

The Furthest Reaches

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Looking back, I'm frankly surprised I lasted as long as I did. It's not everybody in my position who's survived some of the things I have. Hell, it's not everybody who's seen some of the things I have. Life really is like a roller coaster, with highs and lows and unexpected twists and turns. And this last case has certainly been like a roller coaster.

Where to begin...so much has happened to me recently in a short amount of time. Well, a short amount of conscious time. It all started with a video phone call to my apartment. I'd been doing what I normally did in the evenings; try to bone up on my knowledge of history, modern technology and current events all at the same time. It wasn't easy, but books on digital recording chip and leaving my tv on the 24-hour news channel helped. It was one of only four channels I could get; housing with the rent based on income doesn't have many frills.

I hit the "receive" button on my keyboard; my computer was set up to act as a vid phone as well as a PC. The holographic screen opened a new window. A name and an originating number flashed on the screen; Sean Donnalson. The name sounded familiar, so while I accepted the call, I also opened up an internet connection and typed in the name. Meanwhile, a bright red gecko with yellow spots appeared in the window next to the net connection.

"Hello Mr. Donnalson," I said, leaning back a bit in my seat. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Mr. Fang, so nice to speak with you," the gecko said, smiling in a way that dripped insincere charm. "I hope I caught you at a good time."

"As good at time as any, I guess," I said, "Got off work about an hour ago."

"That's good. Mr. Fang," said Donnalson, "I was calling because I have a proposition for you."

"Really?" I said as raised my eyebrows in interest. Meanwhile, my search had turned up what I was looking for. I tried to hide my shock when I found out who I was talking to: Sean Donnalson, U.S. delegate to the United Nations.

"Well Mr. Donnalson," I said, "I don't know what I could do for you, unless you needed your office redecorated," The gecko chuckled.

"Oh no Mr. Fang," he replied, "I was thinking of something along the lines of your OLD job." I ruefully looked down and gave a low laugh in my throat.

"Been a long time since I've been asked for anything like that," I said. "Not to argue, but wouldn't it make more sense to hire a detective that's more...up to date?" The gecko sat back a bit in his seat. I could now see he was wearing a tailor-made suit and had a gold ring on one finger with several diamonds in it. Experience taught me that someone who spends that much on clothes is likely to care

more about image than anything else. That didn't surprise me; I was talking to not just a politician, but an international one.

"Well, see, that's just it Mr. Fang," Donnalsen a breath, "...most of the individuals who handle this sort of work, they aren't qualified for this job. We need someone with your unique.....presence."

"My what?" I said, looking askance at Donnalsen. "Just what, exactly, is it you want me to do, Mr. Donnalsen?" The gecko shifted in his seat.

"One moment, I'll send you a report here...there we go." A blinking file appeared on my computer screen.

"I'll give you the short and dirty version," said Donnalsen. "Something strange has happened at a research base in the Antarctic. The main base has lost contact with one of its furthest research stations. Currently, the base is rather short-handed, and doesn't really have the personnel to send out an investigation squad. Now, as it so happens, a very high-ranking and well-known member of the Cammephian military is on the planet, and has offered to conduct the investigation himself. Apparently shi has a reputation for doing things personally."

I nodded along, getting the sneaking suspicion I wasn't going to like where this would lead me.

"I see. Well that's interesting, but what do you need me for then? Sounds like our Cammephian benefactors," here I could help but allow just a mild hint of distain to creep into my voice, "have this all covered." The gecko got a look on his face like he was trying to think how to put something as delicately as possible.

"Yeeessss...thing is, the base is a Sol-3/Cammeph-2 join operation...and we feel that we should respond to the Cammephians' very generous gesture with a similar one. Unfortunately, none of our equivalent military personnel are available for a job such as this. So, we need someone to act as our... representative in this investigation."

I leaned back a bit in my seat, rubbing my chin, mulling this over. "So," I said, not looking directly at the screen. "Let me see if I understand this...you've got a military crisis...and no personnel with both a high enough rank and the necessary skills to match who the Cammephians are sending...so you want me to go out there to act as a FIGUREHEAD? Because I'm from Sol-3 and I used to be a private eye?"

The gecko seemed to realize I'd called his number; stripping away his sugar coating and bullshit to get down to the core of the matter. "No...," he said, leaning forward on his crossed arms, "because you're from Sol-3, used to be a private eye, have been of interest to the media since that bank incident AND have been setting yourself up to be some kind of spokesman for Sol-3 supremacy."

"Hey," I said, starting to get irritated. "I'm not about supremacy, I'm about self-respect and self-reliance. The Cammephians should be allies to us, not...guardians looking out for some help!..."

"Mr. Fang, please, I don't need one of your speeches," Donnalson said, holding up his hand. "You say you think we shouldn't be relying on the Cammephians for everything? Well here's your chance to put your money where your mouth is."

He was hitting me hard. I couldn't deny he had a point. But I wasn't convinced the job he had in mind was the one I wanted to do.

"If you expect me to go down there just so the media can say Sol-3 is an equal partner in this investigation, that's NOT the same thing," I said, cocking my head to one side, slightly peeved. "Come on Mr. Donnalson, there's got to be somebody better qualified for this."

"Anybody we have that could be better qualified still isn't good enough to compare to the officer the Cammephians are sending," said Donnalson.

"Is he...she...shi, with an 'I', all that and a bag of chips?" I asked, shifting a bit to one side.

"Admiral Redwolf." That's all Donnalson had to say. I hadn't been as up-to-date on the news as I wanted to be, but I'd heard of Admiral Redwolf. Practically a Goddamn legend in his own time.

"THAT's who you expect me to be an equivalent to?!" I gave a pathetic laugh. "Oh I'm flattered as hell, but nobody's going to believe...,"

"Mr. Fang," Donnalson now sounded like he was out of patience. "We don't expect you to be as good as him. Frankly, nobody on this planet is as good as the Cammephians."

"I don't...," I started, but he cut me off.

"I don't care if you don't believe that," the gecko snapped. "You can delude yourself and anyone dumb enough to believe you if you want, but the rest of the world has wised up. Problem is, it DOES look bad if we don't do SOMETHING when there's a problem in our own backyard. Look, we're going to pay you a nice, handsome figure for your services. So just go out there, do your gumshoe bit if it makes you feel better, and we'll all be happy. Because honestly Fang...do you have anything better to do?"

He had me. I felt like a mouse cornered by a cat, wishing it would stop playing with me and just end it. Or maybe like a fish with a hook in its mouth, fighting furiously but being drawn ever closer to the net coming down in the water.

"Why me?" I asked. "Besides the previous reasons." Donnalson shrugged.

"Because you're convenient," he said. "We don't have any heroes from this planet anymore. You seem to be the only person around that thinks he can still become one." Donnalson's previous statement had been the knife to my stomach. This one was the twist. He beat me.

"Alright," I said. "Where do I leave and when?" Suddenly Donnalson was all smiles again; the perfect politician, able to snap on a camera-pleasing grin at the drop of a hat. My computer screen showed another flashing file.

“Good! Here are your authorization papers. Print them out, and present them at the Cammeph Military Base at Annapolis. The CMDS Slingshot will be leaving for the base day after tomorrow at 6 a.m. When you get to the base, the C.O., a Captain... Whiteout.” The gecko shook his head. “How do they always get such a fitting name? Well, anyway, the captain will give you and the admiral the specifics on the situation. Just stick by the admiral, shi’ll make sure you get through this without any trouble. We’ll see you when this is all over. Good luck!” The video link clicked shut. Good thing too, cause I was ready to start cussing at Donnalsen. Bad enough they wanted to use me as a publicity stunt, a pacifier for the media to suck on. Now I was about to be slated as the sidekick of one of the most powerful Cammephians I’d ever heard of.

“Mother fuck,” I said, sighing and looking behind me at the small, two-room efficiency rental I now lived in. The living space was a cot against the wall, a desk next to it for my computer, a tv build into the wall, a kitchenette on the far side next to the door. The other room was a bathroom with a sink, a toilet and a shower stall. It reminded me of my college dorms, only less cozy. But that was my life now. That’s what it had become since two years ago.

Two years. I still can’t believe it’s been that long, I thought as I wandered into my kitchenette and pulled an iced tea from the fridge. It had been two years since I’d been defrosted; that’s what they called it when you were brought out of cryo stasis. Back in the 21st century, I’d been a private eye and a freelance reporter. I’d gained a fair amount of notoriety in my home city and some abroad. I’d brought down thieves, anarchists, macros, corrupt politicians, organized criminals and professional saboteurs. But then came the big change in 2012. The newly-elected American president caused major changes in policy. He was a diehard liberal with a diehard liberal Democratic Congress. They passed things like the Open Mind Act, which allowed legal prosecution of any perceived form of racial or gender inequality. It wasn’t a can of worms they opened, but a can of poisonous spiders. In that year alone there were over 200 lawsuits brought against churches, synagogues and mosques that didn’t want to perform gay marriages. The abortion rate tripled as women began suing doctors for denying them a by-choice convenience termination.

If all that wasn’t enough to make the founding fathers roll over in their graves, the government passed yet another act that gave the United Nations sovereign rights in America. The UN began dictating American foreign policy directly. Income taxes doubled as the UN began demanding America take on over 75 percent of the cost of foreign aid, most of which was given directly to warring nations’ governments that spent them not on assisting their people, but buying weapons for their troops.

I was one of a few who wouldn’t stand for it. I went on every radio talk show I could get on, wrote to every newspaper’s op-ed page I could think of, and even at one time managed to get on national tv. But when you climb too high, you risk falling hard. I was labeled a political and social dissident, but I shouldered the ugly things being thrown at me as best I could. They couldn’t shut me up, not legally at any rate.

But then came the day I fucked myself over. I admit it, it was my own fault. I’d shown up at a rally for the research of new and safer abortion methods. The woman leading the rally was yelling about

a woman's right to safely choose to do what she would with her own body; that being shackled by the fanatical beliefs of religious throwbacks was denying women their rights. That's when I lost it.

That's when I punched the bitch on live tv.

It was all downhill from there. I'd poked at the trembling trapdoor once too often, and now the trap hit me full in the face. I was arrested, tried, and my every action in the past scrutinized with glasses more tinted than anything Elton John ever wore on his face. All the times I had used a gun to defend myself were used to paint me as a gun-wielding lunatic. My religious devotion was seen as deranged fundamentalism. And of course, all my letters, my radio bytes, my 15 minutes of fame on tv were used to make me look like a dangerous hatemonger trying to incite riots. I got the honor of being the first person convicted under the newly-passed Public Good Law; one that stated anything that the Supreme Court rules to be detrimental to the public majority could incur jailtime. They took everything I'd said that criticized what the government had done recently and labeled it "bad for public morale". At my trial, as they read off the charges of political dissidence, public inflammation, assault, assault with intent, use of a firearm, and several other charges, I had to smile; not everyday Congress passes legislation just for you.

The courts may have convicted me, but they knew the dangers of jailing me. I'd made a ton of enemies, but I'd made very sure to let few of them escape to come back for me later. As a result, every local prison had at least several people who would've liked to hold me down and shiv me up my backside. But the nice thing about liberals is they always believe in reform. And their latest concept of "reform" was a prison where you're not awake to realize time is passing. I had no idea why they thought a term of cryogenic stasis would reform anyone, but they weren't about to let a little fact like taking away a period of one's life was the punishment of prison get in their way. Cryo-stasis was the wave of the future; no more worrying that you won't be a young stallion anymore when you get out after your 25-year sentence for beating an old woman to death for her jewelry. Of course I didn't have 25 years, but you get the idea.

I was given a three-year sentence in stasis. Everything was filmed, me being led to my stasis chamber, the warden's speech about the new "humane" form of incarceration, me rolling my eyes at his speech. As they led me to my chamber, one reporter asked me if I had any final statements. I turned to the cameras, looked at the crowd and said...

"Just sit tight, folks. I'll be back."

Several hundred years later, some construction worker wipes the dirt and dust off my cryo chamber and sees me inside. I'd fallen through the cracks in the system. The information on what happened after I was frozen was difficult to find, but the nearest I've pieced together is that shortly after I was chilled, there was a hurricane that hit the city. This hurricane spawned numerous tornadoes, and did massive damage to the prison. The cryogenically frozen prisoners were moved to a temporary facility in the prison's basement, and there we were forgotten; like old keepsakes stuck in the far corner of an attic or cellar. When studies showed that, surprisingly (insert plenty of sarcasm here), cryo-convicts weren't showing any reform after being released, the practice fell out of habit. And so a lot of

poor bastards like me, as well as some that deserved it, were left to get freezer burn; Out of sight, out of mind.

They finally found me, the only convict in my block whose life support hadn't malfunctioned and was still alive. To this day I remember the moment the same dream I'd had for as long as I could remember finally ended. The world appeared before me, bleary and unfocused as I shuffled from the cold. I leaned against the first solid object I could find by sense of touch, unsteady on my feet as a newborn horse. I tried to think of something witty to say, but all I could manage was...

"Can I get a glass of OJ, a newspaper, and directions to the bathroom? I gotta piss like crazy."

A voice that sounded both smooth yet strong replied.

"Sure, what's a newspaper, and out the door, turn left, first door on your left."

"Thanks," I said, rubbing at my eyes.

"And could you please not lean on my crotch? I don't know you well enough." THAT snapped me wide awake. I looked to the side, and saw I was leaning on a very large package.

"WHOA! WHAT THE FUCK!?" I remember yelping.

Re-orientation with the world was much like if you'd taken someone from the 19th century and brought them to the 21st. I still spoke the language and I could understand the concepts as they were presented to me, but it was all mind-blowing. At some point Earth had made contact with a race of creatures called the Cammephians. They were a race of mostly hermaphroditic creatures that were mixtures of drygers (dragon/tiger hybrids) or wolfskunks (wolf/skunk hybrids). While they didn't have the same variety of species as earth sentient life did, they were remarkably more varied physically. Limbs and bodily extremities could come to them in a variety of combinations and sizes. A rare few of them even had the ability to change shape. But the general rule of thumb seemed to be that all of them were at least twice as big as the average earth resident and had sexual appendages (both genitals and breasts) that would turn virtually any earth resident several shades of green with envy (with a few very rare exceptions).

As shocking as the transition was, I quickly got acclimated to it. Old science fiction had helped prepare me for the possibility of life different from my own, and I'd been mentally ready for it. I'd also been ready for the fact that they'd had quite a few improvements over my own race, particularly in the technological department.

What I hadn't been prepared for was that my planet would roll over and become a lap dog so quickly. Everywhere I went in this new age, the Cammephian influence was there. I could see it in numerous architectural designs, cultural customs, and in the government. While I admit it was my old government that put me in prison in the first place, I still felt it was better than what the new one was turning into. Personal freedoms were being removed drastically, and the government, while not forcing

anyone to behave a certain way, was becoming more and more restrictive. Rather than trying to push you towards a choice, they were taking away certain choices you used to have.

I would've protested, if it wasn't for the drugs.

The court system back in 2012 may have been twisted, politically biased, and unfair, but it was thorough and clever. The new court system found old files on the terms of my release; one of which was an airtight demand that I be placed on a new form of psychological drug designed to weed out my "undesirable aggressiveness." This souped up form of Ritalin put me in a rather lazy form of mind, chaining up my Id. In a sense, I felt like I was in a constant daze as I went to and from the government-sanctioned job I was given as a defrost, staying at a halfway house for other poor saps like me trying to adjust. And somewhere deep inside me I could feel my Id, pounding on the doors of his drug-created cell, going nuts every time he saw the signs of how my once-proud planet had become the hapless, helpless bystander that had to be protected by this oh-so-wonderful bunch of aliens. I didn't blame the Cammephians (not much anyway), but I was disgusted with my own planet, which had been officially renamed Sol-3 in another display of pandering. Deep inside, I wanted to scream, I wanted to get on a pedestal and rant, to tell my race to look at themselves, to pick themselves up by their own bootstraps and start being self-reliant again, rekindle the sort of scientific and technological exploration that had been present in my day rather than just wait for the next big Cammephian development, and to stop depending on the Cammephians for everything, to have some dignity and self-respect.

Then I'd take another pill.

All this would have continued for as long as they kept me popping those happy capsules, if it hadn't been for that bank job. I'd been assigned to help a maintenance crew with the spring cleaning of the 5th National Bank. It was just us and several of the bank employees, using the time the bank was closed to get caught up on some book balancing. That's probably why the bank robbers chose that day to hit. They came around lunchtime, five of them dressed in identical hooded gray sweatshirts and jeans with uzis and handguns, shoving their way into the bank and rounding up everybody in a fat minute. One of the employees managed to hit a silent alarm before we were all forced against the walls. The cops showed up, and the stereotypical stand-off began.

The robbers were pros; patrolling the doors and windows while they stalled on the police, making demands that any intelligent person knew would never be given into while simultaneously gathering not bulky money or heavy gold, but stacks of corporate bearer bonds worth a million dollars each from several companies whose did business through the bank. Deep inside, my detective skills resurfaced, telling me that if they were planning to get away with so much money, they must have planned an escape route that would take into account the cops. Sure enough, eventually the sound of a helicopter came from overhead. Crouched down against the wall between two other hostages with my head between my knees, dressed in a light blue cleaner's jumpsuit and ball cap, the drugs were making me a very compliant victim, scared for my own safety and wanting nothing more than to curl up in a ball and wait for it to all be over. But my detective skills, as they started coming back sharper, noticed that

all the robbers were concentrating on the windows and doors; none of them were watching the hostages. They expected us to all just lie down and let them walk on us.

I knew what my noticing this meant; my dose was wearing off. I reached into my pocket and produced my prescription bottle. I had only one pill left. I looked at the frightened, whimpering bank employees around me, at the smirking, sneering thugs walking past us, then at the pill again. Deep inside, my Id asked me a question.

Are you going to be a victim?

One of the robbers, a black panther, decided to try and warn off an approaching police helicopter from their own by threatening a hostage. He grabbed a vixen in a red dress by the arm, dragged her to the plate glass door, and put one of his two .45 automatics to her head. Firmly, I set the pill bottle down on the floor.

NO. I answered my Id. Standing up, I grabbed the brass pole used to hold up the rope guide to the tellers' desk. The thug was holding the shrieking vixen in front of him, yelling at the chopper coming closer. He never saw me come straight up behind him and bring the pole down on his head. He crumpled to the floor, where I brought it down on his head a second time. My face set in a cold glare, I picked up both the automatics he dropped. The other thugs turned towards me in stunned amazement. That's all I needed to start taking careful aim at them. One hand raised and the other lowered, I fired one pistol with controlled, carefully-lined up shots while they fired wildly at me. Pros they may have been, but they'd obviously never thought they'd actually have to shoot at someone; at least not from more than 5 feet away. A few shots came close, and I did step behind one support column in the bank for cover, but they never hit me.

When the cops came storming in, both my .45's were empty, two bank robbers were dead, and the other three were laying on the floor, howling in pain and spewing profanity. The sound of tactical combat boots squeaked on the marble floor as a chorus of sub machinegun safeties snapped open. Slowly, I extended my arms slightly from my sides and dropped the pistols. The cops didn't arrest me, but they did say they would have to detain me until they could get the mess sorted out. As I walked down the steps of the bank, two SWAT officers flanking me, each with a hand on my shoulder, the news cameras came in closer, right up to the sawhorse barricade. I looked directly into the nearest camera, and said one thing.

"I'm back."

That was the new beginning for me. If my life was a novel series, my drug-filled days since my awakening would have been the prologue. After that was the start of a new chapter in my latest series of misadventures. It didn't take long for the media to get ahold of my rap sheet. There were a number of old recordings of my commentary. I made a few headlines on the new data crystals that had replaced newspapers, as well as on the internet. I didn't have nearly the notoriety I used to, though. I was still another defrost among many, just with a little more face time in the media.

But I had something a lot of cryo sleepers didn't; my footpaw in the door. I'd grabbed people's attention by helping stop the bank robbery. After the bank staff had confirmed I wasn't working with the thieves, my story got picked up and I made a few interviews. My time as a reporter helped me to guide the questions onto the right track I wanted. I told them how I saw my planet becoming soft and weak, and how I was determined to see it rise back up to its former self-sufficiency. I picked up where I'd left off before my prison term; writing opinion letters, trying to get my message heard, only now not only was I standing up for personal freedom, responsibility and morality, I was calling for strength of character, personal dignity and self-reliance. The reaction was about what I expected; some people thought I was an asshole. Some were determined to argue every point and detail with me. And every now and then, one or two actually agreed with me.

To avoid looking like a hypocrite, I did everything I could to take my own advice. I moved out of the government subsidized housing and into my own place. It was a step down in housing, but at least I could call it my own and not a handout. I couldn't quit my job, however. No matter where I looked, I couldn't find any publication to take me on. Starting back up as a private eye was out of the question; I had no money for an office, my rep as an investigator had died with the people who knew me centuries ago and I had no contacts to help me. I became my own work in progress, a voice in need of a megaphone.

"And now this, " I thought to myself, looking over the printed authorization papers my printer had just rattled out. "Is this what my efforts have gained me? A chance to be a dancing chimp for the UN? They're not taking me seriously, that's what this shows. They're condescending to me, just like those....," I growled inwardly as I slumped at my desk, my fist against my forehead.

"Well screw them," I muttered to myself. "They think they can manipulate me? I'll show them." My fingers started stabbing at my keyboard as I brought my internet browser up again.

"I'm gonna turn this right back on them," I said to myself. "They think they're gonna make me look helpless next to the Canmephians, eh? Well we'll see just how helpless I am. I'm gonna "do my gumshoe thing." I'm gonna do it good enough to PROVE a Canmephian couldn't do it better! And I'll do it if it freakin' kills me!"

The next hour or so was spend searching the 'net. I tried to uncover some information about the military base. What was publicly available was sparse; CMSC/UN Peacekeeper Antarctic Station 7 was the primary landing point for all military and scientific traffic going in and out of Antarctica. There were regular rotations in personnel once a month, outside of essential personnel. The station was the deployment point to six other satellite outposts. The outposts were much smaller than the station itself, each one consisting of one building to house scientific personnel conducting weather observations, experiments requiring arctic temperatures, natural resource exploration, military training for arctic conditions and zoological work on arctic fauna. It was satellite station 4 that had gone quiet; one of the natural resource exploration outposts, staffed solely by UN scientists.

I printed out the meager information I'd found; I felt a bit more confident now that I'd actually begun being proactive about finding the silver lining to this dark cloud of an assignment. I left my desk

and went to my bed, reaching underneath it to pull out a plastic bin. I grinned as I flipped the lid off; the few personal items of mine that had managed to survive centuries of storage. I started laying them out, preparing for the next day; a pair of black, steel-toed boots, a pair of tan slacks, a white, buttoned, long-sleeve shirt, a green tie, a tan trench coat and a brown fedora.

From underneath my clothes, I picked up a leather hip holster, a plastic knife sheath and a smaller ankle holster. Inside the former was a large stainless steel .357 revolver. The sheath held a carbon blade buck knife. The smaller holster held a stainless steel snub nose. 38. Setting it on top of the clothing, I also took out a digital camera, a digital voice recorder, a flash drive (I was still sort of surprised that USB was still used this far in the future; I guess some things are hard to improve on) and a notepad and pen.

I rubbed my chin, musing if I'd need to be ready for anything more dangerous than the guns I was already planning to take could handle. Deciding I'd rather be safe than sorry, I picked up an olive green box roughly the size of a shirt box and stuffed it in a duffel bag from my closet, hiding it under a my toiletries and a change of clothing. Zipping it up and setting it next to my clothes laid out on a chair next to my bed, I turned in for the night.

"Tomorrow's gonna be interesting," I thought as I drifted off.

The air was what some people call "bracing" that morning; cold, frosty and almost a foreboding of the cold that I was headed towards. I was actually glad it was cold that morning; I figured it would be an easier transition than going suddenly from a warm day to a frigid climate. I'd left my apartment early in the morning, somewhere around 4 a.m. my gps, which came built in to my rented car, told me I'd arrive with about 15 minutes to spare. That suited me fine; I didn't feel like having to hang around long.

As I rolled down the exit off the highway, the sun was just coming up on my right, a pale yellow and red in the morning fog that hung over the water like a short curtain. I could see the military base built right over the water near the Annapolis wharf. It was a massive structure; concrete walls surrounding it like a prison with a main gate created by an energy field that crackled in the vapor-filled air, almost as if it was growling a warning to anyone that would even think of trying to break in. As I pulled up to the gate, one sentry on the side walked up to me. Shi was a large wolfskunk with brilliantly purple fur. It went well with his uniform, a light gray suit that reminded me of pictures I'd seen of an old (old for this day, anyway) science fiction series. I shut off my engine and rolled down my window; the sentry slung his laser rifle when shi saw I wasn't about to try to ram through the energy field. Standing at least 10 feet tall, shi had to kneel down to see me.

"Can I help you sir," the wolfskunk asked. I presented him with my papers.

"I'm here on authority of the UN," I said. "I've been sent to look into an.....operations irregularity, I guess is the best way to put it." The wolfskunk nodded, handing back the papers to me.

"The next transport leaves in ten minutes," shi said. "Present these papers to the pilot; shi should be getting his drop ship fueled up. Hangar 10."

"Thanks," I said, rolling my window back up as the guard stood back up, pushing a button on a wrist-mounted radio.

"Open the gates, it's that inspector we were told about," shi said as the energy field faded into a few static cracks.

"Inspector?" I muttered to myself. "Oh brother..." I felt like I should be going around with a clipboard, squinting at things, then frowning as I scribbled notes. I slowly cruised through the military base, looking for a parking spot. Things were pretty quiet, but then again it was very early in the morning. A few technicians lugged massive crates from storage bunkers to drop ships. I cruised to a parking spot between hangars 9 and 10, then went searching for the pilot. I found hir, a two-armed, six-breasted dryer, yanking a hose free of its coupling on the side of a ship with the name "CMSC Frogger" airbrushed across the nose.

"Scuse me," I said, walking up to hir. As with many Canmephians I'd met, shi first looked around at hir own eye level before glancing down and spotting me.

"Oh, there you are. Help you with something," shi asked, tossing the hose to one side. I handed hir my authorization papers.

"I'm here on assignment from the UN. I was told you were headed..." I said when shi finished my sentence for me.

"...to Antarctica, yeah, no sweat. We'll take off in about ten; need to hit the fresher then grab a cup of coffee." I nodded, heading aboard to stow my luggage. I walked up the back gangplank and into a storage area lined with boxes. From the markings on them, they contained guns, MRE's (Meals Ready to Eat) ammunition, everything you wouldn't think an outpost in the middle of nowhere would require, save for the food. Beyond the cargo hold was the passenger section, set up with individual drop harnesses facing one enough. Most of them were larger than I could use, but a few of them had foam inserts for smaller passengers. It was the first time I'd seen Canmephian transport converted for Earth-sized passengers. I knew they were trying to think of my safety, but I couldn't help but feel like I was being given a child's booster seat.

The pilot's heavy footsteps were audible as shi came up the gangplank. I'd taken my seat and was busying myself figuring out how to work the harness.

"So," I said, finally figure out which ends of the five-point straps went, "how many others are being shipped out?"

"You're the only one," the dryer said, ticking off a few items on a clipboard. I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

"Only me?" I asked incredulously. "I thought the base had regular troop rotations."

“Regular nonessential rotations,” the pilot corrected me. “The captain’s determined most of the personnel currently stationed at the main base is ‘essential.’”

“How many is that?” I asked.

“ ‘bout 30 Canmephian troops and 30 Sol-3 UN personnel,” shi said, heading into the cockpit. That number seemed to ring a bell to me. I pulled out the printout on the base from my coat pocket and looked over it. My suspicions were confirmed; those numbers were practically the entire staff on base.

“Hey,” I called through the hatch to the cockpit as the drop ship’s engines began to hum to life. “how long has that much personnel been deemed ‘essential’?”

“About six months now,” the pilot said, the drop ship shuddering as the gangplank was pulled up on pneumatic pistons, slowly lifting from the ground like bread rising with the yeast. I kept my opinion to myself as I quickly stuffed the printout back in my coat and settled back in my seat for the ride, but the gears in my head were already turning. Six regular rotations of personnel missed; something was seriously out of wack. The captain must have been keeping communications with Canmephian command quiet for this sort of irregularity to have gone unnoticed for so long. Either that, or the higher-ups knew, and were ignoring it. Either way, I got a feeling something wasn’t right about the way this base’s commandant, Capt. Whiteout, was running things.

The drop ship shuddered as if it could feel the cold wind whipping off the ocean. I’d been out on the water at this time of year before, but never this far out; I could imagine just how frigid it was outside, and unconsciously pulled my coat tighter around me, tugging my gloves onto my hands. The flight had taken just under two hours. After updating my notes on the situation, I’d fallen into my old habit of dosing on long trips when I’m not driving. I’d always found the subtle vibrations and steady white-noise sounds of a moving vehicle would put me to sleep, like a sunbather on a beach listening to the waves.

“We’re almost there,” the pilot said over hir shoulder. “ETA’s 10 minutes.”

I unstrapped myself from my seat and went up to the cockpit. The pilot’s array had more blinking lights than a corporate receptionist’s phone. I had to put my footpaw on the edge of the copilot’s seat and hoist myself up to see clearly out of the windshield. Ahead of us, the coast of Antarctica was rapidly filling the view; a vast expanse of white drifts on a backdrop of a dull gray sky. Wind whipped up the snow in a swirling, chaotic dance that scattered the granulated ice powder. It made me think of growing up for several years in Michigan, where in the winter, a sand-like snow often falls, piling like dunes everywhere, biting your face when it’s blown at you.

“There’s the base, right up ahead,” the pilot said, pointing just off to the right. I shifted my gaze a bit; the Antarctic station looked as though it had sprung up out of the ice, large drifts of it piled up almost as high as the protective walls. Five Canmephian military-style buildings were erected on the inside of four solid concrete walls; to the left and right of a central courtyard were two barracks, one for the UN troops on the left and a larger one for the Canmephian personnel. On the far side of the base

from the front gate was the primary building; a two-story research lab with several antennae, satellite dishes and other devices extending from it. In the back right hand corner was a small, squat storage building of some kind. A one-story administrative building was next to the Canmephian barracks just inside the gate on the right. The base's landing pad was located on the opposite side, just beside the UN barracks.

The base's buildings were a dark beige color; drab and unremarkable, but that was to be expected; no competent military is known for making flamboyant structures; function before fashion. Satisfied with the view, I returned to my seat and strapped myself in for the landing. The drop ship made a sharp dive, driven down by the winds that seemed to come from all directions like a horde of frenzied sharks. A swift swoop upward followed as the pilot overcompensated a bit to keep from hitting the ground too hard. One last thump with a feeling of finality told me we'd touched down.

"All ashore that's goin' ashore," the pilot said, unstrapping himself from the cockpit. I clambered down and picked up my duffel bag from where I'd stuffed it under the seat as shi lowered the ladder to the hatch. A blast of icy air tossed several handfuls worth of snow through the door, causing the dryer to scrunch hir face up.

"Never like it when it's windy here," shi grumbled, climbing down from the ship. I followed suit, my boots crunching in the packed-down snow as I stepped off the ladder. While the walls surrounding the base provided some protection from the wind, it couldn't stop it completely; few mortal-built things can truly hold back nature; The gusts still found ways up and over the walls from time to time, as if they were searching for every opportunity to get in.

I looked around as I pondered what to do next. Nobody was apparently designated to receive me when I showed up. The base's personnel were all in motion. Some were patrolling the interior, as if they were afraid of a sneak attack from penguins. Others were conducting maintenance on snowplows and a few other vehicles parked next to the two barracks. Nobody was standing still; not even the laziest goldbricker would have, Motion is probably one of the only ways of keeping from freezing in that kind of numbing cold.

No reception, I thought to myself, Something seems off here. Even for an unknown like myself, you'd think they'd have somebody to put me on a leash so I don't wander around and accidentally blow the place up. Alright, I think the first order of business is to check in with the C.O. Adjusting the strap on my duffel, I headed for the administration building, one hand on the brim of my fedora to keep it from getting blasted off in the wind. After a minute, I had the sense to take it off and pull the thin, clear line of monofilament fishing line I'd attached to the inside band out and tie my hat to a loop on the inside of my coat collar so I wouldn't loose my hat to the wind.

The door was flanked by two sentries, both staring ahead like Buckingham Palace guards. I hesitated briefly, not sure what would happen if I tried to pass them. As it turned out, nothing; I walked right up a small flight of steps between them, the automated door sliding open, pulling the freezing air in behind me as I stepped into the admin building's reception room. It was a small alcove with a secretary's desk right in front of me, a door behind the desk labeled "Commandant's Office: Capt. Whiteout". The

secretary was a thin, four-armed wolfskunk that looked more feminine than his other counterparts. I cleared my throat and presented the authorization papers to him once she finally laid eyes on me a couple feet below his line of sight.

"Ah, so you're the UN representative," she said, flipping through the papers with two hands. One of the other two hands dug into his ear with a pinky finger. "I'm afraid you've arrived before the Admiral has, so you'll have to wait."

"Ah, maybe it's none of my...", I started, then quickly decided otherwise. "No, I'd say it is my business. Why can't the captain see me while we wait? I'd like to be able to go over the information on the..."

"I'm afraid the commandant has given orders that the information on the communication break be kept strictly on a need-to-know basis," the secretary said, sliding the papers back across his desk to me. I raised an eyebrow, a smidge of irritation starting in the back of my head. I suspected I knew the answer to my next question, but I decided to ask anyway as I took the papers back, folded them up and put them in an inside coat pocket.

"Well I am one of the investigators on this matter, I'd think that'd make me need-to-know," I said, tilting my head to one side and raising my eyebrow. The secretary gave me the same look.

"Yes, but you don't need to know it YET," she said, adding a touch of finality to his tone. "If you'd like, there's an officer's club here; you can wait there. The admiral shouldn't be more than an hour or so from getting here."

"Thanks," I said dryly, "but first I'd like to talk to the ranking UN officer here."

"As you wish," she said, pointing with a stylus towards the door. "I believe Cornel Sweeper's in the UN barracks right now." I nodded and got a blast of frost as I went back outside. The UN barracks looked a bit more familiar to me than the Canmephian structure. The thing looked like it was built back in my time, some several hundred years ago. I shoved a hinged door open, then had to turn and push it shut again. The inside of the barracks reminded me of my college rec center; a few pieces of bargain basement furniture around a wide screen tv in the front lobby, a pool table with stained felt behind them, a couple pinball machines with lights flickering from age. The clerk behind the desk, a male blue dragon dressed in arctic fatigues, was busily typing on a laptop, surrounded by a ton of paperwork. Off to his left were a couple restrooms and a hallway leading further into the barracks. The whole place looked decidedly worn out; the tax dollars of several governments at work.

I cleared my throat after approaching the dragon; so absorbed in his work he hadn't even looked up from his computer when the cold air came blasting in.

"Yes, caaaaan I...help you," he said, punching a last key with finality and looking up quickly at me. Feeling like a Jehovah's witness handing papers to so many people, I once more turned over my credentials.

"Yes, I'm Mike Fang, I was hired by the UN to..." I started.

"Oh yeah, you're the inspector," the dragon said, looking over the papers.

"Eh, somethin' like that," I muttered. "I'm looking for the ranking officer..."

"Oh then you'll want to talk to Capt. Whiteout," the dragon said, handing the papers back over. "Across the courtyard, big admin building."

"Actually I already tried hir, shi's....busy," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "I'm actually looking for the ranking UN officer."

"Oh, pff, him," the dragon said, rolling his eyes. Alarm bells went off in my head.

Ooooh THIS isn't a good sign, I thought. When your own personnel treat you like you're a joke right in front of non-enlisted people...

"Col. Sweeper's in his quarters," the dragon said, picking up a phone; yet another outdated looking piece of equipment, it wasn't a vid phone like the modern ones. He punched the page button, then put in a direct line number.

"Cornel? That UN inspector's here. He'd like to speak with you...yes, I did, and apparently shi's busy....yessir." The dragon hung up. "The Cornel will be down in just a minute." I nodded, shifting a bit from one leg to the other.

"So's how's everything been operating up here?" I asked. "Besides this communication's break." The dragon looked up again from his work; he glanced a bit around, making sure we were the only ones in the lobby, it seemed.

"It's been going to the satisfaction of most of the people who work here," he said, his expression slightly rueful. I decided to try and probe a bit further.

"Really," I said. "Funny, I've heard a lot of personnel haven't been given their regular rotation of duty." The dragon sputtered a laugh.

"Yeah, that's the truth," he said, "But you won't hear too many people complain."

"Why's that?" I said. The clerk was about to answer when an elevator at the end of the hall chimed. Out stepped a gryphon dressed like the other personnel I'd seen, but something was different; his clothes looked extremely neat and pressed, his boots carefully scrubbed and polished. I'm all for looking one's best, but Col. Sweeper struck me immediately as one of those types who are overly concerned about outside image.

"Mr. Fang," he said, coming to a stop in front of me, hands clasped behind his back. "I'm Col. Sweeper."

"Pleasure to meet you," I said. "I was wondering..,"

"Where you'll be quartered, I take it," he said. "We've got a bunk set aside for visitors, we'll be putting you up there. I can take you there now if you wanted."

"Ah, thank you," I said, falling into step behind the gryphon. Lodging hadn't been my concern, but I figured I could get to the information I wanted more if I didn't balk. The Cornel led me back to the elevator, and from there to a second story room with a bunk, desk, window, phone and a wash closet. Simple quarters, but they were all I'd need, I figured as I tossed my duffel on the bed.

"The captain will no doubt want you in his office as soon as the Admiral arrives," Sweeper sounded like he was trying to contain some pride and excitement, and only half-succeeding. I hid the look on my face by keeping my back to him until I was sure I wasn't about to let him know exactly how I felt about Canmephian fanboys.

"Speaking of which," I said, turn to the Cornel, "Perhaps you might be able to tell me a bit about the situation before the Admiral gets here? I'd like to be a little more knowledgeable about the issue, since I'm sure shi's had more access to the information than I have."

"Ah, well....," Sweeper rocked a bit on his heels, looking pensive. Already I wasn't liking where this was going. That bit of irritation smoldering in the back of my head was starting to get hotter. "I don't think it would be very prudent of me to go revealing classified information without the captain's recommendation," he said. I couldn't help but give the Cornel a frankly amazed expression.

"Cornel, you're the ranking UN officer here, I'd think that qualifies you to make such decisions yourself. This is a joint Earth-Canmephian outpost after all, that should mean you have equal authority here." I'm not quite sure how, but Sweeper managed to give the impression his was pursing his beak as his eyes shifted from side to side. He then tilted his head forward like he was trying to be confidential.

"Mr. Fang, I'm sure we can both agree that the Canmephians are rather more advanced than we are. So that in mind, I think when their ranking officer gives an order, it's in the best interest of the base and the operation to..."

"Conform to their wishes?" I said bluntly, arms crossed.

"...Cooperate, is the term I'd use," the gryphon said a bit tersely. What patience I had was wearing thin. I stepped closer to Sweeper.

"Cornel, let me be frank; I've heard this base hasn't been following standard operating procedure and hasn't been rotating the personnel like it normally should. I've heard this's been going on for some time, too. And as ranking UN officer, I'd think it's your duty to do what's in the base's best interest, which I can't imagine is breaking S.O.P without good cause or withholding information from those authorized to have it."

"MISTER Fang," the Cornel now got rather serious with me, glaring hard. "May I remind you this is a military base and you are a CIVILIAN. The UN might have given you some pieces of paper to let you on here, but that doesn't mean you're anybody with any sort of real clout. You're up here to assist Admiral Redwolf when shi arrives, you're not going to fucking take over! So I advise you to shut the fuck up, get your ass off your shoulders, and do what your told. You'd better not embarrass us when the Admiral gets here, or we'll be in touch with the UN about your conduct."

I looked impassively back at Sweeper, then brushed past him as I walked out. Stepping into the hall, I glared over my shoulder.

"I'd tell you to kiss my ass Cornel, but you'd probably need the Canmephian's permission to do THAT too." Not waiting for his response or the elevator, I took the stairs back down to the ground floor and left the barracks. I was angry; I was being pigeon-holed into the monkey-for-the-media position I was trying to avoid. Without anyone who would cooperate with me, I was screwed. Mad as I was, I knew at this point I had little other choice but to wait for Admiral Redwolf. Remembering what the Canmephian secretary said, I headed back to the administration building, passing through a different doorway marked "Officer's Club" just to the left of the one that led to the offices.

The Canmephian officer's club was a definite step up from the UN barrack's lounge. A fully-stocked bar was located on the left side, where a wolfskunk bartender with two arms, six breasts, yellow-dyed fur and a crew cut was polishing a large beer mug. A flat-panel tv that took up most of the wall just to the right of the door had several cushy leather seats and one large couch in front of it. Hooked up to it were modern video game systems. Across the room from the bar were several doors marked "Sunday Rooms". I raised an eyebrow; I'd heard plenty about how Canmephians spend their Sundays; made me wonder just how often those rooms needed cleaning. Behind the tv furniture were three Canmephian-sized pool tables, which looked in much better repair than the UN ones. Three or four round tables with upholstered seats surrounding them finished off the décor.

I'll give the Canmephians this much, they know how to build a watering hole, I thought to myself, stamping the snow off my boots and brushing it off my hat. I climbed, literally, up a barstool only a foot shorter than myself and sat down in front of the 'tender, who'd looked rather surprised.

"Uh personnel aren't allowed to drink bef...," shi started, but this time it was my turn to cut someone off in mid-sentence, holding up my hand.

"I'm sure, but I'm not personnel," I said. "Got any whiskey?" The bartender smirked a bit and poured a double Jack Daniels on the rocks for me.

"I take it you just got in," shi said, capping the bottle and setting it back on the shelf behind hir.

"M'yep," I said, taking a healthy pull from the drink. "Sent here by the UN to look into that communication snafu."

"Thank diety," the 'tender said. The old investigator instincts in me kicked in and my ears pricked up just a bit.

"Is it worse than I thought?" I asked, swirling my drink a bit. The wolfskunk looked around a bit.

"I've seen people do that a lot around here," I said. "What, do you think you're being spied on by penguins?" The 'tender looked pensive, then leaned fully on the bar, two of hir racks squishing outward as shi did, acting like shi was scrubbing at a tough stain.

“Most of the personnel here don’t exactly take to rules n’ regs,” shi said. My eyebrows shot up. Now it was MY turn to look around in a semi-paranoid fashion. The bartender didn’t look at me, but shi kept talking out of the corner of hir mouth.

“The majority of the Canmephian staff here’s been busted on some kind of misconduct charge; drinking on duty, sexual harassment, abusing equipment, something. But they’ve all gotten real buddy-buddy with Capt. Whiteout, who likes to run this place like its hir own personal fortress and we’re hir private army.”

“No shit,” I muttered. “Now it makes sense why shi’s trying to keep a lid on this thing; if word got out shi was abusing hir authority...”

“You got it,” the wolfskunk whispered, now digging at a new spot on the bar, “but thing is, shi doesn’t have to worry much; shi’s real cozy with most of the troops here; shi lets them do as they please, and they jump when shi snaps hir fingers. The staff does their jobs well enough to pass a cursory inspection, but anyone not on duty can jerk off however they see fit; go joyriding with the vehicles, toss around explosives for fun, get smashed whenever they like, use drugs, all kinds of stuff. Anyone who pisses hir off, though, gets dumped at one of the satellite outposts like some fucking gulag. Being in the arctic ain’t no picnic, but out there, all you’ve got is a few shacks to keep you from freezing to death.”

I nodded; the situation was becoming clearer to me, but it was like cleaning a window to see a bigger mess in the room behind it.

“What about the scientific research that’s supposed to be going on out here?” I asked. The ‘tender snorted a laugh.

“That outpost that’s gone quiet was the only place any real science has been conducted at for some time,” shi said. “Most of the Observers here are just as bad as the Detectives and Nurses and other classes; doesn’t matter what they are, they’re all more interested in acting like asses with military equipment than doin’ their duty.”

I nodded; now I understood the paranoia and the part of the treatment I was getting; the better part of the Canmephian personnel here were out of control, the commandant was trying to set himself up as the makeshift military despot of Antarctica, and at least part of the UN personnel were either overlooking the breaches of conduct or couldn’t see them for the stars they had in their eyes for the dual-gendered aliens. In the back of my head, I wondered how the Canmephian Admiral was going to react once shi got here, but first and foremost, I wondered how I was going to actually carry out my own responsibilities.

The door to the bar swung open. Three Canmephian officers came in, laughing and talking loudly.

“And then, shi yanked it so hard, I swear it stretched out a good 20 feet!” one thickly muscled dryer said. Shi didn’t have any extra limbs or boobs, but shi looked to weigh close to two tons. Hir coloring was also odd, coal-black with white stripes. Hir companions laughed loudly again as they made their way to one of the tables just behind me.

"And what did Stapler say?" asked one of the dryer's companions, a wolfskunk taller than hir by a head, which she had two of.

"Shi didn't say nothin', shi was cross-eyed and...who the hell's that?" the dryer said. I could already feel eyes on me, so I turned around, giving them a customary nod.

"Oh yeah, he must be that guy the UN sent," said a small (for a Canmephian anyway) wolfskunk with a head full of dreadlocks. Interest in me seemed to wane as they each ordered drinks and I got a refresh for my own. Things passed uneventfully for the next half-hour. I amused myself for a while listening over my shoulder to the loudmouthed troopers talking about their sexual exploits. I'll spare most of the details but suffice to say comparisons were made of appendages (both their own and their partners') to various pieces of military equipment, in particular vehicles, artillery and large ordinance. After about ten straight minutes of this, I grew tired of the giant erection descriptions.

"Hey how about you?" I heard the reverse colored dryer say. I assumed he meant me since the bartender was pointedly not getting involved. Dreading where this was going, I turned to face the dryer, who was looking at me with that expression you see on people's faces when they're thinking "this oughta be good."

"Beg pardon," I said.

"I said, how about you? Got any decent piece of ass lately? If you can call it that on this planet." I clenched my teeth a bit behind my lips, but tried to brush off the snorts of amusement from the dryer's friends.

"I'm a defrost," I said, "my last intimate adventure was so long ago I don't remember it."

"Pssssh, then what are you doing up here," the dryer said, "Pining for the freezer?"

Right about now, yeah, a bit I thought to myself, but didn't voice the thought. Little did I know, I didn't have to.

"Aww, wassa matter," said the dual headed wolfskunk, "woke up and found you don't measure up anymore?" I blinked in surprise.

"What the hell makes you say THAT?" I said. The wolfskunk smirked and tapped both hir foreheads.

"Your mind's an open book to telepaths like me." Shi said "That, and its only common knowledge none of you Sol-3 folks are swingin' that big a stick."

"Hey", said the shorter wolfskunk in a mocking tone, "don't you know what they say on this rock? 'It's not the size, it's what you do with it.'" That got a rise out of all four of them. A something of mine rose, too; the hair on the back of my neck. I try not to be touchy about my looks or my physical endowment (or lack thereof), but getting mocked by those four aliens was only piling more weight onto the load I

felt from the social and species tension I had. Bad enough so many of my kind were kissing these people's asses, did they have to mock us too? People often compare anger to an explosion or a gun going off. But it's more like fire; it flares up fast, much like an explosion, but it doesn't always die off as quickly; it can burn and flame for a while.

I knew it wasn't a good idea, but I was too irritated not to respond.

"Yeah well if your dicks are so big, then how 'bout you all go fuck yourselves?" I sneered at them. "With you it's actually possible." I turned back on my stool. The four goons seemed a bit surprised to hear something like that coming from someone like me. But the reverse colored dryer wasn't about to let me get the last word. Smirking, shi stood up and walked over to the bar.

"Bet you wish you could," shi said, leaning on it, waving the 'tender over. "Since that's the only way you'd get any action, Inspector Gadget." Shi snickered as the tender wolfskunk got hir a fresh beer. The 'tender looked slightly apprehensive as shi saw my face. I never liked being called "Inspector Gadget." I'd been razzed all through college about my fashion sense that way and it rubbed me raw about it. Now, as the dryer turned to start back to hir table, humming the cartoon's theme song, it was the straw that snapped the camel's back, along with my patience.

"I suppose you don't have that problem, do you, you cocksucking pussy?" I said over my shoulder. The dryer stopped, turning to one side.

"Hey, I'm a hermaphrodite not...," shi started.

"Oh so you get the honor of being able to be both a cunt and a dick," I snorted derisively at him. "Whoop de fucking do." The dryer leveled a finger at me.

"HEY! You gotta real mouth on you for someone from a pussy-whipped, puny little race that's so worthless they can't get their asses off their shitty little planet!" I couldn't think of a good retort for that, so I decided to just beat the dryer's ass. Getting off my barstool, I grabbed it by the seat and swung it 'round, slamming the legs against the dryer's washboard stomach. The 'tender quickly ducked behind the bar as the dryer snarled in pain and doubled over, giving me time to bring the stool around and crack hir across the back of the neck and head. I'd caught the goon off guard, but once the initial shock was over, the real fight began as shi backhanded me hard enough to send me slamming against the wall. I crumpled to the floor on my hands and knees. The dryer's friends were now on their footpaws as well.

Ah crap, was all I could think. The dryer started towards me, making movements like shi was about to stomp on me. I had to mule-kick with both footpaws backwards, catching hir right in the shin. Even then, it only made hir stop from stomping as shi clapped a hand to hir leg.

"OW! Little punk!" shi snarled. I used the momentary distraction to jump back up, grab hir by the head, and slam my own skull right in the center of the dryer's forehead, which was twice the size of my own. Shi staggered back, clapping one hand to hir forehead with what probably felt like little more than getting nailed in the forehead with a fist-sized rock.

The move made me a bit dizzy myself, so I didn't have time to react as the dual-headed wolfskunk grabbed me around the chest and squeezed. Now it was my turn to snarl in pain from the pressure as it got harder to draw a full breath. My face screwed up in pain, I shot out both hands and cracked the wolfskunk's heads together. Shi put on more pressure, so I followed up by kicking hir in the solar plexus with steel-toed boots on. That got hir to drop me as shi doubled over. I had just enough time to give hir a one-two punch, one to the nose of hir right face, one to the eye of hir left, before the short wolfskunk smashed a bottle over my head with a blow that dropped me to the floor with colors exploding in my vision.

"So you think you're a fucking tough guy, do ya?" I could hear the voice of the Dryger say. My vision was clearing, but I was still dizzy as I felt myself get pulled by two pairs of hands to my footpaws and quite easily dragged face-down onto one of the pool tables.

"Think you're a big dick huh?" The dryger grunted, sounding like shi was getting hir cocksure attitude back. "Why don't I show you just what a big dick is!" My arms were pinned, outstretched. A cold feeling shot down my spine as I heard the sound of a belt unbuckle and a zipper get pulled down.

Oh SHIT! I thought. Damnit, I'm fucked now, or about to be! Gotta wait until shi's close enough, then kick hir in the nads, it's my only chance... I heard the door open and shut. At first I figured the bartender decided to slip out rather than watch the show. But then, I noticed a new set of footsteps, followed by a new voice.

"AHM!" this new voice said, "I don't think that doberman's enjoying himself, from the looks of things."

"Buzz off," I heard the reverse colored dryger say. "Mind your own business, GAAACK!" I never got a clear view of what happened, but from the shadows on the opposite wall, it looked like the dryger was picked up by someone single-handed, hir own trouser snake used to hog tie hir, and then, from the sounds, shi was punted like a football so hard shi smashed through the club door and (I later found out) flew all the way across the base courtyard and hit the wall head first.

My head started to clear a bit so I was able to look from right to left; the wolfskunks were staring with slack-jawed awe at seeing their crony go flying out the door with hir own appendage tied around hir like string on a roast. Then they glared at the newcomer.

"HEY! Just who the hell do you thi-OOOOooooohhhhhh SHIT...." The shorter wolfskunk said, hir eyes going wide once again as shi apparently realized who shi was talking to. I had a hunch myself.

"If I were you...," my erstwhile rescuer said, "I'd LET GO OF THAT DOBERMAN NOW!" I quickly found my arms released by the two goons, who looked about two seconds away from needing a fresh change of pants.

"You two screwups are lucky I've got pressing business," the as-of-yet unidentified person said. "Or I'd give you the same treatment as Happy Pants. Your court-martial and punishment will come later, now

GET OUT OF MY SIGHT!" The wolfskunks left smoking trails out the door. Slowly, I pushed myself up off the surface of the pool table and into a sitting position. I rubbed my eyes; I didn't know what hurt worse, the beating I took or the humiliation I felt at being emasculated in such a manner and then needing someone to save my ass, literally.

"Are you going to be alright?" my rescuer asked. I clenched my eyes shut, then slowly opened them. The lounge slid back into focus as I found myself facing a large wolfskunk. Shi stood roughly 12 feet high and was colored an off-white cream and a dark, rusty red. Shi had four arms, three very ample breasts, and three long, flowing tails folded up behind hir in a manner that made them look almost like one big tail. Hir hair had a short cut on top, with two bangs coming down around hir face. Hir features were a mix of both feline and canine; hir muzzle wasn't long enough to be wolf-like, yet also wasn't short enough to be cat-like. It was somewhere in the middle, almost like a hyena, but narrower. Hir ears, however, were decidedly canine, tall and with rounded points. Overall shi was well toned and in excellent shape, but shi wasn't a walking wall of flesh like some of the Canmephian's I'd seen. Shi appeared to be dressed in the traditional Canmephian military uniform, but over that shi was wearing a four-armed, synthetic leather, fur-lined bomber jacket with a hood, which shi had pulled back. The heavy black boots on hir digigrade footpaws also looked like they weren't normally worn with the uniform, but in the arctic conditions were necessary.

"Admiral Redwolf, I presume." I said, rubbing at the back of my neck, sitting in a slumped posture.

"That's me," shi said, unzipping hir jacket slightly. Shi undid a couple buttons on the top of hir uniform and rummaged around with one hand in hir cleavage, pulling out what looked like a medical bag. Shi began giving me a checkup, making sure I wasn't any more brain-damaged than I've always been.

"And you must be Mike Fang," Redwolf said, shining a light first in one of my eyes, then the other. I gave hir my customary half smirk as shi checked me over for any open wounds.

"Guilty as charged," I said. The drygerskunk (as I later found out shi was) pulled out some sort of electronic scanner that looked like a handheld video game unit to me and passed it over me like a 21st century airport guard using the wand on a traveler. Shi nodded at the readout, putting it up.

"Well Mr. Fang, your sentence is to tell me what the hell just happened here," shi said, stuffing hir bag back into hir cleavage and zipping hir coat back up.

"Oh, just a little...social discourse," I said, lowering myself off the pool table. The Admiral had two hands on hir hips and both eyebrows raised.

"Social discourse doesn't usually involve physical assault," shi said. I chuckled dryly.

"Well with me you never know," I said. The drygerskunk didn't return the laugh.

"Mr. Fang, please, what the hell's going on here? I arrive and the UN troops do everything besides throw loas around my neck and give me a fruit basket, while every Canmephian personnel act like a kid trying to keep hir mother from seeing hir messy room.

"Well I can tell you what I know, but probably best to hear it from the horse's mouth," I said, walking over to the bar and knocking on it; the 'tender slowly poked hir head up from hir hiding spot. Shi filled in Redwolf the same way shi had me, then I gave her an explanation of how my fight started. By the end of it, the Admiral was leaning on the bar, one hand over hir eyes, two more drumming their fingers on the bar, and the last one running its fingers through hir hair.

"Dear diety, it's Alpha Station 1 all over again," shi muttered. I couldn't help by raise an eyebrow; first I'd ever heard of any other Canmephian operation not running smoother than an oil-covered snake.

So what now? I thought as crossed my arms and leaned against one of the pool tables, forgetting once more that I couldn't count on keeping such thoughts to myself. Redwolf looked to the side.

"Now we need to go have a word with Capt. Whiteout and get hir explanation," shi said.

God damnit! I thought, clenching my eyes shut. *God damn fucking telepathic bullshit! Can't have a moment's privacy, not even in my own God damn mind! I swear I'm gonna start smashing heads in oh crap, you can hear this too, can't you?*

"Uhhhh yyyeaaahh....," Red said, looking both shocked and apprehensive. "Are you sure you're feeling alright? I did detect some blunt trauma to your head just erli....,"

"I'm fine," I said quickly. "I can take a hit." I started to mull something over, then quickly envisioned a quiet day on the beach instead before I got treated to another dose of telepathy.

"As you wish," The Admiral said, getting up from the bar. "Oh, and the whole telepathy thing, it's not deliberate, it's just that some thoughts are broadcast, if there's sufficient willpower behind them. It takes a little practice but it's not too hard to get some mental privacy."

"Gotcha," I said with a flat tone, falling into step behind the drygerskunk. Shi went straight for the administration office, personnel both Canmephian and UN snapping to attention as shi did. The secretary was very prompt this time as shi alerted Capt. Whiteout, who was very quick to admit the Admiral to hir office.

"Admiral," said Capt. Whiteout, "This is an honor!" I half-hooded my eyes and looked off to the side; apparently brown-nosing isn't just an Earth trait. Capt. Whiteout was a dryer taur with a charcoal gray furcolor and a sky-blue mohawk. Four breasts, slightly smaller than Redwolf's, were in two sets on hir upper torso. Shi also had four eyes and four arms. Shi came around hir desk to quickly shake Redwolf's hand, who received it dryly. The captain looked to the side, spotting me and acting surprised.

"Ah, and I see you brought that UN entourage that was mentioned!" Whiteout said. I felt myself bristling at the label I was given. Redwolf gave the taur a searching gaze.

"Oh I found him; found him being assaulted by three of your troops. Is this how you normally receive guests captain?" The captain looked astounded; I smelled bullshit coming.

"I wasn't even made aware he'd arrived on base," Whiteout said.

"Of course you weren't," I said, "You left standing orders not to be told until anyone but Admiral Redwolf showed up." The dryer taur steeped his fingers on two of his hands as Redwolf gave me a surprised look, then turned back to the captain.

"Ah, well, it seems there was a miscommunication," she said, but she was addressing the dryerskunk when she did, not me. "I told my personnel that notice of your arrival was top priority."

"And what about his?" The Admiral said, tossing his head at me. Whiteout gave me a cursory glance.

"I thought the priority level of the UN inspector's arrival was understood," she said smoothly. I pursed my lips and tried not to roll my eyes again, thinking the captain was very smooth; sure, my arrival priority level was understood; it was completely immaterial to them as long as I didn't break anything or go anywhere I wasn't supposed to. If either Redwolf or Whiteout picked up on that thought wave, they kept it to themselves.

"Well, if you're ready Admiral, I can give you a sit-rep on the communications issue," the captain said, stepping between Redwolf and myself and heading towards the door. Looking irked, the admiral cleared his throat.

"Captain, what about the troopers that assaulted Mr. Fang?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," Whiteout said, turning around. "Well....unfortunately Admiral, the conditions up here are very strenuous for the troops. Prolonged isolation, a harsh environment, limited connection to either the rest of the planet or off of it...I'm afraid sometimes cabin fever and SAD can make tempers flare. But rest assured, I'll have these troopers undergo psychological evaluation immediately." Redwolf nodded, as if at least partly satisfied. I couldn't help but give him a look that probably broadcast my feelings louder than my thoughts did.

What, that's IT? They try to make me ride one of their flagpoles and they get sent to a fucking SHRINK? I felt royally pissed.

"I imagine it's not what you'd like to happen," Redwolf's voice was suddenly in my HEAD. It was a bizarre feeling; not one I was entirely unfamiliar with, but never quite so intense before.

"But at this point all I have is hearsay that there's been any abuse of power going on and any misconduct before today," she continued. *"I'm not going to make a snap judgment and start doling out punishment left and right. You wouldn't think it right of me to start abusing MY authority, would you?"* Redwolf had a point, but I was too pissed and too jaded at the time to admit it. All I saw at the time was one person's word being taken over mine.

Whatever, it's your call. I thought.

The chair I climbed into was, like most Canmephian furniture, twice the size I needed, making it a bit of a challenge to get into. I was a dwarf among giants frequently twice my own size; rather a change of pace. In my own day, 6'3" was pretty tall for the average person, so I'd often find myself trying to make do

with things not big enough for me; clothing sizes, food portions, and the like. Now I was in the exact opposite situation as I sat in a padded chair in the admin building's conference room, my legs dangling over the edge of the chair like a kid.

Redwolf and I sat on opposite sides of the conference room table, a ceiling mounted projector throwing ghostly images of digital readouts on the wall. Capt. Whiteout sat on his haunches at the head of the table, clicking through the slides as she narrated the slideshow like some nature show host.

"About eight months ago, the current Satellite Station 4's personnel took up their post there after the old crew was rotated out," the captain said, narrating a slide with a list of some thirty or so names. It switched to an air shot of the station, a smaller one than the main base with no outside wall, a large main research lab, a living quarters building and a vehicle storage shed.

"The station's outfitted for military research on detection technology and for archeological and mining exploration," the captain continued. "It was about five months ago that we received the last transmission from the base."

"What was the...," both Redwolf and I started at the same time. I looked at him and smirked.

"Sorry," I said, "it's your show."

"What was the last transmission you'd received from them?" said the Admiral.

"It was a report on some scouting team's find in the ice," the captain said. "It was hard to make out at the time, possibly frozen remains of some creature from Sol-3 prehistoric times."

"Another defrost," I chuckled, "how nice, I'll have someone here I can relate to." Redwolf also gave a light snerk of amusement. Whiteout ignored me and continued with his slideshow. This one was of a GPS map showing the location of the base and its surrounding outposts; the one marked no. 4 was circled in red.

"Satellite Station 4 is our furthest outpost. It's approximately 1,000 miles away. At this distance communication is difficult except during clear weather, so we mostly reserve it for emergencies and monthly status reports."

"Monthly," Redwolf said, an eyebrow raised as she turned his head to look at Whiteout. "You didn't think it strange when they missed five reports?"

"As I said Admiral," the captain replied, "communication's difficult except during clear weather."

"So why not send a recon unit out there," Redwolf said, sounding more and more incredulous.

"I'm afraid we've been a bit too busy with work of our own," Whiteout replied, the faintest hint of testiness entering his voice. "And I believe that is what you were asked to come out here and do Admiral."

"But why ask...," Redwolf started, but I had a feeling I knew what she was about to ask.

“Because it’s gone public somehow,” I said. “Word’s gotten out a bunch of Canmephian and Sol-3 personnel have been cut off and now the world’s concerned, so they need a publicly visible response.” I looked over my shoulder; Whiteout looked visibly shocked I’d managed to put that much together. Redwolf gave the captain a demanding look.

“Well captain, is this true?” Shi asked. This time, Whiteout actually gave me a look besides indifference; now shi looked like shi wanted me off hir base, preferably by shooting me out of a cannon.

“As...he said, Admiral,” Whiteout said with a grudging tone, “Somehow the communication’s break has become common knowledge...at least to the local authority on this planet. As such, they requested, and I quote “a noticeable response.” Apparently they want to use this incident to show the firm cementing of cooperation between Canmephian and Sol-3 operations and relations.”

Monkeys for the media, I thought with a muffle snort.

“I don’t mind a promotional stunt so much as the fact nobody explained to me the matter was so...,” I heard Redwolf’s voice say in my head.

Trivial? I thought.

“Eh, routine,” Shi projected to me. I had to chuckle a bit again; sometimes a mild dose of cynicism can help you see the ironically funny side of things. You just don’t want to overdose on it, or you become a bitter crank.

The Canmephian shuttle the admiral had come in was nicely spacious; for me, that is. It was a simple, almost van-shaped. I’d noticed most of their architecture and designs were for function rather than fashion. I mulled this over as I sat at the desk in the guest quarters, updating my notes on the situation. I tried not to think of how the UN was going to react when they found out I’d gotten into a brawl; even if it wasn’t my fault, the fact I participated at all wasn’t going to help either my situation or interplanetary relations.

There was a knock at my door as I finished up the last of my notes. “It’s open,” I said. The door swung open and I was a little surprised to see Redwolf step through an Earth-sized doorway with some head clearance.

“Weren’t you about twice that size a minute ago,” I said incredulously. The drygerskunk chuckled.

“I guess no one told you; I’m a liquid polymorph,” shi said.

“You can change shape?” I asked. I couldn’t help starting a bit in my chair as I watched Redwolf’s body become glossy, like shiny rubber. Shi rippled like water when a stone’s dropped in it, and suddenly a third eye appeared in hir forehead. Two bumps on either side of hir shoulders rose up and became two additional heads, while a snap-buttoned flap on the back of hir fatigues came open as hir body extended outwards from behind, allowing to grow into a six-legged taur. Then, just as easily as shi’d done it, the

performance reversed itself and shi shrank back to hir more conservative, one-headed, four-armed, two-legged, two-eyed, three-breasted form.

"I've heard of being flexible, but damn," I said with a smirk. Redwolf snerked, leaning against the doorway with two arms crossed, one on hir hip, the other re-buttoning the back flap of hir fatigues.

"The shuttle's prepped and ready. You all set?" I nodded, tossing my camera around my neck and pocketing my notepad. I followed the admiral out to the elevator, punching the lobby button as the old lift rumbled and shuddered to life like an old pack animal stirring from its sleep. Redwolf pursed hir lips a bit and looked up at the elevator's ceiling.

"This barracks could use an upgrade," shi said. I snorted a bit.

"No kidding," I muttered, kicking at a loose tile on the elevator floor. Red turned to me with hir head cocked to one side.

"You don't approve of the conditions here, I take it," shi said. I turned and gave the admiral a frank expression.

"Put it to you this way," I said. "You know about the history of American race segregation, how white humans and certain anthro species lived and worked in comfortable conditions while black humans and other species had to make do with cheap, sub-standard buildings and equipment?" Redwolf's face showed comprehension as shi nodded as the elevator chimed and came to a shuddering halt.

"Yeah," I said, "too many similarities here."

"You know the Sol-3 personnel here are responsible for their own upkeep of their own facilities," the admiral said as we stepped out of the elevator. I nodded to the desk clerk, who nodded back, as I went to the front door and held it open.

"I suspected as much," I said with chagrin in my voice. "Which makes it all the more embarrassing." Red immediately expanded hirself back to hir normal size as soon as shi was outdoors, stretching and twisting at the torso. In fact, she twisted around 180 degrees to face me.

"What do you mean?" Shi said. I started to answer, but thought better of it; I had to work with the admiral and risking getting into a major argument with hir wouldn't make that easier.

"Eh, I'll explain later," I said, climbing up the steps into the shuttle. The admiral swept in behind me, carefully draping hir tails over the back of the seat and folding them up in the space between the back of hir seat and the wall. The drygerskunk flipped several switches and adjusted tapped the sleek control panel in front of hir.

"Base tower this is Jump Shuttle 34, requesting clearance for takeoff," shi said. A high-def-quality radio broadcast came over the shuttle's intercom.

“Rodger that Admiral. Be on the lookout; we’ve got indications of a heavy snowstorm coming our way sometime late today.”

“Not to worry tower,” Redwolf said as the engines hummed to life, “I don’t expect we’ll be gone that long.” The ship slowly and smoothly lifted from the ground at an angle, doing a mid-air pirouette to turn in the right direction. We picked up speed fast, but I didn’t feel the usual lurch in my stomach that I do when traveling by air. There wasn’t much scenery to watch, so I decided to pass the time by beginning the audio portion of my notes, and dug my pocket recorder out.

“This is the audio log of Mike Fang,” I said, leaning back a bit in my seat. “I’m creating this log as an additional means of recording this investigation and its findings. I’ve been contracted by Representative Donalson of the United Nations to look into a communication break in Antarctica between a joint Earth/Canmephian science and military outpost and one of the outposts satellite stations.”

“You don’t have to do that,” said Redwolf. I turned and gave him a raised eyebrow.

“Hmm?” I said. Redwolf tapped his head.

“I have an internal computer up here that has recording features.” I clenched my teeth a bit, but did everything I could to avoid thinking with too much emotion, lest Redwolf pick up on my anger again.

“Consider it a redundant backup,” I said, and continued to log the investigation thus far. We were about three quarters there by the time I’d finished. The dull gray sky practically melted together with the ground, making the horizon difficult to spot. But soon, a small, indistinct shape appeared ahead of us, right angles cutting through the blur of snow and clouds. I took my camera from around my neck and used the zoom. The station was dead ahead.

“Satellite Station 4, this is Jump Shuttle 34, Admiral Redwolf, requesting permission to land,” Redwolf said, tapping an overhead console. Silence answered him. I couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow.

“They’re having com problems, remember?” I said. Redwolf frowned and tapped the console a few more times.

“Yes, but that’s their long-range radios...their short waves should still be functioning; every satellite station’s has a primary short wave and two backups....Satellite Station 4, this is Admiral Redwolf, do you copy?” Dead air was all we got. I began to get a queer feeling, but it passed quickly. After all, there were several possibilities why all their radios could be out; a power surge maybe, or damage to an antennae.

“Before we land,” I said, adjusting the zoom on my camera, “take us around the base, could you? I want to get some shots.” Redwolf nodded, tapping the controls. The base was coming up quickly, but we slowed in our approach, the engines’ hum becoming deeper as the shuttle slowed to a crawl. I snapped a picture, then looked over the top of the camera, a feeling of suspicion in the back of my head.

“Something’s not right here,” I said.

The base looked deserted.

For a minute Redwolf and I stayed hovering just over the station's front gate, looking out the windshield at the utter stillness in front of us. At the main base, there had been people moving around, attending to duties like vehicle maintenance, security patrols and the like. There wasn't much movement, but there had been enough to be noticed when I'd landed. But Sattelite Station 4 looked...dead. The main gate was wide open; none of the snow blowing through appeared to be hitting an energy field. Using my camera, I zoomed in and took snapshots of each building. Large drifts of snow were piled up against them, even in front of the doors, save for the research building.

"Where the hell is...," Redwolf started, then tapped the radio console again. "Sattelite Station 4 this is Admiral Redwolf, where the hell is everybody?" The persistent quiet was starting to make both the drygerskunk and myself a bit edgy. I figured the thrum of the motors would have brought out at least one curious onlooker.

"Let's circle the camp...," Redwolf said. The shuttle made a slow, winding arc around the station, like a cautious animal circling some strange thing it's never seen before. I continued to take photos of the base from various angles. As I zoomed in on the barracks, I noticed something.

"The front windows on the barracks are broken," I said. "I can see snow piled up inside; nobody's bothered to try and fix it."

"You're kidding me," Redwolf said. Shi reached in between the buttons of hir uniform front and pulled a pair of binoculars out, focusing on the barracks.

"This is starting to weird me out," shi muttered. "I don't see any fresh tracks in the snow outside either."

"Well, I've got my pictures," I said, jotting a few quick notes. "Guess we're gonna have to take the plunge." Redwolf nodded. The shuttle slowly began a descent under her command, snow billowing up from the thrusters as it settled. For some reason I got a feeling like the disturbance we caused landing was noticed, but I wasn't sure who could have noticed it...or what.

The air hit us with an expected chill blast as the door came open. Redwolf stepped out, a grim look on hir face and a pistol gripped in one hand. I'd thought it a little premature to start pulling guns just yet, until I was outside the shuttle myself and felt like I'd walked into a nest of spiders I couldn't see. I reached under my coat and un-clipped the strap holding my revolver in its holster. The base was utterly still, save for the wind blowing through it, making it feel like a frozen old west ghost town. It was the kind of place where something felt decidedly not right; it brought out memories of when I was younger, of hearing a noise in the middle of the night and laying there in the dark, breath held, waiting to see if I heard it again.

"So," I said, clearing my throat in an effort to shake off the creeping unease, "where should we start?" Redwolf nodded towards the barracks. We both scanned the front of the building, taking in the broken windows, the piled-up snow in them and the apparent lack of activity. The drygerskunk used hir tails to scoop away the large drift of snow in front of the door, revealing it's buried access button. I stood to one

side of the door, Redwolf on the other, as I pushed the button. The door ground its gears noisily, then slowly, jerkily, it receded into the wall. Redwolf and I exchanged glances.

“Must be ice buildup,” I said, then looked inside. The barracks showed serious signs of neglect. Snow covered the floor, deepest at the windows then slowly going back towards the far wall. The building was single story, filled with bunk beds like a boot camp, with a few footlockers and televisions. The bartender had been right; bare essentials were all anyone sent to the station got. But these few affects were now damaged and frozen by the Antarctic cold and frost.

Redwolf turned and looked at the other buildings. “Nobody here,” shi said, “let’s check the others.” I nodded, looking down in the snow as we headed towards the center of the station.

“Looks like the freshest tracks are towards the main research building,” I said, pointing to the paw prints in the snow. The ones with the least snow covering them led to the largest building in the station, the one with the least snow in front of it. We were crossing the yard when we heard a very faint clattering sound coming from the vehicle shed. The admiral spun on hir heel and leveled hir pistols at the building. Even I reflexively gripped my revolver under my coat. A wordless look passed between me and the drygerskunk, then we changed our course to investigate the shed.

The vehicle shed was a long, low building with four vehicle bay doors. The noise we heard came from just inside a Canmephian-sized entrance just to one side, which turned out to lead into an office, probably used by the officer in charge of the motor pool. The door, like the one at the barracks, was jammed up with ice, but with a bit of shoving we managed to get it open. Inside, everything looked in place, but untouched for some time, judging from the layer of dust that covered the desk on the far side of the small room. Another door to the side slid open easier, leading to the vehicle bays.

“This is bad,” Redwolf said. I didn’t disagree. The vehicles were in pieces. Hoods were up on all four of the tank-like troop carriers, outfitted with treads to move through the snow. Parts from all of them lay strewn about on the floor, the most delicate ones apparently thrown down hard enough to smash them.

“This is definitely sabotage,” I muttered. Leaning against the doorway, I bit at my lip and looked from side to side.

“Croatoan,” I muttered. Redwolf turned to me.

“What’s that?” shi asked. I took off my fedora and ran a hand over my head, scratching at the back of my neck.

“In the early settlement days of America, there was a colony established in the state of North Carolina. One day, when the governor of the colony returned on a ship from England, they found the colony abandoned, all the settlers vanished. There was no sign of where they went or what happened to them. The only thing they found was one word carved on a tree; Croatoan. It was the name of an island, but

when the governor and his men went to investigate, they didn't find anything. As far as I know, to this day nobody's yet figured out what happened to the lost colony."

Redwolf was about to say something when we heard a creak on the far side of the building. Our attention immediately snapped in that direction, the drygerskunk again taking the lead as shi stepped around the nearest vehicle and slowly but steadily went further into the garage. The place was dimly lit by skylights that let in rays of daylight from outside, but left huge areas of shadows throughout the mechanic's bays. On the far side, a window was left unlatched and swinging open.

"Think it's been open all this time," Red asked. I shook my head.

"No," I said, "if it was we'd see snow piled up in here. Someone opened it just now."

Red threw the window open and stuck his head out. The wind blew tendrils of snowy vapor in around his shoulders.

"There's tracks out here," shi said, "fresh ones. They're going towards the research building." With acrobatic ease, the drygerskunk squeezed himself through the window and did a little flip onto his footpaws. I followed, but with slightly less grace, sitting on the edge of the window and dropping out the other side. Even then I managed to get my coat caught up on the edge and had to turn and un-snag it. Once freed, I jogged across the wind-swept yard of the station to meet Red next to the door of the research building. The fresh tracks were laid in the snow over the tops of old ones. That feeling of creeping unease washed over me again, refreshed by the knowledge that there was someone at the station other than the admiral and myself; someone trying to remain hidden. I drew my revolver as Red pushed the door button. This time there was none of the grinding we'd encountered before; the door had seen enough recent use to keep the ice from building up.

The interior of the science building was dark. The front hallway led down a central corridor that had, from what I could see in the gloom, doors lining it on either side. I dug around under my coat and fished out my heavy-duty flashlight, panning the light slowly around. It was then that I was not only treated to a bizarre sight, but the revolting stench of mold, decay and waste. It was only the continuing sense of apprehension that kept me from letting out a loud grunt of disgust. Instead, I just turned my head away and put my nose in the crook of my arm. Red, whose sense of smell I later found out was rather more sensitive than my own, turned quickly away from the door, fanning fresh air to his face and muffled several coughs with a free hand.

We both looked back into the building with disgust. Littering the floor were empty food cans, wrappers, drink cans and bottles tossed carelessly all over the place. Mixed in with the containers were half-eaten pieces of food as well, discarded haphazardly and left to rot. But most shocking of all, as Redwolf and I took our first tentative steps into the building, handkerchiefs now placed over our faces to block out the rancid smell, was our next discovery.

"What the hell...," I whispered. Among the trash and moldy food was....crap. Literally. Stale mounds of bodily waste were all over the hallway. Red lowered hir cloth momentarily and took a very light sniff of the air, then covered hir nose again.

"Ugh, that's not all," shi said quietly, "I think I can smell urine."

"Whoever's here must be either sick or lost their mind," I said. "They're behaving like animals." I pulled out my notebook and scribbled a record of what we'd found so far; damaged buildings that showed signs of not being repaired in a long time, sabotaged vehicles, missing personnel and waste of all kinds dumped without care. The drygerskunk and I slowly crept down the corridor; every time we disturbed the piles of trash, it sent up fresh wiffs of that moldy stench, some of which almost made me gag.

But the sights to come were what almost made me faint.

We'd been slowly making our way down the hallway, guns at ready, carefully checking each room. Most were small labs of various kinds, machine shops being the primary ones, with a few offices for the higher-ranking personnel. Down at the end of the hallway was a pair of large double doors labeled "Biology Lab". Having seen nothing too out-of-the ordinary in the other labs yet, I wasn't fully prepared for what awaited us at the end of that foul-smelling gauntlet as Redwolf pressed the door button.

"Oh my God," I gasped under my breath, swallowing hard. Redwolf remained silent, but hir expression was one of disgust and apprehension. I'm no stranger to death or corpses. Neither does surgery or medical procedures give me any trouble...but there was something decidedly wrong about the four bodies we saw on operating tables in the lab, each one illuminated under a fluorescent light that still left much of the lab soaked in gloom.

The bodies we saw were of both earth personnel and Canmephian. Each one was strapped firmly to its table. Blood-stained medical equipment lay on trays next to each body. All of them were in some form of dismemberment, cut open to some degree with organs or limbs removed. The worst part of all was their faces, or what was left of them since some had eyes, ears, noses or patches of skin missing. On each one was a mask of pain; there was no doubt in my mind those poor souls had been operated on while still alive, no anesthetic given to them.

"These people weren't operated on," I said, drawing closer to one of them. "They were..."

"...dissected," both Redwolf and I said simultaneously. With my jaw firmly clenched, I slowly brought out my camera and took pictures of the morbid spectacle in front of us. Redwolf slowly examined the nearby cabinets, picking up a crystal sitting on top of one of them.

"Let's see what's on here," shi said. Before I could ask what shi meant, she dug a device out of hir pocket and plugged the crystal into a hole in it. I realized the crystal must have been a Canmephian form of data storage, as the small screen on the handheld device flashed to life. The admiral frowned at the screen, tapping it with hir thumb.

"It looks like a recording of medical data on both Canmephian and Sol-3 fur anatomy," shi said. "But I can't be sure...it's in some kind of language I can't read."

At this I blinked. "Wait," I said, "Does it use Canmephian writing characters?"

"No, I've never seen text like this," Redwolf said. The implication's struck me immediately.

"That means whoever wrote it must have found a way to program your technology to write in their own language," I muttered. The drygerskunk blinked, then seemed to get what I was getting on.

"Wait a minute," shi said, "are you suggesting creatures from another world did this? That's....," shi stopped as I gave hir a look.

"...not outside the realm of possibility," shi finished. I would have smirked if I wasn't trying to maintain a death grip on my nerves. I snapped one final picture, this time with a flash. That must have been what startled the lurker crouched in the shadow next to the cabinet just behind Redwolf. There was a sudden scuffle of footpaws, a rattle as an empty metal tray hit the floor, and suddenly some hunched-over figure bolted out a side door of the room just behind the drygerskunk. Red and I both whirled on the departing figure, the admiral with hir gun aimed. Shi threw the door open and took off with me on hir heels down a dimly lit side corridor littered with the same refuse we saw out front. Shi stopped short of the intersection at the end of the hallway. I gave hir a curious glance and shi pointed down at the floor; the garbage in front one door had been recently stepped on.

I watched the corridor in case of a trap. Redwolf, back to the wall and with pistol at port arms, tapped the entry button. The door slid silently open to reveal a locker room with Canmephian-sized lockers. The room seemed free of refuse and largely unused, like the vehicle pool officer's office. A fluorescent light light up a large square in the center of the room. The drygerskunk slowly steps into the room, hir eyes scanning the banks of metal doors facing hir. I stepped in after hir, not liking the situation; the lockers offered numerous hiding places to spring an ambush from.

I have to agree, Redwolf's voice said in my mind. I jolted a bit, suddenly remembering hir telepathic ability. I still didn't like the invasive feeling of it, but I was still glad to have a way of conveying my thoughts to hir without giving ourselves away.

Any ideas on how to check them? I thought, trusting Redwolf was monitoring my mind for responses.

Actually yes. Get down on the floor, shi "said". I didn't argue and laid prone on the cold tiles. Redwolf also slid to the floor in a very fluid motion. I watched as all four of hir arms stretched and slid across the floor, stretching out of their sleeves like snakes shedding their skin. Each of hir arms slid in front of the doors, then I watched in amazement as shi grew an additional hand for every locker door like branches budding off tree limbs. All at once, each hand slapped the front of each locker door with a firm rap.

From one of the doors on the right came a frightened gasp, then suddenly there was a burst of panicked gunfire. The rapid but light chatter of a sub-machine gun came out of the locker as bullet holes suddenly pock-marked the door. Red jerked all hir hands and arms back into hir sleeves like a rubber band

releasing, melding the extra appendages until shi had hir customary four again. The gunfire continued for about five seconds, then came a small, impotent clicking. The admiral and I jumped to our footpaws and threw open the locker door before the shooter could finish changing magazines. Redwolf reached in and pulled out a coyote dressed in arctic earth fatigues, screaming at the top of his lungs and thrashing like a fish on a hook.

“AAAAGH! GET OFF ME, YOU MOTHERFUCKERS YOU WONT GET ME YOU FUCKING BASTARDS
AAAAAARRRRGH!”

“Hey hey hey!” I said, trying to get the soldier to calm down. “Take it easy, we’re not gonna hurt you!”

“At ease private, he’s telling you the truth,” Redwolf said, trying to hold the soldier at arms’s length as he now made repeated attempts to kick hir. When the coyote started trying to bite hir wrists the drygerskunk darted a third hand out and grabbed him by the muzzle.

“Stand down private!” Redwolf said with a tone of authority. “If you keep this up I’ll have to knock you out.” The coyote stopped thrashing, his chest heaving as he breathed heavily through his nose, snorting and gasping. He had the look of a cornered animal, bug-eyed and wound up tighter than pocketwatch.

He’s crazy as a shithouse rat, I thought.

He’s scared out of his mind, that’s for sure, Redwolf responded. Slowly, shi lowered the soldier to the floor and let go, though not before shi first disarmed him. The soldier slowly backed away from us, his gaze jerking between Redwolf, myself and the door. He minced slowly backward until he was in a corner. Getting information out of him was going to be tough, so I decided to try and appeal to his deep-seated military training.

“Name, rank and unit soldier,” I said, trying to sound like I wasn’t on the verge of panic myself; it wasn’t an easy task. The coyote continued to cringe, but managed a lucid answer.

“Private John Fieldman, 22nd infantry,” he said.

“Private, I’m Admiral Redwolf of the CMAS,” the drygerskunk said. “This is Mike Fang, private investigator hired by the United Nations. I want a sit-rep on the station.”

“Sit-rep?” the private said, a pathetic, hopeless laugh welling up in his throat. “Sit-rep? Sit-rep?” He kept repeating the question, slowly sinking down on his haunches to the floor.

“We’re fucked, we’re fucked, we’re fucked, we’re fucked, we’re fucking fubar like you’ve never seen,” he babbled, his head between his knees, fists balled up on top of his head. Redwolf and I exchanged a glance, both of us sharing the exact same thought.

Not a good sign.

Redwolf knelt down in front of the coyote and put two hands on his shoulders. With a third hand shi tilted his face up to look into hers.

"Private, I know you're scared but we need to know what happened here. Where's the rest of the personnel? Did they abandon the base? Were you attacked?" The coyote whined a bit, but seemed to regain a very faint glimmer of sanity.

"Not attacked, not outright. Knew we should've never brought that damned thing back. Never should have let it in. After they started poking at it....the experiments....kept calling for...volunteers." It didn't take me long to figure out what experiments he was talking about, given what I'd seen in the lab we just left.

"You mean those people back in the lab VOLUNTEERED to be dissected?!" I said. The private's eyes darted to me.

"No, no, nobody knew what the experiments were...until it was too late....," the coyote stammered. "Damn them, damn fucking scientists..."

"Private," Redwolf again turned the private's face to meet his, "you said something was brought to this station. What was it?"

"Some...some strange...thing...they found it at an archeological dig...Dr. Ulysses, he and his crew found it...carted it back here, poked at it, took it down to storage...then..." the private glanced to one side, just over Redwolf's shoulder. The life seemed to drain from his face. Both Redwolf and I knew what that meant. Experience and intuition told me the time to act was coming fast. I slid my revolver from its holster and thumbed back the hammer. Red drew one of his pistols. We both looked behind us.

Standing in the doorway was a large figure; It appeared to be Canmephian, a dryger with feline features. The figure was fairly slim with four breasts; a "nurse" class, as they're known. In the dim light, further features were difficult to make out.

"Name, rank and unit," I said, keeping my revolver out of sight. The figure didn't reply. I repeated myself, and still nothing.

"Identify yourself officer," the admiral said, his tone hard. Suddenly the figure crouched and flung itself into the room, tackling the admiral and slamming him up against the lockers, knocking me to one side in the process. Redwolf put his arms up defensively as the figure attacked him, crossing them over his torso. Shi snarled and shoved his attacker away quickly, leveling his pistol at the dryger as shi stumbled backward a few steps before regaining his balance. Now in brighter light, the figure made me screw up my face in both disgust and shock.

The dryger was dressed in the standard Canmephian uniform. But that uniform, along with the rest of him, was disheveled and filthy. Stains of various kinds marred both his clothing and his fur. I'd been too on-edge to notice before, but now I realized the dryger reeked just as bad as the garbage-strewn halls did. As I looked at his face, I saw the dryger's eyes were jet black, like two polished marbles.

"Hands up!" Redwolf snarled loudly at the dryer. The dryer paused for one moment, then took a step towards the admiral. Shi pulled the trigger, a loud report echoing around the room. Shi hit the dryer squarely in the shoulder, sending the mangy-looking figure off balance again. But it kept coming!

"Stand down NOW!" Redwolf roared at the dryer. An expression utterly devoid of emotion was pasted on the dryer's face. Shi once again marched directly at the admiral, who shot again, this time going for the hip. It struck, but this time the dryer pushed on against the blow, an arm reaching for the admiral's throat. Redwolf took a step back, but before shi pulled his trigger again, I pulled mine, twice. Two .357 shock hollow points found their marks in the dryer's torso, sending him stumbling to one side to drop to the floor, arm outstretched even as shi went down.

For a second, Redwolf and I just stared at the figure laying in a growing bloodstain on the locker room floor. Then the dryerskunk knelt down next to the body and rolled it over on its back. I kept my revolver trained on it the whole time, glancing out the open door periodically.

"Who is...was that?" I said, teeth clenched; I was amped up. Somewhere in the back of my mind was an alarm screaming that the dryer couldn't have been the only dangerous person in this base and our little scuffle was going to bring the rest of them down on us. Redwolf pulled a set of dogtags off the dryer's neck.

"Ensign Deedra Gomez," shi said. Redwolf put the dogtags in his pocket with one hand while putting another over his nose. "Erugh! I don't think shi's bathed or changed his clothes for weeks, maybe even months."

"And did you see his eyes?" I asked. "I wasn't sure if that was drugs or a disease or something."

"Shi didn't seem to register the pain of those gun shots either," the admiral mused, standing up. "Diety, this better not be some 'zombie outbreak' situation."

"I don't think so," I said, now focusing my attention on the door. "Zombies don't hesitate when you point a gun at them. The ensign paused just before shi charged you a second time. Guess shi figured the risk of getting shot was worth...whatever shi had planned." The admiral looked at me and cocked an eyebrow.

"Know a bit about zombie situations eh?" shi said with a slightly amused snort. I gave him a modest shrug.

"I've seen a few movies, played a few video games..." I said.

"Never was my thing," shi said. "How's the private?" I wondered who Redwolf was talking about when I suddenly remembered our erstwhile basket case. I turned and looked at the now prone coyote laying on the floor, staring vacantly up at the ceiling. I crouched next to him and took his pulse.

"He's still alive," I said, passing a hand over his eyes, then snapping my fingers in front of him. "But he's checked out; catatonic."

“Shit,” Redwolf grunted. Shi stretched out an arm, wrapping it like a python around the coyote and lifting him up. Shi turned to look at the corpse on the floor, then wrapped two arms around it as well.

“What do you want with that,” I asked. Redwolf rested both his passengers on his shoulders.

“We need to study it to figure out what’s going on,” Shi said, leading the way out of the room.

“St...,” I started, then nodded as I realized what Shi meant. “Going to take it back to the main base then?” I said, following Redwolf back to the lab. I got a fresh shiver down my back as I looked at the mutilated bodies again.

“Nope,” Redwolf said, setting the unconscious private down against a cabinet. Shi went over to an empty examination table and laid the corpse on it. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with here; wait too long and we may lose something.” I made a guttural noise in my throat that was partly a hum of understanding, but also slight apprehension. Nevertheless, I followed the drygerskunk’s example as Shi put on a surgical mask and two pairs of gloves she took from a box next to the table. Shi stretched out his arms to go through several cabinet drawers and assembled a tray of instruments. While Shi did, I set my recorder up on the tray as well. My hand shook slightly, my nerves still not entirely calm as I pulled the cap off my pen and flipped open my notebook.

“Audio log, Mike Fang, update. The time is...4:32p.m. Admiral Redwolf and I have partially searched the satellite station. At first we thought it had been deserted, as signs showed a lack of activity, such as broken windows, snow piled up in buildings, and signs of general neglect. However, we’ve discovered something has happened to the station personnel. One of the Canmephian personnel, and Ensign Deedra Gomez, attacked us. We were forced to kill him. The Ensign displayed unusual behavior; Shi was dirty and showed no signs of pain when Shi was shot. The main research building, where we encountered him, is filled with both garbage and bodily waste, apparently accumulated over a long period.”

A slight moan from the coyote caught my attention. Redwolf also looked over at him, but when the private didn’t wake up completely, we both resumed our work.

“We also found a Private John Fieldman of the Earth U.N. force. Private Fieldman appears to have undergone extreme mental and emotional stress and is only partly coherent. During a more lucid moment, he said a discovery was made at an archeological dig by a Dr. Ulysses. From his other statements, the dig team brought back their finding to the station, which was when whatever....event caused the chaos we’ve found occurred.”

Redwolf cracked all four sets of knuckles, picking up a scalpel. I nodded to him.

“Admiral Redwolf has decided to conduct an autopsy on the body of Ensign Gomez. We’ll document the autopsy on this log.” I readied my camera, taking a few photos from several angles of the ensign’s body. Redwolf took a pair of scissors and cut away the ensign’s uniform. As I looked over his naked breasts, I couldn’t help but start to feel somewhat aroused. I quickly shook it off though by reminding

myself I was looking at a dead body. The gunshot wounds also helped toss proverbial cold water on my testosterone.

"Making the primary incision now...," the drygerskunk said. The scalpel blade glided like a shark's fin from the base of the dryer's neck down to the base of his torso. Redwolf rolled back the skin and tissue to reveal the dryer's rib cage and abdominal cavity. Blood welled at a few points, which Redwolf vacuumed up with a small portable suction device.

"Subject's physiology seems normal," said Redwolf, taking a pair of forceps and carefully probing. "Damage done from bullet wounds apparent cause of death...slugs lodged in both lungs and heart..." The drygerskunk picked up a mechanical bone saw. A high-pitched whine came from the tool that deepened as it was placed against the corpse's sternum. The sound brought back memories for me of home improvement projects with my dad. I tried to focus on those more pleasant memories to distract myself from the sight of the dryer's rib cage getting sawed open, then cranked apart with a crank-operated rib spreader. Two of the ribs snapped in the process, weakened by the bullets that had apparently deflected off them. Redwolf picked up a fresh scalpel, then carefully removed each of the internal organs, setting them in trays on a trolley she pulled up next to him. The heart and lungs came out in pieces, making me wince slightly behind my mask.

"Organs show no apparent signs of discoloration or damage, apart from ballistic trauma," Redwolf said, setting the organs aside. "Now let's take a look at the stomach contents..." I snapped some pictures of the autopsy so far, then turned my head away as Redwolf made a cut in the dryer's digestive organ. The unpleasant smell of partially digested food came from it. I slowly turned my head back as I grew accustomed to the odor.

"I don't see anything unusual," I said. "But then again I'm no expert."

"No, you're right," Redwolf said, carefully clamping off the ends of the stomach and removing it from the body. She turned it over a strainer above a basin set at the end of the operating table, emptying the contents of the organ through it. "All the contents are perfectly normal; it appears she was surviving on a diet of canned food products; soups, vegetables, processed meat." The drygerskunk pulled out the same scanning device she'd used on me, then slowly started scanning the removed organs and the body.

"Why not just use that earlier?" I asked.

"This dryer's so filthy, the scanner would have serious trouble picking up internal readings for all the various substances smeared on his outside," she said, rubbing his chin as she looked at the scanner's screen. "Hmmm....scan shows extremely minute traces of an unidentified foreign substance in the lungs, heart, stomach and blood vessels...but only the ones leading from those organs to the heart...and the brain." We both looked at the dryer's lifeless head. Redwolf picked up another scalpel and started a new incision. I took a few more photos, wincing as the admiral peeled back the corpse's scalp, revealing the blood-tinged skull underneath. She changed out the bone saw's blade, then began slowly tracing a circular path around the top of the dryer's head. There was a wet sucking noise as Redwolf used two instruments to carefully pull the top of the skull away, revealing the dryer's brain.

My eyes went wide. "What the hell...?" I said.

The dryer's brain looked like it was covered with some kind of dark, transparent plasma. Veins of some kind of darker substance wove through the plasma like a spider's web, appearing to hook into the center of the ensign's nervous system at certain points. Redwolf looked at the contents of the dryer's skull with as much surprise as my own.

"I take it from your expression," I said, getting a subconscious feeling of unease at the sight, "that's not normal for dryers."

"Not hardly," muttered Redwolf. "There's some kind of foreign substance encasing the brain. It looks like some kind of gelatin with a denser substance interweaving inside it, directly contacting the brain at points. I seriously doubt this could have been caused by any known drug or chemical...I think it's some kind of diseased growth." The dryerskunk stretched out an arm and took an empty test tube out of a cabinet. Shi carefully scraped a sample of the plasma into it and sealed the tube, setting it to one side. Shi also took some various tissue and hair samples while I finished photo documenting the autopsy results. The admiral took a syringe with a long needle on the end and carefully pierced the gelatin, apparently planning to get a sample of brain tissue.

That was when the slimy growth attacked hir.

The dryerskunk let out a yelp of surprise when the dark, web-like substance in the gelatin suddenly started climbing up the sides of the probing syringe. Shi dropped the needle just before the black strands reached hir hands. We both watched in shock and fear as the growth began spreading out of the bowl of the corpse's cut-open skull, creeping quickly over the face and waving tendrils towards the both of us. My first reaction was to go for my gun again, but I knew that probably wouldn't do anything useful. Looking around in desperation, I saw a bottle on a nearby table with a bright yellow warning label that read "Danger: Corrosive." I grabbed the bottle, yanked the top off and dumped it quickly on the dead dryer's skull. A hissing noise, followed by a sharp, acidic odor came from it as both the growth and the corpse's skin started to dissolve. Both Redwolf and I recoiled from the smell and sound, then slowly looked at each other.

"We have to find out more about this stuff," Redwolf said. I nodded.

"The private mentioned a Dr. Ulysses and an archeological dig," I said, tossing a glance at the still-unconscious coyote. "Maybe we can find something in his office."

"Right," the dryerskunk hefted the coyote onto hir shoulder again. "Offices were back down the front corridor."

The sights and smells hadn't improved as the admiral and I went back out into the garbage-strewn hallway we'd come in through. The first thing I noticed was the corridor seemed darker than before. At first I thought night had fallen, but Redwolf, hir eyes lighting up with some kind of bioluminescence, stopped after two steps into the hall.

“Shit,” shi hissed, “we’re blocked in!”

I reached under my trenchcoat and yanked out my Mag-lite. The circle of light it threw out landed on a several large metal cabinets stacked in front of the door. I felt something inside my mind clench hard, like some invisible trap just snapped shut on my head.

Something knows we’re here. I thought. It doesn’t want us to get out. It could be watching us right NOW.

Keep it together Mike, Redwolf’s voice echoed in my skull. We can’t afford to panic. Let’s stick to the plan, head for Ulysses’ office.

But why don’t we...I started, then I answered my own question. Right, rushing for the door and trying to unblock it is exactly what someone would expect us to do. So they might set a trap.

Exactly, Redwolf “said”. I panned my flashlight around, looking at the nameplates on the office doors, eventually locating one labeled as the office of Dr. Craig Ulysses. The doctor had quite an alphabet soup after his last name; Ph.d’s in cultural and physical anthropology, geology and archeology. It seemed fitting that the atmosphere in his office felt like an ancient tomb; undisturbed for an unusually long time. Redwolf looked around, then set the still-unconscious Private Fieldman in a chair next to the door. I tried flipping the light switch and got nothing; my flashlight continued to be the only illumination pushing back the darkness.

Dr. Ulysses’ office was furnished mostly with bookshelves, a surprising number of volumes lining three of the four walls. It appeared unlike most of the station staff, which didn’t intend to stay out in the Antarctic styx any longer than they had to, the doctor had made the frozen Gulag his base of operations. I mentioned this to Redwolf, and the drygerskunk agreed.

“To drag this much reference material out here, he must have been working on something,” shi said, dusting some of the books off. The titles were a wide range of texts on ancient cultures, mythology and the geological and natural history of Antarctica.

“Wonder why he didn’t just have these on data crystal...,” the admiral mused.

“Maybe they haven’t been converted yet,” I said, turning away from the bookshelves to the doctor’s desk. The chair was set very low, making me adjust it upward a bit; the doctor, whoever he was, had to be physically bigger than me. An attempt to boot up his computer revealed the power wasn’t out just to the lights.

“Damn,” I grumbled. “We know there’s power here...but why’s it only on in the lab?” Redwolf mused, then something seemed to click in hir eyes.

“Whoever or whatever’s taken over this station must be rerouting the power where it wants it,” shi said. A cold drop went down my back as my imagination grabbed ahold of that tidbit.

"What's it need power for...," I said. Redwolf was silent as we met each other's gazes with tense expressions. Many people say the greatest fear is the fear of the unknown. No small wonder why; my imagination started coming up with a gallery of nightmare possibilities; some Frankenstein-esque experiment made up of the cut up remains of the station crew, a makeshift weapon of mass destruction ready to wipe out the entire Antarctic installation, a bio-engineered weapon like a virus that could spread over the entire planet.

"Let's see what else is here...," I said, rifling through the desk drawers. It took a bit of searching, but buried amidst the office supplies, stale snack food and other bits and pieces of junk was a data crystal. I held it out to Redwolf, who plugged it into his PDA-like tool and started skimming it over.

"It looks like a private journal," she said. "Dr. Ulysses must have put it on here to make sure nobody hacked his computer and read his personal stuff." The admiral skimmed over several dozen pages very quickly; the doctor had begun his journal around the time he came to Antarctica. He accepted the assignment as the station's resident Earth geologist in order to pursue, in his spare time, a personal project to determine if there was ever any signs of intelligent life on the Antarctic continent before it became frozen.

"Says here he found Cpt. Whiteout 'appealingly tractable' to his request," said Redwolf. I snorted a bit. "I can imagine why; he provides Whiteout with sound geological work, it helps the base look like its functioning properly, so the captain gives him whatever he needs to conduct his personal project."

Without commenting, Redwolf continued to skim. The first three months at the station provided very little in the way of fossils or any other evidence of intelligent life. Then, a breakthrough was discovered; a core sample taken from a drilling team the doctor sent far out onto the frozen plains brought up a sample of prehistoric stone that contained a fossilized bone that looked like it might have been part of a finger. Dr. Ulysses immediately led an archeological expedition out to the drilling site, where after a week of heavy digging, he unearthed an entire skeleton of some kind of primitive creature.

"From the bone structure, the shape of the spine, limbs and appendages," Redwolf said, reading out loud, "It appears that this creature may have been able to walk upright on its hind limbs. But signs show that not many generations previous, it would have run on all fours. Darwin, you son of a bitch, you should thank me; I've proven your theory and found the missing link." Redwolf and I looked at each other.

"You think he did?" I asked her. The admiral mused.

"Eh, I'd want to examine it for myself before I said yea or nay," she said, scrolling further down. After his discovery, Dr. Ulysses immediately sent for all his personal belongings and equipment to be sent to the nearest satellite station; satellite station no.4. Capt. Whiteout wasn't very pleased that one of the senior scientists was moving his base of operations out of the main station, but Ulysses was adamant. He also insisted no public announcement of his discovery be released; he wanted to gather all data possible before someone's government tried to lay claim to the skeleton. He regularly requested

additional manpower to expand the dig; Capt. Whiteout was only too happy to comply, sending the doctor any personnel shi had a problem with and wanted out of hir hair.

“When they arrive, almost all of them are surly and irritable,” Redwolf said, scrolling down the journal a bit more, “but their attitudes brighten when I explain to them they’re to become part of the biggest archeological find of the century on this planet. We’ve discovered no less than five additional skeletons. Just yesterday, one digger struck what turned out to be granite. After carefully air-blasting and washing the stone away, it became clear the stone had been carved deliberately. At last, at long last, I’ve found the proof! An artificial structure must have once stood there! What purpose could it have served; was it a house, a temple, a meeting hall, a storage place for food? I must know!”

The excavation crew, with their increased numbers, doubled their digging efforts. Then, Redwolf noticed something strange in the journal; there was a gap of about two weeks between dates.

“I have been too preoccupied to update my journal for a number of days now,” shi read. “The most incredible discovery I could possibly imagine. I must start from the beginning; after discovering what was believed to be ruins, the dig crew continued further down into the sediment. The carved stones we found were no ruins, but the top of a complete structure. After many days of excavation, the structure was unearthed. It measures at least 100 feet high and has a base in a perfect square. By my calculations, the interior must be at least 10,000 square feet. The exterior is covered with carvings, some of which depict beings that bear little physical similarity to the skeletons we’ve found. Given their proportion and the size of the building, I believe this may have been some form of temple.”

Redwolf began to pace back and forth as shi quoted from the journal; I heard a note of excitement enter hir voice; in hindsight I’ve come to believe it was the scientist in hir (since shi had a bit of every canmephian class in hir, including the scientific ones) that became interested in the prospects of discovery. At the time, though, all it did was make me worried shi was losing focus on the issue at hand.

“I also have a theory on how the temple came to be buried in its entirety,” shi said, scrolling further. “By examining the sediment, I’ve discovered trace elements of volcanic ash. It appears there was at one time a volcanic eruption, and the temple must have been buried in a mudslide caused by the eruption. Indeed, the building’s location near the base of a mountain would support this theory.

“After the temple was cleared away, we were quick to find the entrance and open it. The interior was almost empty; no doubt time and the Antarctic conditions that eventually covered the continent led to the destruction anything in the temple not made of stone. As it was, we discovered little more than a few rotten bits of wood and some tattered pieces of cloth. Of stonework, however, we discovered a strange series of rectangular stone pedestals surrounding a central pillar that reached halfway up to the ceiling.

“We took extensive photographic records of the discovery, barely able to contain our enthusiasm. Just then, Edwards, one of my personal assistants, began shouting for me. He’d discovered a small alcove on the far side of the room from the front entrance. I couldn’t have ever imagined what he’d found; three

strange egg-shaped pods, each about the size of a watermelon. They were covered with a strange, almost leathery outer husk that was a deep purple going to practically black.

“The entire crew was dumbstruck by the discovery. What are these things, we wondered, and still wonder today. We spared no effort in carefully securing the pods. I have left the dig in the hands of Edwards; something compels me to learn all I can about these pods; I must get them back to the station for careful analysis and study.”

Redwolf tapped the screen of his tool. “That’s all there is,” she said. “He stopped updating it about six months ago.”

“The same time the communications between the station and the main base stopped,” I said. We both began to mull this fact over, giving the perfect cue for what happened next. The door burst open, sending in a wave of the rank stench from the hallway; or maybe it was coming from the tall, lanky figure framed in the doorway, a three-eyed, six-armed wolfskunk dressed in filthy fatigues. She had a blank, almost dead expression, coal-black eyes and a rifle in his lowest set of arms. Without hesitating, she brought it up to fire, but Redwolf quickly kicked the rifle to one side, the high-powered shot knocking several books off a bookcase. Adrenaline and a shot of pure fright going down my spine made me launch myself out of my chair. Once my brain finally kicked in, I charged at the door; the wolfskunk had landed a double fisted punch right in Redwolf’s stomach. She grabbed the admiral by the head and was trying to push his thumbs into the drygerskunk’s eyes when I hit the door shoulder first and slammed it into the admiral’s attacker. It knocked him slightly off balance, but otherwise was un-phased as she now had the admiral crying out in pain as she continued to try and gouge Redwolf’s eyes out.

Letting out a yell that was half fear, half anger, I grabbed the door and started slamming it on the wolfskunk’s limbs. Fortunately the door was a sturdy one and she eventually lost his strength, allowing the admiral to yank the filthy claws off his face. But the wolfskunk wasn’t going to leave without some prize. And it found one. His last remaining hand in the door shot out and grabbed the coyote by the neck. The feeling, not to mention the smell, must have shocked him out of his coma, but it would’ve been more merciful if it hadn’t. His eyes registered full awareness of what was happening, and the soldier let out a bloodcurdling scream as he wildly thrashed against the limb that had him in a death grip.

Redwolf, his eyes still blinded by the abuse they’d suffered, reached out without looking and grabbed the private by the footpaw. I grabbed his other limb, and together we tried to pull him back in the door. But too much time with too little to eat had caused the coyote to lose weight, and his clothes were loose on him. His paws slipped out of his boots and he was yanked with shocking quickness through the door. Redwolf quickly threw the door open, apparently intending to go after them, but a volley of gunfire made him slam it shut again.

“Fuck!” she said, crouching down as a couple more shots pierced the door. “There’s two more out there!”

"Great," I hissed through clenched teeth as a third shot came dangerously close to taking my head off, making me hunch down on all fours. The drygerskunk gave the door a quizzical glance as the assault suddenly stopped. It was dead silent outside, not a hint of movement from our would-be killers.

"Why don't they just rush us," Redwolf whispered. "They outnumber us by one at least."

"Why risk getting themselves shot," I said, sitting back against the desk. "We're in their territory; they can wait us to death if they want. Or until we do something to expose ourselves."

"Maybe," the admiral mused, "but I don't know...."

"Well whatever the reason we need to...," I said, my eyes scanning the room, looking for any possible escape point. I caught sight of one of the oldest tricks in the book right in front of me; the vent for the air duct. Motioning for Redwolf to follow, I carefully opened the vent and slid inside. I tried to keep my movements to a minimum; if our attackers heard the ducts rattling, they'd likely start spraying lead into the walls.

The air duct was a rather tight fit for me as I carefully crawled along like a seal; pulling myself with my arms and keeping my legs flat. I couldn't do a commando crawl like a soldier would; there wasn't enough room for me to flex my knees. Redwolf had a slightly easier time of it; shi just shifted into a python-like form, slipping quietly along behind me, using hir tails to shut the vent behind us.

"Any idea where we're going?" Shi asked.

"Anywhere but cornered," I said. I was kicking myself for leaving my flashlight at the base as I crawled in pitch blackness; but then again I hadn't expected to be imitating Bruce Willis. I decided the best course of action was to find a vent that opened to an unoccupied office and try to escape that way. The shaft, however, decided the best course of action was to end in a straight drop down. Before I could find any available vent, both my arms dropped out from under me and I collided headfirst with a flat surface.

"Fuck!" I hissed. "We've hit the end."

"What?" Redwolf said, clearly surprised. "With no other vents? What kind of bullshit design is that for a building?"

"Great, just great," I muttered. I was starting to get a severe case of claustrophobia; at any moment those things that used to be the station personnel could discover where we'd gone and here I was, jammed into an L-intersection in a vent shaft. I realized there was only one course of action.

"Okay," I said, "we've got to drop down this shaft. I'll go first, can you hang onto my paws and make sure I don't shoot down to the bottom?"

"No problem," the drygerskunk said. I felt a pair of hands take hold of both my ankles. Trying not to think of what amusing shape Redwolf must have been in to pull that off in such tight quarters, I started sliding downward. Fortunately the vertical shaft was wide enough to allow me to get my legs to bend at the knees, otherwise I would've been stuck. Even so, my backside and my shins were scraped painfully

against the sides of the duct. Not only that, but as I took the shaft headfirst, the contents of my pants pockets fell out and got caught up in the shoulders of my coat, making an awkward load. As I got further down the shaft, I could see a dim light at the bottom; a vent that must have been in the ceiling of a basement room.

"Hold up," I said as I got to the vent. Redwolf held me just an inch or so away. I let my eyes adjust to the dim light so I could take stock of the room we were about to enter.

"Looks like a janitor's closet," I whispered, "this should be safe." I tested the vent and found that with just a bit of pushing, the latches came loose and it swung open. The drygerskunk lowered me slowly to the floor, where I stuffed my belongings back into my pockets as shi oozed out of the duct like syrup, reforming into hir customary form, hir clothing sliding to the surface of hir exterior; apparently shi encased hir garments inside herself while creeping through the vent.

There was a light creak from the door as I pushed it open to check the hallway. I froze for a second before feeling assured there wasn't anyone or anything in the dark corridor for the sound to alert. Redwolf and I stepped out into the hallway; the same layer of filth and garbage was present on the floor down here, but there was another pervading odor.

Where's that smell coming from... I mused.

It's coming from the room down there at the end of the hall, Redwolf projected into my mind. Watching our backs, I slowly followed the admiral as shi picked hir way carefully through the debris, trying to keep the noise to a minimum. A single door marked "storage" was at the end. Part of me kept saying to leave well enough alone, to just run for our lives back to the shuttle and have the station bombed out of existence by the military. But another part of me said to live in constant ignorance would just breed more fear; we had to know just what was going on.

Redwolf tapped the entry pad. The door slid open, exposing us to a waft of rancorous stench worse than the trash. Clapping hands to mouths and noses, both the drygerskunk and I made our way into the storage room. No movement caught our eyes, so I switched on my flashlight and panned it around.

"This is bad," I whispered.

The store room had been cleared out of all its previous contents. Two rows of shelves went from front to back, with a pair of long tables at the far end. On every shelf and on all the tables were egg-shaped pods like Dr. Ulysses described in his journal. To me they looked a lot like avocados; spoiled, mutated avocados. Each one had a jagged seam down the front that was split open. Suddenly remembering my camera. I fumbled with it and took several pictures as we slowly moved forward.

"It looks like they were forced open from the inside," Redwolf muttered, stopping for a moment to peer closer at one of them. Tentatively, shi dug out hir scanning device and played it over one of the strange pods.

"It's biological...the outer husk is some kind of...skin I'm not familiar with. And inside, there's trace amounts of that parasitic growth we found during the autopsy."

"Dr. Ulysses must have tried to cut one open," I said, my jaw tightly clenched. "The parasite must have come out and infected the entire base."

"Yeah...", said Redwolf, looking around with a furtive and tightly-wound expression. "But where did the rest of these come from? There must be over twenty of the damn things!"

"Oh God," I said, feeling slightly light-headed. I'd shined my flashlight on one of the tables as we got to the end of the shelves. I could guess their purpose all too well from what I saw. Sitting on one end of the table was one of the split-open parasite sacs. Stretched across the table were two lengths of heavy chain. It didn't take much imagination to visualize a fighting, struggling captive being chained down, the sac at his, her or his head splitting open as the parasite slithered its way over their face.

I snapped one more picture, this time of the table. "I think we've seen enough," I said, eyes still locked on the torturous scene in front of me. Redwolf was silent; rigid, in fact. I suddenly realized the importance of that as the door swung open. A canmephian wolfskunk soldier and a U.N. soldier, their eyes dead and black, their clothing wretched, walked in and halted briefly, apparently not expecting to find us there. Big mistake; I leveled my revolver as Redwolf spun his torso around, drawing his pistols. We unloaded on the two interlopers just as they were about to bring up their rifles, sending them to the floor in a twitching heap. As the echoes of the gunshots died down, one of the bodies moved in an odd way. Redwolf slammed in two new clips with his second pair of arms as I dumped out my empty shells and shoved a speed loader against the cylinder of my gun. Just then, a familiar face pushed aside one of the corpses.

"Fieldman!" I said, holstering my gun and rushing forward. Shock had obviously rattled me; in hindsight I can't believe I made such a dumb mistake. As I took the private's arm to pull him to his footpaws, I got a chance to feel my blood drain from my face as I saw the obsidian darkness in his eyes. The private, or what was left of him, grabbed me by the throat. I immediately grabbed his wrist with one hand and shoved away on him with the other.

"I don't have a shot!" Redwolf yelled. I could see him out of the corner of my eye, sighting one of his guns, but looking anxious as he was unable to pull the trigger with myself and the infected private clinched the way we were. The coyote's flat, expressionless face opened at the mouth, and from his throat I could hear a sound like some kind of thick mucus coming up his pipes.

"FUCK!" I howled. I let go of the private's coat and balled up a fist. I connected an uppercut with the coyote's jaw, knocking his head upwards as a torrent of gelatinous ooze shot like a geyser up out of his mouth. The sludge splattered against the ceiling and stuck there. With all my strength, I shoved the coyote out to arm's length. A shot cracked through the air and the side of the private's head indented, then less than a fraction of a second later, the opposite side was blown out. Both the coyote's remains and I slumped to the floor simultaneously, but whereas his heart had stopped, mine was revved up like an engine.

“GET UP, WE’RE OUT OF HERE!” Redwolf hauled me to my footpaws and had dragged me halfway down the corridor before I’d regained my senses enough to start running too. We lost all concept of trying to be quiet or subtle; only one thought was running through my own mind, and was probably running through the admiral’s as well; get the hell out before we wound up just like Fieldman and the others. We barreled up the stairs from the basement, burst out onto the first floor, and bolted for the front door. Redwolf used all four hands to hurl the makeshift barricade away from the door, shoving open the locked doors, breaking the locking mechanism in the process. We burst blinking into the harsh snow glare outside, taking two running strides out the door before we heard the rumble of engines.

“Over there!” Redwolf pointed. A convoy of three tread-mounted troop carriers was rumbling through the gate. I let my hopes rise in panicked desperation, thinking backup had come from the main station when they didn’t hear from us.

But hope can be a treacherous thing, a roll of dice when all your chips are bet on long odds. Redwolf and I ran up to the troop carriers, waving our arms. The carriers stopped in a line, their engines slowly rumbling to a shuddering halt.

“Perfect timing go...,” Redwolf started. The door to the troop carrier slid open. A dryger stepped out, wearing remarkably little protective gear against the cold. Since shi didn’t bother with a helmet or protective goggles, we were able to see the black, soulless depths of hir eyes as shi stepped out of the carrier and turned hir head towards us.

I felt my blood run as cold as the freezing wind. I turned in dismay at the next carrier. The two earth soldiers stepping out had the same eyes. All three of them started marching purposefully at us.

Redwolf howled something in a language I couldn’t understand, but I knew it was probably profane. The two of us fired wild shots at the infected soldiers, but they didn’t hit their marks. We ran straight back to the building we’d just vacated; the only one we knew that would offer us decent cover. A pair of shots went through the doors as we slammed them shut, frantically putting the barricade back in place.

“Damnit, where do we go now?!” I hissed through clenched teeth. Redwolf pointed to a door off to the right.

“Upstairs! We can try to find the radio room,” shi said, immediately making for the door and taking the steps four at a time. I followed behind hir, though I managed the presence of mind to scatter the garbage on the floor to mask the door getting opened.

“We came here ‘cause of a communications break, remember?!” I said in a hoarse whisper.

“Yeah, but maybe they just stopped answering and didn’t break it,” shi said. I had to concede the point and followed the admiral through the second floor door. The upper floor was much cleaner than downstairs, but showed definite signs of neglect. Apparently the infected crew didn’t bother with the

upstairs rooms much, so there wasn't much garbage, just unswept dust. Redwolf pulled her scanner tool out again and brought up the schematic for the building.

"Com room's this way," shi said, leading the way to the fourth door down the hallway. We stepped as lightly as we could; halfway down the hall, we heard a crashing noise downstairs; the crew had broken through the barricade. We had no doubt they'd search room by room, but hopefully they'd save upstairs for last. The door to the radio room creaked slightly as Red pushed it open; a lone window cast the only light in the room, falling on a dusty table with a radio set up on it, a wire leading up from the top through the ceiling, no doubt to the antennae on the roof.

The drygerskunk wasted no time in sitting down at the radio and started scanning frequencies. As shi did, I went and put my ear to the door, listening to see if anyone was coming. I heard nothing from the hallway, but my attention got drawn to faint echoes coming from a floor vent. Cautiously, I put my ear to it and listened. I could hear two voices. One sounded normal; the other had a dead, hollow, unnatural tone to it that curdled my blood.

"...find it hard to believe there was anyone on this base left we hadn't converted," said the normal voice.

"They were not of this place," said the unnatural one. ***"The ship outside is proof of that."***

"Yes, that would explain it," said the musing voice. "I suppose this couldn't have gone without some notice. But why send somebody?! I told Whiteout not to interfere! Shi's never felt the need to poke hir nose into our work so long as shi gets the results shi wants."

"It must be another," said the hollow voice, ***"We have drawn attention to ourselves in some way. We must move quickly to secure our hold."***

The wheels in my head started turning. If what the normal voice said was true, Whiteout had some clue as to what had happened here! Looking at the radio as Redwolf continued to test frequencies, I had a hunch.

"Bee in you bonnet?" Redwolf's voice said in my head.

"Yeah, you know what I'm thinking?" I thought.

"Yes, and I agree; we'll take a copy of the transmission logs." The drygerskunk opened a few desk drawers, eventually finding a data crystal she plugged into the side of the radio. Shi typed on the radio's keyboard with two hands while with the other two shi held a pair of headphones to hir ears and adjusted a dial. Finally, hir eyes lit up.

"This is Admiral Redwolf calling from Sattelite Station four. We have a major security breech and a potential biohazard! We need immediate support....WHAT?! I don't care how bad the weather is, send somebody NOW!" Redwolf was getting angry; I tried to tell hir to keep hir voice down; the voices downstairs had suddenly gotten quiet.

"I repeat, we have a major fubar situation here," the admiral hissed into his mic. "Send immediate support...hello? Shit, storm's cut us off." A light flashed on the side of the computer; Redwolf pulled the data crystal from the port she'd put it in and slipped it under his uniform.

"Do you think they heard us?" Shi said. I eyed the door, my revolver out and pointed at it.

"Oh count on it," I muttered. Redwolf quickly went to the window and cracked it open. At two stories, we were probably better than 70 feet off the ground. A small drop for the drygerskunk, for me one that would guarantee either death or a broken limb. Redwolf quickly and quietly slid out the window and lowered himself to the ground, motioning for me to follow. I looked down and bit my lower lip; if there's two things that make me nervous, it's spiders and heights. Redwolf stretched up one of his tails. I grabbed onto it and carefully started sliding down the fluffy appendage. The snow crunched under me as I landed on the ground. Both of us crouched down by the back corner of the building; we were between the outer wall and the back of the main command center. Carefully peering around the corner, we could see several of the infected conducting a building by building search.

"We've got to get to the shuttle," I said.

"First, we have to make sure to eliminate these things," Redwolf replied, turning away from the corner. "We can't let them get out or who knows how far this...contamination will spread?" Slowly, I nodded in agreement.

"Okay, so does this base have any ordinance we can use to blow it up?" I asked. Redwolf shook his head.

"No...but it does have a large underground fuel storage beneath the motor pool. Okay, here's the plan..."

The window sill was cold and icy under my hands as I hoisted myself through the window into the motor pool. I had to jump and catch the edge, carefully pulling myself up, winds buffeting me from the side. Every moment I expected one of those infected soldiers to spot me and start shooting. As it was, I did hear gunshots, but they weren't aimed at me. I'd waited until Redwolf gave the signal, then bolted the distance from the research building to the motorpool while Shi marched straight up to the front door, shoved it open, and fired on the search party inside. The last I saw, the drygerskunk had taken off at a dead run across the courtyard, the rest of the search team in pursuit. Two wolfskunk infected had come out of the derelict barracks, getting knocked inside as the wolfskunk dropped his shoulder and tackled them both. Now more shooting was coming from inside that building as I scrambled through the window into the motor pool. It took my eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light. Finally, I spotted the fuel pump. Long hoses were attached like coiled pythons with metal heads. I grabbed one of them and flicked a couple switches on the pump's control console, powering it up.

Outside, I heard another crash. I ran to the door, wiping grime and frost off it's window. Redwolf was leading both search parties back to the research center. The admiral threw himself like a cannonball through one of the windows, his pursuers following close behind.

I knew I didn't have long. Fear was running through me like a stitching needle being drawn through a cut, but something stronger pushed me on; the unconscious need to survive. The fuel hose dragged behind me like an oversized tail, leaving a trench in the snow. I ran up to the window Redwolf had broken open. Hoisting myself up, I held the hose nozzle in one hand and pressed down on the release switch, a sharp, acrid smell filling the air as liquid propellant of some kind spewed out of the hose. Playing it around the office I was looking into, I gave everything a good saturating douse before moving to the next window. I tried to only go with windows that were already broken, but to make sure I spread the fuel far enough, I had to break a couple. Rather than risk shooting and drawing attention, I ran back to the motor pool, found a heavy wrench and used it to smash a hole in the windows I could fit the hose head through.

I was just finishing up the fourth office on the far side of the building from where I'd started when I heard a loud THUMP just behind me. I dropped the hose and spun around, going for my revolver. Redwolf grabbed my wrist before I could fire.

"Easy, it's me!" Shi said. Picking up the fuel hose, Shi waved me off with one hand.

"Get back to the shuttle, I'll finish up here," Shi said. Before I could even begin to open my mouth, Shi knew what I was about to say.

"Don't argue, DO IT!" Shi yelled. Unable to avoid feeling slightly resentful, I jogged back towards the shuttle. The door was locked, so all I could do was stand around, looking back and forth, nervously shifting like I was in line for the bathroom and I had to piss something fierce. Redwolf, meanwhile, had thrown the front doors open again and was dousing the office furniture barricade with fuel. Several shots came his way from behind the barricade, but Shi returned fire and was apparently a better shot than his attackers. When Shi'd covered the barricade enough, the dryerskunk took three steps back from the door. Shi dug into his uniform and pulled out several signal flares. The end of one erupted in sparks as Shi struck its end along the top. The admiral tossed the flare onto the barricade with a flick of his wrist, the furniture bursting into flame with a cloud-like gush of fire. Redwolf proceeded to go from one side of the building to the next, tossing lit flares into each office, flames belching from the windows soon after each flare went through.

The fire was spreading quickly; by the time Redwolf returned to the shuttle, grim-faced and with a haggard look, there had been several muffled explosions; no doubt from pressurized gas tanks somewhere inside the building. Great gouts of black smoke were emerging from the second story windows, showing the fire was eating its way up from the inside. I leaned against the side of the shuttle. That feeling of something watching us was starting to fade, as if unconsciously I knew all the infected personnel on the base were either dead or would be soon. But the experience had shocked me to the

core. Redwolf too had been shaken badly as shi leaned on the shuttle as well, two arms crossed with hir head resting on them.

“Do you think it’s over,” I asked hir. Years of reading suspense and horror novels and movies had taught me not to assume the fight was over until you saw the monster’s dead, lifeless body for yourself. Redwolf looked to the side at me, then glanced up. Hir expression changed from weary and contemplative to alarmed.

“No,” shi said, and tossed hir head toward the station gate. I turned and looked over my shoulder. Where there should have been three troop carriers I now had an unobstructed view of the gate from between two carriers.

“Shit,” I hissed through my teeth. Redwolf tapped the lock open on the shuttle hatch and I quickly scrambled inside behind hir. The drygerskunk used all four hands to fire up the shuttle. As we blasted off, I got one last good look at the derelict satellite station; a collection of deserted buildings and the burning remains of another, now slowly starting to collapse in on itself in a flaming heap; the site where a military and scientific crew had met a nightmarish fate. I still had questions.

Little did I know I’d get my answers all too soon.

The wind whipped crazily all around the shuttle. Redwolf and I hadn’t been off the ground more than ten minutes and following the tracks of the missing troop carrier before we’d run into ugly weather. The gusts outside howled like banshees, causing the shuttle to tremble as the drygerskunk tried to hold it steady, tapping the radio console with one free hand.

“Antarctic Base, this is Jump Shuttle 34, do you copy?” Shi said, trying one frequency after another. All I could do at the moment was hang onto my seat and look at the blinding white snow washing over the front of our craft.

“Antarctic Base, this is Admiral Redwolf, we have a troop carrier headed in your direction containing possible hostiles! Base, do you read me? SHIT!” Redwolf pounded the side of the shuttle with hir fist. “I can’t get a signal through; the storm’s too strong.”

“Do you think...,” I started, but the storm outside cut me off. Not content with just drowning me out, it instead felt like some giant, unseen hand slammed down on top of the shuttle, sending it towards the ground at a steep angle.

“FUCK, HANG ON!” Redwolf yelled, hauling back on the controls as hard as shi could. The shuttle started to level out, but we were closer to the ground than we realized. A large snow bank loomed up; the shuttle hit it at an angle that sent it rolling over. My eyes clenched, I started praying hard, somewhere in the back of my mind thinking it was kind of pathetic to have survived a nightmarish experience like we had only to end up dying in a lousy shuttle crash. The shuttle rolled for a time, then started spinning on its top, finally coming to a halt when it struck something hard.

For the first minute, everything was dark. There was no sound besides the howl of the wind. Finally, I remembered I was clenching my eyes shut and slowly opened them. I felt banged around a bit, but otherwise without any other serious physical injury. The interior lighting in the shuttle had gone out. The power was gone, and the heat inside the cabin was quickly following it. As I unbuckled my seatbelt, I could already see my breath. Turning to the side, I was slightly startled by a pair of glowing yellow eyes before I remembered the admiral could see in the dark that way.

"Nnnngh," shi groaned, "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'll live," I said, hanging onto the seatbelt strap as I dropped down. "You?"

"I've been through worse," Redwolf said. I couldn't see very well, but from the sounds of it, Redwolf stretched out his arms to release the shuttle door's emergency latch and shoved it open. I watched a fluid form slide out the doorway and reform into a dryggerskunk just outside, putting his hood up against the icy gale that was now even more audible. Slowly, I crawled out the door myself, rubbing at several bruised spots.

Redwolf pulled out his handheld tool, tapping the screen until a map appeared. "Looks like we're still a hundred kilometers from the base," shi said, trying to make himself heard over the winds. I cinched my fedora down and leaned into the wind to keep from losing it.

"We can't fix the shuttle in this storm; we'll have to find shelter until it dies down," Redwolf continued, shutting the shuttle door to keep out the snow. Shi opened a compartment on the outside and pulled out a case of some kind. Panning his scanner around, shi pointed off to a slightly darker spot in the already darkening storm. Night was fast approaching.

"There! Looks like there's an ice cave that way. Let's go. Stay behind me, you'll be out of the wind that way," Redwolf said, shouldering the survival kit. Shi started off through the storm; it seemed to me like shi was barely phased by the winds. My concerns about self-dependence, temporarily forgotten during the shock of our experiences at the base, now resurfaced. The idea of me following in the dryggerskunk's shadow, relying on him to protect me, seemed almost symbolic of what my planet had been doing for God knows how long. Instead of getting behind him, I started marching right next to Redwolf, shoulders hunched, hand on my hat, pushing hard against the winds.

"I said you can....," Redwolf started, but I cut him off.

"I'm fine," I said, my voice raised over the wind, "I can handle it." Redwolf seemed to pause to say something, then thought better of it and continued to march. The snow was shin-deep on him, which made it almost knee-deep for me. I trudged against the biting, stinging gusts, asking God to give me the strength to keep going. Every now and then, a blast would come from a different direction, sending me stumbling a bit until I righted myself and got back in line. Sheer stubborn determination and self-esteem demanded I keep pushing on. The dark form of the cave ahead slowly grew bigger, but as we got close, the storm increased in intensity.

We were maybe a football field's length from the cave when a massive gust from the side sent me sprawling, snow going down my coat and shirt, making my already frozen body feel practically numb. I tried to stand up, only to get knocked on my ass again. Trying desperately not to lose my hat to the gale, I started crawling along through the snow.

Oh yeah, real dignified, A voice in my head was saying. It wasn't Redwolf thought; it was a voice I was all too familiar with; my tempting demon. In cartoons he's always a funny-looking miniature version of the person he appears to, often accompanied by his counterpart, an angelic version of the person with wings and a halo. But in reality, for me at least, he's not nearly so cute or amusing. Instead, he's like a drug dealer; a sneering, menacing bully always trying to bait me.

What's this doing for your pride now? The voice said.

Oh shut the fuck up, I thought back at it like I had many times before. Shoving through the icy drifts, I tried to keep my eyes on the cave, at least when the wind didn't make me duck my head down. Suddenly, I felt an arm around my waist and I was hoisted up. I looked up and to the side; Redwolf was carrying me underneath one arm, shi himself now having to fight against the wind. I would have protested but for two things; the wind and the look on his face that said shi wouldn't be argued with. The cold had numbed me to physical pain, but wounded pride goes deeper than that. Biting down hard on the chagrin, I just kept a hand planted hard on my fedora until we finally emerged from the storm into the protective walls of the ice cave the admiral had detected.

Redwolf set me down without a word or fuss, brushing snow from himself. I did the same, mumbling a few words of thanks. The cave was a large, cathedral-like in its structure. Playing my flashlight around, I could see the walls glinting with countless granules of tightly-packed snow. A thump from behind me made me turn; Redwolf had set down the case shi'd brought and was unsnapping the lid. From inside shi produced several bundles of synthetic cloth; the case was a survival kit of some sort.

"It'll just take a minute to set up the tent," shi said. Shining my flashlight on the case, I probed around inside until I found a device marked "camp stove."

"I see about getting some heat going," I said. Redwolf turned a bit from where shi was putting together a couple support rods.

"That's okay I'll get that in a min..." I let the sound of me snapping the burner's legs open be my answer. The burner was definitely strange to me; I honestly wasn't sure which end was the top until I held it by one end, thumbed what looked like the power switch, and got an electric zap on my arm from an ignition switch. After a minute of fiddling, I got the stove going, setting it carefully on an area I'd cleared the snow away from until frozen dirt was exposed. Redwolf had got the tent set up in the meantime, as well as pulled out a couple camping chairs (one even the right size for me).

For the next few minutes I wrote feverishly in my notebook, putting together as thorough a record of the horrific events as I could. My handwriting was sloppy; not because of my nerves, however shot they may have been, but because the cold kept me shivering. Finally, I finished up and shoved my notebook

into my coat, now concentrating on not freezing to death as I blew my breath into my clenched hands. I was so fixated on writing I hadn't noticed Redwolf watching me out of the corner of his eye. Shi'd pulled out his scanner and appeared to be doing something on it at the same time I was writing, but I now that I wasn't focused, I could tell Shi was just faking it; Shi kept tapping the same three keys in the same order over and over. I was about to say something when I felt one of his tails start to drape over me. I pushed it away and tried to give the drygerskunk a wry smirk.

"Sorry admiral, but I don't know you well enough for that," I said. Redwolf gave me a look of genuine concern.

"C'mon Mike you're going to freeze if you don't get warmer," Shi said, starting to put his soft, fluffy appendage over me again. I pushed it off a bit more firmly.

"I'm FINE," I said. I knew I was acting stupid, but I hated the feelings starting to creep into me like the chill that had crept into my bones. Redwolf shook his head with a look of disbelief.

"Mike, honestly, what's with you? Ever since I met you, you've had this stand-off attitude; you're acting like I'm trying to steal your thunder here."

I couldn't hold back a cynical snort. "That's not what you're stealing," I muttered.

"Then what is it?!" Redwolf snapped. "Just what the hell do you think's being taken from you?! The spotlight, the glory, the credit?!"

"MY SELF RESPECT!" I yelled at him. The drygerskunk blinked. Deep down I knew it wasn't really fair to do what I was about to do, but I couldn't hold it back any more.

"And it's not just YOU," I said, a hard expression plastered on my face. "It's practically every Canmephian I've seen! Ever since I woke up out of cold sleep it's been Canmephian this and Canmephian that! You people have turned my planet into one big...one big...gang of groupies, all clamoring and kissing your asses and fawning over you like your rock stars! It makes me sick! My entire race has become dependent on you like babies or...or...SHEEP!"

I glared at Redwolf for a minute, breath snorting in and out of my nose in anger. Then, my resentment and ill will started fading, slowly being replaced with the feelings of self-reproach and inner-chastising I almost always feel when I blow my stack. I looked away slowly from the drygerskunk, slumping my shoulders and leaning forward, my elbows on my knees, my head hung.

"I can't believe what's happened to my planet," I grumbled. "We've lost all semblance of dignity. My race seems to just...expect you Canmephians to do everything. Everybody's set in this idea that we're nothing compared to you." I sighed, then looked up at the drygerskunk again; not with anger, but with determination.

"Well I say fuck that," I said. "I KNOW we're better than that. I REFUSE to believe we're not capable of being just as smart or as skilled as you." Redwolf, who'd been watching me intently, seemed to dawn on something.

"That's why you came here," shi said. "Even if they didn't expect you to be able to do anything useful, you came here because you were determined to do a worthwhile job investigating this problem."

"Yeah," I half said, half sighed, turning back to stare into the stove. "That's right. I was determined to show I could conduct an investigation as good as anybody from either planet but..." I sighed again, rubbing my forehead. Exhaustion was making me appraise myself and my performance with frank honesty.

"I can't think of a damn thing you couldn't have done on your own here. Shit, you probably would have done better on your own without me to have to look out for. And me, pff, I probably would have been dead the moment I set foot in the station if I'd been out here myself."

At that moment I felt weary, weak, and beaten down. A person is his, her, or hir own worst critic, looking back with absolutely unforgiving eyes at one's own actions and accomplishments. And I felt like I'd been nothing but a tag-along. I started to think maybe my worst suspicions were true; that I was obsolete.

I heard a smooth, sliding sound to my right. "No," Redwolf said, "I would've been dead too." Shi didn't sound angry or hurt, shi sounded like something I didn't often hear in my own time and heard even less now; understanding.

"I may have eyes in the back of my head," the admiral continued, hir voice sounding less above me and more next to me, "but having that extra perspective from your standpoint is refreshing, and well needed. We're still visitors here, and unfortunately alot of us, both Canmephians and Terranians, have forgotten that."

"We need the detractors, the differences in view... and I'm kinda in the same boat." That made me blink a bit in confusion. I couldn't imagine what a person of the admiral's stature felt shi had in common with me.

"Tell me," shi said, "have you researched me?" I turned to the side; Redwolf had shrunk himself down to my height again. Shi tapped hir forehead with a finger. "Where this comes from?" I chuckled ruefully. Redwolf's history; comparing it to mine was like comparing the sinking of the Titanic to a fender-bender.

"I've read the quick n' dirty version," I said. "Captured by a hostile race, experimented on and tortured heinously, but you escaped and returned to your people and have been instrumental in its survival." I shook my head. "Shit, you're twice the hero I could ever be and have suffered far worse than I ever did...so what've I got to bitch about?"

"Everything," the drygerskunk said, "It's your right. You're right that I've got a colorful history, but the body is Canmephian. What is here," shi tapped hir head again, "The personality, it's human. It's why I'm

getting tired of all the pandering much more quickly than others. Why I'm willing to let Medical switch folk's species. And why I'm glad you're here. Besides, someone's gotta watch my ass."

I started to say that I didn't believe that a person's personality wasn't tied to their physical body, but I stopped, finding that for once in my life, I didn't have the will to argue just then. Fidgeting with my hands a bit, I tried to think of something to say.

"You know, you don't have to condescend....I mean, patronize...erm, you don't have to stoop to my level." I glanced back over at the admiral, eventually making eye contact. "I'm not that...touchy about the whole height thing. I'm used to it, honestly." Grinning, Redwolf stretched himself back to his normal size. A cold wind chose that moment to whip past the cave, sending a few tendrils of snowy drifts through the entrance. I couldn't help but shudder, a cold feeling going down my back. It chilled me to the bone, bringing up feelings of loneliness I'd sometimes feel, like I was completely without any sort of meaningful companions in life.

Slowly, I felt a soft, smooth warmth coming down over my shoulders. Red was draping one of his tails over me again. This time, I didn't push it away. Weary, I just laid back in my chair, unconsciousness slowly taking me over.

A bump jostled me awake. I blinked and looked out the cockpit window, rubbing one eye. It was getting on towards evening. Redwolf and I had to wait for hours for the storm to die down. Repairs to the shuttle had also taken a while, but eventually we were back in the air, the admiral quick to start spamming the radio, trying to raise the station. For the better half of the trip, we got nothing but silence. Then, finally, we got a weak signal.

"Read you.....uttle 34, but you're.....ing up, over."

"About damn time," Redwolf muttered, then tapped the com button. "Understood Station 4; we've got a major malfunction; a ground transport carrying hostiles was headed in your direction as of yesterday. Did you receive any unexpected visitors, over." There was silence for a minute before the response came through.

"Copy most of...received no incoming transports since you left. What....osition? over." Redwolf blinked a bit and glanced sideways at me.

"I think they're asking for our position," I said.

"Yeah," the admiral said, sounding lost in thought, "I figured that much, but where else could that troop carrier have been headed? It was making a beeline straight for the base."

"Maybe they got wrecked like us," I suggested. The drygerskunk ruefully grinned.

"We should be so lucky," she said. Finally, the station appeared on the horizon, shadowy in the Antarctic dusk. Drifts of snow were blown away like sawdust from a shop vac as Redwolf maneuvered the shuttle

onto the landing pad. Shi was out the hatch before the engines had even wound down, leaving me to chase after hir as shi bolted into Capt. Whiteout's office.

"WHITEOUT!" I heard hir bellow. I was still in the reception room, but Redwolf was loud enough to make both me and the receptionist jump a bit. When I got to the commandant's office, the dryer taur was hastily re-arranging hir desk; apparently the admiral had startled her so badly shi'd made something of a mess.

"Admiral! I didn't know you were back from the..." Shi started, but Redwolf cut hir off.

"Can the shit, I want to know what the FUCK was going on at Sattelite Station 4!" the drygerskunk hollered. Whiteout gave hir a perplexed look; I could tell as I came around from behind Redwolf that the captain was trying to put on an act and doing a very poor job of it.

"Admiral, if I knew, they wouldn't have had to bring you in," shi said. Redwolf slammed hir fist so hard on Whiteout's desk shi left a huge dent in it.

"I'm not talking about the com break, I'm talking about the experiments being conducted out there! The ones connected to Dr. Ulysses' discovery!" The look on the captain's face was priceless. It didn't just say "how the hell did you find out about that?" It broadcast it on all channels and pay-per-view.

"Oh don't look so surprised Captain," I said. "I don't see how you couldn't expect us to find out, given the state of the base." Whiteout didn't look at me, as usual. Instead, shi continued to address Redwolf.

"Admiral, what's he talking about?" Shi asked. This time, however, hir surprise looked genuine.

"The base in pieces, the personnel either dead or taken over by some kind of parasite, the poor bastards that got cut up in pieces like high school dissection frogs..." the admiral growled. Shi shoved hir face right up to the dryer taur. "ANY OF THAT RING A BELL?"

Whiteout's face clenched in pain. Shi shook hir head, putting a hand to hir forehead. "Ulysses, you stupid ass. I should've never trusted a terran."

"What did he offer you captain?" I said, crossing my arms and cocking an eyebrow. The jig was up, and Whiteout knew it. What's more, I knew shi knew it. "You didn't know exactly what was happening, but you knew you were going to get something out of it."

Still refusing to look at me, Whiteout instead stared at the surface of hir desk, leaning an elbow on it, head resting against hir fist.

"Ulysses said he'd discovered an amazing ancient secret; a secret of perfect mental control. It would eliminate soldiers of fear, of any rebelliousness they might have, of any risk of disobeying orders. It would give a commander complete control over their men. I knew high command would fail to see the potential, but I saw it." Whiteout's voice took on an almost pleading tone as shi looked up at Redwolf; shi was trying to convince the admiral of the rationality of hir desires.

"Imagine it; a fighting force without fear, without hesitation, without any thoughts of disobedience! But unlike an army of machines, they would have the ability to react to unexpected situations in the field while still maintaining their focus on their orders! The perfect blend of intelligence and control!"

"Sure," I snorted, "all you have to do is tear out a soldier's free will and their soul." Whiteout finally decided to grant me a scowl of anger.

"There's no room for that shit in the military!" shi snarled at me. "You don't ask questions, you don't debate, you just DO. WHAT. YOU'RE. TOLD."

"That kind of attitude is only appropriate on the battlefield," Redwolf said, hir voice cold. "You don't question or argue when you're under fire or in the middle of a mission, but before the mission begins, that's the time to ask questions and debate, because THAT is when you decide what the best course of action is. And you don't figure that out if you just wait for somebody else to tell you what to do."

"Well of COURSE the higher officers wouldn't be subjected to this treatment," Whiteout sighed, sounding exasperated. "The grunts are the ones that need to be controlled, not officers like us!"

Redwolf looked at the dryer taur like shi was a cockroach. "And when the fighting's over, then what? What kind of life do you think these soldiers are going to have?" Whiteout looked at the admiral with a frank "are you joking" look.

"Since when has that ever been a commander's concern?" shi said.

Redwolf rolled hir eyes. "Fuck this," shi snorted. Reaching out, shi grabbed the captain's symbol on Whiteout's shirt sleeve and tore it off.

"I'm relieving you of your command and stripping you of your rank," the drygerskunk said. "I'm also placing you under arrest for a pending courtmartial for more charges I feel like naming." Turning to the side, Redwolf yelled out the door.

"PRIVATES! IN HERE NOW!" The two guards outside the building stepped through the front door, a cold blast of air coming in with them. They stood in the doorway to the captain's office, pretty much blocking the way out completely with their muscular bulk.

"The captain is under arrest, confine hir to hir quarters," Redwolf said. The two guards looked at each other, then glanced past Redwolf to Whiteout as if looking for instructions.

Oh shit...I thought, Not a good sign.

"What the hell are you looking at hir for?!" Redwolf snapped. "Lock hir up!" A sardonic chuckle came from behind Redwolf.

"My my, now who wants to have control over their men, hmm?" Whiteout said. "You see Admiral? Having their hearts and minds doesn't do shit. You've gotta have 'em by the balls."

“Shut it Whiteout,” Redwolf snapped, not looking behind him. I was looking at the former captain, however, so I did see him pull a laser pistol from behind his desk. My own hand went for my revolver, but the dryer taur leveled his piece at me before I could draw it.

“I don’t think so,” she said. Something in his tone made Redwolf turn. She glared as she saw Whiteout had a weapon, which she was now holding so she could cover both of us.

“This is MY BASE,” Whiteout said, his voice taking on a hard, rough edge. “And I’m NOT giving it up to ANYONE.”

There was a tense pause; time seemed to freeze for a minute. Then, Redwolf took one step towards Whiteout. The captain calmly fired, sending a white-hot flash of light and heat straight into the admiral’s head. Shock went through me like a spike; then I was pulling my revolver. I would’ve had a bead on Whiteout if one of the guards hadn’t effortlessly grabbed my arm and yanked my gun away.

The dryer taur grinned at me, but then the penny dropped for all of us; Redwolf hadn’t fallen down. His feature’s clenched, one of his eye’s gone and a hole burned through his cranium from front to back, the admiral’s other eye slowly opened. Like clay melting, the hole in his face sealed shut, and another eye appeared where the last one had been, surfacing like a bubble coming to the surface of water.

Whiteout gave the admiral a look of abject amazement. As his features hardened again, Redwolf shot out a hand with lightning speed. It hit Whiteout’s forehead as the fingers closed around his skull and slammed him up against the wall behind him, twisting his head at a severe angle all in one fluid motion. The dryer taur’s body went limp and fell to the floor as the dryerskunk released it.

The guards, much like the assholes that I had a fight with in the officer’s club, stared with slack-jawed awe. Redwolf withdrew his arm and gave a nonchalant glance at the two meat walls.

“Zip that in a body bag and put it in storage,” she said. Walking over to the vid phone on the commandant’s desk and punched up the all-base intercom.

“Attention,” she barked into the mic. “This is Admiral Redwolf. I’ve assumed command of the base.” I couldn’t help but smirk a bit as I watched the admiral make sure to angle the com so people would get a good view of the grunts stuffing Whiteout’s body into a black rubber bag and zip it up.

“All personnel WILL assemble in the courtyard in five minutes. All personnel who fail to follow this order who aren’t dead, comatose or paralyzed will be court-martialed and arrested. That is all.” Redwolf tapped the intercom, which blinked off. The grunts trundled past me, carrying the body bag between them. Smirking a bit, I plucked my gun back from where one of them had tucked it into his belt and holstered it.

“Looks like there’s a new sheriff in town,” I said. Hands in my pockets, I followed the grunts out the door. As they dragged what was left of Whiteout through the front door, I ran into Col. Sweeper coming in.

“Fang! What the hell’s going on here?!” he said, looking utterly at a loss. Quirking an eyebrow, I pointed a thumb behind me at the commandant’s office, where Red was busily typing on a computer.

“Why don’t you ask your new commanding officer?” I said. “Now may be a good time to start kissing up; I don’t suppose I need to tell you that, though, do I?” Sweeper managed to shoot me an ugly look as he made a beeline for Redwolf. I casually weaved my way through the scrambling military personnel, like a salmon moving upstream. Making my way to the Earth-troop barracks, I took the creaking, ill-maintained elevator up to the second floor and made my way into my room. Ever since we’d returned from the satellite station, the stench of the place still seemed to linger in my clothes. I stripped them off and took a shower, changing into a pair of blue jeans and a long sleeve denim shirt.

Since Redwolf had the situation firmly in hand, I decided now was the best time to write up the formal report on the case. Going back over my notes wasn’t pleasant, like bringing up memories of a nightmare. Despite the discomfort, I pushed through it like taking a large dose of unpleasant medicine, typing on my laptop what I’d scribbled down on the fly in my notebook and recorded on my digital recorder. I got a particularly nasty feeling down my back when I found out I’d left the recorder running after the autopsy the admiral had conducted.

When it was finally finished, I saved the formal report to my laptop, put a backup on my flash drive, saved copies of my audio recordings and digital pictures to both my laptop and my flash, then e-mailed the whole thing to Donnalsen, that greasy U.N. rep that got me in this mess, with a note saying I’d send him an addendum if anything else developed. Finally done, I pushed the top of my laptop down, flicked off the desk lamp and leaned back in my chair, letting out a slow breath. Staring up at the ceiling in my darkened room, I found myself reflecting on the gruesome and bizarre events I’d gotten mixed up in. Ancient parasites, military disobedience, a power-hungry commander and a likely-as-not insane scientist; if I hadn’t seen half of it myself, I’d have a hard time believing it. Then my memories drifted back to that ice cave and the outburst I’d had with Redwolf. Now that I wasn’t feeling so emotionally volatile, I looked back with a more frank assessment of what was said.

I didn’t have long to think about it, however. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as a wolfskunk walked past my door with a smooth gait, his arms held perfectly still by his sides. Fear grabbed me in a vice lock as I caught sight of his face; his eyes were black, soulless marbles. Abject horror gripped me as I realized that I hadn’t smelled the stench from the satellite station on my clothes all over the base; the contaminated victims were THERE! The trooper carrier that had escaped the station must have arrived at the base and Whiteout must have hidden the parasite-controlled soldiers, planning to continue with his deranged project after Redwolf and I had left.

I slowly began to regain control of my muscles. Terror had kept me still, and in the dark the monster must not have noticed me. Slowly, I sat up, frantically looking around my room. I’d tossed my revolver and its holster into a bag with my dirty clothes, so the first weapon available to me was my backup, a model 1911 .45 automatic in my duffel bag on top of my clean clothes. I grabbed the pistol and slowly crept out into the hall. I was just in time to see the wolfskunk’s tail slip around the corner. But before I could step out of my room, I noticed a trail of small droplets on the floor in the dim florescent light

made irregular by multiple un-replaced burnt-out bulbs. Following the trail, I had an unpleasant feeling I knew what I would find as followed the trail into another officer's room.

It's a rare thing for me to be glad I'm right.

Laying face down on his bed, a badger in an arctic military uniform was staring blank-eyed at the wall, his sheets growing ever-more stained with the blood oozing out of his slit throat. I mouthed silent profanity, then jerked my head to one side as I heard the sound of a muted struggle. I hadn't taken more than two running strides down the hall when everything went silent. I froze, even holding my breath as I waited a good half a minute before creeping around the corner. A door further down the hallway, too far to be within earshot of my steps, was open. I slid along the wall as quietly as I could, making my way up to the doorway and peering around the side.

The wolfskunk was standing in the middle of the room, a zebra marine held in a hammer lock in front of hir. With hir back to the door, shi was gripping the equine by the muzzle with a third hand, while a fourth held a blood-stained combat knife. The zebra was twitching, but it was the final, involuntary spasms of a dying body.

Sliding silently around the corner, I drew a bead on the wolfskunk's head. But without even looking behind hir, the wolfskunk did a backward mule kick, sending me across the hallway and slamming me into the wall! In a fluid motion, the wolfskunk turned, dropping the dead marine and strode purposefully toward me. But I sent off a wild shot that hit hir in the arm holding the knife. That stopped the wolfskunk. But shi wasn't looking at the gun. Instead shi was looking around, like shi was less concerned with me pointing a weapon at hir than shi was about others being alerted by the shot.

"How the hell did you know I was there?" I rasped, the wind still more or less knocked out of me. Finally looking down at me, the creature dropped it's mouth open. I started to bring up my gun, fully expecting the geyser of diseased sludge that erupted from that other creature that attacked me the other day. But instead, a voice came from the motionless mouth; a voice that sounded like it wasn't the wolfskunk in front of me talking, but something hiding *inside* hir, talking out of hir throat. It was a cold, emotionless voice, devoid of any feeling that I could recognize. I immediately recognized it as the same kind of voice I'd heard echoing up the ventilation shaft back at the satellite station.

"I could sense your thoughts," the voice said, making me jump in my skin. ***"And yes, I can understand your language and yes, I am intelligent and able to think for myself."***

"Why the fuck were you helping Whiteout sieze power then?!" I said, slowly pushing myself up off the floor. There was only one explanation I could think of for what I was hearing; the parasite, the thing now pulling the wolfskunk's strings was the one speaking.

"That one was only a means to an end." Said the voice. ***"I don't care about any lesser races' petty ambitions, only what will further my ultimate goal. That goal is to end all conflict."***

"Tch, end all conflict? By taking control of people?" I said incredulously. "You and your kind must not realize..."

"I am singular," the hideous voice said. "I have no others; I am collective, existing in many, with the mind of one. This conflict between myself and existence will be temporary. That is what you were thinking; that conflict will continue between myself and others, but only until all either join me willingly or by force. But others fighting others, they have endless reasons to fight, and they all are based on one simple concept: That there is good and evil."

"Oh, so you think there is no good and evil," I said, sneering. "So you're going to wipe out everybody whose got a firm opinion on that."

"No," Said the flat, dead voice. ***"There is good and evil. And for conflict to end, evil must prevail."***

I was left speechless for a moment. I never thought I'd actually hear somebody say that and have any sincerity behind the statement.

"To end conflict," the voice continued. ***"Evil must prevail because evil is always willing to compromise. Good demands opposing actions that are widely disapproved of. Evil is unbiased, accepting of all. It opposes nothing. If all is evil, then large-scale conflicts shall end. Wars will be impossible because there will be no interest in a cause, because causes are selfless while evil is self-centered. There will be no crime because nothing will be disallowed. And with no unity under a cause and no judgment for actions, the security of my own existence will be almost assured, for no one outside my control will desire to oppose me."***

I shook my head. This creature, this collective being wanted to bring all of existence under its figurative thumb for one reason; the concept of so-called "rational self-interest." It wanted to take over to make sure nobody threatened it. And to do so, it would possess and kill anyone not on its side.

"Then why are you just murdering these marines?! Why not take control of them?!" I was trying to think while guarding my thoughts; I was sure there was some ulterior reason for this monster to be jabbering to me. Its next statement made me think perhaps that reason was hubris.

"Your kind are inadequate as tools," the thing said. ***"You are physically weak and few of you possess any abilities that aren't also possessed by hosts now available that are much more advanced in every way that matters."***

It was talking about the Canmephians; I knew that without having to think too hard. And suddenly, it hit me why it was running its mouth; it was keeping me from raising an alarm while the rest of its monstrous puppets worked way through the base!

"And now you know why I've been so informative for you," The creature droned. ***"But even with that knowledge, your failure is inevitable."***

"I doubt that," said Redwolf. Both I and the creature turned quickly to the right, just in time for the possessed wolfskunk to get his head blasted off his shoulders and several more shots to find their way into his torso. The wolfskunk's body slumped to the floor as the admiral holstered four sidearms.

"I got suspicious when several terran troops didn't make it for the assembly," Redwolf said, looking down at the corpse. "So I did a fast psy-scan of the base. I picked up on your thoughts like a magnet." I looked up at the admiral, somewhat at a loss for words. An alarm going off ended the awkward silence before it could linger too long.

"ALERT! HOSTILES IN THE BASE! THEY'VE TAKEN CONTROL OF THE RESEARCH LAB!" Redwolf ran for the stairs while I went back to my room, grabbed a leather jacket, a wool watch cap and my gloves to keep from freezing to death. I took the stairs three at a time and slammed out the doors. The sight that greeted me made me stop cold faster than the temperature.

The base courtyard was the stage for an assault on its own research facility. Canmephian personnel had quickly moved armored vehicles to provide cover from the fire coming from the windows and doors of the research lab. Lazer fire, grenades, and a variety of extra-ordinary powers like telekinesis were being launched from either side. The Canmephians were laying siege to the lab, while their former comrades, now being used by the soulless monster within them, held a firm ground against them. Several shots came close to me and I ducked for cover behind the generator for the landing pad lights. Judging from the amount of fire coming from the building, the two sides had to be equally matched in number. Just then, a door on a building nearby opened. Redwolf stepped out with a pair of grenade launchers under two arms and a pair of rifles under the others. Shi marched towards the front line...and then stepped out of the building AGAIN, similarly armed.

"What the fuck...," I said. I watched in surprise as no less than ten identical drygerskunks emerged from the building, armed and ready.

"Shi can...duplicate himself?" I muttered. A grenade rolled close to me, the explosion making my ears ring and my head throb. I shook my head to try and clear it; that's when I caught sight of the terran troops. Most of the personnel were watching from the sidelines from covered positions on building roofs and around corners. Occasionally one or two would fire a few rounds, but mostly they appeared to be just trying to weather the storm.

Looking at the scene, I felt it was a sign. A sign of how things were and how they were going to stay. A part of me went numb and it wasn't from the cold. I'm not sure how long I just crouched there behind the generator, watching the battle, but my vacant staring was cut off when out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure about my size slinking out the front gate behind everyone else's backs. My instincts told me it was trouble, so I took off after him.

The snow had picked back up again and was falling heavily in the evening dusk. The explosions muffled the sound of an engine to my right turning over as I looked around, shielding my eyes with one hand from the wind, but it didn't quite drown the sound out. I turned and saw a troop carrier, probably the same one that tried to get away from the satellite station. I ran through the snow, taking long, jumping strides to get through the snow. I managed to grab the door handle and slapped the open button the hatch sliding up just as the carrier started out through the snow, the lurch of the vehicle throwing me to the floor. I managed to get my pistol up and pointed at the driver just in time before he could reach for his own pistol.

"Don't even think about it," I said, raising my voice to be heard over the motor. I clambered to my footpaws, holding onto the troop seats next to me to keep my balance, keeping my gun trained on the driver; a short, stocky beaver in a red parka with a fur-lined hood. He glared at me with a mixture of frustration and nervousness. I could certainly understand the latter, considering we were riding around with a full cargo load of those leathery parasite sacs.

"Dr. Ulysses I presume?" I said, side stepping right up next to the beaver. The doctor scoffed a bit.

"Lucky guess," he said. I shrugged, glancing out the windshield. Snow was buffeting the carrier as it plowed through the snow, making it hard to see.

"Lucky or smart, it's right." I said. "Tell me something doc," I nodded my head at the back of the carrier and its disgusting cargo. "Do you really think you can control this thing? Or did it make you some kind of promise, 'cause frankly I don't think you can trust this fucker."

The beaver shook his head. "It's not about trust," he said, "it's about what's practical. I'm on its side, so there's no reason to expend the effort to kill me."

"Oh, so you know about this sick shit's plans and you're going to be it's willing tool," I said. "You fucking sellout."

"Better to be at the devil's side than in his way," the doctor said, still keeping one hand on the wheel. The carrier rumbled along at a good clip, the howl of the wind almost keeping level with the motor. I snorted, cocking the hammer of my gun.

"I don't believe that for a minute. Now turn this thing around and head back to base." The beaver scoffed again.

"If you think there's any hope of fighting this thing, then you're all alone there." I cocked one eyebrow, a sardonic, rueful half grin playing across my face.

"Story of my life," I said.

That's when the troop carrier shot out over the edge of a steep drop off.

We hadn't been able to see where we were going with all the snow. I hadn't just shot the doctor 'cause we were going so fast it would have more than likely caused a wreck, but it had also taken me too long to realize the beaver was beyond reasoning with. Next thing I knew, however, the vehicle lurched downward. I got that funny feeling in my stomach that you get when you go down a steep hill, then I was hurled through the windshield as the carrier smashed into a rock outcropping. Loose objects in the carrier got thrown out with me, and as I slammed against another outcropping, a piece of sharp metal went into my rib cage.

A gasp escaped my muzzle. All sorts of types of pain shot through me. I looked down with surprise at the strange new metal appendage that had suddenly sprouted out of a bleeding wound in my chest. Then, I

started to feel numb. No pain, no fear, no worry. Slowly, I laid back, closing my mouth and looking up at the dark, snow-powdered air.

“Is this...” I thought to myself, then felt myself emotionally shrug. “Well, it’s probably for the best.” As I laid there, I looked back on everything that had happened lately. I finally decided to face the truth. I was obsolete. There was no denying it anymore. Not much of what Redwolf had said in the cave was true. We were in similar boats, but not the same. Whereas everybody expected me to be nothing, everybody expected hir to be everything. Similar, but not the same. And shi did not need me for any reason. There wasn’t anything I’d done shi couldn’t have done himself. There just wasn’t any arguing it.

I came to realize just what I was; I was a person from my own time. The 21st century was where I’d belonged; a time on Earth when people could still do great things not just by what was handed to them or what they were born as, but by what they made of themselves. Sure, the admiral said hir personality was human, but shi was Canmephian through and through; hir body, hir powers, hir knowledge, hir education. The only difference between hir and other Canmephians was hir birthplace. Shi wasn’t a product of Earth, that was for sure.

My time was an era where my people were still in the running. The running for what, you may ask? For being among the dominant life forms in creation, as it is. We were keeping pace, as far as we knew. We still had ambition; we hadn’t been thrown onto the intergalactic stage just yet, so we still had time to get our act together.

But then, we made contact. Time is up class, pencil’s down. The universe wasn’t going to sit around and wait for us to play catch up with everybody else. Our technology, our science, our government, our very physical bodies couldn’t compare with the forces that were now at work on our own planet. No one told us when to run; we missed the starting gun.

The lines had been drawn before I woke up in this era. But now, now it truly was out of our hands. As a Christian, I’d always felt that my life was being guided by a higher power, but God doesn’t treat us like children or sheep. He gives us opportunities to feel a sense of personal satisfaction, of accomplishment. But now, times and the universe had changed. Or maybe we just got pulled into it before we were ready. Either way, Earth had decided at some point it was going to be a sidekick, and that’s just the way things were going to be, I guess. From here on out, my race was going to have its hand held by the Canmephians all the way. But I didn’t want to live like that; I couldn’t live like that. I had no place in this time. I was too weak and too unintelligent to make it as an influential, important person anymore, but I couldn’t resign myself to a life of mediocrity.

And so, as my body grew colder, though I couldn’t feel it, I realized that this was probably the most merciful conclusion for me. Looking back, I’m frankly surprised I lasted as long as I did. It’s not everybody in my position who’s survived some of the things I have. Hell, it’s not everybody who’s seen some of the things I have. Life really is like a roller coaster, with highs and lows and unexpected twists and turns. And this last case has certainly been like a roller coaster.

And like a roller coaster, the ride was over before I knew it.

As I looked up at the dark sky, I noticed it getting brighter. I also felt myself getting warmer. Above me, I could feel something...something inviting.

No reason to keep it waiting.

EPILOGUE

-Personal e-mail from Sean Donnalson, Representative of The United Nations to CMAC Admiral Redwolf-

Dear Admiral Redwolf,

Thank you very much for your personal attention into the bizarre and dangerous events that occurred in Antarctica. We here at the U.N. are honored that you gave the situation such a great amount of personal attention and that you brought a resolution to the situation so quickly. Your efforts have once again aided not only the U.N., but the entire planet immeasurably. I want to personally assure you that we will be carefully analyzing the information you've provided us on what occurred and will be quickly working to get the public what they need to know about the matter. Thank you once again for all your indispensable aid.

Yours truly,

Sean Donnalson.

-Press release from the United Nations to multiple national and international news agencies sent out one week later-

TRAGEDY IN ANTARCTICA SPURS U.N. TO PUT MORE RESEARCH INTO TREATING STRESS IN TROOPS

A report of remarkable casualties at a U.N./Canmeph-2 research base in Antarctica has shown the UN that it needs to find a way to better treat stress-related illnesses in peacekeepers. After careful analysis of data provided by the Canmephian military and by U.N. personnel, authorities state that a massive number of deaths were caused by riots stemming from Seasonal Anxiety Disorder (SAD). SAD is often seen in extreme climates where a lack of sun or night causes people's bodies to have difficulty getting rest. Due to the emotional and psychological stress placed on the person, tempers often run short, which can sometimes result in violence. The incident began....

-Two weeks after the press release-

Seagulls circled over the city landfill, cawing and searching for scraps of things that looked edible. A low, dull bellow came from across the water of the nearby harbor as a ship sounded its foghorn. Like crabs on the beach, landfill workers crawled over the huge mounds of refuse, sorting through them and

separating the garbage into recyclables, machine parts, medical waste and other categories, tossing them into the proper bins for proper disposal.

"Hey, Hy!" The foreman, an overweight bear yelled out. A hyena in a greasy jumpsuit looked over at him. The 'yena, has his hands in his pocket while in front of him a junk car was hovering several feet off the ground. The hyena strolled over to his boss.

"You rang?" he said.

"We're getting a big load in from the state warehouse," the bear said, showing the 'yena his digital clipboard screen. "Seems they're cleanin' out a bunch of unclaimed belongings, you know, from disappearing persons cases n' deaths with no known relatives, shit like that. I want you to sort it out.

"Sure, just as soon as I finish what I was doin'," the hyena said, looking the bear straight in the eye. He grinned as behind him, the floating car squealed and crunched as it was squashed and crunched down into a cube roughly the size of a beach cooler.

"Telepathic show-off," the bear muttered as the hyena grinned, turning towards the landfill entrance.

"That's telekinetic," the 'yena said without turning around. Making his way towards the front gate, the hyena watched as a forklift rolled backward, taking a palate of stacked, cube-shaped plastic boxes off the back of a dump truck. The lift turned and dropped the palate right in front of him.

Isn't that just like life, the hyena thought, looking over the stack of boxes that was as tall as he was. *Just pile your crap in front of me and expect me to take care of it. Eh well, it's a paycheck.* Yawning and stretching, the 'yena flipped open one of the boxes and started rooting through it, taking out items and using his telekinesis to launch them into the appropriate bin like they were shot out of a catapult.

"Crap, crap, shit, crap, shit, crap, shit, more shit, more crap, why can't people throw out anything good anymore?" he muttered. Of course, the hyena known simply around the landfill as "Hy" was used to having to go through garbage to get what he wanted. Hy wasn't his name, though. It was just the easiest thing to call someone who had no known name. Since he'd woken up in a hospital with a weird case of selective amnesia and no recollection of his name or the last five years of his life, the hyena had taken government subsidy housing and government jobs to keep himself going. He often had to do stuff he didn't enjoy but needed to if he wanted to keep from getting kicked out of his dinky apartment into an even dinkier homeless shelter. He knew someone with his talents should be able to do more than just sort garbage for a living, but he didn't know what he wanted to do. Telekinesis, telepathy, remote viewing and pyrokinesis were all great abilities to have woken up with, especially the better he got with them, but he wasn't sure yet how to use them for a profit.

The hyena was halfway through the fourth palate of boxes by now. He flipped open the top to the latest one, then looked inside.

"Hmm? What's this?" The hyena set the box down on the ground. Reaching into the box, he stood up, slowly shaking out a tan trench coat that had been folded up inside. Looking around, the hyena

shrugged into the coat and turned from left to right, looking himself over. He was surprised to see it fit him rather well; standing a little over six feet tall with a halfway decent build to his muscles, most of what he found never fit him.

“Hey, nice fit! What else is in here?” the ‘yena said, going back to rooting through the odds and ends. He found the clothes in the box were, for a change, actually to his taste. He also pocketed a flash drive marked as a personal journal, figuring it might make for interesting reading later. He was also quick to stash a hefty looking revolver he found in the coat pocket; landfill rules dictated anything dangerous found was to be turned over to the authorities immediately...but the hyena was one of the types who only bothered to follow rules when he felt like he should. The rest of ‘em he’d blow his nose with if he had the chance.

“Well this is a nice find for once,” the hyena chuckled, twirling an old-fashioned hat he’d also found in the box. “Wonder who I have to thank for this little treasure trove...” he picked up the box and looked at the side where the belongings’ former owner’s name was printed.

“Mike Fang....hmmm...that’s got a nice ring to it.”