

Touring Canmeph at \$100 a Day

by Mike Fang, with creative input by Striker Redwolf

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A soft digital chime sounded overhead, making me look up from my tablet. "Attention passengers," said a voice in a smooth, practiced tone. "We're beginning to enter Canmeph-2's atmosphere and will be making our descent to Mako Spaceport. The local time is 13:17; on behalf of the flight crew, we thank you for choosing InterSol Spaceways for your interplanetary travel needs." I smirked and tapped my tablet screen, shutting it down as the spacecraft shuddered with the friction of entering the gaseous pocket surrounding the planet. I felt it a bit less than the other passengers, thanks to the cushioning of the seat built for someone at least twice my size. Rather than going with a Terran-sized seat, I'd sprung for a full Canmephian-sized one. It was still coach class, but the bigger seat afforded me more legroom, which as anyone whose flown commercial can tell you is a luxury not often available.

This wasn't my first trip to Canmeph-2; business had called me there once or twice before, but my visit this time would be my first casual trip. After my last case, I'd decided to schedule myself a vacation, once my workload allowed it. So after putting a halt on incoming cases, I took care of the few that had been waiting for me on my return from Scotland. It was thankfully a light backlog; a few routine background checks and one suspicious husband. Once they'd been taken care of, I'd packed my bags, hung a "Gone Fishin'" sign on my inbox and hopped the first ship off Earth.

The weather report I'd checked said this would be an ideal week for a casual visit to Canmeph-2; temperate conditions overall with maybe a shower or two late in the week. To that end, I'd dressed in my customary casual attire; a green button up-short sleeve shirt i wore open with a tank top undershirt, tan slacks and boots. I'd traded my regular fedora for a straw one, too. Sliding a pair of mirror shades onto my face, I waited for the bulk of the other passengers to make their way off before entering the aisle myself; I didn't care to start my vacation by getting stepped on by a Wolfskunk or Dryger with a blind spot for anything a few feet in front of them.

The spaceport was the expected hive of activity any mass transportation station is during regular business hours. As I walked down the ramp to enter the terminal, taking in the crowds of business travelers, vacationers like myself and military personnel on shore leave, I reflected with some bemusement on how apt the term "hive of activity" was and how much more readily certain Terran species find it to use mass transportation. While it's true that anthros aren't feral animals (despite our strong resemblances to our ancestors and natural cousins) in all of us are

still the ingrained traits we're born with. Nobody sane is divorced of responsibility or control over their actions (though I've seen some people try to get out of trouble by claiming instinct made them do something) but there's no denying being a member of a certain species can come with certain inclinations. Herd species, hive arthropod species like ants and bees, and schooling marine species tend to fall back on their natural talent for navigating crowds and moving en masse. I've rarely seen them get claustrophobic moving through the masses, though it happens. Pack predators are at less of an advantage; while -most- of them have a natural knack for teamwork, they're used to having breathing space. Solidary species often have it the toughest; believe me, you don't want to share seat on a flight next to a grumpy bear.

As for me, I found I could take or leave the crowds; I certainly didn't find it enjoyable as I wove my way through the masses to get to the baggage claim, but I didn't find myself having to clench my teeth and bite back on some deep-seated anxiety, either. Once I had my bag, I was headed for the door when my smartphone started buzzing on my hip. I didn't have to wonder much who was calling; my contacts on the planet were fairly select at the time. Sure enough, the caller ID was just who I guessed.

"Hey Red, fancy you calling," I said, moving off to the side so I was out of the main flow of footpaw traffic.

"Hey hon," Redwolf said, "How was the flight?"

"Just fine," I replied. "How'd you know I was coming?"

"Oh you know me," the drygerskunk said on the other end, "I like to keep tabs on you, 'specially when you're getting up to shenanigans."

"Shenanigans? ME?" I said with deliberate insincerity, a grin creasing my muzzle. "What EVER gave you THAT idea?"

Redwolf snorted with amusement. "Oh please," the drygerskunk said. "I saw the 'on vacation' auto-reply you put on your work email; I expect to see some people rolling down the street, looking like parade floats before you're done."

I could only snicker in reply. Secured in my bag was an identical shirt to the one I was wearing. However, that shirt had couple of very important additional features; I'd made use of the Canmephian developments in "hammerspace," as it's called, and had a couple of physics-defying pockets sewn into them. Each one containing about as much space as a walk-in closet, they made packing a breeze, though I had to check it before boarding my flight since the pockets contained a number of non-carry on items, including some "toys" I'd brought along.

"So where are you now?" Red asked.

"Just got my luggage," I said as I continued toward the exit, passing by some other recent departees standing in line at a vehicle rental desk, "and I'm headed out to catch a cab and find a hotel."

"Pfff," the drygerskunk replied. "Forget that; we've got some guest rooms here at Shotgun Shells."

"Oh well that's generous of you," I said, "I wasn't expect you to play host for me."

"Nahh," Red said. "No problem at all. The driver will bring you straight over."

I stopped in my tracks. "You sent someone?" I said. "Wow, now you ARE spoiling me."

"Heh, enjoy the perks when you can get them, that's what I say," Redwolf chuckled.

"Sounds good to me," I said with a smirk as I stepped through the sliding doors out of the spaceport. Standing under the covered entryway, I looked around and spotted a three-wheeled ground vehicle; standing next to it was a Bond wolfskunk - a variety of wolfskunk equipped with a number of prehensile tendrils, camouflage capabilities and a knack for espionage - holding a sign with my name on it.

"And I see 'em now," I said. "Well, thanks for the pick-up; I'll see you in person in a few."

"Catch you when you get here," Red said as we hung up. As I approached the Bond, I wondered in amusement what made Redwolf decide to send this particular person, given some recent events.

"Mr. Fang?" The bond said, looking at me with some apparent surprise.

"That's me," I said. "I suspect my reputation precedes me?"

"Heh, it certainly does," the Bond said with a slight chuckle. "Name's Woodwork, Fadein Woodwork; the admiral sent me to give you a lift into town."

"Much obliged," I said, hefting my valise. Woodwork popped the locks on his car with a keychain fob and I climbed (literally) into the shotgun seat. "I suspect from your surprise you were expecting me to look different?" I asked as the wolfskunk slid in behind the wheel.

"Mmmm, just a little," shi said. "From the stories I've heard, I'd expected someone a bit, well, bigger, no offense."

"Heh, none taken," I said with a smirk. "I have a knack for defying expectation."

I suspected Woodwork was thinking of a particular story more than any other. In the few days after my last big case - the "Quipple Incident" as I thought of it at the time - I was a bit paranoid for fear of reprisal from the psychopathic geneticist whose plans I'd helped disrupt. One evening, as I was working on my computer in my bedroom, I got the distinct impression I was being watched. It was evening, and as I looked at a darker corner of the monitor, I saw something in the reflection of the room behind me. A large patch on the wall just over my bed moved. I thought I could just barely see an outline of someone or something there.

Trying to seem nonchalant, I'd reached over and turned off my desk lamp...then I jumped out of my seat, grabbed the glass of iced tea sitting next to me on my desk and threw its contents at the distorted space on the wall. The space suddenly moved, destroying the illusion of concealment. I leaped at the figure on the wall, grabbing it by its shoulders and dragging it onto the floor as I yanked my revolver off my hip and pressed it to the back of the camouflaged interloper's neck.

"AHHH! DON'T SHOOT! DON'T SHOOT!" Shi'd yelled out. I immediately demanded to know who shi was and who sent hir. Slowly, the camouflage coloration faded, revealing a Bond wolfskunk in a skintight, reactive suit that worked somehow with hir natural camouflage ability.

The Bond had sighed. "I'm gonna get SUCH a bad grade on this...," shi'd groaned.

As it turned out, the Bond was a recruit training to join the Canmephian intelligence bureau. As part of a training exercise, and to afford me some added protection, Redwolf had hir assigned to shadow me and send in reports on my activity. Hir cover now blown, however, shi was worried about flunking the project. I felt a bit bad about lousing up what was, ultimately, a harmless exercise with the best of intentions (even if shi had imposed on my privacy somewhat, though the recruit swore shi'd never spied on me doing anything especially private), so after contacting Red, we worked out a make-up assignment for the recruit; instead of monitoring me, shi monitored activity of those around me. I felt a bit more at ease with the added security, and the recruit got to salvage hir grade.

Woodwork pulled smoothly into the flow of traffic leaving the spaceport terminal and soon we were on the freeway. I'll certainly give the Canmephian's this; they're no slouches when it comes to building smart. The freeway rose up on large cement pilings, taking us up just above the treetops, minimizing the impact to the natural spaces between towns and cities. Just below the highway also ran a commuter rail line for municipal transportation between the major metropolitan areas. After a while, the tree line thinned out and turned into vast tracts of farmland, the colors alternating between the native grain fields, vegetables, orchards, and livestock ranches. Solar panels spread out in small patches beneath us as well, while wind turbines dotted the horizon on occasion.

Finally, as we got closer, I could make out the skyscrapers and denser metro area of the Canmephian city D.C. The road began to dip and slowly incline downward as we entered the suburban sprawl just outside of it; a fairly ritzy neighborhood where those who could afford larger houses with more privacy were located there. Most of the houses had a good-sized plot of land that went with it, and were done up in either composite materials molded to look like genuine wood, or the real deal for those with enough money to afford authenticity. Further in, as the houses got a bit more densely packed, the homes became more prefab affairs, looking cozy but not anything like the mansions we'd passed before.

As we entered the city proper, I reflected on how well the Canmephians also handle their municipal systems. The streets were clean almost to the point of being spotless, and regular automated sweepers rolled by. There were bus stations in the suburbs at frequent intervals, as well as monorail and subway stations the further into the city we got. Back on Earth, a major city would be plastered with all sorts of advertisements and billboards, but here, commercial advertising seemed to be much more streamlined. Some buildings had holographic billboards on top, which changed the ad displayed on it every so often. Street level, there were business logos over the doors and on the windows of the businesses, but you weren't assaulted by ad posters every 10 feet or with product placement slapped on every square inch of vertical space that could be filled.

The streets themselves were also remarkably well-kept. Try to drive through any major city on Earth and you can't seem to go a block without seeing some kind of construction project with a road blocked off. But as we cruised down Canmeph's D.C., I saw only two small areas where road repairs were being conducted. The workers, all Detective classes, were hauling ass too, rather than the frequent practice of Terran road crews having maybe two people work while eight others stood around and "supervised."

On the few occasions where the city didn't seem almost immaculately kept, it actually drew attention. We saw one example as we passed by a small corner convenience store, where someone had decided to "express" themselves with spray paint on the side of the wall. A flustered-looking shopkeeper was standing nearby, talking to a cop while a second officer was taking pictures. A few rubber-neckers were nearby, as well as a dryger with a tablet and stylus that I suspected was a local journalist.

Finally, turning the corner, we'd arrived. A three-story building came up on our left side; the street-level door had an awning over it, with a holo-marquee that read "The Double Barrel" over it. The door lead to an upper-middle-tier restaurant that I was told was popular with dual-headed clientele. Just a bit down the sidewalk from the front door was a descending staircase that led to a bellow-ground cellar door; another holo-marquee was installed on the side of the

building, over this lower entrance with an arrow pointing downward. The words "Shotgun Shells" were super-imposed over a pair of crossed examples of scatter gun ammunition.

I grabbed my valise and followed Woodwork down the steps and into the bar. The lunch crowd had thinned out just slightly, but there were still a good number of patrons scattered about the place. Shotgun Shells was arranged with its public areas up front and its behind-the-scenes workings to the rear of the basement. A peninsula bar was immediately in front of the doorway, barstools surrounding it, ornate taps all along the surface while registers remained semi-hidden beneath the bar's surface. Booths lined the walls, while several small tables were set up near the stage of an "ergo strobbler," the Canmephian equivalent of a Karaoke machine. At the far rear of the bar, several doorways were labeled "Male," "Female," "Herm" (the restrooms, naturally), "Office," "Kitchen" and "Brewery." To the left of all these were an elevator and a staircase leading up and around a corner.

The door slid shut behind me, the digital recreation of a shop bell dying off. From behind the bar, a neatly-dressed wolfskunk in a upper-scale bartenders uniform with a tie snugged between hir cleavage, looked up from polishing a pint glass.

"Ah, there he is!" the 'tender said, setting the glass in its rack.

"Hey Shotgun," I said, grinning and nodding in recognition. "Staying busy as always?"

"You know it," Shi said, taking a glass being held up by someone at the bar. Shi filled it from the nearest tap, drew a foam-scraper neatly along the top and set the refill on the coaster in front of hir customer. "Red's upstairs, said shi'd be down in a bit. We've got you in #5."

"Preciate it," I said, using the footrest of the bar to reach up to the counter, where Shotgun had set a keycard. "I'll be right down after I get unpacked." I took the stairs up to the guest room floor; Redwolf had bought the brewpub and done a lot of renovations and improvements over time, turning it into one of the most popular watering holes in the entire city. Shi had an apartment overhead and had fitted up several guest rooms, as well apartments for several others. The guest quarters I got would be considered cozy for a Canmephian, so for me they were pretty spacious. A living room with an open kitchenette off to the left of the front door, with a small hallway leading to a half-bath with a shower stall and two bedrooms. I took my pick of them, tossing my luggage on the bed and opening it up. I couldn't help but grin, whistling the tune to "Mack the Knife," as I dug through my luggage and found the special shirt I'd brought with me; the one that was identical to the green, button-up, short sleeve number I was wearing, but with the physics-defying pockets I had filled with "toys." Slipping this shirt on in place of my normal one, I was armed and dangerous...for shenanigans.

"Lookout D.C.," I said, flipping my straw fedora back on. "Mikey's back in town!"

I took the elevator back down to the pub. With me were a couple of other patrons; when one of them noticed me, I caught the faint sound of hir humming the theme to "Inspector Gadget." I couldn't help rolling my eyes, but bit back the urge to tell them to pick a classier reference to make.

Stepping out of the lift, it didn't take me long to spot Redwolf. Even among hir own kind, shi tended to stand out; the drygerskunk had gone "six paw drive" as the phrase went that referred to a hextaur form for Canmephians. Six arms also lined hir upper body, which went well with the three heads that were simultaneously fiddling with a tablet, drinking a beer and talking to Shotgun. When it comes to multitasking, Canmephians have got the market cornered.

"...so troop rotations need to be completely redone," I heard Red saying as I approached. "I think that base must have had the most cases of cabin fever and SAD I've ever seen in an installation."

"You mean including the Antarctica base?" I said, hopping up on a barstool.

"Hey Mikey!" Red said, one of hir heads looking up from hir tablet. "Actually the South Pole base's problem was abuse of authority and disciplinary issues."

"Pff, that's putting it mildly," I said, looking to the side as Sidearm, another Shotgun Shells staffmember, came down my way. I ordered my usual screwdriver; one of the nice things about Sidearm was shi never screwed up my drink; vodka in the glass first, orange juice on top of it, chilled but no ice and hand stirred. I don't know why that recipe is so hard to follow for some tenders, who just dump in ice, juice, then vodka and hand it to you so you get the vodka sitting on top and tasting like lighter fluid.

"So," I said to Red, taking a pull from my glass. "What's new around here?"

"Pretty much SSDD," the drygerskunk said, setting hir tablet down as shi drained hir brew and tapped himself another one; one of the perks of being the owner. "We've been trying to increase troop rotations to avoid stagnation and tedium setting in. We've also had a few small disciplinary issues with some of the cadets."

"Heh, the pledges starting to act up on you?" I said with a chuckle. Red smirked in response.

"Something like that. First one of them got tired of the muzak in the mess hall so they hacked the sound system and started playing hir own mix tape. Then another one found out one of hir instructors had been moonlighting as a stripper for extra cash; so they stuck a video of hir in a presentation being given to the academy board. Then for the coup de grace, a trio of the little

hack-happy punks seized control of an entire platoon of power armor troopers while they were doing drills; hacked the armor controls and used 'em like puppets."

"Oooh boy," I said, smirking and shaking my head. "What'd they make 'em do? Harlem Shake?"

"Nahh, too predictable," Red said. "They went with Oppa Gangam Style."

"Ahh, classic," I said with a snicker.

"So, how long are you planetside?" Red asked, draining hir latest brew. I finished up my own drink, but declined a refill.

"A week or so," I said. "One of the nice things about being your own boss is you don't have to meet someone else's schedule, unless you want to."

"Got any plans while you're here?" the drygerskunk asked. I feigned nonchalance.

"Oh, figured I'd do a bit of sightseeing," I said, "visit some landmarks and local attractions...also mmmmmmmaaayyyyyybe get up to some...shenanigans." A slow grin spread across my muzzle as I smirked at Red; the drygerskunk scrunched up all three faces like somebody just told hir every weeaboo was going to attend the next anime convention on Canmeph.

"I KNEW it," shi said in triplicate, before two of hir heads went back to what they'd been doing already while the third remained focused on me, still looking apprehensive. "So when am I going to need to bail you out of jail?"

"That'll depend on whether they catch me or decide to press charges," I snickered evilly. "Ah c'mon Red! I'm not gonna do anything THAT bad!"

"P'shyeah," the wolfskunk scoffed, looking askance at me. "You're probably just going to require half the doors in D.C. to get cut wider to let people get through 'em."

I started to respond when one of the overhead flatscreens caught my eye. They were finishing up a commercial for one of the frequent public events they hold in D.C.; the Canmephians were pretty well known for their fairs and expos, but this looked like something different to me.

"The Growth Games?" I said, my curiosity piqued; I turned to Red and pointed at the screen over my shoulder with my thumb. "What's this about?"

"Oh the games?" Red said. "Surprised you haven't heard about them by now. We have a series of annual competitions that involve growth and expansion. You've got your typical grow-offs, plus some various tests of skill to see how well contestants can perform with expanded parts; the whole thing culminates in the big 'balloonie-ball' competition."

"Rrrrrreeaaallly?" I said, feeling more excited by the minute. "Heheheh, this sounds like my kinda thing!"

"Tsk, yeah, it would be...", Red said, looking a bit rueful, "except for one thing. The expansion that goes on here isn't the kind I've seen you typically get up to."

"Ahhh," I said. I could feel my enthusiasm starting to wane. "So more traditional for Canmephians then, eh? Plenty of breasts, dicks and butts...",

"But not guts, yeah," the drygerskunk said. "There's been a little bit of talk about adding some girth-related competitions to the games, but let's be honest; your particular brand of inflation is still kind of a niche deal around here."

"Mmm, always has been," I said, signaling Sidearm I was ready for my second screwdriver. "Both here and on Earth."

"Where?" Sidearm said as shi mixed my drink.

"Sol-3," Redwolf said. "Mikey uses the classic name for it."

"Ahhh," the 'tender said, sliding me my glass.

"Still," I said, taking a pull as I watched the remainder of the ad playing out. "I can't imagine it would be -that- hard to get the roster of competitions, heheh, expanded."

"Well, there's a stumbling block," Redwolf said, leaning two sets of elbows on the bar. "See, the events are set up and coordinated by the World Wide Committee on Competition, which has a number of expansion industry bigwigs on it. And of course...",

"They're all about traditional Canmephian inflation," I said, nodding. "So they don't wanna spring for what's not making them a lot of credits." The drygerskunk tsk'ed, and pointed at me while nodding. I pursed my lips and thought a bit. I felt like me and my fellow girth expansionists were being unfairly marginalized. They had a series of games devoted to stretching the limits and they were going to dismiss us entirely? Shame on them. The more I thought about it, the more I started to grin.

"Uh oh..., ' Red said, raising three eyebrows on three faces. "I know that look...",

"Perhaps all these big wigs need is the right person to make a case with them," I said, turning and grinning toothily at Redwolf. "Someone to...BROADEN their viewpoints, EXPAND their...horizons."

The drygerskunk did a perfectly synchronized triple eyeroll.

"Oh," said one head.

"Good," said the second.

"Diety," said the third.

Neon lights were burning into the night, playing off the already multi-colored crowd of people standing in line outside the club. I stood on the street corner, feigning like I was looking at my smartphone. In reality, I was building up my nerves to try and pull off my intended caper. Inside the club, my target was waiting; the overlord of the fortress, secure behind his minions and followers, not knowing I was scheming to dethrone him, if only temporarily. A plastic shopping bag was in my other hand, containing my disguise; I'd need to be unnoticed if I was to get close enough. I just hoped the crowd would be motley and lively enough I wouldn't attract attention.

My target was one Wolfskunk Sylvia Cracken, the first member of the WWCC on my list. Cracken was one of the biggest latex providers in D.C.; his business provided all the outfit material for participants in the games, particularly for the team events that needed color-coordinated uniforms. She was also owner and operator of The Vat, one of the most popular latex bondage clubs in the city. I'd gone there earlier in the day, feigning an interest in a membership and was given the dollar tour of the place, so I had an idea of the layout and, most importantly, the staff's dress code.

I crossed the street about a block away from the club, then headed towards the front door, veering off into an alleyway. Like the rest of the city, it was surprisingly clean and orderly, though there were still plenty of dumpsters and stacks of empty boxes, crates and loading pallets. It only took me a second to locate the door I was looking for; while most of the building had modern keycard or password-protected doors, this one was an old-fashioned tumbler lock. I pulled over a couple pallets to give me the height I needed to comfortably work on the lock with my picks. It took a bit of extra pressure to move the Canmephian-sized pins, but in short time I heard the telltale "SNICK!" as the door opened. It revealed the back of a standing shelf unit, proving the door wasn't used regularly. I ducked under the lowest shelf and pulled the door shut behind me as quietly as possible, looking around the interior of the ground floor storage room. Liquor crates, beer kegs, bulk containers of snack foods, all the usual fare you'd expect to see in a bar were stored here; at least that's what I could make out in the dim light from the crack under the far door.

Slipping over to the most out-of-the-way corner I could, I got changed into my disguise. A pair of black latex pants took a bit of tugging to get into, but eventually I managed to slide them on and buckle the built-in belt. No shirt was required, but a black latex hood that was a

combination gas mask and gimp mask slid on fairly easily, with a bit of talcum powder to prevent it from pulling at my fur. I'm not usually one for kinky restraints, so I felt a bit weird dressing up like I should be telling someone to twist my tail and call me a bad boy. Finally, I clipped a small black latex dimensional pouch to my waistband on my hip. It would be the sort of thing most bondage people would keep personal items in; for me, it was a handy place to stash my equipment for tonight's job. Thus equipped, I took a breath and went to the storage room door, sliding it open and slipping into the crowd.

The Vat was in full swing that night, most likely thanks to the upcoming Growth Games. Plenty of Canmephians decked out in their best latex were swinging it on the dance floor, as well as just about everywhere else in the club. The races of the planet were well known for their, to put it politely, carefree attitude towards modesty. At least during appropriate times in appropriate locations. I can safely say I've never been blindsided by sudden and unexpectedly lewd behavior from Canmephian people. No, they've always given ample forewarning. In fact if they have any seemingly universal weakness, it's that they seem to have everything over-organized; culturally they seem to have smartly-built systems and plans in place for almost everything. It's commendable in a lot of ways, but at the same time, it means they're predictable; being spontaneous is not one of their strong suits, as a general rule.

As I emerged from a side hallway onto the main floor of The Vat, I knew exactly where my target would be. Cracken's personal schedule was openly distributed, as being admitted to his personal party when he attended the club was considered a VIP event. I knew Cracken would be in his private party room, an out-of-the-way upstairs lair I'd seen the doors to during my dollar tour, but hadn't been permitted to see inside. If I was going to get in there, I needed to have a reason; and I had a story in mind. I just hoped they'd buy it.

Looking out over the technicolored crowd, I was pretty sure my ruse would work. In addition to Canmephians, there were plenty of Terran customers as well, most of the larger variety, but also a number of the average-sized, like myself. They were all bumping and grinding in all manner of motion, from the apparently skilled dancers to those who were clearly just making the most suggestive hip thrusts they could against their partners. Just about everybody was disrobed to some degree. Like I said, Canmephians plan to an almost manic degree, and give you plenty of forewarning, but that doesn't mean they don't cut loose. Large, eye-popping breasts, jaw-dropping genitals and titanic rumps were scattered about, freed to the wind and bared for all to see with no shame; in fact in most cases, it was with no small amount of pride, from the looks on people's faces. Up on the stage, the DJ who was spinning discs looked dressed for Mardi Gras back on Earth. Shi (or perhaps she, I couldn't see the DJ's lower extremities due to the turntable) was a wolfskunk whose fur color I couldn't make out due to the laser light show and the multi-colored glow stick bands around his four arms. She was dual

headed, wearing a pair of top hats done up in a voodoo style with feathers and skull ornaments, and a collection of beads were bouncing around between the cleavage of his four sizeable and bare naked breasts.

I weaved through the crowd over to the bar on the left, where one of two bartenders was busily pouring out drinks and loading them onto a tray. I tapped him on the elbow and she looked down at me.

"Hey there, what can I get for ya?" she said.

"Actually I'm here for work," I told the 'tender. "I'm trying out for the wait staff."

"Really?" the 'tender said, eyebrow raised. "I wasn't told to expect any extra help tonight..."

"Well I'm on my probationary period," I said, "And I wasn't supposed to start YET...but I heard how busy it was tonight, and figured I'd try to earn some brownie points by pitching in early."

"Heh, well you're certainly earning some now!" the bartender said with apparent relief. "We're running at capacity; if this crowd gets any bigger, I'm gonna have to ask Cracken to call in some reserves. Anyway..." The 'tender slid a tray over to me. "This one goes to table 10 upstairs."

"No problem," I said, taking the tray carefully and heading for the escalator to the upper balcony. As I stepped onto it, I couldn't resist a mischievous impulse that slid across my brain. No reason I couldn't have a bit of fun with the REST of the partygoers tonight, as long as I didn't make it too obvious...Balancing the tray on my shoulder, I reached into my pocket and grabbed the first packet of expansion prank concoction I could get my hands on. Tearing it open with my teeth, after unzipping the muzzle of my mask, I poured the contents into one of the cocktails on the platter, stepping off the elevator as it dissolved into the drink.

The lighting upstairs was brighter and wasn't strobing like downstairs, allowing me to see the maroon-painted walls with the occasional abstract art hanging on them. Table 10 was just to my left; a trio of dominant-looking Canmephians were sitting there; a female dryger in a corset with a riding crop, a male dryger in a daddy harness and a herm in biker leathers and assless chaps. As I rounded the corner, I saw that the male dryger wasn't just shooting the breeze like his other compatriots apparently were; on his hands and knees in front of the dryger was a large Terran husky giving the dryger a BJ, or so I suspected from the way his head was moving.

Trying to keep my cool, even though I'm not normally one to hang out in places that cavalier about sex, I walked to the table and slid the tray onto the surface.

"Refills, folks?" I said, lifting the sizeable cocktail glasses onto the table surface and taking the empties. Only one of the trio, the female, acknowledged me with a nod, while the other two

just took their drinks and waved me off. I headed back towards the escalator down; there was a bit of a crowd there, apparently a large group coming up, so I had to wait. I didn't mind. It meant I got to catch part of the show behind me in peripheral vision.

The male dryer took a big slug from his drink...the one I'd spiked. I didn't have time to read the label on the packet I'd dumped in there, but quickly found out it must have been a packet of Flab-ulous Fun Powder. With a burp, the dryer's rock-hard abs were beginning to soften and spread. His compatriots blinked and seemed a little perplexed, like they weren't sure what they were looking at. Then dawning realization seemed to come to them as they watched in awed fascination as the dryer's gut started spreading out from him in waves of jelly-like flab. I chuckled a bit; I'm not a fan of flab, but I know some people are and hey, if someone got a kick out of it, that was fine by me.

The two other doms were stifling laughs as their fattening friend seemed to be having an Emperor's New Clothes moment; completely oblivious to his expanding girth, the now flabby feline let out another belch as his mounds of lard were spreading across his lap...and consequently, across the back of the head and neck of his good-time buddy down there. The sub on his knees in front of the dryer seemed to pause a moment, then reached up and jolted in shock as his hands touched the blubber spreading across his shoulders.

"MMMPH!" He said, and started to try and get up, but the dryer reached down and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Heh, hold on there boyo," the dryer said with a smirk. "I didn't say you were finished yet."

By then the crowd had cleared up at the escalator, and I wasn't able to keep hanging around with out raising suspicion. As I stepped onto the stairs going down, though, I got to hear the delightful sound of the dryer going. "WHOA, WHAT TH' FUCK?!" as he doubtlessly had finally clicked to the fact his girth was putting those harness straps to the test.

Back downstairs, the bartender motioned me over with a couple bottles of champagne. "These two go to the fun-time couple in Room 3," shi said. I nodded without comment and headed upstairs again, getting a sideways glance at the dryer dom playing with his new rolls with a bemused expression. The private rooms were down a short hallway and around a corner. I'd seen their insides during my dollar tour of the place; the kind of rooms you'd expect in a cheesy hookup motel, heart-shaped beds and all. I located room 3, the sounds of vigorous humping audible from through the door, but before I went in, I dug a syringe out of my side pack, along with one of those medical bottles with the aluminum-rimmed rubber cap. The needle pierced the cap and withdrew some clear fluid, your basic air producer. It was specially formulated to mix with digestive fluids and produce mass quantities of air. Marks on the syringe showed lines that were a safe dosage for a person of a given height. I stuck the needle into the cork of the

champagne bottle, dosing it with enough to blow up a person 10 feet in height; a fairly average height for Canmephians. After repeating the process with the second bottle, I went inside.

The lovebirds were a male and female pair of drygers, the former eagerly giving it to his girl doggy style. Hips were thrusting back and forth, with rhythmic grunts going in time with the swaying of the male dryger's package. I tried not to stare as the two were kneading the baby dough.

"Ahem," I said, standing just to the side. "Your champagne."

"Oh! Thanks!" The male dryger said breathlessly, twisting around and taking both bottles. He passed one to his girl, the two unceremoniously pulling the corks out with their teeth and slugging straight from the bottles as I left. I slid the door partly shut, but left it cracked open so I could get a good look at the show, once I was sure the halls were still empty. I giggled behind my mask as the drygers began to swell and bloat, their bellies extending - the male's along his girlfriend's back, the females along the bed. The two were so enthralled in their thrusting they didn't even seem to notice they were taking up more and more space as they stretched further and further out. The expansion began to spread a bit to their limbs as well, their arms and legs becoming larger and more like a parade float in shape.

"Oh GAWD YES!" The female dryger gasped, starting to bounce up and down on her belly. "That's it, FILL ME!"

"Mmm, oh I'm gonna take you to OUTER SPACE!" her boyfriend grunted lustily, his head starting to reach the ceiling as his gut was growing past the back of his lover's neck. I just stifled a snicker as I slid the door shut on the hump-meisters. Finally, it was time. The doors to Cracken's inner sanctum was just behind me. With an empty tray like I was there to bus tables, I took a deep breath and put my shoulder to one of the double-doors and slipped through.

The master of The Vat had a private chamber that was a perfectly square room where shi entertained hir closest VIP's. Spread around the room like a semi-disorganized gym were spanking saddles, vacuum beds, suspension frames, racks, stocks, and other kinky bondage furniture, all done in the customary black leather and stainless steel. Interspersed between them, in alcoves along the walls were leather couches surrounding low glass coffee tables. A private bar was on the right hand side of the room, a 'tender shaking two different martinis in a total of four hands. It was a busy night, and gasps, moans and groans were coming from all over the place as gimped-up subs were getting worked over by their harnessed and corset-clad masters. Crops snapped through the air, paddles smacked with loud cracks, and hips were thrusting in every direction.

In the center of the room, like the ringmaster of a perverted circus or the king or queen of a decadent court, was Cracken. The wolfskunk stood a good 13 feet tall and was of a feminine shape, though hir physique was well toned with well-defined muscles. Shi had pure white fur with a head of long, blood-red hair that was tied in a ponytail that reached all the way to the floor. Cracken had four eyes arranged in stacked pairs, two arms, one on either side of a trio of large, swollen-looking breasts, and two canine tails. At first I thought shi had three legs, but then I realized shi was just letting hir manhood swing free and easy, and almost to the floor at that. The wolfskunk was decked out in a latex corset with red lacing on the sides and plenty of cleavage exposed. Hir footpaws and lower legs were clad in an open-toed form of bitch boots designed for the digigrade wearer. Perched on a black, wrought-iron throne, swirling a wine glass idly in one hand, Cracken looked around in bemusement at the cavalcade of kinkiness on display that night. Hir smug, arrogant expression said with billboard-sized letters "I own all of you."

Three words entered my mind. *"You. Are. Mine."*

I couldn't just walk straight up to Cracken; I figured that would raise too much suspicion, so first I decided to try and integrate into the room a bit more. Walking around to the occupied alcoves, I took empty cocktail glasses and beer mugs, taking some fresh orders at one table and going to the bar. The 'tender there gave me a quizzical look, but when I said "Heard it was a busy night, so I figured I'd try to get in good with the mistress," shi gave me a knowing grin and a nod. I had to be careful getting around this particular room. While the erotic shenanigans before had been -somewhat- restrained, in here it was like running a message through the trenches of a warzone's No Man's Land. With two fresh beers and a martini balanced on my tray, I ducked under a pair of tails and butt cheeks that belonged to a thrusting dom giving it to some eager beaver (literally) bent over a railing (again literally). I had to get down practically on my knees to get under the tree-trunk-sized member of a wolfskunk that was cuffed spread eagle on a kink table while hir master was sliding hir own meat piston between the strapped-down Canmeph's breasts. When I heard an orgasmic groan and an aerial whistle, I looked up, and got behind a vacuum bed just in time to avoid the impact of a splooge glob as it hit the floor a couple feet from where I'd been standing.

"CLEANUP ON AISLE 3!" somebody yelled, getting laughs as a gimp with a mop and bucket jogged out to clean up the mess. Meanwhile, I made it to my table, getting a condescending pat on the head from the customers and a tip for managing to get their drinks to them without mishap. I took care of a couple of additional orders this way, frequently tossing a glance towards Cracken. So far I hadn't caught hir attention; good. As I bused one last alcove, I saw the wolfskunk finish hir wine.

"*Bingo*," I thought, and made a beeline up the steps of the raised platform to his majesty's throne.

"May I get you another glass, mistress," I said, trying not to sound too eager. Cracken slid the gaze of his two left eyes down at me.

"Mmm, yes," she said, setting the glass on my tray. I bowed as well as I could while carrying a full tray of empties and went back to the bar. Passing the order along to the tender, I dipped my hand into my pouch and palmed the pre-prepared surprise I had for Cracken.

Those who know me may recall that for a while since waking up to the current era I live in, I've begun dabbling in amateur chemistry. With higher education becoming increasingly common knowledge, I feel I need to do something to keep up, lest I wind up with a reputation for being an uneducated dolt. So I've been self-training in organic chemistry, and found a lot of it to my liking. As you'd expect, most of my experiments have been with an expansionist bend to it. In fact, I managed to make a remarkable discovery, three parts hard work and one part good fortune. Through my tinkering with various compounds, I managed to locate one that will stimulate a dormant section of the brain that strengthens molecular bonds and speeds up the natural recuperative processes under certain circumstances. Those circumstances? Explosive over pressurization. That's right, I found a compound that will let people recover from swelling up until they burst. I've been refining and developing variations for it to allow for different species' physiologies, but in all its forms it's managed to perform admirably, acting as an excellent safety net for some...and for others like me, who enjoy pushing the envelope and walking on the wild side when it comes to expansion, acts as a means of indulging in the most extreme possible expansion without harm.

This compound was part of what was in the small vial I'd palmed. Along with it, was another prank compound, Belch-O-Max. Designed to cause a person to produce more gas than they could let out through burps, it came in a variety of strengths, as well as a warning label that using a higher strength than necessary could have "potentially dangerous consequences." That's exactly what I was banking on, as I'd used the "Macro Strength" blend.

The bartender slid me a glass of Cracken's private stock, which I placed on my serving tray and began to weave through the crowd back to his throne. I waited until I had something between the wolfskunk and myself as cover, then quickly spiked his drink. Good thing I had a mask on, I don't know I could have hidden then gleeful grin I could feel on my face as I approached.

"Your drink, mistress," I said, extending the tray. The wolfskunk stood up.

"Good, bring it with you," she said. "I think a few of my pets need some personal attention,"

"Damnit," I thought to myself, taking care to exercise the mental safeguards necessary to avoid being picked up by wandering telepaths. Like a dutiful servant, however, I followed Cracken down the steps of her throne's pedestal as shi went out among the doms and the gimps, like a shepherd wandering among a flock of particularly perverted sheep. As I ducked to avoid a log-sized member swinging around at face-height for me, the wolfskunk reached out a hand and caught it. The rod was attached to a dryer on a X-rack, or whatever the proper name is. With a mean smirk, Cracken lifted the dryer's man-meat up and fixed a leather strap to it that was attached to a chain hoist. Grabbing the other end of the chain, shi yanked down on it. HARD.

"OOOOOooooo!" the masked gimp feline gasped out. I had to roll my eyes at the simpering begging he started to do, all variations on the phrase "more please" but as sycophantically as possible. Cracken hauled on his manhood three more times, before getting him to release a jet of splooge. Dusting hir hands off, shi left the mealy-mouthed gimp mumbling platitudes of gratitude as shi moved on, with me carrying hir drink in tow.

Hir second stop was a wolfskunk bent over a gymnast's hobby horse, ankles and wrists chained to the floor. The giggling gimp was wiggling hir tush at anyone who passed by, a sign hung on hir tail that read "Free Spankings!"

"Wow, somebody's desperate," I thought, again doing my best to hide my mental signals. Cracken looked at the sign over the wolfskunk's hiney, and give hir a smirk.

"Mmm, isn't that tempting...," shi said, "but I think I've got a BETTER idea..."

"Huh?" the strapped-down gimp said, trying to crane around to see what was about to happen. However, shi wasn't able to turn hir head quite far enough (a bit of a rarity for Canmephians) and so shi never got a really good view of the arm-length vibrator Cracken picked up from a table of sex toys and plowed into hir without hesitation. The gimp let out a squeal that was somewhere between a horse's neigh and bugle call. Shi didn't get any quieter as Cracken flipped the switch on the toy and left it running in the squirming wolfskunk's fanny.

"Keep an eye on hir in case shi says the safety word," Cracken said to a passing waiter, pointing hir thumb at the orgasming gimp. Things went on like that for a minute or two; me following Cracken with feigned obedience while shi had hir fun with the latex-clad boot lickers around hir. Finally, we returned to hir throne and the wolfskunk sat down. With a snap of hir fingers, shi motioned towards me for hir drink. With a bow and a mask-concealed grin that was all teeth, I held up the serving tray, the wolfskunk taking the wine glass off of it and taking a long, healthy pull from it.

"Finally...," I thought, *"SHOW TIME."*

"Hmm, I feel like a beej," Cracken said, turning to the side and snapping his fingers at one of the attendants. "Send me up a-URP!" The wolfskunk blinked in surprise and I fought back the urge to snicker as she coughed. "Send meURRRRRP!" Cracken shook his head in confusion as the attendant looked at him, just as unsure. "Mistress? I'm sorry I didn't quite get that..."

"I want a-ORRRP!...I w-ARRRRRP!....a NuUUUURRRRRP!" The wolfskunk blink his eyes out of sync with one another, starting to look a little dizzy from all the burps coming out of him. I could resist no longer.

"Ma'me, are you feeling alright?" I said, a hint of insincerity creeping into my tone. Cracken didn't seem to notice it right away, though.

"Ngh, I feel something funny in my BORRRRRRP!" She said, putting both hands on either side of his stomach. It was at that moment his stomach began to gurgle and churn, audible even over the muzak and the other sounds of the room. Those background noises started to die off, however, as more and more patrons became less involved in whatever kinky mischief they were engaged in and instead turned their attention to the spectacle that their host and chief dominatrix was becoming.

"OOoooo, URRRRP!" Cracken groaned out as his stomach GLURP'ed and GLORK'ed, "OOoohhhh, ORRRRRRP!" She was letting out the gas as fast as she could apparently, but it was obvious that wasn't fast enough, as his stomach began to stretch and swell outward, pushing on the latex corset around it, the elastic material sliding over his fur as his six pack began to get spread out by the gaseous pressure inside him.

"My goodness ma'me!" I said, "does it really taste THAT good both ways?!" That made Cracken blink hard, and look at me with surprise.

"Hold it, I don't BOOOORRRRRP! Ooohh, recognize that voice. Who are yOOOOOOOOUUUUURRRRRRRRP!" Cracken had developed a pronounced paunch by now, and that rounded, gurgling gut was only growing bigger! Those in front of the dominatrix were looking at him curiously, as if they could see something was different, but weren't sure what. Those to his sides, however, who could see him in profile were looking even more surprised; they knew exactly what was going on as Cracken's belly was stretching the latex strings of his corset to new lengths, exposing more and more of the sides of his now spherical girth.

"Oh now that would be spoiling the surprise!" I said, and finally let loose with a hyena snicker as it tossed the serving tray aside, crossing my arms and cocking my head to one side. Oh how I wish I'd brought a camera. Cracken jumped up off his throne, but that just served to shake up the contents of his belly, and she quickly clapped hands to the sides of his girth again as a new wave of gas hit him.

"OOooooo! BORRRRP! Ohhhh my GUT!" shi groaned, reeling a bit as hir belly bloated and stretched its way through hir fingers, growing as big as a beer keg and then some. "BAARRRRRP! OOOOoo what did you do to me?! BUURRRRRRP!" The straining cords of hir corset were now getting rather thin as hir bloated girth was pressing up against the underside of hir chest. I strolled in front of the dominatrix, putting a hand between material of the mesh in front, right in hir belly button.

"Oh just gave you something to make you reflect how FULL of yourself you are!" I said with a snicker, and gave Cracken a good firm shove, causing hir to drop back into hir throne in an undignified sprawl.

"OOOnnnnngh!" Shi groaned, followed by a "BORRRRRRP!" The mix I dosed hir with started working overtime with all the stimulation it had just gotten, and the wolfskunk began to squirm in hir seat as hir belly finally grew so big, hir outfit could no longer contain it. Shi BARRRRP'ed and BUUURRRRRP'ed as it GLORP'ed and GLURP'ed beyond the corset's capacity, the strings snapping as it burst open before the slack-jawed patrons.

"Damn, shi's getting HUGE!" I heard one of them say.

"Look at that GUT!" I heard another one gasp.

"I've never seen anyone get that bloated before!" someone else said.

"Shi's incredible!" yet another guest said, making me snicker even louder than before as I pressed my hands to Cracken's bloated stomach and began rubbing at it.

"Sounds like you're putting on quite the show for your guests, ma'me!" I said, making no effort to hide my amusement. The wolfskunk seemed to be trying to comment, but all shi could do was let out another BRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRP! followed by a BOOOOOOOOOORRRRRRRRP! as hir belly swelled up so big, slouched the way shi was on hir throne, it blocked all view of hir face from the front.

"Deity, how much bigger can shi get?!" Another one of the patrons said.

"That belly's got to be getting full!" Yet another chimed in.

"Damnit, I can't see! Turn me around or get me a mirror!" I heard someone else snap. That made me giggle like an idiot as I gave Cracken's belly a good, firm SLAP! the sound was like a kettle drum, causing the wolfskunk to let out a particularly loud groan, hir spread-apart legs shaking uncontrollably. By now hir belly was as big as a weather balloon, and it's growth had stopped...but the gas hadn't! Still squirming, the wolfskunk rocked hir belly from side to side as it added a new noise to the cacophony of gurgles and churns; a slow, steadily rising creak!

"Uh oh!" One of the patron's said loudly.

"I don't think Cracken's belly can hold much more!" another said.

"Shi looks like shi's bloating TOO MUCH!" another added.

"Ready for your grand finale, ma'me?!" I said with utter glee. Cracken's eyes, or so I was told later from those who could see them, were bugged out and crossed in two different directions (since shi had four of them), as hir hands groped at the sides of hir belly, as if making a futile attempt to pull it back in, the rumbling and creaking growing and growing to a perfect crescendo!

"SHI'S GONNA BLOW!!!!" A patron yelled.

"Ahhhh, perfect," I thought to myself when I heard that; I couldn't have asked for better timing to make the scene just right, as patrons ducked for cover, myself included, as Cracken's belly reached a fever pitch in its straining and groaning, unable to hold it in anymore....and WABOOOOM! The wolfskunk's belly flew apart like someone just set off a bomb full of confetti, scrap-like fragments of white-furred wolfskunk raining down like snow. The force of the blast knocked over the wolfskunk's throne, knocking hir back with hir footpaws up in the air.

Slowly, I stood up from where I'd ducked down on the step just below the top of Cracken's throne platform. The blast of hir belly blowing up had gone right over me, giving me a good feel of the gale-force, carbonated winds that came out of hir. Snickering as I dusted the scraps off my shoulders, I walked over to the turned-over throne, putting one footpaw up on the armrest as I leaned an elbow on my knee. I pulled my mask off, giving Cracken a good look at my insanely grinning mug, snickering with crazy glee.

"How's that for a party favor?!" I said. Cracken was rolling hir head back and forth dizzily. Hir eyes blinked a couple times, then all four of them finally regained focus. Shi sat up sharply, then looked down at hir front. I wasn't surprised; it's the typical way for first-time poppers to react; I know I did my first time. In my experience, many of those who are squeamish about the experience are worried about the potential for, to say the least, injury. It's understandable, and was my entire reason for researching a way to prevent such disasters. My reason had been twofold: not only to allow people to indulge in the experience of deliberately overfilling, but also to act as a safety net for those who don't care for it, but who might accidentally become overfilled.

Cracken had clearly been expecting to look down and see parts of herself that shi shouldn't have had an open view of. But instead, to hir apparent surprise, all shi saw was hir abdomen, washboard intact, hir body fur growing back in over it at a remarkable rate, until after a few

seconds more, the only evidence of hir explosive display was hir corset torn open around hir midriff.

As Cracken pushed himself further upright, more patrons emerging from their hiding places saw that shi was alright. A few of them were looking like they clearly just got exposed to someone's kink that they weren't into. A few others were just chuckling ambivalently. But a good number were applauding; some were simply clapping politely, while others were doing it with gusto, some of them whistling in their enthusiasm.

"Heheh, take a bow ma'me," I said. Cracken gave hir adoring crowd an uneasy grin, then looked to the side at me.

"My office. Now," shi said, picking himself up as shi put hir throne upright. Recomposing himself, Cracken headed towards the door, acting like nothing out of the ordinary had just happened, while three or four submissive were fawning over hir, praising hir performance like it was Oscar-worthy. As for me, I followed behind Cracken, feeling excited, exhilarated...but also nervous.

"Well, the dice are thrown," I thought. "Time to see if I got a seven or snake-eyes."

I'd expected Cracken's office to look like something out of the Marquis de Sade's wet dream. To my mild surprise, however, it actually looked quite professional. A laptop sat on a steel-and-glass desk, along with customary office paraphernalia. There were a couple filing cabinets for hard copies of whatever documents the club might need to have immediately on hand, while a few pieces of furniture - admittedly of the same leather style as those elsewhere in the club - kept the room from being unusually empty. One large piece of abstract art hung on the wall behind Cracken's desk, while on the sides were a few digital portrait frames with rotating pictures. Most of them appeared to be of Cracken with other people; some of them were patrons of the club - VIP's most likely - but others appeared to be personal photos of hir out and about with friends, or so I surmised from the fact shi was wearing regular street clothes instead of bondage gear.

"Sit," Cracken said, walking over to a standing closet. Shi unceremoniously stripped off the remains of hir corset, tossing it into a waste basket next to hir desk as shi opened the closet.

"I'd rather stand," I said.

"That wasn't an offer," Cracken said, not looking my way as shi flipped through the contents of hir wardrobe. I knew it was risky, but I wanted to make my position perfectly clear.

"With all due respect," I said, thumbs hooked in my waistband, "while I don't want to push my luck, if it wasn't apparent I'm not one of the club's submissives, so I don't take your orders."

Cracken turned around, regarding me with an evaluating gaze as shi unashamedly gave me a good, long look at hir large, lusciously curved, triple-breasted rack. I did my best to look hir in the eye, but my gaze tended to bounce up and down, going from hir face, to sneaking a look at hir knockers, then back again. Finally, Cracken gave me a pert little smirk, eyebrows raised.

"Hmm," shi said, with a tone like shi'd just confirmed something in hir mind. "In that case, please, have a seat."

I grinned as I nodded to the wolfskunk and hopped up into the Canmephian-sized leather easy chair directly in front of hir desk, most likely ones used for business interviews and the like. Cracken started to pull out a replacement corset from hir closet, then let out a slow breath.

"On second thought, I think I have enough of this crowd for the night," shi said, and with just as little ceremony as before, stripped off hir lower garments and stiletto-heeled boots. Shi slipped on a pair of black jeans and a black t-shirt with the words "Space is Cool! (-454.81 F)". I chuckled.

"What?" The wolfskunk said, sitting down at hir desk. "Surprised I actually have regular clothes?"

"Oh no," I said, shrugging, "Just that a friend of mine has that exact same shirt."

"Ahhh," Cracken said, putting hir elbows on hir desk and lacing hir fingers together. "Well, I have to say, when I heard reports from my staff that there was a practical joker running around, I certainly wasn't expecting to be among the targets."

"So you'd heard about me beforehand," I said; I wasn't entirely surprised. My antics couldn't have gone completely unnoticed.

"Not that I knew it was you," the wolfskunk said, "But I had heard..." shi turned hir head to one side, tapping what looked to be an advanced version of a bluetooth earpiece from back in my day clipped to hir ear. "That somebody was pumping up my guests by surprise. So, who are you?"

"Before I answer that, " I said, unease creeping up my spine. "Are you planning to call the police and press charges?"

"As long as what you've done with my guests isn't permanent, no," shi said.

"Oh no," I said, holding a hand up. "Those prank products I used are time limited; three hours and they'll wear off."

"Good," Cracken said, tapping an intercom on his desk. "Violet, could you send in those three wide loads?" Shi said as she turned back to me.

"I just want you to assure them they aren't going to need new wardrobes," she said. The three patrons I'd pranked earlier that evening waddled in. After explaining my antics were intended all in good fun and weren't going to last, the three seemed a bit more at ease. The flabby blob of a dryer just gave me a bemused smirk and shrugged, apparently not all that jazzed by the experience, but not perturbed by it either. The parade float couple, meanwhile, said it had seriously spiced up their experience, and I wound up giving them the website where they could order more of the stuff I'd given them.

"Well, now that that's settled," Cracken said as the couple waddled their way out of his office. "I'll ask you again; who are you?"

"The name's Mike Fang," I said, leaning back a bit with as easygoing a grin as I could muster, feeling a bit relieved that a couple of hurtles had been jumped. A look of dawning comprehension crossed the wolfskunk's face.

"Ahhh yes," she said, "I recognize that name. You're one of Admiral Redwolf's acquaintances, aren't you?"

"Bingo," I said.

"Well," Cracken said, leaning back in his own seat and steepling his fingers. "You certainly have made this night interesting. Though in the future I'd ask that if you want to...put on a performance like this again, you give us some forewarning."

"Aww, but the surprise is half the fun," I said, grinning. Cracken chuckled, nodding in a knowing way.

"Well I can't deny that," she said. "Having been known to surprise people myself from time to time. But in the interests of safety, and avoiding people lodging a complaint against us, I'd have to ask you at least allow us to advertise the night you plan to show up and start blowing people up. You can certainly be disguised, and we don't have to tell people who's going to get it, but we should at least let people know if they come here, they should know what they're getting into. Then they can't say we didn't warn 'em."

"Heh, fair enough," I said, shrugging.

"Well, I think that's all I needed to clear up with you," Cracken said. "Feel free to stick around for the night if you like, I think there are a few folks here who are openly into your sort of fun..."

"Actually...", I said. It was time to get down to business. "I had another reason for coming here and pumping some folks up."

"Oh?" the wolfskunk said, sounding curious.

"Mmmhmm," I said, leaning forward. "Tell me, how did you like your own experience with my brand of expansion?"

"Honestly?" Cracken said, giving me a silly grin. "It was pretty fun and exciting! I was a bit scared there as I was about to burst, of course, but once I saw I wasn't about to die or need to get rushed to the ER...",

"Heheh, e'yup, it's a hell of a thrill ride," I said, wagging my eyebrows.

"Now I'm not sure I'd want to do it -every- night," the wolfskunk said, "but as something to indulge in every so often...why, you looking for a new playmate or something?"

"Heh, not exactly," I said. "Cutting to the chase, you're one of the WWCC members responsible for The Growth Games, I understand. I want to try and introduce some new events to it. This little performance tonight was...a publicity stunt, basically."

"So, you were looking to gauge my reaction, eh?" Cracken mused, rubbing his chin as I nodded. The wolfskunk leaned back, putting his footpaws up on his desk, eyes looking up to the ceiling in thought.

"Up until now," she said. "All I've heard are a few noncommittal suggestions made to add things like gut and body inflation and fattening to the games. Nobody really did much to try and sell the committee on it. Before tonight, I didn't think there was enough appeal to make it worth bothering with. Now...." Cracken looked at me, a grin spreading across his muzzle. She sat up at his desk, elbows on it again as she leaned forward, her breasts pressing down heavily on its surface.

"You submit a formal proposal, and I'll endorse it 100 percent," she said.

"Excellent," I said, extending a hand, which Cracken shook. "One down, two to go."

"Ah, you're going to go to the other committee members for 'publicity stunts?'" Cracken said, smirking. I smirked back.

"You bet," I said, toothy grin on my face. "But do me a favor? Don't let 'em know. After all, it should be a surprise."

An overcast sky greeted me the next morning as I got up. After going through my usual morning routine, I headed down to Shotgun Shells for some breakfast, and was met with some unexpected responses as I came down the stairs and looked for some space at the counter among the breakfast crowd.

"Hey, there's the party animal!" one customer said.

"Nice show last night," another one said, raising up their coffee mug to me. I responded with a chuckle and a two-fingered salute.

"Do you take requests?" a third patron further away shouted at me. I grinned, pointing their way. "Leave a note with Shotgun for me and I'll get back to ya," I said, climbing up a barstool as Shotgun came over.

"Looks like word gets around fast," I said, grinning as I looked over the menu. The wolfskunk smiled. "That, and we share plenty of customers with The Vat," shi said.

"Ahhh, didn't recognize them with their clothes on," I said with a smirk. "Can I get the biscuits and gravy plate with a glass of O.J.?"

"Comin' up," Shotgun said, scribbling down my order on a pad. As I set down my menu, a shadow loomed behind me, giving me a split second before I was getting smothered by a set of impressive jugs.

"Starting things off with a BANG, I hear," Redwolf said, hir face suddenly appearing in front of me. Shi must have extended hir neck to see past and beneath hir chest. I smirked at hir and reached up, giving the drygerskunk's central mammary a squeeze.

"I like to lead with my best footpaw forward," I said, Red letting out a purring chuckle as shi slid hirself off my head and shoulders and took hir own seat at the bar.

"Well you certainly left an impression," the drygerskunk said after Shotgun had taken hir order. "I had a call early this morning from a Sylvia Cracken. Since I'm the diplomatic contact for Sol-3, shi wanted to know if I could put hir in contact with several inflation product companies."

"Ooo, shi's taken to it more than I realized," I said with a grin, Shotgun bringing my order out. I cut into my breakfast eagerly as Red stirred copious amounts of sugar into a coffee mug the size of a Terran trash can.

"So who's your next victim?" Redwolf said, taking a slurp from hir mug that lasted 15 unabated seconds. I pondered that for a moment; now that I'd made my presence and intent known, word-of-mouth was likely to get around. Even if my intended targets didn't know I was coming

for them, they knew I was around, like a fly that's flown past and landed in some far corner of the room.

"Let's see...," I said, taking my smartphone off my belt and tapping the screen, bringing up the profile pages of the Growth Games committee members. "Think now that I'm limbered up, I'm gonna set my sights on Derrek Ironsight," I said. Redwolf raised his eyebrow, blowing on his coffee a bit before taking another slug.

"Watch out you don't hit a brick wall with him," Red said.

"Naaah," I said. "Mr. Brickwall's a sponsor for the games, but he's not on the committee." That got a snerk out of Red as I reviewed Ironsight's profile page. Derrek Ironsight was a former CMSC captain and owner of Feel The Burn, a gym franchise based in D.C. with branches in multiple major cities on the planet. A Detective class dryger, Ironsight's personal trainers served as referees for the games. It was no surprise to me to find out the dryger was an incorrigible health nut, the video ads for his gym's featuring the catch phrase "get ready to make your fat cry!"

I mused on how I was going to get at Ironsight as I finished up my breakfast. It wasn't going to be easy; he looked and sounded like he wasn't as open to experimenting with indulgences as someone like Cracken. A public prank played on the dryger would probably just make him mad; I figured the best way to get him to open up a bit would be to find a way for his tastes and mine to go hand-in-hand. Then it hit me. Red raised an eyebrow as I snickered and started dialing my phone.

"Ordering a secret weapon?" he said.

"Nope," I replied as I put my phone to my ear, the dial tone's electronic purr filling it a few times. "Calling in some help....hey Zaphod!"

The sky was overcast and rainy the next day, as I cruised along the highway in a taxi out to the spaceport. The driver was a dryger with a fascination with Earth sports, and regaled me with an almost encyclopedic knowledge of Super Bowls and FIFA championships as we rolled along. I think after I'd mentioned in passing I'd been cryogenically frozen for quite some time, he saw me as an opportunity to share his knowledge to bring me back up to speed on what I'd missed. I couldn't bring myself to tell the guy I was never a big sports fan.

The spaceport terminal was as busy as ever. I wove my way through the crowds to the gangway Zaphod said his ship would be coming into, and killed some time with a Minesweeper clone on my smartphone waiting for him. Eventually the ship taxied up to the terminal gangway,

disgoring a stream of passengers. Zaphod wasn't hard to spot among them; he was one of those types that always stood out. Back on Earth it would have been because of his size; he was an off-white unicorn somewhere between 8-10 feet tall, or as he'd measure in his home country, somewhere around three meters. On Canmeeph, he was actually closer to the average sized person, so his species was what made him stand out more. His clothing style was also something of an eye-catcher too. Straight out of the 1980's, he wore dark spandex pants with knee-high boots and a white synthetic jacket that looked like it came straight out of Michael Jackson's wardrobe, which he wore open over a black tank-top shirt. A pair of visor-style sunglasses sat on his muzzle, and his cream-colored, shoulder length hair was styled with a sort of a side flip with a buzz-cut patch behind one ear, sporting a purple streak going through the flip.

Then there was his physique. It may be worth mentioning I met Zaph at a gym and we wound up becoming workout buddies. His regiment was definitely a lot more extreme than my own, however, but it was a ton of fun spotting him. The unicorn was a massive wall of muscle, with bulging pecs and biceps and thick, powerful legs. But on top of that, the horned equine sported a tremendous, globular ball gut; a round, firm testimony to the fact he ate just as hard as he pumped iron. Back on Earth he was something of an entertainment personality, being a popular indie recording artist as well as an actor in several low-budget films. He'd often told me, in between exercises, that it was just a matter of time before his career made it "as big as the rest of me!" often accompanied by a big, smug grin, a bicep flex with one arm and a slap to his belly with the other.

I got up and waved to get Zaph's attention as he came off the ramp. I definitely got it, and he got almost everyone's attention within earshot as he responded.

"'ey mate!" he said loudly, and lumbered in my direction, pushing his way through the crowd. "'Scuse me! Comin' through! Make a hole!" The unicorn brazenly asserted himself as he squeezed (and shoved) his way through the crowd, getting more than a few looks of surprise as I chuckled and shook my head.

"Still hogging the spotlight, I see," I said as he got to me, shaking his hand. The unicorn beamed as he put both hands on his hips.

"Well it's not like I can spare much space in it, can I?" he said. "But I guess there's room for a little fellow like you." I smirked.

"Riiight," I said, "Just remember when you're up there accepting some award to thank all the little people who made THIS," I punctuated my point by giving Zaph a good hard poke in his wrecking ball, "...possible." The unicorn chuckled.

"Oh of course," he said with a magnanimous wave of his hand, before clapping it onto my shoulder as we headed towards the baggage claim. "SO! You said you need me to help win over a convert, so to say, ey? Well, what's the plan then?"

I gave Zaph my best evil snicker. "I'll lay it all out for you at the bar."

"Ahhh now you're thinkin' like a Brit!" He said, slapping me on the back. "Everything's best discussed at the pub over a pint."

Zaph managed to get a few eyebrows raised as we picked up his luggage and hailed another cab. The horned equine couldn't resist commenting to the driver it was funny to be riding in a vehicle and actually not making it risk tipping over to one side if he leaned too far. At Shotgun Shells, he packed away a half-dozen mugs of the house brand ("It's not Buxton or Fuller's, but it's still good!" he proclaimed loudly, getting an awkward smile from Shotgun while I whispered to him "home region pride"). I explained the plan to Zaph and showed him the special "equipment" I'd bought him for the job.

"Ooooh nice!" he said, holding it up and looking it over. "Mind if I keep this after we're done? I could have some fun with this on my own!"

"Heh, she's all yours," I said.

Bright and early the next morning, the doors of the main branch of Feel The Burn slid open in front of me and Zaphod. We'd arrived as early as possible, to ensure there were as few people around to distract as could be. The familiar sounds and scents of a gym met us as we stepped inside; the scrubbed-clean fragrance (a result of the cleaning that goes on in a place where sweating is the primary occupation), the clank of weight plates, the buzz of fans used to keep the air moving. We walked up to the front desk, Zaph leaning on it nonchalantly, flexing a bicep in the process. The equine was dressed in his workout gear; black spandex pants, boots that looked like something a professional wrestler would wear, knee and elbow pads to boot, and a fresh black tank-top. But something was decidedly different about Zaph today...he'd slimmed down in front so fast it would've made every diet product company offer him their last dimes to find out his secret. A perfectly trim torso held up his muscle-rippling frame now. As for myself, I was dressed in kakis and a red polo shirt, carrying two duffel bags, one that rattled and sloshed a bit and another that had a lot of rustling going on.

"Good morning!" A female dryer said perkily. "How can I help you today?"

"Mornin' luv," the unicorn said, wagging his eyebrows at her. "I'm in town for a bit, an' I need t' keep up on my workout schedule. I'm not a member though, so can I get a guest pass or something similar for the day?"

"Of course!" the receptionist said. "We'll just need you to sign a waiver that says we're not liable for any injury caused by accident or misuse of equipment...and if you could provide us with an emergency contact in case of mishap...and that will be 15 credits."

"Can do," Zaph said, snapping his fingers to me. I gave him a wry look as he grinned at me, my credstick passing between us as he slotted it to pay our way. We saw a handful of folks working out as we made our way over to the free-weight section. Zaph sat down on a bench set up for bench presses. The weights were permanently affixed to the barbell, and marked at 250 lbs each already, which Zaph snorted at.

"Really, is that the best they've got?" he said. I smirked and stepped over to the wall, where there was a remote control sitting in a receptacle.

"Nah, this is a gravity gym," I said, pointing upward over the bench. A device that looked similar to a fluorescent light hung overhead. "See that? It puts out a cone of increased gravitational pressure. All I have to do is tap in a multiplier and it'll increase the weight by any amount you like."

"Ah, good," the unicorn said, unzipping one of the duffel bags I brought. "gimme...2500 kilos." I pulled out my smart phone and did a quick conversion.

"Two n' half tons coming up," I said. The amount raised a few eyebrows and got a few of the gym rats to look over our way. "Oh, but first...." Zaph said, digging into the bag. "Heh, need to load up!" Zaph pulled out bag after bag of junk food from the duffel; corn chips, potato chips, cheese curls, pork rinds, all sorts of greasy snack food that would sent most health nuts into fits. The folks at the gym watched in confusion as the unicorn snapped his fingers to me, tilting his head back and pointing into his open muzzle. I grinned at the looks we were getting as I tore open bags of snacks with a practiced hand and started emptying them into Zaph's mouth. I stuffed his face full, then tore open fresh bags as the equine chewed and swallowed. Some muttering started to go around the room as soon as I finished the snack bags already lined up, then reached in the duffel and pulled MORE out.

"Hammerspace," I heard one gym rat mutter to someone else, as I poured two cans of stacked chips into Zaph's waiting maw. The pile of empty bags, boxes and wrappers began to form a pile on the floor. Not wanting to make a mess, I pulled over a trash can and soon had it filled to the brim with empties. Finally, I zipped up the now-empty snack duffel. Zaph reached over and used a towel to wipe off the combination of cheese dust, BBQ flavoring, crumbs and grease that

had built up all around his mouth. He unzipped the other duffel and pulled out a sports bottle, taking a big squeeze off of it, draining the entire bottle in one go.

"Right then...", the equine said, cracking knuckles as he laid back. By now we had a slight audience of about five or so people just staring, no doubt wondering just how strong someone who ate like a college freshman could really be, not to mention wondering where the several dozen bags of greasy snack food could have gone; Zaph hadn't gained an inch, by the look of it! I tapped in a multiplier of five into the remote, the overhead gravity generator emitting a low hum.

"What's the big deal?" I heard a voice say. I glanced to the side; approaching us was a dryger with an alternating blue and yellow Mohawk. It matched hir fur pattern, with yellow stripes on a blue "background" color. Hir features were predominantly feline, but hir tail was noticeably draconian, complete with a ridge of spikes going from the base to the tip, which ended in a horizontal spade. Hir musculature was bigger than anyone else's in the gym; The only two Canmephians I'd seen larger were a retired CMAC General called GroundPounder and another gym owner called Muscle-In-Motion (the owner, not the gym). There was more beef on display in hir than at a bovine-only bodybuilder competition. The dryger was decked out in a skin-tight polo shirt with the gym's logo on the breast pocket and a pair of cargo shorts that looked like shi was using them to smuggle a couple prize-winning pumpkins and a length of rolled up carpet. Hir chest was an average pair of breasts, nothing spectacular in size, when it comes to Canmephians.

"Oh, Derrek!" One of the gym patrons said. "*Bingo*," I thought.

"This guy's benchin' two n' a half big ones," another patron said, as Zaph rubbed his hands together and grabbed a hold of the barbell.

"Well, that's pretty good," Ironsight said, "but nothing sp...", at that moment, shi looked over and caught sight of the overflowing trash can. The dryger leveled a finger at the can.

"WHO BROUGHT THAT POISON INTO MY GYM?!" shi bellowed.

"BORP!" Zaph let out, wagging his eyebrows. Ironsight put hir hands on hir hips and scoffed.

"You eat that crap and think you're gonna bench two n' a half tons?" shi said. "Oh please, I'll give you maybe five reps before you make yourself sick and puke."

"Heh, wanna bet on that, mate?" the unicorn said, lifting the barbell out of the cradle, slowly lowering it down onto his chest.

"Sure, 20 credits says you barf before your workout's done," the dryer said, crossing his arms. Zaph and I looked at one another, letting out similar chuckles. The unicorn began to pump iron, pushing upward with a grunt, then slowly letting the bar back down with a sharp inhale. The equine worked his arms up and down, slow and steady. Sweat began to bead on him, so I used a fresh towel to dry him off. His grunts became a bit louder, and the eyes of the patrons, not to mention Ironsight, began to widen...because Zaph's muscles were doing the same. The unicorn's biceps bulged visibly bigger, as his pectorals began to follow suit. He sucked in another breath and grunted through clenched teeth as his shoulder and neck muscles began to pulse slightly as well, growing more pronounced on his frame.

"What in...?" Derrek said, looking in awe and confusion at Zaph as he continued to pulse his musculature bigger with every rep. After about 20 in a row, he stopped. His throbbing upper body looked like he'd gained an extra six inches all around; he even looked like he'd gained a bit of height too!

"Right, what's next?" Zaph said to me as the barbell clanked back into its cradle. I tapped my phone, acting like I was looking it up, as the unicorn sat up.

"Looks like leg presses," I said, a couple of the gym goers looking in confusion as we made our way to the appropriate machine.

"Ahh right," the unicorn said with that British inflection in his voice. "Don't wanna skip leg day!"

"Uhh, most folks focus on one muscle group at a time per workout...", one gym rat said.

"Y'know, lifts, core, leg day...",

"Heh, well I'm not most folks!" Zaph said. "Right, 2500 kilos, just like before!"

"He can bench as much as he presses?" someone said. I threw a glance at Ironsight. The dryer was rubbing his chin, looking curiously at Zaph, as he dug out another sports bottle from the second duffel and sucked it dry. I adjusted the plates for him and used the remote to boost the gravity, then the unicorn was off. He gripped the handlebars of the leg press and pushed his legs outward, the plates rising up smoothly on their track, then coming back down with a firm, but not too loud "CLACK!" The equine let out a heavy breath, snorting and flaring his nostrils as the reps piled on. Meanwhile, everybody gaped at him as the definition of his legs became more and more pronounced through his spandex. It slid smoothly over his swelling thighs and calves, until finally, as he lowered the plates one last time, RRRRRRRRRRRIP! he got two identical splits down the outside of his pant legs from hip to knee, revealing the bulging muscle.

"Ooops! Third pair this month!" he said, chuckling as he stood up. Several of the gym rats blinked as they suddenly realized they were actually having to tilt their heads UP slightly, as the

unicorn had now grown to about four inches over the average height of them. In fact, he was now where he could look Ironsight in the eye.

"Well, I think that'll do me for an afternoon," Zaph said, toweling off. Like a good "personal trainer," I picked up the duffel bags as Zaph headed towards the shower room, towel slung around his neck.

"Hey," we heard Ironsight say. We stopped to turn as the dryer dug his wallet out of his back pocket. "Looks like I owe you," she said, but Zaph waved her off.

"Naaah, I was just funnin' ya mate," he said.

"Oh, well, still, that was the first time I saw someone manage to bulk up THAT fast, especially after..." the dryer looked over his shoulder with uncertainty at the trash can full of junk food wrappers. Zaph and I just chuckled.

"E'yeah," the unicorn said. "Well, that's cause of my special, secret training regimen."

"Oh yeah?" the dryer said, "How's that work?"

"Heh, well, it's this special workout supplement I take," Zaph said, looking side-to-side conspiratorially. Ironsight narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Supplement? You don't mean roids, do you?" she asked. Zaph shook his head vehemently.

"Noooo nononono, never touch that crap," he said. "This stuff's Terran health authority approved, not habit formin', decidedly safety tested. But y'gotta know how to use it right to get the most out of it."

"Yeah?" Derrek said, leaning in closer. I suppressed a grin as hard as I could. The "sales pitch" Zaph and I had worked out was performing perfectly. We had her hooked, and were ready to reel her in.

"Aye," Zaph said, glancing around himself again. "Hmm, you seem like someone who can be trusted with this sorta thing; you want a lesson and a free sample? We could come by tonight after hours."

Ironsight rubbed at his chin again, seeming unsure. If she had been a fish, she'd be shaking the hook at this point. But I knew Zaph, and he knew how to sell a performance.

"Hey," he said, spreading his arms in a shrug; a shrug that made his muscles bulge and his pecs pulse. "Look at it this way," he turned to the side, brought up his arm and flexed his bicep into a firm hill of strength.

"What've you got t'lose, eh?!" Zaph said, grinning at the dryer as he made his bicep swell. The dryer looked to the side a moment more.

"Seven o'clock," shi said.

"Hook, line and sinker," I thought.

The gym had been emptied out, and was all locked up, when Zaph and I returned that evening. The titan unicorn put a hand to the glass door, so as to block the twilight reflection on it and allow himself to peer inside.

"Ahh, there shi is," he said. As I got closer myself, I saw Ironsight pushing himself off the front counter where shi'd apparently been leaning, setting aside a tablet. Shi let us in, holding the door for us and looking around furtively. The gym bag that held all the drinks was once again over my shoulder, while in my hands, I carried what looked like a pizza box, the name "Double Decker's" printed on top. Its size was such it took both hands for me to carry, and was a bit awkward for me, but I managed.

"All ready to bulk up, 'ey goyo?" Zaph said. I'd coached him a bit in proper Canmephian terminology, such as how herms were sometimes referred to as "goys". Ironsight coughed in a semi-awkward way, looking around again like shi was worried someone would spot us as shi locked up the gym again.

"Right," shi said as we crossed the front lobby. "So how's this work?"

"Heh, well, it's pretty simple," the unicorn said. He snapped his fingers to me, beckoning with one hand. I had to set down the pizza box to dig out a sports bottle from the duffle bag and hand it over. Zaph flipped it from one hand to the next, then offered it to Ironsight.

"This sports drink's a big part of it," he said. "You want to drink this as step one or two, and make sure to drink a full bottle of it, at least one liter."

"Okay...," the dryer said, looking curiously at the bottle. Shi knocked it back as we continued through the darkened gym. I'd spotted a good place to stage our little demonstration earlier; a folding table set up with some pamphlets on the upcoming Growth Games. At my size, I had to scoot it away from a wall one side at a time, but I managed, then cleared off the pamphlets and pushed a folding chair up to the edge of it, motioning for Ironsight to have a seat. The dryer sat down, still looking a bit unsure, but Zaph's charisma and continued pulsing of his musculature won out.

"Now comes the next step in my special regimen," the unicorn said, taking the pizza box from me and setting it in front of Ironsight. With one finger, he flipped the top open, wafting the smell of sauce, cheese, freshly baked crust and toppings into the air. A deep-dish pizza loaded with pepperoni, olives, green onions, bacon and extra cheese (non-lactose, since Canmephians are notoriously intolerant of the stuff) was met by Ironsight with a look of apprehension, like someone just plopped a venomous snake in front of him.

"Are you kidding me?" she said, giving Zaph and myself a few uneasy looks. You'd think we were asking him to disarm a bomb blindfolded. "This stuff is hell on the figure!"

"Oh is it?" Zaph said, doing a double bicep flex. "Think of this as extreme carb loading."

Ironsight looked at the unicorn's rippling muscles, then at the pizza. If she had any telepathy, she would have heard me mentally intoning "*do it, do it, do it...*" Finally, she picked up a slice, and like a kid who'd just been told "it's good for you!" about brussel sprouts for the first time, took a bite out of it, chewed and swallowed.

"Thaaaat's it...", Zaph said as Ironsight worked his way through the first slice. Inertia was slowly starting to shake off him as she picked up a second one, getting through it about as laboriously. His third slice went a little faster, as the dryer actually began to pick up some steam. Slice by slice, Ironsight worked through the first pizza, until finally the last bit of crust was disappearing between his teeth.

"There now, wasn't so bad was it?" Zaph said, patting him on the shoulder.

"Mmmnn," the dryer grunted in a noncommittal way. I chuckled; we had him started, now we just had to keep him going.

"Well, time for your next set," the unicorn said, getting a look of confusion from the dryer. Zaph reached into the box, hooking his finger in a small divot in the bottom of the box. It was a false bottom; he pulled out the square cardboard flap to reveal a fresh pizza!

"EH?!" the dryer said, eyebrows shooting up.

"Heh, it's a hammerspace box," Zaph said. "It's got pizzas stacked with separators between 'em."

"Yeah, I get that," Ironsight said, again looking uneasily at the unicorn. "What I'm wondering is how many of 'em there are!"

"Ahh, don't worry 'bout that," Zaph said, waving his hand in a dismissive way. "It'll all turn out in the end."

"I dunno....," Ironsight replied. I grunted; I was getting tired of hir dragging hir footpaws.

"Well I suppose if you're a QUITTER..." I said with a shrug. The dryger gave me a look, stared back at the pizza, and like a swimmer having to dunk themselves in a cold pool, shi took a breath and plunged both hands into the pizza box, grabbing two slices and cramming them one after the other into hir muzzle.

"THERE ya go!" Zaph said, clapping hir on the back. I grinned widely and let out a hyena snicker as Ironsight plowed through the pizza with the same kind of determination you'd expect hir to show when beating hir own record at something. But shi wasn't doing chin ups or curls. Well, not the usual curls, unless you counted hir arms curling at the elbows to cram slice after slice into hir snapping, gnashing maw.

"That's it goyo!" Zaph said.

"You've got this!" I said, chiming in, "keep pushin' it!" Ironsight had a look of determination on hir face, eyes set in a steely glare as shi tore into the next pizza. Then the next one. And the next. You could practically hear the "Rocky" theme or "You're The Best Around" playing in the background. I snuck a glance under the table; our efforts were bearing fruit. Specifically, a big blue fruit. The dryger's belly was bulging out into a paunch that was steadily filling hir lap with every new slice shi destroyed in the industrial grinder of hir teeth. At my height, I could hear the gurgle and churn of Ironsight's growing gut as it stretched further and further towards hir knees. But as for the dryger herself, shi was in the zone, tunnel visioned on muscling hir way through this challenge.

Right where I wanted hir.

Zaph and I continued to shout words of encouragement, things like "You can do this!", "C'mon, one more, one more!", "There ya go!", and so on as the dryger grunted and scarfed, snorting through hir nostrils as shi continued to stuff herself like shi was possessed. Hir belly was now going past hir knees, and Ironsight was unconsciously spreading hir legs apart to make room. Hir abdominal muscles, well built from years of conditioning and work, were still visible on hir girth, but were getting stretched by the size of it.

Pizza after pizza disappeared down Ironsight's gullet through a solid five minutes of non-stop chewing. Then, hir efforts began to slow. Hir snorting and breathing became more labored.

"C'mon, that's it, just one more slice!" the unicorn said. The dryger laboriously chewed hir current mouthful, slowly raising that last slice to hir lips. With a "MMMMPH!" shi crammed it in, then leaned back, arms dropping by hir sides as shi chewed once, twice, three times...GULP! BARRRRRRRRRRP!

"ALRIGHT!" Zaph and I said almost in unison, applauding the dryer's performance as shi ran hir tongue around the inside of hir mouth and grunted.

"Z'at enough?" shi said with a huff.

"E'yup!" The unicorn said, crossing his arms and nodding emphatically. "I figure that'll about do ya."

"Good, so what's..." Ironsight started to say, when shi tried to stand up. Shi stopped midway, though, when shi saw the table in front of hir get lifted up by...something.

"Huh?" shi said. Apparently shi was more tunnel visioned than I realized. Zaph and I looked at each other and broke out in almost identical toothy grins.

"Oh yeah," Zaph said, eyes looking up and off to the side, a mischievous smile on his muzzle.

"See, my regimen does come with one particular...." the unicorn trailed off. Then, he picked up the pizza box (now empty of its 60 pizzas), and flipped the table over on its side, exposing the dryer's belly. That huge round ball now attached to the dryer had grown enough to have lifted the table off the floor a bit, but we hadn't noticed due to the gradual way it had risen. Hir gut had hir former washboard abs lightly stamped across its surface, and was now big enough for hir to use it for Pilates...if Pilates could be performed with a bean bag chair.

"...side effect," Zaph said with his self-confident smirk that was so characteristic of him.

"HOLY FUCK!!!!" The dryer yelled, leaping to hir footpaws. Hir belly followed suit, bouncing up and down a few times, making hir stagger a bit and spread hir legs to keep balanced. "WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO TO ME?!" Ironsight yelled.

"Nothin' I haven't done to myself," Zaph said with a shrug.

"But...", the dryer said, looking at Zaph's slim core. My grin got almost as wide as the dryer's bulging eyes as Zaph lifted up his black tank top. Like some kind of magic trick, his big, round, off-white ball belly FOOMP'ed out into view, nearly the size of Ironsight's own girth.

"What th, how in, where did..." shi sputtered. Zaph chuckled, turning his tank top partly inside out, showing hir the velcro lined mouth of the pocket on the inside of the shirt's front.

"Heheh, special order shirt," the unicorn said, "It's the Hide-A-Gut line; comes with a hammerspace pocket in front to help you conceal your, heheheh, assets." Zaph grinned, proudly patting his belly with both hands. "Course I normally don't WANT to, cept for the occasional gag. And goyo, that look on your face is well worth it!"

"Gag?" Ironsight said, still apparently trying to process what just happened. "You mean you planned to fatten me up?!"

"Ohh I can't take all the credit," the unicorn said. "It wasn't even my idea, really, to introduce you to my workout regimen."

"Then wh-" the dryer started to say, then as the British say, the penny dropped. Shi wheeled around on me, at least as fast as shi could wheel with that wrecking ball in front of hir. I could only grin and give hir a "hey, what can ya do?" shrug as shi narrowed hir eyes.

"YOU," shi said. "I THOUGHT you looked like someone I heard of! MIKE. FANG."

"Looks like the secret's out," I said, just before a navy blue hand shot out and grabbed me by the neck. I was soon dangling off the floor at Ironsight's eye level. Zaph, the grin dropping from his face, quickly stepped in, but with hir other hand, the dryer reached out to grab him by the neck as well. The unicorn was able to handle the squeezing better than I was. Zaph took hir hand around his throat by the wrist with one of his own hands, reaching out with the other to grab the wrist of the hand around mine.

"Hey hey easy, easy!" the unicorn said. I would have echoed his sentiment, but all I could do was cough and struggle a bit for air.

"YOU. TWO. HAVE. RUINED. ME!" the dryer snarled.

"No we haven't!" Zaph said. "Didn't I say this was part of my regimen? I wasn't LYING! I got these muscles of mine just this way!"

"AND you're fatter than a Sol-3 whale as well!" Ironsight snapped.

"Aye, yeah," Zaph said, "But only by CHOICE. That supplement we gave you? It lets you burn your carbs like mad, as long as you work out while it's still in your system. You work out enough, you'll be back to normal TONIGHT."

The dryer's eyes narrowed to slits as shi looked from Zaph to me, then back again.

"Tonight?" shi said, not sounding like shi totally bought it.

"Mmhmm," Zaph said.

"Yeah," I croaked. Slowly, Ironsight let both of us go. I rubbed at my throat as shi leveled a finger at each of us.

"If this doesn't work...", shi said. "I'm going to KILL the both of you."

"Oh calm down mate," the unicorn said, hands on his hips. The daggers Ironsight glared at him bounced off his unphased attitude as he looked back at hir coolly. "You'll be back in your prom dress in no time."

CLANK! "UNGH!" Ironsight grunted loudly as the nautilus machine's weight plates dropped back down. The dryer had been lifting the entire stack with double gravity turned on, the last exercise in a workout session that had lasted about two hours. Both Zaph and I had been spotting Ironsight through a rotating series of squats, pull-downs, leg lifts, arm curls, butterfly presses and core crunches, though before we got hir girth slimmed down enough, they were more like core squeezes. It was disheartening to me to watch the dryer's once rotund belly shrink before our eyes, but only slightly so. I've always said expansion should be an indulgence and not an unhealthily chronic thing, so it was with some relief that I saw we hadn't made Ironsight stuff himself further than shi could burn through in a workout.

In the process, the dryer had been required to graduate herself from the sets of machines for average-sized Canmeph's to those reserved for the especially large. By the time it was done, Ironsight had gained at least an additional three feet (or for Zaph, a meter) of height and looked to have added at least 3/4 of a ton (or 750 kilos) of muscle to hir. Hir full t-shirt had shrunk to a half-tee with hir size, and hir shorts had become booty pants to hir.

"Satisfied?" I asked, sitting on the bar of a barbell in its rack next to where the dryer had just finished hir workout. Ironsight looked at hir now-even-more-massive musculature, flexing hir biceps a couple of times.

"Hmm!" shi grunted, nodding a bit to himself. Zaph, leaning against a nearby wall, crossed his arms over his chest, consequently also resting them on top of his ball gut, which was still exposed since he'd rolled up his shirt and tucked it between his girth and his pecs.

"Is that a yes?" he asked.

"Well...", the dryer said, and hir voice then dropped as she mumbled something.

"Mmm? Wassat?" The unicorn said, pushing himself off the wall.

"I said I suppose," Ironsight sighed, and once again hir voice died off in a sotto voce grumble.

"Sorry, can't hear ya," Zaph replied, putting a hand to his ear.

"I SAID I SUPPOSE it is an effective workout plan," the dryer said with a big, dramatic huff.

"Good," Zaph said with a satisfied nod. Ironsight stood up, stretching his newly pumped bulk. Shi'd been big before, but now his hands stopped just barely before reaching the ceiling.

"So what was the point of all this?" shi said, looking at the two of us. "Were you two jokers just trying to get your kicks?"

"Noooooot quite," I said, hopping off the barbell and down to the floor. I had to stand a bit of a way's off to talk to Ironsight now; standing too close would have meant craning my head back to the point it would be uncomfortable.

"This was actually sort of a...private demonstration," I said, getting a confused look from the dryer. "You're one of the WWCC people who runs the Growth Games, correct?"

"Yeah, so?" Ironsight said. For the second time that night, the penny dropped. "Oooohhh I get it, you're trying to get a greenlight for some fat competitions."

"That among other forms of expansion besides tits and ass," I said. "Oh, and dick."

"Hmmpmph," the dryer snorted. "Yeah I've heard it before. Can't say I think much of it."

"Yeah, so we heard," I said, giving Ironsight a bit of a curt frown. "But just 'cause you're not into it doesn't mean other people can't be into it. AND as we've shown you here, you -can- be into muscle AND enjoy the other kind of sideways growth at the same time; they don't -have- to be mutually exclusive if you don't let them. I mean...," I held my hand out towards Zaph as if I was presenting him to him. "HE'S living proof."

The unicorn smirked that proud smirk of his. He flexed his arms, kissing both biceps as he also muffled out his pulsating pectorals, then kissed his hands and slapped them against his tightly packed belly, rubbing over it with an oh-so-pleased-with-himself noise.

Ironsight responded to this with pursed lips and a raised eyebrow. "Mmmmm...," shi said, sounding like the long-neglected door to his flexibility was creaking open on rusty hinges. "I guess it's only fair to, ahem, broaden the games' range of events. So if someone make another formal petition, which I presume you're planning, I'll...not have any real reason to say no."

A pleasant breeze blew by, setting the tree limbs overhead swaying and rustling. I fiddled with my tablet while stretched out on a park bench, sliding my finger across the screen. I'd taken a day or two off from my shenanigans to let the heat die down, spending it visiting some of the sights around Canmeph-2. Zaphod had decided to stick around, saying he was having too much fun to leave before things ended, and joined me on the sightseeing tour. Visits to a couple of

museums offered up some interesting insight into Canmephian history, and they had some impressive interplanetary monuments as well.

As I skimmed over a news report on my tablet, I happened to notice someone approaching from the far side of the park plaza my bench was on. Zaph was over at a nearby picnic table, a trio of musclebound locals engaging him one by one in arm wrestling. It looked like the unicorn was holding his own nicely. Shifting my attention back to the approaching figure coming around the side of a large statue dedicated to the fallen in a conflict known as the "Plonk Wars", I saw it was a black-and-white, dual-headed drygerskunk, the only other drygerskunk besides Redwolf I was aware of; shi was Sandra Felis, Red's semi-unofficial significant other. I say that because as far as I knew they hadn't tied the knot, per se, but they were a known item.

"Afternoon Sandy," I said as the drygerskunk got closer, brushing dark pink (or maybe it was light purple) hair back from one of hir faces.

"Hey Mike, hear you were in town and stirring up trouble," shi said with a stereo smirk. I gave hir a look of insincere incredulity.

"Trouble?! ME?!" I said, "Perish the thought! I'm just a Terran on vacation taking in the sights." I scooted up a bit on my seat and made room for Sandra to sit down. One of hir heads turned and looked in quizzical amusement over at Zaph as he pulled over the arm of a tooth-baring dryer who looked like shi was about to bust an artery before shi'd give up. The frustrated dryer clenched and unclenched hir defeated hand as shi shifted over, letting an equally burly wolfskunk take hir place as Zaph took a lengthy pull from a sports bottle, dropped his elbow back on the table, and clapped hands with his next opponent with a grimace.

"Suuuure," Sandra purred with hir other head. "And people go to Double Deckers when they're on a diet." I chuckled; Double Deckers was the name of a popular restaurant in Canmephian D.C. It was famous for its copious portions and enthusiastic staff.

"So I take it Red's been regaling you with tales of my shenanigans then," I said.

"Mmmhmm," Sandra replied. "Sounds like you've been making good headway. Who's your next target?"

"Haven't decided," I said, tapping my tablet. "I was actually going to browse the WWCC website and pick my next candidate."

"Heh, surprised you haven't gone after President Hermes," Sandra said. That made me look up.

"Wait...the committee PRESIDENT is in town?" I said, genuinely surprised.

"Oh yeah," Sandra said. "Shi's in town for the games. Got in last night, I hear." Quickly I tapped the presidents profile link. Wolfskunk Hermes, hir full name not given, was president of the full WWCC and among those who administered the Growth Games directly. I could feel my eyes lighting up; this was my big chance. If I could sway the full committee president, inclusion of body and gut expansion competitions to the games was in the bag. I scanned over the presidents profile...and slowly, I felt my grin fall off my face. Sandra cocked one of hir heads to the side.

"Something wrong?" shi asked. I pursed my lips and tsk'ed.

"This...is gonna be tough," I said.

Later that night, I was back at Shotgun Shells. It was a quiet night, which left me plenty of room for pacing the floor, getting a few quirked eyebrows from the patrons that showed up. What I'd read in Hermes' profile concerned me. When I went after Cracken, I'd been confident I could sway hir, because from all accounts shi was open to experimenting with expansion, shi just hadn't bothered trying it my way. Ironsight had been a bit tougher, having been against it entirely, but based on preconceived misconceptions. With hir my challenge had been disproving those misconceptions, after which shi was at least willing to tolerate my brand of fun.

Hermes, however, was going to be a real tough nut to crack. From what I read about hir, shi'd actually tried body and stomach expansion, and just hadn't found it all that interesting. Hirs was the kind of person that would be hardest to convince; It wasn't a matter of giving hir an opportunity to try out my kind of expansion, or getting hir to open up. It was going to be convincing hir there were enough people out there who'd enjoy something shi just didn't see the appeal in. That meant pumping or stuffing hir personally wouldn't work; shi'd already done it and hir reaction had been utterly "meh." Some might say that seemed an awful lot like Ironsight, but there was a key difference. Ironsight had clearly known there was an interest, albeit a niche one among Canmephians, in body and belly expansion; shi'd just done everything possible to keep it away from hir, like shi was afraid of getting bloat cooties. Hermes, on the other hand, was indifferent to it; a whole other beast to take on.

Shotgun looked over hir register after a customer finished paying their tab as I continued to pace.

"You walk a hole in the floor, you're paying for it," shi said to me. I just looked at hir and smirked. "If I manage to do that, I think you need to have to have words with your contractor," I said in reply. I turned around and started to take a step, when I blundered right into a rather inebriated, burly wolfskunk.

"URF! 'scuse m-," I started to say, only to find out my obstacle was one of those mean drunks.

"Watch the hell where yer goin!" the wolfskunk snarled at me, giving me a shove backward that knocked me on my ass. Hir breath could have lit up like a refinery derrek, judging by the smell. I looked up at hir with an irritated expression into hir own bleary, unfocused, and pissed off gaze.

"Th'hell's a Sol-3 runt doin' in here anyway?!" the wolfskunk slurred. Shotgun was giving hir a stern glare, and Sidearm looked ready to jump the countertop at a moment's notice. As I was picking myself back up, a figure equally as large as the mouthy wolfskunk came up behind him.

"Stupid lil' pipsqueaks," the wolfskunk said. "Why'dwe gotta babysit yer whole damn planet?!"

"You DON'T," I said, arms crossed. "Last I checked we were holding our own. Certainly a lot better than you can hold your liquor."

"You little shit...", the drunk sneered, taking a step at me. Sidearm had all hir hands on the countertop and was about to launch himself over it, when a hand tapped the drunk on the shoulder.

"Oi," Zaphod said, an uncharacteristically stern look on his face. "You got a problem with my mate?" The drunk turned around, weaving unsteadily, and Zaph later said shi had to squint one eye shut as shi looked the unicorn up and down with a drunken "wtf?" expression.

"Wassit t'you, fatty?" the wolfskunk snorted. Zaph put both hands on his hips and glared over the top of his shades.

"It's plenty to me," he said. "I don't like people pickin' fights with my friends, 'specially when they haven't done anything wrong."

"Well I don't like people TRESSPASSIN' on my PLANET!" The drunk snapped. That made just about every person in the entire bar jump up out of their seat. Every eye was on the drunken wolfskunk as Zaphod looked around, then cocked his head.

"Seems you're in the minority there, MATE," he sneered. "Now if I were you, I'd pay my tab and get the hell out. Otherwise...", the unicorn set his teeth and started thumping his finger into the wolfskunk's chest. "I'm gonna sit on your head till it goes FLAT. I'm gonna have a permanent imprint of your stupid Chevy Chase on my ARSE CHEEK. You get me?!"

The drunk blinked hir eyes out of order with each other, the bar dead silent for a couple seconds. Finally, shi blew a rank breath between hir lips. "Psssh," shi snorted. "Screw all'vya, I'm leavin'." Shi dug a card out of his pocket, slapping it on the counter. Shotgun wordlessly slid it through the scanner, thrusting it back at the drunk like shi thought it might give hir something contagious. Snatching it back, the drunk stumbled out the door, everybody seeming to breath a bit easier once shi was gone.

"Pff," Zaphod snorted, arms crossed over his chest and on top of his gut. "Bigots," he muttered, shaking his head.

"Yeah, there's always a few no matter where you go," I said. Glancing around, I noticed how the mood in the brewpub had gotten a little less upbeat. I decided to fix that and pulled out my own credstick, sliding it across the counter to Shotgun.

"A round for the whole bar on me!" I said loudly, managing to get a few cheers of thanks and a smile and a nod from everyone. I was taking my own screwdriver from Sidearm when Redwolf came down stairs, looking around in curiosity.

"Something just happen?" shi asked.

"Naahhh," Zaph said, sitting with his back to the bar, fresh mug of beer in hand. "Disaster was averted." He took a slug off the sizeable mug, running his tongue over his muzzle to lick up the foam.

"Had a drunk closet case," Sidearm said, serving another customer. "apparently enough booze loosened the hinges of the closet door and their bigoted opinions fell out."

"Ugh," Redwolf grunted, rolling hir eyes. "No serious trouble, I hope."

"Mmmm-mmm," I said, taking a pull from my drink. "Nah, thankfully they left after the troops rallied." I set my glass down. Then, I blinked.

"Rally the troops...," I said again to myself, rubbing my chin.

"Uh oh," Redwolf said, looking sideways at me. Zaph looked my way as well, only he looked more enthused.

"He's got that look in his eye again," the unicorn said. I turned to Red.

"Red, can you get me a conference call with Admirals Starchaser and Migraine?" I asked.

I eagerly fidgeted in my seat next to Redwolf. We were waiting in hir personal office upstairs from the brewpub; the drygerskunk had sent out messages to the admirals in charge of the Canmephian military's space and medical divisions, per my request. I knew if I could sell the two of them on my idea, then convincing Hermes would practically be in the bag.

"You seem pretty sure about this," Redwolf said. I grinned at hir.

"Oh this idea almost sells itself!" I said. Just then, Redwolf's video chat program pinged; two video windows popped up, Admiral Migraine on the left, Admiral Starchaser on the right.

"Evening Redwolf," Migraine said. "What's the sudden meeting for?"

"I have someone here who needs to talk to you about a service offer," Redwolf said. "A Mike Fang; you may've heard of him."

"You mean that fidgety hyena bouncing in his seat?" the medical admiral said, looking sideways in his screen at me. I could only snicker.

"That would be him," Redwolf said. "I'll let him explain further." The floor was mine.

"Admirals," I said, clapping my hands together. "First, thank you for agreeing to speak with me. I have a proposition to offer you for a new line of healthcare testing."

"Do tell," Migraine said, eyebrows raised. Starchaser looked at me quizzically.

"Yes, I'm wondering what this could have to do with Interplanetary," the other admiral said.

"Oh you'll see," I said. "Now, it's my understanding that spacer troops undergo testing both for initiation into the fleet and as a part of their regular physicals. I also understand part of this testing involves expansion."

"Correct," both admirals said. I grinned.

"I daresay the expansion being tested is focused on the troops' genitals and breasts?" I said.

"Of course," Migraine replied. I grinned wider.

"Of course," I repeated. "So that being the case, I detect a neglected aspect that's NOT being tested among the spacers. Admirals, I propose to add a regimen of stomach capacity testing to the physicals. These tests will help determine the troops' maximum capacities in their stomachs, as well as their response and ability to handle both gradual and sudden stomach expansion."

I leaned back in my seat a bit, steepling my fingers. "Now, you may be wondering what possible value this could have. Well, there are at least three I can think of. First, I daresay this is an area of data on CMC personnel that hasn't been recorded in their medical records; I'm sure the Observers among you would be glad to have such additional information. Second, working in space, I'm sure the CMSC is aware of the risks of decompression; this would help determine each spacer's capacity to ah, keep it together, shall we say, in a low-pressure environment should any protective gear they have malfunction. Third, since the CMSC is often the first one on unexplored planets, there's no telling what sort of encounters they may have with unknown

flora, fauna or sentient races. As such, it's possible they may encounter something in unexplored space, on unexplored planets, that would leave them with expanded midsections. This sort of testing would both help them prepare for such incidents and could be helpful in their diagnosis and treatment."

"Now I don't expect you to immediately agree to this for the entire fleet," I said, shifting a bit in my seat. "So I propose a trial run first. I'll administer a pilot bloat test to a group of selected spacers of your choosing. Cadets, enlisted, whoever you so choose, and with their drill sergeant or commanding officer present; observation and such, you know. In order to ensure the test is run up to Medical's standards, I'd request that Dr. Alex McHuge be assigned to assist me. Any other personnel you'd care to have observe the pilot test will be fine. After the test, I'll also have a survey for the participants."

My sales pitch completed, I leaned forward, elbows on the desk, fingers laced together.

"So, what do you say?"

It must have been a trick of how the two admirals had their video feed windows arranged, because it looked as if the two glanced at each other before responding.

"I've got questions," Admiral Migraine said. I felt a small twinge of concern, but bit back on it; questions at least meant potential interest, rather than outright dismissal. Starchaser, meanwhile, had gone all contemplative, like shi...she...he...I never did ask what gender the AI identified with...was searching their memory banks for something.

"First, Redwolf," Migraine said, turning to the drygerskunk. "As I recall, McHuge is on your staff, correct?"

"That's right," Redwolf said. steepling hir own fingers.

"Do you think shi's qualified to act as Medical staff for this kind of physical?" Migraine asked. I couldn't help but give a bemused smirk as Redwolf said pretty much what I was thinking (thought I don't think shi read my mind, since I had my defenses up).

"I think shi's one of the few in Medical who is," the drygerskunk said. "Shi has both the medical knowledge and the experience with this sort of expansion."

"Professionally?" Migrain said, eyebrows raised. I bit my lip to stifle a snicker.

"Professionally and personally," Redwolf said. Dr. Alex McHuge was a black melanistic dryer of the Riot Class sub-branch of Detective Canmephians. This unique branch, a mix of the four-armed-and-breasted Nahli and the massively burly Detectives, were a rare case. They were particularly noted for having even more fingers than the additional ring finger many

Canmephians had, which was a warning sign to bartenders and liquor salesman across the planet. That's because their second key feature was a colossal intolerance for alcohol. Word is Riots can't even have so much as a beer without becoming violent drunks with all the destructive force of a derailed train, and usually with the same results.

I'd requested McHuge because I knew hir personally, having been introduced during a previous, brief visit to Canmeph-2, during which I took part in one of their frequent street fairs, sponsoring an inflation and stuffing tent for those adventurous enough to try it out. McHuge seemed to take well to it, and that, combined with hir medical knowledge, would be perfect for my proposed test, someone with the proper alphabet soup after their name to make any assurances that this wasn't going to end in disaster credible and the pesonal experience to know it was the truth.

"Has shi been authorized to perform physicals for CMC personnel?" Migraine said, head cocked.

"Signed, sealed, delivered," Redwolf said. Migraine nodded, and turned back to me.

"Shi's yours, Mr. Fang, if your next answer is satisfactory to me." I chuckled.

"Lay it on me," I said.

"What is going to be your methodology here?" shi asked. I leaned back in my seat a bit, crossing my legs.

"Well," I said, "The volunteers, selectants, whichever it may be, will each be administered with a dose of the compound Safe-T-Blow. You may've heard of it, it's become commercially available and is my own product. Yes, I have heard about the issue with the drygers and the compound cutting off their dimensional link that enables them to macrofy. As it so happens, I've got a new variation of my formula that takes this into account and it's passed all laboratory tests, so you needn't exclude drygers from the volunteer or selection process."

"Once the volunteers are there, we'll ensure each one is both comfortable and properly protected; they'll have their choice of accommodations to their personal tastes, whether they prefer a seat, to take the test standing (with proper protective padding on the floors of course and all potentially hazardous objects cleared) or laying down.

"Once the drug is administered and the patient is in position, we'll begin the test. The patient will have their choice to have their stomachs filled by whatever orifice they prefer, though for sanitation purposes I'll likely recommend either oral or navel. The patient will then be filled to their stomach's full capacity slowly with air, most likely over a period of, say, 30-60 seconds, depending on the individual's size, with proper instruments to measure size, proportional dimensions, internal pressure, and any and all other medical data deemed pertinent. Once the

patient's capacity has been determined, they'll be deflated for the second test. This test will be to determine how they handle rapid expansion. Again through their choice of orifice, the patient's stomach will be rapidly inflated with air, the most likely rate being within 3-5 seconds. After deflating them again, there will be a test to determine their reaction to near-instantaneous expansion, in which they will have their stomach's inflated to capacity in a second or less."

"Hmm," Migraine said, stroking his chin. "It sounds like a valid addition to the physicals. I'd say I'm willing to greenlight the test run...provided Admiral Starchaser approves the tests."

"Excellent!" I said, clapping my hands, turning to the ranking AI. "So, Admiral Starchaser, what was on your mind?"

"I was just thinking about an old mission I was on...," Starchaser said. "It was nearly a disaster. Have any of you heard of an unnamed planet designated BBW-426?" The three of us all shook our heads.

"That doesn't surprise me," the AI admiral said. "That planet's been labeled a 'no-go' and hasn't been revisited since. Back when I was a ship-stationed AI, my vessel, the *Voyeur*, was sent to scout the planet."

"*Voyeur*?" Redwolf said, cocking all three heads at once. "Don't you mean *Voyag*,"

"No, I mean *Voyeur*," Starchaser said with a rueful grin. "The ship-naming committee was running into copyright problems that day and, well they had to make do." Shrugging, the admiral continued.

"The ship's company was a small one; a single away team comprised a third of the crew. Once down on the surface, something in the atmosphere garbled communications; it seemed to be some sort of natural energy field. When the team failed to return at the appointed time, a second team was sent down. Second verse, same as the first. Then we got desperate and the remainder of us went down with the ship in autopilot."

"I hope you didn't find anything horrific," I said. Again, Starchaser gave us the rueful grin.

"No, but it was...confounding. We found the other two drop ships in the same area, all abandoned. I remained behind to check the logs and sensors while the rest of my team went looking for their shipmates. Well, they found them...and while I didn't find anything in the drop ship's logs, the rest of the crew found SOMETHING, because all of them returned so...BLOATED their midriffs could barely be contained by their uniforms."

Redwolf blinked his eyes hard. Surprise had been painted over his face with a roller. Migraine looked equally shocked.

"One," Redwolf said, "how the hell did that happen?! Two, why have I never heard about this before?!"

"Three," I said, grinning like an idiot, "did you take any pictures?!" The dryer sunk facepalmed three times, shaking his head, albeit with a smirk of his own.

"We...sealed the on-board medical records," Starchaser said, "And in our official report, we simply said that 'unforeseen conditions' made the planet unsuitable for exploration and that nothing of interest for further investigation was found."

"Well I beg to differ!" I said with a laugh. "I wanna know what they found that pumped 'em up!"

"I've wondered that myself to this day," the AI said. "The crew, you see, was in no condition to pilot their crafts, so I had to bring them all back myself, piloting one and towing the other two. The automated medical facilities were able to keep the rest of the crew safe while I piloted the Voyeur back to the nearest station. Every crewman was found to be expanded with either air or water, both of which would contain trace amounts of unidentified elements. After they spent two weeks in quarantine while they were screened for potential contaminants and got deflated..."

"Pff," I snorted, rolling my eyes, "I could have shown them a few tricks to cut that down to minutes or seconds."

"...I tried to debrief them," Starchaser continued. "Unfortunately, none of the crew was willing to say exactly what happened. All they'd tell me is they encountered 'something bizarre' and they 'didn't want to talk about it.' Some of them were obviously ashamed and embarrassed about what happened to them..."

I tsked. I never like hearing about people being genuinely uncomfortable about getting expanded. Pranking someone with a bloating is all well and good, as long as they don't feel honestly humiliated or upset. I admit I've goofed up a time or two in that regard, and I've always immediately gone about restoring the person to normal and trying to make it up to them. Such was the case of Ironsight to me; I considered his added mass after pumping iron following his carb loading my atonement. Besides, what we did with him was in private.

"...while several of them seemed more, well..." Starchaser said, snapping me out of my personal reflection as he(?) struggled for words. "Their reaction wasn't so much humiliation and embarrassment, it was more like..."

"Shyness?" I suggested.

"Yes!" Starchaser said, looking at me. "That's exactly what it was!" I nodded in what I hope looked like a sage expression.

"That's a sign they may have enjoyed it to some degree," I said. "Believe me, I've seen it. I know the look, that..." I hunched my shoulders down just slightly, fidgeted with my hands a bit, refused to meet anyone else's gaze, and kept shifting my expression from confused to nervous to butterflies-in-the-stomach.

"EXACTLY," Starchaser said. "That EXACTLY how several of them acted." I nodded again.

"It's that moment when you realize you got a kick out of something, but you know most people are gonna think it's weird." I said.

"Well," Starchaser said, looking down and raising hir(?) hands as shi shrugged. "Whatever the case, we stamped BBW-426 a 'No Go' planet, and to date nobody's questioned it. It wasn't much of a mystery planet, anyway, just a routine stop off in a system which had planets whose initial orbital scans had yielded much more interesting results."

"So have you ever considered going back?" I asked.

"Never again," the Admiral AI said, shaking hir head. "Unless there's a way to manage the bloat."

A grin spread across my face as I looked over to Redwolf. Shi returned the expression with one of hir heads.

"You know," shi said. "This may be up Mr. Fang's alley..."

Three days later, at about noon, I found myself heading into the main headquarters of the CMC Medical division. The Canmephians has an interesting way of organizing their military; rather than having separate medics for each of their other branches, they had one branch to facilitate all the rest. The massive building was like the biggest hospital I'd ever seen; the front room receptionist directing me to the exam ward where they had the bulk of their non-emergency facilities.

I began wandering the halls, a hammerspace cardboard box in my hands, looking for the right room. I'd only been at it for a couple of minutes when I heard a voice just behind me.

"Hey! Over here!"

I did a little 180 spin on my heel; a melanistic dryger head crowned with a bright orange Mohawk was poked out of one of the exam room doors. The dryger's face boasted a remarkably prominent chin.

"Ah, Dr. McHuge! Glad you could make it," I said as I stepped through into the exam room. The room was actually a pair, with a waiting area separated from the more clinical side of things by a door. Dr. McHuge, or Alex as I knew hir, lead the way back into the exam area. The dryger was a massive Detective/Nahli mix, meaning shi has a seriously beefy and ripped build while also having four arms and four breasts. Shi was someone I'd met through our mutual association with Redwolf, and had seemed to take a shine to my expansive ministrations. That, combined with hir medical expertise, had made hir a perfect research associate to help oversee this trial exam. I'd even heard shi'd been conducting a few tests of hir own with my Safe-T-Blow solution; word was it was showing potential in certain therapeutic applications.

"I trust everything's going well?" I said as I entered the exam room. It looked like what you'd expect a doctor's exam room to be, only there were a few medical gizmos around that weren't available back in my day. Alex, meanwhile, shrugged two of hir arms. "So far so good, only I had to get Engineering to design an infopad for you." The dryger handed me the Canmephian equivalent of my age's iPad. The infopad was a one-stop-shop for a wide variety of informational needs.

"Ah, thank you!" I said, tapping the screen to activate my new gadget. Then I realized I was holding it upside down and flipped it 'round. "I have to wonder why these haven't been made regularly in Terran size." I connected easily to the building's network and pulled up the file on my exam experiment. Inside I found a roster of the volunteers the CMC had selected for me. However, as I looked at them, something seemed a little odd to me, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it...shrugging it off as just nerves, I opened my banker's box and began pulling out the various pieces of equipment I'd brought: syringes, injection needles, air tanks with hoses (I'd decided after my conference with the admirals to forego the liquid tests for the exam for the sake of expediency. I figured they could be added later if the results were good), and two large bottles of Safe-T-Blow, one marked "Wolfskunk Variant" and another marked "Dryger Variant." That reminded me of something as I turned to Alex.

"Oh that's right!" I said, snapping my fingers and pointing to the dryger. "We need to get YOU detoxed of my old formula."

During one of my previous visits to Canmeph-2, I'd been informed of a side effect my formula was having on the drygers who used it. It seemed the species had a natural ability to shift their size to macro proportions, but it was fueled through a connection they all had to some kind of pocket dimension where they could store excess physical mass. The formulae that would work

for wolfskunks, it turned out, would work for drygers, but it would interfere with their dimensional connection somehow.

"Ooooh, there's a reversal?" Dr. McHuge said, ears perking as I nodded. "Ohhh YES. Believe me..." I said, as I rummaged deeper into the box. "...I don't just go around pumping chemicals into people with no care for the consequences! I was always aware some day somebody may turn out to have an allergy or something to my formula, and so...." I grinned as my hand finally found another bottle I'd been looking for. I pulled out a bottle of thick, opaque yellow liquid marked "STB Flush".

"...I came up with this," I said. Picking up a syringe, I fitted it with a needle as I continued to chatter. "See, the way I designed Safe-T-Blow is with another agent that dissolves over time. This ensure that the chemical is released slowly, so you only have to take a shot once every 6-12 months, like a vaccination."

"I gotta sit down for this...." Alex groaned, locating a stool and sitting. It groaned as well, not being built for the bulk shi's carries up front.

"Oh don't worry, I'll spare you the boring details," I said with a smirk. Climbing up a stool next to hirs, I had to ascend it like a makeshift ladder. Once at a proper height, I felt along the side of one of Alex's upper arms for a good spot to stick hir.

"Suffice to say, without its slow-release agent, a full dose of Safe-T-Blow in it's 'raw' form would only last about 3 hours, tops. This stuff...", he waggles the needle in his hand. "Will dissolve the releasing agent and leave you detoxed in roughly about...hmm, when did you take your last dose?"

"I think it was when you injected me last," Dr.McHuge said, ruminating. "It was at that all-you-can-eat on Sol-3; I nearly ate it out."

"Heheheh, ahh yes, fun times!" I said, giving the dryger a little poke, squeezing the plunger of the hypo. "Let's see, That must have been an extra-strength dose I gave you, but this stuff most likely is near the end of its course as-is. So you should be detoxed in about...I'd guess a half-hour." Throwing the needle into the nearest needle bin, I reached over and into my banker's box again, pulling out a second bottle of the Dryger-made Safe-T-Blow marked "For Dr. Alex McHuge" and "25 Adult Doses".

"Here you go!" I said, tossing it to hir. "I haven't yet figured out how to formulate Safe-T-Blow so it doesn't cut off Dyrger's completely from their dimensional bulk storage. BUT I did come up with a formula with a lower release agent to chemical mix. It's formulated for a 24-hour release period, so Drygers like you will only be separated from your marco-fying abilities for a day at

most. I'm talking with the distribution company about packaging this stuff in injection pens for general sales."

"Sounds good," Alex said, rubbing his arm just slightly where I poked him. "But, not 28 hours? Canmephian days are a bit longer."

I slapped my forehead. "Oh crap, that's right!" I said. Even this long after waking up, my time in cryostasis was catching me in little ways. I took out my smartphone and brought up the notepad feature. "Note...to self...make...Safe-T-Blow...with...28 hour...release..." I muttered, putting it back in my pocket as I shrugged.

"Sorry about that," I said. "So, yeah, that stuff's still good, it'll just wear off a little before a full day's past."

"Tis fine," Alex said, standing back up. "Most blow within a few hours anyway." I snickered in response.

"Very true. Well!" I clapped my hands together. "Looks like everything's set! Now we just need our guinea p-I mean, volunteers, heheheh!"

"Let me see...", Alex said, getting out his own info pad and presumably pulling up our volunteer roster. "Oh him," she said, a glib smirk on his muzzle. "Heh, still hasn't gotten out of being a Lt. Commander."

I looked at the list again myself. It contained a Lt. Commander and several Corporals. Then, I finally put my finger on what had been bugging me; all of them came from the same unit, which had been labeled the "Kamikaze Squad." I pointed it out to Alex and the dryger started getting a bit concerned too. Just then, we heard the sound of people entering the waiting room. Alex went to the door and poked his head out, then rechecked his infopad.

"Oh boy...", she muttered. "I don't think these ones had a choice about entering military service."

"Eh?" I said. This was the first I'd ever heard about someone being DRAFTED into the Canmephian military.

"Yeah, this affects things," Alex muttered, then sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "What were they thinking?" She suddenly turned and barked at the door. "SASSKATOON! GET YOUR ASS IN HERE!"

As the door opened and a dryger in a uniform with Lt. Commander marks on his shoulder came in, I couldn't help but feel frustrated and a little testy. Ever since waking up from cold sleep, I'd been doing my best to reintegrate and catch up with the rest of society. But it wasn't easy, and

I'd quickly found being left out of the loop and not knowing what was going on right in front of me was my newest pet peeve.

"Uh, Dr. McHuge, would you care to share with the rest of the class?" I said, eyebrow raised and arms crossed. Meanwhile, the Lt. Commander shut the door behind him.

"Lt. Commander Saskatoon reporting for...," he started to say, then got a good look at who he was talking to. "McHuge?!" he said, looking like somebody just suddenly goosed him. "Ohhh boy..."

"Commander," I started to say. "I take it y...." I stopped short as Saskatoon had his little surprise at seeing Dr. McHuge. I looked between the two of them. "I sense some personal history..." I said. Alex nodded, a pained expression on his face. Not slammed-something-in-a-door pain, probably just stubbed-a-toe pain.

"Yeah," she said, "and I wasn't going to call in that favor but I'm forced to. Please explain your squad makeup to Mr. Fang, the researcher, here." Saskatoon turned to me, sighing.

"Alex helped cover up an addiction issue I had in boot camp," she said, "and lined up in-camp treatment. It helped, but I've resisted going full commander because of some lingering side effects. That said, yeah, this would cover it."

I presumed the Lt. Commander meant the favor owed as she continued.

"My mooks are repeat minor crime offenders that come from broken homes," Saskatoon said. I did my best to hide my surprise, but couldn't stop from pursing my lips and raising an eyebrow.

"I see," I said. "Have you been briefed on what this exam is about?"

"Not with the particulars," The dryger said. "I've been told it's in relation to revisiting BBW-426, and that a new procedure may clear its no-go status."

"That, among other things," I said. I was trying to think fast on the fly. This was a sudden, unexpected development, and I wasn't sure precisely how it might affect my plans, but my gut feeling was telling me it might cause trouble. "What sort of minor crimes are we talking about here, exactly?" I asked.

"Petty theft and minor aggravated assault," Saskatoon told me. Alex, meanwhile, was looking something up on his datapad.

"These were kids that were abandoned, homeless, slipped through the cracks, ended up in the system," she said. "The courts have the option to run them through the military as a stabilizing force if they're old enough, and if they've been doing it often."

Another unexpected detail; alarms were starting to ring in my head. "Just how old are these kids?" I asked.

"18 to 19 years old," Alex said. "They're not even old enough to drink."

I clenched my eyes shut; this was a complication I didn't need. "And this is whom Starchaser and Migraine chose to assign to my exam," I sighed. "I was expecting adults old enough to know what they were getting into. Minor legal issues are one thing, but teens? Ngh..." I bit my lip and started ruminating. I knew Canmephian society was different from my own, but I had to wonder just how President Hermes was going to react if I brought his exam results from a bunch of TEENAGERS.

"I doubt Starchaser or Migraine even chose this team," Alex said. "This was just made. An underling had gotten this one and threw this together."

Wonderful, a half-assed decision made by some idiot who probably didn't even read the specifics of the exam. In my head, I was seeing my entire plan swirling the bowl. A bunch of juvenile delinquents to work with; yeah, that was going to seem like a great demographic to pander to. Then it hit me; maybe I could still work with that. If I played up the young adult angle and downplayed the whole trouble-with-the-law part, I could sell the results to Hermes as evidence of interest in the games' young crowd! Of course, that would only work if the results of the exam were good, and the only way to know if they would be good...was to take the plunge.

And, while I was at it, might as well get a little payback on whoever was responsible for the mess. I felt a slow grin spread across my face, tinged with a hint of sinister intent. I turned back to Saskatoon and Alex, shrugging.

"Well, when life throws you a curve ball, just gotta swing," I said. "Go ahead and bring your boys, girls and goys in, commander. Make yourselves comfy and I'll be with you in just a tick." I stepped to the back of the back into the exam room and took out my cell phone, punching up Redwolf's number. The day after my conference with the admirals, shi had to return to Sol-3 and his job at the embassy. However, that didn't put him out of touch. I waited for the super-long-distance connection to be made across solar systems.

"Heyo Red," I said, "how's every little thing?"

"Oh, hey Mike," the drygerskunk said on the other end. "I hear you're in testing..." shi looks at a synced time clock, "...actually, right now. Huh, something must of thrown a rod in the plans. What's going on?"

"Heh, just an unexpected development," I said, "We'll be continuing on with the test, I hope, though that will be decided in just a moment. In the meantime, I wanted to ask if you could do me a small favor. Not much, I hope. I just need you to call CMSC HQ, find out who ordered the Kamikaze Squad to take part in my text exam, and then shoot them a message instructing them to report to my exam room in about, oh...an hour's time."

"Wha... Kamikaze Squad?" Red said; Alex hadn't been wrong, the upper echelons of the admiralty clearly had no damn clue how my exam had been handled. "That's... Okay, the test was supposed to come under my supervision. I will find out who and get them to you. And I know I had rescinded my 'paper only' policy two years ago..."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. I'll letcha know how everything goes! Catch you later!" I tapped the disconnect button, then turned on my heel to look over the squad. Two drygers, two wolfskunks and a drygerskunk were waiting to take this exam; I wondered how many of them had a clue as to what they'd been roped into. All of them were of the Detective class of Canmephian; wide and built like cinderblock outhouses; forget brick, this type of Canmephian takes it to the next level. One of the drygers, a stocky male, looked particularly fidgety, as did the four-eyed drygerskunk, whose ocular oddity marked hir as an Observer-Detective mix; not something you see often.

While Alex was talking with the male Dryer, who identified himself as "Keyhow," saying shi wanted to examine him first, I approached the drygerskunk.

"Excuse me, you are...?" I said, swiping at my datapad to bring up the drygerskunks profile.

"Corporal Koone, sir!" Shi said smartly.

"Koone, good...," I said, locating hir profile. "Have to say Corporal, you're perhaps the first drygerskunk I've encountered since the admiral. Always figured there were more of you around, heh. Given your people's penchant for documenting and studying the bejezus out of everything, I presume your genetic information has been thoroughly catalogued?"

Koone looked to Lt. Cmdr Sass for approval to respond, who confirmed I was in the clear. Koone turned back to me. "I'm assuming my bloodwork? They pulled some when I was sentenced into the military but haven't heard since."

I nodded in response, noting the bloodwork order was there, though the results weren't. It didn't mean much to me, other than there were no notes in the test results pointing out anything alarming; at least I presumed so, though it occurred to me the results might not have been complete yet.

"Hmm, I see," I said. "Well just a personal warning Corporal, once the tests are back, don't be surprised if you wind up getting called in for follow-ups. Nothing personal, but your fellow Canmephians, particularly your Observers, get a real research boner whenever an unusual physical variation shows up in someone."

"Especially Admiral Redwolf, once shi learns there's another drygerskunk here," Dr. McHuge said. Koone mouthed "Oooohhh," and nodded in understanding.

"E'yup," I said. "I wouldn't worry too much corporal. Although, just a word to the wise, if they bring in the anal probe, don't clench." I gave the corporal a smirk and a wink.

"We better take Keyhow in first," Alex said, twiddling hir stylus in one hand as shi looked at hir datapad. "I gotta ping on him that says he'll be the more... difficult one, and I'm talking medically."

"Really?" I said, turning to Dr. McHuge. "Well, we'll have to do that. But let's handle this properly..." Taking a couple steps back to address the group at large, I clapped my hands together. "Well! First thing's first, proper introductions. My name is Mike Fang, and this is Dr. Alex McHuge, so named for obvious reasons, and I'm betting you all are wondering 'what the fuck am I doing here?'" I smirked and began pacing a bit, a customary thing for me when I get on a roll. "Well, you're here to take part in a new form of physical evaluation. Since you're all in the CMSC, I presume you've had physicals before, including inflation physicals. Well, this is going to be sort of like that, only it's not going to be a test of your expansive capacity in your ah, extremities...it's going to be a test of your stomach capacity."

A collective "ERRP!" went up all through the squad. I smirked again; I figured they'd say that. "I understand this is probably a surprise to most of you," I said. "To be honest, I wasn't aware your particular squad was the one chosen for this test. When I'd put forth the suggestion to your superiors, I'd expected they would get volunteers from among the enlisted or possibly the cadets in training. I didn't realize they'd assign it to individuals such as yourselves." Climbing up onto a stool so I could look the group in the eyes, I put my hands behind his back; I knew what I was about to say could put my test in jeopardy, but I felt it was the right thing to do; these youngsters had been put in the military to give them stability in their lives, and I wasn't going to risk destroying that by using them against their will.

"As such," I said, "since you also apparently weren't briefed on the exact nature of this new, experimental exam, the last thing I want is to force you into this. SO, with that in mind, I'll explain a bit more about this exam, then give you a choice. Our purpose here is to determine how much capacity you have in your stomachs. To that end, we'll be pumping you with air to determine your maximum capacity and ability to handle expansion at varying rates. I assure you

this won't be harmful in any way, but if the very idea of this kind of experience makes you uncomfortable, you can say so now and you'll be excused from this test."

Alex piped up just then. "If you are wondering how safe this could be, and how uncomfortable it would be, do not worry. Both myself and Fang here have undergone the same tests, with no problems afterwards. It is fully documented by Admiral RedWolf himself. That said, whoever has concerns, speak up. It won't be held against you. If your records get updated because of it, we will volunteer the person who updated it."

I definitely appreciated Dr. McHuge's input. The squad started exchanging looks among themselves; in particular they looked to Kehow and Koone as if expecting guidance. It made me briefly muse on the dynamics of their squad as Keyhow stepped up.

"I'm for it," he said, "and I kinda want to go first."

"I want Keyhow to go first because I think he was operated on," Alex "said" to me in my head. In addition to his other qualities, the black-furred dryer was also mentally gifted with telepathy (and possibly telekinesis, I can never remember if they always go together with Canmephians) a quality that among Canmephians is known as being a "Sputnik."

"Well good!" I said, trying to sound as upbeat as possible. "Seeing as how Dr. McHuge said you need to go first anyway..." I motioned the stout dryer over to the testing area. Digging into my box of goodies, I took out another bottle of Safe-T-Blow and prepared a half-dose. "This is a protective measure to guard against injury," I said, rolling the stool I was on over to the dryer and feeling for a vein. "Again, not to worry, I use it myself all the time." I found a good spot and got a wince out of Keyhow as I gave him the injection. "Now then, we'll begin with gaseous expansion," I said, clapping my hands together and rubbing them as I took up the hose on the air tank. "Our first test will be to establish your maximum capacity. Feel free to have a seat, remain standing or do whatever would make you most comfortable."

"It's hard to get comfortable," Keyhow said, shifting in the examination chair. "My sides are killing me again."

"Really?" I said. "Do you have any pre-existing medical conditions?"

"It was way early, but I think I got a pair of limbs removed," Keyhow said. "I don't know if it made it into my records or not. Can you check, Doc? You look like you escaped."

"I didn't." Alex said. "But I got better. And from what I know of Safe-T-Blow, I think you will too."

I reflected for a second on this unexpected development. I'd found out that at some point in Canmephian history, abnormal physical variations got a pretty extreme response from the medical establishment. I know, for a people as varied in the number and arrangement of their body parts as the Canmephians are, how can there be anything "abnormal"? Well apparently if someone of a given class had any features that weren't typical for members of that class, the first response was to cut off whatever wasn't "supposed" to be there. Personally, I think that was an absurd overreaction. If the limbs or other parts looked vestigial, diseased or would have been a health risk to them, that would've been one thing. But as far as I could tell, we were talking about healthy, perfectly functional body parts that they sawed off just because they weren't used to seeing them someplace.

As for Alex's comment about Safe-T-Blow, I smirked a bit. I'd heard that shi'd been conducting a bit of hir own studies about its medical applications. Word was, and my own observations backed it up, my humble brew was something of a medical reset button. It seemed to have a knack for reforming people back to a state of peak physical health; it showed signs of being able to rebuild a body that had sustained injury and possibly even physical defect. Whether this was a reliable result and what its limits were remains to be seen, though.

Snapping out of my introspection, I smirked and picked up the hose from an air tank I'd taken from my hammerspace box. "Now then," I said, "We'll begin with a slow expansion. When you feel like you've gotten as big as you possibly can, just raise a hand. Try not to get scared or stop too quickly; remember this is to help establish parameters." He hands Keyhow the hose. "Whenever you're ready."

Keyhow gave me a look of confusion, then looked at the hose dubiously. Alex chuckled. "Overenthusiastic much, eh Mike?" Alex said, to which I responded with a smirk and a shrug. "Hold that hose," Dr. McHuge said to Keyhow. "I'm first going to put in a few breathing tubes through your nose down to your lungs. Then I'll slip a long tube in that we'll hook up. You won't be able to speak, but raise your hand if you want to stop. Raise both hands if you're having trouble, or wrap your tail around Mike here."

I blinked in surprise. I wasn't expecting to have to intubate any of our volunteers. "Uhh, Dr. McHuge, could I consult with you for a minute...?" I beckoned hir over out of earshot.

"Questions about procedure?" Alex asked, keeping hir voice down.

"That's putting it mildly," I said, throwing a quick glance back at Keyhow, who was fidgeting with the hose. "Why are you prepping Keyhow like he's about to go under the knife? There's never been a need for this kind of prep work before, and I've done this dozens of times. All he's gotta do is keep the hose in his mouth and let the air go down his throat, I've never had to shove breathing tubes down someone's nose and make them deep throat the airline before."

"We're trying to inflate his stomach, right?" Alex said. "If we don't do it this way, it may go down his lungs instead." I blinked a bit in confusion, but then something dawned on me; in the past, I'd always done inflating from a hose with experienced expanders, people like me who had practiced swallowing air orally. Alex must have seen from Keyhow's medical records he'd never developed such skills.

"Ahhh, alright, alright," I said. "Well, I've got a plan B. I brought some pressurized hammerspace orbs as well that're used for carrying mass quantities of gas and liquids. They're remote controlled, so we can just have them swallow one and..."

"Oh wait!" Alex said, snapping his fingers on two hands. Shi went over to a medical cabinet and came back with what looked like a plastic egg carton for rather undersized, spherical eggs; the same kind of package the spheres I'd been talking about came in. "I forgot we had these; we use them to test for physical inflation defects by inserting them surgically under the skin. They're linked up directly to the hospital network, too."

"Ahhh," I said, nodding. That certainly made this test a little easier, though I couldn't help but get a twinge of melancholy. I was feeling increasingly superfluous in my own experiment. I did my best to hide it, though, as Keyhow swallowed one of the balls with a glass of water. I picked up the remote that came with the box of medical spheres; it was pretty user-friendly, and I didn't have any trouble keying in the frequency of the gas ball Keyhow had just swallowed.

"Very good," I said. "Now, we'll start with a gradual expansion in 3...2...1...", tapped the remote's touchscreen. Slowly, but surely, Keyhow's middle began to swell. The dryer seemed to blink a bit in surprise, and shifted a little in his seat, but didn't show any outward signs of distress (although he looked decidedly fidgety). His shirt grew tighter around his distending middle, and at first he tugged at it to try and get it to stay in place, but then he realized it was a wasted effort, and instead quickly rolled it up to avoid having it rip as his belly was expanding like a stop-motion video of a melon ripening on the vine.

I tried to hide my grin, since I figured it might make Keyhow uncomfortable, and did my best to maintain a not exactly stoic, but reserved expression; something appropriate for a person conducting a medical exam. The dryer's belly began filling his lap; his fidgeting was still apparent, but he didn't seem to have any other issues besides the butterflies in his stomach having plenty of room to flutter around. I continued to monitor his PSI, the digital needle gauge creeping up and up, while below it a digital readout gave a precise reading. I was fairly impressed; 15 psi and climbing may not seem like much, until you figure the average tire on a ground vehicle takes 35 psi. This guy was made of some pretty strong stuff.

Keyhow's expression began to take on a look I can only describe as "pinched". It only got moreso as his swollen girth stretched closer to me and Dr.McHuge, who was nodding in

approval at the results. Finally, as Keyhow scrunched up his face with a strained expression like he was trying to bench press just past his limit, he held up a hand and I quickly hit the off button, leaving him with a gut that was almost down to the floor.

“Very good!” I said, not bothering to hide a broad smile at this point. “So, how do you feel?”

“OOoooohh...,” Keyhow groaned. “Incredibly full...I don’t think I could hold anymore, erf!”

I chuckled. “Well, that’s the idea!” I reached out a hand and slid it over the dryer’s stomach. The term “tight as a tick’s ass” suddenly sprang to mind as I rubbed his enlarged gut.

“If you’re ready, we’ll get you back to normal,” Dr. McHuge said. “Time to get your ball out; this’ll be like popping a cork...”

“Actually,” I said to Alex, smirking a tad; time to teach the Canmephian’s an old-school Terran trick. “Since we’ve got two more tests, we’ll want to leave it in a bit longer. But you’re right, we should get him down to normal. Here, let me show you a trick we use back on Sol-3...”

I climbed up onto the stool next to Keyhow, Alex looking on with apparent curiosity. “Okay,” I said to Keyhow, “in the future if you ever find yourself like this and want to release pressure, put your hands about here...,” I felt along Keyhow’s neck, locating a particular band of muscle. “and rub downward while exhaling...”

I stroked my hand along the base of Keyhow’s esophagus as he opened his muzzle. What started as a simple exhale suddenly grew into a gut (and window) rattling belch that left Alex timing it; later shi told me Keyhow managed to set a new Canmephian record.

“Tastes good both ways, doesn’t it?” I said, getting a slightly cheesy grin from Keyhow. “Now then,” I said, “the second test will be a more rapid expansion, to test your response to such. It will probably only take three to five seconds or so. Just tell me when you’re ready.”

Keyhow nodded, taking a moment or two to compose himself and make sure his shirt remained tucked up away from his about-to-expand middle. I took the time to adjust the settings on my remote, changing it from a continual release to a specified amount of gas, setting it to the amount that took the dryer up to the edge of full.

“Ready?” I asked. Keyhow gave me a thumb’s up, and I hit the button. Once again the dryer’s belly bloated out, but this time it was less of a creep and more like a pan of Jiffy Pop on a stove, probably even played in fast forward at that. Keyhow’s eyebrows went up and his eyes were wide, hands suddenly clapping the arm rests as he watched his own gut swell out from him like it was bubble gum. The dryer leaned back a bit as his girth reached maximum size once more, his entire body seeming rigid for a moment in surprise, before he finally relaxed. Meanwhile, Dr.

McHuge and I were monitoring his vitals. He'd had a slightly elevated heart rate before (most likely due to nerves) but this time, if hearts were cars, his would have just done a peel out from a dead standstill. I continued to watch the monitor on my datapad, and nodded in approval as I saw it slowly coming down to normal again. Breathing and all of Keyhow's other vitals were also normal.

"Good, good," I said. "How're you doing?"

"URF!" the dryer grunted. "Really tight again!" I shared a chuckle with Alex as I adjusted the release rate on the gas ball again.

"One more test," I said. "This one will be for near-instantaneous inflation. Heh, just release your gas, then let us know when you're ready." A prolonged BARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRP and a few moments to clear his head, and Keyhow adjusted himself in his seat, probably psyching himself up. A quick nod, and I counted down from five again, then tapped the remote control. This time, it wasn't like bubble gum or a growing melon; it was like a car's air bag deploying, only in a globular shape that made Keyhow's eyes almost pop out of his head. I think he even bounced a bit in his seat, because he suddenly jolted his arms and legs, and suddenly sprawled with a look of dizzy shock.

"You alright?" I said, double checking the vital monitors. It looked like his heart rate had skipped a couple beats, but in a few moments they once again began to return to normal. His nervous system, however, had displayed a sudden blast of activity in his sense of touch; at least that's what it seemed like to me from the displays.

"Oooooohhh," was all Keyhow could manage to groan out.

"Well, that's the last of the exams...," I said, as Keyhow dizzily raised up a hand to rub at his throat, once more belching out all the air. "Overall I'd say you did really well," I said to the dryer as his hand moved from his throat to his now once-more washboard abdomen, rubbing at it absently. "Now before we wrap this up, there is something we wanted to propose to you..."

"Hmm?" said Keyhow, looking curious now that the tests were over. Dr. McHuge grinned in a way that was rather impish, and I couldn't help but share it. I explained to Keyhow about the injection of Safe-T-Blow I'd given him, and Alex told him about the potential that it might help regenerate his amputated arms. The dryer only needed a few moments to consider our suggestion to put it to the test.

"An end to the pain in my sides?" he said. "Let's do it."

“Excellent!” I said, and took the remote for Keyhow’s gas ball out of my lab coat pocket. “There should be enough gas left to do that...,” I paused a moment; an urge to do something bad came over me, as I got a grin that neatly mirrored the devilish one Alex had earlier.

“Heheh, now watch me go be a complete bastard,” I said. I went over to the wall and pushed a button, extending one of those medical privacy screens. I made sure the lighting was such it provided a very clear silhouette of Keyhow. Alex seemed perplexed for a moment, but then realization dawned, and shi snerked as I went over to the exam room door and opened it.

“Alright, I said to the rest of the Kamikaze Squad in the waiting room, looking down at my datapad as they looked up at me, “I think we’re ready...oh wait, I’m forgetting something...oh yeah, now I remember!” Taking the remote control out of my pocket, I turned and looked to the side at the medical screen in full view of the doorway. With an emphatic tap of the remote, that silhouette of Keyhow began to grow. The shadowy outline swelled in the middle, bulging outward, my grin growing in time with it. Keyhow began to shift and squirm a bit in his seat the closer he got to his max, and I felt that delightful sense of growing anticipation.

My grin got toothy as the dryer reached maximum size, and his silhouette stopped growing, but began shaking; an audible grunting and creaking noise came from behind the screen, and thought I wasn’t looking at the rest of the squad, I could hear them talking among themselves in rather tense tones. Those tones got even tenser as Keyhow’s shadowy belly looked to be doing the same, and the grunting got even louder. Finally, with a long, drawn out “RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRGH!” there was a sudden, sharp WHABAM! that made the squad gasp out in shock. The screen shook with the force of the blast and any medical equipment in front of the exam chair not weighted down got knocked over. Alex toward the end quickly put up hir datapad to shield hir face as the dryer went all to bits.

Grinning, Dr. McHuge nonchalantly strolled over to the wall, tapping the screen retract button. As it slid back into its slot, the squad got a good look at Keyhow’s bits and pieces coming back together. The Safe-T-Blow did its work, re-assembling the dryer as he had been before. Actually, it had made a couple improvements; Dr. McHuge had another success to add to hir own experiments, because Keyhow, sitting with a look of absolute amazement on the exam chair, was now test-flexing a second pair of arms.

“You’ll want to exercise those to help get used to them and build up their strength,” Alex said. I turned back to the squad, toothy grin still fixed to my muzzle. Several of them had jumped to their footpaws in shock at the explosion, and likely from the sight of seeing their squadmate reassemble with his lost limbs regained, they were all now looking boggle-eyed, their gaze going from him, to Dr. McHuge, then back to me.

I let out a hyena snicker as I flipped the remote control in my hand. “NEEEEEEXT!”

It was time for the big presentation. I got up early that morning, making sure all the results and data I'd gathered were in order. Tucking everything into my inner shirt pocket, I bothered to button it up this time (so as not to look -too- casual) and headed downstairs to Shotgun Shells. Zaphod was there, finishing up what looked to be his third Canmephaian-sized breakfast plate. Shotgun was standing nearby, leaning an elbow on the counter, looking at the unicorn with an amusedly impressed expression.

"First time I've seen someone from Sol-3 manage to finish more than one of those," shi said. The unicorn grinned, scarfing down the last bit of toast with preserves, washing it down with a generous mug of hot tea. I waved over Sidearm and got myself a sausage and egg biscuit to go as Zaph paid his tab and looked over to me.

"We ready?" he said, wiping his muzzle with a napkin.

"E'yep," I said. "I take it you're coming with?"

"Ha! wouldn't miss it," the unicorn said, running a hand through his flipped hair. I took my breakfast-on-the-go and headed for the door, the sizeable equine in tow. I'd called ahead the evening before and arranged a personal meeting with Hermes. The wolfskunk's primary business was in advertising; hir ad firm, Quick N' Dandy Advertising, handled all the promotional work for the Growth Games, and it was quite the money maker for hir business. Hir personal secretary had arranged for me to get in a meeting with hir while shi was at the local branch office of hir firm.

Using my smartphone's GPS, I'd located the firm at a fairly easy walk of 10 blocks from Shotgun Shells. The morning crowd was out and about, folks going to work, running early morning errands, the usual sort of traffic. Normally with a crowd of people where the average is larger than I am, I'd have to be cautious about not getting kicked or stepped on. However, with Zaph right next to me, spaces tended to get made to accommodate us, frequently with a few lingering, surprised sideways glances.

Finally, we reached the skyscraper where the office was located. The local office wasn't the main headquarters, so the firm didn't own the whole building, instead renting space on one of the 50 stories available. The unicorn and I crossed a broad, polished marble plaza leading up to the building, checking in at the security desk before we headed to the elevator. It was there we had our single mishap during the whole trip. There were already three others in the lift as we got in and punched the 22nd floor. However, just as the doors closed, someone behind us sneezed and bumped into Zaphod. He's always sworn what happened next was an accident,

though it struck him as amusing at the time. The unicorn stumbled forward, and with that big ball gut of his, he collided with the key panel, punching about 20 different floors all at once.

"Whoops!" he said with a cheesy grin and a shrug as everyone groaned, myself included.

Five minutes later, we FINALLY hit our floor and stepped off, leaving two remaining Canmephians looking decidedly irked. Shaking my head as the doors shut behind us, I walked up to the receptionist's desk on this floor, the Quick N' Dandy logo on the wall just behind him.

"Excuse me," I said, my eyes just coming up to the top of the desk. The receptionist looked up and around, at first looking to Zaphod, who pointed to me.

"Oh, yes!" the wolfskunk said, blinking a triangle of three eyes at me. "How can I help you?"

"We're here for our appointment with Wolfskunk Hermes," I said.

"Ah yes, Mr....Fang, correct?" the wolfskunk said, tapping at a screen somewhere on the desk in front of him.

"Correct," I said.

"Mr. Hermes is expecting you," the receptionist said, tapping a button to slide open a door to the left of the desk. "Shi's in the conference room at the end of the hallway. Do you need me to show you?"

"That's alright mate," the unicorn said. "We can probably find it without gettin' lost." We made our way down the hallway the clerk had indicated. Low-wall cubicles were set up, allowing plenty of oogling of the unicorn as we approached the conference room. Just before we got there, a wage earner (which I figure is more polite than calling them wage slaves), with her eyes focused on her tablet, walked out of the cubicle maze and straight into the side of Zaphod's wrecking ball. A BAOOMP like a kettle drum rumbled from the unicorn, who glanced to the side as the office lady pinwheeled four arms as she staggered backwards. With surprising speed, Zaphod turned and bent slightly at the knees, catching the dryer by the belt around her blouse, just over the top of her knee-length pencil skirt, while with the other hand he caught the tablet as it fell.

"Careful on the rebound there love," the unicorn said with a smirk, standing back up and handing the tablet back to the blushing dryer. I chuckled myself as I reached the conference room door, sliding it open as Zaph brought up the rear.

"...and I expect this quarter's earnings will rise noticeablyff, given past precedence during Growth Games years," said a wide, slightly-shorter-than-usual wolfskunk. This, I suspected, was Wolfskunk Hermes, given that shi appeared to be the one speaking while others were listening.

At least I presumed so, since the only other person in the room, another herm wolfskunk in the Nurse Class (six breasted in stacks of two) was typing on a personal device like shi was taking notes. A device in the center of the conference table appeared to be a group chat speaker, while at the end of the table a holographic display was showing what appeared to be a shared computer UI screen, displaying the usual sort of business charts you'd expect to accompany a regular report.

"How many ad slots have we sold so far for game time?" a voice from the speaker said.

"According to the networks, nearly half," said Hermes. The wolfskunk had two heads, one that was 100 percent lupine and the other 100 percent skunk; an unusual sort of arrangement. Shi had four breasts, double stacked, two arms and a taur lower body. Hir upper body wore a male-style business jacket and shirt, double-collared with each head wearing a red-and-white tie with symmetrical designs.

"Were there any other questions?" Hermes asked. A chorus of "No's", "Nope's," and "I don't think so's" came from the speaker. "In that case, if any of you need anything else, feel free to email me. Thank you for your attendance." Reaching forward, the wolfskunk tapped a button on top of the speaker as one of hir heads turned towards me and Zaph. "OH! You must be my 10:30 appointment," the wolfskunk said.

"Right on the nose," I said, walking forward and climbing into a seat. I had to lean across the table to extend a hand to the wolfskunk. "Mike Fang," I said. The eyebrows on both heads went up as Hermes shook my hand.

"Ahh yes, Mr. Fang," shi said, rueful grins on hir faces. "I've been hearing about your...activity as of late."

"Heh, word travels fast, it seems," I said with a grin. Zaphod let out a chuckle of his own, sitting down in a chair that he was better sized to fit. Even leaning back slightly, his girth still managed to reach the table, the last four or so inches resting comfortably on its surface, receiving stares from both Hermes's secretary and the wolfskunk's leftmost head.

"So," said hir other head to me, "Am I to take it that you're here to pump me up in an effort to get my support for your Growth Games proposal?"

"That would be my strategy," I said, "If I didn't know that you've already tried such activities and don't find them personally interesting."

"Heh, yes, unfortunately so," the wolfskunk said with a happy shrug. "I'm sorry, but I've given it a try and it's just not for me."

"Eh, not a big deal," I said, with a shrug of my own. "We all have our own tastes and not everybody's into growing sideways." This elicited a melodramatically shocked gasp from Zaphod.

"That's absurd!" the unicorn said. "Who could say no to all THIS?!" he picked up his belly, hefting it in his hands before letting it drop back onto the table with a WHUMP! making everything on it bounce. Hermes' secretary followed suit, bouncing in his seat in shock.

"Now now Zaph," I said. "Let's be fair. Shi's given it a chance, at least." The unicorn pursed his lips, sighed, shrugging like he just couldn't understand some people. Hermes gave a silent laugh of his own.

"So since that's off the table," Shi said, "What exactly do you have to present me to support adding guts to the games? With all due respect, from where I'm sitting I just don't see it being enough of a draw to justify the cost."

"Heheh, oh ye of little faith," I said, shaking a finger in the air. "As it so happens, I have evidence that there's gracious plenty of interest to begin phasing in some new events to the Growth Games."

"Do tell," Hermes said from both heads.

"Well," I said, and reached into my shirt, pulling out the folder I'd brought from its inner pocket. "Just recently I took part in a new form of physical examination with the CMC. In case you're not aware, part of their regular physicals is a testing of officer's and recruit's inflation capacity."

"I believe I had heard about that at some point from some of my military acquaintances," Hermes said. "I myself served a stint with planetary law enforcement, but not the military."

I nodded. "Well, as it so happens, I've recently conducted a pilot physical exam for them to add to Medical's regular checkups for the Space branch; regular stomach capacity tests."

"Really?" Hermes said, one eyebrow on each head arching. "And you think they're going to have long-term interest in continuing that?"

"Oh I'm VERY confident they are," I said. "They seem quite interested in the kind of medical data on their personnel this new kind of physical can provide them, plus it will be useful for ensuring their troops are ready for potential dangers, such as decompression and encounters with unexpected forms of life during exploration missions."

"Hmmmmmm...", Hermes said, rubbing a chin on one head. "I admit I hadn't thought of that aspect of it. It -does- sound like that would provide some long-term interest in this form of expansion."

"Indeed," I said. "And I have good evidence that there may be a growing, no pun intended, interest in recreational stomach expansion too."

"Really?" said one of Hermes' heads. "What's that?" said the other. I slid my file across the table to the wolfskunk.

"After conducting the exams, I took the liberty of also conducting an anonymous survey to gauge the reactions of the participants." I said as Hermes flipped open the manila folder. "You'll notice among my questions I asked them whether they found the experience enjoyable, unpleasant, or indifferent, then to rate several things on a 1-5 scale, such as their overall enjoyment or discomfort from the experience, previous interest in stomach expansion, their interest after having taken part in the exams, their interest in further engaging in stomach inflation as a leisure activity or personal indulgence and any additional comments they cared to make on the exams and the experience."

The wolfskunk began to sift through the results, going from one filled-out survey page to the next. His eyebrows on both heads went up as he skimmed the results.

"Interesting!" Hermes said from one head while the other continued to read. "Looks like the majority of them were won over by testing it out! 'I need to go bigger,' 'If there are ways to do it legally, I'm all on that,' ...Most of them sound like they want to look into it further...heh, I suspect some of these have some Observer in them."

"I've found it does tend to pique their curiosity," I said, steepling my fingers and grinning. "I'd also point out that those who took part in the exam were fairly young, in their late teens. I think this is a good indicator recreational expansion like this has good potential with the younger demographic."

"I do see one of them didn't care for it at all, though..." Hermes said, getting to the last page. I nodded in what I hoped was a sage expression.

"True; as we've both noticed, like a lot of things, it's not for everybody," I said. Again, Zaph gave me a quizzical look, like I was talking gibberish. "But in that one's defense, I get the feeling she may have had some previous experience with it, and not the good kind."

Hermes nodded both heads, setting aside the survey results. "Well, Mr. Fang, this does look very promising for the future of new kinds of expansion. Where are you looking to go from here?"

"My next step..." I said, reaching into my shirt again, pulling out a second folder. "...is to make this formal application to introduce several new events to the Growth Games with a stomach

and full-body expansion focus.” I slid the second folder across the table. “I filled these out last night, and hope I can have this brought before the committee at its next regular meeting.”

“Well Mr. Fang, that would be the normal procedure...,” the wolfskunk said, sliding the application folder to his assistant. “But in this case, given your promotional efforts...I’m going to call a special meeting of the committee.”

If my grin got any wider, my head would have split in half.

It was the last day of my vacation; I’d made my travel arrangements back to Earth, along with Zaphod, and had gotten in some final sightseeing before packing up my bag for the trip the next morning. Downstairs at Shotgun Shells, I was finishing my dinner at the bar (with Zaph sitting next to me on his own third helping) as Shotgun came over to give me a refill on my drink.

“Word is the WWCC held their special meeting this afternoon,” she said as she slid my glass back to me. “Surprised you weren’t there.” I chuckled.

“I’ve been to enough meetings in my life to not want to spend any of my vacation time at one,” I said. “Besides, I figured with everything I’d done, I’ve said all that needs to be said to the committee.”

“Heh, you’ve certainly been busy with that,” Shotgun said. Glancing along the bar, she looked up at the flat screen on the far wall; a news segment had just come on, and guess what it was about.

“Oooh, you’re up!” She said to me. Zaph managed to tear himself away from his grazing as he looked up as well. “Oh nice!” the unicorn said. “Oi! Turn that up, will ya?” Sidearm, who was down at that end of the bar, grabbed a remote and cranked up the volume. A dryer newscaster was seated next to a graphic reading “Growth Games News”.

“...met today for a special meeting on a proposition to add new events to the games,” the newscaster said. “After a half-hour of discussion, the committee voted 7-3 in favor of adding new stomach and full-body expansion events to the games.”

“YES!” I whooped, pumping my arms and slapping five with Zaphod, who was drumming his hands on the countertop in celebration. The bar was buzzing at the announcement, as the newscast cut to an interview with Hermes.

“This has been a proposal brought up in the past,” the committee president said, “but the previous petitioners weren’t as thorough and less enthusiastic than this one.”

“Said petitioner, Sol-3 native Michael Fang, reportedly gave personal presentations to both President Hermes and two committee members who previously had voted against it,” the newscaster said. A few heads at the bar turned my way, a small smattering of applause making me blush slightly. The news feed cut to an interview with Sylvia Cracken; the wolfskunk was dressed in a female “power suit”, which showed off a lot of cleavage.

“Previously I was unconvinced of this form of expansion’s draw,” shi said. “But after Mr. Fang’s demonstration, I was impressed enough to revisit the matter with the rest of the committee.”

The feed then shifted to an interview with Ironsight, who was looking like shi didn’t want to meet the gaze of the tv reporter holding the mic.

“I’m not personally sold on this kind of pass time,” shi said, trying to sound calm but looking decidedly otherwise. “But Mr. Fang made a decent argument that it’s a valid form of expansion to add to the competition. If there’s enough interest from other people to make it worthwhile, I don’t see any more reason to oppose it joining the games.”

“With the addition approved, the committee will now move onto approving specific events and their regulations,” the newscaster said as the view switched back to the newsroom. “Proposed events include eating-for-size competitions, team pumping events, beer chugging, and inflated wrestling matches. While this year’s Growth Games won’t feature any new events, the committee intends to have a new lineup ready for the following year. In other sports news, the referees’ union is continuing negotiations with the WWCC to increase hazard pay...”

Sidearm lowered the volume on the TV as I turned back to the remains of my drink. “As they say on tv, ‘don’t you just love it when a plan comes together,’” I chuckled.

“Job well done, I say!” Zaphod said brightly, draining his own pint and wiping his muzzle off on the back of his hand. “SO! Where d’we go from here, eh?”

“Well,” I mused. “It’ll take more expert people than myself to come up with regulations for the events. Offhand...I’d say the next step is going to be forming up an Earth team.”

“Aaaaahhhh!” the unicorn said, eyes glittering. “Now there’s a good proposition!”

“Heheh, it’s only right, I figure,” I said, leaning back in my seat with a grin. “Now that we’ve got the new events coming, we need to show these beginners how it’s done.”

The Canmephian Embassy terminal was crowded, as usual, as Zaph and I stepped off the shuttle. We’d arrived about the middle of the day, so we had quite a bit of squeezing and dodging to do

to get to our bags and escape the terminal unscathed. As we left the building, a familiar face was waiting.

“Care to drop by my place for some after-flight decompression?” Redwolf said, surprising me by appearing just to my side.

“Damn you’re good at that,” I said with a smirk. I didn’t see any reason not to take hir up on the offer, and neither did Zaph. The drygerskunk had brought hir ride, which provided ample room, even for the unicorn, for the short trip over to hir sizeable estate, Pawstooth. As we walked in the front door, the unicorn looked around in appreciation.

“Niiiice digs!” he said, “I see a few features I’m gonna have to get for my place once I’m rich n’ famous enough.”

“I can give you some engineers’ names,” Redwolf said with a purr as we made ourselves comfortable in hir sitting room. “So, I heard the good news about the games; guess you really managed to wow them.”

“What can I say?” I said. “Sometimes it’s just a matter of presentation.”

“Indeed,” Red said, slurping at some coffee. “Oh, you might be interested to know, I’ve heard from Alex. Those exams you test ran are turning a few heads in the CMMC. It’s also helped hir own research.”

“Good!” I said; it was heartening to know that my little accidental breakthrough was turning out even more useful than I expected. “I’ll have to give Alex a call later; I’ve heard of a couple people I think might make good additional test cases for the therapeutic applications of Safe-T-Blow.”

“Sounds worth exploring,” Redwolf said, as I stood up and excused myself to put on a change of clothes.

“I’m sure Alex will want to set up a consultation with whoever you’d suggest,” the wolfskunk said as I came out of the restroom.

“I certainly hope so,” I said. “However, that will need to wait a bit. For now...,” I stepped around the corner, changed back into a pair of slacks, my combat boots, a white button-up shirt, and an olive tie.

“It’s back to the old grind,” I said.

IT’S BACK TO WORK.

FANG ISN'T DONE.