

Words of Love, Soft and Tender

By Mark Rudolph, illustration by Cathy Buburuz

4 December 2000

Pienskar had spread his welcome spoor so thinly that I blundered into his keep-outs and go-aways at least four times, burning my common tongue on his spiced words. I cursed him -- he could be such a miser -- as I swung through his peskana trees and hopped from bough to bough, licking the thick, claw-like leaves as I went. Once, I almost crouched down on all six of my hands and spewed a come-get-me, but I was afraid it would be midday before my spoor reached him, too late for the council meeting he had scheduled.

I hated council meetings. Most of the time, we bickered about territorial boundaries between other troupe members or argued over policies handed down by the upper council. Rarely did anything come of it. But I didn't have a choice; everyone had to serve at least one term, and I was glad mine was almost over. Until now, I hadn't been assigned anything too troublesome, which was the way I liked it.

"Lose your way, Epheska?" A splash of silver-green fur dangled by two sky-arms in front of me.

Startled, I snorted an orange oh! from my common mouth and reached for a limb with my sky-arms. Pienskar laughed at me, and the hair on my back bristled.

"You've given me blisters, Pienskar," I said and stretched open my common mouth with my out-fingers, keeping my private mouth shut.

He closed one yellow eye, and peered into my mouth with his other, clicking his common tongue in mock concern.

"If you came to see me more often, you wouldn't have to follow my welcomes. You'd know the way." He scratched his fat, gray stomach with his two down-arms, his words flitting around his stubby head.

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"Where to?" I said curtly.

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"There." He pointed a down-hand five

drops and seven swings away where two council members clung to a limb like unripened beelia fruit. They waited for his signal to drop to a temporary nest that he had built. "Everyone's arrived but you."

He swung into the air, spit a ready-made chute from his neck pouch, and floated down to the nest.

He can waste thread on that, but he can't waste his spoor on a decent welcome, I thought.

I took a more conventional route, from limb to limb, purposely climbing slower than usual to irritate him.

"Finally decided to join us, Epheska," Benestre said and gave the limb we were sharing a sharp jerk.

I ignored the icy taste of his sarcasm.

"Everybody's here now," said Garskein, "Let's get this started as quickly as possible." Two black eyeless heads, one over each of her shoulders, puffed out green feed-me spoors. Garskein should have left her babies at home --her neck pouch must ache from the weight --but no one could tell her anything. Usually, a parent ate a first brood before their mouths opened. I did.

"Drop," said Pienskar, and we dropped.

I thought we all landed well, until Garskein squeaked and skittered to the edge. She had lost a baby when she hit. It had fallen from her pouch and bounced out of the nest. She leaned over the edge,

keening like a wounded mersata bird. There was no use looking for it: the ten-drop fall would have surely killed it.

"So sorry," I said, thinking what a spectacle she was making of herself. "But you still have one left."

"What a waste," Benestre muttered, "Food for the night creepers. And it looked so tasty."

"Hush." Pienskar scooped up a handful of dried peskana leaves and threw them at Benestre. "Have a little compassion."

"I'm okay." Garskein lumbered back to the group. "It's just that all my hard work . . ."

"I understand," I said, trying to be nice. I scratched her stomach and petted

her remaining baby. It cried out for food again, and for a moment, I imagined snatching it from her and swinging away. She didn't deserve a baby.

"Everyone? Please?" Pienskar said. "We need to make a decision about the new ground walkers. They keep stumbling around and making a mess of things. And their spoor is polluting our territories--"

"I've seen one. And tasted it too." Benestre wrinkled his common mouth.

"Stupid creature. I tried to scare it away, but it just stood there, staring up at me as if it couldn't taste my spoor. Not even smart enough to climb a tree at night--"

"Really?" Garskein blew out a violet

streak of awe. She was easily impressed.

"Did it look dangerous?"

"About as dangerous as a dead garabuti."

Giggling, Garskein slapped Benestre on the back and wagged her private tongue at him. Benestre put his private mouth to her ear and rumbled deep in his chest. To my shock, I realized they were creating a private language together -- right in front of us.

This is no place for courtship, I thought. Noises like that would be a distraction. How rude of them.

"Enough, you two." Pienskar raised a sky-arm. "We need to stick to the agenda. First up, someone needs to

gather information about the walkers. Who hasn't had an assignment lately?"

I didn't need spirit dust to tell me where this meeting was headed. When it ended, I scurried up four climbs in the trees and picked at the mites in my fur, sulking and muttering to myself.

Much later, Pienskar crept up and squatted next to me. "Don't be this way, Epheska," he whispered in our private language. The sound of his voice wouldn't carry far in the trees, nor would it drift away like common speech. These words were meant for me alone. No one else would have understood them anyway.

"Talk common," I said, "This is no time for words of love." He knew what

power our shared words had over me, and I tightened my neck muscles, trying not to show it.

"But it feels good to talk this way again. It's been so long." He lowered his head and fluttered his pouch, a sign of his sincerity.

We used to eat sarinkal blossoms together --sliding out the stamens and dripping the yellow nectar on each other's private tongues. We had mated hundreds of days ago when my fur was greener and his hands softer, but only one brood came of it. My first brood, the one I ate. He had tried to mate with me a few times afterward, but I had lost interest in him.

"You knew I'd be chosen to study the

walkers. I'm a handful of days away from completing my term on the council and this happens. It isn't fair, Pienskar!" I blew a cloud of stinging spoor at him. His eyes watered, but he didn't wipe them away or return my attack. The shame of what I had done greased my common tongue.

"Who else has the patience to do it?" He switched to the common language. "Or the intelligence? If anyone can learn to understand them, you can." He turned both out-hands palms up and held them out.

"Please. Don't try to manipulate me." Though that was exactly what he had done, what he had done to everyone at the meeting. I couldn't help feeling he

was punishing me for the way I had rejected him long ago.

"You were the best choice. Everyone knew it." I shut my eyes and both mouths tightly. After a long while, I heard him climb down and swing away. Only then did I start for home.

For many days, I kept busy. I rubbed the floor of my nest with grubba oil, freshened up the peskana leaves, wove new webs for the snaring of mersata birds, and re-scented my trees with my spoor. Though I knew the importance of my assignment, I put it out of my mind, relying on the mundane and familiar to keep me occupied. When I sampled the common words floating on the wind, I spit them out before I could truly

understand them, refusing to listen to their questions.

I should have known better. If you keep pretending a rotten branch will hold, it will finally splinter in your hands.

One morning as I gathered moss from the sunless side of a peskana tree, I looked down and saw a walker blundering about on the ground, rattling dead leaves and snapping twigs. Dragging its nest behind it --though I saw no tether

--it seemed to be going nowhere, as if it couldn't understand my keep-outs. It was dull and slow, totally wrong, walking on its two down-arms and waving its two sky-arms uselessly.

Though I had heard descriptions of the walkers, I was amazed that it had no out-arms. I had been unable to picture it. The ground could be a dangerous place, and walkers did not sleep in the trees. How could it possibly live through the night?

I followed it for a number of swings, keeping up with it easily. Soon it stopped, disassembled its nest, which I thought odd, and built another nest from the pieces, rounder and smoother, covered with a silver silk that I had never seen. It planted three bare trees around the nest, dead limbless sticks taller than itself. Bored watching it do incomprehensible things, I headed home, but the memory of Pienskar's words lingered in my common mouth no matter

how many times I swallowed. Finally, I turned back.

Dangling five drops above its nest, I puffed a hello down, and even though it was in my territory, I decided to be polite and ask if I could join it. I received no answer. I asked again, aiming my spoor a little better. Still no answer. Of course, I thought, its common language may be different than ours. That's why it didn't understand my keep-outs. Or my hellos.

Benestre was right --it didn't seem dangerous at all. Actually, it seemed helpless: no claws that I could see and only one mouth so tiny I couldn't even imagine it having teeth. I realized there was only one way to get a closer look.

Because it was in my territory, I dropped into its nest without an invitation. I hit hard and screamed.

Its nest had been badly made, without any leaves to cushion my fall. My down-arms crumpled under me, and I bounced, spinning and sliding down the slick side. I fell to the ground, howling in pain with my private mouth, not caring who heard me. I knew I had sprained my down-arms, perhaps even broken one. I kept thinking it was all Pienskar's fault.

When I tried to stand, I howled again, this time in rage, and the walker lumbered over and pointed its sky-hands at me. It was so tall, at least twice my height, and so menacing that I cringed, but my anger and my embarrassment took

over. Because I could find no leaves, I grabbed handfuls of dirt and tossed them in the air, a sign of disgust. But the walker didn't move.

"Leave me alone!" I yelled. "Get away from me!" It threw something that struck me in the chest. I flopped on my back, and the world disappeared.

"Epheska, how's the assignment going?" Pienskar's words were almost a day old.

"I'm making progress," I said. "I'll give you an update at the next meeting." Kathleen must have noticed my colored words. He asked me what I was doing. I told him, "Nothing-ota."

Kathleen was the walker's name in our shared language: a name that twisted

my private tongue, but when I pronounced it right, it tasted sweet and light.

"Kathleen," I said.

He wasn't beautiful by any standard. His face was pale and almost hairless, his eyes brown and small. And he had a single mouth, a private one, and two fleshy holes where a common mouth should have been. When I gazed at him, I often wondered how I had come to love this ugly walker with long gray fur sprouting from the crown of his head.

"Eat-aka mersata night-oto?" I said and he nodded, which meant yes, he would like to have mersata bird for dinner.

Kathleen had won me over with

kindness: taking care of me and aiding me after my foolhardy drop into his nest. He protected me from the night creepers on the forest floor, soothed my fears with sounds like the ones a parent coos to a child and eased my worries with gentle pats. And as I healed, I realized he was doing more than making nonsense noises: he was talking to me, trying to create a private language with me.

At first I was repulsed, but with each sweet word he gave me, my revulsion lessened, until I began creating words too. It was a difficult task for both of us. We had no common language to build on, and Kathleen was deaf to many of the private sounds I knew. But we were determined. Because Kathleen was the

first to speak the words of love, "it" easily became "he" in my mind. Not until recently had I told Pienskar about Kathleen, but I hadn't told him everything. What would he say if he knew? What would the council say? I was afraid to think about it.

Though my sprained down-arms were still sore, I climbed into the trees, brought down a fresh catch from my webs, and divided it in half. Kathleen took his share and sealed it in a pouch. He couldn't eat any of the food that I brought him without doing that first. He had tried to explain, but the concept eluded me. This would be our last meal together. Kathleen was returning to his people and I was supposed to do the

same. I didn't want him to leave. We had so much more to learn about each other. I wanted to tell him I would never reject him, not the way I did Pienskar. I would wait for his return. But I didn't tell him. I was afraid to.

We crouched together quietly outside his nest, eating the rich flesh of the mersata, as the light fled through the trees. I still wasn't comfortable on the ground at night, and I crept closer to him, knowing he would keep me safe. Night creepers prowled just outside the circle of light Kathleen had named the

'perimeter'; they snuffled and scratched in the dirt, their four green eyes glowing in the shadows of the forest. Kathleen had said that I needn't

worry about them; the dead sticks held them at bay.

I leaned into him and he into me, and our shadows, one big and one small, merged on the ground.

Later, we crawled into his nest, lay down on his special sleeping mat, and spoke tender words to each other. He curled one sky-arm around me, and we fell asleep.

"You idiot!" Pienskar said. "We asked you to contact the walker, not fall in love with it! How could you touch it? It's so ugly!"

"What were you thinking?" Garskein waved her sky-arms at me. "You can't be serious! You can't have babies with it!"

"You don't understand!" I cried, my

words spurting from my common mouth.

"You weren't there! I was hurt and he was so sweet to me. He talked to me first--"

"He seduced you? Is that what you're saying?" Pienskar said, concern in his eyes.

"No excuse! No excuse at all!" Benestre crumpled a fistful of leaves, preparing to toss them at me.

I could never make them understand. I jumped, snagged a limb above me, and swung up and away. Pienskar called out with both his mouths, but I wouldn't answer him. I didn't glance down, too afraid to see the disappointment in his face.

Later, Pienskar found me where

Kathleen had made his nest, an empty place now. He had followed my spoor.

"Epheska, come back into the trees," he said. "Come up where's it safe. It'll be night soon."

"This is how he held me at night." I wrapped all my arms around me. "When the creepers were out, he made me feel safe."

"It isn't right for you to feel this way." He sighed. "I'm somehow responsible for it. Why didn't you tell me you were so lonely, so desperate to love someone? To love anyone who would love you back? Why choose him?" I stared up at Pienskar, wondering if he was right. Did I need someone so badly that anyone would do? If that were true,

why had I eaten my first brood and never tried to have another? It had been Pienskar's first brood too. But Pienskar was asking another question, though he might not have realized it. He was asking why didn't I love him instead.

"I don't know what to tell you," I said. I didn't know what to tell myself.

"Come up, please," he begged in our private language. "You'll die down there." So I climbed up and Pienskar took one of my out-arms and lead me back to my nest. He asked if I wanted him to stay until morning, but I told him, no, I could manage.

"I'll be all right," I said.

When I tasted a ground walker on the wind, I clapped my hands and danced

around my nest. It had to be Kathleen, returning after all this time. While he was away, I had spun webs the color of his gray hair and pinned them in the highest boughs. I had dreamed of him next to me, his smooth skin against my fur. I decided not to go to him; instead, I would let him come to me. Though Kathleen didn't know how to climb, I had scratched out the directions on the ground near his old nest, just in case he returned. Wanting to look my best, I cleaned and trimmed my nails --they had grown so long --and combed the snarls from my neck pouch. I laid out the sleeping mat, the one Kathleen had left me and I had saved for this occasion, and tacked the curled edges down with

my own silk. I wanted everything to be perfect.

I waited until late afternoon, so long the forest shadows grew dark, rays of sunlight turning into gold bars. I wondered if Kathleen had lost his way. His spoor tasted unfamiliar, but I dismissed it, believing it had been so long that my tongue didn't remember correctly.

Finally the scuffling below cued me to his presence, and I scrambled down to the ground, shouting his name with my private mouth. When I was close enough to see the red hair, I realized it wasn't Kathleen. I stopped, stunned to silence, my words frozen on my tongue.

It raised both of its sky-hands and

said, "Epheska? You-gaw Epheska?" It knew our language, mine and Kathleen's. He had given our language to another walker, shared something that was supposed to be ours alone. How could he? I thought. How could he have done such as thing?

I threw up my sky-arms and out-arms and shouted his name with my private mouth, though I knew he would never hear me. I shouted it one last time. I would never speak it again.

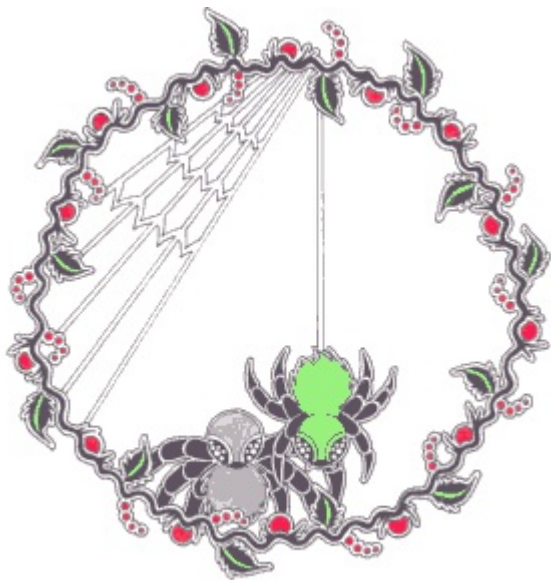
I didn't eat or sleep. I fouled my nest so badly that I had to move and build another. I left my webs unattended and the carcasses of birds drooped and rotted in the silk threads. I shredded the sleeping mat. If anyone had known how

neglectful I had become of my territory, they would have evicted me. I don't know how many days passed before I began to function again. It was like trying to climb a tree without bark or branches --each handhold won with tremendous effort, each small progress easily lost.

"The council has asked that you come to the next meeting. Do you think you can make it?" Pienskar's words were soft and tender, but I knew what he wanted. All the walkers were trying to talk to us in a private language, and Pienskar had figured out whose language it was.

I didn't respond. I couldn't. There are only so many falls a person can handle in this world, so many miscalculations

of distance and air current.



Perhaps to the walkers, private words are just words, spoken by everyone, given away like sarinkal seeds, but to me they are much more. Our words had

been crafted delicately, born from a place that I had thought Kathleen and I shared.

Now the taste of them dwells in the mouth of every walker, as if they had sampled my children, as if they had eaten the last of my babies. They shamble on the ground with my love flying from their tongues, turned bitter and empty from Kathleen's betrayal.

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