

BOOK TWO OF THE SNOW ADVENTURES

THE INFINITE WISDOM



DANNY C. ESTES

The Infinite Wisdom

A Fantasy Novel

By

Danny Carl Estes
dannyesstes.com

Edited by Kelly Lynne

Cover art design by:
Eira Queen of Snow

Furry art designed by:
Tapcykreetts
Echo Chan
Moonway
Claudia Lazarus
Faukk
Dom Fambro

Copyright 2018 by Danny Carl Estes

Danny Carl Estes Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, please return to your favorite E-Book store and purchase your own copy
Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious.
Any resemblance to real persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Word count: 79,382

Table of Contents:

Chapter 1: Myths Come Alive

Chapter 2: My New Lot in Life

Chapter 3: Collecting My Rent

Chapter 4: Future Seeds

Chapter 5: Planning

Chapter 6: Catch and Release

Chapter 7: A shaky Path to Follow

Chapter 8: Food and Clothing

Chapter 9: Duck and Cover

Chapter 10: Another Hairless Ape Building

Chapter 11: Standing up for All

Chapter 12: Hairless Apes Live

Chapter 13: Concessions of Freedom

Chapter 14: Vigilance

Chapter 15: Cubs and the Cost

Chapter 16: A New Life Worth Living

Mrs. Svea Dovell



Chapter 1

Myths Come Alive

“Come on, fella. You’re not too old to remember suckling at your mother’s tit.”

I awoke to these words. I lay in a white fur lap, my muzzle pressed up to a milk-bearing breast. My tongue lolled out. The female polar bear squeezed her breast with a large paw so a stream of milk fell on my lips and tongue. I lapped it up like a pup.

“That’s it, wolf. Drink up. I’ve plenty to spare you.”

I was only semiconscious. A strange, flat light shown in two places within gray walls. The room felt small and warm, but then again, I did lie as a cub in a warm lap.

Hunger awoke muscles that barked for sustenance, and so my muzzle pressed upon the offered breast and I suckled nourishing liquid until my belly felt content.

“Good wolf.” Smiling green eyes looked down on me with praise as if I were her cub. Once my thirst abated and my lips relinquished her breast, she stood with me in her arms and carried my weight easily over to a hard bed elevated a meter off the floor, where she laid me down and pulled a woolen blanket over my naked body.

My tongue rolled out to pass over my lips in satisfaction before my eyes fell closed on their own and I slumbered.

Joann sat on the bed next to me. She bent over and kissed my cheek. “Wake up, love. You’ve slept long enough.”

I stirred. Distant sounds of unhappy animals bombarded my waking mind. I opened a sleep-crusted eye, twitched an ear to the noise and blinked both eyes open. Large, beautiful gray eyes looked down into my ice blue ones as a sad smile covered the lips of a fetching white-tailed jackrabbit.

“What happened? Where are we?” I asked Joann as realization that I knew neither answer confused me.

Joann’s ears lay on her back, denoting her sadness. “We’re alive and together.” She squeezed my paw in both of her soft ones. “As for what happened, it seems some animal found us out on the snowdrift.”

Some animal, out in the snow? My mind sought what Joann was talking about. A vague image hovered just out of reach in the depths of my mind, which masked the identity and features of our rescuers, although a fragment of a memory did surface of a female horse who snorted at something I’d said and had replied, “You may say such now, but time will truly tell if you hold to that sentiment.”

Joann helped ease me up into a sitting posture. I felt weak in all my muscles and extremities. During this simple chore, my right calf warned me it was still angry at having been used as a chew stick for a hungry wild polar bear some days back, though presently the leg was covered in a clean bandage.

Chew toy? I roamed slowly about my waking mind until a clear memory of being lost out on the glacier came to the foreground. *Of course; now it’s coming back.* My family heritage had bestowed upon me a good memory and a logical mind. Without them and my tendency to look at clues from different perspectives, I’d never have considered detective work in my youth.

Discomfort showed on my face as I winced and laid back my ears to the pain. I looked down to rub my leg with a paw. My tail twitched. That’s when I noticed Joann wore no clothes. Not an unpleasant sight to wake up to, seeing the

soft white fur on her chest glide down to disappear between nicely-shaped strong thighs, save I was in no condition to do anything other than admire her beauty. Still, it seemed out of character for Joann to greet me so unattired in a strange place. A second after this rolled past my rebuilding memory, I realized my body was lacking clothes as well. Though it wasn't totally out of the question for an animal in the hospital to be undressed, still the question remained, why was Joann naked? If she were in the hospital having her frostbite treated, she'd still be wearing a hospital gown; and for that matter, shouldn't I be wearing a gown as well?

Another fragment of recollection brought forward my muzzle and lips happily suckling on a pair of pleasantly large white breasts. Naturally, in response to such a memory, my gaze traveled up Joann's belly until it acquired her familiar white fur-covered breasts. I already knew those breasts, having enjoyed them with paw, lips and tongue for some years. But though they were soft and cuddly to hold, nuzzle and kiss, I knew they had never been large enough to fill my paw completely. The breasts I'd nursed off of had not been hers, nor could they have been, as Joann had never been pregnant to develop the nourishing breast milk young leverets needed to continue their growth. This puzzlement helped to restart more gears in my mind. I rotated into full wakefulness. "Where are we?"

"In a hairless apes' building is what I've been told," Joann enlightened me, as she hugged me close. "I was so worried for you." She pushed back from my shoulder to kiss my lips in loving affection.

In my peripheral vision I caught sight of something white and very large in motion after the kiss. My nose came alive in the same instant, recognizing Joann, my fiancée, and Clair, Joann's sister, the woolen blanket at my side, the scent of which covered my skin, and other animals out of sight who I didn't know, along with a multitude of odors I'd never experienced. Aromas I could not describe left my mind scampering about my awareness to try and catalog them. However, the large, naked, female polar bear walking over was not one of these total

unknowns.

She settled her bulk heavily on the floor next to Joann, who seemed not to be alarmed by the polar bear's proximity and looked at me with caring green eyes I vaguely remembered.

"So how is my patient today? Are you hungry? Do you think you can drink something a bit more fortifying today, or do you prefer my milk still?"

I stared at the polar bear, trying to assimilate fragments of delirium into something cohesive, but Joann interrupted this process.

"You've been ill for some days. Mrs. Svea Dovell has been kind enough to give her milk to the three of us."

The three of us? Again, my thoughts had to open up recent incomplete files. Finally, all aspects of the past days came forward like a whimpering puppy with its tail shamefully tucked under his legs. I gazed about and saw Clair in a corner. She looked downhearted and huddled in on herself. Her long, brown, black-tipped ears lay on her bare back as if she held no life within her body. Her fur had lost its sheen, and she sat with arms about her drawn-up legs with her head on the wall. Joann turned to see what I saw. She sighed deeply with sorrow, her ears twitching to give me more visual clues to her pain before her troubled eyes sought out mine.

Gilt left my mouth dry as I recalled it was my fault Clair's newlywed husband had been murdered before her eyes back in her burrow. My fault she'd been animal-napped, along with Joann, and sold to my father's clan out on the border of the largest glacier in Burrland as the main ingredient in the clan's rabbit stew. My fault for saving her and Joann from the stew pot only to follow an obsessed archeologist deeper out on the glacier instead of following my nose to get Clair and Joann off the ice, even though the odds of them both surviving the journey had been low to practically nil. Riddled with this heavy guilt, I still had to risk compounding it further by asking, "How is she doing?"

Joann's black-tipped ears twitched yet again before she shook her head. "She hasn't said a word these many days after we'd been declared whole by a

mean-tempered wolverine and installed in this cell with Mrs. Dovell. As it is, I have to make certain she drinks the meals brought to us.” Before I could add this weight onto my heart, Joann went on, “Braxton.” She sucked in her bottom lip so her upper incisors showed. She touched my shoulder with a soft paw. “I think she’s suffered a miscarriage. When I suggested she needed to eat for her developing leveret’s sake, she fell into a fit of crying that lasted a whole day.”

My memory of Clair’s scent of pregnancy and her present scent told me Joann’s fears were accurate. An emptiness of certain pheromones I’d tagged out on the ice was absent on the air without my having to take a deep whiff. This knowledge furthered my guilt, when I didn’t think anything else could have; I was riddled in self-hatred.

Joann went on, as she’d had time to deaden the pain of her sister’s loss, to remind me of the red fox. “As for Oscar Sullivan, I haven’t seen him. Mrs. Dovell explained if he were found in good shape, he’d have been taken to another section of this building.”

An image surfaced of a fortyish red fox. My ears laid back briefly as I sought to lay blame on his shoulders for our current captivity, but this quickly fell to the wayside as it became quite clear that if I’d tried to follow my nose off the glacier another pack of arctic wolves would have found us, and this time Joann and Clair’s death would have been assured.

This understanding came about as Mrs. Dovell revised Joann’s information.

“The male quarters. The place you’ll be taken to, wolf, once Mr. Thelin sees you’ve recovered enough to drink down a meal on your own.” She placed a compassionate paw on Joann’s shoulder. “I suggest you two spend as much time together as you can. Once he’s taken to the male cells, Mr. Thelin will tease you with brief moments together to get you to do as he wishes. For those of us who are couples, his wishes always end in having to conceive another cub.” Mrs. Dovell touched her belly to help visualize what she meant.

Her latest information left me puzzled. *Why would our captors wish Mrs. Dovell to bear a cub? Why would this same captor wish Joann and Clair to*

conceive a litter? My eyes focused on the cell across the way, on a rare female smooth-coated otter, very obviously pregnant. Although her species could use a larger population, it still begged the question, *Why would they care?*

Joann put a paw to her breast, distracting me as her eyes sought out mine.

Before she could capture my gaze, Mrs. Dovell pushed herself up sadly, her missing cub so easy to visualize as she still had milk to give; weighed heavily on her. She gave me a cheerless look before she padded to the cell bars and settled to give us what privacy she could.

Joann forwent words and sought to bury her fear of the forthcoming future to slide in behind me so I could lie back on her chest. She wrapped her arms around me possessively and settled her chin on top of my head, accustomed to the echoing misery of other female animals in varying states of fetal development rolling into the three-walled cell acting as our quarters.

“Don’t fret any on what she said,” Joann bravely whispered. “The main issue is we’re alive and together right now.”

I turned my head to see her better. Joann encircled my face with her arms and hugged me close as if she could meld us together. On the air I smelled the salt in her tears as they rolled slowly out of her eyes and onto my face. I looked into her eyes. “I’ve made a mess of everything.”

“Shhh...”

“If it weren’t—”

“Hush. None of this is your fault. We each pad to the beat of our own drum, and I’ve known about yours for years.”

“But because of me, Clair—”

“Love, you could not have foreseen our future.” She cut me off with a shake of her head. “Once she and I came into danger, you did as promise and risked your own life to protect the two of us. Though we’re caged as wild animals, we’re healthy, to an extent, and improving.” Joann shifted an arm down and ran her paw along my arm. “Just remember, whatever befalls us, you did everything in your abilities to bring us through this alive.” She kissed my ear. “I know in my

heart that as long as you live, you'll continue to see to Clair's and my safety. But for the moment, I bid you to put away all your thoughts of the future and give me every second of your time. For I'll need every moment to hold onto once we're taken from one another."

Joann had skated around the obvious. Our future was up in the air with our new captors, who held us in a seven-meter wall-to-wall room, with metal bars acting as the forth. Somewhere in the middle of the glacier in a hairless ape building, which as far as I knew no animal knew about, not even the wolf packs.

A glance toward Mrs. Dovell told me there appeared to be no escaping our captivity. Very few cages could hold an enraged polar bear long, and yet the walls about us and the bars at the head of the cell showed no visible signs of her wrath. An impossibility in my mind, considering a pregnant polar bear overflowing with hormones could exert considerable force on the bars. Yet she's still here, trap in a cell pining over her missing cub. Still, even if we could escape our captivity, Joann and Clair would last little time out on the ice pack. We'd been stripped of all our clothes, not to mention made defenseless by having our paw and pad nails cut to the quick, I soon discovered. Such precautions rendered most animals incapable of lasting long out on the ice, which also brought to mind a possible cavity search to make certain no equipment might follow us into these cells.

The answer to why the iron bars showed no apparent abuse from Mrs. Dovell's strength came later when I learned the hairless apes' buildings were far more developed in processing than our current knowledge of technology, which gave the bars enough tensile strength to withstand ten polar bears.

For the present, I shelved brute force to bend the bars out of my mind to make room for other considerations. Such as the light source in the walls that radiated no heat, which begged the question of how they worked. As for amenities, this cell came fully equipped with a steel sink and toilet made to accommodate a polar bear's size and strength. This held my curiosity, as the hairless apes were supposed to have died out before animal kind advanced

beyond simple instincts, thus how would they know to make such facilities so large and indestructible? Or were the hairless apes larger and more powerful than we'd conjectured?

Regardless of these puzzling facts, the most profound in my mind was how could these strange smelling items feel, look and smell so new after all these thousands of years, as if the workers had just finished? Even the concrete floor held a sheen, though I never smelled concrete like it. In spite of what I was experiencing while encased in Joann's arms, I had to concede that these hairless ape animals had advanced in technology far beyond our current civilization. Perhaps this was what Mrs. Irina Yenin, the head scholar at the library of history, tried to warn me about. Perhaps I—no correct that—we were going to see the animals who sought to control the advancement of animal kind so as to make as many bank notes as possible on each hairless ape revelation before they'd allow the next innovation to be discovered.

No matter who the caretakers of this place were, presently that information was irrelevant. Relevant details were the hallway outside the bars, lit with the same in-wall lighting. But I was getting ahead of myself. Right now Joann wanted my full attention.

The next morning, if you counted day and night by the wall lights dimming for a span of time and brightening for another span of time as day and night, our coming separation came about.

Joann lay in my arms, having quietly made gentle love to me while cloaked in darkness moments before the lights eliminated night by gradually brightening up the area. Some short while later the distinct clatter of hooves echoed from down the hallway. These sounds were accompanied by the claw scratch of two sets of animal pads striking the floor.

Mrs. Dovell stirred, ears shifting. Understanding who the sounds belonged

to, she hastened to whisper to us, “That’ll be Mr. Thelin and his cronies. If you wish more time together, I’d suggest you quickly separate, and you, Braxton, play act as if you’re near death’s door.” After her warning and suggestion of deceit, she shifted her body so her back was to the bars.

Joann’s ears laid back and she latched onto me. I hugged her a second before she slid out from under the covers and sat on the floor. For myself, I laid back, closed my eyes and tried to look as limp as a wet noodle.

Out in the hallway, the sound grew louder. My wish to remain still was surely tested when the approaching pads stopped outside the cell. Joann took in a breath of fright and stood. She backed into the bed, her white and brown tail pressed into my shoulder. As long as the bars remained closed, reason told my intelligence no harm could come to her or her sister, so I resisted the impulse to have my first peek at our captor and instead remained still.

“Aw, Svea,” a deep-throated voice began. “How is our patient? Is he well enough to be relocated?”

I heard movement and Mrs. Dovell growl with a nasty attitude, “My name is, as it’s always been, Mrs. Dovell, and until you address me as such, you can just go to the devil.”

“Now, now, Svea, is that any way to speak to your benevolent host? Why, I might mistake your intent as a true insult, in which case I might be inclined to punish you in some manner.”

Mrs. Dovell snorted. “As if you could do more than you have, you bastard.”

“Now, Svea, in what manner I was conceived has no bearing on your present circumstances.”

She emphasized her contempt with a, “Humph!”

“Hmm, if you’ll not consider your own circumstances, perhaps you should consider your husband’s?” Mr. Thelin threatened.

Mrs. Dovell growled. “You leave my husband out of this!”

“In point of fact, if you don’t behave yourself, I could do just that.” Mr. Thelin became thoughtful. “I’ve enough specimens of his DNA to impregnate

you forty times over and then some. So unless you'd rather not have his usefulness deemed unnecessary, I suggest you hold your attitude to yourself and answer my question."

Mrs. Dovell shifted, and by the sound of her next heated words, she now faced Mr. Thelin more squarely on. "You hurt Espen, and I swear I'll kill you."

"I'll do more than hurt him; I'll let him watch as Lawrence here uses you to see what type of cub could be had by your union. After which, I'll reverse your rolls and let you watch as Lawrence slowly guts your husband."

Mrs. Dovell's intake of breath suggested this Lawrence animal could take on a fully enraged polar bear. Which meant Lawrence was either a larger polar bear with fighting skills, or the most powerful bear living, a fully-grown grizzly. *I could, of course, be wrong; both polar bears could be as easily sedated, so any animal could do as Mr. Thelin suggested.* Regardless of which scenario was correct, Mrs. Dovell shifted, settling heavily with an out-blown breath of defeat, and answered him.

"The wolf needs a few more days. His fever has level off, but as yet it's showing no signs of lowering."

"Indeed?" I heard the snort of exhaling. "Norbert, how say you?"

The bit of air movement, which kept the air from becoming stale, ran over my nose and into my olfactory nerves. Memory cells attached to the smells pulled down into my nose told me the hooved animal Mrs. Dovell was talking to was a stallion, though of a mixed breed I'd never come across. *Or have I?* A long-ago memory pricked. The scent my nostrils took in seemed to bring up my cub-hood days, and for some reason more recently, though at the present I couldn't place it.

The animal Norbert took in a lungful of air, as I'd have liked to, to identify the stallion further, and said in disdain, "The bitch is lying."

Though I'd yet to place the hooved animal, the scent of the one who just spoke smelled like one of those mean-tempered wolverines. Briefly, I wondered if he was the same animal as the one who imprisoned Joann, Clair and I some

unnumbered days ago.

“How is that?” Mr. Thelin inquired.

“That hare had sex with the wolf not long before we arrived.”

“Indeed? Well,” Mr. Thelin’s tone hinted on pleasure. “This is an agreeable event. We now know at least one of the two new females is sexually active, a boon for our needs as well as for their own continued survival. However, you are mistaken in three things. The large one here is not a bitch and the two females are not hares, nor is the wolf, his correct label.”

“Oh, right, sorry...” Norbert said in ill temperament.

“You know very well sorry doesn’t cut it, Norbert.” Mr. Thelin said in some heat. “You best correct yourself.”

“Fine, sure. This one’s a female polar bear, of course. The two other females are white-tailed jackrabbits and the one play acting he’s too sick to be moved is a male arctic wolf.”

“Much better. By labeling them correctly, we avoid mistakes later, as you well know. Yet you did misspeak.”

“Mr. Thelin, technically I had their common names right,” The wolverine whined.

“Not precisely; granted you had the new acquisitions’ common names right, yet how often do I refer to any animal in such a manner? As for the term ‘bitch,’ that word refers to a pregnant dog, not to a lactating polar bear.” After some seconds of no response, Mr. Thelin said, “You will of course report to the punishment room once I dismiss you.”

The wolverine grumbled under his breath.

“You will set the dial to level two for that, Norbert.”

Since the cat was out of the bag, as the saying goes when a female kitten learns of her sexuality, I rolled on the metal bunk and had my first look at our captors. The animals outside our cell all wore white, spotless lab coats. This, in a way, surprised me, as no odors of cotton or wool found my nose, thus begging the question, *What materials could they have used to create the lab coats?*

The wolverine I smelled was as expected. Medium height for his kind, black and brown motley fur body with white tufts under his chin. Soulless black eyes, which added to their reputation of housing malevolent spirits. Short ears. Basically lean and evil looking, and the fact he still had claws on both paws and pads meant he'd be a formidable opponent to cross.

Further afield of the bars was a very large adult brown grizzly bear. Now him I should have smelled, or would have if I'd taken a deep whiff. The fact I didn't catch a scent of him told me the air movement outside the cell branched off in different directions. This answered my unasked question as to why I'd yet to catch the scent of the smooth-coated otter across the way.

Bypassing the otter, I took account of my possible future adversary, the grizzly bear. He leaned on the otter's bars and moved a paw wide enough to crush my head, using claws as thick as my little finger, to rub and scratch under his muzzle as he ogled Mrs. Dovell with an easily-read look of lust. He stood a good two hundred and sixty-five centimeters tall. He was broad of shoulder and built for survival. In other words, he had thick brown fur to fend off possible attackers, underlaid with layers of fat over muscles strong enough to kill an elephant.

Aside from his powerful frame, which foretold my quick demise should I venture a test of his abilities, I saw he held a metal chair with some kind of wheels that looked to be neither wood nor steel. I puzzled over its construction only a second. *I've heard of such a chair being used in an aristocrat's nest but having never seen one I can't be certain this one is like the other. Still, if Mrs. Irina Yenin's story is correct, and the wealthy are holding back such innovations to line their dens with banknotes, it stands to reason such well-preserved ape items may have come from this very dwelling. If so, it definitely makes sense why they were out to kill Oscar Sullivan, whose archeology digs could bring to light their deception to the whole world.*

Regardless of the advanced technology I was now privy to, my gaze moved in front of the grizzly bear and to the side of the wolverine where stood a

stallion, whose nature I'd heard rumors about but thought never to see save when I died. It was said his kind only appeared to those leaving this world. He was a large animal for a horse. Skin and hair so black it shone purple to the play of light across his withers. But what set him apart from regular horses was the radiant white spiral bone that jetted out of his forehead some sixty-two centimeters.

The fabled Unicorn of Death... I labeled him from stories told before the hearth in my cubhood. Unlike the White Unicorn of the glacier, who'd appear out of the barren snow and ice bearing orphan animal cubs with the help of two sheepdogs, the dark unicorn before me was supposedly the bringer of death.

Upon seeing the living entity of those stories in the flesh, the animal in me wanted to growl low in my throat as a warning for him to stay away from Joann and Clair. My intelligence, however, forestalled this telegraph of the deep-seated fears of my cubhood days, for they were based only on those fanciful stories. Though stories were often based on reality, they didn't tell the whole truth, as most were embellished with falsehoods to make them stick in the mind. Still, my intelligence couldn't stop me from standing and stepping between Joann and Clair to set myself as a barrier between him and them.

The black unicorn eyed my antics and Joann's reaction of taking up my arm in both of her paws before he shifted his head to look on the grizzly. "Lawrence, would you be so kind as to extract the arctic wolf from the cell and bring him with us?"

"Yes, Mr. Thelin." The grizzly grinned, displaying long sharp teeth.

"And, Lawrence," the unicorn added with a touch of annoyance on his tongue, "I bid you do so without your normal want of touchy feely of the resident female, even if that female be Svea, if you please."

The grizzly's smile vanished when he glanced at the unicorn, but a leer returned once Mr. Thelin returned his gaze to me.

On the grizzly's lab coat-covered hips hung a white belt with a pawful of oddly shaped, overlarge keys. Lawrence unhooked these from his belt. He

looked at the locking mechanism on the outside wall of our cell as if it were a puzzle and sought out a key to match.

“Mr. Thelin,” Mrs. Dovell spoke up in our defense, “Have some decency. Let these three remain together. They’re obviously family. These two rabbits are sisters and the wolf’s engaged to this one.” Mrs. Dovell gestured to Joann. “Besides, the other rabbit is still locked in a depression. Surely keeping them together would help her come out of it. What be the harm?”

The unicorn raised an eyebrow. “An arctic wolf and a white-tailed jackrabbit?” The unicorn looked at me. “Is this true?” He pointed a finger and gestured to Joann and I. “Are you two engaged to be married?”

Mr. Thelin’s question held no mockery, simply plain curiosity. Unlike the wolverine, who snorted and covered his muzzle with a paw while the grizzly guffawed out loud. The unicorn slid a disdainful brown eye onto the wolverine before he looked back at me.

I was of a mind to ignore his question, save I’d already been a witness to his counter to disobedience. A threat to Mrs. Dovell about the loss of her husband and someplace called “The punishment room” for his hench-animal for breaking protocol.

“Joann and I, yes.” I answered truthfully, though I wanted to sass him, but until I’d a better handle on what threats he’d follow through on, I couldn’t risk he’d really hurt my only true family, unlike my birth family who chained us out on the glacier to be eaten by a wandering wild polar bear.

The unicorn lost focus briefly, as if searching out a memory, before he asked, “Are their many such marriages between carnivores and herbivores?”

“In truth, I only know of two others in Furlton City. Beyond that I can’t say.”

“Interesting.” Mr. Thelin lost focus again but came back to himself and looked at Mrs. Dovell. After a moment he truly saw her. “Forgive me, Svea, but your news had not been told to me.” He looked at me and Joann then glanced at Clair before he returned his gaze to Mrs. Dovell. “To answer your question, I’ve

already plans for the three of them. The arctic wolf will advance my work considerably by donating his DNA, while the white-tailed jackrabbits will receive the results of those tests and be inseminated with genetically-altered fertilized eggs.”

I quirked an ear and tilted my head at his words. *Inseminated? Does that mean what I think it does?* I looked at the polar bear and her still lactating breasts. *Does he really think he can impregnate Joann and Clair using my sperm?* Before I could run that question to ground, Mrs. Dovell snapped.

“Bastard.”

“Tsk, tsk, Svea,” Mr. Thelin said without anger. “You’re judging me too harshly. Why, I’ve been very gracious to these three. For one thing, I saved their lives.” The unicorn paused and tilted his head. His ears swiveled and his tail swished back and forth as if working out a problem while he considered something. “Hmm...in truth that’s not quite accurate, and I detest inaccuracy. Perhaps I should rephrase that. My sister and her two sheepdogs saved their lives.”

Sheepdogs? Sister? An image that had been hard to pull forward in my mind padded up close so I could plainly see the White Unicorn of the Glacier, the bringer of life, and her ever-present sheepdogs. *The White Unicorn’s his sister? But...but that makes no sense.*

“For my part,” the black unicorn continued, as more questions cluttered up my mind. “I examined the three to take care of any injuries or frostbite they possibly sustained out on the glacier. As for kindness, I allowed them to remain with you for over a week while their health improved.”

The admission he saw to our health was contradictory to the stories around the campfire. *So, what is the truth?* Another question fell into the growing stack of files inside my head. With so many piling up on each other like case files on my old desk, I chose one of the newest to ask.

“Excuse me...I’m confused. You’re the White Unicorn’s brother?”

Mr. Thelin nodded. “Bright animal, this one.” He whinnied and jerked a

thumb my way. “Got it in one.”

“But if you’re the bringer of death, as the stories go, how is it your sister would give us over to you?”

“You’ll be privy in due time, I assure you. But presently such details are not necessary.” The unicorn looked at the grizzly and motioned with his paw that he should precede.

Presently, I was in no shape to argue with the grizzly bear, let alone a wolverine, thus I offered no resistance to being separated from Joann and Clair, lest my full recovery be postponed because of other injuries.

Briefly, Joann turned to bury her head at the nape of my neck, her long, brown, black-tipped ears falling to lie on her brown back before she found the strength to pull away to look into my ice blue eyes. Her pupils filled her gray eyes, indicating her fear without words.

I patted her paw and whispered in her ear short words of encouragement. “Help out your sister as best you can. I’ll come for you both.”

Out of my peripheral vision, I saw the stallion’s ear twist to catch my softly spoken words. I turned a contemptuous eye his way, indicating I disliked his eavesdropping. The unicorn saw this and a smile creased his lips. I gave Joann one last hug and kissed her soft lips before I reluctantly separated from her and took the couple of steps to the cell door, which brought me even with Mrs. Dovell. She touched my shoulder.

“If you please, Mr. Snow. If you learn of my husband, Espen, could you tell him I’m fine and miss him ever so much?”

Compassionately, I laid a paw on hers and nodded.

“Touching, Svea. But it’s not a certainty the two of you will see each other again. It’ll all depend on the total tests performed on your latest cub.”

Mrs. Dovell lowered her head and mouthed, “Bastard.”

From the bars, I gave Clair a worried glance. She still sat in the corner like yesterday, as if nothing existed to her. I’d have said something inspiring, save her predicament was all my fault. Besides, if Joann couldn’t pull her out of her

inward seclusion from the world, she didn't need me to sadden her light brown eyes any more.

The grizzly's brown eyes settled on me before he turned the key in the lock outside the cell. "No funny business, wolf, or I'll thump you a good one."

As a thump from his large paw could shatter the vertebrae in my neck, I nodded understanding. He harrumphed, satisfied, turned the key and slid the bars open. With a paw strong enough to crush my skull he pushed the wheeled chair in front of me and said, "Sit." He held it as I obeyed. The wolverine slipped inside, took up leather straps stitched onto the metal bars of the chair and fastened them about my arms, legs and chest to secure me to the chair. Pulled outside the cell, I watched as Joann held her paws before her breast, mouthing, "I love you," while tears fell down her cheeks. Mrs. Dovell took up Joann's arm with a sympathetic paw to make certain she wouldn't get hurt by trying to stay at my side. For this I felt grateful, and I nodded to Ms. Dovell, who sadly nodded back.

Although I didn't want to take my eyes off of Joann, I needed to understand how the bars locked, so against my heart's desire, I watched the bear slide the bars back into place and took note of how the locking mechanism worked. *A sturdy design. In fact, it could prove challenging for a skilled lockpick like myself.*

Lawrence backed off once the apparatus gave a loud sound indicating the cell door had securely fastened. The wolverine, Norbert, stepped behind the chair and put paws on the two handles protruding from the backrest. The unicorn stallion took note my confinement to the chair had been properly completed and the cell bars were once again closed. *Not good.* I filed this away. *He's detail-oriented. That will make an escape that much more difficult.*

With all in order to his satisfaction, he started walking. Norbert pushed me away from everything I cared about.

"You can't imagine how pleased I am to have you here, Byrghir," Mr. Thelin said to emphasize he knew exactly who I was. "Or do you prefer Braxton? I

wouldn't wish to presume, would I?"

I glanced at him. "As you already presume much in the captivity of an Alpha Arctic Wolf, what's it matter what you call me?"

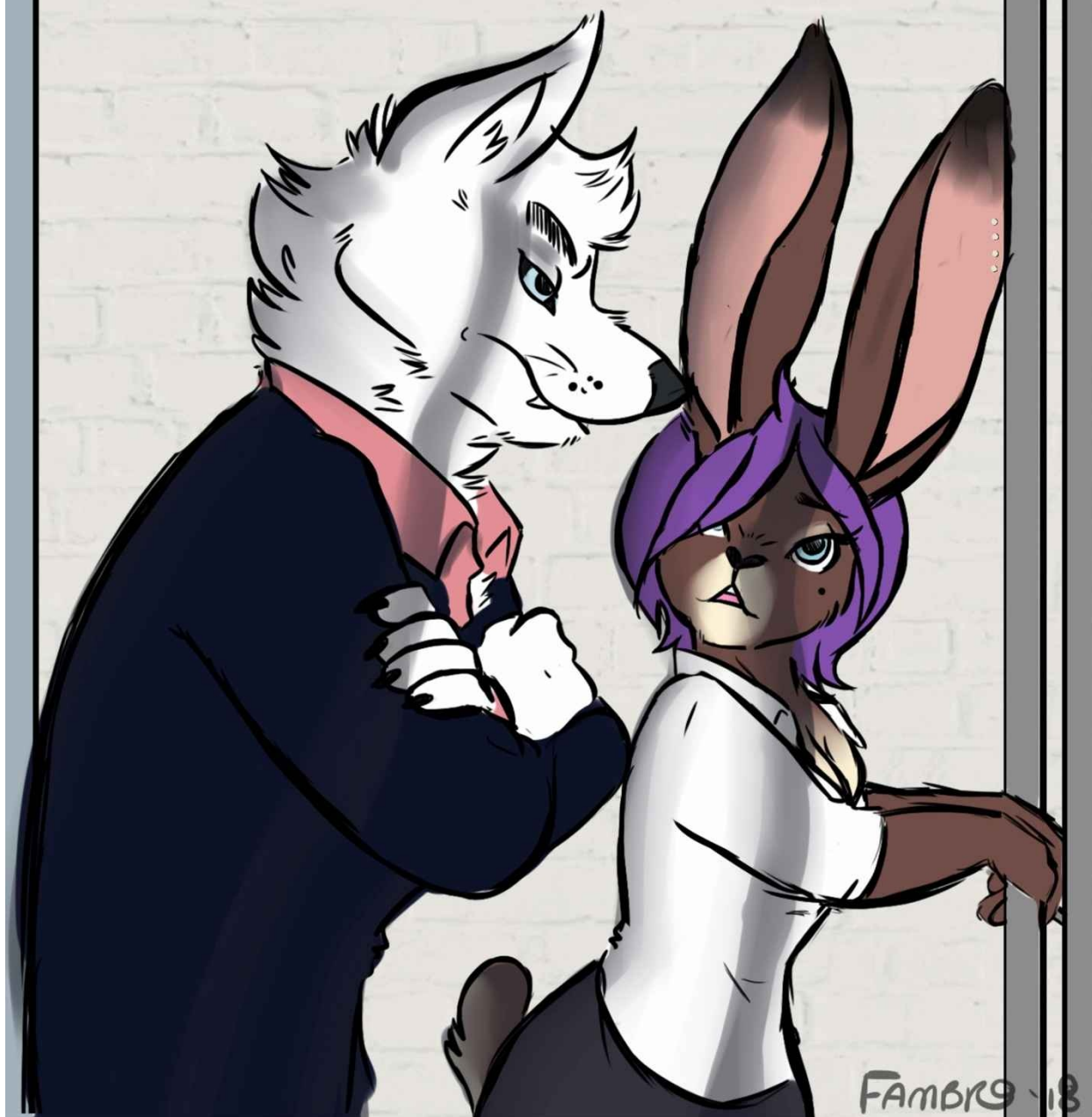
Mr. Thelin gave a half smile. "In point of fact, it doesn't. I simply wish to know which name might make you grind your teeth."

"Not only do you resemble an animal whispered about around the cooking fires, you're also a sadist as well," I remarked with a controlled glare. Of course the look was for show only, for inside I was already lamenting the lost presence of Joann. Along with this, a heavy guilt lay across my mind for Clair, who witnessed Oscar Sullivan's nephew, Mr. Bryn Nelson murder her husband. While my intelligence and animal instincts butted heads concerning how much guilt should cloud my thoughts, a portion of my feelings brought up cubhood stories of unicorns as I was rolled down the hallway past cell after cell occupied by various female animals.

The unicorn turned his head to better look at me. "I've been called many things but not that. Umm...a sadist." He followed my gaze to the occupant of the cell we passed, a tigress whose ears lay back on her head. Her tail twitched angrily and she offered him a sneer, showing off her razor-sharp teeth.

"You know, I quite like that," The unicorn remarked. "Sadist." He ignored the young tigress as if he hadn't even seen her and looked ahead. After some thought, he whinnied in laughter. "Norbert, remind me later to add that word to my sister's vocabulary. It somehow seems poetic."

Braxton Snow
Joann South



Chapter 2

My New Lot in Life

It soon became apparent Mr. Thelin enjoyed the sound of his own voice as he labeled off the female animals we passed, rendering up this animal's or that animal's habits and traits while surprising me in that he considered their given birth names important enough to remember.

For myself, I listened with half an ear, while my eyes were busy marking the strange hieroglyphs on the walls that I hoped would make sense enough when I came back to this hallway to rescue Joann, Clair and Mrs. Dovell. Yes, I was expecting a lot of myself. But in a sense, no more than I did in my day-to-day job as a private detective. Each case held its own problems, and I was good at problem solving, or so I'd been told.

The black unicorn led the way to an intersecting hallway some hundred meters away that ran to either side of us into the distance. Without hesitation, he turned right into a slightly curving left hallway where we covered twice that amount of distance, passing hallways on the right every thirty meters, before entering a vast room with a cylinder-shaped monstrosity smack dab in the middle that descended through a hole in a steel-grated floor while it also rose up through a hole in the steel-grated ceiling. Strewn about the overlarge room were all manner of boxes, crates and carts, tall, fat, short and wide, along with countless metal containers with dead or live blinking lights in multiple colors. Looking on it all, if it were indeed all of hairless ape construction, I couldn't help but imagine this could be the wealth of knowledge the upper crust animals were obtaining to keep them flush with banknotes.

I glanced at my captors as they made their way through a pathway and had an epiphany.

Some of the fairytales told me as a cub weren't simple fiction to scare young cubs to behave, they were down-to-earth descriptions of this menagerie of ancient artifacts. A way to describe items our own knowledge held no understanding of!

This rolled about my mind in near stunned disbelief. Oscar Sullivan's words at the ancient edifice we'd been chained to came back to me. "Paradise, Braxton. A stretch of land the old book referred to as Cleo Baker Two. It's referred to as the last best hope. A place to gather and commence a life changing event."

As I looked around, I wondered what one of these hairless apes really looked like. *Do they still exist here? Will I see one? Would I recognize one if I saw one? From my studies in the night school, I have some idea of their appearance. Of course this knowledge I gleaned from illustrations in the textbooks concerning archeological digs. But would they still look the same? After all, ten thousand years has changed us animals quite a bit.* These questions rolled around in my mind while I continued to mark landmarks we traveled past.

The black unicorn droned on as he led us into another slightly curving corridor similar to the one we'd left behind; an animal would have to be well versed in the layout to find his or her way around. After a short walk he guided us into a hallway seemingly at random, where I was pushed past more cells, these holding male animals.

Our procession finally came to a halt before an empty cell. The grizzly bear opened the cell with a key from his keyring of many and I was interred.

Mr. Thelin turned around and gazed at me with what could only be called satisfaction. "Ah, Byrghir, what a boon you are to me. As I said during our walk, this place is dedicated to the improvement of animal kind." He glanced at Norbert and Lawrence. "We're forbidden, you see, to breed genetically born subjects within these walls. A written rule my predecessor made me swear to. I'm not certain of the why's of it, but if I had to make a guess, it's probably to

make certain inbreeding can never be a factor. Of course, I have other theories. But I needn't bore you as yet with these. Suffices to say, we'll have plenty of time to air out the possibilities your genes will provide." The stallion swished his tail in an act I understood meant he was enjoying himself. "Ah, yes, quite a catch indeed. Two white-tailed jackrabbits, not quite out of their prime, and you. Yes you." He looked at me. "As you might have guessed by our conversation on the way here, my dear sweet sister delivers all genetically-altered animals born here to the arctic wolf packs surrounding the glacier so they can be distributed throughout the world to add their altered genes into the gene pool. But as we can never keep any for further testing and breeding, we have never obtained an animal whose blood has been thinned out by only a single parent."

"What are you saying?" I asked to reason out his rambling.

"Why, quite simply, your father was a product of my predecessor."

"Say what?"

Mr. Thelin flattened his ears. "I thought you'd be smarter than this. Your father was born here and given to your pack as a cub. The fact he became leader and held the title so long was a feather in my predecessor's cap. So much so, I speculated what might one or both of your sisters produce if brought here and inseminated. My dream, however, has been forcibly left to simmer since they became pack leaders." He looked down the hallway a moment, as if considering something, then back at me. "One does not simply remove a pack leader without complications. However, I can move forward with my ideas without them. With you as my guest, I can test out theories that will leave this facility functional well beyond my time on this world. Best of all, while females have only a short span of years for birthing, males can render up gallons of sperm until their death." The stallion laughed. "Make yourself at home, Byrghir. Tomorrow you begin paying for your accommodations by giving over your first samples." The unicorn's whinny of laughter filled the hallway as he left.

Across from me, a kangaroo walked up to the bars of his cell. Taking them in paw, he watched Thelin and his goons go. Once they had turned the far corner,

he slid his arms through the bars to lean on the metal and whistled. “Crikey, mate. It sounds as if you’ve made the old unicorn happy.”

I looked up at him. “For now,” I answered, puzzling out the whole conversation. Parts of it I’d missed to put to memory sights and smells we’d passed in the hallways.

“The name’s Johnny. Johnny Roo.”

“Mmm? Oh, Braxton Snow,” I said out of paw, trying to recapture a thread of thought.

“Snow, uh. I’d say that’s one odd last name for a black wolf.” Johnny eyed my present fur coloring.

“Mmm?” I looked at him, then down on my black-colored fur. “Oh this.” I gestured to my fur. “I dyed myself black some days back in an attempt to leave town unnoticed.”

“Apparently it didn’t work. I take it the coppers didn’t take kindly to you. Nor the judge, for that matter, to land your tail here.”

“Coppers?” I questioned with a raised eyebrow as I dumped my current thoughts to tune in my new neighbor.

“You know, the copperheads who nicked you.” Johnny clarified.

“Copperheads?”

“Oh, blimey. Sorry, mate. I’d forgotten you have police dogs here. Back home we have copperhead snakes as our street law enforcers, backed, of course, by dingoes.”

He said something that made inroads into my brain. “Judge? You mean you were sentenced to this place?”

“Not precisely. As I was being transferred with some other animals, this judge shows up with a fancy dressed weasel. The animal looked at the bill of lading and took a gander at those of us headed to the big house. Words were exchanged, banknotes were passed over and I was cut from the herd to find myself after a long journey on land and ocean, interred here.” The kangaroo looked about him. “At first I thought the place some sort of maximum prison. A

place to send animals to forget about them.” He shrugged, thinking. “But my incarceration in such a place made no sense, as I’m nothing but a petty thief.”

Although I could use all the information I could glean, an emptiness in my stomach prompted me to limp to the back of my cell and sit. “Not to change the subject, but when’s chow time?”

Johnny put his head on the bars and his ears dropped. “Now that, mate, has ever been the question here.” He turned to put his back to the bars. “It seems to my stomach I’m fed whenever the mood strikes them. Though in reality its merely that the time fluctuates.” Johnny turned his head to eye me. One ear rose. “Perhaps my luck may change with you here. That unicorn seemed to sound as if he needed you. Perhaps that’ll mean regular meal hours.”

The “better care” Johnny Roo talked about started that day. A two-wheeled meal cart drawn by a regular brown draft horse arrived some short time later. The green-eyed snowshoe hare dressed in a white lab coat who led the horse by holding the reins halted the procession. Behind the cart, two long-haired white and black sheepdogs, also in lab coats, worked in concert to obtain two 3.78-liter boxes from the cart and set them down before our bars. After that, each retrieved a sixty-one-centimeter pipe made of a material I’d never seen or smelled. It was not metal, wood, rubber nor glass, but whatever it was made of held some flexibility with hardly any weight at all. From my place on the metal bed I watched one sheepdog insert one end of the tube into the box then push the other end through the bars, one tube per box.

Across from me, the kangaroo’s ears rose. He slapped his paws together, hiked his tail up and smiled brightly across at me. “Ah wonderful, breakfast!” He got down on all fours like a common animal, took up the tube, inserted the end in his mouth and started sucking.

The cart and accompanying animals moved on with nary a curious glance for the newly interred captive, me.

As for myself, not at all thrilled to be on my paws and knees as if giving homage to my captors, nonetheless I limped over and mirrored Johnny. The

liquid inside the box was horribly vile.

Johnny snorted through his nose in laughter at my antics of wiping off my snout and tongue while my facial muscles portrayed to the world my feelings concerning the liquid inside. He pawed his face and apologized. “Sorry, mate. I didn’t think to tell you how awful it is. Truth be told, I’d forgotten. You see, I’ve been drinking this stuff for about a year now, and I can no longer taste it. But don’t worry, after the first hundred or so it’ll eventually kill your taste buds.”

I laid back my ears, my tail twitching while I used the fur on my arm to mop off the last of the taste. “What is it made of?”

“I asked the same question long ago, mate, and if you believe those sheepdogs, you’re better off not knowing.”

When after some moments I’d not taken up the tube to resume the consumption of the vile liquid inside the box, Johnny paused in his supping.

“Drink up, mate. Regardless of its taste, it’s good for you.”

I waved off. “I’ll pass until the next meal.”

Johnny shook his head negative. “Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, mate. This is it. Two meals a day, whenever they take the notion to deliver them. Although the flavor does alter a mite from bad to worse, now and again.”

Ears still laid back, I grimaced.

“You could try a hunger strike, save the unicorn don’t like it none. If you miss two meals, he’ll have you taken to the pain room. When I’m feeling poorly, I do something like that to get myself taken there to relearn what it means to be alive.”

“What’s in the pain room?” I inquired, not at all ready to try the liquid again.

“Electrical devices they attach to you that make your muscles jump about on their own, kind of like the antics of a fish out of water. A little entertaining at first, but after a while you hurt so much the higher doses become anticlimactic. When that happens, they strap you down on a steel surface where that snowshoe rabbit you saw pulling the horse will slowly work one needle after another, no

bigger than the fur on your body, into your back. You'll scream with every one he applies." Johnny sucked up more liquid and admitted, "I've had that done to me three times the whole time I've been here, and I can tell you it'll wake you up something fierce."

I looked sideways at the box and tube. *I'm hungry dammit. Drink it.* With an audible sigh and a twitch of my tail in preparation, I flattened my ears and gagged it down, all the while shaking in revulsion.

"That's it, mate. Soon your taste buds will shrivel up and pass beyond caring. Once they do, it'll be no big thing to drink up."

"So now what?" I ask, wiping my lips off, wondering if I'd get rid of the taste faster if I licked the floor.

"We wait until dinner then tomorrow's breakfast. After which, if I heard the unicorn correctly, you get your first milking, uh...entertainment." The kangaroo smiled with a far-off look.

"And this will be?"

Johnny's attention came back and he licked his lips. "I'd hate to spoil it for you, mate. Just know it's the one bright spot in this mind-numbing place." He thought for a moment, his ears giving off clues as to whether they were good or bad thoughts. "Hmm, make that one of two bright spots."

With that I had to be satisfied, for the kangaroo refused to say more on the subject. I considered calling out to the other males occupying cells nearby, three cells beyond mine to either side of us, save learning details didn't seem important enough at the present.

I allowed the liquid to settle in my stomach to make certain it stayed there and gave an ear to Johnny as he talked sadly for a short time about girlfriends across the ocean. After running down a short list of female kangaroos and a tryst with two dingoes, he talked of one female kangaroo imprisoned somewhere within this building. "Now don't get me wrong, she's a pretty Sheila. Which makes seeing her from time to time a breath of fresh air in this place. But, uh, it's just that we don't mesh as a couple."

After a few minutes of silence from Johnny, I inquired, “How’d you two meet? On the trip here?”

“Mmm? Oh, uh no. She was already interred in this menagerie of boredom. In fact, that’s why I’m here, or so I’m told by the snowshoe hare. I’m her new partner. Her husband couldn’t stand the endless hours of nothingness and in shredding his blanket, hung himself. At least that’s the information the smooth-coated otter in that very cell told me two days before he did the same.”

I raised an eyebrow. *That’s three sets of animals I’ve come across who were or are couples. The polar bears, the female smooth-coated otter and now a female kangaroo who’d had a husband. Hmm, I wonder.* I considered my caseload of fifteen years as a private investigator. *Animals disappear all the time; some move to other cities, other leave the continent altogether. Some change their names, and a small few are murdered or killed in accidents in remote areas, which makes their bodies hard to find, let alone recover. Personally, I’ve had three cases of disappearances I couldn’t solve. Nor the police, nor other investigators.*

I pondered the ramifications as Johnny pushed up off the floor and walked slowly back to his bunk to lie down and take a nap. I, on the other paw, stood, folded my arms and slowly paced my cell to give my bad ankle a workout, regardless of the pain. *Mrs. Dovell has recently given birth. The otter across from her is heavy with a pup. Mrs. Dovell mentioned the black unicorn uses deceptive tactics to get her to agree to bringing a cub to term.* I turned to the opposite wall, wishing I had my pipe. *It’s times like this the pipe helps to calm my mind so the scattered pieces will settle into cohesion.* My distracted thoughts brought me to the opposite wall, where I turned for the one I’d just left and opened a new folder of thought. *If I understand this correctly, the orphan cubs brought into the arctic wolf packs by the White Unicorn are cubs born from captive animal pairs in this facility.* I reached the concrete wall trying to make sense of it. *But why would they do so? The black unicorn said something about altering the animal gene pool. Again, why?* Ankle complaining it had had

enough exercise, I limped to the bed and sat. *Wait, wait, wait—didn't he say it had something to do with improving animal kind?* I rubbed my muzzle. *Yes, yes, he did.* I flattened my ears in irritation at my jumbled thoughts and sought to put them in order. I grimaced and shook my head. *If only I had paper and pencil to write them out for comparison.* I huffed and lay back on the bunk.

After a bit of jumping around in my thoughts, I felt certain I'd reasoned out a plausible scenario. *For centuries, the arctic wolf packs have been chaining up captives out on the ice pack as a sacrifice to the fabled Black Unicorn of Death, to, as superstition termed it, turn his sight from the packs. These chained-up animals, whether sold to the packs or found wandering around on the glacier, are then found by the White Unicorn of the Glacier and her accompanying sheepdogs and brought to this building, that is if they haven't already become wild polar bear food. I stretched out my leg to work out a kink. Once animals are interred in a cell, the Black Unicorn of Death then breeds like species by way of a process that alters the new life's genes in some way. Supposedly for the betterment of all animal kind. After which, without regard to the young life's parents, when the new life is deemed strong enough to survive a long trip out on the ice, the White Unicorn of the Glacier returns to the packs with her gifts of life, who the arctic packs then pass on to orphanages in the cities that surrounded the glacier.*

I rubbed my eyes and muzzle with both paws and slumped. *Who started this program? Most importantly, why is it being done? Advancing a species without proper evolutionary adjustments for climate and living conditions will in time render a species incapable of handling basic living conditions.*

After a few minutes of futile conjecture on a valid reason why, I sat up and humphed. "This is getting me nowhere." I eyed my bad ankle and told myself, "Best to put my skills to better use." So saying, I stood and started seriously to check out my cell, especially the locking mechanism. Not able to really see the device from this side of the bars, I looked across to Johnny's cell and the lock a few centimeters away while my fingers explored the one holding my cell door

shut.

Yeah, tricky. Although the lock was big enough to get a claw inside, if I had a chance to grow one long enough, a fingernail was no match for the metal device. *I'll need a metal knife or perhaps something with a round shaft. Preferably both, with the tensile strength of a screwdriver.* With fingers a might sore from exploring the strength of the metal, I took the bars in each paw and gave them a pull, twist and push. *Of course, it couldn't be that easy, if they could have been bent, Mrs. Dovell would've escaped long ago. But you never know unless you try. After all, if I understand this right, this place was constructed around ten thousand years ago. And that's a long time for anything to continue working correctly.*

I eyeballed each segment of the bars, looking for a weak spot, testing its strength as I went along. Finishing up without locating a single centimeter of corrosion or production flaws, I checked out the odd lights embedded in the concrete walls. As I'd already discovered back in Mrs. Dovell's cell, the light source gave off no heat, which in itself was astounding, but then again, this whole place seemed to defy all physical laws as we knew them.

These hairless apes were beyond clever animals if they really built this.

Johnny rolled over on his bunk and eyed my antics for a short time. "It's no use, mate." He sat up and rubbed his eyes clear. "Cleverer animals then I have been brought in to fill these cells many times over before you landed here. Whoever built this place knew their stuff. Of course, it doesn't help matters any being naked. Why even if you escape this confinement, you'd have to contend with the cold outside." He eyed my fur. "Then again I'm guessing you'd have little problem with that if you truly are an arctic wolf."

I pushed out from under the bunk. The whole of it was one solid piece of metal attached right into the wall as if forged that way, for I found not a single welding spot. If the bed was part of the wall, I could jump up and down on it all day long for months and it wouldn't give a centimeter. I sat on my butt, somewhat discouraged, and looked at the kangaroo.

“To answer your question, I am an arctic wolf, so to me the cold is simply a force to contend with as long I take certain precautions. But what else is there to do besides look for a way out?”

He rubbed his muzzle with a paw. “Well, let’s see. There’s the all-important liquid meals. Sleeping whenever the mood hits you. The self-gratifying jerking-off, if counting the walls and ceiling gets boring, and lastly, the entertainment of watching a bat-eared fox clip your finger and toenails—that is if you behave. Trust me on this, mate, you want to behave. Cause if you don’t, he doesn’t stop at your cell. If that happens, for a time you’ll be walking funny, trying not to jam the nails into your toes or snap them off.” Johnny shivered at the notion of doing so then cleared his throat. “Hmmm, about the only bright spot in this purgatory of hell is when I’m pulled out of this cell to be milked of my semen.” Johnny slapped his muzzle. “Oops, I meant not to tell you about that.”

I arched an eyebrow.

“No worries though, I left out the best part. Anyway—”

“Best part?”

He waved me off. “You’ll find out, mate.” Johnny looked off into space. “Now, where was I?” He snapped his fingers. “Oh yes. The other is when I’m brought before that lovely kangaroo, Colene. Though we’re not allowed to touch, it’s refreshing to see and talk to a female of my kind.”

After Johnny was quiet for a few minutes, I prompted, “Anything else?”

“Mmm, what? Oh, uh, sorry, mate; other than these distractions, it’s a mind-numbing life until you end the party by hanging yourself or angering the grizzly enough to warrant his wrath. That’s if you want to go out fighting. Believe me, after some months in this purgatory I’ve had my thoughts turn to such destructive measures, but then I get myself taken to the punishment room and I’m good to go for another month or so.” During his speech, Johnny stood to walk up to his cell bars. He settled on the ground, stuck his tail out between the bars as far as it would go, then turned to see his tail as he moved it about. “Live or die, the unicorn doesn’t seem to mind. Sooner or later another animal is

brought in to fill the empty cell.”

I pushed up from the floor to inspect the sink and toilet. “Have you seen any pattern in what animals are brought in?”

Johnny looked ahead of him at the back wall to his cell and stretched. “Never thought to. Why?”

“No reason. I’m a private investigator by trade, or was one, so it’s kind of ingrained in me to check things out.”

Johnny finished his stretch and turned his head to look at me. “You know, down where I lived, animal dicks were always stirring up trouble with the authorities because of circumventing the legal system. You wouldn’t by chance be one of these—would you?”

I sat up in disappointment, intending to take up the washrag to clean my paws off of the filth which always accompanies being under a sink, when I noticed my paws were still clean. *Now that I think about it*, my mind sought out the evidence I should have come across, *I haven’t seen one speck of dirt, dust ball, hairball or even an old spider web.* “Hmm...”

“Hey, mate, are you one of those P.I.’s?”

I eyed the kangaroo, my mind digesting this discovery of over-cleanliness and considered. *A thief, hmm.* “Yeah, I’ve had my fair share of run-ins with the law.” To make certain of my facts, I pulled my tail forward and inspected the fur for any dust or dead bug carcass, and to my surprise, found nothing of the sort.

Johnny inspected his fingernails. “Would that by chance include lock picking?”

“I’ve done my fair share, but presently I’ve no idea how to accomplish that with these locks.”

Johnny let his head fall back on the bars. “Well, if something comes to mind, let me know. I’ve a trick or two which might appropriate an item that might come in handy.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Out of curiosity, I ran my paw along the concrete floor and came up with the same results. *How is this even possible? Dust gets*

into everything, even something that's sealed up. A small amount will always be present, as it's in the air we breathe. Thinking of which... I eyed the light source, tilting my head this way and that, but couldn't see a single speck of dust in the air. I was about to question my finding when my ears picked up on hooves striking the floor.

"Gosh, dinner already?" Johnny pulled his tail in and turned to the bars to take them up in his paws. The sound of squeaky wheels followed his words. "Yep, I'd know the sound of that cart anywhere." The kangaroo grinned at me. "Things do look to be improving with you around, mate."

I took up my tail and yanked a few strands of hair out with a grimace. Uncertain as to what I would accomplish, I held my arm out and eyed my fur as my fingers released the hairs. I watched the hairs fall to the floor without anything untoward happening. *What did you expect?* I rubbed my muzzle as my ears twitched to the sound of the cart halting momentarily outside my cell. I eyed the sheepdog, who took up a carton of revolting liquid and dropped it off next to the bars. A moment later he stuffed a tube down into the carton and made sure the top end stuck through the bars. After which he picked up the empty carton from breakfast and tossed it into the forward portion of the cart before signaling the snowshoe hare in front of the horse to proceed.

I looked down on my loose fur lying on the floor, seeing nothing special happen before I tucked my paws under my armpits and glared at the container outside my cell. As I actually could taste the foul liquid by memory, my tail dropped. A snarl found my lips; my ears laid back when they picked up Johnny's sucking sound as he consumed his dinner.

Keeping my strength up is paramount, I told my taste buds. Regardless of its vileness, the kangaroo seems no worse off, nor did my stomach upchuck my meal of earlier. Even so, I had a will to pick up the carton and cast it down the hallway at those who delivered it. *Yet to do so would deny my leg of nourishment to better heal.* With a heavy sigh I got down on paws and knees. Though undignified to eat in such a manner, not to mention looking obedient, the carton

was not made to be held in one paw. But to rise up on my pads to drink the stuff with more dignity would require a balancing act in one paw while I worked my paws over three horizontal bars that weaved between the vertical bars.

Johnny regained his pads after slurping down the last of the liquid in his container and slapped his belly. “That hit the spot, mate.” He looked up, smacking his lips. “A bit tart for my taste, but with a nice bouquet.”

The straw fell from my lips a moment before I started to drink as I stared unbelievably up at him.

Johnny looked sideways down on me and laughed. “Come on, mate, can’t an animal use his imagination?” He stretched and said more seriously, “I assure you, without it I’d have been chasing the kangaroo lasses outside the door of the Great Maker by now.”

Before I could comment, he yawned deeply and took to his bunk. “But as I’m not, at least I can dream of doing so.” He sat down and grinned. “I can’t wait to hear your reaction when you’re brought back to your cell tomorrow.”

I watched as he pulled up the covers and snuggled into his woolen blanket. In sucking down my meal, I considered his words. *Imagination would definitely aid one’s mind from falling into despair.* Moments after fully consuming the liquid I also yawned largely and stretched my arms about before I limped to my bunk and settled as well. It occurred to me before sleep closed my eyes that the taste of the liquid had been slightly different from this morning’s meal. I looked over at Johnny. He’d slept part of the day, so in reality, sleep should be a little elusive for him to doze off so fast after lying down.

Something had been put in the drink to cause...ZZZzzzz.



Ms. Eliza Thelin

Mr. Thomas Thelin

Chapter 3

Collecting My Rent

Our vile breakfast had settled. With my fever a memory, I felt better and decided exercise would gain back some muscle tone while I continued to work out the stiffness in my right leg. *Besides, keeping in shape will serve me best should an opportunity present itself to escape.*

Across the hallway, Johnny eyed my antics of push-up and sit-ups while he idly talked, remembering his homeland through his words. Around three hours of this passed, by which time I'd added the bed to perform two other muscle-building exercises. I finished up the last set and used a cotton washcloth provided to wipe down my body with cold water from the metal sink. Since there was no bath or shower, such hygiene activities would have to suffice. With no other bathroom supplies, not even a mirror or toothbrush for basic oral hygiene, I rinsed out the cloth and left it to dry. Echoes of unclipped toenails filled the hallway. Johnny got up and padded to the bars in quick steps. He pressed his head up against the steel rods and smiled.

"Well, if I'm not mistaken." He grinned. "Your festivities are about to begin."

I regained my pads and tried to keep from limping up to the bars to have a look. I took up the bars in my paws. My ear twitched in annoyance. "You're making no sense."

I looked down the hall, my nose and eyes hard at work as I watched the snowshoe rabbit and the grizzly bear walk along the hallway. When they came to my cell, the snowshoe hare looked me over questioningly. He checked a

clipboard he carried, flipping the pages, and eyed me.

“Uh, it says here you’re an arctic wolf. I’ve never known one to have black fur.” He scratched his head, ears automatically shifting to catch the sounds of the caged animals around him. “What are you, an albino in the reverse fashion?”

The grizzly, who pushed that same wheelchair to transport me to this cell the other day, snorted. “Come on, hare, it’s either him or it’s not. Make a decision.”

The snowshoe hare glared up at Lawrence and snapped, “That’s easy for you to say. You never get sent to the punishment room.”

The grizzly grinned.

For myself, I had to grudgingly give the snowshoe hare credit for talking back to so powerful an animal, and a predator at that.

Regardless of his bravery, I still didn’t feel informative, so I merely looked at him.

“Humph.” The snowshoe hare eyed me, looked at his chart and shrugged. “Norbert’s the one who keeps these records. If he says you’re an arctic wolf, who am I to correct him?” He shifted the chart and pulled from his white lab coat a dart gun. To this threat I backed up. But before he leveled the gun, Lawrence made a quick grab with his massive open paw and caught up the snowshoe hare’s long ears then yanked him up off the ground.

“Owowowowow! Lawrence! Let go of my ears!” The snowshoe hare complained, dropping his gun to try and grab the grizzly’s wrists.

The grizzly raised the snowshoe hare up to his eye level. “Mr. Thelin said no tranquilizer darts are to be used on this one.”

“Gaw, Lawrence, why didn’t you tell me?” The hare complained, going limp, not fighting the grizzly’s hold on his long ears as he couldn’t reach the grizzly’s wrists without hurting himself further.

Lawrence’s grin grew. “Sorry, forgot to tell you.”

By the grizzly’s looks, I reasoned he was enjoying mistreating the snowshoe hare, which brought to mind he may have conveniently forgotten to tell the hare just so he could mess with him.

“Okay, fine. I won’t use the gun. Now put me down!”

The grizzly’s smile fell, as did the hare when he let go.

The snowshoe hare dropped sixty-one centimeters. He flung his arms over his head, flattening his ears to his back, and turned a glare up at the grizzly to complain. “Dammit, Lawrence, you know that smarts like hell.”

“In point of fact, I don’t.” The grizzly bent over and turned his head. “But if you wish to demonstrate by pulling on my ear?”

The hare snorted. “I haven’t the strength, nor do you have an ear long enough to remotely match up to the pain you caused me.”

The grizzly stood straight and shrugged. “Then I suggest you keep your ears out of my reach.”

The hare picked up the gun. He eyed the grizzly briefly. A change in those eyes told me he’d like to shoot the bear; instead he glanced my way a second before he breached the single-shot barrel and withdrew the dart.

“Good choice, rabbit,” Lawrence growled. “Had you tried, I’d have killed you.”

“The name is Filip, you big oaf,” the hare snapped. “As for your empty threat, shove it up your tail. I’m the only animal who knows acupuncture. Unless you want proof of that fact on your next visit for relief from your chronic neck pain, I suggest you treat me better.” Filip closed the breach and stuffed the gun back into his pocket. For the dart, he retrieved a discolored brown case from his other lab pocket that didn’t smell like glass or steel. Inserting the dart, he closed the case and tucked it back into his pocket.

“You through playing with yourself?” The grizzly sounded miffed, though he held a mean grin on his muzzle.

The hare glanced my way before he scolded the grizzly. “Arctic wolves are not as dumb as you suppose they are. Even if this one’s not an arctic wolf, he looks brighter than most black wolves. I suggest you remember that.”

The grizzly snorted. “Intelligence counts for nothing in lieu of a good thump.” His muzzle bore an evil grin as he gave a show of what he meant. After

which the bear gathered up his keys to match the keyhole. Sliding the key into the lock, he looked at me and threatened, “You do other than I tell you and you won’t wake up. You get my drift, wolf?”

“I fight you, I’m dead. Sure, I got it.”

Lawrence snorted. He looked at the hare, as if to say, “See?” and unlocked the door. He next pushed in the wheelchair as the snowshoe hare, Filip, pushed the bars open enough to admit the chair. “Sit and strap your ankles, thighs and right arm down to the chair,” the bear ordered.

As I was not yet ready for any confrontation with such a large animal, I did as told.

Once I was semi-confined, he pulled the chair out and Filip strapped down my left arm. After which he made an adjustment to all the others to make certain I couldn’t escape my bonds before he buckled up the last one around my torso to the backrest.

After the hare seemed satisfied I was well secured, the grizzly pushed me down the corridor.

“So, huh, tell me, Lawrence, how long have you been here?” I asked to further my file of information on the residence.

“What’s it to you?” the grizzly snapped.

“Just curious...” I lied, looking left and right to see what other kinds of animals were locked up in here, as I hadn’t done so on my trip in. Up from my cell was a white-nosed coati, a great gray owl, further up a maned wolf and lastly a Kodkod, a small feline.

At the end of the corridor, Lawrence turned us along the slightly leftward curved hallway before he pushed me into that large room with the grated metal floor and roof surrounding the building in the center that disappeared both below and above. Pushed along a different pathway through the scattered boxes, crates and odd machines, I got a better look at the building in the center. It was a circular construction, about thirty meters at a guess. Its overall color was white; black lines here and there decorated its outer structure, with two-by-three-meter

single hieroglyphs running up and down its length. Halfway across the floor, a ramp had been laid out so an animal could walk over the two-meter gap between the floor and the building to an open oblong archway that led to another oblong archway a little over a meter in, at best guess. By the little bit of light falling into its darkness within, I could make out rows of single couches.

Lawrence paid no attention to the structure and kept right on padding along until entering a long hallway. He ignored all doors to either side until we came abreast of a double-wide door. Not bothering to stop, he pushed me into the doors, which gave way without having to turn a doorknob. Here, the wheelchair was pushed to the middle of the room and rolled into a set of clamps that were bolted to the floor. Lawrence locked down the clamps on the wheels by himself as the hare had veered off on another errand sometime during the trip.

Some steps before me, a wall full of muzzles of different sizes caught my eyes above a work bench. The grizzly walked up to these and took some time to read a white card under those he looked over. Selecting two, he came back and said, "Hold still."

As much as I wished to fight from having the metal muzzle buckled on my face, I dared not. Once he chose one and buckled it in place he tossed the other onto the bench without regard, cuffed my head for good measure and walked out.

Briefly I closed my eyes and shook my head, wishing I could rub my ear. Though unable to do this I could crane my neck about to see the rest of the room. Behind me was a table with glass bottles of various sizes. To my left, on the opposite side of the room, was a wide filing cabinet. The walls other than the one before me held a multitude of shelves, each crowded with items I couldn't even begin to describe. By the time I had a look around, two female black-tailed jackrabbits came through the doors and stopped some short steps in front of me.

Both smiled as their eyes traveled about my frame. Minus the smile, I did the same observation of them, without embarrassment about my unclothed body. Though both females raised their ears in interest, the one on the left spoke first.

“Now, don’t you look like a tasty treat?”

I compared both by sight and smell. “Twins?” I was just able to speak with the muzzle on.

The two giggled like youngsters.

The only difference I could see between the pair was their hair and eyes; one had hazel eyes, brown shoulder length hair and long eyelashes, while the other had long, light brown hair, long lashes and heterochromatic eyes—one eye blue while the other was green. Both of their coloring was darkish brown with black hairs about. Though both were centimeters shorter than Joann and Clair, I could tell within their lab coats both were fuller-breasted with wider hips. At a guess, because of their hip size, I’d wager both had already had a litter.

They whispered in each other’s ears, too low for me to catch, even with my ears swiveling about to catch the remotest echoes of their conversation. They glanced at me during their secret communication and nodded as one. Both raised their arms and began the age-old game of Rock, Paper, Scissors. With scissors cutting paper, the one on the left with off color eyes burst out laughing; she pulled her arms to her chest and shook with pleasure. The loser stuck out her tongue then poked her sister.

“Don’t forget. He’s mine next time.”

“That depends.” Off color eyes smiled mischievously.

“Mansi, you promised.”

Off color eyes took up her sister’s shoulders and turned her to the door. “Just joking, sis. Now be a good loser and make yourself scarce.” Once the door was closed, the winner put her back to the door and looked at me longingly. It was a look I knew well. A look which gained such rabbits the label nymphomaniac. Being the recipient of such a look made me self-conscious, and wished I could cross my legs to try to conceal a certain part of my anatomy. With no way to do so, or even the ability to close my legs because of the leather straps about my calves and thighs, I initiated our conversation to try to deter her from her obvious intent.

“Beg pardon, Mansi,” I began as off colored eyes slowly walked back to stand in front of me. “I assume you are here to collect a sample of my semen? Yet your obvious arousal tells my senses you’re about to forgo the black unicorn’s wishes and have sex with me.” Not able to properly talk, I still sought to wet my lips and mouth to try to reason with her. “I must dissuade you, as I already have a chosen female, and you know how we alphas are about such bonds.”

She slowly licked her lips as she undid one button after another on her lab coat, which after the third button left me knowing the lab coat was the only thing she was wearing.

Her ears shifted to hear my nearly mumbled words within the muzzle, to which she smiled and shook her head negative. “If your chosen were here, I might have to worry. But having read up on your species’ behavior, I know I’ve nothing to fear from an alpha male, and you know it.”

“Well, true that, but I have a chosen and would prefer to only have sex with her.”

Off colored eyes wiggled her nose in that endearing way Joann would when she felt frisky. “Tsk, ts, you mean you’d be so selfish as to deny me the pleasure of your male body? This is so unlike your kind. Why, any wolf seeing a willing female as I would pick me up on the instant and have inserted himself in me already, had he the chance.” Her lab coat opened fully, revealing a slightly heavier physique than Joann or Clair’s. A physique any male animal could get his arms around and fully enjoy. The fact I became aroused was not exactly embarrassing, as she seemed to be a professional. To be honest with myself, in another time and place I would have done as she said. But at this very moment I was a captive, and that realization slapped me on the muzzle. This helped me to try another tactic.

I bared my teeth and flattened my ears in threat. “I choose only my love to mate with. So I suggest you get dressed, perform the needed work to collect my genes and take me back to my cell.”

My threat impressed her none, for she dropped her lab coat behind her without care and walked unencumbered up to squat before me, putting her paws on my thighs. “You’d deny an admiring rabbit the pleasure of the power I see throbbing so close at paw?” She licked her lips having said this, her eyes on my crotch and her ears spreading to make certain the tips wouldn’t bypass the wire over my muzzle. “Tsk, ts, so selfish, wolfy. Luckily for me, my beautiful wolf, this decision is not yours to enforce.”

Her desire filled my nose with her aroused scent. I looked down into her off colored eyes when she looked up. Although I could see lust plainly within, I could also see she was no simple-minded black-tailed jackrabbit. This caused me to consider, *Since I can’t scare her to leave me be, perhaps I could talk her out of it.*

“Uh, if I may ask, why are you helping the black unicorn who holds even your own kind captive?”

She laid her head on my knee and let her fingers play with the black-dyed fur on my other leg, which closer to my skin showed clean new white growth, proving without a doubt my true fur color. After a short minute, she confessed, “Truth be told, my sister and I owe our lives to Ms. Thelin.” She sighed and stood up. “We were but nine, bound up on poles in an arctic wolves’ encampment waiting to be made into rabbit soup, when Ms. Thelin happened upon us. With little problem she secured our release and brought us here.”

After her explanation she cleared her eyes of the past memories with a wipe of her paw, then held her head back and shook out her long light brown hair behind her. “That felt nice to share with you.” She smiled. “Still, it kind of killed the mood. So no more sad words. We’ve a pleasant job to do, and I must confess, I’m on fire thinking about it.”

I considered her story and realized she unwittingly gave me a way to get her to back off. “Didn’t the grizzly tell you? I’m an arctic wolf. Like my kind out on the rim of the glacier, if given the chance I’d eat you without a second thought.”

The black-tailed jackrabbit smiled mischievously. “Lawrence has already

warned us of this fact. I also know you're engaged to a white-tailed jackrabbit. As white-tails and black-tails are near on cousins, I don't believe you. Besides, my sister's and my experience was years ago, so that horrible moment is far in our past." She brought up a paw and sucked on her finger a moment. "All I see before me is a powerful animal who I want nothing more than to feel deep inside me."

Damn, she's over-aroused.

Mansi turned to her right and sauntered over to the cabinet of drawers, giving my eyes the full treatment of her swaying hips and lovely long legs in a display to aid in bypassing my misgivings about cheating on Joann. To see if her ploy was working, she glanced back to see where my eyes were before she turned back to the cabinet. She looked in three different drawers before she pulled out what looked like a sheepskin penis cover, a product used on the male during sex without worry of an unwanted pregnancy. Puzzled she could perform like this after her harrowing escape from those of my kind, I also wondered in the selection of the device to avoid an unwanted pregnancy when it was impossible for her to conceive with any animal other than her own species. Bewildered about the cover, I watched her pad slowly back over and pull on the thing between her paws making it stretch far more than any I'd ever seen. This filled the air with its scent, which smelled more like a rubber O-ring than a sheep's intestines.

"What's that for?"

She giggled. "To collect a sample from you, of course."

"Huh?"

She smiled and bent over so her nose was but a centimeter away from my muzzle. "I thought as much." She wiggled her nose and touched my chest with a finger. "You, wolfy, obviously have never had to protect your partner."

"What's to protect from?"

She planted a kiss on the metal muzzle. "My sister and I normally take turns in this room, as we're both very fond of how a dick feels, but when we were told

an arctic wolf had been brought in, we both had to look at you before we figured out how we'd decide who had dibs on you today."

At this point I ran out of ideas how to keep her from having sex with me; if I managed it, her sister would take her place.

When the knowledge of this showed in my eyes, she smiled, turned around and bent over, giving me a right close view of her white, fur-covered butt. She wiggled her tail enticingly, pelting my nose with her strong scent of arousal. She shifted her butt to the side to look at my crotch.

"Hmm, you've lost some stiffness in your partial erection. Perhaps we're talking too much." She giggled, and while still bent over she reached between her legs and started fingering herself. "Hmm, yes, I'm already soaked with anticipation of taking you in."

In truth, I felt guilty in that I was enjoying her display. My animal, however, regretted nothing. Fully intoxicated with the scent of her wetness, it was battling to squash my guilt to get inside her as soon as possible.

Without a real choice in the matter, as she could do so many things to attain my unwilling cooperation, I decided to get it over with. I pushed back my thoughts of cheating on Joann and took in a deep whiff of her scent. I closed my eyes, envisioning Joann teasing me. Though the scent was a shade off from Joann's, I felt myself stirring.

"That's my lovely wolf." She backed in between my legs so I felt her tail fur tickle my chest and the bottom of my muzzle. "Just sit back and enjoy." Her tail pulled away and she sat down on me, sliding her butt around my crotch.

Between her scent, touch and display, she had me. Once she knew this she stood a moment and admired my size.

"Hmm-mm. If only you'd agree to join our small community, I'd treat you like no other wolf has ever been treated by a rabbit." Mansi bent and expertly pulled the cover over my penis. Once it was in place, she turned, and taking ahold of my throbbing rod, impaled herself.

I felt certain the cover would eliminate a lot of the sensation between us, yet

in truth it was almost as if no cover had even been applied.

With her paws on my thighs she sighed and wiggled her herself about to get me all the way inside her before she set herself to the real pleasure. Ignoring the fact I began to growl low in my throat out of old habit to the wonderful sensation of her administrations, she became more aroused. “Oh, fight it, wolfy, please fight it. I just love the way you feel inside me.”

In point of fact, I wasn’t fighting her; I was seeking a vision in my memory of Joann when last she did me like this. We were in Tanner’s stable back in Furlton City. We had argued about our plans for the future then I pulled her into my arms to quiet her tears. Petting and kissing, we equally felt a need for one another and she pushed me down into a barrel chair. Joann stripped out of her shorts and crawled into my lap. After a bit, she did as Mansi was doing. She bent to give me an eyeful of her female pleasures and settled on my thighs to tease me a good ten minutes before our mutual need overpowered us and she settled with me deep inside her before she worked me hard for a short minute or more until the moment came. In those few second of memory, I felt Mansi/Joann’s vagina muscles tighten, their bodies quiver as they moaned in pleasure. Joann’s moment and that of Mansi combined in my mind, and I had the strongest orgasm I’d ever felt wash over me.

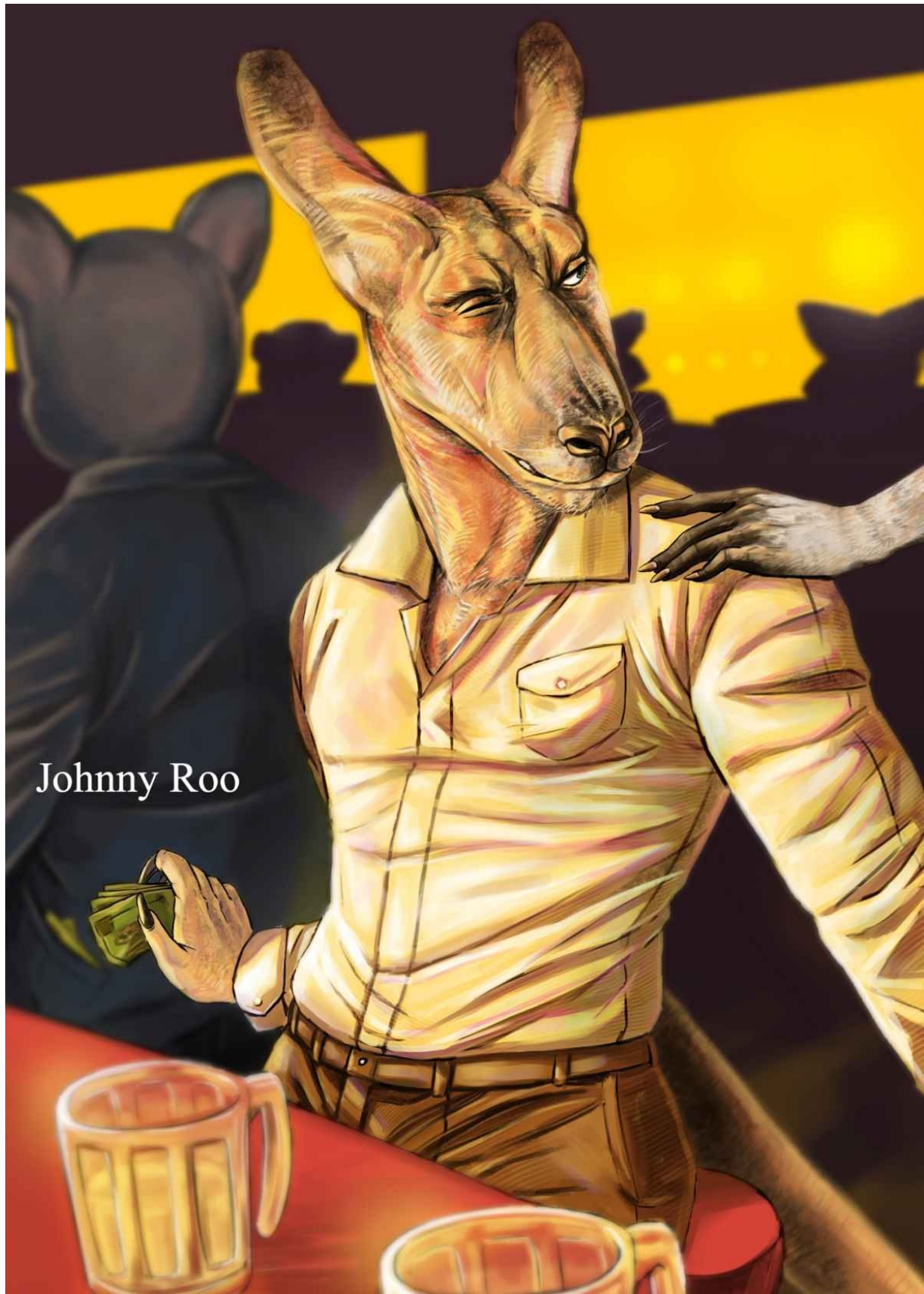
Mansi sat down heavily. Her breath came fast, filling her working lungs. She lay back on my chest so her lips came close to my ears, and sighed. “That was heavenly.” She licked my ear. “The power I felt in you as you came.” Huskily, she whispered, “What I wouldn’t give to have my legs wrapped around your sides and feel your arms holding me tight to your chest as your powerful thrusts brought us to ecstasy. Ah, that would be heaven indeed.” She stood with a sigh of regret and turning, she bent to pull off the cover, allowing her long ears to fall to either side of my muzzle.

Although I was still remembering Joann’s last lovemaking, a thought came to mind, causing Joann’s image to vanish. *If Mansi is that horny, I may have an opportunity here to facilitate my escape.* I ventured, “How about now?”

Mansi turned the cover over and held it up to see how much I'd expelled in orgasm. Her eyes slid my way, and she wiggled a finger negative. "Now, now, don't be a tease, wolfy. This has been very pleasant for me, so don't spoil the after-sex sensations I'm enjoying." She bent and gave my cheek a kiss. "Besides, teasing is my job." She giggled. She nipped my ear playfully before she backed away and donned her lab coat. She sighed and her ears shifted, listening to my breathing before she sauntered out with a playful bounce in her pads.

Not long after her departure, the grizzly reappeared. His nose caught the smell of sex on the air and his eyes rolled about. He licked his lips as if tasting Mansi's natural lubricant on the air like I still could. His brows lowered and he expelled a snort of irritation. Without any comment to what had transpired, he removed the muzzle cage secured to my head and tossed it onto the counter where he left the other. After a kick of the clamps one at a time to disengage them, the grizzly pushed me back to my cell without venturing a word.

For myself, I'd have like to have ventured a few questions in hopes of gleaning more information about this place, save the grizzly seemed more in a mood to thump me a good one instead of answering any questions.



Johnny Roo

Chapter 4

Future Seeds

Johnny waited until Lawrence's receding back had traveled some distance down the hallway before he gained the bars and asked in lustful curiosity, "So which one did you have?"

I sat on my bunk, still smelling the black-tailed jackrabbit's fragrance intermingled with mine. I sighed and looked at him. "Does it matter?"

"Come on, mate, don't be that way. We've nothing to entertain ourselves save for the few pleasures allowed us. So give, and don't leave out any details."

I eyed him from my bunk. Guilt, though irrational because I literally held no choice in the matter, lingered on my mind. "Mansi," I said. "It was Mansi."

Johnny leaned on the bars and sighed in remembered delight. "Ah yes, Mansi. Of the two, she seems the more experienced. Or should I say, adventurous." He sat down at the bars, facing inward. "I can almost imagine her here. So tell me, did she wave her soft fluffy tail in your face?"

I decided to clean up to dilute her scent. "Yeah..." I stood. I turned to wet the washcloth and trailed off from any more details, as I realized the kangaroo was using my description to aid his imagination in giving himself a paw job. His next words were more demanding. He wanted more elaborate details; words befitting magazines designed to aid couples in overcoming sexual deficiencies. Needing such explicit facts, his questions became vulgar. But while I was reluctant to reveal such personnel information of an event I didn't want to discuss, his own imagination took over and he no longer needed my words to draw up images to aid in his goal.

I ignored the kangaroo's self-gratification to finish diluting the jackrabbit's scent from off my fur so I could lie down and consider Mansi's wish that I join the community. *Is that even possible? Would the unicorn trust me enough to grant my freedom? As the grizzly holds the keys that can release Joann and Clair, it is possible Thelin would chance it, knowing I'd never best the bear in a fair fight.* Mmm. I looked up at the ceiling, considering the possibilities and opportunities. *Twice a day the snowshoe hare and two sheepdogs deliver food to the captives. Now and again the black-tailed jackrabbits milk the males for their semen.* I considered how many others could be working in this hairless ape building. *From what I've seen, it's conceivable hundreds could live here. Perhaps a whole community to support the unicorn's goals.* A large yawn took over my face. As the noon hour should be approaching and Johnny not in the frame of mind to answer questions, I allowed my eyelids to drop and fell into a light doze.

When I awoke some hours later, the food cart had yet to arrive. I thought back to my earlier considerations and asked the kangaroo, "Johnny, are there any other visitors to our little world?"

Johnny rolled on his bunk to look at the ceiling. "Hmm...oh, not as a regular thing, mate. The bat-eared fox pops in when it suits him to trim back our finger and toenails. Once in a while a new male is interred with us. Other times those who can't abide our daily lives end theirs and are taken out. Mr. Thelin will tour the hallways from time to time to gloat." He shrugged. "That's about it."

"Have you any idea how many animals are imprisoned here?"

"I've never counted. Mr. Thelin likes to keep us separated by three cells from each other. The only full-time company we can expect is the one put in the cell across from us. That cell you're in had been vacant for three weeks. Its last

occupant was killed by the grizzly when he reached out and scratched his paw, trying to get Mr. Thelin's attention." Johnny Roo fell silent a time, then said, "You'll forgive me, mate. I'm not really in a talkative mood at present."

"No problem." I lazily looked up on the ceiling. Moments into my thoughts, I spied a thin metal rod lower from the ceiling out in the hallway. I sat up and left my bunk to investigate this new introduction into my small world. I eyeballed the shiny rod, taking note other rods up and down the corridor were also lowering. I looked across at Johnny's cell and estimated each rod was placed in exactly the middle of the hallway between all the cells. With this information, I sought to count the rods to get a grasp on how many animals were interred down our hallway when they all started spewing a white cloud that rose to the ceiling and began to roll out from the rod in a widening circle.

"Uh, Johnny," I asked backing up and pointed. "What's that?"

His eyes opened with mild interest. "What's what?"

"That white cloud coming out of that metal stick in the ceiling."

Johnny looked up; after seeing what I pointed at, he yawned. "Oh, that." Showing no alarm in the growing white cloud, he resettled as if going back to sleep. "I can't tell you what it is. I can only tell you after it's gone, the place looks and smells clean. It even cleans the fur on your body and the teeth in your mouth, if you let it."

"Is it harmful to breathe?" I asked as the cloud reached my cell, ignored the boundaries and entered.

"Not that I'm aware, mate. At least it's done no harm to me."

I backed away. The cloud rolled out along the ceiling, filling the top of my cell as well as Johnny's. However, it didn't seem content to remain over our heads, for the rods in the hallway continued to spew out more of the stuff so the white cloud could engulf everything as it filled the air above us. Experimentally, I reached up to feel its texture, if any, to learn if it was wet or dry, yet I discerned nothing, save my fingers came away tingling. I lowered my paw and rubbed my fingers, turning my paw about to better see my fingers.

The black dye in my skin and on my fur had vanished!

My eyes grew round to this miracle. I raised my palm into the descending cloud as I kept my ears up and open for sounds of distress. Echoes of mild irritation to sighs of welcome relief came to my ears. Still on his bunk across from my cell, Johnny Roo apparently fell asleep, if the light snoring coming from his cell was of any indication. I lowered my paw and in seconds saw clean white skin, fur and nails. The black dye was totally gone. I felt no ill effects, other than a tingle in my skin. A bit unnerved, I sat and continued to watch the fog roll in while keeping my ears peeled for cries of alarm from any of the other animals. When at last the cloud flowed down over my ears, I hunkered down on myself and closed my eyes. The tingling sensation broke out at the tip of my ears and flowed down to my scalp in a slow but steady movement. Not long after this, I held my breath for some seconds when it found my black nose. Still unnerved, I ducked down and opened my eyes and took in several breaths. I looked across the way; Johnny had become engulfed in the cloud and snored away without distress. I rubbed the top of my head. My fur felt cleaner. *What I wouldn't give for a mirror right now.*

I thought about sliding under the bunk and covering myself with my blanket. *But what good would that do?* It finally came down to dignity. If I was to avoid the cloud, I'd have to lay flat on the floor, yet that was no guaranty of escape. With eyes closed tight, I forced myself to sit up into the lowing cloud and still felt nothing untoward except tingling skin. Arms crossed and held tight against my chest, I fought a wild need to squeeze through the bars and scramble crab-like down the corridor until I was out of there.

When I was forced to take a breath or collapse unconscious, the cloud invaded my mouth and sinuses. Scared whatever the cloud was would obliterate my best senses, I felt its tingling sensation flow up into my olfactory. A sensation of needing to sneeze had me shaking my head, yet the sneeze never came out. Another breath flowed down into my lungs. The sensation caused my mouth to open wide. I pulled my crossed arms in even tighter, expecting at any moment

for my throat and lungs to send me into a coughing fit. Yet nothing happened.

After submergence in the cloud for ten minutes, the air about me swirled around. The movement was definitely a stronger breeze, one which had been heated to dissipate any temperature change that might follow its path. As the air flowed over my nose, my olfactory filled with clean air as if a rainstorm had just fallen, yet the breeze held no trace of weather or the slightest hint of anything organic.

I opened an eye experimentally. Finding I could see, I opened the other and used my senses. All about me was clean. The floor and walls were cleaned as if someone had scrubbed them. Not a speck of dandruff or a single strand of my fur which I'd shed was left to float in the air or lay scattered on any surface. Puzzled, I took deeper whiffs and found my woolen blanket and cotton washcloth smelled as if newly made. In fact, after discovering this, I came to understand my hearing was perhaps keener. My sinuses felt one hundred percent better. My white fur puffed out as if I'd just came from the groomers. Even my tail looked and felt cleaner than I'd ever gotten it on my own by scrubbing and brushing. Best of all, all skin mites, fleas and ticks which had made me their home those past weeks outside this building were dead and gone.

Whatever that stuff is, I marveled at the miracle. I'd sure like to take some with me after I escape from this place. Talking of escape, its time I put my mind seriously on the pro-bl-em. What the? My eyes having dropped on my arms, I discovered wherever I'd held them pressed tightly to myself, the black dye still remained. A look at my chest showed the same results. I rubbed my paw over my forearm but the dye stubbornly remained. *Crap.* I got up from the floor and tried the blanket, the washcloth, even the water from the faucet, without success. *Dammit.* Annoyed, I sat on my bunk, but before I settled I had a thought. *No, ah no.* I twisted about. *Oh, for crying out loud!* Though most of my butt was beyond my sight I saw enough black fur to know where the dye remained. *Well this is inconvenient. I look as if I've shit on myself and used my arms to wipe it off onto my chest!* Disgusted, I plopped down on my bunk.

Johnny Roo roused himself and caught sight of me when he stood. “Well I’ll be, you are an arctic wolf. I thought you were playing with me.”

I eyed him. “Why would you think that, if I may ask?”

Johnny shrugged. “Being new here, I thought you wished to appear tougher than you are. You know, to bolster your standing.” He covered his muzzle, forestalling a smile from breaking out. “You best be on your pads next month.”

“I know, I know,” I grumbled. After a moment it dawned on me. “Wait a second, you mean that cloud is a regular thing too?”

Johnny turned away and said “Yep.” His shoulders moved, a telling shift that told me he was trying to laugh quietly so I couldn’t hear.

“Ha ha ha...” I said without humor. “You think this is funny, wait until I moon you; that’ll have you rolling around your cell.”

A burst of laughter stung my ears. “If only I had a camera...” he managed.

Being the butt of a joke brought back sore memories of my cubhood. This soured my disposition further. Yet to allow my past feelings to dictate the day’s reactions was stupid. The kangaroo held no knowledge of my younger days. Yet I still couldn’t help but glare at him.

Our moment of opposite feelings dissipated as the sound of horse hooves striking concrete foretold something coming.

Johnny took himself to the bars and pressed his head against the metal rods. “Sound as if breakfast is coming.”

However, the sound of heavy pads still owning claws instead of wooden wagon wheels said differently. Across from me, Johnny groaned once he put this together.

“Oh, for crying out loud, now what does he want?” Johnny pushed from the cell bars and padded further back in his cell to sit on his bunk, folding his arms and looking despondent.

Mr. Thelin’s rambling voice found our ears as he, Norbert and Lawrence made their way along the cement floor. The three came abreast of my cell and looked in.

“How is my prized possession settling into his new home?” Mr. Thelin gloated. Seeing I’d not quite been cleaned by the cloud, he smiled before continuing with his thought. “I imagine Mansi gave you quite a thrill yesterday.” The unicorn shifted his head to better eye the places the dye had yet to leave. “By the amount of your deposit, I’d say you enjoyed her endeavors.”

The grizzly also looked at my chest and arms, but the glaring difference of fur color showed a lack of humor within him. The wolverine seemed to care less about anything concerning me.

As the unicorn really hadn’t asked a question, I remained silent where I sat.

“Come now, we’re all males here. Do give details. Did you find her exotic? Can you image having her and her sister at once?” He shifted his head, tossing his mane. “But of course you could.” He sounded as if he was correcting himself. “You were found with two white-tailed jackrabbits of your own. So tell me, which pair would you prefer, if you had to choose? Mansi and Muna or the other two?”

I crossed my arms, which hid all the visible black dye.

Mr. Thelin tsked. “Byrghir, you need not be so stubborn.” The unicorn turned his head in thought. “Perhaps...hmm.” He eyed me. “If you cooperate, you could conceivably have all four as bedmates from time to time.”

Hmm, he’s negotiating. Interesting. Perhaps Mansi broached the subject of my release. I kept my thoughts to myself, though I did twitch an ear. I could tell he saw my slip-up and knew I was listening, for he closed his eyes slowly.

“Though I care not for any of the others here, you hold a great purpose to my future work. Yes, very promising. I think to aid in your decision, you deserve some understanding in what we do here as well as your role. Perhaps it’ll enlighten you to how important my work is, and in learning this, you’ll volunteer to stay on as has most of my staff.” He looked off down the hallway. “Hmm... yes. A great help that would be, especially for your two white-tailed jackrabbits.” Mr. Thelin shook his head and snorted. “Ha, dreaming am I.” He looked me over, taking in my posture. “Don’t mind me, Byrghir, I tend to think

aloud.” The black unicorn looked at the grizzly. “Lawrence, even though it may be a waste of time, I’ve a mind to show this animal why his semen is so important. Please get the chair and bring him to the Substance Treatment room.”

The grizzly eyed me with a grimace but reacted by turning. “Yeah, sure, okay.”

Mr. Thelin turned around to leave, but before he did he speculated, “Perhaps a demonstration would be better in making our purpose easier for you to understand. Hmmm, yes, after all, you did bring me those two valuable white-tailed jackrabbits.”

“Say what?” I jumped up and padded to the bars as a snarl escaped my lips. “What do you intend to do with them?”

Mr. Thelin had started to step away but stopped to eye me. “Why, Byrghir, I thought you an intelligent animal. Have you not put together what I’m doing here? I intend to breed them, of course.”

If I could have gotten my paws around his large neck, I’d have choked the life out of him. The unicorn eyed my paws as I made tight fists out of them and tsked. “Byrghir, would you rather I release them? Turn them out on the cold glacier where they could possibly freeze to death or face wild, hungry polar bears or your own kind?”

“Of course not,” I said through clinched teeth, knowing where this was going.

He shook his head. “I thought not. Such would be cruel. Still, I can’t in all good conscience hold them here unless they can contribute to my work.”

“You could let us all go...” I said lamely, knowing he’d never do so after what he said about my capture.

The unicorn whinnied. “It’s good to see you’ve a sense of humor.” Abruptly he changed tone. “Time’s a-wasting. Norbert, I’d like you to fetch one of the two white-tailed jackrabbits and make her ready for insemination.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Thelin.” The wolverine bobbed his head in ill grace.

“Wait, what? Mr. Thelin, please, don’t hurt them on my account,” I pleaded.

The unicorn looked me over. “I’ve no intention of hurting either one, Byrghir. At least as long as they can bring a new life into the world.” The unicorn was about to leave when he thought a moment and gave me a warning. “I’d curb any thoughts of escape. As much as those two white-tailed jackrabbits can advance my work in producing other species, others could find their way here, which would make them less valuable.” He looked ahead of him as both the grizzly and the wolverine walked back up the way they came. “Byrghir,” I heard an edge in his voice. “Lawrence is quite capable of handling a polar bear, let alone an arctic wolf with a leg injury, so to be perfectly clear, if you try anything, you’ll learn first-paw how painful the punishment room can be.”

Once I was reluctantly installed in the wheelchair, Lawrence pushed me down the corridor in ill temperament.

“Tell me, Lawrence, what else do you do here?”

“What’s it to you?” the grizzly snapped.

“Just curious...” I lied and decided to scratch him off my list as a conversational companion. Once more he pushed me through the menagerie of hairless ape items and past the room Mansi had entertained me in to enter a room just one door further up.

Upon entry, my ears experienced a change in pressure as air flow pushed out. Once the doors closed behind us, my sense of smell was decimated by the strong odor of sanitary cleaners. Deprived of one of my best senses, my eyes ran over a room filled with countertops, cabinets and rolling carts. Each inundated with bottles and steel containers of all different sizes. Steel cutters, tweezers and other unidentifiable items lay next to a lot of these. Some distance into the room, two clear glass plates held in the air by metal arms had me bewildered. Colored hieroglyphs and jumping lines magically moved about their surface. This might have captivated me for far longer save my eyes were drawn to Norbert, who

stood by a solid metal table. Above its surface was some indescribable machine with appendages all about, each looking different yet similar. Currently two were holding one of these square glass objects over a white-tailed jackrabbit who was restrained with arms and legs spread from her body and tied near the edge of the table to either side. At the noise of the double doors closing, Norbert looked over while securing the last buckle. The prone jackrabbit on the table turned her head and both our eyes went wide.

“Braxton!”

“Joann!”

The two of us struggled against our bindings. My ears flattened and I growled. “What the hell are you doing to her?”

The grizzly’s heavy paw smacked the back of my head as he growled. “Shut it, wolf, and keep still.”

Norbert merely gave me an impassive look.

A moment before the last syllable of the grizzly’s words died out, the doors behind pushed open and the black unicorn came in. “Ah, there you are.”

Regardless of Lawrence’s threat, I fought on, struggling with my restraints, as did Joann, who shouted, “Help, Braxton, do something!”

“Tsk, ts, such a fuss.” Mr. Thelin shook his head as he bypassed us to walk up to the machine over Joann. “Computer,” he said with his muzzle raised to the glass object as I received another slap to the back of my head from the grizzly. “Sedation, please.”

I winced at the ill treatment of my head, yet still managed to see movement over Joann as she begged. “Please...”

“Stop this!” I yelled at the unicorn, eying the metal arm which supported a long thin needle at its end. “I’ll do anything you ask, just don’t hurt her!”

Mr. Thelin turned his head to look at me with both large eyes. “Hurt her? The Great Maker forbid.” He looked down on Joann and said, as if he were talking to both of us, “I have no intention of hurting you.” His next words were for her to hear, “However, for the medical procedure I plan on performing with

the aid of this wondrous machine above you, I do need you to be still and quiet. So for your own safety, I've set things in motion to put you to sleep for a short time."

The metal arm continued to descend. A light appeared out of the metal thing above Joann in the form of a square patch on the table that shifted about until Joann's upper arm and shoulder was illuminated.

"Braxton!" Joann screamed and arched her back trying to gain any leverage she could to break free and escape the approaching needle.

Lawrence's large paws landed on my shoulders and he squeezed until I ground my teeth in pain. "I said hold still."

The arm above Joann adjusted its position and lowered until the needle pierced her skin.

Joann screamed. I yelled out her name.

The grizzly's claws dug into my shoulders, which changed my yell to a howl of pain.

Forced into silence, restrained as I was, I could only watch the contraption stab Joann. My ears smarted from Joann's insistent call for help, yet I was as helpless as she. Her incisors showed as she gritted her teeth. Pain and fear covered her face. She turned her head to look at me with pleading gray eyes before her face relaxed and she slowly stopped struggling to lay quietly, as if the life had drained out of her.

Lawrence let go of my shoulders, retracting his claws.

"What did you do to her?" I demanded, my shoulders smarting from the puncture wounds the grizzly left. Regardless of the pain he'd already inflicted, the grizzly cuffed the back of my head to shut me up.

Mr. Thelin eyed me and the grizzly before he stepped past the machine to the back wall. "I assure you, Byrghir, she has not been harmed. I merely put her to sleep that we may talk without raising our voices." Mr. Thelin came upon another square glass plate thing, which held more moving hieroglyphs, and eyed me. "The other reason is so this procedure can take place without the chance she

may hurt herself.” The unicorn made eye contact with the glass plate and said. “Computer, inseminate present subject with new batch from AF-QE705.”

A black box over the glass plate replied in a female’s light but competent tone, “Verify authorization required.”

The unicorn shook out his mane and stepped closer to the glass plate. He tilted his head back so his horn wouldn’t hit the glass. He leaned in a little more.

The black box announced, “Mr. Thomas Thelin. Present custodian of project Evolution. Authorization accepted.”

“You might want to watch this, Byrghir.” The unicorn gestured for me to look up at the ceiling after he stepped away from the glass plate. “The technology the hairless apes possessed is beyond words to describe.”

Over our heads a circle of the roof about ninety-two centimeters in circumference lowered, revealing countless pinky-sized bottles with a white milky substance inside each. One arm from the contraption above Joann shifted away from its body and reached out to take one of these small bottles seemingly at random and inserted the bottle into an orifice in the side of the machine. The device with the bottles reversed course and slid back up into the roof. The glass over Joann began to glow as if somehow someone had made a new kind of lightbulb. It didn’t stop there; inside the glass, an odd image began to appear, rendering an odd diagram.

“What’s happening?” I demanded.

“Pay attention and you’ll see,” Mr. Thelin snapped.

The image on the transparent plate of glass began to look familiar. At first I couldn’t place it, but after some moments the glass plate rendered up a jackrabbit’s pelvic region with the fur and skin transparent so I could discern the bone structure underneath. In the meantime, a different metal arm jerked to life from the machine over Joann, smaller and flexible looking. It reoriented to slide into a hole next to the bottle.

I helplessly watched as it slowly lowered until a section of it lay centimeters above the polished metal table in between Joann’s spread legs. A second of time

passed before it shifted toward Joann and inserted itself into her. I winced as an involuntary snarl rolled over my lips to its invasion of her vagina. Yet I had to see what it was doing to her. Movement above Joann had my eyes shifting to see an image appear on the glass plate of a dense gray object similar to the arm now inside her entering the image of the jackrabbit's pelvis, mirroring the movement of the arm inside Joann. After penetrating deep inside my betrothed, both image and arm halted for a span of seconds. A beeping sound caught my ears and I looked up at the metal contraption above her. A liquid substance rolled down inside a clear flexible tube, much smaller than the one I drank my meals through, yet far more flexible looking.

"Mr. Thelin?" I wanted to beg, watching the liquid fill the tube along the arm until it disappeared inside Joann. A moment more and a small quantity of the liquid seeped out of Joann before both image in the glass plate and the arm inside her withdrew as if synchronized.

"There, did you see that?" Mr. Thelin inquired.

"See what?" I bit my lip to keep from yelling at him.

"By this wondrous machine."—Mr. Thelin indicated the machine above Joann.—"I've implanted into this white-tailed jackrabbit's womb an egg gathered from a female arctic wolf from a different pack than yours, pre-fertilized by the genetically-altered sperm sample you so recently provided. Thus, in less than nine months' time, she'll give birth to a healthy male wolf cub who will be smarter and stronger than you. Of course, this is only half of my project. Once the other white-tailed jackrabbit is fit to conceive, I'll repeat the process but alter the outcome so she'll birth a female. In this way, the two will be bonded by blood and one day take over my sister's job as well as mine."

Okay, that made no sense. "Huh?"

Mr. Thelin shook his head, irritation showing. "I hate explaining my work." He blew air out between his lips. "Of course, how could you comprehend?" The unicorn gathered his thoughts. "You see, Byrghir, my sister and I are already in our sixties. Although our genetic makeup will see us living past one hundred

years, we know time is no longer on our side. We must look to the future of our responsibilities and make ready for another pair of animals to take over our work as we took up for our predecessors.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” My mind was fast pulling at strings to understand all of what was happening. “So, what’s that got to do with Joann and Clair?”

He smiled and walked over to turn a full brown eye on me. “Everything, but let me clarify. You see, Byrghir, my sister and I were genetically manipulated by our predecessor to make us want to continue the evolution of animal kind, even to producing another set of unicorns to take up our duties like those who came before us. However, unbeknownst to us all, my sister, the poor thing, was born sterile. Something to do with random genetics.” He waved his paw as if pushing that line of thoughts aside. “Be that as it may, this caused us both considerable consternation, as no more unicorn eggs are stored in the vault to artificially inseminate her. Yet just as things were looking darkest, you and your two friends fell into our world.” Mr. Thelin shook his head, his eye twitching as if remembering something. He looked at Joann as if he lost his place in his explanation, then nodded to himself, having recollected his place. “Through the womb of this unimposing white-tailed jackrabbit, along with the other, your two friends will birth two new custodians who’ll continue our work while also having a better skill set to deal with your pack brethren.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Baw.” His ears flattened. “I know I’m coming across clearly. You simply wish to play stupid.” The unicorn shook his head in irritation. “So be it. Until you wise up, I’ll hold you in your cell as ignorant as the rest of the animals.”

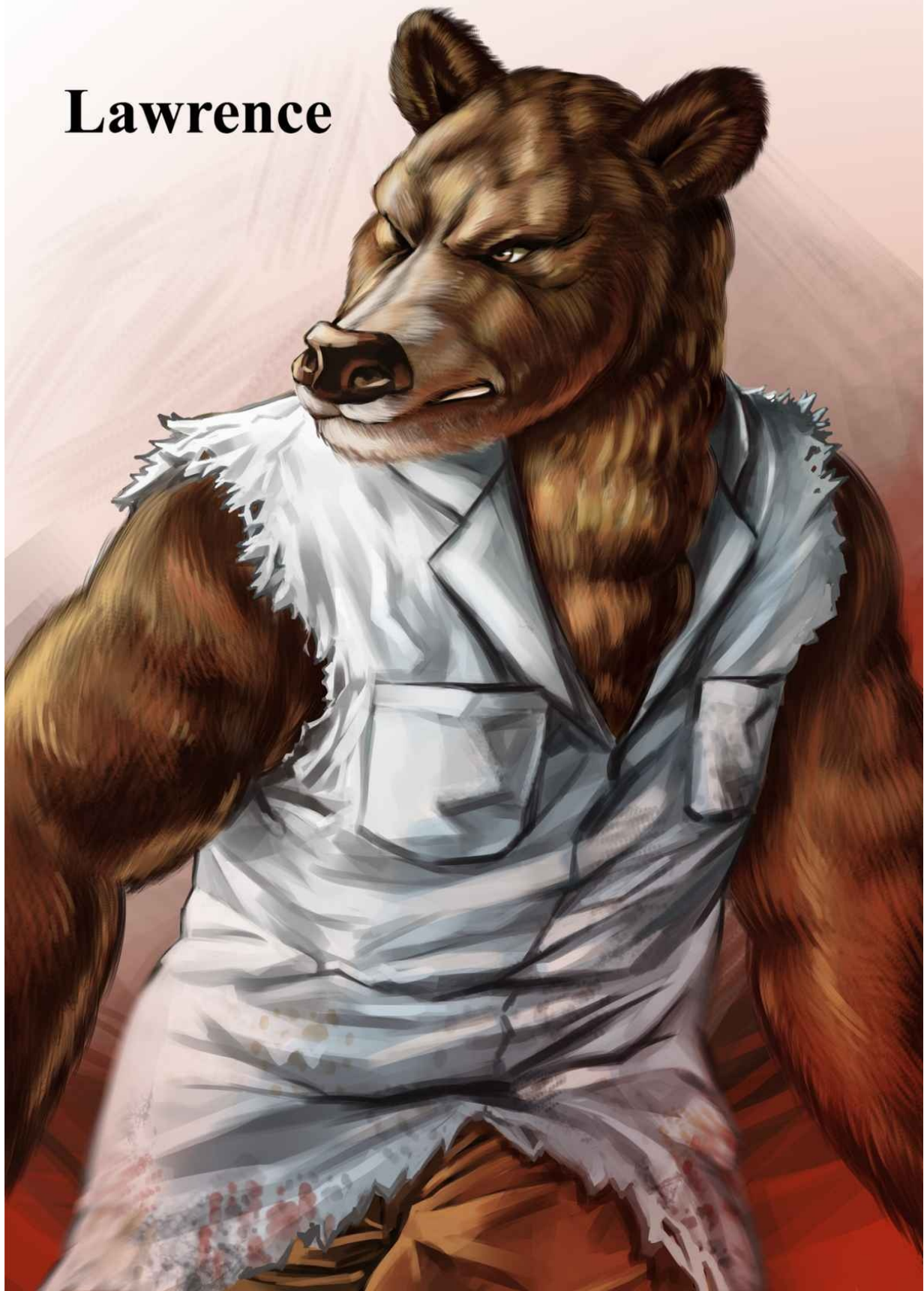
“No wait—” I begged as Lawrence began to back out of the room with me in tow to Mr. Thelin’s head motion. “I’m sorry. Please, I’d like to understand all this.”

“Hmm, fine.” Mr. Thelin followed us out. “Perhaps I should start at the beginning. Yes,” He swished his tail. “You see, Byrghir, the hairless apes started a program to advance our evolution exponentially before they died out. This

facility is dedicated to that accomplishment. The room we just vacated is the center of all advancements animal kind has had the pleasure to undergo these past centuries. By those marvelous machines, the current caretaker—that's me, by the way—can dissect and cleanse the sperm obtained from donors—that's you and the other males, if you need clarification—to eliminate current defects. Once that is done, females such as your friend back there will birth animals that surpass years of evolution, thus advancing animal kind." Mr. Thelin made a gesture with his paw and the grizzly stopped his forward motion. "Perhaps even in time surpassing the hairless apes." Mr. Thelin glanced back to the room we came from. "In time, I hope you'll come to understand what we do here and help out your two cubs." Mr. Thelin nodded. "Don't forget, by doing so you'll be with your white-tailed jackrabbits." He motioned to Lawrence. "For now, consider my words and cooperate."

The grizzly turned the chair and I found myself heading back to my cell while my emotions churned in my stomach. *Guinea pigs to fast track evolution? That's just not right! Evolution is a means to make certain an animal is viable. A being adapted to its surroundings. Pushing us to become something we're not could have the total opposite effect.* Of course, I could be overthinking, as in truth my thoughts were of Joann and Clair. The possible reality had me giddy and terrified. If it could be done. *Could it be done?* A whirlwind of passions sought to show up on my face. For the first time, I understood the hyenas' predisposition to laugh while talking, regardless of how they felt inside.

Lawrence



Chapter 5

Planning

“So, mate...” Johnny Roo asked as soon as the grizzly left. “You learn anything that might deny the tedium of this place to settle on my shoulders for a spell?”

Paws behind my back, I paced within my cell, wishing I had a pipe in one paw to help calm my nerves. I took a glance his way but shook my head. “Besides feeling lost, small and guilty at the same time, I’m afraid not, except for one detail.” I waved my paw to indicate the walls about us. “This place, so the unicorn explained, was built by the hairless apes, who apparently sought to make animal kind better and smarter than they had been. For what purpose, I’ve no idea.”

“Uh huh, okay, so why are we here? Didn’t the hairless apes die out thousands of years ago?” the kangaroo asked.

Without hesitating in my cognitive thinking, I told him what I’d learned. “Yeah, but it would seem the function of this place is still being perused by Mr. Thelin and all his perverse predecessors.”

“Truly? You mean we’re here because we can still be made better?”

“Apparently so,” I acknowledged, still pacing. “But not us specifically. Our offspring.” I admitted, putting some of the pieces in place. *Father was conceived and born here, according to the unicorn. If I understand things right, the unicorn intends to do more manipulation on my seeds and impregnate Clair as he just did with Joann.*

Johnny grabbed the bars. “Offspring? Are you telling me I may be made to

father a little joey off of Colene?”

I eyed his excited antics. “Not in the physical sense, no, if I understand this right. Apparently, the hairless apes devised a way to advance procreation without the need of sex.”

“No need for sex?” Johnny questioned, his ears going flat and his eyebrows raised. “Well that’s boring.” He slumped against the bars. “Damn, and I’m a great lover.”

I spared him a glance. As I’m not wholly familiar with kangaroos, I had no idea if he was idly boasting or telling the truth.

“So, mate, as you were treated to the lovely jackrabbits, has the old unicorn procured a female wolf for you?”

“As far as I know, no.”

“So why did the unicorn take you away?” Johnny asked.

I shrugged. “He thinks he can impregnate my fiancée, Joann, with my seed, though you and I know procreation can only be achieved within the same species.” I stopped my pacing. My shoulders slumped. A heavy lead weight fell into my gut. *Could it be the unicorn has found a way to cross-impregnate animal species and he just showed me this process?* I paced back to my bunk and stared at it. *Mmmm...I’ll need to ask the black-tailed jackrabbits. If he can, those two should have already gone through such a process.*

Johnny leaned on the bars and asked. “So, uh, if he somehow can, does that mean you’ll wait out some time before you figure out a plan to escape, so you can have a joey by your rabbits?”

I raised my ears and turned enough to see Johnny. “What? No, of course not...” I trailed off as the thought found fertile ground in my mind. My tail twitched as I consider it. *A cub? No, two cubs? One of each sex, if the unicorn wasn’t boasting...* I looked at my bunk and imagined Joann sitting there, holding our cubs to her breasts, not some other jackrabbit’s get. My cubs. *All I need do is wait out a month or so.* I sat and let the idea run its course. *Just off the top of my mind, there’d be three scenarios in this. Try to escape while she’s pregnant.*

Escape a little after our cub is born, or join up with the unicorn and live here with my family and see what can be done for Clair. After a moment it hit me. *Oh damn, I'd forgotten about Clair! If Joann carries to term our cub, that means Clair would also carry to term my second cub.*

"So, any ideas then?" Johnny inquired, bringing me back to the present.

I shifted an ear his way before I looked at him. "Hmm...presently, no," I truthfully said. "But if an idea comes to mind, I'll let you know."

Johnny turned to set his back on the bars. "Wishful thinking on my part, mate. But if you come up with a way that involves hurting that unicorn, let me know. I've so many ideas as to what I'd do to that horse, there'd have to be over a thousand of him to get partway through them all."

"Hmm, oh sure..." I sat. *Regardless of how I intend to get Joann and Clair clear of this place, many things have to be worked out first. The packs and roaming polar bears must be considered. The weather out on the glacier must also be worked out. Joann and Clair are not built to handle the freezing temperatures. And if I wait out their term, the cubs would be just as vulnerable.* "Hmmm..." Oh, for cripe's sake, I admonished myself and stood to pace more. *I've been too linear in my thinking! Joann, Clair and I are not the only animals here.* I stopped pacing to look at Johnny, who presently sat on the floor with his tail threaded through the bars halfway up its length while waving his arms about as if he were conducting an orchestra. *This adds other issues I've got to think on. I need to know what other animals are interred here. Knowing their strengths and weaknesses will greatly aid any plans.*

To clearly understand the magnitude of our situation, I spent days on my pads. Finding out who all the males were was easy; a bit of yelling back and forth solved that problem. The females, however, had to be pondered out. It made a certain sense a good portion would be the opposite of the males.

Harboring animals who couldn't breed seemed counterintuitive to the unicorn's plans. Save by his boasting he could impregnate jackrabbits with any animal he so chose.

I also deliberated on possible options, opportunities and outright chancy activities to better our odds at escape. Weeks passed as I and Johnny exercised to keep fit. I'd considered telling the other animals down our block, but if Mr. Thelin learned of our endeavors he could relocate me to a cell with no one near at paw.

To glean more information of my surroundings, I sought to befriend Filip, the snowshoe hare who lead the horse and cart, and the two sheepdogs who worked in tandem to deliver the cartons of food. Alas, none took up the bait. No animal would venture up a conversation save Mansi and Muna. But their minds never drew far from sexual thoughts.

Four months into my captivity, the unicorn, Mr. Thelin, toured the hallway. When he came upon my cell, he stopped. His ears rose inquisitively and he stared. It was as if he'd forgotten about me. He inquired quietly of his help, Norbert, the wolverine.

"Ah yes, now I remember." Mr. Thelin nodded and looked at me. "So, how are you? You look quite fit."

"Let me out and I'll show you how fit I am."

"Now, now, is that any way to thank me for keeping you and your lovely white-tailed jackrabbits safe and sound?" He tilted his head in thought, whinnied and swished his tail. "Speaking of them, I must say those two are developing along quite nicely."

"Developing? What do you mean by that?" My paws squeezed the bars, though I wished they were around his neck.

Mr. Thelin whinnied. "Why, Byrghir, I know you're smarter than that."

"You mean you did it? You actually impregnated them both?"

"Of course. But after they come to term, it'll rest on your shoulders whether they continue to thrive here within this structure or be given to Lawrence for a

bit of entertainment.”

Startled, I yelled, “What? No!”

“Yes...” He stretched out the word as if driving home a point he wanted me to fully comprehend.

Understanding him, I thought fast. “But, but if you can impregnate them with cubs, wouldn’t they be valuable in birthing other animals?”

“If that were possible, yes,” he admitted. “Alas, it’s not to be. The procedure to extract the new life from their wombs makes them sterile afterwards. Think well on that, Byrghir. What you do from now on will determine if they live here with your cubs or be given to Lawrence or die out in the cold either by the paws of your own kind or those of a hungry polar bear.”

As much as I wanted to wring his neck, the unicorn turned and continued on down the row of cells without a glance back.

“Crikey, mate, my heart goes out to you and your rabbits,” Johnny sympathized.

I wrang my paws on the bars to have something to strangle while I worked out some of my aggression. While I did, my thoughts were not so hot I couldn’t consider the situation. *If he’s not boasting, Joann and Clair should be two to four months pregnant by now.* I looked across at the kangaroo. I let go of the bars and slammed my tightly clenched fist into the wall. “Dammit,” I said aloud. “I’ve got to figure a way out of here.” I folded my arms about myself while Johnny nodded. It hit me then, something the kangaroo said some time back. *Only by death has an animal ever escaped.* I rolled those words around. *If I could fake my death. But how?* An inkling of an idea spilled out and saturated those thoughts. *If it looked as if I’d hung myself.* I rubbed my lower muzzle. *My blanket can be torn to size and tied around the bars and into a noose.* I considered possible scenarios. When best to give it a try. Who was to find me and what might they do should they react. *Dammit. To many variables.*

I ditched the idea for the moment. *I’ll need all my faculties should I come up against the grizzly or the wolverine.*

Another month passed. I was beside myself with worry for Joann and Clair. *If both are pregnant, their condition would make an escape downright dangerous for them both now. The same could be said for Mrs. Dovell. She could very well be heavy with another cub already.* This set my wish to free us all downright near impossible. *Think, wolf, think. There has to be a solution to my problem.*

Finally, I had to admit, *I'll have to forget about their condition and take our chances when an idea comes to mind.*

Once I banished that worry, the solution soon presented itself. I was on my bunk the day I saw it. The sheepdog who brought my liquefied food had a problem with the food container and padded back to the cart to obtain an ice pick to open the carton hole large enough for the tube to be inserted. Though he never carried it on his person, it was on the horse drawn cart, begging to be used. I sat on my bunk and considered the matter.

The pick can be bent to pick the lock. But how do I get to the pick? I rubbed my muzzle. *Who knows how long it will be before another container might need the hole enlarged? Waiting on that would be foolish.* After a bit I walked in circles about my cell. *There has to be another way besides chance.* For the next couple of days, I considered the problem.

Johnny saw my agitation and inquired softly so his voice wouldn't carry. "You seem to be working out a problem. Can I help?"

I stepped up to the bars and whispered back. "I believe I can use the ice pick on the food cart to open the locks. The problem is getting to the pick."

Johnny looked off down the corridor, his ears laid back as he scratched his head. "Ice pick? What ice pick? I've never seen one on the cart."

"It's located on the back end inside wall. I saw the sheepdog pull it out to widen the hole in my food carton two days ago."

Johnny eyed me, made a face and dropped his head onto the bars. "Oh, great." He turned around and slid to the floor. "Fat chance of getting at it."

"That's why I'm pacing," I said and went back to working out the problem.

When next the horse drawn cart made its trip down the hallway, I eyed its

construction as it traveled to my cell. *Metal. Rivets. Some sort of cloth other than cotton or leather makes up the harness.* Nonchalantly, I stepped to the other side of my cell when the cart stopped and studied the back end. *Cargo beds also made of metal. Food containers stacked three high.* I eyed the whole of it. *Possibly forty to sixty cartons, depending on how far back they go. It would help if I could see over the side walls of the cart.* “Mmmm...” *Weight distribution could make the front end heavy if the cartons go all the way to the front.* “Hmm...” My tail twitched as I watched the snowshoe hare and sheepdogs. *They never seem to talk. It’s as if they can’t. Bored at their job too, if I read their looks right.* I folded my arms and contemplated. “Mmm...” *The snowshoe rabbit will be the problem. No matter how I consider handling the dogs, the hare is always free to hop off.* I paced about, considering new tactics. “Damn, I wish I had my pipe.”

Johnny stirred. “You say something, mate?”

“Hmmm...Oh no, not really.” I spared the kangaroo a glance. “Back home when I had a difficult job, I’d light up a pipe to give my mind some minor duties to contend with while I worked out the problem. Sometimes the little distraction helped.”

“If it’s a distraction you want, I could clear my vocal cords and serenade you?”

I looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “You can sing?”

“You betcha, mate.” Johnny stretched out his arms and interlacing his fingers, cracked his knuckles. “If you want a room cleared in a hurry, I’m your roo.”

I stared at Johnny for a moment, working out what he’d just said. As it hit me and I rolled my eyes to his quip, he busted out in laughter. His humor had its affect; a light smile crossed my lips.

“There now...” He said in between slowing his laughter and wiping his eyes clear. “Did that help any?”

“Somewhat...” I granted and scratched under my jaw. *So where was I?*

Johnny sobered up and taking his usual seat at the bars, he began to conduct some tune in his head with his arms as he hummed.

I watched him for a short while before I walked up to the bars and imagined the meal cart rolling down the hallway. The snowshoe hare out in front. The sheepdogs behind. “Damn...” I snapped. “The hare will just have to be factored in as a time limit.”

“Subdue the sheepdogs,” I explained my plan to Johnny. “Ignore the hare unless he comes in reach. You click your tongue. The horse should turn and step up to you. This will turn the cart some. Undo his harness and set him free. Once he’s out of the way, work the cart so you can shove it my way. I’ll get the ice pick from the back and shove the cart back to you. While I get to work on the lock, see if you can break free the steel poles—”

“Hold it, mate,” Johnny interrupted. “What if you can’t get the lock open as you say? What if that grizzly arrives before—”

“I didn’t say it was a sure thing.” I shook my head. “It’s a risk. All I can offer is my capabilities. I’ve picked more complicated locks than this one.”

Johnny looked skeptical. He folded his arms, his bearing agitated.

I huffed, my tail twitching. “Look, do you want to spend the rest of your life in here?”

“Of course not.” Flat and simple.

“Then hear me out.”

Johnny paced his floor, considering. “What of your two rabbit friends? That unicorn made it perfectly clear who he’d give them to.”

“Currently, I’ve no doubts he won’t do so anyway, after they birth my cubs.”

Johnny stopped and eyed me. “You’re being very cavalier with their lives.”

“Not at all...” I answered. “Mr. Thelin made it very clear he spared Joann and Clair’s lives to breed a pair of arctic wolves to take over the mission of this

zoo.” I slid my arms through the bars and leaned on my forearms. “But afterwards...” I shrugged.

Johnny seemed skeptical, but after some thought, he shrugged. “It’s your choice, mate. I’ll bear no fault in what happens to the pair of them if we fail.”

“Understood.”

The timing was set for the evening feeding after the cleansing cloud evaporated; this would see that our natural musky scent would be reduced to a minimum while all within the place would have put in a full day’s work and be tired. The laziness which accompanied full stomachs after their dinner meals should also be a factor. We also gained the aid of our cellmates left and right of us—Johnny’s idea, not mine, and a good one at that. The animals in the cells would make one rope out of their combined blankets during the afternoon. Once the dogs passed the cells on our right, the animal inside those cells would cast the blanket-rope to the other. The ones on my left would do the same once they heard the ruckus of our attack. Both sets of rope blankets would lay loose on the ground so when the hare or a missed sheepdog ran down the hall, they would try to trip them up. Only a delaying action at best but as seconds could mean freedom, we all agreed it was worth the effort.

Lazily resting my head on the bars close to where the sheepdog habitually left the carton of liquid, I watched their every move. I sat cross-legged and controlled my breathing. I eyed Johnny’s dog and his actions. As I had a longer reach than the kangaroo, I waited for his nod. Like normal, the sheepdogs worked in unison to gather up the old and place new cartons down. Once the sheepdog near Johnny bent to place his carton, Johnny reacted. A second behind him so did I.

Heart quickening, blood flew through my veins. My arms shot through the empty space between the bars. Paws open, fingers clasping and unclipped nails

digging in, I grabbed the sheepdog's wrist. The surprised sheepdog, already bent over, was easily pulled off his pads and slammed into the bars. Across from me, Johnny's powerful legs made short work of the sheepdog at his cell.

The sound of equally hard impacts of flesh on metal startled the snowshoe hare. He jumped. His ears fell back, head jerked left and right of him. He covered his mouth with both paws. His body shook. Unbelievably, he froze in place. If he snapped out of his fright, he could upset the plan by taking up the horse's bridle. Whether he would or could was beyond our control. I signaled Johnny.

"Whistle for the horse!"

"Right." Johnny called over. He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. The horse did as I'd hoped. He turned to the sound and stepped over to Johnny. The snowshoe hare remained as he was, his fear heavy in my flaring nostrils. The scent added a factor into my awareness. My senses sharpened. My ears not only detailed sounds, they also picked up vibrations in the air as they swiveled about.

I shoved the unconscious sheepdog out of the way.

Johnny untied the cart from the horse and maneuvered the horse sideways with the cell bars before he slapped his haunches to get the horse out of the away. Once achieved, he shoved the cart my way. The cart slammed into my cell bars, jarring its cargo of liquid dinners.

I made a grab for the metal tailgate as the cart sought to bounce out of reach. Fingers curled over the lip of the tailgate. The weight of the entire load tested my resolve as I hadn't time to set my pads before the cart slammed me into the bars. With only my arms available to counter the cart's momentum, I gritted my teeth as the cart rebounded toward Johnny and pulled my shoulders into the bars. This forced a growl of pain to escape my throat. Arms and fingers stretched to their max, I sought to counter the cart's momentum away so I could slowly pull the cart back to me. Some point during my upper body's struggle with the weight of the cart, my nostrils told me the hare's frozen state had passed.

With my face and chest married to the bars, I didn't see the hare snap out of his debilitating fear but felt him hop up onto the cart. At first, the change in weight caused the cart to shift away, yet with determination I countered the change. I clenched my teeth as the space between cart and cell bars diminished. Knowing I had only seconds to attain my goal before the hare countered my gambit, I reached for the metal side railing and the ice pick taped to its surface there.

Unfortunately, the hare realized my intent and leaped into the cargo bin. The slight movement shifted the cart and I lost my chance as my knuckles hit the metal wall, giving him that second to snatch up the pick an instant before my fingers had a grip.

No! I shouted in my mind. "Give that to me!" I snapped, my voice low and furious.

The hare's eyes went full with terror. His ears laid back stiff behind his head. He was reacting out of panic, yet he held onto the ice pick and jumped back but misstepped and fell back on the cargo.

Angered at having missed my opportunity, yet desperate to acquire the pick, as this was my one shot, I reset my pads, grabbed the lip of the back gate and shoved the whole cart back to Johnny, hoping the sudden motion would keep the hare from catching a chance to hop off the cart.

The snowshoe hare tumble inside, jarred about among the full and empty cartons.

Johnny saw the cart come back his way. Fortunately, he also saw the hare and took the hint we were to play catch. He did as I'd hoped and caught the cart by a pole as it hit his cell bars and quick-like shoved it my way with all the force his legs and tail could muster.

The cart came back fast and I hurriedly pulled in my arms. The tailgate slammed into the bars. The hare tumbled into my grasp. Yet the damage had been done. The hare had lost the icepick in the tumble and hung in the air by my paws as the cart bounced away. Rage reddened my eyes. My lips curled back. I

was so furious in my lost opportunity to free Joann and Clair and get clear of this place, I had a will to crush the life out of the snowshoe hare.

Within the red sight of my eyes, I saw his long ears go limp. His nose quivered. He knew my intent in the way I was looking at him. Wide eyed, he stared into my fury-filled ice blue eyes and fell still, awaiting the brief amount of pain his death would cause him—a reaction so imbedded in smaller herbivores that it pierced my animal rage to let my intelligence see it for what it was.

I stood there. Muscles trembling with my animal need to kill him for stealing my chance at escape, my intelligence told me it would be an empty act. To kill the snowshoe hare would result in no gain save to satisfy my animal's lust for destruction, but I wasn't prepared to fall into that badger hole.

"What's happening, mate?" Johnny called over urgently. "Did you get the ice pick?"

"No..." I whispered and dropped the hare. "No," I said loud enough for him to hear as I drew in my arms to sit down in defeat against the cell bars.

"No...No? No!" Johnny repeated, his voice rising with each repetition. Johnny spit out a bunch more "No's" before they trailed off in despair. There were also calls from down both hallways as the other animals learned of my failure.

I brought my knees up and placed elbows on knees and my face in my paws.

Behind me, the snowshoe hare gained control of his debilitating fear and inquired meekly, "You could have killed and eaten me. Why didn't you?"

My ear twitched to his question. I raised my head a little to eye him. "I haven't the taste for you." It wasn't the whole truth but it was close enough.

"But, but all of your kind has hunted and killed my kind."

"Perhaps the ones guarding the glacier do, but outside the ice pack, cities and towns stand where animals like you and I coexist in harmony. Or fairly close to it, anyway." I turned and set my left shoulder and head on the bars and blew out a lungful of air, seeking to calm my nerves.

"Cities? Towns? I've heard of such places from the animals brought here."

The hare held his paws clasped before him. “More so from the prisoners. Though I’m curious to learn more, Mr. Thelin doesn’t like us lingering about the cells and has punished us from time to time for good measure to reinforce his wish.” The hare was silent for some moments. “If you had somehow managed to get the ice pick and used it to pick the cell lock, what would you have done?”

“I’d have freed all the animals down this cell block, then set out in search of my fiancée and her sister and gotten the hell out of here.” What did it matter now if he knew?

“You wouldn’t have sought out Mr. Thelin and tried to kill him?”

“I wouldn’t have sought him out, no. I’d have fought him if he got between me and my goals, though.” I turned my head to better look at him. “How did you know I’d intended to pick the lock with the ice pick?”

He shrugged, having banished his fright. “It stood to reason. The grizzly’s too thick-furred for it to do anything but make him mad. Mr. Thelin never gets near enough to a cell to give the captives any chance to hurt him. As for the rest of us, we’re never allowed a key to these cells, soooo, besides killing yourself, which I’ve never heard an arctic wolf would do, it’s the only other reason I can think of.”

“Smart.” I turned to look at the back of my cell. “Hey, that is smart.” I turned to look at him with better respect. “If you’re so bright to have figured that out, what are you doing leading a horse on such a mind-numbing duty?”

He shrugged. “I’m too small and lightweight to do much, so besides applying my acquired skills in acupuncture, Mr. Thelin assigns me duties like cleaning out vents, scrubbing floors. At least with this job I get to stretch my legs.”

“How long have you been here?”

“All my life. Ms. Thelin came across me in the snow after a group of your kind raided my parents’ warren.”

I grimaced, knowing what that meant. “Sorry to hear that.”

“That’s okay.” He shrugged. “I’m over it. Not knowing your parents makes

it easy not to think of them.”

The sound of something hitting the floor next to me had me look down. There by the bars was the ice pick. I looked up at the hare and he shrugged.

“I’m tired of nothing ever really happening here. I think you’d make things interesting for some days. Just promise me you won’t hurt Ms. Thelin.”

“The female unicorn?” When he nodded, I said, “I can’t speak for anyone else. But I give you my word I’ll pass it along.”

“Good enough.” He smiled crookedly.

I got up and stuck my arm through the bars as a gesture of thanks.

The snowshoe hare looked at my open paw but backed away. “If it’s all the same to you, your thanks is all that’s needed.”

“I quite understand, and again, thanks.” I pulled my paw back and padded quickly to the end of the bars to re-examine the lock with my fingers. With an idea how to bend the pick, it occurred to me the other animals might not take too kindly to the hare once freed. “Best scamper off. No telling what these caged animals will do if you’re around.”

“Right. Good luck.”

I watched the snowshoe hare pad quickly back up the hallway the way he’d come. I shook my head. I was grateful to him but bewildered as well. He still could get hurt or killed. “Damn...” I shook my head. “I forgot to get his full name.” I made a face of regret and set to work on the lock. Although I’d never come across a lock quite like this, there are basics all locks must be designed around. Knowing them by heart, I had the lock open in seconds. Once in the hallway, I checked on the sheepdogs. Johnny had killed his. I, however, only knocked out my sheepdog. I tossed him into my vacant cell and heard the mechanism lock when I pulled the bars closed.

Refiloe Kalu



Chapter 6

Catch and Release

Johnny was enthusiastic upon being released. He gave me a bone-crushing hug and hopped about before he caught himself and stopped. “Oh, sorry, mate.”

“No harm.” I said tightlipped as I shook out my body to make certain everything still functioned.

“What now?” he asked.

“You tear apart that cart to gain any kind of weapon we can use to fight with while I start releasing animals from their cells.”

“Right...” Johnny intertwined his fingers and cracked his knuckles, apparently a habit before he started something.

I first released the animals along the hallway out, setting them a task of guarding the corridor. After which I padded back down the corridor, setting to work on each lock while receiving quite a few greetings like, “Where’d you come from?” “How’d you get out?”

From one frightened riverine rabbit, I got quite the opposite reaction. “Oh, blessed Great Maker, no, please no.” He fell to his knees and pleaded, “Don’t eat me. Please have mercy.”

“What? Uh? Oh no, you’ve no worry of that from me. I’m not one of the arctic glacier wolves.”

“But, but,” he stammered, backing up in his cell when I shoved the bars aside. “You’re an arctic wolf! Everyone knows the arctic wolves are carnivores.”

“And they are,” I agreed, for sadly, it was the truth. “But I’m an outcast because I’m not.”

I hurried to the next cell. When I came in sight of the last two cells, it dawned on me I hadn't come across Oscar Sullivan.

Could he have eluded capture? Or is he kept someplace else? The question as to where he was did fill a remote part of my mind. Yet to puzzle too much over his whereabouts would be counterproductive to the magnitude of responsibility I'd inherited in releasing all the male animals. For the present, I couldn't afford to distract my mind with his absence. *Later, I'll consider him*, I told myself, and set to open another locked cell.

With the last cell bars thrown aside, I shook paws with the zebra who'd been inside.

"You have my gratitude, wolf."

"You're welcome." I looked down the hallway where everyone had gathered and saw an argument had broken out.

"I hate to ask after just being released, but have you seen a female zebra?"

"Sorry, not yet. But if she's still here, she'll be in the female section of this building." I set off at a jog to get into the crowd of animals that mainly consisted of foxes, canines, felines and owls.

"So who died and made you leader?" a snow leopard snapped at a large polar bear.

The polar bear growled. "Would you like to volunteer?"

"That will be enough!" a great gray owl interjected, walking in between the two. "Bickering amongst ourselves accomplishes nothing. By the grace of our Great Maker, along with the nimble fingers and intelligence of an arctic wolf, we're free. Let us not squander it."

"Yeah, let's get out of here!" a greyhound suggested.

"What about our wives?" an Asian golden cat questioned.

"Hang them," a Sechuran fox spoke up. "This place is far too large to search them out. Besides, if we did, we'd risk running afoul of that grizzly. I say we make a break for it."

"I'm not going anywhere without my Svea," the polar bear snapped,

identifying himself as Mrs. Dovell's husband. Mr. Espen Dovell folded his arms and glared about him.

"Gentle animals." The great gray owl held up his arms to gain the crowd's attention. "The fox has a point." This earned the owl a threatening glare from Mr. Dovell until the bear heard the owl's next words. "For the sake of safety, we needs stay together."

"I'll not argue staying in a group would be much safer." The leopard nodded. "But I'm for splitting up into two groups. Those of you who wish to risk your lives to free the females, stay with the polar bear. Those of you who wish to get out of here, follow me."

"That's easy for you to say," a white-nosed coati griped. "The climate outside is to your liking."

"How do you mean?" the Zebra asked, stepping around me.

"Has anybody thought about the cold outside?" The white-nosed coati reminded everybody. "You arctic animals are in your element, but the rest of us are nothing but frozen food on the pads." He stepped up to the leopard and pointed. "You've got to do something to help us." He then catered to the rest of the non-cold weather animals. "All of you arctic animals have a duty to aid the rest of us off this glacier."

"In point of fact, I don't," the leopard snapped, showing his teeth. "Once outside these walls, my pads are taking this leopard as far and as fast as my pads can take me."

"Coward..." the white-nosed coati snapped. He waved at the others. "You hear that? He's just said to hell with us."

At this point I had to interject before the leopard took offense and made things worse. "That's the worst thing you can do," I said, directing my words at the leopard.

"Why's that?" The leopard eyed me, appraisingly. "We owe nothing to each other."

"In point of fact, you're wrong," the great gray owl cut in. "At least when it

comes to this wolf.” He pointed at me. “Without him, we’d all still be locked up behind bars. I say we give the wolf our ears.”

Mr. Dovell looked down on me with lowered eyebrows. “I’ll listen, so long as he’s not talking out of his—”

“Well, someone needs to make up a plan,” the white-nosed coati cut in, his temper showing. “Something other than hanging around here waiting for the grizzly to find us!”

The bickering started over with animal pointing at animal. Believing I held no choice, I puffed out my fur, raised my tail high, took an aggressive stand and shouted, “Enough!” Unbelievably, they stopped the squabbling to look at me. With all eyes turned to me, I announced, “Fine. You want a plan? Then I’ll make one for you.” I snapped, “Any objections?”

“What makes you qualified to direct us?” the long-tailed weasel griped.

“The whole damn lot of you.” I laid my ears back. “Any other stupid questions?”

The snow leopard smirked but did not argue. Of the others, Mr. Dovell was the only other animal who had a good chance to best me.

The polar bear looked at me. “No offense, but I’ll not follow any animal unless you plan on freeing my wife.”

“What I plan is to get the whole lot of us, male AND female, out of this building and off the ice. As an arctic wolf who was once part of the clans, I’m your best bet in doing so, so listen up!”

“What nonsense is this?” the white-nosed coati complained. “We’ve no knowledge of where the females are. We—” The coati had the bad grace to say this within reach of Mr. Dovell, who bent down, laid a paw on his shoulder and snarled.

“I haven’t had the taste of fresh meat on my tongue in three years. Say one more word against freeing my wife and I’ll break my fast by eating you.”

The coati blanched, shrunk in on himself and stepped back.

I nodded thanks to Mr. Dovell.

“Before we get started,” I began. “Four matters must be dealt with. First and foremost, a plan to take out that grizzly, as I’m not foolish enough to believe we’ll be lucky enough not to run into him. Second, finding out where the females are kept captive. Third, obtaining enough food to last us at least eight days on the ice; more would be great. And lastly, fourth, finding clothes, tarps, or some kind of cover to ward off the cold and freezing windstorms that can run across the ice.”

“So we split up?” the great gray owl guessed.

“No,” I said flatly. “Splitting up gives the grizzly a better chance to take us out or scatter us into more manageable individuals for recapture. No, we stick together. We face the grizzly and the unicorn as one group to better the odds all of us get out of here.”

“Good point,” the long-tailed weasel said, though his posture told me he had no intentions of joining in to subdue any animal who got in our way.

I had an urge to slap him for his blatant future intention, but I needed to get us going.

“Will these help?” Johnny held out the cart poles.

“Yes.” I pointed to the only other heavyweight in the group, the zebra. “Give him one.” As Johnny did so, I outlined my thoughts, but forewent using Mr. Dovell’s name yet, as I wanted to get us moving. “The polar bear will cover our backs.”

“Done,” Dovell agreed.

“You and I”—I pointed to the snow leopard—“will take the lead. Johnny, you’ll back us up with the metal pole. You”—I instructed the zebra—“will stay with the polar bear with your pole at paw.”

He nodded, though I could see he had some doubts.

“The point is, the two of us in front and the polar bear in back will take the brunt of any attack. The pole holders will use the sharp end to jab and distract as possible. The rest of you may aid as you can, but do so only if you think you can inflict some harm without tripping those of us fighting. Otherwise, stay out of

it.”

“Right then,” Mr. Dovell chimed in. “So which direction to the female cells?”

“As I was there, I’ve some idea.” I looked at the snow leopard. “What’s your name?”

“Lamont.”

“Right then. Braxton.” I gestured up the hallway where the snowshoe hare had darted off. “We’ll start off this way.”

When we came abreast of the cell I left the sheepdog in, he called out. “Hey, fellows. You think I might be able to join you?”

“So you can sound the alarm at the first opportunity?” the long-tailed weasel sneered. “No way in hell.”

The weasel’s remarks earned him a glare from me, which backed him up into the group. Once he was put in his place, I queued up my senses to read the sheepdog better. “Why would you aid us?”

“Because I’m tired of this life.” He let his head fall on the bars with a sigh. He looked at me and used a paw to rub his forehead. “Because my wife and pups deserve to see green grasses and tall trees instead of looking out on a world that’s cold and unforgiving with nothing but a white landscape to blind their eyes.”

“He’s lying...” the long-tailed weasel spoke out from behind the great gray owl.

“What reasons have I in lying about my family?” the sheepdog rebutted.

“I could count off any number of reasons,” I said, after giving the long-tailed weasel a snarl. “However, the best question to ask is why you haven’t left before now.”

“At the risk of sounding ridiculous, I once held a romantic notion towards Ms. Thelin. I thought if I did everything she asked, she’d see me as more than a coworker.” He dropped his head on the bars and continued. “When I finally confessed my love, she told me she was flattered, yet our union was an

impossibility. She couldn't be tied down in such a way to any horse, let alone a dog. Her duty—she tried to let me down gently by explaining—her duty to deliver genetically improved animals into the world was her life and nothing else.”

“Uh-huh. I see; so after that, why didn't you leave?”

He looked skyward and smiled. “I was all set to try my luck out on the ice when Ms. Thelin brought in a very fetching, but half-frozen Dalmatian.” He looked at me but in a way he also looked at all those about me. “I was crushed by Ms. Thelin's rejection and in a bad place in my head. But upon seeing this beautiful dog, I fell in love all over again. I asked Mr. Thelin if he'd spare her from being a captive. He denied me at first, citing our job came first above all other things. But after she'd had a litter of genetically-altered pups, he grudgingly agreed to let her out into my care so long as I forgot any nonsense about leaving this facility.”

“What a load of hogwash,” the long-tailed weasel said aloud from behind the great grey owl.

Lamont huffed. “We're wasting valuable time, wolf. Either let the dog out or get moving.”

I spared the leopard a glance and made a decision based on my senses. “I believe you.”

“You're not really going to let him out, are you? Not after what's he done to us,” the long-tailed weasel argued. “What right have you to overrule the rest of us?”

I had the ice pick in the lock when the Sechuran fox spoke up, “I'm with the weasel. Leave the dog; he deserves it.”

The lock clicked and I took ahold of the bars as I slid an eye over at the Sechuran fox. “Perhaps you're right, but his wife and pups are as much victims as we are. Besides, he can be of help to find food and clothes, not to mention the females.”

“He could've made up the whole story,” the long-tailed weasel said, gaining

confidence with another animal siding with him.

I slid the bars open. "True," I acknowledged. "And if so..." I eyed the sheepdog and spoke plainly so he would understand me. "I'll kill him."

"Enough..." Lamont snapped impatiently. "Let's get moving."

I caught the sheepdog's shoulder and warned, "Best stay with me. But I promise you, I'll not show any mercy should you prove me wrong."

"I understand." He fell in step with me. "Thank you."

"Save your thanks. You may regret this between traversing the glacier and the wolf clans."

"You're the one who knocked me out?" He rubbed the top of his head.

"That's right."

"Why, why didn't you simply kill me?" The sheepdog looked at the other of his kind lying in a heap as we passed the body.

"I'm loathe to kill any animal unless it's truly warranted," I confessed. "So far, you haven't given me a reason."

"I have one," Johnny spoke up. "Feeding us that terrible slop all this time."

"Johnny..." I warned, my face pained at his interruption for such a stupid reason.

"Well, it's true..." Johnny got a few to agree behind him.

"That's enough!"

The sheepdog glanced back. "I've been eating that stuff far longer than you." When I questioned his statement with a look and ears clearly listening, the sheepdog explained, "All us animals working here eat that stuff. All save Mr. Thelin and his sister. They eat specially raised alfalfa."

"Alfalfa?" the zebra chimed in. "Damn, that sounds good."

"If you like that sort of stuff," an ocelot spoke up.

"Alright, drop the unneeded comments," I warned.

"That's easy for you to say," the ocelot argued, "You haven't been locked up as long as the rest of us."

"He has a point," Johnny agreed.

“Johnny, you’re not helping matters,” I said with a sigh. I looked at the sheepdog. “I suppose you don’t happen to know where any regular food would be?”

“I do, but it’s a walk from here, so I’d recommend freeing your females first. That is, if you don’t mind seeing them in the state of undress most of you are in.”

Most? crossed my mind as I looked down on myself. A quick look behind me showed some animals had taken advantage of the argument back down the hallway to snatch up blankets from cells to cover their lower extremities. I also noticed the sheepdog’s lab coat was missing, most likely taken from him before I’d let him out. *I guess they’re right.* My memories displayed details of four psychiatrists’ test results. *Once something becomes a habit, you tend to proceed without thought. As is evident in my lack of covering, having gone so long without clothes.*

“Um, yeah.” As we were approaching the end of the hallway, I said, “I guess it’s a little too late to think of modesty. Besides, we’ve more pressing matters at paw, like how would you recommend handling the grizzly bear?”

“Honestly?” The sheepdog shrugged. “Keep out of his way.”

When I showed I wasn’t pleased by his comment, he relented.

“Sorry. That brute could do with a beat down. But I’ve no idea how to aid you when we come across him, save to suggest running would be in order.”

“As much as that’s sound advice, it’s out of the question. He has to be dealt with if we meet up. Otherwise he could intimidate everyone into a route that would leave us all vulnerable to recapture.”

“I have a thought,” the white-nosed coati spoke up. “How about the dog shows us the exit so those of us unable to fight are out from under pad?”

A few of the animals nodded or vocalized agreements to this suggestion.

Before I could veto the suggestion, Mr. Dovell agreed. “Wolf, it would be expedient. I’m loathe to have so many animals under pad.”

“It’s too cold outside for them to wait on us,” I warned.

“They could sit just inside by the door,” Mr. Dovell corrected, gaining nods.

I thought this over. “I’m still in disagreement. However, if this is what most of you want, then fine. But not until we free the females so you males can protect them while the rest of us fetch the supplies and warm clothes.”

Mr. Dovell rubbed his muzzle in thought and his ears swiveled to his thinking process. After only seconds, he said, with some doubt in his voice, “Agreed, so let’s get moving.” He looked expectedly at the sheepdog. “Lead the way.”

“The name’s Pascal,” he supplied, looking about him. “To reach the female cells, we’ll have to go through a large room. There’s very few soft surfaces in the room to absorb sound, so if you all can hold in your toenails, it would help in passing unnoticed.”

Most of them looked down at their pads.

Lamont snorted. “You’re joking, right?”

The sheepdog looked at the snow leopard and shrugged apologies.

I also looked down, understanding his warning, and wanted to club my forehead. *Of all the stupidity! I should have waited another month for the bat-eared fox to clip our nails.* As a result, because of my goof-up, all our nails were quite long. Up until now I hadn’t thought about them, having adapted to the noise my toenails made striking concrete and the irritation of waiting on the bat-eared fox to come by and trim them back.

“Have we time to tear up blankets to tie about our pads?” Mr. Dovell questioned, though it was plain in his tone he loathed the time it would take to do so.

“Pascal, what do you think?” I asked. “Have you been gone long enough to be missed?”

“As I was out for a time, I couldn’t say,” Pascal began. “But truthfully, we’re not watched over. I don’t know what Mr. Thelin had on Lazare to keep him in line; he never confided in me. For myself, having a wife and pups to look after kept me from causing trouble.”

I checked about us then looked at my pads. “The risk is the same with or without. However, the blankets have a use later. Let’s get our pads covered.”

Some thirty minutes later, having ripped blankets up to cover pads and hips for modesty’s sake, we were walking softly double-file through the large chamber. Midway across, steam began to wind its way up through the steel-grated floor. Pascal stopped, his nose at work.

“What is it?” I asked, my nose identifying hot water particles and some chemicals I’d never smelled.

“This is not good. Not good at all,” the sheepdog complained.

“Pascal?”

“We’d best hurry.” Pascal surprised me by trotting off.

“Damn,” the long-tailed weasel griped from the other side of Johnny Roo. “I knew taking him was a bad idea.”

“Shut it!” I snapped and signaled all to pick up the pace. Some moments later I caught up with the sheepdog and asked urgently, “What’s wrong?”

He never missed a step in his answer. “It’s never happened before. Not all the time I’ve been here.”

“Speak plainly, dog. What’s got your tail twisted?” Even though the white cloud back in our cells had deadened our own musky scent, as a byproduct of cleaning out my nose it had heightened my sense of smell, thus I caught wisps of pheromones a pregnant female will exude to bring about the protective nature in all male animals.

Pascal looked out of sorts. Worried. I smelled fear building. “Mr. Thelin warned should we ever encounter steam rising in this large room, we were to let him know on the double.” He glanced behind us and pointed to the cylinder-shaped building in the center of the room. “He also said if he couldn’t be found we were to secure all the caged females in that building.”

“Did he say why?” I asked, still trotting at his side.

Pascal looked down at his pads then forward as we came upon the hallway the scent of pregnant females was coming from. “Something about it’s the safest

place.” He glanced up into my eyes. “He never did say why.”

“What about the males?” Johnny asked, having overheard our conversation. “You know, us?”

Pascal did his best to shrug as he kept pace with me. “We never asked and he never said.”

I looked in the direction we were headed. *If the sheepdog isn't lying, our circumstances may turn for the worst.* My thoughts acknowledged the improved odds of running into the grizzly.

“What’s the big deal concerning that building?” Johnny inquired as we turned into the corridor.

“We’ve no time for twenty questions.” I glanced at those behind me and warned, “Be on your guard.”

A vibration tickled our pads a second before loud screeching, knocking and clattering sounds bellowed up out of the depths in the large room and rolled over us within the hallway, causing nearly all to jump.

Among those affected, Pascal became even more unnerved and slowed his pace, as did the others.

Far in the back, Mr. Dovell yelled out, “What the hell! Why are we slowing?”

The sheepdog’s ears laid back and his tail drooped. I’d already smelled his fear building, but his physical show allowed others to take note of his anxiousness. This forestalled my brief wish to shout back at the polar bear, *Something weird is happening and it's got the sheepdog frightened.* However, even a dumb animal would know such a statement could be detrimental to the bravado some males were already forcing themselves to present.

Herbivorous animals in the group fell prey to their natural instincts to smell, look, listen and be still; the momentary halt of these animals forced the rest to stop, which caught the polar bear off guard. He stumbled to a halt. Before he could complain further, I got the sheepdog back in motion with a paw to his back. This led to the rest putting one pad before the other. However, for some

reason the snow leopard hesitated; enough so he ended up in the back of the group. His appearance before Mr. Dovell caused the polar bear some annoyance.

“Well?” Mr. Dovell shoved Lamont, who’d let a gap widen before him. “Move it!”

Lamont stumbled forward, glaring. “You’re not the boss of me!”

“Shut your trap, leopard,” the polar bear ordered and shoved Lamont yet again. “Get moving. You’re supposed to be up front.”

With my nose as an extra guide and Johnny Roo right on my heels, the hallway eventually led us to the female cells. However, before we rounded the corner, a loud boom from the large room we’d left meters behind bounded down the hallway to bowl us over, causing the animals to halt our progress. Once steadier on our pads, we were suddenly subjected to an ear-splitting voice that came from everywhere.

“Attention! Attention, all personnel! We are in situation yellow. Structural stability may have been compromised. For your own safety, microseism masks are to be applied until repair crews have located the structural fault.”

The loudspeakers over our heads bombarded our hearing a second time with the same message, reinforcing the apparent emergency. Once the repeated warning fell into silence, we all lowered arms and paws from our hurting eardrums. Behind me, whispered fears filled the air as animals looked for confirmation from others.

Even Johnny Roo called over to me, “Structural damage? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I haven’t a clue.” I leaned on my inner animal for strength so my words would come out without a tremor. “Pascal, do you have any idea?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say it had to do with the rising steam. In any event, I can tell you one thing—if Mr. Thelin had been asleep, he’s not now.”

“Wonderful...” I shook my head. *That guaranties the grizzly will be out and about.*

Though everyone was unnerved, time was fast passing us by, so I gave the

signal to proceed. In short steps we rounded a corner, ignoring the hallway still advancing before us, and came across a boobook female owl, who backed from the bars upon our arrival.

“Who, who are you?” she stammered, physically shaking, her gaze touching each male that came into sight around me. When she saw the boobook male owl, she cried out, “Nye? Nye!” She rushed the bars and he did likewise, reaching for each other.

“Dilwen!”

Across from her, the male great gray owl greeted a female owl of his kind. “Laudine.”

“Nel? Nel, what’s going on, what’re you doing here?”

Before the sight of these two female owls sunk into the minds of the males behind us, my eyes were drawn to a running bat-eared fox who came upon us too fast. He bounced off Johnny as if he hadn’t seen us and stumbled back to looked wild-eyed about him.

“Nonononono, this can’t be happening! You can’t be here!”

His surprise soon became a struggle to remain standing as the males behind me with wives or love interests, having discovered the caged female owls, sprinted past our stationary forms. In truth, I wished I could’ve joined the tide of males to locate Joann and Clair. However, we’d lost far too much time for me to get all moon-eyed and rush down the corridor for Joann. She would have to wait, for I had locks to pick.

Lamont stumbled to a halt next to Johnny and thought to capitalize on the fox’s confusion by stepping into the bat-eared fox, getting a paw around his throat. “Well, what luck.” The snow leopard pulled the surprised fox close in so he could growl in his face. “Someone I can take my anger out on.”

Even picking locks would have to wait a few seconds as I dressed him down before he could hurt a possibly valuable ally. “Lamont! Retract your claws and let him go.”

Before he replied to my demand, the whole group of us were shoved aside

as Mr. Dovell charged past, clearing a path with his bulk while calling out his wife's name. "Svea!"

Once I'd regained my pads in the polar bear's wake, the boobook owl, Nye, grabbed my arm. "Wolf, quick, you've got to release my wife!"

"In a second," I said. Searching out the bat-eared fox, I gave instructions to the kangaroo. "Johnny, grab that fox and hold him."

"Uh? Oh, sure, mate."

"Lamont, pad up to the corner and guard this corridor."

Lamont regained his pads and gave me a heated sideways look. "Guard it yourself. I said I'd hang with the group until you found the females. Well, you have; now I'm leaving, and you best not stop me."

The Sechuran fox who'd remained with a few of the other unattached males jumped in and added his two banknotes. "I'm with the leopard. I'm out of here."

Amidst our words, Johnny took a hold of the bat-eared fox, who complained, "Nonono, don't hurt me. I'm not at fault for your captivity. I'm just the fox who does your nails..."

"You agreed to stay until the females had all been released," I charged the snow leopard over the bat-eared fox's plea to remain unharmed.

Lamont snarled, extending his claws. "Only because that damn polar bear was around. Well he's not now, so unless you want to back up your words with force, stay out of my way."

"Hold still, you little creep," Johnny demanded, dropping his metal pole to get a better grip on the fox. "Or I will hurt you."

"Wolf, about my wife," Nye touched my arm, trying to regain my attention. "You need to get her cell open so we can get out of here before that grizzly discovers we're out of our cells!"

I was wasting time. Although losing the snow leopard meant one less capable animal in fighting off the grizzly, priorities had to be set. A fight would take time and leave both of us in a bad way. Not a good start for a journey out on the ice. I had to let him go in favor of being able-bodied when we did meet up

with the grizzly. Besides, freeing the females was a higher priority than kicking his furry tail and reinforcing my dominance. “Fine,” I threw out my words at Lamont. “Just don’t expect any help from us!”

“Who needs you?” the Sechuran fox sneered and joined Lamont in padding off.

Shortly after they left, the white-nosed coati and honey badger joined them.

“Braxton?” Johnny watched them leave.

“Let them go,” I answered over my shoulder as I started in on the lock to the female boobook’s cell. “What we need most is cooperation, not dissention.”

“Cooperation, right!” the bat-eared fox improvised. “I can cooperate; as long as you don’t hurt me, I’ll give you all—”

“Oh, shut it, you.” Johnny turned on the fox and shook him.

“Hey, what’s the holdup up there?” a maned wolf yelled. “Get your tail moving, wolf.”

I spared a look on the maned wolf but ignored him for the moment to look for Pascal, who appeared to be weighing his odds about staying or leaving. He saw me looking and noted my ears turned to him.

“My wife and pups. Wolf, I’ve got to go to them. They’ll be frightened.”

I chewed on my tongue, not wishing to let him go, but gestured to the bat-eared fox. “Does the fox know where the food and clothes are?”

Pascal looked at the bat-eared fox. “Kofi? Yes, Kofi knows. We all know where they are.”

He looked hopefully at me. Although I hated to lose a willing ally for an unknown, I told myself, *You’re just a softy at heart*, and nodded. “Alright, attend to your family.” I sought to come up with a rendezvous point and settled on the cylindrical metal building, as it was hard to miss in that large room. “Meet us at the circular building as soon as you can.”

“Done and done. Thank you, Braxton.” Without hesitation, the sheepdog took off.

“Err? Wait! Nonono. I can’t help. I’m just a lac—”

Kofi's eyes bulged when Johnny squeezed his throat. "Can't help or won't help? Be careful in what you say next. I've already killed a sheepdog. I've no qualms in making you number two."

Eyes wide to the kangaroo's confession, if the bat-eared fox could have swallowed, he would have.

As Johnny clearly had control of Kofi, I turned to the lock, and with the ice pick in paw, slid it into the right spot. A twist here and there with a sprinkle of poking, and I heard the lock unlatch. Together with the greyhound who'd decided to remain instead of joining Lamont, he and I pushed open the bars, whereby the female inside screeched happily and rushed into her husband's arms.

Once her door was open, I set to work on the other female owl's cell. "You there," I gestured at the greyhound. "What's your name?"

"Gavin." The greyhound answered.

"Gavin. Good. I need you to stay here and help the kangaroo. Don't let any animals wander out of this corridor."

"Why should I stop anyone from leaving? You let those other animals go," Gavin pointed out.

"Don't be a nimrod, you idiot." Johnny interceded. "It's always best to stay in a pack."

"I've no time to explain it better than Johnny has," I said in padding off. Before I was too far, I called out to the kangaroo, "Johnny, have Gavin hold the fox. I need you to take up the pole and guard the corridor."

"No worries, mate," he called back.

Mr. Espen Dovell



Chapter 7

A shaky Path to Follow

Cell after cell I applied my skills of lock picking, the whole while anticipating a pair of lovely soft gray eyes to lock onto my ice blue ones a moment before Joann's paws reached out to me. Until this moment I'd been able to deny how much I needed to see her face, feel her soft paws and taste her lips, yet with each passing cell, I was left wanting while other animals joined in tearful reunions. Halfway down the hallway, I came upon the polar bears just as Mrs. Dovell informed her husband he was a father yet again.

"A son? I've a son!" I happened to be passing the polar bear to get at the lock when he got this happy news. Arms needing to fasten onto something, Mr. Dovell pulled me off my pads and declared loudly, "I've a son!" He gave me a bear hug that had my skeleton crying Uncle!

"Congratulations..." I managed to get out with little breath left. "Now put me down!"

"Espen." Mrs. Dovell landed a heavy blow on her husband's shoulder with a balled-up paw. "You're crushing Braxton!"

"Mmm, what?" Mr. Dovell pushed me out to his arm's length. "Oh, yeah. Sorry, wolf." He let my pads retouch the floor. "I want to hug my wife so badly and can't, I just grabbed up the first animal I could."

Back on my pads, I sought to reacquaint my body with its natural state. "I understand."

Mr. Dovell's light brown eyes wandered off a moment before he looked at me and his wife. "Wait a minute. How do you two know each other?"

“Braxton was very sick when the female unicorn found him,” Mrs. Dovell explained. “The black unicorn put him and his family in with me so I could nurse them back to health.”

After a moment of filing this in his brain, Mr. Dovell’s eyes turned red in anger as he reasoned out what that meant. His face turned ugly, and his paw shot out and locked about my neck, squeezing. My response was quick; I grabbed his paw with both of mine, which was a good thing, for he once more pulled me off my pads. “You touched my wife’s breasts?”

Situations like this can often times be misconstrued. I’d done nothing wrong, while the polar bear was acting out of jealousy. If I reacted in self-defense, most animals would hold me accountable for any harm I might do him regardless of the harm he was doing me. Of course, I had other things to contend with, like a time constraint in getting us all out of the building before the grizzly bear stumbled upon us. Thus I held a reasonable confidence any action I initiated was for the betterment of all and not just for my own wellbeing. Of course, I had to admit that would be a positive outcome.

While holding onto his arm to take my weight off my neck, I dug both paws full of claws into his fur, hoping to penetrate skin. “Let go!”

A second later, Mrs. Dovell came to my rescue. “Esen.” She slapped the back of his head with force. “You let Braxton go right now!”

In all honesty, it wasn’t until the smooth-coated otter across from Mrs. Dovell’s cell yelled out a caution in a high-pitched voice, “For the love of our Great Maker, don’t harm him!” that the polar bear came back to reality.

Her plea made my ears hurt. I assumed it did the same to the polar bear, as he winced, looked over at the otter, and at that point realized he was strangling the only animal who had the skill to free his wife.

He blinked then looked at me and let go. His muzzle worked. Barely understandable words came out as he tried to apologize while still dealing with his jealousy.

I went down on one knee. One paw massaged my throat while I drew in

painful breaths. I twisted my neck left and right and took note the zebra, whose wife would be released after I'd released Mrs. Dovell and the smooth-coated otter, had gotten halfway between the cells with his pole in paw ready to be used on Mr. Dovell had he not dropped me. I put out a paw in acknowledgment of his rescue and slowly stood up.

"Look, wolf, I'm sorry," Mr. Dovell stumbled through saying.

"Apologize later." I managed to pass air over my vocal cords to speak, glad they were still working. Only after I'd padded over the ice pick did I realize I'd dropped it in our scuffle. Ice pick retrieved, somewhat slowly, I turned to the lock.

"Braxton," Mrs. Dovell sought my attention as I set to work. "I, too, am sorry. I never thought to mention my Espen is of a jealous nature."

I spared her a look but declined to answer, as my throat hurt, not to mention my chest and lower back.

"Espen." Mrs. Dovell reached out and grabbed his ear and pulled.

"Ow! Svea..." Mr. Dovell complained.

"You keep that temper of yours in check. You know how you are when you get angry."

The lock clicked open, but before I could tell them the bars were unlocked, they both sent the cell bars crashing open to reduce the time stolen from being in each other's arms. While they were engulfed in loving passion, I walked across the hallway and set to work again.

"Mr. Wolf?" The smooth-coated otter inquired. "By any chance, do you know what happened to my Szymon? I haven't seen him in over a year, and that unicorn's hench-animals won't tell me anything."

I stopped the movement with the icepick to look down into her sad black eyes. *She knows her husband is dead. Still, like any animal in love, she holds out hope.* Briefly I wanted to push her off on Johnny to tell her. *After all,* I reasoned with myself, *he told me what happened.* Yet it would be callous of me to pawn her off like that. I swallowed and looked at the floor.

“He’s dead, then...” she said sadly, tears erupting from the corners of her eyes, the last shred of hope burnt to ash.

“I’m sorry, but that’s what I was told.”

She sat down and held herself, her last tears for a husband rolling down her cheeks.

Although she needed compassion, someone to hold her, I had no time to comfort her broken heart, and that hurt. Her cell bars unlocked, I shoved them open enough for her to step out when she was ready and set out at a jog to continue my search for Joann and Clair while freeing those still imprisoned.

With something to keep my mind occupied while I worked my way down to the end of the corridor helped to push down my growing fear something bad had happened to Joann and Clair, for cell after cell I came away empty-pawed of either white-tailed jackrabbit.

The last two cells held a snow leopard and a great horned owl. *Where are they?* My fears had my intelligence struggling to continue my responsibilities while my animal wanted nothing more than to sit down and howl out my sorrow.

Yet no matter my heartache, I’d released around eighty animals I now was responsible for getting out of this building and past the arctic wolf packs; a daunting task by itself made even more so with thirty or so clearly pregnant females emitting strong hormonal scents for all animals to smell.

Regardless of my wants and needs, I set to work freeing the last animal.

“My name’s Natalie Killesso.” The snow leopard behind the bars tucked in a corner of her blanket sarong, which had loosened up from around her torso when she stood.

“Braxton Snow.”

“So, Braxton.” She walked over to lean on the cell bars to watch me, apparently over any excitement of being freed, as it had taken me over an hour to reach her locked cell. “Did you and the other males already kill that black bastard unicorn?”

“Sorry, but no.”

“How about that perverted grizzly bear?” she inquired as the lock rotated open.

“Again, no,” I said, sliding the cell bars open.

Natalie Killesso stepped out into the hallway, stretched and took a big breath of air. “Have you any plans in doing so? If so, I’d like to be a part of the party.”

“In truth, I’m in hope of getting the whole lot of us out of here without either one noticing,” I admitted. She fell into step with me as we walked along the row of cells so I could make certain I’d not left any animal within one.

“Pity,” she remarked. “I’ve a very strong wish to get these paws around either one’s throat.”

“I’d suggest you curb that wish for the sake of your cub,” I pointed out needlessly.

She looked crossly at me. “What, this?” She touched her swelling belly. “Why should I care for a cub I had no intention to conceive? No, far better I lose it in a fight against those two animals than give it life only to kill it.”

Bereaved as I was for Joann and Clair, her attitude toward an innocent life growing within her shocked me. Before I could form any words regarding her callous remark, the whole building shook, causing all of us to startle, plant pads and hold on to one another to retain our balance.

After which, as if to move all the animals into a state of hysteria, panels in the ceiling dropped open to reveal large, red rotating spotlights. This was followed by a male voice that hollered at us all from every direction.

“Attention! Attention, all personnel. Code red is in effect. This building is no longer structurally sound. All personnel are to wear microseism masks and contamination suits until further notice.”

The loud warning beat down on our paw-covered ears a second time, causing all animals to cringe. To make matters worse, the metal rods in the ceiling also lowered and began to spew the white cleaning cloud. This was followed by another announcement.

“Attention! Attention, all personnel. Due to the breach, clean and repair

nanites are being released in all compartments until stores are depleted.”

Once the vibrations of the bellowing voice had dissipated enough for us to gather up and look about, many animal throats spewed questions.

“What will we do now?”

“We’ve got to make a run for it!”

“How do we get out of here?”

These cries battled paw-in-paw with others.

“We need to get back in our cells!”

“We never should have tried to escape!”

“The wolf’s at fault! He brought these troubles down on us!”

Mr. Dovell stood to his full height of two hundred and twelve centimeters and let out an ear-splitting roar. The force of this silenced the panicking animals. Afterward, he bellowed, “Enough! We’ve our freedom! I, for one, am getting my wife, son and I out of here! I recommend the rest of you do the same.”

“But as a group!” I shouted into the moment of quiet. “Only as a group will we best the grizzly and defend ourselves from the arctic wolves guarding this ice pack. Before we head out onto the freezing ice, we need to gather clothing and food to last eight to ten days, at the very least.”

“Right!” Mrs. Dovell agreed, loud enough to carry her voice to all the animals as she looked about her. “The arctic wolf makes considerable sense. We females are in varying stages of pregnancy and will need the strength and support of all you males.”

“But what of our owlets?” a female great horned owl spoke up. “We can’t possibly leave without them!”

“I’ll not leave without my two sons!” Mr. Dovell pulled his wife into his side.

Mrs. Dovell looked adoringly at her husband for that.

“How do we go about locating them?” two or three animals asked at once.

“The sheepdog will show us,” Mr. Dovell spoke out, unaware I’d let him run off to aid his family, a decision I now regretted as I’d yet to find Joann and

Clair.

“That won’t be possible,” the greyhound tattled on me. “That wolf let him run off.”

“WHAT?” Mr. Dovell bellowed. His angry eyes sought me out. “Why’d you do a fool thing like—” The polar bear shoved an animal out of his way in an effort to get his paws on me but another earth movement forced us all to hold onto one another to keep on our pads.

I felt it wise to exit his field of vision during the confusion, as it was becoming clear the polar bear acted on his impulses instead of thinking a matter out. When the tremor subsided, everyone stood erect and looked around. Before Mr. Dovell could gather his thoughts, the panic that held the animals a moment ago found fertile ground to reinsert itself. The resumption of futile questions again pained my ears.

Mr. Dovell bellowed, “Silence! I’ll suffer no more of your infuriating babble.” The polar bear looked about him. “Wolf! Where in the devil are you? You’ve got some explaining to do.”

“Forget him,” the male maned wolf called out from his spot. “It’s time we got out of here instead of standing about with our tails up our—”

The maned wolf was shoved by his wife, who cut him off. “Shut it, Carlos. We need clear guidance, not machismo.”

“So how the hell do we get out of here?” the male zebra demanded.

A commotion amidst the animals had some step aside as the male great gray owl dragged the bat-eared fox into the mix. “This fox will show us the way.”

“Who?” the female Asian golden cat next to me spoke up in doubt. “That sissy? We’d be better off stumbling around blind than trusting that thing.”

“I-I a-agree,” the bat-eared fox meekly said just loud enough for those immediately about him to hear.

Johnny followed behind his charge and cuffed the fox on the head with a paw. “Quiet, you.”

“Before we get too far ahead of ourselves,” the female Zebra cut in, “who’s

leader of this herd?” She looked at me as I made my way back into the inner circle now that Mr. Dovell seemed to have lost control of the animals. “You, wolf?”

Before I could comment, Mr. Dovell spoke out against me. “I allowed him to lead for a time, for he had the best nose to aid in locating you females and the skill to unlock the cells. But I’ll take over as leader, for I’m the biggest and strongest of you all.”

“Who says brawn is better than brains?” the great gray owl challenged. “It was the arctic wolf who devised a way to get us free. It was the arctic wolf who holds the skill in unlocking our cells. And was it not he who kept the leopard from killing this animal?” he gestured to the bat-eared fox. “The very animal who will now show us where our owlets are as well as food and clothing?”

“Maybe so, but he lost my vote of confidence when he let that sheepdog run off,” Mr. Dovell declared. The polar bear’s declaration was met with a few agreements.

“Arguably a mistake,” the great grey owl acknowledged. “B—”

“Enough!” I cut into the argument. “I appreciate the vote of confidence, but we’re wasting time. Something odd is happening to this place, and we’ve far too much at stake to stand about debating.” Even though my need to manage these animals was in full force in my mind, I bowed to expediency. “I relinquish any role as leader to Mr. Dovell. Now, let’s pull together, find your cubs, get what we need and get out of here.”

I turned to the female polar bear as Mr. Dovell dealt out orders. “Mrs. Dovell...”

“Hmm? Oh, Braxton, yes what is it?”

“I didn’t find Joann or Clair; have you any idea where they might be?”

“Not here?” She looked around briefly as if searching them out. “They must be in the examination room.”

“Where’s that?”

“Just down the hall from the room where the jackrabbits sex up you males

for your semen.”

“You mean the room where the unicorn impregnated them?”

“Yeah, sam—”

“Wolf,” Mr. Dovell snapped, cutting his wife off. “Pay attention! You’re in charge of acquiring food. Take five males and any female not encumbered with advanced pregnancy.”

“No, I can’t. I have to find my family.”

The polar bear looked cross. “That wasn’t a suggestion; you will do as I say. Gather up what you can and meet the rest of us near that odd white building in the middle of the large room. Once we’re all back together, we’ll head after our cubs. At that time, you may hunt out your family. Not before, understand?”

Antsy as I was to find Joann and Clair, without food, clothing and the support of the herd, they’d never live to see civilization. Reluctantly, I nodded agreement.

“That’s settled,” Mr. Dovell bellowed. “Let’s—”

Before the polar bear finished his orders, the loud male voice rang out over us all yet again. “Attention! Attention, all personnel. Clean and repair nanites are nearing depletion levels. All personnel must wear contamination suits at this time.”

Mr. Dovell locked his jaws closed briefly at the interruption and raised his muzzle to bellow over the voice, “Move out!”

Once the echoes of both Mr. Dovell’s command and the loudspeaker overhead had died down, the group of us started off. Johnny fell easily into step with me. “So what do you think of Colene? Didn’t I tell you she’s a real looker?”

At first my mind was elsewhere, but I caught the kangaroo’s jest. “For a kangaroo, sure.” I agreed, though in truth I had no idea, as I didn’t really remember her.

Johnny looked disappointed. “For a kangaroo? You must be joking. She’s the prettiest female here.”

I looked at Johnny and saw the partially-covered blanketed female kangaroo

he was talking about a few steps ahead. Even though she was talking to the female snow leopard at her side, she had a single ear turned our way to hear what Johnny was saying about her without really appearing to do so. This told me Johnny was likely trying to butter her up for an attempt to get her to like him. *At least until he gets home*, I thought sarcastically.

The cleaning cloud of white ceased spewing out of the ceiling rods after we cleared the female corridor cells. A moment later, a rumble rolled down the long hallway we'd entered, causing the floor to roll latterly under our pads. Briefly, all animals stopped moving. Panicked voices fell out of several muzzles. Mine might have joined in but my animal forbade it. *I'm an alpha*, it reminded me. *Fear is a hindrance in killing my foes*. Though killing any animal was far from my thoughts, I took the meaning and steadied up. *Joann and Clair need me*, I reminded myself to aid in that task.

At any rate, the polar bear took care of the hesitation by hollering out, "Move it!"

Before we reached the large open room, a cloud of white boiled into the corridor onto itself some meters ahead like a rolling sea crashing in on itself, filling the hallway and obscuring our exit. Though similar to the white cleaning cloud, it was fast evident it was nothing like it at all. It reminded me of a steam room, as I could feel the heat on my white fur while my nose took in the scent of water molecules but also those same unidentifiable chemical substances intermixed in the water.

Mr. Dovell called out a halt, grabbed up the bat-eared fox and demanded, "What the devil is that?"

The bat-eared fox whimpered. "I've no clue. I've never seen or smelled it before."

"Is it connected with those warnings being shouted at us over those..." He pointed to the patterns of small holes in the ceiling.

The bat-eared fox cringed in on himself, gulped and said meekly, "I don't know."

“Baw, you’re useless.” The polar bear shoved the fox back into the care of the greyhound and snapped at the great gray owl, “You, owl, you’ve feathers for protection. Step up front and take the lead.”

“Umm...” the owl stammered, evidently trying to come up with a plausible reason why he couldn’t advance.

“I’ll take the lead,” I said to combat anymore waste of time. Besides, I couldn’t smell anything dangerous. “Johnny, back me up.”

“Uh, okay, sure.” Johnny gulped, but agreed on the account the female kangaroo gave him a look to see if he were brave enough to follow me.

With Johnny as backup, I raised my tail in defiance of the unknown and padded arrogantly up the corridor right into the heated mist. The heat and chemicals stung my eyes, yet I persevered. I waved my paw before my muzzle trying to see and found the further I padded, the more the cloud of white began to dissipate.

“You alive in there, wolf?” Mr. Dovell called out after a couple of minutes.

“The air tastes foul and stings the eyes, but nothing that can’t be worked through,” I replied. A few more steps and my toenails fell on the corrugated steel floor. *I made it to the large room.* I sighed and briefly stopped to get my bearings. Here the sound of water turning into steam became louder. The chemical smell also increased, yet it was tolerable. A piece of warm steel touched my arm and I reacted, grabbing the steel with both paws, and only stopped myself from doing Johnny any harm after I remembered he was behind me.

“Oh, sorry, Braxton.” He came closer. A look back showed me his dark outline in the white rolling cloud, which I realized was bellowing up out of the depths of the room. “Bluh, you’re right, the air does taste foul here.”

The accursed loudspeaker sounded off again. “Attention! Attention, all personnel. This building has gone beyond safety codes. Protocol 101 is now in effect. All personnel must seal specimen containers and secure them on board the Mary Alice. Again, Protocol 101 is now in effect.”

Johnny came up on my right side. “Do you have any clue as to what that’s all about?”

“Sorry, no.”

“If you ask me,” the female Sechuran fox said, approaching on my left, “The unicorn is playing with our heads. Trying to scare us back into our cells.”

I looked down at the fox as her dark outline appeared.

She looked up at me. “You wouldn’t by any chance know where my worthless husband is? Everyone I talked to said you’d been in charge while releasing us, so you might know.”

I recalled the male Sechuran fox leaving with Lamont, and said as much. “I’m sorry to say he left already with some others, looking for a way out.”

She said some choice words under her breath, not meaning for me to hear, then said clearly, “Mother told me he was good for nothing. Well, if abandonment is good enough in the courts to gain a divorce, I declare myself free and clear of him, and you two are my witnesses.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Johnny agreed.

A commotion behind us made the three of us turn to look behind.

“The devil take you. Will some animal please shut him up?” Mr. Dovell requested of any animal to silence the bat-eared fox.

“Nonono. You don’t understand! It’s the signal before the end. It means this whole place is going to fall in on itself. There’s no running from it, he told us. He said if we want to live, we were to get our tails inside that metal building in this large room as quickly as possible!”

“Hang on a minute,” I interjected myself before anyone silenced the bat-eared fox. “He’s the second animal to warn the rising steam means all us animals are to get in that center building.”

“Nonono,” the bat-eared fox set out to correct me. “You misunderstand. I’m talking about protocol 101. Mr. Thelin said if we ever heard that message, we’re to get all the pregnant females and all kits still left in the building and secure them inside that metal building.”

“Kits?” Mrs. Dovell questioned. “Does he mean our cubs?”

“Yes, yes!” the bat-eared fox agreed quickly. “All those born in this facility are to be taken to the metal building.”

“Hold it. You said this building is going to collapse,” I said before anyone else questioned his words.

“Yes, yes, exactly.”

“But that’s part of this building,” I reminded him.

“Not so. It’s separate—” He was cut off as I was shoved to the side.

“Our cubs,” Mr. Dovell began. “Will be taken to the center building in here?”

“Yes, yes. Mr. Thelin will have Lawrence, Norbert and any others around gather up the kits and head straight to the metal building. Once they’re secured, we’d be sent after the females.”

“What about the males?” Johnny asked, still wanting some animal to tell him the obvious.

Johnny’s question fell to the side when the polar bear spoke up. “That’s good enough for me. Wolf,” Mr. Dovell singled me out. “You and the greyhound take twenty able-bodied females and go after the food and clothes. The rest of us will set an ambush for our captors.”

The basic idea given to me by the sheepdog earlier was that the clothes and food locker lay across the large room opposite where Joann and Clair should be. I considered the layout of the place as I knew it. *It stands to reason the cubs will be somewhere close to the examination room. The same room Mrs. Dovell said Joann and Clair should be. Though I wish to have Joann in my arms, getting to them with Mr. Thelin actively sending animals in my path means at some point I’ll run into the grizzly, the wolverine or both. Although I could take on the wolverine now that I’m whole once more, the grizzly is another matter. I have to be pragmatic. I cannot help Joann or Clair if I’m hurt or dead. Of all of us, the polar bears are best suited to take on the grizzly and survive.* I also considered the circumstances. *If this place does collapse and we do survive in the metal*

building, we'll need food and clothing to keep warm and keep our strength up to the task of digging out. With my alpha still pushing to rescue my chosen mate, I shook my head to clear my thoughts and set about selecting the females to accompany the greyhound and I with a promise to myself. *Once the clothes and food are secured in the metal building, I'm going after Joann and Clair, grizzly or no grizzly.*

While I picked out the females who had a look and smell of steadiness, as I didn't need any of them to panic if something did go wrong, a tigress stepped up and inquired, "You are the wolf who's engaged to the jackrabbit, right?"

"If you're referring to Joann, then yes."

She nodded. "I'll be going with you."

I looked her over. She stood around a hundred and ninety-seven centimeters and showed little fat. *A very fit tiger*, crossed my mind. She'd be a formidable foe in a fight. I'd been selecting females for my supply crew who stood no chance in a fight. My thinking was that the strongest fighters needed to remain with the polar bears. "I wouldn't mind your company, yet for the greater good of the herd, I'd suggest you stay with the polar bears."

"You mean to aid them in fighting off Lawrence," she said without resentment on my practicality.

"The more able-bodied animals capable in holding their own, the better."

The tigress nodded. "Smart, but all the same I'll follow you. Joann and her sister were housed in the cell across from me. According to Joann, you bested two polar bears and some other animals before the numbers took you down. Whether she was elaborating or not, it took considerable guts to take on one polar bear, let alone two. Courage like that is rare, even among carnivores. So I'll stick with you."

"Is that true?" the Sechuran fox asked in wonder.

I grimaced. "I was backed into a corner. Joann and Clair were in grave danger. What I did then has no correlation to any acts of aggression I'd be forced to make in the future."

The Sechuran fox smiled and touched my arm. “A modest hero; I like that.”

Time continued to run away from me. To argue my so-called deed of bravery against two young and inexperienced polar bears or why the tigress needed to stay with the others meant minutes we didn’t have to spare. I sighed and capitulated. “Come on, I haven’t the time to correct you both, and we need to hurry.”

The tigress grinned, showing off her sharp teeth.

I shook my head and told the greyhound, “Gavin, take up the rear to keep any of them from getting lost.”

“Okay, sure,” he answered, his tone sounding doubtful.

Not at all thrilled with his “sure” reply, I called out, “Let’s go...” and signaled the females to follow me at a quick pace along the wall.

Off in the steam-filled room, I still heard Mr. Dovell comment, “Damn, it’s like a white-out heat wave.”

I seconded his observation as the rising steam made traversing the large room more difficult. Even so, by keeping close to the wall on the right, the sheepdog said I’d come to an opening where I’d need to turn left then pad past two corridors before turning right. That was all he said, so I hoped it’d be enough.

“By the by, my name’s Shresth Pham.” The tigress padded next to me.

“I’m Sofia Cuevas, or should I say, I was.” The Sechuran fox corrected herself at my back. “I guess I should revert to my maiden name, as I’m divorced now. So, I’m Prieto. Sofia Prieto.”

“Nice to meet you both.” I acknowledged, though I didn’t look at either one so I could keep looking for the opening. Before any of us could say more, another tremor rumbled under our pads, this one violent enough to cause us all to stop and grab something to steady up.

“What’s causing this?” Sofia questioned, her voice quivering.

Other voices just as scared sought out the same answers.

For myself, I wanted to duck and take cover, but wisdom took ahold of my

primal wish with claws bared, and I called out, “Keep together! We’ve only a short way more!” At least I hoped that to be true.

Natalie
Kilesso



Chapter 8

Food and Clothing

The opening came up as promised. With the turns made we came to a hallway full of doors that had been outfitted with vents top and bottom. The doors stood in the walls to either side of us every three meters for the whole length of seventy meters, where the hallway ended at another door.

“Alright, everyone spread out and take a door,” I ordered. “Gavin.” I singled out the greyhound. “Check out that door at the end.” I pointed.

“Why me? Why not one of the others?”

“Because you’re a sprinter, and I want to know what’s on the other side of that last door as quick as possible. Now get running.”

“Fine, order the dog around...” he complained and took off.

In my mind I heard more of his objections. The same protests a lot of dogs grumble about as the cornerstone of the work force. In reality, that wasn’t so. It just seemed that way because of their numbers. Next to rabbits, dogs outnumbered all the other animals.

The females padded to doors. Fortunately for me, all of them were unlocked, and what’s more, behind every door was clothing. Kilograms of clothes. Male and female. Yet they all seemed to be manufactured wrong.

“I’ve never seen clothes like these...” Laudine, the great gray owl observed, holding up a jumpsuit. “Where’s the hole for the tail feathers?”

“Nor I,” commented Livia, the maned wolf. “Not a one of these pants”—she pulled out and observed one after the other—“has a stitched notch and tail strap to loop over the tail and button on the pants.”

“They also smell funny,” Sofia, the Sechuran fox commented. One of the other females discovered centimeters deeper into the pile of clothes that those buried underneath literally disintegrated in their paws.

“What gives?”

“Hey look at this!”

“What material is this?”

“A rather odd fashion statement, if you ask me.”

I stepped over to have a look. *Interesting*. I pulled one out only to have it fall apart as if moths or mice had been at them, yet I saw no carcass or mice dropping. A whiff of the interior gave me a very old scent of long dead mold spores. *Yet the ones up front are brand new*. “Hmm.”

While I puzzled over the cause of the deterioration, regardless of the unfamiliarity of the clothes that looked new, the females were shifting from door to door donning what they found to fit, using tips of claws to rip holes in the backs of pants, coveralls or dresses to accommodate tails.

Shresth, the tigress, snorted her irritation and snatched up a red and black checkered long-sleeved shirt with buttons only to find her breasts too large to get the last three secured. “Err, it’ll have to do. None of these others are big enough.”

“Being that’s a male shirt you’ve got, it really shouldn’t fit,” Sofia commented.

I rolled my eyes to the comments of style and comfort and called out, “This isn’t a fashion show. Grab up an armful of good clothes and get—”

“Hey, wolf!” The greyhound interrupted my scolding, padding up quickly. “There’s nothing behind that last door but a bunch of these things.” Gavin came to a halt and showed me a silver, crinkly packet in his paw.

I took up the thing and eyed it. “No food? Just these things?”

“Yeah, I’ve never seen anything like them, and stranger yet, the door was airtight. It took some pulling on my part, but when it finally came open, I felt a rush of air pass me to fill the room.”

I took a whiff of the silver packet and as luck would have it, that very moment the whole place shook under our pads. Startled, my claws sprouted, digging into the thing, and I caught a scent of dried cow beef as the tremor stopped.

“Whoa, that smells good!” Gavin exclaimed, though his arms were up and out at his sides so he could keep his balance. Gavin steadied himself as I ripped off the silver wrapping covering the meat inside. “Damn me for a fool, I should have thought to do that.”

The Asian golden cat near at paw caught the scent a second later and she exclaimed. “Meat? Who found real meat?”

I was about to comment when that accursed loud voice echoed about us. “Warning. Warning. All personnel. Drop what you are doing and precede to your designated couches upon the Mary Alice. This is not a drill. T-minus one hour and counting.”

“One hour and counting? What’s that mean?” Laudine, the great gray owl asked, looking about, her eyes wide.

“Who cares?” Shresth the tigress called out, her whiskers working overtime. “Where by the Great Maker is that meat smell coming from?”

“It’s coming from this...” I held up the dried cow meat. “Gavin says the room at the end of the hallway has a lot of it.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Shresth said in turning and sprinted off. Several others did likewise.

“Don’t waste time in gobbling up what you find!” I hollered after them. “Use some of the clothes to wrap around as much as you can carry. The rest of you, get up armloads of clothes.” I wanted to add that we needed to hurry as we had a time constraint before something bad happened, but such a long sentence would be a waste, as they already knew this.

I gave over half the cow meat to Gavin, stuffed some in my mouth and sprinted down the hallway while my taste buds bellowed out in ecstasy, clamoring for more to pass over them. Ignoring the desires, I gathered up a pair

of pants on my way to the last door. Upon gaining the entrance, I discovered the herd of females had found silver containers without meat, by their scattered remains. Crackers, peanut butter, dried fruit and some sort of white powder that held a scent of milk littered the floor.

“What the hell are you all doing?” I exclaimed. “Grab up what you can and let’s get back to the others!”

With grumbles aplenty, as they very much wished to satisfy stomachs left empty of solid foods for so long, they snatched up packets and clothes while I rent a hole in the pants I purloined and pulled them on, with a quick pause to get my tail through the new hole.

“Damn my luck...” I grumbled as I’d gotten a pair too small to button closed.

“Here...” Sofia offered up an oddly-designed leather string contraption that circled itself several times before the ends tied up onto a flat, pear-shaped leather piece. “I picked this up for Shresth to tie closed her upper shirt buttons, but you’re apparently in more need to tie up your pants.”

I took up the offered leather thing with thanks. Holding it in my paws I had a memory of a similar thing I’d seen in a hairless ape’s museum. The plaque had said the apes covered their pads with such things. Why they would choose to abandon traction when needed was beyond me. Regardless of the reasons I was glad of the string I pulled off in hope of holding up my pants should the need to run become paramount.

Once it was tied, I considered our luck as we set off back to the large room. So far, our way remained clear of the unicorn’s staff; however, some short minutes later we rounded a corner and came across a few sour animals who I’d not expected to see still wandering the hallways.

“What the?” Lamont stumbled to a halt before me. “Damn my eyes, not you!”

“Hold it!” I shouted behind me.

Shresth stopped next to me. She took in the sight of the snow leopard

followed by other males and bared her teeth, ears laid back with claws sprouting.

“Hold it, Shresth,” I put out a paw to signal a negative toward confrontation. “I know these animals.”

“Where from?” The tigress asked, not refraining from a threatening pose.

“Paulo!” Sofia exclaimed in anger before I could elaborate. “You worthless piece of—”

“You know these animals, Sofia?” The tigress cut off the Sechuran fox’s hateful exclamation.

“Only that worthless fox hiding behind the honey badger,” Sofia spat.

“I wasn’t hiding!” Paulo denied. “I’m the rear guard.”

“Enough!” Lamont snapped with a snarl and a turn of his head that sent the Sechuran fox a few steps back. With his threat clear, he set angry eyes on me. “Have you found a way out of this maze?”

“I haven’t looked for one; besides, there’s no time. This place is coming apart, and we’ve learned from the unicorns’ employees that the safest place is inside that round building in the middle of the large room.”

“Wolf,” Lamont snapped, “you’re too gullible. So we’ve had a few earthquakes. As I understand it, this place has held up for thousands of years. What’s a few tremors going to do to it?”

I shook my head in disbelief at his ignorance. “Burrland has never had earthquakes greater than a tickle under the pads, let alone the size and frequency we’ve been subjected to today. My suggestion to you and the others is to run down this hallway, grab up clothes and the silver packs of food still left in the last room and get your tails in gear to make it back to that round building.”

“What say you? Food?” The long-tailed weasel perked up, as did a couple of others.

“Yeah, at the end of the hallway,” the great horned owl behind the tigress directed, aiming her wing back the way we’d come.

Lamont shot a glare behind him to silence the long-tailed weasel, whose voice of wonder was louder than the others.

“I’ve no time to argue.” I said thinking of Joann and Clair, and raised my paw to call out, “Let’s go.”

Pads hitting the floor, we ran at a good clip until we closed in on the opening to the large room and hit the hot wall of steam. We slowed our pace until my toenails found the steel-grated floor. Engulfed in hot white vapors, I halted our progress to get my bearings and caught a strong new smell, as did the others.

“What the hell’s that smell?” Sofia inquired.

“It really permeates the air,” Shresth complained while she wiped her nose in distaste.

“It’s a lubricant of some sort,” I guessed, for it smelled similar to the heady scent of gun oil. “But for what and why?” I shrugged, forgetting the white vapor made such movements hard for others to see due to my white fur. Regardless of the smell, we needed to locate the others, so I took a guess by the position of the wall behind us. “This way.”

We padded out and were subjected yet again to another violent tremor under our pads. More steam bellowed up from the depths. Noises loud and untraceable, metallic and indeterminate echoed above and below us. Panic rolled over the animals behind me like an ice storm flows over the snow, burring everything in its path.

“Enough!” I shouted behind me to stem the tide of woe. “Whatever’s happening, we have time to outrun it.” *I hope!*

Despite the wretched heat of the steam and the unknown sounds, causing hackles to rise behind our necks, we padded across the corrugated metal floor at best possible speed.

Some short distance before my nose I caught sight of black lines that were too regular to be anything other than the zebra.

“Johnny! Espen!” I called out to identify us.

If a response came it was drowned out by an ear-splitting voice giving us another update; we couldn’t begin to guess what about.

“Warning! Warning! All personnel. The Mary Alice will depart in T-minus forty-five minutes. All personnel should be on board and making final preparations for departure.”

“Departure?” I heard Mr. Dovell demand some short distance before my nose as I patted the bicep of the male Zebra guarding the animals behind him. “What by the Great Maker does that mean?”

The zebra’s wife stood on the other side of her husband and nodded to my group as we passed.

“I’m sorry,” Pascal the sheepdog answered, his tone speaking volumes that he was scared yet seeking to reason with Mr. Dovell. “I cannot answer you.”

“Baw, the pair of you are worthless. Neither of you has the faintest clue as to what’s happening, yet you constantly insist we get our tails into that building.”

I approached the polar bear and directed those with me, “Find the opening in the building and get inside.” I asked Mr. Dovell, “Any sign of the grizzly?”

Pascal ignored my question to try to acquire my aid. “Praise the Great Maker, wolf, talk some sense into this bear and get these animals inside that building.”

“No one’s going anywhere until my cubs are safe!” Mr. Dovell ordered.

For the moment I ignored the polar bear to talk with the sheepdog. “Did you find your wife and pups?”

“Yes, they’re here. I sent them inside the building already.”

“That’s good.” I laid a paw on his shoulder. “I’ve been told the two white-tailed jackrabbits were taken to the examina—”

Mr. Dovell shoved me aside. “Your rabbits can wait.” He demanded of the sheepdog, “Where’s my cubs?”

Mrs. Dovell landed a heavy paw to side of her husband’s head.

“Ow!” He glared at his wife.

“Esen, haven’t you learned anything? Yelling at the dog will gain us as much as we gained from that fox. Nothing.” She looked at me as she took ahold of her husband’s arm with a tight grip. “You’ve the cooler disposition; talk to the

dog.”

I nodded, feeling my alpha glow as once more I was put in charge. “Pascal, could everyone’s cubs be near the examination room?”

“Just beyond, yes. But Norbert and Lawrence should already be on their way here with all the pups.”

Mr. Dovell growled, “I’ve heard that already. So where are they?”

“The time for guessing games is over.” I ignored his question as my animal merged with intelligence. A feeling of euphoria came over me as the two united in a common goal and I looked at those around me. “Our cubs are in that direction.” *Joann is in that direction*, my alpha said as I pointed. “It’s time we go get them.”

“Now hold on, wolf,” Mr. Dovell snapped. “I’m in charge. I’ll give the order —”

Mrs. Dovell yanked on her husband’s arm, cutting him off. “Lead the way!” she said, loud enough for all to hear.

To Pascal, I ordered, “Get those who can’t fight settled in the building.” To the rest I called out, “Let’s get our cubs!”

My senses heightened. I led the way across the floor, somehow able to avoid the obstacle course of crates, metal boxes and other oddities while others, by the sounds of grunts, yells and curse words, did not. Around the metal building we padded as quickly as our vision would allow in a near white-out condition.

Hot vapors rolled over us. My sweat glands poured water out of my body in an attempt to cool off. In the midst of the white steam, a huge brown tree trunk materialized. Brain matter deduced correctly the unexpected brown mass was none other than the grizzly. In a split second reaction I leaped to the side. The polar bears treading right on my pads had no chance to correct their course and slammed right into the beast head on. I recovered a bit quicker than the bears and found the situation for once favored me. Or, more to the point, us white-furred animals. The exposed brown-haired chest and head of the grizzly gave our eyes something to look at, and as I discovered this, something else loomed out of the

white-out behind the grizzly: a cart full of crates from which emerged several unmistakable cries of young cubs.

An ear-splitting deep roar bellowed out of the grizzly. This was met by two enraged roars from polar bears. Sensibilities aside, three towering giants slugged it out with paws larger than my head, meaning a smart wolf would have to be insane to jump into the fray. Being sensible, I yelled for non-combatants to scatter as the fight that ensued encompassed the surrounding ground.

There is a downside to near blindness. The combatants, once engaged, paid no attention to the whereabouts of the cubs. This left matters in my paws, lest the combatants inadvertently topple the cart of cubs. Gritting my teeth, I left my haven of safety. A step out in the open and a glancing blow from one of the bears spun me into a metal box. A howl of pain burst from my throat, unnoticed by the flurry of crushing blows meters away. A single claw had raked my shoulder open. Anger surfaced. I toughed out the damage and forced myself out yet again. A blur of brown spun to my left. The cart's metal handle jabbed my leg. A curse escaped my lips. I took up the handles and ground my teeth against the rage of my wounded shoulder in lifting the weight off the floor.

Damn, I never thought a few cubs could weigh so much.

Toes and nails slipped into holes in the metal floor, I hunkered down and pushed what felt like four hundred kilograms of dead weight. The throats of a tigress and leopardess filled in the gaps of roars in the air, as I assumed they joined in the fight. Seconds later, a gurgling sound found my ears from the mayhem behind me. The sound was easily identified as a fatal separation of the veins in the neck. The question remained of whose neck? Not to take chances, I kept my momentum going to separate me and the cart from the fight behind us.

Colene Jones



Chapter 9

Duck and Cover

“Braxton!” a familiar voice bellowed. “Where the devil are you, wolf?”

“Not far,” I replied and gladly halted my actions as Mr. Dovell found me.

“The cubs, wolf, how are they?”

Now that the fight was over, Mr. Dovell could hear the ruckus of the cubs as well as I could. “Frightened but safe, and you?”

Mr. Dovell loomed over me before I saw him. He was bloodied and heaving great lungfuls of steam-enriched air. “Near done in. The wife took a bad blow but swears it’s only superficial. Had the tigress and leopardess not joined in, I fear I’d have lost my wife.”

Shresth stepped out from behind Mr. Dovell. From what I could see in the steamy mist, she looked right pleased with herself.

“I caught sight of you guarding the youngling,” Shresth said as she caught her breath. “I would have aided your efforts, save an opportunity presented itself in the form of the grizzly’s back being turned my way.” She stepped closer and I saw some redness among sharp white teeth when she opened her maw wide to work out her jaw. “Not one to pass up an opportunity like that, I leapt onto his back and bit deep into his neck.”

“Right pleased and grateful I am to you and the snow leopard.” Mr. Dovell nodded. He looked at me. “But there’s time for that later. I need to check on our cubs. So tell me, how are they?”

“Can’t say. There’s too many containers on the cart to make an assessment.” I sagged into the side of the cart. My sides heaved and my left shoulder

screamed.

“You’ve done your bit, wolf.” Mr. Dovell’s face hovered centimeters from mine. “Get yourself to the building. I’ll gather the animals out here to aid me with our cubs.”

“I wish it were that simple.” I took his arm to regain my pads. “My fiancée’s still missing. I need to head to the examination room.”

A loud horn blasted out, echoing about us. “Warning. Warning. All personnel. Thirty minutes until liftoff. All level red experiments should be stowed in static field containers and locked away aboard the Mary Alice.”

“Damn,” Mr. Dovell complained. “I wish I knew what that’s all about.”

“You and me both.” I confessed.

“Regardless, times a-wasting. Get your female, wolf.” Mr. Dovell turned from me and bellowed, “Animals, to me! We’ve cubs to save.”

Shresth took up my arm. “You’re hurt. Here, let me help you.”

My left shoulder smarted something awful; I nodded acceptance of her help, as I still might have to face off with the wolverine. Still washed by hot steam, I panted my way across the room cradling my left arm with the tigress at my side. Once we found the wall, it took some time to find an opening. At the entrance, the steam followed us a short way in. *Gad*, I thought at the relief from the steam. *It’s great to see clearly again.*

Ears swiveling, nose hard at work, I used every sensory receptor I had to pick up any scent or sound emitted by Joann or Clair that hadn’t been washed away by the steam. With nothing to work with, I knelt to sniff the floor like a common dog for any odors I’d missed. Here the pungent smell of the grizzly’s passing permeated the area. I shook my head, snorted to clear out the smell, then realized I was being stupid. *Idiot!* I admonished myself. *The grizzly’s trail should lead me to them or close enough to pick up where they are.*

“Do you smell her yet?” Shresth inquired.

“Not yet, but the grizzly’s scent is very strong, which leads me to believe we’re in the right corridor.”

I picked up other smells, of course; the unicorn, the over-sexed black-tailed jackrabbits, the wolverine and some others I'd yet to meet. As I regained my pads, the sound system went off, warning I had only twenty minutes before whatever was going to happen was going to happen. This was seconded by the irritating large red lights in the ceiling blinking on and off every few paces.

"Damn." I held up my paw to shade out the blinking lights as I followed the grizzly's scent down the hallway. "If it wasn't so disorienting, I'd say they were meant to emphasize danger."

"You're slowing, Braxton," Shresth informed me. "I know you're in pain but we'd best pick up the pace."

I nodded understanding just as my ears shot forward to the sound of animals calling out for help.

"Oh, thank the Great Maker, over here!"

Up ahead, we came upon a locked steel door. Behind a small glass plate, I made out the two black-tailed jackrabbits.

"Please, wolfy, please help us..." the two called out in unison. Other animals scampered up behind the rabbits and added to the commotion of calling out in panic to get me to open the door. Before I could do anything, the wolverine, Norbert, pushed animals out of his way. His look of hatred caused me pause, but then he eyed me with what looked like shame.

"That damn grizzly locked us in here, wolf. Can you get us out?"

"Why should we?" Shresth demanded. "You never aided any of us. Besides, I heard you killed countless animals that your master deemed useless."

The wolverine looked at his pads a second before he nodded. "I admit as much. But in my defense, if I refused the unicorn's orders he would have had that grizzly kill me. So my choice was simple, be killed or kill an animal Lawrence would kill later." He shrugged.

"You could have refused and left the buil—"

"Beg pardon." I cut off the tigress with a paw to her arm. "We haven't time for this." I looked at those behind the door. "I'll let you out if you'll tell me

where the white-tailed jackrabbits are?”

“Two doors down,” Norbert and the black-tailed jackrabbits said at once.

“Hurry, please...” Mansi and Muna pleaded in unison. One of them added, “We’ve only minutes to get to our couches in the big building.”

The tigress eyed me as I unlocked the bars. I gave her a look that said I understood her warning, then without waiting, told those inside of the grizzly’s demise and turned tail to rush down the hall to the indicated doors.

Twin doors thrown open, the strong odor of sanitation cleaners assaulted my nostrils. I covered my nose with my right paw to run my eyes over the room filled with countertops, cabinets, bottles, steel containers and other unidentifiable items that looked as if time had stopped months back except for the presence of two white-tailed jackrabbits with shoulder-length brown hair.

Joann! I wanted to yell. I was so excited to find her and Clair, my animal sought to take over and howl at the moon. Before this desire could fully manifest into audible sounds, my eyes widened, having fallen upon their swollen bellies, where within I knew grew my cubs—*Our cubs*.

Though she was held immobilized by wide straps on a table in the center of the room, at the noise of my entrance Joann turned her head as far as she could and our eyes met.

In that moment my ears stood erect, my muzzle fell open and I fully understood I never knew love as I did then. The world could come crashing down on our heads any second, yet in that instant of seeing Joann’s beautiful gray eyes, I could have died a happy wolf without a second thought. However, that would have meant the death of Joann, Clair and our cubs.

When the tigress slid to a stop at my back, her paws contacting door and my arm snapped me out of my moment of awe. Joann screamed.

“Braxton!”

In that one breath of air from her exquisite lips I heard love, longing, fear and defiance all rolled up in one.

“Thank the Great Maker. Quick, while the unicorn’s gone. Get these straps off me!”

Urgency moved me. I surveyed the room and the hallway behind for danger before I ran up to her. Every fiber in my body screamed to hug and kiss her. My animal wished to howl. My Alpha demanded I take her in my arms and crush her to me. My intelligence vetoed every action submitted to my brain save to unhook her straps.

“Untie that jackrabbit.” I directed Shresth to Clair’s supine and unmoving body on another table near the wall.

Joann’s tongue worked overtime to bring me up to date on all that befell her and Clair. However, once she could sit up, she was in my arms crying, holding me with all her strength and causing me to wince in pain.

“Oh, love, how I’ve missed you!” was all I really pulled out of her long-winded tale.

“Warning! Warning!” Words poured out from unseen speakers in the room to pound down on our heads. Joann’s ears flattened on her uncut hair of six months’ growth as her paws tried to close off the loudspeaker. “All personnel. Drop everything and head to the Mary Alice. Ten minutes to liftoff.”

“What’s going on?” Joann pushed away from me to stand. “That blasted voice keeps spouting warnings, but what’s it talking about?”

The ground under us rolled with violent tremors, throwing us against the table, spilling glass jars from out of cabinets surrounding us. Joann discovered blood on her arm and traced its origins to my back. “You’re hurt! Love, what happened?” She sought to turn me around to have a better look, but I forestalled her fussing.

“We haven’t the time. This place is coming apart and we’ve ten minutes left us to make it to the metal building in the large room.”

I looked at Shresth, who’d already untied Clair and turned with her in her

arms.

“The poor thing’s still unresponsive,” Shresth told me.

“Joann?” I indicated her sister.

Joann looked at her sister with loving anger and pain. Her paw touched Clair’s un-dyed grayish-brown hair and gently stroked her. “She’s been like this since that metal thing”—she indicated the contraption in the ceiling that had been over Joann when I came in— “violated her to dump a liter of white liquid inside her like it had me.”

With first-paw knowledge of that event six months back, I banished regret and anger, as we hadn’t the time. With a nod to Shresth, I pulled Joann with me to the exit, trying not to step on too many shards of shattered glass on the way. “Let’s go.”

“Which way?” Joann inquired.

“Halfway back to where you came from.”

Another tremor had us staggering. I stepped solidly on a glass shard and yelped.

“Braxton?”

“Damn it, no time, just get movi—”

“Warning. Warning. Seven minutes to liftoff. All personnel should be aboard the Mary Alice. Please take your couches and strap in.”

Once we were able to shake out the loud voice from our ears, Joann threw open the double doors only to come face to face with the unicorn!

“Ah shit, not now!” I muttered.

The black unicorn raised his head and snorted in anger. “What the hell? What’re you still doing here? I told that worthless grizzly to get you and your sister on the Mary Alice.”

His words knocked me so off kilter, I was left immobile a second trying to switch gears. Joann backed into me as the tigress collided with my back.

The unicorn saw me and the tigress. Somewhat miffed, he said “I don’t know what you’re doing out of your cell, wolf, but matters are progressing too

fast to rectify that.”

His words were spoken as if he didn’t recognize me; however, the tigress recognized him, whereby my ear was subjected to her loud growl of hatred. Before Shresth could alter his current state of living, Mr. Thelin looked behind him at a pure white unicorn who came up beside him.

“What’s the holdup?” the fabled Unicorn of the Glacier griped, looking in on us. “We’ve no time for your experiments. Get your rear end in gear before I skewer your butt.”

“My apologies, animals, but my sister is correct. There’s no time. Miss South, Miss Pham.” Mr. Thelin nodded to Joann and Shresth. “If you and your wolf will follow us?”

“Braxton?” Joann inquired of me.

Mr. Thelin heard her and looked hard at me, his ears full forward. “Byrghir Snow, is that you?” Before I could answer, the white unicorn slapped his head. He squealed and turned his head to her.

“Thomas! Move those legs of yours if you want us to survive this.”

“Right you are.” Mr. Thelin looked at us. “If you’ll follow us, we’ll lead you to the room containing the Mary Alice. From there you’ll have to see yourselves onto the ship, as we can’t spare the time if we’re to get out of this building before this place self-destructs.”

The unicorns took off. As they traveled the same hallway we needed to go, I nudged Joann to follow, though I had a hundred questions fouling my mind. Within a couple of steps, our pads landed hard on the stone floor and we set out at a dead run along the hallways.

I knew we’d arrived at the large room when white steam bellowed about us. Briefly, Mr. Thelin came to a screeching halt. “The Mary Alice is in the middle of this room. Make haste and may fortune be on your side.” He might have ventured forth with other words, but his sister grabbed his arm and yanked him down another hallway.

“Get moving, you flea bag!” she demanded fiercely, shoving her brother

from behind.

Another tremor hit, nearly toppling us all.

Sweat rolling into my eyes, I wiped them clear with my arm and wondered why they weren't seeking the shelter they themselves insisted the animals should head for. *Most likely out of self-preservation. Even if only the females made it inside the building, two unicorns could not hope to best an angry polar bear, let alone an enraged tigress.*

Joann grabbed my arm during that rogue thought, interrupting any more fruitless conjectures.

"I'm frightened!"

"So am I," I confessed.

"Should we not follow the unicorns?" The tigress asked, her thoughts running down a different path than mine.

Before I could consider Shresth's idea, the loud voice called out, "Warning. Warning. All personnel not scheduled to board the Mary Alice must vacate the building immediately. The countdown is beyond the shutdown stag. T – minus five minutes and counting."

I shook out my hearing. "Our best survival is that building in the center of this room."

"If so, why aren't the unicorns coming with us?" Joann and Shresth inquired at once, nearly using the same words.

"Given everyone's hatred of them, if they're to survive, they're taking the best path before them." I grabbed Joann and Shresth's arms tight in my paws and stuffed my nose in the steam filled air. Though still suffering under the antiseptics, I took a deep whiff and started us off at a trot, using my instincts to guide us. Though urgency filled my thoughts, along with questions of what really was going on, I felt confident we'd make the building and its entrance in time. Unfortunately, my pad hit a metal crate in my endeavors to hasten our steps.

"Ouch!" Yet in my stumble that brought us to a halt, I made out in the

heated mist a railing and what had to be the building just beyond.

“Braxton?”

“We need to skirt that railing to the other side.” *If I make it inside that building in one piece, I’ll be amazed.*

There was another tremor, yet this one felt different.

“T-minus three minutes. Retracting all gangways.”

Joann squealed in fright. “Braxton, the floor’s moving.”

“Not only that,” Shresth announced. “It’s pulling us away from the building!”

I grabbed their arms and pulled them along at a dead run, risking fouling ourselves up on objects. “Johnny Roo!” I called out in my loudest yell, hoping my voice could be heard over the din of noise surrounding us. “Hold the door open!”

The further we ran, the further the floor moved from the building. Echoes filled my ears of screeching metal and falling objects.

“Johnny Roo!” I screamed with all that resided within my lungs. “We’re here!”

“Oh, Braxton!” Despair filled Joann’s words as the gap widened past three meters.

“We’ll make it,” I assured, though in truth I wasn’t sure. Johnny Roo may have closed and locked the door, believing us lost. But merciful Great Maker, I heard his faint call.

“Braxton, is that you?”

“Yes!” I hollered with all my volume. “We’re coming!”

Our luck ran out. Shresth slammed headlong into a tall metal box. She fell back and lost her hold on Clair. I made a grab for Clair before she tumbled over the railing.

“Braxton!” Joann cried out.

“Don’t stop for us, dammit!” I bellowed at her.

“T-minus two minutes. Liquid hydrogen transferring to tanks.”

The whole building shook. Loud knocking and assorted other sounds filled the air. The assault shook me off my pads. I lost my grip on Clair, and she went over the side. By the needs of the desperate, I followed her over the railing. One paw locked on the railing as I did so, the other on Clair's leg in midair. Her dead weight hit the length of my stretched-out arms and jerked hard on all my attached muscles. A scream of pain seared my body and colored my mind as my shoulder wound tore open.

Joann screamed in horror, yet she reacted and her paws found my wrist. "Braxton!"

"Get out of here, you fool!" I hollered, mad as hell she hung about and scared out of my wits that I'd have to make a choice of letting go of her sister to get back up over the railing or lose my grip and we'd both fall to our deaths.

Joann's grip on my wrist increased. The tigress leaped the railing and grabbing the topmost rail with one paw while she reached down and took ahold of Clair's leg below my death grip.

"I got her, wolf!" Shresth yelled to override the sounds of all hell breaking loose. "Get your tail back over the railing!"

Joann set her pads, reached and locked her paws further down my arm to give aid.

Muzzle locked. Face determined. She helped to pull my heavier weight up over the railing.

Clair came out of her coma at that most inopportune moment. The steam about us cleared away as a rush of cold wind fell down from the heights above. Clair got an eyeful of the vast empty space separating her from the ground and she screamed. She screamed even louder when she looked up and saw I was abandoning her to her fate when I groped over the railing, leaving her dangling. Hysterical, Clair pleaded for me to aid her, making it that much more difficult for the tigress to retain her grip.

Precious seconds spilled past as Joann and I sought to aid Shresth in pulling Clair up, both of us trying to calm Clair's hysterics. Once over the railing, Clair

latched on to me like a vice, her tears of fright pouring from her eyes. Joann encompassed the both of us with her arms and sought to soothe her sister.

Shresth landed both pads on the moving floor below us. “No time for family reunions.”

She was absolutely right. I scooped up Clair as the tigress grabbed Joann’s paw, and the three of us ran for it.

“T-minus one minute. All systems are go. All stabilizers activated. Final countdown commencing. T-minus Sixty seconds...fifty-nine...fifty-eight...”

We rounded the building enough to see the opening with Johnny Roo standing guard.

“...fifty-three...fifty-two...” continued the echoing voice.

“Braxton!” Johnny hollered out to us. “The gap’s too wide, what do I do?”

With the cold air flowing down from above thinning out the white steam, I took a guess at the distance to be six meters and widening. *No time for finesse. No time to give in to exhaustion or the needs of the body.* Without thought, I let go of Clair’s legs and used both paws to pull her arms off from around my neck. To stop her from reattaching herself to me, I did the unthinkable. I brandished my teeth in her face in an uncensored canine display of ferocity. The ploy worked. Clair cried out in fright and pulled her arms in to her chest to protect herself. I unceremoniously grabbed her up into my arms, ignoring the agony in my shoulder by sheer desperation, and yelled over at Johnny, “Catch!”

I took off at a run to the ledge and tossed her over the gap before she could react. Her scream started midway across. The sound of her terror tore out my heart, yet I had no time for sensitivity.

“...forty-two...forty-one...” the echoing voice continued to count down.

At the edge of the doorway, a familiar, unexpected face stepped in the opening Johnny created when he stepped back in catching Clair up. For a fraction of a second I stared unbelieving. My wide eyes locked with his briefly as the red fox, Oscar Sullivan, gestured about them urgently. It didn’t take much imagination on my part to reason he was arguing the necessity in closing the

door.

“...thirty-seven...thirty-six...”

As the gap was still widening, I wasted not a thought on how he came to be here nor where he'd been all this time. I turned to run back to Joann, and yelled at the tigress, “Your turn.”

“I'll not argue...” Shresth leapt for the open doorway when she hit the very edge of the moving floor.

“Braxton...” Joann betrayed her fear in that one word as I came to a stop near her, knowing I'd have a greater distance to cross once I threw her over.

“No time,” I said. *Not even for a brief hug*, my mind told me sternly. Without ceremony, I scooped her into my arms and ran for the edge with all the desperation a husband and father could muster for his family.

The building shook. My toenails caught in the shifting corrugated flooring. I misstepped.

I caught Joann's look of horror out of the corner of my eye. The floor shifted and dropped thirty-one centimeters. I'd meant to toss Joann over and then join her in a few seconds. But with the drop of the floor, I made a split-second decision. I gave the last step everything I had left and sailed over the gap, lunching Joann toward the opening with a prayer to the Great Maker she and my cub would survive this. Though I had no expectation for the tigress to aid us further, by her character alone I hoped she'd do so. Knowing she understood the situation, I gambled on Joann's life. Merciful Great Maker, the tigress turned as quickly as she landed to receive Joann.

Joann left my arms. Shresth reached out for her. For seemingly eons of time I watched Joann sail beyond my reach on the path to safety while I floated over the empty expanse, knowing my effort to save Joann had sent me below the lip of the doorway.

This is it... my mind unnecessarily declared as the realization I would plummet to my death far below became real. *There's no escape. No second chance. No do-overs. I'm going to hit the building below the lip and have*

seconds before death enfolds me in darkness.

I wish I could have kissed Joann one last time.

Two words leapt out of my mouth meant solely for Joann, "Please live."

A sudden blast of scorching air rolled up out of the depths to pelt my body. Though the evaporated water scalded my skin, causing considerable pain, it ultimately gave me a moment's chance to save my life, countermanding my descent ever so briefly. I rose a few centimeters. My fingers caught the bottom edge of the doorway.

True gravity resumed control of the world a second later, at which time my body weight slammed into the building and sought to obey nature's rules without reflection of its harmful effects. Heart in my throat, my arms took on my full weight. The open wound in my shoulder screamed. Its stabbing effects distorted my facial muscles to a point I'd have traumatized the average herbivore.

For a brief moment in time, I dangled in the air, clinging to the doorframe, badly wanting to take advantage of this chance to live, to see the love in Joann's eyes as she held our cub, but my fingers lost ground on the lip of the doorway. Even the added strength of my animal in my bid to survive held no sway to change my destiny.

"...thirty-two...thirty-one...thirty..."

My fingers slipped.

My life had time to pass before my eyes once before two sets of paws fell on my arms as Johnny Roo and Norbert, of all animals, dropped on their bellies and saved my life.

Once they'd pulled me in through the doorway, Johnny jumped up and slammed his paw on a large blue button. The button turned green. A door slid along the wall, pushing my pads out of the threshold as Norbert helped roll me away from the closing door, ignoring the red smears my angry back left on the floor.

The large metal door filled the empty space and settled so air tight it buffered out the noises of the outside world. Helped to a sitting position by

Joann's quick arms, I watched thick bars in four places on the wall push out of their resting places until encountering brackets that took them in on the other side of the closed door.

"...twenty-five...twenty-four..." the same voice from outside came over speakers from a metal box above our heads.

The room I was so lucky to be in held another doorway, which Johnny insisted Joann and I go through.

"This way!" He waved urgently.

Though Joann's eyes had been swollen with tears she aided me up off the floor and past the threshold of the second doorway, where Shresth helped Clair to a couch some steps beyond Oscar Sullivan, who stood directing everyone with gestures and shouted words.

"...nineteen...eighteen..."

"No time for explanations," Oscar Sullivan called out, to override the loudspeaker, indicating the couches. "Strap yourselves in."

Although I wished to question what the need was, since we were now inside the building I was told would protect us from the collapsing world outside, I nonetheless followed his directions, grateful to get off my scalded pads, yet dreading anything touching my shoulder blades and scalded body.

"...fifteen...fourteen...thirteen..."

"I'll see to him, rabbit," Johnny told Joann, steering her to a couch. "You need to be strapped in," he told us both. Sullivan had already chosen a couch and belted himself.

"But he's hurt!" Joann complained as she backed into the couch next to me, knowing of my back injury, though unaware of the damage my body took being exposed to super-heated water.

"...nine...eight...seven...ignition!"

"Do as he sa—Oww..." I complained as I rolled onto the couch.

Once on my back, I gritted my teeth against the natural urge to withdraw my skin from contact with the couch. Regardless of my distress, I sought to

understand how the metal latches on the couch interlocked as Johnny locked me in so I'd know how to escape if the need arose. Another moment passed as my enraged shoulder complained of the necessity to shift about so my tail was properly laid out down my legs, as the couch held no accommodating slits for the basic needs of any normal animal.

Once I was properly settled, Johnny turned and snapped in the latches that would hold Joann in place a second before the whole structure began to shake violently.

He launched himself at a nearby empty couch and did likewise for himself.

A loud roaring came up through the floor.

"...six...five... All moorings lines dropped."

Clair's fear of the unknown came to my ears in audible sobs from the other side of Joann.

My teeth chattered. I bore down on my jaw muscles to stop them.

"...four...three...two...we have a green light."

Joann shifted an ear to her sister's distress over the noise of the world falling apart around us. She turned her head to the other side of her to see Clair and reached out to clasp her paw. Clair's paw latched onto hers like a lifeline, though her sobs never decreased. Joann looked at me. Her eyes told me as mine told hers we may have been misled. This so-called room of safety may have been Mr. Thelin's last joke on all of us. Instead of saving our lives, we may only have a mere second or two of life left! I wanted to hold Joann in my arms. I wanted to get off this couch and lay my head on her breasts and allow her to cradle my head as she rested her muzzle atop of my head. But there was no time left. We took up each other's paws.

The roar outside grew fivefold. The structure shook so violently I had no doubts it would come apart.

Then the most peculiar feeling fell over me. The structure felt as if it were moving! Not sideways in a fall or down into the depths, collapsing on itself as anyone would have thought, but upward. As if the structure were raising out of

the earth.

Gravity pushed down on my body like an invisible paw, as if we were in an animal-driven elevator, ascending a few floors at a fast pace. *But that makes no sense.* My mind quested for answers. *The building's far too large for no less than a hundred pachyderms to lift its weight off the ground, let alone pull us up at such a speed to feel our weight double.*

The shaking continued for long minutes. My eyes traveled down Joann's body to her swollen belly and I couldn't help but think of what this was doing to our cub. Joann seemed to be of the same mind when she briefly looked down the length of her body. The fear in her eyes when our gazes met again spoke volumes.

"We had no choice," I told her, praying to the Great Maker I'd made the right decision.

Joann tried to put on a brave face to show she didn't blame me. "Whatever happens, love, we're together."

I knew her words included her sister. For myself, guilt of all the tragedies I'd caused Clair to suffer filled my heart with loathing for myself. Yet in these moments I felt it crueler to leave Clair with only Joann's support. Without regard for myself, I let go of Joann's paw and unbuckled the straps keeping me solidly on the couch. Wincing, for the blood seeping out of my wounded shoulder had coagulated between my skin and the recliner, I gnashed my teeth and pushed up. I rolled off and was forced to my knees by the unfamiliar weight of increased kilograms on my body pressing me down to the floor. With the help of my stubbornness, I pulled myself up onto my pads and staggered around the lower half of Joann's couch.

"What?" Joann startled when I let go of her paw and rolled off the couch. "Braxton, what the hell? You get your tail back on that couch!"

"In a minute." I tried to smile as I worked round her couch and steadied up to step over to Clair.

"Braxton, you idiot, you sit back down and strap in this instant!" Joann

demanded as fearful tears rolled off her cheeks. “My sister and I don’t need a foolishly gallant dead wolf. We need a live one!”

I nodded, for I understood her. Yet I disobeyed her wish to kneel down between their couches as the tigress took notice of me.

“I can’t say what’s going on, wolf, but I’m in agreement with Joann. You’re acting foolish being off your couch.”

I ignored Shresth as I took up Clair’s and Joann’s paws in mine.

Clair took notice of the extra paws and looked up on me through tear-soaked eyes. At first she sought to pull her paw out of mine. Yet I held on tight enough to forbid her retraction and watched as her face shifted through emotions. A kaleidoscope of them. Finally Clair ran the course and settled; she shifted one paw to squeeze mine tight, abdicating her need for my strength.

Meanwhile, the nightmarish events of the world ending around us mercifully found an even pitch that canceled out the scenario I feared would lead us to our deaths.

The pressure on our bodies eased up, thank the Great Maker. Yet it went on beyond that, even to the point I felt weightless. My body rose off the floor, whereby I had to let go of their paws with one of mine to grab the couch in order to remain where I was. While this astonishing event found some place in my mind to go, Johnny spoke up.

“What on earth just happened?”

I looked over at him, puzzled, seeing he and Shresth also held paws for fear of the events about us, but not in reaction to his justifiable question, but rather on the fact his voice sounded strange. As if his vocal cords had risen an octave. Johnny also noticed and touched his throat with his other paw.

Beyond the confines of our safe haven, a loud noise somewhere below our pads rang through the walls.

“Braxton?” Joann gained my attention; her voice also gained an octave.

I looked at her and discovered as she had her hair floating as if she were underwater. Other objects that had littered the floor, including the clothes and

food packets they had dumped in the corners, followed her hair's example in defying the law of gravity.

By astonished voices about the room I learned every other animal began to notice strange actions of normally earthbound items. Forgetting the rules of gravity, the objects sought to ascend slowly to the ceiling two hundred and forty-four centimeters above the floor.

"Braxton?" Johnny called from his couch, his head swiveling about, ears turning this way and that in agitation. "What's going on? Why are loose items in the room floating?"

"I'm glad you asked that," the tigress remarked with a nervous, higher-pitched voice. "I thought my eyes were going screwy."

With all this strangeness about, I still took notice of the red fox on the other side of Clair, lying on his couch, arms stretched out more in curiosity than panic, seeking to touch one object after another that floated up near him. That this never-before-seen event caused him delight was plain in his bearing.

As the red fox seemed at ease in all this strangeness, I called to Oscar, noting my voice had risen a degree as well. "Mr. Sullivan, by the Great Maker, what's going on?"

The red fox's ears swiveled, indicating he heard me, yet he refused to answer.

Johnny pawed at his buckle until it released. "Answer the wolf, fox!" His intended threat fell short when he yelled after he pushed up to stand and shot upward as if gravity had reversed itself, making the ceiling the floor.

I looked on in amazement. So did the others.

The red fox, on the other paw, saw the kangaroo and smiled. He swiveled his head and suggested to the room, "It might be best if everyone remained buckled in their couches for the present time."

"Sullivan, if you know something, how about cluing us in on it?" I demanded.

The voices of eighteen animals out of twenty-two filled the room in

astonished tones as all began talking at once.

“It’s hard to believe,” Oscar began, batting a small item back and forth between his paws with absolute delight as I sought to hear him over the din of worried voices. “But I’m fairly certain we’re no longer earthbound.”

Johnny hit the roof and sought to catch something to hold but instead of staying there, he bounced off the ceiling to end up just as quickly falling back to the floor. Also evident to my eyes was that his fall did not adhere to physical laws, in that he didn’t travel in a straight line to the floor but rather at an angle so he would land several meters from his couch. Wide-eyed, I watched Johnny’s defiance of gravity as he tried a swimming motion to gain the floor faster, but the action gave no indication of changing his current travels, course or speed.

Clair’s paw tightened on my paw to draw my eyes to her as she looked about her. Weakly, she asked. “What’s happening, Braxton?”

Unable to let go of the couch lest I float off like Johnny, I settled on squeezing her paw. “I’m trying to find out.” I called over to Oscar, “Say again?”

Whether the red fox heard me or not, Oscar showed no reaction as he spoke out to no one in particular.

“This absolutely proves my hypothesis!” He smiled, teeth exposed. The red fox looked about the room and only then noticed me watching him. “You have no idea what this means to me, wolf.”

“You’re absolutely right in that, as I don’t follow you,” I tried, hopeful he took my meaning.

“I tried for years to gain even a single positive response. Now everyone will see that I was right.” He beamed. “Regardless of the outcome in this, I’ll be famous. A legend in my own time.” He laughed.

“Braxton, what the hell’s he on about?” Johnny growled, safely back on the floor, holding tight to a couch near the Sechuran fox, Sofia Prieto.

“I’ll see if I can gain his attention to find out,” I replied on the loud side to override the babble of all the others. “Oscar!”

The red fox acted like a cub in a toy store. Gaining answers from the

distracted fox, if he even had any, would require a little more face-to-face time. I looked at Clair, who still held my paw but had quieted her tears. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I want to throw up.” Clair swallowed and grimaced. “What have you gotten me into now?”

“Clair,” Joann snapped from the other side of me. “Braxton has done nothing but risk his life to aid you and I.”

Clair looked about to argue, but instead turned her head and covered her muzzle with her free paw. She wanted to cry again. That much was obvious. Yet she sought to control herself. I squeezed her paw in hope of aiding her before I disengaged to see if I couldn’t make my way over to Oscar. Before I did, I looked at Joann and found she, too, looked queasy. She’d let go of my paw to hold her muzzle while her other paw was occupied in holding her stomach. Everyone knew pregnant females often suffered nausea commonly referred to as morning sickness, a state of affairs females suffered in bearing a new life into the world. However, why she and Clair apparently suffered such condition presently was puzzling, as my internal clock told me morning was yet hours away.

While this distracted my mind a moment, Johnny used the help of the surrounding animals to make his way back to his couch, where he stopped and quietly held on. It took a second on my part to notice he too looked a little green around the jawline as well as the tigress, the maned wolf, Livia, Nye the boobook owl, and his wife Dilwen. In fact, all the animals in the room seemed to be suffering the same illness.

This realization manifested in my stomach wanting to revolt, but for what reason I couldn’t say. My belly should be devoid of any meal, as breakfast had been half a day behind us. I should be hungry, not nauseated. This caused me to pause even longer to consider the question why, but I was interrupted when a screened covered box on the ceiling above my head called down on the room of animals.



Evert Vong

Chapter 10

Another Hairless Ape Building

“Attention, attention. All passengers be advised automatic docking procedures are in effect. Countdown to lockdown and capture: forty-five minutes.”

Though we were all in varying degrees of illness, we all looked up on the walky-talky box. Our faces mirrored the same expression of puzzlement save for Oscar, who spoke out in the silence, “Well, that answered my next questions quite well. Yes, quite well indeed.”

Whatever was happening, Oscar had some clue to the events, yet was too smitten by circumstances to relate in simple words what it was. Gently, I disengaged my paw from Clair’s and using the couch as an anchor, worked around her couch.

“Braxton?” Joann asked.

“Stay put. I’m going to get some answers out of that red fox, one way or another.” Careful to keep my paws holding tight on the couch frame, I sought not to upset my wound much further nor give my rebelling stomach a reason to give in to the dry heaves. Awkwardly, yet easily, I shifted my body about until I faced Oscar.

Mr. Sullivan enjoyed the antics of the floating objects with eyes wide open, but also saw my slow approach and eyed my antics as if studying me under a

magnifying glass. Only after drawing close did I see he still wore the vest and pants from when last I saw him. With all that befell us I'd not noticed this small detail, but small details could change the outcome in a life or death situation. Fortunately, this small detail didn't. Still, I'd missed the information and chastised myself for being unobservant.

Once close enough to the red fox, I grabbed his couch arm, to which Oscar scrutinized my proximity. He noted my serious face, blanched and spoke in some trepidation, as if I meant to hurt him. *Which, I told myself, if his explanation is not satisfactory, I just might.*

"Uh, Mr. Wolf?"

"That's Mr. Snow, Mr. Sullivan. Now tell me. What's happening?"

My question caught him off guard; his brows lowered in irritation. "Ack, of course you couldn't follow these historic events. No animal has ever experienced this. Then again, neither have I, but that's beside the point." He looked pensive. "What I wouldn't give to have my peers here to discuss this situation."

"Mr. Sullivan..." I put a little heat into his name to emphasize I wanted answers as well as to bolster my courage concerning this never-before-known event happening to us.

The red fox waved off my words. "The matter's far too complicated to explain with any real details in a short period of time. But I'll do my best. You see, wolf, over the course of my studies of the past I'd found clues which seemed to indicate the hairless apes could fly in the sky like any bird of flight. Some ten years ago, a piece of information was unearthed that took me some while to decipher enough to learn that the last viable city these apes may have occupied was deep in the middle of the glacier. With this knowledge and a reasonable survey team I'd hope to prove my hypothesis the apes built machines that traveled the skies. Unfortunately, I couldn't gain any access to the glacier. It seemed all of the arctic wolf packs guarded the borders of the glacier and so denied anyone entrance. This includes your father's pack, which I'd sought to befriend over the years. Even though I seemed to be making headway in our

relationship, Mr. Elov Snow still refused me access to the glacier. Being blocked in my endeavors only added fuel to my resolve. Thus I sought out ways to untie the vast fortune my parents left me to pay off an arctic wolf pack to allow me and a team of archeologists to prove or disprove my theories. Unfortunately, my nephew Bryn caught wind of my attempts to gain my parents' fortune and tied up my money in lawsuits and legal manipulations while he ran me through the wringer in court to declare me incompetent."

"What's all this got to do with what's happening now?" I questioned to speed up his explanation.

"I'm getting to that, if you'll allow me?" Oscar huffed. He licked his teeth and went on. "When I'd made some headway through the lawsuits, my nephew had me animal-napped and carted off to be sold to your father's pack to serve as a midday meal."

"To keep you from discovering this building we're in?" I took a logical leap that Mr. Bryn Nelson was involved with the group of rich animals who sought to keep a lid on their goldmine of advanced technologies buried deep inside the glacier.

"Hmm?" Oscar looked at me but shook his head in denial. "No. He cared for nothing concerning my work, save if it involved my parents' fortune or cost him banknotes. No, he had me animal-napped because I was close to winning my case and would soon gain full access to my parents' banknotes." Oscar waved his paw to indicate he was done talking of his back-stabbing nephew. "When the unicorn, Ms. Thelin, found me out on the snowdrift, she recognized me from tales of the wolf packs. It seemed she and her brother had need of my expertise in the study of the hairless apes' language. No one on Earth has complete knowledge of the apes' language, as it follows no set pattern. However, Mrs. Irina Yenin, head scholar in the Library of History, has made some intriguing hypotheses concerning the apes' language. Following her lead, I uncovered a cipher which proved useful in understanding twenty percent of the alien hieroglyphs. This knowledge I found was very useful to Mr. Thelin. Thus

he gave me a job doing what I love best.” Oscar’s face glowed in remembrance of the offer. “In due course of wading through thousands of books and learning a fraction of how to use the advanced technology the hairless apes had at their fingertips, my studies brought me across this air ship.”

That word caught me. “Air ship? You mean they’re real?”

“Undeniably real, my friend, but I’m getting to that.” Oscar paused to reorient himself. “As free time allowed, I sought out the heart of this air ship, experimenting with the treasure trove of knobs, buttons and levers in each of the upper and lower rooms. However, Mr. Thelin denied me access to the very upper level, and set the wolverine, Norbert, to watch over me when he found me nosing around this mislabeled ‘building.’ But today, I spied Filip, the snowshoe hare, acting out of character. Curiosity pushed me to investigate, and I spied some male animals had escaped their confines. Certain their discovery would have the place up in arms, I snuck into this air ship and on up into the upper control room. Wolf, you can’t imagine my feeling of exoneration when I saw everything I’d believe in made manifest before my eyes. However, in my exuberance in examining the many consoles, I accidentally activated some sort of timer, which caused our latest adventure.”

That admission had my ears go flat. “You’re the reason we almost died in the building collapsing around us?”

Oscar was about to turn his head away, but my accusation halted this. I saw his mind working by his facial muscles. After a second he shook his head. “In truth, no. The fault lies with the hairless apes.”

“How could that be? They died out long ago,” I reminded him.

“Are you familiar with the concept of erosion?” When I nodded, the red fox went on. “Well, to keep this simple, over the centuries the ice around the building has melted and refrozen, creating weak spots. When I activated the countdown for this air ship, I’m guessing areas that lay dormant all this time became active. This upset the current order of things, and there you have it.”

Nothing he said made any sense, thus I thought to push the issue with an

insane question. “Are you saying the ice melted out from underneath this building and now we’re in freefall into the depths of the ocean?”

Oscar eyed me with scrutiny. “You’re being facetious, aren’t you?”

“For crying out loud, fox,” Johnny yelled. “Answer the question!”

Oscar looked at the kangaroo. “I have, but you’re failing to understand the reality.”

For some reason the red fox was avoiding a straight answer. I wanted to lean down and growl in his face, but with gravity acting out of character, the gesture would lose a lot of its meaning. Instead I narrowed my eyes and showed him my teeth. “What you’re saying is because of your messing with things you had no concept about what they do, we’re buried alive under tons of stone and ice?”

Oscar’s ears flattened and he looked at me, brusque. “In what universe does gravity disappear when one is buried in the earth’s crust?”

“I only know of our universe; thus, I can’t answer.”

“Then considering our universe, where does gravity have no effect on an animal?”

I stared at Oscar a moment. My ears shifted as I realized the red fox was leading me by the nose to answer my own question. I raised my muzzle and looked about. The last time I weighed myself, I’d topped off the scales at ninety-six kilograms, yet with but a finger I could shift my whole body without any effort. *No place on Earth is this possible. Not even submerged.* I looked at Oscar unbelievably, noting he was appraising my reactions.

With a nod of satisfaction that I understood him, he said, “To simply tell you what I know to be true would have left you denying reality. But now that I’ve led you to the well, will you drink from it?”

“Braxton, what’s he on about? Does he know why the world’s topsy-turvy?” Johnny inquired.

As I was preoccupied with reality, Oscar turned his head to look at the wall beside him at a colored glass plate I’d yet to scrutinize that bore changing symbols I didn’t understand. After a few seconds he looked back at me and

pointed to the glass plate. “If my understanding of those hieroglyphs on this screen are correct, I believe we’re presently one hundred and thirteen kilometers above our world, headed for a hairless ape city built in the heavens outside our planet’s atmosphere.”

Though the facts of reality were unbelievable, had my weight returned, I’d have sat hard on my tail, for in truth my senses were telling me he was right. Before I could require more proof of his hypothesis, that loudspeaker over our heads called out again.

“Attention, attention, all passengers. Docking procedures will commence in twenty minutes. All passengers are requested to return to your seats and strap in.”

Oscar smiled brightly to the announcement. “You see, wolf? My life’s work is about to be made manifest, and those of us in this air ship are about to make history together. For every one of us will soon put pads on a hairless ape city that no animal eyes living today has ever seen.”

The red fox’s unbelievable tale was so far-fetched only a loon would grant any credit to it, yet sane as I was, circumstances kept undermining every conceivable alternate theory for what was going on about us.

The animals closest to our conversation looked as bewildered as I and spoke out in disbelief. I sought to change events so things would return to a normality in which I could confidently handle the situation.

“That’s not going to happen,” I told Oscar in a tone dripping in threat as I pulled myself closer to his face. “You’re going to undo whatever you did and get us back to Earth!”

“Look.” Oscar sought to sink deeper into his couch as he confessed meekly, “I’m sorry you all got caught up in this. But the truth of the matter is I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t?” the tigress behind me snapped, having sat up carefully to better hear our conversation. “Just do what you did in reverse.”

“Haven’t you been listening?” Oscar looked at her then back on me. “This air ship is operating like a precision clock and designed to follow a

predetermined path set to it by its makers.”

“Then turn back the paws,” I growled, purposely pulling back my lips to better expose my sharp canine teeth.

Mr. Sullivan somehow found it within himself to fold his arms over his chest and set his muzzle in defiance. “Even if I could, I’d do no such thing.” He looked me square in the eyes. “Can’t you comprehend the vast knowledge we can glean from the race of apes? The wonders of our world that might be revealed?”

“Have you any idea, mate, what my tail will do to you if you don’t?” Johnny threatened, having worked his way over to Sofia’s couch.

The red fox looked at the kangaroo and admitted, “As much as I’m afraid of the unknown, of dying in a mishap for not fully understanding the apes’ language, your threats to beat me with your tail pales in comparison to the discoveries that await us short minutes away.”

The box overhead announced, “Attention. Ten minutes to capture. All passengers to your seats.”

Mr. Sullivan looked at me. “Best take a seat, wolf. The unknown is about to be revealed before our eyes.”

As much as I hated to give in, the situation forced me to back off and work my way back to my chair near Joann.

“Aren’t you going to force him to stop this?” Johnny asked. His fear hung plain in the air as well as in his words.

“Apparently, we’re at the mercy of this red fox. And this, whatever it is.” I waved my paw about to indicate our surrounding. “If we truly are far above our world and want to get back to everything we know, I’d suggest you take a seat. Later, I’m in hopes we can reason with him to turn this thing around and get us home.” Of course I was taking it on blind faith that the incredible event Oscar wanted us to believe was even remotely close to what was happening was, in fact, happening. Until things stopped long enough so I could ascertain what was what, I was going to sit my tail down and hold Joann’s paw for any amount of

comfort we could offer each other.

As I passed Johnny, the tigress prodded Johnny from where she sat. “Don’t worry. He’ll change his mind. Because if he doesn’t”—She turned her head and gave Oscar her best fearsome glare—“I’ll tear him limb from limb.”

I had no idea what Oscar’s reaction to her threat was, as my back was turned, but knowing the felidae family held sharp claws that made canine family claws feel dull in-comparison, I’d wager he gave her threat more than a shrug of the shoulder.

Back in our couches, the seconds ticked by. The voice box kept us apprised of the time passage with minute-by-minute warnings. Finally, the box declared we were on approach. On approach to what, only Mr. Sullivan knew; at least he’d like us to think he had some clue. For myself, I just hoped he was insane and all of this was some sort of mass hallucination.

Seconds later, eyes wide, we listened to screeching metal, clicking noises and loud banging somewhere beyond our room until all seemed quiet. Before we gained the courage to unbuckle, a hissing sound filled the room.

In moments I detected a difference in the air quality. The odor of plants and rich earth filled my lungs instead of the antiseptic air we’d been breathing for months, devoid of life. Involuntarily I found myself taking deep breaths, appreciating the scents denied us. Eyes closed, savoring the fragrance, I heard other animals discovering the rich smell of living organisms. If the situation were deferent, I believe we’d all have quivered in ecstasy. But reality stomped on the moment as our bodies regained some weight, reminding us things weren’t back to normal.

With the moment of relief stolen from us, cautiously, I unbuckled and eased my pads onto the floor. I stood and felt as if I were descending in an elevator, though at a faster rate than I’d ever felt. Ears swiveling and senses alert, I discerned no ropes, pulleys, the squeak of guide wheels, nothing to indicate what we were feeling had some place in reality. Mr. Sullivan watched my antics in some interest. So did Johnny, Shresth and Sofia. I looked at them before I took

experimental steps forward. It was like walking in a pool of water. Not the resistance in a liquid that must move around you as you traveled through it, but the buoyancy one gained by its nature.

I looked at Joann and saw her hair lay more on her scalp. It wasn't flat like normal but held a bouncy look, as if she'd just shampooed her hair. In fact, even her fur looked to have more fluff. With the life filled air calming my nerves and her looks, my face screwed up in a fickle, nervous smile. *Like a fluffy bunny.* She saw my expression and looked down on herself. Though I know she was as fearful as I regarding what to expect when we exited this building, she still found the courage to cross her arms and give me a sullen look.

"When you're quite through admiring my body, perhaps you could get Clair and I some clothes?"

Her reminder she and Clair were the only animals in the room without a stitch of covering brought about a flush of sheepishness; after which the fact other males could see her nakedness caused an animal desire to tear into them for daring to ogle her. Fortunately, intelligence squashed this wish so I could turn for the pile of clothes we'd gathered earlier.

When I did so, I saw the other animals' fur look as fluffy and noted the objects that moments ago had been floating now lay motionless on the floor. Curiosity tweaked, I knelt to pick up a piece of wood. I gently tossed it in the air and watched amazed as it traveled two to three times the height it should have in its upward arc. My paw remained vacant three seconds more than it should have on the chip's return journey.

"Attention. Attention. This is the AI system of Earth Orbiting Station The Infinite Wisdom. All passengers please unbuckle safety straps and proceed with caution to the decontamination disembarking ramp. Please have ID's at hand and follow the green line to registration."

Above and at two corners of the room, loud clicks were audible about round metal doors as locks disengaged and seals were broken. Like a wave of rushing water, volumes of scared, confused, annoyed and impatient voices fell through

the opening hatches to join those already in existence around me.

For a second I stood immobile until Joann slapped my arm. “Braxton, clothes please!”

“Oh, right...” I said, distracted, and carefully set out for the corner I’d seen the clothes floating near.

Another clank and gears grinding prompted me and the others to turn to see the two doors open that had locked us in from the collapsing world outside. Though I wished to investigate, I couldn’t ignore Joann’s desire to cover herself and her sister from male gaze.

Carefully, I stepped around the female maned wolf and a male Kodkod who’d swung legs over the edges of their couches to stand up. I came upon Natalie the snow leopard, who presently was bent over sifting through what few garments were left in search of something better than her blanket.

Paying no mind to my toenails hitting the metal floor, her ear swiveled to my approach and she eyed me by a slight turn of her head. “You’ve already found pants, what more do you need?”

“It’s not for me, but for my fiancée and her sister.”

She stood up with a long white overall and stared. “Fiancée? I didn’t know any female arctic wolves were among us.”

“There are none. My fiancée’s one of the two white-tailed jackrabbits near the kangaroo.”

She shifted her head; her ear twitched, as did her whiskers, showing disapproval. Whether that was because of our species difference or our dietary differences, I didn’t know or care.

She tried to make light of my life choice. “To each her own, I guess.”

I smiled politely.

With her implication Joann was making a big mistake, she added her blanket to the pile. “Do you think we’ll be able to dig out of the rubble and get clear of this prison?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Though I wish I could believe that’s what awaits us,

I'm inclined to think we're no longer on the glacier."

The male Kodkod commented meekly, "Me and Gero"—he indicated the male Ocelot who'd been in the couch next to him—"believe we must have fallen into the ocean. We're probably docked at some underwater building the government secretly built."

A secretly-constructed facility really isn't that far-fetched, but it wouldn't explain why nature's rules are no longer being followed. I let the comment go without speculation or challenge and picked up two blankets; I had no idea what would fit Joann and Clair in their present condition.

I sidestepped questions as to what had befallen us on my way back to Joann and Clair. I waited for them to unhook their belts. Once Joann was sitting up, I wrapped a blanket about her.

"Braxton, I'm scared," Joann openly admitted, echoing my thoughts. We both turned our heads to look out the entrance door. A white and gray corridor appeared beyond the entrance rather than the great open expanse and corrugated steel floor we had leap off of to get into this...building?

Clair yelled behind us. Both Joann and I turned our heads fast to see her off the couch, floating centimeters above it and madly reaching for anything to grab as she rotated in the air a moment before her momentum ended and she slowly came back to the couch. Fingers white-knuckled on the couch's sides, she looked daggers at me. "What kind of nightmare is this?"

That, of course, is the question. I helped her sit and wrapped the other blanket about her. "I'm sorry, but I've no answers."

As Oscar was behind Clair, I looked at him for possible response, but he seemed to be off in his own little world. He grinned like a cub on his birthday, and after carefully gaining his pads, he began to work his way slowly, step by step, to the doorway out.

Far to the back, Paulo Cuevas, the Sechuran fox, poked his head down through the open hatchway and called out over his shoulder to those in the room above us.

“Hey. The doorway out is open. Come on!”

Shresth padded carefully over to Clair, apparently having formed a sympathetic attachment due to their mutual condition of pregnancy. “You okay?” she asked. Before Clair had a chance to answer, the tigress looked at me. “Braxton, how about we stick together for a time until we can make sense of what’s been happening?”

Joann stood with the help of my offered paw, and tightened her hold on my arm. “Just so long as you understand this arctic wolf belongs to me.”

The strength in Joann’s declaration caused my heart to do cartwheels. I looked down into her beautiful gray eyes.

“Fear not, Joann.” Shresth laughed. “I’m a loner by nature.”

“We’ll I’m not,” Sofia proclaimed as she worked her way over to our growing group. “I’d be right pleased if the four of you would allow me to hang with you?”

“Does that include me?” Johnny asked with a thumb pressed to his chest.

Before any of us could answer, Mr. Dovell called out a complaint from the hatchway to the room above. “Hey, wolf, I thought you said getting into this building would save our lives?”

“You’re still breathing, aren’t you?” the tigress called across the room to the polar bear, now descending one of the ladders.

Our room began to fill up with more animals complaining, griping, questioning and however else one might react to everything that had happened.

Annoyed at the situation, confused as everyone else, I released Joann and got up on a couch, disregarding my grumbling shoulder pain, and yelled out at the top of my lungs, “Quiet!”

The sudden loud shout shocked the horde of animals into a temporary silence. With their attention focused on me, I confessed, “I’ve no answers for any of you!”

I wanted to make plain my displeasure in being blamed for our current predicament, whatever that was. “I’m not your pack mother, so stop crying on

my shoulder. I'm not your pack leader, for if you recall, you chose Mr. Dovell to take on those responsibilities. So stop blaming me, and rather be grateful we're alive and not crushed under tons of rock and ice." I licked my lips, for I was as frightened as they. But a show of strength had to be presented, and I seemed the likely animal to do so. "The building we'd been in was falling apart. Had we tried any other avenue of escape, not many of you would be standing here casting blame. I suggest you stow your complaints. Grab up a partner to aid in navigating to the door, as gravity has taken a day off, and make your way out of here before this building begins to move again."

I was about to get down when the white-nosed coati called out from the ladder, "Wait, wait, wait! What if out there is worse than in here? What if we stay? If this building does move again, might things go back to normal?"

All eyes turned to me. I scowled. "I'm not a fortune teller." I pointed to the door out. "The answer lies out there. If you want answers, I suggest you use your brains and decide for yourselves whether you stay or go."

"You can't abandon us! You freed us and dragged us all in here. You're responsible for all of us!" The white-nosed coati charged.

"Braxton..." Joann pulled at my pant leg. Worry colored her voice. Her ears drooped. As for smells, there were far too many in the room for me to ascertain information without some conscious thought.

I reached down and patted her paw. "Just a second." I look out over the crowd. "Fine! I'm responsible for saving your lives. You're welcome."

The animal behind the walky-talky box above us reiterated his instructions as before.

I managed to get down without looking the fool and without reopening my shoulder wound. I made a gesture for Shresth and Clair to follow us and tucked Joann's arm under mine to get us walking out the door at a slow rate.

"Hey, wolf?" Mr. Dovell called out. "What of our cubs?"

I looked over my shoulder. "You brought them in. Why don't you get them out?" Whatever else was said I ignored.

Clair walked close to the tigress for support and protection. She cleared her throat. “Braxton.”

I craned my neck to look at her. She looked miserable; small but defiant. “I still blame you for my husband’s death and everything that’s befallen me since.”

“Clair—” Joann began, but I cut her off.

“You’ve every right to. In fact, I blame myself.”

“Good.” Clair said.

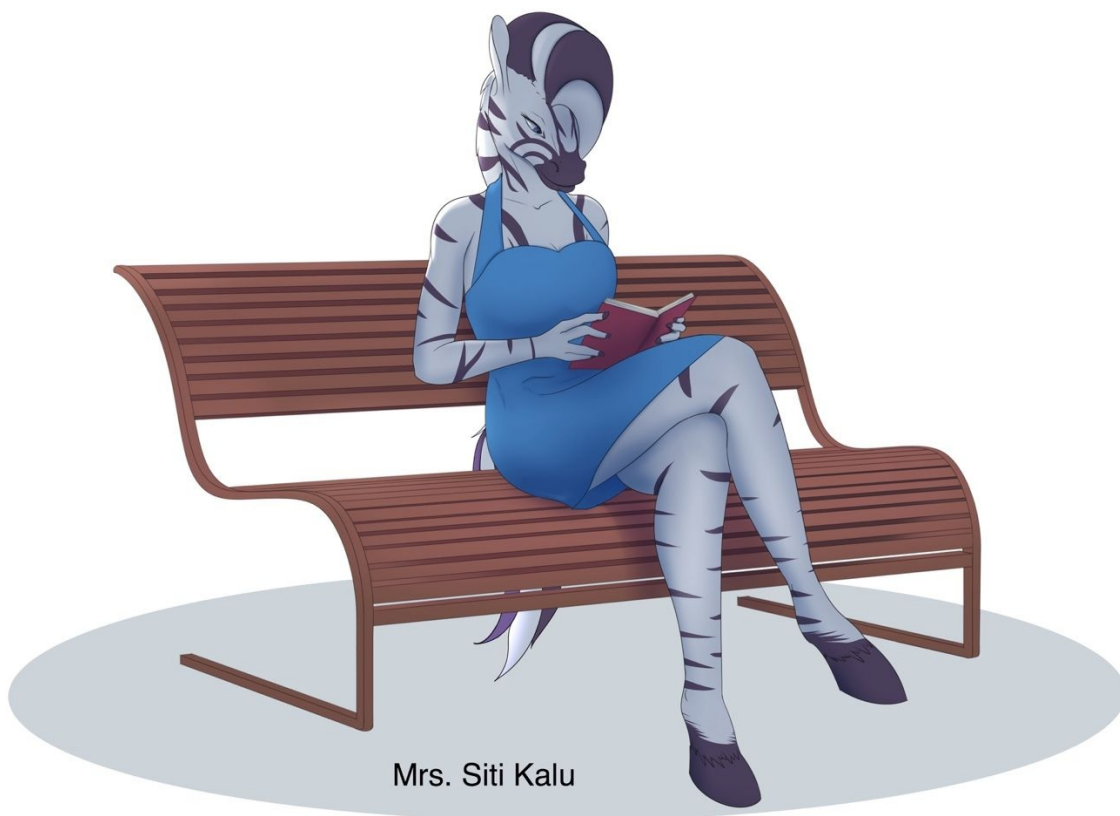
I nodded acceptance of our understanding.

The odd building we stepped out of seemed to remanifest itself before us in that its strangeness continued to fill my sight and nostrils, though the earthy smell did lend some encouragement.

I soon discovered the walls were made of nothing like I’d ever smelled. The hallway we entered, though easy enough for most animals to traverse, would be a bit cramped for the polar bears.

Joann and I fell in line with those who’d already chosen to vacate the building Oscar was calling an air ship. Below our pads, the green line the walky-talky had requested we follow continued along the corridor some twenty-five meters before we encountered an open, oval-shaped door with a metal tube bent in a circle attached to it. The door had been left open to gain access to a larger and less cramped hallway, one that had a column of white mist cascading down over those of us stepping through the doorway.

Johnny Roo, who I thought had been behind us, joined me in the front. “Braxton, we have a problem.”



Mrs. Siti Kalu



Chapter 11

Standing up for All

“As opposed to the problems we already face?” I snorted.

“I’m serious, mate. Those two black-tailed jackrabbits and the others who worked for the unicorns are trapped a level up in the building, surrounded by a few males who wish to have their pound of flesh.”

“So?” I looked back the way we’d come.

“So? Dammit, mate, if things get ugly, they could get hurt in the fight.”

Joann was right at my side. I slid my eyes her way and considered.

“What are you going to do?” the tigress questioned.

“They voluntarily worked for Mr. Thelin. Whatever happens is their fault.”

“Now there you’re wrong, wolf,” Norbert, the wolverine commented. He’d followed us closely and hearing Johnny’s warning, had spoken up. “That black unicorn forced us all to work for him. If we refused, he made the threat we’d be the grizzly’s lunch if we disobeyed.”

Interesting. So that’s why every animal seemed distant and unfeeling. I was about to argue they could have run off, but I thought about the harsh climate on the glacier. I rubbed my muzzle, rolled my eyes and shook my head. “Fine, I’ll see what I can do.”

“That’s it, mate,” Johnny patted my bad shoulder. “I knew you’d save the jackrabbits for me, err, uh, what I meant.” His ears went flat with his slip of the tongue.

I winced, shifted my shoulder away from his paw, and eyed the kangaroo. “You’re not asking for any animals’ benefit. Your motives lie with the black-

tailed jackrabbits in case the female kangaroo will have nothing to do with you.”

“Err, uh.” He rubbed his neck with an aggrieved look on his face. “Come on, mate, have a heart. If not for me, then for the lives of the other animals.”

For a brief second the tigress looked daggers at Johnny, possibly remembering holding his paw when we all thought the building was going to collapse on us. However, instead of speaking up and telling him how shallow and callous he was, she shrugged and kept her opinion to herself.

I grabbed his arm and squeezed. “I’m not doing this so you can talk your way into a rabbit’s bed later. So get that thought out of your head.” I turned to the tigress. “Ms. Pham, would you be so good as to watch over Joann and Clair for me?”

“That I can do. And, Braxton,” the tigress warned as she pulled a reluctant Joann with her through the doorway into the white mist we’d stalled at so that the main crowd could pass us by. “Do be careful. That shoulder wound makes you vulnerable.”

“I’ve considered that,” I said and looked at the wolverine. “Care to join us?”

“Why should I?” Norbert asked, looking indifferent.

“Because I asked you nicely.” I bared my teeth in a snarl. “And you very well may need my help to intercede on your behalf later.”

He gave me a negative look. “Fine, but you owe me.”

“How do you figure?”

“You asked me for help first.” He started back the way we came.

I followed the wolverine with Johnny in tow.

Joann called to me, “Braxton, please don’t do anything stupid. I need you. We need you.”

I looked over my shoulder at her and Clair. “I’ll be back, love.”

Back inside the building—Air ship?—whatever, I looked for the collective cluster of males. Johnny pointed from behind me. “On the next level, mate.”

I eyed the group on the left-paw side passing down containers which held cubs of all varieties. Once they were down, the females squabbled over whose

might be whose and pulled the cubs from the containers before walking away from the area to join those leaving. Not wishing to upset their rhythm, I climbed the right-side rail.

Once level with the floor, I heard the commotion. The situation was not at all as Johnny would have me believe. A group of animals apparently led by Lamont the snow leopard and backed by a female wolverine had cornered all the animals who had helped the black unicorn.

I made my way into their midst, elbowing animals on the way to the troublemakers, and hollered, "What in the hell is going on here?"

The two instigators quickly turned to me as all other eyes looked at me and them.

"What's it to you?" Lamont snapped, giving me a hard look.

The female wolverine echoed his attitude. "We're going to get our pound of flesh, if it's any concern of yours."

"The hell you say." I neared both and took notice Pascal the sheepdog and a male raccoon were all that stood between the seventeen irate animals who'd been imprisoned and the few employees of the black unicorn who had made it inside the building.

I walked on past so I could turn and face the group. "You will this very second disperse and head down the ladder and on out of this building."

"Not before we've had our share of retribution for being locked away all this time," Lamont snarled.

"Who died and made you an authority over us?" the female wolverine sneered.

"You both did!" I answered the wolverine's challenge. "Our current circumstances dictate we all work together. That includes all these animals who worked for the unicorn, whether you or they liked it or not."

Lamont flexed his paws, exposing his sharp claws, and stepped into me. "You think you're tough enough to put yourself between all of us and our rightful retribution! You best think again and stand down, wolf, or die."

My eyes narrowed, my ears flattened, my sharp canine teeth revealed themselves when I snarled. Any herbivore within smelling distance would have naturally cringed as we carnivores stood pad to pad glaring at one another.

“Don’t test me, Lamont. I’m not in the mood.” The hackles on the back of my neck rose as I smelled his breath and knew he was weighing the odds. His claws were curved to hold on so he could sink his razor-sharp teeth into the neck of his victim. Mine were straighter, meant for rending flesh; my teeth were just as deadly. What I think decided his next action was my thick white fur and larger mass. I’m also sure having Johnny Roo at my side and Norbert facing off the female wolverine added some deterrent. But the truth of the matter was, as the rest of the animals behind the leopard were smaller or simple herbivores who held no chance against an enraged arctic wolf, the odds he’d get hurt were too great for his taste.

“Fine...” He hissed between his teeth. “But don’t think this is over. You and I may settle this at a later date.” Lamont sought to give off airs of superiority as he slid an eye to those I was protecting before he walked off as if nothing had happened.

The long-tailed weasel who stood behind him swallowed and looked after the snow leopard.

“You have something to add?” I asked in a menacing tone.

He swallowed yet again, ducked his head in resentment and followed Lamont without a word.

With the instigator tucking tail and padding off, I knew the only other true combatant was the female wolverine; her species was known to take on even grizzlies when enraged. But as she would face off with one of her own kind, she too backed off with ill grace and a snarl. For the rest, I knew they could be dispersed easily.

“The way out is down those ladders.” I pointed to both exits. All the cubs had been taken down, leaving the other ladder open for use.

Johnny Roo watched as the grumbling animals gave last looks toward those

behind us before they too headed for a ladder. My hackles laid down as the threat retreated.

“You have my undying gratitude, Braxton.”

I turned. The sheep dog Pascal stood to the side of a fetching Dalmatian, who held the paws of two young pups.

“We all do.” Her expression of gratitude was genuine. “Thank you.”

Behind her were the two black-tailed jackrabbits, Mansi and Muna, a male brown-eyed gray fox, blue-eyed male arctic fox, and a male black-eyed hawk-owl.

“You’re all very welcome.” I nodded soberly. “Now hear me out. I’ve a feeling you all best stay close to me until current matters can be laid to rest.”

“Then you hold no animosity towards us?” the gray fox inquired, eyeing me suspiciously.

“I’m not fond of any of you, if that’s what you mean. However, as some of you may have been forced to work for that unicorn, I’m going to give you all the benefit of a doubt.” I narrowed my eyes and showed my teeth. “Cross me, and I assure you it’ll be the last thing you do.”

The black-tailed jackrabbits’ ears flattened on their backs and they ducked their heads in shame, if I caught the smells right.

Johnny Roo stepped up, and I whispered in his ear, “Don’t test me. Offer aid, befriend them if you like, but don’t force yourself on the jackrabbits.”

He beamed his charming smile. “You wound me deeply, mate, that you’d believe me capable of such a crass action.”

“Just remember I warned you.”

The females were where I left them as we padded up. Shresth’s teeth gleamed evil under the lights when she saw the group of animals behind me and Norbert. Before she spoke up, I dashed her hopes of any retribution with a

negative shake of my head.

She eyed me and asked, unbelieving, “You’d seriously think after I coaxed you on to aid them, I’d do any of them harm? You injury me deeply, Braxton.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you, but I’m fairly taxed and haven’t the energy to separate intentions from physical postures.”

Joann looked the black-tailed jackrabbits over with disapproval. Her ears were up and her nose twitched. “I don’t see any reason why you have to be protector to these animals. You owe them nothing but a pad to their tails.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “Joann, I don’t need this right now.”

The two black-tailed jackrabbits looked meek and held one another. Mansi came up before Joann. “We’re both sorry for our behavior and wish to ask your forgiveness.”

“There, you see? They’re sorry.” I waved toward them. “Now for the sake of healing past wrongs, accept their apology and let’s be on our way.”

Joann possessively put her arm around me before she acquiesced with a curt nod. “Fine...”

I sighed and looked down the hallway everyone else had already gone down. “Come on, let’s catch up.” After I checked on Clair, I turned with Joann and started us walking to the far end, where another spray of white mist showered us from head to toe before we crossed the threshold of another oblong door into a larger hallway that traveled beyond our sight in both directions.

Before us, animals were spread out looking through windows in stunned silence or outright crying. The whole scene was one of disbelief. Odors of fear, anxiety and loss assaulted my nose. Before I could ask the natural question of “What’s the matter?” Mr. Dovell saw me and stood to his full height.

“This is all your fault!” He stormed up to me, pushing others out of his way. “You’re going to pay dearly for this!”

The bear grabbed my throat and raised me off my pads. Although I might have reacted to duck from his grab, I’d fallen victim to a sight my mind fell all over itself to explain. Only out of need for air did I grab his arm, but otherwise I

was staring out a window on an impossible sight.

What I beheld that distracted me so was a vast emptiness of darkness far beyond the window, intermittingly spotted with dots of white light. Closer up, an unsupported construction, not unlike half of a rickshaw wheel, began out in the far distance. Further examination showed the outer ring wound out of sight to either side of the window before me, while at regular intervals it sent out runners which appeared to connected at points to either side of the hallway about us. All of this would have been hard to see in the blackness, save for splashes of light outlining the wheel that evidently came from the sun we all knew so well. Save it wasn't up in the blue sky above our heads. No, this large rickshaw wheel we appeared to be in floated in the vast blackness of the sky and making its way past an overlarge ball one could only stare at in awe. Had I not needed more air to breathe, had my arms not felt the strain in holding onto the polar bear's arm, I might have hung there dazed and confused until time ceased to exist. However, these things did intercede in my disbelief as well as my world being shaken like I was a rag doll.

Brought back to my surrounding, I noticed the polar bear was strangling me to death. Already the lack of air in my lungs caused a burning need inside my chest. My sight narrowed. My thoughts reverted to necessities all animals shared. My grip on his arm increased and I doubled up, using my arms and stomach muscles. Once coiled in on myself, I sprang out and kicked both his shoulders with all the strength my legs could produce. The moveable connected with the unmovable. My neck came free with but the loss of some fur and a little skin. I twisted and managed in the lighter gravity to keep from landing flat on my back. Though dazed from lack of oxygen, with a quickness of paws and pads I was up on guard.

Our one-sided spat caught the attention of Lamont, who took the opportunity to come up on the polar bear's side in support. Brandishing his teeth and claws, he readied himself for the unfair fight if the bear charged me. His opportunity, however, was halted when Mrs. Dovell, though burdened with her

cub and dealing with her own injuries from the grizzly, grabbed her husband's arm and yanked him to face her.

"Stop it this instant, Espen!" She relayed her will by landing a heavy paw across his muzzle. His anger filled the hallway when he roared out his indignation right in her face. Not to be outdone, Mrs. Dovell returned as good as she got.

The two complaints overrode all other sounds in the area to the point all animals put paws to ears trying to save their eardrums, save those holding cubs, who joined in with cries of their own.

Joann blocked my view as she surveyed the wet redness about my neck, which my nostrils identified as more of my blood that had found another wound to seep from. The worry in her large gray eyes was sincere, for the new wound was far more dangerous than my shoulder, yet I couldn't be distracted. I took ahold of her arms and forced them down and moved her to the side.

The polar bears' complaints came to an end. Lamont listened to the bears' heated words and guessed no imminent attack on me was forthcoming. I spared him a look of irritation. He spared me one that said, "You're lucky, wolf," before he shrugged off the tension and walked away.

With his threat arrested, I paid him no more mind and listened in on the argument between the bears.

"—look out there?" Mr. Dovell yelled. "I've no doubts what that is. It's his fault we're here!"

"That may be so," Mrs. Dovell countered. "But if it hadn't been for him—"

"We'd still be on Earth—"

"—we'd still be locked in our cells—"

"—making good our escape to get back home."

"—possibly crushed under tons of rocks falling in on us," Mrs. Dovell

finished.

The area cleared of their words, which left them staring at each other. Chests heaving, they took in lungfuls of rich plant oxygenated air. A rather odd thing to comprehend considering where we were.

Their silence allowed the cries of the cubs to become fully understood by the males. The same moment, the announcement overhead urged us to follow the green line. I glanced at the floor and located the indicated line, noting it traveled down the left paw side.

Mr. Dovell folded his arms and stubbornly argued, “We could have survived the collapse.”

Mrs. Dovell laid a paw on his arm. “We did survive, darling.” She nuzzled her cub to comfort him before she continued, “Now let’s make the best of it.”

Joann came up to my side and put her arm around me.

Though her arm was wrapped in a torn-up blanket, Mrs. Dovell put her free paw through her husband’s. “By trusting each other to work at solving our current problem, finding food, medical supplies and suitable clothes.” She looked at Joann, who wore a blanket about her figure the same as she did.

The reminder that a few animals still walked around unclothed had me evaluate my badly-fitting pants. Joann’s blanket made her look as if she were dressed for a toga party, as was Clair.

“Right...” I coughed into my paw. “Let’s try this way.” I nodded at Shresth, who’d come out of her shock of our current location to follow with Clair as I pulled Joann with me in following the green line. However, in the back of my mind, I was beyond anxious, for in reality, clothes were the least of our worries. *If this is a hairless apes’ city, where are they? If they all passed on centuries ago, does this place still have edible food and water supplies? On the other paw, if the apes do exist, will they accept a bunch of strangers or attack us on sight with weapons we can’t possibly avoid?*

Not long after padding along the cold metal surface, we encountered a large room. The green line split up into ten lines, each ending at a counter. At arm's length over the counter, a glass window, sixty-one by sixty-one centimeters, stood up on a metal pole. Drawing near one, I saw a blue light permeate the surface. I eyed the glass as the furless head of an alien animal appeared.

"What the hell?"

Other remarks followed my example as the animals gathered around me, overlapping the green lines where other windows came to life with images of more alien faces, also devoid of fur. This shocked the animals, who spread out even more so.

The alien faces were flat. Their noses were unlike anything I'd ever seen as they were the same color as their hairless skin, whether that was light brown or near on black as night. The eyes of these things were far smaller, as was the mouth, while their small ears resided behind the eyes on the sides instead of on top of their heads. The garment on their shoulders was white with a single green stripe across the chest.

Unable to help myself, I drew nearer. Once I stood before the counter, the thing came to life! In the common language all animals are taught to promote understanding throughout our world, the image spoke.

"Please pass your ID card under the scanner." The light brown eyes of the furless animal lowered briefly as if looking down on something before they rose to acquire my eye contact.

"What are they?" Joann asked at my heels.

Oscar Sullivan chose that moment to pop up from behind the counter unannounced. "I've a theory on that."

My paw flew to my chest. "Dammit, Oscar..." Had I been paying attention to the smells in the air, I'd have picked up he was close at paw. But with all the strangeness, taxation on my strength and hunger pains starting to add its voice to the pile, my plate was overfull.

Before I continued in my complaint on his sudden appearance, Oscar took ahold of the glass window plate and turned it to face him. Even so, the image in the glass remained looking right at me expectantly.

“I believe it’s an image of a hairless ape.” He stared at the glass from the other side. “Remarkable.” He looked all about. “The technology they had. To think it’s been preserved in near pristine condition all these centuries up here in space.”

Which brought to mind our predicament. “Yeah, right. So how do we get back to Earth?”

Oscar raised an eyebrow. “I haven’t the faintest idea.” His brown eyes took in all the animals. He looked back at me. “But more to the point, why would you?” He arched his arm in a flourish as if revealing a sought-after item. “Look around you, wolf. This place is far beyond us in technology. Just think what we could learn here. The miracles of lost knowledge right here in our paws’ grasp.”

Mr. Dovell made his way up and slammed his paw on the counter. “I remember you. You were doing some kind of work for that unicorn.” He leaned over the counter, but before he could say anything else, an alarm sounded.

“Security! A breached of protocol has been initiated.”

The bear looked about him, as did the rest of us, to red lights that dropped centimeters from the ceiling and began to flash like those we left behind in the collapsing building.

“All disembarking passengers will kindly step back from the counter and hold out ID’s for inspection.”

“What is that thing on about?” the bear growled.

“I’m not sure, but it might be prudent to back up,” I suggested.

“Baw.” He waved his arm. “I’m not afraid of any animal.” The polar bear looked across to Oscar. “In fact, I could use a good row with someone.”

Sounds above our heads had me look up to see several round metal pipes lower from the ceiling. A red light appeared at the end of each. A flash of light encompassed us all in a circular motion as the cylinders rotated.

“Warning. Warning. All station personnel. Unauthorized personnel have come aboard. Protocol three will now be initiated.”

“Ho, dear...” Oscar whispered.

Before anyone could wonder as to what the voice referred, a sound of flowing air emitted from the cylinders. Those of us directly under one rolled eyes back into their heads and collapsed on the spot. Shouts and screams sprouted from throats that fell silent a moment later. Joann grabbed me in fright. Clair screamed. Lastly, darkness flooded my world as my eyes closed and I lost consciousness.



Filip Melin

Chapter 12

Hairless Apes Live

My thoughts rolled around in my mind for some while until something coherent formed words and I slowly opened my eyes. I sniffed and sneezed.

“Easy. Take your time,” someone instructed. “You’ll be fine in moments; the gas you inhaled is harmless.”

The smelling salt applied under my nose was taken away. Though I was groggy, my senses were returning. I lay on a cold metal table similar to the one Joann and Clair had been strapped to in Thelin’s lab building.

Oh, for the love of the Great Maker...Now what? I grumbled to find my arms and legs had been strapped down to hold me where I lay. This upset my animal, yet to waste energy struggling to get free might be detrimental to my current situation, not to mention possible harm could fall on Joann and Clair for my actions. *Calm yourself, wolf*, I told myself. *It’d be best to understand the situation before allowing the animal loose.* Back in control of my faculties, I sought knowledge with my nose, identifying objects within my vicinity while discovering no other animals were present. *But what is that new smell which holds life in its spores?* I blinked.

“Calm yourself. You are in no danger,” the voice assured me while my nose told me the spores were from some kind of a male animal I’d never come across.

“Hmm?” I managed.

“You should be able to see in seconds,” the odd-smelling animal told me.

My eyes opened. Focused. I blinked several times. Regardless of how many times I blinked, the same image of a living, breathing, flat faced furless ape

dressed in white coveralls still remained in my sight.

“That’s it. Just relax,” the supposed-to-be-long-extinct hairless ape instructed.

My tongue lolled out of my mouth while I gained my senses before I drew it back to lick my lips.

“My name is Art989042B17. Can you understand me? Can you speak? Do you comprehend the common language of man?”

The hairless ape fired question after question, seeking answers I wasn’t sure I wanted to divulge until my mind was fully operational.

Not receiving any response from his captive, me, he reached over his shoulder to a blue light-infused glass window on a metal arm and touched the glass with his fingers. Though the movement drew my attention, I didn’t miss his odd claws, or should I say the lack of true retractable claws. *Hmmm, how do they protect themselves from other animals?* A glance at his flat faced muzzle reminded me of a species of dog, yet not.

The animal drew back his paw; a second later the air around me filled with incomprehensible sounds. First one, then a second after the first, which was replaced by another after another. The strange sounds changed in pitch, variation, length and inflection. At first I was puzzled as to why the ape wished to subject me to the odd sounds. Then it struck me that he was watching my face for any kind of reaction, as if the sounds might mean something to me.

“Are any of these languages familiar?” he inquired.

As if I’d have understood his words if I didn’t know the same language. I snorted in my mind. To the ape, I asked, “Languages?” Inward, I wondered, *Those sounds are hairless ape words? If the written language is as varied as these sounds, no wonder our scholars have so much difficulty translating them.*

“Oh, you do understand common.” The ape touched the glass and the sounds stopped. “So, how are you feeling? You have some nasty cuts on the back of your shoulder and scrape marks on your neck. I had help in tending to them, and I hope you feel much better.”

I shifted my neck, and yes, the pain was gone. A shift of my shoulder came away with achiness, but no sharp pains from the exposed nerves. “Bewildered comes to mind,” I answered simply. I had a lot of questions, but right then basics were all I could handle. I tried to get a better look at the animal to get a feel for his vulnerabilities. After all, it was probable I might have to defend myself against the ape. That was if I somehow managed to get free.

“Sorry for the restraints.” He gave me another clue into his species by exposing the herbivore teeth inside his muzzle. “I assure you they’re only precautionary, for the safety of us both.” He held up a finger-sized, paw-length cylinder which shot light out of its end right into my eye, blinding me. I blinked and flinched.

“Be not afraid; I’m checking to see if you sustained any brain injuries. I must confess, Pam should be the one performing these tests, but she’s currently busy elsewhere.”

I assumed this meant there was a female of his kind somewhere.

He next used his fingers to open my other eye to blind that one as well. Whether he learned anything or not by blinding me, he remarked, “Yes, you do seem to have a strong constitution. Normally that gas would have knocked out a person for twelve hours, approximately one-half rotation around the earth in our current location above the planet.”

“Where am I?” I asked, waiting for the afterimage of the bright light to fade so I could see once more. “What is this place and who or what are you?” I left off asking where Joann or the other animals were, as I figured they were held somewhere I could not get to. At least until I was freed.

“Questions, questions. Oh, are they not wonderful?” He backed a step and pondered me. “When there are only a limited number of people to converse with, questions taper off, as the mind has little to stimulate it. But with new working minds introduced on this station, the norm will step aside to allow the mind to venture past old boundaries. I am so looking forward to conversing with each of you to open up new learning capabilities. I’m already sensing a change in my

nature as countless questions are filling my head. But protocols must be seen to.”

He turned to the glass plate window and his fingers flew over the surface. “Station date 12.24.12120. Art989042B17 overseeing recording.” He touched the glass again, after which the table I lay on began to shift its arrangement on its own. In moments, I was positioned at a forty-five-degree angle. He touched the glass once more and the table stopped as if the glass plate controlled the table in some way. Once we could see each other a little better, he proceeded to ask many things regarding my personal history.

“Before I tell you anything, how’s about we trade information?” I bargained. “I tell you something, you tell me something.”

“Hmm.” The animal shifted his arms up close to his body. “Not really protocol, but I can’t see any reason not to. After all, we’ve years to learn of each other. So, okay. First, what is your name and species?”

I’ll admit I wasn’t thrilled upon hearing his comment of years to understand each other, but for the moment such concerns could wait. “My name is Braxton Snow. I’m an arctic wolf.”

“An arctic wolf. Interesting.” The ape let his fingers fly over the glass plate. He slid an eye my way after a moment. “Forgive my archaic nature in typing in your information manually, but previous Arts suggested future Arts should refrain from using speech controls to avoid forgetting how to spell.”

“Um, okay. Sure.” I had an urge to scratch under my muzzle, as well as a wish to light up a pipe. *Oh well...* I spent a second to gauge what I might ask. “My turn. Who and what are you?”

“I am the nine hundred eighty-nine thousand and forty second clone of Art Ling, batch number seventeen. My species is human.” After saying this, his brown eyes brightened. “Oh, this is delightful, just answering you has brought up more questions.” He licked his lips and asked where I was from. My next question was for an explanation of this place.

He turned to the blue-tinted glass plate and tapped his fingers on the surface. Astoundingly, once he did so I saw an image appear within the glass plate.

“This,” he said, as a picture of a rickshaw wheel floating in the black void of space materialized. Once fully rendered, the picture rotated as if the wheel was wobbling. “This is the last remaining lifeboat of humankind still present in the Sol system. The four others have all passed beyond the Kuiper Belt some 50 AU’s distance, and have stopped sending messages for over eight thousand years now.” The ape looked thoughtful. “I can get you an exact date, but I see from your expression that may be premature.”

It definitely would be premature, as I had no idea what he was talking about. The ape seemed to comprehend this and tilted his head back to rub under his chin.

“Hmmm. I believe a history lesson might clear things up. But I wonder if you’re intelligent enough to understand it.” He pondered briefly and tapped the glass. When he removed his paw, the image had vanished. Not a trace of paper or ink remained to hint at the fact something had been there.

I don’t believe in magic... I reminded myself. While I did so, I watched his facial muscles to log into memory what each expression might mean. On his part, he came to a decision and turned back to the glass plate window to let his fingers roam. He shifted the glass plate closer to my face so I could see the clear surface without any difficulty.

“Here we are. I’ll let you watch this file. It’ll explain in some detail what you and I am, and some commonly known facts about this lifeboat and its mission.” The ape tapped the glass plate, whereby another image magically appeared within its surface, this one of the earth as if I was looking down on it from space. A baritone voice filled my ears seemingly from everywhere. To my wonderment, causing my eyes to widen in surprise, the image miraculously grew in size to fill the glass plate glass like an exploding anthill, until I was looking on an alien civilization no animal had ever seen.

“In the year 2105, a meteor collided with Range Finder 2, an unmanned spacecraft launched toward the outside of our solar system to investigate Alpha Centauri. This meteor consequently was nudged out of Jupiter’s orbit and fell

into Earth's orbital pull some forty years later. As meteors are part of the natural order of things, no preemptive measures were implemented to redirect its trajectory. This one mistake out of the uncountable human errors throughout history proved to be the downfall of all mankind. For within the rock fragment that survived entry into our atmosphere was a minute DNA strain imbedded in the nucleus of a germ. This germ, once exposed to open air, found a home compatible with its encoded purpose. At first introducing itself in the working class of humanity, the poor, the young and old, as merely a common illness, it spread from host to host like a seasonal cold. Unrecognized as any virus ever dealt with by the medical profession, its manifestation as a mild irritant akin to seasonal allergies marked it as non-life threatening and therefore of low priority to the powers that controlled the world economy. This attitude of the rich and powerful remained unshakable until the working force began using sick days. Instead of capitalizing on universities to research a way to eradicate this new virus, the powerful imposed laws that restricted the use of sick days to force mildly-affected workers back to their jobs. By this time, half the world's population had become infected and productivity dropped. The world leaders, forced by low profit margins and reduced GDP, pressured doctors to seek out a way to eliminate the virus from the human body, or at least treat symptoms to boost worker productivity. However, after months lacking success, the higher echelon realized more drastic measures would have to be taken or they themselves would have to cut back on luxuries.

“All off a sudden, the virus went dormant. The workers returned to their jobs. With their return, moneys allocated to the eradication of the virus dried up quickly. Without funding, universities and pharmaceutical companies put a halt to curing the virus and resumed other normal matters of healthcare.

“Six years later, the virus resurfaced. This time, however, it had mutated into a deadly disease. Every human infected fell ill within days and died three days after. Within weeks, hundreds died. In months, thousands. Within the year, one half of the earth's population had succumbed to the virus. Worldwide panic

ensued. Soon even the rich and powerful fell ill to the first symptoms of the virus, leading them to understand the human race was doomed to oblivion, if a cure could not be found.

“Hope did remain when no other mammal, bird, reptile, fish or insect contracted the germ. Researchers scrambled to understand the reason, so a serum to battle the virus could eliminate the fatal germ. The various ape species, being closer genetically to human kind, were the first animals to be experimented upon. However, by the end of a year, the ape populations were decimated to single-digit numbers due to the outstanding quantity of test subjects the rich and powerful demanded for the operating labs.

“During this same timeframe, the governments of each nation pulled together and started the construction of five space stations, dubbed ‘humankind’s lifeboats.’ In the year 2195, all that remained of the human race lived within the confines of the five constructed stations. It was surmised not a single human lived on Earth save by complete isolation from the earth’s atmosphere and its deadly virus. With all research exhausted, all five stations were slowly retrofitted to push out into space in hopes of reaching several documented Earth like planets to repopulate. However, it was deemed prudent to allow one station, the Infinite Wisdom, to remain in Earth’s orbit for a period of centuries to continue the fight in curing the blight, thereby allowing humankind to return to their home world. To do this, it was rationalized the answer resided in the genetic makeup of animals immune to the disease. Thus, new experiments were launched—all manner of experiments, regardless of how farfetched the idea. In 2228, a last-ditch effort began to repopulate the world with humankind. The plan was to evolve a select number of animal species until they were made human-ish. The hypothesis stated that once so evolved, female animals—”

The ape tapped the glass plate. The incredible tale and countless photographs that had flashed by within the blue glass plate so fast an animal could swear it was real life ended suddenly. He pulled and pushed the thing away. “The rest of that file need not concern you.”

The ape, who identified his species as human, looked at me and I on him while he decided what else to let me know.

“I’m sure you have as many questions concerning this history document as I have in regards to your development. Such as why did the researchers send you up unsupervised when it’s obvious you’re not developed enough to commence stage two of the program? If it were decided to give the next stage a try, why have I not received a communication relaying that message? Furthermore, why did they send up males, babies and pregnant females when impregnable females are the only test subjects needed?” He turned and planted his paw on the counter and drummed a beat with his finger as he pondered. “These questions shall have to wait until another time while I consult with Pam and the archives. For the present, I’ll place you back with your fellow males so you can rest and pass onto them the information I’ve let you see.” He opened a drawer and pulled out a finger-sized cylinder with a long but infinitely thin metal needle unlike any I’d ever seen. He pricked my skin with it, and within moments of its contents flowing into my vein, I was fast asleep.

“Wake up.” Someone pushed on my upper arm to shake me. “Wake up.”

“He’s been out a long time. Perhaps he’s dead?” Lamont’s tone was hopeful.

“He’s not dead, by any means,” Norbert said. “He’s breathing normally. It’s possible whatever we fell victim to just affected him more than us due to his injuries.”

“Well I, for one, will be glad when he finally comes to,” Gero the Ocelot said. “Perhaps he can get us out of this mess like he did before.”

“You’re forgetting it’s because of him we’re not on our world and prisoners of another animal. Perhaps he’s a plant. An animal sent in amongst us to get us all in that moving building to be brought here. Wherever here is. Have you thought of that?”

“You’re forgetting the facility was falling apart,” The wolverine snapped. “Mr. Thelin gave no orders to have any of you males released. Had this wolf not set you free, you’d all be buried under tons of rock and ice.”

“You were fine with letting us die?” Gero questioned.

“I had little choice in the matter. Lawrence was the only animal with a key and he was instructed to get all the cubs into the building first. If time allowed, the females would be released and taken there next. Males were never mentioned.”

“That makes sense,” I licked dry lips and used my elbows to prop myself up. During my slumber, the facts showed me by that magical glass plate had coalesced into semi-understanding. Had my world not been upside down, I had to believe my intelligence would have had a better perspective of our situation. Regardless, the circumstances were as they were when I let the three animals know I was awake.

“You’re awake,” Gero said unnecessarily.

“What do you mean by that?” Lamont demanded.

I ignored his question. “How long have I been out?”

“The better part of a day, I reckon,” Norbert said. “Though it’s only a guess, as there are no clocks or windows to judge the time of day by here.”

“Do you know where we are?” The Ocelot’s posture and ears made it plain he was nervous as hell.

I looked around the small space and saw four beds in sets of two, chained to the wall, one over the other. I resided in the lowest one on my side. Lamont perched on the topmost bed on the opposite wall while Gero and Norbert sat on the one I laid on as if protecting me from the snow leopard. Which I believe was true. That leopard didn’t like me at all.

Behind my head on the back wall was a shower unit and relief station. The opposite wall, a few meters from my pads, was a wall with both a solid outer door and an inner door of bars, apparently so the outer door could be opened without worry those behind it would make a break for it. I looked at Norbert,

who grumbled.

“Locked, both of them.”

“We were in hopes you could do your magic and get us out,” the Ocelot said, his ears and eyes showing hope.

A might dizzy, I lay back down. “I’ll have to wait until the world stops spinning before I can try.”

“As I said.” Lamont snorted in irritation, and lay down as well. “He’s too old to be of any real help.”

“You presume far too much, cat.” That remark earned me a glare before he turned his head to look at the ceiling.

“What do we do?” Gero asked.

“For the present, get some rest,” I suggested.

“But that’s all we’ve been doing,” Gero whined.

I wrinkled my nose; the smell in the room was growing. “Take a shower, then. I’m sure we all could use one.” I put my paws behind my head, noting I felt no twinge of pain from my shoulders, and closed my eyes.

“Yeah, sure...” Norbert grumbled and took my advice.

“You sure like ordering animals around,” Lamont sneered.

Norbert turned on the shower. “Damn, I should have known it.”

His remark earned him a glance from all of us. Instead of water, which we all naturally expected, that white cleaning mist we’d been subjected to back on Earth cascaded out of the showerhead, save this mist seemed heavier in nature as it fell to the floor.

Norbert sighed. “What do these hairless apes have against real water?” He unzipped and stepped out of his jumpsuit. “What I wouldn’t give for a real hot shower.” He stepped into the failing mist just as there came a knock at the door. We all adjusted our postures as the outside door swung out.

“By the Great Maker!” the Ocelot cried out when we could see who had opened the door. “What’s that?”

“Whatever it is, it doesn’t look healthy,” Norbert commented from the

corner of the shower to staunch his understandable nervousness.

Art989042B17 looked in on us.

“That,” I began, and closed my eyes as I was still sleepy, “is apparently our new jailer, and if I’m correct, he’s of the hairless ape species.”

“What? No. impossible,” Norbert said. “Mr. Thelin spoke of them. He said they died out thousands of years ago.”

“If I may interject,” the ape began. “This Mr. Thelin you speak of is correct. Although the human species passed on into history well over ten thousand years ago, you are in error concerning my designation. I am modeled in the form of the human species. Specifically, a clone of a human man named Art Ling.”

“Well, whatever you are...” Lamont threatened, “you don’t look as if you could defend yourself against a carnivore, let alone most herbivores. I’d suggest to get on my better side you release me and I’ll forgo killing you at a later date.”

“And you are?” Art989042B17 inquired.

Lamont bared his teeth. “An animal who’s fed up being locked up. So if you know what’s good for you, l-e-t m-e o-u-t.”

In one of the ape’s paws he held some kind of weapon. Tucked under his other arm was a glass plate window. He checked the room over before he holstered the weapon then pulled the glass plate out from under his arm and looked it over. “Telling me you are an animal is rather redundant. I already know this. What I’d like to know is your name and species.”

“He’s joking...right?” the Ocelot looked at those of us around him. “How can he possibly not know Lamont’s a snow leopard?”

“The same as he didn’t know I’m an arctic wolf,” I enlightened them through a big yawn. As sleep was behind me, I slowly sat up. “Apparently this place we’re stuck on has no animals like us.”

“In point of fact, that’s not entirely true,” Art989042B17 corrected while his fingers tapped the glass plate several times. “There are a number of cats on board to control the rat and mice populations. In addition, there are one thousand specially-selected animals in cryogenics.”

Gero's ears shifted, letting me know he was interested in the reference of Felidae being on board. Presently he didn't have a chance to ask about them.

The ape looked at me. "Mr. Snow, if you would be so kind as to come with me, I've more questions."

Gero whispered in my ear, "If that creature's being polite, maybe things are not as bad as they seem?"

"Perhaps..." I stood slowly to avoid getting dizzy. My wobbly legs seemed unused to holding up my weight, for some odd reason. After a second, they resumed their natural duty, and I approached the bars slowly since gravity still refused to act natural. "Art98-9-uh, 04...I'm sorry, I can't remember the rest."

The ape smiled and nodded. "Understandable, as we have just met. To make things simpler for you, Art will suffice."

"Simpler. Yeah, he'll need that," the snow leopard commented from his bed.

Lamont's implication I was a simpleton wasn't lost on me. Yet to rise to his quip would only further his cause to undermine any creditability with Norbert and Gero.

I ignored his slur on my intelligence as Art checked on the others' placement in the cell before he inserted a card in the wall next to the door. Somehow the card unlocked the bar door, which slid along the wall, leaving the way clear. Once I stepped past the threshold, the bar door slid shut on its own and locked. I glanced back on the animals inside. Gero's yellow and black eyes pleaded that I do something while the wolverine snorted and simply returned to his shower.

Once past the second door, the hairless ape beckoned me to come with him as the door swung closed and gave off an audible click to indicate the lock had set in place. As we walked, I noticed a large black metal box as tall and wide as he following the pair of us on nearly silent wheels.

Art saw me eye the rolling contraption. "Pay that no mind, Mr. Snow. It's merely a safety measure to protect me in the unlikely event you considered a harmful act would benefit you in some way."

I wondered how the black box would stop me. “Present circumstances forbid me from doing so. However, that could change if I don’t learn where the other animals are kept, especially the white-tailed jackrabbits.”

Art gestured to the doors around us while we walked along a slightly curving corridor. My ears swiveled toward muffled voices, arguing, crying, and a couple doors being pounded on from the other side. My nose, however, discerned no animal scent in the air, which seemed impossible, except I remembered the two small white showers we’d passed under when leaving the flying building that felt similar to the white cloud used on us back on Earth that had removed all odors from our surrounding for a brief time. It stood to reason Art’s ancestors had used the same technology to keep the building we were in now clean in the same manner.

I walked by the ape’s side, wishing I could do more than simply follow. Art paid the pleas and lamentations from behind the locked doors no mind as he looked over his clear glass plate.

“So that was a snow leopard,” Art affirmed as he tapped on the glass plate.

I needed to start comprehending these strange devices. I paid more attention to Art’s placement of fingers on the glass plate while he did more tapping.

“Uh, to be honest, Mr. Snow.” He looked at me. “I’m uncertain as to most of your animal species. You see, my training has only been in the upkeep of this Earth station, as well as basic first aid. But while this station holds billions of files so numerous questions can be answered, I must confess the archives hold no images or details concerning the advancements the Iceland research lab had achieved in your development these past centuries. This is but one of many reasons why I wish to have further talks with you. Once we’re seated comfortably in my office, I’ll be glad to tell you the condition of the”—he looked puzzled—“jackrabbits?”

“White-tailed jackrabbits,” I corrected.

“Yes, right. I’ll tell you how they fare once you identify their pictures for me.”

The walk to his office took ten minutes, during which time I passed countless doors. It appeared this place had plenty of jail cells. Which begged the question, *Why so many?*

“Ah, here we are.” He placed his paw on a plate that glowed yellow briefly, then changed to green. I heard a click, and the door slid into the wall. “If you’ll settle in a chair, we can begin.”

To put things in perspective as I walked in, I pictured myself as a primitive animal just come to the big city, a circumstance I’d already faced at age fifteen when I left my father’s clan and found a home in the city of Furlton.

Its time this old wolf learned some new tricks. I eyed the chair that had not been made with an animal’s tail in mind and sat so as not to cause myself harm. Then I causally had a look around. Though the room had many smells unknown to me, it still held familiar sights. Three chairs, file cabinets, clipboards, a tack board with an array of old, fading papers tacked onto its surface and most important, a cluttered desk. Behind the desk, a lengthwise window overlooked some of the rickshaw wheel we were held hostage within. Once this caught my eye, I paused, as my mind sought to grasp the gravity of our predicament while looking out on that vast black emptiness beyond the window intermittently interrupted by the rickshaws limbs. *How by the Great Maker do I get us home?* I confess I was being selfish in only thinking of Joann, Clair and me, overwhelmed by the unimaginable obstacles before us.

The ape waved his paw before my eyes. “Mr. Snow? Hello, are you alright?”

“Hmmm?” I blinked, feeling my animal miserably howling in the back of my mind. “Oh, sorry...” I said lamely.

The ape looked behind him at the window then back at me as his facial muscles showed he picked up on my distress. “No problem.” He made a gesture to the window. “I think I can understand. Your present location must come as quite a shock. Yet even the society you animals have formed back on Earth, however primitive, must have someone who understands these things, because

one among you animals had to have known how to activate the Mary Alice. How else could you have gotten here?”

Still dealing with the enormity of the situation, the words Mary Alice stalled my thinking. I raised an eyebrow. “Mary Alice.” My eyes slid left and right. “I’ve heard that name before.” I finished by looking at the ape. “Who is she?”

The ape’s eyes fell on the glass plate he’d laid down on the desk and his fingers went to work on its surface. “She is not a person. She’s a transport ship from the Iceland research lab.” He picked up the glass plate and held it up so I could look on its glowing surface. “The last of her kind, and until yesterday, thought to have been inoperable or destroyed.”

Like the glass plates displayed back on the tables at the end of the green line we’d followed and the one he pushed into my face while I was tied down on an examining table, this smaller version miraculously showed an image on its glowing surface. At a glance, the image resembled a pencil. White with black hieroglyphs running up its length. Between two black lines that banded the circumference, two triangle-shaped flat objects had been applied and finally, at its bottom, three similar but smaller triangles had been added.

For a moment I stared at the image. *Is that what Oscar calls an air ship?* My next question put a puzzled look on my face. *How can such a contraption even get off the ground? To get airborne, a bird must flap its wings or jump off something.*

The ape noted my puzzled look. “Is the person who started up the Mary Alice among you?”

“Person?” I relinquished my gaze on the air ship in the surface of the glass plate to look at the ape. “I don’t understand. What’s a person?”

Briefly he looked surprised. “A person is a term used to represent a man or woman in a sentence, especially when the sex is either not known or not needed.”

“Okay, you’ve lost me.” I scratched under my muzzle. “The words person, man or woman are not known to me. What are they?”

My question had him fully puzzled. “You’re not half man and half animal?”

I can safely say confusion set up residence on my face. “I’m an animal, of course, specifically an arctic wolf like I told you. But if you’re asking if I’m half arctic wolf and half something else, I’m not. Where I was born, the arctic wolves would never mix their bloodlines with another species of wolf.”

The ape pinched his nose in some irritation. “This is getting me nowhere. I thought as the leader, you’d be more educated.”

“Leader?” Here I had to deny the honorific term, though in truth my alpha wished nothing more than to acknowledge it. “I’m sorry, but you’ve been misinformed. I’m naught but a simple wolf who wants to be with his family.”

His face took on a look of pain, if I registered his facial muscles right. “But this recording clearly shows you as the leader.” He tapped on the clear glass plate a few seconds. He then held it up for me to look at. Amazingly, the picture of the air ship had gone and in its place were countless pictures flashing by at such a speed as to make the images look as if a real-life scene was happening at that very moment from a slightly above point of view. The pictures were of the moments I stood before Lamont inside the air ship building, protecting the animals who worked for the unicorns. Suddenly these pictures stopped and a second scene played out on the glass plate of me standing before the row of glass plates that held images of the hairless apes above countertops, talking to Oscar as he explained his theories. A moment more, and Mr. Dovell came up.

While these pictures flowed on in the glass plate, the ape narrated his belief. “If I interpreted this right, here you are settling a dispute between these two groups.” When the next set of pictures came up, he went on. “And here I saw an animal explain what he found to you while this large animal came up and disputed something.” The pictures blacked out and one more set of pictures played out. “I will admit at first glance the larger animal here seemed to be in charge, but when he grabbed you and clearly meant you harm, these other animals came to your rescue.”

The scene I looked at showed Joann, Pascal, Mansi, Muna and Gero trying

to intercede on my behalf until Mrs. Dovell noticed what her husband was doing and took charge of him.

“So if you’re not the leader, who is?” Art asked, laying the glass plate down and awaiting my response.

What should I tell him? I pondered. Do I trust him enough to tell the truth or lie my tail off? As a private investigator, there were plenty of times I made up stories to gain what I needed to solve a case. But this is no case. This is a life and death situation where the wrong words could result in consequences I’d never forgive myself for.

As truths left no false details to remember, I went with that. “Circumstances were so fluid until recently that we had no leader save who had the better chance to aid our cause of escape from Thelin’s facility.”

“Which was?”

“To be honest, I’m uncertain if I should tell you. But as you might get the wrong story from another animal, I’ll explain events as I saw them.”

Art touched the glass plate and stood it up on his desk by inserting the bottom edge in a groove on the desk. “Please...” He gestured for me to start.

“Uh,” I looked at the see-through glass plate, wondering what miracles it would perform as I started to render my tale from the moment Ms. Thelin found Joann, Clair and I in the snow bank.



Mansi & Muna Witt

Chapter 13

Concessions of Freedom

After my tale, the hairless ape tapped a finger on his drawn-up knee briefly. He sat straighter and took up then laid down the glass plate. With a bit of tapping on the glass plate, within its structure, an image of Oscar appeared. “If I understand your description right, this animal started up the Mary Alice?”

“That building, air ship, or by whatever name you give that contraption that brought us here, yes.”

He looked at the picture of Oscar a moment before he stood. “You’ve been very helpful, Mr. Snow. I hope you’ll continue to be so, but for now it’s time I return you to your quarters.”

I stood. “What of my family? You said you’d let me be with them.”

He seemed unaffected by my stretching our deal. “You’ll need to make up your mind, Mr. Snow. Do you wish to be with your family or do you wish to be with the jackrabbits?”

“The jackrabbits are my family.”

The ape looked at me strangely. “Really? I never would’ve guessed.” He tapped his glass plate and showed me a picture. “When you see your wife or children’s image, let me know.” With a movement of his finger one picture after another appeared within the surface of the glass plate, just as quickly replaced by another. As the pictures rolled past, part of my mind wondered on the new words he used, man, woman, person and now children, while the other half wondered on who he thought might have been my family, as he didn’t seem to know one animal from another. When Clair came up, I indicated her as my sister-in-law,

though Joann and I had yet to be married.

“Ah...um, I’m sorry, Mr. Snow, but this animal and others who are currently with child are unavailable at present.” He worked his finger over the plate a moment until Muna’s picture came up. “Could this be your wife?”

“No,” I said distractedly. “What do you mean unavailable?” The hackles on the back of my neck came up as my animal wished to grab the ape to discover the answer. My intelligence fortunately overrode my instincts to protect my family. I asked with a slightly aggressive tone, “Has anything happened to her?”

What happened next, I was unprepared for; I felt a pin prick in my neck and instantly I was paralyzed.

The ape walked behind me, showing no alarm as my head fell forward and I collapsed back into the chair, apparently understanding what had happened to me. “My apologies, Mr. Snow. Your aggressive mannerisms in physical state and tone activated the protective protocol in the security bot behind you. I will admit I had its controls set a little high for our meeting, but I assure you, your paralyzation is only temporary.”

Since I still had control of my eyes, I saw more than felt a black cloth or something like it wrap around my chest and under my arms.

“According to the main files,” the ape calmly explained behind me, “it’ll be some hours before you regain full motor control. I’m afraid this concludes our meeting today.”

Without my muscles performing any functions, my body rose up out of the chair. I next heard the chair move aside.

“Had you remained calm, I would have told you all pregnant animals are currently undergoing testing under the care of Pam990073B21. She is the botanist and medical expert on this station, and better equipped to judge their condition and render aid if needed.”

Somehow floating off the floor, my body backed out of the room of its own accord. Art joined me.

“I’ll of course let Pam990073B21 know of your relationship with the

rabbits.”

The hairless ape walked silently at my side as I floated back down the hallway. Once before a door I assumed was now my home, Art slipped a card into a slot near the door edge and the door unlocked. He pulled the door open and two of the occupants inside jumped up.

“We’ll talk more on a later date.” To those inside the cell, Art said, “Be of ease; Mr. Snow is well. He’s been temporarily immobilized due to an aggressive action. If you’ll stay clear of the door, I’ll deposit him in your room so you may take care of him.”

“What makes you think we care for him?” Lamont remarked, bored-like, from his bunk. “It’s because of him we’re locked behind these bars and stranded on this whatever it is instead of on firm ground making our way back to civilization.”

“That’s not true...” Gero the Ocelot countered. “If it weren’t for him, we’d be buried alive behind similar bars without hope of anyone coming to rescue us.”

“So you think...” Lamont showed no sign of being upset for being challenged.

“No, he speaks the truth.” Norbert refuted the snow leopard’s comment. “I told you before, Mr. Thelin held no concern about your fate.”

“Whatever...” Lamont snorted.

Norbert showed his front teeth in a snarl.

Art said, “Oh dear.”

A second later the wolverine came into my sight as he fell to the floor, as paralyzed as I.

My stay behind the locked door and bars wasn’t all fun and games. Lamont was pretty much a pain in the tail. My worry for Joann and Clair stayed foremost on my mind, and like Lamont, I also blamed me for our new predicament,

though my intelligence kept telling me, *There are two sides to every story. The fact I had no knowledge a way could have been found out of the building before the whole place collapsed doesn't mean we might not have found it. Still, being alive beats being crushed, in my book.*

Three days later, the outer door opened and there stood Oscar behind Art. "Good day, Mr. Snow," Art began. "I'm sorry to have left you so long without a word, but Mr. Sullivan and I lost ourselves in talks concerning many things."

"In truth, we'd still be conversing on so many topics," Oscar began, a step behind the ape in unapologetic explanation. "If it wasn't for the human Pam—"

Art cut him off. "Perhaps only one of us should explain matters?"

"Oh yes, sorry," Oscar admitted, looking just as excited as he did on the air ship.

"No harm done." The ape turned to us behind the bars and continued. "To make a long story short, Mr. Sullivan gave several good points as to why you would make the best animal to appoint as leader of all the animals that came on board this station."

Lamont jumped down from atop his bunk and casually rebuked my appointment. "I'm sorry to say, but you're wrong on two counts in your judgment."

"Oh?" the ape inquired with a raised eyebrow. "Would you please enlighten me?"

All eyes fell on the snow leopard as he walked up and stood by me. "For one thing, he's a coward. For the other, the animals all know the male polar bear has the strength of bearing and commanding presence needed for everyone to follow."

I felt like being sarcastic by saying, "Thanks for the vote of confidence." However, no matter how much my alpha self wanted to be crowned leader, I wished to be with my growing family far more, and that wouldn't be possible if I were made leader.

"Hmmm, indeed?" the ape looked at me. "How true would you say this

animal's words are, Mr. Snow?"

I glanced at the snow leopard. "Lamont has a point concerning Mr. Dovell. Because of his brute strength, most animals would follow his lead. As for who I believe would make the best leader, I'd appoint Mrs. Svea Dovell, Mr. Dovell's wife. She has the better temperament to reason first, while Mr. Dovell is more prone to bully everyone into doing what he wants."

"What about you?" the ape inquired.

"In all honesty, I haven't the drive to impose my will on the others."

Lamont made a gesture with his paw toward me. "See? A coward, as I said."

"Hmmm, I see." The ape looked at Norbert and Gero. "Have you two an opinion?"

Norbert spoke up first. "I'll not be bullied by another hulking bear, so I'd not follow the male polar bear. The female, Mrs. Dovell, is another matter. She has an inner strength and a kind heart. She would be fair."

The Ocelot looked at me. "You truly don't want to be leader?"

I shook my head.

He looked at the ape and shrugged. "I'm sorry, I can't say."

"Well, this is awkward." The ape looked at Oscar. "You said the wolf was a born leader."

"He is," Oscar said looking at me. "I never thought he would turn down the posting."

"What do you think of this female bear they're talking about?" Art inquired.

"I'm afraid I don't know her, but if Braxton vouches for her..." Oscar shrugged.

"Well, she did cause the larger male polar bear to back down, which is saying she has guts." He looked at Oscar. "If your choice feels she's best." He looked at me. "Would you come along to reason with her if she disagrees? I really need to get one of you to take up the post so all of you can be freed and we can get down to the business of talking about our future."

"Our future?" I questioned. "Does that mean you know how to get us back

home?”

The ape scratched the back of his neck. “I’m sorry to say that is not a possibility at this time. Long ago, the Mary Alice could have made many trips back and forth, but frankly, in its current condition, it’s a miracle it didn’t blow up upon liftoff, let alone make it here.”

“What if some of us wish to take that chance?” Norbert asked.

“I understand your pain,” the ape sympathized. “If the truth were to be told, I’d like nothing better than to send you all home. However, the craft will need considerable work done before it is structurally sound enough to survive a trip back to Earth without burning up in the atmosphere.”

“What does that mean?” Gero asked.

“It means we’re stuck here until the ape is tired of us.” Lamont turned for the shower, doffing the shirt he had found before he and his followers joined up to get inside the air ship building.

“The leopard”—The ape looked at Oscar to make certain he had the species name right—“is both right and wrong. But before we go any further, I need to clarify something. My species is human. Not ape. I know it’ll take some time getting used to, but there’s no time like the present to get started.” The ape who wished to be labeled as human, whatever that was, backed a step, whereby I saw the security bot behind him. Art inserted his card and the bars slid open. “Mr. Snow, if you would?”

I glanced at Norbert and Gero before I walked out of the cell.

Once the bars and door closed, Oscar commented, “I’m surprised you didn’t jump on the opportunity to take up leadership. You were born for such a role; in fact, you should have taken over your father’s clan, so Mr. Thelin assured me.”

Not wishing to go into any details, I shrugged indifference.

The ape walked us past five doors before he used his card to unlock the door before us. Once the door opened enough for us to see inside, Mr. Dovell surprised us by being at the bars, jaws opening wide to let out an ear splitting roar. I squinted and crinkled my face in pain to the all-too-close volume of his

outburst. Art and Oscar backed up a step, as would any animal unused to standing their ground upon being threatened. The security bot following behind us must have perceived danger to the hairless ape and shifted enough to get a clean shot between all of us with its paralyzing dart, for the polar bear's roar dropped in volume until he slid to the floor, mercifully silent.

Behind him and sitting on a bunk with her young cub in her good arm, Mrs. Dovell watched her husband sink to the floor. Without alarm, as if she'd seen this happen before, she remarked, "Happy, dear?"

Once Mr. Dovell's bulk fell below the level of our heads, she spotted me and her disdain for her husband's action changed to relief. "Oh, Braxton. It's good to see you. Does this mean you've figured out a way to get us all released?"

"That really depends on you," I answered.

She looked at me strangely.

After an agreement was satisfactory to Mrs. Dovell, who sat on the floor of the ape's office, for she was too large for any of the chairs, Mrs. Dovell added one more requirement. "I'll need a peace keeper to aid in governing the animals, and I want Braxton to be him."

"That's acceptable." Art nodded.

"What? No," I began. "If I wanted anything to do with governing anything, I'd have taken leader."

"Braxton, to be leader I have to have animals around who I trust. Sure, my husband will help all he can, but you have years of training in dealing with animals. All kinds of animals, Joann told me. Thus the posting is yours, whether you want it or not." She looked at the hairless ape. "With that settled, how do we go about freeing everyone?"

"That will come in a few days," Art said. "First you, Pam and I must create

some basic rules all animals will need to follow. In addition, boundaries must be set. There are countless sensitive areas on this station that until these animals are trained to understand and possibly operate them must be set off limits.”

“Agreed, so long as training is provided,” Mrs. Svea Dovell amended.

With all preliminaries seemingly handled, I asked, “Now can I see my wife and her sister?”

“I’ll inquire it of Pam,” Art promised.

When the hairless ape Pam990073B21 arrived, I wondered if all the apes were so hairless. If so, how did they survive long enough to create the advanced technology surrounding us? *Am I giving them credit for some other animals’ inventiveness?* I wondered. *Could there have been an animal more advanced than them?*

When the female ape greeted me, it was with apprehension. “Uh, hello.”

Since I couldn’t remember her full name, I greeted her as I did Art. “Good day, Miss Pam. My name is Braxton Snow. It’s good to meet you.” I stuck out my paw.

She took ahold of her paws and brought them close to her body as she looked at my polite offer to shake. The female ape glanced up at Art, as she was twenty-one centimeters shorter than he.

“It’s alright.” Art smiled. “He may look fierce, but I assure you he’s quite tame.”

I’ll admit I didn’t like his descriptive, but I didn’t want to delay seeing Joann and Clair.

A little reluctant and with a shaky smile, she tentatively took my paw.

This is what’s been taking care of my family? After a second of consideration, I reasoned, *She could just be unused to carnivores, being as their teeth resemble herbivores’.*

With little grace in retrieving her paw, the female ape looked at the male ape, squared her shoulders and with a pointed look to a security bot which had arrived with her, she signaled that I should follow her.

To try and break the ice with her, I started up a conversation. “Your male tells me you’re trained in botany. Does this mean you take care of the food supply?”

She looked up at me then glanced back at the security bot. Her mannerisms, though new to me, gave off vibes she was debating her answer. When she spoke, she showed how fearful she was of my presence. “Y-es, yes I d-o.” She looked ahead down the corridor we were traveling as if forcing herself to keep pace with me instead of running away. After a second, she repeated herself with more certainty. “Yes I do. I-I know many things con-concerning growth, fertilization and harvest-vesting.” In some hurry, she added, “Without me, everyone would soon starve.”

Point taken. I filed that away. *At least until we learn the ins-and-outs of this place.* “I see. Does that include the delicious sushi I’ve been eating these past days?”

Another glance, one that held a bit of relief. “Yes, yes it does.”

Our walk took some time. I ventured a guess it was about a quarter the way around the wheel before she turned us onto one of the spokes. A few steps in, she opened a door with that small paw of hers held to a plate that changed to yellow momentarily, then green before the door opened and she allowed me to walk in first. Without hesitation I did so, and shortly after had the shock of my life.

I stepped in a small office, outfitted with nothing more remarkable than a desk, file cabinets and two raised clear blue glowing glass plates on the desk. For walls, three sides which began at hip level were clear glass plates. Although the room I walked into was unremarkable, what I saw beyond the glass plates stopped me dead in my tracks. I blinked, yet the image on the other side of the glass remained.

Next to the wall, going as far as I could see toward the wheel hub were clear

glass oblong boxes on table tops with wheels. Opposite these, three rows deep and traveling just as far were body-length steel tables like I'd woken up on. What was worse, it appeared over half the females who'd made it to the airship building were laid out on them. All strapped to the tables. All hopefully simply asleep. Connected at the head of the table of each was a tall steel pole that held an oddly see-through bag with some kind of liquid inside. A long flexible tube-like thing ran from the bottom of the bag, down to the animal's arm on the steel tabletop.

My lip curled back in an unconscious act. My animal saw red, then boiled hot when my sight found Joann was one of the animals so interred. Like a vice, my intelligence took ahold of my animal, whose only thought was to tear the female ape to pieces. My ears fell flat on my skull. Trembling, I struggled with myself to keep from reacting. I lowered my muzzle and slowly turned my head enough to locate the security bot. It was there, behind the female ape. Silent. The speed in which it targeted and shot Mr. Dovell possibly outmatched my abilities. For this reason, I sought not to alarm it. Still, why it had yet to paralyze me might mean my alpha was under control, or the bot had to have more clues that I was dangerous. *I'll have to reason out which at a later date.* In the meantime, I ran over the clues I had of these ape animals.

The male ape Art seems friendly enough. He alleges he wants to work with us. So why would our females be so treated? These were questions that would need to be answered before I lost control. In as mild a tone as I could muster under the circumstances, I asked the female ape, "Could you explain why these females are all tied down and sleeping on those tables?" I wanted to add more, but every word was a trial to speak in a controlled manner.

The female ape walked past me slowly. She shrunk in on herself when my face came fully into view. "Um...truthfully, it-it's for their own go-good," she worked to say.

"Explain?" my clipped word snapped out.

She got behind the desk, using it as a barrier between us, before she

answered. “The traum-ma of lift off and-and the effects of the extra gr-gravity on the develop-oping fetuses may have caused them so-ome harm. For these reasons the babies’ hosts are be-ing kept sedat-ted so as to all-low them a more harmonious surrounding to bett-ter develop.”

I rolled my eyes back a second to strengthen my hold on my anger. “Please speak plainly, Pam.”

She folded her arms tightly to her chest. “I just di-id.”

I took a deep breath. I hated to appear as a simpleton, but my needs overrode my self-esteem. “Perhaps you could use smaller words?”

“Oh...uh okay. Um...Your trip here-re could have ha-harmed the babies. To treat them for any damage and avoid birth injuries, I’ve put the mo-mothers to-to sleep.”

“Pardon my ignorance,” I said evenly. “What are babies?”

For the first time she looked at me in disbelief. “You don’t have babies?” She glanced behind her on the pregnant females and gave a nervous laugh. “Uh...well, of course you do, or rather they do.” She gestured behind her. “Perhaps you use a different word for them.”

I believe I caught her drift. “You mean the little ones these females will have in a few months.”

“Yes, yes, little ones. Babies.” She nodded.

I began to settle, yet I was still fighting my animal. “Very well. When will they wake up?”

The ape eyed me before she touched the glass plate on her desk. “Some days yet. No matter the stage in development, babies are very delicate.”

“I see. Then perhaps you would allow me a few moments with my fiancée?”

“Fiancée?” She looked behind her.

Before she stated the obvious, I interjected, “The white-tailed jackrabbit, six rows over and two back.”

She looked back at me, puzzled. Her eyes dropped to the glass plate and she tapped the glass a few times. “Ahhh, that explains that.”

I hated asking the obvious, but with most animals it was the only way. “That explains what?”

She glanced up, while reading off from the glass plate. “According to the computer, the baby she’s carrying is not of her species.” She started tapping the glass plate. “You said she’s a rabbit?”

“White-tailed jackrabbit, to be precise.”

“Uh, right. Thanks.” She finished up whatever she was doing. “The baby is yours, I presume?”

“The cub, yes,” I corrected her.

The ape stood and looked behind her. “So your civilization learned how to inseminate animals to produce the young you desire?”

“To make a long story short, no.”

She looked at me, uncomprehending.

“May I see her?” I asked with as much patience as I could muster.

“Oh, sure. Just don’t touch the IV’s.” She touched the glass plate.

Whatever those are... I considered asking but didn’t want to waste any more time.

Meanwhile, at her action, a sliding door on my left opened. I briefly eyed the glass plate and the glass door before I walked in the next room and made a bee line for Joann. In so doing I took note that the glass boxes held padding and blankets in each. Disregarding them I arrowed in on Joann, took up her paw once there and held it in both of mine. The fact her paw was warm was reassuring. More so was the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed.

I bent down and nuzzled her face with mine. “I’m here, love,” I whispered. “Rest easy. I hope to have you awake and freed in a few days.” I glanced over at Clair. “Your sister is also here. She looks well taken care of, as do you.” I gave her a gentle kiss. I shifted and laid my ear on her stomach to briefly listen to my cub’s heartbeat. I could almost hear my animal purr to the strong heartbeat within my developing cub. Although I didn’t wish to leave her, I had much to do in making certain we would be alright. Reluctantly, I laid her paw down and

gently touched her stomach before I left her side to step over to Clair. I picked up her paw and sought to assure her as well. Although I wished to lay my ear down on her stomach too, it didn't seem right. The cub growing in her womb, though mine, was not of her choosing. *Later*, I promised myself. *Later we'll talk this out. Until then...* "Rest easy."

I returned to the office. "Most of these animals have husbands," I told the female ape. "It would be most appropriate if they were here to receive their wives when they awaken."

"I'll consider it." I knew she was lying by the tone of her voice.

Not wishing to make our awkward situation worse, I let it go, for now. I took one more look at Joann's prone form and walked out. Briefly, I stood outside the room, my thoughts a jumble. My sense of smell picked up my scent and I followed it back to the male ape's office. Not finding him there, I followed Mrs. Dovell's scent back to her cell. Seeing she wasn't there and Mr. Dovell was still on the floor, slumbering away, I put my nose up in the air and tracked her and the ape. A long walk later, I found them both in what looked like a conference room. Mrs. Dovell and the male ape looked up at my entrance.

"Ah, Mr. Snow. Perfect timing. We were discussing limits for all animals to abide by until you've had proper training concerning rooms and equipment on this station." He looked at Mrs. Dovell, who sat on the floor here as well for there were no chairs available in her size. In her lap, sleeping comfortably, was her eight-month-old cub.

"As I was about to explain," Art continued, "this facility's been designed to aid all residents in locating places and or personnel. As you may have noticed, there are colored lines on the floor. All green lines travel to areas on the station anyone may safely visit. All yellow lines represent corridors or rooms that only station staff may enter, while red lines are strictly off limits."

"I take it you and the female are station staff?" Mrs. Dovell questioned.

He smiled. "Of course."

"Are there any other, uh, h-u-m-a-n-s," Mrs. Dovell stretched out the word to

be better understood, “here about we should get to know?”

“Presently no, but with the need to get this station fully operational, as well as examine possibilities in getting you all home, Pam will begin incubating specialized personnel to fill the holes in manpower.”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupted. “What?”

Art looked at me. “Beg pardon, Mr. Snow. I’m still learning there are gaps in our languages. To put it briefly, Pam will select stored personnel, who after proper training will be ready to take up their posts.”

Mrs. Dovell looked at me. “Though this will be hard for the animals to take, Art has explained returning to the surface of our home is unlikely for our generation. The device for that job is beyond repair. As for repairing the only other one on station, Art tells me he and Pam are not qualified. So other humans must be bred to take up this task.”

I looked at both. “So why in a few years? If you have the personnel here—”

The ape interrupted. “Sorry, Mr. Snow. It’s not that easy. The personnel I refer to have yet to be born.”

I looked a question at the ape while I did some quick imagining. *How many, uh, babies, can the female ape have at a time? The female ape didn’t look capable of birthing more than one or two at a time, unless ape babies are birthed as small as rabbit kittens.* Before I could do some quick calculations on how long it would take to breed ten apes as a start, Art cut off my thinking.

“I see you don’t understand. No matter, the process can be shown to you at a later date when the correct personnel are decided upon. For now, we need to see about training some of your more level-headed animals in how to operate the basic necessities. They can then show the others while we work out plans for the immediate future.”

A thought came to mind. “Art, I’ve a question.”

“Yes?”

“You said more of your kind needs to be birthed to accomplish our needs. As all young-ones need be trained, why not start with the ones we brought with

us? In addition, there are several females currently short months away from birthing more. Would not these animals suffice?”

The ape looked caught off guard.

“That’s right.” Mrs. Dovell said with a loving look on her cub. “We have fifteen cubs already.” She looked at me. “If that unicorn can be trusted, they will grow up smarter than their mothers.” She turned back to the ape. “I also know of twelve females currently with cubs.”

“Twenty-three,” I corrected, “if all the females I saw back with the female ape are indeed pregnant.”

“That many?” Mrs. Dovell raised an eyebrow. “I hadn’t known.” She looked back on the ape. “That makes thirty-eight young ones at a minimum, unless twins or more are born.” She looked at me once more with a glint of mischief in her eyes. “Of course, more can be conceived as needs be.”

Art cleared his throat. “Umm, of course they could be trained. But Pam and I will need to have replacements soon so it’s only logical we go ahead and start them. In addition, human embryos have already been altered to better understand some of the more critical jobs, so we might as well start them up as well. In the long run, this will better your odds of getting home. If not, then they’ll have the genetic alteration to set in motion other alternatives.”

“How many are you suggesting?” I asked, not at all liking some of his mannerisms when he sought to convince us more apes were needed.

“Ah, let me look.” He tapped his portable glass plate. After a bit he cleared his throat. “To properly run this station at full capacity, about four thousand crewmen.”

Briefly my muzzle dropped. Before either Mrs. Dovell or I made a comment, the hairless ape continued.

“However, as minimal operation is what we’re looking for to handle critical operations and repair a ship for descent back to Earth, six hundred personnel should be made available.” He glanced up briefly. “However, before such a number can be incubated, basic necessities needs be fulfilled first. Your thirty-

eight children and any new ones conceived can be trained to fill these positions.”

“What of us adult animals?” I asked. “There’s over eighty of us.”

The ape sat back in his chair. “True, but it would be best to work with children who grow up in this environment. It’s well documented children can absorb more than we adults can teach simply by living around the devices they will need to operate.”

Mrs. Dovell looked at me. “Have you heard of such, Braxton?”

I didn’t like agreeing with the ape, but I had to answer honestly. “I have, and I’m a living example.”

“How so?” She asked.

“I grew up as a pack animal in an arctic wolf clan, learning the ways of our ancestors. However, my finicky nature couldn’t abide by some of the rituals. So I left that life for something I could handle and spent many years simply learning how to fit in with the city animals, yet to this day I’m still pack.”

Art looked harder at me. “What exactly does that mean?”

I looked at Mrs. Dovell. “It means I fight every day to keep my animal side in check.”

The ape looked at Mrs. Dovell. “Animal?”

The polar bear clarified, “The arctic wolf clans are the most violent animals on the continent of Burrland. They’re made so by their forced seclusion in inhospitable lands.” She nodded toward me and told him the truth of my family. “A grown arctic wolf such as Braxton here would think nothing of killing you for meat if he were hungry.” When the ape blanched and turned to look at me, she assured him, “But you need not worry on that. Joann has told me Braxton is a very gentle and loving wolf. From what I’ve seen in him, I doubt her not.”

“Joann? The rabbit, right?” he asked.

“The very same.” She nodded. “If Braxton adhered to the pack life, he’d have rather eaten her than look at her. The fact she is his fiancée says a lot about him and his control.”

“Okay...good to know.” The ape spent some moments touching the glass

plate before he put it down. “I believe we’re in agreement. Pam will begin the process of incubating a batch of specially-altered human embryos. In the meantime, I’ll start training you and a select few about the station. In a week, you’ll know enough to begin training other animals.”



Chapter 14

Vigilance

“This station is equipped with an exercise room, to keep fit,” the ape was explaining as he showed Mr. and Mrs. Dovell and me the next day. “It has a fine greenhouse that will suit any plant eaters’ tastes and several aquariums filled with countless fish and crustaceans that will do well for all the meat eaters.”

Throughout our tour, Mr. Dovell sulked quietly until the ape mentioned fish. The polar bear slapped his paws together and licked his lips. “You don’t happen to have salmon or brown trout, do you?”

Mrs. Dovell adjusted her cub and slapped her husband’s shoulder. “Oh, you males, always thinking of food.”

“Among other things...” He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

Mrs. Dovell smiled.

The ape glanced up at the polar bears during the exchange. “The species of fish is unknown to me, but Pam would know.”

“I must admit barbeque trout sounds good,” I said aloud.

“Barbeque? What’s that?” the ape inquired.

I eyed him. “An open fire pit where meat and vegetables are roasted.”

The ape shook his head. “Sorry, I forget if I mentioned that exposed fires are not allowed on this station. If the flames should escape their captivity, they could endanger the entire station as well as all living beings aboard.”

“That would explain the raw white fish you’ve been serving us,” Mr. Dovell remarked dryly. He looked down at the ape. “Are you sure there’s no way to have a cooked meal now and again? Susi is all well and good, but a bear’s got to

sink his teeth into something charred over an open flame now and again.”

“Within the galley you can of course microwave or sun cook your meals, once you’re shown how.” The ape glanced at us. “Pam has been preparing simple fare, as we’re not used to preparing meals for anyone other than ourselves. But that will change once a human child has been grown and trained in the art of cooking for large groups.”

“Actually,” I began, envisioning a certain white-tailed jackrabbit’s soft white and brown tail shifting about when she was working the counter in the restaurant. “We won’t have to wait that long. Joann is an excellent cook. For experience, she’s worked at Millie’s Café for three years. I’m sure if she’s shown how to use your kitchen, she could make us up some very fine fare.”

Mr. Dovell turned up his nose at my suggestion. “Stewed, fried or boiled vegetables may be to your liking, wolf, but this bear requires meat. Red meat like goat or deer would be wonderful.” He eyed me for a reaction. “Even rabbit can be tasty enough, though it would take several to even whet my appetite.”

“I’ll not argue with you there; however, you’re jumping to conclusions. Millie’s Café served all animals, herbivores and carnivores alike. When the cook was sick, Joann would fill in. She’s used to cooking for large crowds and serving up all kinds of meat, even rabbit,” I added to see his reaction.

“That I find hard to believe.” His eyes and muzzle bore a negative view to my statement. “I’ve yet to come across an herbivore who didn’t become squeamish around me when I’m eating.”

Mrs. Dovell snorted. “Of course not. You never had to see yourself eat.”

Mr. Dovell gave his wife a sideways look of reproach. She looked amused. Her cub become fussy, so she shifted the blanket to let him nurse on her breast. Mr. Dovell smiled at the scene.

I looked on in thoughtful imagination. *I do so long to see Joann and my cub so...*

The ape tapped his glass plate and coughed. “Hmm, sorry, Mr. Dovell; fish is all we can offer as of now. Given a few months, perhaps Pam can incubate

some animals to add variety to your diet.”

“See that she does,” Mr. Dovell said crossly.

Mrs. Dovell gave her husband an annoyed look. “Espen, you’re being disrespectful. Art is making exceptions to his lifestyle to accommodate us, so be more gracious.”

“Once we’re on our way back home, I’ll be as gracious as you like.” The polar bear gently rubbed a finger along his cub’s cheek.

I felt an ache in my heart watching the polar bears affectionately fuss at one another. “If we’re done for the day, I’d like to visit my family again.”

The ape looked at me. “Do you need a guide, or can you find your way?”

“I’ve an idea how to get there.” I tapped my nose. “If I get lost, my nose will aid in retracing my steps.”

“Nose?” the ape questioned, as if using one’s natural abilities was foreign to him.

“His sense of smell,” Mrs. Dovell supplied. “Living out on the barren ice teaches us bears and wolves to rely on our sense of smell far more than any other of our faculties.”

The ape looked us over. “Your animal senses are still as strong as they were before you became what you are today?”

“Of course,” Mrs. Dovell answered without pause.

I thought it best to correct her statement a little. “I can’t speak for our ancestors,” I said. “Nor can I speculate on the development for city-bred animals, but for the arctic packs, a cub must learn to trust his or her nose or perish out on the ice.”

The ape tapped his glass plate a few times with his fingers.

Mrs. Dovell made a shooing motion with her paw. “Be off with you. Tomorrow we’ll see about selecting the animals we trust to aid us in teaching the others.”

I glanced at the security bot who’d been following silently behind us, turned and followed my scent back to the cells, where I relied on my memory to guide

me back to Joann. While I did so, I pondered the ape's constant tapping on that glass plate. *Though I still don't understand how it works, I know he's making files on us. An understandable action to comprehend us unknown animals. I did so all the time at my job. Yet I get this feeling...hmmm. Perhaps I'm simply paranoid. Still, best be vigilant. These two apes are total unknowns.*

With my mind all a-jumble, I knelt a couple of times and took a deep whiff of the floor to make certain I was on the right path. When I rounded the corner onto the spoke that housed all the pregnant females, I came upon the door. Only after looking for the door handle did I remember that colored plate the ape Pam used to get in. Imitating the apes, I placed my paw on the plate. Briefly, the plate turned yellow, but instead of green afterward, it turned red.

I heard a beep, and a female voice called down from above, "Entry denied. Please see the current medical staff, Pam990073B21, for assistance."

"Crap!" I said aloud, upset with myself, and rolled my eyes at my stupidity in not asking Art how to enter rooms with these door locks. With little optimism, I knocked on the door. "Pam? Are you there?" To get a better idea, I bent and took a whiff of the plate and surrounding area. *Hmmm, her scent seems fresh.* I knocked. "Pam, it's Braxton. Could you let me in, please?" No answer. *She could be in the room with the females, I reasoned. I could try a few paces over and knock on the wall; perhaps she'll hear that.* I did that and added a few extra knocks further along the wall, without luck. *Damn the ape, I know she's in there.* My animal wished to pound on the wall until she opened the door, but I didn't wish to disturb the females if some were simply sleeping. *Nothing for it; I either wait her out or go find the male ape and have him call her on the walky-talky.* Before I could make up my mind, the female ape's voice called down on me from the hidden speaker.

"Mr. Snow, I'm sorry, but I'm quite busy at this time. Perhaps you can come back tomorrow?"

I looked up. "I promise not to be a bother. I only wish to sit at my wife's side and hold her paw a short while." I looked at the ceiling, searching out the

speaker. My ears shifted to catch a reply, but there came none. “Crap.” I put my paws in my borrowed pants pockets and with a growl at the door, started back. *That male ape is going to give me some way to gain entry or he and I will have a problem.*

Though the male ape failed to do whatever it was that granted the apes entry to such closed off rooms with their paws, two hours later after Art had a talk with Pam over the walkie-talky, I was by Joann’s side, watching her even breathing, wishing I could sit vigil with her until the female ape allowed her to wake. *Yet my wish is impossible right now*, I reminded myself. *Tomorrow, I promised. Tomorrow Johnny, Pascal, and the great gray owl Nel will be shown the ropes. Then I’ll spend more time with you, love.* I kissed her cheek.

“Mr. Snow,” the female ape called over from her place near the door. “I need to close up for the night.”

“Close up?” Her words gave me pause. “Shouldn’t you stay with them?” I stood and glanced about me.

“There’s no need,” she assured me. “The maternity system is designed to handle all conceivable events. But should a problem be discovered, I will be notified.”

“Uh-huh, sure. I’d feel better if you or I remained to watch over them. Whatever that computer thingy you’re talking about is was designed for you apes, not these animals. All you need to do is show me how to work the walky-talky if I need your help.”

The female ape looked about her as if she were unsure if she should argue with me. I saw her eyes fall on the security bot. “Mr. Snow.” She found the gumption to speak her mind; I also noticed she’d lost her hesitant stuttering. “Unless you designed this system, you cannot know that. Also, I’m not an ape. I’m human. I may not have human parents by gestation of nine months in the womb, but that in no way detracts from the fact I’m one hundred percent human, and I’ll thank you to remember that.” She threw her shoulders back and spoke with more authority. “Protocol doesn’t allow an unsupervised man—uh...male—

alone with a room full of unconscious females, so I demand you leave or I'll instruct my security bot to take care of you."

My ears lowered and my tail rose. "You need not threaten me," I said with as much control as I could muster. "My concern is with these females and my family. Leaving them unwatched in their condition seems irresponsible." I had no wish to cause a negative confrontation, especially with the pregnant females all around me, so when the ape stepped back and the security bot shifted into the opening, I froze, knowing exactly what was to come next.

If I seek to evade the contraption, one of the female might pay the price. In another corner of my mind, my animal took control of my face and stance. I snarled my discontent. My claws extended. My posture changed into preparedness for a fight. However, my intelligence overrode any actions. This left my body with only one alternative, with instincts and intelligence arguing, my body shook with energy to perform whichever function the two warring factions decided on. Receiving none within the milliseconds needed to avoid the oncoming attack, the expected needle found my neck. I took a threatening step her way out of reflex alone and collapsed to the floor. Before I went completely under, I knew the apes and I were going to have serious words.

"That doesn't give her the right to sic that be-damned metal contraption on me!" I shouted from behind the bars of the cell I found myself in when I woke. "I may not understand much about these devices you call computers, but I know enough about hospital care, and YOU DON'T LEAVE PATIENTS ALONE!" I bellowed, as I was making no headway in controlling my fury.

"Calm yourself, Mr. Snow." The male ape seemed genuinely concerned. "Your worry, though unnecessary, is natural for expectant fathers, or so Mrs. Dovell has informed me."

"Perhaps so, but I'm telling you that female ape is unsuitable to care for our

pregnant females. She's too afraid of us! Hell, I bet she's keeping them all sedated to keep from having to interact with any of them!" Seeking to control myself, I stood a meter away from the cell bars. Behind my back I held my paws in a tight grip lest I made a threatening gesture indicating I wished to strangle the life out of the ape before me.

The ape's eyes lowered to his glass plate and he tapped it a few times. "Hmm, I'll admit Pam has made certain concerns known to me, but I assure you, she's quite capable in her duties. Her genes were specifically manipulated to give her the instincts needed to handle the care of all lifeforms. If she's keeping the pregnant females sedated, I'm sure it's for their own good."

I wanted ever so much to pace, puff on a pipe or squeeze his neck between my paws until his eyes bulged out. Pacing, however, was my only option. But it would allow the ape to see how far gone I was in losing the battle with my animal. *And this after making it clear to him I have such good control of my natural wild side.* Digging my nails into my paws to aid me in distracting my animal, I sought to reason with him.

"Listen. How about dismissing your female and wake up Shresth? She could select other female animals to care for our pregnant females. The tigress has a level head on her shoulders. She can be trusted." When it looked as if he might object, I added, "You did point out Pam is needed in, uh, however you conceive your own species."

The ape took on a look of consideration.

"This gesture on your part would better cement relations between our species, especially when the others are finally released from their captivity. Consider how they'll feel if they find their loved ones sedated."

"You have a point." The ape eyed me for a few seconds. "Very well, I'll run the idea over with Pam. If she's in agreement, we'll transfer the care over to this Shresth." He looked at his glass plate. "By the way, which animal is Shresth?"

"Her full name is Shresth Pham. Her species is tigris. She's the female tigress."

His eyes widened a second and he glanced up. “She’s...uh...”

“You need not be afraid of her,” I assured him. “If you wake her up, I’ll talk with her.”

Art lowered the glass plate. “Yeah, about that. You did threaten Pam—”

“I did nothing of the sort.” I cut him off. “I argued someone should stay with the females and she sicced that metal contraption on me.”

“That’s not what her account here says. She wrote you became belligerent. When asked to leave, you threatened her. That’s why the security bot took action.”

As I’d calmed down some, I brought my paws around front and crossed my arms before I shook my head. “That’s not what happened.” I sighed. “Look, I don’t expect you to believe me over someone you’ve known for years. Take Mrs. Dovell into the hospital and let her talk with Shresth. Once she understands what’s going on, you can let her select other females to help her. After which, you can introduce them to your female.”

For some reason, the ape felt the need to deny the relationship.

“Pam is not my wife. We’re coworkers and partners. Because we’re clones, our DNA was manipulated to make reproduction impossible. It’s a safety procedure to make certain degeneration of our faculties would never endanger our purpose in being here.” With that cryptic remark, the ape decided to have me along as well.

“So...we’re really in space?” Shresth questioned, still shaking off the effects of the sleeping drug as she looked out a window that showed nothing but small dots of light out in the black distance.

“That we are.” Mrs. Dovell nodded. “Not exactly any place we’d like to be.” She glanced at me. “But considering the alternative, I’ll take it any day.”

Johnny Roo sat on the floor, stunned. He looked down the corridor away

from the view, unable to get himself to look out the window again. “What now? We may not be caged, but we might as well be?”

“We make the best of it,” I said to all the animals present. “If my understanding is correct, this place has been circling our world since before us animals started reasoning out our environments.”

“What does that even mean?” Pascal questioned, a tremor easily heard in his voice. “I mean...I knew we’d been living in a building created by the hairless apes. The unicorns told us that much.” He gestured to the window. “But how does one even comprehend the magnitude of this?”

“It’s a matter of survival,” Mrs. Dovell said. “You either accept it and move on or go crazy.”

“Preferably you accept our new circumstances and help the Dovell’s and me, or we find another animal who can,” I said flatly, knowing such a matter-of-fact statement would help them turn the right corner.

Shresth looked at me. “I take it by your calm demeanor Joann has accepted our new environment?”

My ears lowered slightly, revealing my sadness. “She’s presently unaware of our circumstances.” My facial muscles further demonstrated I wasn’t happy. “The doctor here is the female ape, Pam, and she’s afraid of us. Although she’s been caring for all the pregnant females, she keeps them all sedated so she won’t have to interact with them. That’s where you come in, Shresth. I’d like you to select two assistants to aid in keeping the females calm as they are woken up.”

“Me? Why me?”

“Because you’re the largest and strongest female animal here.”

“Not so, she is.” Shresth pointed at Mrs. Dovell.

Mrs. Dovell looked at me with a smile at my mistake. “Sorry, Miss Pham, but I’ll be busy elsewhere. I’ll be indoctrinating the rest of the animals here into our new environment so they, in turn, can help me set the rest free.”

“Will we ever get back home?” the male Zebra inquired.

“Refiloe, right?” I asked.

“Yes, Refiloe Kalu.”

“That is yet to be answered. The male ape here—”

“Pardon, Braxton,” Mrs. Dovell cut me off. “The two animals that live here have said their species is human. Not ape. Whether that’s right or wrong, we need to keep in their good graces for now. At least until we get off this floating wheel, disprove their claim or by expediency accept their belief.” She looked at each animal in turn at the window.

Like a true diplomat.

“So please, when speaking of or to them, call them human. In the long run, this will help us to live more harmoniously.”

Joann sat upright on the table, her soft head nestled in the crook of my neck with arms holding me tight. I stood next to the table, returning her embrace while seeking a way to keep from crying. The emotions flooding my body were that strong.

Shresth, who’d selected the Sechuran fox, Sofia and the Dalmatian female, Olivia Diaz, stood next to Livia Garza, the maned wolf female, disconnecting the small flexible tube in her arm while the wolf’s husband, Carlos Garza, held his wife’s paw. The ape, or rather human, female Pam had said the females would awaken slowly once the tubes were removed. Though I still didn’t trust her, the proof of her words was in Joann soaking my shoulder with her lightly falling tears. Not from being awakened from her dream or learning where we were; hers were tears of built-up emotions from the harrowing escape from the landbound laboratory we managed to leave beyond.

While I held Joann, I had to give credit for my choice of the tigress. She had the good sense to ensure the husband or suitor of the female was present before the female was awakened so the two could comfort each other, like I was doing for Joann. Once Joann was on her pads and steady enough, she and Shresth

would release Clair from her dreams while I waited a few steps away. In truth, I felt the coward.

It should be me who helps her to reality. But as she formed an attachment to the tigress, the two of them will be better suited to comfort her. As for later, when she learns the unicorn, Mr. Thelin, has impregnated her with my cub... I'm hoping someday she'll forgive me.

"Oh, love. How can you hold me so when I carry...I don't know whose litter in my womb?" Joann whispered in my ear. Her ears lay flat on her back as she pulled away. Her face flushed with shame and she held her gray eyes downcast.

So the unicorn didn't tell her... "It wouldn't matter to me whose cub is growing within you as long as I knew you to be safe and in my arms." I gave her a moment to comprehend this in an embrace. "I do know whose cub it is. Mr. Thelin made certain I knew."

Joann pulled further way and dared to look into my loving eyes, searching. I gave Joann a shame-faced smile. "The cub within you is mine."

Joann covered her muzzle with a paw, her eyes gone wide, and her ears shifted. "But...but that's impossible."

"As I told him, but the unicorn assured me it's possible. He even showed me the process that day the wolverine strapped you to the table while I was brought in by the grizzly."

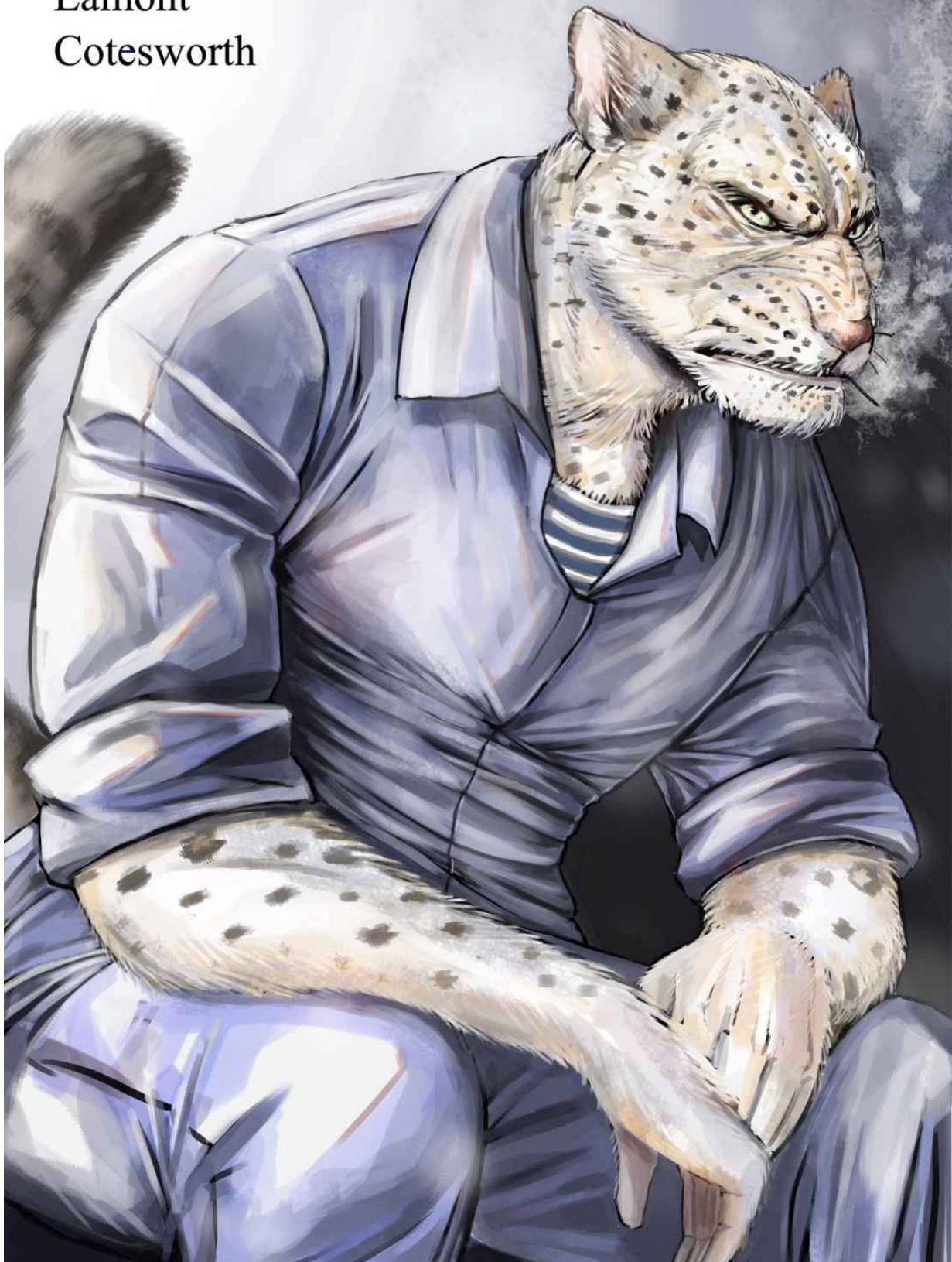
Joann's paw released her muzzle and she touched her enlarged stomach. "Truly?" She allowed her paw to wander about the bulge while looking down at herself. "This leveret is truly your seed?"

"He seemed certain of it." I took up her face in both of my paws and nuzzled her nose before giving her a light kiss. "Regardless of whether it's true or not, I already dearly love the little waif."

Tears of gratitude flowed from her eyes this time as we embraced again. Short moments passed of this before the past months caught up with her and she let the floodgates of her heart open. Though we were far from truly safe, the fact

we were together meant hope sprouted anew in my heart for the future.
The question now remained if Clair would be a part of that future.

Lamont
Cotesworth



Chapter 15

Cubs and the Cost

“Order!” Mrs. Dovell called out over the crowd of animals who, like me, had to sit awkwardly, as the seats were not designed with animal tails in mind. “Order!”

When her attempt failed, Mr. Dovell stood from his place on the floor, turned on the group assembled in the auditorium and bellowed a loud, deep and long roar. When he fell silent, the turmoil of all the animals had stalled.

“Thank you, Espen.” Mrs. Dovell nodded with a grateful smile.

Mr. Dovell turned to give her a large grin before he looked hard-eyed on the crowd a moment and settled with his cub in his arms.

“To matters at paw.” She looked at the kangaroo female, Colene, who stepped up from her place at the polar bear’s side to speak with the audience before her.

“As the only midwife among us, I’ve been designated to oversee all pregnancies.” Colene looked out on the animals, making eye contact with some of the females close up to the podium. “The human animal Pam has agreed to bring me up to speed on this facility’s advancement in deliveries. However, one animal is insufficient support to handle so many females, thus I’ll be asking for volunteers to help out in mock deliveries that I may learn these advancements, which will aid us all in the long hop.”

Johnny, who sat next to me, nudged my side and whispered in my ear, “My wife, the doctor. Has a nice ring to it, don’t you think, mate?”

I spared an ear his way, as applause followed the female kangaroo back to

her place. "I didn't know you were engaged yet."

"We're not," Johnny confessed. "But do you see any other kangaroos among us?"

I slid an eye his way. "That doesn't mean anything," I reminded him. "Though she'd need you to have another joey, there are other males here."

"Pshaw, once I turn on the charm, she'll soon be swooning in my arms," he said smugly.

"I seem to recall a conversation where you said she wasn't your type." I reminded him.

"True..." he admitted. "I'd rather be with Muna or Mansi, but those two are overly-frisky. If I married one of them, I wouldn't be surprised to find you in bed with her."

Joann's ear twitched to Johnny's imaginative statement. She leaned across my body and told the kangaroo, "If I catch him in the bed of another female, he'll lose his reason for doing so."

Johnny covered his muzzle quickly to keep his burst of laughter to himself.

I eyed Joann as she sat back and then I placed my paw on her stomach. "That'll never happen, love. I have everything I'll ever want sitting right here."

She laid her paws on top of mine. "You just remember that."

Other announcements such as Colene's continued to inform us what animal took up what jobs in our new, and hopefully polite, society. A clever ploy by Mrs. Dovell to aid in delegating work to other animals to leave her free to work out problems and disagreements that had so far left us but a simple bunch of misfits in our new home.

Next on the agenda was finding living quarters for all the animals. The human ape Art assured everyone the cells we awoke in were perfectly safe to take up residence in. The resounding responses, all centering around the word "NO!" bounced off the walls for a few seconds.

After some apologies when the noise of the refusal faded, Art settled on rooms along one spoke between the large and small wheels. A round of

acceptance was given, ending our first meeting as he escorted us to the rooms.

Joann and I wondered down the spoke of eighty rooms per side, until I looked in on one room with four bunks, an upper and lower bed to a wall, with four metal boxes that was as tall as me and about half as wide, that the ape called a closet. I eyed the small den knowing full well the larger animals would have a hard time with these. For me and Joann, it would suffice until our cub was born. The larger jail cells would reluctantly become more appealing as the cub grew older. For the present, I led my six-months-pregnant fiancée into the privacy of the room and closed the door.

Joann was right behind me as I turned around. She looked up into my eyes with loving gray ones that danced in mischief. Her arms snaked around my waist and her ears fell back so she could nuzzle my neck and jaw with her face, practically purring. “My adorable wolf. You best not behave yourself tonight.”

“Wouldn’t think of it,” I whispered as I sought to explore her body, which I’d been missing for far too long.

Stuck on a revolving rickshaw wheel in space created by a species that had surpassed our society by hundreds of years meant the following months were filled with awesome discoveries and psychotic episodes of freaked-out animals. In the middle of these events, the two human apes found very little free time, for everything had to be shown to us, including my new office, appointed to me as acting peace keeper. Being sworn in was a hurried event, as I found myself swamped in tasks of mediator, psychologist, teacher and enforcer.

Though forced into the role, I took the job posting seriously and spent free moments familiarizing myself with the layout of the wheel, including scouring the hallways and rooms for places an animal might find to escape justice. A rather foolhardy escapade, I was told many times, since an animal had nowhere to go. All arguments very true, save I felt it my duty, for what if an animal went

missing? A cub, perhaps, who recently learned to walk? A thorough knowledge of the place could very well mean life or death to the young cub.

I was involved in such memorizing during a short interval of free time when the walky-talky in the roof of the corridor outside the crawlspace I'd worked into called down after me.

"Mr. Snow! Your wife needs you immediately in the maternity ward!"

I banged my head on the piping above, startled by the strength of the demand. "Ouch! Dammit all!" My ears flattened and my tail drooped as I backed out on paws and knees, my head smarting.

"Mr. Snow, respond please!" the call came out once more with an added female cry of pain in the background.

That sounded like Joann! I sat on my butt and worked at my white-and-red-striped jumpsuit to fish out the miniature walky-talky the human ape Art had given each of us. My memory hurriedly dredged up the command words that would make the metal-encased glass thing work. "Call, uh, damn, who..."

"The name 'Damn who' is not listed." The walky-talky told me in a pleasant, unhurried female voice. "Perhaps you meant Mr. Johnny Roo?"

"No, dammit. I mean, uh..." I shook the walky-talky out of frustration, as I couldn't think beyond Joann's cry. "Never mind," I growled and jumped to my pads to bolt down the hallway. However, in my rush to be on my pads, I'd forgotten the gravity on this wheel was less than that of Earth. This found me off my pads a couple of seconds more than I anticipated, my mind all a-jumble as it was with thoughts of, *My cub is coming! Joann's giving birth right now!* But our conversation this morning promised she wasn't due for another two weeks.

I freaked for a span of seconds, instincts desperate to be back on solid flooring while my mind still remained elsewhere. *I told her I had no pressing matters, for the Great Maker's sake. Why did she shoo me out of our den if the birth of our cub was this close?*

Pads finding the floor, they slapped on the metal haphazardly until eventually I was at a full-out run in the lower gravity, adjusting my body angle to

better keep contact with the floor in my bid to get to Joann's side. *You idiot jackrabbit!* I cursed. *I wanted to be at the birthing. I wanted to hold your paw as you gave me my cub!* Outside of my mind I gave out mumbled apologies as I passed animal after animal in my adjusting haste. As I hit the center hub, Colene once more called over the station walky-talky asking for me. With her name finally in my head after calculating my run in the lower gravity, I yelled out at the greyhound, Gavin Cooper, as I passed him.

"Cooper, call Colene and tell her I'm coming!"

I know he said something in return, but I was already rounding the outer ring of the hub headed for the spoke that led to the maternity ward, the same vastly long and wide room the animal Pam had used to keep all the pregnant females asleep in. *Why the human apes need so many birthing tables with only two adults in the entire station is beyond me.* I'd even gone and pondered a what if. *What if there were that many? Could the station even support so many animals?* I hadn't yet investigated the farms or fish tanks. *It might be possible.* I shook my head as I ran. *These thoughts are meaningless, regardless if I'm using them to counter my worry and anger for and at Joann.*

I finally hit the spoke leading to Joann. Using my intelligence only half-heartedly in directing my body movements, I still concluded I'd made the distance so far in a shorter span of time than it would have taken on Earth.

Meanwhile, part of my thoughts found a puzzle to work over. *Why isn't the door closer to the middle hub instead of near the cells?* This reasonable question passed through my mind as I sped up my run, since no one was in my way. Nearing the door, I slowed, adjusting to the gravity and placing my paw on the paw pad, waiting out the change of color impatiently. Yellow briefly then green and then the door opened.

I found Clair in a chair just inside the office, weeping. I spared her a momentary look, wondering why she was crying, but never stopped in my journey to be by Joann's side. Through the glass door, Colene stood over Joann, holding her paw as Joann let out a scream of pain. The Asian golden cat female,

Yoshe Luu, stood with a rag that she used to wipe Joann's brow once her head was back on the pillow.

"I'm here!" I yelled, passing the desk, hitting the paw panel to release the door that slid into the wall.

"Thank the Great Maker. I've been calling you seems like forever on your walky-talky without answer. Here, take up her paw and lend her your strength before I cut the Joey out."

Joann lay on the table. Her soaked and matted fur gave off clues as to how the birth of my cub was coming, or rather not coming.

My ears stood and turned full on to the kangaroo. "Cut? What do you mean cut? Are you saying my cub can't be born as nature intended?" I asked confused and scared for Joann as I took up her paw in both of mine.

Colene had been about to take up a sharp knife from off a shiny steel plate to the side of her. My question caused her ears to shift and stand as erect as mine. She turned her head and stared at me. "You mean you don't know?" The kangaroo looked a question at Joann, who bit her lip and gave me a sorrowful look that begged I forgive her.

"Oh, by the Great Maker no." Colene's eyes filled with pain and sorrow. "You told me this was the choice of you both," she accused Joann. "You swore to me."

I looked at Joann. My ears shifting. My tail high. My intelligence telling me something was very wrong while my animal smelled my cub and Joann dying before my eyes. I had an overwhelming urge to howl. To voice my breaking heart, yet instead I asked, "Tell me what?"

Yoshe Luu turned her face away, her tail limp. Her ears drooped.

Colene looked heavenward for guidance. "Two months ago, I realized the joey in her womb would outgrow her body's capability to pass through the birth canal. I told her so. I warned we should induce her into birthing the joey right then, for should you both decide to bring the joey to term, he'd have to be cut out or they both would die."

I looked at Joann. She gave my paw a squeeze.

“My beautiful wolf.” She gave me a tired smile. “Please don’t hate me. I wanted our leveret to have every chance to live.”

“Joann? What?” The magnitude of what was happening sent signals all about my body that made no sense, even to me.

“You murderer!” Clair shouted from the doorway.

I jerked to look her way.

“You’ve killed my sister!” Clair held the doorframe in both paws, her accusation falling from her lips as did the tears off her cheeks. She slowly sank to the floor, saying in a hopeless voice, “You’ve killed my sister...and possibly me with her.”

“I? What? No!” I looked at Colene in desperation. “Surly there’s been a mistake! The unicorn told me jackrabbits could birth any species.” Words Mr. Thelin had said came back to me. “He’d said if I behaved, Joann and I would see our cub grow up. He sounded so certain of it.”

Colene’s large, sad brown eyes lowered a moment to Joann’s before she looked into mine. “I’m sorry, wolf. I have no knowledge of how he might have achieved this. All my training is in the standard way, and as everyone knows only one in four young mothers in their twenties survive the procedure. In Joann’s case, being she’s in her thirties and already tired in waiting for you to be here, this lowers the odds to one in six.”

“This was of my own choice, love,” Joann told me, her tone determined. “I wanted your leveret no matter the risk. Though my choice may have sealed my fate, I have no regrets.” She squeezed my paw. “Say you love me and you’ll take care of our leveret if I leave you.”

What could I say? *But the unicorn was so sure...* “I love you, Joann, but you’re not going to die. You can’t.” A picture of two black-tailed jackrabbits crossed my mind and I shot a look at the kangaroo. “Wait, you’re not going to die,” I said with growing hope. “Muna and Mansi. They must know how the black unicorn kept them alive. They must!”

Colene shook her head sadly. “There’s no time to search them out and ask, wolf. She’s wasted far too much energy in waiting for you to be here. The joey must be cut out now if your wife is to have any chance at all.”

“They have to know!” I blurted, still fixated on the black-tailed jackrabbits. The situation was beyond my control. My animal fought for control to howl out in anguish. My intelligence sought out other options that would save Joann’s life.

This turmoil lasted a long second before, deep down in the depths of my mind, my alpha awoke. It tore through my mind like a shark after a seal and separated my anguish and scrambling thoughts with a roar of fury. It snarled its rage at my self-pity and uncertain mind, finding real muscles on my muzzle to curl my lips. My alpha pressed further and my face took on the full brute force of an enraged arctic wolf. Reason left my eyes, briefly causing both kangaroo and Asian golden cat to blanch and back up as my alpha took the reins of my being.

Renewed strength of purpose filled my soul and I regained control. I squeezed Joann’s paw in both of mine and kissed her wet cheek. “Fight for your life, my heart.” My words were gentle but demanding. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Braxton?” Joann questioned as I let go of her paw and bolted for the exit.

“Wolf?” Colene called out. “By the Great Maker. Get back here!”

I shut my ears to Joann’s plea and the kangaroo’s demand as they held no relevance to what I needed to do. My ears flattened and my tail streamed out behind as I made for the larger of the two small hubs. While my pads demanded some control to carry me in the lighter gravity, my paw shot into my pants pocket and withdrew the miniature walky-talky. I commanded, “Get me Muna!”

There was buzz from the speaker. That friendly female voice told me, “I am sorry, Mr. Snow, but Ms. Witt is currently engaged with another on her com-unit.”

A small fraction of my mind said, “Ms. Witt? Oh, that must be her last name,” while another portion wanted to shout, “Well do something, I need her

now!” But such thoughts were a waste of breath and time. Instead, I adjusted, “Get me Mansi.”

The speaker gave off a different sound. After six empty squawks and my flight taking me into the hub, where I had to slow down, the female voice suggested, “There’s no answer, Mr. Snow. Would you like to leave a message?”

“No!” After a second of thought, I requested, “Try Muna once more.” After a moment I received the same answer, that she was still using her walky-talky. An errant wish to toss the useless device surfaced, but some meters ahead I saw the hallway blocked with animals in intense discussion. A rather lively discussion, I surmised, as arms and fingers were being pointed. With no time to waste by interjecting myself into the conversation or begging pardon in my haste to pass them, I closed my paw over the walky-talky and kept my momentum going by leaping high in the air as if diving off a diving board. This action carried me over the startled animals, whereby I rolled up into a ball until my downward motion had me calculate my gamble would not be very graceful. My shoulder and hip took the brunt of the impact on the floor. I rolled, unfurling until able to regain my pads. Seconds later, the spoke that housed us animals came up and I slowed, but not soon enough, as I collided with Norbert, dropping him and sending myself into the wall.

“Hey! Watch it, wolf!” the wolverine spat at me.

“Sorry...” Back up on my pads, I started off, calling over my shoulder, “Have you seen the black-tailed jackrabbits?”

“Yeah, Mansi’s home, but she’s busy.” He had to call out this last as I worked past other animals in my way.

If he said more, I was too busy to hear it while apologizing to animals I pushed past. Though I was flooded with urgency, my alpha kept me calm and focused. My pads brought me to the black-tailed jackrabbit’s room near the end of the spoke. Breathing evenly, I stopped and knocked.

“Mansi, it’s Braxton. It’s vital that I talk with you.”

“I’m busy, honey!” she shouted through the door. I planted my ear on the

door to better listen. “Come back in an hour and I’ll fit you in.” After a second she laughed, as if she’d made some sort of joke.

“I’m sorry.” I placed my paw on the colored plate, which overrode her door lock to allow me entry. “My need is...”

The door opened. A quick search inside the small room found Mansi on the bed straddling the hips of a blue-eyed, male, arctic fox. She was leaning forward so her muzzle was within centimeters of his while her hips worked the fox’s hips in a sexual duel of pleasure. My unwanted entry caused her pause in her rhythm. The arctic fox looked over at me.

“Do you mind?”

“Sorry,” I repeated as I walked in unembarrassed to find her so engaged. “But I need the jackrabbit now.” To Mansi, who sat up to inspect me more closely, nose twitching and ears raised, I asked, “You and Muna had a litter while in the employ of the unicorns, right?”

“Sure,” she said as if that should have been a given.

The arctic fox looked at me and her. After her reply he snapped, “Happy? Now get out before I totally lose the mood.”

I eyed the white-furred fox before questioning Mansi further, “Was the leveret you brought fourth of your species or of another?”

She turned her head to look on the fox under her, who had grabbed her hips with both paws and started bucking. “Filip, please. Can you not wait? He’s our savior, after all.”

“You call being cooped up in a metal can being saved?” the fox snapped. His blue eyes looked daggers at me. “He can go to devil for all I care.”

The arctic fox was a distraction I had no time for. I stepped up and allowed a taste of my animal to show. I grabbed his muzzle and slid out my fingernails to jab under his jaw. “My wife is dying. If she dies and I determine it was due to your interference,”—I flattened my ears and bared my teeth in a vicious snarl—“I’ll kill you.”

My action caused the fox to shrink in on himself; however, it also had Mansi

trembling. Her ears drooped and she shook, her hazel eyes wide as dishes. Only then did I remember a clan of arctic wolves had decimated her family save for Muna and herself.

Though I kept my paw over the muzzle of the fox and my nails up under his chin, I softened my appearance and gently placed a paw on her bare shoulder. “Forgive me, I meant not to scare you. But my wife is dying and I need your help.”

She swallowed. She looked at my paw holding the muzzle of the fox. Her ears rose slightly. “I-I believe you. But I’m no doctor. I’m a simple hare fulfilling her needs by helping others solve their own.”

“Regardless, you may hold the answer in saving her life.” Even though I was gentle with my words, I still saw the age-old surrender in her eyes most prey animals like herself still showed when confronted by a predator. A surrender of life to make their death less painful. “Was the leveret you birthed cut from your body?”

Mansi bit her lip. “Yes,” She looked down on her stomach and rubbed her fingers through the white fur.

“Do you remember how it was done?”

“Um...I’m sorry, but no.” Her answer had my hopes drop a level but then she recalled something and went on. “Norbert might, though. He was there before I was put to sleep and after I woke.”

Norbert? But of course, I should have thought of him sooner. I released the fox. “Thank you.” Hurriedly I pulled out the walky-talky and ran from the room. “Call Norbert,” I instructed the thing. The metal-encased glass plate buzzed four times before I heard Norbert’s voice.

“—ow do I work this thing?”

“Norbert, it’s Braxton,” I said quickly while my pads took me back up to the small hub at a fast run.

“Braxton?” came his uncertain reply.

“Were you with the black-tailed jackrabbits when they gave birth?” I said in

between breaths.

“Hey, does anyone know how I reply on this thing?” Norbert inquired of the animals near him.

“Norbert, I can hear you.” I said, dodging the same animals from before who had yet to clear the hallway. “Talk at the glass plate.”

“Like this?” he asked sounding perplexed.

“Yes...I need to know if you were present when the black-tailed jackrabbits gave birth.” Although my alpha was in control, the other two parts of me were fretting about the time this was taking. *Surely by now Colene has cut into Joann to remove my cub.*

“Of course, I was Mr. Thelin’s assistant,” Norbert replied, sounding indignant.

“Great. I need to know if they gave birth naturally or were the rabbits cut open to remove the leverets.” Up ahead the hallway was coming to an end.

“Leverets? You got your information wrong. Those rabbits gave birth to a set of rare white lions. A male and female pair. Mr. Thelin said the two would help in revitalizing the population.”

“That’s all well and good,” I said keeping my tone neutral. “What I need to know is were the animals cut out of the jackrabbits?”

“Well of course they were. No rabbit could possibly give birth to a carnivore’s cub without the risk of losing it,” the wolverine said in some exasperation, as if such knowledge was well known.

“Okay...” I said approaching the hub and stopping. “You know how the unicorn performed the procedure so the mothers survived, right?”

“I know both unicorns operated the hairles—uh, the human contraptions that did most of the work. I was never involved. My role was to stay with the birthing mother until they were done. After which, I rolled them into a recovery room for a few hours before returning them to their cells.”

“You don’t know how they helped the mother survive?” My hopes to save Joann fell, causing me to lean on the wall for support, even with the strength my

alpha was lending me.

“Of course not. That was not my job,” he snapped. “If that matters to you, why don’t you ask that human female? If I understand it correctly, she knows all about that stuff.”

Pam? I lowered the walky-talky. *Oh no, not her. That animal’s afraid of us!* I raised the metal-encased glass plate and looked at the contraption the hairless apes had created. Its size and sophistication were far out of reach even for a far-seeing researcher like Oscar Sullivan. Yet without her help—my hopes lowered, but there was still a chance. “Call Colene.” I waited an interminable amount of three buzzes.

“This is Colene. Is this Mr. Snow?” the kangaroo asked, her voice sounding tired with a touch of sadness.

“Yes, Colene, how is—how did the operation go?” I managed to ask.

“Mr. Snow,” she was all formal, unlike an animal with good news. “I’d like to inform you that you are the proud father of a healthy male cub.”

“And, and Joann?” I was afraid to ask. I already knew.

Her voice was filled with sympathy. “I’m sorry, Mr. Snow. I did all I could.”

Nooo...ah, Joann. If it weren’t for my alpha, I would have collapsed to the floor. Instead, I set my back to the wall and stared at the wall opposite me.

“She hasn’t long, Mr. Snow. If you hurry, she could spend her last moments with you and your cub.”

Her last moments? Those words shot through me and I stood up straight. “She’s still alive?” I said unbelieving.

“Yes, Mr. Snow, but hurry, she’s bleeding out inside. I’ve given her some pain killers so she comfortable—”

I know she said more, but I wasn’t listening. *She’s alive.* My wolf wanted to howl out the good news. I even had an overwhelming urge to be at her side. *But not for long. She’s dying and only that hairless ape might be able to save her!* With a prayer to the Great Maker, I brought up the walky-talky, cutting Colene off. “Call Pam.”

After a few buzzes, she answered. “This is Pam. I’m sorry, but I’m busy right now. Please leave a message and I’ll get back with you.”

“Pam! This is Braxton. You need to drop everything and run to the maternity ward. Joann is dying and you’re her only hope!” After a second of no response I grabbed the walky-talky with both paws. “Pam, did you hear me? Pam?” I heard a click. Not understanding, I called again. “Call Pam.”

After a few buzzes, she answered. “This is Pam—”

“Pam, its Braxton—”

“—I’m sorry but—”

“Pam please...—”

“—I’m busy right now. Please—”

“Pam can’t you hear—”

“—leave a message—”

“—me?”

“—and I’ll get back with you.”

“Pam I’m desperate! Joann’s dying...don’t you under—” I heard that “click” noise again. “Pam? PAM?” I yelled, shaking the walky-talky out of angry frustration.

“Braxton, what’s the problem?” Oscar Sullivan inquired, having rounded the corner and found me in such a state.

I started at the red fox who was the reason we were all here. My animal struggled with my will to get my paws around his neck and yell “She’s dying and it’s all your fault!” but such would aid Joann not at all. Instead, I spoke as clearly as I could.

“I can’t reason with the animal Pam.” A thought came to mind, and I pushed my walky-talky over to him. “Perhaps you can. Joann’s dying and she needs Pam’s help now!”

“Oh, uh...” He fumbled with the metal-encased glass plate. “I’m sorry to hear that. Uh, sure, I’ll try to help.” He looked at the device. “Call Pam, please.”

Like before, there were four buzzes, Pam answered and said the exact same

thing in a voice that sounded as if nothing urgent was happening.

Oscar looked up into my eyes. "I'm sorry, Braxton. But she's not answering."

I stared at him incredulously. Without thought, I grabbed his jumpsuit with both paws and yanked him off his pads. "What do you mean? You heard her!"

His eyes opened wide and he swallowed. "Braxton, no, that wasn't her. It's a recording of her voice."

"A what?"

"A recording." He grabbed my arms for support. "Don't you remember? Art showed us how it was done on these." He nodded at the walky-talky. "If you think about it, these are like those talking plates we're learning about."

What he might have said next never made it into my ears. *Oh Great Maker, no. She's got to answer!* Panic ate away at my alpha's influence. I was losing it. Even my intelligence couldn't yell loud enough in my mind to counter my thoughts of a life without Joann.

A spark in the dark flashed. A word spoken. *Art*. A glimmer of hope resurrected. *Is it possible?* The world refocused. Oscar was gently prying at my fingers.

"Braxton, I feel for you, but could you—?"

He was referring to my death grip on the front of his jumpsuit as well as to the fact I was holding him off his pads. I focused on the world and saw I was drawing a crowd. "Um, sorry." I let him down, but just as quickly I recovered my walky-talky from his paw. "Call Art!"

While I waited out the buzzing, animals were inquiring of Oscar what had my tail all in knots.

"His rabbit is dying," Oscar was saying. "It would appear only the human Pam might be able to save her, yet she's not answering her calls."

"This is Art, what can I do for you, Mr. Snow?" the human ape asked.

"Pam, really?" I heard Refiloe Kalu, the male Zebra, say. "Why, I left her not long ago in the farming room."

I snapped my head his way and stared at the zebra. My ears stiffened erect to Refiloe's knowledge of where she was. Without excusing myself I sprinted away from the animals. To Art I said, "I need Pam in the maternity room NOW! Do what you can to get her running. Then call me back!" Not waiting for confirmation, I shoved the walky-talky into my pocket to leave my paws free to help me negotiate the corridors to the farming room. Running all out, it still took a long ten minutes to traverse the hub to the wheel spike and on down the corridor to the outside wheel where all the farms and fish tanks were kept.

I placed my paw on the glass plate next to the door. The plate turned yellow then green, then the door slid open. Behind a door that could be mistaken for countless others was an indoor farm.

Row upon row of one-meter-by-twelve-meter tables had been designed to hold thirty centimeters of rich black earth. Growing under a piped sprinkler system were all manner of newly-grown leafy greens that would make an herbivore salivate simply by the smell of the room. Further back were freshly started fruit trees the hairless apes had promised would bear fruit in as little as six months. Though the thought of biting into a freshly-plucked golden apple would normally have had me dreaming of spring days out in the park, nary a whisper ventured out into the turmoil of my mind. Tail up, ears shifting to catch the barest of sounds, I searched the room with desperate eyes seeking any movement.



Sofia Prieto

Chapter 16

A New Life Worth Living

There! To the far right. “Pam!” I hollered. She’d just stood up from under one of the tables.

Her head swiveled and she caught sight of me charging her. The blood drained from her face. Like a cornered prey animal, she backed into the table and braced for my attack.

“Robot!” she cried out in fear. “Help me!”

Though this episode of her automatic reaction to a charging wolf found a growing file in the back of my mind, the fact her security bot rolled a few meters toward her but did nothing to halt my fast approach held no relevance in the foreground as I set my pads to stop centimeters from her.

“Mr.—Mr. Snow?” she stuttered, her paws clutching white-knuckled at the side of the table behind her.

“My wife is dying!” I blurted and took up her elbow. “We’ve no time to waste.” I yanked her loose from the table and bolted for the door with her in tow.

“Ow, please!” she begged and struggled as she sought help from the security bot with a desperate look.

Somewhere in my intelligence I understood she would fight me the entire way. Gaining a sense of lost time in this, I stopped. “Beg pardon, Pam,” I said, having no time for niceties. Without regard for the bot that started following us, I hefted her over my shoulder.

The ape screamed. She pounded her fists on my back. She waved her legs up and down. With all her caterwauling, part of me wondered why her security

bot hadn't reacted to her pleas.

Regardless of its reasons for staying its protection, I set pads to floor toward the maternity room, drawing in air through my mouth, for the exertion of my urgency was finally catching up with my overworking muscles even in this lighter gravity.

"HELP!" The female ape continued to scream.

Ears closed to her plea, I dug deep for every ounce of speed I could muster, for the farm and maternity room were close to complete opposites of each other on the giant wheel.

Hold on, love! Please stay alive for me! I begged while I defied the laws of physics in my desperation. Bowling over animals unlucky enough to be in my way I felt all my senses come together.

Tunnel vision set in. Time slowed. I gritted my teeth as a light shone at the end of my tunnel. Body adjusting, pads bracing, I neared the maternity room door.

Pam's nonstop plea for help adjusted in volume with my coming to an abrupt stop. I slapped my paw on the plate. Anxiety washed over my body as an eternity passed while the plate grew bright yellow before it finally changed to green. When space allowed through the sliding door I passed the office in quick steps, already pulling the hairless ape off my shoulder—only to stop at the door to the birthing room.

Stunned, I stared wide-eyed on Colene's downcast sad face as she slowly tore asunder my heart by gently pulling up a white sheet to cover Joann's face.

"NO!" I shrieked. The hairless ape forgotten, I ran to Joann's side. Muzzle quivering, I threw the blanket aside and gathered her lifeless body into my arms. "Blessed Great Maker, NO!"

"Braxton, I'm so sorry." Colene's words fell into the hollow void in my soul and evaporated to dust without granting the remotest of comforts as they were intended.

To the right, Yoshe Luu cried softly, holding a bundle of blankets in her

arms that emitted tiny, distressed cries that joined Clair's some steps way.

For myself, my gaze roamed the room. An ocean of guilt filled the depths of my eyes as I beseechingly sought any hope among the faces I saw looking on me and Joann. Yet none was found.

I raised my muzzle and howled my loss as had centuries of my kind, telling the moon of our loved ones' departure.

A new shriek joined my howl of pain, causing me to lower my head to see through soaked eyes the hairless ape, Art, with a painful grip on Pam's arm, dragging her over to the table opposite to where I stood.

"Dr. Jones," he inquired of Colene. "How long ago did this poor animal pass away?"

"Moments only before Mr. Snow arrived," she told us sadly, her brown eyes fleetingly brushing mine.

"Then there's still time." Turning to Pam he demanded, "You know as well as I that she can still be revived. So do your job!"

"If it were human, yes," Pam snapped. "But an animal? I've no training in saving the life of one. I only know how to manipulate their growth."

"According to your own tests, that animal is more human than animal! Now save her!"

Their argument gained inroads into my heart. Hope resurrected from the blackened ashes. Still clutching Joann to my breast, I pleaded, "Please...Please, Pam. I'll do anything. Anything you want. Just save her life and...and I'll be yours to command!" I added this last hoping she heard the truth in how much Joann meant to me.

The female ape stared at me.

"There," Art reasoned. "You told me you're scared of him. Save the animal and you'll fear of him no longer."

"Please, Pam," Colene said. "If you cannot, then show me how that I might try."

Pam closed her eyes tight. She grabbed her head a second, teeth clinched;

her face showed a battle was going on inside her mind. One side won. She threw out her arms to either side and shouted, “Alright! Alright I’ll do it.” She looked at me. “Put it down.” She indicated Joann’s body. “You, get to the other side of the table,” she ordered the kangaroo. “As for the rest of you, get out!”

Art motioned with his paw to me. “We’d best give her room.” As I hesitantly complied, not wishing to leave Joann’s side, the male ape took up my arm in one paw. “Come with me, Braxton, and we’ll pray together that Pam is still able to bring your wife back.”

With tail and ears displaying to the world my anxiety and new hope, I looked over my shoulder as Art led me to the office door. We turned around as one to watch the possible miracle.

Some steps away, Pam looked up and said to no one, “Sara, bathe the area in clean nanites.”

A white mist like that of the shower, spewed from the ceiling, making everything clean once more.

Colene looked about and held out a paw to feel the texture of the white cloud. Opposite her across the table, Pam rubbed her paws together and made more requests of this Sara-someone not in the room and whom we had not met.

“Sara, look up profile of the animal on the table. Then dispense IV, blood drip, heart stimulator, surgical tools, body screening equipment.”

A panel in the ceiling slid aside and a device not unlike the one the unicorn used to impregnate Joann descended to hover level above her. Arms, kind of like a spider’s many legs, spouted from its sides and shifted about. Four of them stabbed Joann.

“Easy, Braxton,” Art said as I tensed to the contraption’s attack on Joann’s body. “Pam’s in her zone now. She’ll do whatever it takes.”

Still, it wasn’t easy to stand there helplessly as someone who obviously had prejudicial feeling toward us animals worked over Joann. Teeth clinched, paws fidgeting with my tail, it wasn’t until Clair came over and put her arms around me that I remembered her. I turned to gather her to me. She planted her head at

the crook of my neck.

She was softly crying. "I'm sorry, Braxton." She spoke for my ears alone. "I've blamed you for everything that's happened, when none of this was your fault." Her ears lay back on my arm.

My emotions were too wound up for me to say a word. Even my alpha was silent. I'd taken my eyes off Joann to comfort Clair the way she was trying to comfort me when the hairless ape squeezed my arm to gain my attention.

"Look, she appears to be breathing again."

Clair heard this and turned her head to see. Her ears shot up in front of my face so I had to shift my head to see around them. A noise escaped my throat. Clair's paw covered her muzzle. I held her even tighter, for Joann did appear to be breathing. Her chest rose and fell in shallow breaths. Over her muzzle a clear cup was being held by the metal contraption over her. A long, thin, flexible tube was attached to the cup and run up into the ceiling. The female ape still worked over Joann. Her paws were inside Joann's stomach. Her eyes were glued to a glass plate held before her by the machine over Joann. Across from the female ape, Colene watched intently. Though not physically involved, she held a look of total concentration. Her eyes and face shifted from the glass plate to the ape's paws.

"Take that as a good sign," the male ape said. "Pam would not be still working on her if she believed your wife beyond help."

Mouth closed tight, I nodded. I had to release Clair with one arm to clear my vision.

"Come, the operation may take some time yet. Let us wait in the office. Besides, your sister-in-law could do with a spell off her feet."

Not understanding some of what he said, I still kept an arm around Clair as he guided us into the office. I sat in a chair next to her.

No words found our throats to travel into the air lest we somehow influence the fates to look down on us harshly. As we clung to each other, time seemed to stand still, yet in between the moments I kept my eyes on the female ape, so

when she took her paws away from Joann and slouched in a telltale sign of finished fatigue, I stiffened. She barely acknowledged Colene before she started walking our way.

Clair and I stood. We both trembled to hear if Joann would live.

The female ape stepped past the opening glass door. She gave a glare at the male ape and another on her security bot before she reluctantly looked at us. “I’ve repaired its womb and gave it a complete blood transfusion from sensitized blood made available during her earlier stay. It’ll live, but I can’t say if its memories will still be present.” The female ape turned on its shoe-covered pads and walked out, closely followed by her bot.

Colene came in next followed by the Asian golden cat, who still held my cub in her arms. She looked tired but satisfied. “Braxton, Clair. Joann’s breathing on her own. But I must caution you, it’ll be sometime before she’s conscious. I’d recommend in the meantime”—she looked at me—“you get to know your cub, for you’ll have to take care of him on your own for a time.” While Yoshe Luu pawed over my cub, Colene spoke to Clair. “Your brother-in-law will need your help in caring for the little one until your sister is able.”

She was about to turn when I asked, “May, may I see her? Please...”

The kangaroo considered my request a moment before she nodded. “Hearing your voice might be good for her.”

My cub began to fuss. Colene smiled. “If you’re willing, Clair, now might be a good time to get to know your nephew while I mix up a healthy formula for his first meal.”

I stood before the assembly; most of the animals were present. Joann and Clair were absent, as Joann still needed help. She’d awakened two days later and for a brief time couldn’t remember anything, not even her name or who I was. That had been a heartbreaking moment, yet I was still overjoyed that she lay in

my arms warm and very much alive.

Today she was resting peacefully in her sister's care as I subjected myself to the inquisition.

"He was a menace to us all!" Filip, the blue-eyed male arctic fox testified. "He could have killed me."

"Yet here you stand." Mrs. Dovell defended my actions of a week ago. "Unharmed in any way from what Miss Muna Witt testified earlier."

"That's beside the point. The wolf's claws were pressing so deeply into my throat that if I or he moved wrong, I wouldn't be here today!"

"Now wouldn't that be a shame..." one of the animals out in the crowd joked, prompting some other comments close to the same attitude toward the fox.

Though many had no idea who had spoken, I looked at Johnny Roo, having recognized his voice, and slowly shook my head negative. He grinned, not in the least chastised for his unwanted comment.

"Alright," Mr. Dovell bellowed over the talking. "Quiet down. This hearing isn't over yet."

Mrs. Dovell nodded her thanks. When the noise level lowered, she asked, "Any other complaints?"

Lamont spoke up. "I have one concerning his fitness to continue his posting."

"Yes, Mr. Cotesworth, you have the floor." Mrs. Dovell motioned with a paw.

The snow leopard pushed his way up front, where he gave me a sneer. "We all know why you gave him this posting as peace keeper. But I tell you now he's unfit to continue."

"Be more specific, Mr. Cotesworth," Mrs. Dovell said. "Why do you disapprove of Mr. Snow?"

"Quite simply, recent events speak for themselves. The wolf was panicking. He put his rabbit's life ahead of everyone else's." The snow leopard looked

about him to gauge his audience. “Imagine how he’ll be with two kittens to take care of, let alone his rabbit, who may never recover fully.” Lamont pointed to Nel Rye, the male great gray owl. “Could you fully trust the wolf to take care of an important matter for you while half his mind is on his family? I think not. How about you?” He gestured to the male maned wolf, Carlos Garza. “Could you fully trust a matter he oversees if his kittens are sick?” Without waiting for an answer, he looked up at me. “How about it, wolf? Answer honestly. With your growing family as they are, can you really stand there and tell us you’ll devote your time to matters that are in truth no concern of yours?”

Mrs. Dovell spoke up before I could admit the leopard might be right. “I see where you’re going with this, Mr. Cotesworth. You wish to depose Mr. Snow, citing that his family will influence his performance. I take it since you yourself are single and have made it abundantly clear you’ll have nothing to do with Miss Killesso or her cub—a cub which you fathered—you’d be the right animal for the posting?”

Lamont looked neither right nor left but straight at the polar bear. “You forget, her pregnancy was of the unicorn’s doing, not mine. In the real world, the two of us would never have mated nor have been in the same vicinity, as we’re not compatible in the least. So the point you’re trying to make that I’d abandon my responsibilities is moot.”

“In your frame of mind, it might be,” Mrs. Dovell observed.

The leopard huffed. “Don’t believe me? Ask her yourself. I know she wants nothing to do with the kitten.”

“No need to; my husband and I know this.”

“Then don’t throw the situation in my face,” Lamont snapped.

Mrs. Dovell smiled. “In all honesty, I did so, so all here could judge for themselves how passionately you might throw yourself into solving a problem. Personally, I find your lack of feelings for your own cub a fatal flaw in your character. But we’ll let these fine animals decide.” The polar bear stood taller and raised her arm. “All in favor of keeping Mr. Snow as our appointed

constable please signify by a show of paws.”

The polar bears, Lamont and myself all individually counted the show of raised paws. Even to the snow leopard who stood somewhat among the crowd could tell more paws were in the air than not.

Lamont turned his face my way and glared. A sneer touched his lips, and I saw him mouth under his breath, “This is not over, wolf.”

For myself, I would not have minded giving up the posting, as the snow leopard was right; I did have a family who needed me. However, to paw over the job to Lamont was not something I would willingly have the animals suffer. That leopard cared nothing for anyone except himself. Fortunately, most of the animals knew this, at least I thought so by the show of confidence I’d received.

I stood by a window overlooking the central hub of a large rickshaw wheel. In the far distance, the bright yellow sun peeked over the curve of a blue and green world I and all those presently aboard this ape-made space station would most likely never set pads on again.

Clothed in a simple jumpsuit of white with red stripes, made out of some material other than cotton, the coloring indicating I still held the job of peace keeper, I looked out at the stars, which I now understood were in truth suns not unlike our own.

A ghostly shape of a white-furred face wandered into my vision. The sight of my muzzle’s reflection had me consider what would become of us. My thoughts wandered to the many lives that had been changed in but hours by the curiosity of a single red fox. I considered how such an instant of time would reflect on our next generation.

Speaking of which... A shift of my eyes brought me a fetching image of a white-tailed jackrabbit, who proudly cuddled in her arms my two-week-old male cub. I turned my head to fully admire the full-color beauty leaning into my side,

whose loving and trusting eyes gazed up into mine and had my heart doing cartwheels.

Joann smiled up at me and placed her paw on mine. The love in her beautiful gray eyes gave me hope for the future. What lay before us was a consequence of being herded into a ramshackle spaceship that at its age should never have survived the trip into outer space. This much I'd learned from the human ape, Art. That it did meant we would live out our lives together and have the chance to raise our cub. Who in time, the Great Maker willing, would have cubs of his own.

A chapter in my life was forever closed, my private eye days over. Now began my greatest adventure.

Joann turned to me, and I took her lips with mine.

For ninety animals and a handful of cubs saved from being crushed under stone and ice, this metal wheel hurtling through space would be our world for over a generation or more. Though some of them despair of our future, I for one, intend to live it. As husband to a lovely white-tailed jackrabbit and father to our cub and the female cub in Joann's sister's womb, I will be the happiest arctic wolf to ever live.

Mr. Pascal Diaz



####

*Thank you for taking the time to read, The Infinite Wisdom.
If you enjoyed this novel, please consider telling your friends or posting a short
review.*

*Word of mouth is an author's best friend and much appreciated.
Currently a third book is in the works, but with no timetable for an appearance.*

Please be patient.

Thank you, Danny C. Estes.

About the author:

Danny graduated high school in 1978.

In the 1990's, Danny won an

Editor's Choice Award

And

Accomplishment of Merit award for his poems.

Only Feeling

And

Loneliness by War

From

The National Library of Poetry.

Presently, Danny resides in North Carolina, works

3rd shift, and during off moments, he thinks up ideas to flush out
on the weekends, when Danny spends several hours continuing his writing
adventures.

To leave feedback concerning this novel,

please visit: danniestes.com

or

The site in which you acquired this book.

Please check out these other works by:

Danny C. Estes

[The Paranoid Thief](#)

Vampires: Don't You Just Hate Them?

[Charlotte's Soul](#)

Lord Athina

Book 1 of the Athina series

Lady Athina

Book 2 of the Athina series

Mother Athina

Book 3 of the Athina series

Master Athina

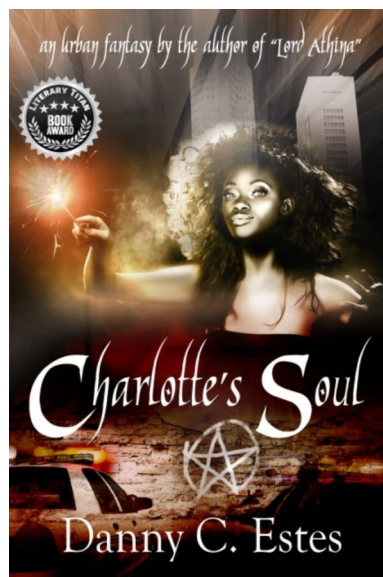
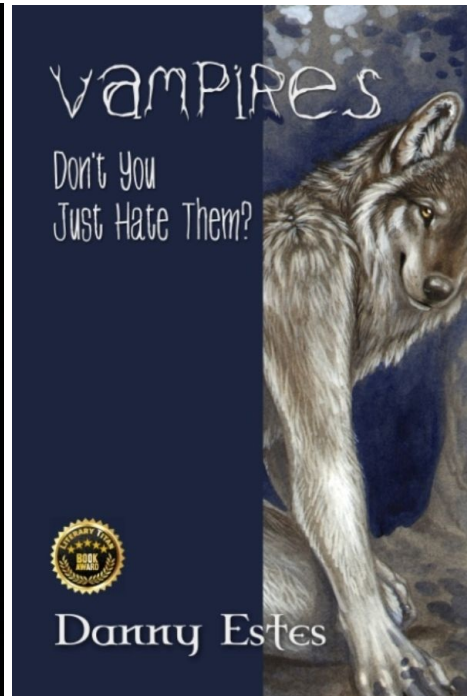
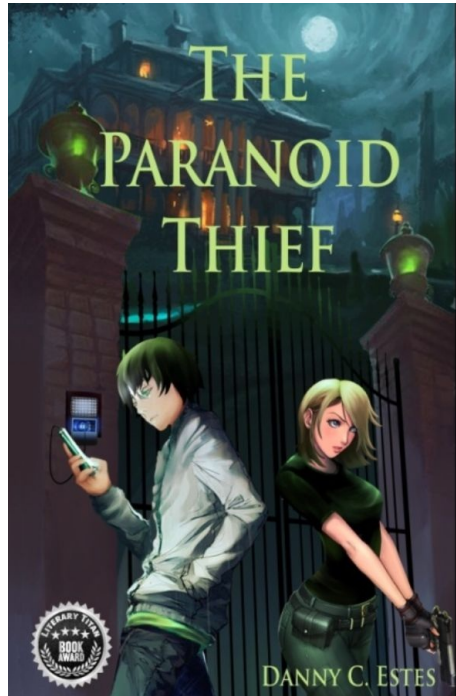
Book 4 of the Athina series

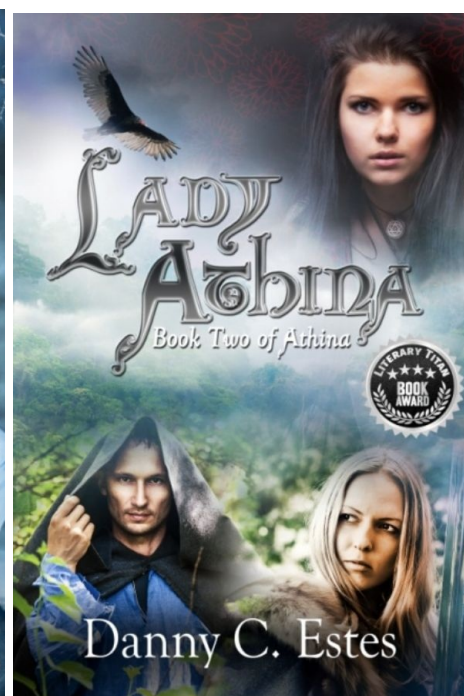
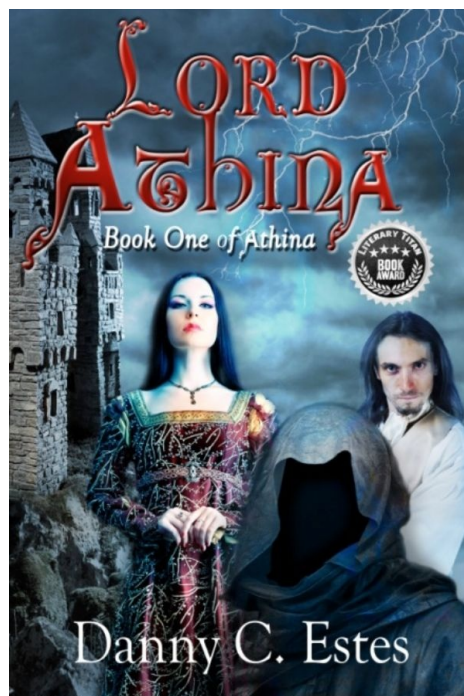
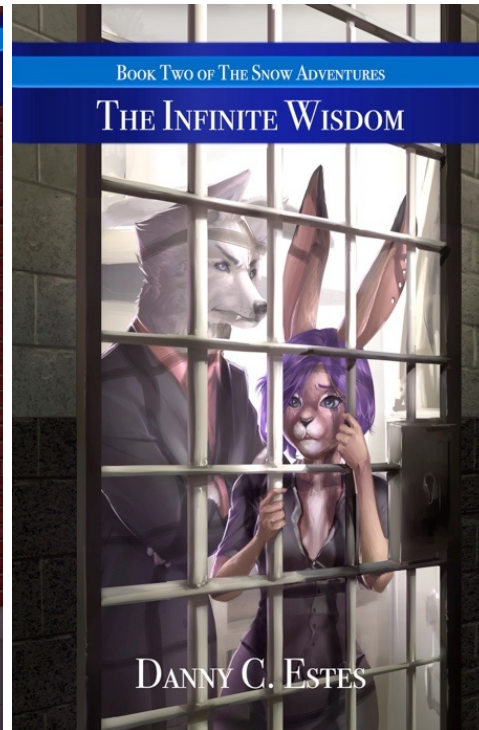
Braxton Snow P.I.

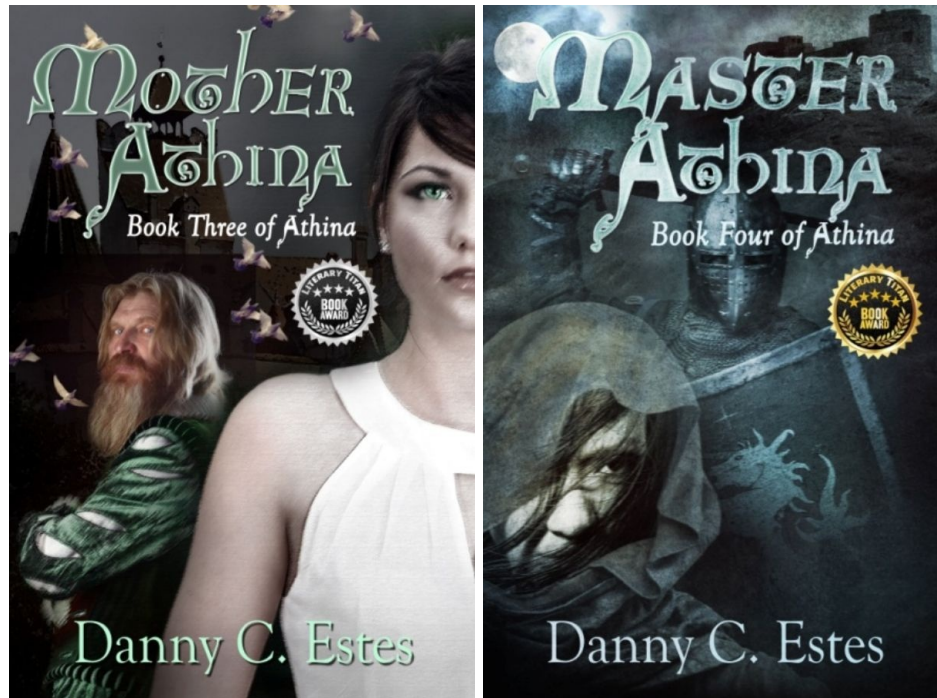
Book 1 of The Snow Adventures

The Infinite Wisdom

Book 2 of The Snow Adventures







At this time I'm proud to announce the following:

The Athina series

Has won Silver and Gold awards from:
The Literary Titan Book Review.



Lord Athina Lady Athina Mother Athina Master Athina

The Snow Adventures

Book One

Braxton Snow P.I.

Has won a Gold award from:
The Literary Titan Book Review.



Braxton Snow P.I.

The Paranoid Thief

Has won a Silver award from:
The Literary Titan Book Review.



The Paranoid Thief

Vampires: Don't You Just hate Them?

Has won a Gold award from:
The Literary Titan Book Review.



Vampires: Don't You Just hate Them?

Charlotte's Soul

Has won a Silver award from:
The Literary Titan Book Review.



Charlotte's Soul

####

