

# 1 The Parakeet Returns

Killer Parakeet woke up to find himself on a large, firm bed filled with pillows. Rusty, his faithful wolf-mutt companion, was curled up next to him and had taken all of the blankets for himself. "Russ, gimme some too! Even parakeets get cold!" squawked the six and a half foot tall, three hundred pound parrot, tugging some blanket away from the snoring dog as his dirty turquoise feathers fluffed up to trap in some more warm air. Then he saw that the light sources weren't candles but rather what looked like small orbs. Was he in some wizard's castle again? Or did Clawstaff decide to allow the students to use their wizard-lights in their rooms? Then he saw the strange-looking red lights with numbers on them. It read: 4:30 AM before the zero turned into a one. "Huh?" he mumbled to himself. Certain he had been drinking too much again, he went back to sleep and hoped he wouldn't have too much of a hangover.

Iliiryana smirked evilly at him as she poised herself to plunge the ice-cold scimitar through him. Just as she was about to sacrifice him to Tindarien Dalithariel, a pair of red-haired ogre-like twins charged into her with their hockey sticks and distracted her long enough to give the parrot a chance to break free. In the distance, the giant albino mole-wolverine was shattering, smashing, devouring everything in its path. "Yuck, the Unnamed Terror," squawked Killer. Rusty was biting into it before it shook the huge dog off and grabbed him with its long, sticky tongue. Without a second thought, Killer grabbed his axe and dented pot and charged at the Unnamed Terror. The two Terrian football player twins, Chad and Chester, would have to deal with Iliiryana on their own.

Tindariel, too, had charged at the Unnamed Terror and shouted, "Frontier Justice!" at the top of her lungs before slashing madly at the monster that had captured Rusty. She and Killer both attacked the god of blind fury and hunger, intent on saving their canine friend. Not far away, little Kestrel was dueling with Cylithera Eaglestrike, the Champion of the Eternal Huntress, and by the looks of it, neither was making any progress and neither would surrender to the other. Suddenly, the Eldharin student and the students collapsed on the ground just as Iliiryana shouted out some harsh spidery syllable. The record-holder for failing wizardry classes was pretty sure that Iliiryana had cast a cantrip to create some flowers, making her wonder why. Paralysis made her realize that it was not what she thought it was and all she could do was swear non-stop while her feet were rooted to the ground and her arms felt like they were held back by chains. "Damn arcane lore classes," she thought. She did fail all of her arcane lore classes multiple times. The Unnamed Terror moved towards Tindariel and in anticipation of its next meal, it pulled the struggling mutt into

its mouth before dropping him in. Then the tongue extended out to grab the muscular Eldharin woman.

Killer let out a hideous challenging shriek at the sight of his canine companion being eaten and of his best friend in danger.

Without thinking, he lunged madly at the giant mole-wolverine, hacking away at the tongue as hard as he could with axe, beak, and claws. "You killed my buddy-o-pal Jeremiah three thousand years ago and you just ate my doggie! You're not gonna take my buddy-o-pal Tindariel either!" he squawked. Tindariel could do little more than curse and lay helpless under Iliiryana's spell.

The parrot felt the wet, acidic hot tongue wrap itself around him. Squawking in pain, he tried to bite and claw at the rubbery tongue, but it only created more acid that burned his feathers and skin.

Iliiryana returned to where the mole-wolverine was, covered in human blood. Smirking at Killer, she said smugly, "Farewell, Uncle. I gave you the choice to help me by helping me to destroy my father, Baelnorn Clawstaff, but you chose death and so the Unnamed Terror will have you." With that, she threw a black-bladed curved knife that resembled a panther's claw into Killer's heart.

Blood poured everywhere and Killer's struggles stopped almost instantly before the Unnamed Terror swallowed him and let out a loud, noxious burp. One burp turned into several more and the creature began to writhe in intense pain before charging off this way and that. Without warning, it combusted into a bright silver flame and melted into black goo that vaporized into smoke. Tindariel cried out when Killer vanished into the creature and summoning what was left of her strength, she forced herself to get up and pick up her longbow. Nocking her last arrow to the string, she took aim at Iliiryana, who was busy gloating at both Killer's and the Unnamed Terror's demise. With a whispered prayer to Gwaeron, the patron god of brawlers and bears, she loosed the arrow and struck Iliiryana in the arm. "Frontier justice!" she screamed at the top of her lungs before charging in at the half-Dhaerow woman.

And then Killer realized that after he got swallowed, he was witnessing the Unnamed Terror's destruction and Tindariel's berserk fury at Iliiryana from high above. Rusty was next to him and began to whine at the sight of one of the young students leaping in front of Tindariel to protect her from Iliiryana's spell...

"Wait a minute, I'm supposed to be dead," thought Killer as he woke up groggily in response to the sunlight that filtered in through the blinds. "Unless that whole Godsfall war was just a bad dream," he added. Some things were just so confusing to the parrot, who was very smart for one whose brains were squished in such a thick skull. He surveyed the room to see where he might've been. There were a handful of lamps with those strange orb-like things and the thing with the numbers was still on the night-stand next to the bed. He

could see a closet filled with clothing and yet another closet where Rusty seemed to be bent over something. The second closet had a white chair-like thing that Rusty was drinking out of and two more basins, one that he recognized as a bath-tub and the other he was sure was some kind of basin to wash up in. Rusty's voice echoed in his mind. "Killer, there's a nice drinking fountain here. You can even refresh the water and it's got a good minty taste to it too. I haven't found the food yet but I'll bet if you opened that third door, it would lead us to food."

Killer walked to where Rusty was drinking water and he leaned over to also drink. "Ooh, it even has a lid to keep it clean!" he squawked before pulling the little handle. The water in the basin poured out and fresh water poured in with a swooshing noise. He took a beakful of water and commented, "Good stuff, Russ. We oughta get Clawstaff to build one of these for us too!" Then turning around, they both spotted a table covered with food and the aromas of various cooked items permeated through the air.

Without even bothering to question the source of the food, both parrot and dog began to gobble up the ample food on the table. Not only was there plenty of all the foods they had smelled, there was also large tankards of dark beer, another open bathroom with an inviting-looking toilet, and a huge box that both Killer and Rusty recognized as the food-boxes that somehow stayed perpetually cold. "This is good! If I weren't so hungry, I'd be a bit more leery, but heck, I'm too hungry to care!"

Rusty finished his plate of bacon before trying to slide some slices off Killer's plate. Fortunately for the dog, Killer was too focused on eating fried roaches and drinking dark beer. Slowly, the dog's paw pulled a few large, juicy hunks of bacon off Killer's plate and he slurped up the pieces before Killer noticed. If there was anything that was in short supply to Rusty, it was bacon. He thanked whoever provided the feast for providing so many roaches so Killer wouldn't notice a few (or several) missing pieces of bacon. After several minutes, Killer began to burp loudly. "Whew, that was good! Perfectly fried roaches with the perfect crunch to them! And that was some good beer! Dunno 'bout you Russ, but I gotta lift my tail somewhere."

"I'm going to wash down the meal with some water. Ya know, I don't drink beer like you do. Water might even do you good!" Rusty ran to the toilet and flushed it before drinking eagerly from the clean white porcelain bowl. For some reason, he felt really sluggish and lazy. Turning around to see how Killer was faring, he saw the parrot staggering about, probably from having enjoyed one too many pitchers of beer. Then Killer wandered out of sight, unable to walk in a straight line.

"Hey! Lookie here, we got dessert here too!" called out Killer

eagerly. He opened a large white refrigerator to reveal several pies, cakes, dog biscuits, several bottles of beer and whiskey, and yet more roaches. With that, he tore into the refrigerator, heedless of the fact that that his stomach was full. Rusty looked up from the toilet, flushed it, then ran over to the refrigerator and grabbed the fish-shaped dog biscuits and one of the pumpkin pies. Rusty started belching and then Killer squawked, "Ooh, lemme see if I can do better!" He let out a loud, noxious burp and started to eat another chocolate-coated roach and washed it down with some more beer. Several more slices of pumpkin pie and candied insects later, the room seemed to spin around Killer. "Hmm, maybe I shouldn't have finished that twelve-pack!" The mutt, too, staggered about, confused and dizzy.

"Maybe we ate too much, too fast. Or there's something funny in the food."

"Naw, it's the beer. Well, the pumpkin pie had rum in it," said Killer, trying to stop the world from spinning by hugging a nearby lamp before stumbling over to Rusty. Then darkness swirled around both of them. "I think I'm gonna have a headache soon!"

"I don't feel so good. Was there any grass in here?"

"I think I need to make a deposit somewhere," whined Killer, clutching his distended stomach. "How could you make a withdrawal with that sagging gut of yours?"

"I was going to make a deposit too."

Killer staggered around some more before returning to the bathroom and sitting on the toilet like a chair. The faithful and bloated mutt followed him, certain his friend was going to get into trouble. After seeing him seated precariously on the toilet, he pushed him off and led him to the shower stall and closed the door. "Huh? I was gonna sit in my comfy chair!" whined Killer again.

"You're not dirtying the water source." As soon as Rusty secured the gigantic parakeet in the shower, he crawled into the bathtub and curled up into a surprisingly small ball. All the while, Killer was squawking incoherently and then the sound of water flowing began.

"It's raining!" squawked Killer eagerly before yanking the door off the shower and staggering towards the toilet. Then he tripped on his own clawed feet and fell onto the ground, snoring. Rusty, too, began to snore loudly. Had either one remained awake long enough, a lone roach crawling around suddenly froze in its tracks and became a square white package labeled "Extra Firm Tofu". A tasty-looking fried potato wedge shuddered ever so slightly before turning into a shiitake mushroom and a pumpkin pie shook about before warping into a rectangular box labelled "Natto".

The gigantic parakeet opened up one beady black eye and wondered what was filling up his copious paunch to the point where he felt a bit nauseous. "Russ, remind me to not eat so much at once," he

groaned before rolling over and staggering over to a nearby garbage can.

"Killer, you shouldn't have eaten so much. You always do this after gorging like that. Won't you ever learn?" The large mutt followed the huge parrot, feeling slightly nauseous but not quite as bloated or sick. "You better not puke or I might have to really keep you off the beer."

Killer Parakeet made a few gagging and retching noises, but nothing came up except for a loud, noxious burp. "Better, much better!" he squawked cheerfully, forgetting about his upset stomach. His tail suddenly lifted up as he let out a resonant and malodorous fart.

"Stop it before I find a cork!" Rusty turned away and ran back into the bathroom, tail tucked between his legs. Killer, on the other hand, was completely oblivious to the stink he produced. After all, he had a very limited sense of smell.

He then wandered back into the kitchen, wondering if there was more food for him. The only food left was some broccoli, some kind of white stuff in water in a box labeled "Tofu", a glass bottle of smooth brownish-red substance called "Red Curry Paste", and a bottle labelled "Nam Pla". There were several open boxes of other unfamiliar things along with tofu and half-eaten vegetables scattered all over the place as well, but neither dog nor parakeet had any recollection of consuming tofu or vegetables. He recalled Kestrel mentioning tofu on a number of occasions but he never got around to trying it. Tindariel had once told him that it was a squishy chameleon that needed the appropriate background. While he rummaged about hoping to find something more appetizing, one of the doors creaked open. Even Killer Parakeet had no desire to try the red curry paste or the mysterious brown liquid in the container of "nam pla". Just the smell of those two things was enough to dissuade him.

In walked a man and a woman, both clad in blue pants and grey shirts with a hand carrying a lighted torch. The man was heavy-set with a neatly trimmed black beard but had almond-shaped eyes like the Eldharin and the Sidhe. Unlike the Eldharin or the Sidhe, his eyes were deep brown. He also had a slightly golden tinge to his tanned skin that reminded the parrot of the regal Zineng Eldharin. Since when did dwarves breed with Eldharin or Sidhe to produce this? The man was certainly hairier than even the hairiest dwarves he had seen because at least he didn't see the dwarves' chest and back hairs through their clothing. Maybe a dwarf, Sidhe, and a bear had somehow been mutated by an evil wizard to produce this man who faced him?

Killer was relieved that the feathers under his tail were not white because there was something about the man that made him a bit uneasy. The woman was tiny and slender with jet-black hair like her

companion and also had the deep brown almond-shaped eyes and a fox-like cast to her. What caught his beady black eyes most though was the fact that her right hand didn't match because it was bright silver and looked very mechanical. An involuntary shiver passed up the nearly fearless bird's spine. At least it wasn't something coming out from under his tail, which was a response he reserved for Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon and maybe Cylithera Eaglestrike. "Hey, got any real grub here besides weeds and this weird tofu stuff?" he squawked.

"What the frequency?" asked the woman in a clear, almost flute-like voice that made Killer think of some of the Eldharin operas he had been subjected to in his time as a professor at the University.

The man motioned for the woman to stand back and approached Killer.

"Who or what are you?" he demanded in a baritone voice that also reminded him of Eldharin operas. Only Eldharin or other entities with truly beautiful voices were allowed to sing in the operas, a fact that Killer didn't appreciate until that time Kestrel took him to one in this world. Somehow, this man's voice had a soothing effect on him and his feathers lay back down, slightly calmer.

"I'm Killer Parakeet the Great, Hero of the Banishings! And Rusty, descendant of Huan of the Imlad Estel is in that room with the good water!" he squawked proudly, pointing at the large black and tan wolf mutt who was happily drinking from the toilet. "What about you two?" Both people tried to refrain from giggling at his outburst before their eyes widened at the implication of his name.

"Shit, Joanne was right when she said we'd have visitors," said the man. "I'm Vincent Gahan," he added. He reluctantly shook Killer's wing and sneezed at all the feather dust that came off him.

Also shaking his wing, the woman said, "I'm Tarathorn Gahan." Like her companion, she sneezed repeatedly from all of the dust on the parrot. "So why are you here?" She tried her best not to sniffle too hard, but she could feel her sinuses clog up and he reeked badly. A voice in the back of her head suggested that she direct the smelly bird to a bath, but she restrained herself, unsure of what would happen if she did so.

Bobbing his head to express his uncertainty, Killer replied, "Dunno, one day I was out at the bar with my buddy-o-pals Gwaeron and Russ and Jeremiah and then next thing I know, Gwaeron gets summoned to the Council of the gods and I wake up here with Russ!" He let out a bit of a hiccup and his tail lifted involuntarily before settling back down. The smell of rotten eggs and broccoli surrounded him.

Whispering to Vincent, Tarathorn asked, "I thought we were supposed to have a Dhaerow visitor."

"Maybe I heard wrong," he replied, shrugging.

"Dhaerow? Where?" squawked Killer, bobbing his head up and down again.

"Hey, who's these people?" Rusty bounded out from the bathroom, wagging his tail eagerly and sniffing both Vincent and Tarathorn. He tried to sit in between the two of them, unable to decide on who to snuggle up to first. Even being a descendant of both the wolves of Dûnhèasa and the hounds of the hidden kingdom of Imlad Estel didn't stop him from being like an oversized puppy at times. "I kinda like the imitation Gwaeron even if he is Sidhe and has a bit of an attitude and is almost as stupid as you sometimes. I really like the little Alfar girl, kinda reminds me of Ilithara actually. Speaking of which, where's Ilithara?"

Suddenly, Rusty started sniffing around on the ground and wandering around. "Uhh, ya need to empty the spout?" asked Killer.

"No, just smelled something. Dhaerow I think. And spell components." Rusty then looked up into the air before trotting off. A clear, musical voice called out from the distance, "Killer? Is that you?"

Both Vincent and Tarathorn looked over to see what Rusty was running towards. It was a slender, dark-skinned woman in dark blue overalls. She walked with an unearthly grace that made both of them think of Sidhe or Alfar and as she drew closer, they could notice her features. While her almond-shaped eyes were a bright blue-green and her ears were somewhat pointed and long, her skin was dark brown. Her hair was curly and black, making both of them wonder how someone of what they were sure was African could have the bright blue-green eyes. Contact lenses, perhaps? Despite her slender build, she still had the wide hips that many would consider a "ghetto booty". Killer broke the confusion by running up to her and hugging her, leaving a trail of dust everywhere. "Ilithara! I missed ya!" he squawked cheerfully. Rusty was also wagging his tail excitedly and trying to snuggle up to her. "By the way, nice disguise!"

Approaching the couple, Ilithara smiled at them. "I got word that Killer would be here. And so we're no longer strangers, I'm Ilithara N'Shad-Daermon, although in this world I'm going under the name Michael Jackson." At the mention of her alias, a few giggles escaped from both Vincent and Tarathorn.

"What's so funny?" asked Ilithara, confused.

"First thing is Michael is a male name, the female version is Michelle. And then there was this pop star named Michael Jackson who went from being a black man to a white woman," started Tarathorn.

"He was a bit nuts with his Neverland ranch and there were lots of rumors of him being a pedophile."

Suddenly, Ilithara grinned. "I remember Kestrel mentioned this character," she said. "Anyway, after exploring the beautiful Institute of Environmental Sciences and the city of Ocala and running into some of the weirdest characters, I'm supposed to get

Killer and Rusty back to Palindor. Something's up, lots of reports of several gods vanishing and the Triad of Honor going nuts. Plus, Mom and Dad need to talk to you but something's blocking their powers. If the Grand Arch-Mage and the Keeper of Secrets can't get through, something's really bad."

"Wait a minute, explain what's going on," demanded Vincent, wondering what on earth this woman was talking about.

"It's complicated," she replied. "But what makes it relevant for you is that you may've put Iliiriana out of commission for nearly three years, but she's come back."

"Crap!" declared the couple at the same time, then they looked at each other in amusement despite the gravity of Ilithara's news. Killer and Rusty looked at each other, then at their long-time friend and then at the couple that greeted them. "I guess that explains a lot," squawked Killer, unusually thoughtful for a parrot of very little brain. "The whole thing with Gwaeron being a bit antsy and me having that flashback of when I died. Wait a minute, I shouldn't be around!"

Ilithara stopped the mutant parrot in what could've been a loud, painful soliloquy. "Killer, you and Rusty are coming with me, like it or not." Turning to both Vincent and Tarathorn, she said, "I might be able to transport you to with me as well. My parents would love to see you again, if you don't mind. I've never attempted to use their spell for more than two others, but I don't see why I can't pull it off."

"Parents?" asked Vincent, puzzled.

"Tanilthara N'Shad-Daermon and Baelnorn Clawstaff. Well, Clawstaff is my step-father..." started Ilithara before Vincent's face turned beet-red.

Tarathorn tried to restrain her husband, but a few choice words escaped and he growled, "Not them again! They were the ones that got me and Ivan into the whole fuckin' mess!" With that he lunged at Ilithara, who merely stepped aside in a fluid, graceful action, causing the enraged man to bump into the over-sized bird instead. He merely looked at the stocky man and laughed while he sneezed at the excessive feather dust that rose up from the parrot like a dense cloud. "And Killer, you smell!" he added, fed up with the excessive odor coming from him.

"He's hot-headed like a Sidhe. I'm surprised he isn't supporting that witch with that temper of his. He's also a real idiot apparently, even worse than you! But he is right about one thing, Killer. You stink, can't you bathe once in a while? A bath might even make your feathers a bit nicer!" Rusty began to sniff around again and went back into the trailer before re-emerging with a large bone and gnawing on it. The parakeet merely bobbed his head up and down and started scratching at an itch on his back with his sharp

clawed toes before dealing with another itch close to the base of his tail with his beak. Everyone looked away in disgust at Killer, who merely shook off and spread feather dust everywhere.

Killer squawked before putting Vincent into a light head-lock, "Well, those two started a lot of trouble. They're also Iliiriana's parents for real but yeah, don't take it out on the kid sister or on my poor brother. She's cool, if you're gonna beat up on someone, beat up the big sister." At the mention of brother, Tarathorn and Vincent both let out an incoherent squeak.

"Long story, but I'm sure Mom and Dad can tell you more later on if they feel like it. I think Rusty's getting bored of us talking, why don't we head out?" asked Ilithara, watching the huge mutt chewing eagerly on the bone.

Turning to each other, the couple began to whisper to each other in a language that neither Ilithara nor Killer could understand. "How much of a hurry are you in?" asked Vincent finally, holding onto Tarathorn closely. "There are a few little things we need to take care of."

Ilithara looked into one of the pockets on her overalls. "Well, it is urgent, but it's hurry up and wait, might be a few days while I refresh my mind on that incantation and set up a few things. So if it's not going to take too long, go ahead and deal with it because you're gonna be away for a while. And Killer, Mom sent you something so you can enjoy some time on Terrios without attracting too much attention."

"Yeah, we're not going to be able to hide that for long," commented Vincent, eyeing the giant parakeet. "Especially if we're going to keep him around for more than a few hours."

Digging around again in her pockets, the Dhaerow woman pulled out a plain black ring. "Put this on your toe, Killer," she instructed.

Both Vincent and Tarathorn grinned quietly at the thought of Killer having a toe-ring.

Without hesitation, Killer lifted up a foot and hopped about, unable to balance himself until he grabbed onto the nearest stationary object, which happened to be Vincent. While Vincent sneezed and did his best to not inhale more of the parakeet's foul odor, Ilithara slid the ring onto one of his forward-facing toes. In a flash of light, the giant parakeet's form began to glow and warp. The zygodactyl parrot feet became human feet and the scaly avian legs thickened into powerful, muscular legs. The dusty feathers disappeared, while Killer's stance became more erect and his wickedly curve beak receded. Within several heartbeats, what was once a gigantic parrot was now a tall, heavy-set clean-shaven man with a ruddy complexion, beady dark brown eyes, and short dirty blonde hair. Much to everyone's relief, he also was fully clothed in a pair of blue jeans and a slightly stained white tank top that

revealed his ample belly that hung over his pants.

"Not my choice exactly," said Ilithara. "Even Dhaerow illusions can cover so much out here, but seems strangely appropriate for you, Killer," she added, laughing.

"I feel funny," said Killer before realizing that he was no longer squawking, although he did bob his head up and down. "Hey, I got a working spout! And now I've got two separate holes for pee and poop!" he cried out, dancing about after putting his hands on his crotch and his butt. Rusty covered his face with his large paws and whined softly.

While the large man continued to prance about excitedly about not having to lift his tail for everything, the couple merely looked away in disgust and amusement at him. Finally, Vincent spoke up.

"Killer, you better not do that in public. And you might want a real name like Bob Smith or something."

"Bubba seems to be a pretty common name here," suggested Ilithara once Killer stopped his display. "It's non-descript enough, right?" A few giggles escaped from Tarathorn, while Vincent started to laugh loudly.

Finally, Tarathorn said, "Fits you well, Killer. And you do fit the Bubba stereotype with your looks."

"But I like being Killer Parakeet!" grumbled Killer. "Bubba Parakeet just doesn't do me justice!"

Looking over Killer, Vincent said, "Well, there are enough weirdoes who take on funny names for Killer Parakeet to work."

Later that day, after Ilithara had been poring over the notes that Clawstaff and Tanilthara had given her, Rusty began to whine softly. He pawed at the refrigerator before opening it, only to find tofu, vegetables, and a small amount of meat, mostly ground venison and some fish. Killer lay on the sofa, absently watching the television and rubbing his belly. "Hey Russ, is there any real food in there?" he called out to the mutt.

"Well, there's some deer and fish and that squishy white tofu stuff Imladrien likes." Just then, the TV flashed to a commercial. Two men were sitting at a table with a red and white striped box filled with golden-brown lumps. They both had plates with fried potato wedges and baked beans and were removing the dumplings from the box one at a time, dipping them into a red sauce before biting into them to reveal white meat. "Get yourself some KFC boneless buffalo wings!" spoke an unseen voice in the television. "Available only for a limited time!"

With that, Killer shouted to both Ilithara, who was also looking in the refrigerator, and Rusty, who was still whining, "Hey, let's get some buffalo wings, they're not related to me at all! They're those big dumb cow-like beasts that Kestrel and those other Terrians used

to talk about!”

Ilithara said, “Let me make sure.” With that, she closed the refrigerator door and went over to a nearby computer and typed in the word “Buffalo”. An image of a large, shaggy four-legged beast appeared on the screen. “Yup, should be ok for you. Plus it’ll give us a chance to explore a bit and maybe even try a car. I’ve been wanting to drive one for a while, how hard could it be compared to activating lost artifacts? After all, they did leave their keys with us here.” She held up a small set of keys, including one with a larger base with a stylized H and three buttons on it. “If I remember what Kestrel told me, this one is it!” she said, holding up the large key.

“Killer, I’m not so sure about this, maybe we should get Imladrien or Tinúvion. Remember that time Ilithara took us to what she was sure was a temple, that one with the golden arches, only to find out it was a place that served fried food that was great going in but awful coming out.” Rusty let out a small groan and rolled his eyes at both Killer and Ilithara.

“Rusty, don’t worry, I studied up based on that last visit with Kestrel,” she reassured the dog, patting him on the head. For some reason, Rusty still had a deeply sinking feeling in his stomach. It wasn’t exactly easy for all three hundred pounds of Killer to fit into the passenger seat of the small blue Honda Civic that Tarathorn and Vincent had parked near the trailer the trio stayed in. Rusty didn’t feel any better in the back seat, but at least he was relieved to know that at least he could stretch out a bit. Only Ilithara seemed to be comfortable and after reading the manual in the car for a moment, she inserted the key into the ignition and turned. The car rumbled and shook at first, making Rusty whine for a moment. “It’ll be ok,” said Ilithara. Then she handed the manual to Killer. “Let me know if anything goes wrong.”

Ilithara then squeezed the button and pulled the transmission from park to reverse. The car began to move ever so slowly backwards and then she pressed her foot on the larger of the two pedals beneath her, stopping the car. Realizing that it was the brake, she then put her foot on the other pedal with the same force, sending the car backwards into some saw palmetto bushes. “Uhh, try the D,” said Killer, fumbling with the book.

She adjusted the transmission to the D and then stepped onto the gas pedal, this time more gently. The car moved forward, lurching a bit thanks to Ilithara’s irregular foot motion until she found a balance between intense acceleration and deceleration. “Ok, think I got it. The rest should be easy,” declared Ilithara cheerfully, steering the car onto the bumpy road. The seat-belt light then lit and beeped. She looked around and pulled the seat-belt down onto herself, inserting it into the buckle. “I remember something about Kestrel

telling me how to do it." The chest strap was across her front while the lap portion was over her lap. "Killer, do the same." Killer pulled the belt only to find that it barely reached over his copious paunch. He tugged frantically at the belt, dropping the manual at his feet. "It won't reach!" he groaned.

"Try pulling it slowly." Rusty let out a little whine before staring out the window. The mutt prayed that Ilithara wouldn't get them killed while attempting to drive this strange device. Nausea began to overwhelm the dog and in desperation, he put a paw on a button on the door near the window. The window opened and he stuck his head out, throwing up and feeling greatly relieved.

Considering the wolf-mutt's advice, Killer relaxed his tugging and let the seatbelt return into the device before pulling it slowly. This time, he was able to get it to reach around him comfortably before Ilithara helped him insert the buckle into the appropriate location. "Ok, hold on, here we go. Time for some buffalo wings at KFC!"

While the car lurched about on the road, several on-lookers stared about, wondering what was wrong with the driver. "Watch it asshole!" cried out a scruffy man driving a patchy blue pick-up truck that emitted sparks everywhere. Ilithara had nearly collided into him and only her quick reflexes with the brakes saved them from a near-accident. "In case they ain't got them in Africa or wherever you're from, a stop sign means stop!" With that, he drove off in a huff.

"Killer, could you look up things like where to stop and stuff?" asked Ilithara, now making sure that there weren't other drivers about to crash into her.

"We're gonna be in deep dookie." The mutt whined yet again.

"Uhh, red lights, stop signs, at least if I read this right,"

replied Killer. Then turning to his canine companion, he said,

"Russ, you got me here, we'll be ok!" All Rusty could do was gulp and stick his head out of the window.

An hour and several wrong turns later, the trio finally spotted the red and white sign with the letters "KFC" on it. Cautiously, she looked around for somewhere to park the car. With some fumbling around and horrified onlookers, she finally was able to park her car into a wide stall with blue lines surrounding it. "Ok, safe to come out, I guess," she said, pushing down on the brake, engaging the parking brakes and turning the key to turn the car off.

Woozily, Killer stepped out of the car with Rusty, who staggered from nausea for a moment. The warm, damp air didn't help the mutt's mood, but exiting the car did. "I'm not going in there." Rusty pointed his nose towards a sign that read: NO DOGS ALLOWED. "You and Ilithara can cause all the trouble you want, but I'm gonna let my stomach settle. Just bring me back something good like potatoes,

buffalo wings, and whatever those cheesy things Kestrel used to cook were.”

”Ok, but you’re gonna miss on some fun and yummys,” said Killer, petting the wolf-mutt before sauntering in with Ilithara alongside him. Several people glanced over to the heavy-set man and smiled, amused at the rapport between him and Rusty.

More eyes focused on Ilithara, and as she noticed, most of the eyes were from males. She merely smiled back at them before following Killer into the restaurant. Some of the men whistled at her, leading to one heavy-set balding man in a greasy tank top being hit over the head with a large purse by his strong, matronly wife before she dragged him by his shirt back to the car. ”You ain’t gettin’ any of that,” said the woman. ”We ain’t puttin’ no nigger genes in our line and you sure ain’t gonna be messin’ with anyone but me!” Once in the air-conditioned restaurant, Killer plopped himself down onto a nearby table. ”They do it like at the inns and taverns, right?” he whispered to Ilithara.

Looking around, she noticed people standing in line and ordering their food one at a time. ”You stay here and stay out of trouble, I’ll order the food and then we can feast,” she said. Then she stood in line behind a very muscular woman with shoulder-length blonde hair that was tied in a neat braid. As soon as she got into line, a wiry man with glasses, short black hair, and scruffy facial hair stood behind her.

After a handful of iterations of ”What would you like?” followed by whatever the person ordered and then followed with a ”Is that for here or to go?” and an exchange of money and trays of food, it was Ilithara’s turn. She looked up at the menu above and at the pictures, thinking quickly.

Finally she answered the cashier’s questions as they came up. She hoped that Killer would like her choice of side dishes. ”I’d like the thirty piece boneless buffalo wing bucket with potato wedges, mashed potatoes, baked beans, and macaroni and cheese, all super-sized,” she said confidently. It was something she remembered seeing on the television before and with Rusty wanting the leftovers, it would probably be a good idea.

”For here or to go?” asked the pimply-faced teenaged boy who couldn’t help but look at her. ”And would you like drinks with that?” he added, trying to not stare at the exotic customer.

”Here. Yes, two large drinks,” she replied, smiling. The boy then placed two large plastic cups with the red and white KFC logo on them onto the tray.

”Drinks are over there,” he said, pointing to the soda fountain near where Killer sat. She glanced back, noting that Killer was actually behaving himself and breathed a sigh of relief. ”By the way, nice hair color, what kind of dye did you use for that?”

Thinking quickly again, she replied, "Lab accident plus light hair runs in the family." Her stomach turned slightly, realizing that her illusion wasn't holding up as well as she hoped. As long as Killer didn't return to parakeet form, she was fine. After all, a dark-skinned woman with silver hair and bright green eyes was an attention-grabber, but not as much as a gigantic parrot! Her food arrived almost instantly and she walked back to where Killer was sitting.

As soon as he saw the red and white paper bucket that Ilithara brought, he let out a cheerful whoop and opened it up. "I'll get our drinks," she said, going over to the soda fountain. She looked at her choices. Mountain Dew. Pepsi. Root beer. Sprite. Iced tea, both sweetened and unsweetened. She also saw a container of ice and put some into each cup before deciding. She thought to herself, "I better get Killer the root beer, I'll get myself some Mountain Dew." The Mountain Dew was a fluorescent yellowish green liquid that fizzed, while the root beer was a deep, rich brown.

"Darn, should've gone with the root beer, but maybe this Mountain Dew will be good. Dew from the mountains should be healthy." She returned to the table, where Killer had already torn into the potatoes and boneless wings. "Buffalo is good!" he exclaimed cheerfully, also scooping up large helpings of beans, macaroni and cheese and mashed potatoes. "So yummy!" he said between bites. Then he took a swig of the root beer. "Hmm, kinda sweet but not bad!" he declared. "A really unique beer!"

Ilithara quickly decided that the food was good after a forkful of the various items she ordered. On the other hand, the sweet, fizzy concoction known as Mountain Dew didn't quite appeal to her. It was just too sweet for her and there was just something weird that made her feel a bit jittery. Wondering if this was a Terrian specialty that they enjoyed, she continued to eat, making sure Killer didn't accidentally spear her with a fork while enjoying the macaroni and cheese or the baked beans. The biscuits that came with the meal were also tasty in both her mind and Killer's mind. "Ya know, I can see why Kestrel came to us built like a dwarf warrior. This food is just so good!" she said.

"Buffalo and sweet root beer, that's some good stuff!" said Killer yet again, burping loudly.

The wiry, dark-haired man with glasses, who sat at the next table and a book titled "Forest Mensuration Techniques and Theory", turned to Killer and Ilithara. "Very tender and tasty chicken, isn't it?" commented the man with a heavy accent that reminded Ilithara of the accent many of the hill folk in the northern part of Tuonela had. It was also similar to the one that Kestrel's family had. Combined with the dark, slightly slanted almond-shaped eyes and the relatively flat nose and black hair, she was convinced that he was

probably of similar, if not the same, roots as Kestrel, who identified herself as Korean and Japanese.

"Chicken?" asked Ilithara incredulously. She could see Killer's face turning bright red, recalling all the incidents of poultry and fowl being served to him at taverns and inns while he was in parakeet form. Killer was obviously struggling to restrain himself and he continued to eat the potatoes and pasta noisily, as if to screen things out of his mind. "I thought it was buffalo."

"Funny one. They're called buffalo because they're from Buffalo, New York," he said, laughing a bit, thinking that Ilithara was just joking around. "But they are pure chicken."

Suddenly, Killer spat out the buffalo wing and stood up. He roared in fury, "What? I've been lied to?! I ate my thousandth cousin thinking it was some big dumb beast of burden? Liars!" With that, he overturned the table, sending food everywhere, while the wiry man ran in terror and called for help. Killer then grabbed a chair and whirled about, inadvertently knocking Ilithara down. At that moment, the people watching the huge man throwing a temper tantrum witnessed a sudden transformation from the stereotyped "Bubba" to a gigantic turquoise-feathered parakeet.

"You idiot! You just blew your cover and maybe Ilithara's too! And now you've cost me a tasty meal!" Rusty charged in through the door, heedless of the commotion he was going to cause and tried to knock the giant parakeet down to stop him from causing further damage. In the meantime, several uniformed police officers also ran in, pointing their guns straight at Killer. Ilithara groaned in pain at the sudden headache Killer inadvertently inflicted on her before seeing the police aiming their guns at him.

"Madam, are you all right? Did this monster try to assault you?" asked one of the policemen, a muscular man with a large, droopy brown moustache that reminded her of a Knight of Arnor.

Thinking quickly again, Ilithara staggered up and replied, "No, he just threw a tantrum. I've got the situation under control."

In the meanwhile, Rusty was salvaging as much of the spilled food as possible, finishing off the last of the beans, potatoes and the pasta, knowing that Killer would throw a fit if he saw him eating chicken. He also slurped out the last of the drinks in both Killer's and Ilithara's cups. The brown liquid in Killer's cup tasted good to him, albeit sweet, while the bright yellow-green liquid in Ilithara's cup made the wolf mutt feel sick to the stomach. "Killer, next time, we confirm with a real Terrian. I told ya Ilithara sometimes lacks a bit of common sense. How else ya explain that incident at the Tindarn-Niniel or that time she nearly got ya executed by those Hin-Iril priests or the time she accidentally activated that crystal that took us to that demon's lair?"

"You do realize that he can be taken in for assault and disrupting

the peace, right?’ said the policeman, confused at Ilithara and Killer.

With a quick gesture of her hand and a disarming smile to the police and a handful of witnesses, including the wiry man who mentioned chicken, she said, ”Don’t worry, it’s all right. I’ll make sure I pay for the damage and it won’t happen again.” A small wisp of violet light left her hand, surrounding everyone in the restaurant and slowly, the crowd stepped back calmly. Ilithara continued to focus, hoping that her concentration would hold and that she’d buy them enough time to at least get away. Digging through her pockets, she pulled out her wallet and looked for money. Unsure of what would be appropriate, she removed five hundred dollar bills and placed it on a clean table that wasn’t over-turned during Killer’s outburst. Hopefully Vincent and Tarathorn would understand! Killer’s parakeet form also disappeared, shifting to the appearance of a heavy-set toddler, effectively a miniature version of the huge man he was coming in.

The lead police officer then pushed a button on a device at his hip, pulled it closer to his face, and said, ”All clear. Incident has been resolved peacefully.” The device beeped a handful of times before static-like noise filled the room.

With the crowd calmed down, Ilithara led Killer and Rusty out and into the car. ”Sorry about that, never thought there would be a place called Buffalo that those things were named after,” she said to Killer.

”Still they’re liars!” grumbled Killer, crossing his arms and pouting. ”At least they had good beans and potatoes and cheese noodles and sweet beer! Might come back again and just not order chicken!” he added on a more cheerful note. Rusty merely whined in the back of the car, knowing Ilithara’s driving was going to make him regret drinking that brightly colored drink she got.

As if that weren’t enough, there was a small note written on the windshield of the car. She opened it up and read it. ”Parking violation, four hundred dollars.” Then it hit. Hard. She felt an urgent sense of fullness in her bladder and her vision began to blur and shift randomly, making her feel dizzy and nauseous. Rusty also sniffed around and whined before making sick gagging noises out of the open window.

”I have to pee! Much more and I’m just gonna go here!”

Killer merely burped contentedly before saying, ”That was good except for the chicken! Can’t they label things right? Hey, lemme try that Mountain Dew drink!”

”Killer, no!” groaned Ilithara, slapping the parrot but too late. He downed the entire cup of Mountain Dew and continued to burp noxiously. Then the smell of rotten eggs overwhelmed the car and all Ilithara could do to not cause any more trouble was to open the

window and whisper an airy incantation to clear the air.

Vincent paced about in frustration after Ilithara finished talking about her day in town. "At least you two didn't get arrested, but next time, be a bit more careful. And thank you for not totalling the car, even if you did get that big parking ticket and that warning! You could've been arrested for driving without a license or worse yet, a fake license! Don't park if you see blue lines with the wheelchair symbol in it, it's for handicapped! Even if Killer could qualify with his little pea-brain," he sighed, relieved that at least Ilithara managed to drive the car well enough to not have anything worse than a few extra scratches from scraping against the curb. "And Killer, you might just want to stick with what REAL parakeets eat like seeds and vegetables and fruits!"

"But I wanted some buffalo wings or strips like Kestrel used to make with real buffalo or cow!!" whined Killer, leaning back on the reclining chair, enjoying the fact that he didn't have a tail to worry about. He was still in human form, although he could tell that Ilithara needed a break from maintaining the enchantment. She had returned him to his "adult" man size after they returned to the Institute.

Sitting next to Vincent on the couch, Tarathorn said, "Well, Killer, next time just ask and we'll find something for you. Or there's plenty of non-bird stuff in our place like fish, pork, beef, tofu, and vegetables." She rubbed the back of Vincent's neck, knowing he was often sore there, especially when riled up. Killer's face scrunched up at the mention of tofu.

Laughing, Ilithara said, "Well, just a few more days I think then we can get out of here. Oh, any recommendations for pizza?"

Both Tarathorn and Vincent looked at each other, then at their guests, especially Killer, who had the remote control to the television in his hand and was flipping channels randomly if he wasn't playing with the volume. Killer suddenly stopped playing with the remote and his eyes fixated on the commercial. "Pepperoni, sausage, ham, double cheese, a thick cheesy crust, garlic sauce, and no nonsense! Come by Gorilla Pizza and see what real man food is all about!" spoke the unseen voice on the television as close-ups of a large slice of pizza with oozing mozzarella cheese and plenty of meat mesmerized Killer.

"Pizza doesn't use bird products, I hope," grumbled Killer, drooling. "At least when Kestrel made it, she never used bird product!"

"Well, they do occasionally put in chicken or turkey for their pepperoni and sausage, but ham is almost always pig unless they say it's turkey ham. Maybe if you got ground beef, ham, and anchovies on your pizza, you'd be safe," suggested Tarathorn.

In a loud, booming voice, Killer roared, "What's with all the eating of my kin?! I don't eat monkeys and apes, at least, not knowingly! If it's safe, let's get some pizza here, I want some grub!"

Vincent and Tarathorn both hoped that Ilithara would get the spell ready soon because they weren't sure if they wanted to deal with Killer's appetite much longer. His feather dust was also so bad that they had to vacuum the place daily just to even make the place remotely tolerable. "Killer, this time, we'll have the pizza delivered here," sighed Vincent, accepting that Killer and Ilithara were more of a liability away from home.

"Yay!" said Killer, his voice returning to a squawk as Ilithara's focus shifted away from maintaining the shape-shifting spell.

"And Killer, I'm gonna leave you as a parakeet until we go to town again," said Ilithara, shaking her head. "I'm not like Mom or Dad."