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presents

The Extinction of *Ursus Theodorus*

By

Ted Kosmatka

From behind chromed bars I watch her enter the lab. She is so beautiful to me. Tall, fair skinned, and bipedal, she is everything that I am not, but still she loves me. She tells me so when I do well.

She crosses in front of the cages without a glance and makes her way over to the far end of the lab. My nose twitches involuntarily at the rich smell of coffee she carries in a mug. My tummy rumbles in hunger.

For a long while she is intent upon her work. Sunlight pours in through the big windows making her hair glow golden. I watch, studying her movements, as she removes a rack of instruments from the autoclave with a long pair of crucible tongs. She isn't smiling. I marvel again for the hundredth time at her long limbs and slender digits. So dexterous. She removes a test tube from beneath a large, glass condensing funnel and carefully places it in the centrifuge. She made a game once of teaching me the names of these things in the lab. She is my mother, I think, although I've never asked her.

While her back is turned I slither my forked tongue out between the bars as far as it will go and taste the air, taste her. She is warm and alive. Healthy taste. Friendly taste. I see she is about to turn around so I slurp in my tongue and move to the back of the cage as quickly as I can. I would surely die of embarrassment if she caught me like that. With my thick, stubby fingers I grasp the bedding and wrap myself beneath its soft fabric. I wait. Soon I know the man will come. He will walk through the door swinging a briefcase from his hand. He will take off his brown jacket and put on his white one. They will sit and talk while I listen, then maybe they will let me out for a few hours.

Faintly, in one of the smaller cages beneath mine, one of my siblings begins mewling softly. She looks up from her work for a moment; a concerned look perched across her face.

"Three," she says gently. "What's wrong with you today?"

But Three only continues his crying; he's one of the older ones and so doesn't understand very many words. She puts down her equipment and walks over to our cages. Her face is on level with my cage and she looks in and smiles at me. I try to smile back and she laughs just a little. She does that sometimes when I try to smile. Her face disappears as she bends down, and I hear a click as she opens Three's cage door.

"Come on, what's wrong? Come here little guy."

A moment later she stands and Three is cradled in her arms. A wave of intense jealousy washes over me as I watch her stroke his fur. His short arms are slung around her neck, his head pressed against her chest. He looks like me, or rather, because he's older, I look like him, although she tells me I'm much cuter and smarter. I'm basically an improved version of him, she told me once, just as he was an improved version of Two. My name is Seven.

After a while he stops his irritating whining and she puts him back in his cage. She stands and looks at me through the bars.

"He's getting so old," she says, shaking her head slowly.

I shirk off the cover and move to the front of the cage, pushing myself against the bars. "So old," I mimic shaking my head like her.

She smiles again and this time I don't try and smile back because I don't want her to laugh. "Pretty today," I say.

"You say that every day."

"Because you pretty everyday."

She just stands for a while looking at me with that smile on her face, and in her eyes, smelling so pleased. I am her favorite, I know. She told me that once when none of the other young ones were around, but I would have known it anyway. She loves me more than any of my brothers.

She reaches up and unclasps my cage door. It swings open and I jump into her arms. My throat starts making that strange ticking noise that I can't stop when I'm happy. She calls it "purring", and it's one of the differences between Three and me. She told me once that children prefer pets that "purr." More lovable, she had said, but wouldn't explain what a "pet" was.

I lick her neck and she laughs. Her laughter is like food for me. It fills me up inside. I want to make her happy.

She takes me over to our special table and sets me on top of it.

"I've got a couple of new ones for you to try today," she says, pulling two small colorful books from a briefcase. "Which one would you prefer to try first, *The Curious Little Kitten* or *My VR Friend*?"

"Kitten, kitten." I say. Kittens are cats, and cats purr like I do, so I like reading about them.

She puts the book in my lap and sits down in her chair to listen. "The curious little kitten," I say, then flip the little cover over. My stubby fingers make turning to the first page a little difficult, but finally it comes. "There... was once a kitten... who was...born in a dark...cozy...close it?" I say, not sure of the last word.

"That word is closet."

"What is a closet?" I ask, trying out the new word.

"It's a place where people hang up their clothes when they aren't wearing them."

"Oh." I wish I had clothes.

I read her the rest of the book, all the while expecting the man to come in at any moment. He usually arrives just after the woman. Today he is late. I am nearly done with the second book when he finally bursts into the room so fast that it startles me. His face is red and he smells very unhappy. He slams his clipboard down on the table and collapses into the swivel chair next to her.

"That bad?" she says.

The man just looks at her for a while, not saying anything at all. His eyes cast about the room, then softly, he answers her. "Worse than you would believe."

The woman gets a funny look on her face. She stands and carries me back over to my cage and puts me inside without shutting the door. "Stay inside, ok?"

"Kay," I say.

Now she smells unhappy too, and that full feeling inside my belly is gone. I want her to be happy again, but I don't know what I can do. I poke my head out of the cage slowly. They aren't looking at me. I watch and listen and sniff the air.

The woman walks back over to the man and sits down. "What's going on? What did the promotional board say?"

A long sigh from the man. "We over shot the mark on Seven."

My ears perk up at the sound of my name.

"What are you talking about?" she says, leaning forward in her chair.

"The board says he's *too* smart. The reading thing backfired on us. It really got them in an uproar." The man gestures toward the books on the table.

"Well, that shouldn't be a problem. We can stop teaching him. His clones will never learn."

"You don't understand. It's not just that he knows how to read. It's the fact that he's capable of learning to read at all. The promotional board rejected him as a prototype. They want us to start again with Six as a template."

I can smell the woman's disappointment now. I'm not sure exactly how, but it has something to do with me. I'm the cause. I try hard not to mewl, but it's difficult. I don't want to be like Three.

She stands up, her face getting red like the man. "Why?" she asks.

"They're afraid of controversy. Pressure from the animal rights groups. There have been designer pets on the market for years now that could mimic human speech after a fashion, but never anything like Seven. They're afraid of the public's reaction. The legal aspects of it alone have them petrified. Images of civil rights lawsuits danced in their heads."

"Civil rights! It's supposed to be the perfect pet," her hands moved as she talked. "A companion for the old, a playmate for the young. They will just want to please, nothing more."

"I told them all that. Don't you think I tried? They are simply not ready. They said he learns too fast, and to be honest with you, I can see their point." The man's eyes dart in my direction. "He doesn't forget anything."

The man smiles, trying to cheer her up. "They did however, like the appearance. A little teddy bear. Oh, and the name. They loved the taxonomic name you thought of, *Ursus Theodorus*. They got a little chuckle out of that."

The woman was glaring at him. "There has got to be something we can do. Seven represents a year's work for both of us."

"Mary, they threatened to pull the plug on the whole project. If you want to know the truth, I was barely able to convince them we had a viable course of action in Six. Besides, they liked most aspects of what we've been doing. We just need to make a couple of changes. No big deal."

"What about Seven? We'll be able to keep him in this unit, right?"

The man looks down at the floor, then reaches up to loosen his tie. He sighs. "They were emphatic on that. They want him... uh, terminated, and his records purged. We are to continue on as if project seven was never advanced to fruition."

"What," the woman shouts, scaring me badly. Her mouth stays open and she looks over at my cage. I pull back inside, knowing she caught me eavesdropping.

"Mary, it took three hours of negotiating just to get them to agree to let us continue with the project at all. We should be happy we still have funding."

For what seems like a long while I huddle in the rear corner of my cage. Neither of them speaks. Minutes go by until the man gets up and I see him walk across the room to the door. He turns and looks back in the woman's direction. He opens his mouth like he is about to speak, but doesn't. I am happy to see him go.

Eventually my curiosity gets the better of me and I peek my head out again. The woman is sitting in her chair. Water is dripping down her cheek in small drops. An overwhelming sense of sadness is coming off her, and soon it is too much for me so I retreat back into the corner of my cage. Wrapping myself in the bedding again, I remind myself to ask her later what the word "terminate" means.

The End

About the author

Ted Kosmatka was born in Northwest Indiana where he now lives with his two small children and wife, Tamela. He has an associate degree in Biology from Indiana University and works as number one analyst at LTV chemical laboratories.