

Prologue.

Twenty five years had passed since the end of the Plague War, the name that the third Feryn-Human War had the misfortune to be called due to the human forces deploying a Biogenic weapon to wipe out the feryns... but like most viruses, it mutated and infected the human populations of several nearby worlds. In this most stressful and trying of times, the scientific communities of both sides came to realise that to save their species, they would have to work with the other side. In an unprecedented move, scientists from both sides met on an uninhabited world and set up the first of the science stations known as Sci-Alpha One.

There, in the labs of Sci-Alpha One, the scientists worked hand by paw to develop the cure. It became clear that the cure was dependent on both species, but neither species could figure out the final hurdle until a happy accident happened. A lab technician, a young feryn called Dorna Bristleclaws, who was setting up some cultures of infected human blood, cut herself on a broken test tube. Her blood dripped into several cultures, contaminating them, but rather than destroy them, the researchers decided to watch them. Those cultures became the basis of what became known as the Serendipity Cure, which ended the Plague War.

By wars end, several other scientific camps had sprung up on different uninhabited worlds, and had been tackling problems that had been eluding both species. The camps expanded into small communities as families of the scientists settled, these communities grew into townships and the oldest ones grew surprisingly fast into cities in their own rights. The worlds settled by the scientists approached the governments of both races and requested that they be an independent group of worlds, who were to be seen as neutral parties for both feryns and Humans, and that neither side could deploy military assets on any of the neutral worlds. They received this request, with no opposition.

Twenty three years later, the world of Serendipity received a large contingent of human military as "Extra Security" detail. The Feryn Coalition demanded the human troops be removed from the world immediately. The humans refused. In a misguided attempt to safeguard the safety of the capital city of Copernicus, the feryn Government landed troops at its main spaceports. This had the unfortunate reaction of the Terran Dominion condemning it as "An Act of War", and then ordered the human troops to open fire on ANY feryn they saw, not just the troops... Somehow, word of that attack managed to spread beyond the confines of Serendipity, igniting brushfire incidents on numerous worlds. These brushfires grew in the conflagration of combat, sparking the fourth War. The war has raged for two years, with no end in sight...

Chapter 1.

Jason Roick peered through the window, looking up through the falling snow, trying to catch sight of the landing shuttle. He was a handsome brown and white cat, with a lean, but toned build, his emerald eyes reflecting the snow as he scanned for any sign of the ship.

"Mac, do you think there'll be any cuties amongst them?" The comment was directed to the well-built Doberman lazing on his bunk, a well-worn and battered book held in his paws, an herbal cigarette screwed into his lips. Mac slowly turned his head towards the excitable fur, retrieving his cigarette and in a southern drawl, spoke,

"Jayce, my old friend... the people on the shuttle are soldiers. Troopers like us; they are not to be considered cuties, regardless of gender. Cute is not in the make-up of the trooper. And as for the shuttle, have you even known Tara and Toby to miss chowtime?" Mac replaced his cigarette, and lifted his paw as if waiting for something. With a small flick of his wrist, he pointed at the bell in the dormitories. It rang.

"Come on, Jayce. Chowtime."

High above the base, a shuttlecraft screamed through the atmosphere, the air rushing over its tortured wings, small trails of fire streaming from its wingtips. The shuttle, in a steep nose-dive, would be in free-fall if it weren't for the engines blasting it groundwards at a terrifying rate. Its pilots seemed to have everything under control, which made the descent seem that more frightening! The

eighty feryns sitting in the troop compartment had their paws clenched tightly to the armrests, their claws digging into the material, their eyes closed. Most of them were silent in their terror, though a male Kodiak near the back was openly crying, and screaming for his mommy. Two rows behind the howling bear, sat a young she-wolf. She was a pretty wee thing, mostly ebony black with sandy yellow snout, chest, gloves and socks, her fingers being a darker shade of yellow. Around her eyes, she had red masking, which complemented her bright red hair and mane. Besides sat a small yellow catgirl, a yen symbol on her forehead being the only marking on her, her tousled light brown hair draped over her closed eyes, she was quietly whispering something that the sharp ears of her friend could make out.

"Dani, are we down yet? Are we down yet?"

The she-wolf risked opening one of her sea green-blue eyes glanced around the compartment and looked out of the window. For a moment, she watched as the shuttle ripped through the clouds, before bursting through into the snowstorm raging below it. Danika caught sight of the ground rushing up towards them at high speed... She whimpered and her eye snapped shut again, "No, Asheria. We're not down... yet. Any minute now though... Ash, don't open your eyes until we land!!"

After a torturous minute or so, the shuttle levelled out, though it was clear to the passengers that the flight crew hadn't reduced the throttle and were now skimming along some 80 feet above the snow.

Both Danika and Asheria opened their eyes and looked at each other, seeing the fear of the flight slowly receding from their faces. Both fems looked out of the window. In the distance, they could see the landing lights of the base approaching fast, the packed snow racing under the shuttle, the shadow of the ship dancing over the white cornices; it struck Danika as being quite beautiful. She noticed that the cabin was quiet; half stood and looked at the hulking bear. He'd passed out at some point during the descent, and considering the size of him, would take some effort shifting, once they landed.

The remainder of the flight was quite swift and smooth, with a slightly bumpy landing. The rear hatch dropped, and freezing air washed into the warm cabin, chilling everyone, and fortunately waking the bear, much to everyone else's relief. The two flight crew raced past, chanting Chowtime as they went.

Danika watched the two raccoons disappear into the distant doorway, before reaching up and grabbing her and Asheria's duffle bags. Passing Asheria hers, the young she-wolf remarked, "Looks like this place is goin' to be an interestin' postin' after all." Her friend scowled at the driving snow, watching as it got heavier, pelting the young troopers as they ran for the door. Danika and Asheria were the last two off the shuttle; they stood under the tail for a moment or two, enjoying the heat from the engines' afterglow. A small break in the snow came and the two young fems bolted for the now invitingly warm base.

Upon entering, the first sight was that of a glowering wolverine, her rank badge indicating her as a Sergeant Major, her face as she wasn't at all happy about missing out on Chowtime to deal with a bunch of freshly out of boot troopers. Her steel-grey eyes scanned the assembled recruits, before she barked at them,

"I am Sergeant Major Liamari Mangador; I am not your friend. I am here to brief you in your orientation of your posting, and to assign you kitlings to barracks. You twenty, Barracks A-3. Next twenty, Barracks A-7. Next twenty, Barracks B-9. Next fourteen, Barracks C-2. Last six, Barracks D-12. You have fifteen minutes to stow your gear and then meet back up in the main hall." The troopers hung around, looking a little lost. Danika raised her paw, to a questioning look from Asheria, "Mam, where's D-12 and the main hall?"

Liamari turned and glared at her, "Map. On the wall. And don't Mam me, I work for a living, it's Sergeant Major. DO YOU HEAR ME!!?"

The troopers all straightened and answered, "YES, SERGEANT MAJOR!"

"DISMISSED!!"

The troopers surged forward and crowded the map, Danika and Asheria looked at each other and glanced up. A sign hung from a pair of thin chain, "BARRACKS C&D ←, BARRACKS A & B →, "Turning to their left, the pair of fems hustled down the corridor, looking for D-12.

Meanwhile in the mess hall, Jason was scarfing down his food, though he was sure he'd eaten his cornbread at least twice, another had appeared on his tray. Shrugging, he ate it. Mac sat beside him, eating slowly. The doors to the mess hall burst open as two rapidly moving raccoons in flight suits rushed for the serving counter, trays in paws. Jason looked at them, slightly amused. He turned back to finish his spaghetti and meatballs, and glanced at the yellow block sitting on his tray. Cornbread. Bewildered, he looked at Mac, who was still taking his time with his food, munching on his own cornbread.

"Mac, didn't I just eat that? I'm sure I ate that." He said as he pointed at the skulking block. Mac, looked at the cornbread impassively, he bit into the piece in his paw. Swallowing, he answered, "Nope, that's still your first one. Why? Are you in a hurry to check out the new transfers? Now, just eat your cornbread and we'll see if any have been assigned to our barracks." Mac finished his cornbread, and reached over to pick up another piece. Jason turned to face the door, thinking as he nibbled on his (fourth) cornbread, "Wonder if any of them are cute?"

Ten minutes later, both Mac and Jason wandered back towards the barracks. The young cat was bouncing around his stoic Doberman friend, trying to get him to hustle a bit, but Mac was having none of that. A young white mouse came barrelling out of the barrack's door, shouting behind him as he went,

"Dani!! Ash!! We're gonna be... OOF!!!!", as he ran straight into Mac, bouncing back onto his arse. He looked up at the Doberman with a nervous smile, "... late."

Mac offered the young feryn a paw, and helped pull him onto his feet, practically lifting the little guy in one clean motion. To his side, Mac heard a slightly annoyed sigh from Jason; he turned and raised an eyebrow at his friend,

"Why the sigh?" he said as the lil mouse ran off in the direction of the main hall.

The feline wore a despondent look on his face, as he stepped through the doorway backwards, slowly turning as he spoke,

"Awww!! They're all going to be guuu..," as he finally faced into the barracks, his eyes locking onto the wiggling rear end of Asheria, her golden fur shining in the overhead lights, the shape of her firm well-rounded arse enhanced with the pair of light blue scanties she was wearing. Jason stared open-mouthed at the feline beauty as she daintily climbed down the bunk ladder, Mac chuckled at his friend as he looked towards Asheria, suddenly snapping to attention as Danika stepped around the bunk, her Second Lieutenant insignia visible on her collar. The Doberman glanced to his side and elbowed the still moonstruck feline, breaking the trance he seemed to be in. Jason winced and looked around, spotting the giggling she-wolf, and reflexively saluted.

"At ease, guys," Danika's voice had the lyrical qualities of an Irish brogue to it, the words drifted musically in the air, she smiled warmly at the two males standing before her, "Could you gentlefurs show me and my friend to the main hall, we're runnin' a little late for orientation?"

Behind them, Asheria had wriggled into her dress uniform, and was quietly watching her friend and the two squaddies. She had a slight smile on her lips as she observed the conversation, noting the slight perking of Mac's ears at Danika's accent, and the sidelong glances she was garnering from Jason. Silently, she filed away the observations for later mental dissection, and stepped forward.

"Please?" she mewed. Jason seemed to melt, and gestured towards the door,

"Follow me ladies, I'll get you to orientation before you're late," and strode out the door, the two fems following him. Mac just rolled his eyes, and followed behind them, stopping briefly to reach around a corner and hook the collar of the panicked and hopelessly lost white mouse from earlier. Fifteen minutes later, the camp's auditorium buzzed with the sounds of the assembled Feryns, new recruits intermingled with veterans. The troopers shuffled, talking among their own small groups as the stragglers slipped in quietly, the sound of heavy boots from the stage puncturing the haze of chitchat.

The speakers flared into life as Sgt Major Mangador screamed into the podium's PA system.

"AAAAAAAATTEN-SHUN!!!!"

The auditorium rang from the collective stamp of combat boots as the troopers snapped to attention, their assembled gaze fixed on the glowering wolverine on stage.

"Welcome to Camp Glacier, your home for the next three months. Rules are simple, be professional, don't screw up and don't freeze to death."

"During this time you will be tested, and stretched to your limits, physically and mentally. You will learn how to run, fight, and if you pay attention, maybe even survive this spirits forsaken war... I now hand the stage over to your company commander, Captain Emberpaw." Mangador pivoted and strode off the stage, giving the vague impression she was diving for cover.

Captain Emberpaw rose from her seat in the shadowed wings of the stage, and approached the podium, her stride carefully measured to carry her swiftly and efficiently across the short distance. The captain was a female spotted skunk with chestnut red hair, in her mid to late twenties. She paused at the podium; her green eyes scanned across the assembled Feryns, before she leant forward slightly and spoke into the mic, her Russian accent cutting through the silence like a hot wire through butter.

"At ease, I am Captain Droushnakovi Natalya Emberpaw, of the 37th Triskellian Rangers, and the Commanding Officer of Camp Glacier. V'hile you are here, you v'ill call me Captain or Mam. I am the highest authority in this facility, and the last person you v'ish to cross." She flexed her paws, cracking her knuckles as she paused in her speech.

"Do any of the new recruits have any inquiries they v'ish to have cleared up now, or can v'e end this time-v'asting piece of bureaucratic bullshit?" She scanned the crowd, looking for raised paws, the glare suggesting that she wasn't in the mood for petty little questions, so several paws shrivelled back into the crowd. Seeing no paws raised, the Captain leaned into the mic.

"Dismissed."

The next few weeks passed in a blur of intense training, frigid conditions and the taste of more MREs than the recruits ever wanted to encounter. D-12 trudged towards Camp Glacier, the squad consisting of 4 veterans, Mac, Jason, a quiet blonde haired red vixen called Siouxsie Firetail with her variant pulse rifle¹, and a boundlessly energetic red-haired polecat girl called Nanvel Anvilstar, who is the squad's tech, and 6 rookies including Danika, Asheria, an optimistic otter girl with black hair called Ariel Wavedancer, Sevrans Brushtail, one of the most sullen red squirrels ever and had showed some expertise with firearms, a small quiet bat called Quint Treewing, who showed a remarkable ability with knives and rattan sticks, and the last member Jacob Snowpaw, the little white mouse, whose unconscious form was presently slung over Mac's broad shoulders.

"Trust our medic to be the one to collapse," growled Sevrans to no-one in particular, going silent when he spotted the glare from Danika. She looked back amongst the squad, thinking to herself.

"Squad, we're still 50 miles away from Camp Glacier, with a sick trooper. I think we need to stop and figure out what happened to Jacob before we continue on, and hopefully get him well enough to travel. Considering we're in the middle of a snowfield, I suggest we build us a burrow." Her eyes glanced towards the veterans to see their responses to her thoughts.

Mac, as usual, looked impassive but gave her a curt nod of approval, Siouxsie and Nanvel were breaking out their entrenching tools, and Jason's shoulders sagged at the thought of digging.

"Ash, weather report."

The yellow furred catgirl punched a few controls on her vambrace, a small scowl crossing her face at the results. "Dani... Mam, we have a snowstorm blowing our way from north-north-east, ETA is 2 hours 37 minutes before it hits us."

"Orders, mam?" asked Siouxsie, waiting with entrenching tool in paw.

"Firetail, Anvilstar and Brushtail, start diggin' the burrow. Treewing, Wavedancer, you use the snow dug out to build a wind break and coverin' mound for the burrow entrance. Align it with prevailin'

winds. Sandfur, keep an eye on that storm front, tell me the instant anything changes with it. Campbell, Roick, stay watch. I'll tend to Jacob. Everyone understand?"

The squad acknowledged the orders in their own ways, as Mac handed her the shivering body of the young mouse, the other squad members setting upon their tasks. Danika cradling Jacob's head in her lap, feeling a little bit miserable about herself as she watched the horizon for the approaching storm.

A small black paw shook her shoulder, accompanied with the high pitched voice of her polecat tech Nanvel, snapping her out of her apparent reverie, "Mam, Snow burrow is completed. Storm's getting close. We need to move Jacob inside now."

Danika looked up at the smiling polecat, simply nodding in response to what she'd said. Nanvel raised an eyebrow, making the young wolfess realise she wasn't reacting to the news.

"Sevrán, get Jacob inside now! Make him comfortable. Siouxsie, see what you can do for him.

Everyone else, inside." She glanced back at the horizon, the roiling wall that was the storm front was rapidly rushing across the plain towards them, the sight giving speed to her own paws as she dived into the dim hole, quickly followed by the small polecat. She looked back to see Nanvel shoving her backpack into the mouth of the burrow, blocking the entrance and cleverly preventing any snow from entering. The burrow was, for something hastily built, just on the comfortable size for the squad, with a small trench cut out of the back floor and a small shelf with an impromptu chimney drilled to the surface. Someone, assumed to be Nanvel, had placed one of the squad's portable stoves on the shelf and had lit it. The floor of the burrow had been covered with the thermal groundsheets issued to all troops on this world, giving them somewhere comfortable to sit or lie, and protecting them from freezing. Jacob lay on an ad-hoc cot constructed from the squad's backpacks, keeping him even further from the floor. Siouxsie was reading the data feed on the mouse's left sleeve, looking concerned. Danika glanced over her squad; several of them were taking the opportunity to get some rest, as she crawled over to the vixen tending Jacob.

"What's wrong?" inquired the young wolfess, in a whisper. Siouxsie turned her head, and quietly replied.

"Looks like Snowpaw messed up his suit's environmental. Suit's feed has records of him turning it up, registered an overheating response... he started to sweat, vitals spiked at this suggesting he panicked a bit, and overcompensated for the heat in his suit, which given the outside temperatures, caused him to go into a thermal shock... and from his present symptoms develop mild to moderate hypothermia. I've corrected them to be slightly above recommended levels to keep him warm, and I think we've got him stabilised. Feed's telling me he's not getting any worse... Personally, I'd feel better if he regained consciousness, since he is our medic."

"Yeah, I think all of us would be more relaxed if he regained consciousness... Firetail, I'll watch him, you try and get some rest..." Danika yawned before she could finish her sentence.

"Mam, you haven't slept in the last day, you need some rack time yourself." The vixen poked at the sleeping otter girl not far from them with her foot, waking her and the bat beside her. "You two, it's your turn for watch. Keep an eye on our patient here, and wake us if the storm breaks."

Ariel and Quint snapped quick salutes and shuffled over to Jacob's side, watching as the vixen and wolfess slumped into the now unoccupied warm spots.

"Soooo... Ottahgirl. Got yourself a deck of cards?"

After a while, the squad roused itself and looked around its present quarters. Everyone feeling a bit brighter for the sleep, Mac checking his watch to see how much time had passed. The storm could be heard raging above them, the wind tearing past the entrance to their small but warm burrow.

Quint had moved to the tunnel and was looking up it, while Ariel was smiling to herself.

Seeing her CO awake, she scrambled over to her and snapped off a ragged salute.

"Mam, Jacob woke about an hour ago, we got him to take some soup despite his protests. He wishes to speak with you, Mam."

"Thank you, Wavedancer. I'll see what he wants now," she turned to the small yellow catgirl, "Ash, what's your Spookware² tellin' you about our situation?"

Asheria, with her visor pulled down, tapped away on her vambrace. The scowl on her snout suggesting that her data feeds were not telling her good news.

"Storm's at full force and will probably stay like that for at least a day, Dani. Good news, we're not in it. Bad news, all that turbulence and flying ice is playing merry hell with my sat-links and our Comms so we're cut off and more importantly... I'm not getting my full data!!"

Dani just smiled at her friend, she knew Asheria liked to have all the facts before making a recommendation, and could get quite upset if she felt something was being held from her. The wolfess turned and headed over to where Jacob lay, his eyes open staring at the ceiling of the burrow.

"Hey there, soldier. How you feelin'?"

"Like I went through a spin cycle in my uniform..." He turned to face her, shivering visibly. The young mouse smiled at his twitching body, "Believe it or not, that's a good sign."

The young wolfess cocked her ears in enquiry, waiting for her mouse medic to explain himself.

"Shivering means I've only got a mild case, if I wasn't shivering... means I'd need medevac as soon as possible... talking of which, can we call for medevac?"

"Storm's screwing up Comms, so no. Might be stuck down here for at least a day, possibly two. Luckily... we have enough MREs to see us through this." She smiled to try and lighten the mood.

"You want some more soup?"

Jacob made a disgusted face, and then nodded, "Yeah, need to eat. Need to warm the core... despite the soup tasting like... like... something bad!"

She pointed to the soup, and Jason ladled a generous portion into the mess-tin, before passing it over. Carefully Danika helped as Jacob choked down the foul smelling soup, watching the others collect their share of nourishment before eating it with various degrees of dislike. Jason stared bewildered as Nanvel gleefully wired into the soup, before taking another serving of it. Mac handed Danika her share of the bounty, and drank his with only a slight waver in his impassive mask.

Quint stared up the tunnel, his large ears twitching, "Mam! I think the storm's eye is about to pass over us. The air sounds less tortured and glassy."

She turned to Ash, who was already fiddling with her sensor gear... "Confirmed Dani, we'll have a clear signal for approximately... 3 minutes."

"Ash, get up there and bounce a message, you've got the best gear for it."

The young feline bounded up the tunnel, followed by Quint, carefully pushing the impromptu backpack door out to clear the entrance and they crawled out.

"This is Specialist Asheria Sandfur of the 37th Triskellian Rangers. We are trapped by an ice storm at coordinates 665N-982E. We have a trooper in need of medical assistance. Squad is hunkered in a snow burrow. Limited Comms window."

Her comm-unit crackled as a response came back, "This is Glacier Actual. Message received. Storm is grounding all birds. Nightingale³ is being prepped to evac."

"Message received, Actual... meep!!" Asheria let out an anguished squeal as the wind slammed into her, knocking her off her feet, her visor suddenly covered in snow... something grabbed her by the ankle and dragged her, she kicked out in fear, only to feel her other ankle get snatched too. She screamed as she was pulled into a dark hole. Panic-stricken, she clawed the snow away from her visor, to see the blurred image of Quint crouched over her.

"Miss? You okay? Got you back into the burrow."

Ash slowly blinked for a few moments, "Thank you." Before reaching back, and replacing the backpack sealing the storm out, returning to their awaiting unit.

"Medevac incoming, Dani. No ETA though."

A light clicking sound began after Asheria had made her report.

"Great... so all we have to do is wait and hope they... find... us..," Danika looked towards the sound, Nanvel was sitting near the stove, clicking her thumbclaws together, quietly muttering to herself, her eyes darting from side to side.

Danika started to ask what she was doing, Mac holding his paw up to make her shush. He leaned in and whispered so not to distract the little polecat.

"She's running scenarios of how long it'll take them to reach us. Give her a few minutes to work."

The squad sat and watched the thinking tech, who seemed oblivious to the attention she was receiving. Small snatches of her thinking process could be heard.

"... average speed of nightingale in extreme storm is 5 mph... clear ground... head straight to coords... barring breakdown... cautious driver... 10 hours wait-time... variables on time... good, reckless driver... pushing upper safe speeds... straight course... drops time to 3hours 20ish... add in prep time for search squad and vehicle... 4 hours wait..." She turned to see her squadmates looking at her, "Umm... we have between four and ten hours to wait depending on variables... that's my best guess, Mam."

The young wolfess sighed, "Any suggestions on how to signal them when they're close..."

In Camp Glacier's motorpool, several Feryns busied themselves around an armoured Snowcat, a large red cross painted on its sides and rear. A squad of troopers were assembling beside the rear cab, as a small Scottish Fold stood nearby, holding a dataslate while trying to get the attention of one of the officers. He coughed loudly to attract attention from the assembling feryns.

The medical officer glanced over and nodded, before approaching him, looking at his name.

"Supply Sergeant W. Madreo, how may I help you?" she queried.

Sergeant Madreo looked over the frames of his glasses, and held out the dataslate to the young lioness, "I need someone to sign the requisition forms for the Snowcat and the equipment you're loading onto it. You know, in case it goes missing and Logistics asked where it went."

Taking the dataslate, she read through the list, double checking it as it was loaded before signing it, "Senior Corporal D. Katri." She motioned to return it to Sgt Madreo.

"Thumbprint, pawprint and retinal scan too, Corporal. Extra security measures."

Dhariya had a small sigh, as she completed the security checks before returning it to the quartermaster "Is everything in order now?"

Wessy quickly checked the dataslate, then smiled and nodded. "Everything is confirmed, and tagged. Go get our soldiers back, Corporal."

"EVERYONE MOUNT UP!! WE ARE LEAVING!" called out Dhariya, as she climbed into the front cab of the Nightingale, the rescue squad and remaining medical personnel scrambling into their respective stations, as the driver revved the engine to warm it and the cabins up.

The Snowcat trundled forward as the outer doors opened, the storm blasting its freezing white fury into the warm interior as the vehicle exited. Once clear, the doors slammed shut with an audible clang, sealing out Winter's anger.

"Visibility sucks royal arse, Mam. I think I can see maybe 15 feet ahead of us, but that ain't a problem, Mam. The problem is all this flying ice, it's kicking up a stinker of a static charge so it's fu..." the rabbit looked at Dhariya, "... screwing up long range comms, Mam, guessing we'll need to be within... one or two hundred metres for them to hear our pings."

"Understood. How fast are we going? The tracks seem to be chewing up the snow something fierce."

"Safe maximum speed for the weather conditions, Mam." The rabbit fem had her eyes locked on the ground ahead of the sprinting Snowcat.

Dhariya glanced at the speedometer, the digital reading clearly showing they were hurtling along at 20mph, a tad faster than the recommended maximum safe speed for the conditions. She sat back in her seat and double checked her safety harness, glancing worriedly at her driver.

"You do know how to drive on snow and ice, right?"

"Yes Mam! Grew up on New Alaska... It's sand I'm not so good on," came the reply.

"Oh... Good."

Asheria sat distracted, fiddling with her Spookware as the rest of the squad dozed in her burrow. The fact the storm raging outside had effectively cut her off from her beloved data-streams was vexing her to a point she couldn't sleep. Periodically, she glared up the tunnel at the sound of the wind tearing past the entrance to the little haven, making a disgusted face and the occasional rude gesture at it.

She rubbed her face with her paws, fending off a touch of weariness. Going by the chrono of her gear, she'd sent the message to Actual some 5 hours ago... and was getting pensive.

The young fem looked over the sleeping squad, only to see Jacob in his makeshift cot watching her. "You should get shome shleep, missh. Ishn't good for you to force yourshelf to remain awake like that."

A faint smile played over her lips, "I know... but don't want to miss any pings on comms. You understand that, don't you?"

Jacob smiled and chuckled a little, causing him to cough somewhat. "I undershtand, Miss Shandfur. I'm the shame with my patientsh, like to know all I can about their ailsh before ... what ish that?"

"What is what?" queried Ash, just as she heard it herself.

A quiet little beep pulsed through the burrow, causing Asheria to look down at her electronics and communications gear. She blinked twice before snatching up her helmet, and sliding down the augmented reality visor. Her left paw tapping on her vambrace as she identified the signal.

"Feryn medevac transponder... 70 metres and closing fast... CLOSING!!??"

Reflexively she kicked out; hitting Sevrin in the ribs and causing him to sit bolt upright, screaming obscenities at whatever woke him. Waking the rest of the squad in the process.

"DANI!! Medevac!! Closing!! Going to run us over!!!!" blurted out the young cat. Danika shook her head to clear the last of the sleep still clinging to her, as both Siouxsie and Nanvel responded to her outcry. Nanvel rolled past her CO and grabbed her flare gun, shoving her arm up the snow hole's chimney. Checking briefly to see her aim was clear, the polecat squeezed the trigger, sending the incandescent charge up and out. As she was doing this, Siouxsie grabbed her rifle and scrambled up the burrow's entry tunnel, punching the backpack out of the opening and shoved the barrel of her weapon outside. Flicking to the underslung weapon, she squeezed the trigger gently, sending a 60 foot jet of burning napalm blazing into the storm. Lighting up the area in front of the approaching Snowcat...

Dhariya let out a small squeal of panic as the blizzard in front of her burst into flames, her driver reflexively stamping hard on the brakes to avoid driving headlong into the sudden firestorm. The young lioness looked at her rabbit companion, as she gesticulated out of the Snowcat's windscreen. "What the hell was that!!?" spat the bunny girl. Dhariya just shrugged in response, as she cross-referenced her map.

"While we've stopped... going by this, we should be within... 25-30 metres of their position." She stopped, as a thought leapt unbidden into her mind, the sky above them lighting up into a malevolent red glow.

"We nearly ran them over... WE NEARLY RAN THEM OVER!" shouted a distressed Dhariya at her driver. The rabbit's ears were down as she was admonished. In a tiny voice, "Sorry mam..."

Snatching up the radio, the young lioness barked into it.

"This is Nightingale Nine-two to missing squad. Senior Corporal Dhariya Katri in command. Do you read?"

A tense minute passed as the radio gurgled static. "This is Nightingale Nine-two to missing squad. Senior Corporal Dhariya Katri in command. Do you read? Over?"

The radio sprang to life "This is Lieutenant Danika Moondancer of squad Delta-12, we read you. Guess you got our signal, Corporal Katri. Over."

"Signal?... That was you!!? The snow exploded into flame!! What did you do!!?"

A soft Scottish voice replied, "Used my underslung incinerator rifle as a signalling device... in our defense, your driver wasn't giving us much time to warn you."

"Sorry about that, that was one of my operators. We have one sick soldier, has mild hypothermia. He is conscious. Over."

"Understood. Approaching on foot with stretcher team..." Dhariya looking at the burning trail leading back to the burrow entrance, "... thank you for marking the way. Over and out."

The next 15 minutes were filled with packing up gear and impromptu medical checks on Delta-12, as Jacob was safely sequestered within the Snowcat's Valkyrie⁴ unit followed by Delta-12 climbing into the heated rear of the Snowcat for the long ride back to base.

Three days pass.

Gau Ashook watched the night skies above Outpost 34, smiling at the light show above him. A meteor shower played across the blackness, the rocks bursting into brilliant trails of light as they sheared into the atmosphere. As he watched, a squadmate joined him, offering a welcome cup of hot coffee. The bearded lizard sipped at the hot bounty, marvelling at nature's spectacle... A series of thunderous claps ripped the quiet apart as three meteorites screeched overhead, before quietly impacting behind an ice shelf three miles outside the outpost.

Gau flicked his mic on, "Glacier Actual, this is Outpost 34, Sergeant Gau Ashook reporting. We just had three meteorites strike ground not far from us. Private Kusco and myself are going to take a skidoo out to check on them. Over."

"Understood Sergeant. Report all findings to us. Actual out."

Elbowing the squaddie next to him, Gau thumbed in the direction of the meteorite strikes.

"Let's go see what survived."

The skidoo buzzed as it carried its two riders towards the impact zone, its engine complaining slightly at the climb up the slope of the ice shelf. The warmth from it, stopping the soldiers from shivering.

Gau throttled back, stopping below the lip of the slope. Disembarking, Kusco and Gau crept up to the edge and peered over. The area below was filled with lights...

Sergeant Ashook raised his binoculars to get a better look, when he heard the snow beside him crunch. He turned to see that Kusco had stood up, and was pointing down at the lit area.

Gau grabbed at the private's leg and glanced up as he heard the young okapi say, "Sarge, there's movement down the..."

A retort of something large calibre punctured the air, Gau's visor suddenly darkening as Kusco's head exploded in a shower of bone fragments and blood, his lifeless body toppling backwards from the impact.

The sergeant rolled away from his former squadmate's body, frantically wiping at his visor in a slight panic.

"Glacier Actual! Glacier Actual!! We are under fire by unknown forces. Kusco's dead! Come in, Actual!!"

His only reply was the sibilant hiss of static and a rhythmic crunching of snow as something large strode up toward his position, its immense form blurred by the smeared blood, its shadow reaching out for him as he cowered amongst the ice.

Raising his visor, he gazed up at what towered over him...

"Oh shit."

End of Chapter One