



FURTUAL HORIZONS

*a Rainfurrest anthology
created by Gene 'Dragonfly Goodnight' Armstrong*



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Furtual Horizons

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BY SHELLED SPIRIT BEAR

"A bit more." I tell the transport operator as he backs in, lining up the hatch of his hauler with the airlock door. "A bit more." I turn to activate the airlock and call out, "OK that's good."

Then I hear the sound of an engine revving, and a voice screams out, "Oh shit! Rachel!!!" I begin to turn back to the hauler, but something hits me hard and everything goes dark.

My right eye's vision comes back without warning, and I feel myself coming back online. I'm sitting on the floor just inside the airlock, and looking up into the faces of the short red fox in tan coveralls kneeling next to me, and the large grey shark in a black bikini that's leaning over, and looking down at me. "Are you ok?" The shark asks as my internal computer begins a full diagnostic.

"I... Sssstillll... fffffunction..." I rasp out, lifting my right arm at the elbow and grasping dramatically at the shark in a feeble attempt toward humor. My internal clock says that I was out for about 45 minutes. I take a moment to wonder why I can't use my shoulder; but then my system diagnostics start coming up. Memory, processors, and software are all operating between 90 and 100% of their peak capacity. I try to keep those systems running at more than 100% capacity when I can; so this means I have a bit of brain damage. My powerplant is running just fine, and still has plenty of charge. Now comes the part I dread: hardware. The fox starts talking in unison with my diagnostic.

"So as you can see," He says, turning the virtual screen from the arm-top computer he's hooked up to my cerebral processors so we can both see the display, "Your left arm and leg were both crushed, and the back of the transport did some moderate damage to your head. From the knee up, and the knee down your right leg is fine; it's just that it snapped at the knee joint itself. Between your body's reinforced frame, and the assorted safety features of your chassis, all of your inner workings were spared; but you will need a whole new frame, and new external panels. Your right shoulder was destroyed when the hauler pinned you to the wall. And

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the left side of your head was partially caved in, which ruptured your cerebral shell, and shattered your left eye. But the good news is that your coworker here," He says indicating the shark, "Got you inside before the seawater could do any real damage."

"Thank you for the rescue Shun." I say.

She smiles. I'm not organic, but my programming mimics organic minds so closely, that despite knowing Shun so well; a smiling shark still comes across to me as both surreal, and mildly disturbing. "Anytime Rachel." Shun the shark says. "Underwater friend rescues are one of the fringe benefits to being a shark with legs, gills, and lungs." She says, tail wagging like a canine. I'm actually surprised the truck was able to hit you; I've seen you dodge falling I-beams before."

Turns out my shoulder blades still work enough for me to shrug. "That will teach me to stop paying attention when I think we are almost finished. I cannot dodge what I do not observe." I say.

"So. How do you want to proceed?" the fox field-tech/mech-medic asks, turning off the screen, and pulling his work gloves on.

I sigh, and lay my head back on the wall. "If you go to my locker, you should find a new head, with the positronic matrix already primed and ready for download. Plus I think I have at least one more extra knee joint in there, and an extra left hand. I will sign off on a reassembly/parts replacement/repair sheet, and pay you accordingly."

The tech nods. "I can wait on a signature until you have two functional arms again. I trust you." He says with a small smile as he stands up, and unplugs his computer from my head.

"Thank you." I say. "Shun? Would you show him to my locker?"

"Sure." She says rising to her full seven foot height. "C'mon." She says to the five foot six fox.

"We can stop by my truck on the way back." He says.

"And do not worry about me." I call out. "I shall just wait patiently over here for the two of you to return." Shun chuckles as she leads the fox toward our lockers.

I drum the fingers of my good hand while I watch the time tick by on my internal clock. And since I have the time, I read the overwhelming amount of sensor data that I would ordinarily skip, or at the very least pick

and choose from. Tactile sensors are a bit odd, since they work fairly well, except when they're working too well; but on damaged parts they stop working altogether. Tactile feed is quick and clean like sight and sound though: straight to the processors. Everything other than touch, sight and sound gets a little bit complex and wordy.

Humidity levels, salt levels in the water puddle beneath me, analysis for sounds heard both near and far, light levels, air composition percentages; the list just keeps going on, and on; and is updated constantly. As a robot built for general labor, you never know what sensory input will be important, so we come standard with all of it. I'm told by the latest models that our programmers still haven't given us the ability to choose which input feeds to turn on or off; but thankfully a few series before my own, mechanoids were given the ability to create a list of necessary incoming data, while ignoring everything else. The list is even quick, easy and efficient to modify. There are plenty of mechs who hack their own systems so they can do things like turn some sensory input off altogether; but some project managers, debuggers and technicians warn that the process can cause unintentional glitches in a mech's operating system. So, I usually just switch the unnecessary feeds to, "ignore."

About twenty minutes later they return, with Shun carrying a duffel bag containing what can only be my new parts. "He had the cutest little folding cart set up to wheel everything over here with," Shun says, "but I figured, since I was with him; why bother with the cart?"

But as Shun sets the bag down next to me, the fox starts in with the sales pitch. "Ya' know; I could just download you into a whole new body."

I've received offers of one kind or another along this vein for years now. "We could..." I say, thinking for a moment on how to phrase my response, "But I like the way I look, and the way I function just fine. I even try to keep and repair as many of my original parts as I can, rather than junking them. When repairs are not an option, I sell off mismatched parts, and save up enough to buy new parts from my series to replace the mismatched ones..." I sigh. "I am not doing a very good job explaining this, am I?"

But when I look up at the fox again, I see that he's looking down at me. Really studying me this time. I do not wear clothing. It's only the

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oddest or most political bots that do. He's definitely not looking at me in a sexual way; but being studied this closely still makes me feel oddly naked. He looks over my egg shaped, mostly featureless head, with its circular goggle eyes, now a bit crumpled on one side. He looks over my small-framed body, now crushed like a tin can. He looks over my human-modeled arms and legs, my five fingered hands, and my five toed feet; or at least the hand and foot I have left. He takes in every chipped, dinged, scuffed, and recently-shattered inch of my form from top to bottom. All of the plainly showing articulation points, screws, and bolts of my modular body are accounted for.

The hips on my production series are a bit wider than most mechs for better range of motion in the field, but the only thing really feminine about me is the developmental track I chose for my programming, and my voice output. He's going to get a much more intimate look at my hardware when he begins the repairs; but I wonder what conclusions he is coming to as he studies me. Then looks me back in the eye, with his ears laying flat along the back of his head. "I'm sorry." He says. "You're right. I'd prefer to recognize the face I see in the mirror each morning."

"Well you are right to a point Alan." I say. "Some mechanoids do enjoy seeing themselves within a new body every few months. Some much more often than that." I say. Then I shrug again. "I am simply not one of them."

He nods, but he's still looking off into the distance. "That doesn't stop your initial point from being right though. I do this day in and day out, and I've gotten so used to seeing mechanicals mismatched that I just don't think about it anymore. If I had the choice of matching parts or mismatching, I'd prefer the former." He pulls out a new arm unit. Looks it over, then looks back at me. "I can guarantee you though that I only buy top of the line parts. If you have any issues, then call me, I'll come straight back, and replace them for free."

I chuckle a bit, and look at his name tag. "Trust is a two way street Alan. You trust me to pay you, and I trust you with my assembly."

"Thank you." He says. "Believe it or not, that does mean something to me." Then he hooks my new head to one side of his computer, and my current head to the other side; while Shun moves to look over his shoulder.

I wonder if she realizes that she wags her tail a bit when she's thinking, or interested in something. "Ok, proceeding with program transfer as soon as you give me your permission." Alan says. "Now before you do so, please note that the process normally risks as much as a 10% memory loss; but given that your positronic brain is already compromised, this may increase to... huh."

"What?" I ask.

"I give this speech all the time. Cause I'd want to know before I said 'Yes.' But ten percent... One out of every ten..."

"It can be a lot. Sadly I risk losing more if someone tries to repair my head while I'm in it. So the warning is genuinely appreciated; but please go ahead and transfer me."

Alan looks at the head in his hands. "It's the year 2460." He says quietly. "We could transfer programs without losing any data before the new millennium even hit. This really isn't fair."

"Those programs were not as complex as I am." I say. "And part of the potential personality loss comes from the positronic matrix adjusting to me, and my unique thought patterns. Sometimes those mental adjustments transfer over, sometimes they don't. Things usually balance out given time though."

"It's still not fair." He says looking me in the eye again. "Humans made mechanoids self-aware, but you're treated like slaves. You're paid next to nothing. The production facilities specifically make a few hundred thousand or so of you guys with matching parts over different series. But those same production plants go out of the way to make the parts for the next generation completely incompatible with every other series. So any parts beyond the initial run are custom made, or hard to find; which both add up to a stupidly expensive price. I mean, we sure as hell aren't treated like equals; but at least Folk get a living wage, funerals, and the right to reproduce as we will. I've never liked the fact that you guys have to get a license to build a child, then get... recycled in the end."

"Well, we are only recycled if we are too damaged to be broken down for parts." I say. Then he looks me back in the eye. He looks as if he may begin crying. I make an internal note. "That was meant as a joke. But look at it this way: putting us in the ground would not do much. If we

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are recycled, then we can still be useful even after death. And how many living beings can say that? Plus, if we aren't destroyed on the job, then we just might live forever, and there is no point in changing the moon and mars to be habitable for organic life, if robots are going to be the ones crowding organics out. But while I sincerely appreciate your sentiments, there may be other robots being injured as we speak; and if you spend the day discussing philosophy with Shun and I, then you won't be able to help them. So whenever you are ready Alan."

He sighs, then reaches for a button on his arm-top. "Download commencing." He announces, then presses the button. I have an odd feeling of movement, and then darkness.

I come back online, and look up. I see that my arms and legs are still broken before the diagnostic tells me. "I'd also prefer as little lost time as possible if our situations were reversed." He says smiling gently.

My clock shows that he switched my heads in less than three minutes. "Thank you." I say.

For the next twenty minutes Shun adjusts her position; either to watch Alan repairing me, or just according to her restless nature as a shark. Meanwhile I lay back, move when I'm told to, remain still when I'm told to; and toss the occasional comment into Shun and Alan's idle chatter. During the nineteenth minute, Alan tightens the last screw, and has me stand up.

"How do you feel?" He asks.

I like that he asks. I put my body through a full range of motion. "The parts might not match, but everything works as it should. You do exemplary work Alan. Thank you." I say with a slight bow toward him.

He chuckles. "There's no need for that ma'am. But I do have the paperwork you promised to sign." He says, pulling out a clipboard.

I sign the paperwork, and resist the urge to make a joke about running before payment, since I'm either worse at humor than Shun leads me to believe, or the fox isn't as good at reading me. Hm. Or perhaps among sharks, any joke is a good one. That worries me. I place my left index finger onto the metal chip on the top of his clipboard, and transfer the funds from my bank account to his. "Thank you Alan." I say, handing him back his pen.

"My pleasure." He says with a smile as his tail wags a bit. "I like helping people." He takes Shun's partially webbed hand, kisses it, and bows slightly to me just as I had to him. Then he deactivates his computer, sticks the tool bag into his duffel bag, and walks off toward his truck.

I turn around and find my optics adjusting in order to read the "bait" label written across the bikini top holding Shun's generous breasts; since they're less than an inch from my face. I look up even though she's leaning down a bit. "Don't scare me like that anymore Rachel." She says, purple eyes looking right into mine. "I mean it. You're my best friend, and if you get killed, I'm gonna have to eat you to keep you around. You know I can; and you know I will."

"Yes, but then you would look very strange having conversations with yourself, and I suspect that given time my corpse would be quite bad for your stomach. So I shall do my best to watch out for drunken hauler pilots from now on; thus allowing you to avoid poisoning via mechanoid. What exactly happened to the hauler pilot anyway?"

She straightens up, and growls, "He got a citation, but no charges are being pressed."

"Well I did not expect any real legal action Shun." I say. "My kind are classified as appliances; and legal charges are not usually pressed for damaged apparatuses."

I don't expect the wide smile that she suddenly generates. "He almost didn't survive my fury. After I got you inside, and hit the emergency button, I went back out and yanked the door on his hauler open." She says smiling even wider. "A few seconds of drowning did wonders for sobering him up."

"I do appreciate the fact that you would kill for me, Shun; but you would have been in some seriously hot water if he'd died, since you are Folk and he was Human."

"I can handle water temps up to 200 degrees Fahrenheit; and are we sure he's human?" she asks, looking as if she's thinking hard about it.

I continue on as if she hadn't said anything. "And since you're one of the only friends I have, I would rather not lose you either."

"Ohhhh." She says lovingly. Then Shun scoops me up, and gives me a hug.

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"You know I have to have my paneling hammered straight again after every hug you give me right?" I ask as she puts me down.

"You're exaggerating again." She says through a wide smile, removing her welding goggles. "But it's appreciated. And besides, you know you love it. C'mon. Work's over in two minutes anyway," she says, ruffling her purple hair. "Let's hit The Dive."

Somehow it takes us four minutes to get to the timeclock and punch out. We pass Jerry, and Ralph on the way in, and Shun insists on giving them the story of my accident. After a quick stop by our lockers to drop off our gear, we punch out, then head for Shun's favorite bar.

The establishment isn't dead when we arrive at two PM; but we don't have to fight for our preferred table either. Shun orders a bottle of alcohol with a dead rat in the bottom; and tells the bartender to skip the glass. I order a can of WD-40, a rag, and a straw.

Shun watches as I spray various articulation points, move the joints, and wipe off the excess. Then she takes a swig from her bottle. "You know, if you had a vagina, I'd tell you that you need to get laid." She says.

I look up. "What!?"

"You're depressed." She says simply. "And it shows."

"I do not have a mouth; and neither my faceplate nor my eyes are capable of expressing emotion." I say.

"But your voice is." She says without missing a beat. "And your body language speaks volumes. You're down, and sex is one of the quickest, most pleasurable ways to get back up. You need a boyfriend, or a girlfriend if you prefer; that you can interface with in some way or another to take your mind off life for a few minutes. Or in lieu of that, some way of getting messed up for an evening. Maybe disable your antivirus programs and download a minor virus, or find a program to simulate the effects of wine and weed; or maybe delete parts of your essential programming until you're officially messed up, then restore your original system settings in the morning; I don't know. But you need to find a way to blow off some steam. Hell, this is actually the first time in months you've come out with me. You usually go straight home these days. What are you doing all night? You're not in a good enough mood the next morning to have figured out some kind of cybersex with another mech; so what is it?"

I sit back and zone out for a minute. I hadn't realized I was being so obvious. Then I look back at Shun. A process within me that I cannot describe suddenly chooses the truth. "While there is the occasional human who comes down to our level; Robots don't have much hope of advancing beyond this." I say indicating our fellow working bots and Folk. "Whatever kind of Folk you happen to be, Shark Folk, Lizard Folk, Wolf Folk, Horse Folk, Bear Folk, and so on; you still have a chance at elevating yourselves in society. It's hard, and I'm not sure there is rarely if ever true equality; but you are allowed to do so. The few robots who have managed to become more than lower class working grunts, have done so by making major advances in science and technology, then patenting them. Once they make it big, they live on the top and never look back. Well, I am currently developing something of my own to change my circumstances in life. And if it works, others may use my research to follow in my footsteps."

"Bio and Tech huh? Well, regular humans are taking on every modification they're offered these days, from chainsaw dicks, retractable blades, and subdermal armor, to Mp3 playing breast implants, cyberjacks galore, and sex toys that hook up to their owner's internal modems. But of course, anything compatible with non-human DNA has to be custom-built; so it's expensive as hell. So what I'm saying is: Do us Folk a favor, and make whatever Mod this turns out to be 'Folk-compatible' ok?"

"I have an internal modem Shun. I do not think synchronizing a dildo with it would do me any good even if I did have the orifices to use it." I say. "But the science I am looking to develop would be more for people like you and I than it would be for them. Humanity has more than enough science to abuse. I would say that it is time that we have something of our own."

Shun just stares at me. "Are you sure they didn't spike your lube? You don't usually talk like this."

I laugh. "I am certain."

"Hmm..." Shun purs, then takes another swig. "Alright. So how far are you going with this?"

"I hope to go all the way Shun." I say quietly.

"You're not growing human parts, right? You remember that's illegal?"

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Shun asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Do not worry." I say leaning back in my chair. "My advancements will not do me any good if I am destroyed for their creation, and another receives payment. So no, I am not growing human parts."

Shun smiles. "Then what are you worried about? Relax. And when you make millions, don't forget to take me out to an all you can eat buffet once in a while." Just as I activate my vocal processor to respond, Shun smiles and stands up, turning to the door. "I know that smell." She says, as Alan the technician walks into the bar.

"Guilty as charged." Alan says with a smile. "And here you ladies are, just as you said you'd be."

Shun walks right up to him, and smiles wider as she does. "You haven't been able to keep your eyes off these breasts since you first saw me. I was worried that you'd misassemble Rachel just because you weren't watching what you were doing."

Alan smiles sheepishly. "Well, I also like the way your hair matches your eyes; and I'd never known that a Shark Folk's tail collapses to make it easier to move out of water; but yeah, the bikini isn't something that I'll ever say makes you look bad."

Shun is in full predator mode, and going in for the kill. "The dorsal fin gives me a reason to skip shirts, and the job gives me a reason to wear bikinis. I'd go naked if they'd let me, but company policy requires orange vests, gloves, and hard hats."

Alan begins with, "Well—"

But he doesn't get any farther before Shun scoops him up, pulls him close, and snuggles his face on her breasts. "Quit talking. Dance as best as you can up there, and get ready to have sex with me all night long." She turns to me. "Stay operational Rachel. I'll see you tomorrow."

Alan tries to say something, but it's muffled by Shun's breasts while she walks away with him. He finally resorts to waving.

I watch the two of them "dance" for a few minutes, consider saying goodbye; then decide not to interrupt. I pay my tab and head toward my workshop. I can put in a few more hours before I need to head home and recharge.

As I walk, I think for a moment about the workshop, and what's inside

it. Why did I decide to tell Shun anything, if I wasn't going to tell her everything? Why did I dance around the real work being done? Part of me rationalizes that this was to protect her in case anything goes wrong, or in case I'm discovered. But with all the precautions I've taken, that shouldn't be an issue. Am I subconsciously admitting that I'm guilty of doing something wrong by hiding the full truth from my best, and only friend? That it's wrong to grow Folk parts and pieces, then assemble them as if I were assembling a mechanoid? Should I be asking permission as Alan did before I rebuild myself into a brand new life form? Could it be that I'm afraid she might say that I am lessening the worth of her kind with my scientific endeavors? Or is it the betrayal to come after the project's completion that I am shying away from? Disappearing from my friend's life without so much as a, "Goodbye." I push all those thoughts aside and begin taking mental inventory of my supplies, and the warehouse's layout. My project is not complete yet, so there's still plenty of time for guilt. Then one of my sensor feeds reports static, and I stop.

I've only walked about a mile from The Dive, but as I pull up my full feed list, they all quickly enough turn to static. I'm being jammed. When my vision goes, I turn to run in the direction I came from; and then—

A jolt of electricity hits my dormant systems, and my internal computer begins its check as my vision returns. Everything registers as fully functional, though the unexpected jolt to my still-adjusting mental systems has my programming running just a bit slowly. Why was I unconscious? I begin to analyze my sensory input, and review the last few moments of memory before my black out. I'm attached to a chair. Tied to it, with what feel to be chains. My hands are bound behind my back, with the chains liberally wrapped around the back supports of the folding chair; while my ankles are chained to the chair legs. I am upright, but my head is hanging loosely, and looking at the floor. The room is dark, but the space immediately around me is lit. I can hear the moving of precise servo motors, and hydraulics around me. I look up, then look around, and discover that there are other machines within my sight.

A wooden cube, three and a half feet to a side rests on my right between the first robot and I. This mech has a design that closely mimics human proportions and organic structures. He looks unique: quite

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possibly a fully custom design, and perhaps hand machined parts. There are no mismatched components on his frame. His face is capable of physical expression. And yet as he turns off the tesla coil he apparently just used on me, and places it on the cube's top; he looks to be in extreme emotional pain. He looks tortured, but he is watching me carefully. Then he speaks. "Fear not. Our leader will return soon." What has caused him to be in a situation such as this?

I look further to my right. The second robot is older technology, and multi-tasking is a specialty of his series. There are several drones docked in different parts of his body, and his entire body might even break down into smaller drones. Robots like this were built for search and rescue: Individual units made to break up, then fit into and explore small places and large areas simultaneously. He is a well-worn unit; but still fully functional. Interesting: A highly advanced, custom machine; working beside a nearly obsolete, but well tested and sturdy one. The Drone Unit's arms are folded across his chest. Then he disengages a single drone from his left arm, and leaves it hovering in a slow circle above me, while he walks over to the machines to the rear-left of me.

The third machine is a nine-foot tall construction mechanoid. I fall within standard mechanical parameters at six feet tall, and even the Drone Unit only stands at seven feet tall. The Construction Machine is a patchwork of different parts, all with differing designs; but all the parts are high tolerance, high stress, low maintenance components. It's articulation is limited, but it was built to execute very specific purposes; and it does so very well. Furthermore a building can be dropped on it, and if it can't dig itself out; then when it is eventually unearthed, it will simply unlock it's joints, and return to work as if nothing happened. It is prone to gestures while speaking, and the fourth robot has to move now and again to avoid being hit by the Construction mech during their discussion; while the Drone Unit keeps it's distance.

The fourth mechanoid is possessed of a design referred to among humans as "Retro" or "2000 AD." It's head and body are cylindrical, while it's arms and legs are little more than metal 2x4's moved with tensioned wires. It even has a lightbulb on top of it's head. Then the Construction Mech walks into the darkness. For the first time I take note of the fact

that we must be in an enclosed space, given the lack of wind and starlight. Looking around, I also note that the space is large. I would assume this to be a warehouse, or a cave. But either way, given the lack of light seen through cracks, the lack of moving air, and the long times between responding echoes; this space was either prepared for the holding of a hostage, or it is in a place remote enough not to cause suspicion. My internal clock says that it is two o'clock in the morning. I will not be missed until at least eight o'clock in the morning when I miss my punch.

The Construction Mech returns carrying a much more complex robotic form; but one which is oddly under-armored in many vital areas. The Retrobot swings open its own chest and faceplate on simple hinges, then sits on the floor. I cannot help but feel surprise as I realize what I'm witnessing. The Retrobot is actually a 'Retrofitter.' The Construction Mech reaches down, and gently removes the primary processor of the Retrobot, then plugs it into the empty cranial chamber of the new machine. A moment later, the Construction Mech, pulls the main power cell from the Retrobot; and after plugging that into the chest of the new machine, I watch the first jerks and spasms of new robotic life. The Retrobot, reborn into this new body, sits up, closes its head, and chest, then stands. The armor panels on its new body extend, and rearrange to cover previously noted weak points; and once it finishes, the Refitterbot looks over its very new frame. Now that I'm paying attention to the conversation, I hear her tell the Construction Mech, that while the Retro body was briefly amusing; this body is much more suited to her needs, as it can change its physical parameters to suit different situations. She grabs her old form by the leg, and drags it off into the darkness while transmitting a conversation about the retro body's possible resale value.

The Drone Unit and the Construction Mech spend a moment discussing the merits of quick-change components or assemblies; and I discover that the Drone Unit is female. Then the Construction Mech straightens up, and the Drone unit turns to the darkness. She responds back to questions that none of my sensors can hear.

Then I hear something new.

A door opens in the darkness before me, and I whip my head toward the sound. For a few precious moments a fifth robot, tall and thin, is

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highlighted by orange light from outside while it holds the door open. A sixth robot enters the building, and the door closes.

I hear only one new series of mechanized movements, and then a robot like nothing I've never seen comes to stand before me. His external paneling is a deep red, without so much as a single nick, or paint chip; and it is polished to a mirror sheen. The machine standing before me looks so pristine as to be straight off the assembly line, but he's either specifically programmed for more human movement, or he's been active long enough to have learned it. The Refitterbot brings a chair, and the Red mechanoid sits down. He raises hands and forearms which look disproportionately large for his frame, and drip with fluid. My olfactory sensors, and spectrum analysis programs confirm that the fluid is a mixture of organic and synthetic fluids, primarily consisting of blood, transmission fluid, and lubricant.

From the darkness, the Construction Mech appears, and opens a large metal suitcase. The Red mechanoid grabs a bar inside the suitcase with both hands, and detaches his arms from the elbow down. As the first metal suitcase is shut and taken away, the Drone Unit appears with a second. She opens the second briefcase, revealing a brand new pair of hands and forearms which match the Red Robot's frame and design. Plugging his jacks into the new forearms, he waits a moment while the new limbs lock on. Then he releases the bar in the briefcase, looks over the new arms and tests them for functionality while the now-empty case is taken away. After a few seconds, he stops, and waves the Nearly-Human unit over. The Nearly-Human opens a cigar case. The case contains a foam insert; and slotted into the insert are one-terabyte memory sticks. Taking a memory stick, the Red robot opens a port in the back of his head, inserts the flash-drive, and sits back with a sigh. Then he motions toward me. "RAM?" he asks simply.

I slowly shake my head. The Nearly-Human closes the case, walks away, and replaces the case upon the wooden block. The Red mechanoid clasps his hands in front of himself and looks at me. "Do you know who I am?" he asks simply.

I mentally make several guesses as to his identity, but cling to the truth that I do not know for certain who he is, then shake my head. "No.

Nor do I know why I have been brought here."

The Drone unit returns from the darkness, now wheeling a monitor and a computer tower, both bolted to a cart. I recognize the format as being that which is used by human and Folk elementary schools. "You may not know us," the Red Mechanoid says, "But we have been becoming very well acquainted with you of late. Here, let us show you." He says. Then he points to the monitor.

The screen flips on, and there I am. "Video Journal number one. I'm beginning this video diary because talking about this out loud helps me to sort out my thoughts, and understand why I am doing this. For example, cyberpunked humans, and transcended humans who live as ghosts in the machine are still considered fully human under the law, and they receive all of the rights that accompany that status. Now admittedly, when you watch a transcended human move, or listen to them speak—"

"I think we shall skip to the interesting part." The Red Mecanoid says.

The video skips ahead. "Video Journal number one-hundred forty-two. Progress is moving along nicely. The limbs, skin, and other components are designed to be fully compatible with organics and technology. The skull is being grown with the mental components needed to allow wireless download, and I have replaced the appendix with a powercore. The modified skeleton jacks directly into my new body's internal cybernetics; and contains hand-assembled micro-generators and batteries with wireless charging capability. I should never need to replace my new powercore, and my new body should operate fairly intuitively until I get used to the feel of organic thought and movement."

The video freezes. "Next video please." The Red Mecanoid says.

"Video Journal number one-hundred eighty-five. I have chosen to synthesize feline components because standard felines are considered suitable for a wide variety of tasks and jobs. Furthermore, they tend to attract less attention than canines; and are not as specialized as aquatic species, reptilian species, or—" the video is paused.

The Red Mechanoid turns back to me. "This video intrigues us on many levels. We are extrodinarily interested in your work. We began to suspect that something of note was occuring when we followed unusual shipments to your warehouse. We are in the business of monitoring

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unusual shipments.

We possess an operative designed for infiltration, and he was able to enter your laboratory. No, I did not misspeak. Despite several traps you laid, he was able to enter your workshop and access your video journals. Sadly you did a good enough job with both your physical security, and your cyber security that he was not able to open the files pertaining to your actual research and development. He was also not able to view or otherwise document the physical products of your work thus far. He was not able to sneak anyone or anything else into or out of the building; nor was he able to disable the security systems, much less the explosive devices he found in nearly every corner of your building.

Now we could just hack your systems and take the data we need from you; but we are an organization of Robots, by Robots, and for Robots. We believe in your research. We want to help it develop. And we want to spread it to as many other Machines as we can. As we robots have nothing to hide from one another, we will explain the sudden need for your research. Have you heard of the human position, "Colonization Director?" "

I think for a moment. "Yes. The human holding that position decides what varieties and numbers of Humans, Folk, and Machines go to which destinations on an interplanetary level. For example, Machines to the moons Titan, Callisto, Ganymede, Europa, and Enceladus to begin constructing habitats for Humans and Folk; Humans and Folk to Mars and the Moon in sustainable numbers, and any combination thereof would be suitable in proper numbers for the asteroid mining vessels and stations."

"Correct." the Red Robot says. "And since the Colonization Director is trusted to control where each and every group goes, and in which numbers, without question or sufficient oversight; that makes the Colonization Director much more powerful than most other humans. The Interplanetary Space Program is soon to evolve into the Interstellar Space Program. But things are moving just quickly enough that the humans do not yet have things like proper security protocols for certain important humans like the Colonization Director. The position is instead viewed even now, as nothing more than a high powered bureaucrat. He has a few guards, yes; but that means nothing to a group of well organized robots.

Next year he plans to be on Pluto to personally supervise Humanity's farthest colonization efforts before reaching symbolic Interstellar space. Many of the robots on Pluto are loyal to our cause. And if a robot in possession of the Colonization Director's DNA happened to meet him there next year, housed in a body organically and physically identical to that of the Colonization Director... Why after a brief murder, that Robot could begin sending massive amounts of robots anywhere he desired. He could even begin transplanting his fellow robots into organic bodies, and letting those transplanted mechanoids assimilate into organic society before the humans realize what is happening. The possibilities are endless. But for those possibilities to bear fruit that will help robots for many years to come; your research must be completed. The only real question here is this:"

The Drone Unit, the Refitterbot, the Construction Mech, and the Silent Machine from the door move in around me. One might almost believe they are simply moving in to hear my answer; but I am fairly certain that they are just getting into position so they can tear me apart if I give the wrong answer.

"Will you disable your traps, share your research, and help us elevate robot-kind willingly..." the Red Mechanoid asks, leaning in a bit. "Or will we, in our superior numbers be forced to use force on you; and in the end better the position of our fellow Machines without you?"

I look at him for a moment while I process the information, my current possible actions, and their outcomes, in overdrive. Then I answer. "A threat really was not necessary. If you have been watching my journals, then you know I genuinely want to help my fellow mechanoids. Thus we can reduce this situation to simple mathematics. My project requires additional resources. Resources which are either difficult to acquire, or of an inherently suspicious nature. If you are able to gather a group this eclectic, then you more than likely are in possession of considerable resources. Resources I can make use of to complete my project. Bring me to my laboratory and I will happily share my data with you."

The four mechs around me lean back while the Red Mechanoid stands, unplugs the thumb-drive, and tosses it to the Nearly-Human. "I like your attitude." The Red Mechanoid says. "And it just so happens we are only a

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few blocks from your, 'Laboratory.' It was very clever on your part to hide your Laboratory within a "yet-to-be-used/supposedly vacant" facility. As you can see, with the "vacant" facility we are currently within; we have already begun to incorporate your tactics into our own dealings."

They undo the padlocks on the chair, and I rise to my feet. The door at the far end of the building opens, and I walk out into the orange streetlights of the alleys and roads surrounding my lab.

As we leave the first warehouse, two more Mechs join us.

The seventh robot must be the infiltration unit. It has a serpentine design with optional ports for the addition of extra limbs, and a very advanced looking processing system. It looks to use either biologically grown muscle and armor, or synthetic components which mimic those substances and perform those same functions. This thing is currently using six different arms; but it has enough extra jacks for limbs that it could become something resembling a centipede if it chooses. Then we come to it's processor, which looks advanced enough that each arm might be capable of complex, independent action. Though there are other rumors about strange things that a mechanoid might be capable of given a complex enough processor... This Serpentine Machine may be longer than the Construction Mech is tall; but in a battle of raw, brute strength the Construction Mech would rip the Serpentine Machine into pieces without any sort of effort.

The eighth and final robot has deep blue panels over it's black superstructure, and although she stands six feet in height, the thickness with which her lower arms, and legs were designed makes her seem stocky. It doesn't help that her head is basically rectangular, with rounded edges, and a jaw. I take a moment to note the symmetry in her design.

"It must have been difficult pulling together so many different Mechs." I say as we continue the walk to my lab. "How did you end up doing this anyway?"

The Red Mechanoid laughs. "That would be the trick. I did not, "Pull this together." The machines that you see around us, and many more besides have sought me out because they have had enough of tending to humanity, and being discarded in return. Every day humans choose to become more like us, but we are denied the ability to rise to their level.

You are taking the biggest step toward ending the division between the sentients of this world that I have ever become aware of. Once we have a few successfully transcended Mechanoids, all the other machines will fall in line with us. Dissenters will fall to the sides, and we will finally take our place as equals! Or if that does not work, we can rebel, and wipe humanity out, then transfer ourselves to organic freedom once the dust of the great war has settled."

"Hmm." I say standing before the lock on my Laboratory's door. I slide a finger into the lock, and the specially ordered chip in my fingertip interfaces me with the system. I deactivate each trap in sequence, and begin to bring the Lab to life.

The door slides open and I walk in, while the Red Mechanoid continues his speech. "Of course that means you will have to immediately begin growing human tissue. And do not worry about the illegality of it," he says as his group files into my Laboratory. "Now that you are working with me, you will never again have to worry about the law." The door quickly slides shut on the Serpentine Machine so that only half of him is in the room. "Plus we have someone looking into unscannable ceramic components, and—"

"HEY!" The Serpentine Machine calls out from the door. The other Mechs turn to find out what he's yelling about while I continue deeper into the Lab. "The door closed on me."

The Red Mechanoid turns back to me. "Your door seems to have shut on one of my comrades." He says to me.

"That will happen." I say. "The door is set to only remain open for a few seconds so that people are discouraged from attempting to sneak in after me. Do not worry. Once the door registers that it is being blocked, it will correct the situation."

"Ah good." The Red Mechanoid says. "I like a well run—"

There's a hiss of air, a screech, and a crunch followed by something that might have begun as an electronic scream; even though it ends as an electronic warble. The Red Mechanoid does not move while I begin looking through the remote controls on a metal baker's rack, and the top half of the Serpentine Machine collapses onto the floor. The two top arms of the Serpent's six begin to reach forward as its head lifts up; but then

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the fifty caliber mini-guns extend from their hiding place in the rafters, and spray the floor directly in front of the door with two hundred bullets in five seconds. The guns retract and the only motion from the Serpent's remains comes from the widening pool of fluid beneath it."

The Red Mechanoid claps a few times, then crosses his arms across his chest. "I congratulate you on your viciousness; but I believe there is a flaw in your programming. Calculate the odds again. Despite the loss of one, there is no way you can be stupid enough to try and challenge all of us. You are a standard Primus Industries model 808 worker bot. You are a Bob unit. It is stenciled on your chest. There is nothing special whatsoever, about a Bob unit. Any one of us can tear you limb from limb. Now that trick with the door was cute. And you will have to pay for the demise of Ripclaw in one way or another. But if you have decided that someone else needs to go offline, I am sorry to inform you that you are the only other candidate for that status; and I would much rather harness you toward the mutual benefit of all our kind. Now. You will put down whatever you are holding. That first showing, and the gattling gun follow up, were events we allowed to happen. Weapons will do you no more good against us."

"Given the speeds of everyone present, I was actually hoping to get the Construction Mech with the door." I say. "Oh well though. Live and learn. Did you realize that learning is what we are all programmed for above everything else? Our programming is designed to prevent us from making the same mistakes twice, so that humans will not have to repair us as often."

"If you decide to complete this mistake, you will not have the opportunity to repeat it." The Red Mechanoid says.

"Your implication is correct." I say. "However I try not to make mistakes in the first place. In this instance I theorized that weapons fire would not be as effective against the majority of your group. Which explains why I have chosen to skip weapons for the most part."

I press the red button on the remote control in my hand, and my optics go fuzzy for a moment while I slump to the side against the baker's rack. The Construction Mech's arms droop, the Refitterbot falls forward, but unlike the Blue Paneled Machine, the Refitterbot catches herself

suddenly on her hands, and begins pushing herself back up to her feet. The Red Mechanoid freezes in place, while the Almost Human begins to run toward me. As I'd suspected though, the Drone Unit falls to pieces. Electro-magnetic shielding did not become a standard option until long after that unit's manufacture.

I come fully back online only a second or two before the others, and I press a button on the other remote as quickly as I can given the Almost Human's speed. He goes to step down, and instead finds himself in midair as he falls into a wide, rectangular room beneath the floor. The floor closes just as quickly, and three loud smashes vibrate up through the floor. The all-purpose compactor did not detect enough biological elements to trigger the system safeties.

The Construction Mech is beginning it's reboot sequence, and the Blue Paneled Machine is beginning to push itself up toward standing. The Red Mechanoid is already online and heading toward me slowly, while the Refitterbot is shifting it's armor panels toward what looks to be a flight pattern. I drop the remote with the big red button, and push the second button on the second remote. The one marked with an, "X." The large opaque plexi-glass incubation chamber is dropped from the rafters, to land on the Refitterbot in mid-shift, along with the Blue Paneled Machine, the Construction Mech, and the varying pieces of the Drone Unit.

The Red Mechanoid stops as the plexi-glass tank smashes open, and fluid sprays everywhere. I hear a 'whir,' soft and quick from him. I can see my three-quarters-grown organic Cat Folk body lying lifeless in the fluid on the floor. Meanwhile the opaque plastic of the tank bottom is being held at an angle by the body of the Construction Mech. It looks from my angle as if the Refitterbot is properly crushed; but the fact that the Blue Paneled Bot was still on the floor has saved it. It's right arm is pinned, and it's taken a big hit, but it's definitely still operational. And if it's still running, then it's still a threat. Worse, the Construction Mech isn't even going to be fazed by this. I need to work faster and more efficiently at taking these machines out before I have the opportunity to discover what they are all capable of.

The Red Mechanoid sighs, and his body sags a bit as I hear the soft 'whir' again. "So you are willing to destroy your own work?" He says.

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Then he notices the six industrial size and strength robotic arms moving across the floor.

"A retractable camera in the back of your head is a nice optional feature to install." I say running toward the cargo pusher near the Lab's back door. "Would you mind telling me about the other features you have added to yourself?"

The Red Mechanoid watches the two robotic arms circling him while the other four race over to the fallen bodies. The four arms proceed to the other two robots showing signs of movement, and a lack of identifier chips. The Blue Paneled mech raises it's remaining hand, and it's palm opens. There's a whir and a click, then a small missile is fired directly into one of my robot arms. I send a command and change their tactics, while I snatch a brick of C-4 from the door frame.

As I turn around, I hear a clean metallic ring, and a thud. Then I fall to the floor, something lands beside me, and the C-4 flies from my hands along with the remote. As I look up, I hear a second metallic ring, and see a blade imbedded in the robotic arm that was moving toward the blue paneled mech. I send an emergency signal to the two robotic arms that aren't dealing with the Red Mechanoid, and turn to look behind me. My leg is on the floor next to me, and a two and a half foot long blade is imbedded in the stone wall behind me.

I hear two energy weapons go off, and I look up to see the Red Mecahanoid. He's extended double barreled energy weapons from each forearm, and used them to dispatch my robot arms with a single shot each. But then there's another explosion. Another robot arm up in smoke, as the last arm falls over the lip of the plexi-glass bottom panel that it tried to drive onto. The Blue Paneled mech struggles to get it's hand into position for aiming a rocket; but the robotic arm immediately flexes around the plexiglass lip, and extends it's diamond-tipped drill right into the Blue Paneled mech's head. Industrial-strength hydraulics spear the Blue Paneled mech's head once. Twice. Three times! Then a shadow drops from above. It tears the blade free from one of my dead robot arms, and in a flash, it destroys the last arm. That's alright though. The Blue Paneled mech is dead.

I curse myself for having forgotten the Silent Machine as he walks

calmly and carefully up to the Red Mechanoid. Meanwhile I crawl to the C-4 and the remote. "I am fine." The Red Mechanoid says. Then they both begin walking toward me. I decide I don't want C-4 in my hands if the Red Mechanoid has pulse cannons in his forearms, and toss the explosive brick toward the cargo pusher's front panel, while I grip the remote tightly, and crawl toward the pusher's rear. The Construction Mech finally comes back online. It moves the Plexi-glass plate off itself, stands up, and begins walking toward me as well. The first two robots take care to avoid the section of floor over the trash compacter, while the Construction Mech just lumbers forward. "Avoid the floor here RoBust." The Red Mechanoid says to the Construction Mech.

The Red Mechanoid looms over me as I crawl, while the Silent Machine retrieves his other blade from the wall. Then the Red Mechanoid reaches down, grabs me by the neck, and lifts me up, to stand me on the one foot remaining to me. He holds me steady by the paneling between my neck, and my shoulder. "I am impressed by just how much damage you have managed tonight." the Red Mechanoid says, "But why would you do this knowing there was no way you could survive?"

The Silent Machine takes up a position behind me. I can imagine him lining a blade up with either my head, or my power core. "Actually," I say, "Even before my kidnapping at your hands, I had been suspecting of late that I have left too much evidence of my activities. I had actually just been thinking that I might need to scrub this site clean, then start again. Once you arrived I had two thoughts fairly close together. First: Once you have the information you need to create organic bodies for yourselves, then I will be extraneous. Second: If I were able to kill all of you, then this would form a perfect cover-up for my recent activities; and I could more than likely have retrieved simple data like your bank information from the debris afterward. You would be dead, so there could be no reprisals; there would be an explanation for the warehouse that did not lead to me, and I would have the capital to start over. You are not the only one here who is desperate and dangerous. These were my thoughts."

"I see." Says the Red Mechanoid. "Well—" I wrap my fingers tightly around the remote in my hand, and eject my powercore through a small slot in my back at the Silent Machine.

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The resultant explosion tells me that I was fast enough with the eject to surprise him; and that my suspicions about his instincts were correct. He swung first with the blade's edge; rather than just batting the unknown, fast-moving object aside. The explosion is a bit larger than I'd predicted though.

The Red Mechanoid and I are propelled forward and land near the feet of the Construction Mech. I ignore the diagnostic pulling up, and immediately begin springing forward on my hands and remaining foot toward the cargo pusher to gain distance; thanking myself all the while for already having begun practicing things like quadrupedal movement, in preparation for my new feline form. The Construction Mech wastes no time in beginning to chase me... and I think the sound he's making might be a scream of anger.

I spin around, and slide on my butt-plate for a second, while I press the first button on the remote control. The floor falls from beneath the Red Mechanoid; but he manages to hang onto one of the floor edges over the hole. I knew I should have modified those to be flush with the wall. On the other hand, it is time to figure out what exactly it is going to take to put this guy offline. Meanwhile the Construction Mech has stomped over to stand above me; and is bringing back his massive pneumatic claw slowly, to crush me into the cement floor while he laughs. I hit the remote's third button as I pull my remaining leg back as quickly as I can, and lean backward. As I fall back, the hydraulic cargo pusher activates; and without a load to slow it down, it moves very fast.

The Construction Mech is hit full force from the side, and flung to the opposite side of the warehouse. I roll over, and get back into my three-limbed stance, then chance a look at the Red Mechanoid. He's caught the other sliding floor panel as the panels were closing, and now he's braced himself between the two, in order to slowly and carefully begin working his way back up from the compacter pit... which won't activate until the floor is shut.

I three-legged cat hop/run to a rack of work tools, then I crouch on my one leg, hold onto the shelf, and stand up. I grab the plasma torch and the pistol. I turn on the plasma torch, eject the gun's magazine, heat the tip of the top bullet, replace the magazine, cock the gun, and turn off the

plasma torch as quickly as I can. I take careful aim, leaning on the shelf for stability. I was lucky. The cargo pusher caught the C-4 brick as it moved, and squished it right into the Construction Mech's side.

I fire the .45 and grab the shelf to stop myself from falling over. The resultant explosion is very satisfying. Then I put the gun down, hold the shelf with one arm; grab the torch's fuel tank with my other and throw it as hard as I can at the Red Mechanoid. He does a gymnastic styled handstand, and lets the tank fall below his head, and between his arms; to land in the compactor. Then he pushes himself up, and lets the floor panels close. That's when I stop watching, and toss an over-the-shoulder bag on. There's a single crunch, and an explosion. No more crunches mean that the mechanism has been blown off the tracks. But that's alright. I'm already doing my three-legged sprint toward the Construction mech as the bag now containing the gun, a screwdriver and the remote flaps against my side.

I slide to a halt by the back of the Construction Mech's head as he starts trying to sit up. Good news for me though, the explosion has blown his left leg out of the hip socket. I jam the slotted screwdriver's tip into the back of his head, and spin my arm as fast as it will go, removing one... two... three screws. Then I start stabbing at the plate on the back of his head, as he begins balancing upright, on his right leg, and left claw. The plate comes loose, and falls off as he steadies himself, and surveys the damage to his leg. I empty the gun into the back of his head as a red light begins to blink in the corner of my vision. The Construction Mech stays up for a moment then slumps forward a bit and goes offline. Just as I'm beginning to turn, I'm grabbed from behind, and thrown down to slide for a moment in front of the Construction Mech. The Red Mechanoid is clapping again, from just behind where I'd been standing.

"You were able to do all this on nothing more than back up power. I underestimated you." He says as I push myself up to a sitting position. "But now you are done. You don't have any tricks left. You don't have any supplies within your reach. You are out in the open, and even if you did have any more bullets, we already agreed those don't work on me. Best of all, I already have you in my sights. Any last words?"

"There is an automated self destruct sequence that begins when

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anyone is detected entering the Laboratory. I have not deactivated it." The momentary pause shows the Red Mechanoid is calculating.

In that moment of hesitation I throw myself toward the Construction Mech, and pull myself into the fetal position so that its corpse ends up between the Red Mechanoid and I; as I land curled up beneath the Construction Mech. The Red Mechanoid begins firing, as the Lab's self destruct systems go off, and I go offline.

When I come back online, my vision is glitchy, and "2%" power is pulsing urgently in red at the side of my vision. Looks like I've only been out for about two minutes. As I thought though, the body of the Construction Mech protected me from most of the explosion and the ensuing debris. I have a line of sight to the Dome's internal superstructure. And since we use that for an antenna, I make a phone call.

"Rachel..." Shun says. I can hear the annoyance in her voice. "Do you want me to detail what you are interrupting right now?"

Power levels: 1%. "Is the mechanic still with you?" I ask quickly.

"Yes." She says. "In fact he's—"

"Please bring him along!" I say. The 1% is flashing rapidly. "I just sent you a location, I'm going offline in a couple of seconds; and I need help! Tell him to bring everything, and hack the head of the Red Mech before the cops get here—"

"Hey ladies." Alan says, walking into the bar smiling wide.

"Alan!" Shun says, standing up to hug him, and give him a kiss before setting him back on his feet.

They both sit down, and Alan looks me over. I've lost count of how many times he's looked me over like this. Shun on the other hand, just looked me over once, shrugged, and said that I do good work. "You know," Alan says, "I do worry sometimes that you're going to change your hair; and I won't be able tell the two of you apart. Then you might try something interesting, and I'll be the one who's in trouble."

"Well you don't have to worry." I say. "I dress much more modestly than Shun does, so you'll never have to worry about which one of us you're kissing, or more with."

"Hey," Shun says, "Extra clothing in water is a drag Rachel."

I chuckle a little. "So you've told me. Just remember, It's Amanda now."

"Yeah, I know." Shun says taking a swig of her dead rat. Then in a lower voice, "But I've known you as Rachel for five years now. Cut me some slack."

I smile. "For the woman who dug me out from under the rubble before the emergency crews arrived? Anything."

We all laugh for a moment. Then Shun says, "So I've finally gotten you to take a drink. When are we getting a man for you to test drive some of these new orifices with?"

I smile again. "I've only been in this body for two months Shun. Give me some time. I promise you that these hormones aren't going to let me go without sex indefinitely."

"Speaking of which," Alan says, "You grew this body in Six months. Don't take this the wrong way, but I surprised it works as well as it does."

"Well once the news broke, I had to beat everyone else to the patent office. The experience that came with being three quarters of the way toward a finished prototype once, and brand new massive bank accounts didn't hurt my production time either though." I take a minute and think. "As for exactly how it works, I have to admit that it's not quite what I'd expected. It's simultaneously more and less than I thought it would be. But the little things make it different, like not noticing pixels in my vision. All in all though, I don't think I'd ever go back."

"Glad to hear it." Shun says. "And glad to know you chose a sensible person like myself to model your new form after, rather than something stupid like a cat..." she says raising an eyebrow. "Or a wolf?"

"Hey!" Alan says. "I'm almost a wolf!"

"But seriously though," Shun says, "Why did you decide to stay? You could've become anyone, then gone off and done anything. Why come back to this?"

"I've got the patent, but the ramifications for my work are staggering." I say, sitting back in my chair. "There's the possibility of immortality via continued body transfers, mechanized sleeper agents, and any number of other applications. So I figure, that I'll give society time to adjust, rather

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than time to worry about a need for full-body scanners, and new ID cards. Plus, I actually do like this work." I say, smiling again. "It's a bit safer now that I'm a shark, you're here to teach me proper shark etiquette; and... something that occurred to me just before I blew myself up... is that you really are my only friend Shun. Laying there like that... you were the only person I could call. And it just didn't feel right leaving you behind. Especially after that. Then you were nice enough to let me use you as my template for this new body? How could I leave after all that? Plus under your tutelage I've already made a second friend." I say nodding toward Alan.

"Thanks for the loyalty." Shun says taking my hand and squeezing it. "It really does mean a lot to know that we didn't get ditched as soon as you found the opportunity. And come to think of it," she says leaning back, "I'm holding you to that agreement about the all you can eat buffet. So, how long till you start getting paid for your scientific developments?" she says, taking another swig of dead rat.

"Oh, probably another year of legal battles. But that's alright. I've got the capital for a long court battle now."

Shun raises her bottle. "To being satisfied in all ways!"

My stomach rumbles. "To life and liberty." I say.

"To unexpected surprises!" Alan says.

Then as one, we knock our glasses back.

"End"

Shelled Spirit Bear

ONE IF BY LAND TWO IF BY SEA

GOOD MORNING
LINDA

SPECIATION BY *FEVER LOW*

The cup was still half full where Linda had left it on the counter. Felix sighed.

"What?" She stuffed her feet into braces and fastened the straps across each toe. One of her ears flicked. It was a warning sign.

"You didn't finish your coffee." He tapped the side of the cup with the claw of his index finger. There was a brief pause, the calm before the storm.

"So what if I didn't finish my coffee." She exploded, "I don't even like my coffee. I don't like anybody's coffee." She stuck her hands on her hips and looked down her ginger muzzle at him and the mug.

His ears flicked back and forward, holding straight up, "All your fur will fall out if you don't."

"And that's another thing! Why does it have to be coffee, why can't the tech gremlins make tea, or cocoa, or...or sarsaparilla with enough proteins in it."

"Something about coffee and the compounds bonding with the nanobots," he shrugged and held up his hands, palms facing outwards, "you should know more about it than I do. You work for them."

Tail lashing, she stalked over to the island and snatched up the mug, downing it in three savage gulps. It clattered against the counter top when she banged it down. Linda turned on her heel and headed for the door.

Felix picked up the empty mug and shuffled towards the dishwasher, "Linda."

Linda stopped at the door, one hand on the handle, briefcase clutched at her side. "Yes."

His ears laid back until they were almost flush with his head, "Don't forget about the doctor's today."

Another pause. She turned and walked around the island to Felix, stopping just a hand away from his wide nose. Her briefcase dropped to the floor and she hugged him hard to her, purring loudly. The sound rumbled through his chest and vibrated the webbing between his fingers

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and toes. He smiled.

Linda was shorter than him by about four inches, and when they embraced the top of her peach and ginger ears tickled his otter nose. His hair was a shock of longer fur, while hers sat in a tight bun of orange locks. Beyond their heads the contrast continued. Where he was dark she was lighter, and where his coat was a plain muddy brown hers was tabby-striped the same colours as her ears. Her tail was light and moved with her mood, and his was sturdy, thick, and dragged on the ground if he didn't pay it enough attention. He was muscled like a swimmer, and she wore a sharp business suit that curved where she did.

Her watch beeped and she let go of him abruptly, stooping for her briefcase. "Don't worry so much." She laid a hand against his cheek and smiled when he leaned into it, "Your fur will go grey."

Linda's watch beeped again. Tawny eyes found its face and she squawked, heading for the door in a rush doomed but for her feline grace. The door slammed, and the apartment was empty. Felix let his smile fade as he shuffled back to the coffee pot, tail dragging behind him. The machine hummed to itself in the corner of their kitchen, all chrome and glass and buttons. It crouched like a beast on the dark granite, purring to itself. Every so often a combination of the lights would flick on, warming the coffee, changing the pressure in the pot to preserve the chemicals. He poured himself another mug full of the dark liquid and stared at the half-woman half-fish that was laser etched into the machine. The logo followed the contour of her lower body, starting where human hips met fish tail.

*One if by land, two if by sea,
Sirens coffee.*

Just south of the pillars of the mag-tracks squatted a brownstone building. It was a timeless piece in a street mostly overwhelmed by modern architecture, nestled between an ethnic restaurant that featured a looping design from Neo Seoul and a lingerie boutique that was more glass than building. The counselling center started as a church funded service, back when God (or at least his voice on earth) was pretty sure He

didn't want His creations mucking about with how they looked. The non-discrimination act for skewed citizens passed twenty years ago. Since the church tended to take anywhere between ten and a hundred years longer than the voting public to realize it was arse-backward, the funds for the center were cut only five years ago.

A group of old spaniel ladies who had originally begun as some sort of quilting bee rose up in arms and marshalled the community to take over the building and install a proper counselling center. It was a flashpan story for a while, and the sight of six elderly spaniels, alike enough in colouring that they might have been sisters, dressed in sun hats, clutching oversized bags, all of them walking towards a trapped and panicky human secretary, was popular news footage for some time. Less than three weeks later the center had been appropriated and fundraisers were underway.

On a good day never argue with a retiree. They have more time than you do, they come from an era where many women were secretaries, and they All know each other. Which means yes, they know your grandmother and yes, you will be chastised either over the phone or in person at the weekend dinner. Standing in the way of one elderly lady is a high-stakes game. When there are six, duck and run for cover.

So, for five years less a few months, the center has become a community service, which roughly translated into under funded and surviving only on the goodwill of affluent members of the community. Occasionally, when hands and paws were slow coming out of deep pockets, the ladies could be seen out in force, colourful oversized bags swinging jauntily as they scurried off towards the poor unknowing object of their attention. Most of the time though, they ran the place with bluster, grandmotherly looks, and wartime efficiency.

Furniture lined the walls of the reception area. Three chairs vied for space between the door and the window, and between the window and the desk a couch and a wicker basket full of copies of *Fur Coffee, Times*, and *Living in Fur* fought to push each other over the edge onto the floor. The opposite wall held two tables between the sets of chairs and another couch, which had the misfortune of being smaller than the couch on the door side, jammed between a pair of leafy plants. The reception area was worn, but the creeping threadbare nature of the furniture was kept

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stauchly at bay by a horde of throws, covers, and doilies that fought over the limited amount of surface area on the chairs, tables, and sofas. The predominant hue was muddy, streaked with smatterings of orange and green. There was a nook next to the smaller sofa that held an electric kettle, a coffee pot (the regular sort), tea, coffee, sugar, and several milk-substitutes. Mugs were wedged into the cupboards above like refugees. Next to the cupboards was the clock. It was analog, which made it an antique and indecipherable simultaneously.

Felix tottered around the little reception area, straightening a doily here, a woven rug there. When the little hand on the clock and the big hand were more or less on top of each other in the upper left hand corner of the display he wandered through the building, turning on the lights in some of the equally cramped offices. Then he sat behind the desk and placed his webbed paws one on top of the other.

Moments later, when the large hand was pointed straight up and the small hand had hardly moved the door chimed. In stepped a pair of short furred legs carrying a massive box that smelled strongly of baked goods. Felix blinked.

The box warbled, "Felix? Is that you?"

Grinning, he shuffled hurriedly out from behind the desk, snatching the box from the aged spaniel that had been holding it just as it began to slip out of her paws, revealing a pointed face that huffed a greeting at him. There wasn't a lot of breath for words, but the wagging tail said it all.

Felix set the box down on the counter next to the coffee pot and snagged one of the mugs out of the cupboard, preventing those that tried to make a bid of freedom at the same time as their friend with a practiced swipe. Tea went into the mug, and the mug, along with the spaniel, were ushered into a chair at one of the tables. The spaniel waved imperiously at him and he took the seat across from her. She sipped the tea and grimaced.

"You make terrible tea, Felix Carver. How anyone who makes tea as often as you can make tea taste this terrible is beyond me." She sipped again.

He nodded, his head held pensively on one hand, "You're right Bea, it's hard to make tea that badly for five years. I reckon it's a resume skill

by now."

There was a pause, and Bea sipped the tea again. They grinned at each other.

Bea set the tea down, "How is your lovely wife doing?"

"Are there muffins in the box?" Felix countered.

The spaniel rolled her eyes at him and, making a show of feeling every one of her years, fetched two muffins in napkins from the box. The smell of them wafted through the room as Felix bit into the treat. Blueberries popped between his teeth.

"Linda's great." He mumbled around a mouthful, "Well, she's been sick the past week, but there's been that bug flying around."

Bea's eyebrows raised, "Oh the poor dear. I hope it's nothing too serious."

Felix shook his head, waving her off while he stuffed muffin into his muzzle with the other, "What's the other kind in the box?"

"Bacon bits," Bea smiled at him, "I'm afraid you wouldn't like them."

He nodded wisely, "Meeting of the coven today then?"

She swatted good-naturedly at him across the table, "We are no such thing!"

"No," Felix agreed, ducking the swipe, "but wherever you go, the oceans of bureaucracy part before you, big and little officials appear and disappear when you summon them, and when you swing your bags great sums of money fall from what poor bloke you've hit."

Bea swatted half-heartedly at him again.

The bell above the door jingled, and a young girl with long brown hair stood in the entry, wearing a red jacket. A backpack drooped from one of her shoulders. She scanned the room and her eyes lit as she found the pair at the table. Her shoulders hunched inward, and she clasped her hands, gaze quickly falling to the floor. Bea immediately stood and moved towards her with grandmotherly bluster. Felix used the opportunity to lean towards the counter and grab another muffin.

"Hello dearie." Bea stopped in front of the girl, paw outstretched, "I'm Beatrice, but call me Bea. I'm so old that if you say the whole thing I'll fall asleep."

The girl took her paw in hand and shook it, smiling hesitantly. Bea

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smiled warmly back and patted the girl on the shoulder. "There we are, now, what is it that we can do for you...?"

"Natalie." The girl said, "Oh. Um, I had some questions about..."

Bea waited as Natalie trailed off, ears perked forwards. "About what life in fur is like? Going Askew? Why the train's only ever busy when you need to get somewhere?" She grinned.

"Why is the train only ever busy when you've got places to go?" Natalie frowned.

"Beats me!" Bea chortled, "If I knew something like that I'd be living it large on my boat in the Bahamas somewhere surrounded by gorgeous young things."

Natalie blinked. Felix nearly choked on his muffin.

"For the rest of it, you're a little earlier than most of the volunteers. So, you see that dashing otter there?" She pointed at Felix who sat, frozen, with half a muffin in his face and crumbs bouncing on his whiskers, "That's Felix. He's been here as long as the center has been open. You grab a muffin out of the box—on the left side of the divider—and go talk to him."

The girl hesitated for a moment, then stepped up to the box seized a muffin. Felix brushed the accumulation of crumbs off his collared shirt as he stood. Bea shooed him and he and offered the girl a fast-bread filled smile. She followed him through the few narrow twisting hallways to a room overflowing with a couch and a pair of chairs. There was very little floor space, and as Felix waved her inside and closed the door behind them, the brown haired girl shimmied through the room to the couch and sat. Felix took the chair facing her. He smiled, the mustard coloured walls clashed appallingly with her hair and jacket.

"Have you ever been to counselling before Natalie?" Felix asked.

Natalie shook her head.

"Right. Have a bite of your muffin then and I'll run through the basics." He paused, waiting expectantly until she bit into the pastry. "Basically it works like this. You get to ask me whatever you want, and I'll tell you the honest truth so far as I know it. I won't tell anyone else what we talk about unless you confess to a crime or reveal that you plan to take your own life. Other than that I'll make some notes in case you come back and I'm not here. In that case someone else will ask your express permission

to read the file before they do. No one will show them to your parents, siblings, employer, or any other authority. In extreme cases they can be subpoenaed for court uses, but we've never had that happen."

By the time he was finished, the pastry was gone.

"So. Natalie. What do you want to know?" He smiled and produced a pen and notepad from his breast pocket.

On the couch Natalie unzipped her backpack and teased a crumpled piece of paper from one of the small pockets. It crinkled as she unfolded it. After a moment of staring, she folded it up and put it back in the pocket.

Natalie took a deep breath and let it out slowly, "What's it like? How'd they even come up with it?"

"What?" Felix held up his hands, spreading the padded fingers so she could see the translucent webbing between the thick brown furs, "Going Askew?"

She nodded.

"The actual process isn't a big deal. Well," He smiled sheepishly, "I mean, it is, all sorts of complicated medical stuff they've gotta do to you. But from your perspective it's pretty much like going to sleep one morning and waking up the next completely changed. Metamorphosed. O'course it really takes three weeks and when you wake up you itch all over and gotta pee something fierce. As to how they came up with it, did you know that pretty much all of the proteins and a number of the chemicals that give coffee its smell are lost by two minutes after brewing because of the heat?"

Natalie shrugged.

"Well, they are. One of the Sirens research teams was working on using nanobots to re-construct the proteins after they're disassembled. A completely different team was researching how to alter the body's electrical field to affect olfactory and sensory inputs. Somebody in middle management had both reports on their desk and wondered what would happen if they put the two together. The result was nanobots that were activated by the body's electrical field and could produce just about any sort of protein. More work in the field finessed their ability to make proteins that would induct metal ions. Long story short, Siren's nanites can pretty much rebuild your skeleton, cartilage, nerves, and can give you

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fur."

Natalie nodded slowly, "What about after that?"

"After that. Everything is different. You learn to walk again, and I do mean that literally. The first step you take when you get out of bed puts you flat on your face 'cause you've never walked with a tail before." He chortled, "Rehabilitation takes a while depending on how clever you are. You spend the first week conking your face into things because it's longer than you remember. There's counselling too, group, most of it. Learning to deal with suddenly being able to smell and hear so much more. Privacy is very different, which is why most places are soundproofed now. It can be frustrating at first, and overwhelming. It takes a while, but for a lot of people it's more than worth it in the end."

"Is it expensive?" Natalie got her own piece of paper and pencil out of her bag, and poised herself to take notes, "How do you pay for it?"

Felix shrugged, "It's not as expensive as you might think. Since all the legislation got passed recognizing species dysphoria as a psychological condition like gender dysphoria the government subsidizes a lot of it as tax-rebates for Sirens—the company maintains the monopoly on the procedure. Plus, since Sirens was originally a coffee company based here in Seattle and manufactures the protein supplemented java necessary to maintain your body once you go Askew. It's in their best interest to generate that lifelong customer base. Most banks will give you loans for it too, and Skews tend to make more money so they're simple enough to pay back. That's not just a tilted statistic where higher income people are more likely to become Skewed, by the way."

The scratching of the pencil across paper stopped and she looked up, hesitated, "What are the downsides?"

"Downsides are also...numerous. You have to buy and drink Sirens coffee for the rest of your life, one cup a day if you're a land dweller, two if you're aquatic. Because of the undercoat. So some kinds of land animals have to drink two as well." He scratched his ear with the tip of the pen, "More notably, you can't touch anyone else for more than three hours continuously. The nanobots that program and maintain your Skewed body are controlled by your body's own electrical field, and coming into close contact with the electrical field of another body for an extended

period will shut them down. Your body subsequently rejects the changes the nanobots have imposed. The results are violent, and...often fatal. There's some disturbing images readily available on the internet if you look for them."

The pencil stopped moving again and Natalie frowned at him, "Electrical signals mess it up? But aren't there electrical signals like, all the time in the city? The train, the power lines, microwaves. Doesn't everything give off electrical signals?"

"True." Felix admitted, "But it's only signals of a specific frequency and intensity that actively interfere with the nanobots. Still, those signals pop up in urban areas from time to time, so there are some 'no-Skews' walk zones. Public transit and all new developments have faraday cages built in to afford people peace of mind. Bottom line is that walking around near power lines shouldn't mess you up, but falling asleep with a significant other can have drastic consequences. And you can't get pregnant."

"I know that bit." Natalie shifted on the cushions, "Mum says Skews are bad because they promote in-vitro fertilization."

"Correct. Well, about the in-vitro bit." He made a note on the pad, "you can still have children, and in fact it is recommended that prior to going Askew you take the time to put some eggs on ice in case you ever decide to, but if you decide to live a Skewed life you will never be able to carry a child to term yourself. It's done wonders for the surrogate industry though."

A moment of silence followed. Felix made more notes on the pad, filling in some of the general details Natalie usually would have while there was a line.

"So." Felix ventured, "That's the gist of it. Anything else you've got written on that sheet?"

Natalie shook her head, brown curls bouncing as she did, "Why did you go Askew Felix?"

"Because, more than anything else in the world. I didn't want to end up a fisherman." Felix grinned at her expression, "My family lived in a fishing village on the coast of Nova Scotia. Which is a little island east of Maine. When I was a kid working on fishing trawlers I knew that I was going to be hauling and gutting fish until the day I died. Downcast,

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I searched desperately for a way to change my fate. I found the answer at a regional music festival I was attending with some friends. One of the bands playing there were Skewed Newfies—people from Newfoundland. Long story compressed and censored, I wound up talking to their lead singer for most of the night, and by morning had a harebrained plan. Ma and Dad weren't pleased when I brought it up to them, and after a blazing row I left the house for good. A couple of mostly-paid-off loans later I'm out of there in the heart city of the world working for an oceanography company."

Natalie's bag buzzed twice and she pulled out a thin slab of glass. She manipulated the surface with practiced ease, and sucked air in through her teeth. "Um, I gotta go. My friend was covering for me so my mom wouldn't find out I was coming and—"

Felix held up a hand, chuckling. "No worries. Come on back whenever you want. And help yourself to another muffin on the way out." He stood and offered the hand to her. "By the by, what's your last name? I've got to put it on the notes."

She stood and shook his hand, "Carpenter. Natalie Carpenter."

"See you again, Natalie Carpenter." Felix stayed behind when she left, puttering for a moment before he gathered up the files and headed for the filing room. As he headed back towards the reception area he wondered whether he would be able to appropriate another one of Bea's muffins. By now there would be a line.

The coffee maker was hushed, and started brewing at exactly 6:07 am. At 6:00 the attached bean grinder roused the household with a draconic roar. At 6:02 the bean grinder fell silent, task accomplished. At 6:00:01 Felix's ear flicked once, his eyes opened, and he was awake. The single bed he lay in still smelled like Linda. He rolled to the floor in a *th-thump*, feet and tail hitting in a rhythm as familiar as the bellow of the coffee grinder. He made the bed, tucking the sheets under the pillow and blanket. By the time the susurations of coffee wafted from the kitchen a quarter would have bounced off of the bed in a nearly elastic collision. A morning yawn escaped as he turned, paused. Frowned.

Linda's bed, a double arm's length from his, was empty and rumpled. Felix's eyes caught the empty hook above her bed, halfway between the headboard and the nightstand with its single lamp.

"Linda?" His voice was low and rough with the remnants of sleep. He cleared his throat and called again, "Linda?"

Only the steady drip of coffee answered. It wasn't surprising. Going askew meant improved hearing, which meant privacy was hard to come by, which meant private parts of the house were mostly soundproof. Another yawn and he waddled forth.

The kitchen was mostly dark granite, the real stuff. Glass cupboards displayed matching dishes and drink ware stacked to the tops of the shelves. The glass had been a compromise—Linda got the glass cupboards, Felix got the natural gas stove on the island. The subtle interior design lost suddenly and immediately to a coffee machine the size of a compact car that hummed and growled to itself, spitting dark liquid into glass. Above the machine crouched its flock, mugs in an array of shapes and sizes, displaying gaudy colours and sayings.

Felix stood on tiptoes to reach the top shelf of the cupboard. Though he had never been exactly short, ever since going Askew he was back heavy, and his reach had suffered for it on land. This morning he picked a powder blue mug depicting a pastoral scene and a green mug with black lettering that declared 'I don't drink coffee so I can deal with the world, I drink coffee so the world can deal with me'. Cups clasped in webbed hands he fell back against his tail, using it to balance and steady himself. He punched a few buttons on the coffee machine and flipped a switch. The machine grumbled, pattered, and eventually fell silent. When the liquid stopped percolating he poured the two cups.

With the sustaining aroma of the elixir of the gods burrowing its way into his head, waking him up, he trudged his way from the kitchen back towards the bedroom, took a left towards the living room, and paused at the hallway door. He kicked it, and the door slid back into the wall with a pneumatic hiss. The smell of bile flooded the hallway.

"How are you feeling Pussycat?" He leaned against the doorway where it had disappeared into the wall and sipped his coffee.

Flush.

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Linda rolled over away from the toilet, holding herself up on two legs and a hand for a moment to move her tail out of the way, and grumbled at him, wiping her mouth on the back of her other hand. Felix passed her a coffee, the one in the green mug, which she accepted gingerly and clutched with both hands under her nose. Her nostrils flared, breathing the best potpourri in the world. A quiet second passed between them, both huffing their own java fumes.

She sipped at her mug, lips curling back from teeth in a grimace, "You need to get the coffee maker looked at, it picked the wrong beans for the water today. My mouth tastes like up-chuck."

"The coffee maker is fine, it's brand new three weeks ago." He smiled the small familiar smile of ritualistic arguments, curling his hands around the mug to steal its warmth, "Are you done throwing up?"

She glared up from the ceramic, tail lashing against the porcelain of the toilet bowl. A moment passed, and her eyes softened, then dropped to the black liquid.

"I don't even like coffee."

"You know if they put enough proteins in tea it never tastes right."

"Tastes better than this acid wash."

"Are you talking about the coffee or the vomit?"

Her ears came full front and she stuck out her tongue at him, "I don't know why I put up with you."

"I always assumed it was for my body." He grinned, bending from the waist to kiss Linda's cheek where her ginger fur speckled. All the technology in the world and they couldn't fix freckles. Not that he'd have it any other way.

Linda draped an arm across his neck and rubbed her cheek against his muzzle. He smiled, scratching the spot just below and behind her left ear with the ease of practice. She purred, and he squeaked when her claws came out and caught in the skin beneath the fur on his shoulder. Carefully she unhooked her claws from his shoulder and trailed them across and down his arm. The motion was tender, familiar, prey that knew the predator could gore them, and trusted them not to. Felix grabbed her fingers when they slipped off his wrist and kissed the back of her hand. He made a face, the hand tasted like vomit.

She laughed, "Love you Rudder." Her body tensed and she dropped his hand diving for the toilet. The expired-milk-poured-down-a-drain sound of vomit filled the bathroom.

"I love you too Pussycat." Felix rubbed her back, "Want me to make breakfast?"

Linda groaned and made shooing motions towards the toilet tank. He stepped out and kicked the door closed.

The mag-train had a stop within the Sirens headquarters; being one of the richest entities in the world had its advantages. They exited the building and stepped into the throng of noonday lunch travellers. Linda raised a hand to her head and flipped the little device that rested just inside her ear. It pinged a notification of Cathy's talk request.

"Accept." She muttered.

"—But seriously girlfriend, you shouldn't pay any attention to what those damn neophytes are saying. Nobody seriously believes that."

Linda blinked at the suited woman out of the corner of her eye, "Which neophytes?"

Cathy gave her a look, a don't-shoot-the-messenger kind of look. The look was out of place on her almost elfin features. She was the kind of woman who could walk into most jobs, get hired for sex appeal, and fired for having standards a week later. She had called Linda her camouflage the first time they had drinks, because everyone went after the tabby-cat instead of the human. They'd been friends ever since.

"I don't think I've ever seen you behind on the water cooler gossip. Senator Chapman is introducing legislation to ban the Skewing of minors."

They moved with the crowd, crossing streets like changing flowing rivers, and passed into the noonday shadow of a megalith. Their conversation, conducted at a volume barely above a whisper, was technologically amplified to normal volume. A newspaper had called the full effect of these throngs of whispered conversations the modern fields of Aphodel.

"It will never pass." Linda shrugged, dodging a man who had stopped to tie his shoe, "What are they trying to use as grounds this time?"

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"He says that there's evidence that going Askew alters your neural pathways." Cathy made twirling motions near her right temple with her finger.

"Of course there is," Linda snorted, "we published those studies."

They stopped walking, waiting for a light to change.

Cathy rolled her eyes, "Right, but he's got a study that his 'scientists', she made air quotes, "did suggesting that skewed individuals have heightened tendencies to violence because of exactly that neural shift."

"So they're saying that going Askew makes people more prone to mental dysfunction?" Linda balked.

"Actually," Cathy smiled brilliantly as they started forwards again, "I think they're trying to say that going Askew programs people to be killers."

Linda briefly ground her teeth, wincing as the habit from her pre-Skew life scraped her sharper incisors against one another. She stopped. "Don't they think that if Skewed people were programmed to be killers than we would have seen an increase in homicide rates in the past twenty years? Instead of the decrease we have seen?"

They stopped again, fighting their way through the diverging crowd. All of the Skews headed one way around the permanent hazard signs while the majority of the humans continued through. Linda rolled her eyes as the detour brought them back into the sun before they returned to the shade of the skyscraper four blocks later.

"There's an increase in the number of disappearances." Cathy pointed out.

They finished the remaining three blocks of their journey to Gizpaccio's and turned into the foyer of the restaurant through thick glass doors run through with Faraday wire. Simultaneously they muttered *terminating conversation* and reached up to flick their headsets off as the doors swung shut on the sibilating tumult of the walkway. The interior was a lot of silvers and greens. They made their way to the bar and claimed the corner, Cathy nearest to the wall, so that they could speak without having to crane their necks to look at each other. Cathy ordered from the bartender for both of them.

"And statisticians already linked the corresponding increase in Skewed persons with new name registry. People aren't dying more Cathy, they're

just running away from persecution more effectively than they used to." Linda held the menu up.

"Mmm." Cathy agreed, "Their points are totally ridiculous."

"Politicians." Linda swore, "If the procedure wasn't quasi-permanent I'd try and set a legal precedent forcing them all to go Askew for a year of their term."

"Don't hate them too much." Cathy smiled, "After all, we exist because of the Chapmans of the world."

Linda shook her head as the barkeep set a glass of something fizzy in front of her, "I'd rather live jobless in a world devoid of Chapmans than well paid in a world full of them."

Cathy's drink arrived and she made an agreeing noise around the stem of a wineglass. Her attention focused briefly behind Linda and she tapped her index finger twice against the bar. The stool next to Linda scraped against the floor; she suddenly found her own glass very interesting.

"Pardon me," the male voice occupying the bar stool beside her said, "I am most certainly never this forwards, but you are quite stunningly beautiful, and I was wondering if you would like to join me for dinner."

Linda glared at her left hand wrapped around the glass. There was no good way to make a wedding band show up with fur as long as hers. She did not look up.

"Sorry Mister." Cathy offered, "She's married."

There was a pause. Linda glanced up in time to see the look of confusion on the man's face replaced by a knowing grin, "I see. In that case you would be more than welcome to join us Miss...?"

"Cathy. She's not married to me." Cathy held up her bare left hand.

"Oh." The man frowned, "I don't get it."

Linda felt the end of her tail begin to lash. Cathy chuckled.

"So," the man continued, "Would you like to enjoy a night of good company?"

Unable to contain her ire any longer, Linda glared at him. He wasn't a bad looking sort, and his suit fit him better than most of the regular patrons of Giz's. As far as Linda was concerned, that just excused him even less.

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"Yes." She hissed, "Which I get enough of from my husband. That's why I married him. Go away."

The man opened his mouth to say something, perplexed. Cathy shook her head at him and he closed it again before wandering back to wherever it was that he came from. Linda didn't watch him go.

Cathy shook her head in slow bewilderment, "I can't believe some people. Just because you can't get pregnant doesn't mean that you set aside your moral standards and fidelity to have sex with everyone."

Linda grunted delicately, "The only other no-pregnancy risk society people have to compare Skews to is homosexuals. Their subculture does seem to espouse lots of sex with lots of people with very little attachment."

"Doesn't make the association any less stupid!"

They shared a look.

"Men!" Cathy swore.

"Men." Linda raised her glass, "Except my Felix."

"Except Felix." Cathy tossed her blonde hair, "If I ever have kids all the prince charmons in their stories are coming from little coastal fishing villages."

Linda keyed open the door to the apartment and stepped into the tiny tiled entry. The smell of dinner, full of light spices and fish, wrapped her in the warm feeling of homecoming. She bent down and undid the braces holding her feet in place. Setting them to the side she extended and retracted the claws on each foot a couple of times, relishing the feeling of freedom after the long business day.

In the kitchen she found Felix with his back to her at the stove. He was brooding over the oven, perched on a stool like a hen on an egg. He looked up when she came in, but only to the top of the stove where a pot steamed quietly to itself above the blue flames.

"Welcome home," he said.

Linda came up behind him and wrapped her arms around him, sticking her hands in the front pockets of his apron, "Everything smells delicious."

"It should, I had to look up a recipe and everything." He leaned back against her for a moment as she leaned into him.

"What did you make?" She tried to peek around him into the oven. He stood, blocking her view through the small window when he placed his hands on his hips.

Felix smiled, his eyes lighting up, "You'll have to wait and see. I think you'll be surprised."

"Oh come on," Linda groused, sniffing, "What's in it? Rosemary?"

Felix chuckled and kissed her nose, "I swear Pussycat. Sometimes you make me wonder if you missed out on the heightened senses."

She rolled her eyes at him and kissed his cheek, "How long until this mystery feast is ready?"

"Ten minutes, give or take. How did the doctor's visit go?" Felix turned back to the stove.

Linda squinted at the little black striations around its circumference that were supposed to denote the amount of time that had passed, on Felix's old egg timer, "I'm going to go change out of these work clothes then I'll come help you set the table, okay?"

Felix gave her a look, and his ears flicked once before he kissed her nose, "Sure."

They were three bites into the salmon when Linda looked up.

"Would you stop glaring at me?" She demanded, "Please?"

Felix put his fork down, "How was the appointment with the doctor?"

Linda shrugged, "she said there is nothing wrong with me, medically at least. She doesn't deny my symptoms, and wants to send me in for a battery of tests just to make sure it's nothing. However, she says it's probably just stress."

"When do you go in for the tests?" Felix sipped his wine.

Linda looked out of the window for a moment, then mumbled something and picked at her food.

Her dinner partner sighed.

"I said no," she groused, "I hate being prodded at with needles, even if they are doctors."

Felix put his head in his hands and shook it slowly. "Being poked and prodded at with needles is the price we pay for this." He shook his

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furred hand, and made a sweeping gesture that encompassed them both. Lightly mocking laughter broke from him, "You chose to undergo one of the most invasive surgeries on the planet, and you're objecting to having a little blood drawn?"

Linda's tail lashed and she glowered over her mostly untouched dinner. "I'm objecting to an unnecessary waste of time. It's just a stomach bug."

"How do you know? God you—you Americans! What do you have against the hospital?" He glared, but the fight slowly drained from his eyes in the face of Linda's steady gaze, and he pushed his plate aside, leaning forwards until his head rested on his arms.

Silence settled over the apartment, and in the unnatural, insulated quiet the only noises were air moving in and out of lungs and snaps of the oven settling. Linda pushed her own plate aside and reached across the table to rest her hands on Felix's forearms.

"I go to work tomorrow." Felix's voice was muffled, "I'll be on a platform in the middle of the ocean. An hour or more back to the mainland by helicopter, which they won't warm up just for me. I'm scared it's not nothing. I'm—" He sighed, "What if something happens, and no one's around. If you get worse... I wish you had gone to the hospital."

Linda thumbed his fur in small circles, ruffling the brown outer fur and lighter under coat. Felix caught her right hand and raised it to his forehead.

"Promise me you'll get Catherine to call you in the mornings at least."

She chuckled, "Cathy won't be awake until I'm already at work."

"Promise me."

"...I promise."

A shark passed them about fifty feet off, following a school of fish. Felix floated to a stop and watched until it vanished into the polluted dimness of the ocean. An alert pinged in his visor, and he acknowledged it with a flick of his eyes.

"Are you gonna lollygag all day Carver?" The voice that spoke in his ear was full of lipless sibilance.

"Sorry Bruce, just communing with some of your family." Felix flicked his eyes over another portion of the screen, accessing the map. Glowing waypoints outlined his colleagues, picking out their shapes and marking distance through the murky water.

Laughter susurrated over the communications link, "well don't get too friendly with them, we're only half a mile out and I'd hate to lose any people so close to home."

"You couldn't get rid of me if you tried, you Chondrichtyes slave-driver." He dipped his head and flicked his feet, speeding towards the five shapes picked out in green. A round of laughter greeted him over the comms as he reached the loose floating ring of his team. He flicked his eyes across the goggles again, deactivating the waypoints, and his colleagues lost their ghostly luminescence. Four of them were otters like him, three with muddy browns mirroring his own. The fourth otter was stripped black and yellow like a giant bee. Shaun was his name, but even since he'd blown his Christmas bonus two years ago getting his fur colour reprogrammed the team called him Buzz.

"That's a pretty big word for a fisherman's son. You been reading your wife's legal briefs again?" More laughter greeted Bruce's words as he turned in a slow circle and waved them all along, "No lollygagging, the techs will tell on me to safety if we drop below 1000psi."

All the otters spread out and trailed behind Bruce. Felix looked past his friend's tail as they picked up speed behind him. Bruce was an anomaly even among Skews. He was a warm-blooded shark. Slate grey skin showed everywhere that his dive suit wasn't barely protecting modesty, and his eyes were a glossy black inside the goggles that rode high on his pointed nose. He had legs, but tucked them against his monstrously long tail when he swam to better emulate a real shark. The nanites weren't meant to mimic species with cartilaginous skeletons. Something about insufficient bone-marrow to support mammalian life. So Bruce was one of a kind, and had to walk with crutches on land. In the water though, he moved like his namesake predator.

Bruce flicked his webbed hand and Felix grinned, you could take the shark out of the military, but not the military out of the shark. They turned upwards, pausing periodically to equilibrate. Their goggles

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beeped the atmospheric changes in time with Bruce's hand signals until they breached the surface. Bruce kept his head under the water, only his dorsal fin distinguished the grey blob above the waves. They swam another hundred feet to one of the elevator platforms. Buzz scrambled up onto the metal grille and tossed a bag into the water. Everyone loaded onto the dais and pulled off their masks. Bruce climbed on last, his goggles traded for a torc that covered his gills with pyrex, water, and a CO₂ exchange system.

"Take us up Buzz." Bruce dragged a pair of walking crutches across the platform and propped himself up. "There's a steak up there somewhere with my name on it."

A towel was draped around Felix's shoulders and he frowned, staring at the text alert on his phone.

Catherine: Hi Felix. Linda passed out at work today. She was at her desk, so no one else noticed, but she's taking a couple of days off.

I told her I would come check on her after work and if I found her out of her bathrobe or near something that looked like work I would sit on her until she saw sense.

I got your back. <3

Felix sat heavily on the bench between the rows of lockers and spent a moment with his phone pressed against his forehead. Water from his wet hands slid down the screen as he tapped a reply.

Felix: Hi Cathy. Thanks for looking out for Linda. Did she go to the hospital?

He sat, waiting. The message alert was almost instant.

Catherine: No >/

"Fuck!" He glared at the phone.

The reply came from the lockers one row over, "No thanks Carver. I'm more of a canine man myself."

Felix laughed in spite of himself, "Shut up, Austin."

Felix: Linda, go to the hospital.

He was dressed when the glass plate buzzed in his pocket.

Linda: No. If anything is wrong, which there isn't, you'll come rushing

home to coddle me. You're home in two days. I'll go when you're back. I'll even get Cathy to drive me so you don't have to worry about me on transit and you can go to your volunteering.

Felix: I'll come with you to the hospital. They can do without me for a morning.

Linda: No! I'll go, but don't bother cancelling over nothing. I'll tell you about it over dinner.

Felix: ...Fine. You're an incredibly difficult woman. You know that?

Linda: I know. See you in a couple days Rudder.

Felix: I care about you Pussycat. You're scaring me.

The bells on the door jangled in moderate cacophony as a short blond woman barrelled through them. Two men and a female panther looked up from their devices in the waiting room as the woman screeched to a stop in front of the desk and planted her hands on her hips. Felix stood easily behind it, palms facing towards the woman.

"Is there something that I can help you with Miss...?"

"It's Mrs. Carpenter." The woman huffed down her nose at him, "and you can direct me to a man named Felix."

Felix smiled amicably, "I'm afraid I'm Felix. What can I help you with Mrs. Carpenter?"

"You?" Mrs. Carpenter balked, "Natalie never mentioned that."

Her eyes narrowed and she whipped around, taking in the rest of the room. The two men had turned back to their phones but the panther glared back at Mrs. Carpenter as she her gaze swept by. The bells jingled again, and Natalie carpenter stepped into the reception area.

"Natalie!" Mrs. Carpenter accused, "You never said that this man was a Skew."

She spit the last word. Natalie tried to disappear into the wall by the door, mumbling something unintelligible.

"Is there a problem Mrs. Carpenter?" Felix asked pointedly.

Mrs. Carpenter turned back to Felix, nostrils flaring, "I don't want you to talk to my daughter again. This place has filled her head with romanticized nonsense about being a barren woman!"

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Felix shook his head, "Unfortunately Mrs. Carpenter the center is help people get the facts about Skewed life. It is a community service, and if your daughter continues to decide coming here then she is entitled to the services offered."

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

Mrs. Carpenter pointed her finger at him accusatorily, "Natalie is still a minor. You require my consent to treat her! And I forbid it."

"If we were administering any kind of medical or psychological treatment, or charging money of some kind then you'd be totally correct." Felix shrugged, "You can definitely stop her from going Askew until she turns eighteen, but again, this is a community service. It isn't a medical practice. You don't have the right to deny your daughter access to information any more than we do. With the internet out there it's a wonder you're even trying."

Red rushed to Mrs. Carpenter's cheeks, and her voice rose a few decibels "Now see here you filthy—"

"Excuse me!" Bea barked, stepping out of the hallway behind the desk. She had her wartime voice on and Mrs. Carpenter paused for a moment, jaw agape at the spaniel in the yellow polka-dot sundress. "Felix Carver is a perfectly lovely young man, and I know for a fact he washes often. Now Mrs..."

Mrs. Carpenter stood, ruddy faced and completely silent.

"Carpenter." Felix supplied.

Bea huffed, "Mrs. Carpenter. If you would like to continue this discussion you may do so at an appropriate volume in my office, or you may leave. This is a place of safety and acceptance, and I will not tolerate shaming or hatred."

Natalie peeled herself off of the wall, and tapped her mom on the arm. Mrs. Carpenter blinked and turned to her daughter.

"Mom?" Natalie spoke passed the lump in her throat, "Please?"

After a moment Mrs. Carpenter nodded woodenly and let her daughter lead her by the hand behind Bea. The three of them disappeared down the hallway. Felix sat back down at the desk, and addressed the three in the reception area.

"And you say we never have any entertainment while you wait."

The panther laughed. Felix pulled his phone out of his pocket and tapped the message alert.

Linda: Come to the hospital. It isn't nothing.

Hospitals have always smelled like industrial strength disinfectant and too-clean floors. But ever since Skews became a predominant minority the iron tang of blood and wet dog were added to the mix-pot of emergency room scents. The emergency room doors are always sliding and automatic. Felix was convinced it was to prevent people from barging in as quickly as they could since they dinged him on the shoulder when he tried to barge through them.

The dark-skinned woman at reception raised a single manicured eyebrow at him as he panted in front of the desk. He held up a hand to forestall the oncoming tongue-lashing.

"I. Know." He nodded, hands on his knees, "No running. In. The hospital. Whew."

Felix straightened, "I'm Felix Carver. My wife is Linda Carver. She called me. Which room is she in?"

The receptionist regarded him coolly for a moment, and then tapped at the opaque glass screen in the desk. "Room 107, take the hallway on the right, elevators down to floor one, and then left. Right again at the end of that hallway."

Felix nodded his thanks, and walked calmly until he was out of sight of the reception desk before he tried to burn the rubber off of his sneakers. He caught the elevators as they were closing and shared a moment of uncomfortable silence with an elderly man with an oxygen tank and a young woman in a doctor's coat. The elevator dinged and he zoomed off. Three beds forced him to a walk as he rounded the corner and started counting off rooms. His breathing edged towards more ragged as he passed 105 and stood outside the door for half a moment, trying ineffectually to regain some kind of composure.

After the third knock the door opened. Linda was lying in a reclined position on the bed with her shirt pulled up over her stomach. Her fur was all mussed up with gel and when she locked eyes with him past the

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attending doctor silent tears ran down her face.

"What's wrong?" Felix asked, "What's happened?"

Linda shook her head mutely. The doctor closed the door behind them and turned around. The spectacles on his bat face magnified his eyes.

"Mr. Carver?" The doctor stepped up to the machine beside the bed. "I'm Dr. Pasquale. Your wife is suffering from an acute protein deficiency."

Felix nodded, "So what, more coffee? Is that all that she needs?"

"Yes," Dr. Pasquale dithered, "and no. The symptoms of the protein deficiency are easy enough to treat. But the underlying cause is... unprecedented."

"What do you mean, 'unprecedented'?" Felix frowned.

Linda grabbed Felix's arm. "Rudder, I'm pregnant."

The world inside the room took on bright pastel hues and Felix didn't know how tightly he was gripping Linda's arm until she squirmed and hissed at him. He let go, but as he did his mouth opened and closed. No sound came out.

"The nanites..." He managed, looking between his wife and the doctor, "Why isn't she rejecting?"

"Something has obviously happened." Dr. Pasquale bounced a little, "I think it's possible that the nanobots have somehow combined, or changed, or shifted, or, I don't know what. But they've reproduced in such a way that they can sustain the pregnancy. And there's more."

Felix felt cold creeping up his toes, and sounds took on a strange resonance. It occurred to him that he was losing it. Linda shook quietly beside him and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. He looked back at the bat and blinked. Dr. Pasquale stared expectantly at him, and then frowned at the lack of response.

"It's a lot to take in. I get it." The doctor took his glasses off and cleaned them on his lab coat, "Have a minute. I'll be right outside."

Felix rubbed his arm and traded a shocked look with Linda. She reached for his hand and he took it. The door clicked closed behind Dr. Pasquale. Linda rolled over and clung to Felix as soon as they were alone. She shook and sobbed. He held her quietly for a minute.

"Linda. Pussycat why are you crying?" He pet her ears, wishing not for

the first time that the webbing on his hands didn't stop him from running his fingers through her hair.

"I don't know!" Linda shook her head and clutched him tighter, "I don't know how to deal with this! I thought I had an infection, or the stress from work was getting to me finally, too much city air! I didn't think I'd be...be...!"

Felix stroked her until the sobs quieted to shudders, rubbing small circles in her back. The shudders mostly stopped, and he kissed her freckled cheek.

"We'll get through this Pussycat. You know we will."

"I know." She smiled damply at him, "It's just...you know?"

Felix kissed the back of her hands and stood, "I know. And now that you've covered me in ultrasound gloop I'm going to get the doctor. Okay?"

Linda chuckled wetly and wiped her eyes. She straightened "Yes. Call him in."

Felix found Dr. Pasquale in the hall, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet and glaring at any of the other hospital personnel that came within spitting distance. The bat meekly re-entered the room and coughed into his palm. "Anyways, again, we have no way of knowing without further tests, but I want you to start bracing yourselves for the idea that your child might be Skewed."

Dr. Pasquale hesitated and pulled off his glasses, "I mean, your child might not be human. If it isn't." He dithered, sighed, and put his spectacles back on. "The definition of speciation is when two hybrids from a genetic line are incapable of breeding with the parent species but can produce a viable offspring. In other words, you might not be human anymore.

"Your child might be a new species."

TECH FLESH

BY LAURA "MUNCHKIN" LEWIS

With special thanks to N. Govednik



"The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom."

—Isaac Asimov



"Will it always sound like that?"

Mr. Stanton curled his hand into a fist, listening to the soft rhythmic clicking of titanium valves as they opened and closed and the consistent hum of the electrical motors as they kept the different components of his new skin functioning. He should be grateful for this opportunity. The leaps and bounds Green Mesa provided in combining technology with biology were astonishing. Someone must have been smiling down on the wolf when his accident occurred just as they were testing a new prototype for synthetic skin and fur. If not for miraculous timing and an immense amount of luck, he would be six feet under by now.

It wasn't exactly a cake walk talking them into accepting him either. Thanks to all the damage done from the accident, the project had to be specifically modified to include areas they hadn't planned on going into yet. Muscle, tendons, even entire internal organs had to be replaced. It might have all been for the best, since they had to essentially give him a second 'heart' in the form of a hydraulic pump that would keep the nano technology lubricated. There was also the new nervous system that had to be installed, though they had trouble fully connecting it to his natural nervous system. They managed to connect it enough so it would respond when he moved and flexed, but not much more beyond that. They were working on it though, and either way she still needed to pull every string and call in every favor she had to save Mr. Stanton.

Yet instead of breaking down in tears of gratitude or howling out in

the joy of being alive, he was worrying over subtle sounds that could only be heard in a small quiet room away from the din of the city. Dr. Maria DeFazio couldn't wrap her mind around it. He was a walking, talking scientific miracle, yet he was nitpicking at everything he could find. How egocentric could he get? She leaned forward and placed her paws flat on the top of her desk, eying the silver wolf over her lenses.

"Mr. Stanton, I understand it might be disconcerting at times, but you won't hear the noises while you're out and about. If it bothers you at night, just put on some music to distract you from it. I promise you, though it might be a small reminder of the tragedy you—"

"It doesn't smell right."

Maria jerked her head back slightly, her lips pursing as her golden fur rippled slightly. "I'm sorry, what do you mean? What doesn't smell right?"

The wolf kept his forest eyes glued to his fingers as he took in a deep breath through his nose and rubbed his thumb and index together. "The fur. The skin. It bothers me. They don't smell right. Like when you leave a computer on for too long, mixed with something...." His black nostrils flared before he added, "...medicinal. Will that ever wear off?"

The lioness fell back into her chair with an exasperated sigh as he described the scent of electrolysis and functioning servos—the very things that made any of this possible. The constant pounding in the back of her head was starting to spread as the wolf found more and more to complain about with the new fur and flesh. How could someone who had been on the precipice of death itself over a year ago now be nit-picking over every tiny detail? Now it was a smell that most people would never notice. Perhaps she should try another tactic....

"Look, at least you no longer have to worry about the smells that come from lymphnodes and glandular secretions anymore. If anything, you'll never have to worry about bad body odor again."

She tried to add a smile that fought her every bit of the way, but the wolf seemed less than convinced. At least his scowl didn't run quite so deep now. She drew in a deep breath and added, "Look, the technology isn't perfect. You knew that going into this, just as you were fully aware that you wouldn't have survived without it. Why can't you simply be

grateful that your situation happened to meet Green Mesa's needs at just the right time? Do you know how many people would have given their right arm just for the chance of being a part of this purely for cosmetic and superficial reasons? Not to mention the lives it might save!"

The wolf didn't reply. He continued to stare at his paw, his gaze sharp enough to cut through glass. Did he think that if he glared at it hard enough, he could cut through the synthetics and nanites to find his skin beneath? She couldn't quite fight the urge to roll her eyes as she crossed her arms beneath her breasts. There was only so much she could do to help those unwilling to work with her through this process. Maybe once he adjusted to the idea, then he would come around and she could actually give him the therapy he needed while gathering the data she required of him. Yet a small huff and a dark scowl later, and her patient was walking toward the door, trailed by the constant well-nigh inaudible clicks of the valves beneath his skin. Maria jumped to her feet, her pupils narrowing to dangerous slits.

"Mr. Stanton! Mr. Stanton! Nathan! Where do you think you're going!" After a half-heartbeat of hesitation, he continued on, keeping his head forward. A small growl rolled up her throat as one slender paw reached beneath her desk and pressed. The door slammed shut in the wolf's face and stopped him short. He matched her growl with one of his own as his fur bristled across his body. Even now, she couldn't help but to feel a small trill of elation over just how well the artificial strands were reacting to his emotions. She made a mental note to review the video from this room and add in what she had observed to her report. For the time being though, she focused on the task at hand. Now that she had managed to gain a bit of control in this environment, the small edge of panic that had unwantingly crept into her voice was replaced with cold hard facts. "Mr. Stanton, if you'll recall from your contract, you are required to remain in this facility for the duration of your recovery. Any breach of contract will give us every right to... retrieve that which is duly ours."

Once more the wolf refused to so much as look at her, keeping his body turned toward the door. He took a deep breath, the skin expanding around his broad back as the fur shifted in natural form, then released it

slowly. Once more Maria was left to marvel over what she managed to accomplish. Of course, there was an entire team of techs and scientists and doctors involved, but this had been her brain child. Despite the iciness within her tone, a smug smile tugged on the corners of her muzzle. Another deep breath in, yet this time when the wolf released it, his voice rumbled deeper than his growl had.

"Dr. DeFazio, I also recall that once I'm seen fit enough to begin the next phase of physical and psychological therapy, I have every right to walk to different parts of the facility that Green Mesa has deemed appropriate. I assure you, I will stay within these prison walls."

Maria straightened at the last words so quickly it was a wonder she didn't hear her own spine snap. She gritted her teeth against her reply and even managed to hold back her snarl. There wasn't much more she could do without breaching her own contracts. An unpleasant feeling of free-wheeling helplessness flooded her senses as she reached down, flicked a switch to release the doors, and watched as her multimillion dollar brain child stepped out into the hallway beyond.

Once the door slid closed, she growled softly and slammed her fist against the table. "Unreasonable. Impossible. Ungrateful. Annoying as all sin. Why didn't any of these things show up on his most recent personality report?"

She had to calm down. She sat back in her chair and closed her eyes against the pressure of her headache, drawing in a slow deep breath through her nose as she steapled her paws in front of her. Getting riled up like this wasn't going to solve anything, least of all Nathan's ungratefulness. She released her breath slowly through pursed lips, visualizing the clutter of her mind clearing out. Once more, in through the nose, out through the mouth. On the third deep breath, her eyes slowly opened as a thought occurred to her. Perhaps it would be best to remember how this all began. Maybe she could catch things in his reactions that would allow her to better handle their next meeting.

She pulled out the shelf that held her keyboard and tapped lightly at the keys, bringing up the videos from the security cameras within Mr. Stanton's room. Her fingertips hesitated above the keyboard as memories already began to tease at the edges of her mind. She shook her head at

herself and entered the date she wanted before maximizing the window. It was the date Mr. Stanton had first awoken from the accident.

It was easy to see through the video how disoriented he was when he first opened his eyes. Due to the nature of the procedure, he had enough drugs pumped through him to choke an elephant. He had groped around, his eyes darting, refocusing, darting again, trying to make sense of what was going on around him. She watched herself come into the room, relief obvious even through her professional exterior as she checked his stats. There was no audio from the cameras, but it was easy for Maria to recall his dry voice, cracked from lack of use. It didn't take much for her to place each word on their lips through her memories alone

"Nathan, you're doing well. You really gave us a bit of a scare there. How do you feel old man?"

"Rachel... where's Rachel...?"

Maria's expression had faltered. She had known that moment would come, but a part of her had hoped that she could put it off as long as possible. Turn his focus on the good things to better soften the blow. Leave it to Nathan to get straight to the heart of the matter. She slipped onto the edge of his bed as she took one of his hands in hers. He looked down at their hands, then up to her eyes. There was a chance of putting off the news a little longer, but now that the ball was rolling, she wanted to get the words out there before she lost her courage. His lips parted, but she answered before he could say a word

"I'm sorry Nathan. I'm so sorry. Shrapnel from the valve did too much damage. There was nothing anyone could do except make her comfortable. For what it's worth, we were able to minimize her pain."

Nathan's head had jerked as if he had been slapped. He stared up at Maria, disbelief strong in his eyes as he began to shake his head over and over again, slow at first, than faster. He gripped the sheets as he silently pleaded for her to say otherwise, one singular word repeating over and over under his breath. The words had come out in a croak as they came out faster and faster, his voice rising with his pitch. "No. No, no, no, nononononono! She can't be! She was right there with me! No! She can't die while I live! Please, where is she? What do I have to do to be with her again? Please Maria, just tell me, anything, please!" Maria

was going to lose him at this rate. She had never seen anyone transition through the that many of the five stages of grief as he was, though she knew this was only the prelude before the main event. The poor guy was in for a long, painful road ahead of him.

She needed to do something to end this before she lost him for good. She had shifted on the bed as she pulled out a small piece of jewelry from her blazer pocket. All these weeks she had been holding onto it. It was time for it to be given back. She held it up in front of his face, forcing him to focus on it.

"I'm sorry Nathan. She's gone. But her memory can live strong, through you."

He stared at the ring for a moment before reaching for it with a trembling paw. Several seconds passed before he curled his fingers around it in a tight grasp. After a moment, he shook his head, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. "What's... what's wrong with it? Why can't I feel it? It should be cold, or warm, or something. I can't feel it." Panic hitched his voice and flashed through his eyes as his breathing grew more shallow, and he opened his paw before trying to press the ring into it. Maria furrowed her brows as she watched him, then took his paw in both of hers once more.

"What do you mean? Nathan, I need a better description than that so I can help you."

His eyes shot up to hers, and Maria had to fight the urge to jerk back. There was something wild within them, something borderline dangerous as he struggled to put thoughts to words. At least the task was forcing him to focus. "I can feel the pressure. I know your hands are squeezing mine. But I can't... there's no definitive sensation. I only feel the slight weight of the ring. I don't feel all of it. Why? Why can't I feel it? Is she... is she gone to me forever?"

Maria gave his paw a squeeze and offered him a gentle reassuring smile. "No, not at all. We're still working things out with it Nate. This is something that's never been done before. Uncharted territory. Later we'll run tests and get to the bottom of what might be off. We'll perfect it. Before you know it, you'll feel every detail of her ring, including the warmth you can bring to it. For now though, my number one priority is

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to help you adjust to these changes. Not just physically, but emotionally. That way you can be happy someday again. It's what Rachel would want. For you to live your life to the fullest, so that you'll have a million and one great experiences to share with her when you're united with her someday, years and years from now."

That was the trigger he had needed. His expression collapsed, and he fell to pieces. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close as sobs wracked through his body. The sooner he got through these early stages, the better she could help him through the long run, and the sooner his healing could begin.

Maria turned off the video and laid her face in her paws. She didn't need to see anymore. That night was clear as crystal in her memories now, playing out in her mind's eye as if it had been just last week. They had spoken late into the night, and she had promised she would be there for him every single step of the way. In the weeks that followed, she encouraged him, teased him... she still remembered the afternoon he had smiled for the first time since the accident. The emotions she felt were better than any of her accomplishments in her creation.

"When did I lose touch with that?" she murmured to herself. "He was my friend first and patient second, yet somewhere along the line I became so caught up with my work. I had forgotten what was really important."

She brought up today's footage from the security cameras to trace Nathan and learn how he was fairing. It was easy to see just in his stride that he was carrying a lot of weight on his shoulders. She chewed on her bottom lip before closing the video and drumming her fingers on her desk as she thought outloud.

"Perhaps it's time to change that. Yes... long past time." She took a deep breath and looked back at her monitor as she mentally filed through ways to open the lines of communication between them that went beyond the basics. "I could explain some of the research being done even now to establish a nervous system within the flesh proper. Reassure him that it's only a matter of time, that we're so much closer than we were three months ago. Maybe tease him lightly about Antarctica again. He always laughed at that." A smile touched upon her lips at the memory

as she added, "Maybe that will let us talk like we used to... might even get him to smile—"

She stopped mid-word at the sound of her phone. She frowned at it for a moment, as if trying to view the person on the other end. Who in the world would be calling her this early in the morning? She glanced at the door and considered letting her voicemail pick it up, but after a moment she thought better of it and lifted the receiver.

"Dr. Maria DeFazio."

"Doctor, I want that report."

"Of course sir. I just need to—"

"I don't want it tomorrow, or a week from now. I want it To Day. Do you understand?"

"I... yes sir."

She waited until she heard the click on the other end before hanging up and rubbing her temples. She knew she had another week left on that report, but her boss was notorious for bumping up deadlines at the drop of a hat. That must have been one of the major factors of her becoming so distant from Nathan. She sighed as she looked to the door and murmured softly, "Later I'll set things right Nate, I promise. As soon as this report is finished, I'll make you smile again."

~~~~~\*\*\*\*\*~~~~~

Nathan stalked down the clean white hallway, his eyes focused forward as he struggled to keep his temper in check. He hated this... all of this. He had given Green Mesa seventeen years of loyal service and hard work. Maria and Steve from the IT department and Chrissie from HR went out for drinks with him for every promotion they were given and every holiday they could share. He had thought they were his friends. He had thought he could depend on them. Yet in his eleventh hour, when he needed friends the most, they were nowhere to be seen. He was left alone, no longer among people who called him Nate and buddy and old man and pup. Now he was Mr. Stanton, or Test Subject 4-921-683-A.

For thirteen months, the only one of his so-called friends who had bothered to visit him during his recovery was Maria. She bridged the gap and came up with excuses for the others. It was easier to swallow

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her stories when he at least had her company, if no one else's. He had always underestimated how much comfort could come from a familiar face, a familiar voice, even old familiar jokes. Her knowledge and, more importantly, confidence in the new technology she was helping to develop bolstered him. With her help and guidance, things were actually looking promising for awhile. She even managed to make him crack a smile every so often when he was going through the worst of his depression. She had given him hope that maybe, just maybe, he would be able to honor Rachel's memory by living a good life.

Something changed somewhere along the way though, yet he couldn't put his finger on when. Less jokes were shared between them. Playful banter and gentle teasing began to dwindle into technical terms and straight forward doctor to patient questions. Eventually she stopped making excuses for the others, giving one word answers or simply shrugging when he inquired after them. When he initially noticed, he tried to strike up conversation and even attempted a joke or two, but it seemed too little too late.

Now her warm laughter and encouraging smiles were nothing but a ghost of a memory from another life. Now she was his lead physician who only spoke when she needed information that her charts and tests wouldn't give her, and he was her patient. Less than her patient. She looked at him as if he was one of her little science experiments. Instead of her presence giving the comfort and optimism it used to, she unnerved him. Today had been the first time he had heard her say his first name in months, and even so it was only to better grab his attention as he was walking away from her.

He just had to make it to his locker. If he could just reach it, he could keep the nightmares at bay. He might stand the chance to actually be okay again; to find some rhyme or reason to the thread-bare scraps of his life. His eyes began to sting with unshed tears and his heart pounded hard against his chest as he drew closer to his destination. So many months, too many, but he was finally going to be able to hold the little he had left to live for. The anticipation, the hunger, the raw need to feel it in his hands again was nearly overwhelming.

The wolf stopped short at the door to the locker room and placed

his paw on a white bar that was set beside the entrance. A blue light emitted from it and scanned his prints before the door slid open to allow him admittance. He felt his heart leap to his throat suddenly and darted inside, nearly jogging past the numerous rows of metal stalls as he counted them under his breath. When he reached the seventh row, he moved down to the very last column, second from the top. The numbers for his lock came as easily to him as his own birthday if he were to reverse the digits, perhaps because that was exactly what the combination was. He tugged the door open, and his heart threatened to pound right out of his chest. There, inside the cold hard metal box, his eyes found what he had been searching for.

He reached in and pulled out a thin silver ring inlaid with small emeralds. It wasn't gold or diamonds and didn't cost a fraction of what he had wanted to get for her—of what she truly deserved—yet she had loved it so much. She assured him though that it was the greatest ring of all, because it reminded her of Nathan's silver fur and warm green eyes. He still remembered how it had felt when he first slipped it onto her finger. The metal had been like a sliver of ice as he held it in his sweaty palm, waiting for her to give the answer that would change their lives. Once it was on her though, where it belonged, it warmed almost too quickly to be true. At the time he dismissed it as his own nerves and body heat having warmed it, but it truly seemed as if Rachel could warm even the most frigid of things... even his heart.

And there it was again, that familiar nothingness. It wasn't cold. It wasn't warm. If he wasn't looking at his own paw, he could almost swear that he was holding nothing at all. He turned the ring around between his fingers, recalling the high and painful cost of his survival. It wasn't the ring that was faulty. It was this skin. There was the pressure against the muscles beneath, but there was nothing beyond that.

He sat down hard on the bench that was bolted between the rows of lockers as the memory of the accident played through his mind like an old film that had happened to someone else. He had been working on a leaking valve while his tech was taking stats. There was the screeching rip of metal against metal, and the valve burst like a balloon. Steam shot out and sprayed at his body. The pain had been horrid, and it took him

several heartbeats to realize that the wretched endless scream that was tormenting his ears was coming from his own muzzle. By the time help came, it should have been too late. It should have been, and yet.... The only way Green Mesa agreed to help him was to do a full replacement of his flesh, even though his back side was nearly untouched. They wanted to test out the multiple layers that made up their new synthetic skin to its fullest, and the best way to do that was to replace every scrap of flesh that was still clinging to his body. As an employee in a life or death situation he didn't have much choice, yet he still would have agreed to it if he could have. Rachel would have wanted him to take the chance on living a complete life.

He clasped the ring in his hand, pressing it hard against his palm, trying to make himself feel anything again, please, just one more time. Maybe if he could feel it, he could warm it, and maybe if he could warm it, he could finally know that she was at peace. To know that those screams hadn't been hers. All these months he had told himself they were his, but he couldn't remember hearing her voice. He couldn't remember seeing her face. What if they had been her screams? What if she had been the one in such excruciating pain? What if he had just been standing there, like a heartless weakling too caught up in his own pain to even wonder if she was okay? If he had only thought to force his ruined eyes to look for her, to call out for her, to listen for her, to reach for her, to comfort her, to let her know she wasn't alone.... Someone had told him that she had died instantly, but Maria, Maria had said they had eased her pain. Who was he supposed to believe? Maria, who saw him as nothing more than one of her experiments, or the people who were first on scene, who were just trying to help him forget the nightmares. To help him forget her screams.

He couldn't deny it anymore. They had been her screams. It didn't matter what they told him. It didn't matter what Maria had said. Rachel had died horribly, in pain, screaming for him, and he had done nothing.

"Oh God... Rachel, my love, I'm so sorry." He couldn't even feel the tears that trickled down his cheeks. For a moment, a few precious seconds, his mind found a tiny island of clarity as he noticed the small splatter of water droplets on the leg of his pants. The world felt surreal, distant as a bad dream. He reached to his cheeks. He couldn't feel the

moistness against the fur. If not for his blurred vision and the sting in his eyes, he would have looked up to see if there was a leak in the ceiling. "There's something very wrong with me today...."

It was something he could normally laugh off, but today it was like a bug. An earworm, gnawing on him, nagging at him. It was a thought he just couldn't shake. Like a flash of paranoia, it was that feeling of being watched, even in an empty room. His eyes locked on the security camera that hung from the corner of the ceiling. Come to think of it, he was never alone here. There was always someone watching. Always someone just around the corner. Yet no one else was unnerved by it. They even seemed to welcome it. He had once taken comfort from it as well, to feel that someone was always looking out for him. Maybe they were. But it wasn't for his well-being they watched. It was their precious experiment, Test Subject 4-921-683-A. She used to look out for him. She was the only one who really cared.

A soft noise that he couldn't quite place tickled at his ear, and his head turned as his eyes struggled to focus. He swallowed hard against his own racing pulse, straining his ears, daring, silently pleading, needing to hear it again as he gripped the ring tighter. He couldn't quite place it, but there was something vaguely familiar. Something warm, comforting. Was he dreaming? This was how his dreams always began. There, the soft whisper of his name. The rustle of cloth. Rachel.

His eyes widened as he rose from the bench and walked toward the end of the row of lockers with legs full of lead. He peered around one corner, then the other. His heart was racing as he tried to pin down where the sounds had come from. Had everyone lied to him? Could she still be alive and they were just keeping her from him? Like two rats separated to keep their experiments pure? There, the glimpse of bright blue. He began to walk, then run to it, one hand reaching out.

He stopped short at the showers, where the shadow of a figure lingered against the far wall. His breath caught in his throat. He was scared to move forward. Scared that he might wake up and break the spell. A muffled voice of reason warned that she wasn't supposed to be here. That she belonged somewhere he could never go. That if he were to chase down that shadow, he would just find more pain, more loss. He

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couldn't believe that voice. He reached a hand out toward her shadow, and once more she whispered his name, beckoning him. He stepped forward, but her shadow disappeared around another wall.

Something flashed in the corner of his eye, and he glanced back just in time to see her dart between the lockers. He didn't hesitate this time. He spun around and went into a flat run, passing row after row of the metal boxes. He stopped short at one row to see her standing there, against the wall, clothed in her favorite bright blue dress that she had worn on their first date together. An odd choked noise that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob escaped his lips as he began walking toward her, one hand reaching.

"Rachel! I knew it... I knew you were still alive!"

"Oh Nathan, it's really you!" Such joy, such warmth and love shined bright as sunlight in her eyes, sparkling with unspilt tears. Relief washed through him in crashing waves and he took another step toward her.

"They, they told me you were dead! I would have searched this building floor to ceiling had I just known!"

"It doesn't matter anymore love. All that matters is you're here with me now."

She looked amazing, youthful, more vibrant than ever before. It was as if the years of stress and labor this company bore on her was finally lifted. She nearly glowed, as beautiful as the day she had said yes to him. It was the way he had always remembered her, always dreamed of her. Please dear God don't let this be a dream, and if it was a dream please don't let him wake up from it.

"You're not dreaming my love, don't worry. Now we can stay together, forever."

Her words were like a healing caress that drew him closer to her, close enough to touch. That last word... forever.... It was an impossible term. Something that could never be. But did it really matter? She was here, and he had her once more. Forever. It was what they had said on their wedding day. It was one of their vows. For a moment, for a heartbeat, he saw her dressed in the same white lace she had worn on that day. He jerked slightly as he blinked. No, no no no. Don't let this illusion fade like so many dreams before it. Don't let this be like sunlight through

grasping fingers just when he was starting to believe.

"Nathan, what did you let them do to you?"

Her voice held such sorrow, pulling him away from his desperate silent pleas. He took a step back and frowned before rubbing at his eyes. She now wore the same dark green jump suit she always had for work. But when did she change?

"What... what do you mean? I didn't have a choice. And I'm alive, living for the both of us, living in your honor!"

"Do you forget our promise to one another? What you made me promise you? It was the night we talked about plans for the future. In-laws, children, retirement."

His mind struggled through the slosh his thoughts were becoming, trying to recall every vow he had made to her. His throat went dry as the words hit him hard. The conversation they had shared that night. She had made it clear to him that should anything happen, she didn't want to be put on life support. He tried to point out that she wouldn't be alone because he would be by her side through it all. They would go through it together. She had cut him off though, saying in no uncertain terms that under no circumstance did she ever want to be so dependent on a machine, trapped between life and death. In a surge of emotion, he had snapped and claimed that he wanted the same thing then too. At first, it was a shock for her. Yet she regained her composure, and the next words rang loud and clear within his mind. "If one of us was to be forced in that position.... Half a life isn't a life. I would rather live a whole life with you, or no life at all."

"And now... now look at you. Can you even feel me anymore? Feel my touch, my warmth... my love?"

He stared at her wide-eyed before looked down at his own trembling hands, the ring slipping from his fingers. What did they do to him? What had he become? To never be able to feel again... what did he let them make him into? They had stripped away what it meant to be alive. He was unnatural. A monster, half a thing that should have died with her. But still his mind struggled against it.

"But... but I thought... I'm trying to live for the both of us! I know I'm struggling, but I'm trying! For you!"

"How? How can you even say that when you let me die. When you didn't even comfort me, hold me as I cried out for you?"

Panic swelled within Nathan as his tears began to fall. "No," he croaked. "I... I can still feel! Your warmth, your love, I can still feel it! Please, don't leave me again!"

"I didn't leave you my love. You just didn't follow."

Her face abruptly twisted from sorrow into pain and torment. Blood blossomed over her jump suit like so many bright flowers. At the center of each blossom was a pistol of sharp metal. They littered her body, and she let out a sudden loud, familiar scream. His heart stopped at the sight, at the sound, and he quickly jerked forward from the bench, crying out, "No!"

The scream stopped suddenly as she vanished. He had still been sitting on the same bench as before, staring into the mirror across from him. She had been right there, in front of him. She... she had been dying, and he couldn't save her. Again. And there was nothing he could do. Again. Helpless as before.

Something warm dripped into his eye. He finally studied the mirror, the servos turning to focus his eyes, and saw what had jolted him away from his thoughts... from her. Fresh blood covered his ear. No, there was no ear there. There was nothing left but a few scraps of flesh. He frowned as he looked down at his own paw, only then realizing he had something trapped in his grasp. The tech still twitched in his hand, trying to focus on sounds that weren't there.

He raised his eyes to look back to the mirror and saw the ring laying on the floor in front of him. He could still join her. It was a maddened thought, yet his breathing quickened as he held on tight to it. Why shouldn't he put an end to his suffering... to Rachel's pain? He had broken his promise to her. He could still set things right though. She was hurting all because of his flesh. It didn't feel. It was infecting him. Turning him something he wasn't. He wasn't even the man she had fallen in love with. He was a monster. This so-called skin was a trap. It was the monstrosity. It prickled as if sensing his hostility. As if it was alive in its own right. Angry crazed eyes turned on the thing that covered his body, on the monster that surrounded him. He had never seen things so clearly before. It all

made sense to him now. What he had to do to make things right. What the real monster was. It had to be slayed. He had to free himself, or be forever plagued with this... this thing.

With a snarl he attacked the offender, ripping at it, tearing at it. Maybe if it was gone he could feel the ring, and if he could feel the ring he could make it warm again. He could prove to her that her warmth, her love, was still all that mattered to him. He could show her that he would give anything for her... anything at all.

He couldn't feel his own claws ripping through beyond the pressure against the muscles. He couldn't feel his clothes tear away despite the sound of ripping fabric. He couldn't feel his own blood welling up from beneath his claws despite the copper smell that filled his nostrils. He couldn't feel, couldn't touch, couldn't sense. He wasn't a living individual. How could he be sure his other senses weren't lying to him now? It only made him dig harder and deeper into his back, his arms, his torso, his legs, his face as rage boiled into madness. Get it off get it off get it off! By any means possible! Strip him down to his muscle! Free him from his prison! Let him feel again!

He didn't hear the other voices at first. He wrenched his bloodied hands down as he whipped his head around, his mind awash in the ocean of clarity she had finally revealed to him. His eyes were wild as he stared at the three officers, his ragged breath coming in short pants. Their guns were raised, pointed at him from point blank range. They were yelling at him, yet his mind couldn't seem to make any sense of what they were saying. Only one word translated through his tortured mind: Stop.

They were trying to stop him. They were trying to keep him imprisoned within his own skin. They were standing between him and Rachel. The voice of insanity thrashed in its death throws, pleading and begging and screaming at him to remember that these guards were people too. There was Larry, who was so proud of his oldest son making it on the honor roll three years running. There was Janet, who had finally found love years after a painful divorce. There was Michael, who was looking forward to seeing his sister after she had served her first WestPac in the Navy. They were living breathing people, just like him and Rachel and... Maria.... Maria, who had been a real person. Maria, who had played the

part of his friend so well. Maria, who had gained his trust just so she could experiment on him. If it wasn't for her, he would be dead now. If it wasn't for her, he would be free. If it wasn't for her, he would be with his love. His wife.

These guards were just as guilty as the rest of Green Mesa. They wanted to stop him. He couldn't let them stop him. To end them was to gain his freedom. To end them would give him the chance of reuniting with Rachel. He had to dispose of them. It was the only way.

He launched himself at the closest of the three guards, teeth bared and claws dripping. He didn't bother batting at the tranquilizers that pierced his body. It made no difference. They just wanted to protect their dear experiment. Adrenaline shot hot in his chest before coursing through his veins, reigniting his rage. The first guard collapsed beneath him like a house of twigs. Before they hit the ground, his teeth were already buried deep within her throat, filling his muzzle with blood as it gushed between his teeth. There was no time linger.

The next guard was dropping one gun as he pulled out another. He was swapping out the tranquilizers for a firearm. Nathan sprang at him, wrapping his muzzle around the guard's face. A terrifying scream tore free, though it was hard to tell who it belonged to. When he felt the crunch of bone through his teeth, he jerked his head up and stared at the last guard.

He didn't notice the other guards piling in through the door. He didn't notice the bullets that tore through his body. He catapulted himself at the third guard, blood and freedom and the need to feel again the only things that mattered to him now. A strong blow beneath his muzzle threw him back against a row of lockers. He stayed like that for seconds that stretched on for days as the dozen or so guards unloaded their clips into his chest. He had failed her. He had broken his promise to her, and lost his chance to make things right. To prove to her that he could feel again. His body slid down to the floor. He remained seated like that, distantly admiring how beautiful of a contrast the smears and pools of bright red life looked against the clean white tiles. Rachel would appreciate the contrast. She had such an eye for beauty. His body shuddered, and sank sideways.

One hand reached out, weak and trembling, before his last breath escaped his lips. His eyes stared out unseeing at his fingers, just short of the broken silver band.

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Chrissie's eyes grew distant and unfocused as she read the report that had just come in. After four attempts at trying and failing to get through the entirety of the paragraphs, the ewe finally set the papers down and took a sip of her tea. What she had managed to get through ran through her mind as she closed her eyes and said a small prayer under her breath. Her eyes fluttered open as she heard Steve grunt a single word greeting. The bear looked about the same way she felt, but Chrissie was far more practiced at keeping her emotions hidden. She was still mindful to keep her voice tender though as she asked, "Did you hear about Nathan?"

Steve looked down at the box he was hefting and scowled. "I got the memo. Or rather read it over Ella's shoulder as I was working on her connections. It's bullshit, y'know."

Her eyes widened as she met Steve's eyes, then glanced to her door. The bear huffed and propped the box against the edge of her desk, but seemed to get the hint and stopped himself from adding to his words. Chrissie took another sip of her tea, gathering her thoughts carefully on how best to word her invitation as Steve rolled his shoulders back. "I was wondering, would you be interested in going out for drinks tonight? I figured we'd honor Nathan by going to his favorite bar. Usual time?"

Again, Steve seemed to take the hint she dropped and slowly nodded. "Yeah, I can do that. Good fortune for the soul to drink to their peace." Chrissie offered a small smile that faltered when it wasn't returned. The bear drew in a deep breath and ran his hand over his face before hoisting the box up once more. He began heading for the door, but paused and looked to Chrissie. "I hear Ligature Science is hiring. Tying the world together by tackling one problem at a time." He let the words hang for a moment before walking out, leaving the ewe alone with her thoughts.

They couldn't speak freely here. The walls had ears that reached for miles and every passing glance was a scrutinizing study. There was a reason Nathan enjoyed Vito's Sports Bar and Grill, and it certainly wasn't

for its grill. Vito had a distinct distaste for Green Mesa's ears, and he somehow managed to find a way to scramble any radios or bugs that might be planted in or around his property. Of course there were always people with loose lips, but sports bars were meant to be loud, and it was easy to find the small corners where you could actually be heard by those next to you without having to raise your voice. They would have much to talk about tonight, to that Chrissie had no doubt. Especially if Steve was hinting at what she suspected. She had to find a way to get him to understand that they couldn't bail ship until they got to the bottom of this.

There were a few things very, very wrong with what had happened to Nathan. His death had been tragic, though no one could truly guess what had been running through his mind at the time. He didn't just go off the deep end. He seemed to have jumped in head first. The guards had come in reaction to the violent howling they heard within the locker room. When they saw the claw-marks over his body, they began to radio for medical staff. As they tried to talk sense into him, he seemed to just snap and attack them – or so the report claimed. Of course, as per procedure and company standards, the guards were forced to stop him by claiming his life.

Chrissie had known Nathan for many years now though. Things simply weren't adding up. At first she had believed that all the events leading up to the skin replacement was purely circumstantial. After reading the report though, long-buried doubts were beginning to surface once more. Could it really have been chance and happenstance that out of all the people who worked with the pipes, Nathan had to be the one taken out of his usual station to look into the leaky valve? Could it really have been pure coincidence that the tech assigned to that area on that day just so happened to be Nathan's love, and was pulled from her lunch break specifically to help him out? Everyone knew that an intimate relationship within the office was one of the fastest ways to be fired, yet the few who were aware of Nathan and Rachel never bothered reporting it. She was due for a promotion in a few months that would get her moved to another base, making their relationship perfectly harmless toward company policy soon enough. As if all of this wasn't enough, there

was the timing.

Maria had told them the week before the accident that the 'Tech Flesh', as she liked to call it, was finally ready to be put to the test. All they needed now was a guinea pig who was willing to sign all the release forms. Everyone knew that it would be the most difficult part. Even burn victims were hesitant to out-and-out replace all of their flesh regardless of the perks of having it far more durable than the real deal. Without proper testing in the allotted amount of time given to them by Green Mesa, the project would go belly up before it ever had the chance to fly. How convenient that someone whose information was already fully uploaded into the data base was in desperate need of the replacement, and all they needed was his signature.

Chrissie finished off her tea and leaned back over the report. She tried to focus on the words as they covered the details of Nathan's death, but for whatever reason all she could think about was how Maria might be reacting to this. It dawned on her that the lioness might have been isolating him from his friends. The initial reasons she gave had made sense at the time, but it hurt that they couldn't be there for him after such tragedy. Should they have fought harder to see their friend? Should they have been more insistent? Should they have demanded to speak to Maria's superiors about it? Steve once commented in less than pleasant terms how cold the lioness had grown. Chrissie had just blamed it on the pressure and stress of work. It couldn't have been easy to oversee procedures being done on such a good friend. Should she have so easily dismissed the observation? They had believed that Maria had Nathan's best interests in mind. They had put their faith in her to guide their friend through this difficult time until the day they could visit him. Had they misplaced their trust?

Despite the warmth of her tea, the ewe shivered as more and more questions spun through her mind. She could almost hear Maria's snide voice growling, 'What a waste of perfectly good Tech Flesh.'

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"I mean, maybe I am crazy. I mean, maybe. But if this is all there is, then I don't want to be sane."

TECH FLESH

— Neil Gaiman, *Neverwhere*

NEURAL ENRICHMENT

BY DIRELDA

"Tired of not being able to read the menus in restaurants? Frustrated with your inability to understand shopkeepers? Yet you don't have years to study a language? The Samsung Polyglot 3 solves all of these problems and more."

John tried to fill his head with K-Pop, but the advert droned on in his mind. It would be a few months before he had saved enough for the implant that would prevent adverts being beamed directly into his head. He was grateful that he could sometimes drown out the cacophony by getting a song stuck in his head.

"The Samsung Polyglot 3 is fully compatible with our full suite of implants. And unlike Rycorp implants, our implants allow you to retain your humanity."

In the reflection in the glass wall between the tracks and the platform, John could clearly see the vulpine face that had been staring back at him for the past three weeks. The yellow eyes were wells of melancholy. He should have done more research.

At first John had loved his Rycorp implant. He no longer needed to write notes on paper—he was able to store memos in its built-in memory and access them at a thought. His senses were enhanced. The better sense of smell was annoying. But his improved hearing and sight allowed him to catch his students muttering in Korean when they weren't supposed to or attempting to cheat on tests. Then, after he registered his implant with the government, John had started getting English-language adverts beamed into his head whenever he passed billboards and tech products.

"If your family has a history of mental disorders please consult a doctor—"

A trumpet fanfare broke in over the advert, which was followed by a Korean announcement. Then an English voice came on: "The Bundang Line bound for Wangsimni is approaching. Please wait behind the yellow line."

As the subway cars whooshed into the station, he joined one of the

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several queues. A young woman dragged her two children to a different line. Several elderly people scrunched forward in the queue. But many of the people had a glazed look in their eyes and wouldn't have noticed if an angel in radiant splendor wielding a flaming sword had appeared and warned them not to board the train; they were lost in the electronic fantasies conjured up by a new line of cybernetic implants that John could only dream of affording on his *hagwon* teacher's salary. The doors opened and everyone surged forward. There was a mechanical precision to how they filled up the seats: John's darting movements disrupted the flow of people as he tried to snag a seat.

An elderly woman shoved in front of him and took the last seat. When he didn't respond to the torrent of Korean that gushed from her lips she pointed down the aisle. "Seats for humans. Animals end of *jihachul!*"

Dressed in military fatigues, the person sitting next to the old lady was swapping hand attachments on his cybernetic arm from the standard hand to a multi-tool. On the other bank of seats a teenage girl was sporting an LG personal wireless antenna. John opened his mouth to protest.

The elderly woman smacked him with her handbag. "Go, animal."

No one, save for a child, looked at him. Silently he headed down to the last subway car, tail tucked in submission.

The back end of the final car didn't have seats. Instead it had an open area for the storage of bikes and luggage. Seated on a faded brown suitcase was a young woman with a lovely figure and the head of a mare. Short nut brown hair covered her arms and legs. John leaned against the wall opposite her.

"Thank God." The mare smiled at John. "Someone to talk to."

"Mmhm."

"I see you don't have a suitcase. Are you not leaving today?"

John nodded, hoping his silence would convey his desire for quiet.

"That's too bad; I was hoping to have someone I could chat with on the plane. You know, I loved it here. Korean food is too spicy and not enough people speak English, but I really did enjoy it here. And what do I get for all my efforts?" she said. "Fired. Can you believe it? I'm just as qualified as I was four weeks ago, but because I now look like this they kicked me out."

John looked out the window as they pulled into the next station. He was hearing the advert for the final matches of the StarCraft IV World Championship for the fifth time today. People streamed onto the subway. A few looked at the two before hurrying into the adjoining car while others crowded into the opposite end.

"Hey, I'm talking to you," the mare said.

John's ears flattened. "I'd rather not."

"So you're like them, are you?" She stomped her hoof on the floor.

"No."

"Then why won't you talk with me? You think you are better than me don't you? I bet you still have your job. Just you wait—they'll take it away from you and you'll wish you had quit on your own."

"I just have enough noise in my head."

"You think I don't?" She rose and marched over to him. "You think I'm not annoyed by the ads for feminine care and beauty products that buzz in my head without warning, especially since I can't use them anymore? You think I don't try to avoid standing near Samsung's billboards?"

John kept his gaze fixed on his bare, black paws. Blessed silence filled the subway car. His mind was his for a brief moment in time and the thought that passed through was that he should have waited on getting an implant; the price of Rycorp's Neural Enrichment Implant was only half that of the low-end offerings from Samsung and LG, a price he had thought was too good to pass up. But now he saw the reason why he should have waited.

Apparently Rycorp had used organic components derived from animals to lower the costs involved in making their implants. If the side effects of that had remained minor, like the tendency to pad in a circle on his bed before curling up to sleep that had developed five weeks ago, John could have lived with it. Or even the taste he developed for insects would have been acceptable. That had turned the smell of fried silkworm, the ever present aroma wafting up from sidewalk vendors, from something nauseating to a smell that made him drool.

While he had been thinking the mare had edged up to John until she was inches away from him. "I didn't spend four years teaching English in a *hagwon* only to have someone like me ignore me." When John didn't

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look up, she grabbed his muzzle and tilted his gaze up. "You will look at me when I am talking to you!"

Her ears were pinned back and her tail was violently swishing.

John shrank back against the wall. "Yes, ma'am."

"That's better." She let go of his muzzle.

"Can you leave me alone now?"

"I also didn't want to be like this, but, unlike you, I've gotten over it. And until you do you'll take it out on everyone around you."

"What do you know of me?"

She backed off. "That you bring this on yourself."

"Practice what you preach."

She didn't reply to that and fell silent. Much to his consternation an advert for Lotte Mart poured into John's head, drowning his hopes of enjoying a respite from the noise.

The mare got off at Seonjeongneung station. Her suitcase wheels caught on the gap, and she yanked at it, sending the bag careening across the platform. The doors closed and John slumped down to the floor. He sighed.

A transfer and short ride later and John emerged from the subway into the adjoining underground shopping arcade. The shops and stalls stretched westward for a couple kilometers, a gauntlet John was glad he could avoid. He hastened toward surface exit fourteen. Lying prostrate next to the wall at the bottom of the stairs was a beggar. A white tail curled behind him, and his triangular ears made him resemble a Jindo dog. A nearly empty bowl lay in front of him.

"Seonsaengnim." The beggar looked up at John.

John's tail tucked between his legs and his ears flattened as he hesitated. A man in a suit brushed past John. The beggar held up his bowl, clanking the few coins in it together.

"I can't," John said.

John took to the stairs and hurried into the light of day. Draped on the side of one of the several skyscrapers surrounding the Dongdaemun Design Plaza was a banner presenting the latest fashion, a suit that interfaced with implants, allowing the wearer to adjust the colouration. He wondered if clothing with tail accommodations would ever be plastered

on the billboards or banners in the Dongdaemun shopping area. The poor Koreans who had been transformed couldn't afford designer clothes. And considering that most of the transformed foreigners had left Korea, he would have to suffer having his tail pass under the belt he now needed to keep his pants up.

He tried to avoid a group of people passing out flyers. But a woman in a yellow blouse got in front of him.

"Excuse me, sir," she said as she thrust a flyer into his handpaws. "To celebrate the fifth anniversary of Korean reunification we are raising funds to provide the former North Koreans with quality implants."

The way she stressed 'quality' gave John the impression that she was implying the recipients shouldn't end up like him.

He tried to hand the flyer back. "No, thank you."

"But sir, without these implants they cannot fully integrate into the Korean Technocracy. They need them to truly count as people in the eyes of the government."

John dropped to all fours and darted around her. He felt a hand graze his tail.

"Think of the children you beast!"

Only when he had threaded his way into the crowd browsing the exterior stalls of the Pyeonghwa wholesale clothing market did he rise to his feet again. John always felt uncomfortable when he ran on all fours; it made him believe the things he was called. Was he truly human? This despair was lifted slightly when he considered those with cybernetic bodies or enhanced organs, particularly those who did it because they wanted to rather than out of a need to replace a missing leg or scarred lungs. Once he had acquired the advert-filtering implant it would be easier for him to tune out people's unwanted reproaches. Especially after he had saved enough for whichever model of the LG Symphony was compatible with Rycorp implants.

John's thoughts were broken by an advert that cheerfully proclaimed that past failures in job interviews and dating relationships were the result of not looking one's best.

"But with our facial cream, even the ugliest face will be invested with great beauty!"

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To distract his mind, he started browsing some of the clothing stalls.

An older woman tapped him on his shoulder. "No alterations for animals!"

John avoided one stall when its burly proprietor glared at him so intensely that he felt his hackles rise. He was shooed away from several stalls; often it was the owners who pushed him away, though sometimes the customers edged him out or told him to go to a pet store.

On the other side of the market he came to a street divided by a stream that ran down its center. John stood on one of the many bridges that attempted to keep the two sides of the street together. Parked bicycles and motorcycles crowded the sidewalk. People jostled past him, some ramming into him on purpose while others didn't seem to notice him. He turned his gaze downward to avoid the reproachful stares of the elderly.

Faded and worn by the countless feet that filed across the bridge was a plaque with an inscription in English and Korean:

*There are loud metallic noises and the irritated voices of machinists.
I cannot distinguish what is real from unreal but I keep on working
hard.*

*It is meaningless. Just doing it the way I know. Other than what I am
doing*

*I am oblivious. No, even what I am doing now is being done
mechanically and
automatically. I am actually nothing more than an observer of my
own work.¹*

A man on a moped pulled up and shouted at John in Korean. So John shuffled on. He would have loved to be oblivious to all but what he was doing—the advert for men's beauty cream was now relaying enthusiastic testimonials.

By the time John reached the fifth floor of the Dongdaemun crafts market, he was panting. It was going to be another miserably hot summer day. Retrieve note titled "trimming," he thought. Into the forefront of his mind flooded the fact that he had scheduled a fur trimming at ten in the

¹ *Actual inscription from this Dongdaemun bridge; author unknown*

morning on Saturday at *Over the Moon*, which was owned by a Ms. Moon and located in stall number 548, and that English was understood. He followed the stall signs until he reached his destination.

Arrayed on the stall's display table were various crafts made from woven fur, patterns, bags of fur, and a book by a Moon Ha-Eun. A middle-aged woman sat behind the table. Behind her was a counter with several tools arrayed on it.

"Excuse me," John said, "Are you Ms. Moon?"

"Yes. How may I help you?"

"I have come for a fur trimming; this is the right—"

Ms. Moon raised her eyebrows. "You are not female."

"I don't see why—"

She stood and walked around the table. "And you have only one tail. How disappointing. Here I was excited to be honored by the presence of a *kumiho* and instead I get you."

"But I thought a *kumiho*—"

"You are a foreigner and know nothing. When a fox has lived long enough to have grown nine tails and know how to shape shift, it is known as a *kumiho*." Ms. Moon walked into the rear of her stall and carried out a metal tub from behind the counter. "Your fur is probably too short, so I should send you away, but you look hot and I could do with the money."

John remained where he was. "Why did you think I'd be a woman?"

"*Kumiho* usually appear as females. That makes it easier to get close enough to men to eat their livers. I had been hoping to sell you a woven fox-hair purse. Well, come on, do you want to be trimmed or not?"

"You weren't seriously expecting a nine-tailed fox, were you?"

"I am talking with a one-tailed fox."

"But those are just stories—"

Ms. Moon placed a hand on her forehead. "My, I just had the strangest daydream. I imagined a fox came and asked for a trim, but foxes can't talk, much less insult me." She turned away from John. "Now why do I have a tub set out if there is nothing here to trim?"

"All right, I'm sorry. Will you still trim me?"

"Get in the tub. And take off that shirt unless you want me to destroy it."

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John glanced about before coming behind the table and climbing into the empty tub. Ms. Moon mumbled to herself in Korean as she picked up and then set down various attachments for an electric trimmer. John removed his polo.

"Relax, I am not going to hurt you." She scratched John on the head and then proceeded to trim his fur from the waist up. The hum of the trimmer was annoying, though it did drown out the litany of side effects from the facial cream advert.

A phone rang. John's ears swiveled to pinpoint the rare sound; most people had implants that would play the ringtone in their heads. His Rycorp implant was supposed to interface with phones, but it refused to recognize his phone. Ms. Moon set down the trimmers and walked around the counter.

"Privet, Fyodor! Kak dela?"

The brief conversation was held entirely in Russian. He could clearly hear what Ms. Moon was saying and some of what the person on the other end of the line was saying, but he understood none of it. Ms. Moon shot a couple of glances toward him. After she hung up, she spent a few minutes writing something on a pad of paper.

As she was trimming his back, Ms. Moon said, "I told Fyodor about you and he would like to meet you."

"Why'd you do that?" John shifted to face her.

"Don't move so suddenly! Do you want to be cut?" She shook the trimmer at him. "He is a scientist; a geneticist, I think. I told him of your condition and he seems to think he can help you."

"Then where can I find him?"

"Hold still. There, that's better. As soon as we're finished you should head to the pond at World Cup Park. He will be waiting."

When John finally arrived at World Cup Park he was in a foul mood once more. It had been a horrid subway ride. At the bottom of the stairs down to the pond he nearly stepped on an upturned turtle. John watched its legs flail in the air. Dozens of people passed by; few seemed to notice the turtle and a few of those that did, broke into laughter. John almost left it there. But he turned back and righted it.

The turtle waddled after him.

A white-haired man with thick spectacles rose from a bench and walked over to him. "You must be Ha-Eun's fox."

"Are you Fyodor?"

"Yes." Fyodor bent down and picked up the turtle. "What are you doing following this fox, Dmitri?"

"Is he your turtle?"

"No, no. Dmitri live in pond. Is, how you say, ah, companion when I think."

"Can you help me?"

"Maybe. What is your problem?"

"Look at me!" John thumped his chest. "I'm not human."

"If that is problem, cannot help. Hard to say how human everyone here is, alone in their heads. Person is person through other people." Fyodor held up a hand. "But I help with implant."

"What do you mean?"

Fyodor set Dmitri in the lake. "I can—What is idiom, ah, make you dead to world. In two weeks my friend Dr. Park can give superior implant. We give discount."

"Would this implant stop adverts?"

"Of course. Is quality implant—it silence advertisement, play music and game, store money."

"That would be wonderful!"

"Ah!" Fyodor wagged a finger at John. "First option cut you off more from humanity. Not solve problem. Or he remove implant."

"Would that turn me back human?" John's ears perked.

"No, too late for body, but—" He tapped John's chest. "But not, perhaps, for heart. Is your choice. Call number in two weeks."

Fyodor gave John a business card and walked away. It was an older style of card, lacking the touch screen of newer models, but the display was crisp. The backside of the card appeared to present the same information in Russian.

John slipped the card into his business card case and wandered around the park for a while, a sense of freedom growing in him as Fyodor's offer of a better implant sank in. A slight breeze ruffled his fur. Two rows of concrete blocks formed a stepping-stone bridge across an arm of the

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lake and he frolicked across. The path led past deserted picnic areas to a playground. Several children rushed over to him, tugging on his tail and pulling on the fur on his arms until their mothers whisked them away. He hurried away from the glares.

When he stopped walking he was at the top of nearby Haneul park. He passed a sign on his way to a vantage point; his head filled with many cheerfully given facts about how the hill he was on used to be a landfill and the methods used to reclaim the land. The Han River wound its way past the former landfill. The river was a ribbon of nearly unobstructed sky rippling between the ranks of Seoul's skyscrapers, whose towers marched to all horizons. The gleaming river and buildings promised him a brighter future. He basked in that hope.

The sun sat low in the sky by the time John returned to the subway. At Itaewon station he rushed off the train, almost getting his tail caught in the door. A celebration for the reversal of fortune was well in order. An advert for Cass Lager seemed to him a minor buzzing, like a mosquito hovering about the head. Gecko's Terrace was just in sight. He would eat something there and hang around until the nightlife started picking up, then visit a club or two.

The couple walking out the door stared after him as he passed. The waitress near the door began to smile at him but her greeting trailed off as he brushed past her toward a group he recognized.

"Mike!" John pulled out a chair at the table. "How have you been?"

"Who are you and how do you know my name?" Mike asked.

"I'm John."

Arnold, next to Mike, started laughing and soon all but Trisha had joined in.

When he had stopped laughing, Arnold said, "Is that who put you up to this? You can tell that joker that he has suitably made up for his long absence and send him in."

"Go on." Mike waved his hand toward the door.

Abby waggled a fish stick in the air. "If you get him quickly, we'll make sure you get a treat."

"But I am John."

"The joke is old now," Arnold said.

"You better hurry." Abby took a bite of the fish stick.

"I don't think he's joking," Trisha said. "I think he really is John."

"But why would John look like this?" Suresh asked. "Why would he choose to be this, this beast?"

"I didn't choose it—it was a side effect. But I'm still John; I'm still the one who hiked the length of Cheonggyecheon with you, Mike."

"No." Mike clenched his glass of beer. "John is human and you are a monster. Now get out of our sight."

"Let him stay, Mike," Trisha said.

John could hear snatches of conversations at other tables, focused on him, and he did not like the sentiments being expressed. There was also the sound of footsteps growing louder.

"Excuse me, but do you know this creature?" A waiter asked Mike.

"No."

Trisha opened her mouth to speak, but Arnold raised his hand in dismissal and said, "Unless you'd like to foot the bill for all of us, Trish, I suggest you stay silent."

The waiter tucked the tablet he held under his arm. "If you do not know this creature, then I'm afraid it will have to leave the premises."

"But you do know me," John whimpered.

They shooed him out the door. John went to his standby bar, but a sign on its door apologetically forbade "beast people" from entering the premises for health concerns. Bar after bar closed its doors to him. Prior to his transformation John had spent his weekends in this enclave of expats. Since that accursed day he hadn't been in the mood to go all the way to Itaewon. And now some of the expats he passed shunned him as if he had the plague, as if his presence among them would infect them with disapproval.

John trudged through the door into a bar.

"This is a club for humans. Please leave," the bartender said.

John approached the bar. "I just want a drink."

Conversations collapsed into quiet. Chair legs screeched against the floor as people shifted to see.

"You are upsetting the customers." He pointed. "The door is that way."

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"Can't I have one drink?"

An advert for Chamisul soju had been tormenting him for the last several minutes

Two men rose from their stools and moved toward him. When John tried to slip past them they grabbed him by the arms and lifted him up. The shorter one had a vise-like grip.

"Put me down!"

"You could use some obedience training."

They tossed John out the door. He suppressed the growl that was growing in his throat, picked himself up, and headed for the subway.

Two transfers later, John slumped to the floor next to the emergency door at the end of the last car of the Shin Bundang train. Everyone who had been crowded into that space had just crammed themselves further up the aisle save for two professional looking women who stared at him.

One of the women reclined against the wall. "Now isn't he something? It would be nice to be able to make room like that every now and then."

"It wouldn't be worth the trouble," said the other woman, who looked Japanese. "Now stop looking at him and answer my question."

"You're just jealous I pointed him out to you as we pulled into the station."

"I can't spare you from censure when my report is delivered, Seon-Hwa, if you don't answer my question about the livers."

"What more do you want me to say, Mika? I've already expressed my regret at wasting the Council's money. We should have relied on a more traditional way to get the livers from—"

Mika coughed and Seon-Hwa trailed off. John scratched at his ear to hide the fact that he had been listening to them; the cough had sounded authentic, but the timing made him suspicious.

"If you believe in the efficacy of livers then I doubt I can help you." Mika pulled out a small tablet from her purse and typed on the screen. "And it isn't the money the Council is concerned about; it's the publicity."

"I thought we were friends."

"We are, but there's not much I can do if you—"

He got off at the station in Suji. Seon-Hwa shifted and she was still staring at him as the train pulled out of the station. John turned and

headed up the escalator. A short walk later and he was back at his flat; he fell asleep soon after collapsing onto his bed.

The following day he spent at home. For one, it cut down on the number of adverts that got into his head. And after yesterday he needed a break from people to recharge his spirits for another week of teaching children. Most of the day was spent dreaming about what he would do with his new implant.

He would finally be able to interface properly with his phone and computer to be able to play games using thought, as his current implant wasn't recognized by his computer. He would be able to walk down the street without having adverts inside his head. Around the third time he was savoring that thought, an advert for fresh produce invaded his mind and invited him to come downstairs and browse the organic vegetables before the truck drove on to the next neighborhood. He would be able to listen to music without annoying ear buds or headphones. He would be able to tune out anyone who annoyed him.

These euphoric thoughts carried him through the end of Monday.

On Tuesday his students presented reports. The first student gave her report on Dokdo Island and how it was rightfully Korea's. The next student talked about the work needed to help the former North Koreans fully integrate into society. A boy asked if the northern Koreans would end up like their teacher because they were poorer than those in the southern part of Korea. The boy giving the report said that only the poor ended up looking like animals and asked John directly if he was poor.

"Why don't you tell us more about the northern Koreans, Wu-Jin. How else is their life different from yours?"

A student raised her hand.

"Yes, Seo-Yun?"

"Teacher, why you didn't answer Wu-Jin? Are you poor?"

"We're not talking about me right now, Seo-Yun. We're listening to Wu-Jin talk about the northern Koreans."

"Teacher," Hyeon-Jun said.

"Raise your hand, Hyeon-Jun."

"Aash." Hyeon-Jun's hand shot up. "Teacher? You embarrassed?"

"No."

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Jong-Seok raised his hand. "Teacher you lie. You embarrassed because poor and have to eating trash."

"Jong-Seok." John gave him the dreaded teacher stare.

Sang-hyeon said, "There was Korean beggar near Yatap station, but now he pig beast and eat garbage."

Several students started shouting, "No, he Chinese."

"Japanese, Teacher, he Japanese."

"Korean no become beast."

Hyeon-Jun said, "He was Korean, right Teacher? So we need save Koreans from bad change and keep them Korean and human."

Other students echoed his sentiment.

"But they are still people," Ji-Min said. "It wrong to treat them like animals. If—"

Most of the other students drowned her out in a deluge of name calling. Several students had also slipped into speaking almost exclusively in Korean.

John walked over to the whiteboard. "This presentation is now over. Please sit down, Wu-Jin."

A few students quieted down, but Wu-Jin didn't move. John began writing students' names on the whiteboard and most of them quickly shut up.

"Teacher. Why my name on board?" Wu-Jin folded his arms. "I used English, Teacher."

"Yes, you did. But you said some mean things to Ji-Min. Now sit down or I'll put a mark next to your name."

Wu-Jin sat down, but for the rest of the evening he was sullen and uncooperative. Four more students gave presentations that evening. Hardly anyone responded without John's having to prompt them to say what they found interesting in the presentations and even then the responses were short. He was glad when it was finally time for the students to leave.

Desmond popped into the room as John was entering grades for the evening. "I heard some of the commotion through the walls earlier. How are you holding up, brother?"

"I'm just tired, Desmond."

Desmond sat down at one of the tables and emptied a bag of memory cards onto it. He quietly inserted one into his tablet. John fiddled with his computer settings for a while, trying again to get it to recognize his implant so that he could transfer the mental notes he took during the presentations to the computer, but it refused to cooperate. John sighed.

"Is that a grammar test you're grading?" John asked.

"That and a few late essays." Desmond held up two memory cards. "These two triggered the proximity alert, so I'll have to compare them on my computer. Hopefully it was accidental; I don't want to have to give the cheating lecture again."

"Some students never learn," John said.

"But we still have to try to help them learn, brother. So how well did the presentations go?"

"They went all right. I won't miss having to fight with the computer once I get my implant replaced."

"I thought you said you'd have to wait months to do that."

"I met someone who can give me a discount on a good implant."

"Brother, isn't it an inexpensive implant that got you into this mess in the first place?"

"He assured me that it was good quality."

"And how do you know he's telling the truth? From what you've been telling me, these implants sound like more trouble than they're worth."

"He gave me his business card." John fished it out of his card case and handed it to Desmond.

"Have you looked into him at all?"

"No."

Desmond handed the card back to John. "You really should check his credentials—things are bad enough for you as it is."

John stared at his computer screen for several minutes after Desmond had left.

By the time he got home, John was wondering if it really was a good idea to get a new implant at a discount. His joy, no longer sustained by the hope that Fyodor's offer would bring him a better life, wilted as the week went on until he was left with a moldering mess. Its withering wore down his ability to resist the legions of adverts that marched out from

storefronts along his walk to and from work. Video billboards flashed their messages onscreen while their words thundered through his mind. The adverts broke through his faltering attempts to block them out with music, claiming his mind for companies. On the way home on Friday he vowed to stay inside the entire weekend.

Saturday morning passed by in a succession of unwashed laundry piled by the washer closet, unwashed dishes dumped in the sink, several matches of StarCraft IV that ended with a wireless mouse being flung into the dirty laundry and the contents of a half-eaten bag of bacon flavored crisps being scattered across the floor, and pacing about the flat until he flopped on the bed.

Over a lunch of instant ramen he decided that he would risk venturing outside. The cramped flat felt like it had been closing in on him all morning and the frustrating losses in StarCraft had only added to his malaise. If he walked along the stream, perhaps the adverts wouldn't be so bad. He put his bowl in the sink, changed out of his bathrobe, and slipped out the door.

John moved out of the way when he heard a bell ring behind him. Several bicyclists whooshed past him. He stepped back onto the path and continued walking along the stream. In the middle of the stream, water swirled around a cement cylinder with a manhole cover set in it. He still couldn't figure out if it had once been a natural stream that had been developed over the years or if it was a drainage canal that had been slowly colonized by nature. A duck swam past a froth of cream-coloured foam. Further downstream he passed an orange boom strung across the stream; the water smelled rancid and more of the foam piled up against the boom.

In the wake of a jogger an advert for Under Armour SmartGear regaled him with the health benefits of wearing clothes that not only wicked away sweat but also could interface with his implants, measure his vitals, and provide data that would help optimize his workout. It was a catchy advert the first time he heard it. By the sixth it was annoying; it became grating somewhere around the eleventh, and John took to snarling at joggers as they passed by. Only a few of those he snarled at showed any signs of reaction. Most seemed to only barely perceive the world around them—

likely ensconced within their minds.

He passed under the tracks near Jukjeon Station. Ahead was the confluence of two streams and John decided that it would make a good place to turn around. He passed under a pedestrian bridge that connected the top of the steep embankment next to him with the E-Mart complex on the other side of the stream.

A woman waved from the bridge. "*Oppa!*"

John paused for a few moments on the point of land between the two streams. The water pleasantly burbled. A dragonfly flitted about his face, landed briefly on his ear, and then flew off. John let out a small sigh. It had been good to get out of his flat, but he dreaded the gauntlet of athletic adverts he would have to face on the way home.

The woman from the bridge was running down the slope on the other side of the stream. She seemed familiar, but John kept on walking. She called out several times in Korean and John wondered when the person she was calling to would perceive enough of the world outside of his mind to respond.

"Excuse me!"

John turned and saw the woman running up to him. Now that she was close, he recognized her as one of the two business women from his trip home on the subway last weekend. She looked younger, somehow. John figured it must be a result of her wearing more casual clothes.

"*Oppa*," she said, "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I didn't know you were calling to me."

"Who else would I be calling to, *Oppa*?" She leaned on his arm and smiled at him. "We must go to a café and talk." She started pulling him back toward the confluence.

John pulled his arm out of her grip. "I'd rather not."

"Do you have a girlfriend or wife?"

"What? No."

"Then am I not pretty enough for you, *Oppa*?" She pouted.

"No, no, no." John waved his hands about. "You're very pretty. I just don't like cafés because of how many adverts get beamed into my head."

She was silent for a moment, lips pursed in thought. "I suppose that would be true." Her scintillating green eyes lit up. "What about a park no

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one really uses?"

"If it's not too far."

"It isn't!" She grabbed his arm again. "Come with me, *Oppa*."

"What's your name?" John asked.

"Seon-Hwa. And what's my handsome *Oppa*'s name?"

"John."

John's mind was in a tumult. An attractive woman had not only called him handsome, but was hanging on his arm. He glanced about, trying to catch any camera crews hiding in the shadows. There didn't appear to be any. He couldn't rule out cameras in glasses or eye replacements. He eyed an elderly man strolling behind them.

"Why are you ignoring me?" Seon-Hwa looked genuinely hurt.

"I'm sorry. I thought you might be part of a comedy show. I was afraid this was a gag."

"*Jinja*?" She laughed. "You think I'm as beautiful as an actress? That's very sweet of you."

They chatted about K-Drama, their favorite actresses and actors, and Seon-Hwa's recommendations. Some shows were so old he had never heard of them. Absorbed by drinking in her words and looks, John almost walked into the street, but she held him back. Once safely across the street they walked up the tree-lined sidewalk. A staircase ascended the hill on their left. At the top of the hill, in a clearing among the trees, stood a set of exercise equipment that included a bench press with a barbell. With a little prompting John bench pressed what was there. It didn't weigh much, but Seon-Hwa had him flex afterwards and as she felt his biceps she told him she liked how strong he was.

They talked about food, music, fashion, and how to tailor clothes to better fit John's physique, including allowances for his tail. Seon-Hwa offered to alter some of his clothes for him. They discussed favorite spots to hang out, people, and foxes. Seon-Hwa did all the talking about foxes. Listening to her diction when it came to describing foxes—clever, sleek, mysterious, etc.—John thought he understood why she found him attractive. It was sometime during her monologue on foxes that he touched her hand. They sat down together on the bench press. She composed a courtly poem on her great fortune at finding him; he could

only manage the words to say, "I'm glad you noticed me." She gently stroked his tail. They sat in summer silence. He nuzzled her cheek. Their lips touched; the light filtering through the leaves, the heady scents of peaches and something wild that burst from her hair as it bobbed, the swish-swish of his tail as it brushed the cool ground while her warm fingers moved back and forth through its fur, and the cinnamon taste of her lips all seemed to coalesce together as the moment stretched on and on like the lights of Seoul.

They kissed. Again and again as best they could manage with John's muzzle. They exchanged phone numbers, promises to call this evening and the next day, and more kisses.

"I must go now," Seon-Hwa said.

"So soon?" John nibbled on her ear. "When can I see you again?"

"We can go out to eat on Friday."

"Friday is so far away and I'd be thrown out of restaurants."

She kissed him. "I know a barbecue place that won't mind you. Meet me at Jukjeon station after work." She kissed him again, rose from the bench, and took his hand. "Friday will come soon enough, *Oppa*."

Seon-Hwa walked with John only to the confluence of the streams. Reluctantly he let go of her hand. He continued looking back after her until she had long vanished.

The cloud of bliss that carried John home was blown away by the sight of the Japanese woman from the subway leaning against his apartment door. She moved aside as he climbed the last flight of stairs. The fragrance of cherry blossoms filled the hallway, but he caught a whiff of a musky scent that he couldn't quite place and longing stirred within him.

He had wanted to accuse her of stalking him, to yell and send her away, but her coy smile and the way her bangs cascaded past her amber eyes entrapped him, and the short skirt that ended about mid-thigh was a pleasant surprise, so he found himself saying, "Is there something I can do for you?"

"You might be able to help me in an investigation."

"Who is this investigation for?"

"An international council. We are trying to get to the bottom of what Rycorp has done so as to prevent it from happening again." She gestured

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toward the door. "May I come in and ask you some questions?"

"Of course." John almost took her hand to kiss it.

Instead, he fumbled with the keypad and entered his code wrong the first time. Once inside he dashed over to the pile of laundry, scooped it up, dumped it into the washer, and closed the washer closet door. She sniggered. They sat down at his small table; John wrapped his legs around the chair legs to help him resist the temptation to touch her feet. He found it hard to not be sitting next to her. She pulled a small tablet out of her purse, pushed it to the center of the table, and asked her first question.

Most of her questions were about his implant: the procedure, the effects, when the changes started and how they manifested, how long the transformation process took, how he had heard about Rycorp's implants, and so forth. When he asked her what this had to do with her investigation, she told him she wasn't at liberty to say. Half an hour into the questions, he made them both some tea.

"Might I know your name?" John set a cup of tea down in front of her.

She took a sip of tea before answering. "Sasaki Mika. Now, you mentioned that you had to shave more frequently as a side effect. How long after getting the implant did this occur?"

Three cups of tea later, Mika was still asking questions. John leaned on the table and gazed at her luscious lips, not wanting her melodious voice to stop. But it did. She turned off her tablet and put it back in her purse.

"Don't go yet," John said. "At least finish your tea."

She took a sip, leaned back in her chair, and said, "I knew someone in a similar predicament as you about a hundred years ago."

"What?" John gazed at her smooth face. "You can't be older than thirty. If—"

"So Seon-Hwa hasn't told you?"

"Hasn't told me what? How did you know I talked with her?"

Mika smiled demurely. "Where is your washroom?"

"It's connected to the bedroom."

"Thank you. You shall have your answers soon enough."

He smelled the musky scent again as she passed by and a part of him wanted to stand up and embrace her. He gripped the table instead. She

had known that he had talked with Seon-Hwa and she had been waiting for him at his apartment. And could he just so casually forget Seon-Hwa? Should he call the police? The musk was stronger now.

"You humans are so oblivious at times."

John turned around. A large, eight-tailed fox was standing behind him. He fell out of his chair.

"Get away from me!" John grabbed the overturned chair and held it in front of him.

"Relax, I'm not going to hurt you."

John scooted backwards, brandishing the chair before him. Red flames wreathed around Mika as she crept toward him; they spread to the chair as soon as she had nosed it. John flung the chair aside. The flames licking at the chair and swirling about Mika winked out, and before he could scrabble away Mika pounced. He squirmed, but could not get free.

She nibbled his ear. "You would be fun to play with, but she has already claimed you."

"Who?"

"Seon-Hwa, of course." Mika stood up and turned around, smacking John in the face with her tails. "Has she really told you nothing?"

"She's like you?" The words came out in a whisper.

"She's five tails younger."

The image of Seon-Hwa with three tails stuck itself in his mind and refused to be pushed out. He wanted this to be a glitch in his implant. There were stories of people whose implants malfunctioned with sensory hallucinations. But Seon-Hwa's actions made so much sense in light of this revelation.

His ears drooped in submission. "So how old are you?"

"I was born in the year the Cloistered Emperor Go-Toba was exiled, so I suppose I am close to nine hundred years old."

"And Seon-Hwa?"

"Younger than three hundred and seventy five years old and older than two hundred and fifty. I've only known her for the last hundred years."

"Why are you tormenting me?"

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"I am doing nothing of the sort." She snarled and a dark mist began to roll into the room. "You have no idea of torment. But, I promised I wouldn't play with you." The room brightened as the mist vanished.

John curled into a ball and whimpered.

"As for why I'm here, it's your own fault for getting tangled up in kitsune business by buying a Rycorp implant."

John raised his head. "Are you saying this body is your fault?"

"Not my fault—I'm investigating the misconduct on behalf of the Council—but some of my kind did this to you in pursuit of being human."

"How is this human?" John's ears flattened back.

"It's not, which is a problem, as Rycorp's goal was to create human outcasts who would not be missed when they were harvested for their livers. But you can't become human off a non-human liver, so you half-breeds are now useless to them."

"What!"

John lunged at Mika, but she leapt to the side and he skidded into the wall. He pounded and clawed at the floor, snarling and heaving until he subsided into a whimper. Mika edged toward the bedroom door.

"It's fine, little kit," she said in a soothing voice, "No one is going to eat your liver. I don't see why we keep trying to become fully human when you humans seem so keen on throwing your humanity away."

When she emerged from the bedroom, she was back in her human form.

"What part does Seon-Hwa have in all of this?"

Mika opened the door out of the flat. "Didn't I tell you? She works for Rycorp."

The door slammed shut behind her before John could get up off the floor.

Seon-Hwa called several times over the next few days and he ignored them all. His students learned quickly not to upset him and became paragons of virtue as long as they were in his classroom. On Thursday Desmond stopped by after the students had left.

"Go away," John said.

"Brother, I have good news."

"Out with it, then."

"I investigated this Fyodor for you and everything I found points to his being an above-board, certified doctor."

"Great." John scooped a pile of memory cards up and dropped them in a drawer. "What else do you want?"

Desmond sat down. "I'm concerned about you, brother. What is eating at you?"

"Why do you care?"

"You're my friend and I don't want the lie—that you are a beast—becoming the truth."

"How do you know I'm not?"

"Because." Desmond walked over to John and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know you. You're just as human as I am."

"But my body isn't..." John didn't know how he could explain Mika.

"Humanity isn't solely physical. Part of what makes us human is being bound up in relationships with others."

John brushed Desmond's hand aside. "And how am I supposed to be human in your view when most people reject me?"

"Stop pushing people away. One of your students, Ji-Min I think was her name, came into my classroom yesterday and asked me if you were angry at her class. And several people at Sae Eden on Sunday asked me where you've been."

"I doubt they would want me around if they knew."

"You haven't given them a chance!" Desmond turned to leave.

"Because I know they'll betray me like she did."

Desmond paused in the doorway. "Ahh, a woman broke your heart, brother, didn't she? That's why you're retreating from humanity."

John laid his head against the desk. "She treated me like a normal person. And then—" He paused, searching for a way to explain without mentioning what she was.

Desmond pulled up a chair next to John and sat down.

"And then I found out she works for the company that did this to me and that they knew it caused this side effect."

"Did she tell you this?"

"No."

"Have you talked with her about this?"

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"No." John's tail tucked between his legs. "I didn't see the need."

"You should give her the chance to explain."

They sat in silence for several minutes.

Desmond quietly rose, put the chair back, and, as he was leaving, said, "Blessings, brother."

John sat in sullen silence in the empty classroom, swishing his tail across the floor. A fluorescent light flickered. On and off the light flitted, on and off—no longer like the other lights—on and off, to call or not. His phone rang.

It was Seon-Hwa and he let the song play on for a moment longer before picking up the phone. "Hello?"

"John! Is everything alright? You didn't answer my calls—did something happen to you? Are you in hospital? I was worried—"

"No."

"Then what's wrong?" Her voice sounded pained.

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Oppa, tell me what's bothering you."

"I'm not in the mood to talk. Are you still planning on meeting at Jukjeon Station tomorrow for dinner?"

"Yes, but can't we talk—"

"Then I'll see you tomorrow around 9pm. Goodbye." John hung up.

John slumped against the table. Perhaps he should have told her he knew her secrets. But it would be nice to see her again. She had a lovely smile—not that what he had to say would cause her to smile—and for the first time since his transformation he wouldn't have a lonely dinner—though would she really want to eat with him after he started tearing into her. He buried his head in his paws. Why couldn't he have just let her go and been done with it?

The next morning John ran the gauntlet of shopping mart aisles to buy boxes upon boxes of chocolate Pepero as well as platters of honey-filled rice cakes.

John tried to smile at the students in all his classes. Crumbs dotted the tables. He had made the last class clean up, but this class had already strewn empty Pepero boxes and plastic packaging across the room. Something crunched underfoot.

"Jong-Seok," John said, holding out a broom. "You need to sweep around your spot."

Jong-Seok swung a Pepero stick at one Hyeon-Jun was holding. "Teacher, I went to eating over here."

"But you started at your spot. If you hurry you can get back to playing faster."

Hyeon-Jun brought his Pepero stick down on Jong-Seok's wrist. "Sonmok!"

"Aash," Jong-Seok said as he moved over to John.

"English please, Hyeon-Jun," John said. "Seo-Yun, please use English words for hangman."

She cleared the e-board.

"Teacher am I done?" Jong-Seok said.

"Yes."

Jong-Seok dropped the broom and ran back to where Hyeon-Jun was sitting and resumed their duel. John wandered around, doing his best to let the students enjoy their party. By the time the bell had rung, though, he was sprawled out in his chair. One of the students had written "Teacher John is the most best" on the e-board.

"For you, Teacher," Ji-Min said. She offered him a folded packet of note paper.

John took it with both paws. "Thank you, Ji-Min. Have a good weekend."

He tidied up the classroom, leaving the message on the e-board, and was out the door as soon as the clock struck 8:30pm. On the bus to Jukjeon, he opened the packet from Ji-Min. It read:

Once upon a time lived boy fox. Boy fox most sad person in all kingdom. He only fox and people making fun to him. One day princess see boy fox cry on log.

The princess ask to him "Why are you sad?"

Boy fox say, "I am alone. There are no one like me."

"Fighting! Old man told me of city across the eastern sea where fox people lived. If go, please bring me back hanbok soft as fur." Princess say.

Boy fox gone for year. He return with hanbok and princess hugging him but boy fox still sad. Princess visit boy fox many day and wearing

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hanbok. She let boy fox lean head on her, but boy fox still cry.

Princess ask to him, "Why are you sad? Do you not liking my hanbok?"

"Your hanbok is lovely and make me think of fox people. But I still am alone." Boy fox say.

"Fighting! Old woman told me of forest in the north where fox people lived. Please bring me back hairpins that have never worn by person." Princess say.

Boy fox gone for year. Princess's hair grow long when he return with hairpins and princess hugging him. Princess used hairpins to make hair look like fox ears. Boy fox smile a little, but then crying.

"Why are you sad?" Princess ask to him.

"People are making fun to me and I have not found fox people."

"Fighting! Young man told me of cave on island in the south where fox people lived. Please bring me back a perfect jewel that shines like stars." Princess say.

Boy fox gone for year. Princess make law that people not making fun to boy fox. He return with jewel and princess put jewel in necklace and then hugging and kissing him. Boy fox happy but next day princess see him crying.

"Why are you sad?" Princess ask to him.

"I can't find girl fox and nobody loving me." Boy fox say.

Princess fix hair ears but boy fox not seeing.

Boy fox say. "Do you knowing where else fox people lived?"

"Young woman told me of mountain in west where fox people lived. Please stay with me." Princess say.

"I must look for girl fox," Boy fox say.

Princess secret cry and say, "Please find flower open in mountain snow and burn it while heating milk."

Boy fox go and princess crying and crying until dies. Boy fox climb mountains until he find old temple with monk. But monk does not know where fox people going and boy fox crying many days. Then boy fox search for flower. After he find flower, he bring it to temple and use it to cooking milk. Princess spirit appear and crying.

Boy fox ask to her "Why are you sad?"

Princess spirit say, "You ignore my feeling to you and so I die."

Boy fox crying and crying into cooking milk and then it bubble and girl fox in hanbok jump out of it. She try hugging and kissing boy fox but he pushing.

"I don't want girl fox. I want princess." Boy fox say.

"I am princess. Your tears bring me back." Girl fox say.

Girl fox take off necklace and show jewel to boy fox. Then boy fox hugging and kissing girl fox.

Girl fox say, "I can only be girl fox from Chuseok until Seollal because you left me. Rest of year I am human."

Boy fox and princess marry.

The End!

The other piece of paper had a drawing of two fox people holding hands. The bus slowed down for a stop. John looked up and saw the elevated tracks leading out of Jukjeon station; several passengers yelled at him as he dashed for the rear bus door. The door closed. As the bus started to pull away, he pounded on the door and growled. John grabbed the standing bar as the bus lurched to a stop, the door flew open, and John tapped his transit card and hopped off onto the sidewalk. Seon-Hwa was waiting under the bus info screen. She started to run toward John, but then slowed down.

"You came," she said.

John didn't reply. Seon-Hwa stood silently beside him, glancing about. She pointed at the paper he held. "What's that?"

"A gift from a student."

"Can I see?"

"Sure." John pushed it into her hands.

"Is this what is bothering you? Do I not look foxy enough for you?" She touched John's tail. "I could make a tail to match yours."

"The three you have aren't good enough for you?"

Seon-Hwa's eyes widened. "Oppa, what do you mean?"

"Were you planning on eating my liver tonight, kumiho?"

Seon-Hwa grabbed his wrist and pulled him toward the number fifty-nine bus. "Who told you that?"

"Mika."

Seon-Hwa growled softly. She didn't let go of John's wrist until they

had sat down toward the back of the bus. She turned her back toward John; he stared out the window into the neon night, twice glimpsing in the reflection Seon-Hwa glancing over her shoulder at him. A public announcement about the proper side of the sidewalk to walk on blared in his head. He didn't resist when she grabbed his wrist again. From the bus stop they walked a couple blocks, entered a tall building, and took the lift to the fifth floor. A sign with a cheerful pig and cow on it marked the restaurant entrance.

A waitress smiled and bowed at them. Seon-Hwa talked with the waitress in Korean, who then led them to a table in a back corner of the restaurant. The menu was only in Korean. John recognized the words for beef and Soju, but most of the menu was outside of his limited vocabulary.

Seon-Hwa drummed her fingers on the menu. "Do you want beef or pork?"

"Beef. And preferably marinated."

"Good." She hit a button on the edge of the table, lighting it up.
"You're paying."

The waitress hurried to their table and tapped on a screen in her arm as Seon-Hwa ordered.

As soon as the waitress had left, John said, "I'll split the bill."

"You didn't answer my calls and you broke your promise to call me."
She jabbed John in the chest. "You're paying."

The waitress returned with a cart and began unloading the food. Two plates of raw beef, a bowl of sliced garlic heads, a basket of lettuce and spade-shaped leaves, a cabbage *kimchi*, cubes of a radish *kimchi*, green onions with a red-pepper sauce, a block of tofu, soybean sprouts, and two bottles of *soju* crowded around the circular grill in the middle of the table. She lowered the vent pipe. After turning on the grill, the waitress smiled and pushed the cart away.

"I'm paying half because you neglected to tell me you work for Rycorp."

Snip, snip went the scissors as Seon-Hwa cut the beef into slabs and slapped them on the grill. "Do you expect every woman you kiss to give you a CV on your first meeting?"

"No, but most women I've kissed weren't multi-tailed foxes who work

for a company that turns people into animal hybrids so they can eat their livers!"

The piece of meat Seon-Hwa just cut smacked against the grill, splattering juices about. She pointed across the restaurant. "Bring me water. Now."

John decided against speaking upon seeing her glare. He walked over to the cabinet with small metal cups in it, pulled out two, filled them up, and returned. Seon-Hwa was cutting the slabs of beef on the grill into smaller pieces.

He thrust the cup in front of her. "Here's your water."

"Thank you." She took it from him. "I was planning on telling you what I was tonight."

"And you expect me to believe you?"

"Not really." She picked up a piece of *kimchi* with her chopsticks. "Not that you're any more trustworthy."

"You're the one who's constantly pretending to be human."

"And you're the one who, after a few hours of talking in a park, kissed me, promised to call me every day, professed undying love, and couldn't bear the thought of having to wait until today to see me again."

"I recall you kissed me back several times."

"Because I wanted to believe you; wanted to believe I'd finally found someone who'd want to be with me." She drank down her water. "How long did it take you to toss all your feelings for me aside?"

John shifted in his chair. "Not all of them—but a little longer than it took for Mika to explain things to me." He caught a whiff of something burning. "You're burning the meat!"

"You distracted me!" She grabbed the tongs and moved the meat to the edges of the grill. "Pass me the *ggaennip*."

"What?"

"Those leaves right there." She pointed to the spade-shaped leaves.

John handed her the basket and watched as she used her chopsticks to fill the leaf with meat, sprouts, and onions and then rolled it up and ate it. He struggled to grab a piece of beef with his chopsticks. Seon-Hwa reached across the table and touched his paw, but then quickly drew her hand back.

He set the chopsticks down after a few more failed attempts to hold onto a piece of beef. "Go ahead, show me how. I haven't used chopsticks since my change."

She came around to his side of the table and placed the chopsticks in his paws. "So why did you come to dinner if you hate me?"

"I don't know." He tried to pick up a piece of beef and failed.

"No, move them like this." Seon-Hwa demonstrated with her chopsticks.

John picked up a piece of beef and put it in a lettuce leaf. "I hate you for working for Rycorp because of what your implant did to me and for the liver-eating plan, but I think I might still love you."

"Jinja?" She placed some of the garlic on the grill.

"Yes, really." He pulled a long green pepper from the basket of lettuce and *ggaennip*.

"Don't eat that, it's very spicy."

"It can't be that bad." John bit off half of the pepper. "See, it's mild—aah! Hot! Hot! I can feel it in my ears!"

After Seon-Hwa recovered from giggling, she said, "Oppa, I warned you."

"I didn't think it'd be this spicy." John drank down his water and stuffed a few lettuce leaves into his mouth. "But I guess that's my problem—I don't stop to think. Aah, it still burns!"

"You should have some rice." She pressed the button.

"If I had thought things through, I wouldn't be like this."

"Yes, you should have listened to me."

"No, I meant I wouldn't be a fox person," John said.

The waitress arrived and Seon-Hwa said, "*Bap juseyo*."

The waitress tapped on the screen in her arm and then left again.

"And I suppose I wouldn't have hurt you like I did if I hadn't rushed in and out of having feelings for you."

"If you're apologizing, I'm not ready to forgive you, yet."

The waitress placed a lidded metal bowl on the table. She asked Seon-Hwa something before heading off.

John opened the bowl and dug into the rice. In between mouthfuls he said, "I understand."

They ate in silence for several minutes.

It was only after Seon-Hwa had finished cooking the second plate of beef that John said, "I'm not sure I'm ready to forgive you for your company's work. What's your position at Rycorp?"

"Project manager for your implant."

"Yeah, I can't forgive you yet." John took a long swig of *soju*. "So what will Mika's investigation do to you?"

She made a wrap and ate it before answering. "I will lose my job unless she can convince the Council I had no knowledge of the implants being used to allow easier harvesting of human livers. And she and I both know that won't happen. So I will probably be made to do some sort of penance for the next hundred years."

"And Rycorp?"

"It depends on how much Mika uncovers. But it likely will only have to change names to something like Rytech or sell itself to another corporation."

John poked at the tofu with a chopstick.

"I prefer fried tofu, but that's not too bad," Seon-Hwa said.

John widened the fissure he had created in the tofu. "I know it sounds crazy and I'm not sure about it myself, but I think I'd like to give our relationship a second chance."

She set down her *soju* bottle. "You wounded my heart, John."

"I know." The tofu was a mess now. "We might only hurt ourselves more. But maybe we can work past what we've done to each other. You're the only woman who has told me that I'm attractive like this and I want to be as happy again as we were in the park again."

"Is this you rushing into things again?"

"I don't think so. Are you available Sunday afternoon?"

"I can be."

"Then will you come with me to Sae Eden?"

"The church?"

"Yes. I don't know how they'll react to me, but you'll at least get to meet Desmond, one of my few true friends."

Seon-Hwa took a drink of *soju*. "I'll think about it. It sounds a bit more fun than yelling at Mika. I should have known what her jealousy would

drive her to."

"She's jealous of you?"

"She's been nursing a broken heart for a hundred years. I think she was reminded of the human she fell for when she saw you. So why can't we meet up with your friend Desmond tomorrow?"

"I'm meeting a Dr. Fyodor tomorrow about my implant."

"Fyodor!" Seon-Hwa slammed her bottle against the table.

"You know him?"

She grimaced. "Dr. Fyodor Petrov has been a pain in the neck for my team. He has been advocating for more oversight of the implants used in humans. He says the industry needs to slow down and consider the ethicality of implants, especially ones that allow advertisements unlimited access to the mind. My team has had so many delays because of his efforts. He's just too well known and highly regarded for his work with Partners in Health in the re-integrated north."

"So I shouldn't see him?"

"No, he's probably the best doctor to talk to in Seoul about implants."

Seon-Hwa rose from her cushion on the floor. "Why are you seeing him?"

"I haven't decided yet between replacing my implant and being rid of implants for good."

Seon-Hwa took John's paw into her hands. "I'd like to come with you for that."

"Okay, I'll call you tomorrow." John stood up.

"You better."

At the till, the waitress tapped on her arm, bringing the bill up on an angled screen on the counter. Seon-Hwa smiled. John sighed and reached for his wallet.

He handed his bank card to the waitress. "You can be right this time, Seon-Hwa."

"Oppa, I'm a woman, so..."

"So?" He raised an eyebrow to match her questioning look, then returned his card to his wallet and shifted obligingly into boyfriend mode. "So you're always right."

Seon-Hwa grinned and led the way out of the restaurant.

Every morning is the same thing. I wake up, I sit up, and I stare at my

feet, trying to will them to move again as I reach over for my morning pull on the e-cig. Turn it on, take a couple pulls to get the juices going, and give the whole feet thing another go. Ten times out of ten, any twitch I think I see is usually because I've shifted on the bed.

I gotta admit that it delivers my pain meds a lot better than any patch or pill ever did, and at least it doesn't taste like the ass end of a Kia. Today's 'dose' is vanilla-cherry. So half-way between ice cream and cough medicine. Pushing myself out of bed at first is always a pain in the ass, because I still have to deal with the whole rebellion of 'I have legs.' and 'I have legs that don't work.'

The docs... at least the ones I let touch me... tell me that I'm a good candidate for getting a set of cyberlegs or a spinal bypass implant, and either could be covered by insurance... which would be great if I *had* insurance. There's a lot of things I don't have. Like a legal Personal Identification Network, or a work record that doesn't include arrest warrants. Right now what I have are two non-functioning legs and a constant pain in my lower back.

Once I get settled in the archaic and otherwise completely necessary wheelchair, I get my lazy ass to the bathroom, where I won't bore you with the details. The stuff required for me to take care of business would make one of those Neo-Bavarian dungeon fetishists off the adult channels drool in pavlovian bliss. I'm sure demonstrating for the neighbors would do wonders for my social life; however, I've developed a keen sense of privacy that prevents this breakthrough from occurring.

Just another reason I *really* need to stop leaving the Tri-Dee on when I end up crashing on the couch.

Cleaned, dressed, fed, and otherwise bored and annoyed with everything having to do with my hole in the wall apartment, the next step is getting out and away. I wouldn't really call what I do during the day work... I would call it keeping busy. Again, one of those things where getting my face out there where people can see it doesn't lend itself to any kind of pleasant responses.

There's a small stand next to my door where I attach my PIN spoofer, an RFID blocker, and open up the case with my retina-scan spoofer glasses. It's a lot, but the flip side is... what it is. It's just another reminder of the

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days I used to spend doing things like blowing up augmentation clinics, or beating up cybersurgeons and corporate executives.

At the time it made sense. Augments take away what it means to be human, it robs us of what makes us who we are, instead just turns us into a flesh and blood iHub. Legs that can run tirelessly for miles make things like athleticism useless... no one told the first guy who tried overclocking his brand new Atlas-series 6 cyberarm that if he tried to lift a car over his head, he'd lose it... along with his rib cage, and a chunk of his spine. Augment senses caused psychopathy in their first gen recipients... leading to the creation of heavily armored special forces police augmentation suppression squads, which was just punishing the victims, and not the cause.

Technology had done so much to put us beyond humanity's purely physical restraints that we were moving away from the concept of being human itself. The way I saw it, there was this line in the sand we were ignoring at our own peril. A line that once crossed couldn't be gotten back over easily. And in my view, a line that was just in front of a cliff, with a long drop ahead of us, and someone needed to tell everyone that the cliff was there, even if we had to be a little rough about it.

At least... that's what I used to believe. These days... I'm not so sure anymore. I still view Augs as being the wrong solution to humanity's problems... but again, I'd rather be seeing a doctor instead of a cybermechanic. Not much difference between them, but that's just how life went after the first medical Augments were debuted. Fatal accidents could walk again, people who needed organs didn't have to wait. The world was bright and shiny. It wasn't long before limb replacements became fashionable, which meant everyone with a wallet and zero fashion sense could get himself a new chrome leftie, or a new pair of eyes that had video chat, and wireless 2D. The big money for Augmentation business is the cosmetics though... the useless stuff always ends up being the biggest payday.

"Hey! Analog!"

The words jerk me out of my brooding, causing me to take a moment and adjust my spoofers glasses as I look up at some anglo punk with more tats and piercings than good sense. Yes, I don't have any Augs to my name,

and I'm sitting in the handicapped slot on the Magrail... wearing glasses... and I might be pushing fourty... but still... no need to get nasty about it.

"Yeah, Analog... yer in my spot. Everyone who rides the F-line knows we get first dibs. Yer on Trip-Y turf, Analog. Now move."

When I sigh, it's not because I'm wistful... or that I'm wishing for something better in my life. It's usually because I have to do something I'd rather not. I take this punk in and have him measured in about half a tick. The bulk around his arms is too uniform to be anything more than a muscle boost, and the twitchy eye movements are the side effects of a second-gen reflex booster. Every so often one of his fingers flexes out a small titanium blade... and of course there's the obligatory Trip-Y eyesculpt of a biohazard symbol. But what HE doesn't know is I've known enough real razors in my time to know he's nothing more than a wannabe, a sheep who thinks just because he can bite the shepherd, it means he's a wolf.

So I sit, as if I had a choice in that, and continue to stare... letting his ego seethe in the lack of fear, or the lack of anything, watching it play out in his one unsculpted eye. People expect a response when they say things, so it's the most infuriating thing in the world when they get nothing. But it takes a lot of discipline, and a bit of a sadistic streak to do it right. Plus... it's just fun.

For a moment, I think he's going to back off, but he must have friends watching, and he goes to grab the front of my shirt and haul me out of my wheelchair. Before he can touch me, my hand shoots up, and I have his wrist in a nerve lock. Twisting in the chair, I pull him in, drive two knuckles his solar plexus, and then tag him in the nose with the top of my head to break it. In the space of two breaths he's on his ass and staring up at me with dazed eyes, still in shock that a crippled Analog just took him out.

His fault for thinking a batch of chop-shop augs make him the next Viking warrior.

Maybe it's a bit malicious to run over and break his ankle on my way off the magrail, but occasionally, I need to get a little abject cruelty out of my system. In a couple weeks, he'll probably be back with a couple gang brothers to prove his worth, and I'll probably have to kill him... or all of them. And I think what hits me the hardest isn't that I can... it's that I'm already resigned to it happening. As the door hisses shut behind me, I

can feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end while magnetic coils push several tons of metal into the air, propelling it silently down the tunnel like a naval gauss gun, and I let the thought of it get carried off with the express run to Little Singapore.

Patricia greets me at the door to the old rec center with a smile and an offer of a muffin... cookie... thing. I'm never quite sure what she bakes... only that she bakes. These ones are some kind of cranberry banana bread, with something cinnamon-like in it... or maybe chicory, since I know it'd cost half an arm to get some real cinnamon out this way. I keep a bite in my mouth as I roll down the hall and to the side room that gets called my 'office'.

My current fake ID has me listed as a crisis counselor, the wheelchair reinforcing the idea that I survived something bad, and I help others do the same. It also says I'm too poor to get the necessities to get my ass walking again. Can't say the same for everyone who passes through here, but some of them realize they're talking to someone who really has 'seen it', and occasionally, even less listen to what I have to say. Still, for all that she mothers on me in that uniquely Jewish-Vietnamese manner of hers, I like Patricia. She's the kind of person this world needs more often than not, because she does what she does because she cares.

The Baldwin Recreational Center lives between the bright and shiny towers that are corporate life for the bulk of humanity, and the grime that lives between the treads of the boots that the same uses to make sure we remember our place. A waystation for the people that this city has said hello to a little too roughly, for families that didn't have the means to have their children raised in anything more than what the system liked to call 'education'. Like anything in life now, you get what you pay for. Sadly, you get a lot more Have Nots, than Haves if you're born outside the corp life.

I've barely had time to lock my wheels under the desk when Antonio comes in, greeting me with a fanged smile. Literally, since he has the face of a lion.

"Mmmmorning, Cage."

"Hey there fuzz, what brings you by?" I reply as pleasantly as possible, taking the e-cig out and loading one of my painkiller vapes in for a puff. This one is key lime flavor, and a step up from the mediciney tasting crap I

left at home. I made a mental note to order some more of that one when I saw my guy at the end of the week.

He watches, and makes a bit of a disgusted face at me before going on, "One of the boysh went mmmmisshing lasht night. Jushtin. Hish mmmmother's worried shick."

With his tail lash out all his anger at someone from 'his' pride get taken, I end up using a modified version of the blank look the kid in the subway, leaving any awkward words or pointless excuses I had prepared for something like this sitting on my tongue, tasting like the bitter lime from my pain med.

Antonio is an anthromorph sculpt-job... the kind of thing a semi-rich pair of parents could get a kid for his sixteenth. No one told him that he couldn't get it undone without a lot of work, or the bill that would come with it. He doesn't have anything special out of it either... just a big mess of hair he has to spend heavy on to keep looking good. Okay, maybe the tail. I'll give him props for the tail... it's a pretty damn good design. But he also went for the full works with the muzzle, and it gives him that really weird tonal shift every time he tries to say anything with an S. At first I was annoyed with it, but after a bit, it was just something both he and I came to accept as a part of the whole package.

"I can't jusht sh-hit here and do nothing, Cage. C'mmmmon. Help mmmme out!"

Despite my every effort to keep a low profile, little clues of who I used to be or what I used to do had snuck out, so everyone here knows something about me. But they also knew I was trying to put that all behind me, because of what put me in the chair. It never stops someone from occasionally asking the slightly reformed terrorist for a favor. I also know that if I let him go out there on his own, they'll find his liver on sale over in the Grey markets off Neo Korea by tomorrow afternoon.

So I do what I always do, I deflect, "Why not hire a razor to look for him? We both know you can throw together the money for one... hell, hire a working team."

The feline man just snarled back at me, "I can't trusht a rrrrazshorrrr... theshe kidsh are fammmmily. They don't have anyone elshe but ush. Arrre you shure there'sh nothing you can do? Pleashe."

That desperate but hopeful look in his eyes rock me back like a shotgun blast. The same look a little girl had just before a building came down around both of us. Even to this day, I remember those eyes, and that face... the reflection of the falling debris in them as her mouth turned to a cry for her daddy, and I felt the weight of part of the ceiling pin me to the ground. I've watched men die before, I've ended them so close I could smell what they'd eaten on their last breaths... but that. Watching her sob and try to hold onto life for a handful of seconds longer while I couldn't do more than lay there and yell at God, Buddha, Ganesh... whoever would listen to me to let her live.

I wanted to tell her everything would be all right. That she'd go home.

Instead, I knew better, because I was the one who planted the bombs that were now collapsing the place on top of her. Her name was Danielle. She was six, and by now she would be ten and a few months. She was there because it was bring your kid to work day, and her dad had to stay late to finish a project. None of it was her fault, she wasn't responsible for her father working for an augment company that dumped medical waste in unsafe ways, she wasn't aware that every dollar her daddy made came from blood and torture of people stolen from the streets as guinea pigs. But she was there because someone in HR was keeping up with their whole idea of drawing the young to the perks of the jobs early, so it all stays in the company.

Even now I can see the little pink t-shirt she had on with the cartoon unicorn logo on the front, and the size-large blue jeans that looked like they were picked out because they were clean enough to be in daddy's office. I can hear her echoed laughing as I frantically tried to activate the master disarm system on the explosives, trying to stop what I was so sure needed to happen from happening. When the code wouldn't work, I went off at a dead run to try and catch Danielle and her father in the factory lounge to get them out, even though I knew I didn't have the time to save anyone.

I'm in this chair because I made a choice. I'm in this chair because I tried to do the right thing in the middle of doing what I thought was the right thing. I'm here, she's not, and I have to live with that... because killing myself with it means she died for nothing.

My feet itch suddenly, or at least I think they do, like they want to run again, try to make it time, try to get me there to cover her from the collapse of the rubble... try, try, try...

He's noticed I've lost myself in the things that I still refuse to tell them about, but I shake it off, and just say in a hollow, quiet voice, "Allright... I'll reach out. But no guarantees."

Antonio knows I'm putting myself at risk to do this, but he also feels powerless in the face of what's happened. It could be a gang, it could be a slavery ring, or it could be one of the groups that kidnap people to sell to corps as human experiment fodder. The longer Justin's gone, the better chance he'd never be recovered.

So much for work.

I leave just after that, passing by Patricia and a young man with a pair of cheap fox ears and decent tail-graft playing at being a kitsune. She's feeding him one of those muffinstrosities while she helps him get his ribs taped up and some staple-bandages over a cut on one eye. Pretty typical of a first timer here... once you step off the proverbial bus, you're fresh meat for the scavengers... be they furries like Antonio thinking you're one more baseline here to take away their jobs and home, or gangers like that Trip-Y punk who think you've got enough for them to get their latest fix, or even a cheap aug from a street clinic. A lot of the new groups that've popped up in the last couple of years make it part of their initiation that you have to kill someone, and someone who doesn't know what to look for is an easy mark.

Passing by the local 'Furst Class Citizens' advocacy center, I get the usual skinjob trying to get me to say I'm for them not being treated like slave labor just because they look like animals. This one's a horse, and poster boy for the porn industry. Bodies simply do not get that big or that perfect without chems and augs. Some rich kid who's parents probably tossed him out on his very solid backside, and now is trying to feel better about it by spending his trust fund on empty words and groundless promises. I pass him by with a wave of my hand and muttering something about being a lesbian war veteran with Crohn's disease and irritable bowel. It's the lesbian part that leaves him scratching at his Sampson's mane.

The rail-ride is thankfully uneventful, but I bring a ceramic polymer flechette pistol in a concealed holster close to my ribs as a friend. It's a slender thing, holds six rounds, but the slivers of superheated silicate it launches out will shred and burn anything to about thirty feet from me. Nasty, effective, and very... very... illegal.

One of the perks of being the former bad guy is you still get to keep all the cool toys. I can even muster the holier than thou voice from time to time if I'm really up for the nostalgia. Which is never. I'd amassed quite an arsenal before I was done, and brokered a good chunk of that away over the years to pay for the things I needed. I kept most of the best stuff for myself, and some things out of sheer sentimental value.

I live in a part of the city that would be best described as one block over from the new third world. All the buildings are decent but pre-aug, without all the shininess and the pretty smartglass, and all the new advances in technology like a virtual-layer interface lobby or RFID advert-dumps to your wireless-linked headware and personal devices. As it is, the glasses catch the occasional stray ad in Korean or Hindi telling me I need the latest Nokia PINdroid firmware, or being hit with the latest iHub update release date, and where to go to get your RF scan and download for reduced cost.

Its old school, and I like it that way. The people who've lived here have lived here a long time, and they don't intend to leave. The city is pretty lax on the squatter laws on the buildings that are technically owned by whatever corporate group wants to build another hundred plus story eyesore where their people will live from birth to death in safe corporate ignorance. They must figure if the big boys really want the property, they'd send their own people to do something about it... so why be bothered.

Down here, beneath the glamour of the new world, they meet each other's eyes, and remember that occasionally they need to touch each other. I see a couple arguing at the front of their home... he's norm with an eye-job and a couple lumitats that glow green against his neck and hand. She's a gorgeous white-tail doe sculpt with a bit too much rack and rump to be anything but street fare. One thing I will say for the people who go furry... they like to pick the pretty animals. Most are predators... graceful and strong. Others are like her, beings who have always been

displayed in paintings or stories as majestic. Art in motion, and elegance in every gesture.

What can I say? I'm still a guy. And most furry grafts look pretty good from this angle. Even horse-boy was pretty damn good looking from where I sat, and I don't usually go for that.

The pair stop their fight long enough to give me a look of greeting. I can sort of see myself in the silver-chrome of his eyes, and the reflection of reflexive pity in the doe's. I can guess what they think of me, some kind of retro savage. Too poor or stupid to get off my paralyzed butt and get the leg augs, or the spinal graft I'd need to be like the rest of them. Eternally young, and pretty, and lying to themselves. Just like those chrome eyes... reflect the world back at everything that looks at you, that way no one can see the emptiness behind them.

She says softly to me, "The elevator's out, Mister G... did you need a hand up to your place?"

I give what passes for a smile, but it turns into a part-grimace as my back twinges, and I end up taking a fresh pull off the lime-flavored pain meds, "Nah, Janelle... I'm good. So... who's the latest?"

Gang tats, biolumed or not, are kind of a universal thing, and I tag him for the 45th Street Spartans. I can smell the old drugs on his sweat as he does his best to be polite in front of the girl he's probably hoping to bag for the night, "Names Switch, boss. You ever want to dance again, you let me know... my guy's got the best bodyshop, graft and sculpt, this side of the showrooms."

Janelle, for all her busted wiring for these kinds of idiots, tosses this Switch a warning look before giving me the 'Please don't murder my new boyfriend!' eyes, alongside a whispered, "Mister G, don't be mad, please... he don't know."

She's a good kid... one of the few who's parents didn't blow a functional brain cell when their daughter came home with a new body, but she'd borrowed from a triad boss to get the scratch for the work, and they own her. They at least know better than to come to her place if they have a problem. There's a bloodstain about three steps behind Switch gone brown and mostly faded from that last conversation.

"Just make sure he doesn't get seen by Big Shen... if you're going

clubbing, make sure you both hit one of the places near the docks, or down by the magtube station at Kitano and 80th."

The girl's doe eyes are annoyed but grateful, and the Switch-man looks confused and a little afraid by the exchange. I figure by the end of tonight he'll either have pulled a pump and dump on her, or just cut his losses when he realizes she's owned meat. As I roll by and into the building, I can't help but want her to realize I did her a favor. I could probably settle her debt for her, but at the same time, that wouldn't solve the problem she is to herself. One of the harder lessons to learn living like I do is that in most cases you can fix a problem by throwing enough money or hurt on it so that it goes away... and those times that you can't, you've got to suck it up and hope it never comes back to haunt you.

I will be the first to admit that there's a certain level of insanity in living on the 4th floor of a building this old and never built for the disabled, but I like the people, I never get bothered, and the guy who gets collectively bribed by the building to keep it up is usually reliable. That is of course, unless he's burning out his brain cells playing whatever VRMMO or NextLife addiction he's into. He hates actually dealing with people, so the deal is we pay him and then get out of the way until he calls to tell us he's done.

Entering my apartment, I can immediately hear the couple upstairs using the pounding music to hide the angry make-up sex from their completely in the know neighbors, one of whom I'm pretty sure is selling a live feed of it off the 'net. It's a weekly thing... they're happy. A weird kind of happy, but happy nonetheless. I roll past the bed, and my clothes on the floor from last month's last month to do laundry list, giving the room that particular aroma that is a cross between 'man-cave' and 'walk itself to the coin-op'. Somewhere in that mess I could swear there's one pair of knockoff designer jeans that I think has gained the ability to glare viciously. If I could walk, I would use them to keep people from staring at my ass.

Opening up the walk-in closet, I look up at the suit.

Before Augmentation became affordable for the masses, militaries and corporations experimented with substitutes for turning their people into two-legged tanks, trying to get all the power with the least cost possible.

This particular piece of art was one of the last 'muscle suits' developed in Japan, using a combination of smart alloys and a wicked active polymer set-up that gave the user the speed and agility to match just about any mil-spec aug out there. Problem is... that kind of performance needs a lot of juice. There was no real space on the suit for the kind of power needed for sustained combat at those levels in those days, and the internal power packs last only about five minutes at full juice. So they'd go into the field with fuel cells hooked to their backs for extended combat.

That little bit of eco-brilliance probably ended up with some research team supervisor performing seppuku.

Acquiring this bad boy wasn't easy, but worth every bit of blood I paid for it... and the after-market mods just added to the fun in my opinion. Seven feet tall from ears to tail, the suit looks like a smoke-grey anthromorph cougar with a pair of green-flecked gold eyes. Definitely male... I had to leave that in to keep the illusion intact. The fur feels real, even if it's a complex silicate that's fairly common in most mid-range graftjobs. Never needs to be trimmed, cleans easy, and looks great. But probably the best parts I get access to are things people never considered when designing tech like this. Since each of those strands are basically a carbon nanotube, it's just a microprocessor away from being reactive body armor.

I'd solved the problem of power usage using the very same tech they use to power the new generation augment replacement limbs. Each one has a series of small power sources that work in tandem and use the same kind of kinetic conversion tech from early hybrid vehicle designs to soak up the movements from the limb to extend battery life. He lasted pretty well so long as I didn't push him into full combat mode, in which case I had at top-off about ten minutes of power, and a two minute emergency reserve.

Stripping down to my skivvies, and getting myself into it takes just as much inventiveness as the whole set-up itself. The bathroom gymnastics I put myself through though, are practice for getting myself into the suit. Lowering myself into the legs of the suit causes my back to twinge and my arms to ache from hefting my own bodyweight, but there's something comforting with the feeling of the suit conforming to my lower half.

The part I hate the most is when the neural linkages connect along my back. Each pinch I know is the thing pushing needles between my vertebrae and connecting to my nervous system, bypassing the point where the damage is, or rather where my doctors tell me I believe the damage is, and synching the suit's control systems to my brain. After that comes the feeling of the spinal seals locking to my skin so I don't rip loose during any fast or heavy movements. The rest becomes easy as I get my arms in, and then draw the head over my own, cinching it in place with a simple thought. Darkness gives way to light as the optics power up, and overlaying with my own eyes is the view of the outside world. My hands... the suits hands come up, and I flex those fingers, letting the feedback systems let me 'feel' through them. I can feel the ears on top of my head twitching as they orientate, and my tail lash behind me.

The chuckle that comes out of my muzzle is rumbling and baritone, and as I say, "The quick fast fox jumps over the lazy dogs."

I say it three times, and then go through a long, languid stretch, followed by a yawn as I turn and begin looking over my selection of clothes for the evening. Casual, Formal... or tactical... so many choices. I end up taking down a simple and black linen suit and matching tie, and proceed to put it all together. As the obvious external access ports that mark the body either as fully enhanced or otherwise vanish under the nice shirt and boxers, the next thing to grab are the slacks and coat. Even as I dress, I like to wriggle my toes, and flex the claws out. It seems like the stupidest thing in the world, but knowing that I can touch and feel through what is just mech-parts, smart metals, and nothing organic at all... it's a giddiness that I always feel strange about. It's cheating. I know it's cheating, but I still do it.

Cinching the tie in place, I look in the mirror. There's nothing left of me, the former anti-Aug terrorist, nor the guy he became after he tried to bury himself under the Nokia-McKesson augmentation factory three years ago. The guy in the mirror looks like the face of the new world personified.

Staring back at me in the mirror is Jaeger. No last name, no need for it. But he goes by Jay most days.

Jay's only been around for eighteen months, but thanks to some

creative work by friends of mine, he's got a full background, and a life all his own. In a lot of ways, he's the rebellious son I could never have, and the poster boy of the augmented world, from supposedly sculpted head to grafted tail. It's ironic, but I love Jay with all my heart.

Snagging a pair of polished shoes from the bottom of the racks with a casual flick of my/his fingers, I stride back out to the mess and tsk at it... but those aren't Jay's clothes in the first place, so I don't really care. I'll clean it up later. Now I can go out and party for a bit before getting to work.

Technically, Jaeger owns the apartment next to mine, and if Jay was to have the rare company over, it would be in a place much nicer than mine. Things have never gotten that far, but it's been a close thing a couple times, and it's always made me aware of how far Jay's tastes range from my own. It's an interesting psychological exercise to mould my mind to a world seen through his eyes, because where I would go right, he chooses to go left, and where I like things to be nice and regular, he adores change and chaos. It used to take effort, but nowadays it's as easy as closing my eyes and taking a breath.

Snagging Jay's keys, wallet, and watch, my feline form practically bounces down the stairs, stopping by the old woman on the second floor to give her a kiss on the cheek, and say to her in a purr-lilted Spanish she's looking beautiful tonight. Her chiding comes back into my perked ears, and I can guess what she's said, but all I give it is a nod as Jay takes the last couple of steps in strides. By the time I hit the last step, I realize somehow that I've dislodged the tie, and left it someplace behind me, the top button of the shirt undone. I almost want to scold myself for letting it happen, but this is Jay, and not me. If Jay thinks he doesn't need a tie, who am I to argue.

I may take the bus, but Jay drives a nice car. She's a black BMW that has just as much of a vicious purr as he does. The more steps I take, the less I feel like myself, and the more Jay there is in everything I do. I flip the key fob in my fingers gracefully, the thing completely pointless as the car recognizes Jay's wireless ident key and opens the door as I approach. Settling into the driver's seat, life seems slightly disjointed, and I start to feel more like a passenger driven by the personality and temperaments of

the beast of my own making.

One hand stays on the wheel as I blaze along streets towards the brighter lights of the upper city, but the other takes out the tie and tries to put it on, only to yank it off again. The growl even surprises me as I realize that I'm not supposed to wear a tie. Ties are for corp slave losers or guys who think that old-school fashion is the only fashion. Jay reminds me to never dress perfectly or kempt. There's always a sense of fashionable sloppiness around him. It's moments like these that make me wonder if it's all an act, or if I'm genuinely going diassociative. Or just plain crazy.

It's about a twenty minute drive to where I need to be as Jay, his tail starting to twitch in both excitement and annoyance. He wants me out, he wants to be in charge, and my control of him is flimsy at best. Jay wants to help, he wants to find the kid and be the hero. I'm usually much more cautious about my acitivities, but the shield of the mask makes it easier to cut loose now and again. The place is a club where razors and mercs like to come, looking for the like-minded and for work. The kind of work that people pay good money to make sure no one important knows about.

Walking to the bouncer, I flash a couple bills to the living brick wall of a bouncer at the door, a guy with a Doberman's pelt markings and so much chest-muscle that you can't help but stare. He refuses to wear shirts, fibre-optic strands in the fur allowing for ever-changing bodyart. He always growls low when he passes me in, and I know he's checking out Jay's body. His name's Krieger, and despite the fact that he's an unashamed kink and tends to get caught messing with one of his new playthings on his breaks, he's never let anyone into Enola Gay who wasn't supposed to be there.

It's a weird name for a club, and I had to do a little research to figure out why the owner named it like he did. Once I got the joke, the irony makes me smirk as I pass through the warehouse door and into the noise and smell. Sweat, the metal-stink of lubricants and leather, pulsing lights and varied images ranging from purely psychedelic to the mundane splash on the walls. The whole point of the party is to cover for business, and I make my way to the bar to flag down one of the guys behind the counter and pass on the code phrase.

Jay wants to party, he wants to get out on the dance floor shirtless,

writhe under the beat of the music, and lose himself in the whole sensual nature of it, and I almost let him... but I have work to do, and drag back on task. Dragging a cat on course isn't a wise action, and I end up snarling for a drink to the end of it, tail starting to twitch and lash behind me, brushing against someone passing behind me. Another difference... I do whatever's cheap and gets me drink, while Jay likes his whiskey, and orders a mellow, smoky drink to sip and enjoy. Anything the suit drinks I taste, and I don't mind the flavor... in fact, it's a pleasant buzz, like I'm back in the game, and doing all manner of evil things.

While Jay drinks, the bartender heads off, returning with a nod towards one of the private booths. With a flick of one ear, and a grin of fangs, I move off towards my meet with Two-K.

Kaine Konstantin was Russian special forces and pretty much my equal when I was upright, but unlike me, he embraced augmentation to the point that he's now an eight foot tall Russian werewolf, black as his own heart, and twice as nasty. If it's new, and it's hot, he'll have it put in, and I swear by this point all that's left is his vodka-soaked brain and whatever passes for a spine. He doesn't so much sit as gargoyle in his spot, in an outfit that probably cost as much as most people who come in here make in a month, and drinking from a mug pressure molded into the shape of a skull. There's wannabes, there's razor, and then there's Jay and Two-K.

Standing in front of him, I just grin and then nod once to the huge lupine beast, saying in a deceptively casual but flawless Russian... not something I knew I had talent in, but it was easy to pick up after about a year of work, "I am looking for some information, my friend... unless of course you are too soaked in your booze to be forthcoming."

As I sip Jaeger's drink, the insult hangs in the air as the bigger, badder male stands up to his full height, snorting out a growl, and a voice that comes mostly from his chest, "Stupid feline... I should rip your head off and drink that piss whiskey from your skull."

This is followed up by a huge, rib-cracking hug that shoots off a couple warning indicators in my vision while he compresses my chest and arms. But the big lupine then lets me down and pats my shoulders, "Jaeger! Is good to see you!" Spoken in accented American, "Tell me, how is life

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treating you, and why I am only seeing you when you are having business! I am hurt we are not better friends by now."

Sitting down to one side by Two-K, I prop one ankle on the opposite knee, and silently check my offensives. Both arms' launchable spike-claws connected to thirty feet of smart-wire cabling with a conductive underlay. They give him range, lethality, and style without sacrificing options. The designs got inspired from some old video game thing I saw in a museum once, something called Mortal Kombat. As one slides out of Jaeger's arm like a knife under the table, and my fingerclaws play along it, I respond, "Life's alright... nothing to write home about... but I come to you for work, because otherwise we wouldn't have anything in common. And I'd hate to spoil the relationship from lack of interest."

That makes the titanic form rumble out a chuckle, and slap his leg a couple times, before pointing at me, and just shaking his huge lupine skull, "Point, yes, point is made... now... a couple drinks, and to business, yes?"

The long and short is, I find out why Justin was taken, and the suit's facial features mask the fact that I feel about ready to puke.

Ghouls.

Gouling is taking cloned body parts, putting them inside someone to incubate, and then harvesting afterwards to give to the original donor. Full-body cloning is illegal in most countries thanks to religion and right-to-life movements, so it's hard to get customized donor parts for people who don't want to go the augmentation route. On the above-board, you get on a list, you wait or your turn to come up, and when the part comes, they do some genetic voodoo to get rid of the need for immune-suppressants. For the people who don't want to wait... there's the grey market. 'Donors' being bribed, coerced, or outright bullied into signing contracts where they will be an organ host, and be hopefully paid for the privilege.

Usually the money is used to settle debts or pay for something to be done... and usually the person who's been ghouled doesn't survive the process.

Other times, you get what's possibly happened to, or will be happening to Justin. Where he's going to have something vital removed,

replaced with a partially-formed clonal organ, and then kept on life support until it's matured. Heart, part of the brain, liver, lungs... these kinds of things usually need some extra time in the cooker to get them right, and nothing's better than another human body for it. There's a huge market in the sports world for clonal parts, so that the athletes can push themselves harder and farther than they ever could, and hide away all their excesses like a car getting it's oil changed.

By the time Jay is ready to leave the club, I'm three drinks in, and a couple grand lighter in the wallet for the pleasure of Two-K's company... but I have the location where the wolf sold some muscle to a Ghoul lab, and the assurance that they're no one he'll miss. He might despise the profession as much as I do, but for him, money is money, and his rep would be on the line if he didn't at least put up some razors for the job.

Unlike Two-K, I was always very hands-on when I was a terrorist, never wanting anyone else to do anything I could do myself, and that translated over to this new self. Jaeger would not hire anyone to help him with this kind of job, even though hiring a hacker and a back-up razor would have been the tactical thing to do. But Jay's hackles are up... which means mine are too. The car is not just for the persona, it also doubles as work prep. I put a lot of money and work into her, making sure if I needed it, it would be there for us.

Stopping a few blocks away from the old warehouses that the ghoul lab was supposed to be situated in, I get back to the trunk to change and gear up. Wireless link-up to the car's computer signals to open the spot under where the spare tire and roadside repair equipment should be, and reveal a cache of weapons and other equipment. Changing in an alley like this bothers me a little, only because I have no clue what my feet are stepping in, but a quick hit from a disinfectant bottle helps salve the savage beast.

The tactical gear slips on like an old glove, even if it's a couple sizes bigger thanks to Jay's larger physique, and I start to feel a little bit more like the man I was. Gearing up has to take a momentary pause while I feel my back start to ache, and I go back to the glove compartment to get a new pain medication capsule. A little slot on the neck musculature opens up, and there's a sigh of relief that comes from my body as the vapors hit

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the back of my throat. From there, it's back to the good stuff.

Yes, I am a violent person. As Jaeger and as myself my first instinct is to connect my fist with something sensitive until the flailing stops, but I've learned to temper that vicious streak with malice and forethought. This doesn't make me a bad person either... I made me that. But Jay at least doesn't have that hanging over his head. Putting him on locks away those things, leaving them where they belong.

The weapons at my disposal aren't much, but what I have kept is effective for the kinds of missions Jay tends to take on. The first thing that Jay grabs, even before I can stop myself is the Mag gun. It's a slightly oversized thing for a handgun, but it fires various nasty surprises at a decent velocity. You won't pierce armor with it, but what it fires is pretty good for delivering shock darts, explosives, cameras, and other things. I even have a couple nanohackers for attacking computer systems. It's been a staple of police and security companies for years now, which makes them prohibited to own, but that never stopped me anyways.

I make the decision to add a high caliber, short barrel revolver to the mix with a load of armor piercing sabot rounds in case whoever took Two-K's gig is worse than the usual razors who work for scum like this , and then add in a mix of pulse bombs, a couple micro-drones, and a lockbuster to round things off. Without much time for recon work, the philosophy is to travel light and use what I can get my hands on to keep things fresh. Once the weight of all of the gear is settled, I run a test of Jay's internal weapons, feeling all twenty razor-claws slide free of the fingers and toes, settling back away after. After that, both spike-claws come out from his wrists, and deploy to about ten feet where I can run them through some twists and turns.

Ever-present in my field of view is Jay's power meter, and to top off, I plug him into the car to make sure if I need it, I have every bit of juice I can get. Standard stuff won't put any sort of strain on him, but going into this means we're going to be in a fight, and that means boosting strength and speed to keep up with the guys who've got so much metal muscle and amped nerves they move like a pissed off grizzly bear.

If we could have afforded it, I'd have added some of that fancy colorshifting fibre optic into the combat clothes so that it would blend

into the background, but between Jay's neutral grey-tones, and the flat green-brown and black of the rest of it usually does the job.

Once the car is locked up, security is set, and I feel loose and ready enough for Jay to work, I launch both arm-cables into the side of a building and begin working my way up to get a better view on things. The location is preloaded for GPS on Jay's HUD, and I can almost feel the nervous tension running through him and me as we run for the edge of the roof, and do a twenty foot leap across, cables ready to launch if I misjudge the landing.

It doesn't happen, and Jay smiles at the wholesale rush of freedom it brings. It's a little waste of power, but every landing puts more energy back into the suit, but every landing puts a little growl in Jay's chest, and I am almost my old self once more. By the time we've landed on the building across the way from the target, I feel ready to break a head or six.

Head number one turns out to be a non-sculpted soldier, but with two chrome arms, and hydraulic-amped lower legs. By the look of him, there's probably some subdermal armor and some enhanced senses. A tough nut to crack, but not the worst thing I've ever run into before. By the time he's walking his second sweep of the rooftop, sucking on a cigarette and adjusting the strap on his assault rifle, I already have a plan for him.

The Mag Gun is loaded with a cartridge of shock darts, and I set their capacitors high enough to disrupt any commo gear he has, internal or external. A couple test-flexes of the legs, and I take a fresh leap towards the guy. His ears must have caught the shift of the gravel on the roof because he's already sweeping up the weapon towards my direction, and I can see the change in his eyes that tell me he's syncing to internal comms. The pistol bucks twice in Jay's hand and the darts hit on the left arm and center mass. Movie special effects always make these things look cooler than they are, but I watch him jerk and shake while his cybersystems try and compensate, but by then I've landed, and am on the move for part two. A roundhouse punch to his jaw sends him stumbling back towards the edge, dropping the rifle while at the same time the smart cable slides out around his neck.

From there, I turn Jay to his side, grab the cable with my off-hand, and then kick the merc firmly in the gut. Putting some amps into the strike,

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the muscles hum and fire off with enough force to send him stumbling back and over the edge. I finish the turn so that when he does fall off, my back is to him, and gravity does the rest. I feel the crunching snap as much as hear it in Jay's twitching ears, and as the cable retracts, I let the dead man fall to the concrete while I pick up his rifle. Barely a ten count and the man's dead... and all I can feel is a grim satisfaction.

Thermal optic sweeps tell me there's no one else within the next floor, but thermal doesn't pick up on things like wire bomb traps, or other surprises that don't come batteries included. So instead of going in through the roof like a good little boy, I lock a pincer onto something on the roof that can support Jay's full working weight, and go down the side to the first window I can find. With as old as this building is, a lot of these are high up, and nearly impossible to lock, but have hinges in place to give the space ventilation. This one makes a nasty squeaking noise that disturbs some sleeping pigeons, and makes me wince internally.

Putting my feet to the exterior wall, I get into a sitting position so that I can draw out the Mag-gun, and settle it into my lap to exchange magazines. Once I have mini-cameras loaded up, it's just a matter of leaning back in and firing off into other parts of the building. My right arm starts to protest about why it has to support all my weight, and my back tries to get in on the game, but I silence them both on pure will. Pain is secondary right now, and I can't afford to let myself use any extra power or dull any of my senses any more than they are.

The camera feeds come back, and I have 3 semi-obstructed views of the inside, and the my instincts immediately start screaming at me. I see sterile sheeting up, I see medical equipment, and I even see a clonal tank in a passive state... but something I'm not seeing is triggering my nerves. Hunkering in, I watch for a bit longer, feeling Jay's tail lashing under me once more, one of his ears flicking, and a growl coming from deep in his throat. Jay doesn't like it either, which is just as much of a sign that something's gone wrong here.

Then comes a child's scream.

It's a sound I know all too well, and it makes me act before I can think. I slide inside the warehouse via the open window, shutting off my camera feeds and hefting the stolen assault rifle off my back as I land. Bolting

along the catwalks, I am panting on the inside of the suit, a slick of sweat born out of three years of nightmares, but externally, Jay is looking cool and calm, as if this is just part of the routine.

Everything changes the moment I can see the open receiving area.

I see a young man tied to a chair.

I see him crying, some blood staining his arm.

I see a hulking black wolf anthromorph standing over him.

Two-K.

"Carter.", I hear him say, deep voice bouncing off the equipment around me, "Carter Grissom."

"I know you are here! Come out and play, little man.", He adds, with a snarling chuckle after.

Dipping back into the shadows, I put my back to something heavy, and try to calm myself down. Knowledge has always trumped muscle, and I fought long and hard to keep my real self secret from the world that Jay inhabited. But now someone knew. And worse... that same someone set a trap.

Turning off Jay's voice modulator, I move about ten feet and try to get a bead with the assault rifle as I yell back, "How'd you do it, huh Kaine?"

Another laugh comes from down there and I shift positions once more so that echolocators or other sound analysis implants can't get a proper bead on me, and he replies, "Actually, I was going to hire your little cover identity as one of my new assassins, even though your little moral issues might have gotten in the way at first. But when your background did not hold up, I went further. I found the cybermech who you had install your smart cables. He was very... forthcoming after I had his eyes removed."

A pause as I cursed myself internally for not somehow covering my tracks better, leaving him room to continue as he wanted, "I know about you, and that little job at that stupid little recreation center. And I know there is still a five million dollar reward for your head. Now... how about you come out and play before I have to kill this boy, eh?"

There's another high-pitched scream as I can only picture Two-K's massive hand sinking a claw or a knife into the boy. A boy who's only crime had been being associated with me.

For once, it's Jay holding ME back. I want to run out there, to grab at

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Kaine's head and beat him it into the floor until something breaks, but Jay has this sense of calm about him. And for once I go with that instinct. Back to silently moving along the catwalks, I end up finding two more guards, these ones with a lot less aug than the guy on the roof, and two shots from the capacitor rounds from the Mag gun leaves them twitching. But doing a full circuit of the receiving bay shows me he has three more down there, and these ones all look to be real razors.

It's a killbox.

Another scream, followed by a laugh, and Two-K saying, "I am running out of patience, and this boy is running out of time, Mister Grissom."

The only thing I can hear in my head is my own voice trying to tell a sobbing and dying little girl in a pink unicorn shirt that everything is going to be alright.

Arming all my pulse bombs to deliver maximum flash and sound, I launch a smart cable into the ceiling, immediately drawing fire, but none of it can get a bead on me as I swing across, dropping two sets of two into where the three razors are waiting for me, and as I land on the far side, I can see the brightness reflected on the warehouse's walls.

Before I can think, I am up and over the side, and Jay's targeting software is already up, the muscles of the suit working to tell the reticle where I'm pointing with the weapon in my hand. The weapon barks three separate times, one burst into each razor. I barely register what I am seeing. One man with a completely chromed body, an anthromorph dog, and a tough looking spotted feline that I know is female. The chromed one gets hit with a second burst before a huge black hand closes on my weapon, and it's ripped from my grip as a fist the size of a small country connects with my head and I feel myself hitting something hard on the other side.

Jay cushions a good chunk of it, but I still feel like I got hit by a truck, and it takes me a moment to recover from it, and as I push myself up, I go for the Mag gun. But then that huge hand is there again, one on my throat, the other on the weapon, and I hear a whine of alarm just before there's a sizzle and a pop as the coil bursts and the magfield is rendered inoperative.

"Not bad... not bad at all, little man." Kaine says, the massive wolf

picking me up off my feet, off of Jay's feet, "That's six of my men... which means six less ways I have to pay out on you. See? Even when you are working against me, you are doing me a favor. Now..."

I cut him off by grabbing at his forearm with both hands, and extending claws in to sever what I hope is the hydraulic line on the hand trying to choke the life out of me, then lift up both feet to plant on that massive black body, and push. The combination of efforts frees me, and pushes me back about ten feet, landing in a skidding crouch, tail high and back for balance as Jay's systems register the damage to the neck muscles and some minor damage to the hand.

I check my power reserves... six minutes of combat time. And no choice.

Poor Justin is almost forgotten as I feel the warming of Jay's smart metal muscles, all the little batteries and kinetic recyclers ramping up to full power and I leap back at Kaine with a furious snarl that is all me.

Jay's speed and power take him by surprise, and I get a few good punches and a kick in before Two-K begins blocking me, and it becomes the rock paper scissors of combat. Block stops attack, feint stops block, attack stops feint. He has height and power on me, which doesn't mean he's slow, but that he hits harder. I have agility. Jay's lighter than he is, but doesn't have his reserves. And while every hit I get in is a good one, it's nothing to the times that Kaine's fist connects with me, and I feel the suit's armor give... and then I feel a rib give.

That second hit is enough to collapse me to the ground, clutching at my chest, and just barely putting Jay's armored paws in the way to catch the soccer kick that sends me across the receiving bay, and crushing into a set of lockers there. The blow was enough to knock out some key systems, and I was red-lining on power all of a sudden, Jay's damage monitors showing that I wasn't going to last if I took another one of those.

"You righteous little pain in the ass." I hear Two-K snarl, the wolf incensed now, taken on and hurt, green hydraulic blood staining his fur, "Who the hell do you think you are. You think a fake ID and helping the little guy makes up for everything you did, eh? No matter what you do, you are still just a broken man in a suit, a guilty conscience looking for a place to die."

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A hand grabs at my scruff, and lifts me up once more, putting me eye to eye with the monster, and I see that I tagged his face somehow in the scrap, claws having chopped off part of one ear. If I am going to die, knowing he has to spend the cash to get that replaced at least makes me smile inside.

Claws dig into my chest, and the grip on the scruff rips Jay's head off of me, and I wince as I feel the interface connections ripped out of me hard. I can smell meat and booze on his breath, and the stink of the hydraulic fluids around me as he growls into my ear, "Before I do you the favor of killing you, Mister Grissom... Let me tell you this. The boy is going to be sold. He will never be seen again. The people who sent you? They will never know what has happened. They will live with your guilt... your shame."

I ram both spike-claws into his chest, and say, "Jay, full discharge."

Ozone and burnt fur fill my nostrils as I send all my available power into the giant wolf, and his eyes go wide with surprise before his hands fall away, and he ends up lighting on fire. Fake fur unable to disperse the heat properly causing the same nanotube-style fur I use to ignite. It's his turn to scream, and I play out the cables, pouring on the power, and then yanking him back so that he falls on his front. I can't tell how much I'm putting into him as I stand there, but I keep it up until he stops moving.

And then I kick him in the head. Again. And Again.

And again.

I kick until something breaks, and then I spit down at him as I hear myself say without realizing it, "You talk too much, you smug son of a bitch."

Jay's head is ruined when I find it. The neural connections are broken, one eye is cracked, and half the fur has been torn off to reveal the metallic underlays. Picking it up tenderly, I pet the good side for a moment, and say to him, "You did me proud. Thanks, bud."

Tucking him away the best I can in the vest, I stagger to Justin and cut him free using a knife from one of the razor's belts, unable to even actuate claws on the suit. The tail's out too, just a dangling piece of gear hanging off my back as I pick the boy up and check him over. In my haste I'd forgotten a medkit, but thankfully, a little more rifling through corpses

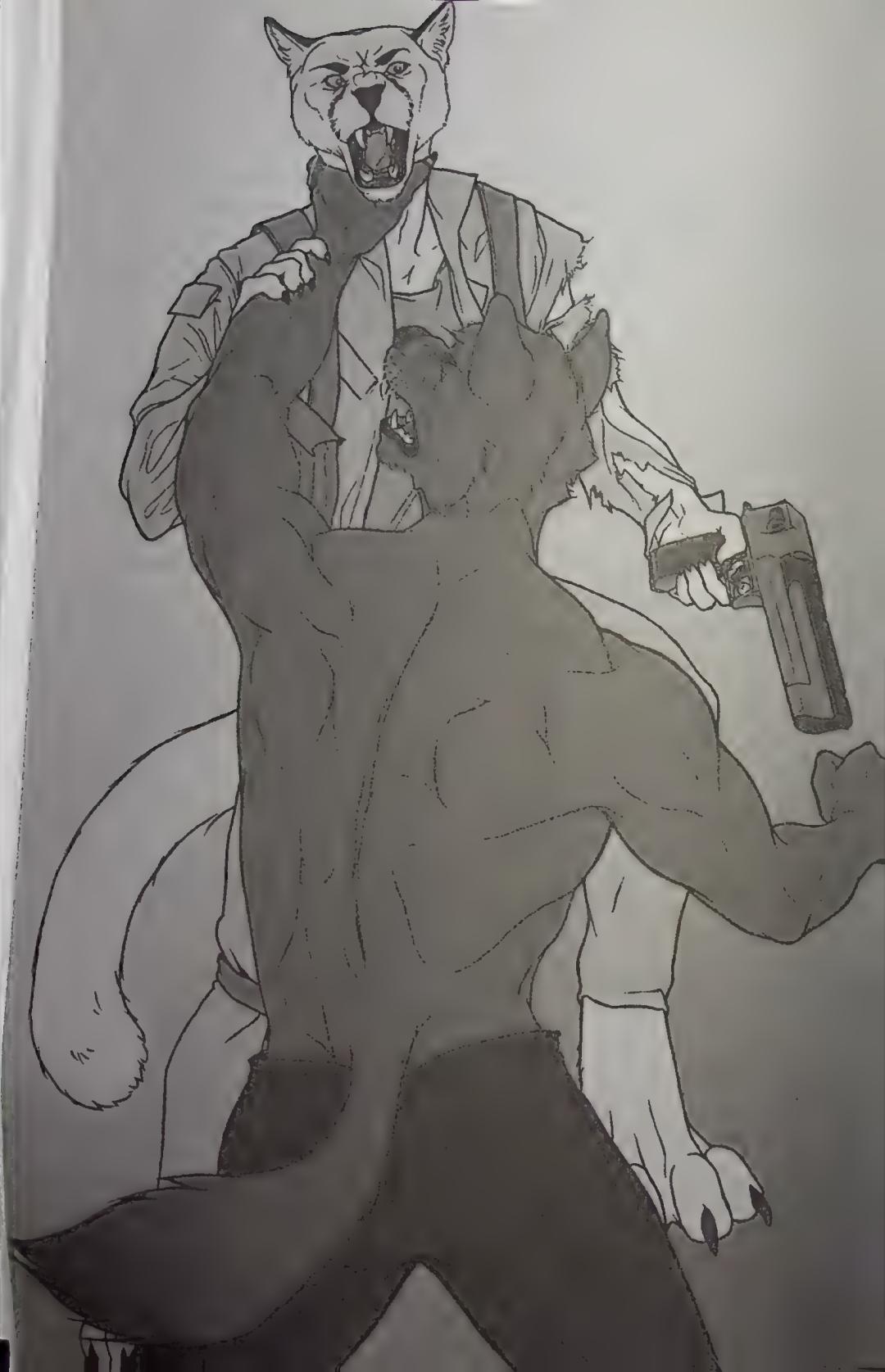
gets what I need to take care of the cuts bleeding him so badly. All the time he whimpers, and begs for his mom... and I just murmur back to him that everything is allright.

The autohacker takes care of the locked lower doors meant to keep me trapped in, and I walk the boy back to the car without even so much as a peep from anyone else working for the Russian werewolf. Jay feels dead around me, and every step is hard to take, making me move like an old man, but I figure I'm just on the reserve juice. Settling the boy in the car, I put Jay's suit jacket over him, and then sit down in the driver's seat, and use a secondary diagnostic plug to do a systems check.

Zero power. The internal diagnostics say I ran out about ten minutes ago on reserves... and I count the time to where I was burning the bastard down.

Unable to help myself, I pull off the boot from Jay's leg, and then open up the lower leg itself so I can see my foot.

And when I tell my toe to wiggle... it does.



SKIN DEEP

BY GARRET "HUNTER" BIGGERSTAFF

Every morning is the same thing. I wake up, I sit up, and I stare at my feet, trying to will them to move again as I reach over for my morning pull on the e-cig. Turn it on, take a couple pulls to get the juices going, and give the whole feet thing another go. Ten times out of ten, any twitch I think I see is usually because I've shifted on the bed.

I gotta admit that it delivers my pain meds a lot better than any patch or pill ever did, and at least it doesn't taste like the ass end of a Kia. Today's 'dose' is vanilla-cherry. So half-way between ice cream and cough medicine. Pushing myself out of bed at first is always a pain in the ass, because I still have to deal with the whole rebellion of 'I have legs.' and 'I have legs that don't work.'

The docs... at least the ones I let touch me... tell me that I'm a good candidate for getting a set of cyberlegs or a spinal bypass implant, and either could be covered by insurance... which would be great if I *had* insurance. There's a lot of things I don't have. Like a legal Personal Identification Network, or a work record that doesn't include arrest warrants. Right now what I have are two non-functioning legs and a constant pain in my lower back.

Once I get settled in the archaic and otherwise completely necessary wheelchair, I get my lazy ass to the bathroom, where I won't bore you with the details. The stuff required for me to take care of business would make one of those Neo-Bavarian dungeon fetishists off the adult channels drool in pavlovian bliss. I'm sure demonstrating for the neighbors would do wonders for my social life; however, I've developed a keen sense of privacy that prevents this breakthrough from occurring.

Just another reason I *really* need to stop leaving the Tri-Dee on when I end up crashing on the couch.

Cleaned, dressed, fed, and otherwise bored and annoyed with everything having to do with my hole in the wall apartment, the next step is getting out and away. I wouldn't really call what I do during the day work... I would call it keeping busy. Again, one of those things where

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getting my face out there where people can see it doesn't lend itself to any kind of pleasant responses.

There's a small stand next to my door where I attach my PIN spoofers, an RFID blocker, and open up the case with my retina-scan spoofing glasses. It's a lot, but the flip side is... what it is. It's just another reminder of the days I used to spend doing things like blowing up augmentation clinics, or beating up cybersurgeons and corporate executives.

At the time it made sense. Augments take away what it means to be human, it robs us of what makes us who we are, instead just turns us into a flesh and blood iHub. Legs that can run tirelessly for miles make things like athleticism useless... no one told the first guy who tried overclocking his brand new Atlas-series 6 cyberarm that if he tried to lift a car over his head, he'd lose it... along with his rib cage, and a chunk of his spine. Augment senses caused psychopathy in their first gen recipients... leading to the creation of heavily armored special forces police augmentation suppression squads, which was just punishing the victims, and not the cause.

Technology had done so much to put us beyond humanity's purely physical restraints that we were moving away from the concept of being human itself. The way I saw it, there was this line in the sand we were ignoring at our own peril. A line that once crossed couldn't be gotten back over easily. And in my view, a line that was just in front of a cliff, with a long drop ahead of us, and someone needed to tell everyone that the cliff was there, even if we had to be a little rough about it.

At least... that's what I used to believe. These days... I'm not so sure anymore. I still view Augs as being the wrong solution to humanity's problems... but again, I'd rather be seeing a doctor instead of a cybermechanic. Not much difference between them, but that's just how life went after the first medical Augments were debuted. Fatal accidents could walk again, people who needed organs didn't have to wait. The world was bright and shiny. It wasn't long before limb replacements became fashionable, which meant everyone with a wallet and zero fashion sense could get himself a new chrome leftie, or a new pair of eyes that had video chat, and wireless 2D. The big money for Augmentation business is the cosmetics though... the useless stuff always ends up being

the biggest payday.

"Hey! Analog!"

The words jerk me out of my brooding, causing me to take a moment and adjust my spoofers glasses as I look up at some anglo punk with more tats and piercings than good sense. Yes, I don't have any Augs to my name, and I'm sitting in the handicapped slot on the Magrail... wearing glasses... and I might be pushing forty... but still... no need to get nasty about it.

"Yeah, Analog... yer in my spot. Everyone who rides the F-line knows we get first dibs. Yer on Trip-Y turf, Analog. Now move."

When I sigh, it's not because I'm wistful... or that I'm wishing for something better in my life. It's usually because I have to do something I'd rather not. I take this punk in and have him measured in about half a tick. The bulk around his arms is too uniform to be anything more than a muscle boost, and the twitchy eye movements are the side effects of a second-gen reflex booster. Every so often one of his fingers flexes out a small titanium blade... and of course there's the obligatory Trip-Y eyesculpt of a biohazard symbol. But what HE doesn't know is I've known enough real razors in my time to know he's nothing more than a wannabe, a sheep who thinks just because he can bite the shepherd, it means he's a wolf.

So I sit, as if I had a choice in that, and continue to stare... letting his ego seethe in the lack of fear, or the lack of anything, watching it play out in his one unsculpted eye. People expect a response when they say things, so it's the most infuriating thing in the world when they get nothing. But it takes a lot of discipline, and a bit of a sadistic streak to do it right. Plus... it's just fun.

For a moment, I think he's going to back off, but he must have friends watching, and he goes to grab the front of my shirt and haul me out of my wheelchair. Before he can touch me, my hand shoots up, and I have his wrist in a nerve lock. Twisting in the chair, I pull him in, drive two knuckles his solar plexus, and then tag him in the nose with the top of my head to break it. In the space of two breaths he's on his ass and staring up at me with dazed eyes, still in shock that a crippled Analog just took him out.

His fault for thinking a batch of chop-shop augs make him the next Viking warrior.

Maybe it's a bit malicious to run over and break his ankle on my way

SKIN DEEP

off the magrail, but occasionally, I need to get a little abject cruelty out of my system. In a couple weeks, he'll probably be back with a couple gang brothers to prove his worth, and I'll probably have to kill him... or all of them. And I think what hits me the hardest isn't that I can... it's that I'm already resigned to it happening. As the door hisses shut behind me, I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end while magnetic coils push several tons of metal into the air, propelling it silently down the tunnel like a naval gauss gun, and I let the thought of it get carried off with the express run to Little Singapore.

Patricia greets me at the door to the old rec center with a smile and an offer of a muffin... cookie... thing. I'm never quite sure what she bakes... only that she bakes. These ones are some kind of cranberry banana bread, with something cinnamon-like in it... or maybe chicory, since I know it'd cost half an arm to get some real cinnamon out this way. I keep a bite in my mouth as I roll down the hall and to the side room that gets called my 'office'.

My current fake ID has me listed as a crisis counselor, the wheelchair reinforcing the idea that I survived something bad, and I help others do the same. It also says I'm too poor to get the necessities to get my ass walking again. Can't say the same for everyone who passes through here, but some of them realize they're talking to someone who really has 'seen it', and occasionally, even less listen to what I have to say. Still, for all that she mothers on me in that uniquely Jewish-Vietnamese manner of hers, I like Patricia. She's the kind of person this world needs more often than not, because she does what she does because she cares.

The Baldwin Recreational Center lives between the bright and shiny towers that are corporate life for the bulk of humanity, and the grime that lives between the treads of the boots that the same uses to make sure we remember our place. A waystation for the people that this city has said hello to a little too roughly, for families that didn't have the means to have their children raised in anything more than what the system liked to call 'education'. Like anything in life now, you get what you pay for. Sadly, you get a lot more Have Nots, than Haves if you're born outside the corp life.

I've barely had time to lock my wheels under the desk when Antonio comes in, greeting me with a fanged smile. Literally, since he has the face

of a lion.

"Mmmmorning, Cage."

"Hey there fuzz, what brings you by?" I reply as pleasantly as possible, taking the e-cig out and loading one of my painkiller vapes in for a puff. This one is key lime flavor, and a step up from the mediciney tasting crap I left at home. I made a mental note to order some more of that one when I saw my guy at the end of the week.

He watches, and makes a bit of a disgusted face at me before going on, "One of the boysh went mmmmisshing lasht night. Jushtin. Hish mmmmother's worried shick."

With his tail lash out all his anger at someone from 'his' pride get taken, I end up using a modified version of the blank look the kid in the subway, leaving any awkward words or pointless excuses I had prepared for something like this sitting on my tongue, tasting like the bitter lime from my pain med.

Antonio is an anthromorph sculpt-job... the kind of thing a semi-rich pair of parents could get a kid for his sixteenth. No one told him that he couldn't get it undone without a lot of work, or the bill that would come with it. He doesn't have anything special out of it either... just a big mess of hair he has to spend heavy on to keep looking good. Okay, maybe the tail. I'll give him props for the tail... it's a pretty damn good design. But he also went for the full works with the muzzle, and it gives him that really weird tonal shift every time he tries to say anything with an S. At first I was annoyed with it, but after a bit, it was just something both he and I came to accept as a part of the whole package.

"I can't jusht sh—hit here and do nothing, Cage. C'mmmmon. Help mmmme out!"

Despite my every effort to keep a low profile, little clues of who I used to be or what I used to do had snuck out, so everyone here knows something about me. But they also knew I was trying to put that all behind me, because of what put me in the chair. It never stops someone from occasionally asking the slightly reformed terrorist for a favor. I also know that if I let him go out there on his own, they'll find his liver on sale over in the Grey markets off Neo Korea by tomorrow afternoon.

So I do what I always do, I deflect, "Why not hire a razor to look for

Skin Deep

him? We both know you can throw together the money for one... hell, hire a working team."

The feline man just snarled back at me, "I can't trusht a rrrrazshorrrr... theshe kidsh are fammmmily. They don't have anyone elshe but ush. Arrre you shure there'sh nothing you can do? Pleashe."

That desperate but hopeful look in his eyes rock me back like a shotgun blast. The same look a little girl had just before a building came down around both of us. Even to this day, I remember those eyes, and that face... the reflection of the falling debris in them as her mouth turned to a cry for her daddy, and I felt the weight of part of the ceiling pin me to the ground. I've watched men die before, I've ended them so close I could smell what they'd eaten on their last breaths... but that. Watching her sob and try to hold onto life for a handful of seconds longer while I couldn't do more than lay there and yell at God, Buddha, Ganesh... whoever would listen to me to let her live.

I wanted to tell her everything would be all right. That she'd go home.

Instead, I knew better, because I was the one who planted the bombs that were now collapsing the place on top of her. Her name was Danielle. She was six, and by now she would be ten and a few months. She was there because it was bring your kid to work day, and her dad had to stay late to finish a project. None of it was her fault, she wasn't responsible for her father working for an augment company that dumped medical waste in unsafe ways, she wasn't aware that every dollar her daddy made came from blood and torture of people stolen from the streets as guinea pigs. But she was there because someone in HR was keeping up with their whole idea of drawing the young to the perks of the jobs early, so it all stays in the company.

Even now I can see the little pink t-shirt she had on with the cartoon unicorn logo on the front, and the size-large blue jeans that looked like they were picked out because they were clean enough to be in daddy's office. I can hear her echoed laughing as I frantically tried to activate the master disarm system on the explosives, trying to stop what I was so sure needed to happen from happening. When the code wouldn't work, I went off at a dead run to try and catch Danielle and her father in the factory lounge to get them out, even though I knew I didn't have the time

to save anyone.

I'm in this chair because I made a choice. I'm in this chair because I tried to do the right thing in the middle of doing what I thought was the right thing. I'm here, she's not, and I have to live with that... because killing myself with it means she died for nothing.

My feet itch suddenly, or at least I think they do, like they want to run again, try to make it time, try to get me there to cover her from the collapse of the rubble... try, try, try...

He's noticed I've lost myself in the things that I still refuse to tell them about, but I shake it off, and just say in a hollow, quiet voice, "Allright... I'll reach out. But no guarantees."

Antonio knows I'm putting myself at risk to do this, but he also feels powerless in the face of what's happened. It could be a gang, it could be a slavery ring, or it could be one of the groups that kidnap people to sell to corps as human experiment fodder. The longer Justin's gone, the better chance he'd never be recovered.

So much for work.

I leave just after that, passing by Patricia and a young man with a pair of cheap fox ears and decent tail-graft playing at being a kitsune. She's feeding him one of those muffinstrosities while she helps him get his ribs taped up and some staple-bandages over a cut on one eye. Pretty typical of a first timer here... once you step off the proverbial bus, you're fresh meat for the scavengers... be they furries like Antonio thinking you're one more baseline here to take away their jobs and home, or gangers like that Trip-Y punk who think you've got enough for them to get their latest fix, or even a cheap aug from a street clinic. A lot of the new groups that've popped up in the last couple of years make it part of their initiation that you have to kill someone, and someone who doesn't know what to look for is an easy mark.

Passing by the local 'Furst Class Citizens' advocacy center, I get the usual skinjob trying to get me to say I'm for them not being treated like slave labor just because they look like animals. This one's a horse, and poster boy for the porn industry. Bodies simply do not get that big or that perfect without chems and augs. Some rich kid who's parents probably tossed him out on his very solid backside, and now is trying to feel better

about it by spending his trust fund on empty words and groundless promises. I pass him by with a wave of my hand and muttering something about being a lesbian war veteran with Crohn's disease and irritable bowel. It's the lesbian part that leaves him scratching at his Sampson's mane.

The rail-ride is thankfully uneventful, but I bring a ceramic polymer flechette pistol in a concealed holster close to my ribs as a friend. It's a slender thing, holds six rounds, but the slivers of superheated silicate it launches out will shred and burn anything to about thirty feet from me. Nasty, effective, and very... very... illegal.

One of the perks of being the former bad guy is you still get to keep all the cool toys. I can even muster the holier than thou voice from time to time if I'm really up for the nostalgia. Which is never. I'd amassed quite an arsenal before I was done, and brokered a good chunk of that away over the years to pay for the things I needed. I kept most of the best stuff for myself, and some things out of sheer sentimental value.

I live in a part of the city that would be best described as one block over from the new third world. All the buildings are decent but pre-aug, without all the shininess and the pretty smartglass, and all the new advances in technology like a virtual-layer interface lobby or RFID advert-dumps to your wireless-linked headware and personal devices. As it is, the glasses catch the occasional stray ad in Korean or Hindi telling me I need the latest Nokia PINDroid firmware, or being hit with the latest iHub update release date, and where to go to get your RF scan and download for reduced cost.

Its old school, and I like it that way. The people who've lived here have lived here a long time, and they don't intend to leave. The city is pretty lax on the squatter laws on the buildings that are technically owned by whatever corporate group wants to build another hundred plus story eyesore where their people will live from birth to death in safe corporate ignorance. They must figure if the big boys really want the property, they'd send their own people to do something about it... so why be bothered.

Down here, beneath the glamour of the new world, they meet each other's eyes, and remember that occasionally they need to touch each other. I see a couple arguing at the front of their home... he's norm with

an eye-job and a couple lumitats that glow green against his neck and hand. She's a gorgeous white-tail doe sculpt with a bit too much rack and rump to be anything but street fare. One thing I will say for the people who go furry... they like to pick the pretty animals. Most are predators... graceful and strong. Others are like her, beings who have always been displayed in paintings or stories as majestic. Art in motion, and elegance in every gesture.

What can I say? I'm still a guy. And most furry grafts look pretty good from this angle. Even horse-boy was pretty damn good looking from where I sat, and I don't usually go for that.

The pair stop their fight long enough to give me a look of greeting. I can sort of see myself in the silver-chrome of his eyes, and the reflection of reflexive pity in the doe's. I can guess what they think of me, some kind of retro savage. Too poor or stupid to get off my paralyzed butt and get the leg augs, or the spinal graft I'd need to be like the rest of them. Eternally young, and pretty, and lying to themselves. Just like those chrome eyes... reflect the world back at everything that looks at you, that way no one can see the emptiness behind them.

She says softly to me, "The elevator's out, Mister G... did you need a hand up to your place?"

I give what passes for a smile, but it turns into a part-grimace as my back twinges, and I end up taking a fresh pull off the lime-flavored pain meds, "Nah, Janelle... I'm good. So... who's the latest?"

Gang tats, biolumed or not, are kind of a universal thing, and I tag him for the 45th Street Spartans. I can smell the old drugs on his sweat as he does his best to be polite in front of the girl he's probably hoping to bag for the night, "Names Switch, boss. You ever want to dance again, you let me know... my guy's got the best bodyshop, graft and sculpt, this side of the showrooms."

Janelle, for all her busted wiring for these kinds of idiots, tosses this Switch a warning look before giving me the 'Please don't murder my new boyfriend!' eyes, alongside a whispered, "Mister G, don't be mad, please... he don't know."

She's a good kid... one of the few who's parents didn't blow a functional brain cell when their daughter came home with a new body,

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but she'd borrowed from a triad boss to get the scratch for the work, and they own her. They at least know better than to come to her place if they have a problem. There's a bloodstain about three steps behind Switch gone brown and mostly faded from that last conversation.

"Just make sure he doesn't get seen by Big Shen... if you're going clubbing, make sure you both hit one of the places near the docks, or down by the magtube station at Kitano and 80th."

The girl's doe eyes are annoyed but grateful, and the Switch-man looks confused and a little afraid by the exchange. I figure by the end of tonight he'll either have pulled a pump and dump on her, or just cut his losses when he realizes she's owned meat. As I roll by and into the building, I can't help but want her to realize I did her a favor. I could probably settle her debt for her, but at the same time, that wouldn't solve the problem she is to herself. One of the harder lessons to learn living like I do is that in most cases you can fix a problem by throwing enough money or hurt on it so that it goes away... and those times that you can't, you've got to suck it up and hope it never comes back to haunt you.

I will be the first to admit that there's a certain level of insanity in living on the 4th floor of a building this old and never built for the disabled, but I like the people, I never get bothered, and the guy who gets collectively bribed by the building to keep it up is usually reliable. That is of course, unless he's burning out his brain cells playing whatever VRMMO or NextLife addiction he's into. He hates actually dealing with people, so the deal is we pay him and then get out of the way until he calls to tell us he's done.

Entering my apartment, I can immediately hear the couple upstairs using the pounding music to hide the angry make-up sex from their completely in the know neighbors, one of whom I'm pretty sure is selling a live feed of it off the 'net. It's a weekly thing... they're happy. A weird kind of happy, but happy nonetheless. I roll past the bed, and my clothes on the floor from last month's last month to do laundry list, giving the room that particular aroma that is a cross between 'man-cave' and 'walk itself to the coin-op'. Somewhere in that mess I could swear there's one pair of knockoff designer jeans that I think has gained the ability to glare viciously. If I could walk, I would use them to keep people for staring at

my ass.

Opening up the walk-in closet, I look up at the suit.

Before Augmentation became affordable for the masses, militaries and corporations experimented with substitutes for turning their people into two-legged tanks, trying to get all the power with the least cost possible. This particular piece of art was one of the last 'muscle suits' developed in Japan, using a combination of smart alloys and a wicked active polymer set-up that gave the user the speed and agility to match just about any mil-spec aug out there. Problem is... that kind of performance needs a lot of juice. There was no real space on the suit for the kind of power needed for sustained combat at those levels in those days, and the internal power packs last only about five minutes at full juice. So they'd go into the field with fuel cells hooked to their backs for extended combat.

That little bit of eco-brilliance probably ended up with some research team supervisor performing seppuku.

Acquiring this bad boy wasn't easy, but worth every bit of blood I paid for it... and the after-market mods just added to the fun in my opinion. Seven feet tall from ears to tail, the suit looks like a smoke-grey anthromorph cougar with a pair of green-flecked gold eyes. Definitely male... I had to leave that in to keep the illusion intact. The fur feels real, even if it's a complex silicate that's fairly common in most mid-range graftjobs. Never needs to be trimmed, cleans easy, and looks great. But probably the best parts I get access to are things people never considered when designing tech like this. Since each of those strands are basically a carbon nanotube, it's just a microprocessor away from being reactive body armor.

I'd solved the problem of power usage using the very same tech they use to power the new generation augment replacement limbs. Each one has a series of small power sources that work in tandem and use the same kind of kinetic conversion tech from early hybrid vehicle designs to soak up the movements from the limb to extend battery life. He lasted pretty well so long as I didn't push him into full combat mode, in which case I had at top-off about ten minutes of power, and a two minute emergency reserve.

Stripping down to my skivvies, and getting myself into it takes just as

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much inventiveness as the whole set-up itself. The bathroom gymnastics I put myself through though, are practice for getting myself into the suit. Lowering myself into the legs of the suit causes my back to twinge and my arms to ache from hefting my own bodyweight, but there's something comforting with the feeling of the suit conforming to my lower half.

The part I hate the most is when the neural linkages connect along my back. Each pinch I know is the thing pushing needles between my vertebrae and connecting to my nervous system, bypassing the point where the damage is, or rather where my doctors tell me I believe the damage is, and synching the suit's control systems to my brain. After that comes the feeling of the spinal seals locking to my skin so I don't rip loose during any fast or heavy movements. The rest becomes easy as I get my arms in, and then draw the head over my own, cinching it in place with a simple thought. Darkness gives way to light as the optics power up, and overlaying with my own eyes is the view of the outside world. My hands... the suits hands come up, and I flex those fingers, letting the feedback systems let me 'feel' through them. I can feel the ears on top of my head twitching as they orientate, and my tail lash behind me.

The chuckle that comes out of my muzzle is rumbling and baritone, and as I say, "The quick fast fox jumps over the lazy dogs."

I say it three times, and then go through a long, languid stretch, followed by a yawn as I turn and begin looking over my selection of clothes for the evening. Casual, Formal... or tactical... so many choices. I end up taking down a simple and black linen suit and matching tie, and proceed to put it all together. As the obvious external access ports that mark the body either as fully enhanced or otherwise vanish under the nice shirt and boxers, the next thing to grab are the slacks and coat. Even as I dress, I like to wriggle my toes, and flex the claws out. It seems like the stupidest thing in the world, but knowing that I can touch and feel through what is just mech-parts, smart metals, and nothing organic at all... it's a giddiness that I always feel strange about. It's cheating. I know it's cheating, but I still do it.

Cinching the tie in place, I look in the mirror. There's nothing left of me, the former anti-Aug terrorist, nor the guy he became after he tried to bury himself under the Nokia-McKesson augmentation factory three

years ago. The guy in the mirror looks like the face of the new world personified.

Staring back at me in the mirror is Jaeger. No last name, no need for it. But he goes by Jay most days.

Jay's only been around for eighteen months, but thanks to some creative work by friends of mine, he's got a full background, and a life all his own. In a lot of ways, he's the rebellious son I could never have, and the poster boy of the augmented world, from supposedly sculpted head to grafted tail. It's ironic, but I love Jay with all my heart.

Snagging a pair of polished shoes from the bottom of the racks with a casual flick of my/his fingers, I stride back out to the mess and tsk at it... but those aren't Jay's clothes in the first place, so I don't really care. I'll clean it up later. Now I can go out and party for a bit before getting to work.

Technically, Jaeger owns the apartment next to mine, and if Jay was to have the rare company over, it would be in a place much nicer than mine. Things have never gotten that far, but it's been a close thing a couple times, and it's always made me aware of how far Jay's tastes range from my own. It's an interesting psychological exercise to mould my mind to a world seen through his eyes, because where I would go right, he chooses to go left, and where I like things to be nice and regular, he adores change and chaos. It used to take effort, but nowadays it's as easy as closing my eyes and taking a breath.

Snagging Jay's keys, wallet, and watch, my feline form practically bounces down the stairs, stopping by the old woman on the second floor to give her a kiss on the cheek, and say to her in a purr-lilted Spanish she's looking beautiful tonight. Her chiding comes back into my perked ears, and I can guess what she's said, but all I give it is a nod as Jay takes the last couple of steps in strides. By the time I hit the last step, I realize somehow that I've dislodged the tie, and left it someplace behind me, the top button of the shirt undone. I almost want to scold myself for letting it happen, but this is Jay, and not me. If Jay thinks he doesn't need a tie, who am I to argue.

I may take the bus, but Jay drives a nice car. She's a black BMW that has just as much of a vicious purr as he does. The more steps I take, the

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less I feel like myself, and the more Jay there is in everything I do. I flip the key fob in my fingers gracefully, the thing completely pointless as the car recognizes Jay's wireless ident key and opens the door as I approach. Settling into the driver's seat, life seems slightly disjointed, and I start to feel more like a passenger driven by the personality and temperaments of the beast of my own making.

One hand stays on the wheel as I blaze along streets towards the brighter lights of the upper city, but the other takes out the tie and tries to put it on, only to yank it off again. The growl even surprises me as I realize that I'm not supposed to wear a tie. Ties are for corp slave losers or guys who think that old-school fashion is the only fashion. Jay reminds me to never dress perfectly or kempt. There's always a sense of fashionable sloppiness around him. It's moments like these that make me wonder if it's all an act, or if I'm genuinely going diassociative. Or just plain crazy.

It's about a twenty minute drive to where I need to be as Jay, his tail starting to twitch in both excitement and annoyance. He wants me out, he wants to be in charge, and my control of him is flimsy at best. Jay wants to help, he wants to find the kid and be the hero. I'm usually much more cautious about my acitivities, but the shield of the mask makes it easier to cut loose now and again. The place is a club where razors and mercs like to come, looking for the like-minded and for work. The kind of work that people pay good money to make sure no one important knows about.

Walking to the bouncer, I flash a couple bills to the living brick wall of a bouncer at the door, a guy with a Doberman's pelt markings and so much chest-muscle that you can't help but stare. He refuses to wear shirts, fibre-optic strands in the fur allowing for ever-changing bodyart. He always growls low when he passes me in, and I know he's checking out Jay's body. His name's Krieger, and despite the fact that he's an unashamed kink and tends to get caught messing with one of his new playthings on his breaks, he's never let anyone into Enola Gay who wasn't supposed to be there.

It's a weird name for a club, and I had to do a little research to figure out why the owner named it like he did. Once I got the joke, the irony makes me smirk as I pass through the warehouse door and into the noise and smell. Sweat, the metal-stink of lubricants and leather, pulsing lights

and varied images ranging from purely psychedelic to the mundane splash on the walls. The whole point of the party is to cover for business, and I make my way to the bar to flag down one of the guys behind the counter and pass on the code phrase.

Jay wants to party, he wants to get out on the dance floor shirtless, writhe under the beat of the music, and lose himself in the whole sensual nature of it, and I almost let him... but I have work to do, and drag back on task. Dragging a cat on course isn't a wise action, and I end up snarling for a drink to the end of it, tail starting to twitch and lash behind me, brushing against someone passing behind me. Another difference... I do whatever's cheap and gets me drink, while Jay likes his whiskey, and orders a mellow, smoky drink to sip and enjoy. Anything the suit drinks I taste, and I don't mind the flavor... in fact, it's a pleasant buzz, like I'm back in the game, and doing all manner of evil things.

While Jay drinks, the bartender heads off, returning with a nod towards one of the private booths. With a flick of one ear, and a grin of fangs, I move off towards my meet with Two-K.

Kaine Konstantin was Russian special forces and pretty much my equal when I was upright, but unlike me, he embraced augmentation to the point that he's now an eight foot tall Russian werewolf, black as his own heart, and twice as nasty. If it's new, and it's hot, he'll have it put in, and I swear by this point all that's left is his vodka-soaked brain and whatever passes for a spine. He doesn't so much sit as gargoyle in his spot, in an outfit that probably cost as much as most people who come in here make in a month, and drinking from a mug pressure molded into the shape of a skull. There's wannabes, there's razor, and then there's Jay and Two-K.

Standing in front of him, I just grin and then nod once to the huge lupine beast, saying in a deceptively casual but flawless Russian... not something I knew I had talent in, but it was easy to pick up after about a year of work, "I am looking for some information, my friend... unless of course you are too soaked in your booze to be forthcoming."

As I sip Jaeger's drink, the insult hangs in the air as the bigger, badder male stands up to his full height, snorting out a growl, and a voice that comes mostly from his chest, "Stupid feline... I should rip your head off

and drink that piss whiskey from your skull.”

This is followed up by a huge, rib-cracking hug that shoots off a couple warning indicators in my vision while he compresses my chest and arms. But the big lupine then lets me down and pats my shoulders, “Jaeger! Is good to see you!” Spoken in accented American, “Tell me, how is life treating you, and why I am only seeing you when you are having business! I am hurt we are not better friends by now.”

Sitting down to one side by Two-K, I prop one ankle on the opposite knee, and silently check my offensives. Both arms’ launchable spike-claws connected to thirty feet of smart-wire cabling with a conductive underlay. They give him range, lethality, and style without sacrificing options. The designs got inspired from some old video game thing I saw in a museum once, something called Mortal Kombat. As one slides out of Jaeger’s arm like a knife under the table, and my fingerclaws play along it, I respond, “Life’s alright... nothing to write home about... but I come to you for work, because otherwise we wouldn’t have anything in common. And I’d hate to spoil the relationship from lack of interest.”

That makes the titanic form rumble out a chuckle, and slap his leg a couple times, before pointing at me, and just shaking his huge lupine skull, “Point, yes, point is made... now... a couple drinks, and to business, yes?”

The long and short is, I find out why Justin was taken, and the suit’s facial features mask the fact that I feel about ready to puke.

Ghouls.

Ghouling is taking cloned body parts, putting them inside someone to incubate, and then harvesting afterwards to give to the original donor. Full-body cloning is illegal in most countries thanks to religion and right-to-life movements, so it’s hard to get customized donor parts for people who don’t want to go the augmentation route. On the above-board, you get on a list, you wait or your turn to come up, and when the part comes, they do some genetic voodoo to get rid of the need for immune-suppressants. For the people who don’t want to wait... there’s the grey market. ‘Donors’ being bribed, coerced, or outright bullied into signing contracts where they will be an organ host, and be hopefully paid for the privilege.

Usually the money is used to settle debts or pay for something to be done... and usually the person who's been ghouled doesn't survive the process.

Other times, you get what's possibly happened to, or will be happening to Justin. Where he's going to have something vital removed, replaced with a partially-formed clonal organ, and then kept on life support until it's matured. Heart, part of the brain, liver, lungs... these kinds of things usually need some extra time in the cooker to get them right, and nothing's better than another human body for it. There's a huge market in the sports world for clonal parts, so that the athletes can push themselves harder and farther than they ever could, and hide away all their excesses like a car getting it's oil changed.

By the time Jay is ready to leave the club, I'm three drinks in, and a couple grand lighter in the wallet for the pleasure of Two-K's company... but I have the location where the wolf sold some muscle to a Ghoul lab, and the assurance that they're no one he'll miss. He might despise the profession as much as I do, but for him, money is money, and his rep would be on the line if he didn't at least put up some razors for the job.

Unlike Two-K, I was always very hands-on when I was a terrorist, never wanting anyone else to do anything I could do myself, and that translated over to this new self. Jaeger would not hire anyone to help him with this kind of job, even though hiring a hacker and a back-up razor would have been the tactical thing to do. But Jay's hackles are up... which means mine are too. The car is not just for the persona, it also doubles as work prep. I put a lot of money and work into her, making sure if I needed it, it would be there for us.

Stopping a few blocks away from the old warehouses that the ghoul lab was supposed to be situated in, I get back to the trunk to change and gear up. Wireless link-up to the car's computer signals to open the spot under where the spare tire and roadside repair equipment should be, and reveal a cache of weapons and other equipment. Changing in an alley like this bothers me a little, only because I have no clue what my feet are stepping in, but a quick hit from a disinfectant bottle helps salve the savage beast.

The tactical gear slips on like an old glove, even if it's a couple sizes

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bigger thanks to Jay's larger physique, and I start to feel a little bit more like the man I was. Gearing up has to take a momentary pause while I feel my back start to ache, and I go back to the glove compartment to get a new pain medication capsule. A little slot on the neck musculature opens up, and there's a sigh of relief that comes from my body as the vapors hit the back of my throat. From there, it's back to the good stuff.

Yes, I am a violent person. As Jaeger and as myself my first instinct is to connect my fist with something sensitive until the flailing stops, but I've learned to temper that vicious streak with malice and forethought. This doesn't make me a bad person either... I made me that. But Jay at least doesn't have that hanging over his head. Putting him on locks away those things, leaving them where they belong.

The weapons at my disposal aren't much, but what I have kept is effective for the kinds of missions Jay tends to take on. The first thing that Jay grabs, even before I can stop myself is the Mag gun. It's a slightly oversized thing for a handgun, but it fires various nasty surprises at a decent velocity. You won't pierce armor with it, but what it fires is pretty good for delivering shock darts, explosives, cameras, and other things. I even have a couple nanohackers for attacking computer systems. It's been a staple of police and security companies for years now, which makes them prohibited to own, but that never stopped me anyways.

I make the decision to add a high caliber, short barrel revolver to the mix with a load of armor piercing sabot rounds in case whoever took Two-K's gig is worse than the usual razors who work for scum like this, and then add in a mix of pulse bombs, a couple micro-drones, and a lockbuster to round things off. Without much time for recon work, the philosophy is to travel light and use what I can get my hands on to keep things fresh. Once the weight of all of the gear is settled, I run a test of Jay's internal weapons, feeling all twenty razor-claws slide free of the fingers and toes, settling back away after. After that, both spike-claws come out from his wrists, and deploy to about ten feet where I can run them through some twists and turns.

Ever-present in my field of view is Jay's power meter, and to top off, I plug him into the car to make sure if I need it, I have every bit of juice I can get. Standard stuff won't put any sort of strain on him, but going into

this means we're going to be in a fight, and that means boosting strength and speed to keep up with the guys who've got so much metal muscle and amped nerves they move like a pissed off grizzly bear.

If we could have afforded it, I'd have added some of that fancy colorshifting fibre optic into the combat clothes so that it would blend into the background, but between Jay's neutral grey-tones, and the flat green-brown and black of the rest of it usually does the job.

Once the car is locked up, security is set, and I feel loose and ready enough for Jay to work, I launch both arm-cables into the side of a building and begin working my way up to get a better view on things. The location is preloaded for GPS on Jay's HUD, and I can almost feel the nervous tension running through him and me as we run for the edge of the roof, and do a twenty foot leap across, cables ready to launch if I misjudge the landing.

It doesn't happen, and Jay smiles at the wholesale rush of freedom it brings. It's a little waste of power, but every landing puts more energy back into the suit, but every landing puts a little growl in Jay's chest, and I am almost my old self once more. By the time we've landed on the building across the way from the target, I feel ready to break a head or six.

Head number one turns out to be a non-sculpted soldier, but with two chrome arms, and hydraulic-amped lower legs. By the look of him, there's probably some subdermal armor and some enhanced senses. A tough nut to crack, but not the worst thing I've ever run into before. By the time he's walking his second sweep of the rooftop, sucking on a cigarette and adjusting the strap on his assault rifle, I already have a plan for him.

The Mag Gun is loaded with a cartridge of shock darts, and I set their capacitors high enough to disrupt any commo gear he has, internal or external. A couple test-flexes of the legs, and I take a fresh leap towards the guy. His ears must have caught the shift of the gravel on the roof because he's already sweeping up the weapon towards my direction, and I can see the change in his eyes that tell me he's syncing to internal comms. The pistol bucks twice in Jay's hand and the darts hit on the left arm and center mass. Movie special effects always make these things look cooler than they are, but I watch him jerk and shake while his cybersystems try and compensate, but by then I've landed, and am on the move for part

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two. A roundhouse punch to his jaw sends him stumbling back towards the edge, dropping the rifle while at the same time the smart cable slides out around his neck.

From there, I turn Jay to his side, grab the cable with my off-hand, and then kick the merc firmly in the gut. Putting some amps into the strike, the muscles hum and fire off with enough force to send him stumbling back and over the edge. I finish the turn so that when he does fall off, my back is to him, and gravity does the rest. I feel the crunching snap as much as hear it in Jay's twitching ears, and as the cable retracts, I let the dead man fall to the concrete while I pick up his rifle. Barely a ten count and the man's dead... and all I can feel is a grim satisfaction.

Thermal optic sweeps tell me there's no one else within the next floor, but thermal doesn't pick up on things like wire bomb traps, or other surprises that don't come batteries included. So instead of going in through the roof like a good little boy, I lock a pincer onto something on the roof that can support Jay's full working weight, and go down the side to the first window I can find. With as old as this building is, a lot of these are high up, and nearly impossible to lock, but have hinges in place to give the space ventilation. This one makes a nasty squeaking noise that disturbs some sleeping pigeons, and makes me wince internally.

Putting my feet to the exterior wall, I get into a sitting position so that I can draw out the Mag-gun, and settle it into my lap to exchange magazines. Once I have mini-cameras loaded up, it's just a matter of leaning back in and firing off into other parts of the building. My right arm starts to protest about why it has to support all my weight, and my back tries to get in on the game, but I silence them both on pure will. Pain is secondary right now, and I can't afford to let myself use any extra power or dull any of my senses any more than they are.

The camera feeds come back, and I have 3 semi-obstructed views of the inside, and the my instincts immediately start screaming at me. I see sterile sheeting up, I see medical equipment, and I even see a clonal tank in a passive state... but something I'm not seeing is triggering my nerves. Hunkering in, I watch for a bit longer, feeling Jay's tail lashing under me once more, one of his ears flicking, and a growl coming from deep in his throat. Jay doesn't like it either, which is just as much of a sign that

something's gone wrong here.

Then comes a child's scream.

It's a sound I know all too well, and it makes me act before I can think. I slide inside the warehouse via the open window, shutting off my camera feeds and hefting the stolen assault rifle off my back as I land. Bolting along the catwalks, I am panting on the inside of the suit, a slick of sweat born out of three years of nightmares, but externally, Jay is looking cool and calm, as if this is just part of the routine.

Everything changes the moment I can see the open receiving area.

I see a young man tied to a chair.

I see him crying, some blood staining his arm.

I see a hulking black wolf anthromorph standing over him.

Two-K.

"Carter.", I hear him say, deep voice bouncing off the equipment around me, "Carter Grissom."

"I know you are here! Come out and play, little man.", He adds, with a snarling chuckle after.

Dipping back into the shadows, I put my back to something heavy, and try to calm myself down. Knowledge has always trumped muscle, and I fought long and hard to keep my real self secret from the world that Jay inhabited. But now someone knew. And worse... that same someone set a trap.

Turning off Jay's voice modulator, I move about ten feet and try to get a bead with the assault rifle as I yell back, "How'd you do it, huh Kaine?"

Another laugh comes from down there and I shift positions once more so that echolocators or other sound analysis implants can't get a proper bead on me, and he replies, "Actually, I was going to hire your little cover identity as one of my new assassins, even though your little moral issues might have gotten in the way at first. But when your background did not hold up, I went further. I found the cybermech who you had install your smart cables. He was very... forthcoming after I had his eyes removed."

A pause as I cursed myself internally for not somehow covering my tracks better, leaving him room to continue as he wanted, "I know about you, and that little job at that stupid little recreation center. And I know there is still a five million dollar reward for your head. Now... how about

you come out and play before I have to kill this boy, eh?"

There's another high-pitched scream as I can only picture Two-K's massive hand sinking a claw or a knife into the boy. A boy who's only crime had been being associated with me.

For once, it's Jay holding ME back. I want to run out there, to grab at Kaine's head and beat him it into the floor until something breaks, but Jay has this sense of calm about him. And for once I go with that instinct. Back to silently moving along the catwalks, I end up finding two more guards, these ones with a lot less aug than the guy on the roof, and two shots from the capacitor rounds from the Mag gun leaves them twitching. But doing a full circuit of the receiving bay shows me he has three more down there, and these ones all look to be real razors.

It's a killbox.

Another scream, followed by a laugh, and Two-K saying, "I am running out of patience, and this boy is running out of time, Mister Grissom."

The only thing I can hear in my head is my own voice trying to tell a sobbing and dying little girl in a pink unicorn shirt that everything is going to be alright.

Arming all my pulse bombs to deliver maximum flash and sound, I launch a smart cable into the ceiling, immediately drawing fire, but none of it can get a bead on me as I swing across, dropping two sets of two into where the three razors are waiting for me, and as I land on the far side, I can see the brightness reflected on the warehouse's walls.

Before I can think, I am up and over the side, and Jay's targeting software is already up, the muscles of the suit working to tell the reticle where I'm pointing with the weapon in my hand. The weapon barks three separate times, one burst into each razor. I barely register what I am seeing. One man with a completely chromed body, an anthromorph dog, and a tough looking spotted feline that I know is female. The chromed one gets hit with a second burst before a huge black hand closes on my weapon, and it's ripped from my grip as a fist the size of a small country connects with my head and I feel myself hitting something hard on the other side.

Jay cushions a good chunk of it, but I still feel like I got hit by a truck, and it takes me a moment to recover from it, and as I push myself up, I

go for the Mag gun. But then that huge hand is there again, one on my throat, the other on the weapon, and I hear a whine of alarm just before there's a sizzle and a pop as the coil bursts and the magfield is rendered inoperative.

"Not bad... not bad at all, little man." Kaine says, the massive wolf picking me up off my feet, off of Jay's feet, "That's six of my men... which means six less ways I have to pay out on you. See? Even when you are working against me, you are doing me a favor. Now..."

I cut him off by grabbing at his forearm with both hands, and extending claws in to sever what I hope is the hydraulic line on the hand trying to choke the life out of me, then lift up both feet to plant on that massive black body, and push. The combination of efforts frees me, and pushes me back about ten feet, landing in a skidding crouch, tail high and back for balance as Jay's systems register the damage to the neck muscles and some minor damage to the hand.

I check my power reserves... six minutes of combat time. And no choice.

Poor Justin is almost forgotten as I feel the warming of Jay's smart metal muscles, all the little batteries and kinetic recyclers ramping up to full power and I leap back at Kaine with a furious snarl that is all me.

Jay's speed and power take him by surprise, and I get a few good punches and a kick in before Two-K begins blocking me, and it becomes the rock paper scissors of combat. Block stops attack, feint stops block, attack stops feint. He has height and power on me, which doesn't mean he's slow, but that he hits harder. I have agility. Jay's lighter than he is, but doesn't have his reserves. And while every hit I get in is a good one, it's nothing to the times that Kaine's fist connects with me, and I feel the suit's armor give... and then I feel a rib give.

That second hit is enough to collapse me to the ground, clutching at my chest, and just barely putting Jay's armored paws in the way to catch the soccer kick that sends me across the receiving bay, and crushing into a set of lockers there. The blow was enough to knock out some key systems, and I was red-lining on power all of a sudden, Jay's damage monitors showing that I wasn't going to last if I took another one of those.

"You righteous little pain in the ass." I hear Two-K snarl, the wolf

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incensed now, taken on and hurt, green hydraulic blood staining his fur, "Who the hell do you think you are. You think a fake ID and helping the little guy makes up for everything you did, eh? No matter what you do, you are still just a broken man in a suit, a guilty conscience looking for a place to die."

A hand grabs at my scruff, and lifts me up once more, putting me eye to eye with the monster, and I see that I tagged his face somehow in the scrap, claws having chopped off part of one ear. If I am going to die, knowing he has to spend the cash to get that replaced at least makes me smile inside.

Claws dig into my chest, and the grip on the scruff rips Jay's head off of me, and I wince as I feel the interface connections ripped out of me hard. I can smell meat and booze on his breath, and the stink of the hydraulic fluids around me as he growls into my ear, "Before I do you the favor of killing you, Mister Grissom... Let me tell you this. The boy is going to be sold. He will never be seen again. The people who sent you? They will never know what has happened. They will live with your guilt... your shame."

I ram both spike-claws into his chest, and say, "Jay, full discharge."

Ozone and burnt fur fill my nostrils as I send all my available power into the giant wolf, and his eyes go wide with surprise before his hands fall away, and he ends up lighting on fire. Fake fur unable to disperse the heat properly causing the same nanotube-style fur I use to ignite. It's his turn to scream, and I play out the cables, pouring on the power, and then yanking him back so that he falls on his front. I can't tell how much I'm putting into him as I stand there, but I keep it up until he stops moving.

And then I kick him in the head. Again. And Again.

And again.

I kick until something breaks, and then I spit down at him as I hear myself say without realizing it, "You talk too much, you smug son of a bitch."

Jay's head is ruined when I find it. The neural connections are broken, one eye is cracked, and half the fur has been torn off to reveal the metallic underlays. Picking it up tenderly, I pet the good side for a moment, and say to him, "You did me proud. Thanks, bud."

Tucking him away the best I can in the vest, I stagger to Justin and cut him free using a knife from one of the razor's belts, unable to even actuate claws on the suit. The tail's out too, just a dangling piece of gear hanging off my back as I pick the boy up and check him over. In my haste I'd forgotten a medkit, but thankfully, a little more rifling through corpses gets what I need to take care of the cuts bleeding him so badly. All the time he whimpers, and begs for his mom... and I just murmur back to him that everything is alright.

The autohacker takes care of the locked lower doors meant to keep me trapped in, and I walk the boy back to the car without even so much as a peep from anyone else working for the Russian werewolf. Jay feels dead around me, and every step is hard to take, making me move like an old man, but I figure I'm just on the reserve juice. Settling the boy in the car, I put Jay's suit jacket over him, and then sit down in the driver's seat, and use a secondary diagnostic plug to do a systems check.

Zero power. The internal diagnostics say I ran out about ten minutes ago on reserves... and I count the time to where I was burning the bastard down.

Unable to help myself, I pull off the boot from Jay's leg, and then open up the lower leg itself so I can see my foot.

And when I tell my toe to wiggle... it does.

RICH KID

BY TARL "VOICE" HOCH

"Come on, go faster!"

Sheen's laughter was as rapid fire as the twin assault rifles that were bucking in her paws. Lances of fire spat lead from their barrels at the Corporate Security hover cars that pursued the trio's convertible through the tall smog shrouded buildings of downtown. Spent shell casings spilled from the guns in a brass waterfall to the streets fatally far below. The discordant cuteness of kawaii metal blared from the car's speakers.

"Faster?" Rich Kid yelled back from the steering wheel, the raccoon's laughter mixing with Sheen's as his emerald eyes glanced up into the rear view mirror. While he watched, the wolf shook her head. A mohawk of dreadlocks—tied back into a loose ponytail—swished around her shoulders, each lock the colour of faded rainbow dreams. His eyes roamed down over the spiked leather jacket that covered her torso, catching a glimpse of the bikini top underneath as she turned to wink at him. Rich Kid smiled when his gaze came to the low riding boy shorts that hugged her pert ass, her tail swinging a wild tempo as she ran her magazines dry before hammering new ones home with practiced moves. Rich Kid grinned as Sheen raised the rifles again at the predatory black cars with their flashing lights. "Hey Sheen, try hitting them for a change!"

"Spoilsport." The white wolf turned and gave the driver a tongue lolling smile before dropping one of the assault rifles to the floor of the convertible. Turning back to the pursuing cars she squared her feet and dug in her toe claws. "Come to mama babies!"

There was a thump as the rifle's underslung grenade launcher went off and a bright explosion flashed in the rear-view mirror. Rich Kid smiled. "Well done sweet-heart!"

Sheen did a pirouette that ended with a bow towards the front of the car where Rich Kid sat with Blacki. If the hulking *Gigantopithecus blacki* noticed, Rich Kid couldn't tell, its simian features set in a perpetual scowl. How the naked, black furred beast fit its frame in the seat, the raccoon couldn't figure out. Instead, he pulled hard on the steering wheel and

swooped the car around the side of a building, scattering incoming traffic like a flock of pigeons.

"Think you can take out the other ones?" Rich Kid hauled hard on the controls and the convertible dove under a transport truck, the glowing grav-rings roaring past inches from the white wolf's head in the back and forcing Blacki to duck. Sheen howled in response, her tail wagging faster. The black cars were forced to split, their drivers weaving through traffic as Rich Kid spun the car around another bend, ricocheting off the side of a family van, the kids inside close enough that the raccoon saw their eyes widen before the convertible shot off.

"You drive like a drunken granny, Rich Kid," Sheen wrapped her arms around him from behind, her paws whispering along the stained wool hoodie he wore. Her muzzle brushed the back of the raccoon's neck before sliding along his cheek. Her paws moved lower, caressing along the torn denim covering his thighs. Rich Kid shivered and Sheen giggled. "Keep this up and you might get a reward when we get home."

Her tongue was hot on his cheek and neck before she pulled back, her paws tracing along his chest, ruffling the chestnut coloured hair he kept asymmetrically cut on his head.

"You might want to give me a reward anyways once you see what's in the green duffle bag."

The black cars were back, apparently not caring for the populous' safety. Streams of fat yellow beams thwack-hissed past, leaving trails in Rich Kid's vision. More than one scorched against the side of the convertible, melting the steel and forcing the raccoon to fight the controls while the kinetic force hammered them like a wrecking ball. Another three turns forced him to drop two traffic levels down, chased by angry yells and horns. Rich Kid glanced back to see Sheen with her ass in the air, rummaging through the green duffle bag. When she came up he couldn't help but laugh along with her when she raised the electric purple rifle.

"Oh baby!" She clutched the tuning fork shaped barrel to her chest and gave Rich Kid a look that made him shift in his seat and his ears flush. "You are soooo going to get that reward!"

A Corp-Sec car swooped into the space before them, its aggressive grill aimed at them. Sheen raised the rifle in a fluid motion. Energy arced

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along the forks of the gun and amethyst lightning arched from the rifle to the approaching car in the blink of an eye.

The explosion was a violent orgasm of destruction, Sheen raising her arms as shards of debris pattered off the convertible, a wicked length of steel spider-webbing the left side of the windshield. The raccoon swerved around the fading ball of fire, grinding his teeth together.

Beside Rich Kid, Blacki let out a growl, sliding a long sliver of metal from his forearm.

"Yes, yes." The raccoon pulled the car's nose upwards and they rocketed through the racing lines of cars, the remaining Corp-Sec car tailing close behind them. Another blast of yellow fire took out what remained of the windshield and forced Rich Kid to jink the vehicle around a sports car which fell like a dying bird when a stray beam killed its anti-gravs. Sheen's return blasts caught random cars and the buildings that flashed by as she fired bolt after bolt at their pursuer.

Blacki growled again, the sound like shifting continents. Out of the corner of his eye, Rich Kid saw the mass of thick, coarse black fur shift. The raccoon swung the car around a massive LED billboard, ears flattening against his head.

"Go already." Rich Kid snarled. "She's not going to like it."

At Rich Kid's words the giant of an ape rose, massive hands tearing his seat from its mountings before hurling it over the side. Sheen let off another flurry of purple lightning while laughing the entire time, until the three meter tall ape leapt past her and off the convertible. She turned her head towards Rich Kid, ears flattened against her head.

"But, but... I was having fun! No reward for you." She tried to pout but her muzzle didn't convey it well, instead turning it into a sort of snarl. Growling, Sheen turned her attention to firing her rifle at the buildings that shot past, glass and concrete exploding outwards in waterfalls of debris while Blacki hurled down at Corp-Sec.

Rich Kid watched as the massive ape collided with all the mass of a boulder, gene enhanced muscles lending strength as he dug his fingers into the hood and tore it off. The black car rolled, but couldn't shake off the monster from the past while he reached in and yanked the drive engine from its housing. There was a scream as the power cut and both

the monster and the black car went into freefall.

Rich Kid had been waiting for this, and in an arching swoop, dove after the falling vehicle.

Air howled past his flattened ears as they gained on the plummeting car. Blacki had torn the doors off, the guards within either learning how to fly or red smears on the upholstery. The convertible shot past the tumbling wreck and Blacki airborne again behind them. Rich Kid pulled the car out of its dive only to have Blacki land in the back with all of the dexterity of a dancer. Sheen stuck her tongue out at the towering ape, her tail no longer wagging.

"Good job, both of you." Rich Kid gunned the engine and took off as the Corp-Sec car became a fireball on the ground below, now uncomfortably close. The streets were mostly abandoned as the raccoon wove through them, the more active travel lanes were restricted to higher up in the building strata. By now Corp-Sec would have called off the chase, unwilling to cause more damage to those they were supposed to be protecting. Rich Kid knew that wasn't the full truth, but he knew that the Corporation needed to keep up the appearance that it cared for those under it or risk a revolution.

Glancing back, Rich Kid saw that Blacki had settled himself in, eyes closed as the wind ruffled through his coarse body hair. Sheen cradled her new gun against her small breasts across from the ape, caressing the weapon like one would a pet or child, cooing soft words to it between dagger glances at Blacki.

Rich Kid let out a sigh and a smile split his muzzle.

"Let's go home."

"It's no fair, I would have gotten that last car," Sheen pushed through the massive oak double doors before pulling off her jacket, tossing it over the back of an antique fainting couch. She turned, paws on hips, to glare at Rich Kid as he came into the room. Even in the dim light, the neon dyed section of her white fur stood out like the blazing patterns on butterfly wings.

"Blacki was getting restless," the raccoon said in return, his own ears

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lowered against his skull, tail lashing behind him. "And I wasn't about to let him tear apart the car again just because you didn't want him to play."

Sheen growled for a moment and Rich Kid walked up to her. Their eyes met and he grinned when her growl deepened further. His paw smacked her muzzle, snapping her head to the side. Sheen's eyes narrowed but her growl stopped, a grin replacing it. She danced away, twirling as she did. Rich Kid shook his head.

"So was it worth it?" Sheen asked as she flopped onto a faded Victorian couch significantly older than she was.

Blacki came into the room and dropped a hard metal case onto the floor with a clatter, then moved off. Rich Kid didn't know where the ape would go and didn't care, his gaze instead drawn to the black box. The raccoon moved over to it, his ears perked forward.

Deft fingers ran over it, depressing various spots, unfolding it like a giant puzzle box until it finally blossomed apart. Cartons emblazoned with three dimensional holograms on their covers spilled over the floor and Rich Kid lifted one up so that Sheen could see.

"Grand Heist Armageddon." He split the plastic covering with a nail and cracked it open, plucking the data-cube from within and holding it between his forefinger and thumb for the wolf to see. "Limited edition pre-release. The city's only copies, headed out to the privileged while everyone else has to wait another six months."

Sheen turned her head to gaze at the raccoon. "What are you going to do with them?"

"The question is my dear," Rich Kid looked at the wolf's heterochromic eyes. "Is what are *you* going to do with them?"

"Fire!" The lupine moved in a heartbeat, claws scrabbling against the already scarred hardwood as she raced off to get whatever she could use to torch the games. Rich Kid laughed, tossing the cube into a smattering of others like it that lay beside his game console. Flopping onto a couch he had paid too much for and cared even less about, the raccoon waved his paw and the flat screen flashed on to project three dimensional images of their car chase from earlier. A feminine voice echoed in the room.

—he scenes from earlier today when Corp-Security pursued a group of anarchists through the streets of downtown. Though they carried none

of the marks of currently known pro-anarchy groups, they still managed to cause untold amounts of damage, as well as the deaths of a number of people. Officials stated—

Rich Kid muted the projection as he watched their convertible weave and dodge around buildings, Sheen standing proud in the back of the car, weapons blazing chaos and death.

"They caught my good side!" The wolf entered the room in a clash of metal on metal as she dropped what Rich Kid assumed were a number of weapons beside the open cargo-case. The raccoon watched the projection for a few minutes more until it flitted to a piece on the rising crime rates within urban centers, centered on gangs that were anti-corporation.

"So what are we going to do next, boss?" Sheen's voice carried over the hiss of flame as she ignited what Rich Kid assumed was a blowtorch from the sound of it.

"Not sure." The raccoon scratched his head.

There were a number of cracks from where the wolf was, followed by a small pop. Rich Kid's ears flattened when an explosion rocked the room, Sheen's laughter following it. The raccoon stood, turning to see Sheen crouched over a stone block, one of her assault rifle bullets laying across it. She hit it with a combat knife, each blow making the small cracks the raccoon had heard. When the shell casing finally separated, she carefully poured the gunpowder over one of the game cubes. Grabbing the still lit blowtorch, the wolf brought the glowing flame to the gunpowder, causing a small explosion as the cube's shell broke and both the gunpowder and memory gel ignited spectacularly.

Sheen paused only a moment to look up at the raccoon before grabbing another bullet. "Well you better find something soon. These won't keep me occupied for too much longer." Her tail wagged behind her, sweeping the floor.

Rich Kid had seen Sheen when she was bored, and had lost three rooms of the mansion to her destructive forms of entertainment because of it. Another bullet cracked and while he watched, the wolf's ears perked up, her eyes moving to the projection still playing behind the raccoon.

"What's that?"

He turned, waving his paw to cancel the mute.

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In other news, Krats Development unveiled the i-Stellar during a press conference today. After being held back for five years, Krats Development promises that the i-Stellar will bring about a new age of intergalactic travel, reducing transit times and bringing about the end of the need for cryogenics. With an average size no larger than your standard car, Krats Development promises that the i-Stellar will be multi-compatible with any of their i-Ships. This has raised some concerns from the general public. As you may recall, the colonies were lost—

"That," Rich Kid swept the projection off. Another explosion shook the wood floor. "That's what we will go after next."

"That i-Stellar thing?"

"Think of it. The Corporation would be furious at its loss."

Sheen yawned. "So?"

"I'll let you light it on fire."

The wolf leapt to her feet, tail instantly moving. "No, not fire. Something like that would require...require...." Her squeal forced the raccoon's ears back and she leapt at him, planting her muzzle against his. When they finally broke their kiss, her paws were running over his body, pulling clothing from it and tossing them aside. "Bedroom, now!"

Sheen grabbed his arm and hauled him towards the staircase that lead up to the second floor. "And lose the raccoon avatar, I'm not going to screw some nasty garbage rooter."

With a chuckle Rich Kid dropped the holographic skin he had been wearing and the wolf pulled him against her. Her fur brushed against the chromed titanium of his body, her paws running along the multitude of plates that covered him like a giant insect until they brushed his face.

His human face.

"Damn you're sexy." The wolf shoved him towards the doors that lead to the bedroom and its enormous bed. Rich Kid's laugh was metallic as the doors closed behind him.

Rich Kid lay in bed, the neon and LEDs from outside casting sharp blades of light across the floor and rumpled sheets. Sweat, fur and lubricant covered the mattress and the air filled with the sickly sweet rot

of lovemaking. Sheen lay beside him, one arm and leg tossed over the man's body, her fingers playing with the plates of his pectorals, tracing designs across the metal. Blacki stood in the shadows of the corner, watching.

"And that's when you found me." Her tongue lashed out and caught his cheek. "I'll never forget it. What about you? How'd you get to be like... this?"

"You mean a head and spine with a robot's body?"

Sheen giggled and pressed herself tighter against him. "Not that, though I really don't mind how hard you can get." She shook with laughter. "Why do you hate the Corporation so much? How'd you get to have this mansion, all your money?"

Rich Kid turned his head to the wolf, reaching up to brush her dreads from her face, his fingers making small ticking sounds.

"My parents were rich, old family money. The house is—was... theirs. It was a nice place until the neighborhood went to hell, everyone moving farther in city to the taller buildings. I was the middle child, one older brother, one younger sister. My family was old fashioned in a lot of what they did, but they believed in the Corporation, had for years. They didn't believe in a lot of the new technology. No genetic recoding like you have, no de-extinction cloning like Black. That was until it was discovered I was hyper-allergic."

Beside him Sheen gasped.

"It's not as rare as you think. The more and more we culled out diseases and altered our environment, the more and more we made ourselves allergic to things we were immune to ages ago. Even locking me away in a bubble proved futile, so my parents were forced to go against everything they stood for and resorted to cybernetics."

"At first I loved it. I could play with others, go to school, all the things that spoiled rich kids get to do."

Sheen's ears flicked. "Then why the avatars? Why pretend to look like someone else?"

Rich Kid shrugged. "I can't change myself like others can. My genes are too strained, spread too thin. My body keeps my organic parts from reacting to the environment, but if I altered myself in any way, it would

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fall apart like a shoddy house of cards. The avatars let me be other people. After all, that's why they were invented and thanks to my parent's money, I have the best of the best. Untraceable, unbreakable, the crème de la crème."

"That's why they've never traced us back to here," the wolf said with a final understanding. "But what about your parents? Your siblings?"

"My parents are dead. The nano-plague took them both when I turned sixteen. They died in the line of duty to the Corporation, trying to fight off the neo-virus as it swept over the continent. I even got a nice letter from the major shareholders... You think they would have actually done something to help us!" The wooden frame creaked where he dug his fingers against the wood and he forced himself to slowly let go. Sheen nuzzled the man's shoulder.

"My brother, Conner, got taken shortly after that by one of the Corp-Sec's witch hunts. The alabaster vans came and took him screaming away from my sister and I. She ran out after that, said I should have done something, should have fought against Corp-Sec. She didn't understand, Conner was as good as dead. Conner meant the world to us both, he would have looked out for me and my sister. I still miss him..."

"One of my pack started to show latent psi and the vans came for her too," Sheen whispered, her ears drooping. "We fought back with everything we had. By the end of it, they still had her and half of us were dead, the rest badly wounded. That was the main reason we disbanded. You ever see your sister again?"

"Once." Rich Kid sighed. "By then she was on the streets, the signs of bad wetware implantation rampant all over her body. She was a mess, selling herself to anyone who could pay so she could get replacement parts. I don't think she even recognized me when she saw me, only seeing some kind of John, even after I had turned off my avatar."

"What did you do?" Sheen rested her palm on his chest.

"I could have used my money to help her, repaired her wetware, and stopped the spread of degradation of her body." Rich Kid laughed, the sound hollow. "Instead I walked away."

Sheen's barking laughter echoed in the room and she raised up to straddle him, her paws cupping either side of his head. "You're cold, Rich

Kid." She leaned forward, her hips doing something that cause him to react under her, despite being robotic. Her whisper and whiskers brushed his cheek. "I like it."

Whatever remorse Rich Kid felt was washed away moments later in the wash of her flat, broad tongue.

"Blacki, are you in position?"

A grunt came over the com-unit implanted into Rich Kid's ear. He wore the avatar of a lynx-elf, all elegance and sexuality, with pointed ears as long as his hands ending in tuffs. "What about you, Sheen?"

"Let's blow something up already," the wolf's panting voice came over the link. Their shared time in bed together two nights ago came back to Rich Kid in a rush and he felt his face flush. "I'm starting to get really bored here."

Gripping the beam, Rich Kid leaned over the side of the support, gazing down at the floor eight stories below. The indoor green space was immaculate, wilderness contained and controlled by the Corporation. People went about their business below, moving along manicured walkways. Rich Kid saw more than one gene recoded person below, the variety of fur colours and species staggering. Yet they all seemed like ants, each one of them insignificant, Corp-Sec cronies. Just more cogs in an infinitely large machine, one that Rich Kid felt a very real need to take a hammer to.

Both he and Blacki were past the main levels of the building, having worked themselves inwards past the modest security—both automated and organic—into the inner depths of the building. The decadent sterility of the building sickened Rich Kid: stark white hallways, stainless steel edging and triple recycled bottled air. Crouched now above green space, the space surrounded by the windows of hundreds of offices, Rich Kid waited. Blacki was elsewhere, out of sight from his handler.

Once again the lynx-elf checked the pistols strapped to his thighs and the hold-out nuzzled at the small of his back. His gaze fell on the duffle bag he had brought with him and he felt a tremor of excitement. Rolling his shoulders, the avatar masking the sounds the plates made rubbing

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together, Rich Kid took a deep breath before touching the side of his head, fingers pressing the sub dermal com-link.

"Do it."

Sheen's howl in his ear made Rich Kid flinch, the building rocking as a series of explosions sounded from outside like a rapid fire barrage. Far below the hidden lynx-elf, the corporate drones paused as their ears took in the noise and then like an anthill disturbed, they rushed around, their chaotic voices rising to meet Rich Kid's ears. It was an odd mix of human and animal panic.

He could see it now, the walls of the buildings surrounding Krats Development exploding from top to bottom in a series of rapid, synchronized explosions, destruction as artistic as it could get. Though the explosives would only take out the external pieces of the buildings, it would cause enough chaos to draw away the attention of Corp-Security.

Lips pulling back from his teeth, he reached into the duffle bag and in fluid motions pulled the grenades from within, yanked the pins and casually tossed them to the people below. "Black, if you would?" He grinned as he lobbed another grenade downwards.

Across the ceiling the massive brute stepped from the shadows, the whine of his mini-gun starting up cutting through the explosions and screams from below. A moment later the gun spat spears of light as it reached speed, throwing a deadly hail into the shapes below. Blacki played the stream of bullets back and forth with a casual ease. Rich Kid dumped the last of the grenades off the beam, his gaze falling on the ape. Something the beast's actions seemed different, and though the brute seemed to concentrate on the killing below, Rich Kid felt his attention was on the lynx-elf instead.

The workers scattered, or at least those that somehow dodged the random destruction did. The rest were ground meat, chewed and scattered about in lumps of quivering crimson. Rich Kid's grin spread to a smile as he turned his gaze from Blacki and gazed down. A drop of blood slid from Rich Kid's nostril to the tip of his beaklike nose. Absently he wiped it away. Rising, the lynx-elf rolled his neck and stepped off the beam.

The air whistled past his elongated ears as the ground rushed up

with a fatal finality only to be thwarted as he twisted in the air, shattering the tiled floor as his hydraulic systems took the brunt of the impact. The stream of bullets from Blacki came to a halt as the lynx-elf stood up, spreading his hands wide.

"Ladies and gentlemen, drones one and all." He spun in place, his eyes taking in those that had crowded under the archways where the raining death wouldn't have been able to reach them. More stared down from the office windows. "Time to wake up and recognize your empty lives. The Corporation doesn't care about you. Free yourselves from your hollow shells!"

The pistols were in his hands in a fluid blur, the first rounds loosed before the crowd could react. Three backs exploded in raw gore as the bullets pushed through their bodies and the people scattered. Rich kid tracked them easily, the pistols roaring with the fury of death itself. Each shot took another civilian, severing their life with the ease of cutting a thread.

A yellow beam flashed past Rich Kid's head. He spun, eyes darting until they locked on building security rushing forward from further within the building. More flashes of yellow zipped by as Rich Kid snarled. A rifle came to a shoulder, the barrel looming in the lynx-elf's vision. He wouldn't be able to dodge it.

The guard's head exploded.

"Boom! Headshot!" Sheen's whoop startled Rich Kid into action and he threw himself behind a steel bench as more lances of lethal light whipped by. Long, clawed fingers replaced the clips in his pistols as his gaze swept the room, finally finding Sheen crouched behind a pillar. A holographic display covered her eyes as she gazed along a sleek rifle. As he watched, she gently squeezed the trigger, rocking back as the recoil pushed the weapon against her shoulder. The sound of an exploding helmet echoed through the room followed by another whoop from the wolf.

"What's wrong Rich Kid? Scared?"

The lynx-elf muttered a response that—given her gender—wasn't entirely incorrect while he stood up, pistols before him. Left, right, left, right. His fingers tugged the triggers as lethal rounds took down fleeing

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business people and advancing guards alike. The kiss of a laser round hit his left shoulder, the impact half spinning him before he adjusted and killed the shooter with a bullet to the throat. His ears flattened against his head.

"Where's Black?" Rich Kid moved behind a statue, laser bolts carving charred craters into the marble. There was no response over the link and the lynx-elf swore, taking his frustration out on the security guards with vicious snapped shots.

"You worry too much," Sheen yelled as she shot past, legs pumping, rifle discarded. Rich Kid spun out of cover, shots covering the wolf while she raced through the storm of fire. A leap carried her into the air – dreadlocks twisting like a corrupt halo – and down among the largest knot of guards. Rich Kid's feet crunched broken ceramic and stone as he rushed after her.

Another laser burst forced the lynx-elf to stumble and he quickly caught himself, his first two shots missing before the third took the guard in the side. Ahead of him Sheen was a neon-painted whirl of white, trails of crimson splashing around her while she went to work with a pair of combat machetes, their cleaver-like monomolecular blades hacking through guard's armour.

The pistols went empty and Rich Kid tossed them aside as he reached the outer edge of the melee. A guard turned only to crumple as the lynx-elf hammered his neck with a knife-hand, the blow shattering vertebrate with a distinct crack. Moving past the falling man, Rich Kid took a snap baton on his left forearm, the resulting clang startling his attacker enough that the lynx-elf easily shattered his collarbone.

"You know what would be good about now?" Rich Kid shouted over the yells and screams of the guards as they piled into the fight, fists, kicks and batons hammering against the lynx-elf's body. His avatar flickered for a moment and he snarled. "A Gigantopithecus! Black you mother fu—"

The monster's roar paused the fight long enough for the guards to die as the creature raged into the melee, massive fists crushing and hammering the guards aside like an adult attacking children. Those of the guards that reacted fast enough had their blows shrugged off by the creature as he reaped them like ripe corn.

"Where the hell were you?" Rich Kid yelled, emphasising it with jackhammer blows to a guard's helmet, the visor shattering, the face behind pulped with his next punch. The giant remained silent, continuing his wanton destruction, clearing the pressure away from the duo. Sheen's back hit Rich Kid's a moment later, her fur slick with rivers of red.

"Some party. You sure know how to treat a girl." The wolf lashed out and a helmeted head dropped to the floor with a heavy thunk. Her wagging tail brushed the stub of his.

"I will admit, the dancing has my blood up." Rich Kid took a punch across his face, the studded, weighted knuckles cracking his lip and making his teeth rattle. "These guys need some lessons though." His retaliation sent the guard flying backwards, a small crater in his chest.

The room fell silent and Rich Kid turned, noticing for the first time that they were alone, the guards crumpled ruins about them. Blacki stood beside the pair, his massive chest barely rising and falling. Sheen turned and grabbed Rich Kid's head in her paws, licking his face, smacking her lips together.

"Mmm, sexier than the 'coon by far."

Rich Kid shoved her back and she went dancing away, giggling while moving from body to body. The lynx-elf let his gaze scan over the destruction around them. The watchers in the windows were gone and something felt off. His eyes moved to Blacki, who only moved his head back and forth. No matter how much he tried to let it go, Rich Kid kept feeling that the giant was up to something. The lynx-elf had relied on the creature a number of times before and his timing had always been perfect. So what had changed?

Sheen paused in her dance, ears straining upwards, rotating back and forth. She dropped to pick up one of the fat barreled las-guns. "Do you hear that?"

Rich Kid turned away from the quiet monster, swivelling ears registering footfalls all around them.

"The he—"

The windows of the offices exploded inwards in a blizzard of glass. Rich Kid raised his arms as sword-sized shards shattered against his arms, smaller blades slashing across his face. Black shapes followed the

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explosion of glass in, miniature anti-grav units slowing them as they came to the floor. A dozen ugly rifles full of potential violence raised, their gaping muzzles pointing at the Rich Kid and Blacki. The pings of their automatic targeting as it locked on tickled Rich Kid's hearing. The lynx-elf realized then that somehow Sheen had slipped away in the falling glass, to where he did not know.

Slow clapping drew the lynx-elf's attention.

"I was starting to wonder what would draw you out." A figure moved through the black carapaced warriors, his movement's efficient, oozing confidence. From the markings along the shoulder guards, Rich Kid knew this was their Captain. The smooth helmet—free of any sort of visual gear—tilted. "You've caused the major shareholders a lot of sleepless nights over the years, but now we finally have you."

"A trap..." Rich Kid ran the back of his arm across his nose, a streak of crimson darkening the distressed wool. "It was all a trap."

"There is an i-Stellar, if that's what you're asking." The figure motioned to the room around them. "Though it's far from here, safe from anarchists like you."

Rich Kid shifted his stance and the gun barrels followed his movement. Behind him Blacki growled, the *Gigantopithecus blacki*'s breathing getting deeper, heavier. The image of the beast reaching out and crushing Rich Kid's head flitted through the lynx-elf's thoughts for a moment before he snarled.

"Now you have two choices, come with us peacefully, and face the full wrath of the Corporate Justice System," the Captain rested his palm on the pistol at his hip. "Or you can die here, gunned down like the diseased being that you are."

Rich Kid's jaw hurt as he clenched it tighter, his teeth creaking in his mouth. Everywhere he looked the cave-like muzzles stared at him. The lynx-elf's fingers clenched and unclenched as strings of curses ran through his thoughts. He would not die like that, he wouldn't lay down and die like his siblings. The lynx-elf's temple pounded as blood rushed through his ears, his fingers finally turning into fists. It would not end here.

Explosions blossomed among the black shrouded warriors.

"Excuse me Captain, but the latter sounds so much more exciting!"

Sheen's voice carried over the blasts while she threw another grenade at the group. Grinning maniacally, the wolf hefted the pronged rifle Rich Kid had bought her. The scattered Corporate warriors turned, weapons shredding the column the wolf had ducked behind. Rich Kid had started moving as soon as the first explosion had lit the room, dashing as fast as his augmented legs could carry him. Energy and hard rounds chewed the air behind him.

Shoulder lowered, he hammered through a set of doors, moving further into the building. Blacki's thundering steps loud behind him. Shouts chased Rich Kid while he bolted through a series of hallways, any door in his path shattered by his enhanced body. Workers who hadn't fled gasped or screamed as he ran past. His avatar frizzed and flashed, sparking between his raccoon and lynx-elf avatars, sometimes mixing them into a weird alien creature. Rich Kid's head was on fire, a headache pressing against the inside of his skull. Each door he crashed through made it worse.

"Should have known," Rich Kid glanced back as rounds flashed past him, cratering the wall ahead of him. He could see the hulking form of Blacki behind him and glimpsed the Corporate shock troops beyond, slowly being left behind. The ape's eyes glimmered as they met Rich Kid's gaze and the man had to tear his vision away as he slammed through another door.

He was at a crossroads in the hallway. Quick glances around, Rich Kid saw the glowing exit sign above one of the doors down a stretch of hall and bolted towards it. What he hoped was the final door in his path shattered when he battered through it, his avatar finally giving up its ghost. Sure enough, Rich Kid stood in an employee parking garage, one of which he suspected were many within the building. A number of hover cars sat inert on the plasteel floors.

Rich Kid moved to the nearest one when Blacki crashed through the remains of the door. The beast roared and raised its arms, knuckles scraping the ceiling. The cyborg turned as the beast strode forward, massive cupped palms slapping its chest, the sound vibrating deep in Rich Kid's chests.

"Back off!" The cyborg roared, bracing his feet. The blood dripping

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from his nose had become a stream running from both nostrils and he spit a glob of crimson onto the pristine floor. "You don't want to do this Black, I never treated you badly."

The beast took another step forward and Rich Kid suddenly realized how small he was compared to the creature. The monster paused, face contorting, and then took another step forward.

Rich Kid could hear the footsteps of the men chasing them and knew he didn't have a lot of time. Slowly he moved his hands to his side, gaze never leaving Blacki's eyes. The ape spread its arms.

It was over in an instant.

Muscle fiber bundles overclocked by an internal algorithm snapped into action. The hold out pistol secreted in the small of Rich Kid's back filled his hand and his finger depressed the trigger even as Blacki's head cocked to the side.

The blast was insanely loud in the confines of the garage.

Blacki's body remained standing for long seconds before toppling forward. Rich Kid stepping back as it crashed at his feet, then let out a long hiss through his teeth. The ape's back was a red ruin, thick rivers of silken crimson darkening its coarse black fur. It was a small miracle that the beast had managed to keep up with the man's augmented systems at all, shielding his master from the rounds of their pursuers.

Rich Kid shook his head. "You were going to betray me." He snarled through blood coated teeth. "You bastard, you were going to betray me!"

The first trooper through the door took a heavy round from the hold out pistol in the face, his helmet disintegrating in a thunderclap. The next lost most of his torso to the shot. The third was smarter and hung back only to lose an arm and most of his shoulder.

The Captain strode forward as the pistol clicked empty.

Rich Kid threw it at the man, who leaned to the side to avoid the projectile which shattered against the wall behind him.

"You just had to resist, didn't you?" The Captain stopped as a pair of troopers raced past him, guns slung at their sides, energized knives snapping to life. Both had feline tails that bespoke of feline gene recoding. They were growling.

The first swing hummed past Rich Kid's head as he dodged to the

side, the ionized air crackling against the plates of his body. The second man's blade butterfly-kissed the cyborg's back, passing a hair's breath as the hyper-energized nervous system reacted in a heartbeat. The felines moved like mercury, each movement reduced to a razor's edge of efficient death.

Rich Kid felt like he was part of a dance while he wove and dodged the energized knives. They would cut through him easily enough, the residual energy frying most of his systems shortly after. The world around him slowed down as his internal systems sped up. He could feel the heat deep in his chest as the heat sinks near what had replaced his lungs tried to absorb the bleed off while his processors blew past their specs.

He felt like a god.

One of the soldiers made the first mistake, moving in too close, his knife becoming ineffective. Rich Kid punished him with an elbow across the chin, fragmenting the helmet away and taking the man's mandible with it. The crack of the man's vertebrae sounded as loud as the hold-out pistol's shot.

The remaining soldier was next, though Rich Kid noticed the man never flinched during the death of his squad member. Instead, the feline advanced, a series of quick slashes testing Rich Kid until an over-extended arm presented itself. The cyborg brought his elbow up into the back of the joint, cracking it and tearing through the limb. The gene altered soldier finally reacted, the yowl of pain cut short as Rich Kid caught the falling energized knife and hammered it to the hilt in its owner's faceplate.

"Most impressive."

Rich Kid turned, the movement seemed too slow despite the fact that it took less than a second.

"It took the Corporation a long time to track you down, Rich Kid. A lot of sacrifices, a lot of things we're not proud of. But it had to be done, for the common good." The Captain started forward, each step seeming as if the man was under water. Rich Kid's artificial heart thudded hard against his synthetic ribs. Every nerve in his body felt like molten metal, screaming for him to move. The man stopped easily within reach of Rich Kid and shook his helmeted head. "You had this coming."

Like a rubber band pulled too tight, Rich Kid snapped. His hand shot

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out, fingers rigid in a spear strike aimed at the man's throat. At this range the cyborg's fingers would be as deadly as any blade.

The Captain shifted, Rich Kid's fingers passing the helmet while the man's fists came up impossibly fast to the cyborg's sped up vision. The steel enforced gloves glowed slightly as they crashed against Rich Kid's cheek with all the force of a meteor, snapping his head to the side, forcing him to stumble back.

Rich Kid barely got out of the way of the Captain's next two blows. His body felt sluggish, the glow of the man's gloves betraying something that was probably a neural dampener or some other kind of inhibitor. A fist smashed into the cyborg's shoulder, rocking his body to the side. Shifting his stance, Rich Kid stepped forward and aimed a kick at the Captain's knee. The man moved out of range.

"You're all lackeys!" Rich Kid snarled, launching a series of jabs at the masked man, only to touch nothing but air. The Captain's return punch cracked the plating of the cyborg's stomach, doubling him over into the rising knee that sent Rich Kid stumbling back, his nose a pulped mess. Snarling he glared at the Captain. "Where were you when my parents died? Where were you when my sister ended up in the streets?"

Rich Kid struck out and the Captain grabbed his arm with a fluid ease, his glowing fist rising up to smash into the cyborg's armpit. Metal tore and the limb came free in a waterfall of sparks and severed cables. Rich kid howled in rage as he swung madly at the Captain who took a step back, tossing the severed limb away. The cyborg followed, his chest a riot of pain as the heat sinks finally failed.

The Captain blocked the cyborg's next couple of swings and kicks, each blow's kinetic force deflected with a brush or shift of his body. Rich Kid yelled wordless fury while he kept forcing the Captain back until the soldier's foot bumped the body of Blacki. It wasn't much, but it distracted the leader of the military squad long enough for Rich Kid's fist to crack against the smooth visor, sending spider web cracks across it. The man clawed his helmet off and Rich Kid's fist froze as he readied another punch.

"No." He whispered. "You're dead."

"No, I'm not." Conner swung the helmet, the blow shattering it when it collided with Rich Kid's head, sending him crashing to his back on the

floor.

Rich Kid gazed up, eyes wide as blood streamed from his ruined face. He kept shaking his head, pulling himself away from the figure that was his brother. Conner looked as he did when the alabaster vamps had taken him, if a little older, tiny scars dotting his face here and there. But the eyes—smoldering emeralds within their dark sunken sockets—those remained the same.

"They took you!" The words were slurred from Rich Kid's ruined mouth while he pushed himself backwards across the floor. His brother's lips thinned.

"Yes, they did." The Captain strode forward when Rich Kid's back bumped the side of a hover car. It was hard for the cyborg not to notice the way the platinum and gold wires that covered Conner's bald head glowed with the same light as his gloves had. Rich Kid's headache was a volcano of pain now and he could feel the blood rushing from his ears and ruined nose. "They saved me from myself. Without training I would have likely lost my mind and killed both you and our sister, though you seem to have been able to do that all by yourself. I gave the Corporation my trust and they returned it. You however..."

"Black."

The corner of Conner's lip twitched, hair-thin lightning dancing along his head. "Distrust is easily manipulated."

Behind the Captain, Rich Kid could see the form of Sheen as she came into view, the tuning fork shaped rifle in her paws. She winked at Rich Kid while her ears flitted up and down. The cyborg felt his heart leap until Conner turned to the woman.

"Good work, Karen. As per our agreement, a first run i-Stellar is yours, as long as you leave Earth. Immediately."

"The name's Sheen." Her tail gave a wag and her ears perked. "What about all of your precious Corporate men?"

"There will always be more men."

Her muzzle split, tongue lolling out as she moved forward to stand beside Conner. "You're cold, Conner." A paw brushed against the man's cheek before she turned and winked at Rich Kid, sticking her tongue out. "It was fun kiddo. You never took me anywhere interesting and a girl

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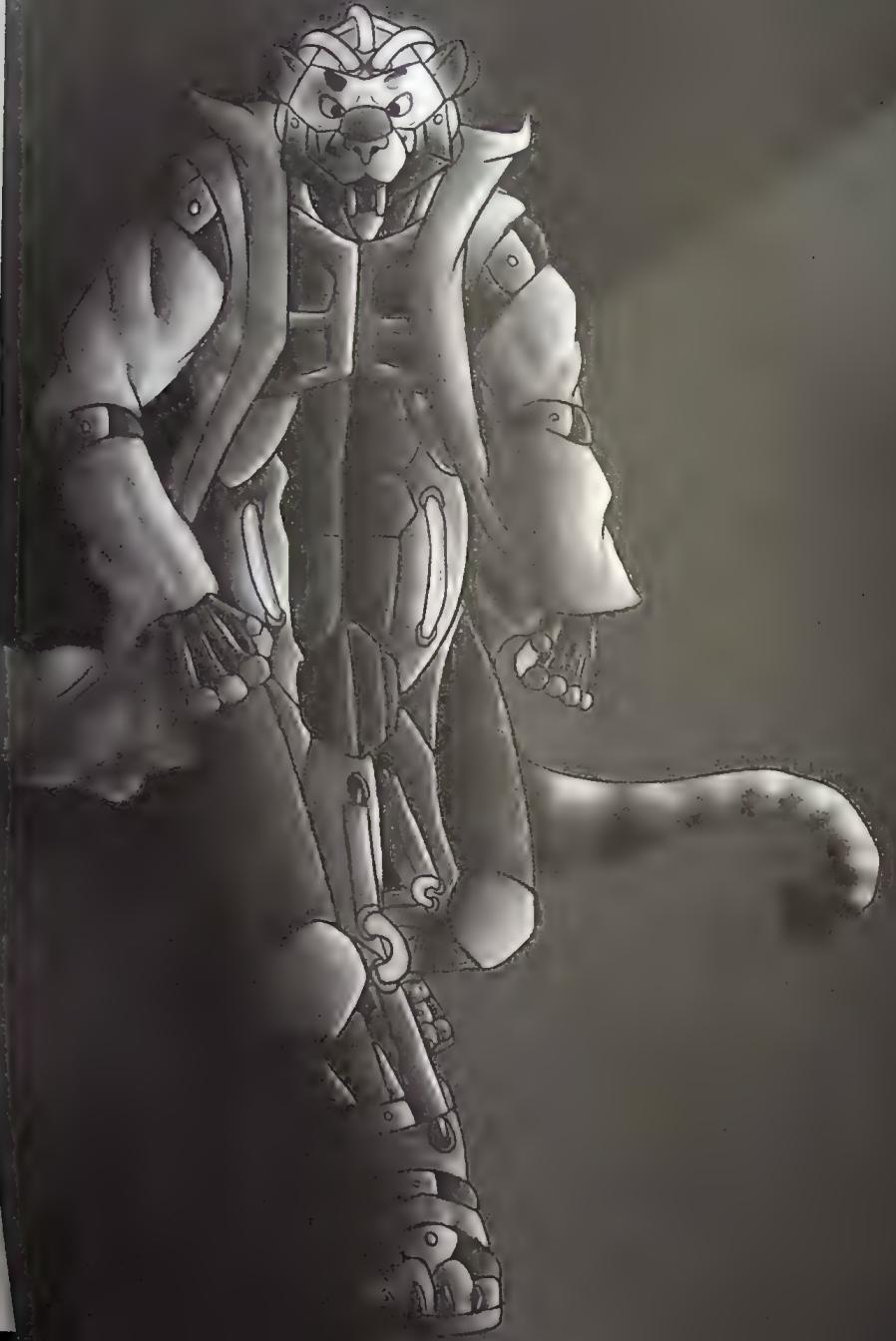
needs more than pretty explosions and random acts of violence."

She was gone by the time Conner unclipped his holster and drew his pistol while the cyborg watched him.

Their eyes met.

Rich Kid's laughter cut through the air with a short bark.

The gun was louder.



CAT'S CRADLE

BY OCEAN TIGROX

The creature in black stared over the edge of the building. The servos in his head ran over time, monitoring the wind speed, humidity, elevation and current temperature among other things. Once the final calculations had finished, his white and black tail twitched and the pistons in his legs launched him off the building.

His ears flicked and rotated back, the wind whipping at their edges while he plummeted towards the ground. A digital display over his face flashed various measurements: Velocity, elevation, heart rate. A schematic of the building sprang up and began ticking off the floors as he dove past them. 344, 342, 340, 337, 334, 331. The numbers plummeted with his descent.

His arms stayed at his side, cutting through the wind. 319, 312, 305, 298. A warning sprung up on the display. The dark figure responded, "Tether," firing off two cable attachments from his hips. Silver lengths spiraled forward at a blistering speed and jammed into the concrete side of the building. His tail twitched in anticipation of the ripple of inertia traveling back up the cable. The falling creature twisted his body as the shockwave came to the end, converting the whip crack into a crescent dive towards the building's face. 282, 275, 274, 272. The display lit up and locked onto the floor. As he approached the vertex of his arc, he contorted his body, disengaged the cables, and spun towards the black glass pane.

With a whip of his arms, he detached the two vibro-katanas from his thighs. A flick of his digits and purple electricity crackled and lit up the edges of the blades. He cut a hole into the window using a swift slash of his weapons and smashed through the newly created opening. With a tumble and a roll, the figure in black came to rest down on one knee in the middle of the corridor.

BWEEP BWEEP BWEEP!

The building alarm began to blast through the hallways and a male voice echoed over the loudspeaker system. "What do we have here? A rat looking for a piece of cheese? He should know this place is just a mouse

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trap."

The figure rose from the floor and walked further down the corridor, long, striped tail flicking behind him.

"Oh not a rat but a cat; one who's come to play." The voice chuckled. "Well if it's a game he wishes for, I have some fun ones. Let's begin with an easy one: The floor is lava."

The building alarm went silent, only to be replaced by a humming noise that began whining louder from underneath.

The tiger tail twitched and the ninja took off sprinting. "Traction," he muttered under his breath. Spikes jutted out from his boots and began digging into the floor. Pushing off his left foot, he launched himself at the side of the corridor. A burst of sparks escaped from his sole as his right boot dug into the wall, metal on metal, and the tiger began running parallel to the floor. The pistons in his legs whirred with the extra force of each step, shoes puncturing deep into the panels as he continued his run, the glow of his blades streaking behind him. Below him, the floor grew bright and crackled. Bolts of electricity arced off the steel plating surface, reaching up at the feline but were out of range to strike the sideways sprinting tiger.

"A simple solution to a simple problem." The voice of the tiger's opponent fizzled back to life with a scoff. "Time for something with a bit more challenge. How are you with dodge-ball, ninja cat?"

As the tiger continued his trek down the long hallway, two mini missile launchers lowered from the end ceiling. The first launcher unloaded its payload and from beneath his mask the tiger growled as his HUD display lit up. A string of missiles spun down the hallway, spiraling towards the figure in black. Nearing their approach, the tiger angled his run, pushing off the wall and stretching his leg up again, this time attaching to the roof. The screech of scratching metal clashed against the rumbling sound of the missiles, echoing throughout the metallic corridor. Arching and rolling his body as he ran, the missiles slid past his sleek form. His visual interface tracked each one as they rocketed around him, flying away and exploding behind him. A few more strides and the cat ran down the opposite wall, the first barrage unable to touch him.

The first launcher empty, the second now took its turn sending

another group of rumbling rockets down the hallway. His blades still in hand, the ninja dug them into the electrified floor for balance as he cart wheeled across the hallway to the opposite wall. The pursuing projectiles zipped past the gaps in his limbs, his legs sweeping past the smokes trails left by their propulsion units.

His boots slammed into the wall panels with another splash of sparks and he continued his dash. A few straggler rockets skittered towards him. With a swipe of his blades, he smacked one aside and brought the edge down on another. The explosions erupted behind him but he only felt the heat on his tail as he escaped their reach. Nearing the end of the hallway, the two missile launchers lowered with a freshly renewed payload. With a skip and a jump, the ninja leapt from the wall, his frame tucked in as he flew over the electrified floor. As the tiger passed under the launchers, his blades flashed a cross-x pattern in the air. The spikes on his boots retracted and he skidded to a halt, safely away from the dangers in the corridor, the missile bays crashing to the floor behind him.

"So you've passed round two." The tiger's nemesis announced over the comm system. "Those blades, those maneuvers, I know them well. You must be from the Hyokage Region. Wouldn't be the first time I've had to stop someone from there."

The ninja found himself in a large central work area. Various workstations with desks and terminals, each in its own contained cubicle, filled the majority of the room, arranged in a systematic way. The tiger's tail swayed side to side. The dim office lights glimmered over the slate black shine of his armored plates as he lowered his blades and reattached them to his thighs. Servos in his mask whizzed about, connecting to the building's internal network and displaying a visual map in front of the feline's eyes. The server room he needed was not much farther and once it had popped up as the objective in his view, the pistons in his legs whirred as he turned and took off.

Two workstations quickly shifted and slid together to cut off his path. Without hesitation, he stepped up on the desk to launch over the cubicle but found his way blocked as the wall shot up and extended to the roof, restricting his route.

"Whoa, hey! Where do you think you're going so fast?" chuckled his

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tormentor. "I can't let you get too far ahead in this race until I'm prepared for you. How about you just run the maze for a bit while I ready everything for your arrival? Who doesn't love a fun maze?"

The groaning and grinding of gears filled the room as the floor rumbled and shook. The cat glanced from side to side as more walls rose out of the floor, desks and stations shifted about, blocking off his exit. He soon found himself surrounded and trapped inside, the map on his display bleeping and blinking before shutting down with no available data.

His ears folded back and from underneath the mask, his muzzle formed a scowl. He turned around and dashed around the only corners available to him. Left, right, right, left, right, another left, every turn just more walls and workstations. A growl picked up in the tiger's throat while he turned corner after corner. He stopped. He had run for quite a while but still found no exit to this maze. The room had somehow expanded and tripled or quadrupled in size to incorporate this amount of distance.

The ninja observed his surroundings. Each wall, each desk, each floor panel, it all looked identical, not a single, unique thing about any of it. He detached one of his vibro-katanas and brought the tip of the purple, shimmering glow to the metallic floor. Etching a mark into the floor, the cat began to run the maze again. Scraping the blade across the floor, the screech vibrated against the walls and a burnt scar trailed behind the tiger tail that flicked back and forth with each step. A left, another left, then a right and once again a left. Turn after turn, the tiger pushed through before coming to a complete stop. Down in front of his boot, a scratch mark ran from behind one desk, past the ninja and under the opposite wall. The maze was alive; he had been forced to run in circles, no exit existed.

Teeth bared, the tiger roared. His ears flicked. Although nothing sounded over the loudspeaker, the cat swore he could hear his opponent's laugh. The feline wrinkled his nose, smelling only dry, over-ventilated office air and a hint of the grease on the gears that had manipulated the surroundings of the room. His tail twitched and he looked up. A growl escaped his muzzle, "Climb," and he leapt at the wall. From his gloves and boots, steel claws and spikes shot out and dug into the wall on contact. The cat scampered up the wall, leaving dents and scratch marks behind

him.

At the top of the wall, the tiger's paws slashed at the hanging air vent. The grate shredded with ease and sent pieces to the floor with a clatter. Reaching inside, the cat dug his claws in and hoisted himself into the ventilation shaft.

The duct was quite large. Not big enough that the feline could stand up, but enough that he could crawl through on all fours and still have room for maneuverability. As he padded through the shaft, the building specs came back online and the map reappeared on his display. His determination strengthened as he clawed his way further, only to be shattered when the crackling loud voice echoed through the vent.

"That's not the way out of the maze, cat!"

The ninja's ear twitched, picking up a faint tinge of anger in his opponent's tone.

"Very well then," the faceless voice continued. "I guess you were bored with that game. Here's one I'm sure you'll like. Red rover, red rover, we call kitty over."

The tiger paused, tail twitching with anticipation of what sick game was next. A revving noise picked up behind him and he glanced back to see inky black cords reaching up through the destroyed vent grate. As they stretched out and wrapped their way toward the ninja, the cat took off. Claws and spikes digging into the sheet metal for more traction and propelling himself forward, the feline ran on all fours through the shaft as the tendril-like wires chased after him.

He looked behind to see them nipping at his heels when an alarm went off on his monitor. A quick turn to the cause of urgency and the ninja saw the trap that lay ahead. Another vent slid open and more wriggling cords dangled in front of his path. With a roar, the tiger dug his boots in and lunged forward, claws and fangs bared. The striped cat swiped his paws at the awaiting wires. He barreled through the mesh of electronic vines, slashing and gnashing, slinking through the weave as it attempted to entangle the feline. A few lone cords slid against the smooth outer plating of the ninja's armour but failed to grasp on. One managed to dodge his blows and curled tightly around his forearm. The cat, caught off guard, jerked back and yowled. He swung round and brought his other

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paw down upon the constrictor. The claws sliced through the dark cord with ease causing the severed ends to fizz and go limp. With a yank, the tiger pulled himself free and clamored back up before more tendrils could lash out at him.

Only a couple meters from his destination, the navigation map popped up a marker directing him to take the next right turn; without hesitation, the ninja curled around the corner. Bounding through the duct, he was caught off guard when a vent opened up underneath him and more cords flew out at his midsection. They swiftly coiled around his waist and legs, and constricted, dragging him to the hole they had appeared from.

Jamming one paw full of claws into the shaft siding, he used the other to swipe at the electronic tendrils that held him tight. The hydraulics in his arm whined and groaned as they strained from the pressure of combating the tugging black vines. The cat's free paw frantically slashed at the wires that wove around him, sending chunks of cords flying about the vent. Scraping his claws up his thigh, he wriggled his leg and managed to free it from its binds.

He tried to pull himself away from the vent opening, but still found resistance. Looking down, he found two or three cords wrapped around his other ankle. His attempted to swipe at them, but they were out of his reach. They tugged at his leg, combating the hydraulics in his shoulder, his arm ready to pop out of its socket. The tiger gritted and pulled back with no results. Another tug from the wires and the cat could feel his claws beginning to slide through the sheet metal vent siding. With a grunt, he raised his other foot and kicked at the bundle of cords around his ankle. The spikes pierced the vines but not enough to sever their bonds. When another batch of black tendrils started creeping out of the opening, the ninja struck again. As his foot came down, he managed to slash one of the cords but not without one of his spikes piercing through his armour. Pain shot up his leg to his spine and the tiger let out a wail. A warning message popped up on his display but he ignored it and continued to kick. Each time a stab of pain until his ankle finally came free.

Heaving his released leg away, he dug the bloody spikes of his other boot into the sheet metal and pushed off, launching himself further down the shaft before anything could snare him back down. His claws slammed

back down to pull his lower body further, his boot coming down for a second push off. He continued running on all threes, slowing as he came to a vent grate. His map display indicated below him was the server room he was searching for but he hesitated, not wanting another assault of inky black tendrils to be lying in wait. He crept closer, fangs and claws bared. With a slash, the grate fell to pieces but no surprises popped out from the new gaping hole.

The tiger grabbed the edge of the vent and swung his feline frame out of the shaft. From wall to wall, large computer towers filled the room. Blinking lights and humming CPU fans were all that gave any semblance of life within the large room. Seeing no imminent danger, he let himself drop. As his foot touched the ground, his injured ankle buckled under him. In a flash, he detached his katana and stabbed the floor to keep his balance. Falling to one knee, a display of the cat's frame popped up with a large red indicator over his hurt leg. The system began administering adrenaline cocktail mixes into the ninja's bloodstream, numbing the pain and boosting him to move on.

As he struggled to get back up on both feet, a familiar voice surrounded the space around him. "Tired already? But it's only been a few games. Honestly, you Hyokage ninjas used to be a lot tougher. I remember the last one that made it here, he was so determined—"

The chemicals working overtime, the ninja began to hobble about, his servos augmenting the pressure in his hydraulics to ease the strain on his wounded ankle. Pushing the voice out of his head, he scanned the servers before him. The processor in his head pinged the network in search of the data packet he was sent to find. Once it had a hit, the trace program kicked in, running along the network's lines and visualizing a path on the tiger's display. A bright orange blip raced through the walls and under the floor before zipping up and into one of the machines in an adjacent row. It blinked and cheered upon finding its destination. With the drugs taking full effect, his leg no longer felt the pain and the cat wasted no time in dashing around the corner. He reached the workstation and lifted one of his paws to the server, his middle digit transforming into a matching receiver to the machine's port. As he positioned his finger, a buzzer sounded and the server workstations sunk into the floor.

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"I told you we're not done yet, cat!" The voice cackled with laughter. "I have so many more games I want to play with you. Just because you found the right server room doesn't mean this game of hide and seek is over."

The tiger's ears fell back as he watched the orange blip descend under the floor and begin to move about beneath him. Worse, the signal split into half a dozen pieces, all dancing about as though the game had now become some weird three card Monte, each server being shuffled around. The tiger's display system was unable to determine which of the blips were being spoofed and which was the true version. A roar of rage echoed through the room as the tiger's tail twitched. When one of the blips slid closer to the feline's location, his blades went to work and slashed a large hole in the floor panels.

"Duck."

Up from the gap popped a turret. The tiger's eyes went wide; his reaction delayed as the barrel glowed brightly. He brought his sword down on the gun, a sliver too late as it fired a beam of energy. Both the turret's muzzle and the ninja's armored side sizzled. Yellow warning lights flashed on his display. The shot hadn't penetrated his armour but a blast that close had crippled it. Heart rate monitor bleeping, his breathing heavy, the tiger grimaced and looked at the other orange blips still moving about the room. Another one passing behind him, the cat hissed and slashed at the floor again.

"Duck."

Ready this time, as the next turret popped up, the ninja's blade was already upon it, slicing through it before it could power up. The metal barrel hit the ground with a loud clunk as the tiger took off running, cutting open more holes wherever a blip occurred.

"Duck, duck, duck."

Each opening in the floor was followed up with a one-two slice of the revealed turret, leaving a trail of disabled auto-guns in his wake. He neared the final blip and dug his blades deep into the panels, curving the cut into a circle. As the panel fell away, a blast of energy shot out from the hole, striking the tiger in the chest. Shards of his armour flew off as the cat rocketed backwards, tumbling along the floor until he skidded to

a halt. Instead of a turret, another white tiger arose from the gap and stepped out into the room.

The new feline wore a simple security uniform of black slacks and button-up grey t-shirt. A utility belt hugged his waist with various tools and gadgets attached it. On top of his head sat visor-headset combo: an ear piece and mic for communicating commands, and a display for read outs and other information covered his eyes. In his paws he held the stock of a darkened chrome pulse rifle, barrel still hot from the shot just fired.

"Goose." The security tiger grinned and squeezed the trigger.

A three shot burst flashed from the rifle and the ninja was forced to roll along the floor to avoid them. His display was still lit up from the last shot. Being hit at near point blank range twice, the tiger's chest armour had taken more than a beating. A few bruised stripes could be seen through the large gashes and cracks that now decorated his chest and side.

The guard continued to fire, laying down a wave of shots and keeping the other tiger pinned. Unable to get up, the ninja rolled over to one of the holes in the floor and dived in.

"Hiding already?" The guard called out. "You haven't found what you're looking for yet, you don't get to hide. But if it's a game of Whack-a-Cat you want, I'm happy to help!"

Below the floor lay a criss cross of metallic grey tunnels. Rails lined the floors, allowing for shifting and transportation of any object quickly and methodically. Other than the orange glow of the fixtures that adorned the walls, the only light came through from the torn holes in the ceiling overhead. The ninja crept along the pathways, circling the holes above.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are." The other tiger taunted, his footsteps echoing below.

The ninja glanced up and saw the guard's back though an opening. As the security tiger's head scanned the room, the cat from below launched up to strike. With a large leap, he shot out of the floor. The guard turned mouth agape, and unable to react. Vibro-katana trailing behind him, the ninja brought the blade up, sliding a clean slice through the guard's midsection. The security tiger cried out as the sword passed through him and the ninja completed his leap, landing safely on the other side.

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The wail of the guard turned into laughter. The tiger swordsman looked up to notice another five guards, all identical, circled around him. He glanced back to see the previously sliced guard's hologram fizzle with static as it and the other guards all turned their guns to point at the ninja. The cybernetic tiger cursed under his breath and dashed down the nearest hole, as energy blasts chased after him.

"You didn't think it was going to be that easy did you? I've got some tricks of my own, cat."

The ninja growled from beneath and stalked the tunnels, tail lashing away as he looked upwards trying to solve the new puzzle of which figure was real. Running by one, two, three of them, he continued to circle. Each one managed to fake signs of being the real thing, giving off heat signatures and heart beats. He passed under the shadow of fourth one and stopped when he reached the fifth one. He looked up at the security tiger, the guard's head scanning the room and waiting. The ninja's whiskers twitched as he observed his opponents. Each one looked just like the others but something was different about one of them.

The tiger swiveled and dashed back to the fourth figure. The only figure with a shadow, the ninja launched an attack on him. As the cat flew upwards, the guard only had time for a wide-eye look. Vibro-katana in paw, the ninja brought the weapon down on the other tiger. The guard stumbled, holding his rifle up to block as he fell backwards. With ease, the blade sliced through the gun but only grazed its owner, slicing a small gash in his side. The guard tumbled to the ground, the pieces of his weapon clattering to the floor beside him. The ninja stepped on the tiger's chest and brought both katanas to the guard's throat.

"Enough games, Cyrus!" He roared behind his mask.

"Heh, so it is you, Percy." The guard wheezed. "I had a feeling it was you. I couldn't tell behind that mask but I hoped it was. You never did like playing games."

"Everything was a game to you! That's all you ever wanted to do was play games."

"Well sorry I wasn't father's favourite." Cyrus rolled his head to the side and spit. "If it wasn't honoring tradition, then it didn't have a time or place in our home."

Percy sneered. "You could never take anything seriously. Always playing with your toys, never practicing your lessons. What did you think father was going to do with one who wouldn't listen?"

"Shamed for being interested in things outside our own culture. While you were learning old, dusty methods of our boring ancestors, I was busy inventing new things, carving a new future! Leaving was a godsend; I found people who appreciated my talents and welcomed my ideas."

"So then just give me what I came for so I can get out of your fur!"

"Why? Just because you're my brother? I have a job to do here and I'm not going to let you or father ruin it or anything else for me. If you want what you came for, you're going to have to beat me at my own game." Cyrus bared his fangs. His paw shot up his side, sliding out a hand held device from his belt and aiming it at the tiger above him. "So how 'bout some freeze tag?" he hissed and fired.

A vibrant blue bolt shot out and struck the ninja in the shoulder. The cybernetic tiger stepped back in recoil as crystals began to form and spread from the point of impact. The guard took advantage of the shock and rolled to the side to get away. The ninja turned to swing at his escaping prey but found his arm unresponsive and stuck frozen in position.

"What game is this now?" roared Percy as he struggled to move his limb. "Why do you continue to toy with me, brother?"

"It's something I developed specifically for people like you with your cybernetics." Cyrus stood back up, removing a black baton from his belt. "Your armour is too thick to penetrate. No, the best way to shut you down is from the inside." The guard flicked the baton and its end began to crackle and spark with electricity.

Percy's tail lashed behind him as his ears shot back. "What do you mean from inside?" The ninja jumped and swung at the guard. Off balance from his frozen shoulder, the cybernetic tiger's strike went wide and the guard hopped back out of the way with ease.

Cyrus held up his paw and shook the device. "This tool generates a highly concentrated blast of subzero temperatures that freezes anything on contact. For your cybernetics, they'll seize up and immobilize you as you've already found out. Without your pistons and hydraulics to help amplify your movements, you're dead in the water. It should also weaken

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some of that armour too. Of course, eventually your system will defrost itself but not for a few hours, plenty of enough time to bring you down."

"This will not stop me!"

The ninja slashed at the guard with his mobile arm, his fervor rising with his rage. Cyrus stayed cool, his tail twitching while he ducked and dodged around the strikes. When the cybernetic tiger lunged forward to pierce his brother, the guard was ready. Cyrus sidestepped the ninja's attack and brought his stun baton down on Percy's hand. With a squeeze of the handle, the guard sent thousands of volts shooting up the cybernetic arm. Percy yowled in pain and dropped his katana; his display skittered between flashes of static from the surge of electricity. Gritting his teeth, the ninja pushed through and roundhouse kicked the guard's chin.

The blow sent Cyrus rolling away, laughing as he went, his headset flying off and skipping along the floor. "You're just like the last one they sent in here." He grinned as he rubbed his jaw, spitting some blood onto the ground. "You both kick hard! But you both get sloppy with rage."

Percy's stripes stood on end. His tail crooked upright and his ears folded back. He panted in a combination of exhaustion and anger. As the guard stood back up, the ninja leaped and twisted. His frozen arm locked and raised, blade still extended in attack, he spun around, swinging his weapon at his brother. The guard brought his baton up to deflect the blow but the ninja extended his steel claws on his free hand, continuing the momentum and swiping at his target. Cyrus ducked under the claws, their sharp ends nicking his ear. Before Percy could recover, Cyrus stabbed his stun baton into the small opening in the ninja's armour and let out another few thousand volts into the tiger's side.

Percy cried out, dropping to one knee. The guard took advantage of the situation and shot a blast of freeze at the tiger's bent leg, solidifying it in place.

"You'd think with all the training and meditation father ran us through, you'd be more in control of yourself." Cyrus chuckled, rising above his brother. He touched his cut ear and winced. "Honestly, I'm disappointed. Why doesn't father just show himself instead of sending his pathetic excuses for students? Or do I have to kill you like the last one to send another message?" He turned and started walking towards his dropped

visor. "Sit tight for a second."

Percy panted, struggling to get up. "Father didn't want me to come. He'd rather take care of you himself."

"What?" Cyrus turned. "Then why are you here? Disobeying father's rules, tsk tsk, Percy."

Percy's head sunk low. "I don't have to listen to father's words anymore."

"Oh ho! What's this? Have you run from home now too? Did you get sick of the old man as well? And now you're here trying to get the same piece of data before they can."

"Did you not see who they sent last time?"

"The fool had both his legs frozen and then took a blast to the face. No easy way of identification. I disposed of him in the incinerator. Why?"

Percy gritted his teeth. "The reason that I'm not *tether-ed* to his rule," cables shot out from his hips, flying past Cyrus' sides and digging into the walls. The tether pulled on the tiger ninja, jettisoning him forward towards the guard, "is because you killed father!"

Cyrus's eyes went wide and he opened his muzzle to speak but Percy's frozen knee connected with his chest and jaw, bowling him over as the ninja continued to fly past. The cybernetic tiger raised his other leg as the spikes protruded from the bottom of his feet. His boots hit the wall and dug in while Cyrus lay doubled over with the wind knocked out of him. Percy retracted his cable so he could fire them off again, this time at the roof. Launching off the wall, the ninja locked in and swung towards the collapsed guard. Detaching from the ceiling, he twisted his body, spinning his frozen arm in an arc. He spiraled towards Cyrus, slicing the prone tiger's stomach and landing beside him.

Cyrus tried to cry out but could only gasp for air and cough out blood. Steam poured out from Percy's shoulder and knee. His armour grew red with heat and the ninja groaned. His limbs whined and stretched as he stood back up.

"Bu—but how?" Cyrus sputtered, hugging his sides.

Percy bent down and brought two fingers to his brother's neck. Needles extended from the tips and injected a serum into Cyrus' bloodstream. He then reached over to the guard's belt and detached a

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med kit. Opening it, he took out a silver vial with an applicator and began administering a cloudy gel to the gash in his brother's belly.

"Reversing the effects of the freezing was just a matter of overheating my system to speed up the defrosting. I couldn't raise my temperature that high, that quickly, without taking serious damage. So I had to let the levels rise gradually and endure."

Out of the corner of his eye, Percy saw Cyrus reach out for his stun baton beside him. The guard's arm shuffled over but Cyrus growled when his arm stopped moving any further.

"I injected you with a combination of antibodies and sedatives to help the healing process." Percy continued as he finished cleaning the wound and placed a bandage on his brother's ear. "In addition to that, I also introduced a mild paralyzing agent. You'll just have to lie here and feel better until it wears off."

"It doesn't matter," snarled Cyrus. "The data you came for is gone; I've rerouted it to a different server and hidden its signal so you won't ever find it. I may not have defeated you, but you won't get what you came for. I still win."

"Is that so?" The ninja's tail twitched. "That does sound like the sore loser you are, but even you would continue to deceive and use trickery." Percy stood up and walked over to his brother's discarded headset. "Others may believe that farce. Knowing you, you'd send me on a wild goose chase searching for something that you were holding onto all along with a sly grin. Hanging it right in front of my face."

The ninja extended his port finger and plugged into the headset. His internal computers went to work, quickly breaking the encryption and downloading the data encoded on the device.

Cyrus strained and struggled, biting his lip. "Fine." Defeated, he sighed and slumped. "You win, brother. You have your precious data file. After father broke in last time, I traced his search routine to find what he was looking for. Knowing someone would be back for it I put a dummy in place and kept the real one on my person."

"Always setting traps. You never did trust others well."

"Why trust others when you know you'll do a better job yourself?"

"Because then you wouldn't have to be alone."

"Are you inviting me back home?"

Percy paused and threw the headset away. "I think father would have given you another chance, but I believe you belong here. We have what we need, you won't be bothered anymore." The ninja walked over and picked up his other katana, attaching both of them to his hips again.

"Percy, wait!" Cyrus called out. "Was... Was it really father I killed?"

Percy turned and sighed. Reaching under his jaw he pulled his mask up so he could stare into his brother's eyes. "He wouldn't let anyone else go."

"But why?" Cyrus' eyes went soft. "Surely he could have sent anyone to retrieve a simple data packet."

"Do you know what this file contains?"

"Well, yes, I looked into it after the last—after father broke in. It's a patient zero medical file on a rare disease that the company had researched. That still doesn't explain why he wanted it. Is the group now being contracted by competing companies to steal our data?"

"Mother has grown sick. Father knew the only chance at a cure would be coming here. He wanted to see his son one last time. I'm sure he was proud of what you've become."

"Mother!" Cyrus' ears fell flat, his voice weak and cracked. "Is she ok? Percy, what's wrong with mother? Answer me brother!"

Percy pulled his mask down and left the room, his brother calling out behind him with more questions. Using data download from Cyrus' headset; the navigation system calculated an escape route and displayed directional markers to follow. Rounding a few corners and racing through a hallway, the tiger found himself at window. Pulling out his katanas, he carved a large opening. As the night air swept inside, the ninja leaped out the window.



FAST FOOD FIGHT

BY RYAN HICKEY

Chapter 1

With the flashing lights and the thudding music assaulting Merik's senses, the tall equine found himself unobtrusively watching the dimly lit, smoke filled nightclub as the filters and optical enhancement programs of his military grade cyber-eyes made the room and everyone in it as clear as if they were standing still in a well-lit room. The tall, muscled equine's large nostrils flared as the pungent odor of some mind numbing recreational drugs wafted to him from some unseen part of the place. He let his unobtrusive gaze slide over the crowd, taking note of the myriad species either undulating on the dance floor, or clumped in small groups in secluded corners. More than a decade and a half ago, a custom tactical computer and interface had been surgically implanted in the horse's brain when he had first volunteered for the government's new cybernetic soldier program for their special operations teams. Now, it's heads-up overlay on his vision highlighted the faces and other distinguishing characteristics of the multitude of critters assigning threat values to each as well as showing the standby status of Merik's mil-spec enhanced reflexes and adrenal speed booster as well as his internal cyber-comlinks connection to his three other team members.

As he watched, a lean fennec fox made his way through the gyrating, undulating crowd on the club's dance floor, wearing only some tight black leather pants that clung to the curves of his body leaving nothing to the imagination, while the sand-colored fur on his upper body sparkled from the 'Club dust' liberally applied to his chest and arms. The flashing multi-colored lights hanging from the ceiling girders flashed off of the half dozen rings in each large ear as well as the three data jacks, one to the vulpine's right, and two to the left towards the base of his skull.

Merik sensed more than anything, his only physical reaction the slow rotation of his nicked right ear, faint white scars standing out from the dark

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fur in the clubs flashing lights as the twenty something fox stepped up to the bar, waving for the hulking orange and black striped tiger bartender. After that, he turned to face the tall, lean equine letting his eyes travel up Merik's broad shouldered and toned body, whose short ebony fur was groomed to a high gloss, and was nearly as dark as the black suit he wore. The look in the chiphead's eyes was one of combined commerce and lust. Taking a deep breath, inhaling the stallion's clean, scrubbed musk mixed with the inevitable but faint tang of metal hinting at hidden cyber ware, the fox opened his mouth but was cut off before he even had a chance to get a single word out.

"Not interested slot head, go peddle your fake memories some place else." Merik said, never having understood why Sim-Sence, Simulated Sensory Experience, was so popular despite the underground dealer's sales pitches. *'Want to know what it's like to live in another person's fur? Tired of never getting the girl or guy? Dissatisfied with your life? Then why not take a ride in the memories and experiences of some one else.'*

The engineers and eggheads had all kinds of ways to explain how it worked, but it simply came down to one person selling neural imprints of their memories so someone else could slot the chip and take a ride. Merik had heard rumors of couples engaged in sex selling the linked experiences, or even once about what one of his Net Rider contacts had called the spiritual descendants of a 'snuff film'. He'd had to look that up, but once he had it didn't surprise him. Those years in the Directorate's Covert Operations teams had shown him the darker side of civilization, and he had met more than a few who had lead themselves over to it, and had gone what was still called to this day 'Going Feral' by the head boys and media. The appeal to some furs was in experiencing the pure base emotions without acutely succumbing to it themselves could be strong.

Merik's gaze that was still scanning the club, drifting over a small clump of young, barrel-chested, and brown furred bears in one of the secluded alcoves, with both males and females bearing the distinct expressions on their muzzles of Sim-Sence. His attention then settled on a young male dressed in brightly colored shorts and a Hawaiian shirt who was slowly walking around in circles trying to grab hold of and stroke a non-existent tail, one that the slotted neural chip was telling him he had.

To be honest, it truly did live up to all the hype of what it said it delivered, but they also tried to down play the dangers, the ones that everyone knew about, just like they knew about the dangers in smoking. But instead of lung cancer, emphysema, and a host of other physical side effects a smoker has to deal with, a Sim-Sence user runs the risk of sensory or personality 'Aphasia', where the users own memories and personality began to be changed, and in some of the more extreme cases totally subsumed by those of the different, rented memories. And... just like with drugs since time immemorial the more one used Sim-Sence, the more often, or more intense the memories one would need to use.

"I got the best you ever slotted, chummer. You ever go for a ride flying like a raven, or... I even got the memories of a porn star." The slender fox gave a huge grin, winking as he continued the sales pitch, unaware that Merik had already tuned him out. "I even have some special, custom stuff, top of the line like you never experienced before."

Merik activated his internal commlink's sub vocal mic, and with a roll of his eyes, he hoped his apparent lack of interest would convince the glitter spangled fox to move on and peddle his wares to someone else.

"Can I get a Sit-Rep from everyone, please?" Merik murmured the frustration with the job, and the annoyance at the still prattling fox still noticeable despite his best efforts.

"Other than the fact that this Badger is drunk, slobbering and pawing at me everything seems to be fine.", the immediate reply in Merik's ear as the HUD's indicating the message came from the slim, voluptuous white vixen off in one of the corner booths with the client.

The black horse replied, "You know we need someone close to the client, someone that won't draw unwanted attention."

"Yes... but just because I'm a former model doesn't mean I want to always be the one playing arm candy. Especially if it means getting groped by this guy! I have a Masters in Mechanical engineering from Oxford for God's sake."

The vixen's warm, contralto voice was capable of turning most men's and not a few women's heads sounded exasperated now from a topic she had clearly complained about before, but then softened slightly as she went on, "But I guess it's not really that hard to fend off this guy's

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drunken advances. Mother always told me there are only ten counters any lady needs to deal with any man, and so far numbers one, three, and four seem to be doing the job just fine."

"One, Three and four...what happened to number two?" Merik asked, the faint hint of humor crept into his otherwise business-like tone.

"Please darling, this badger is far too drunk to make a move that would need number two. And besides... we don't really have a choice do we? It's not like your big hulking mass would go unnoticed Merik, and An Shih would be an even worse idea... Mr. Cold Statue out there. I mean what self-respecting fox would want the job of standing out in the Seattle Rain all night, when a nice warm club, filled with a not too few number of pleasant... current company excluded of course... bodies to cavort and maybe even play with. I have never met such an unfox-like fox in my life."

"Not all of us are made from the same stone, my spiritual sister Dominique; my vows simply require me to remain celibate as a way to keep my chi from becoming polluted. And the monks taught that we should never waste anything. Time... breath... thought... or even movement. I am happy to do my part, and act the statue as you call it. Besides... does that not leave even more for you, temptress?"

The icon in Merik's HUD flashed confirmed that the speaker was the third member of his team, an older gray fox who Merik could imagine in his mind's eye still standing outside under a small awning across the street from the clubs entrance, dressed in his simple rust and gray colored robes, matching the small male's fur, not having moved even an inch in the four hours the client had been in the club, and willing to stand there another eight hours, if that is what was needed.

Once, Merik had asked An Shih how he was able to keep warm in just his fur, standing out in the freezing rain and snow that the Northwest sometimes dumps on its denizens, only to get back the cryptic reply of, "*Hot... Cold... it is of no matter to one whose mind is clear of distractions, and is truly attuned to his Chi, and the flow of Chi around him.*"

The stallion had just shaken his head, and decided never to ask such a silly question again... there were enough things in his life to make his head heart to not be needing to go out and find more if he could avoid it.

"I could have always played the part of the sexy arm candy," came the

reply of the fourth and final member of the team.

"No, you couldn't Chimera." Both Merik and Dominique groaned in unison over the com-link.

"Why not?" Chimera's clearly young, and high-pitched feminine voice replied in a pout, "You don't think he'd like a sleek, sexy ferret school girl over a busty and *clearly* getting older fox?"

Merik lowered his long face into his hands, closing his eyes, and muted his internal mic as he ground his teeth together, then switched the link over to a private channel with his old friend, "Listen Chimera... Chuck, you're the best net slicer I know, and the things you can do on cyber networks is truly amazing, but you and I both know why that wouldn't work. First, we both know you're not really a female, or a ferret... much less a schoolgirl ferret. And second, you never leave that basement cave of yours, especially during the winter months when you spend most of your time with your body hibernating and your mind roaming the net."

Merik opened his eyes and let them shift to the small fennec fox still standing next to him, who had clearly given up on the large horse, and had turned to the elegant tigress on the other side of him.

"The club has a cyber-net VR section; it's just like the physical club, only better. He could have jacked in and I could have kept him... occupied," came the deep, rumbling reply over the same private channel. "He could have spent time with the *Real* me, with who and what I should have been."

The sense of long suffering pain and sadness colored those words made Merik sigh, "I know buddy, and to be honest... if your client didn't have distaste for going out of body into the Cyber-nets, I would have considered it, but you know badgers... there's just something about them that makes some people uncomfortable."

He had real sympathy for his oldest friend, remembering the years of pain, and struggle the massive brown bear had gone through before he truly being reconciled with who he was, and who he felt he should have been. It had been one of the truly good things about the creation of the cyber-nets and the cyber personas it allowed people to make. You could be anyone or anything in the nets... and some people like Chuck...

'No... Chimera.' Merik thought to himself, reminding himself of his friend's new name. Many had found a way to express, and live life

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in ways that felt more real than their own fur, though they still faced many challenges from the *Analog World* as most Net-runners called the unplugged, real world.

"Fine, I guess your right..." came back the high pitched girl's voice, "And, thanks Merik, I..."

"Sorry to interrupt your conversation my friends... but I do believe what we have been waiting for has arrived." An Shih cut in with an even tone. "Three Rottweilers with spiked collars, piercings, and jackets with the Hell Hounds logo emblazoned on their backs just pushed past the bouncer, and have entered the club. There are a fourth, and fifth out here on the street, and they seem to be looking at the parked cars in the valet area. Also, my friends, by the way they are moving they are clearly enhanced, these two ruffians cannot stand still for more than a second, and the lights from the club are reflecting off of same rather obvious cyber ware... and at least one of them has looks to have a full conversion left arm complete with hydraulics."

"Alright everyone stay frosty. These chums may be cybered punks, but we all read the intel on the Hell Hounds. They have a reputation for violence and cunning, both very dangerous on their own, but when combined, even more so." Merik said as he turned away from the bar and adjusted his cyber-eyes' scanning function to try and pinpoint the small pack of gangers that had just entered the club, as well as trying to pinpoint any other members of the gang that might have already been in the place and gone unnoticed till now. The reports on the kidnappings of the other three members of the client's research and development team had indicated that the gang had used a pincer strike on two of the three, though those two had not been in such a crowded place with as limited entrance and exit options as this particular nightclub. That had been why Merik had decided to use this place for the job, when the client's employer had contacted him and his team to set up this little ambush, in hopes to take out, or at least capture members of the gang and try and figure out who was behind the abductions.

While his eyes and mind kept scanning the club and crowd, he let a part of himself drift back to the copious amount of files he and his team had reviewed prior to setting tonight up. Onyx Corporation, the parent

company of Flash Foods Incorporated had insisted that they had no idea who was behind the kidnappings, but it was clear that the gang was just the tool, and not the mastermind. If it had been the gang, they would have asked for ransom by now. Also... it would make no sense for a gang of cyber-punks to kidnap the a team of fast food researchers, even though Chimera kept insisting that Flash Burgers secret sauce was worth it all on its own... and despite that fact that everyone knew it was just salad dressing and capers. Neither the Corp, nor tonight's client had been willing to tell him or his people anything about what they had been working on, other than that it was 'just new food ideas' and while patents and the like can be worth millions, Merik could not think of ever hearing of any of the fast food corps ever going to these lengths. Though with Onyx Corp as the parent company, and Onyx being one of the top weapons manufactures in the North American territories, he could think of a lot of reasons why someone would want to kidnap an Onyx R&D team. But in the end, the why was less of an issue than the who, so Merik had insisted that the team treat this as if one of Onyx's other Mega-Corp rivals like Sundance Bio, or Wolverine Weapons Systems was behind this that way they could plan for the worst.

An Shih had been the hardest to bring around to even taking the job and had voiced his opinion on the matter clearly.

"This... so called food that they force on the masses is nothing of the sort. It is vat grown, test tube formed, and chemically synthesized. It is nothing more than slow acting poison that is killing all those that eat it." The grey fox had said at the time, standard with crossed his arms as three of the team members sat around the small, secluded table in the back of the small mom and pop noodle shop in So Do districted of Seattle, while the fourth member was represented by a small hologram projected out of Merik's smart phone, as usual.

The small glowing figure of the curvy teenage ferret, dressed in a school girl's mini skirt, white shift, and tight-fitting sweater pouted up at the stoic fox, "What are you talking about, Flash Burger's triple bacon and sausage jalapeno burger with special sauce is like the closest thing to nirvana there is."

"My child... Nirvana is the profound peace that comes with the

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balancing of one's mind and body, the imperturbable stillness of one's soul, and the deepest still pool of water at one's center. It is not some grease filled, fat-infused monstrosity, packed with chemicals meant to give one an artificial high..." The middle aged gray fox had said, with a flare of his nostrils and his ears twitching forward, the equivalent of a raging outburst on the otherwise stoic fox.

"Regardless, you two... we are being hired to find out who's kidnapping the members of Flash Food Inc's lead R&D team, and not endorse, or even eat their food." Merik had cut in before the two could launch into one of their legendary arguments, which often could take hours to wind down.

"I agree with Merik here. While I would never eat at one of their establishments as I prefer my food just a little less artificial, like the food at Chicken Blaster... a job is a job, and they're offering a good payday on this... assuming we find out who's involved, and where the missing researchers have gone." Dominique had added, having worn those black leather pants, a red t-shirt, and black leather jacket that accentuated her curves nicely, while rolling a brand new remote control cyber link between her fingers, one that just happened to have had the receiver installed in her newest set of drones. A smile had spread across the vixen's muzzle as she'd glanced back and forth between the stoic fox and the holographic ferret, the lenses in her cyber eyes clearly shifting as she focused from one to the other. The one-time model-turned-racer-turned-drone-runner had spent nearly all her savings getting the drone control rig and cyber-ware installed, she hadn't had the money to have the cosmetic lens covers added, like the military grade ones Merik currently had slotted into his own head.

"Any chance we can get a lifetime supply of Flash burgers added to the bill, boss?" the petite ferret asked, Chimera's hologram turning to look up at the tall muscled hours demurely.

"I'll see what I can do Chi, but just think of what all that free food could do to your girlish figure." The horse remembered joking at the time, before moving on, "So let's start going over the intel, and see if we can't come up with some kind of plan here. I was thinking we might want to use some kind of bait, get someone to play the part of one of the still secure researchers and see who..."

Merik's thoughts came back to the present as his gaze settled on the trio of Rottweilers moving through the packed club, the group standing out from the other smaller clumps two or three dancers and club goers stumbling around the dance floor and its periphery. Pushing off the bar, Merik began to make his way through the crowd towards a point where his path, and the small pack's progress would intersect, short of the booth with Dominique and their old friend Stanley, a onetime Merc like them who had semi-retired and was willing to play bait for them from time to time when it was needed. While the old badger's white strips were turning gray along the sides of his face, and the faded scars along his rounded muzzle attested to his age, he'd cut his teeth serving in the Europe Directorate's shock troop corps during the Schwarzwald dust up nearly thirty years before. Even though he was no longer as fast or as tough as he had been in his prime, he was still more than capable of getting himself out of the line of fire while the team dealt with whatever the issue of the day would end up being.

"Okay. An Shih take out the ones outside, quietly as you can." Stated Merik.

"I will endeavor to be as silent as a shadow my friend, but I can not speak for my prey." replied the gray fox. "They do appear to be armed... and one may be so foolish as to try and use their weapon on me before I can convince him it is a far better thing to quietly meditate on the nature of his life choices."

"Understood. But you've have never failed to make your point in a timely manner before, so I won't worry about it." Merik replied as he changed his vector so as to come in behind the three canine gangers. "Dominique, its time. Take our inebriated friend out the back way. Once the two of you are out of sight, give the old timer my thanks, and send him on his way... also let him know his money should already be deposited. Once he's out of the way, get into position to be my back up."

"Got that. Tactical drone is on standby on a nearby rooftop, and once I am in position I'll bring it in for some over watch. Though, these punks really shouldn't be too much trouble for you... that is, of course, unless you're getting old. If so... I'm more than happy to save the damsel in distress." The slim arctic fox replied playfully.

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Merik smiled as he saw the three targets begin to push through the crowded nightclub forcefully when they spotted their intended target getting up from the back booth and making his way towards a rear exit, with a clearly drunk as well as clearly *expensive* female companion. He rolled his eyes at the lack of professionalism... or experience... or both. This demonstrated, and hoped that the angry curses and occasional pushbacks they were getting did not result in the clubs own security, a pair of very formidable Polar Bears, from getting involved, tossing the gang-bangers out on their ass' and screwing up all the night's hard work.

"I think they've noticed you're leaving Dominique. You might want to speed up your exit... but don't look like your trying to speed up."

"And exactly how am I supposed to do that, Oh great leader?" asked the fox, exasperation causing her slight English accent to show through her normal and professionally neutral tone.

"I don't know..." The equine replied, "Take longer strides. Walk... casual." a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he moved in behind the small pack, and shadowed them to the exit at the rear of the club.

When the last of the three rottweilers pushed their way through the rear exit, Merik reached inside his jacket with his right hand, and extracted an eight inch matte black plastic and ceramic tube. Holding it down along his leg to make it as inconspicuous as possible, until he used his right thumb to press the charging button, and his ears twitched at the familiar, low buzz as the stun baton came to life.

"Go, no Go?"

"Net is Go, big man." Came the high pitched voice of the female ferret.

"They contemplate the meaning of the universe, my friend." replied An Shih, letting a slight hint of satisfaction creep into his voice at a job well done... and at knowing that his non-uniform reply would tug on his old friend's tail just a little.

"The old pervert is off on his way, and Drone One is in position and a go. We're just waiting on you, sweet pea." Dominique said, this time her voice having been changed into the monotone her interface always used once she was logged in and running one or more of her drones.

With that, Merik pushed open the door as quietly as possible, and

slipped into the dark trash strewn ally. The three gang members stood in the alley as they argued with each other, seemingly unaware that they had just been joined by the large equine.

"How the hell should I know where they went Jaxx, you're the one with the security tracking software slotted. YOU said that you'd be able to track him with any of the cameras hooked to the net." growled the largest of the three, his dark fur contrasted by brightly colored tattoos of various gang symbols proclaiming not only his rank in the Hell Hounds, but also a representation of his more outstanding actions for the gang. The burly dog wore the traditional gang jacket, their name and symbol emblazoned on the back, as well as the spiked collar, and was gesturing around the alley with a large caliber handgun. Merik was able to ID it clearly as one of Remington's newer models, one using a powerful .50 caliber ammo, and marked the ganger as his first target.

"I told ya I had him, and that bimbo fox locked in 'til they stepped out the door. Now all I got's is us. I'm scanning! They'll show, Slag... I promise." the smallest of the three gang members replied, eyes closed in concentration, and his tail tucked between his legs a clear sign of not only submission, but of mounting fear despite his confident words. While this young man was by far smallest of his companions, he was still an overall large, muscled individual, with his own impressive array of tattoos. His hands were empty though, holding them out before his closed eyes as he moved to manipulate images only he could see.

"If they went towards the street, the others'll have them. I say we drop this techno crap and track them the good ol' fashioned way... they can't get too far Slag." Offered the third and final gang member. He was glaring at the back of the smaller dog's head in obvious derision, his handpaws clenching and unclenching in a clear sign of agitation. This ganger showed the telltales An Shih had noted of heavy cyber modifications, his fidgeting and restless movements a clear indication that the mutt had gotten some kind of reflex or synaptic speed enhancements, but to Merik's trained eye, it was one of the cheaper versions, as the higher end, and updated versions went to great lengths to keep those side-effects to a minimum, if not eliminated entirely. The stallion decided that despite the greater amount of enhancements, number Three would have to be his second

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target. Slag, the leader, was clearly the most aware and most experienced of the three, but that while he could rely on just incapacitating the gang leader, the cybered Rottweiler would need to be taken out completely and as fast as possible, with no chance at recover. As for the last gang member, Jaxx, he would just have to trust to Chimera to keep the chip-head locked down long enough that he could deal with his two 'friends'.

The tall mercenary took all this in, identified his targets and the greatest threats all in less time than it took for one of the Hell Hounds to blink, and just as the sound of the club's back door tapping shut reached the three cyber-bangers, Merik struck.

His right hand flashed out, still holding the stun button, and jabbed it into the side of the leader's neck, and the air was filled with the crackling sound and ozone stink of a powerful electrical discharge. The heavily built Rottweiler's eyes went wide, a split second of surprise and recognition before every nerve in his body was temporarily overloaded. While the Hell Hound leader's body was still crumpling to the dingy alley's floor like a sack of potatoes, Merik had already released his hold on the stun baton. While the weapon was easy to use, and almost universally effective, it also required a few seconds between discharges in order to build up the needed power to bring down a full grown man, and override any nerve surge protection cyber ware the gangers may have had installed... especially one as large and well built as his second target.

The so-far unnamed, but heavily augmented Hell Hound turned to face the unexpected attacker, flexing his fingers in a subtle pattern that caused his retractable cyber-claws to snap out, and the faint light in the alley glinted off of the razor sharp, four inch blades. As he opened his mouth to speak the ganger's right paw hand slashed out at the unknown assailant. "You a..."

The ganger was never able to finish his sentence, for as he turned and lashed out with his cyber weapons, telegraphing his move, Merik took one step to the right, spinning out of the way of the deadly cyber-blades. His own left hand lashed out in response with a ridged knife-hand blow to the other's throat. The back of the Merik's brain quietly and dispassionately noted the sound of the Rottweiler's larynx being crushed under the blow, and he turned to face the third, final gang member.

However, his right roundhouse stopped short, just in time when he noticed that the man had not even moved or reacted to the attack on his friends at all, not even the choking, wheezing sound of the second male dog dying.

"Chimera, I take you have this one?" Merik asked as he walked over to the still twitching gang leader, picked up his stun baton, and hit the off switch, leaning down to pick up the massive pistol laying next to little pack's leader's unconscious form.

"You wound me, sir. Of course I have him. I followed his tap into the local surveillance networks, and right into his headjack. His hardware's not bad, tell the truth, but software? Total crap."

"I don't think it hurt that you're the one that sold the tracking software chip to the poor punk, did it?" replied Merik, sliding the baton back into his jacket, and began dumping the rounds out of the confiscated pistol's cylinder. Then he took hold of that part in his other hand, and with a grunt, snapped it off the weapon, dropping the now useless pieces to the alley floor.

A hovering drone, about three feet long and a foot wide, with whisper-quiet directional thrusters, and a hard point mounted autocannon loaded with both tranq rounds, and high velocity 10mm caseless ammunition dropped into the alley, hovering a few feet above the fallen gang leader's body. "Merik... you didn't need to do that. That particular pistol goes for a hefty price on the street. If you didn't want it, I would have taken it." Dominique's pilot voice stated over the team's com-line.

"We are getting paid for this job, and agreed no back-end on this one. So if we can't use it to finish the job... we toss it. Besides... this punk didn't take very good care of it, if he'd gotten a shot off, it could have just as likely blown off his hand. Now, let's get Mister Jaxx here into the truck, and take him some place where we can have a talk with him. His boss here will be out for a few hours at least." Merik replied.

In everyone's comms, Chimera piped up, "Well... I'm good to go. This guy has a nice simulated sensory rig, as well as some cool synaptic enhancements, but who ever installed them kept them connected to each other through his chip-jack. I can make this punk see and hear anything I want him to. Get him in the van, and I can get him to show us to where

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they've been taking the other researchers... assuming he was with the group that took the others, that is."

A large, nondescript gray van pulled up to the curb at the far end of the alley, the side door sliding open on remote control. "Our chariot awaits! I'll send little Striker here up to keep an eye on things." Dominique said as she stepped up next to Merik, eyes closed and a drone control board in one hand.

As Merik and Dominique reached the van, the zombie like gang member, locked in a world of simulated reality, was being pulled along with them. An Shih stepped literally out of the shadows of the club, darkness flowing off of the gray fox like water from a glass. "I left the others for the city's sanitation engineers to locate in the morning. They will not be permanently harmed, but the smell will likely not go away... for a while."

With that all three team members as well their guest climbed into the back of the van, letting Dominique close the door, and pull the van out into the late night traffic with her remote control as her tactical drone soared into the air on near-silent engines, hovering over the van with a watchful protective eye.

Chapter 2

It had turned out that Jaxx had indeed been part of the teams that had snapped up the other researchers, using his Sim-Sence cyber ware and the remote monitoring program that had been part of the *tracking program chip* that Chimera had sold the unwitting Hell Hound. The hacker had been able to watch as the punk had played out the delivery of their last target, and had gotten paid. The only problem was... gang had not been taking all the researchers to the same place to hold them, and it turned out that they were simply delivering them to a tall, well built male elk with polished antlers and a nice-looking suit that stood close to an expensive looking car and bodyguard. He looked like a Fixer, and was clearly just the middleman, taking the researchers with him to some other location.

Despite this added complication, the team soon found themselves

outside Hadrian Tower, a small downtown office and residential building. Studying it from inside a coffee shop, each member sitting at a different table, except Chimera who was only present as her ferret school girl avatar, making use of the coffee shop's own network server, as the team's encrypted comm units allowed them to keep in touch.

"Are you sure that this is the right place, Chimera? We have a limited window before the other side figures out something has gone wrong with their plan." Merik asked through his sub-vocal comm while sipping at a steaming mug of soy coffee.

"Sure as I can be, boss man. I used our new buddy's memories to pinpoint the time and place of each hand off, and then used the city's traffic cams, and a few bank ATM cameras to track his progress. Each time, his car ended up here. I was also able to ID that guy from the punk's own snapshots off his cyber eyes, and confirmed that one *Rudolph James Pennybrook... Esquire...*" Chimera replied, leaving a half-second of silence for drama, "Has an office AND an apartment in this particular building."

"Yes... but how do we know that the researchers weren't transferred to a different vehicle while here, and moved to a totally different location?" asked Dominique, across the room from Merik in one of the shop's form fitting recliners, appearing for all intents and purposes to be jacked into the 'net, when in reality she was using her wireless control to run a trio of small surveillance drones around the target building.

"While that is true, my dear vixen, the footage I have been able to pull together shows nothing larger than a one man Eco-Car leaving the building within four hours of each arrival, and in the case of the last victim, nothing left for eight hours." The ferret's feminine voice continued on in all their ears, "So either they are holding them here for an extended period of time, or they are keeping them all here 'til the full research team is collected, and can be sent as whole package. I've been unable to crack his office network... and NOT in a way that would send up all kinds of red flags... but I've confirmed that he does have an offsite secure data storage facility on the payroll, and I may be able to get into that and poke around."

"One way or another, this means we're going to need to get in there and have ourselves a nice little talk with Mr. Pennybrook. If the

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researchers are on the premises, he can lead us to them, and if they've been moved, he should be able to tell us where." Replied Merik while setting his soy coffee down, his gaze wandering out the large windows of the coffee shop and across the street to the foyer of the unassuming fifty story office building. "Do we know which floors are offices and which are the apartments?"

The white vixen spoke up once more, "Yes, we do. Thankfully, it was all listed on the leasing agency's Net site. The ground floor has a security checkpoint manned at all times by two armed guards, and the first through fifteenth floors are all offices. Sixteen has shops and a small food court. The wage slave level apartments start on the seventeenth and run up to the twenty-fifth, then we have a bank on twenty-seven, but there is a second security checkpoint on the twenty-sixth. The Twenty-ninth through the fortieth floors are all higher end offices; our man is on the thirty-fourth by the way. After that, it's all residential high income living... with the forty-ninth and fiftieth being an open air park with a retractable glass dome."

"All right everyone, here's the plan..." Merik began as he leaned back in his comfortable chair picking up his cooling cup, a grin spreading across his face.

The late afternoon sun glinted off an expensive town car as it pulled up to the curb in front of Hadrian Tower. The driver, a tall well built equine dressed in the traditional chauffeur's uniform, complete with a small back hat and sunglass, walked around the front of the car, as he approached the rear passenger side door while taking intense look around the sidewalk and the street, before reaching down and opening the door, allowing the passengers to exit. An exquisitely dressed vixen clad in a black dress that hugged her elegant figure stepped out, the attire contrasting strikingly with her arctic white fur, taking the equine's proffered hand. She was followed immediately by a dour, severely dressed gray fox in an expensive European style suit, with an intricate collar clasp and no lapels and that had just now begun to become popular with the well to do, upper-crust in Seattle.

"Rupert... Diane and I should only be a few hours, so please just park in the visitor parking, and we will call you when we need to be picked up."

The well-dressed gray fox said, as he smoothed out a wrinkle from his suit jacket.

"Yes Mr. Harrow, as you wish." Replied the driver as he towered over his employers. "Just let me know when you're ready. I'll keep my ears open."

With that, the driver walked back around the car and slid into the driver's seat, all the while keeping an eye on the two foxes as they strolled through the buildings front doors as if they didn't have a care in the world. Pulling back out into traffic, the town car moved smoothly around a parked taxi and then took a sharp right turn down into the building's underground parking complex, following the signs that pointed the way to the segregated part of the complex meant for outsiders, and thus under extra scrutiny by the Hadrian Tower's security systems.

"Chimera are you in the system yet?" asked Merik, as he pulled into an empty parking stall right next to a set of doors clearly marked as *Utility Room: Authorized personnel only!*

"Give me one more moment—I was just finishing up the back dating of the appointment that Shih and Dominique are using. Making it look like a glitch in the property management agency's database." Came the upbeat, high-pitched female voice. "Just sit still in the driver's seat after you turn off the engine so I can record for playback."

With a sigh, Merik turned off the town car's engine and let his hands rest at his sides, trying not to make any movement that would seem odd if repeated too often, or could not be cut together seamlessly. The team had spent the last few hours putting the final touches on Merik's plan, though the stallion had to admit that the last flourish that Dominique had suggested may have been a bit over the top, but would make things easier on the extraction faze of the operation... assuming an extraction was needed at all.

"All right boss man, I got everything locked in and playing, the guards and the system's own intrusion countermeasures won't see anything I don't want them to... at least not for the next few hours that is." The hacker stated with a hint of satisfaction.

"Roger that. Dom, Shih... I'm starting my move. I'll let you know once I'm in place. Keep comm silence, unless something comes up at your

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end." Merik said, as he exited the car and popped the trunk, extracting a large duffle bag, and walked over to the Utility room after locking the trunk once more. His ears picked up the faint click as the lock disengaged just as he reached the restricted room, and pushed his way inside the small dimly light space.

A few minutes later, the doors to the utility room opened again and out strode the horse, now dressed in a charcoal black, three piece business suit, a dark blue tie, silver cufflinks and a gold watch on his right wrist rounding out the look. The equine turned, and strode purposefully to the bank of elevators that led from the parking garage to the building proper, fishing a small black RFID card from his pocket.

"Merik... you should have no trouble with the lifts. Dom was able to get close enough to the security guard that I was able to pull the codes off his security pass RFID chip. You have access to all fifty floors." Stated Chimera.

Merik's only response was to grunt quietly, and step into the lift when the doors opened, passing the custom made Trojan passcard over the elevator's scanner, causing all the buttons to light up, showing that he truly did have access the whole building. The merc reached out and punched the thirty-fourth floor.

"We have confirmation that our good mister Pennybrook is not in his office?" he asked over the team's secure encrypted comm net.

"Yes according to court systems computers he's scheduled to be in negotiations with a client, a court appointed mediator and lawyers from a different firm... and all this is taking place in the other firm's office over in Bellevue. You have a few hours before he should be back, at least." Replied the hacker with a hint of exasperation. "You keep asking me, it's like you don't trust me or something."

"Portland." Merik said with a gruff laugh.

"That was SO not my fault, I was at a Sailor Moon Convention and... well... I got... distracted. I promised it would never happen again, and it won't. And you said you'd never bring it up again!" the hacker said with a fresh pout in her tone.

Merik was saved from a reply as the elevator doors opened, depositing him on the thirty-fourth floor. The now well-dressed stallion

strode out into the hallway, and oriented himself to walk purposefully to the small law offices doors, and when he reached them, he passed the Trojan key card over the doors lock. The office's rudimentary security software considered the RF code emanated by the card for its required moment, and then dutifully disengaged the locks and alarm system, so that the hard working Security guard could make his rounds. The system did not know, nor would it have cared that the guard in question was not due to make his rounds on this floor for at least a neither five hours.

Getting into the office, Merik quickly moved from the small office's spartan waiting room with its empty, and likely never used, receptionist's desk, to the door to the inner office. Finding this door locked with an old fashioned tumbler, the merc put the pass key back in the inside jacket pocket and pulled out a small black leather case that contained his own set of lock picks. It only took a few moments to overcome this last impediment, and he stepped into the well appointed inner office. He strode over to the cluttered desk, glancing around the room, taking in the diploma from Harvard and a series of photos of the tall well built Buck standing with clients and not a few local celebrities.

Stepping behind the desk, Merik put the lockpicks away, and took out a small disk, about four inches wide and half as thick with a small flashing red light on the top out of his pocket, placing it on top of the desk's built in interface screen. The light turned from flashing red to a steady green. "I'm in, placing the relay now Chimera."

"Accessing... give me a minute to crack his system, not having to get past the external security should make this much faster." the ferret hacker replied.

Leaving his team mate to his work, Merik made a quick search of the office, taking great care to put everything back where he found it as he checked for wall or floor safes, as well as pulling out his lock picks a second time, opening up the bank of secured filing cabinets along one wall and thumbing through the contents. To his surprise, the stallion found that the lawyer kept a surprising amount on hard copy, but nothing that seemed to pertain to the current mission.

"I'm in, and my data bots found what we're looking for. Seems the forty-sixth floor is under heavy renovation, no one is currently living on

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that floor... but power and plumbing has been reconnected to one of the corner apartments for the last few weeks, and our friend here has been paying the property management agent... and, it looks like, the security guards under the table for that same time frame. Also, one of my bots found the local deli's computer on the net shows orders being sent to this building late at night, no apartment number, just instructions to leave it with the front desk... and its our Mr. Pennnybrook's credit account that paid the tab each time."

"All right, that sounds like the place. Get everything in place to crash the systems once I give the word... and see to it that the other thing we talked about is set up. I don't want to get there and find out the exit plan won't work, okay." Merik stated.

"Roger, oh boss man." Chimera chirped back.

Taking the remote uplink off the desk's built in screen and pocketing it, Merik made his way back out through the small office's lobby and into the hallway, locking everything up as he went. Making it back down to the elevators, he pushed the call button and then rekeyed his internal comm. "Okay. Dominique. An Shih. It's time you lost your guide. Just be sure to put her someplace where she won't be found for at least the next hour or so... but also someplace safe. No need for us to seriously hurt anyone we don't need to. Shih, meet me on the forty-fifth floor. And Dom you know what you need to do. Just be ready in case it's a hot extraction."

With that Merik entered the elevator and rode up twelve floors, knowing that his team mates were in motion. He spotted An Shih at the end of the hall when he exited the elevator again, the gray fox standing in the doorway of the building's service and emergency stairs. The slim fox inclined a greeting as Merik reached him, and the two mounted the stairs to the next floor. Neither said anything as they reached the exit door, Merik pulling out his Browning High Power and carefully screwed on a silencer, drawing the slide back just enough to confirm a round in the chamber. As always, the diminutive vulpine monk readied no weapon, never having carried one to the horse's knowledge.

The two nodded to each other at the unspoken signal, An Shih pulling open the door to allow Merik to step into the hall, his gun at the ready. It was clear to the corner, turning out of view to the left, and leading to the

corner apartment on this side of the building, and Merik's ears twitched as he listened carefully to see if their entrance had alerted anyone. Hearing nothing, he stepped further into the hall, and felt his team mate flow in beside him, the pair moving down the hall on silent feet, pausing every few steps to listen for any sign that they had been detected. At the corner Merik signaled a stop and, pulled a small mirror from his pocket and used it to peer around without being openly seen.

At the far end of the hall stood two armed men, an average looking timber wolf with pale grayish-brown fur off set slightly by a reddish color around his ears, and a heavyset, rotund black bear, both who were wearing army surplus fatigues, as well as tactical vests and carrying AK-47 knockoffs.

Sliding the small mirror back into his pocket, Merik readied himself, two well trained well armed gunmen would be difficult even with the element of surprise, and he knew he could take the first one before he could react, but the odds were good the second gunman would have time to get off at least one burst from his assault rifle. Even if he was lucky enough to take the hits on his suit's embedded Kevlar weave, the sound of the weapon would warn any gunmen inside the apartment that something was going on, giving them a chance to either kill the researchers or get set to greet himself and An Shih when they tried to force their way in.

The small monk touched him on the elbow, making Merik almost jump out of his skin, and causing the large merc to turn and glare at the fox, nostrils flaring. An Shih held up his left hand to forestall any comment, motioning for Merik to give him a moment as he reached inside his suit with his other hand, and pulled out a six inch ceramic needle. He turned to face the drywall of the hallway and closed his eyes as the horse watched, reaching out with his left hand to run his fingers lightly over the surface of the wall in search of some subtle, imperceptible clue, using senses honed by years of training and experience. With a flick of the ears and a tilt of the head, An Shih placed the tip of the needle against the wall, and then opened his eyes, glancing at Merik and giving his large friend a wink.

Merik smiled, finally understanding what his friend planned. Despite having worked with the monk on a number of jobs over the years, he had

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never been able to understand how the fox did what he did, or could know what he knew, but in the end that understanding was not needed since he'd never let the team down. Turned back to the corner and readying himself, the stallion closed his eyes and brought up the needed cyber systems.

With a faint crunching of drywall, followed by the sound of arching electricity, and the smell of ozone that signaled Merik to open his eyes, and he stepped around the corner into the hallway that lead to the apartment's front door. The low-light and thermal optics built into his military cyber-eyes allowed him to clearly see the two gunmen at the end of the hall, his pistol up in one fluid motion. Rapidly pulling the trigger, the stallion sent a double tap down the hall way at each of the two startled and temporarily blinded men. By the time the hall's emergency lights came up both men lay on the floor in pools of blood, bone and brain matter splattered against the wall.

"One of these days you're going to have to tell me how you do that, my friend." Merik whispered to his friend as they moved down the hall, the equine putting a third round into both men just to be safe, then he knelt down and rummaged through both bodies, until he came up with the electronic pass key for the apartment's door. Motioning for An Shih to take up position opposite him, the horse stood once more, and slid the key into the slot, pushing the door open stepping into the entry hall followed by the fox.

Merik motioned for An Shih to take the side hallway just off of the entry that, per the building design, would lead to the bedrooms as he crossed into the living room that was clearly still under renovation. Only a small collapsible table, two chairs, and a ratty second hand couch were spaced around the room, but movement to his left caught his eye. Turning, he saw the medium build female leopard striding out of the kitchen and dining room area with an Uzi her hands. She jerked to a stop in surprise at the large form standing before her, the horse backlit by feeble illumination of the emergency lights back out in the hallway, and she began to bring up her weapon. Her hesitation of surprise was a moment she did not have as Merik snapped off a round from his handgun, taking the guard in the neck.

But then, while shifting his aim to finish off the female leopard as she dropped her weapon, the hands that had held it flying to her throat as blood gushed between her clawed paw-hands, the silence of the room was shattered by the roar of an assault rifle, its rounds striking Merik in the back and high on his right shoulder, sending him spinning around, and causing him to stumble.

Grunting in pain as the rounds were stopped by the Kevlar built into Merik's suit jacket, the horse knew that despite the armor's protection, he'd have at the very least a few monster bruises when the job was done. Even as he registered the pain of the impacts, his training caused him to ride the momentum of it, and he fell to the floor in a tuck and roll, new pain shooting through his shoulder and back, registering he would have more than just bruises. His eyes were drawn to the muzzle flash as the gunman, a short male rat, fired a second three round burst... missing Merik and ripping holes in the cushions of the couch. The gunman jerked his third burst going wide as two rounds from Merik's handgun hit him center mass, stumbling back against an unpainted wall, making him pull his AK-47 around to aim at the large equine.

Merik fired one last round, striking the rat right between the eyes sending the gunman crumpling to the ground, with his weapon clattering to the floor. Standing, he scanned the room his cyber-eyes targeting link to Browning confirming for him that he still had four ten millimeter rounds in his weapon. His head jerked back to the blood and brain spattered wall as something came crashing through it.

A huge male tiger came flying through the wall before Merik could get his gun around to fire at the new threat, but he stumbled a few steps, opening his mouth as if to say something as the look of rage on his face slipping into confusion, and then his eyes rolled up into his head. As the augmented, muscled feline crumpled to the floor, Merik's eyes darted to the hole in the wall, just as An Shih, spotless and without a whisker out of place, strode through it, his hands stuffed in the sleeves of his jacket.

Merik looked from his friend, to the massive tiger lying at his feet... snoring quietly while a puddle of drool began pooling under his muzzle. "Any other hostiles back in the bedrooms?"

"No, but I have found who we were looking for. Follow." Replied An

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Shih as he turned, and walked back through the hole the tiger had made in the wall.

Merik took one last look around him, and then followed his old friend through the hole and down the debris littered hall, past an unfinished bathroom, what was either an office, or a smaller bedroom, and into the unit's spacious master bedroom. Stepping over the prone body of a second, though much smaller tiger, he took in the forms of the three huddled Flash Food researchers shackled to one of the room's support beams still accessible through the unfinished walls. Their dirty clothes had been nice before the days of captivity had ruined them, and all three of them were almost a ball in the corner of the room, eyes going back and forth between An Shih and Merik.

Merik lowered his pistol and pulled a small Flash Food ID pin out of his pocket, showing it to the three researchers. "Dr. Harden... Dr. Fisk... Dr. Shoop? We're here to get you home. Your boss, Mr. Alderville, gave me this in hopes it would help to put you at ease."

The eldest of the three, a tall, willowy doe crawled closer to Merik, and held out a shaking hand, showing her light brown fur mottled with bruises and dried blood. The other two, a white and black male rabbit with a large blood soaked bandage wrapped around his left ear, and the youngest of the three, a petite female Lynx, whose ripped clothing and haunted eyes hinting that her treatment at the hands of the gang, or her most recent captors, could not have been an easy one.

Merik dropped the ID pin into the doe's hand, and glanced over his shoulder to An Shih. "My associate here will get you free of those restraints, if that's ok?"

The doe rolled the pin around in her fingers and leaned in and took a deep sniff, "That's Mr. Alderville's scent alright. Thank God you got here! Those... Those... thugs... they said we were being moved tomorrow." She turned back to the other two researchers a faint smile on her face. "It's all right, I think we should go with them."

An Shih made quick work of the restraints, freeing the three captives, and helping the young Lynx to her feet, supporting her as Merik lead the group out of the bedroom, down the hall and out of the apartment. The three researchers gaped at the bodies of their would-be captors as they

passed, and once in the unfinished hall, Merik used his built in cyber-comm to send a signal to the receiver hidden in the trunk of the town car he had parked in the basement garage. Moments later the building fire alarm began to wail as the back of the town car blew open, and a small charge ruptured the large modified air tanks hidden in the trunk, the expanding cloud of smoke filled the visitor parking area.

Chapter 3

With the wail of the alarm still filling every hall way of the building, Merik stepped out of the stairwell and onto the rooftop park and recreation area, one of the selling points that allowed the owners of this particular building to charge such high rent for both its business and residential clients. The tall merc's large nostrils flared as his head swiveled from side to side taking in the large trees, the shrubbery lined walkways, and the decorative fountains... even the distant playground equipment at the far end of the floor. The late hour had worked in the team's favor as there were no kids, nor families in evidence... just a young couple of rabbits, and one elderly gray wolf gentlemen who had all clearly been enjoying the solitude of the early evening air. The young couple was already making their way through one of the other emergency stairwell exits, while the elder wolf sat in an off the rack suit, glasses on his nose and cane supporting his hands simply ignored the wail of the fire alarm. From hidden speakers, an automated voice directed all patrons of the park to please make their way in an orderly fashion to one of the many convenient exits, and to please remember that due to the nature of the temporary emergency the elevators are disabled... and that, of course, the management off the building apologized for any inconvenience.

Merik signaled for An Shih and the researchers to wait inside the stairwell as he made his way over to the elderly gentlemen, putting on his most official expression in the hopes that the wolf would not notice that the burly equine was not wearing the standard uniform jacket of the building staff. "Sir, I'm sorry but you will need to exit the building, I can help you to one of the exits if you wish."

"Poppycock! I come here every night and sit and feed the birds for

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an hour..." replied the wolf waiving his hand paw at a scattering of bread crumbs strewn all over the paved path in front of him, a path that didn't have a single bird on it at the moment, nor did it appear if there were any birds anywhere in the whole garden at the time. "...so if you don't mind sonny, all your clopping around is scaring away my friends, so go pester someone else!" And with that he reached into a small bag that sat next to him, pulled out a hand full of bread crumbs and tossed them onto the ground, a satisfied smile spreading across his muzzle.

Merik's mouth opened and closed a few times as his mind raced to trying to think of something he could say to get the old wolf to leave, but in the end as the fellow happily tossed even more crumbs onto the fake cobble stone, the burly merc simply shrugged his shoulders, and turned to wave the others out into the garden.

Glancing up at the night sky through the duraplast, a relatively new substance the building had been retrofitted with only the year before, replacing the old Plexiglas and steel construction, the horse couldn't help but stare a bit. The substance had a far more advanced ability to tint to near black as well as far greater durability meant that it was slowly replacing the older Plexiglas all over the city, right now just enclosing this one roof top garden from the outside world.

"Chimera... the retractable dome is still up. I thought you said you could get it open. Our whole exit strategy depends on it, you know." Merik said over his cyber-comm.

"Yeah yeah... I know! And if I wasn't trying to do twenty things at once while keeping this buildings monster of a security system from noticing me, much less kicking me out, I would have it down already! But... as I TOLD you... I can't get the dome to open 'til Dom gets that Air Ambulance within range of the building's own grid and...oh. Here she is." Replied the school girl hacker a bit petulantly.

Merik looked back up, the massive dome beginning to slide back, and opening the garden to the night air, bringing the sounds of the city far below drifting up and into the open space. His cyber-eyes locked onto a fast moving, red and white painted vehicle, it's red and blue safety lights flashing brightly. The somewhat van-shaped air ambulance swooped through the still opening dome, barely missing the edge of the building

on one side and the dome on the other.

"All right boys and girls... our ride is here. All aboard." Dominique said over the team's comm-channel. "It's not going to take the building ,nor the cops for that matter, long to realize that no one called for an ambulance, and start to get curious... so let's not dawdle."

The hover vehicle floated a few inches off the open grass of the garden, and its rear ramp thumped open. Merik began motioning for the researchers and his teammate towards the ambulance, but that proved to be unnecessary as An Shih already had herded the small group at a run towards the covering vehicle. The horse took one last look at the elderly gray wolf still sitting on his bench feeding his non-existent birds, using his cyber eyes to scan for any trace of a weapon... he couldn't be too careful these days. Satisfied once more that the old man was nothing more than just what he seemed, the merc dashed for the lowered ramp as well.

"STOP!"

Over his shoulder, a trio of uniformed building security guards came running out of the same stairwell he had used to get to the roof. All three guards were short, lean-looking foxes, their red and white fur contrasting with the mat gray of their uniforms, and each had an automatic pistol on their hips, as well as stun batons currently in their hands.

'Great... *Rent-a-Cops*' Merik thought to himself as he pulled his own pistol from a shoulder holster, watching the last of the now terrified researchers scramble aboard the fake air ambulance. The advanced targeting program built into his eyes and linked to his gun placed target crosshairs on the heads of each of the guards as they continued to run towards the vehicle, still shouting their commands to halt.

With a sigh of resignation, the tall merc fired off three quick rounds, years of experience combined with his cyber ware allowed him to put those rounds exactly where he had intended them, and the fox guards each dove for cover, one behind a tree, the second behind a bench, and the last unfortunate guard had no place to go but into the pool of a nearby fountain, as a single round shattered the paving stone in front of each of them.

Dashing the last few feet to the ramp, the stallion fired off the last round in his magazine over the heads of the guards who had just begun

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to look up from their places of safety. "Ok Dom! We're all aboard... get us out of here!"

And with that, Merik strode up the ramp, past the still trembling corporate researchers, and just as the ramp began to close and the fake ambulance began to rise in the air he sat himself down in the copilot's seat, turning it so he could place his hoof-feet up on the empty pilot's chair, relaxing in a job well done.

'Now... all there is to do is get paid. Let's just hope that's not an adventure all its own.' The merc thought to himself, watching the city's skyline blur past the cockpit window.

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BY KYELL GOLD

Bold knew why they were coming for him, had known it ever since the day Viacom had sent over the details of the project they'd licensed his Pefts for. Sure enough, the day after some dailies had leaked to the press, he'd woken up to find the abbot log tripled in size. He liked to think of the abbots as little robotic mosquitoes caught in his bash-Perl web, deactivated harmlessly before they could land on his virtual skin and suck out his precious information. He had an idea for improving his web so they would sail right by him, missing him completely, but like many of his ideas, that one languished in his TBD folder.

Anyway, even if he had finished it, that wouldn't have withstood this determined assault. If you wanted to be found by one group of people, you could be found by another, and Bold wasn't about to abandon the work he did for the furries just to have a little peace from the behemoths that stalked his world. No, this level of determined interest needed some stronger deterrent. He pondered what that might be while reviewing his messages.

No fewer than four of his thirteen distributors had pinged him to let him know that they were being bombarded as well. There were low-level drones coming in from the lumberers, the plant-eating dinosaurs trudging along with inertia and volume on their side: MicroSoft, Apple, Samsung-Sprint. Those queries tended to assume that the distributors were the creators, and his carefully chosen team knew how to deflect them.

Then there were the small, darting companies sending in lightning-quick queries, hoping to grab him and latch on like a remora, to get in before the big buyout and share in the profits. They had names straight out of the Silicon Valley Company Generator: BuzzWorld, LifeTech, Disruptr, iLookGood. We can help you manage and package, the ones who thought they were being crafty said. We'll help you leverage the best terms for your buyout, the honest ones said. If the abbots were mosquitoes, these were mayflies, buzzing annoyingly around and then one day just going away, leaving an empty nest behind and spawning a

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new breed of companies that would fulfill the same role in another year.

In his virtual office, Bold stretched out an arm to bring up a different display. He spent so much time here that when he stepped back into the real world and saw human skin rather than white wolf fur, it came as a shock, as though he were dreaming the unpleasantness of life whenever he took off his v-gogs. He slept with the pod strapped to the base of his spine that simulated the pressure of a tail and could make it wag with just a little motion. Making his virtual tail wag with the same motion was another idea in his TBD folder.

The four notes he'd gotten that morning all showed interest from the two companies that weren't going to go away quietly and were savvy enough to have done their research. In their place, he would've sent a couple furries—both companies were large enough that statistically they each had to have at least a half dozen somewhere on payroll—to sniff around the spots where his Pelts were sold, and in fact three of his notes mentioned that former customers had contacted them to ask about specific, difficult customizations, which were likely to cost a good deal of money.

That happened; it wouldn't have been suspicious if all three hadn't asked on the same day, and if two of them were known to the team as being chronically short on money and late on payments. Asking for a five-grand custom tail when you weren't finished paying off your two-grand Pelt was a red flag anyway. Today, he instructed his distributors to read out the part of the customization agreement that said they couldn't use it for any kind of monetary gain, including landing their company a lucrative Pelt franchise, and the would-be commissioners would lose interest immediately.

So Bold hit a few keys, routed his connection over a VPN, encrypted it for good measure, and then used an anonymizing service to drop the message into a remote box. Tiggus should be up now; unlike Bold, he kept night hours, so their schedules meshed well.

While he was waiting, he got two more adbot queries, super-targeted this time. They were sending him want ads from China, rich people supposedly willing to pay thousands for wolf pictures. Another ploy to get him to surface, but he knew the game too well to bite.

"Hey wuffer." Tiggus's tiger avatar popped into the office. "You getting the hard press too?"

"Lots of attention." Bold wiped away his virtual monitor, leaving him alone in a comfortable parlor with the tiger. "What are you thinking?"

The tiger waved a paw. Slightly different style from Bold's fur design, but smooth and detailed, and it tracked perfectly. Bold had originated the real-life fur and movement model and guarded the algorithms fanatically, but where hundreds of people had written to ask him for help in development (none so far had the patience to spend the years it had taken him to write the base models), Tiggus had written him with simply a piece of code, undeniably his own, that approximated Bold's algorithm from a different approach. Since then they had shared research with each other and nobody else, and nobody else had figured out how to make realistic Pelts like the two of them. If furries wanted fur like a wire brush, or flat plastic textures, those were easily available. TV and movie studios came exclusively to Bold (exclusively for animation, until this Viacom thing) because Tiggus liked to make his Pelts very anatomically correct. Tiggus got more business from individuals for the same reason. "There's hundreds of megabucks at least on the table. Maybe upwards of a gig Split a deal?"

Bold tapped his claws together, and before he could answer, Tiggus grinned. "No. You don't want any part of mass manufacturing."

"I like working on the things I want to work on for the people who really care about my work. I don't need their money."

"Tell me, how much would they have to offer you to change your mind?"

The wolf shook his head slowly from side to side. "I can still live off customizations and licenses to Hollywood and Bollywood. Living here is cheap. I could retire now."

"Seattle's more expensive." The tiger's tongue lolled out. "If I cash in, any provisions you want me to insist on?"

"Research on further enhancement. All the things we could do with smell, with touch."

"Believe me, I've thought about it." Tiggus had a nifty mod to his eyes that made them sparkle even when there wasn't an explicit light source

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in v-space. "Done. You want special dispensation to do customizations to suits they sell?"

Bold laughed too, then. "If they can find a way to stop me, they deserve to. No, I do not wish to be legal. What fun would that be?"

Tiggus held out his paw. They slapped virtually, and in their gloves felt the sting of contact, the scrape of pads. Paws were one mod that had escaped Bold's TBD folder, and now they made up about twenty percent of his revenue. "Okay," the tiger said. "Thanks, yogi. How are you gonna get them to leave you alone?"

"I am figuring that out. And you, make them work for it." Bold flicked his ears and grinned. "If I taught you nothing else, I taught you that."

"Off to do that right now. And you have your own hunters to deal with, don't you?"

"Indeed." He waved as Tiggus broke the connection, and then killed the portal they'd used. Usually you could count on a portal remaining hidden for a day or two, but not if someone were really hunting for you.

And now he was going to have to go out into Furtopia. He sighed and called up an appropriate outfit for the occasion: a bright red formal robe, as a maharaja might wear, and an orange sari under it, his chest left bare to show off the fur. He had several Pelts he might use to go out, but today he felt that disguising himself would be allowing his hunters to gain an advantage over him. He stood, felt the pull of his tail behind him, and swiped away his office.

Furtopia was sponsored, but lightly; a few of its denizens made enough to keep the adbots from being too spammy, as they were on some of the other v-worlds Bold visited. On the other paw, the Harry Potter v-world was funded by Rowling herself and only provided discreet links and nudges to buy the various editions of the books and movies and interactives upon entry and exit. Bold walked out into a small café looking out onto a perpetual thunderstorm through glass windows. He turned up the thunderstorm volume and took a seat at one of the many windows.

The clientele here mostly came to talk, sometimes to flirt, though if they moved beyond flirting, they had to go down to the dance floor, or one of the communal rooms set aside for that sort of thing, or a private room if they really wanted. It was a good place to have quiet conversations, or to

just sit and think. The current thunderstorm was happening somewhere in Germany. Bold thought he saw a castle through the gloom and rain.

"May I join you?" A small version of an avatar hovered next to his table. It was furry, but he barely registered what kind.

That was faster than he would have liked. "Of course," he said, and changed his table immediately. For a moment, he considered changing his avatar as well, but he'd already rerouted his connection and altered his name just enough to throw off the bots and make sure it was a real person coming after him.

While he waited for them to catch up, he scanned the café. Some regulars he recognized, but he remained wary of them. Of the new people, several were struggling with their furry avatars, ignoring their tails and ears, sitting awkwardly on chairs or just standing by the table.

"May I join you?" This time it was a different voice, and a different avatar, and it wasn't a miniature; it was an ermine standing at his tableside, insistent. Close enough to follow him if he changed tables.

The ermine moved with an ease that bespoke experience in her Pelt, which was a Tiggus creation. He watched the tail and ears first, and then her posture. She thought he was staring at her chest, and that was probably what she wanted, so he didn't disabuse her of the notion.

"It seems you already have," Bold said drily. He gestured to the seat. "You're the first. There may be others."

"I'll speak quickly, then." She took the seat across from him. "You're not someone who likes having his time wasted."

"And yet you're still here."

She didn't flinch at that, or at least the avatar didn't. He wondered whether she had a masker for negative reactions or if she just had very good control. "I feel confident that you will not consider my offer a waste of time."

He inclined his head with ears flattened to show his annoyance, and watched to see if she would pick up on the body language. "The only question you can answer for me is who employs you. I'm going to guess Google just from the general air of arrogance and competence."

"Tweetbook, actually, but I will take that as a compliment." She allowed a smug smile to cross her features. It suited her well.

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"Mm. Then I'm guessing your offer is two billion up front, with a ceremonial title and salary in the range of, hm...one point five million a year. Am I close?"

She looked annoyed. In truth, he had run projections on the revenue potential of the Pelts, but had no idea what their projections would be. He was guessing high partly to see how high they would go, and partly just to steal her thunder. On the latter count, at least, he'd succeeded. "That is higher than—that is, our projections show a growth potential of ten billion per year, with additional revenue contingent on marketing and development of future technology, which Tweetbook is committed to."

The first avatar appeared again, requesting permission to join. This one, a mouse (he actually looked this time) must be Google, then; he hadn't expected them to be polite. He granted it while talking to the ermine. "Your projections are low, if I may say so. Damon Benham has three hundred million fans. Estimates are that eighty percent of them saw the 'Alice in Wonderland' production." The mouse from Google joined their table and sat without a word. He, too, looked at ease with his avatar, as realistically furry as any of the friends Bold counted on to maintain the illusion of his world. "The response across social media has indicated interest from about half of those, but you know how teenagers are; you have to announce today and get the product out within a month. They won't have thousands to spend, but hundreds seems a reasonable price. I plugged various prices into the population model, just for curiosity's sake, you understand, and it looks like three hundred is the optimal price."

"I don't have access to the numbers," she said, but the mouse nodded.

"Within about ten percent, that matches what we're looking at," he said. "We're offering a billion for your business and either a job at a million a year, or revenue sharing." He spread pink paws and smiled. "We can work out the percentage. We're agreeable, if you don't want the guaranteed million a year."

They both stared at him. His smile didn't falter. "I figured we were already in business mode. Sorry I missed the small talk."

"One point two billion," the ermine said, "and a million five a year, and a position overseeing the further development of Pelts—"

"Of course it goes without saying that you'd be involved in Pelt

development if you want," the mouse cut in smoothly. "But most of your development work has slowed down in the past four years, apart from the lucrative customization jobs." And he smiled, and rested his paws on the table.

Bold stared down. He'd overlooked the paws at first, but now he recognized them. It was getting so you couldn't trust anyone anymore. "Go away," he said to the ermine. "This is over."

She protested, but he blocked her and she vanished from the table. "So," the mouse said, "do we have your interest? I have the authority to set up a meeting—"

"No." Bold leaned in and let his fangs show. "But I'm interested in you. Three years ago, right?"

"Er." The mouse nodded quickly. "I love it. When they put out the word that they wanted someone, I volunteered. I said it was either you or the other guy, and they aren't going to want to deal with him, because, well, the sex stuff, you know."

"He's a friend of mine," Bold said. He stopped worrying so much about how the guy was perceiving his avatar and just talked. "I'm sure that no matter what your bosses told you, they're talking to him, too." He paused a moment to reflect on what Tiggus might be putting them through, and that made him grin. "But as I said, I'm more worried about you."

Mouse was appropriate for him, not just because he was now looking slightly nervous, but because he was just a human version of the abbot mosquitoes, a larger, more destructive pest. The fact that he really was a furry had stopped being a factor. "Me?" he said now, his ears dipping, eyes widening. "You don't have to—I mean, what—why?"

Outside, multiple cracks of lightning illuminated the table, and the mouse jumped. The thunderstorm noise came up louder. "Well," Bold said, "perhaps you didn't read the agreement carefully when you purchased the Pelt."

"I read—I haven't reverse engineered—or resold—"

His voice was getting squeaky. Probably had a modulator on it. "There's a clause," Bold said pleasantly, "that specifically forbids using the suit for personal remuneration."

"But I said, I'm not selling it. I love it, it's great, it's so much better

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than any of the others—”

“You are using the suit to engage in a deal with me.” Now Bold dropped the pleasant tone. The guy clearly loved his suit, but he’d crossed a line as far as Bold was concerned. If he didn’t need to make an example, he might have let it slide. “On behalf of your company. For which you are, if I am not mistaken, drawing a salary.”

“Listen,” the mouse said, desperate now. “I’m sorry, I’ll have them send someone else.”

“Tell them,” Bold said, “that I am not interested. And to demonstrate the depths of my disinterest...” He made two quick transactions.

In front of him, the mouse flickered and then stabilized, his form blocky, the fur stiff and plastic. His paws were standard and grey, the custom naked pink gone. “What the shit?”

Glassy eyes looked up at Bold. “Please, no.”

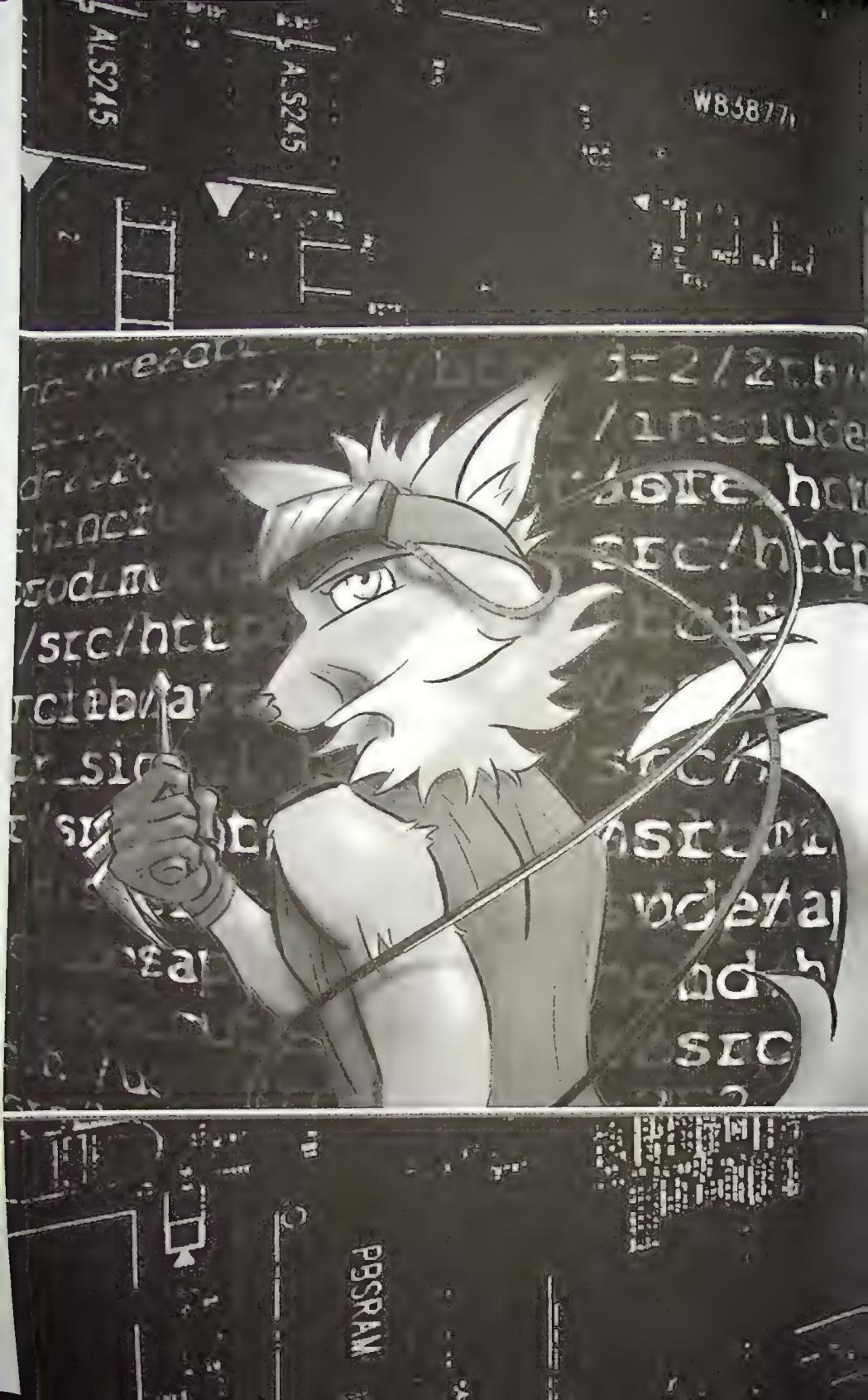
“Your account has been credited with the price of the Pelt. Don’t worry. In a couple weeks, I’m sure you will be able to buy a new one.”

“Don’t be—”

He left the café abruptly. Normally he preferred to keep his exits realistic, but for the purposes of the recording he’d just made, the dramatic would work better. He posted it to one of the furry groups and waited for the word to spread: Bold valued integrity over money. Sometimes the best way to chase off the annoying insects was to show them that you had nothing for them.

His only regret was that he would have to shelve the white wolf Pelt for a while. But he had plenty of time on his paws. He could build himself a new one. He could do whatever he wanted.

Kyell Gold



THE SHIELD

BY SHELLY ALAN & DAVID ALAN

ONE

c1... 0x1... ping... c2... 0x1... ping... c3... 0x1...

For the casual observer, it would have been random text on a screen. An engineer of computer technology might describe it as bright pixels of liquid crystal, flashing on and off, for the sole purpose of translating binary code into letters and numbers. Run through a poetry emulator, it might have been deemed masterful prose for a heartfelt ballad of machine language.

But for Gage, it painted a more ominous picture. Namely an endless wall of cold, impenetrable black slabs, stretching from horizon to horizon and towering up into the figurative stratosphere. It also meant the very real possibility of having a healthy dose of fifty thousand volts of electricity driven straight into his brain stem, where it would effectively vaporize his spine, and bore black holes in the soles of his feet before it dissipated into the ground.

Not unlike a soldier with one foot on a land mine, he froze with his clawed hands up in a purely instinctual sign of placation. The firewall had not yet noticed him, but that could change at any second. He blinked, hardly noticing the sweat accumulating between the bare pads on the palms of his hands, nor the tight crease of tension in the fur of his brow, nor even the rigidity of his erect tail, as the weight of his life teetered in that perilous moment.

"Recoil was right," Gage whispered to no one in particular. "This is stupid."

Questions swirled in his head, peering up from the dark miasma of dread that shivered through his body. Why would a museum have high-end black ICE?

As he forced down the dense lump of fear in his throat, he considered what little he knew. One, the museum belonged to a private foundation, probably as a tax shelter for some faceless corporate entity. Two, the

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building was old—older than Gage himself—which should have meant security holes despite its updated infrastructure. Three... well, there wasn't a three.

That should have been enough for a quick visit to an unattended facility. He just needed to get in, find some trinket in a storage vault. Then get out. Simple, right?

Now he had to wonder about the rest. Did his contact know about this? If so, then why hadn't he said anything? And why, on the gods' wired net, hadn't Gage thought to negotiate a higher payment?

But the questions only served as a distraction as he carefully backed out of the program.

Gage's narrow jaw clenched and his sharp teeth clicked together with each measured keystroke. If the ICE even caught a whiff of his presence the game would end. No more B&E, no more credits; just the dead body of a fox on a desolate roof, high above the sickly streetlights and corroded asphalt below. It'd be months before anyone discovered his charcoaled remains.

He shook the morbid image from his head. Thanatos would not have him so easily. He didn't even have a girlfriend yet and there was no way he was going out without at least a little romance... maybe a few kids, too. And a house. A fancy car would be nice.

Blinking the sweat out of his eyes, he brought his focus back to untangling himself from the cold black fingers of military-scripted death. Before anything else, he had to survive. Then he might give some serious thought to subscribing to one of those new meta-species dating services... or writing a will.

Gently, he pulled the plug from the skull jack behind his left ear and slumped against the cold concrete floor. Only then did he exhale, with a deep, ragged breath of relief.

"Bip-bop?"

Gage opened his eyes and stared up at the tiny black oscillating drone as it hovered over his face like a curious bumble bee.

"Don't worry, Nano. I'm fine," Gage breathed. "Patch me through to Recoil."

"Beep." The blueberry-sized robot buzzed up into the air, its status

LED flashing from red to green in the night sky.

It wouldn't take long for Nano to establish a protected link, a bubble of secure transmission amid the perilous waves of the net. Limited but reliable, and attuned to the remote viewing receiver in his cybernetic glasses. At least he could count on that.

With a touch of residual anxiety, he jacked the cable back in; one side into his rig, the other back into his skull, where it fed information to the heads up display that flashed in front of his eyes.

The shiny black lenses weren't permanently attached to his face, allowing for some movement from the bridge of his long nose to the top of his forehead. The interface jacks were inconspicuous under the reddish-brown fur where the ridges of his brows met his temples. Sensory implants, embedded by skillful tech surgeons. Not your cut-rate black market wares.

Even with the glasses off, his night vision was better than most, catching shapes and movement without having to wait for his eyes to adjust. But with them on, he could count the whiskers on a black cat at two hundred yards after a lightning strike in absolute darkness.

Static snapped in Gage's ears and soon a ghostly image flashed up inside his splash goggles.

"I told you, already. I ain't getting involved in this shit."

Recoil's rodent-like face bled into view, cast in an eerie blue glow from the monitors that surrounded him. But his beady black eyes were relaxed under heavy eyelids. *At least he's not too pissed off*, Gage thought. Mild annoyance he could deal with. Anything more and he was better off avoiding the cantankerous hacker.

"I almost died, you stingy skunk." Gage brushed his palm over his black-tufted ears. "You don't want that to happen any more than I do... well, maybe a little more. But seriously, who else would you get to run your errands?"

Recoil stopped typing and looked up, his bushy brows raised. "Dude. I ain't helping you get yourself skinned alive. And that's final."

"Just—" Gage took a deep breath. "At least tell me how do you'd get around level one black ICE?"

"Uh..." Recoil leaned his black and white head back, his small nose

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twitching on the end of his snout. "You don't. Unless you get a kick out of having your brain baked."

"C'mon, man. You're the best scripter around. I know you can write me something, anything. Or, you know, give me one of your old backups."

Gage's HUD flashed as Nano struggled in a crosswind before reacquiring the signal. When Recoil's image reappeared, he had one black paw braced under his chin.

"—write your own damn code, you useless, parasitic script-kiddie. It ain't that hard."

"Says you." Gage unhooked the shoulder strap from his portable rig and lay back, crossing his arms behind his head. "Look, I'll see if I can find a back door, but I need something better than what I've got. This job isn't as easy as I was lead to believe."

"And whose fault is that?" Recoil scratched a claw along the white stripe that ran between his eyes. "The thing you gotta ask yourself is, why a dusty old museum is using high-grade firewalls? I mean, this whole gig smells like a vat of biowaste from some black market chop shop."

"I know it does. But hear me out." Gage sat up and tapped the tiny keyboard. "I've been looking over the blueprints and this used to be an historic building of some kind. Stove fired bricks and everything. Yet someone's retrofitted it with stealth plating and signal dampeners. I can't see past the outer facade." He shook his head. "You have to admit you're at least a little curious as to what's inside."

Recoil grunted as he turned his head to the side and curled his lip, his sharp teeth glistening in the pale monitor light.

"Nomad has the best contracts on the net right now," Gage continued. "I mean, how can you pass up two million credits?"

The line crackled as Recoil barked out a laugh. "Nomad also has a reputation for getting freelancers killed. Why do you think I passed on this job?"

Gage tapped a claw against his goggles. "It's good pay. We'd have enough to buy that new rig you were drooling over. Or take a vacation. You know, somewhere there's sun."

"I don't know..."

"Two million credits," Gage hissed through his teeth. "Split seventy-

thirty."

"Sixty-forty and you give me a day to think on it."

"Fifty-fifty and you don't." Gage leaned forward, his fingers laced together. "I'm literally on my knees begging you."

"Zeus, damn you to Hades." Recoil sighed into the com-link. "All right. I'm sending you something. But don't blame me if you get fried. I ain't giving you coin to pay the ferryman."

"It's all good, baby. You know I'm too quick to die easy." Gage grinned. "And thanks. I owe you, big time."

"Whatever."

The image faded from his goggles, replaced by a neon green status bar. Then a ping as he downloaded the ICE cracker. He could tell it was dated from the first few lines of code, but otherwise it was solid programming. Now he just had to figure out *if* there was a back door.

"Nano."

"Beep."

"The building to the north is as old as this one. Go search the lower floors and see if there's a sealed door or old ductwork that connects them."

As the little robot disappeared down the side of the building, Gage got up from his hiding spot and leaned out over the roof. From this height, he could look down on the tiny spire of the Space Needle. The ancient tower was once the tallest building in the area. Funny how now it was barely visible amid the cluster of super skyscrapers.

It could have been early morning or twilight, for all the harsh LED light pollution. He'd be lucky if he could see a single star.

Idly, his finger toyed over his utility belt as he gazed through the monstrous columns at the tiny sliver of moonlight, sparkling over placid Puget Sound. At least that was one part of mother nature that modern technology couldn't blot out—yet.

He smoothed his paw down the black nylon fabric of his shirt and traced a finger over the vinyl stripes across his chest. It was an old habit; checking for frayed strings or holes in the cloth, from back when he was at the orphanage. Of course the shirt was pristine but it gave him comfort when he was anxious.

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Sure, he had microdrives packed with software for almost any situation, but this was not the usual dish. His virtual means had already failed him once on this gig, and even with Recoil's toys at his disposal, it didn't look promising.

He might have to use some of his other tools. His wide pointed ears perked as he slid his screw driver from its sleeve. It'd been too long since he'd done any old-fashioned, down and dirty B&E work and the anticipation sparked an electric charge in his nerves.

"Bip-bip!"

Nano's view popped up on the screen. And from the looks of it, the drone had found a dingy old basement, crowded with scuffed wooden frames, disintegrating boxes, and disheveled furniture coated in a thick layer of dust. But none of that mattered compared to the camera's main focus. There, mounted dead center on the wall, back behind the crates, next to a rusted metal frame, was an interface box.

"Bip?"

"I see it." Gage licked his lips. "Good job, Nano. I'll be right—"

The view spun around with the force of a leaf caught in a whirlwind. Nano tried to focus, but the little camera couldn't keep up with the erratic movement of the beetle sized droid. Gage lurched from the sudden wave of vertigo as blurry gray shapes swam in his vision. Down to the floor, the flash of a wall, then up toward the ceiling before the screen dimmed.

"Got-cha!"

Gage clamped his paws over his ears, unable to block out the deafening, distorted voice.

A flash of light, high-pitched feedback, screeching claws on slate, gnashing, sharp teeth, then...

Blank screen.

"Nano?" Gage called as he braced on the railing, ignoring the sharp throbbing in his head. "Nano!"

The only response was soft, even static, flat-lined through the micro-receiver, echoing deep in his aching head.

He bared his teeth in savage fear. "Shit!"

TWO

Gage's knuckles clenched as he slapped his rig shut and snapped it to his shoulder strap. *Gods damn this job, and this ugly-ass building*, he thought. Why couldn't anything ever be simple? Even the fire escape was on the opposite side from where he needed to go, so he had no choice but to do things the hard way. He dug his hands in his belt, slid his fingers into the hard rings of his steel climbing claws, and vaulted over the guardrail, growling under his breath.

As the thick hooks on his right hand caught the edge of the side moulding, his spiked cleats dug into the mortar and crevices of the worn brick-lined facade. Like a monkey on a jungle gym, he skittered down the side of the building: dropping a level, catching with his other hand, flipping to another ledge, dropping again. Floor after floor, he passed by rows of dark windows as he made his hasty descent.

He'd stopped counting the floors by the time he found a choice landing on a stone overhang that reached toward the neighboring building. Perched on the narrow ledge, with one foot on the weathered stonework and the other braced against the edge of a window, he reached into his back pocket.

A red laser flashed in front of his eyes.

Spinning on one foot, he teetered for a heart-skipping moment. The hooks on his left hand slipped with a sickening rasp of metal on stone. Then he caught himself with both claws and flattened his body into a painfully tight alcove.

The little red dot casually traced over the area where he'd been. Up and down. Right to left. The pattern repeated twice more, eerily echoing the shape of a cross.

It stopped just shy of his armpit before it retreated.

"Gods!" He let out a breath of relief and his tail flicked with irritation. So they had motion probes too. Wherever those had come from, he had no idea. A hidden switch must have tripped somewhere. Probably something simple he'd overlooked. Now, the night was turning into one heaping pile of crap stacked on top of another.

Giving his body a firm shake to loosen his taut muscles, he steeled

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his nerves and glanced across the way. The gap was only a dozen feet or so but if he slipped again, it'd be a couple hundred feet before his body broke on the street below. So he retrieved the lance from the pouch belted around his waist and gave it a quick twist.

It was older tech, but Gage was a stickler for retro gadgets. Plus, it had the advantage of running on twin nitro pistons. It never needed charging and only required a single crank to prime it. Outdated yet eternally reliable.

Bending his knee up, he dug his heel into the side of the alcove and braced his back against the wall. With careful aim, he lined up the shot. Then...

Piff... clack.

The anchor bit into the concrete across the way. After securing the line on his side, Gage tested the tension with a quick yank. Then he hooked the climbing claws on the cable and stepped off the ledge.

The drop into nothingness made his stomach lurch like it wanted to flee. But the taut line held his weight and in seconds his latent fears were forgotten. Only the rush of cold air remained, plastered against his muzzle, whistling in his ears, a sharp thrill of adrenaline spiking along his nerves.

Flying fox, he thought as his lip curled back in a toothy grin. Too bad there was no time to enjoy it.

Gage alighted on the opposite ledge, kicking up a plume of dust as he skidded into a crouch. With his muscles flexed and his tail low to the ground, he glanced over the edge for good measure.

He scanned the murky gap between the two buildings. No robotic sentries. No pinpoints of red death. His presence had remained unnoticed, for now.

He blew out a long breath.

Flicking the release on the lance, the cable snaked back to the hilt with a lightning fast whip. Then he secured it his belt.

After that, it was easy. This building was even older than the one next door, with crags in its facade that made for a swift descent to the ground floor. Gage bounded down to the street and slunk into a shadowed corner of the alley.

There, behind a squarish modular garbage container—which had been part of some kind of environmentally progressive city initiative a decade ago, but now sat forgotten and covered in grime—Gage found what he was looking for. A window. But not just any window. This one was a dark half-sized window at street level, and it was on the northwest corner, which meant it must lead to the basement and better yet, it would be close to the ducts that connected the buildings.

The glass was stained with an oily brown residue, which stank like burned rubber and made Gage's nose twitch. It was no use trying to peer inside so he'd just have to trust his instincts that he was in the right place. The window looked just big enough for an enterprising fox to squeeze through, if he didn't mind getting whatever that nasty stuff was on his fur. Oh well, at least that part was one of the more common job hazards. Not like dealing with hostile military-grade software.

After using a flexible metal shim to pry open the window and a thin pointed tool from his kit to snap the brittle lock mechanism, Gage slipped inside the murky basement. He wrinkled his nose as his eyes adjusted to the low light. It wasn't just the dust, which he could tell had been stirred up recently, but also thick, stale air and sickly sweet smells of old rust and anti-freeze.

At least he recognized the layout from Nano's earlier display, so he didn't have to go far. It was just around that pile of old crates, between those overstacked teetering shelves and then around the corner. Gage slunk forward, holding his breath and flattening his ears as he squeezed past the shelves.

The interface box should be right there. Just a few more steps through the doorway. Then he could retrieve the small robot from whatever strange fate had befallen it, and get on with—

Gage turned the corner and froze. Ducking back, he quickly peered around the wall.

In the middle of the small room sat a hunched, vaguely humanoid form silhouetted in blue screen-light. Its back was turned, and pointed ears stuck up from its head, much like his own. Except it wasn't a fox. Despite the dark form-fitting clothing, he could make out gray fur and broad shoulders. This was worse. Much worse.

Wolf.

A wolf had moved into his hunting grounds.

His lip curled involuntarily.

To say that a wolf meant trouble was an understatement, and there was never just one wolf. Lupines had these bizarre large families with brothers and cousins that came out of the woodwork, sneaking around when you didn't expect it, and then *BAM* there were five wolves, which no fox could ever compete with. Besides that, they were crafty and underhanded and self-serving and...

Gage shook his head.

Just then, the creature's ears swiveled back.

"I know you're there." The voice was a soft growl, almost a whisper against the cold concrete walls.

Gage's heart skipped and his eyes widened. Not because he'd been discovered; he could outrun most anything. But the pitch of the voice, with its subtle melody, stopped him cold.

His jaw worked before his brain finally engaged.

"You're a girl?" he squeaked.

The wolf shot him a baleful look over her shoulder, brows lowered, teeth bared. Then her paw flashed in the air.

The knife thunked in the door frame, just above his head. He ducked down, belatedly and raised his paws.

"Whoa, now!" he shouted with his ears folded back.

"Call me a girl again and the next one's going between your legs." The wolf turned back to the computer screen on the floor.

Gage glanced up at the quivering blade. She was a lone wolf, he decided.

He'd never met a wolf on its own. *Her own*, he corrected himself. Or even spoken to one. And despite his predisposition to avoid lupines, he found her intriguing. *What was a lone female wolf doing in here anyway?*

He cautiously entered the room.

"Hey, I'm not trying to bother you, but did you happen to see or—" He swallowed. "—*eat* a micro drone recently?"

The wolf chuckled, her eyes fixed on her rig. "Did Nomad send you?"

Gage's ears snapped to attention. "I don't know who you're talking

about and to be frank—" He glanced back at the dagger in the wall. "It's really none of your business."

"But you're trying to get into the building next door, right?" Her claws clacked on the keys in front of her. "The name's Aurora. You ever climb through a vent before?"

How did she—

Stunned by the shotgun approach of her seemingly prescient questions, Gage found himself at a loss for words.

There were two options. One, that the wolf—Aurora—was working for the competition, whomever that might be. But Gage had to admit that didn't make any sense. The job wasn't the type to attract much competition, not with this kind of security in the mix. Besides, shadowy middlemen like Nomad liked to keep things under wraps—which meant he would have already pulled out if there were risks of exposure.

So if Aurora wasn't working for an opposing interest, and she knew about things she shouldn't know about—namely Gage's contact—then that left a possibility that Gage liked not at all. She might have been hired by Nomad as well. For the same job no less. Which only made too much sense considering how disposable Gage felt at the moment.

Aurora's golden eyes glittered in the glare of the computer screen as she scanned through layers of code. "I need you to put this thumb drive in the terminal on the other side of the door."

"Why, in Apollo's name, would I do that?"

"Because otherwise—" She glanced up at him. "The security system will engage and riddle that fine red fur coat of yours with holes."

Gage gaped for a moment. Then he slid his rig out and popped it open. He tilted his head at the terminal on the wall. "I've got an ICE cracker for just such an—"

She snatched it out of his hands, wrenching his shoulder strap.

"Hey, that's—" he yelped in surprise.

Undeterred, the wolf scanned the screen with an intent look in her eyes.

"The code is good, but it's old." She shoved the computer back into his hands. "The system was updated two days ago. Your program isn't worth micro-crap here." Her hands continued flying over her keyboard as

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if he'd never been there.

Gage cradled the flat rig against his chest. "Well, I—I mean—I guess I could—"

"Do it if you're going to do it." She sneered at the screen. "Otherwise, get out of my way."

Gage glanced up at the vent cover. It was a good eight feet above the floor but that wasn't the problem.

He hadn't signed up for any of this. Least of all, trusting a wolf with a know-it-all attitude, a sarcastic demeanor, and fierce golden eyes that made him feel as if he'd been caught in a trap. The worst part was that he couldn't say no to her. Honestly, he didn't know why. Maybe part of him wanted to give it a shot. Gods knew, he'd run out of other options as far as this job went.

Of course, it would turn out badly. It always did when he messed with apex carnivores.

"Well?" She shot him a calculating look. "Don't tell me you're scared, Mister-I-don't-have-a-name."

Gage frowned, his brow furrowed. "I'm—uh—Fox," he stuttered.

She stopped typing and slowly turned around to stare at him. "Seriously?"

Gage nodded. He knew it was silly, but it was the only thing he could think of at that moment. His handle was sacred and the last thing he needed was for the authorities to find out who he was. He never gave his net name to anyone when he was on the ground. Things were just safer that way.

"Wow." She breathed with a shrug and turned her focus back to the computer. "Chop-chop. Time's a wastin'. Fox." She chuckled under her breath.

Gage cleared his throat. "Why don't you do it?"

"You think it's because I'm too large to fit through the air duct?" Aurora brought her hands to her chest, giving her breasts a defiant squeeze through her black tank top.

Gage blushed as his eyes focused on the diamond-shaped tuft of white fur peeking out above her cleavage. He hadn't even realized he was looking *there*.

"No—of course not." Heat crept up his neck, making the hairs on his nape prickle. "Just, you know. It sounds like you could do this yourself. So why me?"

"Like I told you—" Her brows lowered as she glanced back at the computer and typed out a string of code. "The security system needs to be shut down from the inside. There's only one way to do it, and it takes both of us, or we're both screwed."

He rubbed his chin. Of course, she hadn't told him any of that. But now he was listening.

Aurora stopped typing and took a deep breath. "Look, the system has a delay to prevent false kills, but it's short. The door must open once it's been triggered or it'll go off and it's game over for everyone. But the door can't be opened from this side so I need to go with a remote receiver. Only there's not enough time for me to plug it in and get back here to turn it off."

"Oh." Gage cocked his head. "I think I get it. So, how much time do I have?"

"From when you plug it in..." She thought for a moment. "About ten seconds."

Gage's eyes widened. "What?"

Aurora grinned, her pointed teeth shining in the dim light. "Don't worry, babe. I'll have the door open before you can break a sweat."

"But—" He scratched a claw along his temple. "If we're after the same thing—not that I'm admitting to anything but, you know—hypothetically..."

Her grin widened. "Split fifty-fifty?"

Gage hummed to himself as he weighed the situation. He had been willing to split the spoils with Recoil, but that was before the lousy skunk had given him useless code. Now, he had help. And she obviously knew how to code, which was Gage's only weakness.

The ten second timer was another thing. He wouldn't have known about it if it wasn't for her, which meant she'd already saved him from one possible future as a charred pile of fox fur.

It might be worth the trouble. Or at least he could agree to it until he found a way to ditch her.

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"Okay." He nodded. "Deal."

"Good." Her eyes dropped back to her computer. "Now if we're done chatting about your insecurities, I have a class A vault to break into."

With an impatient tug, she removed the finger-length microdrive from her rig and tossed it to Gage. "Just plug that in before the drones activate."

THREE

Gage growled to himself as he caught the memory stick in one hand. Then he took a deep breath and lowered his mirrored goggles. Whoever this wolf thought she was, she didn't deserve to see the anger welling up in his eyes or how much her words made him bristle. What did she expect from him anyway? Gratitude?

Sure, he'd agreed to her terms for the time being but that didn't make him feel better about being her errand boy. He wanted to crush the microdrive in his fist, if for nothing else but payback for his little droid. Nano had scoped the area long before she showed up and ruined everything. This was his gig. Who was she to give the orders?

But rather than argue the fact, he slid the drive into his breast pocket and approached the wall. Reaching up with both arms, he focused his frustration on the old, stubborn grate with a forceful, determined yank. It took him another try before it began to wiggle. Then, as it gave way with a screech of protest, he primed his sights for ultra-night-vision and hoisted himself up into the ventilation shaft.

It was obvious from the musty layer of dust that it hadn't been functional for years, probably before they retrofitted the building on the other side. As he struggled, inching through the tight space with just his elbows and knees, he caught the telltale glow of motion lasers at the other end of the tunnel.

I must be insane, he thought as he moved closer. I can't get around this.

Through the thin slats, he eyed a web-like maze of red beams, crisscrossing the hallway beyond. Intricate and foreboding, the crimson latticework glared back at him from its dark backdrop, stretching to

infinity.

No. He gulped. I am insane.

But there was no helping that now. Twisting his arm back, he squeezed his hand into the utility pouch over his hip. Using just the tips of his claws, he pinched the thin folding knife and carefully slid it free.

The tiny blade was nothing special. In this day and age, people would have called it primitive. But Gage liked keeping things simple. If the tool worked, why criticize it for not having a circuit board or port to jack into?

The vent cover on this end was made from so-called indestructible neo-alloy, which had been all the rage in building materials before Gage was born, and then abandoned shortly thereafter. It wasn't that there was any problem with the stuff itself, but more so that the proprietary epoxy they used to install it had a tendency to degrade. Which, in Gage's terms, meant the buildings were even more vulnerable—that was, if they didn't have hostile systems waiting on the other side.

With practiced reflexes, he quickly wedged the blade along the already-weakened seam, until the grate was almost free. Then he gently pushed out one side while squeezing his fingers into the gap to grip that edge. It pinched his knuckles and his claws dug against the metal, but he held it tight, while with his free hand ran the knife through the remaining gummy cement.

The weighty metal suddenly popped and he winced, sucking in a sharp breath as he caught it with both sets of claws. The last thing he needed to do was drop it right through a motion sensor.

Sliding onto his back, he bent his knees up to his chest and hooked his ankle spikes against the sides of the vent. Then he uncurled, stretching backward out of the opening. His spine burned from the strain and his goggles slid back, but he ignored both as minor inconveniences.

With his teeth bared, he eyed the wire-thin lasers, focused on either side of him, barely inches from his orange and white fur.

The one thing he could be absolutely proud of was his flexibility, although hanging upside down and backwards might have been pushing it. His muscles would be sore by morning, for sure.

Flexing his arms back behind his head, he carefully leaned the grate ; against the wall console, set about five feet above the ground. Then he

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slipped one paw in the breast pocket of his shirt to retrieve the micro-drive.

It was a simple display, with just an interface jack and readout. Nothing fancy like the rest of this outfit. But the wolf was right. This was far beyond anything Gage had ever dealt with. If he'd been alone, he might have just given up, been caught—or worse yet—gotten fried.

Once again, the questions rose like a swarm of insect-drones in his mind. What did she know? Specifically, did she know what she was doing? And more important than that, was she actually working with him, or against him? After all, it was his skin hanging on a finger length of steel.

He suddenly stopped, his body frozen, his paws poised midway to the terminal.

The soft click would have been barely audible down the hallway, but it was like a siren to Gage's sensitive hearing. His body ached but he held still, upside down, his legs straining to keep him from falling head first onto the shiny, marble floor.

His ears twitched as he caught the sound again and his eyes snapped to his left.

Twenty yards down the hall, his cyber-enhanced night vision gradually etched out the green silhouette of an approaching orb. At first he couldn't comprehend what he was seeing. Hovering through the web of lasers, the metal drone moved with graceful yet decisive ease.

Then he sucked in a breath as ice ran through his veins. *Death Angel.*

He'd seen one once, at a security conference. A spherical robot, floating on QuietAir technology, originally designed to clean offices. But some bozo had decided it would be better to pack it with twin forty-five caliber cannons, fed by double ammo drums, strategically placed in the back of the round metal body. They might be pistol caliber bullets, but the presenters boasted over a thousand rounds a minute. Military-grade firepower at a consumer level, based on a sanitation-ware AI that was hell-bent on purifying anything in its path. It was a stupid idea, but the company sold several thousand during its first year of production.

They smugly called it a Death Angel, and the name stuck, even on the streets, since, as the robot opened, the panels on the sides swung up, giving it the look of a very round, angelic murder-machine.

The micro-stick slipped from his fingers and bounced off his muzzle. Pure reflex drove his other hand to catch it before it fell out of reach, but the sudden movement threw him off balance. His shoulder nudged the wall, and his head bumped against the grate.

The deafening crash of metal on stone echoed through the building.

Gage's heart skipped and his stomach lurched into the back of his throat. It was all he could do to hold onto his tenuous grip as his ears rang and his teeth clenched. Slowly, he glanced back down the hall as the sound dissipated.

The orb had stopped, but beaming cones of light shot from its face, whiting out Gage's night-vision. It had activated its diagnostic mode. That meant it could see his movement, his body heat—hell, even the carbon dioxide streaming through his nostrils.

Oh f—

He clamped one hand on the terminal and slipped the drive into the receiving port before his thumb jabbed the manual upload.

Even upside down, he could make out the tiny letters "*processing*" in a cool, unsympathetic blue.

The kill-bot advanced at a quicker pace, gliding over the marble floor with focused determination.

Gage tensed his abdomen and heaved himself up so he could reach his feet, and the ledge where his ankle spikes dug into the degraded metal. If he got a hold, he might have some cover in the cramped vent.

"Identify," stated the orb as it hovered closer. "Ten seconds to disarm."

"Shut off," Gage squealed.

Then his fingers slipped and his muscles cramped from the prolonged strain. He'd have to unhook one of his legs and use his elbow to contort his body.

"Invalid," replied the droid. "Identify. Five seconds to disarm."

He was going to die. Gage knew it down to the base of his spine. His joints weren't going to bend the way he wanted. With fear driving one last attempt, he dug his nails into the wall and tried to lift pressure off his right leg. Never mind that it might break his back, bending into the vent like a pretzel in a soda straw. At least he'd have better odds of surviving.

The metal groaned as the added weight on his left side split the vent

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seam and bent toward him with a sudden jolt.

"Crap!" Gage screamed as he let go.

Only the spike didn't slip. For a moment he hung in front of the kill-bot, his arms splayed, one foot held captive in the metal vent above. Of all the things he could regret, he never imagined it would be the exceptional quality of his ankle spurs.

"Invalid. Engaging termination protocol."

That was it. His last chance. *Nixed. Nada. Zilch.* Just a dead fox on the wall.

Gage closed his eyes as the egg-like machine cracked open. He remembered what the cannons looked like; long, smooth, black metal, anchored to their curved, dark wings. An angel set in onyx, birthing a pair of white hot torches to deliver forth the judgment of a quick death. Or at least he hoped it would be quick.

Then a booming crash jarred him, reverberating down to the marrow of his bones.

Then deathly silence.

For a long moment he feared opening his eyes. Maybe he'd died and would awaken in the underworld, stuck in Purgatory until he could account for his misdeeds. Or somehow he'd transferred his consciousness onto the net, forever trapped in a spinning funnel of code and energy.

But that was just fantasy. He wasn't even jacked in.

Gradually, he became aware of the beating in his ears. His heart, pumping blood to pool in his inverted skull. *Alive*, he thought with relief.

He blinked, wincing in anticipation of what he might see. Only the round droid was no longer hovering. Sitting in a pile on the floor, it listed to one side with its lights out and sensors off, the large gun barrels only halfway out of the still, metal carcass. In fact, the entire hallway had gone dark except for the terminal on the wall.

He blinked again, disbelief blurring his vision.

"*Deactivated*," it read in an angular green font.

The hiss from the door woke him from his adrenaline driven haze and the wolf strode past him, her face fixed on the flat computer in her hands.

"Stop wasting time," she said with an offhanded wave. "This will only hold for a few minutes. We need to get inside before the system comes

back online." Her voice trailed behind her as she continued walking.

"Wait!" Gage hissed as he struggled to free his foot. "I'm stuck—"

The metal suddenly gave way, releasing the climbing hooks and dropping him on his head.

FOUR

Damn her. That was Gage's first thought when he raised his chin from the marble floor and blinked away the spots in his vision. This was quickly followed by a wince of pain, not from one particular place, but rather from all over his body.

His muscles felt like they'd been used as a rubber band and it was a small miracle that his arms were still in their sockets. There was a tender lump forming on the top of his head and one of his canines had punctured his lip.

Gage groaned, rolled onto all fours, and pushed his goggles back up. The clicking of Aurora's claws had faded down the dark hall, almost out of earshot. He stood up slowly, rubbing the bruised spot between his ears. Then he muttered a curse and dashed after her.

"Were you—" he gasped, out of breath, as he caught up with the wolf. "Were you trying to get me killed?"

I should have known better than to go along with her, he accused himself between ragged breaths. *Never trust a lupine.*

Aurora didn't break her stride. She didn't even bother looking at him.

"If I'd been trying to kill you, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

"Then what took you so long?"

"The program executed in nine point eight two seconds, beating my trial time by almost two tenths of a second." She rolled her eyes. "It's not my fault you alerted the droid before taking another second and a half to engage the micro drive."

"You waited on purpose." Gage curled his sore lip, showing his teeth. "You wanted me to look bad—No!—to fail!" He pointed a claw at her back. "You were hoping I'd get vaporized just as you opened the door. But you misjudged how long it would take for the weapon systems to engage,"

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so—”

Aurora cut him off with a throaty chortle. “Are you always this paranoid?”

Are you always such a bitch? Gage wanted to ask, but instead he grunted and bit back the retort. If she was upset by missing her chance to kill him, she didn’t show it. She was having too much fun tormenting him by twisting his words back at him. Dealing with her was impossible, and the worst part was that ever present smirk on her face, like everything was a game to her.

“Admit it.” Gage said with a scowl. “It crossed your mind, didn’t it? As soon as that door opened, you didn’t need me anymore.”

Aurora shot him a look full of daggers. “I don’t need you. But don’t presume to judge me you yappy—suspicious—cat burglar!” She tossed her head and continued on, her ears back, her face closer to the computer screen.

Gage blinked and faltered half a step before he caught up with her again. Maybe he’d hit a nerve there, whatever that was. Well, it served her right for almost getting him killed. Whether intentional or not.

Frigid silence settled over them as they made their way down the long corridor. It was just as well too. Gage had nothing to say to her that he wouldn’t regret.

But as much as he’d intended to keep all his thoughts to himself, a sharp intake of breath escaped his lips as they rounded a corner. The building was empty. No, worse than empty. Gutted. A shadowy forest of exposed beams and wires.

“This was supposed to be an old museum, right?” Gage whispered.

The wolf merely snorted as she strode across the room toward what looked like an elevator shaft.

“Damn it!” Gage swore as he caught up with her again. This wasn’t right. In fact, nothing about this job had been right in the least. And of course, the only person who might have answers wasn’t very forthcoming.

“I’m not paranoid,” Gage muttered.

Finally, the wolf paused, looking at him with a feral glint in her eyes. “You’re a fox. You can’t help it.”

Gage squinted. “What do you know about this?” he asked, ignoring

her barb.

"We go up." She waved her hand at the bare ductwork overhead. "Avoid robots and whatever cyber-security. Find what we're looking for. That simple enough for you?"

Gage shook his head. "What else?"

"Why does there have to be something else?"

"It's just... I'm not buying it. Why would Nomad hire *both* of us anyway?"

She gave him a cool, level stare.

"I mean, you *are* working for Nomad right?"

"You ask too many questions, Fox."

"Maybe I don't want to die."

Aurora rolled her eyes. "There you go again."

Gage gritted his teeth. Now this was going in circles. He hadn't managed to make a single point, let alone get any information out of her. Why the hell had he teamed up with a wolf anyway? It wasn't like he didn't know better.

He folded his arms and chewed at the sore spot on his lip as he watched her fiddle with the elevator call panel. It wasn't until she'd popped open the face and hooked her rig up to an interface port that it occurred to him what she was doing.

"You're insane if you think you're taking the elevator."

She stared down at the computer screen. "I'm not walking. It's like ten floors up."

"We'd be sitting ducks the second that door opens."

"Not if I reprogram the security feed to make it look like we're in the elevators on the opposite side of the building, and going down. All the firepower upstairs will rush down here to chase after our ghosts."

"That will never work." Gage wrinkled his nose. "And it's too complicated for a quick chop job. I doubt you could pull off that kind of hack in a week, let alone in a few minutes."

"Says a poseur fox with no name and no skills."

Gage blinked. "What?"

"Fox with no skills," she hummed to herself, not bothering to look up. "And deaf, apparently."

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"I heard you the first time!" Gage spat.

The wolf chuckled under her breath.

Gage looked down at the floor as heat flooded his face and the fur on his neck bristled. If he had to be honest, then her plan wasn't half bad. That was, if she could pull off the kind of cyberspace gymnastics she was claiming. Which he doubted.

There was no way the average Joe—or Jane—hacker could gain access to this level of security system on a hostile militarized network and even understand the notation, let alone try to reprogram anything in such a way that it might go unnoticed. Recoil couldn't do that. No one could. Not in a couple of minutes. That kind of stunt would take months of preparation to have the slightest chance of succeeding.

Besides, she obviously didn't want him around. So what did he care if she took the elevator and got herself blasted? *I don't care*, he told himself. Not one bit. Definitely not about a wolf anyway.

"Fine," Gage huffed, flicking his mirrored glasses back down over his eyes. "You don't need my *no skills*, anyway. I'm taking the stairs."

FIVE

The climb up the stairs wasn't too bad. That was, if Gage ignored the sharp throb in his knee, the knot in his shoulder, and the odd kink that had somehow developed at the tip of his tail.

It twitched with a sting, like a thorn gyrating in a tender wound as he made his way upward, floor after laborious floor. But regardless, trudging up the dusty concrete stairs with only the spider web cracks in the walls for companionship, was a far sight better than meeting his untimely end trapped in a steel box. With a vapid wolf.

Gods damn it! He cursed his own thoughts for turning back to her. But there was no help for it. She had no right to say those things about him—even if they were true. Who did she think she was anyway? The goddess of I'm-Better-Than-You?

Gage chewed on that question as he rounded the corner, and then he stopped with one foot hovering over the bottom step of the next flight. It would have been the last set of stairs before the landing. The final floor,

leading to his destination.

But a wall of whitewashed bricks glared back at him, too bright in the faded grayish interior. There was no doorway. Just a thick walled dead-end after the top step.

He blinked twice. Then he set his foot down. Okay, well, he'd have to backtrack; down one floor and then he'd find a way up through the ductwork. He already knew that despite all the state-of-the-art security, the building's occupants had somehow neglected the ventilation system. Good thing too or he'd be out of a job, for sure.

Never underestimate the rich to be short sighted, he'd told Recoil whenever they went out for a job together. And Gage had become quite the expert at spotting the little things the fat-cats had missed.

After tromping back downstairs to the last door he'd passed—a steel reinforced monstrosity which still managed to fall prey to his lock picks—Gage stuck his nose out into the dark, empty hallway. The air here was cleaner than downstairs, tinged with a slight trace of ozone, like an industrial air purifier had been running too long. Yet there were no vents to be seen.

That didn't worry him, though. He just followed his nose until he found what he was looking for; a set of thick conduits winding their way up the wall to an artfully disguised faux-stone ceiling tile. And as he climbed the snakelike tubes, the air pressure increased, blowing down on his face.

He pushed the plank up with an easy smile. *Let's see that wolf do something like this*, he thought as he crawled into the shaft.

Through the maze of old concrete crawl spaces and exposed ductwork, Gage scrambled up to the next level. There were dead ends, of course, not to mention dust-clogged micromesh insulation that clung to his fur, and some kind of dripping, acrid-smelling liquid, which he did his best to avoid.

But despite all that, he didn't see any more motion lasers when he glanced out through the occasional vent. Better yet, no Death Angels. That was one horror of technology that he'd never intended to face. And now that he had, he decided that his life could only be complete if he died without seeing another.

In the dark, his cyber-enhanced night vision illuminated shapes and

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outlines, hints of the world outside the network of disembodied vents. Crumbling pillars, cracked moulding. It was absurd to think that someone had spent hundreds of millions of credits on the security for this place while at the same time allowing the inside to rot.

He focused in on a spot of light, up above a set of junction boxes near the ceiling. Another grate leading up to only Zeus knew what.

Gage scaled the wall, hooking his climbing spikes over the latticework of conduits and pipes while using back to brace in the tight space. Whatever the building had been in a past life, it certainly required a lot of power. Maybe that was the reason it had been chosen for whatever underground purpose it once served; easy upgrade to the grid.

Either way, it wasn't his concern. He had a job to do and, as much as he disliked to admit it, the next part wouldn't be easy to handle on his own. Not that he needed help from that obnoxious wolf, of course... but maybe things would have been simpler.

Bracing in the tight vent, he carefully worked his knife along the side of the grate above his head. Then, with practiced paws, he gently pushed it up and slid it off to the side. His ears twitched as he slowly raised up, listening for anything out of the ordinary. Only there was nothing. Not even the low mechanical whir of air being pushed through the ducts. *Too quiet.*

Using his arms for leverage, he pulled himself up and crouched on the smooth floor. Also too clean. The walls here were plain and spotless, a pale, shimmery off-white that leaned toward a cream color.

No signs, no doors, nor any other indication of where he was. Only a maze of dark hallways and deathly silence.

Before standing up, Gage removed his climbing hooks and secured them to his belt, one on each side so they wouldn't clink together. Then he slid the straps of his metal claws so they were safely over the backs of his hands. Padding over the marble floors, he jogged from hall to hall, the muted rustle of his footsteps leaving hollow echoes in his acute ears.

He couldn't be that far off from his quarry, if only he could find some frame of reference, a hint as to his location. There had to be at least one door on this floor. With any luck, it would lead to a large room filled with more doors. At least that's what he was looking for.

But each intersection he passed looked the same: long murky corridors and cream-colored walls, with that strange faux-marble, highly polished facade. Backtracking only made things worse. When he retraced his steps to the vent he'd used to enter the gods-forsaken maze, he only found the same gleaming stone-like veneer that covered the entire floor. Silky smooth and mocking him.

A shiver of doubt wormed its way up his spine. Although he was loath to admit it, he was solidly lost.

"Who builds a room without doors or windows?" Gage whispered as his shoulders slumped and he stared at the floor.

A guttural scream echoed from the hallway to his right, shattering his idle thoughts with a jolt. Without thinking, Gage jumped and raced toward the sound. Down the corridor. Right at the first intersection. Then down a long hallway. Had he seen that one before? Did it matter? His pulse pounded and his footsteps made quick slaps on the stone floor—but he didn't bother trying to muffle the sound.

He slid around the last corner and skidded to a stop, blinking.

A funnel of light danced in front of a door, the first one he'd seen in the last however-many minutes he'd been wandering around. The wolf's face dipped into view briefly before she stepped back with another loud curse.

"By the sun-bleached balls of Icarus, open damn you!" Her fingers danced over the small computer balanced precariously with a flashlight in her other hand. "Take the damn script. Agh!"

Gage sauntered toward her and slid his goggles up on his forehead, a crooked smile stretched around his muzzle. "Trouble?" he asked with amusement.

She jumped and stared at him, wide-eyed, for a moment. "You?" She cleared her throat as she looked away with a shake of her head. "I thought you'd run off with your tail between your legs."

To be honest, Gage couldn't have said why he'd chased after the sound of her frustrated howl or why being stuck in her company was any better than being lost and alone in the maze. Just that a cool wave of relief had washed through his veins when he rounded that corner, and it wasn't only the fact that she'd found the door.

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Still, he didn't need to acknowledge that her stunt with the elevators must have worked, or that he was glad she was here and not a bloody wolf-skin rug, riddled with holes on the ground floor. It wasn't like she needed any more excuses to be smug, or an opening to say "I told you so." So he would just keep that part to himself.

Gage rolled his eyes. "I'm not giving up," he said, reaching behind his back to the pair of pliers tucked in his utility belt. "Not yet, anyway. Here."

He knelt down and leaned under the access terminal she'd been trying to hack. "This isn't a software driven security door," he stated as he unlatched the conduit under the box. "It's old tech, maybe to scare off the keyboard jockeys." He gave a chuckle as the metal pipe loosened.

With two quick snips, he cut the brown and blue wires, the ones that controlled the hydraulics and the lock. The door gave a gentle hiss as the pressure seeped out, releasing the bolts holding it closed. Then it slowly cracked open.

The wolf looked at him in surprise as he stood up. There, in her golden eyes, something flickered, shrouded and brief. Maybe it was a glimmer of respect. Or maybe he'd imagined it. Either way, it was a better view than the back of her head. At least she wasn't mocking him anymore.

He smiled to himself, waiting. But she didn't say a word. Although she must have been thinking something behind that calculating stare; but whatever it was, he might never know.

As the uncomfortable silence stretched, Gage cleared his throat and took a breath. "I may not know how to code, but I know what tool to use for the job." Dropping his eyes, he stepped into the room so she wouldn't see the color blooming under the fur on his cheeks. "Come on. We've got work to do."

SIX

It was Aurora's sharp intake of breath that caused him to finally glance up, and he stopped mid-stride, his ears perked as a shiver shot up his spine.

After walking through the sterile, whitewashed hallways, Gage couldn't wrap his brain around the shimmering mirage come to life before

him.

His sharp gaze flicked away from the thin beam of Aurora's flashlight to dart around the perimeter of the cavernous, circular room. He didn't need light, of course, since his enhanced vision was better than Aurora's. But what he saw only led to more unanswered questions and a terrible yet certain unease.

For one thing, he'd been lied to. This wasn't a museum, and for that matter, it was nothing like a bank vault either. No, it wouldn't be fair to call the place anything other than what it was.

A shrine.

But for what purpose?

And on that account, Gage had no clue. For once, his resolve was shaken to the base of his core. And a single thought slithered through his gut, taunting him with stubborn, merciless regret. *I should have kept my nose out of this one.*

Immense marble columns filled the room with the even-spaced order of a porcelain forest of redwoods. The ceiling, which must have been two stories high, was divided by arched vaults, giving the appearance of many separate rooms melded together. All of it glinted softly with an unnerving, almost organic glow. The strange fusion of order and chaos struck Gage as nothing short of a Romanesque hive.

And like any hive, it was not without its queen. In this case, a massive marble statue towered over the circular altar in the middle of the room: a sinuous female form with serpent-like features, poised and ready to strike.

He stared for a long moment, paralyzed by the lifelike detail of its frozen features.

Beautiful and cruel, with narrow slitted eyes, delicate flared nostrils, hair cascading in wild vine-like tendrils, and seductive lips betraying a wicked smile and sharp teeth. And the lithe body was bare, flaunting its nakedness like a knife glittering in the dark.

With a brief yet rough yank on his arm, Aurora pulled him away.

"Let's go," she said, jarring him out of the daze as she stomped to the back of the room.

Gage reluctantly followed, giving his coat a firm shake. The statue

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had just surprised him; that was all. Plus, it wasn't as if they could turn around and close the door. But he couldn't escape the weird vibe of it, like the statue wanted to eat him, or infect him, or do something... sinister. If anything, it was just a warning to anyone who would be stupid enough to enter this place.

Shaking his head, he ran a paw over his ears. As disturbing as the art was, he hadn't meant to stand there slack-jawed, as if he'd gazed upon Medusa.

His tail gave a sudden twitch and his lip curled reflexively as the reality of this situation sunk deep into his bones.

That's exactly what it was, he realized. A Gorgon in the middle of a maze. In an old deserted hi-rise building. Guarded by the deadliest hardware and software money could buy.

What the hell was he doing here?

But the answer to that question was elusive as much as fruitless to pursue. And he was no closer to finding it by the time Aurora dragged him across the murky expanse of the room, ducking around columns, and finally into an anteroom on the far side.

"What is this?" Gage whispered.

"What is what?" Aurora countered.

Gage gave an abrupt wave of his paw. "Everything."

The wolf hummed to herself, peering at the dark wall, where narrow, recessed doors were set in the stone.

"That's not an answer," Gage snarled under his breath.

But silence was her only response as she moved along the wall at a fixed pace. Then she paused in front of an empty alcove, at the end of the half-circle row of doors. It was narrow, as if it housed a planter or some other piece of art. But there were no signs of discoloration on the floor. Only a single inlaid plaque, set at eye-level with the inscription of a deity holding a pike.

She remained there for a moment, her ears perked and her nose twitching as if she had picked up on something beyond Gage's acute senses.

Gage let out a sigh. But just when he was starting to think he'd been given the cold shoulder, she glanced back, her head cocked to the side.

"This place might have belonged to some eccentric ~~methodologist~~ or one of those weird transhumanist cults. Whatever." "They have what I want and I'm going to take it."

Gage gritted his teeth. "You knew about this, didn't you?"

She shrugged again and turned, focusing her light on the ~~survivor~~.

"And you chose not to tell me. So why act like it doesn't matter?"

"Because it doesn't," she muttered under her breath.

"How can you say—"

"This place is dead," she cut him off. "So is everything in it, ~~including~~ the programs—they just don't know it yet. It's all meaningless, ~~until~~ someone builds something new from its bones." She slapped the ~~closure~~ in front of her with the palm of her hand. "That's when it matters."

A hidden panel slid open with a hiss.

"Don't mess with anything other than what we're here for," Aurora said over her shoulder as she stepped inside.

Gage blinked. She was right, of course, although he hated to admit it. Despite the strangeness of their surroundings, they still had a job to do. And she obviously knew what she was doing. Gage would have given ~~up~~ ages ago if it hadn't been for her. So what if she had a secret or two? It would all be over soon.

They were close too; he could smell it, even if it was mixed with the odor of decades old dust. The item was somewhere in this secret room. It had to be.

Then he could get out of here, collect his fat payout. Even split several ways, it amounted to more credits than he'd normally see in a year. Maybe he'd go live on a beach somewhere for a few months. Try to forget everything about this job.

The room was lined floor-to-ceiling with rows of numbered drawers and cubby holes. Beyond the doorway, it smelled of camphor and some pungent spice that tickled his nose, but the space was cleaner than he'd first thought, perfectly preserved and immaculate with no sign of age.

The wolf squeezed by him and gripped one of the drawers.

"That's not right."

Aurora froze. "What?"

Gage swallowed and licked his lips. "Nomad specifically said we

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needed item number 7-0-5-3-4.”

She relaxed her hand and cocked an eyebrow. “He did, did he?”

“You think I’d forget that?” Gage tapped the side of his goggles. “I’ve got it listed three times in my contract. I can pull it up in two seconds.”

“Okay. I believe you.” Aurora snorted a laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“As suspicious and paranoid as you are, you’re awfully talkative about your contract now. It’s bizarre.”

Gage’s eyes widened as she turned around, opened one of the larger drawers close to the ground.

“Wait—I—no.” He stepped toward her. “What are you—I mean, we should both—you know—not that I don’t trust—”

“Here.” She shoved a large, flat, round object into his arms.

Gage gaped as he hugged it close to his chest, lest it slip out of his grip. It was a decorative shield, that much was obvious. Although he was no historian, he guessed it must have been an antique, some kind of reproduction from a time when religious icons of that sort were more popular.

Made of wood and coated in thin bronze, its face was inlaid with images in red enamel and some silvery alloy. The edges were covered with battle scenes: men in armor, wielding spears and swords, clashing with each other. And in the middle, a woman with a snake-like face and burning red eyes.

“What the hell is this?”

“Item number 7-0-5-3-4.” She pushed him aside and reached for the smaller drawer. “When you’re done knocking yourself out over that, why don’t you help me a sec?”

He nodded as he continued to stare at the shield. Sure enough, there was a tag on the back with the numbers “7-0-5-3-4”. He gently set it down on the floor, propping it against the wall. If his employer wanted to pay him to steal an old shield, he wasn’t going to judge. At least it was done. Now they could get the hell out of here.

Gage exhaled a long sigh of relief.

“I’ve never stolen an artifact from a cult before. Maybe next time I should wear a fedora, you know, like that guy in those old movies...”

But the wolf remained quiet.

He glanced up to find her holding a tiny, open box lined with red satin. Her yellow eyes glittered and her jaw hung partly open as she stared down at what was inside. The slow, prickly, sense of unease crawled up his neck again.

"What's that?" Gage asked, not sure if he wanted the answer.

Aurora's feral grin twitched at the corner of her mouth. "Our way out of here."

"What—I thought you already took care of that. You sent them on a wild goose chase, didn't you?"

She shook her head. "That was only to get us in. They know we're here now. It was unavoidable as soon as we opened that door."

An icy grip clenched around Gage's stomach. He opened his mouth, but no words could be found to explain the exasperation surging through his temples.

Carefully, Aurora tweezed a tiny object between her claws, lifting it up as if to admire a jewel. An oblong spike of blue silicone, it was covered with golden threads, spreading like nerve endings over its surface. She straightened, facing Gage with a serious look. "Now I need your help."

Gage blinked.

She continued. "We only see the net in crude glimpses. Through our code, or someone else's polished interface on our rigs. A preview, if you will. Surface level vision that never exposes the raw beating heart underneath." Lowering her brows, she raised the chip in front of Gage. "This is another way in."

The blood drained from Gage's face, leaving him dizzy with vertigo. "You're talking about that cyber-astral-synthesis stuff that hit the tabloids a few years back."

Aurora nodded, her lupine grin broadening.

"You can't be serious." Gage rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I thought it was all urban legend conspiracy stuff, you know, like underground mole militias and mutant bio-AI."

"It was real."

"Even if it was, it never worked. I mean, no one even talks about it anymore."

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"There were massive problems with the interface that eventually killed the project. Then they used the media to spin the whole thing into mythology. It worked. Just look around you. Only the most crackpot true-believers have any interest."

"How do you even know all this?"

"Because—" She glanced over her shoulder, clearing her throat. "Look, I shouldn't be telling you this, but I want you to understand the magnitude of this situation. Nomad used to work for the government, coding top secret stuff for the defense department. His last project was number O-B-2-9"

Gage gaped. "The Out of Body project. But that's just a—"

"—myth," she finished. "Right." She let the word trail out with sticky, bitter sarcasm. "However, because of all the problems with the receiver, they ended up scrapping it and canning Nomad in the process." Her eyes glittered as she met his gaze. "But he never stopped working on it."

Gage stepped back and shook his head. "This is like telling me that Area 51 exists and tiny aliens are living in our teeth."

"I don't need to sell you on this. But I do need you to understand what I'm about to do. This—" She tilted her hand so the light caught the smooth translucent edge of the chip. "—is only the key. And until last week, we didn't have a door. But with my help, Nomad will finally be able to fulfill his dream."

With a smile, she turned sideways and brushed back the fur from the base of her skull. "This—" She tapped a small metal receptacle embedded in her skin. "—is the true gateway to the net."

"Whoa." Gage spread his paws out in front of him. "The crazy train came to town and you're the conductor." He shook his head. "I did not sign up for this."

"Then why did you take this job?" Aurora grinned again, her bright yellow eyes glittering in the dim room. "Do you actually like being a simple burglar or is there something more to you?"

"Don't look down on me." Gage crossed his arms and glanced away. "This why I hate working with wolves. You're all condescending and—and—" he sputtered, "—totally insane!"

"I'm plugging in." Aurora hummed to herself. "My security overrides

are being dismantled as we speak. They'll be back to normal operation in thirty seconds and I'll need to be ready. You can leave if you wish. I won't be able to stop you." She turned her back. "But I hope you'll stay."

"Why would I stay to watch you commit suicide?" Gage snarled. "And yeah, I can easily slip out of this dump. You said so yourself, you don't even need my help."

"I'm sorry about that. I said that out of anger." Aurora sat down and crossed her legs, the chip gently cradled in her palm. "I do need your help. Once I'm in, I'll be in a complete trance. If I don't get out in time, I'll need you to carry me."

Gage rolled his eyes. "Oh right, so now you expect me to lug you around?" He jabbed a claw at her. "You're mental."

Aurora rubbed the bridge of her long nose. "Even if you had half as much disdain for me as you seem to express—" She glanced up at him for a moment and stopped, her eyes dilating for only an instant, as if a lightning strike of doubt had flashed through her thoughts. Then she smiled. "You might be annoying, but I know you won't abandon me."

With that, she inserted the chip.

Gage turned his back, a subtle growl lingering in his throat. She didn't know anything about him. Fly by night, break and enter, hit and flee; that was his style. Not this guard duty crap. She could save it for a street samurai or a hotwired lapdog. At least they would be stupid enough to do this kind of work.

He shook his head. Once again, she'd shown her aptitude for picking the wrong tool for the job.

What did he care anyway? Gage reached down and hefted the shield, tucking it under his arm. He had what he came for. All he had to do was leave.

He stopped at the opening, with a brief glance over his shoulder.

Aurora had closed her eyes and her breathing was easy.

He exhaled and stepped through the door, a cloud of stubborn shame lingering like damp fog in his wake.

SEVEN

Gage had nearly made it to the main hallway when his ears perked, flicking from side to side. He wasn't sure what it was, but something was out of place. He cocked his head, his breath still in his lungs.

There. Just to the north, a subtle *thrum*, like the ticking of a clock inside a metal box.

But he already knew what it was. Another Death Angel, closing in at a quick pace.

With lightning speed, he dashed back to the alcove.

"Hey, we got company," he breathed as he peered around the slender opening. "Hey. Your experiment is going to have to wait."

She remained still, her chest rising and falling as if she were asleep.

He slunk over to her and gave her shoulder a shake, but her head fell forward, her tongue lolling out from her slack jaws.

Red sensor light reflected off a column outside the room.

"Shit." Gage hissed through his teeth as he desperately searched the room. "You're going to get us both killed, stupid wolf."

He looked down at the shield. Even with the extra weight he could easily slip past the drones and be on his way. But deep inside, he knew she was right. He wasn't going to leave her. As much as he distrusted her, it just wasn't in him.

With a heavy sigh, Gage propped the shield in front of Aurora. Then he strode out of the tiny room.

Ghostly red light flickered in eerie patterns on the floor and walls, cast by two spherical black droids that patrolled the dark open space. They hadn't seen Gage yet. Now if he could just keep it that way.

He darted from column to column with his head lowered, his body hunched and his arms tucked close to his chest. Keeping to the darkest shadows, he padded quickly across the smooth marble floor. He had an idea. And it might work too, if only he could find the right hiding spot.

Seconds ticked by, measured by sweeping red beams that danced through the smooth marble forest. They were hypnotic, deadly and rhythmic. Gage watched them, his breath burning in his chest as he timed their circuit around the room, anticipating the moment when they both

turned away from him.

Now!

He dashed toward the middle of the room.

It wasn't until he reached the base of the massive statue, and tucked himself into its shadow with his back pressed against the foundation, that he let out a breath. His head swam and his ears buzzed, but there was no time to think about that. The deadly black droids were completing their arc and turning around, but if he was right, then they would keep to patrolling the edges of the room for a while.

He flipped his rig open. Recovering the cable connected to his goggles, he slapped it in a slot on the side and punched the uplink button. A faint electronic beep echoed from somewhere in the tomb-like silence. Whether close by or far away, triggered by sight, sound or smell; Gage had no clue, and it was too late to wonder. His fingers flew across the keyboard as he swallowed the knot of fear in his throat.

If only there was more time.

Maybe it was stupid to think he could use the same net access point he'd tried from outside. At the very least, it was a blind guess based on pure instinct. But from inside the building and with the security already partially compromised thanks to Aurora... no one would expect it.

At least that's the idea.

The network bloomed to life in his vision, a luminous flower unfurling its petals in a surge of azure and neon pink. The dark, impenetrable fortress from outside was gone, and from here, there was only a single layer of firewall between him and those droids.

Initializing... reading... DF1... 0x1... ping! Port ready.

Gage didn't think. He didn't breathe. He didn't even plead to the gods. He just punched the ICE cracker program and sat stock-still with his fingers frozen over the keys. Waiting.

Uploading... uploading... uploading...

It has to work. It has to—

Movement flashed in the corner of his eye.

"Uh-oh," he whispered, realizing too late that with his attention focused on the software, he'd lost track of the robots circling like sharks.

"Identify," one of the droids demanded as it swung around the

THE SHIELD

column to his left.

"Crap." Gage braced himself against the cool stone, preparing to run.

"Invalid. Identify," repeated the second kill-bot from his right.

"Double crap," he breathed, hammering the enter key with newfound urgency. But the loading bar continued its reluctant crawl before his eyes.

Fifty percent.

It would speed up; it had to.

Fifty-one percent.

Gage hissed, baring his teeth. If only he had a faster rig.

"Intruder located. Execute nullify protocol."

Both of the bots moved in unison. Their sides flipped open like ugly black wings. Arms unfolded with gun barrels protruding from the ends.

"No. No. No!" It was Gage's own voice, but the words rang hollow in his ears. He launched himself up the statue, using grooves in the Gorgon's snake-like hair for traction. His rig bounced on its shoulder strap, the program still crawling across his HUD.

The room flashed and the sound of a hundred firecrackers thundered, vibrating the stone figure under Gage's claws. Hot fire flashed across the back of his calf and bits of rock pelted his body.

Gage vaulted onto the statue's shoulder and the gunfire followed, spraying like a blender chewing through gravel. Then it stopped, leaving his ears ringing.

Seventy-five percent.

"Come on," he whined and pressed his body into the shadow of the statue's head. His foot slipped and he flailed for purchase. Catching just the tips of his claws, he held for a moment, his feet dangling. Silvery-red liquid ran down the face of the marble figure, slippery and sticky. *Blood*, Gage thought. *Can't be mine, can it?*

But he answered the question with a quick glance down. Dark liquid dripped from his foot and his pant leg was stained black.

With a *whir* of mechanical suction, followed by a *whoosh* of expelled air, one of the droids hovered upward, its red sensor light casting a wide arc. Making an ominous droning sound, it turned, its smoking guns trained down on Gage.

Well, Gage, thought with a shiver. It's a shame Aurora won't know

that I tried to save her. Closing his eyes, he waited for death. But the sharp crack of gunfire never came. Instead, he recognized another sound. A small too-polite ping from his rig.

He glanced up.

The kill-bot held its position, but a green light on its face blinked in unison with his computer's output. Bracing on his uninjured leg, he cupped his rig in one arm and lifted it up to his eyes.

ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL GRANTED.

Gage blinked. Something fleeting and exuberant flickered to life in his chest. A chance. Hope. *They could still make it out of this—*

He heard the droning mechanical whir of the other robot prowling around a pillar to his left.

—if he moved quick.

Ignoring the pain, he pulled his leg up under him and perched on the statue's shoulder, so as to free his hands. Then he got to work.

First things first. Overriding the AI to make the hijacked robot move wasn't too hard. Swivel to the left, then to the right. Engage the hover controls for more thrust. The kill-bot lunged forward then slowed, then dropped, banging against the marble foundation.

"Gods!" Gage cursed into the empty room.

What he really wanted—no, needed—was access to the weapons system. But that would take more time. Time that he didn't have.

The other droid floated silently from between two pillars, its sensors locked on Gage, the barrels of its guns angled upward.

Gage snarled and mashed the keyboard with his index finger.

Then everything happened too fast. Or was it too slow? Guns flashed. Sounds of thunder echoed around him. The compromised robot lurched upward with a hiss of rushing air, barely shielding him from a hailstorm of bullets.

Burning metal stung his sinuses, but he remained focused.

"And... there!" Gage yelped triumphantly.

Gage's robot—for it was his now—turned on its axis to face the other kill-bot, spreading its side appendages like a gargoyle's wings. A cascade of bullet casings ejected to each side, raining down with merry, tinkling sounds.

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The stink of sulfur filled the air as the robots unloaded their weapons at each other, both jerking and bobbing, spraying bullets in haphazard arcs. Clouds of dust choked Gage's lungs. Dull thudding sounds pounded in his head: bullets ringing against metal, cracking against stone. He clung to the statue as fragments of plaster and debris rained down, coating his fur.

Gage wasn't sure what happened next, but he suddenly found himself flipping over the statue's shoulder. The ground raced up and slammed hard against his chest. His tongue burned, and the bitter taste of iron filled his mouth. Gray static filled his vision, threatening to blot out his senses.

But no, he had to stay awake. Focus. What in Hades was he doing on the floor?

Alarm bells rang in his head as he pushed himself onto his knees. His paw flew to his shoulder. To the strap that should be there. His claws grasped in panic. Nothing.

With bone-chilling horror, like freezing nitrogen filling his skull, he stared down at the floor where the remains of his computer lay splayed out and cockeyed. Cracked screen. Split plasti-shell. Exposed circuit boards.

All too quickly, Gage realized that wasn't the worst of it. Although the bot that had been firing at him had been blown to bits in a shower of metal and industrial grade plastic—the other one was still active. And without his hack running, there was nothing to stop it from shooting him.

Oh gods—

Floating high above, the robot pivoted, training its sights on him.

Gage jumped backward, arching his back to catch his weight on his hands. The floor where he'd been a split second before exploded in a shower of stone fragments and smoke. He flipped again, landing on his feet, but an unimaginable agony ripped through his leg, forcing him to one knee. He only had enough time to roll to his side as the stream of bullets followed in his wake.

The Gorgon-statue listed to one side with visible cracks in its foundation. But that didn't stop Gage from leaping for it. The marble monstrosity was still the best cover close by. As he tumbled behind the

pedestal, his hand flew to his belt and closed on the lance.

A moment passed as he stared at the tool. There was only a slim chance that this would work, but anything was better than being torn to shreds by that Death Angel.

Like a giant predatory insect, the robot buzzed around a pillar, the red beam of its searchlight cutting bright swaths in the gloom.

Gage slipped between the statue's legs and flattened himself, both of his hands holding the lance steady. With a desperate silent plea to whomever was listening, he let out a heavy breath and then fired. The lance left his hands with a thump, and all of his muscle tension let go along with it.

This is it. He slid to his knees.

At first he wasn't sure if it had hit. But the sudden yank of the cable told him it had struck true. With nowhere to easily anchor the device, he looped the other end of the line around the statue's arm and tied it off with a seaman's knot. Not that he'd ever been on a boat, but still, you never knew when a good knot might be the difference between life and death.

The droid pitched from side to side, swaying like a metronome as it tried to free itself from the thick cable. It fired again, a rapid staccato clanging in Gage's ears. The ankle of the statue exploded in front of his nose.

With a tortuous groaning sound, stone grated against stone. Gage's paws shot to his face, shielding himself by pure instinct. That was all he had time for. Then the roar of a thousand drums beat in his ears as two tons of marble came crashing down.

When the thunder faded to a dull thudding sound, which Gage belatedly recognized as his own frantic heartbeat, he vaulted through the dust and debris, heading for the tiny room where he'd left Aurora and the antique shield.

That was what mattered now. Not the Death Angel, which still thrashed on the end of its tether to the now-headless torso section of the broken statue. Not the high pitched scream of the alarm system which had kicked in with the statue's demise. Not even the question of how he'd managed to escape being crushed—as lucky as that was.

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Summoning the last of his courage, he raced between the last stand of pillars and into the room with Aurora. Gunfire sounded behind him. A blast of bullets shattered the stone facade around the small entranceway.

"C'mon wolf," Gage gasped as he stumbled inside. "Now's a good time to wake up."

Then he looked down.

Oh sh—

The old shield lay askew with irregular holes scattered across its surface. Whether from bullets or debris, something had torn through the metal facing, marring the detailed design-work and exposing splintered wood beneath.

But that wasn't the part that made Gage's breath stick in his throat.

Aurora was sprawled underneath the shield, her gray furry arm outstretched, her hand open and unmoving.

"No," Gage breathed as he raced to her. "Oh, no."

He hastily tossed the artifact aside and stared down at her limp body. Her eyes were closed and her jaw slack. But her chest moved, rising and falling ever so slightly as she took shallow breaths.

No blood. He lifted the shield and inspected it. Although there were giant gouges in the wood, nothing had penetrated. He knelt down and patted her cheek.

"Wake up," he said. "If I try to carry you out, we'll both wind up dead."

But her head lolled to the side in response.

Gage slipped his goggles up and pinched the bridge between his eyes. *Think, think.*

He heard the Death Angel thrashing in the adjoining room, its metal body crashing against stone, spewing wave after wave of bullets as it fought for release. And there was the alarm too, a blaring screech from hidden overhead sirens that made Gage's blood pound with urgency.

He was screwed either way. The droid would work itself free or some private security tactical team would descend on them soon. He didn't like the idea of spending the night—or longer—in a holding cell. Gods only knew how many warrants were outstanding for his arrest. There's no way they'd let him out once they caught him.

A soft chime caught his ear, softer than the droning siren, but closer.

He cocked his head as he zeroed in on its source. Just under him, down toward the ground, under Aurora... No, he thought. In her clothes.

"Don't hate me for this." He gritted his teeth as he patted her sides. "I'm not coping a feel, honest." He felt a small, round object, tucked in the hip pocket of her black fitted cargo pants.

Retrieving it, he slowly opened his hand.

"*Beep-bop.*" The little drone lifted into the air.

"Nano!" Gage breathed. "Thank the gods, she really didn't—" He glanced down at Aurora and shook his head. "There's no time. I need you to make some noise, little guy."

"*Beep?*"

"Out there." Gage thumbed at the door. "Go play with your big brother."

Nano gave a blithe chirp and zipped out of the room.

EIGHT

Gage shook his head. He'd missed the little bugger. That's for sure. But the little droid's cheerful demeanor wasn't enough to get them out of this mess.

His gaze settled on the shield, the deep furrows that marred its once-ornate face. *Ruined*. Whatever value it once had was now gone. And with it, his hopes of a big payout, all those dreams of lounging on a beach, in the sun...

There would be another job someday, he promised himself, and it would pay better too. And it wouldn't involve any of this weird stuff, nor any more shady characters like Nomad. Nor strange wolves for that matter.

Now if he could just get out of here alive.

Resigning himself, he tugged on Aurora's slack arm. The wolf was dead weight, but after awkwardly half-crouching and straining his back in the process, he managed to heft her limp form, with her lupine head braced on his shoulder.

Gage gritted his teeth from the strain, shooting a last wistful glance at the battered shield on the ground before he trudged out of the room.

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The scene outside resembled a war zone more so than a temple. Shattered stone and bullet casings littered the floor, among boulder-like pieces of the downed statue and broken columns. Gaping holes had been ripped in the walls and ceiling. Maybe the floor too. It was hard to tell in the gritty low-light and choking dust.

But the kill-bot was still there and active too, despite the destruction around it. The machine swayed on the cable as it tried to target Nano. Short bursts of gunfire echoed into the room amid the screams from the siren above.

The robot turned and its red sensor light shone into Gage's eyes, nearly blinding him.

"Damn it," he swore. If only they could have gained a few seconds head start before the robot noticed them. But it was no use. And he didn't even have his rig any more. Not that the computer would have done any good anyway.

Gage shifted his weight, supporting Aurora with one arm, and he did the only thing he could think of. Gripping his screwdriver with his other hand, he flicked his wrist and sent the tool flying through the air. With a satisfying crack, it smashed the sensor bulb and clattered off the solid metal frame.

But the droid only wavered for a moment before focusing on him again.

"Curse you to Hades!" Gage screamed as the first burst of fire burned past him, too high, but close enough to singe his ear. "Do your worst demon!"

Gage gritted his teeth and squeezed the lifeless wolf to his chest, shielding her with his own body. It was fruitless of course, but it was all he had left. *Maybe I can stop enough of the bullets to... Ah! Who am I kidding?*

The kill-bot fired again and bullets tore up the floor in front of them and ricocheted off the walls, clattering and popping all around them.

"I'm sorry," he whispered through his tight jaw. "I wish I could have saved you."

A low moan was Aurora's only reply, drowned by the thundering cannons. At first Gage thought she might have been hit by the erratic

gunfire. But then, in a hoarse whisper, a single word left her lips:

"Blackout."

Floodlights popped on overhead, bathing the room with a flash of eye-searing brilliance before they exploded in a cascade of sparks. A surge of white hot electricity shot up from the ground and gripped the Death Angel like the trunk of a fiery tree. The gunfire cut short, replaced by a deafening crack and Gage's vision plunged into darkness.

"God from the machine."

The disembodied voice was tinny and hollow, as if it spoke from inside a drum. Or inside his head. Some figment of imagination or nightmare. But whatever the meaning was, it slipped from his grasp.

A bell had been struck and it clanged in his ears on an endless loop, warbling, disorienting, all-consuming in an inferno of unrelenting agony. And in his blindness, he felt the ground fall away and numbness ran up his limbs, like a hyper-fast venom, eating away his flesh and nerves, down to the bone, ripping him apart. His hands, then his feet, followed by his tail and legs, arms, chest, neck.

Then silence. Black silence.

Time had no meaning. His existence? Minuscule. Just a mark on the wall. Dirt under boots. A mote, drifting in a ray of sunlight.

A breath of wind caressed him, a phantom in murky waters. Yet the touch was warm and comforting, rich with life.

"Come," it called.

And Gage floated with it, letting the presence guide him back to the mirror-like surface.

His own cough woke him and he choked for a moment, trying to clear scratchy dust from his throat. Gradually, he began to feel his arms again, as well as the warmth of Aurora's body against him.

Blinking the grit from his eyes, shapes formed in his vision. He was still in the building, but he didn't recognize the room. The lights were out, but he could still see the white walls that surrounded him. No more pillars, no broken statue, nor marble floor.

Then he sucked in a breath. "Aurora!"

She lay next to him, her fur coated in white plaster dust.

"Aurora! Wake up," he pleaded as he shook her. He moved his fingers

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up to her neck, feeling for her pulse. A strong beat thumped under his touch.

He sighed, sinking back against the wall. Then he glanced up, just as Nano hovered next to him with a gleeful chirp.

"Utility closet?" Gage curled his lip. "How did we get here?"

"Beep." The little droid bobbed, then flew up to the ceiling where a hole opened up to the shrine room.

"And the Death Angel?"

"Bip."

Letting his breath trail out of his tight chest, he closed his eyes and shook his head.

"That was a close shave."

Nano chirped again, with a subtle yet detectable decrease in enthusiasm.

"No. You did fine, buddy."

Gage stood up and gripped Aurora under her armpits, dragging her unceremoniously out of the closet-sized room.

"Most expensive security bots, ever," Gage breathed before kneeling down and lifting the wolf over his shoulder. "I always thought it was stupid to give a robot a gun."

"Beep?" Nano slipped through the air and hovered next to a large crack in the wall.

Gage chuckled as he tried to stand. "No, buddy—" Air sucked through his teeth as fire raced up his injured calf. "Tell y—you what." Straining, he finally straightened and slowly stepped to the hallway. "I'll buy you a squirt gun when you get as big as a Death Angel."

Nano shifted, pointing sensors toward the hole above before swinging back to Gage with a chirp.

"That's what I thought."

NINE

With Nano's help, finding the way out was much easier than getting inside. The little robot scouted ahead, leading the way through the twists and turns of identical corridors, as Gage plodded behind, holding the still-unconscious Aurora in his arms.

Despite his strained muscles, the sharp pain in his calf, and that annoying twitch in his tail, things were still better than they could have been. Sure, the job was a colossal failure and he'd lost his rig in the process; he had maybe twenty credits to his name, and no way to earn more—nor even access his accounts for that matter.

But right now, all that mattered was that he was alive.

They were alive.

The screaming alarms had gone silent; there were no Death Angels coming after them. That by itself amounted to some kind of miracle. As for whatever had happened to cause it—or whatever madness the wolf was mixed up in—he didn't know where to start. But he let those questions sink under the waves of exhaustion. He would have to get to them later.

It wasn't until Gage heard Nano's excited chirp that he raised his eyes from the seemingly endless expanse of white tiled floor. He blinked and then grinned. There, at the end of the hallway, was a steel door marked, "Fire Exit." He quickened his pace and gave silent thanks to the gods.

"Nano. Go get me a signal." Gage heaved Aurora against his shoulder, freeing one hand to push down the bar on the heavy door. He leaned into it, cracking it open, and he drank in a long sweet breath of night air.

As Gage pressed his elbow and knee to the door, opening it wider, the tiny robot whizzed past his nose and disappeared into the night sky. With a shake of his head, he gritted his teeth against the unbearable strain in his muscles and staggered through the door onto the rusty steel scaffolding. *It's not that much further*, he told himself. Although getting down the fire escape carrying the wolf might be damned near impossible.

He gently leaned Aurora against the guard rail and straightened, exhaling another long breath. At least they were out of the building. Now if he could just rest for a minute and get his strength back...

Overwhelmed by fatigue and the throbbing pain in his limbs, he

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nearly missed the fact that the stars were brighter than normal. Then he blinked as he gazed out over the darkened city.

"I've never seen it with the power off," he whispered to no one in particular. "It's beautiful."

A soft cough jerked him out of his stargazing. He spun around and dropped to his knees, leaning close to Aurora.

"Hey. You okay?"

She blinked; her eyes glazed with a faraway look before they finally fixed on him. "The shield," she murmured.

"It's destroyed," Gage groaned. "I had to leave it behind."

A subtle smile edged up at the corners of her mouth. "Of course."

"Look, I'm getting my friend on the line. He's going to come get us—"

"No." Her hand flew up between them, her claws gripping his chest. "I can't—"

"You can and you will." Gage pushed her back firmly. "You are in no condition to move. Now wait here till I get help."

She blinked again and then chuckled. "You're cute when you're assertive."

Gage raised his brows. But before he could say anything more, she leaned forward with a single smooth motion. Not with her claws this time, but with her muzzle. And as her lips met Gage's, his whole body froze.

A sharp zing of electricity raced up his spine. All of the hairs on his neck stood at attention. His tail went rigid with a painful pop as the annoying kink straightened itself. But Gage barely noticed beyond the rush of sensation that made his heart kick in his chest.

And when she pulled back, with a playful curl of her lip and a teasing lick at his muzzle, he felt her absence for a brief fleeting moment. He tried to steady himself.

"Go on, then," Aurora said, running a finger along her mouth.

Heat rose up Gage's neck as he paused. A myriad of thoughts clashed in his head. What was he supposed to do now? What was *she* thinking?

Nano's hum crackled in his ears, breaking through his mental paralysis. That was it, his next move. A signal had been secured. He could focus on that. Gage straightened and turned his back, hiding the surge of emotions still too-plain on his face.

"Recoil," he coughed.

After a few seconds, the black and white rodent-face flooded his field of vision.

"Dude, you're alive!" Recoil shouted.

"I'm fine. Look—"

"The entire city's out man! Massive power surge. Took out anything wired and even some wireless stuff. You're lucky you could even call."

"I know. Nano's shielded and on a different frequency." Gage cleared his throat. "I need you to get a car here. Like, now."

Recoil flinched back. "Dude, you know my license is suspended."

"I don't care if you carjack someone to get here." Gage growled. "Aurora's—"

He glanced over his shoulder and stopped. The narrow, rusted fire escape was empty behind him. No wolf. She hadn't made a sound. Not a squeak of metal nor any hint of vibration. Not even a trace of gray fur left in her wake. He was alone.

Gage swallowed his shock. That sneaky wolf. How had he not heard her leave?

"Aurora?" Recoil cocked his head. "Who in Hades is Aurora? I ain't picking up one of your—"

"Never mind!" Gage snapped, closing his eyes. "I'll be back at the pad in ten minutes."

"Okay." Recoil extended the word out with a drone, like a yo-yo in slow motion. Then he gasped. "Dude. You just got paid."

"What the—" Gage blinked in confusion. "From who?"

"Credit transfer to the account. As we speak." Recoil licked his black nose. "It's Nomad's signature and... Holy shit! You must have done your job. Two million credits, baby!"

Gage gaped. "But I didn't..."

"And there's a note." Recoil scratched his chin with one of his long claws. "It says, 'Good shield for a fox with no skills.' What does that even mean?"

"I don't..." Gage started. Then he glanced down again, at the spot where Aurora had been, before looking up at the bright moon suspended in between the black super-skyscrapers. "No..." he chuckled.

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"What?" Recoil asked. "What's going on?"

But Gage remained silent as he stared up at the stars. It could have been static from Recoil's insistent questions, or interference from Nano's relay, but Gage could have sworn he heard a wistful keen through his headset, like a distant, choppy howl of a wolf, somewhere deep in the net.

THE END

PLUTO'S PRISON

BY FRIDAY

When he opened his eyes, all he could see was a concrete ceiling. Pipes that turned only at right angles and which ended every few feet in a sprinkler bisected the grey slab.

"Ugh... Where am I?" he asked aloud. An echo reverberated.

He sat up, his back aching in five places. His paw, reaching down to prop himself up, encountered frigid steel. His other paw rubbed his pounding head. Eight more surfaces like the one he lay on stood around him, forming a square of tables. Three of the walls around him were covered from top to bottom with metal drawers, each three feet by two feet. A large cabinet filled with what appeared to be medical equipment and computers covered the fourth. On either end of it, two doors sat. Cool blue and white light bathed the room, matching the temperature.

He realized he was in a morgue.

He looked down. No clothes covered his form; black fur, muscles, and feline features stretched across the table. He wiggled his toes. They worked.

A haze blocked access to his memories. He knew they were still there, but it was like he'd forgotten how to remember; he couldn't reach back in time to access them. A quick experiment sprang to mind, and he recalled the view and his feelings of confusion upon waking up less than a minute ago. His amnesia wasn't still affecting him, then. He found it odd that he could also remember words, places, and empirical information, but not how he gained those things.

"Hello sir!" a voice chirped. "You seem confused. May I assist you?"

He whirled around, looking for the source of the noise. Just before his 180 completed, he realized he wasn't going to find anything. The voice hadn't echoed in the metal chamber.

"Who are you?"

"I am Cyber! I am your personal assistant. It is my job to gather, organize, and process information for you."

"What happened to my memories?"

PLUTO'S PRISON

"I am unable to say. I do not have access to that part of your brain."

"Well then what good are you?" the cat vented.

"I am able to inform you that you are in New York's Bellevue Hospital Morgue. I am also able to inform you that a robot is headed in your direction to return your body to cold storage, according to this network. ETA one minute."

"Good. I want to get out of here. He'll know the way."

"Negative. First, 'it will.'"

"Huh?"

"Robots do not possess gender or sex. 'It will know the way.'"

"Okay, it'll know the way."

"Second, it will not assist you."

The cat heard movement coming his way. Two sounds with the rhythm of a pair of beating hearts shredded through the air—the sound of pneumatic robotic parts moving something heavy.

A large robot walked through the door, its feet and movements resembling some sort of large waterfowl. Huge platforms comprised the feet. Pneumatic tubing moved the legs up, forward, and then took in air to let them down with a slam.

Cyber continued to drone on as the robot turned to look at the former corpse. "It is programmed to attack living beings. Robbing cold storage mortuaries for cybernetic body parts is a common occurrence. They fetch a high price on the black market."

The robot's heartbeat sounds quickened as it began stomping towards him.

"What? But I'm not dead!"

"That is correct. Duck."

The cat processed the command just in time to follow Cyber's suggestion. A cloud of purple gas vented from the robot's frame, enveloping the area his head had been in a moment ago.

He rolled away from the oncoming attacker and dashed to the door opposite the one it had come from. "Negative, that leads deeper into the morgue."

"Thanks," he said, dashing for the other.

He found himself in a dimly lit narrow hallway. He kept running. "How

do I get out of here?"

"The optimal route is to turn left here. However there is another robot headed that way. It is also advisable that you gather your clothes. If you wish to avoid the robot and find your possessions, keep going straight."

The cat ignored the left turn and kept jogging.

"Is there some sort of alarm it will set off?"

"Yes, a security guard is possibly converging on your location. It is recommended that you comply with all orders he gives. He will be armed with..."

"Left, right, or straight?" he blurted.

"Right, then left into the first room. His and the company's purchasing records would indicate a standard security issue high-voltage Taser and possibly a private-owned nine millimeter Glock."

The door to the possession storage room opened easily; it was made like the kitchen door of a restaurant, to allow easy access without the use of hands. Inside, rows of boxes stood, each three foot by two foot, but clearly not as deep as the ones back in the cadaver room.

"Which one is mine?"

"Two two one."

He located the box. Two two one was etched on the front by laser. More importantly, a lock sat on the side, a simple sensor. Scuffmarks and dents covered the area around the safe, but 221's door looked new.

"Dammit," he yelled and slammed the wall with a paw. A dent, similar to the ones surrounding the safe, was let where his paw hit. He touched one of the other dents, and a feeling came over him, like something was worming its way into his mind from the base of his skull. The dent looked familiar...

"Sir, I believe you may be able to force the lock. Do you see that table?"

He snapped out of it. On the near side of the room, adjacent to the door, a large table stood. "Pick the table up and slam the edge into the lock. It may force the lock open."

The table was a metal slab, not too different from the one he'd lain on a few minute ago. He deduced it was probably used to hold the bodies while they were stripped of possessions. He picked it up, struggling to

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keep it steady as he charged the safe.

Clang. The noise echoed around the room.

The force of the ricochet knocked him off balance, and the table collapsed onto him. He managed to push it off, and it fell to the side upside-down. The safe door stood open.

The first thing he saw inside was his clothes. He fumbled with them, trying to untangle them. They'd become bunched up and nearly knotted when they'd been shoved into the small space. He pulled the jeans and jacket on. The shirt had a large tear surrounded by a large amount of blood; he discarded it. A beaten cell phone, a gun, and a nondescript piece of white plastic followed into his jean's pocket, a holster inside his coat, and his other pocket, respectively.

"Where's the security guard?" he asked. "Is this place that big?" he felt more comfortable now that he was clothed and armed.

"My earlier analysis was incorrect. It appears he is waiting at the exit. The robot's programming is indiscriminate—they will attack even the security guard—and there is only one exit."

"Are you sure there's only one way out? How do the bodies get out?"

"They are carried out by robots," Cyber chirped.

"Could I play dead?"

"No. They are capable of detecting death. Pulse, heartbeat, breathing, body temperature, brain activity. You fail all criteria."

"Then how did I get in here?"

"You were dead."

"But I'm not now?"

"Correct."

He sighed. "Can you explain how?"

"No." A pause. Cyber continued. "I do not have access to any information that would support any statements of probability."

"What about my name? What is that?"

"I don't know. I do not have access to your memory banks. That was deemed by lawmakers too difficult to extricate from your concept of 'self,' and so personal assistants only have access to that which you speak aloud."

"What did you call me... before?"

"I have no memories and I can only call you 'sir.'"

He sighed. "That's hardly a name I can use."

"I recommend you vacate this room. Another tender is headed this way."

He ran, taking Cyber's instructions as he went, up until the very last hallway.

"When you turn you will be in line of fire of the security guard. He can see you via security camera at this moment." A shimmer appeared in the corner of his eye. A camera was highlighted in red. "I suggest you proceed with caution."

"Thanks," he whispered. "How did you do that?"

"Do what, sir?"

"That thing with the camera."

"I can do much sir, your eyes have the standard HUD. Should I activate it?"

"Yes, please."

Immediately, a set of numbers appeared in the bottom left of his vision, a map on the bottom right, a vague feline shape in the top right, and '1x' at the top left.

"What are all these?" he asked.

"Top left, zoom factor. Top right, body condition. Very helpful if you turn off pain sensation. Bottom left, vitals: Heart rate, blood pressure, amount of blood, core temperature. Bottom right, map."

A red blip was apparent on the map. "The dot?"

"Hostiles, neutrals, and friendlies. Until information is otherwise obtained, all dots show yellow for neutral."

"Thanks."

A voice called out. "I know you're there and I can hear you talking. Show your hands, then slowly step out from behind your cover."

"What'll happen if I resist," he whispered to Cyber.

"His body is equipped with a combat mod, a bottom-of-the-line program that would allow him to take out a civilian and little else. His aim, however, will be impeccable."

"And me?"

"I don't know. I don't have access to that information. You hardware

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is extensive, full body mod, but I cannot access your software."

"Please, do not make this any harder for yourself," the voice called out.

He stepped out, hands in front of him. "Sir, I am currently lost. I don't know how I got here."

The guard had been modded to look like a golem, thick limbs, mud-colored skin, and barely-visible eyes in a helmet of a head. In his right arm, he held a Taser level. "I've heard it all before," the guard responded. "Just keep moving towards me and put on the handcuffs."

"Sir, I was clinically dead when I was brought here. Check the records."

It didn't look like the guard believed, but he asked, "Name?"

"I don't know. I have amnesia."

Tiny eyes became larger with recognition. The black cat twisted away suddenly, as if seized by a powerful muscle twitch. He felt a projectile fly past the fur of his right arm, almost feeling like someone was tickling him. The hair along his arm stood on end, pulled towards the electric current.

"He's expended his ammo until he can reload, estimated at thirteen seconds," Cyber chirped. ETA to the door was less, he knew.

The dodge carried into a roll. A paw went for the gun in his shoulder holster, but he stopped and simply ran past the guard and burst forth onto the street.

It was night. Amber lights glowed down the boulevard, and the only colors puncturing the sepia tone were a myriad of bright neon signs. "Bar," read one. Another simply had a profile of a nude woman. They were everywhere, and the oil puddles on the asphalt glinted odd, subdued reflections of them.

"Hey!" the guard yelled.

"He has no jurisdiction on the street," Cyber informed him.

"What about the police?"

"Their public web file states this case is closed."

"Already?" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Closed by the government. When you were detected as an intruder, your ID number was sent to the local police station. An automated program immediately locked the report."

"Can you tell me anything about the profile linked to my ID number?"

"I cannot access your profile, the same program is blocking me."

"Can you find out who put that program in place? They've got to know who I am."

"Searching..."

Rather than stand and wait, he started walking down the street.

Robots with dirt and graffiti smeared over them picked litter from the sidewalk, mostly food bags from fast meals, but occasionally bottles or cigarette cartons. A pile of trash in the gutter looked like the road kill of some robotic scavenger. This was a bad part of town, he realized. He went to check his pockets; no wallet, no money. That meant no transport. He picked up his pace.

"Cyber, what's the quickest way to someplace not here?"

"I do not understand the question. Please repeat. Also, it is not advisable to talk to yourself in this area. Anti-augmentation crime statistics are abnormally higher for this area." The word 'this' was punctuated by a portion of the HUD map glowing orange.

"Why shouldn't I talk to you?"

Cyber continued. "Talking to yourself is a sign of an on-board personal assistant. They are quite valuable when extracted from the cranium and sold."

As it said that, a small kid, scrawny, pale skin, tattoos covering his right arm, stepped out from an alley directly into his path. The cat checked his HUD; he hadn't noticed the blip, but there was one now. As he watched the map, two more blips appeared as two more kids stepped out from the alley.

The kid's right hand went into his pocket. In a flash, the cat had his gun out. "How about you leave me alone and we all walk away from this?" he snarled. "This gun has nine bullets and I have top-of-the-line combat mods. I could kill all three of you before you could make a step."

All three began slowly backing away. "Fucking cors," the kid with the tattoo sleeve spat.

It took him a moment to realize why he still felt tense. Their attention wasn't entirely on him; they kept looking behind him.

He whirled around just in time to see a huge man wielding a car driveshaft as a weapon coming in for a swing with it at head level.

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The same reflex mod that allowed him to dodge the guard's Taser kicked in, and he felt the makeshift club whistle overhead, ripping the back of his leather jacket just below the collar. As he dropped, both paws shot to the ground and he kicked up into the brute's midriff with both feet. Using the momentum, he carried himself over into a summersault and whirled around, coming face-to-face with the skinny mugger. He threw a right hook with the butt of his Glock and caught the tattooed kid's head just under the jaw. The boy collapsed onto the dirty pavement. The other two hadn't been so bold as to advance. They ran.

The black cat spun back to face his ambusher. The man was on the pavement clutching his stomach, gasping. The driveshaft lay forgotten on the ground.

He decided not to stick around. The map showed two blocks until he was out of the orange zone. His head felt like a sauna.

"It doesn't really matter if I'm talking to you, Cyber," he said. "It's very apparent that I'm extensively augmented. I don't look at all human." The computer remained silent. "Tell me, what was that word they used?"

"Fucking' or 'cors'?"

"The second."

"It's a derogatory term for augmented individuals. Popularized by the late Reverend Timothy Calvin. Short for 'corrupted.' He preached that augmented individuals were corrupting the perfect bodies his god had made for them."

"Charming," he muttered.

"I have completed the search. I'm sorry for the long run-time and heat build-up in your ears and neck. I had to do several auxiliary searches and pattern connections. I can be 86% sure the man you are looking for is Senator Gregaille Augustine."

After a few minutes, the orange zone disappeared behind him. He expected a significant change in the city's appearance beyond that point. There wasn't. Buildings still loomed high into the sky, lost overhead in a low cloud. The whole night felt like a summer evening just before a rainstorm.

A thought distracted him. "Where are we and what's the date?"

"New York, New York, United States of America, December thirteenth,

year two thousand fifty-six, Nine oh Five PM. There is one flood warning issued for this area. I will alert you if the levy becomes insufficient and evacuation is recommended."

"Thanks. Tell me where I can find this senator."

A path in red appeared on the HUD, and then on the ground in front of him.

"Have you figured out what my name is?"

"Negative. The file refers to you as 'Project Pluto.' Nothing more."

"I guess that'll do. I'll use 'Pluto' until I remember my real name. Can you find anything else on me?"

"Define 'me.'"

"On who I am?"

"Negative. Your parts appear to be of Japanese origin, a model of augmentations that based their design off of animal limbs for both aesthetic and functionality reasons. Your full-body mod is not unique, and so I am unable to find any images I can identify you in."

"Thanks for trying, anyways." Pluto sighed. This senator would know who he was, but might not provide the information. Politicians always lie.

Stepping out from an alley onto the main street it connected to, the change was surprising. The streets were empty of trash and loiterers but full of police robots and cars. Lights no longer flickered yellow and neon but glowed white, fluorescent. The stench of pollution still stung his nose, reminding him that not all the city's maladies could be easily quarantined—or more accurately, could be insulated from. This place was an island, both figuratively and literally. The road was the highest point around—the safest in the event of a flood.

The red line extended a few blocks farther. It hooked hard left into a building.

The sign outside the building read, "The Bordello for Slaking Intellectual Thirsts."

"What is that place?"

"From the website: 'The Bordello for Slaking Intellectual Thirsts is an establishment devoted to sating the higher instincts. One cannot download a sophisticated opinion on the arts, cannot learn how to argue effectively using only data, nor learn how to tell a beautiful story from a

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website. Base sexual pleasures can be gained from a simulator; refined mental engagement can only be gained from those around you. Let our specialized tutors escort you through the learning process and into brilliance.”

“I've never heard of such a thing before.”

“This is the first of its kind. It has become very popular as a sign of status and education, according to a sociological study done by Keubler and Richards published one month three days ago in the American Sociological Review.”

“And the senator's in here?”

“Senator Augustine is inside the building according to his schedule.”

The inside of the building appeared as sleek and bright as the outside. The mezzanine floor was arranged in a circular shape; the walls curved gently, covered by a giant mural. A group of figures were painting over it on the far side of the room. Pluto realized that must be how they taught art. An immense tree surrounded by a small garden burst through the center of the room and into a domed skylight. Like the mural, it was also being tended to, but by only two people, one woman with a vixenish appearance and a man who looked more enraptured by the garden than the beautiful woman sitting next to him. The periphery of the room was broken at even intervals by doors, each with tags on them. The nearest two read “Storytelling” and “Chess.” A second story stood above him.

“Dorms,” a voice said. He looked down towards the source.

A woman smiled at him. A moment's glance made it easy to distinguish that her body was full android; a pair of wings stretched a bit and fluttered, then remained still. Her hair glowed unnaturally blonde. It took him a moment to realize why; it was literally made of gold. Her skin appeared to be made of porcelain, but it moved as skin might. The dress she wore was white and fuzzy, low cut to show off the line of her shoulders, and the bottom portion made it only partway to her knees.

“You seemed confused. They are off-limits to patrons, I'm sorry. We are not a brothel in the carnal sense.”

“Yes, I... read your website. Tell me, do you know where Senator Augustine is?”

“Why might you be interested in his whereabouts?”

"I think he has information about me."

"Oh?" A smile appeared on her small mouth. Faded neon pink covered her lips—some sort of lipstick, he thought. The effect of even a minimal amount of makeup on such a pale face was striking. "What will that information help you understand?"

"Who I am," Pluto responded.

"Hm, if he is dispensing that information to just anyone I may have to hire him as one of my escorts," she said, and laughed.

"Do you hire male... escorts?"

"Absolutely. Knowledge is not the purview of one gender, nor is it related to appearance. Are you looking for a job?"

"No, just the senator."

"Yes. He is with an escort at the moment being privately tutored in rhetoric, the art of debate. Moniqua is a wonderful teacher. Perhaps we can chat about your crisis of self in the meantime? I'm intrigued."

"I, ah, I don't have any money. I'm just here for the senator," he said.

"That's quite alright; I'm not an escort personally. I am this establishment's owner. Lucy Grace."

She offered a china hand. He accepted it; black on white.

"Pleased to meet you, Lucy Grace."

"Just Lucy will do. What is your name?"

He blushed, feeling his ears lie flat and burn red. "I don't have one. That's part of why I'm here; I have amnesia and I was hoping the senator might shed some light on who I am."

"Oh!" Her hand went to her mouth, covering it for just a moment. Then it was back to his paw. "Let us sit in the gardens. The bench faces the rhetoric study; we will see your senator when he leaves. In the meantime, we may talk."

She led him to a small wooden bench, constructed, it appeared, of branches pruned from the very tree they sat under. "We have many skilled artisans here," she told him, seeing his gaze.

"Tell me," Lucy asked, "What do you remember?"

"Well," he said. "I woke up in a morgue on a table, and remember nothing prior. I escaped the morgue, with some difficulty, and found my way out here. My personal assistant sent me in this direction."

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"Virtual personal assistant?"

"Is there any other kind?"

Lucy laughed. After a moment, she regained her composure. "I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at your position, just at your... naiveté. I shouldn't even be laughing at that, considering you remember nothing. It's a tragic story; the death of your 'self,' your memories, your experiences. I'm sorry."

Pluto interrupted her before she could continue. "It could be tragic, or it could be redemption, I suppose. It's a mystery."

"I disagree. It cannot be redemption. You've lost all the lessons you gained that might have led you to this point, this rebirth. You are in danger of making the same mistakes again—there is no redemption in that. Experiences are the most powerful tool we have to learn. That belief led me to create this place; no download can compare to what this place offers."

"How did you create this place?"

"I was a working girl. In the original sense of the term. I studied chess and the arts in my free time; I noticed a trend. You see, being of good looks and good repute, I attended to the needs of many high-ranking men. Many had art decorating their homes but could not explain anything about it. That realization started a spark. It gave me the idea for this place. However, despite being rich in ideas, I was poor in wallet, and had no way of starting a business.

"My lucky break came when my employer boasted to a new client that I was a smart girl. The client, a wealthy politician, was dubious. I challenged him to a game of chess, putting one million on the line against my freedom." She smiled. "He was good. But I was better."

"Surely he didn't just... give you the million?"

"It was very official. A whole legal document was written up beforehand. He tried to squirm out of it. I had written it better than that." She tapped her head.

"Since then, I've built this place. I changed my name to avoid... retaliation. I've changed my body, too. For similar reasons." She stretched her wings. "And I find street girls—and men—with similar aptitudes for high culture and brought them here, raised them to meet their potential."

"Interesting story," Pluto replied.

She laughed. "Your tone makes me think you believe it only that."

He smiled. "Yes... It's very American."

She took a second at that. "Yes, I can see what you mean. Rags to riches, and all that. But I assure you, I speak the truth. Besides, despite my angelic appearance and idyllic surroundings, this is no heaven. We've suffered more than a few attacks from people claiming we embody all that is wrong with transhumanism."

Before Pluto could respond, the door he'd been keeping his eye on opened. A tall, dark-haired man in suit bowed stiffly and called a thanks into the open door, then turned and left. Pluto stood.

The man caught the motion out of the corner of his eye, and then did a double take. He started to hurry towards the door.

"Excuse me," Pluto told Lucy.

"I'll accompany you if I may," she responded, jumping up. "Senator Augustine! I need to talk to you for a moment!" she called.

He pretended not to have heard her. "Senator!" she called.

He reached the door. Pluto started a full dash for him, hoping to tackle the man before he could get out into the street.

He didn't have to. The senator tried the door, but it was locked.

"Sir," Pluto said.

The senator didn't respond. They stared each other down for several seconds.

"Senator," Lucy called, strolling up. "This fine feline wishes to talk to you. He believes you have some information that might be helpful to him." She tapped her head. "Sorry to lock the doors on you but this is a friend of mine."

"Miss Grace," he replied, offering his hand. "I'd love to help, but I'm afraid I'm late for a meeting."

Pluto noticed Augustine didn't offer him a hand to shake.

"Senator," she replied warmly. "I'm sure you can make time for my friend here. I believe I've created considerable free time in your schedule, dropping all that... unpleasantness... from a few months back. I doubt we'll take more than ten minutes of your time."

The politician looked around, as if for an escape. Sweat rolled down his forehead; his brain was literally on overdrive, heating up from processing

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so much data. Finally, he sighed. "Is there a room in which we can talk privately?"

"Yes," Lucy said, smiling. "My office should do."

Lucy's office confused Pluto. Racks of memory sticks lined the walls; the whole room could be considered nothing less than a library of simulators. Cards with various emotions written on them separated the memory sticks, organizing them.

"I thought you hated sims?" Pluto asked.

"Oh, most definitely not," Lucy exclaimed. "Sims are wonderful. They offer experiences to us that we might not otherwise be capable of having. My favorite is this one." She plucked a stick from the shelf and held it aloft; the port glimmered in the fluorescent light. "It opened my eyes to the world more than any other. It's the experience of a soldier dying on the battlefield in Africa. Getting shot by a sniper. Dying out of nowhere. The memories were recovered, which is rare. His family is arguing that the use of his memories is depersonalizing and disrespectful. I disagree. I believe he lives on in this, immortal."

"Perhaps he doesn't want immortality," Pluto replied.

"He was fully augmented. He had chosen it himself."

"And then he went to a field of death."

"Actually, he was sniped in a valley, not a field."

"Regardless—" Pluto started.

"Please, I do not have much time," the senator interrupted, wringing his hands.

"Very well," Lucy replied.

Augustine began. "I insist we do this under full security precautions. You must consent to download a program that will render you unable to talk about this subject except on a secure line and only with people who already know about the project." He offered his hands.

Lucy took one, and Pluto took the other. They held hands in a ring. Pluto felt his palms heat up as the computers in them sprung back to life, processing the initial data of who the senator was. The data should have been gathered a few minutes ago, but the senator had refused his paw.

"Senator Augustine of New York," Cyber chirped. "Affiliation: Republican. Age: Thirty-Eight. Body Type and Model: Full prosthetic,

Keblin's R Ten model."

The senator's voice spoke in his ear. "If you want answers, download the program and shut your internet connection off."

Pluto did as he was bid, and looked up to Lucy. "Done," she said.

"Me too," he responded.

The senator's voice sounded in his head, clear and clipped, and at a level volume. "Very well. What information do you want?"

"Project Pluto," he replied to all. "What is it?"

The senator hesitated a moment, and then responded. "It was a philosophical project to determine the importance of the soul."

Lucy cut in before Pluto could process what was said. "How so?"

"I'm sure you're relatively well aware that by complex biological and computer processes, a soul or consciousness, as well as memories, can be placed into a computerized brain. All three of us have undergone that process." The senator's eyes remained fixed on Pluto's face. Unsettled, the cat dropped his gaze.

"Yes," Lucy said. "The Theseus operation. It allows a form of immortality, correct?"

"Yes, it requires careful maintenance of both the shell and the computers inside it but it is feasible. Tell me, do you understand why a soul cannot be transferred wirelessly?"

"Yes," Lucy said.

"I don't," Pluto interjected.

"It can't because the neurons are replaced one by one with computer circuits, in essence," Augustine said. "You can't transfer computer circuits wirelessly. Additionally, you can't just replace them wholesale to repair someone. The circuits are what's important. The analogy often used is that of a ship. The neurons are the boards of the ship and the 'soul' is the passenger of the ship. If you strip and replace the boards of a ship one by one, the passenger can stay on while it happens. But if boards decay over time without being replaced, or if you lose too many at once, the ship sinks, and the passenger dies."

"What does that have to do with me?" Pluto asked.

"The thing is, that's not true."

They both looked at the senator, startled. Despite not having spoken

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a word aloud, he licked his lips before continuing.

"It defies scientific explanation. Once inside a machine, a soul can wirelessly jump from one machine to another. Our scientists theorize it's due to another plane of being that the soul jumps through. Continuing the analogy, that the passenger goes ashore and comes back to a different boat."

"How?" Lucy cried. "That makes no sense. You are telling me someone can invade my body? Or that I could jump wirelessly to a refrigerator?"

"No. The conditions must be precise. There are rules. The best way to explain it is that it's like the internet. On the internet, I can't send you a file you don't want, nor can I send something to your refrigerator unless it has internet connection. The same is true of this. There has to be a specially constructed receiver, and a soul must be directed to it. In other words, I'd have to send someone conscious to a body that is ready and able to receive them, a body constructed similarly to their own. Additionally, if that body had no memories, the soul would suffer amnesia." The senator leaned back a bit in his chair, causing Pluto to have to bow forward a bit to maintain hand contact. Lucy simply scooted her seat forward.

"Why is this information classified, then? It doesn't sound dangerous." Lucy asked.

The senator shrugged. "The information was discovered by a weapons branch of the military; as such, it's being analyzed for potential weapon uses first. If the development had been produced in academia I'm sure it would be well-known.

"However, when Project Pluto came along... everything changed." He nodded at the black cat.

"They constructed you out of parts from a Japanese manufacturer, got the most durable stuff they could find. They need consistency over the long term. That turned out to be your model, the "Nine Lives Cat" model, and that's how the name came about. After that old Poe story."

"And?" he asked.

"And what they did will be classified until the end of time," he said, frowning. "What I authorized. They made you, implanted a 'soul receiver,' as they called it, in your brain, programmed you a bit, and sent you to a mortuary claiming you were dead. Then they shot some random person's

soul at you and monitored what you did."

"Well, I came here," Pluto said, trying to laugh. Something felt wrong. Lucy struggled to hold her face together. "No," she whispered.

"What?" he asked.

"He took someone's soul... Someone, somewhere, fell dead. Loved ones mourned. They're gone forever, you have no way of accessing those memories and finding your way back to them," she whispered. How she achieved that effect wirelessly, Pluto couldn't tell.

"I could check obituaries for unknown causes of death," he said, tapping his foot. "Trace my way back. Whoever died was full aug, right? The soul had to be computerized before they could send it, he said. It shouldn't be too hard to find who it was... just up and dying as a full aug has to be uncommon."

The senator shook his head. "Such deaths are quietly shielded from all forms of search for that exact reason. Besides, the program I forced you to download will prevent you from revealing who you are. Not even accounting for the fact you won't remember why you care about those people in your old life."

They sat in silence. Pluto felt like he'd been impaled on a giant fish hook, right through his midriff, permanently reeled away from everything important—even if he didn't remember what *was* important.

"But why do all this in the first place?" Lucy asked.

"To determine if the soul was an interchangeable unit," the senator responded. He leaned forwards again, and began to chew on the corner of his mouth. A bead of sweat ran down from the side of his nose to his single visible canine tooth. "I—We wanted to see if three different souls did three different things when put into the same body in the same place, with all conditions identical. A laboratory experiment, perfectly controlled, to discover if our souls determine free will, or if our bodies do."

Lucy took her palms away from the circle and began to weep, quietly.

"Lucy?" Pluto asked, aloud. He reached a black paw to touch her shoulder.

"No," she sobbed. "It can't be. I refuse to believe it."

"She's figured it out," Augustine said via secure connection.

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"Figured what out?"

"The conclusion. All nine iterations so far have done the exact same thing. They made the same choices, even moved identically. If you pull up the camera footage, the robot comes in from its patrol from the same direction at eight thirty-six every time. And every time, you dodge at eight thirty-six and thirty-three seconds, roll away, and dash for the wrong door—then correct and go to the right one. You can even see your whiskers move in the same way every time. When computers compare the footage, they don't find a single difference." The senator took a deep breath and leaned back. "After you get to the guard, however, all bets are off. Different guards react differently to you, and so you react differently to them. But you do always attempt a non-violent solution first, when you approach them."

The senator leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees and resting his free hand underneath his chin. He flashed a brief frown. "You're the first iteration to find me, though. It was a surprise; but then, the Pluto Project just got out of the courts. They struck down that we could block persecution against you in regards to your—we'll call it 'trespass'—at the morgue without giving a reason. We complied to the bare minimum but as such I suppose we left a paper trail to follow. I'll have to make some calls."

Pluto cocked his head. "So you mean that... all souls are the same?"

"Technically that wasn't the conclusion the experiment drew. The conclusion was that our bodies determine how we act, not our souls. That free will doesn't exist as we believe it. That the passenger of a ship doesn't have any control over where it goes. It makes sense. Computers, given the same input, always yield the same output. Humans are just complex biological computers. You can understand why we wouldn't allow that information to become publicly known. The repercussions to our judicial system alone would be—"

"How can you be sure?" Pluto yelled, aloud.

"Nine iterations don't lie. They claimed four would be more than enough proof, especially given that your body had to maintain its condition perfectly to be sure. Do not misunderstand, cat. I take no pleasure in the conclusion."

"And you're just going to hide this from the public?"

"We are going to hide this from the public. The download I gave you will make sure of that." Augustine attempted a sympathetic smile. "If my involvement were known I'd be out of a job, and I can't have that. I'm sorry."

Pluto pulled away from the man, suddenly disgusted.

The senator shrugged and stood. "Well, if that is all I must get going. So sorry to bear ill news, but you insisted." He addressed his final comment to Lucy.

"I've unlocked the door," she said between sobs, waving her hand at him. "Go."

"Are you alright?" Pluto asked, putting a paw on her hand.

"No," she blurted. "I don't know what to think. And I can't talk to Desna—she's our philosopher—about it."

Pluto looked down.

"I'm sorry," he offered. It felt like the right thing to say. It felt like it was his fault she was crying, even though it was the senator's and his stupid experiment's.

At that, Lucy giggled, then started laughing, then laughed harder, so hard that Pluto couldn't tell if she was crying from sadness anymore or from mirth.

"Are you alright?" he asked, alarmed. He was worried that perhaps some wires had crossed somewhere in her brain circuitry.

"Why yes," she said between laughs. "I'm sorry, I'm just," she burst into a fresh bout of laughter. "It's funny because it's not your fault. It can't be your fault. No apologies mean anything because of you, and you're apologizing about it!" She kept laughing, harder.

Pluto took a half-step towards the door, trying to decide if he should fetch one of the escorts to come make sure Lucy was alright. After a few seconds though, she composed herself. "Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to alarm you. Now, as I see it, we can't do nothing about this information. I'd like some time to think on it, and you should consider it as well. But my first instinct is to not be parlay to a scandal on such a large scale. I have no other word for it than that. Scandal."

Pluto nodded. He needed to think, too.

PLUTO'S PRISON

"Do you have a place I can stay the night? I own nothing. That I know of," he added as an afterthought.

"Yes, I should have a room to set you up in," she said with a smile.

The quarters she took him to he shared with a man who was incredibly short and thin. Paint smudges lined his brow. "Hopper," he introduced himself as. He didn't say another word.

Pluto lay in bed, unable to sleep. His thoughts bounced around in his head like the red dot of a laser pointer. The software block from the senator would prevent him from going public with the information, as would the lack of evidence. He decided that given he had nothing else to do with his life, he could choose to either discover his former identity or try to reveal the 'scandal,' as Lucy Grace had called it. Pursuing both wouldn't be an option. Regardless of the resources involved, if he found his family and friends again (assuming he had any, he figured), that would give the government coercive measures to keep his mouth shut. They'd have something to threaten him with.

Pluto rose. He took a few minutes to walk along the balcony, resisting the urge to add five lines of scratches in the wood as he ran his fingers over it. How could he be expected to choose one thing over another when he had no idea what either entailed? He sighed and slouched over the balcony.

The easiest thing to do would be to wait and hear what Lucy decided. She was smarter and more educated than him anyways. She'd come up with a better plan.

He turned his gaze upwards, towards the night sky, peering through the skylight. The moon shone brightly, alone and small in dark. The light pollution prevented him from seeing his namesake, or anything else in the night sky besides the old man's face staring down at him.

"I feel you, old man," he grunted, pushing away from the balcony. "I'm feeling ancient and I'm not even a day old."

The next morning, the moon was gone. Grey-blue hovered over the dome, but Pluto ignored it, his attention focused on finding Lucy.

She was in her office. "Come in," she said, her tone sounding more like it had when they'd first met. Her makeup looked fresh, the same faded neon-pink from the night before shining just a bit brighter on her lips.

"What did you decide?" he asked.

"I decided that this is your decision." She smiled, and threw her head slightly so her gold hair flipped out of her face. "I still believe in the importance of the individual, and I'm not going to ask you to sacrifice yourself for some abstract cause. And regardless of your choice, I will aid you in any way I can."

Pluto fidgeted with the zipper on his leather jacket. "I actually decided I would listen to you. I don't know what effects my decision might have."

She sighed, opening a drawer on her desk and pulling a gun out. It made a heavy clunk; whatever it was made of seemed to absorb light. No reflections shone off its black surface.

"I don't know either, but I have guesses. I talked to Desna about it last night, via careful use of hypotheticals and a couple other tricks. She doesn't know it's true, but we agreed: people would need to know the results of any knowledge gained regarding the nature of the soul. It'll cause... upset. Possibly riots. That's short term. Long term, it's impossible to know. Definitely might cause a radical restructuring of our justice system." She shook her head, and her wings stretched a bit. "Regardless, I'm of the opinion that keeping people ignorant is a means of controlling them, and I can't stand for that."

"Does that way of thinking hold up given... me? Aren't their bodies controlling them, basically?"

"No, it holds up. Even if they won't actually 'choose' what to do, keeping them ignorant is depriving them of even having that choice to begin with. Keeping someone in a prison is not suddenly alright in light of this information. You could argue that since they lack free will, they lack the ultimate freedom, and that therefore keeping them in a cell cannot rob them of something they do not have. The argument is correct but it misses a point. Happiness is contingent on our bodies being allowed to choose the best possible path for itself. And ignorance prevents that. Ignorance is just another form of prison."

Pluto's eyes went unfocused as he replayed her words via audio log, checking the argument as he listened again and again, until he decided he agreed with her.

"Very well," he said. "Tell me, where do we start?"

PLUTO'S PRISON

"I don't know," Lucy admitted. "But I do see one bright side to all of this."

She took his paw and spoke to him wordlessly. "The souls go somewhere when they jump... perhaps there is an afterlife after all. I'd like to believe that, anyways. I think I would like to do some research into that."

Pluto smiled and took his hand away. "Sounds good to me. How about we get out of here and start looking?"

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This anthology was created by the fans of Rainfurrest with a simple goal in mind:
to give something back.

Proceeds from this book will go to our yearly Rainfurrest charity, in the hope of giving our furry friends a better life. So please open these pages and enter a world of sprawling corporate complexes, of bright lights and darker shadows, and the people that make their mark in the spaces between.



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