

Greg's adventure continues.

Or is this just the beginning?

# The Furry Human

*When the world of yesterday collides with today*

Book 2

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The furry human.

## 51. Keith

Greg's eyes flew open when something hit his head, hard. A short disorienting flow of images slowly coalesced into steel bars. He'd slid to a halt, and saw he was in a metal cage. The ceiling was littered with tube lights. The first thing he could think of was, this was not the original experiment chamber of what he'd come to think of as 'Tabitha's Universe'. The equations on the tablet would most likely get him to a place that had to be very, very close to what he'd left here.

Next he realized something heavy was on top of him and he looked a centimeter down where his cat companion was resting. Shirra was unconscious. Nothing alarming, the transition was a bit of a shock.

Red lights flooded the place, an alarm sounded and a door slid open. Soldiers rushed in, pointing guns at them. Too many guns to count.

"Hi, I'm Greg," he said feebly to this overwhelming show of force. Funny people here, aiming guns like that. What would this look like? A red and black cat with a passed out white one on top of him. Next he saw Shirra still clasped the tablet.

"At ease!" he heard.

Ah. Score one: English. With an unmistakable US sound to it. Good, for all he knew it had worked, it should have but still... He looked past Shirra, where he saw a really good setup. His by now expert eye picked out several details that he thought to be top of the line. It was exactly like he and his Koala friend Keith had built so long ago.

Time to consider it was cut short though as the cage was lifted and he was grabbed tight and ushered through the door like a sack of flour, down a corridor and into a cell. Shirra was out of sight.

The cell door slammed shut. Greg yawned. This cell appeared to be devoid of light but for a tiny speck at the door.

He took to the bed and quickly fell into a deep coma like sleep; he'd not had a good meal or anything serious to drink for a while. If this was the US, and akin to what he'd found before chances were they'd be sort-a nice, if perhaps a little over excitable. Americans are that way, he mused as his mind let go.

###

“Hey, you!”

The voice stirred memories in his aching head.

Blinking, feeling his head with a groan, he noted a koala and a badger in military uniform. The koala's was unmarked but for a name.

Greg pushed himself up on the bed to sitting. The koala shrank back, and guns were aiming at him. How lovely! Water was on an indestructible nightstand like thing next to him. He drank it greedily before wondering if that might be smart.

After swallowing he looked at the koala again, “Keith?” he asked, slowly. He saw recognition in that stance, but it was covered up by something else.

The koala's voice came again, he was sure of the name now. “You may think you know me, but in this universe I know no red and black cats like yourself. You are not in your own world anymore.”

“Cats?” Greg drawled, “Oh, sure! Cat!” he giggled a little giddy. “Keith man, you're not going to believe this but I'm not a cat, I'm Greg. I'm a human, you know me!”

The little hesitation was all he needed to know. This was Keith. Complete with the reply, “You are not a human, um, ‘Greg’, I know what they look like, you see, and you aren’t.”

“Ah, but this is a clever disguise! If you dare, I’ll show you what I mean.”

“How?”

“Come closer, look into my mouth, er... muzzle, teeth thingy.”

Greg pulled his muzzle open, causing a few ‘ieeew’ like sounds from some of the military personnel.

“See?” he asked of the on looking koala with his ‘mouth open’ so speaking should be impossible.

Keith shrank back again. “You... you have two mouths?”

“Keith, I just *know* you are smarter than that! You’re the fixtures wonder boy remember?”

“Greg?”

“Sure!”

“Greg... from the gold, and the setup and the singularity?”

He thought for a second.

“Why, yes, all three.”

Keith giggled like only the koala could. “Oh, my, I got to get Ricca on this, she’s going to flip!”

“Keith?”

He called the leaving koala back who turned on his heel, or actually his forefoot.

“Uh, sorry, yes Greg?”

“I’m to stay here? What happened to the white kitten?”

“Ah, um, she’s um, not well.”

Greg swallowed.

“What is ailing her?”

“She’s in a coma.” Keith fidgeted.

“What from?”

“She’s been shot.”

“Damn! Those bloody horses, I should have jumped with her before that!”

He punched the bed, with nil effect.

“Keith? What about the tablet?” he started to get up and found the muzzles of guns in his body from several angles. A grunt here and there indicated the amount of tension.

“It’s okay guys. It really is Greg; I accept responsibility for this guy.”

This caused some paperwork to appear, signatures, words of liability to be spread over him, hell and doom professed should be saying anything untrue at the risk of perjury, to the best of his knowledge, and how much he understood from all that. Anyway, Greg got a red badge and walked with Keith through the corridors.

“What is this place?”

“It’s a military institute, you could say, sort of investigation bureau for new technologies. A special branch of them does the, ah, unlikely stuff and they stumbled on my gold. Well, our gold.”

“What about that gold?”

“It’s got another quantum signature.”

Greg simply nodded, “Cool, they can measure that?”

“It’s one of the uses of the quantum computer. Yes, they can.”

“And it led them to you?”

“Indeed. And via me, to the setup. We brought it here from storage, and have been running tests for the last few months. Fancy getting you from one of the experiments! Come to think of it, it really was the first complete exchange of -”

Greg butted in, “Say, what happened to that ‘time project’ then?”

“I don’t know.” Keith shook his head and shrugged, “But I do know it has been dormant for over a year now. Seems that it was not under control the way it was supposed to be.”

“Cryptic.”

“Intentional, I fear.”

“Aha. So, Keith, how’ve you been?”

“Good, fine, things are rolling. Getting a steady income from this job. Mostly I’m hopping around here.”

As his memory began to retrieve more detail he recalled his escape from the orbital station on what he decided to think of as ‘Amandine’s World’.

“Keith, did we manage to get your sister back, did Tabitha make it?”

“Yes, to both questions.”

“Damn, I’m good!” he called, punching his fist into his palm.

“And you live with her again?”

“Ah, no.”

“So, she let you go finally eh? Good!”

“In a way, she let me go. But not voluntarily, Greg. You see, she’s dead.”

Greg gulped. “Oh, Keith, I’m so sorry... I...”

“You couldn’t know. Greg.”

“This is weird, it is as if everything I touch dies or gets destroyed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Another time, Keith, another time I will speak more of this.”

“Otherwise you’re fine?”

“I think so.”

“Well then, what’s the story with you looking like a very convincing cat?”

“This?” he pulled the hair on his arm, “best available disguise, I’ve been told.”

Keith stopped and held him at arm’s length in front of him.

“Do you mind if I try and touch your muzzle? It’s so freaking real, you see.”

Greg shrugged, “Sure man, go right ahead.”

Keith felt all over his face, his ears and his skin.

“This is unreal man, believe you me, this is not funny anymore.”

By means of explanation, Greg offered, “That white cat, her name is Shirra; she said it was a sort of graft-skin.”

“Feels so real...” Keith mumbled as he resumed their path through the corridors.

Greg agreed it felt a little more real than he liked. ‘Skin graft’ ... right.

With an elevator they reached a level higher up and Keith led him to a nice room with a view on the forest, kept at bay behind a secured fence.

“The forest here is too dangerous so you need a fence to keep it out?”

Keith looked at him a little strangely. “If I had any doubts, they’d be dispelled by that comment, Greg.”

Then Keith went in the next room where Shirra was in a bed, a tube in her muzzle. It looked quite pathetic, that is to say he didn’t feel a lot upon seeing her other than ‘a cat’. This sparked another thought. “Keith? Can I see your hand for a moment?”

Keith held his out, for inspection, “sure.”

He looked at the hand, fingers, thick black nails but still a good usable piece of finger tip. He walked over to the bed and took Shirra’s limp hand. Here, indeed the nails covered the whole of the finger-tip. More cylindrical claws than Keith’s fingers. His own glued glove looked like Shirra’s fingers. Hopeless.

“See that, Keith? Difference in the hand, even cats differ in these universes.”

“Details, Greg.”

“You wanna know what they used the lead for?”

Keith shook his head, stared and then nodded. “Ah, the lead. No, what did they use it for?”

“You'd never guess, for fuel!”

“But there is lead in abundance on any world!”

“Sure, but apparently we were providing pure lead. They could not make that.”

“Hmm, and then paying so-so-grade gold is not so strange anymore.”

“Yep.”

“Greg, do you know how their energy conversion works?”

“Nope, sorry.”

“That’s a real shame, Greg; it would have helped so much to return something with this project.”

The pair looked up as a doctor walked in, to check on Shirra. It was a cat, a grey striped one. The cat looked at him, asking, “Sir? Are you all right?”

Greg nodded. “I feel fine, why?”

“Your muzzle, it seems to... sag?”

“This is not real, doctor, it’s just a skin graft.”

After introducing them, Keith started to explain in short and concise terms what was the case. The doctor also jumped nearly out of his skin when Greg opened his muzzle to show his real mouth.

“Holy crap!” the doctor exclaimed in horror, and then his scientific interest emerged. “Greg, can I make a scan of that skin?”

“Be my guest.”

And so, after some preparation, Greg stood looking at the results of the MRI.

“Um, two layers of epidermal skin, indeed, but in this case there are actual veins going towards it. It’s alive!”

“Shirra mentioned something like that,” Greg agreed a little unhappy.

“Shirra?”

Greg pointed, “The white cat, there.”

The doctor made a note, then again regarded his visage. “I’ve never seen anything like it. And you say it was created, made?”

“Yes, Shirra said it was genetically matched or so. Based on my own genotype or something.”

“If you don’t mind Greg, I would like to examine this further. Can I keep the scan on record?”

“Be my guest doctor. By the way, if you can find a way to remove it, I’m all ears.”

“Remove it? I fear that will be nearly impossible without severe reconstructive action!”

Greg tapped his muzzle. He pulled it for good measure. “Guys, I think I have been a cat long enough now. See these gloves? Stuck. These shoes? Also stuck.”

The doctor's eyes went from the bed to Greg, "Does this Shirra lady know much about all of this?"

"I think so, she talks about it as if it were obvious, and-"

Keith interrupted this, saying, "Like the way you talk about mathematics?"

A little hurt, Greg frowned, "That's not the same Keith, math is just math, that is easy, this is *biological* things."

This earned him two smiles.

"Of course, Greg. Say, it's nearly lunch time, care to join me?"

"I'm not so hungry Keith."

"Too bad, our chef is serving 'sauerbraten'."

Greg knew that. He tore his gaze away from Shirra, the only one who understood about his mask. "OK. I might try it."

"Good."

Before he went with them, he walked to Shirra's bedside. She looked peaceful. He touched her ear. It flicked.

"Doctor!" he called, excited, "look!"

The doctor stood at the bed and looked. Greg touched her ear again.

"See that? She's still here!"

The condescending look would have wilted the most forward of people but not Greg. "Um, that is an involuntary response Greg; it will work unless she is dead."

"Ah. But she keeps telling me how she hates it when I do that."

"I imagine. If you would try it with me I'd be all over you, I can assure you."

"Touchy area?"

"Point is, she feels it of course and she can't control it."

Greg reached for the doctor's grey ear, just for the fun.

A hand flew up to intercept, barring his reach for the grey ear. "Don't sir, I mean it."

"Copy that."

The doctor sniffed.

"I suggest you take a wash, Greg."

Greg tried smelling his arm. "I might."

But then again he might not. Why bother. And so they set off to get something to eat.

While walking there, Greg asked his friend, "Keith? Did anyone or anything go into the setup, for balance of exchange?"

"Oh, block of lead."

"Nice, so I'm worth a block of lead?"

"Pfff," Keith blew, "that's a stupid joke and you know it."

They reached the restaurant.

Keith scolded him for trying that ear-thing with the doctor. Greg found he was unable to explain to him it was just too much fun.

Waiting in line for the cashier, Keith asked him about the red hairs.

"Disguise."

Keith laughed. He kept laughing, in fits, all the way to a table.

"Could you fill me in on the hilarious nature of that remark, Keith?"

"Disguise! Greg, a human as a near perfect cat and you see fit to dye your fur? Oh, sorry, your 'hair'. Ha, ha!"

“You wouldn’t understand, Keith. Trust me. It certainly is not vanity.”

“There’s black at the roots already. I guess another two weeks and you’ll be a black cat. Hee hee.”

“And how is *that* funny?”

“Bad luck and all that?”

Greg frowned, but it was likely Keith would not read his face too well. He tried the meal.

Greg was not pleased with the food. “Disgusting, Keith. An affront to all Germans.”

“Can I have yours?”

“By all means, I didn’t know you ate garbage. Your sister would not have approved.”

To his surprise, Keith looked at him, then at the food, and then left it.

“I’m afraid, you are right.”

At least the koala’s incessant laughing had stopped and Greg looked around him. Most people here wore military uniforms, soldier to officer, happily mixed. This was proper, he felt. Not like that weird world with the blanches.

His reverie was interrupted by an unpleasant shrill voice next to him.

“Hi!”

Greg looked up, startled, into a big raccoon’s fat face. Longer than him, military dress (tent was the more apt term), low ranking officer. Bulbous tits, was about the next thing he saw. Her big butt and thick calves certainly made her no movie star. A friendly smile was hers to share though. It seemed this

was approximately the route his eyes were taking, confronted with the big dame.

He could not help but think ‘fat ass’ when he saw her. She was longer than he was and maybe twice as wide as Keith. Still she probably fitted to some sort of standard or she would not be in the army. Using American standards no doubt. Greg suppressed a chuckle.

Keith greeted the raccoon, happily. “Hi Ricca, have a seat,” Keith said, and moved over.

Ricca sat down next to Keith who went down a few millimeters.

“Hi, I’m Ricca Raccoon, and you are?”

Did that chair she’d pulled up actually support her?

Greg produced a hand and said, “Greg de Beers, how do you do?”

She giggled in an aggravating way, and he saw Keith hated it too. What a charming personality.

He kept looking at the raccoon.

“Say, those ears, they don’t point in the same direction, that’s strange.”

Ricca looked up from her tiny salad, and if looks could kill he would be a pile of ash.

He noted her muzzle. “Your muzzle is a bit warped, it seems. I don’t think I’ve seen that before.”

Ricca clanged her cutlery on her crockery and stood up in a strained move. Her chair shoved to the back, forced by her big butt. It might have hung on to her wide ass.

“Bye,” she said icily and marched off.

“Something I said?” he offered to Keith, radiating surprise.

Keith pinched the bridge of his muzzle, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Greg, Greg. If I would have been searching before, now I know for sure it’s you.”

“Thanks, I guess. Again, who was that, and why did she march off?”

“Greg, why did you have to go and call her ugly? She knows she is that, no need to push it so. It’s trite!”

“Ugly? I have no idea, I mean, it’s a fat raccoon. I don’t know what is nice or ugly about them.”

“Being a raccoon is not at all defining beauty or ugly, Greg, it’s like that white cat you brought, that Shirra. She is the talk of the research group. The most stunningly gorgeous cat any of us ever saw, even the females say that.”

“If you say so. That raccoon: I just see a big lady, OK?” Greg drank a sip from his coke.

Keith looked at him open muzzled. “You really don’t see what is ugly about her?”

“Nope.”

“You don’t find Ricca repulsive?”

“Nope, but she’s big. I suppose in Germany all would call her fat.”

He swallowed another sip.

Keith shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

“You know Keith, it is funny how I walk around here as a cat and don’t get all those stares. I feel like I blend in well.”

“You would, but you do look very scruffy.”

“I do?”

“Yes. Although I can’t help but feeling you were *made* to look scruffy.”

“Possible, I asked for a scruffy look. Glad to hear it works.”

“You don’t see what is scruffy about you?”

“Nope.”

He took another sip, while Keith looked at the ceiling for a second, reconsidering his next words.

“Greg, that raccoon is Ricca. She is doing the mathematical support for our stasis field setup.”

“So?”

Keith played with his napkin. Greg waited for the new subject, the ‘real’ question.

“Greg, about that tablet, and Ricca.”

“Just say it, Keith; what do you want me to tell you or Ricca?”

“Glad you see it that way. Greg, Ricca would like to be able to generate a singularity.”

Greg choked on his swig and looked at his coke. Sputtered and took another sip. Chances were he’d already made a singularity coming here. The setup here simply was prone to it. To add one would be monumentally stupid in terms of danger.

“I like coke, Keith. Haven’t had it for a while.”

Keith understood his evasive reply well, he saw.

“Why not, Greg?”

“Cally understands it, I don’t. You should contact Cally.”

“We’ve tried, actually. We couldn’t.”

“You tried? You don’t know the world equation for it!”

“Ricca made one, based on my description of you.”

That was clever. Perhaps there was something to Ricca? “And you tried to find a world from which you knew I was missing? Smart.”

“I hadn’t looked at it like that. I’m still the hardware man, you understand.”

“Yes, I do. Come, we shall visit Ricca. I’ll explain why I think that singularity idea is a bit dangerous.”

So, Ricca made a world equation. Well, that package might contain a brain of course.

###

Keith knocked on a door labeled ‘ER-GREEN- A1.021.1’.

Greg shook his head seeing that sign. Anyone who came up with such codes should be shot. On the spot.

“Yes?”

The koala entered and Greg walked in after to see the raccoon lady at a white board on a chair. Her eyes shot daggers at him. Her hand held a partially peeled banana.

Keith started to explain Greg was not a cat.

Ricca put her smelly half eaten banana on her desk, wheeling the chair over. Greg heard it squeak in protest. After she stopped laughing, which interestingly didn’t sound ugly at all, Greg proposed to show his muzzle-trick. This didn’t get a tall reaction.

“Could we try again, from the start?”

“All right, Greg. Mind you, I am stone headed about people who find me ugly, but in your case I will try to make an exception.”

She extended a well-manicured hand and sniffed. “I’m sergeant Ricca, I’m the scientist and mathematical brains here. Keith suggested once you understood all about the stasis field, is that true?”

“You sure don’t beat about the bush, Ricca. Keith is right, but I might be a bit rusty with it.”

She sniffed again, and waved her hand before her nose. “Is that you?”

Greg shrugged. Keith elbowed him. “You really *are* smelly, Greg.”

“Right, right,” Greg folded, “where is the shower?”

###

Refreshed, he appeared at her door. Keith had procured decent army wear. Dark tough material. He liked it. Keith carried a replacement tablet under one arm, and his old tablet under the other.

“You really have to tell me how this tablet has survived about one hundred and fifty years on one power cell. Even in standby that is a feat. Plus, every thing shows this tablet actually is over one hundred fifty years old. What *have* you been doing?”

“It got stolen, and it found me back, I guess,” he said absentmindedly.

“Never a dull day around you, is there?” Keith remarked.

“Sure. Where I go, people die, or get hurt, or lose loved ones.”

“Remarkable, hearing that from you, Greg. After all, you arrived here with the plan to murder a certain Zig Zag, isn’t that true?”

“Not murder, Keith. *Hunt*. That is not at all the same.”

Keith would have nothing of it, “I must say it sounds pretty dark, what keeps you going?”

Angrily Greg retorted, “I could return the question, since you lost your sister because of me.”

“That is hardly true Greg, and you know it. She was murdered on the street by thugs.”

“You told me over lunch that they did that because she looked so nice, which was because she lost her husband, which was because I shot that squirrel.”

“Have it your way, Greg, as long as you know I won’t hold it against you. For now, your work here allowed me to build a life which I enjoy. With people I like. I count Ricca as a friend and I hope very much you will be civil to her!”

“Don’t sweat it, Keith, you know me.”

“Exactly my point.”

Exasperated, Keith looked to the ceiling for support and then looked ahead of him.

“Well, shall we then?”

Greg rapped on the door and entered. He saw the banana had been eaten in the meanwhile. A faint sickly smell of that banana skin hung in the room, together with a hint of sweat. Ricca’s no doubt.

“Well, well,” the dame called out, “that is a huge improvement, Greg. Mind if I call you Greg?”

He didn’t. Not at all, and he liked her personality. He could imagine someone would call her ‘big mamma’.

Ricca got up and walked (moved would be more apt) to the white board. “You are arriving at the right moment, I’m stuck here. What is this, Greg?”

Greg closed on the board. Bold round writing covered it. After a while he started to recognize the equations that were written down.

“Well, that is quite clear, don’t you think?” he said eventually.

“It is not, you tell me, what is this?”

“Wrong.”

“It’s not! You wrote it!”

“Ah, no, you are mistaken. This,” he underlined a part of the equation, “is mine, as is this, and this.”

He closed his eyes a second. The equations danced through his mind in a parade. Quickly he picked out the correct pieces of information. This was a long while ago!

With a few gestures, he zoomed in on the electronic board and started rewriting the equation.

He threw the marker up, and caught it without looking. “This is what is meant there.”

Ricca was reading it, clearly. She stood in silence. Keith, at the door was smiling.

“This can’t be right,” she concluded eventually.

“What, you don’t see this? Tabitha understood it at once.”

Ricca rubbed her muzzle vigorously between her hands, a rare sight. Maybe she *was* trying hard to understand, Greg could not be sure.

“But how...” she started, and stopped, pulling an ear. Greg decided it was a tick, and was getting impatient. It was *so* obvious.

“Come on, Ricca, you can’t be both fat and stupid.”

Ricca looked at him with a scowl. “And so the legendary Greg proves himself to be a substandard person.”

Strangely she did not sound too upset.

Rolling his eyes Greg explained, “I’m not a didactic wonder, Ricca. What is the problem?”

It took a while, but when he finally understood the problem, he could explain it easily.

Ricca’s obtuseness ended with an ‘aha’.

Admittedly, he kept bumping into her emotional space from time to time, she did endure it. When he excused himself to take a leak, he caught a sliver of a discussion flaring up between Ricca and Keith. It was not his problem and he walked off.

When he returned, he listened at the door, curious if something about him would be said. He stood close to the door, and listened to the loud conversation seeping through.

“...always!”

“He really doesn’t mean all that, he’s just socially inept, Ricca.”

“No he’s not! He’s playing me, you can see it. You said he has excellent control over his social appearance.”

“That’s not the same.”

“He’s a bully.”

“Even if he is, you must confess that he does understand the equations, right?”

“Yes, he does.”

A short silence.

“But why does he have to be such an asshole! I always imagined a sort of alien, with popping eyes and now it appears he’s, well, a cat, a scruffy looking cat.”

Greg checked his arms. The black hair would return, that was clear. Also, it would be human hair, not the fine fur stuff. He couldn’t wait to feel human again.

He opened the door and walked in.

“Hi fellows,” he remarked happily.

Ricca looked up, haughty.

“Greg, please try to be a little more civil? For all I know you two will have to work together for a while.”

“What makes you think I will stay here?”

Keith was dumbstruck.

Ricca put one of her obnoxious giggles in.

“Won’t you?”

“I haven’t decided. I hope Shirra regains consciousness. Until that time, I’m in a sort of –aha- stasis.”

Ricca crossed her arms. It looked like a sort of self-hug, and waited.

###

“I could use some coffee,” Greg announced.

They had been going through the equations for more than an hour. Keith had left them alone, satisfied no more ungainly speech would be used.

“Good idea, Greg.”

Ricca walked out, and he followed. She actually fitted through the door!

At the coffee machine, Ricca sat down. A lot of raccoon, he still thought.

“I know what you think; I can see it in your face all the time.”

“I find that hard to believe. This face is not showing half the emotions of a human face.”

“Whatever, I know that look.”

“And what do I think?”

“I’m big, but it’s a genetic trait of my family. From my mother’s side all girls are like this. My brothers are thin, like my father.”

“And it can’t be solved?”

“The set of genes that is responsible hasn’t been identified yet, and it’s unlikely it ever will. With my luck it’ll be one of those entangled sets: like, we can help you but you will be stupid after.”

“Bummer,” Greg agreed halfheartedly.

“Anyway, it would not solve my ears, or my muzzle.”

“I don’t ‘see’ that, Ricca.”

She squeezed her eyes to slits, “Your luck... Greg, tell me about your world?”

“What do you want to know?”

“What it looks like, what species are there, socially, you know.”

“Hmm. You sure?”

“Yes, I would not ask else, would I?”

“It’s like your world, Ricca, almost a copy. But for one detail.”

She seemed to hang on to his every word.

“Well?”

“There are no, ‘species’, as you expect. Sure there are squirrels, but only this big.” Greg indicated twenty centimeters from the floor.

“Like some sort of dwarf-affliction?”

“You misunderstand, they’re not intelligent. That is to say, self-conscious.”

“Like wild species squirrels?”

“Those exist here too?”

“Certainly, but there’s few of them.”

“Well, my universe only has talking humans. All the rest is ‘wild’.”

“Raccoons too?”

“I never saw a wild raccoon, but there are no talking ones, for sure.”

“So, I’d be the only one, there?”

“If you would be daft enough to go there, yes.”

“I would like to see that world.”

“Unlikely, it’s just a copy and you would stand out like a sore thumb.”

“Why?”

“What do you think would happen if you were to drop me downtown, looking like a human, like that picture Keith has.”

“Freak show?” she asked, understanding, “But I could disguise myself?”

“Yeah, right, if you would accept some major facial reconstructions maybe. That muzzle can hardly be covered.”

“See, I knew it! You think my muzzle is not right.”

“Ricca? Cut that out. I was trying to explain how you would have to make your face *flat*, get it?”

“Shame though,” she huffed, “I would like to go there.”

Exasperated, Greg confronted her, “What on earth for? I don’t get it! You seem to have relatives... family... a life! For all I know you even like them, what if you could not get back?”

A little smile crawled into the corners of her muzzle. “The singularity, Greg! You used it to get Tabitha home, to get Keith’s sister home.”

“And then, you get there. There you are, a world full of humans with one weirdo. Assume you actually luck out to the level you *might* get back, what would you do?”

“Seek out that professor Cally!”

Dumbfounded Greg stood eying the raccoon while that name bounces through his mind. Cally? Cally! Of all the reasons... At least, they were getting somewhere.

“What is the magic about her?” But he knew the answer of course; Cally could incite almost anyone to dig mathematics. Incite them to use all the innate ability they had to their maximum. Considering madam Ricca here, someone with more than rudimentary understanding of equations, it was perhaps logical to expect the raccoon damsel to get excited over Cally’s work.

Ricca smiled victoriously, “She’s invented all of this, hasn’t she?”

That was true. Moreover, it was so much more remarkable than Ricca could possibly imagine!

“Yes,” Greg offered carefully.

Ricca put her head on her hands, leaning on them with her elbows on the table, her eyes unfocused, “She must be the smartest female in the world, no the universe, no! The multiverse!”

So, it was Cally-praising time, was it? In an effort to add his two cents he pointed out something that would no doubt increase the awe.

“Ricca, Cally wrote a thesis on the stasis field.”

“It was her PhD thesis, wasn’t it?”

“Mmmm... Yes sort of, but it was censored you see. Too advanced for her contemporaries, I fear.”

Ricca nodded. “Visionaries will suffer that fate. It only lifts their prowess in hindsight.”

“Then,” Greg went on, “to get her degree, she wrote something else in six months for which she was highly praised.”

“Credit where it is due, I should think!”

“No Ricca, Cally hated it. She lives for tutoring and the sole reason for her stasis-field, the actual reason she developed her theory was and probably still is to help students understand.”

“Wonderful...” Ricca dreamed, looking into far fetched images only she saw.

“Let me give you a piece of advice, Ricca...”

Her head snapped up and angrily she said, “I don’t need to hear that, Greg! I’ve got this affliction; my thyroid gland is not working properly, OK?”

“... not pertaining to your size, or imagined ugliness, I should add.”

“*Imagined?* Why Greg, that’s maybe the nicest thing anyone ever said to me, except of course that time when my little brother said...”

“Ricca? Please?”

“Oh sorry, Ah- I get carried away sometimes.”

“Really? You don’t say. Anyway, if I were you: do not think of going to Cally. It will only lead to death and destruction.”

“How ominous.”

“No, based on experience.”

“Pfff. You’re not spooking me, Greg.” Ricca smiled a wide smile. Greg thought ‘ear to ear’ but realized that the anatomy in this case did not support that.

“Too bad, apparently I need to work on my spooking.”

“I’d disagree there Greg. That muzzle-thing you did, that was a lot of spook. Like that alien movie, you know? Two pair of jaws!”

She laughed merrily.

“You find that movie funny?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Greg was getting a little lost. “Has anyone ever said your mind works in mysterious ways?”

Her eyebrows rose in perfect wonder, “No, not that I can recall. Why?”

“Never mind, Ricca.” To save the moment he watched his mug. “Say, my coffee is drained. We better continue.”

She nodded, eager, and thankfully torn away from the previous subject.

## 52. The release

Greg studied the ceiling which sported some sort of uniform slab of illumination. Fancy. The ceiling was not too interesting; it was a result of not finding sleep. According to Keith he'd been here for nearly a week now and he had no idea of the time anymore. The whole of yesterday, Ricca had kept asking questions about Cally. All the while he'd tried to explain one or two things and Ricca had, from time to time, written things down.

It was pretty obvious she was compiling information for a world equation which was dangerous and stupid. "Not my problem," he concluded. Turning over he sighed, he should be sleeping instead of talking to himself!

Greg yawned, putting a hand to his mouth and once again encountered his prosthetic muzzle, eliciting a curse. Stupid mock ears! He pulled the aggravating fake tail.

Man, he could get *mad* because of this. If he could get those rotten gloves off, it would not be a second too soon.

###

He sat up, feeling an irritating pinch just above his ass. He scratched, again. And again. The pinching increased. He got up and yelled in pain and light in the ceiling went on in reaction to his moving about. Cursing, he jumped around and pulled the tail, for that was the source of the hurt.

Suddenly he stood with the infernal thing in his hand. It had finally come off.

"Hurray!"

With a mighty sweep, the black piece of dread hit the wall, near the corner and fell down.

“Die, sucker!” he said, softly.

Next, he walked to the mirror to take another look at the, by now, hated visage. He tried to get a glove loose, and lo and behold it gave a little! Although hairs on his arm were pulled from their sockets he persevered through the pain until in a near frenzy he wringed and pulled to get some centimeters of the glove free.

Greg now put his cat-foot boot on the glove and pulled until he stood with his own, actual hand free in the air. He kissed his hand; it looked as if immersed way too long in water. It was ruddy, irritated, and painful to the touch. But free.

A similar, but much more controlled and precise action freed his other hand. Shirra had been right: those cat-paws were not nearly a good substitute for his own hands.

After standing there for a while, flexing his fingers, he washed his hands and soaked them in the little sink filled with warm water.

“Ahhhh,” he said.

If that glue was giving, finally, then he would try to remove the idiotic ears as well.

###

At nine, Greg hit the alarm clock with his ‘own’ hand and got up and headed for the shower. After a very refreshing shower he dressed and walked to the mess, for a bite. En route, he met many stares. He greeted everyone, “how are you today?” or “how are you doing?”

A quick peek at his watch told him it was thirty five minutes past nine. Would Keith be in time for their 'breakfast-meeting'? The answer came quickly from behind in the form of a half-constricted "Greg!"

He turned and saw the koala hurry up.

"Yo Keith-man, how are *you* today?"

Keith didn't waste any time on niceties, "Greg! You are... ah, are you aware your ears... they are, ah, *gone*?"

Greg patted his head and pulled his still sore earlobes. "Splendid improvement, don't you think? I'm loving it! Before long I'm going to get rid of this frustrating thing as well!" He tapped the snout in front of his nose.

"That is very nice Greg, but right now I suggest..."

"No, no buddy! I'm going to eat now, what are you..."

Keith would have none of it though. He pushed Greg in front of him, "Move it Greg, come along, you are putting that ear piece back right *this instant*."

"Keith! I've got the right to..."

"You've got the right to remain silent so help me God!" another shove, "Shut up and move!"

Keith was pretty strong, also longer and of course very angry to boot. Thus Greg found himself pushed into his room by a bristling koala.

"Where is it?" Keith demanded.

"What?"

"No jokes, Greg. Put that ear thing on *now*."

"Um," Greg began a little helpless.

"Don't tell me you wrecked it, Greg"

"I didn't! It's just that I don't know where I threw it."

Keith stood with his arms crossed, glaring at him while his nails tapped the floor, "I'm waiting."

Meekly, Greg started seeking through his room, uncovering the thing from under his disarrayed sheets.

"Put it on."

Greg looked at the diadem with some loathing, "Why?"

"I know you're smarter than this but I'll indulge you on this one. While you try to appear oblivious to the fact, all others here are trying to reset their brain upon seeing you. It's the talk of the base; people are walking into doors, walls. More seriously, they talk to their friends, family and whatnot." Keith pointed, "Ears, on, now."

"No."

"I'm really a reasonable guy Greg. You're not going to want to test my other side, the side that has been in the brig and learned somewhat."

"Pfff," Greg mumbled unimpressed, "Prison. I've been to places you can't imagine. What's a jail? I've been in so many jaily things."

"You're testing my patience, Greg?"

"I didn't say that. I just feel like freakin' Mickey Mouse with that thing on."

"Who?"

"Never mind. I'm going to put them on because it's you, for old time's sake, and you're getting a grumpy Greg in return."

"As is fitting."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that."

"A happy Greg is very disturbing to my peace of mind."

Giving Keith the evil eye, Greg walked to the mirror and tried fitting the stupid thing on.

"But I'm not gluing it Keith, you hear me?"

“I’m not asking you to Greg. This will do nicely.”

“Fabulous,” Greg growled, “Freak de Beers on stage. Tell me Keith, are my hands acceptable?”

Keith looked, his brow rose with a little surprise and he smiled. “They look fine to me, Greg.”

“Glad I achieved something.”

“Did you perchance also ‘lose’ your tail?”

“That rag is in the corner. You are going to have to tell me I’m getting away with that Keith or I’m going to explode.”

“Oh, how messy Greg. Now we wouldn’t want that, would we? No, it’ll be fine. Cat without tail, happens.”

Greg stared at the ears in the mirror. The sound was damped just so, by the furry ear-caps.

“Do you realize, Keith, what it is like, to see this face?” Greg tapped his fake pink nose, getting again the real touch sensation.

Keith cleared his throat. “No, Greg, I can’t.”

“Yeah, I guess not!” Greg spat the words.

“Do you want to talk this over, Greg? A little heart to heart?”

“Swell, now I’m getting advice from an overgrown koala.”

“As opposed to...?” Keith inquired.

“...to someone ‘real’ like a fellow human being!”

“We seem to be in short supply of those Greg, but you can use my shoulder.”

“Nah...” Greg said then whispered, “nah.”

Keith stood next to him, a hand on his shoulder. “I know this isn’t what you want Greg, but I just can’t fathom you, one way or another. The one

moment you call Ricca fat and ugly, the next I hear her whistling happily because of something you said to her.”

“She can whistle?”

“You know what I mean Greg.”

“I know.” Greg shrugged, “It’s just...” he stopped and tried again, “It’s just, that...”

Keith filled in, “You look happy, when you work those equations.”

“Keith, there are but a very few things for me, that are happy.”

“Like that nice white cat lady?”

Greg closed his eyes for a moment. What exactly did Shirra mean to him?

He settled on, “She’s nice, I think. But she does not reach this here,” he put his hands over his chest and turned to Keith. “You know what I mean, Keith?”

“Oh yes! I know so well what you mean. It is the way I could not live with Barbara, the way she did not touch my heart where Maria did.”

“Your sister meant a lot to you Keith. Too much I thought then.”

“Maybe,” Keith allowed, “but irreplaceable nevertheless.”

“You’re still with that Barbara?”

“It’s a physical thing Greg and we both know it. We both seem to be unable to let go of one another but we both miss the fatal attraction.”

Suddenly and rather out of nowhere, Greg felt a pang of regret leaving Amandine behind. A sort of worry rushed through his body and he saw her little head, the ears turned to him to hear his every word. Her friendly ‘daddy’ word while her eyes shone, the bright green eyes full of life and love. Love for him, her daddy. Her hand with the little fingers trying to shift pegs in her wooden puzzle toy or a little hand full of apple. She’d say ‘daddy’, and ‘yum yum’. Greg knew she only clung to him, hung on for dear life it sometimes

seemed. Even Sasha, who had bathed her, cleaned her, steered her, loved her, even that overgrown teddy bear could not soothe her the way he could.

Amandine, his little coyote.

Her tail wagging so strangely as he walked in. How she would run at him, take a jump and land in his arms. He could not imagine cuddling anyone, anything, that much. He focused his eyes and turned to the mirror.

He missed Amandine and he missed her badly.

“Greg?” Keith called, “Helooo? Calling Greg?”

“Sorry, Keith.”

“Where were you? You seemed miles away.”

“Miles? Ha, you know Keith time and space are a relative measure when you deal with parallel worlds.”

Greg sighed. He felt alone all of a sudden. “Keith, I have met a girl who can fill my whole being.”

“That must be a very special girl, Greg!”

“She’s this big, grey, with the sweetest green eyes ever created. When she smiles Keith, nothing else matters... can you picture that?”

Keith frowned. “What are you saying?”

“In that world I just left, that ‘gold for lead’ world, I helped raise a little coyote girl. Just now we were talking love. That little girl is who I love. That, Keith, is love. Undeniable and irrevocable love.”

“A child?”

“A toddler actually; but not just any toddler! The most endearing toddler ever!”

Keith smiled widely. “Who would have thought that it would take a child to tame Greg’s wild heart?”

Keith's words filtered past Greg, he felt cold and shivered for a second, gulped and said dismissively, "I'm hungry, I think."

They went back to the mess hall.

Greg ate some sort of cereal. It didn't really carry any taste he could recognize. After cleaning his mouth he saw Keith's inquiring face and explained, "I think I prefer the food from that other world."

"Not good?"

"Do you always eat here?" Greg evaded.

"Only now, because you are here. Normally I'd sleep at home, have breakfast and drive here."

"So," Greg swallowed another mouthful, "you're a regular commuter?"

"Just like Ricca, really."

"Uh, uh," Greg munched, "Ricca fat ass."

"That is not nice Greg! And speaking of her, there she comes. She also came in early on your behalf."

Greg turned around to see Ricca wave at them, pick up her speed and head for their table.

"Hi guys!"

She sagged onto the vacant chair next to Keith, panting.

"You were running?" Greg wondered.

"Phew, no! I took the stairs."

Greg stated flatly, "Up one full flight?"

Ricca eyed him and smiled.

“Up from the parking lot, Greg.”

With a little shrug he said, “I haven’t been outside. Keith doesn’t allow me.”

“Not one day this whole week?”

“Nope.”

Ricca wiped her brow with a massive arm with undeterminable results.

Greg sniffed his coffee. It had cooled to lukewarm already and appeared somewhat tame for coffee. Under the right light he could see the bottom of his cup.

“Greg, what’s that I see? You got the cat-gloves off?”

He regarded Ricca with a little surprise. Good eye for detail she had, after all, it wasn’t all that obvious.

“Yes. Actually, I also got the ears off,” he demonstrated it for a second and quickly put them back when Keith’s face drew into a thunder of anger.

“Wow,” Ricca said amazed, “Could I see that for a moment?”

Greg looked around, Keith did the same. No one seemed to have noted and they were sitting near the wall where it wasn’t crowded at all. Keith nodded. He put the diadem to the side and showed his ear.

Ricca reached out and felt his ear. Greg suppressed a shudder at feeling that finger caress his skin.

“Intricate,” she said, sat back and added, “It is a beautiful shape.”

Greg put his ear-thing back.

“You think so?”

“Sure,” Ricca confirmed, “I had thought you would be more like white though.”

“Cally is white.”

“Thought so.”

Greg felt Ricca was getting cocky in her confidence. So he tried a little jab, “Did you get a world-function compiled for her world?”

Ricca looked startled, but recovered at once. “Your home world? Yes. I think so.”

“I could check it, if you like?”

“You’d do that?”

Greg sighed, “Listen Ricca; I figured if you attempt that, you had best end up with the real Cally. She’s a sucker for furry things, you know.”

“She has two cats,” Keith added with a mysterious glint to his eyes.

“Two cats? What on earth would she need *that* for?”

“Pets.” Greg said jokingly.

“Wild cats Ricca, little ones,” Keith supplied. He was clearly thinking it hilarious.

“Ah,” Ricca nodded. She had about caught her breath, finally.

Keith sat bolt upright as the details were connecting in his brain. “Hey!” he held Ricca by her shoulder, “You want to go there?”

“Who says so?”

“Greg just insinuated...”

Keith deflated his arrest. “Oh, right, having fun at the expense of the poor mechanic, eh?”

Greg pushed his tray forward a bit, indicating his preparation to go on.

Ricca got laboriously to her feet. “Let’s go!”

###

That afternoon, almost a week after he had arrived here, they had covered the whole singularity theory Cally had written down. He sat with Ricca, sipping his coffee at the machine in the hallway which thankfully did offer good coffee—at a price, Ricca was buying.

“Greg, if you have a world with only higher developed humans, I suppose you would not have specie-ist manifestations, would you?”

Greg coughed. “If only! I’ll give you a simple example: take a world with only dogs. You think a German shepherd would think highly of a Chihuahua?”

Ricca nodded. “I get it. So instead of specie-ists, you get racists?”

Greg smiled, “I thought you would be smart that way.”

“Smart? Hmm, actually that reminds me of something that has been nagging me.”

“Shoot.”

“Those electrons in the stasis field, don’t they fall back to their ground state? You know, with the Kasimir effect and all?”

“Uh?”

Ricca was completely put off and said “Quantum electro dynamics?” as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Sorry Ricca, you have the wrong guy. I read equations, I can dream them at times, but I won’t come up with that kind of thing.”

“You’re no physicist?”

“Nope.”

“And Cally?”

“I couldn’t say. But I wouldn’t put it beyond her because she’s so damn smart you hardly dare waste her time by asking questions.”

“But you said she is a perfect teacher!”

“True, but you first need to dare ask a question.”

“I would!” Ricca volunteered.

Greg smiled inwardly, “I don’t doubt that for a second.”

“You know Greg, I talked this whole stasis field thing over with my family and they support my choice of attempting it.”

“Isn’t this classified?”

She looked away, as if caught, “Sort of. The application is classified, not the field...” she trailed off and went back to physics, “You are certain you don’t see a problem with the stability of the electron state?”

“If there is, I’m not aware of it.”

Ricca leaned forward, “You needn’t use electrons per se. Could use any boson with the right setup!”

“Gesundheit, I have no idea what you talk of.”

After a moment of easy silence where both sides considered the other, Ricca spoke up.

“It’s nice of you to help us, Greg. I realize there’s nothing that is interesting for you here otherwise.”

“There is one thing in this world that is interesting.”

“That Zig Zag person?”

“No,” Greg shook his head, “not her. An employee of hers, a cat. Darke, she’s so impressive I would go and see her if it weren’t for the possibility I would do her more harm than I already have.”

“You sound so fatalistic Greg. How is that?”

“Are you my shrink now?”

“Come on, tell me?”

“Ricca, I have found that I tend to disrupt other people’s lives. Badly. I am beginning to believe I can even wreck whole worlds.”

“Or you are just overestimating your effect on the whole of things.”

“That would be nice, but an underestimation is altogether possible. Wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time, that sort of thing?”

“Hmmm. Crossroads of history.”

“Or the butterfly-effect. Take your pick.”

She didn’t, nor did Greg and they sat in silence while drinking and eyeing their beverage until the cat doctor appeared at the coffee machine. He selected his drink and eyed them. “Greg, we got some activity from your lady this morning, would you stop by to look in on her?”

“Does that help in any way?”

“It might.”

Greg shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Ricca pushed him. “Go see her! You should, don’t be afraid!”

“There is no such thing as ‘I should’, Ricca.” Besides which it had absolutely nothing to do with fear.

“I’ll come with you! We can talk about that singularity until I get it.”

## **53. Awakenings**

Greg and Ricca took a walk, all over the place in fact, and ended up at the bed with the white cat. The first thing he noted was her dyed fur had been trimmed quite expertly and she was much more a white cat now. Also her long hair was clipped to ‘cat-length’.

“She really is stunning, Greg.” Ricca said in a hushed voice, at the bed.

“I sometimes tease her ears like so, she hates it.” Greg tapped her ear, which twitched.

Ricca looked at him with a rather dangerous grin, showing a row of unpleasantly sharp teeth, “If you would do that with my ears, I would bite your arm off.”

“I trust you to actually do that. Rest assured I will not try that with you.”

“Didn’t she get mad?”

“Sure.”

“And you did that often?”

“A few times, why?”

“Why did she stay with you?”

“Ah, that’s interesting. You see, she claims she was genetically programmed to ‘like’ me. Can you imagine?”

“Genetically programmed? Is that possible?”

The doctor joined them and replied to Ricca’s question.

“Ricca, there are those who believe many traits can be defined that way. It’s not as weird as it sounds; in fact we tend to like kids because of their looks. That is a basic emotion which we have not learned but which is predefined, if you will.”

“Hmm,” Greg said, “I had not thought of that. Maybe she is a victim of the Blanchés.”

“The who?”

“Long story, another time.”

Greg walked to Shirra and stroked her head, between the ears. He knew she liked that. As he did he heard a startled cry, “Hey!”

He looked back to the doctor. “What is it?”

“Do that again!”

“What?”

“That stroking! Look at that brain activity! My God you are...”

A slurred spoken word filled the expectant room.

“Greg?”

He looked down into her green eyes while Shirra swallowed with some difficulty and said, “Where am I?”

“Hi Shirra, we’re in another universe. Just like I said, remember?”

Her eyes closed and she tried to move but failed. Her eye-lids squeezed to thin lines with the effort.

“Greg... I feel so weird, everything hurts.”

“Madam,” the doctor offered, “you had a bullet buried in your back. We removed it and rebuilt the part of the spine that was hit.” The tone of the doctor’s words indicated he still didn’t believe what he was seeing, “How... how do you feel?”

“Hurt,” Shirra said with increasing strength and clearly anger. “Who are you? Greg, who are these people? What other universe?”

“That,” Greg pointed and Shirra followed his arm, “is the doctor and that is Ricca. This place is *their* universe.”

Ricca waved, “Hi.”

“Doctor?” Shirra blurted with almost regular anger, “But he is a *cat*! A *grey* cat!”

Greg tried to stop her from getting up, “Easy now Shirra, you better relax.”

“I feel fine! I just...”

She tried to get up anyway and fell back, wincing, muzzled clamped shut and eyes wide in shock.

“... will lie back here for a moment, catching my breath. I’ve never been hurt like that before.”

She closed her eyes, mumbling, “hmmm Greg,” and drifted off.

The doctor checked the meters, and whistled in astonishment, “She’s spent, but what spirit! I had no idea her body could... it’s just... this isn’t really...”

Ignoring the flabbergasted doctor, Ricca asked Greg, “What did she mean, about the doctor?”

“Ah, in her world there is this ruling class of humans. They let cats and dogs in on the game; the rest is sort of lower level.”

The doctor sniggered, “Well, Ricca, seems she finds you a simpleton then?”

“Hey!” Ricca flared, “I’m sure you are not supposed to talk about patients like that, and least of all in front of them.”

The doctor coughed and straightened. “You’re right.”

Greg explained, “She would expect to be treated by white cats or dogs, or even white humans. Not a grey cat.”

The doctor shrugged, “Different worlds, different rules. Who am I to question them? Anyway, here she has no choice. I trust you will stay with her, Greg? She’s clearly sleeping now, but I have no idea for how long. She might wake any minute, in fact.”

“Stay with her?” Greg turned the concept over and over in his mind, not understanding.

Surprised the doctor added, “I’m sure you would want to be with her? I mean, she *is* carrying your child and all?”

“Well no I’m,” Greg began and snapped his head to the doctor, “... sorry?”

“Uh, I thought you would know?”

“Know what?”

“She’s pregnant, Greg. I sort of assumed it would be yours given the results, I really am sorry to-”

Greg blurted, “That is impossible!”

“She is pregnant Greg. No medical doubt about it. Look at her FCG levels, I even made a scan of her abdomen.”

Greg got lost. “FCG?”

“Feline Chorionic Gonadotropin hormone.”

“But how can you say she’s pregnant from me!”

“I’ve taken the liberty to cross check the DNA of the fetus with yours, Greg. It’s a match. Aren’t you happy?”

Greg shook his head in an unhappy little arc; feeling lost beyond anything possible and echoed, “Happy?”

Then he frowned, shook a little and looked outside, speaking in a very dangerously controlled just-not shouting voice, “Happy?”

He stamped a foot in anger. “She fuckin’ raped me and now she’s pregnant? This bloody well is the bloody limit!”

He stamped away.

Ricca rumbled after him and pulled him around by his arm, bristling. “You listen to me mister, and you listen good! You are going back to that bedside, right now or I’m going to make sure no one ever needs you at any bedside ever, is that clear?”

Greg glared at her, “Are you threatening me?”

“Oh no,” Ricca dripped sweetness, “I’m actually giving you a choice!”

The grip on his arm was painful by now. She pulled him back to the bed.

“You are hurting me, Ricca.”

“Ha! I haven’t even begun to hurt you Greg, believe me! Have a seat.”

“But you don’t understand!”

“I understand perfectly, you are abandoning your wife!”

“I’m not married and least of all to her!”

“You *will* support her, that’s a good boy.”

He walked/stumbled along, to prevent his arm being pulled from its socket. At the bed Ricca pushed him on a chair and stood beside him.

“And be nice to her!”

“But she...”

“Tut, tut, *nice* I said.”

A heavy pressure on his shoulder pushed him towards the white cat.

“Shirra?” he said.

She opened her eyes, said, “I heard you,” and looked at Ricca. “I thank you for your concern madam raccoon, but I assure you it is not needed.”

“This poor excuse for a man was trying to abandon you, lady!”

“It’s fine, thank you for your concern.”

Ricca loosened her pressure. The doctor watched all of this, in silence.

“I said, *thank you.*” Shirra intoned.

That was very definite.

Greg looked up at Ricca, who seemed lost. She said uncertain, “I suppose I will leave you two for a moment, then?”

Ricca awkwardly retreated from them.

The doctor took a step closer. “You—ah, heard my remark, about your pregnancy?”

“Yes. Thank you too, *doctor.*”

“O-kay. I’ll check your status remote.”

And so, Greg sat alone with Shirra.

“Happy now?” he asked.

“Yes Greg, I’m the happiest cat on this world.”

“Of your kind Shirra, because you happen to be the only one. By the way, look I got my glove off and my ears too.” He took the ears off.

“You begin to look decent; I hadn’t expected the glue to hold that long... We’ll see your skin revert too, I expect. All that is left to do is get that rejection agent for your mask.”

“Rejection agent?” Greg mulled over the words but then realized there was this tiny little problem, “Would be nice, but I reckon that might prove a bit unattainable at the moment with us being in another universe and all, remember?”

Shirra mentally sidestepped that. “I don’t blame you, Greg. You need not take care of me. It is not proper if you would.”

“You tricked me, Shirra.”

“No, Greg, you have to believe me. I knew my body would react the way it did, but I was convinced this was impossible.”

“I was too.”

“Isn’t it wonderful? Think of what this means!”

“Yeah, a freak baby without a father.”

“You’re being obstinate on purpose, but you cannot get me down from here.”

“What, from cloud nine?”

“I’m over the moon, Greg.”

“As long as you don’t even *try* to ask for alimony Shirra!”

“What’s alimony?”

“A very bad invention, designed to make fathers hate their ex.”

“What’s an ex?”

“A very bad invention, showing that you shouldn’t have married in the first place.”

“I’m mystified.”

Greg nodded, “Good.”

“It matters not. When can we get to the citadel?”

“Whoa! I didn’t quite catch that, it sounded as if you wanted to go to the *citadel*?”

“Yes, could we?”

Greg looked out the window, to the forest. If he would go back to that world, he would be able to retrieve Amandine from the bear village. Somehow he was convinced she would be there. Shirra could take care of all of them, she knew all there was to know about it.

“You would need to get well, first. The doctor thinks your body needs at least another week to recover. Even if he clearly doesn’t know too much about your physiology.”

“And then we could go?”

“I would need to prepare. Setup equations and figure out how to protect ourselves from those bloody horses.”

“Oh! I’d forgotten all about that!”

“You remember it all?”

“Sure!”

“Good girl.” He ruffled her head. She purred.

“I love you, Greg.”

“I am afraid you have to, if you want it or not.”

“That is not bad, is it?”

“Bad? No, I suppose not. Maybe aggravating.”

He didn't want a child, certainly not from Shirra. This was more like a nightmare. “You get some rest, Shirra.” He kissed her on her head, and left.

Why did he kiss her just now? He looked over his shoulder and noted she was sleeping with a happy smile.

Just outside the door, Ricca held him. “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing. I told you what is happening and you just witnessed her superiority complex.”

“What a lovely girl.”

“My point exactly.”

“Hold it buster! Her opinion of *me* does not give *you* the right to abandon her, am I clear?”

He nodded and said, “You're strong headed, you know that?”

“Thank you for the compliment. Right now I think I will need your assistance with the electrons and the vacuum fluctuations.”

“Nice, another something I know nothing about.”

Ricca smiled deviously, “I think Tabitha would have known about it.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Greg grumbled, “Make Greg look stupid?”

“Put those ears back on. I don't want to upset Keith.”

Greg noted he was still holding the ear-thing in his hand and put it on. “Is Tabitha working on this project still?”

Ricca led him to the nearest coffee machine, set him up with a decent drink, took one herself and folded into a heap of stretched taut clothing.

“Why do you ask about Tabitha?” she asked, unable to suppress her glee at having offered a topic he was interested in.

“I wouldn’t have expected it,” Greg explained, “Keith is here, makes sense, you’re here, doesn’t make sense because Tabitha could have been here.”

“She’s not the theoretical scientist. I am.”

“Well, good for you!” Greg said, dripping cynicism.

“That’s not what I mean! All I know is she stayed with the,” Ricca quoted in the air, “‘other’ project and that has been under wraps for quite a while.”

“Something bad happened? Like an explosion?”

“Nope.”

“No? Ah well, hope springs eternal.”

“You two really didn’t get along, did you?”

“Nope,” Greg said very definite, “did you have dealings with her?”

“Actually, no. Keith has interesting stories of that time but he can’t tell everything, even now. All I know Tabitha is quite a special person when it comes to hardware.”

Greg nodded.

“No smart remarks on that?”

“Let me say I was very impressed with her work. Not her personality.”

Ricca took another sip of her coffee and got up.

“I can’t vouch for that, so I’m afraid you’ll have to quiz Keith on that. I do know he is out of touch with her.”

“It’s irrelevant anyway. Someone else should do her story, ha ha!”

He followed Ricca to her work-room to check the equations.

## 54. Skunks

Recovery felt slow yet was impossibly fast given the injury, by rights Shirra should have been in a wheelchair from paraplegia! After two weeks Shirra was finally out of the bed, walking around stiffly. According to the doctor, this had everything to do with her motorial-nerves adjusting to the new situation in her spine, the doctor sure had an explanatory story with everything that happened. Greg didn't mind, he had nothing with the medical profession and nodded absently whenever doc got ranting, however he realized Shirra being able to walk around was by the virtues of huge medical improvements compared to his own time. Shirra's physical health was, medically seen, mending in giant leaps but her mind was another matter: the most difficult thing was her obvious assumption she was still in her own universe.

In parallel to her recovery, Greg had cleared his plan with Keith and had begun to collect materials for the trip 'back'. This was mostly due to reoccurring nightmares featuring Amandine in the most improbable ransom situations. Greg could not dismiss her out of his mind; he even feared he would forget her face! One of the issues getting back was that he was certain he would need to shoot his way out from a horse-infested Hawaiian isle. Keith had explained he would support him with special built materials. The koala had not let him in on the details other than a few references to 'thrust'.

Now, Greg watched Shirra get out of bed without aid. All in all, she was working hard to recover and seemed in some sort of continual happy state. Looking up, she noticed him, and smiling she asked, "Greg? I think I should get some more covering garments, don't you think?"

Greg hesitated before asking incredulously, "I have to decide that?"

"Not so grumpy Greg! You can certainly ask the simple folk around here to do something for me?"

Irritated again, he turned away. It seemed to be his average state of being, ever since the 'beautiful' news on her pregnancy had hit him. Yuk.

“Yo!” Greg called out to the nurse who walked past the door, “the missus here wants something to wear.”

The lithe lioness stopped in her tracks and nodded to him, long since used to the tone of Shirra and Greg’s handling of that.

“I hear she still talks to me via you, Greg?”

Nodding, Greg agreed, “Built in, I’m afraid.”

“Doc says we must consider her cultural reference, but I feel she could adapt a little bit too, at least make an effort.”

“Don’t look at me; I have no idea how to tune that.”

Shirra ignored the talk stoically while the nurse sighed in resignation. “Anyway, size?”

“Size?” Greg blinked.

“What’s her size? I’ve an idea but woe befalleth me should I wrong The Lady.”

“How would I know? I’ve not even a fleeting idea!”

“Well? Ask!”

Grumbling, “I’m not a bloody messenger!” he turned to Shirra and walked over to ask her about her dumb sizes.

She just sat there, all smiles. It would help a lot if she would stop doing that.

“Could you try doing that just a tad less?”

“Do what?” she smiled.

“Again! You’re *smiling* all the time. I’m getting sick of it.”

“I understand you are not so thrilled, Greg. You’re entitled to. Now I’m not familiar with the sizes applied here, what is it you are wearing, M or an L?”

Greg shrugged, "You're obviously longer than I am, so I guess an L will do hmm?"

"How many centimeters is that?" Shirra wondered.

"Ohh!" Greg gripped his hair, got entangled in the fake ears and yelled "ELL!" to the nurse, adding, "If you're looking for me I'm on the terrace, checking Ricca's equations, see you! Not!"

He stormed off, collected his shining new tablet with the copy of all his data and arrived in time at the terrace to catch the first drops of rain. Right now, he was going to have his outdoor moment and he was not going to let a bit of stupid drizzle keep him from it. Greg took an umbrella from the stand at the door and fastened it to a chair, on which he sat.

This got some laughs from the collected personnel. He didn't mind and soon he was immersed in the equations Ricca had compiled. Other than his head, he was getting wetter and wetter. It turned out to be the English sort of pissing rain rather than just drizzle. At least he felt *something* here, something other than the constant aggravation. Everything seemed to be geared to tick him off.

Just when he was really getting lost in his own world of symbols and numbers, just when he finally found some peace of mind, Keith appeared next to him.

"What's this?"

Bored he looked up, "Don't you start too Keith, please? I just need a moment with myself, OK?"

"You're not fooling anyone buster. You're just attention-hungry, now get inside or you'll catch something if you keep this up."

"Bullshit."

Keith was getting wet too. He eyed the human critically, "I could have you dragged inside, without asking."

"You could," Greg answered noncommittally, "no doubt about that."

“OK, have it your way... Wanna talk about it?”

Casting an evil eye to the hairy man next to him, Greg spat, “What do you think?”

“Thought so, but you are going inside now and you get to choose how.”

“I am?”

Keith pulled Greg’s leg into the direction of the door to the terrace until he sat on his behind on the flagstones.

“Whoa!” Greg called out. Getting up he grumbled, “Right! Point taken,” and followed Keith inside.

“Get something dry on Greg, don’t force the issue. Clear?”

“Pfff, you’re just worried you won’t get your equations and singularity stuff!”

“Maybe, but this sounds exactly like a certain unpleasant guy.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah! One who once hit me senseless, some years ago, just because he thought I wasn’t worth it to be shot.”

Greg narrowed his eyes, lowered his voice and stood his ground, “...meaning?”

“I’m not too happy with that kind of Greg,” Keith loomed over Greg, “Capiche?”

Greg wandered off, brooding over what Keith just said. He thought he’d changed, Keith sure had changed, wasn’t that just normal? Keith no more was the uncertain youngster, no sirree, this fellow here was a koala with a mission. Keith had a clear plan in life, or so it seemed.

He felt a furry hand on his shoulder.

“Greg?”

Looking around, he met Keith's warm brown eyes, so reminiscent of his own father's eyes.

"Buddy, I don't understand anything that goes on in that head of yours, but I know there's a really caring person in there, somewhere. I'd like to know more of him before you leave."

Keith took his hand back, nodded, and walked away in his usual, relaxed, manner. Greg felt left hanging. Was he a caring person? Was there one, in there, somewhere? He raised his eyebrows, trying to dismiss Keith's request, but found it was stuck in his mind now. That guy had something special on him. It was a knack, he was sure, but he had no idea how it worked.

Resuming his way to his quarters, he mulled over it, whispering, "Caring..." Well, one thing was for sure, he cared for Amandine! But teaching Ricca, doing this 'knowledge transfer', suffering the preparations... It all took so long to complete! Sometimes he didn't even know anymore what kept him here.

###

Dried, combed, and indeed feeling a little better he went back to Shirra. While walking towards the hospital he tried to convince himself he was going to her for curiosity's sake, but he knew he also needed to see those green eyes. The eyes that provided a glimpse of Amandine, in color and shape.

He found her when she had just put her brown-green army outfit on and was busy getting very annoyed. She had-of course-dismissed the help of the orderly and the nurse and was, as far as he could see, trying to close the zip-fly with a strained look on her face. She looked up, saw it was him and sighed in relief.

"Greg! Oh, I'm so glad to see you! Look at this contraption in these pants. Tell me; honestly, what sort of mind it takes to place this at the front of the pants!"

Greg looked on amused. It was army standard issue, with a metal zipper. What was wrong with it?

“Is it too tight?”

“No, it isn’t. I’m not growing that fast,” followed by an uninvited smile, “you teaser!”

He had no intention of teasing her, and certainly not about *that*. His emotional state was ready to take a plunge when she gazed at him, not smiling even, and found that spark of Amandine-like look.

“My,” she said in surprise, “are we going somewhere special? You have certainly brushed up.”

Greg ignored this as pointedly as he could and checked the zipper.

“Come, stand like this,” he guided her and stood before her, reaching down. “Works flawlessly, I’d say.”

“Well of course, you’ve got human hands. How am I supposed to do this?”

Greg went on his knee before her. “Open it, come on, and try.”

She took the little lever of the zipper and indeed, with the fingers’ conical nails this was not an easy task. Getting it open seemed to work, after some trying. But closing was not an option.

“That’s weird,” he concluded a little mystified.

“See? I told you, it is not a good construction. Firstly this tiny zipper can’t be handled by other than human hands, and secondly a fly at the front, like this... I’m not a male.”

“Wait here, I’ll have a word.”

“Would you? I’m sure you can instruct them to come up with something more fitting.”

“Green really *is* your color, Shirra.”

“You really don’t mind asking them for a more appropriate choice of clothing? I mean, they don’t strike me as bright to begin with, if you follow me?”

Greg shrugged. “I don’t mean to change the clothing, just this detail.”

“But I thought...”

“Shirra *please*, I’m on it. Just wait, thank you?”

“Of course, Greg.”

He walked off, wondering: was it right for her to be holding back so, towards him?

“Not my problem,” he explained softly to the vinyl of the floor.

The medical staff had retired to the coffee machine, Shirra being their only worry right now, and he caught their conversation before he got there.

“...that damned princess. Man, if the doctor weren’t continually referring to her social reference I’d, well, you know what I mean.”

Greg recognized it as the lioness nurse, she sounded like backbiting a patient. The orderly agreed, “You know what I think? I mean, the doctor *is* a cat, I bet he’s secretly in love with that weirdo.”

The nurse topped that, “She bosses me around, makes me feel I’m less. She makes me feel like a speck of dust, know what I mean?”

The orderly hummed his assent to that.

Greg made a rush appearance on them. “Hi guys! I was wondering, you see, Shirra, she has some trouble with her zipper and all?”

“Why hello, mister cat-not-cat. How are you doing?”

Greg by now mumbled an automatic ‘fine’ and ‘howaboutyourself’ before the rest of the message followed, “So she has some trouble? Yes, we’d noticed.”

A pregnant pause later he went on, “She shoed us off since we were apparently in her personal space.”

Greg expected no less, “Had you guys taken a good look at her fingers yet?”

Two blank faces indicated this was a novel idea.

“They really *are* a bit different from yours.”

“Well sure, I’m a lioness, she’s a *cat*,” said the nurse frowning.

“No, no, not like that. She has a differently developed finger. Look at my hand.”

He showed it, turning it.

“It’s a hand,” the orderly noted.

“And the nails?”

“Very thin, you would not want to have to *grab* something with that, ha ha!”

“No, indeed.” Greg tilted his head, “Now you see you have much more talon-like fingers.”

The lioness looked at her fingers as if seeing them for the first time. She nodded.

“Gee, I hadn’t noticed.”

“Now take Shirra’s, she has not even got soft fingertips.”

Both frowned.

“Are you sure? I mean, I’d have noticed surely if-” the orderly asked.

Greg cut in, “Come along, I’ll show you.”

This didn’t quite get the cavalry going, “I was enjoying my coffee for a moment, mister.”

“Instead of pants for her, you would not have a skirt of sorts?”

The lioness shook her head, grinning. "US Army, unless you are thinking dress uniform: nope. Besides: same zipper eh? Standard."

"Actually, some Velcro would do. Do we have that?"

The lioness put her hand over her muzzle, giggling. "Velcro? There?"

"Solves the problem, don't it?"

"Anything for madam princess!" she saluted, "but only because else the doctor will order me to do this ridiculous request anyway. I know you will ask him else, besides you're so cute when you're going about caring about the Princess that way." She winked at him.

###

True to her word, the next day the problem had been solved with a piece of canvas attached to the zipper so clumsy hands could operate it and Shirra, awaiting her freedom, could put it on herself. She kept nagging about the injustice imparted on her for having clearly male-pants forced on her. An attempt by the nurse to quiet her down backfired wonderfully. The lioness showed her own pants with the upfront fly.

"Well, of course!" Shirra stated, "You *are* lower staff. That would make sense, now wouldn't it?"

After this, the nurse went for a 'strong coffee' by her own words, which Greg found amusing.

Shirra turned to him, happy to have put the obnoxious staff back in their rightful place and asked him for their lodgings.

"Our lodgings?"

He hadn't thought about that at all and stammered, "I-I suppose I could ask Keith?"

Shirra glared at him, but only very shortly so. She recovered and took his hand in hers. "Come, Greg, let us explore our surroundings here!"

"You mean the compound?"

Shirra softly squeezed his hand, "What compound? Where are we, for that matter, are we in South Africa now? We surely must be close to the cradle of the Savior!"

"What? No! We are in fact in Ohio, that's near... well, uh, I suppose it's more like near the east coast of the US and..."

"I know where it is," she snapped, "and I'm sorry to say you're talking nonsense. Ohio's one big field, cows and farms litter it front to back. This," she pointed around, "contains way too much metal to be anywhere in the US. You know as well as I do, that there will be some blanches in control here."

"Too much metal?" Greg grinned, "That is a valid point Shirra. Come, we'll go find a friend of mine."

He led her through the corridors down to the basement where the setup was kept. His 'visitor' badge would have allowed him in, but he could not take another badge-less person. The guards at this gate were not pleased with this, informing him this was going to take a while and that by-the-way their replacement was due any minute.

Shirra was apparently speechless with all the metal tubes, the wiring, the lighting everywhere, let alone the appearance of personnel.

"Sir, could you *please* call Keith?" Greg pleaded.

"Keith who?"

"Keith Lorne, koala-guy, you know?"

"Sorry sir, we can't..."

By a stroke of luck he sighted his friend lost in thought down the hallway.

“Keith!” he yelled to the koala. Good hearing made his friend stop and look. He walked up with a funny smile. “Greg! And that’s Shirra, I see. That attire makes her fit right in!”

Greg noted the pleased look in his friend’s eyes. This head-turning effect was something he’d seen happen all over the place. The only logical conclusion was that Shirra was considered something interesting by males around here. Perhaps this was funny as she didn’t register as attractive in his book. Just a cat, no different than Ricca the raccoon. Ricca was considered very ugly and not because of her size. He simply didn’t understand her ugliness; he simply just saw furry animals everywhere.

Keith extended a hand to Shirra, who shook it after seeking his approval with her eyes. Then Keith addressed the guards, “Guys, I’ll need another visitor badge.”

“Sir, this cat has not been cleared, she carries no classification.”

“That’s easy: I’m clearing her now. She’s from the *other* side, so that sort of implements clearance.”

The word ‘other’ made the guarding pair gulp and they seemed awed by her. One sputtered, “Regulations require...”

“Yes, I’m aware of regulations,” Keith said and hobbled to the nearest terminal to enter some data. After some tapping he looked up with a nod to them, “That should do it, *private*.”

The guard, ruffled at Keith’s official call, checked the system and produced a badge. On the bright side, the situation was solved and within his watch. His partner blew a ‘phew’ of elation.

“There’s the relief!” one guard hissed.

“Shit!” Keith cursed suddenly, “Greg, come over quick.”

“Why?”

“Skunks.”

Greg made a dash to be behind Keith, in doing so caused Shirra to cry in alarm and the guards to jump on him for his sudden move. Held like this, he saw two skunks halt at the gate and they looked Shirra over with that dumb pleased 'check this out' smile she got everywhere.

"Why hello lady, visiting?" one said, keeping his tone carefully neutral.

Greg tried to get the guards to let him go, explaining about his fright for skunks, but achieving only disbelief. One of the skunks moved his rifle to the side and friendly asked Shirra how he might be of service, much to the chagrin of the other three soldiers.

Seeing he was not doing anything nor going anywhere, Greg was released and he at once took position behind Keith. That helped him to keep his sanity whilst confronted with no less than two, big, skunks.

He heard Shirra gasp as the fellow who addressed her turned to them to find out what the commotion was. Shirra stood looking at the tail and immediately checked the other skunk for a tail finding it present at his shoulders.

Another gasp.

Then she looked at Greg with large eyes. "Yes, they bloody have got tails!" he snarled in answer to her unspoken question, "and no doubt their stinkin' glands too!"

The skunks looked at him, not amused while their fellow guards frowned.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Is it true?" Shirra asked, bewildered.

"Is what true?" was the double reply of the skunks who were so interested in her they simply forgot about his unreasonable act.

"You, both, have your... ahem, I'm really sorry to ask this, but you have to understand, you are whole? Both?"

"Whole?" one said, looking at his friend.

“Um, Pete here is known for having half a mind of futility, ahum, but I’m sure you mean something else?”

This earned Pete’s skunk-colleague an angry look as soon as Shirra wasn’t looking at him.

“I’m whole lady, see?”

The guy turned to the side and seemed to flex his muscles for effect.

“Don’t your masters abhor this?”

Greg decided to further this a bit and talked to Keith in subdued tones about the status of skunks in Shirra’s world. Keith then pulled Shirra along, excusing them all and left the four guards behind.

Shirra walked along with a faraway look on her face.

“Shirra?”

“Yes, Greg?”

“Just checking if you’re completely here.”

“Oh, I am Greg, but I’m not so certain anymore where ‘here’ is.”

“Parallel universes are tricky things Shirra,” Keith said friendly, “mind if I call you Shirra, Shirra? I haven’t had a chance to formerly introduce myself”.

He stopped them and did so.

“A friend of Greg’s is a friend of mine, Keith. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Greg half expected her to make a curtsy. It was clear Shirra had been convinced, finally, by that set of skunks, that she was somewhere impossible.

Keith took them on a tour of the facilities. Shirra kept her muzzle shut, but she was taking in the view, Greg saw. At the setup she finally asked Keith a question, “That is not for power, is it?” and pointed to the tetrahedron.

“No, Shirra, it is used to generate a space-containing field that coincides over multiple universes.”

“Multiple universes...” Shirra mused, “they’re for real! These parallel worlds, how can it be?”

With a fatigued look Greg countered this, “I would love to dive into that, but I prefer to do that another time.”

At the sound of a classic-phone ringing, Keith picked up his phone and watched the screen unfold where the doctor appeared, quite distraught it seemed, asking after his patient.

“She’s here,” Keith said evenly, “why?”

“I *am* accountable you know and I haven’t given her leave to go, what if something happens?”

Keith gave the doctor on the virtual screen a blank look. “Something? She’s sound of mind and limb if you ask me, *very* sound of limb I might add.”

Greg noted the smile it put on the doctor’s face.

“Just send her to me afterwards; I really need to check her.”

“Will do doc, bye.”

Keith put his phone on his belt and wanted to continue but noted how Shirra gawked at the phone with intermittently blinking eyes.

“Just a phone Shirra, look.” He handed the small white plastic brick to her.

“What is this thing? There are absolutely no markings on it, no buttons, how does it even work? Where does it get its power?”

“Easy, easy, look, my gesture unlocks it and the GUI shows.”

“GUI?”

“It’s a user interface, a menu,” Greg explained. He still found the phones here a huge improvement over the cellular phones of his own age.

Keith waved his thumb in a way to unlock the thing and numbers and text appeared.

“And it shows color images as well?”

“Sure, taps into the net, has a projection keyboard, this one has a beamer and the new virtual screen you just saw. Look, I’ve still got Greg’s image from when he’d just arrived.”

Keith gestured and tapped, said ‘Greg’, selected something and a photo of him was projected onto the grayish wall.

“How old is that image?”

Keith called up the date, “Says here March 10, 2024. Well, about two years ago.”

Shirra looked at Greg, comparing him to the image.

“Wow! You have changed, Greg!” She said in an awed manner. Greg immediately liked her for it.

Keith nodded, “I second that Shirra, he has. But there still is a Greg in there like the fat bastard human that arrived in the corporate setup.”

The guys ignored the gasp that escaped Shirra while she put hands to her muzzle and checked them for a reaction.

Since nothing happened she followed them as they walked to a coffee machine and while Keith and Shirra drank tea, Greg and Keith explained about the history they had together.

After a while, Shirra looked at Keith earnestly. “So, there really are no humans in this world?”

“No, there are not Shirra. Greg is not from here and there never has been one. His kind didn’t evolve; we do have some fossils that hint at his kind.”

Greg prepared to get a bunch of questions on ‘fossils’ but instead Shirra reacted stricken, put a hand to her muzzle and looked at Greg dismayed pleading him, “I don’t want to be here, Greg.”

“That’s OK. Keith has agreed to help us return to your world, Shirra.”

Her eyes spoke for her, as she locked her eyes with Greg, submitting her whole being to him. Greg found it called up an awful feeling of responsibility. This led him to remember those same eyes again but now set in the face of Amandine, the little coyote in Shirra’s world. Without him, without a father even if he was only a makeshift one. He had decided to be there for her. That was turning out to be a grand job! Instead of making sure Amandine would not be blasted to kingdom come by a laser he had removed himself altogether. What had he been thinking?

What was he doing here anyway?

Greg shook his head to get the feeling away but it wouldn’t fade.

“Come, we’ll go to that doctor and find you a room to stay.”

Keith held him.

“I’ll have an additional bed placed in your room.”

Inwardly, Greg cursed. Please no! Keith shouldn’t even have suggested as much! Hastily he corrected his friend, “No Keith, you’re too kind. It’s better if she stays in her own room.”

Shirra let them talk about her this way but listened closely.

The koala crossed his arms defensively, “We don’t have spare rooms.”

“What about the room next to mine?”

“That is *not* available! Trust me buddy, it took a lot of work to secure that one room.”

“No,” Greg said and repeated with much more force, “No Keith, I can’t do that. I’m not staying with *that* cat,” he pointed, “24/7, is that clear?”

“Perfectly, so you can take turns living there or partition it, I don’t care. She bunks with you.”

“Jesus man! Are you aware what you are setting me up with?”

Keith held him by his shoulders and locked his eyes. Warm brown eyes. “Greg, listen up. I don’t know what the impediment to your eyesight is but I can guarantee you about 99% of straight guys will bunk with her married or not. Get it?” then he went on in a very low tone, “I promise you gays will be glued to her, she’s so exotic and flamboyant it needs a new definition of *hot*.”

Greg shook his head miserably. Shirra was a cat, were these people blind?

“Buddy?” Keith tried once more, “I think there are a *lot* of colleagues, especially single ones, who are willing to give up something dear to live with her in a room.”

“I’m not a cat, Keith!” Greg wailed.

“Greg, my hands are tied, you bunk with her or all hell breaks loose on this base.”

Greg put his hands over his face, encountered the muzzle mask and balled his fists instead.

“Great.”

Shirra had somehow closed in on him and stood real close, speaking softly, “I’ll be invisible Greg. Really, I will make myself so scarce you will not notice me at all and I’ll make sure the rest of the plain folk here will notice me less. It’ll be just like that shed next to the transport field in Campone.”

“That’s what I was afraid of, Spiffing nice.”

Greg gave up resisting but realized that the bloody cat was sucking up on him in unheard ways. Keith in the meantime kept looking as if he was a gargantuan moron to even think *not* of Shirra. Greg saw Keith’s eyes dart to

her every now and then. What could Shirra possibly possess to affect the bunch here so much?

## 55. Lodger

Shirra was inspecting their room. She'd been at it for quite a while already and Greg felt uneasy. He had no idea what to make of it. She'd tried the taps and felt the water, feeling the cold tap and a telltale frown had appeared once more. Another shortcoming?

"Well, at least we have hot and *lukewarm* tap water. And what is this?" She pointed at the small table model refrigerator.

"Fridge," Greg said while Shirra's eyes kept investigating the room.

"Toilet, shower, closet." Greg added, pointing. He'd had enough.

Shirra had been right: the two beds certainly made the room smaller, but to state it and then let it hang like a weight around his neck? Greg's proposal was they might have them each at one wall no matter that it would make best use of the space having them together. Right now the beds were together, despite his proposal.

"Shirra, if I feel as much as one hair of you during the night, I'll lock you in the closet clear?"

"Of course Greg," she droned absentmindedly, "Whatever you want."

She opened the fridge and looked surprised at the light in there.

"Is this a kind of cool storage?"

"Yep."

She closed the thing carefully and when she righted herself, Greg saw an amazed look on her face. "Wow Greg! I bet this is a special facility, you heard how much trouble that koala fellow went through to get you this room? So in

the end it's obvious your status as singular human on this world is understood by the people here, don't you agree?"

"Certainly," Greg said quickly. No point in upsetting her about his status here.

"What's this?" she stood sniffing a little vial.

"Rose water, compliments of the house."

"Hmmm," she purred, and stopped suddenly while scanning the room, troubled.

"How can I provide food for you here, Greg? There is no facility for it."

"Mess hall."

"What? You have to eat with the commoners?"

"We're guests, staying with the US army and I'm paying by means of securing their equations to achieve contact with my former tutor."

Huffing 'US Army' under her breath she skipped the subject and went on, "You had a tutor, Greg?"

"A lady of sorts, Professor Cally."

"Was she smart like you, Greg?"

"Shirra, two things!" Greg exhaled and prepared, "Listen carefully. First: you are maybe not a physicist but I reckon in this world you might probably be considered a medical doctor of sorts once they find out what you know. Second: there is nothing or no one who can possibly match with Cally."

Shirra's eyes shone. "I knew it! You have been reared by the finest of multiple universes combined!"

"Did you hear a word of what I said?"

"About that professor Cally?"

"No, about you! The way you talked to that doctor, he was simply outclassed by your knowledge of the workings of a body."

“I only had the standard courses on physiology, and I took an additional class on biotechnology. That hardly makes me a doctor. I’m not a blanche, Greg.”

“You play yourself down too much.”

“Not with that simple grey cat, Greg. I’m white, he just doesn’t seem to know his place. And not just for a moment, no always!”

“Come on now, you should cut him some slack. He did save your life. Also, around here he’s considered a doctor of some standing.”

Shirra crossed her arms defensively, “I don’t like how he tries to court me. He should know that assistants can’t be courted. He should know his place.”

“Shirra please! In this universe there are no such things as assistants. How could he possibly know.”

She put a finger to her lips and sucked her teeth for a moment, “Good point, I will keep that in mind.”

“Thank you.”

Without further ado, Greg undressed and got into bed, his mind spent and his body weary from standing up. Shirra proceeded to neatly fold his clothes over the chair and then got out of her clothes. Greg realized it was the first time he had seen her doing that, and in the bright light too. Somewhere in the back of his mind thoughts rummaged around, ‘A white cat, just a white cat’ the one said, ‘With breasts’ the other said. ‘Not even that: two mounds with white fur’ the one said. ‘She’s lean’ the other said. ‘Cats are lean’ the one said. With a groan he closed his eyes until he heard her puff. With a little difficulty she got out of her panties and got into the bed as well. On the one hand butt-naked, on the other completely covered up.

His eyes traveled her form before the light went out. She really was white fur everywhere. Just a cat, weird shape for a cat, walking on legs in dire need of a shave. Greg closed his eyes and called up the image of Blikol in her

bathing suit. Now that was a sight... it was clear why one would say 'I don't think we're in Kansas anymore'. Or Ohio, or even Aachen for that matter.

###

At the entrance to (in this case exit of) the compound they were stopped. Their passes did not allow them off the premises. Nice.

"Too bad, Shirra. We won't be able to stroll in the woods."

"I find it disrespectful to treat you this way. How can you accept that! You should have let me talk to them."

If he had, the guards might well have let her pass. Maybe she was producing some pheromones? He'd have to ask her, she'd know for sure! Other things pushed that out of his mind though, "Right now we'll get a lunch. I'm starving."

"Good thing I'm around!" Shirra said, "I have noticed that you still crave a good supporting assistant here."

"I crave nothing of the kind, I just want food."

"No Greg, you want *good* food, nutritious and wholesome. There is way too much in the assortment at the canteen that will not agree with you."

"Don't tell me you have followed courses on food too?"

"Of course, don't be silly. I *am* an assistant."

They walked past the few cars in the parking lot in front of the building. Most cars were in the garage behind it. Only 'government' vehicles stood here. Big trucks.

"Many cars, Greg. This must be a very important place!"

"Many? If we ever get a chance, you'll see an interstate, or even a city. Imagine the citadel without a dome."

“How would they protect themselves?”

“Against what?”

“The space lasers!”

“Haven’t got those, around here-” Greg stopped as he heard the distant noise of a jet fighter, “Here there are airplanes, look!” He pointed.

The noise grew louder and in the clear blue sky a pair of jets appeared.

“Man they’re close! Look, you can see the wing shape and color,” he had to scream over the noise, “must be those new JSF’s!”

A split second later they were past.

“What was that!” Shirra called dismayed.

“Those, Shirra, were jet planes. They will carry a pilot twice as fast as the speed of sound.”

“There are people in there?”

Greg nodded.

“What are they for?”

“Ah, um, for attack I’m afraid; used for bombardments and strikes.”

“With explosives?”

“That usually is found to be effective. Little flags that say ‘boo’ have been replaced by more deadly things.”

“You are making fun of me!” Shirra protested.

“Sorry, but what would you propose instead of explosives?”

“The space lasers allow for precision strikes.”

She had a point there.

“There are also bigger planes, used to transport people. Not as fast though. But much faster than the choppers.”

While they walked inside and in the general direction of the hospital, Shirra pointed at all the tablets people carried around. "So many, Greg!"

"I asked Keith for a replacement, an old one at that because I needed the serial interface."

"Old one?"

"Yes, he said new ones are issued; a much faster network."

"What does Keith mean with 'network' Greg?"

Would it really make any sense to dive into that? He took his time to explain it and had the eerie feeling she was storing all he said. Shirra was frighteningly able to grasp information if presented in the correct context.

At their room, Shirra pointed to the letters on the door. The sign said 'Guest Room A'.

"That writing, could I learn that?"

"I'll ask Keith for a movie with the alphabet, you will find it is not too difficult. There's tons of the stuff for Chinese people."

He feared Shirra would start asking all kinds of questions but if she wanted, she kept her thoughts to herself.

###

Shirra had been looking at her first English course material. "This isn't all that difficult Greg. Each image is simply a sound; this should not take too long."

"So you'd think, but then the fun begins Shirra. You will find it is nearly impossible to derive the pronunciation of a word given its writing. With for

example German that is much better. No, let me restate that, nearly infinitely better.”

“German? Europe still exists in this universe?”

“Sure. I actually started this trip from Germany.”

“But you aren’t German, Greg?”

“No, ha, ha, of course not! If anything, I’d be a South African.”

“This world is going to take some time to adapt to,” Shirra mused.

“If you can read this,” he tapped a book, “you will be able to read the texts you call ‘Chinese’. That reminds me...”

He took his tablet and showed the Cyrillic alphabet. “This is used in Russia, and this...”

He called up a Chinese page, “...is Chinese in this world.”

Shirra went over the signs, “Looks like common, but with a lot of signs missing.”

“Oh, but of course. Silly me. Look at this...” he looked up a Taiwanese page, containing ‘traditional Chinese’.

“Aha!” Shirra said excited, “this is much better! But its syntax is weird, I can understand enough though.”

“You know what? I’ll set your teaching-tablet to Chinese. You should be able to work with it then. Almost every thing on the screen has help texts; here, have a read.”

He pointed her to a web-site to learn English from Taiwanese and happily she worked through that, tapping and weaving her hands to control the tablet. Greg noted how easily she absorbed the controls of the tablet.

Next, he took a seat with his own tablet, continuing the checking of Ricca’s equations. Her work needed a lot of corrections. Someone like Cally would explode over her lack of attention to detail.

He looked up at Shirra, as she worked through her tablet-controlling course. Gestures and speech and clicking seemed a second nature by the time she finished the course.

Greg checked his watch. Half an hour to master the device, that was quick. If Shirra didn't understand technology, or equations, she sure *did* understand language and biology.

###

Shirra had spent a few days on the language thing. She was able to read most signs. Greg was mystified.

"How can you possibly have learned this so quickly?" he asked, as they were walking back from lunch.

"I wasn't born yesterday. And I suppose the selection process that made me who I am will have been founded on prowess that is readily available in my person."

"Right," Greg said, a bit dismayed.

Shirra was so smart! He ought to love her or something like that. But his mind would wander to Blikol when craving for lust and to Amandine when thinking of love.

"Shirra?"

"Yes, Greg?"

He wondered if he was going to do something stupid by saying what he was going to. Then again, her 'love' for him was hardwired in her being, in her genes. She was simply incapable of leaving him.

"Did you ever consider the possibility that you might be smarter than me?"

She smiled. He didn't like it at all, that warm 'love you' smile, her hand surreptitiously passing over her tummy. It was clear what was going through that head: 'I carry your child, it does not matter.'

She'd said that often, until he had forbidden her to say it ever again.

"You know what? Don't answer that."

She didn't. But she did ask a question he thought obvious. "I know you are not in love with me, Greg. I accept that."

"I'm glad you do."

"You love Amandine, don't you?"

He nodded, unsure where this was heading.

"I recall you were very impressed by this 'Darke', a black cat?"

"Yeeees?" He said slowly.

"Would it matter if I dyed my fur black?"

"No, it would not and you know that. I don't hate you, and I *like* your green eyes. Darke has yellow eyes."

She narrowed her eyes, adding, "So there is not a thing I could do to be more attractive to you? I could shave all over?"

Greg had to smile at that. "I think that would very much not help. Short of becoming a black human female you don't stand a chance."

"I thought as much."

That sounded very definite. "Is there something I should know, are you trying to say something?"

"There is nothing going on Greg. I carry your child. That is enough."

This was getting ugly! Greg tried to draw a point in his thoughts, trying to change the unpleasant direction his mind was traveling.

“Shirra, you might try to talk to that cat doctor. I would hardly be surprised if it turns out you know things he might like to learn about.”

“Me? Teach that simple cat?”

“Yes Shirra, he does have access to scanners and machines that present advances you will no doubt be thrilled about.”

“If you say so, I will. What makes you think the sod would impart that knowledge to me?”

“Come on Shirra, not so innocent now. I’ve heard the remarks of nearly all the males that saw you! You are considered a *very* hot chick.”

She giggled, which was a delightful sound. And not heard often.

“I mean it madam assistant. If you just use a bit of your charm, I bet you can swoon the whole base.”

“I will remember that. Thank you Greg.”

She walked with him to the hospital where he allowed her to kiss him on the cheek, he didn’t even know why. The doctor already came walking up. That guy was very happy to see her; Greg noted the gray tail tip was swinging with anticipation.

Waving, Greg left them and returned to the room where he might find Ricca. She had come up with yet more equations for ‘Cally-world’, as Ricca had dubbed it.

“Good grief, Ricca, I didn’t even use this extensive a set to get here. Don’t you think you’ve got enough?”

“If the chances are as slim as Cally makes them out to be, I can’t let anything get in the way.”

“I’m not so certain if that assumption of hers is really so sound. I’ll let you in on a secret, Ricca.”

“Hmm?”

“I got here because of a certain image, once I had that, I reselected this world and retrieved a CD. Then, I tried again, but went in myself.”

“So?”

“That is *three* connects, to the same world. Ah, no. I’m lying: the initial image had some unintelligible characters written beside it, so that was likely a derivative of this world. But still: two times to this world?”

Ricca tapped her muzzle and was thinking, then asked, “And you didn’t use a quantum computer?”

“Nope, but we did align the setup very well.”

“Two in a row... and the singularity hadn’t formed the first time around?”

“No. That happened after I went through and the power was sucked from the other side. Like Cally’s equations. Those equations are sound. Very sound.”

“Yes,” Ricca nodded, “that they are. I can’t find any crack. Still they do not explain why the electrons would remain in their excited state the way they do.”

Greg shrugged, “Search me. I only understand the mathematical part. I can derive stability requirements from it, that’s about it.”

Ricca half-lidded her eyes, “I think we should try to create that singularity.”

“I think you are stark raving mad.”

A frown was cast his way, “I was hoping for a more supportive attitude.”

“Ricca, that singularity happened in both cases through accidents. And if Cally was able to shape a theory about them it does not mean you ought to try that out.”

“Why on earth not? If we succeed, we’d be able to communicate with you whilst there.”

“You dumb fat raccoon!” Greg exploded, “Don’t you get it? A *singularity*, what does that mean in your exalted physical world, tell me!”

Ricca smiled one of her wide smiles and licked her nose and lips. She took his insult-bait. “You poor sucker, you obviously assume we’re talking a mathematical pole.”

“I’ll tell you what, you dimwitted furry sack of bones, you think I haven’t seen one of these things. Well, they are this big.” Greg showed with his fingers, half a centimeter apart, “So I know what a singularity is, silly bear, and I saw one.”

Unimpressed, Ricca countered, “Dickheaded idiot, I know we will easily get one. That theory is sound!”

“You ungainly, ugly muzzle head, I’m telling you: don’t. The forces in that thing I saw reeked of instability.”

“Greg, you are a flat headed, earless and sorry excuse for a sentient being. I’ve calculated the flow of events with the setup you used with Keith. It fits.”

She turned her tablet to him, showing a simulation.

“What’s on the axis?”

“You can read, can’t you, you backward ape?”

“I sure can, you nearsighted bear head.”

The axis showed millimeters, and the size was very well matching his experience.

“OK, I’m listening. But you’re still an idiot, rotund retard.”

“Fine, dumb door, listen then.”

Greg held his fake cat ears up and twirled them in the air.

“I’m all ears.”

“Poor joke,” she said, but laughed anyway.

“I could really like you, Ricca,” Greg added.

“Don’t push it, mister human. My plan is as follows, you go in there and we force the singularity by allowing a misaligned power failure like you had with your metal-exchange to that universe of your cat.”

“Hold it, Ricca. Did Keith show you the movie of that event?”

“Sure.”

“That block of lead was partially formed *into* the singularity, remember?”

“Sure, it follows from the equations. But when you went in to get here, first time, you also caused the singularity. And you’re still in one piece.”

“Dumb luck! Besides, the polarity was reversed compared to the second one. You can’t expect to control it. I don’t want to die. Not yet, anyway.”

Ricca ignored that.

“Listen, we’ll not be using the field-scanning method. You take your place and we switch it, right?”

“Do I look like a guinea pig?”

“You’re certainly freaky enough.”

“Cut the crap, Ricca. I’m not going to try this. Is that clear? A block of lead will do nicely.”

“I sure want to...hold on...”

She retrieved her phone, reacting to a call. “Oh hi, yes... aha...of course....”

“Can you hurry?” Greg asked hopefully.

Ricca waved him to be quiet. It was her family no doubt, Ricca seemed to be solving the problems of her entire family even if that only meant her parents and two brothers. The problem was that, one: it went on day in day out, and two: problems ranged from having lost soap through to support to buy a house.

“...under the sofa, you looked there? I’ll hold...”

“Hold? I’m here discussing the essence of stasis fields and you talk to your relatives?”

“Shss! He’s searching!”

“What has your little brother lost now?”

“His phone.”

“Right, and what is he using to call you?”

“Ha, ha. His old phone of course.”

“...you found it? Super! Good, no problem... yes, me too. Bye.”

“Where was I?”

“Trying to blow a hole into this world with a singularity,” Greg said, irritated.

“Ricca, you need to start charging money for this service you provide to your relatives. I’m beginning to get a dislike for raccoon-kind like poison.”

Ricca, unperturbed, continued about the stasis field and convinced him all was in place. “To sum it up,” she said, “this experiment gates all. It’s the long pole in the tent and if no new arrows come in it we’ll be in good shape.”

Greg looked difficult, repeating the words, “Gate? Pole? Arrow?”

Dismissively Ricca rephrased, “Everything depends on this experiment, it takes the most resources and, if no new surprises show, we can control this going forward.”

Having understood a little more of the lingo, Greg agreed, “Right, first thing tomorrow then,” and left her with his ‘homework’, the latest set of equations.

## 56. Oops

His roomie had expressed a desire to be in the medical lab and prepared herself. Shirra stood brushing, checking the progress intermittently with a squint at her visage in the mirror. She no longer had the long hair, making her cat-skull stand out all the more. With a mental sigh, Greg decided she looked like a big tabby, one who needed a lot of grooming to feel somewhat happy.

“Fur is almost covering that shaved patch on your back again, Shirra.”

“Is it?” she didn’t even stop her brushing routine but glanced at him, “That’s nice.”

Her head was tilted to the side to check something only she could see, turned this way and that then proceeded. “My hair will grow back Greg,” she offered when she held his eyes captive for a short spell. Her eyes were locked on him via the mirror.

“I know you do like my longer hair, Greg. It’s a lot of work but I’ll not cut it, even if the blanches abhor it.”

Greg felt caught. He had no idea it was so plain in the way he stared. Shirra finally put the brush on the little table.

“How about I help you clean out that muzzle?” she offered between strokes, “Last time it had already started to smell unpleasantly from the food-residue.”

Good point from her, so he got out of bed to allow her to assist. While she used the little brushes for this purpose, Greg explained, “Today’s the singularity-test, Shirra.”

“Important, I understand.”

“I take it you have found something of interest in the hospital wing, given your eagerness to return there?”

“I have. You were quite right about the tooling available there. There’re some workable DNA sequencing tools that indeed do work great. Honestly, I can’t understand why the doctor doesn’t know more about cellular compilation and communication.”

“About *what?*”

While she brushed a more tender part of his ‘nose’, she explained, “The mechanism of building a cell of its constituents and the way to get substances in. How else to build a suitable protein-shell for a retro-virus?”

“Huh? I’m lost.”

“You shouldn’t worry Greg. I don’t understand about the equations and fields so it all cancels out, doesn’t it?”

“If you say so.”

“Don’t belittle yourself. You dared, reached our world and fulfilled a prophecy! That is not given to just anyone.”

Greg kept his mouth shut about the reason he got there as well as the reason for that prophecy. Moreover, Shirra didn’t need to know he went through in the first place to ‘hunt’ a striped skunk. Not a particularly exalting goal.

A little later, neatly clad, Greg pulled their door shut. While Greg went to the setup, Ricca had promised to be early, Shirra went to the hospital. She’d made a point of having him speak of ‘infirmary’ for some reason beyond him.

Within the hour, Greg sat right in between the setup arms, adjusting the interferometers. Details of the mechanical layout simply reappeared in his head as he did this. It was rather amazing he still knew anything of this thing.

“Left!” Ricca called. Greg turned a bolt. “Oh, *other* left.”

“Right!” he called. Ricca was so sloppy.

“Got it!”

Greg crawled out of the tetrahedron and waited for Ricca. She had just put a block of lead down on the smooth surface as Keith walked in, he was humming happily.

“Hey gang! I see you’ve changed the parameters already?”

“Sure Keith,” Ricca called up from the slope, “let her rip!”

“Well folks, come on up to the control room. We’re certainly not going to try this with you next to it!”

At the controls, Keith set the program and the block of lead neatly was transported into the field. The programmed misalignment beautifully sparked and a bulbous field appeared for a second which contracted into a singularity.

Keith, Greg and Ricca had held their breath. All three of them let it out in a long ‘pheeuw’.

“We did it Greg.” Ricca mumbled.

“Good work, Ricca!” Keith was glowing with happiness.

Annoyed, Greg asked, “Are you two getting a bonus over this or so?”

“Listen up Greg. Singularities mean the gate is shut. That is the goal.”

Greg said nothing. He had been whisked away to Shirra’s world when that gate was supposedly locked. Then they had retrieved both Maria and Tabitha via the singularity. But Keith was right in that control of it was from this end only.

“Come on! We should go investigate!”

Reluctantly he followed the eager koala and raccoon down to the setup proper where Ricca produced a magnet with which she tested the properties, just like he had done back then.

Memories of the unexpected transfer to Amandine’s world played before his mind’s eye as Greg stood at the side of the setup when Ricca tried moving the singularity. “You really don’t wanna do that, Ricca. I tried and it resulted in a very bad experience.”

Ricca shrugged it off, “You worry too much Gregory boyyo.”

That was a reserved name, only one man could use it. One man who could not use his name anymore and she knew it.

“Ricca!” Greg growled, advancing on her, “You will take that back this instant!”

He reached across the setup to her and pulled her through to him, “You bitch!”

She giggled, completely missing his anger.

“Oooh, you’re scaring me,” she waved an arm in mock fear.

“Hey!” Greg exploded, “Keep your head straight! Mind you this thing is live!”

Ricca carelessly leaned back, put her hand on the setup and touched the singularity.

“Oh shit!” Greg said and dove into the tetrahedron. Ricca’s eyes went large as he did that and had enough presence of mind to jump onto him. The weight of her pushed air out of his lungs and the environment was dark. Pitch dark.

“Great!” he called, his mouth close to the metal, trying to suck air in, “just great! Any idea ...” he wheezed, “...where and *when* we are now?”

Greg pushed Ricca off his back. She rolled to the ground with a thud.

He knew this smell. A singular combination of semi-burnt electronics and that light sweaty whiff.

“I’m at the university in Aachen,” he said slowly.

Feeling his way, Greg reached the door to the large experiment room and found it locked. Since he had dealt with this very often, even if a few years ago by now, in the darkness he reached out to the ledge beside the door and retrieved the key.

It opened soundlessly and Greg surveyed the hallway. It was empty, minimally lit and the windows showed it was dark outside. Nothing seemed out of place. Greg walked to the window and looked down to the parking lot. One lone car stood there, exactly where it was supposed to be: his rusty old car was collecting debris. It had a flat front tire; he recalled he didn't keep the maintenance up very well. Would that car look like that in two years? If it was in this state, time could not be much more than a year past his departure.

How intriguing!

Next, Greg looked up at the seventh floor, half expecting to see the room of his tutor lit, but no: Cally's room was dark.

A voice from behind made him nearly jump out of his skin.

"Where are we?"

Greg swirled around, his breath half-stuck in his lungs to see Ricca stand in the doorway. Her lofty tone indicated she didn't take any of this serious!

"Don't creep up on me like that!" Greg panted and waited to catch his breath. Then he explained, "We're in Aachen, likely in the universe I left... I think, about 2011."

"How is that possible!"

With a shrug Greg drily noted, "You must have used the Cally-equation set. Accurate, it seems."

Some military thinking must have rubbed off on Ricca because she asked, "What now?"

Greg groaned inwardly, of all the stupid questions! Instead he confronted her, "You tell me, you stupid piece of fat raccoon refuse."

Ricca looked pained, said "Not now please, Greg." Squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, "I'm not in the mood for that game."

“Ricca, your stupidity and disregard for *anything* I say brings me here. I’m dead serious, I was preparing to go see my Amandine and now I’m here. See my face? This is the not happy Greg, do you read me?”

“Another world...”

Ah, it was sinking in. Great timing! “Honey,” Greg drawled, “if this really is *my* world, you are going to be very badly surprised! There are *no* talking raccoons here, is that clear? You think this is a vacation? You may well be stranded here.”

Ricca looked at him. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Get back in there,” Greg pointed, “and shut the door. I’m taking a leak.”

“I gotta go too!”

Greg rolled his eyes and surveyed the ceiling for help, then settled on, “Right, down there.”

He walked to the toilet and went in the men’s, pissed and then waited outside for Ricca to return from the women’s.

“Took you long enough,” he said when she appeared finally.

She shrugged. “Good, how about we make a start getting back?”

“I’ve an idea, but for that I’ll have to go down to the basement to switch on the high voltage line. It’s off at the moment. In the mean time you had better stay here. If the night guard is a guy called Wolfgang, supposing he still works here, he might get a heart attack upon seeing me with this muzzle thing stuck to my head. He’s a bit nearsighted and I’m pretty sure I can convince him I’m dressed up for something. Then again, if he’d see you, he’d likely flip!”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ricca’s question dripped with near-explosive anger.

“No raccoons, remember? This has nothing to do with looks and dumpiness.”

Ricca retreated to the setup room and Greg went down with the elevator. He did remember to take the cat-ears off before getting out. At the ground floor, he looked into the face of grey old Wolfgang who tried to look intimidating. And failed.

“Halt! Kein bewegung!”

Greg’s German was a little rusty, but this was easily translated to ‘Stop! Don’t move’. That wasn’t quite the sort of ‘heart-attack’ reaction he’d expected. “If I don’t get out, the elevator door will close, Wolfgang.” Greg said in German, in a leisurely tone, hesitating at the correct form of ‘the’ in this case.

Wolfgang blinked and searched while his head moved a little from side to side as if there was more to see than met the eye. “Herr Greg? Sie sind verkleidet? Nah so was...”

Greg’s brow furrowed. So Wolfgang thought he was dressed up, did he? The words ‘Nah so was’ he finally converted to ‘how queer’ and it only underscored the point that the old guard needed better glasses.

The doors started closing, an action interrupted by Wolfgang who pushed the button, for which he needed to abandon his watchful stance.

Greg casually offered, “I’m just about to switch on the main power to the setup room, you don’t mind?”

The old guard was dumbstruck. Greg marched past him to the basement doorway. By the time Wolfgang had caught up mentally, he was on his way back.

“But Herr Greg! Frau Professor Doctor Badger has said *not* to do that. And I wasn’t informed of any party?”

“Just checking my costume Wolfgang. And about the power: new instructions.” He knew he could easily convince this guy. Right now even more so! “You’re welcome to go up with me.”

Leaving a bewildered guard behind, he traveled up. Four hours, he estimated, before more aggressive interruptions would occur at the start of a new day.

###

Ricca had rebooted the computers and squinted in his direction when he entered. “What a bunch of old timers, these things,” she scoffed at the keyboards.

“Shoo!” Greg said, waving her aside before he took the seat behind the keys. “I think we have four hours of time to get away, tops. If we’re not back by then... we’re doomed.”

“Doomed? Uh... I don’t even want to know. You have a plan?”

Greg nodded and typed, “I hope Keith has not lost his head, I’m counting on him to start the sound and data interface.”

Since he’d never actually seen what he was looking for (at this end), it took some searching around until he finally found Cally’s files with the sound interfacing. With a little anticipation in his voice, he informed his furry charge, “Here goes nothing, Ricca,” and with some drama he tapped the enter-key and waited.

“Keith?” he said into the microphone next to the keyboards.

“Guys!” he heard the koala say excitedly.

Greg smiled and looked at Ricca, whispering, “He sounds pretty worked up.”

Next he said, “I’ve located Cally’s solution, the one she used the other time, but setup is assuming some sort of remote control from your end. Can you help me with that?”

An inaudible curse later Keith replied, "That programming is not online Greg. This might take an hour or so."

"Hurry then! I think we're in deep shit within some four hours."

In the hour until the remote interface would work, Greg had copied Cally's work and adjusted to a version of her solution that ought to solve the one singularity that was in the setup right now instead of two as was previously the case.

"And now we wait for Keith," he said to Ricca who had checked the setup in the mean time.

"It looks much crappier than it is Greg. You really constructed this well."

"Cally did. I just used it."

"Smart girl, that Cally."

"Girl?" Greg asked incredulously, "Over fifty, she is!"

"Wow," Ricca said with awe, "smart *lady*."

And then the door opened to let Wolfgang enter, startling Ricca right out of her shoes, had she worn any. As it was, she side-stepped off of the setup ramp and right into the mess of materials, leads and cables on the floor.

Greg held his breath and counted mentally for the shit to hit the fan while he admonished himself for not locking the door or even for not checking up on the old guard.

"Ach, Herr Greg, Sie haben einen Besucherin?"

Since Ricca wasn't likely to understand German he repeated the sentence in English, as if he was translating out loud, "Do I have a visitor?"

Ricca was tangled in wires and tape she hopefully would not damage, she was no use now. Greg's mind raced as he tried to understand how Wolfgang

might have missed the species of Ricca. Too dark? Just an assumption? How long had the guy seen her before she fell out of sight? If Wolfgang didn't think anything of this he just would carry on!

"Yes, a visitor from the United States, Wolfgang. She's only going to be here shortly!" Greg said in his best German.

"In that case, she must enter in the log, I cannot waive the rules!" Wolfgang would not let form be done away with so easily. The guard narrowed his eyes, "Does she have a legal ID at all?"

Greg looked at the old guard. He was apparently convinced he and Ricca were in for some costumed ball. Amazing how the human mind could fit expectations to what it saw. Ricca got up and whatever it was Wolfgang saw, there was no denying she was not human. Indeed, Wolfgang's eyes went large with surprise.

"Herr Greg, Meine liebe Gute! Eine völlige Fraulein Washbäre, dass ist ja Einzeln!"

Greg blinked and translated for Ricca without thinking too much, "My goodness, a full-raccoon lady. How unique!" Yes, he'd heard it, noted it, but he had to file it under 'investigate later'. His brain only came up with one reply he thought fitting.

"Ricca, you go with Wolfgang to the lobby to enter your name. See you in a jiffy."

"I... what?"

"Rules, Ricca. Just go with the man, fill in your name in the booklet. Only takes a moment, he understands two or three lines of English."

Ricca gave him a bewildered look.

"Go on, hut, hut, there's a good girl."

Wolfgang neatly held the door open for her, a real gentleman, and they left. Greg stared at the closed door. His befuddled state was cleared by

Keith's voice. Keith blurted his findings through the speakers, "Greg! Got it! Try to fire it up."

Greg started the interfacing code and saw a terminal window with the hopeful line, "connecting..."

When an 'OK' appeared behind it he kept a cheer in, saying, "I think we're in, Keith! I'm looking at a number with the connection speed. It drops when we talk."

"That's it Greg! Good work! Ricca, you-"

"Keith, sorry to interrupt, but she's gone with the guard to enter her name."

"You did *what*?"

"I know what I'm doing. She'll be back in a moment."

Greg ignored the near tantrum that Keith threw over that and tapped the table until Ricca walked in a little later, eyes all glazed over. She was alone and she was still limping a bit from her fall off the ramp.

"I... I think I'm losing my mind here," she said in a near spasm, "I showed my driver's license and he nodded when I saw-"

Greg groaned. What a moment to get impressed! Irritated, he commanded her to get going.

"Get in the setup. I'm going to try something."

Greg set the system up with a count down and pointed the large raccoon to the correct position in the setup tetrahedron. She was limping around and stumbled a few times, each time uttering a soft 'ow'.

"Ricca, you are being very difficult! Do you want to get back to your home or what?"

She complied with his directions at once, very willingly but absent too.

“OK, you were on top of me, remember? That won’t work because you nearly suffocated me.”

“Sorry,” she said subdued.

Greg clambered in and lay down on top of her. “Well, you *are* soft like this. Now pray this works!”

To his surprise she closed her eyes and mumbled softly, while the countdown continued. A minute later, they both breathed out while getting out of the setup. Keith came running up, panting from the exertion of having run to them. Greg noted the room was empty save for them. Ricca was feeling herself, seemingly checking if she was still in one piece. Then she tended to her ankle, parting the fur to see how bad the injury was.

“This thing is more dangerous than I thought,” she mumbled, balled up on the floor to examine her ankle. She was surprisingly agile for her bulk.

Keith bristled. “Two hours! I have been worried sick! What the hell happened?”

Instead of answering, Ricca simply fell on her knees and held the setup tight for support. She had big staring eyes, moist with stress.

“Hello?” Greg asked softly.

Keith noted the distressed raccoon too. “Post traumatic stress Greg, and she sustained some injury.”

“Stress?” Greg exclaimed to the mentally distant raccoon, “From just *one* transition over there and back? Ricca, *girl*, cut the crap! We’re back in one piece, no harm done thanks to the quick action of yours truly and Keith here.” Greg stepped next to Keith and beamed, “Quite a team eh?”

Keith shook his head, “I think... Ricca, you are excused.”

Ricca gripped a bar next to her with two hands, tightly, and stammered, “I-”

“Hey, fat ass!” Greg taunted happily.

The raccoon got up, slowly, and she took an uncertain step while seeking words, "I would like to be with my husband, I..."

Keith stepped right up to support her, "Sure Ricca, will you be able to drive? Do check that ankle with the doctor!"

As if Keith's help had finally switched the gears she resolutely nodded, "Yes!" and walked out, purposefully.

Greg looked after her. "What was that all about?"

"Can't you see, Greg? She's shaken to her very core!"

Greg frowned, a stupid look on his muzzle-face, "I didn't know she was married..."

"She is."

"That must be one blind bat."

"Actually he's a raccoon, like her, and he really is 80% blind."

Greg raised one eyebrow, "Figures."

"That's not very nice Greg."

"No, but true."

"I'm not so sure you would react that way had you more details!"

"Pfff," Greg blew, "imagine I would have reacted like that; she was planning to go meet Cally for heavens' sake. I told her before it was madness."

"Good. Now that you have established your point, I suggest we dig into this thing, do some investigation on this event."

###

In the afternoon, he returned to his room and found Shirra there with her tablet. She was working on English writing and reading.

“You sure you need that, still?”

Looking up with a ‘studied’ face, she conceded, “I am filling in some gaps Greg. Some words I encountered today that I have to be sure on.”

Greg walked over, taking a look. “That’s biochemistry, isn’t it?”

“Yes and no. I have been given to understand that this is called microbiology here. And this,” she pointed, “is called enzymology. But I understand the reasoning to split it up.”

“Good girl Shirra! Enjoyed yourself today?”

She stared at the wall and lowered the tablet to her knees. “Greg, that doctor is trying to court me. Will you believe he does that and actually is *married*?”

“Good for him,” Greg checked his arms, they were itching and Shirra’s business was sort of passing right through him.

“Are you even listening?”

“Maybe,” he said and scratched. The orange color had almost gone. Hair on his arms had thinned considerably. Here and there skin was beginning to show. Ruddy, irritated skin of old. “Ahhrhg.” he said in annoyance, “this is down right inflammation!”

Shirra got up and inspected his arms. “You ought to have the repellant agent for your mask Greg. This is clearly a reaction.”

“You bet!”

“Given what the mad and stupid doctor showed, I think I could make it, here.”

Greg stopped scratching, and turned to her. “*This*,” he thought, “*is a cat worth liking to the level of love.*”

He looked at the white feline face who was basking in his attention. Pink nose with whiskers, short muzzle. Soft white fur. Her green eyes glimmered in the light.

Seconds passed.

In the corner of his eye he noted her tail: the end was going back and forth.

“Still a cat,” he thought.

Shirra realized at once the moment was over. Her eyes focused on his arm.

“I heard you, Shirra. That doctor fancies you. So what? Play him, get what you want. No one will be the wiser for it. No one will be the worse.”

“That grey cat may be a propped up farmer, but I have my station. I will not offer my person to this cat, knowing he is *mentally* cheating his wife. I know what I look like, even in this.” She tapped her army suit.

Greg couldn’t care less. “You think you can make this separation-component? *Please*, Shirra, make that stuff. I don’t care what it takes, moral or immoral. Make that crappy stuff and get it to me.”

“I *will* synthesize it Greg. I’ll do so morally right, and not, um, ‘crappy’. I don’t do that, you will understand?”

Greg smiled.

“You, Shirra, are a cat. A soft, purry, furry, white cat. But know this, Shirra: I would not have kicked you off my parent’s farm when I was young.”

He put his arms around her, giving her what she craved. It was not fair, not just, but easy. He could loathe himself, if... she weren’t just that: a cat. She responded at once, wrapping her arms around him.

Feeling her embrace, longing, enveloping, with a slight squeeze as she pushed her torso onto him, he wondered about his place in all this. Fur

pressed on his neck, pulling, wanting, she found the strength to keep from kissing him and instead placed her head on his neck and held him close.

He felt how he was just about raised up by the embrace, she was a little longer. A sigh escaped her. "You know I like you, Shirra."

"Hmmm."

He waited for her to stop the hug, but in the end disengaged with a little push.

"How was your day, Greg?"

"Fine, we did some experiment at the setup."

"It went well?"

"Depends, actually, I think I was in a home-like place for two hours. That was fun."

"Home?"

"I'm not 100% sure," he thought of the guard's reaction, "but very close, my own world at the university in Aachen. It was nearly hilarious. With a little help from Keith I quickly set all in order to reach this place again. And here I am, still."

Shirra looked at him with big frightened eyes. "You went through that setup, alone?"

"Ah, no. Not exactly alone. You see, Ricca said something stupid and I overreacted. So we ended up in a..." Greg stopped and realized that she wouldn't understand 'singularity'. Gee, how to describe this?

"...we got transferred to my world. She was all big mouthed about it and then this guard from the building shows up, takes her down... she gets back and now she's gone to her own place. Flipped. Can you imagine? That big Ricca, all words and no action. Bit of a disappointment, I have to say."

"After that she just went home? So she abandoned you and Keith?"

“Ah no, Keith sort of supported her leaving. Incidentally, did you know she was married?”

Shirra nodded.

“Well I didn’t. Not in my life I would have guessed.”

“She does carry a ring.”

“Not around her finger, I’d have seen that.”

“Around her neck, she does, on a chain.”

“Weird.”

“It does not fit her finger anymore.”

Greg shrugged. “Anyway, I thought her more stable. Stupid hysterical females.”

Shirra looked at him longingly, “I’m not hysterical.”

“No, but you’re not Ricca either.”

Was that a compliment? Not intended, but Shirra smiled leastways.

“Greg, you might not think you are so special, but don’t you see what this means? It shows the man of quality you are, of standard, above the average.”

“What? That I don’t flip from an inadvertent swap to some universe?”

“Precisely! It is written by our savior, how you are wide in compassion, stretched in knowledge. ‘Stretched, but not thin!’ she recited, ‘Knowledgeable on many subjects, outwardly so’. I feel humbled to be with you, Greg.”

She looked down, in some sort of respectful stance.

“Swell.” Greg mumbled, “Now, care for some food? I’m starving.” He walked out.

###

The next day, Ricca had returned to her office. Speaking with her seemed slow and he got ambiguous responses. A bit under the weather he decided. At one point he nearly dragged her to the board, saying "I know I'm not a physicist, but here you are adding the charge of the electrons. You surely see it's a minus?"

Ricca had just stood there, looking at him. Mute. That morning resulted in a lot of coffee intake.

At lunch, he noted Shirra talked to her a while. When they set out for a walk around the compound, he asked her about it.

"She was pretty shocked from what I understand," Shirra said.

"What, from that *one* human man? He's nothing but an old guard, how dangerous could he have been? If she'd fallen over with fright on top of him he'd've been squashed right dead."

"That's not it, Greg. This man, he seemed to wonder about her tail. She claims he said a raccoon with a full tail was singular. Then he touched it."

"So?" he asked, disregarding whatever it was that was kicking in the back of his mind, but he could not make anything of it.

With a little sigh she reminded him, "I told you, it is disrespectful."

"So?"

"You do not do that, least of all in an elevator."

Greg tapped her ear quickly, to make it twitch.

"It's worse than that! Please don't Greg?"

"Today I'm going to tap ears until I get seriously whacked. This is going to be fun, this was number one, lemme see how far I get."

Shirra cast an angry look at him. "You're being childish again, I'm really sorry to say."

“You haven’t had to endure an entire morning with ‘salt pillar’ Ricca.”

“Ricca says she hurt her ankle badly. And she got spooked by an image in that lobby.”

Greg stopped walking. Image? In the lobby! “The marathon?”

“Your reference means nothing to me, I’m afraid. But she talked about thousands of human faces. She got scared, as I understand it.”

“It’s an image of a sports event, a run. All over the whole wall, life size.” A daunting image maybe, but to get spooked?

“It shows a few thousand runners,” Greg explained, “is that daunting?”

“Wow,” Shirra said impressed, “I’d like to see that... thousand humans... White?”

“What makes you ask that?” he asked, pissed.

“I’m sorry, Greg, did I upset you?”

Shirra looked positively stricken.

It struck him that he had never before felt *real* anger towards her. It seemed to hit her hard, deep inside.

“I just... I don’t understand Greg, I’m so sorry!”

A tear appeared in the corner of her eye.

“It’s OK, Shirra, I didn’t mean that. Come, give me a hug.”

He hugged her, shortly, determined not to make a habit out of it.

“Did Ricca say they were white?”

“Yes, she did. I told her how much that meant but she simply stared. I think I have also put her in her place with respect to you, Greg. She needed a lecture on that.”

“Did she, now?” Greg wondered. He imagined it would be fun to get Shirra and Ricca in a fight. Not a physical fight, no, he would take pleasure in the mental aspect.

## 57. Trip to Fly

The next day, Greg was unhappy. He had just finished his Shirra-induced healthy food lunch and pushed his tray to the side. Yes, the food was all according to Shirra’s best intentions, no it wasn’t his preference. She really was close on his skin where food was concerned. According to her, correct food and light and tons of blah-blah would keep his skin healthy. Yeah, right. And if her ‘constant’ pregnancy wasn’t enough of an irritation, her state seemed to incite some sort of all-out nuclear blast level of impact care-attack towards him. Latent mother instincts perhaps?

And while he was under the scrutinizing eye of ‘mother Shirra’, Ricca had unexpectedly shown up, but she hadn’t eaten anything at all. True enough, she seemed tired, uncharacteristically so. ‘Skulking like a bear with a sore head’, Greg thought aptly and smirked for his witticism. She was also still limping a bit, due to the injured ankle. It apparently was quite a bad injury.

His thoughts were disrupted by Shirra patting his knee conspiratorially and winking. Greg could think of no reason for that gleeful happiness other than the damned pregnancy, and he sat annoyed as Keith marched up. He portrayed his happy-happy-bobbing walk indicating something had been achieved.

“Guys, you’ve been good and I’m taking you out for a ride!”

Ricca looked up, her eyes suggesting she might be somewhat excited, asking in a slow voice, “You actually got clearance?” Normally she would be much more vocal, showing Ricca was not her usual expressive self.

“I’m allowed to leave here for a spell?” Greg asked hopefully.

“Come on gang, move it! I don’t want to plow through peak traffic.” Keith waved them on and went to the exit.

Since neither Shirra nor Ricca moved as much as a hair, Greg got up. Shirra followed him and Ricca laboriously got to her feet. Shirra kept silent and close to him, as she would. Keith took them to the main entrance, signed him and Shirra out, and waved them on, past the guard. The koala was certainly brimming with energy as he stopped at a truck in the parking lot outside the fence, where the two ‘otherworlders’ hadn’t been allowed until now.

“Big,” Greg noted with a disapproving nod, “what happened to your old hybrid Toyota?”

Keith missed the sarcasm and shone with pride as he tapped the hood, “This one is hydrogen powered! I *must* say I like it. And... perk of the job.”

“Perk? Pfff,” Greg countered, unimpressed. Cars were for transport, not for show.

Ricca groaned as she put her hands in the hollow of her back and tried to stretch her big body. Greg took a surreptitious look at that show. It impressed him how little stretch was visible from that move.

Greg got in the front and the girls took to the back. Greg smiled as he felt the tilt in the level of the car when Ricca got in. The clock on the dashboard showed 3 PM, bit early for rush hour, Greg judged. “Rush hour, Keith? How far is it?”

Keith fired up the hydrogen converter. The faint whine echoed through the car.

“Buckle up, Ricca.”

“I’ll be damned if this thing fits, Keith!” she protested halfheartedly.

Keith held his arms crossed in fortification. “I’m waiting, Ricca.”

Interested to see Shirra’s response to Ricca’s use of ‘damn’, Greg turned around. Shirra was looking at Ricca, with maybe disgust, he couldn’t be sure. So he pried, “No problem with her damning herself?”

“I cannot help those who can’t help themselves,” Shirra stated aloof.

“That’s cryptic,” Greg went on, “even more so for your doing.”

Ricca hadn’t spent a second to listen to them and was fighting her seatbelt with some theater.

“What will you do when we get pulled over?” Greg asked in a nasty voice, a smile on his face.

“You just get *your* belt on, will you?” Ricca replied huffy.

Shirra motherly intervened, “Ricca, you ought to be a little more kind to Greg, for all he is doing to help you, don’t you think so?”

Greg smiled even wider. This would be fun. So far, Shirra and Ricca had evaded one another more by chance than design. He looked at Keith, still smiling and saw Keith wasn’t smiling at all.

“Are you smiling?” Keith hissed.

Realizing his fake muzzle didn’t quite smile like it should. Greg grinned when he saw Keith’s face relax.

“Excited, Greg?” Keith asked now, interpreting his smile totally wrong.

This situation was getting better all the time! He looked at Ricca again who, in the meantime, had finally closed her seat belt. She definitely was uncharacteristically irritated today and Greg felt in the perfect mood to incite her.

“What are you looking at?” Ricca spat.

Too easy, he decided, but could not hold his tongue.

“A cat may look at the queen, as they say.”

Shirra laughed with her eyes, and kept her muzzle stylishly closed. She apparently understood the remark. Neither Ricca nor Keith did and they frowned.

“Go Keith!”

Keith pulled out of the parking lot and onto the empty three lane freeway ending at the base, checking traffic in both directions –just in case, it seemed.

“Ricca?” Greg asked, “What is your problem? That belt issue was enough to make a cat laugh. If you hadn’t tried that belt like a cat on hot bricks it would have taken no time at all.”

“Greg, if I wouldn’t be locked in this belt I would have kicked your sorry ass all over this car!”

“I don’t doubt for a moment you would be lithe enough for it.”

“Keith!” Ricca said indignant, “You say something or you will have a freakin’ *murder* on your hands!”

Fatherly Keith talked to the windshield, “Greg? Could you pipe down an inch or two, considering the time of the month?”

“My, my,” Greg taunted, “you’re on *her* side for a moment. I could get the impression you two are an item.”

“Ahhrgh!” Ricca screamed.

That was not funny. Her scream was splitting three heads.

“You’re being very insensitive, Greg!” Keith scolded.

“Only to Ricca, and she’s never so short tempered. Let me relish this for a moment, Keith.”

Ricca was looking outside with her jaw set in grim determination not to react to anything anymore. Shirra meant to defuse the situation, one she was ill equipped to understand in many ways.

“Ricca, you surely understand Greg’s position? As a human, in this world, he has not a single fellow member of his species to speak to. At his level.”

That last bit was the real wonder of course.

Ricca's fist flew out to Shirra, apparently to frighten the cat. Instead Ricca hit Shirra in her stomach as a result of her uncontrolled sweep and both being secured in their seats.

Keith slammed full on the brakes, screeching to a halt from 50. The car's electronics kept it more or less on track but nothing like that was available for the passengers, all of whom were shaken none too gently.

They stopped with a fine little jolt and all landed with their backs in their seats when Keith roared, "This stops now!"

Ricca looked at her hand in distress. She clearly hadn't wanted to strike Shirra, least of all in her belly. Shirra was lost for words, gasping for air. Greg had to admit that this was quickly spiraling out of control. And, unhappy as he was with Shirra's pregnancy, Ricca hitting her was interfering with a low level feeling of righteousness.

"I'm so sorry Shirra!" Ricca wailed, "I would never..."

Shirra sucked in while her eyes flew open with full wrath, "How dare you! Can't you fathom the consequences of such an action?"

Whimpering and trying to appear impossibly small, Ricca blubbered, "I'm really sorry, Shirra. I'm just..."

"Greg! She did this on purpose! You saw her!"

"Um, maybe I was just taunting a tiny little teeny weenie bit. I'm not so entirely sure she... I don't think she did it on purpose, Shirra."

Shirra folded at once, after that, rearranging her position on the raccoon, "You really are sorry, Ricca? But why did you do this?"

"Time of the month, Shirra," Ricca said pained, "you surely understand this?"

On Shirra's brow two perfectly brushed eyebrows knitted together and looked at Greg for support.

"Don't look at me, I don't know what she means with... ooh, ah, I see."

Looking up, Keith hopelessly said, "I *told* you Greg."

"You know about her period?" Greg gawped, "Good God Keith, are you deranged?"

"You know about my period?" Ricca asked in shock.

Keith summarized, "Yes and no and yes."

"Um..." both human and raccoon stalled.

"I'm not deranged," Keith explained, "as you so nicely put it. Living with my sister and her quirks has made me, ah, exceptionally attuned to the mental state of females."

"But I..." Ricca began, and seemed to be checking herself for any visible signs.

"It's only your temper, Ricca, it doesn't show. Relax," Keith said friendly.

"Guys?" Greg interjected, "I would like it very much if we change the subject, OK? I find it a little gross."

"You said that as if it *might* show." Ricca whispered to Keith in a very tiny, forlorn voice.

"No, no, not with you Ricca. Call me an expert, rest assured."

Feeling ignored, Greg tried again, "Guys? This is a little bit more information than I need, OK?"

"But," Ricca wondered, "the lioness nurse, she always has it at the same time I do and she's always happy and cheerful."

"I still know, Ricca. For example, she always leaves out the brushing at that time."

"My, you are right!"

"Guys!" Greg called loudly, "Cut it out now!"

Keith signaled and continued their trip on the freeway.

“Greg?” Shirra asked. Greg turned to her, straining to look her in the eyes.

“What is a period?” she asked in common. Greg had to rearrange his audio reception to decode the ‘common’ language.

“You don’t know what that is?”

“No, why would Ricca have it and what is so unpleasant about it?” she asked in common.

“What are you two talking about?” Keith and Ricca asked simultaneously.

“Oh, sorry, that’s the ‘common’ language of Shirra’s world. Not that I am very fluent in it.”

“Is there anything we should know?”

Greg mulled about this for a moment. It would mean she had not ‘tricked’ him to get pregnant the way he had thought.

“Shirra, how can you know you are fertile?”

She glanced at Keith and Ricca, in sequence, to signify her unease at this subject.

“I think you will find this interesting too Shirra, trust me,” Greg appeased her.

“Are you sure?”

Ricca was all ears, as was Keith. It would turn out to be for not too dissimilar reasons.

Shirra cleared her throat. “Biologically seen, it is quite simple. In layman’s terms: if suitable semen is available my body will of course prepare an egg-cell on time.”

“Only then?” Ricca was direct.

Shirra checked with Greg again, and then nodded.

“So you never have a period?”

“What is it, how is it tied to this subject? I know of nothing of the kind and I know raccoons in my world don’t suffer it.”

While Ricca explained, Keith supplied examples of how this hormone thing affected the mental state of many a female, to greater or lesser extent.

“Is there some sort of disease active here?” Shirra wondered.

“Oh, no! It’s normal, always has been.”

Shirra looked compassionate, “Does it hurt?”

“That’s not the problem; I’m just tired all the time.”

Keith piped up, “Speak for yourself, Ricca. My sister would at times be on the floor and she could not take medication for it or her mental self-control would slip.”

Shirra sat in silence while Greg was still hoping the subject would pass quickly. Without reply, the discussion thankfully dried out.

In the distance, Greg noted the sign of a fast food chain, in a few miles.

“Yes!” he called.

All started. Keith drove straight, but only just.

“What now Greg?”

“A drive-thru! We gotta get a meal there!”

“Hadn’t you just eaten?”

“Indulge me, Keith; I’ve not had that for over two years!”

Keith was quickly won over. “I’d like a shake, Greg. Good plan, you will keep my sister out of this now?”

“My lips are sealed!”

Keith drove to the very, very new place. So new, in fact, it wasn't open yet. Despite this Greg sat looking at the mouthwatering pictures of what would be offered once the place would open. The rest of the neighborhood and shopping was still half finished and also very empty. No one was working; signs suggesting some strike of the workers were all over the place.

"Greg! You're not going to eat *that!*"

"Can it, Shirra, nothing is available now but if it were I would eat this even if it killed me, in say forty years."

Keith laughed with Greg, but Ricca sided with Shirra. Just as Keith prepared to turn, she unbuckled, grabbed the invisible burger Greg had just sunk his teeth in and snatched it from his grasp.

"Give it back, you stinkin' piece of thieving raccoon!"

"Fat chance. It goes out here," she lowered the window and made a throwing motion, "with the consent of your wife."

"She's not my wife! You had no right to do that!" He made a halfhearted grab for the goods.

Ricca produced her nasty giggle.

"Shirra! Did you see that?"

Shirra looked outside, ignoring him.

"Shirra!"

"It is exceptionally unhealthy. I would be a sorry excuse for an assistant if I'd so much as suggest you should ever eat such food."

"Ahh!" Greg yelled.

"I won't forget that, Ricca!" Greg growled, it sure was getting to him.

"I'm counting on that. You had it coming."

"You deserve a period, a lifelong one. There!"

Ricca giggled again. "You will have to do better than that, Gregory boy."

“You can’t call him that!” Shirra called, “You shan’t!”

“Quiet!” Keith bellowed over the din, “I’m driving here with a grade-school class! You’re bickering like kids, everybody keep their muzzles shut right now!”

“Good, that excludes me,” Greg noted happily.

“Aargh! Shut your muzzle or any other kind of speech orifice!” Keith growled.

Unimpressed, Greg informed him, “I warn you Keith, gloat and I *will* reminisce of your immediate family.”

Keith said nothing, his eyes locked on the road as Greg pushed his point home, “I don’t take orders from a bear, and certainly not a grey one.”

Greg smirked and Keith rolled his eyes, then he elbowed him.

“I agree with Keith we might better keep silent for a spell.”

That defused one half of the back-seat company. Ricca glowered at him but kept her tongue in a quiet that would befit a royal tomb.

Greg’s mind wandered, touched on a black cat and his mouth worked before he had a chance to stop it, “You know Keith; we could go past the ZZ studio building.”

Keith slammed on the brakes again, a little more subtle this time. “Okay, that does it,” he grumbled and just made the next exit, turned and went back the way they came.

“Keith?” Greg wondered.

“You heard me; I’m done with this kindergarten.”

“What’s the matter?” Ricca asked.

“You keep out of this, biggie.”

“Greg!” she exploded, “I’ve been slaving over that rotten setup for years and now you pop up and the problem is *ten times worse!*”

Greg didn't follow, no one seemed to.

"Don't you see?" Ricca asked, "The gate should have been shut. All you did was demonstrate we're not going to be able to *shut* it at all!"

Greg shrugged, "of course not. You can only shut one particular match. One, of an uncountable gazillion. Not all of those would pose a threat, mind you."

"Really? Oh, that helps... idiot!"

"It's not his fault, Ricca."

"It is! He shouldn't have come here in the first place, let alone the second time around. Don't you realize what this means?"

"We'll guard the gate, is all," Keith observed.

"It'll cost money."

"Less than a carrier."

"Not helping, Keith."

Ricca watched out of the window with a derisive frown.

"What's a carrier?" Shirra asked.

Greg looked around, "Big ship, unpleasant when it attacks."

"Strange name for a ship," Shirra went on.

"It carries... um, choppers." Greg explained.

"Ah, I see. But how are choppers dangerous?"

"They can shoot you." Greg offered.

"Shoot? Like on TV?" Shirra looked frightened.

"Yes."

"Oh, that's... I see."

Ricca looked at Shirra with an inquiring stare. Suddenly she blurted, "What's the ZZ studio?"

Keith and Greg looked at each other. Not totally unexpected of Ricca, Greg decided and saw Keith had reached the same conclusion.

"It's a location where art is made," Keith was picking words with care and Greg nodded.

"Oh," Ricca nodded, clearly satisfied.

"What sort of art?" Shirra probed.

"Realism," Greg achieved to Keith's nod.

"Oh."

Shirra looked at him, for a much more intense and longer moment than was warranted. Greg saw how the two females looked at each other, reaching an unspoken angle on this.

"Sex," Ricca mumbled, shaking her head. Shirra nodded.

"I'm glad you two are in agreement." Greg said flatly.

"The two of you are nothing but a bunch of overgrown boys," Ricca accused them.

"Technically, I'm still your boss Ricca!" Keith fulminated.

They had already reached the road to the base and soon enough they sat waiting at a coffee machine for Keith to return.

"Gang," the koala announced as he ran up, "we'll try something. It's called shooting for the stars."

###

"So, why this?" Greg asked, interested, at the indoor practice range.

“I’ve learned to shoot here. You’ll get the basics of weapons handling too.”

Greg huffed, “I don’t need to know that. What are we doing here? I can shoot perfectly, you know that.”

Ricca laughed halfheartedly, “Perfectly. Yeah, right.”

“Actually Ricca, he does.”

“I bet you a tenner he can’t hit a target at a hundred meters!”

“You’re on, Ricca.”

Keith unlocked a closet, took a hand gun from it and offered it to Greg.

“What are you doing?” Shirra asked with rising concern in her voice.

“I’m going to show the slow raccoon there that I can hit that target.”

Ricca was a little less secure in her opinion now.

Keith pressed a button to bring the carrier in and attached a target.

“Here we go.”

Greg felt the gun, closed his eyes and let his mind converge with it. Then he focused on the target, pointed, supported with his fist, aimed and shot.

Keith smiled. “That’ll be ten, Ricca.”

“I’ll write you an I-owe-you,” she agreed a little bit flushed.

Keith held out his hand, “Gun please, Greg?”

Reluctantly he returned it. “Well weighed, Keith.”

“I should hope so; our boys and girls out there depend on this. Now, as you can see there are no stars here, so follow me please?”

He walked to the outside range, to a separate shed from which he emerged triumphantly a little later. “Look,” he said and held high out a white clad, squarish, backpack.

“What a piece of junk, Keith.” Ricca opined, “How old is *that*?”

“This, Ricca, is going to be a very nice exit strategy once I’m done with it. It doesn’t look like much now, I will make it into something.”

“A jetpack!” Greg exclaimed.

“What’s a jetpack?”

All three turned to Shirra who stood frowning, missing the point entirely.

“Right,” Greg said drawn out, “Shirra, let me explain...”

###

“My back hurts Greg, I had no idea I could feel this way.”

“Same here, muscle ache. I had no idea I had muscles there. Right now I don’t want to get up at all. You know Shirra, I think I did a little too much ‘jetting’ with that ‘pack’. It’s all nice to fly around and we’ll certainly have to do some more exercising and training with it, but not so extensive.”

“Wise words,” she winced. Shirra wasn’t the sort to complain like this.

“I was going to talk to that colonel, that Barry badger. Keith thinks he will be able to help define our ‘break-out’ strategy better than the shambles of a plan we have now.”

“We could maybe ask those ... horse-people... to just let us go?”

“Of course, if I remember correctly they threatened to break your fingers one by one until I would be so kind as to restore their laser-control?”

“You will know best. You’ll get us to the citadel, won’t you?”

“Actually, do you have any idea what to do once there? I mean, Amandine won’t be at that particular spot!”

“Of course! We’ll provide the tablets we have, reinstate the control!”

“I was afraid you might say that.”

“It is the right thing to do, Greg. Pardon me, but how can you be so doubtful?”

“Call it a hunch.”

It was more than that. It was the knowledge of impending doom, descending on Amandine and her bear community if that ‘control’ was made available. Yet, he needed the support of the council and their cronies to walk that world safely and to seek out Blikol to bring him to Amandine. She could be enticed with his standing as ‘the hairy human’. He would of course collect Amandine before allowing any sort of control. He’d talked it over with Keith, this would work nicely.

###

Greg sat on his bed with a headache. He felt tired and realized he had pushed his body beyond its endurance. Today’s test with the colonel and his team had been taxing but he was confident it had been for the right purpose. They had covered all angles he could think of, including those the colonel had provided and even those Keith had come up with.

Shirra walked in with a light tread, she’d been in the medical office all day again.

“Greg? I have something for you.”

She held a capped syringe in her hand.

“A shot? With what? Poison?”

“Now, now Greg, that’s not nice. I would not poison you! No, this is the protein-agglomerate, an agent to reject the mask-substrate. Come to the infirmary and we can administer it while checking your status.”

“Checking... Is that necessary?”

“A graft-skin rejection can happen in multiple ways, we can’t take chances. It must come off, that much is clear. In fact, it must come off for several reasons besides you disliking it.”

“Good.”

He got up, eager to have the stupid muzzle thing removed and it even dulled the ache in his body.

At the hospital, lying on his back, he awaited the shot.

“Are you certain?” the grey cat doctor asked.

“Yes,” Shirra all but snapped, “put it in.”

Apologetically, the doctor checked with Greg, “I only have the lady’s word for it. This substance is like nothing I know, a designer drug if you will. I must say I am against this.”

“Do it, doc. Shirra would not allow it if it weren’t safe.”

“You heard the man,” Shirra smiled, “go ahead!”

The syringe was emptied in his drip and he waited.

“How long until this works, Shirra?”

“The dermal cells will react instantaneously, but before you really see something... that might take over five hours, given your metabolism.”

Greg checked his watch. Four PM.

His skin suddenly began to itch on his arm, where the IV line went in. In fact his face itched too and he scratched.

“Are you all right?” the doc asked, concerned.

“It itches.”

“That is no surprise.” Shirra held his hand, he snatched it away.

The itching increased and he scratched with two hands all over his face and muzzle.

“It itches enormously!”

It got worse and worse and soon he jumped out of bed, hollering, pulling the mask, reaching in via the fake muzzle to reach his skin. “It’s burning!”

“Relax Greg! Relax! You should not move this much, it has to go gradually!”

“Relax? My face is bloody on fire!”

He pulled and pulled, it hurt.

A prick in his arm made him look aside to the lioness nurse who stood with a syringe.

The itching grew distant and the sounds around him seemed very remote as he collapsed backward.

###

When he regained consciousness he felt his face at once and only met bandages.

“What happened?” he tried to say, but instead he produced, “whuff huffnf.”

Shirra was by his side, “Easy Greg, your skin reacted so violently the graft was rejected all right but most of the veins were not well dismantled. It will heal soon but right now your skin is lacking an epidermis.”

Shirra’s light voice did instill some relief into him. At least the itch was gone, and he felt the bandages again, realizing suddenly the stupid muzzle was gone too. With Shirra’s help he got the bandages adjusted so he could speak.

“Thank you Shirra, I thought I would never get rid of it.”

“You are now Greg, you are now. I’m sorry it went so fast. I asked the doctor to calculate the dose given the IV he used but I have found he erred. The concentration was no less than doubled, I’m really very sorry. I have reprimanded him, but I should have double checked.”

“That doctor is a stupid cat.”

Shirra nodded. “He is a common cat, and is just that. He shall not reach greatness.”

“Never mind. How long will this recovery take?”

“You will have to endure for two days, Greg.”

“Marvelous! Just spiffing! Two bloody days! Just while we were ready to go and get Amandine.”

Shirra patted his hand, which was painful as his skin was ruddy and puffy from the biological.

## **58. Ready, get set...**

In total, it had taken over 8 weeks to the scheduled departure, including the facial mishap. Greg had woken and felt ready, *quite* ready! The bed next to him was empty; Shirra wasn’t anywhere, probably taking a piss. He got up and walked to the mirror to look at his face. Hair had begun to grow again on his baby pink chin and cheeks, it was really good to be him once more, he’d almost gotten used to that muzzle! Now where was that cat?

“Shirra?”

The room was strangely quiet, so he walked to the toilet to listen. Just as he tried to grab the door handle, Shirra appeared. She looked like a wreck, broken down, devoid of any joy or feeling.

“What is the matter?” he said softly, for he felt something grave was afoot.

Her lip quivered.

“Shirra?” he asked her softly.

“Greg... I’m...”

A tear appeared in her eye.

“I’m not going to... it’s not...”

He held her close, she seemed so fragile suddenly. Shirra, his dependable, unwavering assistant now clutched him, sobbing.

“I’m losing my baby!” she cried into his shirt.

Greg swallowed. This was too good to be true, but he would be damned to let it show.

“How can you be certain?” he asked with care, hoping it would not sound eager instead of concerned.

Her tearful green eyes spoke clearly. She sniffed, “Yesterday I thought... I only lost a drop of blood.”

He guided her to the bed. She sat down and held her belly, with two arms crossed over, bending double, willing it to be right again.

“It’s wrong Greg, it’s...Ah!” constricted cries of anguish and pain stopped her words and she sobbed, big tears of pain.

Although he felt really quite happy about this, Greg did feel very sorry for her. He wanted to console her and held her and soothed her. He would not show his true feelings about it now, maybe later. Maybe never.

“If we’d been in the citadel, this wouldn’t have happened!” she forced in a hiss through clenched teeth in a sudden fierce spell. But it didn’t last, a moment later she was on her side, clasping her belly. Her muzzle clasped tight in a contortion induced by pain.

Greg didn't like this at all, "Are you..." it would be silly to ask 'all right', but something else was going on. "Are you well?"

"It...Ah! ...hurts..."

Shirra's muscles contracted mightily, and all the while she went 'oh-oh-oh', the tendons stood like cables on her arms.

"Shit! I'm getting the doctor!" and he ran out, only just hearing her soft wailing "oh-oh-oh".

Greg rushed through the corridors until he reached the hospital wing. He saw the doctor getting his white coat off a peg, for the start of the day and called, "she's having a miscarriage!"

The doctor looked up, surprised at seeing Greg here and not believing his ears.

"She's bleeding!" he added with a strange hint of panic, much more upset than he thought he was.

Having reached a conclusion, the doctor ordered an orderly, who ran after the cat with a gurney. Greg was the last to arrive, wheezing, stepped into their room and got a fright from the scene.

Shirra was on the bed, looking like a corpse. Blood stained the sheets all around her as well as the white fur of her left upper leg, and a part of her side. This much blood, this couldn't be right! Greg found his gaze automatically traveling away from that white cat. Her arms were still wrapped tightly around her belly and she gasped then breathed erratically, intermittently wheezing loudly.

It hit Greg, that even if he didn't care much for Shirra's love, he knew now how much he cared *about her*, he felt fear for her wellbeing.

Shirra was wheeled right into surgery, 'IV, stat!' the doctor called to the lioness nurse who just walked in, buttoning up her uniform, with a surprised look on her face. Nothing much ever went on here and the rare action made

people shift a few gears. The first thing she did was push Greg out the door. “Just... wait please?”

And so, Greg sat waiting outside looking at the green sheets in the operating room. What were they doing? He saw her heartbeat on the monitor. It looked stable to him. Other values, like oxygen or blood pressure, seemed in the ‘green range’ as well. The danger surely had passed, but he saw the doctor busy between her legs still.

When the doc finally walked out, he consoled Greg at once. “Tough lady, your Shirra. On the physical front I’d say not much harm done, just lost a lot of blood. She’ll recover in a few days.”

“Recover well?”

“Certainly. I have removed everything. The endometrial material was not being rejected properly. I have collected it so you can-ah-bury your child?”

“My...” Greg stammered and quickly rejected the very idea, “No-no, nothing like that, but uh, there is nothing left, right? There’s, like, no chance that anything... you know?”

The doctor shook his head and interlaced his fingers tightly in order to remain calm, his eyes spoke volumes though before his mouth spilled over, “I know you weren’t too thrilled about her pregnancy, but this seems a *tiny* bit cold.”

Then he took a peek at Shirra and continued, “It’s fine now. No ill effects. Keep in mind she’ll be a bit under the weather from the hormones. You really must decide what to do, Greg. I’d like to point out that even if you do not feel fatherly, she feels differently!”

“Emotionally unstable, you mean?”

“I would not put it like that. She will need caring people around her. And, I’m sorry to say this, while I can’t work out what makes her like you so much, you are the only person who can console her. You must do that, Greg. Promise me you will?”

“Great.”

A dark frown was cast his way, “I don’t get it, that very fine cat is totally overwhelmed by your person. And you treat her in an unfitting way. How can you deny her your support?”

“Your sentiments are noted,” he said and walked to the bed. A white tray contained a bloody mass. It meant nothing to him, reminding him more of the slaughter of animals on the farm by the village butcher. He took a moment to search for feelings, but there was nothing there to feel anything for! Would all females get mad in their head about such things? Shirra sure was broken over the loss, he’d seen that.

How could she not see this world, or any world for that matter, would be better off without a freak? He stroked her head. She seemed so feeble like this. Yes, he would be nice to her, she deserved that at least. Greg took his hand away from her. She did deserve it, didn’t she? Of course, right?

A bleep on one of the monitors indicated some warning. The oxygen pressure had reached a low and the doctor walked up, resetting the warning as he adjusted the apparatus. “Her body reacts badly to the blood substitute. I don’t know what’s causing it.”

“Is it dangerous?”

This *did* reach his feelings, very much so.

“No, it’s just not working as well as it should. There seems to be a large difference between her DNA and that of a normal cat.”

“She’s a cat!”

“Well, erm, yes and no.”

The doctor was gnawing a nail.

“You are not making sense to me, doctor.”

“I have no experience with xeno-biology, Greg. But that,” he pointed, “I mean, this lady, she is not a cat in my book. Looks like it, talks like it, smells like, walks like. The whole deal, you name it. But not a cat, not medically.”

“So she’s a little different. She will be all right?”

“As far as I can see, yes. Like I said, since the synthetic blood works no better than partly, it will be a slow recovery.”

They stood at the bed, looking.

“You know Greg; I had not expected ever to treat any emergency of *this* kind. I’m not a gynecologist.”

“What is your expertise, actually?”

“On the battle field you will not likely need to deliver babies. I’m a generalist.”

“So a little of everything and of anything nothing?”

“Uh?”

“Knowledge spread thin.”

“It is your trademark, isn’t it, to aggravate people?”

Greg didn’t react and the doctor walked off, a little cloud of anger drifted over his head. This left him alone, with a passed out Shirra, and beeps, and bleeps, and monitors with graphs.

‘Slow recovery’ the doctor had said. Now what was *that* supposed to mean? Days? Weeks?

Sometimes you just needed to put a gun to a doctor’s head for straight answers. It must be something they learn in their training, like a course in ‘talking around it’.

He reached for her head again, feeling the soft fur, the warm skin on her skull. Shirra moved in a tiny way and he pulled back his hand in alarm. With a little relief he saw her eyes were still closed. She looked peaceful now, better

not to disturb her. Greg walked out of the infirmary; aimlessly he walked around the compound until he ended up in front of Ricca's room. Her 'study', for it wasn't even an office.

He really didn't fancy seeing the fat raccoon right now. Still, he waited outside the door for the better part of a minute, so he might have a slanging match with her. Then, with nothing achieved, he walked on, to the big room with the setup. It was deserted. It usually was at this time. His eyes roamed the room where he encountered the cage thing, which was suspended from the ceiling. 'Safety-device', Keith had said.

Greg read his watch. "Nine" he said to the empty room.

"Yo!"

He turned and saw a waving Keith enter, not so neatly dressed. Right behind him followed a much tidier Colonel Barry Badger.

"Where's Shirra?" Keith asked.

"In the hosp... infirmary."

A baritone added, "She caught a cold? Ha! Ha!"

That was the 'good natured' Barry all right. Would that guy ever be down?

"Not exactly," he evaded, smoothly.

"Ha! Ha!" Barry laughed loudly, clearly hoping, by virtue of some miracle, that he was still in the ballpark with his assumption.

Keith took his hand in an apposite way. Not affectionate, instead more fatherly. His dark eyes took him in. Greg noted a fleeting slight frown there.

Keith listened, he had that rare ability: listen first, talk later. Who could do that nowadays? It was Keith's uncanny ability to get under his skin, where right now he even allowed it, accepted it.

The Colonel stopped, next to Keith.

“Spill it, boy!” Barry said. Barry in contrast to Keith had none of these fine attentive qualities. Maybe that made him a colonel? Ah well.

“She miscarried this morning.”

He sort of expected Barry to laugh again, instead the guy looked at him crestfallen. The yellow brown eyes of the colonel stared right through him. As if an unseen horror passed, cold, gripping. The guy winced. All took place in a second and then the ‘shield’ of ‘carefree distance’ ‘jolly good fellow’ fell back in place.

“That’s hard, man! You guys lost the baby... My condolences, phew!”

Barry wiped his brow for no apparent reason, and was en route out of there. He turned on his heel. Keith had said Barry had ‘a problem’ with emotions, notably other people’s but this appeared to go a little deeper than that.

“Can I take one guess why he was put in charge of this project?”

“No you can’t, Greg. Let’s just say I’m saving you the trouble.”

“Does he have any kids?”

“I’m not going to talk about him. You will have to ask him about all of that.”

“That sort of answers my question. He just saw some private hell pass in front of his eyes.”

“I’ll tell you this, though. Right after Barry lost his wife, he was assigned to this project. He asked for this.”

“Hmm. I think I can paint the picture.”

“Greg, since you so happily discuss my superior rather than Shirra, let me ask. Am I far off target, assuming you are not exactly crushed?”

“I’m not so very happy with this. Shirra’s under the weather with it.”

“I thought so. You really don’t care a rat’s ass about your child? *Your* child, Greg.”

Greg shook his head vigorously in denial. “Are you aware you are talking about a cross between a cat and a human? Listen buddy, I am half black and half white. I don’t belong anywhere. Do you honestly believe I would wish such a thing magnified tenfold upon *anyone*, let alone my own flesh and blood?”

He had not expected to feel so strong about it. Panting, he let go of Keith’s arm who rubbed it. When had he gripped his friend so tightly?

“Apart from the shouting just now, I feel better having heard your reasoning. I certainly hope you will not ever, and I mean this, *ever* think back to this moment in regret.”

“What are you saying?” Greg was certainly sensitive to the subconscious remark.

“Can’t fool you ever, can I?”

“Not you, anyway.”

“You know I’m a half squirrel.”

“Yes, so?”

“I won’t have kids of my own.”

“Because of that?”

“Yes. But I know it is so. And you know what the funny thing is? Barbara would long since have left me if I had ever made a single remark about starting a family. Where you were constantly wishing to be a non-parent you had better make damn sure you remember why you felt like this. Because now, it is a train that has left the station without you. Do you read me, Greg? Me and Barb... only if, oh, only if that one match, would happen. I’d lose a part of me, for a little Keith.”

“Wishes have a tendency to come true.”

Keith blinked. He put his hand on Greg's shoulder. "That is actually a nice thing to say. You realize?"

"Right now, I think I would rather leave. I keep on feeling something might happen to Amandine, she's not 'mine', but I feel so close to her... you can't imagine. When I'm here I feel like I can reach out and console her."

Keith put his arm around him, asking, "No qualms about Shirra?"

"You have to believe me buddy; I really was worried about Shirra when I saw her there. You have no idea how much blood she lost. All over the place man!"

"You'd be surprised, Greg," adding under his breath with an ominous darkness, "You'd be surprised."

Greg noted the underlying emotions. He sifted through his memories, and ended up with 'Maria'.

"Does this really remind you of Maria?"

"You are astute Greg. My sister, indeed."

"I never asked after it. Should I? Could I?"

Keith let him go and put his hands behind his back. He studied the setup. "When I got out of jail, I got mad at her. I left her, with a curse. She was dead when I returned and I realized what I had done. I pay the price daily, I feel like she's watching over me. From that day on, I have pushed away the darkness around my soul with ease. As if it does not stick to me anymore."

The koala looked at him. "You're surprised, aren't you? You thought I'd break down, howling, crying."

"Maybe."

"I cried, my friend, when she died in my arms. I cried my eyes out. On the ground, butchered by that misguided group of thugs, she was forced into a corner. Those coyotes who thought they ruled my neighborhood attacked her because she looked so nice. Maria, of all people, she looked *too* nice."

“What did you do to those dogs?”

“I started to educate them. Although I admit I exempted that foursome that attacked Maria from such study.”

“Educate... that’s what I thought I would do too! In Shirra’s world, I mean. But it’s so much more complicated there.”

They stood in silence at the setup, until he could make out the sound of the fans in the air conditioning and Keith’s breathing.

Keith broke the silence. “You are in for a couple of tough days, with Shirra.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Will you believe tons of guys on this base would love to support her in her emotional state, just to be with her?”

“No.”

“Then you still are a sucker.”

“I take it I deserve being a lollypop?”

“Maybe.”

Greg turned a raised eyebrow at his friend. “You’re beginning to sound like me, Keith.”

The koala looked at him, an eyebrow raised. “Maybe,” he repeated.

## **59. Meddling**

Greg sat at Shirra’s bedside. For want of anything, he was browsing his programming he’d used on the Hawaiian isle in Shirra’s world. It was a bad piece of programming, he admitted. While he read it, he could see many possible errors. Since nothing else was popping up, he started to repair the

code. One never knew when it would come in handy and there was a good chance he would need this tablet, with this program. Keith had provided him with a neat little powerful emitter that would allow communication without the whole dish-setup he'd used before. Better be prepared, than sorry!

When he was done, he put the tablet aside and looked at Shirra.

Up close, he could see her pink skin between the dense fine white hairs. He didn't care for pink skin at all. Neither did he like white too much. Blikol was black, pitch black, really nice. His mind wandered to the time he had sat in the 'white house' with Amandine on his lap. She'd fallen ill, then. And just like that the emergency-feeling of losing her surfaced and he gripped the bars of the bed to feel anything.

Nothing should happen to her! Was there a chance he had endangered her with his actions? What if he had inadvertently restored the communication to the satellites? What if the blanches had grabbed control of them again? Amandine was in the bear village, he was certain! It would be destroyed utterly.

"Don't panic!" he scolded himself audibly.

Vehemently, he scrolled through his programming, looking for ways in which he might have induced changes in the satellite controls. Why didn't he have a manual of that damned piece of crappy hardware? Suppose the blanches had? Growling he followed several options leading to possible disaster but so far they all came to naught.

"What are you doing?"

He looked up from his tablet.

"Shirra?"

Wrenching his attention away from the program, he managed to say "How are you feeling?" while in the back of his mind pathways were traced still.

She had her head turned to him, her eyes closed. Well, if she wasn't looking, he might as well continue and read the lines of code again.

"What *are* you doing?"

"Checking if the laser control is still off line!"

"Oh."

She was silent for some time before she mumbled, "It's not, is it?"

Greg snorted and counted to ten to keep from saying very unpleasant things. Of course she would see it completely reversed.

Shirra puffed difficultly before managing a patronizing, "Greg?"

Greg shook his head, he was just imagining things! His programming was sound. With a slightly shaking move, he put the tablet on its side next to his chair. He sucked the air through his nose, in preparation.

"How are you feeling, Shirra?"

"That's no answer..."

A timbre in her voice reminded him of his mother. In her worst moments, at that.

He got up and looked at a frowning Shirra, pushing her point home, "Don't mind me, you were checking for the control, you... ah-"

Greg clenched his jaw as Shirra stopped talking. "Hhhngngng!" was what he produced for an answer, to keep from saying something more stupid. Then he quickly walked away from her. Shirra with her incredible fixation with her stupid 'blanches'. How could she have missed how he fretted over Amandine? That stupid cat!

Before he could fully exit the hospital wing, he found a raccoon claw in his collar. His tunic caught in his neck because it was kept firmly in place by the furry arm that arrested him.

“I *thought* you’d try to slip out!” Ricca disciplined him, “You’re abandoning her, even like *this*. You’re nothing but a pathetic little man!”

“Fuck off Ricca! Let me go!” Or he would lash out, at least. He was crammed with aggression.

“Or what? You couldn’t even hurt me with those puffy little feet.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!” She steered him back, “Turn around, back you go. You are supporting that cat in distress, even *if* she thinks she’s the queen. Capiche?”

Greg struggled against her shove, using the most venomous thing he could think of, “You are something Ricca! It’s your fault she’s there!”

“That’s a lie!” Ricca wailed, her voice breaking, “Shirra herself assured me I didn’t!” and with a gasp she screamed at the top of her volume, into his ear, “You hear me!”

“Shirra’s too kind to you,” Greg managed, fuming.

“She wouldn’t lie to me!” Ricca screamed, “not about that, you miserable monkey!”

“I think I’m going to use my puffy little foot on you, gullible gopher.”

Ricca stood mute for a second at that taunt, giving Greg the room he needed. He made a half turn and kicked out with all power he could muster.

His foot hurt.

The large dame stood open muzzled, on one leg, holding the other. But this didn’t last long.

“You dirty little bastard, you actually kicked me!”

His foot hurt plenty, but the anger had been fueled rather than abated. He kicked out with his other foot. Kicking with his left wasn’t too accurate, and he thought he missed. No pain in his foot this time. A short growl from Ricca

followed, as she held her good ankle. The other was still wrapped in a bandage, ever since that visit to Aachen.

“Stupid fat raccoon!”

“Why, you little dipshit!”

Unexpectedly fast, she pulled his head and wrapped her arm around his neck. His head was pushed against her soft, bulbous side. This kind of grip was familiar to Greg since he’d endured a lot of it during his years at the British boarding school. He grappled with his hands, while finding it increasingly hard to breathe. She sure knew how to do this.

“Growing up with a little brother around teaches me something, Reggie!”

His left hand found a hairy mass. He seized her tail and handed it to his right hand.

“No you don’t!” she said angrily.

He bit down, hard, on the grey white hair mass. Harder, she maybe wasn’t even feeling it.

Ricca let out an earth shattering scream.

Good, she did feel it. He bit again, with might.

“Aaah! Get him off! Get him off! Aaah!”

Her grip didn’t loosen, but his jaws were locked. Next, her fist pounded on his head, although her bulk did not allow for a strong strike. The incessant hammering of her fist, coupled with the very strong squeeze, were making him see double, and a tunnel vision made it impossible to see spectators of their show. He heard them, muffled.

“Hey guys! The freak’s eating Ricca’s tail!”

“I bet you a fiver she’s going to kill him.”

“That freak? Nah, I’ll see your fiver and raise you ten!”

“Do you think... no... take... bet...”

He missed most of the words, and mentally remained 'out' until the room slowly swam into focus again when he was sitting on the floor, against the wall.

Colonel Badger was shouting to the assembled soldiers.

"I will make a report on *all* of your sorry asses! You know I never forget a name! Dismissed!"

Greg started pulling hairs from his mouth. This kept him busy for some time.

"Phflblblf" he said, trying to spit the remainder. There was no telling where those hairs had been.

"Yuk," he said at last, and looked up.

Ricca stood there, restrained by two soldiers, and she tried to escape yet again when he made eye contact.

"Do you ever wash that bloody thing? Bah."

"You little dipshit! I'll *kill* you!"

"Sergeant Raccoon! Step up!"

"He started it!"

Greg laughed out loud for a second and kept grinning.

"Real mature!" the Colonel cut his laugh short, "I won't have this sort of melee in my corridors!"

"Sir!" Ricca responded.

"At ease boys, let the sergeant go."

Ricca 'dusted' her fur with her hands and saluted the colonel.

Greg spied Keith running up.

"What happened," the koala wondered, "I just was told Greg *attacked* Ricca?"

"I don't care what or who happened," Barry barked, "you two," and a slightly shaking finger went back and forth between them, "are coming with me *now!*"

###

In Barry's office, they were standing abreast; Barry paced. He walked forward again, thinking it seemed, and backward, around them, the palms of his hands hitting his thigh from time to time in frustration. He had been giving Ricca a lecture for minutes. Greg wondered if he would be included into the equation that was so obnoxiously sticking in the colonel's head.

"Ricca," the badger rumbled, "you are not taking your private quests into this building, is that clear!"

"Ah," Greg thought, "A question redressed as statement."

"I don't care how much good work you do for your church," Barry went on, "We are *not* in a congregation here."

Now the badger stopped in front of him. The long muzzle swayed from left to right, taking him in. Greg suppressed an inquiring frown. Something told him this whole situation was way past 'funny'.

"You're one ugly son of a bitch, you know that?"

Greg nodded, "Yep."

"You," the long snout made a little dance in his direction, "mister smarty pants human, were supposed to lay *low!* What have you got to say for yourself?"

Greg's head made a neat little nod to his side, where Ricca stood. "She interfered."

“Oh man! Are you *dense*? We are way past that. I’ve half a mind to kick you off this base. Keith tells me you could be rounded up for murder on a lion from the police force. X-files get reinstated at request, get the picture?”

Greg shrugged, looking ahead, meaning he was investigating the colonel’s throat. “I couldn’t say, Barry.”

“Sir, Greg!”

“Sir Barry,” Greg quipped.

“Dammit Greg, this is *not* a game!” Another pat landed on the badger’s pants. The colonel’s patience had about reached critical mass.

Recouping Greg began, “Pardon, Sir. Once Shirra is on her feet, we’re out of here. You can seal off all the worlds you want.” For as much good as that would do, Ricca still hadn’t had the heart to explain that a successful closure would be neigh on impossible.

“You’re damn right I will. This world needs no uninvited idiots, look what you are doing to my unit, boy!”

“A frolic Barry,” Greg recovered at once, “*Sir*, Barry. I generally like ox-tail soup, so I figured I just had to try hers.”

Barry slapped him in the face. That hurt plenty, the fire indicating his lip had split.

“What do I have to do, Greggy boy, to get the whole of your mind *fully* over here? You’re costing me money, mister! You’re costing me resources beyond my budget, this nice toy your friend Keith has brought along is a gate to worlds that may benefit us but I’ll be damned to let the enemy in. Are you,” a fist landed in his stomach just enough to make the point but not to let him puke, “my enemy?”

“No,” Greg coughed, “I rather think I’m solving your endless money drain. That stupid raccoon over there could not solve it for you.”

“That, my dear human, would be so, if you hadn’t pulled off that stunt with your two hour absence.”

“Come on! Even you should be able to understand we both ought to have been killed. For me, to have lived through such an inadvertent transfer *twice* is nothing short of a miracle. Mathematically speaking: a chance of one to Avogadro.”

Barry’s head turned, “Ricca?”

“What are you asking her for? She’s too stupid to calculate it!”

“I didn’t ask you Greg! Shut up!”

Barry sure made a heavy impression, getting angry like that. It caused him to listen for a second.

“Sir!” Ricca responded, standing even more to attention than she had.

“I’m listening.”

“I think the human is right, sir!”

“About you being stupid or about his chances?”

She giggled her obnoxious little laugh in response. He had no idea she was so nervous.

“Ricca, I *could* kick you off this program.”

Another giggle. Greg smelled sweat, it was stinking up the place and it wasn’t him. Barry eased his voice.

“You go home, girl, make sure the doctor checks your tail first, though. And that bandage, it still looks bad. Freshen up, see you here first thing tomorrow and before that time I will have *something* done about *this* abomination.”

A claw-tipped finger was pointing in his direction.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked, feeling very much grieved, and holding back only because he feared the physical confrontation.

Barry gave her a little push and Ricca left, closing the door behind her.

“Keith, your half days are not enough to keep this man here out of harm’s way. You promised he would behave. From now on, you’re on him like a shadow.”

“Barry?” Keith protested, “You know I can’t do that. I’ve got my shop and lessons to think of!”

“That is *your* problem.”

“Then I quit. I don’t need this.”

Quit? Keith could quit just like that?

“Keith? I hate to stem the flow of gold into your school. You know, that sword of Damocles, I hold over your enterprise?”

“You do your best, or your worst, colonel! I’m not that easily scared.”

Greg saw how Keith was forced into a very unpleasant corner, because of him. He reconsidered his demeanor. A few weeks being a good boy, he could manage that. And he would, for Keith’s sake.

“Sir, I regret my actions today. I assure you Keith was right in trusting my word with regard to my behavior. I will seek out sergeant Raccoon, and grovel for her if need be.”

Keith looked at him in relieved surprise, the badger stood open muzzled. But only for a moment.

“Right. I will hear from Ricca tomorrow. Keith, you’re off the hook. Greg, you know the rules of engagement in this base. I hold you to it.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Outside the office, Keith shook his head. “Thanks, man.”

“I’m sorry I got you into this, Keith.”

“No worries, mate.”

“Why do you use that line, you’re not even from down under?”

“No, but koala’s are supposed to talk like that. For my shop, I always go with the flow.”

Greg wiped his brow, “That was an easy commitment but I’ve got to figure out a way to talk to Ricca.”

“That’ll be hard. She opens up to no one. No one has her private number. I know where she lives from the files but that is about it.”

“You could take me there?”

“You think that wise?”

“I fucked up, man, I’ve got to make amends. And yes, Ricca is stupid math-wise but she understands physics well. No she’s not Tabitha, but if that black and white menace would have been here it would certainly be worse for me, compared to a raccoon.”

“Skunk-o-phobia, eh?”

“It’s not a laughing matter Keith. You seem to understand, but you’re singular in that.”

“Right, first things first though. You go tell your sadly hurt fine white kitten that you’ll be absent and we’re outta here.”

###

They’d driven for half an hour. Keith cruised through a posh neighborhood. It held mansions with sweeping drives set in veritable parks visible only through gates.

“You sure this is the place? I mean Ricca does not seem so rich.”

“She lives with her husband in her folks’ place, if I’m correct.”

Keith drove up to a gate, sliding his window down, "11915 Oak Vale Parkway. This is it."

He pushed the button, and stilled the car's whine so he'd hear the answer.

"Keith Lorne, to see Ricca Raccoon!"

"And you are?"

"I'm her coworker at the base!"

"Please hold."

"Snobs," Greg concluded, "look at that old fox there, doing the hedge. All grey."

"A little red is left, see his arms?"

"If you keep such old geezers in your staff, you're making a point of what a great employer you are, and that you have them on your own payroll. Snobs."

"We'll see. I'm on unfamiliar territory as well."

"Nouveau riche, you mark my words."

"See that name on the plaque? 'Copeland', mean anything to you?"

"Nope."

The fence opened.

"Seems we've been cleared?" Keith mused and activated the hydrogen converter to drive on.

A large patch of gravel in front of the white house was used to park cars. Many cars, of all sorts: SUVs, pickups from the garden staff, sports cars. Except for the pickup they had one thing in common: expensive.

They got out of the car and Keith looked at him meaningfully, "You really should have left that mask on, this won't make it easier."

Greg considered that, “Well, as long as I’ve got you with me, it’ll convince others to accept my exterior. If you behave as if it’s normal others will follow your lead.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“Basic human psychology.”

“And we, non humans, are the same?”

“So far? Yes.”

Greg didn’t doubt his comment for a split second, but to fortify Keith’s feelings he added, “Trust me, just look what happens and you can be the judge.”

They walked to the grand entree, the size of a church porch, where a meticulously clad brown bear waited for them. He raised an eyebrow at their approach but no other outward uncertainty showed.

“Mr. Lorne?” he asked in a quiet friendly tone.

“Yes?” Keith tilted his head, uncertain.

“How are you, sir? May I presume your guest supplements your visit?”

“Fine, ‘bout yerself? And Mr. de Beers here accompanies me,” Keith made this answer certain and definite and it worked.

“Follow me, please.”

They followed the butler to an oak-wood paneled room.

“Please wait here for the lady of the house.”

Greg looked around. “These guys are off their head, Keith. First a butler, then this here: a veritable *drawing* room. But who am I to question their motives, eh? My mission is to mollify Ricca.”

He walked to a sideboard with crystal flasks where he poured a glass of water.

“Like some?” he asked a horrified Keith.

“Are you sure we should?”

“Sure. With these types? Trust me.”

“Trust you... that’s twice today, Greg. Don’t make this a habit?”

After a few minutes, a fine clad dame entered. Raccoon species, and past her ‘best before date’, he saw grey hair roots and wrinkles all over the place with sagging skin. Not pretty. The tail was possibly scruffy if it weren’t so well styled, if not altogether painted and pasted together. He was sure the hair on the tail was kept in place with the likes of hairspray. The fine brown dress had an exquisite sheen and even an impossible shape but he wondered if there would be something impressively compressed underneath it. The fabric didn’t seem to move or wrinkle at all.

She took the pair of them in as they stood next to each other at the drinks sideboard. She rested her gaze on him for a second longer while a fleeting frown passed her features.

“You are the army boys?” she asked in a voice that belied the accent of a little more common descent, contrasting just a bit with her fine presentation.

Greg stepped up, “Yes, please allow me to introduce myself, my name is Greg de Beers, this is my friend Keith Lorne who is working with your daughter on the army intelligence program.”

That was a little dangerous, assuming her to be the mother. But all else fitted.

“I am so sorry, my manners! Gentlemen, I’m Lucretia Copeland. Ricaronella will most probably be down later - I hope.”

That soft, last, part somehow summed it all. Greg was very sensitive to such signals and although he was no fan of Ricca, his heart went out to her now. And in doing so he was ignoring the dreadful name of the ‘lady of the house’.

“Do call me Lucy, guys. I’m not so for the formal. Ah, ah.”

Greg smiled friendly, which seemed to upset the raccoon. He remembered suddenly how Keith had told him how his face had 'too many muscles'. He adjusted his smile accordingly and found the old raccoonette return the smile. Next, the door was thrown open and a young raccoon entered.

"Dammit Mom! Where's my fuckin' phone!" he called in irritation, before noting them.

"Dzees! What kind of *freak* is that?"

Unfazed, Greg simply introduced himself and Keith again.

"You're an ugly motherfucker, you know that?"

Greg simply smiled, "I take it you are Ricca's younger brother?"

"Fuck off man, l..."

The raccoon dame cried in desperation, "Randy! Show some decorum, will you?"

"Mom!"

"I mean it! I will not have to tell your father again, Randy?"

Greg had a little trouble keeping from making a remark on that name and looked at the koala. Keith didn't like the remarks of the teenage raccoon at all, he saw. His friend had his fist clenched.

"Randy," Greg intervened, "were you by any stretch certain about all the things you just said to me?"

"Whatch-ya sayin'?"

"You just stated I would have done something about my mother, recall? My mother, as it happens is quite old. She was forty years of age when she was in labor with me. You honestly believe I would have a go at her?"

Randy thought about this a second, Greg's words filtering down like abalone before figuring this one out, "Figure of speech man, are you dumb or what? Chill out, man!"

"Figuratively speaking, no doubt?"

Greg noted he had two raccoons and a koala captured in his speech. That had not happened before. Besides, he wasn't used to being the center of attention like this. To make things worse, another pair of raccoons walked in, one of them loudly chatting.

"Mother? We *really* have to talk this over. Gabe doesn't want to change the door and I...oh, I'm sorry? What's this? National reserve?"

Mother Lucretia intervened, too late of course, but not entirely her fault.

"Gabriel, please have your wife pipe down a bit, we're having visitors and I don't want a scene."

Next, a young raccoonette sort of ran in, "Randy, you here? I've been looking for you all over the place!"

She took one look at the assembled group and decided this was interesting enough to stop whatever it was she was doing before.

"Randy? Having some party?" she asked her big brother.

"Search me, Cat. I'm lost with this getup," the brother scorned.

Lucretia tried once more to get on top of this.

"Randy! Cathleen! Out!"

"Yeah yeah, in a mo, mom."

The butler walked mostly silent, up to the old dame and said just loud enough for all to hear, "Young lady Ricaronella asks to be excused."

That was a setback! "Might I talk to her?" Greg tried.

"She asked to be *excused*, sir."

The bear left the assembly. Greg had the distinct impression he was an object of interest and only the butler had the decency to keep to his job. A moment later yet another raccoon walked in, to the chagrin of the two youngsters. Randy took his cue and walked off, pulling his girlfriend with him. The middle aged pair of raccoons didn't even try to hide their disdain of the new arrival. In fact, the lady pushed unfriendly to the newcomer saying, "so sorry, Pradesh, didn't see you there." She pulled her husband along and away from the assembly at a slow rate.

Greg wondered about the profession of the new arrival, the demeanor was so strange. Then he recalled Shirra'd said Ricca's husband was blind.

"Pradesh, please entertain our guests a moment, I'll be back in an instant. My apologies, gentlemen." and Lucretia left.

"Phew, that was the whole Copeland family?" Greg pondered under his breath.

"Yes, sir. Have we met before?"

The thick Indian accent clarified the name. Greg realized a showy presentation would not do here.

"Sorry, my name is Greg de Beers. I've worked with Ricca. Hi."

He held out a hand.

The raccoon missed his outstretched hand beautifully.

"You're Ricca's husband, aren't you?" he ascertained.

"Yes."

Greg felt at once that this Indian guy was definitely using a larger part of his brain than the rest he'd seen.

"How is she?" Greg asked making Keith suck in his breath.

"I'm surprised you ask that. Keith, is that you?"

"You know me?"

“No, but Ricca talks of you often. I hoped to make your acquaintance sometime.”

The raccoon held out a hand and Keith shook it.

“Are you,” Greg began, and then thought ‘why not’, and said “completely blind?”

“No, Greg. Officially I’m ninety percent blind and increasing. It behooves you, to be so candid.”

“Glad you think so. I’m here to apologize to Ricca.”

“Why?”

Greg sucked his fingertip. This blind raccoon indeed was much smarter so he took another approach. “Pradesh, you just scared all your exalted Copeland family members out of the room. That was interesting.”

“Indeed, Greg. But you’re evading my question. Did I scare you with it?”

“Scare is not the correct word, Pradesh.”

“What’s going on here?” Keith asked.

“Keith, Pradesh here is making more use of his faculties than the rest combined. They were scared to talk to him. Isn’t that great?”

“How can you know all this?”

“Use your ears and eyes. It shows. Trust me.”

“Greg is right. It is a shame he uses these talents to be rude to my beloved Ricca.”

Ouch. That was a direct hit.

“You are very much in love with her, aren’t you?” he asked Pradesh, forlorn. He hadn’t meant to be so mean to Ricca in the first place. It simply happened and Ricca took his jest so... strong?

“I can hear you’re sorry, Greg. I accept that, come we will go to my wife.”

“No need to wait for the alma mater of this nice family, I take it?”

“Right you are, Greg.”

“Guys?” Keith stumbled verbally, “I’m missing all the nonverbal communication and it’s not even visual!”

“Sub-channel communication, Keith. Just tone and loudness. Pradesh here is unusually good at it.”

“You are certain of your senses, Greg?”

“What an odd question.”

“Be that as it may, I have found my eyes deceive me.”

“Not anymore, aha?”

“An ill concealed attempt at humor to cover your uncertainty, perhaps?”

Greg mulled over that for a moment. Was he? Nah...

“I don’t think so.”

“Again your candor set you free. It is astounding the way you resemble the descriptions my Ricca has given of you.”

“Has she? Pradesh, I feel differently about her now that I have had a chance to see her family run past me in a continual state of bewilderment and rudeness. For her to help them out even if they’re like that... weird.”

“They are not as bad as they seem.”

“How does Ricca fit in? Why do they shun you?”

“Asking many questions robs me of taking the word.”

“I’m not what I seem, Pradesh. I think I am saved the visual misunderstanding in your case. For all the people I know, I am alone in the world. This world, as well as that of Shirra. You’ve heard about her too?”

“Do you think no one likes you?”

“Likes me?” Greg echoed, wondering if it mattered. Did it matter really? He did not want to get Keith in a predicament on his behalf. Why would he need liking, it only would result in hurt in the end! Look at what Amandine did to him. It was bad, and yet he would travel to the end of the world, and back if need be, for her sake.

The little smiling furry face of Amandine shimmered into a ghostly shape in the specs floating in the myriad colors of light-beams coming in through the stained glass panes up high in the hall they walked, while her high happy voice rang through his head, ‘yum yum’, he heard her say in her singsong way while nails ticked on the marble. And just as suddenly he stopped, gripping a paneled wall for support, as the ugly feeling of her almost dying in his arms passed by. It was a second, but it squeezed his heart.

“Are you all right, Greg?” Keith supported him. He leaned to his friend for a moment.

“I’m all right. It’s nothing.”

“Was that a bad spirit, or a good one, Greg?” Pradesh asked.

“What do you think!” he spat.

“You really want to know what I think?” the raccoon offered measuredly.

“No! I want to get to Ricca, tell her I’m sorry and leave this mad house!”

Damn!

“Greg?” Pradesh asked uncertain, “May I perhaps feel your face?”

“My face? What for?”

“I can’t see your face, but I wonder about it. Can I?”

Greg looked at the raccoon, a long and thin figure. Longer than Ricca, supple in moves. He looked at the little claw-tipped nimble black fingers at the side of this long figure. “With those?”

“You refer to my fingers? What else would I use to feel with, Greg? I won’t harm you, if you fear that.”

His anger evaporated at the friendly words of this relaxed near blind, long animal. Normally he would get mad if one tried to get under his skin this way, but not with Pradesh. He liked the guy.

“All right.”

The raccoon stepped up, gauged his distance to him and started feeling from his jacket up. While holding him with one hand, the fingers of the other carefully traced over his face, from his cheekbones to his ears, rounding them and on to his forehead.

Pradesh frowned and felt his ear again, and his hair, “You have a most... unusual visage, Greg.”

The raccoon stopped and seemed to be building an image.

“I’m not a beauty, if that’s what you mean.”

“Your white cat companion seems to be very much concerned about you. It is a good thing someone looks out for you. You step into things, methinks.”

“I had no idea she had told Ricca how she felt about me.”

“I do not believe she said precisely that. Ricca is a good listener.”

“Ha!” Greg laughed without mirth, “With this family you have to be, else you’d be driven over by the whole set combined.”

“You believe Ricca is the odd one out?”

“Sure! The rest is either law school, like the two brothers, or only interested in visual appearance, like the mother and the sister in law.”

“You are quick to condemn people to a certain niche.”

“I have found I am usually right about such things. It has saved my butt on many an occasion.”

“Wordy.”

“True.”

“What caused this exceptional attention to detail Greg, if I may ask?”

He sighed, looked at Pradesh who made an effort to look at him, failing to do so only just.

“To you, I am one human, in my world I am one of six and a half billion.”

Keith gasped as always when he mentioned that, Pradesh, in contrast, frowned, “That is many. It does not leave room for other species.”

“Nope, it doesn’t. There aren’t any other than humans but not all are of the same race. I for example am a colored person...” he stopped in his tracks and thought about that for a moment.

“...I’m what you would consider a ‘mix’. The social weight is about the same, I guess.”

“You are not fertile, then?”

He looked at Keith. This subject made the koala look at a painting, to escape notice.

“That is not it. It is not a cross-species thing, but a cross-race thing. I only meant to say: I don’t fit in with the blacks, or with the whites. It has followed me throughout life and made me... attentive.”

“You put it marvelous, Greg. But if that is the case, what makes you so abrasive towards Ricca? I’d think you would have room for the ‘odd one out’?”

He had no idea really. After seeing her family, he rather liked her for being who she was. “Until I had seen that lovely family, people whom she regards highly and supports at every turn and every moment, I thought her too limited in ability.”

“It is strange how you do not condemn her for her form, or looks, even if you call her names.”

“No.”

The raccoon felt for the banisters and ascended a pair of stairs.

“She is in the chapel; we will wait for her outside it.”

“Why is she considered ugly?”

“Greg!” Keith blurted in alarm.

“What man?” Greg defended, “I simply fail to see it. She’s fat, but can’t help it. She’s hardly eating anything and does not sit on her chair for more than five minutes in a row unless I ask her.”

“Pradesh is *married* to her, you’re being unbelievably rude! You can’t do this!”

“I sympathize with your view Keith, but Greg does not share your bear-references.”

“Indeed, I don’t,” Greg agreed, “To me Shirra is a cat, just another cat, and Ricca is a raccoon. Sure, I see her muzzle is warped. I hadn’t seen that ever. I think it... uh, cute? No forget that, I didn’t say that.”

“Greg, man, are you gay or what? Get normal.”

“Not that I know Keith, but so what if I were?”

Keith said nothing, but it was clear he felt gay people were not normal. Not by far.

“Here we are,” Pradesh announced and sat on a dark oak bench, affixed to the paneling.

“Say, Pradesh, for an Indian you have arrived at a most remarkable location.”

“Ricca and I met in India. She was on a mission,” the guy sighed with a smile, “...it was love at first sight. That is about ten years ago. I had still about ninety percent vision.”

“Hmm. I take it she didn’t change too much in the mean time?”

“Ricca retains more water now, compared to then.”

“I feel sorry for her.”

“Don’t, Greg. Ricca is a fighter and she will not easily let her spirit be crushed. That said, I will add that I’m afraid it is her fear for the disintegration of this family that keeps her on top of things.”

“I see.”

“Until you came along Greg, she would talk about Keith. Since then, I have heard all about you. You are intriguing her no end.”

“That’s lovely. How long do we have to wait?”

“You are not used to idling, are you?”

“I have ‘idled’ half my life away, Pradesh. Right now I need to get things going or else I will not get to my Amandine!”

“That would be your adopted daughter?”

“I didn’t adopt her!”

“How do you call it then?”

“I...”

He didn’t need to wait around here! He got up and pushed open the door to the chapel. Inside he found a room furnished like a tiny church. Five beautiful stained glass windows, below each he saw a graceful painted-in banner, reading ‘Luke’, ‘Paul’, ‘Peter’, and ‘John’. They were four raccoons, facing to the center window which was showing a yellow-white robed figure without a face, seeming to glow golden with the sun behind it. Instead of a face, there was a bright void, with two eyes. Kind eyes, Greg found. The shining hands of this Christ-figure were like human hands: no fur. In surprise he regarded the feet. Those were not visible, covered by the folds of the robe. Now *this* was interesting.

“Greg?” he saw Ricca, she got up from a bench near a cross on the little altar.

“It’s Jesus Christ...” he said softly, pointing to the central figure.

“Yes Greg, it is. Why do you ask?”

“He has no face, and...” he looked around, seeing a crucifix, “there is no Christ figure on that either?”

“No, there is not. You are familiar with the bible?”

Greg felt uncomfortable. He had long since decided to become an active non believer. That is, to believe strongly in the absence of God. He knew, deep in his heart, that it meant belief in God was there, but it did not keep him from actively denying the presence of a supreme being let alone the supposed interference of this power.

“Ricca? Could we go outside, please?”

“What makes you so uncomfortable?”

Her voice was relaxed, filled with concern. She achieved to keep him inside still. This place was quiet and serene.

“I don’t believe in God! He does not exist!” he said it too loud. Softly, he added, looking up at the indiscernible figure, “You hear me? I don’t believe in You!”

Ricca neared him and held his clenched fist.

“Why are you so angry at our Lord, Greg?”

“He let my father die! In front of my eyes! What kind of God deprives children of their father? You tell me!”

“Shirra told me your mother and you both escaped with your lives.”

“Fat lot of good that did! I endured years of agony at the hands of my peers in the boarding school. To top things off I had to find a very, very good friend of mine murdered, throat slit for no reason! Hysja didn’t have to die either. No Ricca, you need a whole different level of truth to convince me.”

“I feel you are still believing, deep inside. He will accept you too; you know that, if you only accept Him.”

She had opened his fist and held his hand flat on hers. Her hand felt cool, relaxed. Ricca's light brown eyes took him in. She was relaxed, but her eyes showed fatigue.

"Are you tired?" he asked, quietly.

She took her hand back and closed her eyes a moment. "Yes, I feel bad."

"How's your tail? I'm sorry I bit it."

"I should not have interfered, Greg. I had no right; it's one of my bad habits. To find you here, answers my prayers."

"That is weird. Your butler said you were inconvenienced."

"To show only how the Lord sometimes works in mysterious ways, Greg."

"Hallelujah," Greg thought, but held his tongue.

"Ricca?" Pradesh called from the door.

"I'm here, love." She walked to him and kissed him deeply.

"Your head feels hot, what ails you?"

"I have a splitting headache. Oh, hi Keith! Wow, you came too?"

She sure had a happy disposition for one with a 'splitting headache'. He'd seen her pain, it was real. What a wonderful girl.

"I worried Greg would not get to a good end, and he can't drive of course. I think I only just was able to keep him from attacking your family."

She looked around. "You met them?"

"Your mother, both brothers and their associates, the butler, and finally your husband."

"Isn't he the sweetest?"

She hugged Pradesh, who hugged her back.

"You are overdoing it a bit in the sweetness department, Ricca."

“I can’t contain myself around Pradesh, excuse me. So boys, what brings you here? Can I get you anything?”

“Some tea would be nice,” Greg said.

“Come, we’ll go to the kitchen. By far the best place in here anyway.”

Ricca was near giddy happy, to have them over. Greg was astonished. She darted off. “See you there, guys!”

Greg walked over to Pradesh. “Is she always like that?”

“Always, and it is why I love her so much. Come, follow me.”

“I come here, expecting to find a crushed Ricca with a grudge and find her overflowing with happiness with our presence? I can *see* she has an enormous headache!”

In a dark tone the raccoon noted, “It worries me, she *never* has a headache.”

Pradesh walked along the corridor to the stairs, before descending he waved them on. “Come, follow me.”

“I don’t know about you, Keith, but this is one successful mission. I’m dying for a cuppa!”

“Great,” Keith scoffed, “Tea.”

“No doubt with a biscuit. Yum, yum!”

Greg was in high spirits, and followed the long thin raccoon down the stairs and regarded Keith, “come on, drink some tea, have a chat and you’ll be back home well on time today. Maybe Ricca can drive me back?”

Pradesh answered, “She will Greg, you will see.”

## 60. Poison

Back at the compound, Greg eased out of the small car. “Thanks for the ride Ricca! See you tomorrow?”

Ricca massaged the sides of her head. The driving sure had taken it out of her, so Greg suggested, “You could come along so the doctor can give you a check up?”

With a little grunt, Ricca nodded and at once regretted the move, “I believe that is a good idea.”

After an arduous exit, Ricca closed the car leaning heavily on it and walked along. At the gate, the guards looked at them. They recognized him and Ricca, of course. One of them frowned at Ricca and stepped up, meaning to support her. “You all right, ma’am?”

Greg wondered about the whole thing and only was just in time to help ease the collapsing Ricca to the ground. “She’s hot!” he yelled, feeling her head strike his exposed arm. The other guards couldn’t suppress a very misplaced snigger and the other chastised him with a look and commanded, “Get the doctor idiot! She’s really *not* good!”

In less than no time, Greg found himself next to Shirra who was asleep. He looked at the doctor, busy in the intensive care unit, hooking up the unconscious raccoon. The grey cat had just told him that everything pointed to a serious bacterial infection. After the lioness had returned with test results, all had been checked. The data showed a very nasty bug in Ricca’s blood and the toxins released by this intruder were disrupting her thermostat as well as her basal body functions. The doctor was already certain the Aachen-visit was to blame because of the deteriorating infection on her leg. Greg wondered how he could be so uncertain.

He stood up and walked to the window to look at the stricken raccoon. The doctor and the lioness nurse both wore a suit to keep them from getting

the contagious bug, which apparently was present on her skin even. He and both the guards had been cleared.

“Great,” he said softly. This was certainly not going to increase the speed with which he needed to get to Amandine. And, as if to put a point on it, he heard Shirra stir behind him.

“Greg?” Shirra asked, softly, trying to sit up. She was weak still. The doctor had been right when he said it would take days for her to regain her strength. The nurse had only just cleaned her, before they wheeled Ricca in.

Greg went to Shirra and stood firm at her side. His presence would support her, he knew. Right now he needed her to get well, so he could leave... if it weren't for Ricca.

“I'm here Shirra,” he said softly. Funny, the condition of Ricca and her remarks had softened his feelings to Shirra too. He felt sorry for her to be like this. In a rare moment of care, he sat back down and held her hand.

She squeezed softly, “I love you Greg.”

He realized that he did like her more than he knew. Greg nodded slowly, “I like you a lot too, Shirra.”

She turned her head towards him and produced a little smile; the green eyes sparkled for a moment. Then she drifted off. He waited a minute before trying to disentangle his hand from hers.

The doctor exited Ricca's intensive care room.

“And?” Greg asked.

“I'm going to look at the additional test results, but ...”

“Yes?”

“This is not good. This thing is growing like mad, and for the sake of having tried, I have just thrown at it the last remaining, working antibiotic known to medicine. Unless some miracle happens...”

“How can she all of a sudden contract this bug?”

“It’s definitely yours Greg. Sorry.”

“What? How? You said it was the Aachen thing!”

“When you bit her... this particular bacterium, a strain of Staphylococcus Aurius lives in your mouth, I think.”

“And no one else got sick? This can’t be right. Think how many people I mingled with!”

“As long as you don’t bite anyone, don’t forget her body was already battling the infection on her leg.”

The cat doctor looked to the floor. “What your body does to withstand this sucker of a bug, I don’t know. It’s marvelous; you should be eaten alive by it for all I know.”

“You’re sure you haven’t any drugs left to give?”

With a sad shake of the head, the doctor said, “It’s all down to her. I have prepped all I can. I even thought of giving pure tri-phosphates, I don’t know what else to do.”

“Dammit you cat! Why not give her those tri-phos-thingies right now?”

The cat moved his hand onto Greg’s shoulder, in a deliberate move, and held it a second, tight, eyeing him. “See that drip she’s getting? If I set it higher I kill her for certain.”

Greg gnawed at his nails. How was he always killing people, and then the good ones at that? That one time he took a stance, that one time he decided to throw a punch, take a bite, he was killing someone, all over again. Though not dead technically, Ricca was at the moment near death.

The nurse got out of the IC as well and eyed him with disdain while explaining, “She can’t breathe for herself.”

The lioness nurse was typically blunt that way but Greg allowed her, instead taking the info as a confirmation of his doom, “Thank you, thank you very much.”

With an inaudible huff, the nurse left as well. Greg looked over his shoulder to Shirra, then back to Ricca. Two damsels, in dire straits, both unintended, and even if both invited their ailment, in a way, he hadn't meant for them to be like this. With a sigh he realized it wasn't the same because Shirra would be all right. The doctor had said so. According to the cat doctor Shirra had some sort of 'perfect' genome.

Perfect... Greg half lidded his eyes, thinking Ricca clearly had no such thing as a perfect genome.

Not perfect... "Bummer" he said to the room at large. It was about six PM, his stomach rumbled.

###

Greg stretched. Sleeping alone was good, but he kept dreaming of a little coyote that needed him. "No," he chastised himself, "a little coyote girl / need!"

He needed to see her, know she was okay, he needed to know badly! Frustration rose and his fist flew harmlessly into the mattress.

"I'm stuck here!" he managed through clenched teeth, "Fuck!"

A rain of fists hit the bed until he stopped for fatigue. Which was soon, way too soon. It brought to berth the statement of Keith once more, his friend had said he had no stamina. How could he hope to get to the citadel, or even fight his way out of that horse-man infested isle?

Greg felt the chubby flesh around his stomach between his fingers. "Fat ass!" he scolded himself.

Looking up he decided it was time for a walk, on a ramp, a few miles. See how far he could get. Work out; get well, get faster, better. A good goal!

The next two days consisted of the 'healthy' pickings of food Shirra would have selected, a quiet secluded place to eat together with Keith, a visit to 'the sleeping beauty and the witch' as the pair were unaffectionately dubbed on the grapevine, and of course exercise. A lot of exercise.

Shirra improved readily and continuously. She would be up and about in a few days. Ricca, in contrast, was merely 'stable', meaning she was dying unless a host of very unwholesome medication was dripping into her. It kept her in, for lack of a better word, a medical stasis, living because of resuscitation. Doc had said her brain was still active. Greg had understood well what 'still' meant.

Greg had taken it upon himself to tell her husband, had gotten out with Keith to collect the blind raccoon and brought him to her. The long thin raccoon could not physically reach her of course, but it felt important to him.

Afterwards, rather suddenly, Pradesh had broken down, crying, in the hallway. Greg had sat down next to him for support, but he simply missed something. It was as if the ability to feel was getting numbed, there was only room left for that little grey coyote girl. Even when Ricca's broken husband left, with nothing achieved, nothing in his power to change anything, Greg felt unmoved. The thought of that ugly family, waiting for that raccoon at his home sparked a bit of empathy. Pradesh would be at home without Ricca, she could not even be moved to another place because no hospital accepted this unknown strain of bacteria.

###

A few days later, Shirra got out of the bed. Greg told her of his training progress, "I can run for more than half a mile now!"

"That is good, how many kilometers is that?"

“Uh, about three quarters, I think.”

Shirra giggled, and righteously so! His stamina was pathetic, however her giggle made him feel better and he patted her shoulder. Her hand arrested his there, holding it in place, and she looked down to him, “I appreciate your support.”

Greg kept quiet, anxious for her next move. All of a sudden Shirra wrapped her arms around him, leaning on him and she sobbed, shaking with it. She cried seriously for a moment and then wiped her tears with the back of her hands so that the fur there stood in funny patterns before releasing him. She sniffed, “It’s nothing.”

Like hell, nothing! Shirra had never broken down like that, ever.

“Hormones?” he suggested.

“Yes,” she sniffed, “I guess,” and tried to regain her dignity.

Greg filled her in about the situation with Ricca. They talked about Ricca and her family while they walked the compound.

One day later, while he was working out, Shirra walked up and waited for him to get up. “The raccoon girl is awake,” she said simply.

“What?” he called in happy surprise. He ran to the hospital wing and found Ricca outside the intensive care.

“Easy!” the doctor warned him as he approached, holding Greg by his arm to stop him.

“She’ll be all right?”

“No Greg. She won’t; ever.”

“But look! She’s awake!”

“She’s deaf, and has severe liver damage. She’ll be on dangerous drugs for the rest of her life. That bug of yours is being fought, but it’s touch and go.”

He must have looked very crestfallen at that for the doctor tapped his shoulder, “Sorry, it is no better than that.”

“Doc, can she see her husband?”

“Sure, but keep the visits to a minimum.”

He noted Ricca looked dull, her fur tangled up here and there. On her head a thinned out patch was visible. “What’s with her fur?”

“I... don’t know, Greg. Her skin is really going bad. Here and there are pustules, eh, boils, with that bacteria-strain.”

The doctor left, having asked him again to keep away for a spell.

Shirra walked up, with a little puff, “You were going a little fast, Greg.”

He nodded to Ricca, “I worry about her. That ankle got chafed because I pushed her, then I bit her, you know?”

“Yes, I heard. She should not have intervened.”

“I should not have bitten.”

“It’s academic now. However, I must say I don’t understand why they did not prepare a dose of inhibitor for that particular strain. It’s so simple with the magnificent tooling set they have here.”

Something in Greg’s mind clicked.

“Whoa!” he held her at bay for no reason, “just a minute lady, you think you can mix something up to help her? You could?”

“Too late now, I’m afraid. The damage is done.”

“Isn’t there anything you can do?”

“Of course there is, but I would need to do some research into her physiology. I can’t tell upfront what the side effect would be.”

“Side effect? How bad can those be? Anything would be an improvement, I should think!”

“Greg, you really care so much about her that I spend the effort on her?”

Greg tried to keep calm, reminding himself Shirra simply regarded Ricca a lower form of life and not worth her time either way.

“I feel responsible, if that is what you mean. That raccoon was a happy person, now it’s a wreck.”

Shirra smiled, “You really have a large heart. I will start on this forthwith and it will be nice to show that idiot doctor savage how to treat a biological system with regard.”

“Eh? Savage?”

“Certainly, you really think anything he did made a difference for my situation?”

“I thought so, what are you saying?”

“His meddling made no difference at all.”

“How can you know this?”

“I can, my training was more than adequate to know this.”

“Whatever, we’ve not a minute to lose, methinks.”

“Indeed,” she agreed with a nod that would put a dictator to shame. Still moving slowly for the pain in her abdomen she went about the laboratory unit. Shirra collected materials throughout the ‘infirmary’ and went to see Ricca. Greg kept out of sight, and looked at her working; how she drew a tiny bit of blood in such a composed manner it was clear she’d done this before, comforting Ricca all the time. He followed her to the lab.

“Right,” Shirra announced, and started up the systems of the microscope unit and nano-scanner. Meanwhile she made notes on a tablet that was lying around and studied the images on the microscope as well as through the eyepiece, after which she fed the blood sample into the scanner.

“This one we’ll have a look at...” Shirra mumbled. Greg saw how she applied micro-manipulators and on the screen saw her collecting ‘things’ from the sample.

“What are those?” Greg pointed.

“We’ll see in a moment, because here is the magic of this place!” Shirra went to a large setup and opened a lid in it, lifting it up. Greg saw the ease with which she worked the equipment.

“You seem to know your way around this stuff, when did you learn that?”

“I’ve been experimenting here, *a lot*. This is an easy task, even more so with this,” she tapped the machine lovingly. “Now if you’ll excuse me please, I do not mind you looking in, but for now I prefer to concentrate on this, is that okay with you?”

He nodded and she smiled, the image of which evaporated in a second. He wondered if the feeling he had was that of looking onto a ‘mad scientist’, seeing her active like this. She took a seat at the machine and manipulated the modern user interface with ease.

Behind him, he suddenly heard the lioness nurse skid and he looked over his shoulder. “She’s at it again!” the nurse muttered and made a bee-line for the doctor’s office. With pad in hand, the doctor rushed in and he started making notes and pictures at once.

“Do you mind?” Shirra asked peeved. This caused the doc to retreat like a docile pupil, giving her the space she demanded.

And so, Shirra worked, to an audience of three. It didn’t take long before, while settings were adjusted, images appeared on a large screen. Shirra made more notes which were copied verbatim, and used the tablet to model a molecule. Time rushed past, Greg was overwhelmed with the speed Shirra combined and collected information. From time to time, the doctor got a copy of Shirra’s design thrown to his tablet, forming a trickle of information that may well have been the doctor’s life line.

With another nice grabbing motion, the finalized molecule model appeared on the large screen and with tapping and dragging Shirra moved it close to the structure on the screen. She was probing something, obviously, but the amount of variables was staggering.

“Almost,” she said and continued on her tablet.

“Harder than I thought,” she mumbled and kept trying. Three onlookers held their breath until she tried again.

And again.

The fifth attempt made her sit back in content satisfaction.

“See, Greg?” she said, reducing the doctor to a whiff of air, “An inhibitor, I am certain this will totally disrupt the communication between these bacteria. One hour of modeling... and to get this stuff, clean, at the push of a button!”

She got up and walked to an even more impressive setup with many transparent little hoses and vessels. This, she programmed quickly; the doc hastened to copy the settings, and fed it the molecule data she’d designed. Finally a screen with a start button appeared, including a time estimate.

“Oh, I was afraid of this. It’ll take several hours to synthesize.”

“Is that bad?” Greg wondered.

“More waiting, but I’m still awed by this thing,” she nodded towards the hoses-apparatus, “the best machine of this lab.”

“What is it?”

“It builds almost any molecule to order, within limits. The one next to it even creates enzymes but its power is not understood by a certain overgrown wild cat doctor. Yet that machine is what we’re going to need this time! Hush now, and look closely.”

Did she just talk seriously demeaning about the doctor? Right to his face?

“How interesting,” he thought as he noted the doc was bent on getting the data and process down.

To make good use of the time, Shirra took her molecule model and started comparing and trying it, with a large number of images that had in the meantime been retrieved from the other machine, using her identification parameters. Casually, Greg grabbed the data-glove next to the system, and used it to move the molecule.

“How did you do that?” Shirra asked alarmed.

“I think this is a data-glove, here, you try it on like this and...”

Shirra gave a little shriek of happiness and looked at her hand in wonder, “It’s getting better all the time! I even get feedback from the interactions!”

“Is that good?”

“It’s magical! If only I had known this when...”

Greg wanted to ask when what, but she ‘shsh’-ed him. Shirra sat, moving her hand, noting results on her tablet in parallel, until with one structure on the screen she convincingly said “Aha!”

A triple “Aha?” was heard from the public.

Ignoring it, Shirra explained, “I thought so. It explains her skin condition too. Bear with me, Greg. I’m going to add some stuff here; I’m on home ground now.”

“You are?” Greg asked mystified.

“Sure! It’s your follicle-anti-stimulus. What a vector to accept, stupid bug. And then to see its effect on Ricca. Singular.” With a shrug she went to work.

Greg understood ‘follicle’, it had to do with hair. His hair? Anti? Ah well, as long as Shirra was happy he had hopes for the raccoon dame.

From there on, the process of designing and testing went on for hours. Relentlessly, Shirra kept working. The doctor and the nurses took turns in tracking her actions. Every time the doctor returned from a break, he was

humming consent from time to time as she worked. It was funny that they were not even mad at her for working with their equipment. The weird thing was their respectful distance. As one would do, watching a master at work.

At some point he overheard them, “She’s nailing this thing I tell you,” the doctor whispered to the lioness, who agreed, nodding. Both were smiling! It was a feat, considering he knew for a fact that that lioness had a serious dislike for Shirra. To find her admire the white cat now...

Then, at the end of the day, Shirra wiped her eyes, announcing, “Tomorrow, I continue. Tonight the machines will produce the required precursors for the enzyme synthesis.”

She yawned.

Carefully the doctor asked, “Can I use your programming, Shirra? I’d refer to you of course.”

Uninterested, she regarded the doctor. “It’s not mine. It’s the result of Ricca’s physiology so you may do what you will with it.”

Unfazed, the doc went on, “You are making a supreme anti biotic, aren’t you?”

Her head a little tilted she agreed, “A targeted agent is being synthesized. That was one hour of work. It’s being made in there,” she pointed to the machine on the lab table, “as we speak. While this here,” now pointing at the large screen, where she’d been busy all the time, “is me trying not to *kill* that raccoon.”

“Can I...” the doctor asked, with little lights in his eyes locked on Shirra’s tablet.

“Certainly, here are my notes. Have a look.”

Shirra got up from her chair and clamped onto Greg’s arm for support. She was dead beat.

“Come Shirra, bed time.”

In response, she leaned to him with a little purr, while they walked out of the hospital wing.

## 61. Insomnia

Shirra slept like a log, unmoving to a degree it was almost scary, but she felt warm and was breathing softly. Wistfully he whispered, “I could use a little of your sleep,” to the white hairy mass in the bed next to him.

Since it was no use trying like that, Greg sat up, massaged his temples and supported his head in his hands, leaning on his knees. Today he had seen Shirra ‘at work’; she was –in her own words- functioning at fifty percent. By contrast he felt like a useless, incompetent, aggressive, and poisonous, all over dangerous nobody. He did not fit in here, wasn’t supposed to be here even.

Would there really be a higher form, one frowning on his presence here? One that had fun by sending little messages like the situation Ricca was in now, for example? Chagrined, Greg clenched his fists whispering, “I don’t believe in You, You know that, don’t you?”

He got up, dressed quietly although he doubted a howitzer was capable of waking Shirra right now. Through the quiet hallways he walked straight to the setup, passing the single night-guard with a mutual nod.

The large room was quiet, for want of something to do Greg initialized the system and selected the same program used last time and ran it. A sizzle-like sound erupted from the setup signifying a failure to execute his request. After a lot of searching he found several disconnected service leads, marked with a yellow label ‘lock out tag out’, indicating maintenance. At the setup he wondered the year he was living in now, about 2025. He had started out from 2010. Cally had never tried to nail the time thing, had she?

He tapped the setup mulling over the time thing when a thought came to him... hold on for a sec... Cally *had* tried!

Greg blinked, thinking so loud his mouth overflowed with a whisper, "Tried?"

No, not tried. Cally had succeeded, having gotten Maria and Tabitha back through two disjunctive singularities! Greg's head swam with the equations describing just one singularity, where the four dimensions of time and space intertwined in a fifth of the singularity's existence.

And Cally had solved not only that thing, but since it apparently wasn't enough of a challenge to her, she'd, on the side, solved two of the things. Her solution must have been a generic one, knowing her! So Greg's mind sparked with energy and he sat down, reading Cally's notes. There had to be an answer in there. An answer, explaining why he was able to move from one parallel universe to the other and all of them kept perfectly in sync. As Greg read the equations, he felt how he immersed into his 'mathematical' world. A feeling he had not had for a long time. The equations formed structures, square or angled but always fitting. Anything amiss, he could spot unerringly. Reading and thinking he reached, in a suitably detached state of mind, halfway through the treatise of his professor, the small meeting room next to the control panel for the setup. Notes appeared on his pad, scribbles recognized and reformatted, he started to combine the temporal parts of the equations. It was easy going, with Cally's work it always was. She was so precise and careful. The only problem was the large amount of superfluous, obvious steps in between the equations. If he read over those, it was palatable. A noise distracted him now, it was his stomach rumbling and churning. He checked his watch: four in the morning. The guard at the gate had been replaced by another and Greg tried hard to figure out what kind a critter it was. For starters, he was sure it was a she or, he decided amused, a he with a very pronounced breast area. The species was, for all he could tell, squirrel-ish. The black hairs on that face hinted of a different background, as did the missing tail. New on the job, he decided, as she (hey, a light voice)

asked for his card and wrote his name down. The way her eyes lingered on his face, in a growing state of disbelief underscored how new she was.

In fact, she kept staring at him, at his face.

“Never seen a human?”

“A...? N... Uh, no.”

“Never mind, I’ve not had the pleasure yet to gaze upon a black tailless squirrel-ish person either.”

The grumpy reply-gaze was enough of an answer. Anyway, he sped to the vending machine for a set of candy bars and a coke. Eating the rather poor substitute for a meal, he passed her again; her eyes glued to him as they would to a very ghastly wounded yet living victim on the street that you don’t want to look at yet can’t help yourself. Kind of like watching a horror movie, Greg mused and he stopped to turn this way and that.

“You’re welcome to feel me, if you dare,” he teased her.

“Really?”

“You’d be the first around here to actually dare. You could impress your friends.”

She tentatively reached for his face but her hand went past his cheek. He felt her touch his ear and saw her shudder. Swallowing, Greg bit another piece of the candy bar, did so without losing any crumb of the (according to the wrapper) ‘sumptuous crunchy butter-treat’ that was mostly sticky and sickly in taste. As he carefully lowered the bar from his mouth while deftly moving the bits and pieces on his lips inside, he noted this also got her looking.

“Fuwwy eh?” he asked around the not-so-sumptuous treat, chewing, “eawting withouww aw muwwle!” and with a brisk walk went to his equations. He’d been deterred long enough and felt he was arriving at answers at long last.

Indeed, after a lot more writing, scrolling the board contents he'd proceeded on from his pad, and adding yet more, he started putting in assumptions for his mass. He wasn't too sure, but mass would be in there. It felt as if it made sense. Now he found new derivatives linking his gut feeling to the results. There had to be some sort of 'offset' in time, one he had created himself by going through and creating that singularity at his first transition.

A thought hit him. He placed all his transitions in one super set and stood looking.

"You stupid idiot," he scolded himself softly, since it was plain now. And it explained his little trip 'home', with Ricca, perfectly. Only by going to and back together had kept time balanced. One could go somewhere and return, but not change the whole thing. Still, it was exactly what Cally had done.

"How?" he grumbled, not understanding. Only with colossal effort could Cally have been able to return Maria to her own time while keeping him out.

"Wow," he said in total admiration. Since he didn't understand a bit of it, now, it meant he *had* to return *with* Shirra or they would get another time offset, hundreds of years was nothing.

Aside from his failure to grasp how Cally had pulled it off, the thing that was really baffling him was how Cally could have achieved the transfer of that husband of Maria. That made no sense at all. From all of this he could derive though, one certainty. The outcome of these equations would *not* have brought him to his own universe. It didn't fit. Had he been transported there *alone*, a small chance, but together with Ricca that was simply impossible. Or at least: one to infinity.

The remark of the guard, Wolfgang came to mind. The old guy had requested Ricca come along. He had not been surprised to see she was a raccoon, had he? Now what had he said exactly... something about her being a 'full raccoon'. But that would mean this particular Wolfgang-the-guard was

familiar with humanoid animals. Greg tapped his head in realization. That universe he called ‘home’ was *not* his. In that case...

He adjusted the equation and smiled happily. Indeed. That made sense. A universe much like his own, but not exactly so. A universe with a Cally, and a Greg. Another Greg, would they be alike? It would also mean there were two near identical forms of Cally in the multiverse. He’d found the programming Cally had used and that had been exactly like... no no no. Wait a moment, most of that software was *here*, he’d only used the gateway. It did not mean that particular ‘instance’ of ‘Cally’ had succeeded.

How big had the chance of succeeding been, in the first place?

“Greg!”

He looked over his shoulder, Shirra stood in the door frame. She didn’t look too well; her fur was not nearly as well groomed as it was wont to. “Are you...?” he walked over to her, really happy with his written achievements on the white board behind him.

“Greg! I was *so* worried, I thought, I...”

He could read her emotions easily, “I would not leave you behind, Shirra.” That said he knew it also was impossible to leave without her. But not saying that served many purposes now. Indeed, she smiled, comforted.

“Look at all that work!” she exclaimed and reinforced with happiness strode to the board. Scrolling it, zooming, “what an effort! You’re incredible, Greg!”

“No Shirra, *you* are, if you can help Ricca.”

She came to stand next to him. “You realize there is a chance I will get her worse off?”

“In what way?”

“It’s difficult, Greg, I miss books, information and knowledge in general. I could overlook something. And it is still the physiology of a complex system.”

“Would not that doctor spot that?”

She giggled. It was a delightful clear and amused sound, and meant she was certain it was a joke.

Right, not the doctor then, “Could you not run a trial?”

“Greg!” as his remark made her realize something, “Of course! I could, I will try at once. Come!”

## 62. Horse around

“I was so afraid, Greg, really,” Shirra said while she worked with the cells she had retrieved from Ricca with permission of the sick raccoon. With one remark, gone was the mighty scientist who understood all there was to know about the functions in a human, or otherwise, body. This was her frail ego when it came down to him.

He told her again, “I would not leave you behind, Shirra. Don’t you worry.” Hoping to keep her focused, he bent down to her as she sat at the microscope, and kissed her on her head, resisting the urge of spitting from the hairs. Shirra looked up with her nice green eyes. They were wide with admiration and love.

Greg swallowed a lump in his throat. For the first time ever he felt a pang of guilt for not being frank with her. Luckily, she returned to her work, looking into the microscope so he better not disturb her. Greg looked up as the lioness nurse walked in, followed by Pradesh and two brothers of Ricca. He had not thought they would care enough! Pradesh had suggested they liked Ricca a lot, but he had waved the notion aside. Now they stood, tall and glowering.

“I think it should work Greg,” Shirra announced, getting up, “for the next hour I’ll let this brew and we’ll see.”

“Have some rest, Shirra. It’ll do you good.”

“I will,” she nodded, “see you soon.”

She went to their room, leaving him free to approach the raccoon family who seemed to wait for her departure. Indeed, when they deemed her out of earshot the two brothers growled supposedly mean.

“Bastard!” the younger brother said through clenched teeth, taking a menacing stance. Greg was not impressed at all. The older brother and Pradesh coaxed the guy to release his hateful stance. Unperturbed, Greg walked up to the young raccoon, “listen, I am sorry this happened. I can’t undo this. You gain nothing by getting mad at me. But if you like to be mad, be my guest, you’ll have to get in line though.”

That said, he explained to Pradesh, whose mental capacity surely capped the brother’s combined wit, Shirra was trying to come up with a cure. That gained Greg the ears of the brothers at long last. The nurse, judging all this to be too enthusiastic, interrupted them and guided him away from them for a spell.

“You idiot!” she whispered dangerously loud, “What if it does not work? For all I know we can’t give her a shot of that medicine, it’s not tested, it’s dangerous.”

Up close, the lioness sure had some impressive snappers but Greg stood his ground.

“And, what does the doc think?”

“I speak his words!” she hissed, “thanks to you I now have this lot on my hands for the remainder of the day! Why don’t you just go eh? This *whole* base would be better off.”

Greg shook his head just so, “You are wrong there.”

“Wrong? How can I possibly be wrong on *that*?”

“You think just this installation would benefit? I think this whole *world* would benefit.”

“You... oh, I see,” she huffed, “Words again. Nice. Just be sure you take that white queen with you, think you can do that?”

A wistful smile pulled at the corners of his mouth, “I have to, or I will end up in the wrong world.”

She smiled, crossed her arms over her chest, pressing it flat. “Good. Please don’t try to encourage that family any further. Deal?”

Greg made a locking motion on his mouth, with a throw-away of the key.

The lioness nodded and directed him to the raccoons to convey his sincerest wishes for Ricca to get better. “Or as much as is possible,” he thought on his way to the ‘sweat-room’.

###

After an hour of working out, Greg joined Shirra to see the results of the test. It was great. The doctor had inspected the data minutely, concluding, “I give this a seventy percent chance.”

“Optimist,” Shirra chided, “anyway, I suggest I apply this now.”

The doctor’s hand travelled halfway to interrupt Shirra but her frown cancelled the very notion of stopping her. Instead he said weakly, “You realize that by giving that to Ricca, you are violating protocol and laws?”

With a crooked smile, and boy can a cat like that smile crookedly, Shirra informed him, “They do not apply to me.”

The doctor fought back from his corner. “Let me put it another way, if it works badly, you had best get the hell out of here.”

“I planned that anyway, doc,” Greg put in and followed Shirra who walked to the IC unit and emptied her syringe in the infusion of Ricca, who was sleeping, and stood back.

“Right.” She announced, “Next check: tomorrow.”

“Are you mad?” the doctor exploded, “you can’t very well leave her to her own devices!”

“How presumptuous, to think I will wait at her bedside. You are much mistaken, my dear common cat. I will use my time to prepare for departure. Coming, Greg?”

Greg would like to prepare for their departure, he should, but at the same time he wanted to know about Ricca. He saw the grey cat doctor nearing his boiling point.

“You just call me, the minute, no the *second* she changes, how about that?”

“You bet!” the doctor replied angrily.

###

“That should do it.”

Shirra agreed. They stood with their full kit and all measures in place, it occurred to Greg that they had no idea how fast they were in this getup.

“We ought to try a run like this.”

“Down the hall?”

“No, I’ll race you to the setup!”

She won, but only just. They stood panting. Of course her blood levels still weren’t normal but Greg was amazed to see her stamina.

“Heavy... stuff.”

“Very... much... so.,” she agreed.

They both unloaded heavy items next to the ramp. Greg checked his watch and announced the timing, “two more hours.”

“I propose we have a good meal. Given the plan it might be a while.”

“Indeed!” Greg puffed.

“Take calories, Greg. You should eat to your heart’s content.”

“Really?”

“I do not believe we will get our hands on anything fresh for a while.”

“It’s an ocean,” Greg mumbled but he agreed easily and they went to the mess hall.

Over a stack of burgers, Greg looked confounded at Shirra’s meal. “Don’t you care for meat at all? I never see you eat that.”

“Meat is for commoners, the luxury of deciding for non-meat foods is my prerogative.”

“Vegetarian, is the word.”

“It entails what?”

“Means you’re a nutcase who doesn’t eat meat due to some sort of conviction. I must say though that never in my wildest dreams would I ever have conceived of the notion you just brought forward. Still nuts in my book.”

“Food is supposed to be wholesome. The fatty material you eat will sustain you but they are all expensive to break down.”

“So?”

“You’ll get tired for digesting it. Your body isn’t set to do that effectively.”

“I shouldn’t eat this? Just now you said I could!”

“Before long you will have adrenaline to serve you. Rest assured I would not steer you to such dishes if I would think it bad for our chances of unscathed arrival at the citadel.”

“Good.”

He wolfed a burger down and stopped when he encountered her one-eye-brow-raised stare.

“I would advise you to chew a bit though, Greg, really, it will be better.”

“Hmm,” he nodded, chewing.

It was quiet in the mess hall and the arrival of a group sparked interest for the few eaters present. Greg turned in his seat, chewing, as he recognized the voice of the cat doctor. He swallowed and noted to no one in particular, “What have we here?”

Shirra studied the group. Greg saw the cat talking with grand gestures to a giant snow white husky or shepherd dog, difficult to say. Both wore the white clothing of their trade. “Seems our doctor has interested his colleagues, you reckon it has to do with your inventions?”

“A white dog,” Shirra said, somehow enthralled.

The cat doctor spotted them and hastened over, keeping his coffee shielded in the dash to their table, with the giant dog in tow.

Shirra nearly got a fright as the white dog neared.

“This is my good friend Hubble, he is professor in pathology at the hospital downtown, let me introduce the human Greg and the white cat lady from the other dimension Shirra.”

“How do you do,” Shirra said icily, “as you can see we are in the middle of a good bye meal and I would not keep you or your *esteemed* grey cat friend.”

Greg wondered at her reaction. Here was a white dog, and still something was off? Greg shook the offered hand, and saw the two doctors get down next to them with their coffees.

“Shirra,” doc began, “please let me congratulate you on the wonders you have done for me, my patient, and this world in general.”

Shirra munched on her ‘nut and nutmeg casserole’ meal, happy to not answer, Greg saw.

The dog looked at him, in that by now familiar inquiring stare, “You are welcome to feel my skin, if you dare,” he invited the white dog. Funnily, he noted one blue and one brown eye. “You’re a husky, aren’t you?”

“Certainly, mister human, well met I say. Madam Shirra, I concur with my friend here on the status of your work. Is there anything we might offer you to consider prolonging your stay with us?”

Shirra checked with Greg, to see if she should and a simple and short message passed in between them, it spelled ‘no’. He clearly saw her relief at that. She cleared her muzzle, swallowed and turned a little to regard the white dog. She had to crane her neck.

“You have an off color eye, sir doctor.”

Ah, that apparently had thrown her off her cloud nine feeling just now, Greg noted with interest.

“A trait of my kind, as you will no doubt be aware my good lady. I implore you for the good of all sentient beings on this planet: stay! The wealth and fame you may find in your immediate reach is indescribable!”

Shirra spent one word on this. “Wonderful.” She took another spoon of her casserole.

“I have the feeling the lady is not too interested in your offer,” Greg said, unable to keep his sardonic tone out. He leaned back in his seat, to take in the reaction of both doctors.

The prof tried again. “Have you any idea how many people you have saved with the agents you have developed in the span of a mere day, my lady?”

This was downright groveling and that for a supposedly esteemed professor. Both were clearly over the moon. Greg got the distinct impression of seeing a child with a new toy, about to be taken away. In fact, doctor cat had seen this coming as he was rather relaxed. Doctor dog wasn't though for he truly believed he had something of interest for Shirra. Besides that, it was clear that her physical appearance was also enticing to the dog, given the way the blue and brown eyes kept following her moves in that tell-tale way. Greg had to admit that, even for an animal, Shirra was very well mannered. It sort of radiated off her, 'here is one who is socially refined'. Out of nowhere the word 'royalty' appeared in his head.

To his mounting disbelief, the dog kept offering grand rewards, including the suggestion of a Nobel Prize.

"You are keeping us from our food." Shirra concluded after the rant.

"I told you, she wouldn't."

Greg tapped the cat. "And, how is Ricca?"

The cat blinked before he answered rapidly, "She is fine. No! She is more than fine, she is up and about and her lymphocyte count is stabilizing already. It is incredible! In fact," the doc pointed, "here she comes now."

Bewildered, Greg looked in the direction of the check-out where a family of raccoons surrounded Ricca. She looked haggard still, but walked, smiled and was hungry. A pole with bags for her infusion followed her along, offering support.

"Excuse me, Shirra," Greg said and got up. The younger brother was again kept in check by the other males and he sought contact with Ricca. She appeared indeed to be stone deaf, and gave a shriek as he did touch her, rattling her tray which was caught with dexterity by her older brother.

"Greg!" she said loudly. Pradesh softly implored her to keep the volume down, waving his hands up and down.

"Greg," she said again, in a more decent volume.

What could he say now? She wouldn't hear him. "I'm sorry," he said, standing before her. He hugged her a second. She returned his hug fully and kept him at arms' length. "The lord blessed me with you around, I will recover, you will see!"

Pradesh placed a hand on his shoulder. "Greg, you are not the bane you think you are. Open your heart and you will find all the good things you did are there to see."

"Sorry, Pradesh, I know what I see. Every world I reach it gets worse. I must go home lest I destroy billions of lives."

"Only one force in the universe has that power, and that force loves us, not hates us."

The two brothers seemed to acknowledge this and closed their eyes in a short prayer, as did Ricca despite her deafness.

The next sentence he spoke slowly and deliberately. "I will leave you now, Ricca. Live long and prosper."

She laughed, seeming to get the drift of his remark, or possibly recognizing his quote. The family progressed to a table where Ricca started to eat. She looked thin, of course, but differently so!

As he sat down by Shirra again, he noted the dog was still trying to convince Shirra. Clearly not the type to listen, or not used to a rebuke, whatever the case, Shirra took it stoically.

"Shirra?" he butted in, cutting short the umpteenth plead of the dog.

"Yes, Greg?" she said, her muzzle half filled with chewed casserole still.

"Ricca seems fine, she's deaf and her skin is a tapestry of boils. I think she has not been so repulsive to me yet."

"I clearly explained to you her skin would be a problem."

"You knew!" the dog exclaimed, as if hit by lightning.

“Sure,” Shirra said off hand, “It’s in my notes, had you taken a second to read through them you would have known. Now, I will not assume you are a charlatan but if you keep this up I have no choice but to consider you a disgrace to science. Apart from that I’m sorry your parents saw fit to let you live.”

This took the wind out of the sail of the dog doctor. He sat with an open muzzle, clearly at a loss to reply something fitting.

“I beg your pardon?” he uttered at last.

“Don’t look at me so innocently, that affliction would be more than enough for *any* proud parent to do away with you.”

“I say?” he said dumbfounded, looking from Greg to the cat doctor, both shrugged. Greg simply said, “She’s from a place where that is a very hard truth.”

“Come, Sir Hubble,” the cat doctor invited his colleague, “we should have another look at the results of this morning’s tests and the lady’s notes.”

The white dog was guided away by the grey cat in a state puzzlingly unfamiliar to him; Greg watched them go and concluded, “I think I have eaten enough.”

“Me too,” Shirra agreed, “and I fear more of that sort of interest would make me sick.”

“How so? I thought he was interested in your scientific prowess?”

“If only, did you see how he looked at me? This is where the phrase ‘undress with eyes’ comes from Greg.”

“Ah, and I never do that?”

“No, you have never done that. Of all the males in this base, you once more show how the human race is far superior in even such aspects.”

The whole human race? “Ah,” Greg said lingeringly, “and Wolfgang, the guard at the Aachen University was less superior, I suppose? He is a white human at that.”

Shirra shrugged, “He had not ever seen a raccoon, you said. I would not find that off beat.”

They delivered their trays to the cleaning station and left for the setup.

“You really meant that, about the multi-colored eyes?”

“Of course. You would not accept that either, I’m sure?”

“It means nothing to me Shirra. If you would have had a black spot on your tail I would see you the same as I see you now.”

“Oh Greg, you’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” he said. It was better not to set her off, right before leaving.

First he inspected the progress of the ‘world equation’, it was being converted and every step was checked against the quantum computer in a simulation.

“Nearly there!” he yelled excited to Shirra, unaware he was yelling about right into Keith’s ears.

“Ow! My ears!” Keith pulled the ear-shells flat in mock pain. When he’d released them, Greg tried to give one ear a tap, to make it twitch. Keith was faster and stayed his hand. “It’ll be a cold day in hell when you achieve that, Greg, believe you me.”

“Indeed? I find it *is* chilly, today, don’t you?”

“Don’t mock my ears, or anyone’s for that matter. You would find sympathy nonexistent, get it?”

There would be another chance for his hobby, Greg decided and went to join Shirra. They helped one another into their gear. The bullet proof vest and plates on the legs and arms were not too heavy at first, but after ten minutes you began to feel them with every move. So they were the last parts to go on before the packs.

“You’re all set. Test!”

Shirra fired the one second burst they’d calculated would be available to them upfront.

“Is your tablet tuned?” she asked for the hundredth time.

“Yes.”

“Phone in the pack?”

“Yes.”

He felt the backup tablet and the adjusted phone. He would be prepared for real this time around. Keith helped them, checking his pack and added the final covers, helmets and auto-adjusting blinds.

Finally, he placed the mini rocket-launcher on his shoulder.

“It’s the right way around this time, Greg.”

“Ha, ha,” Greg managed.

Barry appeared at the doorway to the bunker, looking down he called “Ready to go?”

“Yes! Sir!” Greg said loudly.

Barry walked down to stand next to them. “Don’t forget the tactical advantage you have. I estimate a seventy percent chance.”

“I thought fifty-fifty would be near the mark,” Keith commented dryly.

“Thanks man,” Greg returned grumpy, “I needed that. Assuming we get to the right universe in the first place.”

“There are many people in this base who would shy away from such an undertaking!” Barry went on, “Hot LZ, heavy odds. I gotta say, you have balls Greg, you too miss cat.”

Barry tapped his beret and blinked.

Greg eyed the badger and the koala. This was too good to resist.

“Final hug, gentlepeople? Get ready, Shirra.”

“You too!” he yelled to the pack of privates at the other end, who were aiming at the unthinkable that might come through in reply to their transition. Of course, it could as well be their weight in gold given the clever equation they were using.

Shirra nodded, and took a stance like a speed skater ready for the sprint.

Greg took a step to the long badger and koala and reached for them, they bowed down a little in response. Tap! Tap! That was two ears.

“Why you!” they cried in unison but he retreated and dove into the setup, pulling Shirra along.

## **63. How to snatch a satellite**

Two white Hunnuny sat on the floor in silence, around their bowls of rice. One slurped his seaweed soup noisily. It was a small room, a meditation cell with unadorned concrete walls and a narrow window high up. Just how they liked it; had demanded it at the cost of concrete more suitable for military works.

“Amazing,” said one.

“Indeed,” agreed the other, “I’d never believed Tekwu capable of this.”

“Yep, smart.”

One sigh, quickly followed by another sigh.

"We're doomed," one said to change the subject.

"Hmhm. No other word applies."

"We only get him madder, no matter what we try."

"It's not as if we're not getting anywhere. The infuriating thing is he seems to know that."

"Yes, why else did he get us the control system from the vault"

They looked at each other.

"Yeah, he didn't have a choice, mister hoity-toity all mighty not so benevolent leader."

"The ever incongruent Chiral."

A pair of sniggers, nods and the agreement that, "he wouldn't even know what we'd be saying."

Their woolgathering was broken by the arrival of tea. As was their wont, they accepted this with the minimum acknowledgement they spared for the feeble support staff.

"You're right though, bro," one said after they saw the slave depart, "Chiral and his stupid war."

Nodding, the other fulminated against the limits imposed on them, "It's stopping science, according to history the one thing to spur development is war. Trust Chiral to disagree with 'historee'."

"Uhuh, not with the mad majesty at the top."

"Then again, to find the stupid thing actually does work. Bit unexpected, I'd say, even if matching with theory."

"We'd be dead if we told him."

The two nodded, in the silence of the room. They sipped some tea.

"The black guy is beginning to bug us too."

"Yeah, Djenghis is doing real weird things."

"He shouldn't have kids. How did he do that? It's not normal."

"It's not natural. You don't go and make kids if you're officially not suitable. Simply not done."

"Both should listen to the inner circle. There's a bunch who understand our need for scientific research."

"In the end, it's Tekwu who got lucky, but then to wind up with such a nutcase as the black guy."

"Still, we've been spared a nightmare. Imagine, it could have been the dear brother's."

The two whinnied softly in their chuckle.

"We'd be in some real bad weather then."

"Spare me."

They resigned to meditation and sat in the gloom, finding their peace for a while until both flew upright as they recognized a set of hoof-falls in the hallway.

Chiral burst in; he flicked the switch of the light and stood, rather looming despite his length until the twins were ready to face him. Although, in all fairness, no one was ready to face Chiral these days.

Chiral eyed the one and then the other brother, pinning either with his spirit-enhanced stare so they felt ripped apart.

"You've missed some updates, seems."

The twins eyed one another and said nothing.

"Ahrgh! Don't do that!" Chiral exploded, "keep that up and I really am going to separate you two. Clear?"

The twins knew it was an empty threat but then again, Chiral was volatile and neither had the wish to be away from the other. For any period of time.

"You wouldn't be helped with that," one said, happy to have a subject that didn't involve satellites.

"Don't play games with me," Chiral grumbled low key and it was as if the room vibrated with that voice, "the topic is space lasers and not your separation."

"So, ask," the other twin invited with an air that could put a baby to shame in the department of innocence. For good measure, the brother fluttered his lashes at Chiral.

Chiral puffed a little, staring them down. At once the fun was gone and both felt an inexplicable weight bearing them down.

"Warm here, don't you think?"

They were sweating.

"Must be all those volcanoes here," Chiral mused and took freely from the spirit on the island.

"Ask!" the twins blurted as one.

Chiral lifted the pressure. "The thing is working, right?"

Nods.

"Why didn't I hear this before?"

"The screen is dead and we've been unable to complete a replacement design because of all the stupids. The project is locked."

"Well, unlock it. You're the wizards!"

"Um, really locked, Chiral."

"I begin to repeat myself here, un-lock it!"

"Up there," they pointed to the roof, "one a control satellite is locked, it does communicate but it replies with vector information we can't see."

Chiral frowned, his mind racing, "Are you saying that the human rigged the master control satellite over the North American continent?"

Nods.

"Options! Give me options!"

"Well... we're monitoring the human collective messages. It's not much but there is one sure conclusion."

"Well?" Chiral waved them on, "I haven't got all day!"

"Only one base station is in use. And, we can see the power stations linked up. The human city at the North American west coast is the source. The only source and we have no reason to believe they know we are using the satellites for communication."

Chiral sighed theatrically. "I'm not stupid guys. You know I know that."

"No you don't," one said with certainty.

Chiral pushed him mentally but found it to be true.

"I really know already guys. Sorry."

"You could have told us!"

"Irrelevant. I need access to those lasers. Get that display working!"

"Or?"

"Don't go fuzzy on me boyo!" Chiral yelled, "I cannot trust the humans to not fire lasers on my invasion force. Either demolish the stuff or use it. That is an order!"

"I think there is an echo in the air somewhere, sounds like 'use or demolish' you got that too?" one brother asked his kin. Nodding the other agreed, "yeah, kind of."

Chiral grinned. The twins gulped, they knew what that meant.

"I could," Chiral said coldly, "take your rice-rights away again."

"No!" they both yelled in distress.

"No? You surely mean 'yes'. I could."

"Yes! No!" they blurted independently, "you can't do that!"

"I don't see you working. Your staff is. You aren't. You are both Hunnuny and shall work like all the collectivians. Scram!"

Faced with losing perhaps the dearest thing they could think of the twins went 'to work'. Chiral followed them and the large setup room was quiet like a tomb as Chiral stepped hoof in it. The machines were silent; all you could hear were held breaths, waiting for words from the already mythical leader.

"Your exalted leaders have decided to help out. Isn't that nice?"

The door closed after Chiral who threw a meaningful glance their way and all ran up to the twins, offering excuses for not having achieved their targets.

"Shut up!" they called, "Get back to your work. There is nothing to see here. Move it or we're going to oversee your work personally. Clear?"

Afraid, their staff went to their stations and consulted with one another in hushed tones while the twins went on in their well-known tone. "Bunch of idiots. Delirious dumbos. Donkey heads. Retards."

They went into their office and chased the few Hunnuny out who were busy measuring the hardware of the vault. One of them stopped

at the door, chiding them in a bout of courage from the mystical leader, "you are impossible!"

"Really?" one brother asked.

"Come here you," the other invited, "explain your reasoning."

The young white Hunnuny stood his ground. "We are making a copy of this system, like you ordered. You are chasing us away whenever you are around to work with it. When we continue you've changed the whole layout of the thing. Every night again!"

"And?" the twins asked innocently, after all by their standards any moron could restore the system state by merely looking at it and remembering the odds and ends of dials and switches.

"My team is not able to work, this way. We've three piece-wise unmatched copies of this damned thing. How about some help?"

A little taken aback they conferred with each other, under their breath and regarded the by now trembling team lead. Just as sudden, they stopped and one said, "Good. What do you propose?"

Overcome with relief, the guy beckoned his team in and unrolled the layouts they had been making. True to their word the twins poked holes in the design with ease but also filled them in. By the end of the night, the display unit was drawn up and for the first time ever the twins were not doing science, they were developing.

###

"Here we go bro."

"Power on."

The screen flickered badly, it wasn't synchronized. The staff around them was turning knobs like crazy to get the frequencies stable. This

failed spectacularly because everything was heating up and drifting all over the place but with effort to match this, the screen's picture soon enough remained more or less inside the display area while it went blurry and sharp, low and high intensity, rolling and static and of course skewed in all possible ways.

However, it was legible.

"The menu screen," one brother breathed in awe, "finally."

To their astonishment, the staff stood up and faced them to make a formal, congratulating bow. They all finished with a nod of reverence to them. The twins felt real weird, things weren't supposed to be like this. All through their life they had been at war with the collective, with the world at large in fact and now they were out of their depths with this show of support. Flustered they started directing Hunnuny to tasks, meaning most of them were keeping the screen alive. That done, they investigated the flickering, animated screen and using logic they soon enough ran into the setting that Greg had added to the system. The control was routed to something called 'aux'.

"Right," one started and the other went on, "now this we can work with."

The display team was charged with creating a stable screen and the twins went to do 'real' work. They dug up the files on the programming, in as much as they had been able to gather from Greg's work, to figure out how to piggy-back on the signals to the control satellite. Someone, they reasoned, would use the system sometime and if this someone did, they would have their virtual hook ready.

They worked on their programming, spurred by the scientific novelty of their boldness, for days, until it was ready to show to 'the leader'. Chiral didn't waste a second, acting on their summons. His arrival was announced by the sudden quiet outside, this time the low hum of a test at the setup was the only thing that was heard.

Just that faint 'hmmmm' of power going through the electronics. Just a hum, and the faint whine of the charging up of the inversion field.

## **64. F.M.E.A.**

Chiral looked around the assembled collectivians. All eyes seemed to be actively looking past him. With a grunt he went for the closest high ground available: the ramp through the setup. Its smooth metal shone with the reflection from the ceiling lights and as he stood there, turning to face the assembly he saw the twins appear from their den, all the way in the back. Good, this was complete and he felt it was about time something had come from this satellite thing. It had cost him dearly to keep this show going! His head hurt at once, thinking of the resources spent on the communications gear scattered through the room.

"Get off that!" one of the twins called out over the quiet. The other Hunnuny seemed to be afraid to say anything but he suddenly sensed the unease. What was the matter? The slide he was on was solid, wasn't it? For good measure he stamped his hoof down on it, the clang of it reverberated through the room.

"What!" he called, in challenge.

"It's active with gold, get off!" the other twin added.

Amused, Chiral looked around to the active field. He wasn't afraid of a block of lead, ha! For good measure he picked up the pieces of gold, ready for the exchange. Boy, were they heavy, they seemed so small! With a grunt he made to slide them in, took a step, skidded on the smooth surface and slid right after the blocks into the setup while behind him a chorus of terrified cries went up.

Greg and Shirra slid over the ramp, away from the infuriated colonel and koala. Both held their breath to ease the field inversion as the blue scan line made all a blur and together they exited into the horse-man and minotaur infested room on the Hunnuny isle of Hawaii. They were sure the element of surprise would not last longer than a few seconds and while still moving they hauled one another to their feet, sliding to a halt at the edge of the metal surface. It was quite a show to see this go so smooth, if they hadn't trained on this it would no doubt have been impossible with all the gear they'd strapped to their backs. They were prepared, this time, so extremely prepared in fact that Shirra took no more than a second to get into position, her weapon poised. Greg was similarly ready, as ready as he'd ever be and scouted the room with a turn of his head, mentally locking possible adversaries. There would be whole bushels of guns aimed at them and the bullet impacts would hurt plenty yet they were both fully covered like a knight of old with armor of new.

Greg finished the scan of his surroundings and found they were with their back to the assembly in the hall. "Oops," he mouthed and turned to Shirra. At the other end stood a pack of no less than two brownish horses with glasses on, dressed in white lab-coats staring at them in utter surprise. 'Openmouthed' would probably be the apt description if that didn't go a bit afoul with these horse-types. A little further were more again a score of the lab-coat-dressed horses. All were similarly stunned looking, but in the back stood a trio, two with an amused frown. The three stooges would have looked more intelligent, Greg felt.

As for guns... Nothing. Not a gun in sight!

Hence, he was startled by a salvo from his right. Shirra shot the two scientists point blank with several bullets each, their bodies slumped to the floor and let out a yell as she began shooting the group in the back. To Greg's utter disbelief they formed a protective coat around the twins, taking bullets. Flesh turned out to be a pretty good stopper for their bullets, they'd loaded

up with hollowpoints, but Shirra didn't waver in her determination. When the group she was attacking had taken cover or died, depending on the timing of her gruesome attack one of the twins got hit by Shirra and as the white-horse-guy sagged to his knees with an interesting look in his eyes, Shirra stopped shooting.

"Take that, you mean monstrosities," Shirra declared. Had she blown the smoke of the barrel, he'd not have been surprised.

In the silence that followed Greg asked, "Um, you think that really was necessary? I mean, they weren't attacking us, right?"

"In war, thinking costs lives. I just follow the plan. Your plan, it involved getting out if you will be so kind as to remember?"

That was true, but it felt very unnecessary to blow the ceiling since they stood an excellent chance of walking out just like that.

"Shoot!" she shrieked as he stood contemplating this. Reluctantly, he aimed at the ceiling and fired, stumbling from the backlash. As the rocket flew, an alarm sounded and by the time the explosion had stopped reverberating in the hall, a pack of bulls and horses appeared in the outside corridor, aiming at them with rifles, wasting no time. Those guns would not kill, but the bullets would cause painful bruises and he had no desire to get black and blue spots all over. They were at an unexpected angle too; maybe they could cause a malfunction in the equipment.

"Go!" he cried and they blasted their jetpacks.

Shooting erupted from the corridor through the windows and bullets ricocheted from all the metal surfaces, sparks flew from the electronics racks, little lights died and in that mayhem Greg felt one or two impacts on his leg and cursed. Fighting with the controls, steering and guiding he went up faster and faster when he heard return fire. Shirra was still ascending yet had found a moment to empty her automatic gun on the attackers and when he finally stole a glimpse Greg saw a number of them go down.

“She sure is pissed with these guys,” he thought through the rush of adrenalin as he cleared the roof, glad to not touch any of the sharp metal rents. He looked down, seeing her throw the rifle away and put all effort in flying through the gaping hole in the roof.

The sun caught his helmet’s visor, darkening it. It was early morning, a beautiful morning too, for now. The sun was rising like a yellow ball at the horizon, pointing his way, towards the American continent. From the north, an utterly gray sky rolled in; it would be moments before it would rain softly, or misty, the weather wasn’t sure it seemed.

Shirra was clear of the building too, “Now!” he yelled as loud as he could. His booster pack fired and they shot up with dazzling speed. Below him, he could see all over the main Hawaiian isle as it grew small below him. Now he understood why the colonel had thought him insane when he had described the island. There wasn’t that much room for harbors or factories yet the place was one big factory and but for the steepest inclines not an inch of the island was in natural form. Then, quickly, it washed away in grey white masses of mist. It lasted for no more than thirty seconds.

The booster stopped and he felt gravity’s angry grasp on his stomach. For a fleeting second he surfaced above the thick cloud deck, a blue dome in all directions. This was great!

With a few quick and well trained, unbuckling movements, the jet-pack left him and he prepared for the free fall! They headed to the ocean, a pair of surfers in the sky, applying once more the lessons they had learned in the previous weeks of preparation. They ought to reach the ocean easily. As he picked up speed, the suit got wet all the way through, limiting his ability to guide his fall and instead of a nice flat layout, he lost all sense of direction. He was spinning!

Fighting for control, he had seconds left when at last the ocean neared him with incredible speed. The cold enveloping waters nearly shocked him senseless. He found he was immersed and since everything still felt attached, he assumed he’d gotten his feet down.

How deep down had he gone? Don't think! Hold your breath! It took agonizing seconds until finally the flotation devices activated, filling up. Upon reaching the right pressure, he was going up with their buoyancy so he should break the surface any second now. He kicked out with his legs... Still water everywhere. This should not take more than seconds...

Suddenly a set of bursts on his back indicated more flotation balls inflated. Too late! But Keith had set them, tested them, and now he nearly drowned? Powerful forces pulled him up and he shot up out of the water, to fall back with a large splash. Gasping, he quickly unbuckled the pack that was wrapped around him and waited for it to inflate-unfold into a black, thin-rubber raft.

He looked around next, trying to locate Shirra through the ever increasing mist. The waves were very shallow but still so high he could not see her anywhere. "Shirra!" he called, trying to look around the nearly ready raft. From in it he would no doubt get a better view and he clambered in the inflated affair. "Shirraaa!" he called at once, while undoing the pieces of armor for more maneuverability in the little boat. He knew these fiber plates would float so she could not have been dragged down, or could she?

Suddenly he felt something collide with his little boat and looked all around, alarmed at what this might mean. Then he saw something white under the water. Jumping over the side he fished for Shirra who seemed to be bobbing up and down in the water. He knew she could not swim then realized from her limp shape she was unconscious and it took all he had to get her and the supplies on her into the small boat. Once there, he started to unpack the drive that was part of Shirra's pack. Being static in the pacific, within sight of the enemy's harbor was a sure way to die! The drive... Keith had been pretty proud of that. Indeed, it bore his trademark of thoughtful and efficient design, the *métier* of a mechanical engineer of extraordinary class.

Greg mounted the deceptively flimsy looking thing on the stern and fired it up and finally the boat started moving over the mountainous waves of the Pacific. He spared another worried look at Shirra, bumping along with the

waves and noted the weather was certainly not improving. What a moment to run into bad weather! He had not thought of mist for a single moment. In fact, no one had.

Damn!

As if in answer to his thought, the engine sputtered and the display showed 'power failure'.

"What the hell?" Greg mumbled, faced with the inferred catastrophe of that fact.

Indeed, matching his call all hell broke loose, for a loud ship horn indicated the next level of trouble was about. He kicked out, trying to get Shirra awake but she was a hapless form. She was breathing, but somehow not present. He'd have sworn loudly right now if it would have helped but he daredn't spend the breath. Shirra couldn't be helped right now... win some, lose some. His hands were active already; he hadn't spent all that programming for naught! In a moment he had his tablet out, glad he had thought to seal it with transparent plastic and tried to connect to the phone in the orbital station.

"Come on..." he urged the blinking cursor on his tablet. If this was going to fail, their escape would certainly not lead to a generous reception! Those horse types would grill them for shooting their precious white-coat-leader, and it would not be pretty. He recalled how they had threatened to break Shirra's fingers one by one.

No. Not pretty at all.

"Come on!" he shook the tablet, knowing this was so ridiculous it was preposterous. Then again, almost instantaneously the dimwitted, backward, low-res graphical interface started. At least that worked. "I'm in!" he thought and feverishly zooming and pointing, he found the satellite network which was for some reason perfectly pinpointing the ship nearing them at high speed and a particular blip showed even their own little raft! Whatever technology was up there, he was very grateful right now that it wasn't

available to those horsies on that ship! Then it struck him that he and Shirra had several types of metal on them and he was a human.

Indeed, metal and human... these things measured metal. A value appeared next to them in support of that notion, indicating the percentage of this 'object' and two inhabitants. A symbol blinked next to their raft. He'd have liked to indulge in this but he needed to do something about the menace headed for them. Guns and merciless torture awaited him.

So a ship was nearing him, the marvelous design in his hands showed that, the noise in that direction matched... what could he do with this super-toy? Could it really only be applied in one way?

He looked in the direction of the cruiser. Only mist showed there.

An unexpectedly high wave tilted his little boat, making him fall on his back and causing a laser discharge through the interface. Nearby a rather bright light shone in the waves and shortly afterwards he felt and heard the explosion which had been generated on the ocean surface. Together with that a gust of wind passed them. It was a good thing he was on his back!

When he got upright, he noted the little engine had found some power somewhere and was propelling them forward again. Forward, to the cruiser, he saw on his tablet. He steered, to turn around. A loud horn behind him made clear how close the big ship was. He looked around and saw sailors on the dark outline of the ship, armed with rifles, pointing at them. Plops of their guns sent out a round of bullets, missing them only just.

"Sorry!" he screamed and meant it as he pushed 'enter' to execute the laser discharge onto the ship, resulting in an explosion. This time the explosion was much louder and it was followed by a series of more. Carried by a mini tidal wave, wind that was clearing the mist in a portentous circle, they drifted along for a little while as Greg kept his head down. He sneaked a look in the direction of that formidable ship but by now saw mist again. He could not see a thing. Checking his tablet, he found a large number of

scattered crosses where the cruiser had been. In the bottom left of his little screen, he had to squint at it, a question appeared behind a word.

“Clear?”

What the hell could that possibly mean? He selected the question and saw a connection line for all the debris generated just now. Would there be survivors? He decided not to go on, but apparently the software defaulted to ‘yes’ instead of ‘cancel’.

“Oops,” he muttered as a salvo of muffled explosions going ‘boom’ and ‘hiss’ followed.

“God save their souls,” he thought, and at once slapped his head. What was he thinking, and which God would that be? As silence reigned, only broken by the whirring of the engine, he steered his raft in the direction of northern America, over the long, slow and round waves. It felt as if he was in and out of little valleys all the time. He was glad he had taken the pills for seasickness. “California, here we come!” he announced, thinking of little Amandine. First however, the engine needed maintenance of a sort. Stopping it and using the last dry pieces of cloth he could produce, he dried the innards of it then closed it the best he could. Finally he fitted the remnants of the cloth in the gaps in an attempt to shield the little engine from wetness.

Stupid Keith! An outboard engine which doesn’t take to salty moisture! If he could tell his friend that now, he would certainly not sleep for a week. Ha, what an oversight!

At last, content with his labor, he set the thing to full power and made himself comfortable for the long haul. About two thousand three hundred and ninety miles, assuming this world was similar. It should be doable, in ten days, moving 24/7 with an average of ten miles per hour.

Some trainers had shaken their heads and helped them anyway. Others had been impressed. Still others had been eerily quiet.

“Ah well, ‘alea iacta est’ out of my hands now, eh?”

He ate a candy bar and tried again to revive Shirra. She had been out for maybe an hour now. The weather had kept to an unpleasant wet level but the misty situation meant they could plough the calm long waves fairly well and he was sure they were making good time.

Once he had dragged the cat to him, he'd removed her helmet and most of the protective bullet proof vest parts, so she would feel the wind through her fur. Her ear was pulled by the thick air only just. This gave him an idea and he tapped her ear, to see it twitch. At least that still worked. Last time, he'd been able to revive her by fondling her head. Maybe, just maybe...

Five minutes later, she sat looking around with a glassy look. "Where am I?"

"We just escaped that horse island!"

"What horse island?"

"You recall the name of Hawaii? Never mind, here, take the helm and navigate according to this direction on the tablet."

"Tablet," she breathed in reverie.

Greg's eyes flew open at that remark. "Oh, shit," he thought, that was *just* like the 'old' Shirra and he could hardly believe how hard this realization hit him. "You must have bumped your head entering the water. I sure hope you will get your memory back quickly."

"My memory?"

"Just do as I say and we'll reach the citadel."

Nodding eagerly she did as he asked, but she was looking at the tablet with big eyes. "What does it say?"

"Ah, come on now! Really! You forgot *everything* of the last months? What is the last thing you remember?"

“I recall us going down while trying to get to the citadel, how did we get here?”

“Shit.”

She cast a furtive look about her, checking for said substance and went on, “I’m sorry to upset you Greg, but I really do not know...”

“Just steer. I’m going to take a nap. When you get tired, wake me and we’ll take turns.”

###

“Greg?”

He looked up, it was pitch-dark. Over the side of the boat the edge of the ocean showed like a wonderful very faint illumination. There were stars above and wind, chilly wind. First he ate and then found a sound was missing.

“The motor has stopped! Ow, my head,” he blinked against the headache. He reached for his pills to combat the sea sickness.

“That’s why I woke you, Greg. This device is not working anymore. Ohhhh....”

He checked the display, the thing complained again of missing power. “Shirra? Are you... all right?”

“Ohhh...”

“Bloody hell!” A broken engine *and* a broken companion.

“Take some pills, they’re in your pocket, no the left one... yes those. Just swallow.”

Shirra obeyed and looked ‘green’, quite an achievement for a white cat. Then he concentrated his efforts on the damn engine. After disassembly of

the thing again he saw how the salt water had corroded parts already. Keith should have done a failure mode effect analysis on this.

“This way it is going to be a long, no a *very* long trip, Shirra.” If they ever were going to make it at all.

“We won’t reach the citadel?”

“Unless you can swim half the pacific.”

“Where are we?”

“Somewhere between Hawaii and California, in any case *far* from the U.S., sorry, I mean the Citadel.”

“Is that far?”

“Could not be more than oh,” he checked the display and the location relative to the coarse outline of Northern America, “2000 something miles.”

“How...”

“Over 3000 kilometers, yes, that is pretty far out. With this boat it should take about a fat week. Unless, of course, this fantastic contraption gives out.” He tapped the top of Keith’s fine handiwork he was cleaning. After the cleaning it started up again. The power-cell capacity was five times surplus of their need. “You never know,” Keith had said. How well said, indeed!

“Is that metal?”

“Yes it is, and now we are going to go on.”

The engine spurred to life and they dashed forward again through the dark night.

“Greg, I have to... I think I...”

“You can puke into the ocean. Big enough, but try to keep it in, you just swallowed that pill.”

“Uhhhh....”

Maybe Shirra was not all he had thought, but having seen her at work in that hospital lab, and seeing her ease of mind now... Marvelous girl, too bad she was a cat, for he liked her no-nonsense mentality a lot. Then again, she'd shot those scientists without any thought. He shivered. That was her too, a product of this world's class-society.

"Greg, I have to, well..."

"What?"

"I need a restroom."

"Gee, I seem to have misplaced my last portable toilet a mile ago. Sorry there, you'll have to take a crap into the ocean, you're a big girl."

"No need to get upset, I can handle that." She resigned her protest to the point he'd made.

He added in a surprisingly fatherly tone, "Just make sure you don't fall in."

The next days passed uneventfully. Their candy bar supply and water supply dwindled while he kept drying out the tracks in the electrical engine. This was not going to last for the five more days they needed it to. He tried explaining their situation to Shirra from time to time; she seemed to recall bits and pieces so he was able to jog her memory. Too bad this often resulted in things she had apparently picked up while in the military base. At one time she looked real thoughtful, strained and locked eyes with him before asking, "Do you know what 'the bill of rights' is, Greg?" That wasn't a particular question in Greg's eyes but she had come back to it a few times. That was strange, in the end he'd pointed out it was "Probably something American and not my cup of tea."

She'd dropped the subject after that, but not after pressing on him, "It's eluding me and I know it's important, as you say 'something American' and so it pertains to me. I'm sure it'll come back to me."

At day eight, he found the copper track in the engine had eroded to a break. Cursing, he searched for metal parts in his supplies to repair it. Finally he found a piece of aluminum wrapping which he pressed into place after he had scrubbed the ends of the copper the best he could. Then the engine started, it worked, but he could not press it down while forty volts ran past. At least not without pain due to the heat and the potential. Using bullet proof shields, he pressed the things down and so managed another few days of transport.

According to his tablet they were about five hundred miles from the citadel still. If they went right to Baha California they might find land within some hundred miles. Well, there was nothing for it. He steered due east and hoped.

At roughly fifty miles off the coast, it wasn't visible still, the engine gave out. "No power." And that was a fair statement, applicable for good this time. He knew the patching and cleaning had sapped the battery.

"This is it, Shirra."

"You can't fix it?"

"Nope. We'll have to row." He produced the small 'emergency' paddles. "Here you go." With those, they went on until they were exhausted. "We're close!"

After eating, and resting, they went on. Sore and exhausted they reached the lush beaches of this part of the world. Palm trees lined the sandy slope towards a venerable jungle that stood out from the beach up.

"Right, now we need to travel due north, a few hundred miles, it would seem."

“We need transport!”

“Quite so, now you click your heels and magic up a cart, I propose.”

“I’m being serious, Greg.”

“First we decide on what we have to bring. I’m not carrying all that,” he pointed to the boat, “clear?”

The large packs were divided up and they started out. His bad knee did not take well to the load though. After an hour of walking along the surf, he stopped, feeling it.

“It’s getting thick!” Shirra cried out, “Let me feel that.” She examined his knee carefully. “What happened to it, Greg? You never told me.”

“I did, I told you about the space station, didn’t I?”

“About that Tabitha, that skunk girl?”

“This is her fault.”

“What, a full tailed female skunk who would do this? Impossible!”

“Cut the crap Shirra. You’ve seen a bunch of skunks where we just came from. Way more than healthy for me.”

Interestingly, Shirra did not deny that. Instead, she stood thinking, looking up. Then she took her tablet and turned it on. “By the praise of the messiah, I remember!”

“Good. Too bad it needed a skunk to jog your memory.”

She stopped him. “Greg?”

“Yes?”

“I need to check something.”

She went through his pack and through her own.

“Something missing?”

After a while of searching she looked at him. He knew what she wanted to say, and angrily said, "I'm not going to walk back for another hour, if that is what you're thinking. What can possibly be so important?"

"I... don't know for sure."

"Well?"

"I made this potion, for me, to improve myself, and..."

"Well, bad luck. We're not going back. You're fine the way you are. Period."

"You really think so?"

"For a cat, you're the finest."

A bit disconsolate she walked along. Not happy, clearly, but he could not solve this for her.

Trudging on in silence he watched the endless beach stretch in front of them. Amandine was so far away. "Daddy is coming," he thought.

Shirra cut his thoughts short. "You know Greg; I heard transports travel the coast down. We stand an excellent chance meeting one, just waiting."

"Is that so? And you could not have thought of that, say, an hour ago?"

"Sorry."

"Well, a fat lot of good that does my knee. Right now I..."

A soft chopping noise filled the air.

"Shirra, you are right!"

"Told you," she nodded, smiling.

"And now, how to stop them?"

"Easy."

She put her gear off her and stripped, exposing her body fully except for a bra and panties, waving to the approaching transport. It was a huge one, the

type he'd been in when brought to be 'sold' to the 'Chinese', as the horse-people were known here.

The huge thing set down on the beach and Shirra quickly dressed again.

"White cat effect, I'm to presume?" Greg inquired.

"Spot on!" she called as they dashed to the quad-rotor transport chopper.

A black man walked out to meet them, yelling, clearly worked up, "What the hell does a white cat do here? You appear almost like a top assistant!"

Greg recognized that voice at once.

"Well, well, you're Blikol's cousin, or uncle, right?" he called out over the din of the rotors.

"Well met! You're... you must be... no shit! You're Greg! How on earth did you get out here?"

The man eyed him with a sort of fright. "Come!" he said, eager to have him aboard. As they got inside, Shirra walked up to the pilot at once to direct them down the beach to their raft. Greg was guided to a room, furnished with brass and walnut paneling. Quite nice, really. The door closed and the noise was instantly diminished such that he might easily talk.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Greg of the bears. I'm TonTan; can I get you a drink, Sir Greg?"

"Water please. I'm pretty thirsty. And it's Greg de Beers."

As he accepted the glass, accepting his correction fell on deaf ears, he asked surreptitiously, "any slaves?"

The man started. "You won't tell the blanches, will you?"

"What if I would?" He liked to see the man squirm.

"You can't! They don't know, they can't know. You like Blikol, right? It would be bad for her too."

"Oh really?"

“Really.”

“In that case, I might keep my mouth shut for a spell. You would not try anything on me, would you?”

“Me? Oh no! I wouldn’t dare!”

“Money makes the world go round, doesn’t it? I bet there is a huge reward on my head. Provided you bring me in alive.”

“How can you know that?”

“I’ve learned you and your family do anything for money.”

“No! That is not true. We would not think of swindling our kin.”

“Good for you.”

TonTan took a swig of some spirited drink.

Greg nipped his drink and fixed his eyes on TonTan, “Rest assured, I have no desire to tell the blanches... Tell me, right now we’re flying in the wrong direction. Where are we going?”

“To Mexico. I’m hauling parts and getting more fuel.”

“Ah, the large citadel?”

“No, that is in Argentina. Mexico is the factory.”

“I see. And tomorrow you go back?”

“Certainly! You will be my guest, yes?”

“Just curious, why did you transport that lion?”

TonTan nearly choked in his drink.

“What lion?”

“Siesie, if I’m not mistaken, is his name.”

“Uhhh... Blikol said you’re peculiar.”

“Did you give her the money you got for that black and red cat and his girl?”

The man was silent, thinking and watching him through slits. “How can you possibly know that?”

“I have information. You just have a bad day, but it’s only today. Tomorrow we go to the citadel in California and you will have your reward.”

TonTan emptied his drink in one gulp.

Greg smiled ruefully, “Drinking is bad for your blood pressure, you know that?”

“Ha! Live life, short with a bang. That is our motto!”

“How old are you?” he asked the big black man. This guy was twice his width, a head higher and trained to the extreme.

“Twenty, why?”

“How much time, you recon?”

“Pfff. At least five more years. In my prime, I say.”

“Is it difficult, to live in the knowledge that once you are in your prime each day may be your last?”

“I’d rather talk about something else.”

“I see.”

He drank his water, seeing how Shirra entered. He placed the glass with a clang on the table. “What is that?” he blurted in amazement, seeing her in a black dress.

“Yes, incredible, finding this here.” Shirra made a twirl. “I will have a red dress after we reach Mexico, of course. The pilot has radioed them already.”

“Great.”

Greg hated that demeaning dress. Why did those blasted blanches have to have such idiotic ideas about fashion? Shirra misunderstood his reaction as a

dismissal and happily left, closing the door behind her. “Fuckin’ blanches,” he fulminated to the window where he saw the beach passing by. Their little boat came into view and the chopper made ready to set down.

He saw Shirra run down to their raft in her black dress, she searched all over and stopped suddenly either finding whatever it was or concluding it was lost. The latter, Greg decided. Whatever it was, it had been lost on that horse-island. He ought to ask her about it, later, but he didn’t really care.

TonTan sat himself near him. “Blikol said some things about you.”

“Ah, did she?”

“Yes, she felt your private parts, didn’t she?”

Greg turned to him so fast he felt the muscles in his neck protest. “Close family, I hear. You guys talk everything over?”

“You’re really not one of them blanches, or are you, Greg? I mean, apart from looking differently.”

“No, I should hope not,” he said derisively while he watched Shirra return, clearly very downbeat. How strange of her to be so obviously unhappy.

The chopper lifted off again and now went much faster. TonTan was all that time mulling over something, until he finally asked, “Will you restore the lasers?”

“I might.”

“You can?”

“I said I might.”

“Sounds as if you can.”

“What part of ‘I’ and ‘Might’ is too difficult for you?”

TonTan got up, and Greg felt assaulted by the muscle and power the guy presented. Greg pulled out a hand gun from his belt and pointed it at TonTan. “I would like to remind you that this thingy will hurt you plenty.”

“Whoa! Put that thing away! I was going for the reward, remember?”

“What do you guys do with all that money?”

“Well, what do you think? Keep the factories running, of course!”

That was new.

“Filled with slaves, no doubt? Materials from the Chinese?”

“Ha, if only. No, the blanches control the flow of metal. They pump money around. We can’t all live as leisurely as dear Blikol. She’s got the nice Campone spot.”

“That is the most desired spot?”

“Well, yes, it’s just that you need to accept a small transport and keep it in perfect condition. It was only logical she was picked to service that part.”

“Picked? Those blanches control everything and you lot just accept it?”

“Without them there would be war. That would not benefit us. Not yet anyway.”

“You’d rather have no repaired lasers, right?”

“Let me put it this way... you should not hurry on my account.”

“Are you aware of the power of those things?”

“I haven’t ever seen them work. Remember the last time anyone heard of those, at least in the Northern hemisphere, is almost two years ago.”

Feeling like pestering the guy, Greg replied, “Gee, I wonder what could have caused that.”

“It seems to coincide with the foretold appearance of someone who looks like you, Greg.”

“Yes, that Remon knew it all, didn’t he?”

“Don’t get me wrong Greg; I don’t care for that white ass boy. He clearly wasn’t too taken with the dark kind of his own genus, with us. Look at the

physical prowess of the blanches, one blow and they fall over. We're not even susceptible to that idiotic spittle of theirs."

"You're not?"

"No."

"How nice, seems to me they hold you in some regard then."

"You know, I had not looked at it like that." And as TonTan said it, he clearly envisioned a new world order.

The door opened and the pilot walked in with their outboard motor, eyes lit, "TonTan! Look at this man; you're not going to believe your eyes!" The two men were taking the thing apart quickly, absorbed in the new toy. "I don't know who made that, but this ain't Chinese, I'm telling you!" The other nodded his consent, "Hell! You're right! Look at this, and here, this fits so precise, this has to be micron tolerances. Will you look at that power cell? Not lead, but still impressive."

Two black faces turned to him as one, filled with suspicion. "Where did it come from?"

"Oh, somewhere not too far from the California Citadel, why?"

They looked at each other with an understanding grimace. "Yeah, right."

"If you can guess what species designed that, I will give you this gun." Greg threw his gun in the air and caught it.

"Ha!" they inspected the machine, front and back and got more and more puzzled. One asked, "Too tiny for the animals, but here's some weird writing. Will you read this?"

Greg ambled over and squinted, "Ah, that's 'Keith'."

"Who is Keith?"

"A good friend of mine."

"I take it this wasn't made by a human then, was it?"

“You’re getting warm,” Greg allowed.

“You know of any species?” the pilot asked TonTan.

“Shit man, this thing is impossibly precise. If we had parts like this in the transport, we’d be going twice the speed I’m telling you.”

Greg felt generous. “OK, you’re not going to guess. Keith is a koala.”

“What, a bear?”

“Sort of, anyway, I’ll show you something else, I’ll show you an airplane.” He took his tablet and turned it on, activating the beam function of his replacement tablet.

“Shit! He’s got the fuckin’ tablet. The *tablet!*”

“Lemme see that thing man!”

His audience was all over him as he showed the computer.

“Look at that sucker, it’s got enormous resolution! You can read this? And what is that? How does it make the colors? Are there many colors? And how... and what...”

Greg had not expected this much enthusiasm. “Say, who’s flying?”

“Oh, autopilot, my kid’s looking in.”

“Nice, safe, a junior pilot.”

“Hey! He’s very bright as it happens! When he’s eleven he will be a pilot himself!”

Super, he thought, and knew better than to say this. “Anyway, if you guys have a factory, you might ask your design department to build a plane. This is a plane.”

He showed the image, projected onto the wall.

“I know what a plane is, Greg. But they need a runway, way too expensive. Helicopters are much more versatile and more economical on fuel.”

“Maybe, but with a plane you could fly to China.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Earn more money?” Greg suggested, innocently then adding, “Do you also make computers in that factory?”

The two men started a lengthy discussion on silicon processing. As it turned out, the pilot was en route to the factory to take the place of a family member who had died. He would be the head of the chip-production.

“What d’you want to know?”

“How small can you make the features on a chip?”

“Does it matter? For now, we can just about make a piece of silicon this big with the right properties. We ought to understand that first!”

“You mean you are making chips while you have no idea what you are doing?”

“Hey, smart-ass! It’s taken fifty years, to get this stuff to work in the first place.”

“What do you think is in here?” He tapped the tablet.

“Well, not a computer, I can vouch for that, safely. This is something else altogether!”

“I could tell you one or two things about silicon, if you’re interested?”

“Hell, this guy is worth more to us than to those crazy blanches, TonTan!”

“You’re after my reward, eh?” TonTan asked of his pilot dangerously.

Greg thought about what he knew. It probably was worth something to the pilot, who seemed a decent sort. The trip was probably not going to be too long, on the ground he would do a lecture for them, they seemed interested enough.

(based on input from the Old Gray Raccoon)

## 65. Dispirited

After the loud pang Chiral partly lost connection with himself. He felt lightheaded and heavy at the same time, nauseous and kipper, angry and happy, everything at once. What was the most startling though was the moment he finally found his body again and blinked his eyes to see steel bars close up. Other than those, it seemed dark but after a short moment he was able to focus further, only to find bars in all directions, locking him in as in a prison.

Then he noted the figures behind the bars. It took a split second to realize he was surrounded by slaves! And, he soon saw, not even sanitized ones at that. To his utter amazement he even counted two figures who appeared to be Hunnuny. All of the furred slaves were chatting in what was clearly the slave-language.

Chiral was ecstatic, for he'd found a gateway right into the lair of the slave-rebellion, perhaps even into the human collective. All the slaves needed to do was send him back and the Hunnuny legions would come forth to recapture the world.

“Dear slaves,” he began while trying to draw spirit strength. This caused instant quiet, as expected, broken after a moment by a mumbled comment, “Sarge, that guy just said something.”

“Positions!”

A rattle of arms being brought up and locked on Chiral followed.

“Put those guns down right now!” Chiral commanded, indignant.

No one moved; the guns followed his every move in perfect choreography. Chiral felt real weird seeing this, these people were extremely well trained. They were possibly, each and every one of them, twice his size! In this stalemate, Chiral noted all were identically dressed with uniforms dedicated to their various species' particular shape. All seemed to be of one

mind, and that one mind was not with him. He realized it might take a little more planning on his side. Careful planning, he'd need to build a beach head.

Suddenly the platoon parted, allowing a differently clad, clearly less trained bear sort through. Chiral didn't recognize this species.

"What do you make of this, Keith?"

Keith looked at the platoon leader and swirled his head around before Chiral to get a better view. "I'd almost say... I think... Actually... It really is like..."

"Cut the BS Keith, finish your thought for once!"

"Hey there, mister horse? You understand me?"

Chiral suppressed the notion to look around for 'mister horse', after all he was Hunnuny and not just any of them. He'd never seen slaves that weren't afraid of Hunnuny although a pair of them seemed to be present here, explaining that.

"You seem like a reasonable inhabitant," Chiral answered and noted the smile that appeared on the rather stupid face, so he decided to offer a compliment, "you'd make a fine slave for the collective."

The smile disappeared. "Pardon?"

"You keep that up and you'll find my offer may vary, meat eater!"

"Pardon!" Keith went again.

Chiral sucked air in, seeking his isolation and his self, and felt... felt... A cold dread descended on him, as he concluded that it was this cage! They had his spirit trapped! He'd no idea how or what but it was maddening. The prospect of isolation washed over him like waves of cold, making his legs twist and chest hurt. Breath came in ragged, burning gusts down his constricted throat while tears sprung to his eyes from the pain.

An impressed "Jeez!" was heard from two of the marines, as Keith decided to take the risk.

“OK, on my mark!”

Everyone was at once at full attention and ready to move, or shoot if necessary. The cage started to lift while the horse in there kept thrashing, fighting for air. Going on like that, obviously it didn't take long before loss of consciousness set in. Keith shrugged as he carefully touched the horse-man.

“Incredible,” he breathed, “I suppose we'd better lock him up and get the doc over; his physiology must be like that of Shirra if he's from that world. Doc'll know what to do.”

###

Chiral felt more detached than ever, yet he wasn't in the cage anymore. Whatever it was that was going on, it wasn't physical. Maybe they'd drugged him? That would be strange; if anything it would enable more contact. No, something was missing!

A knock on the door made him look up, light streamed in and the strange bear with what had to be a Hunnuny and a cat appeared.

“Feeling better?” the bear asked.

Chiral didn't feel well at all, but he was missing everything he could possibly relate to so he nodded vaguely.

“I'm Keith; this is the doctor who's been trying to calm you.”

Chiral addressed the horse-marine in his own language, “Why are you allowing this! What can possibly have been done to you to side with these meat eaters?”

The Hunnuny frowned funnily and nudged the Keith-bear, asking softly ‘what the heck had just been asked of him,’ in the slave language! The collectivian was absolutely fluent in it, native it sounded like.

The bear rolled his eyes and hit his head, to underscore his stupid docile face perhaps and went to his knees to look him in the eyes. Chiral was manacled so he wasn't going anywhere and had to accept this.

"You're a Hun-thingy, Hunhorse... Hunnuny! I should've realized before, how silly of me. I suppose you..."

Cutting in, Chiral hissed, "You had better lift the spirit ban on me or you will be very sorry!"

Keith bounced back in surprise and looked up at the doctor. "Greg never said these guys were mental."

"What's a Hunny?" the horse marine asked carefully, everything in his stance at the door belying the readiness to protect the doc and the 'mad scientist' as Keith was known on the base with affection.

Keith scrambled to his feet and took a step backward. Chiral decided this was a good time to teach these feeble idiots a lesson and tried to get up using the few centimeters of slack he had, pulling them taut.

"You'll all die horribly if you choose the side of your diseased masters!" Chiral challenged them, straining against his bonds.

Keith smirked, "I have news for you, buddy. There are no humans on this world, blanche or otherwise."

This broke through Chiral's haze of anger. "What do you mean 'this world'?"

"You are in a parallel universe, Mr. ...?"

"I'm Chiral, of Mother Monachi!"

"Well, Chiral, this is not your world. Looks a bit like it, tastes like it, but is very much different. No humans. Trust me on that one!"

"Lies!" Chiral jumped with effort, trying to gain access to spirits in vain again. It tired him no end, and soon he fell exhausted on his bench, panting and drowsiness closed his eyes.

“Well?” Keith asked the Doc as the door to the sleeping ‘Hunnuny’ clicked closed.

Doc sniffed loudly, “I hesitate, for given the circumstances it is certainly a hefty dose of PTS. But even then I would use the word ‘delusional’. This guy is what we technically call ‘a gonner’.”

“Oh,” Keith replied, “you could have fooled me. Good thing you were there though!” Keith nodded appreciatively to the giant. “Actually,” the marine added thoughtfully, “my folks are from Taiwan and while I couldn’t be sure...”

“Yes?” Keith and doc urged him on, hanging on his words.

“I think he thinks I’m one of those Hunny’s because, I could be wrong, but he called you ‘meat-eaters’?”

Doc and Keith exchanged a blank expression, then shrugged. “We should ask him,” doc turned to the door.

Keith stopped him, “We’ll try when he wakes up, the computer will check for movement.”

They sauntered down the hallway.

“What are we going to do with this guy anyway?”

“Colonel Badger asked me to ask you!” Keith said, placing the issue with doc.

“Me?” doc asked innocently, “why?”

“I guess you could run tests?”

“If that is an attempt at humor it is a resentful and failed move!”

“Hold your horses,” Keith appeased the doc then helplessly checked with the marine who smiled understandingly, “you’re jumping to conclusions.”

“I thought you were ridiculing my family name. It still happens, you know!”

“What’s with Mengel?” the marine asked as Keith shook his head to dissuade him from asking the very thing.

Doc replied with silence.

“Anyways,” Keith concluded, “if you’ve no idea what to do with him, and since he’s not very cooperative I was wondering if we might simply get him back there.”

“So, retry or cancel?” the marine quipped.

“Sort of, send l’idiot out get another bunch of lunatics, they can’t all be delusional.”

“Why a bunch?” doc asked.

“Gate-logic,” the marine sneered.

“Very nice,” Keith huffed, “but I’m afraid it is indeed a sensible description.”

“Actually,” the marine postulated, “we might end up with a feral type and something weird.”

Keith’s eyes lit up. “I like the way you think!”

###

Chiral sat at ease, meditation worked well and more so after the copious supply of tea and rice he’d received once the idiots here understood he didn’t care for their abysmal foodstuffs. Most of it was so sweet he thought his mouth was dying on him. This was better! Interestingly it was good rice; the best was the tea though. Green tea of exceptional performance, almost as good as brown-rice tea. No bowls though, but hey one couldn’t have

everything, now could one? The simple minded slaves were just that, it was evident in all their 'decisions'. They lacked direction, his direction. It would be a matter of time before he found a way around their spirit-lock and then all of this would be resolved quickly and efficiently.

"Yo!" the Keith-bear asked once more.

Chiral opened his eyes. "Ah," he breathed, "Keith."

"You've been here for three days now. How about you start talking? I've gotten you your rice and tea. Deal?"

"Deal?" Chiral asked perplexed.

"You talk," Keith explained, leaning his chair against the wall.

"I seem to be restrained still," Chiral lifted his arms.

"And I seem to be in possession of my faculties still."

"Ah, a joke."

"Who are you, *Chiral*?"

"I'm a collectivian, just like you soon will be."

"I'm a citizen, Chiral. Not a 'collectivian', you sound like a commie."

Chiral thought about that word for a moment.

"Perhaps it would be wise to clarify 'commie', I am not able to follow."

"Communist!" Keith spat, marking his feelings in the word.

Chiral remained silent.

"You know, sharing all and everything. I don't buy it; you seem a little smarter than that."

"History tells of such things, it is a human invention. And flawed. The Hunnuny collective isn't."

"So you're just a worker in the collective huh? Got any family other than your mom?"

Chiral dissipated his relaxation and slowly turned on the bear. “You will not speak of my Mother, of any Mother, so disdainful.”

“Right, your ‘Mother’. Any relatives?”

“Of course!” Chiral admitted annoyed, “Mothers with but one child are very few. Mother Monachi has provided the collective with countless Hunnuny.”

“Don’t you miss your siblings?”

“Are you deranged?” Chiral asked in true wonder.

“Not a happy family, I understand.”

“Family?”

Keith’s eyes went large as he tried to understand what was being said here but found it was too far from him and turned to a new subject.

“You’re in the USA, means anything to you?”

“You-Es-Aye?”

“United States of America. North America, actually.”

Chiral’s lips pulled back to show his teeth, “So I am in the human collective! Ha, I knew it.”

“There are no humans here buddy. I told you that.”

Chiral sat himself, at ease, reaching for his inner self. With closed eyes, sitting on his bench, he said, “No humans. Fancy that, yet you know what I mean by the name. You even claim to know what they look like.”

Keith couldn’t think of a suitable answer to this and got up. This guy was utterly useless, he’d no idea what could possibly come from the nut-case. Anyway he had tons of work and left the room. On his way to the setup, preparing an exchange to get mister high and mighty Chiral back to wherever he’d come from, he got waylaid twice, ending with a serious detour. First with Colonel Badger who wanted a ‘status update, at 3 in my office’. While

digesting the dread forming bile in his gut for that encounter he got a box thrust in his hands with Greg's left-overs.

"Am I the only one thinking this stuff is gross?" he asked no one in particular, holding up the tail implement of Greg. Sniggers rose up from nowhere but he knew it was his problem. The box would be filed and that was it, wasn't it? He noted one of the tablets Greg had requested. Having finally arrived at the dusty store-house, he was about to slap his face for forgetting a tablet to file the box when he realized the tablet in the box didn't need to be stored. With it, he filled the forms and handed the box over.

At the setup he set the sequence according to Greg's last destination. That would work out of the box. Keith watched the time crawl by; he'd one hour to come up with the status report and didn't feel at all like writing that up. He wanted to run tests but Barry certainly would be cross if he didn't prepare the setup. Playing with the tablet, Keith's thoughts strayed to his girlfriend, he imagined how she'd come out of the setup, requiring shelter and support.

"Oh, honey," he mumbled and wondered if there was a chance of getting anything out of the setup other than dead material with the next exchange. Having reached a decision he got up and rushed to the secured room with the inter-reality-traveler. The guard signed him in and he entered.

"Yo, sleepy head!" he yelled at the silent Chiral.

Chiral didn't appear disturbed in the least; in fact, it appeared the horse-man was barely clinging to life! Keith touched the head, trying to not touch the ugly head-wound.

Cold.

"Shit." Keith blurted.

###

Chiral floated at ease, it had cost him much more effort than he had expected but some sort of peace was his at last. Indeed, spirits were here, but at a higher level. The spirit world here was so different that many things started to make sense.

He couldn't understand the spirits around here. They didn't even bother with him, instead they broadened his horizon and quickly changing patterns were making it difficult to trace the route to his body. Chiral was no stranger to this world but it was as if things moved differently here. There weren't any pointers to go by, a white goop of sticky nothingness kept him in place from time to time. Finding the black peace was getting more and more complex. As if he had to walk further every time, even if walking and time didn't mean a thing here.

Finally, when he did touch base, his eyes didn't want to open. On the one hand he felt the dead weight of his body, on the other something was interfering. Somehow his breathing was aided along. 'Aid' wasn't quite the right term though; it was surely the next trick to cross him! These slaves needed a serious bashing for such meddling! But they certainly had counted without his ability and using a very careful trance Chiral achieved just enough mental lift-off to perceive his environment. In false colors, and warped time he noted he was on a bed, the Keith-bear and the cat were arguing about him.

Keith pointed to a plaque in his hands. Chiral recognized it. It was the tablet! The realization broke his concentration and his body's spasm with trying to breathe while a tube is down your throat alerted all in the vicinity.

Once the tube was removed he kept coughing feebly while building his strength. Then he jumped up from the bed and snatched the tablet. The bear and cat toppled at his move. A lion slave tried to hold him but his well-placed hoof changed her mind. Out the door, he glanced left and right before ripping the movement-hampering gown off. Unsure where to go, he ran through the corridors.

Soon several of the huge people from this place were in pursuit but he trotted on. It was obvious that while he didn't have the physique or strength of the locals he certainly could outrun them speedwise! Charged with purpose he kept making turns, scattering a chair here and there if he could.

Suddenly he ended up in a large mess hall. Food smells assaulted his nostrils, cooked meats and other unknown smells. Sour and fermented, it was rather appalling. His escape surely was opposite the hall and he set course for it when he noted the outside view, woods with a cloudy sky where the sun carefully edged through to give them a silver lining. He wasn't underground at all? Perplexed he stopped running in the middle of the hall before realizing the stupidity of this.

"Freeze!" someone yelled, lots of clicking noises could be heard. Guns! The human collective had guns!

Not thinking about this at all he made a dodging, rolling motion like in his training while the claps of bullets sounded. Getting up he found another gun aimed at him and he swerved around, skipping, and jumping, with a somersault ending on his hooves, running out the door.

Something was nagging him, his lungs were now protesting with the strain. Luckily these corridors were empty for the most part excepting one or two stupid faces with more tablets. If the collective had this many tablets then the assistant-cat had lied about their tablet... or...

Chiral kept racing, reason begging to get blotted. One goal stood in his mind leave, get to the setup. He'd been running so long his spleen was hurting plenty. Slowing down wasn't an option despite the fact he hadn't heard his pursuers for a while. How long was a while anyway!

Some doors were closed, his directions were getting more and erratic, following the only path down he could. At long last no one appeared to be anywhere anymore. Through an enormous door he rushed down a ramp almost passing the setup before his tunnel vision showed it to him. With a side-long jump he landed on the ramp and slid down the ramp of the setup.

At this moment, slaves sprang up from all directions with side-arms pointed they took position.

###

“Good thinking,” Colonel Badger agreed.

“It was obvious the guy wanted to get home. And, let’s face it; the ‘volunteer’ lion ‘slave’ we received in return is going to help us out with the workings of the portal at the other end.”

“When do you think you’ll have something substantial on that?”

Keith shrugged, “I couldn’t say,” then noting once more—it was the talk of the base- “Two bullets, one to his chest, one to his abdomen, and he ran on. Jeez.”

“I take it that is all in the report?”

Keith nodded, “A bloody trail leads from the mess hall to the setup; blood is smeared all over the ramp. We’re still cleaning.”

“War is messy,” the colonel dropped easily.

“We’re not quite at war,” Keith differed, “it does match with doc’s assessment the guy was a nut-case. No one can run that far with that much blood-loss. Impossible.”

“I’d have said the same about that setup out there,” the colonel reminded Keith.

“Yeah,” Keith agreed and took this small talk as a dismissal, making ready to leave.

“One more thing, Keith.”

Keith turned at the door, “yes?”

“The tablet our refugee took along isn’t in your report.”

“Come on! *One* tablet, that’s not going to kill the budget, is it?”

“*Think* dammit!” the colonel exploded.

“Aaaah, you mean the *effect*?”

“Well?” Keith was prompted.

“It’s not like they didn’t have one before. I can’t imagine how that makes them more dangerous? And, they’ve no manual with it or anything.”

Two piercing eyes kept Keith in place. “You sure about that?”

“Of course, don’t worry.”

“It’s my job to worry about that gate-thing.”

“Portal,” Keith corrected.

A grumpy frown made Keith leave quickly.

###

While sliding down the ramp, Chiral tried to cry out in challenge but was tasting blood in his mouth. A loud pang exchanged his view and he at once reached his elevated state, meeting the mighty spirit of the isle.

“Home...” he thought happily and his lips moved with, “Kill them.” Then he was caressing the mighty spirit of the isle. Nearby he felt his sister’s spirit and sent all and everything he had, as well as that he could take from the mighty spirit, to her and all that listened, before his lips moved the last time, “... all.”

The next hours were filled with near pandemonium. No matter what Tekwu called, screamed, ordered, the word was out. Their beloved leader had returned, covered in blood, savagely murdered by the humans! Retribution was demanded. And not only Tekwu had felt that last flash of her brother, all had. All were ready to die this instant if it made any difference. No one thought about anything else but the war, the final and grand war that would elevate the collective to the rightful place on the planet with justice for all. The new golden age was upon them, they would be the ones to see it happen and by Chiral, they would.

Communications ran back and forth continuously, reporting the mutilations and torture that were to be expected if no actions were taken right now. Not from the top down, oh no, from the bottom up. All brothers and sisters on the isle made sure their Mothers knew. They all implored the stationists and collectivians in their power so that before long the entire collective wanted to work, knowing only one thing:

Fight or die.

## **66. Mexico to Citadel**

The arrival at Mexico was hot and moist, terrible. Flying in, Greg saw acres and acres of factories with a large city sprawled around that and the air field. He clearly saw a block of houses, big and clean, for the blacks. The rest were lesser buildings for the factory workers and further out farms and buildings that resembled sheds indicative of a nice, layered society. It just was the same everywhere, wasn't it? He sighed.

Once they set down, Shirra was the first out. She was welcomed by two white cats in black dresses with white stripes, who took her along. Two blanches sat in a well-covered, thick walled office, wallowing in the

unpleasant, sticky air while fans provided a token reprieve from the heat. They were warm too, Greg saw, sweating even. The job was utterly unclear, but they seemed to take their job incredibly seriously. Maybe their mere presence was enough, he decided, to keep the masses under control.

Greg went along with TonTan and the pilot to the 'silicon factory'. He'd never seen one of those and hoped to learn something new. After a tour of the factory, they discussed what they'd seen. Greg wondered about the fur covered animals, "Aren't they causing dust?"

"Yes! And my first action will be to get them all suited up."

"Cool."

"Hardly!" the pilot grimaced, "They'll have a sweaty time, but either that or no job."

"I notice you aren't too concerned with the dog and cat thing, unlike the blanches. How's that?"

"Pfff, A worker is a worker. What's the difference?"

"Although you're not putting it very nicely," Greg remarked, "I think you're quite right."

"Super, so we agree on something at least."

The pilot seemed to be unconvinced of the whole silicon and semiconductor thing but at the same time he seemed to be able to relate to things Greg had hinted at concerning the design in the factory. All in all, Greg felt it a time well spent.

That night, they slept in a lush bed. Shirra lay next to him again and for some reason he didn't mind. In this place, he felt exposed, vulnerable to the blacks whom he did not trust fully. After all, to them he was just money. It was a smart move to suck up to them, that much was clear. Shirra

meanwhile, was in her own heaven due to her red dress and the power that came with it. How all these animals would know about a white cat in a red dress and what it implied was beyond him. Very, very, far beyond him.

This afternoon, when they had walked down the street with Shirra in front, all had parted for them in reverence. It was ridiculous. But it didn't matter; tomorrow they would go to the Citadel in California again. That place was not just a citadel; it was the 'research-citadel' according to the blacks. An important research place, they had explained. The Mexican citadel he was in now was small and outside the city. Domed up, like the one in California, but not nearly as impressive.

Probably the city was too dusty? Too much fur? Too much sun? The latter, most likely. Greg sank into a restoring sleep, dreaming of Blikol in her bathing suit. She certainly would like to see him! She was showing off her figure and then the three of them were dancing, he, Blikol and of course Amandine.

###

Greg yawned, stretched and finished his slightly trembling drink, shaking with the motions of the huge chopper-ship. Shirra had cooked for them and she certainly had made use of the facilities and the aid of her singular staff member, a deep red squirrel. The first squirrel he had seen here. It looked different than the ones in Keith's world. This was much more squirrely. Black eyes for example. No wonder the blacks felt a bit superior. This particular squirrel even had some sort of speech-impediment. Shirra had shrugged when he'd asked. "It's a squirrel, what do you expect?" she'd said.

They would arrive within the hour. Shirra was restless now. She kept looking through the window. Sit down, get up, walk around, sit down.

TonTan had pointed out the bookshelf with 'tech-stuff'. Greg tried to understand anything of the book in his hand. It was all Chinese markings, no matter it was called 'common' around these parts. The book held technical

drawings of the chopper. There were lots of books with such drawings. Engines, cars, and indeed planes. The blacks had tons of documentation. This room was a show-case of their knowledge. He had been given to understand that TonTan was sort of the 'king' in their clan, their family.

Greg put the book back. He wondered about the reception they would get. Somehow he was certain the blanches were still waiting for their lasers to be activated and it would give him leverage. They would treat him nice. Plus, he could show a working tablet. Not 'the' tablet, of course. His tablet held a full copy of the original one, with the added bonus of not falling apart soon. He'd made many copies; it would allow Keith to dive in if he ever needed. Tablets were cheap, Keith had said. So, he had brought a nice spare as well as his spiffy phone, a tablet in its own right.

Those blanches probably would get their lasers, but he'd be in between. It would be insufferable to have a laser eradicate the little bear settlement. He still was sure Amandine was there.

Amandine... would she still recognize him?

He pictured the dog-like face, clear green eyes locked on him. He imagined her muzzle, imagined her saying 'yum yum' and the dog-toothy-smile with it.

"Greg?"

He looked up to see Shirra had her arms crossed over her chest, watching him with interest, wondering what he was thinking perhaps. The dress was really nice material, but the white, lace trimmed apron somehow did away with the majestic exterior, demoting the thing to some maid costume. Then again, it wasn't, it clearly wasn't. The only reason he felt that 'maid' thing, was because of the cultural notion only he carried in this world. He didn't miss any of the 'erotic' net-surfing. Funny, he hadn't surfed like that since he had left Aachen. All in all, it was his problem; for Shirra nor any other here, felt about that dress the way he did. Plus, on the bright side, his eroticized

link was evaporating. The apron was nice material, but also useful. It was a long apron and cross-linked on the back. Functional, not for the looks.

“Contact!” TonTan called from the open door. This meant they were approaching the air field. Indeed, five minutes later, in the twilight, the big thing set down. When he finally stood outside between the choppers, looking down on the large dome again, he felt apprehension. What if the blanches had a different idea with him? He thought about Amandine, to strengthen his resolve. The fears quickly evaporated, as a small army of lead-adorned, all-white shepherd dogs formed an honor guard. More guard than honor, and the blanche doctor Henry stood ready to receive him. This person, for Greg still felt it difficult to call a sexless being ‘man’ or ‘woman’, received him with a wide smile. The doctor really did feel like a ‘man’.

“Greg!” he said with a grand gesture of open arms, “you left us in the dark!”

“Just horsing around on a trip,” he said, with his best joking face.

Henry kept smiling, with a sort of uncertainty. Greg remembered these guys could not read facial expressions very well. His joke must have gone wide of the mark.

“I had some business,” he concluded with a straight face.

“Anyway,” Henry concluded, “I am glad to welcome you back.”

“What happened to the wolves?” Greg asked.

“My project? Ah, yes, they seem to have decided to leave us.”

“You didn’t hunt them down?”

“Why, and what with? We can’t spare the dog-power.”

“Right.”

“What would you desire, now?” Henry asked, neutrally.

“Well, a bath would be nice.”

“Of course, let me escort you to your quarters. Tomorrow I hope you will show your prowess with the tablet I hear you have recovered, to the council?”

He squinted at Shirra, who nodded eagerly.

Why, that snitch!

###

Standing cleaned and freshened in his bed room he took the robe from its peg and felt much better. He'd ordered all the guard dogs out, this wasn't a house. It was a stronghold! What idiocy.

“Rafael!” he called, the black Labrador butler appeared. Shirra had spent the time to collect staff. She had followed up on his suggestion a guy between all the girls would be a nice change.

“A hot cocoa at the fire place, please.”

“Certainly sir! I have placed your slippers, warmed, sir.”

“Nice.”

He walked to the large living room, and propped himself up on the chaise lounge, with his tablet. He tried the satellite interface again. It was not working of course, courtesy to the lead dome. Keith's beefed up transmitter certainly had worked outside the dome. It would do its trick at the council chamber. The room was empty, and he suddenly missed the nearness of his white cat.

“Shirra!” he called.

She appeared momentarily, flushed, clearly having been called from something or other.

“I think you should take a night off.”

“Oh Greg, that is wonderful!”

“In fact, I think you should take every night off.”

Exasperated, she explained, “I will not let you down!”

“Sorry?”

“You’ll see!”

“Are you preparing a present?”

“Not really. I will visit my sister though.”

“Oh, I suppose that is good.”

Next, she stood contemplating something, wiping her hands on her apron before blurting, “I love you Greg.”

He knew she couldn’t help feeling so and didn’t like at all how dependent it made her on him. “You do? That is very nice, Shirra. You know I like you, a lot. Come here.”

She walked up to him.

“Whoever made you so pathetically linked to me did not do you a favor.”

“How can you say that?” she said in near distress.

Greg considered the wording, settling for, “I feel someone has tampered with your free will in doing that, you ought to be trying to change that.”

“I thought I had changed, haven’t I?”

“This time around, it took you only half a day to get that perpetual smile on your face.”

“This role grows on one.”

Greg nodded. “Go, go see your sister, do things normal cats do. See you tomorrow.”

“Sure!”

She nearly danced out of the room. At the moment, he did not understand a fraction of her. How different she had been in that medical laboratory. Shirra was a medical master, 'mistress' he corrected mentally, yet here she accepted the star-status of her red dress readily. Whoever had wired her up that way had some explaining to do.

He took a sip of his hot cocoa.

"Rafael!"

"Yes sir?"

"It's too hot."

"Certainly sir. I will remember to have lukewarm cocoa next time. My apologies."

"It's fine man, I was just pulling your leg."

"Aha, sir made a joke. Amusing."

This was going nowhere.

"I think I'll turn in early tonight. If Shirra feels like it, she's welcome to sleep next to me, I think."

"You 'think', sir?"

Greg wondered about that. "Is that considered normal, to have one's assistant next to one in bed?"

The dog nodded. "Very much so, sir."

"Why?"

"People would talk, sir."

"What about?"

Greg sat up, motioning to the seat opposite him, "have a seat, Rafael."

The butler sat very awkwardly in the chair, Greg noted. "If you prefer to stand that is all right."

The pitch black Labrador sprang up at once. Shirra had pleased him no end, getting this black dog instead of all the white furs. A little less slave-mentality would have suited him though.

“People might think inappropriate, *things*, sir.”

Greg eyed the ring on the dog’s finger. “Are you married?”

“How exceptional of sir, to notice this triviality, sir.”

“On that healthy, shiny black fur I can easily see the gold ring, Rafael.”

“Indeed, sir.” The dog beamed with pride.

“You have a black dog wife, Rafael?”

“Certainly, sir, the blanches would not allow differently. They are preoccupied with species.”

“And just now, you felt just a little bit different I hope?”

Rafael nearly jumped in place, to keep his bearings.

Greg waved this away, “I’m sure you are aware of my reputation. I have my own version of the truth.”

Finally, the dog aide decided to go out on a limb, letting his training fade. “Is it true what they say? You, sir, were in space with a skunk lady?”

“Ah, you heard about that? Heard it long ago?”

“It’s been the talk on the street for weeks, sir! I’m to presume it’s true then?”

“This matters to you a lot, a whole skunk, does it?”

“Yes, it does! It’s really true then, isn’t it? Um, sir.”

“Yes, Rafael. It is. I’ll show you a picture of the,” he thought of saying ‘bitch’ but reconsidered given the amount of misunderstanding that might arise, “lady in question, as well as her family.”

“Her... family? But how?”

“Hush, lower the lights and look.”

He activated the beamer on the tablet and selected the picture of Tabitha and her parents at her graduation.

“Holy mother of Maria...” Rafael muttered, making a very quick cross over his chest while looking on with large eyes.

“You’re a Christian, Rafael?”

“No!” the dog lied strongly.

“Don’t lie to me, I’m not deaf. And in case you’re wondering, I don’t mind whatever belief you hang on to.”

“You... don’t?”

“Own truth, remember?”

“But... about *faith*! That is...”

“Never mind that, is there anything important about this picture that makes you offer a prayer?”

As if caught red-handed, the butler looked away in shame. “I’m sorry sir, it won’t happen again.”

“Probably, but indulge me.”

With a pained look the dog explained, “There are stories, sir. A family of skunks will light the new dawn, brought forward by the savior.”

Now that was way too freaky. Fearing where this would go, he shut off the beamer. “That’ll be all. You’re welcome to tell anyone you like about that skunk.”

“Thank you sir, thank you!”

Greg flip flopped to his bed and fell asleep in a heartbeat.

###

Dawn seemed to spread through the bed room. Greg looked to the source of sleepy breathing next to him in the slowly increasing light. Shirra was sleeping with a happy smile on her muzzle.

“Hey?” he said softly.

She stirred and smacked. “Hmm? Greg?”

“Good morning, cat in the red dress. Add boots and you’re puss in boots,” he sniggered softly.

“I don’t understand...”

“Inside joke, never mind.”

“Oh.”

“Why did you tell that Henry or whoever about the tablet?”

“I assumed...” she blinked, waking up quickly.

“You assumed wrong. That was not very nice.”

“Oh no, Greg, what did I do? I must pray!”

She nearly jumped out of bed, in all her furry whiteness. This only increased the ‘cat’ feeling he had about her, rather than consider her a mate in the way she preferred. Too much fur, Greg thought. How about if she wore some night shirt?

On her knees, facing a red dot on the wall she sat praying. Just when he had thought she’d gotten clear of this she was slipping back into this whole servant routine!

“What are you praying for?”

“Forgiveness, I have betrayed you, and doomed myself.”

“I didn’t say you betrayed me. I said you ought to ask me before you do such things. We’re in this together, right?”

She stopped. "You're not mad?"

"Yes I'm mad at you, but it'll pass. Partners can get mad at another without leaving, I should hope. Now, I will have to go to the council and lead them around the garden for a bit."

"But, that is not right, is it?"

"No, I suppose it is not 'right'. Then again, killing about five hundred thousand civilians in one sweep isn't either."

"Including white cats and dogs?"

Exasperated, he looked at the ceiling, then at her. "Yes, those too, no doubt."

"You're sure?"

He wanted to say "stands to reason" but reconsidered, "Yes. Certain."

"What can you do?"

"As I said, I'll buy some time. I will get this rigged. Don't you worry."

He yawned and rolled on his back. "So, did you have a nice visit to your sis?" and looked at her when he found the reply took rather long.

Shirra was getting into her clothes so he could not see her face, when she finally said "Visit... yes."

Probably not too great a success, he guessed. She *had* said there was a little animosity between them. Better not dig into that. "You know the schedule for today?"

"I think at noon there is a special session about you and your work. I can say there is a lot of excitement in the city."

"Is there?"

"You're a bit of a star, Greg."

"I bet that reflects on you then?" he asked in a nasty tone.

Shirra zipped her dress up, and turned around with a blank expression. "This dress gives me power you cannot imagine."

"You mean, it being official and all."

She narrowed her eyes. "Yes?"

"You like that, don't you?"

"So? Are you accusing me I misuse my station?"

"No... I'm trying to figure you out. Sort of a hobby, I suppose."

"Hobby? You have a hobby? Just like a genuine blanche! Greg, you're astounding. And one of such exaltation at that, super!"

Greg got lost. "And again you're baffling my ability to understand you. I think the female mind must be the most intricate design in the universe, strike that: multiverse."

There was a fleeting moment where he saw that 'real' Shirra, like he'd seen and experienced when at Keith's. And poof, it was gone again. She was back being an assistant. Quite off-putting, as a matter of fact.

"Seeing as we have another two hours to get to the council, could you try to break your fast and clean up within the next two hours?" Shirra asked.

"You forgot the magic word."

"What is the magic word?"

Greg smiled, but was annoyed and didn't answer. He got up, announcing, "I'm going for a shower," and walked to the ample shower room, next to the equally spacious bath room. Inside, he worked his muscles, watching his image in the heated mirrors. Still a bit soggy in the mid-section despite his walking and working out. At least the fine coat of black hair was gone everywhere but where prudent. He was pretty hairy still. His skin was going a shade lighter, he noticed. Not enough sun. Close up to the mirror he saw the dark spots of the itchy inside of his elbows. In his face he also noted small

infections. What could be causing it? Some doctor in Aachen had once said it was stress.

As he stood inspecting this in the private solitude of his shower room, Shirra walked in with towels. “Shirra!” he called out dismayed, “Can’t you knock?”

“There is nothing there I haven’t seen before, you feel uncomfortable?”

“Well, what do you think? Get the hell out or I’m going to kick you out. Now!”

She took a leisurely walk back and he took his robe from the peg, calling, “What makes you think you have any privileges with me? Well?”

“We’ve been through so much, I thought, I could...”

“You thought? You think too much, Shirra, or too little, either way I’m still pissed you set me up with that bloody council today!”

A knock outside the door indicated the arrival of yet another part of the household.

“Yes!” Greg yelled.

“Sir, the Remonovna assistant is at our premises, and I apologize for taking the call. Sir.”

Shirra looked stricken and rushed out mumbling ‘no no no no no’ all the time in her bee line out of there.

Once she was out he decided to check something, “Rafael, tell me, is it custom for an assistant to walk in on their master unannounced?”

“I couldn’t say sir. Such events are well shielded from the outside. After the master retires, only the assistant is allowed close unless she calls.”

“Shirra sometimes gets me taut, I tell you.”

“Sir?”

“She’s nothing but a fuckin’ cat, Rafael; you’re at least a dog. And not white. Sight for sore eyes, I’ll say.”

The dog took this stoically.

“Say, what’s the word on the grapevine about me sleeping with my fur ball cat?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t you sir me, Rafael, I saw yester eve you’re not like that.”

“How would sir like me to call sir?”

“How about just ‘you’ and ‘Greg’?”

“That would be very inappropriate, sir.”

“Fine. Now, what could have set off my fancy white kitten so, you think?”

“The assistant of the lady Remonovna, sir. Very inappropriate too, for her to call at our house would we not be with the red lady. Again I’m sorry I took it upon myself to answer the unknown call.”

“I suppose Shirra was due to show herself, all nice and red, eh?”

“Certainly.”

That would teach her.

“Inappropriate, you say?”

“The whole city tries to get an audience with her highness, and calls are *not* made by her. Never. Ever.”

“Interesting...”

He fastened his robe and walked down the hall in his slippers. “Sir!” Rafael hurried after him, “can I be of assistance, sir?”

He marched on, gliding down the two flights of steps by the rails, startling two black dressed blue eyed white cats busy with linen folding and ironing. They curtsied at once and he heard Rafael thunder down the stairs after him.

In the large vein-marble vestibule, below the majestic chandelier, which he liked actually, stood Shirra who was trying to appear haughty to the other white cat. The other was the 'special' assistant no doubt, a white dress with two red bands on the hem. Part of him still thought the attire tacky. The other had blue eyes, was slimmer than Shirra and clearly more refined. She was immaculately brushed, with short hairs. Shirra's lengthening hair was slightly messy. He had no idea what could have caused it, but it made her look a bit more wild and, from behind, with the dress and all, not bad.

"Hi kittens," he yelled happily, "what's cooking?"

Shirra seemed 'beaten'; his appearance clearly was not helping much given her rolling eyes. The other cat raised an eyebrow. "You believe this is a suitable presentation of oneself to the eyes of the city.... Sir Greg?"

The last word dripped venom.

"Wow, you must be thrilled to be here. Do come in, have a dish of milk. I'm sure Shirra can procure some cat nip. Do we have any kitty litter, Shirra?"

Shirra gripped her hair head, staring at him, aghast.

The white dressed cat went on, "At twelve you will appear at the lady, she will receive you. Unless your master looks like that, sis."

"Whoa, *you* are Shirra's sister? How about you treating her a bit more civil, eh?"

The white cat turned to Shirra, "I believe your master lacks decorum and could use some etiquette lessons."

"Hey! So far no one has fallen over my manners. What's your name?"

"You wouldn't know, how typical. I'm Moewabi, sir. Be on time."

She turned, elegantly.

"Hey, *Moebi*," Greg called after her making sure he was stripping decorum as he could, "you're not on a catwalk, and we can't make it to your missy because we'll be at the council at noon."

“I am certain such trivial matters are in the good and *capable* hands of my dear sister.”

Moewabi opened the door, stepped outside into an army of white dogs and Shirra rushed to close the door, whirled around to face him wide eyed. “What in the name of the prophet were you thinking?”

Greg smiled, as he’d expected he had easily hurt her feelings this way and he was glad he had made the effort. Indifferent, he turned and started for the stairs. Shirra yelled to the present (or eavesdropping) staff, quite beside herself, “If *any* of you so much as *thinks* about this, you’ll find yourself in Mexico! Am I clear?”

Some shuffling from undisclosed areas indicated all the other personnel made to hide from the exploded Shirra.

“Greg!” she called matronly.

He walked on.

“*Greg!*” It was a shriek; there was something in there that made him realize perhaps he’d gotten back at her and then some. He stopped halfway up the stairs, looking back, “Well?”

“Why, Greg, why-hy-hy?”

“You’re not always too nice to me either, I’d say.”

“What have I done to deserve this? What?”

Collapsing on the cold marble, in a pathetic heap, she broke down in tears. There were a lot of reasons for him being like this. One always present reason was he hadn’t taunted enough people in a while, another was she had gotten pregnant, he’d bitten Ricca because of her miscarriage, he could go on ending with her brilliant move of informing the locals about their tablets. However, the pitiful heap of red on the floor was touching him and he went to her. Shirra was a proud and strong woman, not this. This was not right.

Squatting at her side he cradled her, “Come, girl, come, we’ll get cleaned up and you tell me what you would like me to do. After all, it can at worst be her word against our appearance, right?”

She looked up, hurt and forlorn. The tears had changed her fur to a messy series of clots of short thin hairs. He wiped the tears away with his thumb and pulled a hand through her lengthening white hairs, which she grew because of him.

“I like your long hair. You are much better looking than your sister.”

For some reason he’d said something special, as she clung to him with a sigh of relief and together they went to the master bed room.

## 67. The Lady

Prepared, they arrived at the Remonovna place, a big and showy place that would be called a palace but for the failed exterior. Greg got the impression someone had been trying to cross the French Louvre with a German Schloss, including drawbridge. It was across this they arrived at the first of what turned out to be several rounds of guards and levels of security.

“I say it is only show,” Greg grumbled at the second ‘interview’ Shirra went through; “there are only so many guards, in the end.”

At the final level, they were received by nothing less than a blanche; this one was clad like a horrible page. Greg kept a straight face, but it was costing effort.

“Follow me, Sir Greg,” the page said and led them to a large room which might have been part of Versailles, mirror-wise. Greg noted many fine details, small sculpted odds and ends that appeared in all corners of the mirrors, not one similar. If anything, it was impressive!

“I like what you did to the building, nice,” he offered.

“I will let the lady know, sir.” The page held another door open and motioned to a pair of chairs. Exactly two. “Please be seated here. Upon entry of the lady, you are expected to stand up, Sir Greg. Your assistant is allowed beside you to signify her social rank.”

Instead of saying “dandy” he nodded, and sat down.

“Would sir prefer refreshment, while waiting for her highness?”

This was too much, obviously, so he rolled along with the request, “I rather do fancy a little bit of water, dear sir.”

Missing the innuendo, the page clapped his hands and a black dressed cat appeared with a glass.

“Shirra, you like a drink too?” Greg asked.

She shook her head in alarm, to the irritation of Greg. He’d enough puppeteering for a day and brusquely he informed the page, “Nonsense, she’ll have a glass of water too.”

The hairless page raised a painted-on eyebrow and accepted the request. Again the assistant-cat dashed forward. He noted this cat had very short hair and there was something about the folds of the dress he couldn’t match. It was altogether possible she had no tail.

Once both had their glass of water set on a little table in front of them on a rather non-obvious wobbly-looking tableau-on-a-pole, they were left alone. That is, except for the cat in assistant-black who stood ‘inconspicuously’ to the side. Greg took his glass. Not too heavy, he guessed. It was crystal clear, with a myriad of colors from the dispersion of light through the cuts. “What on earth is this?” he asked, turning the glass.

“Fused diamond,” Shirra said slowly, watching her glass with dread.

Greg turned the glass, it was small but diamond? Idiots. Then he took a peek at the remaining assistant before leaning to Shirra, whispering, “She hasn’t got a tail?”

Shirra nodded.

Greg sat back, admiring the glass again and wondering how one could in fact create it, on close inspection it was many-cornered rather than round. With a sigh, he looked at the cat who wore a 'not here' stance and said, "Sad."

Shirra turned to him, surprised, "I thought you hated my tail? It reminded you of everything a woman is not, you said."

"True, but it is you. Without it, you would be something wrought, unnatural and 'made'. You understand?"

Shirra thought this through. "I think so," smiled and added, "That was nice to say."

A bell sounded and the doors opened. At an urgent nod from Shirra he got to his feet, holding the glass. In walked Moewabi in a much less secure gait than the last time he'd seen her, followed by a stocky built Caucasian woman. She had short gray hair on her head and was a sight for sore eyes as she definitely was a complete woman. Greg couldn't be sure but somehow all his senses told him so. It radiated off of her.

Following the figure, not too attractive, he judged, he noted the dress was rather simple. He'd call her 'alternative' had he met her in the streets of Aachen. In short: not his type, short of a few light-years. Yuk. There were some things about her that were tugging at his memory but it didn't quite fall into place.

"Have a seat, Greg, dearie," her hand beckoning him invitingly. The voice struck a few real weird chords, finishing the picture in his mind. It was as if he was listening to Remon with a too high voice. The words made Greg feel much more at ease, but not so the assistants! Moewabi gasped as she heard her mistress, as did Shirra.

The lady Remonovna smiled and looked at both cats, "You hear that? The sisters even gasp alike, isn't that wonderful?"

Greg read the events easily and approached the lady to shake her hand warmly. "My, my, finding a normal person here. Fancy that. Well met! I'm Greg."

"I know you are. I'm the lady Remona Remonovna."

"You have some traits of him. I must admit there is a likeness."

"Only the good ones, I hope?"

"No really," Greg returned the smile, admitting Remona captivated his senses, "that handshake, you just offered your hand in the exact same way he did, will you believe?"

She let a pause long enough to be detected, "So... I am to assume the rumor is true then, you actually met my ancestor in the flesh."

"Didn't he write something nice about it?"

"You're teasing, Greg." She smiled but didn't laugh.

"Something tells me you are not normally like this, lady."

"No, but then again the set of two feline gasps we both just witnessed *are* a bit of a dead giveaway, methinks."

"But Moebi there," Greg probed, "she would know, right?"

"Of course, don't you Moebi?"

"Yes, Remona."

Greg noted the downcast eyes. One did not cross Remona however slightly and enjoy the tale to tell.

Shirra giggled, but Greg knew it was pure stress.

"Don't you just love the way she giggles? Exactly like my Moebi here."

Greg considered that. He liked Shirra's giggle, very much so in fact. Caught by the spirit to say something nice he added, "I also like her eyes, Remona. Can I call you Remona?"

“You can, you being a friend of the family, as it seems.”

“Friend? Strong word, Remona. I will admit I have had words with Remon.”

Shirra and Moewabi, who by now stood sort of awkwardly together, broke into an acute whisper of ‘savior’ etc. Remona let it pass.

“So,” Greg addressed Remona, “you let your girl here go over to our place -en plain publique- and get us over here before we can go to the council. What is so very important?”

The woman nodded almost imperceptibly... amused? No, bolstering an expectation more like.

“My ancestor was not kidding about you, Greg. You do have a ‘social eye’, in his words.”

“Hmm. Let me say my contemporaries would disagree, but anyway.”

With a short sweep of her hand she put the niceties aside.

“Right then, this is about the tablet.”

That was to be expected, and unperturbed he waved one hand into the air in the general direction of Shirra. “Oh, Shirra?” snapping his fingers spurring Shirra into action. She took the tablet from his backpack.

Remona held it with a frown, looking at him and the tablet in sequence. “This is not the original.”

“Indeed. But how would you know?”

She eyeballed him, irritated.

“You’re not stupid, Greg. Play me and find a quick or painful demise. It is my business to know things. Now, where did you procure this?”

Big talk, he wasn’t easily scared. Then again, given the behavior of Moewabi he chose to be political about it. “Somewhere else.”

“You went to the horse people, didn’t you?”

“Yep. Half of them seem to be cows though. Or at any rate, I saw bulls.”

“Is that so?” she eyed him levelly; “Sounds like you even took your eyes along, my, my. How did you persuade them to let you go?”

Greg noted a sub-sound which reminded him very much of the original Remon. He went for the covert answers.

“Using hard and compelling arguments.”

She studied his face but Greg put his neutral mask in place. Here was someone who had a knack for reading faces, however not well enough for the likes of him. Satisfied she nodded, “Good. We can’t afford a war right now.”

A war? But how... what... that island had looked like a complete war-machine, and he had blown a ship out of the water. He settled for asking, “A war?”

Still checking the tablet she said, “They are provoked at the least offence.”

“Are they now, hmm, I could imagine they are. You know they have this rather strong idea about females?”

“I do. My predecessors had much less trouble with them. They’ve been growing stronger over the last century.”

Remona talked too easy about centuries, to his taste. “I imagine they might feel unfavorably about inter-species relations, however I’m sure they’ll feel the human’s collective sets the right example,” here he eyeballed the woman and feline, “like how you-”

Remona and Moewabi looked at him with a fright, but Remona hid it within a second. “Get *them* out,” Remona hissed, recovering.

Greg had no idea if he was supposed to get out but Moewabi and Shirra both started to order seen and unseen cats from the room at once. Greg was overwhelmed to see four of them. He had not even seen more than one! It didn’t take long and once the door closed a new chapter began. Moewabi

stood purposefully next to her lady. Shirra stood close to him. Her stance already made it clear this was not to be considered an equal relation.

Remona pointed her finger at him, “How did you know?”

“It’s rather obvious in the looks and glances between you two. I may not be smart with my manners, but things like that are pretty clear to me.”

“You will not speak of this, is that clear?”

This was unexpected. “Sure, if you like. It means nothing to me.”

“That is clear. I remind you the penalty will be a painful death, Greg.”

Seeking a way out of this he went back to the tablet-subject, “Something tells me you do not believe the lasers should be online.”

“For generations, my family has lived up to this moment; we have created the perfect environment. The lasers shall be no more.”

“Is that a decree?”

“Decrees are through the council. The wishes of the council are secondary to mine.”

“So, Shirra, you hear that? The lady Remona Remonovna would like to have broken lasers. Fun eh? It only can mean one thing: civil war is her game.”

“It is time for the blanches to get out in the open. We will spread over the world, take our rightful position. But those lasers cannot remain to threaten our new world order!”

“I see,” Greg retorted, “And here was simple me thinking you were the only one with her head screwed on straight.”

“Greg! Don’t you see? You live, you are proof we can remove all the genetic wards, we will be whole again!”

“Meaning?”

She cast a dark look at Shirra, asking, “You feel those blanches out there resemble humans?”

“Sort of.”

“Exactly, no more than that. But now, all is past, we can grow to our rightful might. The Chinese, the horse folks would not allow this! Their age is at an end, as is their bio war. Your presence testifies to this.”

“Hypothetically speaking, those horses, what sort of war would they wage?”

“Utter destruction, Greg, you cannot imagine their hate!”

“Hmm.” Those horses had a grudge, sure enough.

“What does that mean? Speak up!”

“For your information, lady, I’m not one of your soft followers.”

“I will inform you I own a well equipped cellar with very fun tools. And, I’m proficient with them.”

“Are you threatening me with torture?”

“You? Ahahaa!” She laughed heartily, sniffed and wiped a tear from her eye. “No, Greg, my friend, of course not. I would test your white kitten friend there. It is well known the mind plays tricks under extreme stress. Torture by proximity is the key.”

Her pointed finger rested on Shirra, who froze, and Remona winked at him. His mind raced, this was not following the conversational line he expected at all. He decided on a gamble.

“Interesting. You could make her scream, you recon?” Greg’s hand went to his neck then travelled forward feeling the increasing beard there, scratching it, to channel his anxiety.

“Are you serious?” Remona said as her brow rose in surprise. Then she took a short look at Shirra who was equally surprised, to the extent her mouth stood agape.

Pushing his luck, Greg went on, "Sure, we could string up the sisters and see how they scream, have a ball."

Again Remona laughed, differently, and more sinister.

"Strings? Oh, but you misunderstand, my dear Greg. Torture should not leave marks. I have developed very nice infections and site specific substances and toxics that create pain you would not believe. For the foolhardy I've very nice bio-agents. Recently I developed one which makes the subject severely sensitive to light." Remona clasped her hands a second in pleasure. "You," her eyes glinted, "are mistaken with your 'sex' games. None of that ripped fingers, ears, pulled teeth, glowing pokers in an eye socket. I'm for the civilized method. Just a drip of the right enzymes or a neat design virus... Sooo fun. And it's all reversible in minutes."

Her eyes lit up with glee.

"No knives?"

"Greg, my young friend, your neat cat can take a battering, on the inside. Assistants can, the best lot for a test, I always say."

"I, eh," This was going way too fast, and he was sorely lost for a fitting reply.

"I have information that links you and Shirra very closely. Are you trying to make me believe she means nothing to you?"

Greg looked into the distance. How much did Shirra mean to him? A lot, true, but still: he would offer her to save Amandine. He needed to get the little coyote, and find a way out of this madhouse! Interestingly, his thinking delayed his reply and made it seem he wasn't too sure of Shirra. The effect on Shirra was devastating, rocked to her core. Good, that would make it look real. Shirra was nearly hyperventilating, rooted to her place. Moewabi was also very quiet and looking with big fearful eyes to her mistress. That spelled a nasty turn, Moewabi certainly expected something appalling. And she would know.

Remona shook her head, seeming to seek something immediate while she advanced on the trembling Shirra. Her frowning vision sought through the room, finding nothing. Suddenly she kicked out with force. He heard a bone snap and Shirra went down wailing, holding her broken leg. He noted 'one-bend-too-many'; the kick had resulted in a completely severed bone!

Afraid he might show any emotion he quickly switched to his 'it's a cat' feeling. A cat, just a cat! And forcing this thought he managed a debonair "If we shoot it, it'll be out of its misery, Remona."

And then to think he wasn't much of a gambler!

"By the beard of the prophet," she yelled over Shirra's whimpering, "you... don't care?" Remona went to one knee, next to Shirra, and felt the broken leg. Shirra's eyes were full of fear.

Would she try to help her?

Then, gripping the leg in a particular way she twisted the broken leg, while examining his face for his reaction. 'Cat' he kept repeating in his mind, 'only a cat'. Blood welled from her leg as a wound formed and she screamed. Suddenly a thin edge of bone stuck out, only just, from the red mass. The sound of the bone squeezing through the flesh reminded him very much of the slaughter work on the farm. He would always look on as the village butcher was at work. This gave him a good mental hold, pushing ever further away his feelings for Shirra. Focusing on that memory of the village butcher, he saw a cow strung up on a frame to the wall of the shed. He recalled the curse of the butcher as a bone would break and the way he was shown how the bone had broken. His thoughts were uprooted by Moewabi, who rushed to her sister on her knees, next to the woman in the coarse dress, pleading.

"Please! Please stop it!"

Remona stood up with an evil glint to her eye. This woman was a very dangerous opponent and he hoped his game would pay off. How could he hope for success while he faced this lawless person, this unrestrained person?

“She’s done so much for you lady, please!” Moewabi pleaded, crying up to her mistress.

Remona kicked her cat friend hard in the back causing a muffled ‘uh’. Moewabi fell down, over her sister, staining her white dress with the blood of her downed sister. Remona grunted annoyed, and put in another kick. Moewabi took it stoically; she clearly was no stranger to this treatment.

“What a savage, what an unprecedented savage,” he thought as he saw Remona at it. This lady answered to absolutely none, she was the highest authority and this was her wont.

The second kick to Moewabi’s head had sent her to the floor and both cats were silent. Moewabi certainly was Remona’s ‘love’ and yet gets kicks out so carelessly? Remona was crazy. He hoped Shirra was not going into shock since the blood loss was profuse.

“See, Greg? These cats’ bones are really strong. You have to kick perfectly, I learned through a lot of experience. Paid off, don’t you think?”

Greg dared not swallow but decided to look close to the ghastly wound. “Clean break,” he observed. “What a peculiar way to show that piece of bone. By the way, your carpet is getting soiled.” He swallowed while his back was to her.

“You are so right!”

She clapped her hands and the doors flew open, the page walked in quickly. The blanché took the scene in. “Clean up here,” Remona commanded, with a vague wave. The page replied in a sort of, ‘not again’ type voice, “Refuse, lady?”

“No, I think repair. Greg?”

His mind signaled danger. The best he could do now, was take his time to check on Remona’s body language. He must spend time over this, and so he investigated the woman’s visage for information. She was looking him over,

trying to gauge him. Remon had been able to do that, she clearly wasn't even aware he was sizing her up. Thank God!

He looked up to the ceiling and silently thought "I still don't believe, you know that!"

"Well?" Remona asked, showing she was getting impatient.

"Will she be useful quickly?"

"Tomorrow, promise."

"Huh?" he offered genuinely amazed, "With that kind of muscle damage? You're kidding, right?"

"Don't question my prowess, Greg," she huffed, "Tomorrow, at the latest! I'm sure you must realize by now I know exactly what I do."

Impressed, he nodded. "Wow, all right then, repair." And then he realized he had just clumsily but definitely pushed the Remonovna dame from the aggressive side to the defensive, she now was trying to prove her restorative ability. 'Good' he thought, while Remona gave short instructions to the page.

Presently she waved him on, walking into another room. It was entirely white washed with dark industrial tiles on the floor and once inside the door closed behind them while muttering, "I know how to work a piece of bone without damaging tendons, by Remon!"

Indeed, what a nice person.

She looked up, "So let me get this right Greg, you are, that is," she waved the black slab, "I am in possession of a tablet from your own parallel universe?"

No point in denying this, so he nodded.

"Can you reprogram the lasers?"

"I might." That had worked before.

“You can or can’t, don’t bullshit me. Remon warned us for your play with words.”

“I simply am not sure. Remon could write code better than I can.”

“Is that so?”

With well hidden glee, he found he had just caressed her being, bathed her in the shine of her mythical forefather.

“I can’t make it nicer than that.”

“This programming will take a lot of time, I expect?”

“Yes.” And it was perfectly true, not restoring the access, but adjusting it to his wishes.

“What will you tell the council?”

“That I can do this, and it will take a lot of time.”

“You almost had me convinced with Shirra there, Greg. Rest assured I will restore her.”

Damn! How could she have seen through his ruse? Perhaps... he had to try it just once more, maybe she was bluffing. A double bluff?

“What makes you think I care for her? You return her nicely to that building I’ve been assigned, I will leave without her anyway.” He very well might, so his body language should show this to be true.

Now Remona frowned. He had her!

“Leave?”

“Of course, I need not reprogram those bloody lasers. I only need to get home. Right?”

“But there is not a gateway, ah, ‘setup’, anywhere?”

Daring, he put in an affronting word, just to check his status with her.

“Don’t act so stupid, they are all around! Every power converter has one.”

She slapped her head. "Of course! And you can use any of them?"

This was leading to an interesting conclusion.

"Nope, I will have to repair them to a state that allows transport."

"You need tools for that?"

Excited, he noted her assent. If only he would be able to goad her to his end!

"Actually, I need a black human for that," he said expectant.

"Pha! The blacks! They're excrement."

'Now, where have I heard that before,' he thought. He narrowed his eyes and held his dark skin in his fingers to make a point.

"Not your skin you idiot! Their sickle cell thing, they're an evolutionary dead end."

"Ah," he nodded. "Anyway, they have superb mechanical prowess. Also, I will need that private army of wolves that Henry built."

"Henry's failure? I thought you lead them to their promised land?"

She was very well informed, he had counted on this.

"Yes, but I have to collect them. I can trust them, not that bunch of brain washed white dogs in this city."

"And I thought Shirra was mad for hiring a black dog. It makes sense now."

"Listen up, Remona, I won't kid you, I think Shirra is nice and all, but she's a cat. OK? A cat, not a woman."

"How true..." she sidled over and pursed her lips.

"I don't find you..." he thought about what to say next. It was no doubt dangerous to make an enemy of her now. He'd just found out the hard way she was running the show here. Now he was quickly running out of options, this hag was cornering him and he had no idea if it was wise to reject her.

“You do not find me what?”

“You are not dressed in a way that incites me.”

“So, what’s it you get hot about? Anything can be arranged.”

He thought quickly and the answer stood clearly in his mind like a beacon. “The thing is, in my world, a French maid uniform is rather misused for a sexual message, and...”

“What is that, a French maid?”

“Like the black uniform the cat assistants wear,” he said flatly. Bang! He had her!

“You like me in one of those? Fat chance!” Ruffled, she threw open the door. “Tomorrow council time, I trust you have a good memory.”

He tapped his head. “Solid.”

“Good, hate to see you lose it, bit by bit.”

He was escorted to the street, alone, with the bag with his tablet. Outside, he was surrounded by his ‘guard’. Whom were they guarding him from anyway? Panting, he was searching for control. His adrenalin was pumping still.

“Where is Miss Shirra, sir?” his lieutenant asked.

“She will be ‘delivered’ later, let’s go.” He noted one or two pairs of eyes with a sort of ‘ouch’ look. No questions. This was clearly normal. What a world! He walked the two miles to his house, in silent thought. That lady needed to die, horribly if possible, but he would settle for a quick death. He was sure he could get one of those wolves mad enough to go in for a suicide attack. With the gear he’d entered this world with, he should have done that himself even, but like this? He felt the thin fabric of his black suit. All in all, this had proven to be one lucky escape! If there was a God, meddling in

affairs, then this was certainly a moment he was on his side. “Thanks for saving Shirra,” he said softly, unaware of his acknowledging prayer.

At the house, he called the staff together. Four maids, two kitchen ‘dogs’, two cleaning dogs and Rafael stood there. “Listen guys, when Shirra gets back, be nice to her. She needs it.”

The staff nodded in silence, it was almost as if someone had died. One of the maids looked at her colleague, with two hands covering her muzzle to mask the gasping expression. This was clearly the youngest of them, she wore a grey dress. Probably a sign of something, he didn’t care. He left them as low key talk erupted between them.

On the balcony, overlooking the city, he wondered, would a laser be able to penetrate this encasing he saw there on top of him? The dome blocked something, radiation, he was led to believe, but it might also be indestructible to a carbon dioxide laser; simply too big. How about the moving windows? The removable slabs of dome in that ceiling; weren’t they an option? What if, one of the lasers could pinpoint that stupid castle of Remona through such a window?

He went in and called for Rafael to see the Labrador appear promptly.

“How is the control of those windows designed?”

“I will find out, sir.” With a short nod the dog left.

Greg sat down in the living room, and took the tablet. He needed to adjust that code. Procrastination was not going to solve anything, and he started working.

## **68. Broken**

Shirra was ‘delivered’ at his house in the very late evening, more like early morning. The clock pointed at 2 but since the thing had ten hours, a hundred

minutes and a thousand seconds, he didn't bother with it. Moewabi was at her sister's side, cooing over her apparently. Her look shot daggers at him, and anger distorted her fine features. His heart bled for her but this cat was in league with the enemy and needed to be treated accordingly lest his cover be blown.

"Your mistress is a smart woman, you know that, Moebi?"

This didn't even get a reply.

"If you harm her, ever again, Greg," she hissed this like a true cat, "I will find you, is that clear?"

"To do what?" he taunted her, "Please leave her now."

"We're sisters! I will hunt you down, destroy you utterly!"

"Right, lovely and all, out now. My house, my rules, you leave now."

Moewabi defied him, "You haven't the right to bar my sister from me!"

"I sure have. The door is that way, there's a good kitty."

"The lady has assented to the time to visit her!"

"Nice, now you go back and whine at her side then or whatever it is you like to do for her. Bye. Shirra will be fine, Remona promised. I take her word pretty high, and I don't need you fluttering around."

"But..."

"No buts, out or I will escort you out personally," he drew his gun from his belt.

She was way too persistent, totally caring for her sister suddenly, not fitting her character as Shirra had painted it. He believed this a ruse to spy. Anyway, once the interfering cat was out, he went to see Shirra. She had been put in their bed and was crying softly.

"Sir?" she asked softly, "Why can't even my own sister see me, sir?"

He winced at her use of that official title. He hadn't expected her speech to touch him so deeply. To evade her face, he first checked her leg. It was placed in a cast.

"How is your leg?"

"I will be able to resume my duties quickly, sir."

He sat down, next to her, ruffled her long hairs that covered the pillow around her head, nearly obscuring the ears. He felt so sorry for her, seeing her crushed this way.

"Shirra, I have to tell you something."

"Please don't fire me, sir," she sniffed, living in a hell, "I will do anything for you, sir; you know that?"

"That lady Remona was a little bigger bite than I had anticipated."

She looked at him, with frightened eyes full of question; her ears went all ways, capturing slight noises throughout the house. Totally stressed out he knew.

"I had not expected her to threaten me, least of all via you."

"She did, didn't she?" Shirra asked in a tiny voice.

"She has little regard for the grains of sand that are crunched in the cogwheels of her designs. You and me, we are grains of sand. I have done an awful thing, Shirra; I have put your life at stake to win a small point with Remona. Lives aren't meant to be gambled with."

Still not understanding, or not believing, she frowned in fear, "I did well, sir?"

"Shirra, understand, I nearly prayed to see you survive."

Her eyes glazed over when she said, out on a limb, "so you don't really hate me?"

He happily noted she dropped the honorific. “No I don’t, and I care for you a great deal. Believe me, much more than I thought.”

“Greg, oh Greg, it was all a bad dream?”

“If you call that plaster cast a dream, then yes, but I’m afraid the reality of this thing is as ugly as it feels.”

“What can we do, Greg?”

“Not trust your sister, for one. I’m sure she came along to spy on me.”

“But she cares for me, Greg.”

“Sure, but she cares for her mistress more.”

“She should!”

“Good, you keep this in mind when you visit her.”

“I will, Greg, I will. I only tried to help you.”

He kissed her head and then looked into her eyes. “Yes, you did. It was a sad misunderstanding of her ladyship’s true intentions.”

Her eyes seemed to calculate his reaction. Then, suddenly she said defiant, “Kiss me, Greg, prove I am important.”

“Eh? Kiss... you?”

“When you say I mean much to you, you mean this, don’t you? Prove it.”

He looked at her pink nose and invitingly pursed thin lips around the short muzzle. He reached a conclusion, after what he’d pushed her through it would be a small price to pay, right? And her horrible tongue? What the heck. When push comes to shove, just see it as running the gauntlet. So, he pushed his lips on hers and let her rough tongue enter his mouth. Not too long!

The taste was no worse than he remembered, but that rough tongue, like sandpaper, still a cat.

“That was not a real kiss!” she whined.

“Don’t push it, lady.”

She smiled, humming “I got a kiss... I got a kiss...” in a soft singsong.

“You *are* pushing it. Incidentally, I find the nightdress an improvement.”

The white, lace frilled satin material clad her fur from neck to upper legs.

“My sister’s doing, I think she got brainwashed by her mistress. She used to hate this stuff.”

“And you?”

“Do you have any idea how static this gets, with this much fur?”

“Couldn’t say. Cotton then?”

“I don’t wear anything in bed. Final.”

In protest, she crossed her arms over her white satin clad belly.

“So?”

Heaving and pulling, she put the garment to the side and then pulled the sheets over her. “So, that is better.”

He waved and went to the ‘study’, a large room with a large window overlooking the city. He took up his work again, digging through the endless lines of code he and Tabitha had made in the space station to control the setup there. He was trying to understand the operating system in the phone. His tablet contained all the details, but it took time. After that, he still needed to reverse engineer the firmware in the space station and adjust it to not shoot at any tiny piece of metal where a ‘human’ life sign was missing.

What a war-Monger that Remona was! He really ought to fire a laser into her fine palace, just to tease her. With some luck he would kill her, incidentally.

“Sir?”

Greg looked up, Rafael stood at the doorway. He waved him inward.

“I bring information, schemas and timings for the panes on the dome.”

“Excellent. Let me see.”

The dog rolled out handwritten papers with timings and a drawing of the dome.

“Nice, Rafael. With those coordinates we can draw a design. Look.”

With the tablet, he drew up a dome model with moving panes. Then he projected the image on the wall, and let it rotate in 3D. Rafael was impressed.

Greg pointed out what he meant, “This, here and here, and the station on the coordinates it actually resides, and using the laser pointing vectors we find where the intersections are.”

One laser could be made to shine through, but the impact would be in the garden of the palace building. Still a nice try.

“You think there are moments the lady ever walks in her garden, Rafael?”

“If sir is contemplating what it appears like, I need to warn sir that such an undertaking will hardly improve the situation for anyone.”

“How so?”

“Her position will be contested and instead of one strong line we will have feuding houses. Each house will presume the privileges she now ‘enjoys’; to the greater suffering of all.”

“Well said. There is always something, there just bloody always is something, isn’t there? How about a warning shot then? Just to prove something is happening.”

“Very well, sir.”

“You do not seem to think this a good idea still?”

“Innocent bystanders may get hurt.”

“Can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs, I always say.”

“This applies as well to sir’s assistant, sir?”

“I’m glad you understand me so well, Rafael.”

“Sir? I think that putting Shirra’s life at stake was bold, bordering on the ill-advised, if you pardon me for saying so. Her death would have put sir in a dreadful position.”

Interested he looked up at the dog. “Really? Do tell.”

“An assistant is tuned, sir. For sir this knowledge would not be accessible of course, but the gist of it is one cannot simply recruit on a new one.”

“Funny, she found me, not the other way round.”

Rafael considered this. “I beg your pardon sir, I was being presumptuous.”

“Not at all, I value your insights. You know something, my dear Rafael; you were right about me taking a chance there with Shirra’s life. However, I could not know that woman was a maniac.”

“It is well known, had you asked anyone here you would have been told so.”

“Thank you Rafael.”

He continued on his work, feeling a bit sweaty and unpleasant but happy he was getting on top of his design when he was startled by a white hand on his shoulder. Startled, he looked into the face of Shirra, “You can walk?”

His watch indicated a quarter to four in the morning.

“Surprised huh? The lady Remonovna has a huge laboratory under her palace. It is the apex of biogenetic research in this world. My bone will heal naturally but agents developed in that very place are used to add attuned cells on the fissured edge. Also skin-plasts cause a growth spurt resulting in usable tissue in a day or two. Specialty bio glues will support my muscles. I

have now seen the abysmal state of medical science of your world and you would not believe what is possible.”

“Uhhh I’m lost.”

“In a week, the cast can come off and the fur will grow back. How are you progressing?”

“Slow. But I now shifted my work to make a nasty explosion in her garden. I need to show off something to her.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yes, but I don’t intend to stay here too long. You must arrange a transport, a big one, and we will collect the wolves and go to Campone.”

“Why?”

“Safe.”

“I think you are right, going to Campone. Coincidentally close to Blikol, isn’t it?”

“Jealous?”

“The comparison isn’t fair.”

“And Amandine?” Greg asked, looking her square in the eye.

“That I can’t say, but if she is important to you... she is equally important to me.”

This touched him. “You really mean that?”

She nodded. He got up and hugged her. “That is a nice thing to say, Shirra!” he looked into her nice green eyes, which were smiling. And, he was just quick enough to get her kiss on his cheek instead of his mouth.

“Come, sit, Shirra. You speak of danger? Well, I have a nut to crack.”

Shirra stiffly lowered into the seat across and he pulled his closer to her. Shirra called Rafael and dispatched him with requests for several snacks.

“Do I look peckish to you?”

“I know you, Greg, working all night not eating. Speak, what is the problem. I’m all ears.”

Her cat ears poked out from the hair that framed her head loosely. Indeed, all ears.

“She didn’t kill me.”

“Sorry?”

“Remona, she didn’t. It would solve her problems since I wouldn’t enable the lasers and I’d not be in the way with the Chinese, the horses.”

Shirra began setting her elbows on her knees but took her left elbow off, for the hurt in that leg. Instead she leaned back, the strong nail of her fingers ticking to her nose as she thought.

“She is an unchallenged power. Answers to no one, but how would she fare if she would kill you... her position would weaken undeniably. You are said to solve ‘it’, through the tablet you are supposed to change ‘it’. What if she wasn’t sure?”

“Sure of what?”

“Well, she could not know if your action would postpone reactivation of the lasers, or instead reactivate them, or even kill them off altogether, could she?”

He scratched his beard. “But I told her I might be able to re-enable the system. In hindsight that gives her the information she needed.”

“It did?”

“Yes, she spoke of programming and I think there is information about that tablet in her family. She saw at once I hadn’t the original. She wasn’t pleased about that, I can tell you!”

“Why would she dislike it?” Shirra looked at him, as Rafael brought in all kinds of dishes with various hot and cold bite-sized snacks.

“A drink, sir?”

“Cold beer, small one.”

“Water, madam?” he asked Shirra respectfully, and she nodded.

When Rafael left Greg wondered. “What is your status to them, Shirra?”

“An unreachable semi goddess, if they fail to acknowledge me thus, they’re toast. Not by my hand mind you, by the hand of my sister and her mistress. They knew this when I selected them and in a way it guided my hand.”

“Wow, you *really* like them, don’t you?” he said sarcastically.

Unaffected she rebuked his jest, “Staff must be under control, not liked, first rule of a household.”

“Anyways, where was I? Right, her disliking the tablet, well that is an easy one! I come in, show the tablet and behold it is another one. A new variable to deal with, not under control. She is a control freak, you must realize that?”

“I never heard that description; mostly she’s dubbed a monster or freakazoid.”

Greg sniggered. “That does not do her justice, Shirra. She is smart, calculating and this all works as long as she has things under control. The breaking of your leg was for show and to test me. She liked it, and just for the heck of it she kicked that Moebi down.”

“She did?”

“Right in her back, then kicked her senseless in her head. Mean too.”

“Moebi always has sore spots...” she said looking past him into the distance.

“She was not surprised! This was likely ‘normal’. I think Remona likes her close but also needs to vent frustration. I hope your sister is masochistic.”

Shirra said nothing, she seemed sad.

“You can’t help her.”

“I have always been so nasty to her...”

“Come on, she’s just like you! She craves her ‘position’ like you do! That reminds me, she has these red bands on her dress. You have a full red dress. What is the ‘power’ ladder for that?”

“Socially?” Shirra asked surprised.

“Just wondering. If you told her to do something, would form dictate you order her, or the other way round?”

This caused a bout of serious reflection. Shirra frowned and closed her eyes, thinking. He ate some, and some more, it was good stuff! He kept eating until she replied. “The definition of the red dress dates back to the savior himself. He put down the black, white and red dress. The red band is not defined. In fact, it caused a riot, some three generations ago.”

“So?”

“The writings are clear. My station is over her, but I think the Remonovnas and Remonivits have risen in power considerably over time.”

“And here I come, upsetting that balance. Hmm. I should have been dead three times over if it weren’t for that laser thing. What does it mean?”

“I don’t follow, Greg.”

“She got aroused by my presence. Isn’t that weird?”

“No.”

Greg rolled his eyes. “I’m asking the wrong cat.”

Shirra was shifting in her seat; Greg saw and got annoyed for he knew what this meant. “Could you try to can that for a moment?”

“Can what?”

Her mind was clearly on a trip somewhere, it was too late to reset.

Shirra puffed, “It’s hot in here.”

He could trust her to go on some sort of enticing fantasy trip at just this moment.

“I have to visit the ladies room,” she said and laboriously pulled up out of her chair, and slowly passed him balancing on her good leg. He followed her leaving. The toilets were to the right and she went left at the door. Bed room, of course. Her tail was certainly busy under that dress. Weird cat, funny weird though.

He shook his head in amusement before considering his task. Tomorrow, at the council, he was sure Remona would be present to check him. He could scarcely believe it would pass just like that. She wanted him, for a playboy, or some puppet. And he would have to step up, stick his head through the noose as it were. He hated this. It felt like the days in the boarding school all over again.

To battle the rising bile, he thought about Amandine. That felt good. He’d go! He’d do it for her! How difficult could it be? Get the wolves, flee to Campone and get Amandine. And then, well time would tell. Greg got up, yawning, Time for bed. A bit mindless he barged into the bed room, finding Shirra on the bed with her dress pulled up, busy.

“Aww... damn!” he called, “you are grossing me out!”

She jumped up; clearly feeling caught while they both knew nothing unexpected had been going on. “I’m ... so,” gasp, “sorry,” she puffed, keeping her arm to the side, the fingers extended.

“I’m going to sleep. Tomorrow’s council time, and that stinker Remona again, I’m sure.”

“How can you know she would be there? That would be almost absurd!”

“Call it a hunch. You’ll see.”

“Greg, do you have any idea what that means? She only ever comes there to put a council member in their place.”

“Indeed, she will want to put me in my place.”

“You don’t understand!” Shirra lamented, getting worked up, “she does that by *killing* an assistant by torture!”

“Ah,” he said, understanding dawning.

“Greg! You’re so cool?”

“We can’t solve that, can we? Tell me, she comes in with a set of ropes and a chair?”

“It’s not funny, Greg! She brings along her latest experiment, it’s... horrible!”

“How can you know? You’ve never been there?”

“Moebi has!”

The sister again... Shirra went on, “A syringe with a test-serum, Moebi once saw a cat sort of liquefy...” she shuddered.

Greg blinked his eyes.

“I think my imagination is one short there, sorry.”

He went to the bath room to brush up. His clothes, he threw on a chair and dove into bed. Shirra left the shower and folded his clothes carefully. Then she got out of her dress. Her underpants were still missing. She limped to bed.

“How’s your leg?”

“It’ll heal.”

“Does it hurt?”

“A little, not as bad as what will happen to me tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry I startled you, I could have taken a little longer. She didn’t kill me, nor you, for all I know she thinks I don’t like you.”

She didn’t answer, and he turned over. He would bring his gun, and lots of bullets. That freak was not going to torture Shirra. And that was final.

“Shirra?”

“Hmm?”

“You should be all ‘sir’ and stuff tomorrow. But I still will have my gun on me, should she think of something.”

“Hmm.”

Greg turned a few times, seeking a way to get rest.

“Greg?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

He slept quickly, dreaming of target practice on Remona, it was a good dream.

## 69. Flying tablet

As they walked to the council surrounded by their little army of guard dogs, Greg thought of a way to irritate Remona. It was the least he could do before the final showdown. It would be rhetoric, no killing. Greg was convinced it didn’t make sense for Remona to kill Shirra, he was a practical person though, and patted the gun in his belt.

“Your red dress outranks the white of Moebi, think of something that clearly identifies this difference and order her. Nothing mean of course, a ‘normal’ task that marks her clearly as lesser than you.”

“Why?”

“Humor me.”

“You’re trying to get at the lady, aren’t you? You’re almost thinking like a blanche, Greg.”

“I need to upset her, probe her. Maybe I can incite her there. As a bonus, I will know the allegiance of the council members.”

“Politics, Greg?” Shirra replied glumly, “It’ll be moot. If she comes, I die.”

“We’ll see. You said it before Shirra, I’m a man of many talents.”

Determined she stood tall, “I will make you proud. Never a dull moment around you! Fierce until the end.”

He stopped, in mid stride.

“What did you just say?”

“I said-” she began reiterating but Greg cut in. “I know it, I just hadn’t realized it! I left my job to find excitement, and hey, I’m getting excitement! Thank you Shirra, for reminding me.” He kissed her almost on her muzzle, and ended up kissing her nose as he realized what he was trying to do at the last instant.

Shirra looked at him enchanted.

“Come, move, we’re late. Excitement is waiting!” The very idea rejuvenated him all over. Why skulk? Take the bull by the horns! And so, they made it safely to the council where the session was opened forthwith. A bit of form passed the table and Henry was still talking about the agenda of today when the doors opened with a bang. Moewabi walked in, followed by an impeccably clad Remona. A light blue shirt and dark blue skirt. Thick material, no fancy frills anywhere but well made.

She strode regally to the center of the room, under the portrait of her great-great-something-grand father Remon. “Hey!” she greeted to the image, with a little bow, and sat down on the chair procured by Moewabi, who then took station behind it.

All council members were impressed. Henry was the least impressible and tapped his little hammer. “The lady Remonovna honors our council with her presence.”

Good show, Greg thought, since everybody knew what would happen now. He saw Remona home in on the speaker, turning her head and looking down on him. "Shut up, Henry."

The atmosphere was charged, no one dared speak anymore. Remona looked pleased and went on, "Agenda item one, tablet and Greg." She looked around, eyeing each member in turn. It was clear Henry was about the only one who was not too happy. What was his sin?

"I see we have a non believer in our midst," she said and nodded to Henry before getting up and producing a syringe. "Look closely Greg, you might learn something."

Behind him he heard Shirra exhale. She had been convinced she'd meet her end today. Greg realized a demonstration was going to be given.

"Come dear," Remona beckoned in Henry's direction. The doctor was looking around nervously for support. Nothing gave way though and his assistant walked forward in slow strides, knowing she was facing her end, looking at the floor in anticipation of whatever gruesome fate awaited her in that syringe. She stopped, turned for a last glance at her master, and proudly walked forward.

Greg was impressed.

"Come on," Remona grumbled, "I don't have all day."

She curtsied and kneeled, offering her wrist. Remona pulled it to her with a malicious jerk and placed the injection in a swift motion. He wondered what kind of injection it was, perhaps it had to be intravenously, but how Remona would see to hit a vein through that fur was a mystery to him. Experience weighed in here no doubt.

He strained to see what would happen.

"So, now we wait a moment," Remona informed her audience happily. She looked around smiling, as if she had just achieved the impossible and basked in their disbelieving glow. Quite the entertainer, Greg thought until

her gaze stopped on him. This was not good. He fingered his gun behind him. A precise, well kept weapon. He had trained with it. His aim was as accurate as ever. So as not to be taken by surprise he brought the weapon to his knees and clicked the safety off, slow and soundless.

The stricken cat, meanwhile, swayed a little, there before Remona. Next, she shook a little, a sort of convulsion.

“Why?” Henry wailed softly, “this is the second time you attack me, it can’t be!”

He was miserable and sat looking on with tears in his eyes, hurting perhaps as much as his assistant and looking at Greg with pleading eyes.

“I’m not killing her Henry,” Remona offered out of the blue, “At least, I am not directly. However...Observe, Greg. You will no doubt like this enormously.”

“That would surprise me, Remona.”

The audience looked at him as if a switch were thrown. All eyes locked on him. Theater? Bring it on!

“They were your words Greg, you said ‘stupid cat’ and gave me this brilliant idea. I’ll activate it.”

She took a green torch and shone on the assistant’s short haired head. A green spot appeared between the ears. Then she bowed down and whispered something in the ear. A second later, the cat gagged and fell to the ground clutching at her body in general. Wailing she rolled over the floor and, ears flat, started to claw at her dress, ripping it to shreds. That was quickly done, but Greg could only think of a lioness forced into some clothes, by the way this was done.

The result was, well, a wild cat? Degenerated, he guessed, causing this developed assistant to transform into something resembling a mountain lion maybe. The elongated legs didn’t fit of course, instead of a cat it looked much like a human playing a cat. He nearly sniggered.

The show was over, the cat was on her back, panting. The last shreds of clothing were falling off the wheezing body. For some reason Greg wondered about the cat in terms of an opponent. The talons might be a little unpleasant up close, he decided. That muzzle was laughable for size.

Suddenly the degenerated assistant got up, sniffing and looking at him. "Oookaay?" he said slowly. So that was the trick, he was supposed to kill the cat because he must protect himself.

"How long will it stay this way?" he asked Remona, gripping his gun.

"Who's to say? Minutes, hours, forever? It's a test."

A test? Yeah, right.

The cat tried to approach him, on all fours, the tail swing left to right in anticipation of the prey. "Henry, are there particular suggestions you'd like to share with me?"

The doctor sat silently behind his little dais, ready to duck out of sight. At least twenty guard dogs stood along the wall. They were completely silent and each stared, but the hands hovered at the maser guns at their side. Greg considered his situation. He had better not sit down this way. He could move nowhere, and thus he stood next to his chair, while the cat lined up with him. Blue eyes sought food.

With a snarl, the cat lunged at him and he got a sudden vision of the black cat in Tabitha's world attacking him. Darke had surprised him, but now he was ready for this enraged ball of fur. He sidestepped the attack and found a claw had reached him. He looked surprised at the rip in his clothing. Much like Darke had achieved, but these nails were manicured and slid off him without damage to his skin. He'd be fine as long as she wouldn't get to use her fangs.

The cat got in attack position and hissed, the tail rippled with anger and the very end tilted from side to side.

Rather suddenly, his mind came up with a word. Hunt, this was fun. Without really being aware, his gun was aimed, following the seeking motions of this cat.

“Henry, any suggestions of how to not kill this?”

“Th...The... arm?” was the stuttering reply.

He backed up, keeping his aim, slowly in the direction of Remona. Stopping next to Remona he bowed over to her, whispering, “Very entertaining.”

Remona went rigid for a split second. Then the lady looked at him, and her eyes filled with warmth. The rest of her face was impeccably emotionless. Trained in keeping a straight face, with a good dose of passed on talent.

“Will you shoot her?” she asked in a sweet voice.

“That depends...”

He hugged the wall, skirting the dog guards. Suddenly the cat exploded in a run at him and he stepped behind a dog. Dog and cat went down in a snarling ball. In a moment, the dog had the cat under control, pressed to the floor, hand on her neck. The former assistant hissed.

The dog looked around, helpless. No orders were forthcoming since all were afraid to interfere. When he tried to loosen his grip, the cat turned on him at once and kicked out, flattening the dog. The cat bit him in the back of the neck with an ungainly crunch and, licking her muzzle and nose, turned to Greg. His gun was apparently a mystery to it and with his free hand he made moves in the air to distract it as he backed up to the next guard.

How would this guy cope? Well, having learned some, this guard-dog kicked the screaming cat off him. At the third guard, the cat changed her action and crawled over the floor, seeking a way in. “You’re hungry eh?” he asked.

The cat mewed.

By this time he had about rounded the hall all the way back to Remona. The cat kept her distance from the lady. Greg decided to put Moewabi in between them, hoping for something interesting.

Moewabi hissed at the cat, trying to keep her haughty stance. The cat jumped and Moewabi lightning-quick ducked out of the way. This enraged the cat and it jumped on her. The two rolled over the floor in an impressive show of strength. Moewabi was seriously hampered by her dress and it didn't look all that good for her.

Greg looked at Remona who shrugged with a lovely smile, "Either you do something quick Greg, or she dies."

Damn! He'd wasted enough time and shot easily at the assembly of clad and unclad cat. The wild cat went down with a snarl.

Moewabi got to her feet, fur standing out in all directions. The shot cat licked her bleeding hand like it was a paw, looking at it uncertain, the rage dispelled for the pain. Greg walked to the shredded dress and took a strip which he took to the shot cat where he tied it around the arm.

"How do you feel?"

She mewed, helplessly. Aha! Something was still 'active' in that head.

"Come," he said fatherly and led her to her master who received her from him and held her like a child on his lap. "You did so very, very, well," he consoled her and kissed his assistant, rocking with her ever so slightly.

Remona nodded to him. "You are an enigma, Greg."

He looked back, ready to say, "Fuck you bitch." But kept silent, making sure his eyes didn't speak for him. However, he pointed his gun at her for a moment, moving it to his belt.

"You would not dare!" she yelled in anger. Excellent, she had clearly not expected that. Why explode over it?

"Just putting it away, my dear lady," he said stiffly and walked to his seat.

Shirra had stood there all the time, gripping the chair, clamping so tight a row of indentations showed in the wood.

“You could use a chair too, right?” he said, going with the proposal they had talked over.

“I...” she hesitated.

“Well?” he pressed her. Her eyes read ‘No! Don’t!’ but he nodded, frowning.

Giving in, she said, “Moewabi... get me ... a chair. Please.”

Greg sat down and looked at Moewabi who stood looking at Remona for support, still trying to get presentable.

“What do you think you are doing?” Remona asked in staccato syllables.

Greg explained loudly, “I hear a red dress here, asking a white dress there, for a chair. Be quick about it. I think that guy agrees with this.” He pointed up to the painting. Remona’s expression softened. Remon clearly was her soft spot, unreasonably so.

“Go on, dear.” she said to her assistant who went to fetch a chair and wheeled it to Shirra who accepted it with a little dread from the angry looking white dressed assistant. Nevertheless, Shirra sat down with care and sighed, happy to get the weight off her leg.

Once Moewabi had returned, Remona sat back, leaning. “Go on,” she said, waving at Henry.

“Item one,” Henry forced through thin lips, while holding a hand on his pathetically bundled up assistant at his feet, “the tablet. Greg, you will return the control to the lasers?”

Henry acted badly, he was seriously happy his assistant was not dead. Even if at the moment she only mewed, but that would no doubt be repaired too.

“Yes. It will take some time,” he said and stood up to retrieve his bag. Greg took his tablet out and showed it. “This is the real thing.”

All looked on, except for Remona.

“I’m making good progress,” he added and looked at Remona to see her frown ever so slightly. He started his presentation, beaming on the wall behind him where this was just about possible given the light. “See this? You’ll recognize this as a three-dee model of the dome, where we can look down upon the city through the window.” He made a sweep with his arm.

“From space we see this,” he flipped the screen to a map of earth above California. From Keith’s world, but that wasn’t too well visible from this height. “Now, the control is a nifty thing, it takes enormous effort to program correctly. Only very experienced programmers can do that,” pausing for effect, “Take Remon there, for example,” he pointed and waited for the short prayers to end, “he was a very nifty programmer. Good guy.”

Nodding all around; including Remona.

What a bunch of stupid!

Throwing caution to the wind, he launched a free talk. “However, his efforts will not match with for example the girl friend of my good friend Keith. She built a program that controlled gateways. And in the span of 10 hours, I might add! One hell of an accomplished ocelot, that, more so for a blonde, but I digress.”

He ignored his public by now.

“Another lady, whom I’m not so close to, Tabitha by name, programmed and interfaced the space station.”

He looked at Remona to check if her attention was still with him. Amused, she leaned on her chair.

“Turns out some people in this world actually made a photograph of Tabitha there. Nifty buggers, but anyway.”

He turned to his tablet. "Because of that interface, we can for example," he switched to the screen showing the satellite readout, getting a mumble from his audience. Not quite like the 'ah' of astonishment, more the 'aha' of recognition. Unexpected, he realized that in some way or another the screen's information was known here! Then again, it didn't mean they knew the actual function, of course. To test that, Greg narrowed his eyes and reached the tablet-surface with his index finger.

"When you do enter here, you get..."

An explosion sounded from the city below.

At another place, at this time, one white Hunnuny sat writing and one gasping bed-ridden white Hunnuny lay thinking.

"Hey," the mobile brother said to his twin who could only nod and blink his eyes in acknowledgement, "what's this?"

"Hmmm?" the brother on the bed asked, straining to see.

His brother took the tablet that their leader had paid for with his life and showed the data rolling over the screen. The brother's eyes met and they nodded.

Agreeing on the unspoken comment that just passed between them, the sitting brother voiced their thoughts. "By the blood of Chiral's spirit, we've got it. We were right to expect this!"

"Hmmm," the bedridden one nodded in agreement, sighing with relief. Relief he'd not allowed himself to feel ever since 'the event' and heaped another "Hmmm..." to support his feelings.

"I think, I should drop this," the sitting one said, "I think, it's time for payback. I'll get Djenghis."

“Hmm? Hmwuuuuuu” causing the brothers’ eyes to meet again.

“You don’t care what he thinks or wants? Yeah... this is personal.”

Nodding and muttering to himself the sitting brother went along. “It is, isn’t it?”

Nods confirmed their goal.

“What the hell are you playing at!” Remona yelled and ran over, pulled the tablet from his hands with force and threw it to the floor, where it bounced harmlessly.

“It’ll take a little more to destroy these things,” he laughed.

“Oh yeah?” Remona sneered, stooped, placed the tablet under an angle and kicked out like a karateka. The tablet broke in two with a crunch.

“So,” she puffed, the deed done, “that ends your little exercise.”

“Oh no!” Greg feigned, “Now we won’t be able to restore control to the lasers.”

“Right, any more smart asses around?” Remona hissed and tried to kick out at him to ease her anger.

Greg was feeling the need for excitement. His adrenaline had been pumped up seriously with his ‘hunt’ just now and he blocked the sweep of her boot. Then, he pulled the ill aimed foot up, causing her to fall backward.

“Help me!” she yelled.

‘What an unwarranted show,’ Greg thought amused. Still, all the guard dogs shot into action. Greg offered his hand to the stricken Remona, “Need a hand?”

“You’re a dead man!” but the volume level of the woman was lowering already.

“Not right now.”

“You will wish you were, in oh, five minutes.” She was getting her control back just like that.

“I don’t intend to wait around that long,” without thinking too much, he hefted his gun and walked to the double doors. “Bye,” he said and aimed at the first dog.

All council members were stunned.

“Grab him!” Remona ordered and dogs raced to seize him, knowing their maser guns would not work.

He shot the attacking dogs in the leg, one after the other, quickly. He swapped his magazine, with care and continued. The dogs tried to get at him, but these bullets were causing serious wounds. They were incapacitated.

Remona yelled, “Stop!”

He stopped, turned and innocently asked “Yes?” while trying to get his adrenaline down. His count stood at eleven.

“OK!” she snapped, “Point made, Greg! I’m *sorry* to say you’re not dying just yet.”

“And I have to take your word for that?”

“What do you want?”

At a glance he saw the other blanches were trying to appear invisible. Their assistants hiding behind their chairs. As if Remona, at this stage, could even begin to convince him of her ‘good’ intentions, ha!

“I will want something you cannot provide.”

“Ha!” she thundered, “Anything is within my power!”

“Is it really? I would find love. Endless, unending, trust and love.”

Silence would have been complete, if it weren’t for the grunts and soft whimpers of the shot dogs around him.

“You want something Greg, materials, stuff for your portal. Things.”

“Indeed?” Greg nodded, realizing he’d suggested he’d build another portal, “I will take my leave from the city, retiring to Campone and send for materials. How is that?”

“Deal.”

This was so unlikely, he would have gasped like Shirra, if he had known how to.

“I think I just missed what my end of the deal is?”

“You get the hell out of here before you break anything else, or before I break you! You are wrecking *My City!* *My World!* *My Life!*”

Certainly, just leave and he would be distrusting all shadows for the rest of his life here. But there was a solution to that too...

“Come, Shirra, we’re leaving.”

She got out of the chair, with effort, and limped over to him. During that time, Remona stood fuming inwardly. He could see it as he took Shirra by the arm and pulled her to the doors, out, to the elevator.

Once inside he regarded her still stricken face, “I think I may have overreacted a bit.”

“A bit?” she panted, fighting for control.

“What would you... have done if... she’d tried... *that* on me?”

“I dunno. I like to hunt.”

“You... what?” she panted, grabbing him for strength.

“You seem to forget that a ‘wild cat’ of that size is not uncommon in my world. A lion would be like that. Or a panther. They’re hunted, sometimes, for fun. I have done so, with my dad.”

Shirra had lost the breath to talk and leaned on him heavily.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m... just... over ex..cited.”

At the end of their ride he pulled her along to their transport home, once there she had finally begun to quiet down.

“First things first, do we have a transport available?”

“Yes.”

“Good, get packing, we leave now.”

She nodded eagerly, “I’m all for it.”

###

Within the hour, they were transported to the air field outside the city. The ‘King’ of the blacks, TonTan, stood there, expecting him. He laughed as they neared.

“Back so soon, Greg?”

“Shut up, you have your sad money.”

“Makes the world go round, eh?”

“I don’t want to hear it. Fueled up?”

“Sure.”

“Good, I will instruct your pilot.”

“Pardon?”

“You heard me, let’s go.”

“That’ll cost you,” TonTan said threateningly but smiling widely, “and that kind of cash is not on bouncing checks, get my drift?”

“You want money? Here is money.”

He threw the suitcase with 'credit-billets' Shirra had procured to the eager man, who opened it and smiled even wider than before, now the eyes lit up. Greg shook his head at that. "Do you have any idea how sad it is that you can be bought like that?"

"If you live as short as I do, this is perfect, buster. You can keep your philosophy spinning for yourself. We're going. This kind of money only can mean trouble is not far behind."

Using his other tablet as a makeshift GPS, he guided the pilot to the settlement of the wolves. The metal was easily pinpointed, including the number of souls. At the edge of a wood he let the huge quad-chopper land and walked into the woods, reading his 'compass'.

"Hey, guys!" he yelled at the edge of their coarse settlement. It was a large structure with little wolves running around and furry men and women looking up in surprise.

"How did you get here? We haven't seen you and we've monitored the transport!" the captain said, approaching him with welcoming, outstretched arms.

"I have brought that transport, asking you to come with me to the cleft, the canyon. It will be much safer and richer in food. What do you say?"

"We will discuss this," the captain said politically and he coughed.

"You do that. The transport is at the edge, it should be able to take you all to the cleft. Tomorrow we leave. It's a free ride, pass it up and see how you cope when the lasers get back on line."

The captain's eyes searched his face. "You are serious?"

"Never been more serious in my life."

"Damn!" he turned around, walking back and coughing a little.

Greg walked back and enjoyed a meal in the chopper. "We could shoot rabbits and barbeque them, how's that?"

This met with great approval and so the evening was spent with beer, rabbit morsels on a stick and otherwise quiet munching and belching.

“Those wolves aren’t going to join you Greg, why would they?” TonTan slapped his back. He could not take his beer either, like Blikol and was getting close to a stupor.

“If they do not come along, it’s their loss, I gave them the option. The cleft is a refuge for many.”

“True, and this place is not very healthy.”

“No? Why?”

“It is full of spores of the fungus on those trees. Bad for the lungs.”

“TonTan! I didn’t have you down as a naturalist.”

“Hobby.”

“I thought you all had technical hobbies.”

“Biotech is tech.”

“Ah. So that is not a blanche-only venue?”

“Sure, Greg!” another slap to his back, and a hug.

Then all looked up, hearing a cough.

At the edge of the fire, the captain showed up. “We’re coming. This place is not healthy, the black man is right. We’ll be here tomorrow early.”

“Don’t take too much or we won’t fly!” TonTan warned.

“We will travel light.” The captain assured and left.

At that, the camp-fire spirit was over, people began to get up.

“Sleep, boyo’s, that is what I need.” TonTan unsteadily made his way to the huge chopper.

Greg followed soon and found Shirra sound asleep on the double bed roll on the floor. He got in, next to her. The sleeping bag was ice cold, as was he,

from sitting outside. He felt her warm fur and, well, snuggled up, ending with an arm around her to feed off her warmth.

She woke to his cold touch and turned around. Her eyes shone in the dim light. “Hmmm,” she said and enveloped him in an embrace. Nice and warm.

Then, she got on top of him.

“Oh no you don’t,” he warned her, “We’ve been there, Shirra. Back off.”

He pushed her to his side and held her tight.

“I thought...”

“Well, you thought wrong. I was cold and I like you close.”

“Oh.”

“You smell nice, roses. Sleep tight.”

“Hmmm.”

He disengaged his hold and was ready for sleep.

## **70. Up north**

The descent of the big chopper wasn’t too smooth. Greg was shaken thoroughly and his stomach protested. By comparison, Shirra sat looking out of the window bored, feeling the hem of her red dress when she suddenly pointed, “Look Greg, there is the white house!”

Greg couldn’t see it. Didn’t want to see it even, just if the infernal contraption holding him would stop shaking. Oblivious to his discomfort, Shirra went on, “I will have to handle the place alone for a time, of course. The rest of the household will arrive later.”

Greg looked up at that. “The rest of the... what rest?”

Mildly surprised, she explained, “Well, my maids, the cook, a gardener and a gaffer. What do you think? We have to keep our station!”

“But... who is going to pay them? Care for them, where will they live?”

“We’ll have the building extended of course. That goes without mention-I think. Anyway, it’ll be commerce for the community; they will prosper due to our presence.”

“Build... whatever, Shirra. You’re in the lead.”

“Greg, you realize how silly it would be for me to be alone in that house?”

“Alone with me.”

“You are not listening. I’m talking about social structures, as head of the household...”

Greg stopped listening and looked at the dark stones of the rock face rising past the window. Another jolt to the craft nearly threw him off his chair. What a bloody nuisance. He’d thought such a big craft would not be thrown around in the turbulence so easily. “Almost there,” he thought fervently.

When he stood on the grass field, next to Blikol’s transport, he went to his knees and felt the grass with gratitude. “Ah, solid ground.”

The wolves ‘tribe’ was being unloaded. Whining kids and marital rows combined to a lot of racket now that the thunder of the rotors had died down. Blikol stood at the edge of the field, indecisive it seemed. Suddenly she neared him, took a haughty stance and tilted her hips.

“Well, well, the great Greg is back.”

He looked her over, glad to see something like that. “You look nice,” he said. Too bad she had brought along her clipped skunk. Asis stood in the shadow of a shed, trying to blend in with the darkness there.

“I hadn’t thought you’d ever be back, Greg.”

“Why is that?”

“The last I saw of you was your escort to the council. Uptown boys don’t come back for downtown girls.”

He smiled. “I’m glad to see you.”

She smiled. “You are a flatterer.”

“I try.”

Shirra bumped into him, clearly on purpose. “You *are* interfering, Shirra.”

“Sorry, Greg, I have a lot to do.”

Blikol narrowed her eyes at Shirra’s display of..., Greg couldn’t quite think of the word, but it had all the markings of jealousy. Now that was weird.

Blikol added some fuel to the fire. “You ought to teach your assistant some manners, Greg.”

Bristling, containing her rage, Shirra took the bait. “Your manners aren’t developed too well either, Miss N’Gozy. My lord is due a little more respect!”

Greg blinked. He hadn’t expected Shirra to show jealous feelings. Least of all towards Blikol! The reaction of the black woman however, was even more surprising. To a level he nearly forgot to close his mouth.

“You stupid cat! He doesn’t like white furballs, he likes this!”

She hefted her boobs and put her hand on her thigh, smiling at him. Her action was generating tons of system-wide interrupts and emergency calls. They boiled down to one thought along the lines of “Whoa!”

Batting her eyes just once, rather sensuously Blikol asked, “Maybe you would accept my hospitality this evening, Greg?”

Shirra sort of stepped in between. “My lord will instruct me with report for such undertakings in due time, Madame N’Gozy.”

“Just a moment Blikol,” Greg took hold of Shirra’s arm, “trouble with the staff.”

He pulled Shirra along, a few steps further on. She stumbled almost, producing a protesting “Hey!” as she recovered her footing.

Greg spoke softly, “I expect you to act as a responsible assistant. What is going on here?”

“She’s bad news, that’s what. Remember how she treated me?”

“She didn’t know it was you.”

“Like hell she didn’t! She kicked me viciously, several times!”

“Let bygones be bygones, Shirra, right now I have some fifty wolves to find shelter for.”

“Great, I thought you had a plan with them.”

He looked at her as he got an idea. “Actually...”

“Blikol?” he walked over, “I’d like you to fly me, and some of them,” he pointed, “to the bear village.”

“Now?”

“Could you?”

“Why not take TonTan’s crate? He would take the lot along, right?”

“I can’t pay him now.”

Blikol considered for a moment, then concluded, “You wait a sec.” before she walked away.

Shirra stood with her arms akimbo, being cross. “Real nice, Greg. And how can I be of service in the mean time?”

“Obviously with tending to the house. I’ll be back this evening, and if I’m not mistaken, with my little girl.”

“She better be the ‘dear’ you talk about in your sleep.”

“I hope so.”

Her eyes suddenly went wide, “But... I thought Blikol...Oh Greg, I have made a fool of myself.”

“Partly, you are right to think I like her. It’s no secret. You said it yourself, it is no comparison.”

“No, I guess not.”

Despite his attempt to put her in her place she smiled in a strange way. It didn’t fit. Then again, Shirra was too complex for him to fully understand.

Blikol meanwhile walked back up with a skip. “Load them in, we’ll go with the big crate, I’ll fly myself.”

“Super!”

Greg went looking for the captain, but apparently the wolves weren’t quite blind.

“Looking for me?” he heard the captain say.

“Yes, actually I was. Could you and some folks pack up, come with me to the place I think will be your best start for a good life.”

“Better than this? We should be able to find land around here, I think.”

“Unlikely, the farms around here use all the lands. I will take you up north.”

“Uh, rumor has it there’re cannibals there.”

“That? That depends. I found them very nice actually. Trust me.”

“I know you’re a special sort, Greg. I will trust you.”

The captain barked orders and hell broke loose. All the wolves, including the little ones, started yelling through each other. Unlikely but true, the captain had the whole lot loaded back in, in no time, while the rotors were starting their booming thunder again.

The flight through the canyon was quick but at their destination the setting down took so long Greg decided to seek out Blikol in the piloting section.

“No room!” she kept repeating and retrying. Regardless of the apparent problem she succeeded and when the thing finally stood, she received applause from her family, and Greg clapped along.

Once outside the reason for Blikol’s frustration was apparent, there were less than a few feet of space all around.

“You’re an exceptionally able pilot, Blikol.”

“Thank you, Greg.”

“I’m going to announce the arrival of a serious pack of wolves in the bear village.”

“I’ll walk along.”

Together they walked the forest, he found his way easily. The strange thing was that he had not met a single bear yet.

Blikol noted his stride. “Greg, mind if I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“You look much fitter now, than when you left. What happened?”

“A lot, Blikol, more than I can tell in a lifetime, I think.”

She walked closer to him again, her strides matching his. She was too long, so it meant she had to take clumsy short steps.

“Last time we were here things were rather different.”

“Is this about your brother?” Greg asked cautiously.

“No, not at all. I was thinking about the village. The bears.” She patted her maser system.

“Are you going to blast them?”

“Doesn’t work that way, Greg. The target needs to be very stiff. Tissue and bones aren’t so usable.”

“Why do the guard dogs use them then?”

“Normally they target things on your body that will be blasted, that tends to slow you down, disarm you and stun you from the pain of the impact if it doesn’t kill you outright.”

“Oh. Strange weapon.”

“I’ll take your gun any day.”

“Ah.”

“Do you think they’re hiding from me?” Blikol asked, looking around.

“We’ll see,” Greg offered as they rounded the last bend in the path.

At the settlement edge, he found the full set of bears assembled. Blackie stood in the front, with Amandine next to her. Greg stopped in his tracks seeing her, wondering about the wisdom to come to her, searching for any recognition in her little face, trembling almost with the tension, lost for words.

Finally he produced a soft, “Hi girl,” as he sat on his knees, seeking her eyes. She buried her head in the leg of Blackie. “Amandine?”

Her head turned and she looked at him shortly. “It’s... daddy, come girl, gimme a hug.”

Of course, she hadn’t seen him for months. But to forget him like that? How good would her memory be at all?

He tried in ‘common’, “Sweetie? Daddy is here?”

Then she turned her head just a little, went “yumyum” and behold, her ears turned to his voice.

Now Greg felt more confident, a weight lifted off his chest, “You know me, come and get it!”

Amandine studied him and took an uncertain step, followed by a dribble, breaking into a run. “Daddy!” she called, in the common language. He collected her and sniffed her scent, felt her fur, her weight, her strong muscles. “How you’ve grown!” he said and meant it. “You’re heavy!”

He turned in a circle with her in the air and she gave a giggle.

“Amandine! I’ve missed you, so much, sooo” Kissing and hugging her, he slowly made his way to Blackie whose belly showed an increase in size from her pregnancy.

“Hi Blackie,” he greeted, with Amandine on his hip who was feeling his ear, his skin, his hair. Pulling it.

Blackie, standing here like this, in the middle, up front, it could mean only one thing.

“The shaman is gone?”

“No,” Blackie said, “I’m training with her.”

“You, a Shaman? I didn’t think you spiritual?”

“It comes in many flavors. In the end, the responsibility is what counts. I can bear it.”

“Indeed,” he smiled, “and what do you think I come to bring?”

“The old shaman tells of a pack of wolves.”

“I had thought they might make a living around here.”

“We do not own the woods. Anyone can decide to live here.”

An awkward pause filled the conversation, Blackie grimaced. “Greg? Is Sasha still...”

“Yes. Doesn’t that old bear know about him?”

“His spirit is not here. She does not know. I feared something terrible might have happened.”

“More terrible than dying?”

“Yes.”

“You guys are a weird bunch. You seem to start behaving like that old bear, that’s where I have to get off. I don’t know about you anymore, Blackie.”

“I will teach the youngsters Greg.”

“Pardon?”

“The wolves too.”

Blikol stood next to him, hearing that, reacting angrily, “Listen up bear, you can’t go around teaching. The blanches will not allow it.”

“There are no lasers. The blanches are far away.”

“Don’t bet on it!” Blikol spat.

Greg tried to get away from that subject. “I will find a solution for Sasha, Blackie.”

“Greg, you must release him from that prison. We fear his spirit dies, in there.”

“His spirit dies? How can it, everything is locked in stasis.”

“Only matter is.”

“Are you trying to spook me?”

“Promise me you’ll release him? Be with him, tell him how I love him! His children will have a strong mother.”

“I eh,” he looked at Amandine. “Daddy is a bit lost for words, sweetie. Happens more often lately.”

“Yummy!” Amandine nodded with certainty, waited, and softly asked,

“Yum?”

Greg looked at the bright green eyes. He laughed. Blackie laughed too, explaining something to her tribe. sniggers rose up here and there, even Blikol laughed.

“Good, Blackie. I promise to ‘set free’ Sasha. Do I have to release his spirit into this world?”

“Your parallel universes mean nothing to the spirit guides. They see no boundaries. Release him, as you see fit.”

He bade her farewell, and accepted the bag with Amandine’s toys and clothes which went to show how Blackie had understood perfectly well how this would go. With a final kiss, Blackie waved to Amandine and walked to the house as the bears each went their way.

On their way, Blikol asked, “What was that parallel universes talk about, Greg?”

“The stasis field in the energy conversion unit can be used to enter into another universe. I told you before.”

“It’s hogwash Greg. It makes no sense, there is no magic.”

“Magic? Goodness no, it’s physics. My teacher always felt that the stasis field was the top of mathematical prowess.”

“How do equations tie into that thing then?”

“If you like, I can teach you?”

Blikol looked at Amandine.

“I don’t get it, what does that dog mean to you?”

“She’s my girl, my charge, I’m her daddy. Right Amandine?”

The puppy yelped and smiled, asking, “Pancakes now?”

“We will ask aunty Shirra, won’t we? A celebration is in order.”

“Greg, I don’t want to be a spoilsport, but how will you tell her you aren’t her dad when she’s old enough?”

“Time will tell, Blikol.”

“Is that your solution to all problems?”

“No. Some of them I simply shoot. Dead. Solved.”

“I can see she means a lot to you, I just ask you to consider her future.”

“Her future? Without me she can become a slave. Toiling for blanches. Not in my book, Blikol.”

“I toil, often for blanches. Do you think me a slave?”

“What do you expect me to say?”

Amandine started squirming. “I think she wants to walk,” he said.

Greg put her down and slowed down to let her walk along. Leading on, “No Amandine, not that way, we go here.”

Guiding her, they arrived at the transport. The whole pack was unloaded, the captain upfront. “The bear village is down this path. I ask one thing of you.”

“I knew there would be a snag!” someone called. “Shut up!” the captain grumbled.

“I prefer your guarding ability over the brainwashed white dogs. Can you spare me a guard?”

The wide smile was affirmative. Two wolves stepped forward. “You can count on us!”

“Great! Get your rifles, we leave.”

Blikol looked alarmed.

Surprised, Greg asked, “What’s the matter?”

“You gave those wolves their *rifles*?”

“You trust your skunk, right? I trust these guys.”

“That is different! He-” but Greg didn’t let her finish, interjecting with, “I want to get back now, Blikol.” Then he turned to the captain, “Captain, I take it your guard-boys will be exchanged every month or so? I’ll make sure Shirra provides payment.”

“I’m sure that’ll be taken care of, Greg. We’ll keep in touch anyway, won’t we?”

A bit surprised he nodded. “If you like... Yes, why not.”

###

Blikol had started the rotors and talking was becoming impossible. He waved at the wolves who’d accompanied their troupe and only now discovered Amandine didn’t want to go ‘in there’. She was resisting him fiercely, hanging on to him in fright as he entered the chopper-ship regardless. Once inside, however, she started playing with a door. Enthralled by the mechanism she kept looking at the handle, turning it, checking and so on.

On the way back, Greg explained to the wolves how he had made an enemy of the lady Remonovna. They nodded with severe frowns. “Heavy man!” they agreed.

“Let me put it this way, those white dogs *all* hail from the citadel. I even saw her alter the personality of an assistant utterly with some stuff. So in short, I don’t trust them or anyone else from the citadel. That’s why you guys are needed.”

The wolves nodded gravely, understanding the probably not imagined danger.

Shirra was waiting for him at the air field. Her red dress blew in the wind of the rotors, the lengthening white hair whipped around her head, even her

short fur blew everywhere. Despite that, she stood proud. When he carried Amandine out in the slowly diminishing thunder of the rotor-blades, she clamped him with her little hands and buried her head in his armpit. When he finally arrived at Shirra, Greg held Amandine at his side, seating her as it were on his hip and she studied the red dressed white cat. She took the view in, apparently pleased.

“You like red, Amandine?” Greg asked. The little coyote looked at him; she didn’t understand a word he’d said! He repeated in common and got a nod.

Slowly shaking her head, Shirra admonished him, “We will need to properly dress her, Greg. This would be misconstrued at every opportunity.”

“What would?”

“Her missing attire! You want to introduce her everywhere as a savage?”

“I’m not introducing her anywhere, why should I?”

“That is another thing.”

“Listen up, Shirra, I don’t like your tone one bit.”

“I only have your best interest at heart!”

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions and ‘best interests’. If she happens to like something you provide, fine, else she’ll be like this, clear?”

“Are you commanding me?”

“If that is what it takes, I am.”

“Fine. *Sir.*”

“Don’t you ‘sir’ me, it’s uncalled for.”

“Pfff! You’re taking me for granted. A master ought to appreciate his assistant.”

Rolling his eyes, Greg huffed, “I don’t even want to discuss this! Oh, and these two guys,” he waved his hand at the wolves, “are the guards at the house.”

“Two wolves? They’re not even white! When did you think this up?”

“Any other comments?”

She crossed her arms, “Two is not enough.”

“Well? How many do we need, say the word. We can pay them, right?”

“You want *wolves* for security?”

“Yes. Those wolves.”

Suddenly her eyes lit, “Hmm. Come to think of it, it would make you stand out perfectly. Good thinking, Greg.”

“I’m glad I did something right, by your book, and...” He stopped because the irksome skunk had appeared at the field, searching for Blikol. She was still in the transport he knew. He remembered well how this guy had treated him.

“Just a sec, Shirra.”

“Greg, don’t hurt him, he didn’t know all right?”

“He was mean to me, and to you.”

“He didn’t know! Just, don’t hurt him... too much. OK?”

Greg nodded.

Asis walked over. “Sir Greg, you haven’t perchance noticed the lady?”

Blikol appeared in one of the chopper doors and Asis trotted over to her, past them. Greg tripped Asis easily and the skunk went flat out.

“What a place to stumble, Asis, there’s nothing to fall over even. Are you in one piece?” He turned to his little coyote girl, “See Amandine? That is a skunk, he has no tail and no stink glands. You mustn’t go near one with a tail, hear me?”

Around him, this got wondrous looks. “Greg!” Shirra hissed, “Save it!”

“Did I say something out of place? My, I wouldn’t know, would I? Not familiar with the traditions and all. So sorry if I did.”

Asis glanced at him, an unhappy and helpless look in his eyes. Blikol arrived at her cuddly skunk and helped him up. "What happened here?" she asked, wiping her hair from her face.

"Your toy skunk fell over. Not too stable, Blikol."

"Greg! What is your problem all of a sudden?"

"You tell me, Blikol. Shirra, hold Amandine for a sec, she's heavy."

He set the little coyote down who decided to stick to his leg instead of going over to Shirra who didn't seem to try to accept Amandine.

Blikol eyeballed Greg, "I think you owe Asis an apology!"

"For what?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean!"

"No I don't. Come Shirra, there is an unsavory reek in the air."

Greg walked to the edge of the field, where Blikol's Dobermans were keeping a crowd at bay. The street was full of farmers, raccoons, and mostly, cats and dogs. Apparently there was something interesting to see. Once they were trudging up the street, he found four raccoons were following Shirra. The best description was people were glad to see Shirra but Greg couldn't fathom the reason for the raccoons.

Amandine jogged along, needing to move about after being cooped up.

"What's with the farmers?" Greg asked.

"They're going to clear a part of the garden for the extension to the building."

"Extension? You know already how and what?"

"This is only phase one, all drawings are ready for it."

"Neat."

"I hope we can start building soon. Until that time, the servant staff will be together in a room."

“You like piling staff?”

“I’m doing my best.”

Noting the hurt tone, Greg appeased her, “Just a harmless joke, don’t jump out of your trousers.”

“I’m not wearing... oh, another joke.”

By now, they passed Blikol’s house. Amandine stopped; panting and he picked her up and sat her on his neck.

“I think she likes it,” Shirra said, looking up to her. “Greg, I will have to get vaccine to inoculate the wolves. They would be killed by the fence else.”

“I had forgotten all about that! Guys, don’t touch the fence, right?”

“We already have had inoculations for such fences, Greg.”

“Not this fence! I must go to the lady Remonovna for that.”

“You can’t order it, have it brought here?”

“Such things?” Shirra wondered loudly, “That vaccine is a special case, you will appreciate. I need to take care of this personally.”

“You probably know best. I just don’t feel like going to the citadel again.”

“I will go alone.”

“Is that wise?”

“I believe so.”

“Yesterday you were afraid she would kill you.”

“Point taken, but the cards are differently laid now.”

Greg puffed, walking up the steps to the house, and halted at the fence.

“You are sure it is safe?”

“Trust me, Greg. I know what I’m doing. I will return with the transport.”

He lifted Amandine up and set her on the floor again and walked in behind her. “House still smells the same,” he noted seeing Amandine’s nasal reconnoitering.

“It should, I had it cleaned,” Shirra said a little indignant.

The little coyote broke into a run towards the kitchen, yelling in perfect English, “pancakes!”

Greg turned to Shirra, “Is that an actual food-option today?”

Shirra smiled and nodded. “I’ll bake some, right after I instruct the work-folk here,” turning to the waiting raccoons.

An hour later, when Greg was helping Amandine to draw something, a call from outside drew his attention. Together with the toddler he arrived at the door to find the black woman from down the hill there.

“Blikol?” he asked, noting she appeared to be alone and he expected her skunk to step up from behind her any moment.

She looked at him, trying to get a handle on her feelings. “I’m sorry about what happened at the transport. I overreacted.”

Greg saw she wasn’t sorry at all yet he saw the effort it took her to appear understanding and convinced. Why would Blikol show such a radical change?

“It’s nothing Blikol. I was a bit tired and maybe I could have been a little bit more tactful.”

While she considered this, he stood aside, inviting her in.

Inside, she went on, “You do realize how incredibly bad luck it is to say the things you did, around a skunk?”

“Apparently not, but do tell.”

“At the very least,” she said strongly, “it’s a bad show! It deviates greatly from the mores around here.”

Greg led her through the building. “I can’t offer you a nice seat at the pool like in your place, but the garden will do perhaps?”

At that moment, Amandine yawned and diverted his attention, “I’m sorry, but I have to put her to bed first, you mind?”

“Oh no, not at all. Can I come along?”

Together they put the little coyote in her cot and left her with a few kind words before arriving in the garden. On the bench there, they overlooked the working raccoons. Blikol sipped her drink, Greg had a glass of water but he was just fingering it.

“So,” he started, not sure where to take this. Before he could go on, she scooted a little towards him. Part of him noted this with great desire, urging him to just go with it, but his always interfering mind made him say other things.

“How are things around here?”

“Quiet.”

“Too quiet?”

“Perhaps.”

Greg realized this was going nowhere. Uneasily he probed, “No work, no money?”

Blikol didn’t take that bait at all, instead pointing out, “I saw Shirra has the red dress.”

Greg nodded. “Hard to miss, I’ll agree.”

“You *do* realize what that means, I take it?”

“I have a hunch you will explain to me, Blikol.”

“It makes her quite powerful; she is allowed to undersign bills in her capacity as assistant.”

“Ah.” Greg stared at the groundwork of the raccoons. Maybe he shouldn’t have been surprised by that statement of hers. Blikol was after money, and he felt it was the bane of her kind. A bit grumpy he said, “You think there might be work for you?”

“Someone that important will no doubt travel to the citadel a lot, right?”

“Wrong.” And if not, he would force Shirra to be less travelling. To her credit, Blikol picked up on his anger.

“Really? You don’t like the citadel?”

“I have a very bad relation with the lady Remonovna.”

She smiled a warm, generous smile. Her lips parted, showing white teeth. “We blacks aren’t too close with her either.” Blikol was pressing her side to his now, and put her hand on his knee.

“She’s not exactly chummy with anyone, is she?”

“You like me, Greg?”

He looked at her brown eyes, becoming ebony skin, and black curls. “How can I not like you, Blikol, you are so...”

She raised eyebrows over pleased eyes, a little wrinkle at either side showed her positive and humorous disposition. Their faces closed and he kissed her. She pulled him closer and kissed with vigor. Blikol lay on her back and pulled him on her, kissing again. Greg felt how his body was heating up, her smell aroused him no end. She pushed his hand to her bosom and placed one hand on his behind, giving a little squeeze.

“Oh, Greg,” she murmured.

“Hmmm, Blikol,” he agreed.

Then they rolled off the bench. She fell on top of him, and because of all the muscle, that was more than one and a half times his weight. He was

neatly pinned down, and would have remained but for two things, the raccoons had stopped and were looking on, plus the pebbles on the path were very uncomfortable.

Struggling, they got up.

“I have softer arrangements available.”

“Come to my place, Greg!”

“Your place, why?”

“Oh, some documents need signing still. And...”

“Blikol! This is always about money, isn’t it?”

“Money is important Greg, but...”

“You only get hot for rich men?”

“I wouldn’t lie about that, it plays an important role but...”

“Can you imagine perhaps how that might be a bit of a turn-off for me? Perhaps even like a major one!”

“Money makes the world go round; it serves no purpose to deny that.”

“Am I buying your love, Blikol? Because that is what it feels like to me right now, and trust me, I have a sad track record when it comes to that.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you,” she said sullenly, portraying a prone woman more than the fit sport star she was.

“You were getting money in by the wagon load, how come you need my money all of a sudden? It’s not even mine. It’s the blanches’ money.”

“There haven’t been any distress calls from the blanches for over a month. I’m having difficulty keeping body and soul together.”

“What do you need money for?”

“Come on, you can’t be that daft. For living and upkeep of the chopper, what do you think?”

That was the real Blikol. Finally.

“I don’t mind shoving money your way for some service. Really, it’s okay. It’s not my money and apparently I can throw the stuff around as I see fit.”

She stared at him with a look he had come to recognize from her as the ‘dollar sign’ look.

“And, Blikol, really, there is no need to suck up to me if you’re doing that to get at cash.”

She shrugged. “I may find you sexy, for your money.”

“I haven’t changed!”

“But you have!” she disagreed, “All that surplus hair is gone, you look like a man now, not a near animal.”

That was true, he’d nearly forgotten about that.

He felt his shaven face. “You really think this is better?”

She took his hand, pulling him along. “You Greg, are money, a technical encyclopedia, a man without sickle cell, I think you are pushing all my buttons at once.”

“Buttons.”

She turned to him, pulling her finger sensuously over her breast, little lights of delight in her eyes. “Buttons!” And for good measure she smiled coyly.

“And you think that turns me on?”

She laughed. “Think? I know.”

In his bed room, she pushed him on the bed and started undressing. He was in the midst of removing his clothes when he heard Amandine yell.

“Oh no, what can that be?” Concerned he quickly put his pants back on and ran out to the cot, leaving a succulent Blikol behind who put her hands on her head, groaning, “noooo.”

Amandine was sitting upright, crying. Greg picked her up and saw she had wet her bed and was inconsolable. "Shirra!" he called over the wailing, not understanding why his assistant wasn't here right now.

With a busy, interrupted look on her face she walked in, "I have to prepare to leave, Greg! What is the matter?"

"She needs a clean bed for tonight and clean clothes."

"I take care of both items tomorrow. Right now I can't keep the transport waiting or it'll be too dark."

"Damn!"

"Please don't Greg! Don't use that word, please?"

The pleading, pleasant voice of Shirra calmed Amandine easily. She wasn't even talking to the little coyote.

"Right!" he said, "I will think of something. You get those special shots for the wolves or I won't have much use for them as guards."

She nodded, stepped up, and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Shirra?"

"Yes, Greg? I really have to go, now!"

"Be careful in the citadel, will you? I think I would like you back in one piece." She smiled and walked to him once more, holding his arm. "See you tomorrow!" and left with a wink.

Blikol appeared around the corner of the door. Still in her underwear. Amandine looked at Blikol, then at Greg and back at Blikol. She reached out for the black woman, who took a step closer, so Amandine could feel her skin. Amandine compared their skin for feel. Then she felt her own skin.

"Fur?" she said, in English again.

"That is Blikol, and she has no fur. Just like daddy."

“H’adine,” she said, mystifying both adults. She pulled the hairs on her arm to support her claim.

Blikol cuddled the little tummy, “Coochy coochy... you remind me of Asis when he was little.”

“Does she?”

Blikol smiled, absorbed in the little coyote girl. “You’re a pretty little lady, aren’t you? Oh yes you are... hi Amandine,” as she stroked her, ending with a caress to her ears.

## 71. Support

Greg had emptied a few beers; the bottles were arrayed at his feet, spilling onto the path of the garden. It was quiet; the sound of chirps here and there could be heard. There wasn’t even a cloud in the sky, stars shone in the darkening sky. The sun had set behind the edge of the cleft hours ago, and the pink of the sky was only a memory now as he looked into the dark night. Next to him, Blikol had sipped her own drink, and again had gotten tipsy with a single drink.

After they’d been at Amandine’s cot, nothing had happened between them. It couldn’t, with the toddler running around them and all. Then, with Shirra being gone, he and Blikol had been forced to cook together, a sort of camping feeling assailing the both of them due to the drinks. With some effort they’d achieved boiled potatoes and some seasoned blocks of a stuff he couldn’t identify. With tomatoes as garnish, (added by Greg), they had sat down at the table, trying to make Amandine eat without her little hands.

Blikol seemed to be quite the motherly type, he’d been very much struck by the way she was caring for the toddler. She liked it, he was certain. His question about her not having kids of her own she’d skirted.

And now, in the garden, she was looking up with him.

“What was it like, Greg, looking down onto Earth?”

“Impressive,” he couldn’t think of words to add. He shifted towards her, pulling her closer with his arm around her. “It’s getting cold,” he said.

“It’s nice.” Her head was still tilted to the stars, “The sky... that is where you can soar, Greg.”

She didn’t feel cold, but that could be the alcohol as well. Her legs folded over him and he found her sitting in his lap. Her face was close now, her scent tickled his nose. A slight sweaty smell, mingled with a whiff of the seasoning that wafted from her clothes. Their lips touched, and they kissed, passionately. She felt his back, pulling his shirt up, off of him.

“Come, inside, it’s too cold here!”

“I’m too hot, Greg, this bench will do...”

Jumping up, she started to get out of her pants, Greg felt his loin’s heat and he didn’t give a rat’s ass where this was going to happen. Nothing could bar their union now.

A wolf nearly ran past them screaming, “Greg! Greg! Sir! Where... Oh, I’m sorry, but there is an emergency, please come!”

Blikol stopped her action in mid-kiss, “is this fondling hexed or what?”

“Search me Blikol! I can’t think of anything important enough to intrude on us.”

His valiant guard-wolf all but pulled him along, “hurry! One of the farmer’s wives is in labor and it’s not good.” The wolf’s finger pointed to a raccoon who neared them, he was so agitated he nearly jumped. His tail swished around and his ears seemed to listen to everything from all directions. His hands were clasped, fingers rummaging for nothing.

“Please Sir!” the raccoon said, in common tongue.

“Why me? I know nothing of that!”

“They came for Shirra,” the wolf explained apologetically.

“Well she’s out. Sorry.”

“She’s dying!” the raccoon lamented, in English now. Greg felt a pang of pity and looked to the nearest female person. “Blikol?”

“Hey! Do I look like a midwife? I’ve n’t had a kid ever remember?”

“Can’t you do anything?”

“I can stand and look, if you really want,” she put in a tone that would freeze fire, combined with her look this spoke volumes of her expectations.

“I’ll write you a god-damn check, if you need,” Greg bit at her, feeling outraged and he sprang into action, putting his clothes back in place as he ran along with the raccoon. “Alane, you stay with Amandine!” he commanded the guard wolf who nodded, “Guard her with your life!”

A single horse stood at the gate, browsing. Was this the transport?

“I can’t ride,” Blikol pointed out with a sneer.

“Neither can I, but mister raccoon here can, can’t you?” The raccoon looked at him hopeful, ready to jump on his horse. He didn’t follow what this was about.

Blikol spoke quickly in common, and in the end all three of them sat on the horse. A big strong horse which didn’t protest until Blikol was pulled on, it might carry them and the raccoon was forcing his mount to obey.

“Will it hold us?”

“It’ll have to, the only transport. Besides, we’re not so heavy.” He hoped. The farmer was heavy built, Blikol weighed a lot. Three adults on a horse? It sure was a big animal, the height of the withers reaching to his eye-level.

Not fast, but quick enough, the animal carried all three of them to the farm outside the sprawl of Campone. Along the road, cats and dogs had come out to look.

It was a serious farm, he recognized. Cow sheds, several heavy built horses and an enormous storage for produce stood next to the building. It

was busy too, the farmer's family counted at least five children in ages he had no way to determine, them all being raccoon. Also, all wore a practical overall, short cut hair and he had no idea if he was looking at girls or boys even.

They chattered amongst themselves in the common tongue and he could only catch words. It came down to no one believing he would have appeared. Once the humans got off the horse, they went inside, and were led to the wife who was on her bed. A slight sour smell hung in the room.

"Good God she's big!" he said to Blikol.

"Twins no doubt," Blikol remarked and sat down to an old fox of sorts at the side of the bed. That was a female all right. "She's their midwife," Blikol translated for him and she talked quickly with this old crone. It was a foxhound, he decided.

"And now?" he asked, hopeful.

"Premature, Greg, and preeclampsia. We're way too late. Only in the citadel would she have any chance at all."

"What! We can't do a thing?"

"Cool it Greg, for these people this is a normal thing in life."

"Normal? Have you seen that guy outside, he would tear himself in two to help his wife. You've got to be kidding me, Blikol!"

"Even if I try to fly her to the citadel, at night I can't find the way."

"There has to be a way! We have to get those kids out of there!" he pointed at the big bellied raccoon in labor.

"At 10 weeks too early? No way Greg, I'm sorry."

The foxhound at the bed held his arm. She spoke in a relaxed voice, decisive, and he could follow her at least. "Thank you for coming, Sir, it means a lot to us all. I knew the lady Akazai was out, but this will make all accept the loss more easily."

He went to his knees before the dumpy foxhound. "Can't I do anything to help? I know nothing of medicine, isn't there a doctor anywhere? I will send the lady N'Gozy," he pointed to Blikol, "to fetch him or her, wherever!"

"Fat check," Blikol piped up.

"Shut up Blikol! Let the dog think!"

"Think!" he said to the foxhound, almost shaking her. Reluctantly she spoke, looking past him, "You have been with the bear cannibals, Sir, and their shamans can do these things. I heard of this. But it will not help us now, too far, too strange, too scared."

The blind-as-a-bat shaman! Greg got up, determined. "Good, she owes me. Blikol, you heard the lady. Can you fly there using your lights?"

"There? Of course, I'm the best pilot and know the land like the back of my hand. But you heard her, she won't come."

"She will, for me! Get that chopper here. I will carry her here if I have to!"

"Greg-" Blikol tried to reason with him.

"You will be paid handsomely. Trust me!" He hoped he would be able to keep his end of this deal.

Blikol shook her head but hurried out of the room. The raccoon in the bed was staring up to the ceiling, breath came in short gasps. His heart went out to this creature. He sat next to her, and used the cold water next to the bed to freshen up the cloth on the forehead.

"What can the shaman do?" he asked the midwife, softly.

The raccoon wife turned her head to him; her eyes seemed to look past him. With his hand, he felt the furry belly. It was hard, and he carefully stroked it.

"She will save either mother or child."

"What a terrible choice..." Greg muttered, dabbing the cloth.

“The shaman chooses. Her knowledge on this is legendary.”

“How do you know her? I thought everybody was afraid of them?”

“The males work here, in the season. They talk.”

“I understand they are paid very badly.”

“Not the farmer here, he is the most generous in his pay. He shared equally with them.”

“That can’t be right. The produce is not that cheap, I saw the prices at the citadel.”

“The black humans determine the transport prices.”

He looked at her, realizing the midwife wasn’t too careful with her words. Not easily scared?

As if she read the question on his face she said, “I am not afraid to speak up, Sir. My life holds no value for the blanches, nor the blacks. I heard your tone to Madame Blikol. She’s just another leach to the furred people here.”

“You are being dangerously candid. The dogs and cats seem to hold her in regard.”

“Of course, they benefit from her squeezing of the non dogs. And I know, trust me.”

Greg again refreshed the cloth on the head of the raccoon. The foxhound watched him carefully.

“How,” Greg accepted her invitation, “would you know so well?”

“I saw you look, you think I miss it? I know I look like a fox. I even have an ID card to identify as dog. You are human, how could you possibly imagine being something and nothing at the same time.”

He smiled. “Yes, that is a hard life to not fit in. Not a dog, not a fox in your case...”

This caught her off guard. She blinked her eyes. “You are-” she stopped and rephrased, “Your reputation is earned, Sir.”

“Reputation?”

“The shaman told me you were in her village. When she trained me, she spoke of this time often. I never thought I would live to see this happen.”

“What?”

“I talk too much.”

“Speak up, you old dog! What did she say?”

He sprang up, hearing the chopper get louder in the distance.

“You keep this raccoon alive until I get back, you hear me?”

“I will watch over her, it is not in my hands though.”

Swiping his hand in irritation, he left the room and found the chopper nearing. Asis was at the door, holding it open. Without touchdown, he jumped; Asis caught him and pulled him in.

“Well done, sir!” he screamed, and closed the door.

Blikol made the chopper tilt dangerously and went with full speed ahead. The search light on the front illuminated the way.

“She could fly to the citadel with that light!” he called.

“Can’t be replaced, used sparingly!”

The noise level didn’t really allow further talk so the rest of the trip to the bear village was ticking away on his watch. Asis was looking at his watch too.

Blikol set the machine down and he ran down the path to the village. Ten minutes, it would take him, at most. He was fit. On the way, he met bears and wolves, who had come out to see what the noise of the chopper was about. In the village, he ran to the house Sasha had built and found Blackie at the door.

“Where is the shaman, Blackie?”

“She is dying, Greg. She cannot come.”

“D...” he stuttered, and stopped, panting, holding on to the beams of the house.

“But ... I need her, she owes me!”

“No Greg, she owes you nothing. However, I will come.”

“That doesn’t help! We need her knowledge of midwifery and birth giving.”

“She need not be with us, she’ll guide me.”

“Blackie! I’m not kidding!”

“Neither am I. Come.”

Blackie started out and took large strides in the direction of the chopper. She had a large bag with her. Nothing else.

“You’re leaving the shaman to die, coming along on a mission that will not lead to deliverance?”

Blackie gripped his arm and pulled, nearly lifting him. “Loitering will make it so. You trust your God, Greg, don’t you? That Great Spirit, watching over you? Now come.”

Stumbling after her, his wrist in the bear claw, clamped, he felt his references were evaporating. The solid walls in his mind, of conviction and truth, were soft, nothing but smoke screens.

“I don’t believe!” he screamed, angry.

“Your conscious talk changes nothing.”

And so, after a total of two hours, he and Blackie sat at the raccoon’s bed. Blackie’s eyes were closed, her hands carefully feeling and searching. She nodded from time to time and finally stood up.

“Clean the room out. Cook more water, cook these in it. Prepare bandages, cook them too.”

A scalpel showed in her hand, and she gave it to the midwife who nodded in understanding. “What will you do, Blackie?”

Blackie stood looking at the raccoon, her head down. Then he heard the clear voice of the shaman, in his head, just like before.

“This, Greg, is for your sake. With it you will solidify your place in this world. This is the cross road, I cannot see beyond it until you decide.”

“Choose Greg,” Blackie said, “should I help her or not?”

“Of course! I didn’t get you over here to go home empty handed.”

“You have a choice. I can’t make it for you, will you go down the path?”

“If you don’t help her I... I... won’t release Sasha!”

Blackie nodded. Again he heard the shaman in his head. “This is where the killing starts. Thank you, Greg.”

“I’m going insane, Blackie, you’re not killing anyone here, are you?”

“We will see what will happen. The signs are good. Help me by waiting outside and get me that boiling water or something else to sanitize the things.”

Taken aback, he walked outside. The chill of the night was on his skin. Blikol sat at her chopper, eating a meal. The farmer walked in circles, his young children looked at the helicopter, Asis was leading them around.

Sit and wait.

He settled next to Blikol who swallowed a mouthful, then said, “This story will get around, Greg.”

“Why?”

“Unique. A human helping a furred farmer for no apparent reason. It’s not natural.”

“You helped Asis, didn’t you?”

“He’s a skunk. That’s different. Cats, dogs, skunks, they have a link with mankind, but not raccoons or even bears for that matter.”

“I don’t see the difference.”

“Somehow I just knew you would say that.”

“Blikol, I’m sorry I yelled at you. You did some fine flying just now.”

“It’s all right.”

His stomach rumbled. “Where did you get this food?”

“Compliments of the farmer’s daughter. I know when to say yes!”

“Daughter? How can you tell?”

She looked at him, searching. “You’re not even kidding, are you?”

One of the kids, the oldest, if length was any measure, walked up and curtsied, looking real dumb because of her overall.

“Please, Sir, accept a meal from our humble station.”

By the sound, indeed, a female.

“You speak English?”

She nodded eagerly.

Greg looked away, “I’m sorry about your mother, kid.”

“You are here, Sir, whatever happens will happen in the eyes of the prophet.”

“Uh?”

Blikol intervened. “He’ll take a meal, thank you.”

She hurried off.

“What was that about?”

“You were going to make a remark about faith, do that here and I will kill you Greg. I’ll do that for free, clear?”

“Now I’m scared.”

“Do not break the spell these people have. Their faith protects them from grief, meddle with it and their world falls apart.”

He nodded. That feeling was an acute memory for him now.

A plate on a small table with a cloth was brought over. He smelled the food, nearly going off his rocker for what it was.

“Spaghetti Bolognese?” he said to Blikol, full of surprise.

“Don’t know it by that name, but this is good.”

He tasted. “Yum,” he agreed, “got to have Shirra make this.”

Blikol nodded vigorously, “I’m thinking of hiring that kid for a cook myself. With you around, there is enough money again.”

“Again?”

“Sure, the metal-transgression warnings were not followed up on anymore!”

“The... ah, those, I see. How unfortunate, eh, eh.”

“You know something, don’t you?”

“Since when has this been the case?” Greg checked.

“About two months ago...”

“Coinciding with you selling that black cat and spotty white to your uncle, right?”

Blikol stopped eating. “I’m not even going to ask how you know that.”

He sniggered and continued eating. "And so the pieces fall in a perfect pattern, how nice." he said, and took another spoon full.

The black woman watched him eat and came to a conclusion. She got up and walked to the farmer, to talk to him. When she returned, his plate was empty and she looked at him.

"And?" Greg asked.

"I just secured a good cook, before you come to that conclusion."

"Shirra could order her from you."

"You wouldn't!" she put her fists on her side.

"Probably not. I might decide to come over for a meal, though. After all, you live just down the street."

"Greg!" he heard Blackie call, and got up to hurry inside.

A bloody mess around the bed made him frown. It smelled badly in here now. "What did you do?"

Blackie pointed to the side, where two wrapped parcels were being kept warm with rubbery warm water sacks.

"Both! And the mother?"

"That is why I called. She has a fever that will kill her. Your strange medicine could save her."

"Right!" Greg said, "I made sure to bring a good supply of those when I came back."

With the helicopter having gone 'home', Greg left with the farmer on another horse. It brought him and the farmer to the house. A short search produced the bottle of small pills, and he gave some to the farmer, who looked impressed at the letters 'acetaminophen' on the bottle because to the

farmer those illegible shapes were pure magic. As the horse thundered down the lane past Blikol's house, he saw the lights going out there.

Yawning, Greg retired to his bed as well.

## 72. One night?

Something was whining. Something, somewhere very far away, was whining. It was increasing in strength though. The whine grew louder while he was looking over the plain at the rim of the canyon. Nothing in sight, yet the whine continued. Greg looked up. Nope, nothing in the sky either. Steel blue, not a cloud in sight. What was that whining?

A chopper appeared, it whined very loudly.

"Something is dragging!" he called.

The whine grew louder still.

He woke with a start in the dark room and cursed strongly, kept on doing that as the whine continued.

"Amandine!" he cried, irritated. He was certainly alone now, except for the wolf guard outside. They would not come in. With a groan Greg felt his thumping head and got up from the bed slowly. What was it with kids that they knew the exact night you hadn't slept?

Grumpy, he arrived at her cot. She was thrashing in her bed. "You miss your toy?" he asked forcedly soft. If he let go his control, he might throw the wooden toy that was next to the cot with force. Instead, he put it carefully in the little paw-hands and noted a serious relief in the face while her eyes were squeezed closed.

"Sleep well, little girl," he cooed over her and bent over to kiss her.

As he turned around to leave, she screamed again. He turned back to the cot and she piped down.

“You are toying with me, Amandine, aren’t you?”

“Boehohoe,” she sobbed in her dream, and let the wooden toy fall to wipe her eyes. Greg looked at the near toddler coyote, sitting in her diaper, wiping her eyes. It was so sweet, so devilishly misleadingly sweet.

He tried again, a kiss, she lay down and he made ready to go... scream.

Back... stop scream.

What now?

He picked her up and her hands reached for him, holding him tight. Her little claws pulled on his skin and together they arrived at his bed. He sought a place between the sheets and Amandine curled up next to him.

“Sleep tight, kiddo.”

He turned over and drifted off, to his plain with the open sky.

As such things go, it cost him another two awakenings that night. Once where he rolled nearly over her by accident, and again where she was waking for some nasty thing only she knew, or saw.

The morning came with a lot of chopping of wood and hammering. Greg checked his watch: nine in the morning. Amandine ignored the noise and was still curled up. She hadn’t had a good night either. Giving in to the reality of the new day, Greg went to the kitchen with droopy eyes and tried to cook up some coffee. Working this electrical stove was a chore but he managed to get water boiling. The search for coffee was another matter and by the time coffee was ready, his head pounded all over, as he sat down with his coffee.

Suddenly, the workers' noise stopped and he took his coffee pot along to the garden to find them huddled together with a sandwich. Two raccoons and a nondescript grey dog looked up. The raccoons here all seemed to wear these overalls. This sure was farmin' country.

The dog wore a sort of canvas pants with a metal button. Fancy.

They nodded at him, and he could not help but feel looked at very much.

"Hi guys" he tried for conversation.

They nodded. "Good day, Sir Greg," the dog said in common. Apparently the most daring one, because the raccoons were busy revering him by looks alone.

Greg studied the sky. No clouds and the mist in the canyon was lifting. "Indeed, a good day. A day to live for..." he sniffed the air to clear his head and yawned.

"Late night, sir?"

"Indeed." He walked on and heard the two raccoons talk through each other trying to tell the dog something. With his uncooperative brain, he would be hard pressed to decipher the chatter. When he reached the garden-bench, he sat down. It was wet from the mist, but he didn't care. The three workers, in the meantime, were at it again. The dog looked in his direction a few times. By now he also found a sort of reverence in those eyes that bugged him.

"They're all mad," he informed the garden. With his coffee in his hand, he sat until the sun warmed his robe. When that got too warm he went inside to check on Amandine. She was still sleeping and he took up his programming work with the tablet. He needed to get his 'man-in-the-middle' control in place. If there needed to be a god on this planet, one to control all the lasers, it would bloody well be him.

At lunch, Amandine happily devoured two whole apples. Big ones. Then they sat looking on to the workers, together. They didn't mind, it seemed,

and they were friendly to Amandine. If they would just leave their stares at home, it would even be better.

He took his tablet outside and in the shadow of a tree continued his programming while he kept an eye on Amandine's antics. This way he also saw that the dog was doing the reading of the few drawings for the house. He was instructing the two raccoons.

An uneventful day drew to an end when the noise of another chopper sounded. One the size of Blikol's machine lowered down from the rim far above. This helicopter was jiggling around as it came down. What a terrible pilot!

Together with Amandine, he went to see Shirra and his household. Blikol was at the field as well, with the skunk. She was holding a piece of paper.

"What is that?" he asked after he had remarked on the bad piloting which Blikol waved aside as "it's not easy" and more of the like. Those blacks were thick, it appeared once more.

Blikol eyed the sheet as if she only now became aware of it.

"This? Oh, an open account."

"You're afraid Shirra might not sign this?"

In a way his mind had easily concluded the events surrounding this all.

"Business is business."

"You are a heartless scrooge, Blikol. That woman might make it, her baby might make it, and all you can think of is money."

"Money makes the..."

"Why don't you just choke on the money, Blikol? Try to eat it, drink it, and see how you like your red bills then."

"You misjudge me."

“No, my dear Blikol, I got you down perfectly well. You are a money grubber.”

“Even while I can accept that as a compliment, I have the feeling your connotation is not a positive one.”

“And you worked that out yourself? My, my, brains and a package. If you weren’t so good looking, Blikol, I’d shun you like the bad thing you are. But I can’t..”

He really couldn’t. Why was he talking to her at all? Just looking at her, now, here, his mind played tricks on him. Was she looking at him, or not? But she wasn’t nice! Stop it! He shook his head. Amandine pointed upwards as the chopper neared and talking was impossible.

The rotors stopped much quicker than on other crafts, he noted. The doors opened as did the cargo hatch. Shirra appeared, pointing and calling, like a general leading her army. Apparently convinced the rest would happen as requested, she made her way to him. “Hi Greg!”

She was totally charged, with positive energy. “Hello Amandine,” she said, stroking the coyote, who tried to get away from her fingers. Strange that, voice OK, touch not. Greg absorbed all this and was ‘feeling’ Amandine at his side while Shirra was discussing the bill with Blikol in common. Shirra knew he was hardly fluent in common speech and this certainly meant she felt this was not for him to participate in. Asis came to stand close to him.

He considered taking a step away when Amandine reached for Asis. He let himself be felt. Amandine seemed to be comparing Asis’ skin to his. Her hand kept going back and forth between them.

“She’s likable,” Asis said.

Greg saw the skunk had no idea how to behave around kids. A probing finger tried an insecure stroke on Amandine’s back. She giggled.

The three of them looked at the ladies suddenly because Blikol was yelling into Shirra’s ear.

Greg laughed.

"It's not funny," Asis said, hurt.

"Not to you, but I find it hilarious. Your ears aren't so suited for screaming into. I think I'm watching the very reason why assistants are cats."

Asis smirked.

"I thought you said it was not funny?"

"It is for that reason."

"Do tell, you're not too fond of cats?"

"Actually, no, I'm not."

"How strange. I distinctly remember you took a red black cat into your so-called covert enterprise. That resistance toy of yours?"

Asis gasped.

Greg gave the skunk a friendly tap on the back. "No sweat, kiddo. As long as you don't suck the poor townspeople around here dry your secret is safe with me. Good spot, beneath that power generator."

"But... but..."

"Am I making myself clear, Asis?"

"But how...?"

"You're stuttering, not your style."

"Sir Greg, please understand, I am very careful with whom I let pay. And even then only to their ability."

"Of course."

"No really, Sir Greg! Please, believe me!"

"On your knees boy, beg!" he said in jest.

Asis did that at once.

“Jesus, get up man! This is ridiculous! I only want to make clear you can’t go around robbing poor people of their money. Robin Hood takes from the rich, not from the poor, get my drift?”

“Robin Hood?” the skunk asked, getting up.

“I might not like you, Asis, but I am not unjust. Especially since you apparently tried hard to get approval of humans.” He knew he was referring to the missing tail again.

“You can’t stop referring to my sorry state, can you?” Asis retorted hotly.

“That’s the spirit!” Greg said, smiling. He set Amandine down who took station behind his leg. Asis stood before him, wide legged, worked up. Blikol’s hand appeared, forcing Asis to his knees. “Idiot!” she yelled. Into his ear. It was not as easy as with Shirra, but this worked too. Asis turned his ears all the way back, shielding from the brunt of the noise this way. He went to his knees before her.

Blikol grabbed his ear and pulled him up. “I told you not to talk to Greg, didn’t I? You know this happens, stupid.”

Shirra stood next to him. “Is this true?” she held the sheet before him, tapping it.

“Shirra, if I could read Chinese I might say something intelligible about it.”

“Ohhh!” she mouthed and read the posts on the bill.

“In the night, to the bear village? How do you think I can pay this? We don’t have endless pockets Greg, this will go up to the lady Remonovna, and she is not known for her generosity in this type of case!”

“She can accept it for once, right?”

“Greg! You’re being obtuse!”

“My, what a beautiful way to say this.”

He went to his knees and looked into the eyes of Amandine who was listening to their talk. “Daddy is obtuse, isn’t that nice?”

“Daddy?” Amandine repeated.

He picked her up and regarded Shirra as if anew who ranted on, “Are you even listening?”

“Sort of. Can we pay this thing?”

“Yes of course we can, but it means the extension has to be postponed a month. Where will the staff live, you tell me?”

“Blikol? You get in a third this month, again a third next month and then again.”

“In that case, I need interest.” Blikol was holding one arm of Asis behind his back, strained he was listening to his mistress, who was taking her anger out on him. Stupid bugger! Served him right, for interfering everywhere and in general for being a stinkin’ skunk. Asis reminded him of the shot up youths he would find around a railway station, pestering passers by with thrown cans or fast-food wrappers, hoping to get one to confront them.

“You get no interest at all,” Greg directed, “It’s this or I will order Shirra to order a discount of thirty percent. I’m sure she will happily do that.”

Blikol narrowed her eyes a second, then frowned and of all things, smiled. She released her buddy, playmate, house mate, thingy, cuddly skunk, whatever. “And you can haggle too, you’re not so bad, Greg.”

“What do you mean: ‘not so bad’?”

“You know you have a nice butt, Greg?”

“Hey, I’m not a piece of meat, OK? Come Shirra.”

“I didn’t say I agreed,” Blikol said pointedly.

“Oh, I have to wait for that? You get three seconds or the deal is off. Two... one...”

“All right! All right! You drive a hard bargain!”

“Happy now?”

He walked away with Shirra. "It is still expensive, Greg."

"I don't care. I don't need an extension to the place."

"I do!"

He stopped, put Amandine down and put Shirra in front of him. He looked her over. "You did something to your hair?"

Shirra giggled, uncertain, "I had it clipped, I didn't think you would notice."

"It's better this way," he said, knowing it was the best, and only sensible answer to such pitfall remarks of the female kind.

She pulled a hand through her hair. That was a nice thing to see. It was down to her shoulders already, and very full. He scratched her below her chin and then behind her ear just above the neck. "Oh..." she went and purred. How cat-like could you get?

Her dress had been cleaned thoroughly and shone in the dimming light. He reached behind her and undid the apron, removing it. Then he took a step back. Really nice, and not at all too 'sex' loaded anymore.

"It's really a nice dress. I'm glad it is more to the Bordeaux, rather than blood red."

He handed her the apron and took Amandine up. "Aunt Shirra has a nice dress, don't you think so Amandine?"

The little coyote looked at him expectantly instead of answering.

"You're hungry, aren't you?" Greg tried. Not a chance, he was being studied by two green eyes in a canine face.

"Are you coming?" he asked the perplexed cat, still holding her apron.

"I don't get you, Greg," she said softly.

He held out his hand and waited for her to put her hand in it. "Come kitten, I like you around. Very much. How was your visit to the city?"

All the way home she talked about the visit to her sister and additional treatments she'd received for her leg. "Good as new!" she said. Things about the council and other 'important' stuff about the citadel he didn't care for at all he put aside.

"With all that, I can't believe you even slept."

"Of course, as long as needed." She patted her bag, as if to check for something and smiled happily while they entered the house. She went to check on the work at once.

"You wait in the garden; I have some additional instructions for the staff."

He accepted that easily and went with Amandine to the orange tree in the garden, pointing at the leaves and fruit. That evening, they ate like a kind of family, the three of them. A dog cook cooked, the cats, except the one in the grey dress, served, and cleaning and gardening were dispatched to two dogs. On top of that, the larder had been stocked back to front. His staff had pushed a wheel barrow of sorts from the chopper up to the house. It had generated some interest along the route.

"What a huge staff, Shirra. Isn't this incredibly expensive?"

She looked at him frowning, not understanding, so he explained, "In my world, having a person on payroll is so expensive you have to be bloody rich to be able. Then to have this many... no way."

"But the personnel costs aren't the issue, the transport is."

"Of course, of course. Another thing, where is Rafael?"

"He's tying up ends at the city, when he's done, he will come along the next time I go over, with his family. Besides, I couldn't fit him and his wife and two kids in the house."

"Couldn't they live in the town?"

Shirra tapped her nose, as she would when thinking, licked it quickly and nodded. "If they'd accept that..."

“Well, you could at least offer the option.”

A short evening later he found his bed and this night everything was quiet. Thank God.

###

Greg was working on his code. He'd just gotten his first attempt working and was now adding debugging lines and checks when the front door slammed.

“That is aunt Shirra” he said to Amandine who was sitting on the floor, trying to fit a napkin through her toy in a zillion ways. She had discovered about two.

“Greg!” he heard her call.

“Isn't she sweet?” he said to the little one.

The door to the living room slammed open and he heard the other door close, the maids found a safe haven in the kitchen. He looked up to Shirra who stood steaming before him.

Having no idea for the reason he asked, “I take it you heard something that goes down in a less pleasant way with you?”

“What is this I hear?”

“You are talking in exclamations, Shirra. We're not married and I don't have any interest in a row.”

“Your behavior is so unprofessional I can't put words to it, what have you got to say for yourself?”

He looked at Amandine. She was engrossed in her play. He smiled then looked at the glowering cat again. “Gee, an angry cat, in a nice dress. Now what could be her problem?”

“Greg!” she yelled.

“Yes, that is me?”

She jumped up and down with frustration, her dress rippled nicely along. Her hands were folded into fists and she held them stiffly along her sides. Her eyes were shut tightly. “Don’t you understand what you’re doing with your drugs? You can’t go about playing the Good Samaritan like this!”

Greg raised one eyebrow. “Your faith is familiar with that story?”

“Don’t change the subject Greg. I’m talking about you getting Blackie. You did that to save a baby and that is dumb as it is, and then you felt you had to try and save that mother too with your magic.”

Greg put his tablet on the table and looked at her hopeful. “They made it?”

“One of the two died, the other, they called ‘Greg’ and the mother is up and about.”

“Way to go, Blackie!” he called.

“OK mister smarty pants, and now you tell me what they will do with the next birth? Well?”

“First come, first served.”

She reached for heaven, “I don’t believe this, you’re insane!” focusing on him, “What do you think happens when you do this kind of thing? These people are simple farmers Greg, they worship you now. I had to haggle to get the workers to accept money. Well?”

“That is it!” Greg now understood the reaction of the workers, “That is what they were doing. Boy, I hate that.”

“You’re not making sense Greg, please elaborate.”

She was calming down, and her speech was getting more civilized. Actually, he liked her a lot when she was angry.

“Yesterday, when I sat looking with Amandine at the workers, they kept looking at me in that weird way. Downright unsettling.”

“Let me say this Greg, you had better weigh everything you say on a silver tray.”

“I will.”

Or not. Not his problem. He was here to get that stupid system set up correctly, and then think up a solution for Sasha. Finally, he’d get the hell out of here, one way or another. This place was not a decent place for Amandine, or for him. Everything he did seemed to do some damage here or there. Now Shirra tried to convince him he’d done something irresponsible with saving that raccoon in labor. How idiotic could you get to be ‘irresponsible’ for doing a good deed? “They’re all nuts here. Nuts as a squirrel.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” He took his tablet and concentrated on the programming. If his method worked, he would have another thirty or so coding-modules to adjust. A month’s worth or so, he guessed.

## 73. Man in the middle

“Sir? Are you feeling well?” Greg looked up at Rafael. The black dog was probably just wondering, he couldn’t read his face as well as that of Shirra.

With an accomplished smile, Greg folded his hands behind his head, “I’ve got it, Rafael! It’s active, and I get the requests passing by!”

A difficult frown formed on the black dog’s face, “This is a good thing, sir?”

“Good? No man, perfect, bloody perfect! I’m the *man*, I did it!”

He danced through the room, his tablet in his hand and stepping around like a Greek Sirtaki-dancer. The tablet bleeped.

“Another one! Let me see...”

“Ah, this is down in the New York area. How about that, they have just over five hundred percent of their default allotted metal budget. That’s easily cured, tip, tap, and it’s stored. Easy as pie!”

Another beep.

A month of work was completed from early to late, only breaking for food and putting Amandine in her cot. He had finally done it. The program was done. The tablet kept going.

“And now the next phase, we store the whole map. ‘Auto’, here we go.”

He tapped the tablet, put it down and activated the projector. The screen showed the warnings rolling by, one after the other were stored. Instead of requiring zero metal everywhere he now stored the current situation on the tablet and had the satellite system check with it to see if an eradication was needed or not.

“Tomorrow the blanches get their precious system on line, Rafael.”

The dog looked at him, unhappy.

“You don’t get it, do you? I’m in between, mister dog, I decide if a warning is passed on or not, I decide if an attack is executed or not. I’m the boss, not the whites. They only think they are.”

“With great power comes great responsibility, sir.”

“Well said, Rafael, Where did you learn that line?”

“Couldn’t say, sir.”

“Still not happy?”

“Would sir care for a dance?”

“Are you not ever happy?”

“I’m a dog, sir, I know my place.”

“Your place? What if I told you, it is about time that ‘place’ was the same as that of anyone? About time one’s ‘place’ is only determined by their abilities and perseverance. Not by their bloody race, or species in your case.”

Rafael looked a little more hopeful.

“Sir? This is the moment?”

“Yes man! This is the moment, tomorrow the gates of hell are supposed to open, and instead I stand in the way. Ha ha!”

He walked out of the room wanting to share this with Shirra but she was at the citadel again. She did that often.

Luckily the big bad dame Remonovna kept silent and away. The fear of something happening to Shirra had abated. He had seen how she was the major kitten in Campone and she seemed to be happy every time she returned.

Now he walked down the path to Blikol who also was away, after all, she was flying Shirra there and back for money. Right now, he was so happy, he was going to tell that upshot youth Asis that the lasers were about to be online. Let’s see how the fur-ball would like that!

“Daddy!” he heard behind him and went to his knees to collect a coyote toddler who stormed into his arms.

“Girl! I got it! Come with me!”

Together they reached the house of Blikol and entered past the Doberman guards who nodded friendly to him.

“Asis!” he called and searched the house. At last he went to the basement, guiding Amandine on the steps.

“Asis!” he called in the gloom and Greg saw a door open. A little black bipedal animal appeared. Cat? dog? Startled, the little one ran down the hall into the dark. Greg wasted no time and he ran after it, and turned the lights on as he passed the switches. Finally he ended up in a room with three frightened, pitch black animals.

A weird musky smell hung in the air. He sniffed. "Uh, hi?" he said. He set Amandine on the floor and she went to stand in front of him.

Was this a little family that was cowering before him? Two grownups, and a child no more than five or six. The mother was cradling the child. She had blue eyes and a long tail, but the hairs on it were strangely cut. "Are you squirrels?" he asked, wondering.

They nodded as one, and the father stood protective before his family, He was rather big, As big as Asis in fact, and proportioned the same way...

"Wait a minute..." he sniffed again.

The three animals stiffened and the father protectively spread his arms before his wife and child.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Greg said but some unpleasant feeling was creeping up his spine. These were... disguised, but still...skunks.

"What are you guys doing here?"

"Are you..." the father asked, in common, his voice carried a tremor of utter despair.

Greg didn't get it. Was he really so intimidating? He checked himself for anything aggressive and finding nothing picked up Amandine, explaining to her, "I think these are black painted skunks, Amandine. What do you think?"

She sniffed and sniffed. "Hmmm." She said.

"You like that smell, girl?"

He sniffed again. Musky. Not so bad, actually.

"Is that you?" he asked the family, "Smelling so?"

They only seemed to put more distance between them and him, backing into the wall, moving along until they reached a corner. The mother skunk turned around in a furtive protection attempt.

“If you try that,” Greg warned, getting really angry, dispelling his fear, “I will kill you utterly!” he said in common.

The skunk man nearly yanked his wife’s tail off, she yelped, and turned around. “Please!” he called, and threw himself on the floor, his tail below him. Wife and child followed his example. Amandine angrily looked at Greg and just as simple as that, Greg felt guilty. Little Amandine didn’t like him angry.

“I’m sorry,” Greg explained, “you have to understand, I have this phobia about skunks. It’s not your fault.”

He set Amandine down and she walked over to the little boy, who got up and said ‘hi’, Amandine studied the skunk long and carefully. She felt the fur, it being her favorite action and walked back to Greg to check the hair on his arm. Then she pulled him along, “Whoa girl, daddy is not too fond of skunks, you can’t...” She kept pulling, so he stopped her. Amandine looked up and started pouting, ending with a heartfelt cry.

“All right, just a moment, then.”

Passing the cowering father, making sure he was not near any tail, he ended up next to the boy. “Hi, I am Greg. Who are you?”

“Are you really Greg the hairy human?”

Greg fingered his full beard, mildly annoyed, “Is this hairy enough for you? You can feel this if you want; I’m used to Amandine here,” he patted her head, “pulling it all the time.”

The boy stuck out a finger and gingerly felt it. Once he had decided no imminent danger was to be expected from Greg, he said, “I’m Timmy.”

“Hello Timmy,” said Greg.

Timmy nodded to his parents, “That is my daddy and that is my mommy.”

Happy to have made progress, Greg asked, “What are you doing here?”

“We’re hiding!” Timmy said and his eyes took on that special gleam of a child who enters into a top secret game.

“Hiding? And from who? Is someone hunting you?”

“We hide from the humans!”

“Humans? Like me, Timmy?”

“No,” Timmy produced a smile, “humans are white and mean.”

Greg laughed softly. This was mind-boggling; here he was sitting next to three skunks. Of course, their disguise helped in that his brain was not registering the white stripes as danger. He knew well it was a mental ruse but he didn’t care how it worked. Greg looked around. The room was a sad location, a little blinded window being the only source of fresh air. One bed stood to one wall, too small an affair for the three of them. A bucket in the corner seemed to be a source of an unpleasant smell. Not the musky smell though. Further he saw a dress and a jacket hanging from nails in the wall. He recognized the dress as belonging to Blikol; the suit was just like one that Asis would wear.

He heard footsteps in the hall and got up to face whoever was going to rush in. By the sound of the footfalls, it was Asis. Indeed, the door burst open and the skunk skidded to a halt in the middle of the room.

“No!” he screamed, and fell to his knees, grabbing his ears, “No! No! No!”

He was hitting his fists on his head as he looked at Greg. “Greg! Why now? You hadn’t shown for a month, and now...”

Asis got up, static, indecisive. Amandine tried to defuse the situation, or more likely had no idea what was going on, either way she walked to Asis and plucked his white hairs on his wrists.

“Leave me alone, kid!” Asis hissed and yanked his hand back.

Amandine started and ran back to Greg, crying. The female skunk got up and started to yell at Asis. She didn’t agree with his action towards Amandine.

“You tell him, lady,” Greg spurred her, “He needs some serious corrections in behavior. That Blikol has spoiled him rotten.”

Behind Greg, the skunk-mother’s voice agreed, “Couldn’t have said it better.”

Greg turned to her to be introduced, “Madam, you are...?”

“Riane Mustelli, that there is my husband, Memet.”

“Memet and Riane. Well, I think, now that I know you are here, you might as well live up in the light, what do you say?”

“Will you clip them Greg?” Asis asked, he was shaking, his fists had pounded the floor to no avail.

“Me?” Greg said innocently, “How would I do that? Besides, Amandine seems to like them.”

“Amandine seems to...” Asis repeated, he was thinking. “Does it matter to you so much what she thinks? She’s a baby!”

“A toddler, but yes, it matters. A lot. Maybe we can ask this mother here, Riane?”

The ensuing discussion was concluded at the pool side. As twilight set in, Blikol’s chopper was heard in approach. “Maybe we can eat here,” Greg mused, “I know Blikol has engaged the cooking abilities of an able raccoon missus. That is, if she is on time today. Blikol is always bickering with her about time, she says.”

Greg went to wait for Shirra to pass by at Blikol’s gate, waving as they trudged up the hill.

“Greg!” Shirra shouted and ran to him, her dress flapping around her legs. She nearly flew around his neck, or at least it felt like that. She kissed him on his cheek, but he was sure that was due to a last second reconsideration. Then she fondled Amandine.

“You are happy, anything in particular?”

“I’ve done it,” she said enthusiastically, “My potion, it is ready! I will astound you, I promise!”

“Astound? You are achieving that already, day in day out, dear. Come, I have to show you something far beyond ‘astounding’. Light-years beyond it, and all because of this little critter here.”

He fondled Amandine below her ears and she looked up cheerfully. Taking Shirra by the hand, he guided her to the pool where she pointed at the assembled black skunks and Asis in turn. “But... that... they... it’s not... you can’t...”

“Come on Shirra, speaking in one whole sentence can’t be that hard? Concentrate for a second, will you?”

“They’re skunks... complete ones... A whole family!”

“Amazing, isn’t it? I got a fright at the moment I recognized them, but Amandine sort of pulled me through. I have been talking to them for the last few hours.”

Amandine trotted over to the skunk boy and pulled his tail. She laughed.

“Greg, don’t you see? This is an affront! The whole society will fall over us if they find out. How can you be so relaxed?”

“Relaxed? I’m over the moon! I think I have conquered my skunk-ophobia!”

Shirra stamped a foot loaded with discontentment. Greg recognized a lecture was forthcoming. At the same time he could see how she was angry. This time her whiskers twitched and one ear had twitched at least twice. As much as he liked Shirra, he still liked to see her worked up. He still was Greg, wasn’t he? Right now, he was going to try to enjoy the show. Instead, Blikol came running up and stopped next to Shirra.

“Asis!” she cried in anger.

‘Nice,’ Greg thought, ‘both ladies angry.’

“You idiot! Now you have *totally* done it. How do you propose we handle this here eh? You stupid idiot!” Blikol expressed her anger physically and proceeded to Asis to drag him over the floor along to the side. There she called him a lot of unpleasant names. Asis took his usual acceptance stance. Would Blikol even see how most she said was simply bouncing off from the guy? It was a recalcitrant youth, kicking would not do much.

In the mean time, Shirra had been hissing angry comments.

“... and if you even think you can get away with this...”

“Sorry, I wasn’t listening, could you repeat that?”

“Greg!” she stamped her feet together in utter frustration.

Yep, she was interestingly attractive when she was angry.

“We have to report this immediately to the citadel! Their department of skunk control needs to take action immediately. That male and female are fully grown. Have you any idea how dangerous that is?”

“Dangerous?”

“Yes! One squirt from their glands can kill the entire population of the citadel.”

Correcting her, he said, “The blanches-population, you mean.” He scratched his beard. This skunk-sanitizing made a lot of sense if you were a blanche. “And their tails go, because...?”

Shirra’s brow rode up her face, “To indicate they are safe. Why?”

“So if they just clip their tail, and not their glands, they can walk around the citadel killing blanches?”

“You are being childish again, there are no skunks allowed in there. Don’t pretend you didn’t know that.”

Greg shook his head, digesting this. In that case it didn’t matter if they had glands, now did it?

“Blikol?” he called. He interrupted another ‘arm-behind-the-back’ session where Asis was accepting his punishment resignedly. She let go of him and walked over.

“What is it?”

“You know why skunks are clipped and all?”

“Of course.”

“And you keep this family here because?”

“I didn’t! Asis is at it again, I always explain how this house cannot be used as a base for his resistance games.”

“You didn’t know?”

Greg carefully checked all signs that might indicate a lie.

“No!”

He wasn’t certain yet so he asked again. “Are you very, very sure? Think before you answer, Blikol!”

“I am sure. Now, what is it?”

Either a perfect liar, or truth. It didn’t matter. “I say we start our deviation from the blanches here and now. Tomorrow they get their laser control back, at the same time we begin with a set of changes here.”

Blikol frowned. If the black woman didn’t agree the solution was simple, he offered the way out, “Money, Blikol, endless helpings of money?”

Her interest sparked, she nodded for him to continue. Shirra stood looking from him to her and back. She didn’t agree at all and was trying to find an entry to get a word in.

“The farms can mechanize, produce can double at least, with twice the flights, twice the money.”

“Nice,” Shirra disagreed, “to whom do we bring all that food? The citadel is going to die out soon, if we allow this.”

Greg laughed. “To the Chinese of course! Didn’t you ever calculate the amount of food you’re getting to the citadel? I’m certain you know very well what Remona does with the foodstuffs.”

Blikol feigned indifference. Badly.

“Don’t try that Blikol, I’m better at that than Remona. I can even deceive her, if I set my mind to it.”

“You can?”

Shirra put her hand in between them. “And now you will listen!” she yelled.

Blikol grabbed her hand in her iron grip. “Get that paw off me, you insolent cat, know your place, next to your master, quickly!”

Greg saw it happen and realized once more how alien this world was to him. Shirra was a person, and when push came to shove, so was Asis even if young and inexperienced.

“Um, that is maybe not a good start, Blikol.”

Blikol narrowed her eyes, “Greg! You have said enough. I will get my uncle in, it will start here. You get that laser stuff on, and we’ll kick some ass!”

“Whose ass?”

“We’ll take our place at the top of the foodchain, according to our rules. This’ll be great!”

“I don’t *believe* this, Blikol. You are going to apologize to Shirra *right* now or I will blow up your entire family with the tap of a finger.”

“You wouldn’t...” she began darkly, stepping closer.

“Apologize!” he stepped even closer.

“Never!” their noses almost touched.

Suddenly, Greg went to the table to take his tablet and pinpointed the citadel.

“I see there are, oh, fifteen choppers present. What do you say?”

Blikol glowered at him, “I *know* there are fifteen! I was there today!”

“Great, then you know I’m not bluffing. The laser is set. Say the word.”

“You little piece of shit, I’ll kill you!”

“Fine, but is your whole family worth it?”

“Ahh!” Blikol started for him.

Greg held the tablet so she could see and held his finger before the enter button.

“Get that hand away!”

“You will apologize to the red clad cat there. Now.”

“It’s demeaning!”

“It’s meant to be so, else I wouldn’t ask it.”

“All right!” she panted, “All right. Get that finger away!” Blikol was sweating; she knew he was not bluffing.

Slowly, he took his finger away.

“Shirra, go fuck yourself,” the fine black woman spat.

“Blikol!” Greg yelled, “Normal, now!” He put his finger on the button again, “I count to ten and then we’re in a different universe altogether, aren’t we?”

“Greg, you made your point, you don’t have to...” Shirra began.

Blikol was pulling at her hair. “Get that finger away!”

Greg did. “You owe that lady an apology.”

Her eyes shot flashes of total dismemberment and she turned to Shirra. “Sorry.” She said, curtly.

“I’m sorry, too, lady Blikol.”

Shirra curtsied. Somehow, with that, she was able to clear the air. Blikol accepted it, and Greg put the tablet down.

“You stupid idiot!” Blikol grumbled, “What are you driving at?”

“Listen Blikol, I do not intend to place the next idiot in the ruler’s seat, your family is no less fit to rule than any other family. Rule should be by the consent of the mass.”

“What? Democracy? You have to be kidding, that was tried all over this globe with the Chinese and it brought us the fine Bio Wars. What kind of improvement is that?”

“The bio wars as result of democracy? Now you’re stretching the truth.”

Asis took a few steps.

“Communism Greg! We will have all for everyone.”

“Nope, Asis, that was tried too.”

“What? When?”

“Are you telling me the only stable system is that of a supreme ruler?” he looked at Shirra, who answered.

“Sort of. Besides, Remona is letting the council handle the everyday chores. They are chosen.”

Greg shook his head, “...by the blanches, yes, why not by everyone? But I can’t just give control to the blanches, they would kill millions. Wait, I’ll give you a count of the killing if that system goes online...”

Greg fiddled with the tablet.

“Here it is, with the warnings so far, that is... five hundred million? My God, and it’s not even finished? You honestly believe this a good system? If anything happens to this tablet, those people might die. One day.”

Shirra, Blikol and Asis looked at his tablet with a weird real look in their eyes.

“How can you know?” Blikol wanted to know.

“Simple, Blikol. I collect all the warnings in a database. Every incident is stored with its value. The next time it goes off, the value is compared. If it is the same as today: no problem. Else...”

Greg’s eyes twinkled at Blikol as he explained, “You don’t want to kill all those potential customers, Blikol?”

Then he looked at Asis. “You feel the blanches are killing wantonly? They use this system. It is *equal* to everyone.” Except the blanches of course.

And to Shirra he said, “even the blanches would not want to kill all these people. Only Remona would.”

The three of them nodded.

“Good. Now we...”

“Madame?” they turned around. The newly hired young raccoon cook appeared. “Sorry I’m late, lady.”

The farmer’s daughter was puffing, from running.

Blikol nodded, “You can start right away.”

Greg cut in, “Can you make lasagna?”

“Sorry?”

Greg started to explain but after a few lines the kid nodded and half turned when she noted the quiet skunk family. She made a little jump of joy.

“Everyone eats along?” Greg sort of decided, “That’ll be seven and a half then, go.”

The raccoon girl went off in her new grey dress.

“What is with the grey dress thing?” Greg asked, seeing the raccoon leave for the kitchen then addressed the little group of Blikol, Asis and Shirra, “Are we at least agreeing we are not going to do anything about the skunks?”

“Yes!” Asis said eagerly,

“For now,” Shirra agreed a bit sulking,

“Sure thing.” Blikol didn’t mind one way or the other.

Greg smiled and mentally moved on. “Blikol, tomorrow I would like you to help me with the energy generator. I have an idea and you are handy.”

“Do you?”

She switched to the new subject just as easily and left all the nasty remarks behind her in an instant. Remarkable lady.

###

“Shirra, I have to say that was good lasagna.”

Greg rolled to his side, in the bed. He was now so used to having her next to him in the bed, he could get *very* used to having it this way.

“If you say so,” Shirra deferred, “I think we should have had a salad on the side. This was too much meat.”

“No, this was perfect.”

“Again, if you say so, I...”

“You needn’t repeat yourself.”

“It’s just... That skunk thing disagrees with everything I stand for.”

“You’re a cat, how would you like it if someone clipped your tail?”

Shirra sighed. “For the greater good that would make excellent sense.”

“Those skunks nearly died with fright when they saw me, what does that tell you?”

“If they had had their treatment when they were young as they should have, they would not have lived in fear.”

“OK, another angle then. A skunk with a tail is considered to bring a lot of luck, why is that.”

“Couldn’t say.”

This was it. He heard how she was trying to convince herself. Even Shirra knew perfectly well why a whole skunk was considered so lucky.

“Keith’s world had whole skunks, Shirra.”

“You just keep on talking until I agree, don’t you?”

“You were flabbergasted, dysfunctional even, when you saw the two skunks there, admit it.”

Greg recalled the incident. “I was,” he admitted.

“Why? Those would not ever want their tail clipped, would they?”

When Greg kept silent, Shirra added, “They had nice tails.”

“You are incredible, Shirra. I like you for it.” He reached over and fondled her chin.

She slid over to him purring.

He tickled her ears and chin more. “Hmmm,” she said and crawled on top of him.

“I don’t mind the hugging, Shirra,” he warned her.

“I know,” she purred, “but a girl can dream, can’t she?”

“Indeed,” he said softly.

Shirra let her hand slide down, “How come you are aroused, if you don’t want to? ...How’s this?”

She moved her abdomen in a way...

“...nice.” he managed.

“And like so?”

Then he felt how she tried to envelope him. “Hey!” he pushed away from under her. “I said *no*, Shirra.”

“You like it, I can see you do. Why do you reject me?”

“Maybe, just maybe, I wouldn’t mind, with you, but you said you get pregnant at any try. I can’t have that.”

“Why not?”

Apart from it feeling wrong in a monumental way, Greg puffed, “I’m not going to help you create a freak, a being ... no. Period.”

“What is it you dislike about me?”

“You’re a cat. That’s enough, right?”

“If I were a woman?”

“If you were a black woman, Shirra, I would, oh I would... I’m going to turn over and dream about that, is that all right?”

“That’ll do fine, Greg.”

“No hard feelings? I warned you upfront, Shirra.”

“It’s fine, Greg, you did indeed warn me. You like me to ... help you?”

Suppressing a shudder, he managed, “I don’t need that right now, can I take a rain check?”

“Hmm hmmm,” she mumbled, drifting off.

He was quickly asleep too although his dreams were not quite of enticing black women, instead he dreamed of Amandine getting hurt.

## 74. Sasha out

Greg watched Blikol climb down from the small field-setup in the power generator bunker. She whistled a little and shook her head, saying, "I still don't get it. What did you say this is used for again?"

"I don't get it either," Greg answered, "I don't understand a single thing about the conversion method. Lead to electricity, and as far as I can see it is using hydrogen from the air for some sort of cold fusion. Waaay too fancy for me."

They'd talked about the fusion thing for a little while now. It had been her reason to visit this setup. His personal reason was much different of course. When Blikol talked shop, technical shop, she was more like a colleague from the university in that she was interested and talkative. Together they had covered the setup in terms of adjustments and Greg had achieved a similar phone-driven adjustment as in the satellite. He still couldn't believe Tabitha had done this in one hour, while being increasingly deprived of oxygen. Amazing!

"That was a skunk too," he had said so often by now that Blikol was filling in the words before he actually got a chance, laughing at him.

All in all Greg was glad he could finally run his program on this setup. He still had to wait for it to be perfect. He'd decided he was going to try to send Sasha to Keith's world. Things needed to be perfect or his bear friend would be released from stasis too soon and he would not be able to get him to Keith's universe where he might be helped. Blikol seemed happy with their achievement and Greg was happy with her help. The structure had been reinforced with Blikol's help and materials.

"This is beginning to look like a decent setup," he decided.

Blikol came to stand beside him. "It's quiet here, Greg." She put her hand over his back, and down again to his pants, slipping her hand in.

“Hey...” he said softly, turning to her. Her figure always got him aroused easily and now she was taking the lead even. He put his hand under her shirt, to her back feeling for her bra.

“Wait,” she said and pulled shirt and undershirt off, unhooked her bra and pushed his hands on her large breasts.

“Nice,” he said, feeling around, losing control. Greg got out of his pants quickly.

Blikol pulled her panties down.

All in all it didn't take minutes.

“You were too quick,” she said, afterwards.

“I haven't a button to control that,” Greg accepted guiltily.

“You don't say.”

He shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Don't sweat it, it was all right.”

He heard the message between the lines, in that she had expected more. Well, he wasn't a Don Juan, and that was it. He had gotten quite what he expected, and yet at the same time it wasn't what he'd thought at all.

“Look Greg,” Blikol pointed, “that wire is still loose,” while she pulled her shirt down. She clambered on the setup immediately while muttering, “Fuck, my hands are slippery!”

“Now what could have caused that?” Greg asked satirically.

Blikol clambered all the way over the setup to the other side and fastened the wire.

“Well, shall we try?” Greg asked, “Here we go...” he punched the program start and saw a flicker in the field after which the adjustments and feed back kicked in and the shimmering fields changed to a nearly invisible line.

“Got it!”

Blikol seemed impressed. “And now?”

“Easy, I setup the dial home thing then disable the field, pull Sasha out, activate with destination and push him in.”

“Right,” Blikol said, “You go ahead, I’m coming back to your side.”

“Spiderwoman, eh?”

“Oh, I’m handy,” she said, missing the point.

He setup the field equation and looked at Blikol on the setup, her short skirt showed her panties. She had been doing that the whole morning and he had been aroused by it before. Suddenly he heard her cry out. “Shit!” she called, lost her grip and fell down. That wasn’t a big problem per se, but Greg was jumpy and his wound up nerves caused him to clamp the tablet in his fingers with fright and activated the program by accident.

The field flickered out as Blikol fell on Sasha. Because of this, the alignment didn’t fit anymore and the worst possible thing happened.

“Nooo!” he screamed as another singularity formed and the field sparked.

Sasha and Blikol blinked out of existence.

Greg checked the setup and soon found the singularity. “Dammit!” he cried. For anger he nearly kicked the tablet to pieces but stopped at the last second. “Fine! You have your fun up there!” he shook a fist to the ceiling. All was lost! How could he possibly hope to regain them now?

Blikol knew next to nothing of this technology. Sasha did, he even understood the equations, but he was dying. Had been dying, and now, and now ....

He yelled and howled at the setup for minutes, punching it. His fists were covered in blood from the cuts he sustained when he stopped. This was not helping anyone. Dejected, he collected his phone and tablet. Blackie would be glad he assumed, but it was no consolation.

Out in the street, he took his tablet and checked the settings. By now metal-content information of the whole globe had been stored. It was time to get those stinkers in their citadel their lasers. In this mood, Greg didn't care anymore. Just shoot everything to pieces, fuck them all. Greg activated the program and set the communication open.

There, done. His mind on other matters, he walked home.

###

At the house of Blikol he halted. The dogs at the door looked at him. "Sir?" one asked. Greg wondered what would happen to them. "Do you guys have a pension plan?"

"A what?"

"Thought so... say how about you get me Asis. I've got to tell him something."

In a matter of seconds the skunk youth appeared.

"Greg!" Asis said surprised, clearly not happy.

"Asis," Greg acknowledged.

"Where is lady Blikol?"

"..."

He couldn't find the words.

"She's..." he tried again and tears sprang to his eyes. He sat down, next to the tablet and the phone, on the road, feeling small and stupid.

“What!” Asis howled.

“She’s... not, here,” he finished.

Asis went livid. “What did you do? What did you do! You fucker, you bastard! You killed her!”

He assaulted him, kicking and hitting. After a few hits, Greg started to defend himself. The combat lessons Keith’s boss, the colonel, had given him he put to use. Asis was stronger but unguided and so the skunk was no match. Greg used the tablet to hit the guy over the head. And again, and again, until Asis was out.

“Stinker” he said but didn’t really mean it. Greg collected the phone and tablet and walked home.

###

Greg sat at the table, looking at nothing. What was the world coming to? Nothing seemed to go forward, nor backward, nothing moved, nothing became. It was useless.

“Where is Rafael?” he asked the maid.

“They’re all out.”

“Out?”

“All the dogs are out.”

“What’s this? Fuck Greg day?”

“Sorry sir.”

“Get lost!” he bit to the cat but before she could, Shirra appeared, flushed. She’d been running, “Greg!” she panted, “It’s terrible!”

“What is?”

Shirra swallowed, “There is a march in the town! All the cats in Campone are being chased up the hill!”

“Oh dear,” he said gloomily.

“You have to put a stop to it!”

“I have to do no such thing. I do nothing anymore.”

“They are chanting ‘the day’, yelling that you said so!”

“Are they? Sod off.”

Shirra pulled him from his chair and slapped his face. “They are chasing fifteen families with kids and babies! It’s a lynching party, Greg!”

“Babies, uh?”

“What’s the matter with you? Little kids will get killed!”

“All right!” Greg moaned, “All right, if it is fuck-Greg-day, let’s have the whole thing eh?” He got up, and trudged to the door and stamped his feet in irritation down the path. Shirra was sort of jumping around him all the time but he didn’t go faster. He couldn’t, hadn’t the heart.

At Blikol’s house he saw Asis was not lying in the road anymore. He walked on, and at the top of the hill he saw below him, in the distance, a street full of assorted species and a group of cats being chased towards him. They were halfway down the street. A mother with a child in her arms was running up the street. She tripped and fell down with her baby.

Greg noted this. Something triggered at last. That wasn’t nice, now was it? He took a few steps but stopped as he heard a scream behind him. It was Asis who came charging at him with a bat of sorts. Far behind him, the skunk family appeared. They were their own black and white now.

Asis tried to assault him again and this time he easily sidestepped the attack. Asis’ momentum carried him down the street, where the clipped skunk fell and rolled on. Greg walked down until he reached the panting, Asis.

“I didn’t kill her,” Greg explained, “she slipped and fell through the setup. She’s in another universe. I’m sorry.”

“Get me there then! Send me!”

Greg shook his head. “I can’t. I haven’t the materials.” And then he walked past the skunk, towards the mob.

His mind was filled with clouds of anger and injustice.

“Hey!” he bellowed. At the third time, he tried to call for attention in common and indeed saw the assorted raccoons, dogs, badgers, and even squirrels look up. All came to a halt so that the hapless cats in front of the mob could catch their breath.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Death to the cats!” some called to the general consent.

“Save your strength for the humans. Is there anyone here who wants to attack them?”

Sticks and fists went up in a cheer.

Greg walked to the cats, to the mother with her wrapped baby. Her nose was bleeding, she had a few bruises and cuts from caught stones. What a lovely scene, Greg thought.

“Listen up!” he yelled, “I saved that raccoon back there,” he gave a nod with his head, “but not to see this baby die! These cats believe the luck-of-the-skunk too!”

“Don’t you, madam?” he asked softly.

“Yes!” she screamed for all she was worth, understanding the implied danger for her and her child if she didn’t.

He turned around. Asis stood in the street, his chest heaving from the exertion.

“See that skunk? He is your leader!”

This didn't get any cheers.

Getting carried away, Greg added, "He brings you his kind, complete!"

As if on cue, the skunk family appeared at the hill top. This got a cheer all right; he thought it would never end; Greg even used his hands to shush the crowd.

"Asis brings them to you, he has a plan."

Asis had reached him now. "I have?" he said softly, bewildered.

"Your call buddy, up there and rise to the occasion or bust." Greg patted Asis' shoulder, "make Blikol proud!"

This finally called up a determined, grim visage. Asis' blue eyes went hard. "For Blikol" he mumbled as he righted himself full length.

"Listen up!" Asis yelled, just like he had done a second ago.

This time, Greg heard the young skunk use an amount of convincing spirit.

"I will fly to the wolves, and their guns, and with that army and all that can follow me, I will find the citadel and their puny hides!"

Cheers went up. A mob's a mob. It had limited intelligence. How could Asis hope to attack with an army?

Greg walked up the hill to Shirra, she stood tall while the wind tugged at her red dress, like a flaming beacon atop the hill. Once he got up there, she looked at him with a funny gaze.

"You simply stopped them. Like that? And then you 'give' them the kid?"

"Blikol is gone; she fell through to another universe. I blame myself."

"Blikol... is gone?"

“Yes, she is...” he began, but was interrupted by a tremor in the Earth followed by a low rolling noise. The ground shook a little.

“What was that?” he asked?

Everything went deathly calm. Quiet like never before!

“That was no Earthquake,” Shirra whispered, with dread.

Then, a very soft ‘chop chop’ could be heard, a sound quickly supported by more like a finale in a grand classical work. Kettledrums being added, each softly drumming but many of them, promising an overwhelming wall of noise.

“Transports!” someone called. One? No, dozens!

Soon the sky filled with them and more and more appeared. Within the span of minutes, the whole airfield-contents of the citadel appeared! The airfield here at Campone could not possibly take them and they landed all over the town, and outside it, as close as possible on any free surface. Finally, the huge quad transport of TonTan thundered into the cleft. From each ship that set down, refugees ran out. Not a cat or human was in sight. The descent of the ships was more like falling as they were using the fastest possible way to get here, only braking just before touchdown. The pilots were pressing the choppers to their limit!

“This can only mean one thing!” Shirra yelled over the noise.

“Well?”

“The citadel has fallen!” she screamed.

“What?” Greg mouthed, totally lost and not understanding why Shirra was so at ease. She took him along and she explained, shouting in his ear. “The Chinese were pretty mad, the lady said. She took off to Mexico last week, very suddenly and very conveniently.”

They stood yelling over the din as TonTan set down on the airfield, their destination. All the choppers were winding down, one after the other, until quiet returned. TonTan walked up to Greg. “You are the man Greg! Save us!”

“Save us?”

TonTan grabbed his clothes. “You heard me right; I’m asking you to save us!”

“How; what?”

“We’ve been attacked. The Chinese have shot the citadel to pieces. They are all along the coast, everything is being destroyed! If they establish a beachhead, the whole continent will fall. How many deaths can you accept, how much destruction can your conscience take?”

“My cons... what are you talking about? That dome can take a battering.”

“I don’t know how, but it was the lasers. They must have used *all* the lasers!”

“That is impossible!” Greg retorted, “If that were true, I would...” he remembered clubbing Asis over the head.

The tablet was at home on the table.

Disregarding everything, Greg ran up the hill, up past Blikol’s house, up the steps, into the house to the kitchen.

He stood panting, looking onto the tablet, fearing what it would show even if he knew exactly! Clubbing Asis on the head had set all the guards free with ‘taps’.

He had inadvertently disabled all guards. Or Asis’ head had, it didn’t matter.

The log listed a number of attacks. All major cities along the coast were toast. The ocean showed a host of ships heading for the citadel.

Mexico had not received any fire. Or rather, it was the space lasers’ swan song and the horses had decided to use it as a pre-emptive strike. Mexico had been spared, those Chinese weren’t idiots.

Neither was Remona, smart crone that she was.

He counted the percentages and life signs on the ships. Fifty thousand attackers? This was a full scale invasion. How come the horses suddenly didn't fear any 'blanche-sicknesses' anymore? What if his visit, or escape, had been of any particular importance?

Shirra ran in, asking "And?"

"Look," he offered the tablet. After a moment she breathed out. Greg explained, "Mexico stands. The others are toast. The counter is on the bottom."

"The counter?"

"Naturally, the lasers are very precise. The number of life signs is counted. Relatively well defined."

"You mean..."

"Death toll."

"For the love of the prophet..."

TonTan jogged in, with him a number of blacks. "Where is Blikol?"

"Gone." Greg said.

"What, time caught up with her finally? Where is her body?"

All of the blacks gave a short, respectful nod. That was it.

"No, she is alive, but not here."

"Parallel universe." Shirra added.

"You stupid cat! Don't play with me." TonTan grabbed her and held her close. "You are probably the only assistant in the next five thousand kilometers, you better get used to your new status. And I mean 'white at the bottom', kitten!"

"Hey!" Greg intervened, "She doesn't deserve that!"

"Are you talking to me, Greggie? I can break you with a snap of the fingers!"

“Do you want me to do something or not, TonTan?”

TonTan took a second. He was certainly no less short tempered than his niece. “Sorry, Greg. Sorry Miss Cat. Your red dress singles you out. I declare hereby that your red dress offers you immunity to us. Clear, boys and girls?”

He looked behind him and received nods.

“Just you Shirra. Clear?”

Greg sat at the table in the full house. It was filling up even further. Asis appeared, with his skunk family in tow. TonTan raised an eyebrow, “What is this, full skunks? Well met, you all.”

The talking in the room rose to an unacceptable level. “Shut up all of you!” Greg yelled. “I’m trying to think up some solution here, trying to save your sorry asses. Get out! Out! Asis, TonTan, Shirra, you stay, the rest goes out!”

Greg stood, ordering and got away with it. “Shirra, get Amandine and her stuff. I have a feeling this is not going to go quite well.” He looked at the satellite tracking system. Those horses had come up with something; that much was clear. The moment the connection of their system was linked they had been uploading some sort of patch to shut him out. As it was, he had only his original space station under control. The others were lost to him. That meant that only an area from about Mexico up to Canada was partly under his control. He pointed all the lasers to the outermost position and found he had range up to some hundred miles out to sea.

The horses no doubt could see this too.

“I can ... I don’t know. Listen...” He explained the situation as quickly and concise as he could. “I can’t stop them from getting on land anywhere below Mexico or thereabouts. However, I know you blacks can make particle weapons, good old fashioned guns. Get the wolves from the bear village; they know how to make good ones. Get to Mexico and see what you can do to make guns. Hold the fort there. Here, in Campone, I will shoot the horses and bulls as I can.”

“The Chinese, you mean?”

“Yes, horses and bulls, like I said.”

Shirra started explaining in fluent common, her description apparently appealed more. Then Greg resumed, “I am certain some will come through. Use the transports and radios to keep contact.”

“The radio doesn’t go into the cleft! We have to fly out!”

“Well, get an antenna on the ridge. A kilometer of wire should be possible? Hut, hut!”

TonTan saluted and ran off, to reappear a minute later.

“Asis, get the wolves.” Asis saluted too.

Shirra seemed to be glowing again watching Greg with pride. So now he was in the lead? What a load of bullshit. Greg knew he was nobody and somebody. ‘The great killer’, he currently thought.

“Shirra, you handle food and lodging. You’re in the lead. Get your cats and dogs. And be very conscientious about the abilities of the raccoons, you hear me?”

“What is it you want me to do?” She asked.

“You are going to install a rationing, and partitioning of the living quarters in this large town. Everyone is in this together, use the skunks to boost morale and the ‘we’re in this together’ feeling. All teeth of the same mouth, and all that.”

“Yes sir!” she smiled. This was another ‘sir’ for sure.

“Shirra!” he recalled her, “get that raccoon girl in charge of the kitchen. Food is good for morale. Make sure she understands about the limits in terms of time and resources!”

She saluted and went out.

“TonTan, we will have to get a sort of militia started, any suggestions?”

“Use the wolves’ captain, I’d say.”

“Great, dispatch to get that guy in the lead. Good team builder too. I trust your family is well suited to gauge physical fitness in these people, or ah, animals, well you know.”

TonTan smiled widely. “Greggie boy, you are a special sort. I know what to do, I’ll use discretion this time.”

“Anything for morale. Also, make sure you do plant the suggestion we humans are in the lead.”

“Don’t worry Greg. You’re new here, remember? In this place a set of blacks calling the shots is not a problem. Here the blanches never really ‘were’.”

“Team up your best engineers, keep the chemically savvy ones here. We will need to collect all the power-cells from the houses and build an adjusted transport running on electricity.”

TonTan slapped his back. “We don’t need to build that, mine can already!”

“Yours can? Why use the combustion engines at all then?”

“Speed, with electricity I only get half the lift.”

“Well, put a freakin’ gear box in between!”

“Uh...Gee, that’s an idea. I’ll get right on it!”

The room was empty.

Greg sat looking at his programming. “Idiot!” he said and slapped his head.

The two cat maids entered the room where they sat frightened in the corner. They were just teenagers if he’d understood Shirra correctly but he couldn’t be sure. Who knew what a cat of ten or twenty looked like?

“Kids? You all right?”

“No sir! We’re afraid. The citadel is really gone?”

“Drop the sir. Right now you’re cats, not a waitress. Sorry about your family but here are people who need you. Shirra needs you and I need you.”

“Yes sir!” one saluted.

At that show of duty, Greg thought to himself, “Is it just me or is there something crazy going on here?”

“One of you stays here to look after Amandine, is that clear? You can decide who?”

After a minute of bickering he called for a stop. “OK, you both can stay. Get me some tea please. And something else, do you happen to have another set of clothing?”

“Yes,” said one.

“No,” said the other.

“You better not walk around looking like that, unless... you get your other clothes. Make sure your tail is not hidden.”

“Not?” they both asked.

“You heard me. It’s war time. New time. Changes start here.”

The cats went out and Greg felt his temples. “God, I’m orchestrating a war and I haven’t got a clue,” he thought.

The sound of departing transports was in the air. On the hill before his white house a construction was being set up. In the sprawl below he saw wheel barrows and horse drawn carts going around. In a glimpse he saw a red dress and a white head with flowing manes. She wasn’t a real assistant anymore anyway.

Headstrong. Good, that was needed. Desperate times called for strong minds.

Greg tapped his tablet. There was nothing he could do with the coding on the satellite now. Too little time. If push came to shove, he would dive in that

setup down the street. With Amandine! And he suddenly realized he would not leave Shirra behind. But she wouldn't want to leave. Would she?

Would he be able to live without her anymore? With a shrug he tried to put it from him. "A cat, she's just a cat," he said softly and knew he could not fool himself anymore.

## 75. War

The next day, the horses had landed all right. In a short game of 'paratrooper' he'd used the lasers and shot down ships as they got in range. It didn't feel right to kill so many so easily, so far off, but there was nothing for it. Besides, the preparations easily kept his mind off such tours of guilt. On the floor he had a map made, of the California coast area, that is, the current one and not quite matching his geography memories. Using the tablet's satellite feedback, Greg had the 'enemy' units indicated with a yellow star, and used blue for their own. His 'staff' would move the counters around. The radio-antenna had been installed at the rim of the cliffs and was working great. His phone turned out to be a super tool for the communication.

The day was drawing to a close when Shirra appeared. Her dress wasn't too clean anymore and she looked tired with her hair tied in a bun at the base of her neck. "Food in the kitchen, go get some!" he ordered. Greg felt she looked worn but somehow not disheveled, rather in need of some attention. In reply, she nodded wearily and went past him to the kitchen.

Greg continued looking at the map on the floor, trying to figure out if perhaps some plan was played out. Suddenly, he found soft white furred arms around him. How long had it been since she'd gone for food? Her fur smelled cleansed and Greg looked up, wrapping an arm around her thighs, hugging her back.

“You are the best, Greg,” she told him and kissed his ear. Greg returned that affection with a peck to her cheek, and then their eyes met for a moment as her nose was closing in. Greg felt tired and didn’t care for her full kiss right now, Shirra needed it he knew, but yet he wondered if skipping a kiss was permissible now. Before he could decide he felt the sandpaper tongue in his mouth. Just a moment, after which Shirra straightened as if caught. When he looked up, he saw Asis standing at the door with the raccoon farmer whose wife he’d saved in labor.

The look in Asis’ eyes told him the raccoon certainly was storing the image he had just seen! Greg thought for a second and decided it was probably a good thing. There was no doubt in his mind this at least would protect Shirra.

Asis cleared his throat, “This guy says he can get carrots from his field, but we wanted to know how and where and when. He needs help.”

“I’m on it,” Shirra said and walked to them, leading them out. It was perhaps five minutes later when she returned and she watched him for a moment. “You should take a nap, Greg. You’ve worked for thirty hours in a row.”

“So should you, Shirra.”

She yawned. “I know.”

Asis walked back in, Greg had no idea why but Shirra had a point and he commanded him. “Hold the fort Asis, collect the messages and wake me if you deem it necessary.”

“Yes, Sir!” the skunk clicked his heels, or rather, ticked his nails together.

Greg was too tired to make a snappy remark about that and followed Shirra to the bedroom. There he simply fell on his bed with Shirra dropping herself down next to him. He turned his head to her, feeling happy somehow. He had no idea where the energy came from, but he decided to stroke Shirra. He felt she had done staggering work, housing erected, food storages and distribution arranged. She was a wonder.

Trying to show her how good she made him feel he offered, “I... like you Shirra, very much.”

Then he sighed, realizing the reason for his pause. How much ‘like’ was it when you felt like this?

Shirra sighed too, fatigue and weariness taking their toll.

Greg decided he had kidded himself long enough. “I love you, Shirra.”

She gasped and her eyes flew open, reflecting like soft green orbs set in a grey-white blanket of fine hairs. “You never said that before,” she replied, slowly.

“I never meant it before.”

In answer she carefully crawled on top of him, close to him. “You want?” she asked.

“Yes, but I just don’t want you pregnant.”

She shrugged. “There is no guarantee for that.”

“Ah, what the hell! Just go ahead. But I have to confess I was ‘with’ Blikol before she fell through. And to be very specific, that wasn’t as good as anything I’ve felt when I was with you.”

“Greg?”

“Yes?”

“Shut up.”

She hugged and kissed him taking care to not put her tongue in his mouth. It was good, short too, but very intense.

“Hmmm,” Shirra rumbled afterwards and purred shortly.

“Me hmmm too,” Greg agreed then sort of dropped into a coma right after, his clothes still on.

###

“Sir!” Asis called surprised as Greg walked bleary eyed into the mission-room makeover of the living room, “A yellow unit is on the plains towards the rim. We can’t be in time to attack them with any transport!”

“How many transports have we lost in the mean time?” Greg asked, as his mind began to churn through the information. He saw at once something was different on the map. The room was filled with his advisors, or lieutenants, or whatever you might call them.

“Three.”

“Damn!”

“You can say that again.”

“Not the big ones?” Greg asked hopeful.

“No.”

“Thank God for that. Well then, right now I will have to exercise my fingers on the tablet for a spell. Gimme that stupid video game.”

“The what?”

“Never mind,” he accepted the tablet and shot the ‘star’ from the plain with the lasers.

“That takes care of that,” he said and looked around. “Listen everybody, even Remona said it and I can back her statement, those horses hate us. We can’t afford a single moment of thought or compassion here!”

“How come they hate us so?” Asis asked.

“Aha! This you will like, listen...”

He recounted the claim of the billions that had died, according to the major of the horses.

“How many is a billion?” someone asked.

His attempts to explain that clearly shot short of the mark. Very much so. Greg kept trying. "Think of it like this, everybody you know and their family and theirs and theirs. And so on. Is that a lot?"

"Everybody?"

"All."

"What a revolting idea!"

He nodded.

"Maybe it is not so weird they hate us."

"Not us, the blanches."

"But why attack us then?"

Greg held his arms out in defeat, "They feel you might be infected." Then took the tablet and checked the Mexico situation. That was dire. A ring of horse units appeared around the city. How were they coping? They had Remona, which would help a lot. Moebi was as able as Shirra. Their problem was probably the food support. At this end, they had run out of petrol. Even TonTan, who had taken all he could find, was running on empty.

"TonTan?" Greg asked, "How about this..."

After his explanation the man saluted and went out. The thunder of his ship sounded not much later. Exchange a food ship for petrol, Remona would be an idiot not to support his action. He was pretty sure she liked him, and given their predicament she could hardly be against him.

Asis had by now become the radio operator of mission central, he piped up. "Sir! Wolf unit 2 got them!"

"Casualties?"

"Five, one dead. They are en route."

The map was adapted accordingly.

"Is the infirmary ready?"

“You were right to keep the high profile cats, sir; they are all proving to be fine doctors.”

Greg nodded; the cats had had extensive first aid training in school. “Just goes to show, Asis,” he confirmed.

###

He ate while he looked into the logs of the connection between his single controlled space station and the others. The pattern had changed, he saw, but he could not dive into that now. The noise of returning choppers indicated the next problem, they were out of fuel. Only TonTan could fly without, and he was somewhere between Mexico and Campone.

So, no air strike defense and on top of that the amount of available shots on the space-lasers under Greg’s control had gone down enormously. That system was breaking down, breaking apart more likely. Failures were reported in all systems by the built-in repair systems. The total was down to two, two operative lasers. Fire one, and he was out of power for half an hour if the satellites would not disintegrate right away.

Greg took the room in. Shirra was ‘hanging’ in a chair, exhausted. His duo of cat servants had been running around all the time as well, running errands. The one in the dress was slumped over the table, asleep. Asis also had slept a little Greg knew, and the young skunk looked deceptively fresh.

‘Beep!’

Greg looked at his tablet. One single line of text in the top left corner on his otherwise black screen blinked, “connection lost.”

“Damn,” he muttered, got up and ran outside. In the brightening morning sky he saw nothing, or... there it was! A long bright stripe of material entering the atmosphere, burning up like a fallen star. There! Another, and yet more.

“It’s beautiful.” he heard Shirra say, next to him.

“However nice it looks, it’s not so good.”

“No?”

“It’s parts of the space station.”

Shirra pulled at his arm, clearly in an attempt to stay upright after this mental blow.

“Your uplink?” she asked, stricken.

He nodded. “One could say our eyes are gone... Yep. They light up the sky once, and then it’s dark evermore. Look there; that is a big one!”

A bright spot appeared, with a lengthening trail. Asis joined them, as did the maid in pants.

“Wow!” he heard them both say.

“What’s that?” Asis asked.

“That, kids, was our top-down over view. From now on, we will be blind to anything we get from the lovely horse people.”

“You can’t change your tablet to another satellite?”

“Asis, although it’s a good question, you must realize that particular satellite had a phone with which I could tap into the laser system.”

To his credit, Asis thought a moment and looked at him with a frown. “Say, if the tablet is out of the loop, won’t the system start shooting all those people you said would be killed?”

“I reprogrammed it, don’t worry. Yesterday I thought about this and I worked to upload the last patch I could, after that the horse people shut me out. The laser system won’t fire unless those horses break the code. It’s a matter of time though. And the lasers are going to come down anyway. They were hanging by a thread.”

“Did they shoot the space station down?”

“Can’t say. I know it was already breaking apart, but this is rather suddenly.”

“I’ll call the choppers back!” Asis called as he went inside.

“Yeah, you do that... good idea.”

Greg walked in too, looking at the map on the floor.

“You see that Asis? There are only two enemy units left and of course a lot of stray soldiers. Lots and lots of them, with guns. Anyway, estimating their move rate I’d say we’re safe for another day. After that...”

He pulled a finger across his throat.

“You think they will kill us, like that?”

“It’ll depend on us, kiddo. You can set the clock, in twenty hours it’s the last stand.”

“Ha, ha!” Asis laughed, not too enthusiastic, then trying once more, “ha?” his face grew hard, “you’re kidding, right?”

“Last stand, kid.”

“But, what can we do?”

“Indeed, what can we do...”

“If *you* don’t even know,” Asis called in dismay, “we’re doomed!”

“Get a grip kid, we’re not dead yet. You can’t begin to imagine what these guys have for guns!”

He walked outside, the sky was bright. Scratch, scratch, he was scratching his beard a lot, lately. But his beard seemed to take a battering.

“You’re thinking, I can see it,” Asis noted, rather taken with himself.

Greg grimaced, that kid was a shooting star, but a push-over as well. Blikol should have raised the kid with a little more realism. Whose fault was it really? He would have liked to have Sasha by his side now. He would have had a good idea no doubt! Even that Colonel Barry in Keith’s universe would

have been a welcome guest. But no, it was just him. Greg looked over the town. It sure was quiet.

What sort of fortifications would help them? A wall of rock rose up behind, that was nice. A group of suicidal people needed to go up and shoot as many of those horse suckers down as they could. How would they come down? Surely not with ropes. A rope that long?

He looked up. The rim was hardly visible in the haze. Parachutes would do great. And it would pose a serious problem. There were not likely to be expert marks-men around.

With his tablet, he could at least 'radio' to the rim, they needed a scout there. A few, probably. Ones that would know they were not likely to return.

Greg's eyes travelled the edge of town. And if those buggers would land further afield, they might attack them overland. The rifles he'd seen with the horses were more like a modern version of the American civil war quality. Not too bad, but limited. If they could get weapons before that time...

Then again, if not, it would be a short action anyway.

He felt someone breathe behind him. "How are you Shirra?"

"Functioning, mostly," she admitted.

He turned around. She was bending backward a bit, her fists in the base of her back, stretching. "I can't remember walking around this much, ever. My feet are sore."

"Same here. And I've mostly been sitting, if memory serves."

Her green eyes fixed on him, she took a step closer. "I could use a hug," Greg asked, "a real hug. Not too much tongue, please."

She smiled, and in one stride pulled him to her, her arms wrapped around him, holding him, tight. He returned the gesture, closing his eyes, feeling her. Her smell was not rosy now, but just-off sweaty, dirty and frankly, normal. She was warmer than he was, that coat of hair did something. He felt her ear twitch.

"If we get out of this alive..." Greg began, thinking 'then what?' Well, he'd be close to Amandine. But was this a world for her? For him?

"I'll always support you Greg, no matter what happens."

"Are you so sure? Suppose you would end up in my world, no anthropomorphic cats at all, no status at all?"

Still embracing, she squeezed against him. "I'd be with you. That would matter. Hmmm."

"Guys?" Asis asked, interrupting them.

He looked up, letting go. Asis was holding his phone out. "The last chopper that was on the way back, they... are not replying."

"Where were they?"

"On the plain."

"Shit. Those bastards are way closer than I thought. I think we have to mobilize the town, get everybody digging. Trenches so we can return fire at least."

"Trenches?"

"Worked in the first world war! And with the gun-quality these guys have... They are not likely to have any tanks, or heavy artillery. We have to dig in."

"Yes Sir!" Asis affirmed, "I'll get the 'troops' going, get the shovels out. We'll get those trenches."

"How deep?" Asis asked, half turning.

"Until here," Greg held a hand at his own throat.

"What? Do you know how much digging that is?"

"I don't care, get the farmers' horses out for hauling, anything. Go!"

Shirra marched off, Asis ran. Greg went inside and saw how his black dressed cat stood looking after Asis. She kept looking at that skunk...

“You like him?”

“Sorry, sir!”

“Please drop that, you’re not in my service. Or anyone’s, you are in your own service. You decide what to do, you only!”

“But I don’t know what to do!”

Greg suppressed a smile; she was a young girl according to Shirra. “If you like Asis, go with him, help him, support him.”

“But... but he is not a cat, I can’t, I shouldn’t...”

“Hey, remember I said *new rules*, OK? They start here, now, you go get your man and stick to him if you want.”

“Really?”

“That was an order, kiddo!”

She rushed after Asis. Without her apron she looked much more normal already.

His other cat wench appeared with Amandine on her arm.

“Your friend is chasing her friend,” he said to her.

“I heard you, new rules.”

Greg nodded, realizing this young cat also was alone in the world now and dealing with it totally different. “You keep an eye on Amandine for me?”

“Yes Sir!” she saluted, Amandine pulled at the saluting arm.

Trenches! Well, they might fare better than the French and Germans. They had to, prevail or bust. He looked at Amandine, wondering. If they did not succeed, what would become of her? These horse people were deathly afraid of any human, afraid of diseases. Would they kill the anthropomorphic beings as well?

“I’m off to the recruits, if anyone asks,” Greg offered.

“Yes, Sir!”

That ‘yes-sir-stuff’ was getting very tiresome. But it seemed to serve some purpose, and he nodded in acknowledgement. The walk to the crude exercise field still took half an hour. Nearing it, he heard at least someone was active. The Captain was trying to get his force to follow orders. It involved yelling at them a lot, apparently. As Greg rounded the last bend, he saw a group of raccoons and dogs, some badgers, and even a squirrel, which stood at attention.

“Present bow!” the Captain bellowed and as one, the whole platoon stood to attention, spanning their bows.

The material was good. The carbon fiber shafts and like-tipped arrows made for deadly weapons, but usable only over a short distance and difficult to master. Where the hell did these high tech bows come from? They even had sights with lenses on them!

All eyes followed him, but the trainees stood their ground.

“Captain?”

“At ease, squad!” the Captain said with a hint of fatigue then he held up a hand with five fingers extended. He turned to Greg and smiled. “I see your eyes are popping, for us having those bows, eh?”

The Captain was all grinning, showing full fangs.

“You took the words right out of my mouth.”

“Present from TonTan, he certainly keeps up his end.”

“And?”

“We’ve been practicing all day and now I was drilling them. We need soldiers, not individuals with sudden great ideas.”

“Can they shoot anything with that?”

The Captain nodded. “That Henry was maybe a fluffy guy, but he took great care to train us. I was taught well. Let me show you.”

He tapped one of the youngsters on the shoulder, "Perry, show the Commander your ability with the composite bow."

Perry, a wild haired dog with a fluffy tail coughed, and said, "Sir!"

The Captain continued in the common language, and Perry took aim. All his comrades looked on, in silence. The string flew from his fingers, sending the arrow away so fast he didn't even see it.

"That orange tree over yonder has an arrow in the only fruit left on there."

Greg walked to the tree, all three hundred meters, and sure enough, the arrow hung from the orange. It had passed through, all the way, hanging by its feathers. Wowee. With a jump, he retrieved the arrow and walked back to the Captain who eyed him peculiarly. He was trying to say something to him, indicating Perry with his muzzle and doing a sort of smile.

Right.

"Good shot, Perry," he began, watching the Captain, who nodded to encourage him.

"If all of you can shoot this well, we will strike fear into the hearts of our enemy, as well as arrows!"

"Be right back, boys!" the Captain said and walked with him. Behind the first house he stayed him. "I know, Greg, but we haven't guns and bullets, but at least they aren't afraid now. I can't say what happens at the first death of one of them. But I would bet they can stomach it."

"If those horses have even the slightest armor..."

"TonTan promised steel tips, with those, the bows will be a lethal weapon."

"Do you realize how much we have riding on him returning?"

"Yes." The wolf wrung his knuckles into his eyes.

"Did you catch any sleep, Captain?"

“Sure.” And then, as the Captain yawned, a total dog experience washed over Greg, seeing that.

“Everybody is tired,” Greg explained feeling the yawn impact him, “but we must press on, dig a trench and put pitfalls in place, round up all the farmers around the canyon floor.”

“We’ll get started.”

“Thank you, Captain. Shirra is getting materials ready. We’ll put our shoulders under this, right?”

“Right!”

The Captain put a hand on his shoulder. “I knew you had spirit, Greg. Courage alone will not save the day.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Chin up, Greg. Look it in the eye, whatever cometh!”

Yeah, chin up; look into the face of certain defeat, demise.

“What are you thinking?” the Captain asked, probably guessing some of his silence.

“Nothing.”

“Nice try. I feel the same Greg, but we’re going to try, you hear me? We’re going to give this damn attack a try. My boys did not die in vain in those choppers. Those choppers we won’t see again, that wasn’t for the heck of it. You tell me right now it wasn’t!”

An angry gleam crept into the eye of the Captain. His ears went flat to the back and Greg received a slap to his shoulder.

“If you show this uncertain behavior to a living soul here I’m going to kill you. Is that clear? You are the Commander and will behave like it!”

Greg shook his head. “You know what? We should have headed south. We should have fled.”

“Think man! The fuckin’ coast is littered with assault teams. You heard the reports; we’re up against a highly trained, determined, well equipped force.”

“And?”

“I’m not an idiot, but I will make a difference. And so will you, Greg! Where is that man who put on a disguise and walked out of the citadel? That man had guts.”

The wolf pushed him backward. “You tell me, where is he?”

Greg took a stance. He wasn’t going to be bullied! “Right here, buster!” he replied.

“Remember that night on the balcony, Greg? You told me you had tried to have more kids see their parents.”

He recalled it like yesterday.

“You said you vowed it. I hold you to that oath, human. We’re all tired, but when push comes to shove, I’m your man.”

“Through thick and thin?”

The Captain pulled him close in an embrace, crushing his chest. “You bet, mister, you bet.”

“Let’s get this show on the road, then. Trenches, pitfalls, we will try.”

“You can make it happen, you know you can.”

“Captain, get those kids shooting. Their aim is fine and with heavy sharp arrows we’ll make the difference.”

“Yes Sir!” the Captain said, nodding, and returned.

###

On the hill, back to the white house he heard a chopper. It wasn't TonTan, it was a smaller one he was sure, but all choppers were here and accounted for. Who could this be? What if those horses had choppers?

A sudden image of a full air-supported horse-strike flashed before his eyes and he pulled his gun, running to the airfield. But he found it was one of theirs. The missing one which was indeed heavily damaged. What if it was an attack, a ruse?

People filed onto the field. "Stay back!" he ordered.

"But our comrades, they will need help!"

"We don't know what's in there!" he yelled over the increasing noise.

His gun in hand, he saw the others shifting their weight uncomfortably. "Get some weapons you fools! If this thing is hijacked we are the first line of defense!"

This got some action going and soon he stood with rifled wolves, ready in a line to shoot. "Get down!"

As one, they dove to the ground, aiming for the chopper which had tremendous trouble getting to the field. It was bouncing a bit before settling down finally. This was not normal at all.

The backdoor of the chopper lowered already and two wolves stumbled out, leaning on one another. One was dragging a leg. The chopper wound down and a moment later, the black pilot appeared. The man, well, a kid really, held his arm. A bandage had been applied that was patchy with red.

"Shit!" Greg called under his breath.

Shouts went up and the wolves rushed to the aid of their fellows. The field was alive with action in no time, people appeared from everywhere and soon Greg was the center of a furry hurricane. Greg too went to the chopper, finding bits and pieces hung from it. They'd been shot to pieces, but somehow they'd prevailed. Wonder filled him, and hope. For if this is possible, who was he to call their odds insurmountable?

“Greg!” he looked around, into the canine face of the Captain. He beckoned him. Following, he looked into the hold of the chopper. The dead wolves had been carried out, and he watched as the Captain opened a wooden crate. Greg tried reading the information on the side, which was written in Cyrillic characters. Using his phone and a snapshot he searched for a translation.

“Explosives?” he mouthed, disbelieving.

“And here!” the Captain said, holding up a rifle and a shotgun. Troubled, he accepted the gun from the Captain. This was a good piece, well made. Perfectly, in fact.

“How many...?” he began, and came to stand next to the Captain.

“We lost contact with these boys two days ago; they’d flown to the citadel to report on the situation there and to find survivors. Imagine getting this stuff!”

The Captain turned to face him. “This stuff...” his voice trailed off, realizing what they were up against.

“My thoughts exactly, Captain.”

In silence the Captain handed him the rifle. “This is like a... a...” it was eerily like a Kalashnikov. Not the failing rifles he had witnessed on that isle.

“High tech man! Explosives, and what’s this?” He fished out a tube.

“Holy shit, mortars.”

“What are we going to tell everyone?”

“We? You are, Greg. And you better make it good. I’m sure my boys understand the issue perfectly well. I’ll debrief them, you make a nice announcement and if you dare suggest what this means for our chances...”

“Yeah, yeah, kill me. At the same time, we can use this for fortification.”

The Captain’s eyes lit up. “I take any odds, as long as we’ve got the spirit, Greg!”

“Right.”

“Your job awaits, Commander.” The Captain gestured to the appearing crowd.

“You, and you, you’re in charge of getting these crates to the training field. The contents are to be left alone. This material is important to our survival!”

“Atta’ boy,” The Captain mumbled and passed by him, to his remaining pack of wolves.

###

An hour later, he sat in the white house. His chocolate milk was good. Shirra sat looking at him expectantly. She wasn’t fooled easily anymore by him. Asis talked big, he was going to single-handedly destroy the enemy with all the ‘toys’ the wolves had pillaged. The skunk tried to appear big to his cat maid. Greg still didn’t know her name. Funny, actually.

Anyway, she was impressed with Asis and hung to his lips. It was sad, really to see these young creatures in the process of mating and seeking while they might not get a chance to get down to business.

He got up. “Asis!” he slapped the skunk on his back. “Yes Commander!”

“You like this cat, eh?”

Totally back-footed, he searched his eyes and those of the cat as well. She was averting her eyes, all fitting with their ‘game’. “I can say she likes you too. Give her a kiss and get your feelings going, that is an order.”

“But... she’s a cat. How can I...”

“So? You like her, right?”

He didn't deny that so Greg went on, "It's nice outside, back in thirty minutes. Move." Greg pulled his cat maid up and pushed the pair of them out the door.

"Was that necessary, Greg?" Shirra asked, inspecting her nails and trying to remove some dirt from her dress.

"I could give you a straight answer girl, but I..." he was interrupted by the Captain who appeared in the door frame.

"Good, it's only you two," he said, and sat down. Greg followed his example and beckoned Shirra closer by.

"After landing, they loaded the crates. There were only six in total."

Greg made a 'phoeye' noise and drew his hand past his brow, shaking it, to signify they had a close escape there. The Captain nodded.

"but..." the Captain let it hang in the air. There's always a 'but', and this was a big one.

"A platoon of horses and bulls attacked them with old material. Not this stuff. The squad shot all the attackers without any losses."

It was a long intro to the 'but', he recognized.

"After that melee they sought to get away, since it was clear no survivors were to be expected with this much activity around there. Fueled up and loaded, they lifted off and got under fire from a chopper."

"Hold on, a chopper with guns?"

"They described it as a single rotor machine, narrow, with little gun-laden wings of a huge caliber... Well, you saw the holes in that machine. Full centimeters across, that's not a hand held gun."

"How come our guys got away at all?"

"Lucky shot of one of the guys, he got in a shot at the rotor causing some malfunction. That thing is fully armored, everything bounced right off."

“Which part did he hit then?”

“We’ll never know. He got ripped apart by a few of those huge bullets.”

Greg closed his eyes for a moment. This was not making sense at all, nothing was right now. Here he was, expected to come up with a plan. Only the Captain and Shirra were aware of their position.

“I don’t get it, Captain. If one has veritable gunships flying around, why bother sending those sailors with their crappy guns in?”

“Not every branch of an army of that size will have the same materials. Nor will they invest their resources in the same components. That marine will try to have the latest ships, perhaps less so in guns.”

“It doesn’t make sense to me, Captain. Why haven’t we seen that gunship here?”

The Captain put his hands on his head. One hand was slightly pulling at his ear. “Search me, for all I know it is their only one.”

“Prototype,” Greg said, wistfully.

“Hoping right along with you, Greg.”

He got up, Shirra and the Captain matched his move and together they left the house. An inspection of the trench along the fields outside Campone made clear once more how determined the inhabitants were. Also, as if word had gone round finally, all the farms in the southern part of the canyon were abandoned. Carts rolled in all day. A positive vibe hung in the air. It was nice weather; they had some guns and ammunition. Even the arrow squad had shown to be able to bury an arrow five centimeters into a tree by increasing the tension on the bows further.

They believed. But in what? He’d asked a few covert questions finding nobody was afraid of dying. Everyone seemed to be prepared to fight to a bitter end in order to save a loved one. And that was just the thing: saving, that meant winning, sort of.

Greg, Shirra and the Captain went to the white house to take a nap, all three suffering from their fatigue. Inside Asis nearly jumped up and down with joy. “Greg! I mean, Commander, we have the scout on the rim!”

His maid stood by Asis, and he was sure they had not really made the most of their time. Can’t be helped, he decided. Asis handed him his phone. “When the enemy comes, we will know!”

“This is Greg, report,” he said into his phone. What a tacky line. It would not do to start laughing now.

An enthusiastic reply indicated all was well. Happy, happy.

“Good, Asis, you and your friend will be vigilant?”

As one, they saluted.

“I’m going for a nap. You coming Shirra? Captain, get rest! That’s an order.”

The wolf yawned impressively, nodding.

“Lest we sight the approach, no need to wake me. If my calculations hold, we’ll have contact in, oh, say four hours.”

###

In the commander’s tent the white Hunnuny twin brothers sat in silence, one in a wheelchair, the other on a makeshift stool. Both had only one goal, to smite the insolent invader that was hiding further inland. If it were up to them, they would spend all their resources on this, but they had to be content with their leaders’ decisions. Now, they were waiting for them to explain their plans.

A tent-flap fluttered and both Djenghis and Tekwu entered, they were silent in a way that could only mean one thing.

"Boys," Djenghis nodded to the pair of whites.

"Sir," the one brother said. The other produced a sickly 'ugh'.

"Still alive, huh?" Tekwu snapped at the chair-bound half of the twins.

"That does it!" the white Hunnuny said and got up to confront Tekwu, "No one..." he began and stopped. He stood his ground as Tekwu deliberately went near the scientist. Djenghis' outstretched arm was resolutely swept aside by Tekwu, followed by a withering gaze from her; Djenghis retreated with a sad shake of his head. He clearly missed his partner, like the twins missed the sane view Tekwu always had offered.

The army outside was aglow with the realization that Tekwu must be carrying some part of their fearless leader. All knew their leader had been the strongest ever with spirits. And ever since his demise Tekwu had changed, slowly but certainly.

Djenghis longed for his mate, his love and support. She was there sometimes. Not now though, for it was *him*, calling the shots. His fist clenched, channeling the anger. Had it been wrong to come here? They had not met the 'hordes' that Chiral had professed to, instead the decoys the twins had come up with had drawn a lot of the laser fire and their invasion was slowly progressing. The situation in Mexico was not, it was a stalemate and everything Chiral had feared appeared there. Tekwu had taken a force north though, insisting this particular pocket of resistance be dealt with.

'Dealt with' had been her words. Hers? Djenghis knew he had to stop fooling himself somewhere. Resolutely he pulled her to him. "Stop this!" he boomed, his face set with determination.

Tekwu smiled a little smirk, just like Chiral would do. Her eyes seemed to glow suddenly and Djenghis felt his resolve waver, his world

waver, and his knees go weak. "Why!" he called out, "Why, Chiral, Why?"

Then all was still and Tekwu looked around her, bewildered. His Tekwu, who pulled him up and embraced him, love filling the air around them. The twins looked on, silent as always and a look of understanding passed between them. Djenghis did not notice, he held her, kissed her and stroked her mane. "Oh, Tekwu, my Tekwu," he moaned having missed her embrace.

She disentangled from him and held him at arms' length. "I sure hope little Chiral and Larich will be fine..." the mention of their children made them both realize how desperate their undertaking and the reason to persevere in Mexico.

"How much should we spend on this attack?" the twin asked.

Tekwu and Djenghis then consulted the maps and information that was available to them. Perhaps the twins didn't agree with everything, but they sure knew how to hold a grudge. The four of them knew exactly who it was, that was hiding out there in that deep rent in the Earth.

"I think we should deploy the choppers," Djenghis tapped the map, "but we have to be sure we won't lose them. You never know when we'll need them! Boys, any ideas how to get our collectivians down there?"

"I think I know how to get them down," the white Hunnuny noted dryly, his arms behind his back.

###

Greg woke to a steady hubbub, a general noise of business that was slowly rising in strength. He thought it had reached a level that would wake

the dead! Asis stormed into his room by the time Greg sat massaging his temples. Both looked at Shirra. She was drooling, still deadly tired and still not awake. This made Greg consider his earlier thought, either Shirra was beyond death or the noise only seemed so loud. Sighing, he consulted his watch. They'd gotten in four hours' worth of sleep. Good. Some food and he could go on!

"Be right with you, Asis."

"They're coming!" the young skunk nearly hopped with anticipation, "Just like you said!"

Greg felt a smile tugging his lips, "Right on time. In fact, they're a bit late. We'll be out in a minute, thank you," he dismissed Asis.

Left alone with Shirra, Greg laid back and rolled on his side to her. "Hey, kitten?" he prodded her, to no avail. So he caressed her head, ears, cheeks and chin. That activated her, causing a little purr. "Wha..." she mumbled and licked her mouth, swallowing with a little difficulty.

"No procrastination anymore, they're here. There is something specific I would like you to do for us. Shirra, can you prepare a bag here? Put in it what we need to leave this place, for you and me and Amandine."

She coughed, swallowed and nodded. "A getaway bag. I see. You're planning on leaving these people to die?"

"I'm planning on winning, but not at the cost of my own life, if I can help it."

Green eyes searched his face, finding nothing amiss she concluded with a tired "yes sir."

"I'm counting on you. So is our tiny army outside. They trust us with their lives."

"Uh-uh," she acknowledged and waved him off.

The room was filled with 'sergeants' and the Captain giving directions. At least *he* had a plan. Asis thrust the phone into Greg's hand as he entered.

"Report," Greg said into the phone and listened, at the same time hushing the assembly. In an instant, all were as still as a mouse while Greg listened. The description was clear, some platoons with the horse-men and bull-men made their way over the plain. No vehicles, he assumed since that would not work anyway on the plain. ETA, one hour, tops. The enemy was jogging apparently.

"Get down here, if you can," he suggested to the scouts. A negative reply followed, explaining his scout needed to tell, "Where they go over the edge."

One set of platoons. Yeah, right. He dare bet a fortune on what was going on up there. He listened to the continuing report, "There is also some sort of automatic vehicle, several of them."

The description led to 'tank' easily. How nice. Also, the frontal length over which the enemy was advancing was, by that description, something like half a mile.

"Get down here," Greg commanded, "that is an *order*."

After that, he looked a bit unreal at the white plastic brick in his hand. He turned it off and looked at the wolves, badger, dogs and raccoon in the room.

Switching to the common language he described the report.

"One hour, about half a mile... about one kilometer wide front going here," he indicated on the map on the floor. He heard a gulp or two. "They've got tanks, huge tracked armored carts with powerful cannons."

This went down badly. Frightened eyes all around except for the Captain who was angry. That wolf took the word, "It will serve them not. They can't get the things down."

Flying tanks were quite another thing, Greg admitted.

Relief could be *felt* throughout the room.

“How will they get down?” someone asked.

“On foot it takes over a day!”

“Yeah!” this was supported by various others.

“Parachute,” Greg said, “They’ll do this at night, or we’d shoot them from the sky. Therefore, we will spread out, ready with bow and gun, and shoot the buggers. We will have to light the sky up, somehow.”

A cheer went up.

The Captain rolled his eyes.

“Listen up! We have an hour, at least. Take a nap.”

Nodding severely, everyone saluted and filed out, except the Captain. When it was quiet again, the Captain walked up, “I wonder what is keeping TonTan. They ought to have been back this morning.”

“He could have been shot down over Mexico.”

“Positivism is your middle name?”

“Or, he is waiting for the first batch of guns and, knowing Remona, biological warfare.”

“Point taken.”

Greg turned, hearing his lovely red clad white cat walk in. She was shining her nails on her dress.

Shine...

“Shirra!”

She gasped in surprise, at his surprise, “what?”

“You’re fantastic! You just gave me an idea.” He rushed over, kissing her full on her lips. The embrace was returned swiftly and unanticipated, as was

the piece of sandpaper that was thrust into his mouth. He had only himself to blame of course.

Disengaging, he smiled at her. "It's your privilege, my dear. Here, put this in the bag."

She took the phone and left, with a happy skip. Greg saw Asis' head appear around the corner and beckoned him. His cat-maid followed him.

"I need reflective materials. You get me the lamps in this house," he pointed at his maid, "you get me a carpenter who can make curved surfaces. Square meter sized."

Asis ran out.

###

As it turned out, gluing flakes of polished metal on a still wet curved parabolic surface was much more work than he'd thought. The surface was some six by six feet. The lump of lamps in the focal point was being adjusted by a black man who placed the bulbs close to each other, separating out the battery supplies. When the guy signaled, Greg threw the switch. It wasn't the first attempt, but this time the alignment seemed to be fine. So fine, in fact, Greg smelled something burning, testimony to the intense heat at the surface.

"Oops," Greg said and turned it off.

"We'll run water from the tap over it," the black man suggested.

With that, Greg felt this was under control and considered his first 'search light' built.

###

Dusk was giving way to night as Greg looked up at the edge of the canyon, high up there like a black wall. It was to be a bright night, for no reason, maybe God was looking on? Anyway, Greg tried his search light and indeed was able to reach the rim, adding a silver lining to twilight's last gleaming.

"That is over two kilometers up," he congratulated himself, "Well done, if I say so myself."

He was handing the binoculars back to Shirra as he noted something. Searching the rim he noted what he had dreaded, he saw the enemy.

"It's starting!" he said excitedly while he followed a jumping horse down in free fall. Falling... chute open... floating away from them.

"Bastards," Greg muttered, "too smart for their own good." They were clearly trying to reach a safe spot, well away from their toil. Perhaps the horses had monitored their actions the last hours? If so, why go to the north? The south gave much better cover. And there his main 'force' was located. Up north only the bows were active. Without light, what could they hope to achieve?

Presently the Captain and a black woman entered the garden, she was carrying a rifle. The design was unlike anything Greg knew as this one had a particularly long barrel.

"What's that?" he called to them.

"You're going to like this!" the woman explained mysteriously, "You're said to be a good shot, so when I finally figured out how to assemble this..." the woman hefted the gun, excitedly. The Captain added, "At the bottom of the first crate, Greg. I thought you would be able to tell me about it."

The woman chattered on, "yes, it was in pieces. A nifty system to assemble it. I'm sure I got it right. There is nothing much to fail at, I have to add, in hindsight."

She handed the thing over. Heavy! All the blacks were strong like ah, well, bears, and he wasn't. More a soft blanch, by comparison. Greg knew he knew little about guns, but he'd seen things. "It's like a sniper gun, what good does that do without bullets or sights?"

The Captain frowned, puzzled, but the woman at once reacted. "You mean these?" She offered a carton neatly stacked with bullets. Again, this material was clearly well organized.

"We are sooo dead," he wanted to say, even if he was not having all the facts but the Captain had taught him about such things. So Greg looked up in surprise as he heard the wolf say, "If they can make those things, we're not going to last," The woman beamed, nodding.

"And you don't care?" he asked her, astonished.

"I'm twenty eight, living on borrowed time. Like Blikol, really. If I want to make a difference, it'll have to be now or never."

Determined, she patted her maser gun at her side.

"I'm handy with these."

"We could have used a load of those, Captain," Greg nodded at the weird device.

"They're genetically linked; we couldn't do a thing with them if we had them."

"And no one to overrule that link?" Greg huffed, "What a coincidence." Then he placed the rifle on the bench and checked it. It seemed straight, the mechanism worked with a nice click. He put it down and looked down the barrel.

"Light, please?" he said.

The searchlight tilted to give him light and he noted this gun was not nearly so nice. Scratches, burrs, even the seams did not match very well.

"OK, everybody get to the side."

Loading a bullet, he put the gun on the ground, and with an extended arm, pulled the trigger. It gave a loud 'Pang' but it was not right at all.

"What a crappy thing. If this is the technical advance of our enemy... Captain, I'm going in with you right now."

"Wait, can't you use *your* gun, Greg? That is precise. Shoot some of those parachutists out of the sky!"

"At a mile off? You have to be kidding. Bullets don't do much at that distance, and you have to take gravity into the equation for this. Nope. That rifle might have, but not this way. I fear we will have a true melee on our hands. Right now we need to make sure we have the teams with the blacks and their maser guns all briefed and ready, everyone with good shooting material needs to be deployed. Clear?"

Everybody nodded.

"You," he said to the man at the search light, "make sure we are not suddenly getting those buggers on our neck. Shoot them if you think you can."

"Yes, Sir!"

Greg and his party left to check out the materials they'd collected from the enemy. They were jogging, for time was tight now. The enemy was touching down on their turf, out of their reach. En route to the crates they got the first report, burning farms in the north. Not that they needed it, the fire was visible from where they stood.

"That proves it," Greg surmised, "Total destruction is what we must brace for. No time to lose!"

The check on the rest of the materials in the crates was quickly conducted. The rifles were not much better than the ones he had seen, but the hand guns were good. Then he held up something interesting.

"This, I believe, is a grenade."

"A what?"

“Pull the pin, throw and it explodes in a mean way killing all in a few feet and maiming to large distances.”

“How do you use it?”

“Throw.” As this got blank faces, Greg went on, “Observe,” he walked onto the field, directing everybody in a large square. “Keep everybody away. Here we go.”

He pulled the pin and threw, counting.

The nervous reactions told him the others thought it didn't work. “Twenty,” he said under his breath and the thing exploded.

“How can we fight such things!” one of the dogs cried in dismay.

“Easy, pick up and throw back. By the way, get this information around. We don't want to lose our troops because this sort of thing is ‘unknown’.”

Grim determination showed all around. “The material in these crates appears sound. But it all is much less sophisticated than I feared. We have a chance, people, a fighting chance, and I for one intend to use it. Dismissed!” he said.

The ridicule of that hit him, but right now the gravity of the situation hardly called for droll side tracked remarks. A chain of command was needed.

“Captain?” he held the wolf by his shoulder.

“Yes?”

“You keep this lot organized if I get hit, you hear me?”

“Me?”

“Who else?”

“Well, lady Shirra, of course. Everybody adores her. She's a shining beacon for us. As long as her white manes are gallantly streaming in the winds we will stand tall. I know you don't dig her, but she's a sight for sore eyes. Her beauty and not in the least her non-blue eyes make her stand out as

something all want to protect and cherish. She is the motor, calling forth the brave in all of us.”

“Good,” Greg thought relieved, “I was afraid I was.”

“...and her power is fuelled by the shared conviction that you are the furry human, the savior. The one who stands between us, the furs, and them, the humans. Your goal is worth fighting for and Shirra’s reverence for you simply closes the circle.”

“That is not funny, Captain.”

“I know you feel that way, and I am realistic enough. My wolves are. You are a human, a weird sort and not from this place. But you care about what happens to the downtrodden. That makes you stand out from your black and white fellows.”

“Captain, I say it once more, I owe nothing to anyone! I’m me, and me is what counts. From one moment to the other, I might decide to leave.”

“You can, no doubt. But you are here still. That is what counts.”

A shot fired nearby spurred them into action. They looked at each other, knowing this was the moment. Greg pulled his gun, as did the Captain.

“I’ve three magazines. Forty five shots.”

“I’ve got forty,” the Captain nearly smiled.

“Make them count, Captain. If I see you in the next life, God’s speed.”

At that, the Captain embraced him, whispering, “This is it, last stand...” then, he breathed out, “God’s speed, we’ll keep saying that in your honor, Greg.”

They separated; Greg went to the white house while he heard another shot to his left. The search light was pinpointing parachutes. They were indeed drifting towards them. A sudden wind was blowing from the north, thwarting the equine plan. No winds ever blew from the north, never had as long as he was here, but now it suddenly was.

Maser blasts were changing the horses and bulls in their excellent gear to shreds. The air borne attackers tried to return fire, but from a moving parachute that didn't do much. At the edge of the town he heard explosions.

Greg sure hoped the grenade story had been passed along.

Trudging up the high street he got slammed down by the complete remnants of a masered horse falling onto his back. Greg salvaged the guns and instructed dogs around him to do likewise and bring them to the stronghold storage of the Captain.

As sudden as it had started, the attack stopped. That made sense. With that wind blowing in, the enemy had to go further up north, so as not to arrive inside their town. Here and there an exchange of fire could be heard. The 'Chinese' were at large in the town.

Greg ran to the white house. What if no one were around there to protect? There were not enough defenses there, to keep Amandine safe! Rushing inside he found all quiet. The cat maid walked in with Amandine. The little coyote looked happy to see him. "Daddy!" she cried happily.

A shot noise behind him made him turn in a twirl. "Down!" he yelled to the maid carrying Amandine. Grunts outside suggested something was happening. The window shattered and a rifle flew inside. Right after that, Asis rolled in; he had a number of bloody patches where the glass had cut him.

"Fucker!" the skunk growled and got up. A muffled 'blob' sounded from outside. That was a maser-hit.

His other maid, in her black dress walked in. That cat had changed enormously in the last ten hours. This was not his nice maid anymore; this was a cat of war. She carried a maser gun at her side. "Got him," she reported curtly.

"Where did you get that gun?" Greg asked from the floor.

"Standard issue for assistants in training."

"And you know how to use it too."

“You bet!” she saluted.

They all got up and Greg walked to Amandine who was quiet, looking at him with large, frightened eyes. She wasn't crying, maybe she felt the emotions, the gravity of the situation. Asis walked to the window and pulled the curtains open. The left window was nastily covered with pieces of bull.

“Nice,” he said, from his vantage point.

Another shot sounded from outside and Asis fell backward, clutching his arm with a stifled ‘ah’ shortly after followed by a leering, “Ha! Flesh wound!” and scrambling back to Greg and the cat over the floor. They all kept low.

“We’re nicely exposed, Asis,” Greg whispered.

“Why are they all here?”

“Because of the search light, what do you think?”

He crawled to Amandine and the maid. The little coyote started to whine softly. “Out!” Greg commanded and went to the hallway. The other maid behind him followed, Asis trailing. A metallic clunk on the floor made him look around.

“Grenade!” he screamed and made a dash through the door, rolling to the side to push Amandine and the maid to the side, right behind him the other cat crashed to the floor.

“What’s this?” he heard from the room.

“Damn! Asis, throw it away!” he screamed.

After a loud ‘bang’, one of Asis’ lower arms flew through the door, along with shrapnel and ‘plunk’ like impact into the wall. Lucky the house was made of bricks! The cat who had lost her heart to Asis sat silent then something clicked inside that head. Her eyes lost the luster and she dove back in, and with a few maser shots the assailant was blown to pieces.

“Get her to safety,” Greg pointed to Amandine and the remaining maid, “the bedroom. I’ll cover from here!”

Outside, shooting was erupting all over, including small explosions. Lots of grenades!

“Good God, tell me I was in time with my grenade story,” he prayed, then slapped his head for doing this. “Happy now?” he asked God, “I think I don’t believe and right now I’m hoping I only *think* that.”

The room was a mess, when he looked around the door. The explosion had generated a lot of debris as well as shattered glass everywhere. How the bare footed anthropomorphs could walk though was a mystery to him. Also, there was about nothing left of the skunk, depending on the definition.

“I told you Asis,” Greg mused, “you should have shagged that cat. Rest in peace, young skunk.”

More shooting erupted. That was an automatic gun! Who was using it? Greg moved to the front door and scouted the direct environment. If anyone would dare appear they’d be toast! With his back to the wall, next to the door he listened. A word was hissed outside, it was Russian-like.

“Shit” he thought and concentrated on his gun. It felt cool, and he took the quiet from it, just like he used to get when hunting with his dad. This was just like hunting zebra’s he thought. Of course, a zebra didn’t return fire.

Something bumped against the door. Greg dove to the floor. A few seconds later the door blew from its hinges. He took aim and waited. Against the black night a large shape appeared. Definitely a bull. They could not have seen him inside. Here it was even darker. Another appeared. This was a horse, the ears flicked and they entered. They were a few feet from him and he was waiting with his attack still. Something told him to.

Again some comments in Russian and now four more walked in.

They thought this spot secure? Well, get this!

He fired at the six shapes. This took less than three seconds.

They all fell to the floor and he collected guns, grenades and bullets.

In the kitchen, he drew up a barricade and got the maid with Amandine out. She had given Amandine some sort of sleeping pill. That was smart.

“Come,” he beckoned her, “what’s your name, girl?”

“Vivian.”

“Well, Vivian, follow me, we have to get out of this house. Wait here.”

Returning with the backpack Shirra had prepared, he arrived with Vivian in the garden, to the search light, which was off. Nearing it, he saw “Off” was not quite the word. Destroyed was a more fitting description, all bulbs were smashed and the black man was dead next to it. However he’d certainly thrown a fight, given the carnage in terms of dead bodies.

“We’ll take cover below it. No one is going to search here. This will be a long night, Vivian. Here, take this.” He offered a candy bar and ate one himself. They would need energy to keep going. Stifling a yawn he scanned the surrounding from their little indentation in the grassy slope.

“They’re still shooting, sir.” Vivian said.

“That is good. It means we’re not conquered yet.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help with shooting, sir,” she said apologetically, “I’m not too bright with weapons.”

“You took good care of us with food and looked after Amandine. You’re my hero.”

She didn’t reply to that, and he saw she was scanning the surrounding too.

“What am I looking for?” she whispered.

“Anything that moves.”

It was tiresome, and he kept yawning.

“We have to keep each other awake, Vivian.”

They had been sitting there for an hour while intermittent shooting kept on going. Greg couldn't take it any longer.

"We're going, come on. I can't stay here it..." A large explosion nearby. Blikol's house blew up. He made for the path down to Blikol's house. It was burning all right with the fire in the background he easily saw the shapes of the horses and bulls.

"Down!" he hissed and started shooting.

Although he didn't hit one per shot, he did empty his two clips before he believed it safe to continue. One of the horses was an officer. He took the hand gun off him and put it in his belt. Ten bullets and one clip for his gun. A number of grenades hung from his belt, feeling ready to continue, they went on with the sleeping Amandine.

At the edge of the town he passed eight shot dogs. Their bows were in their hands still, they had not seen the attack coming from above, he guessed. Skirting the houses, he reached the airfield where he was suddenly pulled into a shed. Shirra put her finger to her muzzle, and Vivian was allowed to breathe after she nodded her understanding. "The field is swarming with them," she hissed. Shirra was also holding her maser gun. She'd procured them last time, believing they needed something to protect themselves from wolves. Funny, how things go. Next, Shirra pulled Greg close and forced her tongue into his mouth, getting her fill. She knew he would not get loud now so it took him some time to break their embrace.

"On purpose!" he scolded her nearly soundless.

She blinked her eye, "Might be last," and she slipped out, he followed her. He waved Vivian down to the floor, indicating to keep down.

Greg and Shirra noted the Hunnuny were not blowing the choppers up which was good, but not understandable. Greg wondered, were the choppers the reason for the attack?

He kept following Shirra. She was now so dirty that her white fur was full of patches of mud, helping to conceal them. She used her maser again and again until they got under fire. Now he joined in and from there on, the fight got out of hand. They were on the edge of the chopper field, and were taking cover behind crates and drums.

Greg prepared grenades. Twenty seconds? Well, he would try ten. Pulling a pin, he counted to five then threw and kept counting.

Boom. The shooting stopped.

Twelve! How dependable.

He had no idea how long they had been crawling around, and he was stiff and sore all over. The grass was wet and he was also wet to his bones. Shirra was too, and her fur stuck to her in patches. "Endure," he thought.

Was the sky brightening? He looked at his watch. Five AM.

A bullet hit the drum he hid behind. He was glad these drums were of redwood, and thick too. Those bullets didn't pass through too easily.

After another set of well pitched grenades they got through this too but he feared to be pinned down.

"Greg, is that you?"

The Captain! "Where are you?"

"We've just killed the last of your attackers after you got them with your grenade."

"How can you be sure there are no further?"

"You forget wolves have good night vision."

"Do you have night vision, Shirra?"

"Of course, but less."

"So, what is the score?"

"Last check, fifteen dead and ten in the hospital."

Was that their death toll?

“Excluding the blacks, I don’t know about them.”

“Asis was blown up.”

“It happens,” Shirra said unperturbed. Greg slowly got up and found the Captain and four wolves with bows.

“Bows?”

“They don’t hear these, and don’t know where to shoot. Night vision and bows turn out to be a real threat. Also, we can simply retrieve the arrows.”

“We’re winning?”

“I don’t know about the war, but this battle, I think so.”

## 76. Counting

The first rays of the sun that reached over the canyon rim penetrated the mists of dawn. In that early light the heroics on the ramparts caught a more sinister glimmer. The brightness of spilled blood turned brown and sad as the balance was made up. Greg swallowed when the number was mentioned. The slightly more realistic number of casualties and reported missing was bitter, hard, like any war. The toll was a certain twenty five dead, with another twenty in the hospital. The doctors were evasive about their chances, but that was equally well possible from exhaustion. The good news was that the location of the hospital had not been compromised, being in the cellar bunker below the power station with the setup.

Shirra wanted nothing of Greg’s gloom. She pointed out that, all in all, this was amazing because they had killed no less than sixty Hunnuny. Greg knew he was considered ‘top scorer’. He had no idea how to deal with the credits this gave him. This time they were earned, he knew, yet he didn’t feel one should ever earn credits for shooting sentient beings.

His conscience kept interfering, pointing out that animals were sentient. Zebras and the big cats his father had taken him to hunt... The mental 'bickering' made him strangely silent and unresponsive. To add insult to injury, his conscience pointed out how that made him stand out even more, as if determined.

And he had to agree. He was, for he had already consulted with his counselors! There were many more up there on the rim. How to continue? How to keep morale? Food needed to be checked, people be thanked (in his name, he couldn't go around). Once you're in a war, Greg realized, time is too short and too long. Time is everything and nothing. You need it to plan; you don't need it to wait on.

Waiting for the barbarians, even more so after the first skirmish, was heavy. And so, a reset was needed. Greg was convinced the others, up there on the rim, were licking their wounds. There might be a surprise strike, even with them vigilantly watching.

Nevertheless, a party was thrown. Despite the dead, victory was theirs! Greg was at their side, the furry human to set them free, it was foretold. And thus, victory, even if only now! The population, in high spirits, had a dance with food and music. This was good and bad, Greg had sort-of crashed that festivity, making sure people used time to restore and some dance and song was good for that. Until drinks appeared, the Captain seemed to have an extra sense for this and he repaired this misunderstanding by ending the party. Watchfulness and time-biding was in place from then on.

Watching, more watching, preparing, charging maser-guns in the bunker, preparing arrows, limited training and... tiresome watching.

Greg noted with some distress that the winds were changing again and if that wasn't bad enough clouds had appeared. It was the deadly combination of circumstances that could crush their opposition like a kernel of grain under a millstone. He needed a miracle now, something to turn their kernel of grain into a kernel of popcorn, exploding in the unprepared face of the enemy.

It was with great hopes therefore that people heard the heavy super-chop-chop of their Mexican liaison. At the end of the day TonTan's chopper appeared, flying up from the south of the canyon. He brought along the steel tipped arrows. Mexico was alive, he said. Remona had installed herself there and with bio weapons had made short work of the horses and bulls who had retreated, even if not defeated. Apparently, she had already had substances and fluids prepared when she went down there. Greg decided to show TonTan what the white house looked like, after the attack there. While they walked up, TonTan circumspectly addressed the issue of the origin of this war, the reason for the sudden attack.

"She says you caused this war, Greg. I really had to rebuke her there, total crap."

For all he knew, he indeed *had* caused this war. Or Shirra had, but if it hadn't been for good ol' Reggie-boy in the first place, Shirra'd not been able to do that, now had she? What was the difference anyway?

"Did she say why?" Greg asked.

TonTan laughed uneasily. Greg realized TonTan had hoped for a more definite reaction from him. Maybe he *should* have been a bit more certain with his response, now TonTan showed doubt.

"Of course she did!" TonTan spoke potently, obviously convincing himself, "she said you and Shirra shot up the base and boats of the Chinese. How can you shoot up an island, or a whole boat? I think she was trying to gather the remaining blanches to her cause or something such."

"Ah," Greg nodded in understanding, mulling over a solid reply.

"She said you shot them with the space lasers. But I know for a fact you didn't unlock that laser thing until you reached Campone. I told her so."

Greg kept his face straight, with ease and asked, "And?"

TonTan smiled now, “She laughed, said it didn’t matter anyway, you had showed them something with windows on the citadel, I think she was talking square nonsense at that point.”

Greg stopped in his tracks. That bitch! She had *anticipated* this war! What destruction, only to satisfy her idea of a brave new world. And he was a tool, a bloody tool! She knew all these things... she must have been communicating with those horses or so. Maybe that slithery Moebi had been out there? Shirra had said her sister had been on ‘missions’ of sorts. How could Remona be so incredibly selfish? How could he not have seen through this? How, why, and what did it matter at this point!

“Damn!” he said under his breath, realizing he had missed opportunities.

“Come on, Greg, let her be,” TonTan appeased him, taking his oath as meant towards Remona. But it wasn’t, Greg was mad at himself and forcedly unclenched his fists, spreading his fingers. They were approaching the smoking remnants of Blikol’s house.

TonTan stood still; he was taking in the blackened scene. “For the love of the prophet, what happened to her house?” Then he looked at the heap of dead horsemen in front of it. “Fuckers,” the stout muscular man shook his fist, “we should shoot them all!”

“Hate, TonTan,” Greg said slowly, “breeds hate, remember that.”

“Pha!” the black man spat, “don’t get me started about hate! I fly into Mexico, finding it a nest of blanches. They’d taken over, the place, our place! Bunch of assholes.”

“Gee, you don’t say.”

“What?”

“It fits the pattern.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Remona, she’s having a nice little war for herself. I think she feels it was time for a cleanup.”

“Hmm. I can’t say. She’s losing blanches faster than you can say ‘blanche’.”

And that only fitted the expected result more.

“I take it the death toll under the servant dogs and cats in Mexico is less?”

TonTan looked from the ruin to him, searching Greg’s face while a surprised frown was on his face. “How could you know that?”

“Call it a hunch.”

TonTan crossed his arms and stood back defensively. “I don’t like you when you’re like that. My niece pointed out you weren’t straight.”

“I’m just me,” Greg held out his arms, “Nothing else.”

“Don’t get me wrong Greg, but you know what the animals say about you?”

Greg nodded. “They think I’m their savior.”

“I heard them call you ‘the sage’ and ‘furry human’, all animals in Mexico knew about you. And I mean *all*.”

Greg stared. “Remona must *love* that.”

TonTan cleared his throat, and looked at his fingers in indecision.

“Just say it,” Greg spurred him, “how bad can it be?”

“She, ah, said that if it weren’t for that status you’d built with the servants, she’d have killed you gladly.”

Greg narrowed his eyes, setting his jaw, “what status?”

“You said you told everyone that at some point you were in space with a complete skunk family. All furry folk seem to find a sign in that.”

TonTan laughed softly, nervously.

Greg nodded, “Anyway, let us see the white house then.”

“Bummer about Blikol’s house,” TonTan shrugged, “It was really fine. Her pet-skunk will be sad.”

“I don’t think so.”

“How can you know how he feels?”

“Well, that I don’t know, but I do know right now he doesn’t feel too much.”

“Dead?”

“Blown to smithereens, seeing a grenade for the first time.”

“A what?”

Explaining about a grenade from his belt, they arrived at the house.

On the porch he found his black clad cat, Asis’ last friend. She was looking straight past them.

“Hello?” Greg tried. She looked at him, unsteadily.

“He’s gone,” she said, wistfully.

“We all go at one time or other.”

He wasn’t quite sure what to do with the cat but his heart went out to her. She’d lost her first love, it seemed. He took a seat next to her, and put an arm around her. She put her head against his neck. The ear was squashed between them.

“It’s OK to cry, if you want,” Greg offered.

Softly, she replied, “That won’t get him back.”

“You loved Asis, didn’t you?”

“Loved? Love! I love him!” she said determined. Her arm felt tight around him. She was very strong. She got up and stood before him, “Tell me what to do, command me to take out these monsters, I will fight them and then be with my love!”

This cat was hopeless. “There is one dangerous mission. You go up to the scout position on the rim and use the tablet to alert us, relay anything you see up there. Use your maser to get as many as you can.”

She saluted proudly and prepared to go.

“Hold it, soldier! First you eat and drink, else you won’t last until you’re up there. Salvage one of the parachutes of those horses to get down here if you feel like it.”

“Yes sir!” she saluted again and went inside.

Greg went back to TonTan who had regarded his talk in silence.

“What’s up?” Greg prompted the man.

“How do you do that? You *order* her to die and she does it *willingly*.”

“I didn’t know you cared that much for ‘servants’?”

“But she’s assistant material; you don’t get there unless you’ve what we call a steel mind.”

“Ah,” Greg replied unimpressed, “She’s dead inside already, can’t you see?”

“I don’t get that,” TonTan differed, “How can you want to die about something irrelevant as love-feelings?”

“Don’t you feel love for your family?”

“No, not really. I’ve my obligation, my responsibility, but that’s not the same.”

Greg suddenly understood something about Blikol, muttering, “That would explain her behavior to me,” then he shook his head to clear it, “But back to business, I wanted to show you the search light, follow me.”

TonTan was clearly impressed, assuring him, “We can revive this thing.”

“Good, we most likely will need it next night.”

As TonTan looked the contraption over, Greg asked about any high tech choppers TonTan might have seen. “One of the scouts went to the citadel; they sighted what I call a gun-ship chopper and retrieved new weapons of the Chinese.”

“What gun ship? What new weapons? In Mexico we sure didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

Greg explained and scratched his chin. TonTan wiped his hand over his brow, considering the weight of this. Finally he simply asked, “What could we do if the horses have that kind of stuff?”

“Pray,” Greg huffed.

“Really?” TonTan reflected, “I’ve a distinct feeling that won’t help much. The folks in town are aware more is coming, some seem to think whatever it is, it’ll be far away.”

That would be nice.

“Greg, I bust my ass for you, flying down and up. Tell me what you intend to do next.”

“Everybody seems to think I’ve the answers. I don’t!”

“Too bad then, we’ll die sitting ducks. Perhaps that party was a good idea after all.”

“How can you be so light hearted? Aren’t you afraid to die? What do you think will happen if we don’t stop these horse-hordes?”

“Firstly, I’m airy because that is my disposition, and secondly no, I’m not afraid to die but I wasn’t planning on doing so right now, as to your third question...”

TonTan stopped and looked at him.

“...Remona has had contact with the mother-citadels in southern Africa. This invasion is not just here. The Chinese are attacking on two fronts; all the

citadels were attacked even if the southern hemisphere wasn't shot to pieces with space lasers."

"Of course," Greg said automatically, knowing the state of the space laser network.

"You understand why? Remona broke her head over it!"

"Talkative, wasn't she? Did she say how she contacted the other citadels?"

"Uhhh. I didn't think she... Well, good question."

"Yes, an interesting one."

Greg finally summed one and one. "TonTan, how many Remonovna's are there?"

"Ten or so, I understand."

"That bitch!" Greg blurted. He should have realized there would not simply be one. A whole dynasty was unfolding and that 'replacement race' was no doubt being hatched now. 'Normal humans'. Yeah, right, according to Remona's definition of normal.

This world was going to get into a world war. The fourth, or fifth, he'd no idea actually.

"She's sacrificing us, TonTan."

"I don't know what you're thinking, but I'm sure it's not the only explanation. She is taking perfect care of the population in Mexico, really!"

He had to admit, that didn't fit.

"It still stinks, TonTan."

"I didn't tell her you are abolishing all her nice rules."

Greg smiled. Good, at least she didn't know that and it made him feel good to have this over her.

"And you, how do you feel about that?"

“Anything deviating from the ‘pure’ blanche bullshit is an improvement. I don’t care how these people mix and match.”

Greg slapped TonTan on the back, “Glad to hear it, TonTan.”

“And in case you’re wondering Greg, if we survive you can be sure that Remona will have a virus on her hands she can’t control, something inside that will change her world. No lasers is a good start and your ideas are already all over the place in Mexico.”

On that note, the men walked back to the village.

“Incidentally, Greg, I think your move to bring a food laden chopper into Mexico was a very smart move.”

“Really?”

“Remona swore somewhat when she learned I had been dealing out the food saying it came from you. Like I said, everyone there knew who you were. Interesting.”

“Yes, stuff of legends, eh?”

“Legends... Yeah, right on Greg! Legends.”

###

Greg slept but somewhere in the back of his mind he saw hordes of horses and bulls jump off the cliffs above him. It was as if a semi-conscious state knew he was in fact ‘at war’, but his sub conscious conveniently ate this and munched the images into pulp that matched the fear that grips anyone who knows what it is to be below the boot, trodden on, wiped and murdered. Chased, hunted down. You can debate it, but if you look up and see a gun pointed at you with determined eyes behind it you are either dead in a second or a primordial survival-instinct kicks in.

Greg had always been of the latter persuasion; in fact it tapped resources he didn't quite know he had. Despite this, any mind will warp and wrap itself around the reality it faces. So did Greg's, the images he noted were embodiments of his dreams. Hordes floated down, shooting, aiming, killing all. Greg ran and ducked and dove and returned fire, dealing death to those in the sky but ending up unable to save those around him.

When he tripped again he heard bullets impact the wall under which he had fallen. His feet, he quickly dragged to safety and turned around to stare in the static eyes of Sasha, caught in the field. He tried screaming but hadn't the energy left. His friend, dying here, without his cubs.

It wasn't fair and was outside his control even. The world wasn't fair!

"He's free," Blackie's voice echoed.

"He's sitting here, damn you!" he returned, "He should have been with Keith, having at least one fair chance! But No, I had to interfere. I don't even know he and Blikol are anywhere livable."

The shooting stopped and he crawled out from under the porch of the house Sasha had built beside the bear village.

"He's free," Blackie's voice repeated.

"I couldn't help him, I can't help these people, I'm useless. An idiot, with grand ideas of leadership. Even Sasha, setting him free was a stupid accident!"

"Be that as it may," Blackie's voice said calmly, "you set him free. That was good."

"I probably killed Blikol with that. And now I'm going to get Amandine killed, and Shirra. Oh how stupid and blind I have been to not accept her as a person. Blackie, tell me, if that does not mark me as an idiot, then what does?"

"You choose the killing," Blackie explained.

“I did not! You with your magical humdrum and bullshit. If you’re so well connected tell me something I can use eh?”

This time the voice was uncertain, “The spirits are restless, and all paths to the world beyond this go through you and the new entity from the seas.”

“I’m so tired,” Greg sputtered, “I don’t know anymore and I only know one thing: I need to get Amandine to safety, better than Sasha.”

“Sasha is free, away from here.”

“Dead you mean! I know he’s dead! The rotten thing was set to lead to Keith’s world and now it’s blocked, it was my only escape. I’m doomed, in a few hours we will perish.”

“He’s free from his time prison and you are building your own! No one can see beyond. All paths converge in you and the new entity from the seas, they’re so strained they are bending.”

“Great help you are.”

“I have faith in you, Greg.”

“That makes one of us then. Blikol had faith in me, look what it brought her!”

“Wait...” Blackie urged, “listen...”

Then Sasha spoke, he’d not heard his voice in ages and it was him undeniably. It sounded healthy and steady. “I have faith in you, Greg. Amandine has faith in you because you are true, I know, like I know you will not let that little one down.”

“I must save her...” he muttered, as he saw the little coyote girl climb the bench in the garden. She looked at him and started to say something. It sounded like ‘beep’, ‘beep’.

A little mental journey later he found himself in his bed while his phone beeped.

“Yes?” he said sleepily, mentally not quite there, expecting Sasha’s voice.

“They’re coming!”

It was his scouting maid. He wanted to thank her but realized he still hadn’t asked her name. Not that she needed his answer, she rattled on. “I’m coming down now! There’s a bunch of weird choppers, too big to shoot with the maser, I will-”

End of transmission. The suggestion, and most probably end of the tablet.

Greg got up. “Well?” Shirra asked, anticipating action and getting into her red dress. He noted she’d somehow seen time to clean it. It wasn’t dry yet, but that didn’t matter. It still lent her an air of regality and control.

“I think we should get that escape pack in order again. Put this in,” he threw her the phone, which she caught, agile.

“Shall I get Amandine along with all remaining vulnerable people into the power station cellar?”

He nodded, adjusting his clothes he’d slept in. “I’m going to get things going.”

“We don’t stand a chance, do we?”

Greg frowned at her, unable to speak his mind. Shirra nodded and left to get things going. Mobilization took less than ten minutes. It seemed everybody was ready to fight, even if they had no idea they were going to fight choppers. TonTan’s crew was finalizing the get-away craft. Infants and those too young to fight were going to be shipped out.

His huge machine, fuelled with all that was left, would fly off due south to Mexico. Those who had been selected had grudgingly accepted their leave and were saying their goodbyes. Final kisses were exchanged. Perhaps, everyone was more aware of their chances than Greg had thought.

No one seemed to be willing to go but Greg and TonTan simply had pushed on. It was not a minute too soon, when the sound of the starting rotors filled the crisp night air but this was rather suddenly drowned out by

another chopper noise. Interference and Doppler shifts reverberated through the miles wide canyon.

TonTan's huge craft was lifting off, Greg was glad to see, while he stood thinking, 'Move, move!' It flew overhead, speeding up to the south.

Just as Greg finally breathed in relief that at least *part* of town would get out alive, a 'swish' noise from the north sounded and a lightening flare shot past the onlookers. Upon impact, an explosion followed in one of the rotary units of TonTan's machine. But it flew on.

Greg stood agape. Rockets! How could they possibly fight that?

Another set of 'swish' noises and four more rockets flew past. He heard shouts of dread and anger around him. TonTan's machine was hit another three times but the damage wasn't even visible from here, even if Greg didn't dare think of the carnage. One of the rockets missed, to explode into the canyon wall. Whatever the horses were using, it wasn't too advanced. With two rotors blown, the machine still flew on. It was burning but the fire was being contained as he looked on. Would they make it?

More swishes, now a number of helicopters on the airfield erupted into balls of flame. Large explosions lit up the sky and showed at least five enemy gunships hanging there. Luckily the horses had spent their trump card on the air field and empty fuel depot there.

Greg went to the bow-squad, calling them to follow him. The machines were hanging no more than a hundred feet in the air. Those steel tipped arrows might...

His group quickly understood what he meant to do. A salvo of large caliber bullets raged past them. Greg realized suddenly he was running right into a position where he was prone to the shots of the heavy guns aboard the choppers. The next salvo came from another chopper which could not reach their position. Why didn't that machine shoot again?

His question was answered by another salvo, shorter this time. He looked up and saw a dull red barrel. Overheated barrels? The idiots!

“Shoot there!” he motioned, pointing. Arrows flew. Sparks flew and the machine climbed higher. One of the arrows didn’t spark though. The gun ship stopped going up and started descending slowly. The search light at the house went on and shone onto the set of choppers. Six in total, nicely in a line.

He would have liked a rocket launcher now. Instead, Greg placed a grenade on an arrow tip and stood next to the dog who held it. He counted with his fingers in the air to ten, then removed the pin and counted down while getting the hell out of there as the dog shot at the chopper above him.

“Boom”

The chopper withstood the impact, but was severely damaged and parts fell off. The grenade also killed the dog who’d hit the chopper. After the impact, the machine kept descending slowly then unexpectedly swerved into the chopper next to it, disrupting the formation. With a shuddering bang and a bright flare the infernal machine lit up the landscape in all directions. Whatever exploded didn’t make the chopper stop though. However, the machine right next to it took a lot of damage and lost control, going down towards the town. There it went down in a set of explosions, causing total carnage in the surrounding block of houses. Greg was blown to the floor by the rush of air from the explosions. The slowly descending, burning machine flew off to the river but lodged itself into the fields with a similarly big explosion.

Two down. At what cost?

Arrows were flying again, while Greg tried to find a safe haven, away from it all. He supposed he could hardly be seen by the horses or the bulls or whoever was flying these things. Having lost two of their number, the remaining gunships flew into the town, shooting in short bursts and dropping their load.

“Shit!” Greg called in dismay, “bombs!”

Explosions erupted all around, in the light he could see bodies flying through the air. This was going to be a very short defense.

“Amandine!” he gasped and started running to the power station. He ran past burning houses, bodies and parts thereof were strewn all over. Panting, he reached the bunker. Shirra was at the top of the stair with a yelling, whining Amandine and the wolf-pack. Greg grabbed Shirra, pulled her with him to the entrance to the power station. This opened at his touch and they went in just before the next bombardment started. He looked back to see another chopper at the airfield go up in an explosion while young cats and dogs threw the collected grenades at the choppers with expert timing. Another one, severely damaged swayed to the side and tried to climb out of the fight. It nearly got in the way of its partner which swerved out of the way, hitting a tree. Two more of the machines of destruction were hit and staggered away, unable to stay in the fight. The last two finally got smart, climbed to a safe height and dropped their lethal charges. No more attacks! Amazingly, someone had his chopper fired up and flew out to meet the two, someone with the guts to take a final flight.

Greg closed the door and regarded Shirra.

“We’re not going to last,” he screamed at her, over the whining of Amandine.

She nodded.

“I’m going to try to escape before our last chance runs out!”

Shirra looked at the setup, with mixed feelings.

“This is final, Shirra, I cannot guarantee you can get back!”

“I will follow you anywhere!”

“I cannot go to Keith’s world!” he yelled, “I only have the home equation set up!”

“Anyplace is better than this!”

She seemed to understand. Who was he to deny her this chance?

Greg walked back to the door, to take one last look. Next to the door sat a cat. Greg looked into the frightened face of Vivian; she had a nasty wound on her head. She suddenly noticed him and dashed inside, clinging to him, shaking. The door closed again.

“Take me with you! Please!”

“You might not like where we go!”

“Hell is better! Help me!”

Amandine had piped down and Greg set to work. He connected the phone up to the setup and programmed it. The whole bunker shook as another set of bombs exploded. It was clear that their enemy felt this power plant contraption needed to be obliterated.

Soon enough, Greg had the phone working but he found it difficult to control the tiny screen and he was correcting his entries time and time again. If anything was set amiss he might end up in hell indeed! The system accepted his commands finally and blue spots glowed at the points of the tetrahedron.

Amandine looked at the blue points in wonder.

Outside the explosions started again, the next bomb-run was nearing them. This bunker would not last indefinitely. Greg held the phone in his hand. The wires were long enough for his jump.

“This is it!”

He put his arm around Shirra, holding her close. “If this fails, know that I love you kitten.” He kissed her nose. He kissed Amandine, “if it fails, know that I tried. For you.”

“What about me?” Vivian called in distress, through tears.

Sighing he looked at her, at the setup diameter. “How small can you make yourself? We have to go in one jump or we might end up in different universes!”

Blubbering she got on the ramp as explosions rocked the building. Dust fell from the ceiling and the blue sparks fluttered but remained. It dawned on Greg he had offered the basement of this bunker as shelter whereas this was the exact spot under attack. Maybe, that was not so smart, in hindsight.

Vivian was rolled up. “Now you, Shirra.”

She gave him Amandine in his free hand and rolled up over Vivian. Greg took a step back. “God have mercy on their souls,” he said softly, thinking of the families and elderly cooped up below.

“Here goes nothing,” and he jumped forward, pushing the cats through the setup holding the phone and Amandine.

Explosions started outside again as the blue scanning line passed him with a flutter. Lastly the phone went into the field, as he had planned.

Utter silence.

Two humans slid down the ramp and dropped onto the floor of the bunker in a swearing heap. One of them started to say, “We’re still alive,” but did not get further than “we’re...” because the setup went critical.

The disruptions of the bomb threw the alignment of the fixtures at the tips off. Since the power station had just generated enormous amounts of power to allow the field to switch polarization and the field was disrupted, sparks and flashes were all over the place. The new arrivals were fried. Greg’s alterations in the control software caused power to keep increasing.

Bombs kept falling on the bunker, weakening the roof, cracking it to less than structural levels. The field’s electron density reached the critical level and high energy pair-formation drove gigantic magnetic fields which in turn

induced currents that melted all wiring. The power-station went critical just as a final bomb destroyed the ceiling. Debris rained down onto the remnants of the stasis field. Whining, the field strength pulled in all matter in a meter radius, preparing for a serious release of 'boom'. The trio of gunship choppers flew right above it, at the moment a chain reaction ran out of control.

Flash.

The time between these events and the subsequent small nuclear explosion blew the wide area flat as with a terrible hurricane. Three enemy choppers were destroyed, vaporized, in that and the blast cloud continued to rise until in the updraft near the canyon wall. At the rim, the sudden expanding hurricane winds pulled most of the onlookers over the rim, killing them with impact and radiation. The horse army that had stood there was decimated, wiped out.

Unaware of the fall out, in the ensuing quiet, the surviving inhabitants of the cellar below the superbly designed bunker came out to look and see what happened.

The Captain stood wordless, taking in the area they found themselves in. It was completely leveled ground. All structures gone! The total destruction of everything in sight sparked his words, "He has given his life... Greg is gone..." And he took his cap off.

Locals who'd come out behind him reacted in a totally different way. They cheered. "Our savior has offered his life, we're free! Greg walks with the Prophet now!"

Their cheer was taken up and so the new rule started.

## 77. Epilogue

The world snapped out of existence right around him and another room, with white washed walls appeared as he and his party exited the setup on the continuation of the ramp. When he got the dizziness off, the sound of generators and air conditioning was the first he heard.

He blinked. This wasn't home.

A white woman in clothes that reminded him strongly of his mother appeared. She adjusted her glasses and made a note on a clipboard in her hand.

"Four, Adam!" she called, "A guy and three of them dog-people."

English. Human. Good start. What point in time would it be?

Shirra was slowly uncurling, also blinking. Vivian was out, as was to be expected, just as Amandine was.

A Caucasian guy, presumably the aforementioned Adam, walked in. He looked at them and then pulled a handle unlocking something. Only now he noticed the Plexiglas cage they sat in.

"Can, You, Understand, Me?" Adam cried, loudly and slowly.

Greg considered several rude replies but decided on a loud, "Yes, I, Can!"

Adam leaned back. "Gee, you're British? That's new. I thought only the US allowed those dogfaces."

Greg happily noted this surely was US English he was hearing, and apparently something called 'Britain' existed. Good score! The woman made a note and admonished Adam by just saying, "Adam!".

Theatrically the man rolled his eyes, "OK, 'mogs', happy now?"

"Adam," Greg asked, "can I call you Adam? What date is today?"

Adam seemed to find this a perfectly normal question. “Friday, March 6, 1981;” he consulted his watch, which Greg recognized as a fairly stupid early digital design from his childhood, “It’s about noon. Welcome to New York.”

“1981?”

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~ The End ~

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