

Part 1

Perhaps the best way to describe it would be to say that it was otherworldly. The raccoon saw the world die around him; buildings crumpled, people were blown away in the blink of an eye, and Raiyev could only feel in a way satisfied that science was the answer to it all. But at the same time he felt almost betrayed, as if science had let him down, stealing away the world like that. After all, science was one of his two passions in life, superceded only by his passion for his fiancée, Brad. Where WAS Brad in all of this pandemonium? He sensed that Brad was already gone, long before any of this had happened, though he didn't know how he knew this—he just sensed it to be true. Now he felt torn, lost...but there was something more... He couldn't put his finger on it, but it was almost as if the whole notion of death due to science had put him in a state where he was feeling every single fathomable emotion at once. Omni-positional emotion. The absolute antithesis of apathy. A fifth dementia of psychology. Downright otherworldly.

He slowly came around, squinting his eyes open into the darkness of his bedroom. A dream. It had been only a dream. The world was still here, and the gentle snoring next to him proved that so was his love. He closed his eyes again and gently pondered his dream. He felt it slowly slipping away from him, as was his otherworldly state of mind. It faded away as consciousness took over stupor. He wanted it to go, but then at the same time he didn't. It was so...*odd*...the way he had felt during that nightmare. Was it a nightmare? He didn't know. He didn't feel like getting up yet—it was still too early. He drifted back into a slumber right as the phone rang...

"Goddammit," Brad grumbled into his pillow. He didn't know it at the time, but that was going to be the catchphrase for the day around his workplace at EarthTech Labs. For now, however, it was five o'clock in the morning—too damn early, as far as he was concerned, for the phone to be ringing. Nevertheless, he grunted, flicking his ringed tail a bit out of annoyance, and reluctantly reached over to his nightstand to pick up the receiver.

"Hello?" he answered groggily.

"Brad? That you?" came the slightly gruff voice on the other end.

"Yes sir, Dr. Patterson," Brad answered, rubbing his eyes. It was Dr. Frank Patterson, a short little fox in his mid 50s who served both as Brad's boss and head of the Geological Department.

"Brad, we need you down here. Something's happening that we can't explain, and we need as many active minds as we can get."

There was obviously excitement in the fox's voice, but Brad couldn't tell whether it was joyful or fearful excitement. "Okay, I'll be there in half an hour. Raiyev won't like it too much—we only have one car, you know."

"I know, I know. He might as well be here, too. This isn't entirely his field, I don't think, but you never know who might turn out useful, ya know?"

Brad grunted and hung up. He didn't much care for some of the bad rap that his fiancée got. Sure, Raiyev was just a touch clumsier than his fellow employees, but he certainly wasn't a "bumbling idiot" as Brad had overheard a husky tell her friend not too long ago. So to hear his boss imply that Raiyev wasn't too "useful" to begin with upset him. As far as Brad was concerned, Raiyev was the most beautiful, loving, kind, benign,

and generous warm-hearted fur ever to have graced the planet. And he was pretty much right, as far as those that knew Raiyev were concerned.

Raiyev wasn't the brightest biochemist at EarthTech, but he was still very well known, be it for his physique ideal of any fur in his late 20s, for his occasional knack to trip over his own tail, or simply for the uplifting smile seen on his raccoon muzzle every day. Needless to say, he got much attention from the ladies and some of the guys, but he was already spoken for, and quite happy for it. Brad, also a raccoon in his late 20s, was Raiyev's lover, fiancée, and best friend, and was much larger than Raiyev, with a body nearly completely ripped with muscles. It was almost a wonder that these two veritable playboys weren't busy modeling or taking up any other work that better suited their physiques, but they were quite content living their current lives and delving into the mysteries of science.

Science was their stimulant in life. The concept of progression through knowledge and understanding of the universe around them, of inventing a better life, was too tempting to them to want to pursue anything else. They both had shared this passion since they were children, so when they met each other at The University of California at Berkley, a friendship clicked almost instantly between them, and the rest, as the saying goes, is history. They both graduated with honors, moved into an apartment together, and began their lives soon at EarthTech Labs. Since EarthTech was the largest independent science facility in the nation (meaning that it was not funded by the government), it covered nearly all aspects of science. This meant that the two raccoons could get in the know of nearly everything new in the science world quite easily—something that just made the deal all the sweeter to them.

Or at least, it did when they didn't have to wake up and get to work so damned early, Brad thought to himself. It pained him somewhat to have to wake his lover up, he realized, so he just stood there for a moment in silence, watching the smaller raccoon's tail flicker slightly as he continued to dream.

Brad reached out a huge, beefy arm and gently caressed Raiyev, bending over to kiss him lightly on the cheek. Raiyev opened his eyes slowly, coming unwillingly out of unconsciousness.

"What time is it, sweetie?" he asked, stretching.

"Too early for us to get up, but we're needed at work," the bigger raccoon replied, frowning. "There's some sort of emergency or something—Patterson wasn't too clear on the phone just now. But I'm needed, which means it's an early start for both of us."

Raiyev made a small noise in his throat that Brad was sure was a whine.

"Yeah, well, once we can afford a second car and perhaps a house of our own, this won't be a problem in the future."

"Hey, it's okay," Raiyev said, sitting up and scratching his chest. "I won't make a fuss if you won't." He winked at Brad, then stood up and kissed him on the cheek. "So do you want to shower first or shall I?"

"Normally I'd suggest we shower together, but we're gonna need our energy, plus I said I'd be there in half an hour, and that was five minutes ago. Geez, that was stupid of me," Brad said to himself in retrospect.

"I'll shower first," Raiyev said, ignoring his lover's last comment. "I'll be in and out in two minutes." And with that, he started for the bathroom. True to his word, Raiyev stepped out of a steamy bathroom a couple minutes later, still toweling off. "Your turn,"

he said coyly as he passed Brad to put on his work clothes. Brad took just a little longer in the shower, as he had more body to wash, but still made it with enough time to dress, groom, and get to work.

“So what do you think this big emergency is, anyway?” Raiyev asked Brad as he drove their Chevy convertible down the highway. It was summer and humid, and the sun had just barely come up, but the wind whipping by at 75 miles an hour was enough that the two thought driving with the top down was rather nice and comfortable.

“I honestly have no idea. Knowing how excitable Patterson is, though, it’ll probably be nothing important. Just something minute with plate tectonics or something. I swear, that guy is such an oddball about plate tectonics. Any tiny seismic reading that shows any hint of abnormality and he gets in such a fluster that you’d think he’d just won the Superbowl.”

Raiyev laughed and said, “Well, you have to give the guy some credit, though—he IS quite brilliant in his work.”

“Yes, he’s won a good handful of awards and recognitions. I’m not saying he’s not brilliant, but it just comes back to that fine line, you know?”

“You mean between genius and insanity?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Brad grinned widely, and Raiyev made the turn into the EarthTech Labs parking lot. From behind the a wall of trees, a rather vast parking lot came into view, with a large white building visible a few hundred yards away—the main building. EarthTech Labs was a large plot of land littered with numerous small buildings, open fields, and large scientific equipment, the least of which not being the huge satellite dish that could be seen peeking above from behind the main building. And all surrounded by an overly large barbed wire fence, which ended only at the sides of the main building.

Generally, the parking lot would be nearly empty at this time of the morning, but to Brad’s and Raiyev’s surprise, it was nearly full, and a few cars were still milling around, looking for a decent parking spot.

“What the hell is going on here?” Raiyev cried out in shock.

“I’m beginning to suspect that Patterson actually has valid reason to be overly excited this time,” Brad replied as he took in the sea of cars filling the parking lot.

“Well, we’ll find out in a minute, anyway,” Raiyev said as he pulled into an open space near the back of the parking lot. Turning off the car and pocketing the keys, he gestured to his fiancée with a grin of excitement as Brad just sat there a moment, lost in thought and wonder. “Well, come on! Let’s go!” he said with an excitement like that of a child at an amusement park. “This has gotta be huge, and my curiosity is trying my patience.”

“Alright, alright,” Brad said, coming back to himself. The two began to trot, hand in hand, the length of the parking lot, getting passed by a few furs who were running more avidly to the main building. “This is gonna be something. I can see that now,” Brad said as the two of them leapt up the stone steps to the eastern main entrance, the rising sun on their backs. Wondrously, they stepped in through the glass doors of their workplace to face whatever this new hype was.

Part 2

"Name?" the large female bear in uniform said almost apathetically from behind the front security desk. The main building was bustling with excitement as furs were hurrying to and fro, phones were ringing off the hook, and the line to check in was longer than even the normal check-in line usually was at nine in the morning on any standard day. Yet, Ms. Bilicek, the bear who headed the front security desk, still acted as if nothing at all was out of the ordinary.

"Raiyev Dmitri Kosekovic," Raiyev answered, and placed his paw on a print scanner sitting on the large laminated countertop in front of him.

"Brad Steven Johnson," Brad said as Raiyev's scan was approved, and placed his own paw to be scanned.

"Alright, here are your security passes," she said without energy as she handed over a couple of large badges on plastic necklaces, each bearing a name, picture, and level of security clearance to its furson. Due to a high level of secrecy in the work done at the facility, it was standard procedure for all personnel to check in and out each day, leaving their security passes in the main building.

"None of this hullabaloo bothers you?" Raiyev asked the bear.

"Just another day at the rat races," she replied unenthusiastically.

"Hey, I heard that!" cried a small and bony rat from behind Brad, who approached Bilicek, trying to size her up. The bear couldn't be bothered, and neither could the two raccoons as they made their way to the northern wing of the building, now adorning their passes. They were turning the corner down a corridor when a ferret, not exactly watching where she was going, ran right into Raiyev, knocking herself and the large portfolio she was carrying to the ground.

"Oh, my, are you okay?" Raiyev said with honest concern as he bent down to help her up.

"Oh, yes, sorry...my boss said she needed this file on the double and—oh, dammit!" the distressed ferret cried out as she saw the papers from inside the portfolio strewn all over the floor. Raiyev began to pick them up while the ferret was still standing there, a horrified look on her face. "Oh, I'm gonna get killed! And this is my second day on the job!"

"Look, honey," Brad began, "I have to run. I'll see you later, okay?"

"I beg your pardon?" the ferret said, apparently thinking "honey" was referring to her.

"Okay, see you later," Raiyev said as he stood and kissed Brad on the cheek. As Brad hurried off, Raiyev bent back down and continued picking up papers. "You know, this would go twice as fast if you helped out a bit," Raiyev said, succeeding rather well in his attempt not to sound condescending of the foolish ferret.

"Oh, right!" the ferret replied, as if the idea of picking up her own mess had only just dawned on her. "Terribly sorry," she said as she got down on her knees and started picking up papers. "I'm Toni, by the way. Toni Hawthorne."

"Raiyev Kosekovic," the raccoon replied.

"Who was that other raccoon? The one that just left?"

"That was my fiancée, Brad. He's wonderful." Raiyev smiled as he stood up, a stack of papers neatly ready to go back into the portfolio.

“Thanks,” Toni said as she slowly took the papers and frowned at them. “They’re all out of order now, though. I’m gonna be fired for sure. I’m so clumsy sometimes.”

“Hey, look—I’m known well around here for being a bit of a klutz myself. Just blame it all on me. It’ll be okay.” Raiyev stood, still smiling at the ferret.

“You mean that?” Toni said in amazement. “You’d do that for me?”

“Hey, everyone has accidents, especially on days when there’s so much activity. Don’t worry about it. Who’s your boss, anyway?”

“Uh, Dr. Paxton, in Astronomy.”

“Ah, yes, I think I’ve met her before. Don’t worry. Everyone here knows me, and they all know that I’m a bit clumsy sometimes, so just say I wasn’t looking where I was going and I accidentally ran into you.”

“You think she’ll believe that?”

“If she doesn’t, you tell her to ask me, and I’ll admit that it was my fault, okay?”

“Oh, wow! Um, okay. Uh, thanks! Mr...uh...Costyovich.”

“Kosekovic. But please, call me Raiyev.”

“Oh, okay. Is that Russian?”

“Yep.”

“But you don’t have an accent.”

“Oh, well, I was born here in America. My parents emigrated here from Russia. Anyway, I have to run, and I’m assuming you do, too. You’ll be fine, just mention my name. Oh, and walk just a bit slower.” Raiyev gave Toni a wink and started off.

“It was nice meeting you!” she called to him, and he stopped and turned.

“Nice meeting you, too,” he grinned back at her. She smiled and took her cue to leave. That was something else Raiyev was well known for—his charm, especially his charming grin. He could always speak volumes with that grin. It is perhaps why he had yet to be fired, despite his semi-consistent clumsiness.

He started back down the corridor and found his way, as he did everyday, to the glass double doors at the northern end of the main building. The warm, moist summer air greeted him again as he exited the rather sterile and heavily air conditioned building. He breathed deeply, enjoying the intoxicating scent of wildflowers and heather from a nearby field. The tiniest bit of him almost felt sad that such natural beauty was being squandered on industrialist progression. But he was a fur of science, and that small hint of sadness was overpowered hundred fold by his love for his study.

As he strolled somewhat casually along the small sidewalk to the Chemistry building, he kicked himself for not having asked Toni if she knew anything about what all of this excitement was about. He figured, though, that a two-day old assistant here probably wouldn’t know diddlysquat, anyway. Raiyev saw a figure standing just inside by the door as he approached the Chemistry building. He put his security pass up to a scanner by the door, where a little red light switched to a little green light.

“Morning, Dr. Frost,” Raiyev greeted the half-dog, half-bear as he stepped inside.

“Morning, Raiyev,” the hybrid answered with a smile. Raiyev always got along well with his boss, Dr. Ebony Frost. She was keen on sticking by Raiyev, since they were both subject to social criticism—her being a product of interspecies breeding, and him being homosexual. Raiyev had to admit, though, that for someone who took a lot more heat than he ever did, she did exceedingly well to get where she is now.

"I'm glad you're here. No one quite knows exactly what is going on, so it's good to have experts from every field here just in case, you know?" Raiyev thought she seemed a bit on edge. Well, a BIT was an understatement, he corrected himself. She obviously needed a smoke, but that was quite reasonably forbidden on the lab grounds.

"No, I don't know, to be honest. Can I get you some coffee or something, Dr. Frost?" he asked her concernedly.

"Oh, no, I'll be fine," she lied.

"Is anyone else here yet?"

"Not yet. You and I are the only ones from our department that are awake so far, it seems."

"So what exactly IS this thing that is causing so much hype?"

"You mean no one has told you yet?" she replied in surprise.

"I just got here with Brad. Patterson—"

"DOCTOR Patterson," she interjected.

"Yes, Dr. Patterson didn't tell Brad anything when he phoned him 40 minutes ago—just that it was urgent we both get here."

"Oh, okay," she responded, looking lost in thought.

"So, what is it?" Raiyev asked, trying to get his boss' mind back to the topic.

Frost looked at Raiyev with an indiscernible expression that only told Raiyev that this wasn't exactly something positive. "You know, I think we SHOULD make that pot of coffee," she said finally, still looking at him. "And if it were permitted, I would suggest perhaps some vodka, too." She escorted him down the small hallway to a room at the far end. In it was a sink with limited counter space, two bar stools, a couple cupboards, a small refrigerator, and two coffee makers.

"No caffeine, I think, Doctor," Raiyev said. The last thing they needed was for her to be even shakier.

"I agree, Raiyev." After she got the coffee maker going, she offered the raccoon a barstool. "You'll probably want to sit to hear this." Raiyev obliged and looked quizzically at his boss.

"So what is this all about?" he asked.

Part 3

Raiyev was sipping his fifth cup of coffee, going over in his head everything he had just been told, when a bespectacled old badger opened the door.

"So THERE you two are!" he said, trying to make his feeble voice sound firm while he looked at the two over the gilded rims of his circular glasses.

"Ah, Dr. Hatchett. Sorry to cause you to look for us," Frost addressed the elderly badger. "I was just telling Raiyev here everything that we've found out so far."

"Ah, yes. I would have been here sooner myself, but I was in an...impromptu conference with Doctors McGrey, Rutherford, Paxton, AND Patterson. You should have been there. Did you not hear the telephone ringing 20 minutes ago?"

"No, sorry. Like I said, I was in here, having coffee and telling Kosekovic about the new data. We haven't even opened any of the lab doors yet."

"Well, the labs are open, and everyone from our department is here now and continuing their normal work, until you can tell us all what ought to be done. You really

ought to get yourself a cell phone, you know, Dr. Frost. If need be, I'll get one for you." Raiyev thought that Hatchett's tone was a bit too haughty, considering that Frost was his boss as well. Sure, Dr. Edgar Hatchett may be one of the oldest non-executive employees at EarthTech Labs—a fur well into his 60s—but superiors are superiors, and Raiyev thought it was unbecoming for Hatchett to speak to Frost as if he were the authority figure.

"Yes, I'll look into it." Frost passed off the old fur's advice, regaining her air of authority. "So what news transpired in this 'impromptu conference'? Something big, I'd assume, considering that you were in the company of the heads of four other departments."

"Yes, well, Dr. Rutherford confirmed that the sizes of all animal life has remained unchanged in proportion to the change in size to the earth as a whole."

"So Dr. Patterson has confirmed that the earth truly is...shrinking?" Frost asked.

"With the help of Dr. Paxton, yes. And with no thanks to you, Raiyev." The badger looked down almost scathingly at the raccoon, who realized it must be related to the run-in he had with the new assistant earlier that morning.

"What does he mean, Raiyev?" Frost asked.

"Oh, nothing...it was just a small accident I had on the way over here earlier," Raiyev replied with a little laugh and a wave of his paw.

"Yes, a rather unfortunate accident that delayed the processing of certain information in the Astronomy department," Hatchett said moodily. "Anyway, Dr. McGrey has also confirmed that, like the animal life, all plant life has remained their correct sizes proportionate to the fluxuation of the size of the planet."

"So what did they all want with the Chemistry department?" Frost asked.

"Well, we're all supposed to be trying anything and everything we can think of that will stop this continuous shrinkage. If we can get everything to stop shrinking, perhaps we can find a way to put everything back to the right size. If not...well, I think you already know the ramifications of what would happen if we let this continue. Dr. Paxton said that the Moon is not changing its size, so we'll have a hell of a time battling extremely tide fluxuations, and we'll be sent out of orbit. In fact," the old badger sighed, looking down, "a shift in orbit has already begun. The government has been alerted, and if we cannot find a way to stop this, whatever is causing all this, it would mean the end of life on this planet. We could get drawn too close to the Sun, thrown too far, or even collide with another planet or satellite."

"Speaking of which, have our satellites circling the earth—I mean fur-made satellites—have they changed in size as well?" Frost asked.

"Yes, for whatever reason, they have changed as well and are, like everything else, properly proportioned."

"Okay, then. Raiyev, you already know what to do. Just get to work and tell those in your lab room what needs to be done. I'll inform the everyone else."

Raiyev looked rather panic-stricken. He still was having difficulty believing everything he was being told about the earth shrinking. "How much time do we have?" he asked Dr. Hatchett.

"At this rate," Hatchett answered, "we have approximately seven and a half years before our change in orbit becomes too critical to continue life on this planet."

“And there’s absolutely nothing that anyone has seen yet to determine the cause of all this?” Raiyev asked.

“Nothing at all,” the badger said. “Your guess is as good as mine this time. It could be anything from global warming to something caused by extraterrestrial beings.” Raiyev raised an eyebrow at Hatchett, who added hastily, “But don’t go spreading rumors or anything!”

Raiyev took his cue to leave and headed out down the hallway to his usual lab. He entered a room marked Lab 8 on his left, which inside looked typical of a modern chemist’s laboratory. There were many blacktopped worktables stationed around the room, each with an assortment of glass and earthenware, microscopes, computers, and various other tools. Many furs were already at work, grouped at tables and concentrating hard. A small and rather squat red-breasted bird came up to Raiyev.

“Hey, Thomas,” the raccoon greeted the bird.

“Lo, Raiyev. What news?” the bird answered.

“We have...um...a situation...” Raiyev’s voice seemed to falter as he tried to fathom how to explain to everyone that the entire planet and everything on it was shrinking. He took a deep breath and cleared his mind before continuing. “Everyone, I need your attention. Dr. Frost has asked me to inform you of a special assignment that calls for immediate focus.”

“You mean why it seems that everyone who has ever been on a payroll here has been called here today?” a voluptuous bunny called from the back.

“Yes, Dr. Harper—for once, the entire facility seems to be focused on the same problem, and it’s because, quite frankly, no one knows the cause of it quite yet.”

“The cause of what?” Thomas asked loudly so that all could hear, even though most had already left their workstations, had made their way up to Raiyev, and were huddled around him

“Well...I don’t know how many of you are going to believe this, but...” Raiyev hesitated for a moment before he continued; he even considered for a split second about giving up right then and there and running away. “...But the planet earth is shrinking.” Everyone in the room (except Raiyev, of course) gasped loudly and immediately started chattering away at each other. Obviously, none of the other biochemists working at EarthTech had gotten any word of what the hubbub throughout the facility was all about. Some even began to laugh.

“How the hell can the earth be shrinking?” scoffed a sun bear from within the group.

“It’s just not possible!” remarked a fox standing next to the sun bear.

“Please, please! Settle down everyone!” Raiyev cried out in attempts to get everyone to listen to the explanation. The small mob calmed itself quickly and allowed Raiyev to continue. He did his best to explain everything he had heard to the group, from the first signs of a dramatic reduction in the overall mass of the earth, up to the estimated seven and a half years left in the life of the earth if it continued to shrink at its current rate. When Raiyev told them how Frost had ordered everyone to begin at once to try and find anything that could counter the shrinking, everyone quietly complied. Raiyev took his place at one of the tables by Thomas and began to brainstorm with him.

The lunch hour seemed to come quickly, as Raiyev had already spent half the morning in the break room with his boss. Not unreasonably, no one had yet to come any

closer to solving this new mystery than they had since they begun. Raiyev took his hour in the local cafeteria like everyone else, which was much fuller than usual that day. He met up with Brad and took a table by a window. The two had just begun to exchange stories of their morning's events when the room went entirely quiet and Brad seemed to stare right past Raiyev. Raiyev turned around, a puzzled look on his face, only to see the President of the United States step into view on the screen of the large plasma television in the cafeteria. The CNN headline at the bottom read "Emergency Broadcast from the White House," and the entire world seemed to stop to hear what the President had to say.

Part 4

Flashes from the bulbs of a dozen newspaper photographers bounced lightly off the greying fur of the well-dressed President. President Alexis McKenzie was the oldest feline president the USA had ever seen inducted into office. However his wisdom, experience, and physical training from spending decades in the Marines (ending at the honorable rank of colonel) gave his appearance a strength and dignity that most other cats his age could never have. So, it was with a courageous "full speed ahead" attitude that allowed him to speak to the public with no hint of fear at the situation.

"My fellow Americans," he began, his stony face resolute and unsmiling, "it has come to my attention that an emergency situation has arisen—not just for our country, but for the world entire. This situation will call for all of us to band together and unite our efforts into one. The US Government has discovered, thanks to the brilliant minds of our country's expert scientists, that a rare and so far unexplainable phenomenon has begun a drastic shift in the mass of our planet."

Raiyev watched from the eerie silence of the cafeteria as the dozens of reporters surrounding the President started chattering all at once. Word had already spread like wild fire throughout the entire facility of EarthTech Labs that morning, so no one in the cafeteria needed to chatter away like everyone else in the country must have been doing at that very moment.

After a couple seconds, the banter died down, allowing President McKenzie to continue. "What this means for us is that we have an approximated seven and a half years to find a remedy to this problem, before our planet's new mass shifts us out of orbit." There was much more uproar from the reporters at this point, but McKenzie raised his voice over them. "Scientists all over the country are working as we speak to provide us all with a solution. However, we already have a plan in progress, though it will take the combined efforts of many nations as well as many tax dollars. An emergency meeting with The United Nations has been scheduled for tomorrow, where we will further discuss possible solutions. I regret to inform you, however, that I cannot speak any further of this. I can only ask for everyone's full cooperation through this inexplicably rough time. Thank you."

As the President stepped out of sight again, bodyguards took their place to ward off reporters trying to follow the President with questions. The CNN correspondent popped into view on the large TV, and Raiyev turned back around face his fiancée as the rest of the room went back to their own conversations.

"So now everyone knows," Raiyev said, sighing.

“Hey, don’t fret it,” Brad offered in return, seeing the slight droop in Raiyev’s face. “We’ll find an answer. Someone will.”

“I sure as hell hope so,” Raiyev said, poking indifferently at his lunch with his fork. “So, anyway...” he said after a moment, finally beginning to eat, “tell me about your morning. Any developments?”

“Nothing yet,” Brad answered after swallowing a bite of his salad. “We’ve been checking different sites all over the globe known to have large amounts of radioactive exposure, the biggest ones first—you know, Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, Hiroshima...”

“Well, at least you’ve got your work cut out for you,” Raiyev said. “We’re still brainstorming as to where the hell we should start, but there’s really nothing we can think of so far. Hey!” Raiyev yelled out as his bottle of water was knocked over.

“Sorry,” came the voice of the perpetrator. Raiyev looked up to see that it was Thomas Ferai, the squat, red-breasted bird he worked with. He talked hurriedly after he picked up Raiyev’s bottle of water. “Just needed to talk to you—now. I just thought of something. If you’re finished with lunch, I’d like to show you now...I honestly don’t know why I didn’t think of it before.”

Raiyev looked down at his half-eaten veggie burger and nearly untouched salad with a bit of a frown. “You want the rest of it?” he offered to Brad.

“Nah,” Brad replied, waving his paw at it. “You want I should wrap it up for you?”

“Um, okay. Thanks.”

“Hey, don’t mention it. You just run along.”

“Okay, good,” Thomas said with enthusiasm as Raiyev stood and followed his hurried footsteps out of the cafeteria.

Raiyev had to run to catch up with Thomas once they were outside. Once they were side by side, however, Raiyev was able to slow down to a quick walk.

“So what is this that’s so urgent?” the raccoon asked.

“A few years before you and Brad came here we worked for a while with the chemical effects of complications of the pituitary gland. We had to quit by 1999, though, so we only got a couple months of work done at the end of ’98 with Gigantism. We never got to learn too much about what was the chemical cause of Gigantism, so the records we have are very limited and unfinished, with some of the shakiest and most unprofessional conclusions ever drawn up.”

The two entered the Chemistry department and jogged down to Lab 8. Thomas hurried over to a set of filing cabinets lining half of a wall and leaned in close. Squinting his eyes, he ran his finger down a column of filing cabinets before pulling open a drawer marked “1998” in small print on a yellowing index card attached to the drawer. He thumbed through an assortment of large, thick manila folders and darker brown expandable portfolios before pulling out a half-inch thick folder with the typed label “Pituitary: Gigantism.”

“Here,” Thomas said as he thrust the folder towards Raiyev.

Raiyev took it and began looking through it. He paced slowly towards his workstation, skimming over the pages talking about the various test patients used, their reactions towards the different injections concocted by the team working on Gigantism, the reaction to placebos...it went on, but not long enough.

“I see what you mean about shaky and unprofessional conclusions,” Raiyev said finally, now sitting on a stool at his workstation. “But tell me—why ever was the work cancelled?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Thomas answered, then paused, listening to the sounds from the hallway that told the two that the rest of their coworkers were returning from lunch. Thomas continued as other furs entered their lab. “The excuse given us was so shady and horrible that I don’t even remember what it was now. Just stupid politics, I think—using test subjects and all of that ‘immorality’ crap the extremists try to feed us.”

“Right,” Raiyev said, returning to the front page of the file. “Can we get any new subjects? I’d like to see if we can try to find the chemical cause to Gigantism; it may well hold a key to...something. Geez, this all sounds so shaky anyway. Do you really think it could work?”

“What could work?” asked a voice right behind Raiyev. The raccoon turned around to find Dr. Harper standing before him. Raiyev was almost surprised at how tall she appeared up close.

“Dr. Ferai here thought about trying to do something with Gigantism. He showed me what you all had worked on a few years back.”

“Oh? I hadn’t thought of that one,” Harper said, looking oddly at Thomas. “Raiyev is right, though—it DOES sound shaky...” She continued to stand there, almost glaring at Thomas for a moment before shaking her head, as if coming out of some deep trance. “Anyway, Raiyev, I was asked to deliver this to you.” She held out a piece of paper that was folded over and taped shut. “I can’t say who it’s from—I got it through some sort of weird chain of deliverers. All I was told was to tell you that you’d understand it.”

Raiyev took the piece of paper and removed the tape as he unfolded it. He frowned a bit to find that the inside was only as blank as the outside, though. Suddenly, though, he had an idea. “Excuse me. I’ll be right back,” he said to Harper and Thomas. He walked hurriedly out of the lab and into the nearest washroom, sighing in relief to find it empty.

Pouring a bit of soap onto the paper, he gently rubbed two fingers over the paper, spreading the soap around until he found what he was looking for. The soap revealed a message written in invisible ink that read in shaky pawwriting: “Meet me at the Western Entrance of the Main Building just after 5 o’clock this evening, after everyone else has left. Come alone.”

Part 5

Raiyev read and reread the paper. He had spread the soap over the rest of the paper, trying to find anything more to the message, but there was nothing else. *Surely this must be some kind of a practical joke*, he thought. *This is something that you only see in the movies*. But he could think of no one he knew who would send him such a thing. After spending another couple of minutes just staring at the paper, he decided it was best that he just comply. After all, it’s not as if anyone was out to get him for anything.

Tossing the soap-smearred paper into the wastebasket, the raccoon washed his hands and returned slowly to Lab 8. When he got back, Harper and Thomas were in a

debate over whether or not a more in-depth study of Gigantism would prove useful. Some of the other furs were standing around, listening and shaking or nodding their heads in agreement or disagreement.

"I just don't see how anything without a pituitary gland could be affected by this," Harper was saying. "This is the entire world we're talking about here—not just us animals." The sun bear, who had been the first in Lab 8 to declare the whole predicament as being ludicrous earlier that morning, was whispering into the ear of his coworker fox and gesturing to Harper when Raiyev walked up to Thomas.

"Well, it's at least worth a shot, isn't it?" Thomas said. "I mean, what else have we to go on in our field? 'Lo again, Raiyev. Where'd ya go?"

"Had to use the restroom was all," Raiyev answered passively.

"What happened to that paper?"

"It was trash," Raiyev lied. "Nothing but a blank piece of paper. Just someone's idea of a practical joke." Raiyev wanted to believe that it was really a joke, but he was still seriously considering going to see whoever it was that wrote him that message. The problem would be that he'd have to tell Brad that he needed to stay behind for a couple minutes...well, he couldn't be really sure about HOW long it would take—it could be just a couple minutes, and it could be some hours. This was really puzzling him. He decided to give the thought some rest until later.

"Anyway," he said, returning to the situation at paw, "I have to agree with Dr. Ferai." Harper cast her eyes to the ground and stuck out her bottom lip in a sort of soft grimace of malcontent. She looked at Thomas again, the same way she had been glaring at him before Raiyev went off to the restroom. Raiyev got the distinct impression that there was something more between the rabbit and the bird that he wasn't totally clued in on, but that feeling passed as Harper spoke again at last.

"Alright," she said. "So where are we supposed to get some subjects to study? The file shows us that we never did totally figure out what was chemically different that caused the Gigantism—"

"I know that, Dr. Harper," Thomas returned quickly, a note in his voice showing a wear of his patience. "I was thinking about calling back the placebo victims we had when we studied all this before."

"I honestly don't think that we would have problems getting the facility to approve of us acquiring test subjects, Dr. Harper," Raiyev added.

Harper was starting to look flustered. "Yeah, fine," she said, raising her voice a little, "but how long will it take to get them? A month? Two months? What do we do until then? Just sit around on our asses, arguing like we're doing now?"

"I would suggest you take a good, long, and thorough look into that file to remind yourselves what you already have learned," came a voice from behind Raiyev. Everyone looked at the doorway to Lab 8 to see Dr. Frost standing there, a stern executive look on her face. She began to approach the group as she continued. "Furthermore, you needn't worry about waiting a couple of months for any test subject. In a situation as drastic as this, the facility can provide them for you pronto, and without all the damn red tape getting in the way. Well, what I mean is that the government should help speed things along."

"What do you mean, exactly, Dr. Frost?" asked Thomas, an inquiring look etched in his eyes.

“Well, it’s rather obvious, Dr. Ferai,” Frost answered. “The government, like the rest of the world, is in dire need of all the help they can get to solve this problem. It’s like I’m sure you heard the President say at lunch today: ‘This situation will call for all of us to band together and unite our efforts into one.’ So, since they can’t legally put us under military rule yet, stating that we should work only for the government, the best that they can do to encourage us is to give us whatever we require.”

“And at top speed,” Raiyev added, understanding.

“Exactly,” Frost said.

“So how long then?” said a bit calmer Harper. “How long should it take us to get our test subjects?”

“Within the next day or two, I believe,” Frost answered. “Now, I just got here in time to hear that you needed test subjects, but I didn’t catch what type of test subjects.”

“Ah, well,” Thomas began, “we were considering looking into the chemical cause for Gigantism to see if we could somehow use that to counter-act the shrinking planet.” He handed her the thin manila file, then asked, “What were you here about in the first place, Dr. Frost?”

“Oh, just checking up on all the labs—seeing what they were approaching.” She thumbed through the file, nodding her head and mumbling to herself. “Ah, yes, I remember this...didn’t get far, did we?” She handed the folder back to Thomas, and then started for the door. On her way out, she said to the group, “Just do as best as you can. That’s all this company asks of you for now.”

The rest of the afternoon went slowly, with Raiyev and his coworkers going over copies of the Gigantism file, discussing possible tests and procedures they should try once they got their subjects. They had agreed that a blood sample from each subject would be needed, and not just for the general physical each subject was required to take. Also, Thomas had pointed out that during the initial study, children had proved to be the best subjects to study. It was various details like this that were the points of discussion for the rest of the day, until the clock in the lab showed them all that 5 o’clock had come.

As everyone was starting to leave, Raiyev remembered his requested meeting with the anonymous letter sender. He was still trying to think of something he could say to Brad that wouldn’t seem too unreasonable. He had thought about just saying he needed to use the restroom before they left, or about saying that Dr. Frost wanted to talk with him. In the end, though, he decided to tell the truth—or at least, part of the truth. He used the phone in his lab to call Brad’s cell phone.

“Hello?” Brad answered.

“Heya, sweetie. It’s me,” Raiyev said.

“Oh, hey. I was just about to come over to your building.”

“Well, um, something came up.”

“Oh?”

“I’m supposed to meet someone about something—they didn’t say what exactly. So, could you just wait in the car for a little while?”

“Um, okay.” Brad sounded a little confused. “Who are you meeting?” he asked suspiciously.

“Uh...” Raiyev tried to think of someone quickly, but just gave in to the truth. “I don’t really know—I just got a note, and it didn’t say who it was from or anything.” Raiyev paused, but there was no sound from the other line. “You there?” Raiyev asked.

“Yeah, I’m here,” Brad said finally. “It’s okay. I’ll wait for you. Just in front of the main building. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine. Thanks a lot, love.”

“No problem. See you soon.”

And with final goodbyes, Raiyev hung up. By now, most everyone had left. He went a bit slowly to the main building, to allow everyone else to leave. When he finally got to the main building’s Western Entrance, he could still see a few others preparing to leave, so he ducked into a nearby restroom for a couple minutes. When he came back out, everyone else had gone, except for Ms. Bilicek, whom he could see far at the other end of the building. He looked back at the two sets of double doors at the Western Entrance—and he saw the messenger he had been waiting for looking right at him. *Her?!* he thought to himself in disbelief. But it was no mistake; it was Toni Hawthorne, the ferret he had run into earlier that morning.

Part 6

Toni caught Raiyev’s eyes and gently nodded her head, her face looking genuinely concerned about something. With a final glance around the large hallway, Raiyev slowly approached the ferret.

“You wanted to see me about something?” he asked her, the curiosity in his voice more than apparent.

“Yes,” she replied in a whisper, casting her eyes about nervously.

“Why did I have to come alone? What is this all about?”

“I have to tell you...you are involved in something—something much larger than you or me. I fear you might be in danger.”

Raiyev gave an odd sort of laugh. “What the hell are you talking about?” he said skeptically. Surely this was some type of elaborate practical joke, he thought.

“This is no joke!” Toni exclaimed angrily, reading him. “Look—they changed it all. They lied to us. That’s why today has been so busy. That’s why—“

“Changed what? Who is ‘they’?”

“Look, I know that I’m being watched. I don’t have much time.”

“Yeah, sure.” Raiyev was still unbelieving of this odd ferret.

“Do you know what happened to the guy I replaced? Do you know what happened to Edward?” Toni had played a wild card, and Raiyev was taken aback. Raiyev had met Edward Haskins before; he had been Dr. Paxton’s former personal assistant and secretary. Raiyev hadn’t even given thought as to why Haskins was no longer at EarthTech. Subconsciously, he had just assumed that Haskins had quit or was fired, but now that Toni had brought it up, he wasn’t so sure anymore.

“Raiyev, listen—this is most urgent. You have to stop everything. Just go off somewhere. Leave EarthTech—just for a while, at least.”

“This is insane. I can’t leave my job! I can’t leave Brad, either! Will you just tell me why? What the hell is going on?”

“It’s why the planet is shrinking. It’s—“

“MS. HAWTHORNE!” called a shrill voice from further down the hall. Dr. Paxton had just rounded the corner and was trotting down towards the two of them. The tail of her white lab coat was fluttering behind her. The course, frizzy fur on her head looked unkempt, and her glasses were in complete disarray, nearly falling off her face. She was an aging and ever-so-slightly eccentric German poodle, but Raiyev knew that she still usually took better care of herself than this.

“Ms. Hawthorne, I’ve been looking all over for you! I need you—immediately!” Her high-pitched voice pierced what had been the near-silence of the corridor. When she finally reached the ferret, she grabbed Toni’s arm and started to pull her away. Raiyev didn’t know what to make of this and just stayed rooted to the spot. “You can finish this conversation later, Raiyev,” she called back as she promptly made her way with Toni towards the exit from which she came.

“Raiyev!” Toni called, her face turned to him. She wasn’t showing any signs of struggling to get away, but Raiyev saw a look on her face that looked as if she thought she was being led to her death. “Raiyev! Just do as I told you!”

And with that, Toni and Paxton rounded the corner and were out of sight. Raiyev finally found his legs again and started down the corridor towards the exit he saw the two of them take. But he didn’t see anyone as he peered around the corner—they had moved quickly and were gone. He just stood there a minute, contemplating whether or not he should try to follow them. After all, it’s not like he didn’t know where the Astronomy department was. But he had a strange gut feeling that he shouldn’t follow. He chucked it up to being reason, the logic that he could always talk with Toni the next day. Besides, it probably wouldn’t be best to further disturb an upset department head. One thing he knew for sure from his brief conversation with Toni was that he wasn’t leaving his job based on the ravings of someone he had only just met.

Somewhat drudgingly, the raccoon made his way to the front security desk. “Not even an ear bent towards that yelling?” he asked Bilicek, who had her face buried behind a copy of *Reader’s Digest*.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell,” she replied apathetically, still staring at the magazine. She looked up over the top of her magazine as Raiyev gently slid his security badge across the laminated countertop. “Checking out?”

“If it’s not too much trouble,” he replied. She gave an obvious sigh and took the badge. Raiyev signed out and left. *She must be one of the worst security guards this place has ever seen*, he thought as he passed through the doors at the Eastern entrance. Brad was waiting for him, the car in neutral just in front of the steps leading to the front entrance. The parking lot looked much emptier than it had earlier that morning when Raiyev and Brad arrived, but the couple dozen cars still there told Raiyev that some scientists might be up for an even longer shift.

“So what was that about?” Brad asked his fiancée as he opened the car door.

Raiyev sat down and felt something squish and crunch under him. He got back up and picked up a squashed and damp Styrofoam box. “My lunch, I presume?” he sighed, holding it up.

“Sorry,” Brad replied as Raiyev sat back down, tossed the squashed leftovers in the back seat, and buckled up. “So...?” Obviously, Brad was eager to learn who had seen Raiyev and why.

“It was Toni Hawthorne—that ferret I bumped into this morning.”

“Really?” Brad said, sounding intrigued. He shifted gears and started towards the exit. “What did she want?”

“I never got to really know. We were interrupted when her boss, Dr. Paxton, came by and said she needed her.” Brad looked at Raiyev, his face twisted quizzically. “Yeah, odd. I know. What’s odder is what she was starting on about.”

“What do you mean?” Brad asked eagerly. Something in Brad’s voice sounded almost expectant, which made Raiyev hesitate a moment before going into a full account of his contact with Toni.

“I’ll just ask her to finish tomorrow,” he said when he finished telling his story. “I mean, she acts as if she knows why the earth is shrinking, and that it’s got something to do with me.”

Brad paused a moment, apparently deep in thought. Finally, he said, “Hmm...well, I don’t know how much time you’ll have if you plan to ask her tomorrow. That emergency UN meeting is tomorrow, you know. Anything they decide to do could dramatically change everything we’re trying to do. I suppose everyone will be busy watching the news tomorrow.”

“Perhaps...” Raiyev hadn’t really thought much about the complications tomorrow’s UN meeting could bring. He decided it was best to just let tomorrow play itself out and to not worry about it just now.

The two raccoons talked for the rest of the car ride home about their day and what they had found out, if anything. The talk really helped Raiyev keep his mind from wandering too much with crazy ideas about what Toni’s warning could have meant. When they finally got home and got some dinner in them, they started to watch the news to see if anything new had developed.

Brad was stretched out on the couch in front of the TV, and Raiyev was lying on top of him. Brad’s arms were wrapped around Raiyev’s waist, their hands clasped together. There was nothing new on the news, much to their dismay—just more about how the earth was shrinking. But lying there with Brad, watching all the information run by on screen made Raiyev realize something.

“I want to get married soon,” Raiyev said to his lover. “If we never find out anything...if we can’t find a way to counteract all this...I want to know that you and I were as close as we could be for as long as we could be.”

Brad seemed to have trouble finding words. After a moment, he just nuzzled against Raiyev’s cheek and said, “Okay.”

“I love you,” Raiyev said, turning around to face his lover.

“I love you, too,” Brad replied, his eyes shining as he stared deeply at the smaller raccoon. He pressed his lips against his fiancée’s, softly at first, but harder as he felt Raiyev press back into him. Raiyev reached for the remote and turned off the television.

Brad carefully held Raiyev as he got up from the couch. He carried the smaller raccoon to their bedroom, set him down on the bed, and laid down with him. The two nuzzled for about half an hour before finally making love to one another.

Tears poured gently down Raiyev’s cheeks as his lover gently but passionately kissed and made love to him—he couldn’t remember a time when he felt happier and more in love with his fiancée. He wanted simply to lie there, forever in the protection of the beefy raccoon’s arms. He almost feared that he needed to stay with Brad like this forever, or else something ill would befall him. It was passion at its peak. Raiyev curled

his tail around Brad and held him as tight as he could for as long as he could. The night was long and beautiful, but the two raccoons eventually fell asleep in each other's arms, neither with a thought about what the next day would bring them.

Part 7

Raiyev was reluctant to get up in the morning—the previous night had been wonderful beyond description—but he had wanted to get to work early, in hopes of catching Toni and talking to her before anything else happened that day. When he and Brad finally got to work, though, it was nearly nine o'clock, so Raiyev only had time to get his security badge and run to the Chemistry department.

I'll get her during lunch, he told himself. When he got to his lab, he found that a small television on a tall, wheeled stand had been rolled into the lab and plugged in. Raiyev spotted Thomas sitting amongst a few other colleagues, all watching CNN.

"As you can see," came the voice of the reporter on the news, "we are experiencing a complete media blackout for this UN meeting. I'm standing here across the street from the UN building..."

"Instructions from Dr. Frost," Thomas said to Raiyev as he sat down next to him. "Every lab's got one. This meeting could change everything we're working on, depending on what they decide, so we need to be in the know the moment something has happened."

"Any news on our test subjects?" Raiyev asked.

"Dr. Frost said they oughtta be here tomorrow," Thomas answered.

"So...what do we do for now? Just watch this?" Raiyev cried a bit incredulously, pointing to the television.

"Well, if you want, you and I can go over the Gigantism file more, see if there's anything more we can gain from it. I personally think we've done all that we can do. We already have everything set up for tomorrow. We just need the subjects now."

In the end, Raiyev decided to just sit and watch with the rest of them for a short time. Realizing that the meeting would take a good while, though, he decided to go off to the Astronomy department to see Toni.

"I'll be right back," he told Thomas, and quietly slipped out. He quickly made his way to the Astronomy building, near the main building, and entered a hallway somewhat similar to the main corridor to the Chemistry building. Reading the room list on the wall to his left, he found what he was looking for: "Dr. Amelia Paxton – Dept. Head – Room 116"

He hurriedly looked at each room number as he sped down the corridor with anticipation. When he got to room 115, though, he was at the end of the hall, and no other rooms were left. Dumbfounded, he peered inside the open doorway of room 115. Behind an empty desk was a shut door with the number "116" at the top of its doorframe. The door read "Dr. Amelia Paxton – Head of Astronomy Dept." He had guessed, then, that the empty desk before him was supposed to be Toni's desk. But where was she?

Hesitantly, he knocked on Paxton's door. "Come in," called a high-pitched voice Raiyev recognized. He opened the door and saw Dr. Paxton sitting behind her desk, busily typing away at her computer. "Dr. Kosekovic?" she asked oddly, looking up at him.

“Yes, but please, call me Raiyev,” he answered.

“How can I help you?”

“Is Toni in today?”

“You mean Ms. Hawthorne? No, I’m sorry—she didn’t come into work today.” Raiyev didn’t know what to do for a moment. He cast his eyes down, as if looking on the ground for an answer.

Looking up again, he said, “Well, then, can I have her home phone number?”

Paxton smiled and shook her head. “Now, Raiyev, you know well that I can’t give you such information without just cause. Besides, I’ve been trying to call her all morning, and I haven’t got an answer yet.”

Raiyev paused, as if completely lost. “Oh...okay...” he said, and reluctantly turned to leave. Suddenly, he remembered something. Turning back, he said, “One more thing, Dr. Paxton.”

“Yes?”

“What happened to Edward Haskins? Why doesn’t he work here anymore?”

Paxton studied Raiyev for a moment in silence, then said, “He fell extremely ill and had to be hospitalized last week. The doctors don’t know what it is yet. Why do you ask?” she said, a foreboding ounce of curiosity in her voice.

“No reason,” he lied. “Just wondering.” He turned and left the office quickly, but slowed his pace as he went down the long path back to the Chemistry building. Something seemed wrong here. A seemingly simple ferret tries to tell Raiyev that something big is going down, is interrupted before she can explain, then seems to disappear the very next day. Raiyev convinced himself that there was a perfectly normal, logical explanation to this...but one little voice in his head kept telling him to stay on his toes.

The rest of the day was uneventful. The UN meeting was still in progress with no new news when everyone left at five that evening. When Brad and Raiyev got home that evening, Brad started for the kitchen to prepare dinner, and Raiyev turned on the television to CNN.

“Brad, you might want to come see this,” Raiyev called, his eyes not leaving the television screen. Brad came in and watched with Raiyev as one of the American representatives—a tall and aging husky—made a statement to the dozens of reporters surrounding him.

“After much debate,” he started slowly, “it has been decided what the best course of action is to take on this matter.” The media seemed impatient with the politician, but held their breath as he lethargically continued. “Through a combined effort of all the major nations, their people, their space programs, and the taxpayer’s dollar, two large omni-directional jet-like thrusters will be constructed, one on the North Magnetic Pole, and the other on the South Magnetic Pole. These thrusters will reach as high into the sky as they need to, and will be rotational to the point that they can safely keep the Earth in its proper orbit. By using the thrusters to counteract the gravitational pull of any outside forces, the Earth will remain on the same path it has been a part of for billions of years.”

“Do they know what has caused the shrinking of the Earth?” a small Schnauzer reporter yelled from further back in the crowd.

The husky replied slowly, “Top scientific minds from all over the world are still working on...” Raiyev turned his attention away from the TV to see Brad standing by the kitchen entryway, still holding a box of rice in his hand, entranced by the events on the television.

“Brad,” Raiyev called, but Brad remained unmoved. “Don’t watch too much of that guy, Brad—he’s got a voice more potently ethereal and tiring than Bob Ross.” Brad shook his head a bit and looked at Raiyev, grinning dopily. “Better turn this off—for your own safety,” Raiyev smirked as he pointed the remote at the TV and pressed the power button. “Otherwise, you’d end up burning the apartment building down or something.” Brad laughed and went back into the kitchen to prepare the meal.

The next day, Raiyev strode eagerly into Lab 8 to greet the new test subjects: six young furs, all between the ages of seven and twelve, and all quite large for their age. Raiyev, Harper, and Thomas were the most friendly and caring with children, so they took the blood samples.

“Their parents are all waiting in the main building, Raiyev,” said Thomas softly, “so we’d like to make this as quick as we can.”

Raiyev smiled, nodding in understanding, and approached an 8-year-old vixen who looked a bit worried. “Don’t worry,” he said, holding the syringe. “I promise that this won’t hurt too badly. You’ll just feel a small, quick prick.” She still looked tentative, her head cocked against her shoulder and eyes cast downward. “What’s your name?” he asked her.

“Sarah,” she said softly and sadly, her eyes now focused on the hypodermic in Raiyev’s paw.

“Well, hello, Sarah. My name is Raiyev.”

She smiled a bit. “That’s a funny name.”

Raiyev chuckled. “I’m glad you think so,” he whispered, “because I think so, too, but they won’t let me change it.” The vixen giggled and loosened up a bit, looking up at Raiyev. “And you know what else?”

“What?” she whispered.

“You’re a very important furson today. You’re helping save the world, you know.”

“Really?” Her eyes lit up with wonder at Raiyev.

“Yes, really. Plus, I have a lollipop here for you if you’re a good girl and sit still during this.” She smiled at Raiyev and allowed him to draw some of her blood from the back of her neck.

“And now, we see exactly how special you are,” he said as he drew her blood, more to himself, and with a sense of wonder and hope in his voice. He really hoped this plan would work—for the sake of the world, for the sake of science, and partly for the sake of letting an 8-year-old vixen be a heroine not only in her childhood fantasies.

Part 8

“She’s dead!” he cried. The tall fox was stooped over the body of Dr. Paxton lying on the ground in the cafeteria. Raiyev had seen it happen; well, most of it, anyway.

He, along with the rest of the cafeteria, had looked over at Paxton when he heard the shattering crash of her coffee mug being cast to the linoleum floor.

She had slipped out of her chair and fallen on the floor, going into seizures. A few furs ran over to try to help her, but her convulsions turned into twitches, and then finally into nothingness. One of the furs, a tall and slender fox whom Raiyev didn't know, checked her pulse, his eyes still wide with terror. After his proclamation to the room, however, Raiyev saw the fox's face turn from terror into a sort of respectful grief.

Being a room full of bright scientific minds, the uproar was considerably milder than it would have been had the event happened in any run-of-the-mill restaurant. However, that is not to say that there was no uproar at all. Almost everyone stood up, some rushing over to get a closer look at the body or to confirm her death, some rushing off to try to get help. The few who decided to remain sitting were either still too shocked to fully believe or be aware of the situation, or merely peering over at the commotion (the body quickly surrounded and blocked from view), or else chatting hurriedly amongst themselves in hushed whispers.

Raiyev was one of the few still sitting in shock at his usual table by the window with his fiancée. Raiyev looked at Brad with a quizzical look on his face, only to see that Brad was still gazing open-mouthed at the scene, his sandwich still being held inches away from his face.

"Out of the way!" Raiyev heard a gruff voice call, and looked back towards the body again to see Ms. Bilicek tossing furs aside to get to Paxton's body. She knelt down by Paxton's body, placing two fat, stubby fingers to one of Paxton's limp, thin wrists. Unsatisfied, Bilicek tried once more, this time with two fingers at the neck. Placing her head to Paxton's bosom, she finally got up, a grave look about her. "Alright!" she called to everyone, making her already-loud voice boom even louder. "No one comes within twenty feet of this body! This is a crime scene now, and I won't have all your filthy paws grubbin' it up and makin' it hard to investigate, ya hear? Now, everyone wait just outside the cafeteria!" She pointed towards the doors leading outside to an open field, then picked up her walkie-talkie and called for some back-up to watch the body.

A short and slender young cougar adorned in the same officer's outfit as Bilicek came running in and stood guard by the body with a surly look on his face. Bilicek, in the meantime, was ushering all the furs out to the field just outside. Raiyev and Brad were still just sitting and watching, the shock not completely worn off, when Bilicek finally came around to them.

"Up, you two!" she barked at them. She grabbed Raiyev and yanked him up from his seat, trying to move things along.

"Hey!" Brad yelled. "We're going! No need to rough-handle us!" He got up from his seat and looked Bilicek up and down, sizing her up. She glared back at him with a queer look in her eye, as if she almost wasn't sure if she could fully handle someone that practically matched her size and strength.

"Brad, let's just go," Raiyev said, not wanting any trouble to spark between the two. After a moment, Brad reluctantly let the matter go, and followed the rest of the group outside to the field.

"She shouldn't have done that to you," Brad said as they strode outside onto the springy grass, where all the other furs were mulling around, talking excitedly to one another. "We were going, after all!"

“I know,” Raiyev offered in return, “but think about it: someone just died—someone we know, or least have seen before. She was probably just having difficulties functioning under the stress. It’s understandable.”

“She’s an officer—she’s supposed to know how to operate properly under stress! That’s her job!” Brad was still fuming as he stared back inside one of the cafeteria windows to see Bilicek getting the last couple furs up from where they were still sitting. Raiyev watched, too, as Bilicek followed behind the last couple furs (a barn owl and a tapir), calling back orders Raiyev couldn’t hear to the cougar standing guard. The cougar then handed Bilicek a large, flat object that Raiyev couldn’t make out through the tinted windows.

Bilicek, the owl, and the tapir all rushed outside, Bilicek prodding the other two into a quick trot with a “Come on, we haven’t got all day.” She surveyed the group of furs, counting heads—a task made easy for her, since she stood so much taller than most of the lot. “Alright,” she called, and everyone grew silent. “Everyone’s still here, from what I can see—all fifty-six of ya.” How she could know for sure that no one had slipped away unnoticed, Raiyev could only guess. “That’s fifty-six eye-witnesses, in my book, and all of ya are going to give me a full report of what you saw and did!” Some nervously looked around at each other at this remark, but everyone silently agreed.

“However,” the bear continued, “I can’t survey you all right now, so the best I can do is get all of your names and question you later.” She held up a clipboard—the object the cougar had just handed her a moment ago, Raiyev figured. “So form a single-file line and let me write down your names.”

The mass of furs carefully turned from an amorphous mob into a neat, single-file line, moving rather quickly as each fur stated his or her name and in which department he or she worked in. Waiting in line, Raiyev considered Toni’s warning to him...what had happened to Paxton? Was this what Toni was referring to when she had talked about danger to him the other evening? And where was Toni, anyway? Is it possible that she murder Dr. Paxton? Scores of questions raced through Raiyev’s mind as he drew nearer to the line’s end.

As soon as Raiyev got up to the front of the line, Bilicek immediately grabbed hold of Raiyev’s security pass and scribbled down his information from it, totally disregarding Raiyev and paying only attention to his pass. Raiyev waited for Brad to go through the same quick ordeal so they could say a final goodbye before going back to their respective departments. Raiyev, however, took this opportunity to check back at Paxton’s office before returning to his lab. His eager expression turned a bit forlorn as he poked his head inside Room 115 of the Astronomy department to see yet again an empty secretary’s desk.

“Toni?” he called out softly, a bit tentative. There was no answer. He stood there for a moment at a loss of what to make of the situation. The death of a colleague just now had sent his reasoning mind out of whack, and he was slowly finding himself. Perhaps it was just as well, then, that Toni wasn’t there—Raiyev didn’t really know what he was going to say to her. He was considering her warning again. Should he leave? Was someone out to get him? He remembered that it was Paxton, after all, who had stopped Toni from telling Raiyev all that she had wanted to tell him. Had Toni herself been murdered?

Raiyev figured that whatever Toni knew, Paxton knew as well. Now, someone who didn't want that information—whatever it was—getting out had murdered Toni, then murdered Paxton. Was he next, then? Is this what Toni's warning had meant? Raiyev started to get rather frightened at this whole notion, but then, regaining himself, reminded himself that there had to be a more logical explanation for all of this. He was still standing by the doorway of Room 115, staring idly at the empty office, when a voice rang through his ears.

"The perpetrator always seems to show up where the victim could commonly be found." Raiyev's eyes widened as he jerked his head towards the sound of the voice. It was Bilicek, and she was headed down the corridor towards him, her look as mean as ever. "You lookin' to be arrested or something?" she said to him, and Raiyev's throat became suddenly dry.

Part 9

How long had he been standing there, idle with his thoughts? Raiyev silently cursed his foolishness. Bilicek eyed Raiyev up and down, glaring almost irately. Raiyev tried to think of something to say.

"Well?" Bilicek said after another moment had passed. "What are you think you're doing over here, huh?"

Raiyev decided that the truth was the best answer. He finally replied, though a bit dryly, "I was just looking for Toni Hawthorne. She is—was—Dr. Paxton's assistant."

Bilicek glared at the raccoon a moment more, studying him. "Were you in the cafeteria, then, when it happened?" she asked of him, her tone not letting up.

"Yes."

"Yeah, I remember you," she said, then consulted her clipboard, which Raiyev had just noticed was still in her large paw. Finding his name, she tried to sound it out. "Cossuh...cossuhCO..."

"Kosekovic," Raiyev offered quickly.

"Yeah, whatever," she grunted. "Well, you were there, and you're scheduled to be questioned, anyway. So get on out of here and go back to wherever you're supposed to be workin'!"

Raiyev slinked away, his generally bright tail slinking apathetically behind him. He muttered a couple curses under his breath, his anger towards Bilicek at that moment greater than it had ever been. Yes, she had seemed incompetent before, but now she was just being a bitch. Raiyev's anger subsided, though, as he made his way slowly back to his lab.

When Raiyev got back, he was almost lost, having nearly forgotten about his work after the events that had just happened at lunch. The collection of blood he, Harper, and Thomas had taken just that morning now seemed like days ago. The subjects were dismissed for now, and all of Raiyev's coworkers were silently and solemnly set to work. Raiyev recognized that some of them had also been in the cafeteria when the...scene had...occurred.

Geez, Raiyev thought silently, *it feels so superficial to say it in such an analytical tone*. He took to his general workstation by Thomas and asked what the status quo was.

“Just general analyzation of the samples and such for now,” Thomas explained, referring to the procedures on a photocopy of the older file he had shown Raiyev previously. Raiyev sighed and set to work, just as silently and solemnly as everyone else in the room. It was a long and tedious process, which Raiyev would generally enjoy regardless of its tediousness, but the idea that someone’s life had just been lost...right before his very eyes, too... Who had done it? It really didn’t seem like just a freak accident...

“What are you doing?!” Thomas exclaimed. “You just saved new data over another data file!”

“I did?!” Raiyev was feeling terribly distracted. He took another look at the computer screen. “Fuck!” he exclaimed, berating himself loud enough that everyone in the lab looked up.

“Stand aside,” Thomas sighed, gently nudging the raccoon out of the way. Thomas typed away at the computer for a couple minutes. Raiyev watched half-heartedly, his eyes casting to the ground every so often, his tail limp and ears folded back. “Got it,” Thomas said after a couple minutes. “Was able to tap into the company’s main system and get it back—but I shouldn’t be doing that, so be more careful in the future!”

Raiyev sighed and whispered an apology and got promptly back to work, doing his best to focus on the subject at hand. As the day wore on, the team was able to find and isolate the general chemicals that seemed to be in excess in the blood stream. Different strands of seemingly random chemicals were slowly collected in an order that gradually made more and more sense, like fitting together pieces of a huge genetic puzzle, until finally...

“I think we’ve got it,” Harper said, coming to Thomas and Raiyev to compare notes. There was some mild debate, and a bit more testing, but it looked rather clear: they had isolated the chemical that appeared to cause Gigantism. Lab 8 took a huge collective sigh, and everyone took a fiver.

“So we’ve got the chemical,” Raiyev said, holding a Styrofoam cup of water in the break room, talking to Thomas and Harper. “What now?”

“I think some basic testing,” Thomas answered after taking a sip of his tea. “You know—on plants.”

“Plants?” Harper said, somewhat incredulously. “You want to test an animalistic chemical on plants?”

“Can you suggest something better?” Thomas asked, a vague hint of challenge in his voice.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, we’re not gonna start on THIS again, are we?” Harper said coldly. “So you have the highest fucking IQ in the Lab. Big fucking deal. Grow up. That doesn’t make everyone else incompetent, you know.”

“I was merely asking—”

“I know what you were asking, and no—I can’t think of anything better, other than to test it on other ANIMAL subjects that don’t have Gigantism.”

“I dunno,” Raiyev said. “Getting test subjects to extract blood from is one thing; getting subjects to inject a foreign chemical is whole other story. We could get into a lot of hot water with the activists groups and media, you know.”

“I don’t care!” Harper exclaimed. “They don’t pay us enough here to worry about hype from the media.”

“But they do pay us enough to make us sign a legal contract about secrecy of what goes on here,” Thomas argued.

“Whatever,” the rabbit sighed, giving in. “You guys can test this chemical however you want. Let’s just get some results, okay?!”

The group headed back to the lab and started the set-up for Thomas’ idea. Testing on plants was going to be difficult, though, as there were only a few specific plants that would show similar results to animalistic chemicals. By the next day, the lab had acquired only a small handful of plants they could use for testing, and more were on their way.

This was also the day, as Raiyev was told that morning by his fiancée, that Brad was to be questioned about everything he witnessed at the scene yesterday. Brad was scheduled to go early in the morning, so Raiyev was looking forward to hearing from him again during lunch.

“Wow,” Raiyev said, sitting down at his and Brad’s usual table. “I just realized something.”

“What?” Brad asked, already munching on his salad.

“It’s just...24 hours ago, approximately...you know?” He was staring over at the table at which it had happened. The police line was still set up around the scene, orange cones set around it. “Just...weird, I guess.”

Brad looked down at his plate, a grim look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” Raiyev asked, concerned.

“The fricken’ questioning—that’s what.”

“What happened?”

“They treated me like shit!” the larger raccoon said, looking up at Raiyev. “Especially that bitch Bilicek. She kept badgering me about it, as if I was the one who did it!”

“Well, you didn’t, did you?” Raiyev realized in horror what he had just said, but it was too late.

“Of course I didn’t do it!” Brad bellowed, turning a few heads in his direction.

“Sorry,” Raiyev whimpered, lowering his head. “I didn’t mean...”

Brad sighed. “I’m sorry. I know you didn’t mean to suggest anything. It’s just this whole goddamn week has been messed up, you know? It’s enough to break anyone, I guess.” Raiyev was still staring down at his food. “Hey,” Brad said gently, reaching over and lifting Raiyev’s head in his paw, a finger tucked under Raiyev’s chin. “I’m sorry I got angry at you. Okay? I love you.”

Raiyev smiled weakly. “I know, sweetie. It’s okay.” The two ate in silence for a couple moments before Raiyev spoke again. “She really rode your ass about it? She really thought you did it?”

“I don’t know what she was thinking—I think she’s just trying to scare information out of people. I think I overheard someone else saying that she had been mean to them, too. So when are you supposed to get interviewed?”

“I really don’t know,” he said, going back to his food. “I sure hope the same doesn’t happen to me,” Raiyev thought aloud. However Bilicek treated him, he wasn’t quite ready to return his mind back to that event. Death wasn’t a fun topic to think about.

Part 10

Raiyev was a bit uneasy going back to work after lunch. He meandered slowly down the long corridor of his building before entering Lab 8. What did she have against him and his fiancée? Why did Bilicek seem to have it in for him and Brad? Or did she just treat everyone the same?

When the raccoon entered his lab, he saw most of his coworkers milling around the bulletin board. He walked on over to the bulletin board to see what the new posting was.

“Questioning schedule,” the sun bear said to Raiyev, a slight hint of disgust in his voice. “Taking away from our work!”

Raiyev took a closer look and found what he was looking for. Around the middle of the short list, it read: Kosecovic, Raiyev 10/02 10:20 a.m. “Shit, that’s tomorrow!” Raiyev said softly.

“They’re finishing it up quickly,” the sun bear told him. “They want to be done by the end of tomorrow.”

“And to think that I usually look forward to Fridays,” Raiyev said.

“You almost sound like you’ve got something to hide...” the sun bear drifted off, grinning at him.

“Oh, you know I didn’t do anything, Jake!”

The bear chuckled. “I know, Raiyev, I know. So why are you so worried?”

“I hear that Bilicek’s being a royal bitch to people that she questions. She gave my fiancée a really hard time.”

“That sounds like Bilicek,” Jake said with a grimace, then walked back to his workstation. Raiyev took one last look at his time to verify it in his mind, then went back to work. He was still having a hard time concentrating, as his mind continually drifted back to everything that had happened since Monday. He was so distracted that he got nothing done for the rest of the day and stayed late afterwards so that he could try to catch up.

The lab emptied at the end of the day, and Raiyev called Brad, telling him to go have an early dinner and come pick him back up around 6:30. He decided the best he could do for now was to inject the chemical into the few untouched plants. His head felt a bit woozy as he reached for the chemical-bearing syringe and stuck it into the stem of the first plant. He continued surreally, his mind going back to the week’s events...

“The world started shrinking due to some unknown force...” he recapped aloud. “...Toni, a new assistant, had only been there a couple of days, and she seemed to know about what was really going on...Dr. Paxton came in right on time to stop Toni from telling me what she knew or thought she knew...right on time...how odd was that? What were the chances that she would turn up at the very moment that...AAUURGH!”

Raiyev let out a loud cry as he stumbled back, holding his left forearm. He looked down and gazed stupidly at the syringe still stuck into his arm. What the fuck had he just done?! He slowly and painfully took the syringe out of his arm, rushing to the sink to wash the wound as fresh blood began to ooze out slowly. He grabbed a bandage and sealed up the wound, then picked up the syringe again, looking at it.

His expression of astonishment at his own stupidity turned to one of horror as he realized that the syringe was half empty. “Oh, shit...no...please, PLEASE don’t let this be true...” He started babbling at the syringe in his hand, trying to come to terms with what he had just done. He cursed himself, berated the fact that he let himself get so distracted...

Maybe it wasn’t in his blood? He tried to remember if he had injected any from that syringe into the plants... He couldn’t remember. He slowly made his way over to the break room and sat down in a chair. He was shaking violently, he was so nervous and scared. “What the fuck have I done? What’s going to happen to me?” He looked down at the Band-Aid covering the small prick on his left forearm.

“Come on, Raiyev!” he said to himself. “Get your head on straight and think rationally! Now...what would be the outcome of this? What’s the worst that could happen to you?” He looked at the clock on the wall of the break room. 5:43. He still had about 45 minutes before Brad was supposed to pick him up.

After another minute, he headed back to the lab and started to clean up, leaving no evidence of the dire mistake he had just made. He spent the rest of the time looking through the data already collected to see what, if anything, might happen to him...there was nothing clear; it was all too vaguely hypothesized. So with a tired head and a guilty conscience, he made his way to the front parking lot where Brad was waiting. Raiyev barely slept at all that night.

At his scheduled time the next morning, Raiyev headed to Bilicek’s office for his questioning. The room was rather cold and barely decorated. Large metal filing cabinets stood in a row behind Bilicek’s small desk. In front of her desk were a couple of uncomfortable-looking armchairs. Only a small plant in one corner made the room feel as if it had any sense of life.

“Sit,” Bilicek ordered Raiyev when he walked in. She was holding her clipboard, filling out some paperwork quickly, muttering incoherently to herself.

“Raiyev, right?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Yes,” the raccoon replied.

“So...tell me what you saw, from the beginning.”

Raiyev told his story. He told her how he had only really seen anything after he heard the crash of Paxton’s coffee mug shattering on the floor. He told her how he had sat there and watched, just like everyone else, and everything following.

“That’s it?” she said, after he finished.

“Yeah,” he said innocently, as if the matter was closed.

She looked at him, a queer look in her eyes, as if searching for something more. “Fine, you can go.”

He left quickly, hurrying back to his lab. So far, there were no signs of any sort of change in any of the plants. Everyone was somewhat upset, though patient, about this. Everyone except Raiyev, who gave a silent sigh to himself. *Maybe nothing will happen after all?* he hoped. He was glad it was Friday, and that his questioning was done. He now had the whole weekend to look forward to, and he, as well as pretty much everyone at EarthTech, could really use a couple of days off.

The weekend went by too quickly, though, and before Raiyev knew it, it was Monday morning again. He was still in the bedroom when Brad was calling for him from the living room.

“Raiyev, honey? What’s taking so long?” Brad’s voice rang throughout the small apartment.

“Uhh...I’ll be there in just a moment!” he called back. The truth was that he was having difficulty getting his clothes on. His pants didn’t want to zip up, and his shirt didn’t want to button; they were stretching on him, as if too small. Had they shrunk in the wash? Was Raiyev putting on weight? No...Raiyev looked down and noticed that he was still in the same perfect shape that he had been in for years now. Why were his clothes suddenly a touch too small, then? With a good struggle, Raiyev finally managed to make his clothes fit on him—somewhat of an uncomfortable fit, but still a fit nonetheless.

When he got to his lab, the team had just started working when Bilicek and her young cougar assistant waltzed into the lab. Bilicek pointed the cougar in the direction of Harper, and the cougar walked right up to the tall rabbit.

“Dr. Amanda Jean Harper?” he asked.

Harper, looking a bit confused, responded, “Yes?”

The cougar held up a document. “Dr. Harper, I have a warrant for your arrest for the premeditated murder of Dr. Amelia Tabitha Paxton. You have the right to remain silent...”

Raiyev watched surreally as Bilicek walked behind Harper and cuffed her, while the cougar continued, and the two officers led the rabbit out slowly out of the laboratory. Harper had frozen up. Raiyev couldn’t tell whether she was scared or just solemn. Either way, she didn’t protest at all. She left the room without a single word.

Part 11

The first thing that truly hit Raiyev’s mind hard when he realized that Harper was really gone was how he was going to be losing one of the few people who actually might know how to help his situation. Ever since he accidentally injected himself with the test chemicals, it had been riding throughout his mind like wildfire. He had idly hoped at one point to confront Harper, one of his most trusted associates, with this news and see what she could suggest, but now that she had just been arrested for premeditated murder, he was beginning to have doubts as to who he could trust at all.

And what of Toni Hawthorne? There was still no sign of her—not since she spoke with Raiyev personally and was interrupted by Dr. Paxton. Raiyev would go to check on her again, but he was already home. He didn’t really remember the events of the day after Harper was arrested; his mind was just too numb. All he really knew now was that he was lying on his couch in front of the television, watching the evening news, while Brad was in the kitchen making dinner.

“Hey, honey,” Brad called from the kitchen. “Can you come test this sauce for me?”

“Certainly!” Raiyev said, trying to sound cheerful. He went into the kitchen where Brad was leaning over a simmering, steaming pot of pasta sauce. Brad carefully

lifted the shallow wooden spoon out of the pot and offered it to Raiyev. Raiyev took the spoon into his muzzle and tasted, looking back at Brad with a look of approval.

“So what do you think of...” Brad began, but stopped half-way to simply stare curiously at the raccoon standing next to him.

“What?” Raiyev asked. “It’s good! Really!”

Brad simply stood in silence for a moment, staring at Raiyev, before he spoke again. “Since when are you and I the same height?” he asked.

Raiyev blinked and looked at Brad in astonishment. It finally dawned on him that he was indeed looking right into Brad’s eyes at perfect eye-level, instead of looking up just a bit at his lover. “I don’t know...” Raiyev began, looking over himself. His mind searched for possible answers, but he kept coming back to the chemicals he accidentally injected into himself.

He put the spoon down slowly onto the countertop and closed his eyes, sighing. “Brad,” he said carefully, “there’s something I need to tell you.” He opened his eyes and looked at Brad for a moment, then said, “You may want to sit down for this.”

Brad nodded solemnly and took a seat on their couch. Raiyev turned off the TV and sat down next to Brad. Holding Brad’s paw in his own, Raiyev proceeded to tell Brad everything that had been happening in his laboratory since last week. He told Brad about Toni and her disappearance, about how Paxton had acted almost suspiciously before she was murdered, about Harper being arrested, and about the chemicals he injected into himself. Raiyev had really only meant to tell Brad about the chemicals, but he felt that he needed to get such a load off, and when he got started it was as if someone had opened up the flood gates.

After all was said and done, Brad simply sat silently, still taking it all in. “Okay,” he finally said, a simple but strong trust in his voice.

“Okay?” Raiyev said, tears welling up in his eyes.

“Okay,” Brad said, and hugged Raiyev close to him. Raiyev wept against the shoulder of his best friend and lover, who held his arms around him, cradling him tenderly. Brad, too, cried, though not as feverishly as Raiyev did. Brad nuzzled his mate’s neck, a few of his tears rolling off onto Raiyev’s fur.

“I’m just so scared right now,” Raiyev managed to say into Brad’s shoulder in between sobs.

“I know,” Brad said, unsure of what could really be done. “I know,” he repeated. Brad knew that his fiancée was feeling scared, hopeless, and alone, and while Brad didn’t know how to fix all of those feelings, he knew that at least he could remind Raiyev that he didn’t have to go through all of this alone. Raiyev ultimately cried himself to sleep in Brad’s arms, and Brad drifted off shortly after, leaving the pasta dinner unfinished and long forgotten.

Raiyev and Brad awoke early the next morning to the obnoxiously loud sound of the phone ringing. Raiyev stumbled around, feeling a slight headache, and picked up the phone. “Hello?” he answered groggily.

“Brad? That you?” answered a familiar voice on the other end.

“One moment, Dr. Patterson,” replied Raiyev with a yawn, and he handed the phone over to his mate, who was now sitting up on the couch where he had slept the previous night.

“Hello, Dr. Patterson,” Brad said, rubbing his forehead with a free paw.

“Brad!” Raiyev heard Patterson say loudly through the phone, “Things seem to be speeding up—get your furry tail down here pronto! We need all paws on deck right now!”

“Speeding up?” Brad replied, not fully awake to understand yet.

“Yeah. Look, I’ll explain better once you get down here, so get moving!” There was a click on the other end, and Brad put the receiver back on the phone base.

“Well,” Brad sighed, “looks like we need to get going early again.”

“Do you think,” Raiyev said slowly, “I could borrow some of your clothes? I don’t think mine really fit me anymore.” The events of the previous few days were still on the forefront of his mind, and as he was waking up, Raiyev noticed how much bigger he was becoming.

Brad stared at Raiyev, silently noticing how Raiyev appeared to have shot up another half a foot over the night. “Sure. Of course,” he said, and they quickly got ready for work.

Work turned out to be bad news—apparently, the rate at which the planet was shrinking had increased dramatically, and if it continued at its current rate, their previous estimate of about seven and a half years would dwindle down to little more than two years. All the while, the events of Lab 8 had already become widespread news within all of EarthTech Labs, and with one of the premier minds of the Lab currently incarcerated, spirits were rather low, causing productivity to suffer. Raiyev wasn’t fazed so much about this, though—he still had his own problems to contend to, and it didn’t help that his height was giving him away.

Everyone who knew Raiyev noticed how much taller he seemed to be since the previous day, and were wondering if their own memories of him were skewed. Though they couldn’t ALL have had the same hallucination, so Dr. Frost called Raiyev into her office later in the day to talk things over with him.

The grown raccoon did his best to reassure his boss (as well as everyone else) that he didn’t know what had happened at all. Though his noticeable growth only got worse over time. By the end of the day, Raiyev could swear that his head was several inches nearer the ceiling than it had been when he entered for work that day, and even Brad’s clothes were starting to feel rather tight on him.

After work, Brad took Raiyev to a Big & Tall shop, on Raiyev’s request, and got him some new work clothes—some to fit him currently, and some much larger than what he needed, just in case. And “just in case” turned out to be a good plan, as over the next couple of days, Raiyev continued to grow quite noticeably. Everyone at work, whether they had known Raiyev before or not, seemed to be goggling at the 9-foot tall raccoon walking through the facilities, and Raiyev himself felt as naked as a newborn for all the attention he was drawing to himself.

All of this made Raiyev determined to spend some time after work to try to do whatever he could to “clean up” the mess he’d created. He cursed himself for his clumsiness and stupidity, and after one of the most awkward days he’d had at his place of work, he stayed behind to see what, if anything, he could do to reverse this process.

He began searching through all the files, both in the computer database and printed out, though he was having troubles getting his large fingers to type accurately on the now-too-small keyboard. He got frustrated with the computer and gave up, turning

around quickly to head towards the filing cabinet again. However, as he turned, he heard a loud SMASH, and froze up, turning around again carefully to see, to his horror, that he had inadvertently knocked the computer off the desk with his tail. It lay there on the floor, the monitor cracked and smoking, and the minitower's guts being spilled out of the casing.

"Oh, FUCK!" he cried out as he bent down, trying to salvage the small chips and other broken oddments that had come out of the minitower, not yet realizing how much strength it must have taken to cause this much damage to the computer in the first place. "Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck..." he repeated, completely livid with himself and afraid of what would happen to him once others found out what he had done.

He decided it was a lost cause, and after slumping in a corner to mope for a couple moments, he got up and went over to the containers of the chemical they had extracted from the Gigantism subjects—the same chemical that they had made into a test solution that he had injected upon himself. He figured the answer would lie in those containers, though he needed to think of a way to reverse the process on himself. As he went to cautiously pick up one of the small test tubes, the glass shattered in his paw.

"FUUUCK!" he roared. "Will NOTHING go right for me here?!" He caught himself just then, remembering that it probably wasn't the best idea for him to be drawing any more attention to himself. He decided then and there that he had to just get out of the Lab and go home. When he left, he realized that he had to squeeze through doors, and he seemed to have gone from 9 feet to about 10 or 11. Silent tears started to stream down his cheeks as he left, leaving the mess behind, unaware that the smoking computer monitor was laying on top of some papers that began to catch fire after he left.

Part 12

"GODDAMMIT, RAIYEV!" the grizzled old horse shouted at the giant raccoon. The sky was a dry, pale blue, and the sun scorched down from above, slowly burning Raiyev's back as he slouched over, his head hanging down and his tail limp. He couldn't fit inside the buildings of EarthTech Labs anymore, so Dr. Phillips, president and CEO of the company, had to berate the now-14-foot-tall raccoon outside on the company grounds.

Raiyev hadn't ever been on the best of terms with the aging equine that led the company, but all the small accidents and other clumsy moments had been contested by Dr. Frost, who was now standing next to Raiyev as she had done many times before, trying to console him as she spoke to Phillips.

"Please, Sir," she begged, "I know it looks bad, but Raiyev is one of our top minds, and he can help rebuild this—"

"Oh, is he really?" Phillips spat. "I know his file well enough to know that he's one of the weakest employees of this company! Don't you try to bullshit his way out of this!" he continued, flailing his arms about to point at both Frost and Raiyev.

Raiyev simply stood by, every so often glancing over at the nearby Chemistry building, which still had a steady column of wispy smoke rising from the closest side of the building. That part of the building itself looked like it was in ruins. Apparently, a fire had started in one of the labs yesterday evening, and though it set off the fire alarm and sprinklers, it wasn't enough to contain the fire before it reached some containers of

flammable chemicals. An entire quarter of the Chemistry building went up immediately in an explosive fireball that could be seen hundreds of yards away.

Now, after firefighters worked through the night to put out the flames, the building stood ruined and still smoking, with a few firefighters still about to finish the job. And as if it wasn't bad enough that other employees were gawking at Raiyev, now firefighters had seen him, and he feared that soon his face would be plastered all over the news, and not just for setting some building on fire.

"This is truly the last straw, Mr. Kosekovic," Phillips muttered in a low voice, his teeth bared and his large nostrils flaring even larger. "You're fired! And you're expected to pay for these damages!"

"But, Sir," Raiyev began, his large, frightened face looming over the much smaller horse, "I *need* to be here! Look at me! I need to be able to be here to reverse what's happened to me!" And it was true. Now that Raiyev had grown so much, he was having a hard time keeping himself and his problem much of a secret. He even had to tie a large bed sheet around himself as a sort of crude loincloth just to stay somewhat decent. He was in no mood for public attention, either, especially after the way people had started treating him. No matter how well he tried to explain himself, most people either ran away screaming, or hid their children as they called him a freak or a monster.

"That's not my concern," Phillips said, brushing the matter off his shoulder as plainly as if Raiyev had mentioned that his parents were going to ground him. "My concern is this company, its facilities, and the people who work here. Since you no longer work here, there's nothing this company can do, will do, or CARES to do for the likes of you! Now give me your security pass and get off this property before I have security escort you off!"

The final threat was admittedly an empty one, seeing as how no furson around was in any position to physically force Raiyev anywhere by his or her own paws. Nevertheless, Raiyev knew when he wasn't wanted, and after handing the security pass he had attached to the bed sheet, he slowly walked away to the parking lot, his head hanging lower than ever, and his 9-foot-long tail dragging slowly behind him.

Brad had rented out a moving truck to help transport Raiyev in secrecy and with efficiency, seeing as how Raiyev could no longer fit inside their little convertible anymore, and now weighed a good deal over a ton. Tears were starting to roll down his cheeks as Brad opened up the back of the truck for Raiyev to get in. The smaller raccoon stopped, though, and took a moment to suddenly hug his fiancée's leg. Raiyev looked down, sniffing, and bent down on his knees to hug his lover better. The two embraced, Raiyev hugging Brad carefully into his chest, and Brad nuzzling Raiyev as best as he could, his small arms wrapped around Raiyev's large neck.

Large tears rolled down Raiyev's muzzle and onto Brad's back, soaking his clothing, but Brad didn't care—it was well worth it, if it meant he could console the fur that meant more to him than anything. After a few moments of simply staying there, hugging, Raiyev finally let up, and got inside the truck.

"I have an idea," Brad said, looking in at Raiyev, who was sitting down cross-legged, facing the opening. "Just trust me," he said with a kind smile as he closed the door.

* * *

Sometime later, after riding around in the dark, Raiyev finally felt the truck stop, heard Brad get out and walk around to the back, and saw him open the door to reveal one of the most beautiful spots of untouched nature Raiyev had ever seen.

"I know that people have started to...not take too kindly to your changes, Raiyev," Brad began as Raiyev simply looked out in wide-eyed wonder.

"Where are we?" Raiyev asked.

"Well, I decided that taking you here for a visit could help you get away from everyone. We don't need people constantly gawking at you, and running away in fear from you."

Raiyev cast his eyes down knowingly. As far as he was concerned, everyone who had stared at him, run from him, screamed at him or called him a freak or a monster was only doing so because of that slip-up in the lab when he injected himself with that chemical, which was, of course, his own fault. Everything bad that had been happening to him since that day was his fault.

"This place is really out of the way," Brad continued. "Not too many people know how to get here. There aren't even any campsites or anything here." Raiyev stared blankly at Brad. "Come on," Brad pleaded, "please come out. It's safe here—I promise."

Raiyev cautiously stepped out of the truck, looking around to see if anyone else was close by. To his great relief, he and Brad were the only ones there, and the sight of the surrounding landscape took Raiyev's breath away. For some reason, Raiyev started to get a feeling deep inside of him, yet still subtle and slight, that he belonged here, that this was far better than the world of science he had grown up around and come to love and live by.

The strong scent of pine permeated the air, and all Raiyev could see was a mixture of blue and green surrounding them. They were in a valley, surrounded by tall foothills on all sides, and all covered with large, robust trees, with sprinklings of open patches of fields and meadows here and there. Raiyev stood currently in such a meadow, the tall grass tickling his ankles. A lake could be seen not half a mile from where he was, and its water looked cool and refreshing, especially under the hot sun of the day.

"I thought you might like it," Brad said with a slight smirk that changed into a warm smile, seeing his giant lover looking all around, his mouth open and tail swishing back and forth. Suddenly, Raiyev looked down at Brad, and he quickly bent down and—much to the surprise of Brad—picked him up swiftly and hugged him tightly against his chest.

"Oof!" Brad heaved as he was hugged by the massively strong arms, but then settled in, murring as he hugged back.

"Thank you," Raiyev whispered softly into Brad's ear. He held the smaller raccoon back a bit, noticing how much like a doll he was to him now, and just as suddenly as he picked him up, Raiyev brought him up to his face to plant a large and wet—but still heartfelt—kiss. The kiss became more tender and less aggressive, and Brad kissed back, his smaller muzzle locking lips as best as he could with Raiyev's.

"I love you," Raiyev said gently, pulling out of the kiss momentarily.

"And I love you, my dearest friend," Brad replied, and found himself back kissing the giant raccoon, his legs dangling down in front of Raiyev's loincloth. As he pressed

his body closer, his hind paws picked up on the swelling rod that was hidden by the giant's loincloth, and he gave a knowing murr.

"No...I can't..." Raiyev said, blushing as he pulled Brad away from him again.

"Why not?" Brad asked.

"It'd be too much for you...I don't want to hurt you."

"Trust me," Brad said, massaging the large member through the cloth with a hind paw. "You won't hurt me. We can be careful."

"Really?" Raiyev's eyes were hopeful but still unsure as they gazed into Brad's, searching for assurance.

"Really," Brad promised. And with that, Raiyev laid down in the grass after setting Brad back down and removed the cloth from around his waist. Brad, too, removed his clothes, and climbed on top of the giant raccoon, snuggling against his large chest, laying his head down to listen to the deep, muffled thump of his lover's heartbeat. Raiyev simply petted Brad, stroking a large paw down his back, smiling as he watched Brad's tail swish merrily.

Raiyev's malehood was standing firmly erect, some 18 inches tall, and when Brad found himself fully hard, he crawled around and started to give the giant cock his full attention. He started by licking the tip, his tongue working all around the 5-inch-thick crown. He made Raiyev moan when he attached his muzzle to the slit, sucking and licking it while stroking the shaft with one paw, and stroking his own hard cock with his other paw.

Raiyev started to buck gently, but then remembered that he should probably try to restrain himself, for Brad's sake. Brad, however, hopped off of Raiyev and started fondling his ballsac, kneeling in front of the large furry orbs. Each testicle was a pawful for Brad, and he rubbed and massaged them gently, giving them a lick every now and again when his tongue wasn't preoccupied with licking the massive shaft in front of him.

Raiyev couldn't stand his own restraint anymore, and started bucking again, and Brad hugged himself against the bucking rod, precum starting to drizzle out of the tip. Brad's own cock was rubbing against the ballsac, and he started to really throw himself into it, licking and stroking the massive cock with relish, sending Raiyev into an ecstatic frenzy of pleasure.

They kept at it like this for a short while until Brad heard Raiyev cry out something that sounded like "I'm about to explode!" just as Brad himself was shooting his load, coating the giant raccoon's furry ballsac. Brad eased up just a bit as his climax started to wane, not sure how powerful Raiyev's cumming would be, and prepared himself. They both thought it was quite remarkable when Raiyev finally came, shooting huge jets of cum into the air, arcing high and coming back down again with an audible SPLAT! against Raiyev's chest and stomach. He released an entire quart of his seed, and Brad simply stood there, panting heavily and watching with great delight.

After it was all finished, Brad came around and started to lap up all the cum that had been shot out of the great cannon that was Raiyev's cock. Raiyev helped him out, cleaning himself up much more quickly and efficiently. After they were done, Brad collapsed onto Raiyev, and they both fell asleep for a long nap, snuggling each other dearly, their minds only concentrating on how much they loved each other.

Part 13

A tiny dragonfly exploring the meadow landed on the slumbering Raiyev's large nose to rest its wings. The giant raccoon's nose twitched at the tickling sensation, and he woke up gently, opening his eyes to stare up at the cloudless, pale blue sky, the sun warming his naked body. He lifted his head and looked down his chest to see a much smaller raccoon curled up under his large paw, still fast asleep. Raiyev smiled at the tiny tail swishing ever so softly against his tummy.

This was heaven. This was the epitome of life itself, and he desperately wished this moment could last for all eternity. He didn't even care now that he was still growing slowly—or rather, that he was staying the same size, and everything else on the planet was steadily shrinking around him. Yes, that was the answer he figured a while ago, soon after he injected himself with the test solution that fateful day and began noticing the size differences. It was, after all the purpose and hope of the solution in the first place: some way to counter-act the shrinking that the entire planet was undergoing. He must have “grown” another four or five feet since he fell asleep, he realized, because Brad seemed even smaller on him now than when they were being intimate earlier that morning.

He kept staring at Brad for a while, letting his mate sleep, but then suddenly remembered that while he himself had gotten fired from EarthTech Labs, Brad had not, and he was probably still needed there today. After mulling it over for a moment, Raiyev reluctantly figured that he should wake his lover so he could return to work for the rest of the day. Raiyev gently nudged the tiny raccoon under his paw, and Brad seemed as unwilling to get up as Raiyev was to wake him. Brad eventually came around, stretching and yawning slowly as he tried to stand up on Raiyev's stomach.

“Aww,” Brad said sleepily, staring into the larger raccoon's big eyes. “Why'd you go and wake me, love? I was having such a good dream...”

“I'm sorry, dear,” Raiyev said, “but don't you still have work to do at the Labs?”

“Oh, pffft!” Brad replied, a goofy expression running across his face. “The Labs! Who needs them when I have you? Besides, you need me more than they do.”

Raiyev smiled and laughed softly. “You're so cute when you're sleepy, you know that?”

Brad just stood there and grinned for a moment, then hopped off the big raccoon, fetched his clothes, and started dressing. “I suppose you're right, though,” Brad said as he buttoned up his shirt. “We do need an income to survive, after all, and with...well...” Brad paused, frowning as he recalled the early morning's events. “...With what that old fart of a horse did to you today, I guess it's up to me to put bread on our table. At least for a while.”

Raiyev stood up, stretching and scritchng himself a bit, and leaned over the roof of the large moving truck, resting his forearms on the top to watch Brad finish dressing. “I think I've gotten bigger again, dear,” he said, a hint of worry in his eyes.

Brad looked up, taking in Raiyev's size. “So you have,” he sighed. “Do you think you can still fit in the truck?”

Raiyev's worried look now spread all across his face. “I don't think so. And what's more, I don't think I necessarily want to go home. Not right now, at least.”

“What are you saying, love?” Brad asked, the same look of worry now in his eyes, too.

“That I need a vacation. That’s all, really. I think I can manage on my own out here for a while, so long as no one comes around and finds me here.”

“But what happens if you just keep getting bigger? You’d eventually outgrow this place. And I don’t want to leave you—not after everything that’s been going on. I don’t want to be away from you.”

“I’m sorry, Brad, but I don’t know what you can really do right now to protect me.” Raiyev looked sadly down at his lover, choking on those last few words.

Brad teared up. “Can’t I do *anything*?” he pleaded as a single tear rolled down his muzzle.

“Yes, my dear,” the giant raccoon responded. “Go talk to Dr. Frost. Tell her that I need as much help as she can provide.”

Brad immediately ran over to Raiyev and wrapped his arms around the thick leg, crying against it. “I don’t want to lose you,” he sobbed. Raiyev bent down and picked him up carefully, holding him to his chest like a doll, feeling his tears mat his fur.

“I’ll be okay, Brad,” Raiyev assured him. “I promise to be careful, okay?”

“I just love you so much,” Brad said between sobs, his face buried in his mate’s chest.

“I love you, too,” Raiyev professed, his own tears quietly rolling down his muzzle.

Brad looked up after a moment, affectionately licking Raiyev’s chin. “You *promise* you’ll be okay?”

“Yes,” Raiyev asserted. “I promise.” They hugged once more, and Raiyev set down the smaller raccoon. Brad gathered up the rest of his things and slowly got into the truck.

“When should I come back for you?” he asked.

“When you can bring Dr. Frost to help me. She knows me well. She’ll be willing to help—I know it.”

Brad wiped a tear from his eye and smiled once more at his mate. He then started the truck and drove off slowly, Raiyev watching the truck until it disappeared from view. He didn’t know it at the time, but that was the last time he would ever see his mate smile.

For the next couple of days, Raiyev simply explored his new temporary home. There was a small, uninhabited cave close by that provided good shelter. Having a little knowledge in horticulture, Raiyev was able to locate some edible plants and berries to sustain him. The lake was a great place to bathe and relax, and the forested areas all around were wonderful to explore. Raiyev found himself wandering for hours at a time inside the woods, and despite how critical and desperate his current situation was, he couldn’t help but feel peaceful and relaxed and totally at home in this new place.

Everyday, though, he would also wait for a while at the end of the small dirt road for any sign of his lover and Dr. Frost. He didn’t have to wait too long before one day, just as the sun was almost set, a large white semi cab towing a long trough-like bed rolled up. He hid around behind some trees first to make sure that it wasn’t anyone he didn’t want finding him. He watched carefully and was relieved and delighted to see Dr. Frost hop out of the driver’s side door.

“Dr. Frost!” he cried out in a booming voice, startling the much smaller hybrid, and popped out from behind the trees, running up to meet her.

“Goodness, Raiyev,” Frost said, clutching her chest. “You scared the dickens out of me!” She looked up, taking in Raiyev’s new size. “And it’s no wonder, too, at that size!”

“I’m so glad to see you, Dr. Frost!” Raiyev said elatedly. “Where’s Brad?” He looked around, as if expecting him to pop out from anywhere.

“That’s what I’ve come here to tell you,” Frost began, talking very briskly and urgently. “Brad told me a few days ago about your dilemma and where you were staying, and I promised to come help you as soon as I had some solution. And I just went over to your apartment where he was supposed to be this evening, but he wasn’t there!”

“What do you mean wasn’t there? Where is he?” Raiyev asked worriedly.

“That’s the thing, Raiyev—I don’t know! The apartment looks awful, like it was ransacked! Raiyev,” Frost said, a pained expression on her face, “I think Brad’s been kidnapped!”

“WHAT?!” Raiyev roared. “Take me there, NOW!”

“Yes, yes!” Frost said quickly, shaking a little at Raiyev’s violent reaction. “Get in the bed, over here, and lay down!” Raiyev quickly hopped into the bed like he was told, and Frost made short order to cover him with tarps. She then hopped into the cab and drove off as fast as a vehicle that large and heavily loaded could go.

The trip seemed to take forever to Raiyev as he lay there, staring up at the blue tarp veiling his entire body. Questions raced all through his mind, and his heart was beating rapidly as he worried about his mate. What happened to Brad? Was he really kidnapped? How bad did the place really look? Where was he? Who would do this to him and why? After a while, Raiyev started to calm down a bit, thinking and hoping that Frost had simply jumped to conclusions like a bad scientist.

Finally, the truck came to a stop and Raiyev heard Frost hop out of the cab and run around to remove the tarp. Raiyev quickly got up to see his apartment door hanging wide open. He was far beyond being able to fit inside, but he could still see inside. He pressed his eye up to the door and looked around, peering all around inside as best as he could. It was as Frost described it—ransacked. Papers and oddments were strewn everywhere, window curtains and blinds had been torn down, furniture had been uprooted, and a lamp lay flickering on the ground, but there was no sign of Brad at all.

Raiyev started to panic again and pulled away from the door, looking around to see Brad’s car still parked in its space. Where was he? Raiyev turned to Frost to say something, but he never got it out, for at that moment he felt something prick his neck, and he fell into a dreamless sleep.

Part 14

The heavy flick of a large switch echoed loudly, and a harsh and bright white light shined onto Raiyev, coaxing him out of his slumber. He writhed as he awoke, but found that he couldn’t move. He was laying flat on his back, facing up into a blinding light that stung his eyes. He looked around quickly—anything to get that light out of his eyes—and saw that all four of his paws were bound to the table, strapped down in heavy metal clasps, with a similar, larger clasp running over his naked torso.

He was on some sort of metallic table or platform—he couldn't really tell from his position, and the only light in the room was shining down right on him, a heavily focused beam that warmed his body. All around him was a vast blackness, obscuring the size and orientation of the room he was in. He struggled under his restraints, trying to free himself, but he couldn't. He called for help, but there was no answer. After a while, he felt drowsy, and once again fell into sleep (despite the brightness of the light above him), fitful due to the nightmare that took him.

The metropolis bustled with activity, as it did on any normal day, and Jacob was making his rounds in the office building where he delivered mail every day. He was trying to think of happy thoughts, like his wife and kids, to pass the time and keep his mind off of how he was barely making enough to scrape by. Just as he was handing Mr. Ticheli of Accounting on the Third Floor his package, the building suddenly swayed violently, and a deep, rumbling boom roared loudly. Lights flickered, and everyone fell to the ground, only to get back up, looking around frantically. Some people near the office windows started screaming, and Jacob quickly turned his head towards them, seeing out the window in the distance a massive dark wall that seemed to be heading straight for them.

Everything outside suddenly went dark, the sunlight of what had been an almost cloudless day now completely blacked out in a sudden eclipse. Everyone around Jacob was getting up and running for the fire exit stairwells, while Jacob (and a few others) stood transfixed by this unknown, impending doom. He kept staring out the windows, trying to see what was there, but he couldn't see anything. Suddenly, the ceiling above him started crumbling and falling on him, and before he could even look all the way up, he was no more—along with the rest of the building and all its occupants.

The people of this city had never before even dreamt of such a magnificent beast, but now, without any warning or any knowledge of where he came from, a giant raccoon was looming over the city, casting many city blocks in his shadow, one of his hindpaws having just come to rest on a couple of skyscrapers. The people panicked, running around almost aimlessly—anything to get away from this mile-high harbinger of death and destruction.

The raccoon's eyes were narrowed, the twisted grin on his muzzle an ominous message of hopelessness to all the victims of this city. He lifted up his other hindpaw with malicious glee and brought it back down forcefully on another set of buildings, flattening them instantly and making some surrounding buildings crumble by the sheer force of the resulting quake.

The raccoon laughed dominantly, his deep bass voice resonating for miles on end, and his great tail, over 3,000 feet long, swished and swayed over a suburb of the city, wiping through all the homes like a massive and long wrecking ball. The raccoon looked back at the destruction his tail inadvertently had just caused, and grinned even wider. This feeling of absolute power he had was a euphoria, and his sheath twitched and began to swell at the thought of destroying the puny city so easily.

He stroked his growing member idly a moment before continuing on, remembering how much he simply wanted to obliterate the entire city. Crouching down (and knocking over a few buildings in the process), he watched the tiny people scurry around, attempting desperately to flee his wrathful demolition. He chuckled darkly and

reached down, scooping up a pawful of dozens of these pathetic little bugs, and snarled at them as he lifted them to his muzzle. They screamed and pleaded, some even jumping off the edge of his paw towards a better fate, and their panic made him smile wryly before he simply tilted his head back and opened wide, dumping the entire load into his muzzle. He felt them struggle within his mighty maw, chuckling to himself as he played with them. His tongue tossed them all around for a moment before he finally started chewing, relishing in the feeling of the tiny bodies grinding into useful meat and pulp between his teeth. He swallowed the lot but was hungry for more.

This time, he took up a skyscraper, wrapping his fingers carefully around the structure and yanking it from its foundations. He could see the people trapped inside as they screamed and panicked, their faces contorted in terror as they beheld their doom. With the bottom of the building open and free, the giant raccoon held a paw underneath the opening and shook the building hard, squeezing some to break away the different floors. All manner of things poured out into his paw—debris, furniture, and of course the most delightful part of the meal, the people. Some fell to the ground, but he didn't care; once his paw was pleasantly full, he stuffed the contents into his muzzle and chowed down hungrily. He swallowed the furniture and debris, too, but he enjoyed every moment of it as it just reminded him of the power of destruction he held over the city. He dumped more into his paw and repeated the process, until he felt satiated. He then looked at the few broken bodies that had missed his paw, and decided to slam the remaining shell of a building down on them, grinding the mess into the ground with glee.

He stood up and noticed his now fully erect malehood, throbbing needily. Looking around at all the destruction that was still left to accomplish, the raccoon got an idea. He stomped his way over to a section of the city that had so far been untouched by his malice, and sat down in the thick of it all, his rear and tail crashing down on scores of buildings. He raked his fingers through a clean part of the city, gathering up building after building in his paws, and then mashed them all against his swollen cock. He churred deeply, moaning as he felt the destruction against his most sensitive flesh. He rubbed the buildings and their inhabitants into ruin against his thick organ, until it became a mass of rubble, broken bodies, and his own oozing precum.

Needing more, he laid down on his belly and dragged his cock through whole city blocks, plowing through countless buildings and people, the feeling of so much death making him groan in ecstasy. A deep trough formed in the city from his unstoppable cock, and he sped up, huge dollops of precum drizzling out of the tip. He reached around, spreading his arms and legs wide throughout the city, simply wiping through as much as he could, like making a snow angel of catastrophic ruin.

All this power, this death, this destruction, this pleasure—it was almost too much for the giant raccoon, and he thrust violently in the self-made trough until he threw his head back and cried out his orgasm, his voice booming for dozens of miles as he shot thousands of gallons of his thick, hot seed into the streets of the city. It flooded the area, coating building after building in the sticky stuff. A playground was buried under tons of the hot jism, and people drowned as they were knocked over by the tsunami rushing up on them.

After a few moments, the raccoon's climax waned, and he slowly got up as his spent member retracted into its sheath. He surveyed the destruction his cruel fuck had just caused, and with his hands on his hips, he laughed evilly. His head swarmed with an

ecstatic bliss as he realized just how powerful he was over the people of this city, and he decided to finish off the job, going on a stomping spree until all that was left of the city were miles of ruin and corpses, fires springing up here and there from the devastation that had been laid upon the metropolis that had once been a cornerstone of industry in its nation. Very few survivors were left, and they only emerged when they realized that the giant god of destruction had disappeared as quickly and as mysteriously as he had arrived.

Part 15

Raiyev sat up with a jolt, cold sweat matting his fur. He panted heavily, coughing as he looked around. *Where am I?* he thought. He was no longer strapped down on the table like he was before, but was now in what looked to be a large prison cell. The room was completely bare, except for the stone bed he had been laying on. It was attached to one of the two stone walls of the room. The other two walls, running opposite the stone walls, were a thick plastic or glass of some sort, with small holes for ventilation. Through one of these glass walls, he could see a corridor—obviously, the way out. Through the other, he could see another prison cell like the one he was in, only that other cell was empty.

He pounded on the wall that looked into the corridor, and shouted for help, but there was no response. Pressing his face up against it, he looked up and down the length of the corridor as much as he could. One end went straight for farther than he could see, but the other end—the end traveling in the direction of the other prison cell—ran into a T-intersection with another corridor just beyond the other prison cell. He kept shouting for help for a while, but when none came, he slumped back down onto the harsh stone bed.

He thought about the nightmare he had just had. He closed his eyes, concentrating on it—gods, it was awful. He had become too large, and had become a monster. He couldn't believe he would do such a thing to so many innocent people. And yet, part of it felt so real...but no, it couldn't have been real, could it? No, the thought of eating people, of laying so much waste to a city, of...he hated to think about it, but of *fucking* the city the way he had... It made him feel sick to his stomach.

In fact, as he noticed the feeling in his gut, he almost started to believe that it had been real. Whatever was in his stomach now wasn't sitting right with him at all, and he felt very ill from it. He rushed around, looking for a toilet or something, but there was nothing, so he bent over in a corner of the room and let loose, vomiting onto the floor. Tears welled in his eyes from the pain, and when all was done, he looked down. If he had anything left in him, he might vomit some more at what he saw, but he had to be sure. It just *couldn't* have been real! With trembling paws, he picked his fingers through his own vomit, and started crying as he came across the evidence.

Bodies. Tiny dead bodies. Most of them were mashed into a red paste that mixed with the sickly green of his vomit, but there were some that were still recognizable. What's more, there was also the tiny debris and furniture he has eaten. Flashbacks of the nightmare came to him, and he started piecing together the whole event in his head. He looked again at the mangled bodies covered in blood and vomit. Some of them, he saw, were children.

At this, he fell over on his side and bawled, crying uncontrollably. What had he done? How was this possible? Why had he done such a thing? What drove him to this? He couldn't believe what was happening, yet he was sure that he wasn't dreaming now. No, it was all too real. He had done those unspeakable acts that his nightmare showed him. He had actually *done* it. How many people had he needlessly killed? What was the death toll? How many billions of dollars of property damage did he do?

How many children had been left as orphans, and how many parents had had their children cruelly stolen away from them for his own sick, twisted...*pleasure*? Raiyev gulped as he realized this, and cried even harder. What were the final thoughts of all those people he killed? What had their ambitions and dreams been? They were all people—real people with real histories and feelings and regular every-day lives, just like he had been. What came over him that made him do such a terrible, unforgivable thing?!

How could *anyone* even get off on that sort of destruction? He remembered that part, too, and wept even harder...what was happening to him? Why did he jack himself off, using the city as a fuck-toy? He couldn't believe that he had such a fetish. He refused to believe it. It just wasn't like him.

And so he lay there, weeping for a while, wondering what would become of him, or if there was some way to end it all now and just commit suicide. Raiyev looked back over at the pile of his own vomit, containing that sick evidence of his being, and wondered how he could go through life now that he had become such a monster. Maybe, if he was lucky, he would rot in this prison cell and wouldn't have to worry about hurting anyone anymore.

Driven by a sudden rage against himself and against everything that had happened, he got up and ran to the glass wall facing the corridor, pounding against it with his muzzle pressed up against one of the ventilation holes. "WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME?!" he cried out, yelling the question over and over again as loud as he could, tears streaming down his face, pounding for anyone to come. He kept it up for some minutes before sliding down against the glass, slumping into a ball, rocking back and forth, crying uncontrollably.

"Raiyev!" he heard a small voice whisper loudly after a few hours. He had nearly cried himself to sleep, but was afraid of falling asleep again, so had been doing his best to stay awake. He looked around, and saw standing just outside the glass wall on the other side of him was the diminutive figure of Dr. Frost.

"Dr. Frost," he said weakly. "What...how did...what's going on? What's happening to me?"

"There isn't much time," she said, looking around frantically. "I'm not sure how well this place is guarded." She pulled what looked like a thin rectangular glass plate from her pocket and held it up towards the glass wall, pressing her finger against the rectangular plate. The right half of the glass wall suddenly disappeared, and Dr. Frost scurried inside.

"How did you...?" Raiyev began, not exactly knowing which of all his questions he wanted to ask first. He wiped his paw over his face, drying his tears.

"The tranquilizer they gave me wasn't nearly as strong," Frost began explaining, "and I was able to fight it off. They shot me at the same time they shot you—just outside your apartment the other day."

“They?” Raiyev asked slowly, his voice hoarse from all his crying and yelling earlier. “They who?”

Frost panted a bit, still tense and frantic about being found out. She looked around again for a moment before answering. “They’re *humans*, Raiyev. Humans—those alien creatures that rednecks here always claim to see and be probed by. I’ve seen them for myself.”

Raiyev stood dumbfounded, his mouth agape, unsure how to process this new information. “But...why have they taken us? What is this all about?”

“I don’t know just yet,” Frost responded quickly. “After I fought off the tranquilizers, I managed to slip away. When they brought us to this base here, I hid inside some air vents. That’s where I’ve been staying, and I’ve been looking all around for a way to help you out. It took me a while, but I’m here now.”

Raiyev cautiously hugged the tiny hybrid to him, weeping softly. “Thank you,” he said. “I don’t know what’s happening to me...you won’t believe what I’ve done...”

Frost returned the unexpected and forceful hug. “I’m not sure that there’s time for that now. We’ve got to get you out of here!”

“What about Brad?” Raiyev asked, suddenly remembering him. “Do you know where he is?”

Frost stared at him for a moment, the truth in her eyes. “I haven’t seen him yet,” she sighed. “Come on—let’s get you out of here before we both get into further trouble.”

Part 16

“I can’t leave without Brad,” Raiyev pleaded desperately to the diminutive Dr. Frost as she fumbled with the thin glass plate that opened one of the walls to Raiyev’s cell. She stared at him a moment, a certain hasty panic in her eyes.

“You have to go, Raiyev!” she hissed at him. “I don’t need to know everything that’s going on here to know that you’re in grave danger as long as you stay here,” she panted, having spoken in a rush of whispered breath. She paused to think as she stared at him, and their eyes met.

“Here,” she said, looking suddenly resolute and proffering the glass plate to Raiyev. “I’ll stay here and continue looking for Brad. You take this in case you need it to open any more doors or walls or something.”

Raiyev silently took the plate and nodded his head slowly. He started for the corridor, and trying to think of something sort of thank you to say to his former boss, he turned back to her. “Please be careful,” he said, the words feeling dry and awkward in his muzzle.

“YOU be careful,” Frost replied firmly, and she watched him as he cautiously stepped out into the corridor, looking up and down its length, and vanished from sight.

Raiyev kept looking around frantically, making sure that no one saw him. After turning around a few corners and still not meeting anyone, he started to feel ill at ease from the lack of activity. Surely there must have been *someone* along by now, so where was everyone? Maybe it was mealtime and everyone was sitting down to dinner? Raiyev couldn’t remember his last proper meal, and there was no telling what time it was wherever he was; he felt his stomach give what sounded like a roaring rumble, and he looked around to make sure no one was coming.

As he gazed all around, he began to finally take in his surroundings. It all looked so sterile and mechanical—not too dissimilar from what he was used to seeing at EarthTech Labs. There was one windowless door further down the corridor on his left, and he eyed it carefully, as if expecting something or someone to pop out from it at any moment.

Next to the door, he saw a rack of what appeared to be long, misshapen metal poles. He took a few steps closer and saw that there was a small trigger on each pole, and though he didn't see any sort of ammunition lying around, it was clear that these were some sort of gun. He picked one up slowly and silently, examining it carefully for a moment, then rested the barrel on his shoulder, the butt in his paw, and started off again, having no clue in which direction he should be headed.

As he made a couple more turns, that ill and ominous feeling within him built up even more, and as he peeked around the next corner, he drew his head back quickly and flattened himself against the wall. He had seen them, two of them—two humans. In the quick glimpse, he thought they looked absolutely horrific, like some sort of furless, contorted monkey. They only stood about shoulder-high to him, or so he thought—it was a bit difficult to gauge as they were farther down the corridor, and he only saw them for a split second—and they were walking upright and wearing clothes no different than a common furson. They had disgustingly flat faces—no muzzle at all, it looked like—and the only fur he saw was on the tops of their heads.

He waited for them to pass, heard them muttering in some language he didn't understand, and just as he began to pray that he wasn't spotted, he heard a loud cry from behind him, down at the other end of the corridor he was in. The jig was up, and without giving it a second thought, he aimed the gun he was holding at the human now running toward him and pulled the trigger.

There was a near-blinding streak of red light and a heavy booming rush of wind, and Raiyev watched as the human was flung back a good twenty feet or so and knocked unconscious. Raiyev stood frozen to the spot, his heart racing, his eyes fixed on the human now lying sprawled on the floor, either unconscious or dead. Raiyev waited for her (at least it looked like it might be female to Raiyev) to get up, but she didn't.

As Raiyev heard more voices approaching him, he had a sudden revelation: if that human's cry hadn't raised the alarm around him, the noise made by the blast of that gun certainly did. And sure enough, a gaggle of more humans was now hurrying towards him from all available directions.

Without pausing to think, Raiyev simply made a run for it, darting down corridor after long corridor—this place seemed to be made of nothing but corridors—pushing down humans as he ran into them, firing the gun over his back every now and again, not looking back to see if he hit anyone. The yells and cries still followed him, but every once in a while, when he fired the gun over his back, he'd hear a loud scream, terrified and painful. He didn't care, though—all he wanted or knew was that he had to get out of whatever this evil place was as fast as he could.

He dashed around corners, blazed through rooms full of things he didn't have time to look at. The manufactured realm of the humans passed by him in a blur that started to be dotted with stars as he felt his legs protesting in pain from running for what felt like hours. He zoomed through a large hall with long tables in rows—possibly a

cafeteria of some sort, and somewhere in the back of his mind, he was briefly reminded of the scene in the cafeteria of EarthTech Labs when Dr. Paxton had died.

Around a few more corners, a few more blasts of the gun, a few more screams behind him in some twisted tongue, and he finally saw it—bright daylight streaming in from two glass double doors. He ordered his legs to make a final dash, putting on a sudden burst of energy as his heart leapt for joy at the sight of freedom—

Raiyev took a tumbling fall as something wrapped itself around his ankles, and the gun flew from his fingertips. He scrambled around, trying to free himself from his captor, and he looked into the face of a particularly ugly human. He was wearing glasses, had the least amount of fur of any of them—just a few patches of white on his head—and his face (if you could call it a face) was sagging and wrinkly. Raiyev paused in horror at the gruesome sight for a moment, then came back to his senses and kicked hard at the human that was now attempting to bind him.

In a splatter of blood where Raiyev hindpaw made contact with the human's nose, the giant raccoon scrambled to his feet and dashed outside, grabbing the gun and firing it one last time at the human before bursting outside into the free open air, taking it in. Wherever he was, the climate was fortunately like his own. He looked back to where the doors that he had just escaped from were, and found to his horror that there was nothing there—just a hill of green grass, covered in patches of shrubbery.

Raiyev's eyes darted around, looking to see where the building was that he had just escaped. Surely, it was somewhere, wasn't it? He had *just* been in it! But as he looked around, all he saw was that he was at the foot of some small mountain, with no building in sight. And then it dawned on him—it was underground, and well hidden. So well hidden, in fact, that there was no way of knowing that there was even so much as a doorknob there. There was no road or even a dirt path leading up to the place, and so there was nothing for Raiyev to follow, no route to take to find his home.

He looked around, and was faced with a small clearing surrounded by dense forest, and looking back up at the mountain, he decided he should start off to get as far away from this place as possible; he didn't want to stick around and chance being caught again. The air smelled a bit familiar, Raiyev thought as he entered the forest, though he couldn't quite put a finger on what it reminded him of. He walked for hours, having no idea where he was or how to get home—or even if he was still on his home planet—but he had to find a way home. This planet was so much like Earth that he was sure that he still had to be on the same planet, at least. The trees were about the size and shape that he remembered trees to be before he was captured, the insects looked like Earthen insects...this *must* still be Earth, he affirmed.

The sun started to go down, and Raiyev sat down for a while, resting his back against a large tree and closing his eyes. When he opened them again, it was much darker; night had already fallen, and Raiyev cursed himself for having dozed off. But in a moment he was up again and searching, albeit somewhat wearily, for some sign of direction to his home.

And then he found it. Almost without realizing it, Raiyev walked into another open clearing, this one much larger than the one he had started out in, and recognized it at once, even in the pale moonlight: It was the place Brad had taken him to so that he could hide from the rest of the world for a while. The familiar lake was close to him, and way in the distance on the other side of the clearing, Raiyev could just make out the dirt road

that led back to the main road. His spirits brightened, and despite his weariness and the darkness of night, he made off for the road, knowing now that he had finally found a way home.

Part 17

What do the humans want with me? Raiyev pondered as he plodded alongside the stretch of highway, keeping behind the dense row of trees, his back bent so that he wouldn't be spotted above the smaller trees. It was the dead of night, and though the highway was practically deserted, Raiyev didn't want to chance being seen by anyone—it could only cause more trouble. So the 25-foot-tall raccoon made his way silently in the direction of his home, wondering all the while about everything that had been happening.

He wasn't headed home to hide, as he was taller than the two-story apartments now, so he surely couldn't fit inside them. In fact, he was barely able to reason just why he was going home in the first place. Perhaps it was just a psychological thing, the thought and feeling of being at one's own home. Or perhaps he might hope to find clues to Brad's disappearance, even though he was sure he knew that Brad was locked up somewhere by the humans in a cell similar to the one from which Dr. Frost had freed him. Perhaps it was that tiniest, most irrational hope inside of him that he might just go home and see Brad waiting for him, everything in order, like waking up from a bad dream.

Answers. He wanted answers. To all the questions he had, like why did the humans kidnap him, Brad, and Dr. Frost? Were the humans the "they" that Toni Hawthorne had warned him about before her disappearance? Why did Dr. Paxton die? Was she connected with this somehow? Was Harper really the one that killed her? If so, why did she, and what does she know? If not, who did, and why?

And what of that...episode he had? That hallucination or dream, where he was a mile tall and did so many unspeakable things? Would he wander into the city he called home and see ruin and chaos about? It was all too much to think about, and Raiyev's head was reeling and throbbing painfully. But where would he go to get answers? Where *could* he go?

And then he saw it, gleaming in the distance under the soft moonlight—a cop car, parked between a couple trees, obviously waiting for a speeder to chase after, pull over, and write up. Raiyev stopped and stared at the vehicle and had an idea. He approached the car carefully, sneaking up behind it, and bending down low so that he could peer into the driver's window, he tapped softly on the glass.

The old stag that had been dozing off inside suddenly gave a start and looked around frantically, then fixed his eyes on the large raccoon face staring back at him through the window. The stag's jaw dropped, his eyes widening in terror, and he clumsily reached for the gun from his holster.

Pointing the gun at Raiyev's face with both paws on it, he yelled through the glass, "Back up! Back away now!"

Raiyev moved his head slightly back from the door and responded calmly, "Please open the door."

The stag was panting heavily in fear, and he screwed up his face as he calculated the request from such a threatening-looking beast. He ultimately decided to open the door, but still kept his gun and both eyes on Raiyev.

"Thank you," Raiyev said, and suddenly reached inside and yanked the stag from the seat. In a quick motion, Raiyev knocked the gun from the stag's grip, then sat down and folded his legs so that they encompassed the cop car, the cop held firmly in his paw. He was nervous about this, too, but made sure to show no signs of it. He continued just as calmly, staring down at the stag. "Now, I need some information. I won't hurt you, as long as you tell me what I want."

The stag struggled against Raiyev's grip, and looked as though he hadn't heard a word Raiyev had said. "Do you understand me?" Raiyev said firmly.

"Yes, yes," the stag sputtered, his panic only rising. "Please let me go! Put me down! I'll do anything!"

"Good," Raiyev said, and he set the cop on the ground by his car, still encompassed by his legs. "Now, I know that you have some little computer in there," Raiyev pointed to the car, "that has information about citizens with criminal records. I need to know where Dr. Amanda Jean Harper is being held. She has been incarcerated, and I need to know where I can find her."

The stag looked as if he had been stunned. Whatever he was expecting the giant to say or do to him, it hadn't been this. He quickly sat down in his car and typed a few things into the computer console sitting in between the driver and front passenger seats.

"I-I've got it," he said shakily to Raiyev. "She's at the Stillcreek Penitentiary, just about 55 miles down this highway," he told him, pointing in the direction that Raiyev had already been headed.

"Thank you," Raiyev said casually. "And I was never here," he added more forcefully. "If I hear of some officer's report about seeing a giant raccoon at night, I'll make sure to hunt you down. And believe me, you'll wish you were dead long before I've finished with you." Raiyev didn't like threatening the officer, but it was the only way he could stay safe, and luckily it worked, as the stag looked petrified beyond comprehension at those words.

So the raccoon lifted himself from the ground and started out again, keeping behind the dense row of trees as he had been. It was considerably further to the penitentiary where Harper was being held than to his house, but he had to get there—he *needed* to find out what was going on. He only hoped that Harper could be of some help to him.

It was a couple days, even at his size, before Raiyev finally hiked the 55 miles to Stillcreek Penitentiary. He had endured blazing heat during the day and had to go further into the wilderness a few times to look for water and food, but he kept on hiking alongside the highway, hidden by the trees, and eventually found himself looking at a set of low buildings, all the same rusty and dun color, surrounded by some open dirt fields, all surrounded by a tall barbed-wire fence that came up to Raiyev's mid-thigh.

Luckily, he got there during the middle of the day, when the inmates were all enjoying some time outside (under guard supervision, of course). Raiyev hid just behind the closest edge of trees, looking around from inmate to inmate, until he spotted her—

Harper, sitting down with her back against the fence, watching the other inmates roam around and socialize.

Raiyev suddenly darted out from the trees, and before anyone spotted him, he had already reached down over the fence and scooped up Harper in his paw. It was only then that a few loud shrieks let him know that he had been given away, and without a backward glance, he dashed off for the shelter of the trees, gunfire following him and a very confused and panicky Harper clutched to his chest with both paws.

He kept running for a good 45 minutes, going for miles deeper and deeper into the dense forest before he finally stopped, his legs unable to carry him any further. He panted heavily and finally looked down at the scared little rabbit that looked like she had been crying from all the sudden excitement.

“Oh, Harper...I’m so sorry!” Raiyev said in a hushed and soothing voice. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Harper looked up at him, gasping as she took in the sight of such a large yet familiar raccoon. “Rai-Raiyev?” she squeaked, drying her tears with a paw. “Is that really you?”

Raiyev nodded silently. “I’m VERY sorry I took you like this...it was stupid of me, I know, but I needed to talk to you.”

“What’s happened to you?” Harper asked breathlessly as she looked him up and down.

Raiyev set Harper down on the ground, and sat down next to her, crossing his legs. He went into a full account of everything that had happened since she had been taken away. He told her about his meeting with Toni before her sudden illness, about injecting himself accidentally, about the lab fire and about being fired, about hiding out and then of Brad’s disappearance, and finally about the humans and his recent escape. He even confided in her the tale of his “dream” about wrecking a town at a massively giant size.

She took it all in silently, and sighed heavily once Raiyev had finished. As it had been with Brad, Raiyev felt a huge weight lifted from his chest as he finished telling her all of this. He needed a friend more than anything right now, and Harper had always been close to him.

“So please,” he wrapped up, “I need to know what you know about all of this. Did you really kill Paxton?”

Harper cast her eyes to the ground for a moment, then looked back up into Raiyev’s eyes with a knowing look. “Yes, but I didn’t mean to,” she said earnestly.

“Why?” Raiyev asked. “What happened?”

“Okay, here’s what I know,” Harper began. “I knew what was written on that note from Toni that I handed you from the start. I’m very sorry to have betrayed your trust, Raiyev, but something was fishy about it—I could just sense it, you know—and so I investigated it.

“I was hiding off to the side that evening when you and Toni met. I saw and heard the whole thing, up through Dr. Paxton dragging Toni away from you. Again, I’m really sorry to have betrayed your trust like that, but I was just wanting to make sure someone wasn’t out to get you. I don’t know why I’d been having that feeling—I just had. It was something that was plaguing me in the back of my head for a couple days.

“Early the next morning, I was coming into work rather early and saw Dr. Paxton talking to Thomas Ferai in our lab. I didn’t enter just then—I didn’t want them to see me, so I hid once again where I could still see them, and saw Thomas pouring some liquid from a beaker into a test tube and hand the test tube to Dr. Paxton. She left right after that, and I went in a couple minutes later, so as not to look conspicuous.

“Later in the day, when everyone else was busy watching the news, I took a look at that beaker and saw that it was a strong poison—not strong enough to kill, generally, but enough to put someone in the hospital for a while. So I poured a bit into a test tube for myself and went to see Dr. Paxton.

“I asked her where Toni was, and she wouldn’t tell me. I threatened her, and she threatened me back, saying, ‘This goes further than your little mind can fathom, Dr. Harper!’ So I called her bluff and put some of that same poison in her coffee a couple days later...and well...you know what happened from there. But it was an accident, I swear! That stuff isn’t supposed to be lethal, not in the dosage I gave her...she must have been allergic or something...”

Raiyev had been sitting silently, taking in every word that Harper had told him in her account, and remained silent for a moment after she finished. “So that’s all you know,” he said to her. It wasn’t a question—just an affirmation.

“Yeah, that’s all I know. I’m really sorry, Raiyev. I wish I could be of more help.”

“You can,” he said, with a sudden thought.

“How?”

“The base where the humans are—where I escaped from. You seem to be so good at tracking down information, maybe you can sneak around there and...” He trailed off, pausing for a moment before saying, “Forget it. I don’t want to risk your life any further.”

“Raiyev,” Harper said consolingly, “You’ve broken me out of prison. I’m just going to end up back there anyway. I’d rather help you find the answers you and I are both looking for.” She looked resolute, and Raiyev, for the first time in what felt like years, smiled again.

“Okay then,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Part 18

“Where are they keeping this place, anyway?” Dr. Harper asked as Raiyev carried her through the forest. They had been traveling for many hours, and Raiyev had silently blessed the clouds blocking out the moonlight, making his travel in hidden darkness all the more easy.

“It took me a couple days to get to the penitentiary after I escaped,” Raiyev whispered, afraid of the projection power of his voice. He had been silently trying to follow what he thought was the path back to the hidden facility, all the while still mulling over everything in his head. *What do they want with me? ...What was Paxton doing, and how was she involved? ...I hope this is the right path home...I really hope I don’t fuck things up worse by bringing Harper into this...Where’s Brad? ...Where’s my mate?*

“And you’re sure you know where you’re going?” Harper asked cautiously. She was beginning to rethink things herself—namely, her position in this sordid affair, and

how it could be very costly to get further involved. She stayed stanch, though, feeling full well the love and respect she held for her friend. Raiyev was always a wonderful friend to her, she mused, and he definitely needed her help now. How could she say no?

"I'm...pretty sure, yeah," Raiyev hesitated a moment before finding a patch of barren, broken bushes. "Aha!" he claimed, a bit louder than he should have, in retrospect. "I recognize this area," he said in his quieter voice.

"You do?" replied the small rabbit. "That's good...glad to know we're on the right track, then."

"Well, I had to eat, didn't I?" chuckled Raiyev softly. "Unfortunately," he said in a more serious tone, "it takes a lot to feed me now at this size...and unless we find a way to get me back to normal, I'm afraid it's going to get worse for me."

"You mean get the rest of the planet back to normal, right? You ARE normal—the only normal-sized thing here, it seems."

"Yeah...right..." Raiyev replied, remembering again his position on this shrinking planet. "And you're really sure—"

"Yes," Harper said heavily, knowing already what he was going to ask. "Raiyev, you should know that you mean more to me than just a coworker. I've always considered you a good friend, and I'm willing to fight for you. I want to help."

Raiyev turn his head to hide a single tear running down his cheek. "I just...I couldn't live with myself if you ended up hurt—or worse—because of this."

"Try to think more positively, love," Harper said consolingly, patting her paw on his large arm. "C'mon now, we need to get going."

"Right. Of course," Raiyev stuttered, wiping his face dry and plodding along again.

In a little less time than it took him to find Harper at the prison, Raiyev found himself on the border of the clearing near the hidden facility. He knew it too well, and there was already a mix of emotions tied to it. He finally set Harper down on the ground, still hidden by the trees a few hundred feet in from the clearing.

"Now, you're going to have to travel around to some side of that mountain there," Raiyev told Harper, pointing to the small mountain he remembered coming out of when he escaped. "I don't know how to get in—the moment I got out the exit seemed to disappear behind me. Oh, and I came out to face a clearing—not this one here, but another one right by the mountainside."

"Okay...I think I manage," Harper said, looking over to the mountain. She glanced over at Raiyev again, noting how much taller he looked now that she was on the ground. Still, that didn't stop her from rushing at his leg and hugging him dearly. "Please take care of yourself. Keep yourself well-hidden...I know that must be hard for you at your current size, but still..." Her voice trailed off, looking up at him. She realized she was probably worrying—and chatting—too much. "Just do your best," she added.

"You, too," Raiyev said, smiling half-heartedly, his tail swaying a bit. "I'll stay around this area, so meet me back here as soon as you can." Harper nodded and was off, wandering into the clearing, leaving Raiyev still hidden amongst the trees. He watched her for a while, until she was well out of sight. He then turned around and started searching the area for anything edible. *There ought to be more berries or something*

around here, he thought, his tummy rumbling audibly. He had had slim pickings for the past several days—not counting the terrible atrocity of eating all those innocent folks from the city he terrorized.

How the hell had he become so huge so fast, anyway? And how did he revert back to normal? He wish he could find a current newspaper lying around somewhere to find out exactly where he had done that indescribable deed. At the very least, this area of the country seemed well intact.

Without realizing it, he had gotten so wrapped up in his silent thoughts that he had wandered inadvertently into the clearing he was trying to avoid. He looked around, spotted the line of trees bordering the clearing, and darted for them once again. Just before he reached the edge, though, he felt a stinging prick in his neck and fell to the ground, completely blacked out.

Raiyev awoke to find himself back in that same cell he was imprisoned in before, now slightly smaller than he remembered it. “NO!!!” he cried out, flinging himself against the clear wall, hoping to shatter it, pounding on it with all his might, fists flailing...but to no avail. It was too thick. “YOU BASTARDS!! YOU SICK FUCKS!! LET ME THE FUCK OUT OF HERE RIGHT NOW!! LET ME OUT!! GODDAMN YOU!! GODDAMN YOU ALL!!!”

He kept up like this for a long while, yelling and pounding until he tired himself out, feeling weak and broken...and, worst of all, defeated. Tears started to stream from his eyes again, his ears folded back. He slumped to the ground, trying to figure a way out, hoping beyond hope that Harper would be able to rescue him or something.

“Please don’t cry, Raiyev,” came a familiar and soothing voice. Raiyev’s ears turned up, his head darting around to look for the source of the voice. And there—obviously having been there all this time—was Dr. Frost in the cell next to his, looking a little worse for wear.

“Oh, gods, Dr. Frost...” Raiyev began, seeing how hopeless she looked, trapped just as he was. He lowered his head, closing his eyes and sighing deeply. “I’m so stupid.”

“No...” Frost said consolingly. “What makes you say that?”

“I should have brought you with me. We should have escaped together. You shouldn’t be in this place.”

“I shouldn’t even be alive, actually,” Frost said seriously.

“What do you mean?” Raiyev said, staring at her curiously.

“I was captured almost immediately after we last parted, Raiyev,” she began. “You’re a viable match for them, but I’m too small and weak compared to them. They snatched me up as if I were a child. They were about to kill me, but...” She hesitated, as if still trying to believe herself what had actually happened.

“...But what?” Raiyev asked, fully intrigued.

“...But Thomas Ferai pleaded them not to,” she concluded.

“Thomas?!” Raiyev said incredulously. “OUR Thomas?” he questioned in total shock.

“I know,” the hybrid replied. “I was just as surprised as you. It seems like he’s been a spy for them or something. I don’t understand it myself.” She and Raiyev sat in silence a moment, thinking it over. “Regardless,” she said, breaking the silence, “he was

very adamant for my life to be spared...so they agreed, for whatever reason beyond me. If this is the life I'm supposed to continue living out, I'd rather they have killed me then and there, to be bluntly honest."

"Thomas wasn't the only one from EarthTech involved, it seems," Raiyev said.

"Oh? How did you find this out?" Frost said, perhaps a little colder than she should have, as if she was accusing Raiyev of withholding information.

"I only just found out from Dr. Harper," Raiyev explained, and after making sure the coast was clear, he went into a full recount of what had happened after he escaped, how he found and kidnapped Harper from the prison, and about everything she had told him about Dr. Paxton. When he mentioned Harper's current mission of retrieving information from this place, he had a sudden revelation.

"Oh, gods!" he exclaimed, slapping his forehead. "She's bound to be caught! Oh, I just knew I shouldn't have let her do this! They'll murder her!"

"Please!" Frost whispered. "Lower your voice! You don't want everyone to know she's here and to start looking for her, do you?" Raiyev looked scared, but kept silent and started to calm down. "If she was able to find out as much as she has already, then she seems to have some sleuthing skills beyond what I could ever do. Just because I was caught doesn't mean she will be, too, Raiyev. So please don't worry too much—have a little faith."

Raiyev nodded, then sat back against the wall of his cell, thinking. He stayed silent like this for so long that he nodded off. When he awoke, he found himself strapped again to that table he remembered once before, the bright white light buzzing overhead. "Oh, gods!" he thought out loud. "Not this again! Not this! I won't do it!" He did his best to struggle against the straps, feeling a heavy drowsiness start to overcome him again. He fought the urge to give in and sleep, but to no avail. He knew what was coming, and he feared for the lives of millions what he might do next. That fear was the last thing he felt before falling unconscious.

Part 19

Somewhere, in a relatively secluded area, a little girl and her mother were weeping at a graveyard. The funeral for the girl's father, who had died while away on business, had taken place only a few days before. No one could have forgotten what had killed him—it was the same thing that killed millions of other innocent people. That terribly monster, that unspeakable giant that appeared out of nowhere, ravaged and befouled an entire city in minutes, and then disappeared just as quickly as he had arrived.

No one could understand it; they could barely comprehend the amount of sick damage—all those lives and billions of dollars worth of damage—that had been laid upon that once shining city. The little girl tried to ignore the pressing heat of the day, cloudless and humid under the hot sun, as she paid her respects to her father, stolen away from her just before her 7th birthday.

Suddenly, though, she realized the heat dissipating quickly, replaced by a cool rush of air, and she looked up to see what was blocking out the sun. She screamed as a massive wall of blackness came rushing down on her, her voice cut off as she, her mother, and everything within a 1500-foot radius were all squished and compacted deep

into the ground, leaving them utterly crushed and very dead, the two fresh corpses mingling with the rotting ones.

The monster was back, and the nearby city scrambled in a wave of panic and sheer terror. He seemed so much larger this time around, they thought. Perhaps it was seeing him live instead of on a television screen, or perhaps he had actually grown. They didn't all know it, but the latter was certainly true, as Raiyev towered 5 miles high, the planet now even smaller to him than last time.

As he approached the downtown area of the metropolis, leaving a path of suburban destruction and desolation in his wake, he made a foreign growling and rumbling sound. The very magnitude of his voice caused glass to shatter and people to fall down in agony, hands over their ears as the weaker ones were deafened instantly. He grinned that evil grin again, and decided to have some fun in the suburbs before moving on to downtown.

Raising a hindpaw high up into the air, he brought it crashing down onto a block of houses, murring as he felt them all crush and compact under his mighty paw, his sheath twitching from the excitement of fresh death and annihilation. He continued stomping around deliberately, making a crude game of catching fleeing people and cars under his paws, trying to make sure every last square inch was smothered under his impossible weight. Just before he decided to move on, he added to the chaos by bringing his tail up high and smashing it down on a long segment of the city, buildings crumbling under his soft yet strong and determined tail. Some people, while not totally crushed by his tail, simply suffocated to death by the mass of soft fur smothering their entire bodies.

As the mega-sized raccoon continued to make his way to downtown, he randomly scooped up pawfuls of desperately fleeing people—some foolish enough to add their cars to the traffic jam already overtaking the city. He beheld each pawful for a moment before popping them into his muzzle, eating them messily. He laughed—a wretched sound to his captives—as they screamed and pleaded to him. Some even prayed to him, thinking this to be their new, wrathful god.

He didn't care, though; his mission was clear and singular in purpose: to lay this puny, pathetic city to absolute ruin. As he came across a monorail snaking along its elevated track (one of the city's pieces of pride and fame), he noticed his now full and throbbing erection, and got an idea for some foreplay. He easily tore the train from its track, lifting it high into the air, most of the passengers on board getting knocked out by the massive jolting and severe G-forces as Raiyev lifted the train to his aching cockhead.

With one paw holding his ominous rod steady (easily longer than any skyscraper), he shoved the long, thin train into his slit, groaning as his most sensitive flesh was tickled by the damaged metal structure, letting it soak in his building precum. He grinned once more and began again on his path to downtown, his massive cock bobbing and oozing with precum, each dollop crashing to the ground enough to fill several swimming pools and heavy enough to crack whatever pavement and buildings it landed on, drowning or crushing several unfortunate souls in just his pre alone.

As he reached downtown, several buildings had already toppled over, crumbling from just the vibrations his pounding footsteps caused alone. However, there were still many other buildings of greater structural integrity for him to play with. Still hungry, he tore a skyscraper from its foundation as easily as picking a flower from the ground. Peering inside, he grinned and laughed as he saw the pandemonium going on as people

were flung to and fro, against walls and shifting furniture, some already with several broken bones. He teasingly ran his long tongue along one side of the building, causing half of the glass panels to shatter against the pressure, the shards dancing on his tongue like salt crystals. Then, closing his lips around the opened bottom end, he sucked in as if drinking through a straw.

The gale-force winds that ensued tore each floor apart, bringing with it all the doomed people, furniture, and debris into his waiting maw. He stopped when his mouth filled with half the building's contents, chewing it all messily and swallowing voraciously before feeding again, draining the building of its "sustenance" before eating the shell of the structure itself, reveling in the metallic taste—a taste of a victorious destruction.

He repeated this process with a few more buildings before his eye wandered upon the largest building—easily the biggest building in the entire country, and another one of the city's gems. He could tell by its sheer size that the people greatly adored this one building, and he knew just what to do with such a structure.

This building would require the most utter humiliation and desecration of all. So he started by slamming his hindpaws down on either side of the structure, so that his dangling jewels were suspended a couple miles directly above the tip of the structure. Lowering himself, he squatted down over the building and, as gently as he could, rubbed his nutsack over the tip of the tower. The tall antenna broke off instantly, falling to the ground with a terrible shattering crash as the giant raccoon gently pleased himself on the building. The people trapped inside were fearing what might come next, hoping beyond hope that this was the worst that would be coming for them and this building.

Lifting himself up a short ways, he raised his tail to expose his tailhole and slowly lowered himself once more on the tall building, this time taking it up his own rear. He churred and murred in delight as his tailhole was filled with the building, sitting down all the way so that the entire structure was inside him, casting the people inside into a hot, smelly, and very frightening darkness. Raiyev could feel the metal twisting and bending as he lightly squeezed his ass muscles around it, the glass shattering to allow the people inside to be overcome with that ungodly, foul odor.

Sitting on the ground, Raiyev began jerking himself off, first with bare paws but then remembering that he could use the nearby buildings and people to help get him off. He started to bounce up and down lightly on the building, each thrust downward making the ground quake with the immeasurable weight and power of his rump, his tail swishing back and forth violently, making a wide arc of demolition. The people inside the monorail train stuffed in his cock quickly drowned in his building precum, the metallic structure still tickling him from within while thousands upon thousands of people were crushed against the outside of his unyielding member.

As Raiyev felt his climax building, he decided to finish his degradation of the skyscraper he had been sitting on, so he eased himself off the already ruined building, now radiating a strong foul odor that whatever survivors were left nearby coughed at, many people inside the building having already passed out from the intensity of the smell. He carefully reached behind him and yanked the building from its foundations—now even easier than before thanks to his weakening the structure—and brought it around to his throbbing, aching cock, so near his release.

Without hesitation, he speared the building with his gargantuan rod, thrusting ruthlessly into the building, loving how it fit his organ like a condom, precum helping wash out the innards as they were mercilessly pushed out the roof of the building, falling hundreds of feet to the ground below. Raiyev clenched his fist around the building's skeleton, thrusting vigorously in and out a few moments before falling on his back, growling out his orgasm.

Wave after wave of his hot, thick jism soared high into the air, arcing gracefully before landing with a vicious splatter, cracking the ground, drowning any remaining buildings, rubble, people...anything it landed on was ruined totally. The monorail train had shot out miles into the air from his titanic cock, completely coated and flowing with his seed, landing with a pool of cum on the giant's chest.

After resting a moment from his intense climax, Raiyev peeled the ruined building off his cock and tossed it aside like a used prophylactic. He grinned once again, and taking the time to stomp whatever parts of the city remained into absolute ruin, he wandered off into the distance, disappearing (once again) just as suddenly as he had appeared.

Raiyev awoke, back in his usual cell, as if coming out of a vivid nightmare. He remembered everything he had "dreamt," and realized what had happened again. He broke down immediately, crying and pounding his fist against the wall, feeling as if he had been severely beaten and broken.

"Why?" he strained to utter between sobs. "Why me? Why are you making me do these things? Please...just leave me alone..."

"Raiyev?" came a familiar and soothing voice. Raiyev peeked into the cell next to his, seeing Dr. Frost's concerned face, and cried even harder. "Raiyev, please..." Frost said in an attempt to aid and console her friend. "Please don't cry...it will be..." Her voice trailed off before she finished saying something inane.

"All right?" Raiyev said cynically, sniffing and wiping his eyes with shaky paws. "How the fuck do YOU know if it will be all right?!" he demanded. "Don't bullshit me!"

"I'm sorry," Frost replied. "I just...oh, Raiyev! I just want to help you, but I don't know how!" She sounded as if she might cry as well. "Can you please just tell me what happened?"

Raiyev stared at her, almost dumbstruck, as if wanting him to recount those horrors was the most painful and insensitive request he had ever heard. "How can you ask me to tell you...you have no idea..."

"Raiyev, what did they do to you?"

"They made me...they just made me..." he began sobbing heavily again, unable to bring himself to say it.

"They made you kill," came a third voice, heavy with despair. Raiyev and Frost jerked their heads towards the source of the sound, and saw Thomas standing right outside their cell doors, looking very serious. "They made you kill millions."

Part 20

Raiyev was nonplussed. His lab partner, one of his closest friends, was standing right outside his cell door—but not as Dr. Frost had stood, no. She was on Raiyev's side,

whereas Thomas stood a traitor. So many mixed emotions were going on inside the giant raccoon that, mixed with the stomach full of city he had somehow been coerced into ruining, he thought he was going to be sick.

"I know what you're thinking," Thomas began.

"YOU SON OF A BITCH!!" Raiyev roared, heaving himself against the unyielding glass door. "I should rip off your beak and break your wings! You traitorous prick!"

Thomas bowed his head, shutting his eyes and sighing deeply. "I know," he said weakly. "I don't blame you for being upset at me."

"Let me out of here! Let me out now, so I can throttle you, you demented fuck!" Raiyev kept on raving, his eyes red from so many tears and his heavy fists throbbing from pounding them on the door, trying in vain to break out.

"Would you please calm down?" Thomas asked a bit firmly. "I WILL let you out, but you have to keep quiet or else we'll all be caught! They'll kill us if they catch us!"

Raiyev panted heavily, still fuming, and started to weep again, his ears folded back. "But why, Thomas?" he queried in a much softer voice. "You're supposed to be my...friend..."

"I know," the bird sighed. "I never wanted you to get hurt, but I didn't have much choice."

"What the hell do you mean?" Dr. Frost asked, stepping into the conversation.

"Look, it's like this," Thomas began. "The humans, if you haven't figured out by now, are extremely powerful and far advanced in science than we are. They have technologies we couldn't even begin to dream of. But that doesn't stop them from still being a violent race. They threatened me, just as I'm sure they've threatened others, to comply."

"Comply with what?" the two prisoners asked in unison.

"It's a war," Thomas explained. "They're at war with some other planet, far from here. And they chose you, Raiyev, to be used as a weapon. I don't know why," he added, seeing and knowing the question Raiyev was about to ask. "I DO know, however, that Dr. Paxton had plenty of dealings with the humans for many years now. She's a secret agent for some government agency that deals directly with humans. She and others in the agency traded information for bits and pieces of the humans' advanced technology."

"What sort of information?" Frost asked.

"A lot of basic information about our planet, the creatures living here...but then a lot of specific information including employee profiles, psych evaluations, that sort of thing."

"How do you know all of this?" Raiyev asked.

"I had my part to play," Thomas said, looking at the floor again in shame.

"And you just went along with them," Raiyev spat in disgust.

"I told you," Thomas said defensively, "They're too powerful to deny. They threatened me. And they lied to me."

"I'm sure they did," the raccoon responded, a bit sarcastically.

"They did! I swear it! They said they'd only use you once...and then you'd be free to go. Geez, Raiyev, I had no idea it was going to go on like this. That's why I have

to get you two out of here now. No more time for questions. We have to get the hell out of this god-forsaken place.”

“Now you’re starting to talk a little bit of sense,” Frost said. “Well, what are you just standing around for? Let us out!”

Thomas nodded and revealed the same glass plate controller that Frost had used to free Raiyev once before. Pointing it at the glass doors, he pressed on the plate, and Frost and Raiyev found themselves free. However, unlike last time, it wasn’t a silent escape: all of the sudden, a loud alarm began going off. *Great*, Raiyev thought as he slipped into the corridor, *they rigged it this time*.

“C’mon!” Raiyev yelled and started to run in the direction he remembered going the first time, heading for the exit, before stopping to realize that Frost and Thomas couldn’t go nearly as fast as he could. He doubled back, running towards Frost and Thomas—and a few humans running after them. One of them had a gun that Raiyev recognized from his last escape, and just as he was snatching up Frost, he heard and saw the loud red blast hit Thomas, the bird being sent several feet before stopping, laying on his back and—Raiyev gulped—very dead.

He ran, cupping Dr. Frost in his paws like a protective shell, darting through the corridors (now smaller than he remembered them from last time). For whatever reason, no more gun blasts came his way. *Perhaps they don’t want to kill their weapon*, Raiyev thought in disgust. He could sense Frost’s fear as she huddled in his paw, and he held her as tightly as he dared, fearful of inadvertently hurting her, but even more fearful of the humans getting to her.

In his panic, Raiyev trying to remember the way out, made some wrong turns and, reaching what he thought were the doors to the exit, he barreled into a room that he had only seen from one other perspective. In the middle of the room lay a huge metal table with wrist and ankle restraints. Above it, a large bright white lamp. Raiyev recognized it immediately—it was the room of his nightmares, the room where he was taken right before he became a monster for a short amount of time. *Not just a monster*, he realized, *a weapon. I am a weapon*.

He stood stunned for a moment, taking in everything he could see in the room. Right behind the head of the table was a large ring made up of electronics and stone. It looked rather crude, but Raiyev could only guess that it was how they transported him to the other planet. *That poor planet*, he thought, *and all those innocent people. And these humans have the gall to drag me into their affairs, their war. Why me? Well, I refuse. I won’t fight for them anymore*.

Raiyev was resolute in not wanting to have any more part of this horrible war, but deep down he wondered how well he could withstand whatever influence the humans used to control him in the past. The sound of approaching voices jarred him from his thoughts, and he ran back out, twisting back around corridors, passing humans along the way.

He had to jump and dodge a lot of attacks, his paws still cupped around Frost, and nearly fell more than once. All he could think about was escaping—he didn’t care how many humans were after him or how powerful they were. He just needed that exit. Turning down a vaguely familiar corridor—it could have been from anywhere—he saw the blessed daylight just ahead, peering in from windows on the double doors to his freedom. With a final mad dash, blindsiding a couple more humans, he was safely

outside. He kept running for many more minutes until he thought he was well hidden in the forest. Finally, he opened his paws to peer down at Frost, hoping she was all right. She was very shaken, like Harper had been when he kidnapped her from the prison, but she seemed unharmed physically. *Thank goodness*, Raiyev thought.

“Are we out?” Frost asked, looking up. “Are we safe?”

“For now,” Raiyev replied.

Part 21

Raiyev plopped himself down on the ground, his large frame making a loud THUD as it hit the soft grass, and he began to weep gently, small streams of tears rolling cautiously down his fuzzy masked face. Dr. Frost, still in Raiyev’s paws, looked up in earnest at her large colleague—her friend, her savior from that wretched prison.

Well, Thomas did his part, too, Frost thought to herself. *Oh, Thomas! Damn you, you fool!* She started weeping as well, her tears a silent elegy for their fallen coworker. Raiyev felt it, too: Even though Thomas had betrayed them and helped get them into this predicament, he at least tried to make amends at the end. He at least freed them. And all this mess...this war the humans were waging with that other planet...and he was their weapon. How many other “weapons” of this sort did they have? It was all too much, and the giant raccoon couldn’t help but feel as if he wanted simply to stay here, in this forest, for the rest of his days.

After a few minutes of sitting and weeping in silence, the bowed head of Raiyev suddenly jerked up, as if remembering something suddenly. “They’re going to be coming after us!” he hissed down at the hybrid in his paws. “We need to split up. We need to just...go our separate ways. At least if they catch one of us, there’s still hope for the other one.”

“Please, no!” Frost pleaded. “You’re so big now—you can make good time running away. Take me with you. Keep me safe, please!” Frost looked almost terrified at the thought of being abandoned here in this forest.

“I can’t,” Raiyev replied. “They’re after me primarily,” he explained. “You’re not nearly as important to them...they won’t search you out if they find me.” He got up and started in the direction of the dirt road where Brad had brought him. *Brad...* Raiyev thought sadly. It felt like an eternity since Raiyev had seen him. He wished so much that he could just go back to being in his fiancée’s arms. He wanted to wake up from this nightmare.

Time seemed to disappear from Raiyev’s mind as he continued to think about Brad, wondering what had ever become of him. Before he knew it, he had already carried Frost to the dirt road. He set her down carefully and pointed down the road with a huge digit. “The main road is just down that way,” he explained. “Please go...take care of yourself. Get away from all this. I’m sure we’ll figure out something in the end, and I’ll be okay. Just you wait and see.” He tried to sound as convincing as he could, even though his heart told him otherwise.

Frost hesitated, then after a long, heartfelt hug around his leg, leaving some of her tears in his soft fur, she turned and started off down the road. To stay safe, Raiyev ducked behind a line of trees and watched her until he couldn’t see her anymore.

He breathed a deep sigh and started off deeper into the forest once again, not really sure where he could go this time. Thomas was dead. Harper had gone to find out what she could...Harper! He suddenly remembered his agreement to meet her where she left him. He wasn't too far, and he started jogging towards their parting place hopefully. Maybe he could meet her there. Maybe she would be there already.

Raiyev came to the place where he had sent her off towards the facility, but he didn't see any signs of Harper or anyone else. The only tracks around were at least a day old—most likely from their previous visit to that spot. Raiyev sighed again and sat down, sniffing a bit at the air, hoping to catch some sign somewhere. It was useless, though, as all he was able to smell was the forest itself.

It's not too bad here, Raiyev thought. *Maybe I should just stay here, in this forest. No, that would be still far too close...but maybe I can find someplace natural like this far away. Someplace where they would never find me. And then I could just relax there...with nature...* He found himself digging his paws a bit into the soft earth, almost curious at the feel and texture of it against his bare paws. That feeling he had been harboring for so long began welling up inside again—the feeling of being at ease in nature, away from the science he had long held dear. He almost felt like some otherworldly force was drawing him to that sense of natural living.

After a while of just sitting and thinking, relaxing under the cool shade of the forest trees, Raiyev finally got up, stooping so as not to reveal himself above the tops of shorter trees (being a good 40 feet tall or so now), and started making his way as far away from the facility as possible. He didn't get far, however, when he heard the rustling of footsteps not too far away behind him. His hopes were up again that it might be Harper at last, but he suddenly cautioned himself that it might be another detestable human out to capture him again.

He turned around suddenly, and gasped as he saw the image of Brad standing there, looking very disheveled, grimacing up at Raiyev, almost as if he didn't recognize him.

"B-Brad?" Raiyev asked, tears starting to well up in his eyes at the mere sight of his lover. "Is that really you? Oh, my god, what happened to you? What did they do to you?" He started to approach the much smaller raccoon when Brad suddenly pulled out a pistol and aimed it squarely at Raiyev's face, making Raiyev stop in his tracks.

"You hurt me," Brad managed to squeak out in a dry, raspy voice. He was shaking, the gun wobbling in his grip.

"What?" Raiyev asked, totally perplexed. "What are you talking about? What did I do, hon?" But Brad just turned around and ran away back towards the clearing. Raiyev stood for only a second, still confused, and then starting chasing after his mate. "Please, Brad!" he cried out, louder than perhaps he should have. "Please stop! Wait! Talk to me!"

In no time, the two raccoons were standing back in that clearing where they had made love, a time that felt so distant to Raiyev now. Brad turned back around and pointed the gun at Raiyev once more.

"You hurt me!" Brad repeated, yelling it out this time, crying in his rage. "All of this! It's all your fault!"

"Brad, please!" Raiyev struggled, trying to find the right words. "Please, listen to yourself! This isn't you! This isn't right! You don't—" Raiyev stopped, thinking a

moment. And he realized: If the humans could make him terrorize an entire city, they could easily take over the thoughts of his mate. “Brad, you have to listen to me! Listen! They’re controlling your thoughts! They’ve brainwashed you! You have to fight it, please!”

Just then, an entire squad of humans dashed out into the clearing, surrounding them quickly, their own guns trained on both Brad and Raiyev. “Lower your weapon!” Raiyev heard one of them call, and saw it was a human pointing a gun at Brad. It was the first time he had ever heard any of them speak in their own language, and it sounded odd—the voice sounded far too unnatural.

“Don’t hurt him!” Raiyev said braver than he should have. “Don’t you lay a finger on him, you bastards! You leave him alone!”

“Why did you let them do this?” Brad cried to Raiyev. “See what they’ve done to me? Can you see what you let them do?!”

“No, Brad!” Raiyev turned to his lover once again. “Please, stop this! Snap out of it! I know you can fight it, please, you just have to try!”

“Lower your weapon or else we’ll have to shoot!” the human said again.

“Why couldn’t you save me...” Brad cried, then turned the gun on himself, placing the barrel in his muzzle.

“No...” the giant raccoon strained, uttering only a whisper, but it was too late.

Raiyev would never forget how simply poetic it looked, Brad’s body arcing backwards after pulling the trigger. He seemed to fly gracefully through the air, suspended in time. The blood didn’t even register in Raiyev’s eyes—only the beautiful body of his fiancée, his mate, his lover. Laying sprawled on the ground, Raiyev tried to imagine that Brad was only sleeping, just like he saw so many mornings of waking up next to him in bed. But he was gone this time...gone for good.

Part 22

It wasn’t until the humans started making their move on the giant raccoon that Raiyev’s thoughts came back down to the severity of the situation. Brad was gone...gone! He was dead, and it was the fault of these damnable intruders into his life and his world.

Blinded by rage and tears, Raiyev starting attacking the humans, his much larger body fueling his strength as he knocked out one after another with fists as big as beach balls, the sheer strength of each pounding wallop sending each human flying several feet through the air before landing, unconscious, on the soft earth. There were inevitably too many humans surrounding him, though, and he felt that faintly familiar prick on his neck, and he fell into darkness.

When Raiyev awoke, he found himself strolling in some strange and foreign landscape. It seemed like a dry, barren desert, with hard and brittle earth that cracked beneath his feet. The sun was shining fiercely in his eyes as it was setting on the horizon, the golden-orange glow hurting his vision. He had no idea where he was headed, either—only that his feet seemed to be guiding him of their own accord. He tried to stop himself, but found it extremely difficult, as if he were in a dream, his body not wanting to respond to his will.

As he started to panic at the thought of his body being controlled like a marionette by some outside force, he cast his eyes around—the only part of his body that was fully under his own control. Then he saw it: glancing downward, there was an assortment of something that looked like tiny glittering pebbles or seeds cast all around the ground. There were faint patches of green as well, looking like tiny patches of moss.

It took a moment for Raiyev to register that these tiny pebbles were actually buildings, and those patches of moss were clusters of trees. It looked like a much bigger city this time, until some part of Raiyev was able to figure that it was really two sister cities overlapping each other's borders. They had done it again—the humans were using him again as their war machine. But why could he sense it this time? Why was he so aware of it?

His panic rose as he watched in horror, his body lifting his tremendous leg, that titanic hindpaw hovering over some part of the nearest city's edge, casting it in a deadly shadow before it came smashing back down with great force, the ground cracking as scores of buildings flattened instantly, snuffing out hundreds of these foreigner's lives in the blink of an eye. The paw rested there a moment before his other hindpaw lifted and swung forward over another section of the suburbs.

No... Raiyev thought. Not this time. Please...not again... You won't use me again! He struggled with all his might to overcome whatever force was controlling his bodily movements, strained to force his own will into dominance. He watched as his leg slowly started to pull back towards him, away from the cowering people beneath its shadow. *Yes!* he thought. *Come on! No more destruction today...*

But it was no good. Just as he started to regain control of his leg, it jerked forward again, much more powerfully and swiftly, and the struggle to win control caused Raiyev to topple over sideways, landing with a planet-shaking THUD that completely obliterated about a sixth of one of the cities. *No!* Raiyev tried to scream, only hearing his own thoughts instead. The twenty-mile-tall raccoon started to tear up as Raiyev felt beaten, feeling himself slip even further away from control over himself.

These stupid people! he thought as he started to rise again. *It's all their fault! Why did they have to war with these humans? Why couldn't they just give in?* He barely noticed that he started stomping the city in earnest now as he ranted inside his own head, causing unfathomable panic and bedlam to unleash down below in the city. *If they just gave in, I wouldn't have to be here! I wouldn't have to do this, and I'd still have Brad!* Massive tears, each big enough to fill fifteen swimming pools, streaked down Raiyev's cheek as he relented, giving himself up to the forces controlling his body.

He watched as his body easily smashed through the first city, only vaguely aware of it all. He barely registered how the houses felt like grains of sand to him, the larger buildings like small pebbles that flattened so easily beneath his incalculable weight. The people themselves were so insignificantly tiny that he couldn't even feel them had he been in total control of his body.

Far below, the people were doing their best to escape, though many resigning to their inevitable fate, accepting the fact that there would be no possible escape for them. The military had gathered, still trying in vain to battle the towering titan, whose body soared up past the clouds. Their guns might as well have been loaded with pudding for all the good they were accomplishing. The larger artillery only registered as a faint tickle for the giant, not reaching up farther than his ankles. The military only stopped fighting

when they were helplessly crushed under another mighty stomp of the raccoon giant's hindpaw, compacting them and everything else in a three-mile radius deep into the earth, leaving a crater hundreds of feet deep.

As Raiyev moved on to the second city (already in an uproar of panic), that familiar twitching from his sheath grew until he was sporting the biggest raging hard-on the planet had ever seen (or likely would ever see again). The two-and-a-half-mile-long cock began oozing with huge dollops of precum that rained down over the city, crashing heavily directly into the downtown area, causing buildings to crumble, the rubble soaking in his thick, warm, sticky jism. Anyone who wasn't crushed to death from the impact of the fluid drowned almost instantly thereafter.

But before Raiyev could fully play, he had to take care of business. Swishing his enormous tail violently, he wiped out humongous chunks of the city almost instantly, murring and churring in delight at how easily he could crush this puny city simply with his thick, soft tail. The part of Raiyev that had been trying so desperately to stave this off just a few minutes ago was now so subdued that an overwhelming sense of erotic satisfaction came from destroying these cities. Every house crushed, every person stomped and broken, left Raiyev feeling better and better, his massive member throbbing almost painfully in need.

The remains of the city died quickly under Raiyev's incomprehensibly brutal attack. It was just all too easy for the looming giant to snuff out in seconds what took these people decades to build. When all was said and done, the great ruins of the twin cities—one of the planet's most prized localities—lay like a vast, barren gravesite, small fires still burning here and there. And Raiyev finally turned his attention to his aching cock.

Lowering himself cautiously to the ground, he rubbed his long member atop the ruins of one of the cities' downtown area, ploughing through it like a greatly oversized battering ram. But this wasn't enough for the giant, so pulling his dick up again, he pointed it directly down at the ground and lowered himself with a moan, murring in delight as the planet's crust shattered and gave way for his unstoppable monster cock. Pile-driving his rod into the planet, Raiyev groaned in lust as he hilted in the ground, then, paws spread out as if trying to hug the entire planet, he started humping the earth.

It was an amazing sensation, the jagged crust around his cock a delightful sensation, and he simply kept humping harder and faster, lowering his muzzle to a part of the ruined cities to lap up some of the rubble, enjoying the taste of adding insult to injury for these tiny people and their proud cities. His great tail swishing above him like a victory flag, Raiyev continued to hump and pound the planet with his rod, the ground shaking with each powerful thrust of his hips, countless gallons of precum leaking into his self-made dildo.

The giant raccoon felt his climax building, and just as he felt himself ready to explode, he pulled back out of the deep hole he made and pointed his cock at the cities themselves, roaring in delight as his organ exploded, shooting wave after wave of his thick cum over the cities, drowning what was left of them in a lake of his messy seed.

His orgasm lasted several long, glorious minutes, and he simply stayed there, his back arched, supporting his torso's weight with a single massive paw on the ground. After his cock finally shrank back into his massive, protective pouch, he rose again to his feet and strolled away, his mission complete.

Part 23

Raiyev awoke with a start, back in that cell that had now become all too familiar for him. He remembered more clearly this time what he had done to those poor cities. Their defense was practically non-existent against him, the raccoon recalled. He got up from the stone bed on which he was laying and, with a heavy sigh, leaned against the cool clear wall facing the corridor.

He had been there too many times now. Well, really, *once* was too many, Raiyev told himself. His attitude towards it all now was beyond distress. He didn't feel like crying or yelling at anyone. All he could feel now was a resolve to escape by any means necessary. He placed his paws on the hard, clear wall, feeling it, trying to understand a way he could escape from it. He ran his fingers all along the edges, trying to find some sort of groove, but it melded seamlessly into the adjacent walls.

Pounding on it before didn't help, but maybe he could break through it somehow now. Raiyev noticed, looking around, that the cell looked considerably smaller than last time he was in it. He reckoned he must have been a little over fifty feet tall now. Pressing himself up against the concrete wall opposite the clear wall from which he had exited twice before, he prepared himself for his new drastic plan.

Raiyev breathed deep a few times, his eyes closed as he gathered his strength. Snapping his eyes open, he stared menacingly at the clear wall for a split second before he broke into a dash across the small cell, slamming his entire body into the wall. He bounced back hard and to the side, ramming backwards into the concrete wall along which the stone bed rested.

He shook his head, his body throbbing in pain all over, bruises forming quickly beneath his ruffled fur. Moaning, he looked up at the wall against which he had just slammed with all his might. Nothing. Not even a scratch or dent of any sign. Raiyev moaned harder, bringing a paw up to massage his forehead.

He sneezed as a sudden amount of dust fell in front of his face, and he looked curiously at the paw he had just raised. It was covered in dust, and looking behind him, Raiyev saw the source: the concrete wall behind him had a few large dents in it, as if someone had taken a few good swings of the sledgehammer to the wall.

The bounce back, Raiyev realized, caused the concrete wall to get damaged. *Well, if that's the case*, Raiyev thought, *then...* He got up, surveying now the concrete wall as he had done the clear wall next to it. It wouldn't do good to go ramming through there, he realized, as the stone bed was blocking the way. However, the other concrete wall at the back of the cell had a clear path to it.

Raiyev rested a minute, his body still aching all over, before he got up in preparation to repeat his tactic to the concrete wall. Backing himself up against the clear exit wall, Raiyev once again summoned every ounce of strength in his massive body, and took a full charge at the concrete wall in front of him. In a shower of dust and rocky debris, Raiyev successfully broke through to the other side.

Just as he was dusting himself off and looking around at the new corridor he had broken into, a loud, raucous alarm sounded. Knowing that sound could only be bad, Raiyev ran off to his left, trying desperately to find a way similar to the path he had found to escape before. The corridor didn't lead where he thought it might have, though, and

Raiyev spent many panicky minutes darting around corners and down long hallways, his back stooped most of the time to avoid hitting the ceiling.

Left, right, right, left, straight, right, straight, left... The entire place felt like a maze, and as the second ticked by, he grew more and more anxious as to when he would run into more of those nasty humans. No one seemed to turn up, however, and he blessed his luck for a while until he figured ten minutes had passed (though it felt like hours), and he was still trapped in the maze of whatever place this was. He paused a moment at another intersection, to catch his breath, the alarm ringing in his ears, and he glanced around quickly.

Still, no one pursued him. He felt odd—more odd and out of place than he had before, as if they were just letting him go and not pursuing him on purpose. He couldn't explain it to himself, he couldn't figure why they'd risk losing their precious weapon now, but he didn't want to risk sticking around to find out.

At long last, he found a hallway that looked familiar enough to him that he dashed around the place almost on instinct. Before he even was aware of it, he had burst through the doors to the outside, the sun still shining brightly. The beautiful clearing and forest beyond still looked out of place directly outside the facility from which he had escaped, as if its natural beauty under the warm sun was mocking the tribulations he had just been through.

Nevertheless, he dashed through the clearing, not entirely sure where to head, until he spotted a figure running out from the line of trees at the other end. He froze a moment, afraid it would be another human, but saw to his great relief that it was Dr. Harper. She ran up to him, calling out to him as he just stood there in the middle of the clearing.

"Harper!" Raiyev cried back to the small rabbit, starting to run towards her. "Come on, we should get out of here, quick!"

"Raiyev, wait!" she said as they got so close to each other that they risked running into one another. "Wait! I don't think you have to run this time!"

"Wha...what?" Raiyev panted, holding a stitch in his side as he sat down in the tall heather, his massive body still looming over the diminutive rabbit. "What do you mean?"

Harper opened her mouth to speak, but at that moment, Raiyev cried out loudly in pain, his head pounding suddenly, and he leaned forward, his head in his heavy paws, rocking back and forth a bit. In a few seconds, something tiny had drilled itself out of the middle of Raiyev's forehead and dropped into the grass between his legs.

Rubbing his forehead and wiping away a small trickle of blood, the big raccoon picked up the tiny black and red object that had just exited his skull. Wiping it clean a bit on his leg, he held it up close to his large eyes, examining it carefully.

"Is this...?" he said slowly, almost more to himself than to Harper. "Is this a *camera*?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Harper sighed heavily. "That's part of what I have to tell you," she said as Raiyev looked at her. She was about to start again when there was a loud rumbling noise and the earth started shaking beneath them. Raiyev looked around, panicked, and suddenly saw the mountainside from which he had exited a moment ago start to rip itself from the earth.

Something very large started rising from the mountainside, and Raiyev looked in slack-jawed awe as a deep, steely-blue metal surface exposed itself from beneath the mountainside, rock and grass still covering that part of it that was concealed by the face of the mountain. Higher and higher rose the facility in which Raiyev had been imprisoned, propelled upward by some unseen force. As it rose, Raiyev was able to take in just how massive the place really was, and saw for himself why the humans needed an entire mountain to conceal them.

It rose a few hundred feet into the air, hovering over them before it disappeared in a flash, leaving the sky empty save for a few high-floating clouds. The mountain now looked more like the remains of a volcano whose side had crumbled during a particularly violent blast, and Raiyev simply stared at it for a few minutes before Harper's voice drew his attention back to her.

"They've finally gone," she said. "And now I can tell you what this was really all about."

Part 24

"Tell me what this is about?" Raiyev asked incredulously. "What, you mean you knew all this time?" he asked firmly.

"No, no, no!" Harper said quickly. "I was able to find out what the humans were doing here, like you had sent me to do, remember?"

"Oh," Raiyev said, remembering his last meeting with Harper. "Yeah...I'm sorry..."

"It's okay," Harper said consolingly. "You've been through a hell of a lot. More than anyone should be put through, honestly."

"You're telling me," Raiyev huffed. "Anyways...I feel bad about sending you in. Thomas told me after I saw you last that it was about some political war with another planet, and that I was their weapon."

"Yes, Thomas *would* say that. That's what he had come to understand, at least. I was able to find some sort of archives—their technology is way ahead of ours, of course, so the way they store data is really different. Anyways, from what I could see, they *were* using you as a war machine...which is very sick and twisted and *wrong*..." she added in an undertone. "But while the war was real, it was only part of the equation. Almost like a red herring, but it did have its own innate purposes."

"What do you mean?" Raiyev asked.

"Well, that camera you're holding in your paw...it's...it...oh, Raiyev! It's for a television show!"

Raiyev sat, staring at Harper in total disbelief. "You're joking," he said accusingly.

"I wish I was," she pleaded. "You know how we have reality shows here, right?"

Raiyev nodded, frowning at Harper.

"Well, the humans do, too, only for them, it's gotten so bad in their society that they turn the news and politics into sick entertainment. They use reality shows to choose presidents and CEOs and other leaders. War to them is just like some fictional movie, even if they're the ones waging it! And your life as you've been seeing it since this

whole mess began has been documented and aired as pure entertainment for the humans back on their home planet.”

Raiyev sat still and silent, the shock of all this hitting him like a freight train. “I’m a fucking show...” he sighed after a moment.

“It’s horrible, I know...” Harper started, patting his arm.

“How?” he demanded, glowering at Harper, as if it was still somehow her fault.

“It’s a bit complicated,” she began, looking up at Raiyev with pleading eyes, but his stare penetrated her, and she continued, “but a lot of our people were involved. First there was Toni Hawthorne.”

“Toni?” Raiyev asked incredulously. “But she seemed so nice...but then...she *did* try to warn me of something...” It felt like ages ago that he had that brief and interrupted meeting with Toni after work.

“I know,” Harper said, “but the humans have plenty of ways to make people do what they want, as I’m sure you’ve learned by now. Remember bumping into her that day, making her papers fall?”

Raiyev strained a moment to recall fuzzy memories. “Yeah...” he said slowly. “Yeah, I think I do. I helped her pick them all up.”

“Exactly. Those papers were coated with a certain solution that worked its way into your body. When that solution was mixed with the Gigantism extract, it caused you to stay the same size as the rest of us and this planet shrunk. Bilicek, the security guard, was paid off well to simply radio to Toni when you had arrived to work that day, so Toni could make sure to run into you and spill the papers.

“Dr. Paxton was a key link between the humans and earth. She worked for—“

“For a secret government organization,” Raiyev interrupted. “Yeah, Thomas laid me privy to that one. She sold information to the humans for access to their technology. Christ, it’s a fucking conspiracy! And Thomas was in on it, too!”

“Yes, Thomas was supposed to make sure that our lab got the ball rolling with the Gigantism idea.”

“Lovely,” Raiyev spat sarcastically. “Anyone else?”

Harper cast a nervous look at the ground. “Well, they had to get that camera into your head that day the planet started to shrink...” she said, her voice trembling a bit. “But it’s not clear...it’s hard to say for sure, because so many of the rest of us were just pawns, Raiyev, pawns that fell right into place as our profiles showed the humans we would!”

“Who?” Raiyev demanded.

“I’m saying, it’s not clear—I could have misread—“

“Who?” Raiyev repeated louder, though he already could tell who.

“Please, Raiyev,” Harper said, looking up into his eyes with fear. “I can’t—“

“SAY THE NAME!” he roared, grabbing her, his fist encompassing her tiny body.

“BRAD!” she cried out, sobbing. “Brad might have...been...”

“No,” Raiyev muttered firmly, releasing his grip on her. “I won’t believe it. I refuse to. He wouldn’t. Not ever, you hear me? Not EVER!”

“Oh, Raiyev...I don’t want it to be true...I don’t want any of this to be true...and it’s hard to tell anymore what is and what isn’t...” Harper leaned over the raccoon’s

large leg and cried. Raiyev, too, had tears carefully caressing his cheeks. He didn't care what Harper ever said—he would never believe that Brad had betrayed him.

“Why me?” he croaked after a minute.

“It was nothing personal,” Harper explained. “They just went through our profiles, looking for the best candidate—the one who would do the best job as both their war machine and their drama queen for their show. But it's over now, Raiyev, and they've gone.”

“It's over?” he asked, not knowing whether or not he could believe it.

“They've left. The war is over. And you're shrinking.”

“What?!” Raiyev said, looking suddenly at Harper with sharp eyes. But as he looked around, he could see everything getting slowly bigger around him.

“They're done with us, Raiyev. They're returning Earth back to its normal size. They only started shrinking it to serve as a warning to us not to mess with them, just as they were shrinking that other planet they made you attack.”

Raiyev looked down at the small camera still in his paw, surveying it as he took in everything that had just happened to him. He gave an odd sort of laugh; it almost felt forced, but not really. He felt broken and betrayed. But there was something more... He couldn't exactly put his finger on it—it felt surreal, like something out of a dream, but at the same time it felt so real...so real... Perhaps the best way to describe it would be to say that it was otherworldly.

-end-