

©Robin d. owens, cut scene "pinky the Famcat"

*This originally took place at a dinner in T'Ash Residence with Antenn, Michella's ward, Antenn's cat, Pinky, T'Ash (hero of HeartMate) Danith D'Ash the Animal Healer (heroine of HeartMate), Mitchella (heroine of Heart Choice), Straif (hero of Heart Choice). Drina, Straif's FamCat is mentioned...now that I've confused you, I hope you enjoy! – Robin 10/31/05*

Talk around the table lapsed into comfortable silence. Antenn cleared his throat and the adults fastened their gazes on him. His face was one of mulish determination. He lifted his chin. "Pinky wants to become a Fam." He shut his mouth, lips tight, and stared at Danith. She looked astonished.

"There are Fam animals and regular animals," T'Ash mumbled. "For instance, Zanth. He's big, his brain–"

"He can't be smarter than Pinky!" Antenn didn't move his gaze from Danith. "He wants to be a Fam. He's a little cat, but he's very smart, and there are other cats as little as he is that are Fams." His voice took on a note of desperation and the cat in question, no doubt reacting to his friend's emotion, jumped onto the dining room table. Antenn petted him.

Mitchella winced.

T'Ash raised his eyebrows, but one side of his mouth lifted. "We have a rule in this Residence. No animal on the table while a human is eating." T'Ash looked around at the empty plates.

"Pinky knows the rule!" Antenn's chin jutted. "He wants to be able to talk to me and I want to talk to him, and he maybe wants to talk to other humans and other Fams. Fams who might think he is stupider than they are. Snotty Fams."

Straif coughed and T'Ash joined in.

This was definitely Drina's fault, Mitchella thought. A day hadn't passed where she hadn't picked on Pinky – hiding around corners and swatting his rump as he strolled by. Hissing at him. Making comments to Straif about the young tom. All that Queen of the Universe Fam's fault.

Danith appeared thoughtful.

"I can pay!" Antenn said.

Staring at Pinky, Danith waved that away. "Gilt isn't important in this matter, knoweldge is. I've never actually done a study as to why some animals are Fams and others aren't. She nibbled at her lip, glanced in the direction of her MistrysSuite. "I don't know whether Princess would like to be a Fam. I don't think so. I think she's happy to just be a cat of the T'Ash household. Though she does communicate to Zanth, on occasion. She might not want to be a Fam, but I don't see why I couldn't give her that choice." Danith held out her hand to Pinky and he trotted over to butt it with his nose. Mitchella noted that he left a smear on Danith's hand, but she didn't seem to care. Probably got slimed all the time, Mitchella thought with an inward shudder. She could never accept that as part of her vocation.

Danith scratched Pinky's head, looked at Antenn. "Does Pinky have any relatives? Any family that might have been Familiars?"

Antenn bit his lip. "I don't know. I got him right after the gang–" He darted a glance at T'Ash.

"Don't worry," Danith said, "we aren't upset by speaking of the Triad."

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But Mitchella saw a fine tension running through T'Ash. After all, the Triad had kidnapped Danith and tried to kill the Ashes several times.

"I only found Pinky. Or he found me."

T'Ash relaxed. "That's what happened to me, too. Zanth found me."

"Where is Zanth?" asked Mitchella.

A smile played at T'Ash's mouth. His eyes gleamed. "Hunting Celtaroons."

By this time, Danith had stood and was examining Pinky on the dining room table.

Mitchella shook her head. There were some things that she and her friend completely disagreed on. Animals on the dining room table was one of them.

Danith's eyes went foggy. She was using her Flair. An instant later, she spoke to Antenn again. "Pinky is a fine cat in excellent health. I'd like to keep him here to study for a couple of days."

At Antenn's frown, Danith continued hurriedly, "I won't harm him in any way."

"You won't let Zanth beat him up?"

"Absolutely not."

Danith bent down and caught Pinky's gaze. A few heartbeats later, she looked up. "I believe Pinky understands that he will stay and we'll explore the difference between Fams and regular cats. Antenn, how did you know he wanted to be a Fam?"

Antenn reddened. "I don't know. A dream, maybe." He shifted in his chair.

Danith just nodded. "All right. Pinky and Princess and Zanth will all be part of my study." She tapped a finger against her lips, glanced at T'Ash and Straif. "Holm and Lark Apple are coming to visit this weekend, I'll make sure to ask them to bring their Fams. Their cats are just out of kitten-hood. I'll have two more Fams to work on – uh, with." She smiled.

Everyone except Pinky looked dubious.

Straif sighed theatrically and looked at Mitchella with a half-smile. "I suppose you think this is all Drina's fault."

"You must be telepathic," she said drily.

"Drina is a snot," T'Ash said.

"Really—" Danith started.

"I'm afraid you're right," Straif said. "And she'll be preening with triumph over the next few days, thinking she's banished Pinky." His eyes narrowed in consideration. "It's going to be rough if Pinky comes back a Fam."

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Right before they left, Mitchella drew Danith aside. "You will make sure nothing happens to Pinky. Mentally or physically, right?"

"I promise he won't be harmed."

Mitchella peeked at where Antenn was talking with the men. "Pinky means so much to the boy. I don't want Antenn hurt if anything goes wrong."

"Pinky isn't the only thing that means a lot to Antenn. You do, too. And Pinky becoming a Fam isn't the only thing that Antenn wants desperately," Danith said.

The innuendo surprised Mitchella. "What do you mean?"

Danith frowned as if impatient. "If you have to ask, then you haven't seen it for yourself and you aren't ready."

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"Danith!"

But her friend moved to the others and bent to squeeze Antenn's shoulders in reassurance, leaving Mitchella with another puzzle to solve. She didn't much like puzzles.

Straif loved puzzles. And he loved unravelling the puzzle of a beautiful woman the best.