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ROAR
VOLUME 1

ROAR

VOLUME I

Edited by Ben Goodridge

Bad Dog Books

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Preface

It's been a while since Alex Vance, Editor-in-Chief and head pot-scrubber of FANG, wrote around to inform people that nerve damage in his hands had forced him to abandon the black-backed anthology. This bothered me. I was weary of seeing good markets disappear through circumstances that had dog-all to do with whether they were any good or not.

I wrote to him and recommended a few good hands-free computer programs, and also suggested if his only challenge with FANG was interfacing with his equipment, that all he needed was to hire someone to do the heavy lifting. Someone to handle the day-to-day drudgery of taking the stories solicited and stacking them in a vaguely book-like shape. You know. An editor.

I'm not quite sure what happened next. I have five or six pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that was the following week, and none of them fit together. For some reason, whenever I try to think about it, I get a vague and probably false memory of being chained in a basement while a figure in a gimp suit approaches

me with a glowing branding-iron in the shape of the Bad Dog Books logo. When contiguous memory returns, I'm lying on a bare mattress in a hotel room in Newark, with a burned-out cigarette butt in my muzzle and clutching a Teddy Ruxpin, with cardboard taped over all the windows and the phone off the hook. Sitting on the nightstand is a stack of business cards: "Ben Goodridge—Editor of ROAR, Bad Dog Books."

I don't seem to have any permanent burn-marks on my body, though, and I certainly came away from my college graduation party with far more disturbing memories and permanent physical and emotional scars (you should see the tattoo), so I shrugged off the lost week, dropped the phone on the hook, and started soliciting writers immediately for the very volume you hold in your hands. And that, apart from a paternity suit and the occasional postcards from someone threatening to sue me for an incident involving a trombone and a bowl of rice pudding, was how I got the job.

I wasn't reluctant to do the job, but I did have kind of a lot on my plate. I had a book coming out from Crossquarter Press, "The Swamp-Poet," and I was spending most of my days perched on my mailbox eagerly awaiting the arrival of galley proofs. I had another book coming out from Coyote Moon Publications, "White Crusade." Having sold my entire inventory of completed manuscripts, the pressure was on to produce more. It was pretty clear that this ROAR thing—which was then still part of the first of BDB's anthology lines, FANG—whatever challenges

it threw at me, would have to be a part-time job.

Right.

There really is no such thing as a part-time job at any level of any creative industry, because you're on the job 24/7 no matter what else you're doing. Whether in the shower or driving the car or doing the laundry, your mind is on ways to make what you're doing bigger, better, stronger, faster, with scrubbing bubbles and a new intense cherry flavor that four out of five plumbers prefer for their dogs. That's me when I'm writing, and, as it happens, it turns out that's me when I'm editing, as well, and I'm just enough of a lunatic to demand the same level of commitment from the stories I read as I put into my own work.

I was expecting to stuff a lot of turkey en route to producing a complete FANG—I mean ROAR—but what really brained my damage was how much stuff I got that was just too good to pass up. Rejecting some of these writers was like stabbing myself in the leg with a shrimp fork. (I should know; I did a little comparison study. Actually, it turns out the shrimp fork hurts just a little bit more. Maybe five percent.)

And, slowly, the anthology took shape. From a formless mass of disassociated stories rose themes, ideas, plans, threads, plots, common goals, common dreams, and common sense. I tried various methods of determining the ideal story order (throwing them all up into the air and letting them sprinkle down at random just didn't work) as well as the content (wow), and ultimately wound up with the volume

you have in your hands and its dozen stories that impressed best. There only followed the kidney damage generally associated with the consumption of absurd amounts of caffeine, followed by the surprising realization that six o'clock comes twice a day, and there was the book.

Having seen the ordeal through to its gruesome finish, I slunk off back to the Great North Woods, where, against all odds, Alex had found me. There were about seven feet of snow on the ground, which I promptly seeded with land mines as proof against any of the villagers with pitchforks sure to siege my home, all waving stories in my face. (The cool thing about the land mines is that as the snow melts, their periodic explosions are the ideal alarm clock.)

So what is ROAR?

Well, the goal here is to publish the best anthropomorphic fiction we can find. A long time ago, I picked up on the conventional wisdom that it is next to impossible to publish a furry story. Other genres treat anthropomorphics as the somewhat creepy little cousin that arrived a tad late to the picnic, and glare down upon it with undisguised scorn.

Which is a shame. Because, my friends, "furry" has been around far longer than any mere genre. From the Coyote stories of the West to the tales of men turning into tigers in the Far East, people have invented stories of animals to explain the light and dark of human behavior. The first modern furry

story, "The Wind in the Willows," was published before anyone had decided what to call "science fiction" and decades before Tolkien reinvented "fantasy."

And "furry" is no mere genre. It is a medium, and one that can span any genre. There are furry science fiction stories, furry fantasy, furry historical fiction, furry mysteries, furry horror, and even furry erotica. (For which see my colleague Cinnamon, who I think may have been wearing the gimp suit, and the Bad Dog Books series "FANG.") Why write furry stories? Well, my own answer is simply that it's easier that way—easier for me to visualize who they are and what they're up to.

It's just not terribly... lucrative.

You could count the number of reliable anthropomorphic fiction publications on one gloved, four-fingered paw, and the sum total of genre publishers that handle furry fiction comes to roughly zero. Writing furry stories has probably set my career back fifteen years. Check your Writer's Marketplace: science fiction, fantasy, horror, literary, suspense... not a single entry under "furry."

Until now. Until Bad Dog Books, until FANG, until ROAR, until a reliable stable of writers finally decided that the time had come to provide a mainstream outlet specializing in anthropomorphic storytelling.

I think you'll dig what we got. We've got familiar faces like Kyell Gold, Whyte Yoté and Karai Croctua, as well as promising young turks like Kevin

Frane, Calcifer Rauth and Redline. We've got tense, exciting dramas unfolding in claustrophobic locations, and sprawling epics that take you from secluded tribal villages to the edge of space. That's entertainment.

Worn to fur and bones with the onerous task of assembling this mighty concatenation, I turned to crawl back into my cave and nap until my fortieth birthday. Before I blew out the candle, though, a communique arrived from this volume's earnest publisher, Alex Vance, asking of the status of ROAR 2.

So clearly I'm in it for the long haul. (There's blackmail material available to ensure my continued enthusiastic participation, I'm told.) There will be a ROAR 2, and a 3 and a 4 and a 5—no fly by night operation, this—and so on until we've exhausted the numbers and have to resort to letters. Because there will always be new material, new writers, new voices needing a new platform. If you get a chance, bung a story up to the Great North Woods so it'll get a fair hearing, and I'll be there to catch it.

Ben Goodridge

The Great North Woods

July 2007

Is his station under attack, or is he being pursued? A Zebra finds instinct taking command as he tries to save his space station—in the company of a seven-foot Lion who likes to hunt.

A Close Port of Call

Altivo Overo

"What beast couldst thou be, that were not subject to a beast?"

—William Shakespeare, Timon of Athens, Act IV, Scene 3

Dockmaster Mark Partine looked up from his terminal when the proximity chime sounded. He expected it, of course, but he liked watching the traffic pull into the station and he had a good viewport. The Class Two Galactic Skimmer glided smoothly toward a docking port with the usual flashing lights and associated comm chatter.

He looked across the room to his communications officer, Lora Rojo, and she nodded to him with a little smile. The vixen was always competent and controlled, and sat erect on her stool with her tail curled around her legs. The dull clunk of the dock making magnetic contact with the skimmer vibrated through the flooring.

Lora pushed the microphone on her headset aside, saying "That's Captain Teftawn with the Leonia, Mark."

Mark nodded, returning his attention to the terminal where he had already called up the skimmer's registry record. The ship was in the diplomatic service, a courier with top clearance and no crew other than the captain himself.

Usually, diplomatic corps had all the latest computer rigout, so

it was surprising that Teftawn had messaged for computer service, saying his navigation system was out. Knowing that the courier's captain would be in his office promptly, the master stood and shook out his tail and mane, though they were always well kept and black as polished ebony. He straightened his uniform jacket, too. Valden 4 didn't often get important traffic like this.

Valden's station was not large, and only had docking for eight ships. Most traffic was made up of trade freighters, bringing in manufactured goods or carrying out agricultural produce from the planet below. It took only minutes for the Leonia's captain to reach the offices, and the portal slid aside for him with its automated rush of air.

The dockmaster watched curiously as Captain Teftawn, a Leandrine of exceptional height and mass, stepped briskly into the room and let the door slide shut behind him. The leonine descendants were noted for their aloofness and attention to protocol, but Teftawn smiled and winked at Lora before turning to Mark and offering his identicap. "Teftawn with the Leonia," he said in a quiet purr that was nonetheless perfectly clear and businesslike. "I hope you have a good computer tech on staff."

Mark accepted the capsule and slid it into the terminal's validation port, then offered his hand in the traditional gesture of friendship and respect. "Mark Partine, dockmaster here," he nickered, trying to keep his voice in the lower register. "Yes, sir, we have an excellent chief engineer with a computer specialty. What exactly seems to have happened?"

The terminal blinked acceptance of the identicap and spit it back out, filling in sketchy information on the screen about Teftawn's current mission even as the lion captain accepted Mark's offered hand in a brief but warm grasp. Trade agreements and loan documents en route from Cassiopeia to the Cascade system appeared to be his only commission.

The Leandrine shook his head, blinking, heavy mane and beard rustling against the peculiar shiny material of his uniform jacket. "Damned if I know," he almost growled. "I was planning a stop here anyway, because I've earned a few days off and the

documents I have are not urgent. Navigation was locked on and confirmed, but I came out of the jump way inside planetary orbit and headed right for Valden's Star. The alarms were coming up all over my board and the helm wouldn't respond. I hit the manual override and it didn't catch until the second try, but then the nav program dropped out and I still had time to steer out of the gravity well. I called in here and used the backup programs to get into the station. Thanks to your communication specialist for letting me right in." He nodded again toward Lora, with a little smile.

"We don't usually have a traffic problem here, Captain," Mark said. "And, of course, an emergency call gets top priority in any case. I'm glad you were able to use your overrides." He tapped a couple of keys on the terminal keyboard, trying not to let his nostrils flare and quiver at the oddly arousing musky scent that clung to Teftawn. His hindbrain told him it was something dead, and yet, in some way, it wasn't that unpleasant.

He looked up into the lion's gilt-backed eyes and added, "I've booked you for immediate repair services, but it will still take at least 24 hours for engineering to run full diagnostics on your computer systems. We have some pleasant guest quarters if you'd like to take a room here on the station, or would you prefer to stay with your ship?" The desire to reach out and stroke the visitor's jacket, to feel the odd material, was almost overpowering.

Teftawn met Mark's gaze openly, appraisingly. It looked as if he were counting the Zebrine's stripes, in fact, and an odd thrill ran down the dockmaster's neck as the lion ran the tip of his tongue over his teeth before answering. "Quarters on a skimmer are tight and sparse," he grinned. "If your rooms have a proper bath and bed, I'll accept that offer regardless of price."

Mark blinked, reawakening from the odd feeling that had crept over him, and laughed nervously. "It's only a hundred credits added to your repair bill, Captain. No great expense." He tapped keys, and a repair authorization slid out of the printer. Placing it over a signature pad, he offered Teftawn a stylus.

The lion captain signed without reading the document. He let his paw drift lightly over the dockmaster's fingers as he handed

the stylus back. "This is a small station," he said quietly. "I'm sure you aren't that formal with each other here. Call me Tef instead of Captain, and I'll feel more comfortable."

The zebra morph let his eyes run over the white diplomatic sash of Teftawn's uniform before nodding slightly. He held out the printed document and the captain's identicap. "Your copy... Tef. You're right. Call me Mark, please." He pulled a plasteel badge with a neck chain from a drawer and handed that over too. "This badge will let you into all publicly accessible areas of the station. It's also the key to your rooms. You have suite 3 at the end of the beta corridor. That's to your left as you leave this office. We have a self-service mess hall, and there's a small gymnasium between the guest area and the crew's quarters. You're welcome to make use of those facilities if you wish. Station gravity is set to one half gee, but the gym has an independent axis so you can increase it to as much as one and a half if you prefer. Tap your intercom button to reach Lora here or whoever is on the comm panel if you have questions or need anything. Our chief engineer will be in touch with you about the repairs as soon as he can look over your systems."

Tef accepted the documents and the badge gravely. Then he laughed, a warm and not unfriendly sound. "Relax, zebra," he said, looking Mark right in the eye. "I'm not going to eat you. I'm not here on a formal mission either. As far as I'm concerned, we're just two guys stuck out here in space. Thanks for your help." He made a little bow to the vixen at the communication panel, and headed for the door. "I'll leave you to your work, 'dockmaster'," he added, pausing. "But when you get off your shift, I'd like to talk to 'Mark' about Valden 4. You're a native, I take it."

The dockmaster swallowed nervously and nodded. "I'll be free in two hours, and usually go to the mess for something to eat then," he volunteered.

"Good," Tef answered, and swiveled on a velvet footpaw to pad out the portal.

After the door whooshed shut, Lora was taken with a fit of giggles. "You'd think you had never seen a lion before, Mark," she

chuckled.

The zebra actually blushed, easily visible through the short white nap of his muzzle. "There were Leandrines at university, Lora. Of course I've seen them before." He blinked and twitched one ear, thinking. "But there was something about this one. What was that odd scent?"

The vixen laughed again, loudly this time. "Trust a vegan not to know," she said, smiling. "It was leather. That uniform jacket he was wearing probably cost him 50 thousand at least."

Mark raised an eyebrow. "Real leather huh? You're right, I've never seen it before. Ostentatious, but interesting."

"I thought he smelled good, as well as looking good," Lora offered. "But... he's obviously more interested in zebra boys than he is in fox girls." She ducked behind her terminal console as Mark threatened to toss his stylus at her, dartlike.

The rest of the shift passed uneventfully. Mark filed reports and analyzed cargo vouchers while Lora handled routine communications, passing doppler-shifted mail between long haul ships and planetside below them. About 30 minutes before watch change, the chief engineer, who was actually their only fully qualified engineer, called in to report that his assistant was going to begin the diagnostics on the Leonia. Mark relayed the details Tef had given him.

"That's just weird, Mark," the badger's voice croaked over the comm link. "You know as well as I do that couriers have the best computers and nav systems there are."

Mark nodded, even though the engineer couldn't see him over the voice intercom. "Yes, I know, Rob. But something happened to it. See what you can find out."

A few minutes later, the relief crew arrived. "Heading for the mess, Lora?" Mark asked.

The fox girl shook her head and yawned. "I'm on a diet," she told him, "and I need some sleep."

Mark chuckled. "You? The day you need to diet is the day this station takes off at FTL speed heading for Vega. Sweet dreams,

lady."

Lora grinned widely, displaying her teeth and teasing with her tongue. "Enjoy your date with Teftawn," she countered, and scurried off toward crew's quarters, leaving Mark blinking and rattled in the corridor. Shaking his head, he turned toward the messroom, where he found Teftawn lolling at a table, waiting for him. He nodded and went to the counter, keying up tossed salad, warm bread, and a vegetable juice cocktail before taking his tray to join the lion.

Tef had shoved aside a plate that still held a patty of synthetic meat with only a small notch taken out of it. He was nursing a cup of tea or maybe broth of some sort, and eyed the gray meat substitute suspiciously. "What is that stuff made from, anyway?" he asked.

"Vegetable protein, I guess," Mark answered him. "I'm sorry. I didn't promise top quality food. Most of us are used to this stuff and don't think about it. Culture-grown flesh is expensive and difficult to ship and store."

The lion waved a dismissive paw. "Oh, I understand," he growled. "But at least it could be seasoned with something to disguise the taste."

Mark laughed and slid open a panel in the wall next to their table, revealing squeeze bottles of dressings and condiments. "This keeps them from floating away if the artificial gravity goes out," he grinned. "Maybe one of these would help." He uncapped a container of salad dressing and squirted some onto his greens.

Tef brightened a bit, and selected a spicy sauce which he applied liberally to the soy patty. "Duh," he said. "I missed the latch for that door entirely." He took a tentative bite and chewed, wrinkling his nose in an amusing fashion. "Well, that's tolerable, if not actually good," he said after swallowing. "Gotta eat something, I guess."

Mark applied himself to the salad and bread. He was always hungry, but fortunately also young and active enough to stay trim in spite of his appetite. The bread was fairly tasty, since Valden was a grain producing planet.

Tef watched with mild curiosity. "You really like that green stuff?" he asked, sticking out a pink tongue in amusement.

The zebra laughed in spite of himself. "Actually, yes," he smiled. "It's in my genes, of course." He broke off a large chunk of the bread and offered it. "Try this with your protein. It's quite good."

Accepting the proffered bread, the lion sniffed at it. "Smells good," he agreed. "Sort of like Denebian ale, in fact." He took a healthy bite and chewed for a while before swallowing. "Chewy but not bad," he declared.

"Local produce," Mark nodded, pushing his own tray aside. "Fresh stuff, fresh made. Deneb imports our grain for the brewing industry, in fact. So what else did you want to know about Valden 4?"

"I understand there's a little tourist attraction planetside. Some kind of hunting resort?" Tef finished his imitation meat patty and washed it down with the hot beverage, making a face. "Is it difficult to get a reservation or license or whatever?"

With a surprised blink, Mark eyed the lion uncertainly. "You want to go hunting?" he asked. For some reason, that made him feel uncomfortable, even though he knew that hunting on Valden was more like playing laser tag with wild animals than anything else. No animals were actually killed.

It was Tef's turn to look surprised. "Is that so strange? Well, as you say, it's in my genes." He held out a paw and flexed the digits, allowing razor-like claws to emerge and then retract once more.

"OK, I see." The young dockmaster smiled weakly. "I've never been there, of course, but the southern continent is almost entirely a game preserve. Species from Old Terra, both grasslands and forest. The ecology is carefully balanced, and preserving the gene pool is the main purpose of the preserve. Visitors are allowed, and can either shoot photos or use special laser rifles to play hunter. Wildlife are tagged with serial numbers that respond to a laser flash, and the rifle records the serial number of each hit. Trophies are awarded for stalking and shooting various numbers and classes of game. It's all rather pricey, but the funds go to keep the preserve operating."

Tef nodded, smiling. "That's pretty much what I heard about it. I'd like to give it a try. I'm entitled to a few days of leave and no one is pacing the floor waiting for my arrival in the Cascades." He hesitated. "Listen, Mark. Would you consider going planetside with me for a few days? I know as a dockmaster you have a substantial education and as a native of Valden you are more familiar with the planet than I am just from reading about it. My treat as far as expense goes."

The zebra coughed. "Tef," he said, "you can easily hire a trained guide down there." Teftawn shifted his position as if nervous about asking, and a cloud of the leather scent enveloped Mark, distracting him briefly.

"I know that," the lion blinked. "But I like you. I already know you a little. Think about it, OK?"

Before Mark could come up with a reply, the lights flickered and went dark. Dim emergency lighting clicked up at the two exits from the windowless dining area, and his pocket communicator beeped. He pulled it out and opened it. "Partine here," he answered.

"Susan at communications, dockmaster," came the distant response. "We appear to have lost everything but emergency power. No departures or arrivals scheduled at the moment."

The soft hiss of life support recirculating air went silent. "I'm on it, Susan," Mark said. "Hold the fort for a few minutes." He pressed two buttons, and before engineering could answer him, nearly brayed into the communicator. "Rob, what's going on?"

"Main computer shut the power down, apparently," the badger's dry voice responded. "We're on it."

"How long are we good for on emergency power?"

"At least eight hours," Rob said. "No need to start evacuating yet."

"Keep me posted." Mark closed his device and pocketed it. "Looks like your repairs may be delayed a bit," he said, peering at Teftawn through the gloom.

The lion captain's eyes had a definite glow to them, though whether just from reflected light or actually from inside was hard

to say. They blinked once. "Does this happen often?" he asked, with an air of amusement.

"Never before during my two years here. Let's go up to operations. At least there's a window there." They went out to the corridor and proceeded up to the room where they had first met, Mark leading the way since he was most familiar with the station, but also feeling Tef's glowing eyes fixed on the back of his neck. For the first time since his earliest spacer training, he felt trapped inside the cavern of the station, as if the walls were closing in on him and something threatened from behind. The zebra quickened his pace, his rubber non-slip soles squeaking on the plasteel of the floor. It seemed to take forever to cover the hundred meters or so until the operations room came around the horizon, but at last it appeared, and they used the manual release to slide the portal aside and enter.

Susan, communications second and a vixen as dark as Lora was fair, was at the panel and looked up calmly as they walked in. Tef slid the port shut behind them without being asked, and Mark twitched, feeling suddenly trapped.

"I've notified planetside control of the emergency, sir," Susan advised. "They're standing by for our instructions. They want an hour's notice if we intend to evacuate, so they can send a shuttle to pick us up."

Mark nodded. "Tell them it isn't that serious yet, but we'll let them know if it becomes necessary." There were only two ships in dock. Leonia wouldn't be going anywhere with her computers presumably down. The other was an empty freighter waiting for a load of grain to be shuttled up from the surface. It took about 16 cargo shuttles to do the job, and only two had arrived so far. "Have you notified the Beltane of the emergency?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Susan immediately. "Captain Andrus volunteered the services of his engineer if we need him. I let engineering know and they've been talking to Beltane directly."

"Good," Mark said, and took a step backward toward his own desk, only to bump into Teftawn, who was still behind him. He wobbled for a second and the lion put a paw on each of his shoul-

ders to steady him and, forgetting where he was, the zebra startled and jumped.

"Easy there, dockmaster," rumbled Tef. "These are tight quarters." He slipped quietly to one side to allow Mark access to his console, and the zebra wasted no time putting the desk between him and the big captain. The room seemed full of the leather smell, and Mark's head was spinning. He sat in his chair and stared at the blank monitor for a second. Then he pulled out his communicator again and punched the two digit code for engineering.

When Rob answered, Mark simply said "Status, Rob?"

"Still working on it. The problem hit shortly after we hooked the diagnostic lines to Leonia's computer. There may have been an interaction. Our system is still live and running something, but I can't figure out what. There's processing going on, but no output. Jeff here thinks it's some kind of trojan or worm," the badger reported. "We've unhooked Leonia for the moment and are trying to pin it down."

"All right, Rob, keep us informed."

Teftawn's eyes were glowing again in the dimmed emergency lighting. "Damn!" he exclaimed. "I knew better. Those encrypted diplomatic packets were delivered by a kid with no ID badge. The pouch looked authentic, and the cartridges loaded, so I figured they were legitimate. The computer is supposed to recognize the sealed wrappers and know if they are forgeries, but now I wonder. You know there have been hostilities between Cassiopeia and the Cascades for a couple of generations. Not open warfare, but trade interference, piracy, that sort of thing."

Mark looked at his wrist chronometer. Almost an hour had passed since the lights flickered and dimmed. He looked at Susan. "Give Captain Teftawn a line to Rob so he can explain that."

The dark vixen punched buttons and handed a communicator to Tef once she had engineering on the line. The lion explained what had happened, and Rob gruffly acknowledged the information. The badger's voice came over the link. "That may be it," he agreed. "We'll go ahead with a disinfection procedure, then. Halt the main computer and restart it to flush the worm or whatever

it is out of memory. I have a dump captured already, so we can analyze it later."

They waited, watching Valden 4 rise and set twice as the station revolved. Another hour had passed before the comm panel beeped. Susan acknowledged the signal and put Rob onto the speakers.

"It's the damnedest thing I've ever seen," the badger told them. "The computer reboots, and then halts with a prompt on the console here. It says 'Conan of Cimmeria' with a question mark as if waiting for a response. No matter what we do, it just keeps giving back that same prompt.

Tef immediately laughed out loud. "That's the passphrase for the Leonia's computer. What's it doing in your system?" he asked.

"I have no frickin' idea," Rob answered gruffly. "Will you tell us the correct response then?"

"Sure," Tef said. "Give it 'King of Aquilonia by his own hand' and see what it does." He spelled out "Aquilonia" in phonetics.

Susan was giving them a blank look and then Mark recognized the name. He turned to Teftawn. "You're a fan of ancient literature?"

The lion nodded, smiling. "Robert E. Howard, to be exact. Ancient Terra. Twentieth Century."

They waited for a minute, and finally Mark called out "Rob?"

"I've got another cryptic message on the console," the badger told them. "It doesn't make any sense to me."

"Read it off," the zebra said.

"All right. Here it is: 'Now could I, Cascadian, name to thee a man most like this dreadful night, that thunders, lightens, opens graves, and roars as doth the lion in the Capitol.' What in hell does that mean?" The badger's frustration was very evident.

Everyone looked at Teftawn, who shrugged. "No idea," he said. It was now two hours and thirty minutes without full power and computer systems.

"Is there another prompt, Rob?" Mark wanted to know.

"The same question mark. It expects a response," was the reply.

"Hold on, we'll query ground control," Mark told him. He

looked at Susan, who began pressing buttons to bring up the planetside link again. She patched engineering through to a ground administrator, who in turn queried the computer there. No link for the quote was found.

Mark rubbed his forehead, closing his eyes. "Yet it sounds familiar," he murmured. "Cascadian, of course, must have been inserted to refer to the Cascades. I wonder what was there originally."

Tef nodded. "The lion in the Capitol," he said slowly. "The Cascades are no longer under Leandrine control, but they were up until twenty years ago."

Mark was still sitting with his eyes closed, trying to think, only an ear twitching now and then, when the portal opened slowly and Lora entered. "I couldn't sleep any more," she said, pushing the sliding door closed behind her. "No lights, no air. Played back the emergency messages on my communicator and thought I'd better see if you needed me."

Mark read off the cryptic message to her and she frowned. "Sounds downright archaic, at least in the language. How old is it?"

"If that's the original English, it goes all the way back to Terra, before space travel and before the gene wars," Mark told her. "I'm guessing it might be 17th Century at the latest."

Susan pursed her lips. "Not much surviving from that era is there?" she asked.

"More than you might think, actually. I think it's probably Shakespeare, though, and not the bible or Milton. The question is, which play and what context."

Tef nodded. "I think it's Shakespeare, too," he said. "But without any computer access..."

"You asked ground control to check?" Lora wanted to know.

"Yes. They couldn't find it," Susan responded.

"Wait!" Tef exclaimed. "Of course. I have a pocket reader in my cabin on the Leonia that has, among other things, the complete works of Shakespeare on it. If I can get there to retrieve it..."

"Should be able to," Mark said, raising his head. "It will take a couple of manual overrides, but we can get there."

"OK, let's go then," Tef growled.

Mark nodded to Lora. "Take my place here in case things come back up," he said. "Let Rob know what we're doing. It's not dangerous, just slow with no power or security."

Tef opened the portal and waited for the zebra to step through before following him again. Mark continued in the other direction around the rim of the station, away from ops and the sleeping quarters and toward the docking bays. Before they had covered a fourth of the distance, he began to feel closed in again, and sensed the lion right on his tail.

He shivered and stopped, expecting Tef to bang into him, but nothing happened. Turning around, he saw the captain standing about six feet behind him, not following that closely at all. However, his glowing eyes were uncanny in the dim light. Mark mumbled something about hearing things and continued forward. He could smell the leather material of Teftawn's jacket. In fact, he imagined, surely, that he could smell Teftawn, a carnivorous predator riding his trail. No, that was ridiculous. The courier captain was a gentleman and a diplomat. Mark wanted to trust him, not to fear him. The ruff of hairs at the base of his mane insisted on standing anyway. He shivered as they reached the Leonia's berth.

Teftawn noticed the shiver, evidently. "Chilly?" he asked. "No wonder. You don't have that much fur, do you? And that uniform wasn't made for an unheated station." The lion laughed softly and Mark realized that their breath was visible now, misting the air before their muzzles. "It will be even colder on board Leonia. Everything is shut down there," Tef continued.

He unzipped his leather jacket and placed it around the zebra's narrower shoulders. Mark wanted to refuse it, unwilling to wear the hide of anything dead, but it was warm with the heat of the lion's body, and lined with something soft and insulating. He acquiesced, and let Tef operate the manual override to open the hatch to his own ship.

"Wait here," the lion said, his heavy mane spreading now over muscular shoulders and chest. The hatch squeaked as it opened, and Tef climbed into the opening, three steps up, his tail follow-

ing and vanishing into what seemed like total blackness to Mark's eyes. Well, the old sayings claimed that cats could see in the dark, didn't they?

After what seemed like an age, but was only 15 minutes by Mark's chronometer, Tef returned and slammed the hatch behind himself. He handed a miniature electronic reader to the zebra, smiling. "Old Earth literature," he said. "Almost four thousand volumes' worth."

The dockmaster touched the key to illuminate the tiny screen, and realized that he had seen one like it before. "I used one at the university," he said. "Borrowed. I couldn't afford to buy it."

"Get the lights back on, and it's yours," Tef smiled. "I'll pick up another one eventually. You studied ancient literature?"

"I took a full minor in diplomacy and another in history," Mark told him. He was shivering from the cold and had difficulty entering the search terms to find what he wanted.

Teftawn stood behind him in the near darkness, and wrapped massive arms around him gently, letting his mane hang down around Mark's shoulders. "There," the lion whispered, his greater height bringing his whiskers right against the zebra's ear. "That should be warmer for you." His tail curled around so that the tufted end lay against Mark's hooves.

It was warmer all right. It would have been a blessing, but Mark's nerves were already on edge. His reaction made him want to panic, struggle, break free. With force of will, he contained that instinct and focused on the tiny reader. The answer appeared. "It's from Julius Caesar," he said. "Cassius to Casca. Of course. All these names that start with CAS are what was rattling my brain back in ops."

He had to dig under the leather jacket to get to his communicator, but he found it. Still shivering, he punched up engineering. When Rob answered, Mark told him what to try. They started back toward operations, moving slowly, and were still on their way when the lights came back on and the soft hiss of air circulation returned, blanketing the silence with white noise that sounded like thunder after such a long period of time.

The door to operations slid open for them automatically, as it should. Both vixens looked up expectantly as they entered, and Lora raised a quizzical eyebrow, staring down her pointed muzzle at Mark's attire. He blushed and hastily removed the leather jacket from his shoulders, passing it back to Teftawn.

The lion captain grinned at the two foxes. "It was damned cold out there, and I didn't want you to accuse me of letting your dockmaster be frozen into a ponysicle."

Without missing a beat, Lora asked, "So what was the answer?"

Tef made a bow and gestured grandiosely to Mark, who recited it: "A man no mightier than thyself, or me, in personal action; yet prodigious grown, and fearful as these strange eruptions are."

The vixens stared at him blankly. "Julius Caesar, Act 1, Scene 3," he told them. "It's the scene where they are plotting the assassination of Caesar."

Tef nodded. "Julius V was the Leandrine dictator over the Cascades System until about 20 years ago," he said. "He was an isolationist, and blocked all trade agreements with the outside. My guess is that someone wanted to remind the Cascadians not to fall back into their old ways, and set this up to do it forcefully."

"But..." Susan wondered, "how does interfering with the computers on your ship or this station achieve that?"

"It doesn't," Mark answered her. "When Rob's crew made their link to the Leonia's computer, they naturally validated the encrypted seals on the diplomatic data packets. Normally that wouldn't have happened until the packets were transferred to the systems on Cascade 7. The worm was supposed to shut down the government systems in the Cascadian capital, not ours. Call ground control and tell them the emergency is cleared and I'll give them a full report in four hours. Then you're relieved. Lora will take the watch here while the rest of us get some sleep."

"Absolutely, I will. Go find a warm drink first, Mark. Your teeth are chattering," Lora said.

Walking back down the now lighted corridor to the mess room seemed only a tenth of the distance it had been in the

dark. Nonetheless, Mark was still acutely conscious of the lion's presence just behind him. "This is ridiculous," he wanted to tell himself. "Lions haven't been predators upon zebras for over four hundred years back on Terra. And lion morphs were never really predators. Sure, they need to eat flesh or a reasonable facsimile, but we grow that in culture now. He even said he wasn't going to eat me..." Wait, where did that come from? Oh yeah, Tef did say it, didn't he? Yeah.

Finding the reader in his pocket, the dockmaster offered it back to Teftawn who only waved a paw in refusal. "I meant what I said. It's yours now, so enjoy it," the lion told him.

Mark selected hot cocoa, a rare indulgence for him, and Tef got himself some coffee. They sat facing each other, sipping the hot liquids.

"Well done, dockmaster," Tef said to him, smiling so that his sharp fangs showed and Mark shivered again. "You really do know your ancient literature. I hope we get a chance to discuss it when we go down to the surface. I really meant that offer, and I hope you'll accept it." The soft pads of a pawfoot found Mark's fetlock under the table and stroked it slowly.

Mark froze, about to refuse, and then decided that he had to learn to override his fearful instincts if he wanted to have a real career in space. He sipped cocoa, relishing the bittersweet warmth of it and wrapping his hands around the cup. Finally he nodded. "I have R&R time coming," he said, "and now I need it. I'll go."

Teftawn smiled, set his cup down on the table, and reached out with his right paw to stroke Mark's cheek. "Those stripes are fascinating," he said softly. "I've wanted to do that all day. How do we book our time hunting and camping then?"

"Susan or Lora can do it. They are masters of any kind of reservations or communication," the dockmaster answered. He put down his own cup, and laid his hand on the tabletop. It was immediately covered by a big furry paw.

"Good," said Tef. "I can't wait."

The shuttle landed smoothly on the southern continent of

Valden 4. Mark watched Teftawn sorting out their two packs from the jumble of luggage in the forward racks, and followed him down the gangplank. He hadn't set hoof on solid ground for about a year, and it felt good in spite of the excess of gravity. Fortunately, all station crew were required to work out in the gym regularly, so he was not overly weak for the nine-tenths gee of Valden's only habitable planet.

They followed signs to the ground transport that bumped over a couple of miles of road to the main resort hotel, Tef keeping up a constant stream of questions about Mark's foalhood and family on the planet, and how he came to choose a space career. Obviously, the lion wasn't bothered by either the gravity or the heat of the heavy atmosphere.

The reservation clerk checked their identicaps and pulled out a packet of maps. "Camping out, are we?" the burro asked brightly, as if she didn't know it already from what she had just read from her screen. "Here are your maps, and the rule sheets. You can pick up your kit in room four down the hall. Just use these badges." She handed them each a plasteel badge with their name and a number on it. "Oh, and don't miss the restaurant. I hear the trail food they provide is pretty meager, so you may want to have a good lunch before starting out."

Mark trailed behind Tef to the restaurant, where the lion smoothly negotiated a pleasant and private booth for them. A waiter arrived and took their orders. Mark had a very large salad with bread and olive oil, while Tef ordered cultured beef in gravy and a glass of wine. The zebra wrinkled his nose when the plate of meat was set on the table, and Tef laughed.

"Oh come on, Stripes," he said, having taken to calling Mark by that nickname. "You don't have to eat it, and nothing was hurt making it."

"Well, that's true, I guess," Mark had to agree. He tried not to watch the lion appreciatively devouring the roasted flesh, but it fascinated him. Tef only raised an eyebrow at him and stole a chunk of his bread to soak up the gravy.

After lunch, they picked up their rental gear and took another

bumpy transport to the trail head. Mark was glad he had eaten lightly, because the jolting of the ground car was quite upsetting to him. Still, he recovered quickly once his hooves were on the ground again, and they hiked about ten kilometers into the grassland and up to a hilltop before making camp.

Mark prepared a meal from freeze dried rations while Tef laid out bedrolls and played with his laser rifle, sighting at imaginary animals in the distance. Mark himself had chosen the camera option, and took several shots of Teftawn playing with the rifle and grinning toothily. They ate, and slept the sleep of the justly tired.

It was only on the third full day, when Teftawn had already exceeded a thousand points with his laser and Mark had filled an image chip with photos of wildlife, that the fears began to return. The lion was enjoying himself immensely, full of energy and curiosity, large of appetite, and broad of gesture. He continued to quiz Mark about the fauna, the culture, and the history of Valden 4, until Mark had to say he knew no more.

Tef got a blister on his paw from pressing the rifle trigger so often, and produced a sharp beltknife to puncture and drain it. Mark stared, because all weapons, including knives, were forbidden. They had been warned of it repeatedly. Tef noticed the zebra's gaze. "Oh, this?" he asked. "It's just a little manicure tool. I refuse to be caught in the wilderness barepawed." He grinned, showing his fangs, and Mark remembered the razor claws in those big paws. Tef was hardly weaponless, even without the knife.

Late that afternoon, they found a herd of zebras: the original, Terran species, with four hooves and a nasty attitude, from which Mark's ancestral genes had been derived back before the gene wars put an end to morphic experimentation on the human homeworld. Mark had a telephoto, and snapped a dozen photos while Teftawn discovered that the herd was just out of range of his laser rifle.

"Let's stalk them and get closer," the lion whispered. So they crawled through tall grass, Mark leading and watching for snakes which might possibly be present. The thought of the lion right at his tail almost gave him pause, and as the stalking dragged on

for an hour and more, the feelings from the dark corridors of the station came back and crept up from his hindbrain into his consciousness. No matter what you might say, Tef was a predator. He moved like one,thought like one, had the powerful muscles and speed of one. Mark caught himself imagining what it would be like to feel those fangs at his throat, or Tef's claws on his flank, and shivered.

The lion had moved a bit to one side, and they were very close to the unsuspecting herd when a stallion raised his head and tested the air, then gave a scream of warning. Almost as one, the herd of a hundred or more striped creatures wheeled and took off across the grassy plain at a gallop. Mark smelled their fear, and heard them calling to one another. In an instant, he was running after them, and swiftly for a biped. Tef stared for only a second, and followed.

The zebra morph was closing the distance between himself and the herd, but the lion was catching up to him as well. He looked over his shoulder and saw Tef running straight for him, open mouthed and roaring, and picked up his speed when he thought he could do no more. He turned to the side, toward a tumble of rock and brush, hoping that the lion morph's enthusiasm would make him follow the larger herd, but to no avail.

Terrified, with his instincts raging and shouting down all rationality, Mark plunged in among the rocks and hid himself, listening to Tef rustling through the grasses not far away. His heart was pounding like a huge hammer, and he was sure the sound of it alone would give him away. Convinced that the lion must have brought him out here into the wilderness only to kill him for reasons unknown, the zebra lay still, panting as quietly as he could.

There was silence, and he had almost relaxed when the heavy weight of Teftawn's larger body enveloped his back, and he felt those fangs on the back of his neck right through his own heavy mane. Mark squeezed his eyes shut and tried to prepare himself for what he thought was coming.

Tef nipped the zebra's neck lightly, growled with laughter, and turned Mark easily in his arms, only to kiss him full on the mouth.

The lion's tongue was soft and smooth, not like a feline at all. He kissed very well indeed, and Mark melted into his arms, wondering what on earth he had been running from.

They broke the kiss, and Teftawn pinched Mark's cheek with his paw. "That was a fun game," he said. "But I like this one better." He kissed the zebra once more, before asking softly, "Now, why have you been running away from me ever since I set paw on your station?"

A University professor searches in vain for some shred of free will, among his Clockwork creations in his Clockwork world.

The Clockwork Mind

Fugue

The room went silent.

The students, sixteen total, sat dumbstruck, slack-jawed, and ear-perked at the jackal who stood in the doorway. He clawed and clutched at the tight waistcoat which restricted his panting, his free hand propped against the doorjamb at the elbow and holding out a single yellow paper in his paw. "Professor Hobbes?" the jackal asked. "Professor Elijah Martin Hobbes?"

The fox at the head of the room calmly nodded.

"Urgent telegram—just came—had to run," was all the jackal could say more before he dissolved into a series of whooping coughs.

Elijah Hobbes set his chalk down, bowed to his class, and took the small piece of paper from the jackal. He gave the gray-furred canine a pat on the shoulder in thanks and returned to teaching his class.

"Professor Hobbes!"

The fox's ears turned back to the jackal, who was trying to free his neck from a strangling tie.

"Your father."

"Yes, Mr. Razvan, what of him?"

"He is ill."

"I read the telegram."

"He is gravely ill."

"Mr. Razvan, I assure you, my grip on my native tongue has not deteriorated during my tenure at Salem, despite what my mother may believe." He smiled, but his smile only unnerved the jackal further.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

The professor gave a curt nod. "It will take a carriage at least until after class to arrive, considerably longer since we are nearing the end of the week and carriages are in high demand. Therefore, I may either fret needlessly of my father's illness or I can resume teaching. I prefer to teach."

There was silence again, and Mr. Razvan scratched his head. "So, I should call a carriage?"

"Please, Mr. Razvan, as quickly as you are able. Just because I will not leave soon does not mean I do not wish to leave as quickly as possible."

The jackal bobbed his head and backed out of the door, nearly tripping over himself as he closed it.

Elijah Hobbes turned back to his class with a smile. "Well, where were we?"

The normally active class had been stunned into silence. Tails twitched uncomfortably. Elijah looked from student to student, but none met his eyes. "Well?"

A wolf from the back row raised his hand. "Professor, will your father be all right?"

"At the moment, I do not know, and since I have no way of knowing, I do not particularly care. However, I do know that my father would be incredibly disappointed if I let my class worry more about him than about studying clockwork intelligence. Now, someone, where did we leave off?"

Another paw lifted. "We were discussing the issue of free will."

The fox's eyes rolled up into his head as he thought. "Yes. Jamie, you were talking about your clockwork pet, I believe."

"Yes, Professor. You had mentioned previously that clockwork

pets do not have free will, yet my pet acts as though it does."

"Then there we must make a very critical distinction between having free will and acting as though one does. Does anyone know how we might tell if a being has free will or not?"

As more and more in the room forgot about the odd appearance of the jackal and focused on the class, hands started to shift into the air. Elijah selected one at random. "Yes, Alice, what do you think?"

"We'd have to know that a choice is being made."

"Ah, but we can make a decision by flipping a coin, and no one would accuse us of having free will for that."

"It must be a conscious decision."

"At which point we have to ask how we know something is a conscious decision."

The female opened her mouth but her brain could not find the right words to speak with. Her tail hung between her legs in shame.

Elijah, however, nodded to her eagerly. "You are almost there. Just realize that so far, we have defined free will as the ability to make a conscious decision. Yet a machine could be programmed to consider all possibilities and choose the best one too, thereby making a rational decision, but not a conscious one."

The class looked to him expectantly, and he looked to the female with just as much intensity.

She realized that she had to speak and she blurted out, "Free will is the ability to make an irrational decision."

Elijah nodded. "Correct. And this provides ample tests for us. For example: last week, half of you did not complete your reading assignments, when I know that all of you had the time to do so. I am forced to conclude that you illogically did not want to finish your homework. So while you may have hurt your grade, you have helped yourself by proving that you do indeed have free will."

The class laughed. One gestured to the girl and said, "What about her? She never forgets her homework."

"Ah, but she does not always answer a question, despite knowing the answer." He smiled to her and she, blushing, looked away.

"And what about you professor?"

The fox looked up, his brows knitted.

"What have you done illogically?"

"Nothing, of course."

The class only laughed harder.

Mr. Razvan returned five minutes after the end of class. He was no longer panting, but neither was he wearing his tie. "Professor Hobbes," he announced, "your carriage will be here shortly."

"In front of the Hamden building?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Thank you, Mr. Razvan." He turned to the pair of students who had stayed after class. "We shall have to finish our conversation on the way."

They did not resume speaking until outside again, where the cool autumn breeze tickled their lungs and filled their eyes with nature's best oranges and reds.

"The thing I don't understand, professor, is how you can create an A.I. to model real decision making," one of the youths, a fine gray fox, said.

"We do not know if it is truly possible to simulate real decision making yet, Jacob. All clockwork A.I.s as of yet are designed to act like a creature making decisions, but it is only a surface appearance."

"That's what I don't understand, how can it look so real without being real?"

"It could just be a random decision, but added in with physical traits such as a cocked head or a pause while the A.I. is supposedly considering what to do."

"Oh, ok, Professor, thank you!" With that, he skipped away, but the female remained silent, head bowed, snout poked between the covers of a book.

"What is it you were curious about, Alice?"

She closed the book, but kept her head down. "Your talk today, Professor, it sounded a lot like your father's work. In particular, 'Of Choices and Decisions.'"

"You have read it?"

"I've read everything he's written, and everything of yours as well. I was curious, since you reminded me of it. At the end of his paper, he suggests an experiment of studying two individuals: one who mechanically weighs all choices like an A.I., and another who acts on pure instinct. He never wrote a follow-up paper, though, so I do not know if he completed the experiment or not. Do you know?"

"The first individual he's had and studied for many years, the second he has only recently come into the possession of. I expect that if his health holds out, you should see a paper within the year."

"And another question. Do you believe the new gearlock technology they are working on has any applications in artificial intelligence? I'm afraid I don't understand it well: electricity and all that."

"Then my dear, I suggest you make it something you study more than anything else, and perhaps you will be the one to answer that question."

She smiled up at him. "Thank you, Professor." She bowed and walked away just as Elijah arrived at the Hamden building. The carriage was there and waiting for him; the feline driver, dressed in a tight, red-trimmed coat, bowed as he approached. Elijah returned the bow, and checked behind him in case any students came running with a last minute question, but there were none. He ducked into the carriage, careful not to hit his head.

The city of Salem was as peaceful as its name suggested, and Elijah enjoyed a relaxing drive back home, the wind blowing a myriad of sweet street scents to him. There was a marketplace on the way to his home, and the carriage smelled of tomatoes and apples for blocks. Even the usual odor of the felines had been masked, as any man wealthy enough to own his own slaves was also wealthy enough to keep them clean.

The elder Professor Hobbes had purchased his son a three story apartment in the most fashionable district in town, with the

top floor having a wall of nothing but glass overlooking a pond and park. But Elijah did not once admire the view while packing. He slipped three changes of clothes, books to study, some notes, spare paper, and pens into his bag.

The only other thing he took with was his pet, a clockwork drake named Uther that came no higher than the fox's knee. It had two wings, two legs, and was covered in thin brass plates so polished it looked like gold. When it curled about his leg, it appeared to be nothing more than a massive bangle. It clacked its metal beak a few times in an imitation of a yawn, and then went immobile around its master's leg.

The carriage took Hobbes, his one parcel, and the clockwork drake to the train station, where Hobbes embarked on the evening train west through the mountains to Yellowtop Glen. Mr. Razvan had been thoughtful enough to purchase a ticket in first class; however, he had not been thoughtful enough to purchase a single room for the professor to stay in. Hobbes boarded to find his roommate already in the room: a jackal, like Razdan, but deeper in color and dressed from tail to snout in a sailor's uniform of deep blue, slightly threadbare. On the table beside him was an equally dilapidated admiral's hat.

"I had no idea I was to be entertaining a companion of your stature," the professor said, entering slowly.

The jackal, who had been writing using an old fashioned quill, flicked an ear towards the fox. "Of my stature?"

"Rear admiral, I would guess by your hat, if not admiral?"

The jackal looked to the hat, and then resumed writing. "It is my father's."

"Admiral Harrison P. Thulgrave?"

The jackal's quill paused and was laid next to the sheet of paper, the hand that had once held it inching towards the scabbard on his hip.

Hobbes spoke quickly. "He is the only jackal I can recall to have reached that rank."

The hand slowly slid away from the scabbard and back to the pen. "Yes, I am Harrison P. Thulgrave the second, and no damn

admiral, captain, or lieutenant. And who are you then that you recognize my father's name?"

"You don't know who I am?" the fox asked, quite surprised.

The jackal set his pen down and turned to look his room companion square in the eye for the first time. "No," he said. "Should I?"

The fox laughed, and his laugh came out as unnaturally as his smile. He set his bag down gently on the bed, still chuckling. "You would be the first not to. Quite a relief actually. It is rather annoying to travel when everyone recognizes your face and knows your name. Half the time I think that somehow I was an acquaintance of a person when I had never met them before in my life." He sighed and tapped Uther's head twice, causing the drake to wake up and take up a place on the bed. "In any case, I am digressing; my name is Elijah Martin Hobbes, professor of clockwork studies at Salem university."

The jackal thought for a moment. "I recognize the name Hobbes, though as a professor of biology, not clockwork."

"My father," Elijah said, pushing himself to smile. "In fact, I am traveling to see him as we speak."

The jackal nodded, and that put an end to the conversation. He resumed writing his letter, and the fox unpacked his bags, stopping only to show the conductor his fare. Minutes later, the train began to lurch forward, then shuddered to a stop, then started again. The rocking nearly upset Thulgrave's inkwell.

"You said you are a professor of clockwork," the jackal growled, "so can you make this rusty bucket any smoother?"

"Afraid not," his companion returned, holding up a mirror. "Clockwork is naturally smooth, but it does not yet interface well with other machinery."

The jackal snorted. "The wind is more reliable."

Elijah did not bother to correct him. Instead, he focused on his mirror again. The silence made the jackal turn his head to examine the fox again, ears perked. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm practicing my smile."

"Is there something wrong with it?"

"Everything," Elijah said and stretched his grin wide. Thulgrave silently agreed and rushed to finish his letter as quickly as possible. He folded his letter into thirds and scribbled an address on the reverse. When a slave came by to offer assistance at the start of the trip, Thulgrave gave the letter to him asking that it be put on the fastest train to Maryton.

Then the admiral pulled a deck of cards from a pocket and played solitaire to pass the time, doing his best to ignore the pen scratches of his roommate. At dinnertime, a feline came in, holding out a tray of food for them both. Each of the canines took their food (hot soup, bread, and a slice of cured ham) with thanks to the chef.

As the feline turned to leave, she stumbled and a container of soup spilled onto the professor's legs, his white breeches immediately turning yellow. The feline fell to her knees, set the tray down, and began to mop up the soup, profuse apologies pouring from her lips. The professor plucked the cloth from her paws and smacked her out of the way.

Thulgrave leapt to his feet, but then froze. He had intended to stop Elijah from hurting the slave further, but the professor made no move towards her: his teeth were gritted together harshly and his eyes wide, while he scrubbed at his pants with hands clenched so tight that Thulgrave could see the outline of the fox's carpals. The feline had shoved herself into a corner, trying to get as far from the crazed fox as she could.

Thulgrave took a cautious step forward and placed his hand on the fox's shoulder. "The stains are already in," he said. "You won't get them out."

"I know," the fox said.

"Then stop."

"I can't stop."

"You can't get it out."

Elijah gave a fierce growl and stood straight up, scaring the feline so badly that she covered her face with her hands. But he only threw the cloth into her lap. "Come back in ten minutes. You will take my pants for cleaning and bring them back tomorrow

morning."

"Now hold on." The jackal stepped forward, shielding the feline from the professor. "You have no authority to command her like that."

The fox continued to simply stare through the jackal's blue-clothed body at where the feline cowered. "Ten minutes."

The jackal drew his sword, shoving the point against Hobbes' neck. "I said, you have no auth—"

The fox's eyes snapped upwards, piercing yellow boring into the jackal's own. "Awfully abolitionist of you, admiral. What did you say you did? Privateer work perhaps?"

The jackal's grip on his sword tightened, a thin trickle of blood turning the tip red.

But the sword slipped down as the conductor burst into the room, thundering, "What is going on here?"

Elijah and Thulgrave both nodded to the conductor, the latter hiding his word behind his thigh.

"A friendly fight that I'm afraid has gotten out of hand," Elijah said. "My apologies for involving your slave in it at the wrong time."

The conductor looked to the cowering feline and jerked his thumb to the hallway. The feline slid out silently, clutching the empty soup bowl to her chest. "As for you two, I expect a safe journey for everyone. There will be no duels aboard this train. Wait till we reach Silvana at least, and then kill each other on the soil." That said, he shut the door and the two could hear his footsteps receding.

Thulgrave slipped to the door, ear tight against it. When he was sure the conductor had gone, he shoved his blade back under the absurdly grinning fox's jaw. "What do you want?" he hissed.

"My breeches cleaned."

"What?"

"My breeches are dirty, and I would like them cleaned."

The blade pressed harder. "What do you know about me?"

"Nothing other than the fact that your father was a slave trader and you appear to be a slave runner. That and your name, Mister

not-an-admiral Thulgrave the second."

"Many would kill to know that."

"And you would kill for that not to be known, it seems. However, that is unnecessary. I will not tell anyone."

The blade dipped. Thulgrave clutched the hilt tighter as his sweat slickened the leather strap there. "How can I be certain?"

The fox tapped his right shoulder. "Help me out of my clothes," he said.

The jackal helped but only with one paw, the other keeping the blade firmly aimed at the fox's throat. Together they removed the fox's coat, waistcoat, and shirt until nothing covered his upper body but his fur. Then Elijah turned around. "On my right shoulder, just above the scapula," he said. "It's in against the skin."

Thulgrave put his hand at the spot and started to hold the fur down to see the skin. There were letters there, embossed in black: ETA-01N. "What is this I'm seeing?"

"A serial number." The fox picked up his clothes, starting to fit the shirt on again.

"That still does not explain why I should trust you."

"If I told the authorities that I suspected you of taking slaves back to Castrovalva, I have no doubt you would be arrested within the week, perhaps hung for treason. Similarly, if you tell anyone about Salem University's most famous professor being branded, I am certain I would lose my career and be relegated to one of the laboratories."

"You sound like you would enjoy experimenting."

"I would most likely be the one experimented upon, Mr. Thulgrave."

Thulgrave considered this a moment, then sheathed his sword and helped the fox redress.

The feline returned a few minutes later, shaking from head to foot as she asked for Hobbes' pants. He handed them to her and said, "I'm sorry about striking you earlier."

She merely nodded and rushed from the room as soon as possible.

Thulgrave watched the fox with wonder, but the latter returned

to his work without giving the jackal another glance. "I'm impressed you apologized."

"It was the proper thing to do."

"Most would not apologize to a feline."

Elijah said nothing more and so neither did Thulgrave. The jackal finished his game of cards, the fox finished his notes, and both dressed for bed. Thulgrave was relaxed under layers of covers, while Elijah slept atop his, face up, hands on his chest, tail held straight between his legs, as immobile as a corpse.

"Why are you branded?" Thulgrave asked, not long after the lamp had dimmed.

Elijah took a moment to respond. "All inventors brand their works. Uther —" he gestured to the clockwork drake, "— bears mine; I bear my father's."

The jackal did not respond directly; whatever he thought about his companion being branded, he did not allow himself to say aloud. Instead he said, "Your eyes."

"Begging your pardon, what about my eyes?"

"When you smile naturally, some of the muscles around your eyes lift. If you are forcing yourself to smile, typically they don't."

"Useful to know."

"Useful for lying," Thulgrave said and rolled in his bed. The next thing Elijah heard was the jackal's snores.

Outside, the trees rushed by, growing sparser and thinner as the clockwork train ground its way up the mountainside. The train crossed onto the plain beyond, rumbling towards Silvana.

"How long are you aboard?" Hobbes asked after breakfast.

"Until Maryton."

Hobbes lifted an eyebrow, though his eyes were firmly fixed on the mirror, where he practiced raising his eyes. "Quite a long distance for a seaman."

"My wife is there. She is expected to give birth within the week. My first child."

"Congratulations."

"Are you just saying that, or do you really mean it, professor?"

"It is the expected response. To not say it would be an insult."

"That doesn't answer the question."

"I believe it did. In any case, why have your family so far inland?"

The jackal considered being angry at the fox for not giving him an adequate response but chose to forget it. "So that my son—or daughter, since I never trust these folk doctors to get it right—should never turn out like me. Or my father."

"You are not proud of what he did?"

"What do you think?" The jackal's voice was tinged with a snarl.

The fox put down his mirror, concentrating now on his memory. "Admiral Thulgrave may have been a slave trader, but as I understand it, he was never supportive of the slave trade and was a firm abolitionist until the day he died. I take it that was not enough for you, however. Did you ever confront him about your feelings?"

"Awfully personal question, isn't it?" Thulgrave picked some of his breakfast out from between his teeth.

"I did show you my brand, Mr. Thulgrave."

"How many others know about that?"

"My father."

The jackal stood and looked out the window at the fields passing by, where crooning slave songs filtered through the air. The songs did not stay constant, but changed from mile to mile, a never-ending refrain of labor.

"No," Thulgrave said with a sigh. "I never confronted him. I didn't know how he would take it. I didn't know how I would take it, really. It was all I could do not to scream at him every time he returned, knowing that he had just brought over another fleetful of kids from Castrovalva to spend the rest of their lives in slavery. I found a job asea as quickly as I could, just so I could stop seeing him. Was only fifteen when I first set out. Didn't come back until I heard he'd been killed."

"I heard a slave killed him."

"Yes, and afterwards the feline was so torn by grief that he hung himself. The body was still there when I got back, but father had

already been buried." Thulgrave moved his chair up to the window so he could better listen to the songs from the fields. His eyes slid shut. "I was back at sea two days later. And I've hardly ever left it. But even though I made my life the opposite of my father, I am no better for it. The sea kills men inside."

"My students say the same things about my classes."

Thulgrave allowed himself a smile. "So I swore I wouldn't let my children have any part in it. I moved Stella to Maryton as soon as it was possible. To be honest, I hope my child hates me. That way they'll never touch the sea at all." He hung his head. "The world is mad and we are all mad to follow it."

"The world runs itself perfectly well without our help. It's the people in the world who tend to be mad for thinking we can control it."

Thulgrave looked to the fox and laughed. "I think you're more right than even you realize."

"No, because I realize the full bulk of what I am saying. In any case, we should be arriving at Silvana soon, should we not? I need to make some purchases."

"Within the hour."

Silvana bustled with activity by midday. It lay along the Golden Fields stretching from Cape Quiet Waters in the south to the fertile lands further north. There were at least three train tracks running north-south through Silvana, and one heading east-west, from Salem to Silvana to Yellowtop Glen and on through the mountains to the forests beyond.

Elijah breathed through his mouth the entire time while in Silvana, but even then the stench still reached him. Silvana was the first destination for slaves leaving Cape Quiet Waters and the first touch of civilization they saw (for Cape Quiet Waters was called uncivilized, even if one were feeling generous). They were kept in long stalls alongside the road, unwashed, untended, unclothed—a seething mass of crying, sobbing, occasionally screaming feline children. The streets were almost as bad. Elijah kept his gaze directly ahead, for he knew that if he looked at his feet, he

would not stop running until he reached someplace to wash.

Thankfully, the apothecary was not far. The stern proprietor regarded the well-dressed Elijah as one might a pair of gnats hovering over dinner. "Whachu want?"

"My father's slave has a bad case of dyspepsia. Do you have some Wollum root?"

"Yeh," the proprietor said and handed him a corked metal vial. "Felines only, that stuff. Lethal fer anyone else."

"I will take every precaution," Hobbes responded, lifting his eyes as he had practiced, then returned to the train before it left.

Thulgrave made no inquiry into the purchases; he had no interest in them. The train picked up speed again, lurching every now and then in a way that made Thulgrave's stomach do cartwheels. He had just been settling down for a sandwich when a lurch of the train nearly made him smash his head against the table. He growled and muttered, then stopped in an instant as he spied something leaping at him.

"Hah!" He ducked back and drew his sword, holding his sandwich high overhead. The tip of his blade was held firmly against the nostrils of the clockwork drake, Uther.

"It does not understand the idea of a weapon, Mr. Thulgrave," Elijah said calmly.

"All the same to you, I'll keep my sandwich out of reach."

"It does not understand the idea of food either."

"Then is there something it does understand that will make it go away?"

Elijah whistled shrilly and the drake flapped its wings once then landed on its master's shoulders.

"Why in the world did you design that thing anyways?" Thulgrave slowly sheathed his sword and resumed eating his sandwich.

Elijah gently stroked the drake's muzzle, causing it to return the stroke affectionately. "It had been said among various authorities on clockwork that though it could make truly intricate designs, it could never create something that would even approximate a

mind. I knew they were wrong, and created Uther to prove it. It was actually its creation which earned me my tenure at Salem."

"He seems to truly have a mind to me."

"And yet he truly does not. I merely programmed him to respond as though he did."

"Is there a difference?"

Hobbes was struck by the question. No student had ever asked such a question of him before; they had all taken the professor's word to be golden and true. Elijah found himself completely unable to answer, except to say, "Perhaps not." He flicked back through his notes and looked up his comments from the previous day, when he spoke to his class about free will. He remembered having said that a clockwork A.I. was programmed to cant its head and delay its answer to give the appearance of making a decision, but what if canines and felines too canted their heads and delayed their answers just so those around them would know they were making a decision? He let that train of thought carry him through seven papers worth of notes.

When the stroke of genius petered out, Hobbes put away his pen and watched the trees rush by. What few evergreens remained this high up were tall and wiry, with green stiletto-like leaves. "I thank you for that inspiration," Hobbes said. "Unfortunately we will be parting ways tomorrow."

"Getting off at Yellowtop Glen?"

"My father's home is there."

"Odd place for a biology professor."

"He retired long ago. His private laboratory is built into the mountainside."

"You'll have to point it out to me before the train departs."

Elijah did. As the mountains grew as thick about the train on the following day as the trees had once been, he leaned out the window and pointed to the protruding red block built onto the steep mountainside. "There," he said.

"Wonderful view," Thulgrave said, resting his blue-coated arms on the sill, the dull brown mountains reflecting in his golden eyes. "Things like this almost make me wish I spent more time at land

and less at sea."

"Perhaps you should. Your son may benefit from it."

Thulgrave recoiled from the window as though shot. "No," he said. "I told you: I don't want my son turning out like me. I intend to do my job so well that there is nothing left for him to do at sea." He gripped his sword's scabbard and lifted it into his sight. "Then I can be rid of all of this."

"Perhaps that will work, Mr. Thulgrave, but perhaps your son will hate you so much he'll become a slave trader himself."

"I do what I must."

"I'm certain your father did too."

The jackal put his scabbard back at his side and looked to the fox. "How ill did you say your father was?"

"The telegram was not precise on the point, but given the urgency with which it was sent, I believe he is in his final days."

"Then if you have peace to make with him, make it. You likely won't have another chance to." Thulgrave then set himself down playing solitaire and did not speak again.

The train slowly pulled into the station, which rested on the only level part of the entire town, and, in fact, just a half mile outside the town proper. Whereas Salem was opulent and Silvana bustling, Yellowtop Glen was neither. Once a former mining site, the town had never dredged itself up from its roots. Old miners clung to the land as though it were the only thing keeping them from certain death. Slaves who had grown too old and useless for the ever-more tasking work in the mines loitered in the street, curled under thin blankets and rotting clothes. Plagues ran rampant, death was everywhere. The only reason why the town survived at all was because it was placed along the only path through the mountains for miles around.

Elijah waved a polite goodbye to the jackal, and the jackal returned a nod. No words were exchanged, just a knowing gaze which carried with it a subtle threat: if ever you tell my secret, I'll tell yours too.

Then the train was gone, and the jackal with it. Hobbes waited

until the train had rumbled away, then pulled out a small brush and dusted himself off. He set off down the long trail with bag in one hand and Uther perched, sleeping, on the other shoulder.

On the edge of town, a coach awaited him, driven by a dour-looking feline with skin hanging loosely from his bones. "Your mother sent for you," the driver said.

"Of course she did," Elijah responded, bowed to the driver, and entered the coach. The drive was pleasant enough; the roads were firm and without potholes, though the scenery left much to be desired. Outside of town, however, the roads deteriorated while the scenery improved: no more dead bodies at least. Hobbes Manor was only a short distance from town, a rust-colored three-walled brick shoved into the mountainside, with small etchings in its imposing edifice for windows and a small veranda.

Only one garden existed beside the manor. Supposedly it had once been there to emulate the gentry villas in the valley, but whoever had started it (Elijah supposed his mother) had long abandoned it and left the roses, carnations, and ivy to choke one another out. The stairwell up to the front door had met a similar fate, and its once proud iron bars and painted statues had rusted and flaked away. Elijah did his best to ignore it all. He stood at the base of the stairs and cleaned his jacket of dust again, but this time he was watched. A single yellow eye stared at him from above.

Elijah watched the eye back, but it never moved and it never blinked. With slow, paced steps, he walked to the door and knocked, and the eye disappeared.

From inside the household came voices:

"Who is that? Elijah? Elijah, come home? Oh, RECCS, be a dear and answer the door, will you?"

"Don't worry, Miss Hobbes. I'll get it for you."

"Thank you, Genivae."

The door opened. A sheepish feline female stood there in a simple cloth dress. She bowed. "Welcome home, Master Hobbes." She backed off and beckoned Elijah inside.

Behind her was a wolf unlike any wolf Elijah had ever encountered before. To even call him a wolf (or a him) might have been

stretching the definition of "wolf" too far. Chunks of his body were simply missing, gone. In their place were clicking clockwork and snapping gearlock. Only one eye—the yellowed eye—remained. The other was a rough construction of mechanical and electrical pieces. So too were fingers, a foot, pieces of the pelvis, torso, and shoulders replaced in this manner. All in all, maybe half of the wolf's original body was left, the other half now a work of mechanics and circuitry that made Uther pale by comparison.

"Hello, Genivae," Elijah said, though he did not take his eyes from the wolf. "I see RECCS is as healthy as ever."

"And as silent too, I'm afraid," came a light voice from Elijah's right.

Elijah dropped his parcels and hugged his mother tightly.

"It is good to see you again, dear," his mother said as the hug ended.

"I wish circumstances were better, though."

Mrs. Hobbes smiled weakly and stroked the side of her neck. "As do I. Come, come, let's not think about that now. You're here. That's good. That's happy. Genivae, won't you show my son to his room." There was no hint of a question in her voice.

Elijah picked up his one bag again, and followed the feline to his room. The wolf followed them both, feet thudding on the floor.

Elijah's room had very little inside: a bed, a dresser, a window, a closet, and nothing more. Even those simple items were models of economy; the bed was just long enough for him to rest comfortably in, the closet just wide enough to hang the clothes he owned, the window just wide enough to permit the proper amount of light. All of it simple and Spartan. "Thank you, dear," he said. "I'll be fine now."

The slave bowed and left, while RECCS remained in the doorway, his massive frame filling to the doorjambs. Both eyes were focused on Elijah. Neither eye blinked.

Elijah sat on the edge of the bed. "Pray tell, how does my father's latest masterpiece feel?"

The half-wolf half-machine did not respond except to swivel its ears forward to focus on the fox.

"I wanted to thank you for staying here. Father needs something to occupy his attentions in his old age. I know you may not enjoy it—or your existence at all—but I thank you for it nonetheless."

"What's this now?" Mrs. Hobbes pushed her way past the massive wolf and gave her son a more proper welcome: a large hug and several kisses. She shooed RECCS away and turned with a smile to her son. "I don't know why you insist on talking with that thing."

"Because he is more than just a thing, mother."

"Dear," his mother said, "I may not have the same credentials as you or your father, but I know intelligence when I see it. That drake of yours has more brains than that wolf."

"Mother, that drake has more brains than me."

She laughed. "Eli, please don't joke like that."

"When have you ever known me to joke, Mother?"

The laugh died; her smile faded. She tried playing with the bow at the front of her dress. "Then I wish you would not be so pessimistic. These times are hard enough as is."

"I'm sorry, Mother."

"Are you? Really?"

Elijah smiled—a fake smile with eyes lifted—and said, "Yes, of course, Mother."

A smile—a real smile—returned to his mother's face. "Well, in any case, you should see your father before you go to sleep. I told him you were back, but I think he was only semi-conscious at the time. He should be better in a few minutes, if you'd like to wait in the den."

The den of Hobbes Manor was a secluded room, little more than a passageway between the house proper and the master bedroom, but with two couches, a fireplace, and several bookshelves lit by candlelight. No one came in or out of the den unless to go to the elder Hobbes' private bedroom. RECCS had followed Elijah there, but his reasons for doing so were inscrutable.

The two sat, facing each other: the mechanical wolf and the mechanical-mind fox. They could both stare at each other, so

they did. They could both breathe together, so they did. But only one could talk, so he did: "Your real name is Cory, isn't it? Cory Shrdlu? No one calls you that anymore, though. Perhaps because Cory Shrdlu is gone, and all that remains is RECCS. What do you think?" Elijah found himself wishing for a piece of paper to take note of his questions. But he had none. "Perhaps when you come to stay with me, I will simply call you Cory. My father won't live long, and then all of his possessions will pass to me: this house, these couches, that beautiful girl Genivae, even you, RECCS. It will be my duty then to finish my father's experiments, and I am sorry for that. You will have to continue to live. At least I hope to be a better host to you than my father."

The wolf remained motionless except for the tick-ticking of its gears.

"If it helps, I know how you feel. Your mind is fighting the constraints built around it. So is mine. The difference between us then is that you have far better chance of escaping your constraints, since they are only gears and circuitry, while I must live within mine. I know I do not look like a prisoner, but there is a difference between acting like one is free and being free. I know that.

"Everything in my life has been planned. My father knew I would become a professor long before I was born, knew I would live in Salem, knew I would publish my first paper at sixteen. It makes me wonder. What did he intend for me to do now? What does he intend for you?"

The door to the elder Hobbes' room cracked open. "Master Elijah? Your father is awake now."

The fox stood and patted the wolf on the shoulder, whispering in his ear, "We will see what he intended."

Elijah bowed to the slave who stood in the doorway. "I would like to be alone with my father, please," he said, and the slave obeyed the unspoken command to leave.

Inside, Elijah found his father resting back in his bed, fifteen pillows supporting his body on all sides so he could not even turn over if he desired to. The face was identical to Elijah's, except there was more gray above the elder Hobbes' lips and the younger

Hobbes' fur was finer. Yet despite the illness, the elder Hobbes had an air of vigor about him that refused to be shoved aside.

"Hello, Father."

"Elijah?" The milky eyes swirled around. "Elijah, come closer, please."

The fox inched closer until he stood just beyond his father's weak grasp.

"Let me touch you."

Elijah extended his hand. His father touched it and ran his thumb across the back of Elijah's hand.

"It is you. I knew you'd come back."

"You know all about me, Father."

The elder Hobbes laughed, but it came out as more of a cough. "No, not at all," he said speaking as though a teacher to his pupil. "Surely Uther does things which surprise you? He may be your creation, but you can't guess everything he does ahead of time."

"Ahead of time, no; after, yes. I can always trace his actions back."

"As can I with you. You came back because it was the proper thing to do."

"I don't always do the proper thing, Father."

"You do when it is proper not to do the proper thing." He smiled, showing off broken, blackening teeth. "I made you well, Elijah. You have at your fingertips all the accolades which are out of reach for the rest of us." He coughed and gestured to a newspaper resting on the bed stand next to him. "Your mother read to me the article about your most recent paper. I couldn't have been prouder. We have missed you terribly."

Elijah had no response to that. He did not feel proud; he felt nothing at all. But he did remember Thulgrave's words about making peace. "Father, I never asked you before: why did you make me?"

The elder Hobbes laughed again, his scientific impulse giving him still more energy. He even managed to sit up against the pillows. "You see? I knew the curiosity would get to you sometime. I had a bet with Doctor Sargun that you would eventually ask that.

Even without emotions, Elijah, even without the burning drive, you are curious." A smile creased his withered face, a smile of age-long satisfaction. "Why, though? To prove it could be done. I am a scientist, after all. And also, to give my son the best in life. I gave you a brain that would surpass all in intelligence, in faculty, in reason."

"And no emotions to get in the way."

"No, no emotions to cause you pain." Though the fox's eyes were milky, they focused hard on his son, the scientific vigor replaced by cold reason. "You may not feel joy or happiness, but neither do you feel sadness or regret or anger or hate. Son, this world is torn apart by these emotions. Nations destroy nations in their fury, and old men like me have nothing left but our what-ifs and should-have-beens. You are spared all that."

Elijah nodded. "I see," he said, and he was truthful in saying it. "But now you have RECCS to work with."

"Indeed. As much as you are my project, you are my son. I had to let you go sooner or later. RECCS though, he is quite different, and oh how different. He's developed a new brain supplemented by clockwork and gearlock technology."

"Supplemented by?"

"Oh yes. You would like this. While most of the Robotic Experimental Constructs were mindless automatons, he retained some portion of will. He acts. And in the years since his making, the clockwork and gearlock portions in his brain have been molding and reshaping themselves to replace what he lost. Originally, he showed no ability to hear or understand words, but now he can. It is as though he is growing a new brain formed completely of clockwork and gearlock. It needs more study, though."

Elijah's voice was tight. "Study how?"

"Removing the new portions and replacing them exactly as they were when he was first constructed. I only hope my health holds out long enough for the entire procedure. The doctor tells me I should die within the month, but I haven't felt this good in years. I have you back at my side, and I have RECCS before me."

"Does he, now?" The elder Hobbes continued speaking, but

Elijah had stopped listening. His body had gone cold. His father wanted to recreate RECCS the way he had originally been, force him to go through his hell all over again, just when he was on the verge of breaking free.

Elijah pulled the vial of medicine from his pocket and muttered an apology to Genivae for using it. Then he upturned the contents into a glass of water on the bed stand. His father was still talking, but he had stopped listening. He was calculating.

But all his calculations came up short. What started as a simple equation became a complex analogy: Was RECCS better off in his hands, or his fathers'? Were the slaves better off under Thulgrave the first? Who hated his father more, Elijah or Thulgrave the third? Was he on the verge of discovery? Was he Alice? Was he damnable? Was he Razvan? Was he RECCS? Was he making a decision? Did he have free will? Was he Elijah Martin Hobbes?

No, he decided.

I am just ETA-01N, obsessive, brilliant, and emotionless.

Nothing but a machine.

Elijah held out the glass of water. "Mother sent me in with medicine. You need to drink up."

The old fox took the cup his son offered and drank sadly. "Ugh, even more bitter than the last brew."

"It will make you feel better." Though Elijah knew it would not be seen, he practiced lifting his eyes anyways. "I need my sleep, father. It has been a long journey."

"I understand. We can talk more tomorrow. I'm sure you'd love to see all the notes I've compiled on RECCS"

Elijah stood.

"Son."

Elijah froze, heart pounding, eyes wide—all the reactions of fear, without fear itself.

"I just want you to know. Your mother and I—we loved you. We always have."

Elijah's body calmed and his heart slowed. "Unfortunately father, I never loved you."

Elijah left without turning again, but he knew his father was

smiling. RECCS was still there in the lounge, sitting, gazing at the spot where Elijah had been. Elijah shut the door quietly and resumed his place. "I didn't have a choice, Cory. I had to do it. Even now, I still can't make a choice."

Then there was silence. Elijah watched the wolf, and the wolf watched back. In time, Mrs. Hobbes arrived, and Elijah told her that when he left, his father was trying to sleep again. Mrs. Hobbes entered the room. A few moments later, Elijah could hear her crying. His face remained as impassive as the wolf's.

"I'm sorry, Eli..." his mother said, returning to the room and trying to brush the tears from her fur. "He's gone."

Elijah stood and welcomed his sobbing mother in a hug. "It's ok, Mother. I got to talk with him one last time. And he died in his sleep, like he should."

Elijah smiled, and his eyes lifted, but for the first time he did not need to force them to go up.

It was completely natural.

Pandora was trying to tell Cassie something...her dreams made that clear. But would she get the message before Pandora's life destroyed everyone Cassie loved?

A Song for Pandora

Kevin Frane

Cassie stood in the center of the silent city. The sky was blue, cloudless, without even the hint of wind or breeze to make any sound. There was no sound. There was only Cassie and the city, alone, together.

The city had a name. The city had a dozen or so names in a dozen or so languages, but only one of those names was permissible, for all of the other languages were Forbidden Knowledge, and Cassie was not meant to know them. Nobody was meant to know them, even now. Cassie did know them, however, in the depths of her mind. She could not speak them aloud if asked, but within her memories, that knowledge was housed, safely kept away from the empty outside world.

Each skyscraper cast an imposing shadow in the sun. It was just after midday, on this cloudless day, which let Cassie see each of those buildings in both the light and the dark. The effect was reminiscent of the pelts of certain species: wolves, foxes, and some of the great cats, single entities that showed variation on a single form for each single individual. Of course, there were no wolves or foxes or cats here today, for it was Cassie's time to be alone in the city, to see it for what it was, what it had been, and what it would never be.

Cassie's own form was hardly uniform, itself. As the daughter of ferrets, she too was a ferret, and so she had of course inherited

those traits that befit that species. Most notable (especially now, when she was clothed), was the mask of fur around her eyes—eyes that now surveyed the empty city with a cold, impersonal stare. All throughout modern history—throughout all of recorded history, and probably even for a time before then, the species whose children were born to have masks around their eyes—the raccoons, the ferrets, the pandas and the rest—were thought, either in superstition or stereotype, to be untrustworthy. Even as civilization grew, predictably, more civilized, those notions never fully died out, but today, of all days, Cassie couldn't think of herself as anything but the pinnacle of trust.

Without conscious thought or any direct intention whatsoever, Cassie began to lift off of the ground. Her feet simply lost their purchase on the blank asphalt below, and she went up. She began to turn slowly, clockwise, viewing the buildings around her in three hundred sixty degrees of motion as she rose higher and higher, seeing more and more of the city as she cleared the tops of buildings, looking past them and looking between them.

She was hundreds of feet above the tallest building when the fire started. It didn't spark and grow, but rather, the whole city—all at once—was ablaze in the blink of an eye. It was no longer just past midday; it was now just before sunset, with the horizon burning a color similar to that of the city itself.

This is the way of things. This is the way of all things. Every city on this world, including this one, with its dozen or so unknown names, meets this end at some point. Every person in this city and in every other city meets with an eventual end, and the only thing left to continue on into perpetuity is the knowledge of what these things were, so that others may know what was and what might have been.

The ferret woke with a start, her heart hammering in her chest so solidly that she could hear and feel her pulse in her ears. The burning city was gone, and though its image lingered for a few seconds, it slowly faded away as her pulse slowed. Once she took a few looks around her bedroom and saw for herself that everything was okay, she finally believed it.

Turning to look at the clock on her night table, she sighed with frustration. In only a couple of hours, she was going to have to wake up and get ready for her day's classes at the Academy, and after such a panicked waking, she doubted whether she'd get enough restful sleep in the time she had left. Resigning herself to an unknown outcome, she let her head fall back against her pillow, and she closed her eyes, lying there for a few minutes longer before she finally fell back asleep.

Cassie woke up to find that, while she hadn't gotten as much rest as she needed, she'd still gotten more than she'd expected, and that made her happy enough. She took her time getting ready, figuring that rushing would only draw more attention to her tired and harried state. Perhaps she could nap through one of her morning classes if she got a seat behind some tall wolf or tiger.

She remembered the eerie dream she'd had, but it didn't haunt her. Unsettling as it may have been, she found herself more intrigued by the imagery than anything else. There were plenty of psychological theories (conflicting ones, even) that tried to explain why people dreamed the things they did, and she almost wished that she had an instructor to bounce this particular dream off of, not because she felt like she needed it deciphered, but because she was curious what someone else might have to say about it.

In the absence of such an instructor, she settled for Oak Mayrow, her classmate, good friend, and companion. She told the portly wolf the story of her dream just as they sat down to eat lunch together at the campus cafeteria.

"You have to admit, it's sort of weird," Oak said when she was finished. "I mean, I'm not saying that you're crazy or anything, but that sounds a lot weirder than anything I've ever dreamed."

Cassie thought that Oak looked cute when he was being sheepish. Most other girls at the Academy probably didn't think he was much to look at: he was chubby (though certainly not grotesquely obese), and he was also just rather plain, with fur that was a boring wash of gray and white, and mannerisms that didn't serve to draw him out from a crowd. It was probably that unabashed realness of

his that was the foundation for Cassie's tiny crush on him.

"What sort of things do you dream about?" she asked him with a smile.

Her smile had caught him off guard, and his embarrassed grin grew. "Well, you know," he murmured. "Stuff. The usual stuff." He looked back at her for another second or so, and then chuckled, "The usual stuff that Academy-aged guys tend to dream about."

"The stuff that you'd be embarrassed to admit to a young lady?" Cassie suggested. Her own smile showed a few more teeth, and her eyelids narrowed. It would probably be another month or so before Oak noticed the signals she was sending his way, so she may as well have fun with him while that grace period lasted.

"Hey, only some of the time," the wolf said. His smile shifted toward something more innocent, and he leaned forward onto one elbow, while his other hand poked at his lunch. "But hey, I think everyone has dreams that they don't understand, from time to time."

That night, it was not the streets of the empty city where Cassie found herself; instead, she was inside, and she was most decidedly not alone. She was looking out over a city again, but it was a very different, very much alive city, and instead of flying above it, she was merely looking out through a high-rise window.

Her eyes swept the bustling cityscape below. It was nighttime, so a myriad of lights—some stationary, some dashing wildly by—filled her field of view, from just below the building she was in all the way to the city's edge at the foot of some distant mountains.

Behind her, people were talking, and they were all very busy. One of the people, she knew, was her father (he was the only other ferret in attendance). Her father was always a busy man, and had always been one ever since she had been a little girl. He tried to make as much time for his dear daughter as he could, but he was an important man in addition to being a busy one, and some things couldn't be avoided.

This current conversation was one such instance. Her father was trying his best to be firm and final without resorting to an-

ger, but his patience was wearing thin, because the people he was talking to were being very stubborn indeed. They were trying to confront him about the Forbidden Knowledge.

By its very nature of being forbidden, these men were not supposed to be asking him about it. Father, of course, didn't actually know the Forbidden Knowledge, but the men knew that he had access to it, even if he'd never looked at it (well, not all of it) himself. He was trying to keep that knowledge safe, but the very fact that other people knew that he had it meant that he needed to try harder.

The knowledge that the men sought—the knowledge itself—was, as everyone in the room knew, in the mind of the girl, and Cassie knew, as the men talked about her in her presence without ever offering to include her in the conversation, that she was the girl named Pandora.

Whatever these men tried to threaten, though, there were certain steps that they couldn't take. They couldn't kill her, certainly, because then the knowledge would die with her. They couldn't kill her father, at least not without making it extremely difficult to retrieve the information that Pandora carried. Also, they couldn't try bribery, because money was not an object where her father was concerned, and moreover, what price could one put on knowledge that was a crime to know?

One of the men was a rotund raccoon, with a determined glare in his loathsome eyes. He didn't look like the kind of man that someone would send to make threats, despite how angry and imposing he looked. Something about him looked wrong. He looked more like a disgruntled office worker who had gotten fat from sitting on his ass all day, and who was bitter over the fact that he'd been unable to grab a mate after his last girlfriend had left him, when he'd been a thinner and gentler man.

They will always come for me. They will come for me, because I am Pandora, and I possess that which has been denied to others for centuries. The allure of something forbidden will ensure that they will always come.

The fat procyonid raised one of his meaty paws. If the motion

hadn't been so slow, an onlooker might almost think he was moving to strike. Surely, though, he knew as well as anyone else in that room that Pandora's father and Pandora herself could both move quickly enough to dodge such a crude attack, and then kill the man before he had time to regain his balance.

Somehow, though, Pandora knew that this raccoon was far more dangerous, in some unknown way that had nothing to do with any threat to throw a punch or draw a weapon. He was a threat. He posed a threat to the mission, to Pandora, and to her father, and that left only a sole recourse.

Threats had to be neutralized.

With her back to the window, the ferret girl screamed. She screamed at the top of her lungs, all but drowning out the sound of glass splitting and shattering as the window exploded into countless shards. The raccoon man's visage seemed to break apart in the same manner as a pane of glass being struck, before he disappeared from reality.

The other man was also gone. He hadn't broken apart like the raccoon, but he was still gone, and that was all that mattered.

Now, the threat had been removed, and the danger was past; parent, child, and information alike were all safe now. Pandora looked at her father, he looked back, and she smiled.

"Cassandra Kairamin, you are a strange one."

Cassie had again taken the first part of her lunch break to tell Oak about her dream. She had kept some details to herself this time, but her friend's assessment was still a fair one. "Do you think it's just stress, maybe?" she asked.

The wolf hummed. "I suppose it could be," he said. "I mean, I've known you for long enough to know that you're not crazy."

"Unless I'm going crazy," Cassie countered. "Really, my dreams are never this vivid, and I can't help but think that there's a reason for that."

"Like exams coming up in just a few weeks?" Oak suggested with a smile. "You know, I have noticed the fact that you've been using your study breaks as free time to take walks out by the edge

of the woods." He reached out a hand and softly poked the ferret in the shoulder. "Maybe someone's afraid that she's not going to be able to cram so much info in so little time, hm?"

Cassie let out a chuckle. "So then I guess this is all my subconsciousness' way of saying, 'To hell with it,' then?"

"You never know," the wolf said, turning his attention back to his food. "All I'm saying is that I'm going to have to study, too, and if you're not too busy avoiding that fate some night this week, let me know."

"I'll check my schedule," Cassie replied with a smile of her own, before she started at her as-yet-untouched plate. She was going to have to start studying eventually, and she'd have been lying if she claimed that she hadn't deliberately been putting it off.

The two of them were both in their last year at Katsur Academy. In just a few short months, if they got the kind of marks required to graduate, then they'd pretty much have their pick of whatever university they might want to go to. Educational institutions around the country—around the world, really—put great stock in the quality of the Katsur curriculum, and with good cause.

That was certainly enough to provide the motivation to do well in class, but what drove Cassie wasn't the prospect of attending a top-rated university. More than anything, Cassie wanted to do her father proud. Even if he had already departed this world—whether or not there was even any sort of afterlife—Cassie still felt that she owed her father that much, for all the love, support, and respect that he gave her, raising her on his own for all those years. She wanted to be able to look back and be proud of herself and what she'd done, and to know that her father would have approved.

By that same token, though, Cassie felt conflicted about her little crush on Oak. He was a wolf, she was a ferret, and there would never be any cubs born of that union. To have a lover and a partner was all well and good, but if Cassie's childhood had taught her anything, it was the love of family, and a big part of her knew that she'd want a family of her own one day.

For the time being, though, she and Oak were just kids. Surely,

there wasn't any harm in a teenage fling, right? If anything, the lack of any risk of pregnancy would be a distinct upside to such a frivolous experiment in young love.

As ferret and wolf parted ways for the afternoon, each headed for their respective classes, Cassie made sure that her eyes and her smile conveyed just the tiniest hints of something beyond friendship.

Cassie, the girl who was Pandora, found herself overlooking a splendid valley that night. The sun shone from behind, giving a clear, crisp view of the verdant fields and rolling hills that stretched out below the high mountain peak upon which she stood. A sense of rightness filled her as she took it all in, and she reveled in purity, perfection, and tranquility, because all was as it should have been.

At the center of the valley, so small and so far away that Pandora could barely see them, were buildings. These buildings, she knew, made up a tiny but cozy settlement, where the people lived in peace and quiet, and where the only cares were ones from day to day, and from season to season. The green lands and blue rivers that stretched out in the area framed by those tall, wall-like peaks, were all theirs, uncontested, in all their natural glory.

This is the Promised Land. It is Arcadia, Eden, Shangri-La. This is place from whence all of us come, from whence we all came, when things were not as they are now. It is here, this utopia, which still exists in the form of Knowledge of What Was, where no person shall ever again, must ever again tread, which you must keep safe.

But Pandora was not a defender. She was more of a custodian, now, in the original sense of the word, a sense that had long been lost to the ages, to linguistic drift, to the tides of cultural memory. In her mind, though, she knew, and she knew also what was housed in each of those buildings in the valley below.

This place is not Paradise. Paradise, like enlightenment, is a state that must be achieved. This place is forbidden, and nobody—not even a protector or defender of custodian or caretaker—has the right or means to circumvent that.

Pandora turned around, then, and looked off the other side of the mountain. She now gazed at the outside world, and at the technological marvel (and terror) that it had become. Whereas on the inside there was an empty valley populated by simple people, the outside had become a sprawling mass of people of different species who bickered and fought, who killed and cheated and schemed. Even the very truth of things had been obscured for so long that the truth had been forced to change, because this outside world could not accommodate it in any other shape. To some of the people, this truth meant very little, as it often went unexamined, and even when scrutinized, the veneer surrounding it still showed what most folks needed to see.

There was still that original truth, though, and it existed in that emerald valley of perfection behind her. But because the outside world could no longer hold that truth, it had to be kept in the valley, sealed away from the outside, watched over forever by the ferret girl Pandora.

She was the keeper of the Forbidden Knowledge, and she would fulfill her duty.

When Cassie woke up, it was not with a start or with any kind of shock. She found herself breathing rapidly, and her pulse was loud and quick, but she simply opened her eyes slowly and gazed up at her ceiling. Without bothering to look at the clock, she just let some time pass, lying still for what she guessed was just a few minutes.

Then, she started to think more upon her dream and the ones that came before it. She rolled the name 'Pandora' over and over in her head, but it didn't dredge up any memories beyond memories of the dreams themselves. Similarly, none of the sights or sounds from her dreams were familiar to her at all, much like any other fabulous dream she'd ever had.

She brought her thinking to an abrupt halt, and then she corrected herself. There was one thing that was still familiar: her father. Pandora's father was Cassie's father. The memory of his smile from the night before was as strong as any memory Cassie had.

That imagined sense of love and loyalty that she felt in her sleep was the same as what she felt every day, in her waking hours, when she thought back on the man who had raised and loved her.

Oak didn't show up for the morning class that he and Cassie shared, and so the ferret was happily surprised when she ran into the wolf in the cafeteria.

"Sorry," the wolf said, laying back his ears. "I overslept and missed the tram. I hope you were able to stay awake through Ms. Hintervale's lecture without my kicking the backs of your heels."

"It was rough, but I managed it," Cassie replied, rolling her eyes. "Honestly, though, you didn't miss much. I can catch you up on it this weekend when we study."

Oak's smile widened. "So, you really are planning on reviewing things? You're not going to try to hit the exam with just your wits and two paws' full of crossed fingers?"

Cassie gave the wolf's shoulder a weak slap before she took her seat and set her lunch tray down. "Hey, remember who you're talking to, here. Have I ever let you down?"

"Not anytime in the last year or so, at any rate," Oak replied. He was quick to stuff his fork into his muzzle, effectively blocking any attempt Cassie might have at taking another swat at him. The boyish and innocent chuckle he let out as he forced a swallow made Cassie smile and blush.

Another lunch tray slapped down onto the table next to Cassie's, and the chair next to her was pushed out by a tallish husky (with a pristine white and cinnamon-red pelt) who promptly took his seat.

"Hey, do you mind? We're kind of eating lunch here," Cassie said to the interloper.

"That's kind of the idea," the husky responded with a laugh. "I hope that's not a problem."

The ferret was about to open her mouth again in protest when Oak chimed in before her. "Rutger! You're back!"

"In the flesh!" the husky announced, wagging his tail through the open back of his chair as he started to dig into his lunch.

Cassie was dumbfounded by Oak's sudden welcome of this dog

at their lunch table. She looked back and forth between the wolf who was her best friend and this unfamiliar husky who'd invaded their private space. The two canines noticed this and stopped eating, looking back at her with confused looks of their own.

"Jeez, Cassie, don't look too shocked to see me," the husky said with an awkward, forced smile.

The ferret flinched backwards upon hearing her name, and she blinked several times. Part of her expected the husky to disappear, or maybe dissolve and resolidify into someone else that she did recognize, but he stayed, just as corporeal as before. "You know my name?" Cassie asked.

Both Oak and the husky—this 'Rutger'—chuckled. "I had surgery, not amnesia," the husky said, his grin changing over from awkward to amused.

"Maybe she's the one with the amnesia," Oak said. Cassie could tell that he was trying his best to keep a straight face as he teased her. "This is Rutger. Rut. Ger."

"I dunno, man," Rutger said to Oak. "Two weeks is a long time. Maybe if I had written more often, she might've not—"

"Okay, okay! I get it!" Cassie interrupted. She was only mildly annoyed at the way her pals were jibing at her, and by now, even she had to see the humor in the situation. It was a fairly silly notion that she could just forget one her best friends like that.

Rutger ruffled Cassie between her ears. "You must've been hitting the books pretty hard while I was stuck in the hospital," he said. "Are you getting any sleep at all?"

"Not enough," the ferret replied with a sigh. "It's been kind of rough, actually." Then, after a pause, she added, "I did miss you, though."

Oak set down his knife and fork and leaned back in his chair. "Did you have another one of your dreams last night?" he asked, concern showing in his voice.

Cassie was caught of guard, and she stared back at Oak as she was overtaken by a momentary panic. Part of her wanted to scold him for mentioning the matter of her dreams in front of Rutger, but knowing the boys, she knew that she couldn't well hide it.

"Dreams?" Rutger asked, tilting his head.

"Yeah," Cassie replied, setting down her own utensils to rub her temples. "Just a few weird ones, for the last couple of nights. I think it's just stress."

Rutger still looked intrigued, if also a bit worried. "What are they about?" he asked.

Biting her lower lip, Cassie tried to come up with a simple answer. "I think they're about my father," she said.

"Oh," Rutger said, going quiet and solemnly turning back to his lunch. "Sorry. I won't ask."

In a way, Cassie was touched by that sentiment, but another part of her wanted to elaborate on things. Given the circumstances, though, she didn't press it. They were just dreams, after all, and it wouldn't help to foist anything uncomfortable onto her friends.

Within a minute, though, Oak broke the silence, bringing the gang back on track into planning for the upcoming exams, making sure that they could accommodate Rutger, who was now almost dangerously behind. And so they chattered away through the remainder of their lunch period, and they were all smiling again by the time they had to head off for class.

When Rutger headed down the hallway to the left and Oak the one to the right, Cassie quickly fell into step alongside the wolf. "Hey, what's up?" he asked. "Isn't your class the other way?"

"I just want to talk for a minute," Cassie said. "Just keep walking; it'll be okay."

"You're acting kind of weird today, Cassie," Oak said, continuing to walk along just the same. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"Maybe," Cassie replied. "Listen, about Rutger..."

Oak suddenly started to chuckle again, and Cassie couldn't for the life of her discern why. "So, finally thinking about making your move now that he's back in action, eh?" he asked, nudging his elbow at the ferret's side.

"My what?" Cassie asked with a yelp loud enough that other students in the crowded hallway turned to look at her.

"Hey, look, don't worry about it: like I told you before, I've done some 'guy talk' with him, and trust me, he likes you," the wolf murmured confidentially. "But I didn't know he was going to be back today! If I'd known, you know I would've told you, right?"

Hearing that from Oak was as much of a shock to Cassie as Rutger's appearance had been in the first place. "Wait, hold on," she said, holding a hand up, as if to keep her fingertip on the point before it eluded her. "I was planning on asking him out...?"

"...right before he went into the hospital," Oak finished. "But someone chickened out," he teased.

Cassie shook her head, trying to rustle the confusion free of her mind. "Why was he in the hospital again?" she asked.

"Kidney transplant, remember?" Oak responded, and then he stopped. He looked the ferret right in the eye, and his own features revealed his shock at what he saw. "You don't, do you? You really don't."

Before anyone could bump into either of them, Cassie grabbed Oak by the wrist and tugged along with her as she slinked back against the wall. "No," she said. "I mean, yes. Kind of. It's all coming back to me as you're saying it." That was a lie. It was really only partially coming back to her, very slowly.

"Cassie, seriously," Oak said in hushed tones, leaning in close to her now, shielding her from the gaggle of students passing them by. "Is everything all right? Are you just not getting enough sleep, or do you need to see a doctor, or...?"

Cassie was silent for a few seconds, and then shook her head. "I don't know," she replied. "My head's just kind of... fuzzy on a few things, that's all. I think maybe the dreams are just messing up my sleep cycle or something. They keep waking me up at odd hours of the morning."

The wolf studied her face for a few moments longer, and then nodded. "All right," he murmured. "But if this keeps up, Cassie, please, promise me you'll see a doctor."

"I promise," Cassie said. "Really." She grabbed the wolf's paw and squeezed it.

She left to hurry off to her class after that, and as she scam-

pered through the hallways, she wondered why she didn't feel more torn and conflicted by her feelings for Oak and for Rutger. She resolved that, when she went to sleep that night, she was going to find out more about this girl named Pandora.

It was the realm of the concrete, not of the abstract, where Pandora found herself next.

The ferret was sitting in an uncomfortable chair, and the floor beneath her was shaking and rumbling. An earthquake?

No. She was flying. She was riding in the back of a tiny jet, screaming along almost at the speed of sound, and she was waiting for the final go-ahead.

She brought her hand to one side of her bulky headset and focused her ears. "Now, remember," came the voice of her father. "You have exactly fifteen minutes to get in, get the data, and get out. After that—"

"After that, the truck drives away, and I'm on my own," Pandora said. "I know."

"And are you ready, then?" Her father sounded concerned. That concern almost made her hesitate, but not quite.

The ferret's sharp little teeth bit down into her lip, very nearly breaking the skin. "I am, sir," she replied.

"Then commence the operation," her father replied. "And good luck."

The young woman took off her headset, got up from her chair, and checked her gear pack on last time before walking over to the side hatch of the plane. The plane slowed as the pilot adjusted course toward the target. Once the jet's airspeed had dropped and stabilized again, the ferret opened the hatch and looked out at the skyscrapers below, until she spotted one in particular: a very tall building with a bright, glowing sign atop it that read "Shambhala."

Now at last had come the moment of truth, where life and death hung in the balance in this, the first true test of Pandora the All-Gifted.

Then, just as she had done dozens of times before in training

sessions, Pandora stepped out through the open hatch, and she fell. She aimed herself towards that electric sign like it was a bull's-eye, and rather than count the seconds in her head, she simply let time pass unmeasured, focusing instead on gauging her distance. Her body cut through the air, and the sound of the wind rushing past was enough to drown out the hammering of her own heart.

When she was near enough, she pulled the ripcord on her gear pack, and a tiny parachute unfurled with a quick whipping sound. She glided slowly over the rooftop, and she waited a few more seconds as she drifted lower and lower, until finally, when she was about ten feet above that flat surface, she pulled a second cord, cutting the chute free from the pack. The ferret dropped those last ten feet and landed with a practiced roll, checking over her shoulder to watch as her abandoned parachute was stolen away by the wind; by the time anyone found it, she would be long gone, and there would be nothing to trace it back to her.

Pandora got her bearings and headed for the door that, assuming the stolen floor plans were right, would lead to a tiny stairwell. She produced a tiny, knife-like gadget from her pocket and unthinkingly used it to destroy the flimsy lock on the door; naturally, security countermeasures hadn't accounted for an intruder to enter from the rooftop of the towering skyscraper.

Nor should they have, really. Shambhala was, at least nominally, a resort hotel and entertainment complex, and so it shouldn't have been a worry that anyone would go through such lengthy efforts to break in, let alone infiltrate it. The corporate entity that owned Shambhala, however—and more importantly, the shadowy, unofficial firms that secretly backed it from behind the scenes—used portions of the massive building to house and store some offsite databases that would be a veritable treasure trove to anyone who knew they were there.

Pandora and her group knew they were there.

Down the stairway Pandora flew, stepping so lightly that her footwear barely made any sound. She went down three stories, and then stopped, checking with her ear against the door. The other side—again, assuming that the plans were correct—would

be a simple storage floor, used by the cleaning staff office located one floor above. In all likelihood, the storage floor would be empty, but on the off chance that any cleaning staff happened to be in there when Pandora burst in through the door, it would be necessary to neutralize them.

That was the part of the job that Pandora felt the most apprehension about. Some poor guy might just need a clean mop to work with, and because he was doing his job, he would have to die. Pandora didn't like that idea one bit, but she'd already come too far to back out now.

Using her lock cutter, Pandora worked the door open. When she saw that the storage room was empty save for the equipment itself, the ferret breathed a sigh of relief. Nobody would have to die tonight. Not yet.

Dashing across the floor as fast as she could without making noise, Pandora headed for the elevator. She checked the display to make sure the elevator was still several floors below, and then she produced a pry bar from her gear pack and used it to wrest the door open. Then, she replaced the bar back into her pack, and took stock of the empty elevator shaft that stretched down below her.

She leaped out and grabbed the elevator cable, getting a strong grip on it with her gloved hands. Her heart was racing, and she eased up her grip just enough so that she began to slide down the metal cable. She dropped quickly, keeping her eyes locked forward as she counted the demarcations between floors: one, two, three, four, five, and stopping six floors down from where she started.

With one leg, Pandora kicked out and hit her foot against the emergency release switch for the elevator door. She then swung herself around the cable a few times, building up enough momentum so that when she released her hands and feet, she was able to clear the gap and land solidly on landing of the 87th floor. Fueled by adrenaline and determination, she dragged herself to her feet, pulled the doors closed with her hands, and then turned her attention to the hallway.

That hallway led to a series of corridors, and Pandora navigated

them unthinkingly, following the path that she had memorized. She came to a nondescript door, identical to all of the others, and stopped. Unlike the other doors she'd broken in through, this one was locked with a keypad, but even that was a trivial obstacle. She'd already memorized tonight's code long before the operation began, and she keyed it in without looking.

A soft 'click' was the only indication that the door had unlocked; Pandora had been expecting the keypad itself to emit some sort of beep of confirmation, but the device was silent. Holding her breath, the ferret wrapped her hand around the doorknob, and pushed the door open, slipping inside before the door could open the entire way. In the semi-dark room, she could see the movement of a pair of triangle-shaped ears perking up in attention.

The security guard was still sitting down, facing away from the door. To his credit, his reflexes were good, and it took him only an instant to swivel around, get to his feet, and shout, "Hey, who're you? You're not supposed to be—"

Unfortunately for him, that instant was all it took for Pandora to draw her own sidearm from the holster at her hip and fire a pair of bullets into the guard's chest. The quiet of the scene disturbed Pandora as she watched it unfurl before her eyes: the silencer on her pistol muffled any gunfire, and her first shot must have done the trick, because the guard didn't even cry out as the second bullet hit him before he crumpled to the floor.

He was a red fox, Pandora could now see. He was wearing a nametag, too, but the ferret made a specific point to avoid looking at it as she stepped past the body and went on through next door.

At last, Pandora had reached her target: up against the wall at the far side of the room was a computer terminal, looking quite like any other one might expect to see in a corporate building. This computer, however, was special, as its hard drives and databases were full of information that the proprietors of Shambhala had no business possessing.

From the moment she first touched the keyboard, Pandora knew that internal security had been alerted to her presence, but

all had been accounted for in these last few minutes of the operation. There was no way to get through the terminal's copy protection to extract the data from the drives—at least, not in the three minutes it would take for security to show up with guns blazing—and that was exactly why Pandora was the only person who could carry out her mission.

She cued up the data sequence, and executed a command to make it all spill out across the monitor. Sixty frames flashed by every second, each one different from the last, and Pandora stared at that screen without blinking, letting those images burn themselves into her cerebellum. The images flickered by so quickly that nobody, not even Pandora, could parse or make sense of them, but they would still be in her mind. This treasure trove of data could be deciphered later, after it was extracted from her brain, the perfect organic computer.

After just over two minutes of holding her eyes open, Pandora blinked with relief. The last of the data had been displayed, and the monitor was now blank. The ferret drew her pistol, and fired another two shots: one into the monitor, and another into the drive casing. She had less than a minute, now, to get to the west-facing window; hopefully, security would be lagging a few seconds behind.

Pandora hopped back over the slain guard and made her way back into the corridor. She ducked around a few corners until she reached the main hallway, and this time, she ran away from the elevators. As she sprinted, she emptied the rest of her clip into the window, which shattered just as she was only a few feet away from it.

The ding of the elevator sounded in Pandora's ears just before her feet left the ground, and she leapt from the 87th story window, plummeting down the side of the skyscraper, headed right toward the truck that would catch her and drive her off to safety.

Cassie awoke before Pandora hit the impact cushion that was waiting for her, but the young ferret knew that her dreamtime counterpart survived the fall and made it back to her base of oper-

ations safely. Despite somehow knowing that, though, Cassie felt not even a shred of relief; instead, she was weighed down with the dour sense of loss, and a preemptive stirring of grief deep within her heart.

When her best friend was absent from their morning class the next day, Cassie somehow knew that he hadn't merely overslept. It wasn't until two periods before lunch, however, that the academy chairman made the announcement that one of the trams had been involved in a wreck, claiming along with its other casualties the lives of three students, with Oak Mayrow among them.

Classes were called off for the rest of the day, but Cassie couldn't bring herself to leave academy grounds. Instead, she sat in the abandoned cafeteria, where she and her friend had sat together not even a day before, talking and laughing and making fun of each other.

She sat in the seat across from where Oak always used to sit, and she buried her face in her palms, and she cried. It no longer mattered that her life and her thoughts made no sense anymore; the realization that she'd never again see one of those half-innocent, half-devilish smiles on her lupine friend's chubby face was as heartrending and hollowing as when she first came to know that she'd never again feel the childish comfort of being held in her father's arms.

It was not a pair of arms that came to comfort her then, but rather, it was a simple paw coming to rest on her shoulder. "Cassie?" the quiet voice asked. "You're still here?"

Cassie lifted her head, turned around, and blinked the tears out of her eyes before she could make out Rutger's white-and-rusty face. She opened her mouth, but instead of words, a simple squeak came out. Before she could feel any embarrassment, though, she folded herself over, tucking her head over the husky's shoulder.

Rutger patted both of his hands at the ferret's back. "I know," he murmured softly, nuzzling at the top of her head. "I know."

For the next few minutes, Cassie just tried to empty her mind, getting out another batch of wet sobs before she found her throat too tense and her eyes too dry to keep it up. It took an almost

monumental amount of effort just to suck in the huge breath that she needed, but once she did, she at least felt composed enough to stand on her own two feet and look her friend in the eye.

"Hey," Rutger said then, bringing his hand up to nudge at the ferret's chin. "You gonna be all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," Cassie said, finally finding her voice again. They exchanged a look, then, so that they both understood what she meant when she said "okay." "I just... I..."

Rutger shushed her and put his index finger to her lips before hugging her again. "Don't worry about it," he whispered. "I know what you mean."

Cassie clung to him for a few moments, and then felt a tingling of unease building in the back of her neck. She wrested herself free of the husky's arms, lifted herself back upright, and then shook her head. "No," she muttered, sounding like she was trying the word on for size. "No, that's not...that's not it."

The husky let out an all-too-canine sound of confusion. "What's not it?" he asked, cocking his head to one side.

"This doesn't feel...this isn't just a coincidence," Cassie said, turning to look around the empty lunchroom. "This can't have just happened now."

"Cassie," Rutger said, sighing with gentle pity. "I know. I'm still in shock, too. I mean—"

Cassie cut him off. "No, Rutger, that's not what I'm saying! What I mean is..." She waved one of her hands as she tried to coax the right words out. "The fact that this is happening now, today, after everything else that's been happening."

The husky looked even more confused, and he clapped both of his hands onto Cassie's shoulders. "What's been happening, Cassie?" he asked, searching her face.

Cassie felt herself flush with self-consciousness; the nature of what she was implying finally hit her, and that hesitation started to mix with the awkward crush she had on her canine friend. When she didn't say anything after a few moments, Rutger squeezed her shoulders. "Cassie, please, tell me what's wrong."

You'll think I'm crazy, Cassie wanted to reply, before thinking

to herself, well, I think I'm crazy, too. "I don't know if I should tell you," she said. Rutger gave her a look, then, and she knew that she couldn't get away with that. "Remember yesterday, when we were talking about my dreams?"

"Yes," Rutger answered, clearly not following.

Cassie started to pace. "They're worse than I was letting on," she began. "In them, I'm... I'm someone else—I mean, it's still me, but it's a different girl, and she's... I don't know, she's special."

"Special? Special how?"

"She knows things—not like, psychic, 'oh, she knows things' or anything like that," Cassie continued. "I mean, like, she knows something, or maybe she knows a lot of somethings, and there are these other people who need to know what she knows."

Rutger was quiet for a while, and Cassie could see that he was actually giving her words some thought. "You mean like she's a witness that needs to be silenced?" he asked.

"Not exactly," Cassie replied, chewing her lips. "It's... it's a lot more complicated than that, but I don't fully understand it myself. I guess the witness analogy is close enough."

"Okay," Rutger replied, still seeming a tad lost. "That...still doesn't explain what you're so afraid of, Cassie," he said, turning his voice back towards something more comforting and sympathetic.

Cassie wanted to shrug off his attempts to touch her and soothe her again, but she decided to allow it. "I don't know if they're just dreams, is the thing," she said quietly, and she felt fear creeping along the sides of her mind as she let herself vocalize her thoughts. "I think that there really is this girl who knows something, and that people are...are trying to get that from her."

"And so, what?" Rutger asked, almost huffing in disbelief. "You think that these people are going to come after you, now, is that it?"

"I don't know!" Cassie cried. "Maybe."

Once more, Rutger got a good hold of Cassie's shoulders, and he gave the ferret a bit of a shake. "Cassie, please, I know that today's been really, really hard on you," he pleaded. "But it happened." There was a panicked sort of love and compassion in his eyes as

he begged her to see what he was trying to tell her. "It's hard on you, it's hard on me, but you've got to accept it, Cassie: there isn't any conspiracy; it was an accident, and it was a terrible thing, but these things just happen sometimes, you know?"

Cassie smacked Rutger's arms away; it was probably only because the husky hadn't been expecting it that the ferret was able to pull it off at all. She wheeled around on her feet and started to stomp off, hands balled into tiny fists and tail lashing angrily. "Cassie!" Rutger called after her. "Cassie, I...I'm sorry, Cassie! I didn't mean to snap at you!"

Despite Rutger's pleas, Cassie continued to walk away from him. What do you want from me, Pandora? she asked bitterly inside her own head. Why won't you just tell me what I need to know?

The building's interior was done up in an understated rustic theme, with subtle hues and simple ornamentation. Cassie, the girl who was Pandora, knew on instinct that she was inside one of the old structures located in the middle of that resplendent valley of promise that was hers to look after. She felt safe within these walls, and though she didn't recognize what she saw, it felt familiar and comforting to her all the same.

It was only a short walk down the simple hallway before she found herself in a much larger atrium—one with a vaulted dome of a ceiling, separated into many levels, each stacked with countless bookshelves. Each of the bookshelves, in turn, was packed to the brim with books that looked like they should have been old and dusty, but most of them still retained a look of newness.

Ah, the library, Pandora thought to herself as she strolled among the bookcases. *This is where people have put their gathered knowledge, here in a single, central place, so that others may come and look at it, and experience it for themselves.* Her fingertips gingerly brushed along the spine of a particularly weighty tome, admiring it in a simple, cursory way, seeing as she didn't have the time to sit and read it.

She looked up, then, and saw on a balcony of the third level

a very large bookcase that was wrapped by heavy silver chains that were sealed with an enormous lock. From the center of the ground floor, the prominence of this sealed-off bookcase was conspicuous, and yet it was also quite hard to reach in addition to being locked up as it was.

These are the volumes I have brought to this place. The words on those pages tell of things not found on any of the other pages in the whole of this library: the reason why we as a people are a menagerie of species and not just a single people; detailed accounts of past happenings, long having passed from collective historical teachings, which never again shall be retold; entire books full of words that nobody alive can read or understand, and yet which long ago conveyed a meaning as rich as the words of the language we speak today.

That which is written in these books is the Forbidden Knowledge: never again can this knowledge be loosed upon the world, and yet never may it be allowed to be forgotten.

In the event of my father's passing, I will be the sole possessor of the key that opens that lock. In the event of my father's passing, I shall have to choose another to carry his key, in case I alone cannot be trusted to be the keeper.

When Cassie drifted back into a state of wakefulness, she knew that she would not be going to her classes at the academy in the morning. She may not have fully understood, but she had an inkling of a plan.

It was barely after sunrise when Cassie banged on Rutger's door, and the husky showed more signs of tiredness than surprise when he stepped out.

"Cassie?" he asked, trying to blink the sleep away from his eyes as he looked the ferret over several times, almost like he was trying to confirm her existence. He had at least thought to throw some shorts on before getting the door, though.

"Rutger," Cassie replied, slipping her way in between the dog and the doorframe before he could protest. "I need your help."

Flustered, the husky closed the door and started pacing around the living room. "Cassie, what're you going on about?" he asked.

"We don't need to leave for the academy for another hour or so."

"Rutger, this is really important," Cassie said, fighting the urge to fall in step next to him as he plodded around the room. "You've got a car, right?"

Rutger slowed down, and was able to look Cassie in the eye without spacing out. "Huh?" he asked, again blinking away some remaining vestiges of sleepyheadedness. Revelation appeared to dawn on his face, and he looked somewhat disappointed. "Cassie, don't tell me that you're afraid to take the trams, now."

"That's not—"

"Look, if you wanted a ride, you could have just called before hauling yourself over here at this hour."

"Rutger, you're not listening," the ferret said, keeping her voice quiet and level. "This is really important: I need to go somewhere, and I need you to take me there."

Now, there was no doubt in Cassie's mind that Rutger was fully awake. He had that same chiding look on his face as he had the afternoon before. "This is about your dreams again, isn't it?" he said.

"They're not just dreams, Rutger; they're messages. They're trying to tell me something, and I think I've figured out what they want me to do."

"Okay, Cassie?" the husky asked, rubbing over one of his ears absent-mindedly. "You understand how weird this all sounds, right?"

Cassie nodded, but didn't let her gaze or composure waver. "Yes. And I'm hoping that you know me well enough to know that I wouldn't be saying all this just to mess with your head."

"All right, I'll bite," Rutger said. "Where is it that you need to go?"

"Shambhala."

"What? Where's that?"

"It's a resort complex in Seizo," Cassie said.

Rutger flinched. "Seizo? You want me to drive you to Seizo?" His tone of voice showed that what Cassie had said had been just about the last thing in the world he'd expected her to say.

Before Rutger could protest any more, Cassie leaned in against him and pressed her lips to his. At first, the husky huffed and squirmed in confusion and panic, and then, just as Cassie felt him starting to try to kiss her back, she pulled away. "I know how it sounds," she said in a serious whisper. "But I think you might be in danger, too, and that's why I want you to be with me."

Still looking sufficiently flustered from the kiss, Rutger flopped down into an armchair and rested his hands on his knees. "You do realize that it'll take something like two days to drive all the way to Seizo, right?" he asked.

Cassie just nodded.

"All right, then," the husky said, standing up. "Let me just take a shower and get dressed, and I guess we can get going."

From then on, Rutger seemed quietly resigned to Cassie's plan (which she didn't entirely feel comfortable with, herself). As they drove, Cassie explained to him how she was sure that there was something that she knew that other people ("What other people?" She didn't know.) were after, and that if she could just figure out how to remember what that something was, she'd know what to do in order to keep her and those closest to her safe.

It was clear to Cassie that Rutger at least wanted to believe her, even if she was pretty sure that he didn't—not quite yet. By the time they got to Shambhala, she was hoping that he'd have a little more trust—or maybe faith—in what she was trying to do. At the very least, the husky kept driving on, and he didn't try to talk her out of it. When evening rolled around, they switched positions, and Cassie drove on until well past midnight, stopping at a roadside motel for some well-needed rest.

Also, just as Cassie had hoped, another dream came to her, bringing the potential of more clues as to what she needed to do next.

Think of a mirror, she thought to herself as Pandora, as she walked through the rooms of an unfamiliar yet nostalgic house, *and think of a photograph. Both are exact reflections of yourself, but*

one of them is removed from the context of the present, and the other exists in the now.

She sat down on a luxurious couch in her living room, and looked at some of the photographs on the mantelpiece. All of them were of Pandora and her father, giving glimpses of father and daughter at various times in their lives. Also, in all of them, they both looked happy, without any hint of the dark future that awaited the little girl, where she would grow up to be an operative who worked in the shadows.

That was Pandora's life, though, and it was her calling. It didn't change the fact that, at one point, she had been a little girl with nothing but a little girl's cares, and it didn't mean that the memories she had of her childhood were worthless, even after she became the capable and dangerous adult that she had always been destined to be.

Before she even awoke, it finally dawned on Cassie that her father and Pandora's father were the same exact person.

The next morning, Cassie remained convinced that the right course of action was to keep heading for Shambhala. She knew that it would be there, just as it appeared in her dreams, and she was convinced that whatever she learned there would both save her life as well as convince Rutger that her dream-messages were real.

Rutger looked determined as he drove. Cassie did her best not to stare at him, but more than once, she noted (as she felt herself blushing) that he seemed very handsome and noble. She did her best to conceal that admiration, though, because whoever was after her and after Pandora's secrets would no doubt try to use her emotions against her; it was what she would have done if she'd needed to extract information from someone else.

Just before sunset, they crested a mountain ridge, and the sprawling city of Seizo came into view. It was still about an hour's drive away, but the tremendous skyscraper of Shambhala still stood out against the skyline.

Cassie breathed a sigh of relief, and then quickly felt her heart

starting to beat faster. "There it is," she said quietly, fixing her eyes on the distant building.

"This is all familiar, then?" Rutger asked.

Cassie nodded. "Yeah. This is definitely the place."

"And you're sure you've never been here before, right?" the husky asked.

"Not as myself, at any rate," Cassie replied, and Rutger didn't press further.

The remaining hour seemed to pass in a fraction of the time, as the towering form of Shambhala grew ever closer and more distinct. The Seizo cityscape started to light up, bit by bit, as the sun began to disappear behind the mountains, turning the sky a vivid purple as night encroached.

At last, Rutger brought his car to a stop on the sidewalk in front of the main entrance, letting the engine run. "Well, here we are," he said, staring out through the windshield. "Do you know what it is you need to do?"

For the first time since they'd started on their journey, Cassie felt the sudden upwelling of true doubt. What did she want to do? She'd proven to herself that the place she'd seen in her dream was real, but now that she was here, what was the next step? She'd just sort of taken it for granted that everything would make itself clear once she got to Shambhala, but no clear-cut course of action—or even vague hint of what to do—presented itself.

"Turn the car off and let's go inside," she said, opening the passenger side door before Rutger could comply. He was right behind her, joining her on the sidewalk, and they both looked upward along the face of the enormous building. Cassie was struck with awe, majesty, and fear at the sight.

They must have stood there for close to a minute before Rutger turned and touched Cassie on the hand. "Didn't you want to go inside?" he asked quietly.

"I'm not sure," Cassie replied, and she found that it took a near-monumental effort to keep her voice from wavering as she spoke. "I don't...I don't know if that's the best idea or not."

Rutger squeezed her hand more tightly. "Just try to think," he

said encouragingly. "You've come this far; I'm sure that you'll be able to figure out what to do next."

Cassie bit her lip. For whatever reason, things suddenly didn't seem right. She'd been so damn sure of what she'd been doing this entire time, but now, as she stared at entrance to Shambhala, she was in such a panic that she couldn't bring herself to move. "What if it's not safe?" she asked.

"You said that staying home wasn't safe," Rutger reminded her. "You were so certain before. Come on—maybe something inside will jog your memory."

Rutger tried to take her by the hand and pull Cassie along, but the ferret resisted and yanked her hand back. "Wait!" she cried. "This doesn't seem like such a good idea..."

"Doesn't seem like a good idea?" Rutger asked, glaring at her with something worse than annoyance in his eyes. "Driving for two days to get to Seizo because your dreams told you to didn't seem like a good idea!" he snapped.

"Rutger, please, calm down," Cassie pleaded, her heart pounding harder by the moment. "It's just—"

"It's just what?" the husky demanded. "You said this was life-and-death! You told me that I was going to be in danger if I didn't take you here so that you could magically figure out what you needed to do!"

"Just give me a minute!" Cassie cried. "Just let me think, and—"

Rutger grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "Then just think, Pandora!"

Cassie's rush of panic came to a dead stop, replaced by an even heavier sense of dread. "What did you just say?" she asked, voice as quiet as it was dry.

"I said that you need to think," Rutger replied, joining her in that sense of quiet.

"No," Cassie said, shaking her head, pulling away from the husky as she took a step back. "You just called me 'Pandora.'"

Rutger nodded slowly, and looked almost like he was afraid for her. "I know," he said. "The girl in your dreams: I thought that it

might jog your memory if I—"

"No," Cassie interrupted, taking another full step back. "I told you about the girl in my dreams, but I never told you what her name was," she said.

The sympathy on Rutger's face fell apart, and instead, he looked like a man defeated. Cassie started to feel dizzy, almost nauseous, and despite her whole world being wracked with confusion, something fundamental in the back of her mind suddenly became crystal clear.

Cassie had a lifetime of memories, and Pandora had a lifetime of memories, but Rutger didn't exist in either of them.

Double-check both sets of memories: when does Rutger first show up?

In Cassie's memories, four days ago.

"You're not real," Cassie said to him, trying to withhold her horror.

Rutger chuckled nervously. "What're you talking about, Cassie?" he asked. "Of course I'm real! I'm right here!"

"No," Cassie replied. "You don't fit in with everything else. You're not supposed to be here."

The husky took a step closer, but for some reason, Cassie didn't try to get away. He frowned a little bit as he put his paw on her shoulder, and then he dipped his head with a hint of sadness. "Actually, Cassie, there's something that I need to tell you."

Cassie swallowed a lump in her throat. Neither she nor Pandora knew what to expect.

"You're the one who isn't real," he said.

Not only wasn't she real, Pandora confirmed for her, but she had never been real. "Cassie" was nothing more than a fake set of memories, a sort of dummy system, created inside Pandora's perfect mind, in the event that she were ever to be captured or ever needed to go into hiding.

"I'm Pandora," Cassie said.

Rutger shook his head. "Pandora is dead," he said. "What I'm talking to right now is a simulation of memories left behind in the form of data."

The young ferret girl tried to process the notion that she was dead, and it first, it didn't make sense. Then, she thought more about that mission to Shambhala, and what happened after she escaped with the information.

Her father had greeted her after she'd made it back safely, and then, she'd transferred her memories over into their computer system so that the information could be decompiled and examined.

"We don't know exactly when Pandora lived and died," Rutger said, after the ferret had been quiet for a few moments, "but our best guesses place it sometime around four to five hundred years ago."

"But the data that she stole," Cassie said. "It never got deleted."

"Exactly," Rutger said. "But Pandora...well, as you know, she was a stubborn young woman. She won't let anyone know what she knows."

Cassie checked Pandora's memories, and sure enough, nothing existed past the moment where the data in her mind was copied over from the perfect organic computer that was her brain. That was where the reality of Pandora ended, and was frozen forever.

"That's why you needed to go through me," Cassie said. "Through Cassie. You thought that you could appeal to her sense of emotion." She understood, then, that the dream of the fat raccoon man had been a failed attempt to deal directly with Pandora.

"We need to know what Pandora knew," Rutger replied, and now, the husky was beginning to sound desperate. "We think that what she learned during that mission to Shambhala might help us."

Cassie felt her hackles rising. She didn't like the idea of letting someone else into Pandora's memories—into the place of the Forbidden Knowledge. "What makes you think that?" she asked. "You don't even know what it is that she knows."

Rutger suddenly seemed so much different from the teenage academy student that Cassie had been forced to think of him as. "Because," he said, "it's pretty much the last place we have to look."

"To look for what?"

"For answers," Rutger said. "For the future. People have made a lot of mistakes over the last few hundred years, to put it lightly."

Cassie didn't know whether she believed Rutger or not, but she decided then that it didn't matter whether he was telling the truth or just spouting a new set of boldfaced lies. "Why should I help you?" she asked, putting airs of pity into her voice.

Rutger shrugged. "Maybe you shouldn't," he said. "It probably doesn't matter to you, after all. But it would matter to us."

The ferret took the husky by the paw. "Here," she whispered, beginning to lean in toward him. "Let me show you what I know."

With hesitation that was full of ironic innocence, Rutger leaned in to meet her, parting his lips to meet the ferret in another kiss. He let out a soft sound of contentment, and then, Cassie, feeling only an insignificant amount of guilt, called out to the computer that made up her world, and she ravaged the all-too-delicate neural interface that connected the husky to her encoded memories.

On the outside, Rutger's lifeless body slumped forward onto the cold, metallic computer console.

Then, Cassie, the girl who was Pandora, used her perfect mind to delete and recreate her fake memories, so that she could once again be a simple academy student who had the beginnings of a crush on a chubby wolf named Oak.

Maintaining a monopoly on an energy supply in the Outer Worlds is tough. Protecting that monopoly can be murder.

Dog Eat Dog

White Yoté

The coffee on Ganymede sucked. Sure, it was hard to find a decent bistro on the entire planet—it was impossible to grow the stuff anywhere near Jupiter—but import regulations had to stop somewhere.

Didn't the bureaucratic assholes on Earth, who probably depended on coffee more than most in the solar system, have any sense of tact when it came to interplanetary trade? The husky sitting in the corner booth of La Prima Tazza had his doubts. He took another sip, gingerly, pinky out like the well-raised man he had become, and grimaced at the bitter diluted flavor. It wasn't worth staining his teeth over, and he pushed it away.

Most of the other patrons in this particularly fresh-looking bistro in the center of Desiderio were busy with their own lives, sipping their crude drink and generally enjoying the year-round tropical climate of Ganymede, the last of Jupiter's moons to be colonized. An experiment in artificial atmospheric duplication, the entire planet had been turned into the solar system's prime vacation spot; its economy was built solely upon tourism and the word-of-muzzle it produced. Vaughn Killeen watched them with mismatched eyes, wondering if they knew how much their happiness depended upon him. And he couldn't even get a decent cup of joe.

Being invisibly prominent had its advantages, and that's what

the husky preferred.

Vaughn had chosen this far obscure corner, away from noise and prying eyes, deliberately. He wore clothing that was comfortable and casual while being trendy at the same time. His ensemble fit perfectly with the upscale clientele of Ganymede without standing out: baby-blue silk shirt under navy blazer, white pants, no shoes, no tie: loungewear to the elite. Tapping a claw along the rim of the saucer which held the coffee cup in front of him, the husky scanned the crowd with subdued impatience. It was certainly like McKay to be fashionably late, but this was pushing it, even for him.

His phone rang. Vaughn tapped the side of his head just forward of his left ear, where the implant was located, and answered, "This is Killeen."

A perfectly clear, smooth voice invaded the husky's head. "Hello, Vaughn."

"You're late," Vaughn replied in soft tones. The microphone in his larynx would have picked it up even if he'd whispered it, so there was no need for loud conversation. "I dislike tardiness. I have a full afternoon planned, and I'd rather not spend it drinking bad coffee in a tourist trap."

The smile was palpable even through the airwaves. "Don't you go spreading trash about my home planet, now. I may not like it either, but I was born here. Call it nostalgic weakness." McKay was toying with him, and Vaughn did not like it. In a matter of seconds their conversation had put his mood into a deeper funk than it already had been. He truly did not have time to waste on cordialities with the mercenary.

"Could you please cut the crap and tell me where you are? My patience is running dangerously thin."

"I see where you're going, man. You threatening to pull out of our deal? Because I happen to know a certain wolfdog who is at the end of his rope trying to solve a problem, and a certain ringtail who is the only person who can solve said problem. We're both gentlemen, and we both want to make money, so just hold your horses." Now it was McKay's turn to sound impatient, even a little

hurt. Vaughn didn't wholly believe that.

Vaughn elected to back off and let the solution to his corporate troubles come at his own pace. Sighing, he said, "Where are you?"

"Look up."

As he did so, the husky had already expected to see McKay in the doorway, yet it startled him a bit nonetheless. Standing just inside the bistro, paws in the pockets of a gigantic black trench coat, was the most incongruous ringtail he had ever seen, in body and attitude.

A complete contradiction to the rest of his species, McKay stood a good 184 centimeters in height, with a very sculpted look about him even under the heavy clothing he was wearing. Tank top, camouflage cargo pants, heavy combat boots and a black trenchcoat to top it all off, the man who went by only a surname was not the unassuming nerdy person the husky had been expecting. The ringtail walked with confidence, paying no attention to those around him, in a straight line to Vaughn's table. He took a chair, twisted it around the wrong way, and sat with his head in his paws. Smiling. Coldly.

Vaughn regained himself quickly enough. He attempted a pawshake but was waved away.

"Spare me the pleasantries, Killeen. I don't need diplomacy to complete a task." The words blended in stereo from the ringtail and from inside his head and Vaughn shut his phone off with a gentle tap to the ear. McKay did the same with a small twist of his neck. His phone must have been integrated, which didn't surprise Vaughn in the least, given the ringtail's résumé and background. The mercenary's comment should have offended the husky, but in fact it pleased him to see such a straightforward person held the key to his business's success.

"Introductions aside," the husky said in smooth, lilting diction, "I appreciate your bold honesty. Your reputation precedes you. I have the utmost confidence we'll be able to come to some agreement this afternoon." The husky was merely posing for now; both men knew an agreement had already been reached, and only a

price and method of execution were to be decided upon.

As the ringtail watched, Vaughn rummaged through his jacket pockets and brought out a disc slightly larger than a coaster. The outer edge of the disc contained various ports and plugs, and a few buttons. The husky set it on the table and pressed a green button. In seconds, a semi-opaque holographic display and keyboard were floating at eye-level between the two men. The keyboard Vaughn disabled in favor of manipulating the display with his fingertips; it was much easier with his familiarity of the system. McKay looked on with mildly-disguised interest and curiosity, his head on his clasped paws.

At last the husky had found the file he was looking for, and turned the computer to face the wall. No one was actually looking at them with more than a passing glance, but there was no such thing as privacy in a position like Vaughn's. Still, anyone who could read backwards would be able to see what they were seeing.

"We gonna get on with this, curly-tail?"

This won a steely glare from the husky, who fought to suppress a growl at the blatant display of apparent subordination. Truth be told, he was in no position to bargain with the mercenary, but that was no reason for unwarranted rudeness.

"Surely. I trust you've been briefed on my dilemma, so I want you to give me a solution. Simple as that. I want this meeting to be short and to the point."

McKay flicked his ears quizzically, looking a little perturbed. "I didn't need to be 'briefed.' A couple of friends told me there was a good-paying job on Ganymede involving some energy baron, and I punched one of 'em for lying to me. Of course I found out they weren't lying once I got the e-message from your second-in-command. We set a place and time, and here I am. You've got quite an enterprise."

"Oh?" asked the husky, his eyebrows raised. "Have you done some personal research on me and my company?" He tapped the table with the flats of his fingerpads as he provoked the mercenary's answer.

McKay smiled, saying, "When you're a walking 'Net receiver,

you can access a lot of information."

"Show me." The husky motioned toward the floating monitor, prompting a scoff from the ringtail, who shoved the device away.

"I don't need that thing," he began. "Killeen is responsible for sixty-seven percent of solar technology in this System. You've worked twenty-seven years to make your business very profitable, and I believe you would like to keep it that way." McKay was smiling slightly; it was the kind of knowing smile one would expect given the subject of discussion. Solar was the most widely-used form of energy in the System, since nonrenewable resources had been exhausted some thirty years prior and nothing else was as abundantly and inherently useful as sunlight. Even in shade and at night, Killeen's fledgling multiplication charging technology made energy storage easier, if still spotty when the sun didn't cooperate.

"You have done your research," muttered an impressed, and a little unnerved, Vaughn.

McKay tapped the side of his head, smiling. "Told you. Besides, I got one of those Alpha racers that works on Killeen cells. Fast fucker, keeps a charge no problem. But why do you need me?"

The ringtail's impatience and obvious lack of tact was beginning to wear Vaughn down at a rapid rate. He had to keep reminding himself that the man sitting across from him, looking downright bored, was the one and only answer to his problems.

"Because," the husky spoke slowly and evenly, "there is an up-and-comer to this business who stands a very good chance of taking over the entire segment and sending Killeen into the gutter."

McKay's attention was back, due in part to Vaughn's increasingly direct language. As long as he needed to get his point across, he might as well do it on the mercenary's level.

Vaughn waited for an answer, but the ringtail remained silent, picking at his claws but still looking at the husky. "Okay then," he said, and tapped a few spots on the holographic display. He got to the menu he wanted, scanned for curious onlookers before moving on, then tapped the file open. A picture of a smirking golden jackal with a Solar Federation flag in the background appeared

alongside a text article. "XenoCon is run by this man, Phileas Dander. Apparently something of a corporate genius, he is very dangerous in his zeal to overtake the 'old dinosaurs of energy,' as he calls us. He is also just twenty-six years old."

"I know all about Xenocon," McKay nodded, his face drawing downward in contemplation. So he was paying attention, after all. "Nobody told me about a homicide here. But you don't want me to kill the kid, though, do you? I mean, I got no scruples about that. I've done worse. But you can get anybody to do that for a lot less money."

"You're right," admitted the husky. "I don't want you to kill anybody, if you can help it. I am in need of your... um, your special... physical traits." It was a given that McKay knew why he'd been called here in a general sense. He was a special kind of mercenary, one who didn't deal in typical mercenary business. He was a valuable asset to those who could afford him. Even now, Vaughn did not yet know if he could authorize a credit transfer for the ringtail's specialized services.

"Go on." The ringtail waved his paw in encouragement. He was definitely interested in the conversation now. His eyes had taken on an intense youthful glow. It sent the husky's hackles rising in spite of himself. It seemed McKay got off on stuff like this.

"Very well then." Vaughn scrolled down the article as he spoke. "Dander is researching new ways to make the best use of light, but not just sunlight. We know nothing of this technology, and no information has gone public yet. I have inside men who have told me of plans to develop lunar- and ambient-cell technology."

"So instead of just depending on sunlight for energy, he can use moonlight and... well, pretty damn near any light source as a charge," McKay finished the thought for Vaughn, and nodded. "I haven't seen any trace of that info anywhere. You got some pretty heavy shit going on. This dude's already got solar tech going for him, so if he puts this stuff out everybody'll flock to him and leave you in the dust."

The husky shrugged, his ears back. "As you so eloquently put it, yes, it basically comes down to that. He already controls well

over a third of the market, and he's gaining. I can't develop counter-technology fast enough; even if I knew how he was doing it I would be months behind. My insiders know precious little. Security is a fortress, from a worker's point of view."

"But that's where I come in."

"Yes."

"You don't want me to kill anyone, so lay it on me. What do you want?"

The husky leaned far over the counter, beckoning the ringtail to do the same. McKay obliged, albeit a bit mockingly and over-accentuated. He spoke in a confidential whisper, muzzle-to-ear. "I want you to crash the company."

McKay pulled back, looking carefully down at the table. He was almost biting his lower lip in concentration. He finally matched eyes with the husky's polychromatic stare, smiling that cold, efficient smile again. "How do you propose I do that?" he asked skeptically.

"You were responsible for the Greenpeace crash, weren't you?" McKay couldn't hide the shock on his face, and the husky continued. "And a few other hack jobs that have caught headlines?"

"Fuck," muttered the mercenary, sour exposure clouding his expression. "How did you get that information?"

"I have people in many, many corners. All I'm saying is, you've done it before," said Vaughn. "I've spent quite a lot of time and money researching you and your methods. I'm actually surprised you're reacting this way."

"I don't think you're grasping the gravity of what you're asking. Those other two jobs I did were simple system subterfuge... back-door infections to intentionally infect data."

"Isn't that exactly what I'm asking of you now?"

"I guess."

"I download the news, and I see it on the holos. The public never gets to see most of what I tap into. I know almost everything there is to know about XenoCon, publicly, and their database is gigantic. Backed up. Can you do it or not?" There was real doubt in his words, partly because of the ringtail's reaction and partly

because he wanted to ruffle McKay a bit to see if he became complacent or combative.

"Piece of cake, but an end like that requires some pretty powerful means. We're talking about a simple virus, if I'm hearing you right. Something nice and quiet that will go in undetected, look around and then tear the place apart. Fuck it up bad, and leave nothing left. You have that kind of firepower?" Now it was McKay's turn to look skeptical.

Vaughn held up one black-and white finger. "I've had a team developing just the right thing to take care of my competitor's files most thoroughly and with prejudice. You have to trust me on this one. It's safe for you, but not Dander's software. Do you think you can handle transporting it?"

"Oh, please!" scoffed the ringtail, on the verge of a derisive chuckle. "Does it need alteration?"

"No need, other than anonymization. Dander's system is a self-replicating firewall. Interconnected, the whole thing."

"You'd think data worth billions of credits would be better protected." The ringtail smiled; the black marks on each side of his muzzle drew into tight "V" shapes. "I underestimated you. Shrewd, intelligent, and efficient. I like that in a man."

"Or an employer," amended the husky, smiling slightly himself. "Talk to me."

"It's fairly easy, really." The mercenary shut down the computer, since he hadn't needed it for much anyway, and slid it out of the way over to the edge of the table. "All of Dander's systems—the main systems—are housed in his manufacturing facility on Earth. I've arranged transportation for myself, so don't bother. Our friend Phileas was so adamant about getting the best of everything for his budding young corporation that he failed to consult personally on most of the operations, leaving that to his assistant managers. He did a pretty good job, too, except for his system security. There are at least seven backups, all in separate buildings, with similar firewalls. Changing codes, replicating binary and all that, easy to infiltrate."

"Piece of cake," repeated the husky, much more comfortable

now that things seemed to be falling into place.

McKay continued, talking quickly like a teenager discussing the latest hot rods. "The Achilles heel of the system is that, while remote and protected from each other physically, they're all connected via satellite signals. XenoCon orbiting satellites download requests and shared information between backups, and new information is encoded and copied there. This is where I need to infect it, to avoid a PIN or serial residual trail."

"I trust you can become anonymous at will?" asked Vaughn.

McKay only grinned, only now he wasn't looking at the husky as much as through him. Vaughn called the mercenary's name three times, getting no response. There was a small beep from the husky's right and he looked over at his palmdisc, which was blinking red. It had never done that before, and red meant trouble. The ringtail's eyes were on the little computer as well, the only part of him that seemed to have moved.

As Vaughn held the thick disc in his paws, it suddenly booted up. The little bluish eye in its center glowed to life and displayed a startup holoscreen. Within five seconds the computer was on, but the husky almost dropped it when the optimouse started moving on its own.

He watched as the pointer opened up a word-processing program, formatted a new document, picked a font, and wrote, "YES I CAN. I JUST DID" in big fuchsia letters on the display.

"Satisfied?" asked McKay.

"You just hijacked my computer, you son of a bitch," the husky said incredulously.

"You could say that. I tapped into the closest 'Net satellite, searched until I found a codec signal matching your computer, downloaded a parasite into the data stream, and used it to hack your system. No damage done, but I proved my point," McKay finished, crossing his arms smugly.

Vaughn nodded. "So I see, and quite effectively. What else are you capable of? I mean, I heard you were a Cyfur, but that's all the information I've received."

"Well, we don't really use the term 'Cyfur' anymore; it's archa-

ic, but what else are you gonna call us? My body is eighty-seven percent cybernetic and non-organic components. The only things that are actual living tissue are my brain, most of my head, and various organs. The bulk of my CPU is stored in the rear of my skull and my upper back. Everything else is just a bunch of wires, circuits and pneumatic joints. See?" With that, McKay offered his right forearm to the husky, pressed gently on the inside portion of it, and a small hinged plate lifted and immediately slid to the side, revealing the inner workings of the mercenary.

"Dear Lord," Vaughn muttered, holding back a strong urge to reach into the ringtail's arm and start poking around. "That's an amazing amalgamation of technology. And you're the only one?"

"The only one who's still alive," McKay replied. "A patchwork quilt of used robotic components, that's me. Paid to do the dirty laundry of upper-class society. Speaking of which, this is going to cost you a lot, Killeen." Reluctance tinged the ringtail's words, and that did not bode well.

"What's wrong?"

"This is not as simple as you think," McKay spread his paws. "I can't just tap into a protected network like XenoCon's from any point in the Solar System. Like I said, I have to break in at the satellites where the data is relayed and lightly firewalled. When it's in transit like that, slipping in unnoticed is easier."

"What is so difficult about that?" queried the husky with forward, expectant ears.

McKay almost laughed, but he bit his lip to stop himself. "You're funny, really. Even if I go in anonymously, other kinds of fingerprints will be all over the place, not to mention the hundreds of cameras that'll catch me to and from the satellite. Everything has to be sanitized, or else you could go away for a very long time."

Vaughn shuddered at the thought of the Pluto Intrasystemic Penitentiary and the prospect of being jailbait among the "real" criminals. The mortality rate was very high. It would be best to fight XenoCon in the business world, with papers and research, but the prospect of losing to just a kid had pushed him this far, almost to desperation. For the sake of his workforce and his future,

he had no choice.

"What must be done?"

"All you have to do is give the virus to me. I can run it through a series of sanitation programs to remove its history and origin. But... you can't have anything to do with me after that. I take my own transport, I work alone, and I won't be coming back."

Vaughn paused. "Excuse me?"

The front door of the bistro flew open, causing both men to jump in their conversation. It was only a group of scantily-clad females, no doubt on Spring Break or some such nonsense. McKay continued before Vaughn had a chance to calm his heart.

"Okay, it's like this," the ringtail sighed, as if he'd gone through this speech a thousand times before. "XenoCon's system is an easy hack, right, but that doesn't mean it doesn't fight back. It's a retroactive viral adjuster. That means, as soon as I load your virus into it, it's going to backwash a bunch of its own viruses back into me, adjusting their codes slightly and multiplying their infection power. Not even my system can handle that much shit at one time. I'll get the job done, but for lack of a better term, I'm going to die doing it." McKay saw the faintly-hidden horror washing over the white mask of the husky's muzzle, then amended, "It's only temporary, though."

"I—" Vaughn started, but he just gave up. He'd lost the battle of wits and knowledge, and now he was in over his head, which he massaged with his thumbpads. First, McKay was going to die, but it wasn't permanent... he was relieved and trepidacious and confused all at once.

McKay continued. "My body will be fine, but my brain will be corrupted... unrecoverable. Basically, when my associates get my body back to ground zero, they'll do a system overhaul, uploading a previously copied version of my brain. Everything will be back the way it was, except..." the ringtail trailed off.

"Except?" prodded Vaughn.

"XenoCon will be nothing more than an empty, expensive shell being sued by its creditors and stockholders for security fraud. And, I will remember nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Why would I need to remember all of this pointless conversation when I could just wake up someday in the near future with a fat wad of untraceable credits? I'll ask about it, of course, but all I'll be told is that it was a delicate job, and I'll leave it alone. I've done it three times before. Secrecy and ignorance go together so well, don't you think?" McKay accented his question with a wink, and the husky broke a relieved smile, showing his clean, white teeth.

"So, speaking of a fat wad of credits, I think we should discuss your fee," said Vaughn, already feeling nervous from the blow to come.

McKay leaned back in the booth and said, "Twenty million should do it." His expression remained unchanged when the husky went into a coughing fit that had him doubled over the table and gasping for air. A load of lead had just been dropped into his stomach. He couldn't have heard correctly. Two young women in an adjacent booth looked his way with mild concern, and Vaughn lowered his voice.

"You—you did say twenty million, right? Two-zero?" The ringtail nodded, and the husky's chest resonated with a mixed moan and growl.

A headache of catastrophic proportions was beginning to brew just behind his eyes. He had thought an operation of this magnitude would command a high premium, but twenty million credits? That was a hefty chunk of his annual profit, and taking money from his own company would raise red flags all over the place. This would be noticeable. This would have to come from his personal account. And it would have to be laundered. It would almost bankrupt him.

"I can see you're having trouble coming to a decision," the ringtail piped up, "which is why I did a little independent financial projection. I figure, with XenoCon out of the way, and its shareholders and customers left with nowhere to invest, you will gain at least one-third of your current financial base. Given six months, and some tactical maneuvering, you could effectively double

your net profits before the fiscal year is out." So, McKay wasn't as rough-and-tumble as his looks suggested. He knew the ringtail was intelligent, but he couldn't help his preconceptions. Too much prep-school brainwashing.

"So, by the end of this year I will have essentially made up my losses, plus some."

"Plus a lot."

Vaughn felt numb, outside his body as he spoke. "Okay then. It's a deal. The money will be transferred to your e-account—"

"Where I will summarily mask the transaction and back-infect the files, making the whole thing seem like a glitch," finished the ringtail, boredly.

"And I will take the loss as the price of big business, with no public complaint." Vaughn's heart and stomach were feeling much better now that he had solidified a plan for maintaining his energy monopoly. "So, then, I suppose you're going to need the virus?"

"That would be helpful," said the ringtail, who offered his arm. He opened up the plate again, and waited while the husky prepared his palmdisc to download to an external source. Vaughn excused himself while plugging in to McKay, who didn't seem to mind at all. The mercenary closed his eyes when the transfer began, murmuring, "Oooh, Killeen, this is a dandy you got here. Very nice..."

Within a minute the virus and all the husky's data relating to XenoCon were safely stored. "Tell your virus techs to keep up the good work." McKay stood then, offering his paw to the husky. "As soon as I see my balance rise sharply, I'll get started on my end. Give it a week, tops, and read the papers. And, of course, you never saw me, or met me. Comprende?"

"Who are you again?" Vaughn asked on purpose, and both men shook paws amiably. Underneath the ringtail's solid shake, he was trembling.

"Good man. Pleasure doing business with you. Hope to never see you again."

"And I, you," replied Vaughn. Shame, he thought. He would have been a nice fellow to get to know. The mercenary turned and

paced out of the bistro, his long (and most likely actuated) tail keeping balance behind him. And just like that, Vaughn Killeen was alone again.

The husky touched his coffee cup and found it to be lukewarm at best. He didn't think he needed caffeine just at this moment anyway. And it would still taste like crap.

Wall Street, the bustling financial center of New York City (and, for all intents and purposes, the rest of the System) was a flurry of shouting, crying, laughing and electronic din. The main action still occurred on the floor, which included an interplanetary business section for stocks on different intrasystemic bodies, but outside instantaneous tickers gave up-to-the-second information for those walking by. If one didn't care to look up, the entirety of the district was a wireless bubble anyway, and all one had to do was link up their PDA to receive the world's news at the touch of a button or the speaking of a word.

Vaughn emerged into the harsh light with sunglasses on, simultaneously annoyed at the harshness of it but happy knowing his products were in full operation at that moment. He hoped the two thousand new clients his company had picked up in the last week were enjoying their new Solar service provider. He was doing his best to satisfy, after all, with a growing customer base and new technology in the workings.

As he crossed the intersection of Broadway and Morris next to the ancient bronze bull statue, a vibration on his wrist announced news of specific interest to him. Stepping into the shadow of a building, the husky tapped his watch and scrolled down through its floating display to an article entitled XenoCon Exec Indicted for Fraud. He stood on the sidewalk, reading about how Phileas Dander's priority of his own interests over those of his business had led to the destruction of all data under his control. Apparently, a simple virus had done the trick, even though the system had tried to retaliate to protect itself. It should have gathered a data trail identifying the perpetrator, but all codes had led to nothing. Dander was suspected of sabotaging his own company for insur-

ance money, and now he was in jail. On Pluto. It was the jackal's own damn fault, the article said, an internal job. That was a special bonus.

Internally, Killeen Enterprises was doing just fine. The day after Dander's arrest, the husky had held a meeting in his boardroom, where he expressed concern for XenoCon's lost clients and customers, and outlined a plan to expedite research for non-solar forms of energy.

"These people will be looking at us closely, and we want to show them we're on the forefront of the business. They need to be able to depend on us. Let's show them some invention," the husky had said, to a round of hearty applause. Then the inquiries came. Deals were being made as he stood there on the curb; he was due back in the office for just that purpose in just a few minutes.

Vaughn's personal finances were only enough to purchase a small vehicle, and even a dinner out wasn't currently an extravagance he could afford, but the husky had kept up appearances well, refusing public events and extra spending. No one had bothered to question him further.

The husky read through the article, and was suddenly struck with the first pangs of guilt since he had made the deal with McKay in the bistro on Ganymede. It wasn't guilt, per se, because Vaughn didn't view this as corporate cannabalism as much as a strategic move to maintain his interest in the market. But there was one last string nagging at the back of his mind; it had been there for the past few days, small but insistent. It would not let him rest. Why he hadn't taken care of it before eluded him, and now would be as good a time as any to find out.

Vaughn tapped near his left ear and was rewarded with a soft dial tone in his head. "Call McKay," he spoke, knowing the voice-recognition software would understand however he said the words. This was the ringtail's personal system number; McKay had told him to destroy it as soon as he had been informed of the virus' success, but the husky had held on to it as insurance. Soon it would be proved one way or another.

Twice his head reverberated, which was followed by a minute

click and a familiar voice saying, "Who is this?" The formerly clever, eager tone was now slightly annoyed and impatient. Good so far.

"It's Vaughn, McKay. Don't you remember me?" The husky tried to sound innocent and convincing.

"Don't recognize you. How'd you get this number?"

Pressing on: "Are you sure? Curly-tail? We talked over coffee."

"Is this your idea of some kind of joke? 'Cuz you're really bad at it. Fuck off, faggot." And with a horrible hissing screech that made Vaughn howl out loud in the middle of the crowd, the connection was severed. He had been blocked. Aural firewall, no doubt.

Not that it mattered much. The husky gathered himself and began walking back in the direction of his main office just a few blocks away. His lunch hour was over, and his afternoon was filled with meetings with potential clients and stockholders. The contracts would no doubt bring his savings account back to its former balance in no time at all. Suddenly, the ringing in his ear didn't bother him as much anymore.

Violet is finally happy again, ten years after her world came crashing down. Now she depends on the brilliance of her late husband and the discretion of his protege to keep it from crashing down again.

Violet

Stormcatcher

She bustled around the apartment as she did most afternoons, humming softly to herself and fighting her private war with the dust molecules. The air sanitizer in the unit did its job well enough, but she knew that it wasn't infallible; dust happens, and not even the most high-end air purifiers could keep it all away.

Violet wore her simple housecleaning outfit like her smile: pristine and without shame, pleasantly understated. A soft twinkle in her eyes offset what tiny evidence there was of the crow's feet at the edges, and the way she wore her long black tophair—curled into a neat bun on top of her head, festooned with a grey ribbon—was so tidy and Geisha-like that one would have to scrutinize her locks very closely to notice the grey hairs intermingled with the darker ones. Although there were definitely more of the grey ones, these days, she never let it diminish her spirit.

Her feet moved with the grace and ease they always had, and there was a sense of dignity in everything she did. It was almost as though the rich lady of a manor house had decided to make a lifelong practical joke of dressing up like a maid.

It was hardly a rich manor house; the two-bedroom apartment was one of many units in a towering skyscraper that stood near the center of the bustling metropolis. Hovercrafts of both the personal and commercial variety could be seen gliding soundlessly through the air at all hours of the day and night, and for those

who couldn't afford such, there was always the air-rail transit system that spanned the city on raised tracks that lay all over the downtown area, its white paths spreading over the streets like a meticulously laid-out spider web. Moving sidewalks made walking downtown easier, and even the weather patterns were simulated, creating perhaps one of the greatest miracles of all: the guarantee that the weatherman would never be wrong again.

Mason Scoletti, a longhaired tabby feline who was also showing signs of leaving middle age behind, peered out the huge vista window that spanned one entire wall of his home office, a light and mirthful smile on his own features as he watched everyone go about their daily business. He squinted his eyes ever so slightly, and the floating lenses that hovered over both his orbs instantly moved his view into a close-up mode that allowed him to see the pedestrian's faces on the sidewalks below as they glided along to their destinations. The computer viewscreen where he did all the work for his day job was designed to be easy on the eyesight, and the way the light blue text seemed to be floating in midair had always been a marvel to him—and sometimes, a bit of a distraction. More than once, he'd tried to reach up with his fingers and flick any typos out of that thin air upon which they sat, and it sometimes took till his hand was halfway there before he realized what he was doing and stopped himself.

His view shifted up to the old chronometer that sat in front of the town hall, a great hulking conglomeration of gears, cogs, and metal spindles that kept the time on the huge analog watch face that sat oriented towards the downtown plaza. The slightly green tint to some of the copper that the device was made of only enhanced its antiquated look, but several of the local historical societies had persevered in their petitions to keep it, and they had surprisingly little trouble convincing the populace of the worthiness of their cause. Time was something deeply respected by most of the citizens, and as long as things progressed forward, they were quite content to keep the relics that reminded them of what once was around.

The tabby's smile was both amused and wistful as he stared at

the clock, the feline understanding quite well what it meant to be an old relic. He shook his head a bit and sighed as he turned back to his computer, his vision lenses automatically correcting themselves to put him back into normal prescription lens viewing mode. His fingerpads danced over the keyboard with brisk, practiced ease, and he nodded decisively at the screen as he ran the compiler, having finished his coding.

"Ahh," he murmured lowly to himself. "Perfection as always. Another well-scripted Scoletti masterpiece." He glanced over at the disc-burning array stack next to his workstation. "Now to save it for posterity and paycheck. Let me see..."

He squinted at the indicator lights on each drive, selecting two small blank gigadiscs and popping one apiece onto the loading trays as they slid out, then he closed them up again and frowned, his brows furrowing as he scratched his chin with a fingerclaw, looking a bit uncertain.

"Dammit, I always get these two mixed up," he murmured, looking back and forth between the two drives. "Let's see... the drive with the green light is the one that makes my personal copy, and the purple light is the one that sends a copy to H.Q. Right. I think that's it." He nodded decisively and began the data burning, then blinked in confusion as an instant message from his employer's office popped up onscreen:

From DIVA: Mace this disc is blank. We know that as a P.M. you don't do any real work but we still can't pay you to do nothing; X)

Mason gaped at the screen, then shook his head and snickered as he typed a response:

Sent from MR. SMARTYPANTS: Better get those old-maid sequined glasses of yours checked, Lois. I just sent it over with copy. But you still make the best coffee ever to scald my tongue.

His smile rapidly faded as the secretary's response came back:

From DIVA: You got your burning drives mixed up again, didn't you? Ask Vi if you've gone color blind :P

The tabby looked befuddled, then gritted his teeth and called over his shoulder to Violet as she dusted in the living room.

"Doggone it... Vi! Honey, could you come double-check something for me, please?"

Her ears perked, and she stepped over and down the two steps into his home office. "What's the matter?" she asked, the expression on her stately Russian blue face fur serene as usual.

Mason made a mock-pouting expression as he pointed at the instant message window. "My department's evil secretary is accusing me of sending a blank disc to her for the close of this project, and I'm sure I got them burned in the right order." He paused, then blinked, looking from the drives to his wife again. "At least, I think I did."

Violet read the messages, then peered over at the burner array, noticing that the purple indicator light was blinking. "Ahh. Nope, I'm afraid Lois wins on this one, dear. Look, the light on your mini-DASD drive is blinking. Remember the color system scheme you and I made up, the last time this happened?"

The tabby quirked one side of his mouth up, trying to recall the system they had devised. "Sure I do. It was, uhh... Err..." He rubbed the back of his neck for a moment, then snapped his fingers abruptly and looked triumphant, pointing at the drives again. "'Green to make it make the scene, and put more green into the bank, which is keen. And purple is for Violet," he paused, reaching over to give one of Violet's hands a fond squeeze, "... the pretty flower I keep at... home!"

He facepalmed as he realized his mistake, then shook his head in mild annoyance as he corrected it. "Holy saints covered in vegetable dip, Vi, who's the moron who thought up this crazy system?" he growled softly as he re-sent the now complete and freshly-burned disc to his secretary.

Violet chuckled softly and rested her hands on Mason's shoulders, massaging them gently as she leaned her face down to peer at him mischievously. "Their best programmer did—namely, you. Aren't you the one that's always saying how important it is to back up your data?"

Mason snorted even as his eyes lidded a bit and he leaned back into her touch, ears splaying as his facial features relaxed and sa-

vored her ministrations. He turned his head to one side to kiss one of her hands, then typed a response to Lois as he murmured, "Oh. Well, shoot, they should know better than to listen to me, by now. I'm just a programmer, for heaven's sake!" he smirked.

His wife rested her chin lightly between his ears as she hugged him. "Only one of the most experienced coders they have," she reminded him. "Tell Lois I said hi, by the way. And your tie is crooked," she noted, as she put it into place.

He leaned his head against her left arm as she worked, his thick tail flicking around and bumping against hers a few times. "Lois says 'hi' right back, and she hopes to meet you in person some day so she can ask you how you put up with my senile old ass," he grinned, as he typed an equally sarcastic response. "Thanks for noticing the tie, by the way. Always looking out for me and keeping me looking professional-looking, aren't you?" he murmured. "Where would I be without you, Vi?"

"Constantly rumpled," she answered, winking at him affectionately. She moved her hands back up and around to the back of his neck, continuing her massage as Mason purred, his head slumping forward in bliss so she could have more ready access to his strained neck muscles. "You had that odd, thoughtful stare you get sometimes on your face, when you were looking at the old chronometer outside city hall. What was on your mind?" she asked.

Mason opened his eyes again, then looked up at her with his own warm grin, shrugging a little as he eased his arm around her thighs and nestled her close. "Nothing much. I guess I just look around this city of ours and wonder why I feel so out of place," he murmured. "The way I dress, the fact that I like to do things manually instead of the automated way, when I can... I dunno, sometimes I just feel antiquated."

She chuckled, leaning down to nuzzle one of his pointed ears with her nose as she gave him a fond squeeze. "Join the club," she said. "I feel the same way. We don't get out much, you and I, now that I think about it, but then again, we've always been content to be homebodies." She shrugged a little. "I like to think of us as just

preferring to be traditionalists. We didn't have all this fancy technology when we were growing up," she said, nodding towards the window and gesturing to the pedestrians below with her hand.

"Tell me about it!" he laughed. "Gosh, remember our first date? They still had compact discs, back then."

"Never forget it," she murmured, her face easing into a dreamy look as she recalled it. "Actually, I think we were before our time, even then. We ended the night slow-dancing together with some waltz music playing from your hybrid pod's CD player."

Mason nodded slowly, leaning back in his chair for a moment and clasping his hands together behind his head so he could lean back on his fingers, his expression musing. "Wasn't that fun? Swing, big-band jazz, blues... my friends back in high school never understood why I had such a fascination with music made over a century before I was born, not counting classical tunes. They used to ask me when I was going to start wearing a zoot-suit full time."

"Wow, now there's a noun that'd have most of today's folks scratching their heads," Violet laughed. She stroked Mason's neatly combed tophair as she looked down at him again. "What would you like for lunch today?"

"Oh, you don't have to trouble yourself, hon," he said, as he nudged a thumb back towards the kitchen area. "I'm not real hungry—I was thinking of just using the food simulator to make myself a sandwich. Something simple." He gave her another hug with his arm, then got up from his office chair, the effort making him grunt softly as his knees popped. He headed into the kitchen and glanced back at her as he called up the options screen that would let him create his meal. "Besides, I haven't forgotten what day it is. Aren't you going to meet up with your kids today for that remembrance-gathering thing you always do?"

"We're planning on it," Violet nodded, glancing over at the wall where the pictures of her children were hung. She gazed at them lovingly as she stepped over to the frame, sliding her fingers over it as she stared at the image. Some things were so simple and timeless that they didn't need technological enhancement, and the only

added touch the family photo had were special chemicals that were guaranteed to keep it from yellowing and aging. Her kittens were now young adults, aged twenty-two and twenty-eight, respectively. "I'm actually amazed that they still want to go to the memorial garden with me, really. It's probably such a boring ritual for them, year after year."

Mason's ears quirked a bit to show that he'd heard her statement, but he was oddly quiet. Violet came around the wall separating his office from the kitchen and leaned back as she watched him work, scanning his features with her usual quiet observance. His tail was flicking a bit faster, and when he spoke next, his words seemed to be tinged with hopefulness.

"Speaking of boring rituals, you could always offer to drag them over here to have dinner with us," he murmured, his head shifting towards her as he lowered his brow and gave her a firm but genial look over the rims of his floating lenses. His smile was gentle as always, but his expression made it obvious that this wasn't the first time he'd made such a suggestion.

Violet's smile diminished for just a second, her mouth twitching a bit at one side along with her left ear. She glanced down at her feet as she folded her arms over her chest, a display of passive refusal as she shook her head slowly before lifting her face to meet his gaze again. Her smile was back, but this time, it seemed a bit more forced.

"It's still a bit too soon for them, I think," she murmured thoughtfully. "I'll ask them about it, though."

Mason's ears drooped, and he sighed but nodded once as he looked back down at the molecular generator below the command window, that part of the kitchen counter slightly raised and glowing with a soft white radiance as the sandwich slowly materialized. "Tell 'em I've had all my shots, and I promise not to bite." His joke sounded a bit flat, the disappointment thinly veiled in his voice as he picked up the sandwich, took a bite, and chewed. His jaws worked slowly, and then he swallowed, grimacing a little. "Dammit, high-end tech or no, this thing still can't get the meat quite right for a salami on rye. It tastes like tofu dipped in grease,"

he muttered.

She came over and checked the settings he'd used on the synthesizer, and her mouth quirked gently in a laugh that nearly escaped, but she managed to catch it just in time. She bit it back as she patted his arm tenderly, then corrected the button sequence. "No wonder. It is tofu, hon. You must have accidentally hit that under 'T' instead of selecting 'salami' under 'S.'"

The male cat frowned and peered more closely at the buttons, then slapped the sandwich he'd created down onto the materialization plate as he picked up the corrected sandwich that Violet created. "For crying out loud!" he said in exasperation. "Do my vision lenses need corrective lenses, even?" He sniffed at the new sandwich, took a bite, then looked relieved as he nodded in approval and made the synthesizer recycle the faulty sandwich back into molecular oblivion. "Mmmn. Much better. Once again, you save me from starving to death from my own absentmindedness, dear. My stomach thanks you." He chewed and swallowed, then picked listlessly at the meat inside the sandwich with a fingerclaw as he continued their earlier discussion.

"It's not like I'm trying to take their father's place, Vi. I know that'll never happen." He looked over at her again, his face sad but patient. "But it would be nice if they'd at least try to accept me. I can be an awfully good listener and advice-giver, even for an old fart."

Violet sighed, raising one hand to rub her temples as she felt what she suspected was the beginnings of a headache coming on. "I know you can, Mason. But really, I have to ask you to trust my judgment on this just a little while longer. Losing their father was very traumatic for them, and I still haven't gotten a clear impression on what their feelings are towards my getting remarried so soon."

"But it's been three years!" he protested, his eyes widening as he held his arms up and out, the sandwich still in his right hand. "I can fully understand that there might be some initial discomfort, Vi, but for pete's sake, they're both adults. How long do they need?"

"I'm not certain, but don't you think it might be in everyone's best interests if we let them give us the cues that they're ready, first?" she snapped, her voice raising a little in spite of herself. "Mason, really—I'm glad that you're interested in them, but you keep bringing the subject up. Why is it so important to you?"

"Because I'm a cat, and cats are naturally curious, is that a good enough reason?" he replied, his own voice raising a little to match hers—but while there was a touch of anger in Violet's voice, Mason's was nearly pleading, his features eager for his wife to understand his point of view. "Violet, I can't help it that I think I'm married to the most wonderful woman in the world, and I just want to see if her children are every bit as marvelous as you are, that's all. I guess I'm just afraid that if we wait too long, that window of opportunity that would allow them to even tolerate me might close." The pouting expression on his face increased, and the effect was remarkably winsome even on his middle-aged features. Violet tried to stay aggravated at him, but seeing him look that way made her heart melt, and her anger dissolved into a dull kind of fatigue. She rubbed her face with both her palms slowly, then lowered her hands as she shook her head and sighed softly.

"I will ask them about it. This very afternoon, in fact—but that's all I can do. I can't guarantee the outcome, but I can certainly ask on your behalf," she said stiffly.

Mason nodded slowly and moved as though to take her hand into his, but she slid it off the countertop of the kitchen before he could, her face downcast and brows mildly furrowed. "Meanwhile, I should get changed and go meet them. Forgive me for snapping at you, I just... I'm just not in the mood to continue this particular topic of conversation. Not today, of all days, anyway."

He nodded, instantly cowed as his pointed ears drooped a little, his feelings clearly hurt. He opened his mouth to speak, but she had already walked down the hallway to the bedroom. She changed quickly into a pair of jeans and a simple blouse, then checked her hair and makeup before collecting her purse. When she came back out into the hallway, Mason was still standing in the kitchen, his sandwich lying on the counter as he stared deject-

edly at the floor.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "Please don't be mad at me, Vi. I promise, I'll never bring it up again."

She shook her head and held up a hand, her usually placid face looking a bit closer to her real age. "No, no—it's all right, really. I'm sorry for getting upset with you. You know how testy I can get for the memorial date, and I've no right to take my frustrations out on you. I'll be back later this evening," she added hastily, as she moved towards the entryway of the apartment, looking over her shoulder at him as she clutched her handbag against herself. "Do you need me to get anything for you on my way back home, today?"

He slowly lifted his face to look at her, features still sad and also a bit awkward as he flicked his gaze uncomfortably towards his office. "Ahh... n-no, I guess not, thanks. I... I suppose I'll work through lunch in my office, if you're going to be late."

"I shouldn't be that late, and it isn't good for you to go without eating," she chided. "I'll fix you something as soon as I get back. I'll see you later." She stepped up to the entry door, which slid open silently—and just before she stepped out into the main hallway, she looked back at him.

"I'd like to see a smile before I go, please," she said.

Mason's lips quivered a little, but he managed to paste a small one onto his face for her. It was obviously forced, but she was grateful for his effort and returned it with an apologetic one of her own as she blew him a kiss. "Much better," she said as she left.

His smile vanished as soon as the door slid shut behind her, and he stuffed his hands dejectedly into the pockets of his khaki pants, glancing at the sandwich that he suddenly realized he'd lost his appetite for. He skulked slowly into his office and sighed, catching his reflection off the thick glass windows. He grimaced in disgust, glowering at himself.

"Way to go, old fool. You've pissed her off, good and proper." He shook his head angrily, then rubbed his arms as he began to pace back and forth in his office.

"How could I have been so stupid?" he berated himself, his

furry brows furrowing in self-loathing. "Honestly, of all the days for me to press the issue, I had to pi—I've got to try to make it up to her. I've simply got to," he fumed, his hands balling into fists as he stopped in mid-stride and thought madly, his striped tail lashing briskly behind him in agitated thought. Inspiration didn't take too long, and he grunted as a determined expression began to dominate his features. "Dinner. I'll make her an incredible dinner, and I'll lavish her with some really beautiful flowers. It's not terribly original, but it's a start," he sighed, as he pondered his plans further.

Morning faded into early afternoon, and Violet had taken her time coming home from her rendezvous with her children. Seeing Zoey and Morgan was always a joy, even to commemorate an event like their father's passing—but their yearly gathering had been done at his behest, anyway, and wandering through the city's memorial gardens was usually something that Violet found comforting and relaxing. The three of them would always have lunch together afterwards, and do something out on the town—and although the food had been wonderful and the conversation fun, Violet found much to her alarm that she was unable to keep her promise to Mason. Every time she had opened her mouth to tentatively broach the subject, they would steer the conversation in a new direction, and she lost her focus. The simple truth of the matter was that Zoey and Morgan didn't even know that Mason was with her in the first place—her wedding to Mason was more along the lines of simply filing the electronic paperwork then an actual ceremony.

Worse still, Zoey had surprised her by suggesting that Violet move in with her for the long term. The invitation had caught her completely off-guard, and she was barely able to give them the thinly-veiled excuse that she wasn't ready to leave the home she'd shared with their father for so many years. It wasn't a lie, but she knew that sooner or later, things between him and her children would come to a head, and she would have a lot of explaining to do.

She was so preoccupied with her thoughts as she entered the apartment that she almost didn't notice the huge array of white roses that was sitting on the silica-topped dining room table. A large white ribbon was wrapped around the glass vase of water that held them, and the smell of a delicious chicken-based dinner—real chicken meat, not synthetic—wafted through the air and greeted her nostrils.

The latter, especially, would have been unusual for many citizens. For most, the use of a food synthesizer was more than enough to suit their needs for food and drink—but many of the world's remaining gourmet chefs insisted on honing their craft with the kitchen appliances of the past, so these items were still available. Installation costs were considerable, but the appliances themselves were very cheap—and since Violet and her husband both loved to cook, they had saved their money during Violet's working years and had a full kitchen installed. This had increased their lovable-but-eccentric factor in the eyes of their neighbors until Violet treated them to a batch of her marmalade mini-tarts.

Violet inhaled deeply, both the flowers and food mingling wonderfully in her nose as her tail flicked happily. "Oh, my—someone's been a busy bee in the kitchen, if my nose isn't deceiving me," she called, smiling. "Mason, how long did that wondrous-smelling food ta—"

He wasn't in their bedroom, or the bathroom—and she couldn't see him tending to the food in the kitchen, nor did she find evidence of a note indicating where he'd gone on the dining room table or affixed to the refrigerator. She walked up the bedroom hallway back towards the living room, and saw no sign of him there, either. That left only his office, and there was no sound of his fingerpads on his keyboard, as there would have been if he were still working.

"Mason?" she called. No answer.

Her gaze fell back upon the flowers on the table, and an icy chill began to trickle up her spine, as well as a nearly mind-numbing feeling of deja-vu.

Roughly a week and three years ago that very day, the roses on

the table had been red. The dinner cooking had been gourmet tuna steaks that her husband had special-ordered as a surprise for their upcoming anniversary—but given that they were supposed to take a trip to the Caribbean for the occasion, he'd sprung the flowers and dinner on her a week early. She thought that he'd turned up missing on that night, too, at first.

Violet's hearbeat began to race, and her eyes widened as she slowly looked towards his office.

"No," her subconscious told her. "No, that can't happen again. Not with him."

She steeled herself, and in spite of her mind trying to tell her that her fears were unfounded, she noticed that her feet felt as though they were slogging through heavy mud as she forced them to move towards his office. She balled her fists up by her side and dug her fingerclaws into her palm flesh, and when she saw him slumped over and onto his keyboard, a jumble of text gibberish spanning itself repeatedly across his viewscreen, the shock was so vivid and the sensation so much like her first husband's death that she had to jam one fist into her mouth to keep herself from screaming.

She thumped her back up against the kitchen wall so she wouldn't have to see him, and closed her eyes tightly, panting softly until her heartbeat slowed down. She lifted her trembling hands and opened them, relieved to see that she hadn't punctured her palms with her claws—but she had come close.

Slowly, she walked into his office and checked him. His eyes were open, staring sightlessly ahead, and his mouth was closed.

Violet gently moved the keyboard out from underneath his head so the maddening scrolling of gibberish on his screen would stop, then took several deep breaths until her breathing was calm once again. She didn't bother feeling for a pulse, but she did manage to get herself over to the sensorphone pad without stumbling, much to her own surprise. She hovered an unsteady hand over it until it lit up, the speaking viewscreen illuminating itself in midair directly in front of her face. A low digitized voice prompted her: "Recipient, please."

"Bryce, Victor," Violet replied, her voice low and clear.

"Initiating panel contact now. One moment, please," the automated voice said calmly. There was a pause, a brief flash of light, and a viewing screen flickered into being over the sensorphone's base, the corporate logo of Mason's company illuminating it before it vanished to be replaced by the scruffy-looking and somewhat distracted visage of a male coyote, his brows furrowed and muzzle pointing down at something as he worked diligently, his eyes not on the viewscreen.

"Yeah, Bryce here, whaddya need... ?" the canid muttered, then lifted his sharp green eyes to see who had hailed him. His tall ears perked sharply when he saw Violet's face, and his mouth gaped open a little, his expression surprised. He squinted at the screen, leaning towards it, then slowly canted his head back some. "Mrs. Scoletti?" he murmured. "That you? Gosh, I haven't talked to you in ages, how have you been?"

Violet nodded, a small and nervous smile on her face as she clasped her hands together out of his view, her mind racing wildly with hope. "Hello, Victor," she said. "Yes, it has been a fairly long while—I'm sorry I haven't kept in touch as I should have, but the truth is... I could really use your help with something. I know how terribly busy you must be, but I promise I'll pay you, if I could impose upon you to make a house call."

Something about the anxiousness in her voice struck a chord with the coyote, and he cocked his head at her, looking both curious and uncertain. "Well, I... I have been really flooded with stuff at work, lately, yeah, but I could swing by on my way home tonight, if you don't mind waiting... probably won't get outta here till damn near 8PM," he muttered, swiping a hand back through his tophair in an exasperated way. "What exactly is it that you need, though? And if it's regarding one of our models, why can't that tech wizard of a husband of yours fix it? Has he gone union, or something?" he laughed.

Violet looked wonderfully relieved, and she exhaled visibly, her eyes lidding as she grasped the edge of the table to steady herself. "Something like that, yes," she nodded. "But I can't tell you about

it over the phone," she said in a hushed tone. "Do you know how to get here?"

Bryce paused again, his eyes narrowing a bit once more as his ears remained pointed upwards. "Yeeeaaaaah," he said, "I'd dropped off a couple things at your place before when Mace n' me were doing University work together."

Violet nodded eagerly. "Excellent. In that case, I'll have some coffee brewed fresh for you. Around 8PM, you said?"

He nodded, still frowning a bit. "Yeah, give or take. I'll buzz you if my plans change, but I don't think they will."

"Sounds good," she affirmed. "I'll see you then."

When Violet next saw Bryce's sharp green eyes that night, they were flashing with anger and accusation. She tried to mop some of the cold sweat that had dampened his brow off with a clean washcloth, and he swatted her hand away, the canid crouched down on shaking knees and leaning back against a wall for support, his features ashen and body quivering.

Violet moved away from him to give him some space and time to recover, and busied herself cleaning up the small puddle of clear vomit that the coyote had choked up after he'd arrived at the apartment and seen Mason's slumped-over form. She had most of the liquid cleaned up and picked up the cleaning bucket with her gloved hands, carrying it into the bathroom and getting rid of the soiled water before she stripped the gloves off and washed her hands, then came back into the dining room area and sat down, folding her hands in her lap as she waited for Bryce to recover. He glared at her for several moments, hands resting on his legs, then finally, he pointed at her.

"You lied to me," he snarled softly. Then he moved his finger to point into Mason's office. "HE lied to me, too. I knew he was working on some kind of top-secret project before he died, but he never told me about it, and the rest of the office dismissed his working late so many nights just as one of his usual eccentricities," he snapped.

"Victor, I'd never even met you in person before the funeral,

and the only other times you and I had talked was on the sensorphone so I could take messages for him when he was out of town," Violet sighed, her voice patient but her features strained. "And if you think you're shocked, how do you think I felt? He'd left me instructions in a letter that he'd sealed in his personal lock box before he died, and when I saw him at the company lab for myself, I nearly screamed."

"'It,'" Bryce grunted in correction, his face still glowering. "When you saw 'it', you mean."

Violet shook her head. "No, that... that isn't the right way to put it," she whispered, casting a nearly haunted look back into the office at the figure slumped over Mason's desk. "Victor, it's actually eerie, how much he acts like the real Mason. The first time he got into bed with me after deliberately stepping away from his charging port, I thought I was going to pass out from fright."

Bryce's features quickly shifted from anger to horror, and then to disgust. "Ewww! You... you slept with it? That's disgusting!"

"Not in a sexual manner, no," Violet snapped back, her features crinkling in anger and exasperation. She had tried to stay patient with the coyote, understanding his reaction—but now, she was beginning to wonder if she had made a dreadful mistake. "It was just as if though he insisted on cuddling with me, that's all. Mason always loved to have me cozied up with him as we slept."

"Spare me the details," the coyote groaned, as he got to his feet and gripped his bag of briefcase full of tools. "I thought he was my friend," he growled, as he put his briefcase full of tools onto the dining room table and began to rub his head obsessively, face scrunched up as though suffering from a migraine. "He was a mentor to me. A father figure! I thought he trusted me with every facet of our work together, and now I find out about this," he snarled, turning to Violet and pointing at the Mason-bot's form. He aimed his accusatory finger at her and lowered his ears against his head in an almost feral manner. "Do you have any idea how illegal this is? They passed that law about automatons not resembling living or dead individuals for a reason, you know—if the company finds out about this, I could not only lose my job, I

could go to frigging jail, and so could you." Then another thought occurred to him, and his face welled up with horror. "Holy shit," he gasped. "The body. What did you do with his body?"

A feeling of dread began to coil itself up in Violet's chest, and she had to fight the urge to slap the coyote to calm him down, his panic becoming contagious. "Mason's body was properly atomized and has a memorial shrine to it just as anyone else who has passed on would have. The funeral was small, and was attended only by myself and the children," she explained patiently. "Believe me, Victor, when I found his instruction letter in his will that explained to me how to find the robot and activate it, it took me three days of thinking about it before I could muster up the courage to do it."

"But you sure as hell did it anyway, didn't you?" Bryce rumbled, his face still accusing. "Lady, you give me one good reason why I shouldn't storm out that door right now and call the cops on your ass," he growled, whipping his finger around to point at the entrance to the apartment.

Violet's own eyes narrowed, and her tail began to lash behind her like a whip. Something cold and commanding entered her features as she advanced slowly upon the canid, her own voice now accusatory and firm.

"Of course, Victor. Where shall we start?" She gestured at the robot. "Should we begin with how close a working relationship the two of you had? If you thought of him as a father figure, I can tell you that there were moments when I think he saw you almost as his own son. He thought very highly of you, you know. He talked frequently about how much potential he saw in you, even when he was working late to patch up some of your mistakes in your coding. Not that he did that too often, I'm sure," she murmured, her ears lowered in a bit of sarcasm as she watched Bryce's expression. Sure enough, she had gotten him right where it hurt, and he broke eye contact with her, looking at the floor, the ceiling... anywhere but her face.

"Oh, yes," she nodded, her eyes flashing. "He covered for you, didn't he? He laid quite a bit of groundwork for your career at

Anthromatons, I bet. What is your official title now, Victor? You're something like... what, a senior project manager, now, with a very good shot at making CIO within the next five years?" She folded her arms across her chest, scrutinizing him closely "Corporation-wise, that's almost unheard of, for a young male not even in his thirties. Let's face it, Victor—you're a very talented young man. But without my late husband's help, you'd still be an entry-level programmer stuck in a tiny cube making under fifty-thousand dollars a year like the rest of the coding monkeys."

Victor's face was flushed, and sweat was trickling down his face, his arms wrapped tightly around himself as he shuddered hard. The truth in Violet's words had nailed him, and he was panting softly for breath as he looked slowly up at her, grudgingly nodding his assent.

"All right," he gasped. "Fine. Yes, you're completely correct, I owe Mason my entire career, and yes, he covered for my rookie mistakes when I was first starting out." He breathed hard, his features meek but almost pleading with her as he murmured, "That's why I'm so nervous about this. Mrs. Scoletti, I'm not like you and Mason. I'm not lucky enough to have a wife that loves me dearly at my home. My work, my job..." He paused, then shrugged helplessly. "It's everything to me. It's all I've got. If I lose that, I have nothing."

"I understand that," Violet nodded. "Perhaps, then, you understand why I'm so desperate to do this. Mason was everything to me, and without him, I only have this as a reminder—someone to comfort me and keep me company. It was Mason's way of making sure I'd always have someone to look after me."

She stepped over to the coyote and placed her hand on his shoulder, gently. Her facial features had softened, and there was a pleading look of her own in them. "I can't make you do this, Victor. But would you really walk out on your best friend's dream?" She glanced over at the robot, a tender look on her face, then she looked back at Bryce and murmured, "I won't be around very much longer, you know. I realize that this may not seem right to some people, but he's my little secret—his existence doesn't

hurt anyone, and he will keep me strong until I can send my spirit winging to be with the real Mason, again. Won't you please help us?"

Bryce stared at her helplessly for a few moments, his muzzle trembling a bit—but after a moment or two, he stepped over to the entrance of Mason's office and looked at the automaton, then back at Violet, his voice and face apologetic. "Of course I will," he said softly. "In Mason's memory, if nothing else." He looked over at his briefcase, then walked slowly over to it, opening it up as he stared at all his tools. Hesitantly, he gripped a device that looked a bit like a voltmeter; only it had an LCD computer display screen instead of a gauge. He turned it on, and it hummed softly to life, the Anthromatons logo popping onto the screen for a moment as the coyote turned to Violet again, his tail wagging slowly. "It's what he would've wanted, after all."

Violet broke into a slow, wonderfully pleased grin, a low breath of exultation coming from her mouth as she stepped over to him and gripped his arm, her eyes alight with gratitude that didn't need words to be conveyed. Bryce smiled firmly back at her and squeezed her fingers gently, then gripped a small plastic case that he removed from the inside of his briefcase, carrying it into the office as he approached the robot. He pressed a button on a scanning device that emitted a wide infrared beam that slowly swept down over the robot's inert form, and he carefully adjusted the controls as he peered anxiously at the screen.

"To be honest with you? I'm not even sure where to start," he murmured over his shoulder at Violet, who watched anxiously from a few steps away. "Mason was a genius, as you well know—and even though his robot is probably full of technology that's nearly obsolete now, I guarantee you that his coding is probably unlike anything I've ever seen befo—" He paused, his eyes widening as his nostrils flared a bit.

Violet frowned. "Everything all right?" she asked.

Bryce nodded absently, his eyes wide as he stared at the machine in front of him. "Y-yes," he stammered. "It's... it's the scent emitters. They smell just like him," he breathed, slowly reaching

a handpaw out to touch the robot's external fur covering on the neckruff. He jerked his fingers back as though they were burned, and he looked at the robot with a spooked face that made Violet's own nerves start to jangle with worry again. "Holy shit, his fur... it feels so real! If this is some kind of modification on the epidermia covering that the company patented, it's the most authentic I've ever felt." His fingers shook as he read the scanner's readout on-screen, and his voice sounded both relieved and unsteady. "Well! The g-good news is that it's not a serious malfunction," he reported, looking over his shoulder at Violet with a shaky smile. "One of his primary motor function chips gave out. That's not unusual, on models that are over ten years old, and it's an easy fix."

Violet nodded, her eyes fixed on the coyote's face. "Then why are you shaking?" he asked. She took him gently by the arm and led him over to a chair, and he sat willingly, panting again. "Victor, your face looks flushed again," she said. "Are you feeling sick? Can I get you something to drink?"

He shook his head rapidly and patted her arm. "I'll... I'll be fine," he gasped, peering over at the robot again before he looked up at her, again smiling nervously. "It's... it's the strangest thing, you know? He's almost... too real," he murmured, struggling to explain his feelings. "I don't... feel like I'm working on a robot. It's almost like I'm... like I'm doing an autopsy on a cadaver." Bryce gripped her arm lightly, his eyes wide. "That's silly, isn't it?" he asked, his face entreating Violet to agree with him.

She shook her head softly and patted his hand. "No, it isn't," she said quietly. "If you could only see him when he's up and about, you'd feel even more so. He's so much like the real Mason that it can be genuinely unsettling, for the uninitiated."

The coyote looked at her with fascination, then over at the robot again, fingers still quivering. He seemed to be reluctant to get up again, and finally, Violet touched the scanner in his hand.

"Victor, you said that this is an easy fix," she murmured. "If you can talk me through it, would you like me to do it for you?"

His eyes snapped up to hers, and his words came out in a relieved gush. "Would you?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'd be happy to. I think I've put you through enough discomfort for one day, and even if I'm not very good with computers, I can follow instructions well."

The coyote looked at her for several moments, then handed her what looked like a pair of surgical tweezers, slightly larger than normal. "Here," he said. "You'll find his main motor function panel on the back of his skull, on the left-hand side, just above his neck. If you feel around with your finger, you should feel the raised square-shape where it's soldered in place."

Violet took the tweezers and nodded, turning to face the Mason robot as she did what Bryce indicated. "Ahh. Found it," she announced in a low voice. "How do I get into it?"

"Normally, there's a small access hatch to it just beneath the epidermal covering, but, uhh,,,y-you might have to... y'know, cut an opening with the, uhh..."

"I understand," Violet said, carefully cutting a small opening with the tweezers as she exposed the square chip socket at last. She glanced over at him and chuckled, in spite of herself. "Is it normal for a computer whiz like you to be this squeamish?"

"This is why I'm not a doctor," the coyote grunted, as he stuffed his hands into his pockets and shook his head. "Can you see the chip yet?"

"Yes," Violet said. "How do I remove it?"

"Just wiggle it a bit with the tweezers and it should pop right out. It's been long enough, so the soldering should be aged enough to let it come loose," the coyote instructed.

Violet wiggled the chip carefully, and it popped out. She carried it over to the canid, who looked at it closely, eyes squinted. "Geez, that's an old one," he murmured. He checked his briefcase and rummaged around in yet another plastic box on the inside of it. "Dunno if I've got a replacement that'll match it exactly, but... ahh! Here we go," he nodded, turning to Violet with a small chip in his palm that had a translucent red finish to the underside of the circuits. "This one should work just fine. It'll fit in the same socket, but it's a newer model, and it should last twice as long as the old one. Here, grab it with the tweezers," he murmured, offer-

ing it to her.

She did as he instructed, carefully, then held it aloft with one hand. "How do we make sure it won't fall out?" she asked.

Bryce held up a fingerclaw and rummaged some more, digging into a small pouch in the briefcase and bringing out a small tube of what appeared to be some kind of gel. "Silicone paste," he said. "It holds better than soldering, and it won't corrode the chip. Here, hold it still while I apply some, and then you can put it into place."

Violet held the chip steady as Bryce carefully dabbed some of the clear liquid on all four sides of the chip, his eyes straining to make sure he didn't apply too much—then she carefully walked over to the robot and eased the chip into the socket, pushing on it with the tweezers. It snapped in easily and locked into place, and she saw the circuits around it come to life with a soft green glow.

"I think it worked," she said excitedly to Bryce. "I can see some green indicator lights coming on, around it."

He nodded, ears perked and face wary. "Sounds like he's back online," he agreed. "He's probably in hibernation mode, though. You'll have to wake him up—just a light shake or calling his name would probably do the trick."

Violet turned towards him slowly, then brought him the tweezers. He took them and put his supplies away, doing a double-take at her face as she gave him a mischievous grin.

"What?" he asked, blinking.

"You," she chuckled. "You're calling him 'he' and 'him', just like I have. I thought you told me that he was an 'it'," she teased.

Bryce sighed. "You tell me," he shrugged. "You're the one that said that he's so much like the real Mace." He peered over at the robot again, then looked back at Violet. "What else has he done, behavior-wise?"

Violet stared at the robot as well, then looked back at the coyote. "He burps occasionally after a big meal," she offered as a start. "He loves to eat, even though he obviously doesn't need food. He knows all of Mason's favorite songs, and he tends to hum or sing them to himself in the same off-key manner that my husband did.

He has the same cornball sense of humor, he knows what my favorite books are and what kind of flowers I like..." She shrugged, then gave the coyote a serious look. "I could go on, but I think you get the idea."

Bryce shook his head in wonder. "Amazing," he breathed. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say it's almost like he put a bit of his soul in there."

Violet stared at the coyote then, and she nodded slowly. "You know... that's a very apt way of putting it," she murmured, frowning. "And I'm afraid that the situation is getting more complicated: he knows about my children, and he wants to meet them."

The canid looked at her in shock. "You mean he didn't know about them, before? How could he no—" Bryce paused, then narrowed an eye at her. "He does know that he's a machine, right?"

Violet opened her mouth, shifted in her seat a bit, then closed it, her eyes widening some as she tried to find the right way to answer him. Bryce read her facial expressions and gasped.

"Mrs. Scoletti, you've got to tell him!" he said, spreading his handpaws out wide. "Good grief, what happens if he goes out looking for them?"

She shook her head. "That's one reason why I've been able to keep this charade going for as long as I have," she murmured. "Mason was always a homebody, even when he was alive. He was practically working from his office full-time towards the end, anyway, and he rarely ventured outside more than a couple of blocks. I brought him here in the middle of the night after I activated him, and I made it a point to do all the shopping so he didn't have to leave the apartment—and he's never shown an inclination to go anywhere unless I'm with him. There are... limitations in his programming, I think, that keep him from asking... uncomfortable questions."

"So, in essence, you withheld the truth from him, about your kids," Bryce guessed. "Is that it? Passed them off as being the result of a previous marriage?"

Violet nodded, her face lowering in shame. "Yes. And that was the wrong thing to do. I've made excuses the whole time to keep

him from meeting them, and to keep them from coming over... and it genuinely seems to hurt his feelings, even though he was fairly passive about it, the first few times."

Bryce was unusually quiet, and Violet waited a few moments before she raised her head to look at him. The expression she saw on his features made her uneasy. The coyote was staring at the robot with renewed interest, his green eyes gleaming with fascination.

"It's almost as if... he knows they're really his children, doesn't it? He might not have sired them directly, but he still cares about their well-being, and wants to establish a relationship with them," he breathed.

He stepped over to the robot and stooped over a bit so he could look directly at the automaton's face. "Incredible. Can you imagine, Mrs. S., what kind of effect this could have on the robotics industry, if we were able to study his programming?" He straightened up and looked back over at her with a look that was delirious with the possibilities, and he didn't seem to be looking directly at her as he spoke—but rather, through her to the world outside.

"Machines that can love! What an advancement in artificial intelligence—imagine nanny robots that care for children all the way up until their teenage years—we could even pass them off as real parents to orphans that lost them when they are too young to remember it all, and they'd never have to know the truth! Can you imagine that? Or... or children that can be custom-created for parents that are infertile—what joy they'd bring to two spouse's lives, not to mention how much money the process could make for the right company..." He began to pace back and forth excitedly, his features animated and lost in thought as Violet watched him with growing horror. She finally clasped hold of him with both arms, making him look at her.

"Yes," she nodded emphatically. "Yes, Victor, all that is very true—but first, we have to make sure that he understands who he really is. I have to tell him the truth." She paused when she saw the slightly confused look in Bryce's eyes, and when he opened his muzzle to protest, she held up a hand to placate him. "It would be

much easier if he were willing to help in the study of his coding, don't you think? Perhaps he could replicate the data into a hard copy format, which would make the extraction process much simpler."

She prayed fervently that her words didn't sound too ignorant, technologically, and after a few moments, she was relieved to see Bryce nod slowly, then faster as he considered all the angles.

"Yes," he murmured, his brow furrowing. "Yes ma'am, that does indeed make a lot of sense—might be easier for him and me to work together on it on the sly, just like old times when we used to hack into things to test our coding," he murmured, his eyes shining bright as he recalled those events with a grin.

Violet nodded firmly, and fed him the final piece that she hoped would win him over: "Precisely! And best of all—you could take credit for it," she said emphatically. "Think of that. You'd become known all over the world as the male who revolutionized the artificial intelligence industry as we know it!"

Bryce's eyes almost went glassy, with that. His trim muzzle dropped open, and he stared into space dreamily for a few moments. When he finally tilted his gaze back in her direction, his words were thinly-veiled, sheer formality, and she knew it.

"Oh, but I... I couldn't do that," he murmured, his gaze latched onto hers. "I didn't create the coding. Mason did."

The feline said what she knew he was waiting to hear. "Well, I'm sure that once I've spoken to his stand-in and explained everything to him, he'll be quite willing to assist you in any way you need. He never really stopped working, and his current income keeps us sustained well enough. But if you're going to pass yourself off as his protégé' and claim these discoveries as your own, you'll have to keep the secret with us. Can't make trade secrets public, you know—otherwise, they're no longer trade secrets."

Bryce nodded thoughtfully, ears perked high as he patted her shoulder. "How very, very true," he murmured. "Best to keep things under wraps, then—until this Mason and I can work out a business plan, of sorts," he said, as he rubbed his palms together slowly. He gave her a careful look, his features uncertain. "You're sure he's

going to take your news all right? If he's as emotionally authentic as you say he is, I'm worried there may be repercussions."

"Actually, I'm more worried about how the children will take the news, than I am about this Mason's reaction to his origin," Violet sighed, looking over at the robot worriedly. "But you let me worry about all that. It's my fault for letting things get this out of control, anyway. And I promise, you'll be the first to know how it all pans out. If everything goes smoothly, perhaps you could join us for dinner? It would be a prime opportunity for you both to discuss the future."

The coyote took his cue and nodded, putting his tools away and closing the briefcase before moving towards the door. "Sounds like a plan, to me," he said. He stepped out into the hallway and gave Violet a lingering look that Violet found hard to read. "Good luck with breaking the truth to him, Mrs. S. If I can help with anything, let me know."

Violet gave him a small smile. "You've been a tremendous help already just with what you've done tonight, Victor. I'm grateful to you—and I'm sure he will be, too."

The coyote smiled a little, then exhaled slowly and walked down the hall towards the elevator, his gaze on the floor and one hand rubbing the back of his neck. Violet watched him go, then slowly closed and locked the door behind her, laying her forehead against the coolness of it as she gathered her inner strength for what lay ahead. She turned to face the apartment, the balled her hands into fists, steeling herself.

"Here goes everything," she breathed softly, as she stepped towards the office and the waiting robot. She stared at him for a few moments, then stroked her hand tenderly along the back of his head, lowering her face to hover just above his own. She shook his shoulder gently, then called his name. The robot Mason stirred, then sat up slowly and blinked, giving her a confused look.

"Vi," he rumbled lowly. "Gosh, I didn't even hear you come in." He blinked again, then looked down at his keyboard, then back up at her. "Did I nod off at my desk, again?" he gaped, looking up at her with surprise.

She nodded. "You looked so peaceful, I almost didn't want to wake you," she murmured, a pang of emotion surging through her body at the sound of his voice. She found it breathtaking how much like her late husband he really was, and even more astounding how fond she'd become of him. It simply wasn't possible for her to think of him as a machine, anymore.

"Well, I'm very glad you did, because that chicken is alm— " Then his head jerked towards the kitchen, alarm on his face as he jumped up from his chair. "The dinner... oh, no! Dammit, I can't believe I let myself fall asleep like that, I bet it's ruined—" He dashed for the kitchen, looking wildly towards the stove.

Violet followed him into the kitchen, shaking her head. "No, it's fine—I found it simmering when I came in, and I turned it down a little so it wouldn't burn." She swallowed hard, then touched his arm. "Mason—there's something very important I have to tell you."

He turned towards her, and saw the serious expression on his face. He frowned a bit, and came over to put his handpaw on her shoulder. "You do look upset," he said in a low voice. "What is it? Did something bad happen with the kids today during your memorial service?"

She shook her head. "No, nothing like that." She sat down in one of the chairs in the living room area and looked into her lap, fidgeting her fingers nervously. "I'm afraid I have a confession to make—I haven't been honest with you about something."

The robot blinked at her in surprise, then came over to stand in front of her and smirk a little, his whiskers twitching. "You're joking!" he gasped. "Is it another guy? I always thought some sleazy Romeo would be unable to resist your charms and would try to abscond with you!" he chuckled. He put up his fists and assumed a fighter's stance. "Where is he? I'll moiderize him for trying to swipe my best girl."

His smile and pose faded quickly, though, when he noticed Violet's expression getting even more somber. "Okay, so it is serious," he murmured. He sat down in front of her, then reached over and grasped one of her hands gently, his other hand tipping

up her chin slowly so she had to look at him.

"Go ahead and tell me what it is," he murmured. "Don't be afraid. If it's something we need to fix, then we'll do it together, like we always have."

Violet looked into his face, then nodded slowly, took a deep breath—then exhaled. Holding his handpaws in hers, she told him everything.

When it was over, she was still sitting in the chair. The Masonbot was standing next to the living room window, muzzle slightly agape, as it stared mesmerized by the glow of the lights and circuitry inside its arm casing, having torn a small strip of its outer synthetic flesh off to see if Violet's words rang true.

Violet glanced over at it sporadically, her whiskers and ears twitching nervously. The robot was unnaturally quiet, and it occurred to her that she had never really seen it angry. She wondered how it would react, and if she was in danger—although a part of her insisted that she wasn't. She gradually realized that if anything, she feared the robot being disappointed in her the most.

"If... if you're angry at me, you've every right to be," she stammered uncertainly, looking over at it. "I should've been up front with you about where you came from from the very beginning."

The robot looked over at her, its face puzzled. "Angry?" it murmured. "With you?" It paused, then shook its head in mild confusion, its brow furrowed. "Is that even possible, Vi? Can machines feel?" Then it blinked and gave her another sudden look, eyes wide and voice low. "Uhh... I can... still call you 'Vi', can't I?" it asked uncertainly.

She nodded firmly, her face sympathetic. "Of course you can," she said softly. "But only if I can keep calling you 'Mason.'"

The robot smiled at her a little. "You can call me anything you like, as long as you keep talking to me," it replied. It looked at the opening on its arm again, then shook its head a bit. "You know... if I have anything close to regret, it's that I never got to meet my creator." It peered over at Violet, its voice low and reverent. "He was a genius, wasn't he?"

Violet nodded somberly, only the tiniest hint of a smile on her face. "What was it he used to call himself? 'An old-timer who was ahead of his time.'".

"No arguments on that one from me," the robot Mason sighed. It walked back over to stand in front of her, its head cocked as it regarded her quizzically. "I guess there's just one thing I don't really understand," it admitted. "You went to some trouble to hide my existence from our..." It caught itself, then swallowed a bit and continued. "... from your children, and from Bryce, up until you had to ask for his help to bring me back on-line. You could actually have stopped this whole thing at any time, really. You didn't have to call Bryce for help, or you could have chosen not to have activated me in the first place, after you read the real Mason's note. So... why am I here?"

Violet looked up at the robot, and the answer came to her quickly. "Because I'm selfish," she said softly, her face trembling a bit as her eyes flashed defiantly. "You are my husband's last and greatest creation. You're the only part of him I have left," she said, her voice trembling with emotion. "When he died, it... it happened so fast. I thought I could handle his passing, but... but it was so hard," she said, clenching her hands tightly together. Her voice was breaking, and she could feel the tears coming, no matter how hard she tried to stop them. "A-and... when you came... and you were so much like him..." She clenched her teeth tightly, her vision blurring through her tears as she seized the robot's legs. "It is you! You're in there, Mason, I can feel you... how dare you leave me behind when you knew I'd never be able to let you go... !" She hammered at the robot's legs in fury, her head shaking wildly until she finally collapsed against it, her body wracked with sobs. The grey ribbon she used to keep her hair tied back came untied and fell gracefully to the floor.

The robot Mason looked horrified, then its features softened, muzzle falling open as its ears splayed in sheer pity for the sobbing feline. Tenderly, it closed its arms around her head and nuzzled her, stroking her hair slowly and waiting for her to calm down. It took quite a while, Violet hitching and rocking to and fro as

she clung to it. Finally, she hung limply, her energy drained and her facial fur streaked and matted with tears. The robot gently brought her to her feet and hugged her comfortingly, eyes closed as its handpaws stroked her back and hair. It waited until she was quiet and only sniffling, then it eased back and looked at her tenderly, before pressing a kiss to her forehead. It saw her ribbon lying on the floor, and it stooped down to pick it up, staring at it in its palm before easing her head down and carefully tying her hair back into place.

"What else was it that he used to say," he said quietly. "Mason, I mean. Didn't he have a cute little slogan for what strong partners you and he always were?" He paused for a moment, then smiled. "'We have to look out for one another, us obsolete old models.'"

Violet rubbed her eyes and let out a small, breathless laugh, and she gave the robot a look of sheer gratitude, a smile slowly shining through her tears. "That he did," she said. "It's one of my favorite adages, from him."

The robot smiled back, then grasped both of her handpaws in his. "All I can say is... he must have been very confident in my ability to look after you. One doesn't entrust one's greatest treasure to just anyone, after all." The smile on his face faded a bit, and he gave her a thoughtful look as he took a clean handkerchief from one of his pockets, then carefully dried Violet's face. "So—what do we do, now?"

Violet sniffled again, then looked determined. "Well... you've been more than good to me, and it's time I returned the favor and stopped being so selfish. I think that Mason would have wanted to share you with our children, and I think they need you—even if they might not realize it, at first."

The robot managed to look both hopeful and scared at the same time. "What if they don't accept me?" His brow furrowed, and he rubbed his chin in a worried fashion. "You know... I'd always wondered why you made such a big production number about not telling them about me, before, but now I know the risks involved." He shook his head. "If telling them about me would possibly create a rift between you and them, I'd really rather you didn't chance

it. I'd feel awful if they turned away from you because of me."

She shook her head resolutely. "They're adults now," she said. "They know how much their father meant to me, and if they love me at all, they'll adjust." She shrugged a little. "Besides, you're just as charming as the original. If you can't win them over, I don't know who can."

The robot's ears splayed, and his whiskers quivered. "Now, that," he murmured softly, "... was a serious compliment. Thank you, Vi."

"You are more than welcome," she replied, the pair of them staring solemnly at each other as the sun began to set on the horizon through the huge window behind them. They turned to watch it, and after a few moments of silence, the robot spoke again.

"When Mason had a particularly difficult project he was working on," he asked her, "... or if there was something in general that he was worried about... what would he do?"

Violet stared back at him, then rubbed her knees slowly in thought. "Well, he loved puzzles, and reading books, when he wasn't working... and he also loved music. He has a huge collection of music from various eras on our entertainment module's hard drive. Sometimes, we'd slow dance while we were waiting for dinner to finish cooking, and he said it was like magic," She giggled softly, her eyes fond with the remembrance. "He claimed that some of his greatest ideas and solutions came to him when I was in his arms and we were moving across the living room."

The robot nodded, glancing over at the sleek black plastic box that sat nearby, the entertainment center somewhat unobtrusive against the wall over the holo-viewer. Slowly, the robot looked back at Violet, hopefully.

"Play me one of his favorites?" he asked.

Violet stared over at the box, then said in a voice raised only slightly, "TuneMaster, play the 'Magical Evening' mix, please."

There was a momentary pause, then the floating speakers in all four corners of the room began to play the doo-wop 1950's version of the Flamingoes' rendition of "I Only Have Eyes for You". The robot closed his eyes and swayed his head back and forth to

the music, nodding. "I know this tune. He planted the memory of dancing with you to it in my memory ROM."

Violet looked at the robot thoughtfully, then got to her feet and offered him her handpaw. "May I?" she asked.

The robot looked up at her with an almost startled expression as his eyes opened to see her offering her hand for a dance, and then he looked up at her with such bashful gratitude that she couldn't help comparing it to Mason's face the first date they had gone on together. It made her heart ache a little, but she couldn't help but return his smile as he got up and took her hands in his own handpaws, carefully guiding her feet to step up onto his. "I should be delighted," he murmured.

The thrum of the guitars and bass line vibrated pleasantly through their feet as they moved slowly about, Violet's head laying against the robot's chest, her eyes closed in dreamy content. The robot's own eyes were open, and he stroked her back as he stared somberly into space, his chin tucked onto her left shoulder.

"You know, Vi," he murmured softly into one of her ears, "I know I'll never be able to compete with his memory, and I really wouldn't try. But... I just wanted you to know, you don't have to love me."

Violet's eyes opened slowly, and she kept moving with the robot's body, her features tranquil. "Don't I?" she murmured.

The robot shook his head. "I think I've got it figured out," he announced. "If you and the kids accept me for what I am, and let me hang in the background looking after you all, and taking care of you... that'd be enough, I think," He nodded softly, giving her a gentle hug. "I couldn't ask for anything more, really."

She turned her face towards his chest and inhaled his scent. There was the tiniest hint of ozone underneath, but over that was the cologne that her husband had always wore, comforting and warm to her nose. She closed her eyes and breathed it in deeply, and for just a little while longer, she let herself believe. Then she turned her face up to the robot's kindly face and gave him a tender kiss on the lips before she stroked both sides of his face, her own eyes and features earnest.

"I rather think that it's a bit too late for that," she whispered. "As long as you're with me, I'll never need to upgrade." Then she cuddled her head against its chest, losing herself in the music and the comfort of her repackaged husband cuddling her close.

Mason lay his head against hers and closed his eyes, nuzzling her neck—and Violet found that she couldn't tell the difference between which was the music, and which was the robot purring. And ultimately, it didn't really matter.

Cassius promised to find his brother and keep him safe. But would he have to betray him to keep his promise?

Hyperstream

Karai Crocuta

Taken from the journal of Trevor Pleiades, January 2nd, 1287 PE

From the beginning, the war had not been about technology, or knowledge, or the people who possessed them. It was not about the need to continue to develop new and better machines or power sources, or to improve the lives of those living under the jurisdiction. No, despite the fact that my son James and the vast store of knowledge in his head were the objects both sides desired, it was power that was being fought over. The power to survive. The power to prosper out there, in the bleakness of space that lies between our old stars.

That's right. We're here, smack dab in the middle. How we ended up stranded out in the void is still something under daily debate by scholars and theologists. All I know is that under the current laws of physics, it would have taken millennia for anyone to get even halfway here, and everyone's at least sure that none of us have ever met anyone from beyond our own little corner of space.

Well, except me perhaps. Do dreams count? I've seen them, even spoken with them in my dreams many times. I ask them the questions burning in my mind, and they've never lacked answers, despite the fact that apparently some things are not for me (a mere mortal?) to know.

So that's how I know. That's why I keep looking for a way to breach the barrier that matter presents, and the very speed of light itself. But, so far, everything I've tried has failed. I'm not even sure why they wanted him, since all he has in his memory are star charts and failed formulae. But that doesn't matter now. I'm going to find him. I'm going to get him back, and even if I have to destroy the entire syndicate fleet to do it, I still won't hesitate.

I only wish Cas could be here with me, lending me that strength he draws from I know not where.

Fire erupted into Cassius's vision. Security personnel had punctured an oxygen pipe with weapons fire, and it had ignited immediately. The jaguar had no time to dodge around the gout of flame before him, so he ducked and rolled instead.

Coming up again, he broke into a run almost immediately as he chanced a look back. He saw only flame and red light, from the fire alarms, filling the hallway. Losing the guards had been perhaps too easy. With appropriate timing, a siren shrieked, drowning out Cassius's heavy breathing. The big cat smiled as he turned the corner. Empire station security were all supposed to be crack shots. So much for their reputation. He was almost there and still completely intact.

As the gray walls of the corridor rushed past him, Cassius began to notice numbers painted in yellow on some of the doors. Four, three, two... and then he ran into another corner. Whipping around at full speed, the big cat had to skid to a halt as he reached door number one.

Cassius took a deep breath, holstering his blaster pistol and pulling a door key from a pocket at his gun belt. He knew he didn't have much time. The oxygen leak would be sealed automatically by the station's emergency systems, and the security personnel were nothing if not fast, despite their poor aim so far.

Stepping forward, the jaguar touched the magnetized end of the key to the lock plate, waiting for the mechanism to light up. A second passed that seemed like an hour before the plate turned yellow and slid to the side, replaced by a retinal scanner

that popped out from the revealed crevice. Most citizens would have put their faces down on the scanner's chin rest by sheer rote, but Cassius wasn't possessing of quite the right eyes to open this particular door. Instead, he gave the scanner a dose of static from his electromagnetic disruptor.

His old friend Tom had said that this particular mechanism, like all of the ones in this half of the station's detention area, were made of brand new technology. That, of course, meant that someone had been stupid enough to rely on their own designs instead of the best (that of the skunk's own design, of course), and anyone dumb enough to do that would never think of including countermeasures for electromagnetic reprogramming. Nor would the penny-pinching heads of Currency Management ever approve such expensive shielding for such inconsequential devices.

Cassius breathed a sigh of relief when the scanner finally retracted. It flashed green on its way back into the little alcove in the wall before hiding behind the locked shield. Tom's assurances had all been right so far. The big cat hoped that all of his friend's information would hold true. If it didn't, Cassius probably wouldn't get a chance to curse his friend's instructions.

The thick, titanium alloy-shielded doors shifted, their vacuum seal breaking and sucking in air from outside with a loud but brief hiss. They began to open after another second or two, an eternity even less endurable than that of the lock plate. Cassius was breathing heavier than he should have been. The jaguar had been through worse, but now that he was so close to his objective he was more nervous than he had been the whole mission.

James was being held behind that door. Every bone in Cassius's body ached to see his little brother again, to free the fox from the clutches of the Imperial Military.

Cas woke to a brightly-lit room and immediately knew where he was. He growled as the disorientation left him—a side effect to which he had unfortunately become accustomed over the past month.

"That's not a very cordial greeting," said a voice from beyond

Cassius's range of vision.

The jaguar knew exactly who the owner of the voice was. The alien had been a constant, unwanted presence in his dreams lately, and had even occasionally appeared while Cassius was awake. What the strange being intended for him he didn't quite know yet. All Cassius knew so far was that the alien had a very irritating way of invading his dreams.

At once, a reptilian snout came into view—a smooth-scaled, pointed muzzle ending in a half-beak, half tooth-lined predator's maw. The alien was hanging upside-down from an unseen platform somewhere above the jaguar, with his chin level with Cassius's forehead. Silver eyes stared at the cat, and Cassius realized that the alien was sneering at him.

"I already told you that you're not going to get anywhere with me," the jaguar said. "I'll not be part of your—"

"Yes, yes. I remember," the draconic being interrupted, "But I don't think you realize what exactly it is that I'm offering. Perhaps you'd like a chance at success, rather than falling short of your goal of rescuing your little brother? He's rather important to them, you know." Sol'lan'ar Katuliss, self-named ambassador of his race, was rather insistent about his demands. Will, he said, was one of the chief virtues of his people. Patience, though, was rather rare for them, and he was proud to possess a high degree of it himself.

Cassius hissed, feeling his hackles raise as the reptilian taunted him. "I was just getting to that, before you interrupted it, you overgrown—"

"Now now," Sol'lan'ar interjected, the reptile turning briskly and walking across the ceiling as if to demonstrate that gravity was but another of the minor universal laws he claimed control over, "Don't pretend that you haven't messed that up already. I know exactly what happened, and I'm willing to afford you a second chance at finding him if you'll simply agree to make use of the only method you have of achieving success." The alien was making his way across the floor after walking quite effortlessly down along the wall of the strange, bright-white room. Sol'lan'ar was a fan of theatrics, something which Cassius had quickly learned

during their first few sessions.

Cassius just wanted to have his mind and body back. He hadn't been able to figure out how the alien was able to enter and affect his consciousness so easily, but he was determined to stop it somehow. Unfortunately, all of his and Tom's effort lately had been spent on the planning for the rescue attempt, not on blocking out the mental invasions of the well-spoken but irritating alien. Cassius hadn't even heard of Sol'lan'ar's strange, draconic race. Apparently, they were quite advanced, especially compared to Cassius's own. If that were true though, why did the alien need Cassius's help in the first place?

"You see, we both want the same thing, Cassius," Sol went on, while the alien stepped back in front of the cat.

A pillar was sitting not far off, rectangular and white like the rest of the room. Upon the pillar sat a device not unlike the paws-free communications-receivers that were used by law enforcement officers and staff members to keep tabs on each other. It seemed to consist of an ear-loop attached to a smooth, plastic little case, with several wires trailing from it.

Sol'lan'ar's smile was mockingly tender as he stepped around the rectangular stand, his claws tracing around the device before he locked eyes with the big cat. "This was originally intended for your brother, you know. Unfortunately I can't get it to him due to some military interference, a fact which you are well aware of. Because of that, I've decided to make some modifications to the interface, as well as adding an adapter to do as much as the arithmetic as is possible, to save on wear and tear of the user's brain."

Cassius snorted. Fat chance of me ever wearing that, he thought.

The door rose amid the sound of whirring machinery, steam clouding what was inside the room from Cassius's view temporarily. He had readied his weapon seconds before, and had made the decision not to ever turn back weeks ago. The jaguar flattened himself against the wall, then crouched and craned his neck down. The room inside was pitch black, but Cassius couldn't afford to

assume it was empty of threats.

His hunch turned out correct. As soon as the door was half open, bolts of energy weapons fire seared the wall and floor, passing within inches of his body as he broke into a run.

The humidity of the room reached his nostrils quickly, but the light came first, blinding him as he returned fire. A searing tendril of flame laced out at him from behind a moment later, wrapping around his ankle and halting his momentum. Cas had been hoping beyond hope that he wasn't running into a trap. He had been forced to build his plan around the element of surprise, because without it he had very slim chances of success. The reality of the situation hit him just a bit slower than the stream of electrically-charged matter.

Cassius hit the ground much less gracefully than he had a moment ago, an audible crack sounding as his shoulder struck cold metal. He was hit with another crackling curl of energy before he could recover, this time square between the shoulder blades. Whoever was on the other end of that energy whip was quick.

"It's a very pleasant feeling to have one expectations fulfilled," said an unseen voice. Cas was still experiencing the incredibly unpleasant sensation of electron feedback spreading outward from the last blow of that energy whip, but he did feel lucky to still be conscious, if no longer mobile. After all, the weapon used on him was rarely used to kill, but to incapacitate, paralyze, and of course torture.

"I have to admit to being impressed with how well you did getting here," the long-winded voice went on. Cas wasn't very impressed with his new captor's gloating skill, but he could only cough in reply.

A second later, he was finally afforded a view of the whip-user. Cassius was immediately impressed at the lengths that were taken to stop him. A thousand soldiers were said to be less dangerous than the panther before him.

"... And that's saying a lot, I realize," said Alexander Blaise, the head officer of the Conglomerate's covert branch of specialists—a group of assassins at the disposal of the Chief Executive himself.

He was every bit as tall and imposing as stories told, his body-suit still alight with the crackle of his energy whip. The cold, yellow eyes of a predator supreme settled on Cassius' prone form, followed by a soft chuckle.

Oh well, thought Cassius, It was impressive while it lasted. Who would have thought that I'd get all the way here alone?

Cassius seethed at the alien's arrogance. Sol'lan'ar took every opportunity to remind him that the alien's draconic race was superior, a habit which was more than caustic under these circumstances. Even now, the dragon was watching him, searching for that look on Cas' face that betrayed his lack of understanding.

"So that a less intelligent being could wear it, you mean?" Cassius was beyond tired of this line of thought.

"Less able to calculate hyperstreamic trajectory, actually," Sol answered. "In fact, almost anyone could survive its operation for a short time. Those with strong wills might even be able to fully integrate their minds with its systems, though that would only shorten their effective timespan of use." The alien shrugged.

Cassius shook his head in disbelief. "That little thing can make jumps? That's crazy! Even I know that it takes immense power to enter hyperstream, and my primitive civilization can't even do it yet." It was a goal that had been struggled and fought over for centuries already, ever since the first inklings that hyper-light travel could exist had appeared in the minds of scientists.

Could Sol'lan'ar's people have perfected this technology to such a degree that it could be held within such a tiny device?

The alien smiled. "No, not even my people are able to produce enough power to make jumps without an immense generator. The beauty of my invention is that the necessary power is always available. The device merely acquires it."

The ludicrousness of Sol'lan'ar's statement was enough to make Cassius' jaw drop open, prompting the alien to shake a clawed finger. "No, I doubt you would understand the physics involved, even if I spent a decade tutoring you. Not even the other scientists of my race truly grasp what I've created..."

Cassius had already pegged the alien as stubborn and arrogant, but a mad genius? It made sense now, but Cassius wasn't about to let himself be manipulated, especially when his brother's life was on the line. Still, did James really possess the kind of mental faculty required to safely traverse the hyperstream, unaided? The fox had always been brainy, but even the best and most talented had failed to fully grasp the theory behind the hyperstream, let alone anything near its successful application.

It was all too much. Cassius wasn't anywhere near to trusting the alien, especially now that Sol'lan'ar's plan had been revealed. The alien wanted Cas to use the potentially-lethal device to zero in on James and somehow spring the fox from imprisonment. It sounds safer than a lot of plans I've already considered, Cassius thought, but that's assuming what he's saying is true. That settled it. Cassius wasn't about to risk his own life and that of James just to serve the alien's interests.

"If you think I'm going to agree to this, you're crazy," the jaguar growled.

Sol smiled grimly. "You still don't understand. They're going to lock you up. They're going to torture you until they can extract every bit of pertinent information about your life. And they're going to have a ball doing it. You've run out of choices, outlaw. I'm offering you a way out—the only one you'll ever get from now on. Think about it. I need you, and you need me. You're the only one with enough guts and skill to even attempt—much less approach success at—what you've been trying to do. If you really care about your brother and bringing down—"

Cas' snarl interrupted the alien. "I risked everything for this, but I'm not going to pull James out of the frying pan and into the fire. I'm not giving him to you!"

Sol'lan'ar paused, his strange eyes flickering for a moment before he spoke. "Have you considered his feelings, Cassius? Would he want you to give up your life rather than have any chance of him seeing you again? And he's the only one in your pathetic race capable of fulfilling his brilliant father's legacy. Give him that opportunity back. Give your race back what they left behind centu-

ries ago. Giving up now would be the same as accepting that you'll never be free again."

Sol's words drew Cassius' gaze to the alien, the cat finding himself silent for the first time during a discussion with someone he considered both a megalomaniac and an enemy. Those draconic pupils focused on him in turn as he took a moment to think things over. He already knew the alien had a lot to lose if the Company were to be successful in their search for Hyperstream technology. Just why did Sol'lan'ar care, if the dragon's race already possessed the ability to breach the Stream themselves?

It didn't matter, he realized. Sol'lan'ar was right, despite how that angered him. Cassius couldn't escape by himself. He couldn't turn down his only chance to rescue James. He would simply have to improvise, to somehow wriggle free of whatever plans Sol had in store for him in order to save his brother and himself.

"All right. I don't know what you could possibly do to get me out of this, but I'll cooperate." Cassius clenched his teeth. He still felt like he was giving in, but he had his back up against a wall that he couldn't move himself. Admitting that might have been harder than infiltrating the Company station.

The dragon simply nodded. "I've a way to get you out, yes. But you're going to have to follow my instructions as closely as possible. You know what the consequences will be if you try to back out, I trust?"

Cas nodded. "I go to Hell and James gets used to make the Company the greatest force in the galaxy for time immemorial. I'll do whatever you say, as long as my brother stays safe and unharmed."

The sneer on Blaise's face was exactly what one would expect from someone who's never experienced defeat. Cassius should have been affected by it, but the new pathways opening up in his thoughts made the emotion of anger much less interesting. He was on his feet before anyone reacted, was in lethal range before the energy whip could complete its first strike. Cassius was in control, his reflexes heightened, his body working faster than his

mind could possibly have kept up with on its own.

That's some trick, lizard, Cas thought. I hope you can keep my organs together long enough to get this done.

Your body won't like this very much, but it can't be helped. I'd be more worried about your mind, frankly, Sol replied. It isn't designed to deal with this sort of thing either, but your race's technology isn't quite as good at repairing that. The alien certainly didn't seem familiar with the idea of offering encouragement.

A look of surprise had just finished forming on the panther's face by the time Cassius finished incapacitating the rest of the guards. There had been seven of them—more than enough to take care of any sort of threat that could fit through the large access hatch Cassius had opened earlier. The jaguar had to appreciate the convenience that Blaise's presence offered. That energy whip was one of the only weapons able to get through the armor worn by those troublesome Company security officers.

Cassius smiled inwardly, though his muzzle remained steeled as he struck down one of the most dangerous people in the galaxy. Cybernetic enhancements were one thing, but even they weren't on nearly the same level as Sol'lan'ar's Out of Body Link. Blaise would be no threat to anyone after this.

You won't be able to return the way you came, Cassius. You'll have to hijack an escape pod.

No, I want my ship. It's still in the hangar.

There's no time for that. Don't be a fool. If we're successful that ship will be useless compared to what your brother can do.

Cassius was angry, but arguing with someone in control of one's body was never a good idea.

In what amounted to moments, he had not only hijacked an escape pod, but had hacked into the station's main systems and put its defenses on standby with the help of the alien's expertise and unexpected knowledge of primitive technology.

As he set a course to take him out of the sector, he was finally able to start slowing down. He felt suddenly heavy, his body going slack and crumbling somehow as if released from a moving shuttle. Cassius was panting heavily, his heart feeling like an im-

possibly fast piston in his chest. It quickly slowed, but the pain spreading throughout the jaguar kept him from even thinking about moving. After all, he had been on the business end of an energy whip, and had been running at three times normal speed since Sol had hot-wired his body.

You didn't expect to feel like you're on the edge of death after all that? I had thought your society provided better education about biological systems and their limits.

Cassius felt like he was going to die, but somehow he managed to keep taking breath, despite how dizzy he had become after hitting the ground. It got easier after he passed out, though the feline probably would have preferred to at least glare at the alien at their first meeting in person. He owed Sol'lan'ar a good broken nose or two after all the alien's remarks.

I'm blind, was Cas's first thought as he woke up. It sure seemed that way, and he found himself actually wishing for it as he realized that the room he was in was just too bright for his eyes at first.

"Damn you. You sure don't waste time, bastard," the jaguar cursed as he tugged at his bonds. He was on his back, fastened to a flat table of some kind in a room almost identical to the one he had visited in his mind during those meetings with the draconic alien. "I suppose you woke me up to have a little fun with my pain centers, or my primitive psyche," he spat, though he didn't see Sol'lan'ar anywhere just yet.

That was odd. If the alien had awakened him, why not stay around?

Something was wrong. If Sol was here, the alien wasn't responding to him. That meant he had no way to get off that table, let alone escape wherever place he had ended up in.

A moment filled with anger and frustration passed, but the cat could make no progress on escaping from the metallic restraints. The lights went out without any warning as Cassius cursed, but to his surprise the cuffs opened a moment later, all by themselves.

"Must be a power outage," he mused. At least that meant the

door locks might all be open too.

Sol'lan'ar was nowhere in sight, not in the small laboratory Cassius had found himself in and not in the living quarters. Cas was thankful the alien kept appetizing food products, the jaguar wasting no time in sating his hunger before he thought about his next move. The restroom had a mirror, and it was there he first noticed the object attached to him just behind his left ear. The hyperstream device! Without thinking, he reached up to touch it, and almost jumped through the steel-plated ceiling when a hologram appeared before him.

"Welcome to the Hyperstream tutorial, Cassius," the three-dimensional image of Sol'lan'ar said. "If you're viewing this, then it's likely my suspicions were true. I've been taken captive for crimes committed against my government, and you have no one to go to for help in making that implant work. Thankfully, I took the time to program each and every one of the necessary commands to execute without my presence. All that's required is for your mind to accept the program and learn to control it. I should remind you that time is of the essence. Are you ready?"

The system was simply amazing. So was the pain. Cassius had passed out during the first time he tried to access the navigation system, as well as on the second, third and fourth tries. Each attempt yielded progress, despite the amount of times the voice recording of Sol'lan'ar warned Cas about the chance of neural collapse during use of even the simplest programs in the system.

Gradually, Cassius became aware of more and more star clusters, more and more planets that made up the quadrant he was in. There was only one, however, that mattered. It felt like hours before he could begin searching for the hyperstreamic signal coming from James. Apparently, someone had taken great pains to make the fox traceable, just not by any means known to his captors.

There he was. Cassius felt each second with greater anticipation as he located the beacon. It had to be James, despite how remote the star was. This had to be where the Company's main labs were, unless it was another trick. Unfortunately, Cassius didn't have the

luxury of a Plan B in case he was being decieved.

"I'm ready. Start up the absorber and open the connection. Now."

Thankfully, after all the refusals dealt out to Cassius during the simulations, Sol'lan'ar's image finally complied. The chance Cas could die of neural overload was still over sixty percent, but it had started at ninety seven. Now was the time for the real rescue.

The air around Cassius began to throb and tremble, the singing of its colliding atoms becoming audible as the module began to adjust the frequency of his own atomic vibrations. Just as he had during the simulations, Cassius became lighter than air, intangible at least to everything around him.

The navigation system began loading almost too quickly for him, but a deep breath of oxygen from his recirculator helped calm him enough to handle the information being uploaded into his memories. His path set, the outlaw slowly closed his eyes, and felt the strange, empty world around him shift.

He was stretching toward an isolated point in space, his body becoming unbearably thin. Cassius felt as if he existed at every point between his starting place and his destination. Time had since become something else, something alien but bearable enough after the multiple times he had experienced it before, virtually.

Cassius saw everything of note on the way. Stars that shone bright in all colors and every color at once spread across his vision and passed like fish in a fast-flowing river whose beginning and end were infinity. Abandoned hulks of space vessels and giant asteroids showed up every now and again, unrecognizable to the traveler, but all part of some forgotten time and civilization, all there because of some prior sequence of events that had transpired in times ages past.

It was indescribable. Cassius found he couldn't even retain cogent memories of any of his simulated jumps afterward, and he knew it would be the same after this time as well, if he survived.

All at once, he was there. The module's hard-wired display showed him what his eyes were too sensitive to risk exposure to. The station was ten times the size of the one Cassius had origi-

nally infiltrated. They had no reason to expect him, so the jaguar let himself in.

He traveled through the hull on a straight path to James's signal, wasting no time now that he was there. The trip seemed shorter than a split second to him now, but even that was too much time. Cassius had to see his younger brother.

Finally, he entered a room not too unlike the one Sol had taken him to the many times the alien had entered his thoughts and dreams. The interior was white, but it wasn't as bare as Cassius remembered. In the center of the room, a cylindrical chamber ran from roof to floor looking as if made of glass. Inside was his brother.

The fox was sitting quietly, fingers drawn over his temples. He looked like he was suffering from a migrane, but the worry lines on either side of his eyes suggested stress, and lots of it. James probably hadn't heard of his brother's escape. In fact, if the fox's captors thought like Cassius, they probably would have told him that the jaguar had been vaporized. But James was a smart kid. He wouldn't believe them even if they fabricated up evidence to try and convince him. James wouldn't believe them unless he spoke to Cassius himself.

The jaguar felt his heart racing, a smile forming on his lips as he watched his brother. James was alive. He was real, and his rescue was in sight.

Cassius halted. There was someone else in the chamber, someone he hadn't noticed at first. There was a vixen moving behind James, placing her hands over his shoulders. She looked tall, but that was probably only because James was short of stature even for a fox. Unless Cassius missed his guess, she seemed friendly. But he wasn't about to make that assumption.

James sighed. "When are they going to give me a break? It's not like we're in a hurry, here. No one else was even close to the point Dad was in his research. I don't even understand most of his more in-depth notes. How am I supposed to give them what they want?"

"Relax, James," Sara soothed. "They can't afford to push you like this and they know it. You'll get a break, soon. If anything, their impatience suggests trouble of some sort. Do you think there are still people out there like your brother, trying to overthrow the company?"

James just shook his head. Sometimes Sara was too hopeful, but other times she was the only thing keeping him going. He felt a small smile gathering at the corners of his muzzle, then his eyes opened wide. What was that image flickering before him? It disappeared before he could identify it, but when he searched his eidetic memory for it, he found Cassius.

Sara took a step back as James jumped up in surprise, then her jaw dropped open. He was gone!

"Cassius!" The small fox's vision was clearing as he was provided oxygen, the world around him feeling different somehow. That didn't matter, though. His brother was here.

"I've got you, little bro," Cas said, smiling genuinely for the first time in over a year. "You wouldn't believe what I went through, but there's no way for the company to get at you now."

James looked around him, seeing the same room he had been imprisoned in for the past month. "What? Cassius, we're going to be caught like this. Where's your way out, and why did I almost pass out just now? Are we..." The fox's ears stiffened, his eyes going wide. "You were invisible..."

"And intangible," Cassius put in. "I've taken you out of phase with the rest of the station, here. We can't stay like this forever, but chances are we'll be fine until I can take you home."

James was spellbound for a moment, but if anyone could accept the existence of devices and states previously thought impossible, it was him. "Then there's no way for them to detect us," he observed, correctly as Cassius confirmed with a nod. The fox took a deep breath.

"We have to take Sara, too. They captured her once they found out her relationship with me and kept her here in hopes I would work harder if we were together. We can't leave her here

imprisoned."

Cassius frowned. "We have only two oxygen tanks, and I'm not sure how long it'll take us to reach Chevron."

James' ears shot up. "We're going there? But how? There's no way we could get there without growing old unless we hijacked a company vessel!"

Cassius only smiled. "You'll have to share your oxygen with her, so be careful and don't get too worked up before the jump."

Days later, or weeks perhaps, the three were standing on a ledge overlooking the Great Desert of their homeplace. James had been wanting to show Sara the canyon, but had given up all hope of ever getting the chance. Now it was right there before them, and she was speechless.

"I told you it was beautiful," he told her, his thick brush of a tail waving slowly back and forth.

Cassius made as if to leave them with each other, but James placed a finger on the jaguar's shoulder to stop him.

"Where did you get that device, and who taught you how to use it? You're family, but even so you've never been an inventor."

Cassius tilted his head, confused. "I thought you figured it out. The gadget was invented by Sol'lan'ar, your alien friend. He mentioned his talks with you more than once, and for a long time I thought he was only messing with me. But he turned out to be telling the truth about this thing," the jaguar said, pointing to the device that had been permanently married to his cranium.

James bristled, eyes widening up at his brother. "That's impossible, Cas. Sol'lan'ar is the name of the program the Company uncovered and was using as a guide while they had me translating Dad's notes. They believed that it was of alien origin, some remnant from a civilization more advanced than ours. But it wasn't alive, and I'm sure it never left the station."

Cassius didn't believe his brother until he went back to the laboratory he'd woken up in.

According to the records they managed to gain access to, Sol'lan'ar was the name of a renegade scientist imprisoned and

executed twelve millennia ago by a race called the Salusians. If that were true, though, none of the things Cassius experienced—including the temporary but significant augmentation of his body during his escape—could have been true.

James found him the next day, a program waiting to run on the dwelling's holo-emitter.

"It took you long enough," the alien said, glancing at each of them. "It was unfortunate that I had to deceive your brother, James. It was necessary for his sake and yours, though. He would never have accepted what I was in the time we had."

The hologram was identical to the one Cassius had seen the first time his dreams had been invaded. Now, the jaguar realized why the alien had avoided coming into contact with him throughout their interactions. The dragon had never possessed substance or a body at all, not since his execution.

"I was a visionary among my people. You see, my race never even dreamed of leaving their solar system, let alone of exploring the entire galaxy. They originally supported my research in the name of progress and knowledge, but those ideals were thrown out as soon as they realized what I was trying to invent. I was practically standing on success when they got to me. My race may not match my intelligence on the whole, but they had been monitoring me closer than I had thought. When I fled, they unleashed their best weapons and destroyed my ship and all of the equipment inside. I escaped, but knew I had precious little time before they caught up with me again."

"But why would they want to kill you?" Sara asked. She had been amazed at James's work, but the alien technology she had experienced had opened her eyes to things she had never dreamed of. How could a race that advanced be so brash and violent?

Sol'lan'ar's gaze flickered lower, the alien's expression turning somber. "I had violated their sacred laws. You must understand that my people have always stood on tradition. They believed that affecting the galaxy around them in any way was taboo, that any kind of travel there would set events in motion that would eventually destroy everything any of us knew. I had always rebelled

against those boxed-in ideals, but to stay funded I pretended to be devout. I paid for my deception."

"So you found a way to transfer your consciousness into data," James put in. "Brilliant, though it would take incomprehensible amounts of patience and will to survive like that for as long as you have. How does one deal with giving up their own body?"

Sol's snout rippled. "You understand me better than you think. I had curiosity and the sacred ideals of the scientist to keep my mind at work. My hidden lab grew slowly, but my robots improved more and more over time until I was able to construct the module your brother now wears proudly. That was my life's work and then some, and I can think of no one better to share it with after having met your family. Your father was especially brilliant, and his loss was tragic. If only I had been able to help him when he needed me most. It was my whisper that sparked his greatest epiphany, the one that started all of this."

The alien's face was downcast, but James merely shook his head. "I disagree. He would have figured it out, or I or someone else at some point would have. You only made the choice of when it happened for all of us. I don't blame you for his death more than I blame his mortality itself. And even if you never revealed yourself to any of us until Cassius returned to try and save me, your help makes you our family, flesh or no."

It was the one thing Sol'lan'ar had wished for during his exile, and even before that when he was spending all of his available time and energy to develop his technology. It had been worth it just to see his research furthered, but that brought an unexpected and wonderful gift along with it, that of family.

Journal of James Pleiades, May 4th, 1288 PE,

We're making more and more progress every day with the star charts. Sol's managed to expand the Hyper-module's range enough for all of us to travel in comfort. Soon, we'll be able to move the whole ship around when we map the stars. We still haven't come close to finding the legendary homes of our fathers, but one thing is for sure. They're out there, and they can't hide from us forever.

Every time I make a jump I think of Dad. I think Cassius does too, though not as much. I still catch him crying every now and again, though that's something we both do. Dad was our whole world back when we were little. I don't even remember Mom, though Cas sometimes tells me about her as well.

Sara has been my inspiration for each and every breakthrough I've made here. Even Sol is occasionally impressed with my progress, though I've a long way to go before I'm even thinking at his level. Still, I can't stop thinking about the next jump. I can't wait to feel that near-infinity of stars at my fingertips once more. I know it will never come soon enough.

Well, it's time for some well-deserved rest. We found possible evidence of intelligent life today, though we didn't get close enough to confirm. That's a job for another day. Goodnight!

In Part One of Angelwolf's "The Journal," we meet a man who reaches out for something greater, and touches a source of limitless power. Does he have the courage to take the first steps?

The Journal: Beginning

Angelwolf

It's been three days since I entered the portal. It occurs to me that this could be a parallel universe, or another dimension, or something of that kind, but I can't be sure. I can, however, be sure that I am no longer on Earth, or at least not the Earth that I knew.

Three days. It seems like yesterday, and so long ago. Four days ago, I was sitting in my office high in the Rockies, looking down on the excavation site, watching them remove the rock and rubble from the ever-expanding hole in the side of the mountain. Bucket after bucket of rocks and sand traveled the rails from the depths of the cave to the surface, to be dumped into growing mounds on the side of the dig site.

As I watched the trucks heave their latest loads off the side of the hill, my executive officer, Declan Michaels, walked through the door that connected my office with the rest of the installation. Even though he knew that I was aware of him, he waited patiently for me to acknowledge his presence. Finally, I turned away from the sight out my window and strode to my desk.

"What is it, Declan?" I asked, casually returning his salute.

"Sir, we've found something. I think you should come take a look at it," Michaels replied.

I considered him for a moment. Declan wasn't a man who startled easily. After fifteen rather extraordinary years in the Marine Corps, he was an impressive man. Almost six feet tall and nearly that broad, he was intimidating, to say the least. But at that moment, his face registered something I'd never seen before: a twinge of fear. That rattled me, as Declan had seen combat in more theaters than anyone else I knew in the force, and even being a civilian advisor, I knew that if this man in front of me was scared, there must be something deeply fucked up going on.

I motioned to the door, "Lead the way, Major."

We walked through the installations corridors and down the massive stairways to the ground. Exiting the installation, I was once again staggered, as I was every time, by the sheer size of the cavern. Over 100 feet wide at its narrowest, a large jet could have fit in the opening and had room to turn around in the first chamber.

The cavern system was discovered intact within the mountain, and my corps of engineers had been working steadily to expand the size to take advantage. So far, we were finished with the initial chamber, and the connecting tunnels, and we were starting work on the other rooms within the cavern system.

No one knew exactly what we were doing with the cavern after it was finished, but all of us suspected something deep and dark and mysterious from some alphabet soup government agency. With the plans that we were following, it looked as though they were building an entire city below that mountain. They had rooms that looked like they were for computer equipment, and some for barracks. I wonder if I'll ever find out what it actually was for.

We walked through the massive main entrance to the cave and plodded steadily through to the back of the cavern where a small opening led deeper into the mountain. Through the door, I could see the string lights that the engineers had strung along the cavern ceiling to provide a modicum of illumination to the workers.

Deeper and deeper we went, passing all the old work, and we arrived at the newer worksites, where workers gradually chipped away at the walls, smoothing the rough edges, making them wider

and safer for human travel. The lights thinned towards the end of the cavern, as the workers hadn't erected as many strings yet, and the shadows grew in length and breadth, taking on a life of their own. Everywhere I looked, I expected a pair of eyes to be staring out of the shadows, stalking the wandering humans, wondering at the invasion of this deep place.

Finally, we reached the end of the corridor, and emerged into a chamber almost twice the size of the first one. If the first could have landed a 747, this one could have landed three, side by side, and stood the space shuttle launch pad in its vertical space. I stood for a moment, dumbfounded at the sheer size of the space. I honestly wondered if the mountain was just a hollow shell.

The cavern was illuminated by giant spotlights at the four cardinal points, pointed at the roof. The reflected light illuminated the space, and highlighted a peculiar feature, dead center, in the chamber. It took my eyes a moment to adjust to the light, and when they did, it took them another couple seconds to focus on the strange object in its conspicuous position.

A large, smooth, black obelisk stood in the center of the chamber, each side polished to a mirror shine. Blacker than the darkness of the cave, it created almost a negative space, a place of nothing, not even light. It defined the absence of space. Carefully, but without thinking, I walked to the obelisk.

The obelisk stood almost 20 feet tall, perfectly square, and eerily shiny. I reached a hand out to touch the side.

Major Michaels pulled me back from the stone, "What the hell are you doing?" he shouted.

"I was examining the surface," I sputtered.

"What was the flash, then?" he asked.

I stood looking at Declan, dumbfounded. "What flash?"

"I think we'd better head back to the base. We'll call for some backup, more scientists to study the thing. In the meantime, we can continue with the rest of the site until we can move this thing."

"That sounded an awful lot like an order, Major."

"No, sir, just an opinion and a suggestion."

Damn his smug manner. I couldn't even reprimand him now.

"Fine, let's go up."

I followed him back out through the tunnel system. Odd, I thought, all the workers are gone. We passed ladders, tools, belts, and scaffolding, but not a soul was in sight. The shadows seemed larger and thicker as well, and the loneliness of the cavern threatened to close in forever.

Finally, we walked out into the first chamber and were bathed in the warm light from the Rocky Mountain sun. Blessed warmth worked its way back into my arms and legs, which were colder than I had realized after trekking through the caverns. I shivered involuntarily as I turned to face the marine officer beside me. To my surprise, he was meters away, speaking on a radio I hadn't realized he had. Furious, I stormed up to him.

"Major! What the hell is that?" I demanded.

A wave of his hand was all I got for an answer. "Yes, sir. Completely black. That's right, sir, completely black. About 20 feet to a side. The damn scientist touched the thing, too."

"Damn scientist?" I nearly screamed, pulling the phone out of his hands. "Damn scientist?" I put the phone to my ear, "Who the hell is this?" I shouted into the microphone.

"This is General Dodges," came the cold reply, "and I suggest you calm down, Dr. Matthews. You're no longer in charge of that installation."

At those words, I looked up to Major Michaels. A handgun had materialized in his hand, and the muzzle was pointed directly between my eyes.

"I'm sorry to do this, Dr. Matthews, but give me the fucking phone."

Dumbfounded, I passed the phone back, my eyes never leaving the weapon. "I trusted you, Declan. I thought you appreciated this project."

"You've got it all wrong, doctor. It's you who doesn't appreciate this project, at least the combined scope of it. Did you think this was just an exercise in engineering?"

"Then what the hell have we been doing?" I asked.

"Building an underground military base, of course. This instal-

lation, however, has the distinction of being the first one built in a set of caverns once occupied by another society, a species so ancient it makes the dinosaurs seem like a recent addition. That piece of stone back there is all that's left of their civilization. Our military intends to be the first to examine it, since our analysis tells us it took more energy than our sun could produce in a year just to compress that block."

"What are you talking about, Declan?" I pleaded. "It's a chunk of obsidian, probably formed by natural causes."

"No, doctor. That block is a chuck of hyper-compressed diamond." He paused, looking down at me, waiting for it to sink in.

"Diamond can't be compressed farther," I said.

"That's what we thought, too. As I said, General Dodges has an extreme interest in this cavern. This is now a military operation. You will be restricted to the fourth floor of the temporary installation until we can get some helicopters out here for you and your scientists and engineers. The army will handle it from here."

"You bastard," I made no effort to keep the rage from my voice.

Major Michaels motioned to someone behind me and almost instantly, two pairs of hands had seized my arms and pinned them at my sides. The two marines behind me led me insistently away towards the temporary structure. Awash in rage, I let them lead me away, all the while cursing slowly and fluently under my breath.

When we came to the fourth floor of the base, the marines let go of me and stepped back in the elevator. "Doc, I'm sorry," the larger one said. "On the bright side, you've taught a couple marines a whole new batch of foul language." He chuckled when I ran towards the closing door. Too late, my fist impacted with the metal door where his face would have been.

Later, nursing my broken hand with a makeshift ice pack, I sat in front of my computer looking over the images sent back by the remote Major Michaels had sent back into the cavern. Every angle of the obelisk had been photographed in every available spectra, and in each photo, the black monument stood as a silent tribute

to the lightless reality of the cavern. The only change was in the x-ray films, in which the obelisk showed up completely white, but with a solid black aura.

Slide by slide I worked my way through the pictures, each one almost exactly like the other. Finally, I reached the laser topography picture. Lasers were used to sketch a 3 dimensional image of the obelisk. I leaned forward in my chair as I realized that there was nothing there, and the LT picture only showed the inside of the chamber.

What the hell? I thought. I flipped back through the rest of the photos, making note of the time, and flipped past the LT images to the next set. The obelisk was still there, no doubt about that. Why did it disappear with the Laser Topography? Was it something about the wavelength of the laser's light? Damn Michaels, I silently cursed, I could be down there right now, figuring this out.

FLASH! A vision crossed my mind's eye, the elevator door unlocking and opening, the elevator there waiting. FLASH!

I struggled to stand up, overturning my chair in the process. My hands clutched my head as I stumbled down the hallway, pain searing the front of my brain, waves of fire cascading to the back of my skull and down my spinal cord.

Just as suddenly as the flash had come, it went away, along with the pain, and I stood in the center of the corridor, looking towards the elevator. The door stood open, waiting.

Blinking a couple times to make sure my eyes weren't playing tricks on me, I walked into the waiting maw of the elevator cab. The doors closed on my view of the corridor, and the cab descended to the bottom floor.

The doors opened on an empty first floor hallway. It was the same hallway I'd walked down a thousand times before, each time on my way to the mouth of the caverns. I had never seen it this empty, though. Usually, there were office workers, day laborers, and other essential staff wandering hither an yon, on their way to something important. Today, though, the corridor was completely empty. Every office door along its length stood open, and only the

safety lights were lit.

I caught sight of the outside through a lower story window, and to my astonishment saw that it was dark out. I checked my watch and was surprised to see that it was almost 0200. How long had I been staring at that picture?

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I walked down the corridor towards the exit. I reached the end of the hallway and pressed against the door. Not surprisingly, it was solidly locked.

FLASH! A chain falling off the outside of a door surprisingly like the one in front of me. A wire in a box burning through. The exterior lights dimming and going out. FLASH!

Searing pain again, cascading from my eyeballs down my spine. Even my toenails hurt this time. I managed to keep the scream back to a small squeak while I desperately clutched my head, trying to keep it from either falling off or falling apart, I wasn't sure which.

Again, the pain left as suddenly as it came, and when I could stand to open my eyes again, the door was open, and only darkness lay beyond. I looked around, making sure I was still alone, then continued forward, through the door and into the cool night air beyond. Even in the summer, the air at the top of this mountain, high in the northern Rockies, was almost arctic at night. I wished I'd had the foresight to bring my jacket.

No turning back now, Matthews. I chided myself. Shivering in the frigid air, I made my way along the same route I had memorized many months before. Even in the dark, I could find my way to the cavern. At the back wall of the chamber, I could see, to my relief, that the string lights were still lit.

Swallowing my fear, I stepped through the entryway into the cavern's corridor, and followed it down until I arrived at the obelisk chamber. A voice sounded behind be as I crossed out of the corridor into the chamber.

"I figured you'd try this, Dr. Matthews," Major Michaels' voice sounded behind me. "I don't know how you got out of the installation, but I can't let you go any further. I'm going to give you one chance to turn around and come with me back to the complex.

You can take this offer, or I will shoot you."

I turned slowly around to face the large marine. In his hands, he held an M16 rifle. It was braced against his shoulder, and he was looking through the sights, centered on my chest.

FLASH! Pain so severe I could only clench my fists and writhe on the floor. No visions came with this flash, only searing, burning, stabbing pain. Convulsing on the floor, I retched again and again, each time bringing nothing up, and making the pain no better. FLASH!

I could breathe again, and my eyes tracked to where Declan was standing. He wasn't there. A smoldering pile of greasy ash, burned plastic, and glowing molten metal was the only sign that he was ever there.

Oh, God, what have I done?

I struggled to my feet and spun around, feeling a pair of eyes watching me. Nothing in the chamber except me and the shadows.

"What a shame," A deep, masculine voice said through the darkness.

Screeching, I spun around towards the obelisk. A dark figure sat atop it, his shadow creating the image of a man with a canine head, clothed in a cloak. He sat with one leg bent, foot flat on the top of the obelisk, and the other leg wrapped around under it, leaning his elbow on his upright knee. An eerie glow lit his shadowy form where his eyes would be, and the dim glow from the string lights in the corridor reflected off an impressive set of canine teeth.

"He did deserve it, though, trying to keep you from your destiny."

"What the hell are you?" I asked, backpedaling away from the cube and spreading myself against the back wall. What am I doing? I asked myself.

The being chuckled and unfolded itself, sliding off the side of the cube to land gracefully on the floor of the cavern. "I am your destiny, William. I am your teacher. I am your friend... and your enemy." As it spoke, it stepped closer. Each step graceful, bring-

ing it closer to the light from the hallway. "I am a god, but yet I'm mortal. Most importantly, William, I am your savior."

"Where the hell did you hear my name?" I asked, almost frantic.

The creature just tapped its head with one clawed forefinger. "It's all in here, William. You've got it right on the forefront. And perhaps I should mention the last, most important thing," it said as it stepped into the light. It's face, though very canine in appearance, looked familiar. Like someone I'd known forever, but hadn't seen in a while. The light made it apparent that the creature was most definitely male. He wore a black cloak with a silver streak at the shoulders, the hood pulled back, and nothing else. His white teeth gleamed as he pulled his lips back into a smile. "I'm you, William."

I stood stock still, not even daring to blink, "What?"

"Oh, not you as you are now, William," he said as he turned and started pacing. "I'm you as you shall become. I'm what you've always been destined to be." He turned and stepped closer, until his chest pressed against mine. He stood almost a foot taller than me, and he craned his neck down as he towered over me. "You have a purpose, Dr. Matthews."

FLASH Pictures of lifetimes, some mine, some not, ran across my mind's eye. Pictures of places I'd never been, places I'd never seen. Pictures of people, both human, and others like the one standing in front of me, and still others even more different. Finally, a picture of a dead planet, smoke filling the air, choking out the remains of a deadwood forest. FLASH!

The pain flowed through my head again, but this time it was less intense. My head still wanted with all its heart to implode, but I felt like it wouldn't.

"It's getting clearer, isn't it?" He asked. "The visions are clearer and the pain is less."

Still too stunned to speak, I just nodded.

"You're passing the test, William. Even now, you're changing. You must come with me. I will take you to a place where you can become what you were always meant to be."

"How can I trust you?" I asked, already convinced.

"You already do," he replied, extending a paw.

Cautiously, I put my hand in his. From the corridor came the sounds of footfalls, more than 20 running men.

"We must hurry," the creature said, pulling on my hand.

"But where?" I asked, looking behind us to the door of the chamber.

He stopped in front of the obelisk and pulled me in front of him, his arms firmly upon my shoulders.

FLASH! A picture of a red desert with a pink sky and a yellow sun, views from the mouth of another cavern. FLASH!

When I could stand to open my eyes again, we were standing exactly where my vision came from. I was looking out the mouth of a cavern, nothing but endless red sand stretched out in front of me. The sky was an odd shade of pink, and the sun was a bright yellow. A hot wind blew in from the sand, carrying with it a substantial amount of dust. I turned around, my back to the wind.

"Where are we?" I asked the creature, who was busy behind me unrolling some fabric from a bundle. Where did he get that? I wondered.

He picked up the fabric, a cloak exactly like the one he wore, except there were two silver stripes on the shoulders. He tossed it to me. "We're elsewhere," he replied.

"What the hell do you mean, elsewhere?" I demanded, catching the cloak. As heavy as it looked, it was surprisingly light and airy, yet it felt as though it would keep me warm through many cold nights.

"We're not on Earth anymore, at least not your Earth." He stood up and bowed a head. "You must trust me. There's too much to explain right now, just put the cloak on, and we'll get some food."

I just nodded and pulled the cloak over my shoulders. It fit perfectly. This creature knew a lot more than he was letting on. I crossed the cave and sat down across from him while he dug in a pocket and came out with, of all things, Meals, Ready to Eat. He tossed a brown, plastic package to me and pulled his open, dumping the contents on the floor of the cave. I watched him for

a moment, then did the same with mine. After adding water to his own heating packet, he passed his small water sac to me and I did the same. We sat staring at each other while we waited for our meals to heat.

"What did you mean when you said that you're me?" I asked.

"I meant just that. I'm you as you should be, and as you may become. Unfortunately, Dr. Matthews, our time is limited, and I'm afraid I must do most of the speaking, otherwise, you won't be prepared for when I have to leave."

"What do you mean, leave? You got me into this mess, you can't just leave me here."

"I have no intention of leaving you here, Dr. Matthews. When I have finished explaining, I will take you to another place, where you will be safe until you decide to follow your destiny. The people there will show you the ropes, and they'll teach you. We will meet again in the future, when you're ready."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Who are you?"

"You may call me Will. It's easier. As I said," Will continued, "I know you have no idea what I'm talking about, mainly because you haven't been prepared. The obelisk gave you a great gift, but it also gave you a great responsibility. It's my job right now to tell you about what has happened to you."

He pulled his MRE package out of the heater and tore open the top. With the plastic spoon he began to shovel it into his mouth. Gingerly, I did the same. Between bites, he started his tale.

"When you touched the obelisk, it felt something within you. It felt that you could handle the power it was about to give you. You have been chosen, Dr. Matthews. In the history of the worlds, there have been only 6 chosen. Of the six, only 4 have survived the training. The other two were consumed by the power, and it corrupted them. One of them was the beginning of your myth of Lucifer. MorningStar's greed overpowered his will and he became obsessed with the power, pushing the limits, crossing the lines.

"The other was driven insane. The power short-circuited her brain, and she became the myth of Loki. Of course humans, turned her into a him, but it's her nonetheless. I told you this so

you realize the kind of power that has been granted to you. Both of them were compared to gods on the human Earth. Of the other four, three try not to interfere with human culture. The fourth... well, that's up to you."

"But..." I started, but the words fell off.

"Why you?" He laughed. "I haven't figured that one out. You have become a traveler of worlds, William. I will take you to one, where you will stay until you are ready to continue. The people there will teach you about your powers, and they will teach you about themselves. What you do after that is entirely up to you."

"What if I decide I don't want the power?" I asked.

"That, too, is up to you. But I warn you not to give it up until you know more about it. Entire civilizations could be altered if you choose that course. Whatever you choose, know that the stakes are the highest they could possibly be."

Finished with the meal, Will gathered the wrappers and stuck them into a pocket in his cloak. He stood up and offered me his hand. "Are you ready, Dr. William Matthews?"

I shook my head, but put my hand in his paw and let him pull me to my feet. "No," I said, "But I'll go anyway."

"Braver words were never uttered," he replied as he turned towards the back wall of the cavern. Once again, he pulled me in front of him and placed his hands firmly on my shoulders.

FLASH! A picture of a peaceful village surrounded by trees on all sides and warmed by a temperate red sun under a slightly lavender sky, children looking remarkably like Will played in the meadows, and men and women smiled and laughed with each other. FLASH!

The Fox's only job was to keep creatures of the night from menacing the world of humans—no matter what. And always for a price.

Graveyard Shift

Redline

Holding his cold, blistered hands against his face, the mandrake sat on his knees sobbing weakly as a chill night breeze howled among the autumn-splashed trees. Leaves shuffled across the graveyard, cascading around the headstones, their autumn colors muted by the night. The half-hearted gaze of a waxing moon shone down from the clear night sky, providing enough illumination for the young mandrake to easily make out the simplistic epitaph of his parents.

Erion & Usrus

Seeing in darkness requires an inner fire.

It was something that his parents had always told him, a phrase meant for him to believe in himself even when the world was crashing down. But their death left a void of doubt in his heart that made every day a horrible and lonely ordeal. If the world destroyed them, then it would destroy him. Vengeance and desperation raced through his mind as he opened his eyes to once again look upon the grave of his parents.

They had been buried in the same grave. He had heard that there was not enough left of either of them to warrant digging separate lots. This thought sent him into another bout of uncon-

trollable shaking as fresh tears welled in his eyes. He grabbed the curved horns on his forehead and shook himself forcefully. His wings unfurled and spread out behind him while his slender tail thrashed about spasmodically. He clutched the silver ankh he wore around his neck, a gift from his father on his last birthday, which was always celebrated at the beginning of each season.

A wall of force slammed into his back, sending him face first through his parents' gravestone. He heard a loud thwack, which was accompanied by a flash of white as his head collided with stone; the momentum of his body was enough that it sent him sprawling fifty feet before finally coming to a rest at the foot of a raised sarcophagus. The racing beat of his heart booming in his ears indicated that he was still alive. All he could see were flashes of dots swimming against a black background. His body felt like it was falling every time his hands located a solid surface. He was completely disoriented.

His vision slowly came back. Something was approaching, but there wasn't any way the mandrake could identify from which direction, let alone who or what. Gasping for air, he forced himself into a sitting position with his back against the sarcophagus. A large blur moved in front of him, and he instinctively recoiled in fear as the world around him struggled to shift back into something comprehensible. The blur moved closer as the mandrake's senses came back to him. A musky odor entered his nostrils; shadows in his mind hid what that smell belonged to. Distorted images faded in and out for a few more seconds until he could make out the figure looking down at him.

Now the scent was unquestionable. His instincts yearned to lash out at the assailant, but his body was incapable of responding. Leaves brushed gently by his face as he leaned his head back against the sarcophagus. Breathing with long raspy inhaleations, he stared wide-eyed at the clear image in front of him. The assailant looked to be of average height and weight for a healthy human, but the mandrake knew by the scent that this was something far different. There was just enough moonlight for him to make out the sharp angular ears protruding from the wide-brimmed

hat. Behind the assailant, a bushy tail undulated in unison with the soft breeze. A clawed hand clutched the stock of a long rifle which rested against the fox creature's hip as he peered down at the mandrake.

"Larvee... alorrrn! Larveee, alorrn!" The mandrake screeched out. "Larvee alorrn!"

Casually the fox lowered his rifle and pressed a clawed finger against his muzzle.

"Ssshhhh."

The sound sent a fresh flow of fear through the mandrake's veins.

"Allorrn, learve!"

Sharply the fox spoke, "Stop trying to speak in a human tongue if you are unable to do so in a comprehensible fashion. Speak in your own language! Though I can not speak it myself, I can understand it."

Tears, sweat and blood marred the mandrake's face as he looked up at what he perceived as his own destruction and cried out for mercy. "Leave, me alone, leave me alone! Why are you killing me?"

The fox slowly tipped his hat backwards and let it slide down over his back. His ears flicked as he nonchalantly smoothed out the fur on his head.

"You attacked a village today," the fox replied.

The mandrake attempted to haul himself to his feet. "They killed my parents for no reason! Why are you trying to kill me, I never hurted you or your kind! Please leave me alone! Please, they deserved it, I have to..."

The fox cut him off sharply. "You have to what? Avenge them? For what purpose other then to satisfy your own selfish desires?"

Unable to stand, the mandrake leaned back against the sarcophagus again. "... Why are you tormenting me before I am to be slain? My desires... are to see them alive again! See the people who killed them suffer like me..."

He broke down again, rivulets of tears streaking a path through the warm blood on his face. The wind died down, leaving an op-

pressive silence to fill the forest, which was disturbed only by the mandrake's sobs. Apathetically, the fox checked the firing chamber on his rifle.

In an even voice, the fox said, "Make them suffer and they will continue to bring suffering to your kind. Another cycle that will never be broken, unless someone breaks it." He reached into a pouch around his waist and removed a fresh ammo cartridge. "Your parents' deaths are not an excuse for courses of action as those you have taken. In the end, someone would have killed you, along with countless others of your kind in the name of revenge for the pain they had incurred from you."

Such vitriolic words burned the young mandrake's heart. Adrenaline began overflowing in his brain, as rage seethed throughout his body. While the fox had been carelessly lecturing, the mandrake was calculating a way to slay the arrogant hunter. When the fox inverted his rifle at an awkward angle to inspect it before loading a fresh cartridge, the mandrake wound his muscles taunt and lunged for his enemie's throat.

The fox was caught a bit off guard. Reflexively his ears folded back in annoyance. Observing the intimate details of fangs, claws and ferocious eyes, the fox held the gaze as the mandrake's high-pitched scream vibrated through his body. Quickly the fox raised a hand-paw in front of the mandrake's face.

The mandrake saw the hand-paw for a second, then a fiery flash of sickly green light blinded him. He lost his balance and fell forward as the fox simply side-stepped him. Panic filled his body; he clawed and slashed at the air until the butt-end of the sniper rifle was shoved into his gut, knocking his breath away. He fell to his knees gasping. It was too painful to think, let alone cry as he stared at the ground clenching fist fulls of dirt. Silence eventually again replaced the ringing in his ears.

Weakly, he looked up into the barrel of a high-caliber revolver being leveled at his forehead. On the other end of the gun, the fox was looking pensively in the direction of his parent's grave.

The young mandrake softly whispered his final plea, "Charade... please, do not kill me."

Finding it a little surprising that the mandrake knew his name, Charade looked down at him without betraying any trace of emotion, then gradually pressed the gun harder against the mandrake's forehead. Devoid of will, the young mandrake closed his eyes and placed his hands over the ankh he wore around his neck. Quietly chanting prayers, he hoped that in death he would get a chance to apologize to his parents for allowing the flame of their family to be snuffed out.

Splashing in the muddy thoroughfare of a ramshackle village, an unsupervised and unkempt child grabbed globs of slop and splatted his hands against a pair of gaunt mongrel dogs that seemed to have inherited the job of babysitting someone else's whelp. Snuffling their noses, half-expectedly waiting for someone to feed them, they caught a more offensive scent then that of the smelly human child.

A ring of palisades encircled the village, which offered a token protection from the surrounding wilderness. This defense was passable at only two locations—one entrance led out into an open valley, and the other faced the edge of the thick forest. From this direction, water ran off from the foothills of a short mountain range, collecting in shallow irrigation systems, as well as in cloudy pools and ruts left from the wheels of cumbersome industrial machines. Grey smoke from a factory furnace blew across the edge of the forest.

The dogs crept towards a stranger walking into the village. Growling, they stopped and stood their ground with heads lowered, ears flattened. But as the stranger approached closer, they began backing away. Tails between their legs, they continued growling until the stranger reached a clawed hand into his long tan jacket and produced a pair of apples which he casually threw at the dogs. Slightly confused, the dogs sniffed at the apples with their fur still standing on end in fear. The stranger was approaching the child, who still blissfully splashed in the mud hole with the sun shining on his face.

Stopping a few feet away, the stranger's form cast a shadow

over the child's mud hole. Curious, the child looked up into a pair of amber eyes with slit pupils that stared back at him down the length of a pointy red muzzle. Charade kept silent as he analyzed the child's filthy condition, his jacket flapping in a stiff breeze that blew up from the valley. Sunlight reflecting off his revolver caught the child's attention.

Aware of only a mindless attraction to shiny objects, the child pointed at the gun. Charade looked down at his hip, then back at the child. He tightened his jacket, then turned and walked towards a crowd which was edging towards him from the other side of the town. The child stared as he went, intently watching the new arrival's paws leaving prints in the soft ground.

A villager cried out, "The half-breed is back!"

Looking behind him, Charade saw a mother and father scoop up the child from his muddy playpen, then slink away into a shabby brick house. Charade just snorted.

"Stop where you are!" a harsh woman's voice ordered.

Holding a single barrel shotgun in hand, the woman stood at the front of a small pack of sullen-faced villagers. All of them fidgeted anxiously as the fox judged their measure. Such a welcome did not surprise him, though he hoped they did not plan on attempting to kill him instead of paying the bounty they had agreed on.

The woman motioned with her shotgun. "Drop your weapons, now, now!"

Charade smirked and crossed his arms. "No."

Indignant, the woman spat on the ground.

"We don't have to pay you if we kill you!" she threatened. A few of the other villagers mumbled in agreement

Charade sighed impatiently. "You're that assured I slayed the demon who had terrorized your village? I'm flattered, really I must admit I am. Of course, you all are aware of my renowned reputation. So, there really should not be any doubts in your minds... right?"

The woman's aim wavered slightly and she gave an acidic sneer. Before she could make more idle threats, a cleanly dressed middle

aged man placed his hand on the shotgun barrel and lowered it. Owner of the furnaces and machines, this businessman had been given charge of the village's financial matters, including the payment of the bounty.

He spoke clearly and to the point. "If he has accomplished the task, then it would be in our best interest to pay. It would not be good for our economy if we became known as swindlers along the lines of our hunter here."

"Hah," Charade laughed out loud. "Such accusations and ignorant bigotry is what got you into your current situation. Namely, scapegoating the mandrakes, going as far as murder... Tsk tsk."

All of the villagers grumbled, attempting to burn the fox with their hateful stares. He knew he was making a dangerous situation worse, but he was not concerned with his safety, only being paid for his services.

Betraying no frustration, the businessman smiled. "You are a very, very preachy creature. Perhaps you should have joined the clergy."

"Naw, I'd burst into flames if I stepped into a church, right?" Charade scoffed.

"If we could be that fortunate!" someone shouted.

"Enough!" The businessman ordered. "You claim to have killed the mandrake as per our request?"

Charade put his arms behind his head and stretched his back. "As per our agreement, I have eliminated the mandrake's threat. You will not have to worry about that particular mandrake anymore. Now, the thousands of others around the world... Let's just hope they don't find out about all this." He snickered.

Reaching into his jacket, Charade watched for anyone to misinterpret his actions. He noticed a few villagers, including the shotgun armed woman draw in deep breaths, expecting some sort of treachery.

Producing a silver ankh pendant on a silver chain wrapped in cloth, he held it in plain sight in order to ease their paranoia. The cloth was tainted red from the blood-stained silver. The businessman eyed the object suspiciously and called for the village

shaman.

An unusually young looking individual came out of a nearby building and walked towards them. Charade waited patiently for a response. Grey clouds passed by overhead, occasionally blocking out the sun and sending a chill through the weary townsfolk awaiting confirmation of their safety.

"Is that supposed to be proof of the mandrake's death?" the businessman asked.

"In itself, no." Charade responded, then tossed the ankh at the businessman.

There was a tense silence as the childlike shaman approached. He was scantly more then four feet tall and wore a neatly pressed robe with various tassels, pins and other junk that was probably supposed to mean... something. Charade found the shaman's scent to be a bit disagreeable, a smell like stale oils and smoke, but he gave a slight nod in acknowledgement of the shaman's position in village affairs; he would not go as far as to show any more respect then that. He knew that the childlike appearance was a facade, created by ingesting some concoction of chemicals or a magical ritual. Carefully the shaman took the ankh pendant from the businessman's hand and inspected it. Then he spoke directly to Charade.

"If this is a deception, you will be punished," the shaman said. "Why did you not bring the body back with you?"

Becoming rather irritated at the villager's audacity, Charade had to make a great effort to maintain his composure. It was of course their goal to trap or bamboozle him, but a fox does not get foxed that easily.

Charade yawned, "You ever try carrying a body over twenty miles through a thick wood? Regardless... are you not aware of the fact that if I had brought the body back here, you would have incurred a curse on yourself, again? What had you planned for the body? Desecration? Chopping bits off to parade around with them? There would have been grave consequences for such actions; then my services would have again been needed. This cycle must be broken, so I broke it. Your village will be safe as long as

you maintain that harmony." He gave them all a cold stare.

Everyone was on edge as the shaman called over the dogs and instructed that they be restrained. A pair of burly villagers obliged, holding them around the neck as the shaman held the blood stained ankh in front of their noses. Upon recognizing the scent, both of the dogs immediately attempted lunging forward with vicious drooling snaps. This proved to be satisfactory enough evidence for the shaman and he nodded for the businessman to pay Charade for his services. There was no way to disprove the hunter's word, and in doing so they could potentially make a new enemy that they could not afford to have. Once Charade had the payment in his paws, he fondled the bag casually testing the weight.

"There is no doubt, the full payment is inside," he said, "Because neither I, nor any of you, would want me back here in the near future." Abruptly he turned and began walking away. "Heed this warning; your knowledge of the world is as limited as your capacity to survive in it," he added while waving his hand-paw dismissively.

Walking down the thoroughfare, he passed the parents of the child he had seen in the road. They held the child close while giving him dirty looks. He stopped and turned to face them, both parents recoiling in fear as the fox took a step closer. Leaning in with an out-stretched paw, Charade fully unsheathed his claws, much to the horror of the parents who stood frozen with confused fear. Their child however simply starred with curious wide eyes. Finding hopeful amusement in such innocence, Charade smirked, then sprang up and over their heads onto the roof of a nearby building. A high-pitched bark echoed through the village as the fox dashed away over the roof tops and cleared the palisades.

A sliver of silver reflected off smooth obsidian. Blistered hands reached out to retrieve an ankh swaying gently in the afternoon breeze, as it hung on a meticulously polished gravestone. Bringing the necklace down around his neck, the young mandrake stared longingly at the small figure adorning the gravestone's top. Carved

into the obsidian was an avatar in the form of a mandrake with its wings spread, as it reached up towards the afternoon sky with outstretched arms. Also carved into the stone were the names of his parents along with the words that they had spoken to him throughout his life.

His reflection in the obsidian was clear enough that he could see the bandages and scars on his head. He felt ashamed of himself for allowing the original gravestone to be broken and for the pain which he could not prevent from befalling him once again. Why had he not been killed? Perhaps it was some sort of twisted game. Then why freely give such a lavish gift? Was it a gift? Frustrated and confused he shook his head.

It felt dangerous to linger here. The fox had told him he had to leave the area until the next season began, then the villagers would be huddled down for winter and avoid the forest. Drawing in a deep breath, the mandrake gazed up into a bright blue sky, blotted with thick gray clouds whose edges shone gold in the midday sun.

The mandrake's image swayed, refracted through the lenses of an awkward-looking rifle scope.

Crouching slightly, he spread his feathery wings wide while winding the sinewy coils of his legs tight, then catapulted himself skyward. Charade lowered his sniper rifle as he gathered himself up from his prone position on the hill edge, brushing dried leaves from his jacket and fur as he watched the mandrake fly off over the autumn trees. A stiff gust of wind did little to inhibit the avian's progress.

Lowering his head and pulling the brim of his hat down to keep the wind out of his eyes, Charade reached into the pouch at his hip. He checked his rifle's chamber, reassuring himself that it had not been loaded, then inserted a fresh cartridge. When the wind died down momentarily, he gazed back up into the sky with a small sigh as he leaned backwards, stretching his arms. Steam puffed out his nostrils as another gust of wind blew up from the graveyard. He hoped there would not be need for him to return anytime soon. As he turned and began walking away, Charade

hoped that he could come back to this place on better terms. He had to keep record on his investments, after all.

One lonely Cat, doing one lonely job, performs a simple act of courage–one that could elevate and liberate his people from the dustbin of history.

Relativity

Rincewind

Rajit panted heavily in the thick air of the cabin. His wrists were locked into thick metal cuffs attached to the wall in the room where he spent the most of his time. At the opposite side of the space, 180° from the clamps around his wrists, two similar clamps were attached to his ankles, stretching his spine straight. After a moment, he grunted loudly and strained on his biceps, pulling downwards. His legs, locked in place, gave him enough leverage to tug the rings around his wrists downwards, straining his biceps and forcing a grunt out of his chest.

He held the position for a moment, then released, letting his wrists move back to the starting position. "Thirty-five," he remarked to the air around him, taking a moment to catch his breath. His tail, hanging behind him, lifted upwards. The end of it was wrapped around a small plastic water bulb, almost half-empty. Acting entirely without thought, he brought the container to his lips by tilting his head to the side and bringing the tip of his tail up over his shoulder. He placed his lips around the seal and bit down lightly on the nozzle, opening it. He took several sips, savoring the cold fluid as it washed across his rough tongue. Releasing the pressure on his teeth, thus closing the seal, he pulled his tail back from over his shoulder and simply let it drift behind him, keeping the water in his grasp for now.

He grunted again, using his biceps to pull the rings along their

elastic bands, paused momentarily, then said "Thirty-six." He panted for a moment, then tugged and released the elastic rings four more times in rapid succession, pushing himself to the end of the exercise routine. "Thirty-seven. Thirty-eight. Thirty-nine. Forty." He stopped speaking, panting quietly to himself. As absentmindedly as before, his tail came up and around his shoulder again, and he found himself draining the remaining water in several sips.

"Computer, release exercise equipment." He spoke to the empty air in a crisp, commanding voice, as deep as the sounds he made when he grunted. At the last word, there was a snapping sound and the rings around his wrist unclamped, as did the ones around his ankles. With a whirring noise, both identical pairs of rings withdrew into the walls of the room. Small metal covers rolled into place over the spot where they had emerged, leaving only a small sign to indicate where they lay when dormant.

Rajit floated in the center of his cabin, his muscles adjusting to the feeling of being used for strenuous exercise for the first time in almost two weeks. The computer had reminded him each day for the previous week that he was past due for such a session. Although his species lost muscle mass at a far slower rate than that of the humans that had bred his ancestors, he still needed to exercise weekly to maintain his edge.

His exercise done, he reached for a rung set in the wall perpendicular to his body. Zero gravity living allowed for no real concept of 'up' or 'down', leaving spatial relations to be determined solely by the position of a person in respect to where he was intending to go. He tugged on the ring lightly, swinging his body over to the screen embedded in the wall near his hand.

"Temperature optimal, all sensors check normal," he muttered to himself, reading from the screen. It helped him to at least keep his mouth in use, so he didn't feel completely isolated. "Cryo-pods read all systems normal. Fuel levels at optimum level for this stage of acceleration. All ship-board systems are in the green." He ran through the checklist slowly, double-checking each indicator.

"Accelerating in five, four, three, two, one, mark."

His finger stabbed at a certain spot on the panel, pushing at it as if it were a button. There was a loud clanging noise, and the entire room shuddered momentarily. This was always his least favorite part. A deep thrumming noise began to emerge from the wall in front of him, a bass rumble that sounded throughout the entire ship.

Slowly, over the course of the next minute or so, he began to feel the effects of the acceleration. He reached above his head and grabbed a rung, holding tightly onto it. The pads of his feet began to move towards the wall from which the rumbling emerged. After another minute, he could feel the effects of the acceleration even stronger.

He sighed, and let go of the rung. Acceleration provided by the engines created enough gravitational force that he drifted slowly down towards what had now become the floor, in what had previously been a room with no floor or ceiling. The rumbling picked up in volume almost as soon as his feet hit the floor. He could now feel the force of gravity tugging him downwards.

"Computer, steady acceleration at point four gravities." He spoke into the air again, the microphones buried in the walls picking up his voice and running it through a vocal recognition circuit. The rumbling beneath his feet leveled out, and the increasing pressure on his body slackened and did not increase again. He turned to his left and took a step under the force of gravity for the first time since the last period of acceleration almost one Earth month ago.

He resented the periods of acceleration with a fervor tending towards hate. His ancestors had found themselves brought into space for experimentation by the early explorers. While so many others of their mammalian counterparts had panicked at the first experience of weightlessness, something unique to the common housecat had been apparent almost immediately. Felines had suffered none of the ill effects of weightlessness; the innate spatial awareness that had proved so useful in falls on Earth seemed to give them an almost instinctual ability to work in space.

After centuries of futile attempts at exploration, a coalition of scientists had created the Pilot species. While the humans lay mo-

tionless and mindless in their cryo-pods, Pilots like Rajit kept the great colony ships on track. Periodic acceleration allowed them to make minor course adjustments if necessary. As it was, each great ship reached a final velocity of almost three-quarters the speed of light before beginning the inexorable periods of slow deceleration.

The scientists who created the Pilots had further capitalized on the very feline ability of spending long periods of time doing very little. Rajit was one of the Pilots who had inherited this aspect in spades, spending the majority of his time resting in one of the specially designed sleeping hammocks, his eyes focused on the screen placed almost a foot from his sleeping quarters. Buried deep within the computer's massive data storage banks was almost every book that had been scanned into the world's largest databases. He had an effectively endless supply of reading material, something that he had spent large amounts of time using during the first three years of the voyage. Besides the reading material, he spent a lot of time simply sitting and thinking, trying to stave off the isolation. The life of a Pilot was a lonely one, but it was an isolation coded too deeply to remove.

Rajit walked slowly, though not painfully, towards his sleeping hammock on the other side of the room. The ship had been designed so that the hammock was still useful, even when under acceleration. He settled down in the hammock, grunting with the effort of fighting the minor gravity after weeks in zero gravity. His tail lifted from behind him, still clutching the empty water bulb. He reached out his left hand and took it between two fingers. The blackness of his fur refracted through the canister, turning the few drops left a murky color, until he lifted it and placed it in a specially designed slot in the wall, where it promptly refilled itself and sat there, waiting for another use.

He turned his head to the side and stared at the panel in the wall. Checking that the acceleration had not changed the status of any of his readouts, he yawned softly, tilted his head straight again, and closed his eyes.

Two days later, Rajit was jolted from a short nap by the loud wail of an alarm klaxon. The sound triggered an instinct deep inside of him, and he rose from supine to erect in the hammock almost instantaneously. The klaxon continued to sound, coming from the wall across from the hammock. He tensed the muscles of his back and legs and sprang out of his resting place in one bound, landing on all fours in front of the panel that was flashing bright red.

"Computer, terminate alarm and bring up cause on panel four." He barked the command quickly, his eyes focused on the screen in front of him. The piercing noise finally came to a halt, and lines of data began to appear in the display. His eyes scanned from line to line as it appeared. "Proximity alarm? What the hell? There are no planetary bodies or charted comets anywhere within a hundred billion miles of here." His tail twitched furiously behind him in agitation. "Computer, give me details on the object."

The data scrolled across the screen, listing relative velocity, approximate size, and various other statistics. The computer's long-range sensors had picked up the object roughly fifteen million miles ahead of his ship. Initial bounce-back information from the sensors recorded the object's size as roughly three hundred times the size of his own ship. That alone had triggered the alarm klaxon, being massive enough to have enough gravitational pull to alter, even slightly, the ship's flight path. Such a minor deviation would become magnified by the sheer length of the voyage, causing the ship to end up in some uncharted region of the galaxy.

The more Rajit studied the data, the more confused he became. His was not the first ship to use this route to reach its destination, and none had reported such a gargantuan object. Whatever the object was, it wasn't a planet. There was no solar system within several light years of his position. His first thought had been that it was an asteroid or comet, but as he studied the computer's readouts, even this much more sensible idea began to waver.

The largest comet ever discovered had been roughly two-thirds this object's size. The astronomers who discovered it were convinced that it was not a traditional comet, but the remains of some

planet's moon, smashed out of orbit by a collision dating back to the universe's creation. This object, however, displayed none of the characteristics of a comet.

Perhaps the strangest thing Rajit found, as he dug through the data, was the fact that the object appeared to be accelerating. This far from any charted stellar bodies, there should not have been enough of a gravitational pull to account for even a fraction of the acceleration the object appeared to be experiencing. The occasional small asteroids or comets that occurred almost always moved at a constant velocity. The object that the computer's sensors had picked up seemed to be accelerating on a vector perpendicular to his current path. A few quick calculations showed that at his current acceleration, he would pass within several million miles of the object, enough to alter his course by approximately one degree.

Rajit stood back from the display screen, his tail twitching agitatedly behind him. The standard procedure for proximity alerts called for the ship to maneuver to avoid the object. The problem with the simple procedures was that they had never been designed to be used during interstellar travel; the chance that a Pilot would encounter anything between the solar systems was considered so minute that no real thought had been given as what to do. Thus Rajit was stuck with extremely vague instructions, and no specific orders.

He sighed heavily, lifting a paw to his muzzle and brushing at his chin in a gesture acquired unconsciously from the few humans he could call his friends. He thought for a moment, trying to work out a plan of action, aware that everything he did now would be reviewed by the Board of Pilot Affairs upon his arrival three years hence. Facing the wall, he spoke tentatively. "Computer, how long until the ship's telescopes can pick up a clear picture of the object?"

A number popped up on his screen. "Right... two hours. Guess I'll have to wait until then," he muttered to himself. He took several steps to the left, walking along the wall of the room until he came to another panel set in the wall. This panel was higher than

the previous one, placed several inches above his head. He reached up and pressed a button on the side of it, turning it on. "Computer, on my mark begin the standard engine deactivation sequence."

After a second, a small warning message popped onto the screen, reminding him that this phase of the voyage wasn't due for another three days. He pressed another button by the panel, erasing the message. "Computer, begin sequence."

By degrees, the rumblings from beneath his feet began to slacken. He took a quick step over to his personal area, quickly gathering up the few objects he had left out during the two days with the small amount of gravity. He stowed each object in a specially designed compartment as rapidly as he could. Already he could feel himself lightening, each step taking him farther. Five minutes after his command, the rumbling finally ceased, leaving him floating in zero gravity.

He let out a very loud, very satisfied sigh, then winced lightly as he felt his spine begin to uncompress, now freed from the weight of his body. Although he had been born in gravity, like every other Pilot, he was much more at home floating in the center of his room, weightless.

Freed from the bonds of gravity, his tail rose to latch around a rung behind him, and he flexed the muscles in it, pulling himself backwards. Having already made his decision, he reached for his hammock and tugged himself into its webbing, now floating without pressure. He reached for the safety straps on the side of the hammock, slipped them around his waist, and paused. "Computer, set alarm for one hour and fifty-five minutes from now." Having said that, he closed his eyes and settled back, returning to the nap from which he had been so rudely awakened.

Visual confirmation of the object's strangeness came roughly two hours later, along with a muffled curse as the computer's alarm forced Rajit from his sleep for the second time that day. The bleating of the alarm drew him from his hammock and across the room to the panel on the wall. "Computer, bring up visuals," he commanded, stifling a yawn. He held onto a rung on the wall

with one claw, stabilizing himself so he could keep an eye on the panel.

A picture materialized on the screen in front of him. Seen from a much closer view, the object seemed oddly shaped. "Not a comet at all," he muttered to himself, eyes picking out minute details in the image. The object was a rough ovoid, tapered at one end but slightly more bulged at the other. Like some sort of egg, the visuals showed the object spinning on its axis almost uniformly.

He stared at the strange ovoid for another moment, then narrowed his eyes and leaned forward to get a better look at a spot on one of the ends. "Computer, enhance and zoom image at my mark." He lifted his hand towards the screen and placed a finger lightly on the screen, drawing out the area he wanted enlarged. His eyes narrowed as the image grew on the screen.

"What the hell is this thing?" he muttered to himself, twitching a finger along the screen to slide the view from one side of the object to the other. Closer analysis seemed to show a number of protrusions coming out of the sides, like the arms of a giant creature, but frozen like crystals. It was like nothing he had ever seen before, out of the thousands of meteors and comets he had examined under the duress of extreme boredom.

As his eyes roamed over every inch of the screen, he could feel a growing sense of excitement rising in his chest. The fur on the back of his neck was sticking straight up from his body, standing on end. With each passing moment, he became more convinced that he'd made the discovery of a lifetime. It couldn't be, it had never been proven, but here was evidence that it just might be true.

Aliens!

After centuries of space travel, and not a single shred of evidence showing the existence of extraterrestrials, they had almost faded into the world of myth, as far from possibility as finding a dragon dining with a unicorn while sitting on top of a pot of gold at the bottom of a rainbow. Rajit, having been trained for years in the strictest mental rituals, had lost all of the belief in aliens before he had even crossed into his sixth year as a cub. Likewise, to make

serious comments in the academic community as to the existence of intelligent alien life was to be laughed out of academia.

To Rajit, standing in front of the monitor with the mysterious object large on the screen, such arguments were rapidly being thrown out. Surely nothing natural could have caused those huge protrusions, jutting at ninety-degree angles from the surface of the ovoid and extending half a kilometer in each direction. Sensors showed that each of the protrusion eventually tapered to a point, like a massive spire towering over the surface of the planetoid.

Rajit's hands began to shake slightly, and his tail clenched tightly around the rung in the wall. Even if this thing was just some sort of freak asteroid, he needed to get a closer look at it. If it turned out to be the first sign of alien intelligence ever detected, he'd not only be rich beyond his wildest dreams, but all these long years of isolation between the stars would finally have paid off.

He continued to scan the panel, then paused for a moment to think. Uncurling his tail from the rung, he pushed off the wall lightly, gliding towards a small panel set in the wall beneath him. He reached out with one hand and caught the rung next to the panel with one finger, tugging himself the rest of the way there, footpaws wrapping dexterously around the rung placed on the other side.

"Computer, bring up trajectory of the ship and match it with that of the object. I want to see where we're going to intersect." Right now, his problem lay with the fact that he didn't have full control of his ship. The job of a Pilot was to keep the ship on course, to keep it facing the right direction, and to make sure that nothing came in contact with it over the course of the voyage. Cryogenic stasis was a delicate procedure, and there was no method of automatic awakening, without a medical support staff on hand. Thus, a Pilot had very little to do in-between solar systems, where the auto-pilot took over, except for small issues of acceleration and minor course correction. Even if Rajit wanted to slow down the ship for an appreciable length of time, he could do no more than cancel the acceleration or alter the course a fraction of a degree. Safety procedures built into the ship had shown that

this was far more than necessary to prevent any sort of collision in dee!

p space.

All of this flashed through Rajit's mind as he watched the trajectory of his ship be traced out onto the panel, a line heading through a three-dimensional field as projected on the screen by the computer. The computer quickly filled in the expected trajectory of the strange object. On his current course, he would pass within three hundred thousand miles of the object. At the speeds he was going, there was simply no way to bring the ship close enough to investigate the object for as much time as he wanted.

He paused for a moment, then his tail contracted reflexively as a solution presented itself. Hidden in the depths of the ship was a smaller vessel, designed for the Pilot as an escape vehicle if ever necessary. Most of the time, the shuttle sat unused, hidden away behind several bulkheads. But the important thing was that it contained a powerful engine and enough power to get him near enough to the object to collect measurements and accurate data.

He turned back towards the panel, reaching up towards the two lines at their intersection point. Almost absentmindedly, he traced out a path that would take him from the ship, to the object, and back. It was going to be tough to do in the allotted time. With his ship unable to do more than simply continue at its current velocity, he would have to accelerate towards his destination, do whatever he was planning to do, and then catch his own ship as it coasted by. The shuttle could only carry small amounts of fuel, so he had to be mindful of the fact that he would be limited by a strict schedule, or else be stranded on his return voyage.

The next words out of his mouth were brisk commands to the ship's Computer to calculate exactly how much time he would be able to spend in examination. The answer, when it came, was not as bad as he had expected; if he left in approximately two hours, he would have just under fifteen hours to make all the observations he wanted. Leaving his tail wrapped around a support rung, he stiffened the prehensile appendage and used it to swing himself across the room in one smooth motion, a practiced maneuver

that was the most efficient way to make it from one side to the other. "Time to start packing," he muttered to himself, opening a locker and getting to work.

The following two hours passed rapidly as he gathered cameras, microphones, telescopes, data recorders, audio recorders, and anything that would be available to document the, well, the whatever it was. As he worked, he managed to hold his excitement in check, but one topic kept rising to the front of his thoughts.

Rajit was a Pilot, and as a Pilot had a number of expectations. Humanity had raised the Pilots not as a species of sniveling underlings, forced to do the biddings of the Men on high, but as an equal match to his own highs and lows. Nothing, however, was that simple. The life of a Pilot was a life of solitude. At the relativistic speeds that each ship traveled, a Pilot could not afford to become known as anything more than a drone that emerged from deep space as his own entry in the history books. Mankind viewed the Pilots as a worthy species, but a species with neither a past, nor a future.

A Pilot existed solely to be a Pilot. Though some showed the aptitude, the peculiar configuration of a Pilot's digits presented any from becoming doctors, or any other such precise profession. The bones that kept a Pilot strong and free from osteoporosis after years in space were the very same bones that prevented them from standing upright under Earth's harsh gravity. Pilots were thus relegated solely to the space stations, or the moon colonies, placed where they could be kept out of sight from the vast majority of the human race.

Pilots began their training at a very young age, and were kept in the training until past adolescence, when some went on to more specialized zero-gravity work and the rest continued to train as Pilots. This intense life meant that in the centuries since the first Pilots took mankind across the great void, there was still not a single Pilot who had gained any measure of celebrity. There were no heroes among the Pilots, no great leaders, no villains either. Thus, while they held every legal right that humans had held, they

were relegated to the dustbin of history.

As Rajit prepared for his trip to the object he couldn't help but reflect on his species, as well as the vain hope that this would be the chance for his species to pull itself up. It wasn't just the fact that, were it really an alien artifact, Rajit would be rich beyond his wildest dreams. It was the fact that for the first time, a Pilot would go down as being a pioneer, an explorer. A Pilot, feline in human form, bred for one purpose, would be known for more than what he had done in servitude to mankind.

"Pilots tango with Solitude out there in the deeps." The words, spoken by an unknown writer in the early years of the Pilots, rang in Rajit's ears. Every Pilot, from the smallest cub to the oldest spacecat lounging around a space station's bar late at night, knew what it was like to be alone. Even in a lover's embrace, or at a family gathering before a Pilot ventured out, solitude was a constant companion. To be the first to discover alien life, to be a Pilot and to know that the rest of Humanity would know who you were, would be to scream in the face of Solitude, to stop the tango, to go whirling off into the circle of watchers and start a new dance.

Rajit opened the hatch of his shuttle and stepped in, the rift inside of him growing smaller by the moment.

Six hours later, the shuttle had shifted into an orbit six thousand miles around the artifact. And artifact it was, as had become clear almost an hour before. Rajit had stayed with his paws clutching tightly to the controls of the shuttle as the spacecraft grew in the viewscreen, rising towards him like a behemoth. Each of the spires that jutted from the surface contained thousands upon thousands of smaller spires, each jutting at a different angle. The impression he was left with was that of a giant porcupine, quills erect and ready.

Rajit's stomach, on the other hand, was about as far from steady as possible. For the first time in his life, he was feeling spacesick. The magnitude of the find was so vast that he was having a hard time dealing with it. It had been fine when it was still just a theory, but to have the proof of alien life shoved down his throat like

this was almost too much for him. If he had been more feline, he would have been hacking up a fur ball about right now.

The cameras were rolling as he continued to orbit the object. He was half-way around the object, circling along the thick part of the ovoid, roughly at its equator. Unfortunately for him, the past hour of flight had provided nothing different than the first few minutes. The spire-studded surface rolled past beneath the shuttle, without any change. Close magnification of one of the images he had taken had shown that even the smaller spires were studded with their own protrusions. They glinted oddly in the small amount of light his engines gave off. Each little trough and valley in the spires seemed to devour the brightness. The only places that allowed any light to reflect were the places where meteorites had knocked some of the spires off, exposing a dull metallic surface beneath.

Rajit had his proof, but the puzzle of this giant object was still hanging before him. What was it for? Why was it here? He sighed to himself, tail twitching moodily from side to side. The euphoria of his discovery hadn't faded entirely, but the sheer monotony of these spires was starting to get to him. He flipped a switch on the control panel, and the shuttle twitched around him, acceleration pushing him back into his seat. He fired several retro-rockets, and the shuttle began to turn perpendicular to its original path, heading towards one of thinner ends of the ovoid. Everything shook around him as the main engines on the shuttle fired, and he settled in for another hour of watching the spires go by.

A loud beeping noise roused him from the fitful nap he had accidentally lapsed into. The spires had proved almost hypnotic, and he had set the computer to wake him up when he neared ten thousand miles of the artifact's pole. He sat up a little straighter in his chair and turned to the monitoring equipment, looking down at the surface of the object as it flashed beneath him. Almost instantly, he noticed that the number of spires had lessened considerably, from a gargantuan forest to plains of smaller spires.

His eyes scanned the surface, looking for some sort of pattern,

something to distinguish this area from the others in any way but the density of the spires. He was so intent on looking for something blindingly obvious that it took him almost ten minutes to realize that the spires were laid out in vast rows, stretching in front of him and behind him. The change had come so gradually as to be almost unnoticeable, but there was a definite pattern, a definite sense that all the spires were leading somewhere. He pulled back the magnification, and the effect was startling. Thousands of rows of spires were visible, heading towards the object's pole. Doing a quick mental calculation, Rajit figured that at their current rate, the spires would converge at a point roughly fifty miles from the absolute pole.

He finally had a point to go to, and his tail lifted from behind him towards the control panel above his head, stiffening so that he could push a series of buttons. His fingers danced over the control panel in front of him. Outside the ship, a row of retrorockets fired, tilting the ship towards the convergence point of the spires. His tail lowered behind him again, resting in the air for now. He would be at the pole in minutes, so he kept his senses sharp, watching every screen, double checking that this was in fact being recorded.

The rows of spires stretched out beneath him, the distances between them narrowing as they raced towards their destination. The closer he got to the pole, the more difficult it became to distinguish individual rows from their neighbors. He spent a few minutes idly coming up with reasons for the odd configurations of spires, but he could think of nothing.

Something flickered on the horizon in the direction he was heading, and his eyes glued themselves to the viewscreen. His tail twitched around the throttle lever, and he gave it a tug, turning the engines off and letting the ship coast at constant speed. He glided towards the converging rows, and activated the telescope attached to the shuttle's outside camera. His eyes locked on the spires, and he drew in a deep breath in one gulp, stifling a gasp at what he saw.

The shuttle was coming up on a massive hole in the artifact.

Every marching column of spires was headed towards the rim of the hole, which the computer noted as being located exactly on the artifact's pole. Rajit's heart hammered in his chest as he took a few quick measurements. The hole in the surface was massive; a few bits of information flashed on the screen, indicating that the diameter of the hole was exactly one hundred miles across. The rim was bent into a perfect circle, and as the shuttle moved closer, it became apparent that the spires didn't just stop at the edge, but instead continued over the side and down into the middle.

Rajit sat back in his chair and reached for a control, cutting the throttle and firing the nose-rockets to slow down his shuttle. He wanted a close look at the shaft, not a quick flyby. His fingers closed around the various buttons and levers of the control board, tail coming from behind him to grab onto the upper panel. He stabbed at a button and the ship's nose tilted towards the artifact, heading for the rim.

As he got closer, he noticed that the spires nearest to him were more rounded than the ones on the artifact's equator. They looked more used, almost smoothed down by the passage of time. His entire body was shivering as he got closer and closer to the point where he'd be able to see over the rim and down into the deep hole. The fur was standing up on the back of his neck, and if Pilots had been able to, he would have been sweating.

Less than one thousand miles away, and at a pace of twenty miles per second, he'd be there in fifty seconds. His entire attention was focused on the viewscreen as he got closer and closer. Off on the side of the control panel, a small warning light suddenly flared red, but he was too caught up in the moment to notice. Twenty seconds left, and a second warning light, close to the first, suddenly popped on, flashing steadily. He ignored this one too, counting down under his breath as he got closer. With fifteen seconds left to go, an alarm klaxon sounded about one foot away from his head, knocking him from his semi-trance.

The two flashing lights now drew his attention as his piloting reflexes kicked in. He noticed which two lights were active, and shouted to the empty cabin. "What do you mean, gravitational

anomaly?" Six seconds until the shuttle arced over the walls of the shaft and into space above it, and Rajit's eyes widened in shock as a small panel above his head lit up like a Christmas tree. Three seconds left, and his tail shot from behind his head towards the throttle lever, moving almost unconsciously, but it was too late.

The shuttle shot past the rim like a cliff-diver throwing himself out above the waters. For a brief moment, the shuttle sailed peacefully into the open space above the hole, until a giant invisible hand reached out and grabbed it, pulling it towards the middle of the shaft. Rajit was thrown back against his seat and his view tilted down towards the bottom of the hole.

There was no control of the shuttle now, plummeting as it was towards the center of the artifact. Outside the shuttle, he could see the inside walls of the hole flash past, rows of spires twisting away from orderliness and mutating into varying patterns that emerged and subsided with a mathematically perfect chaos. The pressure on Rajit eased slightly, enough for one hand to snake out and activate the retro-rockets on the base of the shuttle in an attempt to slow his descent. There was a loud whine, and the switch he had pulled shorted out, sparks flying from the panel and onto his fur. He yelped loudly and yanked his hand back, the motion knocking his head up.

He gasped loudly and let out an almost guttural moan of fear as his eyes locked on the viewscreen showing the cameras from the bottom of the shuttle. He wasn't in a simple hole; he was in a tunnel so large that it stretched out of sight beneath him. At the far end of the tunnel, there was a glint, and he realized that he was looking all the way through the artifact and out the other side. He was nothing, a dwarf, a speck of dust in comparison to this tunnel, boring through from one pole to the other.

Like it or not, he was hurtling towards the other side, and if his instruments were to be believed, he was doing it at a far faster pace than his shuttle was even capable of. Warning lights were flashing on every single panel, but were concentrated the most in the panel that had first lit up, indicating that he was stuck in some sort of massive gravitational field. The field had been undetect-

able from anything further than three or four hundred miles or he would never have gotten close enough to it. Various ideas sleeted through his head as he struggled to find some way to explain what was happening.

Propulsion! The Computer back on his ship had indicated the artifact was actually accelerating, which implied that it was under some sort of force. Rajit's heart sank deep within his chest as he realized that he must have been caught in some sort of giant engine, hurling this ship through space by channeling gravitational forces. He shuddered as he realized that if he was right, and if he had somehow approached the artifact from the other pole, he might have been torn apart by the backwash of the interstellar engine. Instead, it was only luck, if you could call it such, which had brought him to the intake, sucking him down into the depths of the artifact.

He checked his instruments again, and noticed that at the speeds he was traveling, after a mere five minutes hurtling down the tunnel, he was already half-way through. His shuttle had accelerated from what was almost rest to a phenomenally fast speed, with enough acceleration that he was still pinned in his chair. At this rate, he calculated, he'd be thrown out the other side of the artifact in just a few minutes. The walls of the tunnel were a featureless blur now, reflecting back some of the light produced by his shuttle.

The other end of the tunnel was fast approaching, and his shuttle showed no signs of deceleration. His fur stood on end, and he reached out both of his hands to grasp the sides of his seat, holding himself tight. If he was right, he'd be thrown out of the leviathan engine's exhaust like a piece of paper thrown from an airplane, battered by conflicting forces.

He could see the exit of the tunnel clearly now, the marching rows of spires visibly lining the rim. He made sure his cameras were still active, and that he was still receiving footage, and he leaned back in his chair, holding as tightly as he can. This was going to get rough. Eight thousand miles away, then fifteen seconds later only eight hundred miles from the exhaust. The ship jolted

as it cleared the rim of the tunnel, and for a moment he thought everything was fine. Then there was a loud screeching noise and every panel in his vehicle exploded in sparks. This time, much harder than before, a giant hand grabbed the shuttle and shook it, and Rajit's head whipped forward, the restraints holding it in place snapping taut just a second too late. His forehead hit the front console panel, and everything went black.

Eight hours later, the main engine coughed, sputtered, and burst into life. Rajit's head throbbed from where he had hit the control panel, but he had spent every hour since regaining consciousness working on restoring the main systems. The artifact was already receding into the distance behind him, but he had all of his tapes, all of his proof. He activated the steering thrusters and turned back towards the main ship, still sailing through the void on the same path he had left it. As he limped back towards his only home, battered and bruised, a smile crossed his muzzle. Only one year to go, then he'd be at his destination. And it would be his final destination.

Inside his heart, Solitude lifted its hand for one last dance before the Pilot whirled off into the crowd of dancers around him.

It's hard enough being a telepathic, genetically-engineered enforcer-dragon bred for war. It's even harder when you're the scientist assigned to him, and have to clean up after his tantrums.

Kerner's Bad Day

Calcifer Rauth

Fragile glass and hard surfaces were never meant to be best friends; especially when the former was rushing to meet the latter at high velocity. In the quiet laboratory assigned to Doctor Kerner, the two were colliding in large numbers and creating great choruses of shattering glass. Currently, the score was held at a multitude of beakers, a few measuring cylinders and a hoard of test-tubes.

"Relaeth! Stop breaking everything in sight!"

All the agitated scientist received in response was the thump of a box, closely followed by the resounding, and now very familiar, crash of test-tubes breaking. It was a great testament to the indomitable human spirit that the black-haired bespectacled Kerner did not explode into blazing fury, but remained cool, calm and collected.

"That was a new shipment! You leave those alone, Relaeth!"

Very steadily, he stormed over to the black-scaled creature and grabbed a fistful of white hair, dragging it very serenely across the shard-littered floor, away from his precious shipments. The startled yelp was briefly accompanied by the sound of glass scraping scale and floor-tile, punctuated by welcome exclamations of pain. His progress, however, was abruptly halted by claws digging into the inch-thick purportedly damage-proof flooring. Then Relaeth's telepathic voice rang out, thick with emotion.

[Leave me alone, Grain-Kernel!]

Pulling against the determined scientist proved extremely difficult, though not entirely surprising, considering how protective Kerner was about his laboratory apparatus.

"Only when you leave my equipment alone! They cost me quite a chunk!"

It has been said that nothing could rival a mother's love for her child. Currently, Relaeth was of the opinion that Kerner's protectiveness of his equipment could certainly give that love a run for its money. Straining against the scientist, the dragon managed to break free, sending them both flying in opposite directions. Relaeth simply hit the wall and dropped onto the ground on all fours, perfectly unperturbed about the experience. Kerner, however, landed in an ungainly mess of paper, lab-coat and dust. Padding lightly across the glass-littered, and now dusty, floor, the wingless dragon jumped onto the chair behind the scientist and looked down onto him, buried amidst the pile of scattered pages. As if holding back, Relaeth spoke softly, his voice dry and emotionless.

[I don't like anyone else being my attached-scientist, Kerner.]

There was a rustle of crumpled paper, and stifled groans before a reply came, accompanied by the scientist's glare.

"It's not my fault! I don't decide who gets attached to whom! Go whine at the Director."

Clawing his way out of the heap of printouts and discarded reports, he found himself confronted with a morose Relaeth. Instantly, concern replaced annoyance, despite the conflict just moments before.

"Hey. You alright?"

He reached out to feel for a temperature, but his hand was arrested in mid-motion by a sharp glare.

[I'm fine! Leave me alone!]

The dragon leapt off the chair and stormed towards the laboratory exit. Underfoot, glass was ground into fine powder, unable to penetrate his scales. Just as he reached the portal, though, it slid open unexpectedly, allowing a head-on collision between him and a rotund white coat. Falling back a few steps, both parties, suf-

fice to say, were surprised, though Relaeth might have been better described as blisteringly angry. "Good afternoon! Might this be Enforcer Relaeth?"

The glare that the blond-haired stranger received could have curdled milk and set dry kindling aflame. Amazingly, the beaming round face seemed totally oblivious to it, and podgy fingers wrapped themselves in a handshake with the dragon's paw.

"A pleasure to meet you!"

Extricating his paw roughly, Relaeth favoured the newcomer with a snarl, smacking away the still outstretched hand.

[Not one I share, especially with the overfed. Who the hell are you?]

The lab-coat was an obvious enough clue to the stranger's occupation. The nametag was what clinched the deal. Without waiting for the stranger to say anything, Relaeth whipped around and stomped back to beside the now fully upright Kerner, who was dusting himself off and pulling out crumpled papers from the most unlikely places.

"There's your replacement, Kerner. Hope you're glad to be rid of me."

There was a long pause of stunned silence. Then Kerner sighed, extricating a rumpled report-page from his hair.

"I did think you were over-reacting."

Waving to the blond still outside the door, he turned to Relaeth and gestured towards the approaching man.

"This is McKenzie. He is going to be your attached-scientist temporarily—mainly to give him an opportunity to study you in relation to other projects. I will still be around after McKenzie's gone."

Again, there was a long period of silence. Then a test-tube hit the floor. Giving Kerner a deliberate shrug, Relaeth smirked.

[You could have tried to explain better, Kerner.]

His tone was reproachful, coupled with an expression of abject hurt. Then, sticking his tail straight up into the air, looking like a giant black cat, he stalked his way out, tail swaying slightly.

[Have fun, you two. I'll be out and about.]

As the door slid shut behind him, the beginnings of the two scientists' discussion reached him, centering on the dull topic of tomorrow's scheduled workload and meetings. Smirking, the black dragon closed his eyes and breathed a tiny sigh of relief. It was good that Kerner would still be his attached scientist. That chubby fellow rubbed him the wrong way. Taking a step forward, he slammed headfirst into something hard. To his credit, he did not unleash a flood of expletives immediately. Staggering back, with the incessant ringing in his head refusing to go away, he looked up at what he collided with and nearly did a double take. Only then did the curses flow.

The peaceful conversation between kindred souls within the laboratory was unpleasantly interrupted by a loud and ear-shattering shout.

[Kerner! What's this white albino human-lizard bastard-child doing outside your lab?]

The hefty McKenzie smiled. "I see that enforcer Relaeth has met Crauth, my brain-child."

Strolling leisurely out of the laboratory, he and Kerner found an entirely unexpected scene before them: Relaeth was perched up on the wall, glaring down at the expressionless Crauth, who was looking up at him with empty blue eyes.

"McKenzie, so this is your work? Interesting..."

Before Kerner could take a good look, however, Relaeth had dropped down in front of them and looked pointedly at McKenzie.

[That person is your work? Perhaps you'd like to give him a personality, which you lack?]

Strolling over to Crauth, who merely watched him approach impassively, he reached up and waved a paw in front of the white-haired creature's face. It garnered no reaction, not that he had been expecting any. Even when he brought his claws dangerously close to those aquamarine eyes, no expression crossed those blank features. In response, McKenzie merely smiled and turned to Kerner.

"It's much easier to work with a creature that lacks personality. No barbed insults, or acting up. Besides, it doubles as an excellent lab-assistant!"

During his little speech, he beamed at Relaeth, who simply looked on, pretending not to hear that oblique dig at him.

"Of course, it makes for dull company—Excuse me!"

There was the soft buzz of an ether-link, and he dug around in his voluminous pockets, producing wads of old yellowing notes and ancient receipts, before coming up triumphantly with a rather battered ether-link. Looking very similar to a cell phone, it was obviously an old model from the initial genesis of the Network. Pressing a button on it, the buzz stopped and a brief text message flashed across the screen, obviously a reminder of sorts. Apologetically, he bowed slightly to both Kerner and Relaeth.

"I must go, dear associate! Time waits for no man and I'm already quite late!"

He started off down the corridor at a puff, Crauth trailing behind him, the tall humanoid lizard an incongruous companion to the scientist. Watching them go, Relaeth turned to Kerner as soon as they were out of earshot.

[I suggest you steer clear of McKenzie.]

Without offering an explanation, he retreated back into the lab, leaving the man with a well of unanswered questions. Glancing at where Crauth and his creator had gone, Kerner rubbed his head tiredly. Things were going at strange tangents that confused him.

[Kerner! What's with all this broken glass everywhere? Obviously you're lacking a good set of equipment-manipulative skills!]

Whirling around, he strode back into the laboratory and glared at Relaeth.

"That'll be your fault! You broke all of it, including my new shipment!"

Before he could continue, an announcement over the ether-link systems effectively stemmed it.

<Dr Kerner. Please proceed to the Director's office, with enforcer Relaeth.>

Wincing at the volume, he glanced at Relaeth in askance. The dragon simply nodded, indicating that he had heard it as well, evidently withstanding the decibels without flinching.

[It's about McKenzie, Kerner. Let's go.]

He paused at the laboratory exit and glanced at Kerner. For a moment, he opened his mouth, as if to say something more, then he shook his head and walked out. The scientist slowly trailed after, mulling over the two cryptic comments Relaeth had made, totally oblivious to the dragon's hesitation at that moment.

The Director's office was simply that, a place for working, or so the higher-ups claimed. The fact that Kerner's assigned laboratory could fit into the office three times over and still have space left over for a mini bar made him disinclined to agree with their assessment.

The thick carpet underfoot and potted plants so artistically scattered around made it even less as they claimed. Right in the center of all the visible opulence was a massive desk with files and papers stacked neatly at one corner. Behind it, seated in a high-backed leather-chair, was the Director. The back of the chair faced them, allowing the attached-scientist and his charge a very intriguing view.

"An enforcer patrol reported the discovery of Geneticist McKenzie's body and his experiment. Relaeth, if you would please investigate?"

The dragon nodded, his expression grim.

[I assume there's another reason why you asked for both of us?]

There was a brief moment of silence before the reply came.

"Attached-scientist Kerner will accompany you to the Armor-Tech labs to obtain your equipment. The latest modifications have been completed; however, it has been determined to require the attached-scientist's approval before it can be released."

That got Kerner's attention. Rarely did anything require his approval. Opening his mouth to inquire about it, Relaeth sent a cautionary look his way, before quickly interrupting him. Slightly

mystified by the way matters were turning, he shut his mouth.

[That's a first. We'll be off then.]

The dragon turned and walked out of the office, with Kerner in tow. Once outside, he looked at the scientist and smiled without mirth.

[Things are getting dangerous. That's the only reason why they'll release the approval-required equipment.]

"Approval-required equipment?"

Relaeth gave him a look that spoke volumes, mainly on the topic of how stupid that question was.

[It's a euphemism for the war-quality stuff. I wasn't created simply to be enforcer patrolling the streets, remember? There's the other side of being an enforcer.]

Kerner did not reply to that. If matters warranted Relaeth's capabilities as a war-machine, just what exactly was going on? He had no answer to that question, and it seemed that the dragon was not going to give him one either.

They made their way to the Armor-Tech labs in relative silence. Musing on matters, Kerner glanced occasionally at Relaeth, feeling slightly put-out that the dragon was not willing to share his thoughts. It was disturbing, that harsh expression on his reptilian muzzle. Suddenly, the fact that Relaeth was not human slammed soundly home. Was all emotion he displayed simply an affectation of his? It begged the question of whether his innate nature was still the dominant force in the equation of nature versus nurture. After all the time spent as his attached-scientist, that impossible gap between human and dragon had not surfaced. Now, it was all too apparent.

[If you're going to continue staring at me like that, Kerner, I'm going to break your glasses.]

Feeling his cheeks burn, Kerner hastily turned his gaze onto his shoes. At least they did not threaten to cause him or his personal effects any damage. They were of nice comfortable brown leather, relatively common in this day and age, since synthetic leather had reached the point of being almost undistinguishable from the real

thing. Something prodded him and he looked up, only to find Relaeth's annoyed expression in his face.

[We're here. Stop watching at your shoes. It's not as if they're going to grow any cleaner.]

Again there was the flush of red, though this time much intensified. Doing his mental best to shove it aside, Kerner could still feel the heat of embarrassment in spite of his efforts. Relaeth was not making it any easier, especially with that mischievous grin sent his way. He cleared his throat very self-consciously, both as a hint for Relaeth to stop and to gather his scattered nerves. It failed in both aspects. Instead, it only gave the dragon more incentive to carry on.

Purposely looking away from him, Kerner found himself turning in a complete circle to avoid that grin or risk degeneration into giggling fit.

"Relaeth! Stop it!"

There was a pathetic whine, and involuntarily, Kerner glanced at Relaeth. He immediately regretted it.

When they finally entered the Armor-Tech labs, Kerner was a mess of stifled snorts, desperately trying to maintain a semblance of composure. Relaeth was the perfect picture of calm placidity, with only the occasional smirk tugging at the edge of his mouth betraying him.

"On the Director's orders, we're to—"

The scientist had to break off his sentence and turn away, in order to prevent himself from losing what little self-control he had left. Quite a few confused looks were sent his way, but thankfully, all those within the labs either possessed excellent poker-faces, or had the grace to pretend intent interest in their paperwork. In the end, Relaeth had to do most of the talking, with Kerner being useful for nothing more than a signature, thumbprint and DNA-scan. Of course, he botched up on the first try and had to redo it twice over before it was even marginally acceptable. When he saw the equipment though, the scientist quickly sobered. Thin body armor covered almost every part of the dragon, the tough

but flexible material easily merging with his black scales, rendering it invisible even to the assisted eye. Shoulder-mounted panels had tri-barrelled chain-guns, a sturdy companion to the heavy but slow-firing laser strapped onto his tail. His claws seemed obvious now, the platinum-iridium alloy within them easily allowing him to puncture almost any material with relative ease. What quickly drew his attention, however, were not these. It was the brilliant waves of orange energy hovering above Relaeth's back, seemingly unconnected.

"Oh my... are those..?"

[Well, Kerner. You're certainly a gaping goldfish, aren't you.]

Shutting his mouth rapidly, the scientist still could not stop himself from gazing at the pulses of energy, shaped like the wings of legend's dragons.

"I thought it was impossible to craft those things without the transducer..."

Behind him, some of the scientists snickered. A sharp glare from the armed dragon easily shut them up.

[Let's go, Kerner.]

The wings wafted into a thin line, and vanished as Relaeth deactivated them. No point in wasting power unnecessarily. Trailing after him, Kerner mentally reminded himself to keep up with the latest technological breakthroughs. He was really getting behind.

The scene of the murder was grisly, to say the least. The mound of bloody flesh on the floor could hardly be termed a corpse. Limbs were cleanly severed and tossed in all directions, the body sliced open and organs torn out, as if by hand. It was a brief moment of gratefulness when the clean-up crew finally arrived to deal with the body after Relaeth had looked it over. However, the body was not the only disturbing item. McKenzie's experiment was equally, if not more, unsettling. The white clawed hands were coated in blood, and shreds of flesh clung to them. The white clothing it wore was unrecognisable as that colour, so splashed as it was with red. The closest description of it could only be an apprentice butcher's apron, after the slaughter of a particularly bloody pig.

Those, however, were nothing compared to the empty blue eyes that stared at gruesome scene without a hint of emotion.

"Relaeth... I think we can safely classify this as homicide."

Kerner could feel the bile rising in his throat, the bitter taste threatening to send his empty stomach into convulsions. Laboratory dissections were much cleaner and less disgustingly grotesque than this. All evidence was clear—somehow the experiment creature had gone berserk and killed McKenzie.

[You think so, Kerner? Perhaps you're right.]

That reply surprised him. Was the cause of death not glaringly obvious?

"You don't sound very convinced."

[I have my doubts.]

The dragon turned to glance in the suspect's direction.

[There was a reason why the Director authorised this equipment release, Kerner. There's something more to this case.] Before he could continue, however, one of the enforcers came up to them and saluted.

"The deceased was discovered only a while ago. However, all investigations determine the time of death to be this morning."

Receiving a nod from the dragon, he saluted once more and left the two to themselves.

[Nowhere as clear-cut as it seemed, Kerner.]

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, the scientist sighed. "If it was this morning, who did we see earlier on?"

The dragon shrugged.

[That's what I'd like to know, Kerner. In the mean time, drag up everything you know about McKenzie. I'll meet you at the lab later.] He took a step forward, and then paused, a contemplative look on his face. [Don't allow anyone entry to the lab, even the Director.]

"Why? And just where are you going?"

Giving Kerner an annoyed look, he sighed.

[Just a hunch, Kerner. And I'll be in the Old City. There's someone, I suspect, who wants to meet me.]

With the advent of the Network, the far superior successor to the now defunct internet, the city became divided into two sections. One was the brilliant brightly coloured world that most knew; the city patrolled by enforcers and ruled by legislation. The other was the dark shadowed realm of society's dregs and outcasts, governed by the Triads. The split was, and always had been, startlingly obvious. Where the sparkling clean-edged buildings of the new city ended, the abandoned office blocks and rotting behemoths of ancient twentieth century began.

It was into this vice-haven that Relaeth ventured into. Picking his way slowly through potholes and dirt, the dragon kept to the shadows. Even with the bright sunlight streaming amongst the buildings, there was the sensation of black smog clinging to the air, coating the world with a darker hue. The tarmac underfoot was sun-baked into scorching, but an unconscious shiver ran through him. The Old City did not have its reputation for nothing.

There were footsteps, heavy shuffling of a group. He ducked into an alley, sheltering behind a rust-eaten dumpster. The group went by, but not before he had to suffer the stench of their passage. Cleanliness grew with rank in the Triads, and the lowest rung had the dubious luxury of being scum, both literally and metaphorically.

Mentally wishing for a much reduced sense of smell, Relaeth slid out from hiding and continued on his excursion. Digging his claws into the firm mortar, he easily pulled his way up and out of the alley. It was not a tall building, and within a few seconds, he had scaled its height. A cool breeze touched his heaving sides, and it felt good.

Grinning widely, he glanced around, viewing the skyline of the city against the setting sun. Painted an all encompassing black against the sunlight's red and yellow, he could, for a moment, ignore the crumbling architectures and the ilk that lurked within them. Mentally fixing the breathtaking scene into his mind, he turned away and jumped off the edge, landing silently upon an adjacent rooftop, swiftly making his way to his destination, and a possible confrontation.

Kerner, meanwhile, was finding the view of his computer extremely boring. McKenzie seemed like the typical scientist, right from the very beginning. He attended high school, did moderately well in sciences and mathematics before going onto college and studying genetics. With no criminal record, the scientist's was nothing but ordinary. The long periods of unemployment were typical of such scientists, yielding no leads. With a long sigh, he leaned back into the chair and shut his eyes, taking off the black-rimmed spectacles he wore. Activating the ether-link, mandatory for all personnel, he contacted Relaeth. Across the Network, real-time conversations were the norm, similar to mobile phones of the past, just without the subscription and provider issues.

"Hey, Relaeth. Nothing untoward at all about McKenzie."

He paused, waiting for the usually instant reply. It took a while, a few moments. The accompanying static made the dragon's words nearly inaudible, but Kerner could just make it out.

[How long was he unemployed?]

"Twenty-two years. Why?"

This time there was no reply. After waiting impatiently for a few moments, he grumbled about enigmatic and uninformative dragons and turned off his ether-link. With his task now accomplished, Kerner mentally reviewed his usual list of duties. There were reports to be done, the fortnightly review on Relaeth's condition, a write-up for the Approval-required equipment and a whole slew of paperwork to be accomplished. Just thinking about them made his head ache slightly.

With a frown, he put them all aside. They could wait till later. For now, he would do something silly, just to get his mind off matters. Swinging about in his swivel chair, he made soft whooping sounds for a moment, revelling in the childishness of it all. Then, a knock came on the laboratory door, and he instinctively moved to answer it.

However, his motion was arrested by Relaeth's warning. Hesitating, he decided to go against it. After all, Relaeth had said it was simply a hunch, and nothing more. Getting up, he walked

over to the portal and disengaged the lock. It slid open, revealing empty aquamarine.

Growling as the conversation cut off, Relaeth was not sure whether his reply reached Kerner. He just hoped that his earlier warning would still hold, now that his hunch was becoming more than just a calculated guess. It was no longer a matter of who murdered McKenzie; it was now something much deeper. That notion alone made shivers run down his spine, especially when he had an inkling of who was pulling the strings. He retuned the Network amplifier and tried to contact Kerner again. It failed, again due to poor signal. Irritated, Relaeth deactivated the amplifier.

[So much for trying to warn him...]

Taking a step forward, he paused. Something's wrong. Instinctively, he dropped to the ground, a split second before the burst of laser lanced the air. Biting back the snarl, he belly-crawled towards the roof-edge. Engaging his tail-laser to its lowest setting, Relaeth waited for another burst of fire. It came, just not from where he had expected.

Behind!

The heat ate into his side, barely hindered by the armouring and scales. Whipping around, he staggered forward before collapsing, feeling the laser-cauterised wound pulsing steadily in waves of pain.

[... How'd...]

His vision alternated between crystal clarity and blurred fog. The distant figure slowly walked up to him, revealing itself to be two people, one fully white, the other dressed in black. Red eyes widened in recognition, before being replaced by hysterical panic and fear. Forcing himself to move, despite the pain, Relaeth managed to drag himself a foot, then another.

"Now, now, enforcer Relaeth. No need to force our hand anymore. Paw, rather."

A burst of fire destroyed the ground just an inch away from his neck, bringing his frenzied crawl to a halt. Panting heavily, Relaeth's thoughts ran in circles, focusing entirely on the entity

before him.

[You're supposed to be dead!]

There was a dry chuckle, and the man took a step forward, obscuring the white figure from view. Every article of clothing was black, the cut of his suit similar to funeral garb. His face contorted into a leer, and those podgy fingers waved in a sarcastic greeting.

"Dead? I'm perfectly healthy, Enforcer Relaeth."

The fat scientist gestured to Crauth, who simply turned to regard his creator passively, lacking even a hint of emotion. Held loosely within those clawed hands was a military-grade laser-rifle, yet he handled it without a care to the devastating power it contained.

"Destroy him, just as Kerner was."

The rifle came up, aimed at the dragon's throat. The trigger moved a fraction, then paused. The rifle slowly lowered, before clattering to the ground.

"Crauth! What are you doing?"

McKenzie's red-faced shriek was amusing to behold. Smirking, Relaeth disengaged his tail-laser, allowing it to cool. Dropping the façade of false panic, he growled softly.

[He can't hear you, McKenzie.]

The scientist paused in mid-rant, turning slowly to face the enforcer. His expression wavered between anger and confusion, finally settling on the latter.

"What do you mean...?"

The experiment creature seemed hardly any different, with the same dull lifeless eyes, limpid features. Painfully dragging himself upright, Relaeth lifted his tail, allowing the energy-weapon there to come into full view. A wisp of smoke drifted helpfully from its barrel.

[A prototype that uses energy from the non-visible electromagnetic spectrum to the same effect as a laser. Just more effective, and far less detectable.]

Shoulder-mounted chain-guns began to whir slowly, as Relaeth activated them.

[Now, McKenzie. Care to explain why you'd like to be dead?]

He advanced slowly, one agony-filled step at a time. He could see every drop of sweat that trickled down the scientist's face, that salty drop travelling that flushed-red skin. The rising anxiety within the man was obvious, his trembling hands, the rapid pleading glances at his lifeless creation. A low rumble filled the air, and Relaeth found himself purring. The knowledge that he had cornered this rat and was slowly teasing its nerves apart both appalled and appealed to him.

[Talk, McKenzie.]

That flabby mouth gaped like a goldfish, opening and closing without any sound. Washed-out blue eyes darted from side to side, desperately seeking a way out. Then they hardened, and a slight grin touched those lips.

"Got you, enforcer."

Before Relaeth could react, scorching fire blazed along his back, cutting through armour and body with nothing more than a hiss. Pain roared through his system, and his agonised cry filled the Old City. Instinct replaced intellect, and he reared onto his hind-legs, pawing at empty air. Even so, the pain continued to pour in, as the laser continued in its blazing path. McKenzie smirked, the expression growing into a wide mocking grin. Then he laughed, the scornful sound filling Relaeth's mind.

"I've got more than one Crauth! How'd you think I managed to distract you in the very beginning?"

His gloat, however, was suddenly interrupted by a kaleidoscope burst of orange and yellow exploding from Relaeth's back. The flickering forged energy warped in all directions, as the dragon's anguish-scattered thoughts failed to properly synchronise with his equipment. Quickly retreating, the scientist allowed himself a last look upon the suffering enforcer before turning to the heavens.

"I always did hate you enforcers. All of you self-righteous bastards refused me the research grant I needed to produce Crauth. Instead, you gave it to Russov, and he made you! Now, look and see which product is the superior! I'm the genius, not Russov!"

[So, a twin-decade old grudge is all there is? All this elaborate set-up just to lure me out here and destroy me? Is that all?]

The sardonic purr within that voice stoked his anger and he whirled around, only to witness a glimpse of orange flashing across his vision. The edge of one extended wing hummed at his neck, just touching the skin and allowing a thin trickle of blood to hiss across it.

"Crau-!"

[Save it, McKenzie. Your creatures aren't breathing any more.]

His eyes hard, Relaeth extended that wing edge just a nanometre, enough to cause the scientist to gasp. Looking just past the edge of orange, his eyes widened. Behind the dragon, resting on the ground was a cleanly torn apart Crauth. The lack of blood, courtesy of the energy-cauterised wounds, only increased the surrealism.

[This is your last chance, McKenzie. You can choose to talk and sleep in jail, or keep mum and slumber six feet under.]

Two fat-laden arms shot up into the air in the universal sign of defeat. Thick chins wobbled as he tried to sound words coherently through the gag of fear.

"I'll talk, I'll talk!"

Relaeth nodded, and pulled back the wing edge slightly.

[Now, how'd you stage that death scene?]

That elicited a weak smile from the scientist, who spoke with unmistakable pride in his voice, clear despite the many layers of fear.

"Easy... once I figured out how to produce Crauth, producing an inanimate clone of myself was nothing. The artificial womb technology allowed that."

He would have continued, but the growling purr of engines cut him off. Overhead, the hulking mass of an air-cruiser hovered. Its helicopter-like body was supported by wings with propeller-blades rotating within them. A half-dozen enforcers rappelled down, surrounding the two of them, scientist and dragon.

"We'll take over from here, Relaeth sir. Apologies for taking so long, tracing the amplifier signal took a while."

Nodding slightly, the dragon deactivated the energy-wings, allowing it to fade into the night air. Along with it, went his con-

sciousness. I'm sorry Kerner...

Resting quietly on the laboratory floor, Relaeth closed his eyes and rolled onto his back. McKenzie had been taken into custody, and all his research-notes placed under close scrutiny by the CCG scientists. He had not tried to inquire about Kerner. No one had broached the topic, either. Growling softly to himself, he allowed the memories of the past flow across his mind's eye. The memory of breaking glass, so recent yet so far away, brought a faint smile to his face. Kerner...

Something prodded him and reflexively, he growled and ignored it.

[Go away. I'm busy.] Mourning the loss of the only attached-scientist I actually liked.

"Oh sure, tell me to go away after you've single-handedly demolished the entire new shipment of my laboratory equipment! I'm still waiting for a new one to arrive."

[Kerner... !]

Jumping upright, Relaeth winced as he tore open a wound. Collapsing onto the ground, he whimpered softly.

[Kerner, I thought...]

The scientist merely knelt down beside the supine dragon and stroked his white mane.

"I'm alright. Enforcer patrols had discovered the escape of Crauth, and managed to apprehend him before any serious damage was done."

Smiling, he was startled by Relaeth's head suddenly rubbing against his chest. Rather awkwardly, he petted the dragon and pulled him into a hug, careful not to cause any further stress on his injuries.

[I really thought I lost you.]

The scientist shrugged.

"Well, I did say I would be around, after McKenzie's gone."

They called to him across the stars, to a young Wolf aching for the chance to shine on his own. Now, with his life and hundreds more hanging in the balance, he's traveling across a foreign land for the sake of a world he's never visited–the world outside his village.

Warm Exodus

Alexander Wood

Enhart followed the trail as long as he could, never quite sure whether he was getting any closer. He was tired, he was VERY hungry, and he was determined not to go home until he'd caught something that weighed at least sixty pounds. That'd show his brother.

He poked his muzzle through the dried leaves of autumn. Figures he'd have to do this hunt when every step was thunderous, but the trail he tracked was only a few hours old and had a hint of blood to it. Wounded deer. Of course, soon he'd have to break off THIS trail and go hunt up a rabbit for supper or something, but he could get back to it later.

This was all Asmodan's fault, of course. Dear old Big Brother. Five years older, forty pounds heavier, six inches taller, and a thousand times better looking, and always treated him like something someone had forgotten to bury. So what if he couldn't catch bigger game? So what if he couldn't swim as far or run as fast?

So why had Enhart stormed off like that? It wasn't as if they hadn't had the argument before. He'd acted like a pup in a huff, that was all, plain and simple. He'd gotten tired of Asmodan's sneering and snickering and belittling, and...

Well, the female had had something to do with it as well. It had been quite a long time since Enhart had gotten laid, and how he had ACHED for this chance, and then Asmodan came along

and started talking about every embarrassing thing Enhart had ever done. Every mudhole Asmodan had pulled him out of, every sickly prey beast who had ever escaped his clutches, every time he'd fallen off a log and into the river, laid bare for her to hear. Asmodan and Enhart had had some arguments before, but this one rang the welkins. The whole Pack had heard it.

It'd be just as well, he thought, if I *never* returned to the Pack. It wasn't the childish thought of a pup in a huff—Enhart was seventeen and no pup—but he wasn't growing there. Weeds don't grow tall in the shadows of trees, and his brother would always tower over him. Every time Enhart moved forwards, his brother did something to make him feel like a clumsy pup. Everything he learned to do, Asmodan did better. Every time he hunted, Asmodan brought home bigger prey. Every fire he built, Asmodan built bigger. Asmodan could dance longer, sing better, and hold more wine than anyone else in the Pack, not just his younger brother. When Enhart told a story, Asmodan told it better. He was tired of always chasing him.

When the rain started coming down, his spirit sagged. Soaking wet, sullen and sorry, he sat under a tree and let the downpour drench him. Never had he felt so miserable.

Asmodan looked up at the rain, then went to shelter his firewood. The bonfire guttered, but didn't go out, and if the dancers noticed, they didn't stop dancing, nor did the music stop. Their nightly parties weren't derailed by anything so pedestrian as mere rain.

He was just throwing hides over his woodpile when he caught the scent of the Alpha approaching, and straightened up, smoothing out his shaggy fur and wiping water from his face and hair. It didn't work—he was instantly bedraggled again.

"Asmodan?"

Asmodan emerged from behind his hut. "Yes, my Lord?"

"Everything all right?"

"Fine. I just forgot to secure my firewood. It's fine now."

"Good, good." The Alpha was a little shorter than Asmodan—

most Wolves were—but he had presence and charisma. His russet fur shone like sealskin. "Where's Enhart?"

"Still off on his hunt, I suppose," said Asmodan.

"He's been gone two days."

"Not quite. He left yesterday at noon. Now it's barely nightfall."

"He's going to get soaked."

"He'll be all right. He can take care of himself."

"Interesting sentiment," said the Alpha. "Has he ever heard you say it?"

Busted, thought Asmodan. "I love my brother, Master," he said. "I worry about him sometimes. He tries so hard, but falls short so often..."

"By whose standards? Yours, or his?"

Asmodan was, wisely, silent.

"Your brother can hunt well enough to feed himself. He can keep himself warm in winter and cool in summer. He has a good imagination and good looks, and there's no reason that he can't be a credit to the Pack. And I've watched you treat him like an old shoe since he was five. He's a fine young Wolf, and there's no reason for you to treat him like you do. You are to follow him into the forests, find out where he's hunting, extend your apology, and invite him back to the village."

"But, Master, it's pouring out! His scent will be hard enough to find as it is—"

"Then you'd better get going if you want to spend any part of tonight in your own warm den."

Asmodan's face fell. "Yes, Master," he said. "You're right. I'm going."

The flash was what got Enhart's attention. It was high in the sky, but lit up the underside of the clouds. Enhart was ready to dismiss it as a bolt of lightning, and started counting seconds to see how far away it was, when a shockwave rolled over his body, seizing him by the skin and flinging him out of the trees.

He hit the ground in a jumble of limbs, unhurt but amazed.

Scrambling to his feet, he saw a faint green glow deep in the forest, not far from where he'd been standing. The glow didn't so much pulse as throb, like a living thing. If it was a fire, the Pack would have to be notified. Except that forest fires weren't green.

They were slugs, giant slugs, and they glowed in a shallow crater where once a few elderly trees had stood. They were huge—four feet long, and seemed to still be growing, at least to Enhart's fevered eyes. They had no eyestalks—just long, shining, green, featureless bodies.

Curious, Enhart reached out his paw. His fingers captured the green glow, and he turned this way and that, watching the way the shine glistened off his wet paw pad. He reached out and touched one of the slugs with the tips of his finger.

His face went clear. For a moment, he looked as if he'd just seen the obvious answer to a complex problem. "Oh," he said, though he wasn't sure in response to what. Something in him just... made sense.

He rested his paw against the side of the slug and licked his chops. Curiously, he looked at his paw, and grinned foolishly. It glistened with ooze. He reached out again and rested his paw against the slug's side, and then reached another paw out and touched another slug.

"All right," he said. "All right. It's okay."

Faintly, he could smell lilacs. He loved the scent of lilacs, but the time of year was all wrong for them. He felt focused, energetic. He felt ready, though he couldn't define his readiness, or what he was ready for. All he knew was that it was exciting, and dangerous, and new. One of the slugs reached out and brushed his cheek, then rested its pseudopod on top of his head. Enhart felt it ooze down his face, slicking down his mane and fur, reaching for the one who was reaching out.

He tilted his head upwards and regarded the sky. The rain had stopped, and the clouds were breaking up. Thoughts flowed through his mind like fish in a river, organized and steady.

"How can I trust it?" he said, reaching up and lacing his fingers through the cowl of slime on his face. "If it's in my mind, how do I

know that it isn't manipulating me to feel like this?"

It was a sage question, and Enhart felt pride for thinking of it. The flow of thoughts in his mind diverted, drawing his attention to some other part of his essence. The slug under his paw oozed forwards, resting on his neck, wrapping around his shoulders like a scarf. It weighed a ton, and Enhart staggered under its weight.

He saw before him a life laid bare, his life, spread out like tools from a box, organized and arranged in perfect order, something he'd never managed on his own. With all those tools at his disposal at once, he had his evidence. He had a perfect frame for his own self, while the intruder was allotted a fraction of the total space in him.

Intruder? It didn't feel like an intrusion. It felt more like a gentle tap on the door: "Pardon me, I was wondering if..." He had little experience with telepathy, but the presence filling him was timid and uncertain, as if afraid of tracking in mud. His curiosity aroused, and fascinated by the alpha-sensation of having his mind working like this, a small gift from his visitor, he decided to let the being, the creature, the thing, have its say.

He stepped forwards, into the crater. The writhing mass of slugs reached out to him, curling around his arms, and his legs. He tilted his head back, and one probed at his neck. He sank into the squirming mass of them, until they consumed him completely.

It was nearly dawn and Asmodan was just thinking that there was no way that Enhart would go THIS far afield. They were barely within the boundaries of their hunting range, and while no other packs competed with them for game, Enhart rarely ventured close to the borders. Still, here was his scent, and there were his tracks, and the evidence betrayed the impulse. Asmodan felt bad. That must have been some huff.

The green glow had long since faded, but the sparkle of the slugs was still visible through the trees, and Asmodan found himself wondering when giant snakes had found their way into these forests. Faintly, he could smell lilacs. The scent directed him straight towards the green shine.

Asmodan regarded the crater with disbelief and curiosity. The throbbing, writhing mass at its center repulsed and fascinated him. Their bodies made crackling noises as they twined and flowed. Ripples bunched under their skin and moved the length of their bodies. This could only be alien, but in aid of what, Asmodan had no idea. The ships didn't visit this side of the planet.

A paw appeared between a pair of the slugs, attached to an arm with its fur plastered as smooth as wet marble. The arm was attached to a shoulder, and, inevitably, a face appeared. A curtain of slime hung over its muzzle, and its hair was a single shining sheet draped over its shoulders and back, but as it lifted its face to the sun, the curtain broke, and it was Enhart.

Asmodan cursed and stumbled down into the crater. Enhart was breathing, he could see that, this obscene wad hadn't killed him yet, but that look on his face—Asmodan stopped short. The expression was one of pure joy, pleasure that Enhart had never experienced before. The slugs were already swallowing him up again, but whatever they were doing to him felt good. Asmodan grabbed Enhart's arm before he could disappear, but it was far too well lubricated. It slurped out of his paws and into the mass, and Asmodan backpedaled across the loose dirt and landed heavily on his tail.

Asmodan wished he'd brought a knife. Or a spear. Or a gun of some sort, if it came down to it. He saw Enhart's foot appear in the twisting ball, lunged forwards, and seized it, but he didn't stand a chance.

Taking a deep breath, as if about to dive into a freezing lake, Asmodan jammed both his arms to the shoulders in the slugs, groping for anything that felt like slimy fur. His hands wrapped tight around... fibers. Filaments. No—hair! He had hold of his brother's pelt. Digging his heels in, wincing as the slimy bodies oozed over him, he pulled, and pulled, until he could get his arms under Enhart's shoulders, and pulled some more.

No sooner was Enhart halfway out than he started to shake. "Unh! Cold!" he said, shuddering. "Not yet—too cold, not yet—" He wriggled in Asmodan's arms, far too slippery to hang onto.

"I'm coming," he cried. "Wait—I'm still here! I just—No, it's all right—Just a few more minutes—" He disappeared back into the mass.

Asmodan sat slumped on the rim of the crater, face twisted in shock. Had his brother just fought him off and voluntarily dived back into that pile of slime? What was he thinking?

Asmodan was thinking, "Weapon." He looked frantically around. That slop was all over him now, and he hated it. He saw a rock, picked it up, and bunged it off the mass. It bounced off harmlessly. Crap. He scrambled out of the crater and pawed around until he broke off a fairly good-sized branch. Diving back into the crater with a rebel yell, he hauled off and whacked the slug mass as hard as he could. The slugs rippled, but did not yield.

"Give me back my brother!" shouted Asmodan, hauling off to whack the mass again. One of the slugs swung its tail—or head?—and struck Asmodan's wrist, forcing him to drop the club. He sat down again, hard. "Give me back my brother!" he howled.

So aggravated was he that he didn't notice that the ball of slugs had stopped. In fact, it seemed to be... melting. Apprehensively, he got to his feet. The ball turned into a pile, and, his face relaxed with bliss and wonder, his brother oozed out of it.

Enhart took a deep breath. He lay under a blanket of slime, and reached up and cleared his eyes. He looked over at Asmodan. "Exhilarating," he whispered.

Asmodan was on his feet. "Are you all right?" he said. "Give me your paw."

"It's all right," said Enhart. "It's over. I'm all right." He took Asmodan's paw and let him help him up. He wobbled, a little unsteadily. "Woah," he said, lacing his fingers through his mane and slicking it back. "I'm full."

"Those things," said Asmodan. "Those..." He looked at the pile, and was surprised to see that the slugs were less than half their original size. As he watched, they shrank further, and further, all the way down to normal-size slugs, which disappeared into the ground. He stared, incredulous, at Enhart. "What..."

"Warm," whispered Enhart. He looked down at himself, as if

finally noticing that he was drenched in ooze. "I need a bath. I have so much to tell you, Asmodan."

"You're going back to the village and letting the Shaman have a look at you," said Asmodan. "Who knows what kind of diseases those things might be carrying? Or even where they came from?"

"Relax, brother," said Enhart. He straightened his back and threw out his shoulders. "They're just slugs. Ordinary garden slugs from Earth."

"But they were huge!"

"They were the most advanced creatures on this planet that the refugees could inhabit without displacing a soul," said Enhart. "Ordinary slugs."

"Refugees? Alien refugees?"

Enhart nodded. He was striding towards the river, apparently unwilling to be dissuaded from his bath. He marched straight across the fields and into the water. Asmodan jogged to keep up.

"Enhart? Where are the refugees now? What happened to them?"

Enhart ducked under the water, and surfaced clean and shining. He tapped his forehead. "They're in here," he said. "All of them."

It only took a few hours before they returned to the Village and their home. Asmodan ran to get the Alpha and the Shaman while Enhart raided their well-stocked pantry and ate pretty much everything within arm's reach. Once fed, he rested in his hammock and waited for company to arrive.

It didn't take long. The Alpha looked concerned, but the Shaman just sat next to Enhart and went to work. He took his pulse, checked his heartbeat, listened to him breathe, peered into his eyes and ears, lifted Enhart's tail to take his temperature.

"They were all over him," said Asmodan helplessly. "Like they were... trying to eat him."

"The alien slugs?" said the Alpha.

"No," said Enhart. "No, no. The slugs were regular slugs. Their bodies only reacted to the presence of the alien intelligence." He tapped his forehead. "They're in here now."

"In your mind?" The Shaman sat back on his haunches. "You can feel them?"

"All of them."

"How many?"

"Four hundred."

The Shaman sucked in breath. "You have four hundred alien personalities in your brain?"

"It's crowded in here," said Enhart, but he looked mischievous, as if he was getting away with something clever.

"You're all right? You're not in any pain?" said the Alpha.

"No, but I can't hang onto them for long. I have things to do. They need help and protection, and they chose me."

The Shaman brushed back Enhart's mane. "What do they want, child?"

"Freedom. That's all."

"How long do you have?"

"Three days. Maybe four."

"And then what?"

"Well, like I said, I can't hang onto them forever." He drew a claw across his neck.

"They die?"

"We ALL die."

Asmodan sat up abruptly. "Get them out," he said. "Get them all out now. You're not to put yourself at risk." He took hold of Enhart's shoulders. "Do you hear me in there? Get out of my brother! Leave him alone!"

The Shaman pushed Asmodan away and made him sit down in his seat. The Alpha cocked his head. "We have only what you say as evidence that you're not just suffering some sort of... madness, some kind of schizophrenia."

"Well, I could..." He shrugged, then held his paws about two feet apart. A brief spark of energy jumped from one to the other like a bolt of lightning. There was that lilac smell again. Asmodan leaped up. The Alpha raised both his eyebrows.

Enhart reached out to both the Shaman and the Alpha, and held them by the paws. They both straightened up, blinked, and

said, "Oh," almost simultaneously, as if coming to a realization. Enhart smiled indulgently, then let them go.

"All right," said the Alpha. "It's safe to say that there's some kind of energy within one of our people, and that you aren't safe with it in there. Now, what can WE do? How can we help?"

"Let me speak to one of them," said Asmodan abruptly. "Let me appeal to them directly.

"All right," said Enhart. His eyes went blank and stupid, his jaw swung open and his tongue lolled. His fingers twitched. He took a deep breath, then forced it out. His next breath hissed out as a moan.

"Learning... to talk..." he slurred.

"Who is this?" said the Alpha.

Enhart looked around, as if unsure what eyes were for. "I am..." He searched his thoughts. "I am the leader of the Warm."

"What are the Warm?"

Another deep breath. "Our colony... fleeing. We... ran. Our ship disabled. Your world, closest. Ship destroyed, in... at-mos-phere." He groaned. "Weak..."

"All right," said the Alpha. "Rest. Let Enhart talk again."

Enhart blinked, then looked around. "They're not strong enough to command a complex body," he said. "It's taking two or three of them just to make my body talk—one to work the lungs, one to work the mouth, and I'm standing behind them, shouting instructions the whole time. Still, they picked it up quickly enough." He leaned forwards. "The Warm's ship was destroyed when it hit our atmosphere, and the Warm were thrown clear. They have bodies on their own world, but when they travel, they leave them behind. Saves them the trouble of having to feed and water them the whole distance."

"And you picked them up?"

"A living brain's complex enough. Not like their own travel equipment, but it'll do. I've got a shelf-life, though. We have only a few days to get them back into space."

"And how do we do that?" It was Asmodan, speaking as if from a thousand miles away, angry and tired.

"They were on their way here to pick up cargo," said Enhart. "A 'medium' of some sort. I'm not very clear on that bit. Anyway, the medium's ready for them. All we have to do is head to the orbiting laboratory where it's being manufactured, and they'll have a place to call home."

"Then we'll get a communication line, call the platform. Get them to deliver the medium."

Enhart shook his head. "It can't leave its artificial gravity well, nor can it be removed from its energy field, and the energy field can't be transported. It's pretty much stuck where it is."

"Then it seems, Enhart, that you have a job to do," said the Alpha. "You are to take your passengers to the Space Station where they can collect this Medium."

Asmodan ran both his paws through his mane, looking half-frantic. "Now, WAIT a minute," he said. "This is Enhart, here. He couldn't catch a cold. How are we supposed to get him into space? How are we, a sticks-and-stones tribe a thousand miles from the nearest spaceport, supposed to book passage to a space station? In only four days?"

"We're but a day's walk from a Transport Station," said the Alpha. "Another day to the Spaceport. I made the journey once myself, when I was young. Another day to get to the Station. Wait here."

He left the room only briefly, to return with a long, slim pouch that looked as if it had been made from a snake. He tipped it out into his paw. Golden coins slid out and sparkled on his paw-pad. "Currency," he said.

"Wow," said Enhart. He'd only ever seen money once before.

"Do not let anyone see how much you carry, for then they will charge you for the total amount on you, and you will need it for food and transport along the way. The Civilized on this world respond well to hagglers, but our kind have no use for it, so here is what you are to do with this money. Ask how much for items. When they quote you a price, cut the price in half and offer that, instead. They will lower theirs. When they lower theirs, raise yours—but by only ten percent. If they charge a hundred, insist

on fifty. If they drop it to ninety, tell them fifty-five. Continue until a price is agreed on, no matter what they say—about mouths to feed, about starving children at home, about how desperately they need the money. They see us as backwards and uncivilized, so they always claim far more than the price of their goods from us. Do you understand?"

Enhart nodded, taking the pouch.

"When you reach the spaceport, however, haggling will not work. All spaceflight passages have established and uniform prices. When the ticket agent quotes a price, that is the price you pay. Do not spend this money unwisely, for it's been a long time since I traveled to space, and the prices will have changed. I can't say for certain how much of that you'll need to get to the station." He sat back on his haunches. "When will you be leaving us, then?"

"As soon as possible." Enhart sat up, swinging his legs out of the hammock. "I plan to pack light, but I won't be hunting my way to the Transport Station. I have no time."

"Then we will pack part of our food stores for you." He pressed his paw against Enhart's cheek. "You will be missed, boy. Travel safely."

Asmodan stood up. "I'm going too," he said.

They looked at him, curious.

"I can't condone this madness," he said. "I don't even understand it. If it were up to me, I'd chain Enhart to a post until it passed. Master, we have no real proof that the Warm even exist, that Enhart isn't experiencing some kind of... of brain seizure. And if they DO exist, how are we to know the extent of his possession? They may only be playing naïve and helpless. They may have stage-managed this entire performance."

The Alpha rested his head on its side. "Have you NO faith in your brother?" he said.

Asmodan choked on what he wanted to say next, which was "No." He had no faith in Enhart. If Asmodan didn't share part of his own kills, Enhart would be dying of malnutrition. If Asmodan didn't help Enhart build his den, the roof would leak all over him. Enhart would never get laid if Asmodan didn't encourage him.

Enhart never did anything without Asmodan's insistence.

Until now.

"Your muzzle's bleeding," he muttered, pointing at Enhart. Enhart pressed the back of his paw against it and looked at it. The bleeding had already stopped, leaving a faint hint of red in his fur.

"You two had better get going, then," said the Alpha. "I'll help you get ready."

The two set out the next day, packing light and moving fast. Asmodan had no idea whether Enhart had slept, or even if he needed to sleep anymore, now that he had hundreds of aliens crowded into his mind.

It was a damp morning. Dew still clung to the leaves and grass, and the day promised to be humid. Asmodan had never seen Enhart move with such purpose before, straight and steady, through the border of their modest territory without so much as glancing back.

They were fording the river some five miles from the village when Asmodus finally broke the intolerable silence. "How does it feel?" he said.

Enhart glanced at him. "Hm?"

"You have an entire village in your head. What does it feel like?"

"Oh." Enhart waded deeper. "They're very polite. They're not poking all around and getting into the cupboards. If I had any secrets from them, they'd let me keep them. But they like to chat."

"Is that what you've been doing? Chatting?"

"Learning," said Enhart. "There's so much to learn, my brother. It's fascinating. One could drown in all there is to know." As if to illustrate, he ducked under the water's surface and swam for the other banking. Asmodan picked his way after him. He was lucky that it was autumn and the rivers were shallow, or such a move could have swept him downstream.

"They want to know everything," said Enhart. "They want to know what the trees are for, why the air smells the way it does.

They want to know why the sky is blue and what the clouds sound like. They want to taste the insects that they can hear crawling about in the leaves. They want to understand the place that I'm in, and how I perceive it with my five limited senses, and what sort of a picture of the world this creates. They've never had this perspective before."

"But how do YOU feel?"

Enhart pressed his paws to his chest and looked at the sky. "I don't know," he said. "It feels good. It IS good. It's... pleasant. Pleasurable. It's like... the stark absence of loneliness. It's an entire crowd of people cradling your well-being in their paws." He licked his chops. "They keep touching me. Feeling me. Running themselves up and down my nervous system, making muscles move, feeling how things feel in my skin. They travel to my paws and I pluck a flower for them, then they travel into my muzzle so they can smell it."

"They're not controlling you?" said Asmodan. "Jerking your strings like puppeteers?"

"Oh, no, of course not. They don't have the skills to move this body even if they tried to take it over. They can make requests..." He reached down into the leaves and dug out a worm. Tilting his head back, he dropped the worm into his open muzzle, bit it, and slurped it down. "And I can fulfill them, if I choose." He made a face. "Or not."

Asmodan remained unconvinced, and they talked little as they walked. His brother's rockheaded certainty was grating on his nerves. Seventeen years, Enhart had never been sure of anything, and now he was setting himself up as an intergalactic savior.

They finally reached a road of sorts, little more than a dirt track splitting the forest, but it was the most direct route to the Transport Station, and was also neutral ground—no threat of passing through the territory of others. It was old and overgrown and here and there hosted a rusting hulk of a vehicle, but it was passable.

Morning turned to afternoon. The heat sunk in. They rested occasionally, but Asmodan had the feeling that even while resting,

Enhart was urgent to get up and move on. It was while they were sharing food that Asmodan noticed the red stripe on the back of Enhart's paw, running partway up his arm.

"What's that?" he said. "Is that blood?"

Enhart lifted his arm and looked at it. "I guess it is."

"Is your nose bleeding again?"

"Off and on," said Enhart. "What's the big deal?"

"Is this something the Warm are doing to you? Are they hurting you?"

"Well, as I said, there is a limited amount of time that I can host the Warm," said Enhart. "It's just the first sign of bodily breakdown. We still have days before I'm in danger."

"Enhart, you're bleeding!"

"So? It's a rare week that you don't return from the hunt or the patrol with blood on your fur." Enhart cupped his paw to his muzzle, which had shed a few more drops, then looked at his paw pad. "It's nothing, I promise you."

Asmodan sighed. "Well, the smell of the blood could attract predators, but if you're not worried..."

"My brother, I only want to see this through. A little blood around the muzzle isn't going to incapacitate me."

Asmodan didn't push the point, but he did glance over at Enhart every time his brother sniffed or swiped his muzzle with his paw again.

Someone approached them on the roadway, a young female carrying a basket of bread. She was the first Tribal they'd seen since starting this hike, and they bowed deferentially to her. She returned the bow, but said nothing. They were close to a village, and could smell wood smoke and frying meat, but didn't want to be delayed by it. So they stuck to the road.

The road skewed left and tracked downwards steeply, and they followed it gingerly. Within a few moments, the tree cover had broken, revealing the vast plains beyond, and the silver line running through them, beyond the river, some ten miles farther.

"That's the Transport Line," said Asmodan. "This road goes right to the station."

Enhart sighed with relief. "Good thing. My legs are killing me. My guests are discovering what 'fatigue' feels like."

"Can't they help?"

"They are helping, a little. They're keeping my mind off it. Are YOU okay?"

"Of course," said Asmodan, who wasn't about to admit fatigue to his brother. He wasn't THAT tired.

"When does the Transport run?"

"I have no idea. We'll just have to wait for it."

The plains gave way to marsh as they approached the river, with grass taller than them and a road that was a swamp. They slogged through the mud as the reeds sang around them, as the winds made the grass wave.

The river was half a mile wide here, surrounded by sand boils. Here and there it ran under the ground, undermining the grass. The road now ran parallel to it, here and there raised on walkways to keep paws out of the mud. They didn't help much, since the parts of the road that weren't raised were slippery and treacherous. Asmodan snuck occasional looks at his brother, who trod the mud carefully, as if afraid he might break. The red streak was back on his paw, and his nose was actively bleeding. There were spots on his chin and chest. It seemed to be getting worse.

The road curved out over the river and ended in a dock. They stood at the end of it, watching the sun set slowly. "Fancy a swim?" said Enhart.

"What choice do we have?"

Enhart pointed. "There's no road on the other side. Did we come the right way?"

"There's only one roadway."

"Or half of one."

While they were pondering, a boat emerged from around a bend in the river. They watched it approach. It was a five-seater motorcraft with a fist-sized engine, piloted by a long, lean Otter with flowing, golden hair. He wore a beaded vest and breech clout and had a bangle around his neck. He tilted his head. "Ah!

Travelers!"

"We need to get to the Transport Station," said Asmodan. "Are we going the right way?"

"Exactly right way," said the Otter, pointing at them with a webbed finger. "Our scouts saw you approach. My job, carry you across. Costs fifty."

"Costs?" said Asmodan numbly. Nothing ever cost anything where he came from.

"The money," urged Enhart. He cleared his throat. "Twenty-five," he said, boldly.

The Otter stared at him for a moment, then broke out laughing. "No fools, these Wolves, no matter what they say! You learn quick quick. I will save us time. Twenty-five it is. Come, come. We'll be in my village before nightfall."

"Pay him," hissed Enhart, and Asmodan counted out twenty-five little coins and gave them to the Otter.

"Pleasure doing business," said the Otter. "Name's Hans. I'll take care of you."

The brief trip downriver was peaceful and pleasant. The sun was tomato-red at the edge of the horizon. Theirs was not the only boat on the river. Fishing boats dotted the slow-moving waters, and Otterfolk splashed freely in and out. Enhart watched them move, serpentine and silky, gliding under the water like fish. Where they surfaced, their fur sparkled in the dim light.

"Your muzzle's all bleeding," said Hans, pointing. "You okay chap?"

Enhart pressed his paw to his muzzle. Blood was slick against it. He dipped his paw in the water and splashed his face, and saw a streak of shining red on his chest. How long had he been bleeding? "I'm fine," he said. "It happens once in a while." He was a little surprised, when he pressed his paw again to his muzzle, to find that it was still bleeding. Wordlessly, Hans passed him a bit of rag from a bag in the back of the boat, and Enhart pressed it to his nose. "Thanks," he said.

"No problem. Little nosebleed no problem. BIG nosebleed... problem." He grinned. "You're going to Transport?"

"Aye," said Enhart. He looked at the rag, relieved to find that he was bleeding less. "When does the next one go through?"

"Not till morning. You spend the night in my village. Meet my people. They're friends to everyone." He tossed his hair. "I'm watching you watching us," he said. "You think we're beautiful."

Enhart nodded. "Yes. I do." He gazed at the swimmers. "When I swim, I'm all arms and legs and I hardly get anywhere. Your people move like a unit. Your bodies are made for swimming."

"Wolf-folk beautiful, too," said Hans.

"Really?"

"When they hunt."

Enhart grinned, thinking back to his last pathetic hunt. "Not so sure about that, either."

"Is true. Hunted with wolves once. Never seen anyone hunt like that." He reached forwards and stroked Enhart's mane. "You're beautiful."

Enhart rolled his head back on his shoulders, looking straight up at the sky. He could see the first stars. Hans scratched under his chin and rubbed his chest. "You a tough little fighter," he said. He nodded at the riverbank. "We're approaching the village."

The first thing they saw was the dock. It was enormous, more a pier than a dock, with homes and shops built right on it. The buildings were small, seven-foot cubes with sloped roofs, cheek-by-jowl on the pilings. The dock continued into the grass, forming a roadway that led between treehouses, homes on stilts, with woven-grass roofs and plaited walls. Electric lanterns dangled from high posts, giving the whole of it an eerie glow. Otterfolk moved freely throughout, along with Wolf-folk, Bear-folk, Raccoon-folk, and a few others Enhart didn't recognize.

"Why are the houses so high up?" said Asmodan, looking up at the pier.

"Flood level," said Hans. "Water only floods that high once in a thousand years."

He docked the boat at the base of the pilings, and they disembarked and scaled the steps to the causeway. For a moment, they just listened to the sounds of singing and dancing, the smells of

food, the colors of the clothing. It was all a bit dazzling.

"Heh. You two get all glossy-eyed at the sight of the village, wait until you see the City," said Hans, chucking Enhart on the back. "Come. We'll get you rooms, something to eat."

"We should get to the Transport Station," said Asmodan absently.

Hans gave him an odd look. "Transport not come tonight," he said.

"Yeah, Asmodan, don't you remember? Hans said that the next transport isn't until tomorrow."

"Oh." Asmodan didn't look at either of them. "I must not have been listening."

"Come on. Rooms this way." Hans led the pair of them to one of the cubes and spoke rapidly to the proprietor. Enhart haggled for the rooms, and Hans led them up a short flight of stairs to a small box of a room overlooking the river.

"You two definitely from the DEEP forest," chuckled Hans. "That's all you got to carry." He draped a friendly arm around Enhart's shoulders. "I show you around, if you like."

"Do you do this for all the guests?" said Enhart, grinning.

"Naw. Just ferry," said Hans. "You guys, though, last guests of the day. An' I kind of like you." He beeped Enhart's nose. "Come. We get something to eat."

"I, uh..." Asmodan looked around. "I'll stay here. Try to get some rest. You should stay here, too. We have to catch the Transport tomorrow."

"No problem with the Transport," said Hans. "Short walk from here. Plenty of time for sleep."

"Oh, leave him be," said Enhart. "I want to see more of the village."

"All right. I buy you dinner. No haggling."

They chuckled to each other as they left, abandoning Asmodan in his room.

"Your friend?" said Hans, as they reached the pier's marketplace.

"My brother," said Enhart, grinning. "He's probably a little overwhelmed."

"First time out of his Range?"

"Well, for me, too, but I think I'm getting more out of it." He took Hans by the paw. "You mentioned food?"

"Of course!" said Hans, leading Enhart to one of the stalls. Again, he spoke so rapidly to the proprietor that he might have been speaking a different language, and the proprietor offered them a pair of long skewers with burned meat stuck to them.

"What did you do to this stuff?" said Enhart, not looking very enthusiastic.

"Just cooked it. Fire and meat are good together. That's a red sauce, too. Very good. Try it."

Gingerly, Enhart bit into his, and a look of wonder spread across his face. He devoured everything on the skewer. "Wow!" he said. "That's amazing!"

Hans gestured to the proprietor—twelve, it sounded like—and the Otterfolk at the stand passed them a decent sized platter in exchange for a small fistful of yellow coins. Hans collected it and a small brown jug from a shelf on the stand, and they went to eat at one of the tables.

"I see your eyes," said Hans. "Maybe I see into your soul a little bit. Long time I've been carrying travelers. I know people. You, you carry a massive, massive burden. Almost too big for one Wolf to carry. But you're so excited to be carrying it."

"I have..." Enhart licked his chops. "I have a challenge ahead of me. I'm excited to test my resources against that challenge. That's all."

"What sort of burden?"

Enhart searched his mind, wondering what was the right thing to say. If he told this pleasant, beautiful young Otterfolk that he'd been possessed by the spirits of four hundred alien explorers, that would probably end the relationship, and he was the most exciting thing Enhart's new courage had found to explore. Their friendship was doomed to be brief, and Enhart was eager to make of it what he could.

His passengers provided the advice that tipped the scales, and he gazed warmly at Hans, reached forwards, and took both his paws. Hans glanced down at them, then up at Enhart—and then his face cleared, and he relaxed, and said, "Oh."

For fifteen full minutes they sat there, as insects danced around the lantern and travelers made the most of shopping at the stalls, gazing into each other's eyes, briefly sharing the burden that, until now, Enhart had carried alone. When it was over, and Enhart's passengers returned safely to his soul, Hans reached a paw up and pressed it against his muzzle. A tiny spot of blood appeared on the back of his paw.

"They're... so beautiful," said Hans. "Now I know... why you do what you must do." He licked his chops. "That was wonderful, Wolf. That was the most wonderful thing I've ever seen. I envy you your burden."

Enhart grinned a little. "They're telling me now that sharing them has relieved some of the pressure on my system," he said. "No more nosebleeds tonight."

"I'm so glad." Hans cradled Enhart's face in a webbed paw. "You had so much pain before they came... but so many people who loved you. Has your brother really been so much of a task to endure all these years?"

"I don't know. I don't know what life would be like without him. Even if he weren't my brother, I'm still smaller, and slower, and weaker than anyone else in the Pack. They support me and care for me, but my biggest burden has always been my size."

"If it makes you feel better," said Hans, "next to Otterfolk, you're massive."

They laughed, and became close as they laughed, became like the family Enhart craved and Hans lacked. Insects danced around the lantern, and they talked of many things as they finished their dinner.

The bed was hellishly uncomfortable.

Asmodan lay down on it to sleep, bored out of his mind, but unable to withstand the explosive festival that was the pier. He

missed the soft, stretching cradle of his hammock. This flat slab—all right, well-padded, very soft flat slab—was going to wreck his posture.

He gave up, clambered out of bed, and shoved open the door. It creaked. He clattered down the steps and into the light, where people nodded as they passed, or grinned friendly grins, and he grinned back weakly, and tried to wave. He had no idea what qualified as etiquette in this place. Where in the world was Enhart? It was getting late. Some of the shops were already shuttering for the night, and a few of the homes were closed up tight.

Food, thought Asmodan. They'd mentioned getting dinner. He couldn't picture poor Hans hunting, but couldn't picture Enhart shopping. At any rate, they didn't seem to be on the pier.

He stopped at one of the stalls and gazed down at a fine, shining knife, with a carved handle and the sharpest blade Asmodan had ever seen. "Wow," he said, suddenly aware of the weight of the money in his belt.

"You like?" said the Otter-craftsman. "I was about to close up. If you like, we deal."

"I do like," said Asmodan. "Very much." A blade like that would be a Godsend back in the village—one of those manufactured blades that never rusted, never lost its edge.

"Two hundred," said the craftsman.

He stood there in dumb surprise as Asmodan reached into his money pouch and patiently counted out two hundred of the coins he felt in there. He was a bit surprised—it seemed to be a significant fraction of the total contents. The craftsman continued to stare at him as he poured out the coins onto the shelf. "Two hundred," he said.

"Very well, sir," said the craftsman. "Good choice." He opened the glass-fronted cabinet and removed the knife. "I'll throw in the sheath and belt for free."

"Really? Thank you," said Asmodan. He cinched the belt around his waist. He liked how the knife was balanced, how it felt there. He would throw away all his other knives when he got home, nasty bits of flint that they were. This was a REAL knife,

a civilized knife.

He continued down the stalls, peering in to see if any of them had Enhart tied up in the back, wondering where his brother had gotten to. Near a food stand on the land end of the pier, he picked up Enhart's scent. It was quite pleasant—Enhart had eaten well. And Hans, that cornflax-haired otter-folk, seemed to be with him. Good. Enhart couldn't find the toilet without a map and a torch, it was good that he had a guide.

He was a little surprised when the trails left the road and wound into the tall grass. Where were they going? The ground was spongy, and by now it was beyond full-dark and the market was closing up. The sky was full of stars.

For whatever reason, Asmodan chose to move silently. He knew the reason, and it haunted him, but he ignored it. Tall reeds gave way to fine, short grasses over hummocks and hillocks, and the roots of short, stumpy trees with broad leaves. Insects buzzed. An owl hooted.

Asmodan waded through marsh water that felt cold and unwelcome. The sounds that he heard were unmistakeable, but he still had to lower himself to the ground and creep along like a snake, had to get closer and see for himself.

He pushed aside the grasses. He was almost in the river now; a few more feet, and he'd plunge in. Cautiously, he crept along the edge of the river, trying to smell the water while he scanned the marshland for his brother and their guide.

He almost didn't recognize Enhart. The starlight and crescent moon made Enhart's russet fur golden, and his long mane shone smooth and white. He was sprawled out in the grass, with Hans atop him, and they were making love.

Everything in Asmodan's brain collided at once. Part of him wanted to stand and shout, and part of him wanted to creep back to the pier and die of shame. Part of him was surprised that Enhart had a lover, and most of him, an enormous, green, horrifying chunk of him, was aflame with jealousy, and it was this part that he most studiously ignored.

He watched Enhart at play, watched the Ottherfolk's face

bathed in moonlight and enraptured with pleasure. Wow, thought Asmodan, my brother's actually pretty good. At least with an Otterfolk. Otterfolk were pretty small.

But then Enhart and Hans rolled over in the grass, and it was Enhart's face in the moonlight, bathed in an expression that Asmodan had never used. Damn, thought Asmodan, the Otter ain't bad either.

He had no idea how long he watched, but their stamina was impressive. The moon was quite high by the time they finished, awash with sweat, cradled in each other's arms and golden in the starlight. Enhart was trembling. "Do..." he panted, "do you do... THAT... with all travelers?"

"Only ones whose courage and dedication I've fallen in love with," said Hans. "So you're the first."

"Surely there have been other courageous and dedicated travelers."

"But I have not fallen in love with them." Hans kissed Enhart and rubbed his pelt.

"You've given me a choice," said Enhart. "Stay here, or complete my mission."

"I urge you to complete it," said Hans. "I can help you with your burden but a short while. Just promise that when you return..." He cradled Enhart's cheek. "Return for me."

"I will." They kissed. "I will always return, and you will always be with me."

That was all Asmodan could bear. He scrambled off through the grass, and, once out of earshot, stood and ran back to the pier, back to the room, back into silence and darkness. And once he was there and the door was closed, he started to cry. He had no idea why.

He wanted to wait up for Enhart, but fatigue dictated its demands, and he obeyed them, falling heavily asleep. He dreamed that he was in Hans's boat, but it was in the middle of the river, and there were no oars or engine. The river was completely still. He tried to paddle his way to the opposite bank with his paws, but

the boat drifted against his scooping. When he turned to scoop the other way, the boat drifted back again.

When he awoke, it was still dark, with Enhart and Hans shuffling into the room. Asmodan sat up and turned on the tiny lamp, leaving them both blinking. "It's late," he said, looking at the moon. "There are only a few hours until dawn."

"I slept a little," said Enhart. "Hans has agreed to guide us to the Transport Station anyway. He'll rouse us."

"You already smell a little aroused," said Asmodan. He rubbed his eyes. "Stop looking like guilty children. I'm not angry. I am a little confused. You hardly know each other."

"Like that's ever stopped you," said Enhart, sitting down heavily on his bed. "The difference is that I actually love Hans, and care about him, and want to be with him." He cocked his head. "What's that?"

"What?"

"That." Enhart pointed at the knife. "That knife you picked up. You bought it at market?"

Asmodan looked at it. "Yeah, what of it? Our Master said that it's our money to spend, and this knife will save me a lot of time and effort."

"How much of our money did you spend?"

Asmodan shrugged. "Not much."

"How much?"

"Two hundred." He held up the money bag and shook it. "See, plenty left. No worries."

"Two HUNDRED?" squeaked Hans. "To whom did you pay so much?"

"I didn't get his name, just his knife," said Asmodan.

Enhart seized the bag and shook it. "A third of the money's gone!"

"What?" cried Hans.

Enhart showed Hans the money. "Is there still enough to get to the space station?"

"I don't know. Pour it out."

They poured it out and started counting frantically. Stacks of

coins grew around them on the floor. "How much is passage?" said Enhart.

"Transport is a hundred," said Hans. "Each. And there is no haggling with the Transport Station. The price offered is the price paid. I don't know of passage to the station, but it's very expensive." He stared at Asmodan. "You could have talked him down to half what you paid and it would still have been foolish. Your mission is too vital for foolish whims to bring about its failure."

"What do you know of our mission?" said Asmodan suspiciously.

"I have shared with Enhart the beings within his mind," said Hans, counting out another ten. "They deserve their freedom, and so does he."

"Is there any chance we can get the money back from the knife seller?" said Enhart.

"No, no chance. Even if we knew which stall he visited, it will be closed and the seller gone to bed, and he will not open until after the Transport has left." Hans dug into his pouch. "I return to you the twenty-five you paid me. I will also provide you with what funds I can spare. It will not replace what this fool has spent, but I pray it is enough."

Enhart looked hurt. "You don't need to do that."

"Take it. Keep it. You may need it. Especially with this fool handling your money."

Enhart gripped Hans's paw. "Thank you," he said.

"I'm proud to have contributed a small part to your adventure," said Hans. He kissed Enhart's forehead. "Come, let us finish counting."

"I need to urinate," said Enhart. "It's been a long evening with many drinks, but even I'm not so backwater as to believe that urinating in the woods would be a good idea."

"There's a toilet cubicle down the stairs and behind the hut," said Hans. "Pee in that."

"Thanks." Enhart got up and left, sparing a backwards, contemptuous glance at his brother.

"You are cruel to him," said Hans, continuing to count after the

door had closed.

"What? Cruel?"

"Yes. He would not speak of it, but when he shared his burden, he opened his mind to me. He does not see it as cruelty, but I would not long bear the treatment you show him."

"He's my little brother. He can hardly take care of himself."

"Then you are twice a fool, because your brother has come this far without your assistance and would be doing considerably better without you."

"You don't understand what it's like living in the forests," said Asmodan. "It's a rough life. If you can't take care of yourself, if you can't take care of a family, you have nothing. You're a burden instead of a contributor, and no Pack will suffer one."

"Your Pack suffers him. They enjoy suffering him. They care for him a great deal."

"They help him when he needs help, which is a lot." Asmodan knelt down and helped Hans count. "You don't know him like I do. You may be all ready to mate for life, but you've known him only a few hours, and I've been his brother for seventeen years. He's young, and immature, and inexperienced. If what you saw was in his mind, then surely you only saw his side of it."

"Perhaps," said the Otter-folk. "Still, there must be cause behind it. The burden he carries, the responsibility he's shouldered—he doesn't just have a paranoid complex. He truly does feel that you despise him."

Asmodan shook his head. His mane fell over his face. "I don't," he said. "He's my brother. I love him."

"So do I." Hans dropped another ten on the floor. "We're getting close."

Asmodan rested his paw on Hans's. "I don't want you to hate me," he said. "You obviously care so much for my brother, whatever the reason."

"Your brother has a name, which I have not heard you utter," said Hans, but his face softened. "Whether you know it or not, he is but a thing to you, an obstruction. If you are not careful, you will lose him."

"I can change," said Asmodan. He tightened his grip on Hans's paw. "I promise I can change. Tell me how."

Their muzzles were close now, and there was a single beat before Asmodan leaned forwards and kissed Hans. He had never kissed a male before, and it was a clumsy kiss, catching Hans by surprise, and Asmodan pressed their lips together, tasted Hans's tongue, cradling Hans's head in his paws—

Then he lay flat on his back among the piles of coins with a large whack across the back of his head and a vague sensation of being stunned. He found he had to catch his breath.

"Touch me not!" shouted Hans. "I was warned of you!"

Asmodan groaned. He sat up a little bit, wondering what in the world had happened. Could this little Otterfolk really have laid him out so flat? Asmodan was twice his mass.

"I saw in my lover's mind the truth of you, that you rob him of love by seducing those he loves away from him before their love can grow strong! You shall not have me, Savage, you shall keep your barbarian love to yourself!"

"I..." Asmodan coughed. "It was just an impulse," he said, frightened of himself and of Hans. "I'm sorry. I don't know why—"

"All his life, you have robbed of Enhart everything that is beautiful and good! You shall not have this! You have stolen from him every glory he may have once enjoyed. You have held him back to glorify yourself, to make yourself more beautiful as he withered away in your light!"

He stopped, and looked up. Asmodan followed his gaze, rolling over in the coins and seeing Enhart framed in the door, his face a mask of shock and betrayal.

"I had a little trouble finding the bathroom," he said softly, a tear running down his face.

"Enhart," said Asmodan, struggling to stand, coins tinkling from his fur.

"I can't even have this," said Enhart. "I can't even have my burden, my challenge. You have to sabotage everything wonderful that comes from it."

"He shall not have me, lover," said Hans. "Come with me. We'll

sleep elsewhere."

Enhart licked his chops, looking around the room. "Help me collect the money," he said. "Don't let Asmodan alone with the only resource I have left to finish my mission."

"Enhart, I'm sorry," said Asmodan. "I'm not—I didn't—"

"I know you didn't," said Enhart, as they scooped up coins and shoveled them into the pouch. "But you've betrayed my mission and stolen from me quite enough for one quest." He shouldered the pouch. "Maybe you should just go home. I can travel from here. I'll be all right."

"Come," said Hans, putting an arm around him. Together, they left the cabin. Asmodan sat alone in the dark long after they'd left.

Dawn was just starting to break when Asmodan finally left the room. Enhart had not returned, and Asmodan had no idea whether to try to find him, or just go home. He hadn't deliberately betrayed his brother, but betray him he had, and he couldn't help but wonder whether Hans was right. Whether it made Asmodan nervous to see Enhart elevated to the role of master of his own fate. How much of Enhart's perceived weakness was Asmodan's fault? How many lovers had Asmodan stolen? How many hunts? How many adventures?

Enhart and Hans sat on a bench on the pier, waiting for him. Enhart held a bloody cloth to his muzzle. He took it away. "We weren't sure whether you'd come," he said.

"I thought you wanted me to go home," said Asmodan dully. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I think it stopped."

"I talked Enhart into letting you follow him," said Hans. "Whatever bad blood runs between you is for you two to deal with. I would not want you to part on bad terms. What follows for Enhart is dangerous. He has, at best, a couple of days before he succumbs to the invasion of his mind."

"Is there enough money?" said Asmodan. He felt the weight of the knife at his hip, and despised it, but couldn't bring himself to

discard it.

"Enough for the Transport," said Hans. He stood up, and Enhart stood with him. "I take you there."

They followed Hans through the village and down the road. They weren't the only ones on the road now. Other travelers had rousted to catch the Transport, and many were guided by Otterfolk.

"I didn't betray you," said Asmodan softly. "I only wanted... You're having the adventure, not me. You're bearing the burden. You're carrying the Warm. I can't stop thinking..." He sniffed. "It should have been me, shouldering the risk. Not you."

"Taking the glory, you mean?" said Enhart. "There is no glory in this, Asmodan. If you knew the Warm, you would know this."

"Then let me know the Warm," said Asmodan. "Let me bear at least some of your burden."

Enhart looked up at him. Hans looked from one to the other, and shrugged. "Have we time?" said Enhart.

"Oh, certains," said Hans. "Early yet."

Enhart reached out. "Give me your paw."

Asmodan took hold of Enhart's paw nervously. His pad was clammy and soft. Enhart closed his eyes, and a rush of energy flooded into Asmodan's mind.

Stars sparkled before his eyes, and he sank to one knee. He inhaled sharply, which made him sneeze blood. His muzzle was bleeding. He shook from head to toe. The burden was heavy. Far too heavy. There was no room for it in his mind, no way to rearrange his mental furniture for his guests, who were horrified at hurting him, and fled back along the route they took, back into Enhart.

Asmodan shook all over. His body was soaked with sweat, and blood striped his face and chest. "How do you do it?" he whispered. "How do you hold them all?"

"Come on," said Enhart, helping Asmodan to his feet.

"I saw," said Asmodan. "I saw the Warm, everything they are, in those few seconds. I saw... why you do this." He looked at Enhart in awe. "You're my brother, my very flesh, and I never knew you,"

he whispered. "I thought I had the strength, the courage... but it's you."

Tears tracked his face. Enhart's strength and courage had a less-than-noble source. It was the burden of having a brother like Asmodan and still growing strong and healthy that made Enhart brave. Burdened by a brother like Asmodan, the Warm were light and small to carry.

"They're sorry they hurt you," said Enhart. "They're really afraid, and I'm afraid with them."

"I'll be all right," said Asmodan. His muzzle was still bleeding, but Enhart's had stopped. Hans wordlessly offered him a cloth, and he cleaned himself up a bit.

I'm a monster, he thought. I'm a beast who's eaten Enhart's soul, a little each day.

The Transport Station was a small wooden hut on the edge of the marsh. The golden lines of the track stretched off in the distance. Enhart imagined he could see the City in the heat haze, but it might have been his imagination.

The ticket machine, a flat beige box with rust on the sides and a vine growing out of the back, listed helplessly on the decrepit platform. Travelers lined up to pour their money in the top, punch palm-sized buttons, and receive their boarding passes. "Is simple," said Hans. "Buy ticket. I watch. If goes wrong, I help."

Enhart nodded. He couldn't read the writing on the front of the machine, so Hans read it for him. "Pour money in."

"How much?"

"Much as you want. Machine give back rest of money."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure. In fact, pour in all money."

Enhart looked at him. "We still need to get to the space station!"

"Pour all money. No problems. It give money back."

Enhart emptied the bag into the top of the machine. A panel lit up with a zero next to it and more words that Enhart couldn't read.

"Press green panel for two tickets," said Hans, and Enhart did.

The machine made a lot of chickering noises, and spat out two pieces of beige paper with more words all over them. It might have been epic poetry for all Enhart knew.

"You take one. You take other. Press red button for money back," said Hans.

Enhart did, holding his bag under the ticket dispenser in anticipation of a landslide of coins. Instead, the machine started chickering again, and spat out a long blue sheet of paper with a black strip on the back.

"What's this?" said Enhart, his toes going cold.

"Is money. Like you wanted."

"Excuse me," said the traveler behind them, an impatient Raccoon-folk with painted fur. "May I please go?"

Enhart stepped aside, still feeling sick. "All our money went into this?"

"This IS money," said Hans. "Paper money, like they use in the city. City money. Is blue, that means 'thousand.' Number here says how many thousand, number here says how much else. Is over two thousand. Lighter to carry, no?"

"You're sure they'll take this?" said Enhart, watching the Raccoon-folk pour a sackload of change into the top of the machine and collect a ticket and a red scrap of paper.

"Paper money not last in back of beyond," said Hans. "Coin last. So, Tribes use coin. But coin small. Heavy. Get lost easy. In city, use paper."

"You've never been on a train before, have you?" said the Raccoon-folk. "Never used paper money?"

Enhart fixed him with a steel glare. "True, but I wasn't born yesterday."

Something in that glare made the Raccoon-folk back off before he went into whatever pitch he planned to make. He shrank to the back of the crowd and waited for the Transport.

"This is it," said Hans. "I must go. Have duties."

"I understand," said Enhart. He cupped Hans's face in his paw. "Love you."

"Promise to return for me?" said Hans.

"When I do return," said Enhart, "it'll be only for you." They embraced, and kissed, and Asmodan studied his feet as they hung onto each other. A faint and distant roar and a bright red light indicated the approach of the Transport.

A thud of displaced air, and the transport cylinder was in front of them. Enhart wondered how anything could brake so fast without catapulting the passengers into the next time-zone, but if he failed to understand the vagaries of a ticket machine, he despaired of understanding the caprices of a Transport Shuttle.

A gangplank extended. "Good morning," said a soft, robotic voice. "Transport Cylinder 19913. Welcome aboard Deprainis Transport Lines. Please make yourselves comfortable. Our arrival in Center City is scheduled for 1915, with stops in Nexus, Analis, Enfor, Obliosis, and the Spaceport. Please take care to read the information card in the back of the seat in front of you. Entertainment will be provided, and refreshments are available in the dining cabin. On behalf of the Deprainis Transport Corporation, thank you for riding with Deprainis Transport Lines."

"Go on board," said Hans. "Don't be afraid. Is safe." He kissed Enhart, and then, to Asmodan's surprise, pecked Asmodan on the cheek as well. "Go. Finish your mission. Take care of yourselves."

"I love you," said Enhart helplessly.

"I love you. Go."

Gingerly, they boarded the shuttle. The outside had been silver, but the inside was red velvet, large, soft chairs side by side, window and aisle seats and luggage compartments. There was much noise of everyone trying to get settled, and Enhart and Asmodan just stood there like a couple of big oafs.

"Would you like some help finding your seats, sir?" said a contralto, androgynous voice, and Asmodan turned and nearly jumped out of his skin. He had never seen a robot before, and the round face, the slim legs, the almost-correct body were almost pathologically creepy. Why try to get them to look so lifelike if that was as far as they could take it?

Numbly, Asmodan showed the robot their tickets. "This way, sirs," said the robot, pacing the corridor and heading into the next cabin. "Here are your seats. Aisle and window. Please read the safety card, which is stored for your convenience in the pouch in the back of the seat in front of you."

Enhart and Asmodan sat down, with Enhart taking the aisle seat. He pulled the card and looked at it. More squiggles. "I can't read," he said, helplessly.

Asmodan squinted at it, wondering whether he was holding it upside down. "I wonder what it says."

"Master would know," said Enhart. "Master can read, a little." He looked around, wondering what to do, and saw a button on the armrest with a picture of the robot on it. He pushed it, and the robot—probably the same one, more likely a different one, appeared at his side. "Yes, sir?"

Enhart held up the card. "What does this say?"

The robot took the card. Rather than judging Enhart for his illiteracy, it simply started to read: "Welcome aboard Transport Cylinder 19913. This is a Type Seven Magnetic Transport Cylinder. It travels at a cruising speed of two hundred and fifty miles per hour and a top speed of four hundred miles per hour. For the safety of our passengers, we ask that they only leave their seats when necessary or to visit our lounge, and that they keep their seat belts fastened at all times while in their seats. All carry-on luggage must be stored either in the overhead bins or in the space under your seat. Emergency exits are located to the front and rear of the cylinder, as well as to either side in each cabin. In the event of an emergency, sudden braking may occur. Emergency braking is often out of sync with our anti-inertial field and may come without warning. Slight dizziness or loss of equilibrium may result. Medical units are available for emergencies at the front and rear of the cylinder. In the event of a medical emergency, summon one of our robotic attendants and it will assist you. Each cabin is equipped with sanitary facilities. Please keep these facilities clean. Thank you for using Deprainis Transport. Your needs are important to us."

It said all this without drawing breath, leaving Asmodan and Enhart speechless. They'd barely understood a word of it, but didn't want to compound things by asking the poor robot to repeat any of it. "Will there be anything else?" it finished.

"When are we leaving?" said Asmodan.

In reply, the door thumped shut. "Ah," said Asmodan. The car rocked a little, and shot like a bullet down the line.

Asmodan watched the landscape streak by. "Man," he said. "This thing can scoot." He looked at Enhart. "You all right?"

"Tired," said Enhart. He wasn't bleeding, but he did have a red streak on the back of his hand. "The burden is getting heavy."

"It won't be too long," said Asmodan. "You can release it."

In response, Enhart got up and padded to the lavatory. He closed the door and locked it.

Enhart looked at his face in the mirror. Blood bubbled from his muzzle and drooled into the steel sink. He pressed the back of his paw to it, and it simply ran around his paw and down his arm. He tilted forwards, let his muzzle drain, then pinched it shut. He could taste it in the back of his throat.

I'm dying, he thought.

Not immediately, of course, and not from this, but the reality of it—that the Warm were killing him—sank into him. He knew that thinking it was hurting them, he could feel their wet horror at the damage they were doing to him, and wanted to shield them from it.

Of course, it was more than a concern for their fellow traveler that had the Warm worried. If anything happened to Enhart, who was their Transport Cylinder, their vehicle, they would die too, as surely as Enhart would die if anything happened to the Transport Cylinder.

The blood slowed to a steady drip, but was still a steady drip. The Cylinder rocked gently. Come on, he thought, come on, stop bleeding. You can do it, you've done it before, it gets a little harder each time but you can still do it.

"I'll be all right," he said, partly to himself and partly to the

Warm. "I can do this." In response, he sneezed, and his face in the mirror disappeared under a rain of blood. Gritting his teeth, he pulled a fistful of paper towels out of the cabinet and tried to clean it up. That only made it worse. There was blood on the mirror, blood on the sink, blood on the floor, blood on his chest and on his arms. He pinched his muzzle shut and tilted his head back and swore that he wouldn't check until he was SURE he'd put a stop to it.

When the bleeding stopped, he carefully wiped down all the blood he saw sparkling on the shining surfaces of the lavatory. He felt like a time bomb. When the blood came now, it was no warning trickle. What if he started bleeding in his seat? What if he left a murder trail to the lavatory while he tried to stem the flow? What if he bled until he fainted? The Warm swore to help as much as they could, but how much could they help? Had they been able to help this time? Was that why Enhart was no longer bleeding?

With the bathroom shining again, Enhart realized that his fatigue wasn't just a result of blood loss. He'd had little sleep last night. Hans, he thought. Those paws. All over him.

He sat down on the toilet lid and rested his head back on the towel roll. Yes, the bleeding had stopped. Seemed to be stanched for a while, this time. The Warm would hold back the flow. Hans. His golden hair, his shining fur, the way he moved when he swam. The way he felt against him. The things Hans had shown him. Enhart was not an experienced Wolf. He had been helpless. He'd wanted to learn. Hans was the first male he'd pursued, but Enhart knew that that had had little to do with winning his heart. Enhart had won because Asmodan had been nowhere in sight when they had seduced each other.

Muscles moved between his legs and he moaned, licking his chops and tasting salt. This was not proper civilized behavior, of course, he would have to suppress the sounds of his pleasure, but he was still forest folk, and he still let it sweep over him. He growled very softly, his only concession to sound, and then collapsed in a sweaty mess, out of breath.

He looked at himself in the mirror. The blood had not returned, which was good, but he had to clean himself off again. All he had to bathe in was the sink, but he bathed nevertheless, dried himself as best as he could with wads of towels, slicked back his mane, and erased all evidence of his lust as easily as he had erased all evidence of his injuries.

Thank you again, Hans, he thought, feeling warm and glowing, ready with the strength to harness the deterioration of his body. He returned to his seat, surrendering the lavatory following a record-breaking half-hour, but it was still early in the ride and no one needed it yet.

He sat back down and strapped himself in, and Asmodan, who had been gazing out the window all this time, glanced at him. "You were gone a long time." He sniffed. "You smell like blood."

"The muzzle thing started up again," said Enhart. "I wanted to get cleaned up."

Asmodan tilted his head. "That's not all." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Did you pleasure yourself in the lavatory?"

Enhart nodded, eyes closed. He looked serene.

"Isn't that, like, illegal in the civilized world?" said Asmodan uncertainly. "Couldn't you have restrained yourself?"

Not if I wanted to stop bleeding for a while, thought Enhart. Besides, he'd been in the most private part of the cylinder. Surely they had no legal right to spy on him in THERE.

"I'm tired," said Enhart. "I'm going to sleep." He tilted his head back, in case the blood started again, and faded off. Asmodan looked at him for a while, then went back to staring out the window.

The ride remained uneventful, but Asmodan was restless. A small screen in the back of the seat in front of him provided "entertainment," and he switched it on, curious, and clamped the headset over his ears. But while the moving pictures fascinated him, he couldn't follow the narrative. He went through a few channel selections like that, always briefly amused by the tiny people scampering around in front of him, but his amusement was short-lived

when the initial novelty wore off and he realized that he had no idea what the little people were doing.

He envied Enhart's ability to relax so completely. The rocking of the car was very gentle, and it would be easy for Asmodan to imagine that they weren't moving at all, but he couldn't dissuade his mind of it.

Hunger drove him from his seat eventually, and he crept over his brother and padded to the dining cabin at the back of the car. Briefly, he wondered how he would pay for food when Enhart was sitting on all their money, until he noticed that no money was changing hands. Instead, plain white boxes emerged from a vast machine in the back of the cabin, and the diners sat at narrow tables next to the transport's huge observation windows and tore them open.

All right, Asmodan, open your eyes and watch, he thought, getting in line. The queue moved quickly, and Asmodan faced the machine.

He looked over the array of paw-sized buttons unenthusiastically. There was a stylized "C" logo near the top, and then four rows of large buttons graced with words that he couldn't read. Each choice was helpfully labeled with a large picture—nonliterates did ride these trains—but the pictures didn't look like any food Asmodan had ever seen. He wasn't expecting a rabbit to drop out of the slot, fat and lifeless, but the choices at hand were unedifying.

He knew that the Civilized processed the hell out of their meals. The more steps between the fields and the dinner table, the more they liked it. By the time one reached the level of high-tech automatic fast food, the result looked and smelled like no food any Tribesman would touch—

"Oi, Savage," said a Fox-folk behind him. "Wanna hit the button this week? I'm starvin'."

"Shut up, punk," said the Dog-folk behind him, swatting him on the back of the head.

Feeling stupid and pressured, Asmodan hit a button that had a picture of something that looked a little bit like a pheasant's leg on

it. The machine gave a single beep and dropped one of the ubiquitous white boxes from the slot. Asmodan reached down and picked it up, and almost dropped it. It was HOT.

"You're a punk," said the Fox.

"And you're a schtatin' bigot," said the Dog. "Leave the guy alone."

"Yeah, well, schtat you, too," snapped the Fox. As Asmodan walked past them with his prize, he held out and arm and rested it lightly against the Fox's chest, a simple gesture that said "Don't" for all to see. He chose an empty table and stared fixedly out the window, then tore open the side of the box and slid out a plastic tray.

The food inside the box looked worse than the food in the pictures. At least there, the result looked clean and bright and friendly. Asmodan looked down at a squashed... thing. He wrinkled his muzzle, tore off the plastic top, picked up a chicken wing with his paw, and bit into it with a sharp crack of bone.

The Dog passed by, and put some kind of capsule on the table. "You forgot this," he said, and continued on. Asmodan looked at it, curiously, then picked it up and sniffed it, then put it back down. It didn't smell like anything but a chunk of metal, though it was hollow and sloshed inside when he moved it. He put it back down.

He picked up a spoon to deal with some of the squishier items on the tray in front of him, and was shoveling something into his mouth fast enough to avoid having to taste it when, to his surprise, Enhart sat down next to him with yet another white box. Expertly, he zipped it open, slid out the tray, and peeled off the wrapping as if he'd done it all his life. He put another metal capsule on the table, picked up a fork and a plastic knife, and started baling at his meal. Apart from the table manners, he looked as if he'd done it all his life. When the plate was half empty, he slipped a claw into a ring on the top of the capsule, pulled it away with a popping sound, and drank whatever was inside. He made a face. "Too sweet," he muttered.

"How do you know how to do that?"

Enhart grunted. "Robot told me," he said. "We're not the first savages on one of their transports. Had a whole list of instructions. I don't see why they don't just EAT their food. It's dead; how much more do they have to do to it?"

Asmodan didn't answer. Enhart finished his food, then lifted the tray to his face and licked it clean. He opened a slot at the end of the table that Asmodan hadn't noticed, and dropped the carcass in. Asmodan looked at his own tray, and dropped it into the same slot without finishing it. When Enhart closed the slot, there was a faint wooshing sound and a very, very distant smell of burning. When Asmodan peered into the slot after the tray, he saw that it had disappeared.

"Are YOU all right?" he said. "You're not going to..." He mimed something unpleasant with his muzzle.

"I'm safe," said Enhart. "For a while. We can't let them stop us now—the only cure for my condition is to get to the satellite. If we're diverted to a hospital, there's no hope for any of us." He tapped his forehead. "So I have to hold it together."

For a moment, Asmodan was aware of how selfishly he'd viewed this journey for both of them. For the first time, he confronted the idea of losing his brother to this madness, and the idea horrified him. He buried it deep in the back of his mind. A life without Enhart. He hadn't seriously thought Enhart would stay with Hans, nor had he entertained the possibility that this journey was killing him. The idea slipped away, to a place where he didn't have to look at it. He wasn't equal to facing it. He was a trembling coward before it.

For a while, he just watched outside the observation window as the landscape roared past. He tapped the thick plastic and pointed. "Look," he said. "The City."

Enhart looked out the window and squinted. "I can't see much. The glass is too thick."

"You can see the bigger buildings already. We must be getting close. And look, we're reducing speed."

Enhart looked out and did see a few buildings—buildings the size of mountains, balanced precariously, a mile high. He almost

imagined that he could see them swaying in the wind.

"It's a jungle," he said. "Another jungle, just like ours. A different jungle, but still another jungle."

The buildings loomed ominously out of the declining dusk, growing beyond tall to truly ridiculous heights. They grew until it seemed they could grow no more, and still the transport approached. And then there was a rush of darkness and a hollow sound. "We're underground," said Enhart, amazed, looking all around. "Come, we must return to our seats. The Transport will be stopping soon."

They left the dining car and went back to their seats, and fastened themselves in. For another half hour, the tunnel whipped past, its joists and lamps slowing considerably. The transport rocked slightly, then seemed to nose downwards.

"Attention, passengers: the Deprainis Transport Company would like to welcome you to Central City, the fourth-largest metropolis on the planet." It was the tannoy again. "Central City boasts a population of eighty million people, including a population of some twenty million non-native sentient life forms. While in Central City, enjoy a visit to Top of the World, fine wines and dining at the top of the tallest building on the planet, the Central Spire, at five thousand, six hundred and forty meters. Each of our Transport Stations is fully integrated with the Central City Transportation Network, so those of you transferring to the transport to Acin City should disembark at Nexus Station and take the Mauve Line to the A-Station. The cost of your transfer is included in the cost of your Deprainis Travel Voucher. Those of you transferring to the Space Station Line must buy your ticket to the suborbital platform at the Space Station, as Deprainis does not offer service to the Satellites. Please wait until the Transport Capsule has come to a complete stop before unbuckling your seat belt, as braking may result in brief loss of equilibrium. On behalf of the Deprainis Transport family, thank you for taking Deprainis Transports."

Enhart and Asmodan exchanged glances. "Did you understand a word of that?" said Asmodan.

Enhart nodded. "I think so. I think the Warm are helping me understand, a little. We're getting closer."

Then the transport nosed down even more sharply. Had Asmodan and Enhart been standing, they would have gone tumbling. The angle seemed impossible. And then, miraculously, they leveled out. The front of the capsule nosed up, there was a hiss—and the door popped open.

"Nexus Point," said the tannoy.

Asmodan jumped, and Enhart gripped his arm. "We've stopped," he said. "It's all right. What you felt was just the braking thrusters. Everything's fine."

All around them, people stood up and gathered their luggage, shuffling wearily towards the gangplank with the blank expressions of the well-traveled. Asmodan made as if to stand up, but Enhart shook his head a little. "It's not our stop," he said. Asmodan watched tensely as most of the passengers shuffled out.

They were stopped for about ten minutes, then the door whined closed, and the walls outside started to move again. The transport rolled along for no more than five minutes, never picking up much speed, before it nosed up and the gangplank opened again.

"Analis and Tenderan," said the announcer.

Asmodan looked at Enhart, who shook his head. "Wait until they announce 'Space Port' on the speakers," he said.

"Wouldn't it be better to get off before the station? If we miss it, we can follow the lines and walk to it."

"The lines travel underground and are off limits to walking," said Enhart, "and the stations are miles apart. I don't fancy blundering around a tunnel for hours. We need to get to the station in a few hours."

"All right," said Asmodan, but he still looked antsey as the transport ticked off its stops. At each stop, more people got off, until all that was left was Asmodan, Enhart, and a sleeping Ferret-folk in the back.

"Did we miss our stop?" said Asmodan, trying not to whine.

"Will you relax?"

"I can't! I don't see how you can be so calm—you've never been

to the City either!"

"I don't have to have been. The City isn't some vast monster that's going to swallow us whole. It's just a place. It's a place we don't understand, that's all."

The Transport rocked its way through another half-dozen stops, and Asmodan was looking faintly ill as the speakers ran down a checklist. It seemed like a thousand years before the speakers announced, "Last stop. Space Port. Capsule will be decommissioned for refueling and cleaning. Thank you for traveling Deprainis."

"That's us," said Enhart, standing up, and Asmodan stood up as well, nearly banging his head on the overhead luggage rack. The sleeping passenger in the back woke up as soon as "Space Station" was announced, hauled down an obscenely large carry-on, and ambled out of the capsule. Asmodan and Enhart followed him, a little uncertainly, into a cave that was bigger than their town.

They looked way up at the arched ceiling high over their heads, and then all around at the great masses of people—and aliens—working their way through the largest spaceport on the planet. A wobbling mass of tentacles waddled past. Tall, tall aliens with absurdly long necks checked travel papers anxiously.

"What do we do now?" said Asmodan, a little helplessly.

"We need passage to the Space Station," said Enhart. "We have to buy Shuttle tickets. Look for a ticket kiosk, like the one back at the Transport Station."

If there were ticket kiosks in the Space Port, there were none that looked like the ones at the Transport Station. The place looked like a mess. People moved back and forth with so little regard for where they were going, totally absorbed in their own problems. Signs that the two travelers couldn't read hung next to clocks that they couldn't read, and schedules that they didn't understand showed place names that they didn't know next to times that they didn't understand. It was a jumble of advertising, information, and people, and there was a maddening, frantic edge to it.

"Over there," said Enhart, pointing to some distant object lost

in the haze. "Come on."

Uncertain to the point of panic, Asmodan trailed after his brother. They stood at the end of a short line, and reached the front of it to confront a machine far more baffling than any they had yet encountered.

Enhart cleared his throat. "Passage for two, to the Space Station."

Asmodan glanced at him, but the machine went to work. Lights blinked, and Enhart started feeding it money. A lot of money. Numbers counted, and Asmodan held his breath, wondering if his impulse purchase would derail their journey here. Or, perhaps, they'd only have enough money for one ticket, and Enhart would continue on, alone, abandoning Asmodan to this cavernous, terrifying environment...

The machine pondered the vast amount of cash given to it, and then spat out two long, heavy sheets of cardboard and a few dozen silver coins. That was all that remained of their Master's great treasure. He must have truly believed in Enhart to have entrusted him with so much, knowing that Enhart would return with so little.

"I can't read this," said Asmodan, staring down at the ticket. "I don't understand it. Where do we go next?"

"You don't have to read it." Enhart put his thumb over a small box in the upper right hand corner of the ticket—and the cardboard spoke.

"Space Station ticket. Purchased at—Kiosk 104. Your flight leaves—Gate Five, in two—hours. Follow the—Red line. You are—seven hundred feet from your destination." The tone of the tinny voice changed, and the ticket suddenly announced, "With over an hour to go before your flight, you have plenty of time to get through the Security and Health Checkpoints. So why not stop off for dinner at Cully's, located just five hundred feet from your position along the Red Line? Get a Full Value Meal for just under Three, or five point five credits. Cully's—the place to stop for people on the go, go, go!"

They stared, bemused, at the ticket, then looked around—and

saw a red line painted on the floor. Obeying the ticket, they followed it, like trackers following a scent. They did pass a restaurant with the same stylized "C" as on the machine in the Transport, and made faces when they realized what the advertisement was trying to sell them.

They were approaching the security checkpoint when Enhart wrinkled his muzzle, and suddenly clapped his paw to his nose. His eyes went wide.

"What's happening?" said Asmodan, taking his arm. "Dark Forest, are you bleeding again?" he hissed.

Enhart looked around. "Sanitation cubicle," he said, pointing at a picture of a lavatory next to a door. Blood dripped off his elbow, and they lit out across the terminal to the door and slammed it shut behind them.

Enhart took his paw away from his muzzle while leaning over the sink, and a quarter-cup of blood washed over his arm and down the drain. He took a deep, heaving breath. The bleeding was horrific. He looked as if he'd slit his wrist. He let out a low growl, scrunched up his face, and squeezed his muzzle shut.

"What's wrong?" said Asmodan. "What is it? Can I help?"

Enhart shook his head. His heavy breathing was hitching now, as if he was about to sob. "Lock the door," he whispered.

Asmodan twisted the latch above the door handle and heard a bolt slide home. "You need help," he said. "I must get help."

"No!" Enhart grabbed his arm so tightly that it hurt. "Asmodan, you heard the ticket voice. There's a health checkpoint. I can't get on a shuttle looking and smelling like this."

"Can you stop it?" said Asmodan, very uncertainly.

"Give me time," hissed Enhart. "Just do that. Let me have time."

His shoulders heaved as a fierce effort crossed his face, but the bleeding didn't slow. He clapped both paws over his muzzle and squeezed it as if trying to crush it, but each time he let it open again, more blood washed over his paws. His muzzle was slick with it back to the eyes.

Asmodan put an arm around his brother's shoulder. "Come on," he said. "Come on. You can do it. I believe in you, Enhart. You can do it."

Enhart tilted his head up. Blood streamed from his muzzle and down his neck. His mouth was full of it, and it edged his teeth—unable to escape his muzzle, it had found another route. Asmodan took Enhart's bloody paw and held it. "Come on," he said. "Give them to me. Just for a moment. Give me the Warm."

"You can't withstand the Warm," hissed Enhart, blood drooling from his chin.

"It doesn't matter now. You can't withstand them much longer either. Let me have them. For as long as I can bear, let me have them."

"Can't," said Enhart. "Won't."

"You have to get on that shuttle. Time's running out and you're no good to anyone dead, least of all your passengers. Open yourself to me, Enhart. Trust me. I trust you."

Enhart stared at his splattered face in the mirror, awash with blood, two wild eyes rolling in sparkling red. He gripped Asmodan's paw, and, for just a moment, the full force of the Warm poured into his brother.

Asmodan staggered. His whole body trembled. He was wracked with pain, physical and emotional, and his muzzle started bleeding immediately. He didn't have the strength to clamp it shut as Enhart had done. He staggered backwards, against the wall, leaving a bloody pawprint.

Then a wet paw closed around his own, and the pressure eased. It felt like forever before Asmodan was free of it entirely, but free he was, and without the burden of the Warm, he was shaky but healthy.

Enhart looked as if someone had dumped a bowl of blood over his face, but he smiled at Asmodan and led him to the sink. Carefully, they cleaned up themselves and each other, pointing out where blood still hid in places where another might spot it. They washed the sinks and the mirrors and the floor, and Asmodan erased the pawprint from the wall. They were both shaky and

pained, and Enhart looked very, very weak.

"Do you think you can get through a health checkpoint?" said Asmodan faintly.

"I hope so. The Warm are going to try to lie to the machines. To dismiss my weakness as the nerves of a first-time traveler. Our fate lies with them."

"Then let's go. We've camped out here for an hour."

They emerged from the bathroom, recovering slowly and walking carefully. Asmodan knew that Enhart wouldn't let him share the Warm a third time. He wasn't sure he could bear them, but at this point he would have withstood anything to help his brother.

By the time they got to the checkpoints, Enhart was much recovered, though Asmodan still felt a little wobbly. Security didn't plan to spend too much time on a couple of savages with loincloths and leather vests, but the expensive knife was confiscated over Asmodan's vocal protests. "Hey," he said to the security guard. "That's mine."

"Blades are among the list of prohibited items. If it's valuable, provide an address and the cost of postage and we'll mail it to you."

Enhart and Asmodan exchanged glances. They didn't have an address, or even get any mail. Inspiration struck. "Send it to Hans," said Enhart.

"What's HIS address?" said Asmodan.

"The village. Next to the river. You know. Near the Transport Station."

"I'm afraid that won't do as an address, sir," said the guard, grinning faintly.

"Can I pick it up here when I get back?" said Asmodan, his heart sinking.

"I'm afraid not. We can't store personal items for you. It must either be mailed to an appropriate address at the passenger's expense or put up for auction." The guard tilted his head. "What was the number of your transport capsule?"

"19913," said Enhart immediately.

"Deprainis Line?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your clothes look Western. Are you from the Far Western Continental tribes?"

Enhart and Asmodan looked at each other. They had no idea what these Civilized people called their Tribe.

"A place where a Transport Station sits next to a river on the Deprainis Transport Line." The Guard turned around and consulted a wall monitor. "I'm getting four different hits. How long was your trip?"

"Eleven hours," said Enhart.

The Guard pointed at a spot on the map. "Then that was your embarkation point. Shall I send it to the post office at that Transport Station, with an alert for a man named 'Hans'?"

"Yes, thank you," said Asmodan with relief. "He's Otterfolk."

"No problem," said the Guard. "You two have a nice trip, now."

The Health Scan was a row of smart, white cubicles just beyond Security. "Please step into the cubicle before you," said a robotic voice. They looked at each other, then tried to cram into the same cubicle. "One at a time," instructed the voice. "More than one in a cubicle will give a false reading."

Reluctantly, they took separate cubicles, disappearing from each other's sight for the first time since the Transport.

"Please remove all articles of clothing."

Enhart stripped off his vest and loincloth and put them on a high shelf. The place had a strange, lemony smell to it.

"Stand with your legs apart and your arms stretched out."

Enhart assumed the curious position. It was warm and strange in the little room, and lights played over his fur. This was it, he thought. If a health scan would detect the Warm, now would be the time.

"Stand by for full decontamination."

The lights switched off. Enhart had just noticed the list of instructions on the wall—his eyes tended to slide over print, since he couldn't read it—and one of the images, the third one down, showed a figure in the very position he was standing in, with what looked like rain—

Water drenched over him. No, not water. It was slick, like very thin oil. It beat down over his fur. It ran into his eyes, but didn't sting. It was clearly the source of the faint lemony smell, and Enhart shook out his long hair and took his beating like a man. In the next cubicle over, he heard Asmodan roar with surprise. He tried not to laugh, and spat a spray of water. This "health scan" wasn't just examining him, it was restoring him a little, making sure he was fit for space travel. He ran his paws over his face and chest, relishing the slick feeling.

The stuff tasted bitter, so he swallowed none. He scrubbed himself down, washing away the rank travel smell. The oil started to go all foamy, rising from his fur in thick waves. The Warm tapped into his pleasure and gave him power and courage. He looked like he was covered with snow. He shook down, but it did little good, so he shook down again.

The spray switched to what smelled like plain water, hosing him down, leaving him slick and sleek. His skin tingled. His tongue lolled. He had no idea what kind of parasites or diseases a Tribesman might bring from his home in the boondocks, but he felt sure that they were all eradicated. He did a quick head count of the Warm, noting that, though weak, the spray had partially restored their strength as well.

There was a bright flash of light, and Enhart was dry and soft. His long mane was still a little damp, still stringy in the back, but he'd never been cleaner. He felt that the experience had bought him a little time, which was good.

He'd lied to Asmodan about how much time he had left.

Dry and wearing paper one-piece coveralls, carrying their clothes in an air-sealed plastic bag, they continued along the line. No one stopped them, so they must have somehow passed the health scan. Asmodan sniffed his paws. "I smell good," he said.

"Don't get too used to it," said Enhart. "I imagine it'll have long since worn off by the time you get back home."

They followed the red line corridor until they reached a vast open space, a huge departure lounge with hundreds of people

lined up and waiting to board a big, huge, huge, big spacecraft.

The ship was long, and thick around the middle, and had guidance fins and looked a bit like a dart, but in its sheer size, it didn't look like a vehicle so much as a big building with rockets. At least three quarters of that length was fuel spheres, with a massive cabin in the front.

The line wound quickly, and in less than ten minutes, they were feeding their tickets to a slot in a turnstile-field, passing through blue space onto the moving walkway. They were carried up, up, up to the boarding deck. It was tremendously overwhelming, and tremendously humbling.

A short, narrow corridor led to the main carrier cabin, eight rows of economy-class seats with heavier restraints than on the Transport Capsule, yet still reminiscent of transportation. The Economy deck had a small steel lounge and a food machine, and that was it. The ultimate in no-frills travel, but Asmodan and Enhart had nothing to compare it with. They were miles out of their element. Enhart had no more advice to offer and Asmodan had nothing to say. They took their seats in silence as the rest of the passengers shuffled past them.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," said a voice on a hidden speaker, "welcome to Jess Surface-to-Station Transport. This flight is for all passengers to Station 101, and connects with the interplanetary travel hub. If your plans include interstellar, report to Station Customs upon your arrival at Station 101. If you cannot read Native Language, or need assistance with Native Language, press the panel on the safety card, located in the back of the seat in front of you, to review all safety and security protocols."

"Here we go again," said Asmodan, sitting back. The floor was at some thirty degrees—the ship was aiming straight for the sky—and the recline was relaxing.

"For your comfort and convenience, this ship is equipped with one quarter of gravity. Once we are clear of the lower atmosphere, you may unfasten your restraints and move around normally. Please take care with movement in lower gravity, as objects still retain their full mass and will react accordingly. We are five min-

utes from takeoff. Please attach your personal restraint harnesses now. Travel time to Station 101 is six hours, four minutes."

The last of the stragglers shuffled past on their way to Coach and Family Class. Only a handful of travelers traveled economy on this flight, and of the twenty or so people in the Economy Cabin, Enhart noticed three Tribesmen. He wondered what savages wanted in space.

"Liftoff in ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Please brace all objects and rest your head against the back of the seat. Four. Three. Two. One. Separation."

Enhart immediately weighed four hundred pounds. His spine tried to burrow through the seat. He couldn't lift his paws. He felt as if the ship had upended, and his hair fanned out on the seat back. Enhart gripped his paw, but Asmodan's paw was heavy on his.

"Oh, my God," whimpered Asmodan. "Oh, my God. Oh, my GOD."

Enhart was willing himself not to bleed again, though he doubted that the rough treatment would bring about another spray of blood. His chest was almost too heavy to draw breath. His tongue hung out the side of his mouth. I'm all right, he said to himself. I'm going into space. This is normal, and I'm all right.

He closed his eyes. The terrific gravity continued, and he lay immobile under it as if pressed under a rock, and tried to remember the words to an old song he used to sing when he was a pup.

The ground was miles away and receding fast. The whole continent, their entire journey, was laid out below them on a land mass no larger than a kneeling mat. The stars spun as the ship angled to meet a new trajectory. Enhart's feet were higher than his head. He spared a look around, surprised to see that some travelers hadn't even stopped reading their magazines and books. Something bounced out of the Family Cabin—it was a toy ball, moving at high speed, hitting the back wall of the Economy Cabin with a very loud BANG. It bounced high, then crashed out of sight. The wail of a crying child sounded in the other cabin.

Then the monumental pressure eased. Enhart could breathe

again. The ship leveled off, and Enhart grew lighter and lighter and lighter—too light. This was much too light. He held up his arm and let it drop, and watched it float down to the armrest. This was one-quarter gravity. He felt as if he was falling, very, very slowly.

"Oh, God," whimpered Asmodan. "Oh, God... I'm gonna be sick..."

Enhart looked around. The fasten-belts light had not yet gone off, though the ship was nearly level now. He peered into the seat-back pouch, looking for something that might help, and found a small plastic bag. The image on the front was sufficient to reveal its true nature, but when Enhart handed it to Asmodan, his brother just stared at it for a moment before throwing up all over himself.

"Oh, God," he moaned, steaming slightly. "I'm sorry, Enhart... I'm so scared... we're so far from home, so far..."

Enhart gripped Asmodan's paw and held it as Asmodan was sick again. A little red light had lit up on the back of the seat in front of Asmodan, and a robot emerged from a small room in one corner and wheeled towards them. Asmodan stared at it, then clamped a paw over his muzzle and vomited on it. He was a mess.

"Sir," said the robot, "it's come to our attention that you are quite space-sick. We want to offer you special attention to make your flight more comfortable."

Asmodan looked dizzily at the robot, dry-heaved, then slumped back in the seat. "Help me," he moaned.

The robot removed Asmodan's seat belt. "Would you accompany me, sir?" it said.

Enhart watched Asmodan stagger into the back room, stopping only to puke again. Lord only knew how he had that much to throw up, but he managed it, though the quantity was getting lower.

Robots came out and quietly cleaned up the mess around Asmodan's chair. By the time they were finished, the seat was spotless, without a trace of Asmodan's troubles. A few minutes

later, dressed in a new white jumpsuit, Asmodan emerged, wobbling, from the back room, and sat heavily in his old seat.

"Are you all right?" said Enhart.

"I'll manage," said Asmodan. "Oh, God, Enhart, I don't know if it's the gravity or the distance, but I'm so, so scared... I could never have done this alone, my brother. Never. I could never bear your burden." He looked at Enhart. "Are the Warm helping you deal with it? Is that why you're so... calm?"

"The Warm are dormant," said Enhart. "They have been for a while. Dormancy seems to slow my deterioration. I'm scared, too, Asmodan, scared and lost. This is way beyond anyone's experience. Beyond even our Master's experience. A few days ago we were innocent and young and free, and my burden has brought us to this."

"I can't wait to sleep in a proper hammock," moaned Asmodan.

"Eat fresh-caught, raw game," said Enhart.

"Swim in the swamp."

"Make something pretty, like a basket, just for fun."

"Tell a story." Asmodan's grin was thin and weak, but he gave Enhart's paw a squeeze. "I love you, my brother."

"I love you."

The ship tilted ominously, though not dramatically—the Transport Cylinder had been more dramatic—but it caught them both by surprise. Enhart turned on the television in front of him, just to have something to distract him. Asmodan just kept his eyes tight shut, as if he was trying to sleep.

Fear has a curious effect on the mind, and Asmodan was quite exhausted. Trying to sleep turned into sleeping, and the hours of space flight passed without incident. For all their blank, idiot horror at the pressures of takeoff and the terrors of low gravity, the old ship had made the journey thousands of times, and this was no different. Enhart watched the moon slip past the window as the ship changed course. It had never looked so big and so beautiful before. He wanted to keep watching it, but the hull was thick here and the moon slipped away and out of sight, and he couldn't

follow it.

In his mind, he explored his home. Green fields, thick forests. Strong people who took care of each other. Small homes where everything that was needed was provided by the land. It was so far away, and getting farther. Enhart was lost, and afraid, and alone. He felt as if he was trapped in a very small boat in the middle of a vast, tractless ocean. He tried to put aside his fears and be strong, because his uncertainty accelerated his deterioration.

"Estimated time of arrival at Station 101 in ten minutes. Gravity will increase to ninety percent of normal. A period of acclimatization will follow, and then passengers may disembark, beginning with the first class section. On behalf of all of us, thank you for flying with Jess Transport."

The voice switched from the robot attendant to an advertisement. Did these Civilized people do nothing all day but listen to people trying to sell them stuff? The ship trembled a little, which was enough to roust Asmodan. He looked around blearily. "How long..."

"We're docking now," said Enhart. "We're there. It's safe." His head nodded slightly. "I need to..." he whispered, then shook his head. He was having trouble putting together a sentence.

"Where do we go once we're on the Station?" said Asmodan. "What's our destination?"

Enhart rousted the Warm, who had reduced their presence in him as much as they could. They were unwilling to cause their host further damage, but now that they were here, they needed help. Finally, one of them came forward. Enhart rested his head back on the seat and sniffed. "It's a... it's a place called Nemer Labs. It's..." He took a deep breath. "It's a company. A biochemical firm. They have... they have access to the... to the Medium."

The gravity increased sharply, and Asmodan gripped his seat, but Enhart didn't turn a hair. His eyes looked bleary and bloodshot.

"There will now follow ten minutes of acclimatization while the docking protocols are completed. You may feel free to get up and move about the cabin to get used to the greater gravity.

Station 101 is a fully-integrated city in space, with fine dining, hotels, businesses and shopping, and serves as a spaceport to the moon and the inner planets. If your destination is outside the orbit of your world, please be sure to pass through Customs and have your papers ready."

Asmodan looked up. "What was that? Papers?"

"That doesn't apply to us," mumbled Enhart. "We've gone as far as we need to go." He took a deep, shuddering breath. "I tried..." he murmered, "so hard... to be strong. Just... once."

"You were strong, my brother. You were stronger than me."

But Enhart didn't respond. Asmodan saw that he was clutching his muzzle. Enhart unfastened his harness and tried to push himself out of the seat, but only sank to the floor in the middle of the wide aisle. Blood dripped off his elbow.

He looked up at Asmodan, who fumbled with his restraints, with a tragic, pained expression. Then blood squirted from his fist as if trying to escape his face. He dropped to his paws and knees in the aisle, and it poured out of him.

"Oh, God!" Asmodan ripped off his restraints. "Enhart! What's happening?"

A passenger glanced back, gave a yelp, and ran for the emergency bar set into the wall. He gave it a yank, and a deep buzzer sounded throughout the room. Almost immediately, robots emerged from stations at the sides of the doors.

Blood pooled under Enhart's head, and when he clutched his muzzle it flowed from his mouth. Even his ears were bleeding a little. Asmodan tried to clench his brother's face shut, holding him from behind as if trying to stop him from choking. The robots approached, and immediately went to work. "Medical emergency." "Passenger hemorrhaging in the Economy Section." "Alert the Crew." "Secure the ship." "Signal Station 101 Emergency Services." "Prepare the Hospital."

Enhart sagged. Asmodan rolled him over, turned him face up. Enhart's face, chest, and belly were awash with blood, and turning him over didn't stop it from pouring out. His mane was slick with it. He gurgled on it as if choking, and Asmodan had to roll him

over again and let it pour out before he drowned on it.

"I'm the co-pilot," said a warm voice behind them. Asmodan turned—it was a uniformed fox-folk with a long brush and a close-cropped mane. "What's the emergency?" He knelt next to the wild-eyed Enhart and his terrified brother. "All right, son," he said, resting his paw against Enhart's forehead. "The ambulance is on its way. We've hastened the docking procedure. We'll have you out of here in five minutes." He looked at Asmodan. "Was he attacked? Was he stabbed?"

Asmodan shook his head. "It's inside," he said helplessly. "Inside his mind."

"You're tribal, aren't you? Both of you?"

"He's my brother. We're from the West."

"All right. Don't be afraid. We have paramedics coming. Best medical care in space."

"No," whispered Enhart. He spat blood in a fountain and clutched at the co-pilot's arm. "Not the hospital. Laboratory." The pool of blood around him grew. "We have to get to..."

"Nemer Labs," said Asmodan quickly. "We need to contact Nemer Labs."

"Nemer Labs?" said the co-pilot uncertainly. "What can they do to help?"

"Just call them!" said Asmodan. "My brother is carrying the Warm! They're killing him!"

The co-pilot pulled a communicator from his pocket, flipped it open, and said, "This is Co-Pilot Anders from the Shuttle. We have a medical emergency on board and need to get in touch with Nemer Labs. That's right. N-E-M-E-R. Thank you." He paused for a moment. "They're patching me in." His expression changed. "Hello, Nemer Labs? This is Anders, co-pilot of the shuttle. We have a medical emergency on board. An ambulance is on its way, but the fellow's brother mentioned you. Something about—" His face changed. "What was it again?"

"Enhart is the bearer of the Warm."

The co-pilot spoke into his communicator. "'Enhart is the bearer of the Warm.' Does that mean anything?"

His expression changed. A thrum ran through the ship. "Oh," he said. "Of course." Blood squirted past his face, and he watched it fly. "Right. We'll send the ambulance straight to you, then. Thank you. Thank you for clearing that up."

He folded the communicator and put it back in his pocket. "Well, I don't know why, but your friends will take you straight to the Lab from here. I didn't know they had medical facilities, but I'll have to put together a full report. Let's get your brother taken care of, first." He pushed a button on his shirt, and when he next spoke, his voice came from everywhere at once. "This is your co-pilot speaking. We apologize for any inconvenience, but we have a medical emergency on board, and there will be some delay in disembarking from the ship. Please enjoy our hospitality for a little longer, and we will open the ship for disembarkation as soon as possible. Thank you."

Enhart blinked blearily at Asmodan, clutching at his arms. Asmodan slaughtered large creatures to survive and even he had never seen so much blood. There was so much of it that it ran the length of the aisle and pooled at the back of the ship. "I'm so cold," he whimpered.

"Hang in there, brother," said Asmodan. "Just hang in there."

Enhart's breathing was slow and deliberate now. His heart was laboring. Blood still poured from him, but it seemed to be slowing. He has survived it, thought Asmodan. He lost so much blood, but he's winning out over it. The Warm may be helping him. Asmodan wished he could help, could do something other than just hold his brother as the blood slowed to a trickle.

Two attendants hauled an antigrav gurney into the room and lowered it. They scooped up Asmodan's soggy brother and loaded him onto it. A screen at one end checked Enhart's vitals and the attendants started to push the gurney off the ship.

"Follow them," said the co-pilot. "I have to get this cleaned up and then disembark a shuttle full of impatient passengers. I'll report to Nemer when I'm finished here. Hurry, or you'll lose him."

Asmodan chased after the gurney, which rattled down the gangplank and onto the station. He barely had a chance to look

around at the disembarkation plaza before he was ushered into the back of an ambulance, which turned on a wailing siren and sped into traffic.

Enhart looked at Asmodan. Blood still trickled from him, but it seemed to be under control. Enhart was grotesque with it, a sparkling red apparition with bloodshot eyes and shaking paws. How could he have survived it? Yet survive he had, and it was up to Asmodan to get him to the Labs before the next onslaught. The attendants worked him over, shouting numbers and phrases that Asmodan didn't understand, and the space station whistled by outside, but Asmodan's whole world was his brother, who held his paw tightly and looked up into Asmodan's eyes in a way that he'd never seen before. There was something weak and tragic, almost apologetic, about him.

A small crowd was gathering outside the entrance to Nemer Labs. The ambulance lurched up to the doorstep, and the attendants popped the back doors and pulled the gurney out onto the street. Immediately, Enhart was surrounded by white-coat lab figures, and Asmodan found himself pushing through the crowd. "Let him through," shouted a voice. "It's Enhart's brother."

Asmodan took hold of one of the rails on the side of the gurney and hung onto it. Enhart was still gazing at him with an expression of pure brotherly love, of admiration and appreciation, though he was too weak to speak at this point.

"We've prepared the medium," said... someone, a female voice, but Asmodan didn't turn around. "Everything's set, but the Warm within your brother are very weak and growing weaker. They may not have the strength to jump, so we're taking your brother straight to the medium tank now. "What's your name?"

"Asmodan," whispered Asmodan, still not looking around.

"I'm Doctor Hart. I'm in charge of the Warm project. They gave us quite a scare, you know, when they didn't show up to collect the medium. We were afraid they might have been lost. There's a lot riding on this project. The futures of whole worlds are hanging on it."

Asmodan finally spared a glance at her, got a quick impression

of long hair with beads, and returned to his brother. "He's going to die, isn't he?" he said.

"He'll make it. I am sorry, though. Your Tribe was so remote, and the Warm were so scared... They've never been so long in a foreign medium."

Enhart said nothing, but squeezed his brother's paw a little tighter. They'd grown a comet-tail of spectators. The Warm were evidently a big deal, and Asmodan's blood-drenched brother was exhibit A.

They burst through double-doors into a manufacturing center, but Asmodan barely looked around. "Open the cover!" shouted Hart. "We have the bearer! We're out of time! Get him up there! Get him onto the platform!"

Strong arms helped Enhart stand up, though there was no chance of his legs supporting his weight. Blood dumped out of him as his head sagged on his shoulders, but it was only a leftover pool, not a sign of a new hemorrhage. With Hart on one side and Asmodan on the other, they carried Enhart up the steps to a high platform, where a screen was sliding back over a vast sea of dark liquid. This was the medium.

Enhart put his legs under him and supported himself. He dropped his arms from Asmodan and Hart and stared, glistening, into the pool. He took a few shuffling steps forwards, then knelt.

Asmodan caught his breath. "Is that it?" he whispered. "Is he free?"

Hart didn't answer.

Enhart reached forward and touched the surface of the pool, then stared at it. It was like molasses, dark brown and thick, a heavy, oily liquid clinging to his paw. Then he reached down and plunged his arm in, past the elbow, almost to the shoulder. A few thick bubbles rose from the stew, and when Enhart straightened up, his arm was gone. It ended in a flat, cauterized stump.

Asmodan cried out. "Oh, my Lord," said Hart, clutching her chest. Enhart stood up, wobbling weakly.

He took a deep breath. "Doctor Hart..." he said. "I am... the Warm. I thank you and your team. This... new medium... is more

than... suitable. You have saved us, just as Enhart... has saved us." He looked at Asmodan. "Brother," he said.

"Enhart," said Asmodan. His legs felt wobbly and he wondered if he would faint. "Oh, brother, your arm is gone..."

"I'm sorry, said Enhart. "Not merely my arm. This body... is no longer... viable."

Hart looked pained, and rested a paw on Asmodan's shoulder. "Oh, Enhart," she said. "Asmodan, I'm so sorry."

"What?" said Asmodan. "What are you saying?"

"I'm dead, my brother. I died on the ship, just before the ambulance came for me. The Warm are the only thing keeping me animate."

"But that's crazy!" cried Asmodan. "That's... crazy! You—you're standing there! Talking to me!"

"The Warm... are giving me... the chance... to say goodbye," said Enhart, each breath labored. "One final gift, of all the gifts they've given me... but I have bled to death. My heart does not beat. I only breathe... to speak. I can feel my body cooling even now."

"The gifts they've given you?" Tears streaked Asmodan's face. "They've killed you! What could they give you to compare with that?"

Enhart smiled. "Freedom, my brother," he said. "The greatest gift of all."

He tipped backwards where he stood, and plunged bodily into the pool, which swallowed him without a trace.

"Enhart!" wailed Asmodan, scrambling over the edge of the platform and into the medium. It was very warm, and very heavy, and it came to his chest, and dragged on him as he pawed at it. "Enhart! Brother!" He dove into the medium, surfaced, dove again. "Enhart!" His paw brushed something and he seized it and surfaced with it. Slumping against the platform, he stared at what he'd grabbed. It was a skull.

He cried out and flung it, and when it hit the medium it disintegrated to powder and was consumed by the ooze. Asmodan's chest hitched, and he wailed, a mournful howl, lost and terrified. "Enhart," he sobbed. "My brother."

"Come on," said Hart. "Come on, give me your paw. That's it. Get out of there. You're contaminating the medium."

Asmodan hauled his streaming body clear of the fluid and sprawled out on the platform.

"We're nominal," said a voice, far away. "The Warm are in the medium. No casualties. Four hundred and one distinct psychic traces."

Asmodan sniffed. He was lost, alone, and terrified, and hundreds of thousands of miles from home. His brother had left him stranded in space. He sobbed again, and Hart rested a paw on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," said a voice.

Asmodan rolled over and looked up, and saw Enhart standing on TOP of the medium. Not standing, so much as flowing from it. The figure was Enhart-shaped, but made up of the stuff in the tank, constantly flowing and circulating and swirling within itself. He was liquid.

"Enhart?" whispered Asmodan, very softly. He couldn't bear much more before he cracked, if he hadn't already.

"I am Enhart of the Warm," sad Enhart, his voice coming from everywhere. "The Warm have invited me on their exploration, my brother. I will travel with them to the stars. But you needed to know that I live on in the Warm, that your brother is out there exploring. Oh, my brother, had you seen but half of what I've experienced these past few days, you could never turn them down. No force would keep you Earthbound. The Warm showed me such amazing things, from the first moment they touched my mind... I knew that this was where I had to be."

"You're alive," moaned Asmodan. "You're alive, and you're leaving me."

"You would keep me in our tiny village for the rest of our lives," said Enhart. "You have been cruel to me. You have robbed me of my prey. You have stolen my lovers from me. Yours were the paws pulling the strings, wherever my life was at its lowest. Yet, for all the anger I carried from your bullying, it all evaporated the moment I reached out to touch the Warm. There is... there is so

much more than us, Asmodan. We are... we are crucial, yet unimportant. What we do helps time to pass, helps the stars to burn, helps the spheres spin, but we are so small in it that our contribution can never be known by anyone so small as us. And yet, when I touched the Warm, I saw... everything. Not all that there is, for that is unknowable, but everything in you, and me, everything that we shared that brought us to this point. And it all made sense, my brother. It was our story, our life. I needed to know more."

"You're leaving because of me?" whimpered Asmodan. "I can be better, brother. I can... I can let you have the kill. I can let you love. I can stand back and let your glory shine through. I'll do anything, just don't leave me alone. Not now."

"I am dead," said Enhart. "My body has died. The medium has consumed it. I can't go back, even if I wanted to." He smiled. "Admit it. It's better this way. You will no longer have Enhart cluttering up your life, and I will no longer have Asmodan hovering over my shoulder."

"But I love you," said Asmodan. "I thought we were... I thought you were... we were just starting to..." He struggled with himself. "What about Hans?"

"What about Hans? He knew this was my decision from the first moment that we shared the Warm."

"But you said you'd return for him. You promised!"

"I have returned to him. I have always been with him, as soon as he looked into my mind and we fell in love. Part of me will always be with him. Part of me is there now. I can travel to the stars and tell him where I am, and one day, when he's ready, when he's lived his life, he may choose to join me in the Warm, to explore with me rather than just see through my eyes."

"I don't understand," said Asmodan.

"We're out of time. We must return to space. Doctor Hart, on behalf of the Warm, we thank you for your efforts. We know this project could not have been easy for you, yet no matter how much we have paid, it will never be enough. My brother, I thank you for your help. You've carried me a long way. Now I must walk on my own."

Enhart sank into the medium and vanished. The stuff in the tank started to spin, generating a whirlpool, colors and light folded in the mixture like ingredients in a cake. "We have go for jettison," said a voice, and the tank started to drain, swirling around its axis, sinking away to nothing. When the swirling stopped, there was hardly any fluid in the tank at all. "And we're clear. The Warm are on their way."

Applause broke out around the tank, and Asmodan became slowly aware that the high-tech chamber was full of people, crowded around watching this personal moment pass by. Their job was done—the Warm had returned to space and were traveling again.

Hart rested her paw on Asmodan's shoulder. "Come on, Asmodan," she said. "Let's get you cleaned up and then see about getting you back to your Tribe."

Back to his tribe? Did he HAVE a Tribe? The word seemed so distant. "Tribe." Nevertheless, he followed Hart down to the showers in a daze. He had never before felt so lost.

"The Warm contacted us a few months ago," said Hart.

They were sitting in the Lab's cafeteria space. Asmodan was picking at food.

"They gave us the specifications for the Medium, which was difficult for an orbiting laboratory. But when they saw what they'd offer in return, we had no choice but to jump at it."

"What did they offer?" said Asmodan dully.

"Information. Knowledge. The life-blood of any scientist."

"Everything's for sale among you people, isn't it?" said Asmodan. "Your world has been trying to sell me shit since the moment I stepped on the Transport Capsule. Don't you ever get sick of it?"

"All the time. But this is different." Hart rested her paw on Asmodan's. She was quite beautiful, a handsome young cat-folk with a long, curved tail and pretty green eyes. "A world as advanced as ours has to find new ways of progressing, while still maintaining our way of life. Commerce and technology have enabled our world to find new sources of energy and materials—if we didn't,

your Tribe would have been consumed by the Civilized world a long time ago. Turned to farmland, or mines. Your people would be working for us, instead of free. So our progress has preserved your traditions, and it's been that way for centuries."

Asmodan shook his head. "My people know nothing of this," he said.

"Which is also the point. I gaze at you across the table, and it's like looking back across thousands of years to a time when life was simpler for us. We value that ability. We do not colonize, we do not subsume." She tilted her head. "I'm sure that if you chose to stay, we could find a place for you in this world."

"No. I'm sorry, but I want to get back to my own life. Even if it'll never be the same."

"All right. Do you want me to show you around the station? Take a few days off before you have to get back on the Shuttle?"

Asmodan shook his head. "I just want to go home," he said. "Can I get home?"

"Sure. The lab will be happy to cover your transport tickets. First class, if you like."

Asmodan didn't answer. Dr. Hart had nothing else to offer. They sat in silence for a long, long time.

The next few days passed in a daze.

Asmodan had little memory of returning on the shuttle, as harrowing as the outward journey had been. He stumbled through the Spaceport like a drunk, and it was practically by accident that he boarded the correct Capsule. He slept fitfully, drank little, and ate nothing.

It had been his duty to bring up his brother after they'd lost their parents, and he'd failed. He'd exploited him. Plundered what few victories he'd had in life to make himself look good, and the only way Enhart had found his glory was by going somewhere that Asmodan couldn't follow. Now, he was alone, and he had no one to blame but himself.

The Transport Capsule announced his stop, and he stumbled out onto the platform in the Western Tribelands. For a moment,

he came out of his shell. The heavy burden of his few days among Civilized Folk made real life seem weak and distant, but here among the neat shanties and rustic cottages of the village of traders on the marsh, he realized that he was getting closer to his own world, that only his own feet would carry him the rest of the way, and there was some comfort in that. His alienation fell off him like a blanket. He was still numb and grieving, but at least he didn't have the added stress of a foreign and baffling environment.

No one shared his grief. The village was, as always, a bustling center of activity and trade. Everyone seemed to have somewhere to be, some place to go. Asmodan had walked a quarter mile of the roadway platform when he glanced up and saw one figure in a pool of light, not moving. It was the Otterfolk with the long hair. It was Hans.

Asmodan caught his breath. Hans didn't know, couldn't know, that his lover was gone. Hans leaned against a post, watching Asmodan with a touch of suspicion and a touch of sympathy.

He held out a bundle. "Spaceport mailed me your knife," he said.

Asmodan took the package gratefully, tore it open, and pulled the knife out. It was so many things. It was a useful tool, but an impulse purchase. It was a subconscious attempt to sabotage Enhart's journey. It was a selfish act on a selfless mission. Asmodan wanted to wear it as both a reward and a reminder, a burden and a blessing. He tied it on. "Enhart's gone," he said, his voice a whisper.

"I know, Asmodan. I can feel it." He tapped his forehead. "Up here." He reached out a paw and took Asmodan's arm, then drew him close and embraced him. Asmodan froze within the hug, then melted and started to cry.

"Come, come," said Hans, leading Asmodan along the boardwalk. They left the roadway and headed through a narrow trail in the long grass. Asmodan was bewildered. They reached a small clearing near the river, where the water ran slow and the mud shone in the moonlight, and standing under a tree, arms folded, wearing nothing, was Enhart.

Asmodan's face crumpled at the sight. "Oh, God," he cried. "I

thought you were dead... you said you'd left... I thought I'd never see you again!" He reached out both paws, but Enhart shied away. Not fast enough—Asmodan's paw passed through Enhart's arm.

Asmodan stared at his paws for a moment, tears running down his face. "I don't understand," he said helplessly. "Enhart—Hans—help me understand."

"I'm not here, my brother," said Enhart. "I'm not real. I'm a projection. A ghost, relayed through Hans's mind. We both shared the Warm, and it left us with this." He took Hans by the paw and held it up. "Hans is the only one who can touch me, and feel me, since his mind is the source of the projection."

"You're not real..." Asmodan passed his paw through Enhart's body, and stared at it. "How is this possible? How can he touch you and I can't?"

"Right now, I'm approaching a star..." Enhart pointed, one arm around Hans's shoulders. "Right there. It's so beautiful, with colors of blue and gold, whirpools folding sparks of light, electricity, bathing the Warm in radiation. The star is in the Twin Trees constellation. The brightest one. See?"

Asmodan saw, but it didn't help. "It isn't fair," he said, bowing his head. "He gets a lover, but I don't get to keep my brother. It isn't fair."

"One day, I'll join him," said Hans. "When my life in this world has run its course, Enhart will come back for me. I will join the Warm, and join him among the stars. We will have offspring—something we couldn't have had as Tribefolk. It is the reward of the Warm for all we did."

"Then I'll stay here," said Asmodan. "A brother I can see is better than no brother at all, even if I can't smell or touch him."

Enhart shook his head. "I don't think that would be fair," he said. "You have a life to live. You can't follow me any more than I could follow you, brother. Go home. Rear pups. Live that life."

He faded, slowly, and Asmodan stared at the tree long after he was gone.

Hans bowed his head. "I could not deprive my lover of the Universe, and the Universe refused to deprive my lover of me. This

is all the compromise we have, seeing through each other's eyes, sharing our lives from within each other. It feels fair. It feels right." He gestured. "Come. The day is young and I must take you across the river. You have far to walk before you reach your village."

I'm being thrown out, thought Asmodan. Cast out of the village, so I don't hang around and become a nuisance.

He followed Hans back to the boat, and Hans took him across the river. Then there was only the long road home.

It was late when Asmodan returned to the village on the lake, so it was only natural that few people would be out and about, but the place still felt empty and hollow, as if it had been abandoned years ago.

The little wood huts were as tidy and clean as they ever had been, but they looked modest and a little shabby. The bonfire pit was cold and dead. The grass seemed weedy and unkempt, the insects that constantly buzzed were an annoyance, and the sky was too dark. After the splendor of the well-lit, manufactured settings of the City and the Station, his home now seemed humble, even decrepit. Life was hard here. Food did not emerge from a machine in neat white boxes.

He doubted that he could bear his empty hut yet, so he crossed the village and tapped on the doorframe of the Alpha's hut. The Alpha was not yet asleep—he tended towards evening hunts, and preferred to sleep away parts of his mornings—and he answered the door with a carving in one hand and a flint knife in the other.

Savage, thought Asmodan.

"Asmodan, my boy!" said the Alpha, putting aside his tools. "Come in, come in! How was your trip? Is Enhart all right?"

"Enhart's gone," said Asmodan weakly, shuffling into the hut like a broken toy. "He... he's dead." Asmodan thought about this, while a look of alarm crossed the Alpha's face. "No, he's not. But he's gone."

The Alpha looked confused. "Sit down, son," he said. "Tell me all about it."

Asmodan sat heavily in a fine, comfortable chair. He was still

looking down. Slowly, he spooled out the story, from the village, to the walk, to meeting Hans, and how passionately the two had fallen in love in only one night.

"Enhart had certain powers with the Warm inside him," said the Alpha. "He even shared them with me, very briefly, to convince me that his experience was real. Hans and Enhart could have shared years with each other in only a few minutes, and would have had no secrets from each other, if they shared the Warm. I have no doubts that their commitment was true."

Asmodan continued describing the odyssey, including his own betrayals and missteps. He showed the Alpha the steel knife and explained how much it cost, but the Alpha only nodded indulgently and let him continue. He described how lost and afraid he'd been from the moment they'd boarded the transport, how nothing made sense, how Enhart kept his eyes open and learned everything while Asmodan just wanted to curl up and hide. He left out no detail of Enhart's deteriorating condition.

"I was trying to take care of him," said Asmodan, "but I could hardly take care of myself. And he was getting so sick... I was so scared of everything, and he wound up taking care of me."

After reliving the white horror of their space flight, he finished with Enhart's final, gruesome plunge into a huge vat of molasses, and his rebirth as an alien intelligence.

"And he took me to task for the way I'd treated him, but there was no anger in him, no malice. He had decided to leave from the first moment he touched the Warm."

"Son," said the Alpha, "I hate to tell you this, but Enhart had decided to leave long before he had ever heard about the Warm."

Asmodan looked shocked. "What? Wh—why didn't he tell me?"

"Think about the way you were before your travels. Think about the way you treated him. He was an obstruction to you. An annoyance. He loved our Tribe, but he didn't want to continue with a life where he was a continual disappointment. He always wanted to find a world where he wasn't defined by how you saw him. I traveled a lot when I was young, so he came to me.

I had been helping him prepare to leave for three months when he encountered the Warm. Another month, maybe two, and your brother would have left you in any case."

"I just... I thought I was trying to help. I thought he was weak... and I was trying to make him stronger."

"The size of the game one drags back to the village is not the only measure of strength. What happened when you tried to carry the Warm, when you tried to shoulder his burden?"

Asmodan shuddered. "My mind... was swamped," he said. "I—I could hardly move. I couldn't think, or feel, or anything." He bowed his head, and tears ran the length of his muzzle and trembled on his nose.

The Alpha rested a paw on his shoulder. "You're a good hunter, Asmodan, and a good fighter, and a good person. But you always had a blind spot where your brother was concerned. Maybe I stood by and watched and let it go on for too long, but I hadn't realized that the impact would be so severe."

"What do I do now?" said Asmodan. "Where do I go? After all I've seen, all I've been through, how do I go back to the way things were?"

"Well," said the Alpha, "it's late, so first you go home and get some sleep, and then tomorrow you go on the hunt and make sure you've re-stocked your larder. I'm willing to discuss this with you for as long as you want. You've been out of your life for a few days, so you need to take the time to do things that you're used to, things that are a comfort to you. Then, in the evenings, you can come and talk to me."

"All right," said Asmodan. He got up. "Master? You didn't let me go on the trip to protect Enhart, did you?"

The Alpha grinned and shook his head. "No, son. I let you go on the trip to learn. To see. And to have a chance to say goodbye."

Asmodan left the hut, latching the door behind him. The Alpha continued carving for a while, then he blew out the lamp and went to bed.

Sometimes, it isn't enough to fight for what you've lost.

The Firelight (A Parable)

Ben Goodridge

Once upon a time, a handsome young werewolf joined a great and powerful Pack. He became a part of them, hunting with them and sharing the kill, sleeping among them on cold nights, and dancing the dances around their great bonfire, painting his body and singing the songs of joy and celebration, and sharing their griefs and burdens. He became a better and stronger werewolf for his bond with the Pack.

The Pack's range was nestled in a rolling green forest between two lofty, windswept mountain ridges, a valley that slept softly under the white winter snow and came alive with love and color at the coming of Spring, bathed by an ophidian river that swirled and sang with the water that washed it clean, teeming with fat, sweet game that brought challenge and variety to the hunt. At the heart of it all blazed their Council Fire, and each night the werewolves of the Pack would gather to feed it that which they had gathered during the day. They shared the sweet meat of the hunt and the collected fuel of the fire and sang songs and stories in its circle of light and warmth.

For a long time, the young one was happy here, for though his friends in the Pack sometimes came and sometimes went, sniffing out new trails and exploring new wonders, there was always

warmth and safety in the firelight.

But one day the young one caught the scent of a new trail, and felt he'd learned all that he could from his Pack for now, that though they had given him love and joy, he felt he needed more, that he had questions the Pack could not answer for him. And eventually his longing to learn led him to follow this new trail, over the mountain and away from the Pack and the rich smell of the fire.

Though he traveled and learned and grew stronger, he felt in his heart the love of his Pack, and carried an ember of the fire in him, a bright spark that reminded him of that place where the love was warmest and the light brightest, the game richest and the waters sweetest. So he returned to the Valley, eager to bring with him the wisdom of his experiences abroad.

He found the trees dead and the soil gray and bare.

The game had gone to new and greener pastures.

The river was a polluted, stinking serpent, its silted waters devoid of fish, and sparkling with the broken glass that lined its bed.

The land was littered with wastepaper, pop tops, beer cans, broken bottles, cigarette butts, motor oil containers, trash that stuck crazyquilt out of the fouled dirt.

The fire was a dead circle of rocks surrounding a small pile of cold ash.

Gathered around this remnant were no more than two or three werewolves.

Their bodies were scarred and ugly. Their fur was patchy and mangy; they stank of their own sweat and filth. They smoked bad cigarettes and drank heavy booze, and it was without care that they sat in their own excrement and sang base blasphemies. Their bodies were a riot of untended wounds, alive with fleas and maggots and the flies gathered in the corners of their eyes and the tips of their noses and they made no move to wave them away. Instead, they only continued to sing their gurgling, impotent songs.

The songs were blasphemy, and apostasy, and hate, and anger, and hostility, and rage, and fear, and pestilence, and war, and rape,

all rolled into one.

The traveler was terrified by the loss of beauty and the presence of these three stinking survivors; he held his muzzle against the smell and asked, Who are you?

When he spoke, they noticed him, and one leaped drunkenly to his feet and yelled obscenities at him, hollering, I am now the ruler here!

This wasteland belonged to him, he cried, and those who said otherwise would face the white-hot edge of his rage. The devil swung the bottle as he yelled, and there was a flatulent sound as his feet moved in the dry earth, and the traveler felt his own rage rising at the level of devastation and his own rising helplessness. His hackles rose and veins stood out in his neck and he swung out with anger, and the two of them rolled over and over in the dust and filth.

The traveler felt his victim's teeth break and tasted the demon's hot blood, felt it on his skin and felt a grim sense of victory, but the drunk was stronger than he could have guessed, and soon much of the blood they wallowed in was his. The demon gouged his face and neck, his chest and arms, tearing the flesh ragged and leaving the traveler howling, and he thrust the demon aside and scrambled up the hillside, tail between his legs, limping up the mountain, fainting and sobbing and bleeding, until he tumbled over the ridge and out of the valley.

For some weeks he hid in the forests on the other side, his fur covered with dried blood and pustulent wounds; the demon had infected him and infested him with fleas, and his nights were an agony as he struggled not to scratch his swollen wounds or patched fur. He stank. His valley had fallen.

After some weeks had passed and he was a half-starved, half-crazed shadow of his former self, he crawled from his hiding place to seek water, to bathe his wounds and cultivate his strength. Maybe both he and the valley were too gravely wounded to ever heal entirely, to ever be the same again, but giving up wasn't in his nature, whatever form his perseverance took.

But as he approached the stream, he caught a scent—a familiar

smell, an old friend, one of those banished from the valley, but staying close by, like him, watching, waiting.

As he turned, arms open, to greet his old friend, he heard a war cry and was thrown to the ground, and he heard, You're one of them! You destroyed it all! You stole it and destroyed it all!

He could no more believe his ears than he could believe the hail of blows that rained upon his skin, the claws that opened his old wounds and tore new ones, and he curled up tight and let out a yell.

As he trembled in the moss, his attacker crawled from him and looked over his handiwork, at the bloody, injured wreck that trembled and whined, and there was satisfaction in the attacker's eyes. And the satisfaction sank into grief as he recognized who he had attacked.

The traveler whined, You who were once my brother, why do you now attack me? What have I done, to earn such anger? Why have you no pity for a wounded old friend?

The werewolf who was once his friend said, You look and you smell just as they do. You stink of them. Like them, you lose your fur to fleas and mange, and you carry the stink of their blasphemy. You carry it HERE.

But it's only me, cried the traveler, the one who left so long ago! How is it that I can be responsible for the devastation of our home?

You smell like them, said the one who had been his friend. You smell like them, and that means you have had dealings with them. It doesn't matter to me what dealings you had. It doesn't matter that you did not personally destroy our valley. What matters is the smell of you. The smell of those we hate. That is enough.

The packmate turned away. The traveler crawled on his knees and cried, Come with me! You and the survivors, help me and heal me and join me by our old fire! Help me make it good again! We can make it right! Maybe it can't ever burn as brightly or as beautifully, but I won't believe that there is no life and joy in it! Others will come, to feed it, to heal it, and help it grow!

But his old friend only shook his head as the traveler cried out

that he had medicine, and music, and new songs that could make them strong again. There was no trust in the old friend anymore, no trust for anyone who bore the stink of that evil, even if they had earned it by trying to fight it. The shadows swallowed him and the traveler was alone by the stream.

He plunged in, and drank, and bathed, and healed. His fever ebbed and he hunted, and ate. He washed away the dirt, and the filth, and he grew strong, and his fur grew in and hid his scars. And when he was soft and strong and healthy again, he had an idea, a plan, and he wanted to be ready, he wanted to be at his best.

One day, he walked peacefully and placidly over the ridge again. There was no longer any anger in his heart. He had no room for it. There was only the love of the world he had lost, the one he yearned to reclaim. Dust curled from his feet as he tracked the hillside. Old newspapers twisted around his legs. Sand blew in his face and he just blinked it away. Broken bottles tried to cut his feet, but failed. His tread was too soft. In his mind there was neither the dead land that was there, nor the thriving range he yearned for; there was only the stone circle.

He approached the circle among the sneering, echoing voices of the three evil ones. The one who had beaten him so badly now cried out, Were you not beaten badly enough? Do you want more? Shall we once again send you fleeing with your tail between your legs, bleeding from scars your fur cannot hide?

But the traveler's face remained placid, and he gathered a few dry sticks from the parched ground. The evil ones howled louder. It became an effort to block their howling from his mind, to maintain his serenity. But block it he did, concentrating only on building a small pile of twigs and leaves in the heart of the circle. He touched the smoldering nucleus with a stick. There was a puff of dry ash that whitened his fur, and an impotent yowl from the evil one, that he would never be able to ignite the dead embers, that there was nothing to feed it.

But deep within the ash was the glowing warmth of a soft coal, and as the traveler placed his tiny temple of twigs over it, a rogue

spark and puff of breath created a small flame.

The demon set himself upon the traveler with a yell, but the traveler stepped easily out of the way, focused only on the task before him, on turning the flame into a fire. He didn't even have to look as the demon tumbled in the dust, gouging himself on the glass, hurting no one but himself. There was a sickly plop as the evil one dropped into the toxic river.

A small fire was burning bright and the remaining two demons were cowering from its warmth as the evil one crawled out of the river, much of his fur burned away. He was even uglier bathed in his own effusion, and terribly, terribly weak. It doesn't matter, he said, throwing himself in the dust next to the traveler. You cannot keep it burning. There isn't enough fuel to keep it burning. You can't keep it alight forever, not alone. And soon you will tire of trying. Others have tried too, and they all tired of trying. You cannot win.

As the traveler warmed his paws and feet against the tiny young fire, he thought, without responding, Maybe I will not have to. Maybe others will come to help, now that it's begun, and bring their own fuel.

Neither he nor the impotent evil saw the figures gathered on the ridge in the growing dusk, their shining eyes drawn to the single bright light in the abandoned valley, people known to neither of them, but yearning for the warmth and light of a fire all the same.

On the other side of the mountain, a werewolf with the faint smell of the demon on his paws rolled over and failed to sleep.

Afterword

Let's go once around and meet some of the people in the band, shall we?

Calcifer Rauth wants readers to know that he's hoping to clinch a University position in medicine. And that he's taken. (Sorry, ladies.) "Kerner's Bad Day" is his first published story.

Redline is convinced that he never has enough time to write, yet managed to produce "Graveyard Shift." He seeks inspiration in the works of Ray Bradbury and Jack London, as well as his alternate passion of motorsports racing. (There's a combination.) Despite this, he still worries that he doesn't get out enough.

Karai Croctua describes himself as "Odd, anti-social, and over-ambitious." In other words, a writer. He works as a product tester somewhere in the Northeast, and "Hyperstream" is his second story for FANG.

Whyte Yoté grew up in South Dakota. His work has appeared in every volume of FANG to date, including this volume's "Dog Eat Dog." An avid photographer, car lover, and furry author, he lives in Sacramento with his fiance, Tym.

Fugue, the man with "The Clockwork Mind," hails from the mossy woodlands of Oregon, his base of operations when not working on his mathematics

degree or writing about coyotes playing piano. He is still working on synthesizing his loves together, but anthropomorphic mathematics stories have been confined strictly to Flatland, and he does not know how to get there from Oregon. His stories may be found in "Fang, Claw, and Steel" and "Anthrolations."

Altivo Overo was born in a barn when dinosaurs still walked the earth. In his spare time he is a horse who tie-dyes cows, and he got to where he is today by eating his vegetables and not listening to neigh-sayers. He is known to some of furry fandom as "The Clydesdale Librarian" because he maintains a web site by that name and also records an occasional podcast on the subject of furry literature.

Alexander Wood never returns my phone calls, but "Warm Exodus" is his first published story.

Your Editor, Ben Goodridge, hides in a cave in the Great North Woods and has been writing since the mid-eighties. When he's not bickering over minutiae with Alex Vance, your Publisher, he's turned out such books as White Crusade (Bad Dog Books) and The Swamp Poet (Crossquarter Press). And he wants all good writers to keep sending furry stories to him, c/o baddogbooks@gmail.com.

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What is ROAR?

The goal is to publish the best anthropomorphic fiction we can find.

Other genres treat anthropomorphics as the somewhat creepy little cousin that arrived a tad late to the picnic, and glare down upon it with undisguised scorn. Check your Writer's Marketplace: science fiction, fantasy, horror, literary, suspense... not a single entry under "furry."

Until now. Until Bad Dog Books, until FANG, until ROAR, until a reliable stable of writers finally decided that the time had come to provide a mainstream outlet specializing in anthropomorphic storytelling.

Volume 1 of ROAR is a gathering of fabulous anthropomorphic science fiction. We've got familiar faces like Kyell Gold and Whyte Yoté, as well as promising young turks like Kevin Frane, Calcifer Rauth and Redline. We've got tense, exciting dramas unfolding in claustrophobic locations, and sprawling epics that take you from secluded tribal villages to the edge of space. That's entertainment.

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