

The Right Bitch

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Sabre whooped with enthusiasm, barreling through the woods' thick undergrowth, his nose full of *magicsmell* and his ears full of Taliya's distant encouragement, with his brain too hot on trail to think. So hot he almost missed the answering trail cry to the south, a slightly clearer voice than his own and closing in fast. It made no sense; he didn't care. Not with the quarry so close, his sweaty, unwashed *humansmell* strong with forbidden magic.

But suddenly the trail doubled, adding more *humansmell* to the *magicsmell*, and Sabre understood. *Two smugglers*, joining forces, both being trailed.

Sabre called out, wild and strong. Confident.

The second dog sounded again, nearly in his ear, and charged onto his trail, cutting him off. He got a glimpse of flying black ears, smelled the blood of bramble-torn skin, and then saw nothing but dog butt, right in his face.

Bitch-butt.

Shiba, he realized instantly, checking his speed so he wouldn't plow right into her. *Shiba*, whom his linewoman mentioned far too often, and with far too much attention to the discriminating nature of her nose. And when *would* everyone forget about that vaunted critter episode?

She might have a nose, but she couldn't match his speed. "Oowh! Oowh!" he bellowed, demanding and impatient, finally—and rudely—shoving her aside to fly by at top speed.

Show-off speed.

The kind of speed to run him straight into trouble. Into—

Sabre yelped as a whip lashed across his head, popping a welt on one sensitive ear; he flung himself aside, yipping like a pup as the lash landed again. "Git on, you cur!" the man jeered, and Sabre tumbled

down, rolling aside, hearing Shiba gone wise and silent—in *retreat*—leaving him to—

"Watch out!" the other human cried, too late for his partner to respond to the black and silver blur heading his way. Shiba uttered not a sound as the lash fell across her back, but leapt up to grab the stout leather whip handle, as intent on it as on any trail-prey. Beyond her, the other human took flight again.

"Shiba—call!" commanded her lineman—not so far away, now—and Shiba barked *treed* for him, dropping the whip.

"Sabre! Call!" Taliya shouted as Sabre climbed to his feet and shook off, sending bits of leaves and dirt and grit flying. He managed a half-hearted bark and ruefully pawed his stinging ear.

Shiba made enough noise for both of them. He got his first good look at her, then, as the linemen approached from their separate directions. Beautiful, she was—well-muscled, long-limbed, a graceful neck and lovely arch to her tail. Where Sabre was heavily marked with black—his blueing so thick it looked mottled instead of ticked, his head and chest heavy and masculine—Shiba stood a sturdy but clean-lined bitch, her back and head glossy black, her ticking so perfectly distributed that it appeared silver-blue from even a short distance.

Sabre felt an immediate and intense dislike.

And she was the one standing on tree, backing the man against a stout oak, while Sabre stood spraddle-legged and dazed as the linemen arrived, more or less simultaneously. *She* wore bramble-guard, a leather chest plate and canvas body jacket. *She* probably hadn't even felt the whip.

Sabre gave a small sneeze of frustration and pawed his head again. He never wore bramble-guard . . . because he could never stop himself from chewing it to bits.

"There should be two," Taliya said breathlessly, leaving Shiba's man to handle the magic smuggler as she kicked the whip well out of reach and dropped to her knees beside Sabre. Her long, tawny braid fell over her shoulder to brush the top of his head. "There, now, son. Got you a good one, didn't he?"

Despite himself, desperately wishing Shiba's sharp brown gaze pointed elsewhere, Sabre whined in response. *Hurts*. And when Taliya soothed him, he wagged his tail in silly submissive little jerks and whined again. Couldn't help it. Never could, where Taliya was concerned.

Shiba looked away as though embarrassed for the both of them.

"Well, there's only the one," Shiba's man—Tallon, that was his name—said, sounding frustrated. "The other must've gotten away. Sons of bitches, taking a *whip* to him—"

Taliya looked up from Sabre, who'd managed to insinuate himself into her lap, even though she was kneeling and had no real lap of which to speak. "How'd you train her for that? These dogs don't have an aggressive hair on their bodies, not when it comes to people."

Tallon shook his head, still pensively looking off in the direction in which the smuggler had escaped. "Didn't train her. Ever since the critter-based magic smuggling ring last fall, she's been impossible to keep off dangling things—laundry, ropes, hair, you name it. She's got a real grudge against the ugly things—and you know the way their tails hang down when they're treed. I don't hang my socks out to dry where she can reach them anymore."

The other side had concocted their scheme knowing that the linehounds were trained off critter trail, and had used the critters to carry minor magics and amulets, hoping to confuse the hounds. Only pups took a second sniff at critter trail—and any adult dog caught chasing them was retired. It had nearly happened to Shiba, Sabre knew.

"They all hate the critters," Taliya said mildly, which was true enough—no polite linehound would even think their true name, but used only the nickname commonly applied by humans.

"Shiba more than most, these days." He looked after the escapee and shook his head. "*Damn.*"

Taliya nodded at Shiba. "Is she sound? Send her on."

Tallon shook his head. "We've near reached the border already. I won't send her into that alone."

But she would have gone. Even Sabre could see that. And he would have joined her. That's what they did, the linehounds—patrolled the border between Ours and Theirs, sniffing out magic smugglers who wanted to contaminate Ours *with* Theirs.

"Smart man," said the captive, derisive despite the newly applied restraints. "You be smarter, you'll give up on those damn curs right now. They do you no good, soon enough."

Tallon silenced the man with an intense look; Taliya swapped her appraisal from Shiba to her lineman, impressed. Sabre lifted his nose to the subtle scent of new magic, a strange, rich *magicsmell* he'd not encountered before. He couldn't sort it out.

He looked at Shiba, but she'd rediscovered the whip and snatched it up to administer a kill-the-rat death shake. The tolerant affection on Tallon's face gave Sabre a funny itchy feeling—except he couldn't quite figure out where the itch was, only that it was subtle and as invasive as a tick creeping across belly flesh.

Whipped. Embarrassed. Itchy.

More than a good linehound could take. Sabre hid his aching head under Taliya's arm.

* * *

Rumors flew. Sabre heard them when Taliya brushed him down—curried him, actually, massaging him while bringing the dirt up on his short, slick coat.

"Something big going on," Taliya told him, knocking the brush clean against the side of their well-appointed log cabin. The line cabins ran along the border between Theirs and Ours, all more or less identical dwellings—if you didn't count the personal touches the linemen added.

Taliya had added plenty. Nice curtains—even if there was no one in these woods to close them against—a special platform for Sabre's food bowl, a niche below the raised porch for his cool summertime bed. He slept in the cabin with her, anyway.

Sabre applied a hind foot just behind his ear, still looking for that itch, not concerned with Taliya's gossip; the sound of her voice was enough. He paused, examining his foot—yep, still his—noted the continuing presence of the itch, and tried again, this time on his cheek, careful not to poke himself in the eye.

"Something they think will put us out of business, Sabre-old-boy."

Sabre-old-boy. One of his favorites. He stopped scratching again to pant happily at her. Early morning summer sunshine, just been brushed, about to go on patrol . . . Yes. *Happy*. He nibbled absently at his shoulder. And at some point he became aware of Tallon's approach, Shiba with him . . .

Not important. Maybe if he pretended they weren't there, his morning would stay just between him and Taliya. So he nibbled, even catching wind of the strange human with them, and didn't warn Taliya—though he was sorry when she jumped at Tallon's words, and even sorrier at her look of reproach.

"Looks like it's time for a dip," Tallon said.

As if Sabre had *fleas*.

"Grmph," Sabre said, a half-hearted grumble of greeting, making it clear they weren't worth barking at. Not even the strange man . . . he'd had magic on him once, but no more, and besides, his hands were tied behind his back. And Shiba . . . she went without bramble-guards today, and her coat shone in the sun, deep glossy black.

He still didn't like her.

"Just did one," Taliya said easily, as if no flea-born insult had passed. She even looked downright glad to see Tallon. "Been out on patrol already?"

"Had a tip yesterday—caught this one just after dawn. We were close, so . . ."

"Let me get some water for Shiba," Taliya said, picking up Sabre's dish.

Sabre's dish. "Grmph," he said, but no one seemed to be listening. And worse, he detected the strange new *magic smell*. Shiba smelled it; she must. There—her nose twitched; she had the same puzzled look in her eye that Sabre felt on his own wrinkling brow. But she said nothing, merely took a polite drink from the water Taliya presented and stood by Tallon's side as Taliya gave him cellar-cooled tea and one of her own breakfast biscuits. And finally came to the point.

"What's this one been up to?" she asked, jerking a thumb at the sullen prisoner.

"He ditched the contraband before we reached him," Tallon said. "It doesn't matter. The point is more, what *will* he be up to? My source said he's a minor player—but he's got information. I thought you might be interested."

Taliya grinned, a surprisingly predatory expression. Sabre stopped sniffing the air to give her his full attention. Maybe the morning had lost its *happy*, but it had certainly turned interesting.

"Not telling you nothing," the prisoner grumbled, though no one had, strictly, asked. "Don't lay a hand on me, rules say you can't."

Taliya smiled beatifically; a slow grin spread across Tallon's face at the sight. "*I'm* not going to touch you," she said. "Except for this." And with two fingers on his shoulder, she guided him down. With a suspicious glance at Tallon, the man went to his knees, backed up against the house and with Tallon at his side to keep him there. "You just wait there," she said. "Tallon and I are going to discuss the dogs."

"We are?"

"We are. Sabre, son, come here."

Sabre complied immediately, for she had her *good dog* voice on. He didn't like standing so close to the man, but Taliya positioned herself so he had little choice. "Thatta boy," she said. "Tallon, you haven't been properly introduced to Sabre. He's the fastest thing on trail you'd ever hope to see." Ooh, that was definitely the *good boy* voice. Sabre's tail waved with pleasure. "In fact," she said, her voice going positively gooey, "he's the *best* linehound I ever hope to be with. He's *such* a good boy."

Oh, joyful! Sabre's tail whipped the air, impeded only by something soft and yielding and inconsequential. He ignored the strangled noises behind him; all that mattered was Taliya. His linewoman, cooing at him, admiring him, praising him . . . oh, delight! His tail exploded into frenzied activity.

"I'll talk! I'll talk! Just get that dog away from me!"

Startled from his Taliya-worship, Sabre glanced back to discover the man had turned a strange shade of pale green and was all hunched over, hands still tied behind him. He gave the distinct impression that he was trying to cover his groin with his elbows.

Somehow, he nearly succeeded.

Taliya gave him a partial reprieve. "Sit, Sabre," she said, and Sabre plunked his bottom down, his tail sweeping back and forth across the earth. She put her hands on her hips and cocked her head at the man. "Talk, then. Make it good. I still haven't said hello to Shiba."

"No, *nono*—have mercy! I'll tell you what I know! It's not much—"

"Just talk," Tallon growled, but Sabre thought he hid a smile.

"All I know . . . it's gonna happen soon. They've got a way to smuggle in a receiver spell, and once it's in, they'll trigger the other half from over the border. It'll make a safe corridor, one the dogs can't detect—they'll be able to bring magic right through."

Taliya and Tallon exchanged a glance. "How're they going to get the first spell through?" Tallon said. "How are they so sure they'll get it past the dogs?"

"I don't know," the man said, but he'd turned sullen, and wouldn't look either of them in the eye. Or at the dogs, for that matter Shiba had inched closer, scenting the air, eyes glinting with intensity, watching Taliya, following the swaying path of Taliya's long, thick braid against her lower back.

And Sabre scented it too, that strange magic again, the one that swirled around so close to imperceptible, not attached to any one person or thing. Although . . .

He turned a suspicious eye on Tallon.

Tallon was in no position to notice. "Taliya," he said, one firm hand keeping the man on his knees, "what was it you were saying about Sabre? What an excellent linehound he is?"

"Skunk!" the man squealed.

Tallon tightened his grip. "Watch your mouth!"

"No, skunk, skunk!" Desperately trying to protect himself with his elbows, the man did a strange twisting dance on his knees and babbled away. "They've got a skunk! Two skunks! Enhanced ones! They'll dump `em right in front of the dogs, damn curs won't be able to sniff an outhouse in a sweet spring

meadow." He jerked his head at Shiba. "Her, especially. After she broke up the [*critter*]-smuggling ring last season, they know they'll never get by her nose with *this*."

Crude! He'd said the true-name for *critter* right there in front of Taliya! Sabre, increasingly irritated by both the untraceable *magicsmell* and his undefined itch, went so far as to growl.

"Softly, son," Taliya said, though she, too, had a gleam in her eye.

Shiba moved forward, her head low, her expression intent. The kind of expression that meant a linehound had scented prey, and scented it so close that nothing mattered but the nose and the prey; not even the linemen could deter a dog so focused. And Sabre, agitated, lifted his nose to the new *magicsmell* and felt himself slipping into that same state; he growled again, despite himself.

"Sabre!" Taliya said sharply, turning to point a warning finger at him . . . turning suddenly enough that her braid swung briefly out from her body, then thumped gently against her back.

Too much for Shiba. She leapt, belling *trail* and *treed* in a strange combination of voice and bearing straight down on Taliya.

Astonished Taliya, standing there with her arms akimbo and her jaw dropped, crouching slightly as though to run and no time to do it . . .

Too much for Sabre—*Magicsmell! Trail-cry!*—who bounded right over the top of Shiba, bearing straight down on Tallon.

Astonished Tallon, standing there with his arms akimbo and his jaw dropped, crouching slightly as though to run and no time to do it.

Magicsmell! Magicsmell! Oowh! Treetreetree! The trail-haze slowly lifted from Sabre's mind, allowing a slow trickle of input from his surroundings.

Bellowing humans made up the biggest part of it. Tallon, bellowing at Shiba—as best he could with Sabre perched on his chest and bawling in his face—his head twisted aside, his eyes squinched shut, one hand cupped protectively over that soft spot halfway down his body and the other ineffectually shoving at Sabre's broad chest.

Taliya, bellowing at Sabre—as best she could with her hands clamped firmly around her long braid, bent at the waist in a futile attempt to get more leverage than Shiba, whose jaws clamped firmly around the thick rope of hair.

"Get off!" they finally managed, more or less in unison. "*Bad dogs!*"

Uh-oh.

No more *happy*.

* * *

How and when the prisoner escaped, no one was quite sure.

How and when Taliya and Tallon came up with the idea to work together, Sabre couldn't imagine.

How and when they come up with the idea to work each *other's* dogs, he didn't *want* to know.

Maybe it had something to do with events when they'd tried to team up. *Disgrace* was a word that came to mind. Definitely not *happy*. But who could blame a linehound for being a linehound? With *magicsmell* all around them, what were they supposed to do? Not his fault that the smell led him unerringly to Tallon. Not Shiba's that Taliya somehow did the same to her. Sent out to patrol in sweeps, the linehounds inevitably ended up back with the linemen, barking a subdued and chagrined *treed*, until both humans were flushed and embarrassed and frustrated. At that, the strange *magicsmell* seemed to fade, and Shiba—*critterspawn*, but she *did* have a fine nose—picked up the scent of familiar magic, leading Sabre along until the trail came clear to him.

They had worked it slowly, carefully—and had to, because the smugglers were on horseback, and had taken wild leaps from one place to another, traveled some distance up a deeply running creek, and wound their trail around in overlapping circles. Together, they closed on the smuggler, running side by side, picking up speed—

Together, they had run into the skunk.

"God and goddess," Tallon said now, his eyes watering visibly as he dumped another container of stewed

tomatoes over Shiba's back, there in the side yard of his little cabin. "There's got to be a better way to handle this. We're lucky the smugglers spooked back to the other side of the border." He took a rough scrub brush to Shiba's back, smearing tomato into her coat—most unpleasantly, to judge by how flat she'd plastered her ears to her skull.

Critter, he didn't have to judge it by anything. Taliya did the same to him, rubbing sticky smelly tomato into his face, between his paws, along the velvet length of his ears, doing nothing for the itch that ever plagued him . . .

Not happy.

"They'll be back," Tallon persisted, "and we can't take the chance that they'll get through this time."

"No," Taliya said, dumping a big cold bucket of water over Sabre, a gleam coming into her eye. "We can't."

That might have been it, right there—the beginning of the idea. Not that Taliya had had a chance to say so just then, not after dumping another bucket over him, not after Tallon did likewise to Shiba, leaving the two hounds with their heads scrunched down between their shoulders, water streaming off their ears, dripping off their tails, running off their brows and sheeting across their flews.

They exchanged a glance, the dogs did, knowing the humans were engaged in developing some important Human Thoughts. Sabre felt a sudden kinship with Shiba the too-perfect, an admiration for the sly way she lowered and cocked her head, a sudden desire to emulate . . . humans distracted . . . wait till they lean closer . . . wait . . . wait . . .

Shake off!

* * *

Yes, maybe that had done it. And this partner-swapping was meant to be some sort of punishment.

It seemed entirely likely to Sabre. He'd somehow gotten *used* to patrolling with Shiba. He missed her. And now he missed Taliya, even though he knew that the linewoman and Shiba weren't far behind. Shiba was probably harnessed and leashed, just as he was, probably even wearing her bramble-guard.

Humiliation.

And why did Tallon call ahead to him, constant encouragements, using Shiba's name?

Humiliation.

Until he struck the scent of magic, and forgot his woes in the thick glory of it. He forgot Shiba, he forgot Taliya . . . he even forgot about the skunk. He loped swiftly through the woods, nose to ground, thoughts consumed by *magicsmell*, *humansmell*, *horsesmell*. Vaguely, he heard Shiba backing him, but the rough frustration in her voice meant that she remained harnessed.

The scent was his, and he took it. *Gloryglory magicsmell!* He poured on the speed, glorying in that too, in his strength and confidence and certainty that these smugglers had no chance to escape—

Skunk! He literally tripped over the creature, staked right in the scent trail on a short chain. *Skunk!*

Mad skunk.

Mad skunk lifting its tail.

Sabre's eyes snapped shut, his trail cry cut short into gagging and sneezing. His sinuses instantly swelled; his nose began to run. He heard the skunk stamp its front feet imperiously—*again*—and flung himself blindly away from the creature—no seconds for him, no, no! He threw himself on the ground, rolling and whimpering and rubbing his face against the leaves and dirt in a frantic effort to relieve the sting.

At last, someone snagged his collar and dragged him away from the skunk. *Taliya!* He threw himself into her lap and met not her rangy curves, but unfamiliar angles of muscle and bone. *Tallon. Not his.* But as Sabre gathered himself to dive for the ground again, Tallon caught him up by the jowls and held him firmly, rubbing a wet cloth over his eyes and nose. Cool, soothing, something herbal . . . Sabre stopped struggling, if not whining. "Sorry, son," Tallon told him, tossing the cloth away and digging out a fresh one, soaked in tomato juice. "It was the only way." He scrubbed at Sabre's face, borderline harsh, and then brought out yet another cloth. This one he used more gently, wiping away the juice, smoothing Sabre's fur back into place with a petting motion, even wiping along his gums and jowls.

When he was through, Sabre blinked up at him, panting, able to breathe and see again. He gave a tentative wag of his tail and Tallon smiled at him. "Good boy."

Oooh. A *good boy!*

Not far—though definitely upwind—Taliya called to them. Not her human voice, but two short yipping barks. Tallon answered in kind, locating them, and in only a few moments, Shiba took up the trail cry.

Sabre understood, then.

They'd used him, used his speed . . . made the smugglers think Shiba was on their trail so they'd deploy their second skunk . . . and now Shiba had circled round him, her nose protected and intact, and taken up the trail.

He felt a strange twitch of pride. They'd not get past her. He barked, trying to back her even from here, and whined his most beseeching whine at Tallon. It rarely worked on Taliya; she was inured to it. But Tallon . . . Sabre could see him softening. He didn't need his nose to back Shiba, he needed only his legs, and he still had those. He still had his speed; he could catch up to her without trouble. He whined again, wagging just the tip of his tail, and widened his eyes in hopeful attention.

"God and goddess," Tallon muttered. "How *does* she resist you?"

Sabre knew permission when he heard it. He sprang to his feet, dug in his claws, and sprayed dirt and leaves into Tallon's face with his takeoff. Tongue lolling, eyes squeezed into slits against the undergrowth, he ran flat-out through the woods, his body stretching, coiling, exploding, barely heeding the obstacles in his way. He knew he was on trail again by the deep hoofprints before him, signs of the horse being pushed to speed in these tight woods. And then Shiba was just ahead—first just her belling voice in his ears, and then her butt in his face. *Bitch-butt.*

Sabre was glad to see it.

He hung back, trusting her nose, until he saw the flash of movement through the trees. Then his bark roughened, grew choppy; he found a place to pass her and did, surging into his powerful speed. In moments he was barking *treed*, leaping up against the side of the horse to reach the magic carried on the man who rode it.

"[Critter]-spawn!" the man spat as the horse faltered; he jerked on the reins, fighting the creature while Sabre leapt at them again and again, knocking them both off balance, delaying them, not even considering

that the man might turn the horse against him until one hard hoof landed on his front leg, briefly trapping him . . . snapping the limb in a clean break.

Sabre didn't even feel it, not with his quarry so close; he didn't need all four legs to throw himself at the man, and the injury barely slowed him. But it stole his agility, and the man easily kicked him aside; Sabre's strong tail was the next to break, and by then he was beginning to feel his hurts, hesitating—

The man was not. He drove the horse onward, kicking it into compliance, aiming it at Sabre . . .

Shiba. Bellowing all the while, she bounded into the fray from behind and with one mighty leap latched onto the horse's tail midway up its length. The animal froze—an instant only, and then it hunched its back and kicked out, but she was too high up, too close, for the kick to do anything but knock her aside; she was back on the tail in an instant, worrying it, growling, fierce in her trail fury. And all the while the man hammered his heels into the horse, yanking its head around, still trying to aim for Sabre, who'd taken up barking a steady *treed* for Tallon and Taliya, right in the animal's face.

And then he shook out the whip. He lashed at *Shiba*, the kind of feeble strike that would barely affect her through the bramble-guard, and which hit the horse right along with her.

Too much for any horse, even a good one—which this was not. It launched into a bucking protest, dislodging both *Shiba* and the smuggler.

Shiba landed on her feet. The smuggler, not as agile, rolled to a dazed stop on his stomach. Unlucky for him that he had clipped his long, scruffy hair at the back of his head. Unlucky. Just as he made the effort to prop himself up on his elbows, *Shiba* landed on his back, audibly driving the air from his lungs as she latched on to the trailing tail of hair. She braced her feet on his back and *pulled*. His head came up, the skin of his face stretched back and a squeak of protest in his throat. Sabre hobbled forward, stuck his nose in the man's face, and bellowed *treed* as loud as he could.

Which is exactly how Taliya and Tallon found them.

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Sabre shifted his awkwardly splinted leg and woofed to let Taliya know they had visitors. Tallon and *Shiba*, as of course had been the case every day since Tallon had carried Sabre back to this cabin—with the help of a sling made from the smuggler's shirt, for no man carries a densely boned, muscle-packed linehound far without help, not even a lineman trying to impress a linewoman. And once the smuggler was secured, and Sabre's hurts tended, Taliya seemed quite impressed indeed.

Now she came out of the cabin, raising a hand in greeting as Tallon and Shiba broke through the trees surrounding their cabin. Tallon went to Sabre first—*wise man*—offering a treat of dried meat; Sabre accepted it delicately between his front teeth and swallowed it whole.

He was learning to wag his bottom instead of his broken tail.

Shiba sniffed Sabre's toes—*still his*—and sat nearby while Tallon went to greet Taliya. He seemed to have some sort of treat for her, too, although it didn't smell like dried meat. Nothing important, then. Sabre would have ignored them altogether if the strange *magic smell* hadn't filled the air. He'd finally realized the truth of it the day before—when this same thing had happened yet again.

The magic wasn't Tallon. It wasn't Taliya. It was something that happened when the two of them came together, and he was critter-bedamned if he could understand why.

But it did make Taliya *happy*. And it made her *not happy* when Sabre fussed about it, and especially when he jumped on Tallon, so though it tore at his linehound sense of duty, he was willing to ignore the *magic smell*. For her.

Shiba seemed to have come to the same conclusion. Though her eyes glinted and her nose flared at the scent of it, she turned her back on the humans—why did they lean so close to one another, anyway?—and sniffed Sabre's toes again, her long, graceful ears brushing his feet.

Ooh, that itch again. *Where*—he nibbled his side—*not there*—and lifted a hind foot to his ear—*not there*—and tried desperately to reach the spot under his splinted front leg—*no, not there*—and then noticed that Shiba had engaged herself in the same sort of frustrated exercise. She twisted herself around, trying to reach the loose skin directly over her spine, that glossy black fur twitching with her efforts . . .

Mesmerized, Sabre gave up on his own scratching and reached over to nibble the spot for her. To his utter astonishment, his own vague prickling sensations instantly vanished. Shiba regarded him in momentary surprise, then—still twisted around—she solemnly cleaned his face with her tongue.

It seemed he'd finally found the right bitch to scratch.