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ANCESTOR

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SCOTT SIGLER

THE TWISTED MIND RESPONSIBLE FOR EARTHCORE

EXTINCTION ISN'T ALWAYS A BAD THING...

REVIEWS FOR ANCESTOR

“The future of gene manipulation is already here, and this ancestor may well be one of its outcomes. Be very, very afraid ... or be extinct.”

~A.M. Stickel, *BLACK PETALS MAGAZINE*

“Sigler hits the rewind on evolution – and the fast-forward on action! Sigler’s beasties get their chomp on early and don’t let go: you can just feel the little Ancestors wriggling in the shadows of today’s biotech news stories, waiting to sink their primordial incisors deep into your spine.”

~Mark Jeffrey, author of *THE POCKET & THE PENDANT*

“We’ve been told time and time again that it’s bad to play God. If Frankenstein and The Island of Dr. Moreau isn’t enough to convince you, then read Scott Sigler’s *ANCESTOR*. This is Robin Cook rewriting *ALIENS*. Strap yourself in for this intense warning of what genetic science can unleash. Prepare yourself for the ancestors.”

~Tee Morris, author of *THE MOREVI SAGA*

“Scott Sigler writes like Michael Crichton in his prime, but edgier. Intensely addictive, *ANCESTOR* infects the imagination and races forward through a tail of genetic manipulation gone awry. As our primitive and savage ancestors are reborn, the body count rises and the pages keep turning. Intelligent, witty and scary as hell!”

~Jeremy Robinson, bestselling author of *RAISING THE PAST*

“From ultra high-tech labs of bleeding edge biotech to snow-blinded islands haunted by our own genetic past, Scott Sigler takes you for a page-turning ride into real fear and adventure. *ANCESTOR* starts with a literal bang and builds to a desperate climax that will keep you guessing.”

~David Wellington, author of *MONSTER ISLAND* and *13 BULLETS*

“This book shows how the road to hell is paved with good intentions. And the entrails of the scientists who had those intentions.”

~Mur Lafferty, author of *HEAVEN*

“*ANCESTOR* is a standout bloodbath adventure; a continuous assault on the senses that leaves you breathless from riding each wave of action as it swells into the next.”

~Summer Brooks - Producer for *SLICE OF SCIFI*
and *FARPOINT MEDIA*

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ANCESTOR

SCOTT SIGLER



Dragon Moon Press

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DEDICATION

Scott Christian – Specialist, United States Army
Robert Gilliland – Captain, United States Air Force
Jeff Rapleje – Corporal, US Marine Corp

The gentlemen above are three of my high school friends who served in America's armed forces. I dedicate this book to them, and to all of the servicemen and service women who are directly responsible for the freedoms that we all take for granted.

To every soldier that served or is serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Forget politics, ideology or personal definitions of right-and-wrong – when you got the call, you did your job, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

THE SIGLER SYNDICATE

Ancestor was originally released as a “podcast only” novel. You couldn't buy it in stores, and you couldn't peek at the end. To hear the whole story, you had to tune in every week for another 45-minute dose of science fictiony horror goodness.

I followed the same delivery process for my first novel, EarthCore. The fans thought it was so addictive, they dubbed the novel “EarthCrack,” and themselves as strung-out junkies waiting for their weekly fix. The term “Junkie” stuck fast, a favorite term for describing my insane fans. And you are. Insane, that is. Your emails, voicemails, audio bits, video bits, IMs and blog posts make me extraordinarily happy, even when you're insulting me (which, oddly enough is exactly 92.4 percent of the time –yes, I kept stats). So here's to you, you Damn Dirty Junkies!

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PUSHERS

Some of those fans wanted to go beyond just being strung out on podcast fiction; they wanted to help in my quest for world domination. Hence, the “Pushers” were born – why just be a Junkie, when you can help create other addicts, right?

“Well sheee-it,” I thought to myself, “if I'm the dealer, and I've got Junkies and Pushers, I basically have my own crime organization.”

Now I don't know about you, but I've always wanted a criminal organization of my very own. I'd be a good criminal, I think, except for that whole bit about potentially doing time and being someone's bitch – not my cup of tea. Score one for the pre-emptive threat of the prison system.

So the Pushers were born, great people who volunteer to help me with various tasks. Yes, volunteer – oh, you thought I was getting rich off of podcasting? Yes, filthy rich, and I can barely bolt my diamond-encrusted front door against the column of Hollywood starlets wanting to bed me in hopes of sharing my red-carpet spotlight.

Sorry, I digress. Pushers volunteer to help me out, and I want to thank them right in these here pages.

PUSHERS

Annathy & Chuck Baker – Radio
Jeremy E. Ellis – Science Consultant
Lorraine Felt – Editor
Andre Gilbert – Creature Design
Mark Hester – Comic Book Art
J.C. Hutchins – Arch-Nemesis & Trusted Consultant
Bill Kenway – Project Management
Sigrid Macdonald – Editor
Daniel Morgan – Chinese Translations
Lindsay Steele – MySpace
Jeff Steele – SciFi will rue the day!
Aaron Wormus – Search Engine Optimization

I may have missed some Pushers. If so, I blame J.C. Hutchins. I really don't know how that would be his fault, but I'll state it now, and figure out the logic later.

So Junkies consume and Pushers push. Then there are people who take over entire divisions of the Sigler Syndicate (often without telling me, or giving me the opportunity to say "no," I might add - it's a rather cut-throat organization). These folks know more than I do. Way more. Granted, that ain't saying much, but still, they make me look good. These folks attain "capo" status in the Syndicate, and are known as the "MastaPimps." MastaPimps put in a LOT of time, and provide a LOT of talent, and I do not have words to thank them enough.

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MASTAPIMPS

Kevin Capizzi – Graphics
Jeff Sass – Movies, TV, Marketing
Kerim Satirli – Marketing
Robbie Trencheny – SecondLife
Robert "Smegster" White – Video

Junkies, Pushers, MastaPimps – add to the mix the Podshow Crew. Podshow.com is a fantastic site dedicated to gathering digital entertainment and spreading it to the world. My fiction podcasts run on Podshow. The company makes sure all I have to do is create great content – they handle everything else, and they do it well. There are many people at Podshow, but I just wanted to take a little space to thank those I dealt with on a daily basis during the Ancestor podcast. And if you don't like this book, blame Adam Curry – this whole "podcasting" fad is his fault anyway.

PODSHOW CREW

Ron Bloom, Richard Brewer-Hay, Aaron Burcell,
Joe Carpenter, Adam Curry, Marcus Mauller
Chris McIntyre, Matt Oliver

PODCASTER THANKS

The podcasting community is a big part of the success of Ancestor. As in, “huge.” I’d like to thank them all individually, but there are just too many. So thanks to you all, you know who you are.

ABUSED READER THANKS

To my wife Jody. I hope the world will someday know the “joy” of being the first to read one of my books. Or should I say, the first to read a rough draft. Wait, perhaps it’s better said, “the first to slog through a poorly-crafted, error-prone grammatical nightmare that will one day become a good story after seventeen re-writes, but it all starts with this steaming pile of poo your husband just set before you with bright-eyed glee of a child on Christmas morning.”

Thanks, Peanut.

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‘CHECK-MARK “YES” FOR THANK-YOU’ THANKS

Mike, Evo and the crew. Everything started with you guys. I haven’t forgotten that. But then again, I haven’t made any money at this yet ... when I do, I’m sure I’ll relegate you to the Land of Little People and block out the fact that you got the ball rolling. You can go ahead and push the Hollywood starlets aside so you can knock on my diamond-encrusted door, but I probably won’t answer.

HISTORY OF ANCESTOR

I started writing Ancestor in 1998, and finished it in 2001. In 2002, my agent submitted it to all the big publishing houses. Around 20 rejections later, I gave it a big re-write. While I moved more action up to the front, the basic plot and scientific premise of the book remains the same as my first draft. We went through another round of submissions, with much the same result. All in all, Ancestor was rejected around 35 times. Fortunately, that last rejection landed right about the time I finished up the EarthCore podcast. I had all these insane fans (see “Junkies,” above) harassing me for more fiction, so I decided it was better to keep the Junkies happy than to sit around bitching that no one recognizes my brilliance. Hence, I released Ancestor as a podcast, to the titillation and thrills of thousands and thousands of fans (and yeah, it was a little messed up to know that I did, indeed, have “thousands and thousands” of fans when I had yet to see a book in print). The Junkies seemed to like it, more Junkies showed up, Gwen at Dragon Moon Press wanted to print it, and you get what you’ve got in your hands right now.

Which, I hope, is a tad better than said steaming pile of poo my wife first read back in 2001.

Enjoy.

ANCESTOR PATRONS

The following are some of the people the patrons of the Ancestor podcast. Thank you!

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ANCESTOR

SCOTT SIGLER

EXTINCTION ISN'T ALWAYS A BAD THING...

Order your copy from Amazon.com on April 1: Noon Eastern Time, 9AM Pacific
<http://www.amazon.com/Ancestor-Scott-Sigler/dp/1896944736>

BOOK ONE: GREENLAND

November 5

He'd always pictured the end of the world being a bit more ... industrial. Loud machines, cars crashing, people screaming, guns-a-blazing. Perhaps a world-cracking bomb that would shatter the Earth into bits.

But here, there was nothing. Nothing at all, save for some calf-high grasses, endless rocks, and the towering white vistas of glaciers raised high on the horizon.

Greenland was far from the minds of most apocalyptic visionaries. And yet here he was, the man responsible for stopping the end of the world. No cars crashing, none of that nonsense. Just a tiny virus, and some pigs.

Sydney Chapman stood in the empty, fallow field, his long, drawn-out shadow stretching before him, a gun-toting Danish soldier at his side. Sydney looked down into a shallow valley. From two miles away, he could still make out the compound: main building, landing strip, light poles, electric fence, guard tower, two small sheet metal barns for the pigs.

"That it?" he asked his escort.

"Yes sir," the soldier said.

Sydney stared. A part of him noted the wind direction. The facility was downwind. But what direction had it been blowing an hour ago? Two hours ago? A microscopic virus rode the wind like a space voyager – limitless distance, eternal endurance. Five-hundred million viruses fit on the head of a pin. Even the lightest gust could carry billions of piggie viruses all across this barren landscape. As far as he knew, he might already be breathing them in, might already be a walking corpse.

"Sir, they are waiting."

Chapman nodded. He'd somehow expected his guard to have a thick accent, and say something like "Zir, zey are vaiting." Maybe that was German. Shit, he was terrible with accents. But the kid spoke flawless English: no accent at all. The soldier couldn't have been more than twenty-one. Sydney's own son, Eric, was twenty. Even dressed in camouflage fatigues, wearing body armor, a nasty looking automatic rifle held against his chest, to Sydney the soldier was still a kid. Could have been one of Eric's buddies, the ones who came over when they were ten and fought over the PlayStation. But the Danish soldier had that *look*. That "killing is my business" look that came with Special Forces training.

The soldier led him to the trailer, which was decorated with only a drab green satellite dish and several matching drab green antennas mounted on the roof. There were no flags or markings, but it was American. A U.S. Army cargo helicopter had dropped the

trailer less than twenty-four hours earlier, right after the alarm. Sydney walked up the three-step portable ladder and opened the trailer door.

General Terry Percy looked up when Chapman entered the trailer, and waved him over to the bank of monitors that covered the trailer's rear wall. Several American soldiers sat at consoles in the cramped space. A few ranking Danes were crammed in, but there was no place for them to sit, and very few places for them to stand.

"Syd, how you been?" Percy extended his hand for a firm shake. He was the picture-perfect icon of the gruff general – permanent scowl, buzz cut, crystal clear eyes. Picture-perfect, except for his height. Most generals weren't 5-foot-4. Chapman stood a modest 5-foot-8, yet he towered over the four-star general.

"I've been better, General. Much better, if what I've heard is true."

"It's true," Percy said. "I got a call from Longworth, who said he got the word from the President himself. The President says you're the go-to guy on this."

Sydney nodded gratefully. It made everything easier when the military acquiesced to his expertise in this area. "Thank you, General. What are we dealing with?"

Percy simply pointed to the main monitor.

Sydney had somehow expected the images to be fuzzy, not crystal clear. In all the old apocalypse movies, the scenes of carnage came with ample amounts of static and shaky-cam. And poor lighting. For some reason, every doomsday vision seemed to be marked by substandard electrical work – flickering lights, sliding doors that randomly opened and shut. All director's touches, no doubt, to add to the suspense.

But this wasn't Hollywood, this was real. This was the end of the world: the lighting was fine, the pictures perfectly clear.

On the screen, a man crawled across the floor, leaving behind him a glistening trail of puss, blood, and other fluids Chapman didn't want to think about. The man's once-white lab coat was now wet-pink, clinging to his body like a thin straightjacket. Pale yellow vomit covered the front of his coat, shimmering like raw eggs. Blood dripped from eyes so swollen the man looked like some horrid cartoon character, not a Nobel Prize winning geneticist. With each crawl, one arm weakly over the next, the wet man let out a little noise, *eeauugh*. Sounded like a teenage girl whimpering into her pillow after getting the breakup call from her boyfriend. The bottom of the screen read "N. A. Gunston."

"Is he the last one?" Chapman asked.

Percy nodded. "Twenty-seven other staff members at the Novozyme facility. All of them are accounted for. We can't go in and check vitals, obviously."

"So how do we know, for sure, that they're dead?"

Percy nodded to his assistant. One of the monitors stayed on Gunston's futile crawl, while the others started to run through a series of still images on the monitors.

No, not still images, Chapman thought. *This is live video. It's just that nothing is moving.*

Each image showed a prone body. They all lay on their backs or sides, as their stomachs had bloated to obscene, horror-movie proportions. Blood covered their faces, thanks to ravaged eyes that had filled with fluid and burst like water balloons.

Sydney's stomach pinched, and he felt nausea suddenly swirling in his belly. It had been a decade since he'd seen a virus like this. That was back when he helped create death, instead of trying to stop it. Back when *his* creation got loose and killed seven men. He still saw their faces, every day, staring at him through the cameras. Still heard

their hands pounding out a rhythm of desperation on isolation chamber walls.

Sydney took a breath and tried to force the thoughts away. He had a job to do, and this was no time to lose himself in guilt.

“So how do we know, for sure, that they're dead?”

“When was the first confirmed infection?”

“Less than thirty-six hours ago,” Percy said, then checked his watch. “If Doctor Gunston there drops off within the next ten minutes, then that will be twenty-eight dead within a day-and-a-half of first infection.”

“How is containment?”

“All the facility's contamination control readings are in the green. There are only two doors, both pressurized airlocks and both fully functional. Slight negative pressure, so if there are any leaks, air goes in, not out. All air purification systems online and a-okay.”

“And all staff accounted for?”

Percy nodded. “Novozyme ran a real tight ship. The administration helped us locate anyone who wasn't in the building at the time of lockdown. They've all been quarantined, and none show symptoms thus far. Looks like it's fully contained.”

On the screen, Gunston kept crawling, slower and slower with each reaching pull. He tried to make words between his teenage-girl whines.

“Hell ... me ... *eeaungh*. Hell ... me ... *eeaungh*.” Chapman felt tears welling up, his soul filled with pity. Gunston's tongue was so swollen he couldn't even properly beg for his life.

“Who knows about this?” Chapman asked.

“The Danish brass had this place under close watch. Novozyme's shutdown alarm is tied right into their early-warning system. They had a perimeter up within hours after Gunston hit the lock-down button. Nice, tight information control. It's ironic Gunston is the last one to go, considering he shut the place down. Pretty much condemned everyone inside to certain death, himself included.”

“He may have saved the human race.”

Percy nodded. “There is that. Too bad no one is ever going to know. So what's the deal, Chapman? We going to sit here and talk all day?”

Chapman shook his head. He'd known what he was going to do before his helicopter had even touched down. There was no question, really. This was the sum of all fears of the biotech industry – a fast-moving, one-hundred-percent lethal virus. It wasn't a variation on an old human virus, a variation turned suddenly deadly. It was a new virus,

one that had never infected people. Therefore, humans had never developed biological defenses against it, or any strain like it – no previous experience that would allow some people to draw from that species-wide memory, to have the building blocks to develop resistance. If the virus escaped the Novozyme compound and reached the populace, the dead might be measured in the *billions*, not to mention the horrifying but all-too-real possibility of total human extinction.

“What have you got, General?”

“We’ve got the full cooperation of the Danish government. They want this thing wiped out and fast, so they’ll back up whatever story we want. I’ve got a Bone online out of Thule Air Base. It’s loaded with eight BLU-96s. Delivery time less than one minute after I give the order.”

“I’m a little fuzzy on my military lingo, General,” Chapman said quietly.

“No problem. We have a B1 bomber, a ‘bone,’ loaded up with a BLU-96, which is a two-thousand pound ‘fuel-air explosive.’ At a predetermined height, the munitions open and spread atomized fuel that mixes with the air. This creates a cloud of highly volatile fuel-air mixture, then it ignites and causes a firestorm. Temperatures reach around 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Incinerates everything in a one-mile radius. It will burn everything in the Novozyme compound, including those fucking pigs.”

Chapman looked at one of the monitors, one that showed a view just outside the facility. He stared at the monitor, watching the pigs. Gunston and Novozyme had hoped to turn these pigs into a herd of human organ donors – xenotransplantation, the science of taking parts of one animal and putting it into another.

The pigs were called “Chimeras.” Any animal that combined the genes of more than one animal was called a Chimera, named after the mythological Greek creature that was part lion, part goat, and part serpent. Chimeras represented a dream shared by dozens of biotech companies. If animal organs could be modified so that the human immune system would accept them, and wouldn’t attack the organs as if they were a foreign body, millions of lives would be saved each year. But so far, no one had found that magic formula, and no lives had been saved. And here, in this desolate valley, just the opposite had happened.

The pigs didn’t look sick at all. In fact, they looked happy, as far as pigs can look happy. Just inside the airlocks and thick walls, the last of twenty-eight human beings lay dying; dying from a virus that originated in pigs. Yet the pigs seemed oblivious – eating, digging at the muddy ground, sleeping ... doing the things that pigs do.

Live it up, Chapman thought, feeling oddly sad that the pigs had to die: they’d done nothing wrong, after all. *In a few minutes, you’re nothing but spare ribs and ashes.*

Chapman nodded. “Do it, General.” He hoped the bomb would land soon enough to end Gunston’s pain before the massive brain hemorrhaging killed him.

Pearcy picked a phone and made a simple order: “It’s a go.”

“I need a secure line out,” Chapman said.

Pearcy pointed to another phone, this one built into the equipment-thick control panel.

“That’s a straight line to Langley. Just pick it up and it will ring through.”

Chapman did just that. His boss answered on the first ring.

“Longworth here.”

“I’m onsite, sir.”

“What’s your call?”

“I’ve ordered General Percy to go ahead.”

There was a slight pause. “It’s that bad?”

“Twenty-eight exposures, all dead within thirty-six hours.”

“I still can’t believe this,” Longworth said. “From a goddamn pig?”

Chapman sighed. Longworth didn’t get it. And Chapman knew the man probably never would. The director of the CIA dealt in politics, not science.

One of the main monitors switched from the steady procession of the dead to a shaking, blurry view of the Novozyme facility. Bomber-cam. Gunston wouldn’t have to wait much longer.

“This is what people have warned against for years,” Chapman said. “Novozyme was putting human protein encoding DNA into the pigs to make the pig organs transplantable into humans. Some virus common in pigs, probably an influenza, adapted to those proteins, which meant it could infect humans. Once the virus jumped species, there’s no natural human antibodies – nothing can stop it.”

“The President is calling an emergency summit,” Longworth said. “All the European nations, South Africa, everyone capable of this kind of work. It’s a black meeting. We’re shutting everyone down until the W.H.O. can put monitors in place.”

“That’s an excellent decision, sir.” A ‘black meeting.’ A disaster of Biblical proportions was just a broken airlock away, and the world’s leaders would meet in secret to discuss the options. No one would ever know.

Not even Gunston’s family.

On the monitor, Chapman recognized the field he’d just walked through. A fraction of a second later, he heard the roar of the jet’s engine. Only seconds now.

“Do you think there’s going to be any problem with the shutdowns?” Longworth asked.

“I can think of three companies that are going to ignore us and try to keep working: Monsanto, Genetron and Genada.”

The monitor switched to a view from a camera that must have been mounted

on the trailer’s roof. The Novozyme facility was there for a brief second, then a giant orange flash filled the screen. The ground shook. A small mushrooming cloud lifted into

“Once the virus jumped species, there’s no natural human antibodies—nothing can stop it.”

the dawn sky.

“We need to go after Genada first,” Longworth said.

Chapman unconsciously shook his head – Longworth had an axe to grind with Genada. Chapman had that same axe, sure, but Genada wasn’t the most logical choice.

“Sir, Genada’s experiment isn’t the same. They’re not working with current animals. Their risk of viral contamination is statistically insignificant. We should go after Monsanto first.”

“How can you know that for certain?”

“I have an agent embedded on Baffin.”

“Who?”

“Paul Stillwell.”

“Are you in contact with him?”

“Very limited, sir. Baffin’s very isolated, no phones or Internet. He gets a message out from time to time, but his main job is to observe.”

Longworth paused. He couldn’t hide the hate in his voice when he spoke his next words. “Is The Traitor there as well?”

The Traitor. Longworth’s name for PJ Colding: former CIA agent, Chapman’s former partner.

“He is,” Chapman said. He knew where this was going.

“Genada first. As soon as Colding catches wind of what’s going on, he’ll take the project on the run. The Traitor is too fucking good. We can’t have Genada moving around.”

“Sir, with all due respect, Genada is the least of our priorities.”

“I’ll have a CIRG team meet you at your current location. I know you want to be in on it when we shut down The Traitor and Genada.”

Longworth wasn’t fucking around. The Critical Incident Response Group, or CIRG, consisted of men whose resumes were probably titled “bad motherfucker.” That’s exactly what they were: bad motherfuckers who happened to dress in Level 5 hazmat suits.

“We need to get approval from the Canadians,” Longworth said. “The President can call, but that new Prime Minister will probably try and play political games. Getting that approval itself might take five hours, maybe ten. Can you get a message to Stillwell?”

“It’s risky for him, but yes.”

“Ten hours is too long to wait. Paglione is going to know what just happened to Novozyme before then, and he’ll have Colding evac his people. Tell Stillwell to take out all transportation so they can’t get away.”

“Sir, I suggest we just wait. They’ve got fifty cows in the facility ... they can’t go far in ten hours.”

“The President doesn’t want to wait, Sydney.”

“But sir, that could put Stillwell’s life in danger, and I don’t think anything’s going to happen in the next – ”

“You’re thinking like a scientist and not an agent again, Syd,” Longworth said quietly.

“Here’s how the President sees it. When Danté Paglione gets word of the bomb we just dropped, he’s going to know the gloves are off. He’s going to get his people out of there, and have them take what research they can. That puts them on the run. That could make them careless, and they’re carrying potentially lethal viruses with them.”

“But their experiment is completely different from Novozyme’s. The odds of them also having a virus – ”

“Syd, shut the fuck up! The President doesn’t care about odds. You’ve got a man on the ground, so use him. Tell Stillwell to destroy all transportation. And tell him to kill all the baboons.”

“Cows, sir. Monsanto is using baboons. Genada is using cows.”

“Fine, whatever, kill all the cows then. Stop arguing with me. Tell him to shut that place down, and shut it down now. Do you understand?”

Sydney rubbed his face in frustration. His ex-wife Claire told him the habit made him look like a little kid that needed a nap. He’d never broken the habit, and every time he did it, he immediately thought of that cheating bitch.

“Do you understand?” Longworth demanded.

“Yes, sir. I’ll get the order to him as soon as possible.”

BOOK TWO: BAFFIN ISLAND

November 6

Stop it, hands.

Her fingers brushed long black hair out of her eyes. The hair fell back, slowly, almost floated into place, and she pushed it back again. Her small hands seemed to move of their own accord, grabbing, stitching, sewing.

Stop it, hands, she wanted to say, but she couldn't speak. A passenger in her own body, incapable of control, she could only watch.

It was wrong.

It was dangerous.

A dulled sense of dread filled her mind, a metallic-gray cloud of doom.

And yet she couldn't stop.

The hands held a fuzzy stuffed animal, a black-and-white panda, her favorite toy. But the toy wasn't exactly the way she remembered. It was the panda's body, all right, but it had no arms, no legs, and no head.

The possessed hands reached down and came up with an orange-and-black arm from a stuffed tiger, fabric torn where it had once joined at the shoulder, white fluff hanging out in long strands. Jian's hands began sewing. The needle flashed, again and again: tiger arm joined the body. She felt a pinprick of pain. Jian looked at the possessed hand – a rivulet of blood trailed down her tiny, chubby finger. The droplet pooled in the joint between her fingers, then fell onto the panda body, staining the fuzzy white fur.

Fear sent a wash of tingles over her skin, like a billion microscopic needles, a billion bites from a billion carnivorous bacteria. Her small body shivered.

The hand reached down again. This time it brought up a long, dangly, gray-and-white leg from a sock monkey.

The needle flashed. She felt more stings. Possessed hands fixed the leg to the panda body, now black-and-white marked with thin red streaks.

"Stop it hands," she managed to say finally, but the hands ignored her.

The hum never changed – it remained steady, droning, hypnotic.

A lion's tawny leg.

More pain.

More blood.

A pinkish arm from a chubby, plastic baby doll.

More pain.

More blood.

The hum grew louder.

"Stop it hands," Jian said, tears filling her eyes. "Please, stop it."

But the hands ignored her. They reached down again, but this time they didn't find stuffed animals or plastic. This time they came up with cold, scaly flesh.

The bloody, severed head of an alligator, its skin a deep, brackish green, the color of a coal-infused emerald.

Jian started to sob.

But the hands kept sewing.

...

The vid-phone let out its un-ignorable, shrill digital blare: PJ Colding jerked awake. He squinted at the glowing red clock set in the vid-phone's base – 2:14 a.m. He slowly reached out and clicked the “connect” button.

Gunther Jones's tired, melancholy face looked back at him from the flat-panel display. “What's up, Gunther?”

“She's at it again,” Gunther said, his voice sounding only marginally more awake than Colding's. “Christ, Colding – fifty-two years old and she has nightmares like she's six.”

Gunther had the night-shift watch. He slept in the security room, an alarm keyed to sound receptors set through the facility. Any significant noise triggered the alarm, waking Gunther so he could ascertain possible security threats. Of course, in the remote, frigid reaches of Baffin Island, they had yet to experience anything resembling a threat. They did, however, experience plenty of noise-induced alerts, which were almost always caused by the same thing – the esteemed Dr. Liu Jiandan crying out from her nightmares.

“Okay,” Colding said with a sigh. “I'll go check on her.”

He hit the “disconnect” button and the screen went black. Colding slid out of bed, his bare feet hitting the frigid floor. No matter how high they turned up the temperature, the floor remained perpetually ice-cold. He stepped into his ratty-old flip-flops, pulled on a robe and walked out of his room.

...

It didn't even look like a panda anymore. The black-and-white body was now black and red, both from the many needle-pricks on her fingers and from the bloody alligator head. Panda body, tiger arm, sock monkey leg, lion leg, plastic baby-doll arm, alligator head. The possessed hands held the miniature body, a misshapen, mismatched Dr. Seuss Frankenstein.

“Not again,” Jian's little-girl voice whispered. “Please, not again.”

She begged, but like a familiar old rerun, she knew what would come next. Sobs shook her body. Tears flowed hot down her cheeks. Fear filled her like a hydrogen blimp waiting for an inevitable spark.

She started screaming a moment too early, just a moment before the alligator head's

She started screaming
a moment too early...

eyes fluttered open, blinked, then looked right at her. Reptilian, unfeeling, but clearly *hungry*.

Something shook her, shook her. The alligator head's mouth opened, and seemed to smile. The Devil's smile. Mismatched arms lifted and reached for her. Jian screamed, the high-pitched scream of a five-year-old girl.

Something shook her harder, and she dropped the horrific stuffed animal.



Colding gently shook Jian one more time, and she blinked awake, the expression of terror still fixed on her chubby, confused face. Long, heavy, silky-black hair, wet from sweat and tears, hung in her face, reminding Colding of the sheepdog he'd owned as a child.

"Jian, it's okay," Colding said quietly.

She blinked once more, perhaps trying to see through the hair, then threw her arms around Colding, squeezing him with that hidden strength that all obese people seem to possess.

He returned the hug, patting her fears away as if she were his daughter and not twenty years his senior.

"I have dream again, Mee-Sta Colding."

"It's okay," Colding said. He felt her tears on his neck and shoulder. She shook like a thunder-frightened dog, her fat jiggling in time with each tremor. She called every man "mister," although with her thick Chinese accent it always came out "mee-sta." He'd known her for years, but had never been able to convince her to call him by his first name.

"It's okay, Jian. Why don't you see if you can get back to sleep?"

Jian pulled away from him and wiped tears with the back of her hand. "No," she said. "No sleep."

"Jian, you need to sleep. I know you haven't slept more than six hours in the past three days."

"No."

"Can't you at least try?"

"No!" She turned and slid out of the bed, surprisingly graceful for a woman that carried 250 pounds on a 5-foot-6 frame. Colding realized, too late, that she wasn't wearing any pajama bottoms. He turned away, embarrassed, but Jian didn't seem to notice.

"As long as I up, I get some work done," she said, putting one leg through a rather large pair of pants. "We have another immune response test this morning."

Colding rubbed his eyes, partially because they were tired, and partially because it kept him from looking like he was trying *not* to look. He stared at the familiar chessboard sitting on her dresser. She'd beat him ninety-seven times in a row, but who was counting?

The immune response was the hurdle that the scientific trinity of Claus Rhumkorff, Claudette Overgard and Jian simply couldn't surpass. Now that she was awake, she'd monitor the experiment and prepare for success, or, more likely, yet another failure and

the resultant wrath of Dr. Rhumkorrf.

He heard the *zip* of her pant's zipper, and knew it was okay to look her way once again. She was pulling on a Hawaiian shirt – lime-green with yellow azaleas – over her sweat-stained, white T-shirt. Her hair still hung wetly in front of her face, but through that hair he could see the dark rings under her bloodshot, haunted eyes. She walked to her desk and switched on her computer.

"You need anything?" Colding asked.

Jian shook her head, her attention already fixed on the monitor. Colding knew from experience that she probably wouldn't register another word he said. A long list of letters – T, G, C and A – scrolled across the screen. Without looking away from the scrolling letters, Jian opened a small dorm-room fridge that sat under her desk and pulled out a bottle of Dr. Pepper.

"Well, I guess I'm off to bed," Colding said. "Holler if you need anything, okay?"

Jian grunted, but Colding didn't know if it was a reaction to him or to a piece of data.

He walked out of the room and into the hall. The lights flickered on in response to his movement, illuminating bland, gray cinderblock walls and the speckled tile floor common to so many educational facilities and industrial buildings. Even through the soles of his flip-flops, he felt the floor's undefeatable cold.

November 7

Shoulders slumped, Colding sat down at the secure terminal and stared at the Genada logo slowly spinning on the computer screen. Things weren't going well, and the boss wasn't going to be happy. Colding wondered if his boss had ever heard the phrase "don't kill the messenger."

He yawned as he checked his watch – 8:00 a.m. His boss, one Danté Paglione, demanded punctuality. Colding moved the mouse and clicked the icon labeled "Manitoba," then waited patiently as the encrypted line connected with the home office. The Genada logo disappeared, replaced by Danté's smiling face.

"Good morning, PJ. How is the weather out there?"

Colding grinned at the hackneyed joke. On Baffin Island, latitude 65 degrees, there were only two temperatures – Fucking Cold, and Even Fucking Colder.

"Not that bad, sir. Mind you, I don't go outside much, but at least everything is working great in the facility."

Danté nodded. Colding had learned long ago that his boss always liked to hear something positive, a process Colding referred to as "giving a little sugar." He couldn't blame Danté's need – when a man spends almost three-quarters of a billion dollars on a project, he would much rather hear good news than bad.

Danté's skin held a deep tan, the tan of a rich man that can afford a private spa even in the deepest, darkest isolation of Manitoba. He sported a thick coif of raven-black hair, styled as if he'd just stepped out of some Hollywood hairdresser's chair. High, pronounced cheekbones gave his face a regal look, accented by a wide, strong nose.

Danté's bright-white grin looked like it had put an orthodontist's kids through college. This was the face that led a billion-dollar biotech company. The face that had graced the covers of business magazines, the face that kept all the investors pumped up and enthused.

"That's good," Danté said. He leaned towards the camera, only slightly, an expectant look on his face.

Here it comes, Colding thought. He'd had this same conversation so many times in the past six months, the questions might as well have come from a script.

"So ... where are we?"

"I'm afraid there's no significant progress since last time. The computer pegs embryo viability at sixty-five percent, but they can't beat the immune response."

Danté's smile faded. "But that's exactly where we were at last week."

"They're working their collective asses off. Rhumkorrf, Overgard, Jian, they're constantly in the lab."

"Then they've got to work even harder!" Danté's expressive face switched emotions as fast as a drag racer shifting gears – a fake smile one second, a narrow-eyed snarl the next. "We're under a lot of pressure to produce, PJ. You know that. I'm sick of these excuses."

Colding paused, choosing his words carefully. "They're barely sleeping as it is, especially Jian. And when she does sleep, she's –"

"Having nightmares, I know. That fat old woman drives me crazy. She's been a borderline psycho since you snatched her out of China."

Colding nodded again. In addition to punctuality, Danté prized efficiency. He portrayed a well-cultivated, buddy-buddy persona, but the truth was that if you couldn't do the job you'd be fired faster than a Yankees' manager with a losing record. Unfortunately for Danté, he had yet to find anyone even remotely capable of replacing Jian. Colding doubted Danté would ever find such a person – she was one of a kind.

"Find a way, PJ." Danté's lips tightened into a narrow line. "You find a way to make them work harder. I can't spare the details, but we may not have a lot of time left. What we have here is too damn important to let it slip away. You, of all people, know just *how* important."

Colding nodded. He knew, all right. "I'll find a way, sir."

Danté broke the connection, his scowling face instantly replaced by the spinning Genada logo.

Colding's shoulders slumped even further. Yes, he knew how important – he knew that all too well. He wondered how many people were sitting by a hospital bed at that very moment, watching a loved one die while waiting for an organ transplant that would never come – the same doomed wait he'd performed at his wife's hospital bed.

A flash of pain welled up in his chest at the thought of his Clarissa lying in that bed, her deathbed, her skeletal hands holding his. She somehow managed to smile, right up to the end. Colding hadn't smiled. He'd tried to be strong for his wife, tried to be a man, but in truth he'd spent most of her last two days of life crying his eyes out, sobbing like a child. She was the one dying, yet *she* had to comfort *him*.

He knew he could never bring her back, and he knew nothing could fill the void in his soul, but what he *could* do was find a way to spare others the same pain. The project held the promise of that miraculous cure, held the promise of saving *hundreds of thousands* of lives.

Danté's phrase "not a lot of time left" could mean only one thing.

The competition was getting closer to solving the problem before Genada could.

•••

Inside the facility's massive hangar, Colding watched Brady Giovanni check the propane heating system. Bobby Valentine would arrive soon, and he'd have to refuel. Electric heaters, powered by the base generator, kept the building temperature well above freezing, warm enough for the fifty cows that sat in stalls at the hangar's northwest corner. The big black-and-white cows chewed on feed, letting out an occasional moo that

Danté's phrase "not a lot of time left" could mean only one thing.

echoed off the hangar's sheet-metal roof some seven stories above.

The heaters kept the place warm enough for the cows, but whenever Bobby flew in, Colding liked to crank up the temperature a bit via the backup propane heating system. The man flew a long way and had to refuel his helicopter before he could return. That meant time in the hangar, and Colding didn't want any of his people to be uncomfortable if he could help it – especially not Bobby Valentine, their lifeline to the outside world.

"Everything working okay, Brady?"

The big man laughed. "Yessir. Same as the last fifteen times Bobby has come out." Brady's laugh sounded much like his voice – high-pitched, more at home in the body of a fifteen-year-old girl instead of a 6-foot-3, 300-pound man. As a security guard, Brady cut an imposing figure. He looked like one of those state cops who wore a bulletproof vest under his shirt, only Brady didn't wear a bulletproof vest. Had there been anyone around the remote facility other than the scientists and the security staff, Brady's intimidation factor would have come in handy.

Brady looked up at Colding with a patient smile. "I think I can handle it, boss."

Colding felt his face turn red. "Of course you can. I wasn't saying you can't."

"It's cool, boss. You're anal. Don't sweat it. And I know what day it is. You probably want some alone time, so get out of here. Bobby will be here any second."

"Thanks. I'll be outside if you need me."

"If I catch fire, I'll yell."

Colding smiled, and walked out of the hangar into the Arctic air. It was freezing, but that didn't matter to Colding. Not like he could do anything about it anyway ... once you

were north of the Arctic Circle, you weren't going to do a whole lot of sunbathing or frolicking about the pool. Besides, it was his wife's birthday.

PJ Colding spent most of his waking hours dealing with prima donna scientists, a backstabbing underling, two bosses (one who hated him and wanted him gone, another whose intensity and drive bordered on megalomania), oodles and oodles of raw guilt, and the endless pressure of potentially saving millions of lives. So these few minutes he spent alone were precious, and tolerating the temperature was a small price to pay considering the view.

"Happy birthday, Clarissa," he said quietly. He didn't know if she could hear him. He liked to think that she could, but he was far too steeped in science to put a lot of faith in the afterlife.

The early morning sun perched just above the watery horizon, a molten orange blob that lit up the snow-white hills with an almost blinding brilliance. Black lichen-spotted rocks peeked out in many places, already soaking up the Sun's heat and burning off the dusting of snow that had fallen during the night. With his back to the lab, there wasn't a building in sight. Here he could escape. From most of it, anyway – the guilt was never far from his soul, no matter how beautiful the frozen, pristine landscape of Baffin Island.

A black speck appeared on the horizon, soon followed by the distant, muffled thumpa-thumpa of rotor blades. Colding checked his watch: 5:24 a.m. Bobby Valentine, right on time. The speck quickly grew into the familiar sight of a flat-black Bell 427 twin-turbine helicopter. No logo, no decoration. The 427 swooped down to the landing strip like a noisy shadow, kicking up clouds of powdery snow. The 427 was Bobby Valentine's main ride, a big eight-seater with a range of almost 400 nautical miles. It looked like a typical TV news helicopter.

The compound consisted of only two buildings: the hangar and the lab. The hangar was ten times the size of the facility itself. Colding had never understood why the Pagliones had built such a massive structure, over 100 yards long and seventy feet high. It looked completely out of place on the barren landscape. The hangar easily housed the facility's only two vehicles, a Humvee and a Eurocopter EC 145. The Humvee saw very little use – there was nothing to drive to on Baffin Island. Every two weeks, Bobby flew in the day-to-day supplies. They only used the Humvee for a weekly check of the off-site data backup, which sat at the end of the facility's one-mile landing strip. The Eurocopter saw no use at all, save for Rhumkorr's joyrides. The eight-passenger helicopter was more insurance than anything else: a way to get everyone off the island in case of an emergency.

Other than that, the hanger housed the little fuel tractor, and served as a barn for the fifty cows. The hangar's northwest corner led into a two-acre cow pasture surrounded by a fence that carried a mild electric current. They couldn't use barbed wire, for fear the cows might be cut and develop an infection.

About fifty yards southwest of the hangar stood the main facility, home sweet home. The square, cinderblock building only looked simple. It had two entry points, both pressurized airlocks that maintained a slight negative pressure – any holes in the building would result in air coming in, not flowing out. That was always a sobering

thought, that he spent all of his time in a place designed to keep death in, just in case the unthinkable happened. The building contained a state-of-the-art veterinary lab, a genetics lab, a computer lab, a cafeteria, rec room, and 600-square-foot apartments for nine people. It was a good-sized place, but after a year, even the Trump Tower would seem claustrophobic.

Between the hangar and the main facility stood the communications rig, a ten-foot satellite dish sitting on a platform that was elevated six feet off the ground. The platform, the hangar, the facility – the sum total of civilization at the Genada’s Baffin Island base.

The main facility’s front airlock opened, and Gunther Jones trotted out into the cold to stand next to Colding, ready to help unload Bobby’s helicopter. At 6-foot-2, Gunther stood eye to eye with Colding, but was much skinnier, maybe 180 pounds compared to Colding’s solid 220. Gunther’s black Genada jacket always seemed to hang from his rail-thin frame the way a shirt drapes from a thin wire hanger. He had lips so large they rivaled Mick Jagger’s, and – while always alert – his half-hooded eyes made him seem perpetually doped-up.

“Morning,” Gunther said. “And happy birthday.”

The sentiment was simple, yet it touched Colding nonetheless. Brady and Gunther had never even met Colding’s wife, yet they remembered from some brief conversation that Clarissa had always celebrated each birthday as if it might be her last, and that was the woman that Colding wanted to remember. He tried, unsuccessfully, not to think about the anniversary of her death, so on her birthday, he celebrated the brief time he’d had with her.

The Bell spun 180 degrees, kicking up waves of white powder, then touched down in a seemingly weightless landing.

The helicopter’s blades started their slow spin-down as Bobby hopped out. He was Danté Paglione’s private pilot and all-around errand boy – if the errand required a flight, that is. Bobby’s heavy, brownish-blond hair blew madly from the decelerating rotor blades. He was a medium-sized man, remarkable in neither height nor weight, wearing an old black leather bomber jacket and ever-present amber Ray-Ban sunglasses. Colding often told Bobby he looked like a character from some ‘70s action television show, but Bobby would just flash the smile that seemed to get him laid everywhere he went.

Bobby carried a lunchbox-sized metal case in his left hand. His right he offered to Colding, who shook it firmly.

“Happy birthday, man,” Bobby said.

Colding smiled sheepishly, and felt himself turn red. He had to admit that the Genada guys – with the exception of Andy “The Asshole” Crosthwaite – were really

“A regular who’s who of extinction.”

good people.

Bobby shook Gunther's hand in turn. "Hey Gun, how's the writing coming?"

Gunther nodded emphatically. "Good! I'm almost finished with the third book. That bitch Danielle Steele won't know what hit her."

"Go get 'em, tiger," Bobby said. He gently lifted the metal case and handed it to Colding, the way a child might hand a precious, fragile heirloom to a grandparent. Colding opened the latches and peeked inside to find four stainless steel test tubes, each sealed with a screw-on cap. "What have you got for us this time?"

"A regular who's who of extinction," Bobby said. "Danté has me flying all over the fucking world to collect this stuff. You've got Caribbean Monk Seal, Stellar's Sea Cow, and I had to fly to Australia to find samples of the Pig-Footed Bandicoot, and a Tasmanian Wolf."

"A Tasmanian Wolf?" Colding closed the case. "Those have been gone since the thirties."

Bobby nodded. "Sure, but there's still skins. We found a stuffed one in Auckland. That should make Doc Rhumkorrf happy, right?"

"He'll be thrilled. You ready to take him up in your chopper in about an hour?"

Bobby checked his watch. "Can he do it right now?"

"He's in the middle of an embryonic immune reaction experiment."

"Damn," Bobby said. "I've got to head back."

"Doc's going to be very disappointed."

Bobby laughed. "That little guy is so anal. He's already a good pilot. He doesn't really need any more lessons. Tell him I'll make it up to him next time. I'll just refuel and be gone."

Colding reached into his parka and pulled out a walkie-talkie. "Andy, come in."

Andy Crosthwaite's choppy syllables came back through the small speaker. "What do you want?"

"Come out here and help Bobby with the fuel truck, please."

"Jesus. What are you guys, cripples?"

Colding shook his head. Andy was the biggest pain in the ass he'd ever worked with. He was also best-buds with one of Colding's bosses, which made it difficult to manage the man in any way. "Andy, Bobby's on a tight schedule. Get out here and help Gun and Brady take care of it."

Even through the tiny speaker, they heard Andy's heavy sigh. "Fine, fine. I'll be right out."

Colding put the walkie-talkie back inside his parka. Bobby just laughed quietly.

"Andy's such good company," Bobby said.

Gunther let out a huff of disgust. "Right. You stay on this barren island with his ass for a year and see what you think."

Bobby laughed again. "Oh hell no. I've known that guy for ten years. I can't stay in the same room with him for more than a few hours, let alone a few months. And it's not like I can kick his ass; that little man is bad news."

Gunther and Bobby walked to the hangar to fetch the small fueling tractor. Baffin Island was far enough from civilization that Bobby couldn't make it back without refueling.

Colding headed into the lab. Andy was a pain, but manageable. Bobby was right about one thing, though. Andy "The Asshole" Crosthwaite was bad news. He'd served in the Canadian JTF2, right alongside Magnus. Colding didn't like having proven killers on his team, but if push came to shove, he was pretty sure Andy could protect the facility and the staff.

Colding checked his watch: 5:34 a.m. Rhumkorrf & Co. had been at it for a half hour now, and would be finishing up soon. Colding hurried inside, hoping that this time, unlike the last fifteen embryonic runs, he'd be able to report to Danté with some good news.



Jian watched the monitors with feelings of dread. *Feelings*, plural, because there were several things she feared, all of which seemed inevitable. First, she feared her dreams. Second, she feared success of the project, because she knew, deep in her heart, that somehow her dreams were tied to that success. Third, she feared the experiment they watched unfold on the big bulkhead monitor. It wasn't the experiment she feared, *per se*, but what Rhumkorrf would say when the experiment failed.

She even wore her lucky shirt – a comfy Hawaiian, neon-green with yellow flowers and orange teddy bears – but didn't think it would have much effect.

Four people watched the experiment – Jian, Rhumkorrf, Overgard and Teyshawn Anderson. The monitor's upper right-hand corner showed the number 82/150. The rest of the screen showed a grid of 150 squares, over half of which were black. The remaining squares showed a grainy-gray picture of a highly magnified, four-cell stage embryo.

The '150' denoted the number of embryos alive when the experiment began. Fifty cows, three genetically modified eggs from each cow, each egg tricked into replicating without fertilization. As soon as a fertilized egg, called a 'zygote,' split, it became an embryo, a growing organism. Each embryo hovered in a tiny test tube filled with a nutrient-rich solution and macrophages – white blood cells from the same cow that had produced the donor eggs. The '82' represented the number of embryos still alive, not yet destroyed by the voracious white blood cells.

The number switched to 78/150.

Rhumkorrf seemed to vibrate with anger, the frequency of that vibration increasing ever so slightly each time the counter dropped to a lower number. He was only a hair taller than Jian's 5-foot-6 frame, but she outweighed him by at least a hundred pounds. His eyes looked wide and bug-like behind thick, Buddy Holly glasses. The madder he became, the more he shook. The more he shook, the more his comb-over came apart, exposing his shiny balding pate.

65/150

"This is ridiculous," said Claudette Overgard, her cultured French accent dripping with disgust. Jian glared at the demure woman. She hated Overgard, not only because

she was a complete bitch, but also because she was so pretty and feminine, all the things that Jian knew she was not. Overgard wore her silvery-gray hair in a tight bun, revealing a haughty face. She had wrinkles due any forty-five-year-old woman, but nothing that even resembled a laugh line. She looked so pale Jian often wondered if the woman had seen anything but the inside of a sunless lab for the last thirty years.

61/150

“Time?” Rhumkorrf asked.

“Twenty-one minutes, ten seconds,” Overgard said.

“Teyshawn, remove the failures from the screen,” Rhumkorrf said through clenched teeth. Teyshawn Anderson quietly typed in a few keystrokes, and the black squares disappeared. Sixty-one squares, now much larger, remained. Teyshawn barely moved as he typed, almost as if he hoped to fade quietly into the background lest he, too, incur Rhumkorrf’s wrath. Jian could never understand that relationship – Teyshawn was a big man, almost as big as PJ Colding. Teyshawn was about a foot taller than Rhumkorrf, and looked like he could probably beat up the smaller man anytime he liked. And yet he flinched when Rhumkorrf raged, just like Claudette Overgard did, just like Jian did.

She watched one of the squares. The tiny embryo sat there helpless, a gray, translucent cluster of cells defined by a whitish circle. Thanks to a year’s worth of modifications, the cells split faster than any animal they’d ever seen. The project’s success hinged on that rapid growth.

At sixteen cells, the terminology changed from “embryo” to “morula,” Latin for “mulberry,” so named for its resemblance to the fruit. It normally took a mammalian embryo a few days to reach the morula stage – Jian’s creatures reached this stage in just twenty minutes.

On the screen, she watched one of the cells approaching the final stage of mitosis, the process by which the cell magically divided into two daughter cells. Left alone, she knew the morula would continue to divide until it became a hollow ball of cells known as a “blastocyst.” But to keep growing, a blastocyst had to embed itself into the lining of a mother’s uterus. And that could never happen as long as the cow’s immune system – the white blood cells – thought the embryo was a foreign body, like a virus or harmful bacteria.

54/150

Jian watched her square. From the morula’s left, a macrophage oozed into view, moving like an amoebae, extending pseudopodia as it slid and reached. Jian shook her head – the macrophage was hunting, searching for an enemy.

The squares steadily blinked their way to blackness.

48/150

The tiny embryo sat there helpless, a gray, translucent cluster of cells defined by a whitish circle.

“Dammit,” Rhumkorrf hissed.

The macrophage operated on chemicals, grabbing molecules from the environment and reacting to them. The developing morula gave off chemical signals. The outer part of the morula, the zona pellucida, or outer membrane, was one-hundred-percent natural, something the macrophage would almost never attack. But what lie inside that outer shell was something created by Jian and her God Machine. And that was the problem that she, Rhumkorrf and Overgard couldn’t surpass – her creation was alien to the cow’s chemistry, giving off chemical signals just different enough that the macrophage didn’t recognize it as “self.”

Anything a macrophage doesn’t recognize, it destroys.

34/150

“Clear them out again,” Rhumkorrf said.

Teyshawn slunk even deeper into his chair as he tapped the keys. The black squares again disappeared: the remaining grayish squares grew even larger.

Squares continued to turn black.

24/150

“Fuck,” Claudette said in a decidedly uncultured tone.

Jian watched her little square. Inside the morula, a cell quivered. Its sides pinched in, changing its shape from a circle to an hourglass. Mitosis. A macrophage tendril reached the morula, touched it, almost caressing it. But Jian knew there was nothing loving about that touch – the macrophage was tasting the ball of cells, reading chemicals.

14/150

The macrophage’s entire amorphous body slid into view. A grayish, shapeless mass, the key component of the cow’s immune system.

9/150

The squares steadily blinked out, their blackness mocking Jian, reminding her of her lack of skill, her stupidity, her failure.

4/150

The macrophage moved closer to the morula. The dividing cell quivered once more, then there were now two round cells where there had only been one. But it was too late.

1/150

The macrophage’s tendrils encircled the ball, then touched on the other side, surrounding it. The tendrils joined, engulfing the prey.

The square turned black, leaving only a white-lined grid and a green number.

0/150

“Well, that was just spectacular,” Rhumkorrf said in a cold voice. “Absolutely spectacular.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Overgard said. She looked at Rhumkorrf, but jerked her thumb at Jian. “It’s *her* fault. All she can do is give me an embryo with a sixty-five percent success probability. I need at least ninety percent to have any chance at success. What am I supposed to do with a defective genome?”

“You’re *both* responsible. You have got to find the genes that produce the offending

proteins. For heaven's sake, Claudette, you've built your whole career on this process."

"That was different. The quagga and the zebra are almost identical genetically. This *thing* we're creating is artificial, Claus. If Jian can't produce a proper genome the experiment is flawed to begin with."

"Then help her *find* the genes that code for the offending proteins!"

"But how can you blame me for –"

"Enough!" Rhumkorrf shouted. "Enough of these excuses!"

Rhumkorrf took a step towards Jian, his bug-eyed glare harsh and malevolent. "When we're successful, this program will save thousands of lives every year. As we speak, there are seventy thousand people waiting for organ transplants. Every day we delay, a hundred people die waiting for an organ. Those are people we can save with transgenic transplants."

Jian felt herself start to cry. "I know this."

"Do you? Do you really? Then why can't you solve this problem? Do you *want* people to die?"

Jian shook her head. She hugged herself, her tears flowing down her cheeks. Why did he have to yell at her so much?

Teyshawn stood up, all 6-foot-1 one of him, yet his shoulders hung low, and his face looked at the ground, not at Rhumkorrf. "Doctor Rhumkorrf, maybe you could ... could calm down a little."

Rhumkorrf stared hard. Teyshawn seemed to shrink even as he stood perfectly still.

"Did I ask you your opinion, Teyshawn?"

The younger man slowly shook his head. "No, sir, but Jian is working very hard. We all are."

"Shut the fuck up," Rhumkorrf said. "Just shut up. I don't need bullshit from a grad student, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, but –"

"Out! Get out! Don't back-talk me! Go take care of the cows, and do it now!"

Teyshawn looked up, briefly, then hung his head and walked out. In that brief second, Jian thought she saw a glimmer of strength in Teyshawn's eyes, as if he might stick up for her. But the moment faded instantly, and he shuffled out of the lab.

Overgard also walked to the lab's door. "This is pathetic." She shot Jian one more contemptuous glare, then left.

Jian was left alone with Claus Rhumkorrf. She hated being alone with Claus Rhumkorrf.

"I want you to think about something, Jian," Rhumkorrf said. "It took us an hour to conduct this experiment. In that hour, at least four people died from organ failure. Four people who would have lived if they had a replacement. In twenty-four hours, over a hundred people will die, all of whom could be saved if we solve this problem. You know you're the best bioinformatics scientist on the planet – if you can't do this, it's simply not going to work. It's all on your shoulders. It's you or nothing ... there is no replacement."

Jian couldn't take any more. She stood up and ran to the door.

"That's right," Rhumkorrf called out. "Just run to your room like you always do, but don't hide in there too long – while you're not working, people are dying!"

Jian ran down the hall, tears streaming down her face. There was too much pressure, she couldn't think. Her room was the only refuge from Rhumkorrf's constant yelling.

She swiped her ID badge through her door's card-reader slot, ran inside, and slammed the door behind her. Still crying, she ran through the living room to the bedroom and threw herself onto the bed. She just wanted to hide.

Had four people really died in the past hour? Maybe five? Maybe ten? Was their blood on her hands? She didn't like the responsibility – she had never asked for it – but Rhumkorrf was right: she was the best in the world. If she couldn't do it, no one could.

The embryo experiment had failed for the sixteenth time in a row. She had to find a way to make number eight work.

She *had* to.

Because millions of lives depended on her and her alone.

November 8

Magnus Paglione listened to the phone. His teeth clenched firmly, the jaw muscles under his taut skin dancing and flickering like a bodybuilder under the stage lights. His eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared open, shut, open, shut. The phone handset looked like a toy in his thick, scarred hand. The room's fluorescent lights flickered off the big man's Grey Cup championship ring.

Danté Paglione sat behind his massive white marble desk, slowly turning his head, first watching Magnus, then taking in the series of original Leonardo DaVinci sketches hanging on his office wall. DaVinci's work was the encapsulation of control, of calmness, methodical execution of perfection. Magnus, on the other hand, embodied barely contained rage.

Danté was a big man himself, but nothing like his monstrous brother. Magnus was 6-foot-8, 320 pounds, the kind of big that drew unabashed stares, made jaws drop, and made parents unconsciously put a hand on their children and push them back a step or two. Big. And deadly. And growing angrier by the second. Even though Danté was the older sibling by six years, his little brother simply scared the crap out of him.

"You're sure?" Magnus asked, then nodded his bald, cinderblock-thick head. He hung up the phone, slowly and carefully, as if he were trying to control emotions that might make him smash it into a hundred pieces.

Magnus's head gleamed under the office lights. His cold, violet eyes looked like they might be more at home in the head of a snake. A pencil-thin, pale-white scar ran from just above his left eye over the top of his shining head. He was so muscular and wide he actually had to turn his shoulders slightly to fit through office doors. Magnus looked like a dented cement truck wearing a suit coat.

He let out a slow, controlled breath. Hand still on the phone, he turned to look at his brother.

"The Novozyme facility in Denmark is gone."

"Gone? As in abandoned?"

"Gone, as in vaporized," Magnus said. "I've got pictures coming over on the fax, but my CIA contact says it's gone."

Danté let out a slow breath. He didn't have to ask what that meant. There was only one reason to incinerate a billion-dollar facility: a virus had jumped species. "What about Gunston?"

"Dead. He was in the facility. The entire main staff is gone."

Danté nodded. Novozyme was Genada's primary competitor. Gunston had been their answer to Claus Rhumkorrf. You could always build new facilities, but you couldn't replace talent like Rhumkorrf and Gunston. In the race for successful xenotransplantation, Novozyme was effectively out of the game.

"It was Chapman," Magnus said. "The CIA put the finishing touches on the Novozyme facility."

"Chapman is so fucking pious," Danté said. "He thinks he's a savior when his sloppy science was what put the world on guard in the first place."

"Regardless of his belief system, now he's coming for us."

Danté felt a coppery stirring in the pit of his stomach.

"But that doesn't make any sense," Danté said. "We created our method specifically to eliminate any chance of transgenic viruses, and Chapman knows that."

"I don't think he gives a fuck," Magnus said. "Or if he does, his bosses don't."

"You're sure he's going to Baffin?"

Magnus nodded.

Danté took a deep breath. He let it out, just as slowly. He was ready for this.

Danté Paglione hadn't made Genada the world's largest biotech by sitting around with a thumb up his ass, waiting for something to happen. He succeeded because he always thought ahead.

"We knew it might come to this," Danté said. "That's why we have the plane."

Magnus stared for several seconds. His giant right hand rubbed at his giant left forearm, the fabric hissing quietly in the silent room. Danté just stared back. He didn't show any fear, he knew too well how to control his outward emotions. But he sometimes wondered if his brother could *smell* fear: smell it like an animal could smell it.

"You can't be serious about actually using that goddamn thing."

"Of course I'm serious, Magnus. You think we spent \$500 million on the plane so we *don't* use it when we need it most? This is too important, and we've invested far too much money to abandon a return on our investment."

"*Invested?*" Magnus said with a snort. "Is that what you still call it? We're broke, brother. The well has run dry. Do you have any idea what it costs to actually *fly* the thing?"

"I know," Danté said calmly.

“And what about Purinam and her crew. Can we trust them?”

“We paid them enough, so it’s a little late to worry about trust now.”

Magnus laughed. “Money doesn’t always buy loyalty, brother. So, how are we going to fund this?”

“We need another round of investment. We need to move *now*. Rhumkorrf is close. Very close. They could have an embryo within a few weeks.”

“A few weeks?” Magnus’s deep voice rolled, the volume barely below a shout. “You know how many times I’ve heard that? You’ve been saying that for six months!”

“Claus Rhumkorrf produces results, Magnus. Everything the man touches turns to gold. Everything. For God’s sake, he spearheaded the project that brought the extinct quagga back to life!”

Magnus shook his head. “Bullshit. He’s not even the guy doing the work, Overgard and that crazy chink bitch are the brains behind all this. Rhumkorrf is just a glorified manager.”

“You’re an idiot, Magnus. Rhumkorrf makes things happen. He’s the one that makes the connections, that sees how two disparate disciplines can be combined to make something completely new. He’s been producing Nobel-quality work since he was ten years old – if he says he’s close, than he’s *close*, dammit.”

“Has he been racking up billion-dollar debts since he was ten years old? We’re way in the red, big brother. We go much further in the red, and we’re not going to have a company at all. We’ve got Q4 reports coming up – the shareholders are going to be pissed when they see the figures. How fast do you think you can raise the money?”

Danté answered by punching a button on his desk intercom.

“Sandra?”

His administrative assistant answered immediately. “Yes, Mr. Paglione?”

“Contact the b-list investors. Tell them they have an opportunity to get involved with us, but they have to act now. I want them here in four hours.”

“Understood, sir.”

Danté released the button and looked at Magnus.

“Four hours?” Magnus said. “These are multimillionaires. You think they’ll jump like that?”

“They’ll be here. These people have been trying to get into business with me for years. They know we’re up to something big, but they don’t know what. This project is too important to stop now. We’re talking about hundreds of thousands of lives.”

Magnus smiled. “Hundreds of thousands? Being a little grandiose, don’t you think, brother? I think there’s one life in particular you’re worried about here.”

Danté’s face flushed red with embarrassment and anger. “That’s *not* what this is about,” he said, although he knew full well that when you got down to brass tacks, when

“They know we are up to something big.”

you got down to the real *nitty-gritty*, that one life – *his* life – was *exactly* what it was all about. “We’re pushing forward, Magnus. This benefits all of humanity. I don’t care if we go into the red.”

“Dad would have cared. He’s probably spinning in his grave right now, wondering how his oldest son could be so stupid to put all his eggs in one basket.”

Danté stood, suddenly and sharply. Magnus didn’t *step* back, not really, but he moved back ever so slightly. Despite his fear of his hulking younger brother, Danté Paglione was the CEO. Danté Paglione was still in charge, and Danté Paglione put up with *just so much bullshit*.

“Dad trusted my judgment enough to give me fifty-one percent of the company,” Danté said quietly. “And that’s all that really matters here, little brother. You get Purinam and her crew to Baffin Island, and you do it *now*. Call Colding, tell him to prep the staff for evacuation.”

Magnus’s nostrils flared a little wider, and before he walked out of the room, Danté wondered if he saw a sneer on his brother’s lip.



In contrast to his brother’s DaVinci sketches and priceless works of art, few decorations adorned the walls of Magnus’ office. Several photos of a dirty, smiling, post-mission Magnus in green camouflage uniforms, posing with other dirty, smiling, dangerous-looking men, hung from the walls. The photos came from Magnus’s years in the Joint Task Force 2, the counterterrorist division of the Canadian Special Forces. One picture showed Magnus in action for the Calgary Stampeders of the Canadian Football League. But those were happier days, when Magnus was in control of his own destiny and not a puppet dancing on the end of his brother’s string.

Magnus stared at the spreadsheet on his computer screen, his fingers slowly spinning the glass of Yukon Jack that sat on his desk. Raw fury swirled in his soul, a calm, methodical swirl, like magma sliding down a slow drain.

Danté was ruining everything, running Dad’s company into the ground because of some altruistic vision. And for what? All those people were going to die anyway, be it this year, next, or fifty years from now.

It had taken years for Magnus to cultivate his contact in the CIA. Danté hadn’t done that; Magnus had. That contact had revealed the identity of PJ Colding. Magnus had wanted to remove Colding, but Danté recruited him instead. He didn’t even know the spy’s name – she went by the code name “Farm Girl.” Fucking Americans. Everything had to be so dramatic.

Now Farm Girl said Chapman and the CIA were out to eliminate any and all transgenic experiments. Genada was at the top of that list. It was time to pull the plug on the whole project, but Danté refused. Danté wanted to go underground. If Genada did that, and if the CIA caught up with them, the whole company, his *father’s company*, would go under.

It was total bullshit. Magnus had served his country. He’d fought in places no history book would ever record. He’d killed men. He’d watched his friends die. At best, they got

a shallow, unmarked grave. At worst, their bodies were left to terrorists, or enemy soldiers, or even buzzards. He'd earned his keep. Unlike his brother, he'd *earned* the right to be rich.

Magnus had left the JTF2 with a box full of medals that now sat in his bottom desk drawer, under a pile of quarterly reports from two years ago. After his service he earned a starting job as an offensive tackle for the Stampeders. For three seasons he was a dominant lineman, helping the team to a Grey Cup title. All in an effort to make his father proud.

And when Dad died from a bad heart, he'd left the company to Danté, who was running the family business into the ground. The Rhumkorrf project was killing the company. They'd fudged the numbers for the last quarterly report, but they couldn't do it again, not with this much loss.

Magnus knew part of Danté's obsession was that Rhumkorrf's technology could have saved their father, who died shortly after his second heart transplant. A larger part of Danté's obsession, however, came from the fact that he suffered from the same congenital heart defect that had doomed their father.

Three-quarters of a billion dollars spent thus far. No profit in sight. When the shareholders caught wind of this, the stock value would plummet. All because Danté owned fifty-one percent of the voting stock, and could manage the company as he saw fit.

The magma swirl picked up speed, and seemed to spread to his eyes – everything he saw seemed blurry, and took on a red haze.

Magnus's big chest swelled with rapid breaths. What should he do? If he didn't do something soon it would be too late, the company destroyed.

He opened his top desk drawer. Inside sat his Ka-Bar knife in its leather sheath, a knife he'd carried on JTF2 missions in Nepal, Zaire, Baghdad, Mosul, Rwanda, Peru and Bolivia. Missions no one would ever know about. Next to the knife sat some gauze and surgical tape. He set the gauze and tape on the desktop, then pulled the knife from its sheath. The seven-inch, flat-black blade seemed to smile at him. The knife reflected no light save for the thin, razor sharp edge.

"I know you," Magnus said to the knife.

He set the knife on the desk, then rolled up his right sleeve. A network of fine scars covered his forearm, each tight and white like the pursed lips of some old woman. He placed his palm flat on the desktop, fingers splayed out like a thick-limbed, white tarantula.

"Help me," Magnus said as he picked up the knife with his left hand. "I can't think. Help me think." He silently drew the blade across his right forearm. The pain flashed up hot and demanding. It pierced his confusion.

Rivulets of blood ran down his forearm, tangling in short black hairs along the way. He gently set the knife on his desk and started wrapping the gauze around his arm. The swirling magma fury evaporated, replaced by a cool blue pool of calm water.

"Thank you," Magnus said to the knife.

He finished bandaging his arm, rolled down his sleeve, and put everything back in the drawer. It was time to take control of the situation. He'd get the info on Sara Purinam. And then he'd take a little trip to London. There was a way out of this after all. He'd save his father's company, despite his brother's best attempts to demolish it.



It was about saving lives, his life included. Most of these lives were abstract, a theoretical importance. There were some lives, however, that weren't just concepts and statistics – and if Chapman was willing to use a fuel-bomb, those lives were in danger.

Danté tapped at his keyboard, calling up the list of employees on the Baffin Island facility. The names listed in two groups – SCIENTISTS and SECURITY.

The SCIENTISTS listed four names: CLAUS RHUMKORRF, LIU JIANDAN, CLAUDETTE OVERGARD, TEYSHAWN ANDERSON.

That list of talent was priceless, irreplaceable. Claus was the genius who conceived it all, Claudette had successfully brought species back from extinction, and Jiandan understood the genetic code on such an intimate level she could literally type DNA sequences by hand, thousands of characters long, without a single error. Teyshawn was brilliant as well, but not on the level of the other three. Every construction project needed ditch diggers, and Teyshawn was it. Danté couldn't afford to lose any of them, even Teyshawn – training someone else to understand the project, to assist Rhumkorrf, Overgard and Jiandan would cause unacceptable delays.

The scientific staff wasn't expendable.

The security staff was. That list showed four names as well.

PJ COLDING, ANDY CROSTHWAITE, GUNTHER JONES, BRADY GIOVANNI.

With the exception of Colding, they were muscle. Danté would get them out if he could, but if anyone had to stay behind, it would be people from security.



Colding looked down at Claus Rhumkorrf, wondering how someone so small could contain so much anger.

"You get that fat bitch back to work," Rhumkorrf said. "We don't have time for her crazy games."

"Just take it easy, Doc," Colding said as soothingly as he could. "We all know Jian operates on a different level. You need to stop yelling at her so much."

Rhumkorrf shook with rage. "Do I have to explain to you, as well, what's at stake here?"

Colding sighed, and shook his head. Rhumkorrf was right. There just wasn't time for Jian to hide in her room.

"I'll go talk to her right now, okay?"

Rhumkorrf paused for a second, then seemed to relax, as if someone had pressed a release valve on his bottled-up anger. "Please, PJ, I'd appreciate it."

Colding walked out of the genetics lab and headed for Jian's room. Rhumkorrf really needed some management lessons. The man was brilliant, but had few social skills. Rhumkorrf had put the entire project together, using Danté's bottomless pockets to

assemble a world-class team that was on the edge of rewriting medical history. Rhumkorrf was always stressed, but Colding had to admit the man had a good reason for it. Every minute, another person died – someone else, somewhere in the world, said goodbye to their Clarissa just as Colding had said goodbye two years earlier.

He knocked on Jian's door. No answer. He knocked again with the same result. He didn't bother calling out to her. He'd played this same game two dozen times over the past two years. When Jian got in a mood, she hid in her room like a small child. Colding pulled his ID badge out of his pocket and swiped it through the card-reader's slot. The door let out a beep, and the lock clicked free. His badge, of course, was a master key to the entire facility.

"Jiandan," he said lightly as he peeked his head inside. Her room, like the others in the complex, was a typical 800-square-foot apartment: living room, small kitchen, bathroom and bedroom. Her chess set – pieces lined up and ready to play – sat on a coffee table. Chess was something of a pastime amongst the staff, except for Andy the Asshole, who spent all his free time either playing video games or reading porno mags.

Jian whipped ass in chess. Most of the time she barely paid attention, but won anyway. She played more to de-stress than for any kind of a competition – everyone else on the island, Rhumkorrf included, posed absolutely no challenge.

Colding walked to the bedroom ... that's where she always hid from the world. He found her on the bed, curled up in a fat fetal lump, clutching a pillow to her chest.

"Jiandan, how's it going?"

She looked up at him, bleary eyes peering through that thick, shiny black mop of hair. "Why must he yell at me, Mee-Sta Colding?"

Colding sat on the edge of the bed. "He doesn't mean it, Jian. He just wants this experiment to succeed."

She hid her face in her pillow, but Colding had a trump card.

"Bobby landed today. He brought four new samples."

Jian's sobs ended suddenly and her head popped up like a jack-in-the-box.

"Four new samples?"

"Pig-footed bandicoot and Tasmanian Wolf. Shall I deliver them to the lab?"

Jian nodded, and without another word, stood and walked out of her room, wiping away the tears as she went.



Danté oozed confidence, and he knew it. The five people in his meeting room had scrambled aboard private jets to be here on time, dropping everything on their schedule for a chance to get involved with Genada. The world knew Genada was up to something big, and these people smelled a profit.

It was quite a lineup. Two men and a woman from America, one Brit entrepreneur and one Chinese shipping mogul. Both of the American men had made billions in software, while the woman had inherited their family's hotel fortune. All five were members of the One Percent Club, the richest people on the planet.

Danté greeted them all, gave his charming smile, then got down to business. “Genada has a cash flow issue with a critical project. I need capital and I need it now. That gives you a window of opportunity. You’ve all signed nondisclosure agreements, so I’ll just cut to the chase.”

Danté picked up a remote control and hit a button, turning on the five-foot by eight-foot flat-panel mounted on the wall. A chart appeared on the screen, showing a rising, jagged red line, similar to a business chart showing growth of stock prices.

Raising money was Danté’s killing field. While Magnus was born with size, strength and a vicious instinct, Danté had inherited their father’s silver tongue. He needed a fortune, he needed it immediately, and he knew he was going to get it. He began his song and dance.

“The red line represents the growing number of people in the U.S. with terminal illnesses waiting for an organ transplant. As you can see, the number is 63,000 right now. A new name is added to that list every eighteen minutes. Only about 20,000 organs will become available this year. Two thirds of the 63,000 patients in need of a transplant will die. In the U.S., the average wait for a kidney is over fourteen months. The discrepancy between those needing an organ and available organs increases by about twelve percent a year.

“Those numbers are *just* the United States. Worldwide, some estimates range as high as 750,000 people who need a kidney transplant, kidneys being the leading culprit amongst failed organs. That doesn’t take into account heart, lungs and liver. Organ transplants are a zero-sum game – someone has to die in order for someone else to live.

Two thirds of the 63,000 US patients in need of a transplant will die.

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“Genada estimates the average fee for a replacement organ will be \$50,000. That means an annual market of \$37.5 billion. Do I have your attention thus far?”

The five investors’ heads nodded in unison.

“There is a major effort by several companies to create animals with organs that can be transplanted to humans. In order to do this, human genes must be put into the animals to make organs compatible. The process is called xenotransplantation – transferring the organs or tissues of one species into another.”

“Other companies are working on this,” said a small man with thick glasses and a mop haircut. He was one of the software magnates, and by most standards, the richest man on Earth. “Monsanto, Novozyme and others. Using monkeys, I believe.”

Danté nodded and smiled, as if he’d been waiting for such a comment. “Pigs and baboons, actually. Many companies are working on genetically engineering those animals so that their organs are compatible with humans. The current problem with xenotransplantation, however, is that you open yourself to the possibility of a virus jumping species. When you introduce a foreign organ into a human body, you also

introduce any viruses that are in that organ. Normally the viruses die quickly, as they aren't designed to attack a human host. The fear, however, is that a virus will adapt the ability to infect human cells and reproduce. If this happens, it could be a major problem, as we would have a new virus against which no human has natural antibodies.

"Some believe a virus jumped species in the great epidemic of 1918, when 100 million people died from a previously unknown strain of the flu."

"Or like what just happened in Greenland," said the lone woman. "This doesn't sound like a valid investment to me."

The comment caught Danté by surprise. Apparently, Magnus wasn't the only person with contacts in high places. The four men looked at the woman – they obviously hadn't heard about Greenland, but their confidence slipped nonetheless.

Danté knew he could get them back. "Genada is valid, perhaps the only valid investment in this area, because our process eliminates any possibility of a virus jumping from the donor species to humans."

He clicked a button on the remote. The picture showed a small creature perched on a rotting log, surrounded by exotic vegetation of some long-gone jungle. It was an almost tear-shaped creature, thick in the middle with a tail trailing off extremely narrow hips. The rear legs stuck out at 45-degree angles from those slight hips; the front legs also stuck out, but at less of an angle. A sparse layer of silvery fur covered the lithe little body. While it showed some characteristics of a modern animal, particularly the long whiskers protruding from its nose, it looked unmistakably primitive.

"This is a Thrinaxodon, which lived some two-hundred-million years ago. Something like the Thrinaxodon gave rise to all mammals. That something is the ancestor of you, me, dogs, dolphins, every mammal species. That ancestor, my friends, is what Genada is re-creating, and it's going to make all of you a great deal of money."

The mop-haired man stood up. "So let me get this straight. You're making this ancestor creature so you can put its organs into people?"

"We will create an animal similar to the mammalian ancestor. Since the ancestor would be engineered from the DNA up, we can ensure the resulting animal will not carry any viruses. You see, we already have the DNA of the ancestor. It's in me, in you, in all of us, in every mammal on the planet. The Human Genome Project and Celera Genomics sequenced the entire human genetic code by utilizing automated sequencing technology, right down to every last nucleotide. Cataloging and working with this computerized biological data is a science called bioinformatics. But cataloging human DNA was only the start.

"Scientists all over the world now have complete genomes of thousands of mammals. These genomes are stored in big databases like GenBank, all of which are accessible through the Internet. With public databases, and with animals we sequence ourselves, Genada has complete genetic code of almost every mammal on the planet.

"Mutating genes is the basis for evolution. But not all genes mutate at the same rate. Therefore, we think pieces of ancestor's original DNA are present, in parts, in at least one species of mammal. By using a 'molecular clock,' so to speak, we can gauge which sequences have changed, and by comparing that gene to the same gene of another

mammal, we can tell which sequence is older, closer to the original ancestor's genetic code."

The woman smiled. "You're using the lowest common denominator. You just take out everything that's different, and leave everything that's the same. That's so simple."

Danté nodded. They were getting it, he had them. The woman was the toughest sell. Even though she'd inherited her fortune, he sensed she was the smartest of the five. Her smile, the sparkle in her eyes ... he had her. And if he had her, he probably had the rest of them.

"We have the world's top bioinformatics scientist, Doctor. Liu Jiandan. She has created an evolution lab inside the computer. The program statistically analyzes the entire genome based on the probability of the function of each gene sequence. The computer works with the combined genome, predicting final form and function, then making changes, predicting again, and measuring probability for desired traits. It's just like evolution, only it is in reverse and a million times faster. We create the creature in the computer, one nucleotide at a time. Since it is created from scratch, we know it is free of any viral contamination."

The Chinese man spoke "But you can't create a whole animal from scratch."

"Of course not, but we don't need to create a whole animal. We need to create the full genome, the genetic instructions for building an animal, if you will. Take yourselves, for example - each cell in your body contains your full genome, stored in your DNA. We create our new genome, put it into an egg taken from a surrogate mother, and then put that modified egg back into the mother, which in our case is a cow. We let nature do the rest. Doctor Jiandan's computer program is designing the genome of a fast-growing, roughly human-sized animal, which is critical in order to produce human-sized organs. It may not be the right size at first, but once we've got a living creature, a *pure* creature, we can continue to modify the genome until the animal's organs are ideally suited for human transplantation."

The Chinese man leaned back. "But if you have all this technology, why not just grow the organs individually?"

"Some companies are working on just that solution, but it's not yet possible. And to grow an individual organ will require an expensive lab or manufacturing center. The ancestors, on the other hand, will be able to breed. They'll grow fast, and they'll reproduce. All we have to do is feed them. We'll have a *herd* of low-cost donor animals to meet rising organ demand. We will *own* the creature, because we made it, down to the last strand of DNA, and therefore we can charge whatever the market will bear."

Danté let that last sentence hang. Nothing sold like life itself, and for hundreds of thousands of people not quite ready for death, the market would bear quite a bit.

"That's the opportunity. I appreciate you all coming on short notice, and I apologize for more short notice, but I need your decision immediately. The buy-in for this project is \$15 million, which nets you a one percent share of net profits from the sale of the organs. We estimate your one percent will equal \$20 million a year."

He didn't need to give them more math. The return on investment would come within

one year of creating the donor animal. After that, it was pure profit. He only needed three of them to come through.

He got all five.



Teyshawn Anderson was sitting alone in bed, listening to the Dawn & Drew podcast, when he felt it.

Podcasts were one of the few forms of entertainment that kept them relatively connected to the outside world. Danté didn't allow any television, any radio, any newspapers. Nothing that could communicate from the outside. The staff got by on books, DVDs, and videogames, mostly. But Jian had rigged up the satellite dish so they could receive internet signal from time to time. When that signal came in, he made sure to grab as many podcasts as he could get. It gave him more voices to hear in project's few off hours, helping dull the loneliness if just a bit. One second, he'd been sitting there laughing about Dawn Micelli's view that being born was the same as going down on your mother - the next second, his wristwatch buzzed, and everything changed.

Teyshawn Anderson didn't leap out of bed when he heard it. He was too well trained for that. Teyshawn, actually, wasn't trained in anything ... not if you didn't count preparing DNA samples, extracting eggs from the uterus of a cow, or being general scientific shit-hauler for the Rhumkorrf project. Teyshawn wasn't trained to live a dual life for over a year, wasn't trained in signal intelligence and covert activities, and certainly wasn't trained to control his emotions when his wristwatch buzzed out a silent message.

But Paul Stillwell was.

He'd only received one message in the past twelve months. Just one, to warn him that Magnus Paglione was going above and beyond in background checks on a certain Teyshawn P. Anderson, Ph.D. candidate from the Biological Engineering Department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. That had been nine months ago, three months after "Teyshawn" began working on the Rhumkorrf project. His background checked out eventually, and Colding accepted him as one of the flock.

Maintaining that acceptance meant maintaining deep cover. Almost no communication in or out from Sydney Chapman, his boss. Twelve damn months pretending to be someone else, so long that on more than one occasion Paul had to think for several moments to remember his own real name. That was how much Teyshawn had become a part of his soul. But it was all for a reason - it was for his country. Hell, it was even for the world. He was here because of the potential danger of transgenic viruses. No one knew if it *would* happen, but they knew it *could* happen, and if it did, it could kill millions. He'd given up a year of his life, but a year was enough, and in the darkness of his room he slowly counted the buzzes, hoping that this was the signal that he could finally get back to his life as ...

As ...

As ... fucking *Paul Stillwell*, that's who.

A tiny chip in his watch picked up satellite signals. The signals carried the highest known levels of encryption. His chip caught those signals and decoded them, buzzing out the translated message in the simple dots and dashes of Morse code.

Destroy all trans

Destroy experiment

Detain all, support lands at 07:00

Teyshawn/Paul sat quietly, not moving, barely breathing. Why now? After a year of this double life, Chapman wanted him to act. But Rhumkorrf was so close. Paul knew the project better than anyone, better than Chapman could ever know it. Rhumkorrf was the real deal, and when he succeeded he'd save millions of lives every year.

No, not *when* ... *if*.

He had to get his shit straight. He knew the project, yes, knew it far better than Chapman knew it, but Chapman was on the outside. Out there, Chapman had access to untold information. Paul Stillwell knew about one thing and one thing only.

That's why there's a chain of command.

He had his orders. No ambiguity. It wasn't his place to second-guess Chapman. He took another slow, deep breath, trying to calm himself. He had to destroy the project. At least he hadn't been ordered to kill anyone ... the last twelve months these people were all he'd known, and they were his friends. But he had a job to do.

Except he had to do that job without any guns. And while he'd have the element of surprise, he had to go up against his drinking buddy, Gunther Jones, the Gulf vet who was addicted to romance novels. He had to go up against the brick wall known as Brady

He had to destroy the project.

Giovanni, the 6-foot-3 mamma's boy with a voice like a girl. He had to go up against that little ball of hate Andy Crosthwaite, Andy the Asshole, the guy who liked no one and didn't give a fuck what anybody thought.

And, he reminded himself, go up against PJ Colding. The ex-CIA agent. The "traitor." Out of all his friends-suddenly-turned-enemies, Teyshawn had no illusions about who was the most dangerous.

Their four guns against Paul's zero guns. He had to prioritize. The first step was to immobilize and isolate. Chapman was coming and bringing reinforcements.

He'd gone through this scenario a thousand times in his mind, and he knew exactly

what to do. He'd prepared for it, timing out the events with rigid precision. He slid out of bed and dressed, then sat down at his computer. A few key taps brought up his private menu. He'd written several programs for this occasion, and hidden them inside a miles-long stream of genetic code. He started the process of translating his hidden code into normal, useful form. He hadn't dared store them in a ready to use format, not with Jian on the island. She interacted with computers in a way he'd never seen – if he had hacker programs just sitting there, she would have found them somehow.

His programs would cause some damage. How much damage depended on if Jian was awake or asleep.



Jian polished off a bottle of Dr. Pepper, then put the empty into the trash. She walked to the lab's small fridge, got a new bottle, and drank half of it in one pull. The carbonation bubbled up in her mouth, chasing away the dry, pasty taste that always accumulated when she worked long hours.

She finished preparing the raw DNA of the four extinct mammals. They'd long ago collected samples of every living mammal known to man. When that hadn't done the trick, when Jian determined they needed an even wider base of DNA, Danté had moved on to acquiring samples from extinct species.

She slid each vial into a Polymerase Chain Reactor, a machine designed to produce huge quantities of copied DNA, the twisting double strand of nucleotide pairs that provided the raw instructions nature used to build every animal on the planet. First the PCR machine "unzipped" the DNA by heating it to 95 degrees Celsius, which broke the hydrogen bonds between the strands, leaving two single strands of DNA. The machine then cooled the mixture to 55 degrees Celsius and washed it in free nucleotides – adenine, guanine, thymine and cytosine. With the aid of an enzyme known as DNA polymerase, the free molecules paired up with the open-ended nucleotides like a self-assembling puzzle, filling in the blank end of the "ladder" that was the DNA double helix. The end result was two perfect copies of the original DNA strand. At that point, the machine repeated the process. Two copies became four, which became eight, which became sixteen, et cetera. The PCR machine ran automatically and unattended, completing a cycle in only a few minutes.

The identical copies were then placed in a sequencer, which literally counted off and recorded each nucleotide. The sequencer would run the same process on thousands of strands, checking for accuracy, creating a nucleotide-by-nucleotide sequence that comprised the animal's DNA. Resultant data fed automatically into the Billups IX supercomputer, where her program took over. She closed the lid on the PCR machines and set them to run automatically.

In just a few hours, they could add the new DNA sequences to her genome database. Each time they added a species, they got a little closer. She sat at a monitor and called up the current genome database.

GENOME AT SEQUENCING: PROCESSING
PROOFREADING ALGORITHM:PROCESSING

VIABILITY PROBABILITY: 65.0567 PERCENT

Over and over again the powerful Billups IX processed trillions of combinations of DNA, looking for the magical combination that would produce a viable embryo. They were close now. A few more samples, a few more mammalian species, perhaps, and they would have it.

She still had her secret experiment, the one she hadn't revealed to Rhumkorrf. Hadn't even revealed to Colding, for that matter. She had a genome with 99.65 percent viability probability, but it didn't use a cow's DNA – it used *her* DNA. Combining the synthetic ancestor genome with bovine DNA had frustrated her, so she'd developed a template of human DNA to provide comparative analysis. It helped some, but not enough. She found it ironic that if they could use a human host, particularly Jian herself, they would have successful implantation on the first try.

She'd even secretly done the immune reaction with her own white blood cells, and the eggs passed with flying colors. Jian had destroyed the rapidly splitting eggs immediately afterwards. She couldn't tell anyone – using human DNA was the ultimate ethical breach. Genada couldn't let something like that go: she would be fired, unable to finish the project, dooming hundreds of thousands of people to a miserable death by organ failure.

So many people. People dying every day, dying because of her incompetence.

She needed to relax. She slid to another computer and called up the Chess Master program. Chess was the only thing that took her away. She set the program on the "Kasparov" level, the highest it would go. She always won, but the computer program was good enough to make her actually think about her moves, and that provided the needed escape from a billion repetitions of C, G, A and T.

Jian stared at the black and white pieces lined up neatly on the video chess board. The computer waited for her to make the first move, but for some reason, she could only stare at the pieces. The black pieces. The white pieces. Black and white.

Black and white.

Like the fur on the cows.

"That's it," she whispered. "That's it. *Hao yang a!*"

Jian's toes suddenly itched and a burst of adrenaline shot through her veins with a goosebump-raising chill. When something amazing was about to happen, she always felt her toes tingle. There was no scientific explanation for it, no way to define how her *body* seemed to understand something that her *mind* hadn't processed. And yet she'd had the sensation enough times, followed by enough stunning discoveries, that to her it was a law and not a hypothesis: tingling toes = breakthrough.

She quit the chess program and called up the bovine genome, her fingers an unrecognizable blur on the keyboard. It was so obvious ... why hadn't she thought of this before?

The main terminal let out an alarm beep, demanding her attention. She called up the alarm window.

REMOTE BACKUP FAILURE

The off-site backup, the ten-terabyte data drive that sat in a temperature-controlled brick building at the end of the runway, had failed. That program hadn't failed once in

the fourteen months since she'd written it. The backup drive was designed to survive no matter what: to keep the experiment alive in the event of worst-case scenarios at the main facility, like a computer crash, a fire, an explosion, or even a transgenic virus. She'd been told it could even survive something called a fuel-bomb, although she couldn't imagine why someone would use something that devastating on a research facility.

“Take a bite out of that, Danielle Steele.”

The backup was far enough away that even if a virus killed everyone, the Pagliones could safely collect the drive and continue on with the experiment.

The timing couldn't be worse. She had inspiration, the missing piece that might let her solve the immune reaction problem. But she highly doubted the backup drive failure was an accident – someone was up to something. She'd just have to do two things at once: deal with the backup failure, and simultaneously type in the genetic code that had hit her like a lightning bolt from Zeus.

Jian's fingers flew across the keyboard. She instantly isolated the computer lab from the rest of the network, then quickly called up a diagnostics program.



Margarite's hands moved of their own accord, as if possessed by an unseen demon of passion. She undid the laces on her bodice, slowly exposing her soft, moon-shaped breasts. When the night air caressed her nipples she gasped ... how could she be so bold?

“Yes, Mrs. Sansome,” Craig beckoned heatedly. “Yes, let me see.”

“I will, Craig,” she cooed sexually.

She stared at him, her eyes passionately out of focus. She wanted him. But he was just a stable boy! She had come so far from her servant beginnings, winning the hand of Edward and becoming Mrs. Edward Sansome the Duchess of Tethshire and a very rich woman with money and jewels and many servants of her own. This was wrong, was it not? She wanted to run, run back to the mansion to the bed where she belonged. Yes, she must go.

However, before she could turn and run, Craig stood up and effortlessly declodded himself of his trousers.

Margarite gasped. Now she knew why the housemaids nicknamed Craig “The Stallion.”



Gunther Jones sat back and looked at the words he'd just typed. Not bad, if he did say so himself. *Take a bite out of that, Danielle Steele*. Danielle Steele had sold, like, 100 million books, and she sucked. He was highly educated in his opinion – he'd read all of Steele's books, as well as all the novels by Sabrina Jefferies, Nora Roberts and a dozen

others.

The wee hours of the morning usually proved to be his most creative. Tucked away in the security control room, no one bothered him, particularly at 3:00 a.m. Not that he didn't do his job – he ran through all procedures, making sure the alarm systems were online and keeping in contact with Andy or Brady, whichever one pulled outside patrol. The control room was small, but state-of-the-art. Closed-circuit cameras blanketed the facility interior, giving him a view of every possibly angle. Tonight, like every night, there wasn't much to see. But that took maybe fifteen minutes every hour, leaving Gunther with plenty of time to write.

Most of those romance novel writers sucked. Gunther knew he was better than all of them. He just needed a break, and that was the thing he couldn't find. Well, once this assignment was over, he'd have that chance. Twelve months on a deserted Arctic island – no women, no bars, no changes – had given him plenty of time to write. He'd completed two novels in the Sansome series already: *Lost Innocence* and *Lost Loves*. As soon as he finished his current book, *Lost Lust*, he'd have a hot trilogy to push on agents. And this time it wouldn't be like before. He had money now, quite a bit, thanks to what Danté paid people to make them essentially disappear for over a year. Gunther would just flat-out hire an agent. No more tossing his hard-crafted words into a slush pile, maybe to be read by some twenty-year-old feminist dyke college intern who thought she knew good writing from bad.

He stretched and took a sip of coffee, then set the mug back down on Daniel Steele's *To Love Again*. The book was good for little more than a coaster. He should know, he'd read it three times.

The computer beeped, indicating an alert message. Gunther reduced his novel (making sure to save it first, he wasn't about to lose those amazing words), revealing a flashing alert message.

SATELLITE UPLINK SIGNAL DOWN

He called up the maintenance screen and hit the “re-link” button. Colding didn't like losing that signal, although it happened from time to time for some interstellar communications reason they didn't really understand. He looked at the screen, waiting to see the link reconnect like it always did.

NO SIGNAL DETECTED, RE-LINK FAILURE

He had never seen that before. He repeated the step.

NO SIGNAL DETECTED

“Colding's going to be pissed,” Gunther mumbled as he called up the diagnostics program and let it run.

HARDWARE FAILURE

He stared at the screen. This had never happened before. There was only one thing left to do in the repair protocol. He slid a headset on his head and punched the “send” button.

“Brady, are you there?”

Brady called back almost immediately, his high-pitched voice tinny through the speaker. “What's up, Gun?”

“Where you at, big fella?” Gunther tapped keys, changing the monitors to bring up views outside the facility.

“I’m on the north side of the cow pen, circling around the back of the hangar.

That put the massive hangar directly between Brady and the communications platform.

“Scoot over to the satellite dish, will ya? See if it looks okay.”

“Sure thing,” Brady said. “I’m on my way. Hey, the cow pen door is open, and most of the cows are out in the pen. Who opened that? It’s freezing out here. Shouldn’t the cows be inside the hanger?”

“Don’t worry about it right now. Just get over to the platform right away.”

“Got it. What am I looking for?”

“Don’t know. Just see if everything looks shipshape. Call me when you get there.”

•••

Inside the genetics lab, Claudette Overgard cursed under her breath. That morning’s embryo experiment had come out the same as the first seven attempts – 150 embryos, another 150 failures. This time, Claus’s face had turned so red Claudette wondered if her former lover might have a stroke.

Claus. That man always wanted what he couldn’t have. It was what made him great, had him on the verge of creating a cure to save millions of lives. But it was also what made him so infuriating, so ... unreasonable. She’s loved him once, back when they worked together on the Quagga project. That was a lie ... she *still* loved him, and working with him every day, so *close* – it was pure torture.

He wanted what he couldn’t have, and what he’d wanted was for Claudette to love only him. But she wasn’t wired that way, wired the way he wanted her to be. She had needs, baseline drives and desires that couldn’t be ignored, couldn’t be corrected. And they didn’t need to be corrected. There was nothing *wrong* with her. She liked men, she also liked women. If Claus had been the right man for her, he would have understood that, accepted it.

Despite his religious beliefs, Claudette knew she could have been more discreet. She should have told him about her bisexual nature before he caught her in bed with Ghaniyah. It had been a shock to the man – not only to find his lover cheating on him, with another scientist in the quagga project, but with a *female* scientist. If she’d only been honest with him from the beginning, honest and up-front with her nature, things might have turned out different. Many men would consider a scene like that a fantasy – to come upon your woman, in bed with a lithe twenty-something, both perfectly willing to embrace a *ménage a trois*. But not Claus, unfortunately. *He* wasn’t wired *that* way, it seemed.

He’d never forgiven her. Despite her attempts to reason with him, her apologies, her pleas for forgiveness, he’d stood firm. They were finished, and that was that. To his credit, he’d kept her on the quagga project. He was the consummate professional, never mentioning the incident, never changing the way he acted around her in the lab. In many ways that was even worse – he treated her like a co-worker, as if their hundreds of

nights of passion had never existed at all.

That was Claus. He'd needed her on the project, so he kept her on the project, kept her working, somehow managed to keep her focused, and she'd found Nobel-caliber success. That same success led to Claus's deal with Genada. Claus, always putting the pieces together, always the brilliant organizer. This time combining Claudette's unparalleled expertise in cloning extinct animals, and Dr. Liu Jiandan's presumed ability to recover a genome that was lost 250 million years ago.

Claudette hated Jian. Each immune reaction failure cast a poor reflection on Claudette's abilities, yet it wasn't her fault. None of it was. There was nothing she could do if that corpulent imbecile couldn't produce a viable genome. Did Claus expect her to create an animal from thin air?

In most cloning projects, the concept was rather simple. First, you identified the cell you wanted to clone, say a stem cell from a particularly valuable steer. Next, you removed an egg from a cow, then "enucleated" it, sucking out the single cell's nucleus. Then you injected the nucleus of the candidate cell into the egg. That completed the lion's share of the work – you gave the egg an electrical shock to fuse the cell and the introduced nucleus, put the newly-fused egg in a chemical soup, and waited for mitosis: for the single cell to begin dividing. After that happened – *if* that happened – it was reinserted into the cow and allowed to develop normally.

The method was originated in the legendary cloning of Dolly, the Scottish sheep. Then variations of the method were used to clone dozens of identical mice. Later came the avalanche of cloned species: fish, birds, goats, cattle, even dogs and cats. Genetic Savings & Clone had made billions by cloning household pets for the world's richest people. Variations on the method abounded, but the central principle remained the same.

The key to all methods, however, revolved around using the same or similar species for both the egg and the creature to be cloned. For the God Machine's creation, however, the last close relative died out some 260 million years earlier. She had a viable embryo, splitting on its own, undergoing several rounds of mitosis, but until they could trick the cow's immune system to accept the embryo as *self*, they couldn't go any further.

Even with the quagga, the answer had been comparatively easy, considering zebras were so closely related. Once they had cultivated a quagga chromosome, they injected it into the enucleated zebra egg, then put the egg back into a zebra mother. It hadn't worked at first; the developing quagga embryo produced proteins that reacted poorly with the zebra egg. The zebra's immune system rejected the embryo. She'd found a way around it by isolating the gene sequence that produced the antigens – the offending proteins – then replaced it with the same segment from the zebra's DNA. It had been a small section of DNA, and they still weren't sure exactly what it coded for, but the method worked. With the offending antigenic proteins eliminated, the zebra's body handled the pregnancy normally, resulting in the first baby quagga to set foot on the planet in more than a century.

And that accomplishment was why Danté had called her to this god-forsaken island in this god-forsaken country. But this was harder, much harder. The zebra and quagga DNA were so similar as to be virtually indistinguishable: over ninety-nine percent identical. That made isolating the offending genes that much easier.

Now, however, they didn't have a mother that was a close genetic match. They had an impossibility, a computer-designed genome. That, and a cow.

That wasn't to say she hadn't made significant progress. Fusing the artificially constructed DNA and the cow's egg to produce a dividing embryo was quite an accomplishment in itself. Amazingly, the egg started rapid mitosis almost immediately after electrical fusion.

Jian had coded for rapid growth, and the fat woman's abilities were downright frightening. Claudette had watched Jian work, in those moments where Jian tuned everyone out, got all glassy eyed, and typed in code so fast it couldn't be read on the screen. Somehow Jian had tricked biology into a growth rate never before seen, especially in a mammal. But the fast-growing embryos still couldn't survive the cow's immune system.

A sixty-five percent viability rating was simply not good enough. That meant the computer basically knew sixty-five percent of the proteins matched established sequences in known mammals. The other thirty-five percent constituted little more than a guess. That amounted to billions of nucleotides, millions of sequences – far too many to eliminate by trial and error. No one knew exactly what genes coded for what traits. She might be swapping out a protein that affected the color of the animal's eyes, or she might be swapping out a protein that was a critical component of brain development.

With each additional genome added to Jian's database, they'd grown closer; the first thousand mammal genomes produced only ten percent viability. The thousand after that took them to twenty-two percent. After four thousand mammalian genomes had been processed, they'd barely cracked forty-five percent viability, but after that their progress grew exponentially.

Claudette hoped that the four new specimens could take them up over eighty-five percent. At that ratio, she was confident she could solve the problem within a month or so. Until then, until they hit eighty-five percent or higher, Claudette knew all her work was nothing more than scientific masturbation.



Brady Giovanni didn't mind the cold, but that didn't mean he was stupid about it. He had been one of those kids that always listened to his mother. Not that Angela Giovanni gave him or any of his five brothers much of a choice about listening to her. Growing up in Saskatoon, listening to your mother meant dressing warm. When he drew midnight patrol, he always wore thermal long johns, thermal socks on his size thirteen feet, the black Genada parka with matching snowpants, military grade extreme cold weather gloves, a scarf, and – the thing that Andy “The Asshole” Crosthwaite teased him about to no end – a wool hat knitted by none other than Angela Giovanni herself. The hat fit perfectly over his big head, and over the headset/mic combo he had to wear when on

his short patrols.

The night wind whipped across Baffin Island: a bitter air-dagger looking for wayward victims. The wind could blow all it wanted, because Brady was prepared. Well, a little more than prepared, as proven by the sweat that trickled down his armpits despite the subzero temperatures. Maybe he was overdressed. But even now, at twenty-eight-years-old, he could hear his mother's voice: *You can always cool off, but if you don't have enough clothes, you can't get warmer.* He missed his mother terribly. Andy could make fun of that too, but Brady didn't care. He hadn't seen his family in over a year. But it was worth it. Rhumkorrf's work was worth it.

Brady kept sharp as he came around the corner of the hangar and approached the satellite array. Not much happened out here, and if Gunther pointed out anything, no matter how trivial, at least it gave Brady a chance to practice good soldiering. The fifteen-foot-wide dish pointed out to the stars, away from Brady. He'd have to move around to the front to see the receiver, which hung on the arms that pointed in and up from the edges of the dish. He steadily swept his vision from left to right, then right to left as he walked.

Baffin Island had suddenly
become quite un-boring.

50

Gunther's voice piped into his headset. "You there yet?"

"I'm twenty feet away and you know that," Brady said. "You're watching on infrared, aren't you?"

Gunther's laugh sounded tinny through the tiny headset. "Yeah, I love this thing. Gotta find my entertainment somewhere. This crap bores the piss out of me."

Brady came around the edge of the satellite dish. He stared at the gadget for a full three seconds, not really believing what he saw – on an island where nothing ever happened, it took his brain just a second to understand that something finally *had* changed.

Baffin Island had suddenly become quite un-boring.

...

The vid-phone again let out its un-ignorable, shrill digital blare; this time at 3:22 a.m. Colding clicked the "connect" button.

"What's up, Gun?"

"We have a situation," Gunther said. "The satellite array has been damaged."

Colding instantly came fully awake. "Define 'damaged' for me."

"Let me patch in Brady," Gunther said. "Brady, Colding's on, tell him what you see."

Gunther's face stayed on the screen, but Brady's girlish voice came from the speakers. "Colding, you there?"

"Go ahead," Colding said.

"Someone whacked the fuck out of the satellite array. The dish is fine, but the receiver-transmitter unit has been smashed up pretty bad."

"Could it be from an animal, or anything natural?"

"Not unless an animal can use a hammer. I checked the hangar's maintenance bin. One of the fence-repair pliers is missing."

Colding felt his pulse quicken. The fence-repair pliers were easily accessible, since the bin sat outside the hangar. A post digger, some spare fence rolls, posts and the pliers. Even docile cows broke fences occasionally; repairs were needed from time to time. Only one of the staff members would have thought to use them. Outside forces would have come armed, equipped. Colding knew it was an inside job.

"Gunther give me a headcount."

"No problem, boss." Gunther's eyes looked away from the screen, back to another unseen monitor.

"Let's see ... Jian is awake and in the computer lab working with the Billups. Overgard and Rhumkorrf are awake and in the genetics lab. Andy's asleep, Brady is doing a perimeter walk, I'm here, you're there, and ... I'm not sure where Teyshawn is."

Colding stood up. "He's not in his room? Where is he? Do an infrared body count of the whole building."

Gunther's droopy eyes narrowed in concentration. "Um ... infrared confirms visual. Everyone accounted for in the building except for Brady and Teyshawn."

"Do you show any building exits?" All entries and exits into the building required an ID badge swipe. The computer tracked all comings and goings.

"No sir," Gunther said. "Nothing in the last two hours."

"I've been in and out twice in the last two hours," Brady said.

Colding felt a cold chill in the pit of his stomach. The doors tracked every entry and exit, unless someone shut off that system. Probably via computer. And next to Jian, Teyshawn was the only one with the skill to do that. Colding had that skill, too ... the CIA had trained him to do it.

"Brady, I want Teyshawn found. It's him. Keep your eyes open for others. He may be acting alone or starting shit and waiting for reinforcements. He's got a weapon. Don't play hero, if he attacks you, put him down."

"Yessir," Brady said, his voice crawling up another pitch in the excitement.

Brady was a nice guy. Colding didn't want him giving Teyshawn the benefit of the doubt, because if Teyshawn was what Colding thought he was, Teyshawn would take big Brady out without thinking twice.

"Gunther, get Andy up and tell him to guard the rear airlock. I don't want Teyshawn getting back inside. I'm going out the front airlock to have a look."

"Yes sir. Should I go help search?"

"No, you stay there and start sweeping the external cameras." Colding jammed his feet into his boots and pulled on his black Genada parka. "Keep your eye on both entry

doors.”

“Yes sir,” Gunther’s face disappeared from the screen.

Colding reached into his nightstand and pulled out his Beretta. He popped out the magazine – full. Popping it back into place, he made sure the safety was on before he shrugged on his parka. He quietly opened his door and cautiously checked the hallway. Seeing no movement, he headed for the main airlock.



Teyshawn was up to something. On Baffin Island, he was the only person, other than her, capable of writing a program like the one that had erased the off-site backup drive. If Jian hadn’t been up and working, Teyshawn’s program would probably have wiped out the main drive and the onsite backup as well. She had caught his program in midstream. Caught it and eliminated it. If she hadn’t been aware, they would have lost everything the Billups IX had produced since Bobby Valentine brought the latest samples.

And that would have been disaster indeed ... because it was finally working.

Jian had to split her attention between wiping out the last vestiges of Teyshawn’s rampaging computer problems and watching the Billups IX readout. No one else seemed to understand the Billups’s endless stream of letters, but she did. She didn’t know why. She always seemed to understand things that no one else could. At times, even *she* didn’t comprehend what she was looking at, not on a logical level, not on A+B = C level, but rather on an emotional, instinctive level.

Her toes tingled so bad she almost had to take off her shoes and scratch them. It had never been this intense before ... something was coming.

The tingling began only a few moments earlier when the PCR process completed and the Billups IX took over, applying high-powered computer efficiency to the endless random math problem of the ancestral genome. They were close, Jian knew it, just as she knew she had ten toes (and all of them tingling like mad).

One computer alarm was still beeping. She was so transfixed on the streaming screen of ATCGs that it took her a few seconds to register it, but she pulled her attention away from the Billups IX readout.

SATELLITE HARDWARE FAILURE

Jian immediately started tapping the keys, rebooting the backup system. She called up a systems diagnostics, which instantly gave her a summary of errors for all programs anywhere on the island. She wasn’t supposed to have access to the security programs, but hacking into it had been child’s play.

She stared at the screen. It listed four errors.

BACKUP FAILURE

SATELLITE HARDWARE FAILURE

DOOR ACCESS TRACKING SYSTEM FAILURE

CAMERA SYSTEM FAILURE

He had cut them off from the outside world, he had wiped out the off-site backup, and he had tried to wipe out the Billups IX’s memory and the onsite backup. Jian didn’t know why he was doing this, didn’t know his purpose, but she saw the connections

behind Teyshawn's moves. For whatever reason, he wanted to wipe out their research.

With the backup destroyed and the satellite uplink gone, there was only one set of data left – the same onsite backup that sat under Jian's desk. She didn't have time to deal with all of Teyshawn's hacks: she had to prioritize. She could get to the cameras later.

The Billups IX interrupted her thoughts with a cheerful chime that sounded horribly out of place considering the current situation. Jian called up the Billups IX's readout.

And when she saw the results, she kicked off her shoes and scratched madly at her toes.

GENOME A1 SEQUENCING: COMPLETE

PROOFREADING ALGORITHM: COMPLETE

VIABILITY PROBABILITY: 95.0567 PERCENT

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Blackness swam around him, but it was dissipating. Bits and pieces came back ... a sound, his name, the shitty taste in his mouth. Andy Crosthwaite just wanted to stay asleep.

But that cocksucker Gunther would just not shut the fuck up.

"Andy, come on, wake up!"

The only light in the room came from the vid-phone. Andy's eyes fluttered open, but just a bit – the vid-phone's light was blinding to his squinting, sleepy eyes.

"Don't you have a fag novel to write, or something?"

"Andy, I'm not kidding, get up *now*."

Andy slept in a queen-size bed, like everyone else in the facility. And like everyone else, he had two pillows. He only needed one to sleep.

"Get up! Teyshawn's sabotaging the place, you need to guard the backdoor, so get your ass out of bed!"

Andy reached out and put the vid-phone face down. Then he put his spare pillow on top of it. It didn't drown Gunther out completely, but Andy was a very sound sleeper, and it was enough.

•••

"Andy, you shithead, wake up!"

Gunther could no longer see anything in Andy's room. The screen was black. He started to scream again, louder, this time, when another monitor caught his eye.

"Brady!" Gunther shouted into the headset. "Brady, come in!"

"Easy, Gun!" Brady shouted back. "This headset is inside my ear, okay?"

"Right, sorry." Gunther continued in a calm voice. "Infrared picked up someone in the hangar."

"Can you see what he's doing? Where is he?"

"Looks like he's in front of the Eurocopter. No, he's moving to the back of the hangar, towards the cattle stalls ..."

Gunther saw Brady's heat signal close on the hangar door.

"I'm going in," Brady said as he closed the last ten feet.

“But I’m also getting a heat source from outside the hangar,” Gunther said. “One’s got to be Teyshawn, but the other is smaller ...”

•••

Brady put his big shoulder into the door, slamming it open with a clang. He leveled his Beretta at the big Eurocopter, eyes looking for a human target.

What he smelled, in that last second of his life, told him he had made a really, really bad mistake.

He smelled propane – and a lot of it.

Paul Stillwell’s homemade fuse was simple enough, a rope soaked in gasoline. He ignited it with a lighter from a good twenty yards outside the hangar. The rope led along the ground, and into the hangar’s mostly closed backdoor. The flame followed the rope, moving inside the hangar just two seconds after Brady muscled through the front door.

Stillwell had opened up every propane canister inside the hangar, filling the space with the flammable gas. When the flame on the rope fuse entered the hangar, the contained cloud erupted in a massive explosion.

The explosion started at the back of the hangar and grew exponentially, lashing out at a pressure of twenty pounds-per-square-inch, the equivalent of a gust of wind traveling at 470 miles per hour. The shockwave smashed into Brady, picking the big man up and throwing him back. Had he gone through the door, he might have been thrown clear, but unfortunately he hit the hangar wall, giving him a concussion and knocking him out cold. He was so knocked out, in fact, that he didn’t feel the 3,000 degree Fahrenheit fireball that engulfed him in the next millisecond. Brady’s skin bubbled even as his clothes burst into flame.

54

Forty of the cows were outside, leaving ten still inside the hangar – they didn’t fare any better than Brady. The fireball knocked them about like little dogs, not the 1,500-pound creatures they were, breaking legs and ribs when they hit the ground or the hangar walls.

Vehicles were Stillwell’s intended target ... Brady Giovanni and the cows were just collateral damage. The explosion knocked down the west wall and part of the east wall. The roof seemed to lift up, balanced on a growing cloud of flame, then it crashed down, smashing on top of the Humvee and the Eurocopter, demolishing the latter’s rotor blades. The 55-gallon barrels of gasoline and aviation fuel caught fire, sending pillars of flame streaking up through the collapsed roof. Dark-orange flames filled the destroyed hangar, scorching metal and melting plastic.

No one would be driving or flying off Baffin Island anytime soon.

•••

Andy’s mother had always said he could sleep through a herd of buffalo stampeding through his room. Apparently, a gasoline explosion was a bit louder than a herd of buffalo.

The blast echoed across the landscape, and even in a pressure-sealed building it was enough to wake up Andy Crosthwaite. There was no grogginess this time – he’d been in

firefights before, and once you've seen men die in combat, the sound of an explosion tends to bring you fully awake.

"Oops," Andy said to himself.

He slid out of bed and grabbed his Beretta. Satisfied that it was loaded and the safety was off, he started scrambling into his clothes.

•••

The explosion shook the genetics lab so much that equipment fell off lab tables. Pyrex beakers crashed to the floor. Rhumkorrf and Overgard both clutched the edge of a black lab table, bracing as if it were an earthquake, but the shaking subsided as fast as it had started.

"What the hell was that?" Rhumkorrf said.

"Must have been an explosion."

Rhumkorrf ran to the intercom and punched the SECURITY ROOM button.

"This is Doctor Rhumkorrf. What's going on?"

Gunther's voice, short and stressed, answered immediately. "We're a little busy, Doc."

"Well, was that an explosion? What do we do?"

"The explosion was in the hangar. We think Teyshawn is trying to sabotage the experiment. Lock the lab door from the inside and hide, Doc. If he tries to get in call me back, but I have to go."

Rhumkorrf let go of the intercom button. Teyshawn? Trying to destroy the experiment. Overgard looked at him, her eyes afraid.

"Claus," she said in a quavering voice. "What do we do?"

She wanted reassurance, she wanted comforting. He didn't want to give her either. So many years of this charade, pretending that he didn't care how she'd been unfaithful – not only unfaithful, but a *blasphemer*. Still, just like Jian was the only person in the world who could recover a dead genome, Claudette Overgard was the only person in the world that could bring that dead genome back to life. And for that skill, Rhumkorrf could keep on pretending, *would* keep on pretending ... for as long as it took.

He patted her on the shoulder. "It will be alright. Gunther said to lock the door and hide. That sounds like excellent advice to me."

•••

Paul Stillwell couldn't believe how well his plan had worked. He also couldn't believe that the back door wasn't guarded. In his projected timeline, Andy would have been guarding it. Paul wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. He checked his watch, and waited. Another seven seconds and his last hacking program would kick in, and then he'd make his move ...

•••

Gunther Jones gave up trying to reach Brady. The man wasn't going to answer. Gunther concentrated on the monitors, trying to locate any sign of Teyshawn. All hangar cameras were gone, of course, and infrared was shot, so he had to find a way ...

All his monitors simultaneously filled with static. His cameras, all of his cameras, were gone. His computer terminal beeped a pointless alarm:

CAMERA SYSTEM FAILURE

“No fucking shit,” Gunther said through clenched teeth.



Paul peeked in the small window – no one there. He entered the first door, shut it behind him, and punched the button to equalize pressure. It only took five seconds – there wasn’t much of a pressure difference, just enough so that the external air pressure was greater than the internal air pressure. But those five seconds were very, very long. Gunther, Andy, Brady or Colding could be inside, or even following him from the outside. They had guns, all Paul had was a fucking pair of fence pliers.

Still, he used the five seconds to check the pliers, his only weapon. They were steel, but long and slim. They could be used like pliers, ostensibly to pull fence staples from wooden posts. They also had a hammer end, to drive staples in. The end opposite the hammer ended in a sharp point, kind of like a single metal claw. A shot to the head from that point, if he did it hard enough, would kill. He hoped he wouldn’t have to use that part.

The five seconds ran out, the interior airlock door beeped and opened. Paul ran silently into the facility.

He’d done everything perfectly, but there was one more task before he could call his mission complete and get the fuck out of Dodge.



Colding hissed into his walkie-talkie.

“Gunther, where the fuck is he?” He held the walkie-talkie in one hand, his Beretta in the other. He crouched twenty feet from the main airlock, half hiding behind a boulder.

The walkie-talkie let out a burst of static, followed by Gunther’s voice. “All the cameras are out. I can’t see a thing. And Brady was in the hangar when that thing went off.”

“Brady, come in,” Colding said into the walkie-talkie.

No one responded.

“Brady, if you can hear this, click the send button twice.”

Colding waited for three slow breaths, but there was still no response. Brady might be hurt, or possibly dead. Colding had to protect the scientists. He needed more manpower, but he simply didn’t have it. He’d have to neutralize Teyshawn first, then take care of Brady.

He knew full well that decision might cause Brady’s death, if Brady were bleeding out, unable to respond. But if Teyshawn was willing to kill, there might be more than just one body if Colding didn’t stop him.

Black smoke poured out of the hangar roof, blotting out the night stars. Teyshawn had taken out all the facility’s transportation, and at the same time had messed up infrared and night-vision scanning. On top of that, he’d cut out the camera system. Teyshawn, or

whoever he was, knew exactly what he was doing.

Colding slowly turned his head, trying to scan the area as calmly and as patiently as he could. He also tried not to look at the flames shooting up from inside the hangar, as he didn't want to fry his normal night vision. He saw nothing.

Then the front airlock door opened. Colding turned, instantly leveling his Beretta, ready to fire at Teyshawn if the man made one wrong move. Only he wasn't pointing his gun at Teyshawn, he was pointing it at Andy Crosthwaite.

Andy Crosthwaite, who was supposed to be guarding the back door.

"Motherfucker," Colding said to himself as he took his aim off Andy and once again kneeled behind the boulder.

Andy ran in a half-crouch, gun pointed down and away from himself. He swept his head back and forth as he ran, eyes taking in as much territory as possible. Andy knelt next to Colding's left and said nothing. The smaller man swept his vision from straight out to the left, automatically counting on Colding to sweep from straight out to the right. Andy wasn't panicking; he was calm and patient. He was doing everything right ... except, of course, staying by the back door he'd been ordered to guard.

Colding couldn't worry about that now. He had to think. If Teyshawn wanted to live through this, he would need some kind of transportation himself, but he'd destroyed everything. That meant he had backup coming. The guy was a holding tactic, trying to keep the facility in chaos until a larger force could arrive.

Colding knew Teyshawn was agency. Had to be. And he had friends coming. How soon, Colding couldn't know. So what would Teyshawn's next move be? If he were trying to shut everything down, shut it down hard, the next step would be the cows.

But the cows weren't that important.

The data was.

And the data wasn't out here, it was in the lab.

"Andy, you keep your ass right here," Colding said. "You don't move until I call you. Do you understand?"

"Back off, big man," Andy said. "I know what I'm doing."

Colding felt the anger swelling inside him, but there was a time and place for every battle. Right now he felt certain Teyshawn was in the building or working his way towards there, and somewhere Brady was probably dead or in a lot of trouble.

"Just stay here," Colding said, then turned and sprinted around the far side of the lab, heading for the rear airlock.

...

Paul slipped silently into the empty computer lab. With every step, he expected a

Black smoke poured out of the hangar roof, blotting out the night stars.

shot to ring out. His luck couldn't hold out much longer, but he had to complete his mission. Transportation and communication out; now all that remained was the data. He'd destroyed the backups, but it was too much to hope that his rampaging programs could best Jian's inhuman computer skills.

He knew he didn't have much time, and moved to the data backup deck under Jian's desk. His hand reached for it before his eyes registered the fact that the terabyte cartridge was missing ... only the black space of the empty backup deck remained.

Jian had been in here. She'd removed the data.

Paul felt a stab of panic as he moved to the screen connected to the Billups IX.

GENOME A1 SEQUENCING: COMPLETE

PROOFREADING ALGORITHM: COMPLETE

VIABILITY PROBABILITY: 95.0567 PERCENT

He pounded once on the keyboard, his fist clattering off the plastic. They'd just made a quantum leap in probability, and Jian had the data. If he didn't get that data, there was a chance she might escape before Chapman's plane landed. And if that happened, his mission was a failure, a year of his life gone for nothing.

He had to get Jian. There were few places to go on Baffin Island, and whenever Jian was stressed she retreated to her room.

He ran out of the lab, no longer quite so concerned with moving silently.

...

Gunther kept calling up diagnostic programs, but nothing he did brought the cameras back online. Teyshawn had fucked the system up good.

Colding hissed through his earpiece. "Where is that bastard?"

Gunther's hands shook in frustration.

"I don't know! The cameras are ... "

His voice trailed off as the monitors flickered once, then all popped back to life. Once again he had a complete view of the facility's security system. He saw Jian in her room, hunched over her computer, typing madly at the keys. He saw Colding standing just inside the front airlock, gun drawn.

And he saw Teyshawn.

"He's heading for Jian's room," Gunther said, his voice a bit calmer now that he had his eyes back. "You better move quick, boss."

A new beep joined the cacophony of security room alarms. Gunther knew that sound – the radar system.

"Shit, we've got another problem. One aircraft inbound. ETA ... five minutes."

...

Paul swiped his ID badge through the lock to Jian's door.

Nothing happened.

He'd reprogrammed the system to accept his ID badge as a master key. He swiped it again, just to be sure. The results were the same. Jian had cleared out his programming, which meant the camera system was probably operational. Even though Chapman was

likely only a few minutes out, Paul knew he'd run out of time.

"Looks like we do this the old-fashioned way," he said, then stepped back and gripped the fence hammer baseball-style. He twisted his hips as he swung, driving the point at the deadbolt lock. The first swing bounced off like an arrow hitting armor. He reared back and hit it again – this time the point hammered in the keyhole, punching the lock array in a quarter of an inch. He had to wiggle the tool to wrest it free, leaving a shiny gouge where the point had been. On the third swing, the point drove clean through the lock. He heard a loud metallic clatter as part of the deadbolt mechanism fell to the ground behind the closed door. Paul wrenched the tool free, reached a finger into the new hole and flipped the deadbolt bar free with a *click*.

Paul ran into the dark room to find Jian cross-legged on her bed, thick black hair hanging full in front of her face, her fat arms clutched around the terabyte cartridge as if it were a stuffed animal that would protect her from evil dreams.

"Go away," she said in a childlike voice.

Paul didn't want to hurt her, but he was out of time. He held the fence tool with his left hand and reached for the cartridge with his right. Jian twisted and threw herself face-down on the bed, her body covering the cartridge as she screamed at the top of her lungs. He grabbed her shoulder and yanked hard, trying to roll her over, but she was stronger than he thought and fought him with all her weight.

"Goddamit, Jian, give it to me!" He pulled on her shoulder once more, but she tightened into a fetal position and pushed her shoulder deeper into the bed, fighting his every move. The tool's point would punch through the back of her skull as if it were an eggshell, but he sure as hell wasn't going to kill poor, crazy Jian.

Paul jumped onto the bed and straddled her legs. He grabbed a handful of her thick black hair and yanked. Jian's head snapped back, and she howled in pain. With his left hand, he slid the fence tool under her chin and grabbed the hammer end with his right. He pulled up and back, lifting her out of her fetal position – she'd let go of the backup drive to grab at the tool, then he could get the drive and end all this bullshit.

He squeezed, steadily increasing pressure on her fat neck, but she didn't let go. She started to thrash from side to side, hands still clutching the drive. Paul kept choking, knowing that if she didn't stop struggling in the next few seconds he'd have to really hurt her.

He didn't want to hurt her, but didn't this bitch understand he was *out of time*?



Colding silently entered the bedroom room to see Teyshawn on the bed, hands at Jian's neck, both of their backs to the door. The room smelled of sweat, of fear. Jian thrashed from side to side. Teyshawn was pulling back, trying to control her. He processed this all in a split-second, never slowing down, knowing he couldn't shoot for fear of hitting Jian. Even if he hit Teyshawn dead-on, the bullet could easily go right through him and into her.

He stepped up to the bed and leveled the gun at Teyshawn.

"Let her go now!"

Teyshawn threw Jian back and to the left, spinning her half-around to face Colding. The movement was fast, flipping back her thick black hair. Amidst that hair, Colding saw the briefest flash of metal, then heard the sound of bones crunching accompanied by a blast of pain exploding through the back of his left hand. The gun went off, deafening in the small room, but the blow had pushed his Beretta to the right and the bullet ripped into the wall. The gun flew from Colding's hand, spinning wildly as it hit the floor, bounced once, and slid under the couch.

Teyshawn had used Jian's hair to hide a backhand left. The motion turned him completely around, left hand extended horizontally as if he were playing tennis and preparing for a forehand smash. Only he wasn't holding a racket. The metal tool had a flat end like a hammer, which had just smashed Colding's hand, and a pointy end that

At least, not by fighting fair.

looked like a single, thick metal claw. Teyshawn swung the weapon forward, point first, this time – but he was still on his knees on the bed, making his efforts off-balance and clumsy. Colding stepped backwards and flinched away at the last second. The sharp point caught his right shoulder, tearing through his parka but only just barely scratching his skin. Small white feathers flew into the air.

He took two more steps backwards as Teyshawn pushed off the bed and landed heavily with both feet on the floor. Jian fell back onto the bed, tucking into a fetal position to protect whatever she was holding.

Colding saw everything as if it were a tape running at half speed. He tried to curl his left hand into a fist – the limp fingers and stabbing pain told him the hand was useless. Teyshawn switched the tool from his left hand to his right. He crouched, head low, then lunged forward as he swung the tool – hammer-side forward – in a low arc aimed at Colding's ribs. Teyshawn was too well trained to swing at the head, which could be easily ducked by anyone with a modicum of combat experience. Colding didn't know why Teyshawn used the flat end and not that deadly point, but he wasn't about to argue logic. He lunged forward, twisting so his left shoulder led the charge. His hand was useless, so he'd take a shot on his left side if he could close the distance.

The hammer smashed into his left shoulder, a cold shot that reverberated through his whole arm. Colding grunted in pain, but twisted his hips as he moved, bringing his right fist in to smash at Teyshawn's stomach. The speed of the move caught Teyshawn off-guard – Colding heard the *whuff* of air as his fist drove into Teyshawn's solar plexus and lifted him an inch off the ground. Teyshawn stumbled and doubled over. Colding planted his right foot and twisted again, driving an overhand right into Teyshawn's left ear. Teyshawn dropped the hammer as he hit the ground. Colding had caught him clean, but the man still had the presence of mind to roll twice as he landed, taking himself out of Colding's range, if only for a second.

Teyshawn rolled onto his feet, blood already streaming from his left ear. He obviously had the wind knocked out of him, but just as obvious was the fact that he wasn't about to panic. Wind or no wind, Teyshawn was calm and was coming in again. Colding had a

broken left hand and couldn't hope to win this fight.

At least not by fighting fair.

Teyshawn drove forward, pressing his advantage. Colding knelt and snatched up the fence-pliers with his right hand. Teyshawn planted his feet and tried to back up, but he was already coming forward and couldn't completely stop his momentum. Colding lashed out, burying the thick metal point in Teyshawn's kneecap. The point shattered his patella and kept going, glancing down off the femur and sliding deep into the meniscus.

Teyshawn dropped hard, both hands clutching at his bloody mess of a knee. He tried to scream, but still couldn't breathe. His mouth opened and closed, eyes staring out blankly as he gently rolled from side to side.

Colding reared back with the hammer, meaning to land it flat on Teyshawn's head, but he stopped; the man had no fight left in him. Broken hand or no broken hand, he couldn't help but feel sorry as he saw blood cover Teyshawn's clutching hands.

Colding reached under the couch and retrieved his Beretta. He then turned to Jian, who remained in her fetal position.

"Jian, are you okay?" he said as he gently shook her shoulder. "Did he hurt you?"

She paused for a moment, then looked up, her eyes barely visible through the mop of black hair. She threw her arms around his neck, almost knocking him over, clutching him tight. Silent sobs suddenly racked her body.

"I'm ... okay, Mee-Sta ... Colding. He ... he choked me so hard."

Colding kept his left hand down and away from her. The pain screamed all the way through his elbow, as if the whole kit and caboodle had been dipped in boiling water. He patted her gently with his right, which was still holding the gun.

"Calm down, Jian. You need to let go now, I have to take care of this."

She gave him one more tight squeeze, taking his breath away for a second, then let him go and once again grabbed what she had clutched while Teyshawn had almost killed her.

"What is that?"

"Terabyte drive," Jian said, her voice a bit more calm. "We have succeeded."

Colding didn't have time to ask what she meant, as his walkie-talkie squawked once.

"Boss, great work!" said Gunther through the walkie-talkie. "But that plane is almost here, what are we going to do?"

The plane. As if he didn't have enough on his hands (or *hand*, really, because only the right was worth more than a pile of shit at this point), a plane was inbound. He had to get some answers and fast ... and Teyshawn probably had those answers.

Colding thumbed the 'send' button. "How long do we have?"

"Probably less than three minutes," Gunther said. "It's coming in and it's big, man, really big."

He almost told Gunther the plane was probably full of CIA bad-asses, but stopped himself. If it were CIA, everyone would find out soon enough just how much trouble they were in. On the off chance it wasn't the CIA, he didn't want to spook the staff. If they got out of this intact, the research had to continue.

"Okay, gather up Rhumkorrf and Claudette and get them out front. I want all of our

people calm and visible. And Gunther, if whoever is on the plane has a weapon, *do not draw on them*. If this is an assault team we can't win, and I don't want anyone getting killed."

"Yes sir, I'm on it."

Colding hadn't even lowered the walkie-talkie before Andy Crosthwaite came through the door. The thick stench of burning fuel oozed off him, as did a smell Colding had prayed he'd never encounter again – the smell of burning human flesh. Andy's jacket sleeves were covered in greasy, wet streaks, and his face and hands looked splotchy with black smudges.

Andy leveled his gun at the prone form of Teyshawn. "Fuck a duck, Teyshawn. You're fucking dead."

Colding's patience had worn thin. "Andy, you left your post *again*."

"Oh shut up with the 'left your post' business, Colding. This isn't a fucking John Wayne movie. You going to cap this asshole, or what?"

"We're not going to cap anyone. Situation contained. Get your ass out front."

"Oh fuck that. This motherfucker killed Brady."

"Brady's dead?"

"Barbecued like a piece of chicken," Andy said. "I pulled his body out of the hangar. So who's paying you, Teyshawn? Monsanto? Genetron? How much did you get for killing Brady?"

Teyshawn said nothing.

Colding felt his heart sink into his stomach. Brady had

"Brady's dead?"
"Barbecued like a piece of chicken."

been a good guy. This was going to get very, very messy.

Andy cocked his Beretta, knelt down, and put the barrel against Teyshawn's head.

"Your knee is the least of your worries," Andy said. "Get ready to say hi to Brady all up close and in person."

Colding took one step forward and raised his own Beretta. The movement caught Andy's eye, and when he turned to look, he was staring straight down the barrel.

"Drop the weapon, Andy."

Andy opened his jaw and closed it again, his eyes wide with sudden fear. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Drop the weapon, Andy. Nobody else dies today."

Andy stood slowly. "Okay, okay, I'll go."

Colding raised the barrel as Andy stood, keeping it pointed right at his face. "I told you to drop your weapon."

"But that plane is going to land. You want me to go out there unarmed?"

Andy meant it as a rhetorical question, but that was *exactly* what Colding wanted.

"Last warning, Andy. Drop your weapon and get out front."

Andy lowered his gun to the ground, then backed out of the room, eyes never leaving Colding's Beretta.

"You're going to regret this shit. Wait till Magnus hears about this." Then Andy turned and ran down the hallway.

Colding sighed. He knew this would cause problems down the road, but he couldn't have Andy the Asshole getting all macho if a CIA assault team was on its way down. Colding knew all too well how those teams worked ... once the first shot was fired, the scene would become a bloodbath. Keeping things very, very calm was the only way he could keep the rest of his people alive.

Colding picked up Andy's gun and slipped it into the waist of his pants, then ran to Jian's bathroom and grabbed a towel. He ran back into the room, knelt down and tied the towel tightly around Teyshawn's knee.

"Teyshawn, is that your real name?"

...

Paul's eyes slitted near-closed with pain. Agony radiated out of the destroyed joint like a miniature sun. The knee screamed when Colding tied the towel around it, but the man was obviously trying to help.

"No," he said through clenched teeth. "Paul Stillwell, CIA."

"I thought so. Paul, I'm seriously sorry about your knee."

"Right," Paul said, but there was something in Colding's eyes that showed he was telling the truth. He looked ... sad. Determined, in control, but still sad.

"Listen, Paul, I'm not going to bullshit around. You're on Canadian soil, and if you die, the Shop will deny any knowledge of you. You know I'm ex-CIA. You know that I know the drill, right?"

Paul nodded.

"I could have killed you. You know that, right?"

Paul paused, then nodded again. In fact, Colding had drawn on one of his own men to save his life. It might be Good Cop/Bad Cop, but Paul didn't think so. When Andy had pointed that gun into his face, Paul knew he was a dead man. Yet he was still alive, and only because of Colding.

"I need to know who's coming on that plane. I can make you talk, but I don't want to do that. You were just doing your duty, and you did a hell of a job. I'm assuming you didn't mean to kill Brady."

Paul nodded again, quickly this time. He wondered if Andy the Asshole was telling the truth, but deep inside, he knew Brady was dead, and that he was responsible.

"I realized we're screwed," Colding said, "but I'm trying to keep everyone alive. So tell me what's coming."

It wasn't torture, or even interrogation, but it was just as effective. Colding had kept him alive, and now he wanted to do the same for the rest of his people. Besides, they weren't going anywhere ... they couldn't even call for help.

"Chapman," Paul said. "That plane will be Chapman. And ... and he'll be coming loaded for bear."

“Why? Why now? We’ve been here for years.”

Paul could only shrug. He’d received his orders; he’d acted on them.

“Okay,” Colding said. He reached out a hand and gave Paul’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Just hang in there. I’ll come back as soon as I can with something for the pain.”

With that, PJ Colding stood up and ran out of the room, leaving Paul Stillwell with his shattered knee.



Colding stopped by the security office long enough to pop four Advil and grab a couple of Kwik-Kold ice packs. One pack he put in his parka pocket, the other he squeezed with his right hand to break the enclosed ammonium nitrate capsules, allowing the chemical to mix with the water inside the sealed bag. The contents instantly turned into slushy ice.

The back of his left hand was already badly swollen and yellow. He gently placed the bag on it, then wrapped gauze around to hold the bag in place. It was messed up pretty good, but he didn’t have time to deal with it. As long as it wasn’t bleeding, he could ignore it and keep moving. Well, he could *try* and ignore it. It was hard to ignore something that felt like a branding iron shoved through the back of his hand.

He put the bottle of Advil in his pocket to join the remaining Kwik-Kold bag. He’d need both later.

Colding gently put his damaged left hand – Kwik-Kold and all – into his parka pocket. He held the Beretta with his right as he left the facility out the front airlock. The wind had picked up, driving light snow under the exterior lamps, making each one look like a shimmering cone of light. Clouds covered the stars.

The sound of approaching jet engines screamed through the air. Chapman was coming. Colding had hoped he’d never see Chapman again, but somewhere inside he’d known that hope was crazy: Chapman was the CIA’s top investigator of transgenic companies, and Colding worked for a transgenic company. He was bound to someday cross paths with his old partner.

Gunther and Andy stood with Rhumkorrf, Jian and Overgard. Gunther, God bless him, had his gun holstered. Colding walked up and joined them, gun out but down at his side. He kept Andy where he could see him. Jian and Overgard were crying, but they weren’t comforting each other. Overgard cried quietly, while Jian’s body shook with huge sobs like a six-year-old denied ice cream.

Twenty feet from the group, a green tarp covered an unrecognizable, smoldering mass. A mass about the size of Brady Giovanni. The night wind made the tarp’s edges snap loudly, and carried away most of the oppressive stench. Most of it. The odors of burning flesh and burning fuel still hung in the air.

None of them looked at the body – they looked up into the night sky. The plane Gunther had warned about was coming in for a landing. A massive silhouette, running lightless, flat-black paint soaking up the firelight from the burning warehouse.

“Jeeze-o-peets,” Rhumkorrf said. “That thing is gigundous.”

Colding couldn’t believe his eyes. The plane’s headlamps flipped on, casting long,

white-hot cones of light down onto the landing strip. The plane was so big it looked as if it were barely moving. There was only one vehicle that had those massive dimensions...

A C-5 Galaxy.

Colding had ridden one during his operations in the Gulf, when he and Chapman had been part of a rapid response team that investigated bioweapons. He'd been amazed by the plane's sheer mass. The C-5 was larger than any commercial airliner, and at 247 feet, it was longer than the Wright Brothers' entire first flight. It was nearly as long as a football field. The plane's tail towered a full six stories up in the air. The wings spread out like the arms of a giant, 228 feet from tip-to-tip. The cockpit looked like a small black Cyclops eye notched into the elongated, rounded triangle that was the fuselage.

It had to be Chapman with a CIRG team. But a CIRG team normally contained four men, and usually came via a UH 60 Black Hawk helicopter. Even if Chapman brought two CIRG teams – eight men plus Chapman himself – a Black Hawk easily carried eleven men. Why on earth would they bring a C-5 Galaxy, which could carry seventy-three fully equipped soldiers, and two M1-Abrams tanks, just in case seventy-three fully equipped soldiers weren't enough to get the job done.

Flames from the destroyed hangar lit up the plane's right side.

The hangar. The *huge* hangar – which was large enough to house the C-5.

And the C-5 needed a mile-long landing strip, which the Baffin Island facility conveniently had.

"I'll be damned," Colding said quietly, feeling a small flutter of hope.

Five sets of wheels extended to meet the snowy landing strip. The C-5 seemed to be moving in slow motion, but it was a jet coming in for a landing at around 120 miles per hour. Nothing that big should be able to fly.

"What are we going to do, boss?" Gunther said.

"We stay calm," Colding said. "We don't know who is in that thing, but if it's U.S. Military, that means American forces on Canadian soil, which is a pretty big deal. They'll want to move quickly, accomplish their mission and get out. If any of you get in their way, they'll shoot you. If any of you move too fast, they'll shoot you. Does everyone understand?"

Five heads nodded. Including Andy's, Colding noted.

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The tail ramp slowly lowered as the wind picked up speed, whipping light snow across the island and sending hands to faces to shield squinting eyes. Lights blared from the twenty-foot opening, a glowing cave that made a hazy, shivering corona against the falling snow. It struck Colding as a giant mechanical monster, jaws agape, waiting to swallow the Rhumkorrf project whole.

As the ramp lowered past the halfway point, a single man walked down it.

A huge man.

"Magnus," Colding said in astonishment. "How in the hell did you guys pull this one off?" He flipped the Beretta's safety to on, then slid it into his right parka pocket where

it clattered against the bottle of Advil.

Andy let out a triumphant “yeah,” gave Colding the dirtiest of dirty looks, then ran to meet his friend. The relationship between Magnus and Andy reminded Colding of the relationship between a man and a pet terrier. Andy was hyper, perpetually angry, and worshipped Magnus. Magnus obviously enjoyed Andy’s company, but never hesitated to dish out discipline as needed.

Magnus carried two large duffel bags. Inside one, Colding recognized the long, lumpy shape of a large automatic weapon, probably an M-60. The other held something long and rectangular. Both were full to bursting, the weight pulling the nylon fabric taut. Magnus carried the bags with the casual ease a man might use carrying a loaf of bread. He walked up to Colding, and slowly surveyed the facility. The flames had died down, but black smoke still poured out of the hangar.

“Nice fucking job, Bubbah,” Magnus said. “They land an assault team or what?”

Magnus loved to call Americans “Bubbah,” especially Colding. He seemed to find great humor in the name.

“Just one guy,” Andy said quickly. “Teyshawn was a plant.”

“You let *one guy* do this?” Magnus said, staring down at Colding.

“That’s right,” Colding said. “One guy that you cleared. I wish his background had turned up the small fact that he’s ... that he’s a plant for someone. “

Colding almost said ‘CIA’ again, but if they could get on the plane and get out before Chapman arrived, the project could continue. Andy didn’t know – neither did anyone else – and Colding wanted to keep it that way. He hated lying to everyone, but he wasn’t about to let anything get in the way of completing the project.

“Don’t blame it on Magnus, Colding,” Andy said with a smile. “You’re the guy on the ground.”

“Shut up, Andy,” Magnus said quietly, yet his voice carried even over the wind and the C-5’s idling jet turbines. Magnus stared at Colding with those weird violet eyes. Colding stared right back.

Magnus shrugged. “Guess you’ve got me there, Bubbah. We’ll discuss the finer plot points at a later time.”

“Are you shitting me?” Andy said, stepping forward. “Colding let *one guy* tear the place apart! And we can’t leave the guy alive, right? But when I tried to deal with him Colding drew down on *me* and even took my gun. He’s still got my *fucking* gun, right? You can’t possibly tell me you’re going to leave him in charge, he has no idea – ”

Colding had always wondered how he would fight Magnus, if it came to that. Magnus was the biggest, strongest man Colding had ever met in person. He had always known that if they came to blows, for whatever reason, he’d have to use speed and lateral movement to stay clear of the massive arms and hands, clear of the powerful punches that Magnus would surely throw. After all, how fast could Magnus be, as big as he was?

The answer was, ‘faster than anything Colding had ever seen.’ Without breaking the stare-down with Colding, Magnus’s left hand shot out and grabbed Andy by the throat, interrupting the smaller guard’s rant just after the word “‘idea.” And he didn’t knock

Don't worry about it, Bubba.

Andy back, not even a bit. The grab was so controlled it looked almost delicate – one second Andy was talking, the next he was choking, his eyes bulging in surprise, a massive hand completely wrapped around his neck.

“Andy,” Magnus said in the same quiet voice. “I told you to shut up, didn’t I?”

Andy’s hands shot up to Magnus’s clutching fingers. Andy tried to isolate a finger, to bend it backwards. Colding saw Magnus squeeze, just a little bit. Andy’s eyes grew even wider, then he held his hands up, palms out.

“We don’t have time for this,” Colding said. “We’re going to have more company soon, well-trained company. We’ve got to get out here and fast.”

Magnus let go and put his hand back in his parka pocket. The entire time, from grab to squeeze to release, he hadn’t broken his deadlock stare with Colding.

“You’re right, Bubbah, let’s move. I believe we have to rustle up some dogs, isn’t that what you fucking Americans say, Colding?”

Colding started to talk, but his throat was bone-dry. He tried to look un-intimidated, but he was intimidated, and Magnus obviously knew it.

“Doggies,” Colding said. “Rustle up some doggies.”

“Right,” Magnus said with a grin. “Right, Bubbah, we gotta rustle up some doggies. Let’s get out of here. And give Andy his gun back.”

Colding pulled the gun from his belt and handed it back to Andy.

“I’m sure you’ve got it covered,” Colding said to Magnus, “but I have to ask, where are we going?”

“Don’t worry about it, Bubbah.”

Magnus looked back to the C-5 and waved his hand to someone inside, beckoning down the ramp. Colding could sense from the walk that the person was military, or ex-military, like most of the non-scientists in the Rhumkorrf project. Military and ... a woman.

A tall woman at that, at least 5-foot-10 and maybe just a hair taller. She flipped her hood back, revealing a crop of tousled, short blonde hair. Light blue eyes were little pinpoints of electric light embedded in her California-tan complexion. Her nose carried freckles, probably from that same West Coast sun. He didn’t see a trace of makeup, which was good, because Colding instantly thought that anything covering that skin would only detract from her natural beauty. She looked the very picture of a surfer girl gone Air Force.

He felt an instant and powerful sexual attraction, the likes of which he hadn’t felt since Clarissa’s death. The thought of his wife brought on a wash of guilt – he had more important things to do than oogle some woman.

“Colding, meet Sara Purinam. She’s in charge of the plane. Sara, this is PJ Colding. He’s in charge of security for this project.”

“Sara,” Colding said, extending his hand.

“PJ,” she said, shaking his hand. Her mouth opened slightly when their hands touched, then shut. She seemed surprised, but it was a fleeting expression – there and gone in half a second. She seemed to pull her hand away a little too quickly.

Sara turned to Magnus. “So what the hell is going on here? This looks like a war zone.”

Rhumkorrf stepped forward. He was afraid, more than a little freaked out by the whole scene, but he was also angry. “Yes, what happened? Why did Teyshawn go crazy like that?”

Magnus smiled and stared at Colding, waiting for him to answer. Colding knew this was his chance to tell the truth, to let them all know just how much trouble they faced. If the CIA was willing to attack like this, everyone in the project was in serious danger.

But if they knew the truth, they might stop working.

“Industrial sabotage,” Colding said. “Teyshawn worked for Monsanto. They wanted to shut us down because they knew we were ahead.”

Rhumkorrf’s fists curled up into little balls. “They will not stop us.” He looked back to Jian and Overgard. “They will *not* stop our work. Will they, doctors?”

Jian and Overgard kept crying, but they shook their heads. The three of them were united in their single-minded cause.

Sara pointed to Brady’s corpse. “That’s a bit more than ‘industrial sabotage,’ that’s a fucking dead body. We didn’t sign up for this shit.”

Magnus shrugged. He took one step forward – he looked straight down at Sara, who had to look straight up to meet Magnus’s eyes.

“You get paid plenty, cupcake,” Magnus said. “You signed up for whatever I tell you. You’ve certainly cashed all those checks. Now, unless you want to lose your business, get this plane loaded up. We need to move, pronto. Get your crew out here, make the introductions, then let’s get some motion in the ocean.”

Sara held his gaze for just a second, then turned away. She waved to the C-5. Three men descended the loading ramp, all wearing black Genada parkas.

The first man extended his hand before he was even introduced. He didn’t bother with a smile – it seemed he enjoyed the cold about as much as he might a barium enema. Shivers periodically pulled his shoulders up into an unpleasant shrug, and brought a grimace to his tan Hispanic complexion. His black hair was buzz-cut perfection, and his thin black moustache was neatly trimmed. His height looked to be a nondescript 5-foot-8, but he looked short standing next to Sara, more so because she was a woman.

“This is Alonzo Barella,” Sara said. “My copilot. Nicest guy you could ever meet, and in a fight he’s as mean as a badger with hemorrhoids.”

“Nice description,” Colding said, shaking the man’s hand.

Alonzo shrugged. “Whatever Sara says.”

“This looks like a war zone.”

“And this is Harold Miller and Andre ‘Cappy’ Capistrano, also known as ‘The Twins,’” Sara said, gesturing to the other two men. Both were a hair under six feet, both had the lean, athletic builds of men just out of the service, both smiled constantly and both seemed genuinely happy, as if the icy Baffin Island cold wasn’t even worth noticing. They truly might have passed for biological twins, save for the fact that Cappy was as black as an old Al Jolson caricature and if Miller were any whiter, his skin would have been transparent.

“They don’t look related,” Colding said, shaking both their hands.

Sara laughed. “Don’t worry, you’ll see. Boys, this is PJ Colding. Once Magnus leaves, he calls the shots. After me, of course.”

Colding thought she was joking around, but all three men nodded their heads, just once and in unison. There was an unspoken respect here – the captain was a woman, but that didn’t matter: Sara Purinam was undoubtedly in charge.

Colding in turn introduced the scientists, Gunther and Andy.

“Fine, introductions made,” Magnus said. “Now let’s haul ass.”

Rhumkorrf stepped up. “Are we going to load in the cattle?”

“No need,” Magnus said. “Fresh cattle in the plane, eggs already extracted and prepared for you. Sara, take them aboard and let’s get this bitch up in the air.”

The others moved into the plane, leaving Colding standing alone with Magnus.

“So who’s behind this?” Magnus asked.

“The hitter was CIA.”

“You’re sure?”

Colding nodded.

Magnus sighed and rolled his head, thick neck popping with the sound of rock dropped on rock. “Do the others know?”

“No. I didn’t tell anyone.”

“That’s good. We don’t need the staff getting skittish.”

“So where are we going, Magnus?”

“An island in Lake Superior called Black Manitou.”

“Lake Superior? How in the hell are we going to get that thing,” Colding jerked his thumb towards the C-5, “through the Canadian air defense grid and then US air defense?”

Magnus looked away, as if the questions annoyed him. “Bubbah, we’ve got it covered. We have a contact at the Iqualuit Airport. We have a flight plan that shows us as a 747 cargo plane going from Iqualuit to Thunder Bay Airport. We have another contact at Thunder Bay – they don’t pay air traffic controllers that much, it seems – and he’s going to log us as landing. Flight is about three hours. Once past Thunder Bay, Sara puts the C5 into night mode: no lights, fly by night-vision, all that covert crap and she flies below the radar deck. There’s nothing between Thunder Bay and Black Manitou. It’s twenty minutes of low-level flying.”

Colding nodded. It sounded like a good plan, assuming the air traffic controllers were really bought off.

“Still,” Colding said, “isn’t Black Manitou a little close to civilization for what we’re doing?”

“Don’t worry about that. When you see it, you’ll understand. It’s a step up for you, Bubbah. No more cinderblock walls. There’s a mansion on the island – first class accommodations.”

Magnus reached a hand into one of his bags, the one without the M-60, and produced a manila folder.

“Everything you need to know is in there. Only two people staffing the island, Clayton Detweiler and his son, Chris. Clayton maintains the place. Chris lives on the mainland and ferries in supplies by boat. He doesn’t have any military training, but he’s a sharp kid and he keeps his ear to the ground on the mainland. If anybody’s snooping around, he’ll know. I taught him how to shoot, and I make sure that he’s always armed. He wouldn’t be up to Gunther or Andy’s caliber in a firefight, but he can take care of himself.”

“And Clayton? What’s his story?”

“He’s been on that island for thirty years. He’s a crotchety old fucker, but he knows his business. We trust both of them. Nobody else. Just them. Got it?”

Colding nodded.

“And when you see Chris, tell him to make sure my snowmobile is ready.”

“You’re not flying out with us?”

Magnus shook his thick head. “I’m staying to take care of the cows. Danté wants all evidence destroyed before Chapman gets here.”

Colding paused. He hadn’t been expecting Magnus at all, let alone considered the big man might stay behind. A C-5 was a massive expense. With that much money on the line, the Pagliones were obviously willing to go to any length to protect their investment.

“What about Stillwell?” Colding asked.

“You mean the CIA plant that single-handedly fucked up your operation and killed one of your men? Don’t worry. I’ll take care of him.”

“Magnus, we can’t do anything to him. We can’t have that kind of heat – ”

“Do you think I’m stupid, Bubbah?” Magnus said softly. “You think I’m going to kill a fucking CIA agent?”

Colding didn’t know what to say. It *would* be stupid to kill Stillwell, but Magnus had this vibe that he was pissed off and looking for a target.

“No offense, Magnus, but I really don’t know what you’ll do.”

Magnus smiled and patted Colding on the left shoulder. The pat was patronizingly gentle, but still jostled his arm, sending new shards of pain through his hand.

“Don’t worry, Bubbah. I won’t shoot your little friend. Chapman won’t be long. I’m going to leave him right where he is, okay?”

Colding didn’t have much of a choice. He couldn’t take Stillwell on the C-5; that would be kidnapping a federal agent ... way more trouble than they were already dealing with, if that were even possible. And he couldn’t stay on the island, not if Chapman was coming. He had no choice but to take Magnus at his word.

“What about you, Magnus? How are you getting out of here? The helicopter’s shot

and the Humvee is toast.”

“I’ve got it covered,” Magnus said, that same fake smile still plastered on his face.

“And what about Brady’s body?”

“Leave it. I’ll have it picked up and shipped back to his family. Enough questions. Get your ass on that C-5, got it?”

Colding paused one more second, unable to shake a feeling of hanging dread, then turned and ran up the C-5’s loading ramp.

Once inside, all Colding could do was stop and stare. The loading ramp led into the cargo bay, which was wider than an eight-lane bowling alley – but he’d never seen a cargo bay converted into a flying barn. The overwhelming smell of cows and cow feces permeated the place. He could see all the way down the long fuselage to the front loading ramp, now folded up behind the closed nose cone. Along most of that length ran 150 feet of cattle stalls, 25 to a side with a 6-foot aisle down the middle. Clear plastic walls marked five-foot-wide stalls, each with a control panel measuring the stall temperature, relative humidity, the cow’s weight and heart rate, and a dozen other factors.

Big-eyed black-and-white Holstein cows stared out from inside the stalls, each munching away on a bin of feed, each partially supported by a durable harness that hung from the ceiling. An occasional “moo” helped reinforce the surreal scene. The animals seemed perfectly calm and happy. Each weighed around 1,500 pounds, and stood nearly five feet tall at the shoulder – cows were huge animals, and Colding could only imagine trying to control fifty of them inside a plane if something caused them to panic.

Miller and Cappy scurried about, checking readouts and testing the straps securing each cow. The men gave Colding several quick looks, as if they expected him to move forward, but he was awestruck by the C-5’s interior. They quickly walked over to him. Colding noticed they moved at the same time, with the same quick gait.

“You need to get inside, sir,” Miller said.

“Yeah, you need to get inside, sir,” Cappy said.

Colding walked deeper into the plane. “Sorry, guys, it’s just a bit ... overwhelming. And don’t call me sir, call me PJ.”

“Okay, PJ,” Miller said.

“Yeah, okay,” Cappy said.

Rhumkorrf ran up to him, followed by Sara. The short scientist looked like a child on Christmas morning, the terror of Paul Stillwell’s rampage all but forgotten.

“Can you believe this?” Rhumkorrf’s voice was practically a scream of joy.

After the stalls came fifty feet of lab space molded into the port side. Colding didn’t know all the equipment, but he recognized bits and pieces of it that were identical to Claudette’s lab back in the facility. On the starboard side, thick bolts held six chairs tight against to the hull. Overgard moved around the lab, checking equipment that looked shiny and new. She, like Rhumkorrf, seemed to have quickly forgotten how much shit had just gone down.

Sara's crew had disappeared from sight, but she seemed to have no problem sticking around to play smiling tour guide.

"The boys are running preflight diagnostics," she said. "All you scientific types sit your asses in those flight chairs. We're taking off. And make sure you're buckled up tight. Magnus said we need to skedaddle out of here."

The sound of heavy hydraulics whined through the C-5. The rear ramp slowly folded up on itself, tucking away for the upcoming flight. The ramp was strong enough to load tanks and helicopters and hundreds of men – Colding wondered if anyone in the military had ever considered its functionality for loading and offloading cattle. Once folded in, two outer doors closed, returning the C-5 to a smooth, aerodynamic profile. The C-5's entire nose section could also lift up like a gaping mouth. With both front and rear ramps down, a 57-ton, 12-foot wide M1-Abrams tank could literally drive right through the C-5.

Rhumkorrf, Overgard, Andy, Gunther, Jian and Colding all slid into the chairs. Andy and Gunther buckled their four-point restraints without difficulty, as did Overgard. Sara helped Rhumkorrf with his, then had to do it for Jian, who seemed quite confused by the canvas straps and heavy buckles.

Colding watched as everyone was secured, then started to reach for his own restraints when he remembered his mangled hand.

"Let's go, Colding," Sara said. She was smiling, but firm. She wanted to get the 'civvies' locked up and out of the way.

"I, uh ... I hurt my hand."

"Let's see it."

"It's nothing. Can you just help me with the buckles?"

"You're on my plane, champ," Sara said. "If you're hurt I need to know. Now *let's see it.*"

Colding stared at her for a second, wondering if he should order her to shut up and buckle him in, but her eyes were jovial despite the firm tone.

"Fine." He slipped the gauze-covered hand out of his pocket.

She grabbed his hand, quickly, firmly, but so gently he felt almost no pain at all. She unwrapped the gauze. Sara took in a hiss of breath when she saw the damage. Her fingertips traced the back of his smashed hand.

"You mucked that up pretty good. We'll take a look at that once we're in the air. Now, any other injuries I need to know about?"

Colding shook his head.

She reached down to both of his sides to grab the straps, buckled him in and tightened him up. Once finished, Sara ran beyond Overgard's lab toward the front of the C-5. Within minutes, the four giant TF39 turbofan engines hummed with raw power. Colding felt the massive plane start to inch forward. He felt the thrust steadily push him back in his seat, and they were airborne.

The cows didn't seem to mind at all.



Twenty minutes after takeoff, Sara walked up to the seated scientific and security crew. Despite all that had gone down, Colding couldn't help watching her – he liked the way she walked.

"We're underway, ladies and gentlemen," she said with the mock hospitality of a flight attendant. "Please feel free to move about the cabin." Jian, Rhumkorrf and Overgard shot out of their seats, eager to explore their new toys. Gunther and Andy stood and stretched – they didn't have much to do.

"There's bunkrooms in the upper deck," Sara said to the two men. "We've got a long flight, you might want to catch up on sleep."

Andy smiled. More of a sneer than a smile, really, but that was his way. "You going to join me for a little love-nap, baby?"

Colding instantly wanted to punch Andy's face in, but Sara didn't bat an eyelash. "In your dreams, little man, in your dreams. You must need some

sleep, you're getting delirious."

It was an insult, but delivered in that old-boy fashion of two friends making fun of each other. Andy Crosthwaite, the little ball of hate, actually laughed.

"Follow me, gentlemen. You too, Colding, you're coming with me." She was still smiling, but the look in her eyes was fixed and serious. Colding understood why her crew deferred to her so quickly. Sara Purinam had the natural tone and demeanor of a born leader.

"Yes ma'am," Colding said as she undid his harness for him.

She led them aft, past the cattle stalls, to the aft ladder leading to the second deck. Sara ascended, followed by Colding, who clumsily managed with his beat-up hand. What he saw when he topped the ladder was just as amazing as the long row of cow cages. The second deck held over 1,000 square feet of lab space, with every last ounce of that space put to good use. A large flat-panel monitor, eight feet wide by five feet high, dominated the rear bulkhead. Soft fluorescent lights illuminated gleaming metal equipment, black lab tables, small computer screens and white cabinets that fit perfectly into the C-5's arcing hull.

Jian looked like she might fall asleep at any moment, and yet she was already right at home in the lab and working away. A towering machine made of thick, black plastic blocks and LED lights dominated one wall – another Billups IX computer, just like the one sitting back in the facility. Jian loaded in the backup drive that had almost cost her her life, then sat at the keyboard and started typing.

The other wall was home to a large, strange looking device just a bit smaller than a compact car, gleaming with stainless steel and unblemished white plastic. A ten-foot by

"You going to join me for a little love-nap, baby?"

twenty-foot glass enclosure kept any dust and dirt at bay. An airlock door provided the only entrance. Three sterile pressure suits hung in three narrow lockers just to the left of the glass room.

Colding knew the device. There was one just like it back on Baffin Island. Paglione had put an entire genetics lab inside the C-5, right down to Jian's God Machine.

"I don't know what any of this shit is for," Sara said, "but it sure looks expensive."

"You have no idea," Colding said.

"Come on. Bunk rooms are between the lab and the cockpit." Past the lab, she walked through a narrow hallway and pointed out the C-5's features: a galley, an infirmary with two beds, a room with six comfortable bunks, and a small room that had two couches and a flat-panel TV mounted on the wall, complete with a Sony PlayStation and a rack of games.

"Now we're talking," Andy said. He immediately sat down and fired up a game of Madden.

"This is Danté's idea," Sara said. "A C-5 normally has two bunkrooms. He converted one to an entertainment center. With midair refueling, the C-5 can stay up indefinitely, so he wanted to accommodate long flights if necessary."

Gunther mumbled a goodnight, then sluffed off to the bunkroom.

"Come with me, champ," Sara said, and instructed Colding to sit on one of the infirmary beds. Without a word, she helped him out of his ruined parka. Bits of white down feathers escaped and floated in the air. When she saw his shirt underneath was ripped and bloodied, she helped him take that off as well.

She wasn't wearing perfume, but she had to get up close to help him remove the clothes, and her scent filled his nostrils. Colding was amazed that, despite a broken hand, lack of sleep, and more stress than he could deal with, his dick twitched of its own accord. He blinked a few times and fought away the thought – there were more important things to worry about.

The cut on his chest, courtesy of Stillwell's fence hammer, ran from Colding's shoulder almost to his nipple. He'd been lucky; if the point had gone just a little farther, it would have torn his pectoral in half. Sara grabbed a washcloth from one of the infirmary cabinets and cleaned the cut. It wasn't deep enough to require stitches. Her hands moved gently across his skin, wiping away the blood before she tenderly smeared antibiotic ointment on the wound. She quickly finished the job, wrapping gauze around the wound and sealing it in place with surgical tape. She also examined the bruise on his left shoulder, where Paul had hit him square with the hammer. Her fingers probed the bruise, feeling for broken bones.

"Lift your arm," Sara said. Colding did, slowly, but was able to lift his left arm up above his head.

"We're okay there. Now let's look at the hand."

Sara repeated the probing touch on Colding's hand. This hurt much more than the shoulder. Her touch was gentle, but fast and firm, like a battlefield wound assessment. Colding hissed as one of her touches seemed to go right through his hand.

"Make a fist," Sara said.

Colding grimaced as he did, slowly curling his fingers into a fist.

"Oh, don't be a pussy," Sara said. "I think you're lucky, Peej. Nothing seems to be broken."

"Peej? What's that?"

Sara smiled. "PJ just seems so ... stuffy. I like Peej better, sounds more fun."

"I'd rather you just called me PJ."

"Okay, Peej," Sara said. "Whatever you say." She went back to the cabinet and produced a plastic bottle. She shook out two pills and handed them to Colding.

"You need sleep. Take these and hit the bunkroom, mister. I'll wake you when we're near Black Manitou."

Colding swallowed the pills. Every ounce of his body ached. She walked him to the bunkroom. Gunther was already asleep, snoring loudly. Sara helped Colding lie down.

"Thanks," Colding said. "I appreciate it."

Sara smiled her warm, eye-crinkling smile, and Colding felt his dick twitch again. He laid back, the pills already kicking in.

"Aren't you glad I didn't invite you for a love-nap like Andy did?"

"Him, not my type," Sara said. "You, well, that's a different story."

She left the bunkroom, shutting the door behind her and headed back to the cockpit. Colding was sound asleep ten seconds later.

•••

"Stop it, hands," Jian said.

The bloody hands ignored her. They kept sewing. The needle-pricks were worse this time, each one a piercing sting she felt clear down to the bone. Wet red streaked the panda body's black-and-white fur. Blood dampened the fur, as did the tears that poured down her cheeks.

"Stop it, hands."

She finished sewing. The alligator head's dead eyes fluttered to life, reptilian eyelids blinking like a drunken man waking to the noonday sun.

Evil.

Jian *felt* evil pouring off the thing like the acrid stench of a skunk. She wanted to move, to run, but her body obeyed no better than her possessed hands.

The alligator head turned, and smiled.

Jian started to scream.

•••

Sara and Alonzo sat in the C-5 cockpit. The small space smelled of artificial pine, thanks to the green, tree-shaped car air freshener Alonzo had hung off the overhead systems panel. They kept monitoring all the systems, but the C-5 was hours into the trip, and there was little they needed to do.

It should have been a nice, relaxed flight, but Sara could feel the tension pouring off her copilot.

“You’ve got something to say, Zo.”

Zo looked at her, then looked back to his instruments, making a show out of looking very closely at everything in front of him. Sara let the silence hang. She just stared at him.

The cockpit door opened. Miller and Cappy came in. They also radiated tension, and wore the same worried expressions painted on Zo’s face.

“Well, well, well,” Sara said. “I bet you’re ready to talk now, hey Zo?”

Alonzo nodded. “You actually need us to say it?”

“Say what?”

Miller laughed a small laugh. “You’ve known us for years, Boss. See if you can guess what we’re thinking.”

“Yeah,” Cappy said. “It’s a fun game. See if you can guess.”

“Okay,” Sara said. “I like games. Let’s see ... you’re concerned that we’re transporting a genetic experiment that we know nothing about?”

“Bzzzz,” Zo said. “Wrong, but thanks for playing.”

“Come on guys, enough. Talk to me.”

Miller sat in the navigator’s seat, while Cappy remained standing.

“Sure, the genetics stuff freaks me out,” Miller said. “But I signed up for that. I knew what I was getting into.”

“Yeah,” Cappy said. “Yeah, we knew what we were getting into. What we *didn’t* sign up for was flying the world’s largest plane into a fucking combat zone, complete with burning buildings and dead bodies, then loading up casualties and flying out fast. The C-5 isn’t build for hot-zone operations like that, and you know it.”

Sara nodded. “Yep, I know it.”

Zo adjusted a control, then leaned in towards Sara. “So why aren’t you freaking out?”

“Because it’s business.”

Alonzo looked speechless. “Sara, a man *died* back there. This is supposed to be a science experiment, not an action movie. Industrial espionage or whatever, this is some serious shit going down here.”

It was Sara’s turn to look away, to overly examine the instruments. She and the boys had been together for seven years. They’d been in her C-5 crew during their days in the Air Force. When they all got out, they pooled their money and bought a 747 that had been converted for pure cargo hauling.

There were plenty of shipping offers from men whose last names sounded like spaghetti dishes, but they never took those jobs. Most of their income came from FedEx and UPS, when those companies had an overflow of cargo that absolutely, *positively* had to be there overnight. They were captains of their own destiny, owners of a shipping company, even though that company had

“So why aren’t you freaking out?”

only one plane. They were beholden to no one save for each other. The job afforded a great lifestyle, but the payments had been too much, and their collective business sense wasn't that great. They had fallen on hard times and had trouble making the payments on the 747.

Danté Paglione had saved the day, so to speak. If Sara and her crew agreed to fly his C-5, he'd pay off the 747 completely, *and* he'd pay them \$100,000 a year *each* for just being on retainer, ready to fly on a moment's notice.

"We took the deal, guys. We took the money. And it's not like Danté can open the Yellow Pages and just go find another crew for this bird. So if we quit, we're leaving them in the lurch."

"I know that, boss," Miller said. "But people are willing to kill for this shit."

"Yeah," Cappy said. "Willing to kill."

Sara stared at them each in turn. "We finish this job, however long it takes, and we own our 747. No payments. We're on easy street from there on out. You know what happens if we walk? Genada keeps our 747. We lose our company. We all go back to working for someone else – we lose everything. Me? I'd rather die first, but ... if you want out of this gig, you just say so, and we walk."

She stared at each of them in turn. It was a group decision. She couldn't coerce them one way or another.

Cappy spoke first. "What if the Monsanto ... or whoever it is ... what if they come after these guys again?"

"Yeah," Miller said. "What if they come again?"

Sara shrugged. "That's a chance I'm willing to take. We've all got sidearms, and we know how to take care of ourselves. And you saw Colding and those other guys, they look like they know what they're doing. I'm willing to take that risk. I'm not losing our company. Fuck it, boys, I'm in for a penny, in for a pound. But it's up to you guys. And I don't want to have this nagging at us from here on out, so make up your minds and make them up right now. Are we *in*, or are we *out*?"

She said it to all of them, but stared straight at Alonzo. Where he went, the Twins would follow.

"Well, Zo? What's it going to be?"

Alonzo seemed to shrink into his seat. He hated to be put on the spot.

"Today, Zo. I've got to go check on that fat Chinese lady, because it looked like she had an injury, and I can't have unknown injuries on my plane. But if you're out, then screw her, we're gone as soon as we land. So what's it going to be?"

All eyes fixed on Alonzo. He was the swing vote, and he knew it.

"Fuck it," he said. "I'm not losing our company. I'm in."

Sara turned to stare at the Twins, but she already knew their answer.

"Okay, I'm in," Miller said.

"Yeah, I'm in," Cappy said.

Sara nodded. "Okay, now that we have that cleared up, let's get back to work. I'm going to check on Jian. Zo, you keep flying. Cappy and Miller, get back down and make

sure Rhumkorrf and Overgard are settling in.”

Cappy and Miller nodded and left the cockpit, headed for the lower deck. Sara watched them go, then headed for the upper-deck lab.

•••

The tiger arm and the baby arm simultaneously reached up, towards her face. Each sprouted bent sewing needles from the finger/paw tips.

“No,” Jian whimpered. “No, please no ...”

The tiger claw needles sank into her shoulder, sending alarms of stinging pain shooting through her body.

The alligator mouth opened wide and leaned in towards her face.

Breath like a corpse.

Teeth wet with saliva.

Jian felt shaking, heavy shaking. In her dream, she lost her grip on the stuffed monstrosity created by her possessed hands. The creature fell to the grass. It landed on all fours and started to scramble towards her, hissing in anger, alligator eyes narrow with hatred and hunger.

•••

When Sara entered the lab, she found Jian asleep. Her head and arms lay heavily on a lab table, her glossy hair seeming to melt right into the table’s black surface. She whimpered in her sleep, small tears leaking from her closed, fluttering eyes.

Sara gently shook Jian’s shoulders.

“Doctor, are you okay?”

Jian looked up at Sara and flinched back, suddenly, as if Sara were some creature straight from the nightmare.

“Take it easy,” Sara said in a soothing voice. “It’s okay.”

Jian looked around the lab, for a few seconds not seeming to know her surroundings.

Sara reached out and stroked Jian’s long black hair. “Just take a breath, kiddo. You had a nightmare, that’s all.”

Jian stared back with haunted, hollow eyes. “That all,” she said with a whisper, then laughed quietly. It was a high-pitched laugh. Had it been louder Sara might have mistaken it for a scream.

Sara stared down at the older woman, her skin slick with sweat, and kept stroking the long black hair. “You want me to get Colding or Doctor Rhumkorrf?”

At the mention of Rhumkorrf’s name, Jian turned back to her computer, shoulders hunched, hair hanging in front of her face. She had the carriage of a woman that’s been beaten by her husband or boyfriend, that slumped look of someone afraid to speak.

Sara saw the change, but didn’t want Jian thinking about Rhumkorrf. She had a chance to make a connection, to get the woman to open up a bit, so she changed the subject.

“Jian, do you have any questions about the plane?”

The woman pointed to the Billups IX computer. “How does it stay powered when we fly, Mees Purinam?”

“Don’t call me ‘Miss.’ I work for a living,” Sara’s smile crinkled the corners of her eyes. “You call me Sara.”

Jian shook her head. “I use respectful terms only.”

“Okay then, Sara it is.” She walked up to Jian and put a light hand on her shoulder, then put a finger under Jian’s chin and gently lifted, tilting her head back. Jian’s neck was bright red, with fresh yellow and purple bruises forming on her skin.

“Are you okay, honey?”

Jian blinked a few times before speaking. “It does hurt a little.”

“I think I need to get some ice on that, Jian. I’ll take care of you. And it’s Sara, right?”

Jian nodded. “Sara,” she said, seeming to try the word on for size, “how does the power work to keep the computer going? We can’t afford to lose data now.”

“When we land, we just hook up to the electrical grid. In flight, the C-5’s electrical system provides the juice. If that fails, the uninterrupted power supply, or UPS, maintains the system for ten hours. And if even *that* goes down, there is a flywheel generator in the C-5’s belly that produces enough power to keep everything stable for another twelve hours. Does that sound reliable enough?”

Jian nodded again, the single nod. “Sara, that sounds very good.”

“Okay.” Sara walked over to the strange looking device that sat behind the glass enclosure. “I told you about the power. Can you tell me what this thing is?”

“Sara, this is an oligo machine. It can create DNA one nucleotide at a time, the same way you’d build chain links but on a much smaller scale. It is directly connected to the Billups computer.”

“Wait a minute,” Sara said. “You’re telling me this thing can *build* custom DNA? Like, create genes that you program on your keyboard there?”

Jian nodded. “This is the most advanced machine of its kind in the world. It can build full, custom chromosomes.”

“Holy shit. That’s amazing. Imagine the brain that came up with that one.”

“The brain is mine,” Jian said quietly. “I invented it. Mee-Sta Rhumkorrf calls it the God Machine.”

The name sent a chill down Sara’s spine. The God Machine. And right smack dab in the middle of her plane.

Sara didn’t like *that*, either. Not one damn bit.



The UH 60 Black Hawk helicopter came in low, just thirty feet above the water, and it came in fast. It banked for a quick circle around the facility perimeter. Tendrils of black smoke still wafted up from the ruined hanger. The bloody bodies of cows littered the fenced-in area connected to the hangar – even from here, Chapman could see the cows had been torn apart, probably by a high caliber weapon.

Chapman wore a Level-5 hazmat suit, as did the eight CIRGs seated in the Black Hawk. The bulky suits made it difficult to move in the cramped helicopter. He spoke to them over the suit’s built-in radio, hearing his own voice in his earpiece as he did.

“Okay, people. Let’s be sharp. This is a civilian facility, so we shouldn’t have many problems. We go in fast, we round up the staff, and we keep them contained in the cafeteria. They’re probably going to be very scared by the chemical warfare gear, so be nice but be firm. Do not forget for one second that we are on Canadian soil with the express permission of the Prime Minister himself. We are to go in and lock down the facility, make sure there is no viral threat, then stand down and let the Canadian military take over. *They* are in charge. We are guests brought in for our ability to deal with potentially hostile bioterrorism situations. When in doubt, you defer to them. Any questions?”

None of the men raised their hands. They looked quite frightening with their bulky yellow suits, their clear plastic faceplates and their SCAR-L Mk. 16 machine guns. Two of the men didn’t look at him – they manned the M60 machine guns mounted on either side, and kept their weapons and attention pointing out from the open side doors.

Chapman hated wearing the bio suit. Even after what he’d seen on Greenland, there was almost zero chance another virus had blown up in a completely separate xenotransplantation experiment, but Longworth wouldn’t listen to reason. The Genada experiment was different – created specifically to avoid any possibility of a virus jumping species.

The Black Hawk lowered, preparing to set down just fifty feet from the front airlock. The airlock door opened ... Magnus Paglione stepped out. On his shoulder was a long tube with a boxy contraption on the front.

A stinger missile.

“Take him out!” Chapman screamed, but it was too late. The gunner’s M60 opened up, just after a trail of smoke shot out from the stinger. Chapman didn’t think, he just leapt out of the helicopter into the open air. The five-foot-long surface-to-air missile closed the fifty-foot distance in less than two seconds, hitting the Black Hawk just behind the open side door. The high-explosive warhead detonated on impact, blasting the tail free from the fuselage. The shockwave ripped through the crew compartment, tearing the CIRG team to pieces, and continued into the cockpit, killing the pilot and copilot before blowing out the canopy in a billowing fireball.

The Black Hawk had been twenty feet off the ground when Chapman jumped. The blast caught him in midair and threw him twenty feet towards the airlock door. He spun as he flew, and when he hit the ground both legs snapped in several places. He lay on the ground, his hazmat suit half torn away, his legs radiating pain.

The ruined Black Hawk fell to the ground, a burning coffin filled with burning bodies.

Chapman looked up, towards the door.

Magnus walked towards him.

Chapman tried to get up, but knew instantly that he couldn’t

“Does the blood scare you? I forgot to clean it off”

move. He was done for.

Magnus knelt next to him. The big man with the violet eyes smiled. It was a warm smile, the kind you unconsciously give to an old friend.

“Hi. Bubbah,” Magnus said. He checked his watch. “I’ve got about twenty minutes before my friend Bobby comes to pick me up. That’s a little quality time for you and me.”

He reached behind his back. When his hand returned, it held a Ka-Bar knife, the black surface streaked with blood. Chapman’s eyes went wide ... he tried to crawl away using only his arms.

“I’m sorry,” Magnus said. “Does the blood scare you? I forgot to clean it off. Don’t worry, Bubbah, the blood belongs to your little spy. I should say, ‘belonged,’ to him, past tense, because he doesn’t really own anything now.”

Magnus reached out with the knife, and Chapman started to scream.



The C-5 sailed through the night sky, surrounded by a welcome envelope of clouds. At first, the big engines created a hum that forced everyone to talk loudly in order to be heard, but the noise was so constant everyone tuned it out after an hour or so. They were halfway to Thunder Bay, the big C-5 appearing on all local radar as Bearskin Air Cargo flight 91.

Sara gently wrapped gauze around Jian’s neck. The gauze held a small ice pack in place over her neck bruise, which was a darkening, angry mix of yellow and purple. Jian tilted her head to accommodate, but never stopped typing. Sara couldn’t understand what the woman was doing – there was nothing on the screen but an endless list of four letters: C, G, T and A.

“I don’t know why you look at that so intently,” Sara said. “I know you’re smart and all, but doesn’t the computer handle all that coding stuff?”

Jian shrugged. “Sometimes I see things that give me idea. I tweak program here, tweak program there.” As if to punctuate her point, Jian called up a new window, typed in a few lines of code, then returned to the endlessly scrolling list of A, G, T and C.

The Billups IX gave off a loud, single beep. Jian took in a sharp breath and held it. She stared at the screen with such intensity it spooked Sara, just a bit. Her staring reminded Sara of a hardcore gambler waiting for the dice to come up ‘7.’

Jian clicked the mouse, and Sara saw actual words appear on the screen.

GENOME A1 SEQUENCING: COMPLETE

PROOFREADING ALGORITHM: COMPLETE

VIABILITY PROBABILITY: 95.0567 PERCENT

DOWNLOADING...

“It is all still here,” Jian said in a whisper. A progress bar under the word “downloading” filled up from left to right. When it finished, the progress bar disappeared. The words on the screen changed.

DOWNLOAD COMPLETE

BEGINNING SYNTHESIS

Sara heard a mechanical humming sound coming from the other side of the lab. She

looked at the God Machine as its airlock access light turned from green to red.



The C-5's incessant in-flight hum filled the lab's stillness as Rhumkorrf, Jian and Overgard stared at the bulkhead monitor – stared at the grid filled with 131 grainy black-and-white eggs, and nineteen black squares.

131/150

Jian let out a long gasp, unaware that she'd been holding her breath for the last few seconds.

A panel went black.

130/150

Rhumkorrf pounded his fist on a lab table, just as he had sixteen times before.

"Time?" he asked.

"Twenty-four minutes, thirteen seconds," Overgard answered.

During the last experiment, *all* the eggs had died within twenty-four minutes. None of them wanted to acknowledge that things were working, as if by saying anything out loud they might jinx months of work.

They waited, but no more black squares appeared. The embryos had split several times already, and all were well into the morula stage. In some of the squares, macrophages, blob-like and hungry, sat side by side with the morulas.

But they didn't attack.

The three scientists kept waiting, but the only motion came from the sudden quivering of eggs with cells going through the final phase of mitosis.

No one spoke. The engine's hum filled the lab.

"Time?" Rhumkorrf said irritably.

"Twenty-eight minutes, forty-two seconds," Overgard said, a slight tinge of hope in her voice.

Rhumkorrf nodded. Jian held her breath.

In square thirty-eight, the egg quivered, another successful mitosis. The macrophages moved around aimlessly, completely ignoring the eggs.

"They certainly grow fast, Jian. Do we have an egg for each cow?"

Jian checked her screen. "At least one egg remain for each cow."

"Doctors," Rhumkorrf said quietly, "I think we've done it."

Overgard let out a laugh of triumph, then ran to Rhumkorrf and hugged him. He beamed with satisfaction, then patted Jian on the shoulder.

"Nice work!" Rhumkorrf said, a smile running from ear to ear. "Jian, what changed? What did you *do*?"

"The four new samples helped, Mee-Sta Rhumkorrf, but I had an idea, very simple, that we hadn't thought of yet. We want internal organs, and we've coded to make those compatible with humans. But we don't need the other parts to be compatible. I told the computer to swap out our combined DNA for unnecessary parts with bovine DNA, trying to find the missing piece of the compatibility puzzle. The computer sorted

through millions of permutations, and finally found it.”

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense,” Rhumkorrf said. “What was it?”

“Several things, but mostly integument. The ancestors will have cow fur.”

Overgard’s jaw dropped. For once, she looked amazed rather than bitchy. Rhumkorrf laughed and slapped himself on the forehead. “Of course! We’ve been so close to it, we never stepped back and looked at the obvious! Replace the unnecessary parts with cow DNA. Jian you’re a genius!” Rhumkorrf hugged the woman. He couldn’t get his arms all the way around her, but he hugged her anyway.

“That’s brilliant,” Overgard said quietly. “I wish I’d thought of it.”

“It doesn’t matter who came up with it,” Rhumkorrf said, elation pouring off him. “The team did it. We’re on our way!”

“Claus, when will we go for implantation in the cows?” Overgard asked.

“If the eggs continue to divide at this rate, they’ll hit the blastocyst stage in a matter of hours. We can implant as soon as we land. Claudette, now we’re on your turf. What can we expect next?”

“We will probably lose all the embryos within a few days of implantation,” Overgard said. “But that’s to be expected. When we cloned the quagga, we implanted over twelve-hundred blastocysts before one survived to birth.”

Rhumkorrf nodded. “Yes, but we’ll conquer that step next. We’re closer, people, we can’t be stopped now.”

Rhumkorrf patted Jian on the shoulder again. She forced a smile, but she could barely take her eyes off the screen. Rhumkorrf had been right – she was the only one who could have done it.

And finally, she *had* done it.



BOOK THREE: BLACK MANITOU ISLAND

November 9

Sara and Alonzo worked the controls as the C-5 approached Black Manitou Island, a tiny sliver of green, red, yellow and brown in the midst of Lake Superior's glittering blue splendor. Colding sat in the navigator's seat, buckled in tight but still able to look out the canopy. His hand felt much better, although it still hurt.

All three scientists were occupied. The Twins were tending to the cows, and Sara and Alonzo were flying the plane. Colding, for once, got to just sit on his ass and let someone else be in charge. He watched the island, periodically flipping through the folder Magnus had provided.

They were flying low enough to see whitecaps on the waves below. The overcast sky seemed a dome of dull gray, punctuated from time to time by the diffuse glow of lightning flickering through the clouds.

"I mean, I knew they were big, but they're called *lakes*," Alonzo said. "These things are frigging oceans."

"That's why they call them the *Great Lakes*, kid," Sara said. "I can't believe you've never seen them. You gotta get out more."

"Whatever," Alonzo said. "I've flown over all the big water on this planet ... I just never had much of an urge to visit the Midwest. You grew up out here?"

"Kind of close," Sara said. "Cheboygan, Michigan."

"I feel for you," Alonzo said. "This is the fucking middle of nowhere."

"This is beautiful, not some city cesspool like Oakland, pal."

"Don't be bad-mouthing Oakland, boss. I'll bring the Raider Nation down on your ass."

"Whatever, Zo. How about you, PJ?"

"I'm from Georgia," Colding said. "I've never seen the Great Lakes before. They're massive."

Black Manitou ran ten miles from tip to tip, almost perfectly southwest to northeast. Three miles wide at its widest point, deep bays and fjords gave it a spread-out look, almost like a tropical archipelago, even though the vast majority of the land remained connected.

They approached from the northeast tip. A wide sandy beach surrounded the coastline.

The longer they flew over water, the more annoyed Alonzo became.

"So how close is the nearest town?" he asked. "Any party places around here?"

Colding laughed. “You won’t be doing much partying, my friend. Closest town is Houghton. That’s three hours by boat, which doesn’t even matter, because no one leaves.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? This place is like an island from *Survivor*. How long do we have to stay here?”

“For as long as it takes,” Sara said, a hint of annoyance in her voice. Alonzo scowled, but didn’t say anything.

“It’s a bit more accommodating than a *Survivor* island,” Colding said. “I’m told the island used to be a four-star resort. Marilyn Monroe supposedly stayed there.”

The island grew in size. Colding pulled out the map, wanting to take advantage of the opportunity for an aerial view.

“I’m not picking up any radar from the island,” Alonzo said.

“Says here they only turn it on for landings and takeoffs,” Colding said. “Danté doesn’t want anyone wondering why an island in the middle of the lake has functioning radar.”

As if on cue, a small ping sounded through the cockpit.

“We’ve picked up radar from the island,” Alonzo said. “Looks like they’re ready for us.”

“You want me to put her down?” Sara asked.

“Not yet,” Colding said. “Fly the length of the island first, then bring her in.”

Sara guided the plane down the length of the island. It was quite a bit larger than Colding had imagined – it just looked so small on the map compared to Lake Superior’s massive breadth. He traced their path on the map as the C-5 flew over. Rapleje Bay split the northeast end of the island into two mile-long tongues of land covered in the red and yellow molten-colored trees soaking up the last rays of fall.

Just past the bay, they flew over a neat little farmhouse and a good-sized red barn with a black tar-shingle roof. Grey shingles spelled out the word “Ballantine” in five-foot letters. Colding saw cows milling about a snow-dusted pasture outside the barn, and a flash of something small and black. Probably a dog. It was hard to tell from this high up, and with the C-5’s window configuration you could only look out front, you couldn’t look down.

They passed over fields long since grown fallow, spotted here and there with young poplars and pines. The island was by no means a mountain, but it did rise considerably near the center. At the high point stood a tall wooden tower, and next to that a thin red-and-white communications tower.

“What’s that all about, Peej?” Sara asked.

Colding flipped through the folder. “Um, it’s an old fire watch tower. They’ve got radar hooked up. They can use it for air-traffic control. Has air raid siren, too. The other one is the secure satellite uplink to Genada. It has a jammer, so we can block all communications in or out.”

“So if they block all communications, how do you talk to someone on the other end of the island?”

Colding ran his finger along the information, looking for the answer. “Here you go. Pretty simple solution, really ... they have normal land lines running to all the buildings

on the island. It's all self-contained, not connected to any outside system, so those signals can't be picked off without a phone tap."

They flew over the two towers. To the left Colding saw the idyllic little harbor, which lay on the southeastern coast. Black Manitou was surrounded by water, with hundreds of small inlets and bays, but it was also surrounded by jagged shards of granite. The harbor was really the only safe place to land a boat. Massive piles of broken concrete and jagged rocks made up the harbor wall, turning the endless Lake Superior waves into busts of white froth. Behind the harbor wall the ten-foot waves gave way to minor chop. A large boat, maybe a thirty-footer, sat moored to the dock. It was painted flat-black, the same color as the C-5.

They moved past the bay and over a cluster of small buildings. Colding couldn't make out much, except for a solid-looking gray stone church. The church's bell tower rose up at least thirty feet, which made it the tallest thing he'd seen yet save for the wooden watch tower.

As they reached the southeastern tip of Black Manitou, they finally saw their new home. The forest gave way to a rising, well-kept lawn peppered with landscaping trees and flowerbeds. At the back of the lawn perched a four-column, three-story brick mansion that overlooked the estate like some lord's castle from old England.

"Wow," Sara said. "That's some pretty nice digs."

"Yeah," Alonzo said. "I'm sure the built-in dance club is loaded with women."

"Just shut up and fly, Zo."

Alonzo nodded once and didn't say anything else.

The mansion's high position gave it a commanding view of Black Manitou's southern tip: a sandy beach lined with rocks, then nothing but water as far as the horizon.

Just south of the mansion sat a long, wide, curving clearing, completely free of trees and undergrowth. It looked like a giant, snaking, golf course fairway. But Colding saw that if you drew a visual line from end to end, there was enough width to land the C-5 right down the middle. Paglione had built a landing strip so that it didn't look like a landing strip, but would clearly do the job.

Next to the strip sat two buildings. The first was a black pole barn with a surrounding fence, obviously meant to stable livestock. The stable would provide the cows with some grazing space and freedom to move around.

The second building actually looked like part of the surrounding forest. A sprawling sheet metal building 150 yards long, 100 yards wide and at least seven stories tall, it was by far the largest structure on the island. Wire mesh ran from the top edges of the building, sloping down to the surrounding trees. Fake pine-tree tips stuck up from the mesh and covered the hangar's roof. From the ground, it probably looked like the worst camouflage one could imagine. From the view of an orbital satellite, however, the hangar would look like nothing more than a wooded hill. Satellite efforts to locate the distinctive size and outline of a C-5 wouldn't see jack, once the plane was inside.

Sara turned her head halfway to address Colding. "Okay, you see what you needed to see?"

Colding nodded. "Take her down, cap'n."

Sara banked to the left, taking the C-5 back out over the water as she circled around. The grass runway was flat as glass, helping her make a flawless, smooth landing. The 450,000-pound C-5 bore down on the fifteen pairs of hydraulic landing wheels, each larger than a Volkswagen Beetle, which cushioned the weight. Colding was surprised by the landing's softness.

The C-5 slowed to a crawl as Sara guided it into the fake-hilltop hangar.



The Twins lowered the rear ramp as the turbines idled down. Colding walked out of the ramp, feeling the pain in his hand, his shoulder and his chest. At least nothing was broken.

Just as his feet hit the hangar's concrete floor, a black Humvee pulled into the cavernous opening. A painted logo on the hood read "Otto Lodge." Two men stepped out. Colding recognized them from the personnel pictures in the folder Magnus had given him: Clayton and Chris Detweiler.

Colding could see the family connection, but only in their faces. Clayton was in his fifties, and looked at Colding with a scowl so deeply marked by permanent wrinkles it might be the only expression he had ever displayed. He sported a three-day growth of bristly gray beard that seemed to make his many wrinkles look deeper, more defined. His thick gray hair was combed straight back, looked oily-wet, and smelled of Brylcreem. He wore a black Otto Lodge windbreaker covered with dirt, grease, and what appeared to be several mustard stains.

Chris, on the other hand, looked like he'd just stepped out of the pages of an Abercrombie & Fitch ad. He also wore an Otto Lodge windbreaker, but his looked new. Oakley sunglasses hung from a cord around his neck. A deep tan covered skin that was already turning leathery. He wore a hemp necklace and a small gold loop in his right ear. Chris's eyes bore premature wrinkles, the mark of a life spent in the sun.

"Welcome to Black Manitou, eh?" Clayton said in a sandpapery voice. He didn't offer his hand. Chris did, and Colding shook it.

"Thanks. I'm PJ Colding. I'm in charge here. Looks like everything is set up pretty well."

"What, you're surprised?" Clayton said. "You thought an old hick like me couldn't take care of business. Is that what you thought, city boy?"

Colding was taken aback by the angry attitude. "No, that's not what I meant at all. I think you took it the wrong way."

"I been running this place for thirty years, eh?" Clayton's eyes narrowed beneath bushy gray eyebrows. Colding couldn't place the man's accent. He'd never heard anything quite like it. "Just 'cause Danté said to take care of you don't mean you're in charge. You got it?"

Chris rolled his eyes, as if he'd heard his father's shitty attitude a million times before.

"Now hold on just a second," Colding said, his voice rising seemingly of its own

accord. "Let's get a few things straight."

Before Colding could continue, Detweiler looked away, up into the C-5's rear cargo door. Colding heard light footsteps on the ramp.

"Hey there, Peej," Sara said. "Who're your friends?"

"We were having a conversation here," Clayton said. "Who da hell are you, eh?"

"I'm da pilot, eh?" Sara said with a smile, her voice a perfect imitation of Clayton's accent. Clayton leaned back a bit, the scowl still on his face.

"You makin' fun of da way I talk?" he asked guardedly.

Sara laughed. "Only a little bit. I grew up in Cheboygan. Used to spend my summers vacationing near Sault Saint Marie."

"Michigan side or Canadian side?" Clayton asked.

"Da Michigan side, of course."

Clayton's face lit up in a genuine, friendly smile. It made him look like a completely different person.

Colding stared, dumbfounded, as Clayton twisted his body to clumsily extend his callused hand to Sara. "Clayton Detweiler. This is Chris."

"What the hell is a 'yooper'?"

"Sara Purinam." She shook Clayton's hand, then Chris's.

"Welcome to Black Manitou, Sara. Glad to have you here, eh? You're just in time for da grand tour."

"Actually, Clayton, we wanted to settle in first," Colding said. "Long trip and all."

"Get in da fucking car," Clayton said, the scowl back on his face. "I gotta get Chris back to his boat and then I'm going to get this tour shit out of da way. I got work to do, ya know."

Clayton turned and got into the Hummer, slamming the door shut behind him.

Colding looked at Chris. "Is he always like this?"

Chris smiled, an easy smile, a stoner's smile. "Unfortunately, yeah. But don't worry about it, man. He's the hardest worker you'll ever meet. And if you need something done, it's done. Okay?" He asked the last word as if it were a signature on a contract, a contract that Colding would just have to accept because that's the way it was. Chris obviously didn't want his father catching any shit.

"Okay," Colding said. "I'll give him the benefit of the doubt."

Chris smiled and nodded slowly, not just with his head, but with his shoulders too. "All right, man." He got in the back seat.

"You're really making a great first impression, Peej," Sara said, smiling at Colding's discomfort.

"How the hell do you do it?" Colding asked. "This guy is obviously a frigging asshole, and he took to you right away. And what's with that 'eh' thing?"

Sara laughed. "Detweiler is a Yooper."

"What the hell is a 'yooper'?"

“People from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. You know, Upper Peninsula ... U.P. ... yooper, get it? Yoopers have a real thick accent all their own. ‘Ya’ instead of ‘yes,’ ‘da’ instead of ‘the,’ and they end a lot of sentences with ‘eh,’ which is kind of like a rhetorical question. You’ll get used to it.”

A blast of the Hummer’s horn jolted them both. Clayton sat inside, one hand on the steering wheel, the other twirling in an annoyed circle that said *let’s go already*.

“I don’t like this guy,” Colding said.

Sara walked around to the rear passenger door. “Oh relax, Peej. Clayton’s fine. Just play along, we’re all going to be together for a long time.”

Colding sighed and got in the Hummer. “Let’s go check out the mansion, Clayton.”

“Let’s not and say we did, eh? I’m dropping Chris off at da dock. Shut yer yap and enjoy the trip.”

Before Colding could answer, Clayton jammed the Hummer into reverse and squealed out of the hangar. He made a jostling three-point stop, then shot down the dirt road that ran down the center of the island like a brown spine.

November 10

Danté’s head rested in his hands, his elbows on his desk. How could this have happened? He looked up. Magnus sat in front of the desk, relaxing in a chair. He seemed not the least bit bothered by the fact that he’d killed nine Americans.

“Magnus, how could you be so stupid?” He spoke quietly, firmly. Magnus had become a severe liability. So severe, in fact, that the bonds of brotherhood no longer seemed so vital.

“Relax,” Magnus said. “The problem is solved.”

“Solved? *Solved?* You just killed nine Americans!”

“Ten, actually. I also did the plant.”

Danté’s face scrunched in frustration. He felt a pain in his chest. He pounded the desk with his fist, just once, and the fist stayed there like a dropped gavel.

“Danté, seriously, you need to relax. I know what I’m doing. Chapman is the best the CIA has. He knew more about us than anyone. Sure, the yanks will be pissed, but they don’t know where we are. They were on Canadian soil, remember? They haven’t even reported the story to the media. The Canadian public would go ballistic if they found out the Prime Minister allowed armed American assault teams to attack a Canadian facility, right?”

Danté thought for a second. Magnus did have a point.

Magnus continued. “So no one is going to report the story. But see, we know the story. We can report the crash of a Black Hawk helicopter on Canadian soil anytime we like. We can also report the death of a Canadian citizen, one Brady Giovanni, during the attack perpetrated by the Americans. You know how paranoid we Canadians are about our militaristic neighbor. And it would put the American President in some seriously hot

water. It's a political nightmare on both sides of the border – that means the story won't get out."

"Go on," Danté said.

"So no story, no problem."

"You think that the CIA is just going to forget about all of this?"

Magnus rolled his eyes. "Don't be an idiot. Of course not. They're going to come after us with everything they've got. But Chapman is the guy who knew us, who knew you, and who knew Colding. The CIA isn't starting from scratch, but it's close to that. Black Manitou isn't associated with us in any way. By now the C-5 is tucked away in the hangar. Even if the CIA can figure out how we moved the operation, they won't be able to find the C-5. We just keep on, business as usual."

Danté sat quietly. Magnus painted a pretty picture. A little too pretty. The CIA looked out for their own. Keeping a story quiet meant they couldn't publicly come after Genada. But the CIA did a lot of shit that wasn't public.

"So what happens if the CIA goes eye-for-an-eye, Magnus? What if they decide to eliminate Genada the old-fashioned way, the same way you eliminated Chapman?"

Magnus smiled and shrugged. "The ball's in play, brother. If they come after me, I can take care of myself. Can you?"

Danté turned away. Magnus would be content to just disappear. Danté couldn't do that, didn't know *how* to do that.

"And what about Colding?" Danté said. "He's not going to go along with this. He works for us – he believes in the project – but Chapman was his *partner*. They worked together for six years."

"How the fuck is he going to know? He's on Black Manitou. He's completely cut off. As far as he knows, his old butt-buddy Chapman is still alive and well. The media won't report it, so he's not going to know unless we tell him."

Magnus was right. The stakes were much, much higher, but they had relocated the project and kept it going when every other chimera project in the world had been shut down cold. Regardless of the consequences, Magnus's murderous act had bought them some time. How much time, Danté couldn't be sure. He just hoped it was enough for Rhumkorrf to finish the job.

"I'm headed to London in a few hours," Magnus said. "I have another CIA source there."

"You can't just call?"

Magnus shook his big head. "Not with this one. Need to be in person. Just there and back. I'll be back day after tomorrow."

Danté nodded. He knew the world of business, and his brother knew all of this covert stuff. As much as he hated Magnus's methods, the man always seemed to be one step ahead of the competition and the authorities.

Danté trusted his brother to handle that end of things. What other choice did he have?

Especially now?



Clayton's Humvee drove through the forest road, through arching trees turning from green to bright red, yellow and orange. A few miles from the hangar, the road forked. Clayton took the right fork, which quickly crested a grassy dune spotted with tall grasses, then led into the island's small harbor.

The place smelled like a beach, complete with a strong dead-fish odor. Colding looked up and down the shore. Nothing but sand, grass and a few scraggly trees visible just beyond the crest of the sloping, twenty-foot-high dune. Thick logs dotted the beach, some with gnarled roots still attached, half-buried, others resting on top as if they'd just washed ashore. All were white, scrubbed clean of bark by the crashing waves and the gritty sand. The beach resembled some far-off desert, littered with the stripped and bleached bones of animals unable to survive the endless sun.

The road ended at a dock, which ran forty feet into the harbor's calm waters. A small, black metal shed sat near the base of the dock. Tied up to the end of the dock was a 36-foot Sharkcat cruiser, painted flat black. White and gold script spelled the words "Otto II" on the boat's aft.

Chris hopped out, as did Colding, and they both walked down the dock to the boat. Colding didn't know anything about this man. Chris was potentially the only means of escape off the island should anything happen to the C-5.

"Magnus tells me you can take care of yourself," Colding said. It was meant to be a compliment, but Chris's smile faded away.

"I do what Magnus tells me. I don't like it, but I do it. That's why I'm always carrying this stupid thing." He unzipped his coat and opened it a bit, allowing Colding to peek inside at the handgun – Genada standard-issue Beretta in a shoulder holster.

"You ever had to use that thing on the job?"

Chris rolled his eyes. "Oh please. Do I look like Clint Eastwood? I get more done drinking in the bars at Houghton-Hancock than I ever would with this thing. I talk to strangers. I ask questions, I find out why people are in town and what they are doing. See if they have any interest in Black Manitou. The only shooting I do involves tequila and bourbon."

Colding laughed. He'd been expecting some bravado, the kind of attitude that – for some men – goes hand in hand with a gun. Guys like Andy the Asshole. But he could hear the sincerity in Chris's voice ... he hated carrying the weapon. In fact, it made him feel downright foolish.

"So you don't like the gun. Then why do you work for Genada?"

Chris nodded towards the Humvee. "My dad has lived on this island for fifty years. He's not leaving. I need to be here for him, you know? And if I work for Genada, well, then I get paid to be here for him. He doesn't have anyone else. It's family, man, you get it? And besides, it's a great gig. I make crazy money, and all I do is drive this beautiful boat. Once or twice a year chauffeur Magnus and Danté around. Maybe I'm not a gunslinger, but this is more like a permanent vacation than a job."

“But you’ll use that gun if you have to,” Colding said, his voice low and deadly serious. “If I have problems out here, and my people are in danger and I call you out here, you’re prepared to do what I tell you?”

“My dad is now one of ‘your people.’ Anyone fucks with my dad, I’ll do whatever it takes to protect him.”

Colding extended his hand. Chris smiled, and shook it.

“Chris. I think you and I see eye to eye.”

“Nice meeting you, Mister Colding. Anything you need from the mainland, just use the super-secret mega-spy radio in the security room. Dad will show you how to get hold of me.”

“Thanks. Oh, and Magnus had a message for you. He said to make sure his snowmobile is ready.”

“Yeah, will do. Mine is in that shed right there.” He pointed to the black metal shed at the foot of the dock. “I keep it there so when we’ve got five feet of snow, I can get to the mansion and back to the docks. Feel free to take it when the snow comes.”

“Can you two stop grab-assin?” Clayton shouted from the Humvee. “I’ve got work to do.”

Chris just smiled, then untied the cruiser and hopped in. Colding took a good look at the boat. Other than the C-5, it would be the only way off the island unless Magnus saw fit to deliver a helicopter. The Otto II had plenty of room; they could easily use the boat to evacuate the entire staff if they needed to.

Chris waved to Colding and shouted to be heard over the engine. “Good luck, chief. I’m just a call away if you need anything.” With that, Chris gunned the engine and expertly turned the boat around, trailing a strong wake as he headed out of the harbor.

“Such a showoff, that guy,” Clayton said. “Okay, let’s get this shit finished so I can get on with my day.”

The term “salt of the Earth” didn’t go far enough to describe Detweiler. More like the rock on which that salt might crystallize.

“Clayton, I think you need to relax,” Colding said in his best ‘I mean business’ tone.

“Ya? Think about this, eh?” Clayton leaned onto his left cheek and ripped off a loud, barking fart. The rotten-egg smell immediately filled the Hummer.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Colding said as he rolled down the window. Sara let out a gagging noise, but she was laughing as she rolled down both the backseat windows.

“Oh, Clayton!” she said, breathing through her shirt sleeve. “That’s just not right.”

Clayton’s shoulders bounced up and down in a chuckle. He breathed in deeply through his nose. “Oh, that was a good one, eh? Welcome to Black Manitou, city boy.”

The Hummer backed off the dock, rolled over the sand-covered pavement and crested the dunes. Just past the dunes, they once again hit the fork in the road. Clayton stopped and turned to face Colding.

“Da road on da left, obviously, goes back to da hangar and then da mansion. Da road on the right leads into da old town and then up to da farms on da island’s north end.”

“Anyone in the town?” Sara asked.

Clayton shook his head. “Nope. Ghost town. Danté bought everyone out years ago, eh? You want to take a look?”

“Later,” Colding said. “I want to get to the mansion first. I want to make sure everyone is settled in.”

Clayton put the Hummer in gear and took the left-hand fork.

Large ferns dominated the tangled undergrowth, making the side of the road resemble an impressionist painting – shades of green embellished with bold streaks of brown. And yet even with trees towering up on all sides, there was always the faint, constant, relaxing sound of the waves crashing against the beach.

Unkempt dirt roads branched off from time to time, leading to small shacks and quaint houses, all of which carried the unmistakable air of neglect. One narrow dirt road, however, looked well-maintained. The entrance was almost hidden with lush vegetation, and Colding had missed it on the way from the hangar to the docks. He peered down the road as they passed. Through the trees, he could see a small log ranch house with a neat yard and potted plants hanging above the front door.

“What’s that place?”

“That’s my house,” Detweiler said without looking away from the road.

“Looks like you’ve done all right.”

“Looks like it’s none of your fucking business, eh?”

“For crying out loud, do you have to be such an asshole?”

“Ya, I do.”

Colding stared at him, dumbfounded. With an answer like that, what else was there to say?

They left Clayton’s place behind. The road continued a slow, steady curve to the right, the curve mirroring the unseen shoreline.

The last bend gave way to the rising, immaculate lawn and the red brick mansion.

“That baby’s been there over a century,” Clayton said. “Used to belong to a guy named Phineas Muldoon. His grandson Kent is da one what turned it into a hotel. Rock Hudson stayed here. So did Marilyn Monroe. Hemingway used to come here. I used to drink beers with him all da time.”

Colding threw Clayton a doubting glance.

“You drank with Earnest Hemingway?”

“Ya, he was one hell of a guy. Used to fart a lot, though. Smelled awful. He could clear out da entire bar when he got going.”

Colding tried to imagine one of America’s greatest literary figures ripping off a loud one in a bar full of ‘Yoopers,’ but the picture just wouldn’t register.

“What about Marilyn Monroe?” Sara asked, leaning forward. “Did you drink with her, too?”

“She liked to drink alone mostly, eh? I banged her, though. Nice tits.”

With an answer like that, what else was there to say?

Colding sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"I see, so you were drinking buddies with Earnest Hemmingway and you used to make love to Marilyn Monroe. And Rock Hudson? You hang out with him, too?"

Clayton let out a scornful huff. "Hudson? Why would I want to hang out with that fag?"

They followed the road as it curved behind the mansion. Clayton drove the Hummer into a large brick garage filled with a dozen snowmobiles, a space for the Humvee, and a large, boxy, white vehicle. The vehicle looked somewhat like the flat-topped, four-door Humvee, but with five-wheeled tank treads instead of tires, and it was shorter – room for the front bench seat, rear bench seat, and a stubby, down-slanting hood that ended flat with heavy headlights. The armor looked quite thick, thick enough to stop small-caliber fire. A hatch on top and a hatch in the back gave the machine a total of six doors. A retrofitted aerial lift with a small, one-man bucket, like the kind on telephone repair or utility trucks, was mounted on the vehicle's back half.

"What's that thing?" Colding asked.

"That's my snowplow," Clayton said. "It's a BV 206, all-terrain thingee. Magnus bought it surplus off da Sweed military. I use it to mow da landing strip, and to groom da snowmobile trails in da winter, and to fix da phone lines. Lot of ground to cover, eh? It hauls a ten-foot-wide mower and an eight-foot-wide trail grooming rig. I couldn't live without it."

Steps outside the garage led up to the mansion's wide, cut stone veranda. The view from the front of the mansion, with the English garden lawn and the emerald-green forest, was amazing, but the view from the back simply took Colding's breath away. The mansion was a jewel atop a crown of golden sand dunes that sloped gently downward. A wet, clean, beach scent permeated, mingled with the deep pine smell that filtered in from the woods. No dead-fish scent here. Dunes, like flash-frozen swells of sand, undulated gently downward towards the beach. Atop each ran clumps of sparse grass that danced in time to Lake Superior's cool wind, adding to the illusion that the dunes were fluid, living things, like waves, temporarily frozen, awaiting some mystical command to roam free once again.

A stunning path of cut stone followed the slope of the dunes, covering most of the hundred-yard distance between the mansion and the beach. The polished stone had a strange, regular pattern, like an enlarged black-and-white picture of muscle cells. Despite waist-high walls decorated with ornate wrought-iron handrails, sand covered the cut stone like sprinkles of powdered sugar on a chocolate cake.

"What's this path made of?"

"Petoskey stone," Clayton said. "Fossilized coral. There's tons of it around these parts."

Whitecaps frosted the lake as far as the eye could see. Spreading outwards from the beach were hundreds of places where the water seemed white more often than blue: frothing spots that stood stationary against the rolling waves.

"Those look like some nasty rocks," Colding said.

“Nasty ain’t da word for it, eh? Those rocks ate a lot of ships back in da days of big boats. Last one to go down was in 1965, when a storm pushed da freighter *Coronado* onto that shoal.”

Clayton reached into the glove compartment and pulled out an old pair of binoculars. He handed them to Colding, then pointed northwest. Through the glasses, what had looked like just another cluster of rocks was actually the jutting, rusted-out remains of an old tanker. The superstructure rose out of the water like the fin of some giant mechanical shark. The ship rested at a deep slant, allowing the rust-eaten bow to peek above the surface between waves.

“Come on,” Clayton said. “I’ll show you around da mansion.”

The back of the veranda was a floor-to-ceiling picture window with wide French doors that led into an expansive lounge filled with leather furniture and expensive-looking tables. Most of the furniture faced towards the window, providing people a picturesque view despite any inclement weather. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined the walls. A thick mahogany bar with a marble counter and brass trim dominated the room. Behind it sat a well-lit glass liquor cabinet filled with hundreds of bottles. One brand dominated, taking up an entire shelf.

“Looks like you’ve got about twenty bottles of Yukon Jack,” Sara said, pointing to the row of whiskey bottles. “You actually drink that crap?”

Clayton shook his head. “Hell no, that’s for Magnus. It’s all he drinks. And he drinks a lot of it.”

Clayton led them out of the lounge. The whole building simply reeked of turn of the century class. Teak paneling with mahogany trim gave the walls a deep, natural warmth. The ornate, molded white ceiling spoke of craftsmanship from a day long past. Brass light fixtures gracefully curved out from the mahogany trim, brightly lighting every inch of the hallways. Most of the rooms, even the small ones, had a crystal chandelier. The larger the room, the larger the chandelier. Gold-colored carpeting held a pattern very similar to that of the molded ceiling, giving the décor a smooth, unified feel.

But all the style and warmth couldn’t quite hide the building’s age. The floor dipped here and there, some teak panels didn’t quite line up with the mahogany trim. Every hall and room held the visible signs of minor repairs – decades of settling had taken their toll.

“Thirty guest rooms, da main dining room, da kitchen, da lounge, and a game room,” Clayton said. “Da basement has all da old administrative rooms and servants’ quarters, which are pretty much storage now, eh? Also houses da security room, which I imagine you want to see.”

Colding and Sara followed Detweiler to a stairwell. It was narrow and somewhat hidden, obviously meant for servant traffic back in the mansion’s hotel days. The basement was only slightly less ornamental than the upstairs. Clayton stopped at a door with a small keypad and punched in 0-0-0-0. A heavy deadbolt clicked open inside the door.

“Pretty crafty password, Clayton.”

The old man shrugged and walked inside. Unlike the mansion's classy antique motif, this room was completely modern, with white walls and fluorescent lighting set into a white suspended tile ceiling. A row of security monitors sat on one wall, above a white desk that held a familiar-looking computer. The computer screen showed a slowly spinning Genada logo.

A huge, three-shelved weapons rack took up the center of the room.

"This here is Magnus's toy chest," Clayton said.

Colding stared in amazement at the weapons rack. He ran his hands along one of three Israeli Galil ARM assault rifles. He also counted two Beretta AR70s, a British EM2 with a thick night scope and a triple-magazine, four Uzi 9-milimeters, a pair of Austrian Steyr 69 sniper rifles and a case with ten Beretta 9-milimeter pistols. Boxes and boxes of magazines and ammo occupied the lower shelves. Two sets of Kevlar bulletproof body armor hung from the end of the rack.

"What the hell is all this for?"

"Magnus was here for that Y2K thing. He wanted to be prepared if da shit hit da fan. To tell you da truth, I think he was disappointed when nothing happened. We got enough dried food in this place to last ten years."

"Some people prepared for Y2K with a gas-powered generator," Sara said. "This is preparing for fucking D-Day."

Colding noticed three small, wooden ammo crates on a middle shelf. He felt his stomach do a flip as he gently pulled out the box and saw the contents.

"Plastique?" he said, shaking his head. "Fucking plastique?"

"And detonators," Clayton said. "Doesn't exactly make me happy to have it in my mansion."

Then Colding saw, on the bottom shelf, a black canvas bag, just like the one Magnus had carried off the C-5. Colding knelt and unzipped it. Inside was a shoulder-fired Stinger missile system.

"A Stinger?" Sara's voice sounded alarmed, which wasn't a surprising reaction for a pilot looking at a plane-killing weapon. "Magnus has a damn surface-to-air missile here?"

Colding shook his head in amazement. Okay, so he had an arsenal for Y2K, but why would he need a Stinger on Baffin Island? Colding's heart sank – the answer was obvious. He needed it because Chapman was coming. He zipped up the bag and kept his thoughts to himself, and wondered if his old partner were still alive.

Colding pointed to the room's only other door.

"Where does that lead?"

Clayton turned the door's handle and pulled, revealing a narrow path that led outside between a brick wall and a thick eight-foot high row of shrubbery. The outside face of the door was done in fake brick.

"When this is shut you can't even see it from da outside," Clayton said. He pointed to one of the fake bricks on the door, the only one that was black instead of shades of burnt red. "You push this and da door opens. Bootleggers used this island back in prohibition, eh?"

Colding tested the door, shut it, then turned to Clayton. "So who else is on this island?"

"The farm near da north tip is Sven Ballantine's, da other is Rory Sherwood's. You want to go take a look?"

"We'll head out there tomorrow." Colding walked over to the counter in front of the security cameras. The setup was identical to the Baffin Island facility. The counter, like everything else Colding had seen in the mansion, was spotlessly clean. He pointed to the row of monitors, each showing a black-and-white picture from a security camera.

"What's the coverage on those?"

Clayton walked to the counter and started flipping switches. A series of views flashed across the screens: the outside of the mansion, the harbor, the ballroom, the hangar, rooms, the kitchen. It surprised Colding to see the ease with which Clayton worked the controls – the old man obviously knew his way around the security systems.

"We got video all over, including everyone's rooms. Sound is only on da ones in da labs, though."

"Does the system cover the whole island?" Sara asked.

Clayton shook his head. "Not really, just all da buildings around here and da harbor. Crew came in yesterday and finished hooking up camera connections for da hanger. I take it there's cameras inside da plane?"

Sara nodded.

Colding walked up to the secure terminal. "How long has this been here?"

Clayton scratched his beard. "Da link to Manitoba has been here for about four years. We also use this to contact Chris. We can call him secure anytime, eh? Magnus set that up about two years ago."

Colding thought over the new information. Two cow ranches already in place, an encrypted transmitter to mainland support installed four years ago, a camouflaged hanger big enough to hide the world's largest airplane ... this wasn't a last-second facility. Danté had planned for this contingency long ago. A lot of people had known about Genada's facility on Baffin Island: no one knew about Black Manitou.

Danté, it seemed, had many tricks he didn't deem necessary to share with mere employees.



Night had fallen. All of the mansion's windows showed the deep black that hung outside. It was a slightly cloudy night, with no lights to be seen anywhere. Black Manitou was three hours from the mainland, too far for light to carry.

Liu Jiandan walked down the hall, steadied by PJ's strong arm.

"Very tired," Jian said. "Didn't realize it while in the lab."

"You gotta sleep, Jian," Colding said, shaking his head. "I have to imagine that hurts your work, going that long without sleeping. What did you go, twenty hours? Twenty-four?"

"Can I have a Dr. Pepper?"

“You don’t need a Dr. Pepper! You need to sleep.”

Jian shrugged. She didn’t know how long she’d worked, and it didn’t really matter. Days and hours, after all, were really just arbitrary time spans set up to properly distribute work amongst the masses. Her research didn’t fall into any predefined shift or workday, it just went on and on and on, as it had for years.

But, finally, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. They’d put in a marathon session, implanting all of the embryos – some cows had one, some had two, even a few had three – but every cow now had a blastocyst in its uterus. The blastocysts, if they survived long enough, would hopefully implant into the uterine wall to form an embryo and a placenta. If that happened, *if*, Jian knew the rest would be a success.

She stumbled and felt Colding steady her, stop her from falling. He’d ordered Claudette and Rhumkorrf to bed as well. Colding was very nice, very patient, but when he wanted to be assertive his voice rang with a strong tone of command, so strong even Claudette hadn’t argued with him this time. Perhaps that was because Claudette also hadn’t slept in over twenty-four hours.

Jian loved Colding – sometimes she thought of him as her only true friend. If only she’d met him thirty years earlier (and perhaps a hundred pounds lighter), who knows what might have happened?

She would never forget how he’d smuggled her out of Shanghai, practically under the noses of the Chinese Academy of Sciences officials for whom she’d worked. Many of her contemporaries were leaving the Academy structure, encouraged to go into business for themselves as part of China’s economic reforms. That option was never open to Jiandan – she was just too brilliant *not* to be used by the government. She was also very malleable; she knew it, and they knew it. She would do what they told her to do and not make a fuss. The Chinese Human Genome project was her home, they told her – that was where her country needed her, and that was where she would stay.

It seemed like a million years ago when a piece of encrypted code showed up on her computer. It took her almost a week to break the encryption – it was that good. She didn’t tell her superiors: even as she broke it, she knew she was possibly the only one in China who *could* break it, which meant the message was intended specifically for her. When she finally opened it, she saw an invitation from Danté Paglione to work on the greatest scientific achievement of the twenty-first century.

Re-creating a lost genome was impossible, a bioinformatics challenge like nothing she’d ever dreamed. She accepted the invitation, re-encrypted the message, and sent it back. That part had been such a thrill – she’d never really done anything exciting in her life, nothing wrong, and that little bit of cloak-and-dagger business made her feel alive. She hadn’t really worried about getting caught, not once she understood the magnitude of what she might accomplish in this new project.

While it all sounded very challenging, and very noble, she didn’t think anything would come of it. She was a crown jewel of the Peoples Republic of China, constantly protected from harm or distraction: who could possibly get her out of there?

Ex-CIA agent P.J. Colding, that’s who.

He had somehow worked his way into China, then smuggled her out of the country - an amazing feat considering his prototypical Western looks. Eight hours in the back of a truck. Another twenty in the cargo hold of a plane. When it was all over, Danté gave her every tool, every piece of equipment she'd ever dreamed of, or even dreamed up. And through it all P.J. had always been close by, supporting her when she missed her homeland, watching out for her when she worked so long and so hard she forgot to sleep.

Back on Baffin Island he had fought hand-to-hand and saved her life. He was the one person she knew she could count on - he was always there, consoling her when Rhumkorrf yelled, watching out for her when she worked so long and so hard she forgot to sleep.

They reached a door and Colding opened it, gently guiding her through.

"This is your room," he said. "Do you like it?"

Jian looked around the well-decorated room. She touched the maroon wallpaper, feeling the texture of the velvet patterns. A small crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, filling the room with a soft, rich light. A beautiful four-post, wrought-iron bed waited for her, a thick white comforter calling to her like a lover. Everything in the room looked delicate and artsy and beautiful, from the graceful wooden nightstand with a marble top to the huge matching dresser and desk. Just like her room on Baffin Island, a computer sat on the desk. She knew it was already networked with the Billups IX - Danté provided his people with every opportunity to work. A massive picture window occupied almost an entire wall. In the morning, it would provide a stunning view, for now, the windows were black.

"Room is amazing," she said. "Not like Baffin."

"This used to be a hangout for the rich and famous. You've got a former four-star resort this time."

Jian sighed as she crawled onto the mattress, marveling at the softness of the thick down comforter. She laid her head on the pillow. Colding pulled the comforter up around her shoulders.

She looked up at Colding. "You like Sara, don't you?"

Colding opened his mouth, then closed it.

"She is very nice, Mee-Sta Colding. You should date her."

"Yes, she is," Colding said. "But I can't date, Jian. I mean my wife died only ... " His voice trailed off.

"Two years ago," Jian said, finishing his sentence for him. "That's a long time, Mee-Sta Colding."

"Two years," Colding said quietly, as if trying the words on for size.

Jian nodded and waved him away. "You go now. I sleep."

She was out before Colding made it halfway to the door.



There was a knock on the door to her suite. Sara's pulse quickened. Was it Peej? A

glance at the clock showed 11:15 p.m. None of her crew would bother her at this hour. Sara quickly checked herself in the mirror ... she looked horrible. She had bags under her eyes, and she was still wearing her flight suit. She felt dirty and sweaty – definitely not her most presentable image.

But he doesn't seem to care about that, does he?

She took a deep breath, then walked to the door and answered it.

Only to look down at the leering face of Andy Crosthwaite.

“Hiya, toots. Flight’s over, how about that nap?”

Sara felt a combination of revulsion and disappointment. She didn’t know much about either man, but Andy Crosthwaite seemed to be everything that PJ Colding was not.

“Go to bed, Andy.”

“That’s my plan,” he said and started to slide through the half-open door.

Sara Purinam hadn’t risen to the top of a man’s world without learning a thing or three. And the last thing she allowed was for a man, any man, to think that she was some soft woman that could be pushed around. Men like Andy only understood one thing – respect. And respect, you had to earn.

Sara blocked the door with her body. The motion brought their two bodies together, so close they could have kissed. Andy’s leering smile widened.

“Andy, I’m only going to tell you one time to get out of here.”

“And if I don’t?”

Sara brought her knee up fast, catching Andy square in the nuts. She could have done it much harder, but she only wanted to stun him a little, not put him in the infirmary. Andy let out a little *whuf* and half doubled over. She put a hand on his head and pushed. He stumbled back two steps, enough for her to shut the door and lock it.

“Next time I put you on the ground, loverboy,” Sara called through the door. She peeked through the door’s peephole. Andy walked down the hallway, hands on his testicles.

November 11: 8:15 a.m. Eastern Time, 4:15 p.m. GMT

The short, fat man in the tailored Armani suit finally looked up from his computer screen. He spoke with the buttery whine of an upper crust British businessman.

“Well, Mister Pagione, it looks like we can accommodate your needs.”

“Please, call me Magnus. Mister Pagione was my father.”

“Very well, Magnus. I was just starting out here when your father began using our services. I had the opportunity to meet with him a few times, and I always thought quite highly of him.”

“Thank you, Charles.”

Charles Littinger gave a little head-only bow. “I must say we at Lloyds of London are thrilled you and your brother choose to continue using us. It pleases us immensely to

know we satisfy the needs of not just one man, but his sons as well. It's quite rare for a Pagione to come all the way to London to see us."

"I felt this merited my personal attention," Magnus said. "We need to keep this very quiet, you see. If word gets out concerning the value of this particular asset, people will know we're succeeding, and that might cause the stock to rise."

Charles frowned as he worked his computer keyboard. "Forgive me for being presumptuous, but I would think you'd want the stock to rise."

Magnus nodded. "Of course. But, you see, we have some rather difficult stockholders. We plan to buy them out while the stock price is still at a manageable level. Once we make our announcement, the stock will increase, and we'll have more control."

Charles smiled and shook his head. "Ah, you remind me so much of your father. He was always thinking five or six steps ahead."

Magnus's smile faded, replaced by an expression of genuine appreciation. "Thank you, Charles. That's the nicest compliment I've had in a long time."

"Well," Charles said as he clapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously. "We're increasing the replacement value of the C-5 to \$800 million, based on our previous evaluation of the plane itself, as well as the highly increased value of the payload. We're more than willing to make this increase, Magnus, but we will need to get one of our scientific representatives to evaluate the first chance you get."

Magnus nodded. "Of course. We welcome your evaluation, and as soon as we feel it's prudent to reveal the plane's location, we'll fly your people out immediately. It's just at such a delicate phase considering our maneuverings with the shareholders, you see."

Charles closed his eyes and held up his hands palms-out. "You need not bother with the explanation, my good man. Your father has given Lloyds of London four decades of business, the least we can do is bend a few rules when the need presents itself. Now, as for the increased premiums ... "

"Continue to bill Genada the standard rate," Magnus said. "Bill the increased premium as a separate line item, and deduct the amount from my Swiss account. The walls have ears, Charles, and if the increase is billed to Genada ... "

"The stockholders may get wind of it, of course," Charles said in polite interruption. "I'll take care of the details."

Charles extended his hand. Magnus shook it gently – he feared too firm a grip might crush the pampered man's hand.

"Do tell your brother that we appreciate your business," Charles said with a warm smile. "Give him our best."

"I'll be sure to tell him."

...

Clayton drove the Humvee up through the mansion's circular drive. He stopped in front of the front porch and leaned on the horn, despite the fact that Colding and Sara were waiting on the porch and descended the ten Petoskey stone steps as soon as he pulled up.

"Let's go, eh? I ain't got all fucking day, ya know?"

Colding hopped into the passenger seat while Sara slid into the back. Clayton turned to smile at her. A thin streak of semi-dried catsup clung to his stubble.

"Hi, doll," He said with a warm smile.

Sara reached up and gave his shoulder a squeeze. "Well, hello to you, too."

"What, no hello for me?" Colding asked.

Clayton let out a noise that was somewhere between a huff and the first half of a "bah-humbug," put the Humvee in gear and pulled away from the mansion. They headed northeast, the road to the harbor passing by on the right. The thick, autumn-colored woods quickly gave way to abandoned farms and orchards grown thick and gnarled with neglect. Decades-old fields of wheat and rye showed the ravages of time, slowly losing a constant battle with weeds and thistle. An old 1940s tractor leaned on its side, one wheel fallen amongst a tangle of tall grass, the other wheel still standing tall. The rust-crusted tractor looked like a demolished tank left abandoned on some obscure battlefield. Old barns leaned in on themselves, patches of dead gray nestled in a sea of greens and living browns. Wildflowers dotted the landscape with color, from the white and purple of the trilliums to the yellow of dandelions to the burnt reds of Indian paintbrush. Their scents combined with the woody odor of damp earth, filling the Hummer's cab with a relaxing aroma.

Colding rolled his window all the way down, taking in the rich scents carried by the crisp fall air.

"I'll bet this place has quite a story," he said.

"You don't know da half of it, eh? This island had people come and go for thousands of years. Between you and me, ain't nothing good ever come of any business on this island. Take that spot, for instance." Clayton stopped the Hummer and pointed to the base of the rocky hill that ran the length of the island's center. Colding saw a small shed made of out bone-dry wood, bleached almost white from decades of sun. Like a set from an old silent movie, a barely discernable sign had the word "danger" written on it in paintbrush-scrawled letters.

"That's da old copper mine," Clayton said. "Da whole U.P. has a lot of copper mining history. Boom towns rivaled anything from da gold rush days of da west."

"Copper run out?" Sara asked.

Clayton nodded. "Mostly. In 1938, there was a cave-in, killed twenty-seven men. Da vein had been running dry anyway, so they figured it wasn't worth digging everything out again. Those men are still in there, at least their bones. And at night, when it's quiet, you can hear them calling for help."

They came to a fully functional farm. Colding smelled it well before he saw it. It looked brand new, complete with a freshly painted house and a sheet metal pole barn. Clayton pulled into the dirt driveway. Fifty or so black-and-white cows grazed in a pasture. Clayton stopped the Hummer and leaned on the horn, without pause, for fifteen seconds. A man wearing a red-and-black plaid shirt came out of the pole-barn, while a woman, round and wearing curlers, walked out of the house. The man had small pieces of hay clinging to his shirt. He reached the Hummer first, reached in the window

and shook Clayton's hand.

"Afternoon, Clayton."

"Afternoon, Rory. Rory, meet da new boss, PJ Colding, and Sara Purinam, our pilot."

Rory reached across Clayton to shake PJ's hand. Rory's hand felt rough, dirty and strong.

Clayton gestured out the passenger window to the women in curlers. "That's Rory's wife, Violet."

Colding shook her hand as well.

"A pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

Violet smiled widely. "Oh don't call me that, eh? Call me Violet. Welcome to da island. You three want to come in for some coffee?"

"Oh, Violet, leave him alone," Rory said, as if keeping Violet from bothering people was a never-ending chore. "Can't you see he's got things to do?"

"Oh you just shush up, Rory," Violet said. "If da man wants some coffee he can have some coffee."

"That's okay," Colding said. "Perhaps sometime soon, Violet. I've got some work to do first."

"You just let me know, eh?" Violet said.

"Yes ma'am," Colding said.

"Everything okay with da cows?" Clayton asked. Now it was Rory's turn to smile.

"Oh ya. Everything's fine. Herd's in great shape."

Clayton nodded as if to say "glad to hear it." He lifted a hand for a curt wave, then backed out of the drive. Rory matched the gesture and walked back to the barn. Violet waved so hard Colding wondered if she might dislocate her wrist. Clayton headed back down the road.

"If you go there for coffee, plan some time," Clayton said. "That woman will talk your ear off."

After another two miles, they came to the second farm. This one looked quite old, with a red-and-white wooden barn, but it also looked very maintained. Black shingles covered the barn's roof, except for the gray shingles that spelled out the word "Ballantine" in five-foot letters.

Clayton stopped the Hummer and got out. Inexplicably, he then hopped up on the Hummer's hood, and stepped onto the vehicle's roof. Colding looked up at the roof for a moment, then leaned out the passenger window to ask Clayton just what the hell he was doing.

As he leaned out, he caught a blur of movement coming from the right. He turned in time to see a thick black lab flying through the air, eyes wide, mouth open, tongue trailing back alongside its mouth. Colding instinctively flinched back into the Hummer, but the hundred-pound dog sailed cleanly through the open passenger window and hit Colding full speed, knocking him flat on the seat. The wet dog started furiously licking his face, paws scrambling as it fought to keep enough balance to continue the kissing assault. Colding tried to push the dog away, but it dove at him as if its life depended on

it. Despite the dog's loud whines of joy, Colding heard Clayton's loud, sandpaper laugh.

"Oh my God, he's adorable!" Sara said from the backseat.

"Pastie!" Another man's voice called out to the dog. "You get off that man and out of that car, eh?"

The wide-eyed black lab managed one last wet lick, then turned clumsily in the seat and dove back out the window.

"What a little sweetie," Sara said. "I'll have to take him with me when the crew and I do our daily run."

"Oh, for crying out loud," Colding said as he used his sleeve to wipe dog spit from his face. He sat up. A heavysset older man, perhaps sixty, stood outside the Hummer's passenger door. He had sandy blonde hair liberally peppered with gray, and a thick old-fashioned moustache to match. He looked like he should be riding shotgun with Sam Elliott in some TBS western. The dog sat next to him, tongue lolling, tail flying, paws dancing; it was unable to stop moving even while sitting down.

Clayton was still laughing.

"You must be PJ Colding," the man said with a thick Yooper accent. "Sorry about da dog. I'm Sven Ballantine."

Colding's left sleeve was already soaked – he switched to his right.

"Dog about scared the crap out of me."

Sven nodded. "Pastie has a knack for it. I can barely turn my back and he's off causing problems. He's a real pain in da ass."

Colding noticed that despite Sven's words, his big hand was absently scratching the dog's wet head. Pastie looked up at Sven with blissful reverence.

"Oh God," Sara said from the backseat. Her laugh gave her words a staccato sound. "What's ... that ... *smell?*"

The smell hit Colding suddenly, a horrible odor, which, it seemed, was coming from his hands and clothes. His nose wrinkled involuntarily.

"You'll want to clean up," Sven said. "Pastie found some dead fish up on da North Pointe, eh? He likes to roll in it. Sorry about that."

Clayton's laugh came even louder.

Colding banged on the roof. "Clayton, let's go!" Colding managed a smile at Sven. "Nice meeting you, wish I could say the same for your dog."

Clayton climbed down. No sooner had his feet hit the ground than Pastie sprinted for him. Clayton slid through the driver's door with an agility that surprised Colding, shutting the door just before the smelly dog could get in. Pastie jumped at the window, his slobber streaking the glass. He barked and whined with an urgency that revealed he just *had* to say hello to Clayton.

"Not today, you stinky fat fuck," Detweiler said, still chuckling lightly. "I'll come see ya after your daddy gives you a bath, eh?"

Clayton turned the Hummer around and headed back the way they'd come.

"Aren't we going all the way around?" Sara asked.

"No road on the north side, just a snowmobile trail. Besides, I want to take you

through the old town before we get back.

Colding looked up at the utility lines running parallel with the road. The island was small, but if the snow got high enough, this end of the island could be very hard to reach. After his battle with Stillwell, he wasn't crazy about having people so spread out.

"You get a lot of storms up here, right?" Colding asked. Clayton nodded again. "Do the power and phone lines get knocked down?"

Clayton shrugged. "All da time. Da security room has a program that can tell me exactly where da problems are, and I go fix 'em."

"That's got to be a pain in the ass," Sara said.

Clayton held his hands up at his shoulders, palms up. "What can ya do? That's da way da boss man wants it, so that's da way it is."

Clayton was an old man, but he scaled telephone poles in the dead of winter, and moved fast when he wanted to. Island living obviously kept the man in shape.

They passed the road that led to the harbor and continued on. Five minutes later, the trees ended, giving way to the old town. Clayton stopped, and the three of them got out and surveyed the area.

"Welcome to downtown Black Manitou," Clayton said. "I'm sure a city boy like you will feel right at home, eh?"

"I'll bet the opera house is right over the next hill," Colding said. The town seemed to be an amalgam of a Welfare shantytown, a Yuppie-fueled vacation resort and good old-fashioned Highway 51 roadside tourist trap. A large well occupied the center. Stones, not bricks, made up the well's walls. Some of those had crumbled away from the walls and lay on the ground like rotted-out teeth. Colding thought it looked like some B-movie version of a trapdoor to Hell.

Uneven paving stones surrounded the well in a circle about fifty feet in diameter. Large, moss-filled gaps marked areas where the stones were either broken or just plain missing. Small trees grew up through cracks and some of the missing stones.

Buildings lined the paved area like numbers on a clock. At 10 o'clock, the thick, gothic stone church dominated the town circle, squatting down like a granite bulldog. It seemed to have so much weight, it looked as if the rest of the town might rise up at any moment: the light end of a lopsided teeter-totter. The church's stones, black and ominous and stained, mossy in some places, matched the town circle's paving stones. The few windows looked original, their glass visibly warped, giving the solid structure an almost fluid appearance. A bell tower (noticeably absent a bell) rose like a pinnacle from the steeply sloped stone roof, its pointed slate roof topping out at just under thirty feet. Wide double doors, set into the base of the tower, had a gnarled appearance.

"Delightful," Sara said. "Welcome to the Herman Munster Commune."

"This used to be a nice place,"

"That's got to be a pain in the ass," Sara said.

Clayton said. "This island has been my home for almost fifty years. That was before da Paglione boys bought everyone out, eh?"

Clayton pointed to a green building about twenty feet from the church at the position of 8 o'clock. The window was still decorated with a faded yellow banner cut in the shape of a star that said 'Ground Chuck On Sale!' The store had two wide windows, and inside Colding saw empty racks and shelves.

"That used to be Betty's, which was a combination grocery and hardware store. Pretty much handled everything we locals needed."

At 7 o'clock, the road out of town ran between Betty's and a red building with a moth-eaten moose head hung over the door, one glass eye long since missing, shreds of fur hanging down like demonic streamers.

"That was the Hunter's Shop. Sven Ballantine ran it during deer season. Magnus and Andy Crosthwaite came up about five years ago and went wild. They brought automatic weapons and the like, decided they was going to run a 'mission' and killed every last deer."

"Jesus," Colding said. "I didn't know Magnus was such a conservationist."

"Pissed me off to no end, I'll tell ya. Deer been here since 1948, when an ice bridge connected da island and da mainland. Deer just walked over."

Colding gave Clayton an untrusting look. "An ice bridge?"

"Yep."

"From the mainland," Sara said disbelievingly. "Three hours away."

"Yep."

"You're full of shit," Sara said. "It can't get *that* cold."

Clayton hawked a loogie and spat it on one of the mottled paving stones. "We'll see. This here winter is going to be cold, if my instincts serve me right, eh? We'll see."

He gestured at a rustic-but-modern structure made of hewn logs and rough wooden beams sitting at about 4 o'clock, directly across from the church. Other than the church, it was the town's only two-story building. It was only twenty or thirty feet from the left side of the road, yet Colding hadn't been able to see it when they drove up, thanks to the thick woods that surrounded the road and the town. Even from the town center, the windows looked dirty. The place looked dead.

"The Otto Lodge, the mansion you're staying at, was for the rich folk, but plenty of regular people came to the Black Manitou Lodge here to hunt, relax, that kind of thing."

A few more wooden buildings, all with peeling paint, some with sagging, moss-covered roofs, dotted the town circle. There wasn't a soul in sight.

"Doesn't look like there's a Starbucks," Sara said.

"A what?"

Colding smiled. "Starbucks. It's a coffee place."

"I have a pot on at da mansion," Clayton said matter-of-factly. "Behind the bar in the library."

Sara laughed. "Clayton probably makes a mean Carmel Machiatto, Peej."

"A caramel what?" Clayton asked.

Sara put her arm around Clayton as they walked back to the Humvee. “Never mind, champ. Just teasing the city-boy. Well, Peej, now that we know there’s coffee on the island, I guess we can have that date that you asked for.”

“A date?” Clayton said. “Didn’t you two just meet? Don’t waste any time, do ya, boss.”

“What date? Sara, I never said anything about a date.”

“No date?” Sara said with a mock frown. “What, don’t you like me, Peej?”

Colding felt his face flush hot-red. “Now, wait a minute, I didn’t say – ”

“Peej?” Clayton said as he slid into the driver’s seat. “What da hell is that?”

“It’s nothing,” Colding said quickly.

“Oh, it’s my little name for him,” Sara said. “It’s cute, isn’t it?”

Colding’s face felt so hot he wondered if he was glowing. “Sara, come on now – ”

“Yah, it’s *cute*,” Clayton said. His grin was a flashing neon sign that said *you’re not going to hear the end of this for a loooong time*. “You are a real cutie, eh Peej?”

Colding shook his head. No matter how long he was on Black Manitou, it was going to be too long.



As Clayton, Sara and Colding drove back to the mansion, the experimental creatures moved to the next stage. A blastocyst floated through the void of the uterus, until it brushed softly against the uterine wall. At the contact point, cells rapidly changed into trophoblasts. The specialized trophoblast cells divided, penetrating the uterine wall, almost like anchors diving into the soft sea floor. The process was common to all mammals – except no mammal, not even the smallest mouse, went through the process that fast.

In less than three hours, the blastocyst became a full-fledged embryo, deeply embedded in the uterine wall, the trophoblasts linking up with the cow’s cells to begin creation of the placenta. Shortly after that, less than twenty-four hours after the enucleated egg first fused with the artificially created DNA, gastrulation occurred.

Gastrulation is a fancy word that means that cells stop being copies of each other and start taking on the specialized functions of tissues and organs. Instead of a ball of undifferentiated cells, three distinct cell layers form: the ectoderm, the endoderm, and the mesoderm.

The mesoderm becomes the structure of the animal, including the muscles, bones, circulatory system and the reproductive system. The endoderm eventually grows into the digestive and respiratory systems. The ectoderm generates skin and the neural system.

That includes the brain.

While all three layers combined to create an animal, the ectoderm would turn out to be the real troublemaker.



Colding walked into the library to find Sara relaxing on one of the leather couches, an old fabric-covered hardcover book in her hand, and two steaming mugs of coffee on the

table in front of her. She sat on one hip, her legs folded up underneath her, an elbow on the armrest. It struck him as a girlish pose, very unlike the good-old-boy style manner in which she dealt with her crew. He'd quickly become used to those two sides of her personality. The girlish side reminded him of his dead wife Clarissa. The good-old-boy mentality, however, that was something he'd never before seen in a woman.

And he liked it.

She looked up from her book. Her face lit up in a wide smile that made his heart seem to skip a beat.

"Hi," she said, drawing the word out in that warm, welcoming way that only a woman can.

He walked to the table and sat on a matching leather chair next to the couch. "Don't you mean, 'hi, Peej?'"

"Oh, did Clayton give you a hard time?"

Colding rolled his eyes. "It was 'Peej' this, and 'Peej' that, and 'you're so cute when you're mad.' He wouldn't stop."

Sara laughed.

"You think that's funny? You've undermined my authority here. Listen, I don't want to play hard-ass boss here, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't do that again."

It was Sara's turn to roll her eyes. "Oh, lighten up. I've just met you but sometimes it seems like you've got a big stick up your ass. He's just teasing you."

Colding didn't know what to say. He'd just tried to exercise a little authority, nothing too stern, and she'd blown it off. It wasn't something he was used to.

"Why you sitting over there?" Sara said, that soul-melting smile once again teasing the corners of her mouth. She patted the couch. "This is a date, after all."

"We just met," Colding said. "It's not a date." He felt as nervous as a high-school boy, and it wouldn't have surprised him at all to hear his voice crack like a pubescent teen.

She scooted closer, leaning over the armrest to look into his eyes. "Okay, you don't think of this as a date. Do you mind if I think of it that way?"

As he looked at her, he felt a heat on his skin – except this time it wasn't just on his face. He hadn't sat down with a woman – a woman that turned him on since ... well ... not since Clarissa had died. He'd never given it a second thought, really, not with all the work that needed to be done. But sitting here with Sara, looking at her beautiful face, her sexy smile, everything took on a new perspective.

Two years ago, Jian had said. That long time, Mee-Sta Colding.

He let out a long, slow breath. "Okay. So it's a date."

Sara's smile widened. "See there? That wasn't so bad, was it? We'll get that stick out of your butt even if we need to fly in a crane."

Colding laughed. Maybe this wouldn't be so hard after all. Sara certainly seemed to make things easy.

She reached out and picked up his left hand, pretending to examine the wound. Her touch was so soft; he felt the heat in his body notch up a few degrees higher.

"This is healing pretty fast. You must be in good shape."

To Colding, the hand still looked like crap: sickly yellow skin surrounding a nasty,

splotchy brown bruise. Still, in the two days since his fight with Teyshawn – or Paul Stillwell, or whoever it was – the swelling had gone away, as had most of the pain.

He started to ask her something about the C-5 when Clayton Detweiler walked through the door.

“Well, well, well. It’s da date that’s not a date.” Clayton walked behind the bar and poured himself a bourbon. “Since it’s not a date, *Peej*, you don’t mind if I sit down with ya and chat with our new friend Sara, right?”

Colding felt frustration creeping into his brain. He’d just started to relax, and now he had to deal with Clayton. “Actually Clayton, Sara and I ... um ... we – ”

Sara reached out and touched his hand again, silencing him. “Come have a seat Clayton,” she said, patting the couch next to her. She looked at Colding. “Just relax, *Peej*, it’s a small island and we’re going to be here for awhile. We’ve got lots of time.”

Clayton walked to the couch and plunked down heavily, more a fall than a sit. “What a day, what a day.” He took a sip, then let out a loud belch and scratched his balls through his worn jeans.

Sara effortlessly switched from date mode to friendly conversation mode, asking Clayton questions about what he did and his life on the island. Colding talked a bit, but mostly just listened, pleasantly amazed to find himself in a discussion that had absolutely nothing to do with work, failing organs or the myriad problems of the Genada staff.

November 12

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Inside the C-5’s second deck, Jian watched Rhumkorrf work the joystick. He guided the remote control fiber-optic camera into Cow Thirty-Four’s womb. Cow Thirty-Four was firmly secured in an overhead harness down in Claudette’s cargo-deck lab. The harness supported the cow’s weight, keeping it still, allowing for the insertion of the fiber-optic camera. Overgard sat in her usual perch, on a stool in the back of the lab.

There was no mistaking the electricity in the air, that feeling of discovery, of success, of the satisfaction at seeing years of work move steadily closer to the final product. Even if all the blastocysts had died in the night, Jian knew they’d already beaten the biggest obstacle.

“Now let’s not get excited, ladies,” Rhumkorrf said, even though his small body visibly shook with anticipation. “We know we’ve still got a long way to go.” He couldn’t help leaning a bit from side to side as he guided the camera deeper, as if he were playing an enthralling video game.

“Maybe one survive,” Jian said, smiling. She felt relieved, invigorated, even *light*. She’d lost some weight in the past few weeks, partly from forgetting to eat, partly from the unbelievable stress that knotted her stomach like a seaman’s rope. If the embryos had been from a normal mammal, she would have expected to see a tiny red dot, almost like a big pimple, jutting from the uterine wall. She knew it would be bigger than that, but she didn’t know just how much bigger.

“Don’t count on it,” Overgard said. “When I brought the quagga back from extinction, we went through the implantation process hundreds of times before we succeeded, and then it took fifty-two implantations before we had a live birth.”

“No worry,” Jian said, feeling her own grin spread across her face. “I have a feeling.”

Overgard let out a huff of disgust. “There you go again with your ridiculous ‘feelings.’ Why can’t you stick to the scientific method?”

“Ladies, stop it,” Rhumkorrf said. “We’re almost there ... ” He finally guided the camera into the womb.

They all stared at the screen.

“Oh my God,” Overgard said quietly.

Jian slowly shook her head, a slow motion showing of disbelief. She knew they were going to grow fast, she’d spent months tweaking the DNA to code for that. But this, this was beyond her most optimistic expectations.

“Jian,” Rhumkorrf said. “You are even more talented than I imagined.”

Cow Thirty-Four had two fetuses. Oversized heads had already formed, each bigger than the rest of their respective bodies. The heads even had big black spots that identified forming eyes. Tiny limb buds sprouted from the bodies, and they could see the ghostly shape of forming internal organs.

“Claudette,” he said. “How big would you say those embryos are?”

“About a pound. Maybe even a little more. Normal embryonic growth for a hundred-pound mammal should be no bigger than a few ounces.”

“From single cell to a pound,” Jian said quietly. “In less than thirty hours.” She used her right heel to scratch the toes on her left foot.

November 13

Magnus took the call in his office. Alone. With the door shut.

“This is Magnus.”

“Well helllooooo, Big Poppa.”

He didn’t like Farm Girl. He didn’t have to like her, as long as she kept him on top of happenings at the CIA. The call came from Las Vegas, in America. At least, that’s what his phone system said. Farm Girl was probably nowhere near that den of American sin.

“You sure know how to throw a party,” Farm Girl said. “Dad is looking for your friends.”

Magnus nodded. ‘Dad’ was the CIA. The CIA was looking for Rhumkorrf and company.

“Does Dad know who threw that party?”

“He’s got a pretty good idea. He’d like to pay a visit in person, but seems he can’t afford travel right now. Word is he’ll come visit as soon as he can.”

Magnus nodded again. He was right. The Canadian government had flipped out when they found the corpses of nine American government agents on Baffin Island. The CIA wanted his ass, wanted it bad, but they couldn’t do anything at the moment, as long as he either stayed in Manitoba, or stayed out of sight.

“You know Dad,” Magnus said. “Never takes no for an answer. So when will he find my friends?”

“He doesn’t have a clue where to start. Seems he can’t find them anywhere.”

Magnus smiled. He had to hand it to Danté. His brother had successfully hidden the entire Rhumkorrf project. Loaded it on a C-5 and hidden it in Lake Superior, right under the Americans’ noses.

“Any chance he’ll find them soon?”

“Probably not, as long as they stay out of sight. If they don’t make any noise, Dad can’t track them down.”

“Anything else?”

“No, Big Poppa. I need to expand my wardrobe a bit. Things get more costly every day.”

Farm Girl wanted more money. Well, fuck it – she could have more money.

“You deserve a new wardrobe,” Magnus said. “Maybe Santa will be nice to you this year.”

He could almost hear her smile.

“I love Santa. I love to sit on his lap.”

“Is there anything else?”

“No, Big Poppa. Nice talking to you again.”

Magnus hung up.

The Rhumkorrf project might pan out after all. Magnus hated it when Danté was right – which was most of the time, actually. Yet Danté was right again, and the CIA wasn’t going to find the C-5 anytime soon.

Farm Girl verified that. She was worth every penny, and more.

iii

November 14

Colding typed in the super-secret password of “o-o-o-o” and entered the security room. He sat down at the secure terminal and stared at the Genada logo slowly spinning on the computer screen. Danté would be thrilled with the news.

He felt a pang of guilt, his ever-present friend, and wondered for the millionth time if there was anything he could have done to make this moment come sooner. Say, two years sooner, when his wife Clarissa was fading away from the rather miserable demise of liver failure. He knew, logically, that is, that nothing he could have done would have made a difference. Logic and emotions, however, don’t operate on the same scale.

Colding moved the mouse and clicked the icon labeled “Manitoba,” then waited patiently as the encrypted line connected with the home office. Colding’s call went through; the Genada system would automatically notify Danté on his cell phone. Danté had a similar computer in his office, and since that computer was the only place Danté could take the secured call, Colding assumed he’d be in for a bit of a wait, so he was surprised when after only fifteen seconds, the Genada logo disappeared, replaced by

Danté's smiling face.

"Good morning, PJ. How is the weather out there?"

"Getting colder, sir. Word is we're due for a big dose of the white stuff."

"When it comes, get on those snowmobiles. Fabulous times. Okay, enough of the chitchat. What do you need?"

"They've done it."

Colding stared at the screen with a bemused grin, watching Danté's reaction. The man had that strange expression of someone who *wants* to believe, but just *can't* believe.

"They've done, what, exactly?"

"Implantation."

"Finally," Danté said. "And it's successful thus far?"

Colding nodded. "More successful than we could have hoped. Forty-seven cows are pregnant. Two failed to implant, and one fetus aborted on day two."

"But that ... that's a ninety-four percent success rate."

"So far. But some have multiple embryos. And Rhumkorrf says double births are likely. Although he was careful to point out that we will lose most of the fetuses, or even all of them, as they get bigger."

"Why?"

"He can't imagine the computer got *everything* right. There's bound to be some problems with the genome. And they're growing fast. It's been three days and they're already ten pounds.

Danté nodded and smiled. It was a wide smile, a genuine smile. Colding realized that he had never seen a real, heartfelt smile from Danté. It made him look a bit maniacal.

"So how long until we have an actual birth?"

Colding shrugged. "Could be a few months."

Danté looked off into the distance, his fingers drumming a pattern on his desk. "You've got to get them working faster, PJ. We may not have a few months."

"Chapman again?"

Danté paused, then nodded. "Yes, Chapman. He's ... close."

Colding had spent years doing undercover work, trying to find the dirty little secrets of people, companies and even governments. That time refined his instincts, his "B.S. Meter," as Chapman had used to call it. That instinct was like a little alarm, flashing when someone lied. And it was flashing right now, big time, flashing when Danté talked about Chapman.

"Does ... does Chapman know about Black Manitou?"

Danté shook his head. "No. Black Manitou is privately owned, not associated with the Genada Corporation at all. This is kind of hiding something in plain sight. He wants us, and he's got help from all the G7 countries, but he doesn't know where we are. But he's pressing, PJ, he's pressing hard. We *must* have live animals if we're going to get the media and the public on our side."

"The fetuses will grow at their own rate – it's up to nature now."

Danté nodded absently. His genuine smile had faded into a distant look of concentration. "We're too close to take any chances. I'm sending Magnus to Black Manitou."

“For a security check?” Colding said with a frown. “But that’s not necessary, and if he travels to the island he runs the risk of tipping our hand to Chapman.”

Danté shook his head. “No, this isn’t a security check. He’s coming out there to stay until we have a live animal. You know how he is, he smells the profit and wants to make sure everything runs according to Hoyle.”

“Danté, that’s a bad idea.” Colding leaned forward. “I’ve got things running very smoothly here. If Magnus starts sticking his nose into procedures he knows nothing about it’s going to cause tension and slowdowns.”

Danté sat back in his chair and stared, chin down. He obviously hadn’t thought of the impact his brother might have on the experiment.

“No offense to Magnus, of course,” Colding said. “But we’re so close – any variable might cause delays.”

Danté seemed to consider this briefly, then nodded. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. I’ll tell him he’ll have to wait. Keep up the good work. Is there anything else?”

Colding shook his head. “That’s all she wrote, folks.”

“Very well. Keep them moving forward, PJ.”

November 16

To Colding, it felt just like playing a video game, albeit with a rather expensive joystick.

“A little deeper,” Rhumkorrf said in a flat-voiced drone. He stared at the bulkhead monitors, which displayed the camera’s view from deep within Cow Twenty-Five’s womb.

“You’d better stop saying things like that or people will talk,” Colding said.

Rhumkorrf gave Colding an annoyed, dismissive wave of his hand without looking away from the monitor.

“Wow, tough room,” Colding said. “I’ll be here all week. Tip jar, edge of the stage.”

Rhumkorrf sighed. “PJ, knock it off, please.”

Colding shot a glance at Jian, who sat perched on a stool, the seat of which disappeared somewhere beneath her ample bottom. She wore a fluorescent yellow Hawaiian shirt patterned with mauve armadillos. She shrugged, but smiled a little.

At least someone appreciates my humor, Colding thought.

The lab smelled of sweat and unwashed people. Cow smells also filtered up from the floor below, adding to the odiferous mix.

Colding turned his attention back to the monitor. He’d long since reconnoitered every square foot of the island. He knew every road, every old house – he didn’t have much to do but sit around and wait for Sara to finish her daily duties, so he’d pestered Rhumkorrf to let him try the fiber-optic camera, if just as a fascinating diversion to the island’s boredom. It had been eight days since they landed – things were running smoothly, and truth was, when Sara was busy, he was bored.

“Now a bit to the left,” Rhumkorrf said, his hand in the air in front of him as if he were conducting some imaginary orchestra. “That’s it, a little more.”

While fascinating in concept, seeing the inside of a cow's uterus wasn't all that thrilling for Colding. In fact, it was kind of disgusting. Just a magnified tunnel of blood red and fleshy white.

"Jian, adjust the focus," Rhumkorrf said. "Give me the wide angle."

She punched a few buttons on her console, and suddenly a crystal clear image flared to life on the overhead monitor.

"I'll be damned," Colding said quietly.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Rhumkorrf said.

"It bigger," Jian said, her voice flat.

Rhumkorrf nodded. "Of course it is."

"How big is it?" Colding asked.

"Fetuses average twenty-two pounds," Jian said quietly. "Twenty-two pounds in six days."

The fetal ancestor's head filled the screen. Colding saw blood coursing through tiny veins, clearly visible under translucent skin. Tiny paws folded up under the long snout, which was dominated by the huge, bluish, closed eyes. It had a thick head, much larger than Colding might have imagined, almost half the length of the rest of the body.

Rhumkorrf faced the large bulkhead monitor, his arms spread wide, his fingers outstretched. "You see, PJ? We've done the impossible!"

Colding couldn't say anything; the vision took his breath away. It had all been, well, *unreal* until this point. Something on paper, a process he administered just as someone might administer an assembly line or a manufacturing plant. Only they weren't

The fetal ancestor, eyes open, stared right back at them.

building cars or stamping sheet metal – this was a living creature. A man-made, living creature that had germinated somewhere in Rhumkorrf's genius, then clawed its way into existence.

"Pretty frigging impressive, Doc," Colding said.

Rhumkorrf turned, an ear-to-ear smile engraved on a face gray with the pallor of total exhaustion. "When Paglione sees this, the man will assuredly crap kittens."

Colding gave Rhumkorrf a solid handshake. "As they say on Sportscenter, you da man. Seriously, Doc, congratulations."

Rhumkorrf started to reply, but a strangled scream from Jian cut him off. They both turned to look at her. Terror wrinkled her fat face into a disquieting caricature, her eyes wide and fixed on the overhead screen. As one, Colding and Rhumkorrf looked up to the screen.

The fetal ancestor, eyes open, stared right back at them.

An inexplicable wave of fear tingled up Colding's spine before he remembered it was

only a television screen, and this was a picture of a tiny fetus, not some six-foot long creature staring at him with a malevolent gaze.

Jian's hands flew to her head, grabbing huge fistfuls of hair. "*Tian a!* It is coming for us!"

"Jian, calm down!" Rhumkorrf said, but she kept on babbling.

"Doc," Colding said calmly. "Is that supposed to happen?"

Rhumkorrf's skin was an even paler shade of gray, the hue of the walking dead. "I must say it's a bit unusual, but it's nothing to worry about."

"You're full of *shit!*" Jian screamed. She was on her feet now, fat finger pointing at the monitor. "Look at that thing! It's not right!"

"Jian, I'm telling you to calm – "

Once again Rhumkorrf found himself interrupted, only this time by motion on the overhead screen. The tiny ancestor turned its wedge-shaped head. Two black eyes stared out from the screen. Colding knew the fetus was actually looking at the fiber-optic camera that had invaded the womb, but the screen created the effect of a Renaissance painting by one of the masters: the tiny eyes seemed to be looking right at him.

"Most unusual," Rhumkorrf said. "Most animals don't open their eyes until after birth."

Suddenly, the tiny fetus opened its mouth and lurched forward. Before the screen blinked into static, Colding had a brief impression of a gaping maw and many tiny, pointy teeth. As the jaws closed, he couldn't stop himself from flinching away from the screen.

Jian shouted something in Chinese, her voice an uneven tremor that rang with fear despite the foreign words. She tangled both hands in her hair and yanked. Her fingers came away thick with her long black strands.

"Jian, stop it!" Colding ordered.

She turned to look at him, and her expression scared him almost as much as had the tiny snapping jaws on the overhead screen. There was no logic behind her eyes, no intelligence, only a wide-eyed primal fear. She pulled another double handful of hair from her head and bolted for the ladder. Colding tried to grab her, but she shoved him with all her strength and he stumbled backwards, foot catching in a stool, tumbling him to the floor. She disappeared down the ladder, heavy feet pounding out a reverberating rhythm.

Rhumkorrf was instantly by his side, helping him to his feet.

"PJ, are you okay?"

"Fine," Colding snapped. "Doc, you can't tell me that was *normal*."

"Well, I admit that was unexpected, but it was probably just a reflexive action – "

Colding raised a hand to stop the explanation. "Save it for later, Doc. I've got to go take care of Jian."

He held the handrails and slid down the ladder in one quick drop. Jian was running down the rear exit ramp.

"Jian, wait!"

She kept moving, fat shaking in time with her panicked waddle. Colding sprinted after

her, catching her easily just before she reached the hangar door. He grabbed her arm. She turned and pushed, but this time he was ready for her surprising strength. He grabbed both of her wrists.

“Jian! Calm down, it’s okay.”

She struggled for a moment, but he held her tightly. Her wide eyes stared at him without recognition.

“Take it easy,” Colding said. “Just take it easy, it’s okay.”

She blinked rapidly, then clarity seemed to return to her vision. She fell forward, into Colding’s arms. The sudden move and her weight knocked him back a step, but he held her up. She wrapped her arms around him, head buried in his chest, her body shivering.

Not knowing what else to do, he held her, gently patting the back of her head. “Take it easy, Jian. It’s okay, you just panicked.”

As he held her, he looked back to the plane, where Rhumkorrf stood at the top of the rear loading ramp. Rhumkorrf pointed at Jian, then pointed at his head and made a circle with his finger.

Colding scowled at him and shook his head. *No, she’s not crazy*, he thought in an internal answer to Rhumkorrf’s accusation. *At least I hope she’s not crazy.*

She kept trembling. He kept patting her head.



Stones and sand crunched under their feet as Colding and Sara walked along Rapleje Bay, almost ten miles away from the mansion. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Stars sparkled like diamond chips on a blanket of black velvet.

He had to get away for a little bit, just had to. Jian was sleeping in her room, courtesy of the same knockout pills Sara had given him on the C5 flight. Jian had always been a little different, a little overly emotional, but Colding had never seen anything like that.

It was all getting to be too much: the fetus biting the camera, Jian going off the deep end, Chapman either dead, or out there hunting for them. All he needed was some time with Sara. That thought scared him – he barely knew her – and yet, it was the truth.

A stiff wind blew from the northeast, necessitating his black Otto Lodge parka. It surprised Colding that Sara seemed perfectly comfortable in only jeans, a sweatshirt and a windbreaker.

“Sara, aren’t you cold?”

She gave him a quizzical look. “Oh, you big pussy. It’s not so bad. From what Clayton says, I’m surprised we don’t have snow already. On an island like this you can bet it’s below freezing every day from December to February.”

Colding shuddered at the thought. “That’s horrifying.”

“Don’t you like it here? This place is beautiful. This is where the jet set from the Fifties came to relax, and you’re being *paid* to be here. Do you know what a resort like this would cost you a night?”

“We’re in the middle of nowhere, I wouldn’t pay a dime.”

Sara rolled her eyes. “That’s you, Peej, last of the tightwad romantics.”

Colding stopped and looked at Sara. Her short blonde hair flopped in the stiff breeze. She had a beauty he'd never seen in another woman, including, he guiltily admitted, in Clarissa. Even when Sara squinted her eyelids against the sun, or against sand kicked by a particularly strong gust, he found himself admiring her laugh lines.

She turned and met his eyes.

"Whatchya lookin' at?" she asked playfully.

Colding felt his face flush red. He looked out at the horizon. "Nothing ... sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Sara asked, the playful tone still in her voice. "Maybe I like it when you look at me."

He looked at her again. "I have to admit I'm ... um ... rather attracted to you."

"The feeling is mutual."

He looked out at the water, silent for a few moments. "Sara, I'm a widower. I used to be in the CIA. I was actually investigating Danté when Clarrisa, my wife, died of liver failure. It ... it changed my perspective on things. Instead of making sure Danté wasn't doing anything illegal, I understood that his vision was the most important thing in the world. I quit the CIA and joined him, hoping I might be able to help the experiment. I wound up running the whole thing, managing Rhumkorrf and the others. She died two years ago. I haven't been remotely interested in anyone since then."

Sara nodded slowly, as if this piece of his past solved some puzzle she'd been working on for days.

"No wonder you're so gung-ho for this project, Peej." She took his hand. He looked down, feeling the warmth of her skin. Clarissa had been the last woman to hold his hand.

"I'm new to this, Sara. I haven't dated in ten years. On top of that, I'm your boss, and I don't want to put any pressure on you."

Sara shook her head. "Don't worry about it, Peej. I'm a big girl, I can take care of myself." She took a small step towards him, their bodies almost touching, and looked up at him, blue eyes wide and expectant. He felt a flutter of butterflies in his stomach.

Colding leaned toward Sara, and kissed her. Her lips were soft and warm, and he forgot all about the cold.

November 17

Sara sprinted down the trail, her exhausted lungs drawing in deep breaths of frigid air. Alonzo and Andy were just two steps ahead of her, their arms pumping and legs churning. She could never beat Zo, but she was so close ...

The Twins and Gunther were much farther back on the trail. They didn't try to kill themselves on the daily six-mile morning run, and Sara didn't push them that hard – she felt fortunate she could even drag them out of bed to run at all. She kept herself and her crew in top shape. Andy and Gunther had joined in at Colding's insistence. You never knew what situation might arise, and it was always best to be in good condition.

Sara ignored her screaming legs and heaving stomach. She pushed harder, pulling

even with Alonzo. Andy was just one step ahead of them. The trio broke from the trees into the clearing of the landing strip. The camouflaged hanger was the finish line, only a few hundred feet away. Sara kept pushing, and managed to actually pull ahead of Alonzo. But as she passed, her spirits sank – he was barely breathing hard.

Fifty feet from the tarmac, Alonzo kicked on the after-burners. He easily passed, and made it one step past Andy. Then Andy the Asshole swung his foot and caught Zo, who went down hard. Sara had to hurdle his prone form. She stumbled, but didn't fall. Andy closed the distance to the hangar, laughing all the way.

Zo got up quickly and sprinted at Andy. Sara chased after them as best she could, but she was still exhausted.

"What the fuck was that for?" Zo screamed.

"Hey, you fell. I win," Andy said with a smile. "Don't get mad about it, you sore loser."

Zo didn't say another word. Instead he shot out a right jab that caught Andy flat-footed. Andy's head snapped back, blood instantly pouring from his nose. Zo tried another snap-jab, but Andy was far quicker than he looked. He slapped the jab away and stepped forward. Zo backed up, but in one smooth movement Andy squatted and reached, catching and lifting Zo's ankle high into the air. Zo flipped and landed hard on his back, the air *whuffing* out of his system. Andy fell on him, planting his knee right in Zo's stomach. Zo doubled over, but before he could roll to his side, Andy landed a quick elbow to Zo's eye.

"Andy, stop it!" Sara grabbed Andy's shoulder. Andy had amazing balance – he spun away from Zo and stood in the same motion, cocking his fist as he did. Sara just blinked: his speed caught her off guard.

As soon as Andy had raised the fist, he lowered it, and laughed.

"You and I will dance soon enough, sister," Andy said as he wiped blood from his nose. "I thought you liked it soft, but maybe you're one of those bitches that likes the rough stuff."

He walked away, ascending the hill that led to the mansion.

Zo was still in a fetal position, finally drawing a thin breath. Blood poured from under his left eye.

"You okay?"

Zo looked up, and nodded. Sara pulled him to his feet. "Come on, let's clean up that eye."

"Just let me ... catch my ... breath."

A full minute later, Gunther and the Twins broke from the trees at an easy trot. Pastie was at their heels, barking with joy, his flopping ears and dangling tongue bouncing in time with his steps. They ran the snowmobile trail from the mansion to North Pointe, then back down the road and into the old town, and from the old town along the trail to the tarmac. Pastie met them every day somewhere near Rapleje Bay and followed them to the landing strip.

The Twins saw the blood under Alonzo's eye.

"What the fuck happened to you?" Miller said.

“Yeah, what the fuck?” Cappy said.

Alonzo stared at Gunther. “I ran into your buddy, Andy. That little fucker is faster than I thought.”

“Don’t look at me,” Gunther said. “I just work with the guy. I’m not on Team Asshole, if that’s what you think.”

“You want us to go get him?” Miller asked.

“Yeah,” Cappy said. “Should we go get him?”

Alonzo shook his head. “No harm, no foul, leave it alone.”

Sara checked her watch – 8:56 a.m. “Okay, everyone, shower up. I’ll take care of Alonzo’s eye. The work day begins at 10 a.m. Pastie, you go on home, boy.”

Pastie barked once, then turned and ran back up the trail.

She took Alonzo to the infirmary. His cut didn’t need stitches after all. She cleaned it up, put a bandage on it, and sent her copilot back to the mansion with a stern warning to steer clear of Andy. Alonzo nodded once, and left.

Sara wandered down to the first deck, where Jian, Rhumkorrf and Overgard were working on the cows.

“Good morning, Sara,” Jian said with a welcome smile. She was standing inside stall twenty-five, working on cow, well, Cow Twenty-Five. “How was the run?”

“A little rough today, actually.” Sara moved across the aisle to scratch the ear of Cow Thirty-Four. It was a big cow. Hell, they all were big – she was 5-foot-10, and was able to stand up straight and look each of them square in their black eyes. This one had an all-black head save for a white eye-patch. She reminded Sara of that dog “Peety” from the old Little Rascals movies. Its eyes narrowed in pleasure from Sara’s scratching. It pushed into her hand, its neck so strong and head so big it made Sara stumble backwards.

“Hey, take it easy old girl,” Sara said laughing. “Don’t go getting greedy on me now.”

Overgard looked up from her current patient, a condescending sneer on her face. “This isn’t a playground, Purinam. I would think a *professional* would understand that.”

Sara felt like she’d been slapped. She just wanted to say hello. Before she could respond, Jian shuffled out of stall twenty-five.

“Sara can go anywhere she wants,” Jian said in a cold tone Sara had never heard before. “You just keep your mouth shut or I’ll shut it for you.”

Overgard stepped out of her stall into the aisle. The two women, one a 5-foot-2, fifty-year old, the other, an obese woman wearing a fuchsia Hawaiian shirt with blue lilies, suddenly squared off like Old West gunfighters.

“I’ve had just about enough of you, you crazy bitch,” Overgard said.

What the hell is going on here? Sara thought. *It’s like Fight Night at the Palace.*

Rhumkorrf stepped between the two women. “Doctors, please, we don’t need this bickering. There’s work to be done.”

There was a brief, awkward moment as the two women stared each other down, then they returned to their work. Tension filled the air.

“Jian, give me some paper,” Sara said. Jian paused for a second, then did as she was asked. Sara grabbed a black permanent marker and wrote something down on the

paper. Jian read it, and started giggling, her fat hand covering her fat mouth. Her laugh seemed to end the tense moment.

The two women stood in front of the cage, blocking Rhumkorrf's view. The hiss of Scotch tape being pulled from a dispenser brought another giggle from Jian. They stepped away from the cage. The piece of paper hung from the cage door. Written on it, in neat, black block letters, were the words "Molly McButter."

"I don't believe this," Overgard said.

"They need names," Sara said. "What kind of a name is 'thirty-four?' From now on this one is Molly McButter."

Rhumkorrf started to protest, but Jian grabbed the marker and another sheet of

"They need names," Sara said. "What kind of name is 'thirty-four?' From now on this one is Molly McButter."

paper. With childlike glee, she wrote down another name and taped it to cage forty-three, the occupant of which, it seemed, was now named "Betty."

"This is ridiculous," Overgard said. "Are you going to tell them to take down those stupid signs?"

Rhumkorrf sighed, then shrugged.

"Claudette, try to relax," he said. "This is completely harmless."

Sara smiled and restrained an almost uncontrollable urge to stick her tongue out at Overgard.

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November 18: Implantation plus eight days

They were down to forty-five pregnant cows.

He had trouble grasping that concept when they were only eight days old. They grew so *fast*. That rapid development proved to be too taxing for some. In the past four days, another single fetus had died for reasons unknown. Although they had forty-five cows still pregnant, there were many more fetal deaths – some of the cows had held two or even three blastocysts, but in each of those cases only one embryo remained. That was a bit of a mystery; why was there only one left? They assumed the cows had reabsorbed the fetuses, but they were having trouble finding any of the tiny remains.

The latest fetal casualty, however, was for a very obvious reason. Rhumkorrf had cut it out of its bovine surrogate mother so he could dissect it and document the embryonic

development. The fetus attack on the fiber-optic camera had returned Rhumkorrf to some scientific sensibility. He should have done an autopsy sooner, should have been documenting the animals' development. He hated to admit it, but he hadn't wanted to kill the embryos, not even a single one. He felt somehow *responsible* for them, as if their safety was his duty.

He set the little corpse on a scale and stared. *Thirty pounds*. In just seven days. They'd set out to create a fast-growing creature, and they had succeeded. The fact that forty-five cows were still pregnant constituted a survival rate of ninety-two percent. Even the most advanced cloning experiments saw success rates on the average of ten to twenty percent. It was as if the combination of the Billups IX, Jian's software, and the God Machine combined to produce unparalleled efficiency. Jian might actually be crazy, but she was also a genius without parallel.

But why should he be surprised? This is what he had planned all along. He had read all of Jian's published research, and he made the mental connections that she could create such a creature, that she could create an artificial genome and alter normal growth rates – so he had Danté recruit her into the project. He had known the computing power she would need, and had Danté acquire two of the Billups IXs. He had known that Claudette Overgard's leading edge expertise in cloning large mammals would be the perfect parallel to Jian's theoretical work. He had put all the pieces together, and after two long years, the pieces ... had ... *worked*.

"It is so familiar," Jian said. She watched his progress on the bulkhead monitor, which was fed by the microscope's built-in camera. "It look like a human."

"Or any other vertebrate at three or four weeks of age, for that matter," Rhumkorrf said. Jian was right, however, it did look like a little human embryo. Or a lizard, or a bear, or a mouse. Vertebrate embryos looked remarkably similar at the early stages: clear evidence of common ancestry.

He examined the heart of his little subject, at seven days already well-developed. Anterior and posterior limb buds – the future arms and legs, respectively – were forming into their final shape. He was surprised by the size of the head and brain case. Obviously the computer had used a great deal of genetic information from higher mammals. But it was far too early to tell if any body proportion would remain through birth and into adulthood.

Claudette currently estimated an unfathomable fifty percent food conversion rate, meaning fifty percent of everything the ancestor took in was converted to muscle or bone or other tissues. That was vastly higher than any other mammal, including humans.

"How big you think it will get?" Jian asked.

Rhumkorrf thought for a moment. It was a question to which he didn't know the answer. But he watched his words around Jian – she was acting normally again after her hysterical outburst. He gave her an answer he thought she could live with.

"I think we'll see a definite slowdown in the growth rate very soon," Rhumkorrf said. "I'm making an educated guess at one-hundred pounds."

Jian nodded. "I also have educated guess."

Rhumkorrf stopped and looked up at her. “And what would that be?”

She turned to look at him. He was wrong – she may have been acting calm, but he could see from her eyes that she was anything but normal.

“Four- to five-hundred pounds,” Jian said.

Rhumkorrf shook his head. “Don’t be ridiculous.” He turned back to the autopsy, removing the tiny stomach. It was absurd to think the ancestors could get that big ... wasn’t it? Rhumkorrf had a brief vision of forty-odd, five-hundred-pound creatures walking around the island.

He carefully sliced open the stomach. The contents spilled onto the dissection tray. They both stared. Neither person said a word. Most of the cows had started with two or three embryos, yet now they were all down to just one. The mystery of the missing embryos lay on the wax tray in front of them. Rhumkorrf stared at the stomach contents, and the tiny, half-digested bones. He could clearly make out bits of two skulls. The ancestors were eating each other, *inside the womb*.

November 19: Implantation plus nine days

For the first time in the entire project, Colding wondered if his job was in jeopardy. Danté stared out from the screen, his eyes narrow slits of fury.

“I can’t believe you could be this stupid,” Danté said with a low tone of barely controlled anger.

“But ... I don’t understand.” Colding wondered what he’d said to set his boss off like this. He’d just given Rhumkorrf’s latest update, and something had ignited his boss’ temper. “Things are going better than we ever expected. The autopsy showed incredible, healthy growth.”

Danté shook his head the way you might when you hear someone say something so incredibly stupid it barely merits a response.

“See if you can guess which word in that sentence has me so mad,” Danté said.

Colding’s mind raced for an answer. “I ... I still don’t understand.”

“Autopsy!” Danté shouted. He repeated the word, punctuating the syllables with his fist slamming down on his desk. “Aw ... fuck ... king ... top ... sy! What the *fuck* is wrong with you?”

“But, sir, we need the autopsies of healthy specimens to document growth.”

“I don’t need documentation!” Danté screamed, a thin line of spit trailing from his lower lip. “I need animals! *Living animals!* What is there about the phrase ‘we’re running out of time’ that you don’t understand?”

“But we need that data,” Colding said. “Jian needs that data to plot growth projections – they still don’t know what the adult animal is going to look like. If the animal is born with some congenital defect, they need all the data they can find to figure out where that defect occurred in the growth phase. What if there are problems later on?”

“What if there is no *later on*?” Danté stood up and leaned forward, his face filling the

screen. Colding couldn't help but think of the fetal ancestor snapping at the fiber-optic camera. "You and I both know the fetuses could start dropping like flies at any moment. We need as many living fetuses as possible to maximize our chances that *at least one* lives to birth and beyond. Chapman is out to get us, PJ. We don't have time to do it right, we just need to get it *done*."

The hairs stood up on the back of Colding's neck. Danté had always been impatient, but this was another level entirely. It had to be because of Chapman and more pressure from the CIA – if Chapman were even alive. Colding needed to know, but he couldn't just come out and ask.

"Let me call Chapman," Colding said. "I can get him to back off."

"You can't fucking call Chapman!"

"Why?"

Danté started to talk, then closed his mouth. His eyes flicked away for a second, then returned to stare straight out from the screen.

"Because we're not going to give him anything to work with," Danté said.

Colding didn't need to probe any further. He needed to get Danté's attention back on the autopsy, so, hopefully, Danté wouldn't realize what Colding had just figured out.

"Danté, I appreciate the fact that we're under the gun, but we're dealing with an entirely new area of science. Despite our research plan, there could be dangers to the project and to the staff if we proceed recklessly."

"Recklessly? You want reckless? How reckless is it to spend a *billion dollars* on a project and have nothing to show for it but a fancy plane? You stupid, *stupid* fucker! I would have thought you had more common sense than this."

Colding didn't say anything. This was all going to hell in a handbasket, and he just wanted to get off the call.

"Let me make this perfectly clear," Danté said, leaning into the screen. "No ... more ... *autopsies*. You do not kill a single fetus, for any reason. Do you understand?"

Colding nodded.

"And I've decided Magnus needs to be there. You obviously don't fully understand the severity of our situation. I'm sending Magnus and putting him in charge. And don't you *dare* argue with me this time."

Danté's wide eyes flashed an open invitation to challenge his authority. Colding knew that any disagreement would wind up putting him on a boat back to the mainland, severance check in hand.

Danté broke the connection without another word. The Genada logo spun slowly on the screen.

Chapman had to be dead. If there were that much pressure from the CIA, Danté would have considered having Colding call Chapman, just on the off chance that Colding could get through to his old partner, make him understand the importance of the CIA backing off for a time. Danté may not have agreed to it, but he would have considered it – if Chapman were around to talk to, that is. Danté's immediate dismissal spelled it out for Colding. Chapman was dead, and so was Paul Stillwell, most likely. And there was only one man who had the opportunity to kill them both.

Magnus Paglione.

Who was now on his way to Black Manitou island.



The first snow fell outside Sara's window – cold outside, but plenty hot in her bed. Her heels hooked in behind Colding's knees. Her thighs pushed against his hips, squeezing him tight. Sweat beaded on his forehead and shoulders as he slid into her again and again, his weight on his hands, the muscles of his shoulders twitching with each thrust.

Her hands tangled in his hair, and she held his head still – she wanted to look into his eyes when he came. She wanted to give that release to him, give him that orgasm, just as he'd given her three orgasms in the last hour.

His breath came quicker and his speed increased. His eyes were wide, pupils dilated, mouth open – she couldn't get enough of him, couldn't *look* at him enough.

"That's it," she whispered. "Come on, baby ... that's it."

His body stiffened and his thrusts suddenly stopped. He let out a deep groan and arched his back, then gently lowered himself to her side, a smile on his lips. He laid his head on the blankets. She did the same, so that the tip of her nose was only an inch from his.

"How'd that feel?" Sara asked softly.

Colding sighed and closed his eyes. "Incredible. It's been a long time."

She stroked his hair and gently wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I'll say. Two years? That's a long time to go without."

He opened his eyes and gazed at her. "That's a long time to go without a lot of things."

Sara smiled and caressed his cheek. "I'm sure she'd be thrilled to know how long you waited, Peej. Any woman would."

He rolled to his back and looked up at the ceiling. Sara instantly wondered if she'd said something wrong. He didn't say anything. She couldn't stand the silence, so she kept talking. "I can't imagine what it's like to lose a spouse."

Sara felt close to him, very close, and wondered if he felt the same.

He leaned on one elbow, looking down at her. She felt the world all wrapped up in his brown eyes, in the curve of his eyelashes, in the smoothness of his nose.

"Sara, I need to know something. I need the truth."

"What?"

"Was that just sex for you? I mean, it's cool if it was, because it was fantastic ... but, was it?"

The comment caught her off guard. She didn't know what to say, and she knew exactly what he meant. It was the kind of thing she'd wanted to hear from several men in her past. Some of them had said something like it, some of them had even said they loved her, but deep down she'd know they hadn't meant it, not really, not in the way she needed them to mean it. She had always been able to sense things like that – her heart *knew*, even if her brain chose to believe something else. And this time, she *knew* he

meant it. Now that she had it, she didn't feel elated ... she felt terrified. Sara didn't know how to handle it, and she didn't know what to say.

So she took a chance, and told the truth.

"No, Peej," she said, a small tremble coloring her words. "That wasn't just sex for me."

He looked straight at her, his brown eyes wide in the dim light. "Me neither."

She felt her heart beating faster. She reached up and dug her fingers into his hair again, pulling him down for another kiss.

"All I can say is I'm sorry."

Colding gently pushed her away. He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "I think we're all in a lot of trouble, and I want you to know. Magnus is coming to Black Manitou."

"Why does that put us in trouble?"

"I think he had a Stinger on Baffin Island. I think he used that Stinger on a man named Sydney Chapman, who used to be my partner in the CIA. I think Magnus killed him, and killed the CIA spy that caused all the damage you saw when you landed."

Sara felt stunned. Colding had never mentioned the CIA. And there was another Stinger missile on Black Manitou, down in the weapons room. A Stinger would pluck her C-5 right out of the air, killing everyone on board.

She also felt pure, unbridled fury. This man, this man she'd just slept with, the man who said it was more than just sex – he'd lied to her and put her crew at risk.

"CIA spy? You told us it was industrial espionage."

Colding looked away. "I did. I wanted to keep the project going, and I was afraid if I told everyone, the project would shut down, that you and your crew would leave."

"Goddamn right we would have left. How dare you not tell us!"

"All I can say is I'm sorry."

Sara shook her head. "Well sorry isn't good enough. You put my crew in danger. You put me in danger. We're not messing with the CIA – we're out of here."

Sara slid to the edge of the bed and sat up. She almost ripped her shirt putting it on.

"You can't leave now, you have to wait."

"Why the hell would we wait?"

"Magnus is a killer. There's a lot of pressure to complete this project. If it's not a success, Magnus might want to make it all go away. If you guys try to leave ... I'm afraid he might kill you all."

Sara sat quietly for a moment. She chose her words carefully. "Other than having that psycho come after us, give me one reason why I shouldn't get my crew and get the hell out of here."

Colding leaned towards her, and his voice turned to a whisper. "If you leave, this project is doomed. I know I said we're in danger, maybe, but ... this project holds hope for millions of people. We may have to move again, and without you, we can't move the

C-5. If the CIA finds us, and we can't move, it's all over."

"Zo, Miller and Cappy are *my* responsibility," Sara said. "They are here because I asked them to be here. We know we're getting hazardous duty pay, but the danger is from our *employer*. That's a different story."

Colding held her face. "Sara, I've given two years of my life to this project. Rhumkorrf has been at it even longer. We are so *close*. The fetuses those cows carry will save millions of lives. I wanted you to know what I thought about the danger, but I'm asking you to stay."

He was leaving it up to her. He wasn't ordering, he was asking. Sara looked into the brown eyes of this man she'd only known for a few weeks – and yet in that ridiculously short time she'd fallen in love with him like no one she'd ever known.

She knew her decision. She knew it was a mistake, the wrong thing to do, but she was going to do it anyway.

"Okay, we'll stay. But if things get crazy, you need to let me know. We're out of here, and you're coming with us, deal?"

Colding smiled, then sealed the deal with a kiss.

November 21: Implantation plus eleven days

Colding watched the hypnotizing dance of thick snowflakes twirling in a light wind. It wasn't even December yet and there was already two inches of snow on the ground. Rhumkorrf picked up a flat stone from the water's edge. It slipped out of his mitten-covered hand twice before he held it firmly enough to throw. The rock skipped once before plunging into a three-foot wave.

"Need flatter water for that, Doc," Colding said. They'd been walking for twenty minutes, yet Rhumkorrf still hadn't said why he needed the meeting, or why he wanted it to be outside the facilities. He didn't want to be out here, he wanted to be with Sara. He wanted to kiss her, to smell her hair, to stroke her face. But he had a job to do, and taking care of Doc's needs was a major part of that job. Colding waited patiently – it was colder than a witch's tit in a brass bra, but Rhumkorrf would get to the point in his own time.

Rhumkorrf tried to pick up another rock, but it kept falling out of his oversized black knit mittens. He gave up after the third try, stood straight, and stared out at the choppy water.

"I think we've got a problem," he said. "I'm worried about Jian."

Images of her pulling out her own hair and the screaming run down the ladder flashed through Colding's mind.

"She's back to normal," Colding said. "She's okay, she just flipped out, that's all."

Rhumkorrf shook his head. "No, it's more than that. She's not back to normal, not at all. She's acting erratic, and yesterday she ... she talked about blowing the whistle."

Colding suddenly felt even colder. He waited for Rhumkorrf to elaborate.

"I don't know if she's serious or not," he said. "But she keeps making comments that she has a 'feeling' the work is dangerous, that we're all going to die, yada-yada-yada."

Colding let out a long breath that crystallized in the frigid air. He suddenly realized he'd been spending too much time with Sara, and not enough time monitoring his people ... not enough time doing his job.

"Doc, was Overgard there?"

Rhumkorrf shook his head. "Just Jian and I."

"Did you tell anyone else about this?"

"No."

"Are you sure? Could Andy have heard it?"

Rhumkorrf shrugged. "Maybe, if he happened to be watching the lab camera at that exact moment, but I don't think so."

"Good. Let's keep it that way. You just stick with the project. I'll make it my top priority to get Jian to chill out. We've got to keep moving forward. Magnus will be here in two days, and we can't let him hear about this."

"Why not?"

Colding thought of voicing his suspicions, but decided against it. They were so close to success, he had to keep Rhumkorrf's mind on the experiment. "Don't worry about it, Doc. Let's just keep this between you and me, okay?"

Rhumkorrf looked up at him. "You'll take care of her? Keep her out of my hair – or at least what's left of it?"

Colding nodded.

"Good. I wouldn't want to talk to Magnus anyway. That freak of nature scares the hell out of me."

"You and me both, Doc," Colding said. "You and me both."

November 22: Implantation plus twelve days

At three in the morning, Jian found herself alone in the C-5's upper-deck lab. She couldn't sleep, not even for twenty minutes. The mishmash animal of her dreams always came to get her. She had to do something. No one would listen. No one would act.

The genome was all wrong. It was because it was in an animal. That was the only explanation. How could they expect to produce an animal with transplantable organs? But she could fix it, she could fix it all, make the whole project work. They needed a different kind of host.

A different kind of host might make her dreams go away.

She worked the Billups computer, calling up a secret program, a secret genome buried so deep in endless miles of genetic code that even Teyshawn couldn't have found it. She'd already tested this genome for viability probability. It worked.

All she had to do was implant the genome into the host's egg.

Jian finished entering commands. The God Machine hissed as the airlocks sealed tight, the light turned from green to red. She could extract the egg, enucleate it, inject

the new genome, stimulate the egg into mitosis and implant it into the host – all in about two hours.

It wouldn't be easy, but she could do it. She knew how to work the fiber optic camera. It was like playing one of Andy's video games.

Like playing a video game, while lying on your back.

November 23: Implantation plus thirteen days

Colding held out his hand to catch delicate snowflakes. Each one seemed so tiny, so fragile – it was hard to rationalize that millions upon millions of the tiny structures had combined to cover Black Manitou in a three-foot layer of icy white. He thought of the parallel between the individual snowflakes and the individual cells of the growing ancestors: many tiny, individually insignificant elements combining to create something much larger, something alive.

A whole greater than the sum of its parts.

The Bell 427 helicopter came in low over the tree line. Bobby, as usual, was right on time. The Bell set down in front of the C-5 hangar. The helicopter's blades started their slow spin-down as Magnus hopped out.

Jesus, he's big. Colding was the tallest man on Black Manitou, and had lost perspective on what 6-foot-8, 320 pounds really looked like. Colding stepped up and offered his hand. "Welcome to the island, Magnus."

Magnus returned the shake. Colding watched his hand disappear inside Magnus's huge paw.

"Thanks," Magnus said. "Where's Andy?"

Colding shook Bobby's hand as he answered. "Back in the security room, it's his watch."

"Think you can spell him for a bit?" Magnus said, more of an order than a question. "I haven't seen him for awhile, and I want to do some catching up."

Colding forced a smile. Magnus had wasted no time in demonstrating a change in totem-pole order. "No problem at all," Colding said.

November 24: Implantation plus fourteen days

Colding knew what the call meant. Or at least, he knew what Rhumkorff's tone of voice meant. Doc had called him to the lab, saying he was concerned about Jian. The woman apparently hadn't slept in two days. Seeing the three of them resemble zombies had become a common sight, but Jian seemed to have taken it to a new level. When Colding entered the main lab and saw her, he felt the rush of an unexpected memory.

As a teen Colding had owned a Collie-German Shepherd mix named "King." The dog had long, beautiful fur. Tan, black and white. While pretty, the fur was ill-suited for hot

weather.

In the heat of a baking Georgia summer, his father – Mickey Colding – had taken pity on King, who spent much of the day lying on the cool kitchen linoleum, panting, his dripping tongue creating a small pool of drool. It was that summer that Colding developed a sudden appreciation for the art of pet grooming: an art his father clearly did not possess. By the time the man finished with a pair of scissors, King looked like he'd been on the losing end of a fight with a Quisnart. The dog's once-gorgeous fur was uneven and stuck out in clumps, some areas a good two inches long, others shorn right down to the skin.

Colding had laughed at the butchery. "Edward Scissorhands, you're not," he said to his father.

"He's happy, isn't he?" his father replied. "He's much cooler now. Who cares how he looks; he's happy."

And – free of several pounds of long, thick fur – King was happy. He'd looked like shit, but he'd looked like *happy* shit.

Sometime earlier that morning, Jian had apparently cut her own hair. Her once-beautiful, silky black locks were gone – in their place was a patch of black tufts that would have made even the hardest butch-dyke look like a fashion plate by comparison. But, unlike King so many years ago, Jian didn't look happy.

In fact, she looked like she'd taken the fuck-nut bus to Crazyville.

"Good morning, Jian," Colding said, trying not to stare or laugh. "You got a haircut?"

Jian looked up from a microscope. She appeared sleepy and seemed not to recognize Colding for a moment – then that familiar smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

"I cut it myself, Mee-Sta Colding."

"You don't say? I would have never guessed."

"I just got tired of it getting in the way, tie a pony tail here, tie a pony tail there, so I trimmed it up a bit with scalpel."

"How much sleep you had in the past two days, Jian?"

Jian shrugged. "It no matter how much. Been trying to work with the computer to project the ancestor's phenotype."

She looked like the walking dead, and it amazed Colding she hadn't cut herself with the budget coiffure. She'd also lost weight over the past few weeks. A lot of weight. The hunter-orange Hawaiian shirt with bright red daisies seemed to hang on her.

Must be down to 215, Doc, Colding thought. Keep it up and you'll hit 190 before the ancestors hatch.

"I think you need to take a break. Get some shut-eye."

Jian shook her head no, then bent back over the eyepiece.

"I can't sleep. Nightmares."

Colding looked at Rhumkorrf, whose expression seemed a combination of concern and annoyance. Overgard leaned on a counter, arms crossed, a look of sadistic glee on her face. To her, this was a wonderful spectator sport.

Colding gently took Jian's hand.

“Come on, Doc,” he said in a soothing voice. “Why don’t you and I go play a game of chess?”

She looked up at him, the fatigue closing her already deeply slanted eyes to nothing more than puffy slits. “Chess?”

“Yeah. Come on. You need a break. You don’t have to sleep, we’ll just have a nice game of chess in the lounge, okay?”

She nodded weakly, then let Colding lead her slowly out of the lab.



Two hours later, Colding responded to another call. And again, he recognized the tone of voice. Only this time the voice wasn’t the high-pitched whine of Rhumkorrf. It was the deep baritone of Magnus Paglione.

Colding walked into the lounge to find Magnus relaxing in an oversized brown leather chair, obviously custom-made to accommodate his supersized dimensions. He held a tumbler of whiskey on the rocks in his hand. A half-empty bottle of Yukon Jack sat on the mahogany table next to him. On the chair to Magnus’s right sat one Andy Crosthwaite: shoes off, white-socked feet resting on a Petoskey stone coffee table, Rolling Rock beer in his hand, and a shit-eating grin on his face.

Magnus smiled – a smile just as fake as his brother’s – and waved Colding over.

“Bubbah, come have a chat.”

Colding walked up and stood, not sure if Magnus wanted him to sit or stand.

“How are things in the lab?” Magnus asked.

“Couldn’t be better, sir. Rhumkorrf says the fetuses could be ready for a Cesarean in a week or less.”

Magnus looked at Andy, who shrugged and took a pull on his beer. Magnus looked back at Colding, his violet eyes cold and lifeless.

“I’ll be amazed if Rhumkorrf pulls this off, I won’t lie,” Magnus said. “To tell you the truth, I thought all of this was a giant crock of shit. But now you tell me we may succeed after all?”

Colding nodded. Magnus smiled his fake smile.

“Amazing,” the big man said. “My dear brother will be so happy.”

Magnus drained his drink in one pull, then lifted the bottle and refilled the glass.

“Is that all you wanted to know?” Colding asked.

“No, that’s not all I wanted to know. How’s Jian, Colding? How’s she doing?”

Colding felt a small wash of fear creep across his back. “She’s fine.”

Andy’s smile widened.

“That’s not what Andy tells me,” Magnus said. “He said she totally flipped out a few days back. Danté didn’t hear anything about that in your reports.”

Colding shrugged and looked out the window. “It’s no big deal, Magnus. She’s a little goofy. Hell, all three of them are a little goofy. That’s the price you pay for dealing with genius, I guess.”

Magnus nodded. “Right. Genius. And she’s had no problems since then?”

“None that I know of. She’s stressed out, she just needs some rest.”

Magnus stared at him, his violet eyes the picture of a hunter sizing up prey. “Okay, I’ll take your word for it. My dear brother told me to keep out of the scientists’ affairs, so she’s your responsibility. But you’d better make sure she toes the fucking line, got it? And no more freaking out.”

Colding nodded. Magnus turned to look out the picture window once again. Colding gathered that he had been dismissed. He started to walk out of the lounge when Magnus stopped him.

“Oh, one more thing, Bubbah.” Colding stopped and turned, wondering what else could possibly go wrong.

“Yes?”

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to be fucking the help?”

Goosebumps rose up all over Colding’s skin. Magnus knew. Colding looked at Andy, who just kept on smiling.

“Andy tuned in to one of your performances. Actually, I got to witness a bit of it myself. Those security cams don’t do much for camera angles and direction, but I saw enough.”

“I made a tape,” Andy said helpfully. “I wish we had sound, but it’s still not too bad – I’ve whacked off to it three times already. Love her titties.”

Colding tried to control his rage. He had never wanted to kill a man more in his entire life. But he couldn’t afford to lose his temper, not now. With things as dangerous as they were, Colding had to do everything he could to keep Sara off Magnus’s radar.

“So is she your girlfriend, Colding?”

“I’m fucking her. So what?” The words sounded sick to his own ears, but a romantic involvement would complicate things in Magnus’s eyes.

“That’s all, Bubbah? You’re just fucking her?”

Colding shrugged. “She’s blowing me, too. Is that against company rules?”

Magnus laughed. “Not against the letter of the law, but you are her boss.”

Colding looked at the wall, trying to appear bored with the whole thing. He needed to be the stereotypical man-pig.

“What do you want, Magnus? You want me to stop fucking her? It’s not like there’s a lot of poon on this island, you know.”

“Take it easy, Bubbah. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t falling for her. You know, shit that might compromise your judgment.”

“No worries there,” Colding said. “She’s a hot piece of ass. I’m going to fuck her every chance I get, unless you tell me I can’t.”

“She a whore, Colding?” Magnus asked lightly.

“She sure fucks like a whore,” Andy said. “Where do you think she learned to fuck like that?”

“She give up that pussy to anyone?” Magnus asked.

Andy laughed. “Not everyone. She won’t give it up to me.”

Colding glared at him. “That’s because your dick isn’t big enough to show up on her

radar, little man.”

Andy’s laugh died in his throat, only to be replaced by Magnus’s hearty bellow.

“Not big enough to show up on her radar,” Magnus said. “Oh shit, Andy, you going to just take that?”

Andy stood and tossed his beer aside. It fell to the ground, spilling on Clayton’s immaculate carpets.

“I’m going to kick his ass right now.”

“Sit down, Andy,” Magnus said.

Andy looked at Magnus, then back to Colding. “But, you said – ”

“Sit!” Magnus shouted the word, so loud even Colding flinched.

Andy sat.

Magnus raised his glass of Yukon Jack in a mock salute. “You fuck whoever you want, Colding. I figured you were tapping Jian, so Sara’s a definite step up.”

Colding kept glaring at Andy. It gave him something to focus on, because he didn’t want to look at Magnus.

“Can I go now?”

Magnus nodded. “Sure, Bubbah. You go on ahead.”

Colding walked out of the lounge. How could he have been so stupid? Just like on Baffin Island, every room had a camera, and he and Sara had put on quite a show for Andy. That little stunt had magnified his problems even more.

November 25: Implantation plus fifteen days

Rhumkorrf watched the video monitor as Jian guided the fiber-optic camera deeper into Molly McButter’s womb. He had taken a liking to Molly, but that was simply because the cow showed above average intelligence. And he liked the way she nuzzled against his chest when he scratched her ear (but only, of course, when no one else in the lab was looking).

Molly was a favorite test subject, mostly because of her remarkable tolerance of someone inserting a fiber-optic camera into her vagina and up into her uterus. They were hesitant to anesthetize any of the animals for fear of what the chemicals might do to the fetuses. The camera slid into Molly’s uterus, the built-in light illuminating the fetus in wet-red glory.

“Holy shit,” Rhumkorrf said, the words out of his mouth before he knew it.

Baby McButter had come a long way from its start as a microscopic ball of undifferentiated cells. The anterior and posterior limb buds were now true limbs, still forming but obvious in their purpose. If he hadn’t known better, he would have estimated the creature up on the screen to be four or five *months* along, not two weeks.

“That fetus is at least *115 pounds*,” Jian said, that uneven tremor back in her voice. “The growth rate is *increasing*.”

Rhumkorrf wasn’t really listening. He marveled at the life he’d created. The back legs

looked much thicker than he'd theorized. The embryo's front legs looked strong as well, but were skinnier and longer. That would suggest a creature that moved at somewhat of an angle, like a sitting dog or a gorilla, as opposed to horizontal, like a running dog or a tiger. Of course, it was still very early in the ancestor's development. The legs might level out before birth, but they just didn't know.

The skeletal structure also showed remarkable growth. Tender ribs looked very thick and extended from the head all the way down to the hips, growing against each other almost like a kind of internal armor.

"Soon," Rhumkorrf said quietly. "Soon, my little ones."

November 26: Implantation plus sixteen days

Colding moved his queen's knight and smiled.

"Check, Jian."

He was winning. For the first time, he was beating Jian. No one in the project had ever beaten her. Jian stared out the picture window, past the Petoskey stone veranda. She seemed to have forgotten Colding was even there at all.

Her hair still looked like shit.

"Jian?" She didn't answer. She just sat there, an unopened bottle of Dr. Pepper in her hands, turning it over and over until the color was a light brown – the normal dark caramel shade mixed with the white of bubbles seeking escape against the bottle's pressure. When she finally opened it, Colding thought, the thing would explode.

He reached out and touched her shoulder.

She looked at him and blinked a few times. "What?"

"Check," Colding said, gesturing to the board.

She glanced at the board, then went back to turning the Dr. Pepper bottle.

"Things are going great, Jian. What's eating at you?"

She looked at him, her eyes once again focused. "You saw," she said in a quiet voice. "You saw it bite the camera."

"Doc said that was nothing to worry about."

Jian laughed. "He's blinded by pride. He wants to see his name on the cover of *Time Magazine*. You're blind, too. You and everyone else."

"Why do you say that?"

"It is so big." She set the bottle on the table, next to the board. Bubbles rose, filling up about a quarter of the bottle's height. Colding wondered abstractly how much pressure it would take to make the bottle burst from the inside. "It is huge, Mee-Sta Colding, don't you understand that?"

Colding shrugged. "Rhumkorrf says it's bigger than he expected, but then again he didn't really know what to expect, so what's the problem?"

"The problem is I programmed the DNA so that growth would level out after an initial burst. We need the things to grow fast, but they still need to be about two-hundred

pounds at most, so the organs aren't too big for humans. But right now it's going to be bigger than two-hundred pounds. The computer says it won't be bigger, but I know it will. I programmed for a herbivore, but we already know the ancestors are predators. There is so much about DNA we still do not know. The ancestor is already straying from the genotype and phenotype predicted by the computer."

Colding shrugged again. "Well, that's even better. If it's born already man-sized, we'll be able to harvest organs that much quicker."

Jian stared off into space, her hands once again spinning the bottle top-over-bottom-over-top. That blank look in her eyes bothered Colding. It didn't seem right to see someone that brilliant staring off like some zombie.

"I want to leave," she said. "I want to leave this place. Something bad is going to happen, unless we stop it."

"Jian, everything is fine." He thought about Rhumkorrf's comment that Jian had talked of blowing the whistle. Colding couldn't come right out and ask her if she wanted to do that. He looked up into the corner, into the tiny camera mounted on the ceiling – Andy was probably watching them at that very moment. But Colding had to convince her that there was no problem. He couldn't let her jeopardize the project, not when they were so close.

"You have to stay. We're so close now, millions of lives hang in the balance."

"Do not remind me of what is at stake, Mee-Sta Colding. I know all too well."

"That's right, you do know, so you know we can't stop now. What's important is that the critters are growing. There's no sign of disease in the cows, no sign of viruses of any kind. Things are so far ahead of schedule it boggles the imagination. You crazy kids are doing something right in that plane. You should be happy, not all bummed out. Seriously, you're bringing me down. Now quit trying to pretend you're not in check."

She looked down at the board and lazily moved her king out of danger. Colding smiled and started to move his rook up into attack position, when he saw that by moving her king, she had opened up her queen, and *he* was now in check.

"Checkmate in two moves," Jian said absently.

"Fuck," Colding said.

The bottle spun even faster. Without another word, she stood and walked out of the office.

November 27: Implantation plus seventeen days

Jian ran the Billups XI through the growth projections for the seventeenth time. No matter how many variables she introduced, it always came up with the same answer.

"What does it say this time?" Rhumkorrf said impatiently. He hovered over her, arms crossed, tiny sweat beads clinging to his shiny scalp.

"Same as before," Jian said dejectedly. "Computer projects the ancestor's birth weight at 50 to 60 pounds, adult weight at 150 to 200 pounds

“It doesn’t make sense,” Frustration thickened his voice. “They’re already way over that. Molly McButter’s weight shows her baby is between 140 and 150 pounds. *One-hundred-and-fifty* pounds, Jian. It gained almost eighty pounds in the last six days. Jian, forget the computer, there’s too many variables to track even for the Billups – you always talk about your feelings. What’s *your* best guess at the ancestor’s weight?”

Jian shrugged. She wore a dark blue shirt decorated with yellow flowers and orange train engines. She stared at the screen with unfocused eyes.

She turned to face him. She didn’t care about his anger anymore. She would speak her mind, and she would speak it *now*.

“I tell you, this bad,” she said. “We need to kill the cows, kill the fetuses, kill everything.”

Rhumkorrf’s jaw dropped in astonishment. “Kill them? We’re succeeding!”

“We need to kill the cows, kill the fetuses, kill everything.”

Jian shook her head. “We are creating something bad, something *evil*. They eat each other *in the womb!*”

“Jian! I’ll brook no further mention of such insanity! We’re not going to kill anything.”

Jian started to speak, but

was interrupted when Overgard’s head popped up the ladder.

“Claus! Come down here quickly.” She disappeared back down the steps. Rhumkorrf and Jian followed. He jumped past the last six steps, landing hard on the rubberized deck. Jian took each step gingerly.

Overgard, a worried look on her face, stood next to Molly McButter. Molly’s head hung almost to the ground. Her eyes were glazed over, coated with mucus. Thin trails of blood ran from her mouth. Jian noticed that Molly’s ribs stood out clearly from her massively swollen belly, the skin slack between them. In fact, she noticed for the first time that most of her bones stood out in nearly comical relief, as if she hadn’t eaten for weeks.

Rhumkorrf looked deeply worried. “What’s wrong with her?”

Claudette shook her head. “I’m not sure. She seems to have borderline malnutrition.”

“That’s ridiculous. She’s getting the same amount of food she’s had since day one. She didn’t look like this yesterday ... did she?”

“No,” Claudette said. She hung a bulging plastic IV bag from a hook outside the cage. “Not like this. I noticed all the cows were looking a bit thin – I assumed it was from the rapid fetal growth. I increased their food intake by fifty percent, but that apparently isn’t enough.”

Jian looked around the barn. Some of the cows looked fine, but most showed symptoms similar to Molly McButter – glazed eyes, protruding bones. Then she saw something move in stall forty-one. Her eyes went wide with shock and fear. It was there,

and she wasn't sleeping this time. A tiny plastic baby-doll hand reached over the stall divider. A black and orange tiger paw appeared a few inches to its left.

"No," Jian said in an inaudible whisper.

The green snout of a tiny alligator slowly appeared from behind the wall.

Jian shut her eyes tight and jabbed her thumbs into her stomach, sending a wave of dull pain up her body. She gave her head one shake, then opened her eyes.

The thing was gone.

"Jian," Rhumkorrf said sharply. She jumped at the sound of his voice, and turned to face him.

"Jian, did you hear me?" He looked annoyed. Claudette looked disgusted.

"No, what did you say?"

"I asked what you thought of this."

Jian quickly looked at the sick cow, then back at Rhumkorrf. "Doctor Overgard is right, the rapid fetus growth is making the cow sick."

Claudette stepped into the cage and inserted the IV needle into Molly. "I'm going to feed the cows intravenously, give them a concentrated protein and vitamin cocktail. Hopefully that will normalize their metabolism enough for them to start eating again. Then we'll keep up with the intravenous while simultaneously increasing their food another twenty-five percent.

"The fetus is growing so fast it demands more food than the cow can eat, so the cow's body is breaking down muscle mass in order to sustain the fetus. I think that sometime during the night the cows became sick enough to stop eating, and since then the situation has worsened."

Jian said nothing, she just kept looking around the lab, wondering what she could do to stop all of this.

She didn't wonder long before the answer came to her. The only question was, did she have the courage to do it?

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"Well, I'm thrilled with the progress," Danté said from the computer screen. "Almost 150 pounds, can you believe it? These results are better than we could have possibly hoped. That Liu Jiandan is a bioinformatics genius. When this is all done she'll be ranked up there with Einstein. With *Einstein!*"

Colding had trouble picturing Jian in the same league with Einstein, when all he could think of was her recent, crazy behavior. Although they both definitely had wild-ass hair in common.

"I think it's great, sir," Colding said. "All three of them are at the top of their game."

Danté nodded. "Yes, they are. I really put together quite a team, didn't I?"

Colding smiled patiently, and nodded again.

"Well, I'm thrilled. Any problems with the new C5 crew?"

"No. Any updates on Chapman?"

"No," Danté said quickly. "No word at all. But to balance the scales, here's something you do need to worry about. I'm transferring the latest weather forecast. Looks like you

may be in for a bit of a snort. Low-pressure system is building up northwest of you, may hit you full force. I want you to be prepared.”

Colding watched as his screen switched to a map. North America was brown, colored by varying shades of green indicating snow and wind. A small green blotch circled slowly just west of Hudson Bay.

“Oh for crying out loud.” Colding rubbed the bridge of his nose. This just kept getting worse. “We’ve already got three-and-a-half feet of snow on the ground.”

Danté laughed. “Don’t worry, there’s plenty more to come. My guys are predicting Black Manitou gets three-hundred inches of snowfall this year. But buck up, Colding – this one may pass you right by. I just wanted to give you a heads-up.”

“Thanks, sir, that’s helpful.”

Danté smiled. “Just keep everyone’s nose to the grindstone, PJ. You’re doing a great job.”

Danté broke the connection.

Carnivore.

November 28: Implantation plus eighteen days

Jian sat in her room, her finger hovering above the “enter” key. A password window sat on the screen, name of “Sysadmin” in the user field, seven asterisks in the password field. Modifying the network would be a simple affair, one for which she’d never be caught.

She had to do something. Why didn’t anyone see the danger? She felt it, felt it deep in her bones. And she could stop it. She could notify the outside world, try and get help. She was the *only* one who could do it. Magnus and Andy watched everyone so closely, and no one could call off the island.

The secure satellite uplink was the only form of communication to the outside world. She could reprogram that uplink, take it over from her computer. The jammer would still block the calls, but she could shut that down as well. Once she made that uplink connection, she could just use the computer’s built-in microphone to talk, a simple voice-over-IP connection that would be as good as a phone.

She looked at her finger, still poised above the keyboard. It shook slightly, a tiny tremble.

It wasn’t like she was making a call now. She was just setting up a way to do it. Just in case. Just in case it got worse.

Jian pressed the “enter” key.

November 29: Implantation plus nineteen days

Gunther practically stumbled into the C-5. He rubbed his eyes and tried to shake away the sleep. He'd volunteered to rise at 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. every day to check on the cows. It was hell on his sleep patterns, but his promise to handle this task was the only way Rhumkorrf and Jian would agree to sleep through the night. If you could call midnight to 6 a.m. sleeping through the night. Gunther didn't mind, not really – there was jack shit to do for him on this island, now that he'd finished *Lost Lust*.

He started with Cow One, dubbed "Pinky Tuscadero." Sara obviously named that one; she was a sucker for those old Happy Days reruns. She'd certainly have named one "The Fonz" had there been any bulls around. The IV bag held 20.4 liters. He checked that against the panel computer mounted on the stall – right on schedule. He checked off the box.

He moved across the aisle to stall two. Gunther rolled his neck and heard his vertebrate crack and pop. The motion relieved some of the pain in his neck, and he started to come fully awake. He was just about to enter stall two when he saw it, halfway down the aisle.

A dark maroon puddle leaking out of stall twenty-four. Any remaining sleepiness vanished as he sprinted down the aisle and looked in the cage. Cow twenty-four, "Miss Milkshake," according to the sign hanging from the cage, lay on her side. The puddle of coagulated blood started at the cow's mouth, which was wedged against the clear door. Her eyes were half-open and glazed over.

The cow didn't move.

Gunther checked the vitals – a flat line.

Miss Milkshake was dead.



Carnivore.

The teeth practically screamed the word.

Rhumkorrf looked down at the body, a sinking feeling in his soul. He couldn't call it a "fetus," not by any stretch of the imagination. He looked at his tablet for the tenth time, still amazed at the weight.

One-hundred, eighty-four pounds and six ounces. Five feet long from the tip of the nose to the end of its tail-less posterior. It looked like a big dog. A skinless, bloody, big dog. The animal had put on fifty-five pounds in the last *three days*.

"That is not a plant eater," Jian said quietly.

"It most certainly is not," Rhumkorrf agreed. Long and pointy, the ancestor's teeth were definitely designed for killing. Not chewing, or grinding, but ripping off large chunks of flesh and swallowing them whole. A mouth full of canines, without a wisdom or eyetooth to be seen.

"Look at that lower dentary," Overgard said, her constant needling of Jian forgotten for the moment. "That creature is going to have one powerful bite."

Rhumkorrf mumbled agreement. The heavy jaw bone bulged with attached muscles. Judging from the size of the jaw and the thickness of the growing muscle, this little fellow's living brethren would possess crushing jaw power.

Miss Milkshake had died in the night for reasons unknown, and her fetus had died along with it. Claudette was performing the autopsy on Miss Milkshake, trying to nail down the mother's cause of death. Rhumkorrf seized the opportunity to perform another fetal autopsy – he hadn't been able to do so since Danté's explicit orders barring the killing of any ancestor. That was twelve days ago, 115 pounds ago.

He carefully examined the skull. It was just over sixteen inches long, eight inches of which were nothing but jaws and teeth. The creature still possessed a proportionately large brain case. It was now clear that the computer program had not found a "primitive" brain to plug into the genome, and had instead utilized the combined DNA of higher mammals. The brain-to-body weight ratio ranked alongside that of wild canines.

The skull wasn't the only amazing thing. The front arms had retained their relative length advantage over the hind limbs, and he saw nothing to indicate that would change in the coming weeks. With that posture, the creature would move half-upright, more like a gorilla than a dog or a lion. The front legs ended in thick, muscular digits, each tipped with a six-inch long claw. Rhumkorrf lifted the corpse's paw and fingered a claw – sharp, pointy. He suddenly wondered which would be worse, death by the teeth, or death by the claws. He shook his head, chasing away the thought.

"It will probably go through more physiological changes before it's ready for birth," Rhumkorrf said. "What I can't figure out is this cartilaginous growth coming out of the back of its head. Any ideas, doctors?" A long strand of cartilage, thin but sturdy, stretched from the back of the fetus' head halfway down the body. He gently lifted the cartilage; still-forming skin ran from the creature's back to the underside of the spike.

"It almost looks like a variation on the dimetrodon's spinal sail," Overgard said. "Maybe it's some kind of heat regulation device."

Rhumkorrf nodded in agreement. "Perhaps, although it seems more flexible than the dimetrodon's sail. Perhaps it will solidify as the fetus grows."

"I don't like this," Jian said quietly.

"Oh please desist with this boring repetition of yours," Overgard said. "I know what comes next ... 'we must stop experiment.' Right, let's just let hundreds of thousands of people die because the Cellulite Queen doesn't like what she sees."

Jian stared at the dead fetus, seemingly oblivious to Overgard's insult. "We are on an island where no one can reach us, growing an animal that is *already almost two-hundred pounds*. We no have facilities for a predator."

The ominous words seemed to hang in the air.

"Maybe she's right," Overgard said. "Maybe we need to contact Danté, build some cages suitable to hold a wolf. Perhaps a tiger."

Jian's gloved hands pried open the creature's jaws, exposing the dagger-like teeth. "Dinosaurs went extinct, wiped out, if that had not happened, humans would never have evolved. Dinosaurs clearly superior to early mammals, faster, stronger, better predators. Nature had to remove dinosaurs in order for us to evolve.

"There was extinction at the end of Permian, when we think the ancestor's nearest relative lived. So if nature had to get rid of dinosaur so we could evolve, did you ever

stop to think what nature had to remove to allow the *dinosaurs* to evolve?”

The lab seemed suddenly far too quiet. Jian waddled over to the ladder and descended. Overgard and Rhumkorrf stared at the body, neither saying a word.

November 30: Implantation plus twenty days

Claudette shivered as she stared up at the bulkhead monitor. She wrapped both arms around her shoulders and rubbed vigorously, but the chill didn't go away. She knew the shiver wasn't from the temperature, anyway.

Jian stood next to the screen, also looking up at it, mumbling in Mandarin over and over again, switching her weight from the left foot to the right foot and back. She didn't look like a scientist anymore, she looked like a retard, or perhaps a lunatic. Only Claudette didn't think Jian was either, not anymore.

In fact, for the first time, she was starting to think that Jian was right.

Rhumkorrf sat on a stool, alternately looking at the IV needle in his hand and the pictures up on the bulkhead monitor. “So the IV needle became clogged,” he said, his voice a monotone of detached scientific analysis. “When would you estimate this happened?”

“About 10 p.m., based on the amount of nutrient solution in the IV bag compared with the other bags going to the healthy cows,” Claudette said. “I estimate internal bleeding started around 2:30 a.m. Miss Milkshake died at 3:40 a.m. according to the heart rate recorded by the stall's computer. The fetus drowned in her blood.”

Claudette looked up at the image on the screen, a digital picture she'd taken during her autopsy. The fleshy placenta, riddled with punctures and torn open in places. A few chunks were missing completely. Without the nutrient IV, Baby Milkshake had gotten hungry and tried to eat the first thing it could find. Claudette suffered another cold shiver, a blast of fear caused by this unknown animal. This was an animal with survival instincts so strong it would eat anything, including its siblings in the womb, including the womb itself.

“This is not good,” Rhumkorrf said. “We're going to have to increase the nutrient intake and set up shifts to check each IV on the hour.”

“There's more,” Overgard said. Rhumkorrf turned to look at her, as did Jian. “Four days ago we had a problem with the cows getting sick, a problem we solved with the nutrient IV.”

Claudette clicked the remote and the picture changed, from the gnawed placenta to a close up of tissue lined with jagged, white, scar-like marks. “These marks correspond with the size of the fetus' claws from four days ago. The cows weren't sick, Claus, they were being cut up from the inside. The fetus got hungry, and woke up, presumably to look for food.”

“Woke up?” Rhumkorrf said with disgust. “It's still in the damn womb; it can't wake up. It must have been a reflexive action, and considering the sharpness of the claws,

damage to the uterus was unavoidable.”

“Bullshit,” Jian said. “We saw Baby McButter bite the camera, and that was over two weeks ago.”

“That was just a nervous reaction – ”

“Stop kidding yourself,” Jian spat. “You’re in denial. That thing *bit* the camera. It’s a predator. It’s aggressive. And it’s getting bigger by the minute.”

“Now that’s enough,” Rhumkorrf said, his voice angry and loud. “Jian, you need help. That’s all there is to it, I can only be so patient! I’ve had it with your paranoid rants! You – ”

“Claus,” Overgard interrupted, setting a hand on his shoulder. “She’s right.”

Rhumkorrf stared at her, dumbfounded. “Are you kidding me?”

Overgard shook her head. “No, and I wish I were. Jian is right. We’ve got to stop this. Stop being so damn *proud* of what we’ve done, and look at the *facts*. We’re putting ourselves in a very, very dangerous situation.”

Rhumkorrf’s small face wrinkled with fury. “I will *not* stand by while you two ... *fraidy cats* ruin this. We’ve been working for this for years! And we’re almost there.”

“Mee-Sta Rhumkorrf,” Jian said pleadingly. “You must listen. We have to – ”

Rhumkorrf stamped his foot on the rubberized floor, cutting off her words. “Jian, get out! I won’t hear any more of this! Get out of my lab! Get out of this plane entirely! Go back to your room!”

Overgard and Jian looked at each other, then back at Rhumkorrf.

“Get out, I say! Get out now!” He pointed his finger to the ladder, anger radiating from his body.

Jian descended. Overgard stood there, wondering what to do next. Rhumkorrf turned on her, eyes wide and furious behind his coke-bottle lenses.

“And *you*,” he said, as if the word ‘you’ were some vile epithet. “I expected more from *you*! I can’t believe you’re stupid enough to succumb to her crazy foolishness.”

Overgard felt her own burst of anger. “What? You question my scientific observations?”

“Question? *Question?* I’m doing a lot more than that, you stupid bitch. I thought so much more of you. I can’t believe you’re helping fuel her paranoid delusion.”

“The only one here with delusions is *you*! Look at that screen! For the love of God, man – what’s going to happen when they’re born? *What are we going to feed them?*”

“We can feed them the cattle from the other farms,” Rhumkorrf said. “And we’ll have Danté bring out more food, and proper pens suitable for predators. I really don’t think newborns will be a problem, Claudette.”

She stepped up to him until their noses almost touched. “Not a problem? They tried to *eat their way out of the damn womb*! What the hell do you think they’ll be capable of when they’re standing on their own feet?”

Rhumkorrf shoved her. The sudden push caught her by surprise – she stumbled back into the stool and fell in a heap on the floor.

“You stupid *dyke*,” Rhumkorrf said quietly. He kept his voice low, but his eyes radiated rage and betrayal. His small hands were balled up into tight fists. His lip curled up into a snarl. “You will *not* betray me again, do you understand?”

She hadn't seen him like this in years ... not since that day he'd caught her in bed with Ghaniyah. The stare was a rusty saw in her soul, cutting, tearing, ripping. He'd never forgiven her, not in the least. He'd kept it all hidden, packed away somewhere quiet and secret, and now his hatred poured from his face and voice.

"Claudette, you get your ass downstairs and start doubling the nutrient supplement. I won't lose another fetus, not when we're so close."

She stood and cautiously slipped past him, then scurried down the ladder.

She had to get someone to listen. Maybe she could talk to Jian later in the day, after Rhumkorrf calmed down. Perhaps she and Jian could go to Colding, or even Magnus.

Claudette Overgard had no way of knowing that she'd never again speak to Dr. Liu Jiandan.

...

Jian shuffled down the hall, small steps making for a slow pace, her hands furiously spinning a Dr. Pepper bottle top-over-bottom-over-top. She entered her room, shut the door behind her and locked it. She then moved to the dresser. She didn't slide it, as that might make too much noise, but instead picked the whole thing up. Grunting slightly from the effort, she set the dresser against the door. The bed came next. She couldn't pick that up, but it didn't really matter, because she was about to make some noise that, she was quite sure, no one would miss.

Jian shoved the bed, the wooden feet of which squealed against the polished Petoskey stone floor. The bed wedged nicely against the dresser.

She sat at her computer desk. She called up the program she'd written two days earlier. There was nothing else she could do. She thought she'd had an opportunity when Overgard suddenly sided with her, but Rhumkorrf wouldn't listen.

No one would listen, and they didn't have much time left.

She entered some commands. The program flashed up a window with the words **READY TO INITIATE CONTACT SEQUENCE.**

She hit "enter."

...

In the security control room, Andy Crosthwaite lowered his *Juggs* magazine, a confused look on his face. A long beep had brought his attention to the main monitor. The command-line window had popped up, seemingly of its own accord. The window listed two lines.

JAMMER SHUT DOWN ACTIVATED.

JAMMER SHUT DOWN COMPLETE.

"What the heck is going on?" He set the magazine aside and scooted up to the keyboard. He called up the main security menu and clicked the "jammer" icon, launching the jammer control window. Sure enough, it was marked "disabled." He hit the "enable" button. He stared at the message that flashed up on the screen.

ACCESS DENIED.

Andy felt a sinking feeling in his chest.

The log monitor scrolled again, this time with the messages:

TRANSMITTER ACTIVATED.

PHONE NETWORK ACTIVATED ... DIALING ...

Andy turned to the camera monitor and started flashing through the channels. C-5 cockpit – empty. C-5 lab – Rhumkorrf working at a lab table, but not near a computer. C-5’s veterinary bay – Overgard in stall four, attending to a cow, also nowhere near a computer. Magnus’s room – empty. Colding’s room – he was asleep in his bed. Jian’s room ...

Liu Jiandan was sitting at her computer.

“Fuck a duck,” Andy whispered.

The log line scrolled again.

VOICE CONNECTION ESTABLISHED. CALLER ID: CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY.

“Oh, motherfucker!” Andy grabbed the phone and punched Magnus’s extension. As it rang, he punched a button on the console, activating the secure satellite uplink monitor.

VOICE OVER IP SIGNAL DETECTED. WOULD YOU LIKE TO MONITOR THE AUDIO? YES/NO

Jian had just hit the panic button, and, of course, it had to be on Andy’s watch. He clicked “yes” to listen in. He hurriedly called up the transmitter control window and clicked “disconnect,” knowing what he’d see.

ACCESS DENIED.

Magnus didn’t answer. Andy pinched the phone receiver between his shoulder and ear as he tore his walkie-talkie from its place at his belt.

“Magnus, come in!” Andy waited all of five seconds for an answer. “Magnus, this is Andy, come in immediately!”

The walkie-talkie produced nothing but static. He changed channels.

“Gunther, come in!”

Gunther answered after only a brief pause. “Gunther here, what’s up?”

“Get your ass to Jian’s room now! Get in there and get her away from her computer!”

Andy didn’t even wait for Gunther to answer before he switched back to Magnus’s channel.

“Magnus! Magnus come in, god dammit!”

Still no answer.

“Oh, unholy duck fuckers.” Andy turned up the sound on the monitors.

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A cheerful voice answered on the seventh ring. “Central Intelligence Office.” The voice sounded tinny coming from the computer’s small speakers.

“Too big,” Jian said.

“Pardon me?”

“Too big. Growing too fast. You get someone up here to stop it.”

“Ma’am, is there someone you want to speak to?”

“I need someone to help with transgenic experiments,” Jian said. “Zhe shi hen jin ji, mai shi jien.”

“Ma’am, I - ”

“You listen to me,” Jian interrupted, speaking as carefully and calmly as she could manage. “I need someone in charge right now. There are problems with our transgenic experiment. If you take the time to screen this call, I’ll be dead before someone can answer.”

There was a brief pause. “Hold on one moment, ma’am.”

Jian sat heavily on the bed. She stared at the computer screen, but wasn’t looking at it. All her eyes could see was a ghostly vision of the needle-toothed fetus snapping at the fiber-optic camera.

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In his room in the mansion, Magnus buttoned his pants, zipped his fly, then picked up his walkie-talkie, which had been squawking incessantly with Andy’s annoying voice.

“Magnus here, go ahead.”

“Where the hell have you been?” Andy screamed so loud Magnus flinched and held the walkie-talkie away from his ear.

“Quit yelling,” Magnus said calmly. “I was taking a shit.”

“So is Jian,” Andy screamed, “all over us. She’s calling the CIA.”

Magnus’s eyes narrowed. He walked to the coat rack and lifted his gun holster.

“So kill the transmitter.”

“I can’t! She locked me out somehow, turned off the jammer, too. I can’t get that back online either.”

“How long has she been on?”

“Less than a minute.”

Magnus donned the holster and fastened it with practiced ease. “Where is everyone? Where is Colding?”

A brief pause: “He’s sleeping. Rhumkorrf and Overgard are in the C-5. I think Sara and her crew are doing their morning run. Gunther’s at Jian’s room, trying to break in. Don’t know where Clayton is.”

Magnus picked up his .44-caliber Desert Eagle and quickly checked the nine-round magazine – full. He popped it back in the gun and slid it into the holster.

“Make sure you record her,” Magnus said. “I want to hear what that fat cunt has to say.” He started to walk towards the door, then stopped. Calmly, he strode to his desk, retrieved a Beretta 9mm pistol from the desk drawer, and stuffed it into his waistband. Magnus then walked into the hall with long, purposeful strides, the stride of a predator.

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A male voice this time. “This is agent Holcombe.”

“This is Doctor Liu Jiandan. Listen carefully.”

“What’s this all about?”

“Shut up!” Her patience was gone. Time was almost up. They would be there soon, the little monsters with the teeth and claws. “You shut up and you listen! Our chimeras are too big.”

“What’s too big?”

“It is,” Jian screamed. She leaned forward until the little microphone was almost in her mouth.

“Ma’am, please calm down - ”

“Wei wei wei! Ting Jian le mei? Ni shenme ta ma de maobing ya ni!? Tai’er tai tama de da, ni dong ma? Dong ge pi! *Si ren le, ni hai dang wo shi shagua, cao ni malegebi!*”

A fist pounded at the door. Jian screamed and dropped the phone. Her hands grabbed big tufts of her uneven black hair.

The door shook in its frame with each repetitive, powerful blow.

“Ma’am?” Holcombe’s voice came from the speakers, his voice tiny and faraway, drowned out by the pounding and Jian’s screams.

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Magnus turned the corner to see Gunther slamming his shoulder against the door. Inside the room, Jian was screaming something in rapid-fire Mandarin.

“Go away, Gunther,” Magnus said. “I’ll handle this.”

Gunther looked confused. “Don’t you want my help?”

Magnus reached out, wicked-fast, and grabbed a fistful of Gunther’s shirt. “I said go away. Jian is suicidal, and too many people will scare her. Now *do what I say!*”

Magnus released Gunther with a little shove that sent the guard stumbling backwards. A wide-eyed Gunther regained his feet, then turned and walked quickly down the hallway.

Gunther disappeared around the corner. Magnus balled up his fist. He took one deep breath, then threw a hard punch at the door. The cracking wood sounded like a gunshot – a white, jagged split appeared in the thick brown door. He reared back and hit it again, swinging all his weight into the punch. This time his fist went through. Blood smears streaked the splintery hole. He took a quick look at his fist – the skin had split over his knuckles. Blood ran down his hand. A two-inch splinter jutted from between his index and middle finger.

Magnus pulled out the splinter, tossed it aside, snarled, then reached into the hole and *yanked*, tearing free a thick, head-sized piece of door.

He stepped forward and looked into Jian’s room.

•••

It had been too much for her strained mind. The violent pounding on the door eroded her sanity to the last pebble of rational thought. When Magnus looked in, Jian didn’t see a human face at all – she saw a crocodile head with smiling, evil eyes and long teeth dripping with saliva.

Liu Jiandan screamed for the last time.

Magnus calmly aimed the Beretta through the hole and fired. The bullet smashed into Jian’s temple, just above the left eye. It punched through bone and tumbled through her brain, ripping out the back of her skull in a cloud of pink and red. Gelatinous globs splattered against the wall.

The shot knocked her back a step, that last scream frozen in her throat. Chunks of bone and brain hanging from the back of her ravaged head, Liu Jiandan managed to take one small step forward, then fell face-first onto the floor.

•••

Colding sat up in his bed, confusedly blinking away the sleep, shielding his eyes against the morning sun that poured through his window. Had he heard a gunshot, or was he dreaming? An instinctive alarm rang somewhere in his subconscious. Something was very wrong.

His bedroom door opened and a panting Gunther rushed in. "It's Jian," Gunther said. "I think she's trying to kill herself."

Colding threw the covers aside and hopped out of bed. "So you left her, you fucking idiot?"

"Magnus told me to. He's there now. Andy called me to her room on a code one, told me to get her away from her computer, but the door was blocked. Magnus showed up and told me to take off."

Colding felt the cold hand of dread close somewhere inside his chest. Dressed in only boxer shorts, he sprinted out the door towards Jian's room.

•••

Colding walked in through the open door, and brushed past Magnus and Andy to stare at the body. Jian lay on the floor in a widening pool of blood. Her left hand was clenched into a fist, strands of her black hair still sticking out from between her fingers. Her right hand held a Beretta. He didn't need to check her pulse – the fist-sized hole in the back of her head said it all.

"She must have sneaked into the security area," Andy said. "I don't know how she did it, but she got in there and got a gun."

"She was a smart woman," Magnus said. "I really don't think our secret room would pose much of an obstacle to someone that smart."

Colding knelt next to her body. A sudden sadness overwhelmed him. He should have gotten her off the island days ago. But he hadn't, he'd wanted her to keep working, to make the project a success.

"What happened?" Colding asked.

"I saw her on a routine video sweep," Andy said. "She had the Beretta, she was babbling something in that chinky-chee Chinese talk."

"Gunther got here first, but I sent him away," Magnus said. "I didn't want to overwhelm her. I tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't speak English. The door was blocked. I had to punch through the door to reach in and move the dresser, so I could get in. I just couldn't get to her in time to stop her."

Colding looked up at Magnus. From the floor, Magnus looked like an utter giant, a cold, unfeeling statue of colossus depicting the strength of the human form. He looked back at Jian's corpse. Magnus wouldn't kill her just because she was paranoid. She was too valuable, too irreplaceable. Despite her crazy behavior, she had still done her work,

and that's all Magnus cared about. He wouldn't have killed her ... unless ... unless she'd made good on her desire to contact the outside world.

Colding looked around the room, looking for a phone, a walkie-talkie, even two tin cans connected with strings. But he saw nothing. It was a stupid idea – she had no way of contacting anyone. Magnus would have had time to hide a radio, sure, but there were no radios on the entire island. None except for the main transmitter, and that was locked up tight.

Then his eyes settled on the computer. Gunther had been sent to the room and told to get Jian away from the computer.

He looked at the blood splatters on the back wall, some droplets still trickling down the wall. He then looked at the hole in the door.

"This is such a tragedy," Magnus said. "I wish we could have done something, but I couldn't get to her."

Colding mentally drew a line from the door to the blood splatters on the back wall. Jian had been facing the door when she shot herself – facing the hole in the door. Somehow, she'd figured out how to use the computer to call for help. Andy found out, and Magnus killed her.

Andy reached down and pulled the gun from Jian's hand. "So what do we do now?"

Fury grew deep inside Colding's soul, glowing orange coals of hatred steadily stoked by the billows of failure, of failing his friend. He'd never killed anyone, that was true, but he now knew he could do so without a moment's hesitation.

Kill you murdering fuckers, that's what we do now. The thought roared in his head with million-decibel volume. Colding took a deep breath and fought for control. Magnus still held his oversized pistol. Without a weapon, Colding knew he had no chance against that mountain of a man. Despite the rage, the fury, the hatred, the undeniable need to *do something*, Colding kept his cool. He had to stay calm. He had to play it smart, get Sara and Rhumkorrf and the others off the island. If he made a move, and failed, he wouldn't be able to help them. Besides – Magnus and Andy were trained killers. He couldn't underestimate them. Better to play along and bide his time. After he had Sara off the island, away from Magnus, then he could think about justice. He had to make like a team player, so Magnus would still trust him.

"We can't tell the others she killed herself," Colding said. "It will screw up their work."

Magnus looked down at him. A small smile toyed at the edge of his mouth. "So what are you saying, Bubbah, that we tell them she's just sleeping?"

"Something like that. We tell them she's had a nervous breakdown and we don't want her in the lab. I don't think the others will mind. In fact, with the way she's been acting, they'll be happy she's out of the way."

Andy nodded. "She has been acting like a crazy bitch. We can say she took a shot at me – that will explain the gunshot. Then we say she's restrained to her room, for fear she'll sabotage the project."

"I like it," Magnus said. "But we can't have her body around stinking up the place. Andy, call Gunther, get him in here. Colding, you and Gunther go and bury her."

Colding stood up. “Are you joking?”

Magnus shook his head. “If we tell them she’s restrained to her room, we can’t have the body around where the others can find it. We can’t have any interruptions now. So go fucking bury her.”

“I’m not going to bury her on this island.”

“Do it,” Magnus said. “If you’d been better at your job, she’d still be alive, so this is your fault. Do you want the others to find out later on that she’s dead, and that we lied to them? How’s that going to affect the success of this operation?”

“Are you joking?”

Colding thought for a moment. He’d always been the project’s biggest advocate, the cheerleader who kept everyone motivated when time seemed darkest. It wouldn’t seem out of character for him to play that role now.

“You’re right,” Colding said. “I’ll take care of it.”

Magnus smiled, turned, and walked out the door. Andy followed him, leaving Colding alone with the corpse of his friend.

...

Magnus sat in front of the secure terminal, his thick fingers drumming a relentless pattern on the desktop – *babababump, babababump, babababump* – waiting for Danté’s face to appear. While he waited, he read the e-mail again.

```
From: Farm Girl  
To: Big Poppa  
Subject: Funny stuff at home
```

```
I heard about that funny prank call to Dad. They know who made the call, and they know who she works for, but they don’t know where it came from. Crazy prank callers! ROTFL! You know Dad, though, he can’t let stuff like that go. He actually put some of his staff to work on it. They think they’ll know where the call came from in five days, six at most. Then Dad is going to do a prank of his own.
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```
TTYL – Farm Girl
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It was over now. Even Danté had to see that. There was just no place left to run. The CIA knew Jian made the call. They knew Jian worked for Genada. They had people working on it – they’d find out about Black Manitou in five or six days, then come a-calling. Black Manitou wasn’t directly owned by Genada, or the Paglione’s, but Americans were the best at sniffing down a money trail, and they’d figure it out. It was only a matter of time.

Finally, the Genada logo disappeared, replaced by the Cheshire grin of his brother. Magnus knew his brother well – he was smiling, but he wasn’t happy.

“We’ve got a problem,” Magnus said. “Jian hacked into the network and accessed the

transmitter.”

Danté’s smile faded. “Who did she call?”

“Only the CIA.” He felt a swirl of confusion start to spin in his head. He couldn’t think straight. Everything was going straight down the crap-shoot, and he didn’t know what to do about it.

“What did she tell them?”

“She rambled on and on about chimeras, ancestors, that kind of thing. She didn’t get a chance to give out any details, but I think she said enough.” Magnus’s vision blurred a bit, and everything took on a red haze. He leaned into the camera, so his brother would only see his face, then reached behind his back and drew his knife.

Danté slumped in his chair. He looked very tired. “Where is Jian now?”

Magnus blinked twice, then jabbed the knife tip into his calf. Pain shot up his leg. He felt hot blood spread across his socks, his pants leg.

The confusion swirl didn’t stop.

“Where is Jian, Magnus?” Danté said.

Magnus started to answer, but caught himself. What should he do?

He stabbed again.

The swirl stopped, but he still couldn’t think. *Help me THINK!*

“Magnus, what’s the matter with you? Where is Jian?”

Magnus stabbed again, harder this time – he didn’t pull the blade out, but left the point in, and slowly twisted it. A scalding flash of agony shouted out from his calf. His face showed not a trace of the pain, but in his head, the magma swirl dissipated.

Thank you, Magnus thought. Thank you.

It hit him – it hit him all at once, a plan so comprehensive and fully formed he might have spent days planning it out. He had a way to save the company, and sweep this project under the rug.

“Colding gave her a shot of something,” Magnus said. “She’s in her room, out cold.”

Danté nodded. He looked relieved to hear that Jian was okay.

“So that’s it, right?” Magnus said. “We’ve got to scrap it, right?”

Danté rose up in his chair again, the electric gleam back in his eyes. “We can’t stop, Magnus.”

Even though he had figured Danté might want to keep going, his brother’s response still enraged him. Magnus balled up his fist and slammed it down on the desktop.

“Big brother, you’d better pull your head out of your ass and do it quick. It’s over. Don’t you get it? She called the CIA. They know she works for us. They’re looking for us, looking *hard*, and they’ll come for blood. We’re on U.S. soil this time – they can bring as many guns as they like.”

“Magnus, we *can’t* quit.” Danté leaned in towards the camera until his face filled up the screen. “We’re so close! Once the ancestors are born, we’re out of the woods. We can make an announcement that we’re close to solving the organ shortage problem. The public and press won’t let anyone get in our way, not with so many people dying. The CIA and the FDA and the CDC won’t be able to get in our way and the stock price will

go through the roof!"

"You're out of your mind, Danté! We won't have the time. The CIA could be here tomorrow."

"And they could also be there in three months. It's a chance we have to take."

"Danté, listen to me. On top of the CIA, there are the animals themselves. Jian and Overgard, and even Rhumkorrf, say we'll have a large predator on our hands in less than two weeks. I want to move the lab to Manitoba. Have your crews start building some first-class facilities that can hold something the size of a tiger."

"We're not moving the lab. Not at this point. We can't risk losing even a single fetus."

Magnus spoke in a low, cold voice. "I'm moving the lab. This island is too hot. The bitch called the fucking CIA, you idiot."

"No! We're *not* moving!"

"We have to move! We have –"

"No!" Danté's nostrils flared and his eyes were a spot of brown surrounded by bloodshot white. "We're not moving and that's final! I'm in charge here, Magnus, do you hear me?"

Magnus fought to calm himself. His brother was going to destroy the company. "We're moving the lab, brother," Magnus said. "I'm here and I'm making the call."

Danté's eyes widened even further, then he sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. Magnus could once again see Danté's head and chest, as opposed to the extreme closeup of his face.

"Okay, let's think this out," Danté said. "There's a major blizzard coming across Lake Superior tonight. The fringes of it are probably hitting the island right now. Our weather report says that's going to last the better part of two days, and there's another storm right behind it. These are big storms, Magnus. No one is going to fly in them, including the CIA. I'll be there as soon as the second storm fades a bit, and we'll talk this out, okay?"

Magnus smiled, and wondered if his smile looked as fake as his brother's. "How big of a storm?"

Danté reached for his keyboard and punched a few keys. The picture changed from Danté to a weather map of Michigan. The land was brown, the water was blue, and the two-fisted storm was an angry green mass hanging like a shroud over the northern shore of Lake Superior. Magnus let out a low whistle – the storm was half the size of the entire Upper Peninsula.

The picture switched back to Danté's face.

"Almost hurricane class winds," he said. "Nobody will fly in that, and any boat will be a death trap. Even if the CIA knew about us *right now*, they couldn't get to you. Just give me four days, brother. I'll find another spot for the C-5 to fly if, and I mean *if*, we decide to move."

Magnus nodded. "Four days? I think I can manage that."

"What are you going to do with Jian?"

Magnus shrugged. "Keep her sedated, what else can we do? I'll have to keep an eye

on Colding, though. Seems he's having some issues with Sara. Lover's spat kind of a thing. He seems pretty pissed."

"Colding?" Danté's face wrinkled slightly in disbelief. "Colding is pissed? I thought nothing phased him."

"Turns out your fair-haired American spy is diddling your hot American pilot."

Danté sat back. "Colding and Sara? Fraternizing?"

"That's one way to put it. 'Fucking' is another. Turns out Sara Purinam is quite a little slut. She's also banging Andy and some of the guys in her crew."

Danté shook his head. "She always struck me as classy and professional – I would have never figured her for that type."

"Well, neither did Colding. He started nailing her and fell in love, the idiot. Then he walked in on Sara in a three-way with Andy and one of the guys in her crew."

"Oh, come on," Danté said, eyes narrowing in doubt. "A menage a trios? With *Andy Crosthwaite*, of all people?"

Magnus shrugged. "Takes all kinds, brother. She hit on me, too, but you know all that American pussy is diseased, the whores will fuck anything."

"So what did Colding do?"

"He flipped. Punched Andy right in the eye. I had to break it up before Andy killed him."

"Is he still pissed?"

"Furious."

Danté looked away, and drummed his fingers on his desktop, *badababap, badababap*. "Colding may seem like a nice guy, but deep down, he's a dangerous man. Do you think he'll do anything else?"

"I don't think so," Magnus said. "I had a heart-to-heart with him. He knows he acts up again, I'll ship his ass off the island, he'll lose all his stock options, everything."

Danté laughed. "Like Colding gives a crap about the money. But if he thinks you'll pull him from the project, he'll toe the line."

"I'll make sure that he does. Don't worry though, I'll handle it. See you in four days."

"Yes, let me know if you need –"

Magnus disconnected before Danté could finish his sentence. Danté would come in four days, all right, and when he did he'd try to get Magnus off the island. Danté Paglione never capitulated that fast, never. He was lying, that much was plain to see.

"Four days? Brother dear, you'll be lucky if I wait four *hours*."

Magnus typed at the keys, accessing the password program. He didn't want Colding making any calls in the next few days. Magnus planned to make this whole ridiculous project go away, and PJ Colding would take the fall.

•••

Sara sat in the lounge, relaxing in a deep chair with an old leather-bound copy of Jack London's *White Fang*. She liked the book, but her eyes merely grazed over the words, marking the brief intervals between long looks out the window towards the angry water and the ice-covered rocks. Thick white clouds filled the sky from end to end and top to

bottom, diffusing light from the hidden afternoon sun, filling the air with a lazy glow.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, Colding walked into the lounge.

Her face lit up, but she saw no smile from him this time. He looked dirty, rumpled and chilled to the bone. His pants were soaked around the legs and streaked with dark, crumbly dirt – a sure sign of someone doing messy outdoor work in the snow and cold. He walked straight toward her and stood, looking down. She'd never seen such an expression on his face: a look of anger and concentration and fear all mashed up into one.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

She didn't answer for a second. "White Fang," she said finally, looking into his eyes and asking him *what's wrong?* without saying as many words. "It's a Jack London book."

"Jack London?" Colding held his hand out for the book, and she gave it to him. "You are a real-life Jack London type, I guess. I read *The Sea Wolf* in high school. The book changed my life." He flipped it over in his hands, casually glancing over the back cover, and handed it back to her. She took it, patiently waiting for some sign from him as to what this was all about.

"Well, enjoy your day," Colding said, and walked away without another word, leaving Sara wondering what was going on.

She set the book in her lap, and her finger brushed a piece of paper sticking out of the top of the book. A piece of paper that hadn't been there a second ago. She hadn't seen him put anything in the book, and her face had been only inches from his hands.

Sara casually opened the book and pretended to read. She let the pages flip to where he'd inserted the note. It was folded in half, the edge slipped all the way back into the spine, so that when she hit that page, the small, pencil-scrawled note seemed to open by itself.

```
magus killed jian. i just buried her. we're in a lot
of trouble. act normal. we may have to make a move very
soon. be read to do what i tell you wihout hesitation.
your life depends on it. eat this note right away.
```

Sara felt the cold hand of fear close on her chest. Jian dead? Eat the note? Was this some kind of a gag? She'd only known Colding for a few weeks, but he certainly wouldn't joke about something like Jian being murdered. She simultaneously felt disbelief and a sense of grief – somehow, she knew Colding was telling the truth, and that her friend Jian was dead.

As casually as she could, Sara crumpled the note. It was hard not to look up at the cameras, one mounted in each corner of the room. She brought her hand to her mouth and coughed. Mouth filled with the taste of paper, she coughed a few more times, the hand in front of her mouth hiding her furious chewing. She swallowed.

Sara felt a sudden urge to run a full check on the C-5 and make sure everything was shipshape. If she had to move quickly, she didn't want any unexpected trouble from the plane. Sara put the book down and calmly started towards Alonzo's room.



She decided not to tell her crew about Jian's murder. Colding had passed her a note instead of telling her out loud, and there must have been a reason for that. There were cameras everywhere in the mansion, and in the C-5 as well. If she talked about the situation, Andy or Magnus might find out, and then it could be 'adios muchachos.' Telling her crew would only put them in more danger.

Sara, Alonzo, Cappy and Miller trudged through the snow, entered the hanger and walked towards the open rear loading ramp.

"Good God, boss," Alonzo gripped. "I thought we parted ways with this surprise inspection stuff after we left the Air Force."

"Quit your bitching, Zo," Sara said. "Just get it done."

"Yeah, just get it done, you cry-ass," Miller said.

"Like you've got anything better to do on this island," Cappy added.

Alonzo flipped them off as they walked up the ramp.

Once inside, Sara stopped to give her instructions. "Miller, Cappy, Overgard wants the cows to move around, so get them out of the plane and into that pasture. It's snowy, but she said that's fine. But check the cows first, start with the IVs. Overgard is very adamant that we find any clogged needles right away."

"Hey, relax" Cappy said. "We just checked them an hour ago."

"Yeah, we checked them an hour ago," Miller said. "We're only sleeping in two-hour shifts as it is. Cappy and I take turns checking them all night long."

"Just do what I tell you!" Sara snapped. "Do you assholes have to question everything I say? And make sure the flight harnesses are ready for each cow, in case we head out in bad weather."

The permanent smiles of Miller and Cappy faded away, replaced by hurt expressions.

"Yavoll," Cappy said, and snapped off a quick Nazi salute.

"Yeah, yavoll," Miller said. He and Cappy walked off and started checking the cows.

"Boss," Alonzo said quietly. "You all right?"

Sara ran a hand through her short hair and let out a long breath. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just go do the checklist for the lab, okay?"

Alonzo nodded and moved to the rear ladder. Sara would run the cockpit check herself. She moved through the barn, walking past the cows, suddenly very annoyed with the ever-present smell of cattle and the stink of cow shit.

She climbed the front ladder into the cockpit. She reached the top and turned – her breath caught in her throat at the sight of Magnus. He smiled at her. Sara's heart beat double-time and adrenaline surged through her body; she was trapped in the cockpit with a killer. A huge, powerful, well-trained killer.

"Are you okay, Sara?" Magnus asked. "You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"You scared the piss out of me. What are you doing in here?"

Magnus shrugged. "Just checking out the plane, making sure everything was in good shape. You don't mind if your boss checks up on you, do you, Sara?"

She forced a smile. "No, of course not, sir."

"What do you think of the weather?" Magnus asked nonchalantly, returning her smile. Sara felt sweat trickling down her armpits. Maybe he'd decided she knew too much, maybe he was here to kill her, just like he'd killed Jian.

"Big storm coming. Go look outside. Those clouds are coming straight for us, driven by forty-mile-per-hour winds."

Magnus nodded. "Uh-huh. Forty miles per hour, eh? I'll bet that would be a bitch to fly in."

Sara nodded, perhaps a little too enthusiastically, grateful to have an actual subject to discuss. "Hell, yes. Taking the C-5 up in that would be stupid."

"But you could do it," Magnus said. He stared at her, his smile gone. His 6-foot-8 frame towered over her. This close to him, all alone, she felt like a small child. No, not a child, like an insect.

"You could do it, couldn't you, hot shot? You could fly this beast in that storm."

Her voice came out small and thin. "I ... yeah ... we could do it. You know, in an emergency, I suppose."

Magnus smiled. "Well, consider this an emergency."

"Excuse me?"

"You're bugging out tonight, sweet cheeks. Get your crew together and prep the C-5 for flight."

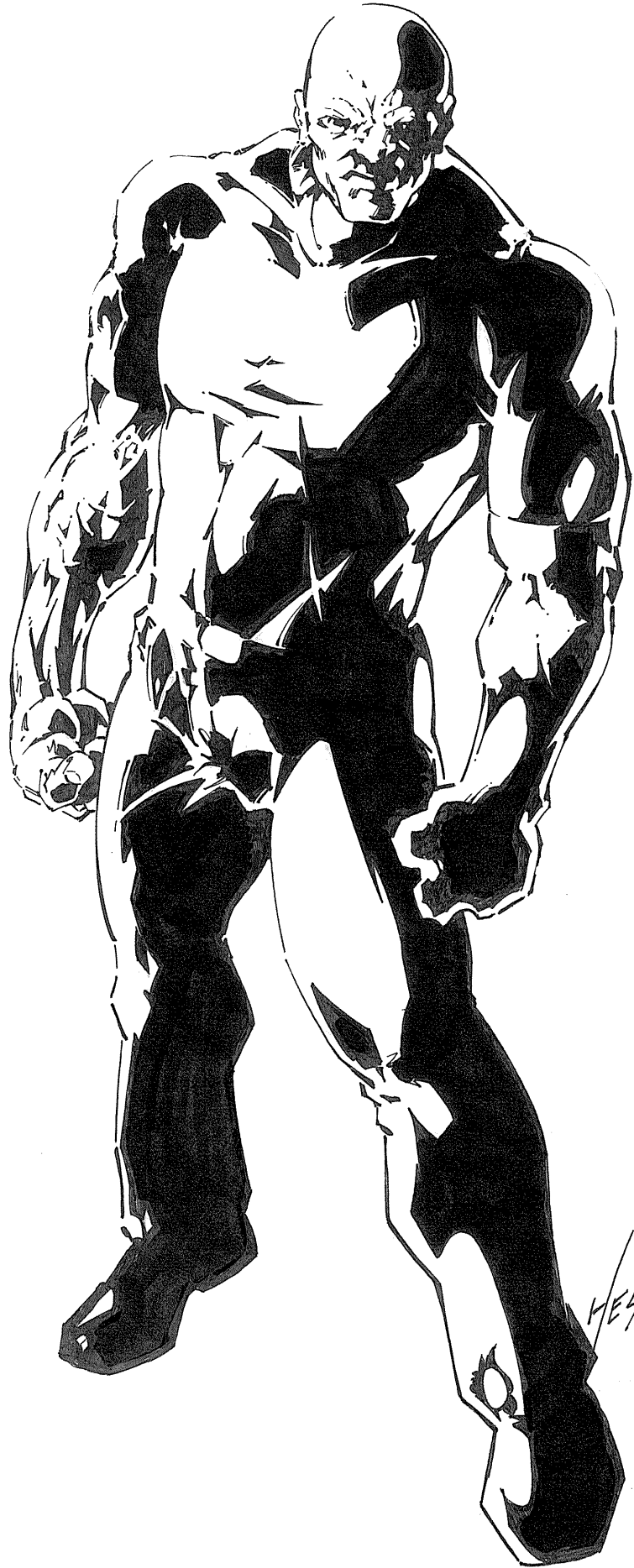
Sara stared up at him, fear slowly eroding in the face of swelling anger.

"You can't be serious, Magnus. I wasn't yanking your chain about that storm. Flying in that is nuts."

"I'm serious, too," Magnus said. He leaned down, and Sara couldn't help but flinch a little as his scarred face, with its odd violet eyes, stopped only inches from hers. She smelled Yukon Jack on his breath. "I'm dead serious, cupcake. I want you flying off of this island by twenty-thirty hours. Not a second later, you got it?"

He nodded once with the flair of a Prussian officer snapping his boot heels together, then slipped past her and descended the ladder to the lower level.

Sara shivered. The storm was coming, but maybe it wouldn't be as bad as they predicted. Even if it were, it had to be better than being on the island.



HESTER

BOOK FOUR: THE FLIGHT OF THE C-5

November 30: 7:34 p.m.

“You two fuckers must be on crack to send us up in this weather.”

That was the voice of the woman Colding loved, loved with all his soul – the woman he might be sending to her death. Sara wore a black parka, a fur-lined hood covering all of her head save for her angelic face. She rode in the back of the Hummer; Magnus rode in the passenger seat.

“Just relax, sweet cheeks,” Magnus said. Magnus also wore a black parka, his face shrouded in the oversized hood.

Winter storms were bad enough on the coasts, but on an island dead smack in the middle of Lake Superior, it was another story altogether.

Wind seemed to shake the very island itself, the clenched fist of a roaring elemental god. The snow didn’t fall, really – it permeated. It was everywhere at once, blowing in all directions, including up. It came in sheets, in waves, only the beginning of a killing blizzard that had already cut visibility to a mere twenty yards.

The Hummer’s headlights poked opaque cones through the shimmering snow. Colding drove slowly, maneuvering cautiously for fear of hitting Miller or Cappy, who were scrambling to get everything loaded.

Or one of the precious cows, Colding thought. God forbid we hurt one of the damned cows.

Magnus fidgeted with irritation. His size made the Hummer look like a toy, as if his head might poke out the top like Dino in a Flintstone’s cartoon.

“Put some motion in the ocean, Colding,” Magnus said. “I haven’t got all fucking day.”

Hazy lights grew visible as the Hummer crept forward. The fact that he was only fifty yards away before he could make out the monstrous plane was a testament to the storm’s sheer power. As long as a football field, the C-5’s six-story-high tail faded off into the gray distance of the twilight storm. In the whipping haze the black plane’s dimensions looked even larger, almost otherworldly.

The wind’s demonic shriek even drowned out the idling giant jet engines. The C-5’s nose was raised high into the air, opening access to the front of the cargo bay. Cappy and Miller, all bundled up in their own black parkas, were leading cows up the open cargo ramp. Lights blared from the twenty-foot opening, a glowing cave that made a hazy, shivering corona against

God forbid we
hurt one of the
damned cows.

the falling show. It struck Colding as a giant mechanical monster, jaws agape, waiting to swallow Sara.

He stopped the Hummer a few yards from the C-5. They hurried out, skirted a cow being led into the plane, and scrambled up the front ramp, fighting the wind all the way. Once inside, they stepped into stall one – still empty – to escape the buffeting wind.

Most of the Plexiglas stalls held an extremely pregnant cow, each with an IV running into its shoulder, each munching away on a bin of feed. They seemed surprisingly calm. Their vacant expressions showed no awareness of the danger around them, of the gale-force winds that would soon shake the plane like a Martini mixer.

Sara pulled back her hood. Short blonde hair stuck up in all directions. Her hair looked much like it did after several hours of lovemaking. Colding felt another pang of guilt ripple through his heart.

Colding's black hair stood up as well, but at the moment he doubted Sara thought of him in sexual terms.

"This is a bucket of shit," Sara said. The cold cabin made her breath visible, but she was so angry it might as well have been the smoke of some internal dragon-fire. "I'm telling you it's insane to fly out in weather like this. We could lose the whole project, not to mention the collective asses of me and my crew."

Magnus smiled. "We wouldn't want anything to happen to your sweet ass, now would we?"

Sara looked at Colding. "You want to fill me in now? Why the hell am I flying the world's largest plane in a goddamn *blizzard*?"

"Danté's orders," Colding said. "We think Chapman could be on his way here as we speak."

She had to get that hint. He'd already told her Chapman was probably dead, yet the CIA agent was the impetus for this evac. He desperately wanted her and the others off the island, and Magnus was giving them that chance right now. Sara needed to stop complaining and get on with flying the hell out of there.

"Come on, guys, it's not like anyone is going to land here in this weather," Sara said. "Trust me on that. We can wait until the storm blows over."

Magnus's booming voice seemed to fill up the barn. "We're not waiting. Chapman could be here the minute the storm breaks. Or he could already be on the island – a boat could have landed any number of places without us knowing it."

"So where the hell am I supposed to fly this thing?"

Even in a thick parka with her hair a mess, she was beautiful. Colding hesitantly looked into her electric, light blue eyes, her intelligent eyes. Those eyes now shone with a need for some positive reinforcement, some sign that everything was okay, even though she knew he couldn't say anything in front of Magnus.

"You're heading to Genada headquarters in Manitoba," Colding said, handing her a map and a flight plan. "We have more security there. At least you'll be *off the island*." He prayed he wasn't being too obvious, but Sara wasn't helping the situation at all. This was his chance to get her safely away, as well as Rhumkorrf and Overgard and the rest

of the C-5 crew. Off Black Manitou, and away from Magnus.

“Right, and Chapman would never think to look for us at Genada *headquarters*,” Sara said with disgust. Colding couldn’t fault her for that, as it was the same argument he’d made when Magnus announced the plan. But Magnus was in charge, so illogical or not, it was off to Manitoba.

Sara looked at the map. “Don’t you two understand the danger of flying in this weather? I tell you I don’t like it.”

“Nobody said you had to fucking like it,” Colding snapped. “Just follow the goddamn orders and fly the fucking plane!”

Sara stared at Colding, looking like she’d been slapped. He instantly hated himself, but she had to shut up and *get off the island* before her complaints made Magnus change his mind.

“No problem,” she said meekly. “No problem at all.”

Magnus smiled, looking from Sara, to Colding, back to Sara again. “And remember – total radio silence. If Chapman is out there, we can’t tip our hand. No radio until you’re thirty miles from the home office. Got it?”

Sara nodded.

“Good,” Magnus said. “The worst of the storm has yet to hit the island. You’re flying southwest to get out of the storm as quickly as possible. From there you’ll circle north around the storm, then head to Manitoba. Now get ready to fly this pig out of here. Jian, Gunther, Colding, Andy and I are staying here for now. Colding, let’s go.” Sara looked uncomfortable at the mention of Jian’s name, but she said nothing.

Colding followed Magnus out of the cage and down the ramp. Sara’s safety, and the safety of the others, now rested squarely on her piloting skills.

Just have faith in her. If anyone can fly through that shit, she can.

He backed the Hummer out into the raging storm, his mind spinning, hunting for solutions but finding none.

November 30: 8:46 p.m.

A brutal down-draft swatted the giant 450,000 pound C-5 Galaxy like an insect. Sara’s stomach seemed to lurch into her chest as the plane dropped a hundred feet in the blink of an eye. She wondered – for the seventh time in the last fifteen minutes, by her count – if this was it. She pulled back on the yoke, fighting the hurricane-class winds. The gust abated as suddenly as it appeared, and she dragged the C-5 back to 5,000 feet.

Alonzo looked white as a sheet; a state that showed his nervousness considering his Hispanic complexion. His eyes flitted from instrument to instrument and back again, his head moving with such sharp, birdlike moments.

“This is fucking insane,” Alonzo said. “We’ve got to put this thing down, Sara.”

“And where the hell would you like to do that? We’re over the middle of Lake

Superior.”

“This storm is going to kill us.”

“We’re here and there’s nothing we can do about it now. Now quit your bitching and help me fly this beast.”

If she could take a step back in time, maybe she’d risk Magnus’s wrath as opposed to flying out into this storm. Was PJ’s note sincere? Was Jian really dead? Or was that just a trick to motivate her to fly out in this ridiculous weather? How could Peej do this to her? He loved her. He’d said so.

But men will say anything in bed, now won’t they?

But he was different. She knew it. He was different, dammit. He was The One. She’d known it from the first moment they touched. When she shook his hand back on Baffin Island, a tingly spark had shot up her arm – not a static spark, but something else, something that made her eyes go wide and her mind blank out, just for a second. That one touch, that first touch, made her *want* him. And when they’d kissed, well, that removed all doubt.

But he did more than kiss me. A lot more.

Yes, a lot more. It was the first time in her life she understood the term “making love.” She’d had sex plenty of times, God knows she wanted to forget just how many times, but she’d never felt like that before. And it wasn’t that tender Hollywood love-making garbage either; “before” and “after” were tender, but the “during” was passionate, intense, animalistic. It was the best sex she’d ever had. It was love.

If he loves me, why would he send me up in this?

He’d had no choice. Magnus had already killed Jian, which meant everyone else’s life probably wasn’t worth a plug nickel. If this were her one chance to get off the island, to get her crew to safety, she had to take it.

The plane lurched sideways, batted through the air like a tennis ball. Her thoughts snapped back to the task at hand, the rather important task of staying alive. Even though the cows were another deck down, she heard them mooing. The sound carried tangible terror. She shared the sentiment, wondering at the power of a storm that could knock the C-5 around with such ease.

“What’s the wind reading, Zo?”

Alonzo snapped a peek at the instrument panel. He looked back at her, eyes wide. “That last gust was sixty-two knots.” Sweat drenched his face, but he kept his hands firmly on the yoke, and his attention focused on the instruments. He was scared, damn scared, but he was doing his job.

“Just be cool, Zo. We’ll be fine.”

She turned back to the instruments. She didn’t bother looking out the window; there was nothing to see but snow and ice.

November 30: 8:52 p.m.

The C-5 dropped again, but only slightly this time. Compared to the roller-coaster

ride of the past thirty minutes, the drop was barely noticeable. Sara didn't want to count her chickens before they hatched, but it seemed they'd left behind the worst the storm had to offer.

"Wind is down to forty knots," Alonzo said. He looked better, relieved. They were now on the blizzard's edge. Winds remained fierce, but nothing the C-5 couldn't handle. The immediate danger seemed to be over.

"Looks like we made it," Sara said. "I'd better see how the civvies handled that mess. Keep on this heading for another five minutes to get us some distance from the storm, then circle north around it. See, Zo, I told you not to worry. Nothing to it, right?"

Zo smiled sheepishly. "Right, boss, nothing to it."

She grabbed the handset to the in-plane intercom. "Deck two, deck two; everything okay back there?"

Rhumkorrf's voice came back. "Are we quite finished with that tumultuous experience? I wouldn't exactly call that the friendly skies."

"You holding up okay, Doc?"

"I'm fine. I'm afraid I had some notable difficulty in retaining my preflight meal. I assume I am now free to mop about the cabin?"

Sara laughed. "Sure, Doc. Get yourself cleaned up. Don't worry about it – I almost blew chunks myself. How's Overgard?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know. She's with one of the cows now."

Sara cursed under her breath. "I told you two to stay put."

"Obviously I embraced your expert advice. But I'm afraid Overgard listens only to herself."

"Get cleaned up, Doc," Sara said, then reached down and punched a button for the lab's intercom.

"Doctor Overgard, are you okay?" No answer. "Doctor Overgard, please answer immediately." Again, no answer. Sara unbuckled her harness and slid out of the pilot's seat.

"Take over, Zo," she said, her voice thick with anger. "I've got to take care of this."

November 30, 8:55 p.m.

Coat in hand, Sara descended the ladder to find the barn a mess. Two or three cabinets had popped open during the flight. Debris littered the lab like scientific shrapnel: loose papers, sterile vacuum packs, broken test tubes and even a microscope that looked as beat up as a violent alcoholic's wife. Miller scurried about the area, picking up loose equipment and cleaning up in general.

The cows moaned and brayed, filling the lab bay with their pitiful sounds. Sound wasn't the only thing that escaped them – the lab smelled like a shithouse. Several of the cows had defecated during the flight. They were wide-eyed, froth covering their mouths and noses, glistening sweat covering their coats.

At the far end of the barn, Sara saw an open door at stall three. Cappy stood at the door, looking frustrated and confused. Sara ran to the cage. Claudette Overgard knelt inside, half her form hidden behind a prone cow. Blood seeped from the cow's ruptured stomach: a ragged, glistening tear ran from the udder almost to the sternum. A small, bloody, clawed foot hung limply from the tear. The cow's chest rose and fell in an arrhythmic pattern. A crack in the stall wall told the story – the crack was where the harness's anchor used to be. The rough flying jostled the cow so much that the anchor ripped free and the cow fell, its overly pregnant belly splitting from the severe impact. The heavy canvass harnesses unhooked automatically when the stall doors opened, but other than that, they were supposed to be tear-proof.

A sign, drawn in magic marker in Jian's scrawled handwriting, hung from the stall door. The sign said "Ms. Patty Melt." Sara felt a sharp pang of loss for her murdered friend.

Ms. Patty Melt's head lolled out the open Plexiglas door. Overgard was kneeling behind the cow's ample rear, her frazzled, shoulder-length silver hair hanging on the cow's black-and-white fur.

"What the hell are you doing out of your seat?" Sara demanded.

Overgard looked up quickly, then returned her attention to the cow. She was preparing a syringe. When she spoke, her French accent was thick with concentration and anger. "I am going to have to put this cow to sleep."

"I told her to get back in her seat," Cappy said. "But she wouldn't go, obviously. I ... I didn't want to, um, force the issue, considering the cow is hurt and all."

Sara patted him on the arm, a way of wordlessly saying, 'it's okay.'

"Overgard, you could have been hurt, or even killed," Sara said. "I ordered you to stay in your seat until I flew us out of that storm."

"It's *Doctor* Overgard. And you call that flying? You incompetent imbecile. Your lack of skill cost us a cow."

Sara felt her temper rising. "Incompetent? Lack of skill? Do you have any idea how close we came to crashing?"

"I have no doubt it was quite close, considering the pilot. I can't believe Danté would let you drive a garbage truck, let alone a priceless plane."

Sara took a deep breath. "It takes a great deal of skill to fly this plane, doctor."

"You want skills? Bring a species back from extinction now *that's* skill – a monkey could be trained to push the same buttons you push, you idiot!"

"Listen here, you pompous –"

"I don't have time for this!" Overgard snapped. "You've already done enough damage. Now let me work!"

Sara watched Overgard finish filling the syringe. The older woman put the bottle in her pocket and flicked the syringe a few times, then gave the plunger a test push. Liquid shot out the needle.

"What is that?" Sara asked.

"Enough to do the job," Overgard said. "One of you, clean up this blood."

Cappy looked at Sara. She tilted her head towards the cage. Cappy ran and grabbed

a blanket, then squeezed into the cell and started mopping up the pooled blood.

Overgard wedged herself between the cow and the stall wall. She slid the syringe into Patty Melt's neck. She pushed the plunger all the way in. Cappy dabbed at the cow's open wound, trying to stop up the spilling blood. The cow's twitching slowed, then stopped.

Sara watched Overgard. She wasn't moving. She just stared at the cow. She seemed to be holding her breath. Finally, after a few seconds, Overgard let out a long breath, and looked very relieved.

"Well, that takes care of that," Overgard said. "I was getting very worried there for a –"

Her words were cut off as the cow lurched to life with a kick and an ear-splitting bellow. In the same instant, a bloody, skinless *thing* slid out of the cow's ruptured stomach, a thing the size of a Rottweiler. Sara saw a flash of wet red, then its mouth opened, a triangular mouth as long as a crocodile's but much wider at the base. In a fraction of a second, the jaws opened and long white teeth bit down on Cappy's left arm. The sound of snapping bones joined the cow's bellows, as did Cappy's agonized scream.

Within the tiny cage, the fifteen-hundred-pound cow thrashed about in a bellowing panic. Overgard dove to the back of the cage, just in time to avoid being crushed as the cow rolled against the Plexiglas wall. Overgard tried to stand, but a kicking hoof hit her in the stomach and she doubled over. Another hoof grazed her head – she fell, blood instantly pouring from her scalp.

Sara drew her Beretta and fired at the cow's head: once, twice, three times. The first bullet removed most of the lower jaw in a spray of blood and splintering bone. The second bullet missed the thrashing head, instead ripping through the floor. The third bullet turned the cow's eye into a black hole of negative space.

The cow convulsed, legs and hooves twitching violently. It made a strange hissing noise, a noise Sara would never forget despite the horrors that were to follow in the coming days.

Sara planted her foot on the cow's neck and leaned in with all her weight. She put the barrel in the cow's ear and pulled the trigger once more. The cow stopped bellowing, but Cappy didn't.

His face contorted in agony, he punched madly with his right fist, raining blows down on the bloody creature locked on his arm.

"It won't let go!" Cappy screamed. He lurched to his left, rolling into the aisle, dragging the jaw-locked monstrosity with him. Sara reflexively jumped back a step,

instinct screaming at her to stay away from the thing.

Suddenly Miller was there, jumping on the bloody creature. He wrapped his arms

The thing fell limp, its dead jaws opening just enough for Cappy to pull out his ravaged arm.

around the twitching abomination.

“Sara shoot it!” Miller screamed.

Sara put the barrel against the thing’s head, so the bullet wouldn’t hit Cappy’s arm, and she pulled the trigger. The bullet ripped into the slimy, bloody head, tearing a baseball-sized chunk out of the skull.

The thing fell limp, its dead jaws opening just enough for Cappy to pull out his ravaged arm.

The remaining cows lurched and bucked, seemingly on the edge of insanity. Sara turned back to the cage. Sara saw Rhumkorrf in the veterinary area, holding tight to the edge of the lab table.

“Help ... me,” called Cappy in a weak voice.

Miller dropped to his knees to examine his friend’s wound. Sara rose and stood at the stall door, looking in at the carnage – two wounded people, a huge cow, a Rotweiler-sized dead thing, and more blood than a slaughterhouse.

“How is it?” Sara asked.

Miller moved so Sara could see Cappy’s arm. She covered her mouth to hide her gasp of dread – the monster’s teeth had broken his radius and ulna in several places. Blood poured from the wound, spilling on his lap and on the floor, where it mixed with the blood of the dead cow. His hand wobbled sickly each time Miller moved it. It looked like a few strands of muscle were the only things keeping the arm attached.

“We need help, fast,” Miller said. He looked at the bloody fetal corpse. “Sara, what the hell is that thing? ‘Cause it sure as fuck ain’t no cow!”

“I don’t care *what* it is, as long as it’s dead,” Sara said. She rushed to an intercom panel and punched the “cockpit” button. “Alonzo, call Manitoba right away,” Sara said. “We need an alternate landing site.”

The speaker crackled with Alonzo’s voice. “But we’re supposed to keep strict radio silence. Magnus will freak.”

“Cappy’s hurt bad,” Sara said. “Get them on the line and tell them we need a landing site with medical facilities, and we need it now. If they can’t find us one, tell them we’re heading for Houghton-Hancock.”

“Got it.”

Sara sprinted back to stall three. The creature was still lying in the aisle, blood spreading out from it in a slowly expanding puddle. It seemed to have no skin, just exposed muscles coated with mucus. Its head looked almost as large as the rest of the body, and it had a strange growth coming out of the back of the skull, like a single antelope horn. Only it wasn’t bone; it looked flexible. Skin ran from the growth down to the bloody creature’s back.

Sara realized it wasn’t the gunshots, but rather the fetus that was driving the cows insane. They lurched at their harnesses, jumping and kicking with a desperation Sara had never seen. They were trying to get away from the fetus, from the dead creature lying on the cold floor. One cow managed to rip free of its harness and started slamming itself against the Plexiglas cage, *wham, wham, WHAM*. Snot and spit smeared the clear

surface with each frantic lurch.

Standing over it, she could see why Ms. Patty Melt had kicked that way despite the poison coursing through her veins. The creature's little arms, still folded against its body, ended in needle-claws, each at least six inches long.

It didn't want to die, Sara thought. It felt the poison, somehow, and it tried to get away. Rhumkorrff sprinted down the aisle, ignoring the braying cows. Sara started to tell him Overgard was in stall three, but Rhumkorrff slid to a stop and knelt in blood, next to the creature.

"Oh my Lord, they're growing faster," he said quietly.

Miller tugged on Sara's sleeve. "Boss, help me get him up to the infirmary." He turned to look at his friend. "Cappy, I'm going to move your arm onto your chest. I know it hurts, but you need to hold tight with your other hand, okay? Keep pressure on it, okay?"

Cappy nodded weakly, the pain scrunching his face into a lock-jawed grimace.

Sara wedged her way into the stall and lifted Cappy's legs. Miller held him by his armpits.

"Is it safe to move him?" Sara asked.

"We don't have a choice. I've got to stop the bleeding right away."

She grunted as they carried Cappy out of the stall. Overgard was still lying in there, bleeding from the head.

"Rhumkorrff!" Sara shouted.

He didn't answer. He seemed mesmerized by the bloody thing with the needle claws. She reached out and kicked him in the ass. He turned to look up at her, his Buddy Holly glasses magnifying his brown eyes to bug-like proportions.

"Get that thing out of here and then take a look at Overgard," Sara said. "Now move, dammit!"

Rhumkorrff looked around, as if seeing only now that 40,000 pounds of panicked beef-on-the-hoof threatened to tear the lab – and the C-5 – apart.

"This is most unusual," he said.

"Well do something, dammit! If they get out of the cages I have to shoot them before they damage the plane!"

Rhumkorrff looked around again, his bug eyes as wide as the dead cow's had been during the premature birth. He took off his parka and used it to scoop up the fetus, wrapped his arms protectively around the bundle and carried it awkwardly up the ladder to the second deck.

Almost as soon as he disappeared from sight, the cows stopped. They didn't tone down, they didn't slowly return to normal, they just plain *stopped*, as motionless as if they'd never freaked out at all. The barn was silent save for the hum of the C-5's jet engines.

"Come on, Sara!" Miller said. "We've got to move!"

She turned her attention to the task at hand. They carried their wounded friend toward the fore ladder, so they could take him up to the tiny infirmary.

November 30, 8:59 p.m.

They laid Cappy down on the bunk. Blood covered his chest, and trailed all the way back to the ladder and into the barn, like some twisted version of Hansel & Gretel.

"This fucking *hurts*," he said through clenched teeth.

"Just hold tight, buddy," Miller said as he pulled gauze and an air splint from a cabinet. "You'll be okay." He looked up at Sara. "Boss, how are we doing on another landing site? We can't wait to reach Manitoba."

"Let me check," Sara said, and she slid out of the medical bay, shutting the door behind her. There was an intercom in medical, but if the news was bad, she didn't want Cappy to hear it. She started to work her way up to the cockpit when she realized she smelled smoke.

She felt the rush of yet another adrenaline surge, and a spike of panic as well. Smoke coming from the cockpit. She sprinted to the door and wrenched it open. Thin smoke hung in the air, expanding the hazy glow of the multicolored control lights.

"Zo, you okay?"

Alonzo turned in his seat to look at her. His face looked pale and stricken again. "The radio is out. As soon as I tried to transmit I heard a pop. The radio is gone, but whatever it was it was small. There's no fire, just a little smoke."

Then it hit her. Hit her with all the force of a wrecking ball punching through crumbly old brick.

"Oh, fuck," she said quietly.

She tried to remember where she'd seen Magnus. She ran out of the cockpit towards the relief crew seating compartment. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. She checked under the eight relief crew chairs – nothing. She looked in the head, lifting the seat, looking under the tiny wash basin – nothing.

Please, please, please, let me be wrong.

Then her eyes fell on the escape slide stowage bin. A small door, down on the floor, right next to the service/emergency door. Sara felt a tingling on her scalp as she ran to the door, yanked it open and looked inside.

There, wedged in next to the compressed escape slide, was more plastic explosive than she'd ever seen in her life.

November 30, 9:03 p.m.

Sara started at the plastique.

And at the timer that read 17:01 ... 17:00 ... 16:59 ... 16:58

Calm down calm down keep it cool if you don't think clear you die.

Everything finally made sense. They weren't sending the C-5 to Manitoba; they were sending it to the bottom of Lake Superior. By the time the storm blew over, there would no trace of the C-5, the scientists, or the cows – the wreckage would be under a

thousand feet of water. She couldn't even bail out. In this storm she'd parachute into the icy water and die of hypothermia. Even if they managed to get a raft into the water, they'd be up against twenty-foot swells and seventy-knot winds. SOS or no SOS, no one would reach them in time.

She took a deep breath and battled against the panic. There had to be a way out. Sara synchronized her watch with the bomb – at 9:19 p.m., the plastique would rip the C-5 to shreds. She didn't know anything about defusing a bomb, and neither did her crew. The plastique had a lot of wires. If Magnus had gone through the trouble of putting the bomb on the plane, logic dictated he'd also set it up to blow if anyone screwed with it. She could start pulling wires, but that was only a desperate last option.

She sprinted to the cockpit, where she grabbed a flight map and threw it down on the small table in the navigator's section.

"Zo, where are we?"

"About forty-five miles due south of Patterson Island," Zo said. "About a hundred miles northwest of Houghton-Hancock."

"We're not going to make it to Houghton-Hancock. There's a bomb on board."

Alonzo quickly set the autopilot and scrambled out of his seat to join Sara.

"A bomb? What the fuck do you mean?"

"I mean this plane is going to blow up," Sara said calmly. She didn't want to be calm. She wanted to sit in the corner and cry, but that would get her killed. The only way to stay alive was to keep it cool.

"Who put a bomb onboard?"

"It had to be Magnus. I saw him in here a few hours before takeoff."

"So what the fuck do we do?"

Sara checked her watch: 9:05 p.m. They had fourteen minutes. They couldn't reach Houghton-Hancock. They couldn't even reach Schreiber, fifty-five miles north. They couldn't reach anything.

Almost anything ... there was one place they *could* reach.

"We've got one chance," Sara said. "Turn to a heading of 184 degrees, then gun it, full throttle."

"But that will put us back in the storm," Alonzo said, hysteria starting to crack at his voice. "Where the hell are we going?"

"Back to the island."

Alonzo's jaw dropped. "Back to the island? Isn't someone on the island trying to kill us? I'm not taking this fucking plane back there."

Sara's composure finally disintegrated under the endless stress barrage. She reached out with her right hand and grabbed the collar of Alonzo's parka. Rage and frustration cut deep lines across her face.

"We don't have a choice! Look at the goddamn map. Either we go back, or we die! We can't get anywhere else before the bomb blows up."

"But they're trying to kill us - "

Sara's left hand joined her right in grasping Alonzo's collar. She shook her fists with

each word, jerking the slick, down-filled fabric.

"I... know ... *that!* Now listen, they only turn on the radar for takeoffs or landings, so it will be off when we go back. We'll set her down on the other end of the island, ten miles from the mansion and the landing strip. In this storm, with the wind howling, that's far enough. Now turn this plane around!"

She released his collar. He blinked a few times, a vacant look on his face, then he scrambled back to the pilot's chair.

"Coming to a heading of 184 degrees," he said. "It's done, we're heading back into the storm, back to the island. You mind telling me how we're going to land a 220-ton plane on the airstrip without anyone noticing?"

"We're not landing on the strip." Before he could ask where, she pointed to a spot on the map. "Rupleje Bay."

He took one look at the map, then looked up, a shocked expression on his face.

"But that's barely two-hundred yards wide, and we don't even know how thick the ice is. How are we going to land there in this storm? We won't see the ground until we're less than a hundred feet from it."

"The GPS will put us on the bay. If we're lucky, we can land right on it – from what Clayton told us, the ice is at least five feet thick. We just have to hope it holds. The bomb should melt the ice and the plane will sink. By the time the storm's gone the bay will be frozen over again."

"Why the hell do we want it to sink? Who gives a shit where the damn thing explodes? Let's just get over land and bail out."

His voice seemed to grate at her spine, making her head hurt, making her shoulders involuntarily bunch up. She reached over and grabbed Alonzo by the back of his neck. She squeezed and emphasized each syllable with a shake. "I don't have time to explain! Follow my orders if you want to live!"

Sara let him go, then grabbed the navigator's intercom handset. She punched *Infirmary*.

"Miller, come in."

"Yes ma'am," Miller answered.

"How's Cappy?"

"I'm working on him," Miller said. "I'm out of my league here, boss, but I've stopped the bleeding. I've got the air-splint on it. I think he'll live, but only if we get him some help real soon."

"Listen close, I've only got time to say this once." Her voice was authority, her tone was command. She didn't for a second betray her fear. "There is a bomb aboard this plane. We're heading back to Black Manitou. That will take us back into the blizzard, but we're going to have to go full burn to reach land in time. We're going for an emergency landing on a frozen bay. Our chances are shitty, but it's the only option we have. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Good. When we hit the deck, we're going to have to move fast. Get Cappy ready to

go. Has Rhumkorrf brought Overgard up yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Okay, hold on, we’re in for some rough travel.”

She clicked off the intercom connection and headed for the ladder.

She tossed the handset aside and wrenched open the cabin door. She stopped long enough to look back at the terrified Alonzo.

“You get yourself together, mister,” Sara said, her voice heavy with threat. “You’ve got six lives riding on your ability to get back to Black Manitou in under twelve minutes.” She gave him twelve minutes, assuming she could get everyone off the plane and away from the blast range in three. That was a hell of an assumption, but she didn’t have much choice.

She descended into the barn and sprinted for stall three. Rhumkorrf had found some surgical thread and was finishing up amateurish stitches on Overgard’s cut. The stitches looked clumsy, and she’d have a Frankensteinian scar on her forehead, but at least he’d stopped the bleeding.

“How is she, Doc?”

“I’m no medical expert, so I couldn’t venture a guess. I didn’t want to move her on account of the head wound. Will we be landing soon?”

“Yes, and it’s going to be a rough landing. We’re in a lot of trouble.”

He looked up. “What’s going on?”

“Magnus canceled the project, and us along with it. There’s a bomb on board that goes off in fifteen minutes.”

Rhumkorrf’s jaw dropped. “A bomb? That doesn’t make any sense. The Pagliones have invested millions in this project!”

“And now they’re cutting their losses. I don’t have time to discuss it. We’re headed for the nearest land, but we’re landing on a frozen bay in the middle of a blizzard. If we live through the landing, we evacuate, pronto. We’ll be exposed to the elements. You need to collect survival gear right now. It’s in the storage bins in the back, past the veterinary station.”

“Can’t we call for help when we land?”

Sara shook her head. “That’s not an option, and I don’t have time to explain.”

“But what about the cows?”

“Fuck the cows! Don’t you get it? There is no more project. Magnus wants all of this gone, and us with it! Now move your ass if you want to live!”

Rhumkorrf scrambled out of the stall, leaving Sara with the unconscious Claudette Overgard.

November 30: 9:12 p.m.

Rhumkorrf’s whine sounded like an impetuous third-grader rather than an esteemed geneticist. “But why? Why in God’s name would he wipe out the project? This is the

greatest scientific accomplishment of the century! We've finally done it, don't you understand that? We've succeeded!"

Sara was stuffing dehydrated food packages into a backpack. A jumbled pile of supplies sat on the floor. They'd be on Black Manitou. If they managed to live through the landing, they had to stay hidden. Magnus would obviously kill them all on sight. If they came down undetected, the island was plenty large enough to hide out indefinitely – but they'd have to survive in the woods in the middle of the winter for God knew how long. That meant cramming together as many supplies she could manage before Zo took her down.

Once they were on land, and safe, she could think of a way to take out Magnus. She didn't like their chances against him – and Andy, and Gunther, and maybe even Colding, for that matter – but at least some chance was better than none. And they'd have the element of surprise on their side. They didn't have time to wait, as Cappy wouldn't last long in this weather. They had to get him to the mansion, and to do that, they had to take out Magnus and everyone else.

What about Peej? Is he on our side, or theirs?

She shook away the thought. For all she knew, Peej had sent them up with full knowledge the bomb would kill them all. She loved him, and thought he loved her, but he worked for Genada, and his ass wasn't on the plane. He might very well be part of the plot to destroy the C-5. Her first responsibility was to her crew – they came before Colding.

Sara knew the severity of Cappy's injury, and she didn't think he'd survive much past the crash landing. She hated to face reality, but as a commander that was her job. If Cappy didn't make it, there was no reason to take on Magnus and the others – they needed to have enough supplies to hide out for a week or so, until they could figure out a way to get some help.

The plane lurched badly and the supplies skidded about, rolling against the curved walls or sliding back into the barn. Rhumkorrf chased the supplies, trying to contain Sara's hastily chosen items.

The cows were bellowing again, the tumultuous motion of the violent storm pulling them against the harnesses that kept their big bodies from being tossed about. They looked panicky, their eyes wide, froth covering their mouths, and yet it was nothing compared to the wave of terror that had washed over them when the bloody fetus slid into the aisle.

Sara had set aside a compact tent, vacuum-packed blankets and MREs. Time shot by like a supersonic rocket. She checked her watch just as the digital number changed to 9:13 p.m. – six minutes to live.

"They can't do this," Rhumkorrf said. "They can't cancel my project, I simply won't allow it."

"Shut up, dammit. It's over, Doc, just deal with it. There's a duffel bag in that cabinet over there, get it."

She zipped up the bulging backpack. There wasn't enough time for more food. Sara

stood and tried to keep her balance as she stumbled for the intercom. The plane bucked to starboard and she fell hard on her knee. She bounced right back up and grabbed the handset, her knee echoing with dull pain.

"Zo, how close are we?"

"We're descending now."

"How long?"

"Less than two minutes."

Sara was about to say she was on her way up when she realized that Overgard was still in stall three. She had to get the unconscious woman strapped in.

"You'll have to do it on your own," Sara said. "Make it count."

"Roger," Alonzo said, his voice calm despite his fear.

They were already too low to bail out, and even if they did jump, odds were the storm would foul the parachutes and they'd drop like rocks. Bailing out held a zero chance for survival. They either landed on the bay, or they died.

"Rhumkorrf, take that crash seat over there, strap yourself in tight."

The plane simultaneously lurched to port and dropped hard. Sara was weightless for a second, then slammed into the floor, her head smacking against one of the stalls. Dull pain filled her head like an alcoholic buzz. She couldn't focus. Sara blinked a few times and tried to stand.

She heard someone calling her name. Rhumkorrf. Sara shook her head, her thoughts slowly coming back into focus.

"Sara!" Rhumkorrf called from his crash seat. "Get buckled in!"

"Twenty seconds," Alonzo said over the intercom.

She'd lost precious time. Sara stumbled to Overgard. The woman was still unconscious. Sara clambered over the dead cow and slid under Overgard's arm. She stood, dragging the older woman to her feet. She stumbled out of the stall and down the aisle towards the crash chairs.

Outside the wind howled hungrily, audible even through the C-5's steel hull. The sound mixed with the cries of four jet engines, creating a cacophony of nature's might battling against man-made power.

Sara threw Overgard into a crash seat and started strapping her in, fighting to keep her balance the whole time.

"Ten seconds."

The final strap clicked home. Sara fell into her own crash chair and scrambled for the straps.

"Five ... "

... you won't make it when the plane hits, you'll be thrown around, you'll die ...

"Four ... "

Keep it calm, just find the straps, buckle in ...

"Three ... "

... we'll crack right through the ice, we'll drown in freezing water ...

"Two ... "

Her hands found the buckles; the harness clicked shut.

“One ...”

... this is it, oh why didn't you save me, Colding, why why wh –

The free-fall elevator ride ended with a smashing jolt, jarring every atom of her body. She instantly knew they'd come in just a little too steep – the nose cone would be heavily damaged. It was one thing to pilot the plane to a near-impossible landing; it was quite another to be stuck in the cargo bay, blind to the plane's chances, waiting each second for the fuel tanks to catch or the plane to roll.

Five seconds passed, and she was still alive, surrounded by the dissonance of creaking metal grinding against ice. The jolts and bounces continued, throwing her against her harness, leaving bruises that would last for weeks, but after the first five seconds she knew they'd made it. Well, they'd landed, anyway – the Galaxy weighed in at 220 tons and was likely to break through the ice. The plane rumbled with complaint at such rough treatment, but it steadily slowed.

Ten seconds later it finally stopped. Sara snapped open her harness and checked her watch: 9:16 p.m. – three minutes to go. She ran to the back of the cargo area and slapped the button to lower the rear hatch. Hydraulic gears whined as the rear doors opened and the thick metal loading ramp began to descend. Wind-driven snow blew in immediately, so thick it was like a billowing gas. The gale howled, almost with delight, as if it had only been waiting for another chance to get at the people inside the huge plane. Sara turned away from the oncoming blizzard and grabbed the intercom.

“Zo, are you okay?”

There was a brief second of silence, in which Sara imagined her friend bloody and beaten in the damaged nose, where he'd die because there was no way she could get to them in time, and –

“I'm fine,” Zo answered, interrupting her near-panicked thoughts.

“Way to land this bitch, Zo! Help Miller get Cappy out of medical!”

Sara ran to Overgard and unbuckled the woman's harness. Overgard was still out – Sara would have to carry her out of the plane. Sara pulled Overgard out of the crash seat and gently put the woman over her shoulder in a fireman's carry.

She turned to help Rhumkorrf out of his harness, but his seat was empty. Heavy steps vibrated through the floor, and she looked up – a cow, huge and black-and-white and insane with wide-eyed panic, barreled down the bay towards her. She caught a split-second image of an all-black head with a white eye-spot. With a burst of strength that she didn't know she possessed, Sara threw Overgard onto the black lab table and hopped up behind her.

The cow rushed by, only inches from Sara, its hooves slamming on the rubberized deck. It seemed to realize it was headed the wrong way, towards the cockpit. The cow violently turned in the narrow aisle, cutting itself on one of the crash chairs. Blood spilled onto the black-and-white fur, and onto the floor, but the cow rushed for the open rear ramp.

Hurricane-force winds poured through the twenty-foot opening, filling the cargo bay

with billowing snow. Two more cows raged towards the ramp, towards freedom from the terror-filled plane. They pushed against each other in a struggle to get out. One cow's hoof fouled in the pile of supplies; it fell hard, the foreleg *snapping* like a gunshot. The creature bellowed in fear and pain, struggling to get up, to get out, but the broken leg wouldn't support its efforts.

Sara looked away from the cow, back into the barn in time to see Rhumkorrf press the "open" key to the stalls of "Droopy" and "Mrs. Mulronee." As soon as the stall doors opened, the cows' harnesses dropped limply to the floor. The animals wasted no time seizing their new-found freedom, bolting out of the narrow stalls and stampeding

"What the hell are you doing?" Sara shouted over the screeching wind and the braying cattle.

towards the night.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sara shouted over the screeching wind and the braying cattle.

But Rhumkorrf didn't answer. Wind blew his comb-over back and forth. He moved from stall to stall, opening the gates, letting loose the frantic cows.

Beyond them, towards the nose, she saw Zo and Miller descending the ladder, Cappy in tow. Even from almost two-hundred feet away, she could see extensive damage to the nose section – metal crumpled in like a head-on car wreck, dangling wires firing off sparks, lights flickering, threatening to leave them in the dark. The nose-cone would never open again.

Zo turned and said something to Miller. She couldn't hear it, but his body language said it all – the crash damaged the forward entry door. They'd have to find another way out. The men started moving down the hull towards the barn, towards the rear ramp ...

A panicked cow ran the wrong way, away from the open rear hatch. It slammed past the black lab table, almost knocking Sara and Overgard to the ground, and continued onwards, towards the three men. They scrambled back up the ladder just before the cow hit the dead end, huge body lurching and bucking. It turned, snot flying from its nose, and sprinted with the others towards the open ramp. She saw the men disappear into the upper deck, obviously headed for the service/emergency door.

Sara threw a glance at her watch: 9:18 p.m. How much of that last minute had already gone by? Five seconds? Ten? Time was up. Sara felt tears – hot and sudden and uncontrollable – run down her cheeks.

Her crew would never make it in time.

No time no time no time ...

Sara took a deep breath, hefted Overgard's weight, and stepped off the table and into the stampede. There seemed to be no end to the lurching, bellowing, black-and-white bodies. Later she'd marvel at the way she'd ran side by side with the heaving animals, as if she were running with the bulls at Pamplona, fighting to escape the doomed plane with a desperation no different than that of the cows themselves. Overgard was over her shoulder, the unbalanced passenger of a woman who flat-out refused to die.

No time no time no time ...

She felt her footing change as she moved from the rubberized floor to the ramp's echoing steel, then the sinking, quicksand feeling of three-foot-deep snow. Sheets of white soared up and around her, swirling about her, finding ways into her eyes and mouth, but she kept moving.

How much longer, how many seconds, I'm not going to make it ...

The night's starless darkness closed around her. She didn't feel the cold, she didn't feel the cows knocking her from side to side, she didn't hear their bellowing. She only moved, moved away from the plane, away from death, towards life.

We're going to die anyway any second now any –

She didn't hear the explosion. A shock wave picked her up and tossed her twenty feet. Blast-furnace heat scorched her as she hit hard and skidded over the snow-covered ice.

... get up, keep moving, fuel is going to blow

Adrenaline raged through her body, powering her desperation. She rose to her feet and looked back. The blast had snapped the massive C-5 in two pieces, like some child's cheap plastic toy. Blinding flames shot thirty feet into the air, lighting up the stormy frozen bay, creating a half-sphere of light that made Sara feel like she was inside one of those Christmas globes where you shake it and watch the snowflakes fall.

Overgard was to her left, prone, motionless. Sara's crew was either dead or burning to death, and there wasn't a fucking thing she could do about it – she'd be damned if she'd let Overgard die as well. Everyone aboard that plane had been her responsibility; at least she could save one of them.

She knelt and shook Overgard's shoulder. No movement. Overgard looked even worse than she had on the plane. Sara pulled off a glove and checked the older woman's pulse: strong and steady. She put the glove back on and grunted as she lifted Overgard. The woman was a mere 110 pounds, but it was dead weight, and Sara only weighed 115 herself. She managed to get Overgard back up on her shoulders in the fireman's carry, then trudged through the thigh-high snow, heading away from the plane and hopefully towards shore.

Another explosion erupted behind her as the fuel tanks blew. She was farther away this time, and therefore spared the shock wave's crushing effects. She turned for one last look. Most of the plane burned, including the wings, lighting up the falling snow with an incendiary light. The C-5 seemed to twitch like a dying antelope under a lion's killing

bite. It took Sara a moment to realize why – the plane was falling through the ice. It went slowly, dropping a little bit at a time as the thick sheet beneath it melted. The tail went first, its weight finally too much for the thinning ice. There was a *crack* as the sheet gave way, then the groan of metal grinding against the frozen surface, then the hiss of that same red-hot metal sliding into freezing water. It looked like slow motion, but within seconds the tail was gone.

Sara stared, peering through the blinding snow, hoping to see a miracle, hoping to see one of her crewmen escape. They might have gotten out, might be on the other side of the plane. But she hadn't made it by much, and she'd been way ahead of them. They were dead.

A series of sudden cracks. The front of the massive, broken plane lurched as the ice gave way. It stayed up for a moment, held up by wings pressed flat against the ice, but they were covered with burning jet fuel as well. Sara stood, helpless, as the burning wings steadily melted their way down. Slowly, almost gracefully, the front half of the C-5 slid into the bay. The broken fuselage filled with water first, pulling the plane down. As it sank, the nose rode up like some huge beast struggling for a last gasp of air. Then it, too, slid beneath the water. It was as if some medieval magician had waved a magic wand – the C-5 had vanished. Only the tip of the tail stuck out, a final gravestone to her fallen friends. There was a last hissing sound as the glowing metal disappeared, then nothing but the sound of the blizzard.

No, there was one more sound – the faint call of a mooing cow.

Sara shivered, perhaps more from the impossibility of her situation than from the cold. She was in some deep shit. All the supplies went down with the C-5. She was carrying a severely wounded woman who had no survival training. They were back on an island where someone really, really wanted them dead. They had no blankets, no food, no protection against the blizzard save for the black parkas. And she couldn't even see the shore.

Animals have instincts that I don't ... the cows will find the shore.

The adrenaline was already wearing off. Her whole body ached from the blast and from running with the stampede. She was already exhausted and didn't know how much longer she could carry Overgard. But she had to get off the lake, had to find some shelter from the wind or die as assuredly as if she'd never gotten off the plane.

Sara adjusted the human burden on her shoulder, then leaned into the wind, following the cows' faint calls.

November 30: 9:27 p.m.

The cows huddled in a huge black-and-white cluster, with thick pine trees in and around them. The dense greenery of the pines helped block the wind, but not much. Snow continued to fly in great sheets – it was already so deep it melted against the cows' burgeoning bellies.

Sara leaned against a tree, shaking violently, trying to rub hands that the cold had turned into curled, brittle talons. The tips of her fingers stung badly. That was okay. As long as they stung, she was still okay. When they stopped stinging, when they went numb, that meant frostbite. Cold permeated her entire body, as if her skeleton was made from icy steel.

She'd never been this cold, and she knew she didn't have much time left. They had to find better shelter than a grove of pine trees. She guessed the temperature at twenty below zero, far beyond that with the wind chill.

Overgard lay in a heap on the ground, snow already drifting on and around her body. Sara had her doubts Overgard would live through the hour, let alone the night. With all the surrounding heavy-limbed pine trees, she could quickly construct a makeshift lean-to that would keep her alive, but would it be enough for Overgard? The older woman needed better shelter than that.

Sara pictured the island in her head. Rapleje Bay was close to North Pointe, and both were within a mile or so of Sven Ballantine's place. If she could reach it, she could save Overgard. But which way? Visibility was less than twenty feet. Sara had to find the place first, then come back for Overgard.

She found a huge pine tree with boughs so laden down by snow they touched the ground. Branches scraping her skin, Sara dragged Overgard underneath the tree. The snow-covered boughs made a sloping wall, creating a small cave. Sara used her ice-cold hands to break off dry, dead branches, clearing a space for Overgard to lie. It wasn't much, but it blocked the wind.

Sara felt an overwhelming urge to lie down next to Overgard and just sleep. It was decent shelter, maybe enough to let her live through the night, or so said her Air Force survival training. So easy, to just lie down ... exhaustion filled her body, as did pulsing pain from running amidst the stampede and suffering the explosion's concussion wave. She ached, she throbbed, and she wanted to collapse. It was almost cozy in the small space beneath the tree.

She looked at Overgard, lying prone amidst the pine needles, broken branches and dead twigs. Sara might make it through the night, probably would, but not Overgard. Sara breathed deeply through her nose, mustering her resolve. This woman's life depended on Sara venturing back into that storm. Sara nodded once, pulled her sleeves over her brittle hands, and gently pushed back through the limbs so as not to disturb the snow walls.

November 30: 9:38 p.m.

The storm seemed to have lost its edge – every five minutes or so the hurricane winds would die down briefly, only to pick up again. In those brief, seconds-long breaks, the blowing snow seemed to relax, improving visibility from about twenty feet to around a hundred.

Had it been daylight, she wouldn't have seen it at all, but as "luck" had it, it was pitch-black night: so dark that a light, even a small one, stood out like a beacon of hope.

Sara leaned on a tree at the wood's edge, eyes peering across an open field to see the light. With each lull in the wind, the light seemed to flicker like a faraway angel. She didn't have much strength left – if this light turned out to be nothing, she'd have no choice but to crawl under that tree and let nature decide Overgard's fate.

Sara pushed away from the tree and walked out into the field. Away from the woods, the snow quickly turned waist-deep. Unencumbered by trees, wind raged with gale-force intensity, battering at Sara, seemingly eager to knock her flat. Tears poured from her eyes to freeze on her face. She leaned into the wind and pushed forward, with each step the light becoming a little brighter, a little more steady.

She drew closer – that revealed a sight more beautiful than anything she'd ever seen.

A barn.

Sara turned and trudged back through her own waist-deep trail. At least now Overgard had a chance.



Five feet from the barn door, Sara's legs finally gave out. After a half-mile of carrying the limp Overgard on her shoulder, the last quarter mile through waist-deep snow, her body couldn't do it anymore. She fell face-first into a fluffy eight-foot snow bank, sculpted by wind whipping off the red barn. Overgard all but disappeared into the snow bank, powder puffing up and around and on her until only her feet stuck out.

Get your ass up, Purinam, Sara thought. You're almost there, don't quit now.

She didn't want to get up. Fuck it. So she'd freeze to death, so what? It was only a matter of time before Magnus came for her. Why not get it over with now? Because she wanted to *live*, that's why. And when Magnus did come, she'd fight him tooth and nail.

Sara picked herself up, too weak to brush the snow off her face, and stumbled to the barn door. She'd never felt so powerless, so drained. She pushed at the large sliding door with the tiny bit of strength left in her body, and managed to open it a couple of feet.

So tired, when will this be over?

She stepped inside, leaving the storm behind as she entered an oasis of calm.

How did they get in here? Sight blurry from the deadly wind, she saw perhaps two dozen cows laying peacefully in stalls full of hay. It was a barn, after all. She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. One more job to do, then she could pass out with a clear conscience.

She willed herself back into the storm, grabbed Overgard's feet, and pulled the woman free of the snow bank. Sara leaned backwards. Overgard's face dragged against the ground, but it was the best Sara could manage. Finally, after all that cold and pain and fatigue, she pulled Overgard into shelter. Sara put her weight against the barn door. The wind blew snow inside, almost as if it were some supernatural hand making one last grab for the meal that got away. The door shut, reducing the wind to nothing more than an exterior howl.

The barn wasn't warm, but it wasn't freezing. Sara heard the hum of a gas-powered generator. She looked around the huge barn and saw the orange glow of several portable heaters.

Safety.

She'd done it. With her last ounce of strength, Sara dragged Overgard in front of one of the big electric heaters, then collapsed.

Sleep came almost instantly.

November 31: 7:15 a.m.

The storm's fury had passed, but winds still whipped powdery snow across the island and smashed five-foot waves onto the ice-covered rocks. Colding stood on the sprawling porch, staring out at the water, staring north. Clayton Clayton was hard at work shoveling snow off the porch and salting the half-inch of ice that had accumulated during the night.

"That was one big storm, eh?"

Colding nodded. "Worst I've ever experienced. That shit happen all the time?"

"Yah, pretty regular. We get around 250 inches of snow in da winter. It snows a lot, but you don't get 250 inches a little bit at a time. Last night was bad, but I've seen worse, eh? We're in for worse yet even this year. You wait, you just wait, da *real* storms are still coming. You should have been here in '68. Coldest winter ever. So damn cold da mouth of da harbor froze over. We had to plant dynamite to break up da ice to get boats in, eh? That was da year Paul Newman got stuck snowshoeing about five miles from here. Paulie hurt his ankle, you know, and I had to carry him back in a storm that made last night's look like a spring breeze, eh?"

Clayton stopped shoveling, stood straight, and looked intently at Colding.

"You're worried about Sara, eh?"

Colding looked at the grizzled older man. Clayton may have been full of bullshit, but deep down he was a good guy. Colding nodded.

"When do you expect to hear back from them?"

Colding shrugged. "They should be back in Manitoba already."

The old man nodded. "Sure, fine, eh? But you listen to me. You need something, you let me know. I've seen a lot of shit come and go on this island, and something tells me we're in for a big dose of the stinky stuff, eh?"

Clayton shouldered his shovel and walked back inside the mansion, leaving Colding alone in the cold, alone with his thoughts.

November 31: 7:15 a.m.

It was as if she'd slept in a thick blanket of dull, throbbing pain. Every atom hurt,

pulsed, screamed or ached. She smelled of sweat and dirty hay, the odor combining with the unmistakable scent of cows and cow shit so that even her nose found something to complain about.

Sara pushed herself up on one elbow, her hangover-times-ten fighting her every step of the way. She wanted to sleep. Sleep for days, weeks, even, but she had to move. She looked at Overgard, and suddenly all the pain was worth it.

Overgard sat on her butt, hugging her knees to her chest, head down and eyes closed, swaying slightly.

“Doctor Overgard,” Sara croaked from a dry throat. “Are you okay?”

Overgard slowly lifted her head. A huge black and purple and green bruise covered the left side of her face, from her hairline down to her chin. Dried blood clotted the crudely-stitched cut on her forehead, flakes of that same blood marking paths down her face. Dark circles ringed both eyes, and streaks of tears made her cheeks glisten orange in light of the electric heater.

She didn’t look like a bitchy genius anymore. She looked like a scared woman. She spoke in a small voice. “Where are we? How did I get here?”

Sara took a deep breath, then gave Claudette the condensed version of Jian’s death, the bomb, the crash landing, and the struggle to reach shelter.

Claudette sat quiet for a moment. Fresh tears welled up in her eyes, silently trailing down her cheeks.

She spoke in a tiny voice. “What about Claus?”

It was the way she said it. Sara knew there had once been something between Claudette and Rhumkorrf, something real and deep.

“He’s dead,” Sara said. Her heart went out to Claudette, but this was no time for candy-coated sentiment. “He’s got to be dead, he was in the plane when it exploded.”

Claudette looked up. “You’re sure? You saw it?”

Sara shrugged. “I was a little too busy to take notes. He let the fucking cows out of the cages, Claudette. That kept my crew from getting out alive.”

The older woman wiped away the tears. “That’s Claus. Or that was Claus - the work always came first. But why do they want us dead? Why did they do this to us, Sara? Why did Claus have to die?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that we’re *not* dead, and we need to get our shit straight to keep it that way.”

Sara looked around. She hadn’t been detail-oriented the night before, so this was her first good look at the barn. Fairly standard: aisle wide enough for a large farm tractor to drive through, twenty-five stalls on each side. Full hay lofts above each row, all under a high arcing roof. A few small birds fluttered up in the rafters, their chirps adding an odd optimistic feel to their dark situation. A big cow head peeked out from most of the stalls, vacant black eyes staring curiously at the strangers

“All I know is we are *not* dead.”

lying on the ground. Inside the first stall to the left of the big door sat a brand new Arctic Cat snowmobile. The machine was only a partial comfort – they could use it to get away from the barn, but where could they go?

“We’re in Sven’s barn, on the northwest end of the island,” Sara said. “But we can’t stay here. We’ve got to get moving.”

“I can’t move, Sara. I just can’t.”

Sara realized that it was the first time Overgard had used her given name. “We have to move, Doctor.”

“Call me Claudette, please.” Overgard struggled to her feet and walked over to Sara. “You saved my life, Sara. You dragged me here, to this barn, no?”

Sara nodded.

The older woman helped Sara to her feet, then gently kissed her cheek. “Thank you, Sara. Thank you.”

Overgard was not only thanking her, but apologizing for being such a total bitch. Sara hugged Overgard. They were in this together, now, their fates entwined, at least for a while longer.

“Claudette, we’ve got to get out of here.”

“But what about the storm? It’s warm in here.”

Sara nodded. “I think the storm is over. We’ve got to get out of here because someone is going to come very soon to check on these cows.”

“But isn’t that what we want? We need help.”

Sara held Overgard’s shoulders, gently, but firmly. “Listen to me, Claudette. Magnus wants us dead. We should have died in that explosion. If he finds out we’re alive, he’ll come for us. We’re still too close to the plane. We’ve got to get out of here, try and find Colding. Maybe we can use that snowmobile over there.”

Claudette looked at the Arctic Cat, but her thoughts were obviously on the bigger picture. Tears filled her eyes. She quickly wiped them away with the backs of her hands.

“But isn’t Colding one of them?”

Sara shook her head. “I don’t think so ... I don’t know, really. But we don’t have a chance without him.”

They held each other, clinging together as if each were the other’s last remaining link to sanity.

A dog bark from outside the barn made them freeze.

The barn door slid open, just a crack, and both women jumped. Sara grabbed Overgard’s hand and yanked her into an empty stall as the door opened a little bit more, letting a golden rectangle of brilliant winter morning sunlight spill onto the barn floor.



Sven Ballantine leaned against the door for a third time. The snow had drifted high against the barn wall, almost blocking the door. One more push and it opened enough for him to walk inside. Pastie ran into the barn, tail wagging furiously, running from one cow to the next as if to say “hello” to the friends he’d missed during the storm. Pastie

barked at the cows, turning his big body in mad circles of canine joy.

"Take it easy," Sven said to the dog. "I'm sure they miss you too, eh?"

And then Sven heard a moo.

At least he thought he had. But it hadn't come from the barn.

He looked behind himself, out across the blazing white expanse of his snowed-over hayfield. Sunlight roared off the undulating snow, an electric field of frozen white waves that edged up to the thick pine trees at the field's edge.

Moooooo.

There it was again. And it hadn't been his imagination.

Pastie's barks of joy turned into serious barks of alarm, a long *ro-ro-ro-ro* of urgency. But Sven didn't look, didn't turn around to see Pastie's hackles raised as he stared at two battered women hiding in an empty stall.

"Shut up, boy," Sven said.

Moooooo.

No mistake that time, and it wasn't just one cow, it was several. Pastie continued his frantic barking.

"Dammit, boy, shut up!"

The scream hit Pastie almost like a slap. His head dropped to the ground and his tail curled slightly between his legs.

Sven took a step into the waist-deep snow, peering across the blinding field, looking for movement. He had to squint to block the worst of the reflected light, but he saw them. Cows. At the edge of his field.

"Pastie, come on, boy."

Pastie gave one last glare at the two women his master didn't seem to notice, then bounded after Sven.

November 31: 7:31 a.m.

Clayton Clayton sat in the toasty warmth of the Bv 206 tracked snow vehicle. Frank Sinatra blared from a battery-powered boom-box on the passenger seat. Clayton liked Sinatra – now there was a man that could knock back shots of bourbon. Clayton fondly remembered the time he and Frank had drunk Dean under the table (Sammy had passed out hours earlier, and as a lark, Clayton had replaced Sammy's glass eye with a ball bearing. Sammy had been pissed as hell the next day, but Frank thought it was fucking hysterical).

Made by and for the Swedish military, the five-ton Bv 206 handled even the deepest powder, thanks to wide tank-treads that let it ride on top of the snow. It handled snow, marshes, mud, bogs, and was even fully amphibious, although Clayton never wanted to test the choppy waters surrounding Black Manitou. The Bv dragged a weighted, flat-bottomed sled, ten-feet wide by twelve-feet long. The sled leveled out the trail and packed the snow, making it ideal for snowmobiling. Fourteen inches of snow had

dropped in little more than twenty-four hours. Clayton had to make sure the trails were ready so Magnus could motor around the island.

It was always so beautiful after a big storm. Storms covered everything in a thick, marshmallow coating of white. Pine trees looked like lumpy white giants out of some paint-by-numbers canvas, and the snow changed leafless branches of the hardwoods into the soft white skeletons of a child's cartoon. Morning sun blazed off the trillions of snowflakes, making the whole landscape shimmer with sparkling life.

Clayton hummed "My Way" as he moved up the trail, wondering if Sara and the others had landed in Manitoba.

November 31: 7:34 a.m.

Sara risked a peek over the stall door. Sven had taken the snowmobile. He and his dog were nothing but a speck far across the snowy field.

"Come on, Claudette, let's get out of here."

"Where are we going to go?"

"That abandoned town seems like the best choice."

"How far away is that?"

"Maybe five miles."

Overgard's jaw dropped. "Five miles?"

Sara nodded. "It's our only chance, Claudette."

Sara crept to the barn door and looked out. Sven was halfway across the field now, his dog bounding in the high snow. She only had a few minutes to find a way out where Sven wouldn't see their footprints.

"So let's go," Claudette said.

"We can't go out the front," Sara said. "When he comes back he'll see our tracks in the fresh snow – there's no way he can miss them."

Sara walked deeper into the barn, towards the door on the other side. It was a normal door that swung outward. She moved a bale of hay under a window to the left of the door. She pushed the side of her face against the cold glass, trying to see the area outside the door. The glass fogged up instantly. She used her sleeve to wipe it clean. She couldn't see much other than huge drifts, a snow-covered shed and a few snow-capped fence posts.

She tried to push the door open, but found it blocked by snow on the other side. She leaned her weight against it. The door's top bent out with a creak of wood, but the bottom barely budged.

They both looked back through the barn and out the open sliding door, but the man was so far away they couldn't even see him.

Sara lowered herself until she was almost kneeling and rocked against the door, each push opening it another inch or two. After three minutes, she cleared a foot of space, enough to slip through.

Outside the door was a long stretch of undisturbed white marked with high drifts. A single line of footprints led into the shed. The tracks were covered with less than an inch of snow, making each print look fuzzy and blurred.

“Shit,” Sara said. “Looks like he went into that shed sometime last night.”

“Is that bad?”

“Well, as soon as he goes to that shed again, he’ll see our tracks.”

“So what do we do?”

Sara shrugged her shoulders. They didn’t have a choice. If they left from the front of the barn, they’d be discovered much sooner. At least the back door offered them somewhat of a head start.

“What do we do from here?” Claudette asked.

“We walk a couple hundred yards through this snow until we’re out of sight of the house, then we head down the road that leads to the town.”

Fear in her eyes, Claudette looked at Sara, then looked out at the snowdrifts and shivered. They slid through the door. Sara pushed it shut behind them, hoping it would still look unused from the inside.

The two women trudged through the deep snow.



Sven couldn’t believe his eyes. He looked all around, searching for any sign of a person. There had to be someone around, *had* to. It wasn’t like forty-three cows could just *appear* out of thin air. Were they Rory’s? Could something have happened to Rory’s barn during the storm? But as far as he knew Rory’s cows weren’t pregnant, at least not *all* of them, and these girls were pregnant with a capital “P.”

Pastie was in the midst of losing his little dog mind, running mad, wide-eyed, barking circles around the nervous cows, powder flying up and away from his thick chest as if he were some furry black snowplow.

Sven walked up to one of the cows. It had a tan plastic tag clipped through its ear that read “A-34.” In permanent marker, someone had scrawled “Molly McButter” underneath the numbers.

The “A” meant the cows were from the main facility on the south end of the island. How in the hell did the cows travel some ten miles, during the night, in the midst of one high-toned bitch of a storm?

“Well hello, Molly. I’ll bet you’ve had an interesting night, eh?”

The cow said nothing.

He didn’t see any human tracks, and not that many from cows, for that matter. The cows had been here for hours, tucked into the edge of the woods, waiting out the storm.

“Well, ladies,” Sven said in a soothing voice as he patted Molly. “I’d better get you all under cover, eh? We’ve got another storm due soon. I’ll find out what you’re doing here as soon as you’re safely in the barn.”

“Let’s get them herded up, boy,” Sven said to Pastie, who continued to run mad circles around the cattle.

Sven started the snowmobile and began guiding the cows back towards his barn.

November 31: 8:14 a.m.

Clayton came over a ridge to a full view of Sven's place. Clayton remembered a post-storm morning just like this, some twenty years earlier, when Sven's wife, Gracie, had died. Poor young fella still missed his wife terribly.

Jesus, Clayton thought. I still think of him as "young." Sven's got to be at least fifty, maybe even fifty-five now. He's an old fart, just like me, except I'm a much older fart.

Clayton's sixty-sixth birthday was only two days away. He hoped it would pass without any notice. Danté might force him to retire, and then what? Clayton had always planned on retiring on Black Manitou. He didn't want to be anywhere but Black Manitou. Where the hell else would he go to "retire?"

He stopped the Bv 206 and set the engine to idle, forcing the thought out of his mind. No one had said anything to him yet, and if there were one thing he'd learned in over five decades of work, it was that the squeaky wheel gets the oil.

Clayton hopped out and was almost knocked over by sixty-five pounds of happy-ass Labrador retriever.

Pastie jumped at Clayton, his front paws on Clayton's chest, his hind paws hopping up and down as he tried to stretch up enough to lick Clayton's face. Pastie whined with excitement.

"Easy there, eh?" Clayton laughed as he twisted his face away from Pastie's insistent tongue. "Take it easy, boy."

"Pastie, down," Sven said firmly. Pastie's rump hit the snow as he sat, tongue hanging out of his smiling mouth, tail kicking up wisps of powdery snow.

"Morning, Sven. Thought I'd stop by and see if an old fart like yourself managed to survive the storm."

"Oh, I was feeling just fine until I smelled you coming along, eh? I suppose today you're going to tell me that da last time you saw a storm like this you were porkin' Lana Turner."

Clayton's brow wrinkled in confusion. "Why would I say that, eh? Lana Turner only came here in da summer."

Sven laughed. "You're a piece of work, old timer. Listen, what's going on with the cows at the main facility? The damn things turned up here this morning."

"Turned up here? What da hell are you talking about, eh? They flew the cows off the island yesterday."

Sven shook his head. "Well, they're back here now. I got 'em in da barn."

Clayton looked at the younger man. "Are you yankin' my crank?"

Sven didn't answer. Instead he just walked towards the barn. Clayton followed. Pastie ran mad circles around them both.

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“Well, I’ll be dipped in shit,” Clayton said. “I saw these same damn cows loaded onto that big fuckin’ plane last night.”

“So did da plane come back?”

“Didn’t land at da mansion. If it came back, it landed somewhere else. Or it crashed.”

Sven shrugged. “Crash couldn’t have been *that* bad, unless they make parachutes big enough for cows these days. I would have called this in right away, but da phone lines are down from da storm.”

Clayton waved his hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it, I’ll report it back at da lodge. Say, you see anything else besides the cows? Any people?”

“Nope.”

“You didn’t hear anything last night, maybe a plane crash or something?”

Sven shook his head. “Slept like a baby, eh?”

Clayton shrugged and started back towards the Bv 206. “I’ll finish my swing up to North Pointe and see if I can find anything. If da cows made it here, da plane has to be nearby. Magnus’s going to want to see these cows, eh? I’ll let you know when that giant asshole is on his way.”

“Oh, thanks a lot, eh?” Sven sighed. “I hate that kid.”

“You have a good one,” Clayton said, and walked out of the barn.

Sven nodded, but didn’t walk Clayton out. Instead, he turned his attention to Molly McButter, whose eyes were glazed over with a thin layer of mucus. She looked a bit under the weather. Sven made a mental note to keep an eye on her.

November 31: 8:46 a.m.

Sara and Claudette stood shivering in the woods, a thick, snow-covered pine between them and the snowmobile trail. The storm had passed, but the cold still hung in the air like an ethereal hammer, pounding at them with a constant, numbing pressure.

When the throaty gurgle of a diesel engine broke the all-powerful winter silence, Sara and Claudette had tramped into the woods to stay out of sight. They’d fought through two miles of knee-high snow on the road, but it was nothing compared to the waist-high drifts on the shoulder and in the woods.

Sara peeked out from behind the tree as the diesel-powered vehicle drew near. She recognized it as the big machine Clayton used to groom the trails. Her heart fell to her feet when the vehicle suddenly stopped, and a thickly bundled Clayton Clayton got out. Sara ducked back behind the tree, reached into her parka and pulled out her Beretta. Her heart pounded in her chest.

“What are you doing?” Claudette whispered fiercely.

Sara spoke quietly. “If he finds us, he’ll tell Magnus, and we’re dead.” She didn’t want to hurt Clayton, but she had long ago entered into the world of kill or be killed.

Claudette put her white hand on Sara’s arm. “You can’t do that. Clayton didn’t do anything. He’s a damn janitor, Sara.”

“You gonna put that gun down, eh? Da way you’re shivering you might shoot me by accident.”

Sara angrily shook off Claudette’s hand. “I’ll do what I have to do to stay alive. Now shut the hell up.”

Sara watched him through a small gap in the snow-covered pine branches. Clayton walked to the edge of the trail, where weeks of snowplowing had made the bank a good six feet high. He climbed halfway up the bank, enough to see into the woods, and there he stopped. Clayton undid his fly, reached in, fished out his penis and started peeing on the bank’s downward slope. His hips twisted, directing the stream of urine.

“What’s he doing?” Claudette whispered.

Sara shook her head in amazement. “I think he’s writing his name in the snow.”

The urine stream slowed to a trickle. Clayton shook once, zipped up his fly, then lifted a leg and cut loose with a fart that nearly knocked snow from the tree branches.

“You can come out now,” he yelled into the woods. “If you don’t mind, I really don’t feel like marching into da woods after you, eh?”

Clayton waited, then spoke again. “You know, it’s damn cold out here, and I’m wearing boots. I can only imagine how cold you ladies must be.”

Sara looked back at the older woman and gave a stern don’t-say-a-word look. Sara’s hands felt cold and brittle on the gun, and she wasn’t sure if she could actually feel the trigger anymore.

“My truck is nice and warm inside, eh? If I have to come in there after you, I won’t be happy.”

“Sara,” Claudette said pleadingly. “I’m so cold.”

Claudette’s face, normally pale to begin with, was so blanched she had little more color than the snow. The woman shivered uncontrollably. The stitched cut on her head was an angry dark-red line surrounded by the purple and green bruise. Sara couldn’t kid herself anymore – if they kept going, Claudette would just pass out again, if not worse. They had to take that truck.

Sara stepped out from behind the tree and leveled the Beretta at Clayton. The man’s hands went up almost of their own accord.

Clayton’s face went blank. “What da hell are you doing, Sara? Why you point da gun at me, eh?”

“Just don’t fucking move, Clayton. You got me?”

Clayton nodded. Sara reached back and pulled Claudette to her feet.

“Clayton, move to your right, and stay in the snow bank. Any sudden moves and I’ll put a round in your kneecap. Claudette, get in that thing and shut the door behind you.

Make sure the heat's on."

Shivering madly, Claudette stumbled her way through the waist deep snow, moving laboriously through the bank's steep incline. Clayton stepped aside, giving her ample room. She climbed in and shut the door behind her. Sara saw her, both arms wrapped tightly around her chest, trembling like a puppy in a thunderstorm.

"You gonna put that gun down, eh? Da way you're shivering you might shoot me by accident."

Sara looked at her own hand – the Beretta seemed to shake like a living thing, as if it, too, were a victim of the island's oppressive cold. She lowered the gun. Clayton probably couldn't move that fast on clear ground, let alone in snow up to his crotch.

"How did you know we were out there?" Sara asked.

"Saw da footprints in the bank. Two sets, both either from women or kids. Haven't seen any kids on da island, and seeing as there were two women on da big plane, and seeing as I just saw all the cows that were supposed to be on that plane, I figured it was you, eh?"

"You're a regular fucking Colombo, Clayton. How many people know we crashed?"

"Don't know. We didn't hear anything about it back at da lodge. When I saw da cows, figured you landed, somehow. Can't believe you could bring down something that big without da whole island knowing."

"Yeah," Sara said. "Hard to believe. When did Magnus send you out to look for us? Did you radio him and tell him you found us?"

Clayton shook his head. "He didn't send me out here, Sara. I was grooming da trails, eh? I do it after every storm."

Sara felt her whole body shaking, and wondered what to do next. Clayton was an old man, for God's sake. He'd been on the island long before Magnus and Danté and Genada ... or so he said. She had no way of knowing who the hell he was.

"Sara, what happened? I don't know why you're waving that gun around, but I'm da only one who knows you're here. Now get in da tractor before frostbite sets in, eh?"

It was only when Clayton said the word "frostbite" that Sara realized her fingers had stopped stinging. They were completely numb. If she had to pull the trigger, she wasn't sure she could make her fingers obey the commands.

She took three steps towards the Bv 206 before her vision blurred and she fell, unconscious, face-first into the snow bank.

November 31: 10:05 a.m.

Sven stood on his porch, the salt he'd put down to melt the ice crunching underfoot every time he moved. Everything was so quiet, so peaceful. Winter sucked up sound, soaked it all in, hoarded it and refused to share. There was never a time like the dead of winter after a storm, when you couldn't hear anything at all.

Anything, except for the cows.

Sven stood still, Pastie at his side, listening to the lonely, painful braying coming from

the barn. He wondered if it were a mistake to mix the strays with his cows, considering that his herd was a backup in case of main herd contamination. Still, those cows were worth hundreds of thousands of dollars each, and it seemed logical Danté would want them sheltered and cared for. Had Genada wanted the cows dead, they would have simply killed them, not let them wander. Still, the new cows were making noises. Horrible noises, like they were sick, were in pain, or probably both.

Sven trudged out to the barn, Pastie at his side as usual, but the dog seemed far more subdued, as if he sensed there was something wrong. Sven slid open the barn door and walked in ... but Pastie stayed outside.

Sven looked at the dog. Pastie's tail half-hung between his legs, and a small whine emanated from his closed mouth.

"What's the matter with you, eh? Don't you want to see your friends?"

Pastie sat down, his butt half-hidden by the snow. Sven didn't like it, not one bit. The dog had never passed up a trip to the barn, a chance to bark at the cows and run around like a wild thing just let out of a cage.

"Fine, you stay out here, you big baby."

Sven walked into the barn, feeling oddly naked without Pastie at his heels. Or was it that something felt wrong, something that made Pastie afraid, something that Sven could feel?

Sven walked to the first stall that held one of the stray cows. Sick wasn't even the right word. The cow looked like it was on its last leg. Thick white mucus covered its eyes and dripped down its cheeks in long, wet, smelly trails. Strands of snot and drool hung from the animal's nose and chin, swaying with thick motion when the poor creature let out a long and mournful mooooo. Its head hung low, only a few feet off the ground, and it barely moved save to let out bray after lonely bray.

Sven felt fear for his own herd. They seemed fine and healthy, heads up, eyes normal, chewing on hay or their cud, some standing, some lying down: all apparently normal. But that didn't make him feel any better, because the stray cows had looked fairly normal only that morning. Whatever the disease was, it came on fast. And if it were a virus, it was already too late for his cows, he knew that.

There wasn't much he could do but wait. Clayton would be finished soon, then someone from the mansion would come take care of things.

Sven left the barn. Pastie was waiting for him, tail wagging furiously, his thick body doing barely controlled circles as if to say, thank goodness you finally got out of there, daddy, that place is no good, come play with me instead.

Sven walked back to the house, wondering what to do next, his dog at his side.

November 31, 12:25 p.m.

She felt a hand on her shoulder.

Sara didn't want to wake up. She was warm, and it wasn't a dream. A bed, she was in a bed, with thick blankets. She was on the verge of sweating, a heat that would have

normally felt uncomfortable, but at the moment she'd never experienced anything so luxurious and wonderful.

"Sara, wake up, eh?"

Her eyes fluttered open to see Clayton's salt-and-pepper stubbly face hovering over her own. Claudette was looking down over his shoulder. Sara absently registered the color in Claudette's cheeks, the first time she'd seen any color in the woman's face since they cleared the worst of the storm. She was smiling and eating a chicken leg.

Sara sat up, still reveling in the simple blessing of Not Being Cold.

"What happened?"

"You passed out," Claudette said. "Clayton put you into the truck, then he drove us to his house. You've been out for a couple of hours."

Sara rubbed her eyes. She looked over at Clayton, and realized that he had a gun, her gun, stuffed into the belt of his thick snow pants. He had them.

"You staring at da gun? I hope you're staring at da gun, because if you're staring at my thing Colding might get mad at me, eh?"

Sara could say nothing. Clayton pulled out the Beretta and handed it to her butt-first. "Now if I give it back to you, you promise not to point it at me anymore?"

Sara took the gun, a feeling of relief washing over her. At least there was one person, other than Colding, that she could trust.

"Claudette told me about da bomb. I knew that Magnus was a pig fucker, but I didn't think they'd go that far. If I was twenty years younger, I'd show his big ass."

Sara nodded. "So what the hell do we do now?"

"We have to get you off da island and fast," Clayton said. "If Magnus finds out about da cows, he'll come looking for you. Da phones are down, but you can't keep a thing like that a secret for long."

Sara looked at Claudette. "How dangerous are the cows?"

"How can a cow be dangerous?" Clayton asked.

"Not the cows themselves. What's in the cows," Sara said. "The creatures Overgard and the others were growing. They're very dangerous."

Claudette thought for a moment. "Well, they are cut off from their IVs, so the fetuses will probably starve. It happened once already. I think the fetuses and the cows will be dead soon, if they're not dead already."

"Well, if Sven took them in, is he in danger?" Clayton asked.

"Yes," Claudette said. "At this point, I'd have to err on the side of caution. He could be in danger. But without the nutrition supplement, the fetuses can't live long."

"Dangerous or not, we still have to get you off da island," Clayton said. "Once you're gone, I can go back to Sven's and we can kill those cows, dispose of da bodies."

"How the hell do you dispose of forty-odd cows?" Sara asked.

Clayton shrugged. "I'll think of something. It's a big island." He scratched his beard. "I think I can keep da cows a secret for a day or two, maybe long enough to get my son Chris out here with da boat and get you ladies off da island. I'll tell Colding, hopefully he can keep Magnus busy."

At the sound of Colding's name, Sara felt a pang of loneliness. But she also felt a pang

of suspicion. "No. We can't tell him."

Claudette looked at Sara. "But you said we could trust him."

"I said we *had* to trust him. We didn't have any other choice. Now Clayton can get us off the island. We don't need Colding."

"Are you sure?" Clayton asked. "He's awfully worried about you."

Sara wanted to say 'yes,' but that just wasn't the smart thing to do. "He sent us up in that plane, Claudette. He sent us up in a plane with a bomb in it. Magnus wanted the project dead, but Colding stayed on the ground."

Claudette opened her mouth to say something, then shut it again. The crazy thing was, Sara knew she was wrong. Deep down inside, she knew she could trust Colding, and that he'd do anything for her. But the facts and her emotions didn't mix.

"But Claudette said Colding told you about Jian's murder," Clayton said. "Why would he do that?"

Sara shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe to make me eager to fly out despite the storm."

"I think you're wrong, Sara," Clayton said. "But you've got a point, eh? If that's da way you want it, fine with me. Another storm is coming in, supposed to hit us pretty hard tonight. Don't know if Chris can get out here in that weather. I've just got to hide you until he can come out."

Sara felt a surge of hope and had to fight back tears. They might make it after all. She looked out the bedroom window. A few snowflakes were falling, light and fluffy, moving gently from left to right, driven by a small breeze.

"Looks like da storm's getting started already," Clayton said. "You two can stay here tonight. You need some sleep. But any longer and it's too risky. Tomorrow I'll hide you in the old town, eh? Now I've got to get back to work, gotta fix da phones. Grab some dry clothes out of my closet, wear whatever will fit, then eat whatever you want out of da fridge." He patted Sara on the shoulder and walked out of the bedroom. She threw back the covers and started raiding Clayton's closet. Overgard rummaged through his dresser.

"Sara," Overgard said. "Is this who I think it is?"

Sara finished pulling on a baggy wool sweater. Overgard was staring at a framed picture on top of Clayton's dresser.

"I'll be damned," Sara said, smiling a little.

In the picture, Marilyn Monroe and a much younger Clayton Detweiler were sharing a passionate kiss.

November 31, 12:45 p.m.

Clayton walked into the security room to find Colding sitting at the counter, calmly flipping through the monitor channels. Colding looked up and forced a small smile. Dark circles lined his eyes, and his normally robust, healthy complexion seemed faded, as if his color were slowly draining away.

“Hey there, Clayton. If you’re here to see me, you must want to share a fart or two.”

“No gas today. And I ain’t here to see you. I’ve got to check the landline integrity.”

Colding stood and moved away from the console. “Be my guest.” He walked to the weapons rack and grabbed one of the Berettas, along with a holster. He strapped on the holster, then sat at the edge of the security counter and started bracing down the pistol.

Clayton sat down at the security console and used the mouse to initiate the phone line integrity program. A little spinning clock appeared, telling him the program was processing.

He was alone with Colding. Now was his chance. There were no listening devices in the security room, at least none that he knew of. And if there were, where would they lead? All the Big Brother monitoring was done from this room. He’d never thought about it before, but the security room was probably the only safe place to talk in the entire mansion.

“No word from Sara yet?” Clayton asked.

Colding’s lip curled up in a brief snarl, but the expression disappeared immediately. “Nothing yet. Magnus has put in new codes and locked me out of the transmitter. I can’t call Dante to find out what’s going on.”

“Why would he do that?”

Colding shrugged. “He says security is compromised, and he wants to be the only one receiving or sending messages.”

Colding’s jaw clenched in frustration. The man was torn up inside. Clayton *knew* Colding couldn’t have had anything to do with the C-5 explosion. And here was a chance to tell him. But Sara and Claudette’s safety hung in the balance. A mistake would cost them their lives.

“Colding, I ... ” Clayton’s voice trailed off. Colding turned in his chair to look at Clayton.

“You what?” Colding asked, waiting patiently for an answer.

Before Clayton could speak, the computer beeped loudly – the integrity check had finished. In that instant, Clayton’s resolve broke. He’d stick to the plan. He just couldn’t take any chances.

“Nothing,” Clayton said, and turned back to the computer.

The screen showed four breaks in the land lines – one near his house, one close to Rory’s place, and two on the line leading from Sven’s. Clayton hit the “print” button, and waited for the repair map to come out of the printer.



Sara gnawed on the block of cheese in her right hand, in between gulps of milk from the glass in her left. She and Claudette ran around Clayton’s house, looking at the plethora of black-and-white framed pictures and Polaroids that would have made any paparazzi green with envy. It helped take her mind off her dead crew, at least a little bit.

“Here he is with Frank Sinatra,” Claudette called from the family room.

“Forget that, here’s a picture of him with friggin’ President Kennedy.”

Sara heard Claudette laughing as she ran into the living room to see the picture. Sara stared at the pictures, but she couldn't laugh. She took another bite of cheese and wondered what it would feel like to put a bullet in Magnus's brain.

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Clayton strapped on his tool belt and looked up at the wooden telephone pole. He was about a quarter-mile northeast of the watch tower and the jammer tower. A fallen tree had snapped the line. He had to repair it to connect Sven to the mansion.

Clayton stopped, face wrinkled in thought. If he repaired the line, Sven could call the mansion anytime he wanted. If something else went wrong with the cows, he might call Magnus. As soon as Magnus found out about the cows, Sara and Overgard were as good as dead. Clayton finished strapping on the belt, then reached into the Bv and grabbed a phone repairman's handset.

He climbed into the aerial lift bucket, and slowly raised himself twenty feet up to the phone line. The storm was already taking shape. Dull gray-black clouds, the color of sour chocolate milk, filled the sky, steadily growing in size and number, choking out the light. In a span of minutes, the air had gone from a dead calm to ten-mile-per-hour winds driving the first flakes of a projected seven-inch snowfall.

He measured his options, wondering if he should tell Sven about the dangerous babies inside the cows. The lives of two women hung on his every decision. It was a simple equation – if Magnus found out, they were dead. And himself probably along with them. He had to keep Sven in the dark until the women were off the island.

Clayton connected his orange handset and punched in Sven's number.

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The phone rang, and Pastie barked at it. Pastie barked at everything.

"Shut up, boy," Sven said as walked to the phone. "Yah, Sven here."

"Sven, it's Clayton." Clayton's voice sounded scratchy and far-off.

"Clayton, those cows are awfully sick, eh? And they're getting worse fast. Who's coming out to help me?"

"Listen, Sven, there's a problem. Genada is up to no good. Can you take care of da cows for a day or so, until this storm passes us over?"

"You don't understand," Sven said. "These cows are *sick*. We need to get Doctor Overgard out here right away. I've never seen anything like it. It came on real quick, eh?"

"Sven, we can't do that right now. Trust me, you've got to wait."

Sven was quiet for a moment. "I can wait until da storm passes, if you need me to, eh? But I gotta tell ya, I don't know if these cows will last through da night."

"That's all da time I need, Sven, I owe you one. I'll get someone out to you as soon as I can, I promise. And Sven, I know this sounds weird, but be careful. Maybe you should just stay away from da cows until I call you again."

"Stay away from da cows? What are you talking about?"

"Just be careful," Clayton said. "You'll have to trust me, eh?"

Clayton broke the connection. Sven hung up the handset, and looked out the window,

troubled thoughts whirling through his mind like the nasty storm clouds taking shape outside. Those cows needed attention right away, but Clayton never asked for favors. It had to be something important. He'd known Clayton for, oh, thirty years now. When Genada was long gone, Clayton would still be on the island. Sven nodded – he could wait, wait until the storm had passed. After that, however, he'd have to get some help for his cows.

If, that is, they were still alive when the storm passed. Sven rolled his neck. He heard and felt his old bones crack. The job was tiring enough without any added stress, but now, thanks to rounding up the extra cows, he felt exhausted.

Sven looked down at Pastie, who looked back, thick tail suddenly thumping against the floor.

"You ready for a nap with da old man, boy?"

Pastie barked, then ran for the bedroom. Sven followed. Pastie spun in circles at the foot of the bed. Sven didn't bother undressing, he just climbed on top of the blankets and lay down on his side. Pastie jumped onto the bed and lay down in his favorite spot, nestled in the crook of Sven's legs.

Both of them fell asleep in seconds.



Clayton realized he hadn't counted the cows – maybe all of them didn't make it to Sven's. Rory's place was fairly close to the crash site, perhaps some of them had wandered there. Rory's phones were down thanks to the same break that cut Sven's communication to the mansion. But if Rory found a cow, and simply snowmobiled in to find out what was going on ...

Clayton punched in Rory's number. Violet answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Violet, Clayton here."

"Oh, Clayton! Are you going to stop by today? I could whip up those brownies that you like so much. I'll put on some coffee and we can all sit down and – "

"Violet, let me talk to Rory," Clayton interrupted. "It's important."

"Okay, hold on."

Clayton measured his options, and they weren't good. He could either keep quiet and put Sven, Rory and Violet in potential danger, or he could warn them and see if word somehow spread back to Magnus.

"Hello, Clayton. Glad to see you got da phone lines fixed this early."

"Not fixed yet," Clayton said. "I'm on a handset at one of da breaks. No point in fixing anything until da next storm is finished, otherwise I've got to do it all over again, eh?"

"Sounds logical, you lazy old fart. Thanks for letting me know."

"No problem. Say, Rory, you seen anything weird?"

"Weird like what?"

"Weird like ... like anything unusual with your cows?"

"Just came from da barn," Rory said. "Everything is fine, why do you ask?"

Clayton breathed a sigh of relief. “No reason. Sven said his cows were feeling a little sick, just wondered if yours were okay.”

“Mine are in da pink of health.”

“Glad to hear it. Just checking up on you.”

“Okay,” Rory said. “Just don’t take forever to fix those phones. If there’s some bug going around, I want to make sure I can reach Doctor Overgard, eh?”

“I’ll fix it up as soon as da next storm breaks. Good day, Rory.”

“Good day.”

Clayton broke the connection, happy there was one less thing to worry about. There were no strays at Rory’s which meant he and Violet were safe.

At least *something* was going right.

December 1, 2:02 a.m.

Outside Sven’s bedroom window, the storm picked up intensity, swelling, swirling, growing. It was loud, loud enough to rattle the windows in their wooden frames, but that wasn’t what awoke him. Not even close. In his fifty-five years in the U.P., he’d slept through far worse and far louder more times than he could remember. No, it wasn’t the wind that woke him out of a stone-cold sleep, it was a pair of sounds – Pastie’s low, gurgling growl of warning, and the cows.

The screaming cows.

Sven sat straight up in bed, eyes instantly wide with alarm. He’d heard sounds like that once when he was a boy in Pellston, and he’d left the barn door open just enough for a pack of starving coyotes to slip in the middle of the night and attack a helpless milk cow. Even as Sven slipped out of bed and quickly pulled on his snow pants and boots, he wondered at the high-pitched sounds of bovine terror, so loud he could hear them over a twenty-mile-per-hour wind despite a distance of some fifty yards between the house and the barn.

He

The screaming cows.

strode to his gun rack and grabbed his Mossberg shotgun, then threw on his coat as he ran out to the front porch, switching the gun from hand-to-hand as he shrugged on one sleeve and then the next. A primitive emotion stirred within him, the urge to protect that which was his. If there was a coyote in there, he’d blow it straight to mangy-dog hell.

Sven ran towards the barn, Pastie at his side, still growling. Sven had gone no more than ten feet when the cold registered on his face and ears. *At least ten below*, he thought as he leaned into the wind and pushed towards the barn. *Ten below, and probably thirty below with the wind chill*. Cold like that wasn’t unusual, but it was no

laughing matter. Cold like that could kill.

The Mossberg was loaded, of course. He always kept it loaded. Sven pumped a shell into the chamber as he reached the sliding barn door. He yanked on the latch, already breathing hard from an adrenaline surge and a strange feeling of desperation, that it was already too late. He pulled open the heavy door just enough to peek inside.

Smells billowed forth as if the barn generated its own cyclone of ill wind. The smell of shit, the smell of animal fear, the smell of burnt fur ... and the heavy smell of blood. The barn seemed a sea of panicked cows. Most had broken free of their stalls. They ran back and forth, as if they might find some way out, slamming into stalls, walls and each other. Blood was everywhere, on walls, on hay, on the cows themselves and coating the floor in long slimy streaks and spotted hoof prints. Just in front of his foot, a long intestine snaked from one side of the barn to the other. Dirt and hay clung to its wet surface.

Sven quickly shut the door so that only a foot of open space remained. He didn't want to open the door until he saw the danger. The barn's cramped space prevented them from building up a head of steam, which was the only thing preventing a full-blown stampede. Inside that barn was nothing but danger, the danger of thousands of pounds of animals crazed to get away.

But get away from what?

Sven craned his neck, trying to see through the narrow opening past the shuffling mass of cattle to see if he could spot the problem. Something was in there, all right. Sven caught glimpses of mangled cow corpses, prone and so torn up their coats looked bright red with dark-red markings rather than black-and-white.

BAM

A cow slammed into the door and Sven jumped back. He leaned forward again, fear spreading over him, and looked in. The cow that had hit the door reared back and slammed forward again. The big sliding door shook as if it had been hit by a lightning bolt. Two other cows picked up on the first's efforts, and like telepathy, they seemed to sense a possible way out.

BAM-BAM-BAM

All three hit the door, well over a thousand pounds of cattle pummeling forward with no sense of self-preservation. Sven stood amazed as the first cow struck again, this time with such force that the skin between her eyes split from the middle of her nose up past her ears. Blood poured down her nose, but instead of stopping, she reared back again.

BAM

He had to let them out, into the growing storm. They'd already seen a way to freedom – even if he shut the door, they'd kill themselves trying to get away from whatever the hell was in the barn. If he let them out, he could kill it and then round up the cows with his snowmobile.

Sven set the shotgun against the door and put both hands on the cold, red-painted wood. The cows kept slamming against it, briefly jamming the roller wheels with each impact. He leaned back hard, pulling open the door with a herky-jerky motion. Each cow-impact generated a thundering reverberation of rattling dry wood. The first cow, head bloody, scraps of skin dangling from its nose and face, pushed halfway through the

door, its shoulders wedging in the narrow opening. It pushed the bottom of the door outward, jamming tight the roller wheels. Sven pulled hard, but couldn't budge the door. The cows brayed in pure fight-or-flight panic. He felt that same panic spreading over him – in thirty years of raising cattle, he'd never seen or heard of anything like this.

Another cow head appeared above the first, thrusting forward, trying to push through the narrow opening. Sven desperately put all his weight against the door, but it wouldn't budge.

BAM-BAM, BAM

This time the impact was accompanied by the rifle-shot sound of splintering wood. Sven looked up; the left roller wheel had almost ripped away from the door.

BAM-BAM, BAM

Sven dove away from the door just as all the wheels tore free. It fell forward like some great drawbridge. Ten feet high, eight feet wide, and three inches thick, it dropped like a rock. The door slammed into the ground, kicking up a huge, swirling cloud of powdery snow. Sven almost made it clear – the heavy door fell on his left foot, just above the ankle, snapping the fibula and tibia like fresh carrots.

Eyes wide and white, froth covering their muzzles, cows roared out like some huge, powerful orgasm of terror. Each pounding step drove the door down onto Sven's broken leg, pinning it, keeping him from pulling free. His screams joined the panicked roar of the stampeding herd.

The snow came up to their chests, causing some to stumble and fall. Those behind plowed forward, sometimes going around, sometimes stepping on the fallen. They spread out like a gas, dissipating away from the distilled fear of the barn, moving out across the snow-drifted field and into the swelling storm.

Sven lay in the snow, eyes twisted shut, teeth bared, mouth wide open in a silent scream of agony. He tried to pull his foot free, but each tiny motion shot nuclear blasts of agony through his leg. He opened his eyes to look, but could barely see through the swelling, swirling black spots that clouded his vision. A fierce shake of his head cleared some of the spots. Blood poured from his leg, staining the snow in an expanding red slush. He had to *think*. He wouldn't last out here; he had to get back to the house or he'd die.

I'm trapped, and something is still in the barn.

That thought crystallized his situation. Pain or no pain, he'd have to get free, even if he had to tear off his own leg to do so. Fighting through the agony, he sat up and worked his fingers under the door. He only had to lift it a little ...

His old, well-worked muscles bunched as he desperately tried to lift the 300-pound door. The wood rose, only a fraction of an inch, but it was enough for him to redouble his efforts. It rose another half-inch, then suddenly slammed down as if God himself had willed it.

Sven's head snapped back in an involuntary scream. He thrashed, a convulsion ripping his system as he fought for control. Tears streamed down his face, quickly freezing into glistening trails on his cheeks. He looked up.

A cow stood on the door.

This one wasn't braying or panicking, it had just walked a few feet onto the fallen door and stopped. Sven recognized the black head with the white eye-patch – Molly McButter.

"Move, goddammit! You fucking cow, move!"

But she didn't move. She stood there, snow accumulating on her back, her head bent almost to the ground, staring at nothing with glazed eyes, her heavy belly round and distended and hanging low.

"Move you motherfucker! Get the fu - "

Sven's epithet died in mid syllable: a long, thick stream of blood poured out of Molly McButter's mouth to splash against the fallen barn door. The blood stopped briefly, then poured out again like crimson vomit. She turned her head to the side, weakly, as if it took some great effort, and looked right at Sven.

Moooooo.

That long, mournful sound was the last Molly McButter ever made. As it died out, another sound replaced it. The muffled snap of a single cracking rib.

Sven's pain wasn't forgotten, but seemed as if it were far away, an echo of its former intensity. The cows were gone, leaving only the wind's lonely wail. Another *crack*.

Molly's ribs ... *moved*.

A bloody paw ripped out of Molly's body, six-inch gore-covered claws tearing a huge hole in her belly. Blood and fluid poured fourth in gallons, splattering against the snow, spraying into Sven's horror-stricken face.

"Oh, Sweet Jesus."

Molly's knees buckled. Her eyes rolled back, leaving only half-lidded whites exposed, and she fell hard to her side, driving the door even farther onto Sven's nearly severed leg. Pain rolled through his head like a swarm of black bees, threatening to take him into darkness.

A bark at his side brought back his focus. Pastie stood next to him, chest out, back fur raised impossibly high, teeth bared, the sound coming out of his mouth more a roar than a bark. Pastie hurled his rage at the swollen cow.

Molly's belly, once swollen and distended, now sagged against her rib cage. The claw came forth again, tearing her from sternum to vagina, and a bloody, slime-covered *thing* slid out. It was big, much bigger than a baby cow, over 200 pounds, at least.

Sven's vision blurred from tears and from pain. Unconsciousness threatened to pull him under. He snarled and dug his fingers under the door – he had to lift it, lift it or die. Sven threw all his strength into it, until the wood dug into his flesh, until his finger bones started to crack from the strain. The door didn't budge. His muscles weakened, only

A bloody paw ripped out of Molly's body, six-inch gore-covered claws tearing a huge hole in her belly.

slightly, and in that moment he knew there was no escape.

Through a haze of semi-consciousness, Sven saw the creature lift its bloody head. A big, triangular head, too big for the body. A black head, with a white patch surrounding the left eye. The eyes opened, dark eyes, eyes that came straight from hell. Sven fell back into the snow, the black bees now big as sparrows, flying about his head, blocking everything out. With his last energy, he lifted himself up on one shoulder. He looked for the shotgun – but it was trapped under the door. The sparrow-spots grew to the size of crows, fat crows. Sven fell to his back again.

Movement from the barn. Through a waving haze, he saw three creatures step out, one after another, like the one that had just ripped from Molly's womb. These were also covered with blood, but mostly dried blood, except for their mouths and claws, which were painted in wet red. Black and white and red. Moving clumsily, like month-old puppies.

Pastie barking. Dog spittle flying onto his face. Four creatures coming towards him. Eyes.

Black eyes.

A yelp.

Hot, rancid breath. Something stinging his neck, a dozen poking knives.

The crows turned into eagles, then blackness.

Then nothing.

December 1, 6:02 a.m.

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Clayton pulled off his mitten and searched his oversized key ring. Sara watched him, knowing they had to move but still sad to leave the Bv's heated cab. She looked up at the big stone church, easily the largest building in the small, dilapidated town. The walls looked solid; if there were any place on the island she could hold out and wait for help, this was it. The second half of the two-fisted storm blew snow in every direction, down, sideways, even up, as winds cascaded off the church's stone walls.

The lock opened with a couple of scratchy clicks. Clayton pulled the twelve-foot-high door, which opened with a gothic screech of the hinges. They slipped inside and Clayton shut the door, blocking out the wind. Snow that had blown into the church gently dropped to the floor.

They walked inside and looked up at the wooden beams of the twenty-foot cathedral ceiling. The wood was a warm brown in some places where bits of varnish remained, but blackish gray most everywhere else. The fading early-evening light filtered through stained-glass windows depicting scenes of the twelve apostles. Most of the pews remained, although two or three had broken bases and rested at an angle, one side on the ground, the other sticking up in the air.

"Nice," Sara said. "They should use this for the set of a movie."

Clayton nodded. "Yah, Clark Gable told me da same thing. Said it would cost too much to bring a crew up here, though."

A choir balcony hovered above the main door, a good fifteen feet above the ground. The choir loft ran along both sides of the church, ending at the sides of the main altar, a large half-circle of three granite steps that stood out from the back wall like a medieval stage. The place smelled of a cold, musty, wet-granite dampness.

Sara pointed to the choir loft. "How do we get up there?"

"Stairs are behind da altar, off to the right" Clayton said. "They're really narrow, but they're still solid."

Claudette tugged gently on Sara's sleeve. "Will we be safe here?"

Clayton answered the question. "Safe as you can be, eh? Let's not beat around da bush. That Magnus is meaner than a two-peckered billy goat. But I'm da only one with a key to this place, and from what you say, no one knows you're still alive."

"So what now?" Sara asked.

Clayton scratched his gray stubble. "Well, I've got to call in Chris, see when he can get da boat out here. Then it's just a matter of sneaking you on it, eh?"

"How can you call him in if all the radio traffic is jammed?" Sara asked.

Clayton held up the key ring and shook it, making the ice-cold keys ring like a chime. "Just got to get to da secure satellite linkup. Chris has one at his place so's we can always reach him, in case of emergency, eh? Well, this is an emergency."

"Clayton," Sara said. "Isn't that going to be dangerous? Won't Magnus be watching?"

He thought for a moment, staring at a dusty, stained glass image of Paul, then nodded. "Yeah, I think he's going to be watching, eh? But I know this place, and I know it better than anyone. I'll be careful. But it's got to be done, eh? We need to get you off da island and fast."

Clayton walked out the door, leaving Sara and Claudette to exchange glances. Clayton was risking his life for them. If Magnus would take out a half-billion dollar plane and a trio of irreplaceable geniuses, he wouldn't think twice about whacking some janitor.

Clayton returned, arms loaded with blankets, a flashlight, a plastic case, and a kerosene heater.

"These are da emergency supplies in case da Bv gets stuck, eh? On da altar to da left there's a preparatory room. It's small, so that's where I'd put da heater. There's no windows there, so no one will see da light. Sara, knock a hole in da ceiling so da kerosene fumes can vent. You've got enough kerosene to last through da night. I'll bring some more out tomorrow morning. There's some MREs in da case. Keep *warm* – it's going to get cold tonight. Maybe colder than it's ever been here, at least in my years on da island, eh? It will take me twenty minutes to get back to da mansion, then maybe fifteen or twenty before I can get to da transmitter. From there, it's three hours for Chris to get here, eh? He's my boy, he'll come. Now you two stay out of sight, and *keep warm*. I'm not fuckin' around, it's going to be cold enough to freeze da balls off a shaggy bull."

Clayton handed Sara the flashlight, then walked out and shut the heavy, creaking doors behind him. Sara heard the click of the old lock before she turned on the flashlight. She and Claudette gathered up the blankets, the case and the heater and

walked towards the altar. Maybe four or five hours, if they were lucky, then they'd be on a boat and off the island. Sara dared to hope they might make it after all.

Claudette stopped at the altar and knelt, head dipped in a silent prayer.

Sara didn't mind waiting for her to finish.

December 1, 8:23 a.m.

Dawn broke over the island, the sun's first rays fighting through the blowing snow. But storm or no storm, there was work to be done. Rory Sherwood slid on his thick Otto Lodge parka. Happily whistling "Slide It In" by Whitesnake, he laced up his snowshoes and started towards the barn.

It looked like another ten inches had fallen during the night. The snowmobiling would be incredible. If he knew Clayton, the trails might already be groomed. As soon as he finished the morning's chores, he and Violet would take a spin or two around the island.

If the storms kept up like this, the snow might well reach the roof of his house by January. Two years ago, a good six feet of snow, combined with wind-sculpted drifts, had hidden his one-story house under a huge snow bank. He'd had to dig a tunnel out of his house after the storm dropped twenty-six inches of snow in two days.

He started the twenty-five yard trudge to the barn, but stopped when he heard the whine of a dog coming from behind his Jeep. Rory walked behind the Jeep to find Pastie, Sven's dog, cowering and shivering.

"Good God, Pastie, what happened to you?"

The dog's left shoulder was torn open, bloody and exposed. He held his left paw in the air, as if it hurt to put any weight on it. He also had a long cut on his head, which was still bleeding a bit. Pastie limp-hopped to Rory and leaned his weight against the man. His whines increased. Snow covered his fur, icy clumps hanging from his whiskers.

Rory gently brushed the snow off Pastie's face. "Take it easy, boy, it's okay now."

In answer, a low, evil growl burbled forth from Pastie's closed mouth. Rory pulled his hand back, suddenly conscious the dog might somehow be rabid, before he realized that Pastie wasn't growling at him.

He was growling at something out in the pasture.

Out there, in the blazing white snow, he saw something, something black and white and red. No, the something was black and white; the snow was red. He raised his hand to block the snow's glare and peered out. It looked like a prone cow. It moved, slightly, an unnatural, herky-jerky movement. The blazing sun reflecting off the pure white field made it hard to see.

A head popped up from behind the prone cow. Were there two black-and-white creatures? Rory couldn't make out much other than some black-and-white fur, marred by the bright red of the cow's fresh blood.

"What da hell is that thing?" he mumbled, squinting his eyes tighter, trying to see through the snow's blinding glare. A wild dog? Perhaps a wolf? Was that what tore up

Pastie? He felt a small surge of adrenaline from a tangible sensation of danger, the unexpected feeling of seeing a predator in the wild. He was fairly close to the house, so even if the wolf rushed him he'd be able to make it to safety.

The cow's carcass blocked any view of the creature's body. It had a big, oddly shaped head. Clayton said there had been wolves on the island back in the sixties. But the wolves had been wiped out by 1974, or so everyone thought.

Was that one of his cows? Was it one of Sven's? How had it gotten out? The thing in the field presented a clear danger to his herd. He'd have to kill it.

Then the wolf raised its fin.

Rory blinked a few times, his brain trying to register what his eyes took in. A fin, like the dorsal fin of a sunfish, rose up above the dog's head. It turned its head slightly, giving Rory a flash of bright-yellow skin streaked with reddish-orange.

That's no wolf, Rory thought. And that sure as FUCK ain't no cow. I don't know what the hell that is, and I don't care until I get my gun.

He turned slowly, and started moving back to the house. More adrenaline pumped into his system, powered by fear of the unknown. The creature didn't move. It stayed behind the downed cow. As Rory walked towards the house, he saw the fin lower, raise, then lower again.

What the hell is that thing?

What the hell is that thing?

He looked for Pastie, but the dog was nowhere to be seen. Rory reached the house and walked inside, shutting the door right behind him before kneeling to take off his snowshoes. He watched

the thing through the dining room window.

Violet stood there, looking at him, her hair in curlers, a white terry-cloth robe around her, a steaming mug of coffee held in one hand. Her expression was half confusion, half amusement.

"You forget something, hon?"

"Get my gun."

Her half-smile faded. "Rory, what's the matter – "

"Get the damn gun!"

Violet shrank back as if she'd been slapped. The coffee cup dropped to the floor, breaking in half, the brown liquid splashing up and staining her white robe. She turned and ran into the living room.

Rory tossed the snowshoes away, scrambled to his feet and followed his wife. He walked into the living room, where she handed him his .30-30 Winchester rifle and a box of cartridges.

"Rory, what's going on?"

He put the box of shells in his parka pocket.

"There's something out there. It brought down a cow."

"What is it, a wolf? I thought there weren't any wolves on da island anymore."

“This ain’t no wolf. I don’t know what it is. Call the lodge.”

Violet did as she was told. She moved to the end table, picked up the handset. She looked at Rory with fear in her eyes. “It’s still out.”

“Fucking Clayton,” Rory hissed.

Violet’s scream nearly made him shit his pants. He’d never before heard her scream in terror, and the sound cut through his soul like a chainsaw. Her hands shot to her mouth, her wide-eyed stare fixed on the living room window. Rory turned to look out the window and caught a glimpse of the creature he’d seen in the field – huge triangular head, bloody mouth full of long, pointed teeth, narrow black eyes and that strange fin sticking straight up in the air. He only caught a glimpse, because that was all he had time for before he shouldered the .30-30 and fired.

The window shattered outward. The creature’s head snapped back. It fell like a sack of potatoes, the misty cloud of red settling down on the snow around it. Wind blew the curtains inward, accompanied by blowing snow and a blast of frigid air.

Rory chambered another shell into the .30-30 and strode forward.

“Rory, don’t!”

He ignored her. He kept the gun shouldered and ducked past the flapping curtains to look out the window. Rory squinted his eyes against the wind-blown snow. Blood poured from the thing’s head, staining the snow, bright red on bright white, but it was still moving. Despite a hamburger-red hole on the creature’s head, it seemed to be trying to rise. Rory leaned out the window, aimed at the head, and fired again. A second ragged hole in its head seemed to do the trick – the creature fell, limp and lifeless.

Rory lowered the gun and cocked another shell into the chamber. He peered out at the dead animal. He’d never seen anything like it. Head much larger than the body, a wedge-shaped head with rows of long pointed teeth.

Like an alligator head, Rory thought. Or a frigging dinosaur head.

It had long front arms and large paws that ended in wicked claws. Black-and-white fur, cow’s fur, covered its dead body. It was big and thick, perhaps 180 pounds. Rory thought the dead animal looked like a fur-covered cross between an orangutan and an alligator. To have looked in the living room window like that, it would have had to stand on its hind legs and lean those big, clawed paws on the wall.

“Rory, it’s freezing in here.”

The wind drove subzero cold through the shattered window. As if to punctuate her statement, a concentrated gust rolled through the window and caught the table lamp’s shade like a sea wind filling a sail. The lamp tumbled to the ground, the bulb breaking on impact. The curtains billowed up around his face. Rory brushed them aside and rested the .30-30 against the window sill.

“Come to the basement with me and help me get a piece of plywood, dear. I’ll board this up for you.”

Violet followed him downstairs. “Honey,” she said, “what was that thing?”

He heard the fear in her voice, and realized just how protected their life on the island had been until five minutes ago. No crime, no dangerous animals, and really no danger

at all as long as you respected the power of nature and winter.

“Don’t know, eh? Something weird, that’s for sure.”

Rory pulled the piece of plywood from the stack, carefully handing Violet one end so as not to give her a splinter.

“It looked dangerous.”

Rory nodded. “Ya, sure as hell did. Damn thing came right up to da house, like it had no fear of man at all. I’ve never seen that before.”

They heard another crash from upstairs – the wind had knocked something else over. Rory knew he needed to get that window boarded up fast before the living room had a half-inch of snow.

They brought the plywood upstairs. Rory walked backwards, guiding them towards the window, but stopped when he heard the muffled crunch of glass being ground into carpet. He looked down to see a few pieces of glass lying on the living room carpet.

But the glass would have been blown outwards ...

A sudden blast of cancerous realization hit him, hit him hard. He dropped the plywood and turned.

The head of a second creature, this one with an all-black head except for a white patch on the left eye, practically filled the broken window. It was so close he felt the heat of its breath and smelled the foul, fetid stink of its mouth. His soul sinking, Rory reached for his gun.

But it wasn’t there.

He stopped short, knowing damn well he’d left the gun there, wondering where else he might have left it, when Violet started screaming again. Not the scream of terror, this time, but the scream of pain, total pain, the pain of long, narrow teeth puncturing terrycloth and soft skin.

Rory had one brief moment to realize that the creatures were *inside* the house, but only a moment, for the spotted one scrambled through the window with a speedy urgency. Rory reached for a lamp to use as a club, but before he could swing it he went down under the weight of two creatures.

December 1, 3:45 p.m.

Andy moved his king back to king-2. He was on the ropes, unable to keep up with Magnus’s methodical attack. The game was already over, but they played it out anyway. They sat in the lounge, Magnus on his leather throne, Andy on a couch, the chess set laid out on a coffee table. Magnus reached out, his thick right hand hovering indecisively over the pieces. He had gauze wrapped around the hand, so thick it almost looked like the tape job on a boxer before a big fight. Andy had learned long ago not to ask about the mysterious wounds that showed up on Magnus’s body.

“So let me get this straight,” Andy said. “Colding is going to take the fall?”

Magnus moved his queen to king-3, right on top of Andy’s king. Andy couldn’t take the

queen without putting himself in check thanks to Magnus's rook, which sat on queen's-bishop-3.

"It's not that complicated, Andy," Magnus said in a drunken slur.

It pissed Andy off to no end that he couldn't beat Magnus, even after the man had downed an entire fifth of Yukon Jack.

"But who's going to believe Colding sabotaged the plane?"

"A lot of people, including my dear brother, know Colding was fucking Sara. So Sara dumps him, and he goes nuts. The plane's already gone. If anyone suspects sabotage, or finds the wreckage, which is impossible, we hang the blame on Colding for a calculated crime of passion. Either way, if the plane is found or declared missing, I collect the insurance money. We get out of this project with a small loss and get back to real business.

"What about Jian?"

"That will probably ride as a suicide, but if it doesn't, Colding and Gunther buried her. I'm sure there's some forensic evidence in the grave that ties it to Colding. He had access to the weapon that killed Jian."

Andy moved his king to queen-1.

"And what if Danté figures it out? What if he tries to get to the bottom of everything?"

Magnus moved his rook to queen's-bishop-1 – checkmate. He casually reached down and picked up Andy's king, the crowned top peeking out from his huge fist.

"If Danté doesn't play ball, I'll take care of that, too." Magnus put his thumb on the piece and pushed – the king's head snapped off and fell to the table, bouncing twice before spinning to a rest.

Andy looked at the decapitated king's head, once again feeling grateful that he fought with Magnus, and not against him.

December 1, 7:10 p.m.

Clayton wanted to get to the radio, but he had to know, for certain, the location of Magnus, Andy, Gunther and Colding before trying anything. If he fucked up and got caught, he'd probably be dead before he had time to think about how stupid he was for getting involved. But he had to get involved, or those women would die. It was just that simple.

He rolled his mop bucket into the lounge, hoping to see Magnus in his usual place. His hopes were rewarded – not only was Magnus in his big leather throne, but Andy was there as well, relaxing in a neighboring chair, the two of them engaged in a game of chess.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Magnus called out. His chair faced the picture window, which meant his back was to the room, so Clayton couldn't see his face. He could, however, see Andy's sneer.

From the back of the chair, Clayton could only see the top of Magnus's bald head and

his big hand wrapped around a bottle of Yukon Jack, which sat on the chair's armrest. The hand moved the bottle out of view – Clayton heard the quick gurgle of the bottle as Magnus took an unseen sip. The big hand and the bottle returned to the armrest.

"I said, where the fuck have you been, Clayton?" Magus called out again. "This place is practically a pigsty. You getting too old for your job?"

Clayton looked around the lounge. Food wrappers abounded, as did empty beer cans and two empty bottles of Yukon Jack. The two assholes hadn't bothered to pick up one damn thing all day. They'd just tossed their trash around as if this were some flophouse. Normally, such a mess would have made his skin crawl, made him leap to clean up the place and get his mansion looking respectable again. But this wasn't a normal situation, and all he could think about was whether the mess was some kind of a signal to Magnus: a signal that Clayton was hiding something.

"Sorry about that, Magnus," Clayton said. "Was feeling a bit under the weather."

Magnus was quiet for a moment. Andy just sat there, staring at Clayton, smiling his evil smile. Clayton felt sweat pooling in his armpits and on the back of his neck.

"I've never seen you sick a day in your life, Clayton," Magnus said, still facing the window. "Maybe you are getting old. Maybe I should get someone new out here."

Clayton snorted, his fear forgotten in a brief burst of anger. "Maybe you can kiss my ass, you circus freak. You wanna fire me, you fire me, but I don't have to take this shit." The words were out of his mouth before he even knew it – he held his breath, waiting for Magnus to come out of the chair and come after him.

Instead, the Yukon Jack bottle disappeared briefly, then returned to its perch. "You got a real mouth on you, old man," Magnus said. "Just don't make a habit of this being sick thing. Clean up in here and then get your butt down to the security room. It stinks down there."

"No problem," Clayton said, letting out a slow breath. He hurriedly picked up the lounge, tossing debris into the trashcan and wiping down the bar and all the tables. Andy and Magnus said nothing as he went about his work.

Clayton quickly finished and tried not to run down to the security room. This was perhaps the best chance he'd have until nighttime. He moved to the back stairs and carried the heavy mop bucket to the bottom. Once there, he rolled it to the security room and opened the door. Gunther was sitting in the swivel chair, feet up on the counter, eyes closed in a catnap. The eyes fluttered open from the rattling, sloshing sound of the bucket.

Clayton smiled and nodded. "How's it goin', eh?"

Gunther sat up quickly, as if he was caught doing something wrong. When he saw Clayton, he smiled, a smile that quickly turned into a yawn.

"Shit, Clayton, you scared me. I thought you were Magnus, thought I was in big trouble."

"Don't worry about it. He's up in da lounge getting hammered with Andy. Hey, I finished *Lost Lust*. Best of all the three books."

Gunther smiled. "You finished it already?"

“Yah. I liked it. Your main character chick reminded me of Liz Taylor. She was a hot one in the sack, let me tell you.”

“You did Liz Taylor?”

Clayton nodded. “She came up three summers straight. I like to think it was because of me, eh?”

“Whatever, Clayton. Thanks for reading the books though, you’re a really fast reader. Man, I’m beat. Doing sixteen hours a day. Magnus has us taking ten-hour shifts up on the tower on Oak Ridge. Andy only has to do four hours at a time, the damn brown-noser.”

“Yah? Who’s up there now?”

“Colding. Probably freezing his southern ass off. Nothing quite like being thirty feet off the ground in a tin shack in the dead of winter.”

“Why is Magnus making you guys do that?”

Gunther shrugged. “He seems to think the CIA is coming at any minute. He’s got the jammer on so no one can make transmissions in or out. We also have to watch for Danté, who could arrive any time now.”

Clayton let out a low whistle. “Sounds like he’s pretty worried, eh?”

Gunther nodded, and another huge yawn opened his mouth wide.

“Jeeze, if he catches you sleeping down here, he’ll be pissed,” Clayton said. “You should go grab some coffee. From the kitchen, though, not the lounge, the big freak is in there with Andy. I’ll keep an eye on da screens for you, if you like, eh?”

Gunther tried to rub the sleep from his eyes. “Yeah, coffee would be great. You know how to work this stuff?”

“Who da hell do you think used it before you all got here?” Clayton said. “Now hurry up and get some coffee while I clean up.”

Gunther smiled, stretched, then stood and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

Clayton quickly sat in the chair at the secure transmission terminal. There wasn’t much time. Andy and Magnus were drinking hard, but that didn’t mean they’d stay in the lounge for good. Clayton had to make this fast.

He sat at the desk and moved the mouse. On the screen, the spinning Genada logo disappeared, replaced by the desktop’s blue background and icons. Clayton clicked the “contact” icon, then typed in his password.

The computer let out a sudden *beep*, and the words `INVALID PASSWORD` flashed on the screen.

“You little shit. You locked me out, too.” Clayton smiled as he closed the window and accessed the administration program. He’d been using the secure terminal for two years. He loved Black Manitou, but never for a moment forgot that if something went wrong, Chris was his only reliable connection to the outside world. Because of that, Clayton made sure he fully understood the secure terminal, the software for the jammer, how to work the radio and satellite linkup – everything that had anything to do with communications on the island.

“I’m not as old and dumb as I look, you big, bald fuck.”

Clayton used the admin program to make himself a super-user, able to override any password protection. He watched the security screens, tracking Gunther's progress, making sure that Andy and Magnus stayed put. Clayton had precious little time to work with. He clicked the "contact" icon, entered his password, and the system opened up. He clicked "Houghton" and waited.

"Come on," Clayton whispered. "Be home, please be home."

After an agonizing ten seconds that seemed a silent eternity, the screen flashed once, then showed Chris's face.

"Dad? What's up?"

"We've got a problem here, eh? You've got to come out right away."

"The weather's bad, man. I don't dare take the boat out now."

"You gotta do it anyway. Magnus blew up da plane. He's killing people here."

Chris blinked a few times. "Are you shitting me, Dad?"

Clayton shook his head. "He wants to kill da C-5 pilot and that French scientist. He already killed da Chinese woman."

Chris's jaw dropped. A hard look replaced his boyish grin. "Killed her? But why? That's fucking nuts."

"It's nuts and so is Magnus, eh? Listen close. Da ladies are hidden in da church. You've got to get here as soon as you can. Come in quiet with no lights, go to da church and get 'em. Get 'em back to da mainland."

"What about you, Dad? Where do I pick you up?"

"Never mind about me, eh? I've got to watch out for some other people here, too. We're getting da women off the island, and I'm not going to listen to another word about it, you understand?"

Chris nodded. "Should I call the cops?"

Clayton scratched his beard. "I don't think that's a good idea, eh? At least not yet. Magnus is really high strung. If da local cops show up, somebody else might get killed. Just get da ladies off da island and fast – I think everyone else is safe for now."

"What about Rhumkorrf?"

"I think Rhumkorrf's dead. And everyone else will be dead, too, if you don't get out here."

"There's no way I can make it out in anything less than a forty-footer, Dad. Storms are tearing the lake up. We're talking 'wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald' weather out there. Don't forget I'm on the water at least six hours, three there, three back."

"But I've got to get those women off the island!"

Chris pulled on his lower lip as he thought the situation over.

"We've got to move quick," Clayton said. "If you drag your feet, those women will die."

Chris took a deep breath, then let it out slow. "Okay, here's the deal. I can't come tonight; that's just plain suicide. But I'll leave tomorrow afternoon regardless of the weather. I'll time it to arrive just after dark. Can you wait that long?"

It would have to do. He didn't want his son to die trying to save the women, so it would have to suffice. "Yeah, I think we can manage that. Be *careful*, Magnus has da

jammer on full-time, so you won't be able to radio in, and I won't be able to warn you if someone is waiting for you. It could be dangerous."

"Sounds like it. I'll watch my ass, Dad."

"Okay, eh? When you get to da church, give two flashes with a flashlight. I'll tell them to look for that signal. Good luck."

Clayton broke the connection. He gave the area a quick once-over, making sure he hadn't missed anything. In seconds he was mopping again, and had the floor half done when Gunther walked back into the room, a steaming mug of coffee in his hand.

"Thanks, Clayton," Gunther said. "I appreciate that."

"Don't mention it, eh? Anytime."

December 2, 6:05 a.m.

A shadowy figure slipped out of the shed behind Sven's barn, ducking his head against the driving wind. He saw the barn's rear door, pushed open by blowing and drifting snow. He walked to the door, limping, every step painful from the burns, the bruises and the frostbite.

Magnus was out there, somewhere, waiting for him, but he couldn't take the cold anymore. And surely Magnus didn't want *him* dead. That made no sense. They'd come for him, take him to safety. Even if he were wrong, he had to try – he knew he wouldn't last much longer in the cold, and if those things came back, he wouldn't even last a few seconds. He had to get back to the mansion, where they had guns.

He carefully, quietly, looked inside the barn. Filled with snow, but empty. Snow was deep in the front of the barn, near the fallen door, and grew progressively shallower towards the back. There was nothing. Well, almost nothing. No cows, no people, nothing but scattered hay and broken stalls. There were piles of feces everywhere he looked. He picked up one of the frozen piles and examined the stool.

What he saw almost made him cry.

He left the barn and moved towards the house, looking everywhere for any sign of movement.

December 2, 6:34 a.m.

"Remember, Chris will give two flashes," Clayton told Sara. "You answer with two. Anything else, and you lay low, because it's not Chris or me."

Sara nodded, a smile on her face.

"Clayton, I can't thank you enough."

Clayton started to tell Sara not to worry about it, but she grabbed his face and gave him a fast kiss. She threw her arms around him and squeezed. Clayton stood dumb for a moment, then returned her hug. She let go and smiled.

Clayton felt his face turn red. He nodded, then opened the church door and slipped outside. He locked the door behind himself, nervously looking everywhere for any sign of danger, for any sign of Magnus. He didn't think the can of kerosene would be missed – as far as he knew, he was the only one who kept track of such things. No one else seemed to pay much attention.

He moved through the darkness towards the Bv. He left deep footprints, but there was no avoiding that. He hoped the prints would go unnoticed if anyone came whipping by in their snowmobiles. Besides, he'd left the Bv on the trail and walked through the woods to reach the back of the church. Odds were no one would follow footprints through fifty yards of woods just to see where they led.

Despite his precautions, Clayton breathed a sigh of relief when he finally reached the Bv and climbed into the heated cab.

He put the motor in gear and moved down the trail. He'd finish grooming the middle trail, just to make it look good in case someone came out to look for him. He guided the Bv around Jody Lake and turned north. Had Rory been up and on his porch, Clayton could have waved to him. But early morning on this freezing island was apparently a time only for old fools.

The Bv's heavy sled dragged across the fresh snow, compacting it into a perfectly groomed trail. Clayton fired up the tape player, listening to some Dean Martin. Dean had been a real prince of a guy. Clayton hated hearing about his death. The trail turned northeast, which would take him within sight of Rapleje Bay. In truth Clayton was dying to see if the C-5 wreck was visible. If it was, and Magnus decided to take a round-the-island snowmobile jaunt, all his sneaking might be for nothing.

Just southwest of Rapleje Bay, Rory's phone line connected to the main line that led from Sven's to the mansion. Clayton referred to his repair map one more time, then found the break. A tree leaned against one of the landline poles. Both ends of the line were still connected, which meant a crack in the line – an easy, quick fix.

Clayton got out of the Bv. He pulled out a chainsaw and expertly cut the tree so it fell off the phone line. He climbed into the aerial lift bucket and raised himself to the cracked line. The vantage gave him a clear view of Rapleje Bay. At first he didn't notice anything, then his eyes caught the strange bumps out on the ice. The wreckage was there, all right, but he was looking for it. Had he just been sightseeing, he might have missed the bumps entirely, or at least dismissed them as chunks of ice.

Clayton smiled. Even if Magnus did drive by, he'd probably miss it. Just a few more hours, hopefully, and the women would be off the island.

Clayton Detweiler turned his attention to fixing the land line, unaware of the hungry eyes that followed his every move.



Three ancestors waited at the edge of the trail. Their bellies were full, and they were sleepy. But the food was almost gone – they had to find more.

Their new prey sat high in the skinny tree. A noisy thing had come, and they had moved towards the noise. The thing moved, but did not smell like prey. Then it stopped.

They sat down and waited. Prey had come this way. Prey would come again.

Prey was *inside* the thing. They moved forward, silently, quickly.

As they closed in, the skinny tree bent in on itself, lowering the prey back down to the noisy thing. They watched, smelling for the scent of the stick that killed. The noisy thing smelled like the stick. Not the same scent, but similar, similar enough to move in slowly.

The prey climbed into the noisy thing. The noisy thing then moved away. The leader, Baby McButter, flipped his dorsal fin into the air, signaling them all to move forward. Thick arms plowed through deep snow as they closed the distance. The noisy thing was too slow.

The ancestors moved in, but then the noisy thing turned and it picked up speed. It started to pull away. The leader roared in anger and ran faster, but the noisy thing kept increasing the distance – it had heard them, and was running away.

Finally, the Baby McButter slowed to a trot, then stopped. Its belly was too full, it couldn't run fast. It watched the noisy thing moving away, and suddenly realized why it could move so quickly. There were no trees here, just a wide open space. The noisy thing liked the wide open space.

To Baby McButter's right, an ancestor let out a low, mournful moan. No food. Soon they would be hungry.

They sat down and waited. Prey had come this way. Prey would come again.

December 2, 9:30 a.m.

"Mother duck-fuckin' motherfucker," Andy said quietly as he hung up the phone. This was going to get ugly. This was going to get butt-fucking ugly in one fuck of a hurry. How the hell was that even possible? But he knew the guy's voice, there was no mistaking it.

He sprinted out of the security room, up the stairs and into the lounge. Magnus sat there, fresh bottle of Yukon Jack in hand, blankly staring out the picture window at the blustery winter morning.

"Magnus, we've got a big problem. You won't believe who just called in."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense."

"Rhumkorrf."

Magnus turned in his chair and glared at Andy. Andy took an unconscious step back.

"Have you been drinking, Andy?"

Andy shook his head. "No, sir. It was Rhumkorrf. He called in from Sven's place."

Magnus stared for a second, then turned to once again face the picture window. He

took a long swig of whiskey, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and sat there. Andy shuffled from foot to foot, waiting for orders. Rhumkorrf was supposed to be dead.

Magnus finally stood. He capped the bottle and set it on a table, then walked to look down at Andy.

“Have you seen Clayton?”

Andy shook his head. “No, I think he’s out grooming the trails again.”

“How about Colding? Is he at the tower?”

“No, Gunther is there,” Andy said. “Colding is probably in his room.”

“Go get him. Tell him Rhumkorrf called in. Both of you go to Sven’s house. Before you get there, kill Colding.”

“Kill him? Magnus, are you nuts? Danté could be here at any minute and you want me to kill Colding?”

Andy felt a giant hand on his neck before he even saw Magnus move. The hand was like an iron clamp. Andy couldn’t breath, and somewhere in the primitive, reptilian part of his brain, he knew that to struggle was useless. That dark part of his brain knew better than to go for his gun – before his hand could even close on the handle, Magnus could effortlessly break his neck. He stood very, very still as Magnus leaned in close enough to kiss him.

“You do what I tell you if you want to live. There’s \$100,000 in it for you when you waste him. Notice I said *when*, not *if*. Do it *before* you get to Rhumkorrf. And when you get to Rhumkorrf, kill him too. There’s another \$100,000 for that little piece of shit. It’s a big island, and it’s covered in snow – make sure no one finds the bodies until Spring. Now, if you agree, blink twice. If you disagree, blink once, but if you blink once, I’m going to snap your neck like a fucking twig.”

Andy blinked twice.

Magnus let him go. Andy felt oxygen flood into this lungs. He blinked twice more, just to be sure he’d got the message across.

“Now move,” Magnus said.

Andy ran for the door, headed for Colding’s room.

December 2, 9:41 p.m.

Only ten minutes after Rhumkorrf’s call, Andy and Colding were already a half mile across the northern trail, their sleds doing over forty miles per hour. Trees whipped by as green and brown and white blurs. The sleds kicked up relatively little snow, thanks to Clayton’s expert grooming efforts.

Colding’s mind and heart raced even faster than the snowmobile. Rhumkorrf was alive, and on the island. And if he were alive, chances were that Sara was alive as well. If she had lived, she’d been on the island for two full days, and she hadn’t contacted him. There was only one explanation for that – someone had tried to kill her, and she thought

Colding might be part of the plot. But again, that was *if* she had lived.

Colding knew he had to make his move, and make it now. The C-5 must have been sabotaged, somehow. Magnus was upping the ante. As much as it sickened him, Colding knew he had to kill Andy Crosthwaite. He wondered if he'd be able to pull the trigger. No, that was the type of comment someone might mumble in a Hollywood film, full of some pseudo-morality meant to make a hero more likeable. He could do it. He *would* do it – it was the only way. If Rhumkorrf were alive, the C-5 had crashed. Not landed, *crashed*, as the landing strip was the only place to safely bring down a plane that big. And, if it had crashed, it must have done so the night of the storm.

Magnus wanted the project destroyed. It would only be a matter of time before he tried to kill Colding as well. Colding suddenly remembered that Andy was behind him, and wondered if Andy would be the one to try and take him out.

December 2, 9:45 p.m.

Magnus had been on and off the island for over five years. And in all of that time, Clayton Detweiler had been the poster boy of the blue-collar work ethic. Everything was always clean, all the phone lines worked, all the machines functioned properly – everything seemed to just be taken care of as if by some invisible hand.

But for the last two days, he'd barely seen Clayton. Not around the mansion, not around the hangar. Sure, the trails had to be groomed, but how long could that take? What bothered Magnus was that the mansion was *dirty*. Nothing big, a few papers here and there, the counters in the lounge were sticky, some dust on the knickknacks and dirt on the floor.

That meant something else was occupying the old man's attention. Now, after Rhumkorrf's call, Magnus had a good suspicion what Clayton had been doing with his time. It was no coincidence that Clayton became scarce the morning after the C-5's flight.

Magnus drove his Arctic Cat into Clayton's driveway. He walked up to the door and tried the handle. Locked. He drew his .44, then raised one huge foot and kicked. The door ripped open as if it were made of cardboard.

He walked inside. The place looked empty. Magnus looked in the kitchen, then moved through the living room. Nothing out of the ordinary. He moved to Clayton's bedroom. The bed was unmade. Clothes covered the floor. Magnus was about to walk out when something white in a pile of clothes caught his eye. Something that shouldn't be there. He bent down and picked it up.

A bra.

Magnus stared at it for a second, then tossed it onto the bed. He rummaged through the pile of clothes. A pair of damp women's jeans. And below that, a pair of women's slacks, also slightly damp. But at the bottom of the pile Magnus found the real prize: a lab coat, covered in blood.

Anger welled up in his mind. Anger wasn't the word for it – nuclear fury fit the bill much better. He breathed deeply through his nose.

"How?" he asked the room. "I don't understand how."

His mind seemed to cloud over. He stood there, blinking rapidly, trying to think, trying to see. Everything was coming apart. How? *How?* Nothing made sense.

Magnus reached to the small of his back and drew his Ka-Bar knife. He didn't bother to remove his parka, he just jabbed the point lightly into his left sleeve. The point stabbed into his thick forearm. He hissed with pain, but it wasn't enough.

"How? I don't understand *how*."

He stabbed again, and again. On the fourth prick, the mind-cloud seemed to evaporate. The room came back into focus. Danté was coming. Magnus knew he had to act fast – if he could get to the women first, he could still hang all the blame on Colding. Insurance would offset most of the project's losses, and the family business would be back on track once again.

"Ahhh," he said to the knife. "Thank you." He put the blade away and walked to Clayton's wall-mounted phone, not noticing the thin trail of dripping blood that marked his path. Next to the phone hung a picture of a young Clayton and a young Clint Eastwood, each holding up a huge steelhead trout, both smiling away.

He'd ordered the jammer turned on full-blast, twenty-four seven, which made the walkie-talkies useless. Magnus dialed the mansion's general number, but there was no answer. God-damned Clayton was out on the trails again, or – more likely – hanging out wherever he'd stashed Sara and Overgard.

Magnus thought about going after him, out on the trails. But he didn't know exactly where Clayton would be. Clayton had been on the island for decades, he knew hundreds of hiding spots. It would take too long to track him down. On top of that, if Sara, Rhumkorrf and Overgard were still alive, Sara's crew might be alive as well. Three military-trained men. And thanks to his snowmobile, they'd hear him coming a mile away. Bad tactical situation.

Magnus took a deep breath. As much as he hated it, his best move was to go back to the mansion and wait for Clayton's return. He had to have more info, had to know the whole story before he could formulate a plan.

Magnus looked at his parka sleeve, slowly growing wet with blood. He didn't know *how* they'd escaped, and he really didn't care. The only real question, the question Clayton would soon help him with, was *where were they?*

December 2, 9:50 p.m.

Colding had the throttle opened up, pushing the Arctic Cat to its limits. The Cat's headlights illuminated a narrow cone of the dark trail. The trail popped out of the trees at Big Todd harbor, and continued along the coastline. The name 'harbor' was a misnomer for a beach strewn with huge, jagged chunks of weathered limestone, but it

was an inlet, so someone had named it ‘harbor’ all the same. He cast a quick glance out at the water – and did a double-take. The small inlet was completely frozen over. At least a half mile of ice stretched out from the coast. The bitter cold wasn’t satisfied with claiming just the land; it seemed to want *everything*, including the churning waters of Lake Superior.

He looked back up the trail, and did so just in time – a fallen tree blocked the path. Colding hit the breaks hard and fought to keep the Arctic Cat under control. The rear end fishtailed to the left, but the sled stopped a few feet from the tree. The skid left it pointing straight towards the trail’s right bank, a long, three-foot high pile of snow.

It wasn’t much of a tree, dead and free of bark, only a foot in diameter, but if he’d hit it full speed it would have demolished his snowmobile and probably killed him. It had fallen from the left side of the trail, and only extended about four feet onto the right bank. They could easily go around it.

But there was something odd about the tree.

Behind him, Andy slowed his Polaris to a stop, his headlights illuminating the dead wood. Colding dismounted from his Arctic Cat and knelt next to the log. He flipped up his face shield for a better look. Long, deep, parallel white marks covered the old wood.

Claw marks.

“What the heck is this?”

He sensed Andy walking up behind him.

“Andy, have you ever seen anything like this on the island?”

Andy leaned forward. “Can’t say that I have. What is it?”

“Looks like claw marks. Maybe from a bear? I thought there weren’t any large predators on this island.”

“I’ve never seen any,” Andy said.

Colding ran his gloved fingers over the deep marks. Something *big* had done this. He felt a sense of trepidation that yet one more thing was going wrong. He wondered if the thing that had made these marks was moving southwest, towards the mansion, or north, towards Rhumkorrf.

Then his eyes registered the footprints. They were everywhere, hundreds of them, pressed into the packed trail. Big prints, eight inches wide and a foot long, clean indentations of claw-tips in front of each of the four toes. The snowmobile’s lights cast black shadows within the prints, making them look deeper, larger, even more ominous.

Colding suddenly wanted to be anywhere but at the log. He stood, walked back to his snowmobile and sat down. He paused before hitting the start button, noticing that Andy was just standing there.

“Andy, we’ve got to get moving.”

“I guess this is as good a place as any,” Andy said. He took off his gloves.

“Good a place as any for what?”

With a smooth motion, Andy unzipped his snowsuit, reached inside, and came out with his Beretta pointed right at Colding.

“A good a place as any to shoot your punk ass, Colding.”

Colding didn't move. He should have tried to take Andy out the second he realized the C-5 was on the island. There was no way he could unzip his snowsuit, reach in, and draw his Beretta before Andy gunned him down. Andy was no slouch – he was ex-special forces, serving right alongside Magnus. Colding swallowed hard. He was in trouble, and a lot of it.

"Why are you doing this, Andy?"

"Because Magnus wants you dead."

Colding kept his eyes on the gun.

"Listen, Andy, there's something going on here. Look around you, look at the weird footprints all over the ground."

Andy looked down. "So there's some animal prints here, so what?"

"But look at the size of them!"

Andy shrugged. "It doesn't make much difference, does it? I've got to whack you anyway."

"Andy, please" Colding said, his voice cracking slightly. "Come on, you don't have to do

"Andy, we're in trouble."

this."

"You're wrong. Magnus told me to do it, so I have to do it. He gave an order, pal, so it's either me or you. And hey, since I'm the one holding the gun, I choose you."

Colding's mind raced for something to say, but he was fresh out of ideas.

Andy cocked the hammer on his pistol.

"You ready, Colding?"

Colding didn't say anything, *couldn't* say anything.

He heard a crack that echoed across the darkness. His body twitched violently – he waited for the pain to hit, but after a fraction of a second he realized the sound had come from the woods. It wasn't a gunshot, but a broken stick.

Andy turned his head, but kept the gun leveled at Colding.

Colding moved to launch himself at Andy, but he wasn't even halfway out of his seat before Andy turned back, the gun pointed straight at Colding's face.

"Don't even think about it, duck-fucker."

Colding froze. He was so screwed, so utterly screwed.

Another crack from the woods, smaller this time, but still definitive. Colding thought he saw movement deep in the wood's blackness, something big.

From the woods behind Andy came a low, slow, deep growl.

Shivers ran up and down Colding's spine. He felt a new fear, a primitive fear, somehow even greater than his fear of the gun.

Andy took a few steps back, increasing his distance from Colding, before looking back into the woods. Colding felt panic clawing at his soul. He had to get away from there, but Andy wouldn't let him move. It was like choosing between two deaths: one

mechanical and efficient, the other surreal and unknown.

Then it hit him.

The fetus, Colding thought. *If Rhumkorrf is alive, then the cows lived.* He envisioned the little fetus attacking the camera, then tried to project how large it would have to be to break sticks big enough to cause an echo, or how big it would have to be to make that low, rumbling growl.

“Andy, we’re in trouble.”

“You’re in trouble, ass,” said Andy the Asshole, but his calm bravado was rapidly deteriorating. The woods seemed to be *moving*, a slithering and sliding deep in the trees, just out of sight.

“Okay, this is bullshit,” Andy said. He once again focused his attention on Colding, leveling the gun. “It’s been real, duck-fucker, but this place is creeping me out.”

Andy squeezed the trigger.

And just as he did, on the trail behind them, something erupted out of the woods.

Andy flinched just as the gun fired, throwing off his aim. The bullet hit the seat behind Colding, ripping up the vinyl and tearing out a huge chunk of foam rubber. Neither of them noticed the bullet hole.

Huge. That was the only word for it. White with black spots like a cow, a lion-sized cross between a gorilla and an alligator, thick muscles, black beady eyes, a mouth big enough to bite a man clean in half and teeth that looked like they could pierce steel plate. Well over 400 pounds, easy.

“Fuck a duck,” Andy said.

A long fin rose up from the thing’s head, revealing a bright-yellow membrane running from the fin to the creature’s back. It opened its gaping maw and let loose a roar straight out of a science-fiction movie. It pounded forward, huge muscles rippling under the black-and-white fur, heaving chest pushing up snow like the wake from a speedboat.

Colding decided he’d rather take his chances with the gun.

He hopped over the snowmobile seat, both feet landing on the right footrest. He crouched down as low as he could, keeping his hands on the handle bars, putting the bulk of the snowmobile between himself and Andy. He hit the ‘start’ button and the engine instantly came to life.

Andy turned to fire at Colding, then quickly changed his mind and turned his attention back to the oncoming creature, now only twenty yards away and closing fast. Andy leveled the gun and started firing – *pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop*.

Colding hit the throttle and almost fell flat on his ass as the snowmobile lurched forward.

Pop-pop-pop-pop.

Now moving, Colding hopped up on the seat and sat normally, his body trembling as he waited for the bullets to tear into his back. He took one quick look back as his sled shot up the three-foot bank and plunged into the wood’s deep snow. The creature was on the ground, a bloody mess. It had taken at least ten shots at point-blank range, yet it was still crawling slowly towards Andy, jaws snapping, trying to get him even as it was

surely dying.

Andy dropped the magazine out of his gun and reached for another as he turned towards Colding.

Colding kept the throttle wide-open. The trails were well-packed, but not the shoulders and the woods. He fought against the deep snow, knowing that if the sled stuck he was a dead man. He turned left, parallel to the trail and skirted past the fallen tree.

Then he saw them.

On his right, from deeper in the woods, two more of the creatures, barely illuminated by his headlights, ten yards away and closing fast.

A bullet shattered his windshield.

Colding angled the sled back towards the trail, and leaned down until his chest hit the gas tank. His hand was a death-grip fist around the throttle, opening it up all the way and still trying to squeeze it farther.

He felt a sudden blazing pain in his left shoulder, but he didn't let go.

The first creature leapt for him just as his snowmobile shot over the bank, a huge jet-plume of snow streaking out behind him. Colding watched the seemingly slow-motion scene as the thing's impossibly long claws reached out and out and out, swinging down in an arc. It mistimed the swing – the claw hit the seat just behind Colding's ass, ripping away a thick chunk of foam rubber. In midair, the snowmobile lurched to the left. Colding threw his body to the right to counteract the sudden shift.

The Arctic Cat slammed down on the trail, jarring Colding's body and snapping his head forward. The sled skidded to the left, but he savagely brought it under control, his grip on the throttle never weakening. Fully opened up, the Arctic Cat quickly hit fifty miles per hour within seconds – it shot down the trail like a rocket.

The creatures gave chase, but only for a few moments, before they realized their prey could not be caught.

They turned their attention back to the other prey, the one that was still standing behind the fallen tree.

...

Andy fired five shots at Colding before he felt the claw on his leg. He reflexively jumped straight into the air, jerking and kicking. He stumbled when he hit the ground, then regained his balance, his vision a panicked blur of white and woods and childhood nightmares come home to roost.

I shot that fucking thing TWELVE times.

And yet it still crawled towards him, leaving a trail of bright-red snow in its path. Crippled and bleeding and dying and still reaching out for him, trying to get him even in death. Andy pointed the gun at the thing's head. It opened its mouth, nice and wide, still reaching for Andy's life.

He pulled the trigger five times, *pop-pop-pop-pop-pop*.

The bullets ripped into the open mouth, punching holes in the black tongue before shattering the skull in a cloud of blood, bone and brain.

The head – mouth still open – finally fell still.

The snowmobile's roar started to subside.

He heard sounds from the woods. A coppery, acidic feeling blossomed in his stomach as he realized that the dead thing on the ground wasn't alone.

And neither was he.

Something – his JTF2 training or his instincts for survival or maybe a combination of both – took over and Andy Crosthwaite simply stopped thinking. Two long strides brought him to the Polaris. He hopped on and jammed the gun into his open snowsuit. He had only a split second to decide between following Colding or turning the machine around and heading back up the trail.

Back towards the mansion, and the big guns.

Andy gripped the throttle and pulled hard to the right, his body leaning far out to aid the sharp turn. On his left, past the fallen log, he saw two of the creatures pounding towards him – heads down, legs pumping hard, black eyes angry with evil fury and the hunger born of the pure need for survival.

Andy expertly controlled the Polaris's rear end as it finished the 180-degree turn. He gunned the throttle and shot forward, back up the trail, towards the mansion.

The Polaris was blessed speed, pure life, pure *safety*.

Two more creatures came out of the woods on his right, but they wouldn't be fast enough to stop him. God, but they were so *big*, like shark-finned bears.

"Fuck you and your duck," Andy muttered as he leaned forward, embracing the power of life.

His glee faded – slowly at first, in denial at first, but he didn't have time for much else, so it really just plain faded, replaced by the knowledge that he was a dead man.

Up ahead, perhaps fifty yards away, a tree slowly leaned over the trail, picking up speed as it descended, a plume of snow marking its downward arc. It slammed into ground with another billowing cloud of powder, completely blocking the trail.

Andy's left hand squeezed the brake as his right fished in his jacket for the gun. Up ahead, near the base of the tree, was another of the creatures, like the pair that were only a little bit behind him.

How is it possible? How could they know to cut down the fucking tree?

The sled slowed suddenly; the momentum pulled Andy forward, and yet he still turned in his seat to face his pursuers.

They were faster than he thought.

He whipped his gun around and turned just in time to see an onrushing mass of black and white surrounding a giant, open mouth.

The teeth closed on his arm, punching through skin and bone as if it were tissue-paper-covered twigs. The weight pulled him to the right. The snowmobile lurched to the side, tossing Andy free. He hit the ground, rolling from the momentum, and came up on his feet before he realized his arm was gone from the elbow down.

He had only a second to look, to be amazed at the surreal sight of his not-there arm, before the second creature hit him at full speed, knocking him to the ground. Teeth sank into his chest and shoulder. Andy had time to scream, just once, before the two

creatures from his right joined the fray.

Less than thirty seconds after the first bite, only bloodstains and an overturned snowmobile marked Andy Crosthwaite's passing.

December 2, 10:00 p.m.

He braked to a stop on the ridge, giving him a view of Sven's house and a good look back up the trail. It had been ten minutes since his flight for life, yet his heart still pounded in his chest like a heavyweight's knockout punch. Gun barrel leading his vision, he looked back up the trail – *really* looked this time, peering deep into the dark woods, watching for movement, or a strange-looking patch of black-and-white.

He saw hundreds of the creatures in the darkness, behind every log, lurking under the snow-laden branches of every tree. Waiting to spring, waiting for him to turn away so they could rush him and tear him to bits.

Colding took a long, slow breath. He felt a jumble of emotions – fear from the creatures, frustration from not knowing Sara's fate, humiliation at begging for life in front of Andy. Colding's shaking hand made his gun barrel dance. He had to calm down. Calm down and think. Sara might still be alive. Rhumkorrf was down the ridge, hiding out in Sven's house. He couldn't save Jian, but he could save Sara and Claus.

He reached over his shoulder and felt the wound for the first time. It hurt like hell, like a burning poker had been permanently fixed to his screaming skin. But he could move his arm, rotate it – albeit painfully – which meant it missed the bone. His fingers came back covered in blood. He'd never been shot before, but he didn't think the wound was all that bad. He wiped the blood on his leg. In the immortal words of Jesse Ventura, he didn't have time to bleed.

He jammed the gun back in his holster and drove down the ridge, towards the lights of the barn. He needed to get out of the open, and quick. He slowed the Arctic Cat near the house and was about to dismount when he saw a small man in a black parka, standing under the barn's light, waving to him.

Rhumkorrf.

Colding was there in seconds. He stopped in front of Rhumkorrf, and killed the engine.

Rhumkorrf looked like a torture victim. He was standing on what appeared to be a snow-covered door that had once hung on the barn. Oozing burn blisters covered most of Rhumkorrf's face. He had no hat. The left side of his scalp was nothing more than a black-and-red chunk of charred flesh. His parka had burned in several places – tufts of blackened down hung precariously in some spots where the jacket was nothing more than torn nylon, providing no warmth, no protection. His lips were swollen, cracked and white, possibly from severe frostbite. His eyes looked vacant and ghostly – soulless.

"My God, Doc, are you okay? Where's Sara and the crew?"

Rhumkorrf didn't answer. He held out his left hand. The fingers were swollen to twice

their normal size, black and blue from burst blood vessels brought on by frostbite. It was second-degree frostbite, probably only a few hours away from third-degree: third degree meant amputation of those fingers. Colding had to get the man inside. In the palm of that ravaged hand, Rhumkorrf held something brown with white flecks.

“What is that?”

“It is all my fault,” Rhumkorrf said in a tiny voice. “It is all my fault.”

“Doc, did Sara hide out with you here?”

Rhumkorrf shook his head.

“Well did she make it? Where’s the plane?”

Rhumkorrf spoke with a far-off, distant voice. “It blew up. I made it out just before the explosion. The blast knocked me through the air. I was on fire, but I landed in the snow and rolled. That put out the flames. I didn’t see anyone else – they’re gone. Claudette ... she’s .. she’s dead.

“I hid in the shed. I didn’t know what to do. Magnus wants to kill me, and I didn’t have a clue what to do next. Then the ancestors hatched. I heard them attacking the cows. When they finally left I made it to the house. I thought about hiding out here, but sooner or later they’d come back, so I called for help – I figured death by gun is better than death by ancestor. The ancestors are alive and they’re growing faster than we could have ever imagined. I watched them through the shed’s little window. I watched them hunting and killing cows that got out of the barn. They eat *everything*, Colding, bones and all.”

He still had his frostbitten hand out, the thing still in his palm. The white flecks looked vaguely familiar.

“Doc, what is that?”

“Stool.”

“What?”

“Feces. Shit. From the ancestors.”

Colding finally recognized the white thing – a human tooth, a molar.

“Jesus Christ,” Colding whispered.

“They ate Sven,” Rhumkorrf said. “They ate Sven and all the cows, Colding. Bones and all. Do you understand? *Bones and all.*”

“I had a run-in with your creatures a few minutes ago.”

Rhumkorrf’s eyes widened with excitement. “How big were they?”

Colding suddenly wanted to hit the man. He had nearly frozen to death, at least two people were dead as a result of his work, and he *still* couldn’t let go of his passion.

“They’re big,” Colding said calmly.

“How big?”

“They ate Sven and all the cow, Colding. Bones and all. *Bones and all.*”

“Like four-hundred pounds big. And mean and tough. I saw one get shot about ten times and it still kept coming.”

“Four-hundred pounds... ” Rhumkorrf said, his voice trailing away. “But that’s impossible, they would need *tens of thousands* of pounds of food to reach that size.”

Colding looked back to the barn. “Would fifty cows at about fifteen-hundred pounds each do the trick?”

Rhumkorrf stared at the barn, seemingly dumbfounded by the building. “Yes. Yes, that would do it. And then some ... they’re going to get even bigger.”

“Listen, Doc, are you sure you haven’t seen Sara? How about Overgard? The crew?”

Rhumkorrf shook his head. The man needed immediate first aid care. On top of that, the pitch-black night would make it impossible to find Sara. He probably wouldn’t be able to spot her tracks in the darkness. And, most importantly, he wouldn’t be able to see the monsters. He and Rhumkorrf would be easy marks.

As much as he hated it, he’d have to hide out until morning.

“Hop on, Doc. We’re going to the house. We’ve got to get you cleaned up.”

December 2, 10:45 p.m.

Magnus finished wrapping the duct tape around Clayton’s ankles, firmly securing him to the folding chair. The security room’s harsh fluorescent lighting played off the tear-streaks that cascaded down Clayton’s face. Hands taped up behind his back, Clayton was at his mercy.

Clayton screamed at the walls. “Someone help me! Get this crazy fucker off me! Gunther, get in here!”

Magnus backhanded Clayton, rocking the old man’s head back and drawing blood.

“Shut up, old man. Gunther is up in the fire tower, waiting for my dear brother. Colding’s gone, there’s no one here to help you. Now, let’s get down to business.” He reached to the small of his back and pulled out his knife. Clayton’s eyes went wide with fear.

“No, Magnus, please,” Clayton said quietly.

“Where’s that bad attitude of yours, Clayton? Where’s the smart-ass comments?”

“I’m ... I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

Magnus gently rested the knife’s point on the top of Clayton’s head. The old man went rigid, eyes shut tight in fear.

“Now I don’t have a lot of time, Clayton. So I want you to cooperate. If you do, I won’t hurt you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Where are Sara and Overgard?”

“They left in the plane a few days ago,” Clayton said quickly.

Magnus smiled. “Sit still, Clayton.” He pushed down on the knife. A rivulet of blood welled up and trickled down Clayton’s forehead.

“Please ... stop ... ”

Magnus lifted the pressure.

“Okay, now I’m going to ask you again, and then I start cutting. Where are Sara and Overgard?”

Clayton’s body convulsed with sobs. A crying, scared old man.

“I’ll tell you,” Clayton said through tears. “Just please stop.”

Magnus smiled and listened, asking all the questions he wanted to know. In three minutes, he had all the information he needed. Clayton had no pride at all. One little poke and the man broke. A perfect example of the tough American soul.

Magnus walked to the door.

“Now I’m going to leave you here, just in case you forgot anything,” Magnus said. He reached up and flicked off the lights. “You sit here in the dark, young man. You sit here and think about what you’ve done.”

Magnus shut the door, leaving Clayton alone in the dark room. He ran for his snowmobile. He had a hot date with a pair of bitches, and he didn’t want to be late.

December 2, 11:07 p.m.

Chunks of ice floated everywhere, small and large, forcing him to drive slower than he wanted. He’d never seen conditions like this, and while there probably wasn’t a chunk of ice large enough to hurt the *Otto II*, Chris Detweiler sure as hell didn’t want to find out while doing twenty knots.

He turned off all the lights, navigating with a pair of night-vision goggles and the boat’s GPS. Thick clouds hid the stars and kept the moon to a faint glow, but it was enough for the goggles to show his way with a neon-green light.

The closer he got to the harbor, the thicker the ice became. Most of the chunks were baseball-sized or smaller, but they collected like tightly packed flotsam, making the water look like an undulating solid, rising with each wave, dipping with each trough. The *Otto II* cut through the solid-but-not-solid surface, leaving behind it a path of visible water that lasted only seconds before the churning ice chunks closed in again.

Ice-laden waves splashed against the pylons at the harbor’s entrance. Actually, they splashed against the ice jutting out from the pylons. Chris shook his head in amazement. It was so frigid that twenty feet of solid ice stuck out from the pylons. If the cold continued, the harbor entrance might very well freeze shut in a day or so. Once that happened, the whole harbor would freeze over in a matter of hours.

He’d come just in time. His father had told him about the Winter of ’68 many times, but Chris had never seen anything like it. The history books talked of the winter of 1948-49, when it got so cold an ice bridge formed between the Upper Peninsula coast and Black Manitou. Supposedly, a herd of deer crossed over, followed by a pack of wolves. That was the coldest winter in recorded history, and, so far, this winter was well on pace to break that record. If the women lived long enough, they might very well be able to *walk* to the mainland.

Chris killed the main engine and fired up the trolling motor. The *Otto II* slid slowly but

silently through the ice-choked harbor entrance. Inside the harbor, the waves dropped to three feet. He could barely believe his eyes – the shore had extended with a good thirty feet of solid, rough, liquid-looking ice. The waves constantly tossed water and fresh chunks onto this frozen, growing shoreline. He had far less time than he thought. The shore wasn't the only thing covered with ice; at least thirty feet of it stuck out from all sides of the dock.

This is fucked, Chris thought. It's dangerous to even try and reach the dock, not to mention the fucking 6-foot-8 psycho who might be waiting for me.

It didn't matter, he had to do it. He couldn't leave those women to die, even if he didn't know them from Eve. He was the proverbial white knight, coming to the rescue. All he had to do was get on the island, make it to the church and bring them back. Once in the boat and away from the island, they'd be safe.

He figured the leading edge of ice would be very thin, but he had to get the boat to a place with ice thick enough to support his weight. He cranked the trolling motor up to full output and steered straight for the dock. The boat crushed the leading edge of ice with a noticeable cracking sound. That sound quickly turned to a definitive *crunch*, then to a *grind* as the boat slowed, pushing up large sheets of half-inch thick ice as it went. Finally, fifteen feet from the dock, the *Otto II* stopped.

Chris killed the motor, leaving him alone with the howl of the wind and the steady, Styrofoam crunching sound of wave-driven ice grinding against wave-driven ice. He pulled on a black life jacket, but knew it wouldn't help him much if he fell through the ice – once in the water, in this cold, he would stand little chance of surviving long enough to get back in the boat's heated cabin.

He popped open the small door to the bow and slid out, feeling the deep cold hit him hard despite his snowsuit. He grabbed a gaff pole and walked to the bow's tip, testing the gaff against the ice. It seemed thick enough to hold his weight.

Keeping his weight on the bow, he swung one leg over the edge and pushed against the ice. It held. He put his other foot down, but kept his chest and both arms in the boat. Still the ice held. Waves splashed water and ice chunks at his feet, making the surface slick and treacherous. Chris swallowed hard and slowly stood up, keeping his hands hovering over the bow railing in case his feet suddenly plunged through the rough ice into the deadly water.

He didn't fall through.

Fighting back his fear, he slid one foot at a time over the ice, taking care to keep his weight on both feet at all times. The danger zone was likely only a few feet – at the dock the ice had to be at least six inches thick, strong enough to support a dozen men.

Four feet from the boat, the ice cracked under his left foot. Water gurgled up as if from a slight pressure.

Chris stood motionless. He felt his heart slamming inside his chest. Holding his breath, he slid his left foot forward, past the crack, and continued on. He wasn't going back. He had to get those women.

After a few more sliding steps, his instincts told him the ice was plenty thick, and he strode cautiously towards the dock.

During the day, the snow-covered island may have been a thing of beauty, but in the dark, through the night-vision glasses, it was more like a wasteland. The wind persistently drove wisps of white powder across the beach. Snow-covered pine trees looked like heavy monsters trapped in thick goo. Chris shuddered, and not just from the cold. He didn't like this, not one bit, and wanted to be out of here as soon as possible.

But first he had to get to the church. He walked down the dock and onto the snow-covered path, taking great care to sweep his vision across the landscape. If Magnus really was killing people, Chris didn't feel like becoming one of the victims. He felt for the lump on his left side, under the snowsuit – the gun's firmness gave him comfort.

Chris walked to the shed that contained his snowmobile and four-wheeler. The snowmobile would quickly cover the one-mile trip to the ghost town, although it also made noise. The snowmobile would be the easy and fast way, though walking would be the smartest. But Magnus was there – Chris didn't feel like getting into a foot race for his life.

He kicked the snow away from the shed and slid inside. The Ski-Do motor gurgled and died on the first two tries. On the third, it roared to life.

Chris drove out onto the trail, moving slow, trying to keep the engine as quiet as possible. He kept the lights off, using the night-vision goggles to guide his way. The Ski-Do glided through the foot of snow that covered the path. The dark woods rose up on both sides like canyon walls.

In just over three minutes, Chris saw the church tower through the trees. He took off the goggles. He unzipped his snowsuit, pulled out a flashlight, pointed it at the tower and flashed twice.

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Sara was sitting in the church tower, shivering despite being wrapped in three blankets, when she saw the two flashes. She gasped with hope. A few more minutes and she'd be on her way to the mainland.

She lifted her own flashlight, a clumsy maneuver thanks to Clayton's thick mittens, and gave two answering flashes. She set the flashlight down and picked up the binoculars, sweeping the moon-lit town square.

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He saw the two answering flashes. That didn't mean he was out of the woods, not yet. It might be Magnus, giving those flashes, waiting for Chris to come in. He patted the gun again, just to be sure it was there. This was crazy, really fucking crazy – there was a gigantic, psychotic, ex-Canadian Special Forces killer out there somewhere, and Chris was playing the action-adventure hero like Uncle Clint.

Chris put the flashlight away and put on the night-vision goggles. He turned the Ski-Doo around, leaving it at the edge of town, its nose pointed back down the trail. He slid off the sled and walked silently up the path. One quick walk to the church and back, and it would be all but over.

He reached the edge of town before he saw movement.

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“What the hell is that?” Sara whispered as she looked through the binoculars. Down there, in the darkness, something was moving. Something big, lurking around in the trees at the outskirts of the small town.

“Oh no,” she said quietly. “Oh my God, no.”

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Chris froze. He half-hoped there was something wrong with the goggles, but he knew they were working just fine. At the edge of town, near the lodge, less than a hundred feet away, was a small bear. No, not a bear, its head was too big – way too big. Through the night-vision goggles, its white skin glowed an unearthly pale green. And something on its back kept popping up and down.

It was looking at him. It opened its mouth, giving Chris a view of long, pointed teeth, each glowing like a wet emerald. He stayed very still, trying to figure out what to do next.

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“Run, you idiot,” Sara whispered. “Goddamit, don’t you see them?” The man stayed perfectly still, staring at the shadowy something near the corner of the lodge. He obviously didn’t see the others – Sara offhandedly estimated at least twenty – closing in on him from all sides of town.

The trapdoor that led downstairs opened behind her, and Claudette popped up.

“Is he com – ”

Sara turned and gave a quick, authoritative “shhh!” Claudette froze halfway through. Sara turned back to the scene. Claudette silently came through the door and crouched next to Sara.

“Sara, what’s happening?”

Sara handed Claudette the binoculars. “Tell me I’m crazy,” she whispered. “Tell me those aren’t what I think they are.”

“Where?”

Sara pointed to the one near the lodge. Claudette looked out, and saw it.

“Oh no ... that poor man is doomed.”

Sara started scanning the town, the horizon, looking for something she could use to help the man.

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The growing wind whistled through the snow-covered pines. Chris slowly took off a mitten, keeping his eyes focused on the bear-thing by the lodge. He was running out of time. If he didn’t get to the church now, those women would be trapped for days – he might be trapped for days. He didn’t know what it was, but he didn’t really have to: he had a gun, and that thing didn’t.

Chris started to reach into his snowsuit when he heard a branch break somewhere off to his left. It had to be a big branch to be heard over the wind. A really, really *big*

branch. He turned, a sinking feeling in his stomach, knowing what he'd see. Sure enough, seventy-five feet away, at the edge of the woods, sat another of the big-mouthed bear creatures. It, too, was looking right at him.

Confidence disappeared, quickly replaced by fear. If there were more than one, how many were there? Keeping very, very still, he swept the landscape.

A third by the bar.

A fourth and a fifth near the church.

A sixth at the edge of the woods on his right.

Fuck this. I can't save them if I'm dead.

Chris made his decision, and made it with conviction. He turned and ran as fast as the bulky snowsuit would allow, his legs "swish-swishing" against each other in a dark parody of a child's wintertime play.



Sara knew she'd only have one shot to help him, she had to make it count. She stood and took careful aim at the creature chasing Chris. A sudden blow knocked her into a pillar, and a strong, bony hand covered her mouth. Claudette had tackled her. Sara angrily brought up her hands to shove the older woman away, but Claudette leaned in close enough to kiss Sara's ear.

"Don't move a muscle!" Claudette hissed. "For God's sake, keep still, they heard us!"

It was already too late to help Chris, so Sara stayed still. Using the hand covering Sara's mouth, Claudette slowly turned Sara's head so she could look down from the church tower. Sara's eyes widened in surprise and fear. In the faint light, against the suffused gray-white glow of the snow-covered ground, she counted seven of the creatures. They were all looking up into the church tower.

They're looking right at us.

It seemed that way at first, but Sara realized the creatures were turning their heads, looking at one side of the church, then to the tower, then to the other side and back again. They weren't looking at her, but they sure as hell were looking for her.

Claudette took her cold hand away from Sara's mouth.

Sara stood very, very still.

A roar – deep and jagged and hateful and savage – erupted from the path that led to the dock.



When he heard the first roar, his heart seemed to stop, but his legs kept on pumping.

All his bravado gone, evaporated in one split-second, fight-or-flight decision, Chris Detweiler ran for his life. Another roar, closer this time. He poured all his energy into the sprint, heavy boots slamming against the snow-covered ground, arms pumping, legs churning.

Like an Old West gunslinger fleeing the law, Chris leapt and spread his legs, landing butt-first on the Ski-Doo. The now-warm machine fired up on the first try and he gunned the throttle, shooting down the path. The journey that had taken three minutes while

put-putting along took just over a minute with the throttle locked wide-open.

There were more of them, lining the tree-canyon walls, coming at him from all sides. Speed carried him past their muscular, heaving bodies.

One came out of the woods far ahead of him. It perched on the dune crest, waiting for him. Chris slowed, banked hard right and drove at an angle towards the crest. The monster came at him, and almost had him when Chris opened up the throttle full-out and shot forward with an extra burst of speed.

Once past the monster, he banked hard left. He flew over the dune ridge, catching big air, the boat now before him like a beacon of hope. So close. He hit the ground and slammed on the breaks. The Ski-Doo skidded to a stop a few feet from the dock. He was off and running before the machine even stopped moving.

Another roar – couldn't be more than a few feet behind him. It was too close now, going for his gun would slow him down and the thing with the huge mouth would be on him.

Chris sprinted down the dock, his steps vibrating the chilled metal. He counted six steps before he felt the heavy vibrations of the creature's pounding feet. The next roar was so close it seemed to shake his body. He reached the end of the dock, the creature only a step behind.

Without even slowing, he leaped off the dock like a long jumper.

And in midair the huge jaws closed around his chest.

He felt a dozen piercing pokes and a huge pressure, then they hit the ice.

They hit hard – the ice seemed to hold for just a second, then cracked like a trap door, dropping them into the frigid water. Cold smashed Chris like a Mack truck, stunning him. His breath locked in his chest, frozen just like the ice covering the bay.

But the biting pressure dropped away.

Swim or die.

He kicked hard. The water soaked into his snowsuit, a lead coat dragging him down. He kicked harder, his head popped above the surface. He forced one, short, desperate breath.

Like Jaws coming up from the depths, the creature surfaced next to him, giant mouth gasping for air, huge clawed paws splashing at the water and fighting for purchase on the thin ice, which shattered from each blow.

Chris tried to swim, but his arms and legs seemed slow to react. It was like swimming in quicksand. His head slipped under the surface again. He fought to rise, but the snowsuit seemed to drag him down as surely as an anchor.

Swim or die.

He snarled and kicked harder, forcing his body to move. He was so close, only a few feet from the boat.

Behind him, the creature slid under the surface for the last time. Chris looked over his shoulder, knowing he only had seconds to live, knowing he had to concentrate, but he couldn't stop himself.

The cow-skinned creatures covered the dock. Diffuse moonlight played off their white fur, the black patches as dark as the night itself. There were dozens of them,

standing at the edge, looking down at Chris with black eyes. But they weren't coming in after him. He was almost there ...

He tried to swim, but his muscles simply stopped obeying his commands. His breath locked up in his chest again, as if plugged by a cork. He couldn't take in air. The leaden, waterlogged snowsuit dragged him down again.

He reached out one last time, stretching for the ladder on the back of the *Otto II*. His fingers hit the rung, but his thick mittens, slick with water, made it impossible to grip. His hand fell away, and he slid under the water.

Swim ... or ...



Sara and Claudette stood motionless, looking down, watching as the seven cow-skinned creatures moved around the church; sniffing, looking, listening. They weren't leaving.

"What do we do?" Sara whispered in an almost inaudible voice.

Claudette slowly shook her head and shrugged.

The ancestors stopped their sniffing, instead lifting their heads and looking north. The creatures all seemed to hear something. Sara listened, and a few seconds later, she heard it too ... a faint, faraway sound.

The sound of another snowmobile.

As a unit, the creatures headed for the noise. Sara watched them go, watched their odd, squat, waddling gait as they disappeared into the woods. Claudette started to speak, but Sara shushed her with a quick glance. They waited. Minutes after the seven creatures had left, the south end of town came alive with movement.

"Jesus," Sara whispered quietly.

The ones that had chased Chris were back. Sara tried to count, but they moved so fast. They crossed the town circle and passed by the church, a wave of black-and-white death. Within seconds, they disappeared into the north woods, following their brethren, chasing after the sound of the second snowmobile.

December 2, 11:11 p.m.

Sara tried to digest what Claudette had just told her.

"But how can they be that big?" Sara asked. "Those things were bigger than a timber wolf! They weren't nearly that size four days ago. How is that possible?"

Claudette shook her head. "We just don't know. The growth rate is phenomenal, like nothing anyone has ever seen before."

"Well, that's just great, Einstein! So much for the Genada brain trust. So just how big are these things going to get?"

Claudette's expression was one of apology. She shook her head and shrugged. "We just don't know, Sara."

"How could you guys have messed it up so bad? I thought this genetics stuff was an

exact science, like it takes hundreds of tries just to get one gene process or whatever functioning correctly.”

“It does, when *people* do it,” Claudette said, hiding her face in her hands. “But the machine made these. Jian was a genius. She made that machine more accurate than any of us could have ever anticipated. It must have been all those virtual generations, the computer refining the DNA over and over again, millions of generations all done within the computer’s memory. I don’t think even Jian knew the power of her program.”

Sara looked out towards the path where Chris had fled for his life. “No one expected it. You could say that again. You should have let me shoot them. What the fuck do you think this gun is for anyway?”

Chris had come to rescue them, and now he was probably dead. She hoped he made it, but wondered if she’d even live long enough to find out.

She also wondered about the poor fucker to the north. She could still hear the snowmobile engine, sounded like it was near the old copper mine. Whoever it was, he was about to face a world of hurt.

Please, God, Sara thought in a silent prayer. Please don’t let it be Peej.

December 2, 11:20 p.m.

Magnus slowed his Arctic Cat, bringing the big sled to a stop in front of the ratty old shed at the mine’s entrance. He needed to be careful, but more importantly, he needed to be fast. Danté could arrive at any minute, so Magnus didn’t have time to play games. Fortunately, Clayton had given up plenty of intel – it was just Sara and Overgard, the rest of the crew was dead.

A couple of women, only one with military training, and pilot training at that. The process of eliminating them wouldn’t take long.

The wind howled through the trees. The mine itself moaned as well – probably wind circulating through some unseen ventilation shaft. It sounded somewhat like a mournful wail from dying men. Magnus was all too familiar with that sound.

Drifting snow almost completely covered the mine’s old wooden door. Magnus walked up to the door, sinking crotch-deep in undisturbed snow. Something was wrong. There were no tracks, none at all. He tried to think of how much snow they’d received in the past three days. Plenty, but probably not enough to cover up the door that much, especially when someone had to enter that door just a few days ago. Unless Clayton piled snow in front of the door after letting the women in, then the falling snow covered it up ... or unless he knew another way in.

Or, more likely, unless he was lying.

“You old motherfucker,” Magnus said quietly.

He heard a noise from the woods on the south side of the trail. Magnus quickly pulled his Desert Eagle and moved to the Arctic Cat, crouching down, using the sled for cover. He scanned the woods, but couldn’t see anything in the darkness. He reached into his

pocket and pulled out his flashlight. There was no one in the mine, that much was obvious. If this was a trap, he didn't want to make himself an easy target by turning on the light. But it wasn't a trap, couldn't be – there was no way Clayton could have alerted anyone. Magnus had grabbed the old fool as soon as he came back to the mansion, taken him immediately to the security room and taped him up.

He decided to risk a little exposure. Magnus turned on the flashlight and scanned the edge of the woods, only twenty-five meters away.

What he saw froze his blood cold. At the base of the tall trees that lined the snowmobile trail, the flashlight reflected off glowing animal eyes. He swept the light in a steady arc from left to right – everywhere the beam fell, it lit up pairs of eyes. At least two dozen creatures, spread out over fifty meters.

Magnus turned off the flashlight. The cows. Or at least, what had been inside the cows. The scientists thought they had a predator on their hands ... but the plane had crashed only three days ago, how could those animals be that big?

A roar erupted from the woods, quickly followed by dozens more, a cacophonous animal challenge. Magnus instantly slipped into battle-think, reflexes and instincts replacing conscious thought. The creatures were too close to try the snowmobile. By the time he got on and started it, they'd be on him. He had to find cover. He ran to the rickety old door, lowered his shoulder, and plowed through it with a loud splintering of dry, old wood.

He pointed the flashlight beam down the old mine shaft as he ran. It dead-ended somewhere up ahead. He sprinted down the mine shaft, trying not to slip on the frozen dirt, eyes scanning for a hiding spot.

He'd made it only ten meters when he heard the monsters rip through the door's remnants. Magnus stopped and turned. Lighting up the doorway with the flashlight, he took aim and started firing, his Desert Eagle filling the small space with a deafening roar. The first creature to come through the door had a white head with a black nose-tip. Three .45-caliber bullets slammed into its skull, ripping through fur and bone and brain. The thing fell, twitching and kicking, its big body partially blocking the door.

Magnus turned and ran again, trying to keep his balance on the descending, frozen ground. He followed the shaft as it turned a sharp corner to the right.

And he found a dead-end. His frantic flashlight beam played off piles of boulders and broken timbers that filled the shaft. Magnus scrambled up the pile, looking for a way through. On his right, he saw his only chance – a dark crawlspace, made where a timber had collapsed, creating a coffin-sized dirt-pocket.

A roar erupted from the woods, quickly followed by dozens more, a cacophonous animal challenge.

Without stopping to think, Magnus scrambled into the tiny space, forcing his big body inside. He dug with the butt of his gun and the bottom of the flashlight, a rabid badger clawing for cover. He had to make enough room to turn around.

A roar filled the end of the cave, bouncing off the fallen rocks in an ear-piercing echo. Magnus grunted as he curled into a near-fetal position and worked himself around. His shoulder was wedged against the wall. Frozen dirt dug into his face like rough concrete. Desperate to survive, scraping his face raw, he finally turned around just as a massive head looked into the dirt-coffin space.

Magnus fired three times. The bullets broke off teeth as they ripped into the mouth and then the brain. The creature made a choking, gurgling noise, its eyes opened wide; then it slid out of the hole and fell to the ground.

Magnus saw another patch of black-and-white out in the shaft. He fired twice more, but couldn't tell if he'd hit anything. He waited, but no more heads appeared to fill his tiny hole.

Heart pumping, he waited for the next attack. But none came. He'd never really been afraid before, at least not of any man, but this was some seriously fucked up shit and now he knew the feeling of true fear. He heard a sound like a body being dragged across frozen dirt, then sounds that reminded him of wolves tearing into a deer on some Discovery Channel special.

He'd beaten them off. Achieved a stalemate was more like it – he could hear them back in the shaft, hear their breathing, occasionally hear small whines and growls, as if from big, playful dogs.

They were waiting.

Magnus tried to readjust himself, tried to get comfortable. He was pretty much fucked. All he could do was wait it out. But if he did get out of this mess, he knew exactly how he'd celebrate.

And Clayton Detweiler would be there to help.



BOOK FIVE: DECEMBER 3

6:18 a.m.

Gunther pulled his blanket tighter and shivered. This was bullshit. Pure and utter bullshit. He looked out the towerhouse windows, unappreciative of the sprawling, pre-dawn view afforded him by the thirty-foot wooden tower, which itself was perched on a 1,300-foot ridge. He could see almost the whole island – the north shore and the south shore were each just a mile away, and the mansion was less than five miles southeast. North Pointe was just over five miles northwest.

Floodlights mounted under the small tower cabin cast a fifty-yard wide patch of light onto the white snow below. Magnus called the tower “the best seat in the house.” Gunther just called it cold. Twenty below zero outside in the dead of night, and Gunther was in a tin shack with only a piece-of-shit kerosene heater to keep him alive. But still, it was better than being around Magnus. That man was going to pop soon, Gunther just knew it, and when he did pop, Gunther didn’t want to be anywhere near him.

Gunther looked at the spinning green line on the circular screen of the radar system. He saw the same thing he’d seen for the last five hours – absolutely nothing. Now that the C-5 was off the island, Magnus didn’t mind leaving the radar on. Magnus wanted to know when Danté arrived, and also wanted to be on the lookout for any unwelcome guests.

Gunther tried to pull the blanket tighter. If he ever got off this island, he was quitting Genada. No one needed this shit, what with the chance of freezing to death, the CIA probably coming to storm the island, and a crazy giant Canadian shooting people whenever he felt like it.

A beep drew his attention to the radar screen. A green triangle now sat at the screen’s outermost circle. Gunther watched as the green line slowly spun around its center point, until it hit the triangle and produced another beep.

The bogey was approaching from thirty miles south, and drawing closer.

He picked up the landline phone and dialed the security extension. With the jammer on full-blast, the walkie-talkies didn’t work for shit. Gunther let the phone ring. No one answered.

“Where the fuck are you guys?”

Each time the green radar line spun a full circle, it beeped when it hit the green dot. And with each spin, the green dot grew just a little bit closer.

Gunther tried dialing the page-all number, the one that rang all the phones in the mansion and the hangar. Again, no answer. He’d been freezing his ass up here in order to warn Magnus of Danté’s arrival, and now at payoff time no one was around.

“Maybe they’re out snowmobiling,” Gunther thought out loud. He had to do something. Danté was only about twenty minutes away. Even if Gunther got down and drove back to the mansion, that would take fifteen minutes. He had to let Magnus and Andy know now.

There was one way – the radar rig was new, but this had originally been a fire-watch tower. Gunther’s eyes fell on the button for the fire alarm, the old air-raid siren that could be heard anywhere on the island. It could probably be heard even over the roar of a snowmobile. If Magnus heard the siren, he’d know it meant Danté was almost there.

Gunther hit the button.

6:20 a.m.

At Sven Ballantine’s farm, Colding stood straight up when he heard the far-off echoing air-raid siren. He and Rhumkorrf had been going over their crude hand-drawn map of the island, trying to formulate a battle plan for finding Sara while simultaneously avoiding the ancestors.

“What is that siren?” Rhumkorrf asked. Colding had bandaged the man’s head and hands with some gauze he’d found in a first aid kit. The gauze covered up his ears, so Colding had to tape Rhumkorrf’s glasses onto the gauze with medical tape. He looked like he’d recover okay, but he also looked more comical than ever.

“Danté’s coming,” Colding said. “Gunther must not have been able to reach anyone on the phone, so he set off the fire siren.”

“Wouldn’t he have called the mansion?”

Colding nodded.

“So where’s Magnus? Where’s Clayton?”

Colding looked at the little man. “That’s a good question, but we don’t have time to find out. Danté’s our best chance to stop Magnus. We have to get to the landing strip. Danté’s probably coming in the Bell 427, an eight-seater. We can use that to get everyone off the island.”

“But the landing strip is on the other end of the island. The ancestors are out there.”

Colding threw on his coat. “So is Sara, Doc. I’m going, this could be my only chance to save her. You can stay if you want.”

Rhumkorrf shook his bandaged head. He pulled on one of Sven’s coats he’d found in a closet. “Forget that, Rambo, I’m staying with you.”

Colding ran to the door and peeked out – still no sign of the ancestors. He jumped off the porch and started up the Arctic Cat’s engine.

6:22 a.m.

They hadn't tried to come after him all night, but they hadn't left, either. He'd ventured a couple of peeks out from the dirt-coffin – the creatures were somewhere around the bend. They were waiting for him. He could hear them, hear their breathing, hear them moving about, but the most disturbing noise was also the loudest; he could hear their stomachs growling.

Then, a new noise. A faint, far-off sound, something constant that he couldn't quite make out. The creatures apparently heard it as well, for their hidden rustling sounds increased, faded away, then disappeared.

He waited for five minutes, listening intently, ears reaching for any sign of the monsters. But he heard nothing other than that quiet, far-off drone. He slowly worked his big body out of the hole, trying to be as quiet as possible – he'd been crammed into that space for seven hours, freezing his ass off. At first his cramped and sore muscles didn't want to cooperate; he almost fell to the ground, but caught himself clumsily – and noisily. He held his gun, waiting for the rush of creatures to come tearing around the corner. But the attack didn't come.

Magnus stood up and stretched, then walked quietly to the bend and peeked around with the flashlight.

Empty.

They had finally given up on him. Gun still at the ready, he trotted up the shaft, that strange noise growing louder as he moved towards the entrance. Finally he recognized it – the air-raid siren.

Danté was coming. Gunther had probably tried to call, but no one was there.

"Very clever, Gunther," Magnus mumbled as he peeked out from the shattered mine door. He scanned with the flashlight beam, but there was nothing out there save for trees and his snowmobile.

The snowmobile that would take him back to the mansion.

Back to Clayton Detweiler.

6:24 a.m.

Sara popped open the trapdoor and climbed out onto the turret, Claudette close behind. Stars flickered up above, slow to relinquish their place to the oncoming dawn. The noise that had been faint inside the thick church was loud and clear in the open air – an air-raid siren.

"What does that mean?" Claudette asked.

Sara thought for a moment, then shrugged. "I'm not sure. But obviously whoever is in that tower wants to let everyone know that something's coming."

"Or perhaps whoever is in that tower is trying to get help," Claudette said. "Maybe because of the ancestors."

Sara shivered from the cold. “Well, if those monsters aren’t there already, they’ll sure come running. I hope whoever it is moves fast.”

“Unless it’s Magnus,” Claudette said quietly.

Sara nodded. If only they could be that lucky.

Sara nodded. If only they could be that lucky.

6:28 a.m.

Gunther held his gloved hands over his ears, but it didn’t do much to stop the ear-piercing siren that blared from the bottom of the small shack. Amazingly, he’d found a way to make his shitty situation even worse.

There were going to be fireworks when Danté arrived; that much was sure. Gunther wondered if Magnus was planning some trouble for his brother. If that were the case, everyone was in danger — Magnus had already killed one staff member, and probably wouldn’t hesitate to do it again. Jian’s “suicide” rap was a crock of shit. Magnus had whacked her.

Still, trouble or no trouble, if he went back to the lodge at least he’d be warm. And he’d be away from that fucking siren. Gunther put his binoculars around his neck, turned off the heater, walked out of the tiny cabin onto the wooden catwalk and started down the ladder. He was ten feet from the ground when his eye caught movement. Instinctively, he stopped, and looked to his left, to the west.

A flashing yellow color, but it wasn’t a light, it was like a flag or something, or triangular fabric, lifting up and down in an irregular pattern, perhaps fifty yards away, just at the edge of the tower’s cone of light. It was centered in an odd-looking patch of snow, a slightly darker white than the surrounding area, spotted with black rocks.

Holding onto the ladder with one hand, he lifted his binoculars.

Even in the dim illumination cast off by the tower’s floodlights, he saw it. A spear of fear slid into Gunther’s chest. It wasn’t a flag in a patch of snow. It was an animal ... a huge, strange-looking animal. But what was it? And why was it just sitting there?

He heard something to the right. Gunther turned in time to see another of the creatures, only ten feet from the ladder, running full-tilt in an odd crouch-waddle like a half-upright Komodo dragon. It gathered and leapt, huge mouth opening wide to display rows of long white teeth.

Gunther grabbed the ladder with both hands and lifted his legs, contracting his body like a spring on recoil.

The creature slammed into the ladder where Gunther's legs had just been. Its jaws snapped down hard on the wood before its momentum carried it through the ladder, shattering the cold, dry wood into a hundred splintery shards. The wood shook from the impact, so hard that Gunther was almost thrown free, but the ladder's top remained fixed to the tower. The creature fell, clumsily, into the snow, its monstrous mouth working the ladder's remnants in short, vicious bites.

Gunther's legs desperately kicked open air as he tried to pull himself up. The creature seemed to realize it had missed its meal, violently shook its head to toss away a mouth full of bloody splinters, and turned quickly, gathering for another leap.

Gunther managed to pull himself up just enough to get a foot on the last, broken rung. He pushed himself up only a fraction of a second before the leaping creature's jaws snapped on open air.

Gunther scrambled up the ladder. He had to get to the phone. The creature roared in frustration, a lonely, deep, guttural roar that echoed off the trees, a sound audible despite the blaring claxon. Gunther realized that it wasn't just one roar. He stopped on the catwalk and looked around.

There were more creatures, dozens of them, coming out of the woods from all sides like some childhood nightmare, rushing forward with their strange waddling gait. They gathered at the tower's bottom, long claws digging into the wood as they tried to climb up, mouths opening as they roared their frustration, mouths as wide and long as a grown man's chest.

The tower vibrated under his feet. Small tremors at first, but after only a second or two they grew strong enough to make him put his hand on the cabin wall to keep his balance. He reached inside, grabbed the phone and hit the page-all, then leaned over the rail to look down.

The creatures were attacking the four thick wooden posts that supported the cabin. Biting and clawing, they tore out big, splintery chunks and tossed them aside before coming back for another try. Dozens of them climbed over each other to get at the wood.

Gunther was fucked and he knew it. He held the phone, but no one answered.

The tower lurched to the left, then stopped. Gunther grabbed at the rail with his left hand, the phone still held in his right, both hands clutching hard in a desperate grip for survival. His heart pounded so hard it felt like a hammer in his chest. His bladder relieved itself, a brief sensation of warmth amidst the bitter cold.

A second post gave way with a resounding *snap* and the tower tilted to the south. Slow at first, but it quickly picked up speed, dropping like a fallen tree. Gunther's scream locked in his throat as the tower slammed into the ground, kicking up a small snowstorm when it hit. The cabin shattered, as did Gunther, dozens of bones breaking on impact.

Unfortunately, the fall didn't kill him. The injuries were lethal, and he would have died within a few minutes, but he didn't have that long.

Groggy but still conscious, Gunther rolled to one shoulder and looked back towards

the base of the tower. All the lights but one had broken in the fall – that last light projected back towards the tower’s base, illuminating oncoming death in a morbid spotlight. They came like a tidal wave, a black-and-white tidal wave with a frothing crest of wide, open mouths and long teeth.

He was too weak to scream as they tore him to pieces.

6:34 a.m.

Wind whipped across their backs. The Arctic Cat screamed like nature herself. Colding couldn’t believe how fast the machine moved – eighty miles an hour on open ice felt like a rocket cruising across the surface. They headed southwest, the island passing by quickly on their left. He prayed they wouldn’t hit a patch of weak ice; any accident at this speed meant certain death. He wondered if the creatures were there, up on the coast, just inside the tree line, watching them.

Even if they were watching, they couldn’t do anything, not unless they were already at the mansion. Colding figured his best bet was to circle around the southwest tip of the island and approach from the shore. That way they’d avoid Magnus if he drove out from the mansion. They had to get to the helicopter pad, and – perhaps far more important – he had to get to the security room and get some bigger guns.

Of course, if Magnus were waiting in the security room, no amount of planning would help. Colding didn’t have any options, so he’d just cross that bridge when he came to it. If Magnus was there, that was bad. If the monsters were there, well, that was worse.

And either way, he had no choice at all.

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6:37 a.m.

The first faint thumpa-thumps of the Bell 467 filtered through the winter air just as Magnus arrived at the mansion. He ran inside, down the stairs, rushed into the secret room and shut the door behind him before turning on the light.

Detweiler looked up at him, squinting against the light, but still smiling.

“How’d that mine turn out for you, asshole?”

“Clayton, you made a mistake.”

Clayton nodded. “I’m sure of that. But those girls got away, eh? What do you think of that, asshole?”

The women, Clayton, the monsters, Danté – too many variables

Help me think.

Magnus pulled out his knife and drew the edge quickly across his thigh, slicing through his slacks to the skin below. The cut was shallow, but long – blood spilled out immediately, spreading down the pants leg. The pain screamed in a suffused agony that tasted clear, clear, clear and delicious.

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Detweiler's eyes went wide with surprise. Maybe now the old bastard knew what kind of man he was dealing with. Magnus pulled his gun and pushed the barrel into Clayton's cheek.

"Listen carefully, you old fuck. I'm not playing around anymore. Where are Purinam and Overgard?"

"Fucking shoot me," Clayton said, his eyes squeezed wrinkle-tight in anticipation of death. "I ain't talkin'."

Magnus took a deep breath. He'd underestimated this man, and that had cost him time, damn near cost him his life. The old coot was tougher than he'd ever imagined. Well, enough playing around – Danté would land at any second.

Magnus holstered his gun, pulled his knife, and walked behind Clayton. He grabbed the old man's right pinkie. Clayton screamed as the knife sliced through callused flesh. The knife cut to the bone, accompanied by squirting blood. Clayton thrashed in his chair and kept screaming, but Magnus didn't stop – he flipped the knife over and used the sawtooth edge, meant for cutting through trees. It only took five strokes before the pinky came off in his blood-covered hand.

He walked around in front of Clayton, tossing the bloody pinky up and down in his palm. Tears covered Clayton's face, and blood streamed from a deep cut in his lower lip where he'd bitten through it. He didn't look hateful or insolent anymore. He didn't look tough, he just looked *old*.

"You've got nine more fingers and I've got just enough time to get through them all. Now, do I go for your other pinkie, or are you going to tell me what I want to know?"

"Church," Detweiler whispered.

"What was that?"

"Church. They're in da church."

"Who is alive?"

"Sara. Overgard."

"No one else?"

Clayton weakly shook his head.

"There. Now was that so hard? I've got to take care of some more business. You just stay here and bleed. If I go to that church and they're not there, I'm going to come back, cut off the rest of the fingers one by one. Now, knowing that, are you sticking with your story? Do you have something else to tell me?"

Detweiler's head hung low, as if all the strength in his body had leached out along with the blood from his severed pinky.

"Church," he said without looking up.

Magnus nodded. He reached into Clayton's pocket and pulled out the thick janitor's ring of keys.

"You don't mind if I borrow your ride, do you, Pops?"

Magnus grabbed a duffel bag and started stuffing it with ammunition and plastique. He didn't know what would be coming next, and he wanted to be prepared. Clayton's

Bv was enclosed, and fairly well armored – it offered the best protection against the monsters. He slung the bag over his shoulder and grabbed one of the ARM assault rifles. Just after he opened the door to the outside, his eyes fell to the bottom shelf. To the Stinger.

It helped to be prepared for any contingency.

He grabbed the Stinger case and slipped into the hall, making sure the security room door was shut tight behind him. He ran out of the mansion, ARM at the ready, and headed for the Bv.

The helicopter sounded slightly louder now. If the monsters were at this end of the island, they'd come running to the noise, just as they'd ran towards the air-raid siren. While the monsters finished off his brother, he could drive to the old town and kill the women. A few well-timed plastique explosions would draw the creatures back to the copper mine; then he could circle back to the landing strip. If he caught a few breaks, he'd be able to take his brother's helicopter and fly out. If not, he had enough firepower at the mansion to kill every last one of these fucking things.

There was only one hole in his plan – Colding and Rhumkorrf. Andy had never returned, which meant he was either dead or tied up somewhere. That meant Colding might be alive. Odds were, however, that he and Andy had both been killed by the ancestors.

Magnus climbed into the Bv and waited.

6:51 a.m.

With dawn breaking across the angry waters of Lake Superior, Colding carefully moved the snowmobile past the ice-covered wreck of the *Coronado*. Boyd Bay was frozen over, all the way out to Emma Island. What had been treacherous, rocky water two months ago was now solid ice. From the frozen water, the mansion perched high up on the bluff, looking like some gothic bulwark straight out of an Edgar Allen Poe novel.

They could see the helicopter now. It was less than five minutes from landing.

“Are we going to meet them at the landing strip?” Rhumkorrf asked.

Colding nodded. “Yeah, but first we've got to get some weapons. Those monsters could be anywhere.”

“What about Magnus?”

“He could be anywhere, too. We've got to get weapons, Doc, or we're asking for trouble either way. You ready?”

“Let's do it.”

Colding drove the snowmobile up the hill. He hoped his timing was lucky – if Magnus were at the mansion, he'd probably go out to meet his brother's helicopter. That is, if the psycho didn't decide to blow the damn thing out of the sky.

They topped the hill and he drove towards the secret bootlegger's door that ran to the security room. He didn't care about being sneaky or careful – he needed weapons

the way a junkie needs a fix, and he was willing to take any risk to get them. It was now or never.

Colding stopped the snowmobile at the snow-covered shrubbery that hid the secret door. He pulled off his glove and wrapped his fingers around the frigid handle of his Beretta. Rhumkorrf was right behind him, his gloved hand on Colding's back as they slowly walked behind the shrubs.

Heart pounding, ears straining for the sound of danger, Colding stood and moved forward. They reached the wall with no sign of an ancestor.

"You ready?" he whispered over his shoulder.

"I could not possibly be less ready for this insanity."

Colding pressed the wall's single black brick, and the door swung inward. He pointed his gun into the blackness, waiting for the next assault to come leaping from the shadows.

Nothing came.

He moved into the room, and heard a grunt. The blood seemed to freeze in his veins, his wide eyes tried to pierce the darkness. It was *here*, in the room with him ...

Another grunt, and this time Colding realized it was human. He moved quickly across the room and flipped on the light, revealing the nearly unconscious Clayton Detweiler.

"Doc, give me a hand."

The two men stepped into the puddle of blood to untie Clayton.

"Jesus," Rhumkorrf said. "Look at his hand."

"Doc, get on those security monitors," Colding said. "See if you can spot Magnus either in the mansion or at the landing strip."

Rhumkorrf slid into the chair and started flipping through the security channels. Colding winced slightly when he saw Clayton's bloody pinky stub. He lifted Clayton's head.

"Clayton, you've got to wake up, we don't have time for this."

"Wha ... ?" The old man's eyes opened, and he blinked a few times.

"Clayton, did Magnus do this to you?"

He nodded.

Colding grabbed a knife and a first-aid kit from the weapons rack and started cutting away the duct tape. "Why was he torturing you?"

"He wanted to know where Sara was."

The words hit Colding like a strong slap.

"Sara's alive?"

Clayton nodded again, a single tear rolling down his battered face. Free from the tape, he cradled his bloody, pinkie-less hand. "I stashed her and Claudette in da church."

"Claudette?" Rhumkorrf said loudly, almost yelling the word. "She is also alive?"

"When I left her she was, eh? But I think it's too late. Magnus made me tell him where they was. I tried not to, but when he cut off my fuckin' finger, I couldn't take it anymore. I'm so sorry."

Colding shook his head. "Don't worry about that now, it's not your fault." He opened the first-aid kit and rolled some gauze into a mini-tourniquet. He looped it around Clayton's finger.

"This is going to hurt. You ready?"

In response, Clayton pushed Colding's hands away. He grabbed one end of the tourniquet with his free hand, and put the other end in his teeth. As Colding watched in amazement, Clayton snarled and jerked tight the tourniquet with a grunt of pain and anger. His own blood smeared his face and dripped onto his lap.

"I called Chris, told him to come get da women," Clayton said.

"Well, did he do it?" Colding wrapped fresh gauze around the old man's hand.

Clayton shook his head. "I don't know, eh? I been locked up in here."

"Colding!" Rhumkorrf called from the security console. "The helicopter has landed."

Colding moved to the console. One of the tiny monitors showed the Bell 427, its slowing rotor blades still kicking up a cloud of powdery snow. "Have you seen Magnus anywhere?"

He was so *hungry*.

"I don't think so," Rhumkorrf said, switching camera views. "I saw some movement on the path but I couldn't make it out. Let's see ... I think it's camera six." Rhumkorrf punched a button, and a new

image popped up on the monitor.

"Oh my God," Colding whispered. "We're too late."

...

Rhumkorrf wasn't the only one to see the helicopter land.

Baby McButter, now 510 pounds and so very, very *hungry*, watched the prey get out of the shell and move down the trail. *Food*. But he had to be patient, make the others be patient. The other animals, the bigger ones, had been easy to take down. But these, the tall, skinny ones, could be dangerous. They had a stick, a stick that could kill.

The stick had a certain smell. The new prey had that same smell.

Baby McButter softly flicked his dorsal flap three times, signaling to the others. Saliva welled up in his mouth and dripped onto the snow. He was so *hungry*.

...

Danté and Bobby Valentine walked up the trail towards the mansion.

"Not exactly a hero's welcome," Bobby said.

Danté said nothing. In all his life, he had never been this angry. They'd made a quick check of the C-5 hangar to find it empty – Magnus had moved the lab. And Danté had no idea where it was. His wonderful project was over. Raw fury blurred his concentration.

Danté felt a sudden hand on his chest. Bobby had reached back in warning, his eyes focused up the trail. Danté followed his gaze. About twenty feet up the trail, something was lying in the snow. Something black and white, as big as a cow. It moved slightly, with

the small motions of a seriously injured animal. The snow all around the animal was churned-up and lumpy, beaten down to the ground in some places, in others still four feet deep. It looked like the animal had been on the losing end of a fight.

"Is that a cow?" Bobby asked.

Danté felt his anger climb up yet another notch. It might be a cow – then again it might be one of his prized creatures, the thing he'd worked on so hard for years. They walked towards the fallen animal. Bobby's hand once again stopped him. "Hold on, boss," Bobby said. "That sure as fuck ain't no cow. I don't believe it. Rhumkorrf actually did it. Let me check it out first."

Danté stood still as Bobby moved forward.

Bobby walked towards the fallen animal. He pulled his pistol and cautiously approached, but the animal didn't move. He looked back at Danté. "It's still breathing. What do we do now?"

Danté also took a step towards the animal. Before he could take a second step, the ground seemed to explode around Bobby. Seven huge creatures erupted out of the snow, as if they were demons spawned forth from Hell. Danté watched in frozen horror.

Bobby reacted quickly, but it didn't matter. He brought his gun up to fire at the creature on his left, but it lashed out with long claws, decapitating the man. Bobby's severed head sailed through the air and landed at Danté's feet. Before Bobby's body could fall to the ground, two of the creatures opened their huge mouths and lunged at him simultaneously. One creature bit him in the midsection, the other caught him high in the chest. Both yanked savagely, tearing him in half just below the sternum. The first creature shook his head violently, like a dog shaking a chew-toy. Danté saw internal organs fly through the air. Some landed on the ground, some were caught in mid-arc by the other creatures.

Danté turned and sprinted back up the trail.

...

A quarter-mile from the landing strip, Magnus sat in the heated warmth of the Bv's cabin, watching the scene through binoculars. It was a shame to see Bobby buy it, but every war had its share of collateral damage.

"Congratulations, brother," Magnus said quietly. "Your project is a complete success."

...

"Oh, dear God." Rhumkorrf stared in horror at the monitor. "We've got to help him."

Colding felt that sinking feeling of powerlessness, the same one he'd felt in the C-5 before sending Sara up into the storm. He watched several huge creatures break out of the trees on both sides of the trail.

"There's nothing we can do, Doc," Colding said. "He's already dead."

The words were barely out of Colding's mouth when the first of the shadowy black-and-white creatures picked Danté off in mid-stride. The thing bit Danté's leg and snapped its head upwards. Danté, minus the leg, went flying into the air, his body spinning, a trail of arcing blood streaming from the new stump. Like a receiver and a

defensive back going for a wounded-duck pass, two of the creatures leapt in to the air and caught Danté before he hit the ground. They jerked their heads, tearing the man apart. Three more animals joined the feeding frenzy.

“Holy shit,” Clayton said quietly.

Just like that, Danté was gone. Colding saw the creatures disperse, except for one who appeared to be eating a bloody patch of snow.

“What have I done?” Rhumkorrf whispered.

Colding took a deep breath. Danté was gone – they needed a new plan. Colding punched a button on the console, bringing up a wide shot of the Bell 427 still sitting on the landing strip.

“Doc, you can fly that thing, right? You flew it with Bobby.”

Rhumkorrf nodded.

They held their breath as more ancestors trotted out of the woods, joining with Danté and Bobby’s killers, surrounding the 427. Colding counted at least thirty of them, maybe forty. The ancestors sniffed around, dorsal fins twitching up and down. Then, as a group, all their heads turned to look down the length of the landing strip.

Clayton reached down, punched a button, switching to a wide view of the strip camera. At the edge of the tarmac stood a black dog, left leg held up as if it were hurt, its body shaking with the intensity of its repeated barking.

Like a perfectly trained army, the creatures took off as one unit, sprinting down the strip towards Sven Ballantine’s dog.

Pastie managed one more round of barks, then turned and ran into the woods at the strip’s northwest end.

Colding watched for a few seconds as the huge creatures lumbered across the tarmac, then disappeared into the darkness of the woods. This was the break he needed.

“Clayton, we’ve got to move right away. Can you walk?”

Clayton nodded. “Good enough to help you go get da women.”

“No, you’re going on the helicopter with Rhumkorrf. I’m going after Sara alone.”

Clayton grabbed Colding’s arm. “He *cut off my finger*, eh? I’m taking one of those guns, and I’m going to shoot that bastard. I know exactly where da women are, and I’m going, and that’s that.”

Colding looked into the older man’s eyes. They were filled with fury and shame. Shame at giving up the women’s hiding spot to a man who would surely kill them, if he hadn’t already. But above all else, Colding saw stubborn determination. He didn’t have time to argue.

“Fine, get a gun, but I’m going to move fast and if you fall behind you’re on your own, you got it?”

“Fair enough.”

Colding grabbed the British EM2 assault rifle. He stuffed five full magazines in his pockets. He grabbed another ammo box with an additional five-hundred rounds.

“This will do just fine,” Clayton said, holding up one of the Uzis. “I used to fire these

with Charlton Heston back in the seventies.”

Colding slid out of his snowsuit, then handed his pistol to Rhumkorrf.

“You know how to use that, Doc?” Colding asked as he grabbed the bulletproof vest and started strapping it on.

“I imagine I point it and pull the trigger.”

“Yeah, and if it’s one of your monsters coming after you, you keep on pulling it till it clicks on empty, got it?”

Rhumkorrf’s eyes were filled with a sick fear, but he nodded.

Colding pulled the snowsuit back on, feeling bulky from the thick vest. “All three of us will ride the snowmobile to the helicopter. Doc will get in, Clayton and I will stay on the snowmobile. When the monsters show themselves, we’ll lead them away from the helicopter. Doc, as soon as we’re out of sight, you fire up the helicopter. They might come back for you when you start up, so move quick. Land at the town square. Clayton, once the creatures are after us, you and I will go balls-out for town. Magnus may be waiting for us, so be ready to shoot, got it?”

Both men nodded.

Colding walked out the secret door. Rhumkorrf and Clayton followed.

7:05 a.m.

Magnus stopped the Bv 206 behind the abandoned log lodge, putting the building between him and the church. He put it in neutral, letting the diesel engine idle, then hopped out, the ARM slung over his shoulder. It was time for that snooty little bitch to get hers, and get hers good.

He took a long, 360-degree sweep of the area. No movement. He knew he’d have a good ten minutes to finish his business before the creatures could reach the town. By then, Sara would be bagged and tagged, and he’d be back in the Bv’s armored safety. The church was only about fifty meters from the lodge.

Time to get yours, cunt.

•••

“Here he comes,” Sara whispered. She crouched in the tower, almost entirely hidden. She knew Magnus couldn’t see her, but that didn’t lessen her urge to run for her life.

“Oh God,” Overgard said in a tiny voice. Sara felt the older woman’s fear, which surprised her, as she didn’t think she could sense anything beyond her own nigh-overwhelming terror. But fear wasn’t her only emotion.

There was also rage. That bastard had killed her crew. And for that, he was going to pay.

She knew, however, that she’d only have one shot, two at the most, especially considering that nasty-looking machine gun Magnus carried. One shot, with a pistol, from almost four stories up, while her hand shook from the subzero cold.

She had to make it count.

She'd never killed anyone, never even shot anyone. But it was her or Magnus.
He came slowly forward, walking in a silent half-crouch, his big body moving with the smooth athletic grace of a tiger closing in on unaware prey.
She would wait until he was halfway between the church and the lodge.
Just a few more steps ...

•••

Magnus stopped. Something was wrong, he could sense it. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and it wasn't from the bitter cold. He was in a terrible position. His instincts told him to turn around, find another approach.
Not today, twat.
She was just some stupid fly-girl, Colding's fuck-hole. Time to get this over with.
He took another slow step forward.

•••

Sara squeezed the trigger slowly, like her daddy had taught her when they hunted deer in Cheboygan. She squeezed ... and jumped a little when the gun fired.

•••

He heard the pistol's report only a millisecond before the bullet ripped through his meaty left thigh. Pain erupted in his leg, but he reacted with blinding speed, diving to his right.
Another shot, the bullet disappeared into the snow where he'd taken that last step.
Magnus landed on his right shoulder and rolled.
Another shot. The bitch was fast. He heard the bullet whiz by his right ear as he came out of the roll, weight on his right knee.
Magnus fired on full automatic, ripping off ten rounds in less than a second.

•••

Sara couldn't fire fast enough to match his unbelievable speed. She barely had time to drop down when he came out of the roll – bullets whined off the granite walls, filling the air with flying stone splinters that fell lightly on her trembling body. She'd hit him, she *knew* she'd hit him, so why was he still firing back at her?
Because he's the fucking devil.
"Stay down, Claudette!" Sara shouted, but it was meaningless advice – if Claudette got any lower, she would have been *part* of the stone floor.
Just give me one more shot ...

•••

Only five seconds had passed since the bullet ripped through his leg, and the pain was really starting to set in.
"You dirty fucking *bitch*." Magnus limped backwards, rifle still pointed at the church tower. He squeezed off another five-round burst. The bullets kicked up little firework flashes when they slammed into the granite tower. He'd been such a dumbass. The

church was like a fortress against small-arms fire. He needed the Stinger. That would fix her fucking wagon, and fix it good.

Ignoring the screaming pain in his leg, he steadily backpedaled towards the lodge.

He emptied the magazine against the tower, pulled it out and slammed home the second third of the triple-magazine, all while moving backwards and never taking his eyes off the black tower.

Magnus turned just as he reached the lodge, disappearing behind the corner.



Sara wanted another shot, wanted to finish him, but she couldn't make her body get up, couldn't bring herself to look over the edge. Her breath came in shallow gasps, her frozen fingers clutching the ice-cold gun. She just couldn't do it.

Magnus's voice echoed out loud and deep from the woods behind the lodge.

"You didn't kill me, Sara. You can't kill me."

His voice seemed to fill the woods, as if the woods were alive, a supernatural spirit come to tear her to pieces. She suddenly *wanted* those creatures to come, hoped they were still around, that they might bring Magnus down. But they were nowhere to be seen.

"It's going to be bad for you now," his voice rang out. "Real bad."

"Why don't you come give it to me?" She shouted back without lifting her head above the rim. "Why don't you just come and get it on right now?"

"Oh, I'll come," Magnus yelled. "I'll come in you, and on you and all over you. And all that before I cut your wrists so you can watch yourself bleed to death, you dirty whore. Maybe Colding's cock tasted good, but after I knock all your teeth out, mine is going to taste even better."

Sara squeezed her eyes tight, tension building in her brain, in her chest. She didn't know how much more of this she could take.

7:09 a.m.

With three men packed on the Arctic Cat, Colding managed maybe twenty-five miles per hour, tops. He'd seen the creatures run – would twenty-five miles per hour be fast enough to get away? Sure, if they were behind him. But if they came at him from the side or the front, blocking the path to the helicopter, there was no way he could outrun them.

The engine seemed inordinately loud. He knew they heard it, and he knew they were coming. It was only a matter of time.

He drove out onto the tarmac as the first rays of dawn broke over the trees. They reached the helicopter and stopped, looking all around, hunting for any sign of movement. Nothing. Rhumkorrf hopped off, stumbled once in the snow, then climbed in the helicopter. Colding wanted to go, to fire up the snowmobile and blaze down the

wide-open tarmac, but he waited.

“What are we waiting for?” Clayton asked.

“We’ve got to draw them away from the chopper. Once Doc starts it up, I think they might try and tear their way inside. We can’t afford that – if anything happens to the chopper, we’re all dead.”

So they sat. And waited.

Colding revved the engine, trying to make as much noise as possible.

Colding felt Clayton’s grip around his waist change, from the manly barely-holding-onto-you to a clutching, desperate grip of fear. Before he even turned around to look, Colding knew the monsters had arrived.

“Sweet Jesus,” Detweiler whispered.

The creatures broke from the trees at the landing strip’s northwest end. There were at least thirty of them, huge and strong and savage.

Clayton grabbed Colding by the shoulders and shook. “Go, eh? Fuckin’ go!”

“Hold on tight or you’re dead,” Colding yelled.

He gunned the throttle.

The Arctic Cat was still a bit sluggish, but free of Rhumkorrf’s extra 150 pounds the machine shot down the unobstructed runway. Colding hoped the path from the runway’s edge to town would also be clear. He’d outdistance the creatures and have maybe five minutes to gather up Sara and Claudette, if they were still alive. Then, if they could either kill or avoid Magnus, they could wait for Rhumkorrf to come in the helicopter, and they’d be off this godforsaken island.

Running wide-open, the Arctic Cat pulled away from the stampeding monsters.

But they kept coming.

7:10 a.m.

It wasn’t as bad as it looked, but it looked like total hell. Magnus sat in the Bv, grimacing as he examined the wound. It bled badly, but he didn’t think the cunt had hit an artery. He pulled his knife and cut open his pant leg. Pulling the first-aid kit from his bag, he jammed a handful of gauze into the wound. The pain welled up fresh and wonderful; it cleansed his mind.

He’d underestimated her, and it had almost cost him his life. He’d *deserved* to get shot for being so fucking stupid. He wouldn’t underestimate her again.

Magnus removed the blood soaked gauze and tossed it on the Bv’s floor. He pulled a pair of tweezers out of the first-aid kit. He couldn’t move very well with that bullet stuck in his thigh. He took a deep breath, embracing the beauty of pain, and shoved the tweezers into his ravaged flesh. The motion sent waves of agony shooting through his body, cascading along his nervous system, but he pushed the tweezers in deeper, feeling for the bullet’s solid resistance. Blood continued to well up from the wound, making him operate by feel alone. So much pain, and everything seemed so *clear*, so *understandable*.

The tweezers clicked lightly against something solid. He breathed slowly through his nose as he gently fixed the tweezers on the bullet. He pulled – it slid out with a fresh wave of pain and a wet, squelching sound. Magnus jammed fresh gauze into the wound, then pulled out a lighter. He ignited it and held his Ka-Bar knife over the flame. He didn't have time for some fancy-pants operation. He had places to go and people to kill. The flame licked up and around the blade's point, trailing thin, greasy black smoke trails into the air.

"I know you," Magnus said to the knife.

He stuck the point into the bullet hole. The knife point hissed and blood bubbled, filling the Bv's cab with the stench of burning flesh.

Magnus smiled.

He removed the knife and again held it over the flame.

"Thank you," Magnus said to the knife. "Thank you so very much."

7:11 a.m.

Rhumkorrf sat in the cockpit, shaking both from terror and from the bitter cold. He watched Colding and Clayton blaze down the runway, and he watched his creations tear after them. *How could he have been so damn blind?* From the first moment the embryos started to take shape, he'd known – somewhere deep inside – that they would be huge predators. He'd *known* this, but blocked that knowledge. And he hadn't done that for the egalitarian reason of saving human lives. That's what he'd told himself at the time, but it wasn't true. The *truth* was he'd *created* life. From scratch. He'd felt the power of a God in creating a creature never before seen on the planet. Not some bacterium, or a virus, not a creature with a few thousand chromosomes, but a large, advanced mammal.

He'd let the genie out of the bottle, and people were dying for it. On top of that, he'd had another chance to stop everything. When the plane crashed, he should have let the cows die, but he just *couldn't* do it. Something in his body wouldn't let him see all that work go up in smoke, even after Magnus wanted him dead, even after the long-clawed fetus practically killed Cappy, even after the dying cow kicked his Claudette in the head, almost killing her.

His Claudette. Yes, that was right ... *his* Claudette. He'd written her off – how could he have forgiven her for her infidelity, for her acts against God? By simply *doing* it, that's how. All that wasted time, all the pain he'd caused her. And the things he'd said to her back in the C5. He still loved her. He hadn't known it, because he'd pushed it so far down that it would never bother him again. And it hadn't, at least until he thought she'd died in the plane crash. But she wasn't dead, she was alive, with Sara, and they were going to save her. Just a few more seconds, after the ancestors followed Colding into the woods, he'd fly in for the rescue, he'd make it all up to her. All of it.

Rhumkorrf's breath caught in his throat. At the far edge of the tarmac, one ancestor stopped, letting the others disappear down the trail. In the early light of dawn, the lone

ancestor looked back. It seemed to be looking right at him.

It can't see inside the helicopter, Rhumkorrf told himself.

The creature stood still for a moment, then took a tentative step back towards the Bell 427.

"No," Rhumkorrf whispered. "No, please, no."

The ancestor's sail suddenly stood straight up, the translucent yellow membrane seemingly catching all of the morning rays. It opened its mouth wide, showing huge teeth. Rhumkorrf couldn't hear it inside the cockpit, but he knew the creature was roaring a hideous roar, calling its brethren back.

They were coming for him.

His body shook uncontrollably. The lone creature sprinted towards the helicopter, a hundred yards away and closing fast.

Rhumkorrf's shaking, bandaged hands dove at the controls. His frostbitten fingers howled in protest, but he easily ignored the pain.

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god ..." He prepped the Bell 427 for takeoff. The engine whined as the rotor slowly started to turn.

He couldn't stop himself from looking up again. The lone ancestor had closed half the distance. Rhumkorrf saw its massive muscles rippling under the black-white-fur.

The ancestor was only twenty-five yards away, close enough to see its beady black eyes, but that wasn't what froze Claus's heart in his chest. The trail seemed to erupt, spewing forth a horrific wave of muscled ancestors. They spread out in a mass, rushing down the runway like some barbaric army bearing down on a hated enemy.

The helicopter shook from a sudden impact.

The lead ancestor had reached the Bell 427. Rhumkorrf craned his neck to see the creature, but it was hidden under the Bell 427's nose.

The chopper shook again and he heard the distinct sound of tearing metal – the thing was trying to rip its way inside.

The ancestor horde was only fifty yards away. The pack would tear the Bell 427 to pieces to get at him. If they did enough damage, he wouldn't be able to take off.

Rhumkorrf pulled the pistol Colding had given him. He slid open the pilot's side window and leaned out, the cold wind slapping his burnt face. He looked down. Trying to find the ancestor.

But it found him first.

It leapt for him, jumping ten feet into the air, teeth flashing and long claws reaching up and up and up. Rhumkorrf fell back into the cabin just as the long claws came through the open window. The huge mouth jammed through and snapped at him, missing his feet by only inches. Rhumkorrf heard a furious sound of claws scratching on metal – the creature's rear legs kicked against the smooth hull, trying to find enough purchase to push its way through the open window.

They were coming
for him.

Rhumkorrf raised the pistol and fired. The recoil threw the weapon from his hand. It fell on the floor past the copilot's seat.

The creature flinched, like it had been stung by a bee, then kept trying to drive through the small window. Its outraged roar filled the small cabin, threatening to blow Rhumkorrf's eardrums.

He shook like a cowering Chihuahua, mind blank from terror.

The creature's rear claws finally found some purchase. It lunged further through the window. Plexiglass broke and metal bent as it tried to cram its 500 pound body through the small space. Rhumkorrf dove back into the copilot seat, his back against the glass. The creature's wide jaws snapped with the speed of a rapidly barking dog, huge *clack* sounds filling the cabin each time the jaws pounded shut.

Each bite came closer, only inches from his chest. He pushed his back against the door, unable to bend over and reach the gun lest he put himself in range of the bear-trap jaws.

The monster's rear claws slipped from their precarious hold on the helicopter's metal hull, and it slid back. The powerful front arms caught the edge of the demolished window. It gathered itself for another lunge, but Rhumkorrf moved first. He bent down and snatched up the pistol. The monster lunged forward, but this time met the gun's blazing barrel.

Rhumkorrf held the pistol in both hands, in a death grip, he wasn't dropping it again. He did as Colding told him, pulling the trigger over and over again.

The first two bullets disappeared into the creature's massive maw. It closed its mouth and flinched away, but it was half-in and half-out of the window – there was no escape. The next bullet smashed out a narrow black eye; the two after that ripped into the thick skull.

"Get out!"

He pulled the trigger three more times. The skull smashed open, sending a gusher of hot blood and brains into the cabin, covering Rhumkorrf's face, hands and black parka. The creature weakly slid from the window and fell to the ground below.

He didn't have time to appreciate his victory – the chopper started to rock from multiple blows. The ancestor army had arrived. They surrounded the helicopter, attacking it from all sides, tearing at the metal.

He dropped the gun and slid into the bloody pilot's seat. During his brief struggle for life, the rotors had spun up to full speed. Rhumkorrf guided the Bell 427 into the air. The helicopter leaned hard to the right as a monster jumped and hung on the right skid, but it slipped away before the rotors hit the ground. Rhumkorrf corrected, mind too fried with terror to realize how close the Bell 427 had just come to crashing, and rose straight into the air.

He put the throttle forward and headed for the ghost town.

Predictably, the hungry horde of ancestors followed.

7:13 a.m.

Colding guided the Arctic Cat through the drifts that obstructed the trail, plowing through the frozen white waves with bursts of fine powder. He wondered when the claws would sink into his back. Clayton's hands were bad enough: the man's fingers gripped like talons.

He was sandwiched between two deadly dangers – the ancestors somewhere behind him, and Magnus somewhere in front of him. He reached the edge of town, slowed and stopped. He needed just a minute to think, but didn't know if he had that much time.

He stopped the Arctic Cat's engine. The woods seemed deathly silent, save for the distant *thumpa-thumpa* of the Bell 427 – at least Doc had made it off the helicopter pad.

"Anything?" he asked Clayton.

"Haven't seen them since we got on da trail. There were a few straightaways. I figured I'd see 'em, eh? But nothing. I don't know if they're coming." Clayton cocked his head to the side and looked up. "You hear that?"

The helicopter sounds grew louder. They were out of time.

"We can't wait any longer," Colding said. "Those monsters will follow the helicopter, but Magnus might be somewhere in the town if the monsters didn't get him."

"So what do we do?"

Colding chewed on his lower lip. "I think we've got to make a run for the church. We have to get there and get in as quick as we can, maybe before Magnus can do anything about it."

Clayton looked across the square. "We'll be in da open for looks like ten or fifteen seconds. Can he get us that quick?"

Colding nodded. "If he's ready, or if he heard us coming, yeah, he could take us out. Depends on where he is."

"And if he's already in da church?"

Colding paused. Anger started to replace his fear. "Then we kill him."

Clayton nodded fiercely. "Now you're talkin'."

7:15 a.m.

Inside the church, Claudette stared at the ceiling. Her action reminded Sara of that old commercial with the dog listening to the record player.

"Sara, do you hear that?"

Sara listened. "I don't hear anything."

"It's getting louder. I think it sounds like ... "

Sara heard it, faintly, but she heard it.

"Like a helicopter."

They rushed up the ladder to the turret's trap door.

7:16 a.m.

Magnus heard the flutter of rotor blades. Helicopter approaching. He'd seen both Danté and Bobby go down – there was only one person who could be flying that thing. “Hiya, Doc. I’ve got something for you. Yes I do.” He reached into the back seat.

7:17 a.m.

Rhumkorrf’s arrival forced Colding’s hand. There was no way Magnus could miss it, if he were still alive. Magnus would come after the chopper, and Colding had to take him out when he did so. But he also had to get to the church and get Sara. What if Magnus was already inside, hurting her ...

The Bell 427’s engine became a roar as it flew directly overhead, then slowed to circle the town square.

“Hold on, Clayton!”

Colding made his decision – he’d go for the church and deal with Magnus when he showed up. It was the only way.

He gunned the engine. The sled shot out into the open town square.

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“Is that helicopter for us?” Claudette asked, hope and joy tingeing her words.

“I sure hope so,” Sara said, but she wasn’t looking at the helicopter. She saw him – even bundled up in the snowsuit, she knew it was Colding on that snowmobile, coming to save her. Sara felt hope and love explode in her chest. But there was another emotion in there: the pure feeling of fear. Magnus was still out there, somewhere. Sara looked around the town square, trying to spot the big man.

Finally, she saw him ... and saw what he was holding.

•••

Magnus looked through the Stinger’s viewfinder. He didn’t care anymore. He really just didn’t give a flying fuck. He’d been shot – that would slow him down. He couldn’t risk any more delays.

“Checkmate, Doc.”

Magnus pushed the firing button.

7:18 a.m.

They all saw the Stinger’s flashing white trail as the missile snaked towards the Bell 427. Rhumkorrf saw it coming, but didn’t even have time to react.

Goodbye, Claudette. I'm so sorry ...

The five-foot missile slammed into the hovering helicopter just below the copilot's window. The warhead exploded on contact, blossoming into a brilliant orange fireball as the Bell 427 ripped into burning pieces. The fuel tank caught almost immediately, igniting a secondary blast. The Bell's remains plummeted to the ground.

Wreckage and streams of burning fuel showered the town square.



Colding saw the Stinger's launch and pulled hard right, away from the church. The sudden movement caught Clayton unaware and almost dislodged him from the seat. The explosion's shock wave finished the job, slamming Clayton to the ground. He skidded to a halt, then didn't move.

Colding managed to stay seated and fought for control. Wreckage rained down around him. He hit the brakes and pulled hard left as the tail shaft – rotor still spinning – crashed into the ground in front of him. The snowmobile pitched on its side. Colding dove free before it rolled over completely, turning three full times before landing on its skids, the fiberglass body shattered beyond repair.

His jacket's down lining caught fire, filling his nostrils with the smell of burning feathers. He rolled on the ground, pushing his burning arm into the snow. He managed to douse the flames before his arm suffered any serious damage.

He stood, a murderous gaze fixed on his face. His hands squeezed tight on the EM2.

A voice came from behind him.

"Drop it, Bubbah."

Colding shook with fury. He fought the urge to quickly turn and open up the EM2, spraying bullets at Magnus, tearing his hated body to pieces. Colding knew he wouldn't even make a quarter turn before Magnus gunned him down. There was nothing he could do. Magnus always seemed to be one move ahead.

Colding dropped the gun.

"And the Beretta," Magnus said. "Do it slow, I have no problem killing you."

Colding slowly pulled the Beretta from inside his snowsuit and tossed it away, where it fell into the snow and vanished.

"Now put your hands in the air and turn around real slow. You and I have a date with a pair of hot ladies."

7:19 a.m.

A large gush of burning fuel had hit the lodge. Long flames rose up into the morning sky, whipped to-and-fro by the growing wind. The old wooden structure would be completely engulfed by flames within fifteen minutes.

A chunk of engine had spun wildly into the air, arcing a good thirty yards before slamming into the church roof. Small flames glowed as the fire sought purchase through

the slate shingles, hungry for the wood beneath. Several of the town's buildings fueled small fires of their own.

From the steeple, Sara looked at the smoldering roof fire. She couldn't get near the flames, and even if she could, she had nothing with which to put them out. In a few minutes the fire would catch full force. They were safe in the stone turret, but not for long – when the fire caught, they'd be cooked to death if the smoke didn't get them first.

"What do we do now?" asked Claudette, who was also looking at the small flames, dejection and defeat written across her face.

Flames leapt up from the town square, blocking her view of where Colding had fallen. "We've got to get out of here, Claudette, we've got to make a run for it."

"But the helicopter, the explosion – the noise will bring the monsters," Claudette said nervously.

Sara nodded – there was no denying the danger on the ground. "But we'll be trapped up here. If we stay, we'll burn to death."

"Saaaaaraaaaa," Magnus's voice called from below. He was *inside* the church. "Sara, I've got someone here to see you."

Blazing rage pulled Sara's lip back in a snarl. Now it was too late to get out. She silently walked to the trapdoor and descended, Claudette only a few steps behind.

7:22 a.m.

252

A gun at his back, Colding stood in the church's center aisle, amidst the broken and moldy pews. The place already smelled of smoke. Small fires burned the rafters on his left, filling the church with a flickering light. On his right, up on the choir loft, he saw movement. He caught a glimpse of someone deep in the choir loft's shadows.

Sara.

"'Tis the east," Magnus said from behind him, calling up the loft. "And fair Sara is the sun. Sara, I brought your boyfriend for a little visit."

Magnus kept Colding's body between him and the loft.

"You think I give a fuck about that piece of shit?" Sara said from her hiding place in the shadows. "That bastard sent me to die."

"Oh, come on, Sara," Magnus said. "You know that was me, you know your boyfriend had nothing to do with it."

"Bullshit. I should just shoot both of you right now. And this time, Magnus, I'm going to finish the job."

Colding looked towards the sound of her voice, but he couldn't see her in the shadows. Damn, but she was smart. Colding's right hand made a fist, his index finger pointing out, his thumb up – the shape of a gun. He slowly moved his left hand and pointed at his chest. He had no idea if she'd understand, or even do it, but it was their only chance.



"I need a vacation," Clayton mumbled as he slowly raised his head. Every last one of his old bones hurt, especially the broken ones in his leg. He was no stranger to broken bones, and knew the feeling. The town was on fire all around him, he had a broken leg, his pinkie was gone, and the creatures were coming.

"You're in some deep shit now, eh, old man?"

From his left he saw movement. About twenty yards away, at the edge of the square where the trail led into the woods. A flash of yellow.

"Oh, shit," Clayton said quietly.

Burning wreckage surrounded him. He hoped it might hide him from the creatures for a few minutes, if he stayed very still. But sooner or later they'd get him. He had to move. Clayton slowly turned his head to the right. The lodge was on fire, the dry old wood glowing red and disappearing as flames shot thirty feet into the air. No shelter there.

But behind the lodge, just past the hazy flames, he saw a familiar white shape.

Clayton grimaced against the pain in his leg as he crawled, with maddening slowness, towards the burning lodge.

7:24 a.m.

The fire in the rafters spread slowly but steadily, filling the church with a spastic flickering light. Shadows seemed to jump with wills of their own, making the pews and the big crucifix seem to vibrate with evil life.

Do it, Colding thought, as if she might somehow read his mind. *Do it, shoot me.*

Magnus stayed hidden behind Colding, but kept calling up to the loft. "Sara, why don't you send Claudette down? I'll trade you Colding for Claudette. I don't need you. I just need her. You don't know enough to be a danger to me."

"Then why did you try to kill me?" Sara answered from the shadows. Her voice had come from a different spot. She was moving around, so Magnus couldn't get a fix on her position.

"I didn't try and kill *you*, per se, sweet cheeks. I tried to kill Claudette and Rhumkorrf. You just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"So was my crew."

"You want me to apologize for that or something? They're dead, cunt. That's the breaks of the game. Jian is dead. Rhumkorrf is dead. Now all I need is Claudette. You and Colding can go on your way. If you make it off the island, more power to you, but I'll let you go. At least then you'd have a chance. What do you say to that?"

Silence.

"What good is Colding to me if he's dead?"

"But he's not dead," Magnus said. "You can see him. He's fine, he's right - "

A gunshot roared out. Colding felt a sledgehammer slam into his chest and drive him

backwards. He crashed into Magnus, and the two men toppled to the floor. Colding rolled once, landed face down, and didn't move. Another shot rang out, but Magnus was already moving, diving behind a pew. The bullet smacked into the frozen, rotted wood.

"What do you think of that, Magnus?" Sara called out. "Now you ain't got jack shit to trade, you sick fuck!"

Magnus popped up from behind the pew and opened fire on the choir loft, spraying bullets everywhere. The wood railing came apart in a shower of splinters. Sara popped up in yet another new spot – Magnus ducked back down just as she capped off another round.



Sara was on her belly, firing between the railing spokes. The madly flickering firelight made it hard to target Magnus, who kept crawling around under the pews and popping up to spray the loft with bullets. Sara could barely breathe from the smoke. She had two shots left, maybe three – she'd lost count.

I shot him. He WANTED me to shoot him.

The only thing that made sense was that Colding was wearing a bulletproof vest; that was the only reason he would want her do it. She silently prayed that was the case, that she hadn't somehow misunderstood his signals. But what if she *had* misunderstood? Then she'd just killed the man she loved.

Sara pushed herself back from the loft's edge, out of sight from the floor, and rolled several times to her left. She had to keep moving. A burning feeling shot up her leg. She kicked, knocking away a smoldering piece of rafter. The ceiling above her crawled with flame. Sara rolled a few more times, carrying her away from the hot spot. She laid flat and eased herself to the loft's edge.

254

7:20 a.m.

Colding coughed, a thin stream of spit and blood escaped his mouth. It felt like someone had driven a baseball bat through his chest. He slid a hand under his bulletproof vest. It hurt, hurt like a bitch, but his fingers came away without blood.

He looked under the pews, the only vantage he had from his prone position. He couldn't see Magnus. Pieces of burning rafters dropped every few seconds. Some of the pews danced with fire, some were just smoldering. Flames crawled across the warped wooden floor. The place was going up like a tinderbox. Acrid smoke expanded through the church, choking out oxygen and stinging his eyes.

Colding rose to his knees and peeked over the pew. Magnus was nowhere to be seen, but he might be only a few feet away, hidden by the wide pews. Colding saw the staircase behind the altar. That was the way to reach Sara, but if he went up there they'd both be trapped by Magnus. He had to get her down. If he could just spot Magnus, maybe sneak up on him ... it was suicidal, sneaking up on a trained killer armed with an

automatic rifle, but Colding had to try. He *had* to find a way.

From behind them, the tall, heavy, double doors swung open hard, each smashing against the wall, flooding the burning church with morning light. Colding looked back. Rising above the pews were at least a dozen tall, yellow sail-fins, spreading out and moving forward.

The pain in his chest forgotten, Colding stood, rounded the pew's corner, and sprinted for the staircase.



When he heard the big doors slam open, Magnus peeked out from behind the thick crucifix. From his vantage point on the four-foot high stage, he had a full view of the ancestors. Through the shimmering heat-haze and the growing smoke cloud, a dozen nightmares trotted through the doors, thick muscles like lions on steroids, massive heads with jaws wider and thicker and longer than a crocodile, a strange yellow dorsal sail-fin flipping up and down in twitching anticipation.

Magnus suddenly realized he'd made a mistake – several mistakes. He should have gotten the fuck off this island when he had the chance. He needed to get back to the mansion, back to the armory so he could take these fuckers out. He was wounded, facing overwhelming odds, with a sniper-bitch hidden on the balcony.

But it didn't matter, because he knew he couldn't be killed.

Movement on his left drew his attention. Colding, not dead, but up and sprinting for the edge of the altar. The cocksucker had tricked him somehow. Magnus brought up the ARM – he'd cut Colding in half.



I've got you now, fucker, Sara thought as she targeted Magnus. In a brief moment of total awareness, she saw it all as if it were in slow motion: the monsters spreading out through the church, Colding sprinting for the stairs, Magnus coming around the cross and bringing up the rifle. She had him dead to rights.

Just as she pulled the trigger, a burning chunk of rafter fell onto her leg, pulling her aim slightly to the right ...



... the bullet tore a huge chunk out of the old crucifix, sending a shower of splinters into Magnus's cheek. He dropped to the ground and hid behind the crucifix, his face consumed with pain. He rolled to his feet, brought his gun up on the other side of the crucifix and fired a wild burst, hoping to hit Colding, but the man disappeared into the stairwell. Magnus looked to his right, back out into the church. There were more than twelve of them now, maybe as many as twenty, and they had spotted him. Some sprinted up the aisle, some tried to crawl over the moldy, smoldering pews – all wanted to get him. Magnus stepped out from behind the cross and shuffle-stepped towards the stairs, opening up on the creatures as he did. The one closest to him fell hard, blood spurting from a half-dozen fresh bullet holes, but there were so many of them ...



Sara kicked the burning rafter free from her leg and stood. Time to finish this shit once and for all. Magnus shuffled to his left, towards the stairs, his attention occupied by the wave of sail-finned land-sharks moving towards him. Ignoring the smoke, the flickering light, the creatures' roars and the crackling flames, Sara took careful aim at his head and pulled the trigger.

The trigger clicked on empty.

She holstered her weapon and ran for the steeple ladder.



Colding cleared the last step. The smoke was much thicker on the choir loft. He coughed violently. Through the black smoke, he saw Sara.

"Come on!" she screamed as they started climbing the ladder. "Up here!"

Colding ran to the ladder, hoping against all hope she knew what she was doing.



Magnus flew up the stairs, firing blindly behind himself until the gun clicked on empty. As he ascended he tried to pop in a fresh magazine, but the narrow staircase made it hard to bring the gun around while he was running full-out. He felt the stairs shaking, not only from his own solid weight, but from something even larger.

He almost cleared the last step when that something hit him from behind. Magnus landed hard on his face, the gun skidding one way, the fresh magazine skidding another. A slashing pain seared up the back of his left leg.

He rolled to his back, cocked his right leg and kicked with all his power. He felt his foot smash against skin and bone. The creature roared with anger and pain. Magnus sprang to his feet as the creature gathered and pounced again. Magnus ducked under the gaping, snapping jaws, moved behind the creature, and wrapped his thick arms around its barrel-like neck. The ancestor thrashed in anger. Its big body was halfway in the narrow stairwell, blocking the way for the others.

Magnus let loose his own savage, primitive roar and squeezed with all his power. The muscular monster threw its head back and forth, trying to bring its jaws around for the killing bite, but Magnus kept it pinned in the stairwell. He brought his knee up and smashed it against the creature's ribs three times in rapid succession.

"Fuck you motherfucker!" Magnus screamed, spit flying from his mouth, his face a twisted mask of psychotic fury. He felt the creature weakening under his stranglehold. "You can't kill me! You hear that, Colding? I'll kill this thing and then I'm coming for you!"

7:21 a.m.

Sara went up first. Colding followed, but stopped halfway up the ladder, unable to look away from the battle. He couldn't believe his eyes. Magnus was killing one of those

creatures *with his bare hands*.

“No,” Colding said quietly. “You don’t get to live.”

He let go of the ladder and dropped down to the loft. He reached down, grabbed a piece of fallen rafter, and held it like a torch, the burning end hissing and crackling with flames.

“This is for Jian and Doc.”

Colding reared back and hurled the burning wood. It spun three times in the air before the flaming end hit Magnus square in the face. Magnus screamed, then fell to his back. Colding scrambled up the ladder.

The monster blocking the stairs shook its head, as if to clear its thoughts, then turned to fix its evil, black-eyed stare at Magnus.

...

Magnus’s hands flew to his seared cheek. Even as his skin bubbled and howled in pain, he knew he had to move. He sat up, trying to scramble to his feet, but the monster cleared the stairwell and was on him. Claws hit him in the chest, knocking him back, pinning him under the bulk of its 510-pound weight. The jaws opened wide and shot forward, but Magnus brought up his hands and grabbed the skin at the sides of the creature’s face. He held his arms straight out. The jaws snapped shut less than an inch from his nose. Sharp claws dug into his massive chest.

Its rancid breath smelled of rotting flesh. Jammed between two of the long, wicked teeth, Magnus saw the tip of a black-and-blue human finger.

The creature tried to rear back, but Magnus kept his grip. It lunged forward, snapping again, and yet he still held it at bay, his arms just long enough to spare his face

from the wide jaws. It turned its head to bite his arm – as it did, Magnus twisted his weight to the side, pushing the thick head towards the ground. It was so goddamned *strong*.

Movement from his left. Another monster coming out of the stairs. Three eager steps closed the distance. The one he held fast pushed hard against his strained grip – if he let go, he’d die; if he didn’t let go, he’d die.

Magnus Paglione started to scream.

The second creature sprang forward, jaws opened wide, blocking the flickering light. The last thing Magnus saw was the gaping silhouette of three-foot-wide jaws. It bit down with crushing power. The front left incisor punched through his right temple, the bottom incisor smashed through his left cheekbone. With a spray of blood and one last, choked scream, the monster bit clean through Magnus’s head just above the nose. His ravaged brains spilled onto the floor, and Magnus’s powerful arms finally fell limp.

...

Magnus Paglione
started to scream.

Colding kicked shut the turret's trap door, and – finally – held Sara again as she rushed into his arms. Sobs suddenly wracked her body. She was almost dead weight, but he didn't care. He held her tightly. Her body molded to his, and he felt his soul breathe a deep sigh of relief. He kissed her smoke-streaked forehead.

"Take it easy," he said just loud enough to be heard over the roaring fire. He took a quick look around. Most of the church roof was on fire, angry twenty-foot flames pouring up and around the remnants of the slate shingles. He heard a heavy, wooden crack from inside the church, followed by the sound of something smashing to the ground amidst roaring flames, and the horrible, deep roar-howl of the ancestor likely trapped beneath. The flames had spread almost to the tower. Heat billowed up like a concussive force. The flames wouldn't reach into the turret, but they wouldn't have to – they'd all be cooked to death in a matter of minutes.

He rubbed Sara's back. "Come on, Sara. We've got to get out of here."

"Oh, let her cry," came a voice from behind him. He turned to see Claudette, sitting on her butt, arms around her knees. "Just let her cry, Colding. There's no way out of here. Even if we can get out of this turret, look what's waiting for us."

Colding shuffled Sara a few steps to the left so he could look over the edge. Dozens of ancestors circled at the base of the turret. Some were trying unsuccessfully to climb the black rock. Others were actually *biting* the rock, chipping their long teeth trying to tear the foundation out from under them. Every few seconds another ancestor ran out of the open double doors. Some were on fire, trailing smoke, their black-and-white hide adding the stench of burnt fur to the ghost town's carnage.

Claudette was right. It was over.

"Shhh," Colding said softly as he petted Sara's head. "It will be okay."

Claudette started to laugh – the sick, demented laugh of someone who's given up all hope. But over her laughter, over the sound of the raging fire, over the sound of the roaring, hungry ancestors, Colding heard another sound.

The gurgling of a diesel engine.

7:23 a.m.

Clayton Detweiler grimaced as he worked the clutch with his broken leg. Pain dominated his thoughts, but he pushed it away, focusing on the task at hand. Those people were stuck in the turret, and they didn't have long. Besides, he'd felt worse, like the time he'd been on the North Pointe, doing ZaZa Gabor doggy-style when she went nuts and stabbed him in the arm (and, to this day, he *still* didn't know what he'd said, or where she'd hid the knife, but at least he'd gotten his rocks off before she cut him). She'd taken his Jeep back to the mansion, and he had to walk – three miles – to Sven's farm to get his arm stitched up. That had been hard, and painful, but he'd made it, just like he'd make it this time.

"Got somethin' for ya," Clayton said as he floored the gas pedal. His left hand was on

the wheel, his right hand on the Uzi. "Oh, I got something for ya, eh?"

The Bv shot around the burning lodge, turned, and rolled towards the church. The ancestors surrounding the turret turned as one sprinted towards him.



Baby McButter saw the strange, noisy animal come roaring towards his brethren. It had been sitting still earlier, and it hadn't smelled like food – but now it did. And it smelled like something else.

It smelled like the stick.

Baby McButter lifted his sail three times, signaling alarm, but some of his brethren didn't notice. Those were the ones too hungry to worry about any danger.



Clayton stood, his weight on his right leg, and stuck his head and torso out the top hatch as the Bv moved towards the church at twenty miles an hour.

"You hungry?" he shouted to the oncoming horde. "Ol' Clayton's got a snack for ya!"

He opened up with the Uzi, firing short, controlled bursts at each monster, just like Charlie Heston had once shown him. The first burst hit dead-center on the lead ancestor, dropping it in mid-stride. He bagged two more, clearly killing one and blowing the left leg off the second. It fell to the snow-covered ground, writhing in pain. It kept twitching and twisting until the Bv's tank tread crushed its chest.

The gun clicked on empty. The monsters kept coming while Clayton quickly popped in a fresh clip.

An ancestor jumped onto the Bv's hood and charged forward, leaping up towards the open hatch, straight for Clayton. Clayton dropped through the turret, back down onto the driver's seat. The huge monster stuck its head through the hatch, jaws agape, long teeth reaching down for him. Clayton fired straight up into the monster's face, shooting twenty-five rounds in less than three seconds. The skull disintegrated, coating Clayton and the cabin interior with blood, bone and brains.

He had to wipe blood from the inside of the windshield to see. He was only a few feet from the church. He slammed on the brakes and turned hard right, sending the heavy Bv into a small fishtail. The back end swung around to the left, smacking against the granite walls. Clayton stood and pushed the bloody corpse with all his strength, slowly lifting it free from the hatch. It rolled down the front windshield and landed on the hood, sprawled out like a prize ten-point buck, blood still gushing out its ground-beef head.

The ancestors were keeping their distance, staying to the shadows or behind smaller fires, where the intense heat distorted their visage into shimmering, demonic ghosts. Most of the creatures were back a good twenty yards, feasting on the corpses of their fallen brethren with a savage, shaking desperation.

Clayton looked up to see the joyous, shouting faces of Colding, Sara and Claudette.

7:25 a.m.

Colding watched Clayton crawl out of the blood-smeared roof hatch. The old man's face wrinkled with agony, but he clamored out as quickly as he could and climbed into the aerial lift bucket. Watching the bucket rise up to the tower was the most beautiful thing Colding had ever seen. He had unlimited admiration for Clayton, who, like an old soldier, stood on his one good leg, covered in the blood of his enemies, the Uzi dangling from a strap around his neck.

"You're one tough old bastard," Colding said, gripping Clayton's shoulder. "You saved us."

Clayton pushed his hand away, then handed Colding the Uzi and a spare magazine. "Well, you can suck my dick later, eh? I think I need a nap."

Colding helped Overgard into the bucket. Then he and Sara climbed down the aerial lift's two folding arms. Sara slid through the roof hatch. Colding stood on top of the hatch, watching Clayton lower the aerial lift and watching the ancestors dart around the periphery of the woods, just inside the tree line.

Colding felt a wave of protectiveness wash over him – he had to keep these people alive. He couldn't fail them like he'd failed Rhumkorrf, Jian, and his wife.

He helped Overgard out of the lift bucket and into the hatch. Clayton crawled out on his own – the old man's leg looked bad. His pants stuck out at a strange angle, anchored by one bloody point. A greenstick fracture.

Colding dropped through the hatch, then reached up to help Clayton descend. The old man collapsed in a heap between the driver and passenger seats.

"Sara, you're driving," Colding said. "Claudette, see if you can help Clayton, but first see if there's any weapons in the back of this thing." Colding stood on the passenger seat and popped his head out the hatch. Apparently, the ancestors didn't want to keep their distance anymore. One rushed the Bv from the right. Colding brought up the Uzi and ripped off a hurried burst. Some of the bullets went wide, but at least two hit the thing in the chest. It stopped, skidding slightly in the snow as it tried to suddenly go the other way, twitching like a kid just stung by a bee.

Colding pulled the trigger, hoping to finish it off, but the Uzi clicked on empty. The monster ran back behind the burning lodge, shaking and roaring like an angry gorilla.

Colding popped in the fresh magazine, the last one. Thirty-two bullets were all they had left, and then nothing would stop the wave of brutal death from pouring over them.

The Bv lurched forward and they pulled away from the church inferno. The town square looked like a war zone, cluttered with twisted metal wreckage and every building burning bright.

Claudette tugged at Colding's pants leg.

"This is all I found," she said, handing up a green canvas bag. He looked in the bag with several quick peeks – he'd seen how fast the things could move, and he wasn't taking his eyes off the landscape for more than a second at a time. Two, no, three pounds of plastique. About two-dozen detonators. His heart leapt when he saw four magazines,

but it sank again when he realized they were for Magnus's ARM, which was somewhere in the burning church.

Sara pointed the Bv to the east.

Head sticking out of the hatch, buffeted by the wind, the town roaring with flames and the Bv's diesel happily gurgling away, Colding had to scream to be heard.

"Sara, where are you going?"

"The docks!" Sara shouted up. "We saw Chris last night. If the creatures got him, the boat might still be there."

"And if they didn't get him?"

"We're fucked no matter what. We're almost on empty. I'm not sure this thing has enough gas to get back to the mansion."

Clayton yelled up from his prone position. "Go to the docks! If they didn't get him, he's probably still out there, waiting for me. It's our only chance."

Even as she drove, Sara looked up at Colding, waiting for his confirmation. She was right; there was nowhere else to go.

Colding looked down and nodded. "Floor it! Get us there as quick as you can!"

The Bv pulled away, making a good fifteen miles per hour over the town square. Sara managed to avoid most of the big pieces of Bell 427 wreckage – those she couldn't avoid, she simply ran over. The Bv bounced along as it drove over twisted metal and small fires.

Sara guided the Bv through town and onto the trail, thick snow-covered woods on either side, the beach only a mile away.

Three ancestors broke from the woods on the left and rushed them. Colding fired off a quick burst at the leader – the monster slowed, but kept coming. He let off another three shot burst. One of the bullets caught the ancestor in the eye. It fell to the ground, thrashing and shaking its head as if it were being electrocuted. His two companions stopped, looked at the retreating Bv for a few seconds, then turned and attacked their fallen comrade. Within seconds, three more creatures joined the brutal feeding frenzy. The fallen ancestor fought desperately, lashing out with long claws and drawing blood several times, but it couldn't resist the assault. It finally fell still, its corpse torn asunder with a savagery Colding had never dreamed existed.

The ancestors kept coming after them, but they stayed to the trees, running parallel to the Bv. They were like shadows in the deep woods, a flash of white, the reflection of a beady black eye, but little more. They weren't going to wait forever. Every hundred yards or so, one of the critters grew bold and made a run at the Bv. Colding waited until they got close, close enough that he could be sure of his shots. He bagged one with a lucky head shot, the bullet likely bouncing around inside the skull and ripping the brain to shreds. The other ones acted little more than annoyed at the bullets – they'd rush, take a few rounds, then turn and dart back into the woods. He didn't need an Uzi, he needed a fucking cannon.

The wind swept in from the beach at twenty miles per hour. With the Bv driving straight into it, Colding suffered thirty-five mile per hour winds on top of twenty-below

weather. His face stung. His ears and nose felt numb.

The Bv's steady forward progress started to outlast the ancestors' short sprints. At the half-mile point, the monsters fell behind. That would buy a few precious moments at the dock.

The Bv topped the dune and rolled down the other side, the wide-open expanse of a roiling Lake Superior spreading out before them. He saw Chris's snowmobile near the dock. He also saw the *Otto II*, and his heart leapt into his throat. It was at the far edge of the harbor, about twenty feet inside the north breakwall. He looked behind the Bv – no sign of the ancestors. They had *made* it.

Then he saw it. They all saw it.

The Bv slowed, crunching over jagged shore ice before Sara stopped it right at the sand's edge.

She stepped out of the driver's door.

"No," Claudette said from inside the cabin, her voice already thick with tears. "No, I can't take anymore, I just can't."

Colding looked at Sara, who shrugged tiredly, as if the weight of the world hung from her shoulders.

"What now?" she asked.

Colding looked back out at the harbor, his mind reeling from this latest blow.

The harbor was frozen solid. Up to and even outside the breakwall entrance was an irregular sheet of ice that looked like a sprawling, massive field of broken white concrete. The *Otto II* sat in the middle of all this ice, resting at a slight list to port where the ice had frozen unevenly and tilted the boat.

The icy winds seem to sink deeper into Colding. He really wanted to just lie down, lie down and sleep.

"Peej, what are we going to do?" Sara asked.

"The Bv can ride in the water, right?"

Sara shook her head. "There's no way this tin can will make it to the mainland. Look at those waves out there."

Colding looked. The wind continued to pick up steam. Out past the breakwall ice, fifteen-foot waves moved like aquatic sea monsters lurking for a victim.

"Can we drive it out on the ice, into the water, maybe wait for help?"

Sara shrugged. "Maybe. But when we run out of gas, those waves will drive us to the shore. And you know what will happen then."

Colding's body grew weaker, both from the cold and lowering adrenaline. He probably didn't have any adrenaline left in his system, but he had ample tension and fear. The ancestors would be there any second.

"We need an icebreaker to get that thing out," Colding said.

Sara looked at him. "You happen to have an icebreaker handy?"

Colding started to shake his head, then remembered the canvas bag slung around his shoulder. The canvas bag full of plastique and detonators. Icebreaker. He looked at Chris' snowmobile, and a plan unfolded in his head.

“Sara, Claudette, help me.” He hopped out of the hatch and dumped the bag’s contents onto the scattered snow.

He grabbed a chunk of plastique and tore off a fist-sized piece. He proceeded to show the women how to make a time bomb.

7:34:01 a.m.

Baby McButter cautiously crested the dune and looked down. The prey sat at the water’s edge. He sniffed – despite the strong wind, he still caught a faint wisp of the stick. He’d taken one bullet already, and didn’t want to take another.

But they had to eat.

His stomach churned and growled. It *hurt*. He was so hungry, despite the leg he’d eaten only five minutes earlier. So hungry. So *hungry*.

Baby McButter flicked his sail-fin into the air in a short, definitive pattern. Behind him, the remaining ancestors fanned out along the dune’s crest. There was nowhere left for the prey to run.

7:34:12 a.m.

Claudette looked up from her pile of plastique balls and detonators.

“I think they’re here,” she said quietly.

Colding and Sara took a quick look at the snow-covered dune. They saw small bits of movement from just behind the crest, like sticks blowing in the wind. That, and a few small glimpses of yellow.

“Move!” Colding shouted. They all shoved the plastique balls into the canvas bag. Colding handed Sara the Uzi, threw the bag over his shoulder and hopped on Chris’s snowmobile. The Ski-Doo roared to life. Colding realized that on his back he carried enough plastique to blow up a twenty-story building. He drove the sled out onto the bumpy ice, towards the *Otto II*, the rough ride jarring him with sudden, punishing ups and downs.

In only seconds, he was at the *Otto II*. He made a wide circle around the boat, dropping plastique balls as he went. Two minutes, they only had to hold out another two minutes.

7:34:21 a.m.

Sara opened the driver’s door just before Claudette screamed.

Sara turned, the Uzi on her hip. Two ancestors barreled down the dune, only thirty

feet away and coming fast.

Why only two? ... Sara thought briefly.

She started firing.

The Uzi belched forth short bursts of death. Sara got lucky on the first burst, the bullets smashing into the ancestor's front left leg. It toppled forward, instantly crippled, rolling head-over-heels from the momentum.

She fired a burst at the second one, now only fifteen feet away, so close she could see its tongue inside the open mouth. The bullets drove into that open mouth, but it kept coming.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Sara heard Claudette's high-pitched screaming. Sara squeezed the trigger and held it down, forgetting the short burst rule. Bullets sprayed into the ancestor's face. It stopped only five feet from her, shaking its head violently, and trying to turn away, but it was too late. It fell heavily to its side, twitching and kicking its powerful limbs.

Sara pointed the Uzi at its head and fired.

Two bullets came out, then the little submachine gun made three clicking sounds. Sara blinked a few times, then tried pulling the trigger again, her adrenaline-stoked brain not quite comprehending the fact that she was out of bullets. The Uzi clicked three more times.

Almost as if the clicking sounds were a signal, every ancestor head popped up into plain sight, and every yellow sail-fin rose high into the air.

"Oh shit," Claudette said. "I think they know the gun is empty."

The ancestors rose and rushed down the snow-covered dune towards the Bv, their wide-open mouths letting loose a cacophonous, roaring howl of long-delayed triumph.

Sara tossed the Uzi aside. She and Claudette dove into the Bv. Sara punched the gas pedal to the floor and the Bv rolled out onto the ice. She knew it would break through eventually, but it was seaworthy, and if it could get them close to the *Otto II* it would be enough.

7:35:06 a.m.

Colding drove the Ski-Doo to its limits, smashing it over the uneven ice, waiting for the jagged crust to crack at any second and drop him into a freezing, watery grave. But the ice held and the Ski-Doo kept churning along, despite the punishment of driving it at twenty-five miles an hour over a surface that looked like demolition-zone concrete.

He stopped thirty feet from the breakwall entrance. That was as close as he dared go to the ice's edge. He threw a plastique ball. It bounced once, then came to rest only five feet from the splashing water. Colding looked back towards the *Otto II*. He'd left a line of ten plastique balls between the boat and the harbor entrance, another six balls in a circle around the boat. He checked his watch: sixty seconds and counting.

The sound of a diesel engine and smashing metal drew his attention. The Bv pounded

across the ice, the ancestor pack only thirty feet behind and closing fast.

A sick, coppery feeling ran through his stomach – he wouldn't be able to make it to the *Otto II* before the ancestors did. He looked in his canvas bag. Still had eight plastique balls.

Plastique balls that were ticking away.

Sweat poured from his body despite the cold that had frozen his shirt to his skin. He checked the watch again.

Fifty seconds and counting.

Colding pointed the Ski-Doo back towards shore and gunned the engine.

7:35:17

Sara kept the gas pedal to the floor. They were only ten feet from the *Otto II*. She checked the side mirror. Three ancestors at the back bumper.

She heard a sharp, sudden cracking, like the Earth's crust snapping into thick pieces.

The Bv dropped through the ice and plunged into the water. The passengers' heads snapped forward as if they'd driven straight into a wall.

Icy water welled up over the hood and through the cracked windshield, pouring into Sara's lap.

A scream came unbidden, but the cold water locked it in her throat.

265

7:35:22

Colding saw the Bv drop through the ice into the water. It almost went under, then popped up like a slow-motion cork. The ice broke up under the lead ancestors. Two dropped into the frigid water. The last one leapt from a thick piece of tilting, broken ice, and landed on the Bv's roof.

Colding couldn't help them now. He didn't have a gun, not even a knife, for Christ's sake. They'd have to find a way to deal with it. He whispered a fast, silent prayer for Sara.

He banked left, between the shore and the ancestor horde, dropping plastique balls along the way.

Forty seconds and counting.

7:35:27

Sara regained her composure and punched the gas pedal to the floor again, despite a foot of water sitting inside the cabin. The Bv moved forward, slowly churning through the icy water.

“Claudette, keep your foot on the gas!” Sara slid out of the driver’s side as Claudette – soaking wet and shaking like a leaf – slid in behind her. Claudette plunged her foot into the knee-deep water and urged the Bv forward. Sara had to tie the Bv off so they could get Clayton into the Otto II.

She slid out of the hatch, water dripping from her legs. She gathered her feet under herself and crouched, trying to keep her balance on the slick metal roof of the swaying Bv.

She heard the roar and knew, finally, that she was dead.

Sara turned to face her fate. An ancestor perched on the Bv roof, long claws digging into the metal as it struggled to keep from sliding off. Only two feet away. So big. So *big*. A snarl twisted her lips. Her hair strung wetly across her face, her eyes narrow, hateful slits. At that last moment Sara looked as much like an animal as the beast preparing to end her life.

Come on, fucker, Sara thought. Get it over with.

The ancestor opened wide its gaping maw and leaned forward.

Sara closed her eyes.

Five shots rang out, *pop-pop-pop-pop-pop*.

Sara felt the Bv shift to the left. She opened her eyes and put her hands on the roof, using her low crouch to keep her balance. The ancestor reared backwards, blood pouring from an eye and from its mouth and nose. Big clawed feet slipped on the wet roof and it tumbled overboard, splashing into the icy water like a boulder dropped from ten stories high.

Sara turned, unable to grasp the fact that she was still alive.

There, standing in the bow, wrapped in a thick blanket like an Indian caricature, stood Chris Detweiler, smoking gun in his outstretched hand.

7:35:52

Colding tossed the last plastique ball and turned towards the *Otto II*, chancing a quick glance at his watch.

Fifteen seconds.

He’d barely have time to clear the circle of plastique that surrounded the boat.

He had only one chance. He opened the throttle and leaned forward, holding on tight as the Ski-Doo slammed towards the boat. He prayed the sled could survive the punishing ride.

7:35:54

They didn’t have time to tie off, or any need to. The Bv’s port side ground against the *Otto II*, breaking away ice that clung stubbornly to the starboard hull. Chris pulled Claudette aboard as Sara dropped back into the cabin.

“Come on Clayton, get up!”

Pain and fatigue had finally caught up with the old man. He struggled to his one good foot and lurched out the passenger door, groaning with pain each time his shattered leg hit a seat or the stick shift or the door frame.

Chris yanked Clayton aboard, pulling his father into the bow.

"Come on, Sara!" Chris reached out his hand. Sara took it, and he pulled her onto the *Otto II*.

"Fire up the engine! Where's Colding?"

Chris dove into the driver's seat and pointed out the port side.

Sara looked out. Colding was driving towards them, Ski-Doo bouncing off the broken ice like a Jeep driving through a rutted gully.

She checked her watch.

Three, two, one ...

7:36:07

Twenty-four plastique balls detonated like an orchestrated symphony of death. Ice chunks and shards flew like frozen shrapnel, some to land a good mile away.

A six-pointed ring erupted around the *Otto II*. The concussive force ripped inwards, powerful enough to hit the ancestors closest to the boat and knock them into the frigid waters. The blast wave knocked Chris flat on his back on top of Clayton.

Colding was halfway between the ring and boat when the plastique detonated. The shock wave hit him from behind, so powerful it tumbled the Ski-Doo like a toy thrown by a petulant child. The force launched Colding through the air, the snowmobile spinning out from under him and smashing into a dozen pieces against the ice.

He arced through the air, helpless, and landed hard fifteen feet from the boat's port side. His body bounced off the thick ice. The bounce carried him another ten feet, in sort of a limp, full-out cartwheel, then he hit again, this time in open water.

Sara watched, horrified, as Colding's body quickly sank below the surface.

"Rope!" she screamed as she stripped off her jacket. "Get me some fucking rope!"

Chris struggled to his feet, his blanket left on the deck. Clumsy bandages across his chest showed huge splotches of red, some of it wet and fresh.

He grabbed a coil of rope from the bow and ran to Sara.

"Tie it around my waist!" Sara said as she peeled off her sweater. She kicked off her boots as Chris tied the rough, yellow nylon rope around her waist.

She turned on Chris. "You do *not* pull me up until I tug on the rope, understand?"

"You've only got a few seconds in that water, Sara, I - "

She reached out and held the sides of his face.

"Pull me up before I tug, and I'll kill you. *Do you understand?*"

Chris nodded.

Without another word, Sara turned, put her foot on the side rail, and dove into the water.

The cold hit her unlike anything she'd ever felt before, far worse than her quick dip in the Bv. She tried to stay under, but her body rebelled.

Get out get out get out.

She kicked hard, rising to the surface. Her head popped out, barely in time for her to let loose a scream of primitive, instinctive fear.

She looked up at the boat. Chris stood there, yellow rope in his hands, a look on his face that said 'should I pull you in?'

Sara didn't answer the unasked question.

Dive now or he's gone forever.

She shook her head "no," took a huge breath, then dove under once again. The cold scraped her skin like a grater, driving needles of pain deep into her body. She kicked and kicked, forcing her body to ignore self-preservation instincts. She looked everywhere, but could see little through the murky water.

So cold ...

Her lungs screamed from lack of oxygen, but she dove further. She wouldn't leave him down there. She kept on kicking with all of her quickly fading energy.

Where is he? I can't lose him ...

She couldn't see him. Blood roared inside her head. She felt her increasing pulse pounding through her body like a kick-drum. She couldn't see a fucking thing.

Her hand smashed into a slimy rock at the bottom of the harbor. She couldn't take anymore, she had to go up. It was so hard to think. She put her hands out to push away from the bottom, and her fingers hit something soft.

Soft like fabric.

She grabbed for it. It was a body – Colding's body.

He's not moving at all ...

Sara wrapped her legs around his back and yanked on the rope. She immediately threw her arms around him, holding on in a desperate, loving embrace. The rope snapped taught around her waist, pulling Sara and her lover towards the surface.

Can't breathe can't breathe ...

Sara's mouth opened of its own accord and icy water poured in, a dose sliding into her lungs. She thrashed her head but didn't let go.

Her head broke the surface and she gasped for air, coughing violently. She barely felt the hands pulling her into the boat. Her body shivered as if from an epileptic fit. Somebody pulled off her pants and wrapped a blanket around her before her thoughts became her own again.

She sat up. Claudette was over Colding, performing CPR, blowing air into his mouth, then pumping his chest.

Sara watched, unable to move, waiting for some reaction.

She felt the boat lurch forward as Chris gunned the engines.

Colding coughed, sending a splash of water out of his lungs and onto his face. Claudette turned him on his side. He coughed again, sending more water onto the deck.

"Take off your clothes," Claudette ordered as she tried to yank off his waterlogged snowsuit. Colding kept coughing, but obliged, weakly helping her remove his clothes. Sara moved to him and held him, their two naked, wet, frigid bodies wrapped in the

same blanket. Claudette threw another blanket around them.

"You're going to be okay, Colding," Claudette said. "I've got to look at Clayton. She moved to the bow, leaving Sara and Colding clinging together, their bodies seeming to shiver in matched time.

"Guess I owe you one," Colding said through blue lips.

Sara nodded. "Guess you do."

They kissed, both sets of lips feeling icy and clammy, but it didn't matter – it was the best kiss either of them had ever known.

Huddling together, shivering together, they sat in the back of the boat and looked back, back towards the shore as the *Otto II* pulled away.



Colding's last eight plastique balls had made an arc behind the ancestor horde. When they detonated, they shattered huge chunks of ice. It wasn't scientific, but it was enough to break off a massive slab, stranding the ancestors.

They ran about the slab, looking for a way off, but there was nowhere for them to go. A small piece near the edge broke off under one's weight – it fell into the water, thick limbs splashing uselessly. It lasted only a few seconds before it slid under the surface.

The main slab split into two chunks. When it did, the seven ancestors at the edge of the left chunk proved to be too much weight – the slab tilted like a large teeter-totter. The seven ancestors tried to turn and run back up the slab, but it was too late: they all splashed into the water, doomed by their useless attempt at swimming.

Sara and Colding heard their roars even over the wind and the *Otto II's* full-out engine. One by one, the ancestors fell into the water and disappeared.

One last ancestor didn't fall in. It had an all-black head with a white eye patch. It looked at the boat, seemed to look right at Sara and Colding. It opened its mouth and let out a huge, primitive roar of unbridled fury.

Colding saw something moving in the water, something with a wet, black head. He felt a last, sudden burst of fear – could some of them swim after all? Then the image crystallized in his brain.

"Pastie," Colding said quietly. "Chris, stop the boat!"

The Labrador moved through the frigid waters, straight for the patch of ice that held the last ancestor.

"Pastie!" Colding shouted. "Get the hell away from there! Come here, boy!"

But the dog ignored him. It reached the ice patch and struggled to climb on top.



Baby McButter turned and saw the small creature. He had seen this prey before. It had been there when he'd torn his way free from the big animal, when he'd taken his first bite of the trapped prey with the wounded leg.

He roared in wide-mouthed fury, challenging this new threat. The prey managed to clumsily climb aboard the ice patch – he barked back, his sound pitiful and small in comparison, but no less hateful, no less primitive.

Baby McButter took a step towards the prey, but stopped, the ice patch seeming to shift with every movement. He'd seen all his brethren enter the water and not come out. He had to stay still.

But he was so hungry.

So very *hungry*.

The prey ran towards him, barking, teeth barred, stopping just out of range of a claw swipe. Its lip curled back. It made threatening lunges, it wouldn't stop making noise.

It looked so *good*.

And Baby McButter was so *hungry*.

...

"Clayton, what is that dumbass dog doing?"

Clayton had crawled to the back of the boat. He leaned heavily on the rail, looking back at the life-and-death scene playing out on the chunk of ice.

"I think he's getting some payback, eh?"

Pastie barked like a rabid machine, his body pure fury encapsulated in wet fur. The last ancestor took an experimental snap. Pastie easily danced away, and kept barking, kept snarling.

The ancestor reared back its head, then lunged at the dog. The ice flow tilted instantly, sending dog and ancestor into the frigid harbor. The ice righted itself, splashing back into the water. A huge black head with a white eyespot surfaced. Baby McButter's long claws splashed feebly. It opened its mouth for one last roar, then slid under the icy surface.

Colding looked hard. Finally, he saw a small patch of black cutting through the ice-filled water.

"Come on, Pastie!"

The dog looked exhausted. It panted, spitting out water in big, cheek-puffing gasps. Colding reached out as far as he could. Sara weakly held his legs, letting him reach out even farther. Pastie pumped his way to the boat, until Colding could finally grab his collar. He dragged Pastie to the rail, where Sara helped him pull the exhausted, tuck-tailed dog on board. Pastie lay on the

deck between Colding and Detweiler, shivering madly, chest heaving: one more exhausted, wounded survivor of the disaster.

Finally, it was over.

Sara and Colding turned to look at each other, and kissed again.

Their lips were already warming up.

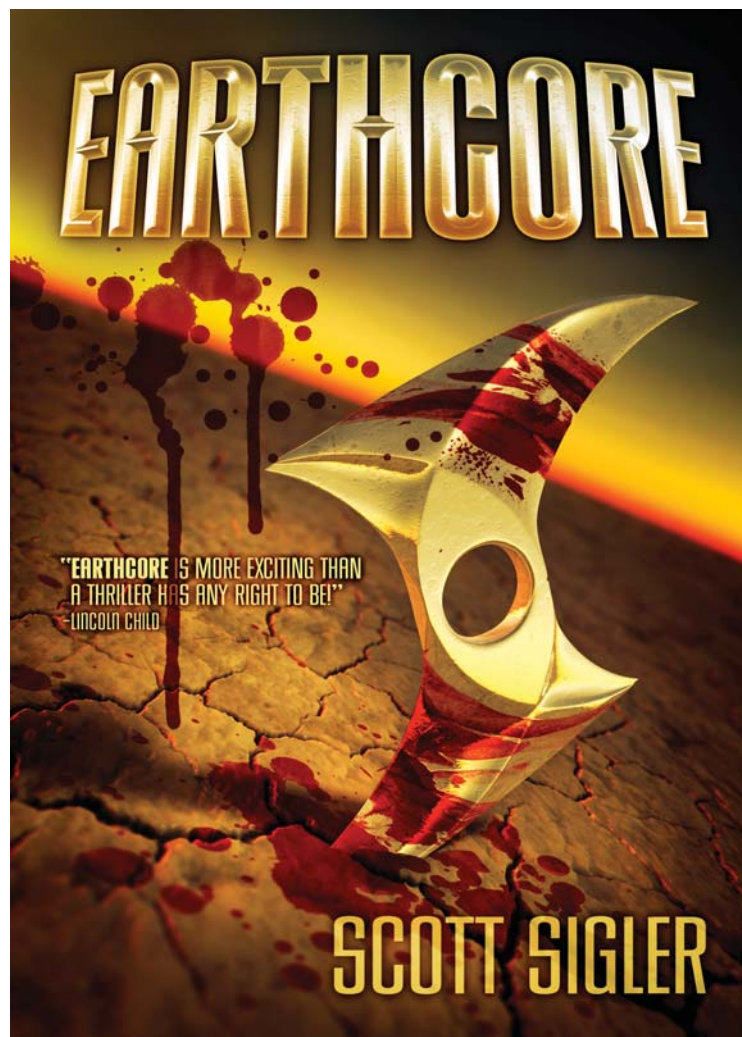
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Scott wrote his first monster story in the third grade and hasn't stopped since. A creator of novels, short stories and screenplays, Scott's work revolves around modern science's dichotomy of simultaneously producing good and evil.

Scott reinvented book publishing when he released EarthCore as the world's first "podcast-only" novel. Released in twenty weekly episodes, EarthCore harkened back to the days of serialized radio fiction and picked up 10,000 subscribers along the way. His next podcast novel, Ancestor, drew 30,000 listeners and saw 700,000 episodes downloaded by fans.

The Ancestor buzz caused Sirius Satellite to pick up the novel, making it the first audiobook carried on the satellite network.

Combined with Scott's other two podcast novels, Infection and The Rookie, Scott's fans have downloaded over three million files of his fiction.

Scott's innovative use of technology puts him at the forefront of modern-day publishing, and has garnered brand-name exposure among hundreds of thousands of fiction fans and technology buffs. He's been covered in the Washington Post, Business Week, CNet, The Book Standard, MacWorld and the nationally syndicated radio show The Dragon Page.

Michigan native, Scott lives in San Francisco with his wife Jody and their two dogs, Mookie and Emma.