

The cover features a dynamic illustration of three anthropomorphic characters. In the center, a tan bear-like creature with a beard and a brown tunic is shown from the chest up, looking towards the right. To its left, a brown rabbit-like character with long ears and a grey shirt is shown from the waist up, looking towards the center. In the foreground, a white fox-like character with orange-tipped ears and a white shirt is shown from the waist up, looking towards the center. The background is dark blue with large, jagged yellow lightning bolts. At the top, there are large black silhouettes of the three characters, with a small purple flower-like shape between the bear and the rabbit.

In the Shadow of Titans

by Sylvan Scott

L. Frank 9/2013

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This is a tale about giant beasts trashing cities ... it was not inspired by "Pacific Rim". Rather, it was inspired by the same films it was inspired by. Nor does this tale have anything to do with "Attack on Titan". Weirdly, I found out about that anime only after finishing the rough draft and, for a moment, thought I should scrap my entire tale and start over since so many terms and broad, general concepts were shared between the two. After viewing a few episodes, though, I quickly saw that (luckily) the two were nothing alike. In that regard, I'm really happy. I know there's no such thing as "an original story" but I felt really kicked in the balls by finding out there was already a show out there about giants called "Titans" devastating human cities.

The artwork in this story was commissioned from Louis Frank; all rights were purchased and are held by myself.

In the Shadow of Titans
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Randall still had grave dirt on his hands and ashes in his fur. They had exhumed poor Mordecai Samuelson, his giant jaguar body half-burst from its coffin, and started taking him to the crematory when the titans had attacked. At Legacy's edge, everyone had seen the tell-tale signs of incursion moments before it began. And while his father had always said Randall was in charge of his own life, both puppet and puppeteer, at that moment it had been impossible to believe.

The sky had darkened in a swirling cone, twisting the clouds like a tornado. Fingers of green, purple, blue, and red arced like time-elapsed frost growing on a winter window pane. The stellar aurora peaked in brightness a few minutes later while the sirens of Sammamish, Bellevue, and even more distant Seattle erupted in warning. Randall, his fellow grave-diggers, and the attending rabbi had run for shelter. The titans, when they appeared, usually ignored the people and instead strode with maddening single mindedness in a straight line. Now in his home he listened to the distant booms of foot-falls near Lake Washington. His tall ears twitched with the reverberations.

Strangers crowded into his small home. Nervously, they looked to the west. It was a long incursion, ten minutes so far, but that could change at any minute.

Like most homes in Legacy, Randall's house had been hastily constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers and volunteers from half a dozen aide organizations. Over the past decade, he and Paul had done their best to keep it up but it hadn't been easy. There wasn't much work in Legacy and ever since Paul started growing, prospects were even slimmer.

Paul's hands wrapped Randall's as they huddled near the kitchen door. It seemed so absurd: a towering mouse just a hair over nine feet tall huddled in fear

next to a humanoid hare in the heart of their domestic bliss. Photos hadn't fallen off the walls or shelves, they'd used glue on the frames of most to ensure them, but a decorative plate had vibrated from the table and shattered into a million pieces. Randall felt a pang at that. The plate had been a gift from his mother at his and Paul's wedding seven years ago. Since then, with incursions continuing unabated, niceties and gifts seemed all-but extinct. Randall looked up to see Paul's large, blue eyes looking down at him. In that simple exchange, his colossal husband let him know that he understood the loss.

"Eleven minutes; why don't they just go away?" Alexi Fields was the only pure-blood human present. She'd come by while Randall was at work. She and her three guests had waited for him to get back but hadn't expected him to come barreling in the door, four minutes into a titan incursion. Introductions had been quick as each huddled in door frames or near exits in case things went from ninety-two to eight percent.

The booming always instilled fear, even while getting fainter.

Randall fought his trepidation and stepped away from his husband. Over Paul's hissed admonishments, he crept to the front window and peered through the slats.

Even fifteen miles away, he could still see them.

The first resembled an alligator or crocodile; Randall could never remember the difference. It was lean and muscular with a rugged, green hide and powerful limbs. Like himself, it was an anthropomorphized creature: humanoid in appearance rather than a pure quadruped. A thick, ridged tail emerged from its lower back and swished, casually, from side to side. Randall's tall ears could hear the crushing of entire buildings in its wake.

To the creature's left strode a beast that seemed to have stepped out of Greek myth. It was a minotaur: a humanoid bull or, in this case, a cow. She was as big as the croc-a-gator but thicker and heftier of build. She had no horns but large, four-nippled breasts which could just be seen from behind swaying from side-to-side as she strode on cloven hooves towards Northeast Seattle. To the right was the third monster.

Heavier and cloaked in shaggy, earth-brown fur, it was taller than the other two by a significant margin. He was wider, as well: muscled and strong but packed with enough layers of fat and blubber to rival any whale. The beast walked upright like the other two but seemed to suit it more to Randall's eyes. Its ursine countenance looked like any of the bears he'd seen in Yellowstone as a child. It walked upright like the others but that was how bears often moved. Of the three, this one was the most relatable.

But each was over six hundred feet tall.

Their strides seemed slow and ponderous from far away but each carried them hundreds of feet towards the ocean. Smoke rose from deep, landscape-wrecking paw prints pressed into the ground from the edge of Legacy all the way through Redmond. And now that they'd passed the long, slender barrier of the lake, downtown was moments from becoming a ruin.

A crack sounded and a rain of splintered light suddenly rained from the sky around the shoulders of the retreating titans. The aurora reached down as the clouds overhead billowed outward. The slivers of illumination blended, merged, and flared sun-bright. When the afterglow faded, the three were gone. The final, tremulous echoes of their footfalls boomed one last time across the hills and over the devastation before fading into a painful memory. The densest population center had been spared but Bellevue and other suburbs were burning. In its wake, Randall knew, were thousands of newly-transformed anthros made out of the incursion's survivors.

"It's over," Randall said.

He turned to face the guests in his home.

Alexi, despite her earlier fearful statement, looked impeccable. Despite meeting her for the first time during a titan incursion, Randall had been immediately impressed by her poise and decorum. She wore a charcoal grey suit with her long, blonde hair was pulled back in a tight, professional ponytail.

The other three guests were nearly as composed but still looked a bit rattled. Two of them were dressed similarly to Alexi, in business suits, while the third was more casual. This latter guest, an anthro like himself, was a fox a few inches shorter than himself. She pressed her hands against her blouse to smooth it. Her yellow eyes looked up at Randall's.

"Good," she said, "then we can get down to business."

"Excuse me," the hare said with a scowl, "but who are you people?"

"Well, as I said before, I'm Alexi Fields. I'm with the United Nations on behalf of the U.S. Incursion Task Force."

"This is Doctor Sound...Sondari...uh, Sonnid..."

"Sondaritch," the fox said, interrupting Paul's attempt at her name. "I came here to bring you a proposal, Mister Coleman: a proposal that could turn the events of recent years completely around."

Paul looked embarrassed at not having been able to pronounce the doctor's name and Randall walked over and took his husband's hands in his. It was getting more difficult as the months progressed. As he got bigger and bigger his mind stayed, technically, the same. But with so much more body to control, his neurons weren't as up to the task as they used to be.

"Proposal? I think you have the wrong house," he said. "I'm just a grave-

digger. In fact, when the attack happened, I was out there getting ready to burn a still-growing corpse to ashes before...”

“And I’m sure your government is grateful for your assistance,” Doctor Sondaritch said. She had an unusual accent Randall had not heard before. “But you are far more than a ‘grave-digger’, are you not?”

A chill settled in the pit of Randall’s stomach. Something in her words, in her certainty, made him shiver. She knew.

“Look, I’m taking care of my husband,” he said. “I took what work I could get. After it was found that colossi bodies kept growing even after death, I joined the corpse brigade down at the cemetery, and...”

“Very commendable,” Alexi said. She sounded a bit annoyed with Dr. Sondaritch’s confrontational tone but kept her own words professional. “And, yes, we know that your husband is a colossus.” She looked up at Paul with an expression of understanding and pity. “But maybe, just maybe, we can fix all of this. You are a size-shifter, right?”

Randall closed his eyes slowly and felt Paul’s grip tighten. Rather than deny it, he just nodded.

“Good,” Dr. Sondaritch said, brusquely. “Then it is confirmed. You shall come with us, and—”

“Come with you?” Randall felt himself moving from nervousness to anger. “Excuse me?”

“Where are going?” Paul asked, sounding nervous.

It struck right to Randall’s heart to see his husband suddenly so uncertain. They’d survived numerous incursions together but all it took was for this one, fox-shaped woman to say a few words and his giant partner was suddenly as disoriented as a child being taken from his parents.

“No one knows where the titans are coming from,” Alexi said. “We don’t know where they go, either. The vast majority just seem to walk in a straight line, not caring what gets crushed underfoot. A few, just about eight percent, seem to take more notice of us and delight in causing mayhem and destruction. Doctor Sondaritch, here, thinks she may have a solution.”

“And it could apply to your husband, too,” she said. “It is ...commendable... that you should choose to take care of a colossus like this.” She indicated Paul. “But you should know that whatever the side-effect of the titans’ incursions that turned you both from pure-blood human into—well—a rabbit and a mouse ... whatever effect started your husband to steadily grow towards an unhealthy and dangerous size... Well, it might be ... addressable.”

The pronouncement didn’t sink in right away. Whether due to her accent or just the inevitability Randall had learned to face when dealing with his husband’s

growing disability, it took his mind a few seconds to process it.

“Hare,” he said.

“What?” For a moment, the fox looked confused.

“I’m not a rabbit; I’m a hare,” he said, turning her words over in his mind.

He cast a sidelong glance at Paul. The mouse’s gaze was already fixed on him: blue eyes to green. It was clear that Paul had understood what Doctor Sondaritch was implying. The problems the colossi had with their size: cardiovascular degeneration, deterioration of bone and cartilage ... she was talking about a cure. However the titans worked, they didn’t seem to obey the square-cube law. Six-hundred foot-tall creatures shouldn’t exist, yet they did. But the rare twelve percent of people who changed into anthros after the appearance of a Titan but started to grow bigger, didn’t share that characteristic. There was a world of difference between the titans and the colossi; a world of difference between a size-shifter such as himself and Paul. And she said it could be addressed.

“How?”

“It is only a theory,” she said, crossing her arms.

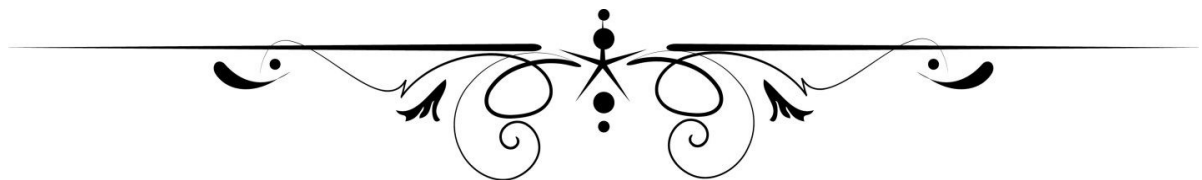
“The good doctor, here, approached the I.T.F. with some promising data; readings taken from incursions around the world,” Alexi said. “Other size-shifters have tried to fight the monsters but they’ve never been big enough, powerful enough, to succeed.”

“But size, alone, is not the key,” the fox said. “I think if I can understand what makes you able to shift in scale I can perhaps unravel what is happening to make the colossi grow uncontrollably.”

Paul squeezed his fingers, lightly. Randall looked up.

Before he could even say anything, he was nodding.

The echoes had faded and clean-up was beginning between Legacy and Seattle. But Randall knew his journey was only beginning.



“So, how did you know I was a size-shifter? I almost never use my ability, and never in public.” The flight to southern California had been long. Much of their time had been taken up by damage control at Washington’s SeaTac Airport and another incursion in San Francisco Bay causing a diversion in their flight plan.

Doctor Sondaritch flipped through documents on her tablet, eyes scrutinizing various charts and graphs. She'd not spoken much since the previous day. Her two bodyguards, a wolf named Mister Torg and a female tiger named Tianna, had been similarly silent. Why she needed personal guards, he didn't know, but the whole world seemed to have gone mad during the past thirteen years.

"Signature," the fox said, absently. Her heavy accent made it sound like "sick nature".

"What do you mean?" Randall asked.

The military plane was loud and set his teeth to vibrating as it came in, low, towards Edwards Air Force Base. The whole flight had been uncomfortable but he and Paul had endured it without complaint. The promise of a cure ... of discovering the connection between the titans, the colossi, and his own size-shifting abilities, made discomfort easy to ignore.

"Each of the titans has a signature," she said without looking up. "It is readable: with Geiger counter and other high-energy detection equipment. You are the same."

Randall blinked. "I'm ... radioactive?"

The fox sighed and turned to face him. "No," she said curtly. "You are *not* radioactive. There are other energy readings; other ...uh... *values* that are very exotic ... very rare. Very hard to detect." She looked annoyed. "I have many lessons to teach you, Mister Coleman: lessons about what you are, lessons about life, lessons about science. Most of all, however, I have to teach you lessons about not asking so many questions: just ... act. Do what I say."

Alexi turned around in her seat. "I've learned not to argue with her results," she added with a smile. "Where the titans are concerned, we've learned to trust what Doctor Sondaritch says and worry about understanding it, later."

Randall nodded to the Task Force agent and squeezed Paul's hand in reassurance.

Within the hour they were on the ground and driving towards the heart of the Mojave Desert. The hot, dry air inundated itself into every pore Randall had. It whipped through his brown fur, cooling him despite its temperature. He began to feel, oddly, at home. He'd not been in a desert environment since before he'd been changed into a hare. Perhaps it was his "natural" habitat, now.

They left the main road after going through a locked "Government Property" fence and bouncing along a winding, gravel-strewn road for nearly an hour. It rose and fell along sharp cliffs and rounded buttes. A few cacti grew along its contours. Most of the vegetation, though, was thin and scraggly scrub. The landscape was brown, almost painfully devoid of life in comparison to the

Pacific Northwest.

The facility gradually came into view.

A simple sign on a chain-link fence identified the cluster of eight office buildings and six hanger-sized concrete structures as “I.T.F. Region 8 Facility - Authorized Personnel Only”. A few World War II-era aircraft hangers dotted the remainder of the base. As they approached, Randall could see that the buildings were much taller than their initial appearance. Each looked about two stories but, as they drove through the gate and approached the nearest parking lot, he could see that each was built into a recessed crater. The two floors he could see were merely the top of six- to eight-floor structures. A chill ran through him as he saw each was built into the footprint of a titan.

The buildings were all about eighty feet by forty feet, nestled snugly within their impact craters. At ground level, a raised walkway led from adjacent parking lots, across the gap, to an entry. Around the edges of some were stairs, built into the sloping sides of the craters, leading down to the buildings’ lower levels.

Their vehicle pulled up and parked outside Building A.

Despite feeling at home, it took most of a day to get acclimated. Randall had expected air conditioning, but was disappointed. While there was some climate control, it was mostly reserved for the labs and offices. Several of the outbuildings, including those used for lodging, were only cooled by fans and forced air. For Paul, the heat was oppressive. Most of the resident staff were pure-blood human.

He and Paul were given a room next door to Alexi in a wing for senior staff and visiting professionals. Military-ranked officers were also lodged there along with Doctor Sondaritch and her two bodyguards. The fox, however, spent most of her time in the laboratories, even sleeping there some nights.

“I bet it’s for the air conditioning,” Paul quipped, upon finding out. Despite the heat he could at least still make jokes.

Randall didn’t have Paul’s sense of centeredness. It was unfortunate. He could have used it over the past few years. Sometimes he wondered if it was laughter that kept Paul going. From the beginning of the incursions, though, Randall had been serious. Ever since he had discovered his ability to shift his size shortly after seeing his first titan, he’d lost most of his ability to joke. It was the knowledge that something of the rampaging titans had lodged deep within him, making him a size-altering ... freak.

He’d been living in Portland at the time, during the first days of the incursions. He had been attending Oregon State University, back when there was still a school and not a massive series of paw-shaped craters.

The titan had been reptilian.

Some asshole in the Oregonian had called the beast “Godzilla” although it had more resembled a titanic crocodile...

...Alligator.

One of the two; the one with the narrow snout.

The beast had actually materialized out of a cloud of steam and fog erupting from the Willamette River. The shrouds of mist made it look like something out of a Stephen King story. Then, booming with colossal foot-falls, it came forth. The skies danced with light and the beast lumbered through downtown like a natural disaster on two legs.

He could remember it, perfectly. The clarity of the experience was frightening.

The beast had possessed semi-scales. That was to say that it had a rough, thick hide that, as it grew lumpier and more pronounced towards his extremities—towards its elbows, wrists, and ankles as well as its shoulders and hips—those lumps became actual blade-shaped protrusions like scales. Its feet were vast, spreading over a huge area: nearly half a city block in a single stomp. While bipedal, its tail was impossibly long. Ridges grew down its back, out onto the tail, and then in a smaller row down its length.

In retrospect, there were a few similarities to the famous Japanese movie monster.

But it was a clueless comment to make in an editorial, anyway.

Faux-zilla attacked the city with a detached ambivalence. Its eyes were always on the horizon and its gait was maddeningly casual. Each of its steps spanned maybe two-hundred feet. With each stride, the six-hundred-foot-tall monster destroyed dozens if not hundreds of lives. It kicked through buildings like a child toppling an ant-hill.

Normally, back in those early days, the incursion would be too fast for anyone beyond ineffectual police to mount an attack. That time, however, some air force jets on stop-over at the airport were able to scramble and take on the beast.

Randall had watched their contrails high overhead as they flew towards him, low over the city. He had watched in fear from the manicured paths of the Oregon Zoo, mouth agape. The fighters met the beast head-on. One didn’t survive that initial pass.

It had been like watching Uncle Stan swat at an annoying fly on a hot, July afternoon. Four billowing explosions from dual pairs of missiles impacted the creature’s thick hide. Acting automatically, its attention finally gained, it swatted at the tiny planes. One blew up right then: the expanding cloud of flaming debris

a ball of airplane fuel that momentarily wreathed the creature's right hand. The surviving plane screamed past, overhead, intent on banking around for another attack. Randall had felt the sonic booms wash over him. Every animal in the zoo was screeching, howling, and scampering in fear. The humans on the park paths emulated them.

But even though the plane banked and came back a minute later, even though two more explosions blossomed on the beast's back, it did no good.

The croc-a-gator swung his bulk about to face the incoming plane like a linebacker facing a rushing offense.

Crouching and with a deafening roar, its tail swept across two city blocks. Exploding buildings sprayed the streets while power lines snapped and sent showers of sparks across the skyline. Cars, lampposts, glass, trash, and debris scattered through the streets. Human collateral was thrown aside so casually, it was over before it could register.

As the jet arced away, attempting to peel to one side before coming back for a third pass, Faux-zilla crouched and swung one arm through already damaged and fractured buildings. Catching them low and ripping upwards, it sent a spray of concrete, rebar, girders, and glass into the jet's path. Whether a large chunk took it out or small bits clogged its engines, Randall didn't know. The second jet exploded just like the first. Its debris rained down on Portland in the now-furious creature's wake.

It stomped its giant claws into the ground and rampaged, ripping into some still-standing buildings and venting its fury. Even as the skies lit up with the lights, once more, heralding the end of the incursion, it visited its anger upon the little city and its decimated inhabitants like the wrath of some ancient, Egyptian god.

Or some callous, angry puppeteer.

He was the puppet.

All of them, all the humans, were puppets; toys for the titans' amusement.

He'd never felt smaller or less human.

A few hours later, in the wake of the strange energies that had swept the urban landscape for fifty miles in every direction, his humanity was a thing of the past. He'd emerged a survivor but one no longer human.

Shortly after recovering from his transformation, he found that when he grew agitated, he would start to expand. The first time, after Caroline had broken up with him, he'd swollen to some ten feet tall, just a bit beyond the size Paul was, now. She'd been suitably terrified but not as much as he had been, stumbling after her with tears in his eyes begging for her to stop.

She hadn't.

In the months and years that followed, he saw scattered news accounts of others with abilities such as himself. In all the time since then, he'd heard of maybe a dozen, worldwide. Some had tried to engage the titans. None had succeeded.

Half the world's population thought the size-shifters were monsters: perhaps precursors to the titans themselves. The rest thought they were failures: having been given a gift, so tantalizingly similar to the strange, alien attackers yet unable to use those gifts to stop them. Randall kept his ability a secret and guessed most others had, too. At least Caroline hadn't told anyone. He'd kept it a secret through two more girlfriends and four boyfriends in the three years before he met Paul.

Paul had been human at the time and not minded dating an anthro. But it was only after they'd witnessed another titan attack, the one that had demolished Centralia, that his boyfriend had changed, too. As a human, Paul had always been small and slight of build. It was only appropriate, then, when he became an anthropomorphic mouse with white fur and large, rounded ears. But when he started to grow—only a little bit at first but, soon enough to realize that he was one of the colossi—it became clear a new level of trust had to be attained. Randall told Paul about his size-shifting abilities that night. A few months later, they were married in a Seattle chapel and settling in to live whatever semblance of a normal life they could acquire.

Despite being an anthro in a world that, at the time, greatly distrusted them, Paul landed a choice position as an advertising executive consultant with Naylor Prospects. It had kept them both with a decent income until Paul's size proved to be both a physical and social liability. Then, after he could no longer easily work alongside his co-workers as anti-colossi sentiment spread, they'd taken their savings and relocated to Legacy. Randall had found work exhuming and incinerating the still-growing corpses of the dead while Paul tried to deal with joint pains and heart palpitations stemming from his increasing size.

Scientists had estimated that the human form, without major departures from its normal configuration, could support life up to about ten feet tall; maybe fifteen. So far, the colossi were bearing that out. There had been rumors of a few in Russia who had reached eighteen feet before dying but that was all they were: rumors. Why Randall could grow to twenty feet without any negative side effects was a mystery. Why his clothing joined him made no sense. But Doctor Sondaritch intended to find out why.

Their research began the day after the group arrived. The doctor wanted to see just how far Randall could push himself; how big he could get. They took a Jeep into the Mojave, out in the middle of the scrub and desolate flat-lands.

He felt embarrassed. Despite having known that this was going to happen, having all eyes on him—especially when displaying the one ability he'd been hiding—it made him uncomfortable. He felt like the new kid on the first day of school.

He stepped into the middle of a chalked-off circle, hastily scrawled on the baked-earth surface of the desert testing ground. He wondered if there was even a word for the flavor of shame he felt. How could he be embarrassed by his ability at the same time as taking pride in it?

“Okay,” Sondaritch said, “let us get started.”

Unlike the only other two times he'd displayed his power for someone, no one asked him to get undressed. He didn't have to. For whatever reason, his expansion made his clothing bigger, too. Unlike Paul, who went through new clothes every few months, Randall never had to worry about popped seams or ripped pants. It was another difference between himself and one of the colossi.

What if it was just a coincidence? What if examining him *couldn't* lead to a cure for Paul?

He shoved the thought down, deep, to the bottom of his heart.

“Here goes,” he said.

The hot sun melted past his fur, past his skin, and seeped deep into his bones as he stood and concentrated. He half-closed his eyes to focus. Randall could feel the inner heat that was always within him. He reached for it, grabbed it—roughly—in his mind's eye, and pulled it towards the surface. It was like reaching through his ribcage to grip his own heart. The throbbing energy rose from his core and made him flush. As it approached the surface, he felt his skin move away from it.

In all directions, he began to enlarge.

While he hadn't done it very often, certainly not enough to become an expert, he widened his stance to keep his balance. In the half-shaded world before his vision, everything seemed to shift downwards. He felt his body suffusing with power. It was like there was some vast, unseen reservoir of energy and, once it was freed, it came bubbling up through him. As the surge moved outwards, it took his contours with it.

He could hear the crack and shifting of soil beneath his bare feet. He could feel the sand and pebbles slowly slide inwards. He curled his toes, reflexively. The sandy earth bunched up beneath his paws. He looked sidelong at Paul and watched his husband grow smaller along with the rest of the landscape. His body grew heavier. Although he didn't feel very different, he could feel the ground beneath him start to buckle. It was only slight, but as the Jeep they'd driven to the test site shrank to waist-height, it became more pronounced.

Brown, cracked clay—flaked and fractured by years of hot, dry winds—buckled into sheets as his broad feet pushed outwards. His head lifted higher.

Doctor Sondaritch held a machine that had a small, ceramic dish on one end with a camera lens in its center. It was hooked into her tablet. She looked unimpressed at his growth. Instead, her attention stayed glued to the small display in her hands. Her yellow eyes seemed to take in every measurement. Everyone else started at Randall.

The Jeep and Paul continued to shrink.

The mountains in the distance still looked the same but his perspective towards them shifted higher and higher. A nearby columnar cactus, stunted and only some six feet tall, was rapidly approaching his knees in height.

His perspective, his outlook, began to shift. Fragility crept into his surroundings and he automatically started keeping his eyes on everything. The world became tinier and weaker as he got stronger and bigger.

Randall's head started to throb. He pushed on, heavier and larger. The Jeep and cactus shrank past the height of his knees. He was having trouble pushing himself much further. He was getting too nervous.

What if he mis-stepped? His feet were already huge, being a hare, but at their current size, they could almost cover a full-grown man. Should he stumble, take just one wrong step towards Paul...

He shuddered and pushed the thought out of his mind. The pressure of vast, unseen reservoirs was still there but the will with which he drew on them had reached its limits.

Finally, with everyone around him the size of house-pets, he stopped. His jaw ached, he realized, from constant clenching. He opened his eyes fully and looked down at Sondaritch, her two bodyguards, Alexi, and Paul.

"This is acceptable," the fox said. She held her tablet up so its camera could get a fuller shot of him. "An eight-point-two-six meter height in seven-point-one seconds from a starting height of one-point-seven-eight meters. And you have not practiced?"

"I try not to use my ability," he rumbled. Despite his increased strength and power, he felt decidedly exposed. The doctor and her bodyguards were so small, now. If he wanted, he could have stomped them flat. His feet, his hare-like paws, were longer than those of most anthros and wider, too. But the reptile-brain idea, as quickly as it came, vanished beneath his shocked, higher nature. Like the impulse to jump off the edge of a cliff, he backed away from the inclination towards violence. "Can I shrink back down, now?"

"No," the doctor said. "No, now I want you to go farther."

"But ... this is as big as I get," he lied. He wanted to rejoin Paul; to hug his

husband, tight, despite the heat.

“Is it? I have my doubts. Try again.”

Growing always felt like channeling anger. It was similar to a trick he’d learned when a school counselor taught him to refrain from responding to every bully’s provocation with violence. He’d learned to control his rage and make it work for him rather than being its slave. Increasing his size was similar. He felt like he was pushing all his emotion outwards to every corner of his body. When he grew, it felt like he was reaching out beyond himself ... like his body was a balloon being filled with all his beliefs and emotion. It thrummed when he grew. It felt ... good.

Reaching inside himself, grasped the well of emotion he always carried. The stress of uprooting himself and Paul from their home in Legacy ... the frustration at being found out ... the fear of living in the shadow of the titans: it was all there. The trick was bringing it not just to the foreground but to channel it.

He could feel the humming that always seemed to exist just out of his line of sight; he could feel the thrum that inundated his very cells every minute of every day. Closing his eyes, Randall tried to fan those flames: to push them outwards. He tried to leverage them into the vast sea of power he could feel when growing.

He felt the change almost immediately as the growth resumed.

This time, though, it was not easy. It was not the simple matter of willing himself bigger. This time, he had to work at it. It was taxing. The hare gritted his teeth and he could hear the shuffling steps of the others as they stepped back. He felt his muscles and bone pulsating with energy. He felt the flood flow through his body. And the sound...

...He thought he could hear a vast, slowly-beating heart. It was faint but it was everywhere. For a moment, he thought he was hearing the pulse of the Universe. As twenty-four-feet was left behind and he, aching, approached twenty-six, he began to feel tired. He slowed as he passed twenty-seven feet tall and opened his eyes.

Everyone looked so small, clustered around his giant paws. He gulped and chewed his lower lip.

“You see?” said Doctor Sondaritch, needlessly. Randall’s giant ears swiveled down to perk in her direction. “You can do it!” The equipment she had brought was pinging and making a variety of noise. “Now all we have to do is push harder.”

Randall didn’t want to push harder but, for the moment, was told he didn’t have to. Sondaritch seemed pleased with how far he’d gone. It wasn’t difficult to

retreat to his former five-foot-ten height; it was like letting the air out of a balloon. He felt exhausted but with a renewed purpose. The doctor had been right. The biggest any size-shifter had ever gotten, according to the sparse news reports, was about a hundred feet tall. Maybe, with practice, he could do the same. Despite his exhaustion, he knew he'd get a lot of practice.

That practice took months.

The heat of summer raced towards the relative relief of autumn. For Paul, the time was difficult.

The towering mouse gained another three inches during that time and rapidly approached nine-foot-six. He had his heart palpitations every now and then but, as September faded into October, they seemed particularly bad. The doctors said he wasn't anywhere near a full cardio-collapse, but the progression of degeneration still haunted Randall's thoughts and dreams.

Several times he woke, screaming, having dreamed of going to exhume a giant, mouse-shaped body for incineration. At the last minute, the not-quite-Paul would open its giant eyes and cry out in pain and betrayal.

No one buried colossi anymore ... not since their continued, post-mortem growth was discovered. It kept grave-diggers like him fully employed, exhuming the previously-buried dead for one last indignity. It was an indignity he didn't want to think about for Paul. But the nightmares kept the concept fresh in his mind.

Each time Paul asked, he deflected.

October wore on. World-wide there were seventeen more titan events: two of which were in the eight percent category. But despite all the stresses, or perhaps because of them, Randall began to get the hang of pushing his limits.

He had been out at the test site close to seventy times, now. It was hot and bright. It was *always* hot and bright. But over those tests, he'd learned a lot. He'd picked up quite a few of Doctor Sondaritch's "lessons" and, apparently, taught her a few things as well. She seemed pleased with the data she was getting and pushed just hard enough for him to force back the boundaries of his upper limits. He was starting to like her, despite her cold demeanor. He had the feeling she knew he was still holding back; that his emotions were key to accessing his power. He wasn't that good of an actor. She kept asking him to try again as she gave him occasional shots, attached wires to him, or brought new equipment with her, out to the desert.

Alexi didn't seem to share the doctor's confidence in the work. It bothered Randall a bit, but he could understand it. Alexi needed results. The whole Task Force wanted to find an answer in Randall. But so far he'd only been able to grow to maybe a tenth of an average titan's size.

Today, he would prove her wrong.

He saw her Jeep coming from a mile away ... literally. There weren't many places to hide out at the test site but he had been working with Doctor Sondaritch all day and wanted this to work. The late-afternoon sun behind Windhorn Peak cast its shadow across the sands as the government representative approached.

The Jeep pulled to a stop next to the wide array of paw-shaped craters he'd stomped into the ground over the previous month. Each was easily eight, nine, or ten-feet across. Sondaritch stood by her equipment.

Alexi scowled as she got out.

"Did he go back to base already? Why did you call me out here?"

"I think we have a milestone to celebrate," the fox said, coolly.

Randall started walking.

Something in him, something vaguely childish, made him smile as he felt the ground quake with every step. Small rocks and clouds of sand slid from the tops and sides of neighboring buttes. The cracked, dry ground sank beneath his paws as he rounded the stony outcropping he'd been hiding behind. He watched as his shadow stretched out before him and fell over Alexi and Doctor Sondaritch.

The government agent's head tilted back, her mouth opening in awe.

Striding with all the cock-sure confidence that size and power could give, he sauntered up to her and looked down. Solidly, he planted both paws on either side of the tiny human. The ground cracked and the impact made her lose her balance. His feet sank about five feet into the dry crust.

Her eyes went up and up and up the length of his body.

Casually he leaned forward.

Alexi reflexively winced and stepped back. Randall was, despite his mass and scale, faster. His giant fingers reached out and wrapped around her Jeep as if it were a Hot Wheels toy. He picked it up in one hand, feeling the vehicle's heat. It was nothing to his insulating fur and thick skin, beneath. Alexi's mouth hung open.

He was not as big as a titan ... not even close. But as he stood up, the Jeep creaking in his hand, he displayed his newfound power so casually that only someone completely jaded would have been able to ignore it.

Gently, he placed the vehicle on the top of the butte behind which he'd been hiding. Then, turning back, he put his hands on his hips and looked down.

"What do you think, Agent Fields?"

His voice shook the air. More dust slid from the sides of nearby peaks and he watched as Doctor Sondaritch reflexively lower her ears. He looked down at

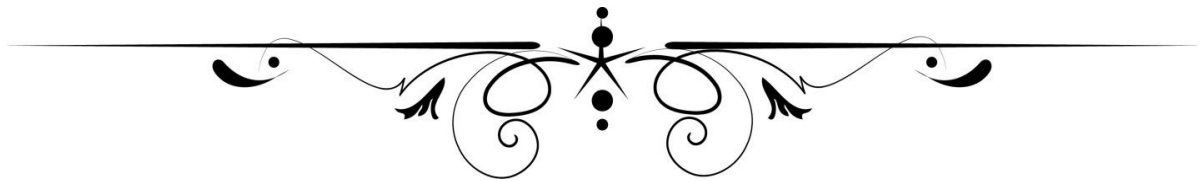
the tiny people, just above ankle-height, and stifled a laugh.

A hundred feet tall and Randall was confident he was the biggest living thing on Earth.

“Holy shit,” Alexi said, shading her eyes while looking up. “I think we’re onto something, doc.”

“Yes, yes,” Sondaritch said, absently. She looked up, annoyed at the theatricality. “Are we done with your little demonstration, Randall?”

Randall’s chuckle rumbled like thunder.



The attack in France was disturbing. A muscular fox with a long, waving tail had materialized in the midst of an aurora just north of Nogent-sur-Oise. Along with him came a buxom, female skunk. The two, rather than simply marching in a straight line, seemed to celebrate their arrival with an orgy of carnage lasting nearly half an hour. Their eight-percent status confirmed, they charged the thirty-some miles directly into the heart of Paris.

The prelude, the destruction of the northern community, bought enough time for Parisians to evacuate ... some of them, at any rate.

The vulpine and mephit titans devastated Carnelle State Forest. Lake Blue, not even as wide as either of the monsters was tall, drained when the fox attacked. Foot paws boomed across the landscape. In their wake, tiny, slender trees snapped into kindling, bursting from thousands of tons of force. The titan looked to be at play. He leaped, like a quadruped fox going after a fleeing rodent, and landed square on the tiny island that provided refuge for the local bird life. Just one paw, that was all it took ... one paw, crushed the tiny island into the waves.

A surge flooded outwards among the few trees not already turned into pulp. The squawks and fearful cries of birds filled the air as they fluttered like gnats around the giant’s calves and knees.

With its other paw, the fox kicked long, and low, like a child at play. What remained of the water in Blue Lake, splashed in a vast arc, soaking the forest and sending plants and fish through the air.

The skunk, for her part, stomped through the forest chasing bird-watchers in their tiny cars as they fled. She stopped near the Rue de la République and seemed to amuse herself by crushing vehicles and their huddled inhabitants

under just one, single toe. After blocking the exits with piles of saplings ripped out of the ground like blades of grass, she walked along the edges of the road, making deep furrows in the ground.

There was a cruelty to her unfathomable, alien intelligence as she isolated the people from any avenue of escape. Only a lone camera crew, on sight filming the opening week of graylag geese migration, caught it on a live feed.

One by one, as the teeming weekend masses streamed back to their cars to hide, the mephit crushed each car and makeshift shelter under foot. The leathern, black pads between tufts of black fur were heavy and solid. When they came down, they bent slightly at encountering the hardness of metal vehicles. Inevitably, the relatively flimsy roofs caved in and the chassis collapsed, crushing those inside.

Hundreds in the park were lost, including the camera crew.

As Randall, Paul, and the rest of the team watched from Building A's rec room, the footage showed both titans descend on Paris.

A passenger train, loaded with fleeing residents, was not fast enough to escape. It had almost reached the hub, just north of the suburbs, when the beasts ascended the horizon. It tried to head back, but as the railway clattered through the streets and raised platforms of the city, the mephit caught up to it and, casually, plucked it off the rails like a spring robin pulling a worm from the ground.

She drew it up before her eyes, squinting to examine it. Not made for such treatment, one-by-one the cars snapped off and fell with their screaming loads into the burning rubble around the giantess' paws. Before the last few fell, she glanced at her approaching companion and with what looked almost like a wink. She raised the final two cars over her titled-back muzzle and dropped them into her mouth.

The fox barked in response; a booming, horrible laugh. Then, casually, it swatted a nearby traffic helicopter out of the air and resumed its trek. The feed quickly switched to other reporters on the ground.

The military had nothing that could do more than slow the beasts down.

The giant todd, his russet-orange fur catching the light of the setting sun shrugged off mortar impacts. Missiles stung its fur from afar. It snarled and barked something back. The sound was like the pronouncement of some ancient, animal god. Then, it stooped to pick up a handful of tanks and cars and people to throw them at the approaching soldiers.

The scattershot counter-attack crushed the on-coming formation while an unlucky fighter was knocked out of the sky. A lone AMX-56 Leclerc rolled for several blocks in a heap of twisted metal after being thrown at close to a hundred

miles per hour.

The titan turned to its final target. Everyone in the rec room, everyone watching on televisions around the world, caught their breaths.

Booming paws crushed building after building as the fox ran. Only a few dozen strides later and it was standing eye-to-top-third with the Eiffel Tower.

The tanks and remaining infantry to the north were crushed under foot by the skunk as she ran to catch up. She arrived just as the fox wrapped his giant paws around the top of the structure and began to pull. She joined in, and hundreds of tons of metal beams screeched and screamed a torturous song. The top third came away as the fox took a few stumbling steps back. It hefted the twisted metal like a club and, as the aurora returned to the skies, hurled it towards a flight of fighter jets coming from the south.

Skies parting and horrible aurora flaring, the two titans vanished just as the remains of the iconic landmark struck two of the planes, downing one and shattering the other in a fireball over the streets of downtown Paris.

Randall felt Paul's arm around his shoulders. He pulled his husband close as they watched. Finally, in the silence of the rec room, Alexi got up and turned off the television.

"Shows over," she said. "Let's get back to work."

None of the military or base personnel in the room saluted or commented. They just parted before the tightly-controlled emotions of the I.T.F. representative as she left. But Randall saw their eyes. They made way for her but shot hateful glances at himself and Paul.

Mostly at Paul.

There was a prejudice that the colossi could grow into titans if left alone long enough. It was a stupid belief, one debunked by every scientist who'd studied the matter. But it was a hard notion to disabuse. It was widely known that less than half of all colossi died from natural causes. The rest...

Suicide only made up a quarter of what remained.

"C'mon," Randall said quietly. "Let's go."

Paul hadn't noticed the stares. Randall took him by the hand and walked out into the hall. Outside, the huge mouse groaned slightly and paused.

"It's nothing," the bigger man said. Randall could smell the falsehood. Paul sighed, correcting himself. "It's nothing I've not been dealing with for a while, now."

"What is?"

"Just, well, joint pain." He looked down with his big, blue eyes and forced a smile across his muzzle. "A lot of it, to be honest. Miss Fields was able to get my prescription for Percocet transferred to the base pharmacy but..." He trailed

off.

Randall didn't need more words. It happened with most colossi. Paul had been lucky it hadn't been this bad, sooner. Most started suffering joint pain once they crossed the eight-foot threshold. Paul hadn't felt it until close to nine.

"You think you need a bigger prescription?" the hare asked.

"I don't want to develop an addiction," Paul said, slowly, after some consideration.

"It's not an addiction if you need something to live," Randall insisted.

"This isn't like eating or breathing..."

You've got a medical condition that if untreated, cripples you. To me, that's a requirement." He embraced him, tightly, and whispered, "You're master of your own fate: you are your own puppeteer."

Paul turned away, frowning.

Randall could see him working on forming concepts into words while simultaneously holding back his emotions. It haunted him to see Paul like this: normally so full of energy and life but, now, unable to deal with so fundamental and imminent part of his life.

"I don't want you married to a junkie," he finally said. "I want my dignity. Does that make sense?"

A long, slow breath escaped Randall's lips. He nodded and took Paul's hand in his own.

"Of course it does," he said.

They stayed quiet for a long while. Other staff members came out of the rec room and passed them but, this time, Randall chose not to notice their glances. He just stood beside his husband and waited. He was thinking, hard.

"Let's see if, uh..." Paul trailed off, face screwed up as he tried to think of the right words. "Let's see if Miss Fields can get a doctor to..." He stumbled over the words and looked at a loss.

"...To gauge how much more Percocet you can take without risk?"

Normally Paul got pissed off if Randall finished his sentences. It was probably a testament to how much pain he was in, both physical and emotional, that he just nodded.

"I think Alexi went to her office," Randall said. "Let's go and see if she can get you a specialist."

That evening, after dinner, Randall entered Doctor Sondaritch's lab. Alexi had only been too happy to help Paul and another doctor was being flown in the day after tomorrow. Until then, Paul had agreed to a temporary increase in his meds. His fur tended to clog up the intakes on the physical therapy room's hot tub so, instead, he just stayed off his feet as much as he could. It was painful to

watch.

When Grantham Torg, Doctor Sondaritch's wolverine bodyguard, came to find Randall, he was only too glad for the distraction.

Sondaritch's lab was like something out of an old, black-and-white sci-fi movie about giant ants. Benches and trestle tables were covered with beakers and a variety of chemical testing apparatus while microscopes, gauges, computers, and assorted pieces of equipment cluttered most available space. The vulpine doctor sat at her computer where she seemed to spend all her time when not in the field.

"He's getting worse," Randall said. He'd not intended to say anything but there it was. Sondaritch looked up, brow: furrowed. "Paul," Randall clarified, "he's getting worse."

"Of course he is," Sondaritch said. "His cells are replicating at an unheard-of rate. They are growing more numerous and his normal structure is not capable of supporting it." She frowned and added, "But we're making progress on figuring out why."

"Oh? Progress? Is that what you call this 'Frankenstein lab'?" Randall tried not to let his anger out but it was getting nigh-impossible. "Have you found out *how* it's happening? Have you figured out *anything* from all the growth studies you've put me through? Have you figured out where the titans come from, why they attack, or what their appearance has to do with the anthro-transformations?" He pounded his fist on a countertop.

Doctor Sondaritch remained placid even though both Mister Torg and the tigress bodyguard, Tianna Patch, bristled and took a few precautionary steps forward.

"Getting angry isn't going to help, Mister Coleman," the fox said archly. "Science is a slow process. It is often trial and error interspersed with mathematical modeling and data collection." She gestured at her monitor and the slowly rotating image of cells, there. "And thanks to some of your recent growth tests, I can now safely say that whatever source of energy fuels them is also fueling your husband's more gradual expansion."

Randall furrowed his brow. "How can that be? I don't suffer any side-effects when I grow. I can get up to nearly fifty feet tall, now, and still feel as good as I do at five-foot-ten."

"I said the source of energy is the same, not how it is being applied." The doctor tapped at the screen a few times and pulled up an array of charts. She indicated each as she explained. "Your body becomes wrapped in a field; it seems to bend space-time. In a way, you aren't growing: your body is following the currents of the universe as you cause it to expand. Normal processes continue

while, when interactions cross the event threshold around you, are translated into your relative reality. But Paul...”

“I didn’t follow any of that.”

“But Paul,” she continued, “his body seems to always be accessing this field, directly. His cells are dining on it: replicating far beyond what other anthros and humans ever experience.”

Randall thought about it and nodded. “So, this energy: can you block it?”

“That is my goal,” the doctor replied. “But to figure out how your body is accessing it, by what mechanism it is being fed into to you so it can be stopped: that will take time and more research.”

The hare grimaced. “What if Paul doesn’t have that time? He’s getting worse.”

“And he will continue to do so,” she said. “Mister Coleman, the colossi’s growth is a one-way street. It isn’t like cutting off the energy will cause that individual to shrink. Your husband will have to deal with his size for the rest of his life.”

A chill went through Randall at the words. It was like hearing a proclamation of a death sentence. “What? Then why are we...?”

“We are trying to find out ‘why’, Mister Coleman,” Sondartich snapped. “And, in the process, help countless others. As long as we catch this before it goes much further...”

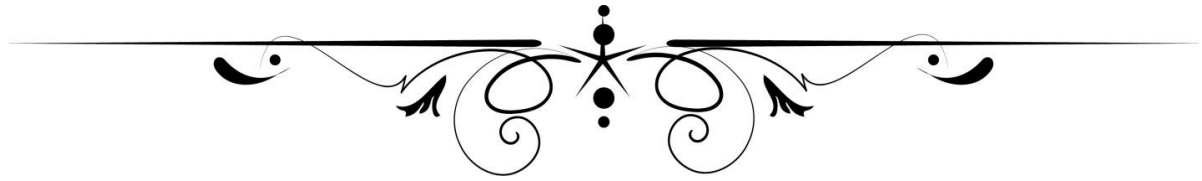
“But it’s already too late! The heart palpitations; the joint damage—!”

“May all be addressed as long as he’s still alive,” she interrupted. “But keeping him alive is the first priority. And for that, we need more data.” She massaged her brow with her fingertips. “You still have so many lessons to learn; so many things... But, first, you must learn to simply *act*. Use your power; let us understand it. Acceptable?”

Randall fumed. He knew that her logic was sound; that her approach was probably the only one. But would it have killed her to be more ... sensitive? He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. Then, he nodded, silently.

“Good,” she said. Turning back to her screen, she flipped to another display. “I have found a curious surge the larger you get. I would like to see if you are moving towards a maximum within the field you are tapping. Perhaps reaching it will provide insight into the method by which you are accessing this other-dimensional energy.”

Randall agreed and, that night, resumed the tests with renewed vigor.



“I would like to try something new.” The equipment that Mister Torg and Miss Patch were unloading from heavy crates was unlike anything Randall had seen before. It was bulky and didn’t resemble medical or computer apparatus so much as a collection of satellite dishes, high-energy cables, and miniature spires from a power plant. It looked even more “Frankenstein” than everything else in the lab.

“What’s all this?”

“Equipment from my home lab,” the doctor said. “I believe it may offer us some better insight into your access of the trans-dimensional field.”

Randall raised one brow at the unfamiliar term but let it slide. Paul was doing better. The doctor had prescribed a relatively new colossi drug, ketamasterine, to go with the Percocet, and his husband was feeling less pain.

Not only was Paul back to a semblance of his normal self, but Randall had managed to push his size up to the hundred-twenty-foot range. He was now able to, with concentration and practice, reach a tenth of the height of one of the average titans. It took him nearly a full two minutes to achieve it, but he could do it.

“What does all this do?” he asked.

Sondaritch motioned for him to sit while Miss Patch hooked equipment that looked like a modified blood pressure cuff to his left arm.

“It should, if I am correct, cause fluctuations in the field your body is accessing. At the exact moment you reach out to it, wrap it around yourself, we can hopefully interact with it. If I am correct, we shall be able to measure, directly, what portion of your biology is responsible for interacting with the field and, thereby, find a way to block it.”

Randall nodded. So far, the fox had been right about nearly everything. It seemed that this energy, whatever it was, was fueling the mitochondria in Paul’s cells, causing them to go into overdrive. Perhaps his own biology had a slightly different or mutated version of them, allowing him to channel the energy around himself rather than feeding the little powerhouses within. Either way, the past seventy-two hours had yielded plenty of results which seemed to have Doctor Sondaritch much more satisfied than usual.

“So, what: I try to grow and we see if the machine can stop it?”

She looked up and nodded.

“Shouldn’t we go outside for this?”

Torg snorted. “Why? You planning on going beyond twelve feet?” His accent was almost as thick and difficult to parse as the doctor’s. He rarely spoke but when he did it was gruff and blunt.

Randall rolled his eyes at the wolf and glanced towards the lab ceiling. “I’m not an idiot.”

“We just need to verify the basic principle,” Sondaritch said. “That is all. No matter what happens, just focus on tapping the field like you always do.”

Something in her voice sounded enthusiastic. She almost sounded eager.

Images of a hundreds of cinematic mad scientists flashed before Randall’s eyes and, for a moment, he wondered if he should say something. But while Sondaritch was off-putting and seemed to treat everyone as her intellectual inferior, she’d done nothing to hurt anyone.

Alexi entered, as always dressed in a crisp, government-approved business suit.

“So, what’s this new test then?” she asked.

Sondaritch sighed and turned the remaining setup over to her associates while she explained in more nuanced terms to the I.T.F. agent.

Randall idly fondled one of his long, brown ears as he watched Grantham Torg unpack another crate. Patch had finished running a cable to one of the lightning-rod-looking devices and was aligning it in its armature with the aid of a laptop.

“So, you’re all-service bodyguards, eh?”

The tigress looked at him, dully.

“I mean you do it all: protect the doctor, put things together, and lug heavy equipment...”

“We’re well-rounded,” she said.

Randall nodded. He knew that one’s personality didn’t reflect the kind of anthro you got turned into but he suspected that as long as she’d been a tiger, she’d acted like a no-nonsense, powerful predator. It was something in her yellow eyes that made him feel like an actual hare: like prey.

He watched her work for a few more minutes.

“You’ve been with the doctor for a long time?”

She put down the spanner she was using and crossed her arms. “Long enough.”

“Well, it’s just...” He sighed. He was, in part, stressed. He was also bored. The dichotomy between the two feelings was making him jumpy. “Never mind.

Just looking for conversation. Can I help?"

"I doubt it," the tigress replied. "We are experts." She resumed her work.

Randall watched for a while longer before taking a seat in a folding chair. He'd gotten used to sitting in folding chairs ever since he grew his tail. Normally, back when he'd been human, he'd hated the hard, metallic icons of convenient, temporary furniture. But when you had a small nubbin of bone and flesh and fur sticking out from the base of your spine, you began to be thankful for anything that gave it room.

His mind wandered as the doctor helped Grantham with a large piece of equipment and Sondaritch told Alexi to not touch anything.

"Why eight percent?"

Miss Patch sighed and stopped working again. "What?"

"Why eight percent?" Randall asked again. "I mean, you're experts, right? Has anyone figured out why most incursions are only incidentally violent while eight percent are intentionally cruel and excessive?"

"And you are asking me why?" she asked. Her eyes were narrowed but the twitch in her tail betrayed an actual interest in what he was saying.

He shrugged. "Just a question that popped into my head; something to fill the time since I can't really help you."

She put her hands on her hips and exhaled, long and slow, through her nostrils. Her blunt, striped muzzle looked even more annoyed than usual. "Maybe eight percent are assholes?"

He chuckled at the unexpected humor. "Or maybe ninety-two percent just don't care?"

The tigress' eyes flickered a bit at that. But she nodded and went back to work.

Indifference or cruelty: were those their only options? Randall had to wonder which was worse.

After another ten minutes, the equipment was connected and humming. Doctor Sondaritch had given Alexi a folding chair off to one side and brought Randall into a center section to stand upon a flat disc made of metallic wedges. It looked like a high-tech "Trivial Pursuit" playing piece only without the colors. His fur itched as Sondaritch attached the last of the wire leads to his wrist.

"There: we are ready," she said.

"This is an awful lot of equipment just for taking readings," Randall commented.

"And you would know this how?" the fox asked.

Randall, cowed, just shrugged.

The three experts took up their position by the end of a counter near the

door. A small laptop had been connected to the technology, looking out-of-place compared to the cutting-edge equipment. With a few taps on the keyboard, the various apparatus began to hum. Randall began to feel warm. His fur started to stand on end in a way that had nothing to do with the dry, desert air. Without even concentrating on it, he felt himself start to expand.

“Whoa. Doctor: I’m feeling it. I think you’re machinery is doing something wrong.”

“Focus,” she snapped. “Focus and expand.”

“But I’m not focusing now,” he insisted. “I’m just getting bigger!”

He felt himself getting heavier. He decided to trust her, again. He closed his eyes for a moment, let out a breath, and then opened them again.

“Okay,” he said, “here goes nothing.”

With an absent-minded tug on his ear, Randall reached out.

Normally, it required at least a minute of focus during which his senses would tease out the background hum of power that he tapped to push his growth. Under normal circumstances, the process was painless.

This time, it was not “normal”. It felt like he was exploding.

The floor creaked beneath him and he could feel the smooth, laboratory tile slide abruptly inward beneath his oversized feet. His balance was thrown and he staggered a half-step forward. His knee knocked into one of the projectors as it slid down in his field of vision. The room began to spin. Even taken by surprise, he wasn’t slow in trying to shut out the humming force that flowed through him.

He couldn’t.

The raw ocean that had been just beyond his field of perception, roared into him. Storm-tossed seas of energy boiled in whatever cauldron they’d been gathered. His mind, his concentration, had opened a spigot into that space and the forces he’d been accessing so slightly—so casually, for months—came rushing through. He tried to close his mind. His head struck the ceiling and his sensitive ears heard alarms and shouts.

Alexi had knocked over her chair: leaping out of it while both Grantham and Tianna began to usher Doctor Sondaritch out the door.

“Get out! Run!” Randall screamed.

Trying to halt it was like trying to hold back the wrath of God. Once opened to it, the flood just kept coming.

The drop ceiling buckled, aluminum rods twisting upwards as fluorescent lights cracked and shattered. He was forced forward. Slumping, his shoulders broke through the tiles and lighting covers and hunched forward as they met wooden supports. Alexi was on her phone but her voice was drowned out by the

crashing of his expansion. He watched her diminish past knee-height. The room got tinier and more fragile as he frantically looked for a way out.

Every visual cue told him the world was shrinking. It was collapsing all around him: trying to crush him. The exit door was closing; Sondaritch and her bodyguards had left. The machinery still hummed but was making grinding noises and throwing off sparks where he'd knocked some pieces over. He doubted it was still really working. The damage had been done.

The ceiling pushed down. Forced to his knees, he gritted his teeth and tried to reach for Alexi.

"Get out!" he cried, again. "I can't stop growing!"

He spread his palms against the floor as he was forced onto hands and knees by the confined space. Not believing in any particular god, he didn't pray or utter any words other than his mantra of self-control.

I am in command of my own fate ... I am both puppet and puppeteer. I am in command of my own fate ... I am both puppet and puppeteer.

The buckling of the both ceiling and floor continued as he filled the room. The twelve-foot ceiling, beyond the now-shattered drop-tiles, started to crack. He could feel it giving away.

Alexi couldn't make it to the outside door but tried to run for lab door, back into the base.

Klaxons were ringing, exploding in Randall's sensitive ears. Their screeching and wailing mingled with cracking concrete and twisting wooden beams. He lost sight of Alexi as she ran past his field of vision. He was forced nearly prone. He felt a wall give way behind him. His foot crashed through: hundreds of tiny splinters raked through his fur as drywall exploded in crumbles of dusty ruin. He thought he heard Alexi cry out.

The weight on his back was getting insurmountable. He knew if he didn't get out soon, he'd be crushed to death. All he could think of was to push back.

Curling himself into a ball, he gritted his teeth and flattened his ears. He tucked his head beneath his arms for protection. The room shrank around his forty-foot frame. He drew in his legs, pressed his gigantic paws against the straining floor, and pushed.

The ceiling didn't give way: the floor beneath him did.

He felt himself falling. Seconds later, as he collapsed into the basement with a boom, a rain of debris surrounded him.

Randall didn't look up.

He knew he must have gotten lucky: his feet hit ground even as he stayed curled into his ball. He got a momentary sense of balance and, at that moment, made a decision.

He stood up.

As fast as he could, arms over his head, Randall stood.

Standing in the basement, lab equipment falling all around him, he stood as fast as he could.

His arms and skull exploded in pain from the impact as he hit the ceiling. It exploded up and outwards around him. He could feel it: he was going to get bigger than ever before. Only ten or twelve seconds had passed and he was pushing eighty feet tall. The office space above the lab went by, devastation collapsing it in his wake. Then the office above that passed and, finally, the two floors of storage and equipment followed. The pain was incredible but, whether due to the field enveloping his body or the relative scale of his size, he felt uninjured. He didn't smell any blood or feel any grievous injury.

Before he knew it, he exploded from the building: growing into the night sky.

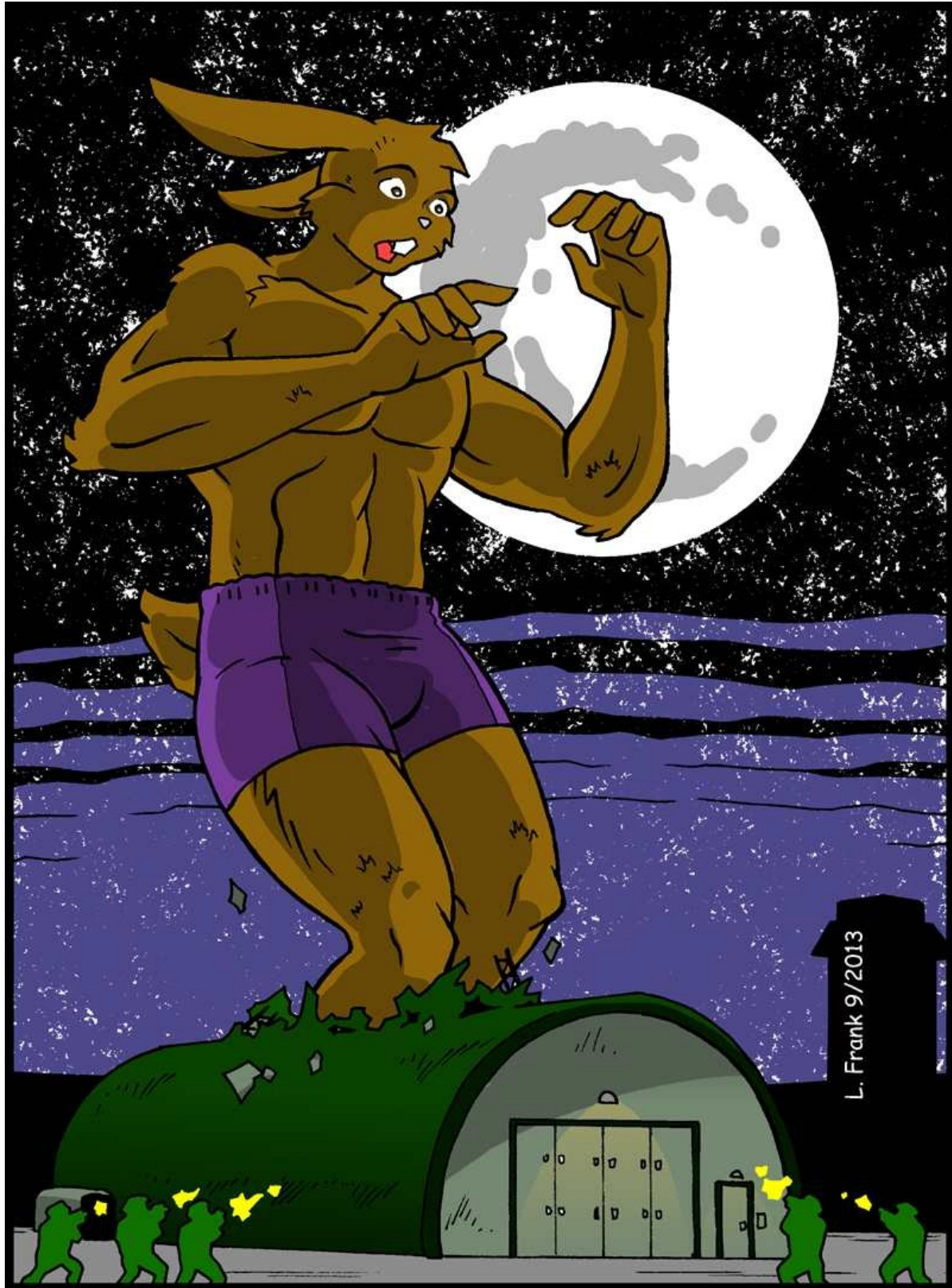
Randall stumbled forward, extricating himself from the shrinking structure. All around him floodlights lit the sky. He saw movement, tiny shadows only as tall as his lower calf, running about frantically. He thought he heard little "pops" and felt stinging on his flesh.

The thoughts in his head were incoherent and random. All he could think about was getting away; getting away from...

Paul.

Paul was down there.

Paul was in the building.



There were people down there and he was still growing in their midst. But the people, even Alexi, weren't as crucial as Paul. He had to find Paul. He had to

stop this. He had to get away.

His feet boomed as they impacted the dry, brittle earth of the desert base. The asphalt and concrete of the nearest parking lot buckled beneath him as he stumbled from the wreckage of Building A. Nearly two hundred feet tall, the world around him looked so flat and delicate. Stumbling over a generator building, he tripped and crushed part of an aircraft hangar roof. He could see the base in flashes of searchlights and tiny sparks against the ground which, on some level, he knew were muzzle-flares.

He was growing so fast that he had reached half the height of a titan. Feet leaving giant, booming craters in the landscape, he ran away from the base. The tiny, razor-wire fence exploded into the desert in the wake of his passage. He lost several tufts of fur but didn't feel anything. With each staggering step, his feet sank deeper into the dry, dusty landscape.

The sky started to darken between him and the stars. Although the Mojave didn't have enough moisture for clouds, he saw some starting to form in thin, swirling stripes. The inky night began to light up with streaks of purple and green. They illuminated the ground like a hauntingly silent Aurora Borealis.

The turmoil, below, sounded so small ... so insignificant and muffled.

The dizziness from the early growth-spurt returned and he had to stop running. Vehicles from the base started to drive after him. Their headlights barely reached ankle-height. Toys: he was being chased by toys.

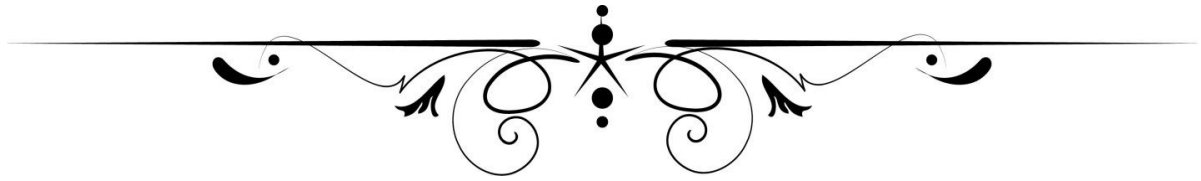
How big did that make him? Four-hundred-feet? Five-hundred? He was so dizzy, he nearly fell over. He had to stop this, but he didn't know how. Where was everybody? Where was Alexi, Sondaritch, and the bodyguards?

Where was Paul?

Fear for his husband's safety made him sick and he nearly retched.

He couldn't stay in place any longer. Stumbling over a small hill, he felt himself topple. The world, in all its vast, flat harshness, rushed up to greet him. He tried to put his hands out but they sank into the flimsy ground as if it was loose sand. The boom of his impact ricocheted off the distant buttes and through neighboring canyons. The lights in the sky grew piercingly bright, stinging his clenched-shut eyes. He could feel the world spinning beneath his feet as, abruptly, the bottom fell out of his stomach.

Blackness reached out to embrace him. A cold, dark pain enveloped his consciousness as, some six-hundred feet tall, the giant hare passed out.



Voices shivered in the inky darkness. A tinge of red and orange blurred around Randall's vision as unconsciousness slipped away and pain took its place. He was lying on his back, his body aching as if he'd been pounded by a thousand fists. Beneath his brown fur, he felt like he was probably one, big bruise. The voices grew closer and he turned his head to find their source. Through his blurred vision he saw daylight.

The room was large and clean; sterile, perhaps, would have been a better term. And although it was filled with technology akin to what Doctor Sondaritch had brought into her Building A lab, everything was much tidier. To his right he saw three approaching shadows. To his left...

To his left was a city.

A large, plate-glass window looked out from the room onto a vast tableau unlike anything he'd seen outside of a science-fiction film. He had to be fairly high up because tall skyscrapers dotted the urban landscape with many of them below the window's frame. The gleaming structures were tall, polished metal collections of glass and light. Around them, as far as his blurry eyes could see, were tiny specks soaring in their midst. A vehicle, looking like a cross between a car and a boat, skimmed past the giant window. The city seemed to stretch on forever. The reddish sun was setting, filling the room with its warm light.

"Good evening."

Sondaritch's thickly accented voice tore his attention away from the window and the surreal vista outside. He blinked his eyes to clear them and turned his head. His wrists and ankles, he now realized, were bound to a padded gurney. The fox stood nearby, dressed in a utilitarian, green coat with long, transparent gloves on both hands.

He tried to speak but his mouth was dry and all that came out was a rasping cough. He grunted and gasped, trying to clear his throat. Grantham loomed close and tipped a cup of water into his muzzle. He drank it, gratefully, and coughed. "What's ... going on?" he managed after a few moments. Down deep, he felt that things had just gone from bad to worse.

"It was as I thought," Sondaritch said. "The transitions through the transdimensional hub had leakage on a fundamental level. Our clients have been seeding your world with their genetic material, inundating a good number of you with their own encoding."

Randall blinked, still trying to clear his mind. “What?”

“You,” she continued, “are one of the rare accidents who gained a permanent connection to the type of energy constructs used for hub travel. Clearly, we have to recalibrate our engines to be more efficient but, in the meantime, we finally understand the parameters of the problem. At least we should be able to counteract it in whatever percentage of your population has become ... compromised. All it will take is one more test.”

He looked with confusion to Mister Torg and Miss Patch. Both bodyguards stared back at him. He felt like a specimen about to be dissected.

“I don’t ... understand,” he gasped.

“And how could you?” the fox said. It was as if she was paying attention to him for the first time. Her tone had changed. She was now ... interested. “You come from a hopelessly primitive world: backward and inferior. If it weren’t for your ecosystem, we’d never have come into contact with you at all.”

“Our ecosystem? What are you talking about?”

He struggled with his bonds, only to find them snug and tight.

“Your world provides a breathable atmosphere, acceptable gravity, radiation shielding from the nearest star: it allows our transit customers to use it as a safe waypoint.”

Whatever was going on, Randall began to see that it was all connected: the titans, the colossi, the size-shifters, and Doctor Sondaritch were all part of the same thing. He didn’t like where this seemed to be heading, either. He gave a sharp tug at the restraint on his leg and found that, while it stretched, it didn’t give. It stayed as tight to his furry ankle as if it had been welded there.

“Your customers?” he asked. “The ... titans?”

The fox smiled, thin and antiseptic. “They aren’t giants, of course,” she said. “That’s just how your world interacts with them. It’s an effect of the field matrix through which they travel. We use your planet as an intermediary space as we ferry them from one destination to another. All they have to do is move; just a little bit while synced with your world and the hub transits them across millions of light-years of space.” She walked up and stood over his prone form. Her eyes examined him. “By ‘we’, of course, I mean the Adelaine Corporation. We provide travel for all members of the Nanosyncratic Union; all three-hundred-twenty-two member races.”

He must have looked momentarily as puzzled as he felt because she actually laughed at his expression. He didn’t know what chilled him more: the abandonment of her previous professional demeanor or her current cold interest in his condition. He pieced her words together and gathered his thoughts.

“I don’t get it, why don’t you...?”

The recent past kept filtering back to him; aligning it from fragments to form a complete image of his last moments on Earth.

But then he realized what wasn't in the room.

His eyes opened wide and he struggled, anew, against his bonds. "Wait a second: where's Paul? Where's—?"

"Probably crushed to death," Mister Torg said absently. "You made quite a mess during transition."

"What?"

"The whole building came down," Sondaritch said. She waved her hand in idle dismissal. "We barely made it out after you. Alexi ...Miss Fields... she was inside, too. Cleaner that way, really. Saves us the trouble of removing witnesses."

A chill ran through him. The words, those few sentences from the alien fox and her wolveren bodyguard ripped the wind from his sails and plunged his heart into an ice bath. It was all gone; everything he'd built his life around for the past decade or more was gone.

Paul was gone.

"But, yes," Sondaritch said, as if getting back to the topic on which she would rather expound. "I'm sorry, but your world is just a waypoint through which our engines can bend space-time to achieve interstellar travel."

"How ... how could you?" Randall said. His voice was quiet; lacking force. His tongue felt heavy and a dull weariness took him. "We're not..." He didn't know exactly what to say. "We're not toys."

"Usually, the transit worlds don't have intelligent life on them," Tianna said. Of them, only the towering tigress had any remorse in her voice. She sounded as if she was trying to find something, anything, to say.

"But when the acquisition department finds a suitable eco-system to serve as a waypoint, well, that's not too much of a concern," Sondaritch interrupted. She picked up a small, blunt-nosed tool with a handle-grip suited for her palm. She cradled it, making adjustments to a tiny screen on one side, before pressing its cold surface up to Randall's neck. He tried to jerk his head away but still ended up feeling a sharp stab and hearing a hiss. A cool numbness flowed through him.

"But ... why? Why would your customers...?"

"They don't know you're intelligent," the fox said. "Or, rather, what passes for 'sapience' on your backwater world. And, truthfully, by our standards, you aren't. But try telling that to the non-scientifically literate out there." She shook her head in annoyance. "The protesters and conservationists: they don't have the capacity to understand." She trailed off, looking annoyed.

Randall felt his heart rate plunge and his eyes start to grow heavy. Desperate, he tried to hold on to his anger; grasp his fading fury before it got swallowed up in blackness.

“The eight percent are those who game the system and like to play,” Grantham said. “Everyone only has a short time in the interface before the aligning fields connect them to their destination on the other end. About eight percent like to make the most of it.” He helped Sondaritch as she swung a large, cantilevered arm over Randall’s body. It was attached to the ceiling, some ten feet overhead. At its base, a collection of heavy cables sank into a hemispherical joint. At the other, it ended in a fan of dozens of tiny, needle-like protrusions, each encircled with a tiny dish-like disc of metal. Each tip glowed a faint blue.

Randall felt like the subject of some kind of alien autopsy. The numbing agent Doctor Sondaritch had injected him with was already deadening all sensation in his body but not knocking him out. Whatever they were about to do, they wanted him conscious.

“So, they—your customers—think we’re just, what, ants?”

“Proto-intelligent insects,” Sondaritch said. “Which, other than your apparent size to the average traveler, is about right in terms of cultural development.”

The machinery hummed to life. The cluster of needles began to rotate, their blue tips becoming circles of light dancing before his vision. Occasionally one would flare and he would feel a dull, pin-prick through his fur.

“Tell me if you feel anything,” Sondaritch said. “Microsurgery shouldn’t have any overtly negative effects on a higher life form but, as I said, you’re hardly what I would call ‘higher’.”

They were removing things from him. They’d doped him up and were removing things from him: probably whatever mutations within his body that allowed him to tap into their transit hub were being removed.

“Why?”

Sondaritch blinked, moving close to look down at his face. “Why?” she echoed.

“Why do this to me? If ... if I’m so primitive...”

“We’re not about to let our technology fall into your race’s hands,” she said. “Something about the transit system causes a good percentage of your people to undergo spontaneous, genetic-level transformation into one of the races in our gene banks. A few gain permanent, cellular linkage to the network. And an even smaller percentage can access it without machinery at all! You already possess a unique biology. You humans are primitive but dangerous.”

More pin-pricks. More extractions. He was, through his haze, starting to

get it.

He had to get free.

Randall closed his eyes and tried to ignore the tiny points of pain. He reached out with his mind the way Sondaritch had taught him. He could feel it there, still: the transit web.

It was barred. They'd shut him out of the system. The energies of the hub were being kept from him.

But if he had developed some sort of natural connection to such systems, maybe...

He pushed his mind more, casting about for other bits of energy; other ebbs and flows in the vast tangle of forces she'd taught him to feel. Perhaps only a few humans were susceptible. Perhaps he was one in a billion. But even if he was, he had to warn the others. He had to get back to Earth, back to...

He tried not to think about Paul.

He had to get back. They were pulling pieces out of him, breaking him down to study how he did it. No help from the military base would be coming. He had to get out of this by himself. The machine kept working and he felt himself starting to feel a slow, creeping pain from where the tiny laser-like needles had been excising whatever cellular structures Sondaritch had identified within him.

Then, he felt it.

It was barely there, but he felt it.

There was a strange undercurrent; a thrumming energy ... a network similar to the transit hub he'd been accessing. It was different but not locked away from his questing mind. He reached out to it.

Almost immediately, he felt pain in his shoulders and ankles as he began to grow against his restraints.

"He's growing!"

"Impossible: I identified the back-door he was using to access the hub," Sondaritch replied to the tigress. "In this room, access is locked against those frequencies."

Randall pushed harder and felt the restraints crush more tightly.

Bands groaned and stretched around his wrists and neck; he began to choke as he grew. But he kept pushing, hoping the straps would give way before he passed out. He felt his left wrist erupt in pain as his sharp ears heard something snap. But, still he pushed on. He felt a sudden looseness around his right ankle as the restraint broke; he jerked his leg upwards, tearing it free. He still couldn't breathe as the strap around his neck cut past his fur into his flesh. It didn't matter. He had to keep going.

He pushed himself to access more and more of the strange, subtle web of energy. He felt, through the pain in his left arm, the next strap rip asunder. He tore his hand free as Doctor Sondaritch lunged at him with her injector.

Mister Torg tried to pin him but, through pain, Randall knew he was half-again as tall as the wolven bodyguard. He pulled his injured hand back as the wolf came close and then punched as hard as he could, catching him under the chin. Torg staggered away, crashing into Sondaritch and knocking her through a tray of medical implements to the floor.

Randall wasted no time and gripped the band around his neck. Despite his broken wrist, he pulled as hard as possible. His tiny, fingernail-like claw tips bit into the material and cut through. As he outgrew his other wrist restraint, he breathed again: his neck, now free. His right ankle was screaming in pain and the rotating wheel of laser-needles had pulled back, apparently trying to recalibrate for his moving body. He tore the last restraint away and swung his legs out over the table and stood.

The ceiling was twelve feet high and he was rapidly approaching it.

He looked towards Tianna to see her with an expression of indecisiveness on her face. Then, after her eyes met his, she began backing away.

Torg sprang to his feet and launched himself at the growing hare.

Randall crouched, planted his back and arms against the examination table, lifted his oversized feet, and kicked with all his might. At six feet tall, his legs were incredibly powerful. At twelve, at the height he was nearing, they were catastrophically strong.

Grantham Torg took the blow, full-force, to his chest and went sailing back against the floor-to-ceiling plate glass window overlooking the city. Like a villain in a Hollywood epic, he looked stunned and shocked as he broke through and went sailing out into empty air to the streets below.

Randall was dizzy and still growing. He saw Sondaritch hefting her injection gun as the doors opened admitting a flood of uniformed guards.

He closed his eyes and pushed harder than ever before. The faint network connection flared to life and suffused him with its energy. Memories of the base, of Legacy, of Paul flooded his mind. He pushed back against the influence of the drugs he'd been given. He felt the ceiling against his shoulders as he half-stood. The guards stopped and stared. Despite Sondaritch shouting at them to shoot, they hesitated. Maybe they had no idea what was going on; maybe they were innocent employees. Randall didn't care; he just kept growing.

In moments, he crashed through the ceiling and felt the floor give way beneath one foot. He outgrew the room and both those above and below it. Still, he pushed himself. His sensitive ears were assailed by the sounds of klaxons and

sirens. Windows broke and inter-story support beams twisted and snapped. He felt his body compress between semi-yielding structural materials before bursting them like his exam table bonds. He squinted his eyes and gritted his teeth. It hurt. Everything hurt.

He'd exceeded forty or fifty feet as he burst from the mirror-glass walls of the skyscraper.

A hundred feet tall and expanding rapidly, Randall lost his balance. The building began to shift as he sank floor after floor and grew outwards through wall after wall. He staggered forward, off-balance, and fell out across the street. His naked body forgotten, he reached out and grabbed the building across from him as he passed a hundred fifty feet tall. The ground was several body-lengths below him.

Still, he grew.

Lights flickered in the sky and the clouds swirled.

He felt himself losing consciousness as he had when he'd transitioned to this world but he pushed through the blackness.

Two hundred feet ... three hundred ... four...

He grew because he didn't know what else to do.

Tiny flying vehicles soared around him, lights flashing, as millions of tiny impacts cut through his fur. They didn't hurt but it felt like he was being bitten by an army of mosquitoes. With a casual wave, he knocked a dozen out of the sky and watched them careen to the futuristic city blocks, below.

He staggered and pulled first one foot out of the half-collapsed skyscraper before extricating his other. Then, standing uneasily, he looked down with his glistening eyes at the smoke pouring out of the futuristic metropolis' streets. The buildings closed in around him. He pushed one over as he turned and tried to look for the tiny guards and people who had come into the lab where he'd been trapped.

He thought he could see, in the cutaway side of the skyscraper, tiny figures running for half-exposed stairwells. He didn't swat at them.

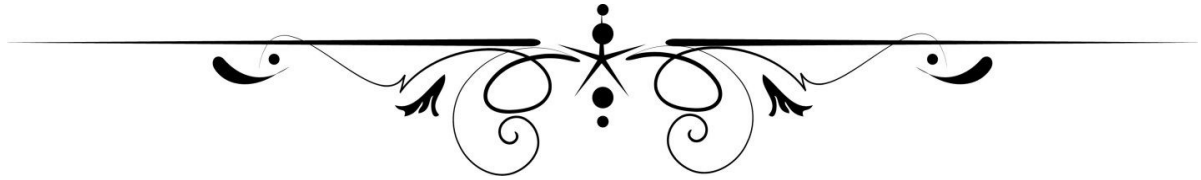
He'd escaped but didn't know what to do. Paul was dead. His world was a toy. He was someone else's puppet.

So he kept on growing.

Five hundred feet and everyone looked like beetles. Six hundred and they looked like ants. He began to get woozy again and steadied himself against the roof of another skyscraper. Its edge crumbled in his casual grip. The world around him started to fade. He didn't know if it was the drugs or exhaustion following his escape, but he was having trouble seeing straight.

He was getting bigger and bigger: past seven hundred feet tall.

The world faded around him as he realized this must be what it was like for a titan destroying the heart of a city full of ignorant, tiny people.



“My best guess is that his body absorbed so much energy that he spread his mass across a ten light-year radius through the medium of the rift network.” The fox’s voice was calm and clinical. All those in attendance and watching via remote took notes on her testimony. “Organic matter, certainly not living organisms, would never naturally evolve to interact with our technology in this way. The mistake is ended and the experiment, over.” Doctor Sondaritch folded her data stick into the vest pocket of her suit coat and looked, in turn, at each of her holographic superiors. She then nodded to the few physical representatives in the room, indicating her statement’s completion.

The manila-colored ferret who had chaired the meeting looked bored. He checked the data feeds, watching as each turned green with the satisfaction of those in attendance. When all of them were clear, he looked up from his seat.

“Doctor Sondaritch,” he began, “Arianne: you say this is over and resolved. Insofar as the immediate danger is concerned, it would seem that the board agrees with you. But we’ll need another size-shifter.”

Sondaritch didn’t change her expression but before she could speak one of the off-site participants chimed-in.

“Agreed,” said the holographic image of a black equine, “the usual manifestation of biology interacting with rift energies is rare. We must find out why it was so much higher on this world, for these humans, than it was anywhere else.”

“If you’ll examine lines six-hundred-seventy through eight-hundred-two of my textual deposition,” Sondaritch replied, “you’ll find my hypothesis on this. A quirk of Terran evolution; no more. With proper funding, I can return, and—”

“That has been denied,” the ferret said, blandly.

Sondaritch arched an eyebrow.

“Excuse me?”

“Denied,” he repeated. He looked up from the display in front of him and scowled. “You already exposed us to unprecedented backlash in the public arena. Seventeen system administrators are screaming for oversight. We have had to assure them that the alien was not sapient. But this has not stopped activists

against the network to ramp up their efforts. Public support is waning.” He flicked his eyes to a holo-screen and briefly flicked through several reports. “No, Arianne; we’ve known each other for years. You’re a brilliant researcher but lousy at reconnaissance. We’ll send someone else.”

She crossed her arms and pursed her lips. “And how long will you waste training them? You’ve already had to shut down all Earth-based transit. Are you going to leave it off until you have someone ready? I’m ready, now. I can take a team and resume work, shortly.”

“You nearly died, Doctor,” the ferret said. “You have lost both your primary assistants and your determination to relegate them to a menial status of ‘bodyguard’ or ‘lab assistant’ while on Earth indicates...” He trailed off as if searching for the right term.

“Our psych evals indicate you have an almost megalomaniacal need to be in charge,” the black equine continued. “And, frankly, we don’t need that sort of ...dangerous... attitude on such an important task.” She crossed her arms over her tailored, purple suit coat and snorted, derisively. “You’re lucky you’re still with the company at all. Frankly, if I had my way—”

“Yes, thank you,” the ferret said quickly. He cut off the audio to the hologram and continued. “We have your opinion on file. The decision has been made. There is no need to belabor the point.”

The meeting was clearly over. Everyone had had their say. One by one, the holographic attendees switched off. The lights gradually came up, illuminating the conference room. Doctor Sondaritch looked as sour and annoyed as she had in the dim light. The other in-person attendees filed out with the exception of the ferret. He stood and walked up to her. He put his furred hand on the podium behind which the doctor stood.

“You are a valued asset, Arianne; you’re not being put out to pasture.”

“Then why does it feel that way?” She brushed off his touch and turned towards the door. The medical clamp on her left shoulder gleamed as its small monitor lights blinked. The progress on knitting her bones together proceeded, painlessly. “You know I’m the best one for this mission. Those humans are going to wonder what happened. I need to go back; to resume my work. If any statistically significant percentage is able to tap into the network after even just a single exposure to one of our patrons...”

He shook his head, slowly, and led her out into the hallway. Sunlight streamed through the towering windows to their right, far above the city streets. In the distance, the construction crews were hard at work preparing to drill out the foundation of the building the human, Randall, had destroyed.

“You aren’t the best one for the job, Arianne,” he said. “You lost two

highly-valued associates. You undertook extreme measures to perform your experiments. In the end—”

“I did what I thought was right!”

“And in the end,” he said, “it was the wrong call.” He grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her around to face him. His eyes fur angry and a frown was deep across his light tan muzzle. “We’ll be fighting this in the court of public opinion for *decades*! It’s only because of your scientific expertise that you’re even still employed, here, rather than in prison. If you hadn’t pushed Randall Coleman to the breaking point before you were ready, before anyone at this company was ready, we wouldn’t be in this mess!”

Doctor Sondaritch took long, steady breaths. Her eyes narrowed but she didn’t say anything. To passers-by, it looked as if she was counting to ten.

As she opened her mouth to respond, the sunlight streaming through the windows changed hue. The glass was largely soundproofed but everyone in the building could still feel the distant, vibrating booms. Both turned their heads to look at the city skyline. Sondaritch, like the ferret, stood: transfixed.

The sky swirled with green and purple light. Sheets of aurora danced across the noon-day sky as clouds bunched up and converged both larger and heavier than anyone had seen in living memory on the weather-controlled world. Lightning lanced dramatically down from the heavens, striking tall buildings as a storm congealed out of interdimensional space. While non-employees wouldn’t know what it meant, the few in the corporate complex did. But it shouldn’t be happening. There was no route, approved or otherwise, that used the hub world as a waypoint.

But it still didn’t matter.

The impossible was occurring.

Before either of the two, or any of those rushing to the windows to see the light display, could do anything, the titans appeared.

The first was vulpine in appearance. She towered over even the tallest of skyscrapers, dressed in a skin-tight, purple bodysuit with light-studded bracelets that looked like a strange confluence of technology and bio-mods. She had materialized about a mile away, by the river. Her height was staggering. Her shadow fell for dozens of city blocks as her head, high above, surveyed the skyline.

Aerial cars and planes veered away, scattering through sky-lanes to avoid the materializing trio.

The second of the three was equine. As black in fur as the corporate colleague who had chastised Doctor Sondaritch, he was a tall man; towering over the fox. Where the first they’d seen was a mere six or seven-hundred feet

tall, the second was nearly twice that. His fiery eyes gazed dispassionately at the urban landscape. His clothing, like that of the one who preceded him, was purple and studded with miniscule lights and technological patterns.

The third...

The third was Randall.

Sirens were screaming throughout the city, clashing with the alarms within the building.

“I don’t understand; you said he was dead!”

Sondaritch scowled. “I said ‘most likely dead’,” she repeated. “Clearly, I was mistaken. But those other two...”



“Attention: residents of this Hub Core.” The voice was like thunder but had a female tone. It took the tiny beings in the city a moment to realize it was

the vulpine titan speaking. The windows shook with her pronouncement. “You are notified of your abridgment of Common Justice Law on the counts of wanton destruction and collateral damage to a proto-sapient species.”

The equine continued where the fox left off.

“You have been using a primitive version of a technology we mastered long ago. But your ignorance of the greater laws is no excuse. You passed beneath our notice before, but no longer. Your access to the hub network is hereby interdicted. Your leadership will be held in trial to begin, shortly.”

“We’ve got to get out of here...” The ferret sounded shrill and terrified.

Sondaritch, however, just narrowed her eyes. To all seeing her, she looked more annoyed than scared. Perhaps it was because of her experiences on the Terran world. Perhaps it was her overall personality. Whatever it was, the sudden appearance of an advanced race using the same transit technology they had been using for the past century seemed to have little effect on her composure. If anything, she looked put out by the inconvenience of a more powerful network of races suddenly taking notice.

“You hear that?” Randall boomed his alien voice over the cityscape at his feet. He was halfway between the heights of those he came with. His lips didn’t sync up to the words they all heard. Something, perhaps the purple, techno body-suit he was wearing, was translating his words. “It’s over, Sondaritch. All of it’s over!” He scowled across the city. His eyes were too big, the distances too far, for him to have been able to see her, but it didn’t matter. His gaze looked directly at the corporate headquarters: the core of the transit network. “Bullies like you have to remember: there’s always someone bigger on the playground.”

The giant hare lifted one leg, his massive paw rising high above the distant wharfs and riverside docks, before making his point. He slammed his foot down, making buildings shake and even more alarms erupt in clamorous squeals. His giant paw sent up plumes of water and shattered concrete for blocks around. Randall looked grim but ... satisfied.

Sondaritch didn’t look around after her boss. The ferret had already run for the stairs. She had no doubt that, throughout the network, executives were all doing the same thing: running for the hills.

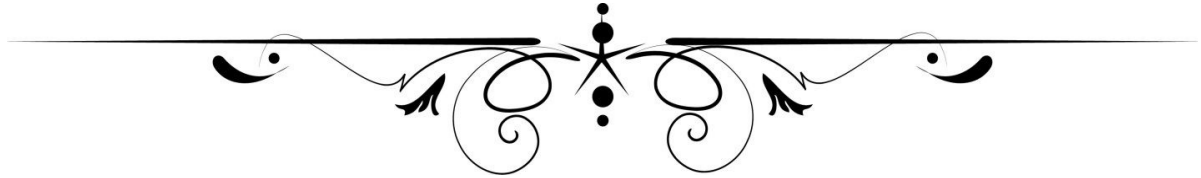
But she’d seen the titans in action too many times not to know how it would end.

There was no escaping the superior forces arrayed against them. As much as she had been to the humans, this other race—these beings Randall had found—were at least that far above her. She knew that this was the way of things. This was the natural progression. Their universal transit discoveries hadn’t been the first. Perhaps even these newcomers weren’t the first. There was no way of

knowing how far down the stack they were. But Randall, however his messed-up biology had allowed it, could access similar networks. His control was amazing.

She allowed herself a small smile as she sat down on a couch in the hallway and watched as, across the city, other titans began to appear.

Randall had learned her lessons well.



The injection stung but didn't hurt. After all he'd been through, it was nothing. Physically, emotionally, the last six weeks had been a culmination of the previous sixteen years. Right now, more than anything, Randall was tired. The damage, the rampaging destruction, had stopped. The only titans anyone ever saw were the representatives who had come back with him and elected to stay at an enlarged, relative size to assist with basic humanitarian aid. They'd also brought plenty of "normal"-sized representatives, along with construction and biomedical technology so advanced it seemed like magic. Doctor Sondaritch was in custody, held by Earth's new allies in the high-rift system, pending a means to actually try an individual at least a thousand years in advance of human technology and experience. Things weren't back-to-normal as much as the new normal was finally sinking in.

Despite it all, the numbness he felt was a relief compared to everything else he'd been through. He doubted things would ever be "easy" again but perhaps, just maybe, they could move in that direction.

"This should, ah, unchain the mitochondrial links between your core biology and the various queta-A rift systems in use throughout this galactic cluster." The man giving him the injection, despite having difficulty dumbing-down his actions to fit the relative technological and experiential vocabulary of humans, was a vast improvement over his last contact with an alien.

This one looked nothing like a human or a terrestrial animal, apart from the copious brown body-fur and gentle, curved ram's horns sprouting from the top of his shaggy head. His four, solid-blue eyes blinked, calmly, as he surveyed the medical equipment Randall was hooked up to.

"Thanks, doc."

The high-rift alien just nodded.

"Will this get me back to normal?"

Several eye-blinks answered him. Finally, his doctor spoke. "That depends

on what you mean by ‘normal’. Genetic surgery could revert you to human. Maybe. If you are, uh, lucky. Your body, however, was fundamentally re-templated off of a local *lepus callotis*—the local species of hare—during your first encounter with a rift-traveler; it may be impossible to fully recover your original genetic code.”

“But my growth; it’ll stop?”

The alien’s double brow furrowed in an attempt to mimic the human expression of confusion. “Such was not my goal,” he said. “Rather, I have installed blockers preventing you from accessing the rift systems beyond a certain energy level. Again, the changes in both your DNA and your cellular endosymbiotic parasites are difficult to isolate. But damage can be ... ameliorated.”

Randall smiled, thinly, despite himself.

“You’re protecting the rift from me,” he said.

“Protecting?”

“Making sure I don’t go on a revenge-spree.”

The alien blinked four more times before answering.

“Yes,” he said simply. “But, perhaps later, we can address...”

“Don’t bother,” Paul said. “He’s outgrown revenge.” The large mouse walked in, looking healthier and better than Randall had seen him in years. Nearly ten feet tall but adjusted for it with recent medical assistance, he smiled as his husband received his treatment.

“You want me to be able to outgrow buildings?” Randall asked.

Paul came over and sat next to his bed. His white-furred fingers squeezed Randall’s hand, appreciatively. “Let’s just say I don’t mind looking up at you, now and then.”

The hare smiled. “Size-queen.”

Paul laughed.

Their home in Legacy had been waiting for them. Those changed by the rift system, those colossi and anthros, still lived the lives they had since after the chaos had begun, but there was hope.

Randal’s alien allies weren’t big on trading technology with a race so primitive but they were willing to help address a few problems. From what Randall had seen on the news, they were working with the United Nations to try and come up with some rudimentary not-quite-an-alliance to cover working with so backwards a people as those native to Earth.

“There we go,” the alien said, using his best approximation of human colloquialism. “Continue to sit for the next hour. The nano-surgery will spread the update to your cells over the next seventeen minutes. Our monitoring

systems will let us know if we need to adjust anything.” With that, he left.

Paul leaned in against Randall’s side. His white fur contrasted sharply to his husband’s tawny brown.

“It’s been ... an experience,” he said.

“I’m just happy you’re alive,” Randall answered.

“Oh, such sweet talk: a regular romantic, you are...”

Randall chuckled and leaned his head against his huge husband’s elbow. Paul wouldn’t be growing anymore; none of the colossi would. But his body would never look completely human again. He was adjusted for his large size, now. At least he wouldn’t have crippling and debilitating side-effects, going forward. He rose and opened the living room curtains to look out across the expanse of their small town on the outskirts of Seattle.

“Do you think this will work out?” he finally asked.

The sun was setting in the west as Randall looked up to meet Paul’s eyes.

“You mean the world? Or just us?”

Paul just smiled in return.

“Both?” the hare replied after a long minute. “Honestly, change is never easy. Emotional roller-coasters change everything and we’ve been riding them for years.”

The mouse nodded, his long, bare tail swishing idly as he considered Randall’s words.

“But that’s just the rest of the world,” the hare continued. He looked up and met his husband’s eyes with his. He smiled, tiredly, and nodded. “As for you and me, I’d say we’re big enough to handle anything the universe can throw at us.”

Paul smiled.

Hand-in-hand, the two rested against each other and watched the sky’s yellows and oranges fade into deep reds and finally midnight blue beyond the distant lights of the city.

The End