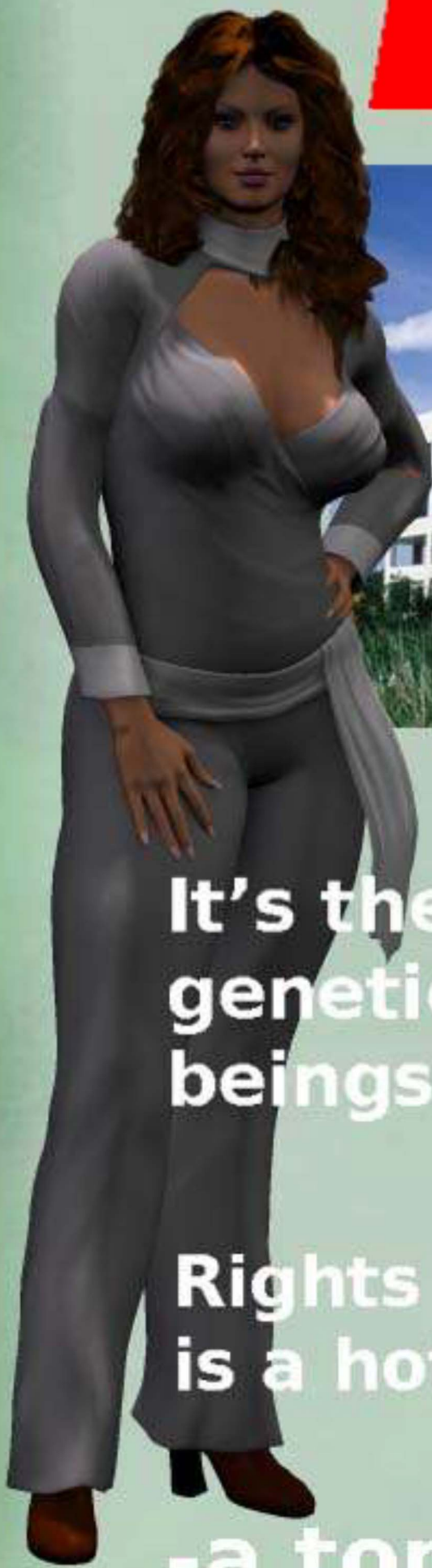


Animals



It's the near future and
genetically engineered
beings are a fact.

Rights for those beings
is a hot topic-

-a topic some would die for.

by
MD Bruffy



Chapter One

If anyone knew the Compton Research Center even existed, all they knew was that it was located somewhere in Virginia. There were sciences being developed there that were so new and so controversial, that the general public didn't even know they existed outside of science-fiction stories.

One of the staff- Dr. Sarah Jackson- was head of the Department of Genetic Research. In her late twenties, with rich brown hair down to her shoulders, the grey pantsuit she wore fit to perfection beneath her lab coat as she began her day. She was just approaching her office when her fiancé, Dr. Michael Andrews, Head of the Cloning Department, called to her. "Sarah!"

She turned at her door and smiled. "Hey!"

The kiss they shared was short, yet filled with promise. He watched as she unlocked her door. "I assume, since you're just getting here, that you haven't seen your morning e-mails yet?"

She stepped inside as she replied. "You assume right. Why?"

The one man in her life sighed. "They're going ahead with the mind transfer experiment. The Board gave their approval last night."

Sarah turned on the lights and started toward her desk. "And?"

"They want to use your leopard as one of the subjects."

She looked up from her computer console. "No one can even touch Cassandra without my approval."

Mike shook his head. "I'm afraid they can. Despite the fact that you wrote her genetic codes, you don't own her. She's C.R.C. property."

The growing anger in Sarah's face was clear as she pushed past him and out of the office. "We'll see about that."

She didn't stop or slow her pace till she reached the office of the C.R.C. director- Dr. David Stone. He looked up from his desk as she knocked and entered. "Come in, Sarah. I've been expecting you."

"How could you do this, David? Allow access to Cassandra without my approval? She's an intelligent being- "

"This isn't England, Sarah," Stone stated as he came around his desk. "In this country, genetically engineered beings like Cassandra are the property of the C.R.C. She has no rights."

"You Bastard!" she swore. "You didn't even *try* to stand up for her!"

"Sarah, I want you to take a few days- "

She slapped him- Hard. *"You go to hell!"* She then stormed from the office, switching to a form of communications she never told anyone about- a mental link she only shared with one other person. 'Cassie, are you in our lab?'

'Yes, but they're coming for me soon.'

'I'm on my way. Tell the others what's going on. Tell them I may be asking for their help.'

'All right.'

*

Sarah reached the genetics lab and paused. It was one of the most modern labs in the C.R.C.- in the country in fact- and there were four large cages set along one wall, each with a single occupant- a single genetically engineered occupant. Ignoring the rest of the room, she went straight to those cages and began unlocking every door as she spoke. "When each of you were created, I honestly thought the C.R.C. would be

the safest place for you.” She came to Cassandra’s cage and paused. “I was wrong.”

She opened that door as Ann left her cage on six spider-influenced legs. “Is this mind-transfer thing really as dangerous as it sounds?” she asked.

“Yes,” Sarah replied as she faced all four of them. “Any way it goes, she’d never be the same. It could even kill her.”

With each step clip-clopping against the linoleum floor, Cindy met Sarah’s gaze as her tail whipped about behind her. “So what will you do?”

Sarah took Cassandra’s hand as she replied. “I’ve got to get her to England. Once there, the C.R.C. can’t touch her.”

The centaur sighed. “I’ve dreamed of going to England.” It was true. Cindy’d watched every video the C.R.C.’s library had as well as every program she could catch on TV. She knew English history better than American.

Rachel suddenly hissed as the lab lights shone down on her diamond backed body and her tail rattled loud as Sarah turned to see two men come into the lab- both with guns in hand.

The doctor’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not C.R.C. security. Who the hell are you?”

“That’s not important,” the leader of the two said. He took aim between Sarah’s eyes. “All you need to know is that we’re here for the leopard. You can either stand aside and live- or die now.”

Rachel hissed again and her tail rattle shook faster and louder. The lead gunman turned toward her- and then backed up a step in shock. In the same instant, Ann pointed her hand and an opening in her wrist allowed webbing to shoot forth- covering both the man’s gun and his hand. “Let go!” he shouted. “Let go of me you freak!”

Ann's eyes narrowed as Cindy spoke. "You shouldn't have called her that."

Cassandra nodded. "She hates that."

The half-human spider hissed and pulled, yanking the gunman off his feet and slamming him against a wall- where he stayed, stuck there by her webbing. The other gunman took aim on Ann even as Rachel hissed and struck- sinking her three inch fangs into his arm.

Sarah could only watch as Ann ripped the leader's clothes off, webbed over his chest, arms and legs and then mated with him. The man screamed in pain and horror as her body took him in-and then crushed his manhood. "She has all the instincts of a Back Widow Spider," Sarah told him. "Which means, after sex, she kills her mate- and then eats him."

The leader's horrified gaze traveled from one to the other even as his own blood ran down the wall he was webbed to. "Might be tasty after he's hung a while," Ann noted as his partner collapsed from Rachel's venom.

Both females then turned to Sarah as Cindy asked, "Now, what?"

"Looks like we're *all* going to England- somehow." The doctor shook her head and sighed. "First thing we have to do is get out of here before Stone orders a lock down."

Taking Cassandra's hand, she began leading the four toward the lab's double doors- only to have Cassandra stop. "There are people coming."

"This time it'll be C.R.C. security," Cindy guessed.

A few moments later, she was proven right when three C.R.C. security guards came into the lab, allowing the five- who had hidden on each side of the lab doors- to slip out before the guards realized what had happened.

*

Sarah led her small band of escapees down a corridor, stopping at every intersection and looking in every direction before letting the girls come- making sure no one saw them. Finally, the five reached a glass door and she pushed it open- allowing the others to step outside the C.R.C. for the first time in their lives. “We’re on the parking lot behind the complex,” Sarah told them as she looked around. “I’m afraid there’s no time for a tour. We- “

“Sarah?” She turned to see Michael coming toward them. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Getting them out of Stone’s hands,” She replied. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought you’d pull something like this,” the man said. “But I thought you’d only be after Cassandra.” He waved a hand toward his sports car parked nearby. “We’ll never get Cindy and Ann in there.”

“We were headed for the motor pool,” Sarah told him. She gathered the others and turned away from the car. “We’ll take one of the vans.”

Once they reached the motor pool, it didn’t take long to find a van and remove the backseat- creating more than enough room for Ann and Cindy.

Alone in the motor pool’s supervisor’s office where he supposedly went to look for the keys, Michael took his cell phone from his pocket and activated a number. “It’s me. There’s been a change of plans. Look, I know you want Cassandra and you’ll get her. Just tell the rest of your men to stand by.” He then returned the phone to his pocket, took the keys off of a nearby rack and re-joined the others. “Where to?” he asked as he climbed into the driver’s seat and the others piled in.

“We have to get to an airport with direct flights to London,” Sarah told him as she settled into the passenger seat.

“That would be Dulles Airport outside Washington,” Michael told her. “That’s a long way- with lots of chance to get caught.”

She looked over and met his gaze. “You have any better idea?”

He shook his head and soon had the van in gear.

*

Chapter Two

Director Stone and an aide watched as techs removed the lead gunman from the wall and Ann's webbing. If Stone's face showed any emotion at all, it was pride- an owner's pride. "Her instincts were perfect." He nodded toward the body that had been Rachel's sparring partner. "Their reactions, their tactics...phenomenal."

Nik Baxter, Stone's aide, glanced around the lab, taking in the four open cells. "But where are they now?"

"With Sarah helping them, I'd lay odds they're not even on the grounds."

Before Nik could reply, the tech that had been working on Ann's matting partner spoke up. "Dr. Stone? We still have brainwave activity in this one." He nodded toward Rachel's adversary. "But that one's dead."

Stone indicated the living gunman as he spoke. "Cut him out of that webbing and take him to Lab Five for the mind transfer."

"Yes, sir."

Nik eyed his boss carefully. "Sir, that takes two subjects- and one of them just escaped."

"I'm aware of that, Nik. Prepare War Hound for our friend to occupy."

Nik stared at the older man in shock. "Sir, War Hound was a failure. He's kept in a padded cell- he's insane."

The Director met his gaze and his n left no room for argument. "Not for much longer."

*

The van drive would be one Sarah would never forget. While Cassandra, Ann, Rachel and Cindy had all had access to videos, TV and so

on, this was the first time any of them had been allowed outside the C.R.C. and their questions and comments were many.

They were well beyond the city limits when two new problems presented themselves: Food and where to spend the night. With the sighting of a fast food place, one problem was solved and the girls were introduced to Big Macs and fries. Yet, the other problem remained: Where could they spend the night?

It was Cindy who actually provided the answer to that by falling asleep in the back of the van. Sarah smiled gently at the sight. "As good a place as any, I guess." With that, Michael pulled the van over to the side of the road and Sarah helped the others get settled for the night. Being June, it was thankfully warm and Sarah soon found herself in the passenger seat staring out through the windshield, thinking and wondering.

Cassandra's soft whisper startled her. "Sarah?"

"You should be asleep."

"You, too." The leopardess moved forward in her seat behind the doctor. "I want to ask you something. Why have you always taken a special interest in me? How is it we share that link? There's more to it than just the fact that you wrote my genetic codes, isn't it?"

Sarah glanced back at her and sighed. She knew this was bound to come up sooner or later. It might as well be now. "Yes. There are two reasons. In order to create you, they wanted both leopard DNA and Human DNA. Since the leopard was female, they wanted the Human DNA to be female. At that time, the C.R.C. was still fairly new and I was the only female on the staff." She glanced back at Cassandra again. "I gladly donated the DNA and genetic material they needed."

"What was the other reason?" Ann asked- revealing that everyone was listening.

Sarah sighed. "When you, Cindy and Rachel were conceived, you were placed in an artificial womb until you had developed enough to 'be

born’.” She looked to Cassandra. “After we conceived your embryo, we found out the womb was down for maintenance- a mix up in the scheduling. If the project was to stay on schedule and you were to survive, there was only one remaining option.” She looked down at her hands. “I carried you to term in the natural manner.” Cassandra’s eyes went wide as the woman nodded. “You are my daughter in every sense of the word.” Sarah reached out and gently touched the younger female’s face. “And I am not going to let *anyone* destroy you.”

In the driver’s seat, Michael had heard this of course- in fact, Sarah had told him a year ago. But it was only now, that he realized how much more complicated his life had become.

*

Back at the C.R.C., activity in the mind-transfer lab was at full pitch. The lead gunman’s body now lay on an operating table, leads and contacts leading from his head to the equipment placed all around the room. War Hound- the monstrous werewolf of fiction and horror stories brought to life lay sedated on another table nearby.

Nik’s red hair reflected the room’s lights as he stood beside Dr. Stone and watched as it was all prepared. Then, a technician looked to the doctor and nodded.

Stone had one thing to say. “Do it.”

“I still advise against this, Doctor,” Nik said. “War Hound was the military’s idea. We shouldn’t even be touching him without a representative of the Joint Chiefs of Staff being present.”

The equipment in the room had begun to pulse and hum as Stone replied. “It’s all right, Nik. The mind-transfer was always part of War Hound anyway.” He looked to his aide to see the confusion on his face.

“How did you think we were going to get a soldier’s mind in that body in the first place?

“We knew we’d never get the funding if we allowed the government and the public to see the military applications. So the mind-transfer was presented as a separate project and the medical and humanitarian applications were played up.” Stone turned his attention back to the operation- unconcerned with Nik’s gaze upon him.

Lights began to shift on the computer consoles. Equipment suspended over the heads of the gunman and War Hound came to life with a sound not unlike the scream of death itself-

-then everything went quiet again. One of the techs made a quick check and then spoke. “Transfer complete, Doctor.”

Stone nodded. “Sedate the human. There’ll be men here in a few hours to take him to the mental institute in Alexandria. Take War Hound to a recovery room. I’ll talk to him as soon as he wakes.”

Nik then watched as Stone left the room and wondered how much more rope the Director needed to hang himself.

*

Michael had waited till he was sure everyone was asleep. Then he quietly snuck out of the van and took his cell phone in hand. He began speaking as soon as the number kicked in. “It’s me. I know, but this was as soon as I could call. No, we stopped along the road for the night. We’ll be coming into Alexandria tomorrow, so listen...”

As he talked, Michael was unaware that he was being watched. Back in the van, Rachel had heard him leave and as she watched him, her eyes narrowed.

*

Chapter Three

Director Stone entered the recovery room next morning as the sun shone through the window to find the patient under restraints – and awake. “Well, Mr. Layton, I wasn’t expecting you to be awake for a few more hours yet.”

War Hound’s eyes narrowed and his voice was a low growl. “What have you done to me?!”

“Given you a second chance at life.”

“*As a freak?!*” the patient demanded as he struggled against the restraints.

“I would think this body would be most useful to you in your line of work,” Stone stated. “Stronger, faster, all the senses are far superior to the human standard, reflexes- off the scale.” The doctor stepped closer to the bed. “Of course if you really want your human form back, it can be arranged.”

The eyes of the creature took on a calculating glare as he met the man’s gaze. “In exchange for- ?”

“Tracking down our escapees,” Stone told him. “Bring them back and you can be human again. Fail and you’ll stay just as you are.”

The War Hound’s face showed its anger at being used- as well as a growing level of thought. “Alive or dead?”

“Whichever is easiest for you,” the doctor stated as he began undoing the restraints. “Bring me their *heads* if nothing else.”

A clawed hand was instantly around the human’s throat and War Hound’s growl was deadly. “If you double-cross me, I’ll add *your* head to the collection.”

*

Cassandra was the only one that seemed to notice how Rachel kept watching Michael. Her eyes never seemed to leave the man and occasionally, her tail rattle would be heard softly. At the moment, Michael was talking. "...Sarah, if you're going to pull this off, you're going to have to stop somewhere to make plans- figure out some way to hide who the girls are till you can get them on a British Airways flight."

"No," Rachel declared. "If we stop, whoever's chasing us will have time to catch up- won't they, Michael?" Her tail rattle made an ominous sound in the confines of the van. Michael met her gaze in the rearview mirror and the look on her face was all he needed to see:

She knew- at least enough to be suspicious.

Cassandra looked to her companion. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying whoever's after us- whether it's the C.R.C. or more gunmen, could've called ahead- might have people waiting for us in Alexandria." She looked to the front seats. "Isn't that possible, Sarah?"

The Doctor nodded. "Yes, it is. You both have valid points. We *do* need someplace to hold up and plan- and yes, there could be someone waiting for us." She looked back to Rachel. "What would you recommend?"

The girl's black hair bounced about her shoulders as she shrugged. "I don't know. I never realized the outside world could be so complicated."

"Well, let's just think it through," Sarah told her. "We have to get into town. Do we continue on the road we're on? Go straight in?"

"No," Ann replied from the back of the van.

Cindy's tail whipped about behind her as she nodded. "Ann's right. If someone is watching for us, they'd be watching the most direct route, right?"

Sarah nodded. "Yes, they would."

Cassandra looked around at everyone as she spoke up. “What about coming in from behind or from the side?”

The woman she now knew to be her mother smiled and looked to Michael. “Let’s see if we can circle around.”

They eventually made their way into town from the north and found another fast food place. Everyone waited while Sarah went in. Rachel’s eyes never left Michael. It was clear now that she didn’t trust him and was just waiting for him to make a move.

The doctor started talking as soon as she returned to the van. “I asked them where the nearest motel would be and we lucked out. It’s only a few blocks from here.” She handed out the roast beef sandwiches as she gave Michael directions.

Luck remained with them. The motel was one of those with all the rooms on the ground floor. Sarah was able to arrange for one, allowing Michael to park the van right at the door. A quick look around assured Sarah that no one was watching before she ushered the girls inside. She nodded toward the room’s TV. “Cassis see if you can find a news program.”

“Why?” Ann asked as she lowered her insectoid form onto one of the room’s two beds.

“The C.R.C. might’ve decided to go public,” Sarah told her. “They might try to enlist the public in looking for us.”

Cassandra called out then. “Found it.”

They all turned their attention to the TV. “...In other news today, there was a disturbance at the Compton Genetic Research Center outside Alexandria. Dr. Sarah Jackson deliberately released four genetically engineered subjects in protest of planned testing. Two of the subjects promptly attacked two men- killing them both.”

“That’s a lie!” Ann shouted. “Mine was still alive when we left!”

Rachel's tail rattle filled the room till Sarah waved them both to silence and the announcer could be heard once more. Photos of all five females were on the screen. "...If you see them, you are asked to remember that they are dangerous. Do not approach them. Report the sighting to your local authorities.

"The fugitives were last seen heading toward Alexandria. It's believed they're trying to find transport to England."

Sarah turned it off at that point and swore softly. "Wonderful. They might as well have issued a 'shot on sight' order."

"So what do we do?" Cindy asked as she occupied the other bed.

The Doctor could only shrug. "I honestly don't know. What I *do* know, is that you four *have* to stay hidden- more so now than before. Which means we can't risk taking you out of here in the daylight. We've been lucky so far- we may not be if we try to leave before sundown."

She turned to face the four and saw in their faces the same thing she knew they were seeing in hers: worry and a tinge of fear. "We have to find clothes for you- something to hide who you really are."

Ann looked at her like she'd gone crazy. "How are you going to do that?" she asked as she waved a hand at herself and Cindy.

"Ann..." Sarah ran a hand through her hair. "I don't know, okay? I don't have all the answers. You think being on the run is only new to you?"

"We've got at least two different groups of people chasing us. The entire countryside's looking for us. The local authorities won't be any help- they're more likely to shoot us after that announcement. We have no one to turn to except us." Sarah turned toward the motel room door as she finished. "I don't know what the hell we're going to do."

*

At the C.R.C., War Hound paused as he left the building- momentarily overwhelmed by his own senses as the scents, sights and sounds of the outside poured in upon him through this half-beast body.

Stone had seen to it his gun was returned- along with the largest pair of coveralls they could find.

But War Hound knew neither would be enough- especially against that half-human spider.

Even in this new body, the mind of Larry Layton cringed at the memory of what she did. Stone would get that one's head all right- *after* War Hound finished with her.

He paused as he reached the van Stone had supplied. After adjusting the driver's seat to his larger form, he pulled out of the parking lot with two goals in mind:

Supplies- and his first hunt.

*

Inside the C.R.C., Nik entered a private lab to find Dr. Stone standing before an experimental stasis tube. Inside the tube was a redheaded woman in her mid-thirties. Some of the equipment in the room resembled that used for the mind transfer. Nik watched his superior for a moment and wondered how much longer it would be before things would have to be revealed to the man.

"Is he on his way?" the Director asked as his eyes passed over the woman's bare form.

Watching Stone eye the woman made Nik shudder. "He...He just left the parking lot."

“Good.” The doctor’s gaze never left the woman as he spoke. “It’s a shame her brother’s death was so traumatic that it shut her mind down.” Now he turned to his aide. “Have her prepped for mind-transfer. I’ll let you know when the actual procedure will take place.”

As he left, Nik watched him leave, then he took a cell phone from his pocket and activated it. “Sir Reginald? Yes, sir, it’s me. Stone’s digging himself in deeper by the hour.” He looked to the female. “I may have to take action soon.

“Yes, sir. Understood. Nikki out.”

*

Chapter Four

Sarah had decided she had to go out alone to find what they needed for the girls. This left the four and Michael alone in the motel room. As Cassandra watched TV and Ann dozed, Cindy stood by the window, watching for Sarah's return.

This left Rachel, who was still watching Michael. Her eyes narrowed and her tail rattle sounded gently as he turned toward the far side of the room and the sink located there. She started sliding across the floor as she saw him slowly reach into his pocket and bring out his cell phone.

He had just activated it, when she ran into him and knocked it into the sink. She had the water running over it before he could stop her. Quickly grabbing the device, he began shaking the water off. The unit blinked, buzzed, flickered and went dark.

"Sorry, Michael," Racheal said in a tone that made it clear she wasn't sorry at all. "Not water proof was it?" She met his gaze without a flinch, daring him to say anything. When he didn't, she turned away toward the room's window.

*

War Hound lumbered from the Army surplus store wearing khakis, an ammo belt, a large bowie knife in a shoulder sheath and carrying several guns: pistols, rifles even a machine gun. He loaded them into the van along with the ammunition and other supplies that were already there.

The shop owner certainly wouldn't need them anymore. He looked down at the blood on his still-extended claws and thought about how easy it had been to tear the man's throat out and leave him dying on the floor of his own store.

He then shook his head and climbed into the driver's seat. He knew the five would head east- make a beeline for the coast and some way to reach England. As he left the surplus store behind, he headed back to the C.R.C.- intending to pick up the most direct route from there.

*

As soon as Cindy and Rachel announced that Sarah was back, Cassandra was on her feet and the TV forgotten as she headed for the door- meeting her mother as she entered with her arms full. "How could you afford all of that?" Michael asked. "Your credit card must be maxed out."

"Found a second hand clothing store," Sarah answered. She then handed out the three bags she'd brought to Cindy, Rachel and Cassandra. She then turned to Ann. "I've been wracking my brain trying to figure something out for you," she said. "Until we can get everyone on a flight to England, all I can think of is-"

"-just stay out of sight," Ann finished. She sighed and nodded.

For Cindy, there was a large, loose dress- a cross between a maternity outfit and a full-length moo-moo. For Rachel, there was a strapless dress that would have been knee-length on someone with knees. As for Cassandra, there was a jumpsuit that managed to hide her spots pretty well and a pair of tennis shoes. Sarah stepped back and looked them over. "Good. Looks good."

A gas grenade came crashing through the window. Without even thinking, Cassandra scooped it up and tossed it back out even as Ann threw webbing across the ruined window. "Only problem is, we can't see anything now," Sarah noted.

"They can't see us either," Rachel noted as her tail rattled.

Sarah ushered everyone to the far side of the door and turned off the lights. For the four under her protection, this was not a problem since the animal and insectoid sides of their genetic codes gave them excellent night vision.

Someone outside tried the door knob. A moment later, the door was kicked in and several men came charging into the room.

Before Sarah could stop them, all four girls charged in with fangs, coils and claws. Cindy reared upon her hind legs and kicked out- catching one gunman in the head and sending him flying into two others- all of which were quickly webbed to the nearest wall.

One man took aim on Ann, only to scream as Cassandra's claws raked his face. Another screamed as Rachel got her coils around him even as she sank her fangs into another's shoulder.

Michael stayed out of it, watching with wide eyes and unable to believe what he was seeing as the men were steadily defeated. One man got an arm around Sarah's neck and he was forced to step in with a fist to the top of his head, dropping the gunman even as Ann webbed the last one to the floor.

Sarah turned on the lights and shook her head at the sight. "How?" she asked. "How the hell did they find us?"

Rachel looked at Michael. "Like I said. Someone called ahead."

Sarah met her gaze, then looked to her fiancé. "What is she- ?" She stopped and stood a little straighter. She stepped toward him and he started to back away- but Rachel blocked his path- and a moment later, had her coils around him.

As Sarah stopped in front of him, the human reptile told her of the night before- and what had happened at the sink while she was gone. "...But I guess the signal lasted long enough to be traced."

Sarah met Michael's gaze, then reached into his pocket and brought out his phone. She activated it and while it didn't light up, it still worked. She pressed re-dial and listened. "Andrews? Do you have her? When can I expect delivery?"

"Never," she told the voice. "He doesn't have her- and he never will."

"Who the hell is this?" the voice demanded.

"Her mother." Sarah then dropped the phone on the floor and crushed it under her heel as she met Michael's gaze with hurt frustration that quickly turned to anger. "You son-of-a-bitch!"

"Sarah-"

"How much was she worth, Michael?" Her voice took on an increasingly hard edge as she spoke. "What were you going to do with the money? Pay for our honeymoon?" She turned away in clear disgust.

"You don't understand," Michael said. "She's worth a hell of a lot on the Black market. You could ask any price you wanted just for her clones."

"Clones?!" She turned back around in shocked fury. "And what would they be used for? Pets? *Slaves?!*

"You and your money can go to Hell!"

"Sarah, please- "

He never saw the right-cross till it connected with enough force to knock him clear of Rachel's coils and drop him in the floor.

Ann moved over beside her and looked down at the man as she spoke. "What do we do with him, Sarah? We can't take him with us- he'll just figure out another way to bring them down on us again."

Sarah stood over the man she had loved- the man she had wanted to spend the rest of her life with- and was silent for several moments. "Do whatever you want. I don't give a damn." She then stepped over him and

headed for the door unaware of Cassandra's eyes upon her as Ann and Rachel closed in on him. He called to her, but Sarah never hesitated as she stepped outside and closed the door behind her.

But even then, she couldn't totally close out the screams.

*

Chapter Five

War Hound looked around as he neared the Alexandria city limits. Once he realized where the others were headed, he broke every speed limit getting here. Now he listened as police sirens filled the air. In moments, he had the direction and was closing in.

By the time the police reached the motel, all they found were the remains of a battle. Gunmen webbed to the walls and floor- some dead or dying from rattlesnake venom and one over by the sink that would take the rest of the week to identify.

War Hound got as close as he dared without showing himself. That meant staying in the alleys and shadows and watching as the police worked. He knew from his days as a bounty hunter that after something like this, the target would get out of town as quickly as possible- they'd take the most direct route.

It only took a few minutes for him to figure out what that might be and soon he was on their trail once more.

*

London, England

It was early morning and the sun was just starting to clear the last building and get the day started. On the edge of town, was one of the few remaining large estates that hadn't been bought up by one corporation or another. This one belonged to Sir Reginald Playton- owner and CEO of PlayPose International, of which, PlayPose Magazine and the PlayPose Clubs were the most prominent- and public- features.

At the moment, Sir Reginald was at breakfast, waiting for his wife to join him when one of the servants approached. "Yes, Louis?"

“There’s another report about those American genetic girls on the television, sir.”

Sir Reginald nodded toward the TV that sat on a nearby shelf as the morning light sent highlights through his grey hair. “Put it on.”

“...Repeating our top story. Last night, in the United States, in Alexandria, Virginia, the four genetically engineered subjects that escaped from Compton Research Center two days ago were involved in a confrontation with six armed men. It’s not clear at this time whether the escapees started the conflict or were themselves attacked.

“Three of the six gunmen are dead. The others are in police custody. Their names have not been released and the local authorities will only say that the escapees are still on the loose and that the investigation continues.”

“Damn it,” Sir Reginald swore. “Get hold of Mitchell. Tell him to find those girls and get them out of that damn country before someone blows their bloody heads off.”

“Yes, sir.”

*

With Cassandra in the front passenger seat, Sarah had taken on the job of driving the van. They stayed on the interstate the rest of the night until they were forced to take an exit in search of fuel. At a gas station, Sarah parked the van, leaned back and closed her eyes. “You’re tired,” Cassandra noted. “You need sleep.”

“I can’t- not while...”

“You can’t keep going like this, Mom.”

Sarah opened her eyes and looked over at her. “That’s the first time you’ve ever called me that.”

The girl shrugged her spotted shoulders. “Didn’t know I had the right to before.”

“We can rest in shifts,” Rachel said as she opened the van’s door and slid out. “I’ll take first watch.” At Sarah’s raised eyebrows, she added, “Those...black market people were only one group that’s after us.”

Sarah nodded. “But don’t go too far. Stay in sight of the van.”

The genetically engineered female nodded and Sarah watched as she slid off toward some nearby trees- being careful to stay in the shadows as much as possible. Throughout the rest of the night and into those early morning hours, Rachel wandered through the area- by the gas station, the tree line and back again- and always doing as Sarah said and keeping the van in sight.

The sun was just starting to clear the trees as Rachel came from behind the gas station on her way back to the van.

“Do you know how they kill snakes?”

She turned at the voice to see the larger, furred form of War Hound.

“They cut off their heads,” he growled as he gripped the handle of his bowie knife.

Rachel’s hiss sliced the morning air even as her tail rattle shattered it.

Hearing the noise, Cassandra woke and spotted the two. “Everybody, Rachel’s got trouble!”

With speed far faster than a normal human, War Hound lunged, knife raised. In the same instant, with all the striking speed of the Rattler, Rachel dodged to one side- and still managed to sink her fangs into his shoulder in passing.

As the sun rose higher, Sarah's eyes went wide as she recognized Rachel's opponent. "War Hound?! Stone must be out of his mind." But as soon as she said the words, it came to her. "The mind-transfer. He put someone else in War Hound's body."

War Hound's knife flashed in the morning light as he brought it down- each strike finding its target time and again. Cassie looked to her mother. "We have to help her!"

"If we do, we'll end up dead as well," Sarah told her. "None of us are any match for him." She reached for the van's keys. "Best we can do is make the most of the situation and get out of here while he's occupied."

She turned the ignition- and the engine refused to start. "Damn it!" The fuel gage was on empty- they'd been driving on fumes all night. She reached for the driver's side door. "We'll have to take to the woods- try to lose him there."

Out of the corner of her eye, Rachel saw them run off and nodded to herself. The four of them- five counting Sarah- had been all the family she'd ever known. Knowing that family was safe was all that mattered.

She hoped they reached England okay.

She struck at War Hound again, going for his thigh and felt her fangs go deep even as his knife was suddenly in her back! Releasing her bite, she fell away to look up and find him blocking her view of the sky. "Don't worry," he told her. "You'll be dead soon enough."

"So...will you."

He laughed. "Not from *your* venom. I've taken so much anti-toxin no poison will affect me."

She shook her head as she watched his every move. "You took a normal anti-toxin designed for normal humans and normal venom. "She gasped in pain. "You don't know if it'll work for you or kill you."

By his expression, she could tell she'd struck a nerve. The two circled each other, watching and waiting for the moment.

He lunged-

She lunged-

Fangs and knife caught the morning light-

And blood flew.

*

Chapter Six

“We should have helped her,” Cassandra said again as they moved through the woods. “He would’ve been out-numbered.”

“Wouldn’t have helped,” Ann stated. “I heard some of the staff talk about War Hound. His strength, stamina, reflexes- all better and faster.” She looked around the trees and then came to a stop. “You three go on ahead. I’ll see if I can slow him down.”

Cindy stepped toward her, her tail a near blur behind her. “You just said we’re no match for him.”

“One-on-one, we’re not,” the spider hybrid said. “But I’m not going to fight- just block his path.” She nodded in the direction they’d been going. “Go on.”

Sarah stepped toward her. “You be careful. If you hear him coming, get out.”

“Don’t worry.”

“Too late,” the doctor stated. “You should’ve said something yesterday.”

“Mom-“

Sarah gently touched her daughter’s arm. “Ann’s the only one that can do what she has planned. If we stay, we’ll just give War Hound more targets.”

Cindy jerked a thumb toward her equine backside. “You two get on. We can move faster if I carry you.”

The doctor stared at her in shock. “Are you sure, Cindy?”

“I was created to be an intelligent pack mule,” the blond replied. “At least this one time, it’s my choice.”

Ann helped them climb up and watched as they rode off. Then she looked to the trees once more and began shooting webbing in all directions.

*

War Hound moved quietly as he entered the woods. He'd checked the van- found the doors open and had no trouble picking up the four scents. Now as he followed the trail, it was like following glowing bread crumbs- he couldn't lose them if he wanted to.

On the other hand, such single-mindedness can be blinding, too.

He was among the webbing before he realized it. It had started thin- almost transparent and had grown denser as he moved further along the trail. Starting to turn back, he found the path behind him blocked by more webbing.

Ann- and she had no intention of facing him head on. Every way he turned, another 'wall' of webbing had taken shape- restricting his maneuvering space more and more. "Welcome to my parlor, War Hound," she said from somewhere in the trees above him. "It's my first, but I'm rather proud of how it turned out considering how little time I had to work on it."

"And you expect it to stop me?" he asked.

"No. Slow you down? Yes. Because you'll either have to cut your way out- and get tangled- or climb over and the top branches of these trees can barely hold my weight- they'd never hold yours."

"Thanks for the warning. If you're so sure of things, why don't you show yourself?"

“And give you a chance to use that machine gun you’re carrying? I don’t think so. Just tell me one thing- who are you? We know War Hound was unstable. You’re someone else.”

War Hound continued to look up at the trees. Ann’s instincts were good. She kept moving, causing her voice to always come from a different place. “You’re right,” He finally told her. “I almost died from your advances before Stone found me.”

Silence. But was it shocked- or unoccupied?

There. Movement off to his left. His movements were a blur as he brought the machine gun round-

-and fired.

*

Chapter Seven

A short distance away- and moving further away with every second- Cassandra looked back upon hearing the sounds of machine gun fire. She said nothing as she held onto her mother even tighter.

There was a sound overhead and the three looked up as they reached a clearing to see a helicopter hovering over them. It was a large one- looked like it even had room for Cindy. But the clearing wasn't large enough for it to land. They watched as the pilot leaned out his door, signaled for their attention and dropped something down to them.

Cassandra jumped off of Cindy, retrieved the object and handed it up to Sarah. It was a flare gun with a note attached. There was one word written on it: Follow.

"Do we?" Cindy asked.

"Right now, I don't see that we have any choice," Sarah told her. She looked up to see the pilot watching them. She waved and nodded and once the helicopter moved off, the three set out to follow. They left the woods and spotted the 'copter as it landed on a nearby road. As they neared the guardrail, a shot was fired and Cassandra screamed as a bullet grazed her arm.

Sarah glanced back to see War Hound- covered in webbing- come from the tree line, a rifle raised to his shoulder. Reaching the guardrail, she jumped off of Cindy, raised the flare gun and fired- sending the rocket back toward their assailant and forcing War Hound to take cover as the flare struck a nearby tree and exploded.

By the time he'd regained his footing, Cassandra and Sarah were on board the 'copter and helping Cindy in. A quick shot glanced off the hull as Cindy got in and the pilot got the ship airborne.

More shots were fired and glanced off the hull as the pilot brought the 'copter's engines to full power and Sarah tried to see to Cassandra's wound with the on-board first aid kit.

Finally, War Hound stopped firing- mainly because the helicopter was out of range. Frustrated, an angered growl escaped him without him even thinking about it as his grip tightened on the rifle till he shattered the stock.

*

Aboard the helicopter, Sarah managed to stop Cassandra's arm from bleeding anymore and once she had her settled and checked on Cindy, she turned toward the cockpit. The pilot looked up from the controls as she slowly assumed the co-pilot's seat. "That's the hottest LZ I've seen since Iraq," the man said with a European accent she couldn't place.

"Who are you?" She asked.

"The name's Dave Mitchell," he said. "I do the flying in this part of the States for PlayPose International."

"PlayPose?" This only served to confuse Sarah. "Why would a men's magazine have any interest in us?"

"All I know," Mitchell told her, "is that I was told to quote 'Find those girls and get them out of that damn country before someone blows their bloody heads off.' Unquote."

Sarah slumped in the seat. "I wish you'd arrived two hours ago."

Mitchell glanced toward the back of the 'copter. "I was told there'd be five of you. What happened?"

He flew and listened as Sarah told him about War Hound, Rachel and Ann. "...I'm pretty sure the girls are dead. They were no match for him. Whoever's in that body's going to grow more and more accustomed to it- making him that much harder to stop."

“Well, we’re not stopping till we reach Dulles airport,” Mitchell told her. “There’s a PlayPose International Jet ready and waiting.”

“But the C.R.C. will certainly have someone watching for us,” Sarah noted.

The pilot nodded. “Inside the concourse. But we’re going to land right next to the hangar itself.” He nodded toward the back of the ‘copter. “Why don’t you go and relax while you’ve got the chance?”

She nodded and turned back toward the passenger section. There, she smiled at the sight of Cassandra lost in the sights she was seeing out one of the viewports. Cindy, too was looking out the other one. Sarah left them to it. She eased down into a seat and leaned back. She’d intended to just close her eyes for a moment. But as soon as she did so, she was asleep.

*

At the C.R.C., Dr. Stone looked up from the work on his desk as Nik came in- followed by a five-star general. “Nik, what- ?”

His aide shook his head. “Not my idea, Doctor. General Maxwell came on his own.”

“And I want answers,” the burly officer stated. He met Stone’s gaze and it was clear he was used to being in control of any situation. “Who the hell gave you permission to use War Hound to recover your damned escapees?”

“He seemed the best choice,” Stone replied. Then he shrugged. “And we would have needed some kind of field test eventually.”

The General looked at the doctor as if he’d gone crazy. “*Field test?! He’s out there killing civilians!*”

Stone shook his head. “No. He’s only after the escapees.”

The look of disgust was clear on the General’s face as he tossed a newspaper on the desk. “Five blocks from here, the owner of an army surplus store was found in a pool of his own blood- his throat ripped out. Just as I arrived here, there was a news report about a fight in a motel room in Alexandria. A short distance from there in a grove near a gas station, they found your snake hybrid with her head chopped off.”

The General leaned over the desk and met Stone’s gaze eye for eye. “Now you listen up. If and when War Hound is stopped, you can be certain the media’s going to track him back to you. The Joint Chiefs expect it to *end* with you. Is that clear?”

“And if it doesn’t?” Stone asked.

The General straightened up. “It will- one way or another.” He then turned away and stormed from the office.

*

Chapter Eight

War Hound had run all the way back to his van. He knew his targets wouldn't land till they reach the airport. Ignoring speed limits and stop signs, he side-swiped a bus and kept going. Police sirens filled the air as one patrol car after another joined the chase. They'd call ahead and set up road blocks only to have War Hound plow right through them.

As he drove, he couldn't help noticing the double vision and the ringing in his ears. He shook his head to clear it. Now, he was sure of one thing: Either Rachel's venom or the anti-toxin was killing him.

*

Sarah woke to Cassandra's touch and looked up at her. "We're at the airport," the younger female stated. She joined her daughter and Cindy in looking out the viewport as the helicopter sat down next to a hangar with the PlayPose logo mounted over the doors.

The three looked up as the engine was shut down and Mitchell came from the cockpit, a shoulder holster and gun now in their proper places. "The plane's right outside," he told them as he pointed out the viewport. "Go out the cargo hold," he said. "It's the quickest way. A short sprint-the jet's door is already open."

Sarah looked to her two remaining companions. "I want you two on that plane," She told them. She met Cassandra's gaze. "You don't stop for anything or anyone no matter what."

Mitchell moved over to the controls for the cargo hold door and Cindy spotted the holster as he activated the unit.

The hatch came down and the four made a run for it.

A shot rang out-

-and Mitchell yelled as he fell, shot in the shoulder.

Cassandra was first to the plane with Sarah right behind her. They both turned to see Cindy going back for Mitchell as War Hound stepped into the open and began taking aim.

Sarah's shout rang out. "Cindy look out!"

Another shot struck the tarmac as Cindy helped Mitchell to his feet. Sarah was watching War Hound. Was it her or was he looking unsteady on his feet?

As Cindy passed the wounded man to Sarah, she took his gun from the holster. "Get inside," she told them as she turned away.

"Cindy!" Cassandra started after her, determined to drag her on board.

But Cindy looked back and met Sarah's gaze. "Give my regards to England."

Another shot glanced off the plane and Cindy turned, raised a weapon she'd never used and fired.

It was close enough to make War Hound dive for cover as Sarah scrambled into the cockpit and struggled to understand the controls. She looked up as Mitchell- one whole side of his shirt soaked with blood- dropped into the co-pilot's seat. "...talk you through it..."

As they began the process, all Cassandra could do was watch out the jet's hatch as Cindy stood in the clear- where everyone could see her- and watched for her target.

A shot caught her in the shoulder and sent the gun flying.

Cassandra was immediately out of the plane with all the speed of her leopard heritage. She scooped up the gun, spun and fired- clipping War Hound's arm even as he was taking final aim on Cindy. Running to her friend, Cassandra helped her up and toward the plane even as its engines came to life.

War Hound stepped into the open as Cindy climbed into the plane. He took aim even as Cassandra saw him and fired. The man beast screamed and howled as the shot took out his left eye in a spray of blood. Using the distraction she'd created, Cassie jumped into the plane, slammed the hatch shut and yelled, "*Now, Mom-Now!!*"

Sarah floored it and the plane began to move. Using clearances Mitchell had arranged for ahead of time, and under his guidance, she brought the plane onto the runway- and her eyes went wide as War Hound- with blood running down his face- stepped in front of them some hundred yards away. He raised one hand.

The other held an automatic sub machine gun.

Sarah's jaw tightened as did her grip on the flight controls. "All right mister, let's see if the new body gives you the guts to play 'chicken'."

Mitchell could only watch as she remembered his quick instructions and fed more power to the engines. In response the plane began move faster down the runway even as War Hound opened fire. Some shots went wide, others glanced off the plane's hull.

One hit the windscreen, shattering it. Then he dove clear before Sarah could run him over. By the time he regained his feet, the PlayPose jet was leaving the ground.

He glanced around and spotting the Air National Guard hangar a short distance away, he began running towards it even as airport security began to converge. It was no contest. Those that tried to stop him were physically thrown aside. The ones that weren't, were killed outright. Others stayed under cover and were forced to exchange fire with him even as city police began to arrive.

SWAT teams climbed out of vans even as he reached the fence separating the civilian and military airfields.

He tore out an entire section with one hand.

War Hound could feel his heart beating out of him and knew he was breathing far harder than he should have been. Ignoring shouts to stop and with blood still running down his face and into his fur, he lumbered into the hangar. When Air National Guards tried to stop him, they met the same fate as airport security.

There were two fighters in the hangar- F-18s. One was being checked for a routine flight. Climbing up its side, he grabbed the intended pilot and threw him into the approaching SWAT teams. With his vision blurring even more, War Hound climbed into the cockpit and managed to seal the canopy as the SWAT teams reached the plane.

Mercenary and gun-for-hire that he'd been, War Hound quickly had the controls understood and smiled as the guardsmen started closing the hangar doors- at least until a launched missile from the F-18 blew the doors open.

By the time the National Guardsmen and the SWAT teams regained their senses, War Hound had the jet out of the hangar and barreling down a runway.

*

Chapter Nine

Dr. Stone reached for the phone as it rang again. “Stone here.”

“It’s Maxwell, Stone.” The General’s tone made it clear this was *not* a social call. “Have you seen the latest news reports? War Hound’s been seen in public. He tore down a fence around the National Guard hangar- and nearly wiped up the city with their SWAT teams and our guards before he stole a fighter.

“Now I’ve got senators on *both* sides of the aisle wanting an investigation and the few that knew about War Hound beforehand want to know why the hell he’s up and around!

“If those escapees of yours make it to England, heads will roll- *starting with yours!*”

The phone was slammed, nearly busting Stone’s ear. He looked at the receiver for a moment, then he pressed a button on the phone’s base. “Nik? Get her hooked up. I’ve got a feeling it won’t be much longer.”

*

Aboard the PlayPose jet, Mitchell had shown Sarah how to engage the auto-pilot, allowing her the freedom of helping him get to the passenger cabin and see to everyone’s wounds that she could.

“How long till we reach England, Mom?” Cassandra asked as the doctor saw to her arm.

“The auto-pilot should have us there in time for dinner,” Sarah answered.

“What about lunch?” Cindy asked.

From where Sarah had settled him in one of the passenger seats, Mitchell nodded toward the back of the plane. “We always keep a fully stocked galley on board.”

Cindy rose to her feet- all four of them-and wandered back to the galley section. Soon she was digging in the refrigerator and setting stuff out for them all.

*

In the cockpit of his stolen fighter, War Hound closed his remaining eye and rubbed it. As he took his hand away, he looked at it and found it trembling uncontrollably. He was suffering hot and cold flashes as well as dizzy spells that knocked his equilibrium all to hell.

If the jet hadn’t had an autopilot, he would have crashed into the ocean ten minutes ago.

He shook his head and tightened his grip in the flight stick. No. He was not going to give in to it. He was not going to die until those remaining three were dead.

“Them first,” he muttered as he worked to increase the fighter’s speed.

*

At the C.R.C., the media had converged as soon as news of War Hound’s attack on the National Guard was made public.

Stone sat in his office, watching the monitor screens and shaking his head. When had it all gone wrong? Using War Hound seemed like a good idea at the time.

Now, he leaned back in his chair, activating circuitry and electronics hidden in the headrest. Reaching into his desk drawer, he took out a pistol and put it to his head even as he pressed a switch on the arm of his chair, activating the mind-transfer.

Even as he felt himself being pulled out of his body, he cocked the pistol- and fired.

*

When Stone could see again, he immediately realized he was *not* in the body of the woman he had in storage. This body wasn't even- NO! He looked around the cage in near panic.

The redhead he should've occupied reached into the cage and removed the mind-transfer equipment she'd placed in there earlier. "The names 'Nikki Calhoun', Doctor. You knew me as 'Nik'." She stepped aside to reveal the male lying on a table. She then looked down into the cage once more. "A clone of my late brother's body. As for myself, I work for Her Majesty's Secret Service. They sent me to look into your black marketing and all the rest of the mess you've made at the request of Sir Reginald Playton."

Nikki reached into the cage and took the female rabbit in her arms. "Under investigation for black marketeering, padding government contracts, and illegal trafficking in high end technology, Dr. David Stone committed suicide- which also gives the US Government a convenient scapegoat for War Hound." She raised the rabbit so she could look into its eyes. "It also means the C.R.C. will need a new director." She glanced around. "Might be a nice place to retire to."

She scratched the rabbit between its ears. "Better get you back to the lab before they realize you're gone."

As they left the room, time explosives Nikki had set, detonated, setting fire to the room and destroying the body she'd used as a disguise.

*

It was near evening when the PlayPose jet was suddenly rocked by turbulence, throwing everyone to the deck. Sarah ran for the cockpit with Cassandra right behind her. The younger female stared in shock as the fighter jet turned off and began to circle back. "Who- ?"

"War Hound," Sarah answered. "Who else?"

"This is War Hound to PlayPose One. You will set course parallel to mine. If you veer off, I will shot you down. Do you copy?"

Before Sarah could answer, another voice cut in. "This blighter has a lot of nerve, doesn't he?"

Cassie looked to her mother. "Who was that?"

Sarah could only shrug as two additional fighters- these with British markings- came into view and a third voice was heard. "This is Spitfire One to War Hound. You will break off- Now."

"Who the hell are you?"

The second voice they'd heard replied with obvious fire in her tone. "We're the bloody Royal Air Force, that's who!"

"That's enough Spitfire Two. War Hound, we have orders to escort PlayPose One safely to Heathrow Airport. We are also authorized to shot down anyone who interferes."

"You're the ones that are interfering!"

"Like bloody hell we are," Spitfire One replied. "You crossed into British Airspace ten minutes ago. Now, are you interfering- or leaving?"

A low, dangerous growling was War Hound's only reply as he turned his stolen fighter and flew off.

"Spitfire One to PlayPose One – do you copy?"

Sarah quickly found and took the jet's mic in hand. "PlayPose One here. Thank you Spitfire One."

"Doing our duty, Ma'am. Please maintain your course and speed. We're taking up positions on each side of you."

"Spitfire Two to PlayPose One- do you require any other assistance?"

"Yes," Sarah replied. "I need medical assistance. I have three gunshot victims. Two are simple flesh wounds, but the pilot was shot in the shoulder. I wasn't able to remove the bullet."

"Spitfire One to PlayPose One- Understood. We'll call ahead and have an EMS crew standing by."

Cassandra sighed. "Looks like we made it."

Her mother shook her head. "It's not over yet."

"Why not?"

Sarah looked over at her daughter. "War Hound flew off toward England."

*

Chapter Ten

The fire had been discovered five minutes ago. Now, trucks and crews worked to put it out as it tried to consume one corner of the C.R.C.

The red head pulled into the parking lot after managing to slip away without being seen. Now, she left her car and slowly walked toward a crowd of employees. One woman saw her approach and moved to stop her. “I’m sorry. No one’s allowed in right now except authorized personnel.”

The apparently new arrival handed the woman her ID card. “I’m Dr. Nikki Calhoun. The board appointed me as the new Director when news of War Hound reached the public. I got here as quickly as I could.”

“Martha Maxton,” The woman said. “I’m Dr. Stone’s secretary. I’m glad you’re here.” She handed the card back as she spoke. “But if you’re planning to relieve Dr. Stone, you’re too late.”

“Why’s that?” Nikki asked.

“He committed suicide just before the fire broke out.”

The look of surprise on Nikki’s face would have won an Oscar for best acting. “Really? And what do the firemen say caused the fire...?”

*

On the other side of the Atlantic, PlayPose One and Spitfire One and Two came into land at Heathrow Airport. An ambulance was on hand and as soon as Sarah had the hatch open, the EMS crew was on board and seeing to Mitchell. As the paramedics carried him off the plane, Sarah followed and only then noticed that Cassandra and Cindy had remained on board.

She turned back and held her hand out to them. "It's okay. You don't have to hide now."

As the two slowly stepped from the plane a familiar voice was heard. "She's right about that, 'luv."

The three turned as two fighter pilots approached. Spitfire One and Two, Sarah assumed. Then, the one that had spoken, removed her helmet, revealing the white, black and orange coloring of a Bengal Tiger. The other one followed suit, revealing the coloring and markings of a zebra. "Well I'll be damned," Sarah whispered as Cassandra and Cindy stepped up beside her.

The tiger took in the sight of the two of them and smiled. "'Cor, you two are a sight."

The zebra glanced at her as she spoke. "I'm Major Zebrah McCay. The talkative one is Lt. Tygress O'Dell. Does our appearance surprise you, Dr. Jackson?"

"Your appearance? No," Sarah replied. "Being in RAF uniforms, yes. I didn't know they allowed- "

"When Parliament passed the Genetics Rights Act ten years ago, it granted all genetically engineered beings the same rights to the same careers as everyone else," Zebrah explained. "Actually, Tygress and I are reservists. When we came out to put in our time for this month, Sir Reginald asked us if we could make a detour."

"Which you did without authorization, Major." They all turned at the voice to see a human male in the uniform of an RAF colonel approach.

Both Tygress and Zebrah came to attention and saluted. Zebrah did the talking. "Yes, sir, Colonel, sir. We did deviate from our flight plan- and prevented an act of air piracy in the process, sir."

"Air piracy?" He looked to Sarah and her companions and he nodded, recognizing the three from the news reports. "Very well, Major. You

have a full report on my desk first thing in the morning and we'll let it slide."

Zebrah nodded. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

He returned her salute, nodded to Sarah and the others and then moved off.

"Is he always that easy to get along with?" Sarah asked.

"He sponsored me and Tygress," Zebrah explained. "Without his support we would never have gotten near a fighter."

"If you're only reservists, what do you do the rest of the time?" Cassandra asked.

"We're entertainers," Tygress replied. "Song and dance mainly. We have an exclusive contract with PlayPose International. We perform at all their clubs worldwide."

"We'd better get going," Zebrah said as she started ushering everyone toward the nearby terminal building. "Sir Reginald is expecting us."

*

Chapter Eleven

The drive to the Playton Estate was a definite change from driving as fast as possible in the midst of an escape. Yet, as Cassandra and Cindy took in the sights from the van they were in, Sarah found herself thinking of Rachel and Ann and wishing they had made it, too. Soon, they left London behind and were practically cruising along the countryside with Zebra driving and Tygress trying to answer Cassandra's questions about how to become a dancer.

As for Cindy, for the moment, she was content to simply look out the window at the passing countryside. Even though she had never been to this country before- like Cassandra, she'd never been outside the C.R.C. till now- she still felt as if she'd finally come home. England. She'd read books and watched videos about the island's history. Now, finally, her dream of being here had come true. She looked forward to finally putting this whole nightmare behind them so she could explore her new home.

Eventually, Zebra brought the van to a stop in front of a door that could have easily served as the main entrance to a major hotel. The Playton Estate was huge- not only the house, which was five stories tall and at least two football fields (American football) in length. The grounds looked to be a good forty or fifty acres.

Louis met them at the door. "Where is he?" Zebra asked.

"The garden."

She nodded and started leading the way. "How do you know where the garden is?" Cassandra asked.

"We live here," Tygress replied. "At Sir Reginald's invitation." She indicated Cindy and Cassandra. "I don't know if you've noticed back in the 'States, but those of us with animal DNA in our make-up tend to favor the country over the city. When Sir Reginald hired us to dance at

his clubs, he made the offer.” Tygress shrugged. “As much traveling as we do, it just seemed to make sense.”

Zebrah nodded. “Sir Reginald and Lady Penelope have no children so they’ve kind of adopted us.” With that, they reached a pair of glass doors and she opened them.

Cassandra’s eyes went wide as the group stepped out into the garden—a well-manicured forest would be a better description.

Sir Reginald had his back to them at the moment. He had a drink in hand and was giving dinner instructions to a female servant. Once she left, he turned and smiled. “Ah, good.” He stepped over to a nearby wall intercom and activated it. “My dear? Our guests have arrived.”

“Excellent, Reginald. I’ll be right down.”

Turning off the device, he came back over and nodded to the new arrivals as Zebrah and Tygress stretched out on their respective lunges. “Dr. Jackson. And you must be Cassandra and Cindy.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry we didn’t get involved soon enough to save Ann and Rachel as well.”

“Thank you, Sir Reginald,” Sarah said as he offered her and Cassandra chairs and Cindy a large cushion. She continued as he sat down himself. “But there’s no way you could have known about any of it till it hit the news.”

“On the contrary,” he replied. “I’m on a dozen different boards world-wide— including the C.R.C. Once rumors of Dr. Stone’s ...more unsavory activities began to surface, I should have started paying closer attention. If I had, I might have been able to stop all of this before it started.

“You can rest assured that steps have been taken to correct the situation.”

“Reginald, are you boring everyone with business talk already?” They all turned at the sound of the voice of Lady Penelope Playton and Sarah’s

eyes went wide at the sight of the bi-pedal Lioness that seemed to glide into view to settle on one arm of her husband's chair. Sarah looked from one to the other. "Excuse me for being extremely naïve, Sir Reginald, but-"she indicated the two of them- "You're married?!"

"No need to apologize, Doctor," Lady Penelope said. "We lived together for ten years until Parliament passed the GRA."

Sir Reginald placed his hand on hers. "We were married the moment it went into effect."

Lady Penelope stood up then and urged the newcomers to their feet. "No more talk of the past now. I'm sure our guests would like a tour before dinner."

As the tour began, Sarah found her thoughts going round in circles. Back home, Lady Penelope would have been considered the property of whatever lab designed her genetic codes. But here, she's not only considered the equal of any normal human, she's legally allowed to marry one. How could her own country be so closed minded to the obvious?

You can't own an intelligent being- even if you did design it.

She looked up with a start at the feel of Sir Reginald's hand on her shoulder. "You looked like you were a thousand miles away."

Sarah shrugged and shook her head. "More like three thousand." She shrugged again as they walked. "It's crazy. Back home if Cassandra or Cindy were seen in public, someone would probably call the police- or try to catch them. Here, they can walk through downtown London and no one can say a word."

"The Corporate mentality," Sir Reginald said. "It still exists here, too. If the corporation created it, then that corporation has the right to exploit it. It takes a lot to fight that. That mentality almost defeated the GRA. Only our persistence and a lot of genetically engineered beings willing to come forward and speak up helped get it passed."

“If it’s that entrenched,” Sarah asked, “How can you hope to defeat it world-wide?”

“By using every resource at my command,” Sir Reginald stated firmly. Then he stopped her and nodded back toward the house. “Let’s go to my den and talk about this. There’s an idea I’ve been working on since I learned about you and the others.”

As they turned back toward the house, Sarah’s curiosity was on the rise. “What kind of plan?”

“We need voices,” Sir Reginald said as they reached the patio where Zebra and Tygress were dozing. “People willing to go out in public and speak about this.”

As they walked down a hallway, they passed several weapons displays- including one that held a shotgun. As they reached the door to the den, a chime was heard and Sarah looked up. “What’s that?”

“The security system,” Sir Reginald said. “There’s an intruder on the grounds.” He headed back up the hallway- pausing only long enough to take the shotgun from its case.

*

Chapter Twelve

He had to stop and one hand went out to a nearby tree to steady him. War Hound shook his head and fought to get his vision to clear. He ditched the fighter a short distance back and only had to terrorize two people to find out where the Playton Estate was.

Where else would the passengers of PlayPose One be going?

His knees wanted to buckle and send him crashing to the ground. But he fought to resist it.

He had some people to kill before he died.

*

Cassandra had been listening as the Lady Penelope told her and Cindy about the garden. Suddenly, she looked away, toward the house, listening to something only she could hear. “We’ve got trouble,” she said as she cut the Lady off.

Cindy had seen her and Sarah use their link before so it came as no surprise to her. “What kind?”

“Mom doesn’t know,” Cassie replied. She looked to Lady Penelope. “But there’s an intruder on the grounds somewhere.”

“How do you know that?” Her Ladyship asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Cassandra said as she took her hand. “But we’ve got to get back to the house- *Now.*”

*

He moved with all the stealth his wolf-based form allowed, relying more and more on his recently acquired form and its enhanced senses.

Spotting the Estate, he began staggering toward it, the large Bowie knife in his hand.

*

Cindy reached the house first, galloping across the patio and waking Zebrah and Tygress. A moment later, Lady Penelope came running. "In the house girls- quickly!"

The four had just crossed the threshold when Cassandra came into view- only to be knocked to the ground by a massive fist. Lady Playton's eyes went wide at the sight of the massive man-beast. "Who the hell- ?"

Cindy put the name to him. "War Hound."

Tygress' eyes went wide, then they narrowed. "So that's the blighter is it?" She traded glances with Zebrah. No words were needed as the two headed back to help their new friend face the beast.

*

He stood over her, panting with labored breath. "You at last- the prize that started it all."

Cassandra looked up at him as her head slowly stopped spinning. Not knowing that that body housed the mind of the gunman that first tried to kidnap her two days ago, she had no idea what he was talking about.

"I'll get paid twice for you," he added- unaware that Dr. Stone was no longer able to do anything except chew carrots.

Hey Wart Hog!” Tygress yelled, “Forget about us?” A moment later both she and Zebrah were on the massive male, pulling him away from Cassandra and giving the girl a chance to get to her feet.

With a bestial howl of rage, he threw them both off and several feet away. From where she landed, Tygress looked to Zebrah and then Cassandra. “A bit upset, isn’t he?”

Then, with Cassandra behind them, the two RAF reservists faced off against War Hound, prepared to bring every ounce of their training into play. He in turn, stood before the three of them, watching them with a deadly glare as his breathing came harder.

“What’s with you?” Tygress asked. “Wear yourself out on those little pigs’ houses? The brick one must’ve given you fits.”

With a roar of anger and frustration, he charged them, putting all his remaining effort into the assault. It was a fight unlike anything Human. Punches were thrown, but kicks and bites and claws were used as well. Even Cassandra- as untrained as she was- joined in. Her animal side giving her the reflexes and speed to avoid War Hound’s grabs while landing several slashes and gouges of her own.

“Damn you all!” He roared as he grabbed Tygress and flung her across the grounds, back-handed Cassandra and prepared to lunge for Zebrah.

The next moment was shattered by the double-barreled blast of a shotgun-

-a blast that dropped War Hound at Cassandra’s feet with the back of his head reduced to a bloodied ruin.

She swallowed and looked up to see Sarah and Sir Reginald- and the smoke still rising from the shot gun in Sir Reginald’s hand.

*

Chapter Thirteen

The police were called and told the entire story. There was no reason not to tell them and it was easiest way to explain War Hound. It was clear the shooting was the only way to stop him and the police soon left with the body.

Now, as everyone settled down to dinner, Sir Reginald was already thinking ahead. "...The police will stay quiet of I ask them to," he said. His gaze traveled around the table. "But we need to make use of this as quickly as we can before those idiots on the C.R.C.'s board try some spin control of their own."

From where she stood next to Cassandra's chair, with her tail forever in motion behind her, Cindy shook her head. "I don't understand."

"It's simple 'luv," Tygress told her. "We either get the truth out and put the blame for this mess on that bloody Center of yours, or they'll figure out some way of putting the blame on you."

"So what do we do?" Cassandra asked as she passed a platter of bread to Zebrah. "Call a news conference?"

"No- Lord no," Sir Reginald replied. "First they only have so much room in their papers and they try to conserve space by only using 'sound-bytes'- usually out of context.

"No, I think it's time *PlayPose Monthly* put out its first special edition- all about you and Cindy- the entire story." He looked to Lady Penelope. "We'll make it a special issue on Genetic rights- hit the US government over the head with it." He looked to Sarah and then Cassandra. "Hell, we'll go the whole route- photospread and all."

"I don't think your male readers would want to see a centaur as a center fold," Cindy commented drily. "But I'll take part in the article."

Sir Reginald nodded and turned to the younger female. "Cassandra, what do you say? It could open doors to a whole new career for you."

The girl's eyes went wide and she looked to her mother. Sarah could only shrug. "He's right. But it's up to you. You're in a country now where you have every legal right to so 'no'."

"It could be just the thing to get a dancing career started," Tygress noted. Then her eyes went wide. "'Cor, you could join us." She looked to Zebrah. "I've been saying the stage felt a little bare."

Her partner slowly nodded. "The way you moved against War Hound, you might even be a natural." She looked to Sir Reginald. "Might not be a bad idea."

"It's a hell of an idea," he declared with a grin. "*If* Cassandra agrees."

For an instant every eye in the room was on the girl and Cassie wished she were somewhere else. Then she quashed that idea and nodded. "Why not?"

"Good," Sir Reginald cheered. "We'll get things started first thing in the morning."

*

Later that evening, after everyone else had been shown to guestrooms, Sarah found herself summoned and led to the den, where she found Lady Penelope standing before an unlit fireplace. Sarah spoke as the servant left. "You wanted to see me Lady Penelope?"

"You can drop the title, Sarah," the lioness said. "It's been mine for ten years now and I'm still not used to it." She waved the human to a chair as she in turn stretched out on a couch. "I wanted to talk to you in private." She looked down for a moment, then met Sarah's gaze. "Why does Cassandra call you 'Mom'? Is it just because you designed her genetic codes?"

“No,” the genetic engineer replied with a shake of her head. She then told the story of Cassandra’s conception. “...So I am her mother.”

Like the lioness whose DNA she shares, Penelope rose from the couch and began prowling the room. “Reginald and I have been very happily married for a decade now,” she said. “Despite our physical differences, our relationship has been as full as any married couple for ask for- except in one area.” She turned to face Sarah. “I am barren- I know many females all over the world are. But I would give anything...” Her voice trailed off. Then she met Sarah’s gaze. “You designed Cassandra. Would it be possible to take DNA from me and Reginald and duplicate your work?”

The doctor rose from her chair and went to the lioness, taking her hands in her own. “I’m willing to give it one hell of a good try,” she said with a gentle smile.

*

Chapter Fourteen

Next day, Sir Reginald got an early start. As soon as breakfast was over, he headed straight to his den and began making calls. By noon, PlayPose's best photographer and writer were at the Estate meeting, talking and working with Cassandra and Cindy.

At the same time, with a letter of introduction from Sir Reginald and with Lady Penelope at her side, Sarah arrived at a genetic research center outside of London that was part of the Playton Corporation. Once the letter had been presented and explanations were given, Sarah was shown to the center's best lab and given the center's best personnel for her staff.

Within an hour of her arrival, the new project was underway.

*

One week later:

METROPOLITIAN MAGAZINE

In this issue:

A one-on-one interview with Lady Penelope Playton

About The events of the past week and the

Genetically engineered Child she and Sir Reginald

Are Expecting!

WALLSTREET DIARY

PlayPose owner and CEO

Sir Reginald Payton. If he

Pulls his investments out of

The US what kind of damage

Could be done? Answer: Lots

PLAYPOSE MONTHLY

SPECIAL GENETICS ISSUE

Our first genetically engineered vixen of the month:

Cassandra Jackson

-Her story:

- Why she had to flee the USA

- The Black marketers

- The military Black-op program that was sent to
Bring her back- dead or alive.

- The invasion of the Playton Estate- and more

The Genetics Rights Act: If Britain can do it, why can't the
Rest of the world?

USA Daily News

Senator vows to fight GRA legislation

PDN- In Washington DC today, a bill was introduced in committee that some are calling 'the American GRA'. Written to give equal rights to those genetically created life forms that show an intelligence level equal

To a normal human, it's already drawn fire by some senators with republican and conservative ties.

The leader of these senators- Senator Morgan McClusky, declared on the floor of the Senate that passing the bill would be the 'same as giving equal rights to a *cat*.'

The Senator- whose last election campaign received several large donations from several prominent genetic research foundations- has vowed to fight to stop the bill's passage.

In a combined PDN/PEW news poll, 38% of Americans favored equal rights while 30% opposed and 32% were undecided.

One week later:

USA Daily News

Genetic rights supporters march on Washington

PNS- It was a scene out of the 1960s with thousands of people holding signs and banners as a show of support for the Genetics Rights Act. The march, organized after Senator Morgan McClusky vowed to fight the bill, grew beyond it organizers' expectations. Moving along Pennsylvania Ave., the crowd stretched for six blocks.

Upon arriving at the Capital, the leaders of the march had hoped to deliver twenty mail bags of signed petitions in favor of the GRA to the Senator's office. But the door was locked and no one seemed to know where the Senator was.

When this reporter managed to locate Senator McClusky coming out of a restaurant two hours later and asked him about the incident, a sneer and a grunt was the only reply before he drove away.

*

Three days later.

"...WPOS 6 News. The oil's burning late in Congress tonight as the struggle to pass some form of the Genetic Rights Act continues.

"Senator McClusky has been staging a filibuster for the last three hours- refusing to yield the floor to anyone else. It looks like he's trying

to eat up what little time is left. The Senator has vowed to quote ‘Go down fighting’- and that he just might do...”

*

“...Welcome back to ‘Face the Country’. Our guest this Sunday morning is Senator Morgan McClusky. Thank you for joining us, Senator.”

“My pleasure, Martha.”

“Let’s get right to it, Senator. The hot topic for nearly a month now has been the rights of genetically engineered life forms. You have come out strongly opposed to the concept. Why?”

“Very simple. If you create something, you own it. It doesn’t matter how intelligent an artificial life form *appears* to be. It was created and therefore it is owned by the ones that created it and they have the right to do with it as they please.”

“Even if the subject they created shows an intelligence equal to its creator? Even if it’s capable of deciding its own fate?”

“That’s not a factor,” the Senator declared. “We’re talking about the end result of a deliberate process of research, design and construction that never existed in nature. The subject has an artificial origin- an origin created by someone with the intention and the right to profit from it.”

Martha thought about that for a moment. “That sounds like the corporate line, Senator- and it’s well known that several genetic research foundations contributed to your last election campaign.

“I would ask you this then: What about artificial insemination? The act of taking a sperm and deliberately seeding an egg and then with conscious thought, placing that egg in a woman’s womb? By your definition, that child would be artificial and belong to the lab that

performed the procedure.” She leaned forward. “Where do we draw the line, Senator?”

He just glared at her in silence as she continued. “Are you saying that all beings with an artificial origin should be considered property?”

McClusky rose from his seat and turned to leave. “Senator?”

He never answered as he left the studio.

*

The night life in London- as in any city- shifts from one part of town to another. But one constant was the PlayPose Club. This was the original- the first club. Opened nearly 50 years ago, it was the standard all the other clubs were expected to meet.

It was a full house here tonight- and with good reason. There’d been rumors that Sir Reginald himself would be here tonight. Those rumors were confirmed when the man himself walked out onto the club’s stage. The crowd went silent as if someone had flipped a switch. “First of all, I would like to thank everyone for coming tonight. We’ve got a special night planned as we welcome a new member to our growing family. Hopefully, you’ve read her story in our special edition.

“Tonight, I am proud to introduce the newest member of our exclusive entertainment ensemble.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Zebrah, Tygress and their newest member, Cassandra Jackson- The Exotics!”

As the crowd applauded, the girls came out and took their places on the stage.

Seated at Sir Reginald’s table, Sarah could only smile and shake her head. Cassandra looked scared as hell. But once the music started, it was clear she was right where she wanted to be- right where she belonged.

Once the girls finished their first number, the audience let her know it, too.

*

ROLLING ROCK MAGAZINE

THE EXOTICS- THEIR STORY

- THEIR OPINIONS

- THEIR KIND OF MUSIC

TEEN TUNE

Cassandra Jackson-

-the youngest Exotic speaks out
on her tastes and views.

World Entertainment Weekly

Cassandra Jackson denied entry into US

PEN- At a news conference in London today, the Exotics- the number one entertainment group in all the polls- announced that they are being forced to cancel their US tour due to political maneuvering. The group's spokesperson, Zebrahead said, "They've refused to let Cassandra return. She's part of our family now. If you deny one of us, you deny all of us.

"We are still planning to tour Canada and Mexico. Those who wish to see our show will have to go there and make sure you let the US Congress know how you feel about it."

When asked about this, Senator Morgan McClusky admitted that the refusal was issued on his recommendation. "We don't need her

genetically engineered trouble making. Just being seen might be enough to stir other genetic property into rebellion.”

*

One week later.

USA Daily News

Democrats get GRA to floor for vote

PNS- In a surprise move the democrats managed to get the Genetic Rights Act out of committee on a roll-call vote and schedule a full vote on the floor of the Senate for next week. The leader of the opposition to the bill- Senator McClusky- was said to be furious with those of his own party who broke ranks to side with the democrats in voting to move the bill out of committee. Vowing that the bill will pass ‘over my dead body’, the Senator is said to be calling every member of his party as well as every Independent in Congress urging them to oppose the bill’s passage.

*

“...WPOS 6 News. We take you now to Washington for the latest on the battle to pass- or defeat- the Genetics Rights Act. Tanya?”

“Thank you, Cheryl. They’ve been going at it for several hours now- it’s been more like a shouting match than the kind of vote we’re used to seeing. I’m sure the latest polls are only adding fuel to the fire. 55% of Americans now favor equal rights for genetically engineered life- which is a major turnaround from the original polls taken almost a month ago.

“Most credit- or blame- depending on which side you’re on, Sir Reginald Playton and his media empire for getting the information out to

the public. It's no secret that several congressmen- even the President- wish the information had never gotten out.

"Not only did it force the cancelation of the Military's War Hound program, it's polarized the nation in a way we haven't seen since the 1960s.

"When asked at a news conference earlier today if he would sign some form of the GRA, the President replied that he would have to look it over very carefully. Of course he also has the option of letting the Act become law without signing it, but in this case, I think that would send a message he doesn't want to send- or be remembered for.

"Cheryl?"

"Tanya, any idea when we might know the outcome of the vote?"

"Not anytime soon. Senator McClusky and his associates are taking turns filibustering and delaying the vote, so your guess is as good as mine."

*

Next morning

London- the Playton Estate

Cassandra woke at the knock on her bedroom door and slowly sat up as she wiped her hair out of her face. "Come in."

Sarah entered and smiled. In the past month, Cassie had easily adopted to the idea of having a room of her own- a private place with no camera or monitors watching her every move. "Morning, Kitten. Got something I think you'll want to see." Her mother then handed her the morning paper.

London Times

US Congress passes GRA

BILL PASSES BY MINIMUM TWO-THIRDS REQUIRED

Cassandra looked up at her mother. “So we won?”

Sarah shrugged. “Not sure. The President still hasn’t decided if he’s going to sign it- but at least he’s not talking veto. On the other hand, Senator McClusky has filed for re-election, vowing to get the bill repealed.”

Cassandra looked down at the paper again. “It’ll never end, will it?”

Sarah shook her head. “The fight for what’s right rarely does. Idiots like McClusky are always going to be out there trying to ruin what’s right for everyone else.

“But, the British embassy called. The US has lifted it travel restrictions. The Exotics can enter the country anytime. Zebrahead wants to reschedule the tour and get in before they change their minds.

“So,” Sarah continued with a deep breath, “You’d best be getting up. There’s lots to do today.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

END