

# Beating the Heat

“...another record-breaking afternoon, with temperatures throughout the region surpassing the 90-degree mark. A cold front is set to bring relief to central and southeast Texas later this evening but looks like there may be some severe weather along with the cooler temperatures. The Storm Prediction Center has issued a tornado watch for the region until early tomorrow morning. Now it's time for your local forecast.” Sarah let the smooth jazz drifting out of the TV wash over her and sank deeper into the couch cushions. Her eyes stung with sweat rolling down from her forehead. Without looking, she reached over and grabbed a wrinkled shirt from the laundry basket next to the couch and wiped her brow. Her eyes were laser-focused on the wall clock, watching the seconds crawl by. “4:30,” she thought. “He was supposed to be here by 4 o'clock.” She closed her eyes and tried to relax. The maintenance guy had forsaken her. Only the sweet embrace of unconsciousness could provide respite from the heat now.

She was dragged out of her blissful slide into oblivion by the sharp click-clack of claws on the hard linoleum floor. It was the halting, rhythmless gait of one unaccustomed to walking on two feet. The clicking was replaced by the sound of a tail dragging along the living room rug, desperately trying to prevent its owner from falling backwards.

She looked up at the cause of the disturbance. Two six-toed paws were digging into the carpet, and a prehensile tail was wrapped around one of the legs of the coffee table, all in an effort to keep the creature before her upright. Its lupine maw was agape, purple tongue hanging off to the side, twitching in time with the creature's panting breath. Its wet nose was twitching frantically, soaking up a mélange of odors that Sarah couldn't hope to perceive. Its erect, triangular ears swiveled about, absorbing the soundscape of the room. Wrapped in its forelimbs, clutched tightly to the ruddy flesh of its chest was a ponderous tome. “Great news!” the creature growled cheerfully as it deposited the book onto the coffee table with a thud.

“You figured out how to fix the air conditioner?” Sarah sighed.

With a padded finger the creature tapped the cover, which bore the title ‘Comprehensive Introduction to Biochemistry’. «At least according to this book here our food should be safe for human consumption.»

“That's nice, Sunshine.”

«You don't smell very excited.»

“It's nearly 95 degrees inside, and it's already half an hour past the window that the leasing office gave me for the maintenance guy to come fix the AC. Forgive me for not being head-over-heels with enthusiasm.”

Sunshine flicked her ears back. «What do you want from me. I'm a healer, not a mechanic. But speaking of food, I think I may have a little something that'll help you beat the heat.» Her curiosity piqued, Sarah leaned forward as Sunshine produced a small carton from a pocketed band wrapped around her right foreleg. "This is a little snack from back home on Hearthside. From the carton she produced a small translucent strip which she placed on her pendulous tongue. She drew her tongue back into her mouth for a moment, allowing the strip to dissolve. After a few seconds, Sunshine dropped back onto all fours, shook her head vigorously, then resumed panting. Sarah caught the strong scent of menthol on her breath.

"Just a breath mint?" Sarah inquired, unsuccessfully masking her disappointment. Sunshine came from a desert of eternal noon, a planet perpetually sweltering under the gaze of an unconquerable sun. Her species had subdued their entire solar system dozens of millennia before those naked Savannah apes Sarah called ancestors had even discovered agriculture. They could bridge the yawning gulf between stars, but the best thing they could come up with to cool off was a Listerine strip.

«Oh, it's a little stronger than that. Go on, try one.» Sunshine pinched another strip between her outer thumb and writing claw, flicking the little snack with another digit in a manner Sarah assumed was supposed to be enticing. She paused, her eyes darting between the textbook on the table, the little hairless monkey fox standing in front of her, and the consumable held in her paw. A dialog played out in her mind.

"Are you really going to put that thing in your mouth?"

"It's just a breath strip, why not?"

"An alien breath strip. It could kill you for all you know, slowly and painfully, too."

Sarah regarded Sunshine again. She had been holding that snack out for a good thirty seconds. "Guess when you've got six centuries ahead of you, you can afford to be a bit more patient," She thought.

"She is a licensed medical professional..."

"A licensed alien medical professional."

A bead of sweat rolled down her cheek, reminding her that the air conditioner was still broken and that it likely wouldn't be fixed today. "Eh, YOLO!" Her curiosity had won the day. Sarah plucked the snack from the alien's claws and popped it in her mouth.

The strip quickly dissolved on her tongue, leaving behind a cooling sensation. So far, so mundane. Sarah leaned back into the couch, chuckling to herself as she contemplated how old this stuff had to be, older than the US constitution, at the very least, given how long it took Sunshine and the others to get to Earth from Focus. Maybe she could start a YouTube channel eating ancient alien junk food. Still, though, it didn't really take her mind off the heat.

Just as her disappointment began to set in, the cold feeling in her mouth began to intensify. The sensation had started as though chewing a normal piece of spearmint gum, but had progressed to chewing a particularly potent piece of spearmint gum. After a few seconds, it became chewing a particularly potent piece of spearmint gum while chugging ice water. "OK, now this is getting uncomfortable," Sarah thought. "Well, it is getting my mind off the heat. Now all I can think about is my mouth freezing." The cold feeling cascaded down her chest and into her gut, then began radiating to the rest of her body.

The roof of her mouth started throbbing in pain, which then radiated to her forehead. She tried powering through the pain by sheer force of will. "It isn't real," she thought. "I'm not really cold. It's just a chemical tricking my nerves into thinking I'm cold." Through eyes tearing up in pain she caught a glimpse of the wall clock. It had only been twenty seconds since she had put that cursed strip on her tongue. She no longer felt like she was chugging ice water, now it felt like shoveling Antarctic snow into her mouth.

«Are you OK?» Sunshine whined. Sarah caught the concern in her voice but was too busy writhing in agony to pat herself on the back for achieving this milestone in human-yinrih communication. "I'm... fine..." she gasped. Sarah swore she could see clouds of super-cooled condensation billowing out of her mouth with each syllable.

It wasn't Antarctic snow anymore, now it was liquid nitrogen. She hunched forward in her seat, then collapsed onto the floor between the couch and coffee table. Through cryogenic tears Sarah could see Sunshine's large ears and muzzle hanging over her.

The penny finally dropped. Sunshine whipped around and bolted down the hallway, her claws skittering on the slippery floor. She failed to turn in time and ran bodily into the back wall, then managed to gain enough traction to dart into the erstwhile office that now served as her quarters.

Sarah could hear her frantically barking one of the traditional healer's invocations as she rummaged through her things looking for whatever implements might prove most useful. Sunshine had demonstrated several of these little rituals to her over the time she had been lodging with her. They were remnants of a time when the office of cleric and healer were still one. The particular invocation used largely depended on how severe the situation was. The one Sunshine chose did not buoy Sarah's confidence in her outcome.

«O Creator of the universe, paws and tail hast thou none, yet wield me, wretched whelp that I am, as thy instrument here within, and wrest this least of thy little ones from the jaws of death.»

Sarah was audibly whimpering now. Her vision began to fade. It felt as though her entire digestive tract was filled top to bottom with liquid helium. The blessed embrace of oblivion finally took her, but not before she saw Sunshine scampering back down the hall toward the living room. The end of her tail coiled around the handle of a satchel that was bouncing along the floor behind her.

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Manny glanced at the clock on the dashboard as he pulled into the parking space. 4:36 PM. He was over half an hour late for his last appointment of the day, and a mere 24 minutes away from the nominal end of his shift. He pulled the key out of the ignition and opened the door, the

perspiration-soaked back of his work shirt peeling away from his skin as he moved to exit the truck. The hot Texas air greeted him as he alighted the vehicle, a welcome respite from the even hotter air inside the cab. He shut the door, perhaps a bit more forcefully than necessary. He turned to look at the apartment number written atop the front door. Unit 38. He glanced down at the work order affixed to his clipboard and sighed. "Unit 38: Broken air conditioner". He definitely wasn't clocking out on time today. At least he'd get paid overtime. He tucked the clipboard under his arm and walked up to the door.

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Sunshine took a deep breath, letting the sharp smell of alcohol fill her nostrils. Sarah's unconscious form was sprawled out on the floor before her, her left arm draped across her chest, rising and falling steadily with each breath. The contents of Sunshine's satchel were strewn across the coffee table: a just-used bottle of paw disinfectant, yellowed only slightly by its two and a half century stowage inside one of the Dewfall's cargo holds, and an electric healer's razor, also none the worse for wear despite its age. The remaining item she had seen fit to include in her impromptu medical bag, a human anatomy text recently borrowed from the college library, lay open on the floor at her side.

«OK, Sunshine, you can do this. Everything's going to be alright. Sarah's going to be alright, alright?» She began a cursory examination of her friend. She slid a pair of azure bandpass membranes over her eyes, shifting her visible spectrum down into the infrared. «Her temperature hasn't changed, and she's still breathing. That's good. First thing's first...» She picked up the razor, only to change her mind and place it back on the coffee table. «No no, that's not right. No fur. Why did I bring this thing anyway?» She began thumbing through the book with her right rear paw. She was greeted by incomprehensible diagrams and labels written in a dead human language she didn't understand. What little confidence she had been able to muster ebbed away with the turn of each page.

«Light blind me!» She kicked the book under the coffee table and crumpled to the ground, heedless of her now contaminated forepaws. «I can't do this by myself. My ignorance got her into this mess. I'll only make things even worse. She needs a human healer.» Just as she rose to her feet, there was a knock at the door.

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Manny approached the door and knocked. "Maintenance," he declared in his best "How can I help you" voice. He could hear the sound of the tenant's dog skittering its way toward the source of the noise. Without so much as a "down, boy!" from the resident within, the door burst open. Manny braced himself for a physical encounter with yet another pet far too large to be kept in an apartment. When the assault was not forthcoming, he glanced down at the open doorway.

His mood immediately brightened. "One of our little visitors!" He thought. Manny had seen her walking around the neighborhood many times, all wrapped up in a white cloak with only her ebony paws and snout poking out. He had heard through the grape vine that she was some sort of doctor, but didn't know much else. He had always wanted to meet her, but could never find the courage to start a conversation. What do you say to an alien? The mundane happenings of a broke college student who had never even been out of state must seem terribly dull to someone who was born under a different sun. Now he found himself thrust into this little first contact, at a loss for words.

He had just settled on a simple “Good afternoon, ma'am” when she wrapped her tail around his forearm and began attempting to drag him inside, yipping and growling frantically. Attempting, but not succeeding. The only way he was getting free of her grip was if she decided to let go, but her claws scabbled uselessly across the hard floor of the entry way, failing to find purchase against the slick surface.

«By The Light! Another human! Please, sir, I need your help. My friend is in trouble.»

“Hay! Slow down. I don't speak space doggo,” Manny protested.

Sunshine stopped her fruitless attempt at pulling Manny inside and glanced down at her empty paw. She had been making her desperate supplications in Commonthroat. Without disengaging her tail from Manny's arm, she reared up and grabbed a keyer and HUD specs that were nestled along with Sarah's keys and wallet in a bowl atop the entry table. She wrapped the keyer in her right front paw and donned the HUD specs, the claws of her left rear paw clicking impatiently against the floor as she waited for the computer to boot.

“Sir,” said the keyer held in her paw, “Please, I need your help. My friend is in trouble.”

Manny stood back up and attempted to enter the apartment. Sunshine's tail was still constricting his arm like a snake. “OK, what's going on?” he asked. “And can I have my arm back?” Sunshine refused to let go until he had entered and shut the door behind him. Keyer in paw, she knuckle-walked around the breakfast bar and into the living room, Manny following behind.

As he rounded the corner he noticed Sarah lying on the floor. Sunshine kept switching her gaze between Manny and Sarah, as though expecting he would immediately know what to do.

“OK, calm down and tell me what happened,” said Manny.

More urgent yipping and huffing from Sunshine. «I... I didn't think it would be a problem. We breathe the same air, drink the same water. This book here,» she pointed at the biochemistry textbook with her muzzle, «says you humans consume proteins, carbohydrates, lipids, sugars, amino acids... all the same stuff we eat. I didn't think it would hurt to share a little snack.» she swept her tail angrily across the corner of the coffee table, knocking off the little carton of cooling bark.

“Mind repeating that in English?” said Manny as he bent down and picked up the carton, turning it over in his hand, examining the alien lettering on the label as though it would provide a solution.

Sunshine repeated her self-recrimination via the synth while Manny took the time to examine Sarah. He noticed her hand resting over her chest, gently rising and falling in regular time with her breathing.

Sunshine's ears perked up in sudden realization. “Don't you have emergency medical transport?” She grabbed Sarah's phone from the arm rest and attempted to unlock it. The gentle tick-tick of her claws on the glass failed to elicit a response from the device. «How do you use this stupid thing?» She had just figured out to touch the glass with the pad of her writing claw when Manny

rested the phone from her paws. Sunshine gave voice to a frustrated hiss like an angry goose. «Hay! I was using that!»

“Hold on there,” said Manny. “Let's not get the wee-yoo wagon involved if we don't have to.”

“What?! Why not? She needs a human doctor,” Sunshine said, desperately wishing she could inject more emotion into the tiny synthesizer.

Manny took a few seconds to respond, considering whether now was a good time to introduce Sunshine to the particulars of the American healthcare system. “Well, I'm a human, and you're a doctor. I think we can figure this out between the two of us. Besides,” he said as he bent down and checked Sarah's pulse, pressing two fingers against her other wrist sprawled on the floor, “I happen to be an Eagle Scout, and I have the First Aid merit badge.” He made this declaration as though that made him a reasonable stand-in for a paramedic. “She's breathing fine, her temperature feels good, and her pulse is normal.”

Sunshine's agitation at Manny's lack of urgency began to mount. She started thumping her tail on the floor. Her anxiety caused a momentary lapse in her English proficiency. “What reason you human do nothing? On that floor this my friend die!”

“I'm not 'do nothing',” he said. “I think I know exactly what will fix her right up.” He walked over to the kitchen, grabbed a cup from the counter, and began filling it with cold water from the fridge.

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Sarah floated content in a featureless void, finally free of the extremes of hot and cold. She could stay like this forever. Snatches of English and Commonthroat bubbled up from the abyss. She didn't catch what the voices were saying, but a vague notion of concern tickled the back of her mind. She brushed it aside and continued drifting in this room-temperature sea of beautiful nothingness.

But her repose didn't last. A sudden shock of wet and cold tore her away from the lukewarm void. She came to, sputtering and swearing. The first things she saw were Sunshine's lapis lazuli bandpass membranes staring back at her. She bolted upright, her head barely missing the edge of the coffee table.

Sunshine pressed the top of her skull against Sarah's shoulder. «You're alright! Light shine upon all of us, you're alright! I thought you were dying!»

“Why did you do that? I was finally asleep!” Sarah glanced down at the water dripping onto the collar of her tee shirt.

«That wasn't me.» said Sunshine. She trotted over to Manny and repeated her cranial gesture of gratitude with the knee of his blue jeans.

“Maintenance,” Manny repeated. “Sorry I'm late. Your friend let me in. Are you OK?”

“Well, insofar as I'm not dying, yes.” She looked at the wall clock. “I wasn't even out for ten minutes.”

“Glad to hear it. Now let's see about that air conditioner.”

Manny got to work, checking the thermostat and then the compressor outside. Sunshine shadowed him all the while, peppering him with questions about everything he did and every tool he pulled out of his bag.

“I'm surprised you're so interested in what I'm doing,” Manny said. “I figured you all think we're cavemen banging rocks together.”

“You humans are so fascinating! The way you're built, the fact your forepaws are completely specialized for grasping and your rear paws are optimized for movement, how you've compensated for your lack of an innate ability to write, and how all that effects the tools you use, and how you construct your buildings and vehicles. Plus it's nice to be around people with almost as little fur as me!”

“But, like, there are others, right? Out there? We can't possibly be that interesting,” said Manny as he put away his tools.

“Nope.” said Sunshine.

“Nope? What do you mean.”

“There's nobody else out there. We Wayfarers have been looking for other sophonts for nearly one hundred thousand years. Until we found you we hadn't encountered so much as a microbe.”

Manny stood up and brushed the dirt off his pants. “So It's just you monkey foxes and us humans, all alone?”

“Seems that way.” she responded.

“That... actually makes me feel kinda lonely.”

“Believe me, we know the feeling. But now we can be lonely together!”

Thunder murmured in the distance. Manny looked toward the horizon, where storm clouds were gathering. “I need to let Sarah know I'm done and get out of here before that nasty weather hits.

He knocked on the window behind the compressor. “Is it working?” he asked. Sarah gave a thumbs up. “Awesome. Let the office know if something else happens. I gotta get going.” He picked up his bag and started making his way to the truck, with Sunshine trotting behind.

“Listen, it was great to finally meet you, I've seen you walking around in that cloak of yours but I never knew how to say hi. I didn't even know you could speak our language with that computer in your hand.”

“I'm happy you came by when you did. Come say hi when I'm out walking, and I can start teaching you Commonthroat.” She set the keyer aside and shook a cramp out of her paw. “The more humans that understand Commonthroat, the less I need to use this blasted keyer.”

Manny gave a thumbs up and pulled out of the parking space. Sunshine went back inside just as the gust front from the distant squall sighed through the trees.

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