

Bottomfeeder: The Last Dog and Pony Show (AIRspace Mix)

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April, 2007. The Dog and Pony Show was a few days away. It was the biggest animal role-playing event of the year, and my girlfriend Vash wanted me to see her as a pony. Even though her primary pony trainer and other lover Dietrich wasn't going to be there, it didn't feel safe. But it was rare and wonderful thing when Vash wanted me around, so I couldn't say no.

I asked her what I would do at the event, and Vash replied: You can be one of the humans who grooms me and feeds me carrots."

I winced. No. No, no, no. That was so distant. I needed to be more involved, to be on her level, to participate, to not be just another anonymous visitor at the petting zoo.

All the same, a million questions went through my mind, and most of them came out of my mouth: "What kind of carrots?" "Pre-packaged baby carrots, or regular ones cut into chunks?" "How often?" "How close could I get?" "Would there be, like, a pen or something?" "Will it cost extra for me as a human?" "And what should I wear?" And and and--

Vash reply to each question was: "I don't know, Sherilyn. I've never gone before."

She spoke in plain English and without metaphor, yet I didn't grasp her point: *this was new for her*. Not just The Dog and Pony Show, but being a pony in public. According to my infallible imagination, she'd been doing nothing *but* pony play with Dietrich for the last six months, both in private and in public amongst Dietrich's friends,

all of whom envied Dietrich for scoring as wonderful a ponygirl as Vash. I needed to prove my worthiness as an animal play partner, or even just as Vash's primary partner beyond my current vestigial status. I was sure she already had the whole weekend mapped out. I just wanted to know where I fit in, if I fit in at all.

After another barrage of questions from me, Vash said: "Do you know what's happening, Sherilyn? You have Little Sister Syndrome. That's when the big sister discovers something new, and the little sister is all 'Oooh! Oooh! What is that? I wanna do it too!'"

I flashed on all the times I'd wanted to join my older brothers in whatever they were doing, but they didn't have their youngest sibling around. It hadn't happened for decades, but...ouch. And I knew Vash wasn't wrong, either.

I said: "I'm sorry. I just won't go. It doesn't feel right."

Sounding somewhat reluctant, Vash said: "Well, maybe you can be a pony."

I'd been waiting months for her to say that, to invite me in.

The two obvious practical issues were that I had no experience as a pony—however little Vash may have had, I still had less—and that I would need a trainer. She said her friend Abby was going to already going to have her hands full with Vash, and there just wasn't time for me to start from scratch with someone else. So, it had to be an animal which wouldn't require a trainer, one which by its nature was solitary...

...like a cat! Of course! Though I would never tell this to the the pony-obsessed Vash for fear of further alienating her from me, I was indifferent to all things equestrian. Maybe it was because I was socialized male and missed out on whatever elements of

female childhood so often result in the horse fixation. Instead, I was a cat person in the classic sense of the word. So, yes. I'd be a cat.

I started asked her questions again, this time about being a cat. Vash grew silent.

According to urban legend, The Inuit have identified dozens of different kinds of snow. I was developing a similar catalog for different kinds of silence. This silence meant Vash didn't want to say anything which might be taken the wrong way. Or, worse, the right way. It translated as: *stop. just stop before I change my mind about the whole thing.* So I did.

Vash and I arrived at the club early on Saturday afternoon for The Dog and Pony Show's orientation classes. They were long, but informative. The gist was that when someone was in animal mode, you treat them as that animal. That made perfect sense to me, because as a transsexual it's what I ask of the world on a daily basis. *um, hi. here's my deal: i identify and (hopefully) present as female, so i'd appreciate it you'd treat me as female. plzkthxbai!*

The concept of the totem animal was discussed: the specific animal the person feels closest toward, an affinity for, what they have inside them. Mine, of course, was a cat. Nothing else came close. I considered declaring it to be a pony in hopes of getting closer to Vash—*see? see how much we still have in common? play with me, too!*—but that would be dishonest. Besides, ponies were discouraged from being alone, so I'd need a human. And I didn't have a human. Even as a human, I didn't really have a human.

Even though it's usually found in sexually charged contexts, animal role-play tends to be rather chaste, focusing more on fantasy and make-believe than anything sexual.

The animal may get petted, referred to as “scratches,” but for all intents and purposes the bestiality taboo remains intact.

Vash and I had been sitting together all day long. Before one of the last classes started, she got up to use the restroom. When she was done, she sat down in the first seat she could find on the far side of the room from me. Which was practical, understandable and reasonable.

It was also painful. At first, I couldn’t concentrate, and I couldn’t hear the instructor speaking. I couldn’t hear anything at all over the sound of my heart breaking.

We were asked to think of what elements of our personality were shared by our totem animal. *Attention-starved yet aloof, slutty yet finicky, skittish, fiercely loyal yet ultimately alone.* Yeah, sounded like a cat. Sounded like me.

That evening over dinner, I barraged Vash with questions again. “So...do we talk to each other? I mean, I know animals don’t talk, but maybe it can be like in movies where they talk to each other but not to humans? Because it seems to me that animals would have a common dialect, a ‘pidgin’ if you want to get strictly linguistic about it, and I think we should in this case, one that transcends species, and—“ Vash was just looking at me impassively.

Then she said: “Sherilyn, you’re doing it again.”

Realizing the answer a moment too late, I asked: “Doing what? ...oh! Oh. Right. Little Sister Syndrome. Okay. You’re right. Sorry.” It hurt, but I couldn’t deny it at this point, either. I *was* the tag-along, the outsider. The little sister.

But I was in it for the long haul, and I wasn't backing out. I just wouldn't ask any more questions. Much like answering truthfully, asking questions got me into trouble. Just be, watch, observe, lurk. And when nobody's looking, participate in the margins.

We went to Abby's place to get ready. Abby focused on getting Vash together, so I was left up to my own devices. It helped that my costume consisted of my street clothes plus a pair of kitty ears and a tail.

Listening to Abby and Vash talk in the other room, I learned that Vash's pony name—which had been Darling One when she was playing with Dietrich—was now Pepper.

Nobody asked, but my cat name was Ezri.

The Dog and Pony Show was in full swing when we arrived at the club. Finding a quiet place to meditate and get in touch with my feline brain as recommended was not an option, so, into the breach: I got down on all fours, and stopped speaking English. Going sub-verbal, they called it. Meows and hisses and purrs and other such sounds. It was like a switch was flipped.

There are other animals everywhere, barking and meowing and neighing in languages I don't recognize. Sometimes an animal howls, and the rest of us harmonize in a beautiful, bestial echo.

Abby leads Pepper towards the ring, a section cordoned off with a rope fence. Cats don't herd, but they do often follow. If they want to. And Ezri wants to follow the pony.

She's very fond of Pepper. Does Pepper know it? Could she return it if she did?

Ezri doesn't know, and though Ezri is sometimes brave she's also skittish by nature. She doesn't get too close to Pepper. If she goes too far into where she doesn't belong, she might get yelled at, and that hurts.

The Parade of Pets begins. In keeping with the faux-egalitarian ideals of this upper echelon of San Francisco sex culture, it is an exhibition, not a competition. There is no wagering, and there are no awards or ribbons. In anticipation of this, Vash made ribbons for Abby and Pepper, for Best Trainer and Best Pony. Ezri doesn't get a ribbon. Cats don't get ribbons.

Other animals are announced and paraded, and finally us. I can't tell for sure, I can't see in the ring well and there are so many other sounds and sights to take in, but I don't think anyone else brings cats into the Parade.

I was there because Abby had called for me to follow her, and with everything else going on she was still my human, but otherwise, I'm not sure what we're doing, why all the people are looking at us. It seems to have something to do with Pepper, but I don't know what. People always make a big fuss about her.

There are other cats when we exit, new and different cats, some I recognize from other bodies and some not. We're tactile, rubbing up against each other and nuzzling and licking whether we know each other or not, and it's nice.

Humans sometimes feed us by hand. Pez and other small things. Scratches on the head as we chew.

I talk a lot. Only cat, never human. My human brain thinks of jokes, always running like it is, and sometimes I meow in appropriate tones—*mrrrowr? mrrrowr mrrrowr, mrrrowr. mrrrowr!*--but I couldn't speak human.

I could understand human, but then again, not so much. Abby was carrying a basket, and she places it on the ground, saying she hopes the kitty will watch it.

Ezri watches the basket for a few moments before she realizes she doesn't *really* understand human, certainly nothing as complex as whatever Abby just said, and with so much external stimuli she can't pick up on *everything*...

...and Abby and Pepper are gone now. No, no, Ezri can't be left alone, not here, not now--

I chase after after them, crying (*mrrowr? mrrowr!*). Since the Parade is over, Abby has taken Pepper into the ring to run and jump. Ezri goes up to the fence and watches from a respectful distance.

Abby sees me watching and invites me in. Yay! I scramble through the fence and go to Pepper's side. I nuzzle against her, meow, then back away. A little is enough.

When Pepper rests, Ezri nuzzles her leg. Pepper leans over and rests her hooves on Ezri's back. Pepper's horseshoes are a gift from Dietrich and engraved with the words DARLING ONE, but that's all right. It still feels wonderful. Does this mean that Pepper likes her, Ezri wonders, or is she just a place for Pepper to put her hooves? Is this the sign? Ezri isn't sure she can trust it. She doesn't want to be wrong and get in trouble.

Abby tells Ezri she's taking Pepper downstairs. Oh. Okay. Ezri's heart sinks a little. So that's that.

Abby then says: "Would the kitty like to come along?"

Oh yes yes yes thank you mom—

It's a usual Saturday night in the Dungeon, with a "critter theme" to acknowledge the quasi-bestial madness happening upstairs. It's all damned spooky to Ezri, humans doing scary things to each other.

They stop at an empty table. Abby moves a chair in front of it and tells Ezri to get up. Ezri lumbers onto the table.

She watches as Abby brushes Pepper, her mane, her hooves, all over. Then Abby massages Ezri's paws, which feels wonderful. Abby tells Pepper what a great kitty Ezri is, how surprised she is, that Ezri's better than most new kitties. *yay! thanks, mom!*

Abby says she's going upstairs for a few minutes, and for the pony and cat to wait here for her. Okay.

Ezri's still on the table, and Pepper is standing next to it. Pepper nudges Ezri back a little, then climbs onto the table. There's more than enough room for the both.

Pepper moves in even closer, and they nuzzle. Pepper looks into Ezri's eyes and smiles. It's like a glow on the Eastern horizon at the end of a long autumn night. Pepper kisses Ezri, and both my cat and human hearts feel like they're going to burst.

Abby returns, nonplussed that Pepper is on the table with Ezri. She leads Pepper and Ezri back upstairs to the ring, and runs Pepper in laps.

I slink away and make myself comfortable. It's been an exhausting night. I watch Pepper and Abby do their final laps and jumps for the evening. When they're done, Abby brings Pepper over. I nuzzle Pepper's legs. Pepper leans over and rests her horseshoes on Ezri's back, Ezri purring and meowing, constantly. Like the kiss downstairs, this is the closeness I'd been craving, what I'd been hoping to find when I crossed over.

Abby says it's getting to be about time to call it a night. Pepper agrees, but Ezri is not so sure. She doesn't want to go away, not yet. The problem with immersion is that when it ends, it gets taken away and never comes back.

Vash returned with me to my apartment that night. As she curled up next to me in bed and fell asleep, I felt more hopeful than I'd been in months.

We were going to make it.



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