

Copycat

A Windward King Vignette

K.T. Ivanrest

No matter what lies Shara believed about himself, he was an incredible shapeshifter—but even he couldn't shift himself into two things at once.

At least Korith didn't think so.

But there were definitely two cats weighing down his legs this morning, their fluffy sides rising and falling gently with each quiet breath. Leave it to Shara to befriend an animal instead of a human.

"Made a friend, did you?" Korith asked, wiggling his legs.

The big orange cat lifted its head and gave him a look that promised death if he moved again. The skinny grey one twitched its stub of a tail and slept on.

Hm. Shara was not a death-by-cat sort of person, but he was known to bare his teeth and hiss when disturbed. Then again, he was also known to pretend he couldn't hear Korith's teasing . . .

"So, which one of you is Shara?" He jostled his legs enthusiastically this time.

Big Orange rose with an indignant yowl and leapt from the bed; Skinny sat up, stretched, and set to licking his paw as though he could groom away Korith's poor manners.

Hm.

Korith slid from bed with a yawn and planted his feet on the cold floor. The whole place was cold—the fire burned low, and the window was cracked open. Shara's work, of course—he hated enclosed spaces almost as much as he hated compliments. At least he hadn't left the door propped open all night. Again.

Korith had hardly finished lacing his knee brace when both cats simultaneously deigned to forgive him: Big Orange trotted across the room, Skinny hopped lightly from the bed, and both began winding themselves around his legs. With every step he took—or tried to take—toward the kitchen, the two cats followed, alternately brushing against him and weaving their way in front of him in some complicated cat-dance. It was a good thing he didn't need his cane today, though it might have been useful for shoving them out of his way.

“Do you want me to pet you, or are you trying to trip me?”

No answer. Obviously. Because they were cats. But even so . . .

“Really, Shara? Is this punishment for calling you furball yesterday?” It wasn't Korith's fault his new alvithi housemate made an exceptionally fluffy lynx. “Or for teasing you about the girl at the Crown and Raven? Or making you attend that party with me? Or . . .”

Hills, it was a long list, wasn't it?

He stopped walking at last and glanced between them, then folded his arms and smirked. “So it's a challenge, is it? Let's see . . . I guess right, you have to read one of those books I bought you and accept a compliment without telling me why you don't deserve it. I guess wrong, and I'll buy you as many sunspots as you can eat for a week. Deal?”

Two pairs of eyes stared up at him, unblinking.

“All right, then.”

First up: annoy Shara into revealing himself.

He padded to the kitchen and fumbled through what few dishes and supplies he owned, loudly lamenting his inability to find anything despite the fact that it was all right in front of him.

Nothing.

He heated water, brewed himself cloudberry tea, and made a show of adding an overflowing scoop of piko seeds to the cup. “Mmmmmm, delicious,” he muttered through the first sip, crunching the seeds loudly between his teeth.

Nothing.

He meandered back into the main room, discoursing about how he really needed to buy at least six more pillows this week, then about how it might be wise to add yet another lock to the door—and perhaps to the windows as well?

“We can’t be letting in too much air, after all, can we?” He grinned at both cats.

Big Orange flopped over on Korith’s feet; Skinny yawned and licked his tail.

“Well, how about this?” Sauntering to the little table by the fireplace where their half-finished game of malir was waiting, he lifted Shara’s unicorn, waggled it tauntingly at the cats, and moved it to the least-defensible position on the board. “Bad play, Shara. And, oops—” The magician clattered loudly as he moved it out of the way. “Even worse. Perhaps I’ll actually win a game? Let’s see . . .”

Several more horrible—and very illegal—moves, and then he dared to look at the cats. Neither was even watching.

Hills, Shara was good at this. Then again, he was so bent on being ignored as much as possible that perhaps he knew how to ignore others just as well.

Korith narrowed his eyes, examining each cat in turn. Shara would have been able to identify a disguised Korith in an instant by his scent and his movements. Korith had less to go on, especially after only three weeks, but he was an artist. He revelled in looking at people, in truly seeing them.

Cats couldn’t be much different, right?

Physically, Skinny resembled Shara more closely, especially with the lynx-like tail, and his faintly judgmental air fit Shara in those moments when he couldn’t wrap his mind around human behavior. Which was most of the time. Big Orange, however, had softer and more Shara-like eyes, and his desire for physical affection—

Oh! Korith dropped into his chair and tipped his head forward. "Who wants to chew on my hair?"

Surely Shara wouldn't be able to pass up a grooming opportunity.

Big Orange leapt into his lap, and Korith was about to crow triumphantly when a loud clatter announced that Skinny had discovered the straps hanging from his glider and was making very inappropriate use of them.

"Ah, no, don't—!" He shoved himself out of the chair, sending Big Orange diving onto the desk with a startled yowl. "Don't—" Dragging the glider out of the cat's reach, he whirled back to the desk. Shara would never have gone after one of Korith's prized possessions, which meant that Big Orange . . .

. . . was chewing on the corner of one of his recently finished portraits.

"Hey!"

Ears back, claws scraping across the desk, Big Orange flew to the ground and skittered into the kitchen, accompanied by a loud clatter. Glider still in hand, Korith darted after him—and nearly rolled his ankle on the broom handle now lying in the middle of the floor.

"Shara!" he burst out, seizing the counter as he pitched forward, unbalanced. A clack from the other room, then a thud, neither of which sounded at all good. "Shara, I order you to show yourself!"

Silence. The soft thwap of Big Orange's tail against the wall. And then—

"Show myself?"

Huffing in relief, Korith turned. "So you were Skinny after . . . ah . . ."

Shara stood in the doorway, his brow furrowed—and a skinny grey cat purring loudly in his arms.

Korith gaped, heat creeping up his neck. "So then . . ."

"Sorry. I always leave the window open when I fly out to pick up breakfast," Shara explained, bobbing his head as he and Skinny competed over who could rub against the

other more enthusiastically. “Sorry, I—oh, and you too?” He crouched as Big Orange came trotting up, then settled himself cross-legged on the floor so he could more easily pet them both. “Such beautiful ladies,” he cooed over two thundering sets of purrs.

Korith stared, laughter bubbling within him now that the chaos was past. All of this over an open window and—

“Wait, ladies?”

Shara peered up at him through a wall of furry bodies and listed his head the way he did when thinking. His eyes went wide, and he clapped a hand over his mouth and stifled something halfway between a laugh and a caw. “Did you think one of them was me?”

“Of course I did!” His face pulled into a grin. “I wasn’t exactly looking—”

He didn’t get any further—Shara was laughing too hard, harder than Korith had ever heard him laugh. In fact, he wasn’t sure he had ever heard his new roommate laugh. Whatever Shara was running from seemed to have left him with few reasons to do so.

“So,” Shara managed through his laughter, “you were yelling at them to shift back into me?”

Snickering, Korith rapped Shara over the head with the glider and eased himself to the floor as well. He might have been clueless about cats and alvithi, but he’d mastered laughing at himself. Big Orange bounded over and rubbed against him, and he grinned at Shara between her ears. “Wait till you hear the other dumb things I tried.”

