

A True Size Queen

By Mike Fang

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It was early in the morning when I received the email. In fact it came in before I was even up; one of the perks of being able to set my own hours is I don't have to get up before I want to. Well, mostly; I still have deadlines, but they're usually flexible. This was a perk I was really learning to appreciate that comes with being a newly-appointed agent for an inter-dimensional organization. I'd been back on Earth for about a month since my induction into the Dimensional Investigation Federation. In that time, I'd been given a few fairly simple jobs to cut my teeth on, compiling profiles on people, businesses and organizations the federation considered of interest. They were nothing special; legwork the likes of which I've done before for clients who needed to conduct background checks. I'd developed a knack for coming up with a believable story for when I needed to question people, claiming to be gathering input for a study being done by this or that company or foundation, then dropping the name of one of the dummy organizations the DIF set up; it had plenty, and the federation contacts who acted as its representatives were accustomed to backing up field agents' stories.

That morning, the sky was dull and overcast, the kind of weather that makes you want to sleep in a bit. I slapped my snooze button a couple of times before finally deciding I didn't want to encourage myself to become a self-indulgent lump anymore than I usually do. 30 minutes on a vertical climber workout machine was followed by my usual morning routine. I dropped into my desk chair at my computer, a glass of iced tea in the coaster next to me, as I brought up my email app. The typical invoices for bill payments assailed me; thank God more of those could be reliably automated these days, though I still wanted to receive notice emails so I wouldn't get complacent about how much money was getting sucked out of my bank account.

I was adding some new spam accounts to my block list when I saw the priority-marked message. It was from Y'tona, a DIF assignment dispatcher who was one of my regular contacts. I'd only met him in person once. Well I say him...Y'tona said that was the gender most familiar to me that he identified with. His people weren't that concerned about gender, as it didn't play any sort of role in their society or reproduction; I guess when you're sentient energy beings that form physical bodies by animating minerals (volcanic sand being the most popular for its ability to be molded) you don't spend much time worrying about those kinds of things.

"Mr. Fang," Y'tona wrote, always the formal sort, "We've been pleased with the results of your work thus far. Now, we have your first, no pun intended, large scale assignment. I say no pun, because we've received word from our other field agents in your region about the increasing hostile activity of individuals of abnormally large sizes; 'macros' I believe is the colloquial term. The DIF is concerned about this upswing in macro hostility, as well as their increasing numbers. Not only are we worried about the general public safety, we're also concerned about anti-macro sentiment growing against those who haven't committed any hostility themselves, as well as the potential for this phenomenon to spread beyond Sol-3, or Earth as you and others still call it, since the causes aren't immediately identifiable."

"Therefore, your assignment is to compile a report on the growing (again, no pun intended) macro phenomenon; gather anecdotal and expert testimony, and search for evidence of the cause of the surge in violence and the macro population in general. Be advised; depending on the evidence you find, we may require you to take direct action to address the cause(s); keep us informed on your progress regarding the investigation into the instigating factors.

Yours respectfully,

Y'tona."

I sat back in my chair and steepled my fingers in front of my muzzle. I'd been hearing on social media and reading in the news about the uptick Y'tona was talking about. It had been slowly building up about three years before I was zapped to DIF headquarters; in that time the estimated macro population on my planet had nearly tripled. Most of them were considered "small scale" macros, but size is relative, and it's hard to call someone 50 feet tall petite. While Earth was no stranger to macros, even in my day, they generally weren't this numerous. It didn't help that most of these new macros were behaving like rampaging kaiju from some cheesy 70's film from Japan. Canmephian construction companies were helping augment the Terran ones in rebuilding infrastructure when it was damaged or destroyed, but it was hard-pressed to keep up.

Like many cases I've taken on, I began my work by gathering as much background information as I could. The biggest surge of openly malicious macro attacks apparently started several months prior, and had been growing steadily in number and frequency. They were also becoming more widespread; the most recent news reports of them came from the west, midwest, east coast, even some from Canada and South America. There didn't seem to be any connecting thread between them from physical evidence; they were all manner of species, gender and nationality. While a number of them didn't have recorded identities – eyewitnesses claiming they appeared to be drifters, squatters or vagrants – others were known residents of the areas in which they'd gone on a rampage. It was strange.

Digging through the older reports, one thing was fairly obvious; the earliest reports, the point from which this, for lack of a better term, outbreak seemed to be coming was a place called Kingdom City; a sizeable metropolitan area, from the look of it. After I compiled copies of the news reports and began a draft of my report with the background info I'd dug up, I decided to start from the outside and work my way in, investigate the most recent incidents and then work back towards what looked like the source.

"Best way to handle macros," I thought to myself with an inner chuckle. "Start from the bottom and work your way up."

The bus's breaks let out a hiss as it came to a stop at the station. Grabbing my valise and my briefcase, I stepped off with the rest of the crowd; while I could have taken my personal spaceship in far less time, it would have been absurdly conspicuous. I also didn't really feel like driving, since the trip to the latest reported macro attack, a 40-foot tall alligator that stepped on several houses in a suburb, occurred all the way in Nashville.

It was a cloudy day, with a light breeze that was just enough to cause anything loose and fabric to flap in it slightly; my coat, for example, flaps on their poles, and the flaps of the tent shelters set up by the emergency services personnel. The subdivision where the rampage had gone on was a gated community, its houses built in neat rows around a golf course. That golf course was going to have several new, footprint-shaped sand traps, by the look of it, as I took a cab past it and down one of the community streets towards the course's clubhouse. The clubhouse had been turned into the HQ of the recovery staff. People in official-looking uniforms were moving in and out of the building with a sense that wasn't quite urgency, but more purpose; they had a job to do and they weren't being slow about it.

"Excuse me," I said to a female armadillo wearing a polo shirt with the Red Cross on its pocket.

"I'm looking for the operation director?"

"Oh, right in there," she said, pointing over her shoulder. "The rhino wearing a ballcap, can't miss him."

"Thanks," I said, stepping through the automated doors. There were three people standing in the lobby of the clubhouse, the biggest of which was a rhino with a bodybuilder physique, wearing a yellow vest with reflective tape on it. A tablet in one hand, he was giving directions to the other two people with him. I gave them time to finish up before introducing myself, explaining my purpose, and asking to speak with any witnesses of the rampage. The rhino suggested a couple families I could talk with, and showed me their houses on a map of the suburb.

That is, a map of where there houses -used- to be.

It was only a short walk to the first of the two lots I'd been directed to. Like a number of the parcels around it, the lot contained a large tent set up in the front yard, something like you'd see set up for a small outdoor gathering, not just a camping trip. It also contained, again like other lots around it, what used to be a house, the structure now reduced to splintered wood, shattered masonry and personal belongings scattered or obliterated.

"Hello?" I said, ducking my head down to look through the front flap of the tent. Inside, I saw a female skunk sitting on a cot, reading while what I presumed were her grade-school-age son and daughter sat at a fold-out table, rolling dice while playing a board game.

"Oh hello," the mother said, looking up from her book, "Can I help you?"

"I hope so," I said, stepping inside and extending a hand. "My name's Mike Fang; I'm doing research for a private think tank on the recent macro attacks. I was hoping to ask you some questions about the one that happened here."

"Of course," she said, putting a bookmark in the paperback she was holding. "My husband should be back soon if you wanted to talk with..."

"Somebody mention me?" said a voice just behind me. I turned and saw a male skunk in a worn-open, short-sleeve shirt with a white undershirt beneath it and blue jeans. He had a banker's box in his hands, containing various personal belongings; it looked like he'd been going through the debris that had once been his family's home, trying to salvage what he could.

Sitting down with the husband and wife, I started piecing together an account of their experience. It had happened about a week prior; both the kids had been at school (which the parents were very thankful for), and both the parents had been at home, doing some redecorating, when they suddenly heard and felt several thunderous tremors that grew in volume and intensity.

"We knew it wasn't an earthquake," the husband said, "and there isn't a military base anywhere nearby, so we knew it wasn't any kind of practice drills. No construction going on around here, either."

The couple had looked out their front window; a colossal alligator, nearly reaching the height of the nearby water tower, was marching towards their suburb. He was decked in ratty-looking clothing that made him look distinctly like a vagrant, and had a nasty grimace on his face.

"He was..." the wife said, then let out a slow breath and shook her head, "Well I guess monstrous is the only word I can think of."

"When did it become clear he was hostile?" I asked, flicking my pen between my fingers as I turned another page in my notepad. The husband let out a mirthless chuff of a laugh.

"When he hauled back a fist and punched a hole in the water tower," he said.

An emergency siren had begun blaring by the time the gator had reached the suburb, smashing the gate with one stomp of his foot. He proceeded to stomp his way through the houses; he would randomly turn towards one, and with insane glee, would jump on top of one with both feet, smashing through the roof, then repeatedly jump on the remaining standing walls with ground-shaking impacts.

"It was like watching some bratty kid at the beach stomp on a sand castle," the husband said, shaking his head.

"Geeze," I said, continuing to take notes.

"Oh it only got worse," The wife said. "Our neighbor down the street, Ned Hollinson...."

"Oh God, poor Ned..." the husband said, sucking a pained breath between clenched teeth. At my prompting, they explained that one of their neighbors, seeing the malevolent reptile, decided to make a break for it, and jumped in his SUV. But the gator heard his engine turn over. I had to wince as I imagined being in Hollinson's position, when the gator bounded in front of his car, swung its tail and sent it barrel-rolling across the blacktop, smashing back into his garage and through the back wall.

"It's a miracle Ned didn't get killed," the wife said. "But last we heard, he was still in critical condition in the hospital."

That was when the gator turned its sights on the couple's house. There was a terrifying moment when they didn't know what to do, then suddenly they remembered the basement. They both made it just in time as they heard their roof cracking and snapping under the gator's weight. After that, all they had to go by was the sounds coming from outside; huddled in the dark, they held each other as they heard their house being smashed to the ground. At least two more houses, by the sound of it, were demolished before they heard the rumble of vehicles approaching. The sound of firearms came from the streets, eventually culminating in a death-bellow that made the marrow freeze in their bones, followed by an almighty crash that they feared would cause the ruins of their house to cave in on them.

"That must have been when the gator hit the ground," the husband said, leaning back in his folding chair. "After that, we were trapped in the basement for three hours; the National Guard got to us by then and dug us out of the rubble."

With this anecdotal account written down, I asked the couple a few brief follow-up questions; apparently the gator had been a complete stranger, and hadn't been noticed before in the area by either of them or mentioned by any of their neighbors. There also hadn't been any warnings or alerts of hostile macros in the area prior to the reptile's rampage.

Thanking the couple, I left them to get back to sifting through what used to be their house, going to speak with the second person the Emergency Response chief had pointed me toward. I found him, a cheetah with his arm in a sling, watching an emergency engineering crew of Terran and Canmephian workmen clearing away debris on what I presume was his own property. The

cheetah's story was much the same as the skunk couple's; he'd just arrived home from work when the gator appeared from over the hill and gave his house the sand castle treatment. He'd been half in and out of his car, so while the gator was occupied, he bolted on foot, rather than attract attention starting his car back up. It probably would have worked, but for an errant flick of the alligator's tail that caught him and knocked him a good 20 feet. He was found unconscious on someone else's lawn by the EMT's, fortunately with nothing worse than a broken arm for his trouble.

Satisfied I had a decent eyewitness account of the incident, I got in touch with the National Guard to find out what they had to say. Apparently the initial investigation, which was ongoing, hadn't turned up any sort of identity for the gator. He was presumed to be a vagrant, going by his shabby getup, and had only been noticed by a couple beat cops, loitering around town. An autopsy and medical tests were also ongoing, but initial results on basic biological scans showed that his macrophile nature wasn't natural; somebody or something had done some work on him.

With supervision, I was granted a viewing of the body and to take photographs for my report. I had to get it greenlit by their top brass, but my local DIF connections knew all the right things to say to convince them it wouldn't do any harm. The gator's body had been moved to a local airfield; the small runway, normally used for private aircraft, made a suitable flat surface to set up a large medical tent so they could examine the remains. Canmephian coroners, along with Terran scientists using robotic frames to compensate for their smaller size, were going over the body with scanners, probes, and large pieces of industrial equipment being used in place of surgical tools. The sight made me immediately think of Gulliver and his encounter with the Lilliputians.

However, if Gulliver had looked to the tiny kingdom like the reptile looked to me, I doubt they would've risked letting him wake up. It didn't take a medical degree to see that there was something decidedly wrong with him; his scales had grown out in several places in uneven, twisting spikes, his hands had sprouted long, curving claws, and from his back were a set of six appendages that didn't look even slightly reptilian; their exoskeletal coverings made them look far more like insect or arachnid limbs.

I've seen corpses before, but few have given me the sense of unease that I had from that giant cadaver. Going around a scaffolding erected around the body. I took pictures from all four sides. As I climbed down, I glanced to the side at the body; I got a vague sense of familiarity from it...and I didn't like it.

My journey towards Kingdom City was filled with interviews and examinations that were very similar to my first. I had nine additional stops before I reached the metropolis. In each one, the story was nearly the same; a stranger to the area suddenly turned macro, shortly after arriving, and would go on a rampage. While the incidents didn't seem to have direct connections, the MO's and circumstances were too similar to ignore. While sitting on the bus to Kingdom City, I went over my notes. All the various macros had what I could only call mutations or deformities; unhealthy looking growths or limbs shaped all wrong, additional limbs that, while healthy enough, were obviously unnatural to the macro's given species. I'd seen mixes of reptile, mammal, arthropod and avian, most in ways that lacked any kind of elegance. There had, however, been two exceptions; a colossal female wolf that had a bat's wings, in a way that seemed, if not natural, at least healthy, and a horse with multifaceted arthropod eyes and antennae that actually looked well formed, not twisted or infected. However, that hadn't stopped them from being decidedly hostile.

As skimmed over my observations on my tablet, another odd pattern struck me. In each instance, the further from Kingdom City the incidents, the larger the macros involved tended to be.

"So if this city -is- the source of the hostile macros," I mused to myself, "then it's like the longer they hold off before transforming, the bigger they can get, like they're building up their strength before unleashing it. 'Course there may be an entirely different reason."

My bus rumbled to a stop at the station, and I packed up my tablet, mixing into the crowd of other passengers. Kingdom City looked to be an average sort of urban area; tightly packed buildings, advertisements all over the place, districts where particular types of people or businesses tended to cluster. I checked myself into an inexpensive-looking motel and began figuring out my next move. This place having had the earliest and most numerous macro incidents, anyone who'd been digging into it like I had would likely have the most long-term info. The only question was, who'd be doing that sort of study?

I decided, like with my previous investigations, to start off with the Emergency Services; nobody better to tell you what was found at the scene than the first responders. I wound up leaving messages for both the Chief of Police and the Fire/EMS department. In the meantime, I took some time to wander around the city. For a place that had been plagued with a rash of violent, gigantic creatures out of a late 70's Japanese movie, the place seemed to be handling it pretty well. There were more than a few construction crews doing repairs, but from the remarkably fast dates of expected completion posted on the temporary fencing around the sites, it seemed like experience and repetition had been effective teachers. I suspected a bit of Canmephian tech to back them up helped too.

Walking through what appeared to be Kingdom City's equivalent to Chinatown, I came across an outdoor eatery. The smells of stir fry, steaming vegetables and wok-seared meat reminded me I hadn't eaten all day; an early dinner seemed in order. Stepping under the awning, I sat down at one of several circular diner-like seats and waited for one of the cooks to get to me, scanning the menu while I did.

"Welcome!" said a paper-hat-adorned chow-chow, rubbing his hands with a towel and draping it over his shoulder. His thick Chinese accent added the perfect touch. "What can I get for you?"

"I'll have one order of pot stickers and...a small pork lo mein," I said, setting down the menu and taking a pair of chopsticks out of a plastic cup on the counter in front of me. The chow-chow turned and said something in rapid Chinese to another cook, and started tossing ingredients onto a Mongolian grill with speed and deftness of hand that belied years of practice. Noodles were drizzled in oil, along with sliced pork, bamboo shoots, carrot slices, shredded cabbage and other ingredients, while dumplings were put into a bamboo steamer and set over a kettle of boiling water. My dinner was done and I slid my credstick into a payment slot just as my phone rang.

"Mike Fang," I said as I put a potsticker into my muzzle; when I'm hungry, a phone call doesn't get in the way of my appetite.

"Mr. Fang, this is Police Chief Dunaway," a female voice said on the other end.

"Ah chief," I said, swallowing before opening my muzzle again. "Appreciate you calling me back. I'm a private investigator hired to do research on the recent macro attacks; I was hoping you might be able to point me in the direction of whoever has been gathering information on the attacks here in Kingdom City."

"Well, there's probably been a couple think tanks that have had their field crews out and about," the chief said as I continued to eat. "Although if it's comprehensive data you're looking for, I think the best people to talk to would be the Hellions."

"And who might they be?" I asked, twirling noodles around my chopsticks and stuffing them in my muzzle.

"A group of mercenaries specializing in rapid response to hostile macros," the chief said. "They've got their main office just outside the city; they've been responding to the majority of our incidents since the city council signed a long-term contract with them."

"Gotcha," I said. "They do sound like the people I'd need to speak with. Can you give me an address or a phone number for their office?" I scribbled down both address and number into my pocket notebook; doesn't matter how far digital technology goes, sometimes old-fashioned pen and paper are the quickest and easiest things to use.

I was halfway done with my food when I felt the first tremor. I'd been reaching for my water cup when it bounced away from my hand, an echoing BRRRUUUMMM coming from behind me, some distance away down the paved corridor between two buildings. Another BRRRRUUUUMMM followed it.

"Uh oh," I muttered. The hair on the back of my neck started to stand up. Slowly, I turned in my seat and looked behind me. Screaming voices in the distance were getting closer, and people were running past the far mouth of the corridor where it met the three others between other buildings in a cross shaped intersection. People in my own corridor were backing away, quickly running inside buildings, storm shutters dropping down over shop doorways to try and make use of what little protection they might afford. I drew my plasma blaster and ran to the corner of the left building on my end of the corridor. Sparks flew through the air on the far side as a neon sign was snapped off a building by the passage of a colossal female badger. Well built, yet still feminine with generous "assets", I felt a mild twinge of regret.

"Shit, she looks like the type I'd invite out for coffee," I thought, "that is, if she weren't a deranged, gargantuan psychopath." The badger was wearing what looked like the shredded remains of athletic tape around her forearms and shins near the ankles, as well as the remains of a hoodie with the sleeves cut off, worn open to expose her otherwise bare torso. She wore a malevolent grin on her face as she stomped her way towards the remains of the crowd, huge footpaws crushing the tiles of the corridor, smashing public benches and reducing cement trash can holders to powder and bent metal.

Using the side of the building for cover, I cocked the hammer of my blaster and took aim, the chamber pre-heating its first shot. A pull of the trigger sent a searing hot bolt of plasma from my sidearm, the heat venting making it buck in my hands the same way a conventional firearm would kick back. However, I'd forgotten to follow the badger woman's movement with my aim; where her head was a moment ago was soon where her shoulders were. The blast hit her in the collar bone, causing the badger let out a sharp cry of pain as she clapped a hand to the spot where it hit. At her size, the bolt probably felt like getting stuck with a finishing nail, but it would have been a glowing hot finishing nail.

The badger woman turned her attention in my direction, her gaze searching for where the source of pain had come from. I cocked my blaster and took aim again, when she spotted me.

"SHIT...", I hissed through my teeth; the sight of the giant badger's eyes lighting up as she zeroed in on me made me flinch. I ducked back behind the side of the building, trying to think what to do next. But as it turned out, my hiding spot wasn't quite so secure as I thought. There'd been a tourist guide kiosk in the corridor; a stout, sturdy number to provide visitors with guidance. The badger woman, or so I was told later, hauled back with one leg and punted that kiosk, tearing it off its foundation, sending it end over end to crash into the side of the building I was behind. A good chunk of the corner was smashed off in the impact, sending me stumbling and sprawling to the sidewalk, careening off a stone flower planter, wacking my shoulder painfully as I hit the ground. I rolled over on my back, clutching my throbbing upper arm. The badger was getting closer, bearing down on me with redoubled speed, her thunderous footfalls making the ground vibrate. I started to raise up my sidearm again as she drew close enough to loom over me, raised footpaw ready to turn me into a greasy smear on her sole.

A loud whistle like you'd expect from a steam locomotive suddenly cut through the air. Both our attentions were arrested, as the badger woman put her footpaw back down, looking over her shoulder, as I tilted my head up further to see back down the corridor behind her.

"Hey cranky!" a loud voice called. Standing about a quarter of the way in from the far end of the corridor stood a colossal white cat. A mane of blue hair adorned her head, and a pair of ruby red eyes glittered in her face, just over a feline muzzle that had a grim, determined half-grin on it. The cat was built much like the badger, only she was actually more generously endowed, her "upper shelf space" clad in a red sports top that displayed some generous cleavage. Her hands were on her hips, and a few belts around her forearms and legs holding cylindrical containers of some sort. A belt around her waist had a number of pouches on it, over what looked to be a swimsuit bottom. Large, fluffy tufts of thicker fur adorned her forearms and shins, as well as her shoulders. On her back appeared to be a pair of metal eskrima sticks.

"You looking for a dance partner?" the cat said, cocking her head to one side. The badger didn't respond verbally, but she turned to face the cat fully, punching one hand into the palm of the other. The cat got a devilish smile on her face.

"...then I'll lead," she said, lacing her fingers together and stretching her arms. The cat took several steps in our direction, a sassy little sway to her hips. The badger, on the other hand, stomped in her direction like a lumbering oaf, hauled back an obvious punch and swung right at the cat's head. Even the most amateur brawler would have seen it coming, and this cat appeared to be anything but amateur. She literally bent over backwards, doing a backward flip worthy of an Olympic gymnast, her footpaws going up and catching the badger on the chin, one after the other, sending her staggering backward. I'd managed to scramble to my footpaws in time and darted out of the way as the badger landed on her ass with what felt like at least a 2 on the Richter scale. "Hee hee hee!" Even I had to blink at the sound of the cat's delightfully mischievous giggle. Even at her size, it sounded high pitched and playful. The badger, however, didn't appreciate it so much, as she snarled with a guttural tone, getting on all fours before bull-rushing at the cat, arms outstretched to catch her. But once again the feline was ready for her opponent. She leaped up

into the air, doing a mid-air split as she grabbed the badger's shoulders.

"Leapfrog!" the cat said, bouncing over the badger and landing neatly behind her. The badger skidded to a halt, sending walkway tiles flying, but only managed to stop in time to catch a backhand across the chops as the cat did a spin on her toes to face her opponent again. The badger took a half-step back, then snapped her eyes open, glaring at the cat, who was still grinning impishly at her "dance partner." But that's when the badger decided to change the tempo. I'd been watching this whole exchange with some amazement. I wasn't sure what to make of it, but judging by the getup the feline had on, I had a sneaking suspicion I'd located one of the Hellions. To me it looked like she had the situation well in hand, and I didn't think I should interfere with a professional at work. However, I couldn't miss how her grin dropped off her face as the badger started to change. With a sickening cracking sound, long, bony spikes began to extend from between her knuckles growing to no less than what would be a foot long on an average-sized person's hands, looking jagged and sharp. The badger curled her lips back, and as she opened her mouth, I could see rows of shark-like teeth in the jaws that opened onto a throat from which firelight was coming.

The cat reached over her shoulders and grabbed the ends of the sticks on her back, drawing them as she did a fast squat. A sulfurous smell came from the fireball that blew from the badger's muzzle, going just over the feline's head. Crossing her sticks in an X, the cat lunged upward, thrusting her weapons forward to strike the badger in the throat just below the chin. That snapped her jaws shut and staggered her back, clutching at her neck and letting out rasping, hacking coughs that sounded like a tractor trailer downshifting.

Before it seemed like the cat had been playing; now she was all business. The badger closed ranks with her fast, and the two of them started slugging it out. The badger fought like a crazed animal, slashing with her jagged spikes with crazed frenzy in her eyes. The cat, however, looked calm but deadly serious, using her sticks to rapidly deflect blows and give the badger a crack to the head or shoulders whenever she could. But the badger's fury didn't seem to let her do anything more than that; she was clearly on the defensive now, and every so often a slash would clip her across the side or on the arm. She didn't seem phased by it, not even flinching when she started bleeding, but no matter how much her pain threshold might be, I knew nobody could take getting nickel-and-dimed forever, and the badger seemed to have insane endurance.

I didn't dare get too close to the colossal dust-up going on in front of me, which made my line of sight rather limited. However, I saw one good target; darting to a more advantageous position, as close as I dared to get, I took steady aim, held my breath.

"Mind if I cut in?!" I said loudly, and squeezed the trigger. The badger took another plasma bolt from me, this one right to her knee. She let out another howl of pain, a hand grabbing her leg as it buckled slightly, giving the feline a chance to raise up both fighting sticks and clap them together on the badger's upper arms. The badger let out another roar, hands going to her arms now with what must have been a fracturing blow.

"Let's mix this up some more!" The cat said; she brought her fighting sticks together, one end against the other, and twisted them in a way that let out a loud, metallic CLANK! I saw immediately that she'd put them together to form a staff, which she twirled between her hands, thrusting one end between the badger's legs and sweeping her off her good leg, sending her to the ground again. The feline spun her staff up over her head, slid her grip down towards one end, and brought the staff down on the badger's head with a resounding THWACK! The badger went down flat, sprawled out on the corridor floor, eyes rolled up in her head, letting off little twitches.

The cat gave her staff one last twirl, leaning it up against one building. Reaching onto her belt, she pulled off what looked to be a large radio communicator. "Hetzer, this is Wyld, are you there?" Curious, I stepped a bit closer to see what was going on, as the cat turned her profile to her downed opponent. "Yeah, I've got the Chinatown incident wrapped up...yep, I was able to catch one live this time. How long would it take Mish to make it out here?"

As the feline waited for a response, I glanced around at the destruction. The corridor itself was a mess; decorative tile walkways had been smashed to bits under the stomping macros; other decorative features were similarly in ruins; stone flower pots in pieces, a fountain in the center now reduced to a broken water pipe spraying into the air, signs that had hung off of buildings now reduced to shattered neon tubing and twisted scrap. I let out a slow breath. Then the sound of shifting masonry caught my ear. I snapped my attention back to the badger. Her rolled back eyes

slid into focus again, then turned towards the cat. My own eyes widened as she pushed herself up onto her elbow, and I saw the sulfurous smoke start to build in her maw again!

"LOOKOUT!" I yelled, raising up my blaster again. The badger, barely paying me any mind this time, swatted at me with a gesture that was more annoyance than genuine anger. That was reserved for the cat. The badger caught me with the flick of her hand; it was like getting tackled by a professional football player at full tilt, sending me slamming into the storefront behind me, overturning a table of oriental sculptures that had managed to escape unscathed to that point. I was sprawled out in the wreckage I'd just helped make, clenching my teeth as I cracked open an eyelid. The cat hat turned sharply, and caught sight of the badger about to spew fire again! The feline swept up a curved section of metallic building façade and held it in front of her as a shield. This time, the badger spewed out a sulfuric stream of flames that hit the improvised shield; it must have been less of a jet-engine blast and more like spewed fuel set on fire. That's the only reason I could think of, as the flames slid along the curved metal and were sent back at the badger's head, engulfing it in the burning stream. As the cat slowly lowered her shield, she winced as she saw the badger's now skeletal head, burning like she was doing a Ghost Rider impression, her body settling back to the ground again.

"Wyld? Wyld do you read me?!" a voice said from the radio the cat had dropped. She grunted in frustration and picked it up.

"I'm here. That live one I said I had? Cancel that; got another one for the meat wagon." The cat hung up her communicator. Tsk tsk tsk'ing, she shook her head as she began to shrink before my eyes. Previously just as tall as the rampaging badger, the feline got shorter and shorter, then stopped at a height that to me looked like she wouldn't have any trouble looking an average Canmephian in the eye. This I caught out of the corner of my eye, as I was now laying on my back amidst the broken pottery that broke my impact. Barely.

"Hey!" I heard the cat say. Aching too bad to do more than tilt my head slightly to one side, I watched as the cat came closer, looking over at me. "You alright?! D'you need me to call an ambulance?"

"I think...I'll be okay," grunted, slowly raising up a hand. "Mind giving me a hand up?"

"Sure," the feline said, grabbing my hand with a strong grip of her own. "Easy now, not too fast, just tell me if something feels broken."

"Nnngh! I think I'm good," I grunted. "Definitely some bruises, but I'll pull through." I gingerly sat up, slipping my blaster back into its holster. I had some decidedly sore spots, but I would manage. I also couldn't help but notice that in the time since the badger managed to cut her last, the cat seemed to have recovered, like her own wounds had sealed back up.

I pushed myself off the table. I was sore in all four limbs and several spots on my back, but I didn't feel any bleeding and my head was still clear enough to feel the throb from the smacks I'd taken. This seemed to make the cat brighten up.

"Thanks for the head's up back there," she said, hands on her hips again. "And you did pretty good with that shot to the leg! Nice job for your first walk on the Wyldsyde!"

I wound the last few noodles of my early dinner around my chopsticks and finished it up, tossing the empty takeout container into a nearby trash can. I'd collected my dinner from the food stand after it had opened back up (like I said, I don't let things get in the way of my appetite when I'm hungry) and, at the request of the white cat who called herself Wyldsyde, accompanied her back to the Hellions' base to help her with a debriefing by their commander, a guy by the name of Hetzer. At the request of the Hellions, I'll not go into too many details about their layout, in order to not compromise their security. I'll just say for now that their base is well-defended and well-equipped with both para-military and scientific facilities.

I was waiting in a office breakroom, listening to the hum of the vending machines behind me while I worked up the final draft of my report to the DIF. I fired it off just as Wyld returned, digging some coins out of one of her belt pouches.

"Hetzer was pretty impressed," she said, slotting in the change and pushing one of the buttons.

"Was he?" I said, finishing off the last of my own bottled water. The rattle of a can came from the machine, but then stopped partway through. Wyld raised an eyebrow, thumping the side of her fist against the vendor.

"Yeah, not many average-sized folks willing to take shots at a macro," she said, putting her hand on top of the machine that still refused to give up her drink. She gave it a couple shoves, the tall

cabinet-shaped vendor rocking back and forth; still nothing. "Plus," she said, "he did a quick background check on ya. Looks like you've made the news."

"Eh, once or twice," I said with a shrug.

"Well whatever Hetzer saw, he said to ask if you're interested in signing on," the cat said. Hands on her hips, Wyld let out a huff, raised up a footpaw, and gave the vending machine a good stamp-kick. The front façade smashed inward and soda cans went rolling all over the place.

"Frell," the cat grumbled.

"WYLD!" the voice of the Hellions' human commander said, coming down the hall. "IF YOU BROKE ANOTHER ONE YOU'RE PAYING FOR REPAIRS THIS TIME!"

"Alright, alright..." the cat said with a roll of her eyes. She scooped up a soda can of her choice and sat down at the table across from me.

"I'm flattered," I said, "But as it stands, someone else has me on retainer, and it's a pretty binding contract."

"Fair 'nuff," Wyld said, the soda can letting out a hiss as she snapped the pull-tab and took a slug.

"So you done with your report then?"

"Yep," I said. "With what your commander was able to provide me, I felt I had a thorough enough paper to send 'em. I was especially surprised at what he said your researcher has found regarding the more recent attacks."

"Yeah," Wyld said, leaning back a bit in her seat. "We've suspected somebody's been turning people into these crazed macros for some time now, but this latest batch..."

"...genetically different from the earliest subjects," I said with a nod. "Makes me wonder what's making this new batch. Or more accurately, who."

"Whoever it is, the last thing we need is a copy cat," Wyld said, slugging down the last of her soda. She flattened the can against her forehead without so much as a flinch and frisbee-tossed it into a recycling bin. My attention was drawn back to my tablet, as a chime informed me of a new email. It was from the DIF.

"Wow, that was fast," I said, opening the message.

"Your clients?" Wyld asked.

"Yyyup," I said. "Seems they've looked over my report, and...huh. Looks like they want me to stay on this."

"Stay on it?" Wyld said, looking quizzical.

"Yeah...", I said. "Your findings are intriguing and concerning. The dangers of a second unknown source of hostile macrophiles is something we've decided can't go unaddressed. Look for the source of this new strain before it has time to establish itself and grow to match the initial attacks in scope; you're free to subcontract and cooperate as necessary, but maintain discretion."

"Heh, sounds like we're going to be seeing more of each other after all," Wyld said; her tail came up from beneath the table, curled around a second soda can, which she popped the top on.

"That we will," I said. "In fact...I may not be available to join your organization full time, but what would you folks say..."

"...to partnering up?" Wyld said, taking a slug from her second soda. "I don't see why not! Hetzer's got the final say, but I can't imagine him turning you down."

"It sounds fine to me," said a voice from the doorway. I turned in my seat; Hetzer stood in the door, hands clasped behind his back. He had the classic "tough guy merc" look about him, with short-cut hair, 5 o'clock shadow, and a piercing look to his eyes that bespoke plenty of experience in the field. Stepping into the breakroom, he looked around at the spilled soda cans with some bemusement.

"My my, look what someone else is going to clean up," he said. Wyld rolled her eyes again.

"Alright, alright," she said, getting up and gathering the cans, stacking them on one of the breakroom tables. Hetzer took one of the cans off the table as he sat down across from me.

"So," he said, "your clients are willing to let you pool your resources with us?" I nodded.

"Seems they're satisfied we have mutual goals," I said, "and want to make sure this rampaging macro problem doesn't get any worse than it already is."

Just behind Hetzer, I saw Wyld flinch, a dejected frown tugging at one corner of her mouth, eyes looking down and off to the side. I felt a twinge of curiosity.

"Something wrong Ms. Syde?" I asked. The cat looked over to me and gave me a smile that was a little on the sad side.

"Oh, call me Wyld," she said. "And well...it's kind of a sore spot for me, the bad rep macros have, especially being one."

"Ohh yeah..." I said, feeling a pang of embarrassment and guilt. "Sorry, I know it's not fair to generalize, but..."

"Oh, believe me, I understand," Wyld said, crossing her arms and leaning against the wall. "And that's what makes it so...shameful. It's not for nothing people are leery about macros. Hard not to be about people that could introduce themselves to the neighborhood by smashing it flat. This upswing in attacks has only made things worse, and knowing people worry you might become just like the ones devastating cities and towns is tough to shoulder. A few years ago, I had my own media studio, and did everything I could to foster a pro-macro message with it. But now..." the cat looked down and sighed. "...feels like I was building sand castles in the surf, and the tide's come in."

That feeling of guilt in my chest got worse, gnawing at me like an infection. "I can commiserate in a way," I said. "Politically, I've always been rather conservative. But I've made an effort to be moderate, open-minded, willing to discuss rather than condemn off-hand. But I'm all too aware that my political camp's got some very ugly members who have done some very ugly things in the name of fundamentalist attitudes. Being connected to violent militias and racists groups is shameful enough; then a lot of them have to go and turn it into some twisted religious crusade that's a downright blasphemous twisting of my religion's scripture. It makes those barbs on social media and angry protestors feel like they're meant for me too; like to others, I'm just a jack-booted bigot waiting to happen."

"Heh, guess we are in the same boat, aren't we?" Wyld said. I gave her a weary grin of commiseration.

"Here, lemme dust off the seat next to me," I said.

Hetzer, watching our exchange silently, pulled the tab on his soda can. He got a face-full of carbonated suds spewed in his face for his trouble from the evidently shaken can. The deadpan expression on his face as he opened his eyes was perfect, and I had to stifle a snicker.

"Oops," I said. Hetzer's eyes slid to the side; Wyld's reaction was...much less restrained.

"HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE!"

With my new marching orders, I began looking into the previous aberrant (as Wyld told me the Hellion's had taken to calling them) attacks, trying to find a pattern with the local incidents. It was largely a repeat of my interstate investigations; a stranger would show up in this or that district, suddenly upscale and start wreaking havoc. When plotted out on a map of the city, the new strain of aberrants didn't show any kind of apparent pattern in location or timing. Species and gender were also all over the place, as were the kinds of mutations. Most of the attacks, barring the one I'd been witness to, were too old to get any kind of fresh trace evidence. As for the badger woman, I went to the autopsy, which was being overseen at the Kingdom City airport by the only other member of the Hellion's I had a chance to meet personally. Wyld told me the rest of her usual teammates had been called out to a distant assignment, while she and Hetzer remained behind, along with one other person.

"Excuse me, Dr. Mishane?" I said as I entered the autopsy canopy, which could have doubled as a circus tent. Like before, the examiners were using scaffolding to get a good overview of the body, laid out on a large section of plastic sheeting. Overseeing the operation was a female mouse in a curious getup that wouldn't have looked out of place in an episode of Star Trek. It had a distinct laboratory vibe about it, a sort of long-sleeved shirt with attached pencil skirt, a belt with several data-gathering devices around the mouse's hips. She also wore a pair of what looked like lower leg warmers with toeless spats attached. The mouse had shoulder-length hair and a pair of pince-nez spectacles as she used one of her devices to gather a sample of clippings from the badger's fur. She had to bend over slightly to do so, because to call this mouse busty would have been an understatement; she had a pair of bazooms that looked like they could knock a door off its hinges (or track) if she swung them.

"Oh hello, squeak!" The mouse said, turning towards me as I walked across the scaffold to her. She took my extended hand. "No need to call me doctor, Mish will do. And you must be Mike Fang, correct?" I nodded.

"Hetzer told me that you were going to be partnering with us on this new strain of aberrants," she said.

"Yep," I replied. "My clients and I are hoping we can nip this one in the bud before they get as out of control as the, for lack of a better term, main strain you've been dealing with."

"We can only hope, squeak," Mish said, once again giving voice to her peculiar vocal tic that I'd come to learn would pop up at random whenever she spoke. Taking the glass vial the fur shavings were in, she inserted it into a different device on her belt. A few taps of its built in keypad, and a screen on one side began to scroll scientific data that I recognized as DNA patterns and a chemical analysis.

"Well, this doesn't tell us much we didn't already suspect," Mish said, showing me the results. "The DNA shows no genetic signs of natural macro-ism, and clear signs of artificially introduced genes, as well as damage from mutagens like radiation."

"Yeah...", I mused, pulling out my tablet from my coat and bringing up some of the previous autopsy reports on the more distant attacks, showing them to Mish. "...and they seem to have a very close resemblance to the alterations done to the others."

"Indeed, squeak," Mish said, then narrowed her eyes a bit, rubbing at her chin with one finger. "Although...now that I look at these reports all side-by-side...the main changes seem the same, but there are little variations here and there."

"Sounds like...experimenting," I said, raising an eyebrow. "Maybe whoever's doing this hasn't perfected their method of creating an aberrant yet."

"That would make sense, squeak," Mish said, looking over the body. "Of all the qualities these aberrants exhibit, stability, in any sense of the word, isn't one of them."

Unfortunately the body of the badger didn't have anything new. It wasn't that there weren't traces of where she'd been, the problem was there were too many of them. Her rather disheveled state meant that her fur was a cornucopia of fibers, granules, residue stains, and all sorts of other little bits and pieces of the environment she'd been through, none of which really stood out among the rest of it.

With not other leads to go on, my remaining option was to stake out the city, in a sense, and wait for the next attack. Like the Hellion's, I was now hoping to catch one of the catch one of these aberrants alive so we could see if there was anything we could learn from a live captive we couldn't from a dead body. Without anything else to do, I started hanging around the Hellion's base; they were gracious enough to permit me use of their facilities, letting me use their target range to keep my accuracy sharp, as well as their gym to try and work on getting in a bit better shape.

While I was at it, Wyld decided to offer me a few free lessons of her own. As the Hellion's close combat specialist, she was well trained with a variety of hand-to-hand techniques, though she largely favored a mixture of freestyle martial arts with heavy influence from capoeira, and a number of melee weapons. I've often carried a buck knife with me, mostly just as a last resort, but with Wyld's instructions I learned some genuine fighting tactics to use beyond just random swipes and stabs.

At the cat's advice, I also decided to learn to use another melee weapon, one that leant itself better to nonlethal incapacitating. Wyld had set up a good dojo for sparring and training the Hellion's seasoned troops and new recruits alike, with a varied selection of weaponry, bladed and blunt, one handed and two. When it comes to melee, what little I've engaged in has left me with a preference for shorter weaponry, quicker to swing and thrust and easier to conceal. That late morning, when Wyld took me to pick out my weapon of choice, I paced back and forth in front of a display rack with various swords, knives, staves, hammers, and the like.

"You've gotten pretty good with a dagger," Wyld said, arms crossed as she watched me. "Now, let's learn something new; which of these really speaks to you?"

Then, I spotted it. I took a small, navy blue metal tube off of the board. I gave my forearm a snap like I was casting an invisible fishing rod. The telescoping baton extended in my hand.

"This has a good feeling to it," I said. Wyld grinned and nodded.

"Good choice," she said.

The next week, the third since the last aberrant incident, was spent learning basic tactics for using blunt melee weapons, my newly-chosen baton in particular. Wyld was a skilled instructor, though she didn't pull punches. While I could appreciate the effectiveness of such a philosophy in teaching, it did land me in the medic bay a few times with an ice bag on my face, waiting for the medic to find her rapid-healing spray. The first time it happened, the medic forewarned me that

Wyld's cavalier attitude to injury wasn't limited to above-the-belt blows; I went out to the nearest sports shop the day after and got myself a protective cup. A good thing, too; the next day Wyld's lesson included her sweeping her staff up between my legs. It hurt and it staggered me, but to her surprise, it didn't drop me to the floor in the fetal position squealing like a rusty door hinge.

Wyld also tried giving me some additional pointers on unarmed combat. A bit of it took, but as I told her, I wasn't very adept at it.

"The only method I know of being on par with martial artists like you....," I said as we sat on the benches in her dojo one day after a lesson, "is...well, unorthodox, to say the least, heheh."

"Really?" the cat said, her eyebrow going up. "Now you've got me all curious; I always like experiencing different styles."

"Heh, oookay...," I said, standing up and removing my trench coat and waistcoat. I'd been practicing in my regular clothes in order to be accustomed to moving in it; people with ill intent aren't likely to give someone time to change into sports gear. The only thing I hadn't been wearing were my boots, since I felt that might give me an unfair advantage on Wyld.

Going over to the dojo's janitor's closet, I hunted around for a hose and screwed it onto the tap for the utility sink. Wyld no doubt was looking curiously in that direction at the time; she probably got even more perplexed as she began hearing the sounds of gushing water, stretching, gurgling, and soon saw the front of my torso begin to emerge from the janitor's closet without the rest of me. Repeating the act I gave a crowd some time ago in the wrestling ring of The WereHouse, I was guzzling down several dozen gallons of water, my girth stretching and swelling like a time-lapse photo series of a ripening melon. My shirt, chemically treated in a similar way to all my other clothes, spread apart at the buttons, but those fasteners held on tenaciously, large oval-shaped gaps stretching across broad expanses of my increasingly broad girth.

When I finally finished, I had a gut that was slightly bigger than a clothes washer. Gurgling a bit with each step, I sauntered out of the janitor's closet. Well, technically I was already out of it...partway, at least.

"So," I said nonchalantly, rolling up my sleeves just past the elbows, "Are you ready?" Wyld looked at me with an expression that was between disbelief and hysterics.

"PFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFare you SERIOUS?!" she said, giggling behind a fist held up in front of her muzzle. I just grinned at the cat.

"You wanted to dance?" I said, lacing my fingers together and stretching my arms. I smacked both hands against the sides of my engorged girth, making the spherical, shirt-straining orb bounce. "This is MY beat. Let's see if you can keep up."

"Oh-ho brother!" The cat said, standing up and doing a few stretches. "What kind of advantage do you really think lookin' like you swallowed a weather balloon will give ya?"

"Oh you'll see....," I said, spreading my legs apart for stability. At first I'd expected Wyld to continue her pull-no-punches policy; but clearly she wasn't taking my sparring style seriously. The cat strode towards me, and with a flamboyant, obvious sweep of her leg, she raised it up and started bringing it down towards me in an axe kick. Without missing a beat, I dropped into a squat and rolled backward, the cat's footpaw sailing right passed where I'd been.

"Eh?!" Wyld blinked in surprise. I chuckled as I stood back up.

"Did you expect me to just stand there and let you hit me?" I said with a smirk. Wyld smirked back at me.

"Alright then....," she said. The cat displayed her fondness for capoera, suddenly dropping down to a squat herself, supporting her body on her hands as she swung her legs around like a breakdancer. She suddenly straightened out vertical to the floor, balanced on her forearms while kicking back with both legs aimed squarely at my distended belly.

But once again, I wasn't there. As soon as I saw her bent legs aimed in my direction, I clicked to her move. I pivoted on my heel, swinging my engorged gut around and out of the way. Then it was time for my counter attack; I kept right on going with the motion, going all the way around, then put an upward swing in my gut's motion. I let the weight carry me up at an angle, jumping with it and coming down in a five star frog splash right on Wyld's back.

"OOOOMP!" The cat grunted out as 200 lbs of spotted hyena, plus the weight of several dozen gallons of water came down on her, slamming her flat into the padded floor, face-first. I let out a true hyena snicker as I rolled forward, over her shoulders and head, then did a spin as I got back onto my footpaws so I was facing her again. Wyld took a moment to recover; I think it was less

any real damage I'd done and more just from sheer surprise. She pulled her face out of the floor matting and blinked several times at me.

"What. The Frell. Was THAT?" she said. I snickered again.

"When you're this big, and your weight's concentrated like this, momentum becomes a great weapon," I said.

"Ah heh heh heh," the cat said, slowly getting back up. I couldn't help but notice that where I'd pounded Wyld into the floor, there were two good sized, curved indentations in the padding just a bit beneath where her head had been. My male gaze took over and my eyes zipped right up to Wyld's bust.

"Uh, Wyld, you're looking a little...compressed," I said. "Or maybe I should say...flattened."

"Hmm?" The cat blinked, then glanced down. "Oh, easy fix!" Taking a page out of 80's and 90's cartoons, the feline put a thumb in her mouth and blew. Her cheeks puffed up, and then...BOOMP! My eyebrows were definitely up at that point, though I'm not sure why I couldn't resist the urge to go "AH-GUUUHH!" Wyld gave me a tight-lipped look, then in a flash did a double-footed drop kick to my gut, sending me bowling over backward.

"OOOMPH!" My gut sloshed back and forth a few times, and once I snapped out of it, I used the motion to roll back onto my footpaws again.

"Now that you're back to reality..." Wyld said with a grin. Going into a crouch, she sprang at me in a very feline pounce, a move I met with a toothy smile and a gut-first bound right at her. For probably about ten straight minutes, the two of us had a sparring match that seemed, at least to me, like a stalemate. I swung my engorged belly like a wrecking ball, rolled with gurgling sloshes, and bounced off the walls and floor in an attempt to squash Wyld again. The cat, meanwhile, pulled off moves that would turn the entire Brazilian dance music industry green with envy. She was doing flips, handstands, roundhouse kicks, spins and moves I can't even begin to describe with fluid ease. But with my distended gut keeping her at a distance, she couldn't reach the rest of me, and her blows to my girth, while they could knock me around, only managed to give me a feeling like a cross between a tickle and that sensation of going down a steep hill in a car.

But nobody can run at full tilt forever. Exertion began to take its toll on the both of us. My lunges and swings became more laborious, and I began grunting hard with the effort. Wyld was letting out breathless giggles, and her kicks were causing her to stumble. Finally, heaving and gasping for breath, I slapped both hands to either side of my gut, hefting it up with a straining "HERRRRRUUNNGH!" Wyld, hunched over as she looked my way, straightened up, and nearly overbalanced backward. I took a stumbling step in her direction, then another. The cat righted herself, and seemed to be fighting with dizziness to get a bead on me. Then, all at once, I stumbled and fell to my knees, my belly hitting the floor with a KER-BLORP! At the same time, Wyld wound up to try to do a Chuck Norris-style roundhouse kick, only to spin on one heel, fling her arms up and land right on her ass, flopped back against my water-logged gut.

The two of us just laid there in the middle of the dojo floor, snickering, giggling and panting like dogs in July. Then we met each other's gaze.

"Had enough?" We both said.

It was another two days after me and Wyld's little sparring match when we finally got the call. Hertzner summoned us to the dispatch room, and we lost no time responding to him. The merc chief was adjusting the knob on an emergency frequency scanner, when he turned back to us.

"They just put out a call for emergency responders," Hertzner said grimly. "Reports are saying there's an aberrant on the west end of town; looks like they went after the university soccer match in the park."

"Frell," Wyld grunted, "How many people are we talkin'?"

"At least a thousand at the game itself," Hertzner said, "plus regular park visitors."

"FFFFF!" Wyld hissed. I wasn't sure if it was a cat thing or if she was biting back on a much worse f-word.

"Any word on what kind of aberrant we're talking about?" I asked.

"Reports say it looks like a mutated fox," Hertzner said, standing up. "Let's not take any chances with this one; we're all going after this nasty sucker, and bring him back alive for study, if we can."

"Works for me," I said. Wyld nodded in agreement.

"We'll be taking along The Big Sleep," the merc leader said, then noticed my slightly perplexed expression. "Our nickname for our tranq cannon. It fires a 25mm flak round loaded with sedative-

coated, foot-long spikes."

"What, no giant syringe?" I said with a smirk. Hetzer returned the expression.

"We've tried that before," he said. "past a certain size, that much liquid becomes difficult to get a plunger to inject on impact."

"Whatever does it for 'em," I said. The briefing finished, we all piled into the Hellion's ATV, a six-wheeled troop transport that looked like something from an Aliens fanfiction. The carrier rumbled down the freeway; we met little traffic on our side, but on the opposite, it was nearly gridlock with people trying to get out, a sure sign we were getting close to our target.

"So what's the gameplan?" I asked Wyld as Hetzer adjusted the squelch on an emergency radio scanner; the chatter was the usual mish-mash of numbers that translated to orders for first responders, no doubt all of it best summed up with the phrase "get everybody the hell out of Dodge."

"Pretty simple," Wyld said, tightening the straps on her fighting outfit. "You, me, and Mish if we need backup get this brute pinned down, Hetzer takes the shot, then we use this...", the cat tapped her footpaw on a spool of steel cable, "to tie 'em up. Once he's hogtied, we'll call in a flatbed and cart him back to base."

"Right," I said. "I'll go low, try to get a shot or two to his legs."

"Alright people, ready up!" Hetzer said. We were rolling through the park gates, police vehicles having already blocked off traffic but letting us through without question; the routine with which they seemed to do this gave one pause. The winding, curving pathway through the park went by well-manicured fields, trees, bushes and ponds...but as we got further in, telltale signs of a macro passing through with little care for his impact began to manifest; heavy stomping footprints, smashed outdoor art pieces and concession stands, the usual destruction. As we reached the soccer field, we could see our mark ahead of us through the windshield.

The soccer field had four sets of permanent bleachers set up around it. The crowd had run out onto the field at the macro's approach, clustering together with the two teams who'd been playing before the interruption. The massive vulpine was toying with his prey; every time the group would make an attempt to move en masse for one side of the field or the other, he'd bound over the field in a single leap, landing with an earth-shaking slam to pick off any stragglers that got separated from the herd. The less said about the state of those stragglers the better; suffice to say it would be hard to identify them.

I felt bile rising in my throat, along with my blood pressure, as I saw the snickering sneer on the fox's face. There was something odd about the way he leapt, and when I looked down at his lower legs, I saw why. At first I thought the fox was digigrade, but a closer look at his footpaws told me those claws and exoskeletal-looking shins weren't anything natural; this macro had the lower legs of a mutated grasshopper. My eyes traveled further up; sprouting from the fox's back, along his spine, were six whipping, smooth, round tentacles in parallel columns of three each, one on either side of the spinal column. As I saw them, the look of those whip-like appendages touched off a memory in the back of my head.

"Let's go!" Wyld said, throwing open the back doors of the ATV. I drew my blaster and followed behind her as she ran for the nearest set of bleachers for cover. The macro fox, dressed in nothing but a pair of ratty cameo shorts, had just landed from a leap across the field and had his back to us. Wyld cracked knuckles, limbering up.

"Okay, 3, 2, 1..." she said, and with a soft thrumming hum, the feline began to grow. It was a rapid shift, and the fox, from what I could see from my position peering around the corner of the bleachers, was giving the growing cat a look of perplexed curiosity. Wyld's head rose up over the top of the bleachers as her torso also grew width-wise along its obscuring top as well. Her arms crossed just beneath her ample bosom, the cat looked all-business as she gave the fox the stink-eye. She grew up and up into the air, the trash cans behind the bleachers getting pushed aside by her footpaws as she reached a height to where the top of the seats only came up to her knees.

"That's your red card, buster!" Wyld said, drawing her staff off of her back. "You're outta the game!"

The vulpine curled its lip at the cat and let out a hiss that sounded like a train putting on its breaks. Wyld stepped over one bleacher, across the field and to the opposite side as the fox began to walk sideways, not giving the cat his back. Meanwhile, I waved and hissed myself to get the attention of the nearest member of the trapped crowd. A bat in a referee's uniform did a double

take in my direction, then nodded as I vigorously motioned for the crowd to start making good use of Wyld's diversion. The ref got the attention of the nearest people to him, and the buzz quickly spread. The crowd moved as quietly as it could out of the far exit from the two macros, who launched themselves at each other in a way that sent the crowd into a silent but fast dash for safety.

Wyld kept the giant, mutated vulpine at bay with broad sweeps and spins with her staff. The aberrant lashed out with its whipping tendrils, but the feline's bo sweeps knocked them aside before they could reach her. As for myself, I was making my way along the edge of the bleachers to the best vantage point for my goal; to hamstring the fox and give Wyld an opening to pin him down. Just as I got to where I had the fox's back to me, it pulled a surprising move, and wrapped its tentacles around Wyld's staff.

"Hey, that's mine!" she snapped as she got into a tug-of-war with the vulpine over her weapon. Then, the feline got a smirk. "Oh you want it? HERE!" With one last yank, Wyld let go of the staff just as the fox pulled back, sending the shaft his way and causing him to stumble. As he put all his weight on one particular leg, I took aim and fired a blast of plasma into his calf. The aberrant howled and went down with a ground-shaking THUD that caused me to lose my own balance. Wyld wasted no time in pouncing on the vulpine, pinning his arms and legs.

"Hetzer, we got him!" Wyld said into her headset.

"Copy that, I'm aiming for his neck, watch yourself," the merc captain said over the radio. A lazer sight danced around on the lower side of the vulpine's throat, just above the shoulder. But the fox wasn't out of tricks yet. Two of its four tendril's suddenly whipped up from its back and around Wyld's throat! The feline let out a strangled squawk; she may have been impervious to pain, but she still needed to breathe. I tried to hit the tentacles with a couple shots, but they were too thin, and I was concerned about hitting Wyld myself. One of her hands came off the vulpine's shoulders to claw at her neck, then the other, leaving her straddling the aberrant. That's all it needed to be able to twist around so that when Hetzer's cannon-like rifle thudded in the distance, the shot went just past him and into the ground.

Hetzer said something over the radio that wouldn't be suitable for public broadcast. "Reloading!" he said afterward, as Wyld untangled her throat from the windpipe-crushing grip. The vulpine took advantage of its rather slim, athletic build and managed to scoot itself quickly out from under the feline. As the two of them stood up to start squaring off again, the aberrant suddenly cocked an ear to the side, as if hearing something that neither I nor Wyld apparently could. Its yellow eyes narrowed; with a single bound, it suddenly was halfway across the park and headed for the wall.

"Frell!" Wyld hissed. "C'mon, we're not letting him get away that easy!" She turned to me as I emerged from my place of cover. Before I could ask what she was about to do, I was suddenly scooped up in a big feline hand and swept up into the air like I was a kid's action figure.

"Hold on!" Wyld said, and tipped her hand. I slid across her palm before I could properly get my bearings, and suddenly found myself snugly tucked between two large, white-furred masses and a wall of fabric. It took me a second before it finally clicked where Wyld had tucked me.

"You alright in there?" she said, jogging at a pace that was causing minor tremors.

"Uhhh, no complaints here!" I said, trying not to snicker out loud. I caught hold of the top edge of the top of the fabric wall and pulled myself up high enough to be able to see. Wyld was expertly weaving through the buildings and avoiding stepping on cars and other, ankle-high obstructions. Our quarry, however, had no such qualms, and was hip-checking every building and flattening every vehicle he could come down on.

"Great, where are we gonna pin him now?" Wyld huffed. Scanning the view ahead, I shot out an arm.

"There! A construction site!" I said.

"Perfect," Wyld said with a smile. She picked up the pace, looking to herd the fox in the desired direction. Cutting around on one side of him, he darted the other way, and made it into a large, fenced off area with the skeletal structure of an incomplete skyscraper. Wyld hopped the fence easily, and taking her staff off her back, she threw it like a javelin, tripping the mutated fox up and sending him sprawling in a tremor-causing THUD!

"Here," Wyld said, scooping me out of her top and setting me several stories up on the scaffolding alongside the incomplete skyscraper, "try to get a good vantage point. Hetzer! ETA on our position?"

"Should be there in a few minutes," the merc said over the radio. "Traffic's a mess, but I just need to get on the other side of-HEY! WATCH WHERE YOU'RE GOING!!!"

"Sunday drivers, eh?" I said bemusedly as watched Wyld make her way across the fenced-in courtyard strewn with construction equipment and materials. The fox was shaking its head, then turned a glaring eye to the approaching feline. He got up on one knee, then whipped his arm around and slung a handful of cement bags at her. Wyld brought her forearms up to block the sacks coming for her face; they burst into powder, sending up a cloud that left her coughing and trying to clear her eyes as the vulpine bore down on her. That's when I snapped off a shot at his left shoulder to make him drop haymaker he was swinging for Wyld's face and clutch his shoulder with a snarl of pain. The fox glared daggers in my direction, sending me ducking behind an I-beam as a tentacle whipped around and just barely missed the spot I'd been standing, cracking across the scaffolding and bringing down a significant section of it.

I peeked around the beam and saw another tentacle coming my way. I ducked it just as it tried to wrap around the beam and crush me against it; but then I was thrown back as the vulpine started pulling on it, the metal groaning and creaking as it was bent backward.

"shitshitshitshitshit!" I hissed through my teeth, firing off two more rounds and missing widely. That's when the sneering fox got a roundhouse kick to the chops. Wyld, having cleared her eyes, was back in the fight. The two started trading swings and swipes; while the fox had the advantage of more limbs, the cat was decidedly faster, putting them on a fairly even playing field. As for me, at that point I was mostly reduced to moral support; Wyld and her opponent were too close together for me to risk shooting into the fray.

"Hetzer!" I said into my headset. "We've got 'em cornered, ETA?!"

"I'm about three blocks away!" The merc said, "Just got to get around this traffic jam, I'm taking a short detour!"

As Wyld delivered a flip-kick to the fox's jaw, sending him staggering, I saw an opening. Drawing a bead on the fox's ankle, I fired off a plasma round that nailed him right in the joint. The mutated vulpine reflexively cringed, grabbing his injured leg; that's when Wyld pounced, literally. Tackling the fox to the ground with an impact that sent up a dust cloud, the cat got her legs around his waist, managed to wrangle all his tentacles into a bundle under one arm, and got him in a headlock with her other arm. Her tail went around his legs; all told, she effectively hog-tied the aberrant, using herself as the rope.

"Take your time Hetzer," Wyld said with a grin. "We've got this one trussed up nice and..."

What happened next, neither of us saw coming. Maybe the fox did, because he'd been struggling with an effort that seemed not just furious, but also frantic. For a moment, I could have sworn I heard a sound that reminded me of that effect they use on medical dramas when they're charging up the defibrillator paddles. A sharp electrical CRACK rang out through the air, followed by a loud buzzing noise. The fox went rigid, and the smelt of burnt hair started coming off of him. Wyld jerked her head away from his, recoiling instinctively as blood spurted out his nose, ears and from around his eyes. Then, he went limp in her grasp.

"What the hell?!" I said, as the cat untangled herself and turned the vulpine over. The vacant eyes, smoke rising out of his muzzle, and blood continuing to ooze from his face said all it all.

"DAMNIT!" Wyld snapped, and pounded a fist into the ground next to her. It sank into the concrete foundation a good five feet. Looking at it, the cat glanced around, then guiltily slid a loading palate over the hole she just made.

The corpse lay on the ground in front of me like a beached whale, only Greenpeace wasn't going to try to roll this one into the ocean anytime. With the aberrant's rampage at an end, the police were quick to cordon off the construction site at our request. They had their hands full with the emergency response at the park, and were content to let the Hellions, and myself, handle the initial physical examination. I hung my coat on a bit of rebar sticking out of a stack and rolled up my sleeves, while Mish was preparing her own tools. Wyld, meanwhile, had shrunk back down to her usual size, and was watching us work; perched on the edge of a shipping container, the cat kicked her heels against the sides as the mouse and I went to work.

Mish was taking DNA samples as I went up to the fox's head. The way it died told me it was more than just some random chance or an accident; somehow he'd been killed deliberately, and I had a hunch it was to keep him from leading us back to wherever this mess began. The singed hair and skin around the fox's head had all the signs of electrical burns, but nothing had hit the fox's head

from the outside.

"The inside then," I muttered to myself, and began combing through the fox's fur, following the patterns of the burns. It took a couple minutes, but eventually I found the needle in the fuzzy haystack.

"Bingo," I said.

"Find something?" asked Wyld, stretching her legs out to the sides, wiggling her toes. It looked like she was doing stretching exercises while she waited.

"Yep," I said, and parted the fur back to show how a spider-web of burn scars seemed to come from one circular point on the fox's neck. I took out my buck knife and made a careful slice into the fox's neck. The inside smelled like overcooked meat; I was thankful my gag reflex was pretty strong, as I carefully slid my hand into the incision and started feeling around. My hunch proved right, as I felt my fingers brush over something hard and metallic.

Clenching my fist around it, I gave several good, firm yanks on it before it came loose. The fur on my arm was matted down with the coagulating blood as I drew it out, opening my fist to reveal a metallic tube about the size of a pen cap. The tube was lined with probes on one side like a comb, penetrating the piece of flesh that had come loose with it.

"Hmm, interesting," Mish said, coming up next to me and looking at the device. "This must be designed to set off a fatal electrical shock directly to the nervous system. I'd wager it probably receives a remote signal to set it off."

"I'll bet you're right," I said. Then, a bolt of inspiration hit me, though thankfully it wasn't like the bolt that hit the fox's nerve center. "Hey, maybe we can use that to locate wherever the signal came from!"

"Hmmm...", the mouse took the device from me. "I think so...it had to have some way to recognize what signal to activate from; I'll get into its receiver back at base and see if I can dig out the frequency and the activation code."

"Perfect," I said. "I've got a way to follow radio signals, just give me a frequency and I can follow it."

I left the shock implant with Mish and Hetzer, who said they'd contact me as soon as they'd determined the frequency. With some time to kill, I went to Kingdom City's primary shopping district to do some window shopping. Wyld came with, pointing me out to a few of her favorite shops. The sporting goods places held mild interest for me, while the game stores and book shops kept my attention for much longer.

"This city's got a nice selection of outlets, gotta say," I said, leafing through a hardback edition of horror short stories.

"You bet, little somethin' for everything," Wyld said, picking up a copy of one of her favorite magazines. "Any word from Mish yet?"

I checked my phone, which I'd put on vibrate after I saw the "please silence all phones" sign in the bookstore window. "Nothin' yet," I said as I slipped my phone back in its carrier.

"Well, when they get the info, I'll follow your lead this time," Wyld said, getting her mag rung up. "I admit, I'm more one of The Hellion's heavies; I don't do a whole heck of a lot of investigating."

"Not a problem," I said. Then, a funny thought crossed my mind. I smirked a bit and turned to the cat. "But y'know, I think if you're going to accompany me on this, we ought to get you outfitted for it."

"Really?" she said, tucking her mag into a hammerspace pouch on her belt.

"M'yep," I said, looking the feline over. "Don't get me wrong, your battle gear is, heheh, flattering, but not very detective-ish. I think we can get you set up with something better. In fact, I think I spotted just the right store for it a couple blocks back."

"Why not? Lead the way, Shamus," she said. I chuckled, clapping the book shut and leading the cat back down the street. The shop I'd spotted was a clothing store with a red neon sign deliberately set to flicker. Letters in Courier New font, the sort that looks like old-fashioned typewriter type, spelled out one word, "Noir."

"Huh, never been in here before," Wyld said, tilting her head at the sign. I chuckled.

"Me either," I said. "But it looks like my kind of place."

Going into the shop, the staff were quick to see if they could sell us anything. I steered them to Wyld, explaining what we were going for. The staff were eager to start showing off their wares, a collection of a variety of noir-themed outfits and clothes, in every sub-genre of noir you could

think of: classic noir, neo noir, steampunk noir, cyberpunk noir, just to name the ones I recognized. While Wyld was trying on outfits, one of the staff asked me about my own getup. I exercised discretion in how much I told them, saying it was a custom outfit from a private tailor who was very exclusive. I promised to give the guy the shop owner's business card, though, since they were interested in offering to carry his work.

"So, what do you think?" Wyld said, stepping out of the dressing room and doing a little catwalk spin. The cat was now clad in a red corset with a top that, while not what I'd call "trashy" or "pornographic," was definitely "suggestive," "flirtatious" and "enticing" with how much of her cleavage it showed off. A dark gray pair of cropped leggings that stopped mid-calf on her legs matched the button-less ladies' long coat she wore, a pair of fingerless gloves on her hands. She'd transferred her fighting sticks from her back to her thighs, straps to hold them in place. The belt around her waist held the same pouches, while those that had been elsewhere on her person were now replaced by the pockets on the inside of her long coat.

"How do I look?" Wyld said, hands on her hips. I cocked my head to one side, grinned and clicked my tongue against my teeth as I put my forefingers and thumbs together on both hands.

"Perrrrfect," I said.

After paying for Wyld's new outfit, we started towards the nearest subway station to head back to Hellions HQ. The cat was eager to show off her new threads to her team mates to gauge their reactions. However, as we turned a corner, life decided to throw us a curveball. The sound of voices had been getting louder as we approached the street corner, but neither of us paid it much mind at the time. I figured it was just a more crowded section of the district that was well populated with open-air vendors and the like. Well, that was only half the truth; it was more crowded, but not with shoppers or window-browsers.

"FASCISTS OUT! FASCISTS OUT! FASCISTS OUT!" the crowd chanted. A group of what looked to be about 40-odd protestors were clustered in the middle of the road. Traffic was backing up behind them, with horns honking, getting no response from the protestors except to either chant louder or for one of them to occasionally pull out an air horn of their own and respond by blowing it at the offending driver. As we drew closer, I inwardly groaned while Wyld openly groaned and rolled her eyes. The crowd was equipped with various signs and tri-color flags of blue, yellow and white diagonal stripes. All the protestors were wearing similar colors, and nearly all of them had on ball caps with blue bandannas worn over their lower faces.

"God damn Mac-Pros," I grunted. When the rise in hostile macro incidents reached its peak in the U.S., the federal government began a crack down of sorts, providing funding to state and local governments to put together task forces to tackle their local macro problems, or hire private sector contractors like the Hellions. This, however, poured fuel on a fire that had already been burning pretty hot; wherever there's a minority, there will be people willing to crusade for it. Sometimes that's a good thing, since bigotry and prejudice should never be tolerated. But other times, people take it too far.

Enter the Mac-Pros. This group of pro-macro activists was, on the surface, a loose organization of advocates for the fair and equal treatment of macros by the law and government. But that was just their mission statement; what they REALLY were was a widespread gang of thugs, militants and violent bigots whose response to people disagreeing with them was to yell and scream in their faces at the best of times and at the worst, beat the daylights of anyone they deemed fit to bear the label of a genocidal macro-hater. There were an awful lot of people they gave that brand. And now there was a whole crowd of 'em standing between us and the subway entrance one block over. I turned to Wyld, who was looking at a sign one of the nearest protestors was holding. "Sewell Murders Macros," she read, letting out another grunt of frustration at the sign that was accusing Kingdom City's mayor of genocide.

"I take it you don't consider these people friends," I said. The cat scoffed.

"These boneheads act like macros should just be allowed to smash cities flat and crush people by the thousands," she said, crossing her arms and scowling. "I want EQUAL rights for macros, not special privilege for them to cause death and destruction and get away with it scot free."

"Commendable," I said. "Well, let's just try to avoid eye contact and get to the subway."

Hands in our pockets and trying to look as unassuming as possible for a 8-or-so-foot-cat and a spotted hyena dressed like a character from a sci fi pulp fiction magazine, we kept to the sidewalk and tried to slip past the crowd. Unfortunately, that's when life's curve ball decided to

bean us right between the eyes.

"Hey! You!" Someone shouted. I tried my best not to look like I'd heard him over the rest of the crowd, but no dice; a tri-color-clad dragon stepped right in front of me and Wyld, shoving a clipboard at us.

"Sign this!" he said, thrusting a pen at me along with the board. I glanced down. "What is it?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it just sign it!" the dragon said, waving the pen at me as I took the clipboard and skimmed the document clipped to the page, which had several signatures that looked rather hastily scrawled, so much so that it was impossible to make out the letters; I wondered if that was the point. The document was a petition; I figured as much, but morbid curiosity made me wonder what kind of ridiculous demands these activists wanted. From what I could tell, they were calling for nothing less than the mayor and city council to step down immediately and turn themselves in for conspiracy to commit murder.

"I'm not getting involved in your fight with city hall," I said, handing back the clipboard. The dragon refused to take it.

"Oh yeah? WHY?!" he said loudly. It was enough to get the attention of three more activists, who got on all sides of Wyld and myself, all staring and getting close enough to show they'd chosen to forget the definition of "personal space."

"Hey," Wyld said, frowning at a female rhino that came up to her own height, "You stand any closer and it's going to count as intercourse."

"You got something against macros?" another activist said in my ear, close enough I could tell he'd had Mexican for dinner.

"No, but I'm not gonna call someone a murderer for enforcing the law," I said.

"THEY'RE FACISTS!" someone else yelled, so close I could feel their spit hit the back of my head.

"You gonna let a bunch of jack bootied dictators kill people just for being who they are!?!?! They need COUNSELING, not DEATH!"

"If they pose a threat to people's lives, you have t-" Wyld started to say, but the dragon cut her off, yelling "COUNSEL DON'T KILL!" right in her face, or as close as he could get to it. That got all of 'em chanting around us. My patience was fast running out, and I could only imagine what sort of a job this was doing on Wyld.

"KNOCK IT OFF!" she hollered, stamping her footpaw so hard it cracked pavement. That got a few other activists to stare at us. Then one of them pointed at the cat.

"Hey! I know her! She's one of the Hellions!" they shouted.

"Oh FRELL," Wyld said through clenched teeth. The crowd around us was starting to get tense. The fur on the back of my neck was starting to stand up; when this started, I'd hoped to make it to the subway without getting into trouble. Now I was hoping to make it with all my teeth and as few bruises as possible.

"YOU!" the rhino said, shoving a finger right in Wyld's scowling face. "YOU've sold out! You take part in the genocide of your own people, you TRAITOR!"

"HEY!" I snarled, my blood starting to boil. "You get the FUCK off her back! She's trying to protect innocent people from aberrants!" Immediately, I realized I just made things worse; a group collectively gasping tends to be a bad sign.

"That's an anti-macro SLUR, you fucking NAZI!" the activist at my side bellowed right in my ear. He shoved me hard, knocking me into Wyld's side. The cat caught me easily enough, and kept me from falling over. I started to respond, when a light turned in our direction, illuminating the dusky scene around us. The TV news had shown up, and a cameraman had turned the public eye our way. I winced a bit; I had a feeling what might come next, but I was still shocked at the speed of it. The Mac-Pros were infamous for their dislike of the press. They seemed to think the news misrepresented them and were just the mouthpieces of the government, spreaders of propaganda (like they were anyone to talk) and "fake news," a phrase that disgusts me every time I hear it. So, to avoid letting the press "smear their just cause" with "lies and misinformation," they were known for physically blocking reporters from getting coverage of their activities whenever possible, and more than once they'd left cameramen with a few dents in either their equipment or their heads.

As I turned to the side, the wolf who'd been snarling in my ear turned on his heel, took a cut-down baseball bat out of a backpack, and smashed the news camera out of the hands of a shocked-

looking horse wearing jeans and a polo shirt with a local news channel's logo on the breast pocket. The canine then caught the equine on the upper arm with his follow up swing, causing the horse to cringe in pain and stumble. The wolf wound up to swing again.

That's when I shoved the other two activists hemming me in aside, shot out a hand, and caught the wolf by the wrist. The wolf turned and gave me a pissed-off look.

"I'm done PLAYING NICE," I snarled, my grip tightening as I dug my nails into the wolf's wrist, making him lose his grip on his bat. With his free hand, he swung a fist my way. I leaned back to avoid the blow, then snapped my upper body forward, slamming my forehead into the wolf's face as I let go of his arm. The canine fell to the pavement, swearing and howling as he crawled away, clutching at the black eye I just gave him.

"Oh you just FUCKED UP asshole!" the dragon said. I turned; the other activists were all pulling out weapons. I pulled my coat back slightly with one hand, my fingers finding the grip-ridged surface of the tube on my belt. A button press and a snap of my forearm extended the electrified, telescoping baton.

"You want a piece of me?" I growled. The rhino balled up a fist with a set of knuckle dusters on them and started to swing at me, when an elbow nailed her in the face, snapped her head back and sent her reeling.

"Then you'll get one of ME TOO!" Wyld said, cracking knuckles. What proceeded was chaotic, but there was a method to the madness. Activists, juiced up on anger and bristling with mob mentality, came at both Wyld and myself. Their first rush was like pigeons going after spilled popcorn, but only the first; even jacked up on adrenaline, the hate-fueled bigots knew it was a bad idea after Wyld snap-kicked one of them so he fell in the path of the rest, tripping them up and allowing us a bit more room to breath and maneuver. After that, they came at us in pairs and trios, the rest forming a ring so we couldn't escape, eagerly fidgeting with their weapons, waiting for the first opportunity to jump in and take a swing.

Wyld was in her element, expertly dodging and weaving around the undisciplined punches, kicks and swings of bats, clubs, bottles, bricks and various hand tools. Of course the law of averages reared its ugly head a few times and the feline took the occasional blow, but it was rare. As for me, I fared better than I would have before Wyld's lessons, but not as well as my informal sensei. I pivoted and weaved around blows aimed my way, bringing my baton down on arms and legs to send their owners staggering or collapsing to the ground, my blows to collarbones and ribs yielding similar results. However the faster attackers managed to get a hand on me more than once, and while I managed to avoid most of the worst shots, one fist split my lower lip when it came at my blind side, a rock hurled by someone from further back nailed me right in the side of my temple, and one sneaky bastard cracked what felt like a clothing rod from a closet right across my back. That last one put me on one knee, and I only managed to avoid a follow-up right to my head by swinging for my attacker's shin, dropping him to my level so I could crack them upside the head.

Wyld seems to be having a grand old time, giggling that "hee hee hee!" of hers that was about as distinctive as my own species' characteristic snicker, as she decked and clouted fired-up bigots left and right, making wise cracks about openings on her dance card whenever she left a particularly aggressive activist laid out. Myself, I wasn't as chipper, giving each new attacker my best dagger-glare, more than once spitting defiantly on the ground or out of the corner of my mouth (moreso after I earned my busted lip to get rid of the blood in my mouth). The cat seemed pumped up on her enthusiasm for the fray, while my own stamina was bolstered by my seething contempt for these bastards that wanted to force everybody to do things their way, or get beaten for daring to question them.

The fight seemed to go on for hours, but honestly it was probably no longer than two minutes, three tops. Finally, that sound that cuts through nearly all others rang out; a police siren. Squad cars and even a riot van pulled up, disgorging heavily-armored officers, forming a wall of civil authority across the road that said "This ends NOW," louder than any bull horn could. Wyld and I, both panting for breath as our attackers finally backed off, got down on our knees and put up our hands, backs to the slowly approaching cops. The Mac-Pros were in retreat, but still taking the time to throw the odd rock, brick, or bottle filled with something nasty at the riot squad.

A half-hour later, I was sitting on the curb, a few bandages covering the spots where the paramedics had applied some quick-heal medications. I'd be patched up from my minor bruises

and cuts within an hour, but it still helped to keep the areas covered while the advanced meds did their work. Wyld was seated next to me, legs extended out as she laced her fingers together and stretched her arms overhead.

"Well! That was quite the square dance!" she said brightly. Arms on my knees, leaned forward slightly, I gave the cat a look that I hoped didn't rain on her parade, but was at least...sobering.

"Pardon me if I don't share the enthusiasm," I said.

The Hellion's mess hall was mostly empty, as I sat at one of the tables a couple days later. After finishing my lunch, I was taking the time to fiddle with a few of my toys; one of them had a spring and some screws come loose, and I'd been meaning to fix it. As I was using a small screwdriver to tighten a bracket back into place, Wyld came up, walking with that decidedly catty gait of hers, with a swish of her hips and her tail twitching behind her.

"Hey slugger," she said, putting a footpaw up on the opposite bench and looking over my impromptu workspace, "Putting together some kind of hidden weapon?"

"Heh, not quite," I said with a smirk. "It's a dart launcher, but I don't use it for combat; I prefer to use it for my...leisure time pursuits."

"What kind of leisure activities require what looks to be a wrist-mounted dart gun?" Wyld asked with a raised eyebrow. I grinned a toothy grin at her.

"Heheh, the kind that involves sideways growth," I said. A glance to the side cause a couple of Hellions within earshot to give me looks and start backing away, holding their empty food trays like shields. Wyld, meanwhile, just shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly.

"Eh, if it floats yer boat," she said. "I don't see the appeal..."

"Really?" I said, giving her a bemused look of my own. "A macro who doesn't see the appeal of growth?"

"Everybody's got their preferences," the cat said.

"I know," I replied, "but still, they're so similar..."

"Maybe, but really, being a giant is fun; you get to tower over everything and be a big, huge, still mobile mountain," she said, putting emphasis on the "still mobile" part.

"Yeah," I said, "I can see how it would appeal to a lot of folks. Expansion and inflation has similar thrills; the sheer spectacle of stretching and filling bigger and bigger, pushing your limits, the sensation and spectacle of it."

"Eh, I guess," Wyld said. "But it just seems weird to me."

"Mmm, plus there's all the shenanigans you can pull, whether you're the one expanding others or expanding yourself," I said, grinning with eagerness as I put away my dart launcher. That got Wyld to give me a look of mild curiosity.

"You can get up to hijinks while you're blown up like a blimp?" she said.

"Oh you bet!" I said, snickering. "It's all about throwing your weight or volume around!" I was feeling the itch, and was probably showing it with my expression. Wyld seemed apprehensive...but ever-so-slightly amused.

"Well, I do enjoy the occasional prank...", she said. That was enough to get me to jump up and clap my hands together.

"Well then! How 'bout we have a little fun?" I snickered a hyena snicker, which prompted Wyld to once more look rather on-the-fence.

"Eeeeehhhh," she said, scratching the back of her head and looking off to the side. I just smirked.

"Hey, don't knock it till ya tried it," I said. The cat tsk'ed, then shrugged in a what-the-hell gesture. I beckoned for her to follow me out of the mess hall. Out in the corridor, I looked up and down, and as luck would have it, spotted a perfect opportunity; Hetzer and Mish were waiting in front of the elevator.

"Okay, this one's classic," I said, whispering. "We get in the elevator with them, then after the doors close, I'll slip you an air hose, and you'll bloat up until you're mashing people against the sides of the lift with your belly."

"Heh, that does sound pretty silly," Wyld said, with an expression of reluctant admittance. I chuckled in my throat again, as Hetzer spotted us.

"Ah, there you two are," he said. "Good news, Mish says the defrag of the implant should be done in a matter of minutes. We'll have that frequency for you two to track down."

"Ahh, perfect!" I said, trying to mask my enthusiasm for being pleased at the good news. They must have bought it, as Wyld and I stepped into the elevator just behind them without them any

the wiser. I was getting that excited, wriggling sensation in my stomach as the doors to the elevator slid shut. Sliding a hand into one of my inner, hammerspace coat pockets, I took hold of a hose that connected to an air tank hidden inside. I carefully slipped it into Wyld's palm; she passed it around her back to her other hand, which was less in view. I grinned with a sense of growing anticipation.

But then I looked up, and caught sight of Wyld's face. The cat's expression looked decidedly uncomfortable. She was opening her muzzle with noticeable reluctance, raising the tip of the hose towards her mouth like she was about to have to take some bad-tasting medicine. A thought hit me like a brick.

"She's not having fun. She's not enjoying this."

Immediately, I caught Wyld by the other wrist and squeezed it to get her attention. The cat stopped the motion of her hand and looked to the side. I looked up at her with the most earnest expression I could muster, and shook my head, waving my other hand at waist level to let her know I was calling it off. Wyld gave me a slightly perplexed look, but as the elevator chimed the floor we were headed to, she reflexively let go of the hose and put her hands on her hips to look unassuming. I quickly put a hand in my coat, pressing the button on the hose reel concealed in my hammerspace pocket, the hose swiftly sliding into my pocket again like a serpent sliding into its den.

As Hetzer and Mish stepped out, I suddenly realized that left us standing in an elevator with no reason why we just rode it down. I quickly started patting my coat. "Wait a second," I said. "Oh shoot, I forgot something, I gotta head back up."

"Hmm?" Hetzer said, turning around. "Oh, right, no problem, just join us in Mish's lab when you're ready."

"I need to head back up too," Wyld said, catching on. "Just remembered I need to make sure I put something away properly; Pads hates it when I leave a mess."

"Alright, but make it quick you two," the merc captain said, as the doors slid shut between us. I let out a small breath as I hit the elevator button to keep the act up. "That was close."

"What'd you stop me for?" Wyld said, giving me a puzzled look, "You don't strike me as the type to get cold paws."

"I realized what I was doing," I said, giving her an embarrassed look.

"And that was...?" Wyld said.

"Peer pressuring you," I said. "I'm sorry, I could tell you weren't enjoying it and were only going along with it 'cause I was dragging you into it. Honestly I'm kind of embarrassed I acted that way; as much as I hate being pressured into doing things, I should know better than to do it myself, even though I give into the urge to do it from time to time."

"Hey, c'mon, I wasn't -refusing-," Wyld said, giving me a shrug and a bemused expression. "You clearly just have a lot more enthusiasm for this sort of stuff than I do. But if you're having fun, I figured, hey, why not?"

"'Cause I don't want you to feel like you have to just to indulge or humor me," I said. "You've shown me an awful lot generosity and courtesy, 'specially for someone you've only known a short while. I don't want you to have unpleasant memories of me or one of my favorite pass times. I know you may not have a problem with my kind of expansion, but if you don't honestly enjoy it, I don't want it to be something you put up with doing just for my sake."

I glanced at my reflection in the elevator door, giving myself a chastising look.

"I don't like people that push you into doing things," I said. "And I don't want to become one of 'em, either."

Wyld chuckled in her throat, shaking her head at me in a way that said she though I was hopeless.

"Don't sweat it so much," she said. "Maybe this wasn't the best time to try it out. We can try again some other time."

"Sure," I said. "But only when you -want- to."

The door to Mish's lab slid open as Wyld lead the way inside. The incredibly buxom and brainy mouse's workspace had a vast collection of various analytical implements and workbenches. I had to wonder just what sort of degrees or doctorates she held, judging from the array of tools on display, beeping and humming as they performed various tasks, feeding the data into several different computers.

"Ah, perfect timing," Hetzer said. The merc captain was standing behind the seated Mish, who tapped icons on a display screen attached to a wall-mounted arm; the setup was evidently made so the mouse could use the desk space for other things, like resting her immense breasts.

"Paydirt?" I asked, hooking my thumbs in my pockets.

"That's right!" Mish said brightly. "We should have the frequency the probe you dug out of the last aberrant is set to in a matter of moments."

"Good," I said, "I'm getting antsy to get back on the job; the longer this sits..."

"I know what you mean," Hetzer said. With perfect timing, Mish's computer threw up a window with the results of the probe's analysis. I dug my smartphone out, bringing up the frequency scanner program. The DIF had equipped me with a variety of useful gadgets and apps; one of them was a handy program to turn my phone into a receiver for radio waves, lazer signals, satellite transmissions, sonar broadcasts and a couple other forms of wireless signals. I could do a sweeping scan to pick up on transmissions, much like a conventional scanner sold at your everyday electronics store. But my smart device also came with a bonus feature; it could also trace a signal back to its point of origin, within a certain distance, depending on the circumstances like atmospheric conditions, encryption and other forms of interference.

Entering the frequency that Mish's research produced into my device, it started searching for a signal. As luck or divine providence would have it, I got a hit.

"That was fast," I said, not expecting to have gotten a response so fast. I slid my finger across the screen to scroll the GPS map; the signal appeared to be coming from somewhere in the northwest area of the city.

"Looks like it's somewhere in the financial district," Wyld said, looking perplexed. "Weird place to have an aberrant factory."

"True, but probably the last place we'd think to look for one," I said. With a solid lead, we quickly loaded up into the first available troop carrier and took off. As we got closer to the source, the circle on the map indicating the possible location of the signal's broadcast shrank, my device's receiver able to more closely focus in on it. I rode shotgun, giving Hetzer directions on where the signal seemed to be leading us. Passing under an el train, the circle's size became static as we entered the district proper; steel-and-glass towers rose high around us in the fiscal fiefdom, where the giants that played were of the financial and corporate type; usually, that is. Smaller buildings were also scattered about, most belonging to private accountants or attorneys' offices.

"Looks like we've got it narrowed down to a 10-block area," I said. "I think that's about as good as I can narrow it down; whatever encryption they've got is enough to bounce the signal around within that area."

"Ten blocks? Not too much," Mish said. "They must have skimmed on their broadcast security, squeak."

"Looks that way," I said as Hetzer pulled up to one corner.

"You and Wyld scout around on foot," he said, as I unbuckled my seat belt. "Mish and I will cruise around; when we find something, call it in, and we'll regroup."

"Got it," Wyld said, affixing her headset. The carrier rolled out as she and I headed down the sidewalk, eyes sweeping the streets.

"So what are we looking for, exactly?" the cat said, scratching her head a bit. I looked up at the tops of the buildings around us.

"Something that looks like broadcasting equipment," I said. "That should be a good indicator we're close."

"Got it," Wyld said, "So, antennae, radio towers, that kinda thing."

"Bingo," I said. Then, something clicked in the back of my head. "If this area -is- where the recent wave of aberrants is coming from, maybe somebody's noticed something. Let's stop in at a few offices, it's not too late."

The hour was about mid-afternoon, so a lot of offices were on the tail end of their regular hours. Fortunately, Wyld and I were still in time to step in and talk with a few receptionists and security guards. After Wyld showed them her credentials, and we explained our purpose, I'd ask them if they'd seen any unusual activity in the last few weeks, particularly any unfamiliar people in the area. However, on at least three occasions, we got something interesting.

"Come to think of it," said one female armadillo dressed in a smart-looking private security uniform, "There have been a lot more homeless folks coming and going around here lately."

"Really?" I said, leaning on the front desk in the marble-floored reception area. Wyld also perked her ears up. "I take it you don't usually see many of them?" I said, probing for more info.

"Not usually," the security guard said, taking a pull from her coffee cup. "But these days it seems like there's always two or three passing by, right around quitting time. Weirdest thing is, they don't stop to ask for change."

"Odd...," I mused, glancing out the glass doors of the building. Thanking the 'dillo, Wyld and I stepped back out onto the streets.

"That makes, what, three people that've mentioned odd behavior from the homeless?" the cat asked as I consulted my smart device.

"Yep," I said, "add to that the two receptionists that said they heard what sounded like construction or roadwork when there wasn't any signs of it the day after. That was going on around...here," I tapped my finger on the screen between two buildings. "And the homeless sightings were going on here, here and here..." I tapped the screen a few more times, putting markers on the locations that formed a triangle around the pair of roadwork reports.

"Let's check that spot again," I said, and lead the way back to where the sounds of unseen construction had been heard. The clues were all pointing to an alleyway between a pair of tall, older buildings, about twelve stories tall each. They alleyway between them was fairly clean; offices don't usually produce the kind of waste that results in noticeably bad-smelling garbage. Hot air blew up from a grating we passed over, causing me to grip my fedora by the brim and causing Wyld's hair to briefly imitate the bride of Frankenstein.

"Hmm, I don't see anything that strange...," Wyld said, eyes scanning the fire escapes and windows higher up on the buildings.

"Me either," I said, then immediately had to retract the statement. "Hold on...," I said, my glance arrested by a what looked like a cable that had been secured to the railing of one fire escape. It went up the wall and proceeded further up and up. I pointed it out to Wyld.

"Can you see where that goes on the roof?" I asked. "I'll follow it in the other direction."

"No problem," the feline said. Even wearing a longcoat, she was able to effortlessly jump up, catch the fire escape railing, and proceed to perform a gymnastic routine of flips, handstands and somersaults up the wall and over the edge. Meanwhile, I followed the cable as it snaked its way down the wall and along the foundation of the building, like a mouse running along the baseboard of a room. It went on for about 15 feet from where it ran up the wall, disappearing behind a dumpster. When I didn't see it coming out from the other side, I gripped the most convenient handhold on the metal container, planted my footpaws, and heaved.

The dumpster stayed right where it was.

Grunting, I tried again. My boots slid across the pavement of the alleyway, and I clenched my teeth, but still the big metal box refused to move.

"Damnit," I muttered under my breath, looking around behind me. I yanked, I hauled, I shoved, I threw my weight against the oversized trash can, and still it sat without budging. I got increasingly frustrated, hissing through my teeth and cussing under my breath. I was still yanking on the damn thing, both footpaws up against the wall of the building as I tried to get some leverage that way, when I heard a cough behind me.

"Need a hand?" Wyld said, giving me a sympathetic smile. Our eyes met for a moment; I could see she meant well, and I think she could see this situation wasn't doing my pride any good.

"Ehhh," I said, looking off to the side. I got back down on the ground and rubbed the back of my neck. "If you could..."

Without a word, Wyld stepped up to the dumpster. With one hand, she slid the box to the side, metal scraping across the pavement, with only about as much effort as it would take most people to push a large piece of furniture. For a brief moment, I clenched my eyes shut, biting my lower lip.

"Thanks," I said, doing my damndest to keep my voice even. But five words crossed my mind. "I am such a wuss." Stepping around Wyld, I inspected the area now uncovered. "Bingo," I said. The cable took a sharp turn downward, disappearing into the pavement; the color and texture changed for the patch of concrete the cable penetrated. It was newer than the rest, filling in the hole that I had a feeling the city's Utilities Department wasn't responsible for.

"Did you see what this connected to up top?" I asked, turning to Wyld. The cat nodded. "Yep, it connected to some kind of electrical box attached to a radio tower. I'm no electrician, but it didn't seem to match the rest of the boxes and wires on it; looked more like something hackers would

use for pirate broadcasts."

"Sounds like we hit paydirt," I said. Wyld quickly radioed Hetzer as I checked my smartphone again. There was something nagging me in the back of my head, though. My first inclination was to think this building was the hiding place of these aberrants; but I wasn't sure. Thinking about it, a building full of unhealthy-looking vagrants would have been quickly noticed in place like the financial district. They might just be keeping to the basement, but the building didn't seem nearly big enough for one basement, or even an additional sub basement, for something like a crazed macro factory.

A clattering rumble caught my ear, and I turned and looked at one of the gratings that dotted the alleyway.

"Of COURSE," I said.

"Alright," Wyld said. "Hetzer said the quitting hour traffic's pretty bad, so he'll get here when he can."

"Tell 'em to meet us at the nearest subway station," I said.

"The SUBWAY, of course!" Wyld said as we quickly trotted down the wide stairwell into the underground.

"Yep," I said. "Perfect delivery system for these attacks. Runs all over the city, and even to the city limits, so some of the aberrants can make it outside the city limits without attracting too much attention." Wyld and I had made our way to the closest subway entrance. If we could find where the cable we'd discovered came out, we could follow it straight to whatever lair the mastermind behind this had created, or so I hoped.

The stairs led to a wide open platform that offered a decent amount of headspace, even for somebody as tall as Wyld when she was her average height. Commuters gathered near the stopping points on either side, where shadowy tunnels illuminated by regularly spaced lights led off into the warrens that burrowed through the ground under the city. Looking around, Wyld spotted a transit cop and lead the way over to him, where she asked about any activity he may've noticed with homeless-looking people.

"I haven't seen much myself," The golden lab said, rubbing his chin. "But I've heard some of my coworkers saying they've seen a lot of scruffy-looking folks leaving their stations, and they don't come back once they do."

"Do they recognize these....," Wyld started to say. That's when I tapped her on the arm. I'd been looking around while the feline questioned the cop; as a group of commuters walked past, I saw a disheveled figure sitting next to one of the support pillars. It was a boar, dressed in a beat-up vest and stained hoodie, with jeans that looked like they were more patches than denim. The boar was stoutly built, and most noticeably, was staring right at us, intently, and without blinking.

"Wyld," I said. "Over there, that guy against the pillar."

The cat glanced over, spotting him. "Hey, officer, d'you recognize that guy?" The lab looked over at the boar, shaking his head. Wyld and I exchanged a glance.

"How d'you want to handle this?" I asked. The cat was about to reply, when the boar made that decision for us. He stood up, stepping out into the walkway of the platform, his eyes never leaving us. Now I was sure he was up to something.

"Shit," I said through clenched teeth. I turned to face the boar, my hand dropping down to my side and brushing back my coat a bit to clear my blaster. Wyld turned to face the porcine lurker as well, the transit cop looking between us and the boar rapidly several times.

"Whoa, waitaminute, you-" the cop said. That's when the boar clenched his fists, spread his arms and legs, and let out a bellow that sounded downright unnatural, drowning out the ambient noise of the subways and the crowds. The boar was growing, his vest coming apart as his muscle mass expanded like he was juiced up on the world's fastest acting steroids. His height increased as well, until his head was barely an inch from the ceiling.

"Get back!" Wyld said, and both the transit cop and I backed away as the feline also began to grow. The cat drew her eskrima sticks from her leg holsters as she took up more and more space, growing to meet the boar's height, if not his unhealthily-distended muscle mass. The feline shifted her stance, her coat flapping like a ship's sail; Wyld, not wanting to ruin her new outfit by "upsizing," had gotten it treated with special textile chemicals that would allow it to grow along with her.

"Clear the platform!" I said to the transit cop. The lab needed no more encouragement, quickly

ushering people towards the nearest exit. The crowd also needed little encouragement either, as most of the commuters had quickly run for the stairs with a few gasps of shock or shrieks of fright; those closer to the train platforms quickly packed themselves into the recently arrived trains, which lost no time in getting away from the impending fight.

The boar snorted, his snout letting out twin blasts of air like a steam valve. He pawed the platform with one hoof, kicking up tiles and concrete as he launched himself at Wyld and me like a linebacker. Wyld, having no height to jump over him, did the next best thing, spinning on one heel to the side, using her coat like a matador's cape as I duck-and-rolled out of the way just in time. The boar closed the 20-or-so feet between us with impressive speed, and went right past us. His momentum carried him into the support beam behind him, concrete and tile exploding as he plowed straight through it.

The boar didn't even seem phased as he whirled around on us, nothing but crazed murder in his eyes, all trace of sanity gone. I pulled my sidearm and fired off two blasts, bolts of plasma hitting the boar in the torso. The porcine mutant let out squealing bellows of rage, as he stomped his way towards us; the bolts may have hurt him, but they weren't slowing him down!

Wyld stepped up, doing a spin kick to the boar's head, followed up by a cymbal clap with her fighting sticks to his neck. The boar snarled again, and lashed out with a sinewy arm, then the other, both missing Wyld by scant inches as she did a backwards tumble to avoid them. The feline lunged forward, looking to strike the boar in the throat the same way she had the badger she'd fought when we first met. But the boar was faster than he looked; he caught Wyld by the wrists, yanked her in close, and gave her a vicious head butt, followed by a savage knee to the stomach.

I knew I had to take a shot, or the boar would stomp Wyld into paste. I gripped my blaster with both hands, drawing a careful bead, and as soon as the feline went down on one knee, exposing most of her opponent, I cracked off another two shots, the bolts searing into the boar's exposed chest. The boar let out another squealing bellow of rage; he was distracted enough for Wyld to make a move, hauling up both footpaws and kicking off from her opponent's torso, breaking his grip and pushing him away from her.

Now was my chance, I shifted my gaze upward, and locked right onto the boar's face. I don't know if it was a primal instinct or just luck that turned his attention to me, but I found myself staring right into two eyes full of blind fury. I pulled the trigger just as the boar swept one arm down and sent a metal trash bin sailing end over end my way. We both hit our mark; the boar's head jerked back slightly as the plasma bolt hit him just above one eyebrow, then he fell forward and landed with a rumbling WHAM on the floor. As for me, there was no time to dodge; the second after my blaster went off, I was nailed by a solid metal container flying like it had been punted by a football player. The impact threw me back and off my feet, sprawling across the platform with the wind knocked out of me and a dull throbbing pain from the base of my neck to my waist.

"Are you alright?!" Wyld said, running over to me.

"I'll live...," I gasped, coughing as I tried to get my breath back. Wyld helped me get back up, a hand resting on my back as I stood bent over, hands on my knees, until I could breathe normally again.

"We're close," I said as I straightened back up and retrieved my hat where it fell off. "I can feel it."

Using my smartphone, I found the spot directly beneath the alleyway where we'd found the comm wire. Just as I'd hoped, it snaked its way down the wall and along the floor, disappearing off into the tunnel. Wyld tried to raise Hetzer on her radio, but if you think getting cell reception is difficult out in the country, try getting it underground when there isn't a wifi router around.

"Either we can wait, or we can scout ahead," I said, digging a flashlight out of my coat and pointing it down the subway tunnel.

"Well I've never been good at waiting," Wyld said. I smirked.

"Good, neither am I," I said, as we started along the narrow walkway next to the tracks. The subway tunnel was full of dark places that my flashlight could only brighten up one at a time, just long enough for us to be sure nothing was waiting to jump us. Every now and then, a train would come rushing past, the air causing us to squint and pause momentarily, on edge in case something was about to use the noise of the clattering, rumbling, giant metal python next to us as cover to strike.

Finally, the comm wire curved into a drainage vent at ankle level, a corner of the vent cover strategically broken or cut to allow the wire to turn into it. A door next to it was marked as the entrance to a maintenance room; we'd passed a few of them as we'd walked the tunnel, but none of them had the digital keycard reader that this one had been equipped with.

"Some more work I don't think Public Utilities did," I said, tapping the card reader with my flashlight. Wyld chuffed as I took the light in my teeth and pulled out my digital bypass tool. Another nifty toy from the DIF, the gizmo looked a lot like an electrical current meter; plugging in the flat keycard imitator attachment, I slid it into the card reader slot, then adjusted the device to produce the magnetic signal it was looking for from the card. The red light on the card reader flicked to green, and a heavy KLACK came from the door as it slid open.

Wyld stepped through first as I put away my tools. The door had opened onto an elevated platform looking over a large, open room, evidently a hub for the city's water system. Log-sized pipes ran into large, grimy-looking fixtures that probably maintained pressure or had something to do with filtration. I couldn't say for sure, I wasn't a plumber or a water engineer.

What I -was- sure of, however, was the -other- equipment we saw wasn't supposed to be there.

In the open spaces between the system's fixtures, tables had been set up with a wide array of lab equipment. Most of them I couldn't begin to identify, but they all seemed either chemical or biological in nature. Multiple computers were set up as well, and several large refrigerators were there too. After we got down to the floor, via a convenient ladder, Wyld and I discovered test tubes inside labeled with dates and Latin that an educated guess told me were probably the scientific names for various species.

"Smart money says this is genetic material for experiments," I said, closing the door to the fridge. When Wyld and I looked around the corner from what looked to be a large water system pump, we were met with an unsettling sight. Three gurneys were sitting underneath a fluorescent light, rolling carts next to each one. The gurneys were empty, but the used surgical equipment on the trays, resting in beakers of alcohol, and the rusty red stains on the floor was all the evidence we needed of what must have gone on there.

"Well, no doubt we've found the source of this outbreak," I said.

"Right," Wyld said, going over to one of the computers. "Let's see if we can get an outside line on one of these, notify Hetzer," The cat fiddled with the computer for a few seconds, before her face lit up.

"Here we go! Heh, whoever this is may be an insane terrorist bent on wanton destruction, but even they still have to use an internet browser." Firing up what looked to be Google Chrome, Wyld managed to get a text message out to Mish and Hetzer. We were waiting for a reply, when the sound of the door sliding open made both the cat and me turn on our heels. Muttering to himself, a jackal in a lab coat and nondescript street clothes came in, carrying a small cooler that he was rummaging through.

"Really need to find a new supplier, these really aren't the kind of quality I ne-," he was saying, stopping just short of the ladder down to the floor. He must have caught sight of us out of the corner of his eye, because he looked up sharply.

"What the fuck?!" he snapped. With his free hand, he started to reach for something in his coat, but I managed to be faster on the draw, clearing leather with my blaster and leveling it at him, stopping the jackal short.

"DON'T. even. Think about it." I said. "Game's over, Frankenstein. Easy way or the hard way, your choice."

"Oh, how 'bout we pick the mystery prize?" a voice behind me said. I didn't turn around; from the sound, I could tell it was coming from the computer's speakers. Wyld did turn, since I had the jackal covered. "The frell?" she said, "who'd be video chatting with THIS freak?"

"Now miss," the voice said, sounding unsettlingly magnanimous, "that's no way to talk about my research assistants."

"Ohh shit," I said. "That voice sounds familiar. Is that who I think it is?!"

"Oh! I hear a familiar voice too!" the chipper voice said. "Mr. Fang! Still alive? I thought those drug dealers you ran into last year finally got you out of my hair."

"Oscar Quipple," I spat. "We really need to stop meeting like this."

"I agree!" Quipple said brightly. "Don't suppose you'd be willing to solve that problem and just shoot yourself, would you?"

"Up yours," I snarled, as Quipple's lab tech smirked from his perch.

"Mike, you know this guy?" Wyld said.

"Yep," I replied with a rueful tone. "He's a rogue geneticist with a penchant for kidnapping people to experiment on them."

"Ahh, ever the white knight for the poor and helpless," Quipple said. "Y'know I'd expect you to be a Democrat if I didn't know you were such a Jesus freak."

"I swear to God Quipple, one of these days I'm going to pull you inside out by your sphincter," I muttered.

"So YOU'RE the one that's been flooding this city with aberrants," Wyld said, a distinct growl in her voice.

"Ahhh, only partly," Quipple replied. "I can't take all the credit; I'd heard about the crazy stuff going down in Kingdom City, and when I heard the reports that authorities suspected someone of deliberately manufacturing macros, I thought to myself, 'I'll take a piece of that action!' 'Course, turns out it's tougher than it looks to create anything more intelligent than a wild animal, but hey, baby steps. I'll figure it out soon enough."

"You know what I'm gonna say to that, don't you?" I said. Quipple's chuckle was just barely audible from the computer speakers.

"E'yeah, I do," he said. "Well, this location was handy while it lasted, but I guess it's time to pull up stakes. TERRY!" Quipple suddenly raised his voice to a yell. "BUG OUT!"

The lights in the maintenance room suddenly cut off. I cursed some more as I pulled out my flashlight again and ran for the ladder, Wyld evidently not needing it and just doing a vaulting somersault up to the catwalk. But the sound of the cooler the jackal had been holding hitting the catwalk told me he was already running for the door. The light from outside in the tunnel briefly silhouetted him, as he raised a beaker to his muzzle and downed the contents.

"Ohhh SHIT," I hissed through my teeth; something told me he hadn't just chugged a Coke. Wyld and I tore after him up the subway tunnel, the cat in the lead. The jackal had a head start on us, however, and had somehow made it back to the station platform well ahead of us. The sound of shouts and gunshots told us the police had arrived to survey the aftermath of our earlier fight, and must not have liked what they saw emerging from the tunnel.

"Fall back! Fall back!" somebody was yelling; yep, definitely didn't like it.

Wyld reached the gate leading to the platform first, shouldering it open so hard it wouldn't have mattered if it was locked or open. I came out just behind her, stepping to one side to get a good look at what we were up against. It was like a scene from some gritty comic book; the chaos from our earlier fight had been added to, with several vending machines smashed, knocked over...and set on fire. The lighting in the station flickered, throwing intermittent shadows over the hunched figure standing right in the center. The jackal was snarling and growling in a way that couldn't have come from a normal canine's throat. As it turned out, it wasn't just coming from one abnormal throat; it was several.

I added some more choice profanity as the jackal grew before us, lab coat splitting at the seams and in places on the back where exoskeletal limbs were emerging, six of them. But it wasn't just chitin like insects or crustaceans covering these limbs; it was a calcified bone covering the clacked and clattered as hands with four spikey digits on each emerged on multi-jointed limbs. The jackal started to straighten up, and three separate heads on elongated necks rose up from its widening shoulders. His muscle mass had grown, albeit not as much as the boar's, but enough to leave most of his clothes in shreds and to make him a hulking menace as he rose up tall enough to have to crouch on his knees in the station. His faces were twisted parodies of themselves, upper and lower canines elongated until the lips couldn't cover them anymore. The eyes of all three heads had vertical pupils like a snake or cat. As the creature bared the claws on his original hands at us, toothy vertical maws opened in the palms of each, and curls of chemical smoke came out of them.

"This...is gonna be tough," Wyld said. As if to drive the point home, the mutated jackal let out three guttural bellows from its maws, and gouts of flame like you'd expect from a jet engine roared towards us. Wyld and I dove behind separate pillars to avoid getting incinerated; the heat was still enough to singe some of my facial fur into a curl. The second the jet blasts stopped, we dove out and around, but the aberrant had lost no time in turning and bolting up the stairs to the street.

A clap of thunder met us as we charged up the steps and into the beginning of a steady rain. Wyld

lost no time in growing to match our quarry's size. It wasn't hard to follow; the mutated jackal wasn't making any attempt to be stealthy, just put distance between us, leaving a path of smashed and wrecked vehicles, melted glass and metal, and other various debris in its wake. Wyld, who was probably about 15 feet tall at that point, got down on one knee and motioned to me. I got the idea and climbed up onto her shoulder, finding good hand and footholds on her coat. "Hang on!" the cat said, and took off at a dead sprint, legs pumping as she nimbly jumped and hopped over cars, lamp posts, and other obstacles the aberrant hadn't bothered to try and avoid. The rain created a shimmering sheet, but we could still make out the figure of Quipple's mutated lab tech pelting along, going against the flow of traffic. People were parting like the Red Sea to get out of its way; I took the opportunity to lean over Wyld's shoulder a bit, and fire off several shots. The bolts of superheated plasma left trails of steam as they streaked through the rain-filled air; at least one of them hit, as we saw the creature cringe visibly and roar in anger.

"What the hell would make someone do that to themselves?!" Wyld said as the aberrant suddenly lunged around a corner.

"Fanaticism," I said grimly. "Quipple's minions think of him as a living god with a Ph.D. They'll do anything for their scientific chosen one to earn a place in his twisted utopia."

Another flash of lightning cracked as we rounded the same corner. I pointed ahead as Wyld just managed to avoid taking a spill from the rain-slicked streets.

"There!" I said. "I think he's headed for the bridge!"

A couple blocks ahead of us, a suspension bridge ran over a wide river, crossing the span from the financial district over to the suburbs past the city. I thought of what might happen if that living nightmare made it to a neighborhood where people had their homes; it made a chill go down my back worse than the rain.

"We can't let him get across!" I said.

"And we WON'T," said a voice from Wyld's headset. I looked at the far side of the bridge; the Hellion's troop carrier was on the other side, its top opened to allow a mounted turret cannon, manned by Hetzer, to swivel around and draw a bead on the aberrant. He'd just made it to the bridge's middle, as Wyld and I skidded to a halt on the far side. An artillery shell thudded from the troop carrier, but the aberrant blasted out a jet flame, exploding it like a firework set off too early.

"How'd you guys know?!" Wyld said, sounding relieved.

"We were tracking your movement by your GPS," Hetzer said. "Saw which way you were going and figured that was the most likely path for our target."

"Good, we've got 'em pinned," the cat said. "Mike, hop down, I'm gonna lay a smack down on this son of a bitch." I slid down Wyld's back as she drew her fighting sticks off her thighs, clipping them together into her staff. But when the lightning cracked again, I looked up sharply.

"Whoa, Wyld! I don't think you want to go waving a metal pole around right now," I said. The cat looked up at the still rumbling sky.

"Good point," she said, sheathing her weapons. "Guess I'll need to get up close and personal with the walking lighter." Cracking her knuckles, the cat started across the bridge. The aberrant had one head focused on the troop carrier, the other staring daggers at us. The third looked between the two, then glanced up.

"Oh no you don't!" the cat said, just as the mutant crouched and launched itself up at the bridge's support towers. It put all those limbs it had to good use, climbing the steel cables and girders like a spider. Wyld was right behind it, leaping from perch to perch, swiping with her claws when she got the chance. She missed by inches, as did the aberrant when it took a swing at her with one of its limbs.

"Damnit," I grunted; there didn't seem to be anything I could do, but stand there in the rain getting cold, watching for movement against the increasingly dark sky every time the lightning flashed.

Then it clicked. I took off across the bridge as fast as I could. My boots splashed down into standing water more than once, soaking me up to the shin every time. Overhead, I could still hear Wyld and the aberrant swinging about on what must have been like a giant jungle gym to them, only there wasn't any teacher around to tell them to play nice as they clawed, swung, and grabbed at each other. By the time I got across the bridge, I was sucking raw, ragged breaths in and nearly collapsed against the side of the carrier. The hatch swung open and Mish stuck her head out.

"Mike, what's Wyld doing, squeak?!" she said.

"Trying...to keep that...bastard from...getting the high ground...," I rasped. "Got an idea...you have

any...sort of...tether gun or...harpoon with a...metal line?"

"What good would that...," Hetzer said, looking over the side of the carrier from his seat at the cannon. I pointed at the aberrant, which Wyld currently had by two of its limbs, the others trying to get ahold of her as she leaned and swayed about on her current perch. Then I pointed up into the sky.

"Ooooooh, I get it!" Hetzer said. He climbed back down into the carrier as I asked Mish for a headset.

"Wyld, we're working on an idea," I said, starting to get my breath back. "Just keep him busy a bit longer."

"One step ahead of you!" she said, dropping from a higher girder to a lower one, the aberrant trying to fry her and only managing to snap several of the cables instead. They cracked like giant whips as they came loose, thankfully not hitting the cat in the process.

"Here!" Hetzer said, handing me what I was looking for. The longarm was gas-powered and tipped with a triangular head with piton-like ends, a steel cable coming off of it and attaching to a spool underneath the barrel. It looked like the sort of thing used for spanning gaps or scaling cliffs. Hetzer had a larger version of that spear tip in his other hand, something that looked like it was fired from the carrier's cannon. He'd hooked up three additional cable spools to it to make one long line, and clipped the other end to the rifle's spool.

"Just say the word!" Hetzer said. I nodded, and forced my legs to start running back across the bridge again. This time, I didn't have as far to go; the aberrant had been trying to work its way closer to our end, so it could make a jump and clear the troop carrier. But Wyld was giving it hell; she'd managed to land several good claw swipes to it, and as I got to the base of the tower immediately before the one the aberrant was perched on top of, I noticed at least three sets of parallel cuts across its torso. Wyld, meanwhile, looked like she'd taken a few shots of her own, and had two horizontal cuts across her face that were slowly sealing themselves shut.

I may have mentioned it before, but I'm not fond of heights. Specifically, I'm not fond of heights when I don't have steady footing. So you can imagine how much I was groaning as I took hold of the service ladder that went up the side of the bridge tower and started to climb in the rain. A strong wind had also started blowing, which made the climb extra fun for me. Fear was chewing my guts up as I rose higher, and when I finally got to the maintenance platform just below the top, I wouldn't have stood up straight for anything short of a direct command from God. Instead, I crouch-walked as close as I dared get to the edge, which still let me use the edge of the tower for cover. The rain pelted my face as I took off my hat (so not to lose it in the wind), unslung the spear gun, and flipped the caps open on its scope.

The aberrant was standing on top of the next tower over, two limbs gripping the edge of the top as it swung at Wyld. The feline was crouched on the landing just below it, reaching up and swiping at it every time it moved.

"Okay Wyld, Grab him and hold him still!" I said into the headset. I drew a bead on my target, aiming up slightly to compensate for distance, and a little to the side to adjust for the wind.

"Here goes!" the cat said. Wyld swept around to one side of the platform, putting herself behind the mutant. She leaped up, and clapped her hands around its ankles, hanging all her weight on it, sinking her claws in. The aberrant bellowed in rage; two boney limbs swiped down and caught Wyld between the shoulder blades, twin claws sinking in.

I squeezed the trigger; with a pressurized bang and a hiss, the spear head went flying through the air, cable twirling out in a spiral behind it, until it nailed the aberrant in the torso just below the left pectoral. I dropped the spear gun.

"HETZER NOW!" I said. "WYLD LET GO!"

Some distance behind and below, the troop carrier's cannon thudded again. The shot, angled as close to straight up as possible, sailed up and into the air, taking the other end of the cable into black, thundering clouds.

Wyld released her grip on the aberrant's legs. She grabbed the limbs sunk into her back, and bent them HARD. A crack of bone breaking was audible even from where I crouched, and the creature bellowed again as Wyld tore herself free, diving from the tower and into the river. I clapped my hands over my ears and turned away, as a bolt from the heavens cracked down in a heartbeat, the following thunderclap so loud I could feel it pass through me. When it had died to an echoing rumble, I looked back. The remains of the aberrant were smoking like a chimney from its mouths

and eye sockets. All its hair had been burnt off and it had been rendered to a charcoal gray.

"You get a charge outta that?" I grunted as the charred aberrant fell from the tower and splashed into the river, where Wyld was treading water. I heard the feline groan over the headset.

"Wyld, are you alright?!" I said. "Are you hurt bad?"

"Just by your PUN," the cat sighed.

I double-checked around my hotel room to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything, like a charging cord or a pair of socks. Satisfied everything was packed up, I grabbed my bag and headed down to the bus station. About two days had passed since Wyld and I had cracked down on Quipple's lab. With the authorities having taken the matter well in hand, I was ready to make my exit. Taking out my smartphone, I started to send a text as the elevator took me to the lobby, but the person I was about to message had beaten me to the punch.

"Oh hey Wyld!" I said, looking up when I noticed a now-familiar shadow blocking out the ceiling lights. "Was just about to give you a jingle," I said.

"Figured I'd catch you in the act," the cat said with a smirk. "So, all packed up?"

"Yep, I think things are under control here," I said, as the feline walked beside me out the door.

"How're things back at Hellion's HQ?"

"Definitely good," Wyld said, as we headed down the sidewalk towards the bus station. "Hetzer said the mayor's practically doing cartwheels over stepping on this outbreak before it got any worse. The police have seized everything in the subway system, and the transit police are getting a federal grant to beef up their security to make sure this doesn't happen again. Mish is going over the hardware that Quipple guy had his goons set up; if we can get a lead on him, we'll have the feds on his tail fast enough to give him whiplash."

"Good," I said, taking out a pocket notebook and scribbling down the name and number of a certain Scottish friend of mine. "If you run into any trouble there, call this guy and tell him I sent you and that you could use a hand following up on Quipple. He and I have dealt with this creep before."

"Thanks," Wyld said, taking the note, folding it up, and tucking it into her pocket.

"Oh," I said as we got to the station, digging into my pocket. I dug out my wallet and pulled out two business cards. "I really appreciate all the help you gave me with this mess. If you guys ever need my help again, by all means keep my card on file; it's got my business number and email address."

"Great, will do!" Wyld said, taking the card and tucking it in the same pocket as she'd put the note in. Then, taking the second business card, I pulled out a pen and jotted a couple things down on the back.

"And for you personally," I said, with what I hoped was a wry grin, "This one's got my business info..." I flipped the card around between to fingers. "And my personal number, email, and home address. If you're ever in my area, let me know."

Wyld took the card, and with a pert little smile, tucked it into her cleavage.

"Anytime you're in the neighborhood..." she said, then suddenly swept out both arms, pulled me in, and hugged me tight enough to push my face right into her bosom.

"...don't be a stranger, shorty!" she said.

"Mmmph-mmmph!" I replied, giving her an "ok" gesture with my hand. The cat giggled, released me before I started losing my breath (as if I would have minded...) and booped my nose, as my bus rolled up to the station. I grabbed my bags.

"You stay out of trouble," Wyld said. I smirked at her.

"Only if you do," I said. We both gave each other knowing grins, and said at the same time...

"No promises!"

FANG WILL RETURN.