

The Tornado

Jim surveyed the empty trailers around him as he sat in the lawn chair in front of his mobile home. Everyone else in this little student ghetto had left for spring break. It was quiet, and he liked it that way. He raised his eyes to the object of interest, a thunderhead billowing in the distance, reflecting the golden rays of the westering sun. He took a sip of iced tea as he listened to the sounds of nature: the chirping of birds, the buzzing of insects, and the quiet clicking of claws on the wooden porch behind him. The clicking was followed by the sounds of something scrabbling its way up the tree trunk and flopping down on the large branch to the left of Jim's chair.

"Hi, Tod," said Jim, not looking away from the skyscape.

«Good evening, Jim,» grunted a voice off to Jim's left. «These alien skies are breathtaking.»

Of course, they weren't alien to Jim. He had grown up in this sleepy town in central Texas and spent many spring evenings watching storms wash over the landscape. To his roommate presently lounging in the tree above his chair, however, the chaotic vista before them was very otherworldly indeed.

Tod's real name would be unpronounceable by any human tongue. Jim gave him that name when he moved into the spare bedroom of his manufactured home. Jim had posted an ad for a roommate over Christmas break, with the only requirements being a quiet lifestyle and splitting the rent. He didn't think it necessary to specify that the candidate needed to be a member of *Homo sapiens*, and, until the Dewfall arrived on Earth, that qualifier would have been redundant.

Honestly, Jim couldn't put his finger on why everything went so smoothly when the Dewfall landed. Something always goes wrong in every story about First Contact. The aliens want to blow us up. We want to blow up the aliens. Other humans blow up the humans trying to contact the aliens. In the best case, the aliens just lecture us about how violent we are and how badly we're wrecking the environment. Maybe everything went so well precisely because we'd been rehearsing this exact scenario again and again through a hundred years worth of books and movies. But Jim figured the biggest reason was that, until the Dewfall entered Earth orbit and intercepted those radio transmissions, the yinrih were all alone, just like us. They'd been howling into the void looking for other sophonts like them for longer than we humans had been tilling the soil, and up until now they were only met with the cold, pitiless indifference of the empty cosmos.

The joy they felt upon discovering us transcended language. It transcended culture. It transcended species. It was infectious. They were so happy to see us that we couldn't help but be happy to see them, too. Sure, the media had a nice juicy headline to milk for a week or two, a few speeches were made, and some laws had to be tweaked to make sure nobody could murder one of our little guests and get off on the technicality that they weren't human. But the news cycle doesn't grind to a halt just because we found out we're not alone in the universe anymore, and ET wasn't going to pay our bills, so life went back to normal after about a fortnight.

Well, for the rest of the world, anyway. For the little Texas hamlet that the Dewfall chose as its landing site, those first two weeks were just the beginning. The first thing to do was chase away all the weirdos trying to see the aliens, pet the aliens, eat the aliens, and do whatever else you can think of with or to the aliens. That wasn't so hard. The unwanted gawkers just had to be reminded that this was Texas, so everyone old enough to write their name owned a gun and knew how to use it. After the clowns were dealt with, everyone got to work helping our little guests settle in.

First things first: communication. It was clear from the outset that humans and Yinrih were never going to speak one another's languages. Our vocal tract and theirs were just too different, but writing, writing they could do. They learned to write English surprisingly quickly. Then it was discovered that, even if they couldn't speak a human language, they could still understand it when it was spoken. Humans could also understand them, even if their little yips and growls were a little quieter than the average human tongue. So we would all just have to be Han Solo to their Chewbacca.

After surmounting the language barrier, it was time to talk lodging. The Dewfall was a tiny, single use craft designed with just enough room to carry six crew in suspension. It would remain where it was, acting as a high-tech storage shed, but our little guests would have to find accommodations somewhere else. They could have gone anywhere in the world. They could have been treated like more than royalty, but they let it be known that they wanted to grow where they were planted, so to speak. And that's how Tod ended up on Jim's porch on that cold day in January. Jim answered a knock—more of a scratch, really—at his door, and opened the door to see this monkey fox with his tail curled around a half-folded, half-rolled up copy of his ad.

Jim turned to look at his roommate lying on the branch. The orange rays of the setting sun made Tod's red pelage glow as though it were on fire. His black ears completed the vulpine impression that earned him his name. Tod was nervously tossing a translucent fluorescent green cube between his forepaws, occasionally flicking a freely rotating corner and letting it spin on its axis like a fidget toy. Just the alloy that made up that thing's chassis was probably worth enough to pay off the national debt, never mind whatever tech was inside it.

Tod, evidently aware that Jim was watching, tossed the cube across his back and caught it in his left rear paw and continued to fidget with it with as much dexterity as before. Tod turned to look at his roommate. Was Jim impressed? He couldn't tell. Jim's ears were practically immobile, and he had no muzzle to speak of. Tod was still learning the ins and outs of human body language, Jim's lack of a tail making the endeavor that much harder. Surely his little trick must seem impressive to a creature with only two prehensile extremities. Still, Tod couldn't help being a little jealous of the human's ability to both walk and manipulate objects at the same time. Tod could waddle precariously while standing on his hind legs and using his forepaws to carry an object, but if he wanted to get anywhere quickly it was four legs or nothing. His tail could grasp objects. It could even support the weight of the rest of his body, but he couldn't manipulate anything while moving at a significant speed.

"Am I supposed to be impressed by those monkey paws of yours?" said Jim.

«Oh... I was just... never mind.» Tod curled his tail around the mystery cube and turned fully to meet Jim's gaze. He studied the human's liquid eyes. In the center of each was a transparent dome-shaped membrane that reflected Tod's features. Behind the membrane was a hazel-pigmented sphincter. The sphincter relaxed slightly, increasing the diameter of the aperture at its center. Delicate muscle movements turned the two orbs upward slightly, exposing the white tissue that covered the rest of the eyes. It was all lubricated with a thin lamina of mucus. When the mucus began to dry out with exposure to air, Jim would rapidly close and open his eyelids to coat his eyes afresh.

Jim hesitated for a split second before responding. Tod's eyes, when they were fully open, appeared to be coated in vantablack. He would occasionally slide a colored reflective membrane over the eye, making it appear as though he were wearing mirrored contact lenses. Jim had noticed at least four different colors of these secondary eyelids. This was in addition to the regular eyelids covered in the same ginger fur coating the rest of his face.

“Well? Should I be impressed?” Jim persisted, raising his open palms to face Tod and making grasping motions with his fingers.

«Only five digits? And you can't even write with any of them?» Tod plucked a leaf from the branch and scribbled on it with his writing claw, mimicking the territory-marking behavior of his non sapient ancestors. He let the leaf flutter down into the cupholder of Jim's chair.

«It's just ink,» Tod clarified.

Jim sniffed the blue-black scribble on the leaf. Petrichor blended seamlessly with the cool outflow from the storm in the distance. He turned back to the skyscape. The violent convection rocketing upward from the storm's base had finally slammed against the stable air at the edge of the stratosphere, and a cloudy anvil head was pouring out across the invisible ceiling like upside-down spilled milk.

«So, what exactly are we looking at?» Tod asked.

“Never seen a thunderstorm before?”

«I was hatched and raised on a moon orbiting a gas giant. All my military assignments were either on other moons or orbital colonies. The only planet I've been on besides this one is nothing but desert.»

Jim turned back to contemplate Tod's form again. He had to be 70 pounds soaking wet. More than once Jim had tossed the little ET off his couch because he was lying on it without a slipcover. Tod could barely walk and hold onto something at the same time. How on earth did he hold a gun? Did they even have guns? What on earth did armed combat look like for a four-legged species? Humanity had barely reached out beyond our own atmosphere, but we had enough nukes to glass our whole planet nine times over. What sort of apocalypse could a species who had conquered their entire solar system bring upon themselves? ...And what if they pointed their weapons at us? Jim swallowed his questions for the moment.

“You’re a veteran?”

«Yup.»

“Hoo boy, you’re gonna be real popular round here.”

«It’s not enough that I’m one of only six sapient nonhumans on this rock? Why in the Void would people here care about my military service?»

“Son, this is Texas! We love our fightin’ men and women. It don’t matter where you served or how many legs y’all got. Hope you like hearing people say, ‘thank you for your service.’”

«Women? You let females in your military?»

“Yes.”

«Female soldiers and male clerics, you guys are full of surprises. You still haven’t explained what I’m looking at.»

Jim looked back at the storm. “That’s a thunderstorm. The sun heats the ground, and the ground heats the air. The air boils up into the atmosphere carrying water vapor with it. The water vapor condenses and falls as rain.” Thunder rumbled in the distance. “And there’s the thunder.”

«And what’s that?» Tod asked a little more urgently, pointing his writing claw at the storm’s base. The gesture was unusual for his species. Tod was accustomed to using his eyes and muzzle to indicate the direction of interest, but he felt this application of human body language would get his point across more quickly.

“That’s...” Jim scanned the area indicated by Tod’s outstretched paw. A swirling eddy of dust had developed on the ground, and a black condensation funnel was snaking its way down to the earth to meet it.

Up until this point, Tod had been mildly nervous about the storm. The sheer size of it, towering into the heavens, was a little disquieting. The flashing arcs of electricity it produced made him uneasy. He had seen similar phenomena back home, but always looking down from orbit. But that sound it made, now that was terrifying. Some of it he was sure Jim couldn’t hear. The grinding, roaring cacophony that seemed to come from the mid-section of the cloud was too deep for Jim’s ears. The loud claps of thunder that followed every flash of electricity were just icing on the cake. His playing with the cube earlier was as much a self-soothing gesture as it was an attempt to wow his human friend, but Tod kept his emotions in check thanks to a little trick he learned in the military. Look at the most experienced guy in the room. If he’s not panicking, then you’re OK, and up to now Jim had shown no signs of distress, but the object of Tod’s query set off in Jim a cascade of involuntary bodily processes, sharpened by three and a half billion years of evolution, designed to survive an approaching threat, by fighting it or by fleeing it.

Tod turned to Jim again, scenting the air as he did so. Epinephrin, cortisol, and perhaps the merest whiff of urea. «Jim, you OK, buddy? Should I be worried?»

Jim took some time to answer. The primitive simian part of his brain was screaming “Fly, you fools!” But the somewhat-misleadingly-named rational part of Jim’s brain was too busy cramming that little monkey into a closet and barricading the door shut. He quickly rehearsed his response in his head. “Oh, that little thing? It’s just a twister. We get ‘em all the time here in Texas. What’s that? It’s roaring with all the voices of the damned? Nah, that’s nothing to worry about. It’s ripping asphalt off the ground? Totally normal. The sirens? The ones we installed back when we thought the Russians would nuke us, and that we are currently sounding, thereby implying this is a proportional threat? Don’t worry your fuzzy little head.”

Jim finally responded. “We... uh... we should be fine as long as we’re south of it.” Jim looked to his right at the setting sun. To his right. At the setting sun. The sun setting in the West. The West that was currently to his right. Then ahead 90 degrees counterclockwise from the West, at the writhing column of wind and debris, appearing to stand still in the field. The field that was to their South, which, simple logic demanded, meant they were in fact North of the tornado.

The monkey burst out of the closet.

“If it’s not moving, it’s coming toward you.”

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“If it’s not moving, it’s coming toward you.”

What had started as an insistent voice in Jim’s head had escaped his lips, repeating like the mantra of a madman. Tod noticed Jim’s crazed mumbling and scented the air again. Now he was sure that was urea he was smelling. He hopped off the branch onto the ground, his tail coiled a little tighter around the mystery cube.

The sound of Tod’s movement broke Jim out of his meditation. He turned down to look at the little quadruped standing beside him. They were absolutely going to die. Tod was going to go down in history as the first alien to die on Earth, and Jim was going to be the nobody who died alongside him. And they would not be going gently. Their skin would be sandblasted away by the dust, their bones shattered by larger debris, their screams drowned out by the roar of the wind.

Jim’s monkey brain finally took control. Must protect tribe! Must protect little one! He swiftly grabbed Tod by the scruff of the neck and draped him over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry.

Tod let out a trilling hiss of surprise. «What in the Blind Void are you doing?!»

“Trying to save our skins!” Jim shouted as he quickly darted hither and thither, trying to choose which of the objectively terrible sheltering options was the least terrible. Flee in his car? Nope, the twister was currently blocking the only dirt road out of this trailer park. Go back inside? Of course not. Mobile homes are a tornado’s staple food source. Where was the lowest point they could get to in time? Jim looked back at the twister. It was definitely getting closer, and was that a cow up there?

Jim's mind seized on the only option they had. "The ditch behind our trailer. That's all we've got. Not gonna lie, Tod, we're probably not going to survive." Tod squirmed his way out of Jim's grip and hopped back on the ground.

«We might have a chance, if this thing still works, that is,» said Tod flicking his tail holding the cube.

The din of the tornado was steadily getting louder, and its wind began to pull against their bodies. The two turned and ran to the drainage ditch behind the trailer, Tod gripping the cube in his tail as though their lives depended on it. Jim went prone, covering the top of his head with his hands. He turned his eye to look at Tod, but Tod wasn't there. In his place was a vulpine sorcerer, executing the verbal, somatic, and material requirements for a powerful warding spell to protect them from the wrath of a god of destruction. He stood on his hind feet, manipulating that powerful arcane focus with his outstretched forepaws, tail and ears blowing dramatically in the wind, hind claws digging into the wet ground for purchase against the gale. Jim could hear him mumbling something as he rotated the cube, twisting the freely rotating corners of the device. The mumbling stopped as Tod quickly glanced up toward their approaching demise. He hastily traced an arcane rune onto one of the cube's faces with his writing claw. The ink beaded up slightly and then was quickly absorbed into the cube without a trace. The spell's requirements met, a metal stake extended from one of the cube's corners. Tod jammed the device into the wet soil, and...

...critical failure...

The device glowed blue for a split second, then went dark again.

Tod often wondered what thoughts would be going through his mind in his last moments. Would he think of friends and family? Would a holy canticle be in his throat? Or would he utter some blasphemy against The Light that had created him? Whatever he thought would be on his mind in his final hour, it wasn't this.

Tens of thousands of years ago, on a rusty planet neighboring their homeworld, there developed among the first wave of colonists and terraformers a strange animist cult. The spirits that this cult revered did not dwell in the wind, for their world lacked an atmosphere, nor in the water, for their planet lacked a hydrosphere, nor in the trees, for their new home lacked a biosphere. The genii worshipped by these heathens dwelt not in natural things but in the artifices of mortal paws. Within every machine—the cult believed—dwelt a fickle spirit that must be appeased with various arcane rites. The most sacred of these rites was the holy sacrament of Percussive Maintenance, where a shaman would deliver a ritual knock with a blessed wrench upon the chassis of a misbehaving machine. As subsequent waves of colonists arrived on that ruddy planet, the cult was diluted and pushed out of the collective memory, but traces of their beliefs lingered on, especially among the rank and file of the military. Ask any of Tod's fellow soldiers, and they would dismiss such superstitious nonsense. But sometimes... sometimes an engine wouldn't spool up, or a fabricator leasemind would refuse to boot. All the normal troubleshooting steps would be followed: Identify the problem, Establish a theory of probable cause, Test the theory, blah blah blah. But every attempt would fail. Then, out of desperation, the frustrated tech assigned to fix the problem would utter a prayer to the heathen spirit dwelling in the machine, whack the offending mechanism with a

wrench, and it would spring to life, the spirit within evidently pleased with the ritual.

Tod looked up again. The roaring hell vortex was almost upon them. He saw a giant beast, hooped and horned, careening through the air toward them. «What've I got to lose?» Tod thought as he picked up a rock and bashed the cube with it.

The machine spirit was appeased.

In an instant, the cacophony was quieted. Jim noticed the sudden lack of noise and risked an upward glance. Just as he did so, a cow slammed into an invisible barrier above them. Bright blue scintillations blossomed from the point of impact, arcing like the flashes of a detaching retina. The light cascaded down, tracing the hemispherical outline of their ephemeral shield. The cube emitted a subtle whine as the hypercapacitor within absorbed the kinetic energy of 1800 kilograms of bovine mass traveling at 134 meters per second. The cow's trajectory halted, it slid down and landed on the leeward side of the barrier. But the twister would not be denied its quarry. The cow let out a plaintive moo as it was quickly sucked back into the swirling mass.

Other missiles collided with the forcefield, repeating the light show and increasing the pitch of the cube's whine as they did.

SLAM! A stop sign.

SLAM! A tractor tire.

SLAM! A transformer coil.

The chaos only lasted thirty seconds, but to both Jim and Tod it felt like an eternity.

Finally, the air cleared. Jim sat up and looked at Tod. Tod's claws were digging into the meat of his forepaws, rills of blue-black ink matting the fur on his front legs.

«By the palms that nursed me, what was that?!»

“What on earth was that?!”

The pair said simultaneously, Tod indicating the retreating funnel, and Jim looking at the cube, which had stopped whining and begun a quiet low-pitched beeping.

Jim spoke first. “A tornado. Never seen one before. Don't want to see one again. What... what is that thing?”

The cube's beeping increased in pitch and tempo.

«A retribution field generator. It's supposed to block relativistic kinetic weapons fire. Absorbs the kinetic energy, then you—»

The cube arrested Tod's attention as the beeping became urgent. In a single swift motion, Tod wrapped the end of his tail around the cube, spun on his heel, and slingshot the cube into the air, then lost his balance, falling backwards onto his back. The cube traced a ballistic trajectory, flying much further than Tod's mediocre strength could account for.

For an infinitesimal fraction of a second, the cube hung at the apex of its arc, then a pillar of light and concussive force burst forth from the cube and rocketed upwards, punching a large hole through the mammatus pouches glowing red in the last rays of the sunset revealing the purple twilight sky above. The pillar of light evaporated quickly, leaving no trace of the cube behind.

Jim stared open-mouthed at the hole in the clouds until he was alerted by the sound of tires on gravel, unmuffled by his now nonexistent trailer. A police cruiser and a pickup pulled up to the remains of Jim's home.

An officer exited the car and walked toward the two survivors. One of the survivors was a man in his 20s, and was that his dog?

Tod executed a formal greeting, rearing up and patting himself on the abdomen with a forepaw, leaving a blue-black stain on his belly. «Ink sacs are probably dry,» Tod thought. «It'll be a few days before I can write again.» He looked up at the uniformed human and attempted an introduction.

"Chuff! Yip, yip! Huff, bork!"

The cop's demeanor immediately changed. "Ah! One of our little visitors from out of town." He jogged past Jim and attended to the little arboreal canid. "You OK, little guy?"

"Yip, huff, wuff!" Tod responded.

"Tod, I don't think he can understand you," Said Jim.

«Well tell him I'm fine.»

"He's fine, officer."

"And you, sir?" asked the cop.

"I'm OK, I think."

"That twister was ripping up the road. How on earth did you two survive?"

Jim looked at Tod, then up at the hole punched in the sky.

The cop turned back to Tod. "That huge laser thing, that was something of yours?"

"Bork!"

The cop squatted down and looked Tod in the eyes, which were shielded by crimson bandpass membranes reflecting the flashing lights of the cruiser. "I'm very happy you were able to save yourself and your friend, but you need to be careful with your fancy little doodads in the future. I just hope you didn't hit anything with that."

«A retribution field generator isn't a 'fancy little doodad'.» Tod mimicked the stress and tone of the officer's admonition, but all his cynoid vocal tract could manage was "awAAA ohOO OOwaah"

"Anyway," said the cop, standing back up, "We need to get you two checked out by a doctor to make sure nothing's wrong." He looked at Jim. "Well, we need to get you to the doctor. I'm not sure what we can do for our little guest, but I'd hate to think we're leaving something untreated."

«I'm fine, really. But if you need someone to give me a clean bill of health, we can have Sunshine take a look at me. All her medical stuff is stored on the Dewfall.»

Jim relayed Tod's suggestion to the officer.

"OK, I'll take you to the clinic, and we'll have Mark take your friend to his ship," said the cop, gesturing toward the pickup.

Just then, the driver's side door of the pickup opened. The beeping cadence of a CW repeater ID and the smell of decade-old second-hand smoke drifted out of the cab. Tod slid back the bandpass membranes covering his eyes and tilted his ears forward in the yinrih equivalent of an excited grin. He recognized that smell. The truck belonged to one of the radio club members, the first group of non-yinrih sophonts the crew of the Dewfall set eyes on after arriving on Earth.

An older man got out of the truck and ran up to the group. He looked at Jim and the officer, then down at Tod. "Hi, little man, haven't seen you in a while. Glad to see your OK."

"*Chuff! Yip!*" said Tod.

"Ah, sorry I haven't learned the lingo yet. You need to come to the club meetings and teach me."

Mark looked back at the officer.

"You're taking him to his ship. He'll contact their medic and have her meet you there," said the cop.

"Will do." Mark looked back down at Tod. "Let's get going."

Tod slid another pair of bandpass membranes over his eyes and surveyed the remains of their trailer. It didn't take long for him to find the little trunk he was looking for. It was impossible to miss. Well, for him anyway. The humans probably thought it looked dark gray, but to Tod it was painted in the Allied Worlds standard safety color, peaking at a wavelength of around 0.186 millimeters. He scampered over and delicately opened the lid, trying not to smear ink on the contents of the box. He pulled out the two objects he needed: a paw keyer and a pair of HUD specs.

The HUD specs looked, well, like a pair of reading glasses designed by a dog: two frameless glass lenses connected by a bridge designed to sit on the muzzle. The keyer looked like the rubber grip on a bicycle handlebar. Four keys lined the length of the device, sitting in shallow grooves sculpted to fit a yinrih's four middle digits, with a fifth and sixth key capping the devices two ends, designed to be gripped by two thumbs. The HUD specs and paw keyer together filled the role of portable computer.

Tod wrapped the keyer and specs in his tail and hopped into Mark's truck. He laid down on his back in the rear seat of the cab, gripped the keyer in his left rear paw, and put the HUD specs over his muzzle. Squeezing the two thumb keys together started the boot process. The two lenses frosted over, obscuring the roof of Mark's truck. Reams of boot text, glowing a comfortable infrared, flowed down Tod's field of vision. After a few seconds, the screen cleared and the login prompt appeared, the square cursor blinking expectantly.

```
Localhost login
Username: tod
password: *****
tod@localhost:~$ omnichat

connecting...

connection successful

4 users currently online:

tod
stormlight
iris
sunshine

=====

tod> Jim and I caught in some sort of windstorm. Both OK but our friends insist I see a
healer. Currently on my way to the Dewfall.
sunshine> It's true you red-pelts really are unlucky.
tod> shut up. Your fur is just as red as mine, remember.
sunshine> What fur? I'm a healer. I was just kidding, Tod. I'll be there ASAP.
<sunshine has left>
/quit

<Leaving chat>
```

```
tod@localhost:~$ humansynth
```

```
Experimental human speech synthesizer interactive prompt
```

```
Enter phoneme string or /h for help
```

```
>>>
```

Mark looked down at his little passenger lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, left rear paw just barely twitching as he entered chords on the keyer. Little inky paw prints covered one side of the bench where Tod had pulled himself into the cab.

“Sorry I got my ink all over your vehicle,” Said a tinny bloodless voice coming from the input device Tod held in his paw.

Mark inhaled. The smell of a welcome rain after a long drought filled his nostrils. “Don’t worry about it,” Mark responded. “I believe we’ve seen each other before but I don’t think I know your name. I’m Mark.”

Tod uttered a few more opaque yips and grunts. “It means 'Steadfast Friend', but that's a mouthful in English. Just call me 'Tod'. That’s the name Jim gave me.”

“‘Tod’, that’s clever, you look like a little tod fox with your red coat and black ears.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“Sure. Foxes are sly little critters.”

“Interesting. This pelt color has some bad associations back home.”

“Is that so?”

“Having a red pelt is supposed to mean you’re unlucky, and having black ears means you’re dumb. I’ve got both, so I’m constantly the butt of jokes. Nobody actually believes that, for sure, but the teasing gets really old really quick.”

“Oh, sorry to hear that.”

The topic of conversation wandered here and there as the pair drove down the road. As they were nearing the Dewfall’s landing site, the subject of Tod’s military service came up.

“So you’re a vet, then?” Mark asked.

“Yeah. Never seen combat, but did a few peacekeeping missions. Relief supply deliveries, helping refugee camps, that sort of thing.”

The truck pulled up to the landing site. A small car pulled up shortly after, a bumper sticker proudly identifying the driver as a student at the veterinary school at the nearby college. A woman got out of the driver's seat and opened the back passenger door. Another yinrih, completely hairless with black splotches on the bare skin of her paws and muzzle, hopped out and ran to the truck.

Mark and Tod also disembarked. Sunshine looked up at Mark and executed the customary introduction, rearing up on her hind feet and patting her belly.

«Light shine upon you, friend. My name's Sunshine.»

Mark looked pleadingly at Tod, who was now incommunicado, having removed the specs and keyer.

"She's saying hi," said the woman. "I'm Sarah, by the way."

"Howdy, ma'am," said mark.

"Sunshine filled me in on the way here," said Sarah. "I'll take Tod back to Jim at the clinic when she's done with her little checkup. You can go if you want."

"OK. Thanks for your help," Mark responded. He climbed back into the cab and started the engine.

"Seventy-three, Tod. Come see us at the radio club so we can start talking for real."

"*Yip, huff!*" said Tod.

Mark closed the door, but quickly rolled down the window for a few parting words.

"Tod, Thank you for your service," Said Mark as he put the truck in gear.

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