

Love Inhuman

by Alison

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Chapter 1 of 23

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Prologue

Aiko's father finally gave in to her pleas and agreed to let her see the kittens.

"Just remember," he told her as they drove through the Japanese city of Miyatsu to his workplace, "these are genetically-enhanced creatures; they don't really look much like cats. At least not the sort you're used to."

It was late in the afternoon, and the Raikatuji Research Laboratory, where her father worked, was quiet. A uniformed man sitting at a desk looked up as Aiko and her father walked into the foyer.

"Hello, Dr Fujimoto," he said with a smile. "Is this your new lab assistant?"

Dr Fujimoto shook his head with a chuckle. "Hello, Miki. This is my daughter Aiko. I promised to bring her to see the kittens for her birthday. Aiko, this is our security officer Takeshi Miki."

"Happy birthday, Aiko," Miki said. "How old are you?"

"I'm seven years and one day old," Aiko told him seriously. "I had my birthday party yesterday."

Miki touched a button on his desk, and the double glass doors leading to the labs swooshed open. "Well, Aiko, seeing as you're with Dr Fujimoto, and especially since it was your birthday yesterday, I guess I can let you through. I hope you like the kittens," he added as she and her father walked through.

The corridor was long, with many open doors leading into labs all along it. But Aiko's father walked past these until they came to a sturdy, locked steel door at the very end of the corridor.

"The kittens are being grown in here," he told her, taking his identity card from his pocket and swiping it in a slot at the side. The door unlocked with a muted click and slid aside, granting them access. "Not many people are allowed in," he added. "Usually just the scientists. But because you're with me, you may come in to look. Just don't touch any of the computers, all right, pet? They're sensitive."

"All right, Daddy," Aiko agreed. She tightened her grip on her father's hand as they walked into the dim lab. It was eerie in there. Huge glass containers filled with liquid loomed out of the darkness. Bubbles floated up, up, up within them, like pale ghosts in the gloom, to disappear at the top with muted gloop gloop sounds. Strange unidentified lumps floated in the liquid.

"Why is it so dark, Daddy?" Aiko whispered.

"The kitten's eyes can't take bright light yet," Dr Fujimoto answered with a smile. "And there's no need to whisper, Aiko, they can't hear you! You could have a rock band going in here, and the kittens would sleep through it." He led her to the nearest container. "See this button here, on the base? This is an infrared light switch. Press this and you'll be able to see the kitten growing inside. Infra-red light doesn't hurt their eyes like ordinary light would."

Hesitantly, Aiko reached her hand forward and pushed the switch. Instantly the container was filled with a soft pinkish glow, and she gasped as she saw that the dark lump inside was in fact a "kitten", curled in a fetal position. A long flexible plastic tube emerged from the place where its navel should have been, branched into several separate tubes of different colors, and disappeared into the base of the container.

"That is it's feeding tube, that's it's waste-disposal tube, and that one there is how we monitor it's health and brain waves," Dr Fujimoto explained, pointing at the various tubes. "All baby mammals have an umbilical cord when they're within their mother's body that provides them with everything they need to grow. These tubes do the same job. When we feel they're strong enough to be 'born', the tubes will be removed, and they'll have normal belly buttons, just like yours!" And he tickled her stomach, smiling at her giggles.

"How many kittens are there, Daddy?" Aiko asked. The room seemed to extend a long way; the big glass containers faded into the gloom, and she couldn't see the back wall.

"We have thirteen that have made it this far," Dr Fujimoto answered, his face serious once more. "We started off with over one hundred eggs, but clones are difficult to bring to maturity, and we were working with the preserved DNA of an extinct animal, a type of leopard. So there were gaps that we had to fill using DNA from other animals. Many of the clones either didn't divide, or else just withered before we could transfer them to the containers. Some had to be culled because they were deformed or showed signs of disease. These thirteen seem to be the strongest. We have to keep our fingers crossed that they will make it long enough to be born, that is, when they're big enough to leave their containers."

Aiko stared at the creature floating inside the container. Its body fur was light, with a soft orange tinge, but whether that was from the infrared light or its actual color was impossible to tell. Its chest, stomach and legs were a lighter creamy shade, almost white. There was a faint suggestion of darker spots, a rosette pattern on its coat, very like a leopard's. Its eyes were tightly closed. Two short forelegs crossed its chest and two long hind legs were drawn up in front. The long tail floated out behind it, rising and falling gently in the currents within the container. It was huge for a kitten, almost as big as Aiko herself.

"How long will it be before they can come out?" Aiko asked.

Her father thought for a moment. "Nobody really knows. You have to remember, pet, this is a brand-new experiment; we're still learning! The kittens are extremely slow growing; we put the first clone in its container eight years ago. You can see the dates each was started written on the base of the containers. This one is the eldest of the thirteen. They get younger as you go further back."

"But they must be going to be born soon, Daddy. They look so big!"

Her father smiled at her earnest face. "We expect to have them growing in here for some time yet. They'll be a whole lot bigger once they're born; that's why the containers are so large, to accommodate them until then."

"What will you do with them once they're born? Will they go to school like I do?"

Her father laughed. "No. The original animal is believed to have been psychic, like many cat species, and we added some DNA from another genetically modified psychic animal, the Coati. They also have some human DNA, so their brains will be large; they may turn out to be the most intelligent of all species of engineered animals. What we're really interested in is any psychic ability they may have. They've got some very interesting brainwave patterns, even this young, and we're going to be experimenting with what they can do for years. If the clones turn out to be as psychically powerful as we hope, they'll be worth a lot of money." He smiled down at her. "You can go and have a look at each of them now. I have to check the computer readouts."

Aiko wandered amongst the containers, pressing the light switches and gazing with fascination at each of the animals. They all looked similar to the first one, curled up, eyes closed, bobbing gently in their artificial womb. Occasionally one would twitch or flicker an eyelid, as if dreaming. But there was no other response to show that they were living creatures.

The dates on the bases of the containers got progressively younger, and each kitten was smaller than the last. Finally, Aiko reached the far end of the room. She gazed at the last, youngest kitten. This one was only half her size, not counting its long tail. Aiko read the date on the base of this container and gasped. "Daddy!" she called softly. "This one, here at the back, has the same birthday as me!"

Her father chuckled and called back, "It hasn't been born yet, Aiko! That date is when the fertile egg was put into the container."

Aiko smiled and didn't answer. She turned back to the kitten. "Maybe you're not really born yet, but you're still my age," she whispered to it, feeling a connection she hadn't had with any of the others. "And you may be the littlest, but I think you're beautiful."

She placed her palm onto the warm glass of the container, where the kitten's shoulder touched. "What is it like," she whispered, "floating in there all by yourself? Are you dreaming? What could you be dreaming of, if you've never seen the world outside?"

Suddenly she gasped. For the kitten had moved slightly, more than any of its brothers, and not just because of the currents circulating around its body. It turned its head in her direction. Aiko watched, holding her breath, her hand still on the glass. "Can you hear me?" she whispered in awe. "Do you know I'm here, little kitten?"

She stared in rapt concentration at the baby animal. It moved its head again, restlessly, and its body drifted a little more towards her. Then, so quickly that she jumped, its eyes opened, revealing two clear sapphire-blue pupils, fixed on her. She heard, no, she felt... felt something... no words, but a strange, questioning feeling in her head. There was no doubt in her mind that this was coming from the kitten.

Leaning close to the glass, her brown eyes never leaving the blue ones watching her, she whispered to it, "My name is Aiko. Hello, Little Kitten..."

She felt that wordless questioning again in her mind. Then the kitten moved one of its forelegs, on the end of which was a paw resembling a four-toed 'hand'. It moved this clumsily, then managed to place it palm-first against the glass where her own hand rested.

Aiko smiled in delighted wonder. "You're the most beautiful of all the kittens," she told it sincerely. "And when you get out of this container, we'll be friends, I know it."

"Well, well!" said a voice, and Aiko turned her head to see her father staring at the kitten in amazement. He came forward and knelt down beside Aiko. The kitten moved its gaze from Aiko to Dr Fujimoto. Again that questioning feeling tickled Aiko's mind.

"He wants to know who you are, Daddy," she said to her father.

Dr Fujimoto chuckled. "It certainly looks like it, doesn't it? I wish I did know what it was thinking!"

"No, really, Daddy," Aiko insisted, realizing he didn't believe her. "He just asked me who you are."

Her father stared at her. "What do you mean, Aiko?"

"I can hear him... well, not exactly, I sort of... feel he wants to know."

Her father shook his head. "You can? Hmm, this is the most reaction I've seen in any of the clones. I wonder... are they dormant psychics needing mental stimulation to bring it out? Why did the youngest wake first? Are the others about to? And how can you hear it, pet? Are you psychically empathic? I wonder..."

Aiko didn't understand all the big words. She realized her father was simply thinking out loud. She stood and smiled at the kitten as Dr Fujimoto hurried back to the desk at the front of the room and began telephoning colleagues. Aiko could hear his low, excited tones as he spoke to each of them in turn. "Jiro? It's Fujimoto Yutaka here. One of the chimeras is awake. Yes, it moved! It opened its eyes. Can you get out here as soon as possible, we need to run some tests. Yes, number thirteen, the youngest one, who would have expected that? Good, good, see you then. No, that's all right, I'll let them know... but could you pick up Saburo on your way in, her phone line was busy when I tried to ring."

Aiko thought friendly thoughts at the kitten and smiled when she received the feeling back, as if the kitten was copying her.

She moved her hand, and with some difficulty Little Kitten changed his position to again lay a paw against the glass where hers lay, making paddling motions in the liquid to get there. She laughed at this and was even more delighted when she saw the kitten's mouth curve up into a smile as well.

It had fully uncurled itself now and hung in the liquid of its container, watching her intently. She felt its happiness and continued to play, the other kittens all but forgotten in her joy at interacting with this one.

"Aiko," she told it out loud, "my name is Aiko."

Ai... Aik... o? It was the first real word she had 'heard' from it, a psychic whisper directly in her head. It felt strange that she could hear it without using her ears at all.

"That's right! Yes, I'm Aiko! And you are my friend Little Kitten!"

But this proved too much for the kitten. It gave up the attempt and turned upside down, looking so comical that Aiko got the giggles again. She felt the kitten's surge of happiness at this new experience of playing with another.

"Can you follow me?" she asked, beginning to walk around the container.

Little Kitten obligingly paddled its short front legs, turning to keep her in sight, until she got back to her starting point. It was then she realized that the kitten's long tail had wrapped around its body as it turned, and she burst out laughing again, pointing.

Little Kitten began to laugh silently too, slowly rotating back in the other direction until its tail unwound from about its waist.

She felt its questioning emotion again, and after concentrating, she thought she understood what it asked enough to answer, "My hair? No, it's only on my head. Oh, and my eyelashes and eyebrows."

She touched her shoulder-length black hair to demonstrate what it felt like and got back a definite impression that Little Kitten somehow "received" the tactile sensation. He then put one hand to the top of his own head, with the other still on the glass.

Aiko touched the glass again and closed her eyes. Tingling in her free hand, she could feel the kitten's wet, soft fur.

She was trying to explain the difficult concept of "clothes" to Little Kitten when her father returned to her side.

"I've called some of my colleagues to come and check this kitten out," he told her. "But I'll be busy for some time, so I've phoned your mother to come and pick you up."

"Oh no, Daddy, don't make me go yet!" she protested. "Little Kitten and I are just getting to know each other. He knows my name, we're playing..."

"Now don't argue with your father, Aiko," Dr Fujimoto said firmly. "You've seen the kittens as I promised, but now I have work to do." He took her hand. "Come along, I'll take you to the foyer. Your mother will be here soon."

Reluctantly, Aiko turned to follow her father. Instantly, she felt a puzzled feeling from Little Kitten.

"I have to go now, Little Kitten," she called, turning back to look at it. "I'm sorry, but I can't stay..."

As it realized her intention was to leave, the kitten grew frantic, pressing its face against the glass. Its emotion echoed in her head as clearly as any words: *Don't go! Please don't leave!* Then, making an effort, it used the only word it knew: *Aiko! Aiko!*

The kitten's desperate psychic calls made Aiko's stomach knot painfully. Fighting back sudden tears, she looked up at her father. "Daddy, I'll go with you, but please, can I say goodbye to Little Kitten first?"

Dr Fujimoto hesitated, then relented at the sight of her tear-filled eyes. "All right, pet. But don't be too long."

Aiko ran back to the incubating container. Little Kitten was still hovering anxiously. She pressed her hand against the glass and the kitten did the same.

"I have to leave now, Little Kitten, I'm sorry. I really can't stay."

The kitten's desolate feeling hit her so hard that Aiko felt her tears spill over and begin running down her cheeks. "Please don't be sad," she whispered to it. "Please be happy. I want to remember you laughing."

Come back? The kitten's wordless emotion was again as clear as speech.

"I don't know if they'll let me see you again," Aiko replied. "Today was a special birthday present. But you're going to grow up to be big and strong someday. I'll never forget you, Little Kitten. Goodbye..."

Hanging her head, Aiko turned and walked back to her father, who took her hand silently and led her away. As they went out through the steel door, Aiko felt another emotion in her head. The little clone was crying.

Chapter One - Bittersweet

Chapter 2 of 23

Aiko and the chimera, Miyatsu, meet again as adults and find that their bond of friendship is still just as strong as when they were children.

Chapter One -- Bittersweet

Aiko leaned back in her chair, gazing at the image on her computer screen.

It was an artist's impression of what the extinct psychic leopard *Panthera pardus adersi* must have looked like. Her eyes ran over the drawing, remembering the day, years ago, when she had set eyes on the augmented animals her father had been working on.

The memory was bittersweet. For the kittens had begun to die not long after she had seen them, the eldest one first, then one after the other, wasting away in their containers before ever being born. The scientists had been unable to find a cause for the deaths.

Finally the child Aiko had stopped asking to see them again; it had been almost a relief when her father, discouraged by repeated failure, had left the project to work on other research.

"There's the boss! Aiko, look, he's crossing the courtyard now..."

Aiko sighed. "Give it a rest, Suzu," she said. "I really don't know what you see in Raikatuji-san. I rode the lift into the building with him this morning, and he didn't say so much as good morning. A nod, that was all I got when I greeted him. I don't think he's very polite."

Suzu snorted. "Huh, who cares about polite? He's good looking, single, and rich. That's enough. If I'd been in that lift, I'd have made him talk to me!"

She moved away from the window and sat back down at her desk. "Oh well, he's gone into the stadium now. He had that new fighting animal with him. I saw it when it arrived two weeks ago."

"Oh yes? What species is it?"

"Don't know. It must be one of the new crossbred strains. Vicious looking thing. All long legs and attitude. The boss ought to keep it on a leash." She shuddered. "Are you going to the exhibition match at lunchtime to see it fight?" she added. "All the staff are invited."

Aiko shook her head. "No. I hate those matches. It's wrong to make animals fight each other."

"I don't understand you sometimes Aiko. It's our job to research fighting animals. It's their job to fight." She shrugged. "I don't have a problem with it."

"The difference is that we get paid for our job, and we have a choice about whether or not we do it. We can always resign. The animals have no choice, get nothing out of it, and can end up hurt or even dead. And people get rich on the results. It's not right." Aiko's voice had risen angrily, and she had said more than she meant to. She stopped herself with an effort, more than a little surprised by the outburst.

Suzu stared at her. "You've been in a real weird mood lately, you know that? You're usually so composed, but the past couple of weeks you've been biting my head off at the least little thing."

Aiko took a deep breath to calm down. "I'm sorry, Suzu," she apologized. "I've felt a little depressed these last couple of weeks."

"What's up? Man problems?"

Aiko frowned. Her friend really did have a one-track mind. "No. There's really nothing I can think of. I just feel... I don't know!" She shrugged.

Suzu nodded wisely. "You need to get out more, relax and have some fun. Tell you what, tonight I'm going out on the town with some friends. Come along and I'll fix you up with Hiroshi. You remember him, he's my friend Takara's brother. You'd like him, he'll show you a good time."

Aiko shook her head. "No. Thanks Suzu, but I'd rather not. I planned a nice quiet night in tonight."

"Come on, girl, it's Friday, live a little! Who stays home on a Friday night?"

"Me," Aiko said firmly. "I'm just not in the mood for going out this evening."

Suzu shrugged. "Whatever. I'm fed up with work this morning. I think I'll go to lunch early. If I wander across to the stadium now, I might get the boss interested."

"Yeah, interested in why you're not working!" Aiko thought to herself as Suzu left.

Aiko busied herself with logging details of the digestive processes of the genetically-modified fighting elephant Gigantos for the next half hour, but her mind stayed on her conversation with Suzu. It was true she had been feeling a little strange lately.

She tried to analyze the mood. She was her usual self when at home, but by the time she got to work, she'd begun to feel irritable. Some days it wasn't too bad, other times she'd felt close to tears, or angry, or both. But angry at what?

There seemed to be no trigger to the emotions which would sweep over her so unexpectedly.

Late afternoon was the worst. She'd begun leaving early, as she knew that if she lingered too long she'd start to feel really depressed. The feeling would gradually subside the further

away from the Raikatuji Genetically-Modified Animal Research Centre she got. It was totally out of character for her, unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. And as she'd told Suzu, there was no reason for it.

Maybe I'm allergic to work! she thought in exasperation. But she enjoyed her work, she was proud of following in her father's footsteps as an animal researcher. And up until two weeks ago, she'd been fine...

Two weeks ago. What had occurred then to make her feel this way? The unhappy, bitter, lonely feeling suddenly enveloped her again, and she screwed her eyes shut, trying to block it out, to make it go away, her hands balled into fists on her desk.

WHY DO I EXIST?

Aiko gasped and opened her eyes, badly shaken. The thought had been like a frustrated scream inside her head.

Abruptly she stood and went to the window, flinging it open and breathing deeply to calm herself. The klaxon announcing the beginning of the match in the stadium sounded, and as suddenly as it had begun, the bitter hopelessness dissipated. Despite the warmth of the day, she shivered and hugged herself, badly frightened by the experience.

For a moment she thought of telephoning her retired father to ask his advice, but she didn't want to worry him. What could she tell him anyway? "I'm feeling depressed, and I heard a voice in my head." He'd think she'd gone crazy.

Am I going mad? she wondered. *What's happening to me?*

She decided to wait for another week. If the feeling hadn't disappeared by then, she promised herself, she'd visit a psychiatrist and see if that would throw any light on her problem.

Hoping that work would keep her mind off the depression, she plunged back into the intricacies of the internal plumbing of Gigantos.

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Suzu arrived back in the office after a couple of hours, full of beans.

"The boss said hello to me," she announced delightedly. "And he smiled when he said it."

"Hey, congratulations. Can I be the bridesmaid?" Aiko asked, suppressing a smile.

"You may laugh, but it's a start!" Suzu answered, refusing to let her mood be dimmed. She sat down happily. "It's a good thing you didn't come along though, since you hate seeing poor 'il fluffy animals get hurt. It was quite a show. That new animal the boss has is amazing. I was right, it's brutally efficient fought everything thrown at it and won each round without breaking into a sweat. It's a psychic animal, by the way, how rare is that? I saw it levitate, and it could somehow shield itself against light, it gave the impression that it had just disappeared you could only see it when it moved, there was a sort of flickering effect. I've only seen that particular trick in Coatis, and then only once before. But I still don't know what they crossbred to get it. It must have cost the boss a fortune."

Aiko shook her head. *It'll probably end up making him another,* she thought, but kept it to herself.

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Suzu had left for the day when Aiko felt the first stirrings of the now-familiar depression.

Oh no, she thought despondently and quickly began to pack her work away, getting ready to leave. She locked the door of the office behind her and hurried down the corridor, feeling the hopelessness building inside her mind as a relentless pressure.

Why do I feel this way? she wondered for the hundredth time, heading for the lift at the other end of the building. As she passed a corridor branching off at right angles from her route, she was so overwhelmed by such a desperate wave of sadness that she stopped walking, her eyes filling with tears.

Drawing a deep breath to steady herself, she half-turned and saw someone standing, gazing out the large window at the end of the corridor, silhouetted against the blazing light of the setting sun. And abruptly, without being able to rationalize the feeling in any way, Aiko knew that the depression she was feeling was outside of herself, that it was not her emotion at all, but emanated from the figure at the end of the corridor.

As she gazed at it, she realized with a shock that the window was open and the figure was standing with feet on the very edge of the casement, leaning far out. And they were six floors up...

Her heart thumping with fright, she raced down the corridor, calling out as she did so, "No! Don't jump!"

The figure whirled about and moved lithely away from the window, out of the full glare of sunlight, and Aiko realized she'd been mistaken.

For facing her was not a tall man as she'd assumed, but a genetically-modified animal, or GMA, standing on two hind legs, long tail no longer curled about his feet and hidden by the bright sunlight, but flicking behind him with annoyance.

He looked down at her with disdain, and then he spoke quite clearly: "I've no intention of jumping. Go away, human."

His voice was deep, each word a mellow roll of sound, like softly purred growls, but entirely understandable.

"You... you can... speak?" Aiko said. It was the first time she'd heard of a GMA being able to communicate using human language.

The creature turned away from her dismissively. "Leave me alone." And a voice she heard only inside her head added: *Stupid human....*

Aiko's eyes had adjusted now to the glare of sunlight flooding through the window, and as she heard that voice, memories long buried rose to the surface of her consciousness in a great upwelling. In wonder she gazed at the figure striding away from her. He was nearly two metres tall, long and lean, yet now Aiko knew the creamy orange-tinged fur and long tail, the dramatic black rosettes that decorated his body, and most of all she remembered the psychic voice in her head.

"Wait!"

The animal glanced over his shoulder at her. She felt his irritation at her persistence. "Go away. I've told you I'm not going to jump."

Aiko drew a deep breath, caught up with him and quickly moved in front, blocking his path.

"You... you don't remember me, do you?" she said. Gazing up into the cat-like face, she continued, "Cast your memory back -- you were being grown in a glass container. A little girl came to see you. You played together and said you'd be friends forever..."

She had his full attention now. He was staring wide-eyed at her, and Aiko could feel a tumult of conflicting emotion.

"You *do* remember," she insisted, "I can feel your emotions as easily now as I could then. Little Kitten, you know me. I'm Aiko."

He backed away from her, shaking his head. Aiko felt fear and bewilderment emanating from him. "No! You can't be Aiko -- Aiko died -- "

"No. I was forced to leave, and I wanted to come back, but my father wouldn't let me. He told me that the kittens had begun to die, and I was so sad, because I thought that meant my Little Kitten... you... had also died..." Aiko's throat was tight, and with surprise she felt tears threatening to overflow.

He had stopped moving and was now regarding her face intently. Uncertainly, he brought up one handlike paw, and Aiko, suddenly knowing what he was doing, raised her own hand. Their palms touched, and he drew a quick shaky breath. "Aiko!"

With his other hand, he tentatively touched the top of her head, then very gently ran it down the side of her face. His paw was warm, the short fur soft as velvet.

"How can it be?" he said in wonder. "Aiko? But Aiko was so much *bigger* than me...."

Aiko laughed softly, breathlessly, overwhelmed by her memories. "I told you then that you'd grow up to be big and strong, didn't I? And you've grown more than I ever imagined. I can't very well call you 'Little Kitten' anymore. What is your name?"

"The Raikatuji labs where I was created used to be in the city of Miyatsu. I was part of the Miyatsu Project, Batch Number Thirteen. Sakaki just calls me Miyatsu."

"Miyatsu," Aiko repeated, memories of the city where she used to live rising up. She nodded. That name fitted him far better than her old nickname for the kitten he had been.

"Aiko, you're crying. A human once told me that people cry when they're unhappy -- has meeting me again made you unhappy?"

Aiko brushed at the tears with one hand. "No, Little... I mean, Miyatsu, tears show great emotion, good or bad. I'm crying because I'm so pleased to see you again!"

Unable to contain herself any longer, she threw her arms around Miyatsu and embraced him. For a moment he did nothing, but Aiko could feel delighted surprise flowing from him in waves. Then he put his arms about her shoulders and somewhat diffidently, then with more confidence, he hugged her back. She felt a strange vibrating rumble begin in his chest, and it took her a moment to identify the sound. But then she was charmed to recognise it for what it was.

Miyatsu was purring.

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They sat comfortably on the floor of the corridor, exchanging memories. Aiko had her back against the wall, her legs stretched out before her on the carpet, ankles crossed. Miyatsu sat catlike on his haunches, his arms now used as front legs for balance, his long tail curled neatly over his forepaws.

Aiko no longer felt the echo of dreadful depression that had haunted her days for the past two weeks. Although she now knew the cause, it was a shock to realize how responsive she was to Miyatsu's moods. She could feel his joy at meeting her again, and the bittersweet nostalgia of times past as they talked.

"The day you woke me," Miyatsu was saying, "I remember many humans in the lab running tests, trying to get me to move about, shining bright lights in my eyes, doing things I didn't like. But nobody would talk to me psychically."

Miyatsu paused for a moment. "I realize now how few humans are able to understand me unless I vocalize. But for a long time I didn't know why they seemed unable to hear me, or answer."

"I always spoke to you aloud," Aiko reminded him.

"I understood the words you said, I think, because you projected their meaning psychically," Miyatsu answered.

"After that day in the lab," Aiko said, "my father took me to be tested for psychic ability. I remember the results were ambiguous. The tests showed that I have a high empathic index, but everything else was rather weak. The tester did say that maybe I could improve, if I was taught by a psychic, or if I was sufficiently motivated," she added, "but I never bothered to pursue it."

"Nevertheless, I understood you." Miyatsu smiled at her, making Aiko realize that this was another area where he differed from other GMA's. Like humans, he had a full range of facial expressions. "But none of the other humans that day could speak to me. Their tests frightened me. I didn't understand what they wanted. I kept begging them to bring you back, but of course they didn't respond. When I realized they couldn't hear me, I put myself back to sleep. They couldn't reach me there, I was safe again." Miyatsu stared at the far wall, his eyes unfocused as he remembered.

"I asked about you," Aiko said. "My father told me that you became unresponsive again fairly quickly. He was in favor of taking me back to the lab, but the other scientists were against the idea. They seemed to think that your awakening while I was there was just coincidence. At any rate, I was never allowed back in."

"I wish you had come back," Miyatsu replied wistfully. "After you vanished, I was very lonely. I reached out psychically, trying to find your light again, but I came instead across twelve others, the sleeping clones. I was able to rouse them, and we would speak psychically..."

"The strange brainwave patterns my father spoke of!" Aiko said. "You all seemed unconscious, but Dad said that the alpha waves of all the clones were off the charts after I left. So that's what caused it!"

"For a while they were my only companions, but I was content," Miyatsu continued. "I had friends, although obviously, our experience of life was very limited. But then number one, the eldest of us, felt horrible pain. He told us it was unendurable, and not long after, his psychic voice seemed to waver and his light dissolved into the gloom. One by one, all the others were affected. Their lights flickered and vanished, and they wouldn't answer my cries. Then when I felt the pain, I was very afraid. But I remembered what you said, that I would grow up to be big and strong. Perhaps, I thought, this pain is the process beginning? I hung on. But the pain was dreadful -- the scientists told me after my birth that it was caused by the -- what was the word? Where something doesn't quite fit together?"

"Incompatible?" Aiko suggested.

Miyatsu nodded. "Yes. Parts of my body were - incompatible -- because I'm made up of the genes of several different species."

Miyatsu's eyes lost focus again as he remembered, and Aiko winced as she also felt his recollection of the agony he'd gone through.

"Inflammation," she murmured. "Anaphylaxis. The body trying to integrate disparate parts into some sort of working organism. The immune system attacking itself..."

"I resisted," Miyatsu continued, "To distract myself I concentrated on how you and I had played together, or else thought about conversations I'd had with my identikin, I even recalled the scientists and the tests they'd run on me, anything to take my mind off the pain."

"But you didn't give in," Aiko said softly.

"No. My will was no stronger than the others, but I had the most life experience, limited though it was. I felt there was more to life than pain. I wanted to live. But, oh Aiko! The temptation to just let go, to dissolve and be at peace, was almost more than I could bear! Then, just when I felt as if I couldn't bear it any more, it started to get better. My body managed to rearrange itself, the fire in my joints died down, my skin no longer itched and burned, and the pain... stopped." Miyatsu sighed, then looked at her and smiled slightly. "Your eyes are crying again, Aiko," he observed, lifting one paw to touch her face. "Are you unhappy? I find your moods difficult to read now -- you're quieter, where before, when we were younger, your psychic voice was like a joyful shout inside my mind."

"I'm moved by your endurance," she admitted, wiping the tears with the back of one hand. "And I guess my mind doesn't project much psychically any more." She smiled and shook her head. "So you were the only one of the thirteen who survived?"

"Yes. The lab was moved from Miyatsu to one of the uninhabited Ryukyu Islands, south of Kyushu. It was just known as Shima. I was born there, some time afterwards. I had no way of measuring time while I was gestating within the container, but they told me afterwards I was there for many years, slowly growing. I was very lonely. On the

island I would hear other psychic voices, but they made little sense. I understand now that there were Coatis on the island, kept as research animals. But at least, hearing them, I felt less alone. There were also one or two scientists working on Shima who were not so psychically blind as most humans. I remember listening to them in awe intelligent minds, sharp and strong and direct. They were very different from the muted sound of the Coatis in their pens, whose only interests seemed to be feeding and fighting. The humans didn't realize that they were broadcasting, of course, but I was inspired, I wanted to be like them." He smiled again. "Over time, by listening, I began to learn the meanings of other human words besides 'Aiko'."

"What happened when you were finally born?"

"I was given to a Capuchin to be mothered," Miyatsu answered. "Do you know them?"

Aiko nodded. "Oh yes. They're a type of monkey, and if they can't get anything animate to baby, they'll adopt rocks! I've seen young Capuchins squabbling over who gets to take care of infant siblings. I like them."

"For a while, I thought I was a Capuchin," Miyatsu replied. Fond amusement colored his mental tone. "I was socialized with a group of orphaned Coatis, each with their own Capuchin 'mother'. But although I had companions again, it wasn't enough. I wanted to be with the humans. I learnt to speak by listening and imitating the scientists. Being psychic helps the process. I can understand the meaning of words when there's a mental picture to go with it. And I was eager to learn. The Capuchins and the Coatis weren't at all like humans. I was fond of them, but... they're not my species." Aiko felt his regret. "I've since found that humans aren't my species either. I have no species."

"That's why you were depressed, isn't it?" Aiko said. "I've been feeling your mood ever since you arrived here at Raikatuji Centre. I thought I was going mad until today." She paused, thinking. "You are the only one of your species," she said, "but you're not alone. You're sentient..."

"What means that word?" Miyatsu asked curiously; then as Aiko concentrated on finding the right interpretation, his expression took on a look of understanding. "Ah, I see! Creatures that can reason and are aware of their own existence."

"You took that out of my head!" Aiko accused.

"You see, the psychic tests you did were right. Your 'voice' grows stronger when you think hard," he answered complacently.

"I don't know that I like having my mind read. I value my privacy."

Miyatsu radiated a sense of contrition, but Aiko could feel amusement there as well. "It was only a tiny whisper," he said reassuringly. "If I wasn't sitting next to you, I wouldn't have heard you."

"As I was saying," Aiko continued with a smile, "you're sentient. There's no reason you can't be friends with other sentients, in this case, humans."

Miyatsu shook his head. "You're one of the few humans I've met who isn't afraid of me. They see me and think 'animal' instead of 'sentient being', and become scared that I'll harm them. None have wanted to stop and talk to me as you did!" He sighed. "Everybody goes away at night, and on the weekends, leaving me alone. At least on Shima I had the company of the Capuchins and the Coatis when the staff left. I dread weekends most. During the week I have my work. But the weekends -- I have nobody to talk to and nowhere to go. Before I met you the only human who would talk to me is Sakaki, and he leaves like everybody else."

"Sakaki? Oh, Raikatuji-san, the boss. But you're not a prisoner here, surely? You can go where you like, can't you?"

"Go where? To do what? Aiko, you were right when you said I'm unhappy here. I have no purpose other than to hurt other genetically-modified animals. I try to knock them out quickly to ease their suffering. I take no joy in giving pain."

Aiko remembered his ringing psychic cry earlier in the day, before the lunchtime match had started: *Why do I exist?* The misery had been intense. She remembered also Suzu's remarks after the match concerning the new fighting animal's abilities: *"brutally efficient... fought everything thrown at it and won each round..."*

She knew now that Miyatsu had not tried to be brutal at all, but merciful.

The radiance that had been pouring through the window had shrunk to a thin bar of light on the floor as the sun sank below the horizon. It was getting late. But she didn't want to be just another human, leaving Miyatsu by himself.

"Would you like to come to my house?" she offered. "We can share a meal and talk some more. Weekends can be fun..."

She broke off as Miyatsu's feeling of gladness washed over her. "I could? I'd like to see where you live very much."

"It's not far from here, just a short walk up the beach. What do you like to eat?"

Miyatsu looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"You know, what are your favorite foods? I have some chicken wings in my refrigerator at home. Or I could make some sushi for you."

Aiko sensed bafflement radiating from him, and Miyatsu's expression remained puzzled. "I don't understand what you're saying, Aiko, the words make no sense to me."

Aiko frowned as a thought struck her. "Do you have special dietary requirements?" she ventured. "Some species do."

"I eat brown mush and green pellets. Is that what you mean?"

Aiko shook her head. "Would you mind if I looked at your teeth? That would help me determine the sorts of food you can have."

Miyatsu obligingly opened his mouth wide, revealing an impressive set of ivories. Aiko examined them. "Hmm. Fairly typical carnivore dentition, feline definitely, although those adapted carnassials at the back should make omnivorous feeding possible." She met Miyatsu's eyes. "I see no reason for restricted food types from examining your teeth. But of course you could have a metabolic requirement for certain foods. Do you have any examples of the food you normally eat?"

"I have packets of it in my room. I'll show you -- it's through that door over there." He stood on all fours, stretched his long back exactly like a cat, and then gracefully rose to his full height to walk on two legs, his long tail held in a sweeping curve behind him.

Aiko gazed about as she entered Miyatsu's room. The word 'spartan' did not begin to describe it. It was merely a room with a large square futon bed against one wall, a cupboard against the other, and what appeared to be a basic bathroom through another door. There was no entertainment of any sort, no television, radio, stereo or books. The floor was tatami matting, the unadorned walls painted the same non-descript shade of bland as the rest of the offices in the building. She tried not to let her feelings show on her face and disciplined her thoughts to quiet, as well, so that the psychic Miyatsu would not pick them out of her head. But he was busy at the cupboard, taking out packets.

Aiko walked over to look. The packets contained standard animal food, a basic diet with all the appropriate vitamins, minerals, protein, fats, sugars and fiber included. In fact, Aiko had helped develop one of them, the "green pellets" Miyatsu had mentioned. It was also bland and unappealing, designed to complement a more inclusive diet, rather than totally replace it.

"Is this -- all -- you eat?" Aiko asked, picking up one of the packets.

"I used to have the brown mush on Shima, but we had some long orange things and crunchy green things too. And sometimes round red things with sweet white inside," Miyatsu answered. "I used to like those," he added.

"Sounds like carrots, celery probably, and apples," Aiko mused. Standard diet for the herbivorous Coatis. She put the packet down.

It appeared that while Miyatsu could eat an omnivorous diet, Sakaki had not bothered to give him variety. No wonder he had no favorite food. He'd never experienced the full range available. Aiko decided to fix that omission, starting that evening.

(Author's note: In the second paragraph of this chapter, I mention that Miyatsu's ancestor's were known as "Panthera pardus adersi". Although the character of Miyatsu and this story is of course fiction, there is, or was, a real subspecies of this particular leopard, also known as the "Zanzibar leopard". If any readers are interested in finding out more about it, the link is here:

http://www.geocities.com/jaffacity/Zanzibar_Leopard.html

The creature was an amazing-looking animal, but unfortunately is now presumed to be extinct, as it was believed to be a witches familiar, and was therefore hunted by humans beyond its capacity to reproduce.)

Chapter Two - Sympatico

Chapter 3 of 23

Miyatsu begins to learn about human culture. Sakaki shows off his investment, while Aiko finds out some surprising information about Miyatsu's hybridised genetic heritage.

Chapter Two -- Sympatico

Miyatsu was fascinated by Aiko's small beach house, although by most standards it was modest. The tiny verandah at the front faced towards the nearby beach and was screened with trees. While the city of Kagoshima was within easy traveling distance of the Centre, the outlying suburb where Aiko lived was still largely undeveloped. The neighbors were scattered over a wide area, with blocks of vacant land in between the houses.

Aiko unlocked the door and led Miyatsu into the combined living room/kitchen, switching on the lights as she did so, then began taking food from the refrigerator and finding plates as Miyatsu looked around. He stopped by the bookcase, examining it closely before carefully taking out one of the books.

"The scientists on Shima had lots of these, too," he remarked.

Aiko glanced across. "Well, our work was broadly similar, so we'd have similar books."

Then she realized that the book in Miyatsu's hands was not a science text, but one of the fantasy novels she was fond of. She watched him for a moment with the book. Something was odd. The unfamiliar way he held it, and the fact that it was upside down as he gazed at the cover, alerted her. She had become so used to listening to him talk intelligently that the thought he may not be able to read was startling.

The idea was confirmed when he said, "Why do humans spend so much time staring at these things?"

Aiko walked over to the bookcase, trying to get her head around this. Of course, he was an animal, genetically-modified, but still, an animal. And animals couldn't talk, let alone read. Yet he was obviously intelligent. It seemed the people he had known hadn't bothered going to much trouble for him: sparse living quarters, boring food, no companionship, no entertainment, he had the bare basics and not much else.

Yet presumably Sakaki had spent a great deal of money on him and must reasonably expect to receive a good return on his investment. She struggled against a wave of sympathy; no, it was more than that, she felt pity. She suppressed it, knowing there was a possibility that Miyatsu would pick up such a strong emotion, particularly as she was standing beside him.

Kneeling, she reached to the bottom shelf of the bookcase and pulled out a child's picture book, a much-loved story from her childhood. It had simple words and a picture on every page. It had been given to her, she remembered suddenly, on her seventh birthday. Going to the couch, she motioned Miyatsu to sit beside her. With him curled up catlike next to her, she read him the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

*

The meal was a huge success. Miyatsu sampled a little of every food she offered, sometimes only a bite, other times going back for seconds, or in the case of vanilla ice cream, thirds. During the meal Aiko had discovered another defect in his education -- he'd never been taught to use eating utensils. As a consequence of this, Aiko had also used her fingers. This had been no drawback with the chicken wings, but got messy when it came to eating ice cream. She had gotten around the problem by using cones.

Also, she'd *never* had such a deep and meaningful conversation about the motivation of Goldilocks. She and Miyatsu had solemnly come to the conclusion that the fictional child was an attention-seeking brat, with no empathy or concern for the rights of others.

"There! Is that right, Aiko?" Miyatsu moved aside so she could see the paper he had been shakily writing upon.

She'd written his name in bold characters at the top of the page, and he had been carefully copying it. His hand, more accurately a modified paw, was not really adapted to fine motor skills. Although the front toes of his forelimbs had been elongated to give him fingers and an opposable thumb, they were short and clumsy, lacking the fine pincer grip of a human hand. Also, the wickedly sharp retractile claws tipping each finger didn't help, as they tended to extend whenever he gripped the pen in concentration, getting in the way. But despite the problems, he'd persevered. The result was not neat, but it was legible.

She considered it. "Good. Very good. You just have to remember that each of those little 'drawings' represents words. Tomorrow we'll access the Centre's library, and I'll begin teaching you how to read."

Miyatsu beamed. "Would you read to me again now?" he asked.

"I've got something better," Aiko replied. She opened the doors of the television cabinet. Stored beneath the DVD player were stacks of recorded discs. There was a wide selection of movies there, including many classic animations, again favorites from her childhood. Considering Miyatsu's limited life experience, she felt it best to start him

off with something simple.

As she searched through the copies for something cheery, musical and feel-good, she asked, "Have you ever watched a movie?"

She was not greatly surprised when he asked her what the word meant...

*

Rain was drumming on the roof of the cottage as the last of the credits rolled and faded out.

Aiko yawned and stretched, wondering where all the water had come from, considering there hadn't been a cloud in the sky all day. She stood and walked to the window, moving the curtain aside to look out. The road outside her home was wet and shiny in the streetlights, with rain still falling steadily, making the puddles jump and quiver.

"You can't go back to the Centre in this," she told Miyatsu, who was still curled comfortably on the couch, his front paws tucked neatly beneath him. "That couch folds down into a bed. Would you like to spend the night here? We can walk back in the morning."

Miyatsu stared at her, his blue cat-eyes wide. "I could sleep *here*? In your house?"

"Of course. You'd get drenched going back in that rain. If you help me with the couch, we can get you settled for the night."

His smile was like sunshine breaking through clouds, and Aiko felt warmed by the glow of happy emotion radiating from him. "Aiko, this has been the best day of my life!"

She smiled back. His utter enjoyment of such a commonplace evening as a night in front of the television made her realize just how few humans in his life had ever bothered about what he might want.

I'll speak to the boss on Monday, she thought resolutely as she went to get a spare blanket. Miyatsu deserves better than he's been given so far. He's going to make Sakaki even richer doing the rounds of the fighting tournaments. The least Raikatuji-san can do is give him a decent standard of living.

*

The morning dawned clear and bright, the last few wisps of cloud blown out to sea overnight. Aiko was finishing breakfast with a cup of tea while Miyatsu showered. She had been a little surprised that he would use the human device to keep clean; during the night she had dreamed of him sitting on the couch, washing himself with his tongue like the huge cat he resembled so much!

But presumably, with his size, such a method would have been too time-consuming. She sipped the last of her tea with an amused smile, wondering if he ever had problems with hairballs. He hadn't liked the taste of the hot tea she had made with breakfast, drinking instead warm milk, lapping it from a bowl with his long pink tongue.

Aiko's mind was still on Miyatsu's similarities and differences to cats in general and Genetically Modified Animals in particular as they walked along the beach to the Centre later that morning. She glanced behind her. She'd taken off her shoes to walk in the damp sand, and the differences in the tracks their feet left side by side were glaringly obvious. Her eyes traveled to his hind legs. Miyatsu walked upright on his toes. His front feet, as she'd observed the evening before, had been modified into hands, the toes elongated to form fingers and an opposable thumb. She could just make out the tips of his sharp hooked claws, retracted at the moment. Strength had been what his creators had aimed for, rather than delicacy of grip. Presumably he could crack the shell of a walnut in one hand, yet be unable to peel a boiled egg.

She glanced up at his face. In the bright morning light, his pupils had narrowed to cat-like slits. But last night, under the gentler electric light, they had resembled a human's rounded pupils. She remembered her vow of the night before to speak to the boss. The dilemma of a being which was sentient yet defined as an animal weighed upon her.

She was still thinking about that as they reached Raikatuji wharf. A few of the Centre's research boats were moored there, quietly bobbing at anchor.

"How did you come to be here at the Raikatuji Centre?" she asked as they turned at the wharf and began to walk inland.

"Sakaki arrived one day on Shima," Miyatsu replied. "He wanted to see me fight and had bought along some animals to be my opponents. Up until then, I'd never fought anything. The scientists had performed a lot of tests on my psychic abilities, and I'd learned to levitate and shield from light. And of course, all the time, I was teaching myself the human language. When Sakaki arrived, he seemed very interested in the fact that I could talk. He told me he'd funded my creation and wanted a strong psychic fighter. I beat a Gigantos and a Rhyhorn fairly easily. I'm afraid I hurt them more than necessary to knock them out, but I was surprised they'd attack me, and I overreacted to defend myself. Of course, now I realize that they were just doing what their human master told them."

Miyatsu frowned. His emotions revealed to Aiko far more than his words did. His feeling of distaste was obvious to her. "Sakaki told me that he would teach me much more than I could learn on the island. He's been good to me, but still, I've been unhappy. The majority of humans are afraid of me, and I don't like it when people talk about me to Sakaki when I'm there, as if -- as if I had no more understanding than an animal!"

They were close to the Centre now. As they walked between the trees that separated the beach from the buildings, they saw a commotion of cars and people. Centre security officers were milling about, and Sakaki could be seen talking agitatedly to a pair of them, anger evident on his face. Sakaki's pet feline Koneko stood nervously by her master's side, eyes wide at the noise and fuss.

"I wonder what's going on?" Aiko said.

Miyatsu shook his head. "I've never been able to read Sakaki's thoughts or emotions. He has a natural shield that I can't get through. But he looks upset."

They walked out of the tree line, into full view of Sakaki. When he saw Aiko and Miyatsu, his eyes widened, then he grabbed the arm of the security officer at his side, pointing. "There they are! Quick, arrest that woman!"

"What?" Aiko gasped as several officers pointed their stun tasers in her direction.

A flash of orange and black blurred her vision for an instant as Miyatsu leapt in front of her, his fur bristling, making him appear even bigger.

"Hold your fire!" Sakaki yelled. "Don't hit the animal!"

"Sakaki, what are you doing?" Miyatsu cried, his tail lashing back and forth in agitation. "Why are you threatening Aiko?"

Sakaki regarded them for a moment. "Miyatsu, where were you? Security couldn't find you anywhere at the Centre, and your bed hasn't been slept in. I thought you'd been stolen."

"Stolen? No. I was with Aiko."

Aiko moved from behind Miyatsu to face Sakaki. "That's right, sir," she confirmed. "Miyatsu came to my house for dinner and slept over because of the rain. I didn't realize you had security watching him." Her tone as she said this was accusing. The man was treating Miyatsu like a child, making sure he stayed in his room at night.

Sakaki gazed down at Aiko, frowning. He needed no psychic ability to recognize that she seemed very protective of his expensive fighting animal. His let his face relax into a relieved grin, and he opened his arms wide as if to embrace both of them.

"I was worried about you, Miyatsu!" he said. "I imagined all sorts of things had happened to you. What a relief to see you were in such good hands with Miss -- ?"

"Doctor," Aiko corrected. "Fujimoto Aiko."

"Of course, Dr Fujimoto, how could I forget? You're one of my gene researchers, aren't you?" And Sakaki took her hand, squeezing it gratefully. "Good of you to look after Miyatsu for me. I appreciate it."

Aiko watched him uncertainly. That broad smile never reached his eyes. With her innate empathic ability strengthened by renewed contact with Miyatsu, the good humor Sakaki was exuding appeared forced. She knew Sakaki had to be shrewd; he was too rich not to be. Aiko wondered how much of the bonhomie was calculated.

Miyatsu, however, was convinced by it. His body visibly relaxed, the bristling fur smoothing back against his body as the fight-or-flight reflex ebbed. "Sakaki, you should know by now I can look after myself," he said. "No human can force me anywhere I don't want to go."

Sakaki put one hand on Miyatsu's shoulder. "Yes, of course. I must learn not to be so overprotective." He glanced at Aiko. "Thank you for returning Miyatsu, Dr Fujimoto. I'll take over from here. Miyatsu, seeing as I'm here, how about we work on that shielding strategy you were trying yesterday?"

Miyatsu shook his head. "No, Sakaki."

"No?" Sakaki was visibly surprised at the refusal.

"Aiko has promised to teach me to read today. You should go home and enjoy the rest of your weekend. I'll work on fighting techniques for you again on Monday."

Sakaki shot Aiko an appraising look. "She's teaching you to read, is she? Dr Fujimoto, do you think it -- wise, to give Miyatsu such advanced knowledge?"

"Yes, sir, I do. I believe if Miyatsu had more entertainment in the evenings and on weekends, he would be far happier, and less eager to leave the Centre. I want to teach him to read, and I think it would be a good idea to let him have a television, or at least a radio, in his room. Also," she added, trying to quell her nervousness as Sakaki was staring at her in a far from friendly manner, "he should have a more varied diet, not just processed staple food."

"Indeed. This is your recommendation as a scientific expert, I take it? You'll be telling me next I should begin paying my animals!"

He turned away from her abruptly. "All right, Miyatsu, I'll leave you with Dr Fujimoto. Come to my office at nine on Monday morning, Doctor," he added, glancing over his shoulder at her. "I'll discuss this in more detail with you then."

As Aiko watched the crowd begin to disperse, she wondered if she would still have a job on Monday.

*

"Come in, Dr Fujimoto. Please, have a seat." Sakaki waved Aiko to a chair in front of his heavy mahogany desk. Koneko, as usual, was by his side. She stared at Aiko for a moment, then blinked, yawned disinterestedly, and began to wash one paw.

Sakaki stepped around Koneko and reseated himself. He steepled his fingers, watching her impassively. Aiko tried not to squirm. She felt rather like a child sent to the headmaster's office for misbehaviour.

"I thought you'd like to know that I've implemented your suggestions concerning Miyatsu," Sakaki stated, still without expression.

"I know that, sir. I visited Miyatsu this morning. He was very pleased with the improvements you made."

Sakaki smiled thinly. "It's in my own best interests to keep my most expensive fighting animal happy and healthy. As soon as he's fully trained, I plan to take him on tour. So he needs to be in peak condition. However, Doctor, that is not what I wished to talk to you about." His expression grew stern. "I was -- disturbed -- by your actions on the weekend. Not by the fact that you spirited Miyatsu away from the Centre without telling anybody where he was going. That is beside the point. As Miyatsu quite correctly stated, he can't be *forced* to go anywhere, certainly not by a mere human. Conversely, if he wishes to leave the grounds, I'm not going to stop him.

"No, it was your behaviour when you returned him that concerns me. Doctor Fujimoto, if you have any suggestions regarding Miyatsu's welfare in future, I would appreciate it if you'd communicate them to me in private, either personally or by email. I understand you are the expert regarding animal health, but I really don't approve of being told what to do in front of Miyatsu. With any of my other animals, you may of course speak your mind freely. But obviously Miyatsu is a special case. Being sentient, he understands a lot of what's being said. I don't wish to -- unsettle him -- by seeing his human master being argued with by an employee. Do I make myself clear?"

Aiko flushed, but managed to keep her face expressionless. It had gotten Miyatsu better conditions, and she still had a job; all in all a good result. She nodded acquiescence. "Yes, sir."

"Good." Sakaki's severe expression changed to one of smiling good humor. He leaned back in his chair, crossing one leg over the other and clasping his knee with both hands, the epitome of relaxed elegance. "I think I've been severe enough on you for one morning, Doctor. Tell me, in your professional opinion, what did you think of Miyatsu's abilities as a fighting animal?"

Aiko shook her head. "I haven't seen Miyatsu in action, sir."

"No? You didn't come to my little exhibition on Friday?"

"I had some urgent work to finish, so I'm afraid I missed it. My friend Ogawa Suzu did go, however. She seemed most impressed." And Aiko tried not to smile, knowing that Suzu's good opinion of the exhibition had little to do with animals and everything to do with the boss's presence.

"Oh, that is a disappointment. I had hoped, with your eye for detail, you might have a few pointers on how to improve his performance. Although I must admit, Miyatsu appears next to faultless at the moment." He stood up enthusiastically. "He's practicing some moves in the stadium now. Come with me, we'll watch him together. You can give me your opinion."

*

Miyatsu was facing a genetically-modified snake when Aiko entered Sakaki's viewing box. The Orochi was huge, at least three times as long as Miyatsu was tall, and heavily-armoured with scales besides. But it was weaving its heavy head uncertainly from side to side, clearly not happy about being in the same ring with the psychic feline.

Sakaki chuckled. "That Orochi has been beaten by Miyatsu before. Looks a bit apprehensive, doesn't it?"

Miyatsu's ears flicked toward the sound of Sakaki's voice, and he glanced up at the box. Aiko felt his gladness at the sight of her for an instant, but the Orochi took advantage of Miyatsu's momentary distraction to strike. Miyatsu saw the movement and flung himself in a dramatic backward somersault, avoiding the worst, but still catching a glancing blow on the side from the Orochi's head. As Miyatsu doubled over, Aiko gasped and flinched as the slamming pain bridged the pair's psychic connection.

"Focus please, Miyatsu," Sakaki said into the microphone. He glanced at Aiko, clearly mistaking her sudden intake of breath as concern. "It's all right, Dr Fujimoto, Miyatsu has been practicing a new technique. See that slight wavering in the air about him? That's a psychic shield, a variation of the telekinesis he uses to levitate. Very little can get through that. It blocks most projectiles and cushions blows. Fire, and things such as lightning and laser beams are about the only things that can get through the barrier unaffected. Another variation of the shield and Miyatsu seems invisible, as he blocks light reflection."

Aiko breathed out slowly, but indeed the pain Miyatsu had suffered did not seem as great as the Orochi's blow should have delivered. It was a dull ache now and fading rapidly. Aiko resisted the urge to rub it, surprised anew by her level of connectedness with him.

Miyatsu was levitating a meter or so above the ground now, and dodging rapidly as he did so, up, down, left, right, always twisting away a bare instant before the Orochi struck. The big serpent bellowed in frustrated rage, twisting and turning in a futile attempt to catch its agile opponent.

Sakaki was smiling, his eyes narrowed as he concentrated on the battle. "Good, good!" he breathed. "Now, oops, almost got you, be careful. That's it!"

Another spectacular somersault and Miyatsu was suddenly behind the Orochi, landing lightly on all fours next to the snake's tail. He straightened to stand on two feet in a fluid movement, and suddenly Aiko was aware of a powerful thrum of unleashed psychic energy.

The Orochi bellowed again, this time in fear, as Miyatsu hoisted the massive creature into the air by mind power alone, let it hang suspended two meters above the ground for a breathless moment, then with a crash that seemed to rock the stadium, released it to fall back to earth, knocking it out.

Aiko shook her head, feeling dazed. For an instant it had been as if *she* were Miyatsu. She had seen through his eyes and had felt the effort needed to lift the Orochi telekinetically. She felt as breathless as if she had been running a marathon.

Sakaki was on his feet in the box, applauding. "Well done! The best yet!"

Aiko gazed down into the arena. The snake was collapsed on the sand. Miyatsu looked back up at them; they could both see his chest heaving as he panted to get his breath back after the exertion. Abruptly he disappeared. A moment later Aiko jumped as a pair of hands covered her eyes.

"*Guess who?*" A psychic voice rang in her head.

She lifted the big paws away, laughing, and turned to face Miyatsu, who had levitated up to the box.

"How's your side?" she asked, gesturing to the spot where the Orochi had hit.

Miyatsu shrugged, another habit Aiko discovered he had in common with humans. "I was shielding. It'll be fine."

"You could have broken a rib," Sakaki said severely. "You have to remember, block out extraneous noise when you're battling."

"What means that word, ex... extray...?"

"Anything outside of the arena," Sakaki answered. He turned to Aiko. "So tell me, Doctor, what did you think?"

Aiko wanted to say what was uppermost in her mind, that it was a monstrous barbarity practiced upon creatures that had no say in their own destinies for the enrichment of a few humans. But she could not do that, not to her employer who paid her wages and certainly not with Miyatsu watching her with eager eyes. So she consciously suppressed her negative emotions towards the sport and concentrated instead on the true skill that had been involved.

"It was an amazing feat," she answered honestly. "The way you dodged and avoided that Orochi, Miyatsu, and then hoisted it up, with the strength of your will alone! I've never seen anything like that before. Are you allowed to vanish during a battle? If you'd done that earlier, the Orochi would have had no chance to hurt you. And if it couldn't see you, it would have been easy to beat."

"It was easy enough anyway," Miyatsu announced nonchalantly, but Aiko felt how her praise had warmed him. "Besides, it wouldn't be what's the word, Sakaki, for playing by the rules that aren't spoken?"

"Sporting. It wouldn't have been sporting," Sakaki answered. "Not that it matters, this particular Mamba was genetically altered to have heat sensors in its nose, another little experimental improvement of mine. It would have known where you were at all times, even if you were invisible."

The big snake was conscious again now. It was being tended to by a pair of human handlers Sakaki employed, and it flinched at the treatment of its wounds. Miyatsu glanced back, then vaulted gracefully over the edge of the box to land on the sand beside it.

The two humans backed up warily, but the Orochi curled upon itself protectively, as if it expected another beating. It made a sound like crunching gravel in its fear.

But Miyatsu knelt beside its head and put one hand on its forehead, gazing into its eyes. The distressed noise the Orochi made stopped; slowly it relaxed. Aiko saw Miyatsu stroke its prominent eye ridges regretfully. The Orochi sighed, a sound like a breeze through leafy trees. Then it turned and slowly left the arena, its body leaving a great looping trail in the sand as it followed its handlers back to the stable.

"What did you just do?" Sakaki called down.

Miyatsu looked back up. "Orochi is a simple creature, but it can receive a little psychic emotion. I touched it, to make it easier to 'hear' me, and told it I was sorry I hurt it. I told it I thought it was very brave, and I felt honored to have the opportunity to match it in combat."

"Why did you do that?" Sakaki asked curiously. "You never have before."

Miyatsu shrugged. "I'm beginning to realize that the feelings of other creatures' shouldn't be disregarded," he answered. "The Orochi had no choice in fighting me, and I felt its fear. I don't enjoy making others suffer. The least I could do was to make it feel better about being beaten. I didn't want to be like Goldilocks, breaking things without any care for the feelings of others."

"*Goldilocks?*" Sakaki shook his head as if he thought he'd misheard. Raising his voice again, he said, "Well if you've finished the hearts-and-flowers routine, shall we continue? I've got a Gigantos for you next."

Miyatsu nodded. "Have you made any 'improvements' with this one that you haven't told me about?"

Sakaki smiled slyly. "I *may* have."

Aiko settled back to watch in anticipation. Gigantos was her favorite GMA. Or at least, she amended, it had been before meeting Miyatsu again.

*

Aiko noticed a strange coincidence during the next match. Glancing at Sakaki now and then, she was startled to see a -- a *similarity* was the only word for it -- between the intensity of her employer's gaze and the concentration displayed by Miyatsu.

The more she thought about it, and watched them, the more sure she was. Although their faces were not at all alike, the expressions both displayed were identical, and the body language of each was eerily echoed by the other. The way they turned their heads, a certain tilt of the chin, a narrowing of the eyes when concentrating, all combined to give her a strange idea, one which she decided to check.

Casually, her eyes on the match below, she asked Sakaki, "Sir, would it be possible for me to examine Miyatsu's genetic profile? I might be able to come up with improvements... in, in diet, perhaps, if I know how his metabolism functions. At the very least, I can make sure he is at his optimum so far as health is concerned."

Sakaki nodded. "Certainly. I'll transfer the information to your computer this afternoon. And please, don't call me 'sir' all the time," he added, once more turning on his easy charm, "you make me feel like my father! Call me Sakaki."

Aiko smiled. "If you'll call me Aiko. I have the identical problem with being called Dr Fujimoto."

"Aiko. That's a nice name -- 'beloved girl'," Sakaki said. "Your father is Fujimoto Yutaka, isn't he?" he continued. "I remember him from the early days of the project, when my mother was running Raikatuji Corporation. What's he doing now?"

Aiko glanced at him in surprise. "You worked on the Miyatsu project? You couldn't have been very old."

"Ha, flattering the boss! Very good! You'll go far, Aiko," Sakaki laughed. "No, I didn't exactly work on the project. I was in primary school at the time. I used to go in to the restricted area and watch the kittens growing in their containers. Unfortunately, my friend down there is the only one who survived. The others succumbed to anaphylactic shock before they could be decanted."

Sakaki's eyes narrowed as he watched Miyatsu spin out of the charging Gigantos' way. "I'd give a lot to discover how Miyatsu survived when the others failed," he murmured.

Then, remembering his original question, he prompted, "So, where is your father working now? Is he still living in Miyatsu city?"

"He's retired now, sir -- Sakaki. He moved to Kyoto with my mother."

"He was an excellent scientist, I recall. It was a shame when he left the project, he never got to see that Miyatsu survived. Ah, there goes another opponent!" he exclaimed as Miyatsu defeated the Gigantos.

*

Sakaki was as good as his word, and Miyatsu's genetic profile appeared on her computer screen not long after Aiko returned from lunch. She spent the rest of the afternoon studying it.

Miyatsu was the product of genes from three different creatures -- forty eight percent came from the extinct leopard *Panthera pardus adersi*, twenty seven percent was from the psychic GMA Coati, and, as her father had told her so long ago, the remaining twenty five percent was human.

Aiko stared at the information on her computer screen for a time, musing. The amazing thing was that the chimeric blend of genes had managed even one successful clone. The techniques of the time seemed clumsy, but Aiko wondered, given the limited resources of her father's era, whether she could have done any better.

The human donor was identified only by an anonymous number, plus the fact that he had been male. Aiko waited until Suzu had left for the day, then phoned her father. After the usual exchange of greetings, she explained the purpose of her call.

"Dad, do you remember who donated the human cells used to create Miyat -- er, the kittens in the Miyatsu project?"

Her father's expression on the mobile phone's screen was one of concentration as he thought back over the years. "I do recall, as a matter of fact," he answered. "We needed a young, healthy volunteer. Raikatuji Sakaki, the son of the company owner, used to visit the lab after school. He volunteered. We took some stem cells from him, and combined his genes with the others -- the kittens had something in the order of twenty or twenty five percent human DNA, if I remember correctly. We think that's why they failed to thrive, though. The combination of three different species' DNA was incompatible. I left the project when it seemed all the kittens would perish."

Aiko thanked her father and hung up, her head spinning with the implications of what he had told her. Her suspicion had been confirmed.

Genetically speaking, Sakaki and Miyatsu were as closely related as brothers.

Chapter Three - Biology 101

Chapter 4 of 23

Chapter Three: Aiko learns some embarrassing facts about the mating habits of some of Miyatsu's animal relatives. Dreams are revealing. Please note that the story from this chapter is rated Adults Only.

Chapter Three -- Biology 101

Afternoons no longer held any fear for Aiko. Gone was the once-familiar depression and crushing sense of loneliness that her receptive psychic ability had previously picked up from Miyatsu. It had been replaced by a growing sense of anticipation as the day wore on.

Miyatsu, with prior notice to and permission from Sakaki, now spent a lot of his time with Aiko after work, learning to read, write and cipher, sharing a meal and relaxing in the evenings at her house before returning to his room at the Centre. Sakaki had at first been a little reluctant to concede to this amount of interaction. However, seeing how his fighting animal's performance improved, he continued to allow the burgeoning friendship, finally grudgingly conceding to Aiko that perhaps a little reading and writing wouldn't do Miyatsu any harm.

It seemed to Aiko, watching Miyatsu determinedly tally up a long list of numbers or work out the amount of change he should get back from a purchase, that he was like a sponge, soaking up all she could teach him about human culture as fast as he could. She found it fascinating to observe his progress, helping to iron out any problems he encountered and applauding his successes.

There was no doubt in her mind that he was at least as intelligent as she was; once a concept was explained logically, he was quick to understand it, although at times Aiko found herself in difficulty trying to explain some aspect of human culture that had little apparent logic, such as why humans bothered to wear clothing in hot weather!

She refused to resort to facile explanations such as: *"because that's the way it's always been done."* If he knew enough to ask the questions, she wasn't going to fob him off, even if it meant she was stretched to the limit answering things which she'd only learnt herself by inference during childhood. Thanks to Miyatsu, she was being forced to think about things rather than just accept them, and she found the process ultimately very satisfying.

Now and then they would venture into Kagoshima so that she could demonstrate first-hand how services such as shops worked. As a major centre for GMA training, there were many GMAs more outlandish-looking than Miyatsu accompanying their human masters about the streets and in the shops, usually leashed and often muzzled. He

and Aiko still attracted fascinated stares from onlookers not only because he was unrestrained, but when it became obvious that he could talk.

"The people look at me as if they think I'm going to attack them at any moment," Miyatsu grumbled to Aiko after one such trip to the city. "Why should they be more afraid of me than they are of other GMAs?"

"I know it doesn't make much sense," Aiko agreed, once again racking her brain to explain the concept adequately for him. "I think it's because humans tend to fear what they don't understand. If you were the regular non-verbal type of GMA they're used to, they'd accept you more easily. It unsettles them that you're not what they expect, therefore they don't know how to react towards you."

His expression was still puzzled as he looked at her. In the gentle light of the overhead bulb, Miyatsu's pupils had expanded and now more closely resembled human eyes than a cat's. "But you don't act that way, Aiko. How is it you aren't scared of me?"

"Well, I've known you since we were both seven years old! Also, I'm a researcher. If I find something unexpected, I want to know all the hows and whys. It doesn't leave me time to be scared." She glanced at the clock. "And speaking of time, there's a programme I want to watch soon on television. Can you tell me what the time is now?"

Miyatsu pricked his ears forward and concentrated on the clock. "The short hand is pointing between the nine and the ten," he said, his brow furrowed with the effort of working out the time. "And the long hand is on the four. That means it's... um... twenty minutes past the ninth hour!"

Aiko had to smile at his triumphant tone. "That's right, and 'Wild Kingdom' is being screened in ten minutes. I thought you'd find it particularly interesting; it's a documentary about wild Pershans."

Miyatsu looked at her blankly; obviously the statement meant nothing to him. Aiko attempted to clarify. "Pershans. It's a subspecies of leopard, like Sakaki's pet, only living in the wild."

Miyatsu nodded. "I know what Pershans are, Aiko. And I'm happy to watch it if you do. But why should I find it 'particularly interesting', like you said?"

"Because Pershans are your closest living relatives, that's why. They're very similar to the ancient leopard used to create you. Your ancestor's scientific name is *Panthera pardus adersi*. The Pershans are *Panthera pardus pershani*."

She watched as comprehension dawned on Miyatsu's face. "So Pershans are like, what, my cousins?" He said it a little breathlessly, his eyes wide.

"Sort of. Researchers believe they were once the same animal, long ago, and then they diverged. At any rate, Pershans are the non-psychic members of your family."

Miyatsu was definitely interested now. "You're right, I'd like to watch that very much."

Aiko turned on the television, then went to the kitchen to warm a bowl of milk for Miyatsu. She made herself tea before returning to sit beside him. He was curled comfortably on the sofa, exactly like a huge house cat, with his paws tucked underneath his body, taking up all the available space. He uncurled himself and sat up, obligingly shifting over enough for her to sit down. For a moment she wondered, if she reached out and stroked the soft fur of his back, whether he'd purr. She smiled at the mental image of a purring Miyatsu trying to fit on her lap, licking her hand in feline affection!

The programme started, showing a sweeping aerial shot of a vast river delta, the banks covered in tall reeds and feathery grasses. Water birds flocked everywhere, and as the camera panned lower, lilies and lotus appeared, with insects hovering over the river, dragonflies and midges, their delicate wings flickering in the hot sunlight. The air was full of the sound of bird calls, the soft whirr of insects, the croak of frogs, and the gurgle of the slow-flowing river underlying all of it.

Then an unseen human presenter spoke:

"Here we are in one of the environments that the wild Persian leopard, commonly known as 'Pershan', calls home. They are adaptable creatures, living in many areas, from high cold mountain ranges to arid semi-desert, but they feel most at home living along the banks of rivers such as this one, deep in the Matango Nature Reserve."

The camera's gliding movement came to rest in a small clearing amongst the reeds. On the dry grass outside of a den dug into the river bank lay a beautiful Pershan. For a moment it reminded Aiko of the pose her friend had recently adopted, lying curled comfortably with paws tucked under its body. It appeared to be dozing in the dappled shade.

"Our team have been following this family of Pershans for one year now. We are able to get such fine detail because our camera is mounted in the chest of a small robotic bird. The Pershans ignore it, and we can direct it close enough to capture such truly magnificent footage. This is the male, whom we have named Rajah. He is a good example of a wild Persian leopard in his prime. He has no mane, as such, however he does have a thicker ruff of hair around his neck, of a slightly darker color than the rest of his body fur."

There was shadowy movement from inside the den, and a second big cat appeared, blinking in the light of the sun.

"And here we have Rahni, Rajah's mate. Please note that she has a narrower head and more slender body, typical of the female of this species."

The first Pershan stirred. He opened his eyes, and Aiko could see that they were the same clear sky-blue shade as Miyatsu's. Rajah sat up, and the pair rubbed their heads together affectionately in greeting.

"Male and female Pershans mate for life. The bond formed is very close. The pair works together in the hunt to bring down prey, and they are observed as being affectionate, some researchers even say loving, mates."

"They spend a great deal of time grooming each other, and one charming characteristic of the species is that they show affection by rubbing their cheek glands against each other, as you can see Rajah and Rahni doing now. This scents their mate, a habit which we believe accentuates their bond."

"These scent glands are one reason that Pershans are now quite rare, as humans used to hunt them to acquire the glands for use in perfumes. The scent is described as a cross between floral and spice and nearly caused the extinction of the animals before the active chemical was isolated and could be synthetically duplicated in the laboratory. Thanks to captive breeding and reintroduction programs, the Pershan is no longer endangered, but is still not common throughout most of its former range."

Aiko glanced at Miyatsu to see how he was taking this information about his distant cousins. He was watching avidly, staring at the screen as if mesmerized.

There came another movement from inside the den, and a pair of long-legged adolescent Pershans appeared, leading two fuzzy kittens. The babies were beyond cute, all unsteady legs and big eyes.

On seeing their parents, the kittens tumbled over each other to get to them. One began to play with its father's tail, which was tolerantly flicked for its amusement. The other kitten butted between the two adults and tried to rub its little head against both of them before falling over. Rajah gently held his baby down with one big paw and affectionately began to wash the little squirming body with his long pink tongue.

One of the adolescents, a young female, stretched her long back, greeted her parents with a chirrup of sound, then went to the river's edge to lap at the water thirstily. The other, with the beginnings of a male ruff growing, sat down beside his mother, yawned lazily and began to wash himself.

"Pershans make excellent parents, with typically two kittens born in each litter. Since the pair-bond between the adults is lifelong, the father takes an active role in caring

for his offspring. When the parents are not present, for example hunting together, then the babies are cared for by a close blood relative, typically an older sibling. This pair of adolescent siblings are Zarda and Zarzoo. They were born to Rajah and Rahni last year. They will stay with the family unit for perhaps another six months, then most likely will leave to seek mates of their own.

"Pershans usually live in small family groups of two adults, two youngsters from the previous year's litter, and any kittens. They share their range amicably with related adults, usually past litters that have grown to maturity. In areas where hunting is poor, the groups spread widely to avoid depleting and fighting over limited resources, but in places such as this, rich in game, the population of Pershans can be quite heavy."

The cat at the river's edge finished her drink and went to her brother, rubbing heads for a second. Aiko could hear their rumbling purrs. The young male got to his feet, and the pair padded off, disappearing into the grass.

"As you can see, even youngsters are adept at hunting. Zarda and Zarzoo have decided to look for food, which will typically be brought back and shared amongst the whole family. They may catch anything from frogs to small waterbirds. Their parents, however, provide the bulk of the group's food, and working together, they can successfully catch animals up to twice their body size."

Aiko smiled as she watched the babies begin to play, mock fighting and rolling over each other with tiny chirrups and growls, while the narrator droned on.

"Although highly affectionate and intelligent animals, Pershans cannot be domesticated once mated, as the bond between mates is unbreakable. Once mated the Pershan will not accept a human owner. If separated from its lifelong mate, it will go into a rapid decline, no longer bothering to hunt or eat. Eventually, if not reunited with its mate, it will die. This decline, known as Pershan Syndrome, was another big killer of captured Pershans before it was recognized as a fatal consequence of separating mated pairs. The practice has since ceased."

"However, if a Pershan is captured when young, before the age when it would find a mate of its own, it can become devoted to its human master. Some experts have theorized that in the Pershan's mind the human master takes the place a mate would have in the wild."

"Whatever the truth of this, the facts are that if a Pershan's master leaves it for any extended length of time, it will pine in exactly the same way that it would if it lost its mate. Typically, it stops eating, loses condition rapidly, and if the master does not return within a reasonable time, the Pershan will sicken and die. This is why most reputable dealers will not sell this breed to a novice, or to an elderly person."

"Luckily, it is amongst the most expensive of animals, so only those people dedicated to its welfare will buy a Pershan."

While their kittens played happily together, the two adults had begun grooming each other. But then Aiko's eyes widened and she peered closer. It was difficult to tell, but their poses, the almost *sensual* way they caressed each other with their tongues, almost looked as if...

She saw that her suspicion was correct when the male cat let his erect penis emerge from his body. The female rolled playfully onto her back and swatted coyly at her mate's snout. He growled affectionately, then paced around her impatiently as she righted herself and crouched down. She held her tail in a graceful curve to one side as her mate mounted eagerly.

"Mated couples copulate frequently, and like many cat species, they have no set season. They will even mate when they have young kittens still nursing, leading researchers to believe they do it for the pleasure as much as to reproduce."

Aiko felt her face redden. Honestly, who was this dried-up prune of a narrator, prattling on about reproduction? Of course they mated for pleasure! This man must be one of those people who thought that animals were nothing more than instinct-driven automatons, with no emotions whatsoever.

But now she was in a quandary. She was aware that Miyatsu was staring avidly at the screen, and her psychic receptiveness could sense his confusion at the scene being played out.

Oh no, she thought. He's going to ask! And then what do I say?

She felt flustered by her own embarrassment - she was a GMA researcher, she'd seen animals mate before! But still, she wished the camera would move away from its focus on the now rapidly-pumping male, wished it would give the couple some privacy in this intimate moment.

In the midst of her embarrassment, she saw Miyatsu sit up straighter, and suddenly she felt a wave of understanding emanating from him.

"Of course!" he said. "I used to see the Coatis do that all the time on Shima! I thought they were fighting! So they're making babies when they do that?"

Aiko felt relief that he was so matter-of-fact about it. "That's right," she said, although she was aware that her cheeks were still flaming.

"But they already have kittens," he stated. "So why are they making more?"

Rajah had begun a rumbling, yowling sound deep in his chest, muffled somewhat by the fact that his face was buried in the back of his mate's neck, holding the skin in a firm bite, his movements losing rhythm and becoming erratic as he approached climax.

Rahni didn't seem to find his bite painful; instead she closed her eyes and threw her head back, her paws clenching in the dry grass as she quivered against her mate in orgasm.

"It also, um, shows their affection for each other. It's called 'mating'," Aiko mumbled.

Suddenly Rajah's desperate yowling was choked off, and his eyes went wide and unfocused. He gave a final shuddering thrust and collapsed against his mate's back, panting heavily.

"How strange," Miyatsu commented, never taking his eyes off the screen.

Aiko wondered if Miyatsu was perhaps sterile, to make a comment like that. His genetic hybridisation may have made him unable to feel anything sexually, similar to a mule. Before she could say anything, however, he answered her thoughts without realizing it.

"I know it feels good when I touch myself there," he said matter-of-factly, "but I never realized before that you could do it with anybody else." Then he turned to her with concern. "Are you all right, Aiko? Your face has gone very red."

*

It had begun raining again after the programme ended, so Aiko telephoned Sakaki to let him know that Miyatsu would be staying over again at her house for the night, an event that was becoming more frequent during this extremely rainy summer.

But now, as Aiko lay in her bed, she couldn't get the images of the Pershans out of her mind. Pictures of them playing, grooming and mating kept playing out on her closed eyelids. They had looked -- so happy together. They had their little family unit, close-knit and loving, supporting each other...

All at once, she felt a wave of loneliness. That was odd. Why should she be envious of the family life of a pair of wild Pershans? Why did she suddenly feel so... so

isolated?

Another wave of yearning, and she realized without very much surprise that its source was external to her. Miyatsu was right next door, lying on her sofa. She was again picking up on his unconscious emotional broadcasting. She supposed she'd get used to it eventually, however much it made her feel like a television antenna now.

But why was he feeling this way? He'd been fine prior to going to bed; after the television show had ended, they'd discussed mates and families, human ones as well as animal and GMA, and she answered his questions as she always did, as truthfully and simply as she could.

She concentrated, trying for better definition. This was not the bitter depression she used to feel from him before. Instead it had more the quality of bitter-sweet longing. He envied the wild Pershans, she realized. He had no family, no loving relationship with his own kind. Indeed, he didn't even *have* any "own kind". Seeing a closely-related species like the Pershans so content had made him realise what he was missing a mother, father, siblings, relationships with those who loved him. Now that he had the time to consider all he'd learnt, he felt very much an outsider.

Not only that, he only really had two people in the whole world that he could call his friends. Herself and Sakaki. And Aiko still hadn't worked out if Sakaki was as friendly as he made out, or if he was just using his considerable charm to keep his investment happy for future profit.

She sat up and swung her legs out of bed, determined to go to Miyatsu and then stopped herself. For what could she do? He might even be embarrassed that she could read him so well, or resentful that she had literally billions of her own species, while he was alone. His question earlier came back to her: "*How is it you aren't scared?*"

Now she examined it more closely, particularly in the light of how other humans reacted to him. *Should* she be scared? Physically, he was a six foot seven inch tall mainly-feline genetically modified animal, with the agility, lean muscle, claws and sharp teeth typical of cat-types. He was a functionally strong psychokinetic and telepathic power. Certainly he was capable of hurting a human, or any other creature for that matter. He could tear her throat out with one bite, or break her spine in two. Yes, it would be easy to fear his *potential* to inflict harm.

But Aiko couldn't find it within herself to fear Miyatsu. Intellectually, he just felt too human. No, that wasn't the right word, she thought in frustration. He *wasn't* human. But she couldn't truly class him as an animal, either. He was her equal in intelligence, even though his life experience up to now had been severely limited. He could reason and apply logic in complex situations and had a level of impulse control that would put some humans she knew to shame. She felt attuned to his emotions and couldn't believe he'd hurt anybody with malicious intent. He had such a guileless, almost naïve innocence about him, and Aiko trusted him far more than she trusted Sakaki, despite the human's easy charm and effortless grasp of social niceties. When she was with Miyatsu, it was easy to put aside their biological differences and be easy and comfortable together. She didn't fear Miyatsu because she trusted him. Miyatsu was her friend, the only category she felt she could comfortably assign to him.

She shook her head at herself. How the people of Kagoshima would admire her courage, she thought cynically, with her huge, potentially deadly house-guest in the next room. They couldn't know the usual human/GMA dynamic had been turned on its head in this particular case. This was not a master and slave relationship like most. No, Aiko and Miyatsu had truly become friends, good friends.

And her friend's wistful feeling had not abated. Quietly she slipped out of bed, opened her door and padded barefoot across the room.

Miyatsu's eyes were open; he lay on his side, and the moonlight coming in through the window reflected silver off his cat pupils. He glanced at her in surprise when she appeared and propped himself up on one elbow. "Aiko? What's wrong?"

Aiko seated herself on the tatami-matted floor and looked up into his glowing eyes. "I couldn't sleep." She smiled ruefully. "I was picking up on your emotions again -- Radio Miyatsu is very loud tonight!"

Miyatsu looked sheepish. "I'm sorry. It's the documentary we watched. It made me realize how far I am from being a true animal. But at the same time, I'm not human either. Whatever I am, I'm the only one of my kind. I have no family, no peers. It's -- lonely. I think I've always felt this way, but seeing the Pershans got me thinking." He grimaced, a faint wrinkling of his nose. "If I was just an ordinary animal, I wouldn't think, would I? It would all be *insin...* um, what was that word you used, for knowing things without being taught?"

"Instinct," Aiko answered.

"Yes. Instinct," Miyatsu repeated. "Sometimes I don't like being able to think. Not when it makes me feel like this."

Aiko reached up and took one of his paws in her hand. "Friends can be a sort of family," she murmured. "And I am your friend, Miyatsu. We just happen to be of a different species."

He smiled gratefully at her. "Yes. You are my friend. And Sakaki, too. You've both been such good friends to me."

Lying back again, he squeezed her fingers gently, in wordless thanks. "I'll try to keep my emotions quieter," he said. "But --would you stay for a little longer, Aiko? Just for a few minutes. I was never alone on Shima, but at night now, there's only me." He gave a wan smile. "Sometimes I even miss the sound of the Coatis squabbling!"

Aiko settled herself comfortably with her back against the sofa, thinking of the irony of the situation she was holding the paw of the most powerful GMA the world had ever seen because he was lonely!

This close, and holding his paw besides, she felt almost as if she could read Miyatsu's mind. Gradually, as the swirling patterns of his brain calmed, she felt him relax. His thoughts became slow and easy, and Aiko could feel them subliminally, as aware of them as she was of the wavelets lapping and breaking on the beach. After a few more minutes, Miyatsu's breathing became slow, and his grip on her hand went loose as he slipped into sleep.

She sat quietly watching him, the moonlight coming in through the window silvering his silky fur and cat-like whiskers. His profile in sleep still resembled the kitten she had known as a child, although far bigger and stronger now, with a gracefully defined jawline and a long, leanly-muscled neck disappearing under the blanket.

But there was still something of the vulnerable halfling about him, neither fully animal nor wholly human, caught between the two worlds and an outsider in both. Too intelligent to ever be content living as an animal, his only hope lay in managing to cope and live within the human world which feared and wished to subjugate him.

Of course he felt lonely: he was the only one of his kind in the entire world, and one that could never have come about naturally. His situation made her feel a slow roil of anger at her own species, and she became even more determined to help him learn how to live in the culture that had created him. Humans owed him that much, at least.

She was beginning to feel tired herself, her proximity to the sleeping Miyatsu having a soporific effect. She yawned, then reluctantly let go of Miyatsu's warm paw, stood and went to her room, shutting the door quietly behind her.

Sleep did not evade her this time.

*

She woke in the dim pre-dawn light of morning, her body shaking and trembling as she gasped into the pillow in orgasm.

Once the room had stopped spinning and come back into focus, she drew a shuddering breath and slowly uncurled, to lie staring up at the ceiling.

Well. *That* had been unexpected. Usually her erotic dreams didn't take her all the way through to the finale like that; generally she woke up and either continued on to orgasm or let it settle, depending on her mood and how tired she was.

Aiko sincerely hoped Miyatsu was a sound sleeper. She knew he had excellent hearing; if awake, he would have surely heard her gasping as she climaxed. Although their discussion last night had made her realize that he was a pragmatic virgin who regarded masturbation with the same unselfconscious lack of embarrassment as he would eating or drinking, still she felt uncomfortably modest at the thought of him overhearing her private pleasure.

She thought back, trying to recall the dream. With a feeling of resignation, she remembered that it had been about those blasted Pershans again!

She'd been Rahni, and her mate had come out of the den, his fur and eyes shining silver in the moonlight. Her heart had lifted in adoration at the sight of him: handsome and leanly-muscled, with his lashing tail and sweet nature, he was everything she'd ever wanted. They'd groomed each other tenderly, purring and rubbing their cheeks together, reveling in the love they shared. And then... well, Aiko was still feeling the pleasantly languorous afterglow of *then*.

She pulled a face at herself. Did it count as bestiality if it was just a dream, and she was the animal besides? Maybe she needed another boyfriend if watching a simple nature documentary made her so horny!

Her last serious boyfriend had been during university. He was a class-mate called Hiroshi. Unfortunately, Hiroshi had been as generous as his name suggested, to the extent that he wanted to give himself to every pretty girl he saw. Finally Aiko had ended their relationship, knowing he would always cheat on her otherwise.

It surprised her now to remember how broken-hearted she had been at his infidelities. Perhaps that was why she'd been single since; too wary to risk her heart again, she'd thrown herself into her work, despite Suzu's strenuous attempts to match her up with friends!

Maybe she ought to consider some of Suzu's males more seriously, she thought, even as she made a wry face at the thought of them. Oh, they were all right, she supposed, but there was a uniform *sameness* about them all that made them uninspiring to her.

She turned over onto her side, preparatory to going back to sleep for an hour, and just for a drowsy moment, felt herself wishing that the Purshan in her dream had been real, and human. Because she could seriously fancy him, if only he'd been the right species...

Chapter Four - Love Not Human

Chapter 5 of 23

Aiko promises to help Miyatsu achieve his dream of creating his own species, using his cloned cells and her knowledge as a top scientist in the genetics field. But to do that and to buy Miyatsu's freedom from Raikatuji Sakaki, they need money. Aiko pledges to invest her money on Miyatsu winning his upcoming circuit matches. Miyatsu then reveals to Aiko his true feelings for her, and Aiko is forced to do some soul-searching concerning her own emotions regarding him. Can she love a creature that is only part-human? And can she deal with society's condemnation if she does?

Chapter Four -- Love Not Human

Aiko relaxed on the grass with her back against a tree trunk. Miyatsu was stretched full-length beside her, his head propped up on both forepaws as he slowly read aloud from a newspaper on the ground in front of him, working out unfamiliar words from their context.

He had approached learning to read with the same determination he applied to everything and was now reading easier passages competently. The remains of their picnic lunch sat to one side of the pair.

It had been oppressively humid all morning, and by noon, clouds were massed in a hot heavy blanket across the sky. But here, under the trees behind the stadium, it was cool. The sound of waves breaking gently on the beach could be heard clearly, and along with the buzzing of bees and Miyatsu's slightly halting reading, it was very peaceful...

"Miyatsu! Where are you?"

Miyatsu made an annoyed sound and looked up from the newspaper, the tip of his tail flicking in irritation.

"Oh, don't go," Aiko objected lazily. "Let Sakaki find us. It's still our lunch hour."

Miyatsu considered, then settled back on the grass. "You're right. He can come to me."

Aiko made no comment, thinking about the incongruity of Sakaki and Miyatsu's genetic relationship. She had kept the knowledge to herself so far, not sure how Miyatsu would handle it. She fully intended to let him know the truth in time, when he became a little more sophisticated in the ways of the world.

"Still," Miyatsu continued his line of thought, "I'm a GMA, not a human. Sakaki owns me. I wish..." He sighed and broke off, then pushed up from his prone position with a very catlike stretch of his long back. He sat, flicking his tail to curl over his front paws neatly, and stared off into the distance, lost in thought.

Aiko tried to pick up his emotions with her psychic empathy, but felt her way blocked and gave up on the attempt. Recently, Miyatsu had taken to shielding his emotions. It had been Sakaki's suggestion, when it became obvious that other psychic GMAs Miyatsu faced in battle could guess what he was about to do from 'reading' his emotions. Such battles had gone on and on, with some ending in a draw between Miyatsu and his opponent.

Miyatsu's shielding proved effective, to such an extent that he was again winning most of his training matches. But a side-effect was that Aiko now had a great deal of difficulty reading him. It was only in unguarded moments that the shields faltered and his mental voice once again became crystal clear to her. In the past couple of weeks, he had been shielding almost all the time.

Before she'd met him, she would have given anything to be free of the confusing alien emotions she felt, but now she missed their previously easy rapport and wondered why Miyatsu bothered to shield when he was with her. Perhaps the practice came in handy, or maybe it was just becoming automatic.

"What do you wish?" she prompted when it appeared Miyatsu was not about to elaborate.

"I wish -- that I could clone others like me," Miyatsu said. He began speaking in a rush, his eyes shining, and Aiko realised this was a subject he had been thinking about for some time and felt strongly about. "I want to go back to Shima and use the facilities there to clone kittens from my genes. I wouldn't be the only one of my species then. I'd have a family, like the wild Purshans we watched on television." His expression changed. "Only it's an impossible dream," he finished regretfully.

"Why? I'm sure the scientists at Shima would be able to eliminate anaphylactic shock from occurring in any kittens it's just a matter of rearranging the genes. I know I could do it; it's not an insurmountable problem. And we could get a female human to donate genetic material for the extra X chromosome we'd need to make female Miyatusus."

Miyatsu shook his head. "That's not what I mean. I understand about the human system of money now. I don't earn anything, so I couldn't afford to pay the scientists to work for me. More than that, I couldn't even buy my freedom from Sakaki. He told me he invested a lot of money in me. I can't repay that when I can't make any money. So I can never make my dream a reality. I'll remain the only one of my kind."

"Oh." Aiko thought about that for a moment. "I read your genetic profile, so I know how much it cost to make you," she began. "And the Shima labs are only hired by Sakaki, he doesn't own them. I can find out how much he paid for their facilities, and how much the scientists can be hired for..."

"Aiko, what are you thinking? It doesn't matter how much it costs, I still have no money."

"When do you go on the overseas fighting circuit?"

Miyatsu looked surprised at the sudden change of subject. "It starts in five months time."

"And it lasts for four months, with a fight a week in every town," Aiko murmured, figuring rapidly in her head. "What do you think your chances of winning are, truthfully?"

"I'll win every fight," Miyatsu answered confidently. "I've been studying the profiles Sakaki showed me of my opponents. They're tough, but I'm stronger. And other psychics can no longer read my intentions. Why do you want to know that, Aiko?"

"You have no money to make your dream a reality," Aiko said. "But I have. Not enough to buy your freedom, but I can invest my money on your winning each tournament." Then she thought of something, and her face fell. "But Sakaki won't want to let you go, especially not if you win every time. But wait a moment. Miyatsu, did you ever sign a contract, anything saying you agreed to work for Sakaki?"

"How could I? I didn't know what writing was until I met you."

"Yes, but writing's not the only way to sign an agreement. Did Sakaki ever get you to put a thumbprint on any paper after explaining to you what it was for?"

"No."

"Then you have no contract. We may have him there, Miyatsu! He didn't bother, or more likely never thought of it; he's never had contracts with his GMAs before. But you're no ordinary GMA, you've got human genes. And a human working for nothing is a slave, and slavery is illegal! Leave it to me. I'll find out how much we need, and then we'll talk to Sakaki. It's not unreasonable to pay him back his investment plus costs. At the very least, you're an employee and should be paid for your work. We can do this, Miyatsu! I know we can!"

Miyatsu stared at her in awe, his eyes wide at the possibilities. "I could have my own species," he breathed. He took her hands in gratitude. "Aiko, I'm going to win every one of those fights! I'll see that you get your money back and a fortune besides!"

"I want to be in on the cloning," Aiko answered, becoming infected with his enthusiasm. "I can work with the other scientists to create the new Miyatsu species!" She grinned. "Oh, Sakaki will be difficult, he's not going to like it at all -- one of his GMAs rebelling!"

"I owe him a lot, but I don't want to be his slave for the rest of my life. Anyway, GMAs are supposed to love their masters, and I..." His voice trailed off. He looked down at the grass, appearing suddenly ill-at-ease.

"And you don't love Sakaki?" Aiko teased, attempting to lighten his serious mood.

Miyatsu raised his head and met her eyes. "No," he said quietly. "I don't love Sakaki."

And his psychic voice was again in her mind as his shield crumbled beneath some strong emotion. It rang in her head, as clear as a bell.

Aiko, my master. It's you I love.

Time seemed to stop as Aiko stared at Miyatsu, overwhelmed by the emotions he was radiating. As always, the touch of their hands had intensified their psychic connection, and to Aiko it seemed as if there was nothing in the world but his blue eyes and the waves of love she could feel so strongly.

The tableau was broken when Sakaki suddenly pushed through the trees. Miyatsu dropped Aiko's hands hurriedly and turned to face him.

"So there you are!" Sakaki exclaimed. "Hello, Aiko. Miyatsu, I've been looking everywhere for you!"

"What is it, Sakaki?" Miyatsu asked in a subdued voice.

"I found out a new detail about one of your opponents," Sakaki said. He looked very pleased with himself. "I have a few ideas about technique for you to try out." It suddenly seemed to dawn on him that his fighting GMA seemed less than enthusiastic at this prospect. "Well, come on, then," he insisted with a grin. "You can eat later, this is more important!"

Miyatsu followed Sakaki. He did not look back at Aiko, but she could feel his unshielded emotions as a raw yearning in her mind.

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Aiko gazed at her computer screen without seeing it, her mind in turmoil. Although the stadium was not far from her office, Miyatsu apparently had his emotions under control again, and she could feel nothing from him. But that didn't help, as the revelation that he was in love with her had caused her to examine her own feelings towards him, and she was confused by what she'd found.

She was now in the absurd situation of arguing with herself, an argument that seemed hopeless whichever way she looked at it.

The logical part of her mind kept repeating that Miyatsu was a GMA, there could never be anything between them. Her emotions countered that she was a hypocrite; she'd told him he could be free from Sakaki because he was part human, so how could she deny that part of him?

But her mind insisted that no matter how potentially human-like he consistently acted, society still saw him as nothing more than a big, dangerous animal, bred to fight. He could never be accorded the same rights as a human, not even if he'd possessed ninety-nine per cent human genes. Around and around in her head the argument went, and still she didn't know how to deal with it.

She leant her head on one hand. She decided to think about it a different way, by turning the problem on its head. So, if Miyatsu were fully human, would there be a problem? How would she feel then?

The answer was instant, and for a change her logic and her emotions were totally in agreement with each other. She would be in love with him, no question. The certainty she felt was a shock, her whole body aching to gaze again into his eyes and feel the touch of his warm hands, not just on her hands, but all over her body...

She broke off the thought hurriedly as the surge of emotion and desire threatened to overwhelm her. She was *so not* going there! Oh, if only he were human, if only he were *human!*

It was wrong for them to be together in any way other than as - well, as human master and GMA. But they'd become friends, and Miyatsu's unshielded emotions had made it clear that he felt more than friendship for Aiko. And to be honest she felt the same way. If Miyatsu had been just a regular GMA, it would have been wrong for her to have these thoughts about him -- the balance of power would always be weighted with the human regarded as the superior, an unequal relationship even if the GMA truly loved the human.

But then if Miyatsu had been born a regular GMA, this problem would not have come up. Their communication would have been limited, and she would never have gotten the idea of befriending him. It was the human genes he possessed that made him not only able to speak, but to want to communicate, and it was also that which fueled his drive to learn all he could about human culture. The human component of his chimeric body craved the friendship, respect and love that other humans took for granted and which must always be denied him because of his animal genes.

She had been drawn to him from the moment they'd met, she thought, remembering her childish delight at being able to play with the kitten Miyatsu. He was a conundrum, a human-manufactured creature that could never have existed in nature, and Aiko now accepted that she loved him, loved him more than she'd ever loved any human man before. It seemed amazing to her that she'd only just realized it.

I think I've loved him from the first day I met him, she thought, all those years ago when we were both children. But I was too young to know it. And then, when I thought he'd died...

She broke off the thought. The remembered ache was still there, tight inside. Even as a seven-year-old child, she'd been heartbroken.

Was it possible, Aiko wondered, for her to get over her feeling that it was wrong for them to be together? Cultural taboo or not, if two creatures of equal intelligence loved each other, what was the harm, really?

Not so many years ago, it was considered wrong for two humans of separate races to have a sexual relationship, or two people of the same gender. Now of course interracial couples were commonplace and same-sex marriage was entirely legal. Time seemed to have a way of sweeping old prejudices aside, so long as a few people were prepared to make a stand.

And for this particular GMA, Aiko knew she would make a stand.

I love him, she admitted to herself. All of him, not just the human part. And if some people can't deal with that...well. Well, that's their problem, not ours!

She finally realized what was on her computer screen. She'd been wandering idly through the index of various breeds, her finger clicking the cursor more out of habit and to appear busy to Suzu, who was sitting across from her at the other desk. Now the clear blue eyes of a Purshan gazed out at her, bringing her back to earth with a bump. For a moment she thought it was Rajah, from the documentary they'd watched together.

Its eyes were like Miyatsu's, but there was no guiding intelligence behind them. They were the uncomplicated and accepting eyes of an animal. She closed that folder and brought up the saved data from Miyatsu's genetic profile. A three-dimensional image of the GMA's body appeared on screen. Feeling a little voyeuristic, she studied the picture more closely than she had before.

This was the closest she'd come to admitting to herself that perhaps she and Miyatsu could have a sexual relationship. If they were going to be more than friends, then sex had to come into the equation. But the differences in their genetic makeup made her uncertain.

No, let's be honest, she said to herself, I'm scared.

The size difference alone was intimidating. For Miyatsu was six foot seven inches tall, while Aiko barely made it to five and a half feet without shoes. The top of her head didn't even reach his shoulder. Sure, there were human males who reached that impressive height, but Aiko had never dated them. Or slept with them. Although if it was only sleep that was involved, she wouldn't be concerned. It was what she wanted to do with Miyatsu when they were both fully conscious that worried her.

The fact was that some GMAs had truly bizarre genitalia and mating practices, and if the same were true for Miyatsu, Aiko was not at all sure she'd physically *able* to have sex with him. She needed to find out more before she went any further. She leaned closer to the computer screen, studying the image displayed there.

As with most male GMAs, Miyatsu's genitals were usually retracted inside his body until -- well, needed, she thought pragmatically. The external opening was discreet and all but invisible under his thick coat of fur. With a click of her mouse, she changed the picture so that his penis was revealed.

Aiko blinked. The organ was not monstrous, as she had feared. Neither was it barbed, hooked or otherwise intimidating, like some she'd seen. On the contrary, it looked - small, even petite as it lay limply nestled against his fur. But apart from that detail, it appeared identical to an uncircumcised human male's penis.

Aiko felt her cheeks flush as she looked, and she suppressed a nervous giggle as she wondered if Miyatsu and Sakaki shared a family resemblance in that respect.

She clicked the mouse again, calling up the figure of a to-scale human male to use for comparison. She manipulated the figure so that it was superimposed onto Miyatsu's, lining up their penises while again stifling an entirely inappropriate urge to giggle.

Well. That *was* interesting. The data on the human figure stated that his height was five foot ten inches. But superimposed like this, Aiko could see that their penises were exactly the same size. It appeared that Miyatsu's genitals only appeared small because of his comparatively large body size. He had a penis that, if not human, was at least a reasonable analogue of human, both in size and shape.

Her computer was equipped with tools useful in working on GMA breeding projects, so another quick click of the mouse directed the screen to show both penises, Miyatsu's and the human model's, fully erect.

Aiko let out a slow breath. Again, there was no difference in erect size between the two. So, a sexual relationship was certainly *physically* possible, she concluded. But could she go through with it? Would her own prejudices rise up and swamp her?

She clicked the mouse, wiping the image and giving instead a close-up of Miyatsu's eyes. Superficially like a Purshan's, they held a definite intelligence of purpose, an awareness of his own destiny that was lacking in the other cat species.

She smiled, remembering how he had looked at her at lunchtime, and felt her body warm and tighten in response. Now that she had thought it all through, it was as if an itch had started within her. An itch that only Miyatsu could ease.

Yes, she decided dreamily. I will go through with it. I love him, I want a full relationship with him, emotional and physical...

"Who's making you all gooey-eyed suddenly?" It was Suzu's voice, alert and interested.

Aiko glanced up and saw her friend had come up beside her unnoticed. Aiko flushed guiltily. "I'm not gooey-eyed about anyone," she protested weakly.

"Huh, don't give me that! Your mind's somewhere else, I can tell. So come on -- who is he?"

Aiko shook her head. "You're imagining things, Suzu! I'm just... following up a work project."

"*Sure* you are. You've been mooning about this office since lunchtime." Suddenly Suzu looked suspicious. "It's not the boss, is it?" she demanded. "Aiko, you're not going after Sakaki, are you?"

"Suzu, that's ridiculous." Aiko laid one hand melodramatically over her heart. "On my word of honor, I have not been thinking about Raikatuji-sama!" *But certainly about one of his relatives*, she added to herself. "Besides," Aiko continued, "while I grant you that Sakaki is charming and handsome, I suspect he's also a snake oil merchant. I wouldn't trust him further than I could throw an Orochi. Just remember he's been married and divorced three times. I think that gives a major hint he'd be difficult to live with. You're welcome to him."

"Fat lot of good that does me," Suzu muttered. "He still calls me 'Dr Ogawa', polite and distant as you please! I'm not getting anywhere with him." She gave Aiko a warning look as she returned to her desk. "Just remember, I saw him first. You keep fantasizing about that guy you say you're not thinking about and keep your hands off Sakaki!"

"You can count on it," Aiko said under her breath, again returning her attention to the screen and Miyatsu's vital statistics.

Chapter Five - Sweet Dreams Are Made Of This

Chapter 6 of 23

Chapter Five: Aiko decides to act on her feelings towards Miyatsu despite what the rest of the world may think about it.

Chapter Five -- Sweet Dreams Are Made Of This

The humid weather had broken during the afternoon and rain splattered in big heavy droplets against the window as Aiko packed up to go home for the day.

She went to get her umbrella from the closet and saw with annoyance that Suzu had "accidentally" taken it with her when she left half an hour ago. That had happened before when it rained; she would return it to Aiko tomorrow with many apologies and protestations of: *"But I could have sworn it was mine."*

Hoping vindictively that the umbrella would spring a leak, Aiko made up her mind to wait downstairs for a break in the storm, then make a dash for home.

She had procrastinated for the past hour and a half about whether or not to go to the stadium to see Miyatsu and talk to him about their situation. Finally, her courage had failed her, and she'd decided to leave the talk they *had* to have until the next day.

But as she stood at the door watching the steady downpour and wondering if it would have been better to call a taxi, she heard her name called. Her heart managed to sink and lift simultaneously, an uncomfortable lurching sensation, as she recognized the voice, and she turned to see Miyatsu at the sixth-floor window of the building. He stepped off the ledge and levitated gently to the ground.

Miyatsu smiled a little uncertainly as he approached, but she could feel nothing of his emotions, as his mental shield was tightly in place this time.

"Suzu took my umbrella..." Aiko began.

"You can't walk home in this rain..." Miyatsu said at the same time.

They both stopped, and then laughed, feeling silly.

"We've lost the rapport we used to have," Aiko said ruefully.

"That's my fault, since I've been shielding. Let me walk you home to make up for it," Miyatsu replied.

Aiko shook her head. "No way am I going out in that rain."

"You won't get wet. Here, take my hand," he offered, holding his paw out.

"Why?"

"You don't trust me?" He smiled mischievously, the expression suddenly so like Sakaki's teasing expression it was uncanny. "Don't tell me *you're* afraid of the big bad fighting GMA, too?"

"Not this particular one." Aiko took the proffered paw. "Now what's supposed to happen?"

"Now I'll walk you home. I'm shielding against water. So long as you hold my hand, I can throw the shield around you as well."

"Oh!" Aiko said, her eyes widening as she followed him out into the downpour. She watched in amazement as the heavy droplets bounced and rolled away from her a bare millimetre from touching, leaving her as dry as if it were not raining cats and dogs.

"What a weird sensation!" she marvelled as they walked through the wet grass. The droplets rolled off her shoes without soaking in, leaving her feet dry. Even when they passed through the tree line to get to the beach, the heavy water-laden branches could be pushed aside without soaking them through.

Raikatuji wharf was silent and deserted this afternoon, all the small research boats out at sea; the dark timbers gleamed wetly as they walked past it and on up the beach.

The sodden sand did not cling to Aiko's shoes as it usually did, instead staying put in the tracks she left. She shook her head, setting her long black hair flying, and every strand stayed dry, as if by magic.

As they walked past a tidal rock pool full of seaweed and small darting fish, Aiko bent down, and still keeping hold of Miyatsu's hand, trailed her other hand in the water, up to her wrist. She pulled it out of the water and held it up. It was still dry. Her delighted exclamation was answered by Miyatsu's smile. It was a magical, surreal feeling, walking through the whispering landscape holding the paw of the tall bipedal cat, with nobody else to intrude upon them.

Suddenly a thought struck her and her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How long have you been able to shield against water?"

Miyatsu attempted to look nonchalant and failed. "For as long as I can remember," he answered smugly. "It was a good way to keep the rain off in the wet season on Shima."

"Then you could have gone back to the Centre that night we met!"

"You were the most fun I'd ever had. I didn't want it to end. Besides," and Aiko managed to catch the fleeting glimpse of teasing in his tone, "you were so insistent, making up a bed for me and letting me drink *two* bowls of warm milk."

Miyatsu dropped the teasing tone; his voice became serious again as they resumed walking. "I never had been anybody's guest before. You made me feel very special, Aiko. Thank you."

This was a wonderful dream, Aiko thought as she watched the pattering rain fall all around them. She found herself wishing that they never had to stop, that they could go on walking up the beach like this forever, just the two of them, hand in hand, and leave everything and everyone behind.

She felt a pang of real regret when they reached her house. For Aiko knew that here one dream must end, and she would need all of her courage to suggest another. For all her rationalizations back at work, still she knew that, if she went ahead and began a sexual relationship with Miyatsu, she would be breaking one of the unwritten but most strictly-held taboos of human society. For no matter what fraction of his genes were human, society as a whole would see this as nothing more than bestiality.

They walked up the front steps and into the shelter of the porch in silence, the soft drumming of rain on the roof the only sound. Aiko looked down at their clasped hands. Although they no longer needed to touch to keep the rain off, she didn't want to slip her hand free of his warm grip.

She looked back up into Miyatsu's face. He was watching her alertly, his ears pricked forward.

"We need to talk," she said softly.

Miyatsu sighed. "I know. Aiko, about what I said at lunchtime -- I'm sorry. I promise you, it won't happen again. Can't we -- just forget it and go on like before?"

Aiko shook her head. "There's no point in ignoring it and pretending it didn't happen, Miyatsu. You said you love me."

Miyatsu dropped her hand and turned away. He leant his forepaws against the railing of the porch and stood staring out to sea. His claws extended and retracted continually, a habit Aiko had come to recognize as something of a nervous tic, an action he used whenever he became anxious.

"I do love you," he admitted slowly. "I've never felt like this before. I think about you all the time. You're on my mind all day, and at night, at night I dream about you. I feel so happy when we're together, and so miserable when we're apart."

He turned towards her again, and his eyes were blazing with emotion. "Aiko, please don't stop seeing me because of this! I give you my word, I'll shield my emotions and never embarrass you again, but -- please let us still be friends. I couldn't help letting you see how I felt today. It was because I was overwhelmed when you promised to help me."

"That's why you've been mentally shielding so much, isn't it?" Aiko asked. She laid one hand on his arm and felt him trembling despite the warmth of the day. "Because you love me?"

"Yes," Miyatsu answered dejectedly. "I didn't want you to know. I'm GMA, you're human; I know there can never be anything between us but friendship. But there's no reason to pretend anymore." He took her hand and held it against the fur of his chest. "This is how I feel about you," he said quietly, dropping his mental shield.

Aiko gasped as she felt Miyatsu's love roll through her, filling her world. She could feel his heartbeat under her hand, beating in time with her own. The naked honesty of the emotion was almost more than she could bear.

"How could I ever accept Sakaki as my master when I feel like this about you?" Miyatsu asked softly.

Aiko gazed up into his face, so beautiful, so alien. "Miyatsu -- I -- I *can't* be your master."

Miyatsu nodded slowly. "I know," he murmured. "But I let myself daydream that one day I could belong to you. I know it can never happen, but I can't help wishing."

"Our relationship is one of equals," Aiko answered. "That's the *only* reason that I can't. But -- " she hesitated briefly before plunging on, "I would be honored to be your mate."

Miyatsu stared at her wide-eyed, and his emotions hit her so hard that she felt giddy.

"Say that *again*," he implored, his eyes searching her face. Aiko could feel disbelief and incredulous hope warring within him, and his heart under her hand was thudding rapidly.

Aiko drew a deep breath. "I will be your mate, Miyatsu. If you want me to be."

"My -- mate?" He said the words haltingly, as if stunned, as if he had trouble comprehending what they meant. "Aiko -- do you -- do you mean mates -- like the wild Pershans are mates?"

Thanks to their connection, Aiko knew what was on his mind almost as soon as he thought it. Mixed in with the hammering hope emanating from him was a healthy dose of lust as well, and she felt an answering thrill of desire ripple through her. This was it, there was no turning back now. She was committed, and glad of it.

"Yes," she affirmed seriously. "*Exactly* like the wild Pershans, Miyatsu."

She wanted very much to kiss him, but that was impossible since his mouth did not even begin to match the shape of a human mouth. Remembering how Purshans showed love to their mates, she put one hand behind his neck, and by standing on tiptoe and gently urging his head down, she rubbed her cheek lovingly against his. Miyatsu's scent this close was like a fresh cinnamon stick. He put his arms about her, a little uncertainly at first, then with more confidence, and responded to the caress with a vibrating purr as he held her.

But now Aiko could feel another emotion coming from him. Elation, certainly, but mixed into it was what? Diffidence? Fear? Aiko gazed up into his eyes and was surprised to see a small worry line had appeared between them. She had seen that expression before: it usually meant that he was studying something that was giving him difficulty.

"What's wrong?" Aiko asked. Was he concerned about how society would treat them as mates? She was sure of the love Miyatsu felt for her, and she was just as positive that she hadn't misread his physical reaction to her -- standing this close to him, she was very aware of his erection. It was still discreetly inside his body, but Aiko could feel the pressure of it against her body, a subtle bulge. So what was the problem? Perhaps she was moving too fast for him?

"Miyatsu? You -- you do *want* me as your mate, don't you?"

Miyatsu made a small, incredulous noise, which in a human might have been a disbelieving chuckle. "Want you, Aiko? I want you so much it *hurts*, deep inside my heart. But Aiko, I want to do -- what did you call it, when the Purshans were together? Mating? I want to do mating with you and make you happy, like Rajah did for Rahni. Only -- I've never done that before, not with a mate. I don't know *how*. What if I don't do it right?"

Aiko felt a surge of tenderness well up within her heart. He was still a virgin and anxious. She disengaged herself gently from his arms and took one of his paws in hers.

"It's all right," she said gently, leading him into the house. "I'll show you what to do."

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Aiko's bedroom was dim, lit only by cloud-shrouded late afternoon light coming in through the curtained window. The rain still pattered down insistently outside, a soft drumming on the roof muting all outside sound. Now and then a soft grumble of thunder could be heard, far away in the distance.

Aiko had shed clothes and shoes on their way to the bed, which seemed small now, dwarfed by the big cat sitting tensely on the edge. She knelt beside Miyatsu on the mattress. She felt none of the shyness that being naked for the first time with a new lover usually invoked: Miyatsu's gaze as he took in her body had an adoring innocence about it, making him appear passionate and nervous all at the same time. She found it immensely appealing, and it allowed her to forget her own nervousness as she concentrated on him.

Aiko smiled reassuringly. Kneeling beside him, she reached out one hand to trace the outline of his erection within his body. Miyatsu was trembling like a leaf in a gale; at the touch of her hand, he drew in a gasping breath and arched his hips towards her.

Aiko giggled. "Relax," she advised him teasingly. "This is meant to be fun."

Miyatsu's mouth quirked into an answering smile. He took her hand and licked it lovingly. His tongue was long like a cat's and slightly rougher-textured than a human's. "It's impossible to relax," he said, "with you touching me that way. But I *am* having fun."

"It gets better," she promised. "Lie down."

The sweet scent of cinnamon enveloped Aiko as she moved to lie in the welcoming circle of Miyatsu's arms, and she inhaled deeply against his chest, feeling her pulse begin to race in anticipation, matching the rapid thudding under her ear that was Miyatsu's heart-beat.

His soft fur against her naked skin made her shiver pleasurably, a feeling which was intensified when Miyatsu licked her naked neck with slow, sensual strokes in conscious imitation of the Purshans grooming each other.

The psychic bond that could be strengthened merely by contact between their hands was proving much more powerful when they lay naked together like this: Aiko could feel Miyatsu's every reaction almost as an echo overlaid onto her own, and the rush, both physical and emotional, was intoxicating.

"Let me see your penis," Aiko murmured. "Oh! I need to touch you *so much*."

"Touch me, then," he whispered, giving a slow twist of his hips against her, and Aiko gasped in delight as she felt his taut erection slip free to rub against her bare skin.

She reached down and stroked its hot length, loving the little helpless sound Miyatsu made in the back of his throat as her fingers closed on him. She remembered how the penis had appeared almost petite on her computer screen that afternoon, the size of a normal human male, but seeming small due to Miyatsu's large body. However, there was no doubting its size now: this close, with Aiko's fingers wrapped about it, stroking it, it was certainly big enough, entirely human in size and appearance.

Miyatsu was breathing heavily now, little gasps and pants, his eyes half-lidded, and Aiko was having trouble concentrating as her own desire deepened with the echo of his growing pleasure in her mind. What had she been thinking? She couldn't remember...

She wanted nothing more than to throw herself onto him and ride him to orgasm, but held back with difficulty. She wanted this, their first time together, to be special, something to be savoured. But she was already more turned on than she'd ever been with any previous lover and wasn't at all sure either of them could last much longer. She took a deep steadying breath, trying to marshal her whirling thoughts into order over the thunder of her heart.

"Aiko," Miyatsu gasped, moving his hips restlessly against her, his penis hot and throbbing in her hand. "I want to touch you too. Show me your penis."

Aiko froze for an instant in surprise, then managed to subdue a brief, inappropriate urge to giggle as she realized that Miyatsu had no idea about gender differences. How could he know? GMAs, male and female, kept their genitals neatly tucked away within themselves, driven by instinct to mate when the season and their own hormones directed them to. But Miyatsu had never had any of his own species to learn from as he grew up. Everything he knew, he'd had to base on himself. From that perspective, it was only logical to think that she had a penis as well.

She felt another hot surge of desire roll through her as she gazed at him, her innocent, rampant angel. *To hell with foreplay*, she thought desperately. *I need him NOW!*

"Females are different from males," she answered. "Let me show you."

She rose to her knees and swung one leg over his body so that she hovered above him. Then, slowly, their eyes locked, she slid down onto him. Oh, how it *felt* to let her body sink onto his hot organ, taking him deep inside her!

Miyatsu's eyes opened wide at the sensation, and he gripped her hips as he began to thrust up instinctively.

Aiko! The words reverberated inside her mind. *Oh, my Aiko!*

She threw her head back in ecstasy at the feel of Miyatsu's hot body within her, cradled between her legs. She reached down and twined the fingers of one hand in his as she rode his writhing body. This was paradise, this was better than she'd ever dreamed!

He wrapped his arms about her waist and pulled her close against his chest. Blue eyes met brown as he gazed at her raptly.

"My mate," he gasped. And inside her head, *I love you so much!*

Still deep inside her and holding her firmly, he rolled with her until she was beneath him. To her utter delight, he took the initiative and began to thrust faster, his hips rocking rhythmically as he buried his face into her neck, his panting breath hot against her shoulder. She raised her legs and locked them behind his back, clinging as closely as a limpet to a rock, letting their psychic bond wash over her at the delicious full-body contact. She felt exhilaration as Miyatsu's love washed over her: she was a goddess, and her lover an angel, worshipping her body...

Through the swirling kaleidoscope of shared pleasure, Aiko felt a sudden stab of pain as Miyatsu's carnivore teeth took hold of the sensitive skin of her neck, gripping, biting her. The feeling rode the very edge of sensation, where pain and pleasure intersect, and she never thought of pulling away. Instead, she clung to him harder, arching up against him desperately and making small whimpering sounds as the feelings threatened to overwhelm her senses.

Yes! she thought wildly. *Oh yes, mark me, make me yours!*

Over the thunder of her pulse and the panting gasps of their ragged breathing, Aiko became aware of a strange sound, soft at first but growing louder and louder, and she realized that it was Miyatsu. He was giving voice to a low, desperate growl which became a yowling caterwaul as his movements grew faster and more erratic.

The squalling reached a sharp peak and cut off abruptly. Miyatsu's eyes flew open, hot and unfocused; he gave a final shuddering thrust and collapsed onto her even as Aiko flew over the edge in his wake, her body jerking spasmodically against him as she came hard, clinging to him and crying out in bliss through the pulsing lightning flashes of orgasm...

*

Aiko lay clasped in Miyatsu's arms, drowsy and utterly at peace with the world. They were still loosely entwined, Miyatsu lying on his side with his long tail looped over her hip, and she was resting her forehead against his chest, trying not to drift off to sleep to the sound of his contented purring and the slow beat of his heart.

No prejudicial demons had lifted their heads to strike her down for daring to love another species. She'd revelled in their love-making and realized now that Miyatsu had spoiled her for any human lover who might have lurked in her future. After this, there was no way anybody else could possibly compete. Not just because of the physical wonder, she thought dreamily, although it had been absolutely the best sex she'd ever experienced; but even now, as Miyatsu held her possessively in his arms, she could feel his adoration for her rolling unabated over and through her. Never had she felt so *cherished*. No mere man could ever hope to entice her away from her GMA lover, not now.

No wonder cat-types pined and died when separated from their life mates, if it felt like this to be together. Just the *thought* of losing Miyatsu now was unendurable. Somehow, somehow she'd find a way to free him from slavery and make his dream of creating his own species a reality! With one hand she languidly stroked the soft fur at his waist.

"We're mates now," Miyatsu stated quietly. Aiko felt him rub his cheek against the top of her head tenderly, in their unique version of a kiss.

"Yes," Aiko answered, stretching lazily and twisting a little in his arms so that she could look up into his eyes. "Mates for as long as you want me, my Miyu."

"Forever, then," Miyatsu murmured, smiling a little at her use of the loving nickname. It seemed so fitting now.

Flicking his tail out of the way, he rolled onto his back, drawing Aiko close so that her head was resting on his shoulder. "Mating is for showing love to your mate and for making babies," he mused. "Aiko, do I have enough human genes so that so that we could make babies together?"

For the briefest instant, Aiko felt an intense *déjà vu*: she was holding two tiny bundles in her arms, gazing down at them tenderly. They looked rather like her memory of Miyatsu as a child, but the eyes of one baby, as it gazed back at her sleepily, were as brown as her own. The other infant was fast asleep, sucking the thumb of a hand that looked more human than paw-shaped.

The vision was gone as quickly as it had come, leaving Aiko with a feeling of real regret for the children she could never have with Miyatsu.

"No," she said wistfully. "We're too different; the biology wouldn't -- wouldn't 'fit' together properly. When the researchers created you, they used techniques not known in nature and cloning methods that had never been used before."

It was a miracle that you survived, she thought to herself.

Miyatsu nodded. "I think I already knew what the answer was going to be." He smiled at her ruefully. "But this seems to be the day when all my dreams come true. So I thought I'd ask." He cuddled closer. "I used to dream about you. When I was awake, I knew we could never be anything more than friends. The most I wished for then was that you'd become my master one day. But dreams don't follow the rules, do they? The morning after we watched the wild Purshans on television, I had a dream. About you and me. Only I wasn't a GMA anymore. I looked in the mirror and saw -- well, I looked like Sakaki, only with blue eyes."

He's got enough of Sakaki's genes to be his younger brother, thought Aiko. *Does he perhaps sense their genetic relationship?*

But Miyatsu was continuing, his eyes unfocused as he recalled the dream. "We were here, in your house. And I was human." He looked slightly embarrassed. "Afterwards, I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't control what I dreamed while I was asleep..."

Aiko remembered the dream she'd had herself, the sweeping desire that had claimed her body as she imagined she was a Purshan, and she understood what he was trying to say. "We made love in your dream, didn't we?"

"Made love," Miyatsu repeated. "Does that mean the same as mating?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Yes, we -- made love. Only -- only it wasn't like we did it just now. I didn't know how to, before. We just touched each other. But it was wonderful." Now he grinned, a look that would have definitely scared any human who didn't know him, as it exposed his sharp cat teeth. "I thought then that you had a penis! It all seemed to make sense in my dream. And when I woke up, I wished -- oh, Aiko, I wished *so much* that I was really human, so that I could be with you!"

"I dreamt of you as well," Aiko admitted. "Only I was a Pershan. I thought at first that I was dreaming about Rajah and Rahni, but now I think of it, I'm sure it was you, on all fours, with your eyes shining in the moonlight." She smiled up at him. "We mated like Pershans in my dream. Sounds like we both had fun!"

Miyatsu laughed softly, his warm breath stirring her hair. "The fun we have when we're awake is better!" He sighed. "Oh, my Aiko. People aren't going to like it, are they, us being mated and making love?"

Aiko snuggled closer. "There will be some who'll think it's wrong. But I don't care. I love you, Miyatsu. I want to be with you, I want to go to Shima with you and clone your genes into baby Miyatus!"

Miyatsu's arms tightened about her. "Then we'll make that dream come true. Together."

*

Aiko woke to moonlight.

Why was she awake? Then she realized that Miyatsu was no longer in bed beside her. The mattress was still warm, and the cinnamon-scented air proclaimed that he'd been there only a few moments ago.

She glanced at the alarm clock next to her bed. The digital readout showed that it was still early evening; they'd only slept for a couple of hours. She smiled dreamily. Sometime while they'd been talking and cuddling after making love, she'd drifted off to sleep.

She could see a line of light under the bedroom door, so the kitchen light was on. She swung her legs out of bed and stood up. Padding across to the chest of drawers in the corner of the room, she fumbled for a moment amongst the clothes, finally drawing out a nightgown which she slipped on to cover herself.

Miyatsu was sitting at the kitchen table devouring what looked like a whole roast chicken, plus various other odds and ends from the refrigerator -- since he spent so much time at her house, Aiko always stocked up with more food than she'd ever need just for herself. He looked up with a sheepish smile when he saw her.

"I was hungry," he explained. "It's been a long time since lunch."

Aiko sat down beside him. "Good idea. My stomach is rumbling too."

She helped herself to some food from Miyatsu's plate. She was a little hungry, but the truth was that she just wanted to be close to him. She shook her head at herself: it would be goofy smiles and racing pulses from now on, she just knew it! Somehow Miyatsu had the ability to make her feel the heady euphoria associated with first love. But then, she supposed, he was her first love. Since she was seven years old. The only difference was that they'd found each other again. And she was probably picking up his emotions on top of her own, doubling the effect. But whatever caused it, she wasn't about to complain: it felt wonderful.

She flicked her hair out of the way as she went to take a bite. And gasped as her hand brushed a spot on her neck, and she felt a small flare of pain.

Her sharp intake of breath made Miyatsu focus on her neck. He leaned forward with a look of concern and tilted her head to one side gently, examining the bite he'd left

there.

"Oh! My poor little Aiko," he murmured contritely. "I'm so sorry! I hurt you. "

Aiko examined the mark with her fingers, then got up and looked in the small mirror hung on the wall. The bite was obvious when she flicked her hair behind her, a reddened patch with a bruise beginning to bloom over it. One of Miyatsu's fangs had broken the skin, and a small scab showed where the blood had clotted to seal the wound. All in all, an obvious souvenir of the afternoon's love making.

She let her hair fall back to cover the mark. The pain of the small wound was negligible, and more than any other emotion, she felt rather smug about it.

Sitting back down, she picked up the food again. "It's all right," she said around a full mouth. "I didn't even know I had it until my hand touched it. I'll live!"

Miyatsu's eyes were still worried. "I should never have bitten you. I don't even know why I did, I just got -- carried away. The scent of you, the feel of you, I thought I was going to die of pleasure. How could I hurt you like that, when you made me feel so good?"

"It's called a love-bite," Aiko informed him, "and humans do it too, sometimes. Only our teeth are blunt, so we can't do much damage."

As Miyatsu opened his mouth to apologize again, she continued, "If it worries you that much, how about I bite you next time? Then we'll be even."

The worry line on his forehead smoothed out. "What, with your blunt little teeth?" he teased. "How is that going to hurt me?"

Aiko grinned back. "That depends on *where* I bite you!"

Miyatsu smiled; one paw stroked her cheek tenderly. "Do I please you, Aiko?" he asked hesitantly.

Aiko put her hand over his paw, then turned her head to kiss it. "Yes. You make me very happy, my mate."

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As Miyatsu finished his meal, Aiko went to the television. With a mischievous smile, she slipped a disc into the player. Remote control in hand, she settled on the couch, and Miyatsu joined her. He sat down and put one arm about her shoulders, pulling her close to him lovingly. He nuzzled her ear, smiling as she giggled and squirmed pleasurably.

"Don't you want to go back to bed?" His voice was hopeful.

Aiko snuggled up, feeling his renewed desire begin to pulse through her own body, and she shivered deliciously in anticipation. "No. I want to stay here with you," she teased.

He rumbled a playful growl. "Mmm. How about I go to bed *with* you? I promise not to bite this time."

"We could, I suppose. But I'd like to watch this programme first."

"What is it?"

Miyatsu's question was answered as Aiko pressed "play" on the remote. A picture appeared on the screen: two beautiful wild Pershans in their natural environment. A clinical voice-over was saying:

"Although highly affectionate and intelligent animals, Pershans cannot be domesticated once mated, as the bond between mates is unbreakable. Once mated the Pershan will not accept a human owner. If separated from its lifelong mate, it will go into a rapid decline, no longer bothering to hunt or eat. Eventually, if not reunited with its mate, it will die."

"Aiko!" Miyatsu turned delighted eyes to her. "You recorded the Pershan program!"

Aiko grinned back at him. "Do you still want to go back to bed?"

"I might watch this for a while. If *you* want to."

Aiko put her hand on the fur of his crotch and began rubbing in a languorous circle, feeling the bulge of his growing erection. "I think that's a good idea. You know how much I enjoy educational things."

Miyatsu sighed contentedly and stretched out his long hind legs, giving her better access. With a slight twist of his hips, he freed his erection. "Mmm, educational is -- good --"

Aiko glanced at the screen and saw that Rahni had rolled onto her back, batting at her mate playfully. She slipped free of Miyatsu's grasp and pulled her nightgown off in one smooth movement before assuming the same position.

"Come on then," she urged. "You have to start pacing around me!"

Miyatsu bared his long teeth in a delighted grin at the role-playing. "So I'm Rajah, is that it?"

Aiko smiled demurely, her gaze fastened on his impressive erection. "Well, you *do* have the right equipment for it, my Miyu."

"Mated couples copulate frequently, and like many other cat species, they have no set season. They will even mate when they have young kittens still nursing, leading researchers to believe they do it for the pleasure as much as to reproduce."

Miyatsu mock-growled affectionately. "If we play your dream now, do we get to play mine afterwards?"

"That's only fair," Aiko agreed, her smile becoming wider.

Getting onto all fours, Miyatsu paced around Aiko as she righted herself and crouched down.

She sighed with pleasure at the feel of her mate's warm body within her.

Chapter Six - Who Your Real Friends Are

Chapter 7 of 23

Aiko begins to deal with the social consequences of her love for Miyatsu. Raikatuji Sakaki proves himself to be an unexpected ally. Ogawa Suzu gets her dearest wish.

Chapter Six -- Who Your Real Friends Are

Aiko punched the lift button for her office. As the lift rose, she wrapped her arms about herself with a dreamy smile. For once it was not Suzu who was late in to work, but Aiko didn't care. Her mind was too full of the previous night.

It had been a wrench saying goodbye to Miyatsu at the stadium entrance. They had rubbed cheeks lovingly before parting, and he had licked her neck tenderly. The sweet scent of cinnamon was all over her. She rubbed the healing bite he'd given her, committing everything to memory. True to his word Miyatsu hadn't bitten her again, but oh! What he'd found to do with his long cat's tongue, once Aiko had suggested a few things!

After they'd made love on the living room floor, he'd picked her up and carried her back to bed, holding her against him as she drifted off to sleep. And this morning they'd made love again, slowly, savouring every sensation, drawing it out for as long as possible before succumbing to orgasm. And now Aiko felt as if she were walking on soft cinnamon-scented clouds.

"What time d'you call this?" Suzu asked as Aiko walked in.

"I see you've brought my umbrella back," Aiko countered.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry Aiko. I mistook it for mine. Still, you don't have far to go home, do you, just down the beach...." Suzu stopped abruptly, staring, as Aiko sat down at her desk. She got up and walked over, then tilted Aiko's head to expose her neck, brushing her long black hair out of the way.

"*Wow!* Hey, girl, you got lucky! Who gave you the massive hickey?" She grinned down at her. "Was it that guy you denied you were getting all hot and bothered about yesterday?"

Aiko flicked her hair back to cover her neck. "Okay, you were right! It was him. And before you start nagging me again, no, it wasn't Sakaki I was with!"

Suzu looked relieved. "Glad to hear it. So, Wonderful-san can certainly bite. But how was he under the blankets?"

"That's private," Aiko said primly.

"Oh, don't give me that! Come on, tell Aunty Suzu all the juicy details." And she pulled her chair across to Aiko's desk.

"You're going to keep bugging me until I tell you, aren't you?"

Suzu grinned cheekily. "You've got that right!"

Aiko hesitated. People had to know sometime, and it was one way to gauge their possible reactions. She decided to take the chance and confess all.

"He was -- unbelievable," she admitted. "Anything I suggested, he wanted to try. Making love with him was the most intense feeling: I've never experienced anything like it. Oh, Suzu," she sighed, "I'm *so* much in love with him!"

Suzu rolled her eyes. "I'm jealous, you lucky bitch!"

Aiko giggled, remembering. "Just before he -- *you* know -- came, the first time, he started to *growl*. That's when I got this!" And she touched her hand to the love-bite. "He got a bit carried away."

"Ooh, growling and biting! What an *animal!*"

"And afterwards, he held me in his arms and told me how much he loved me," Aiko said dreamily. "He's so tall, and beautiful, and loving. Do you know he was talking about having babies with me? He said I made all his dreams come true!"

"Forget Sakaki, I want a piece of this guy!" Suzu said enviously. "Who is he? Do I know him? He can't work at *this* dump, there's no man here who sounds as good as that!"

Aiko took a deep breath. This was the moment of truth. Telling herself that she didn't care what anybody else thought of her relationship with Miyatsu, she said, "Well, I know you've seen him. I spent the night with Miyatsu."

Suzu stared at her. "No, sorry, I don't know him. What's his full name?"

Aiko wondered for a second what Suzu would say if she came out with: '*Miyatsu Project, Batch Number Thirteen.*' "Just Miyatsu," she answered instead. "And you *have* seen him. He's Sakaki's top fighting GMA."

Suzu gazed at her blankly for a second. Then she frowned. "That joke's in *really* poor taste, Aiko. Come on, tell me who you spent the night with."

"I just did. I'm in love with Miyatsu."

Suzu paled visibly. She stood up, backing away at the same time and nearly tripping over her chair. Her mouth opened and closed as she stared at Aiko in disbelief. Finally she managed to choke, "You're *not* kidding, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

"You... you filthy little... *whore!* You had sex with that... with an *animal?*" Suzu's voice rose. "You act pure as springwater all the time, but you're really a sick psycho!" She grabbed her handbag. "I'm not staying in the same office as you! I don't want you near me! *Animal fucker!*" And she charged out of the office, slamming the door behind her.

Aiko breathed out shakily. She hadn't expected quite such an extreme reaction. She could only hope Suzu wouldn't turn out to be typical of everybody...

*

Sakaki showed up at the office just before noon. Aiko knew straight away who Suzu had gone to with her news. She must have just *loved* being able to tattle to the boss, Aiko thought. She watched Sakaki warily as he drew Suzu's vacated seat up to Aiko's desk and sat down.

"You must know why I'm here, Aiko," he began. "Dr Ogawa has given me some -- rather surprising information -- concerning you and Miyatsu."

"Sir, I don't know how much Suzu told you, but I'm sure she put as bad a spin on it as possible -- "

"She told me that you and my top fighting GMA are involved in a relationship -- a sexual relationship." Sakaki's expression softened, and he smiled at her. "Don't look so scared, Aiko. And stop calling me sir! I thought we were friends. While I don't condone what you and Miyatsu chose to do, his work in the stadium this morning was *outstanding*. I must say, I admire your gall not many people will like the idea of a human and a GMA being, er, physically intimate." He grinned ruefully. "It seems I'm not Miyatsu's master after all! I spoke to him at some length about this matter after I calmed Suzu down. He's chosen you, quite definitely. But as long as he continues to work so well for me, I have no problem."

Aiko relaxed, feeling happier. She was positive Sakaki would not understand the distinction between "mate" and "master", so she did not attempt to correct his mistake. "I thought you may have been coming to tell me I was fired!" she admitted.

Sakaki shook his head. "No. And even if I *were* one of those anti-GMA kooks you hear of from time to time, I don't see how I could stop Miyatsu from being with you if that's what he wants. He'd only leave if I fired you, and he's too powerful now for me to try stopping him." Sakaki beamed. "He's going to wipe the floor with his opponents when he competes on the circuit! I've never seen such controlled power. He told me this morning that it would make *you* happy if he won every battle. And he seems very anxious that you should be happy. Pity I can't get such devotion from my other animals, isn't that right, you lazy thing?" And he patted Koneko, who was as usual by his side. The big cat closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against the caressing hand, purring.

Aiko smiled. "*Sakaki's not so bad after all*," she thought to herself. "*Maybe I've been wrong about him*." Aloud she said, "Suzu's reaction was worse than I thought. I only told her so I could know what to expect from others, but she blew up at me and stormed out."

Sakaki nodded. "She was quite -- overwrought -- when she burst into the stadium this morning, and she wouldn't talk in front of Miyatsu at all. I'm afraid she's scared of him. It's only after she insisted we go to my office that she told me. I've agreed to move her to work in another part of the Centre. She's a sensitive girl, so I don't think she'd ever imagined such a thing as a cross-species relationship could occur."

Aiko stared at him. Sensitive, Suzu? She was as sensitive as a lump of granite.

Sakaki gestured at her neck. "That bite looks er, rather *formidable*. I don't have to start paying you danger money, do I?" he teased.

Aiko blushed, one hand going to her neck. "It's not really that bad..." she protested feebly.

"Well, I suppose Miyatsu can be forgiven. I'm assuming this was his first date." And Sakaki chuckled, highly amused at the thought. "But tell him to be a little more careful next time. I don't want to lose my best GMA researcher!" He stood up as if to go.

"Sir... sorry, Sakaki, could I ask a favor?" Aiko said.

Sakaki spread his hands. "Certainly. What is it?"

"I was talking to my father on the phone and happened to mention Miyatsu. Dad told me that you donated the cells for the human component of Miyatsu's genes."

Sakaki looked surprised. "That's right, I did. You know, I haven't thought about that in ages! When my mother told me they were going to try to recreate the fabled Adersi leopard and needed human stem cells, I volunteered."

"The favor I wanted to ask is this: could you tell Miyatsu? He feels so isolated being the only one of his species, and created by humans besides. I'm sure if you told him his genetic heritage and his link to you, he would feel less of an outsider. I mean, this makes you like *family*, and I know Miyatsu craves that sort of connection."

Sakaki considered. "I'd never looked at it in quite that light before," he said slowly. "But perhaps you're right. If Miyatsu feels some sort of -- of family loyalty to me, he's sure to put in any effort needed to win on the circuit! I'll do it, thanks for the suggestion, Aiko!"

"Oh, but... " Aiko began. She hadn't meant for Sakaki to tell Miyatsu for so base a reason, but because it was the right thing to do.

But Sakaki gave her no time to protest. "Oops, look at the time. Sorry, Aiko, I have to go. I said I'd take Suzu to lunch to help her compose herself. I'll see you later." And he hurried out of the office.

Aiko sighed, leaning back in her chair. So Suzu had finally gotten her dearest wish a date with the boss.

Chapter Seven - On The Circuit

Chapter 8 of 23

This chapter begins Part Two, set five months after the previous events, and Miyatsu is about to embark on the GMA fighting circuit, when Aiko has some unexpectedly bad news. Plus, we find out her parents' reaction when they hear who their daughter is in love with.

PART TWO

Chapter Seven -- On the Circuit

Aiko stood at the entrance to the stadium. All around her washed the sounds of GMA battle practice, but she felt a curious sense of unreality. The winter wind was chill, she could feel its icy fingers, but that too seemed like a dream, something not really connected to her.

Miyatsu and Sakaki were discussing some last-minute details before departure on the circuit tomorrow. They both looked up as she crossed the threshold.

"Aiko!" Miyatsu said, and Aiko felt her mate's pleasure at the sight of her. But then her face alerted him that something was wrong. He crossed the sand to her quickly, levitating over two sparring GMAs that got in his way.

"What happened?" he asked worriedly.

Aiko gazed up at him. "My... my father just called. My mother has... oh, *Miyu!* She has *cancer...*"

Saying the word gave it power; the nightmarish unreality shattered and she began to cry. Miyatsu gathered her in his arms, laying his cheek against her head, radiating comfort.

Sakaki walked over, concern on his face. "Aiko?"

Aiko stopped crying with an effort. Holding tightly to Miyatsu's hand, grateful for his loving presence, she turned to her boss.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I won't be able to come on the circuit. Sakaki, my mother has... just been diagnosed with cancer... " and her voice wavered. She took a deep breath. "The doctors are going to operate tomorrow, and then she'll have weeks of treatment. My father wanted to know if I could go home for a while... to... to help him care for her." And she burst into tears again, burying her face against her mate's fur.

"Oh, Aiko, I'm sorry," Sakaki said. "But surely, if she's getting such immediate treatment, the outlook must be optimistic..."

Aiko nodded. "We hope so," she murmured. "I didn't even know she was sick. My father told me she's been complaining of pain, but she wouldn't go to the doctor. She said it was just old age catching up with her. But this morning she collapsed, and Dad took her straight to hospital. That's when they found she had... had cancer..."

She looked down, drawing a shuddering breath. "Dad said the doctors don't think it has spread yet. They think they've found it in time." She gazed up at Miyatsu. "You'll have to win the circuit without me there to cheer you on," she said despondently. "I've booked a flight this evening to Kyoto. Sakaki, I'll have to take a... a leave of absence from work."

"Don't worry about the circuit now. Of course you must go to your parents," Miyatsu soothed.

"Yes," Sakaki joined in. "You just concentrate on getting your mother healthy."

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Aiko's mother was surprisingly upbeat about her illness.

"I'm glad you're here. I won't worry so much about your father," she told her daughter in confidence after Dr Fujimoto senior was sent on an errand to fetch some magazines at the hospital shop for his wife. "I can concentrate on fighting this if I know you're with him."

"But, Mum, aren't you scared?" Aiko asked.

Her mother patted her hand. "Maybe I am. But I have this disease, and being scared won't make it go away. I almost ignored it too long, to my cost. Only facing up to it and fighting will do any good now. But your father he never was very good around sick people. He fusses and worries and drives me to distraction when I should be putting all my resources into getting well. So while it does my heart good to see you, it will do my health a lot more good if you keep your father occupied!"

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After the operation, the prognosis was good, and her mother was allowed home. She required regular therapy, which left her drained, tired, and needing to rest for much of the day in bed. As a consequence, Aiko spent a lot of time with her father, and to help take his mind off his wife's condition, she spoke in depth about her work, and in particular about Sakaki's fighting GMA. She did not mention her relationship with Miyatsu, fearful about how her parents would handle such information. What if they reacted in the same way that Suzu had? But it was not long before Aiko realized that she had underestimated them.

Before she left, Aiko and Miyatsu had worked out the time differences between Kyoto and the various cities he would be visiting on the circuit. Every day at the prearranged time, Aiko would go into the garden of her parent's suburban home with her mobile. She usually made sure that both her parents were occupied indoors, but by the fifth day, her mind full of the first match her mate would be fighting that evening, she became careless.

It was chilly out, and Aiko found shelter from the icy breeze behind her father's garden shed. She sat on his potting bench in a little patch of sunlight, her back against the shed wall, and when Miyatsu rang, they spoke long and lovingly, discussing the upcoming match, the money Aiko had gambled on Miyatsu's dream, and how much they missed each other.

Miyatsu heartily disliked Suzu, who had turned her first date with Sakaki into much more and was now engaged to become the Raikatuji boss's fourth wife. Privately, Aiko thought it likely that she was just the latest in what would turn out to be a long series. Suzu had been invited along on the circuit as "GMA advisor" after Aiko couldn't go.

"She pretends to be nice to me when Sakaki is there," Miyatsu told Aiko, "but I can tell she hates being near me. I think it unnerves her that I can speak. Also, she resents the time Sakaki spends with me in training. She thinks that I'm talking to Sakaki mind to mind as you and I do, but I've never been able to break through Sakaki's natural shield. I don't know what he's thinking unless he tells me aloud with words. However, I have a right to be with him. I am his brother, after all."

There was a hint of pride in that remark. Since Sakaki had revealed to Miyatsu their genetic kinship, Aiko knew the big cat had been happier working at Raikatuji Centre. Along with Aiko's love, Sakaki's disclosure of brotherhood gave him the feeling of a family connection that he'd always craved.

They finally ended the conversation reluctantly. Miyatsu was keyed up about the coming fight; he and Sakaki were due to go to the stadium in the next hour for a warm-up session prior to the match. Aiko turned off her mobile. With Miyatsu currently in Tokyo, they were at least still in the same country. But that would change as he and Sakaki continued to travel. Next week they would fly to Seoul in Korea, then on to China, the week after Taipei in Taiwan, then on to Hong Kong. Aiko's psychic connection with Miyatsu was limited to physical proximity; with him so far away, Aiko could no longer feel his emotions and the easy mind-to-mind contact that usually filled her days and nights. She found herself missing him sorely.

She wanted to wake up next to his warm cinnamon-scented body in the morning and hear his rumbling purr as they cuddled on the sofa at night. Without him, there was an aching hollowness within her heart. The months the circuit would last seemed to stretch ahead intolerably. She would only see her mate's face relayed via satellite to the small screen of her mobile, or on the television, fighting other GMAs in gladiatorial combat for the entertainment of humans.

She sighed and stood up, deciding to return to the warmth of the house. She rounded the corner of the shed and came face to face with her father, who had been quietly planting out some bulbs for next spring. There was no way he could have missed hearing the whole telephone conversation.

Aiko felt her face grow hot with embarrassment as she remembered some of the loving things she had said to her mate and also the fact that she had mentioned Miyatsu's name more than once as they spoke, usually in conjunction with tender endearments. "Tenshi" (*angel*), "koi" (*lover*) and "aishiteru" (*I love you*) had been the mildest of these, along with others far raunchier.

Because she'd assumed both her parents were indoors, out of earshot, she had turned the mobile to its loudest setting and rested it on her knees, so that she could see and hear her mate while he spoke, without having to hold the phone to her ear; her father would have heard everything that Miyatsu had said, as well. She flushed harder, recalling that before saying goodbye, she had teased her mate with a graphic description of what she would like to do to him the next time they were together and how he had rumbled a low growl of desire and replied with a promise of some of her favourite activities...

Yes, she thought, her father must know she had not been speaking to a human.

Her father watched her expressionlessly for a moment, then he stood and brushed the earth from his gloved hands. "That was Miyatsu you were talking to, wasn't it? I've been thinking all this week that you were fonder of that cat than you let on," he commented. "From what I just heard, I fancy I was right."

Aiko stared at him. "You... you suspected? How?"

Dr Fujimoto senior shook his head. "I may be old, but I'm not senile, Aiko-chan! I've seen the way your face lights up whenever you talk about Miyatsu and the dreamy look you get in your eyes. And you talk about him a great deal, far more than if he were just an interesting work project. Far more even than if he were just a friend." He put one hand on her shoulder and began to walk with her back to the house.

"How do you feel?" Aiko asked hesitantly. "About me and Miyatsu being in a... a cross-species relationship?"

Her father was silent for a long moment, and Aiko could tell he was organizing his thoughts. Finally he said, "I won't lie to you, Aiko, this is not the future I would have hoped for you. There'll be problems for you, but you're intelligent enough to have figured that out already. Society just doesn't include part-humans in its mindset of intimate relationships, because there have never *been* any before. Most people will see your relationship simply as bestiality. But I also know you well enough to realize that you'll always make up your own mind on what, and who, is best for you."

"But how do *you* feel about it, Dad?" Aiko asked anxiously. "It's important for me to know."

"If I *did* disapprove," her father said, watching her face carefully, "would you end the relationship?"

Aiko shook her head, her mouth suddenly dry. "No," she whispered. "I love him."

"Enough to give up your family ties for him?"

At Aiko's miserable nod, he said, "Then there's not much point in my objecting, is there? I'd only lose my daughter." He sighed. "I've lived long enough to see many societal changes, both in racial and gender relationships. Things that were unthinkable when I was a boy are now commonplace. If it were anybody but you telling me this, I'd reserve my judgement on Miyatsu until after I'd met him. But I know you. If he... well, grunted and dragged his knuckles along behind him, for instance, you'd want nothing to do with him! You value intelligence."

Aiko smiled. "He's a feliniform, not a primate!" Her face became serious again. "But you're right, I do respect intelligence and honesty. Miyatsu has both."

"Well, then, when he's finished the circuit, bring him home so that I can meet him. I want to see if he can earn my respect, as he's so obviously earned yours. You didn't tell me before because you were afraid I might disapprove?"

Aiko nodded. "Yes."

Her father shook his head as if resigned to the fact. "Aah, Aiko, I remember how upset you were as a child when I told you the kitten experiments were... failing. I suspect you had a connection with Miyatsu even then. I can't change that."

"We do have a - a psychic link," Aiko confessed. "I know what he's feeling, and he can read my mind. Sometimes the intensity is frightening; there have been times when I'm not sure where I end and Miyatsu begins. I've never felt like this about anybody before, Dad. Miyatsu is my soul mate, he really is."

"Such a feeling is rare and precious, Aiko, something that can be nurtured but never forced." He glanced at her teasingly. "So now, please don't feel compelled to go out into the cold to have your telephone conversations unless of course they are to be as racy as the one you had today! That's not for your old dad's ears!"

Aiko smiled at her father affectionately. How could she have doubted that he'd understand? They'd always been so close, she'd been able to go to him with any problem without fear of censure ever since she was a little girl. She was incredibly grateful to see that had not changed. She would have been desolate if he'd reacted in a similar way to Suzu. Desolate, but still convinced that her relationship with Miyatsu was nothing to be ashamed of. The world seemed a brighter place now that she didn't have to pretend to her father about her true feelings for Miyatsu. "You're not old, Dad," she said.

He chuckled. "No? Oh well, I've learnt to live with my wrinkles. By the way, did you say Miyatsu is fighting this evening and that it will be televised? I can see there's no point in my wanting to watch any other channel while he's on, eh? I'll just have to record *Iron Chef* and watch it tomorrow!"

"Thanks, Dad. Did you hear that I've put money on his winning?"

"Yes, tell me about that. I gather there's more to that than just making money?"

"Miyatsu wants to clone his cells to create others like him, his own species. I've promised to help. However, we need money for the project. I got good odds for this first match, as he's a newcomer to the circuit and still an unknown quantity. But I know he'll win. You should see him in action, Dad -- he's so fast and agile he's like a blur, he can shield against nearly anything, he -- "

Her father held up his hands with a laugh. "All right, I won't argue -- I'll take your word that he's perfect!" He paused. "You say he wants to make more of his kind? I find that fascinating. Would you and he mind if an old GMA researcher came along to watch?" His voice was wistful as he said this. "When I retired, I thought that planting daffodils would keep me busy. But the daffodils pretty much take care of themselves, and I miss the intellectual challenge of genetics..."

Aiko smiled at the broad hint. "Would you like to come along to the Shima labs and help us? We're certain to run up against problems, and a scientist of your calibre would be very welcome!"

Her father beamed at her. "Well, if you're sure I wouldn't be in the way," he said, jumping at the offer delightedly.

"You're only invited if you bring mum along too. Some time on a lovely warm island would do her good. Oh, by the way, Dad, I've been meaning to ask you, why did you use Coati genes in Miyatsu, when Pershans are more closely related to the original Adersi leopard?"

"Ooh now, there were a number of reasons for that decision. The few preserved skins we had of the Adersi were in poor condition, we couldn't get a full reading of the genome from them, and we needed to fill in the blanks somehow. But when we began the project, Pershans were far rarer than they are today. It was impossible for us to get any; most were in captive breeding schemes. And even if we'd managed to get hold of some, we'd have needed to anesthetize them because they'd be too wild for us to safely get close! But they tend to have a bad reaction to anesthetic, so we couldn't take stem cells without risk to their health.

"Also, Pershans aren't psychic, while Coatis, after a *lot* of genetic modification, are. And we found that the modified Coati genome, surprisingly, 'fitted' better in the Adersi gaps than any other related species of feline still alive today. Plus, we wanted to lift the level of the chimeras' intelligence, which is why we added the human genes. Although," he added, "none of us ever imagined how smart number thirteen would become! In hindsight, with such a mish-mash of genetic material, it's no wonder the clones suffered anaphylaxis. If we had been able to use Pershan genes, I suspect we would now have thirteen healthy adult crossbreeds, but you wouldn't be talking on the telephone to one!"

Aiko nodded. "Without the human genes to boost intelligence, they'd just be normal GMAs."

"No, they'd be extraordinary psychic GMAs with the basic instincts of animals and no impulse control. If Miyatsu is as powerful as you say, then it's a good thing he possesses a human intelligence to restrain his instincts. I shudder to think what we could have unleashed otherwise." He shook his head ruefully. "Ah, the folly of youth! We thought we could control anything back then. Such vanity. Although," he added, "maybe they wouldn't necessarily have been vicious. There is historic evidence to show that the Adersi were kept by human witchdoctors as a type of familiar. Apparently the animals became very attached to their human companions. Rather like Miyatsu has with you." He smiled at his daughter. "Now, you be a good girl and put the kettle on for a cup of tea. I'm just going up to see how your mother's feeling. By the way, when were you planning on telling your mother? She'll need to know. Particularly if she's coming to this island after she's better!"

"I will tell her, but not -- just yet. I'll wait until she's stronger..."

"Put the kettle on," her father insisted. "I'll be down in a little while."

*

Aiko and her father were settling themselves to watch the match that evening when Aiko's mother came downstairs. She was wearing her dressing gown and had dark shadows under her eyes, but her mood seemed good.

She smiled at her daughter and went to sit beside her on the couch.

"I went up to the attic a little while ago," she told Aiko. "I was looking for something. Do you remember this little fellow?"

She held out a lumpy object. Aiko gave a cry of recognition and took it from her mother eagerly.

"Little Kitten! Oh mum, you kept him?"

Her mother chuckled. "He was your favorite toy for years. How could I ever throw him out?"

Aiko gazed lovingly at the toy, recalling how she had made him after her visit to the kittens. She had gotten into trouble because the only material she had that was remotely the right color was one of her best skirts; she had cut it up to make the soft toy and drawn rather clumsy spots onto it with a marking pen.

Little Kitten had a body that looked more like a fat rabbit than a cat. He had two black buttons for eyes, and his tail was merely a plaited piece of wool. He was sewn with a clumsy glove stitch all around. But Aiko hugged him to her nonetheless. He had helped to comfort her when she learned from her father that the kittens had begun to die, and she had taken him to bed with her every night for years. She laughed softly at the memories the toy evoked.

Then Aiko realized that if her mother had gone to the trouble of finding the toy, she must know about the real article. She looked at her mother, to see her gazing at her shrewdly.

"Your father told me about you and Miyatsu when he came upstairs earlier," she told Aiko. "I, er, admit I was a little shocked at first." She smiled apologetically at her daughter. "You hear such nasty stories about odd people who marry their pet GMAs. Plus, I'm at the age when grandchildren begin to look very appealing. But your father talked me around. He says Miyatsu is part-human, and intelligent, as well."

Aiko leant forward and kissed her mother's cheek, feeling relieved at her attitude. "I hope you'll like him," she told her. "When he finishes fighting on the circuit, I'll see that he comes here to meet you in person."

"He doesn't -- doesn't act like an animal, does he?" Her mother asked a little uncertainly. "I know what your father said, but still..."

"Your mother is worried that he may not be house-trained," her father put in teasingly.

"Don't listen to your father. I sometimes wonder if *he's* house-trained," her mother answered, with a slight smile at her husband.

Aiko thought about that for a moment. "He's human enough that if you spoke to him without seeing him, say on the telephone with the screen turned off, you wouldn't know he's a GMA," she answered finally. "He's quarter-human. He's fully literate and fascinated by human culture, and he's gentle and considerate. He's got a dry sense of humour and an appreciation of irony. I truly love him, Mum."

Determinedly she pushed away the tantalizing memories of when Miyatsu *did* act like an animal: playfully pouncing on her to pin her to the bed and licking her all over lovingly; stretching his long body alongside hers to hold her close and snuffling in her ear to make her giggle; the low mewling cry of pleasure he made just before his climax, not caterwauling exactly, but certainly not something you would expect to hear from a human throat. Aiko suppressed the recollections hastily. It wasn't just her heart that was missing her mate. The rest of her body was beginning to ache for him as well.

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The match began at last. There were to be ten fights between twenty Genetically Modified Animals, each fight scheduled to last for ten minutes or until one GMA was beaten, whichever came first. The various rankings for each contestant were shown on screen, with the more experienced circuit fighters at the top with the best odds, and the newcomers, including Miyatsu, at the bottom. Aiko saw that if her mate won his fight, she would be considerably richer.

She also noticed that Sakaki was named on the board as Miyatsu's master and trainer. Aiko squirmed a little when she saw this; it made her uncomfortable to be reminded that the rest of the world would see Miyatsu not as an intelligent being in his own right, but an animal to be owned, as property.

The first fights seemed to drag interminably: one Genetically Modified Animal, a scarred old bull Gigantos, a veteran of many matches, decidedly beat an Orochi within the time limit.

Two evenly matched animals of the same genome were next. Reptiliforms, they were sinuous and graceful, and their scales reflected rainbow patterns from the bright lights of the stadium. The pair danced and pirouetted about each other, but with neither landing anything more than a glancing blow. Aiko was surprised to see they were reasonably highly ranked, because although pretty to watch, they could have been doing a mating dance rather than a circuit battle.

It was soon obvious to Aiko that the audience in the arena was growing bored with the ballet: there were some boos and jeers to be heard from the crowd. The two animals retired after ten minutes and the points awarded showed a tie, leading to their match being re-fought, which finally produced a victor on points.

Eventually, after seven long matches between a variety of GMAs with varying degrees of skill, the announcer read out Miyatsu's name, with Sakaki as his trainer. Aiko felt her breath catch in her throat. Her mate strode out onto the sand of the arena, and Aiko leaned forward in her seat tensely, greedy for the sight of him.

Outwardly, Miyatsu appeared composed, his face expressionless. But Aiko knew his body language too well by now the way his tail tip twitched restlessly from side to side, the way he kneaded the ground a little with his feet as he walked, extending and retracting his claws, and the way his usually sleek fur bristled out around his body making him appear bigger, all betrayed his nervousness.

But his ears were pricked forward alertly, and his eyes were narrowed and concentrated fully on his opponent, ignoring the crowd in the stands, showing his readiness for the battle.

"Oh my, he is an impressive-looking fellow, isn't he?" Aiko's mother commented.

Yutaka nodded. "It's a good thing he *is* house-trained," he remarked. "We'd never be able to find a litter tray big enough!"

The view on screen changed to show Miyatsu's opponent. This was a big Pachydermaform, heavy in the shoulders, with a vicious sharp horn on its nose. It appeared to have hardly been modified at all from the ancestral rhinoceros, and looked big enough to upend a bus. It dwarfed its feline opponent, and it pawed the ground impatiently as the trainers walked to their positions behind raised barricades at opposite corners of the arena.

Aiko could see that Sakaki, like Miyatsu, betrayed no obvious sign of his feelings; but his composed face did not extend to his eyes, which like Miyatsu's were also narrowed in concentration, showing the family resemblance between the two quite starkly. He had his hands bunched into tight fists.

The klaxon went off, announcing the beginning of the battle, and the Pachydermaform charged, sand spurting up behind it. But Miyatsu was no longer where he'd been. Aiko blinked. He hadn't disappeared as she'd thought, but moved with an eye-deceiving swiftness to bound onto the back of the Pachydermaform. Using the charging beast's broad back as a springboard, he rose up again in another spectacular leap to land lightly behind the animal, turning in mid-air as he did so, his tail whipping behind him.

The Pachydermaform braked to a halt in a spray of sand, skidded around and charged back in the opposite direction. Miyatsu stood his ground for a second, and Aiko gasped, sure he'd be gored. But the instant before the Pachydermaform hit, Miyatsu's awesome psychic power lashed out, lifting the charging beast high into the air above the smaller feline's head. For an instant the Pachydermaform's legs kept pumping before it realized that it was no longer moving forwards. Its eyes wide with surprise and rage, it bellowed, struggling impotently against the invisible power holding it.

Then Miyatsu flung the Pachydermaform. It hit the ground and tumbled end over end to crash into the far wall with such force that a jagged crack appeared in the thick cement. The Pachydermaform staggered to its feet, shaking its heavy head. Its eyes were crossed and dazed-looking as it stumbled forward a few steps, then its legs seemed to buckle and it collapsed unconscious to the ground.

The entire match had lasted a mere fifty seconds.

The crowd in the arena were on their feet, screaming their approval, applauding wildly. Sakaki was beaming, his hands clasped above his head in a victory salute.

Aiko let out the breath she'd been holding. Miyatsu stared at the downed Pachydermaform for a moment, his sides heaving as he fought to catch his breath, and Aiko could see the effort the apparently easy victory had cost him. Sakaki, grinning widely, raced from behind the trainer's barricade to Miyatsu's side, clapping him on the shoulder approvingly.

The announcer was yelling things about "*fantastic victory*", "*unbelievably fast*", and "*new record*". Aiko was suddenly very glad she had invested so much of her funds on this first match. For Miyatsu had just ensured that few would bet against him in his next battle.

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Aiko's suspicion proved correct. As week followed week and Miyatsu continued to win every match with apparent ease, he soon reached top ranking. Aiko continued to invest large amounts of cash, only her payouts decreased as more and more people put their money on the "Attack Cat" as the sports broadcasters had begun calling her mate.

Miyatsu's image was now appearing in every sports magazine, usually close-ups of his impressive moves against opponents. However, it was always Sakaki who was interviewed, and none of the articles appeared to notice that the circuit's new star was anything more than an extremely gifted fighting animal. Nowhere was mention made of the fact that he could talk.

Sakaki had suggested before going on the circuit that Aiko and Miyatsu's relationship should not be publicized until after they'd finished the fighting rounds. His reasoning had been that, if it became generally known, then Miyatsu's genetic heritage would also become common knowledge, with the possible result that the GMA would be disqualified from competing as being too "human". The fact that there was nothing in the rules *against* a part-human competing meant only that the organizing officials had never imagined such a being was possible. But now Aiko was glad that she and her mate had agreed with Sakaki. For she was quite sure that once the news got out, there would be a media frenzy, and she adamantly did *not* want hordes of reporters besieging her parent's house as her mother recovered.

Aiko bought every magazine she found with a picture or article about Miyatsu. Often Suzu was in these as well, appearing side by side with Sakaki, beaming at the cameras, showing her best side and obviously reveling in the attention. The media made much of the "touching romance" of the handsome billionaire and his glamorous GMA expert-turned fiancé.

Chapter Eight - A Fraction Legal

Chapter 9 of 23

Aiko looks into the legal ramifications of Miyatsu's part-human heritage. Also, she is becoming increasingly uneasy at the toll the circuit appears to be taking on Miyatsu's health.

Chapter Eight -- A Fraction Legal

Aiko returned from a shopping errand one lunchtime to find a visitor at the house. She took one look at the round, cheery man sitting with her mother and father and flung herself at him, hugging him.

"Uncle Jo!" she cried. "When did you arrive?"

Tanaka Jomai kissed her cheek affectionately. "I flew into the country an hour ago, grabbed a taxi and came straight here. How's my best girl?"

"I'm fine. How long are you staying?"

"Jo's got two days with us," Aiko's mother said, moving up a bit on the lounge to make room.

"I wanted to surprise you all. Seriously, Kagami," he said, addressing his sister, "I decided to come as soon as you told me about your condition. How are you now?"

"The doctors are confident that I've beaten the cancer," Aiko's mother told him. "I've still got to take their horrible pills, but I'm feeling stronger every day now." She glanced at her daughter with a slight smile. "And soon I'll be well enough that Aiko can go and rejoin Miyatsu. I know she's dying to."

"Your mother's been telling me about this new boyfriend of yours," Jomei said, turning to his niece. "And I've seen him fight on the television. It appears he's the hottest thing to hit the GMA circuit in years. She tells me you have plans to, er, buy him?"

"We're buying his freedom," Aiko corrected her uncle. "I supply the money, and he multiplies it with his wins in the stadium. We also need cash to fund our dream of creating more of Miyatsu's species." She smiled suddenly. "Nobody's ever called Miyatsu my boyfriend before! I like it."

"But if Miyatsu is as invincible as everybody seems to think he is, why can't he just leave his current master?"

Aiko shook her head. "The situation is more complicated than that, Uncle Jo. Sakaki funded the project that created Miyatsu. And one quarter of Miyatsu's genes are human, donated by Sakaki. Miyatsu feels that Sakaki is his brother, he's very fond of him. He doesn't want to leave Sakaki with bad feelings. He wants to win money for Sakaki on this circuit, and then pay him back his original investment on top of that. My only worry is that Sakaki won't agree to let Miyatsu go. In that case we'll just have to go ahead and leave, with or without Sakaki's good will."

Her uncle thought about that for a moment. "I'm no lawyer," he said at last, "but I am a successful businessman with lawyers working for me. It seems to me that this may be a gray area of law, something the rules don't cover. The law says that an individual with human genes *is* human; it doesn't consider that an individual may only have a percentage of human genes, since there's never been any such thing as a *part* human before. I would imagine that legally Miyatsu would have to be regarded as human. In which case this Sakaki would have no case in law to try to force him to stay."

Aiko nodded. "That's what we thought. Miyatsu insists that Sakaki never had him sign a contract."

"You say you're going to create a new species, Miyatsu's species?"

"Yes, that's right. We'll use his genes to create kittens."

"I believe that loophole in the law would protect them legally they'd be human as well, nobody would be allowed to exploit them." Jomei nodded decisively. "Leave it with me. I'll get my company lawyer to look into it for you."

Aiko smiled. "It would be funny if the lawyer says Sakaki owes Miyatsu back pay, seeing as he's been working for nothing."

Jomei grinned mischievously. "Since Miyatsu is what amounts to Sakaki's brother, he's been working unpaid for the family company. I wouldn't be surprised if my lawyer finds Miyatsu is legally entitled to a share of company profits!"

Aiko's eyes widened. "I never thought of that!" The surprised look was rapidly replaced by a delighted smile. "I can't wait to tell Miyatsu!"

"Well, it's probably best not to say anything until I've found out for sure. It could be Miyatsu would need, oh, say thirty percent human genes to qualify."

Aiko giggled. "Don't worry. I've got access to his file. I can always doctor the books and add an extra five percent!"

*

By the end of that week, Jomei had an answer. He telephoned Aiko from his Singapore office to tell her that his lawyer was sending her a letter. This detailed the ramifications of Miyatsu's genetic heritage.

Miyatsu was legally human, with all the rights and responsibilities that entailed. Aiko rolled her eyes exaggeratedly but couldn't really feel upset when Jomei reminded her that meant Miyatsu was now obliged to pay taxes on his winnings.

"It's worth it if it means Sakaki can't legally object to Miyatsu going," she commented to her uncle. A nasty thought struck her. "If Miyatsu can be called human, will this mean he's disqualified from the GMA circuit?"

"My lawyer already investigated that point for you. It appears Miyatsu is in a rather unique situation. While he can claim humanity, he still qualifies as a GMA! The good news is that it is still perfectly proper for him to fight on the circuit, but that if he decided not to, that would be legal as well. The point is, it's up to him to decide, not his human master or trainer. He's his own master now."

*

As the weeks rolled by, Aiko became increasingly uneasy when watching the circuit battles. The tremendous effort Miyatsu was making in the stadium appeared to be taking its toll. As the weeks turned into months, he began to appear tired and thin when they spoke on the telephone, and in his televised fights, he had the look of a famished alley cat. He always dismissed her concerns when they spoke.

"I'm just missing you," he told her wistfully. "If we didn't need the money, I'd take the next plane home." He sighed, a very human sound. "Still, I have my brother for company. But if Sakaki wasn't here for me to talk to, I don't think I could stand it. It's very - isolated? Yes, isolated. Many people are always around, but to them I'm not an intelligent being. They're either frightened or they ignore me. That rarely changes. I can read, and watch television, so it's not as boring as my life was before. But I get so lonely for you."

"I wish I could come to you," Aiko fretted. "If only my mother were a little better. She's getting stronger, but I really can't leave just yet."

"Don't worry about me," Miyatsu told her. "There's not much longer to go now, so I can put up with it. How is the money coming along? Am I earning enough?"

"We've got enough to repay Sakaki his investment. Now we just need to cover the scientist's pay and provisions for when we go to Shima."

"Then I'll concentrate on that. I have my dream to work towards. I'll be all right."

But Aiko couldn't stop worrying. She missed her mate too, but she felt there had to be something more to it than that, for Miyatsu was beginning to look ill and exhausted. Finally she phoned Sakaki to voice her concerns to him.

Sakaki sighed, almost angrily. "I don't know what's come over him," he told Aiko. "He's moody and sullen all day long, pacing about his room and lashing his tail. Suzu's terrified, she won't go near him. The only time he's reasonable is when you telephone and when he's concentrating on fighting. The rest of the time he's bloody impossible. I can only guess it's because he's a cat GMA: everybody knows how temperamental they can be, and fighting on the circuit is a stressful activity even for less highly-strung GMAs."

"Please keep an eye on him, Sakaki," Aiko pleaded. "I'm really worried about him -- he looks so thin."

"He needs a kick up the backside to change his bad attitude," Sakaki grumbled.

*

The stadium was packed with spectators, and even over the television, it could be sensed that the atmosphere was thick with expectation.

Miyatsu was now the star attraction, and as such, his match was first. His opponent was a mixture of many previously modified animals, its genetic structure tinkered with in the laboratory until it no longer resembled anything previously seen in nature. It was a vicious-looking Frankenstein's monster of a creation, owned by an Australian scientific consortium.

This GMA had faced and beaten its share of opponents on the circuit and was now second in the ranking. It did not appear to be intimidated at the thought of fighting Miyatsu. It was busily sharpening its long blade-like forelegs against each other. These were a type of claw extension of the foreleg itself and were as long as scythes and quite as sharp. It leered arrogantly about at the humans in the stadium. Like Miyatsu, it was bipedal, but while not as tall, it had natural armor. An external chitinous skeleton, making it impervious to slashing or biting attacks, protected its body.

But Aiko felt dismay when she saw her mate walk onto the sand. His condition had definitely gotten worse in just the last week. He was now so thin that his ribs stood out against the fur. His face was gaunt, and his eyes looked hot and feverish.

"What's *happening* to him?" Aiko whispered. "Sakaki must see that he's sick. How can he send him out to fight like that?"

Her father and mother also leaned forward in concern. Her father put on his reading glasses to see the image on the television screen better.

"He looks as if he's been starved," he observed slowly. "What can have caused that?"

"There's another strange thing," Kagami said. "That's not Sakaki in the trainer's corner."

"You're right," Aiko answered worriedly. "That's one of the circuit trainers. But they're only hired when a GMA's trainer can't attend. So where's Sakaki?"

Just then the klaxon beginning the match blared. Sisyro, the Australian GMA, flung itself at Miyatsu, its sharp bladed forelegs slicing through the air.

But this time the cat GMA did not dispatch his opponent quickly and cleanly. Instead, Miyatsu dodged, but the movement was slow and rather clumsy, not done with his usual eye-deceiving swiftness.

Neither did he retaliate. Sisyro, encouraged by this sign of weakness in the previously invincible attack cat, threw itself into the fray again, its vicious forelegs a blur of motion.

Miyatsu spun away again, but was an instant too slow. One of the slicing blades caught him, opening a shallow red gash against the creamy-orange fur of his hind leg. Blood dripped onto the sand.

"They have to stop the match!" Aiko cried, her eyes horrified. "He's not well, can't they *see* that? Oh, Sakaki, where are you?"

Miyatsu leapt straight up into the air, somersaulting to land both long hind legs forcefully onto Sisyro's shoulders. The GMA gave a whistling cry of pain and went down, landing heavily on the sand. One of its forelegs snapped cleanly off at the growing point with the impact.

It twisted its body and slashed with its remaining blade, and Miyatsu jumped clear just in time. Clicking in rage, Sisyro scrambled to its feet again and began to circle Miyatsu carefully, looking for an opening to attack. Miyatsu continued turning to face his opponent, watching as warily.

"Why doesn't he just use his psychic power?" Kagami said. "He could pick up his opponent and throw him."

Aiko narrowed her eyes. "Telekinesis take a lot of energy, Mum. It looks to me like he hasn't got any to spare."

Aiko's father nodded. "I agree. He's using everything he has just to stay on his feet."

"He could use his light shielding technique," Aiko said. "He's told me that doesn't take as much energy as telekinesis."

Yutaka shook his head. "There'd be no point. I remember reading about that GMA's creation in the scientific journals. It can sense body heat, it doesn't need to use its eyes to fight. This is bad. What were the circuit people thinking, allowing Miyatsu to fight in this condition?"

"They don't care," Aiko said bitterly, "so long as he puts on a good show. I am going to personally *kill* Sakaki when I see him."

Sisyro fainted with its remaining blade, and as Miyatsu backed up, it rushed forwards again with its blade swinging high.

Miyatsu managed to avoid the lethal foreleg, but Sisyro cannoned into him, knocking him over. He rolled, but before he could regain his feet, Sisyro was above him, raising its blade for a downward strike. Miyatsu desperately lashed out with his legs. He twisted and pushed Sisyro off balance enough that the vicious blade missed, burying itself in the sand inches from where his body had been. Still on his back, Miyatsu raised his powerful hind legs again and landed a solid kick to Sisyro's torso. The GMA went flying, landing on its back.

Before it could recover, Miyatsu had pounced, landing on top of the GMA on all fours. Together they tumbled across the sand of the arena. There were only two spots on Sisyro's body unprotected by armor, its eyes and its throat. Miyatsu had his fangs on the armored shoulder of Sisyro, trying desperately for the throat, using his body weight to prevent the GMA from bringing its foreleg blade up. His claws were hooked into Sisyro's armor, leaving deep gouge marks.

"Miyatsu's reverted to true cat fighting," Aiko's father breathed. "Teeth and claws. Look, he's going for a choke hold..."

With a desperate heave, Sisyro was on top of Miyatsu. It slashed down, and Miyatsu's body jerked as the blade bit into his side and blood began to seep.

Aiko was unaware that she was holding both her parent's hands in a tight grip. She was shaking her head in denial. GMA fighting was not meant to be to the death, but it had been known to happen. Trainers usually forfeited when their animal was too badly hurt to continue. Miyatsu's wound did not appear serious, but the blood stained his fur in a bright bloom. The unfamiliar trainer in the corner was watching him closely, his fingers hovering over the button that would end the match and forfeit to Sisyro.

"Do it," Aiko breathed. "Oh, *please* stop the fight!"

Miyatsu gave a yowl of rage and shook Sisyro off his back. He turned and the pair faced each other.

Sisyro was slower now, tiring and more wary. Miyatsu's chest and sides were heaving as he panted for breath. The microphones in the arena picked up the sound of his rolling growl, low and menacing.

The trainer moved his hand away from the button, apparently satisfied that Miyatsu's wound was not hazardous.

With a sudden rush, Miyatsu was on Sisyro. Aiko blinked. He seemed to have found a reserve of energy for that burst of speed, or perhaps it was borne of desperation, but it was effective. Sisyro was bowled over by the impact with the feline's body, and as it leapt again to its feet, Miyatsu kicked out with one leg, striking the GMA's knee. A sharp cracking sound and a whistling scream of pain demonstrated that the exoskeleton covering the joint had been broken.

Sisyro fell to the ground, grasping its leg and rolling in agony. Its trainer hurriedly pressed the button, and the klaxon sounded, forfeiting the match to Miyatsu.

Miyatsu stood swaying in the arena as the result lit up the board. Despite his condition and without using psychic energy at all, he had triumphed. Then, as if it had been will power alone that had kept him going, he crumpled to the ground in a dead faint.

"*Miyatsu!*" Aiko screamed. She felt a sudden giddy shift in perspective; the world seemed to tilt to one side, there was a sound like velcro being ripped apart, and then she was suddenly in the stadium with the unconscious Miyatsu.

"*He's breathing,*" she thought with dizzy relief, too disoriented to wonder at how she could be there with him. "*He's alive!*"

She knelt by his side. "*Miyatsu! Wake up, my Miyu!*"

Miyatsu's eyes flickered open; he was staring right through her as if he couldn't see her.

"Aiko?" he murmured faintly. "Where are you?"

Then there were people all around, trainers and medics crowding about, and she became aware of a roaring sound, like an oncoming train. The room canted over onto its

side again, the world was rushing past, and suddenly she was back in her parent's living room, holding tight to their hands in a white-fingered grip.

"What just happened?" she whispered fearfully.

"They're saying he fainted through over-exertion," Aiko's father answered. "But that he'll be all right."

"No, just -- just then. When I -- left -- "

Aiko's mother stared at her worriedly. "Left, Aiko? What are you talking about? You didn't go anywhere."

*

"He's suffering from a condition similar in every respect to Pershan Syndrome." The Chinese vet at the circuit GMA hospital in Shanghai paused, and even over the small telephone screen Aiko could see he looked disapproving. He spoke very good, if slow, Japanese. "A Pershan, left alone by its master, will pine and stop eating. It loses condition rapidly and its health deteriorates. Left for long enough, it will eventually die. Your animal is badly dehydrated and suffering from lack of food. If you're his master, why are you not here to look after him?"

Contritely, Aiko explained the situation concerning her mother. "But what I can't understand is, his trainer, Raikatuji Sakaki, should have been there," she added. "He was supposed to be providing the emotional support Miyatsu needed. I've been trying to contact him since the match, but it appears his phone's been turned off."

"Well, although your animal should make a full recovery, Dr Fujimoto, I have no option but to mark him unfit for any more battles on this current circuit. I can only suggest that you arrange to have him shipped back to you as soon as he is released."

Aiko shook her head. "I'm coming to you," she answered. "I'm at the airport at the moment, and I'll be in Shanghai in three hours time."

The vet nodded. "I'd like to keep him here for a day or two to recover. Thankfully, his condition hadn't progressed to a life-threatening stage. Hydration therapy overnight, and the presence of his master, should see him pick up fairly rapidly."

"Can I speak to him please, doctor?"

The vet looked surprised at this unusual request. He smiled, as if he thought she was joking, a smile which faded when Aiko's serious expression didn't alter. "He's sedated, he'll sleep for the rest of the night," the vet answered. "You'll be here in three hours? I'll be off shift by then, but I'll notify the duty nurse that you're on your way."

Aiko shut off her mobile phone and stared thoughtfully at the night sky through the airport lounge windows as she waited for her boarding call. She still hadn't been able to work out what had happened earlier that evening, that curious sense that she'd been at the stadium with Miyatsu when he collapsed. It had seemed so real, but it couldn't have been, could it? She must have imagined it; perhaps it was some sort of hallucination brought on by seeing Miyatsu injured. She shook her head, unable to find any logical explanation, and it worried her.

*

Rain was falling in a depressing drizzle when Aiko arrived in Shanghai just after midnight. From the airport she caught a taxi, but had some difficulty getting the driver to understand where she wanted to go. After switching to halting English and repeating the words "GMA Hospital" several times, the driver brought up a directory of the city on his guidance system, and Aiko flicked through it until she found the hospital, pointing to it and nodding positively. Finally, she settled back in the seat as the taxi cruised through the rain-washed streets of the city.

The hospital was in an industrial area. Aiko paid the driver and got out, regarding the drab concrete building with its locked and barred front entrance for a moment before spotting the smaller night door a short distance away, highlighted by a single unshielded light bulb.

She pressed the call button and when the image of a nurse appeared on the screen, said: "Fujimoto Aiko, here to see my... er, my GMA, Miyatsu." Aiko held her identity card in front of the screen for the nurse to check. The door buzzed and unlocked.

The smell hit her as soon as she pushed the door open and stepped inside; the aroma of disinfectant overlaid an unpleasant hint of urine and excrement. It smelled like a huge pet store full of incontinent puppies. Aiko looked about her with distaste. It was a warehouse-sized place, and along the walls and stretched in long rows down the middle, barred cages of various sizes had been built to house injured GMAs.

Although the lighting was dim, within some cages movement or small noises showed that they were occupied. At least it was warm and dry, which was welcome after the icy drizzle outside, but it was still grey, utilitarian, and depressing.

Aiko's footsteps echoed on the concrete floor as she crossed to the nurse's station by the main entrance. This was more brightly-lit than the rest of the building, and the sour-faced nurse who had appeared on the call-screen looked up at her approach.

"I'm Fujimoto Aiko," Aiko repeated. "My GMA, Miyatsu, was brought here earlier from the circuit stadium."

The woman regarded her for a moment. Most GMA nurses in advertisements Aiko had seen appeared to be efficient and obliging. This nurse was not one of them.

Finally, after sizing Aiko up and down and apparently deciding that she was not going to disappear and let her get on with the solitaire card game she was playing on the computer, she got to her feet. In heavily-accented Japanese, she said, "This way."

She led Aiko down corridors of locked cages, past sleeping GMAs, past the baleful eyes of nocturnal GMAs, past GMAs large and small, some bandaged, splinted or in other ways injured. Some of the cages were covered with canvas. Each of these had a multi-lingual sign pinned to the canvas wall: *"Please do not disturb. Sedated GMA within."* The Circuit season was in full swing, so this hospital was subsequently crowded.

Near the back of the huge room, tucked in the corner where two walls met was another covered cage. The nurse led her to this and lifted one end of the canvas. Aiko crowded close and clung to the bars, staring inside.

Miyatsu was lying curled on his side on a tatami mat in a sedated sleep. A rehydration tube ran into one forearm, and his side and leg where Sisyro had cut him were heavily bandaged. The cage was not much longer than he was. A folded blanket lay by his feet, and a big, unused litter tray sat in the far corner.

"My Miyu!" Aiko breathed. She turned to the nurse. "Open the door. I'm going in there with him."

The nurse regarded her silently for a moment, and now Aiko guessed that she was translating what she had just said into Chinese and framing a response in Japanese. After a second, she pointed at the door.

"Thumb lock," she said. She took Aiko's hand and held it against the lock. It clicked open. "You want stay tonight?" she added, phrasing slowly. "Master rent mat for put beside cage. Very clean, very cheap price."

When Aiko shook her head, the nurse shrugged, turned and walked back down the corridor without another word.

Aiko opened the cage door and stepped inside. Miyatsu was still asleep; Aiko could see his breathing, slow and steady, lifting his sides and ruffling the fur of the arm pillowing his head. It hurt her to see him being treated like this. Of course, the staff at this hospital wouldn't have known that he wasn't dangerous, but Sakaki should have been here to prevent it ever coming to this in the first place. Sakaki! Aiko was going to have a few words to say to him when she saw him!

Leaving the door a little ajar, she put her small traveling bag with her change of clothes in the space between the edge of the mat and the bars and toed off her shoes.

Spreading the blanket over Miyatsu, she crawled in beside him. Reaching one arm out through the bars, she managed to grasp the end of the canvas and twitch it back down, re-covering the cage. Then, in the warm cinnamon-scented darkness, she cuddled up close to her mate, close enough to feel the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, and shut her eyes.

Lulled by the soft sound of Miyatsu's rhythmic breathing, she fell asleep.

*

Aiko opened her eyes to a close grey ceiling and wondered where she was. It took a second or two before the memory of last night reasserted itself. As it did, she felt a warm body cuddled up next to her and waves of love washing over her. She turned her head to the side and saw blue eyes regarding her solemnly.

If this is a dream, a voice rang in her head sleepily, I never want to wake up.

The sudden easing of fear for her mate was such a relief that Aiko felt as if she were floating. She nuzzled closer. "No dream, my Miyu," she murmured. "I've come to take you home."

Home, he agreed telepathically. Oh Aiko, I've missed you! He gathered her closer in his arms, stroking her hair gently. *My little mate, my heart. I've ached to hold you again.*

Aiko felt her pulse begin to speed up with his nearness. It was unbelievably erotic, lying with him once more, listening to his whispered telepathic endearments. Oh, it had been *so long!* Determinedly, she pushed the growing desire back.

No, she argued with herself. Miyatsu is still weak as a newborn kitten. How can I be thinking about sex when... when... when he's licking my neck like that... ohh...

"Miyatsu," she whispered desperately, "are you strong enough to make love? Because if you're not, please don't do that!"

Shhh. His warm paws were all over her, gently peeling off her clothes, caressing as he went. *You're here with me at last. Let me show my love.*

Aiko swallowed against a suddenly dry throat, her body shaking with the force of her desire. Since her mate seemed determined to make love to her, the least she could do was assist as much as she could. She eased out of the last of her clothes, then, still lying side by side, she hooked one leg over him, drawing him close, taking him inside herself...

In the warmth of their small canvas-covered sanctuary, they made love, re-affirming their pair bond. It was slow and gentle, as Miyatsu was still very weak, but Aiko felt she would pass out when the sweet rolling waves of orgasm claimed her, Miyatsu biting the back of his paw to muffle his yowling cries of pleasure.

*

Miyatsu was staring up at the ceiling. Still using his telepathic voice, he asked, *Where are we?*

"At Shanghai GMA hospital," Aiko answered quietly. She smoothed the fur on his chest, stroking it lovingly. It was supremely warm and cosy under the blanket. She knew she needed to get up and dressed soon, before the doctor began his daily rounds and decided to check on Miyatsu, but it was early yet. She decided a few more minutes wouldn't be a problem. And it was very hard to get up the inclination to move when her mate was under the blanket with her, holding her in his arms so possessively. "When I saw you collapse during the circuit last night, I jumped on the first plane to Shanghai. Do you remember the match?"

"Vaguely," Miyatsu said out loud, then winced. *Throat's sore,* he complained, returning to his telepathic voice.

Aiko sat up. "Open up and let me see," she instructed. She peered into his mouth, lifting a corner of the canvas as she did so to let in more light. "Stick out your tongue for me. Hmm. That's more than dehydration. That stupid vet gave you a sedative; he must have known you were related to Pershans, because he recognized you had Pershan Syndrome. Yet he still gave it to you! You've reacted against the sedative, my Miyu. Would you like me to give you some pain killers?"

At his grateful nod, Aiko dug in her handbag and produced a small bottle of paracetamol tablets, her remedy for menstrual cramps or the occasional headache. As she shook three into her palm, she rapidly reviewed her memory of Miyatsu's genetic profile, confirming that only the sedative, chocolate and aspirin were off-limits to him.

"These will take the edge off the pain until the sedative's out of your system." She unhooked the drinking bottle from the wall of the cage and unscrewed the top so that he could take the tablets. "How do you feel otherwise?"

Miyatsu managed a smug grin. *Pretty good. Parts of me are very happy!* He held the blanket open in invitation, and Aiko smiled and crawled back in beside him. *When can we go home? This hospital smells bad.*

"The doctor wants to keep you here for a day or two. And I have to contact Sakaki. His mobile's been switched off. I'm going to tear him into little pieces for leaving you alone. He was supposed to be looking out for you and keeping you company."

Miyatsu's expression changed. *It's Suzu's fault that he's gone. She persuaded Sakaki to become her mate early, and they left on a celebration, a 'honeymoon' they called it. Suzu wanted to go to Beijing. I've been by myself for a week and felt so lonely that I couldn't eat and could hardly sleep. Did you know they speak a different language here in China? I don't understand what's on the television, and can't read any of the newspapers or books.*

"Sakaki left you by yourself?" Aiko said in outrage. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I didn't want to worry you. And I thought I'd be all right, at first. He wasn't going away long, but he said he'd promised Suzu to take her anywhere she liked for the honeymoon.

"He had no business leaving you alone!" Aiko said angrily. "He's got a Purshan, he should have realized the risk."

Miyatsu shrugged. *Koneko went with him. Suzu doesn't mind her; she doesn't talk and upset her view of the world. But I'm not completely cat; Sakaki probably didn't think I'd react the same way. I didn't even know what was wrong with me, just that I felt tired all the time until the effort of getting up day after day became too much. The thought of going home to you has been all that's kept me going this week.* His eyes searched her face. *You're not disappointed that I won't finish the circuit?*

Aiko shook her head. "Oh no, my Miyu! You did a marvelous job. Even with Purshan Syndrome, you managed to beat Sisyro, and without using your telekinetic moves at all!"

A flicker of pride swept Miyatsu's face. *I didn't think I could possibly win when I found I couldn't use telekinesis. I tried to, only it hurt my head so badly I couldn't see straight. But my instincts took over, and I beat it fair and square that way. Only, we don't have enough money to go to Shima, do we?*

"We have enough to pay Sakaki. We'll find the rest somehow. Oh, I've been so worried about you. I *knew* something was wrong, but Sakaki promised me it was nothing! I *trusted* him!"

Miyatsu held out his paw, palm up. *Without you, my Aiko, I feel as if my heart has been cut out and all the joy in my life has gone.* He said wistfully.

Aiko put her hand against his in their old ritual of connection, swallowing against the sudden lump in her throat that his feelings evoked in her. Her life without Miyatsu? That was no life at all.

She pulled her thoughts away from that, from the horrible fear of loss that his collapse the previous evening had generated, the fluttering panic that had accompanied her all the way to China. After a moment, she asked, "Do you have an alternate telephone number so that I can contact Sakaki? He's not answering his mobile."

Miyatsu shook his head. *No. If I did, I would have used it to call him yesterday to tell him I couldn't compete.* He paused for a second, then continued, *Aiko, I'm strong enough to walk, if we take it slowly. Can we go back to the Circuit Hotel, instead of this place? I really need a shower, and,* his voice took on a surprised note, *I'm starting to feel hungry again!*

The canvas covering the cage door was lifted, flooding their sanctuary with light. Aiko blinked as her eyes adjusted to the sudden change. The vet's scandalized face came into focus.

He was staring, open-mouthed in astonishment, at Aiko naked under the blanket and in the arms of her genetically-modified animal. Aiko could see the conclusion he was drawing and knew that he didn't like it one bit. His mouth was now screwed up as if he had just sucked on a very sour lemon.

"You will be billed for the care of your GMA," the vet informed her in clipped tones. "And now I'll thank you to take it and yourself and get *out* of my hospital."

Aiko stood up, wrapping the blanket around herself as she did so. "I'll be glad to," she said calmly. "You've harmed my husband enough, giving him sedative when he's obviously related to the Purshan species. I may decide to take legal action against this hospital for negligence." She raised one eyebrow as the vet continued to stare at her in outrage. "Would you mind dropping the canvas? I'd like a little privacy to get dressed."

Miyatsu sat up, a low rumble of warning in this throat. "You heard my mate," he said with magnificent cat disdain. "Go away."

Reaching out one paw, he twitched the canvas out of the vet's hand and allowed it to drop back into place.

Chapter Nine - Envy, The Green-Eyed Monster

Chapter 10 of 23

Sakaki begins to see Aiko in a whole new light.

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Chapter Ten - Three's A Crowd

Chapter 11 of 23

Sakaki is becoming increasingly obsessed with Aiko and Miyatsu's relationship, leading to envy and voyeurism on his part.

Chapter Ten -- Three's A Crowd

"Sakaki, this is nice of you, but Miyatsu and I would really rather just go home..."

"Nonsense! I went to a lot of trouble arranging this party at short notice." Sakaki gazed about the room with satisfaction. Despite Aiko and Miyatsu's protestations, the car that had picked them all up had gone from the airport straight to his townhouse, a large villa in one of the most affluent suburbs of the city. The huge room was packed with people, talking, laughing, sipping drinks and nibbling finger food supplied by suited waiters carrying silver trays. Music played over the noise of conversation.

"I decided to give Suzu a proper welcome home as my wife," Sakaki continued, and decided to play the *"brotherly love"* card that was so often used against him. "You two are family, you have to be here! And you can stop glowering at me, Aiko, just stay for the next hour, all right? Straight after dinner I'll have you both driven home. You won't even have to stay for dessert if you don't want to! Oh, there's Hideyuki! Hideyuki, wait a minute, I'd like a word." And Sakaki plunged back into the crowd after his friend.

"Sakaki never considers anybody else," Aiko said resentfully. "You've been sick, you need to rest."

Miyatsu put one paw around Aiko's waist. "I rested enough on the plane."

"Well, it was still very high-handed of Sakaki to bring us here," Aiko grumbled. She looked about the room. "I don't know any of these people: they're all Sakaki's friends."

"At least they're giving us plenty of space," Miyatsu commented dryly. Nobody seemed to want to go near the tall cat and his human companion. For the most part they were being ignored. Now and then heads would glance in their direction warily, to make sure they were not coming too close. They wandered to a quieter, more dimly-lit corner of the room, where they could talk without the constant blare of music and other people's conversation swamping them.

"I wonder what would happen if I unsheathed my claws and yelled 'boo'?" Miyatsu said, gazing at the wall of human backs.

"General panic," Aiko assured him with a grin. "They'd all stampede to the door. You're the big bad Attack Cat from the circuit. Oh, well, I'm glad they're leaving us alone." She sighed. "What I'd give to be back home right now," she said longingly. "Just the two of us, in bed, under the blankets..."

Miyatsu gave a soft yearning growl. "I've been *aching* to make love to you ever since this morning," he said. "I'm pleased Sakaki wanted to spend time with me, but I wish he'd left it until later. We haven't had a minute alone together all day."

Aiko smiled, moving closer. "I thought you were supposed to be sick," she teased gently. "Are you sure you're up to it? With your sore leg and everything?"

Miyatsu grinned down at her. "If I could manage yesterday morning, trussed up like a roast turkey, I can certainly manage now! If we didn't have this audience, I'd show you."

Aiko smiled up at him; yesterday morning had been a wonderful, quick release. But they'd been apart for so long that now she really, *really* wanted a repeat performance.

His paw caressed the back of her neck, and their psychic connection made Aiko shiver with anticipation as she felt her mate's need matching and reinforcing her own. She brushed her hip against him playfully, feeling his erection under the fur, and giggled. "I believe you," she said, surreptitiously rubbing her hip against him.

Miyatsu drew in a sharp breath, closing his eyes for a second. "Don't keep doing that, or I'll have to take you right here on the floor."

"This is ridiculous!" Aiko said. "Why couldn't Sakaki have had his party tomorrow?"

"I stayed in this house for a week after leaving Shima. Would you like a tour of the rooms? Perhaps we might find somewhere -- more private?"

Aiko nodded eagerly. "Oh, yes, please! I have *such* an itch I need you to scratch."

"I know one place that's sure to be deserted. Sakaki has an indoor garden with a glass roof, he called it his con -- consy -- "

"Conservatory?"

"Yes. That word. It's full of trees and fountains and things. Sakaki doesn't like people going in there because the plants are expensive and people can be careless, so he keeps it locked when there's a party on. And it's kept warm all the time, for the plants."

"It sounds perfect," Aiko commented. "Except for that bit about the locked door!"

Miyatsu grinned at her wickedly. "There's a window high up in one wall. I can levitate up and open it. But I'll have to carry you, and it is *very* high. Do you still want to go?"

Aiko looked at him uncertainly. "Carry me? I don't know if that's a good idea. Do you feel strong enough?"

"I've recovered most of my telekinesis now. And you're only little, it's not like I'd be trying to lift an Orochi. But of course, if you're scared of heights..."

Aiko laughed softly. "Who's scared? Let's go."

"It'd be obvious if we left together. I'll light-shield so I'm not visible, then you slip out."

"All right. Where is this conservatory?"

"Go out that door over there. When we're out of this room I'll stop shielding. Then I can show you the way." Miyatsu gazed around the room quickly. "Nobody's watching."

His tall form seemed to flicker for a second and then vanished. Aiko could just make out an opaque shimmering effect in the air if she looked out of the corner of her eyes, but apart from that, it was if he had quite simply become invisible. Suddenly she felt his body behind her, his paws on her shoulders. His warm breath tickled her neck as he nuzzled and bit gently. Aiko closed her eyes and sighed as he thrust his hips against her.

"Oh, *don't!*" she implored. "People will see!"

"They can't see me," Miyatsu breathed.

He moved one paw down her body caressingly, lingering on her breast, grazing over the nipple gently and drawing a heated gasp from Aiko. His hand continued on down her stomach, further down...

Aiko hurriedly took a step away, glancing at the crowd apprehensively. "They'll think I'm having a fit," she whispered. "Let's get to that conservatory *now!*"

She felt Miyatsu's laughter in her head as he followed her out the door.

*

Sakaki wasn't listening to his guest. He made the right noises now and then as if interested but he didn't hear a word. He'd seen Aiko and Miyatsu's interlude in the corner when they thought nobody was watching, and it had driven everything else from his mind.

That look on Aiko's face, just after Miyatsu went invisible! The dress she was wearing had moved slightly as if a ghostly hand had run over it, and Aiko's cheeks instantly flushed and her eyes grew hot. At that moment, she had looked incredibly wanton, unbelievably desirable. And then she had slipped out the door, holding it open an instant longer than was needed so that Miyatsu could follow. Sakaki knew exactly what the pair were up to, and now he was burning with a strange mixture of envy and lust.

Cutting his chattering guest short he said, "Would you excuse me? I have to pop out for a moment. I need to go and check on something..."

And he made for the door Aiko had just left by.

The corridor outside was empty, but this section of the house did not lead to any bedrooms. Puzzled, Sakaki wandered what they meant to do. Surely they weren't intending to go at it like a pair of animals out here in the corridor? This hall only led to the conservatory; maybe Miyatsu didn't know Sakaki kept that locked...

Sakaki heard low voices and hurried to the end of the corridor. Cautiously, he peered around the corner. It was getting dark outside as the sun had just set, but there was still enough light coming in through the high windows to see by. Miyatsu was holding Aiko in his arms, and Aiko had both arms about his shoulders.

Miyatsu's feet left the ground, and glancing up, Sakaki saw that they were heading for one of the windows. Suddenly he understood. That window could be opened. The pair intended to enter the conservatory that way. He smiled grimly; Miyatsu had more cunning than Sakaki gave him credit for, obviously! But two could play that game, and a human could always outthink an animal, even an unnaturally clever one like Miyatsu.

Turning quickly, he hurried back the way he'd come. There was another room housed along this corridor, Sakaki's "security network". Hastily he unlocked the door with his thumbprint and entered. The room was small and dark, but a bank of television screens flickered on the far wall. Most of the screens reflected empty rooms, apart from the hall full of guests, and the kitchen, where concealed cameras in the roof showed staff busily preparing dinner. One or two of the bedrooms showed occupation; Sakaki screened out the frantic coupling going on within. The two in the conservatory were the only couple he was interested in.

This room had proved invaluable to Sakaki in the past when he had invited friends, and competitors pretending to friendship, to his house. It was very instructive what people would say to each other when they thought they were speaking privately. Shares bought and sold, legal loopholes found in tax laws, impending business transactions and wheeling and dealing of all sorts had been eavesdropped on by Sakaki from this room and acted upon. This was just another reason he was so wealthy he was forewarned of any deal, on the frontline of every new technology.

Sakaki had never thought of himself as a voyeur before, but he couldn't get Aiko's beautiful face, flushed with desire, out of his mind. Seating himself in the room's single chair, he switched all channels in the house to the conservatory camera. The entire bank of televisions flickered briefly, and then steadied, to show a single big view of the conservatory, with its ferns, logs, rocks and fountains dim and surreal in the dusky light.

He turned up the sound. Miyatsu and Aiko were already there, but they were not doing what Sakaki had expected. The couple wandered hand in hand about the huge room, pausing here and there to look with admiration at the many beautiful plants and fountains. As they walked along the paths, sensors turned on small garden lights so that they could see the various features clearly. The lights winked off again as they passed on by.

Sakaki frowned. He had thought from their previous actions that they would go about sex with the frenzied lust of cats in heat as soon as they got into the room; he hadn't expected this quiet appreciation of nature first.

Finally however, they stopped under one of the spreading evergreen trees that reared almost to the top of the glassy ceiling. The floor under the tree was thickly layered with soft leaf litter. The moon had risen by now, and its light bathed everything in a silvery glow.

Aiko turned to face Miyatsu, her lips curved in a little smile. Miyatsu let his erection emerge as Aiko languorously began peeling off her clothes.

Sakaki watched as Miyatsu enfolded her in his arms, bent his head and gently licked her neck with long swipes of his tongue as Aiko's hand slid downwards. Wrapping her fingers around her mate's engorged penis, she began to stroke the shaft lovingly, and Miyatsu gasped and closed his eyes, throwing his head back in pleasure. Aiko was murmuring endearments, and their breathing was loud over the speakers.

Sakaki's breathing had quickened as well. With a shaking hand, he unzipped his trousers...

*

Miyatsu stood with his back braced against the tree trunk, his tail lashing the ground in great sweeping curves. His front paws supported Aiko's buttocks as she clung to him, panting and whimpering in pleasure as she rode his body, moaning his name desperately.

A familiar low yowling sound began in Miyatsu's throat, a rolling counterpoint to his ragged breathing and Aiko's cries, growing steadily louder as the jerking of Aiko's hips became ever more frenzied.

Aiko could feel the awesome tsunami poised on the verge of crashing over them both, making every nerve in her body thrum in anticipation. Miyatsu's yowling filled the air as he thrust hard, his whole body shuddering with pleasure. She quivered, trying to hold it in, but it was too late. With a last desperate cry, she felt her orgasm wash out of control in hot rolling pulses that seemed to go on and on, her body jerking and thrashing uncontrollably as the intense pleasure surged through her. Vaguely, she heard Miyatsu's yowl rise to a harsh peak, choking off in an almost human cry as he let go deep inside her in a great spasm of release.

Still clinging to each other, they sank slowly down onto the thick layer of leaves and lay together, catching their breath. The physical echo of their shared pleasure washed around them like a wave ebbing and receding back into the ocean, leaving them spent on the shore.

Aiko cuddled close, smiling at the vibrations of Miyatsu's rumbling purr under her cheek. "I love you, my Miyu," she murmured contentedly.

Miyatsu's telepathic voice stroked her mind like warm fur. *I know it*, he said smugly. *Aishiteru, my heart.*

*

The party had gone on into the small hours of the morning, but Sakaki was in no mood to enjoy it.

He had cleaned up and slipped away from the security room while Aiko and Miyatsu were still cuddling, wrapped together in their afterglow, but Sakaki felt none of the blissful euphoria he usually enjoyed after orgasm.

Instead he felt bitter, angry that it was Miyatsu holding Aiko in his arms, envious that when Aiko murmured, "I love you" it had not been Sakaki she meant. That creature, the freakish *doppelganger* Sakaki's money and genes had spawned, now lay with her, sated and purring, while Sakaki burned for her still, his physical release no outlet for his emotional state.

Marrying Suzu had been a huge mistake, he thought bitterly. Aiko was the true gem, a precious stone whose real value did not need to proclaim itself vulgarly; while Suzu was all flashy glass and glitter, sharp-edged and brittle.

Aiko should have become Sakaki's fourth wife, he thought enviously. No, she should have been his first, his only, his to love forever. But Miyatsu had her. What sort of psychic spell had that monstrous cat cast over her, to make her believe she loved him? Life was truly unfair.

Miyatsu and Aiko slipped back into the guest hall perhaps ten minutes after Sakaki returned; he saw Aiko enter apparently on her own, and Sakaki's breath caught at the sight of her flushed cheeks, her tousled hair and the languorous look in her eyes. By the time she had crossed the room to the corner by the tables, Miyatsu had subtly reappeared beside her. He was again walking on all fours, limping slightly on his injured leg as if he had overstrained it, but the smugly satisfied look on his face made Sakaki clench his fists in impotent anger.

After dinner they approached Sakaki and insisted that they still wanted to go home.

"I can't tempt you to stay in any way?" Sakaki asked. "I've been wanting to introduce you to some of your fans among the guests, Miyatsu," he added. "I know they'd love to hear all about your fights on the circuit."

"No thank you, Sakaki," Miyatsu replied.

"But you can't drag Aiko away yet!" Sakaki said desperately. "She hasn't seen the rest of the house! Let me show her around at least, before you go..."

Aiko and Miyatsu exchanged amused glances, and Sakaki felt his heart lurch enviously.

"Thank you, Sakaki, but I think I've seen enough of it for one night," Aiko said with a little smile. She stepped forward and kissed Sakaki on the cheek impulsively. "And thank you for agreeing to let Miyatsu come home," she said softly. "I'm sorry I was so hard on you last night. I know you mean well."

Sakaki smiled sadly back at her. "I'll organize the car for you, then," he said resignedly. "If you're really sure you won't stay."

Miyatsu rose up onto his hind legs and enveloped Sakaki in a hug. "We love you, my brother," he said warmly. "But now we should go home. I need to rest this leg. I've

done something to over-strain it."

And Sakaki had to clutch the rags of his temper as that secret, satisfied look passed between Aiko and Miyatsu again.

*

Dawn was breaking when the last of the guests had left or been put to bed in guest rooms. Sakaki entered his bedroom to find Suzu sitting by the window, admiring the play of the early morning light on the jewels she wore.

"All my friends are just *green* with envy," she said as Sakaki entered the room. She smirked. "Especially Takara. Her fiancé could never afford this engagement ring." She held up her hand, letting the light sparkle off the big chunky diamond set around with smaller emeralds.

Sakaki forced a smile. Suzu was his wife now, he might as well make the best of it. He began to undress. "You enjoyed yourself then, Suzu?"

Suzu turned to him in surprise. "What are you doing?"

"Going to bed. I'm dead..."

"But it's daybreak, or nearly. I wanted to go out."

Sakaki yawned. "You go. I need to get some sleep."

Suzu pouted. "You're no fun." Then a delighted smile lit her features. "I'll ring Takara! She can come with me. I love watching her seethe when I buy anything I like, while she's scraping away on a secretary's salary!"

"That's right. Off you go and enjoy yourself," Sakaki agreed, sitting down to take off his shoes.

"I will then. I'll just slip into something less formal."

She walked to the full-size dressing room which passed as a wardrobe in Sakaki's master bedroom. "I love being married to you!" she exclaimed, as she opened the door, revealing row upon row of clothes. "I have such a lot of stuff now, much more than I could afford before. I must have looked like such a pauper back then!"

She grinned suddenly. "Speaking of researchers and paupers, I thought Aiko looked dreadful at dinner. Did you see her hair? It looked like a hedge!" Suzu patted her own carefully-coiffed hair appreciatively.

"I really didn't notice," Sakaki said with a shrug, as a vivid mental image of how lovely Aiko had looked naked in the moonlight appeared in his mind's eye. Her hair had been like a silvered waterfall flowing down her back as she arched and shuddered in orgasm...

Suzu sniffed disparagingly. "Oh, well, I suppose she can't help looking like a street urchin. *She* still has to manage on her own wage. Miyatsu doesn't earn anything." Suddenly she sniggered. "He probably brings her a dead mouse now and then!"

Sakaki nodded. "I know what you mean. She'd do better with a human, not a monster of mixed genes. You should have seen her tonight, when she -- " He stopped, biting his lip, suddenly aware that he'd said too much.

"When she *what*?" Suzu asked alertly. She walked back to sit on the bed beside him. "What did you see?"

"It was nothing; nothing."

"No, come on." Suzu grinned. "They got up to hanky-panky, didn't they? Tell me!"

Sakaki considered. She didn't seem shocked. Indeed, she looked fascinated. "All right, yes. I... had to go check something in the conservatory, and I saw them fooling around in there."

"They left the door open?" Suzu said in mock horror.

Sakaki nodded. He decided against telling her about his security room, realizing his new wife would probably be less than enthusiastic knowing her every move could be seen on television wherever she went in the house.

"Oh, well, Miyatsu is just a big cat, he probably doesn't understand about doors and locks," Suzu said. "And Aiko is just the sort of exhibitionist that she'd enjoy the attention if someone walked in on them."

Sakaki was remembering Aiko's frenzied movements and lustful eyes. He imagined himself rather than Miyatsu, with his back against the tree, thrusting deeply into that sweet hot body, making her moan and cry out in pleasure, urging him to go faster. He felt himself growing hard again at the thought.

"They didn't know I was there," he said, his voice suddenly husky with arousal. "They were really enjoying themselves. You should have seen them, Suzu, Aiko was going nuts..."

Suzu had a fascinated voyeuristic look on her face, but she shook her head. "I don't want to hear about Aiko. She's kinky. Tell me about Miyatsu -- "

Sakaki chuckled. His hand traveled to his wife's breast and he squeezed gently, leaning forward. "You little hypocrite," he observed with a grin. "You love hearing about what they got up to, don't you?"

Suzu frowned. "Of course not," she protested weakly, allowing him to press her down onto the bed. Then she smiled. "But you have to admit, it is *wickedly* kinky, having sex with an animal. Was he... big?"

"Enormous. And he yowls when he's screwing," he hissed in Suzu's ear, hating Miyatsu as he said it. "He caterwauls like a tom-cat in heat."

Suzu shivered. "Ooh, yes!"

"He bites and claws," Sakaki continued heatedly, his imagination adding details that he hadn't seen. "And Aiko moans and cries out and gets off on it..."

He was on top of Suzu now, pulling her clothes aside frenziedly. She lifted her legs above his back to accommodate him as he entered her roughly.

"Oh, Sakaki!" She murmured in his ear as he began to thrust frantically. "Growl for me," she whispered. "Bite me. Bite me -- and caterwaul."

Chapter Eleven - Departure

Chapter 12 of 23

Aiko and Miyatsu now have enough money and are ready to leave for Shima to begin their dream to breed more of the Miyatsu species. Sakaki does not take the news well, having convinced himself that he is in love with Aiko. His feelings towards Miyatsu begin to change to hatred.

Chapter Eleven Departure

Miyatsu's prediction concerning the Gigantos on the circuit proved correct. Sisyro and Miyatsu had been the two top contenders; with them both out of the running, the Gigantos powered through the rest of the circuit GMAs, winning every battle she fought.

The money Aiko and Miyatsu had amassed grew again, until by the end of that season's circuit they had enough to pay their entire projected requirements, plus an ample reserve besides to live on comfortably.

They had decided the best thing to do was to make all arrangements needed for the move before telling Sakaki. Then it would be a *fait accompli*, and whether he objected or not, they would leave. A comfortable house was being built for them on Shima, and the staff and laboratory was nearly ready to commence work. They had visited several times to oversee preparations, always one-day trips made on the weekends.

They had even found Miyatsu's foster mother still in residence on the island, now with an orphaned baby Coati in her care. The old Capuchin had been overjoyed to see Miyatsu again, chittering with delight when the big cat enveloped her in a hug. Aiko could feel his delight at seeing his "mother" again. The Capuchin had followed them about for the rest of the day, occasionally touching and patting her huge "son" fondly, and when the time had come to leave, Miyatsu had used his psychic ability to let her know that he would be back to visit her again, often.

And in the meantime, Miyatsu continued to refine his powers in the Raikatuji Stadium while Aiko worked on her various research projects.

*

Spring had arrived again, and the cherry trees of Kagoshima were covered with fluffy masses of flowers. Miyatsu and Aiko walked to the office one Friday morning, holding hands as they strolled beneath the fragrant cherry trees planted around the Raikatuji Centre, and a snatch of song from the Sakura Festival floated into Aiko's mind. She hummed for a second, and then began to sing it softly.

"Sakura, sakura. Noyamamo satomo.

Miwatasu kagiri.

Kasumi-ka, kumo-ka. Asahi-ni niou.

Sakura, sakura. Hanazakari."

(*"Cherry blossoms, cherry blossoms. On mountains, in villages.*

As far as you can see.

Looking like fog or cloud. Fragrant in the morning sun.

Cherry blossoms, cherry blossoms. In full bloom.")

Miyatsu listened intently. On impulse he reached up to pick one of the flower-filled branches. As the closest was still slightly above even his impressive reach, he let his telekinesis levitate him into the air. His feet left the ground until he was hovering half a meter up. He extended one claw and carefully snicked the branch off the tree with the razor-sharp edge, then allowed himself to descend once more to the ground. He presented the branch to Aiko.

"Happy birthday, my mate."

Aiko accepted the gift with equal seriousness. "Thank you, Miyu. But you've already given me a gift our house on Shima is finished."

Miyatsu nodded. "The house is something for both of us. The flowers are from me to you."

"It's your birthday too," Aiko reminded him. "I should give you a gift."

Miyatsu shook his head. "A knot of cells being put into a glass jar isn't the same thing as being born."

"It doesn't matter how you started life. I'm just glad you're here." Aiko stood on tiptoe and rubbed her cheek against his. "Let this be from me."

Miyatsu put one arm around her waist as they resumed walking. "You are my gift, every day of my life."

In her office Aiko was putting the flower-filled branch in a vase of water when Sakaki arrived.

"Hello, Sakaki," Aiko greeted him. "This is my birthday present from Miyatsu. Aren't they lovely?"

"Happy birthday Aiko! I did remember, I've got your file." His eyes swept the flowers sardonically, remembering Suzu's comment about dead mice.

"We're going to have a party tomorrow," Miyatsu told Sakaki. He didn't mention that the pair had plans to visit Shima that evening to see how preparations were progressing. They intended to live in their new house for the first time over the weekend before returning on Sunday evening. Aiko's parents would be staying with them, too, to see how island life suited them. Aiko was positive once her father saw the lab, he wouldn't want to leave. And she was equally sure that the subtropical spring on Shima would be just the thing to bring the color back into her mother's face.

"Oh, a party? You know I love parties. I am invited, aren't I?"

"We... we're going to my parents," Aiko invented quickly. "Just a small family function, nothing fancy. You and Suzu wouldn't enjoy it."

"Oh," Sakaki said, suddenly remembering that he would be expected to bring Suzu along. And there was no way she'd agree to go to anything planned for Aiko. He gave in with as much good grace as he could muster. "Well, have fun. What are you doing today, Miyatsu?"

"I'm still trying to master that flame-shielding technique. It's difficult."

"Mm, I would be inclined to say impossible," Sakaki said. "I've never heard of it being done before."

"Nothing's impossible," Miyatsu answered. "I intend to keep trying until I can block fire." He pushed away from where he had been leaning against Aiko's desk. "I'd better go and get started. Do you want to come and watch, Sakaki?"

"No, you go ahead. I may come down later in the morning. I've got a few things to do first."

"All right." Miyatsu gathered Aiko in his arms, lifted her gently off the ground and nuzzled her nose to nose before rubbing cheeks lovingly. "I'll see you later, my little mate."

Sakaki watched Aiko who was watching Miyatsu as he padded from the office. Her eyes followed his tall form until he disappeared around the corner of the corridor.

She returned her attention to Sakaki, her eyes shining, a small smile playing about her lips.

"He's back to full health now," she commented. "He regained the weight and muscle tone he lost and is as strong as ever. Doesn't he look great?"

"He does. He looked like a scruffy feral cat towards the end of the circuit."

"He just needed to come home," Aiko answered smugly.

"Now, you and I both know that's not the reason," Sakaki said teasingly. "It was *you* he was pining for, not home. Typical cat GMA, missing his master." He gestured to the desktop where Miyatsu had been leaning. Long strands of orange and black-tipped hair had been left. "He's shedding?"

"Losing his winter coat," Aiko said. She swept the fur into her hand and dropped it in her wastepaper bin. "This morning before we came in, I brushed him, but I must have missed a bit." She grinned. "I've had to shake out our sheets every morning for a week before I can make the bed. Cat hair everywhere!"

Sakaki tried to chuckle with her, but his breath caught painfully in his throat at the thought of Aiko and Miyatsu sharing a bed, talking and snuggling intimately, making love....

The now-familiar envy grew painfully in his heart like a swelling bitter bubble.

"Speaking of cats, where's Koneko?" Aiko asked, suddenly realizing that Sakaki's loyal shadow wasn't with him.

"She's at the labs today. I waited with her while one of the staff put her under. They're taking a bone biopsy for a new GMA I'm thinking of creating."

Aiko frowned. "Persians have a bad reaction to sedative."

"This is a drug Suzu and her team were working on before the we left for the circuit. They developed it especially for use on that breed. It will make her drowsy for a few hours, but apart from that there should be no side effects."

"What's the new GMA?"

"Just an idea I'm playing with. The researchers will let me know if it's feasible after they've studied the biopsy." He smiled at Aiko. "That's enough about work. It's your birthday, and I have a present for you too."

"You do? That's very kind of you, Sakaki."

"Not at all. It's in my office. Come on upstairs and I'll give it to you."

*

Sakaki's luxurious office was on the top floor of the Raikatuji Building, commanding an impressive panorama of Kagoshima city in the distance from one huge picture window, while from another the wide blue sweep of the sea disappeared into the hazy distance.

Sakaki took a flat velvet-covered box from a locked drawer in his desk. "Here you are, Aiko. Happy birthday from me."

Aiko opened the box. A beautiful diamond necklace and matching ring sparkled inside. She drew a quick breath and tentatively touched the gems, then looked back at Sakaki in awe. "Sakaki, are these... real?"

Sakaki grinned, pleased with her reaction. "Of course. Why would I give you fakes?"

Aiko stared at him. "Why would you give me the real thing?"

Sakaki's face fell. "You don't like them?"

"I love them, but -- Sakaki, they're diamonds! I can't accept..."

"Just try them on once before you refuse, Aiko. I'd love to see how they look on you. You're Miyatsu's mate; that makes you my -- my sister, you're family. I like to give my family nice things."

Aiko felt puzzled. The way he had said that sounded almost as if he felt distaste at his relationship to Miyatsu. Yet his face showed nothing but honest disappointment that she didn't want his gift. She looked back at the jewelry, then a little uncertainly she drew the necklace from its box. The pendant diamond sparkled on its gold chain.

Putting the box on the desk, she tried to put the necklace on, but the catch was stiff and difficult.

Sakaki smiled. "Here," he offered. "Let me."

He stepped behind her, lifted her hair with one hand and gently did the necklace up. It seemed to Aiko he stood for a moment longer than was needed. Her innate empathic sense began to prickle, as if trying to warn her of something. At any rate, it made her slightly uncomfortable to have Sakaki standing so close behind her. She stepped away and turned to face him. His face was very serious.

"You look lovely," he said. His voice was a little husky. "Put the ring on too. It would please me very much."

Aiko tried to ignore the sense of foreboding she felt. She told herself it was silly; what harm could it do to at least try the ring? She slipped it on, and then went to look at herself in the mirror hanging on one wall. She touched the diamond in fascination, then with a sigh, removed the necklace and ring and returned them carefully to the box.

Sakaki stared at her in confusion. "What...?"

Aiko shook her head. "I'm sorry, Sakaki, but this is too expensive a gift for me to feel comfortable accepting. You're very sweet to get it, but it's not for me."

Sakaki seemed to be having trouble understanding. "Suzu would jump through flaming hoops to get a set like that," he said in bewildered tones. "But you hand it back like it means nothing. Yet you were so happy with the cherry blossoms Miyatsu gave you earlier. How can flowers compete with diamonds?" He stopped, drawing a deep breath.

"What *do* you want, Aiko?" he demanded. "Just tell me, and I'll get it for you. It doesn't matter how much it costs or how difficult it is to get, just name it and it's yours."

"Sakaki, money isn't the issue. I appreciate that you went to the effort of buying me a gift. But you need to realize it's not appropriate. I'm still your employee, even if I am your brother's wife. There's only one thing I want from you." She stopped, biting her lip uncertainly.

"What is it?" Sakaki urged. He went to stand beside her, and smiled down at her. "What's your heart's desire, Aiko? Please tell me, and I'll give it to you. Whatever it is, I swear you'll have it!"

Aiko gazed up at him for a second, and then making up her mind, nodded. "Miyatsu and I were going to tell you together on Monday, but this is probably a good opportunity. We want to go to Shima to create more of Miyatsu's species. I know this will come as a shock to you, Sakaki, and please believe me, we don't want to hurt you. We have enough money now to pay you back the original investment and costs from creating Miyatsu. We want to give you that, so that you don't lose the money. But we'd really like to leave with your blessing."

Sakaki was staring at Aiko wide-eyed. Aiko again felt that prickling sense of warning.

"You're *leaving*?" he whispered incredulously.

"Sakaki, please understand. You know Miyatsu and I both love you: we think of you as our brother. But Miyatsu can't go on being a slave. He has his own destiny, he needs to be able to make his future in the world... "

"What about me?" Sakaki yelled suddenly, making her jump. "Do you think I'm about to take some measly pay-off and just wave goodbye?" He grabbed Aiko's arms in a painful grip. "Did you imagine I would meekly watch you both fly off into the sunset? *Did you?*"

Aiko struggled, trying to break his grip. His fingers were digging in painfully through her light summer blouse, and she was frightened by his intensity. She hadn't imagined he'd react this badly to the news that Miyatsu wanted to leave.

"Sakaki, please!" she cried out. "That *hurts*!"

Sakaki shook her, his face twisted, his eyes burning fiercely. "Hurts? Good, I'm glad, because I'm hurt too, Aiko! You're not going anywhere. Do you hear me? I won't *let you*..."

And abruptly he jerked her against him and kissed her, a hard, hurting kiss.

Aiko froze for a second in shocked surprise, then she fought against him, but his arms were tightly around her and she couldn't break free. His eyes burned into hers, and she tried to scream as he continued that horrible kiss.

Her fear overwhelmed her, and instinctively her mind flew to Miyatsu. There was a moment's intense disorientation, exactly as there had been the night Miyatsu was injured; the world tilted, a sound like ripping velcro filled her ears, and then it seemed as if she were actually in the stadium, she could see her mate standing suddenly frozen as he felt her panic.

"*Miyatsu!*" It was a silent scream from her mind to his, bridging the gap between them like an arcing electric spark. "*Help me!*"

Just as suddenly her mind was again in her body, back in the office. Sakaki was forcing her to the floor, bearing her down with the weight of his body. He was breathing heavily, his hands all over her. Aiko fought with everything she had in her, but it was not enough...

The window imploded and Sakaki was sent flying. Aiko had a surreal second where he seemed to be hanging suspended in the air amongst the shattered glass before he hit the far wall and slumped to the floor.

Then Miyatsu was kneeling beside her. He gathered her in his arms, his face frantic, and Aiko let herself slump gratefully against him. She began to cry with relief, clinging to him, hiding her face in his warm fur. She was shaking, and her mate hugged her against himself, whispering soothing words. Finally Aiko was able to draw a shuddering breath and stop the quivering of her limbs.

"You're not hurt?" Miyatsu murmured, cupping her cheek with one hand as he searched her face.

Aiko shook her head. "I'm all right," she quavered. "I was just -- so scared!" She felt her eyes fill with tears again and brushed them away. She turned to look at Sakaki. He was still where Miyatsu's psychic storm had thrown him, but he was conscious and watching them warily.

Now he was reassured that Aiko was unharmed, Miyatsu turned his attention to Sakaki. On all fours he approached the man, menace implicit in every line of his body. The fur bristled up along his back, and a low rumble of anger sounded deep in his throat. The barely-contained psychic energy of his rage thrummed in the air. For the first time, Aiko saw a ripple of fear cross Sakaki's face as he realized just how dangerous his fighting GMA could be.

Aiko could feel a wretched sense of betrayal battling with the anger emanating from Miyatsu, a feeling that mirrored her own emotions towards Sakaki. He stopped a few paces away from Sakaki, still on all fours, his muscles bunched and tense, as if he was only barely able to keep himself from leaping and tearing. His long claws were extended, hooked and sharp as razors. Sakaki sat very still, his eyes wide, his back pressed tight against the wall behind him.

"Only the fact that you're my brother keeps you alive," Miyatsu snarled. The growling increased in pitch, and then his voice cracked out like a whip, making Sakaki flinch. "*What were you thinking?*"

Sakaki huddled in on himself, his fear of the big cat in front of him obvious. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" he cried out beseechingly. "Miyatsu -- Aiko -- please believe me!"

Aiko got to her feet and slowly moved to stand beside her mate. "Sakaki, why did you do that?" she asked. Her voice still quavered with reaction, and she crossed her arms defensively about herself, rubbing at the painful bruises his fingers had left there.

Sakaki stared at her. "You're going," he said shakily. "You're leaving me! I went crazy, I don't know, I just thought -- I had to convince you to stay, somehow..." His voice trailed off. "I know you can never forgive me," he whispered. "But I never meant to hurt you, Aiko." He hung his head dejectedly.

Aiko knelt down, one arm around Miyatsu's shoulders. Miyatsu's fur was settling again; the snarl of rage had subsided. He settled onto his haunches, retracting his fearsome claws but still watchful.

"I don't understand," Miyatsu said slowly.

"Neither do I. How does scaring me half to death convince me to stay?" Aiko asked angrily.

Sakaki shook his head, not meeting their eyes. "I wasn't thinking straight, I felt hurt that you, *both* of you, would want to leave me. I didn't know what I was doing. All my life, I could get my own way by waving money under people's noses, and on the rare occasion that didn't work, I would bully them into doing what I wanted. I know, I'm a selfish bastard, I'm too used to getting my own way. That's why I didn't know how to react when you said you were going." Now Sakaki looked up at Aiko sadly. "I can't buy you. Clearly you're not interested in money or jewelry. So I -- I think, subconsciously, I decided to use the only other thing that usually works. But that only ended up scaring you. I feel like such an idiot. I love you both. You must know that."

"If you *ever* hurt my mate again," Miyatsu growled warningly, his tail lashing the floor in angry sweeps, "I won't be so restrained, brother or not. I can see you were hurt and angry when you found out we were leaving, but that doesn't excuse what you did. I felt Aiko's terror from the stadium. She will *not* be made to feel like that again. Do I make

myself clear, Sakaki?"

Sakaki met Miyatsu's eyes. He nodded. "Yes," he answered huskily. "Aiko, I can only repeat how very sorry I am. I didn't mean to scare you. Can I hope you might find the generosity to forgive me? We've been such good friends; it would break my heart to think that my foolish actions had ruined our relationship."

Miyatsu glanced at Aiko.

"You scared me very much, Sakaki," she said slowly. "I -- I don't know how I feel about you at the moment."

Sakaki nodded. "I did say I'd give you anything in my power, Aiko. That still stands. You are both free to go to Shima with my best wishes. You -- said something about paying me back my investment in Miyatsu. Keep the money. Buy yourself something pretty with it." He smiled faintly. "I know you like flowers. Use it to buy some cherry saplings and plant a grove on Shima!"

Aiko truly didn't know yet how she felt; Sakaki's attack had been so alarming and sudden, so unexpected. She was very glad of her psychic connection with her mate, for what would have happened once Sakaki had forced her to the floor if Miyatsu had not come to her aid? She remembered Sakaki's wild eyes and his hot arousal through his clothes, pressing hard against her hip. It was fairly obvious what would have happened next.

But he had been a good friend over the past year, one of the couple's few supporters. Couldn't she forgive him one mistake, especially as there was no real harm done?

He betrayed my trust, she thought. *Mine and Miyatsu's. Isn't that harm enough?*

But then, as she looked at Sakaki's contrite and frightened face, she knew it did no good to hang onto it.

She nodded. "All right, Sakaki. I do forgive you. You are family, and it's true you've been a good friend." She stood, and Miyatsu rose up to a two-footed stance as well.

He stood for a moment looking down at Sakaki, then finally extended his paw. "Let me help you up," he offered. Aiko could feel that he still had not completely forgiven Sakaki, but was willing to go along with his mate's decision.

Sakaki hesitated briefly, but then took the paw and got to his feet painfully, wincing. His shoes crunched on the shattered pieces of glass all over the carpet. "I'm surprised no bones are broken," he commented. He stared at Miyatsu. "Would you really have -- killed me?"

Miyatsu met his eyes squarely. "If you had hurt my Aiko? Yes, I really would have."

Sakaki sighed, nodding. "When do you plan to leave?" he asked forlornly.

Miyatsu and Aiko glanced at each other. Finally Miyatsu spoke. "We were going to visit the island this evening. We had planned on coming back on Monday to tell you, but since you already know, perhaps we should just go now."

"Oh." Sakaki drew a deep breath. "Well, it sounds as if this is -- goodbye."

"Yes," Miyatsu answered softly. "Goodbye. Brother."

But he did not embrace Sakaki. Aiko could feel Miyatsu's pain, confusion and sadness at Sakaki's actions. She took his paw in silent comfort as they left the office.

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Sakaki stood staring at the closed door long after the pair had exited, his hands balled into fists of anger at his sides.

That monstrosity, that *creature* that claimed relationship with him, had turned on him and totally humiliated him, and Sakaki's mind seethed with a dark hatred. Why had Miyatsu not died, like all the other misbegotten experiments? Then Aiko would have been Sakaki's. Instead, she probably hated him now. She had witnessed his weakness and fear in front of Miyatsu. She must despise him.

There had been a moment when Sakaki was kissing her, when it seemed he might have won her over. For she had gone limp and unresisting in his arms, eyes closed, as if submitting. For the briefest of seconds, Sakaki had felt triumph. But almost immediately she had opened her eyes again and started trying to fight him off.

Then Miyatsu had arrived like a vengeful typhoon. He claimed he'd felt Aiko's fear. Sakaki sneered. Aiko had no need to fear *him*, he was a human, like her. They were the same species and belonged together. But Miyatsu, he was a dangerous animal, and not even natural but a freakish man-made *thing*, a hopeless mishmash of genetic material with no right to exist.

That hybridized mongrel would always get in the way of any possible relationship Sakaki might have with Aiko. What was it Miyatsu had that Aiko found so attractive, what facet or trait Sakaki lacked?

Perhaps Suzu was right and Aiko was drawn to the exotic and the freakish. But he couldn't truly believe it of her. No, it must be that "psychic connection" Miyatsu boasted of. Something about it had bewitched the poor girl, brainwashing her into believing she was in love with that monster.

Sakaki took a step towards his desk and his shoe crunched on broken glass. He stopped, then lifted his foot and stamped downwards on the jagged shards, hearing them pop and snap under his shoe. Smiling savagely, he continued to grind the glass into the carpet, imagining it was Miyatsu's limp body he was stomping on, lying beneath him lacerated and bleeding.

Chapter Twelve - Island Idyll

Chapter 13 of 23

This chapter begins Part Three. Aiko and Miyatsu are living their dream of creating a new species. In this chapter, we meet some of the results. Sakaki makes his reappearance in the story. Has he really forgiven Miyatsu?

Chapter Twelve Island Idyll

The shade cloth flapped gently in the breeze, waking Aiko from the light doze she had slipped into. She yawned lazily and turned her head to see if her mother was awake.

Fujimoto Kagami was lying on a beach chair next to her, watching the children playing and laughing in the water. "Did you drift off?" she asked her daughter.

"Hmm, just for a moment," Aiko answered idly. She started to stretch, and then remembered in time that Benjiro was still curled asleep on her lap.

She stroked his soft fur gently with one hand, and was rewarded by the toddler's drowsy purr. He was the only one of the five children on the beach not yet able to reliably levitate; therefore he still needed to be watched while he was in the water. His older siblings had gone out further than he could manage, so after he'd had a paddle in the little waves and had raced about chasing seagulls for a while on the beach, Aiko had taken him to where Grandma rested under the shade stretched between two trees. The combination of the humid subtropical summer day and the soft wash of waves on the beach had been effectively soporific.

Carefully, so as not to wake the child, Aiko sat up straighter and looked out to where the others were still playing. The eldest twins Mieko and Montaro were levitating completely out of the water while holding the hands of their younger siblings Hanako and Hideaki. They were dragging them through the waves to their delighted laughter. Water splashed and sparkled in the bright sunlight as they played.

"What energy they have," Kagami commented. "And isn't Montaro getting tall! He's eye-level with me now."

"He's beginning to look very like Miyatsu," Aiko agreed. "And Mieko is almost as tall. Although I don't think she'll quite match her brother's length. He seems to be all legs and tail at the moment!"

"Your father was trying to explain accelerated growth rates to me the other day, but I'm afraid he lost me early on. Montaro and Mieko are only ten years old; yet I'm sure Montaro's voice has started to break. When he talks, it's deep one moment and high the next!"

Aiko chuckled softly. Her eldest "son" had been both embarrassed and puzzled about the changes his body was going through as he hit his early-onset puberty. Aiko had already explained the facts of life to her "daughter" Mieko to prepare her for the start of menses and knew that Miyatsu had talked to Montaro about what he could expect.

"Humans have the most extended childhood of any mammal," she explained to her mother. "But like Miyatsu, the kittens are only quarter-human. So they're maturing earlier. It's a learning curve for all of us."

"So Mieko and Montaro are equivalent to... what human age? Twelve, thirteen?"

"Mm-hmm, around there. And while Hanako and Hideaki are chronologically six years old, they're at the same point of development as a human child of about nine or ten. While my little Benjiro," and she smiled down at the kitten in her lap, "at eighteen months, is equivalent to a three-year-old human." She shifted a little. "And as big. My legs are going numb!"

"Miyatsu said he spent a lot of time gestating. Yet the kittens were only in their units for one year."

Aiko rested her hand on Benjiro's soft fur. Unlike Miyatsu, who dated his "birth" from the day his cells were put into the gestation unit, his children calculated their age from the day they were taken out.

"That's because cloning techniques have improved," Aiko answered her mother. "And Miyatsu was kept in the gestation unit much longer than necessary; we've since found out that actually slows growth rates down. When I first saw Miyatsu, he was smaller than me, even though we're the same age. If he'd been taken out of the unit after one year and given some mental and physical stimulation, he'd have been twice my size and nearly pubescent. But of course the researchers back then didn't know, because he was the first of his kind."

"Your father tells me that Miyatsu and the children should have the same lifespan as humans," Kagami said. "But how could anybody possibly know something like that?"

"When we took Miyatsu's stem cells to clone the kittens, we looked at things called telomeres. They're a good indicator of potential aging. Miyatsu's rate of aging is the same as that of a human male. Cat GMAs typically live for around forty years, Coatis a little less. But with his human genes, Miyatsu has a human lifespan." She grinned at her mother. "I'm glad he's got human genes!"

Her mother smiled back. "So am I. I must admit, I don't think of him as an animal anymore. I haven't for years. He's my son-in-law. Oh, I know you could never officially marry, but still, that's how I think of him. Just as much as if he were a human. What are humans, anyway, but intelligent apes?"

Benjiro moved slightly and Aiko looked down at him fondly. He drowsily licked the fur of one hand in his sleep, the kitten equivalent of thumb sucking. She sighed.

"What's wrong?" asked her mother. "You sound sad."

"I'm just thinking how Benjiro is the only one of the kittens without a twin. Montaro has Mieko; Hanako has Hideaki. Even Raku and Raiden will have each other, once they've finished gestating," she said, referring to the newest pair of kitten foetuses, currently growing in the gestation unit.

"And you're worried because Benjiro has nobody of his own age?"

"Yes. You know none of us, not me or Dad or any of the other researchers, could find what caused his sister's... failure to thrive," she said, using the polite euphemism for death during gestation.

"You were an only child, Aiko. And it did you no harm. Benjiro has four siblings, six if you count Raku and Raiden. He'll be fine."

Aiko nodded. "I know. It's just..."

"You're like your father: when Miyatsu's cloned siblings began to fail, he became very discouraged when he couldn't find the cause. But babies don't always make it to birth. It's not your fault, or anybody's. It just -- happens, sometimes."

Suddenly Montaro gave a shout and shot straight out of the water. Like an arrow he headed for the open sea, levitating so low his feet and tufted tail skimmed the surface of the waves, leaving a choppy wake. Hanako and Hideaki followed him. But Mieko hesitated for a second and then sped towards Aiko on the beach.

"Dad and Grandpa are nearly home," she said as her feet touched down on the sand. "Can we go out and meet the boat, Mum?"

Aiko laughed, thinking it would be rather pointless to refuse now that the others were so far out. "Off you go, then."

"See you later!" And Mieko turned tail and raced to catch up with her siblings.

Aiko watched the little group as they sped away over the bright water. The male kittens were all clones of Miyatsu and unrelated to Aiko genetically. But the girls were another matter. They were unrelated to their "twin brothers" in that the Shima researchers had used a different set of Adersi leopard, Coati, and human genes, kept in the same proportions as those that had created Miyatsu. Aiko had provided the human component for the girls. Although she thought of all the kittens as her children, the girls were the only ones related to Aiko genetically.

They all had warm brown eyes instead of blue, and their fur was not the same color as the males in the family, but had Aiko's black hair tipping the fur, so that their coloring was an attractive silver-gray with black rosettes, toning to a slightly darker dove-gray on their stomachs and tails. It also meant that Aiko's daughters were genetically her younger sisters...

"How do they know?" Kagami wondered, breaking into her thoughts, and confusing her until she realized her mother was talking about Miyatsu's imminent arrival. "I can't even see the boat yet."

"Miyatsu says everyone has a 'psychic signature'," Aiko explained. "He always knows where I am anywhere within a kilometre radius, and if he levitates high enough, he can spot my signature from further off. The children aren't as good at picking up signatures yet, but they're learning. So if they say Miyatsu's nearly home, then he is. Feel like a stroll to the jetty?" she added.

Her mother stretched and sat up. "All right. A little exercise down the beach before dinner would do me good."

"Come on, Benji-chan, time to wake up," Aiko said, stroking the child's fur and adding the affectionate diminutive to the end of his name.

Benjiro blinked drowsily at her. *Bit more sleep, Mummy...*

He did not vocalize. Although he could talk, he spoke to her mind to mind when he was sleepy. Aiko felt a wave of love for the toddler -- he looked so like the Little Kitten of her childhood, with his kittenish face and soft baby fur. He had his father's wide blue eyes and sweet nature. She brushed her cheek against his forehead in a brief "kiss".

"Daddy and Grandpa are nearly home," she answered. "Grandma and I are going down to meet them at the jetty."

"Okay, Mummy." This time Benjiro spoke out loud. He yawned, showing needle-sharp kitten teeth, then slid off her lap to stand on all fours on the sand. He arched his back in a stretch, and then rose to stand on two feet, his long tail held in a graceful curve behind him. Standing on his hind legs like this, he was about the same size as a three-year-old human child.

Aiko stood as well, taking his little hand in hers. This was another area where she and her father as principal researchers had improved on the original genes. Miyatsu had insisted that, if possible, his children should not be hindered by short fingers and long claws. Although these were ideal for a fighting creature, they were a clumsy nuisance in a sentient animal who needed to be able to grip a pen or use a keyboard to write. Accordingly, the two Drs Fujimoto had manipulated the genome of each of the children to develop long fingers, as dexterous as any human's, with a fine pincer grip. Each finger was tipped, not with hooked retractile claws, but with flat human nails.

Aiko gazed out over the sea. The sun was beginning to set, painting the sky in a blaze of bright orange, pink and purple, and the children had disappeared, lost in the glorious colors and distance. The distant drone of a boat engine could now be heard faintly over the murmur of the waves.

Grandma took Benjiro's other hand, and with the child between them, they began to stroll down the beach, leaving three sets of anomalous footprints in the damp sand.

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Several vessels were moored at the jetty or bobbing at anchor nearby, some belonging to fishing families living on the island, others by staff who worked at Shima labs. By the time Aiko, Kagami and Benji arrived, the big catamaran had been moored in its usual spot. The catamaran was the family's preferred mode of transport. It was fast, comfortable and efficient, and could reach the mainland in around three hours on a calm sea, making day trips feasible.

Dr Fujimoto caught sight of his wife and daughter, hailed them and stepped onto the jetty.

"The BioTech Expo at Kagoshima was very informative," he called out. "Miyatsu and I are planning to go back tomorrow."

Benjiro called out, "Grandpa!" and ran to him; Dr Fujimoto caught him and swung him up high with a laugh, then let the child clamber onto his back and loop his tail loosely around his upper arm.

"Where are Miyatsu and the twins?" Aiko asked. "Are they still below deck?"

Dr Fujimoto smiled enigmatically and shook his head. "They're not on the boat. Look behind you."

Just then Aiko heard Hanako's high childish giggle. She turned and saw Miyatsu and his four eldest children, levitating a little above the sand so as not to leave footprints, all five of them grinning at her triumphantly.

"You walked right past without seeing us!" Hideaki said, wriggling in childish joy at tricking the adults.

"You've done it!" Aiko cried in delight. Miyatsu had been coaching the children for some time to block light and shield their thoughts whilst simultaneously levitating; but only now had they perfected the difficult maneuver.

The five landed on the sand, looking very pleased with themselves.

"I didn't know they'd managed it until they appeared on the boat five minutes ago," Miyatsu said.

"They scared the life out of me," Dr Fujimoto admitted. "We were just discussing the Expo, and suddenly there they all were! I nearly jumped out of my skin. You didn't sense them did you, Miyatsu?" he asked.

"No, I didn't pick up a thing. You approached the catamaran downwind, so your scent didn't give your positions away. Very good, I'm impressed."

"We've been practicing by ourselves all this week," Montaro said proudly.

"Montaro and I got the hang of it a couple of days ago," Mieke continued. "And we've been coaching Hanako and Hideaki. They did well, didn't they?"

"Teach Benji, too?" Benjiro asked hopefully from his grandfather's back.

Miyatsu transferred Benjiro onto his own shoulder. "You need to be a little older yet," he told him. "You have to be able to shield from light first, that's the hardest part."

Benjiro considered this. "Can block light now," he insisted. "Look!" And he screwed his eyes tightly shut in concentration.

With the child flickering and shimmering on his father's shoulder, but never managing to completely disappear, the family began to walk back up the beach towards their house.

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After the children went to bed that evening, the adults talked for a time about the BioTech Expo in the city of Kagoshima. Dr Fujimoto was effusive about the new developments in biotechnology that he had seen; however Miyatsu seemed to Aiko to be a little subdued. He appeared content to let Dr Fujimoto do all the talking. Finally Grandma and Grandpa retired for the night to their little villa adjoining the main house, and Aiko and Miyatsu went upstairs to their bedroom.

Aiko left the light off and walked out onto the balcony. She watched the moonlight glimmer, leaving a silvery trail on the dancing waves. Miyatsu joined her and stared out over the water, deep in thought, his tail tip flicking idly, his claws extending and retracting continually where his paws rested on the balcony railing.

"You've been shielding your thoughts since you got home," Aiko accused her mate gently. "What happened at the Expo that upset you?"

Miyatsu glanced at her with a slight smile. "You know me too well. I wasn't shielding intentionally. I ran into an old friend of ours at the Expo. The Raikatuji Corporation has a stall there, showcasing some of their new developments. I saw Sakaki."

"Sakaki?" Aiko's former boss had not contacted the pair since the day they'd left. She'd assumed this was because he felt guilty about the manner of their parting. "Did you speak to him?" she asked.

"Yes. His mental shield is as tight as ever, but I believe he was happy to see me. He was eager to talk and wanted to know what we've been doing since we left. But I've never been able to completely forgive him for that day. I'm not as generous as you. I felt a little uncomfortable speaking with him again." Miyatsu's voice was wistful as he said this.

Aiko put one arm about her mate's waist affectionately, leaning her head against his upper arm. "It was twelve years ago! I've forgiven him. He didn't mean it, you know that; it was just a silly overreaction on his part. How was he? Did he look well?"

"A little older-looking. He's still as charming as ever. He wanted to know if you were with me at the Expo; I think he was disappointed when I said you'd decided to stay on the island."

"I'm beginning to think I should have gone after all. I've always thought what a pity it was we let a ridiculous misunderstanding destroy our friendship. Sakaki's basically a good man, I believe, just too used to getting his own way."

"I'd like for us to be friends again," Miyatsu admitted. "Before we came here to the island, you and Sakaki were the only family I had. Your father wants to go back to the Expo; there's such a lot we didn't get to see today. I told Sakaki I'd look in on him tomorrow. Why don't you come with us?"

Aiko nodded. "Yes, I think I will. I'd like to see Sakaki again."

Chapter Thirteen - Old Friends

Chapter 14 of 23

Has Sakaki finally decided to let bygones be bygones? Or is his easy charm merely the façade for a darker secret?

Chapter Thirteen Old Friends

The Expo was a huge affair, drawing visitors not only from Japan, but overseas as well. The stalls ranged from simple canvass-roofed structures, barely large enough to show off one display, to huge prefabricated pavilions. Aiko hadn't realized how many people would be there. After the small and close-knit community she was used to back on the island, the packed stalls and hordes of people felt claustrophobic.

The crowd gave Miyatsu a wide berth, wary and uncertain of the status of the tall cat that padded sedately by the side of the two humans without leash, collar, or any obvious restraining device. Although there were other GMAs with their masters at the Expo, they were generally the smaller and calmer personal pet breeds, and all were securely leashed or wore hobble chains and muzzles.

A few people even recognized Miyatsu as the "Attack Cat" of the circuit twelve years ago, and wherever he went, eyes would turn to watch. Aiko soon found the attention uncomfortable. It was with mixed feelings of apprehension and relief that she saw the Raikatuji pavilion. It was large and resplendent, standing out amongst the others like a racehorse in a field of donkeys.

A young saleswoman sitting behind a desk at the entrance looked up at their approach. The polite welcoming smile she had assumed froze on her face as she saw the big cat walking with the two humans. It gave her features a rigid, startled look, like a toy doll with a single fixed grimace.

"May I -- help you?" she asked uncertainly, her eyes flicking from the humans to Miyatsu and back again. Her body was tense, as if she'd rather scream and run than sit talking to them.

"Thank you. We've come to see Raikatuji-sama," Miyatsu answered calmly, and the saleswoman's eyes widened further in surprise at being addressed by a GMA.

Aiko looked down at the ground to hide her slight smile. No matter how often she saw that look on people's faces, their shocked reaction to her mate's confident grasp of human language never failed to amuse her. She wondered if she too had done a bad impression of a stranded fish when she first heard Miyatsu speak, that day at the Raikatuji Centre.

You did, a voice inside her head assured her, and she looked up to see Miyatsu watching her with a carefully bland expression. She could hear the echo of his laughter in her mind and grinned back at him.

"Er -- do you have, um, have an appointment?" the receptionist stammered.

Suddenly Sakaki appeared at the entrance, just as if he'd been waiting for their arrival. He had a huge smile on his face. He spread his arms wide and strode toward them, beaming with delight. "No appointment needed for all of you! Miyatsu, Aiko! And Dr Fujimoto! I hoped you'd visit again today! It's alright, Mai-san," he addressed the young woman, "these are old friends of mine! At least," he said, his smile faltering for a moment as his eyes searched their faces anxiously, "I hope you still are my friends?"

Aiko smiled back at him. "Of course we are. Oh, Sakaki, it *is* good to see you again!" And she hugged him.

He laughed with relief and patted her back. "And you, Aiko. Let me look at you. It's been a long time!"

"Too long," she answered. She gazed at him. He did look older, but then so did she. His hair had gray streaks, and there were lines on his face she didn't remember seeing before. And although his eyes sparkled with delight at seeing them again, they were red-rimmed, and there were dark circles under them that made his face appear tired and older than it should.

"You're still as pretty as ever; island life must agree with you," Sakaki said. He glanced at the cat GMA beside them and grinned cheekily. "And still hanging around with this guy, I see!"

Miyatsu's features relaxed, and Aiko felt the tense emotions he had hidden behind the calm facade begin to drain away at Sakaki's words. Once again she felt the fond fraternity in her mate's mind towards this man. It was quieter now, not the desperate yearning it used to be before he had a family of his own. He put a hand on Sakaki's shoulder.

"Aiko says we should never have let our friendship die, Sakaki-kun," Miyatsu said. "I agree with her."

Sakaki made a small bow to Aiko. "You always were wise beyond your years," he said gravely. "The fault lies with me. I was too embarrassed to seek you both out. I hope we can put the past behind us?"

"We have many good memories," Aiko answered. "Too many to let one small incident spoil them."

"Excellent! Come inside, all of you, we can talk more comfortably there and catch up. And I can show you some of the things my people have designed lately."

They followed him in. The crowd in the big pavilion was neither as raucous nor as large as the one milling about outside, and the contrast was soothing.

Sakaki led them around the room, stopping here and there to explain what each display did. Dr Fujimoto senior was fascinated by the wealth of biotechnology being exhibited and was soon walking well ahead of the others, poking into everything with great enjoyment.

Aiko smiled. "He's like a child in a candy shop," she remarked.

"Miyatsu, Aiko, you've *got* to come and see this!" Dr Fujimoto called. "It's a new, improved gestation unit. We could use this back home for the next set of kittens -- just *look* at some of these features!"

"What's wrong with the unit we have, Dad?" Aiko called back, but Miyatsu, with a look of interest on his face, strode ahead to join Dr Fujimoto, and together they began examining the machine intently, discussing its possibilities.

"It looks like you've made a sale," Aiko observed to Sakaki wryly, as they stood watching the pair.

"I wish all of my sales were as easy!"

"How's Suzu?" Aiko asked.

"I assume she's living in the lap of luxury somewhere," Sakaki answered with a nonchalant shrug. "My accountant knows where -- every month I sign a cheque that he sends to her."

"Oh, Sakaki, you didn't divorce?"

"Afraid so. We didn't even last a year together. As a matter of fact, I realized I'd made a mistake not long after we got back from the honeymoon. Do you remember, just after Miyatsu was forced to cut short the circuit tour?" Sakaki grinned. "I'll never forget how you roasted me for leaving him by himself in a foreign country!" He held up his hand to forestall her embarrassed reply. "No, it's all right, I deserved every word you said. But Suzu and I were a mismatch from the beginning. She didn't love me, she loved my money. She was very honest about that."

"Sakaki, I'm sorry it didn't work out for you..."

"Don't be. This way everybody is happy. Suzu has plenty of cash to play with, and I'm free to cry on your shoulder and complain that nobody understands me!" He grinned at her so disarmingly that Aiko found herself smiling back. "Ah well, it looks like Miyatsu got the best girl!"

"Sakaki, you're teasing. I remember you ignoring me often, back when I was just your humble employee."

"I did? What an idiot I must have been."

"So are you still single now?"

"Mm-hmm." Sakaki dropped his teasing tone, his voice becoming serious. "There was one woman, years ago. I lost my heart to her in a big way. Unfortunately for me, she was already with somebody. I believe she was -- fond of me, but that was as far as it went. That's one of the reasons I didn't try harder to make my marriage with Suzu work, I suppose. My heart just wasn't in it." He sighed, looking so woebegone that Aiko felt her heart go out to him.

"What happened with the other woman?" she asked sympathetically.

"Nothing at all. You see, she'd never leave her partner." His eyes were unfocused, like he was looking at something far off in the distance. "It's as if she's bewitched by him; if only I could make her see how *wrong* he is for her..."

Something flickered behind his eyes, something dark, and Aiko felt a sudden chill breath down her spine, lifting the fine hairs on the back of her neck and making her shiver with an unreasoning fear. She had felt like this only once before in his presence, and it had ended with her on the floor beneath him. She didn't understand what it meant, but she didn't like it.

"Sakaki?" she whispered, taking a fearful step back from him.

His eyes returned to the present and he gave Aiko a wan smile. "I'm sorry, Aiko, I forgot where I was. What's wrong? You look like you'd just seen a ghost."

"No, no, I'm fine," she said, shaking off the feeling with an effort.

"I haven't thought about her for some time," Sakaki apologized. "Speaking about it again made me remember. Don't mind me -- I'm resigned to it by now."

They walked on a little further, leaving Aiko's father and Miyatsu still examining the features of the gestation unit.

"Where's Koneko?" Aiko asked, suddenly realizing that Sakaki's shadow was nowhere about.

Sakaki looked down at his hands for a moment and didn't answer at first. He seemed to be searching for the right words. Finally he met her eyes again. "Koneko is no longer with me. She -- passed on, several years ago."

"Oh, Sakaki! But she was only a young cat, wasn't she?"

"There was an accident at the Centre, a procedure she was having went wrong. Please, Aiko, I'd rather not talk about it. Koneko was very dear to me..."

"Of course. I'm sorry." Aiko desperately cast about in her mind for another subject to discuss; it seemed everything she'd brought up so far had bad connotations. But Sakaki himself broke the impasse. They were walking by an alcove containing two comfortable-looking armchairs, and he stopped with a slight smile.

"Here's something I'd like you to see. I'm quite proud of it -- it's one of my own ideas. It's a holographic display generator built into one of the chairs. Let me show you how it works."

He seated himself in one armchair and waved Aiko to take the other. "Now, I place my fingers in these indentations in the chair's armrests, see?" A discreet humming sound came from the armrests as Sakaki's fingers slid into a recess Aiko hadn't noticed at first; she had taken it for a pattern on the soft dark fabric. "That's the generator. It was activated by contact with my skin." He rested his head against the back of the chair. "The headrest has adjustable sensors built in. Now, watch that table in front of us while I concentrate."

Aiko turned her attention to what appeared to be a quite ordinary coffee table standing in front of the armchairs.

Something flickered on the tabletop. Slowly, a picture began to build up, as if being scanned line by line from the ground up. It appeared completely solid and three-dimensional. It even cast a tiny shadow onto the honey-colored wood.

Aiko gasped. It was herself in miniature, dressed in traditional kimono and obi, with her hair done up elaborately. The image was only about fifteen centimeters high but was completely convincing. The holographic Aiko stared back at her expressionlessly and unmoving, then it abruptly blinked as if coming to life, smiled and bowed to her politely. Sakaki chuckled, and Aiko glanced at him, feeling unnerved by her realistic double.

"She's very lifelike, isn't she? The generator reads my memories of you and creates a holograph. I can dress her any way I like. The generator adds things like folds in the cloth and shadows; I can even have background if I want to. But there's more!"

The chair hummed again, and slowly a second figure appeared, once more scanning from the bottom up. It was a representation of Sakaki dressed in Samurai attire. Aiko gazed in wonder at the little image. This was Sakaki as she remembered him from twelve years ago, his hair jet-black, his face handsome and unlined.

"I know you like flowers," Sakaki said, his forehead wrinkled in concentration, and Aiko saw a cherry tree in full bloom appear beside the tiny couple. Green grass spread like a swift-flowing pool over the table.

Aiko reached forward, fascinated, and touched the edge of the grassy lawn. Her finger passed through the solid-looking image to the tabletop beneath. She shook her head in wonder and sat back to watch what would happen next.

The little Samurai Sakaki reached up and plucked a branch from the tree. With a courtly bow, the holographic Sakaki presented the flowers to the holographic Aiko. Aiko laughed in delight as she watched her image accept the flowers with a gracious nod of her tiny head.

"Sakaki, that's brilliant!" she said. "Can they talk?"

"I *can* make them speak, but it's not quite right yet. I'll show you." And Sakaki concentrated on the little figures. The Aiko-image turned to look at them both and opened its tiny mouth. "What would you like me to say?" it enquired. The voice was deep, masculine, and utterly Sakaki's.

"I see what you mean," Aiko said, chuckling.

Sakaki laughed too. "That part needs some work," he admitted. "But you can see the potential applications of such a device. The holographs can be recorded on traditional disks and played back. You could make your own movies, video games, tutorials and presentations, whatever, straight from your imagination."

"You make it look so easy. Can anyone use it?"

"The system requires some training to master," Sakaki admitted. "The computer in the chair needs to be customized to each user. And this is just a prototype, the only one in existence so far. If we get enough advance orders from this Expo, I'll think about manufacturing more." He smiled slyly and concentrated once more, and the tiny Aiko bowed to them.

"You'll need to fix our voices first," the holograph grumbled, making Aiko laugh again.

*

They had rejoined Miyatsu and Yutaka, and Sakaki was now deep in discussion with them about the relative values of the new gestation unit.

Aiko wandered a little way from the three to gaze at the other displays on offer. It was amazing how much the Raikatuji Corporation had achieved. Sakaki had diversified into many different fields, no longer concentrating on biotechnology alone. She stopped in front of one display and looked it over with interest; it was a new energy-generation plant currently under construction. What made her look closer was the map posted with the display: she remembered the area well. The Raikatuji Clean Energy Facility was built on the same site as her beach house had been. It gave her a little pang to think that the small cottage where she and Miyatsu had first made love no longer existed; Sakaki must have bought up the whole area for his new plant.

It was an awesome undertaking though, she thought to herself, studying the information. A renewable power plant harnessing waves to generate electricity which it would then sell to the national electrical grid. The schematics showed that the wave power generator was not situated on top of the water as traditional generators were. Rather, thousands of big pylons were loosely tethered to the sea floor, rocking with the action of the ebbing and flowing tide to produce far more electrical power than traditional wave generation could manage. It was discreet and didn't spoil the view above the water.

She waved her hand over the computer screen built into the display and smiled at the sight of fish swimming unconcernedly amongst the gently rocking pylons to the music of Vivaldi's *"The Four Seasons"*.

"Like it?"

Aiko started in surprise, then smiled at Sakaki, who stood behind her, also watching the display with the air of a proud father.

"Very nice. You've really branched out from biotech, haven't you?"

Sakaki shrugged. "Renewable energy is the wave of the future, if you'll pardon the pun. Hydroelectricity has been stretched to the limits in this country, and it seems such a waste to be surrounded by ocean just sitting there doing nothing when we could use it to generate vast amounts of clean power. I'm quite pleased with it; the infrastructure's all built now. I plan to open it to full generation in a few months time once we've tested everything."

"There's such a lot of sea floor taken up with generation," Aiko said. She pointed to the small, discreet building a little way up from the beach. "I would have thought you'd need a bigger plant to manage it all."

"I wanted to keep the visual aesthetics of the area. Tourist and fishing boats will still be able to sail over the surface unimpeded," Sakaki explained. "That building is really just the entrance and administrative centre. The plant itself is built underground. It extends quite a way under the seafloor as well, so that we have easy access to the generation pillars from underneath. Each one can be individually lowered like the periscope in a submarine for manual checking and repair if needed." He rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. "The first time I toured the area without my engineer guide, I got lost, can you believe it? Of course, it's all signposted now, but it was quite confusing at first. The corridors run under the entire pillared area, and that's a lot of corridors! And of course, the further out you go, the deeper the water above gets. I've built reinforced viewing windows in some of the higher levels, where the sunlight still penetrates; the amount of sea-life in the area's really quite astounding and well worth a look."

"We must come and see it when it opens, my brother." Miyatsu and Yutaka were standing behind them, listening with interest.

"You'd be very welcome," Sakaki assured Miyatsu. "I've kept my old office at the top of the Raikatuji Building, since it has easy access to the plant and I still dabble in GMA research. Drop by anytime."

"The plant must have been very expensive to build," Aiko observed.

"Only the infrastructure and start-up costs. Once it's generating at full capacity, maintenance is easy. And if this one is as profitable as it's projected to be, I plan to build a string of them, all along the coast."

*

Sakaki insisted on taking them all to dinner at the Expo hotel that evening. He hired a private room and advised the hotel staff about Miyatsu's presence, so their meal was

a pleasant affair, with only the occasional wary glance from their waiter to distract them from the excellent food and drink.

"Tell me about these kittens of yours," Sakaki said as the entrée was served. "You told me yesterday the girls and boys are unrelated, Miyatsu. Why did you bother with that?"

"It was so they could safely become mates," Miyatsu answered. He looked at Aiko's father. "I think you can explain it better than I could, Yutaka."

"We did it to avoid inbreeding. Since they're genetically unrelated, they can breed healthy infants. And because each kitten is gestated in the same unit as its twin, they bond from an early age using their latent psychic abilities."

"Our first two, Mieko and Montaro, are going through puberty," Miyatsu continued. "They're beginning to act like mates now instead of twins."

"They still enjoy the company of their younger siblings and the family group," Aiko added. "But recently they've begun wanting time alone together. Sometimes they're gone for a full day. They levitate to an uninhabited part of the island and just hang out together without the rest of the family constantly around them. And even when they're back with us, they groom each other and kiss as Miyatsu and I do, cheek to cheek. We're building separate living quarters for them now, a little way from the main house, so they can start their own family once they're ready."

"You make them sound as if they're in love," Sakaki protested. "But how can that be? If they're raised as brother and sister, surely it's... it's akin to incest for them to mate?" His voice held a slight note of distaste as he said this.

Aiko shook her head. "But we didn't raise them as brother and sister," she stated. "They bond *in utero* as mates, don't you see? They always know they are meant to be partners."

"But what if they didn't bond? What if they're just trying to live up to family expectations? Isn't it unrealistic to expect them to want to stay together for the rest of their lives?"

"It's a cat thing," Miyatsu said, trying to explain the concept to Sakaki. "I bonded with Aiko from the moment I opened my eyes in the gestation unit and saw her. It didn't matter that we were only seven years old and not even the same species. Our minds reached out and touched each other, and from that moment I loved her. When she left, I tried to follow her with my mind and came across my sleeping brothers. I was able to raise them to consciousness, but it was Aiko I'd bonded with, to the exclusion of all others." He turned his blue eyes to her. The pupils were fully dilated in the muted lighting of the room, as round as a human's in his cat-like face. "And I never forgot my little mate," he said tenderly, reaching one hand to intertwine with hers across the table. "I was only ever half-alive until I met you again at the Raikatuji Centre."

"Ah!" The knife Sakaki had been using to open his oysters had slipped, cutting a gash in his hand, and Sakaki sat staring at the blood dripping onto the tablecloth as if in surprise.

"Sakaki!" Aiko gasped. She grabbed her serviette. "Here, give me your hand; I'll wrap this around it..."

Sakaki took the serviette, dabbing it at the wound as he examined the cut. "That was clumsy of me. But it's not deep. It'll stop bleeding in a moment."

The head waiter appeared with a first-aid kit, basin of warm water, and profuse apologies, as if he himself were to blame for the accident. He made sure the wound was washed and dried before applying disinfectant spray and a cloth bandage. He then efficiently and quickly removed the remains of the entrée, replaced the tablecloth with fresh linen and replenished their drinks. Soon the only sign of the accident was the bandage on Sakaki's hand.

"Why did you never attempt to contact us, Sakaki?" Miyatsu asked as the main course was served a few minutes later.

Sakaki looked embarrassed. "You know why," he mumbled, toying with his food abstractedly.

Only Dr Fujimoto appeared puzzled by this statement, as neither Aiko nor Miyatsu had told him or his wife about the incident.

Sakaki looked back up at them. "But there was another reason," he continued. "When I finally convinced myself to get in touch, I couldn't find your new telephone number. I tried ringing the lab at Shima, but the line had been disconnected. You seem to have gone to a lot of trouble to keep your location secret. Why was that?"

Miyatsu and Aiko exchanged a glance.

"We were getting anonymous calls, unpleasant ones," Aiko answered finally.

"Our relationship caused some people a great deal of anger," Miyatsu added. "We had calls ranging from mere profanity to outright death threats."

Sakaki stared at them. "I had no idea! Did you find out who made the calls?"

Aiko shook her head. "I suppose a few disapproved of what they chose to see as bestiality. But some were made by groups, and that was frightening."

"The groups gave themselves absurd names," Dr Fujimoto joined in. "'Humans Against Genetically Engineered Organisms', for instance. And the 'Return to the Wild' group."

Aiko smiled a little grimly. "'Return to the Wild' at least had the gumption to show their faces over the telephone. They thought I was Miyatsu's master and demanded that I free him from my evil human influence and let him go back to nature."

"I spoke to them," Miyatsu answered. "But it made no difference. It didn't matter that I said I *am* free, and that I've never lived in the wild, they wouldn't listen to me. Apparently because I'm an animal I couldn't possibly know my own mind."

"Their spokeswoman kept saying you were born and raised in captivity, remember?" Aiko reminded her mate with a grin. "She tried to convince you that you'd *like* it in the wild, communing with your fellow creatures, living as nature intended..."

"... and I told her I imagined it'd be uncomfortable in the wild. You've got to catch your own food, there's biting insects, no plumbing, no soft beds -- " and Miyatsu stopped speaking abruptly, baring his sharp teeth in an amused grin.

"And no warm human mate to share the bed with!" Aiko finished for him.

Dr Fujimoto gave a bark of laughter at this. "We never heard from them after that!"

"I'll give you our private number, my brother," Miyatsu offered. "Do you have a pen?"

Sakaki shook his head. "No, but I have a mobile telephone in my jacket. Put the number into its memory."

He reached his bandaged hand into his pocket clumsily, pulled out the mobile and handed it across to Miyatsu. As he did so, Aiko, who was sitting next to him, noticed something drop from the pocket. Curiously, she leant down to pick up the tiny plastic packet. Inside were two fluorescent yellow tablets, each marked with a swirl of acid-green spiraling out from the centre. Their unique color made them unmistakable. She drew her breath in sharply in recognition and clutched her fist closed on the tabs, looking around quickly to see if anybody had noticed.

Miyatsu had passed the phone across to Dr Fujimoto, as the fingers on his modified paws were not small enough to be able to punch the numbers reliably. Aiko's father was now speaking to his wife back on the island, informing her that they would be home a little later than expected.

"She said she'd already guessed that," he informed them all dryly. "Our dinner has been fed to the seagulls. Well Sakaki-san, you have our number now. Don't go giving it out to strangers, will you?"

Sakaki placed one hand over his heart melodramatically. "You have my word of honor. I will die before revealing it!"

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Sakaki took them back to the dock by limousine and walked with them down the long, silent jetty to their catamaran.

"Why don't you two go on ahead?" Aiko suggested to her father and Miyatsu. "I want a quick word with Sakaki in private."

"She's going to try beating you down on the price of that gestation unit, my brother," Miyatsu told Sakaki with a slight smile.

"Come on then, and let the girl work!" Yutaka joked as he and Miyatsu continued down the jetty.

Aiko let them get well ahead, then quietly took the tabs from her pocket and let Sakaki see them resting in her palm. They seemed so innocuous in the dim glow of the dock lights, their appearance belying their grim reputation.

Sakaki started. "Where did you get those?"

"They fell out of your pocket during dinner."

Sakaki looked embarrassed. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you they were aspirin?"

"Sakaki, these are Anodyne, aren't they? You must know what these things do to your brain."

"Don't lecture me, Aiko. I've got enough money to buy the pure drug. You only get psychosis when it's been cut with rubbish."

"Sakaki, this stuff is poison! How long have you been a user?"

Sakaki's expression had become grim. "That, Aiko, is none of your business. They help me relax. When I think of all the things I could have done differently with my life - I get depressed. The drugs help. Simple."

"It's *not* simple, Sakaki. Have you had blackouts? Has anybody commented that you've been acting... uncharacteristically?"

"I've got nobody to care if I do, Aiko! That's why I take them. This is the real world, and it's a miserable place. We're not all lucky enough to live on an island paradise with the love of our lives." There was a bitter edge to Sakaki's voice as he said this.

He continued with an effort. "I've been married and divorced four times, Aiko. The only woman I've ever loved is with somebody else and unfortunately for me appears content to stay that way. My money doesn't buy me friends, and the people it can buy, I don't want." His face set in stubborn lines. "But one thing I can have is oblivion, and that's what those tablets in your hand represent. They keep the depression at bay and they let me sleep at night." He held out one hand. "I want them back."

Aiko took a step backward. "No, Sakaki. These drugs will drive you mad."

"That's just the junkies. I'm not addicted, I can stop taking them anytime I want."

"Have you tried?" Aiko regarded him seriously. "Truly, Sakaki, isn't that what every addict says? I've seen the press on DreamScreamers," she continued, referring to the drug's street name. "Addicts get delusional. They become aggressive, paranoid, and get wild mood-swings. Sakaki please, book yourself into a rehab clinic and get cleaned up."

"You don't know what these last twelve years have been like for me, Aiko! The drugs help. You may as well give them to me; I can easily get more."

Aiko shook her head. "I know I can't stop you buying them; but I *can* stop you taking these."

She drew her arm back and flung the packet as far as she could. It arced over the black water lapping the jetty pylons and fell with a tiny splash, to disappear amongst the small wavelets.

Sakaki stared at her for a moment, his jaw clenched angrily as if he didn't trust himself to speak. He drew a deep breath.

"So you're my judge and jury rolled into one, and I've been convicted, is that it?" he said finally, his voice tight. "Nothing I do is ever good enough for you, is it, Aiko? I try and try, yet I always fail in your estimation. *You* have everything you've ever wanted, living with that... that cat. I'm just a lowly human - how can I even compete against Miyatsu's engineered *perfection*?" The last word was flung out like a curse.

Aiko stared at him wide-eyed as he abruptly turned away. He stared moodily across the water, trying to regain control, his breathing harsh against the backdrop of waves lapping gently against the pylons.

"Sakaki?" Aiko ventured at last. "I -- I'm sorry. I know I have no right telling you how to run your life, but that stuff is *poison*. If you're determined to kill yourself, drinking drain cleaner would be quicker."

Still Sakaki ignored her, saying nothing. Aiko approached him and diffidently laid one hand on his arm. With a shock she realized he was trembling.

"I *care* about you very much, don't you see?" she pleaded. "I hate the thought of you doing this to yourself. Oh, Sakaki, please talk to me. "

Slowly he turned. "My welfare means that much to you?" he asked, searching her face.

"Sakaki, how can you even ask that? Of course it does."

Sakaki wrapped his arms about himself as if chilled. His eyes were haunted. The small worry line that had appeared on his forehead was so like Miyatsu's that it was all Aiko could do to still her hand, to not reach up and stroke his face to try to make it disappear, as she would for her mate. "Oh, Aiko, nobody else gives a damn if I live or die. Why should you?"

"Stop the self-pity right now," Aiko ordered. "I love you. Miyatsu loves you. You *know* we do. Perhaps we should have made more of an effort over the years to re-establish contact. But we have *now*. You're our family and we do care about you."

Slowly Sakaki nodded. "Yes. Yes, I know that. You're right, I'm acting like a spoilt child, crying because I can't have what I want." He stared at her, looking lost. "Tell me what I should do, Aiko. You have the right. I'm not thinking clearly enough to know. But I trust you. I'll do whatever you say to clean up my act."

"The first thing to do is to stop taking that drug," she insisted. "Book yourself into rehab and get it all out of your system."

Sakaki was watching her intently. "And -- then?" he breathed.

Aiko hesitated. She hadn't really thought beyond convincing him to fight his addiction, and floundered a little. "Well -- well then, you can do anything you set your mind to," she said finally. "You admitted you started using because you were miserable with the way your life was going. But you're the only one who can change your direction. Listen to me, Sakaki, you're attractive, rich and charming. Work out what you want to do with your life, and just -- go for it!" she finished.

Sakaki's brows had drawn down as she spoke, as if he were concentrating hard on her words. "Just go for it?" He repeated softly. "Surely it can't be as easy as that?"

"Why not?" Aiko challenged. "You never know what you can achieve until you try. Look at everything you've made -- like that holograph unit you showed me. That's amazing stuff, and it didn't exist before you made it a reality."

"But could I do it?" Sakaki wondered. He had half-turned from her and was speaking as if to himself. "Could I change -- my own reality?"

Aiko frowned, not entirely sure what he was talking about. However, she didn't want to discourage him when he was finally beginning to act positive. "Just go for it," she repeated firmly. "Take it, whatever it is, with both hands and *make* it work. You'll be surprised at what you can achieve."

Sakaki turned back towards her, and Aiko was delighted to see that he was smiling again. He put his hands on her shoulders, beaming down at her. "I'll do it! Aiko, you've inspired me!"

Aiko smiled back up at him. Impulsively, she stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "That's the spirit! You can do it, Sakaki!"

He stepped back, still smiling, holding both her hands in his. "I will, then!"

Chapter Fourteen - Paradise Lost

Chapter 15 of 23

A human organisation calling itself "Humans Against Genetically Engineered Organisms" has decided to pass judgement on what they see as the bestiality between Aiko and Miyatsu and make an example of them. But are they all they appear to be? And how do they know so much about Miyatsu?

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Chapter Fifteen - The Candyman Can

Chapter 16 of 23

We find out both the identity of Aiko's kidnapper and the reason behind her abduction. The question is, what is Aiko going to do about it?

Chapter Fifteen -- The Candyman Can

The sound of a door and of footsteps approaching brought Aiko out of her drug-induced doze. She opened her eyes, thinking it was the nurse again. But instead a face she would never have expected came into focus above her.

"Aiko!"

"Sakaki?" Suddenly the idea of her having been rescued solidified into reality -- Miyatsu must have notified Sakaki, and his contacts had found her! She was in hospital, with a standard re-hydration drip in her arm, and any moment now her family would arrive, with little Benji holding a basket of fruit! "Oh, Sakaki! I'm so glad to see you!"

Sakaki beamed down at her. "Poor little Aiko! How are you feeling?"

"I can hardly move, Sakaki. And I feel sick. Which hospital am I in?"

"Hospital?" Sakaki looked confused for a moment, then his expression cleared and he glanced around the clinical-looking room with amusement. "Oh, I see! This room looks very like a hospital, doesn't it? No, you're at one of my facilities. You may have to stay here for a while, but once your system's clear of the sedative, you'll be able to move again and the nausea will stop as well. Until then, we've got you monitored for any adverse reactions."

"Oh, Sakaki, when those men kidnapped me, I was so scared! And I had Benji with me, as well. I thought they were going to kill my baby!"

Sakaki stroked her hand, his face concerned. "Oh, dear. They didn't hurt him, did they? I told them not to harm the youngsters."

Aiko froze. A chill draught seemed to steal its way into the room. "What -- what do you mean, *told*?"

"I know you're fond of your little pets. So I specifically instructed my men not to hurt them if it could be avoided."

Aiko's happy fiction of having been rescued shattered like glass. She stared at Sakaki in horror. "You -- Sakaki, *you* -- had me abducted?" she whispered.

"Now, Aiko, it was for your own good. No, hear me out! Remember when we had our last conversation, and you said I should take control of my life? You made a lot of sense! I'd been letting things go on as they always had, taking drugs to forget the fact that the only woman I've ever loved is with a monster. And then I had an epiphany, Aiko! I realized that, if drugs could control my moods so much, then Miyatsu, with his psychic power, was obviously controlling your mind in a similar way! You don't love him, Aiko, you just *think* you do. Because he's got you on his psychic hook. I'm going off the drugs as of today, and you're going to be free of Miyatsu the same way! I've rescued you, Aiko, and we'll get clean of our addictions together. Then we can be with each other as we should have been all along!"

Aiko struggled to sit up, but it was useless: her muscles refused to work. Scraps of her recent conversation with Sakaki hovered queasily in her mind:

'There was one woman. I lost my heart to her in a big way... She'd never leave her partner... It's as if she's bewitched by him... '

And herself saying:

'These drugs will drive you mad... Work out what you want to do with your life, and just go for it!'

It suddenly all made a certain horrible sense: Sakaki had been talking about *her* as the love of his life, and she'd unknowingly encouraged him to think he could have her!

"Sakaki, no!" Aiko said desperately. "This isn't what I meant! I truly love Miyatsu; he hasn't done anything to *make* me love him, I just do!"

Sakaki gave her a tolerant smile. "Aiko, I know you *think* you love him. But that's because you're in thrall to his psychic power, don't you see? Just like I feel happier and more relaxed when I'm taking the drugs. But those feelings are false, we need to face reality. I took my last tablet this morning. No more after this, I promise. Oh, Aiko, we're going to be *so good* together!"

The chill wind of fear was blowing down Aiko's spine at his words; Sakaki was unbalanced by his drug psychosis, he was about to go cold turkey without medical supervision, and he had her completely in his power! This was far worse than anything she could have imagined.

The only thing she could do was to appeal to the tiny bit of rational Sakaki that she was sure had to still be there.

"Sakaki, we've been friends, *good* friends, for so long! Please, if you love me as you say you do, don't do this! Bewitched or not, I love Miyatsu with every fibre of my being. You're hurting me and him by keeping us apart! Miyatsu loves you as a brother; how can you hurt him by doing this? Let me go, I'm begging you."

Something flickered in Sakaki's eyes at her words, but it was frightening rather than encouraging. He was still holding her hand. Now his fingers tightened painfully around hers, and she gasped.

"Aiko, I would *strongly* advise you against reminding me that I have any relationship whatsoever with that creature. My patience there is limited. You're going nowhere until you're over him!"

Anger surged within her, and she welcomed it, as it pushed the fear from her for a moment. "Sakaki, you're fooling yourself! Stop this and wake up to what you're doing! Perhaps you didn't know it, but Miyatsu can find my psychic signature anywhere on the planet. All he has to do is levitate high enough and he'll find me! You can't hope to hide me from him!"

Sakaki smiled coldly. "Oh, I know all about his abilities, Aiko! Don't forget, I was the one who trained him. But trust me, he'll never find you here!" His voice, which had been angry, calmed abruptly. "But there, you're upset, still under his influence. You'll realize how wrong you are after a few weeks."

Something about the way he said this alerted her. "What do you mean? Do you think my feelings for Miyatsu have a time limit?"

"I mean that I went to a lot of trouble to make Miyatsu believe you're dead. He'll contract Pershan Syndrome again. But *this* time, his master won't make a reappearance. He'll weaken, and before long he'll die. And once Miyatsu is gone, you'll be free of his mind control. Free to love *me*."

Aiko's eyes had widened. The anger had faded at his words, and panic was threatening to overwhelm her. "Sakaki, what did you *do*?" she whispered.

Sakaki hesitated. "I didn't want to show you this, Aiko, but perhaps it's best if you see it. It might make you realize that it's hopeless to try to change things now."

He raised the back of her bed until Aiko was no longer lying flat on her back, giving her a view of the wall behind Sakaki.

"Can you see that picture?" he asked.

Aiko glanced at a large framed picture of a landscape painting on the wall. "Yes."

"Good. Watch carefully."

Sakaki reached into his pocket and took out a small remote control unit. The landscape painting glowed briefly then faded away, and Aiko saw that it was in reality the screen of a wall-mounted television.

Pictures appeared: two squares, one showing a fat, bald-headed man, his face screened by pixels. In the other square -

Aiko gave a low moan and tried desperately, unsuccessfully, to sit up. For there was Miyatsu's tense face, his eyes blazing and his ears flat against his skull in battle readiness, anguish obvious in every long lean line of his body.

The image froze as Sakaki pressed another button. "I used my new holographic generator to create this little scenario," he said, touching one finger to the fat man. "Miyatsu is, of course, the genuine article." His voice as he said this was cold. "You'll see yourself in a moment, as well, Aiko. Don't be disturbed by what happens to you, it's all imaginary. But I needed to make it believable so that my audience wouldn't guess it was being duped." He smiled tightly. "That's why you'll see your mouth taped shut. There's no way I would have been able to fool Miyatsu if it wasn't your voice he heard."

He pointed the remote control at the screen, and the recording again began to run. Aiko listened in growing horror. She lost her self-control and let the tears fall when she heard Hanako cry, "*Mummy!*" and was sobbing helplessly as both Miyatsu and Yutaka begged for her life.

"Watch this next part, Aiko." Sakaki seemed unperturbed by her misery. "This is the important bit, where I make Miyatsu believe you're dead... "

The tears running down her cheeks, Aiko watched the face of her mate, the utter desolation in his eyes as he watched what he thought was her murder. It was too much. The nausea that had been threatening ever since she woke up overcame her shaky control, and Aiko vomited, unable to turn her head, unable to *breathe*--

Through the violent reaction, she was aware of the nurse suddenly at the bed, wrenching her head to one side so she wouldn't choke on her own vomit. The world blurred out of focus and Aiko's fear peaked. Then, with a familiar tilting sensation and a sound of tearing velcro, Aiko left herself...

Aiko floated above her now-quiescent body. The monitor had resumed its calm beeping, and the line running across the screen was again dipping and peaking normally as her heart continued to pump.

"She's fainted," the nurse informed Sakaki, checking her vital signs. "The sedative is rather too powerful, sir. I'd really prefer it if we lowered the dosage."

Sakaki looked shocked, but he pulled himself together and glanced down at the vomit splattering his clothes with a grimace. "She's ill," he murmured, as if to himself.

Then, realizing the nurse was waiting for him to answer, he shook his head and said, "No. She's still fixated on that animal I rescued her from. I know Aiko; if we lower the dose, she'll find some way to get out. I don't want her to reach the surface. This is very important. Aiko's smart, if she manages to get outside, she may be able to contact Miyatsu mind-to-mind. I still don't know how far his telepathy extends. Keep her on the same dose, watch her carefully, and keep that door locked."

The nurse nodded agreement. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Can you manage to clean her up by yourself?"

"Certainly I can, sir."

"Then I'll go and get changed. I'll pop back down whenever I can manage." Sakaki paused, and Aiko saw his face as he gazed down at her body. His eyes were full of love and concern.

"She'll get over him," he murmured. It seemed almost as if he were trying to convince himself of it. "Once he's gone, she'll forget all about that animal -- "

There was a sound like an onrushing train, the world tilted again, and Aiko was once more back within the confines of her body. The aches, exhaustion and nausea again filled her consciousness, and there was the sour taste of vomit in her mouth. Nevertheless, she opened her eyes to gaze fiercely right into Sakaki's startled ones.

"I'll never forget Miyatsu," she hissed. "And I'll never forgive *you*, Sakaki."

*

Aiko lay quietly, reviewing what had happened.

Nurse Rin had efficiently cleaned her and the floor of vomit, then changed her bedding. She was now presumably back at the desk Aiko had caught a glimpse of when the nurse had lifted and manipulated Aiko's unresponsive body into a fresh nightdress. Aiko had tried to engage her sympathy while all this was going on; if only she could enlist the young nurse as an ally, she could perhaps get away! But after several attempts at conversation had been met with cold silence on the nurse's part, Aiko realized that escape from Sakaki was not going to be easy.

But Sakaki was right about one thing: Aiko was smart. She was also determined and willing to do whatever it took to escape. Because now her mate's life was in danger.

Deliberately, she made herself remember the look of utter despair on Miyatsu's face. She was well aware that Sakaki was right: believing her dead would precipitate her mate straight into Pershan Syndrome. He'd stop eating and sleeping. The resulting exhaustion and depression would mean his death. She had a narrow window of time to get out of here; but how to do it?

Sakaki had said to the nurse, back when he thought she was unconscious, *I don't want her to reach the surface.* Did that mean they were underground? It made sense; she remembered Miyatsu telling the children that psychic signatures could be seen clearly on the ground from height, even through buildings, although stone or concrete walls tended to blur the signal a little. But if she were deep underground, would that block the signal even from Miyatsu's awesome telepathy? It seemed likely.

Now she needed to find out where she was and, what was by far the harder part, somehow let Miyatsu know or get out herself.

She'd already tried to lift her hands, trying for some movement. If she could roll her arm enough to block the tube feeding sedative into her vein, or even manage to dislodge the needle, she'd be able to fake lethargy until she was strong enough to tackle the nurse.

Unfortunately, the sedative was working too well. Apart from some movement in her head and neck, the rest of her body was heavy and unresponsive. Her arms refused to move, lying like lumps of meat at her sides. She tried moving her legs, twitching her toes, anything, with the same lack of success.

Even moving her head from side to side required an enormous effort of willpower, and left her feeling sick and exhausted afterwards. And every minute that clicked over on the clock on the wall was another minute closer to Miyatsu's death!

Breathe, she ordered herself sternly. *Slowly. In. Out. Don't let the Nurse from Hell come to check why the monitor's beeping has sped up.*

Instead, she focused on her latest out-of-body experience. She accepted that her latent psychic tendency had probably been stimulated into action by years of contact with Miyatsu. After all, reading his emotions by now had become second nature to her, as he rarely bothered to shield anymore. No longer did she have trouble separating his feelings from hers as she used to. Maybe, like anything, it just took regular practice.

But the out-of-body thing, that was something else. She thought back. So far, it had happened four times in her life and all of them had occurred when she found herself *truly* scared:

This evening, witnessing the grief of her family over her "death".

This morning, when she thought Benjiro was going to be killed.

Twelve years ago, when Sakaki found out she was leaving and attacked her (and wasn't that a pointer to today that she had managed to rationalize away?).

And the first time it had ever happened, when she feared Miyatsu had died after his fight with Sisyro.

That first one had been far and away the most powerful of them all: she'd managed to make it from Japan to mainland China in the blink of an eye.

What's more, she was sure that Miyatsu had felt her presence then. He had opened his eyes, and although he couldn't see her, he'd given the distinct impression that he'd heard her somehow. She'd never spoken to him about it, as he had little memory of the fight at all after he'd recovered, but now and then, Aiko had thought about it, and wondered.

So fear was the trigger. Well, she had lots to fear at the moment. Deliberately, she focused on Miyatsu, the anguish on his face.

He's going to die if I don't get away from here, she thought.

Absolutely nothing happened.

Frustrated, Aiko wondered what else she'd done to force the experience. Fear was the trigger. But there *must* be something else. Years of analyzing and research came into play as she considered all the angles and looked at all the data available. Today the out-of-body had happened twice. So what was different about today?

Apart from being abducted, she thought sarcastically to herself, *it's been pretty much an ordinary day.*

It seemed that the fear had to be real and immediate. Maybe it was hormonal, needing an adrenaline rush or something similar to kick her psychic ability into overdrive--

Nurse Rin interrupted her train of thought by bringing over a bowl of mush. She elevated the back of the bed again so that Aiko was in something like a sitting position, then began to spoon-feed her as she would a baby. It was as embarrassing as hell, and the mush tasted foul, something like strained baby food with exotic overtones of mashed pumpkin and unidentifiable stringy bits. Aiko was hungry enough to eat it all.

Then there was another drink of water, after which Nurse Rin moved back Aiko's blanket and she discovered one more indignity that she'd somehow managed to overlook. She'd been catheterized. Nurse Rin checked the connection, then changed the full plastic bag hanging under the bed for a fresh one and disappeared again, all without saying a single word to Aiko.

Aiko swallowed against a fresh round of nausea brought on by the movement of the bed when it had been lowered. She tried to move her head a little, felt the world slip out of focus and tilt, and closed her eyes tightly, fighting the queasy feeling...

Then snapped them open again as something occurred to her. That tilt! Whenever she'd gone out-of-body, she'd felt a tilting sensation, just before the ripping velcro sound! Today she'd gone out-of-body twice, each time with sedative running through her system and under the stimulus of fear. And today, unlike the first two times, she'd stayed out-of-body longer. She'd read case studies done with psychics to see how certain drugs affected their abilities; opium was a potent one, as were certain hallucinogenic fungus varieties. And it was the sedative that was enhancing her psychic ability now, she was sure of it!

Deliberately, Aiko turned her head to the side, as quickly as she could. The world slid out of focus and tilted. There was a sound like ripping velcro...

Chaper Sixteen - To Be Or Not To Be

Chapter 17 of 23

Miyatsu battles the effects of Pershan Syndrome, Sakaki deals with drug withdrawal, and Aiko finally finds out where she has been hidden.

Chapter Sixteen -- To Be Or Not To Be

The police on the mainland had been notified and had arrived on the island three hours later in a sleek and powerful catamaran. They proceeded to take statements from everybody: the family, the children's tutor, the scientists, the five or six fishing families that made the island their home, and especially little Benjiro, as he'd been the only witness to the abduction.

The police team included a specialist child psychologist whose job it was to try to help the children cope with the trauma of seeing their mother murdered. She was also the one to coax details from the toddler's memory of the two men who had abducted Aiko. With his grandmother present, she put the kitten into a light hypnotic trance and was able to get enough details of the second man's features for the police artist to make preliminary sketches of him.

The telephone's computer automatically stored all calls over a twenty-four hour period; the fake delivery call and the abduction call were brought up from memory by the police and copied for examination back on the mainland.

Finally, after assurances that they would do all they could, the police left the family to their grief.

And still Miyatsu had not returned.

Montaro and Miekko took off into the warm night sky, levitating as high as they could, trying to spot his psychic signature.

Dawn was breaking over the island before the teenagers returned, exhausted-looking, flying low, their tails dragging on the ground.

"We think he's circling the globe," Montaro reported as he and his twin sipped a cup of warm milk each at the kitchen table. "Every now and then I heard a sort of echo. How about you, Miekko-chan?"

Miekko nodded wearily. "But we couldn't catch him. He's up too far and going too fast for us."

"But what's he doing?" asked Yutaka in a hollow voice. The old man's eyes were red-rimmed from crying; he had lost most of the boundless energy he usually showed for life, and now looked his age for the first time since he'd come to live on the island.

"We think -- we think he's searching. For a psychic trace of -- " Montaro faltered, and he stopped speaking, unable to go on. A tear trickled down his face, wetting his fur.

Miekko drew a deep breath. "Searching for a trace of Mum's body," she finished for her twin, her voice breaking on the last word. She buried her face in her hands abruptly, the tears winning out again. "Oh, Grandma," she sobbed, "Why? Why did they *kill* her?" It came out as a wail.

Kagami hastily rose and went to her eldest granddaughter, putting her arms about her in comfort, fresh tears wetting her own cheeks.

*

Miyatsu hung, exhausted, looking down upon the earth. The thin air this far up was difficult to breathe and viciously cold, with the moisture freezing into ice particles coating his fur, but he disregarded it. He didn't want to go down further into the warmth to let it melt away, as he had periodically throughout the long night and day following, as he fruitlessly searched for some lingering psychic trace of his mate's body.

Up this high, it was possible to see that the earth really was a globe: the planet's horizon curved downwards on all sides with Miyatsu floating wearily in the centre, his chest heaving as he panted to get enough oxygen into his straining system. When he looked up, he could see stars above him, although the earth below was bathed in sunset light.

Closing his physical eyes for a moment, he let his psychic senses take over. His mind's eye could see that the earth teemed with signatures of life, humans, animals, even plants, a glittering, ever-moving kaleidoscope. Each one was unique to the individual and lingered for a time even after death, gradually fading away to nothing as the body cooled. Miyatsu had spent the past twenty-four hours in the air, combing the earth in thin slices, filtering out signatures that could not be Aiko's. Time and again he'd spotted a small blue-green dot that was similar to her light; always he swooped to the ground to investigate, only to find that it was somebody else.

He was becoming dizzy from lack of oxygen, and started to go down again, but then stopped, reconsidering.

For if he just stayed at this altitude a little longer, he would lose consciousness.

How easy it would be, he thought, looking at the land so far below. *Just to stop moving, to stop thinking, to stop feeling, just drop.*

Quicker in the long run, and the ultimate outcome would be the same. For Miyatsu had no doubt about his symptoms this time: he'd experienced them before. He'd never expected to feel the pain of Pershan Syndrome again; twice in one lifetime was too much to bear. He would never see his Aiko again, so what did it matter if he died now or later? His heart was already dead. Only his body needed to follow.

Aiko! How could her light have been taken from the world, snuffed out so callously? Aiko, who had never hurt anybody in her life, whose only crime in the eyes of the small-minded had been to love him.

Grimly, he decided against a final plummet into the ground's embrace. Not yet. For he still had business to attend to. He was going to find her, wherever they had hidden her, and take her back to the island for burial. And then he was going to hunt down every last member of HAGEO and make them pay for the death of his mate! Until that was done, he had to stay alive.

Fighting exhaustion and heartbreak, he once more began to sweep the planet for any faint clue as to where the cowards had hidden his love's body.

*

Aiko dropped back into her body with a sense of resignation. Sakaki was again sitting by her bedside, so she kept her eyes determinedly closed and pretended to be asleep.

Over the past few days, she'd practiced her out-of-body technique intensively and could now achieve it at a rate of around once for every three attempts. But it was exhausting, and it seemed she couldn't manage longer than about ten minutes before being snapped back automatically, no matter how far away from her body she was.

She recognized the sensations that meant she'd reached her time limit by now; she'd feel a weird stretching sensation and a sound like the approach of an onrushing train: *whum whum WHUM!*

Although she could hold it off for a few moments, fighting against an inexorable pull as strong as gravity, inevitably she would wind up back inside her body, blinking and frustrated at not being able to navigate her way out of the maze of underground corridors. They were all labeled at the junctions, but that didn't tell her how to get to the exit.

The first few times she'd managed to leave her body, she'd floated through the door as if it was no more solid than smoke and navigated along confusing corridors, searching for an exit sign. The place was a maze of corridors and passageways. There was the constant low hum of powerful machinery somewhere in the distance.

An ominous sense of panic was growing within her as the days slipped by. She'd been here for four days now *four days* with Miyatsu and her family thinking she was dead, and she was no further along in making an escape bid than she had been the first day.

It had seemed such a miracle that she could escape the confines of her body that she'd been sure she could somehow get a message to Miyatsu that way. Yet now it appeared to be a useless dead-end, distracting her from any constructive ideas. For not only didn't she know where on earth she was, she'd never be able to stay out-of-body for the length of time needed to get home to the island anyway. Also the sedative that had been dripping steadily into her veins over the past four days made her thought processes slow, and it was difficult to think consecutively. She felt as if her head was stuffed with cotton wadding.

Two nurses alternated day and night shifts between them so that there was one always in the room constantly, seeing to her physical needs and making sure she was well-guarded. Nurse Tetsu was as uncommunicative and coldly efficient as Nurse Rin.

Aiko's only sense of time in this sterile, artificially-lit place without windows was the clock, steadily ticking away the amount of life left to her mate and building on her feelings of helplessness and panic...

Sakaki would come into the room a couple of times a day and just sit beside the bed, watching Aiko with an intent, expectant expression. It seemed as if he were *waiting* for something. Aiko usually coped with his presence either by feigning sleep or else by letting her consciousness leave in reality.

Aiko didn't open her eyes now, letting Sakaki think she was asleep. After a few minutes however, Sakaki sighed and stood up.

"You're leaving, sir?" asked Nurse Rin, looking up from her desk.

"Yes, I can't stay. I'm due to join a satellite link-up with some overseas investors." He gazed down at Aiko again for a moment. "Does she show any sign yet of getting over her -- addiction?"

Nurse Rin shook her head. "I'm afraid not, sir. But it's early days yet, and she's been under that creature's influence for how long?"

"Years," Sakaki said with a grimace. "He first tainted her consciousness when she was seven! Poor little Aiko! No wonder she's confused. Imagine being addicted that long."

"Still, you said that once the animal has died, she'll be free of its mind control. Are you sure that will do the trick, sir?"

"Positive. He should be well and truly into Pershan Syndrome by now. He'll have stopped eating and will only be sleeping sporadically. I'd imagine he's feeling pretty weak by now."

It was as well that Sakaki was on his way out the door as he said this, for as it closed behind him Aiko dissolved into weak sobs of total despair, which Nurse Rin as usual ignored.

The clock ticked off another minute. Aiko stared at it dully through her tears, wishing Sakaki dead at this moment. That he could talk so callously about Miyatsu then just walk out...

The tears stopped abruptly mid-sob. Sakaki was *walking* out -- of course he was! Because he knew where the exit was!

Aiko wrenched her head as hard as she could to the side, desperate to follow before Sakaki disappeared into the maze.

Thankfully this time the trick worked at once. Aiko slipped through the now-insubstantial door. She was just in time to see Sakaki turn one of the corners at the junction of South 10, the corridor where her prison was.

She flashed after him, mindful that she only had around ten minutes in this form. He was going along East-West Connector now, then turned into East 10. Aiko wondered at that, as she knew from her explorations that East 10 ended in an abrupt dead-end wall with no junctions running off it. East 10 was usually where she turned back in her bodiless wandering, searching fruitlessly instead along West 10 or North 10, or one of the many other connecting corridors running like the spokes of a massive wheel that seemingly went on for miles to nowhere.

Now however, Sakaki stopped at the wall where East 10 ended abruptly and reached for what Aiko had taken to be a light-switch. He flicked it, and instead of the lights going out, as she'd expected, a concealed door hummed open, revealing the interior of an elevator!

Aiko was in it before Sakaki entered, and she hovered above his head, watching his next actions intently. The wall panel showed nine floors above them; Sakaki punched

the top button and the elevator doors slid shut.

At last! Aiko felt exultant. After four days of fruitless searching, it had finally dawned on her to simply follow Sakaki out. The idea seemed obvious now: she could only think that it was the sedative that was making her thought processes so dull and stupid. A double-edged sword indeed, for without the sedative she would have found it impossible to leave her body at all.

The elevator stopped at Floor Eight, and two men got in, dressed in hard hats and boots. They greeted Sakaki, bowing respectfully. "Good afternoon, Raikatuji-sama."

Sakaki nodded back in acknowledgement. At Floor Five the elevator stopped again and the pair got out.

Floors Four, Three, Two and One flashed by. Finally they stopped at the Ground Floor. The doors slid open and Sakaki strode out, shadowed by Aiko. She'd lost count of how long she'd been out now, but there was still no sign of her time limit, and there was *no way* she was going to miss finally finding her way out of here!

There were many more people about now; offices opened off the long corridor labeled North G, and Aiko could see people working at desks. This, then, must be the administrative level. Sakaki turned onto West G and there were people here walking about, all looking busy.

And then they were heading straight for a big sliding door beside which stood a receptionist's front desk. Unmistakeably the entrance at last! All around were displays and posters, bright flashes of color on the newly-painted walls.

Sakaki drew level with the receptionist at her desk and stopped.

"Did those estimates I asked you about yesterday come through?" he began, but Aiko didn't stop to listen to business any further. For beyond the glass door the afternoon sun was shining brightly, and she wasn't about to wait. With a rush, she swooped past Sakaki and through the doors and finally -- *finally!* She was outside!

And it wasn't really such a big surprise that she could hear the familiar sound of surf washing onto a beach behind her, or that she knew that the gleaming building rising above the trees at the end of the beach was the headquarters and main office of Raikatuji Centre. Maybe subconsciously she'd suspected where she was all along. She turned slowly about, gazing around. Her small house was long gone, but it was still the same beach where she and Miyatsu had walked hand-in-hand through the rain twelve years ago. Over there was the Raikatuji wharf, gleaming in the sunshine. The building she'd just exited must be the entrance to the newly-built Raikatuji Clean Energy Facility.

Sakaki had brought her back to Kagoshima.

*

It was the evening of the fourth day when Miyatsu at last came home.

The family had gathered about the table for dinner when first Montaro, then his twin, pricked their ears forward and turned to gaze out the window.

Without a word, Montaro ran to the front door and levitated straight up into the sky, streaking westward towards the setting sun.

Mieko gazed wildly at her grandparents and siblings. "Dad is nearly home! But he's weak; he called out to us because he doesn't think he can manage the last few kilometers by himself. Hideaki, Hanako! We'll need all four of us to help him down."

Without waiting any longer, she launched herself out the door after her twin, and the two younger ones immediately jumped up and followed her. Within seconds, the only ones left at the table were Yutaka and Kagami, with little Benjiro on her lap.

The child bounced up and down excitedly. "Daddy's home, Daddy's home!"

Benjiro had refused to accept that his mother was never coming back. He had continued in his belief that her absence was only temporary by stubbornly insisting that: "Daddy will find the bad men and make them give her back!"

When told tearfully by his older siblings and grandparents that Aiko was now in the spirit world with Benjiro's little twin, he had covered his mouth with his hands in astonished delight, before crying out in wonder, "Mummy's bringing my sister with her when she comes home!"

Now the toddler jumped off his grandmother's lap and ran outside, eager for the first sight of his returning family.

Yutaka and Kagami exchanged a deeply worried glance before slowly following their small grandson.

Kagami was the first to put words to the worry. "He can't get back by himself?"

Yutaka nodded. "Pershan Syndrome," he said solemnly. "He probably hasn't eaten or slept properly since Aiko--" His voice wobbled, and he stopped, drawing a deep breath. "Since he left," he amended shakily.

A dot appeared in the sky far out to sea. It was difficult to make it out at first against the setting sun, but it grew larger and larger and eventually resolved itself into four cat-shapes supporting a bigger one in the centre. Montaro and Mieko each had one arm slipped under their father's shoulders, and the two younger children were flying beneath, adding their telepathic strength to help buoy up the three above them.

As they flew lower and touched down outside the house, the two humans could see that Miyatsu was ill. He looked utterly drained and had lost a noticeable amount of weight and condition in just the last four days. His head drooped and his fur was matted and unkempt.

Still with his two eldest children supporting him, he looked into Yutaka's eyes wretchedly. His blue eyes were fever-bright, and Yutaka's heart sank as he realized his suspicion of Pershan Syndrome had been correct.

"I'm sorry," Miyatsu murmured desolately. "I failed. I wanted to bring Aiko home for burial. So that the family could grieve her properly. But they hid her too well. I couldn't -- I can't *find* her..."

"Get him inside," Yutaka told the children quietly. "Up to his room. He needs to rest."

*

Mieko brought the dinner tray from last night back down the stairs. Her ears were down and her tail dragged despondently.

"I left the breakfast tray on the dresser by the bed," she said tonelessly in answer to her grandparent's worried looks. "But he didn't eat anything after he came home last night. Look."

She lifted the tea towel that covered the dishes on the tray. The slices of fish and meat were lying untouched and dried out next to the vegetables and rice.

"At least he drank most of the milk," she continued with a sniffle, putting the tray on the counter. She gazed at her grandparents and her brown eyes swam with tears. "But this will be the fifth day since he's eaten! Dad's going to die, isn't he?"

Kagami hugged her granddaughter wordlessly, but Yutaka's lips thinned in anger and he stood up.

"We'll just see about that! I'm going up to have a word with him!"

"Oh, Yutaka! Do you think that's wise?"

Yutaka looked at his sobbing granddaughter and distraught wife. "Well I can't make things much worse, can I?"

*

Yutaka's knock on the door was ignored; he walked in anyway. Miyatsu was lying on the bed, his eyes open, staring at the ceiling.

Yutaka seated himself on the bed beside Miyatsu. "You do know your children are worried sick about you, don't you?" he said conversationally.

Miyatsu glanced at him for the first time since he'd entered the room but said nothing, his face expressionless.

"You're being amazingly selfish," Yutaka continued. The small frown that creased Miyatsu's face at this criticism encouraged Yutaka; at least he was being listened to. "Those five children, who *you* brought into this world, may I remind you, have just lost their mother. And now their father is going to abandon them."

Miyatsu's eyes flashed at that. "I'm not abandoning them! I came home, didn't I?"

"You're up here starving yourself to death. Explain to me how that isn't abandoning them? They are *your responsibility*, Miyatsu! When I helped you create them it was because I thought you were serious about wanting to start your own species. They need you, Miyatsu. If you allow yourself to die, what happens to them, hmmm?"

He held up one hand to forestall Miyatsu as he opened his mouth to protest. "Oh, Kagami and I will look after them, of course we will, they're our grandchildren. But look at me, Miyatsu! One old human and his wife, who can tell how long we'll live? And even if we're lucky enough to live as long as the Okinawans, we can never help those children develop and refine their skills! They're a different species and have powers beyond anything I can imagine. How do you propose I teach them to, oh, let's say, spot a psychic signature, or shield their thoughts? I don't even understand how *you* do it, much less try to describe the technique behind it to them!"

"They can already do that," Miyatsu said, his eyes never leaving Yutaka's.

"They can," Yutaka conceded. "Because you taught them. But they're still children. Who's going to teach Benjiro? And Raden and Raiku once they're born? Are you honestly going to leave Kagami and I to bring up seven highly-talented children and just trust that Montaro and Mieke will remember enough of your training to take over? They're still only children, Miyatsu, they shouldn't *have* to try to teach their siblings all they need to know. They look to you as the model of how to *be* a Miyatsu, what to do, how to act. And if they don't know how to act as the Miyatsu species, then what is left to them? They'll have to try to become human, and that won't work, because they're *not* human. If you abandon them to their fate now, they'll eventually end up as slaves just like you were, leashed and muzzled and controlled like animals! You know they will! They need the guidance and the experience that only their father can give them. You're their safe harbour until they're adult enough to navigate the stormy seas of life."

Miyatsu drew a deep, shuddering breath and met Yutaka's eyes dejectedly. "I don't want to leave them, Yutaka, I love them. But -- I can't go on without my Aiko! It's like I've lost my beating heart, like a vital piece of myself has died! You can't imagine what it's like -- "

"Excuse me?" Yutaka interrupted, his eyebrows lifting. "I can't imagine what it's like? What do you think I am, a rock with no feelings? This is *my daughter* we're talking about, my baby girl! The light of my life, my only child! How *dare* you say I can't understand the pain of her loss?"

Miyatsu shook his head. "I know you loved her as much as I did, but you're human. You can't get Pershan Syndrome, you can still eat and sleep despite your grief. Your mourning won't kill you."

"So it's a foregone conclusion that every case of Pershan Syndrome ends in death? I'm sorry, Miyatsu, I don't believe it and neither should you. You're not Pershan, even though your Adersi leopard ancestors had much in common with that species. And you aren't your ancestors, you're not even completely feline, you have a significant percentage of human and Coati genes. Plus you've had Pershan Syndrome once before and recovered..."

"Because I was reunited with Aiko!" Miyatsu sat up slowly, watching Yutaka intently, his ears pricked forward alertly.

Yutaka waved away the interruption. "And how long did you have it at a low level before you eventually succumbed enough to fall flat on your face? Twelve weeks, Miyatsu! With your size and metabolic requirements you should have died in a month, five weeks at the outside!"

"Yes, but -- Sakaki was with me. He kept me company, talked with me, I wasn't alone..."

"And there we come to the crux of the matter!" Yutaka said triumphantly. "Are you alone now? Only by choice, up here in your bedroom. Downstairs are your family, waiting, loving, all distraught about you! Come down and be with us! Let *us* support you!" Yutaka suddenly looked old and weary as he pleaded. "You're my son-in-law, Miyatsu-kun, just as much as if you were human. You've loved my daughter and given me grandchildren. Don't leave us now, I beg you! Don't leave Kagami and I. We need you as much as the children do. My daughter is dead. I can't bear the thought of losing my son as well."

Suddenly Miyatsu's eyes were swimming with tears as he gazed at the old man. "Yutaka! How can I go on *without* her? Tell me *how*!"

And he buried his face in his paws and began to sob brokenly, great heaving sobs as if he'd never stop.

Yutaka put his arm about him, holding him close. It seemed the great upwelling of grief went on and on. Yutaka's face was again wet with his own tears.

"Yes," he murmured. "Cry it out. It helps -- only a little, I know, but it helps. Grieve for her, but accept it, and live for the sake of your family."

After what seemed like hours, Miyatsu's wretched sobs finally eased, gradually quieting into long-drawn breaths and hiccups. When he finally raised his face, his blue eyes were red-rimmed and the fur of his cheeks was damp with his tears.

"It's my fault she's dead," he mumbled brokenly, refusing to meet Yutaka's eyes. "If only she'd never met me, she'd still be alive. You and I both know that, Yutaka."

Yutaka still had his arm about Miyatsu's shoulders. He smoothed the fur under his hand soothingly. "No. It's not your fault, Miyatsu-kun. I can't lie to you: during this last week, I have imagined what might have been if Aiko hadn't met you. Oh, I could moan and cry and blame you for it all; it would be easy to do that, and I'd have a scapegoat for my misery."

He turned to look Miyatsu full in the face, putting one hand under his jaw for a second to force him to meet his eyes. "But it wouldn't be fair and it wouldn't be the truth. Because you made her happy, Miyatsu. She loved you, she loved this family that you both created. Both of you were living your dream; you were making it happen together. And you were generous enough to include Kagami and I in your Utopia as well." The old man shook his head sharply. "No, the fault is not yours, and you should never think it is. It lies with the evil-minded creatures that can't abide to see any love that falls outside of their narrow parameters."

Yutaka watched as Miyatsu thought about that, the expressions chasing themselves across his chimeric face. Finally the old man smiled a wavering reassurance. "You'll live, Miyatsu. You *have* to. You have genes that make you susceptible to Pershan Syndrome. That doesn't mean you have to succumb to it. Don't forget your *other* genes, the human side of your heritage! Humans are the damndest animals that ever lived, cantankerous and contrary, and more stubborn than any other! And we need you, because the fight isn't over yet. We contacted the police about Aiko's -- Aiko's murder -- " he closed his eyes in pain and swallowed hard, taking a moment to compose himself. "They're confident they'll track down those responsible," he continued. "They took a DNA sample of the dried blood around Benji's mouth, they're going through the records of every organization that's ever opposed GMAs, particularly HAGEO. I gave them the records of all the threatening communications you and Aiko have ever

received. The police will get to the bottom of this and bring Aiko's killers to justice, I'm positive!"

Miyatsu had a speculative look on his face. "You're right. Just because I -- I couldn't find her, that doesn't mean to say I should die and let them get away with it..."

"Good for you! You know, I wouldn't be surprised if your death was what they wanted all along," Yutaka said. "I've been thinking about that a lot over the past few days. That spokesman said that they'd read your file. But how could they? Aiko told me that it's classified, only Raikatuji researchers get to see it."

Miyatsu nodded. "Sakaki gave her a copy when we met again at Raikatuji Centre. It needed Sakaki's authorization before she could bring it up on her computer."

Yutaka nodded. "So somebody from Raikatuji managed to see it, somebody high enough up in the organization to be trusted with the information. And they would have made the connection with you and Pershan Syndrome if they had any intelligence at all! I think the HAGEO people didn't particularly care about *Aiko*. I think they feared *you*, my son. They wanted your death, as the most powerful GMA the world has ever seen. Don't let them win!"

A flash of fear showed briefly in Miyatsu's eyes. "If what you say is true, then the children will be in danger next!" he said. "Once I'm dead, they'd be easy targets!" He gazed at Yutaka desperately. "They're trying to wipe out my species, Yutaka! That's what this is about!"

Yutaka nodded slowly, the implications sinking in. "I hadn't thought of it quite like that before, but it makes sense. I'll need to alert the police to the possibility." He stood and gazed down at Miyatsu. "So. What are you going to do? It's your decision."

Blue eyes met brown eyes squarely. Shakily, Miyatsu got to his feet. "I'm going to fight to survive," he murmured. "At least until Aiko's murderers are caught, and my children are safe. Until then, I'll live."

*

The family stared in amazement as Yutaka, followed by Miyatsu, came downstairs. Yutaka was carrying the breakfast tray; he set it on the kitchen table.

"Your father has decided to have breakfast with us," he announced to the room at large.

Miyatsu gave his family a wan smile. "I'm sorry I worried you," he told the children quietly.

He sat down determinedly, lifted the tea towel off the plate and put a slice of meat into his mouth. He gave no sign of enjoying the food, in fact it seemed more as if it were a chore he wanted to get over with, but still, he was eating, and one by one his children broke into relieved smiles and sat close beside him, radiating their love as he doggedly chewed, swallowed, and reached for more.

Kagami was standing by the sink, watching in astonished relief. "What magic did you work, old man?" she asked her husband.

Yutaka smiled. "I convinced him that he wasn't to blame. And I appealed to his sense of responsibility," he murmured. "To the part of him that's a father."

*

After Miyatsu had eaten as much as his shrunken stomach could hold, his eyes began to droop tiredly. It was as if his body, having decided to live, was now demanding all the essentials previously denied it, sleep being foremost on the list.

Kagami took the children for a walk to allow Yutaka to continue his good work. As they trooped out, Miyatsu looked at Yutaka.

"I -- I can't go back up to the bedroom to sleep," he said in a small voice. "It holds too many memories. Everywhere up there, I see, and smell, and hear my Aiko. It's too painful."

Yutaka thought about it for a moment. "Remember those times over the years when we've gotten up before dawn to spend the morning fishing on the rocks?" he said quietly. "And we'd get home and everybody's busy and we'd feel like a nap after lunch?"

Miyatsu gave a shaky smile. "And we usually go into the lounge room, shut the door, close the blinds, and each take a couch." He stood up. "I think I can manage that."

Yutaka once more led the way. He bustled about shutting blinds while Miyatsu curled up on the larger of the two couches in the room, pillowing his head on his paws.

Yutaka took off his shoes and lay down on the smaller couch.

After a moment, Miyatsu said quietly, "So. Have we caught many fish?"

Yutaka smiled. "Not a single one, Miyatsu-kun. You keep talking and scare them off. As usual!"

There was silence for another minute or two.

"Yutaka?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you."

"Shh! I'm casting my line. Don't scare the fish away!"

Miyatsu closed his eyes wearily. After a few minutes, Yutaka heard his breathing even out, slow and steady, as sleep finally claimed him.

Yutaka smiled. He'd been a father for a long time. It made one something of a psychologist.

Chapter Seventeen - Message In A Bottle

Chapter 18 of 23

Sakaki goes too far in his obsessive, destructive feelings towards Aiko and Miyatsu.

Chapter Seventeen -- Message In A Bottle

Aiko submitted pragmatically to Nurse Rin's efficiency. It wasn't as if she had much choice in the matter, after all.

Each evening the sedative tube and catheter would be removed for one hour while Aiko was sat on the toilet and a suppository inserted. Once that unpleasant task was over, it was shower time. Aiko sat like a lump of meat in the specially-designed open-weave wheelchair, rotated under the water as Rin applied soap, rinsed her off, wheeled her out and towed her dry.

It was the only time the sedative tube was removed. At first Nurse Rin had attempted to do all this with the tube still in Aiko's arm, but they found that the movement caused Aiko to vomit, pass out, or both. So it and the catheter were dutifully removed, and Aiko found that at the end of the shower she could once more move her hands and feet, if only weakly, enough to help Rin get her dressed again. Then it was a bowl of spoon-fed mush, after which Rin would lift her back onto the bed and the various tubes would be reinserted for another twenty-three hours of sedative-induced meditation.

All of this was done without either ceremony or conversation. Aiko had long ago given up trying to ingratiate herself with the pair of nurses. Rin was polite and to the point and never deviated from the standard line that Aiko was sick and needed to be treated as just another addict going through drug withdrawal. Nurse Tetsu didn't even have that much caring bedside manner, and tended to ignore the fact that Aiko was a living, thinking human being at all.

But although Aiko's body was immobile, her mind was not. Her consciousness had traveled to the surface a dozen times since finding out where she was yesterday. And it was a lot quicker now: enough logic had finally seeped through the sedative-induced stupor for her to realize that she wasn't constrained by the physical in her out-of-body state. She felt rather ashamed that it hadn't occurred to her before, but then, old habits died hard as the saying went. All she needed to do was allow herself to float straight up, through the ceiling, through the many layers of concrete and deep, dark metres of water to break free at the top into the sunshine or starlight above her physical prison.

On her last visit, just before the time came for her evening ablutions, she'd floated above the waves and turned her face south towards the horizon. A mere three hours away lay Shima. Only three hours. And as out of reach to her as if it had been on the moon. Aiko was still fighting to extend her time out-of-body so that she could reach it, but the most she'd been able to manage so far before being snapped back had been twelve and a half minutes.

Oh, Sakaki had been clever, she thought furiously. Aiko knew that Miyatsu would have searched for her psychic signature; even believing she was dead, he would have looked for the fading sign while he still had the strength left to levitate. But Sakaki knew Miyatsu almost as well as she did, as he'd been the one who'd concentrated on developing the GMA's various talents to help him win on the circuit. Sakaki knew that buildings blurred, but didn't eradicate, a living psychic signal. Hiding Aiko beneath the seafloor had been a move of genius - no signal could leak through that many metres of water. Even if it occurred to Miyatsu to look beneath the waves, the signal wouldn't travel much past the mud and rock of the seabed. It would appear to Miyatsu that his mate's body had been destroyed utterly, her signature wiped from the face of the earth.

What was Miyatsu doing at this moment? It was a woeful thought; Aiko knew Sakaki was right, Miyatsu must be deep in the depression of Pershan Syndrome by now. He'd have stopped eating and sleeping, his physical reserves depleted, unable to fight off the demons until his exhausted body collapsed...

Aiko buried her incorporeal head into her hands and sobbed inconsolable, invisible tears for her love.

*

Miyatsu slept fitfully for most of that day. Tossing and turning, crying out with nightmares certainly, but still, it was sleep, and his exhausted body needed it.

An hour or two before sunset, he woke up, took a shower, forced some more food down, then sat on the verandah outside his house as the sun set, with little Benjiro on his lap and his children grouped about him. None of them said very much; the children's usual chatter had been greatly subdued that week as they tried to come to terms with their mother's death. They appeared content just to be with their father, their love and need for him obvious even without words.

Mieko went upstairs and fetched her brush and comb. Handing the comb to her sister, she sat for some time grooming her father, working the snarls from his coat and brushing out the fur shed due to stress. Hanako worked on his tail, gently smoothing the comb through his fur. Montaro and Hideaki sat on either side of Miyatsu, unconsciously mirroring his position, both the boys looking so like their father that Yutaka and Kagami, sitting on the swing chair, could only tell them apart by their body size.

Finally Montaro turned to his father. "I'm glad you're back, Dad," he said quietly. "I was so scared that -- after Mum died --"

Miyatsu put a paw on his eldest son's shoulder. "I won't ever leave you again," he said solemnly. "That's a promise."

*

Nurse Rin had unplugged Aiko from the various tubes and appliances in preparation for her evening ritual. She was on the point of lifting her patient from the bed prior to undressing her when Sakaki arrived.

This time however, Aiko had no interest in feigning sleep. She wanted to talk to Sakaki. She'd thought long and hard after returning from her last visit to the surface and had finally decided, with a heavy heart, that if it was the only way to save Miyatsu's life, she would make a deal with the devil. In this case, the devil's name was Raikatuji Sakaki.

Sakaki looked sick. Aiko hadn't really taken a good look at him for several days; she was usually asleep, pretending to be, or incorporeal. But now, as she saw him coming in through the door, it struck her that her one-time friend indeed looked ill. His eyes had developed even darker shadows under them than she remembered, and as he closed the door behind him, she noticed a visible tremor in his hands. His face had an unhealthy grayish tinge to it, and his eyes appeared feverish.

Nurse Rin looked at her employer with concern. "Sir, are you feeling all right? You look unwell."

Sakaki shook his head. "I'm going through Anodyne withdrawal. It's -- unpleasant. But necessary. If Aiko can wean herself off Miyatsu, the least I can do is give up the drugs." He glanced at Aiko. "You're awake at last, Aiko. Good. I wanted a quiet word with you." He turned back to the nurse. "Nurse Rin, it must be nearly time for your dinner-break?"

"Not for another hour yet, sir. And I always eat it at my desk anyway."

"Nevertheless, I'd like a private word with Aiko. Kindly go on up to the staff cafeteria for an early dinner."

"Oh. Yes, sir. I'll just intubate her again..."

"No, leave it. Aiko has an annoying habit of dropping off to sleep when I'm here; no doubt the sedative working on her. I want her to stay conscious while we have our talk."

When Nurse Rin looked set to object again, Sakaki's lips thinned impatiently. "Look at her, Nurse! She's as weak as a kitten. After you go, lock the door behind you. Then, even is she does somehow manage to overpower me," and he smiled humorlessly at the thought, "she still won't be able to leave the room."

Sakaki seated himself in his usual place next to Aiko's bed and waited while the nurse left. As the door closed behind her, he fixed his eyes on Aiko's face, his elbows on his knees.

"I know you must hate me by now, Aiko," he said quietly. His face had a sheen of perspiration on it, and this close she could see that his eyes were bloodshot. "But I just wanted to let you know that I'm going through a similar pain to you. You're not alone."

He gave a small smile and leaned forward to clasp her hand, drawing a shuddering breath. "I haven't had any Anodyne now for six days. The pain is -- really beginning to bite. But we can get through this together, my darling. Just a little while longer."

Aiko met his eyes squarely. Now was the time, and it broke her heart, but she'd do it to save Miyatsu's life.

"Sakaki," she said quietly. "I've been thinking about our -- situation. And I wanted to let you know that I've come to a decision. I'll -- I'll stay with you, I'll live with you. Or I'll marry you, if that's what you want."

Sakaki's eyes opened wide. "You will?" he breathed. "Yes, I want you as my wife, of course I do! Oh, Aiko, I *knew* it, I knew that once Miyatsu was out of your life, you'd be reasonable -- "

"On one condition," Aiko interrupted.

Sakaki sat forward. His eyes were shining, and he clasped her hand in both of his. "Anything, my darling. Just name it and it's yours!"

"Sakaki, I want you to let Miyatsu know that I'm alive."

Sakaki stared at her in disbelief. "What?"

"Please, Sakaki! I promise I won't try to seek him out, or my f-family. I'll marry you and try to be a good wife to you." A tear slipped down Aiko's cheek. "But don't let Miyatsu die because he thinks I'm dead! Oh, Sakaki, if you love me, *really* love me, do this one thing for me!"

Sakaki's face was incredulous. Slowly it changed to anger. He stood up and towered over her. "I should have guessed it wouldn't be that easy!" he said angrily. "I really thought, just for a moment, that you were over Miyatsu, that you loved me! But no, that monster is still first, *always first*, in your affections!"

"Sakaki, he doesn't ever need to know that I'm with you. Just let me talk to him, just once, on the telephone. I'll explain that for his safety and the children's safety, we must live apart." She was sobbing now, unable to contain it any longer. "I'll make him promise not to -- not to come looking for me, if I have to I'll lie and say I've found somebody else --"

"Do you take me for a fool, Fujimoto Aiko? The *minute* Miyatsu knows you're alive, he'll be searching for you. And he won't rest until he finds you! Why do you think I went to all this trouble?"

"But, Sakaki! Miy -- Miyatsu will *die*!" Her voice ended in a sob.

"That, my dear Aiko, is the whole point of the exercise. And it appears I was right -- you're not going to be over him until he's well and truly *dead*."

"Sakaki, how can you be so cruel?" Aiko pleaded through her sobs. "How can you do this to your brother?"

"*ENOUGH!*" In one swift, vicious movement, Sakaki turned and put his fist through the wall. Breathing heavily, he cradled his hand for a moment, staring at the hole he'd made in the plasterboard while he tried to regain some sort of tenuous control.

Finally he turned around and faced her again. "I've warned you before, Aiko. *Don't* speak about that accidental relationship. I donated some stem cells. That's all! You'll never be free of him while he's alive, and I could never trust that you wouldn't try to go back to him. *And* I'd have to keep looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life, knowing what he'd do to me if he found we were together! No, the *only* way to get him out of your system is with his death."

"He won't come looking for me," Aiko begged desperately. "I'll tell him that if he does I'll be killed! I'll beg him to live for the children's sake, and then I'll go away with you forever! I'll change my name and my appearance, whatever you want. Sakaki, please!"

"Huh! Do you still think you're his master, and that he'll do whatever you want? I saw through that particular ruse of his years ago! *He's* the master, not you. He only has to click his deformed fingers and you'll jump to do his bidding."

"You'll never understand what's between us, Sakaki," Aiko said sorrowfully. "I love Miyatsu more than life itself... "

"Yes, I saw the way you *love* him!" Sakaki sneered. "Going at it like a pair of alley cats on heat in my conservatory when we came back from the circuit. I saw how he controlled you then, Aiko, don't deny it!"

Sakaki was face to face with her now, his hands on the bed on either side of her, his eyes wild. "I saw him standing against that tree with you clinging to him. I heard you crying out his name and him yowling like a scalded cat while he *fucked* you! He controlled you and you *loved* every minute of it!"

Aiko stared at him, appalled not only that he'd seen their intimacy, but that he could debase it and make it sound so filthy.

"You -- you knew about that?" she whispered.

"Did you think you could hide it from me? I *burned* for you that night; I realized then you were the only woman I'd ever love. And I did everything I could to win you over, but still you left me. For *twelve years*, Aiko, I never heard a word from you! Why do you think I turned to Anodyne? It was the only way to dull the pain of my broken heart!"

Aiko felt the slow burn of anger beginning. How *dare* he spy on their love, then throw it into her face as if it was something disgusting? And how dare he blame her and Miyatsu for his bad decisions in life?

"It's always about you, isn't it, Sakaki?" she said coldly. "You can't stand to see anybody else happy, even though you've had all the advantages, all the money and prestige and glamour, all of the education and privilege. You hate the fact that Miyatsu found love, true love. It wouldn't matter if it was me or some other woman. Whoever Miyatsu fell in love with, you'd want her for yourself. Just so he couldn't have her."

She was panting for breath now, her heart racing, the fury she felt making her voice rise until she was shouting at him. "This was *never* about me, it's about your twisted attitude towards Miyatsu. Towards your *BROTHER!*" She screamed it into his face with everything she had in her, wanting to hurt him as much as he was hurting her.

His hand hit her with punishing force, rocking her back against the pillows and splitting her bottom lip. Aiko cried out in pain; she fought to hold onto her slipping consciousness. If she'd still had the sedative being fed into her arm, she wouldn't have managed it. As it was, the world tilted ominously and she forced it down before her consciousness could slip from her body again.

Sakaki gripped her shoulders, his fingers digging in with cruel force. He shook her hard, his eyes burning into hers. "*Shut up, shut up!*" he hissed between clenched teeth. "Or I swear, I'll kill you!"

But Aiko was no longer cowed. "Do it, then!" she shouted at him. "Do you think I care what happens to me if Miyatsu dies?"

"I'm doing you a favour, you blind little fool, you should be grateful! I rescued you from a *monster*, a filthy, manufactured miscreation!"

Aiko stared at his face, so close to hers, so twisted with rage, and her own anger seethed in her chest. Her voice when she spoke was low and steady, but had the force of a blow behind it. "Miyatsu's more a man than you'll *ever* be, Sakaki!"

He paled, and Aiko could see she'd struck a nerve. For a moment she was sure he'd hit her again, and she didn't care.

And then suddenly he was kissing her, kissing with a bruising, hurting force, and pushing her nightdress up to her waist as she struggled against him while he tore at the fastenings of his clothes, freeing his penis. He was on the bed, holding her sedative-weakened body down with his own, parting her legs with ungentle hands.

Aiko struggled, but she had no more strength than a new-born baby, barely able to lift her arms. As Sakaki pulled back from the horrible kiss, his mouth smeared with blood from her split lip, she whimpered, "No, Sakaki! Please don't!"

"I'll show you how much of a man I am, Fujimoto Aiko!" he hissed through clenched teeth. And thrust into her.

The force of it rocked her body, and unready and unwilling, she cried out in pain at the invasion. Frantically, she wrenched her head to one side. The sound of ripping velcro had never been more welcome...

*

Benjiro had been sleeping with his grandmother since the abduction, as he still suffered nightmares about "bad men" if put to bed by himself. After the sun had set in a blaze of color, Yutaka and Kagami left to go back to their adjoining villa, and Miyatsu walked with them, carrying the sleeping toddler in his arms.

At the front door, he rubbed his cheek against the little round head affectionately, then handed the child to Kagami with a grateful smile.

"Thank you for taking care of him this week," Miyatsu said quietly.

"He can stay until he feels secure enough to start sleeping in his own bed again," Kagami answered. "He's no trouble. Good night, Miyatsu."

"Good night, Kagami."

She disappeared into the house with Benjiro.

Yutaka lingered at the door. He put one hand on Miyatsu's shoulder. "And speaking of sleep, what will *you* do now?" he asked in concern.

Miyatsu drew a deep breath. "I meant it when I said I've decided to live, Yutaka. I'll probably sleep on the sofa again tonight, though. Benji's not the only one to have nightmares in his own bed." He said it grimly. Now he looked down at the old man. "Yutaka -- thank you for talking to me this morning. If -- if you hadn't said what you did..." He trailed off, blinking against the tears that threatened again. Finally he said hoarsely, "The pain of losing Aiko will be with me always. But you made me realize how much my children need me. I have to live for them now." He gazed up into the night sky, and a single tear escaped, to wind its way down the fur of his cheek. "But, oh, Yutaka! I miss her so much!"

Yutaka bowed his head in pain. "We all do," he answered in a subdued voice. "I'm just taking it one minute at a time and trying to keep as busy as I can. I can't let myself dwell on it or I'd lose my mind to grief."

"Aiko was the first human I ever met who treated me like *aperson*," Miyatsu said shakily. "As someone worthy of her respect, rather than just some sort of -- of engineered fighting machine. I learnt so much from her about life, about values. I can't believe that she's gone. I keep expecting to look up and see her."

Yutaka nodded solemnly. "If ever you feel the need to talk, it doesn't matter if it's the middle of the night, please, come to us. If anybody understands your loss, it's Kagami and I. We share your pain. Let us share our love and support, too."

Miyatsu nodded gratefully, not chancing his voice anymore. He turned to go.

"Goodnight," Yutaka called after him quietly. "Try to sleep, my son."

*

Miyatsu accompanied his children upstairs to their bedrooms, saying goodnight and giving a quick head rub to each of them in turn before turning off their lights.

He turned to go back downstairs, but hesitated as he passed his own door. He needed to face his demons, to prove to himself that he *could* walk into the room. Keeping it as some sort of untouched shrine to be avoided was not the way forward.

Although it hurt, he forced himself to go through into the dim bedroom, the room he had shared with Aiko for so long, closing the door behind him. He felt a horrible sort of dislocation. This wasn't right, it shouldn't feel so empty: it had always been *their* sanctuary, a place of physical bliss, emotional ease, and unconditional love. He'd never once imagined that it would one day be his alone. If he'd thought about it at all, he'd always vaguely assumed he'd die before Aiko did.

He sat on the edge of the bed and closed his eyes. His feline sense of smell came to the fore: everywhere was the lingering scent of his mate, the pillow where her head had rested, the sheets which had covered her, so immediate that he could almost imagine she was in the room with him. The scents overlapped as he turned his head, still with his eyes shut. There on the bedside table was her hairbrush, under the bed her slippers. Hanging from a hook on the back of the door was her robe, the quilted sky-blue silk one she wore when the nights were cool. He remembered the day she'd bought it on the mainland. She'd smiled then and said the color reminded her of his eyes...

It was too much. Tears squeezed out from between his closed lids as Miyatsu buried his head in his paws and rolled onto Aiko's side of the bed. He sobbed brokenly, muffling the sound in her pillow.

*

It was identical to the time Aiko had seen Miyatsu collapse in the stadium on the circuit -- with no appreciable sense of time elapsed, she was now hovering in the air beside her house on Shima. Somewhere in the back of her consciousness, she was aware of what Sakaki was doing to her, but it was as if it were happening to somebody else, something that she would think about later.

She thought she understood the trick now: twelve years ago, when she'd seen her mate collapse in China, and a few months later when Sakaki tried to stop her leaving, she'd been faced with real and *immediate* danger. And her first instinct both times had been to get to the side of her soul-mate. It seemed fear was not enough, the danger must be extreme to force her psychic power to transcend normal barriers of time and space.

For now, she had to find Miyatsu and somehow let him know where she was. As she floated through her front door, she recalled her first long-distance psychic translocation to Shanghai, when she'd knelt by his side and called frantically, *Miyatsu! Wake up, my Miyu!*

His eyes had flickered open, and she'd been sure he'd heard her even though he didn't seem able to see her, because he'd murmured faintly, "Aiko? Where are you?"

She could only hope their psychic connection was strong enough that he'd hear her now.

Then there was time to be considered. Twelve years ago she'd only managed perhaps a minute before being snapped back to her body. But she was far more confident now and beginning to really understand her psychic potential. She had at least ten minutes, maybe slightly longer.

But she couldn't afford to waste the time she did have. Disregarding the stairs, she floated straight up to the first floor, emerging in the hall just outside their bedroom. Praying that he'd be there, she drifted through the door.

Aiko's heart contracted when she saw Miyatsu. He was lying face-down on their bed, crying heart-brokenly. Oh, he looked so thin! She hovered by the side of the bed, and called out, *Miyatsu! My Miyu! Look up!*

The effect was immediate: Miyatsu stopped crying mid-sob as his head snapped up from the pillow. There was no doubt that he'd heard her, psychic mind to psychic mind. He gazed wildly about the room, swinging his legs off the bed to sit on the edge as he did so. Aiko could see his nostrils dilate as he tried to sniff her whereabouts.

I'm here, my Miyu! she said as loudly as her incorporeal voice would project. *Right beside you, my love!*

Suddenly Miyatsu's tense face relaxed. "Have you come to take me to the spirit world with you, Aiko? Oh, I want to go with you *so much!*" Then the familiar worry line appeared between his eyes. "But I can't go yet, little tenshi. I promised Yutaka; I told him I'd live for the children's sake..."

Miyu, I'm not dead, Aiko said frantically. *Sakaki abducted me! I'm back at Kagoshima!*

Miyatsu sighed and his voice became resigned. "Ah, this is a dream, isn't it? I've fallen asleep and I'm dreaming you're alive again."

No! Aiko felt desperation. She had to make him believe she was no dream or hallucination or spirit before she was forced back. If she couldn't convince him now, she may never get another chance. Sakaki would end up killing her with his twisted version of 'love'. *I'm real, my Miyu! Please, please listen to me! Sakaki's addicted to the drug Anodyne and has convinced himself that I'll love him if you die of Pershan Syndrome. Please come and find me, Miyatsu! Sakaki is -- he's hurting me.*

"I saw you die, my little mate. Whenever I've dozed off, I've seen you in my dreams, still alive. But -- but *Sakaki* was never in my dreams before..." For the first time he sounded uncertain, and Aiko pressed the advantage.

Sakaki staged my death. It was a form of very realistic-looking computer simulation! He wanted you to contract Pershan Syndrome again! Think about it, Miyatsu. He's the only one apart from the family here on Shima who knows you well enough to manage it.

She had unconsciously touched his shoulder, trying to make him believe her, and he started at the contact. He could feel her touch! Aiko was struck with a sudden inspiration. *Put your hand up, my love! I'm here, really I am!*

Hesitantly, as if he couldn't believe he was doing it, Miyatsu lifted his paw. Aiko reached out her incorporeal hand and grasped it. Miyatsu gasped.

"I can feel your hand!" he whispered. "It tingles, like cool, fresh water on a hot day!" He looked frantically in her direction. "But I still can't see you, my heart."

He deliberately shut his eyes, and Aiko felt a slight thrumming in the air as he let his psychic-spotting ability take over from his eyesight. Oh, it was *warm!* She'd never imagined before that this could be *felt*, but in her purely psychic state, it felt like a warm bath enveloping her.

Miyatsu gave a desperate moan, still with his eyes closed. "You're *here!* I can see your soul! Oh, my Aiko! What miracle is this?"

No miracle, my Miyu, but a horrible conspiracy by a man you've never hurt in your life. I'm so sorry, my love, but he hates you and thinks himself in love with me. But his love will kill me if you don't come to get me soon!

Miyatsu kept his eyes shut, still "focusing" on her psychic signature. "Sakaki? He did this to us?"

Miyatsu, I haven't got much longer in this form, my psychic ability is limited And Aiko desperately pushed the incipient feelings of return away.

Miyatsu shook his head, as if coming to a decision. "Whether you're spirit or dream or reality, my mate, I will come to you as you ask. Where must I go?"

Relief flowed over Aiko. *Do you remember at the Expo where we saw the display of Sakaki's new electricity generating facility? The main entrance is on the beach outside the Raikatuji Centre, at the same place my house used to be. The facility extends underground and out beneath the water. Sakaki has me hidden there, in one of the deepest rooms.*

Miyatsu's mouth dropped open. "Oh! That's why I couldn't find you! I didn't think to look under the water!"

Sakaki is clever, Aiko agreed. *You must out-think him. When you get to the entrance, go in invisibly; there'll be security and possibly some others about as well. You're not too weakened to levitate, are you?* she added in sudden concern, remembering how Pershan Syndrome had temporarily robbed him of his strongest power on the circuit *I can't walk, I'm being given a powerful sedative to stop me escaping. So I'll need your help to get out.*

"I'll manage. Where do I go from the entrance?"

Quickly, Aiko gave him directions to the labyrinth under the facility. Miyatsu unsheathed one of his claws and scratched the instructions directly into the plasterboard wall of the bedroom as she recited them. Paint and plaster peeled off in a thin line under the assault, leaving the directions etched deeply into the wall.

Aiko's need to return to her body was becoming urgent. She felt as if she were hanging above a huge drop, clinging to the cliff-edge by her fingertips.

Be careful, my Miyu! she warned. *Sakaki's addiction has made him unstable. And he's even less rational due to withdrawal. He's dangerous.*

Miyatsu frowned, his ears back. "I warned him once before, if he ever hurt you, I'd kill him, brother or not."

No, my love. He's not thinking rationally, it's the drugs. He needs help, but won't go into rehabilitation. He's become obsessed with the love you and I share. Aiko felt the pull to return as a definite ache now. *My Miyu, I've reached the limit of my time here. Please tell me you'll come for me!*

"No! Aiko, don't go yet!" Miyatsu was on his feet, shouting desperately, his arms reaching for her invisible body as if he could hold her to him. "Don't leave me!"

I'm sorry! Come for me! she shrieked as her grip slipped, and she felt herself again enveloped by her aching body back in Kagoshima, at the same time as Sakaki plunged forward on top of her with a harsh cry and shuddered his way through orgasm...

*

Sakaki had been rough. Aiko felt the sting of unlubricated penetration and fought not to wince. He was collapsed on top of her, limp now, catching his breath, and although she wanted to cringe away from his touch, she made herself lie still so he wouldn't know she'd regained consciousness.

Finally, she felt him raise up on his arms, withdrawing from her body.

"Aiko? Oh no, what have I done?" Sakaki's voice sounded lost. "Aiko! Aiko, *please* wake up."

She felt his hand caress her cheek. It was no use: the flutter of her eyelids would give her away. She opened her eyes and gazed steadily back into Sakaki's, her expression stony.

"Oh, Aiko!" Sakaki's face was distraught. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I just lost control! I never want to hurt you, I *love* you..."

Aiko turned her head away, slowly enough to keep body and consciousness together, not wanting to look him in the face anymore. She felt angry, used, abused and sore. Sakaki was always sorry after the fact, and like a child, thought that empty words of apology could make all things right again.

This was the man she used to think of as a friend, who had abused her trust and who had hatched a plot designed to cause Miyatsu a lingering and unpleasant death. Sakaki hadn't cared that it would leave her children traumatized orphans and her parents bereaved, hadn't realized that Aiko would rather be dead than live without her soul-mate.

But at the same time, she didn't want to have a conversation that might antagonize him again: she very much wanted to survive now. For Miyatsu was on his way. That fact warmed her.

"Aiko, what can I do to atone and get you to forgive me?"

Aiko turned her head back to him. "You can let me go," she stated flatly.

Something flickered in Sakaki's eyes, and for a second, just for the briefest instant, Aiko thought she might have gotten through to him. But then the keypad activated on the locked door, heralding Nurse Rin's return, and the spark of compassion that Aiko had seen in Sakaki's face flickered out.

He stood up, hastily tucking himself away before pulling Aiko's nightdress roughly back down to cover her.

"You're not going anywhere, Fujimoto Aiko," he said coolly, with the sudden mood swing of the addict. "And the *next* time we make love, I'll expect you to participate a lot more than you did tonight."

He stalked to the door as it opened, brushing past Nurse Rin without a word.

Rin stared after him for a moment in surprise, then turned her attention back to her patient. Her eyes widened as she got to the side of the bed; Aiko realized her face must look a sight, smeared with blood from her split lip, and most likely she would have a nasty bruise left from Sakaki's fist as well.

"What happened here?" Nurse Rin asked, touching Aiko's cheek. Pain flared where her fingers touched the spot Sakaki had hit her.

Oh yes, definitely bruised, Aiko thought ruefully.

Aiko decided to have one last attempt at engaging the nurse's sympathy. "After you left," she wavered, "Sakaki -- Sakaki raped me..."

"What?" Rin's face showed shock for an instant before her expression closed down. "What a wicked lie to tell about Raikatuji-sama!" she said. "Tell me how you got that split lip! Truthfully, now!"

"Sakaki hit me," Aiko insisted. "And then he raped me. It's the truth."

Rin shook her head. "You addicts are always such liars," she said coldly. Her eyes fell on the sedative bottle with its tube dangling from it. "You must have gotten some movement back and slipped against the bedframe," she said, as if trying to convince herself. Picking up the tube, she reinserted it efficiently into Aiko's arm.

Aiko could see that the nurse wouldn't be swayed. Suddenly she very much wanted a shower, to get the smell and the feel of Sakaki off her body. "Please, Nurse Rin. I haven't had my shower yet," she pleaded.

Rin gazed down at her coldly. "I don't think so, not when you tell such wicked stories. You can have a shower in the morning."

She moved the nightdress up to catheterize Aiko again and gasped.

"What is it?" Aiko asked anxiously. With sedative again flooding her system, she could no longer feel her soreness, but also couldn't lift her head enough to see down.

"You -- you have some bruising," Rin answered slowly. As Aiko took a breath to press the point that she had been raped, Rin held up her hand. "I don't want to hear another word against Raikatuji-sama! I don't know what happened while I was out, and I don't *want* to know! My job is to keep you here under sedation until you're over your addiction. It's not up to me what you and he do!"

"Nurse Rin, please!"

"No!" The nurse refused to meet Aiko's eyes. "Since you've got a little abrasion to the tissues there, I won't catheterize you tonight. You can wear an adult diaper instead. But if you say one more word, I will increase the sedative until you're asleep."

Aiko's lips pinched together. She didn't want to sleep, not with Miyatsu on his way. She watched Rin with resentful eyes as the nurse busied herself at one of the cabinets, finding diapers.

*

Miyatsu opened the bedroom door to find his four eldest children clustered together just outside, wide-eyed and nervous, brought from their beds by their father's cries.

"What's wrong, Dad?" Montaro asked.

This was a complication Miyatsu hadn't foreseen. "I -- I'm not sure," he said. "I had a -- a vision? It was Aiko. She told me that she's alive and -- I know this sounds crazy, but I have to go and check for myself."

The children exchanged glances. Miyatsu could see they feared for his sanity. He knew he must look crazy, with his ears laid flat against his skull and his fur puffed out in response to the adrenalin currently flooding his system. He stilled the nervous swishing of his tail and the extending and retracting of his claws, trying to calm down.

Mieko put a gentle hand on her father's arm, her brown eyes full of concern. "Dad, you must have dozed off and had a nightmare. Mum's -- she's *dead*, Dad."

Miyatsu shook his head. "I can't explain what happened, but I *saw* her. I saw her psychic signature."

Montaro gasped. "You've found her sig? After a *week*?" Hope warred with disbelief in his eldest son's face.

"She managed to project somehow." Miyatsu's eyes unfocused for a moment as his words brought up a memory from years ago. "She's done that projection trick before!" He frowned, trying to remember. "Once definitely. Maybe twice. She projected from Sakaki's office into the stadium where I was training. And -- yes, I'm sure of it, when I collapsed in Shanghai! I thought then that I was delirious, but she was there!" He gazed at his children wildly. "She's alive! I have to go to her!"

"Dad, wait!" Montaro stepped in front of him. The youngster was rapidly approaching him in height. "How are you going to find her?"

"She told me where she's being held on the mainland!" Miyatsu hesitated, then continued more slowly, "My powers are still weak; I've overstretched them and they haven't fully recovered yet. I'll need the boat to get to the mainland and bring Aiko back."

"No."

Miyatsu stared at his son, the resolute blue eyes almost level with his. "What do you mean, no?"

"I mean you're not going anywhere unless we come with you. You told us this evening that you wouldn't leave us again. You *promised*."

"Montaro's right, Dad," Mieke backed up her mate. "If there's any possibility that Mum's still alive, we're coming with you."

Hanako and Hideaki also stepped forward. "If Montaro and Mieke are going, so are we."

"No." Miyatsu shook his head. "You're too young, you're still only children..."

"If Mum's not alive," Mieke said, "if you were just having a -- a realistic dream, we want to make sure you come back home again."

"Please don't leave us again, Daddy!" Hanako pleaded, her brown eyes full of tears.

Miyatsu relented. "Montaro and Mieke can come along, but you have to stay on the boat when we get to the mainland," he said. "But you two," and he looked at Hanako and Hideaki, "I'm sorry, you're too young. You stay by the radio downstairs, and when we have Aiko, we'll let you know from the boat so you can wake your grandparents. They'll be able to notify the police."

Hideaki opened his mouth, looking about to argue again, but Hanako caught her brother's eye and shook her head slightly as Miyatsu turned to the other two.

"Get a pen and some paper," he instructed. "I've scratched the directions on the wall of the bedroom. I had nothing else to write with," he explained in answer to their puzzled expressions. "Copy the directions carefully: your mother is hidden in a chamber deep underground, and I don't want to have to spend hours trying to find my way."

"Whereabouts on the mainland is she, Dad?" asked Montaro as Mieke dashed away to fetch paper and a pen.

"The Raikatuji Clean Energy Facility at Kagoshima." Miyatsu's expression hardened. *And when I get there*, he thought grimly, *I have some unfinished business with my brother*.

Chapter Eighteen - Family Matters

Chapter 19 of 23

Was Miyatsu's vision real, or a hallucination brought about by Purshan Syndrome? And should he act on it to save his mate?

Chapter Eighteen -- Family Matters

The catamaran pulled out smoothly from the jetty, and Miyatsu swung the wheel to head it north. Then he looked to where Montaro and Mieke were sitting, their expressions just a little too innocent in the moonlight. Miyatsu sighed. He raised his voice to be heard above the hiss of the waves and drone of the engine.

"All right, you two. You can stop shielding now."

For a second nothing happened. Then two figures flickered into visibility. Hideaki and Hanako both had sheepish expressions on their faces.

"How did you know?" Hideaki asked.

"Do you think I'm a human with no sense of smell? I knew you were following when we left the house."

"Oh. We didn't think of that."

Miyatsu shook his head in resignation. "If you're that set on coming, you may. But you have to stay on the boat when we get there, do you hear me?"

Both the children nodded.

"We knew you were there, as well," Mieke commented to her siblings.

"Oh, you did, did you?" Miyatsu said, trying to look grim and failing. "You didn't think to mention it?"

"No. We were sure you'd know too, Dad. I slipped a note under Grandma's door so they'll know where we've gone." She hesitated, looking uncomfortable. "And I said why we'd gone. Only I didn't say that you'd -- had a vision. I said you'd spotted Mum's psychic signature."

Miyatsu nodded. "Well, I did. In a way." He stared at his four children, so much trust in him, so confident that he knew what he was doing when he himself wasn't at all sure. He rubbed his eyes wearily. "Or I thought I did. But what if I'm wrong?" he said desperately. "What if it turns out that I was just dreaming? I'd have built all our hopes up for nothing."

"Then we'll turn around and go home again," Montaro said. "But we'll still be together." He stood up and went to where his father was standing by the wheel. "Would you like to sleep some more, Dad?" he asked. "You still look worn out. We can call you when we get there."

Miyatsu looked at his son in surprised gratitude. Montaro looked and sounded so much more mature than his age, even given the accelerated growth rate of their species. For a moment, Miyatsu's heart swelled with love and pride in his children. They had accepted his decision to go charging off on what could still turn out to be a fool's errand, chasing after a vision that might have been brought on by the broken heart of Pershan Syndrome. Not only had they accepted it, but they'd joined him in it.

Even if -- even if Aiko truly was dead (and Miyatsu swallowed hard against the desperate fear that he might have hallucinated the whole encounter), these children were her legacy to him.

He nodded acceptance and stood to one side, letting his son take the wheel. Even though Miyatsu doubted that he'd be able to sleep for the three hours until they sighted the mainland, still he decided he may as well go on down to the cabin and rest. The catamaran was in good hands.

*

Miyatsu managed to doze on and off over the next couple of hours, lulled by the constant drone of the catamaran's engine. When he finally awoke fully, the cabin was in darkness. He wondered what time it was.

Lazily, he reached with his mind towards the light switch on the wall. He flicked the switch using telekinesis and gasped in pain. He sat up suddenly, his eyes wide, the sharp needle-like pain still stinging unpleasantly inside his head.

He breathed deeply, then got to his feet slowly. Turning on the light had *hurt*. Gazing around the small room for something light to manipulate, he reached with his telekinesis for the pillow on the bed.

"Aaargh!"

He dropped to his knees, his paws at his forehead in raw agony as jagged shards of pain sliced across his brain. It felt like sandpaper being rubbed over his mind; he fought not to retch.

Over the next few minutes, the pain eased enough for him to get shakily to his feet. A horrible fear gripped him. In his desperate search for Aiko's body, had he completely burnt out his psychic powers?

But as he managed to focus his still-watering eyes, he realized the pillow lay beside him where it had dropped onto the floor. And the light *had* come on. So his telekinesis still worked, but caused him acute distress to use.

Facing the cabin's mirrored wardrobe door and steeling himself, he tried to shield from light. With a flicker, his reflection vanished, and Miyatsu breathed a sigh of relief. That wasn't painful and it was easy to maintain. He must have overextended only his telekinesis this last week, levitating more or less continuously while he searched the globe. He dropped the shield and his reflection reappeared in the mirror.

But this presented a problem. Aiko had said she couldn't walk. Stubbornly, he clung to his vision and the conviction that it had been real. If he was wrong, he'd deal with it later, somehow he'd deal with it. But for now, he was going along with it, to the extent that a rescue attempt had to be planned.

So. She'd said she couldn't walk. He'd been assuming he'd levitate her out; but what if he couldn't? He'd carry her in his arms if he had to, but he was still weak physically as well as psychically, and wasn't sure how far he'd get or how long it would take. And he wanted to get her safely back on board the catamaran and headed home before it was discovered she was gone. It could take hours if he had to keep stopping to rest. He frowned, frustrated that he couldn't achieve something that his four eldest children could do so easily...

Something his four children could do so easily.

The recollection of the four of them assisting him home after his emergency psychic SOS rose in his mind: Montaro and Mieko with their arms under his shoulders, supporting him strongly, Hanako and Hideaki levitating themselves and adding their adolescent telekinetic power from underneath to help bouy them up. Miyatsu had been faltering when they'd found him, his tail skimming the surface of the sea as his exhausted powers flickered. But working in concert, the four children had achieved something that Miyatsu could no longer manage alone: transporting a weight heavier than themselves several kilometers safely back to Shima.

And Aiko was small and weighed little...

He hesitated, arguing with himself. The children weren't kittens anymore, but neither were they adults yet, and the urge to protect them from danger was strong. But how dangerous was it really? To all intents and purposes, they'd be invisible to both human senses and scanners and could cast the light shield around their mother as well while they stretchered her out and back to the boat. And the crux of the matter was that he couldn't manage this by himself, not anymore. He really, *really* needed their assistance.

Miyatsu climbed the short flight of stairs leading to the deck. Mieko had taken over the wheel from her mate; Montaro was curled up with his two smaller siblings over by the mast. Hideaki and Hanako were asleep, but Montaro opened his eyes and pricked his ears forward as soon as his father appeared on deck.

Miyatsu felt his eldest children's greeting fill his mind with warmth. Montaro stood lithely without waking his younger brother and sister and joined Mieko and Miyatsu at the wheel.

"I tried to persuade them to go down to the cabins to sleep," Montaro explained. "But Hidi-kun wanted to stay on deck. And Hanako-chan wouldn't go if he didn't. So I let them stay."

"We're almost there," Mieko said, her eyes fixed on the glow of lights ahead. "That's Kagoshima. But I don't know how to navigate us to Raikatuji wharf."

She moved aside and let her father take over the wheel.

"You've done a good job, both of you," Miyatsu said after a moment, his eyes also on the lights of Kagoshima in the distance. "But I have to ask more of you. I've exhausted my telekinesis over the past week. I can't levitate at all, not so much as a grain of sand, without pain. A *lot* of pain."

As his two children's concern flooded his mind, he shook his head. "I don't believe it's permanent. It happened once before, twelve years ago in Shanghai, when I contracted Pershan Syndrome the -- the *first* time. But now I have the problem of getting your mother safely away without her abductors finding out at once. She told me in the vision, or dream, or whatever it was, that she can't walk. She'll need to be carried. I was going to levitate her, but with my telekinesis so depleted..." And he trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid.

Mieko and Montaro were listening avidly, their tail tips flicking restlessly.

"We could levitate her!" Mieko said enthusiastically. "Like the way we helped you yesterday, Dad!"

"And we can cast a light shield around ourselves and Mum," Montaro added.

"That's what I thought as well," Miyatsu agreed. "I don't think we'll run into any danger, not if we're all invisible. We can just avoid any humans we come across. But I don't want to leave Hideaki and Hanako on the catamaran by themselves. They still need adult supervision and support. They'd better come with us. And they can help too."

He hesitated, but the children had earned his candour. "I didn't thank you properly for coming to my aid yesterday," he told them seriously. "I was almost done when you showed up. I would have drowned out there, all alone. Thank you. And thank you for coming with me tonight, for trusting me so much. If -- if Aiko is truly dead, well, you children will be my reason to stay alive -- "

Before he could say anything more, both children had enveloped him in a group hug. Mieko was crying and Montaro was not far off it. If the truth be told, Miyatsu was feeling none too steady either, although how much of that was due to Pershan Syndrome was unclear. He rested his forehead against the tops of their heads affectionately.

Finally he disengaged from them, looking towards the lights. The mainland was perceptibly nearer. He took the wheel again and steered the catamaran for the Raikatuji Centre's wharf.

*
All five of the family had shielded from light and now stood by the door of the entrance into the Raikatuji Clean Energy Facility. Miyatsu was keeping track of his children using his cat sense of smell: the two younger children were by his right side, with Mieko on his left and Montaro bringing up the rear.

A sign stenciled onto the glass door showed that the facility was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Through the door, they could see a single security officer sitting at the reception desk, watching a re-run of last season's GMA circuit match on television.

"Stay close," Miyatsu told the children in a low voice. "I'm going to open that door. When I do, you have to get inside the building before the human can get to it. Hold hands so you don't trip each other up, and wait for me over by that far door." He paused for a moment as he listened to them organize themselves into a line. "Are you ready?"

A couple more scuffling noises, then there came a soft chorus: "Yes, Dad," "Ready, Daddy."

Miyatsu had a page torn from a magazine held in one paw. Now he reached up to the light sensor which activated the door. He dropped the page, which became visible again as soon as it left his touch and fluttered to the ground. The glass door slid back smoothly, and Miyatsu felt the movement of air as his children hurried through.

The security officer glanced up and lifted his eyebrows in surprise when he saw nobody. Miyatsu slipped inside as the door was closing again, whisking his invisible tail up and out of the way just in time.

The officer came around the desk warily, one hand on the stun gun in its holster on his belt. The door slid open again at his approach. He relaxed as he saw the slight breeze outside had blown an old magazine page up against the door, activating the sensor. He picked the page up, crumpled it and threw it into the wastepaper bin next to the desk before settling back to watch the match.

*
Due to being operational all day and night, the facility had many shiftworkers about, either at their workstations or walking along the corridors. The invisible family needed to dodge more than once as groups of humans nearly walked into them. Despite this, they reached the elevator without mishap and still undetected.

Miyatsu studied the buttons as they entered the empty elevator before pressing the one marked "Level 10." As the lift started down, the family one by one flickered back into visibility.

"Be ready to shield again when we stop," Miyatsu told the children. In the bright light of the elevator, their eyes were wide, their ears pricked forward alertly. All four faces had an air of excitement with no hint of nervousness.

Miyatsu envied them their childish sense of adventure. He himself was becoming more and more anxious. What would he do if, after all this, he found only empty corridors? The fact that the underground labyrinth existed had so far kept his flagging spirits up; he couldn't have imagined all of this, could he? But doubt still niggled in his mind...

Mieko's ears went back in sudden surprise. She grabbed her mate's hand. "Montaro! Do you see what I see? Tell me I'm not imagining things!"

Montaro gasped. "Dad! I can see Mum's psychic signature!"

"*What?*" Miyatsu had been so immersed in his thoughts that he hadn't bothered to engage his psionic power, but at his children's words, he did so.

And there, yes, over there, was a faint smudged glow of blue-green light! Miyatsu focused on it hungrily, closing his eyes for a moment in order to see it more clearly. When he'd been searching so desperately, he'd swooped to investigate any light that remotely resembled Aiko, only to be disappointed time and time again. But this was unmistakably *her*, his mate's soul, gaining strength and definition as the elevator descended, shining like a beacon for her family to follow!

The lift came to a smooth halt and the door slid open, but the family didn't bother to shield anymore. Their psionic power was fully engaged, and the corridors ahead were empty of any sign of life, apart from a muddy yellow soul hovering near the blue one. They didn't need directions now. The children hurried to keep up with their father, who had dropped to all fours and set off up the corridor at a fast, loping run.

*
Miyatsu skidded to a sliding halt before a heavy metal door which marked the end of corridor South 10, his expression managing to be both eager and frustrated all at once. He rose up onto two legs again and turned to his children as they came panting up behind him.

"I don't dare try to unlock this door with my telekinesis," he said. "Montaro, Mieko, do you think you could focus your telekinetics onto the lock together and break it?"

The two eldest children glanced at each other uncertainly.

"We -- we can try," Montaro answered. He reached for Mieko's hand and together they faced the door.

"On three," Mieko murmured. "One... two... *three!*"

Looks of intense concentration appeared on their faces. The air seemed to thrum briefly as their adolescent psychic power lashed out, merged, and focused on the door, pushing, wrenching, searching for any weakness in the metal.

With a sound like a gunshot, the door was blasted off two of its hinges and swung open a few inches before sagging drunkenly on the one remaining hinge.

Montaro kicked it open the rest of the way with one strong foreleg, and they were through the last barrier between them and Aiko. With a casual wave of his hand, Montaro lifted the yellow soul that was Nurse Rin into the air, holding her suspended off the ground. At her shriek, he clicked his fingers and her mouth snapped shut, muffled sounds of fear and outrage coming from her.

But Miyatsu was already at Aiko's bedside, gathering her in his arms, sobbing with relief, unable for the moment to speak coherently for the emotion hammering through his body.

The children clustered as close as they could, adding their joyful feelings until the air itself seemed to shimmer with happiness.

"Oh, Miyu!" Aiko was crying, too. "I knew you'd come for me!"

Miyatsu drew back a little. He rubbed his cheek tenderly against the top of Aiko's head. "My little mate, my heart," he sobbed brokenly. "Oh, Aiko, my Aiko! You're alive!"

"We're going to carry you out!" Hideaki said. "We came along to help Daddy!"

"We're going to shield you from light and all go home together!" Hanako added.

"They've done a wonderful job tonight," Miyatsu told her huskily. He glanced at the various monitors beeping away as they registered their patient's vital signs, fear clouding his face. "What has Sakaki done to you, my Aiko? All these machines..."

"Miyu, I've been sedated and can't move," Aiko said. "Please, *please* take the needle out of my arm. I want to get out of here before -- before Sakaki decides to come back and finds you -- "

Miyatsu's paws were shaking so much with the force of his emotions that he couldn't grip the small needle. Instead it was Mieko who turned off the drip before taking the needle between her human-shaped fingers and deftly removing it from her mother's arm, swabbing the small bleeding spot left behind with a tissue. She then busied herself removing the heart-rate and blood pressure monitors, each one as it was removed eerily going to a flat-line monotone.

Miyatsu flinched; the nightmare he'd been living the past week had included that sound every time he'd tried to sleep, the memory of his soul-mate arching off the bed, her eyes fixed to his in mute agony as she died, and all he could do was watch helplessly...

It was faked, he told himself, trying to calm the desperate hammering of his heart that the sound evoked. *My Aiko is here, warm and alive and coming home to Shima. It was just pixels on a screen.*

"What about her?" Montaro asked, indicating the nurse who was still making stifled sounds of fury in mid-air.

Miyatsu glanced across at Rin and felt a roll of anger at Sakaki's accomplice. He took the sedative bottle on its mobile stand and rolled it over, gesturing to his son to lower her.

Miyatsu extended his claws and held one paw threateningly in front of her face, the claw-tips lightly touching her cheek. Rin's eyes had gone wide and terrified in her pale face.

"You allowed this to happen," he snarled. "You let my mate be brutalized and tortured and did nothing to stop it."

He took her arm and jammed the needle into the vein at the elbow, using his extended claws to clumsily turn on the drip. "Let's see how *you* like it."

Rin's struggles against Montaro's psychic hold slowed, ceased. Her body went slack and her eyes rolled back. Montaro let her slump unconscious to the floor.

Miyatsu turned and went back to Aiko. Slipping one arm behind her back and the other under her knees, he picked her up, smiling down into her eyes.

"When I tire, you can take over," he answered the unspoken questions of his children. "But just for now I need to have my mate in my arms."

*

Aiko was safely tucked up in bed in the catamaran's main cabin, having been efficiently shielded from light and stretched out of the Raikatuji Clean Energy Facility by her family. They had managed to exit the building when the glass door opened for a large group of employees finishing their shift. The whole family had marched out in their wake.

It was a tight fit, but the family was now squeezed into the smallish cabin. Miyatsu sat on the edge of the bed, holding Aiko's hand, and looked about at the children with pride. The catamaran rocked gently at its mooring.

"I have to ask one more effort from you tonight," he told them. "I need you to take your mother back home to Shima. I can't come with you; I need to stay here a little longer."

"What?"

"Why, Daddy?"

"Come home with us!"

"Why do you have to stay, my Miyu?" Aiko asked quietly, already guessing the answer and dreading it.

Blue eyes met brown seriously. "I know now how Sakaki really feels about me," Miyatsu answered. "I know he hates me. But he can't be allowed to do what he likes to my family without consequences. This ends tonight."

Aiko couldn't feel his emotions anymore and realized he was shielding. She had a little strength returning to her body now, and she clutched his paw tightly in fright.

"Please, don't take him on tonight, my love! You're still weak, he'll kill you!"

Miyatsu shook his head. "I have to have this out with him. He'll try to wipe all of us out once he realizes you're gone."

"Miyatsu, no! We'll radio ahead to Shima, get Mum and Dad to call the police. Let the human police deal with Sakaki! Please come home with us..."

She trailed off, knowing that stubborn look meant he wouldn't be swayed. He held her hand against his face in apology and licked her palm, his tongue curling about her wrist tenderly.

Still holding her hand in his, he said, "You know Yutaka and Kagami will never hear the radio at home. They'll only think to check it when they get up in the morning and find us all gone. And if we went to the police here on the mainland, how many hours would it be before they act? They'd waste time taking statements, getting their precious facts, when we know that the moment Sakaki finds you've escaped, he'll flee. And once he's on the run, he becomes so much more dangerous, not just to me, but to you and all our children. Who knows what he'll do once he knows we've thwarted him? He still has money and contacts all over the world. I don't intend to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder and jumping at every shadow."

Aiko stared at his hard expression. "Miyu, you're frightening me! Are you thinking of killing him? He's sick, not thinking right with the drugs he was taking."

Miyatsu put one shaky paw to his forehead wearily. "I -- I can't kill him," he said tiredly. "He's still my brother. But he needs to answer for what he's done, Aiko. Drugs or not he's responsible for his actions. Let the children take you home, and when you get there, call the mainland police to come and pick him up. I'll keep him in his office until they arrive so that he can't slip away in the meantime."

His mental voice continued in her head for her ears alone. *Please understand, my heart, why I have to do this. I'm not going to run from him like some scared animal. We have to settle this business face-to-face.*

Aiko could see his mind was made up. She nodded slowly, her face working as she tried to hold back the tears she could feel threatening. "Oh, be careful!" she whispered. "Come back to me on Shima afterwards! Don't let him -- h-hurt you, *please!*" The last word was a sob.

Miyatsu gathered her in his arms again, holding her tightly against him.

"How can I live if anything happens to you?" she gasped against his chest, hearing his thudding heartbeat and wondering wildly if it would be for the last time.

He rubbed his cheek lovingly against her forehead. *Live for our children's sake, little mate. But I must do this, if only for my own self-esteem. As a... man.*

*

Miyatsu stood on Raikatuji wharf staring out to sea long after the catamaran had disappeared from view and the drone of its engine could no longer be heard. Finally he turned with a sigh, jumped down to the sand and began to trudge towards the treeline, over the top of which towered the glass and concrete block that was the Raikatuji Building.

Miyatsu was certain that his office would be the first place Sakaki would come to in the morning, still several hours away. And if he decided instead to visit the Clean Energy Facility, Miyatsu would still see him arrive, as this area was the main access-way to the beach. He took up position behind the thick trees screening the stadium, where he had a good view of everybody coming and going while remaining unseen.

He thought about the impulse that had made him stay here while his family continued on to Shima. It was complex. He knew he should wait until he was stronger, but perhaps perversely, he wanted to face Sakaki without the safety net of his major psychic power. Just the two of them, each no stronger than the other. Equals.

Not only that, but Miyatsu had the uneasy feeling that if he put off the confrontation he'd never again have the courage to face the man he used to think of so fondly as his brother. He needed the impetus of his anger to carry him through this. His anger at what Sakaki had done to Aiko. And of what he'd tried to do to Miyatsu.

He hadn't lied when he told Aiko he couldn't kill Sakaki. But Miyatsu needed the truth from Sakaki for once; he needed to hear from his own lips how much the man hated him, however painful it might be. He wanted to strip away the mask of easy charm and super confidence and expose the real Sakaki underneath. Only then could Miyatsu allow the emotional scars to heal. Then perhaps he could sleep without waking in gut-clenching dread from dreams of a flat-lining monitor.

Dawn was still some way off and it was getting chilly. Miyatsu curled himself into a heat-conserving ball on the ground and settled himself to wait for the sun to rise.

He didn't see the moonlight reflecting off a pair of alert eyes a little distance away, carefully upwind and sitting behind some discarded boxes between two smelly garbage skips.

*

Mieko had the wheel, her gaze fixed on the horizon as the mainland receded swiftly behind them. Hanako was still down in the cabin with their mother, but Hideaki emerged onto the deck after a little while to keep his older sister company.

"Will Daddy be all right?" he asked finally, wistfully.

Mieko flicked her eyes to her little brother. "Yes." Her tone was positive.

"But he's still sick, Mieko-chan. And he can't use telekinesis."

"Dad's strong," Mieko answered. "Remember the times Mum told us about how he beat Sisyro on the circuit when he had Pershan Syndrome? Mum said he was only skin and bone and fur, and his telekinesis had gone then, too. But he still won the match!"

Hideaki looked around. "Where's Montaro-kun?" he asked in puzzled tones. "I thought he was up here with you."

Mieko smiled smugly. "That's another reason I know Dad will be okay. After we left, Montaro shielded from light and levitated back to the beach. *He'll* make sure Dad comes home to us!"

Chapter Nineteen - Love Not Human, Redux

Chapter 20 of 23

The final confrontation between two very different brothers. But Sakaki is most dangerous when cornered, while Miyatsu is still very weak from Pershan Syndrome.

Chapter Nineteen -- Love Not Human, Redux

Miyatsu's ears pricked and swiveled at the sound of crunching gravel. He shielded from light, flicking into invisibility even as he opened his eyes to see a car drawing up to the entrance of the Raikatuji Building.

He drew a quick breath; he was right, Sakaki always was an early riser. The sun was barely peeking above the horizon, and there was nobody else about yet. The catamaran should have reached Shima by now; probably Aiko's parents would have already contacted the mainland authorities. It wouldn't be long before the police came to the Centre with pertinent questions for Raikatuji-sama. And Miyatsu was going to make sure Sakaki would still be there for them to arrest. He only hoped they wouldn't waste time by going to Shima first to get Aiko's statement. Surely she would impress upon them the need to act immediately.

He stood in a single lithe movement, trying to settle his dew-dampened fur down as adrenaline began to surge through his body.

As Sakaki got out of the car and shut the door, Miyatsu loped invisibly across the intervening space. Any sound his paws may have made on the gravel of the drive was masked by the car's wheels as Sakaki's driver accelerated smoothly away.

Sakaki touched his thumb to the entrance lock, and the door slid open to admit him. Miyatsu slipped through just behind him, marveling as always at the incredible olfactory blindness of humans. The lobby of the building was empty and dim. Sakaki crossed the marble floor to the elevator with Miyatsu still a close shadow, walking cat-quiet behind him. Miyatsu rode with him up to the top floor, all without Sakaki suspecting that he wasn't alone.

The elevator door pinged and opened directly into Sakaki's luxurious office, with its two picture windows and their panoramic views of Kagoshima on one side and the ocean on the other. Miyatsu gazed around at the remembered opulence as Sakaki seated himself behind his desk. All, all was as he remembered. The only thing that had changed was Sakaki. Now that he was in the well-lit office, Miyatsu could see that his face looked -- not old, exactly, but sick. His skin was drawn tight across his cheekbones as if he hadn't eaten in some time, and his eyes were bloodshot. Aiko had told Miyatsu that Sakaki was going through withdrawal symptoms as he tried to get off Anodyne. Miyatsu hoped vindictively that the man had been having as much trouble sleeping as he had.

Sakaki picked up his desk phone and dialed. After a moment, as the ring tone continued unabated, he began tapping his fingers on the green leather-upholstered desktop impatiently.

"Come on, Rin, pick up," he muttered.

Finally he put the telephone receiver down and went to gaze out of the seaward-side window, his hands clasped behind his back.

Miyatsu let himself flicker back into visibility. "Hello, Sakaki."

Sakaki spun about, his eyes wide in shock and his face paling when he saw who his visitor was.

Miyatsu raised one eyebrow. "Aren't you going to say anything, brother? You did tell me I should drop by anytime."

Sakaki recovered himself with an effort, the urbane mask slipping back on to cover his uncertainty. "Of course I did, of course. Miyatsu! Let me say, er, I saw the news about -- about Aiko's abduction, the police requests for information and so on -- what a horrible shock! If I can do anything to help, anything at all..."

Miyatsu nodded and walked forward, his face grave. "I appreciate that, my brother. You were always -- very *fond* of Aiko, weren't you?"

"Of course! You know how I feel about both of you."

Miyatsu put a friendly paw on Sakaki's shoulder. "I used to think I did. And yet, at the moment of my greatest distress, my *brother* didn't care enough to call me to offer his condolences, didn't bother to make contact in any way. Even though the woman he *claims* to have been so fond of had been brutally murdered in full view of her whole family!"

The friendly grip had turned to a vice of iron. Sakaki yelped and wrenched himself away from Miyatsu, outrage and fear in his eyes.

"What, are you crazy? You're hurting me!"

Miyatsu's fur was bristling now. His claws extended and his ears laid flat against his skull, his tail lashing in anger. "It was a clever plan, Sakaki," he snarled, a low growl beginning in his throat. "To lure me from Shima and steal Aiko away. I remember you even rang me on the catamaran when I was on my way to the mainland that day and you asked about Aiko then. You wanted to make sure she'd stayed on the island, *didn't you?*"

He took a swipe at Sakaki with one paw, and Sakaki leapt backwards, his eyes fixed on Miyatsu's claws.

"Where were your abductors? Hidden around the other side of the island, were they, waiting for the signal from you that it was safe to go in? And what would you have done if she'd decided to come with me that day, hmm? Would you have told them to wait for a few days and have another attempt later?"

Miyatsu snarled, baring his teeth. "But hiding her beneath the seabed in your new power station, what can I say? A stroke of brilliance. You must have guessed I'd never think to look under the ocean for my mate."

Sakaki made a run for his desk, but Miyatsu headed him off in a single swift leap.

"But then, you were the one who helped me refine my talents, so you know my limitations. I confided so much to you when I first came here about what I could and couldn't do. I was so grateful to you and when I found out how we were related, well, I would have moved mountains for you!"

Miyatsu stopped, panting heavily. The intense emotion of the previous night along with the lack of food and over-exertion of the past week were all taking their toll on his energy reserves. His eyes fixed on Sakaki's face, the anger giving way to desolation.

"*Why*, Sakaki?" he whispered. "I know now that you must hate me. I can accept that, even though I don't understand it. But why hurt Aiko as well? She never did anything to you to deserve that."

Sakaki's expression had hardened. "Got it all figured out in that little cat brain, haven't you?" he sneered. "I didn't credit you with that much intelligence, to tell the truth. And don't give me the affection routine, don't bother to claim any sort of relationship. We don't have one, we *never* had one. I donated some stem cells to add to the genetic mix, that's all. I'm not your brother, or your father, or related to you in any way, you misbegotten *experiment!*"

Sakaki had been backed up against his bookshelf. "You look tired, Miyatsu," he taunted. "Do you think I don't know you have Pershan Syndrome? You're as thin and mangy-looking as a feral cat. Probably haven't slept in a week either."

With one hand he pulled out a book from behind him and lobbed it at Miyatsu with all his force. Miyatsu lifted one arm to stop the heavy volume hitting his face, grunting in pain when it smacked against his forearm.

Sakaki grinned evilly at this sign of weakness. "Just as I'd hoped, no telekinesis left! Well, well, how the mighty have fallen. I was counting on you losing your psychic powers, but that you'd come after me weak and unprotected is better than I could have imagined! You ask why I took Aiko? Because she needed to be reminded what it was like to be with a *man* for once, you freak!"

Miyatsu snarled and launched himself at Sakaki again, and Sakaki made a mad scramble for his desk, hitting a concealed switch there. A metal cage slid up from the floor, barring off the small corner of the room where Sakaki stood, a modified version of the trainer's booth on the circuit.

Miyatsu swung about to face one of the windowless walls which had rumbled heavily to one side when Sakaki hit the button. A room was revealed behind the wall, still cloaked in darkness. Inside the room, in deepest shadow, a pair of eyes shone eerily red, unblinkingly fixed upon Miyatsu.

"After your last attack on me, I thought I might some day need protection from you," Sakaki's voice sounded triumphant. "So I had these additions to my office built. Now I'd like you to meet an old friend. Come on out, Koneko. You remember Miyatsu, don't you my pet?"

The thing in the room moved. A metallic foot appeared from the shadows, then more legs, all jointed metal. The creature emerged fully into the office. Six legs splayed out like a huge cockroach. Mounted on one metallic shoulder was an industrial laser, the type used by builders to slice through plate steel. The creature's head was the only part of the original animal left: the rest was cold metal and wiring. Its neck disappeared into a cuff of studded metal.

Koneko scuttled to Sakaki's cage, putting its -- her -- head by the bars for a pat from her master. She fixed her eyes on Miyatsu, and his psychic sense prickled at the waves of despair emanating from her.

Miyatsu stared at the apparition, appalled. "Koneko?" he whispered. "Sakaki, what have you *done* to her?"

Sakaki glared at Miyatsu. "I saved her life," he said angrily. "Her heart stopped when she was under anesthetic, the same day you took Aiko and left me, twelve years ago." He stroked the head tenderly. "But I put her body into a gestation unit and kept her brain alive. I had this robot developed and mounted her biological brain to it, giving her a new body. She'll live forever, thanks to me."

"Sakaki, how can you make her live like this? This -- this is an abomination!"

"Shut up! Just *shut up*, Miyatsu! Koneko might only be an animal, but she's loyal to me, she loves me more than anyone ever has! Koneko would do anything for me!"

Suddenly Miyatsu understood: Sakaki wanted the true love Miyatsu and Aiko shared. But Sakaki could never have the love he craved because he wouldn't surrender himself to another enough to obtain it. To him, control was everything. But Koneko loved him. It didn't matter that it was the unequal dynamic of master/slave; in fact, that was the only relationship Sakaki would countenance.

It was no wonder Sakaki had turned against Miyatsu and disavowed any genetic relationship. Sakaki's precious control was threatened by a character as stubborn, in his own way, as the human. Once Miyatsu had become self-confident enough to insist on his freedom, that had turned him in Sakaki's mind into a competitor. And in Sakaki's experience, competitors were either bought out, absorbed by the Raikatuji empire, or destroyed. Sakaki didn't love Aiko, he had just deluded himself into thinking he did.

She was the prize to be obtained once Miyatsu was destroyed, not a person valued in her own right. And Sakaki never gave up on anything he wanted.

"Koneko's never had a living target to practise on before, have you, pet?" Sakaki said, smiling into the robotic creature's eyes. He pointed to Miyatsu. "Now I want you to eliminate *that* for me! Fire!"

Miyatsu had a bare instant to spare as the laser swiveled in his direction. It was just enough time to throw himself in a sideways somersault to avoid the beam. As it was, he felt the heat of its near-miss before it splashed against the wall of the office, burning a hole through the wall and leaving a large scorch-mark on the surrounding priceless silk wallpaper.

Desperately, Miyatsu flickered into invisibility, and heard Sakaki burst out laughing.

"That old stunt of yours won't work here, Miyatsu! Koneko has heat sensors built into her body. She can see you just as clearly as if you were visible! And remember, she's got a similar sense of smell to you. Fire, Koneko!"

The laser spat again; Miyatsu flung himself to the floor to slide beneath the deadly beam, flicking back into visibility again.

"Oh, nearly got you, Miyatsu! You're still fast, I'll give you that, but you can't keep dancing around my office all day! Fire!"

Another blast, and Miyatsu felt the sensitive whiskers on his face shrivel as he jerked backwards.

Sakaki laughed jeeringly. "What a pity I don't have a monitor recording this! I'd love to watch a playback of it later! Ah well, I'll just have to treasure the memory. Fire, Koneko!"

Sakaki was playing with him. Miyatsu searched for a way out as he dodged yet again. He was panting for breath now, his sides heaving as he fought to catch his breath, trying to make his exhausted brain think. He'd be trapped if he tried to get into the lift. The only other way out was through the window, and without telekinesis the drop would kill him...

"I realize you must have stolen Aiko away from me *again*. All my good work of the past week trying to wean her off her addiction to you has been wasted. But I'll get her back, you know that, don't you, Miyatsu?" Sakaki said it with infuriating certainty. "Oh yes, once you're disposed of I'll offer her a deal: come to me willingly or have those pets of hers killed off one by one. *Fire!*"

Miyatsu spun away, but yowled in pain as the beam caught him a glancing mark side-on across his flank. Koneko's aim was improving, and it was only Miyatsu's speed that had prevented that last shot from hitting him fully in the middle and cutting him in half. And he was tiring, his vision going grey around the edges...

The window on the seaward side suddenly imploded, showering the room with glass. Miyatsu had an instant where he saw a lithe, younger image of himself hanging in mid-air, then with a yowl of fighting rage, Montaro arrowed straight for Sakaki in his protective cage. The bars shook but held as the teen attempted to bend them with his telekinesis to get at Sakaki. He landed, snarling, in front of the cage, one arm snaking through the bars as he tried to grab the man cowering back against the wall.

"Koneko!" Sakaki screamed. "Leave Miyatsu. Get this one! Fire!"

Miyatsu didn't stop to think; as Koneko's deadly laser swiveled in his son's direction, he grabbed the teenager with his telekinesis and flung him across the room, out of the way of the beam he could see lancing towards the cage. And then doubled up on the floor, heaving and dry-retching as pain blossomed inside his head.

It was over, Miyatsu thought, lying gasping on the floor as the sick throbbing subsided to a dull misery. Sakaki had won, and any moment now he'd feel the laser skewer him and see his first-born son die...

But then a furred hand was reaching down to him, helping him stand. Miyatsu clung to his son as he got shakily to his feet. The boy was unhurt, but he wasn't looking at his father. Instead he was staring wide-eyed in horror at something over by the desk. Revulsion was coming off the youth in waves.

Slowly Miyatsu followed his son's gaze. Sakaki was staring at them. He'd slid down the wall and lay splayed out on the floor, one leg protruding through the bars of the cage. The hole through his chest was still smoking, and the wall behind him was stained rust-colored with the superheated blood that had been blasted out of his back where the laser had passed through his body.

As they watched, the light of life left his eyes.

Koneko had crouched low to the ground submissively. Now she scuttled towards her master, making odd mewling sounds of distress. She put one long jointed leg through the bars and nudged him, her sounds rising as she tried to get some response from him, utterly ignoring the pair of Miyatsus in her grief.

She pulled away from the cage a little and determinedly put two of her legs over her back, wrenching the laser on to a new direction, one it had never meant to be pointed in. As Miyatsu and Montaro watched in horror, she laid her head on top of her dead master's knee and blasted the laser one last time, directly into the top of her skull. The robotic body jerked once and collapsed to the floor as conscious control was removed.

"Dad? What do we do now?" Montaro's voice sounded lost, forcing Miyatsu to look away from the dead Pershan and the man that had been his brother.

He met his son's scared blue eyes and took a deep breath, trying to centre himself and concentrate his scattered thoughts on what needed to be done next.

"Let's get out of here," Miyatsu answered. "Only we'd better not use the elevator, we don't want any record that we've been here." He forced himself to look around the battered office. "And this shattered glass everywhere: that would tell police that something came in through the window."

"Leave it to me," Montaro answered. The teenager's forehead knotted in concentration and shards of glass lifted free from the carpet, forming a glittering sphere in mid-air. More glass slivers slid out from beneath the desk and around the room, all of them adding to the growing ball of glass hanging in the air. When no more pieces appeared, Montaro walked to the window and glanced down.

"Nobody's arrived yet," he murmured. Standing to one side he let the glass ball float through the window to land in a shower on the ground far below. Moving back to his father's side, he put an arm under his shoulders. With a grunt of effort, he levitated them both into the air.

"Shield now," Miyatsu warned. "We mustn't be seen leaving."

The pair flicked out of sight together. Montaro floated them through the shattered window and lowered them, slowly and carefully, over the glass shards and onto the lawn beyond the Raikatuji Building.

Chapter Twenty - Where The Heart Is

Chapter 21 of 23

Reunions, soul-searching and healing.

Chapter Twenty -- Where the Heart Is

The boat was one of the numerous research vessels bobbing at anchor at Raikatuji wharf. It was small and slow, but what made it invaluable for their purpose was that the fuel tank was full. And it was still early enough in the day that there was nobody about to see the boat leave. It would have been unbelievable in any case: the anchor was pulled up apparently of its own volition and the engine started by an invisible pilot before it pulled carefully away from the other boats.

They had gotten well clear of the wharf when they saw the first police cars arriving at Raikatuji Centre. For safety's sake the pair remained invisible until the mainland receded and grew hazy with distance. Only when they were far enough away not to be seen did Miyatsu and Montaro flicker back into visibility.

Montaro was staring at his father's side. Miyatsu followed his gaze. The laser had left a nasty burn, scorching away fur and blackening skin. Blisters were beginning to form, but at least the wound had cauterized the skin as it went. Miyatsu grimaced; if he'd been just a fraction slower, the laser would have caught him full in the stomach. He'd seen what that could do to a body: Sakaki's chest had been reduced to a smoking crater. Miyatsu felt his legs begin to shake as the morning's events threatened to overwhelm him; he sank to sit on his haunches on the deck.

"I know you wanted me to go back to Shima, Dad," Montaro said quietly. "But I was worried about you, and I knew Mieke would get them all home safely. I just couldn't let you go in without any sort of backup, at least while you're -- not as strong as usual. So I stayed. Upwind of your nose!" And he grinned briefly before his expression settled back into grim lines. "I was levitating outside the window when I saw you fighting that thing. When it hit you with the laser, I panicked. I just thought if I could get to the human controlling it, it might stop attacking you. I'm sorry I disobeyed you, but I'm not sorry I stayed." He lifted his chin stubbornly.

Miyatsu shook his head. "You saved my life, my son. I'm very grateful you decided to stay." He examined the burn gently and hissed a sharp indrawn breath as his fingers touched the edges of the blistered skin. "It will heal, but it's sore."

"There might be a first-aid kit somewhere on board," Montaro said. "I'll go and see what I can find."

He entered the tiny cabin and began opening cupboards and drawers. After a moment, he made a pleased sound. "Here you go," he announced, bringing out a plastic container with the familiar red cross marked on it, handing it to his father. "And there are tins of food in the other cupboards."

He set about preparing breakfast on the single gas ring that served as a stove while Miyatsu tended to his wound, smoothing on antibiotic cream and taping a bandage securely over the area.

As the small boat chugged steadily southwards, they shared a meal of reconstituted shoyu raman and tinned soy protein. Montaro turned his nose up at the rubbery strips of fake chicken and concentrated instead on the noodles, but Miyatsu ate as much of everything as his shrunken stomach could hold, barely tasting it in his eagerness. And as he ate the distressing greyness around the edges of his vision eased, his limbs ceased trembling and his thoughts began to flow smoothly once more.

Already the events in the Raikatuji Building were taking on the slightly impossible cast of a nightmare. But one fact stood out from the rest: Sakaki's death hurt. Miyatsu had truly loved the man he'd thought of as his brother for too long not to feel pain at his loss. But at the same time there was a sense that it was the only possible resolution in the circumstances. It was rather like the laser slash across his flank: a dull ache, but one that would heal as time went by.

The mainland had disappeared over the horizon and they were all alone in the wide blue expanse of ocean and sky when Miyatsu stopped the engine.

"We should both sleep," he said, in answer to his son's puzzled look. "I'm worn down to my whiskers. Shima will still be there when we wake up."

Gratefully, Montaro joined his father in the shade of a tarpaulin stretched over the front of the small boat's nose. They curled up into identical balls of fur, noses on front paws, and slept.

*

The moon had risen as they approached Shima. Miyatsu and Montaro had slept late into the afternoon, finally waking as the bottom of the sun's disk kissed the horizon, and the small boat had taken another five hours to get them home, due to its slow pace and the distance the boat had drifted while they'd slept.

When they got close to the beach, Miyatsu throttled back and turned in a wide arc so that the boat faced northwards again.

"What are you doing?" Montaro asked with interest.

"I don't want the boat found on our island. It could make for some embarrassing questions. But if it's found drifting in the open ocean, it'll just look as if the last person to use it didn't secure it properly when they got back to shore. Nobody needs to know it didn't just drift away from the wharf."

Miyatsu drew a deep breath. The rest and food had been restorative. Steeling himself for pain, he reached out with telekinesis and was pleased to feel only a dull, easily ignored twinge as he opened the throttle fully. Reassured that he wouldn't be crippled in his major psychic power, he went to the side. "Feel like a swim?"

He dived cleanly into the water, followed a second later by Montaro. The water was still warm from the day's heat. Father and son surfaced and made for the shore with long, easy strokes as the little boat chugged patiently off into the distance.

*

They could see lights on in the downstairs rooms as they approached the house, but Miyatsu was more interested in searching the area for other lights. He scanned and recognized all of the psychic signatures present: Yutaka, Kagami, Benjiro, and Mieke in the downstairs lounge room, the sleeping lights that were Hideaki and Hanako upstairs, and, *oh yes!* Aiko's living blue light, up in their bedroom! It was all he could do to keep from breaking into a run to cover the last few metres between them.

Miyatsu and Montaro entered the house through the back door into the kitchen and went on through to the lounge room. The family tableau held for a moment as they came through the door: Yutaka and Kagami were sitting at each end of the larger lounge, separated by the sleeping ball of fur that was Benji, and Mieke was curled in the armchair next to them, her chin resting on one hand. Miyatsu felt a surge of love at the sight of them, all quietly keeping a vigil for their return.

The tableau broke as soon as the family caught sight of the pair, however. Mieko's head swung up first and her eyes widened in delight.

"Dad!" she cried, leaping to her feet. "Montaro!"

And she was across the room and hugging both of them in joy at their safe return.

Yutaka and Kagami were a little slower, but their faces too were wreathed in smiles of relief as they joined the family reunion.

When the group hug broke apart, Miyatsu placed both arms affectionately about the shoulders of his two eldest children as Yutaka and Kagami led them all back to the middle of the room.

"We contacted the police first thing this morning," Yutaka informed Miyatsu, sitting back down on the lounge. "Just as soon as Aiko and the children arrived."

"The first we knew that you'd gone was when Hideaki came charging into our bedroom in the small hours, saying something about rescuing Aiko and that you and Montaro had stayed on the mainland," Kagami said.

"I filled them in properly," Mieko told her father, "once they came over to the house. I'm sorry we startled you, Grandma," she added.

Kagami shook her head. "We had the miracle of our daughter back alive and well. You have nothing to apologize for, Mieko-chan."

"What did the police say?" Montaro asked eagerly. "Dad and I saw them arriving just as we left Raikatuji wharf, but we stayed invisible and didn't hang around!"

His grandparents stared at the youngster.

"You were there?" Yutaka met Miyatsu's gaze. "Then you know that..."

"Sakaki's dead, yes," Miyatsu answered. "I wanted to talk to him. Just talk, really. I needed to understand his reason for abducting Aiko. But he had a -- a new fighting machine. He tried to kill me with it." He glanced at his son. "He would have managed it, too, but for Montaro. And during the fight, Sakaki was accidentally shot by his robot. There was no purpose to be served by us staying, after that."

There was silence for a moment, then Miyatsu asked, "Did the police ask to talk to me?"

Yutaka looked uncomfortable. "No. They only wanted to speak to me and Kagami. And Aiko, of course. Er, I rather think they mistook Hideaki for you. And since I wasn't sure what you and Montaro were up to on the mainland, I didn't enlighten them."

Miyatsu nodded, not much surprised. He'd found that humans outside of the immediate family often had trouble distinguishing between himself and his two eldest sons, particularly since both boys were now nearly as tall as he was.

"They were very interested in how Aiko managed to contact you," Kagami said. "We told them about the old tests she'd done as a child showing she had some psychic talent. They accepted that she managed to contact you telepathically. But they seemed to believe that it was at her direction that you and the children rescued her."

"They seemed incapable of grasping the notion that a genetically-modified... um, *individual* could come up with such a plan, let alone implement it," Yutaka added.

"Ah. Well, in this case it's probably a good thing. Let them go on thinking that I'm just her pet cat." Miyatsu's expression hadn't changed, but Yutaka felt he could sense a touch of chagrin in his voice. Yet again, he'd been undervalued and underestimated as a thinking being by humans.

"The news reports are all saying that Raikatuji-sama was killed in an accident with an experimental project," Mieko spoke to break the uncomfortable silence. "Some of the people interviewed were speculating that he may have committed suicide."

Montaro shook his head. "No, we saw what happened. And Dad saved my life just as much as I did his. That -- that robot thing -- it was lethal."

"The police told us that nurse we saw with Mum has been found. She was still where we left her, the sedative kept her from moving," Mieko said. "She's going to be charged with -- what was it again, Grandpa?"

"Unlawful imprisonment, reckless endangerment to human life, and aiding and abetting in a criminal act," Yutaka answered. "The reckless endangerment part was because the sedative they used on Aiko was new, designed for use on GMAs and unapproved by authorities. And at the amounts they used, and untested on humans besides, they could have killed her."

Miyatsu looked at Yutaka, his forehead creased with worry. "She *is* going to be all right, isn't she?"

"I spoke to the police doctor who examined her after she got back. The drug may take some time to get out of her system completely, and she'll probably experience some side-effects as well, giddiness, maybe some nausea. But he seemed positive that she'll make a full recovery."

Miyatsu hadn't sat with the others. Now he turned for the door. "If you'll all excuse me, I'm going upstairs to see her."

Yutaka nodded gravely and turned to his wife. "Well, we'd better get home. Benjiro can stay with us again tonight, Miyatsu, until he gets used to having the family all together again."

Mieko also stood and used her telekinesis to levitate Benjiro up into his grandfather's arms without waking the toddler. The family walked their grandparents to the door and waved them goodnight.

Mieko yawned widely as she shut the front door. "I'm going to bed," she announced, taking Montaro's hand in hers. "G'night, Dad."

The pair went upstairs. Miyatsu followed more slowly, his eyes on the young couple walking ahead of him. He had no words to describe how proud he was of his children and of the way they had risen to the challenge of the previous twenty-four hours. Particularly his two eldest. They had proved themselves to be adults in the best sense of the word. He sent a quiet *well done* direct to their minds. Both teens turned and gave him a quick smile before they disappeared into their bedroom.

*

Aiko was dozing when the sound of voices downstairs woke her. She couldn't pick up individual words, but she could clearly identify Miyatsu's deep rumble and the higher adolescent tone of Montaro. Relief at their return washed over her.

She struggled to a sitting position against the pillows. She was regaining the use of her body slowly and had managed to walk as far as the ensuite bathroom without assistance earlier that afternoon. She'd run a bath and scrubbed herself raw with the sponge, trying to wash all traces of Sakaki out of her body.

The door opened, and Miyatsu entered the room, his body silhouetted in silver from the beams of the full moon flooding in through the open window. Aiko's breath caught in her throat at the sight of him. He was alive, he was safe!

His eyes met hers, and the anxious expression on his face faded to intense relief, as if he hadn't believed until that moment that she was really there. He made a small sound in the back of his throat, a soft glad growl.

They had no need for words: she held her arms out to him. Miyatsu was across the room in an instant, his arms going about her and burying his head against the curve of her neck, trying to tuck himself as close as possible while she stroked his silky fur. The sound of his purring was loud in the quiet room.

Aiko slipped down to lie on her side, her arms about him. They held each other, simply experiencing the quiet joy of being together again. Aiko felt Miyatsu's emotions washing over her and relaxed into the experience, relishing it. She hadn't known how much she'd missed their unique feeling of connectedness until this moment. Now she felt like a starving woman suddenly presented with a banquet.

Aiko stroked one hand down his side lovingly, letting the velvety softness of the fur tickle her palm, but then froze as she felt Miyatsu flinch. He was injured?

"Are you hurt, my Miyu?"

Somehow Miyatsu managed to tuck his long body closer against her. "A laser scorched me." His voice was muffled against her shoulder. "It'll heal." He took her hand and laid it directly over the burn. "Feel it. It's not bad."

Through her palm, Aiko felt the dull ache superimposed onto her own body.

"Sakaki wasn't pleased to see me," Miyatsu added.

Aiko's arms tightened about him. "Sakaki shot you with a laser?"

She felt Miyatsu grimace against her neck. "That's not exactly what happened." He gave her the details. "I never suspected he hated me so much," he said at last. "It should never have come to this. Maybe I should have made more of an effort to contact him after we left. Maybe, if I hadn't let so many years go without a second thought, if only I'd kept in touch with him, perhaps this could have been avoided..."

"No. None of this is your fault, my Miyu. None of it. Sakaki is wholly to blame. I -- I can't say I'm glad he's dead. But I'll admit I am relieved."

Miyatsu lifted his head from her shoulder. His blue eyes gazed at her with concern, the pupils rounded and human-looking in the moonlight. "You're all right? *Really* all right?"

"Yes. I'll live. I even managed to walk to the bathroom by myself this afternoon." *And had a long, long bath*, she thought to herself.

Miyatsu stroked her hair tenderly, still cuddled close. He felt so warm beside her...

With some trepidation Aiko felt the first teasing hint of desire, the echo, she knew from experience, of what her mate was feeling. She closed her eyes for a moment, fearful that the previous night with Sakaki would have turned her off sex. But as she inhaled the comforting scent of cinnamon and felt his soft silky fur against her skin, she began to relax. This was familiar and non-threatening. She was secure and safe in her mate's arms, and the nightmare of the past week was finally over.

Miyatsu's breath was warm; it tickled slightly against her neck as waves of love rolled from him. The desire kicked up a notch with his warm body pressed so close against her, and Aiko felt her pulse begin to quicken in response.

This was nothing like the squalid business of the previous night, no roughly unzipped trousers and painful, unready penetration. This was gentle and loving, and Aiko wanted nothing more than to stop thinking about what Sakaki had done to her and relax into her mate's embrace, letting him soothe the emotional and physical bruises that had been left. She sighed as his warm tongue began to caress her neck, so much more arousing than any kiss could ever be...

But no. She couldn't do this, not without telling Miyatsu what had happened first. She wasn't about to lie by omission, not when it concerned something of this magnitude. Regretfully, she opened her eyes.

"Miyatsu? Please, stop for a moment, my love. I need to tell you something."

Miyatsu pulled back a little, his arms still about her. "It's all right," he murmured, stroking her hair. "After what you've been through, I understand that you don't feel like making love yet. I'm just so happy to have you back with me again. It's like a miracle, a dream come true that you're alive. My body wants to be convinced that you're really here."

"It's not that," Aiko answered slowly, dreading what she must say. "My Miyu, last night, Sakaki -- Sakaki raped me. Um, that means --"

Miyatsu placed one finger gently against her lips. "Shh. I understand the word, my little mate. And I already know."

"You do? How?" Then her expression cleared as understanding dawned. "Oh. Your sense of smell?"

Aiko felt her cheeks flame as Miyatsu nodded. She knew how sensitive his cat's sense was: he could always tell who had been in a room hours after the fact just by the odour trail left hanging in the air. So he must have scented Sakaki all over her as soon as he saw her last night. The sharp acrid tang of semen must have been obvious to him right away...

She closed her eyes, unable to meet Miyatsu's, but then his voice came as a gentle rumble against her ear. "I scented your fear and disgust at being forced. The pheromones hung in the air, faintly, but enough for me to read them."

Aiko felt tears threaten and buried her head against the soft fur of Miyatsu's chest. "I couldn't stop him," she whispered.

She felt Miyatsu's arms tighten about her, holding her protectively. "He can never hurt you again," he said quietly. "And I won't risk your life from now on. Tomorrow, I'm going to hire a security firm from the mainland. I don't want anybody landing on our island, not without knowing who they are and why they're here. I never took groups like HAGEO seriously before; now I know I was a fool for ignoring the danger. Sakaki's actions were a warning of how vulnerable we are."

Now she met his eyes, and she saw that they were swimming with unshed tears. "I can't lose you again, my Aiko. I *can't*. I don't have the strength to bear it."

They were silent for a moment. Aiko knew he was right; how easily she'd been captured, how trusting she'd been! They'd been living in paradise, one which had been brutally shattered by one man and his delusions. An efficient security system was the only solution. But at the same time, she felt a pang for the sense of innocence lost.

She gazed up into his face. "Please, make love to me, my Miyu."

Miyatsu looked at her seriously. "Are you sure you want to?" he asked hesitantly.

Aiko nodded. "I need to feel safe again. Sakaki thought I would forget you if you were dead. As if he could somehow blot out our love by denying your existence. I need to be your mate again. Body and soul."

You have always been my mate, Miyatsu replied telepathically. *Nothing Sakaki could do would ever change what we are to each other.*

Miyatsu nestled his head against her shoulder again and began licking her neck in long, luxurious strokes, and Aiko whispered, "Bite me, my Miyu, bite me like you did our first time together. Mark me as yours again."

Aiko felt the sharpness of his teeth sinking into her neck. Once more the sensation rode the bare edge between pain and pleasure, and she welcomed it.

Mine... His telepathic voice rang inside her mind.

She arched her body against him, wanting him to wipe out Sakaki's claim on her body.

"I'm yours," she confirmed. "Yours forever."

Chapter Twenty One - Sakura, Sakura, Hanazakari

Chapter 22 of 23

Will Sakaki, even posthumously, have won? Will his "parting gift" be the wedge that finally splits Aiko and Miyatsu apart?

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Epilogue

Chapter 23 of 23

The resolution of the story.

Epilogue

Sakura's father took her to the lab to see the newest pair of kittens growing in the gestation unit.

"Just remember," he told her as they walked up the path from the house, "these are still only tiny, they won't look much like your big brothers and sisters."

The rainy season had begun on Shima, and as they walked, the light sprinkling rain turned into a steady fall, pattering on the leaves and making tiny ripples in the puddles along the path. At the first heavy drops, Miyatsu took Sakura's hand in his and cast a water-tight shield around them both. The child laughed in delight, holding her other hand out to watch the rain splash and bead and run off without ever making contact with her skin.

Dr Fujimoto Yutaka looked up from his desk as they walked in. "Miyatsu, is this the new lab assistant you've been promising me?" he said with a grin.

Sakura smiled back at her grandfather. "Daddy says I can see Kiyoko and Keiji. As long as you say it's all right for me to be here."

Yutaka stood up and stretched. "Ooh now, I don't think you'll disturb them," he answered, walking to the gestation unit with Sakura.

She stood on tiptoes, trying to peer up into the tank. Miyatsu lifted the seven-year-old in his arms so that she was eye-level with the two pink kittens floating peacefully inside. She gave a gasp of delight and covered her mouth with her hands.

"They look like little pink jelly-beans!" she announced.

"That's because they're so new," Miyatsu told her.

"Did I look like that when I was new?"

"You did. Only we couldn't see you, because you grew inside Mummy instead of this tank. We should show you the ultrasounds. They're pictures we took inside Mummy when we found out you were there. We keep them in a little album with your baby photos."

"I've got to go back up to the house for some notes; I'll ask your Grandma to find the album, and we can look at them after dinner tonight," Yutaka offered.

"It's pouring down outside," Miyatsu said. "If you wait a few minutes, Sakura and I can come with you and I'll shield us all from the rain."

Yutaka shook his head. "No, no, take your time," he said. "I'm not sure where I put my notes, so I may be some time." He placed a waterproof hat on his head, shrugged into a plastic rain-cape, pulled on his gumboots and reached for the big black umbrella hanging from a hook by the door.

"Yutaka, you're only going up to the house," Miyatsu told him in an amused tone. "Not Antarctica!"

"You can't be too careful when you reach my age," Yutaka said with dignity. "I wouldn't want to catch a cold."

He opened the door and stepped out. The rain chose that moment to stop, and a weak beam of sunlight broke through the clouds, but Yutaka raised his umbrella anyway and splashed determinedly off through the puddles.

Miyatsu shook his head with a smile and turned his attention back to the tank. Sakura was still staring at the kitten embryos, a look of intense concentration on her face.

"Benji said I'd be able to hear them talking in my head," she said in a disappointed tone of voice. "But I can't, Daddy."

"That's because you're fully human, like Mummy," Miyatsu told her, walking slowly around the gestation unit with her still in his arms so that she could get a view from all sides. "Your psychic talent is growing, but you might not be able to use it completely until you're older."

"I can always hear Benji speak inside my head even though I can't hear the others," Sakura said. "That's why I really wanted to be able to listen to Kiyoko and Keiji."

Miyatsu looked at her disappointed little face. He knew she felt left out when the feliniforms in the family could communicate so easily telepathically. It seemed that although she had inherited her mother's latent psychic ability, she also had her biological father's tight natural shielding. It made it difficult for her to hear any of the other family members. The exception, of course, was Benjiro, who had managed to bond with her while she was still *in utero*. It seemed as if that contact had accustomed her to his psychic speech patterns, while the others remained impossible for her to hear.

"Kiyoko and Keiji are still so little they don't talk yet," he said consolingly. "They just have emotions, like feeling warm and comfortable. They're really a bit boring."

Sakura turned her brown eyes to her father's face. "Mummy said you grew up in one of these too," she stated curiously.

"Well, for a while I did," Miyatsu answered. "When I got out of mine, I was nearly as big as Benjiro is now. Then I spent the next few years on this island until your father came along and took me back to the mainland with him."

"Ooh, tell me the story, Daddy!" Sakura said, her eyes shining with anticipation.

"You've heard the story lots of times," Miyatsu teased gently.

"But I love it! Tell it again, please!"

"All right." He sat in Yutaka's vacated seat and settled Sakura on his lap. "Once upon a time, there was a very powerful king named Raikatuji Sakaki. He was rich and famous. He had a younger brother..."

"And he was a cat just like you, wasn't he, Daddy?" Sakura interrupted.

"Who's telling this story, you or me?" Miyatsu asked. "But you're right, the younger brother was a *sort* of cat. Now, in Raikatuji-sama's kingdom there lived a beautiful lady named Fujimoto Aiko." He glanced at Sakura, but this time she managed not to interrupt.

"Both the king and his brother were very much in love with the lady, but she chose, not the rich and powerful king, but his penniless younger brother. The lady and the king's brother knew they needed to leave Raikatuji-sama's kingdom. They wanted to go to Shima to make their own small kingdom, but to do that they needed money. The king's younger brother was an agile fighter, so he became a sort of knight, who could make money by fighting other knights in the arena..."

"And he was called the Attack Cat!" Sakura said, too caught up in the story to stop herself. "And he won every tournament, even the one where he got sick and couldn't use his psychic moves!"

Miyatsu nodded tolerantly, watching the little girl's rapt face. From the time she was a toddler, she'd loved stories about kings and queens; as she grew older, Miyatsu and Aiko had discovered that this fairy-tale element worked very well in explaining to her the adult dynamics that had culminated in her birth.

Sakura was aware that this story was an allegory for what had actually happened, she knew that the "kingdom" was in reality a business empire and that her biological father had been a successful businessman. But she loved to hear the story as told to her by members of her immediate family in the "once-upon-a-time" fashion that made it all seem magical.

"The knight and his lady made money that way," Miyatsu continued, "enough to leave and follow their dream of starting a new kingdom of their very own. When the king found out they were planning to leave him, he was very sad. He tried to make them change their minds and stay. But finally he realized that they were going to go no matter what, so he wished them good luck and said goodbye."

Miyatsu's tone had become wistful; the child sitting in his lap watching him so attentively reminded him in many ways of Sakaki. She was very like Aiko in looks; but now and then she would do something, move in a certain way or with a certain type of mannerism, or an expression would appear on her face, and Miyatsu would remember, with a pang of bittersweet nostalgia, where he had seen it before. On Sakaki. And just occasionally on his own face, reflected in the mirror...

"The years went by and the island kingdom grew. First Montaro and Mieko arrived, then Hanako and Hideaki, and then little Benji."

Sakura gave a sudden choke of laughter, and Miyatsu looked down into her face with surprise at the reaction, his ears pricked forward curiously. "What's so funny?"

"Little Benji!" Sakura giggled. "You said *'little Benji'*!"

Miyatsu smiled. Benjiro, at nine and a half, was now almost as tall as his father and older brothers, with the lanky arms and legs typical of the feliniform's early adolescence.

"Ah, well, he'll always be 'little Benji' to me," Miyatsu said. "No matter how tall he gets."

"It was around this time," he continued, taking up the thread of the story, "that the lady and the knight visited the mainland, and by accident they met the king again. They hadn't seen him in many years and were very happy to talk to him once more. But the king had never stopped loving the lady Aiko, and seeing her again made him envious of his younger brother. The king thought if only he could make her forget his brother, he could make the lady love him instead."

Sakura's face was very solemn now as she listened to this part of the story. "What did the king do?" she asked breathlessly, although she knew the whole story off by heart.

"The king waited for a day when his brother had to leave the island. Then he sent two of his men to lure the lady down to the beach. When she got there, they captured her and stole her away from the island kingdom."

"Benji knew about it," Sakura commented as Miyatsu paused. "He told me he was there when the bad men took her. But he was only little then, not grown-up like now, so he couldn't stop them."

"Benjiro-kun tried to fight them off," Miyatsu agreed. "The bad men drugged him and your mummy, but left him on the jetty for the family to find when they got back."

He resumed the story from the point of view of fairy-tale. "The lady Aiko was taken to Raikaituji-sama's kingdom. So her family couldn't find her, she was locked in a dungeon, deep underground. The knight tried to find her, he searched for her night and day, but she was too well-hidden. It seemed as if she had just... disappeared..."

Miyatsu stopped speaking. Even now, the memory of that terrible time had the power to make his pulse race and his mouth go dry with the remembered intolerable fear and loss. He stared unfocused at the far wall, recalling his desperate search for Aiko, the sure knowledge that she was dead and gone forever from him, and the seductive idea that he could finish it all by simply letting himself plunge to earth from on high, let the ground close over him and end his torment. His throat became tight as he recalled how close he had come to ending his life and that it was only the thought that he must see justice done that had sustained him long enough to get back to the island. And how Yutaka had managed to sway him from suicide by convincing Miyatsu that Aiko's death wasn't his fault. And by appealing to his sense of responsibility as a father...

He was brought back from his musings by the feel of a little warm hand that had slipped into his. He glanced down in surprise. Sakura had taken one of his paws in her

hand and with the other was stroking it gently, smoothing the fur over his knuckles in the way Aiko so often did. The little girl's expression was very serious when she looked up into his eyes.

"When Benji tells me the story," she said slowly, "he always makes it sound like a big adventure, that it was because I needed to be born that Mummy left. And when Mieko, Montaro, Hanako and Hideaki tell it, they all talk about how brave they were when they rescued mummy from the dungeon. But whenever you or Mummy tell the story," and she hesitated, her brow wrinkling as she tried to find words for her emotions, "I can sort of... feel your sadness." She touched her throat with one forefinger. "It gets all tight in here and I sometimes feel like crying."

Miyatsu hugged her gently, laying his cheek on the top of her head. "That's a sad part of the story," he agreed gruffly. "And you're right, it depends who's telling it. Mummy and I remember the part where we missed each other so much and thought we'd never see each other again. That's why we feel like crying then." He looked at Sakura speculatively. "If you really can pick up our emotions like that, maybe your psychic talent is growing. You may be able to hear the others telepathically if you keep practicing."

Sakura looked pleased. "Benji's helping me," she confided. "He says I'm whispering with my mind now, and he's trying to teach me how to shout." She went quiet for a moment, then added, "If the story makes you sad, Daddy, you don't have to finish it."

Miyatsu shook his head. "But the happy-ever-after part is coming up soon, and that makes the sad part worthwhile."

Sakura settled back against him, looking up expectantly.

"The lady Aiko found that she could use her psychic ability to get a message to her knight. She told him where she was. Then he and their children traveled to Raikatuji-sama's kingdom and freed her from the dungeon. There was an evil dragon called Rin guarding her, but Montaro dealt with her. Then the family took the lady home once more to their kingdom.

"Now, while all this was happening, up at the castle the king was experimenting with a new weapon. It was very powerful, but like everything powerful it could also be very dangerous. Once the king found out that the lady Aiko had been rescued he was very angry. The knight had gone to talk to his brother, but the king didn't want to listen. He was so angry that he tried to use the new weapon on his brother. Montaro had followed his father and was able to save him, but this made the king even more angry and he got careless. He had an accident with the weapon."

Sakura nodded solemnly. "He got shot didn't he, Daddy? When the weapon was aimed at Montaro, he was trying to reach the king, so the weapon was pointed at them both. And the Attack Cat was able to use his psychic power to pull Montaro out of the way just in time."

"That's right. The laser hit the king instead of Montaro."

"And he died, never to see the lady Aiko or his brother again," Sakura added.

Miyatsu glanced at her face to see how she was taking this part, but as always she displayed fascinated attention but no grief. Of course, Miyatsu thought, the death of a fairy-tale king was easier to deal with than the death of a father she'd never known. That was the main reason he and Aiko had decided on this particular format to explain her birth: they didn't want her to feel guilt about her biological father's actions towards the mother she loved.

"Yes. The king's brother and the lady Aiko were sad that he died. They had truly loved him, you see. But he left them a gift, something they hadn't expected."

Sakura smiled expectantly at this, sitting up straighter. It was her favourite part of the whole story.

"He gave a little princess, his only child, to the lady Aiko. Both she and the knight loved her very much and named her 'Sakura.' The knight adopted her as his own, and he is her uncle, but she calls him Daddy. And when the little princess was born, her blood was tested on the mainland. That proved that she was indeed the king's only child. The lawyers argued about it, but they finally had to agree that she was the king's legal heir. The whole of the rich Raikatuji kingdom belongs to her, and the lady Aiko holds it in trust for her until she grows up."

Miyatsu stared out of the window for a moment, musing. Raikatuji Sakura was a very rich little girl, having inherited her father's massive business empire. It was being operated now by managers, and Miyatsu wondered if Sakura would one day take over personally like her father had. Certainly she was smart enough, Miyatsu thought. She had inherited quick wits and intelligence from both sides of her family. But from an early age she'd insisted that she wanted to be a GMA researcher *'like Mummy and Granddad'*.

Although that had always been one of Sakaki's interests, as well, Miyatsu thought. Not the research side perhaps, but he'd always had a talent for making intuitive leaps of imagination, of taking ordinary ideas and turning them into something extraordinary. Too extraordinary at times. Miyatsu frowned: he still had occasional nightmares of a pixedated Aiko and a flat-lining monitor...

"Finish the story, Daddy," Sakura insisted, impatient to hear the rest.

Miyatsu pulled his mind away from remembered night terrors and returned to the task at hand. "And the family lived on the island... " he said, then paused expectantly, and Sakura finished the sentence with him: "happily ever after."

Sakura nodded, satisfied that the ritual had been properly completed. She was silent for a moment, a pensive look on her face. Finally she looked back up at Miyatsu.

"Daddy, was my father a... bad man?" she asked.

Miyatsu took his time answering, choosing his words carefully. Sakura had never before asked such a question. Also he noticed that she wasn't now referring to the fairy-tale king, but had asked about the *real* Sakaki. That she had done so he considered a sign of her maturing outlook. As such he wanted to give her a truthful answer.

"Sakaki was human," Miyatsu answered slowly, "with all the good and bad qualities every human has. His major problem was that he'd always been rich and was used to getting his own way. So he didn't know what to do when anybody told him no." Miyatsu smiled nostalgically. "When I first met him and went to live on the mainland, I wanted to be just like him. To me Sakaki was the best of the best, a handsome, successful human with everything I'd ever wanted but could never hope to have. I would have given up all of my psychic powers, all of my dreams of building my own species, if I could just have been as human as Sakaki was. I wanted to be his brother *truly*, not something constructed from a mixture of different creatures that just happened to have some of his cells."

"Do you still wish you were human?"

"Oh no, not any more. Once I realized that your mummy loved me for who I was, I was able to accept myself as well, for perhaps the first time." Miyatsu thought about it for a moment. "I think Sakaki envied me. Because despite all his power he was lonely. He could never be sure that the people he called his friends *were really* his friends, or if they just wanted to be with him because of his money and influence. But I loved him for the fact that he was the only family I had, and Aiko loved him because he didn't treat us like freaks for wanting to be together. For a time, he was our truest friend."

"But he stole Mummy away from the family, and that hurt you both," Sakura said, her brow furrowed in the effort to understand.

Miyatsu nodded. "Yes. But I think I know why he did it. Aiko and I were the only family he had, and he missed us once we left. For a long time, I believe, he really tried to forget that he loved your mother; but he was lonely, and when we met him again on the mainland it brought all the memories back, the good times the three of us had shared together. And we did have some good times. Some of my happiest memories are of Sakaki and me, talking, practicing, training. We used to laugh together a lot, that first summer at Kagoshima, and after Aiko, Sakaki was the human I liked most."

Miyatsu sighed. "I should have kept in contact with him after I came here to Shima. Maybe -- maybe if I had, Sakaki wouldn't have been so lonely. I still feel guilty that I didn't make the effort. But we were so busy here, me and Aiko and your grandparents. We were building a new species together, and the time went by so fast that I didn't realize how the years had slipped by. And I was so very happy, it never occurred to me that Sakaki was unhappy. I think when he met us again, that he -- gave in to temptation. He hungered for the sort of love that Aiko and I share. But love can only be given, it can never be taken by force. That was something he never understood."

"I would have liked to meet my father," Sakura said, considering. "I mean, I've seen the pictures Mummy has in her scrapbook of him and you when you were fighting on the circuit. And I've seen all the discs Grandma recorded from the television then, too. But it's not the same thing, is it?"

"No, no it's not the same," Miyatsu agreed.

"But I think it would be confusing," Sakura continued. "You can't have two Daddies, can you? *You're* my Daddy. But you're not my father, you're my uncle!" She smiled as if amused by the idea, and once again Miyatsu could plainly see the resemblance to her biological father. That quick, mischievously charming smile was pure Sakaki. Then it faded and her face became serious again, and she looked far more like her mother. "Does that make Benji my cousin? He says it does."

"Mmm, I suppose you could call him your cousin," Miyatsu said, trying to keep up with the kaleidoscopic train of thought and endless questions of a typical seven-year-old. "Benjiro is my clone, which means he is *sort of* your father's younger brother, like me! Yes, let's just say he's your cousin. It makes it easier."

The child smiled. "I'm glad you saved Mummy and that you're my Daddy, even if you're really my uncle!"

She put her head to one side as if listening. "Benji's finished his schoolwork," she announced, sliding off Miyatsu's lap. "He says would I like to go down to the beach with him and the others before dinner."

Miyatsu was not surprised when the door opened at that moment to reveal Benjiro, along with seven-year-old twins Raku and Raiden, and Kuri and Kiyoshi, Montaro and Meiko's four-year-olds. He'd already spotted their psychic signatures as they walked down the slope from the main group of houses. Sakura ran to join the ranks of her chattering peer group with a smile, taking her accustomed spot beside Benjiro, who was the acknowledged leader of the gang.

"Don't be late back for dinner," Miyatsu said, raising his voice slightly to be heard as the six children exited. "Grandma's made umeboshi."

He watched for a moment longer as they walked off down the path. When they disappeared from view, Miyatsu stood and padded across to the storeroom. The door was slightly ajar, with Aiko standing just inside, sorting through some computer discs. She placed them on the table beside her as Miyatsu came in and put his arms fondly about her waist.

"Why didn't you come out and join us?"

Aiko shook her head with a slight smile. "I didn't want to interrupt while you told Sakura the story. That's the first time I've heard her ask about Sakaki. Not as part of the story, I mean, but about why he did what he did. You handled it well."

"Her questions made me nostalgic. I still wonder now and then if I could have managed things with Sakaki differently, better. Would he still be alive today if I hadn't gone back to the Raikatuji building after we rescued you? He must have been very afraid of me to have built Koneko's robotic body; my being there goaded him into using her..."

Aiko put two fingers against Miyatsu's mouth, stopping him. "Sakaki sowed the seeds of his own destruction when he abducted me," she said firmly. "I'm just glad we're still alive. I was so scared that night. If you hadn't come to rescue me, he would have killed me. Maybe not right away and probably without meaning to, but I'd certainly be dead now. Sakaki's addiction made him completely unstable. And I can never forgive that he planned your murder. If he'd managed to kill you... if I'd lost you because of him..."

She broke off, her expression suddenly bleak. She put both arms about Miyatsu and hugged him hard, burying her face in the soft fur of his chest.

Miyatsu rested his cheek against the top of her head for a moment in a brief kiss, hugging her back. "How fierce you sound, little mate! I'm glad it's not me you're angry with!"

Aiko knew he was making light of it to lift her mood, and looked up into his face, giving him a small smile of reassurance. "I think you were right when you told Sakura that her father always had to have his own way. He could act like a spoilt child at times--charming, but only for as long as he got what he wanted. We kept confusing him, because we didn't want the same things! He didn't know how to deal with us." She picked up her discs again. "Just let me put these away and we can go on up to the house."

"Have you finished here?" Miyatsu asked. "Yutaka may be back soon."

"Dad was yawning before you got here. Those notes of his were just an excuse: I'll bet he's fallen asleep on the couch again!"

The rain was falling once more as Miyatsu and Aiko exited the lab. Aiko slipped her hand about her mate's waist fondly. He smiled down at her and she felt a slight tingle as the waterproof shield activated about them both.

A peal of childish laughter sounded from the beach, and they turned to watch the children for a moment. They were playing by the shore, totally oblivious to the rain as they raced about. The slight shimmer in the air about each showed that they were all shielding against the wet weather, even the pair of four-year-olds. Benjiro was holding Sakura's hand in his own and protecting them both.

"Hey, that's not fair, Raku!" Sakura was protesting. "It's against the rules to levitate when me and Kuri and Kiyoshi can't..."

She broke off with a sudden squeal of surprise as she and her kitten cousins were hoisted a little above the sand. Laughing, Sakura turned to Benjiro, who was still holding her hand but grinning cheekily. She was now on eye-level with him. "Put me down!" she demanded.

"But we can beat Raku now!" he answered.

And the six children raced away down the beach, squealing and laughing, Benjiro levitating himself, Sakura and his pair of cousins with no apparent effort, while his younger brother and sister struggled to keep up.

Aiko smiled at the sight. Raku had turned out to have a competitive streak; she was constantly testing her older brother and human sister and would complain that Benjiro always took Sakura's side in everything. Raiden, on the other hand, was as easy-going as all the males of the Miyatsu clan and happy to let his sister take the lead. The six flying children disappeared around the curve of beach, and Aiko looked up at her mate, sensing a bittersweet nostalgia radiating from him.

"Benjiro and Sakura make me think of you and I when we were young," Miyatsu told her. "We could have been childhood friends too, if we'd been given the chance."

"If only Dad had let me stay at the lab that day we met. But we became friends anyway. We just had to wait a while to meet again."

Miyatsu was silent for a moment, but Aiko sensed his mood. She smoothed the fur over his knuckles with her thumb. "What's wrong?" she asked gently.

"Are we doing the right thing?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Sakura and Benjiro are so close. Maybe that's not such a good idea."

"I don't understand. Benjiro adores her, you know that, and she loves him. Why is that not good?"

"Yes, she loves him as a brother. But I know Benjiro loves her as a future *mate*. He told me recently that they're going to live together like we do when they grow up." The familiar frown line had appeared between his eyes. "Remember what Sakaki said? That it was... what was the word, when people are related and shouldn't mate?"

"Incest? Well, Benjiro and Sakura are only related in the most tenuous of terms," Aiko answered. "Sakura told me the same thing, that she and Benji plan on becoming mates. But they're children still, so I wouldn't worry about it. They may both change their minds in future."

Miyatsu shook his head, his expression very serious. "Benjiro won't. But Sakura might. She has a lot of Sakaki in her temperament. And he got married four times."

Aiko smiled. "Is that what you're worried about? You could just as easily say she'll take after her mother, with one mate forever!"

Miyatsu smiled despite himself. "She is very like you, too," he admitted.

"I've noticed more than a passing resemblance to her uncle as well," Aiko teased gently. "And I know for a fact that he's monogamous! And don't forget, we've broken a few taboos ourselves."

She took Miyatsu's paw in both her hands and gazed up into his eyes. "I loved you from the moment we met. I've been lucky enough to find my soul-mate; I can only wish my daughter the same good luck, with whoever she chooses."

"But what if she decides on a human mate, and Benjiro comes down with Pershan Syndrome?"

"What if a tsunami arrives tomorrow morning and wipes us all off Shima?" Aiko countered. "Or a television satellite drops out of orbit on top of us? Whatever happens, we'll deal with it when it happens. We've managed harder issues before this."

Miyatsu nodded slowly, his eyes losing some of their worry. "You're right. I'm overreacting, aren't I?"

"Maybe just a little bit," Aiko answered with a slight smile. "Let them be children for now. They'll grow up soon enough."

She tugged at his hand. "You know, we haven't gone for a walk along the beach in the rain for some time."

Miyatsu allowed himself to be led back down the path. "Do you want to follow the children?"

"No, I want some you-and-me time. Alone. There's a little spot not far from here that I've always thought looks like the area where the Pershans in Wild Kingdom lived. "

Miyatsu pricked his ears forward and Aiko could sense his amusement. "Except they lived by a river, and we're next to the sea, they're in Africa, we're on Shima, they were... "

"Details," and Aiko waved those considerations aside. "The main thing is, it's quiet and nobody ever goes down there."

She brushed one hip against him playfully and could feel she had his complete and enthusiastic attention. "Come on. Walking along the beach in the rain: that always reminds me of our first time together."

"Mmm, have we got time before the television satellite falls on us?" Miyatsu asked.

"I plan on having too much fun to notice it." Aiko looked up at him. "Can you shield against rain while we're making love, though? I've never thought to ask you before."

Miyatsu grinned, showing his long cat teeth. "We'll soon find out, won't we?"

The End.

Author's note: if you enjoyed this story, please check out the artwork of this artist on Deviantart, she has done some fanart for it under the name "The Miyatsu File -- Promo art."

<http://cadaverine-xtreme.deviantart.com/gallery/>