

A Visit to the Islands
by Christian O'Kane & Stealthcat

"Hello, can I help you?" A woman's soft voice asked over the phone.

"Yes, this is Doctor Lisa Sanchez. I was given this number by a friend in the Pentagon. They said I could get some help. Some super help."

"One moment please," the woman's voice answered.

"Voice identified. Dr. Lisa Sanchez. Graduated from Stony Brook university with degrees in genetics and paleontology. Presently owner and director of the ABERA foundation. Present place of residence Bangor Maine."

"Genetics and paleontology. Very interesting combination."

"Indeed!"

"Perhaps we can help you," the voice on the phone answered. "What is your problem. Do not be afraid as this line is secure."

"I wish to speak with Misha."

"These people have excellent security! We are having great difficulty breaking through into their servers."

"Do not press too hard. After all they are friends. At least for the moment."

"Agreed."

"This is Misha, how can I help you?" Misha said trying to ignore the conversation going on in his head between the nanites.

"This is Doctor Sanchez of the ABERA foundation. We have a situation that needs your special skills. Colonel Haslett recommended you."

"Ah yes! The colonel mentioned that there were people who might need my help," Misha answered.

"I do not wish to discuss the situation this way," the woman explained. "No matter how secure the line may be."

"I understand," Misha answered. "We'll leave for Bangor immediately."

"Thank you!" Came the response and then the connection dropped.

"Call ended," flashed onto Misha's eyesight for a moment.

"Another call coming in," the nanites inside his body announced. *It's Colonel Haslett."*

"Put him through right away," the fox hero thought to the nanites.

"Misha, is this line secure?" A voice in his head said.

"Of course it is," Misha answered. "Even the NSA cannot break the codes used. Not for lack of trying."

"Good. This is Colonel Haslett speaking," the voice said. "You have been contacted by Sanchez yet?"

"Yes. I was just talking to her," the superhero answered.

"Good. I am not sure how much she told you but I am downloading all the information we have on the place. Also I'm adding a few orders for you as well."

An hour long flight from Rhode Island to Bangor and then an hour slowly moving through the cobblestone streets of the old part of the city had brought them to this small building. A four story brownstone that in previous decades had been an apartment building. In the recent past it had been carefully restored. Attached to the wall by the door was a small, brass sign that read 'ABERA Foundation'. At first glance it was a rather plain looking building but Misha quickly spotted several surveillance cameras hidden among the decorations along the roof line.

Brightleaf, Misha, staff sergeant on detached duty stood a little over five foot two inches high. At one time he had been a white, male human with brown hair. But that was in the past. Now he was still human like with two arms and two legs but now his legs had the extra joint called digitgrade and ending in paws instead of human feet. His body was covered with the red, black and white marked fur of a fox. This matched the long bushy tail and his vulpine head. He more resembled a figure from a Disney movie than a human being. He was dressed in the camouflaged fatigues of an army soldier. Sprouting from his back was a pair of large, eagle-like wings. At the moment they were colored all black and dark green.

Walking beside the anthropomorphic fox was another figure just as unusual. This one was also part human and part animal but instead of a fox this person had the sleek, spotted form of a cheetah. The tee shirt and jeans he was wearing did nothing to hide the slim and well muscled body he had. When he walked it was with all the grace and beauty of a wild feline.

Both had been normal people until they made met Them. Officially they had no name although the Dept of Defense classified them as Entity 447. They were not one creature but a host of molecule size machines called nanites. They were far from the simple machines so often depicted in movies and comic books. For one thing these were sentient and free willed. They could also repair, modify and rebuild any living form.

A short walk up the brick steps brought them to the only door to the building. It looked to be wooden but he noticed that it was actually made of polycarbonate and was probably capable of withstanding machine gun fire. He pushed the small button attached to the door frame and after a moment there was a loud buzz and the door opened.

Stealth pushed the door all the way open and both stepped inside. They found that the entire first floor of the building had been opened up creating a large room. It was filled with a dozen desks, several tables and at the far back what looked like a full kitchen complete with a dining table. Tucked against a side wall was a long flight of stairs made of a highly polished wood that led upward to the second floor. Directly in front of them about ten feet from the door they had entered was a large desk. Seated behind the desk was a young woman with long blonde hair who was smiling at them.

"May I help you?" The woman asked calmly as if seeing two people who are a fox and a cheetah is normal. But then considering her company's work it might be.

"Misha and Stealth here to see Lisa Sanchez," Misha said calmly.

The nameplate on the desk announced the woman to be Amanda Fitzsimmons. She stood up and smiled. Then Amanda waved a hand towards the stairs behind her. "Follow me please!"

The office of the head of ABERA was large occupying a good portion of the second floor of the building. An elegant couch and chairs were clustered in one corner around a large television. But what drew their attention was seated behind a large, beautiful oak desk.

Lisa Sanchez was a short, petite woman with her black hair in curls. Her face smiled and showed real warmth but her eyes darted about and taking in every detail. With the practiced ease of a skilled predator.

"Thank you for responding so quickly," she said smiling.

"Always glad to help those who need our help," Misha answered. He shifted a little to make more room for his tail. "How can I help you? The colonel said it was important."

"Oh it is! Lives are at stake," the woman answered. "At least I think there are. For several years we have been doing advanced research in the field of genetics, specifically trying to recover lost DNA sequences."

"Translation: they are trying to recreate extinct species."

"We recently had our breeding pair of passenger pigeons lay their first clutch of eggs," she said with a broad smile. "Very exciting."

"Indeed! they have another 175 other species still in the works including the giant sloth and woolly mammoth."

"And the sabertooth cat Smilodon!"

"Indeed! They already have an agreement with the Bronx Zoo in NY for the first mammoth breeding pair."

"We must do our next subject as a sabertooth! That would be a powerful super. Strong, fierce! ROAR!"

"I'm sure it is!" Stealth answered, trying to ignore the antics of the nanites going on in his mind. "But somehow I do not think you want us to guard some pigeons."

She shook her head vigorously. "Oh no. Our own security here is quite tight. We have several facilities scattered around the country including on Hart Island off of the Maine coast. The Hart Island facility is our main unit for work on the longer extinct species."

"Does she mean dinosaurs?"

"Do you mean dinosaurs?" Stealth asked repeating the nanites question.

Lisa winced visibly. "Please don't use the D word too loudly. We are doing genetic research on those animals but if word of it leaked out things could turn into a media frenzy. And that is something we do not want."

Misha nodded in agreement. "I can understand that. I've never been a big fan of the media and the hype and bluster they always create."

"Have you had any success?" Stealth asked.

"Some. We have managed to recreate some of the smaller species. So no T-rex. Yet," Lisa said and shook her head. "Two days ago we lost all contact with the Hart island facility. There were a few garbled transmissions and some very strange emails. Then nothing. The automated defenses activated and the facility is transmitting a constant alarm and warning to keep away. We tried sending in a team of our own but the defenses fired on them too."

"So the people in the base set it to keep everyone away?" Stealth asked. "Why?"

The woman shrugged. "I don't know. We of course have a security code to turn off the defenses but they aren't being accepted!"

"Confirmed. The facilities systems are not responding at all. Not even getting a carrier signal."

"I see why. The receivers were shut down completely. That's why they were unable to turn off the defenses. They were talking but no one was listening."

"Also the warning being sent is definitely a recording and one done in haste."

The fox slowly nodded his head. "We'll need access to some of your systems."

"So you can stop trying to hack into our servers?" Lisa said calmly.

"Hacking is such a harsh and imprecise word."

The cheetah laid his ears back and his tail switched back and forth. "I'm sorry about that but the people we work with can be a little over enthusiastic on obtaining data."

"She has level 12 cybernetic implants as well as extensive neural implants. No wonder we could not get past their security. She IS the final firewall. Fascinating. Opening direct communication with her."

"Agreed but do not reveal our true nature to her."

"What if she already knows?"

"Deny everything and try to act flesh and blood."

"How does a person act flesh and blood?"

"Offer her an exchange of information," Misha thought silently to the nanites cutting off that train of thought.

"Already have!"

"Cool! We never thought to use THAT program in that manner."

"AH! These new protocols will increase their security at least 43%."

"This is not Ebay," Misha commented sarcastically. "Can we get back to the job at hand."

"Can we see a map of the place?" Stealth asked. "And the defenses we'll have to sneak past."

A map popped up in the vision of both supers showing a cluster of five small, heavily forested islands.

"The islands are small but well defended," came Lisa's voice in their mind. The woman's mouth had not moved and she had not made a sound.

The cheetah snarled revealing a set of sharp teeth. "It's not bad enough I have the others talking in my head but now you are too?" Stealth commented sarcastically.

"It's better this way," the woman explained. "Less chance of someone overhearing us."

"True," Misha answered.

"The facility itself is not one building but a dozen scattered across several islands. The main building is located here," and that point a dot on the map started flashing. "There was a helipad just to the north 120 meters away but recent satellite photos show it wrecked completely. There is a small pier and boat landing on the east side but the beaches are mostly soft sand or marshy ground."

"What about defenses?" Stealth asked.

"Long range phased array radar takes care of the air and surface threats. And a small sonar array on the ocean floor detects any incoming surface or subsurface threats. For weapons there are three rapier surface to air missile launchers, and three harpoon anti-ship launchers spaced around the islands." Six points on the map started flashing. "Also there are several automated antiaircraft gun emplacements scattered about. On the islands themselves we have a force of forty security robots in addition to the trained security force."

"Surface to air missiles, automated AAA guns and forty robots. That's a lot of firepower for a place just doing research," Stealth commented.

"This is not a few metal cages in a plywood shack," Lisa answered. "This is a state of the art facility doing cutting edge research. The re-sequencing chamber alone is worth over three hundred million dollars. I am not worried about the equipment or the research data those can be replaced. Although if you could recover them with a minimum of loss I would be very grateful. What I am worried about is the ninety five people working there. I want my people back safe and sound."

"We'll get them back all in one piece," Stealth said.

"The woman smiled broadly. "Good."

"This is an old military facility," Misha commented suddenly. "At least until the Cold war ended."

"Oh yes. It's the main reason the defenses are so strong," Lisa added. "It was first built in the 1940's and used up till 1998 when ABERA purchased the site. Wasn't a hard sell as we'd been doing contract work for the government there for several years."

"What was done there back then?" Stealth asked. "I'd hate to run into some leftover military project."

"It was originally a backup base for a military super team," the woman explained. "But considerable research was done there on supers in general. Attempting to understand them and create more. Later research was directed more towards genetic engineering and biological warfare. Especially countering Soviet and Chinese bio weapons. Since we took over we have orientated towards strictly peaceful projects."

"Any government projects?" The cheetah asked.

"No, none here," Lisa answered.

Misha let out a yip of laughter. "I see. And you're sure of that?" He already knew the answer from an earlier conversation with the colonel but he asked anyway. Just to see her reaction.

"We do work for the U.S. Government, some of it very highly classified but not here," the director answered. "All our secure work takes place in far more secured facilities."

"There are as you see five islands. Plum, Hart, Diamond, Carleton and Rat," she explained. "The main facilities are on the largest island, Diamond but there is also research being done on nearby Plum island and on the southernmost; Hart. Carleton has no real research being carried out on it but it does have a class four biohazard disposal facility. The smallest is Rat island. But that is really just a pile of rocks with the only runway and dock on it."

"You'll note the underground transportation. It runs from Hart to Carleton and then to Plum. there it splits off with one tunnel heading to the Main buildings on Diamond. The other tunnel runs to Rat island and the dock and airport. The transit system itself consists of small electric powered vehicles running in concrete tunnels."

The only way off or on the islands is through Rat island and the airport and docks there. Rat itself has a decontamination and inspection station. That's to keep anything nasty from getting on or off the island. That is very important with these renewed species since their immunity to modern diseases is often very low until we can immunize them sufficiently."

Misha nodded his head. "Also it was very important when research on bio-warfare was being done there."

"Oh yes. The Russians and the Chinese developed some very dangerous plagues in the 70's and research was being carried out on possible cures," Lisa added.

"Any of the diseases left?" Stealth asked, worried.

"No. The entire facility was very thoroughly cleaned and sterilized when we took control," the woman answered. "But all the deadly disease labs were sealed off as a precaution."

"And where are those?" Misha asked. "I'd prefer to not disturb those areas if I don't have to."

"One hundred meters below Diamond island. The only part of that complex left accessible is the entrance building in the complex called facility B. The one entrance shaft has been locked at the bottom and sealed with 4 meters of concrete. The three, upper doors have each been triple locked, fusion welded shut and then covered with steel plates 4 centimeters thick. A meter of concrete and several meters of earth cover the entrance building completely."

"You don't do anything by half measure," Stealth commented.

"I KNOW what diseases were worked on there," Lisa answered. "And I took no chances. But the possibility that something did remain and has resurfaced has to be considered. If at any time you start to feel ill or show any symptoms tell us immediately and if so under no circumstances do you try and leave the island."

"Understandable," Misha commented. "We will of course search for any sign of contagion."

"So you're sending us into an area where some hideous plague might have killed everyone?" Stealth asked.

She nodded. "Yes. That's correct."

"Oh."

"The chances of there being an outbreak are very small," the woman explained. "But I have already contacted the Center for Disease Control. They are paying close attention to everything involved."

Misha wagged his tail. "Good. The people at the CDC are the best."

"Can the nanites cure us if we did get infected?" Stealth asked Misha in a private channel that Lisa could not hear.

"Perhaps," the nanites answered. "It depends on the disease and its infection rate. We are consulting with Department of Defense experts on the subject now."

"Does Lisa know this?" Misha asked.

"No." There was a moment of silence. *"Well, we hope not."*

"It is very important that we confirm or disprove the presence of a plague on the islands," Misha answered privately.

"But," Lisa said out loud bringing both heroes back into the conversation with her. "If there is a plague loose on the island we will have to take appropriate actions to contain it."

"Up to and including nuking the entire place," Misha commented out loud.

Lisa winced. "Let's not get into theatrics like that. We have a wide range of options. The last of which is nuclear weapons." The woman hesitated for a moment. "We are working on a nanite based procedure but that is not ready."

"Now THAT is research we must examine," the nanites commented with a trace of excitement.

"If the main lab is on Diamond, what's on Hart island?" Misha asked.

"Mostly enclosures for animals. Some are normal species that we're using to help with recreating species and the others are species we've recreated."

"How many species?" The vulpine asked.

"Nine major species," was the woman's reply. "The enclosures are noted on the map."

"All right," Misha commented. "We'll need to beware of any animals that might have escaped."

"Do not harm any of those animals," the director stressed. "They are irreplaceable."

"That's a complication but not a big one," the fox responded. "Whatever is going on we'll get to the bottom of it."

"What's around these islands?" Stealth asked.

"Just the waters of Wokola bay," the director answered. "The closest land is Cooper's Rock island, five kilometers away. There are five islands within a fifteen kilometer mile radius. And the mainland is five kilometer to the west."

"Far enough way to be secure but close enough to still be convenient," Misha commented.

"Yes. Now for a more sensitive subject. Payment," the director said.

"A payment in information would be sufficient. There are certain areas we are interested in."

"Your work on the Smilodon for instance."

"And the nanites too."

"What makes you think we are working on the sabertooth cat?" Lisa asked.

"Everyone is interested in the Sabertooth."

The woman laughed out loud. "True."

Misha ignored the conversation and examined the island and its defenses. They'd land on the southernmost island as far from the main facilities as possible. They could approach from the south east side and land on the beach using a HALO jump. They would then make their way to the closest missile launcher and disable it. Then make their way along that road to the main building on the island. Disable the two AAA guns there and clear the helipad. That will allow them to bring in a full security team from ABERA to secure the island and evacuate any wounded. With that island secured they could take the train tunnel to the other facilities. "We'll leave tomorrow morning," he announced suddenly.

The massive four engine aircraft flew slowly along the coast line. The C130 Hercules cargo plane had taken off from the Bangor airbase a few hours before. No one had paid much notice to an air force cargo plane taking off from there. Which is what Misha and Stealth had been hoping for. The less people who noticed what was happening, the better.

In the cargo bay the fox and cheetah superhero sat side by side trying to relax while the plane approached their destination.

"Before we go Stealth," Misha said softly. "I need to inform you of a few things. You've noticed how well defended this place is?"

"I can't miss that fact. Why all the missile launchers, robots and mines?" The cheetah asked.

"Sanchez was not lying when she said there was some very deadly bio-warfare work done here in the past," Misha whispered. "Colonel Haslett had the files downloaded to me earlier. Some very scary stuff. Almost as bad as the stuff the Russians developed."

"But all that was removed?" Stealth asked. "Or was it?"

"It's supposed to have been removed and the whole complex sanitized," the fox responded. "But the pentagon is going over all those records very carefully."

"Have they found anything?"

"No," Misha said with a shake of the head. "But we all find it very strange how heavily defended the island is. And ABERA IS heavily involved in bio-warfare research. They were instrumental in stopping that plague that the Malta group released in Ecuador five years ago."

"And they're doing it here?" The feline asked slowly.

"They aren't supposed to be," he answered. "That's being done at another location. Somewhere less conspicuous and more heavily defended."

"There is something more heavily defended than that?" The feline pointed out the window to the island far off in the distance.

"The place has a permanent superhero team on staff," Misha responded. "A large team."

"Now that impresses me," Stealth said. "Could ABERA be doing illegal research on the island?"

"That is something we need to watch for. We are here to find out exactly what happened even if that means showing that ABERA was doing something illegal. I also want you to know that there really is at least one nuke aimed at the islands. If this mission goes bad they'll blast everything and blame the whole thing on the Council or some super villain."

"That's a cheerful thought," Stealth said sarcastically.

"True, but we can't let this get off the islands. Whatever it is must be contained."

The cheetah slowly nodded his head. "I can understand that but I hope they don't get trigger happy."

"Never fear Stealth. I trust Haslett," Misha replied. "He won't order the strike unless he has to and not one moment before."

Stealth had a sudden epiphany. "You've done this before!"

Misha slowly nodded his head. "Yup. Before I met the nanites. This isn't the first time we've had a problem that could mean sanitizing someplace."

"Sanitizing meaning nuking?" The feline asked.

"Yes but sanitizing sounds cleaner. Thankfully we managed to clean that mess up without too much fallout," Misha said in a soft voice.

The feline looked straight at his companion. His eyes wide with surprise. "Are you telling me you used a real nuke on someone?"

"A Fifth Column base attempting to create a plague worse than the Black death," the ranger answered calmly. "One underground blast destroyed the complex and the people working there while the radiation killed off any surviving diseases."

"You scare me sometimes," Stealth said.

"I scare myself sometimes," the vulpine ranger answered. "But dealing with nukes is part of the job. One we don't like to discuss publically."

A crewman wearing a full flight suit and helmet came over to the two furry superheroes. "We're forty miles out sir," he said.

"All right," Misha responded. "We're ready."

The man walked to the rear of the plane and worked a control set on one wall. Slowly the massive rear gate began to lower. The large interior of the plane was suddenly filled with a blowing wind and a loud roaring noise.

"Are you sure this is a good plan?" Stealth shouted trying to be heard over the roar of the plane's engines. "Shouldn't we sneak in low and fast, just above the water?"

"Stealth, I've done hundreds of these High Altitude Low Opening jumps," Misha explained. "I jumped into New York city this way and under fire from the Rikti. This WILL work. Mind you this is the first time I'll be doing it without a parachute."

Stealth looked out over the ramp. He could see the ocean a long way down. He also could see a tiny speck of brown and green that must have been the island.

"Are you ready?" Misha asked in a serious tone.

"Yes, I think," the feline answered.

"Stealth, this is deadly business. Yes or no?"

The feline superhero did not answer but simply stared out of the airplane.

"Please don't tell me you're afraid of heights," Misha said calmly.

"I am afraid of heights," Stealth shot back.

The fox super shook his head. "I asked you not to tell me that."

"This is not the Three Stooges," Stealth snarled. "I hate heights."

"You could have mentioned this before now," the fox morph said harshly. "This is safe! I've done it hundreds of times. It's simple really. You just drop from the airplane without opening your parachute until you get within 500 feet of the ground."

"Misha, we don't have any parachutes," Stealth pointed out.

"You can fly remember? Open your wings and slow your decent using your built in flight modules."

The feline just looked at him and didn't answer.

"Can you do this?" Misha asked in a serious tone.

The cheetah morph nodded slowly.

Misha stepped to the edge of the gate. Beneath him, thousands of feet below was a small green/brown speck. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and stepped out into space.

"20,000 feet and dropping."

Misha's hearing was filled with the loud roaring of the wind blasting past him and he was buffeted about.

"Search radar undoubtedly spotted the plane but there is no fire control radar. Neither of you have been spotted yet."

"Yet," came Stealth's answer.

He opened his eyes for a moment and looked for the island to be sure he was on course. Then he looked up and was relieved to see his friend above him and off to his left.

The fox super tucked his arms, legs and wings tight against his body and he felt himself accelerate downward.

"18,000 feet and your speed has stabilized at 210mph. Terminal velocity."

Misha never liked these HALO jumps no matter how many times he had done them. Coming in low and fast a few feet over the water had been an option but modern radar can easily pick up such low and fast moving objects. And worse being so close to the ground put your transport within range of every machine gun, rocket launcher and assault rifle around. But jumping so high up meant few people could see or hear the plane as it went past. And being so high up put the slow moving vulnerable transport out of range of all but a small number of AA weapons.

"16,000 feet."

"How are you doing Stealth?" Misha asked over the communication channel.

"How did I let you talk me into this?" Came the answer.

"Because I'm the expert in this that's why," the ex-ranger answered.

"15,000 feet."

"Have you ever lost people doing this?" Stealth asked.

"Occasionally," Misha answered.

"OCCASIONALLY? I thought this was safe?"

"14,000 feet."

"It is relatively safe," Misha explained. He looked down and saw that the island was off to his left. The fox adjusted his decent back towards the island which was still a small brown spot far below.

"Relatively safe? Why can't you just admit it's dangerous!" The feline asked.

"Will it make you happy if I do? Stealth, my friend. This is the best way in. Unless you want to swim the four miles underwater."

"Swimming sounds like fun!"

"12,000 feet. On course and on flight profile."

"Swimming would take too long," Misha responded. "And we are running against the clock. We need to get this contained fast and I don't feel like tangling with the minefields and homing torpedoes."

"You'd rather deal with radar, missiles and cannons?" Stealth countered.

"Yes," Misha answered flatly. "I joined the Rangers not the Seals."

"You're being swept by radar," the nanites reported.

"Have we been spotted?" Stealth queried. The feline looked about all he saw was Misha slightly below and to the right. It was not the things he could see that worried him. It was what else might be out there that they did not know about.

"No. It was a sweep of search radar. Probability of your being detected is only 3% at this altitude. That will of course change as you close on the LZ."

"What do I do if they shoot a missile at me?" Stealth asked.

"Shoot it down. You have your Gatling gun. Use it," Misha explained.

"Why always the violent path? We can easily jam any radar guided missiles or fire control radar."

"Heat seeking missiles might be a little harder but your IR suppression systems should make you invisible to them except at very close range."

"That's good to know!" Stealth joked.

"4,000 feet. We're picking up more radar activity."

"They undoubtedly picked up the transport plane and guessed what we're up to," Misha said.

"But who are they?" Stealth asked.

"Most likely it is the defenses are being run by the facility computers. They are not sentient but their programming is very advanced."

"True but someone has to have set those defenses on and then shut off the receivers," the feline added. "That was not an accident."

"Agreed, but that information is unavailable at the time."

"That is what we are here for," Misha commented. "To find out what happened and who is involved."

"We're picking up fire control radar. You've been spotted."

"VAMPIRE!VAMPIRE! We have confirmed, hostile missile launch. 4 missiles are inbound on a bearing of 046 degrees."

Misha turned and looked in that direction and saw four little balls of fire moving steadily up towards them. "I see them!" He reached around and pulled out his bow and nocked an arrow. "Stealth do you see them?"

"Yeah. I do. Will they hit?"

Misha intently watched the balls of fire as they raced upward. The first two seemed to be aimed off to his left.

"First two will miss. Their trajectories are wrong."

He shifted his gaze to the other two missiles which were slightly behind the other two. One seemed to be aimed off to his right but the other was headed straight towards them. "Number three is going to pass off to our right but number 4 is headed right at us."

"Number 4 missile has acquired an IR lock! SHOOT IT DOWN!"

There was a loud roar and the sky above Misha lit up as a stream of tracers raced past the fox. The tracers met one of the rising balls of fire and there was a bright flash and loud explosion.

"Nice shot Stealth!" Misha complimented.

"Thanks!"

"We need to get down. they're bound to fire more at us," the fox super said in a matter of fact tone. He activated the small gravatic modules and increased his speed. The wind roaring in his ears even louder than before.

"They have lost lock with the fire control radar but they are trying to reacquire."

"We are jamming."

The two heroes rocketed downward as an unseen war raged around them, one side trying to hide them and the other trying to find and kill them.

"You are both below the minimum altitude for SAM's. So you only have to worry about is anti-aircraft artillery."

"Only?" Stealth asked.

"There aren't any on this part of the island," Misha explained. "That's one reason I chose it."

"500 feet."

With a thought Misha activated the miniature gravatic modules located in his torso. Just a small amount at first and his speed slowed only slightly.

"410 feet, speed 190mph."

He increased the power even more and he slowed down a lot more.

"I don't see any ground fire," Stealth commented nervously.

"We're too small a target and moving too fast," Misha explained.

"295 feet. 160mph."

He pushed the module to half power and his decent slowed considerably.

"112 feet. Speed 80mph."

He threw the module to full power and his entire body jolted like it had been hit by a truck. His wings snapped open and he looked down to see the island rushing up at him like an attacking missile. He swerved to miss several trees and rocks and aimed for the soft, sandy beach. He was barely moving when his two paws lightly touched the sand. He folded his wings and dropped to the sand. In moments his bow was out and an arrow nocked.

"Scanning," came the words of the nanites. "There are many viruses and other microorganisms present but nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing that even remotely resembles the items on the Colonel's watch list. Thankfully."

Off to his right he heard a loud scream followed by an ominous thump. Then after a moment there was a lot of loud cursing and swearing.

"STEALTH! Shut up before you attract every security bot on the island," he ordered through the radio connection they both shared.

"Both are alive and in good shape. Stealth has a broken leg but we are healing that."

"That was exhilarating! No wonder skydiving is such a popular sport."

"It's a lot more exciting when people are shooting at you," Misha commented. "Stealth. Are you all right?"

"That really sucked. Next time we swim," he snarled. "Sharks or no sharks."

Stealth stood up and flexed his right leg a few times. "As good as new." The feline looked at the trees and sandy beach. "No reception committee? After those missiles I was sure they'd be waiting for us down here."

"Not yet," Misha spoke. "But let's not stay here and wait for one."

A quick sprint across the sand brought them to the cover of the woods. A moment later there came a humming noise that slowly grew louder.

"We have company!" Stealth said softly.

Moving slowly an odd, green object floated down the beach. It was still over forty meters away but was getting closer.

"A security robot sent to see what dropped onto the island," Stealth added. "Do we take it out?"

"No," Misha responded. He motioned to a large pile of brush nearby. "The longer we stay hidden the better."

"They know we're here," the feline countered. "They tried to kill us with missiles."

Misha knelt down among a group of bushes. "They know something is here but not what. The less the enemy knows the better."

"Who are they?" Stealth asked. This time he used a highly encrypted communication channel that left the silence of the woods unbroken.

"I don't know," Misha responded in the same silent manner. "But we will find out."

The noise grew steadily louder as the object got closer moving at an almost leisurely pace. Some bushes rattled and the robot came into view. It was a tall cylinder about a meter high and half a meter wide. It floated about a half meter off the ground. The top of the robot spun slowly about scanning the surrounding area. Misha noticed several dark spots on that part that were probably camera lenses, weak points that he could attack if need be.

""It's a security robot," the feline asked.

"The robot is probably not programmed to kill any intruders, just stun and capture them," Misha explained.

"It's a fairly standard mark 4 Amerlsk brand robot," the nanites commented. "With fairly simple sensors. It should not detect you."

"And what if it does?" Stealth asked as he fingered the hilt of his swords.

"Smash it of course! We'll jam any communications."

"I like that idea!" The feline said cheerfully.

"That's only IF the robot detects us," Misha scolded. "We're trying to move undetected and with a minimum of mayhem."

"You spoilsport," Stealth said.

"What weapons does it have," Misha asked the nanites silently.

"A single 9mm machine gun with 500 rounds, a 4 shot grenade launcher carrying three CS irritant gas grenades and a smoke grenade," the nanites answered. "Also three tentacles that can grasp and deliver a minor shock and a short ranged taser. Its hull is armored to withstand only small arms fire up to 9mm."

"One good arrow should knock it out," Misha commented as he watched the robot come closer.

"They're probably meant to just scare off the occasional prowler in some warehouse," Stealth commented.

The robot slowly made its way along the beach without pausing. The sensor head on top slowly swiveled about looking for anything out of the ordinary. It was almost anticlimactic when the robot turned and made its way off down the beach. In a moment only the slight hum in the air to mark its presence. And soon that faded to the point where even Misha's sensitive ears couldn't hear it anymore.

Misha checked one last time to be sure the robot was really gone. "Let's go before more robots arrive." He started forward but Stealth did not move.

"Where do we go first?" the feline asked. "Clear the lab on the island or take out the antiaircraft? Or are we going to take a look around and see what we can find."

"That last one," Misha answered. "I want to get an idea of what's happening here before we let more people onto the island."

"We're close to the north end of the island," the feline super countered. "We can start there and work our way to the other end. On the way we'll pass the lab and the missile sites."

"Sounds like a good plan to me," was the answer.

The island ended abruptly. The ground dropped suddenly down to the sea with roots and branches hanging low into the water. It was there that they located the first of the islands permanent defenses. It was a concrete pillar about thirty feet high and covered all over by plastic and metal panels.

"What is it?" Stealth asked. The two were crouched in some brush about ten feet away.

"Sensor pillar," the nanites answered. *"Radar, infrared, ecm and radio listening devices."*

Stealth reached into a pouch and pulled out a small plastic wrapped bundle. "Five pounds of C4 should bring it down."

"No," Misha said shaking his head. "Why do you always want to blow something up. The nanites can reprogram it to send bad information so no one knows the pillar is down. Then we can sneak in a helicopter or something."

The feline nodded and tucked the explosive back into the pouch. "All right but I get to blow something up later! Blowing things up is fun!"

"True! I calculate that with enough explosives placed under the pillar we could actually get it airborne! Whoosh!" The nanites commented excitedly.

"Now that would be cool!" Stealth said happily.

"Both of you are starting to scare me," Misha examined the pillar closely for a moment before slowly and carefully approaching it. He placed a hand on one of the metal panels.

"Insertion successful and contacting the pillars server. Security is good but not overwhelming. Creating the program to produce false sensor readings now."

"We have limited network access here. The system is not allowing any input except for sensor data."

"The security is too effective," Misha commented.

"Considering that the security was meant to prevent the very thing we are trying to do this is to be expected. The bypass is in place. The only sensor information the main system is receiving is what we want it to get."

"Good. Now we have a way to bring in people or evacuate survivors," the fox said.

Stealth nodded. "Good. At least we have an escape route if things go bad. Were you little guys able to discover anything about the computer systems?"

"No, the security is strong but we did not try to force entry as it would most likely be detected coming from such a remote spot. A better entry point would be through a pc or terminal. Places where entry is to be expected."

"All right," the cheetah morph replied. "We'll get you guys into a pc once we reach one of the buildings."

It was instinct that saved Misha, Not vulpine instincts but the instincts of an army ranger honed by years of training and combat. After every few steps forward he would pause to listen and look around. A habit drilled into him so long ago that he did it automatically. Sometimes even when he was safe at home. He glanced behind him to be sure nothing was there and he saw a large black shape rushing at him.

Misha brought his bow up and snapped off an arrow before something big and heavy hit him and slammed him to the ground. He felt searing pain as his flesh was ripped open. He could hear Stealth shouting and snarling as he fought their attackers. The ranger shifted his weight and twisted his body, throwing the weight off of him.

He got a good look at the creature attacking him. It was a large, heavily muscled wolf at least twice the size of any normal wolf he had ever seen. "Dire wolves," he said over a radio frequency.

"Canis dirus," the nanites commented. *"Try not to hurt them!"*

"Don't hurt them?" Misha snarled. He could feel the blood flowing from the wounds on his arms and leg.

"Grenade!" The fox took a stun grenade off of his belt and tossed it at the wolves. There was an ear splitting bang and a bright flash. When the flash and smoke disappeared the wolves were gone. He saw the feline standing there snarling and looking all around. A sword in each hand.

"Are you all right?" Stealth asked.

"I'll live," Misha answered. He watched as his wounds started to heal quickly courtesy of the nanites that flooded his body. In moments they were completely gone not even leaving a scar. "How are you?"

"Fine, the wolves only managed a few bite wounds," Stealth responded. "They backed off pretty fast when I waved my blades about. That stun grenade helped too."

"Thankfully neither of you seriously hurt any of the wolves."

"I don't think they were really trying to kill us," Stealth said.

"What were they doing?" The nanites asked. *"Just playing a really rough game of tag?"*

"Just feeling us out," Misha commented. "Testing us."

"Which means they'll be back later,," Stealth said calmly.

"Let's not stand here and wait for them," Misha ordered. "We have a lot to do."

A small asphalt road lead out of the woods and up to a large fenced enclosure that covered almost five hundred square yards. The fence itself was of very thick metal bars and was over twenty feet high. Off to one side close to the enclosure was a large wooden box about six feet long, three feet high and two feet wide.

"What needs a fence that high?" Stealth asked.

"I don't know but I hope it's still inside," Misha answered as he slowly stepped towards the enclosure.

A strong musky smell came to him on the wind drifting from the enclosure. He peered into the fence using his normal sight. Inside he saw two massive mounds in the center. They were vaguely brownish/gray in color.

"What is that large pile?" Stealth asked. ""Maybe dino crap?"

Misha was unable to figure out what this was a pile of. He switched to IR and looked for heat signatures. The mound glowed bright red under infrared.

The mound suddenly moved and split into two separate, smaller mounds.

Both supers stepped back from the fence as two very large creatures moved slowly towards the fence.

"What are they?" Misha asked as he nocked an arrow. "They're no animal I've ever seen before. Alive or in a museum."

They were massive, larger than any bear and seemed to be the size of a truck! Thin fur covered a massive, muscled body held up by four, long limbs. Each paw had long, curved claws that were larger than Misha's head! A powerful bear like head sat atop a powerful neck.

"They're sloths!" Stealth whispered. "Giant sloths."

"*They're sloths?*" The nanites asked, as surprised as the two supers were.

"A sloth? It's the size of small truck!" Misha exclaimed.

"They're the size of a BIG truck," Stealth added.

"Confirmed. They are Eremotherium eomigrans of the infraorder Megatheria. OH! Very impressive work!"

"They have to weigh at least 4 tons and are fifteen feet long!" Stealth exclaimed as he examined the two sloths.

"No wonder the fence is so high!" Misha commented.

A massive head poked its way through the bars and looked at the two. Misha stepped forward and gently patted the large head with his hand. "At least they're not hostile."

"Contact established. Checking bodily systems. They are in good shape. Uploading data to ABERA who are checking their vital signs for any sign of trouble. The sloths are in good health and ABERA is happy about that."

Stealth gave a chirp of laughter. The cheetah morph stepped close and stroked the head of the other sloth. "They look hungry."

"I bet. They probably haven't been fed in two days," the fox stopped petting the sloth and walked over to his left. There he found the large box he had spotted earlier resting a few feet from the fence. Opening the lid he found it filled with sacks of grain.

"Here we go! Lunch for our big friends!" He said as he picked up a sack and pushed it through the bars of the fence. A moment later a second sack joined the first on the ground inside the pen.

The two sloths moved over to the sacks at their same slow pace. Their powerful claws ripped open the sacks in seconds and soon they were happily eating the grain inside.

"Those claws are impressive!" Misha said as he watched the massive animals eat. "I bet they could rip a person in half very easily. Thankfully they seem to be so mellow."

"When you're that big you don't need to be aggressive," Stealth answered. "Who'll mess with something that big?"

"Having two foot long claws helps," Misha added.

"Just seeing those claws would scare away most predators," the feline commented.

Misha gave a bark of laughter. "I'm not too happy about being so close to them either."

"Teddy Roosevelt said speak softly but carry a big stick!" Stealth commented.

"But huge claws do just as well," Misha added.

"Well the sloths are happy," the cheetah commented. "I'm glad I won't have to clean up after them."

They moved slowly along the road trying to look in all directions at once. Behind them lay the sloth enclosure. Ahead lay a narrow, winding, asphalt road that the map assured them led to building Twenty Three.

Building twenty three was a simple two story, wood frame structure painted a light blue color. There were several entrances but the main one was in the center of the south wall. A pair of small golf carts both painted bright blue were parked out front along with a dozen bicycles. Some of the cycles were parked neatly in a bicycle rack but others lay scattered on the ground as if abandoned in haste.

"I don't see any bloodstains or damage," Misha announced as he looked over one of the carts. On the passenger seat was a wool windbreaker and a pair of gloves. In the back was a single shovel that smelled strongly of manure.

"Same here," Stealth added as he looked the other cart over. "Nothing in here. Looks like it hasn't been touched in days."

Misha walked to the steps leading up to the door but did not go up. Instead he knelt and examined the ground at the foot of the stairs. "I don't see any human footprints." He touched one paw print that was as large as his hand.

"No human left that print," Stealth said looking down at the print. "It's not the prints of those wolves we met and it's way too small for our sloth friends."

"Well, it's probably something mammalian. A feline or a canine perhaps."

"Does not match any modern animals but they do bear a strong resemblance to several species of felines like the lion, mountain lion and tiger."

"Well it seems something else is loose on the island," Misha said softly.

The two supers looked at the building. All the windows were shut and the shades drawn. One of the entrance doors was partly open. Misha examined both doors and the empty space behind for several minutes without getting any closer to it. He slowly and carefully made his way up the steps placing each footfall carefully. The vulpine stopped in front of the doorway and examined all around the frame and floor looking for traps or anything nasty waiting just inside the door. "I definitely smell some sort of feline. Several as a matter of fact. But no humans. Not in a few days."

Misha slowly pushed the door open and stepped carefully inside. He found himself in a dimly lit hallway. Corridors led off to the left and right. In front of him was a metal desk and chair.

"HELLO!" Misha called out loud. "We're here to help! Anyone there?" His voice echoed off the walls bouncing back and repeating his words over and over.

There was the sound of something scraping on the tile floor and both supers turned to the sound. It seemed to be coming from the left, down a side hallway. A head suddenly popped out from a doorway and then just as suddenly vanished back inside.

"Who?" Stealth grasped the hilts of his swords. "What?"

"We're here to help," Misha said out loud.

All he got in response was silence.

"Don't make us come in there after you," Stealth snarled. "We're armed and have lots of ammunition. It's bound to turn out messy for all of us."

"We were sent by Lisa and the government to help rescue everyone," the fox shouted as he nocked an arrow.

"Who are you?" A voice asked. It was a deep and guttural voice and seemed to echo off the walls endlessly. Neither of the two could locate exactly where it came from.

"I'm Stealth," the feline said in a calm and soft voice. "My friend is Misha. We're superheroes from Paragon City. When they lost contact with you they called for help and we came. Who are you?"

"We've analyzed the glimpse you got but are unable to get a clear image. Also we have not been able to identify the voice."

"Stazinsky, Philip Stazinsky," the voice answered.

"Stazinsky, Philip, J. Junior geneticist assigned to project 43."

"Phil," Misha said trying not to sound too threatening but keeping his bow at the ready. "Are you all right? Can you tell us what happened?"

"I'm all right," the voice of Philip said and paused. "Sort of. As to what happened. I'm not sure. But I know that some of our recent specimens escaped. I spent most of the last two days trying to not be eaten."

"We've run into quite a few of them on the way here," Stealth commented.

"You didn't kill them did you?" The voice asked, concerned.

"No but we did have to wound a few. They rushed us in a pack but they withdrew when I hit them with a few sonic arrows and stun grenades," Misha explained.

"Good. You don't know what it took to get those few."

"We met the giant sloths," Stealth said. "They looked hungry so we fed them."

"They're still in their pens?" a second, female voice suddenly asked in an excited tone. "Are they all right? Are they hurt?"

"No they're fine," Misha answered. "Who's in there with you?"

"There's eight of us in here," Philip explained. "When things fell apart we banded together for survival."

"Do you know of any more people here?" Stealth asked.

"There was ten others on the island but we haven't seen them since the change," came the answer.

"Why don't you all come out here and we'll get you out of here and back to the mainland," the cheetah super said as he slowly stepped towards the voice. "You're safe with us."

"NO!" Philip snarled. "Well . . . I mean." The two supers heard several voices talking and arguing.

"Enough of these games. Just come out now or we'll toss in some sleep gas and carry you all out," Stealth threatened. The cheetah didn't have any sleep gas but the others didn't know that. "We can't help you if you keep hiding. Whatever you think is wrong we can fix it."

What stepped into the hallway was a squat, heavily muscled cat about the size of a lion. its fur was a dark amber color with black spots and it walked on four short legs. What Misha noticed first was the two, long teeth that stuck downwards out from its muzzle.

"Smilodon fatalis! It's a sabertooth!, It's a sabertooth!" The nanites announced cheerfully.

"Can you fix this?" the sabertooth asked sarcastically.

"Have you confirmed it?" Came Lisa's voice over the nanites private communication channel.

"Confirmed. 3 male and 5 female Smilodon fatalis. All in excellent health and all are or were human members of the facility staff."

"And two genuine sabertooth who were born that way and are very confused."

"We're all confused right now," Misha joked.

"Let me be sure of the details. Eight of my staff were physically changed into sabertooths?" Lisa asked slowly.

"Yes," Misha answered.

"Their DNA has been completely rewritten to a new . . old . . . " the nanites paused a moment. *"Well, different sequence."*

"Not possible!" Lisa countered. "It is not possible for re-sequencing to take place outside the chamber."

"I'm looking at them so it must be possible," Stealth answered and pointed to one of the Smilodons.

"I'll need more detailed information and a DNA sample from all of them," she asked. "To find out how this happened."

"For that we'll need physical contact."

"Explain what happened," Misha asked the sabertooths. The fox super was sitting in front of a computer. Within arm's reach was his bow.

"Well," a female sabertooth started. "Things were normal until 10:30am, two days ago when the contamination alarm went off."

"There must have been some of trouble before that Emily," Philip commented.

"True," the female answered. "It was only a few minutes after the alarm went off that I started to change."

"Have you heard anything from the rest of the facility?" Stealth asked.

"No," Philip said shaking his massive head. "It's rather hard to use a cell phone or a keyboard with paws and no thumbs."

"We've had some luck with some of the PC's but the facility network seems to be down," another male sabertooth added. "As are the phones."

"Shame," Misha said.

"If the network was up we could set the security systems back to a more normal level," Stealth commented "So everything would stop trying to shoot us down or blast us to pieces."

"We have accessed the in building network and are trying to get out onto the full network but the local hub has some formidable firewalls preventing access. We can just break through but things would get messy and we would certainly be detected."

"Can you get in?" Stealth asked.

"Yes, but it will take some time to do it unobtrusively."

"If I still had hands I could easily get into the network," one of the sabertooths commented in a male voice. "I still know the log in and passwords."

"You are?" Misha asked.

"John Borentelli," the male answered. "I'm in the IT department so I know most of the passwords."

"That will save considerable time and effort!"

"Good. With those we can hack into the network and get more information on what is going on," Misha said.

I have a question," Stealth said out calmly as he looked at the numerous sabertoothed cats. "If they're full animals how come they can still talk?"

"An excellent question that will require more research." The nanites replied.

"You have no idea do you?" Was the cheetah morph's reply.

"Didn't we just say that?"

"No. No you didn't."

"What were you doing here exactly with all the animals?" Misha asked trying to ignore the argument between the two.

"Mostly follow up work. Studying and caring for all the animals outside of a sterile lab environment. Seeing how they adapt to the real world," Philip answered.

"No actual gene changing?" Stealth queried.

"No," the male feline answered. "Of course not outside an environmentally sealed lab."

"Well something changed you," the cheetah morph countered.

"But what?" The sabertooth named Bridgette asked. "We need more information on our new bodies. That is sure to uncover some clues for us."

"We can do that but it will require physical contact by either Misha or Stealth."

"We'll need a test of one of the changed Smilodons and of the natural born ones," Emily said. "A comparison should show us any differences and similarities. I'm eager to see how closely we are to our two natural cats."

All eyes turned to the two felines. Both of the sabertooths were in a corner of the room with their backs to the wall. They seemed calm but were definitely unsettled by all the strange going's on.

"How are they taking it?" Misha asked. "They seem to be pretty calm."

"Well," Bridgette said slowly. "They've had two days to adjust but Duncan and Donna have always been smart and calm."

"To do a detailed exam of both the real sabertooths and the humans changed into them requires physical contact," the fox said out loud. "So who volunteers?"

"You need to do both genders," Philip suggested.

"We should examine all of them," Stealth added. "Gather all the info we can."

"Good idea!" Philip said nodding his massive head in agreement. "Examine me and Duncan first."

Misha turned to his friend. "I'll do the sabertooths and you do the scientists."

"Why do you get the real sabertooths and I get the people?" Stealth objected.

"Because I have the ability to deal with any problems that might happen," the fox explained.

Stealth held up one of his swords. "And I don't?"

The old ranger nodded. "Good point. Are you sure you want to do that? He outweighs both of us put together. And he doesn't need swords. His weapons are built in!"

He didn't speak. Stealth simply nodded his head slowly.

"Try not to look delicious," Misha joked.

Stealth shot the fox an angry look. "How do I get Duncan to come to me?"

"Call him," Emily responded. "We've trained them to respond to their names."

"Duncan," Stealth ordered in a firm voice. "Come here." He sat down on the floor and remained still. Then he tucked his tail tight against his body and waited for Duncan to approach.

Duncan sat a few feet off and simply stared at the feline superhero with suspicious eyes.

"He isn't coming any closer," Stealth answered.

"Maybe you should offer him some tuna fish," Misha commented.

Stealth looked at Misha. "Don't you know anything about cats?" He snapped.

The vulpine hero shook his head. "No. I grew up in house with three dogs, 2 guinea pigs and a parakeet named Jaws."

Stealth looked at Duncan then turned and looked back at Misha. "The parakeet was named Jaws?"

"He liked to bite people," was the embarrassed answer. "If food won't get him to come. How do you call a cat?" He asked, changing the subject.

"Make them think there's something in it for them," the cheetah answered.

"So twenty pounds of tuna should do it."

"No, you appeal to his curiosity," Stealth explained.

"Ah," Misha said and then fell silent for a long moment. "How do we do that?"

Stealth scowled at his friend for a moment then turned to Duncan. The sabertooth seemed to understand they were talking about him and was staring at them.

"Try not to make eye contact," the nanites suggested. "If you make eye contact with a feline and your eyes are wide open they take it as a threat."

Stealth nodded in agreement. "Good thing to remember!" He carefully sheathed his swords. Duncan hadn't moved from his spot and was calmly watching all the antics in front of him.

"Duncan!" Stealth said firmly. "Come here!"

Duncan yawned once revealing a set of impressively large teeth along with the two saber shaped canines. Then he lay down and closed his eyes.

"He doesn't seem to be impressed," one of the transformed sabertooths commented.

"Maybe if you smear yourself all over with steak sauce," Misha joked.

Stealth scowled at the fox with heavily lidded eyes for a moment.

Misha reached into a pouch on his belt and took out a plastic wrapped bundle about the size of the palm of his hand. He tossed it to Stealth. "Try that?"

The cheetah superhero caught the flying package and found it to be a fist sized lump wrapped in tinfoil. "What is it?"

"Some meat. It's still fresh. See if he'll come to that."

He unwrapped the bundle and revealed a good sized hunk of beef. Stealth wadded the foil into a tight ball and tucked it into a pocket. The hand with the meat in it he extended out towards his intended target.

Duncan leaned forward and his nose twitched but he didn't show any interest in getting any closer.

"That's not working either," Stealth said.

"That's just like a cat," Misha joked. "You spend \$40 on an expensive toy and the cat prefers to play with the paper bag it came in."

"Why don't I just go to him?" Stealth said calmly. "Instead of trying to get him over to me."

"Well he is a half ton of carnivore," Misha responded. "And if he won't come to you what's to say he will let you come to him?"

Stealth gave a chirp of laughter. "One way to find out." He stood up and started to slowly walk towards the sabertooth."

Duncan's eyes snapped open and his head whipped around to look at the cheetah morph.

"Well. I got his undivided attention," Stealth said nervously but he didn't stop moving forward.

The male smilodon stood up and took a step towards the cheetah superhero.

"Ok," Stealth said in soft tones. "We'll meet halfway."

The sabertooth moved slowly towards Stealth one step at a time. The feline was intently examining the cheetah. He would take one step forward, stop and look at Stealth and sniff the air for a moment. Then Stealth would take a step forward and wait for Duncan's response. Duncan would take another step forward. Slowly the two came closer and closer one step at a time until they were standing next to each other. The massive feline leaned forward and stretched out towards the cheetah. His eyes were alive with interest and his ears dancing about. His nose and whiskers twitched energetically.

"Show him the meat," Misha suggested.

Stealth did as the fox suggested and waved the meat under the large predator's nose.

The massive feline sniffed at the meat then snatched it up lightening fast. His powerful jaws and teeth made short work of the food. He towered over the cheetah morph whose free hand tightened on the hilt of his sword. He looked powerful, dangerous and frightening from a distance. Now being this close he was outright terrifying.

The thought entered his mind that smilodons probably used to kill cheetahs like him. His instinct was to bolt and run but he refused to give into his instincts and his fears. Slowly Stealth reached out with an empty hand. His every move watched intently by the massive animal. It would only take a quick snap of those powerful jaws to bite his arm completely off. But the creature did not strike, instead just watching intently. Finally his hand touched the sabertooth. Stealth felt the soft fur, warm with the life of the feline. He could feel the powerful muscles underneath. "Wow his whole body is solid muscle!"

"Contact successful. Insertion successful. Beginning detailed examination of the subject Duncan. Male, feline Smilodon Fatalis. Age 2 years, weights 557 pounds. In fine shape. Mentally he is calm but confused about the whole thing. He seems to think you are all part of his pack and is wondering if the females are available."

"He is also wondering if you taste good Stealth."

"Typical male," Lisa commented. "Only thinking about sex and food."

Stealth gently stroked the massive felines back.

Duncan leaned on Stealth. He was squinting and a low rumbling noise came from his chest.

"Is he purring?" Misha asked. "It sounds like a diesel engine."

"He is purring."

"You've made a friend Stealth," Misha joked. The fox superhero turned and looked at the one ex-human male sabertooth. "All right Philip it's your turn."

"What do I do?" The male feline asked nervously.

"Just relax and stand still," Misha said. He had his bow slung across his back and both hands were empty. He moved slowly, making no sudden movements. Slowly he reached out and placed his left hand on Philip's shoulder.

"Contact successful. Insertion successful. Beginning detailed examination of the subject Philip Stanzinsky. Confirmed that there has been significant genetic re-engineering done recently. Transmitting data to ABERA now."

"This was not done by nanites. Nor was surgery involved. That much is certain."

"Could be virus based," Lisa said. "There is a very high white blood cell count."

"A very strong possibility."

"There are distinct differences between the two patterns," Lisa commented. "Changes were made to the pattern used on the scientists. Specific parts of the brain were altered but not memory or intelligence. Also the vocal cords were altered to allow human like speech. This has to have been done deliberately."

"You're saying this was sabotage?" Misha asked.

"Agreed. The changes to the template are just too specific to be accidental."

"It is very nice work. High quality but not ours," Lisa commented. "It bears no resemblance to any of our past or present research."

"What about the work done in the old, sealed lab? The bioweapons?" The cheetah asked.

"I am examining that now. It will take some time as those records are under tight security. And I do not want to discuss that work over any communications channel. No matter how secure. I am also working with the CDC and the pentagon's NBC group."

"NBC? You don't mean the TV station?" Stealth asked.

"Nuclear, Biological, Chemical," Misha explained. "The part of the military that handles all the nasty things like poison gas and plagues."

"Well?" Philip asked trying to remain calm.

"What do we tell them?" Stealth asked using his built in communications gear. "One of them might have done it."

"Make no mention of sabotage," Misha ordered using the same communication channels. The entire exchange between the two supers was unheard by the sabertooths in the room.

"It seems you might have been changed by a virus of some sort," Stealth explained slowly.

"A virus?" A large, male sabertooth named Anthony asked. "A virus is used in the resequencer but it cannot survive outside the chamber itself."

"What exactly does the resequencer do?" Misha asked.

"It resequences a subject's DNA to a different pattern," Emily explained.

"It changes one thing into something else," Stealth said calmly.

"Well," Emily said. "That is very roughly correct but it leaves out a huge amount of details."

"Have you ever used this resquencer on a person?" Stealth asked.

The female feline shook her massive head. "No. The chamber itself is small. Barely larger than a toaster. What we were using it on was embryos. Fertilized eggs really. Then these altered eggs were implanted in a female of a similar species. Then they are carried to term normally. Our two normal sabertooth's were both born to lionesses."

"Why sabertooths?" Stealth asked. "Why did you all change into sabertooths and not sloths?"

Emily shook her head. "We've been discussing that fact since it happened."

"Our working theory is that it's some sort of virus based attack derived from the Smilodons," Anthony commented. "Perhaps the virus was created when the fetus were re-sequenced? Some contaminant in the chamber."

"But that was three years ago," Lisa countered. "Why now?"

"Since we all started to change within a few minutes of each other that means a fast dispersal and very fast infection rate. That suggests an airborne pathogen," Philip commented. "And one that fully dispersed at a high rate of speed."

Misha sent a mental command to his own built in computer and quickly pulled up the weather report for the day of the incident. "The weather for that day was cool with wind from the northeast. Means it most likely came from Diamond and spread southeast to Hart."

"The pathogen must have a short lifespan," the nanites commented. "Or there would have been changes reported on the mainland."

Lisa cursed in Spanish and Portuguese. "I am already in contact with the CDC and they are not happy. They do confirm no unusual outbreaks. But they are calling in more people. A lot more people."

"Wonderful," Misha said sarcastically. "That means word is bound to leak out and we'll have the press all over the place."

"Agreed but there was nothing else to be done. We must prevent an outbreak at all costs."

The aircraft hurtling towards Hart island skimmed across the surface of the water. It was so close that the massive blades of its turboprop engines barely missed the waves that had been whipped up by the turbulence.

The MV22 Osprey was a good aircraft with a troubled past. A long, difficult development had seen many accidents and several times the project had almost been canceled. But still like a troubled child that becomes a responsible adult the Osprey had matured into a fine system. The aircraft was more complex than a simple C130 Hercules or a UH60 Blackhawk but it did have its advantages. The special forces loved them as it gave them the long range of a plane but with the vertical landing of a helicopter. It meant that parachute drops were no longer needed in many cases. Parachute drops were always messy and dangerous even under the best of circumstances. It also meant that people who parachuted in could be pulled out fast if things went bad.

Inside the plane were the reasons for the flight. Their call sign for this operation was Oboe 04 but their real designation was first squad, second platoon, 144th medical detachment. A bland name for a unit that specialized in biological warfare. Their job was to prevent a reoccurrence of things like the Bubonic plague. They waged a little known war against groups like Arachnos. Malta, the Council and a hundred little terrorist groups all bent on killing millions of people.

All five were long time soldiers with many combat missions behind them. Some were army, others were marines but all were used to dangerous missions. But in the already dangerous world

of special forces these soldiers had another whole level of danger. Besides having to worry about being shot, bombed, stabbed or blown up they had to worry about biowarfare. The artificially created plagues that were an all too real a threat.

The Bubonic plague; a naturally occurring plague had killed a third of the human race in the 14th century. Terrorists, villains, dictators and just plain evil governments had 'improved' on nature. Some of the plagues this group had faced in the past could easily kill ALL life on the planet down to the microbial level.

Also on the team was the reason for using a MV22 instead of parachuting in; Dr William Temki He possessed a lot of the skills needed for the mission including several degrees in viral medicine and diseases. He had worked for ABERA for many years and was well acquainted with everything done in the facilities. What skill he didn't have was parachuting. Also some of the equipment they were carrying was sensitive in spite of long efforts to toughen them up and might not survive a parachute drop.

The already uncomfortable flight was made even more uncomfortable by the level 4 biohazard suits they were wearing. They were designed to protect the wearer against even the most virulent disease but they were not comfortable. Captain Miller had seen people killed by some of the diseases created by the likes of the Council. So he really didn't mind being hot and sweaty even if he always seemed to have an itch between the shoulder blades.

"We are one hundred kilometers from the target. Entering a holding pattern now," the voice sounded throughout the whole aircraft but it came from a pilot who was controlling the aircraft from 300 miles away. The plane's onboard computer was making the moment to moment decisions but it was monitored by a man sitting at a console a long way away.

"Acknowledged," Captain Miller responded. "What's the sitrep?"

"Quiet," responded the planes computer. "Search radar is active but I've detected no fire control radar. My own IR and low light TV have detected nothing unusual."

"It seems Firefly 11 did their job well," Timko said.

"We're not on the ground yet," Sergeant Harrid countered. The ranger was checking his M4 carbine one last time.

"When do we land?" The scientist asked. "I'm getting tired and airsick."

"Not until it's safe for us to land," the captain explained. "We need to have the island's air defenses neutralized first or at least suppressed." The osprey was well equipped with ECM, chaff, flares and its own weapons to protect against being shot down but he was in no mood to risk things unless necessary.

"Can you change us back?" Emily asked. "This has been an interesting experience but I miss my opposable thumbs."

"The enhanced hearing and sense of smell are nice," Sarah commented. The female sabertooth was stretched out on top of a desk and seemed very comfortable. "But I do miss having hands."

"Can you change them back?" Misha silently asked the nanites.

"Computing," the nanites responded. "The answer is no. We cannot change all 8 of them back to 100% human DNA. At least not here. It requires a lot more energy and work than is possible on the island."

"You changed us both into furies and that didn't take too long," Stealth commented.

"We changed you one at a time and it was not a 100% change. We simply added animal DNA and cybernetics to your human form."

"You can change them back eventually?" Misha asked.

"Oh yes! Just not all 8 back to 100% human form. The energy and material requirements are just too high for it to be accomplished in the field. We'll need a lab and some time. BUT we could at least give them an anthropomorphic form. That would require no great DNA alteration and the adjustments to the body would be fairly simple. At the least we could give them opposable thumbs."

"Stealth?" Misha asked confidentially without anyone but the two of them hearing. "What do you think?"

"About what? This virus and it being released. Someone had to have created that virus."

"Do you think Sanchez is lying about not knowing anything about it?" Misha asked.

"No. I don't think she was lying. And she certainly was not responsible for it being released," Stealth responded over the radio. "No one in their right mind would set off a virus in their own base."

"But their enemies would," Misha added.

"An enemy with a genetics lab as advanced as ABERA," the feline said.

"I need a secure channel to Haslett," Misha said silently to the nanites. "One that neither Sanchez nor anyone else can hear."

"Connecting on ULTRA secure channel."

"Ultra? You've been watching far too many of those James Bond movies," Misha muttered.

"I have M on the line," the nanites said.

"Hello?" came a voice in Misha's mind.

"This is Misha," the vulpine answered. "I have an update."

"Go ahead," the Colonel ordered.

"We got to the island all right. Had a run in with the security robots and the SAM's but we got past both," he explained.

"Good. What have you uncovered?"

"There might have been a biological release on the island," Misha answered. "And probably an act of sabotage."

"Sanchez already told me of the release but not that it was sabotage," the officer commented.

"The virus that altered the people was definitely created specifically for the task. That much is certain. I am not certain how it was released but I doubt it was accidental. She also claims to have not manufactured the virus."

"Do you believe her?"

"Yes," Misha answered. "Someone or something else is involved here."

"Who?" Haslett asked. "Council, Fifth Column? The Rikti?"

"Not the Rikti. This doesn't have their style to it. But they are a genetically engineered species and would have the capability. Whoever it is they were most certainly a member of the staff."

"Which means ABERA has a security leak," the colonel commented.

"Agreed. Could it be a leftover from the old bio warfare days of the place?" The ranger asked.

"Doubtful. But the NBC people have been busy since the incident first happened. I have someone who wants to speak with you. He is cleared for information on ABERA but not your little friends. So do not mention them."

"Understood, sir!" Misha replied.

"Hello?" A new voice said. "This is captain Miller. I've been studying the records from location 227. We're also interviewing some of the people who worked there. I have a few questions about the people affected. What symptoms are they showing?"

"You mean besides being changed into a species of animal extinct for the last few thousand years?" Misha asked. "Nothing else."

"Are they showing any abilities that would be unusual for a Smilodon?" The captain asked. "Anything that might be classified as a super power?"

"Well none of them have shot flames or ice or been able to teleport. Why?" Misha asked.

"Well there was an old program in the 1960's that attempted to give super abilities to normal people. It used mostly technology stolen from a similar Russian program at first. But a lot of original work was also done there."

"No wonder this island was so heavily fortified. Was there any success?" The vulpine inquired.

"Mixed," the captain admitted. "There was some success but the results were very uneven. The program was curtailed in the 1980's and canceled completely in 1985 after the Argenskov disaster when the Russian research facility was destroyed by an escaping patient. Thankfully our people were a lot more cautious than the Russians. Also we used real volunteers and not political prisoners who already hated the Soviet government."

"Then this could have been caused by something left over?" Misha asked.

"It is a possibility we must consider but I highly doubt it. We've reviewed the cleanup procedures used several times and it was most thorough," Capt Miller replied. There was a moment of silence. "Hmm. This is interesting. We're examining the data you just sent and I can confirm that the changes were probably caused by a virus and definitely an artificially created one. But I cannot be certain until we get more information. I do recommend you use level 3 bio precautions. I'm leading a team there. We'll be onsite within the hour."

"The island is not secure captain," Misha countered. "You should wait . . ."

"That was not a request sergeant," the captain ordered coldly. "This requires people on site who know what they are doing to obtain more data."

"Yes sir," Misha replied in clipped tones.

"A word of warning," the captain commented. "Be very careful sergeant. If there is one plague on the island there are bound to be others. I know of several tailored to specifically kill supers."

"Understood sir," Misha answered. "Anything else?"

"Yes, this is just an opinion but if this was done deliberately the list of people capable of doing it is very short. It's not the Council as they have tried using diseases before. Several times as a matter of fact. And all three times they went for the mass death angle. Nothing so subtle as altering people."

"Could it be the result of some super serum?" Misha asked.

"A very distinct possibility but these changes are nothing like their Vampyri or War Wolves," the captain commented. "There is an old villain I seem to remember called the Zoomaster. He decided that humans had to be wiped out. He tried several times to do that using some very potent diseases. We have several samples still in custody that showed that he had a very high level of skill and knowledge. Another possibility is the villain Virus. His mutant abilities allowed him to create a disease at will. The man is a walking biowarfare lab. The Germans still have him at a high security prison but we're confirming that now. It took us months to clean up after that psychopath. Another villain comes to mind; a woman," he paused for a moment. "Well, a female at least. Lady Dinosaur. She claimed that the dinosaurs had an advanced civilization before they were wiped out. She wanted to bring them back and reclaim the planet."

"She sounds like another crazy person," Misha responded.

"Not too crazy. Last time I saw her she was a six foot tall raptor," the captain commented. "And was using a beam laser that could cut through several meters of steel easily."

"A laser wielding dinosaur?" Misha asked incredulously. "And people think I'm strange. We've only run into mammalian breeds so far."

"Good point," the captain responded. "It's probably not her but she bears watching. She was last seen somewhere in Asia. Now this one has some merit. She's called Mother Earth and has vowed to wipe out humans in order to save the planet."

"An ecoterrorist," Misha growled.

"An ecoterrorist with enough money to buy scientists with more PHD's than common sense," the captain commented. "She was thought to have been killed several years ago in a fight with a French super team. That came after she had stampeded a herd of elephants through Strasbourg."

"That's weird, even by my standards," Misha commented.

"And deadly," the captain added. "She did over twenty million Euros worth of damage and left over two hundred dead and wounded."

The cheetah shook his head. "It can't be her. Lots of people have been changed but no one's been hurt or killed."

"Good point," the captain said. "But she bears considering."

"We're checking with the French to be sure she is really dead and will stay that way!" Was the nanites answer.

"All right," the colonel said. "First we'll get the NBC team on site to confirm or deny it was a bioweapon. Once they have confirmed things are safe we'll bring in a recovery unit. Then we'll penetrate further onto the site."

"We'll access the network here. One of the people here has the needed access codes," Misha responded.

"With those codes we can gain control of the security and defenses," the nanites added.

"Do NOT disable the defenses," the officer ordered. "Just give us safe access to the site."

"Of course. We'll keep all others off the base and we'll also make sure nothing can leave."

"Until the second team declares the site clear and secured we can't move anyone off the island," the colonel ordered. "But we must get the people to a safe place."

"Define safe?" Stealth asked. "We're on a disease infested island overrun with escaped wild animals all out to kill us."

"I recommend that you wait till we get control of the defenses and security," Misha said.

"With Borentelli's help we should have control in a few minutes," the nanites responded.

"Food," Stealth announced suddenly. "We need food."

"What?" The colonel asked.

"We have several tons of full grown feline carnivores here none of whom have eaten in several days," Stealth explained.

"A good point," the officer responded. "I'll order a food drop right away."

"With the help of your friends we've gained control of the defenses of Hart island," Borentelli commented. The sabertooth was seated at a PC carefully using one clawed toe to type.

"We can control things on Hart, but we'll need direct contact to the network on other islands to take control of those," the nanites added.

"I have limited contact to Carelton and Plum," John said as he carefully tapped the keys with a clawed paw. "But only to the train stations. I've nothing on Diamond at all."

"Your second team can come in any time. But we recommend they arrive on the southern portion of Hart first," the nanites added.

"Agreed," Misha added. "We can meet them there."

"No," the colonel countered. "Continue towards Diamond. The heart of the problem must be there. We need to know what's happening there and so far you are our only eyes and ears on the ground."

"We can also confirm that the defenses and security are all working on automatic. A fairly advanced program but most certainly no intelligence is at work."

"I'm fairly certain the system wasn't hacked," the sabertooth programmer said. "It was deliberately set that way when someone tripped the containment breach alarm."

"Probably when everyone started changing into strange creatures," Stealth commented.

"That makes sense," the colonel commented.

"It's standard operating procedure. Until we do find out what happened I'll keep the protocols in place. Just modify them to help us," John said in a commanding tone.

"Exactly how much does Borentelli know about your little friends?" The colonel asked privately to Misha.

"Nothing," Misha responded. "We told him that they are expert hackers working for the DoD."

"Which is true," the nanites commented. *"Sort of."*

"Good. That's one less complication," the colonel commented. "Also we've gotten a paleontologist online to help. Professor Leonard Ratinov."

"Does he have security clearance?" Misha asked.

"Oh yes," the officer responded. "He's been a consultant with us for several years."

"You have a paleontologist as a consultant?" Stealth asked, surprised. "Why?"

"You're kidding right?" The colonel asked honestly. "With the likes of the Zoomaster and Lady Dinosaur out there? Besides. This is the SPECIAL Forces. We have a consultant for everything."

"Everything? Do you have one for . . .," Stealth paused and shook his head. "Never mind. I . . . I don't want to know!"

Miller felt the aircraft shift and the sound of the engines grow louder. "We're headed in!" He sat back in the seat and tried to relax as his mind went over everything that he had heard. The officer turned and looked behind him. There, carefully strapped to the deck was a plastic cargo box. In it was all the equipment they'd need for investigating and stopping this outbreak.

The captain could feel the plane moving at full speed and the fuselage rocked from side to side as the osprey dodged and twisted to make it a harder target to hit. After what seemed only a few seconds the pitch of the engines changed and the plane touched down. The ramp at the back dropped open and the captain caught sight of a sandy beach and the blue ocean beyond.

There was a mad scramble as the team unbuckled and raced down the ramp as best they could in their biosuits. Miller removed the strap holding down the cargo box. Then he leaned against it and the box moved down the ramp with surprising speed, aided by the rollers built into ramp itself. In moments the ramp was clear and the box was resting on the sand.

The engines roared louder and the plane lifted off as the tail ramp snapped shut. The blades whipped the air into a frenzy of sand blocking out all vision. In seconds all they knew of the transport was the sound of the engines which grew fainter with each passing moment.

No one moved as they surveyed their surroundings. The air settled down and Miller wiped the sand from the faceplate of his suit and looked around. A sandy beach stretched off to the left and right but in front of him a wall of trees marked the edge of a dark and foreboding forest.

Miller tapped the mike to active the radio in his suit. "Oboe 04 to Hacker 06. Feet dry. No casualties. No incidents."

"Acknowledged, Oboe 04," came the reply over the radio.

"Looks quiet," sergeant Hernandez said. "I don't see any signs of trouble so far."

"Stay sharp," the captain ordered. "It might take some time for security to respond." He pulled a piece of equipment off his belt about the size and shape of a book. Miller waved it slowly about trying to get as big an air sample as possible. Off to his right he saw Temki also working some equipment.

"Air samples are clean," the professor said without taking his eyes off his scanner. "No known pathogens but there is a higher than normal pollen count. That's unusual for this time of year."

"No hazardous or deadly substances in the air," the captain added. "But the air temperature is ten degrees below normal."

"CAPTAIN!"

Miller snapped his head around and saw lieutenant O'Grady in the midst of pulling off her hood. What he should have seen when the hood was removed was a red headed woman in her twenties. Instead he saw a lean and spotted feline head.

"Containment breach!!" The captain shouted.

"We're all affected! Including you. Look at your hand." The professor dropped to all fours as his arms became forelegs and his hands; paws.

Captain Miller held up his right hand and saw the glove over it split and tear as the limb inside grew too large to be contained. His hand had already lost its thumb and gained a good covering of gray/tan fur. "Oh shit."

"It cannot be a virus," the professor said in a surprisingly calm voice. "We're in full protection and the sensors are quiet. And all of us cannot have had a breach at the same time."

"Then what is changing us?" The captain said as his body kept changing. He felt his center of gravity shift and he toppled forward onto all four limbs. What amazed him was the total lack of any pain or even discomfort.

"It could be some unknown pathogen that we've never run across before," one soldier said.

"No," the captain responded. "Even an unknown organism would show up in the scans. And this doesn't feel like a pathogen."

"This is not like any disease I've ever seen before. It's moving too fast. No pathogen can change a body so quickly." The civilian was staring at his newly formed paws. "The Zoomaster's took days to fully change people. And Lady Dinosaur used a modified, cellular regeneration ray."

"What about nanotech?" The captain asked.

The animal that had been a professor shook its new head. "No. I checked for those as well. And firefly 11 found no trace of nanotech in the previous victims."

"Well," the one said slowly. "Perhaps it's magic?"

The captain shook his head to remove the helmet that no longer fit his feral head. "Well magic is something we need to consider."

"There are some abnormalities in all of this," O'Grady said. "Why can we still speak? Also it's obvious we still have our minds and memories and yet we are able to walk and use our new bodies easily. That means our minds were at least partially changed. Why?"

"We'll need to contact command and Firefly," the one soldier commented. He looked down at the radio with its complex controls. Then he looked at his paws which had no thumbs. "As soon as we can figure out how."

A short distance away Misha, Stealth and several of the now feline ABERA workers waited patiently in the open ground in front of the building.

"Why didn't we have that other team land here with us?" Stealth asked out loud.

"Two teams can cover twice the ground." the fox ranger replied.

"And if one team becomes infected it won't spread to the other?" Stealth asked.

"Of course. Besides the Osprey would never have been able to land here."

"Cargo drone on final approach," came the voice over the radio. "This will be a combat drop!"

"Everyone stay back till the drone leaves," Misha ordered. "Beware, it's going to be fast and quiet."

"What exactly is going to happen?" One of the felines asked nervously.

"Just watch and see," came the enigmatic answer.

There came a soft buzzing noise that reminded him of a loud bumble bee. Stealth followed the sound and looked up in time to see an object suddenly drop from the sky. It briefly landed on the ground in front of them. He caught a brief glimpse of something about the size of a small, compact car. It seemed to be a large box with wings and engines. There was a soft thump as the box dropped and hit the ground. Stealth watched in amazement as the wings and engines alone held together by a painfully thin, metal frame flew up and vanished from sight in seconds.

"What was that?" Stealth asked as he looked up at the retreating plane. "It looked like a steel beam with wings and an engine."

"It IS really just wings and engines attached to a thin fuselage," Misha answered. "In the Special Forces we call it a Busy Bee but it's more properly called a CQ4b long range, cargo drone."

The fox walked completely around the box which was painted in a green and brown camouflage pattern. One end of the box was actually two doors. There was a simple keypad on one door. "It's used to get supplies in without needing a messy and dangerous parachute drop."

"This is Firefly 11," Misha said over the radio. "Package arrived and in good shape. Thanks." He tapped a small code onto the keypad and the doors popped open slightly.

"Do I smell barbeque?" One of the felines asked.

Stealth took a deep sniff and got a nose full of fresh barbecued pork that made his mouth water. "That smells great! Now this is what I call special delivery!"

Misha gave a yip of laughter. "The quartermaster back at Benning cooks great barbecue and loves to include little gifts."

"Can we unload it all and eat before I just jump straight in and try and eat it all myself?" One of the females asked.

"Of course!" The fox pulled the doors wide open, revealing that the box was filled with a variety of boxes and containers. Taped to the inside of one of the doors was an envelope. He opened the envelope and pulled out a sheet of paper. "It's a manifest."

The first thing removed was a large plastic case with a red cross on it. Opening the box Misha saw it was filled with a wide assortment of drugs, pills and an amazing array of medical equipment. Misha recognized none of it even with the nanites displaying each items correct name on his eyesight.

One of the smilodons poked her massive head into the way. "That's a full viral analyzer and that is a portable body scanner." The feline was purring loudly. "We can do a lot of work with those!"

"Let's get to the food first." Misha gently pushed the massive feline out of the way. Then he closed the lid of the box.

Misha reached into the shipping container and pulled out several more boxes. Opening one box he found it filled with a good amount of meat. All carefully wrapped. He ripped off the wrapping and sniffed the meat. "Forty pounds of well cooked beef! But no seasonings." He calmly placed the meat onto the ground using the wrapping to keep it off the dirt.

With lightening speed the female snapped at the meat and bit the massive slab in half easily. Misha flinched and Stealth leapt backward. The female chomped her mouth a few times and swallowed all 20 pounds in moments. "Sorry," she said sheepishly. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"No problem," Misha said a little nervously.

"You're four hundred pounds of killer, carnivore girl," Stealth said. "You have to remember that."

At the back of the cargo container were a dozen jerrycans, all painted a bright blue and with the words WATER in white. Misha pulled out one and plunked it down in front of Stealth. "Here is something to wash all that meat down with."

"Did they pack some bowls?" Stealth asked. "Seeing as the gang here has no hands. How are they to drink?"

Emily bit into the side of one of the jerrycans. Her massive incisors easily punctured all the way through to the other side. When she pulled her teeth out water poured out of the four holes like from a fountain. She lapped at the flowing water. "Problem solved!"

The fox turned back to the open container. Carefully placed near the door was a cardboard box. Misha patted the box. "And they included enough food for us for a week."

"What's that?" Stealth asked. "The world's largest box lunch?"

"MRE's" Misha explained. "The latest in military field rations."

"What does MRE Stand for?" Stealth asked.

"Meal Ready to Eat," Misha answered and pointed to the lettering on the box; MEAL, READY TO EAT, INDIVIDUAL. "Just like it says right on the box."

"NO!" The nanites commented. *"That's not what MRE means. MRE stands for meals requiring enemas!"*

"NO! It means meals refusing to exit."

"Meals rejected by everyone."

"Meals rarely edible."

"Meals rejected by the enemy."

"Morsels, regurgitated, eviscerated."

"Mentally retarded edibles."

"They actually taste pretty good," Misha countered.

"Meals ready to expel."

"Meal, ready to excrete."

Materials resembling edibles."

"How long can they keep this up?" Stealth asked.

Misha shrugged. "They'll get bored eventually."

"EVENTUALLY?" Stealth snarled. "Eventually the world will end. In a few billion years."

"Morale reducing elements."

"Meals rejected by Ethiopians."

"Why torment perfectly innocent Ethiopians with these?"

"Enough of the jokes or I'll actually eat one right here and now," Stealth threatened.

Silence ensued.

"You just have to know how to handle them."

"Massive rectal expulsions."

Misha and Stealth quickly opened more boxes and soon all the smilodons were happily settled down and eating their first meal in two days. Even Duncan and Donna were resting next to each other and enjoying the fresh meat.

Misha pulled out a small metal ammunition container the side of which was marked with a smiley face. He opened it and pulled out several small, fist sized bundles wrapped in tinfoil. He passed two to Stealth.

"Pulled pork sandwiches!"

"Do you always eat this well in the rangers?" Stealth asked between bites.

"No, but we rangers do stick together."

"We've lost contact with Oboe 04," the colonel announced suddenly.

Both Misha and Stealth cursed softly.

"I knew it was a bad idea for them to land so soon," Misha commented.

"It was a calculated risk," the colonel explained. "And we needed experts on site."

"What about the plane that flew them in?" Misha asked.

"It's been landed back on the island. We did get a fragmentary report," the colonel added. "It seems the entire team is changing."

"I wonder what species?"

"We'll head to their location right away," Misha responded.

"Wait," the colonel responded. "We've got contact."

"This is Oboe 04 reporting," came the voice of the captain. It seemed different somehow, more guttural. "We're all alive but I'm not sure of our condition."

"Explain," came the short command of the colonel.

"We've all been affected by the same thing that changed the staff," the captain explained. "We have all become a different feline species including a giant member of the cheetah family."

"This is professor Ratinov. If you can get me some pictures and a DNA sample?" A voice called out excitedly over the radio. "Or better yet a full body scan?"

"We've been a little busy professor and it's hard to do anything without thumbs. It took some time and effort but we've managed to get the radio propped up and open the control panel. Thankfully the voice recognition software still recognized me."

"Can you describe what you look like now?"

"We most closely resemble cheetahs but are at least twice the size of any cheetah I've ever seen," was the reply. "One moment and we'll get you a picture."

There were several moments of silence. Then a blurry video image appeared. That was followed by a few moments of snarling and curses muttered in several languages before the image cleared up. It revealed a very large cheetah wearing what looked to be a camouflaged tunic.

"This is fantastic!" Ratinov commented excitedly. "Definitely a cheetah. *Miracinonyx* to be exact but whether *Miracinonyx inexpectatus* or *Miracinvx trumani* I can't be sure as we've never had a complete skeleton of either one."

Another feline walked into view. It had the short limbs and tight, compact body of a lynx but it was clearly at least four hundred pounds in weight. Far larger than any lynx that now roamed the planet.

"What am I?" The captain asked. "I've never seen a bobcat this big before. Except in a nightmare or a video game."

"Oh my god!" The professor said with awe in his voice. "I don't know and it's not in the database. It seems to be a species of lynx. Maybe a relative of *felis rexroadensis*. It might be an entirely unknown species."

"Great. Not only am I an animal, I'm an unknown one."

"You don't understand. This is a great scientific discovery. This is the first chance we've had to examine a complete skeleton," the professor said excitedly.

"Well my apologies but you can't examine this skeleton." the feline officer snarled sarcastically. "I'm still using it!"

"Any information on what is causing the change?" The colonel asked.

"It's most certainly not a virus or any other biological weapon. Of that we are sure," the captain answered. "And since it's included species that ABERA is not working on it cannot be their research. Unless there are some projects they have forgotten to mention."

"No. ABERA has been open on their research. They've left nothing out. And they cannot be researching a species no one even knew about till now. As to what is causing the change it is most certainly not nanite based either," the nanites added. *"So what does that leave?"*

"It could be based on an as yet unknown super power," the feline captain commented. "We must also consider the use of magic."

"Agreed," the nanites added.

"Do you think it's safe to send in a magical specialist?" The colonel asked.

"We haven't been attacked directly by anything here. Neither the inhabitants nor the islands defenses have so much as bothered us. So it is safe enough to send in an expert but they had best understand the risks. There is the very good chance they'll wind up on all fours."

"We'll head to your location immediately," Misha announced.

"No!" Miller responded. "We have the situation here under control. The answer to all this lies ahead, on Diamond. Since you two are immune to these changes you have to press onward."

"Agreed," came the colonel. "We need you on Diamond."

"Yes sir," the fox answered. "But first I need to try and help some of these people get back to being human."

"You can do that?" Captain Miller asked.

"I don't know," Misha answered honestly. "But it is worth trying and seeing."

He turned to the crowd of sabertooth's who were watching him. "I need a volunteer to try a method to change you back. I am not sure this will work and it will be dangerous."

John raised a paw. "I'll do it," he said nervously. He stepped forward and walked up to the fox morph.

"We'll start with your front paws and see if we can give you your hands back," Misha said calmly.

The male feline nodded his massive head slowly. "All right. What do I do?"

"Physical contact with your hands will be enough," the nanites explained to Misha.

The vulpine archer extended his hands. "Put one of your paws in my hands."

The feline sat down in front of Misha and placed his right, front paw into Misha's hands. The fox was amazed by the size and power of the appendage.

The microscopic machines that raced through Misha's body concentrated a large number in his hands. Then they seeped from his skin and onto the paw of the Smilodon. Soon they were spreading out analyzing and examining all the flesh, bone and muscles there. *"Insertion successful. Analyzing and assessing the task."*

"This should be easy," the nanites commented. *"A simple rebuilding."*

"Go easy," Misha ordered. "We don't know how our opponent will respond to our unraveling of his changes."

"All right."

"We're ready!"

Misha looked John straight in the face. "You ready?"

The male feline nodded his head. "Yes I am."

"Beginning restructuring." The nanites in the feline paws spread out to the assigned places and instantly set to work. Flesh, bones, muscles and cartilage were taken apart and reassembled to a new pattern. A pattern with five fingers including a thumb. It required a considerable amount of work and effort to achieve. It should have been easy - a simple matter of restructuring. Misha watched as stubby toes grew longer and finer as they changed into human like fingers.

The sabertooth let out a shriek of agony as his paws twisted and reshaped constantly. Toes growing into fingers and then shortening back into toes.

"We can't control the change!"

"Something is resisting our efforts."

"Increase power 250% that should override the resistance."

"Or kill him."

"Heart rate is up 45%"

"Pain levels up 375%"

"Back off. Stop before you kill him." Misha ordered.

"No! We can do this!"

"No you can't!" He countered. "BACK OFF!"

All right. Withdraw before we kill him."

"Are you all right?" Misha asked the feline who was stretched out on the floor and was shaking and shivering.

"I think so," John panted as the shaking and shivering stopped. "What happened?"

"We ran into resistance," the nanites commented. "Something was trying to counter us."

"And doing a good job of it too."

"Whatever changed you is not happy with the idea of us trying to change you back," Misha explained.

"Who or what?" John asked.

"Why?" A female feline asked. "Why go to all this effort to change us into Smilodon?"

"That we don't know but thankfully whatever their plan is it's doesn't include killing people," Stealth said.

"Then what is their plan?" Another feline asked. "Repopulate the world with sabertooths?"

Misha shrugged. "I don't know at this point. We need to get more information."

"What about us?" A large cat asked. "Can you change us back?"

"Our first attempts failed," the fox answered. "But we aren't going to give up. We just need to rethink this a little."

"We WILL try again. When we have more information and a better plan," the nanites added forcefully.

Stealth tilted his head to one side. "Rethink?"

"The direct approach failed so we need to come up with a different plan. Something our opponent hasn't thought of," Misha commented.

"All right if you can't give them human hands," Stealth asked. "What about keeping the paws but just evolving them to be hands?"

"Huh?"

"All right, consider this idea," Stealth said and waved his arms about. "What if smilodons hadn't gone extinct but simply evolved up to a species like humans." He wiggled his fingers in accompaniment.

"Don't change the paws, EVOLVE them to something higher."

"Exactly. So they will still be smilodon limbs."

"That makes no sense."

"Doesn't it?" Stealth answered. "Something changed them into sabertooth's and is fighting very hard to keep them that way. So we have to go with the flow."

"Now that does make sense. In a weird way."

"Everything here is weird," Stealth muttered.

"Says the cheetah man who works with a fox," the nanites added.

"Agreed," Misha said. "But his logic is sound. Try it."

This time the change went painlessly and quickly to the great relief of everyone. John's front paws shifted and moved as the digits were manipulated. After a few moments it was done. John held up his right front paw and proudly wiggled his thumb. He was still walking on all fours but at least he had his hands back. "I like this change!"

"We can alter his entire body as well but that will take some time to design the new form and finalize the procedures."

"And we do have seven other people to alter."

"Good," Misha commented. "That's all we can do for the time being. We can only do so much to each."

"I understand," the male sabertooth raised his right hand and wiggled his new fingers. "I'm happy to have my hands back."

"Now what?" One of the felines asked as she wiggled her newly recovered thumb.

"We have to keep moving," Misha said. "But we can't take all of you along with us."

"Why bother?" Stealth responded and waved hand around at the building that surrounded them. "This place has light, power, food and water and if need be you can close the doors and hold up till reinforcements arrive."

John pointed a paw/hand at a nearby computer. "From here I can stay on the network and see if I can reset the system."

Misha nodded his head. "Good. That will help us. I don't want to have to fight the security for the entire mission."

Emily boldly walked up to the two supers. "I want to go with you."

"You'll be safer here," Misha started to say.

"I don't want to be safe. I want to help. And you'll need the help of someone who knows the lay of the land," the Smilodon responded. "And I can take care of myself. I was in the army."

"Asenov, Emily," the nanites commented. *"E3. Served with 3rd infantry division during the Rikti war. Purple heart."*

"All right," the fox responded. "But stick close."

Misha rummaged through a pocket on his belt and produced a small electronic box. "This is a radio. It will allow you to stay in communication with us and the outside world. But be careful and reveal nothing to people outside the project, we're trying to limit news of this incident."

One of the felines gave a growl that was supposed to be a laugh. "And what would we tell them? We've all changed into extinct felines? Who would believe us? And I do want my family to know I'm all right."

"All right," Misha commented. "That much has already been passed along to your next of kin."

Ahead of them was building 11H, the largest building on small Hart island. It was a three story, wood frame building that was roughly square in shape. Flanking the steps that led up to the main

doors were a pair of tall pines trees. The stairs themselves were of brick and led up to doors that had been smashed. Only small bits of wood dangled from the hinges. The splintered remains of the rest lay scattered down the steps.

"From how the remains of the door are on the outside," Misha commented. "Something broke down those doors while trying to get out."

"We'll give the building a good search then move to the transit station," Misha ordered.

"There are two entrances to the station. One in the basement of the building but there is a separate door and stairs leading down to it on the north side."

"What's in the building?" Misha asked the sabertooth.

"Mostly empty but the lower two floors hold a full medical clinic and examination rooms. Also cages and security cells for the smaller animals," the female replied. "The top floor has offices and the like. Even a few small apartments. Right inside the main door is a security station. And another in the station itself."

"Is the station usually manned?" Misha asked.

"Yes but it was usually just 1 person who also walked a patrol in the building and grounds outside," the female explained.

The steps creaked as Misha placed his paws on them. The sounds were whisper soft but they seemed to echo as loud as gunshots to him.

Just inside the doorway was a small hallway. A metal desk and chair lay in a jumbled heap in the center of the hallway. Off to one side stairways led up and down.

"Which way? Up?" Stealth pointed upward. "Or down?" He pointed the tip of his sword down the stairs.

"Down," Misha ordered. "We'll start at the bottom and work our way up."

The fox ranger slowly started down the steps. His bow was up and he had an arrow nocked. Each step was taken one at a time with each paw placed carefully and deliberately. The bottom of the steps opened up into a large room filled rows and racks of countless small cages. A sharp musky smell came to his nose and he could hear the sounds of many small animals moving about.

"What are the cages?" Misha asked. He peered into a cage and saw a pair of furry creatures each about the size of a small cat. "Test animals?" There was a touch of disgust in his voice.

"They look like hamsters and gerbils," Stealth commented.

"No!" The female responded sharply. "Each pair is a long extinct species we are trying to reestablish."

"Great," the cheetah said. "Ice age hamsters and gerbils."

"They are very important," Emily commented. "If you're going to recreate an entire ecosystem you need all the plants and animals. Not just the few that you like." She waved a paw at the cages. "These little creatures were at the base of the food chain back then and a critical food source."

"There's nothing of interest here," Misha said. "Let's move on."

"We can't leave all of them to starve!" She said. "It would be torture."

Stealth looked across the room at the rows and rows of cages and tanks. "This will take a while."

Misha peered into the cage and was greeted by a pair of brown and black furred creatures roughly the size and shape of a hamster. He reached in and quickly took out two wooden bowls. One he filled with fresh water and the other with a goodly amount of green pellets. As he closed the cage door he saw both of the little animals nibbling on the food and drinking the water. "Well, that was the last one. Everyone is fed and has clean water."

"Good," Stealth said. The feline was at a small sink washing up. "When I became a superhero no one mentioned having to feed and clean up after 200 hamsters and gerbils."

"They always leave out these parts out of the action movies," Misha joked.

"ABERA is happy that all the animals are safe," the nanites commented.

The small group stood at the top of the stairs. Hallways stretched off to the left and right both lined with many doors. At the top of the stairs greeting them was a large candy machine. Its bright plastic front advertising many delicious candies and snacks.

"HEY!" Stealth said cheerfully and stepped up to the machine. "Candy!"

"You really want old, stale vending machine candy?" Misha asked. "That stuffs been there for a week."

"But it's free."

"It's not free you're supposed to pay for it." Misha just shook his head for a moment. "Hey! I claim that bag of cookies."

Crash! Misha used the butt of his pistol to smash open the front of the machine. "Now they're free." The fox nibbled on a cookie and bit off a small piece. "They're still fresh!"

"The wonders of preservatives!" Stealth joked.

"Something very strange just happened," Captain Miller commented slowly over the radio. In an almost confused tone.

"What?"

"I just grew a pair of thumbs," the feline officer commented.

"*WHAT?*"

"Say again," came the colonels order.

"What had been a completely animal paw with no thumbs has just changed," came Miller's explanation. "It is still a paw but the toes are now fingers and I have an opposable thumb."

"It seems our opponent liked your idea Stealth for evolving hands," the colonel commented.

"Should I be flattered or upset?" Stealth asked sarcastically. "Or both?"

"Flattered, upset AND worried," Misha responded. "It means the person responsible is paying close attention to what we do."

"That does have me worried," the cheetah commented.

"It has us all worried," The colonel said over the radio. "But it does tell us something about our opponent. It means he is willing to adopt new ideas."

"To a degree," Miller added. "I'm still a feline."

"And what's wrong with that?" Stealth asked. The humanoid cheetah flexed his arms. "I've done well with it."

"True but you can walk upright!"

The group paused at the top of the stairs and looked down towards the station. The steps descended downward into pitch darkness.

"I don't remember these stairs being this dark and creepy," she said

"Why is everyplace we go dark and creepy?" Misha asked. "Doesn't any villain like to keep the lights on."

Stealth took an incendiary grenade from his belt. "This will light things up."

"We're here to explore the place not burn it to the ground," Misha countered.

"Not yet."

"What was the station like?" Misha asked.

"Not much to it really," the sabertooth said. "Just a concrete platform next to the tracks."

"Anything on the platform?" The cheetah asked. "A magazine stand selling stale donuts, cold coffee and old magazines?"

"No, there is a small security station like the one upstairs but it hasn't been used in years," the smilodon responded. "And a small console for calling a train."

"John," Misha said over a radio channel using the cybernetics in his body. "Can you get us some lights and power?"

"I'm trying," came the response of the feline programmer. After a moment a series of lights snapped on illuminating the stairway - sort of. On the wall next to each step an LED cast a tiny pool of light onto a small portion of the steps. Eerie shadows danced along the stairwell.

Stealth shook his head slowly. "Great, instead of being pitch black and creepy now it's dark and shadowy and even more creepy."

"All I can get is the emergency lighting," Borentelli responded. "Power seems to have been deliberately cut at the control station."

"Where is that?" Stealth asked.

"It's about mid way between Hart and Carelton island," came the reply.

"Could you have placed it any further away from everything?" Stealth asked sarcastically.

"No," Lisa replied. "It was meant to be a final redoubt in case of attack. It has an emergency shelter and the power substation for the whole complex. We maintained all the equipment there but there will only be one person in the substation and that's it. The watch station does have a full complement of weapons and security controls."

Emily stood on the top step and looked down anxiously "I don't think designed their steps with sabertooths in mind."

Misha stood next to her and looked down at the massive feline. "Can you make it?"

"I'm not sure," she answered nervously. "Remember that my hind legs are shorter than my front ones."

"Try going down at an angle," the fox suggested.

She looked at the first step for a moment then turned partly to the right. The massive feline placed her front paws on the right side of the step. Her hind paws quickly followed. She turned partly to the left, shifting her massive body slowly. Emily planted both front paws on the left side of the third step. Her hind paws she placed on the second step. "This will work!" She said nervously.

Slowly they moved downwards taking each step one at a time, wary of an ambush. All of Misha's senses were alive. To Stealth standing behind Misha seeing the fox in action was amazing. In spite of carrying a bow, three quivers and wearing full body armor Misha made not a single sound. Even his super sensitive ears couldn't pick up the faintest whisper of sound and yet Misha was still slowly moving downward. Stealth was reminded that long before the nanites had made him an anthropomorphic fox Misha Brightleaf had been a U.S. army ranger. He wondered how much of his abilities were gifted to him by the nanites and how much was simply good training and experience.

The steps suddenly ended in a level floor that stretched off into the darkness. A single overhead light cast a dim glow over the room revealing an empty concrete floor. The edges of the room were hidden in shadows.

Misha gave a short wave on the hand and the small group came to a halt. He stood there for a long time as still as a statue. The only sign of movement was the faint twitching of his nose and the flicking back and forth of his ears.

Stealth held perfectly still trying to see, smell and hear everything. The smell of dust and a mix of human sweat, old coffee and stagnant water came to his nose.

"It looks clear," Misha whispered in a barely audible tone. "But go easily." He stepped down onto the floor with the slow care of a man walking in a minefield. The others followed behind and soon the group was in the center of the room. Three of the walls, the floor and ceiling were of plain unadorned concrete. There was a large 6 meter high arched portal that led to a concrete

lined tunnel. On one wall was a small control panel with an even smaller display screen and keypad. Set in one wall was a clear plastic window which had a small gun port beneath it. Next to that was a solid metal door.

"Wow, you could have spared a little of the budget on decorations," Misha muttered.

"With some paint, a few pictures and some throw pillows this place could look fabulous!" the nanites joked.

A quick look past the metal door revealed an empty room behind the armored window and gun port.

"Back during the government days there was a guard on duty here at all times," the head of ABERA commented. "But it's been unused since then."

Emily walked across the platform and stopped in front of the entrance. She peered into the tunnel but all she saw was total darkness. "Who's first to go from the dark, creepy station into the even darker and even more creepy tunnel?"

The tunnel was pitch black to a normal human eye and nothing would be visible. But no one in the small group was a normal human. Misha and Stealth had cybernetics that allowed them to still see in the darkness. Emily had been gifted by the strange transformation with a body designed by evolution for hunting at night and all three had highly sensitive smell and hearing. Even so advanced electronics and evolution had its limits and most of the tunnel was invisible to them. This was now a world of smell and sound. Where the faintest whiff or the slightest sound could warn of an attack. What warned Misha was the sound of something scrapping on concrete.

"AMBUSH!" The vulpine ranger shouted and spun in the direction of the sound. He brought his bow up, drew and released an arrow all in one swift motion. Misha heard Stealth let loose a string of curses and he heard the shouting, scuffling and cursing of people in combat.

From the quiver on his back he drew another arrow, this one with the fat, explosive tip. From his cursing and her snarling he had a good idea where Stealth and Emily were. He loosed the arrow at a wall at the edge of fighting.

BOOM! The explosion lit up the tunnel revealing Stealth, swords in hand dueling with a score of large animals. Emily had her hindquarters pushed against a wall and was lashing out with claws and teeth at three animals each her own size or larger. Then the light faded as fast as it had appeared but it didn't vanish all together. Debris and other items caught fire leaving the fight in a semidarkness of shadows.

A massive figure loomed up and raced straight at the archer. Misha took a step backward and snapped off an arrow. The shadowy animal slammed into him sending the fox tumbling to the ground. He felt a searing pain in his right shoulder before he hit the floor. Misha was stunned and confused for a moment.

ROAR! He heard the deep throated, powerful roar that filled the tunnels and echoed down from the distant past. Misha felt the primal power of a predator that had dominated the food chain for millennia and knew no challengers.

It took a moment for the fox ranger to realize the fight was over. Misha slowly sat up mindful of the injury to his right shoulder. By the light of a small fire he saw Stealth and Emily standing back to back.

"What were those things?" Stealth asked. The feline superhero was standing with his blades in both hands. His body was tense and alert for the next attack.

"Panthera leo atrox," the nanites answered. "The North American Cave Lion."

"Wonderful," Misha said sarcastically. "Another group of vicious predators to worry about."

Stealth gave a chirp of laughter. "Maybe the lions will keep the wolves away."

"That species was NOT listed among the ones being recreated here."

"That's interesting and complicating."

"I don't like complications," Misha muttered as he slowly looked around. The worst of the wounds were gone but others were still healing.

"The good news is it confirms that the changes are not being caused by some escaped virus that ABERA created."

"We already knew that," Stealth commented. "I'm more worried about what our other visitors have in mind."

Misha shrugged. "I don't know but they're gone. So we can relax for a moment."

"One of them had a spear! He had a spear!" Stealth said as he leaned against the tunnel wall.

"What?" Misha asked, confused. "He had a spear?"

"YES! A spear. You know - a long stick with a pointy bit on the end!" Stealth said nervously. "Didn't you see it?"

"NO! I was too busy trying to keep from being eaten!" Misha shot back. "The ones I was fighting were using those long claws and VERY sharp teeth!"

"Mine had a spear," the cheetah countered. "He stuck me in the side with it." He pulled his hand away from his side revealing a good sized wound that was closing up quickly.

Misha looked at the wound. "That was not done by teeth or claws."

"You know what this means?" Stealth said softly. "At least one of those things must have been a tech that got changed."

"Make sense," Misha agreed. "But why did he attack us? We're here to help."

"They probably don't know that," the nanites commented. "And we do confirm the use of a weapon. It was a spear with a point that looked to be made of metal."

"Track them! We need to find them and establish contact."

"Agreed!" Misha said and knelt down on the ground.

"You can use thermal imaging to locate their bodies and follow."

"Or I could just follow their footprints in the dirt," Misha countered and pointed to the clearly visible prints that led down the tunnel.

"Sure, do it the hard way."

Suddenly Misha stopped and crouched low to the floor. The others followed suit. "We are not alone," he whispered.

"Our feline friends are back?" The sabertooth asked.

"I think so and they're on both sides of us this time," the fox answered. His infrared eyesight could just pick up some faint heat signatures that could be animals.

"Now what?" The female asked as she looked back and forth.

Misha stood up straight and in plain sight in the center of the tunnel. "THIS IS STAFF SERGEANT MISHA BRIGHTLEAF. WE'RE HERE TO HELP."

There was only silence in reply.

"THIS IS STAFF SERGEANT MISHA BRIGHTLEAF. WE'RE HERE TO HELP."

"Didn't we just do this with the sabertooths?" Stealth commented loudly.

"This does feel familiar," Misha joked. He caught a flash of movement off to his left and turned towards it.

“We know who you are,” Stealth said out loud. “At least who you used to be.”

“This is so confusing,” Misha muttered.

“Who are you?” A voice suddenly asked from the darkness.

“What are you?” Another asked. “And what did you do to us?”

The fox shook his head. “We didn’t do anything. We were sent here to find out what happened.”

“Let’s stop talking to shadows,” Stealth said. He reached onto his belt and grabbed something. There was a soft click and the whole tunnel was suddenly lit up like mid-day.

The sudden light from the light exposed a large section of concrete tunnel and a dozen, large, lion like animals standing on either side of the three adventurers. These felines were twice the size of normal lions and none had manes.

"Panthera leo atrox," the nanites commented. *"Also called the North American lion."*

Mixed in with the lions and lionesses Misha saw several spotted felines that looked to be oversized leopards. He also saw at least 4 more smilodons.

"What are the spotted cats?" Stealth asked.

"Panthera gombaszoegensis," the nanites answered. *"Also known as the European Jaguar."*

"Panthera gombaszoegensis? Could they have picked a longer name?" Stealth joked. "Jaguar. Now that's a nice, short name."

"What happened?" A lion asked still keeping his distance. "Did everyone change?"

"It seems so," Misha responded. "When the lab went silent they sent us in to investigate."

"What have you found so far?" One of the jaguars asked. The feline was examining the new arrivals carefully through slitted eyes.

"A lot of once extinct animals running around, very much alive," Stealth commented.

"This is Firefly 11," Misha said calmly over the military radio channels. "We've contacted another group of survivors. All changed like the rest. 18 in total."

"What's their condition?" Lisa asked.

"All are in good health. At least as good as you can be having been changed into a long extinct species," Misha answered.

"What species?" Captain Miller's question came over the radio.

"North American Lion, European Jaguar and more Sabertooths," Misha responded. "I'll send more data in a few minutes including some DNA samples."

"Hmm," the professor said. "Interesting."

"What is?" The captain asked.

"They're all mammalian species of the Pleistocene era. All the creatures you've run into are from the same era."

"That is interesting and I'm sure it's an important clue but what exactly does it mean?" Misha asked.

The professor gave a shrug even though the people he was talking to were several hundred miles away and couldn't see the action. "I'm not sure but it bears more investigating."

"Agreed."

"All the humans on this island have changed but not Misha and Stealth," the one asked. "Why?"

"Because fox and cheetah already existed in the Pleistocene era," captain Miller responded slowly. "So they didn't count."

"That make sense in an odd sort of way," the colonel commented. "There is definitely some sort of intelligence behind this."

One of the lions walked in circles around the group in the tunnel. "I have to admit that we're all fine examples of our breeds. If we had whatever process did this to us we could use it on regular animals and quickly recreate the entire species!"

"I think someone already has," Lieutenant O'Grady said over the radio as she looked at the group around her.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, look at all of us," she says. "We're an even mix of male and females all in fine physical health and at breeding age."

"I always wanted children," sergeant Hernandez commented. "But not like this."

Emily slowly padded towards one of the lions and looked at him intently. "Philip? Is that you?"

The large, male feline cocked his head to one side. Then the lion sniffed at the Smilodon. "Emily? Is that you?" He walked up to the sabertooth and licked her gently on the muzzle. "Are you all right?"

She nuzzled Philip tenderly. "I'm fine. Well. I'm in good health. How are you?"

"Well, you mean aside from having been changed into a half ton of killer feline," the lion said. "It did cure my baldness," he joked.

"Was everyone effected?" One of the jaguars asked.

"Everyone on all of the islands," Misha answered. "But it hasn't spread beyond them to the mainland."

"Yet," Stealth added.

Misha shot the cheetah a hard glance. "And it won't spread any further."

"What caused it?" Another jaguar asked.

Misha shrugged. "We're not sure. We've already ruled out nanites and are fairly certain it was not a biological agent."

"We are sure it was deliberately done," Stealth added.

A lion stepped forward and sat down in front of them. "By who?"

The fox archer shrugged. "That we don't know. We have a few suspects but nothing solid yet."

"Why are you lurking in these creepy tunnels?" Stealth asked and waved his hands around highlighting the concrete walls that surrounded them.

"The emergency bunker is here," the one jaguar explained and patted the floor with a paw. "When everything went weird and all of us changed we came down here to the emergency bunker. It seemed a good place to hold up till we could figure out what happened."

"And there are some VERY dangerous predators loose up there," the lion Philip said and waved over his head with one paw.

"You're a half ton of pure, 100% predator," Stealth commented. "What could scare you?"

"You don't want to know!"

"Probably not," Misha said. "but we need to know anyway."

"We're not sure exactly sure what it was," Philip explained. "But it was a lot larger than we are. It came crashing through the trees and we just took off."

"Smart idea," Misha responded.

The captain stretched out his massive body, feeling the power in each muscle as it moved. He spotted Sergeant Wexford watching him closely.

"The power in that body is amazing. Your whole body is filled with muscles," the sergeant commented.

He examined his paw with its long, wickedly sharp claws. "I could get used to this."

"Oboe 04," came a voice over the radio. "Oboe 22 is inbound. ETA 15 mikes."

The feline captain leaned close to the radio. "Oboe 04, acknowledged. We're waiting at the rendezvous point."

Miller heard a deep snarl and looked up from the radio to see a dozen massive dire wolves charging at them in a solid wall of teeth, fur and muscles.

Team Oboe 04 had been changed physically into animals but they were still soldiers. They closed ranks and stood in a tight circle.

A cheetah was charged by a dire wolf three times his size. The feline sergeant waited till the canine was almost on top of him before acting. He lunged forward and downward as his teeth wrapped around the wolf's throat. He twisted his body and sent the massive canine flying through the air. The wolf collided with a large bush and tumbled to the ground amidst a lot of snarling and flailing legs, branches and leaves.

The captain lashed out with one of his massive paws catching the lead wolf on the side of the head and sending the canine tumbling to the ground. "STOP THAT!" He snarled. "Back off!"

The wolves stopped and froze for a moment.

"Did you just talk?" One of the dire wolves asked slowly. Her teeth were bared and her hackles raised.

"A talking wolf is asking me if I talked?" The feline captain snapped.

"God this feels like a Narnia movie," sergeant Harrid snarled. The cheetah was standing tail to tail with Lieutenant O'Grady. "All we need is four kids and a giant lion."

"Why not? I've seen a lot weirder things here these last few days," the wolf was standing just out of claw's reach of the sergeant.

The lead wolf that had been knocked to the ground stood up and shook itself. "Identify yourselves," she snarled.

"I am captain Miller, U.S. Army. We've been sent to help." Miller explained. "Who are you?"

The wolf stood up straight and walked right over to the captain. "Ayesha Jefferson. Senior officer in charge of security on Hart island. Can anyone explain to me what the hell is going on?"

The group suddenly halted in the middle of the tunnel. One of the lions walked over to the right hand wall where a metal door sat flush with the wall. There was no knob, handle or lock, but barely visible in the dim light of the flashlight was a small slot. It was just about the right size to fit a credit card.

"I have a card that works," the lion named Philip said. "At least my card used to work." The lion like creature reared up on its hind legs and placed both front paws on the wall next to the slot. "I'm glad I got my hands back." With one paw he fumbled with something on a chain around his neck. He finally found a small identification card and slid it into the slot. After a moment there was a soft click and the door popped open a little bit.

Philip dropped back down to the floor and pushed the door open wider with one paw. It revealed a flight of steps that led upward.

At the top of the steps a corridor of bare concrete walls led off to the left and right. "To the left is the power station," Philip said. "To the right is the emergency station."

Misha noticed a lot of slots that were several inches wide and over a foot tall. Peering into one he saw below them the train tunnel they had just left.

"Gun ports," one of the lionesses explained. "From here a person could control the entire tunnel and prevent anyone from getting near the one door in or traveling to the other islands."

After a short journey the corridor turned suddenly to the left. In front of them was a steel door. Next to that were several slots in the wall that Misha recognized as gun slits. From those slits a person could control the entire corridor, To his right was another steel door with the word EMERGENCY printed on it in bright, red letters.

One of the felines walked up to the door marked emergency and placed a paw on it. "This is the main security office. You can access anywhere and control almost everything."

"Are there any control stations?" Misha asked as he looked around.

"A surveillance station is in the watch post," one of the felines commented and pointed further down the tunnel. "You can see all the security cameras from there."

Misha found a card slot placed inconspicuously into the wall next to the door. Philip leaned against the wall and slid the ID card into the slot. There was a soft CLICK and the metal door popped open a little.

The fox touched the door and swung it all the way open easily, revealing a brightly lit area behind it. The room was large and it was filled with a wide variety of things. In front of the door they had just entered was a large desk on which was a monitor, keyboard and mouse. Behind that were several rows of metal racks most of which were empty but several held a variety of weapons, clothing and equipment. On one wall was a half dozen servers. The powerful computers were humming and running like normal. In front of it was a desk with a computer console - a keyboard and monitor built in.

Misha walked over to the console and placed both hands on the keyboard.

"Accessing the system. Entering the level 1 admin code we obtained from Sanchez," the nanites said. "That will override anyone else's commands."

"Code accepted. Giving John Borentelli full access."

"Thanks!" John said cheerfully over the radio. "Now I have more access to the system." The sabertooth was silent for a moment. "This will take a while but I can confirm the orders setting the base on emergency came from James Vaughn the facility director."

"Any explanation why?" Sanchez asked.

"No," the feline programmer responded. "We'll need to do more research into what happened. I have reestablished the data links but only on the encrypted channels. Also I'm uploading all the latest files back to Bangor."

"And we're sending it to the DOD as well," the nanites added. "Also commencing a search of the records ourselves."

"I've got control of the defenses but I'm keeping them active and enforcing the quarantine for the time being."

"We can control the defenses as well."

"Can you override any commands Borentelli can send?" The colonel asked.

"Yes," the nanites answered. "Well at least we think so. You humans can be so inventive and ingenious."

"Can you bring up some information on Plum and Diamond?" The colonel asked over the radio. "Locate some of the missing people?"

"No," came the fast answer. "All the sensors there are down."

"Confirmed," the nanites added. "Someone or something has disabled all the sensors."

"I can still contact the train stations at Plum and Diamond but nothing else," the feline programmer said. "I can activate the train system if you want."

"Tempting!" Misha commented. It would be nice to ride instead of walking but until we have things under control and someone does a detailed examination of the system let's leave it inactive."

John let out a low growl. "I can reactivate the secondary communication antenna on Hart to at least allow communication to the parts of the system there. Everything else is down. Diamond, Plum and Carelton islands are out. Not shut off or locked. They seem to be physically offline. The radio links, satellite and ground cables are all showing offline. As if someone had literally cut the cables with an axe. At least the power plant is responding. I'm restoring full power to Hart and the tunnel system up to this point."

"Let's clear the rest of these rooms," Misha ordered. "Then we'll continue onward to Carelton."

Misha stood in the doorway and looked down the corridor towards the corner, the steel door and those gun slits. "Everyone else stay here while I go further. At least till I can be sure the coast is clear."

He took a deep breath and stepped out of the safety of the doorway and into the corridor. As a soldier Misha was painfully aware of how really exposed he was standing in the open in the middle of the hallway. If someone started shooting there was nowhere for him to hide or take cover behind. Years of training and combat had given him an almost instinctive feel of being so exposed. Slowly he made his way forward, placing each step carefully and looking for even the slightest sign of an ambush.

After what seemed an eternity he reached the wall and was too close for any fire to reach him from those gun slits. Misha pulled out the id card and slid it into the slot he found at eye level next to the door. He half expected an explosion or a burst of fire from some hidden gun turret but all he got was the click of the door opening.

The room behind the gun slits proved to be well lit and filled with an impressive rack of weapons. On the wall there was a large metal table. Misha realized it was just the right height to hold a machine gun so it would fire through the gun slits and sweep the entire corridor. And conveniently placed on a rack next to the table was an M60A3 machine gun and 4 boxes of

ammunition. Thankfully although the room was filled with weapons there was no one there to use them. With a wave of the hand the fox super ordered the rest of his group forward. In moments they had quickly moved down the corridor and joined him in the new room.

"You really don't do anything by half measures," the fox said as he looked over the room with its large collection of weapons. Aside from the M60A3 machine guns (there were 3) he saw at least a dozen assault rifles, submachine guns, pistols and even several boxes of grenades.

"Most of it's leftover from the paranoid, cold war era," Philip explained. "I always thought it was overkill but now I'm not so sure." He waved a paw towards the back of the room. There's a door to the surveillance room. We can see everywhere from there."

Carefully the group made its way across the room and arrived at another steel door set into the wall. Philip used his ID card and used it. The door opened as easily as all the previous ones had. The room was small and filled with a wide variety of things. One wall was covered with a dozen monitors each set to a different scene. In front of that was a large desk on which was a keyboard and mouse. A door led to a small, closet sized room with a toilet.

A laptop rested on one corner of the desk and a screen was up and running but Misha couldn't see what was running on the computer. A single chair sat behind the desk and a metal locker were the other items in the room.

"Maybe there is some clue on that laptop." Misha stepped up to the desk and he stared at the laptop. He gave a bark of laughter.

"What?" Stealth asked.

"Someone was playing solitaire," the fox hero explained. "And doing pretty good."

Misha had his bow up with an arrow nocked and ready. "I smell a sabertooth. One I've not smelt before."

Suddenly the door to the toilet crashed open and something charged straight at them. Misha had a brief moment to recognize that the mass of flesh, muscle and teeth was a sabertooth.

Misha cursed loudly and pulled a grenade from his belt and tossed it straight at the charging feline. The small sphere hit the feline on the nose and exploded in a web of white, sticky threads that engulf the smilodon. The massive carnivore toppled to the floor next to Stealth with a loud, meaty thump.

Stealth pressed the sharp points of his blades against the vulnerable throat of their attacker but didn't draw blood. "We're here to help!"

They got a good look at their assailant. It was a large, male Smilodon, this one had tan fur and black spots that reminded Misha of a leopard.

Their opponent stopped struggling and eyed them with the cold, hard glare of a predator. "Who sent you? What's happening around here?" He snarled.

Misha sighed loudly. "It's hard to explain. When ABERA lost contact with this complex we were sent in to find out what's happening." The vulpine ranger waved a hand at the cheetah morph. "Let him up Stealth." He reached down and unwrapped the netting from around the smilodon's legs.

The blade wielding super slowly backed away removing his sword points from the other feline's throat.

The smilodon slowly stood up. "What is happening?" He asked and rubbed his neck where the blades had rested.

"Let's start at the beginning," Misha ordered. "I am staff sergeant Brightleaf and my friend with the swords is Stealth. We're from the Defense Department. All our four legged friends are employees. But you probably know that already. Who are you?"

"I'm Nathan Darnakov," the new smilodon said slowly. "I'm assigned here as part of security."

"Confirmed," the nanites said. "Darnakov, Nathaniel is listed on the roster. Army service, E4 with the military police."

Darnakov picked at some stray, webbing stuck to his fur. "Everything was normal until 2 days ago. Suddenly alarms started going off and I lost contact with Diamond, then Plum and finally Carelton. Then I started to change and I was a little occupied for a while. When I had finished changing and freaking out all the computers and communications channels were down. I've been holed up here since then. Thankfully there were emergency rations I could use and there is a toilet in here."

"Why didn't you leave the room?" Misha asked.

Nathan held up his right front paw. "Well until a few hours ago I didn't have any hands. Hard to open a door without a thumb and fingers."

"How did you use the toilet?" Misha asked.

"With great difficulty," Darnakov responded in a straight tone.

Stealth opened his mouth and started to speak but stopped. Then he shook his head and closed his mouth. "I'm not going to touch that straight line."

"All right," the ranger said. "We'll continue onward. I want all of you to head to Hart island and link up with the first group there. Stealth, Emily, Philip and me will continue onward to Plum and then Diamond."

Slowly a large bird winged it's ways towards Hart island. It had the look and shape of an ordinary albatross but it moved with a singular determination that was so unlike the normal seabird. It dropped lower but not too low. All of its senses were active and looking for any sign of trouble. Once it crossed the beach it turned to the north a little and flew slower until it came to the break in the woods it was looking for.

The bird circled the clearing twice making sure there was no traps or ambush waiting for her. Finally it dropped down for a landing. It folded it's wings and dropped the small black satchel that it had been carrying in its beak.

"Oboe 04 reporting. Oboe 22 is on the ground. No incidents," Miller reported over the radio.

The large bird looked over the crowd of animals assembled in the clearing. Wolves, lynx and cheetahs looked at her. "Good lord!" It exclaimed. "It's like the Bronx zoo!"

"Coming from a bird that's an ironic statement," one of the wolves snarled.

A large lynx stepped forward. "I'm captain Miller. Identify yourself."

The bird stiffened. "Warrant officer Danielle Sampers Sir. Reporting as ordered."

"Welcome to Hart island," Miller said. "Any trouble getting here?"

"No, I left the transport ten miles out and flew in myself. It was harder than I expected but I made it fine. Thankfully none of the wildlife tried to attack me," the mage answered. "I . . ." The bird shivered and then forcefully shook it's head.

"What's wrong?"

The bird spun her head around, looking in all directions. "Something is aware I am here."

"What is it?" O'Grady asked. Her right paw grasped the trigger on her carbine.

The bird shook her head. "I'm not sure yet but it was definitely magical. Just a brief contact. A reconnaissance."

"It was feeling you out," Hernandez commented as the cheetah examined the forest around them. "It's sure to come back."

"That's for certain," the warrant officer commented. "I am ready for it. I have wards in place to protect and warn me."

"So is the trouble here caused by magic?" Captain Miller asked.

"Yes, " the avian mage replied firmly. "Of that I am certain. The magic used to change all of you is clearly visible." She stepped closer to the lynx and peered at him. "The magic is strong but not sophisticated."

"We need to know more about our enemy," Miller said. "To understand who and what we are facing."

"And for that we need more contact and interaction," Sampers explained.

"By interaction you mean fighting it?" The professor asked.

"Well hopefully not too much fighting," the mage responded. "But fighting it might be the only way to gain information."

"So you want to be attacked?" The professor asked.

"Not attacked, just try something to provoke a reaction," the lieutenant added.

"The quickest way I think is to not be an animal," the professor said. "It's what got us changed."

"Now that sounds like a good idea," Miller said. "You'll get a good, personal experience with how we've all been changed. But first let's move away from here. If it knows you're here it's sure to come back."

Carefully the odd group moved from the clearing and deeper into the woods. In spite of the changes to their body their training was intact and they spread out with two moving out as scouts and one following at the rear. Her bird form was not conducive to walking so the warrant officer rode on Capt Miller's back. No one spoke and all moved carefully so as to make no sound that might give away their location.

After several minutes Miller came to a halt. They were in a secluded area with tall trees and bushes hiding them from sight. "This looks like a good spot. We'll set up camp here for the moment."

The others quickly looked around, checking the area quietly to be sure nothing or no one was nearby. He, the professor and the mage waited patiently till the other soldiers finished.

"We're clear," O'Grady said in a whisper.

Sergeant Hernandez nodded in agreement. "I'm starting to like this body. The senses are fantastic. Could have used them back in Iraq. We wouldn't have walked into that ambush in Ishan Bayt I bet."

"All these forms we have are of very successful hunters," the professor commented as he settled down in a comfortable spot. "They were around for several hundred thousand years."

"All right," Sampers said slowly. "I'll lower my wards and then take my human form again. There is no telling what will happen so you had best step back."

The group moved backward, away from the mage/bird putting several meters between them and her.

The mage's body seemed to shimmer and grow taller as it lost its avian features and became more human like.

There was a sudden look of surprise on her face and she fell backwards. A human started the fall but a massive feline landed on all four paws.

The new feline examined her body for a moment. "Interesting!" Her body was similar to a smilodon's but leaner and not as stocky. Her legs were longer and thinner. But the most surprising was the massive tusk like teeth a smilodon was famous for were not there. The canine teeth were there but they only protruded a short way out of the mouth. Still those teeth had serrated edges and were meant for killing prey. Her gray fur was fairly thick but had no spots or stripes. "Not a sabertooth but a close relative."

"That change was a lot faster than ours," Hernandez said as the group moved closer.

"You wanted to get its attention," doctor Temki said. "You got its undivided attention."

"Are you all right?" The captain asked.

"I'm all right. I expected an attack but nothing that strong!" The new feline responded as she examined her new body.

O'Grady looked at the new arrival. "Homotherium Serum," she said.

"What?" The mage asked.

"Your new body. It's the name of your species; Homotherium Serum," the lieutenant explained. "Related to the Smilodon Fatalis but with longer legs and shorter teeth. Not as stocky, leaner. Believed to have inhabited more northern realms and solely hunted mammoths."

"You know that just from looking at me?" the feline asked.

"No," came the reply.

"Where did you get that information?"

"The internet of course," O'Grady looked down at a small laptop that lay open on the ground between her front legs.

The station at Carelton island was if possible even more plain and drab than the one on Hart. The dim lighting revealed a small, bare concrete lined room a mere five meters long and twice that deep. The only exit was a set of steps leading upward. Next to that was a large doorway closed by a roll up door.

"That's a freight elevator," the female sabertooth said.

Slowly the group made its way up the stairs with Misha in the lead. The fox moved cautiously, one step at a time, alert for any sign of danger. But for all the caution all they found were steps leading up to a closed metal door.

Misha examined the door for a moment, examining the handle, hinges and the edge all the way around. "It looks clean, I don't see any booby traps. Doesn't mean they aren't there, it just means I can't see any."

He gently took hold of the handle and slowly turned it. There was a soft click as the lock opened. Misha slowly pushed on the door half expecting it to explode but nothing happened. Literally. The door did not explode. It also didn't move in the slightest. "It's not moving."

"Is it locked?" Stealth asked and cocked his head to one side.

"No," Misha replied. "I can turn the handle. It's just not moving. It must be blocked."

"Maybe we can push it open?" Stealth said and stepped up to stand beside the fox. Both Supers leaned their bodies against the door and pushed. In spite of their combined strength the door moved only a few inches.

"Emily, Philip, see if you can both squeeze up here," Misha ordered. "We need your weight and muscle." It took several minutes of maneuvering before all four had their weight against the door.

All four pushed hard and the door finally started to move, one grinding inch at a time. Bright, natural light flooded into the dark passageway and they had to blink a few times to adjust. The light grew brighter as the door opened wider and wider. Finally they were able to open the door wide enough for them to slip through.

What greeted them there was amazing. Waist high grass and bushes filled the area immediately around the doorway. Those quickly gave way to thick, tall trees with trunks meters wide that towered up into the sky. Their tops lost to view high overhead.

"I Thought you said this island was supposed to be barren," Stealth snarled as he drew both of his swords. "This is a forest."

Emily looked around nervously. "It WAS empty yesterday. Nothing was here but some grass and rocks,"

"I've never been in a forest this dense," Misha commented. He looked at an elm tree with a trunk at least fifteen feet wide. "These are old growth trees. It takes two and three hundred years for a tree to get that big."

"Impossible! That island was empty less than 24 hours ago."

Misha looked at the trees that towered over them and the bushes and vines underfoot. "Well it's a forest now. Not one inch of ground left uncovered. Literally."

"Can we get a satellite sweep of all the islands?" Misha asked. "See what else has changed."

"Not right away," came the answer from a captain back at Fort Benning. "We don't have the assets to spare but we're deploying an MQ-1R drone."

"We can't explore this island," Misha said. "Not without a chainsaw to clear a path. The best we can do is try and make it to the beach and walk around on that."

"We have an update from Oboe 04. Our magical expert is on the ground," the colonel said. "And she confirmed that magic is the cause behind the changes."

"That's good news for the CDC," Stealth commented. "But what does that do for us?"

"It explains many things. Like how a barren island grew a 300 year old, old growth forest in less than 24 hours."

"This is a complication. Our knowledge of magic is strictly limited."

"Exploring Carelton is out of the question," Misha said. "Recommend we go on to Plum and Diamond."

"Agreed," was the colonel's response over the radio. "Proceed to Plum and secure the port and airfield. Identify if anyone has come or left the islands since the emergency started. Then Diamond but go carefully. Do not engage if you can help it. I'll send Oboe 04 there ASAP."

"Acknowledged," Misha responded. "We'll need the support, especially the magic." He stood up and started to turn back towards the station.

"STOP!"

"What?" Misha asked nervously as he nocked an arrow and looked about for signs of trouble.

"Turn to your left 23 degrees."

"Why?" Misha asked and turned to his left.

"Down at your feet."

The fox looked down and there in front of him was a small little plant barely ankle high.

"That's it. we need a closer examination!"

Misha knelt down in front of the tiny plant. Now that he was closer the fox could make out the stem and leaves of the small plant. In summer he figured it would bloom with beautiful flowers. "Why and what's the name of the plant?"

"Insidiamini fabrica," the nanites responded.

That's a big name for a such a small plant!"

"Dr Osawa is asking for a sample of the plant. Preferably the whole plant brought back intact with plenty of soil around the roots."

"We don't have the time to go plant collecting," Misha snarled.

"But that plant is supposed to have gone extinct fifteen thousand years ago! We must get a sample!"

*"PLEASE!PLEASE! PLEASE!PLEASE! PLEASE!PLEASE! PLEASE!PLEASE!
PLEASE!PLEASE!"*

"If you don't we'll resort to the ultimate torture - Sarcasm. Or MRE jokes."

"Not that!" Misha joked. "We don't have the time or the resources to carry a potted plant all around. BUT I can take samples of the branches and leaves and mark the location. Later we'll come back and get a whole plant."

"Sounds like a plan!"

"Just touch the plant for a few moments and we'll gain information as well."

From one of the pouches on his belt Misha produced a dozen small plastic bags of the type usually used to hold sandwiches and snacks.

"You have sandwich bags in your ammo pouches? What else do you have in those pouches?" Stealth asked and tapped once of the pouches on Misha's web gear.

"Four extra bow strings along with tools for cleaning my bow and pistol. Two complete changes of clothing including four pairs of socks. A 9mm pistol and sixty rounds for it. A dozen grenades both fragmentation and stun, two claymore mines, two small radios, a first aid pouch, a compass, two canteens, a small flashlight, a big flashlight, scissors, a small mirror, a roll of duct tape, several flares, several meters of cord good for climbing or tying things. A small, folding saw, a small toolkit, a survival kit, an emergency blanket, a variety of chemlights, four days worth of emergency rations, extra batteries and a variety of bits and pieces the nanites want me to carry but whose purpose escapes me. Even after they explained it to me several times."

"Do you really need all that stuff?" Stealth asked dubiously.

"I like to be prepared!" Misha said proudly. "I have everything we need."

"Food," Stealth said calmly. "I bet you don't have room in there for MRE's."

"No MRE's but I have food." From a large pouch he pulled a sandwich bag this time the bag actually held a sandwich.

Stealth took the plastic bag and pulled the sandwich out. He looked at it a moment "Ham and cheese!" the feline lifted up the bread for a moment. "What? No mustard?" He joked.

Misha reached into another pouch and pulled out 2 small, yellow packets. "Spicy or regular?"

"We've been reviewing video of all your time here so far and we have spotted at least fourteen species of plants that simply do not exist in the modern world," the nanites commented. "Nine are completely unknown and the others are only known through fossils."

The cheetah morph bit into the sandwich. "That's good! Where did you get it?"

"I got the cold cuts at the Stop and Shop up on the turnpike," the fox answered. "They always have fresh cold cuts."

"I have to go there when we get back!" He said and finished the last of the sandwich.

"Now if you're done with your snack can we get back to work?" He reached down and gently touched one of the leaves of the plant.

"Contact successful," the nanites said. "Beginning examination. Storing DNA matrix."

"FACINATING! This could be an entirely new genus!"

"The one next to Stealth seems to be a subspecies of the daisy family."

Stealth was holding what looked like a typical daisy with white petals and a greenish yellow center. The flower was about three inches wide and held on a single, long, straight stem. "It's beautiful."

"It's full name is Nipponanthemum nipponicum."

"We called that Montauk daisy," Misha said. "We still have them growing at my parent's house."

"We have initial identification of twelve more species within the immediate area."

"Don't get distracted," Misha ordered. "We have a lot to do."

"Understood. Withdrawing now. Uploading initial examination results."

"We ARE coming back right?"

"Of course," the fox answered. "Besides there is no telling what we'll find up ahead."

There was a loud screech and the trees to their left split apart revealing a massive creature. Brown-black feathers covered a body that was over eight feet tall and weighed at least four hundred pounds. The head had a large crest of bright red feathers and an axe like beak over a foot long. Its wings were small and tucked closed to its body. But the bird's legs were massive and ended with a three toed foot each tipped with impressively long claws.

"Good gravy! What is that!"

"Titanis Walleri," the nanites responded. *"But the common name is Terror Bird."*

"Now that's the perfect name for it!" Misha commented as he nocked an arrow.

The bird let out a screech and charged straight at the two heroes.

Misha snapped off two arrows as a quarter ton of massive carnivore charged at them. "Emily you go left, Philip you go right. Try and get behind it."

Stealth twisted and dodged to his left as the bird's massive head snapped shut just barely missing the feline's stomach. The cheetah lashed out with his swords leaving a pair of crisscrossed wounds on the massive bird's chest. A pair of arrows stuck into the flesh right about the sword marks.

Busy dealing with the cheetah and the fox the bird did not see Philip and Emily racing around it. The two powerful felines charged up behind. Emily slashed with both paws as Philip sank his massive teeth into the avian's flank. Before the bird could react they backed off. Emily barely missed having her spine cracked by the bird's massive beak.

The bird seemed to be unaffected by all the injuries. They only seemed to make the massive creature even madder. The hunter lashed out at Misha with a huge, clawed foot cutting through the fox's armor and into the flesh behind it.

Misha leapt backwards as that massive beak snapped down onto his shoulder. Misha lashed out with his free hand and punched the bird in the eye. Surprised, the avian let go and shook its head.

The cheetah leapt from the ground and landed on the terror bird's back. He drove both blades deep into the monster's flesh. The bird spun its large head about and snapped at the feline. Stealth leapt up, the deadly beak missed its target.

Stealth flipped in midair and landed on the ground some ten feet from the bird. "It's the chicken dinner from hell! Where's Colonel Sanders when you need him!"

The sabertooth and the lion charged forward but the bird swung towards them and squawked loudly. The two predators dug their paws into the dirt and came to a sudden halt to stay out of the range of the axe like beak and deadly claws.

The archer stepped backward and clutched at his shoulder. "I think we are the dinner special."

The bird stood a short distance from the four heroes, obviously confused by the fierce resistance put up by its future meal. Easily it reached its head around and plucked the two arrows from its body and tossed them to the ground.

"Relax! All we need is a thousand gallons of barbeque sauce and we're set!" Stealth joked.

Misha growled at their avian attacker. "I used to like chicken."

"We can't kill it," Stealth asked. "How do we bring it down?"

"Hit it with stun grenades and a web grenade," Misha said. "Once it's on the ground we tie it up." He took a length of rope from out of a pocket and handed it to the cheetah.

"Sounds like a plan!" The feline said and nodded in agreement.

The four heroes turned to the bird who was eyeing them. All five stood stock still for a moment watching and gauging. Slowly the realization came to Misha that the fight had shifted and the hunter had become the hunted.

"I'll get the legs," Misha ordered. "You get the beak Stealth. Everyone else stay back."

Misha took a stun grenade off his belt and then a second grenade. This one was round painted a light brown. He pulled the pin on the stun grenade and tossed it at the bird. There was a bright flash and an ear splitting blast that sent the avian staggering backward.

Moving fast Misha tossed the brown colored grenade at the bird's large legs. It struck right above the knee. There was a loud pop and a web of gray, sticky tendrils exploded out and wrapped around the creature's legs. The bird let out a loud squawk and tumbled to the ground, its legs bound tight together.

Misha and Stealth rushed forward trying to avoid the flailing legs and snapping beak.

"Watch those legs!" Misha warned.

"Watch that beak too!" Stealth added.

In moments the two had the bird's legs and beak bound shut and they seemed to be safe. The two checked the ropes one more time. "He's not going anywhere!" Stealth commented happily.

Misha rubbed his shoulder. Where the bird had bitten him was a good sized dent. "Good,"

"Are you all right?"

Misha flexed his shoulder a few times. "I'm fine. I'm glad I wore the armored shoulder pads today."

"How is the bird?" Sanchez asked. "Is it hurt badly?"

"I'm fine, thank you for asking," Stealth commented sarcastically.

"I know you are fine," the ABERA director responded over the radio. "But that bird is one of two in existence and doesn't regenerate and heal its own wounds like you do. Thankfully the injuries aren't bad."

"One of two?" Misha asked and looked around nervously. "I really could have used that information earlier."

The sound of crashing and screeching filled the air. The bushes parted and another Titanis charged into the clearing.

Misha let out a curse. "This one's even bigger!"

The second bird charged forward and Misha and Stealth stepped backward. The bird reached its fallen mate and stopped. The massive head bent down and the sharp beak slashed through the bindings on the legs and beak of its mate. With a lot of squawking the first bird stood up and seemed to shake off its injuries.

Birds and superheroes stared at each other for a moment. Each eyeing and judging the other. Stealth hefted his weapons and lightly tapped the two blades together with a sound like the chiming of a bell. Misha nocked an arrow but didn't aim it. Philip let out a low, guttural snarl. Emily just curled her lips but made no sound.

The four watched as the two birds backed away slowly. Neither took their eyes off the mammals. When there was a hundred feet between the two groups they spun about and sprinted back into the woods. In seconds they were gone from sight.

No one moved for a long moment, half expecting the two avians to return. "I am getting tired of all the strange creatures here trying to eat me," Misha muttered.

"When we're done I want a chicken dinner," Stealth commented. "A BIG chicken dinner."

"What other nasty things are there we should know about?" Misha asked.

"What are they doing on Plum?" Emily asked as she licked a small wound on her hip. "They were in a secured pen on Diamond."

"How did they get here?" Misha asked. "They certainly didn't fly."

"I think," Philip said slowly without taking his eyes off the place where the avians had last been seen. "That things are escalating and we need to get to Diamond fast. That's the center of all this weirdness. The closer we get to Diamond the stranger things get."

"Agreed," the fox said. "Let's get to Diamond."

The group quickly made its way back to the subway. After squeezing through the door they pulled it shut. Misha made sure it was securely closed. Slowly they made their way back down to the station and towards the center of the chaos.

Flying high and sedately in the upper atmosphere was an object that bore no resemblance to any of the odd life on the islands below it. It was a plane with long wings and two oddly downturned stabilizers at the rear. On the ground the plane rested on long spindly landing gear that made it look ungainly. Like some odd insect that might tip over in a stiff breeze. But once in the air all such illusions dropped away as the ground vanished far below. Up here in the clouds the ungainly insect became a graceful bird, the long wings taking it through the thin air at this high altitude. Officially this vehicle was known as unmanned aerial vehicle, model MQ-1R serial number 1567BRD9081MA. But her ground crew called her Maggie as proclaimed by the name boldly painted on her nose in blue lettering.

"We have a drone coming within range now," a voice announced suddenly over the radio.

"Good," came the colonel's comment. "We've seen Hart and Carelton already so make a sweep over Diamond and Plum, Captain Lee. Especially Diamond."

"Acknowledged," the captain said. The woman was seated at a console in Nevada guiding the one ton drone now flying off of Maine. "Maggie, come to a heading of 045 degrees."

Maggie banked slightly to the right and began her first pass over the island. She had been monitoring the chatter over the radio but her advanced AI computer was more interested in things like fire control radar and possible anti-aircraft positions. Sensors came to life and started scanning and recording what it saw below.

Back at Fort Benning, Georgia Colonel Haslett stood in the situation room. Around him officers and enlisted worked at various terminals. In front of him was a massive screen that at the moment was displaying information sent live from Maggie. "Are you sure this is Diamond?"

A long string of longitude and latitude numbers appeared on the bottom left corner of the screen. "Confirmed," a sergeant at a computer to the colonel's right said. Next to the live image of Diamond island was an older image taken in a routine satellite scan a year before. The two images should have been similar. They weren't. The older image showed an island shaped like the letter C. Easily visible on it were manicured lawns and bushes interspersed with a variety of buildings, walkways and paths. On the current images of the island none of that was visible. What was visible was low rolling hills covered with four foot high grass and forests of mighty trees towering two and three hundred feet into the sky. All of this on a piece of land at least four times the size of Diamond. Of humanity there was no sign. It was as if the wilderness had simply swallowed whole all of mankind's works.

The journey to Diamond was as short as it was uneventful. All they saw along the way was empty concrete tunnels. Misha did notice in one spot two small gun turrets. Their twin machinegun barrels aimed down the tunnel. Thankfully the weapon turrets ignored them.

The tunnel in front of them widened suddenly to be wide enough for three cars side by side. The right side and the middle were blocked by large subway cars. Each sat dark and brooding blocking all movement that way.

The station itself was a duplicate of the ones they had seen on Hart, Carleton and Plum with one exception. Here there was a platform on both sides on the tracks. The platform on the right side held various machinery, tools and a small overhead crane.

Philip pointed to the right platform. "That's where they maintain the cars."

"This is Hacker 6," came the words over the radio. "We've got the results of the drone sweep of the area."

"This is Firefly 11 go ahead," Misha responded. "What did it find?"

"The entire island has changed," the officer answered in an oddly confused tone.

"What do you mean it's been changed?" Misha asked as unnerved by the man's tone as by his words.

"See for yourself," the colonel ordered and the imagery from the drone appeared on their eyesight.

Stealth let out a snarl of surprise. "That's the same island?"

"No wonder we can't contact the island's systems," the nanites commented. "The antennas are gone. The two main and secondary communication antennas are gone."

"Everything is gone!" Misha added, surprised and frightened. "There's nothing left. Just how powerful is our enemy?"

"I don't know but the chaos is growing with each passing moment," Philip answered with a shake of the head.

"Oh no!" A voice countered over the radio. "This is not random chaos. Someone is working to a plan." A small note appeared to Misha and Stealth. It was the nanites informing them that the speaker was an army intelligence analyst. A master sergeant named Gonsalvez with a decade's experience of analyzing data. "Things started on Diamond and have spread out from there. What's happening on Diamond WILL happen on Hart at some point soon."

"What is the rate of change?" The colonel asked.

"It's hard to say without more data but it seems to be spreading slowly at the moment; at the rate of several hundred meters a day," Gonsalvez commented. "But I cannot tell if it will keep at that rate or pick up speed. It might slow down but I doubt it. To make a better estimate I need more information on what's causing the changes."

"That's what we all need," the colonel commented.

The steps ended suddenly in a closed door that had no coded or magnetic lock. Just a simple door knob.

Slowly opening the door Misha stepped out into a large open hall. A floor of linoleum graced a large hall with walls of concrete that were painted a soft, green. Hidden speakers filled the air with the same bland, soft music that was usually played in elevators.

One side of the room had several stores and Misha found himself looking at a coffee shop and a small grocery store. He noted that both doorways were blocked by a barricade of tables and chairs.

Next to the door they had entered through was an ATM. Its screen still blinking and advertising cheap loans at a credit union in Bangor.

"Where are we?" Stealth asked as he looked around. Each hand held a sword at the ready.

"The admin building," Emily explained. "The main administrative offices are here along with the cafeteria and security."

"To the west is the living quarters building," Philip commented and pointed to the left. Then he pointed to the right. "Off to the east is building 43. Low level research was carried out there. Mostly follow up work with animals before they were sent to Hart."

Emily pointed beyond Philip. "The main lab is that way, to the north. All the sensitive research is done there."

"My map shows a complex to the northeast," Misha said. "What's there?"

"That's Facility B," Philip answered. "It's mostly empty now but there is an isolation lab there that hasn't been used since ABERA took over the place."

"A lot of the island is unused or empty since the takeover," Emily commented. "We only have a fraction of the staff now."

"Facility B was where the most dangerous biowarfare work was done," the nanites commented to Misha and Stealth alone.

"It's also a place the colonel specifically wanted us to check out," Misha said to Stealth and the nanites. "To be sure there isn't anything nasty leftover."

Misha slowly moved his head about, his ears and nose twitching. "I smell people nearby. At least seven or eight sabertooths and a few wolves."

"HELLO!" Misha shouted out loud. "We're here to help! We've been sent by the U.S. government and ABERA to help."

All they got in response was silence. Misha raised his nose and sniffed the air for a few moments. The sharp scent of unknown felines came to him. He was able to trace it to where it was the strongest. He looked at Stealth and pointed to the doorway of the coffee shop.

Stealth nodded in reply and the two moved forward.

When they were within arm's reach of the door Misha gave a wave of the hand and both came to a halt. The ranger leaned forward and looked at the blocked doorway, examining each part of it. He saw one table tipped on end along with several chairs all piled into a heap. Misha also noticed long claw and tooth marks all over the table. "You stand guard and I'll clear the doorway," the vulpine said to Stealth over the radio for only them to hear.

Quickly Misha grabbed hold of the items blocking the doorway and started pulling them clear. Stealth stood close by with both of his swords ready. Their bronze blades glistened in the light revealing their razor sharp edges. A few moments work and the vulpine had cleared the doorway.

Stealth started to move forward but Misha stopped him with a wave of the hand. The smells of pastries, cakes and coffee all of it old and stale came to their noses. Misha stood in the doorway with the bow in hand as he used all his senses. His ears straining for the slightest unusual sound while his eyes and nose sought out unusual things. He recognized a pattern of shadows in the back of the shop. Even in the gloom this shadow was darker than the rest and it was shaped like a Smilodon.

"I know you're there," Misha said in cold tones. "So come out now. We're here to help."

A massive figure slowly glided out of the shadows, moving silently on its large, padded paws in spite of weighing over half a ton. It moved with all the silent grace and suppleness only a feline could do well. This was by far the biggest Smilodon they had ever seen. His fur was a golden tan with black stripes along his flanks and back. He pulled back his lips in an impressive snarl. "My name is James Vaughn," the male said ominously. "And who are you exactly? And what did you do to my people?"

"My name is Misha Brightleaf and my partner is Stealth. We were sent by Ms. Sanchez and the U.S. government to find out what happened here and to rescue everyone," Misha answered without lowering his bow.

"If you were sent by Sanchez you'll have a code word," the male said calmly.

"Jimmy always was wrapped too tight," Lisa Sanchez said over the radio. "The code word is Cowabunga."

"Cowabunga?" Stealth asked over the radio.

"Yes and his reply had better be oatmeal with raisins," the ABERA director added.

"Cowabunga," the fox said. "And your answer is?"

"Oatmeal with raisins," the large feline responded in a sullen tone. The massive cat noticeably relaxed and sat down. "I always thought that was a silly code word."

Misha stepped toward James. "I have Sanchez on the radio. We all have questions for you." He took a small radio from a pouch on his belt and placed it on the floor.

James gave a snarl of laughter. "We have questions for you."

"We?" Stealth repeated.

James turned and looked behind him. "It's clear. You can come out!"

At least two score of figures made their way to the front of the shop. Misha recognized a score of smilodons, four North American cave lions, four European jaguars, eight homotherium serum and eight dire wolves.

"Interesting all are mammals and predators," the nanites commented.

"Which means what exactly?" Stealth asked.

"We've no idea. But it is interesting."

"Agreed," Misha added. "We have lots of clues but no real idea of who we are facing."

"Enough speculation," the colonel ordered. "We need to know what Vaughn has to say about what happened."

"What did happen?" The fox asked Vaughn.

The large, male Smilodon looked at the group of animals assembled in the room. "When I took over as the facility manager I expected trouble and problems but I never expected this. I feel like I'm in a Disney movie. I keep expecting someone to break into song.

"When we started to change I instituted a complete level six quarantine," he explained. "Then the computers stopped recognizing my voice and wouldn't accept any of my commands. Soon the island itself started to change and the main and the backup communication antennas went down. They just disappeared. That killed any hope of communicating with anyone."

James paced about the room as he spoke. "We did some exploring of the island but things changed drastically. I decided we'd hold up here till rescue came. I did manage to gather everyone from the other nearby buildings. Thankfully the cafeteria is well stocked. That reminds me. We're going to need more food. We've stripped this place of pretty much all the food."

"I'll order a food drop," Misha replied. "And have them drop a ton of food." He looked around at the sea of very large predators. "I'll make that two tons."

"Make it three in case someone wants seconds," Stealth muttered.

Emily stood in front of James and found herself looking up at the male. "You are THE largest Smilodon I've seen so far." There was a touch of awe and fear in her voice.

"Confirmed," the nanites said. "He is one hundred pounds heavier and a six inches taller than every other sabertooth we've encountered."

"Of course he's the biggest," Stealth responded nonchalantly. "Among felines the leader is always the biggest male around. He was leader among the humans and the creature recognized that. So it made him the leader of the felines."

All eyes in the room, feline, canine and vulpine stared at the cheetah morph.

"You know," Philip said slowly. "That makes sense. In a weird twisted sort of way."

"Everything about this has been weird and twisted," Misha commented. "But it tells us our opponent does recognize human organization. Means it is not some mindless monster."

"Now what?" Emily asked. "What happens next?"

"An excellent question," James added and looked at Misha.

Misha pondered that for a moment. "This place looks pretty secure so for the time being I want all of you to stay here. If things get ugly you can duck down the train tunnel and head to Hart where we can evacuate all of you."

"What about getting us changed back into humans?" One of the leopards asked.

"We're still working on that," Misha responded. "Until then no one leaves the islands. And I need to warn you anyone trying will be attacked."

"You mean if we try and leave we'll be killed," one of the lions said disgustedly, revealing a muzzle full of sharp teeth.

"Nothing so melodramatic," the ranger shook his head. "We do have stunners. But until we understand what happened and how to counter it we are all stuck here."

One of the sabertooths stepped closer. He was a soft, gray color with faint stripes along his side and back. "Does that include you?" He said with a snarl.

"Of course," Brightleaf responded without missing a beat. "That was explained to me before we even took on this job."

"One thing," the massive male sabertooth commented, changing the subject. "There's only one building we weren't able to get into, the main lab. It was locked down and we couldn't get in. I have people trapped in there."

Misha nodded his head. "All right. We'll get those people out."

"Hacker 6 this is Firefly 11. We have an update. There is a report of people trapped in the Main lab. Recommend that be our next destination."

"Firefly 11," came the voice of colonel Haslett. "Continue to explore Diamond. Your first stop is the main lab. We need to be sure that is cleared first and the people recovered safely. That is our top priority."

"Yes sir," was Misha's answer.

"Things seem to be under control on Hart so I'll order Oboe 4 over to Diamond. That's the epicenter of all these troubles. Once there Oboe will run tests and gather data."

What greeted the group when they left the building amazed them.

"Snow?" Stealth said slowly. Everywhere they looked the world was buried under a blanket of the white powder over a foot thick.

"It's snowing!" Misha said softly as he looked up at the sky. Overhead he saw dark, storm clouds.

"Snow?" Sanchez asked over the radio.

"Snow," Stealth commented sarcastically. "White lumpy rain."

"It's June," Sanchez says, the amazement plain to hear. "It NEVER snows there in June."

Misha knelt down and ran a hand through the white powder on the ground. He felt the wet cold material on his hands. "This looks and feels like snow."

"A storm front has just appeared over the island," a voice said over the open radio. "And I do mean appeared. It wasn't there ten minutes ago and there was no such storm front within five hundred miles."

"How?" the nanites asked. *"The weather patterns cannot support such a storm."*

"It just appeared out of nowhere."

"There is no known super with powers capable of summoning a storm this big," came the comment of the colonel.

"Well, it seems whoever is doing all this prefers snow," Stealth picked up a handful of snow and made a snow ball.

"That makes sense," Sampers said. Speaking for the first time. "Our opponent is a natural manifestation of an environment zone. At least a category four in strength. One that has been in hibernation for an extended period."

"All right can you explain it so we all understand it please," Philip asked.

"That would be helpful," Misha added.

"This is a very old spirit," the mage said. "One that had been dormant for millennia and has just woken up. Creatures like this are commonly called nature spirits as they draw power and sustenance from the environment around them like forests, swamps and deserts. Some can be very powerful but they are limited to certain places, environments and eras."

"It's from the Pleistocene era," Captain Miller exclaimed. "That explains why we're all creatures from that era."

"And it explains the weird plants too," Stealth added and tossed his snow ball at Misha hitting him in the chest. "It's trying to make things like what it calls home."

"You said it was dormant," Misha asked as he brushed the snow off of his stomach. "Why did it suddenly wake up now?" He bent down and made a snow ball of his own and tossed it at his friend.

"Of that I'm not sure," Sampers answered. "Such creatures are hard to really be conclusive about. Each is as different as the place that created them."

"Our experiments in recreating the Pleistocene creatures drew it here," Lisa said over the radio.

"Or perhaps it drew YOU here," the mage said. "Why did you choose these islands? And why did you choose the Pleistocene era to recreate?"

"Well, we were working on the islands back when it was an active government station."

"NO! That's not what I'm asking. What made you choose this place to do the work on the Pleistocene. And why that era? Why not an earlier epoch? Or somewhere more convenient."

"I . . ." the ABERA leader stuttered. "Well. I'll admit that I do think sabertooth cats are cool. I've always had an interest in that era. I almost became a paleontologist."

"That doesn't answer the basic question of why now?" The colonel asked. "Why did it suddenly start changing people now and not last month?"

"It's complex. They draw power from animals and people but animals and people can draw power from them as well. Somehow this creature gained enough power to wake up."

"Critical mass," the colonel said bluntly. "ABERA's work into recreating the animals from that era created energy that the creature could feed off of. When there were enough Pleistocene animals alive it woke up."

"Now that makes sense. Our own capabilities are dependent on our numbers."

"With radioactive material it is safe until a sufficient size is reached and critical mass is achieved."

"The colonel just mentioned critical mass," Misha commented.

"Ah! I thought I heard it somewhere before."

"So as long as it has the ice age creatures to draw power from it cannot truly be destroyed," the mage added. "It will simply regenerate."

"So the only way to truly kill this thing would be to kill all the animals from the Pleistocene era?" Misha asked.

"NO!" Lisa snarled. "That is not an option."

"Agreed," the colonel added. "That is far too drastic an answer. And we cannot be certain of this thing's real intentions. Just yet."

"And after finally having all these wonderful species reborn we cannot just destroy them!"

"Have you had any contact with this creature?" The colonel asked. "What's it like?"

"I've only had limited contact," the mage replied. "A few small skirmishes really. After it changed me the creature seems to have lost interest. But it is still here, awake and attentive."

"He is sure to be pissed off at seeing his whole world gone extinct," Misha commented.

"I just wish we really knew what caused the mass extinctions." Ratinov commented. "It would give us some idea of his mental state."

"I thought the extinction was caused by the end of the ice age," Stealth commented. "Things got too warm for the oversized animals."

"That is the most popular theory," Ratinov commented. "But not everyone believes it. There are many other theories."

"A scientific theory is something that's been more or less established, like gravity. Before something becomes a scientific theory it's first a hypothesis."

"Whatever you call them the end of the ice age is just one and there some who rabidly refuse to believe it," Ratinov added.

"True, but remember this. Some people simply refuse to believe the obvious," Misha said. "There are people out there who still think the world is flat."

"You're kidding right?" Miller asked. "Please tell me you are kidding about that."

"No he isn't. There is indeed a Flat Earth society," the nanites confirmed.

"I have a question," Stealth said slowly over the radio.

"For who?" Misha asked.

"Everyone and anyone willing to talk about it," the cheetah asked. "If ABERA was working to bring all these extinct species back. What did cause them to go extinct in the first place?"

"No one knows for sure," professor Ratinov responded. "But there are many theories."

"Two hundred and fifty seven hypotheses," the nanites added.

The professor laughed. "Among scientists; extinction theories are a competitive sport and the ice age is the Olympics! But for the Quaternary period, specifically the end of the Pleistocene epoch where all these recreated species are from there are five basic theories. Hunting, Climate Change, Hyper disease, Comet and one that's sort of a mix of all of the others."

"The first: Hunting says that humans hunted all the mega sized herbivores to extinction. And with the mega prey dead all the mega carnivores went too," the professor explained.

"That's the usual - It's all the humans fault? Theory?" Stealth asked with a shake of the head.

"That sums it up nicely," the professor answered. "Mankind does have a bad habit of rendering many species extinct which helps support the theory. But the idea that man wiped out ALL the species, planet wide just seems too farfetched. There were just too many species and not enough humans."

"The second theory is climate change. The end of the ice age brought warmer weather. This made it harder for the cold weather species to adapt and thrive. This gave the generalist species an edge. For instance the dire wolf went extinct but the timber wolf thrived. The woolly mammoth went extinct but the elephant is still around."

"That one makes sense," Misha said.

"Hyper disease means plague," Captain Miller commented. "Plagues have devastated earth time and again. So it is plausible that some virus ravaged the animal life. But I find it hard to

believe that it completely destroyed all those species. I can see it causing large scale deaths but not complete extinction."

"That sums it up perfectly," Ratinov commented. "It's hard to see a plague causing so many extinctions."

"The comet theory is simple," Stealth said. "A great big rock smashes into the earth. Boom! Like what happened to the dinosaurs."

"So what's wrong with that theory?" Misha asked.

"A lack of evidence for such a strike for one," the professor answered. "And not all the animals died out at the same time. Some only went extinct centuries later than others."

"The last theory is a mix of all the others," Ratinov exclaimed. "Something caused a worldwide climate change. Perhaps a meteor or comet strike. With the change in climate the megafauna species couldn't adapt well. This left them vulnerable to diseases and to human over hunting."

"Now that one makes sense," Misha said. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing really," Ratinov said. "But there is no proof that it is any more correct than the others."

"Congratulations," Stealth quipped. "You have just put forward and eliminated all the theories."

"The problem is that none of the theories really perfectly fit and answer all the questions," the professor explained.

"So to put it bluntly - you don't know what caused the extinctions," Misha commented.

"Correct," Ratinov answered.

"So why didn't you say that before and save us all that long winded explanation?" O'Grady commented.

"Long winded?" Ratinov joked. "Last year at a symposium we had a discussion on this very topic. It lasted 3 days and the final report was over 1,500 pages long."

"So what DO we know about the mass extinctions?" The colonel asked. "Confirmed information. Not theories."

"What we do know is that at the end of Late Pleistocene era around 11,700 years ago there was a mass extinction of most mammalian life. In North America 33 of 45 genera of large mammals died out suddenly. In south America 46 of 58. There simply isn't enough information to fully decide what caused the extinctions."

"Perhaps our new friend might know," Miller added. "After all, he was there."

"An excellent point," the professor said. "Can you imagine the history it's seen?"

"Do I smell an elephant?" Misha asked suddenly and started looking around.

The creature that stepped into the clearing was as tall as an elephant. It looked like an elephant but one covered with a rust brown thick fur.

"A mastodon!" Misha whispered.

"You did read the report?" the nanites asked. "The part where it mentioned the two mastodons?"

"Why are you surprised?" Stealth asked. "We've run into everything else so far. So why not a hairy elephant."

"It's not a hairy elephant. They are an entirely different species. Closely related."

"It looks like an elephant and it's covered with hair," the cheetah countered.

"We MUST do a super based on a mastodon!" The nanites exclaimed happily. "It would be amazingly strong!"

The mastodon turned and looked straight at the group. He raised his trunk and trumpeted loudly.

In moments a second mastodon entered the clearing and took a place next to the first. Then another came in and then another. Soon a half dozen of the massive creatures stood in front of them like a solid wall of fur and muscle.

"That's a lot more than two," Stealth muttered nervously.

"The last time I was in front of this much hostile tonnage," the fox said. "It was a Rikti lander."

"What do we do now? We're seriously outclassed," Philip asked.

"Back away slowly," Misha responded as he slowly stepped away from the mountains of flesh and fur.

"Could some of them be employees changed?" One of the felines asked.

"No," Stealth answered as he slowly stepped backward. "They aren't a predator and one of them would have said something by now."

"An excellent point!"

"Our ancestors used to hunt these thing with spears, stones and their wits. Can you believe that?" Emily said without taking her eyes off the mastodons.

"Amazing," Misha responded. "And they think mankind simply wiped them all out? I don't see how!"

"The idea of taking that mountain of muscle on with nothing more than a long, pointed stick and some fire sounds suicidal," Stealth said.

"Well there is confirmed proof from excavations of them killing mastodons and other large animals," the professor commented. "They actually would set ambushes and kill several of them at the same time."

"With what?" Stealth asked, surprised. "A rocket launcher?"

Misha didn't take his eyes off the mastodons in front of them. There was an almost predatory look in his eyes as he gauged where to place his first arrow. "Back during basic training old, sergeant Johnson always told us that the deadliest weapon a soldier had is his mind."

"But a nice machine gun isn't too bad either," Stealth added.

The ranger gave a short wave of his hand pointing back in the direction they had come. The group slowly backed away from the herd until they were out of the clearing completely. The sound of crashing trees and snapping bushes told them of the mastodons moving off. The sounds gradually grew softer and finally faded away completely.

"Ok," Misha said and pointed off to the north. "Let's go."

Slowly the second group made its way through the station and up to the main admin building. With them was the group they had collected from the tunnel. Soon the main hall was filled with over three dozen animals of five different species, all of which had until recently been humans. Quite a while was lost in getting names to let their families know they were all right - Sort of. They also got their current species and DNA samples from everyone. That was followed by extensive air testing, water testing and testing of samples of food. Last but not least was urine and stool samples.

"This is the part of medicine that they never have on TV," the professor said as he used a portable lab to test yet another stool sample.

"You won't see THIS on the army recruiting posters!" O'Grady joked. "Join the army. Become a cat and take samples of crap!"

The female Homotherium that had until recently been a magic using woman named Warrant Officer Sampers slowly moved among the group making her own tests and taking her own samples.

After several long hours the military group met in a private meeting room to discuss what they had found. With them was Mr Vaughn.

"Well?" Captain Miller asked. "What have we found? Professor, you start."

"Nothing," professor Temki said. The wolf sized cheetah had managed to climb into a large leather chair and seemed to be comfortable ensconced there. "I've found no signs of any virus or other biological agents capable of causing all these changes. I have uncovered several bacteria and other life that are unique but not dangerous."

"Wouldn't we already be immune to any ice age disease?" Hernandez asked. "I mean after all our ancestors already lived through them ten thousand years ago. What worries me is what modern diseases our new bodies might not be immune to. After all one of the theories about what wiped them out before was plague."

"Good point," the professor responded. "I don't have an answer to that but I've seen no sign of illness in anyone. As a matter of fact one person with a missing leg actually had the limb regrown."

"I think I can explain," Sampers interjected. "Whatever changed us is protecting us. I can see and feel an aura of protection around all of us."

"It seems our spirit wants us all alive and well," Vaughn added. The massive cat was squeezed into a leather chair that seemed far too small for his large body. "What do we know of the nature spirit?"

"A little," the magic using cat responded. "I have been careful about probing but it seems to be curious about what the world is like. It is also angry but I'm not sure about what. I don't think the anger is directed at us specifically."

"What about the quarantine?" Miller asked. "Can it be lifted?"

"Yes," Temki answered. "There is no threat of a biological contamination."

"No," Sampers countered. "The entire area is still totally controlled by the spirit. Anyone entering WILL be changed. Also I don't think using a nuclear weapon will permanently kill it. Just put it back into dormancy."

Miller suddenly held up a paw to silence everyone. "Wait." The army captain had managed to adjust his web gear to fit his new over sized lynx form. On it was his radio. The microphone for it was attached to the web straps in the right place for him to use it. Tucked into one ear was the small receiver. It was intended to fit into a human ear and was only held there with some carefully placed duct tape. He tapped the talk button on the mic. "Yes sir. Miller here." He paused for a moment and listened. "Yes sir. I understand. Miller out." Then he released the talk button.

The lynx officer looked up at the group. "Our orders have arrived. First thing is we're getting the airdrop of food Misha ordered. Also Misha and his group are to explore the main lab."

"Shouldn't we be checking the lab?" Temki asked.

"Misha and his friend seem to be resistant to the magic our opponent is using so they are to explore the main lab first," the captain answered. "Also if there is some unexpected problem it's better if they encounter it first."

"So we're using them as guinea pigs?" The professor asked.

"Yes," the captain answered calmly. "And they are aware of that fact. I don't think the problem is there. We're going to facility B. Command wants to be sure that location is secured."

The professor shook his head. "That place is clean. There is nothing there," he snarled, unconsciously baring his teeth.

"Those orders came from above, professor," Miller countered, baring his own teeth as well.

"It's becoming monotonous," Vaughn said slowly cutting off the interaction between the two. "To keep hearing about that old project. Ms Sanchez fully informed me of what work was done there so I understand people's fears. But the answer to all this trouble doesn't lie there."

"I'll take a group and explore building 43, the living quarters and the nearby areas," Vaughn said. "Now that we at least have some idea what we're facing I feel it's safe to look around a little. And this is the chance of a lifetime; to explore an entirely unknown world!"

Miller gave a short growl of laughter. "That's a scientist talking."

The snow was still falling lightly as they trudged through the forest. All around tall trees towered over them. Shorter trees and bushes of all kinds crowded into the spaces between, filling them completely. What should have been a simple ten minute walk turned into a long, cold battle against the elements. The closer they got to the lab the denser the forest around it became. The small group didn't find the building until Misha literally walked into one of the walls.

Building 14 otherwise known as the Main lab was a two story tall brick and stone building. The main entrance usually had a pair glass and metal doors and looked remarkably like an ordinary office building. The main doors and all the windows were covered with metal plates that had automatically slid into place the moment the level 6 quarantine had been initiated. None of this was visible as the building was overgrown with trees, bushes, vines and a host of unidentifiable plants. It was completely covered making it invisible until a person was within arm's reach.

"I'm not able to get the Main lab to respond," John Borentelli said over the radio. "Everything on Diamond is still down."

"All right we'll do things old school." The fox reached into his backpack and pulled out a small pack of explosives. Several minutes of chopping with a knife cleared a small area of the armored plating covering the main door. He set the small digital timer for 30 seconds and stepped far back. He joined his three companions behind a large rock and waited.

"Did you use enough explosive?" Stealth asked as they waited.

"That's a 5 pound charge of enhanced C4," was the fox's response. "It's strong enough blow the treads off of a T90 tank."

Suddenly the front of the building was enveloped in a large explosion that sent flames shooting out. Debris and wreckage were sent flying in all directions as smoke covered everything. When the smoke cleared the woods and brush were gone, revealing the metal plating over the door was dented and battered but still in place.

"One more charge should do it," the fox said and reached into his pack for explosives.

To the south east of the admin building there had been a large open area that held a large concrete pad. It was strong enough for a helicopter or a VTOL aircraft to land on; which was exactly what its purpose was.

Getting outside to the helipad was not as easy as Miller and his team had expected. It took several minutes of shoveling and pushing to get enough snow away from the doors to open them wide enough to let the group through. The team slipped out and into a different world.

All around them were tall, towering trees intermixed with thick bushes all of which was covered with a foot of snow. A bitterly cold wind was piling the snow up into drifts. Where there should have been a helipad was a large field covered with snow - a meter deep.

"Are you sure we're not in Alaska?" Someone asked.

The group stared at the snow that lay on the strange terrain that was all about them. "This is going from weird to weirder," Hernandez muttered.

"I never thought I'd say this but I miss Afghanistan," Harrid muttered.

To clear off the pad they had to resort to brute force. Everyone lined up on one side of the clearing and simply walked across to the other side. Using their bodies to plow through the snow and trample it down.

Only after four passes back and forth was the snow and ice trampled down enough to allow a drone to land. The CQ4b Busy Bee landed amidst a cloud of snow whipped up by the blast of its engines. No sooner had it dropped its cargo pod and lifted off then a second drone came in and dropped another pod next to the first.

Everyone huddled among the trees with backs turned to the artificial storm. All grateful for their thick fur. Finally the last drone had vanished from sight and wind died down leaving the two green colored metal cargo pods sitting in the open field.

"Dinner!" Captain Miller announced loudly. "Has arrived!"

This time the explosion resulted in a good sized ragged hole in the metal covering the door.

Misha pointed to Emily and the lion. "You two wait here while we explore this place."

"Is it smart to split up like that?" Philip asked.

"No," Stealth responded. "The victims always split up right before the monster attacks and kills them one by one."

"True, splitting up is dangerous," Misha added as he shot a hard glance at the cheetah. "You've already been effected by whatever is causing all this. We haven't and that gives us an edge. And if anyplace is going to be at the center of all this trouble it's here. I simply can't risk you two in there."

The lion nodded slowly. "That makes sense but I still don't like you going in there by yourself."

"We also need to consider what happens if we don't come back," the fox commented. "You'll be our back up and report back what's happened."

The two felines nodded slowly. "All right but go carefully," Philip said.

Slowly Misha and Stealth approached the building and paused by the opening in the metal shutters, standing either side hole. A small thin trail of smoke leaked out and the ground around it was covered with debris.

Misha quickly leapt through the hole and into the darkness beyond. In moments Stealth joined him with blades drawn. They were standing in a small lobby that was devoid of anything but smoke and some small bits of debris. In one corner was an overturned desk and chair. Doors line the walls to either side and a short hallway in front of them led deeper into the building. Stairs off to the left led upwards and downwards into the darkness.

"Left, right, forward or up?" Stealth asked as he pointed in the appropriate directions with his swords.

Misha pointed to the left. "Let's check that out first. Be sure the lobby is clear and then do the rest of the floor."

He stepped to the left and halted in front of a door marked "Room 11." in white letters on the metal surface. The ranger examined the door, door frame, knob and hinges looking for any signs of a trap or tampering. Finally he reached for the handle and turned it. The door swung open silently.

Misha looked thru the door for a moment. the room beyond had countless glass cases lining all the walls. But the glass itself was gone and the inhabitants now covered the floor in a large crawling mass. "Bugs. Why did it have to be bugs."

"Are these ice age bugs?" Stealth asked.

"No," came the response from the ABERA scientist. "Those are several different species we use mostly as food for other animals."

"Feet," was all Stealth said.

"Huh?" Misha looked at his friend, confused.

"Feet," Stealth said again and pointed down to the floor. "They're crawling up your feet, fox."

"AK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Misha shrieked as he danced and bounced around in circles. Slapping at his legs. "YUCK! YUCK!YUCK!" After a long moment he had removed the last of the insects from his legs.

The cheetah hadn't moved at all and was watching his friend with obvious amusement.

Misha took one especially large spider off of his tunic and casually tossed onto Stealth.

The feline opened his muzzle and caught it, swallowing the arachnid whole.

"Yuck!" Misha said and turned his head away with his ears down and his tail tucked between his legs. "That's gross!"

"Hey, if it moves it's a meal."

"I'll get you back for that," Misha said coldly.

"Feet. They're crawling up your feet again..."

Misha took an incendiary grenade off his belt, pulled the pin and dropped it to the floor. Waves of flames engulfed the floor washing over both their feet and burning off all their fur.

"Not anymore."

The building seemed to be an endless maze of halls, corridors and passageways intermixed with a never ending series of labs and storerooms. Finally they stopped in a large area that had corridors and doorways running off in all directions. Misha took a flashlight from his belt and shone it about revealing empty corridors devoid of life. Not even spider webs.

"Do we really have to be here?" The feline asked as he looked around. His tail whipped about betraying his nervousness.

"Yes," the fox answered. "We need to sweep the entire place."

"Misha, keep away from the windows," Stealth asked in a whisper.

"Why?" Misha asks looking around nervously.

"No reason," Stealth said without looking at Misha.

Misha fixed his gaze onto the cheetah. "Now Stealth, what do you mean?"

"This place just reminds me of a zombie game, alright?" He snapped.

Misha looked around nervously. "You HAD to mention that didn't you? This place is creepy enough already without bringing that up!"

"Well, at least the architecture is reasonably coherent."

"But it's still a creepy, abandoned lab where they carried out secret experiments," Misha commented.

"Then stay away from the windows..."

Misha pulled his lips back in a snarl. "Could you please discuss something else before the nanites start quoting from some bad zombie movie."

"When there is no more room in hell."

Misha shot Stealth a hard glare. "This is your fault. Now they'll be quoting those movies for the rest of the day."

"At least they aren't doing MRE jokes. Let's just get this over with," Stealth said. "So we can get out of here sooner."

Misha suddenly stopped and stood stock still. "We are not alone."

Stealth stood up. "I'm Stealth and my friend is Misha. You were human until a few days ago when you changed into something carnivorous and extinct. We've been sent by ABERA to help. I'm not in the mood to waste time talking to more shadows. So get your furry butts out here."

This time no one came out.

"All right we'll do it the hard way!" Misha pulled a stun grenade off of his belt.

The cheetah morph waved a hand at his friend. "No need to be so drastic. We'll report your location to Sanchez. They'll send someone to get you in three or four days. Perhaps. It's hard to say with the quarantine in effect."

A door up ahead creaked open and several figures slowly stepped out. First out were three Smilodons, a male and two females. All three stood side by side blocking the hallways as more creatures streamed out behind them.

"A fox and a cheetah walking on two legs and using antique weapons," one female said sarcastically. She had black and white stripes like a white tiger. "And here I thought things couldn't get weirder."

"Do you have any food? We've been trapped in here with nothing to eat for two days."

"We can get you some," Misha answered. "Why don't you head over to the Admin building. There's food there and it's where everyone is meeting."

A swift head count was taken and all names dutifully recorded while Misha and Stealth explained what they knew.

"Good news. With this group we have accounted for everyone in the facility!" The nanites chirped happily. *"Everyone is alive and well."*

"Sort of all right."

"Alive and healthy."

Winter greeted them when they finally stepped outside. The sunlight glistened off the snow that lay everywhere and was a welcome relief after all the darkness.

A female Smilodon shook her body and then stretched and yawned. "It's good to finally be outside! That building was too dark and claustrophobic."

"And really creepy," Stealth added.

Besides the winter, two felines greeted them. "I see you've found all the rest," Emily said as she and Philip walked up to the group.

"Thankfully we've found them all. Philip, Emily, I want you to lead all these people back to the Admin building. In the mean time we'll move on and sweep the rest of the island."

The contents of the two pods were unload and distributed to the waiting crowd. Quickly the open field turned into a cold weather picnic as a hundred animals of nine different (once extinct) species happily ripped into the meat and water provided. Also in with the food were a score of 'Sanitation disposal kit, large animal' and two veterinarian kits - containing everything needed to help care for any sick animals. The remaining space in the pods was filled with blankets, mattresses and two large space heaters.

"They thought of everything," Vaughn said. The large male had already eaten some twenty pounds of cooked beef and was settled onto a blanket.

"We're the Department of Defense," Captain Miller answered between bites of meat. "We have to be prepared."

"Seriously captain," the massive Smilodon asked earnestly. "Can you stop this thing? Stop whatever's doing this?"

"We will stop this thing," the now feline captain answered. "One way or the other."

Stealth and Misha left the main lab behind. They also left Emily & Philip to guide the rest back to the main admin building and the relative safety there. Where these two superheroes were going no one else could follow. ABERA had repeatedly denied that anything was still going on in the old biowarfare lab but no one was taking any chances. By just sending the two super powered heroes they were limiting the chance of any disease or virus there from spreading.

The concrete path that used to lead to the complex was already covered by a deep layer of snow. Still the wind blew hard whisking away the snow and revealing enough bits and pieces of the concrete to allow them to follow the path. But the snow started to pile up anyway. Soon they found themselves wading through snow that was knee deep and sometimes waist deep. The lush forest seemed to go on forever in all directions.

Suddenly the trees parted enough to reveal two gray stones each at least twenty feet high and weighing tons, flanking the path like sentries guarding a great treasure. The path continued past the sentries, leading deeper into the wilderness. Through the snow Misha could see many more stones marching off into the distance till they disappeared in the swirl of snow and ice. Tall, stone sentries guarding either side the path as it wended its way through this magical landscape of snow and ice.

"Those are called Menhir," the nanites explained. "They are large upright standing stones usually uneven or roughly square."

"Wasn't the path we were following concrete?" Stealth stopped and knelt down in and brushed away the snow. It revealed that the path once concrete was now made of fieldstones laid down into the earth to form a rough trail. "The original path led to Facility B," the feline said nervously. "I wonder where THIS leads. Certainly not to Facility B."

"One way to find out," Misha pointed further along the path. "Follow it and see where it leads."

"Is that a wise idea?" The nanites asked.

"No," Misha answered.

"It's sure to lead to danger," the nanites added.

"Lots of it," Stealth added. "But also leads to the answers we all want."

Misha carefully walked between the first two stones with his bow drawn and an arrow nocked. He expected something to happen; lightening or balls of flame to shoot at him but nothing did happen. With more confidence but the same caution the two supers made their way down the path. All around them were the trees and undergrowth of a primeval forest never touched by the hand of man. The only sign of humanity were the tall stones that stood guard along the path and the stones of the path itself. In spite of the snow piled up in drifts on either side the path itself was clear and the rough hewn stones that made it up were clearly visible. He caught sight of movement off to his left and Misha turned to see a white, snowshoe hare racing amidst the trees for a moment before it vanished into a snow bank.

Up ahead was a low, snow covered hill with a circle of stones gracing the top like a ragged crown. Each stone was a different height and size but all were at least three to ten meters high and towered over everything. They cast long shadows that seemed to reach out towards them like the fingers of a grasping hand.

"What is that?" Misha asked. "I don't remember seeing that on the map."

"That hill looks like a barrow and it's not on any map. According to Global Positioning System you left Diamond several minutes ago and are thirty meters off shore," the nanites commented. "But nautical charts show shoals at that location. A shoal called TIGER Shoals."

"Now that is interesting," Stealth said. "Wasn't the water levels a lot lower during the ice age? All that water being locked up in the ice?"

"It was," Professor Ratinov commented. "The ocean level was over two hundred feet lower back then."

"So this isn't land that's been created. It's old land that was drowned for the last twelve thousand years," Stealth commented. "And this spirit just brought it back up."

"OH! Comparing the terrain of the current islands with charts of the surrounding water. Thankfully the Navy, Coast Guard and NOAA have thoroughly surveyed the entire area," the nanites commented.

"BINGO!" The nanites shouted cheerfully. "We've already gotten an 80% match for the terrain around you."

"We're looking at terrain that hasn't been seen in thirteen thousand years," Misha said slowly. "Cool."

Carefully the two approached the hill and its crown of stones, placing each step carefully. As they got closer the details of the stones became clearer. The dark, fine grains in the stones were visible speaking of a long history going far back into the distant past. Also barely visible was the faint traces of carvings in the menhir. Intently Misha tried to trace the carvings to understand what they were but it seemed to be all random swirls, curves and lines. What was clear was this was no random placement by nature. This had been done deliberately, each stone placed with care.

The nanites were hard at work and displayed in his vision was their best efforts to translate the carvings along with size, height and possible age.

"A barrow," Misha asked. "Is that a barrow?"

"It is!" The nanites responded. "It's hard to define exactly who could have made it but the decorations closely resemble Mesolithic art found in Ireland."

"If it is Irish Mesolithic art it would confirm the theory of migration to North America from Europe."

Stealth paused for a moment and looked at the hill in front of him. "What is a barrow?"

Misha looked to his friend and then turned back to the mound. "It's a burial mound."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Stealth commented. "What exactly was buried there?"

Misha shrugged. "Whatever it is it's the source of all our troubles."

"We've learned one more thing about this creature," Stealth said as they slowly moved forward. "That it was deliberately placed here. Someone had to have created this barrow and put the spirit inside."

"Either he went dormant when the last of the ice age species died or he was captured and forced into dormancy," Sampers commented over the radio. "Probably when he was weakened from the loss of the ice age flora and fauna. Whatever happened I doubt he went willingly. So go carefully."

Suddenly, without warning one of the stones slowly started to lean forward. Moving inch by inch at first but gaining speed it moved toward the ground and away from the barrow. It kept moving till it toppled over completely and hit the ground with a solid WHOMP that made the ground shake. A second menhir started to topple over, and then a third and a fourth. The ground on the top of the hill heaved and buckled as something pushed its way free of the hill that had imprisoned it.

"Hacker 6 we've got contact!" Misha shouted excitedly into the radio.

Stealth stepped forward. "This is going to get real ugly."

The last of the menhir toppled over as a massive stone that capped the barrow lifted free of the ground. It rocketed upward spinning end over end before hitting the earth with a thump that felt like an earthquake. Moments later a massive head pushed free of the earth, tossing large boulders and stones flying with a mere shake of its head. Then a pair of paws the size of tree trunks lifted out of the hill. Then a truly tremendous body as large as a truck pulled out of the ground. The creature was free of its prison but it sat on its haunches for a moment, recovering from its great exertion. Then the spirit stood up and shook itself vigorously sending the dirt and rock that covered it flying in all directions. When the dust and dirt settled they got their first really good look at the spirit.

The creature looked similar to a Smilodon but it was unlike any the two heroes had seen before. It was huge, at least six feet tall at the shoulder and twenty feet long. Its fur was the deep blue of ice cold water with slightly lighter blue highlights. Strange mystic symbols of a bright, blue glow ran down his spine all the way to his shoulders and hindquarters and then down to his

paws. Similar runes covered his massive teeth. Icicles dangled from the ends of his fur and on the ends of his sword-like incisors. It stretched and yawned reminding Stealth of a domesticated house cat waking up from a nap on a warm windowsill. It turned and looked at them with eyes the same color blue as that of long frozen ice. Those eyes cast a cold and menacing gaze upon them both.

Misha took a step backward. "It looks pissed off."

"I'm always grumpy when someone wakes me up," Stealth joked as he drew his two blades. "Maybe he just needs some coffee to help wake up. A few gallons of coffee and a snack and he'll be happy."

The fox nocked a powerful explosive arrow onto his bow. "I think we are the snack."

"We need Sampers here ASAP," Misha ordered as they backed away.

"Bring all of them!" Stealth added. "We need all the help we can get."

"Oboe 4," Misha shouted into the radio. "Get over here NOW!"

The creature's eyes narrowed and it laid its ears back. Then it leapt off the mound and straight at them!

The team called Oboe 4 was making its way through the drifts that covered everything. It had stopped snowing for the moment but there was still over a meter of snow on the ground. All were thankful for the thick fur that covered them all.

Suddenly the radio crackled to life. "We need Sampers here ASAP." Came Misha's desperate words. "Oboe 4, get over here NOW!"

"Mayday! Mayday!" Came Misha's frantic voice over the radio. That was followed by a lot of noise, cursing and shouting. Only one word was understandable. "Help!"

"Get a drone strike in their NOW!" Colonel Haslett ordered.

"*Vital signs for both Stealth and Misha at critical levels!*" The nanites announced loudly.

"*Initiate emergency mediport to nearest medical facility?*"

"*Negative. Quarantine still in effect.*"

"*Initiate Omega 3 emergency procedures. Preserve brain functions!*"

"What's happening?" The colonel asked over the radio. "Firefly 11 report!"

"What do you think is happening? They're getting the snot pounded out of them!"

They saw something suddenly dive down out of the clouds. All of them recognized it as a Manticore class attack drone. There were flashes under the wings and two objects raced towards the ground. A few seconds later there were two loud explosions up ahead. Then a loud ripping noise filled the air as the drone's gatling gun fired a long burst at some unseen target.

No one needed to say a word as the entire team broke into a run, pushing their new bodies for all their worth. Even the professor was moving along at a good clip. They broke into the clearing and got a good look at the creature for the first time.

A massive mound of fur and ice lay stretched out on the ground some forty yards away on the top of the barrow. It seemed to cover the entire mound.

"Good lord!" Miller muttered. "I've been in buildings smaller than that thing!"

"Hacker 6," the lieutenant said into the radio she was carrying. "We've reached the contact. Firefly 11 is down but so is their opponent."

"See to the wounded," the captain ordered and pointed to the large creature with a paw. "And stay away from that thing!"

Looking around they spotted Misha stretched out on the ground at the base of a large tree. About six feet off the ground there was a large blood spot on the tree trunk.

A large cheetah raced straight at the spirit till it was standing over Stealth's prostrate form. He bit down on the feline super's jacket and pulled him away with surprising ease. He didn't stop till there was twenty feet of space between them and the spirit.

"Are you all right?" The professor asked as he examined Stealth.

"No," came the sharp answer. "I feel like I've been hit by an express train! But I'll live."

O'Grady and Harrid raced over to the still form of the fox super and examined him. The lieutenant could see that his eyes were open but were fixed and seemed to be staring into space. "Brightleaf. Can you understand me?"

"I must be alive," Misha said slowly. "I can't be in this much pain and be dead." His eyes shifted and he focused on the two felines standing over him.

"How badly are you hurt?" She asked.

"Lots of injuries," Misha answered slowly. "But I'll survive. I just need time to heal. I'm going to just lay here for a little while and heal."

The professor gently touched a hand/paw on feline superheroes body. "You are conscious and lucid. I don't feel any broken bones and I don't see any signs of internal bleeding."

"I DID have broken bones and internal bleeding but I've healed a bit," came the answer from the sword wielding cat.

"Having superpowers does have it good points," the professor joked.

"If I didn't have superpowers I wouldn't be here in the first place," Stealth countered.

"Then you would have missed all the excitement," the professor joked sarcastically.

"What happened?" The captain asked. "Report."

"The thing broke out of the ground and attacked us. It was on us almost before we could react," Misha explained. "It wasn't much of a fight. He blasted through us easily. One swipe of the paw sent me flying and another sent Stealth flying too. Thankfully the airstrike got it to back off."

"Captain!" Came the sharp warning from Sergeant Hernandez. "It's moving."

Moving with the slow and unstoppable force of a glacier the creature stood up and looked warily around.

"Two hellfire missiles and all it did was stun it?" Hernandez cursed fluently in several languages. "I hate dealing with monsters and supers."

Stealth stood slowly and looked at the creature. "So do I!"

Sergeant Wexford had an AT4 rocket launcher propped up on some rocks and aimed at the tremendous creature.

"Don't bother," Misha commented to the sergeant. "You'll only annoy it."

"Can we fight it successfully?" Captain Miller asked.

"We tried that," Stealth said. He was rubbing the massive bruise on his right side. "It only made him mad."

"Believe me Captain. We're outclassed," Misha snarled. "This is at least a class 4 super. We need a full Super team."

The captain pressed the button on the mic for his radio. "We need Supers here now. At least one, full team if we're going to deal with this."

"Our assets are all busy," came the colonels answer. "That's one of the reasons we sent Misha in the first place."

"What's available locally?"

"There's a team in Bangor but they're busy with a Sea Wolf attack," the officer explained. "A group of those amphibious pirates attacked a cargo ship. We'll have team onsite in one hour. Till then back off and observe."

"We don't have an hour!" Misha snarled.

"Wildflower 1," Captain Miller said into his radio microphone. "We have a target for you. Large monster feline, thirty meters north east of my location. Give it everything you have."

"Acknowledged," came a calm, male voice. It sounded like a real human voice and not one generated by the artificial intelligence of an attack drone. "This will only take a minute."

High above them, hiding in the snow bearing clouds was a large, bat winged aircraft. Unlike the MQ-1R drone Maggie, this craft was meant for combat and was small, lithe and fast. It was also heavily armed with eight AGM-199 Hellfire 3 missiles, a GAU-14 30mm Gatling gun and a M12 pulse laser. The craft was designed with all the experience of the Rikti war in mind. This particular drone (S/N AGT137244931, nicknamed Allen) had seen combat many times against the alien invaders. But the idea of fighting a giant, Sabertooth tiger was new to him.

Taking no chances Allen increased speed and dropped towards the ground. He did a 14g turn pulling up only a few meters above the treetops. Massive trees flashed past as the drone raced along just above the tree line dodging the taller trees that towered overhead. His IR and ladar soon picked out his massive target. When in range he armed all eight missiles and launched two, then four, then the remaining two, exactly 4 seconds apart.

"EVERYONE GET DOWN!" The lieutenant shouted. Moments later two missiles raced by passing a mere 2 meters overhead.

Their massive opponent looked calmly at the objects racing towards it. It gave a massive shake of its body filling the air around it with a cloud of snow and ice.

BOOM! BOOM!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

BOOM! BOOM!

Explosions filled the air as flames and smoke enveloped the massive creature. After a long moment the smoke and flames died away revealing a cloud of ice and snow. The icy cloud slowly dissipated revealing the nature spirit standing there untouched.

ROAR!!!!!!!!!!!! The Gatling gun on the drone spit out a long tongue of flame as the tracer rounds slammed into the creature. Small puffs of explosions danced all along the large, furred body. A moment later a bright red beam of light lanced down from the drone and danced along the massive creatures fur leaving only faint scorch marks.

The creature let out a deep breath and a wide cone of frost blasted out. Razor sharp ice shards ripped through the fuselage and wings of the attacking drone. The aircraft twisted about in a high-g turn and quickly vanished from sight leaving a trail of smoke and shedding ice and parts.

"Oh that sucks." Miller touched the mike button on his radio. "Wildflower are you all right?"

"No!" Came the sharp reply. "Now at 23% power and 43% of control surfaces are gone. Breaking off and returning to base."

"Understood!" Miller said. "Good luck and thanks for trying Allen."

The creature was looking up in the direction of the retreating drone. When the last wisp of smoke had vanished its gaze dropped down to the group of soldiers, felines and supers.

The spirit's eyes narrowed as it laid its ears back. Then it stood up and started moving toward them.

"Oh crap!" Stealth muttered.

Warrant officer Sampers stepped out in front of the creature and sat down on her haunches. She raised her right paw in which was a blue crystal. "Alwa Shuntuala wentolo."

The figure didn't stop but kept advancing on the group, teeth bared and ready for a fight.

"Alwa Shuntuala wentolo," she repeated and held her right paw even higher. Misha could see the crystal in her paw had started to glow a dim blue.

"What are you doing?" Miller asked.

"Trying to get him to halt," the homotherum answered without looking away from the spirit. "If I can hold him at bay we can withdraw to a safe distance."

"Will it work?" Someone asked.

"It should," the mage responded. "But I've never used it on something this powerful before."

"Should?" Stealth asked as he nervously fingered the hilts of his swords. "Is that akin to 'he almost defused the bomb'?"

"Everyone back! We'll call in another airstrike and withdraw while the drone has it distracted," the officer snarled and reached for the radio.

"WAIT! It's intelligent. Perhaps we can reason with it. Try and contact it!" Professor Hatwell's voice floated out over the radio.

"HOW?" Misha shouted. "We don't even know what language it speaks. If it speaks at all."

"Hold up the radio so the creature can hear it," the nanites ordered suddenly. "We'll attempt to communicate with it!"

Misha held up the radio and aimed it at the charging force of nature.

"Stāwō! Nsme ghawōd katus!"

"What language was that?" Misha asked.

"Proto-Indo-European," came the answer from the nanites.

"Proto what?" Hernandez asked.

"Proto-Indo-European is a reconstruction of the common ancestor of all Indo-European languages. And would have been in use when he was last active."

If the creature understood it he showed no sign of it and continued to attack. Snow floated around the giant feline as each step left paw prints of ice but each step was slower than the one before. The mage's efforts were having an effect.

"Well he doesn't understand it."

"Or doesn't care."

"Try another language."

"Vviraam! VayaM aashaa shaantiH!"

"What language was that?" Miller asked.

"Sandskrit!"

Sampers grunted and flinched visibly as the blue glow dimmed. Her ears went back and she growled loudly. The glow flared brightly until it enveloped her entire hand. The feline mage reared up on her hind legs and grabbed the crystal with both paws. She leaned forward as if pushing against some unseen force.

The massive creature's eyes narrowed and it growled, the rumbling shaking through everything, right down to Misha's bones. He continued to move forward, placing each step slowly and deliberately. It was clear that he was having to fight to place each step.

"SANDSKRIT? Are you kidding?" Stealth snapped. "That's in India on the opposite side of the planet. Try a language spoken in this hemisphere!"

Sampers snarled and leaned forward every muscle on her body stood out against her skin as she strained against her opponent. "It's like trying to stop an avalanche!"

"Eèhènta-lixink. Wèlàn kuntëwakàn!" The radio blared.

That giant head swung around and looked straight at Misha. It pulled back its lips in a snarl that shook the ground and seemed to rattle his bones.

"He understood that!" The nanites said excitedly.

"What language was that?"

"Lenape," the nanites answered. *"They were the local native American tribes in the area till the arrival of the Europeans."*

"We estimate a 53% possibility of us speaking it in a form it can understand," The nanites commented. *"But we cannot be sure. There is only fragmentary evidence of what the language was like back then. Ten thousand years is a long time for a language to change."*

"You're not reassuring me," Misha commented.

"Alwen kinu antur Umomk nemachi Temyo bahncchu?" The figure asked in a low, growling voice that sounded like an earthquake.

"He asked who we are and are we from . . . somewhere. The place name doesn't translate," the nanites explained.

"That place is probably drowned for the last ten millennia," Ratinov said. "Water levels have gone up over two hundred feet since the end of the last ice age."

"Do something. I cannot hold him for long!" the mage explained in clipped tones. The bright blue glow now covered the entire front part of her body. And even without moving a muscle the feline was slowly moving. Her whole body was sliding backwards as her claws dug into the earth leaving long parallel tracks.

Stealth ran up to her and placed both hands on her back and leaned forward adding his own weight and strength to hers. Even with his strength the creature was still moving forward, pushing both cats in front of him.

"If he understood the language it means he had contact with the Lenape at some point," Misha commented. "How would they have interacted? Would it have been friendly?"

"Hard to tell," Ratinov explained. "Some nature spirits were considered deities, some were considered demons and others were recognized for what they were and thought of as potential opponents or allies."

So the locals back then might have considered them gods and worshipped them," O'Grady commented. "Or considered them the enemy and fought them."

"They might have deliberately trapped him here back then," the professor commented.

"So if he thinks we're Lanape he's liable to be really pissed off," Stealth said.

"He's already pissed off," Misha responded. "Tell him to stop fighting."

"Alamachten!"

"That should mean to stop fighting."

Their opponent tilted his head to one side and then stopped moving forward but he remained fixed and his teeth bared. The massive figure had come to halt a mere meter from the mage. His large form towered over Sampers as he looked down at her.

"He didn't understand that," Hernandez said calmly. "But I think he got the general idea."

"We have no way of knowing what the word is," the nanites responded. "But there is a 47% chance it is something similar to that."

"Get him to talk. The more words we have the easier it is for our translation software to surmise more of the language. We're also consulting with the Defense Language Institute."

"We need to do more. Something understandable even without language." Misha held out the bow in his hands and slowly placed it on the ground.

Stealth stepped back from the feline mage and then drew both of his swords from their sheaths on his back. Gently he placed them on the ground at his feet.

"I'll be blunt and get right to the point," Misha said coldly. "We can keep fighting each other until our friends bring in the heavy support like you faced before," he pointed into the sky where several attack drones circled overhead. "In that case you'll lose everything you've gained so far. Or," He paused for a moment. "Or we can talk this over calmly without trying to kill each other. Maybe we can reach an agreement."

"None of us wants to see those wonderful animals go extinct again," the professor commented.

"So," Misha said slowly. "Do we talk or risk destroying everything?"

A moment passed while the nanites translated what Misha had said into something the creature could hopefully understand. Then silence filled the air as no one moved.

"How much of this does he actually understand?" Miller asked.

"We're uncertain but probably around 50%."

Misha pointed to the spirit and then motioned towards it with his hands palms out as if he was pushing the massive feline back. Then he motioned downward with both hands. "Sit. Talk or fight."

"Lematahpi, ahkenutamenen palia mahatakala," the nanites said out loud.

The large nature spirit stared at them for a moment his eyes sweeping all of them in turn. Then he looked up at the circling aircraft. Slowly he looked back at the group assembled around him.

"He understood that!" Hernandez said out loud.

The massive magical creature looked at Misha and Stealth. Both were standing stock still showing neither fear nor aggression. With the slow certainty of a glacier the Ice age spirit sat down on his haunches.

Sampers let out a loud sigh and fell to the ground with a meaty thump. The blue glow that had covered her vanished. Stealth stood there for a moment wind milling his arms as he tried to keep from falling onto the mage.

Sergeant Harrid raced over and bit down on Stealth's shirt and pulled him back a few steps.

The sergeant sat down next to the fallen mage and found the feline sprawled flat and not moving. A few moments of investigation showed that she was still alive. She looked up at the large cheetah with blurry eyes. "Let me sleep five more minutes mommy," she muttered.

He reached into a pouch and produced a large laptop. On top of the device was a black, plastic box about the size of a human hand. He placed that on the female feline's side and then opened the laptop. In a few moments the screen was displaying all of the Warrant Officers vital signs.

"Her heart rate and breathing are rapid but fine. I can't be certain but I think she's just exhausted," Harrid said to everyone. "It will be a few minutes before she recovers."

Stealth patted Sampers on the shoulder. "Rest."

"Alwen kinu antur Umomk?" The spirit asked again.

"He again asked who we are," the nanites translated.

"So what do I tell him?" Misha asked nervously as he looked at the mage sprawled on the ground.

"Tell him the truth," Stealth said calmly. "We've got enough problems without adding lying."

"Agreed," Captain Miller added. "But go easily. Tell him as little as possible till we can gauge what he wants."

"How do we explain 13,000 years of history?" O'Grady asked.

The fox looked at group for a moment then turned to the large feline again. "The humans who were here back then are long gone. It's been. They . . then . . ." Misha paused. To explain that there weren't Lenape in the area meant explaining how the European colonists had murdered and driven out the native Americans. But THAT meant explaining where and what Europe was and explaining the ten millennia of history there. How do you explain democracy to a creature not used to a government bigger than a tribal chieftain? Misha let out a deep sigh and sat down on a rock. He rubbed his left leg. The wound that had been recently inflicted by the self same creature he was now talking to had almost completely healed. "This is going to take a while."

Misha patted himself on the chest with his left hand. "Misha! Misha," he repeated. Then he pointed the Stealth. "Stealth," the fox said slowly.

Captain Miller stepped forward and patted himself on the chest with a paw. "Miller." He pointed to the spirit. "You?"

The nature spirit just looked at them for a moment and seemed to be confused. "Geimhreadh," he said in a slow, measured tone.

"Interesting. That is old Gaelic for winter storm," the nanites commented.

"This is taking too long, Can't you translate faster?" Misha asked.

"Do you understand how difficult it is to reconstruct a language dead for 12,000 years?" The nanites responded. *"I can think of a way to speed up communications."*

"What's that?" Misha asked.

"Physical contact. We can directly interact with his nervous system."

The fox shook his head. "That sounds dangerous."

"It IS dangerous," the nanites countered. "We cannot even begin to guess what interaction between us and a magical creature like him will result in."

"It could get ugly for everyone."

"I cannot order you to do this," Misha said calmly. "I won't but this could help."

The nanites were silent for a full two minutes. The longest Misha had ever known them to keep quiet voluntarily.

"Well," the nanites answered slowly. "After coming up with some 2,357,000 possible results we've decided."

"We've agreed to try it, so long as we are isolated from the main network while doing so."

"We can make talking easier," Misha said to the large spirit. "But it requires me touching you."

Misha slowly stood up and walked forward. The spirit looked at without speaking but it also didn't snarl, bite or back away. As he got closer the fox could feel the cold coming off the massive creature. He also could see the thick fur that covered it had icicles dangling off the ends and had a light sprinkling of snow all over.

The closer he got the colder it got and the bigger the creature became. Finally he halted within arm's reach. Misha looked up to see the large spirit looking down at him with a look that defied explanation. He wasn't hostile but he didn't seem friendly either.

Misha took a deep breath. "He who dares wins," he muttered and reached with his left arm. His hand came into contact with the spirit's chest. He felt the sold fur, flesh and bone of a live creature.

"GERONIMO!!"

"Who is Geronimo?"

"Attempting insertion!"

"OW! OW! OW! OW! OW! OW! OW! OW! OW! OW! OW!"

"Insertion failed!"

"100% failure!"

The image came to Misha of scores of little soldiers charging straight at a large, furry wall and bouncing off!

"Wow is he protected!"

"We can't get in," the nanites sheepishly admitted.

"At all?" Misha asked.

"Well eventually we could force our way through but it's sure to get messy."

Another image came to him of a dozen little soldiers in medieval chainmail armor. They were all carrying a large battering ram.

"Why not just ask?"

"And how do we do that? Just walk up and knock?"

The image in his mind changed to a single little person dressed in a business suit and carrying a brief case.

"Oh this is not going to go well," Misha muttered. "Try exchanging images. Show him a picture of something and then pronounce its name."

"How are things going?" The Colonel asked over the radio. "I'm being asked for an update. Things are getting tight - politically."

Captain Miller understood what that meant. All too often the military, politics and diplomacy overlapped and became entangled. It was a complication none of them wanted. It was hard enough dealing with this creature without some politician breathing down your neck asking questions and making insane demands. "It's going slowly here. The language barrier is pretty big but we've manage to reach an agreement with the Spirit. He's agreed to stop changing people and we've agreed to not try and undo all his changes. And to not keep hitting him with hellfire missiles."

"The air force is sending a B52 armed with one of their AGM-244 Jack missiles designed to kill giant monsters," the colonel commented. "ETA six hours, twelve minutes."

Stealth gave a chirp of laughter. "Jack - what a cute name."

Misha cocked his head to one side. "Huh?"

"Jack," Stealth explained. "From the fairy tale. Jack the Giant Slayer."

Misha shook his head and growled. "And they say people in the military have no sense of humor."

"I think it's safe to bring in reinforcements but they'd had best have magic protection," Captain Miller added. "We need at least a platoon but I'd feel better with a Supers Team on site."

"Acknowledged," came the reply from command. "We're sending in a flight in four hours."

A CV-22 arrived several hours later and delivered an unexpected cargo along with the five tons of food and a platoon of rangers in heavy battle armor and full magic support. The figure that stepped off the ramp was wearing camouflage fatigues and wearing a helmet but had no weapon aside from a pistol. His face had an intensity of focus and his eyes swept about taking in everything. If the cold bothered him he didn't show it. Walking along with the officer was a middle aged man with a shock of bright red hair. He was bundled up in a parka and gloves obviously not liking the cold. Also with the two was a bigger surprise. Sanchez herself. The head of ABERA was bundled up in a parka. She spotted the massive feline form of Vaughn and smiled broadly.

The man looked at the assembled animals and his jaw dropped open. "This is amazing. It's like a dream come true!"

"Or a nightmare," Vaughn said as he walked up to the new arrivals. "It's good to see you Lisa."

Sanchez leaned close to the massive feline and gently touched him on the muzzle. "Is that really you James?"

"In the flesh," the massive feline answered with a growl of amusement.

Misha raced up to the officer and smartly saluted. "Colonel Haslett. It's good to see you!"

The officer smiled and returned the salute. "Good to see you again Misha. I've brought professor Ratinov," he said and pointed to the civilian next to him.

The vulpine and the professor shook hands. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

The man smiled. "It's good to meet you sir. I want to thank you and the whole team for handling this with a minimum of injury on all parts."

"Call me Misha," the vulpine ranger responded. "I'm just glad that one was killed or really injured." He turned to Doctor Sanchez. "I'm surprised to see you here Ms. Sanchez."

"These are my people at risk," she responded. "I am not going to leave their fate to someone else."

"That and perhaps you want to see the sabertooths in the flesh?" the nanites asked.

"I want my people back," she snarled.

"Agreed your devotion to you employees is clear," the small machines countered. *"But can you honestly say that some part of you isn't excited to see all these Smilodon and the other once extinct species?"*

The woman didn't answer but the puzzled look on her face said a lot.

"We're all glad to see them back. We've already learned so much," the professor commented. "But not at the cost of so many people changed involuntarily."

"How are things going?" Haslett asked.

"Quiet," Misha responded. "The issue is contained. Our guest has been quiet. We've spent the last few hours trying to explain thirteen millennia of history."

"Good," the colonel ordered. "I want a full meeting of everyone involved in thirty minutes."

Thirty minutes later Misha, Stealth, Sanchez, Vaughn, Emily and Philip were all gathered together in the large conference room in the admit building. Also present was Captain Miller and professor Timki. The rest of Oboe 4 was still back at the barrow with the spirit. All were of course listening in via radio. Set in the middle of the table was a small radio that would allow them and the nanites to add their own comments.

The colonel was seated at one end of the conference table. Seated near him was professor Ratnov and Dr Sanchez. Of the twelve people seated at the table they were the only three still human. The rest of the people at the table weren't human and aside from Stealth and Misha they weren't even humanoid! The colonel found himself looking at several sabertooth tigers, a dire wolf and a few other species he just didn't recognize. His entire highly prized NBC team was now walking around on four legs. It felt more like a bad comic book than real life but there was no doubting the reality of all the changes.

The colonel listened quietly as both Misha and Miller gave their reports in turn. When they were done he slowly sat back in the chair and looked about the room. "Your reports sound more like a comic book than real life. But seeing as I just heard them from a fox and a giant lynx it seems almost mundane. After twenty years in SOC I keep being surprised by things but seeing as several hundred people changed into animals is a first even for me. And to think when I was at West Point we thought the Russians were the big enemy."

Stealth watched the colonel and was surprised at his reaction. For an officer who was looking at an entire squad of his people changed into animals by a thirteen thousand year old force of nature he seemed remarkably calm. It made him wonder what it would take to get the man upset or confused. Was he as confused and freaked out as everyone else but just very good at covering it up?

"What's the situation right now?" Haslett asked.

"Calm," the captain answered. "Warrant Officer Sampers and staff sergeant Brightleaf have managed to reconstruct enough of the language to open a dialogue with the entity. They also succeeded in calming him down."

"We had some good help from my friends with the language. Mostly we've been trying to explain thirteen thousand years of change," Misha added. "But it's been tough. That's long a time and it means it's almost like he's from another planet. We have almost nothing in common. But he seems as curious about us as we are about him."

"As long as we're talking that's good. Any other comments?" The colonel asked.

"We've been studying all the known material on the ice age and the Sabertooths. Books, websites, TV shows and the popular media," the nanites announced over the radio.

"Oh God!" Misha moaned. "Please tell me you haven't been watching those awful grade B movies again."

"We must explore ALL aspects of human thought on the subject. Not just the ones you like."

"The movie Sabertooth seems to typify things. It's the usual 'Man vs. Nature' plot. You could have replaced the Sabertooth with Godzilla or King Kong with no real problems."

"The original King Kong was SO COOL. Even if you could plainly see Willis O'Brien's fingerprints in Kong's fur."

"The plot of Sabertooth was hackneyed and SO predictable and the acting was mediocre too."

The creature in the movie was SO badly done," the nanites commented. *"I mean the special effects were terrible. The creatures movements looked cartoonish. The musculature was off and the coloring ALL wrong."*

"I like the one review on the Rotten Tomatoes website 'The film would probably best be enjoyed among friends, with copious amounts of booze handy.' That about sums it all up."

"It was so bad it was good."

"Can you stop with the Siskel and Ebert imitation and get to the point!" Stealth snapped.

"Well our study is incomplete but we see that human thought on creatures like the Smilodon shows a love/hate relationship. They are often portrayed as the villains, unstoppable killers that rip through large numbers of people before being stopped. This shows that you STILL fear them even after they've been gone for millennia. Some primal part of your mind still remembers when

your ancestors huddled in caves from those ravenous beasts. It's a primal fear from when man was NOT on the top of the food chain."

"And yet you are endlessly fascinated by them. Books, movies, TV shows. whole wings of museums devoted to them. And the scientific work on the subject is unending. And let's not forget all those Ice Age movies by Blue Ray studios. Smilodons are among the main characters. Several of the people who were changed were excited and delighted by it. And both Misha and Stealth were excited to meet a real live sabertooth tiger. Dr. Sanchez devoted the entire project to recreating them. Spent billions of dollars to do it. Nor is she alone. The Russians have a similar program going."

"Interesting comments," the colonel said slowly. "And so true. I'll admit a rush of excitement when I found out there were live Smilodons."

"So," Stealth said slowly. "Where does this leave our oversized friend and the U.S. government?"

"The State department is confused," the colonel answered in an amused tone. "That's a first for them. The Agriculture department is sending a team as is the Smithsonian and the CDC. I am giving a briefing to Joint chiefs and to the White House right after that to decide that very thing. What's your best recommendation on this? Miller, you first."

"We have the creature contained. At least for the moment. The platoon of Rangers was a great help. I do recommend we keep it under close observation and have a super team nearby," was Captain Miller's answer.

"Warrant officer Sampers?"

"He is very powerful but limited in area," she responded. "I think we can contain him here for the moment. But we need to keep up a meaningful discussion. We can learn a lot from him and with effort he can be a strong ally."

"Starting a new ice age is not an option," the colonel said.

"I understand sir but ABERA is already recreating many of the ice age species. Maybe we can all work together?"

"I can think of a lot of other groups attempting the same thing," Professor Ratinov added.

"We need to tread carefully on this matter," the colonel said. "It is outside the military realm and into politics and diplomacy. Until a decision is reached we need to contain this and not let him expand any further."

"What chance is there of keeping this secret?" Vaughn asked. "It would make security a lot easier."

"If we went public with this we could bring in several other groups," Sanchez said. "Including the Bronx zoo, the National Zoo in Washington D.C. and the Moscow zoo. The Russians have a similar program going and we've been working with them on this since the beginning. What happened here is liable to happen to them too. If it hasn't happened already."

"We instituted a five mile quarantine around the islands including patrol aircraft, Coast Guard cutters and a navy frigate," the colonel responded. "And let's not forget the Manticore class attack drone that made an emergency landing at Bangor airport."

"CNN is showing footage of Allen making that emergency landing at Bangor airport," the nanites added. "Lots of people took pictures and video before the Air Force managed to collect him. The video on Youtube already has 175,000 hits."

"This is already headline news," the colonel commented. "I'm sure congress will want to investigate this."

"They always do," Misha muttered and shook his head in disgust. "Maybe we can get our large friend to change Congress into wild animals."

"All right. At this point it's not a matter of if we go public but how much do we reveal. For the moment we stick with the official line about this being an ongoing operation and giving no comment. I'm sure the White House will have an answer for that."

Sanchez rested her elbows on the table and leaned forward. "My personal recommendation is that we go with the full truth. Of course we'll leave out some details like facility B."

"I agree with you there and I'll pass along your recommendation Ms. Sanchez," Haslett said. "But for the moment release no information."

"What about all my transformed people?" Sanchez asked. "I want them back to being human. And I'm certain our large friend doesn't want to give them up. Each person he changes does increase his power slightly."

"It's more complex than that," Sampers commented. "But he does need more living creatures of ice age species around."

"What if we offered him a swap?" Stealth asked. "We could swap him real animals for the staff he changed. He could change them instead."

"Now that's a good idea!" Misha's ears perked up and he wagged his tail.

"There are many lions in captivity that have no chance of ever being released into the wild. There are farms that are homes to such big cats that no zoo will take. Big cat rescue," Stealth explained.

The captain nodded his head. "Now that's an excellent idea! We get to remove excess animals, the creature gets more Ice Age species and the animals get a new lease on life outside of a cramped cage."

"We can also use dogs and cats from shelters," Misha added. "I'm sure there are plenty who could use a new start."

"I donate to some rescue groups. I'm sure they can help provide animals" Stealth explained.

"He donates to four of them," the nanites commented.

"We contacted the Ringling Brothers and Barnum Bailey Circus a few years ago. They run an elephant breeding program in Sarasota Springs Florida," The ABERA director said. "Our request for several elephants to help with the woolly mammoth program was answered with a rude comment about our mental capacity and the reminder that elephants are endangered. BUT they did offer several retired lions and lionesses if we met their standards of care. They also wanted some of the Smilodons. As an incentive they offered an eight figure donation. Perhaps the offer for those big cats still stands. They tried to contact me two hours ago but I haven't spoken with them yet."

"They're sure to put those cats in the big show," the professor commented with disgust in his voice. "Put them on display for money."

"And this is different from zoos how?" Misha responded in clipped tones.

The professor scowled at Misha for a moment. "It seems too commercial."

"Agreed but Ringling is a major employer of animals and they DO have a good sized Elephant breeding program going. That's more than most groups that use animals do," Misha said.

"This is neither the time nor the place to discuss the merits or evils of circuses," the colonel said interrupting the debate. "Please contact the circus and tell them that their offer will be taken under serious consideration but we have no answer at the moment.

"Let me be perfectly clear on this," the colonel said and stood up. There was a ring of authority in his voice reminding everyone that this was a skilled and experienced leader. "EVERYONE involved will be investigated thoroughly whether they are circuses, zoos or whatever!"

The professors face turned bright red and he leapt to his feet. "How can you compare . . . "

The colonel scowled and leaned towards the professor. "THAT IS NOT OPEN TO DEBATE," he shouted cutting off the other man's protests. "If you don't like it. TOUGH!"

Ratinov flinched visibly and looked really mad but he had the sense to keep his mouth shut. He did bite his lip hard enough to draw blood.

"But," the colonel continued in a surprisingly quiet tone as his face softened into a smile. "All will be closely monitored by the Agriculture dept with help from the ASPCA. We will handle this carefully. I want no chance what so ever of losing these animals again. We've been given a priceless chance to bring back these lost species and I will not blow that opportunity."

That earned a round of nods of agreement and Ratinov seemed to relax noticeably. Certainly his blood pressure went down as his face went back to its normal color.

"If no one else has anything to add?" The colonel asked. "I have two briefings to give."

Everyone filed out of the room except for the Colonel. The officer set up his laptop on the table in front of him. He let it boot and then entered the four codes that allowed him access to the high level communication channel.

He carefully checked his looks with a small mirror being sure that he didn't look too neat and clean. After all he was in the field and had to look a little dirty. Long ago the man had learned that looks do matter in some regards, especially when dealing with politicians. A check of his watch told him it was time and he tapped a key on the keyboard. A face appeared on the screen and he recognized it as belonging to a Captain who worked for the Joint Chiefs. "Colonel Haslett reporting."

"Thank you sir. One moment while I connect you. The Chiefs are waiting."

It was four hours before the colonel closed his laptop and stepped out of the conference room. There were bags under his eyes and he was sweating heavily. He found a small group waiting for him in the lobby of the admin building.

"You look like five miles of bad road," Misha said and offered his officer a bottle of water.

Haslett opened the bottle and downed it all in one swig. "The president had a lot of questions. It seems the Canadians are not happy with this lab being near their border. The governor of Maine wasn't happy and the mayor of Banger is seriously pissed off. Also a dozen groups are already screaming about how we are torturing and cruelly abusing animals."

"Abusing animals?" Misha asked, amazed. "I'll admit to frying a few bugs but that's all."

"ABUSE?" Sanchez shouted. Truly angry for the first time. "The ASPCA inspects our facilities at least once a year and we've been given a clean bill of health every time!"

Haslett gave a way of the hand. "Never mind those fools. We have lawyers and staff to deal with them. We'll have our lawyers talk to your lawyers. Worse is people are already starting the 'Man dabbling in things they weren't meant to know, crap.'"

Sanchez squinted her face in disgust. "We need to squelch that fast. I'm really tired of hearing that old fairy tale."

"All of us are tired of that crap," Timki added with a nod of the head.

"We have just the answer to that." The colonel looked at Chairman Sanchez. "The president thinks the best course of action is to be honest and open. He is sending an envoy to discuss the details."

The woman smiled and passed a piece of paper to the officer. "I have a list of people I've already invited to the island."

Haslett laughed and scanned the list. "All right. A flight is coming in a few hours with the president's envoy, the Ag department team, the Smithsonian and the ASPCA. If they can be at Bangor airport by 10:00 hours they can come over then. Otherwise they'll need to wait for the next supply flight."

Sanchez had spent the next few hours on the phone talking to lawyers, the president's envoy, her staff back in Bangor, colleagues in a dozen different schools, universities, parks and zoos, more lawyers, several news crews, the agriculture department, the Justice department, the major of Bangor, the governor of Maine and yet more lawyers. All in an attempt to keep the chaos to a minimum. With mixed results.

The chaos arrived on the island with the 10 o'clock flight which landed exactly on time in the open field near the Admin building. The CV-22 Osprey had barely landed before the rear ramp was lowered. The National Geographic crew was first off. Twelve people including camera techs, sound techs and two (semi famous) hosts were in the group. In true NG fashion they came down the ramp with cameras rolling and giving commentary as they ran. Behind them came a phalanx of men and women. They were armed with still cameras, video cameras and an amazing array of testing equipment.

Misha and Stealth stood at the bottom of the ramp and waved their arms to stop the crowd, to no effect. They streamed off the plane en mass and simply flowed past the two Supers and instantly spread out among the awaiting creatures. They defied all attempts to stop or even slow them down. All of them were chattering, talking, pointing and taking pictures excitedly like tourists just arriving in Times Square.

Four of them made a beeline straight for Vaughn and in moments surrounded him. "Look at those markings! Those aren't like any modern cat. This is completely original."

"But look at those?" A woman said excitedly as she pointed at another Smilodon, this one with the orange and black stripes of a tiger. "Those are exactly like *Panthera tigris tigris*."

"These prove that the Smilodon did indeed use similar markings to the modern felines. We can use the modern species as models for reconstructing the extinct ones."

"No you cannot," the second scientist countered and pointed to a cave lion which had tan fur with faint strips along her back. "No modern feline species has markings like that."

"True," the third responded. "But it does look like the drawings in the Cueva de La Pasiega, Ignateva cave and Lascaux. It proves we can use those as models."

"Why bother? The fourth said excitedly and pointed to the living examples all around them. "We have the real things!"

Two other scientists had a tape measure and were busily and excitedly taking bodily measurements of one of the sabertooths.

Unnoticed by everyone else were four other figures flying low over the water. In moments they reached the island and landed in the snow. Their heavy powered armor changed color from the blue of ocean water to the white of the snow bound land. Two were carrying M127 rapid fire railguns in their hands and the others M137 pulse lasers. They didn't radio their arrival to anyone although the nanites noticed their arrival and dutifully notified Misha and Stealth.

"Hacker 6," Misha said calmly. "ALL of our guests have arrived."

"Acknowledged," came the response from command center in Fort Bragg.

"Who are the four?" Stealth asked Misha using a radio channel he hoped was private. "And why are they hiding?"

"That's our backup," the fox responded. "Just ignore them. Hopefully we won't need them."

"They're a little late," the feline superhero commented.

"True but they were busy dealing with Archanos," Misha explained. "And better late than never."

Last off the plane was a short woman with gray hair framing a face that was weathered and scarred from hard use. She walked with a limp and leaned heavily on a metal cane. Her clothes were simple but well padded and protected her from the cold. Her eyes had the hardened look of an old soldier. She walked through the chaos and right up to the nature spirit. The creature regarded her with awe and amazement at her courage and boldness. Gently she patted the massive feline on the muzzle. "Hello Kitty."

"You're not afraid?" the spirit asked in a voice like a howling snow storm.

"I fought the communists," she said calmly. "They spent forty years trying to make me keep quiet. They beat me, tortured me and they even shot me. TWICE. That only made me tougher." She poked him with the end of her cane. "You I can handle."

"I believe you could. My name is Geimhreadh," the spirit said. "Who are you my brave warrior?"

The first animals arrived from the Bear Mountain Animal Habitat; a small, underfunded and over stocked ex-farm near the Bear mountain state park in New York state. A CV-22 Osprey skillfully landed in the open area near the barrow. Along with the two lions, four lionesses, seven dogs, twelve house cats and one liger came a three legged lynx named Miss Ing. Also with them came William and Alison; the married couple who cared for the animals. The pair energetically raced about as the cages were carefully rolled down the loading ramp.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Alison asked nervously without taking her eyes off the cages and their guests.

"It's safe," Stealth said as he walked up to the couple. "I wouldn't have called you here if it wasn't."

"They can watch as we change them. If they have any objections we'll stop," Misha said. "Does that sound fair?"

The two new human arrivals conferred for a moment. "All right," they finally said in unison.

"Good," Misha said. He looked at the caged animals arraigned around them. "Who do we start with?"

"We'll start with Ing," the woman keeper said hastily. "The poor dear has been through a lot over the last few years and deserves a break.

"All right," Miller said slowly. "How do we do this?" All eyes turned to the spirit.

Geimhreadh, pointed with a paw to an open area next to the barrow. "Place her there but she must be out of that cage."

The cage was a plastic and metal thing like often used to carry a medium sized dog. William easily carried it into the required place and gently set it down. He leaned over and dropped a little treat into the cage. "Everything is all right honey," he said in a soft voice as he opened the door.

The rest of the group were all standing a good distance away, watching carefully. Even the National Geographic crew had set up their cameras and then stepped back. This left Geimhreadh and the lynx alone. Nearby stood Sampers, Misha, Stealth, Sanchez, the Colonel and the rest of Oboe 04 a few feet away.

"How will she adjust to being changed?" The captain asked. "I mean she isn't as intelligent as us."

"I will explain," the spirit said calmly.

"She's always been smart and quick on the uptake," the woman with a smile. "And she's a real survivor."

"Please stand back," the woman said nervously as she waved her hands about. "Miss Ing is very nervous around strangers."

"Miss Ing Lynx?" Misha asked slowly.

"Her first owner thought it was cute," Stealth said.

"Her first owner is serving ten years for animal cruelty and running an animal fight ring," the man from the ASPCA commented and smiled. "Took us five years but we shut down the whole fight ring."

"With some help from the FBI," the nanite added over the radio.

"With her leg missing we couldn't rehabilitate her back into the wild," William said sadly.

Slowly and timidly a small feline head poked out of the open end of the crate. Then a beautiful female lynx slowly limped out. What Misha noticed first was the source of the limp. Her right front leg was missing its paw. The limb ending in a stump just above the ankle. Other than that she seemed to be in good health.

"Sit Ing," the woman said in a firm but gentle tone.

The lynx sat down but fidgeted nervously, looking around constantly and flinching at the slightest noise.

Geimhreadh made a soft noise like a meow and the lynx looked up at him and then noticeably relaxed.

"You explained to her what's happening?" Misha asked.

"Yes," Geimhreadh answered. "As best I can. She understands and agrees." The spirit exhaled and a cloud of snow drifted out and covered the lynx.

She suddenly started to grow bigger; her legs got thicker and taller as her body grew heavier along with her head. But she kept the same proportions; just becoming larger. The pattern and coloration of her fur remained the same, just on a far larger body. The most dramatic change was her right, front leg. It had ended just above where the ankle had been. Now, as they watched the leg started to re-grow. The flesh and fur at the end extended and became an ankle and kept going

to form a paw complete with claws and pad. In a minute a maimed limb had been restored. The twenty two pound lynx was now two hundred and twenty pounds of trim, healthy and complete feline predator.

"You just made her bigger!" Misha commented.

"She is a different subspecies. Undoubtedly a relative of felis rexroadensis," the professor responded excitedly. "We'll have to give this new species a name!"

The lynx lifted her newly restored right, front leg and examined it carefully. Slowly she flexed it and moved it about as if getting reacquainted with a long lost friend.

"She seems happy," Stealth said slowly. "And confused."

"Well she lost that leg four years ago," William said and smiled broadly. "It's good to see her so happy and healthy."

Misha looked at the lynx and wagged his tail. "We need to get her a boyfriend."

"We can take care of that," Stealth said.

The spirit nodded in agreement.

"One for one," the colonel said calmly. "We gave you someone now we want one back please."

"Who goes first?" "Who becomes human again?" Sampers asked as she looked over the assembled group. Everyone involved who had changed was there but they were surprisingly reluctant to volunteer to be changed back. "No takers?"

"Well," a female dire wolf said finally. "We want to be changed back but we're still nervous. How do we know we can trust him?"

"I'll go first," a voice said.

The feline mage turned and her eyes fell on Hernandez. The cheetah soldier was sitting calmly and looking at her. His sole clothing was a vest and webgear.

Sergeant Hernandez hesitated for a moment then shook his head. "I like being a feline and liked to stay one but with a few changes."

The spirit tilted its head to one side and purred happily.

Hernandez pointed to Stealth and Misha. "I want to be a Sabertooth but I want to walk like them!"

"Remove the cloth you're wearing and I'll begin," Geimhreadh said.

Sergeant Hernandez took off the vest and webgear with some effort and soon was standing in front of a creature that outweighed him by at least three tons. In the last 24 hours he had gone from being a 150 pound, black haired Hispanic American man to being a 120 pound cheetah of a subspecies they still hadn't identified. Now he was standing in front of the three ton creature that had changed him.

The massive creature leaned close and breathed on him. The cloud of ice and snow that enveloped him didn't hurt, it didn't even feel cold. It was like a cool fall breeze at first but it seeped under his fur and into his flesh and bones. He could feel himself start to grow bigger as he quadrupled his weight. A lean, thin body meant for chasing prey was swiftly changed into that of a powerful stalker. He could no longer run as fast but this new body was certainly better for stalking and killing prey in one massive leap from ambush. Looking at his new body (his third in two days) and saw that he was a sabertooth but he had kept the same amber colored fur with black spots. They seemed to fit nicely.

The Smilodon sat there for a moment on all fours then slowly stood up on his hind legs. The four legged feral animal was now a human like anthropomorphic sabertooth. Hernandez carefully stretched and flexed each of his limbs and then examined his body. His fur rippled with each movement revealing the powerful muscles underneath. "Oh I like this!"

"How do you feel?" The colonel asked.

"Great! I've never felt this powerful, so alive," came the answer. "I'm going to like this."

Sampers walked up to the sergeant and walked around him, examining him in great detail. "His new body is stable and perfectly healthy."

"What's your mother going to say?" Harrid asked.

"She's always liked cats," the new Smilodon joked.

"So she was always the neighborhood, crazy cat lady?" The sergeant joked.

The new Sabertooth shook its massive head. "Oh no! I was always the local kid with all the pets."

"I never thought of you as a cat person, till now," he joked. "I like the markings. They're cool."

"They sure beat tattoos."

"You do realize you're stark naked," Harrid commented dryly.

Hernandez looked down at his fully feline and totally nude body. "Oh, pardon me." He reached down and put on his vest.

Harriid narrowed his eyes. "You've been hoping someone would say that."

"Since we first changed."

"You should have been a standup comedian," Miller commented. "But seriously. Put on some clothes. You are still a soldier even if you're a lot hairier."

The soldier straightened at attention. "Yes sir." Then he started rooting through his backpack for his spare clothing.

Sampers looked around at the crowd. "Next?"

The man pointed to a cage which held a lion and a lioness together unlike the other cages which all held only a single animal. "We'll do Leo and Leona together. They're inseparable. He'll be unmanageable if we separate them for even a minute."

The cage was manhandled carefully into the center of the open area and everyone stepped back but the couple from the habitat. The man walked up to the cage and slowly opened the door. Then he stepped back a few paces.

First out of the cage was the male. He poked his head out of the door and looked around. His nose twitching and his ears moving about. Finally he moved out into the open and took several steps forward. He looked up at the nature spirit as if seeing it for the first time and stopped dead in his tracks. The lioness left the cage and walked up to her mate. They rubbed their bodies against each other and he licked her muzzle tenderly.

Geimhreadh made a soft noise like a meow and both felines looked at the spirit. Then they slowly bowed their heads.

"They understand what's going to happen?" Stealth asked.

"Yes," Geimhreadh answered. He leaned over and moved his head closer to the pair. The spirit exhaled and a cloud of snow drifted out and covered the lion and lioness.

The snow covered them with a light dusting and their bodies started to change. Legs shortened and their bodies grew more compact as their spines gained the distinct slope of a Smilodon. The male's mane vanished as both gained the long, saber like teeth that gave their new species its name. The snow cleared away and where there had been a lion and a lioness were now two sabertooths, a male and a female. The male tilted his head back and let loose a roar and his mate joined in the chorus announcing to all the world the power of their new bodies and pure delight at having them.

"And I was worried how they would adapt," the captain muttered.

Professor Ratinov took a deep breath and nervously stepped up to the warrant officer. She was standing next to Geimhreadh. "Excuse me Ma'am."

The homotherium mage turned and looked at him as did the spirit. "Yes?"

"Well," the man said nervously. "I . . well. When you're done changing everyone back. At least the ones who want to change back. I'd like to try it out."

She tilted her head to one side. "Try what out?"

"I'd like to be one of the species," he explained. His nervousness was quickly vanishing to be replaced by excitement. "At least for a little while. I thought I wanted to be a Smilodon Fatalis but seeing you makes me wonder if the Homotherium wouldn't be better."

"Why not do both?" She responded half joking.

The man's face broke into a great grin and he got even more excited. "Can you do that? A little while as each."

"You're joking aren't you?"

"No," Stealth commented slowly with a shake of the head. "He's dead serious."

"Why shouldn't I be?" Ratinov responded excitedly. "This is the opportunity of a lifetime! I've written about what these animals were like. No more guessing or theorizing. Now I can be one and experience it for myself and know for certain."

A small group of humans had moved forward and were clustered around the two, new Smilodon who until a few minutes before had been a lion and a lioness. Along with Sanchez, was a man from the ASPCA, two women from the agriculture department, a man and woman from the Smithsonian and four others who represented a half dozen other zoos and parks.

"They're beautiful," someone said with awe in his voice.

"We'll monitor them for the next few days to see how they adapt," the ASPCA representative said. "But they certainly aren't in pain."

"Once we have the proper clearance we'll send breeding pairs to the Moscow, the National and Bronx zoos along with the Russian Pleistocene park on the Kolyma river," Sanchez said. "Once we're sure the animals are settled in we can begin an aggressive breeding program and really start to grow the population." There was real excitement in her voice and a broad smile on her face that was matched by all the others.

"Oh Leo!" Someone shouted in dismay. "Can't you two wait? They should have made you a goat if you're so horny."

"What's going on?" Misha asked as all eyes turned in the direction of the voice.

"Wow!" Miller said. "They certainly didn't waste any time!"

"What?" Someone asked.

"It seems Leo and Leona have decided not to wait and have started their own breeding program."

The End?