

WATERLINES

Suzanne Palmer

***Finder*, the first novel by Hugo-Award-winning author Suzanne Palmer, was recently published by DAW Books. *Undertow*, her second novel, should be out next spring. Fortunately, Suzanne still has time to pen shorter works like this amazing new novella about the uneasy coexistent of multiple intelligences and their . . .**

WATERLINES

“Ray!”

Lena stuck her head through the open door of his office. She was wearing her neon green parka, the cowl pulled tight around the oval of her face. Her cheeks were turning a bright, angry red, and he could almost feel cold still radiating off her; she must have come straight here from outside. “Something’s coming up!” she said. He paused his tablet, midway through yet another grant form, and frowned at her. He hadn’t even gotten to requisitions, security logs, or his post-lunch pot of coffee yet, much less feeling ready for guessing games. “What’s come up?” he asked.

“No, *coming up*,” she said. She stepped in and dumped his weather gear on the extra chair in one corner of the small room. “I couldn’t find your boots.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked. It was a balmy -10C out, not counting wind chill, and as much as she seemed immune to the weather, he had no intention of leaving the station for anything short of an emergency until it was at least single-digits positive.

“A walker,” she said.

“What? It’s too early for them to be moving south. Where is it going?”

“It’s about three kilometers out and heading right toward Jettyrock.”

“Shit,” Ray said, barely managing to keep his coffee from hitting the floor as he scrambled out of his chair and around his desk to grab his gear.

Lena raised an eyebrow. “Why are you wearing your boots indoors?” she asked.

“In the six standard years, one hundred forty-eight and a half days since I was assigned this post, my toes haven’t been warm even once,” he said. “It’s the only thing I envy the damned Yetis.”

He took the boots off long enough to pull on his thick, heated snowpants. Lena helped him get his coat on, then he followed her, feeling ten kilos heavier, into the hall and down toward Icebreak Station’s nearest surface door.

Lena had been on Erax ten years longer than him, and she’d probably be here another ten after he was gone. She should’ve been made the surface administrator instead of some middle-aged button-pusher whose career had permanently stalled one promotion (he liked to think) short of incompetence, but she’d flatly refused. She’d said she didn’t want to have to get along with people, which made her ideally suited to be his security chief, not to mention a friend.

"Who spotted it?" he asked.

"Kenna," she answered. "They're out doing soundings on the ice sheet and she picked it up."

Kenna was one of their small crew of xenobiologists, trying to catalog what tiny percentage of Eraxian life was within their reach. "Good," he said. "She's discreet."

"That's why I didn't call you over the station comms: too many eavesdroppers," she said. "But . . ."

"But?"

"Hudson was working tech on her detail."

Well, shit, he thought. "So half the southern pole is heading out onto the damned ice already?"

"Anyone that's awake and sober and can find their pants, yeah," she said. "We still have a head start on most of them, if you can get your ass moving."

"Get Firo and Firn and meet me at the rock. Put word out on the comms for everyone to stay the hell back or I'll set the dogs on them."

"Delighted to," Lena said, and took off at a run. He stepped through the inner door, grabbed goggles off the rack, then braced himself before opening the outer door and stepping into the wind. Tiny, high-velocity particles of ice stung at him, like bees of an angry winter god. This, as he reminded himself every morning in the mirror, is why he kept his beard.

He crunched along the packed snow path to the charging shed where he undocked a skiff and headed due north toward the edge of the ice sheet. It had only just begun its spring recession, and if it were any later he'd have had to worry about cracks and crevasses where the edge was starting to calve, but for now all the scans showed it solid up to where the hulking outcropping they'd named Jettyrock jutted into the bright blue water. At the height of summer, when the land briefly emerged from its smothering white cover, the rock stood freestanding off the shore, breaking the waves into a deafening spray. Right now, it barely touched the ocean. There had been winters where it had entirely vanished beneath the ice, to emerge again from the churning summer melt unscathed.

If there were ships, it would have been the perfect place for a lighthouse, but both the surface and the depths of the planet-circling sea were strictly off-limits by treaty with the alien Oceanics. *They don't talk to us, we don't talk to them*, he'd been told by the local SystemOps Liaison and at least a half-dozen others while they were transporting him down on a drop ship for the very first time. *They stay out of our way, and we stay way the hell out of theirs. The ocean is theirs and theirs alone. You need to cross? You take a fucking plane or an orbital hop. You wanna dip your toes in? Too bad. Just stick to the agreement, and everything will go smooth as ice.*

Ray blamed the cold for freezing what little curiosity he might once have had about the Oceanics right out of him. As it was, the three to five hundred humans on the planet's surface that he was responsible for made enough trouble on their own.

He was halfway to the waterline when Lena came up behind him; two gigantic gen-engineered balls of white fur were racing alongside her, leaving low contrails of kicked-up powder behind them as they easily kept pace with her skiff. There were a few other vehicles out, most behind them, a few ahead, but as everyone noticed the icedogs they fell back and let Ray and Lena go on alone. No one wanted to mess with a dog the size of a small bear and with the speed of a horse, especially when its circle of respect toward humans was very, very small.

He slowed as his skiff bumped over cracks and jumbled ice blocks, until it finally gave way up onto smooth stone. Lena pulled up and stopped behind him, and the dogs settled into the snow beside her, chests heaving and tongues hanging out,

looking pleased with themselves. “Now what?” she asked.

“We should call SystemOps for instructions,” a voice broke in on the channel. It was one of the many burdens of this place—because there were so few other mechanisms of oversight available to the surveillance-happy EarthGov, and no one, not even Ray, was trusted in their eyes—that their only comm system was public access.

It didn’t make him feel charitable with information toward them, in return. Which, he knew, was probably the attitude that got him stuck here to start with.

“I’m the surface admin,” Ray said. “When one of them leaves the surface for orbit, sure, I’ll call ’em. Until then, this is my responsibility.”

“But we’re not supposed to initiate contact—”

“I’m not initiating a damned thing,” Ray growled. “But I’m not going to run away and hide if they’ve suddenly decided they want to talk to *us*. Until we know how the hell this is going to go, everybody should stay off the comms unless you’ve got an emergency. That especially means you, Hudson.”

The dome-shaped head of the walker was cresting out of the water, mottled blue and purple with a living fuzz of tiny, thread-like ocean creatures Kenna’s team had dubbed aquamoss. Two bright lights were mounted on the front, the intensity enough to make Ray throw a gloved hand up to shield his eyes. Whether by coincidence, or because it noticed the gesture, the lights dimmed to a bearable glow.

He’d seen plenty of walkers before, but never up close. They came out onto the southern lands, outside the areas allotted to humans, when the ice melted enough to reveal the planet’s meager tundra. Sometimes traveling solo, sometimes in groups of up to a dozen, the walkers were a little over fifteen meters tall and vaguely humanoid in shape with spindly arms and legs and a thick oval torso, like leftover invader robots from some old Earth comic wandering a frozen wasteland. Scans suggested they were made of a composite ceramic polymer. Three wide fins were evenly spaced along their backs, some sort of propulsion units mounted at their bases, but beyond that basic configuration none looked quite the same as any other, and the more detail-oriented walker-watchers kept notes trying to track their appearances individually.

In addition to the aquamoss, greenish-blue star-shapes of various sizes dotted the robots’ larger surfaces, usually in clusters, with the occasional lone red that had been Kenna’s never-ending topic of excited conversation when she spotted her first one late the previous fall.

Typically the walkers moved upright, but a few would move horizontally with all four limbs on the ground. The admin before him had been a previously undiagnosed arachnophobe, and despite the number of legs being categorically wrong, eventually had to be transferred out on an emergency medical pass.

Aside from wild imaginations run amok, it was a peaceful, carefully separated co-existence.

Except a walker had just decided otherwise.

Ray let out a deep breath and watched the brief puff of warm air dissipate into the cold around his face. “What do you think?” he asked Lena.

“I think it’s bad news,” she answered. “But it also probably won’t be boring, so that’s something.”

“Anything like this ever happen before?”

“Not that I know of. At least not while I’ve been here. I mean, someone must’ve talked to them, somewhere along the line, because we have the treaty and all the damned rules about surveillance and surface traffic, but it must’ve been a long time ago.”

“You think I should have called SystemOps?”

“Naw. Fuck them,” she said. “Here it comes.”

The walker was rising out of the water as it climbed, until it stood on dry stone above the reach of the breakers. In its arms it carried a pod-shaped container. It set this down on the rock in front of it, and stood there unmoving, waiting. The icedogs crouched, growling low, but didn't either rush or give ground. "Good dogs. Now stay," he said, and patted each of them on the head in turn.

"If it steps on me, or crams me into a giant toothy maw, you're in charge," he told Lena.

"What if I refuse?"

"Then give the job to anyone except Hudson," Ray said, and, squaring his shoulders, he went out to meet the walker.

He wished he'd paid more attention to various first-contact news items and docos, over the years. *Should've at least left me a damned manual*, he thought, but when had he even looked at whatever they'd left him that wasn't immediate survival material?

When he was about a third of the way toward it, the walker crouched lower on its legs. If that was preparatory to a leap or some other hostile action, Ray figured he already didn't stand a chance—even if he dodged, the frigid waters would only buy him a very slightly less quick end—but he appreciated that it no longer towered quite so high over him.

He stopped about six meters from the walker. Slowly, it flexed one arm, and set a fist-sized sphere down atop the pod. There was a blue optical iris on the front of the sphere that blinked on, and the sphere uncurled six small legs of its own. *Okay*, Ray thought, *I'm starting to see the validity of the spider thing now.*

"You are Ray Landham in self, the surface administrator?" the sphere asked, almost as much statement as question, the strangely accented and lilting words still perfectly understandable anglero. Not the *Greetings, Human!* he'd expected at all, and that was as far as his expectations had gotten.

Ray cleared his throat against the cold, his lips dry. "I am," he answered.

"We are Ajr en Logo," the remote said. "There is a matter we must discuss. It is a breach of many protocols between our peoples that we are here, and while we have undertaken this action by our own choice, you have not so consented. Do you wish us to leave now?"

"What's in the pod?" Ray asked.

"The matter that brought us to you," the spider answered.

Well, Ray thought, *I'm in charge, so to hell with anyone who doesn't like my choices.* "Then I suppose we should discuss it," he said.

Behind the remote, the walker stood up and stepped backward with a fluid, almost noiseless grace, moving down and away until it disappeared again beneath the roiling waves.

"We will require privacy," the remote said, when the walker was gone. "And you will need to summon your physician, or someone who has a knowledgeable practice with your dead."

Ray glanced at the pod, which was, now that he thought about it, very much coffin-sized, and barely kept himself from taking a step back. Instead, he tapped his comms, knowing everyone within the hemisphere was listening. "Lena, can you go get a skitter with a lift arm?"

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"No, probably not," Ray answered, his eyes on the robot spider, as it single-eyed him back.

* * *

There wasn't an official morgue on-planet, but after a rash of closely spaced suicides-by-weather several winters previously, Dr. Noyes had insisted on a small one

being set up; Ray had requisitioned a small food storage shed and had it dropped just behind Icebreak Station. Originally designed to keep perishable food frozen through the summer, it had worked well for keeping their occasional corpse on ice until either someone claimed it them and paid the transport fee or, far more often, they got permission to incinerate the remains and forget they ever existed.

Lena had the pod moved there, and two of the more reliably untalkative station maintenance workers, Pine and Fairbanks, helped her and Ray wrestle it through the door. For its size, it wasn't too heavy. Heavy enough for a body, though.

It took less than an hour, which was more than enough time for rumors to fly through the admin station and nearby Snowtown. Ray's favorite was that the Oceanics had gifted him a pod filled with gold and diamonds as part of some nefarious smuggling scheme that was being embellished with further imaginative details by the minute, and none of which seemed to take into account how much more cleverness and motivation it would require than he had ever in his life demonstrated. His least favorite was the rumor that the pod contained a body, because of course it did.

Dr. Noyes was already at the morgue, breathing in his hands to warm them up. His hair was disheveled, and his thick lab coat was on inside-out. "What do we got?" he asked.

The remote, which had ridden the pod quietly in, stood up on its multiple legs and turned its eye to him. Dr. Noyes jumped backward, crashing into the cart of instruments behind him. "Holy fucking hell!" he shouted.

"We've got a body we need you to examine," Ray said, reaching out to steady him, and catching the faint, stale odor of alcohol on the man's breath.

"Three bodies," the remote corrected.

". . . Three?" Ray asked.

"Two are very small."

"Children?!" Noyes exclaimed.

"I apologize," the remote said. "I do not mean children. I mean incomplete bodies, only small portions thereof."

"Uh . . ." Noyes said, pointing at the remote. "What *is* that, and why is it talking?"

Lena crossed her arms across her chest and leaned back against a wall. "We woke you up, didn't we?"

"Yes," he said. "You know I get a lot of late-night calls. I came right over when you summoned me. Now someone please tell me what the fuck is that thing? Something new sent down from orbit to torment us?"

"This is Azure um, ah, Logi . . ." Ray said.

"I am a remote unit of Ajr en Logo," the remote said. "We dwell in the ocean."

"No shit?" Noyes perked up. "I thought we weren't allowed to talk to you. Who's in trouble, you or us?"

"The only people in trouble at the moment are the bodies in the pod," Ray said. "As far as I know we're not missing anybody."

"No reports of missing workers from any of the mining camps, or unsolved disappearances from the permanent settlements here in the south for at least eight years," Lena said. "Have to double-check with the north, but they haven't reported anyone gone on a one-way hike either. Wrong season up there."

"A one-way hike?" the remote asked.

"We get people who walk off into the snow to suicide, particularly during the sunless weeks at mid-winter, but eventually we find their bodies when the ice thaws," Ray explained. "I suppose that must seem odd."

"Darkness is also a problem for some of our people," the remote answered. "It is a constant oppression year round in the depths, and affects some more than others. We adapt as best we can, but we did not evolve for the darkness."

Noyes blinked. "But you're robots," he said.

"This is a remote extension to facilitate this conversation," the remote explained. "We are both a biological and artificial people. My bio self is Ajr, and my constructed self is Logo. We are together Ajr en Logo. We remain not far from this location, below the water surface so that we are not conspicuously present."

"Huh," Ray said.

"Some kind of techno-symbiote life? Did we know this?" Dr. Noyes asked.

"I figured they had to be biological, anyway. Who else would build the robots to start with? But can we focus here, folks? Bodies, remember?" Lena looked to the remote. "What can you tell us, before we open it?"

"The bodies are individually sealed in sterile vacuum bags, and have been kept at well below freezing for the sake of what preservation was possible. The first two spent some time in the water before we discovered them. We assumed the cause of death to be drowning, and for obvious reasons—and the extremely degraded condition of the bodies—we looked no further. We estimate they had been in the water for ten to fifteen days each," the remote said. "The first was found about four of your standard months ago, the second two. The third was only in the water for a day when we found it, and this was two days ago. It has changed our perception of the nature of the deaths."

"How so?"

"You should observe for yourselves," the remote said.

"Now that's the first thing that's made sense," Noyes said. He pulled some nitrile gloves off the cart behind him, and snapped them on as he looked back and forth between Ray and Lena. "Anyone want out before I crack the pod open?"

"Uh, yeah, me," Ray said. "Lena, you staying?"

"Yep," she said. "Could be interesting."

"Take this thing with you," Noyes said, and pointed at the remote.

"I may be of use in answering questions," the remote said.

"No. You creep me the fuck out, so you go," he said. "If I have questions, I'll ask when I'm done."

"I'd rather this situation stay off the comms," Ray said. "Call me when you're done, and we'll talk details face to face."

"Okay," Noyes said. He glanced toward Lena. "I don't suppose someone could bring me some coffee?"

Lena snorted and didn't budge from where she was.

". . . Okay then, fine," Noyes said. He grabbed a scalpel from the cart behind him and brandished it in one fist. "Things you can't unsee in five, four, three—"

Ray bailed out quickly, the remote on his heels. "Uh," he said, looking down at the remote, "I guess we should go to my office?" He didn't add: so I can get out from under his hundreds of kilos of snowgear, except his boots.

Further thoughts about what he should do next were interrupted by Dutton racing around the corner, weaving erratically. "Ray. RAY!" he shouted, coming up so close to Ray he was afraid the man might knock him over. "What the hell is going on? Woodside says we're being invaded!"

"Not that I know of," Ray said.

Dutton's pupils were tiny pinpricks. "Ray, be careful, there's a giant spider behind you," he whispered, loud enough that he might as well have yelled it.

Ray looked around, then shrugged. "You're hallucinating it, Dutch," he said. "There's nothing here. Maybe you should go back to Snowtown and sleep off whatever you're on. Unless you want me to call Dr. Noyes and have you officially, on-the-record chem-scanned?"

". . . Okay, no, I'm good, Ray. I'm good," Dutton said, and backed away down the hall, his eyes roving between the spider and Ray's face. When he reached a corner,

he turned and fled.

“That was a strange and incomprehensible exchange,” the remote said.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Ray said.

“We do not know the any of it,” the remote said.

“Dutton is an addict,” Ray said. “His family has enough money that instead of him ending up in a labor camp for it, they had him posted here, hoping a year or two in the deep-freeze would clear up any desire for drugs. Instead, while utterly useless at nearly every job we assign him—at the moment he’s laundry coordinator, which I used to think no one could fail at—he seems talented at finding ways to brew up new chemicals to feed his high. It’s only a matter of time before he hits on something sufficiently fatal that we can’t save his ass in time, but if we’re lucky he won’t take half the settlement with him when he does.”

There was silence for a while as the remote followed him through the short corridor to the administrative wing. Ray noted the faint peek of dim light from the top of the arched ceiling; the snow must have finally melted enough for hints of sunlight to leak through. Spring indeed. Soon he’d be busy with the inevitable leaks.

At last the remote spoke up. “There have been incidences of substance need, as you describe it, among our people, but we have found that it is at least as much driven by our life code as habit and circumstance, and correcting that component often, if not always, resolves the matter. Is that not an option among your people?”

Ray reached the end of the tube and paused to listen. He could hear people ahead, outside his office. “We don’t modify ourselves that way,” he answered, trying to think how to reach the safety of his desk without having to engage a small mob. “I mean, you start tinkering with your fundamental genetic code, where does it end? Not being yourself, maybe not even being human anymore.”

“There are your people you call Yeti,” the remote said. “They are very modified.”

“Naw, but they’re not human,” Ray said. “Humanoid, yeah, and there’s probably a fair bit of our code that’s been added in there to make them useful, but it’s not the same thing. They’re not very smart—they can’t even talk—but they’re sturdy and useful as hell. Look, I don’t want to be rude, but do you mind if I put you in my pocket? There’s a crowd of people ahead and it’d be a lot easier if I don’t have to explain you.”

“I am uncertain of the concept ‘pocket’ in this context,” the remote said.

“I’ll show you,” Ray said, and picked up the remote. He’d expected it to be cold, but it was slightly warm to the touch. Its legs retracted into its body as soon as he lifted it off the floor, and he slipped it into an outer pocket of his parka, already thinking how that would look in the history records: *worst diplomatic faux pas ever*.

And he’d respond, see, should’ve left me a manual.

Taking a deep breath, he turned the corner and found seven people waiting for him, all very carefully on the far side of the lobby from where his office was. Lying on the floor directly in front of his door, head on his paws but eyes intent on the crowd, was Firo.

I owe you one, Lena, he thought with gratitude.

The icedog raised his head as Ray walked around the corner, and he went straight up to the dog and used both hands to scratch his head between his ears. “Good dog,” he said.

“Ray!” Hudson—*of course* Hudson would be first—separated himself from the crowd and dared a few steps toward him until the low rumble of a warning growl from Firo stopped him in his tracks. “What the hell is going on? What did the Oceanics give you?”

“It brought us back our dead,” Ray said. That much was gonna get out regardless. “I don’t know who, but not anybody from the south. I don’t have any answers yet.”

“What did it say to you?” Ella Peakham called out from behind Hudson. She was one of the southern mining safety inspectors, and not someone he’d ever seen smile.

Now was no exception. "What did it tell you?"

"It said, 'Here, take your dead back, stop dropping them on our heads,'" Ray answered.

"Really?"

"No," he said. "But it might as well have. I'll make an announcement over the comms when we know more, or if we get an identification. In the meantime, I have work to do, and none of you need to be here in Admin. Go home."

Without thinking, he wrapped his hand around the sphere in his pocket, almost taking it out and rolling it toward the crowd for Firo. At the last second he remembered that it wasn't, after all, one of the icedog's toy balls. *Okay, now that would be the worst faux pas*, he thought.

"Stay," he told the dog instead, smiled brightly at the group who unanimously scowled back at him, and slipped into his office and shut the door.

Inside, he pulled the sphere out of his pocket and set it on his desk, then hauled himself out of his parka and snow pants. On those rare occasions he had official visitors from offworld, he'd wondered what sort of impression they'd take from his office. His desk was a battered, decrepit thing that looked like it had fallen through the atmosphere and barely survived; that he kept it—had, in fact, moved it up here from the bowels of one of the storage bunkers—he thought made people uncertain about his own stability, and he liked it for just that reason. His chair, on the other hand, was a top-model executive smartchair that mostly understood exactly what he needed to be comfortable from one moment to the next, and it said: *I am the authority here*. He liked that too.

Most revealing, visitors must think, would be the wall-sized panoramic screen of the surface of Earth's Moon, clearly shot from atop the dome of one of the lunar cities, that slid slowly in repetitive circles with a half-ghost Earth, not far from the horizon, the only definitive thing to mark that the image was repeating. It spoke volumes of love for a left-behind home, a stark nostalgia that must, stuck here on this icy world far away, hit like a blow. Ray expected it made his visitors sympathetic, slightly pitying, slightly smug at feeling they knew a corner of his heart.

The truth was the panorama had been left behind by his arachnophobic predecessor, and he had never been to Earth's Moon, nor taken the disaster tour of Earth itself.

What, though, would an ocean-dwelling alien make (or mis-make) of any of it? It was beyond Ray to even attempt a guess, knowing as little as he did about his guest. That the remote seemed to know a lot more about him was discomfiting. "You speak anglo very well," he said, as the remote rose up on its extruded legs and did a perfect, slow, three-sixty spin around before the optical iris settled on him again.

"We speak many of the diasporic human dialects," the remote said, "as well as a few of the Earth-remaining, and a number of alien languages."

Ray raised an eyebrow. "All that, while living under an ocean?"

"There is always much to do in the manner of work, but collectively little in the way of entertainment," the remote said. "We regret this awkward fact, but it is a truth that your open channel programming is far, far more interesting than any of our own. Especially popular among the dwellers is *'Starlost!'*"

Ray laughed, and dumped himself into his chair. "An alien culture, learning everything there is to know about humanity by watching our vid operas. That seems . . . fitting, I guess. You call yourself dwellers?"

"Some of us," the remote answered. "Some drift the world ocean, some dwell in the deep cities, some do both. It is a matter of lifestyle: solitude and exploration, or gregariousness and stability. Neither is a perfect life."

"I take it you're a drifter, by that description," Ray said.

"Yes. One advantage of independence is the ability to make poor or unpopular

decisions that you are willing to own the outcomes for, such as approaching you.”

“Easier to ask for forgiveness than permission?” Ray said.

“That is a wise summation,” it said.

“So, you—the you I’m speaking to—you’re Ajr? And your robot is Logo?”

“We are both,” the remote said. “Mostly, it is Ajr who speaks directly, but when Ajr is occupied, Logo will speak. You have spoken to both, but we speak with one voice. That is plain, yes?”

No, Ray thought. It was confusing as hell. *But hey, aliens, right? At least we’re not stuck trying to communicate through interpretive dance.*

“So okay, I guess I get that,” Ray said. “While we’re waiting on Dr. Noyes to come give us the bad news, anything you want to talk about? I feel like I should offer to get you something to eat, but obviously that’s pointless, since you’re not actually here. And I don’t even know *what* your people eat.”

“We have aquatic gardens, which are frames that float below the water’s surface, where the turbulence is reduced and the temperature more stable but sunlight is still able to penetrate. There is a full engineered ecosystem in those frames, and we sustainably harvest what we need from them. It is one of the many tasks of the drifters.”

“Are these frames enormous rectangles, couple of kilometers long, maybe a third as wide?” Ray asked.

“Yes.”

“We’ve detected them as geometric areas of unusual biological density, usually clustered near the equator, but spreading out when the waters are warmer. No one knew what they were.”

“Our farms,” the remote said, “It is—”

Whatever the alien was going to tell him, it was lost to the sound of a loud bark. Then Lena and Noyes crowded into Ray’s office. Firo tried to follow, but there was no room, so he sat down again mournfully on the floor. The lobby behind him was deserted.

Both Lena and Noyes looked drained. Noyes rubbed at his chin for a moment, then fixed his gaze directly on the remote. “Okay, I have a couple of questions. First, did your people do anything to the bodies before you brought them to us?” he asked.

“No,” the remote said. “Other than a cursory examination before sealing them in bags, everything you have observed is how we found them.”

“Where were they found?” Noyes asked.

“Here, hang on,” Ray said. He tapped at the moonscape, and it switched over to a map of Erax.

One of the remote’s legs stretched out impossibly long and tapped the map. “Approximately here, I believe,” it said. “Our maps are three-dimensional representations of the ocean, and do not tend to concern the land above except to mark the ebb and flow of the ice.”

The spot was along the south coastline, west of Icebreak Station and Snowtown, about two hundred kilometers east of Dunfroze. There was no one living anywhere on that long stretch in between, nor any current or recent mining camps or permit grants.

“And how did you find them?” Noyes asked.

“The first was an unlikely coincidence. We have some . . . equipment, the nature of which is irrelevant and not of your concern, in a zone not far from the southern water-edge. It had been underperforming, so a drifter went to examine it. They encountered the remains not too far from there, caught up under the ice shelf. They called in to our local group for advice, and we suggested bagging it until we could determine the proper thing to do. This was done. The drifter effected a temporary repair on the equipment and determined we should return every twenty days or so to check on it

until a more permanent repair could be undertaken in a warmer season. This is how the second body was discovered two of your month-units later, in the same location, and in much the same condition as the first."

"And the third?"

"We—Ajr en Logo in selves, not the collective of drifters—discovered it, when the temporary fix failed sooner than anticipated and we went out to repair it."

"So you decided to bring all three bodies here," Ray said.

"Yes. There had been ample, unproductive discussion prior to finding the third body, with no resolution. The third body altered the considerations."

"I wouldn't have found anything odd with the first two bodies if you hadn't brought us the third," Dr. Noyes said. "But I saw what you saw, and why you brought them here, though I don't understand what I saw at all. Damn but I need a drink."

Noyes got up, started rummaging through the cabinets along Ray's office wall. "You must have something in here," he said. "Everyone has a secret stash."

"Well, I don't," Ray said.

"Bullshit. It's the only way any of us stay sane." Noyes studied the room, looking for hiding places, then turned suddenly and pointed at the remote. "One last question: why did you trust us, and come here?"

"We do not trust you, Dr. Noyes. We do not know you," the remote said. "But we have spent lifetimes listening to the humans here on our surface, and the last six years listening to Ray Landham in self, and it was our call to trust him with this, to what extent we can afford the risk of trusting any of your people."

"Trust me with what?" Ray asked.

Lena let out her breath, and leaned forward in her chair, putting her chin in her hands on the desk. "Murder," she said. "Something calculated, something complicated."

Ray pointed to a lower shelf. "Bottle's behind the five-year service award plaque," he said to Noyes. "Explain, and pass it around."

* * *

Noyes, after taking a good two-thirds of what was left in the bottle for himself, walked Ray through his findings in gloriously gory detail, with photos, holographic imagery, and other scans, then handed Ray a datachip. "DNA sigs," he said. "Obviously we couldn't get a visual identification. Lots of little nibbly critters in the water, even this cold. The sigs didn't match anyone in my files, but you have access to planet-wide and historical records."

With that, he slunk off somewhere else, probably back to his room by way of a visit to Dutton for a hit of something stronger than Ray's now-empty bottle. Lena watched the door close, then studied Ray with the chip lying in his open palm like he wasn't sure it wouldn't sting him.

"It's my job to be the paranoid one," she said, "so if you haven't thought of this already, I'm thinking it for you: whoever killed those men—and it could be anyone here, even you or me for as much as the other of us knows—went to some trouble, and they might be looking for hits on their victims in the datasphere. Consider how you want to play that before you just plug that chip in for a search."

"Yeah," he said. He had thought of it, and it was making him deeply unhappy.

"Also, everyone on the planet knows by now a walker visited us. So you'll need a good explanation of why."

"Yeah," he said again.

Lena stood with a groan and stretched with her hands against the small of her back. "I gotta get Firo back to the kennels and get both the icedogs fed," she said. "I dunno how much of an appetite I've got after that—gotta say I never actually wanted to know what someone looks like once all their skin has been chewed away—but I'm going to shower and then head over to Snowtown and try to get something down,

or I won't sleep tonight. You should do the same."

When she didn't move, he slipped the datachip into his pocket. "I will," he said, "but I'm gonna give you a head start because the moment I walk in the door everyone in Snowtown is gonna be there shouting at me for answers, and I don't think they'll be happy with the few I have."

Lena nodded and left, closing his door behind her. Ray leaned back in his chair, rubbing at his beard, and considering. All of this was way outside the bounds of the very boring stability he prized in his job.

"I am sorry to have been the carrier of this news," the remote spoke up, and Ray startled in his chair; he'd forgotten it was there, it had not spoken or moved in so long.

"It wasn't you who dumped the bodies in the ocean," Ray said. "Noyes said the holes were something that cut their way out of the bodies from the inside, something mechanically sharp that must have been implanted while the victim was still alive. I don't suppose you've found anything else floating around there?"

"No," the remote said. "A friend drifter, Eas en Ka, is following the underwater currents from the place of origin, but so far has not found anything that does not belong. Given the small estimated size of the cutters versus the volume of the ocean, it is a task with very long odds of success."

"If any at all," Ray said. "All right. I think I have a plan."

He stuck the datachip reader into his office system, sorted through the files Noyes had given him—carefully not opening any of the graphics from the autopsies—and found the profile for Dead Body Number Two. He dragged it through the data filter to remove its tagging to the other results, so that all he had was a basic DNA/blood chem analysis. Then he compressed it and opened a channel to the orbital satellite to relay to SystemOps. "Request identification for unknown drowning victim," he said. "Send usual data, log, next of kin, etc. Medium priority only."

Gritting his teeth, he committed the message and hit send.

The remote had watched him. "You chose the second body only."

"Because the third body is recent enough that someone might fear we found the evidence we found, and the first body, if you hadn't bagged it, should have been long gone by now," Ray said. "If we get data back on one, it might tell us something about the other two without raising suspicions. So from now on, as far as everyone is concerned, your people brought us back one body and immediately left again. No one other than Lena and Dr. Noyes needs to know you're even here."

"I am, to all intents and purposes, not 'here,'" the remote said. "And in fact, Ajr in self is in need of sleep, and Logo in self has some tasks to do, so unless you wish us to withdraw our presence entirely, we will disconnect this remote until further communication between us is necessary. Is there a place we can safely store this remote while it is unmindeed?"

Ray looked around, then sighed and kicked open the deep, long-vacant file drawer built into his desk. "In here?" he asked.

"That will be amply sufficient, thank you," the remote said, and leapt nimbly down into the empty drawer. "If you have a need for us, please shake this unit gently and we will re-engage."

"Okay, thanks," Ray said.

It retracted its legs and, a moment later, the optical iris dimmed and then closed.

"Nighty night," Ray said, and closed the drawer, thumbing the security tab so that it could only be unlocked with his bioprint. He didn't know if it could be opened from the inside, or if anyone had ever had reason to ask that question. *It's because I locked an alien in my desk*, he could imagine himself saying, *and I didn't want it to feel trapped. I explain it all in my book*, "A Beginner's Guide to Being the Worst To Other Sentient Species."

Feeling he had his future claim to expertise well in hand, he left his office and trekked through the half-kilometer-long connecting corridor between Icebreak Station and Snowtown proper.

Snowtown was the largest permanent settlement on Erax, with a current population of ninety-one people, counting himself. One hundred forty kilometers due east was Chilltown, with its forty-three people, and Dunfroze was nearly six hundred kilometers west across a wide bay with nineteen. Most of the rest of the resident population—a hundred and two of it—was up in the northern hemisphere. Also on the surface at the moment there were three mining landers in the South and two in the North, which had registered work crews of eighteen people each, not counting however many Yeti they'd also hauled along to work.

When he walked into the dining hall, his first impression was that absolutely everyone on the planet had crowded in to wait for him. But when he pushed his way to the front of the room and all those faces with their many expressions turned toward him and stilled, he guessed it was probably closer to around sixty. There were five people he recognized from Chilltown and two Northies. Never before had people much cared when he entered a room, and the effect of a loud crowd suddenly becoming deadly silent was unnerving.

He had remembered to grab a comm-clip from his office before coming in, and he double-tapped it where it sat on his shirt near his collarbone to turn it on. It would carry his words to the other settlements all over the planet. And apparently under the ocean, he reminded himself. Did he need to think harder about what he said from now on?

"Okay, everyone, hello," he started. "I'm certain you're not here for the meatloaf, so I'll get right to it: as you know, one of the Oceanics' walkers made a brief contact with us earlier today. It brought us a pod that contained a set of human remains. We spoke briefly, and then it returned to the ocean."

He could almost feel the exhalation move through the crowd at that confirmation.

"Dr. Noyes conducted what autopsy was possible given the highly degraded condition of the body and determined it was most likely that the victim drowned. We're still working on identification. If any of you here discover you are not here, please personally report to me immediately that you are missing."

Everyone stared at him. *Okay, either not funny or over their heads*, he decided, and sighed. "Any questions?"

In the end, other than a demand from the kitchen staff that he retract his meatloaf crack, none of the questions were unexpected. It was clear that most of the people were far more interested in what he could tell them about the walker than anything to do with the body.

"It spoke anglero very well," he answered for the umpteenth time. "It brought the body back because it assumed our customs for our dead were different than their own, and it was a matter of respect. The conversation was very brief, and no, they did not divulge anything about themselves, their planet of origin, their underwater civilization, nor"—he eyed Sal Lancaster particularly as he repeated this—"anything about underwater robot sex. If there are no *new* questions, I would like to express my sincere regret for my earlier flippancy toward the hard work of our kitchen staff, and sit down and enjoy some of the very tasty meatloaf."

At that, his stomach growled so loudly he was sure it was audible across all of Erax. It was enough for the crowd to mostly relent, some leaving and others forming up into clumps to discuss things, and he was able to walk to the table at the back where Lena was sitting with an extra tray of food already out, an overturned bowl over his plate keeping it warm. Only two people stuck with him, and managed to squeeze in to either side of him on the bench.

"I'm going to eat," Ray declared. "You two wanna talk, that's fine, but if you keep me from my food, you're getting booted out into the snow in your birthday suits. Got it?"

"Got it," Hollie Goodman said. She put her chin in one hand and stared at him as he stuffed a large forkful of synthetic meat into his mouth. "So, yes/no question: did you get the sense you were talking to a machine, or to something alive?"

"That's not a yes/no question," Lena said, pushing the last of her own food around on her plate with the tip of her knife.

Goodman glared at her. "Okay, fine, did it sound like a machine talking?"

Ray shrugged.

"Did it sound like something alive?" she persisted.

Ray shrugged again, then swallowed. "It sounded like an alien. How do I know what an alien machine sounds like versus an alien non-machine?"

"Did it tell you its name?"

Ray stabbed another chunk of meatloaf and dredged it through sauce. "Bob," he said, and ate it.

"Fuck you, Ray Landham," the other man said, a Northie named Ron Hill. "This is why you are absolutely unsuited for this job—you don't take anything at all seriously."

"That's not true," Lena said. "Pretty sure he takes everything seriously. Except maybe you."

Ray managed to keep a straight face. "Look," he said, "this place? Is the ass end of nowhere with 83 percent of its population either starting, at the height of, or unsuccessfully trying to quit some addiction, and if you discount those few scrambleheads who actually love the solitude and cold and the *science*, the rest are either here because they embarrassed their rich-ass families, pissed off the wrong people and needed a place to hide, or are fleeing justice for a crime. And you'd be surprised just how precisely I can account for where nearly every single person on this planet fits into those numbers and why."

Hollie glared. "And you, Ray? Which of those categories do you fit into?"

"I'm a career civil servant," he answered, "so it's probably safest to assume all of the above. Was I the most qualified person to handle the first contact in generations with the Oceanics? Hell no, but then no one ever expected this to happen. My job is seeing that the mining corps stay in their quotas and don't try to gut the entire planet when no one's looking, not too many of you freeze yourselves to death in a drunken stupor, and everyone has crunchy biscuits and toilet paper when they need them. And I'm damned good at that, for all the appreciation I don't get. You know how many times there were catastrophic environmental failures that took out whole towns here, during the last five administrators? Nine. Two were far enough out that no one got to them in time. Go look it up. While you do, consider cutting me a fucking break. Some poor bastard drowned out there, and I wish people cared about *that*."

The moral superiority card seemed to be the right move, because Hollie stood up and stalked away, her face red. Ron watched her go, his expression inscrutable, then got up and followed without a word.

"He didn't come down here just for this?" Ray asked Lena when they were out of earshot. The few authorized airskip pilots weren't inclined to take people for unauthorized joyrides off the twice-daily pole-hop schedule.

"Naw, he and Hol have a thing going," Lena said. "Hill and Hol. Hah! They're walker-watchers, and they were occupied when this morning's visit went down, so they're both pissed at missing it."

There were a number of people on Erax besides Sal Lancaster with an unhealthy obsession for the Oceanics' robots, though he hadn't known Hollie was one of them. It was mid-autumn in the north, and walker activity would have begun to diminish there; he wondered how many relationships were founded among the watchers by

one or both parties looking for seasonal bunk space in the opposite hemisphere.

"Got it," he said. "Nothing left but to see if there's still ice cream, and get my sorry self off to bed before something else goes to shit today."

"This huge crowd? Ice cream's long gone," Lena said.

His heart sunk. "Ah, damn," he said.

". . . But I saved you some," she said, and picked a bowl up from somewhere out of sight on the bench beside her and set it in front of him.

"You're a genuine angel, Lena Lincoln," he said, and slid the bowl closer.

* * *

Morning brought dawn light from the small porthole-shaped skylight in the center of the sloped ceiling of Ray's quarters; he still wasn't used to it, after a long winter of snowcover and sunless weeks, and he sat up in bed and stretched and considered that his toes were warm, and if he just laid back down and went back to sleep they'd stay that way.

There was an orange light blinking on his link panel, which meant something urgent but not critical, which meant toes be damned he needed to get out of bed, but he had time for coffee first. He got dressed with regret, putting on a clean pair of thick socks and slipping his feet back into his boots, before carrying his half-full mug of coffee with him back to his office to see what was up.

Nothing new from SystemOps on identifying the body profile he'd sent up, and there seemed no point in rousing the remote just to tell them no news yet. The orange warning alert was a maintenance problem out at one of the coastal surface-to-satellite relays. There was a message from Ames, the mechanic in Chilltown. "It's the relay east of here, on Bone Point," Ames said. "Easy fix. One of the power cells blew, happens all the damned time, but I'm not getting signal from the relay itself, which probably means it took some of the charge and also needs swapping out. Which is also an easy fix, and I've got the parts, but it needs your admin code and a bioscan to bring the new one up and link it into the network, and since you can't reach it remotely until it's up, being a bit of a catch-twenty-two there, that means either you give me your code and mail me one of your fingers, and I am one step closer to my plan for world domination, or you haul your sad ass out there with me to reset it in person. It's a beautiful -28C with windchills out on the point today, if that helps you decide. Call me."

He expected it would still be at least a day or two before he got an acknowledgement, much less an answer, to his query to SystemOps. The official government manned station was on the very outskirts of Erax's solar system, just inside its heliopause, which was as close as the Erax treaty allowed a human military base, and they were busy caring more about the asteroid mining going full-swing out in their neighborhood than about some backwater in-system ice planet of limited strategic or economic value. Meanwhile, he counted it lucky that he'd made it to his office without having to wade through people demanding those same answers. A few more hours of the sun up, and they would come knocking.

The solution was obvious: get out and do something before he got trapped here. He put a call through to Ames in Chilltown.

Ames was the epitome of the cranky old antisocial mechanic—in other words, someone he'd felt an instant bond of brotherhood with—and when he'd finally met him in person, he'd expected some old gnomish shuffler with a gray beard and braid down to his kneecaps, but truth was Ames was a rotund kid young enough to be Ray's, if he'd ever bothered or been able to have any. The cognitive dissonance had been almost a physical blow, and even now, talking to him over the comms, he still was picturing that old man.

"Already got the parts in my skitter. It'll take me an hour and a half, maybe two to fix," Ames told him. "Take you two and a half just to get there, even if you leave right

now, so I'm going to have some coffee, you're gonna have some coffee, and we'll meet there in three. That cake for you?"

"Yeah. That's cake for me," Ray said. *That was okay.*

"Then it's it," Ames said, and hung up.

Chilltown was two-thirds of the way to Bone Point, and a smooth but long ride for Ray. For a half-second he considered commandeering an airskip, but a quick glance at the weather reports suggested the winds were shifting and strengthening, probably in preparation for sucking up some moisture off the top of the ocean and dumping it back on land as ice pellets, and Ray wasn't too proud to admit that he only tolerated flying under very favorable circumstances. Anyway, he liked the idea of some time alone with his thoughts. Or alone, anyway.

He left a message queued for Lena for when she woke up. "Going out to Bone to meet Ames and reset a busted relay," he said. "Back in about six-seven hours. Call me if we get any actual news from out-system."

His parka and snowpants were still where he'd dumped them the afternoon before, so he scooped them up and left his office, locking the door behind him just in case anyone decided to go snooping. As he pulled his thumb off the lock plate, he thought he heard a faint but insistent tapping from inside. "There's no news!" he shouted through the door, in case it was the remote, then trundled himself, his clothes, and a giant thermal mug off to the charging shed and his bright blue official Icebreak Station Surface Administration skitter.

A skiff would have been faster, but they were like riding in an open speedboat, not in the slightest bit proof against the weather. The tiny cabin of the truck-like skitter warmed up fast and would keep him dry, and it wasn't like he was in much of a hurry anyhow.

Out on the icepack, he could see the beauty that Lena loved Erax for: vast plains of smooth white that slowly crackled and frayed along the northern horizon where it met the thin, dark blue line of the ocean. In a few months, the ice shelf would have calved off a solid twenty kilometer chunk and retreated even further toward the pole, leaving a rock-strewn, scoured land that couldn't possibly sustain any living thing by logic, but which would nevertheless fill with a profusion of color as things took their brief moment of glory to flower before the feeble summer abandoned them again to the cold.

With the treaty injunction against the omnipresent surveillance that measured every tedious millisecond of human life everywhere else in the cosmos, Erax was one of the only wild places left where a person could be free. In summer it felt miraculous just to be alive, but Ray could never hold onto that raw joy, instead sinking with the land back into morose surrender. It wasn't that he felt alone here, but that he felt just as alone here as everywhere else he'd ever been.

But was that true? Ray wondered, as he headed uphill toward what would eventually turn into the shifting foothills of another massive rock jutting from the ice today, looming out of the water tomorrow. The ocean wasn't just a dark mirror reflecting back his own emptiness, but a curtain to another world full of giant robots, and the giant robots were full of alien people, and while they had always seemed like some distant, fantastical accessory of the landscape, they'd talked to him.

To me! he thought.

It was no less amazing than if the flowers had suddenly chosen to address him.

He was musing on this, zipping over one snowdune and down into the valley before the next, when he spotted something red in the snow. Slowing the skitter, he turned toward it, approaching it at a crawl. At last he stopped, pulled back on the parka he'd chucked over the seatback a solid hour earlier, and got out to investigate.

It was a red stuffed bear, sitting atop the snow. "What the hell?" he muttered out

loud, and bent to pick it up just as the snow all around him exploded upward into movement.

He was thrown to the ground as something heavy slammed into him from behind, pressing his face down into the hard-packed snow. Desperate for breath, he tried to get his arms under himself, to push himself up and away, but whatever was on top of him weighed more than he did. Relief, such as it was, came in the form of a sudden, sharp sting, and his body went utterly limp.

Hands rolled him over, and he tried to focus on his attackers. Six men . . . no, he realized. Two men in white parkas and masks, four Yeti with their white fur and grayish faces looming over him. One of the men was holding a short pole with a hypodermic needle affixed to the end.

"I'm sorry about this, Mr. Landham," the man with the stick said. "You've been a solidly mediocre and unambitious surface administrator up until now, made no trouble for us, but you shouldn't have talked to the waterfreaks, and if you were going to give out misinformation about how many bodies there were, you should probably have kept your doctor from diving so deep in Dutton's brews he forgot how to keep his mouth shut. I'm afraid you're being retired."

Ray worked his lips, but couldn't speak. The voice sounded faintly familiar, but he couldn't place it, couldn't get any hints from what little of the man's face he could see between mask and hood.

The man snapped his fingers and gestured to the Yeti. "Bring him," he said, and walked up and over the dune. Two Yeti approached him and each grabbed an arm, and they pulled him, not ungently, after.

Over the dune there was a low skiff, painted white with a shifting-pattern camouflage canopy over the bed. The Yeti dropped him on the floor at the back, as his attacker turned to his companion. "Deal with his truck," he said, "then meet me out on the ice."

Both disappeared from his line of sight. Moments later he heard the low rumble of his skitter as it pulled away, and the skiff he was lying on also began to move. The two Yeti jumped on and sat beside him, dangling their thick furry legs off the back. One bent down and stared at him with its deep, black-pupil eyes that were, to his surprise, remarkably human. It put a thick furry hand on his chest as the skiff jostled up and over the rough snow near the edge of the ice sheet.

Some while later another camouflaged skiff fell in behind them, catching up as they reached the ice sheet and slowed.

When they stopped, his Yeti jumped off and joined the others between the skiffs. "You four, get out the boremaker," his driver said, and the four Yeti lumbered through the snow to the rear skiff and together pulled off a large, metal device shaped like a giant drum.

"Is it charged?" his man asked.

The other man nodded, and they disappeared out of sight. Ray squirmed, trying to get his body to cooperate, and managed to loll his head slightly to one side. "Hey," he tried to say, and he could hear the word even though his lips felt like they'd been left behind somewhere in the snow. "Hey!" he shouted louder.

One of the Yeti returned and slung him over its back like a sack of potatoes, carrying him across the ice until one of the men gestured for it to put him down. Ray slumped over on his side as soon as the Yeti let go. From where he lay he could see the drum set up on the ice about fifty meters ahead, a thin curl of steam rising from it. The men and the other three Yeti all moved back from it, standing around Ray, as one activated a handheld remote and the rest threw their hands over their ears.

The noise was deafening, sonic boom and explosion all in one. The drum disappeared in a giant cloud of steam vented out one side, the vapor almost immediately freezing into snow and falling back to the ice pack. In a few minutes it had cleared,

and three of the Yeti moved in and hauled the drum back toward the skiffs.

His Yeti picked him up again and walked toward where the drum had been, and Ray could now see the crisp edges of a perfect hole. *How deep does it go?* he wondered, but he was afraid he knew the answer to that. *Three bodies found up under the ice sheet*, he thought. Now at least he knew how they got there.

The Yeti set him down about four meters from the hole, and stood there as the men came forward. “Yeti won’t throw you in themselves,” one explained to him, his voice still just naggingly out of reach of his memory. “They don’t understand killing. Makes no sense to them, wasting a living body.”

“Why me?” he managed to ask.

“You want us to explain it to you?” the second man asked, then grabbed Ray under his armpits and dragged him toward the hole. “Well, the real world doesn’t work that way. Eventually they’ll find your skitter in a crevasse, figured you crashed it and your body will turn up or it won’t. No one will really care. In a month, no one will even remember you were ever here. That’s all the explanation you get.”

The man dropped him at the edges of the hole, and Ray could see down to where it vanished into darkness, probably long before it reached the water. He tried to remember how thick the ice sheet was here, but he’d never really paid much attention to those kinds of details. *Kenna would know*, he thought.

Then both men put their hands on him and shoved.

Falling was terrible, and terribly brief before he hit the water like stone, and it folded over him and pressed him down into the dark. If he could get back up to the hole somehow, back to air to breathe, he’d only have a few minutes before the cold did its work anyway. And even that was beyond him, even if he suddenly got command of his muscles back; his parka had soaked up all the water it could hold and pulled him faster and faster down as if he was wearing an anvil around his neck. *I’m going to die*, he realized. *And I’m going to die incredibly pissed off.*

At least it would be over quickly.

The cold was like fire, and it crushed him, as if the water had wrapped him in a giant fist to squeeze out what little precious air his lungs had left. Dimly he realized he was being pulled sideways, and whatever was holding him was solid and unyielding against his weak, pitiful attempts to struggle.

And then there was dim light, and the water was falling past him, down and out and away, leaving him lying on a hard floor in shock, in his ten-million kilos of ice-cold wet clothing. *I’m imagining all of this*, he thought, closing his eyes, and gave up and took a breath, expecting the water to return and fill him and finish its job, but instead there was only the ragged sound of his own gasping.

Then there were hands on him, gently pulling off his sodden parka and clothes until he was lying there on the floor wearing nothing at all, and someone wrapped a warm blanket around him and he decided whoever it was he would love them forever, but he still wouldn’t open his eyes because then the illusion would break, and he would be dead.

“This will return heat to you,” a voice said. “Are you able to drink?”

He felt something against his lips and recognized it as some sort of straw. The liquid that came through it was warm, a little bitter, vaguely tasting of salt and the sea. After two sips, he began shivering violently, his body throwing off whatever chemical submission it had been held under to exert its own mindless chaos. Utterly spent, he sank into the comfort of a mindless place.

* * *

Ray awoke in a cocoon.

Maybe they are spiders after all, he thought muzzily, but he was warm and comfortable and didn’t feel constricted, so he decided spiders were okay.

He must have dozed again, because he gradually became aware that someone was nearby, touching his head, checking on him. He opened his eyes, and met those of the Oceanic.

"Are you acceptably warm?" the alien said.

What struck Ray, in that disorienting moment, was how human the alien looked. Then the alienness took over: the light gray fuzz that covered its skin, the large head and eyes, the weird blue fern-like things that projected backward from either side of its neck. Its body was thick, almost toddler-proportioned, except it was nearly as tall as he was.

"Uh," Ray said.

The alien tapped its chest with its long fingers, a pale membranous webbing in between them. "Ajr in self," it said.

"Ray," he answered. "Good to meet you in person."

"It is not ideal circumstances," the alien said.

"No," Ray agreed. "How did you know, to be here to save me?"

"We always listen," Ajr said. "Whoever damaged the relay does not use a signal we can hear, but we saw the activity near it when it went offline and could not track the source. When your human Ames in self called you to come reset it, we concluded it was intentional damage to lure you out. We tried to warn you, but we could not extricate the remote from your desk in time. So we came."

"Thank you," Ray said. "For saving my life."

The alien shook its head sadly. "I would say, in human words, 'no problem,' but in truth there will be difficulty that I have done so, especially with the dwellers deep below. I am sorry that this is so."

"Yeah. Same on my side, I'd expect." Ray looked around; they were in a small space, roughly cube-shaped, with rounded corners and a single wide, circular doorway. "Are we in one of your underwater cities now?" he asked.

"No," Ajr said. "We are within Logo."

Whoa! I'm inside a robot! Ray thought. When he got over his immediate joy in that, he asked, "So now what?"

"We are uncertain," Ajr said. "It has been six of your hours since we pulled you in from the water. Your mechanic Ames in self has reported that you never arrived, and your security person Lena in self has now contacted Chilltown for help in locating your vehicle. It is unlikely they will be able to do so until daylight tomorrow, as it has been driven into a crack in the ice sheet. What is it you would like to do?"

The first flush of anger—that they'd wrecked a perfectly good skitter without the slightest regard for the constant paperwork he had to do to get parts for them, keep them even occasionally maintained—hit almost like the wave of shakes had earlier, his entire body suddenly trembling with the desire to punch somebody many, many times. "Those absolute total fuckers," he said. "They threw me down a *hole*."

Ajr waited silently.

He didn't want to leave the comfort of the cocoon-thing, but he turned himself around and carefully pulled himself out of its warm, soft embrace. "I have no clothes," he remarked, crouching with his arms wrapped around his knees as soon as he was free.

"We have dried them for you," Ajr said, and as if on cue a small cubby opened up in one wall with his clothes inside, each piece rolled up as if into a tube. "Water-filled clothing is—"

"Yeah, yeah," Ray said, "I know. Had to get them off me. I understand. Hypothermia protocol. But, um, far too late as it is, if you could provide me with a moment's privacy—?"

"I apologize for not considering that need in advance," the alien said. It backed away, did something akin to a bow, then slipped out through the door.

Ray retrieved his clothes from the cubby, unrolling them to find they were not only dry but distinctly better laundered than they'd been in years. He pulled them on gratefully.

He had no doubts that when his skitter was found, even if Lena or Dr. Noyes had their suspicions because of the timing, eventually an official determination would be made that it was just a stupid accident. His body not turning up might slow that determination down, but his would-be murderers would still get what they wanted.

And if he went back, as if nothing had happened, at the very least they'd try again. At worst, they'd assume he'd told any number of people everything he knew, and the entire population of Icebreak Station, Snowtown, and Chilltown could be in danger. Even if he didn't particularly like most of them, he didn't wish serious harm on any of them either, and even if he'd thoroughly hated them all, they were *his* people, dammit.

"Uh, I'm done," he called toward the door, and the Oceanic peeked its head back in a few moments later.

"Have you considered?" it asked.

"I don't want my people to think I'm dead, but I don't want the murderers to know I'm alive," he said.

"It is your hypothesis that the disposal of your vehicle is intended to make your disappearance appear to be the result of a careless accident?" This time, when Ajr spoke, the words seemed to also come from the room around him, and Ray glanced up and around in confusion.

Ajr tilted its head to one side. "We ask together," it explained, and again the words echoed. At Ray's continued incomprehension, it added, "both Logo and I."

Okay, Ray thought. It was a stark reminder that there was complexity and alienness here not to be taken for granted. He wasn't sure he was even capable of understanding how the alien and the robot were connected, or what that would be like.

"Yeah," he answered.

"If the vehicle was not found, would that provide you with some additional time?" the double-voice asked.

"They'll find it as soon as it's light out, though," he said. "It's bright blue just to make it easy to spot."

"It could be arranged that it is not."

"Even at night, a walker would not go unnoticed," Ray said.

"It can be done without one," they said.

"How?"

"That is not a question I am able to answer," they said. "But if it could be done?"

"Do it," Ray said.

"I will make the call," the room-voice said, and this time Ajr's mouth did not move. Logo alone, then.

"You must be in need of food-drink," Ajr said. "We have found that our food-drink is biologically very compatible, nutrition-exchange fair, but taste-exchange poor. About the latter we can do nothing, but I will bring you what we have that you may find palatable. Also, Logo will extend you biological facilities, as I anticipate those are also needed."

The Oceanic left, and Ray eyed the room. Before he could open his mouth to ask, another small door slid open almost silently from the exact center of one wall, and a mechanical arm that looked like a giant, jointed spoon extended out.

Right. Biological facilities, Ray thought. Just in time.

The room-voice explained the function, and he followed the instructions while doing his best—which wasn't much—to preserve what little dignity he had left.

It was clear the room was designed to be usable at multiple orientations, from the padded cocoon sleeper that could be anywhere in the room, to the perfectly centered doorway and swiveling spoon-toilet. He'd spent a nauseatingly dull two years as a

junior clerk on a deep space station with no artificial gravity or spin at the start of his so-called career, and though the considerations here weren't the same, the experience had changed how he thought about physical spaces.

At least until he'd settled long enough on Erax to stop paying attention to door-frames and sharp-edged furniture and, apparently, mass-murderers out festering under his snow.

Ajr brought in a large foam cube with concave sides and set it on the floor, then returned with a small tray of bowls with high, inward-curving tops. The Oceanic gestured with two fingers toward the small, pale-green balls inside one of the bowls. "This is *kreh*. It is very nutritive, but . . . bland? Yes, that is your word. This other is *luf*, which has more flavor, and is high with proteins."

The third bowl was full of water. Ray immediately picked it up and guzzled down half of it, losing a carelessly large commission to his beard. *You'd think nearly drowning wouldn't make you thirsty*, he thought.

"If you are well with this food, we have things to attend to," they said. "We will need to secure the door as a safety measure and to ensure a stable pressure for you as we change depths, but please do not feel that you are trapped here. If you have questions, or are in need of anything, simply speak and we will respond when we are able."

"Thank you. For everything," Ray said. "I'm going to eat and then go back to sleep, if that's okay. You must be tired too."

"Yes," Ajr said. It nodded, then withdrew.

There was a pop and hiss as the door sealed. The Oceanic had said something about changing depths, and it struck him anew that he was underwater, and possibly very soon would be near the bottom of Erax's vast ocean. They knew so little about it.

Ray wished there was a window, then thought about his last view of the ocean and shuddered.

He picked up one of the balls of *kreh* and popped it in his mouth. It wasn't terrible-tasting, sort of like a cross between hummus and cottage cheese, but the texture was like eating a gummy eyeball. By contrast the *luf* were small, greenish-brown foodsticks that tasted more like a nutty fish jerky, and would definitely qualify as an acquired taste, but at least they had a nice, dry crunch to them.

When he'd eaten everything and finished the water, he crawled back into the warm, fuzzy cocoon and closed his eyes.

* * *

Dreams of endless falling turned into the waking realization that he *was* falling, or at least half-rolling, half-sliding inside his cocoon toward a side wall that was now distinctly downhill. "Uh . . ." he said, his voice sounding less loud in the room than he'd expected, and a lot more panicked.

"I apologize," came the disembodied room voice. "There is a distress call, and we are heading toward it with urgency. You are safe if you remain within your sleep roll, though you may experience some movement and changes in orientation. It is vital that you do not attempt to leave your room, as we will be experiencing quick changes in pressure to which your people are very delicate."

"This distress call, is it one of my people?"

"No, ours," Logo said. "I cannot give you more answers or attention at this time. Please remain unfretted as best you may."

The cocoon—it was a better name than sleep roll, even if it wasn't his to name—had come to rest in the angle between wall and floor that had become a V with room tilt. He squirmed himself around inside until he was resting on his stomach and could put his chin on his crossed arms in the cocoon opening. Having a steady view of the unsteady floor went a fair bit toward combatting queasiness from the tumbling. Table and dishes were gone, no doubt collected while he slept.

The room stayed stable at that angle for about fifteen minutes, then Ray was suddenly rolled up onto the former wall, thumped into what was once the ceiling, then briefly in freefall as the floor returned to floor again. The cocoon cushioned his landing enough to keep him from getting hurt. Adrenaline and sudden claustrophobia made him desperately want to fight his way free of the cocoon, but he beat that impulse down and pulled his arms and head fully inside, just in time for another round of ricochet Ray.

At last, they seem to have settled into a stable orientation, and he dared to poke his head out to see where he'd come to land. "Hello?" he ventured. "Is it safe to come out yet?"

"There will be one more maneuver in approximately ninety seconds," Logo answered. "After that . . . I will not be sure until we evaluate the situation directly."

"Okay," Ray said. Somehow knowing another tumble was coming made it worse, and he tensed up in anticipation. When it came, it wasn't the massive jolt he'd expected, just a quick roll to the far wall and then slowly back again, finally losing momentum and coming to a stop mid-floor.

Everything was quiet, the motion tiny and almost imperceptible for several long minutes, until Ray decided he was certain it had stopped moving entirely. Unable to bear being still, he pulled himself out and stood, stretching, one hand on the top of the cocoon in case he should have to grab it and suddenly dive back inside.

Instead, the door opened, and the Oceanic peered in at him, a distinctly worried expression on its face. "Ray Landham," it said. "We need your help."

* * *

The control room of the walker was a thing of cluttered, chaotic, mechanical wonder. Ajr had led him up here and seemed embarrassed by the mess, shoving its blankets back into its own cocoon before kicking it to the back wall. Then it climbed up into its tall chair before a wide screen that, belatedly, Ray realized wasn't video feed but an actual window out on the water in front of them.

Instrumentation and monitors surrounded the Oceanic, all on spindly arms that moved around it as if they knew to a moment where it was and where it would want them. *Oh right*, Ray thought. *It does. Logo.*

The water was clear and bright enough that Ray decided they must be not far below the surface. Small things wiggled and swam and darted around them, and a collection of the aquamoss threads and green star-shaped creatures had accumulated around the edges of the view. *Kenna would hate me if I don't ask*, he thought, so when Ajr looked his way, he pointed at them. "What do you call those?" he asked. "The little thread-like stuff and the stars?"

"*Obli*," Ajr said, "and there are three kinds of the 'stars' there: *molufe*, *malesk*, and *mosgomolens*. I have not had an opportunity in a while to clear them off."

He'd remember *obli*, anyway. If he forgot *moldy* and *mongo* and *mossomolo*, he could make something up and no one would ever know. That could also go in his Worst Diplomacy handbook.

Ajr gestured toward a bar on the curve of wall just beyond the window. "You will wish to hang on," Ajr en Logo both said. "We are about to surface. Then we will explain more."

Ray expected a lot of hands-on-controls piloting stuff, but mostly the Oceanic just sat there, leaning forward intently in its chair, mouth moving silently and hands twitching in small but specific gestures. Ray clung to his bar as the room tilted, and even if he hadn't been able to watch everything suddenly disappear downward, he could feel them rising swiftly.

"The drop-off from the continental shelf is steep here," Ajr said, and then the room shuddered as there was an impact from below, and then another, and Ray realized

they were walking. The water outside grew brighter, and more turbulent, until they were up and out into the bright morning light.

They walked up the gentle slope of a pebble-strewn beach. There was greenery here, thick spiraling tangles of it ahead that rose on sprays nearly as high as they were. Ray had never seen anything like it. For a half-second, he wondered how long he had slept, but even in the height of summer the brief, exuberant vegetation on the polar continents would barely make it past the top of his boots. "We're on one of the equatorial islands?" he guessed.

"We call it *Inah*," Logo answered. "It is the middle island in the large chain that runs southwest to northeast, to the west of your station."

"Ah," Ray said. "We call it Mama Bear. Our xenobiologist would give her right arm for the chance to see this. Both, if I told her what it looks like."

"How would giving away her arms facilitate her research? And what expected use would we have of them?" Logo asked.

Ray shrugged. "Use them to smack sense into me, probably. It's a saying, not meant literally, that you want something very, very badly."

"That is some relief," Ajr added from its seat, where it was guiding them now along the vegetation line, parallel to the beach. "Your Dr. Noyes has frequently advocated, over your comm network, his desire to give away his left 'nut' for things, and while we are also not sure what that is, since we do not believe your people are fruit-bearing, it seemed in context an undesirable exchange."

"Same idea," Ray said, "and I'm not explaining that one further. Though if I ever catch up with my Dr. Noyes, he might wish his left nut is all his drunken blabbing was gonna cost him. It's his fault someone tried to kill me. Speaking of which, any word on . . ."

He let the sentence go unfinished, as they crossed over a rocky promontory and he caught sight of a walker ahead, lying face-down on the beach. It was not moving. "Shit," he said. "What happened?"

"This is our friends, Eas en Ka, who were trying to trace the currents from where we found your bodies," Ajr said. "We do not know what has happened."

Logo stopped a hundred meters or so from where the other walker lay. "My people can function on the surface, though we are not at our best there," Ajr said, turning to face Ray. "Eas en Ka sent a distress call that was cut off within seconds, and they are not responding. I will not lie and tell you there is no danger in this, but will you accompany me?"

"You saved my life," Ray said. "I may be an asshole, but I'm not *that* kind of asshole. Of course I'm coming with you. I just wish I had my dogs. Or a gun. Or anything, in case we get attacked."

Ajr jumped down from its chair, tapped a wall, and another compartment opened. It pulled out a thick, grayish fabric that it wrapped around itself like a cloak, then handed Ray a long stick with a sharp, serrated knife-blade fitted onto the end. It removed a second one from the cabinet for itself. "These are *anfluto*. We use them to occasionally hunt *flut*," it explained. "We are omnivores, and although we are mostly satisfied with plant matter, there are nutrients we require in flut that are not easily found elsewhere or replicated. Also, flut have many big teeth and chew on important infrastructure, so there is utility in occasional reduction of their numbers. Be wary that your *anfluto* is very sharp."

Ray was just about to tap the point with his finger, and stopped himself. "Right. I'll take your word," he said. "Unless those fuckers that threw me down that hole show up, then I'd be happy to field-test it on them."

Ajr touched another wall. A large circular hatch opened up, revealing a second door on the outside; airlocks were just as important underwater as in space, even if

how you died when they went wrong was vastly different in detail.

The outer door also opened, and Ray peered out beside Ajr. The air that pressed in was warm and humid, and the sweet, cloying smell of living plants was almost strong enough to drown in. The ground itself was about twenty meters down, and although Erax's gravity was only about 86 percent of human-standard, it was still way too far to jump. "Got a ladder?" he asked.

"There is a simpler and faster way," Ajr answered.

Logo's hand moved closer and formed a small, flat platform level with the door opening. "Okay," Ray said. "This is definitely the weirdest thing I've ever done." He stepped out onto the hand and braced himself against the arm as Ajr joined him. Then the walker bent slowly and they were lowered with smooth precision to the pebbled ground.

Ajr ran in big bounding steps toward the fallen walker. "I need to determine the state of my friends as quickly as I may," it said.

"You go. I'll search around out here," Ray said. Behind him, Logo stood up straight again, and it turned slowly side to side doing the same.

The pebbles made it impossible to find footprints, but there was no sign of anything large being pulled up onto the beach other than where the walker itself had stumbled past, and the softer band of sand between tideline and where the vegetation began was bare of everything except Ajr's child-like, duck-like footprints. The Oceanic was at the fallen walker's side among crushed and flattened weeds, pulling tools from its cloak. "Shout if you need help!" Ray called.

Ajr did not turn, but waved in what could have just as easily been either agreement or an alien fuck-off. Ray chose to go with the first, and continued his trek around the perimeter of the walker.

The upper half of the walker had fallen in the stubbly seashore vegetation, and from the minimal amount of crushing around it, had pretty much landed right where it was. On its shoulders, the patchwork colonies of aquamoss—obli?—were drooping, a sodden, tangled mess slowly drying out in the sun. A few of the star-things had already dropped off, legs curling upward, so he picked them up one at a time and hurled them toward the waterline. "Incoming!" he called out. "Green, green, blue, green . . . uh, blueish-green, blue!"

His aim was terrible, but he got enough distance that it didn't matter; the stars plopped back into the water where hopefully they would recover and find their own way to a safe depth. One lone red one clung just where the tips of his fingertips could brush it, but he couldn't get enough leverage to pry it free and didn't want to poke it with his fish-spear. "Fine, be that way," he told it. "Maybe I'll come by again later when you've given up and dropped off, and I'll throw you back in the sea if you ask nicely, but no promises."

"Promise what to whom?" a voice asked, and he jumped and dropped his spear. Behind him was one of the remote spiders. "You scared me," he told it.

"Our apologies," it said. "Ajr in self is still trying to open the entrance into the primary control unit, as all Ka in self's systems are non-functional. We fear for the immediate continuance of our friends."

"Can I help?" Ray asked.

"No," the remote said. "There is too little room and too much water. We deployed these remotes to see if we can find out how the water leaked in, when we heard you address someone."

Glancing around, Ray spotted a half-dozen more of the spiders, crisscrossing their way along the surface of the fallen walker. "I was just talking to myself, mostly," he said. "Or this red starfish thing, and I'm sorry I've already forgotten the name, muffle mubble something."

"I see nothing there," the remote said.

"What?" Ray said. He reached up and bumped it with his fingers again. "Right here."

The remote, with no warning, scuttled up onto Ray's shoulder, and he had to close his eyes for just a second. *It's not a spider and you're not afraid of spiders anyway*, he reminded himself. *Not a spider. Got it?*

". . . yes," the remote said. "That is very hard to see. It is the same color as our exteriors."

"It's bright red," Ray exclaimed. "That looks the same color to you?"

"Yes."

"What color did the blood in the bodies look?"

"Blue gray," the remote answered.

"Wait . . . is that Ajr answering, or Logo?"

"Logo in self, but I answer for us both," the remote said. "My vision modules were, after all, designed to mimic our biological creators."

"Ah! So you're both color-blind!" Ray declared. "That's interesting. Sort of." He could see three red stars just on Logo's facing side, one right in the center of the walker's forehead. He wondered if they'd always been that way, or had adapted their coloration to keep from getting scraped off a good host.

"It is a challenge to accept that our vision might be inferior or deficient," the remote said. "When we are done with this matter, may I scan your eyes?"

"As long as you don't need me to take them out of my head to do it, sure," Ray said. "How's Ajr doing?"

"Ajr almost has the door open. It requires hard effort. We have found the location of the water infiltration."

"Well, let's go look," Ray said, and followed his remote around to the walker's far side. There were three more remotes clustered around a perfectly circular hole cut through several layers of hull.

"Does that seem familiar?" Ray's remote asked.

"Yeah," he said, feeling sick. "It looks just like the holes cut out of those bodies, except less messy."

"The diameter of the hole is consistent," the remote said. "Assuming it was caused by the same source—"

"Whatever it was came out of one of those bodies, then cut its way in to your walker."

"There is no sign of any foreign device inside," the remote said. "Ajr in self has found friend Eas, who survives; we require assistance relocating them for transport."

"Got it," Ray said. He scrambled over to the forced hatch, and after a moment's consideration, regretfully left his flut spear just inside. "Shout if you see anyone coming," he said, and went in.

The interior was nearly identical to Logo's, except that everything was wet. The control room was sideways, the transparent wall showing—where Ray could see, through the spray of red blood, only sand, rocks, and the walker's usual coating of sea life pressed under it. Ajr was crouched over another Oceanic, larger than it, who was not moving at all. "I cannot lift Eas," Ajr said, "and I fear moving them roughly and making the bleeding further."

Ray crouched beside them. The injured alien was covered with deep cuts, each in a half-moon shape the same diameter as the hole in the walker's hull. "Shit," he said. "That looks bad."

It was an obvious and tactless statement, and Ray grimaced at his own stupidity. He spotted a sodden sleep cocoon wedged up under the console and he pulled it free. "If we can get your friend into this, we can carry them out more smoothly," he said.

"That is a good idea," Ajr said. "It is something I should have thought of."

"Hey, no one is thinking their best in situations like this," Ray said. He set the

cocoon down, and carefully tore the loose, wet fibers from the opening to make it wider. “When I was a kid, my best friend—Well, you don’t need to hear it, I guess. Ready?”

Ajr put their hands carefully under their friend’s head and shoulders, and Ray took gentle hold of the Oceanic’s torso, trying very hard to pay no notice to the blood that immediately crept out from between his fingers. “Now,” Ajr said, and together they picked up the alien and got it, awkwardly, into the cocoon.

“In Logo we have injury sealants,” Ajr said, as together they walked the cocoon carefully to the hatch and out onto the beach. “But I will need to take Eas back as quickly as I can to one of our cities for healing work, and I cannot take you there. I will have to leave you here until I can return, which will be most of a day at least. I am sorry for this.”

“Hey, I understand,” Ray said. “It’s fine as long as there is a coffee machine somewhere on this island. Maybe a bar? Cheap hotel?”

“I am sorry,” Ajr said again. They moved the cocoon away from the fallen walker, and Logo crouched again and extended one hand. Ray and Ajr loaded the cocoon on.

“Just don’t leave me here forever, okay?” Ray said.

“We promise we will not. We will leave a remote with you, so we can be in communication,” Ajr said. “More drifters will come to watch over Ka until we can see if it can also be repaired. But I must go with speed.”

“Then go. I hope your friend makes it,” Ray said, as Ajr stepped into Logo’s hand and rose up into the air. Remotes swarmed around him and up the walker’s frame, disappearing back inside, until only one remained standing by his ankle.

They watched together as Ajr en Logo straightened, turned, and walked back down the beach until it disappeared beneath the waves.

“Well,” Ray said. “I admit, I would have liked to see one of your cities. Wanna help me find something to eat?”

Without warning the remote scuttled up his leg and perched on his shoulder, and he did his best not to flinch. “Ajr is busy tending to Eas, and I am acquiring depth and setting course for our nearest city, Rafahi Where Many Dwell, so I will not have much attention to spare for approximately twenty-four minutes,” the remote said.

Ray went back over to the walker’s hatch and retrieved his flut spear from inside. He should be settling into his office, listening to complaints from Noyes and Hudson and Ella Peakham, poking at his daily datawork, freezing his toes off. Instead he was missing and probably presumed dead, abandoned on a tropical island with nothing but the clothes on his back, a spear, and a robot spider on his shoulder like some kind of creepy pirate-castaway.

Other than the lack of coffee, it didn’t seem too bad.

* * *

“What happened to your best friend?” the remote suddenly asked from where it had wandered a few meters down the beach, as Ray sat on a boulder disconsolately poking the sand with his stick. “I am sorry to ask, and you do not need to answer. This is Ajr—I am needing distraction, and I am curious about Earth.”

“Not much of anyone lives on Earth anymore. I grew up on an ice planet named Bydrus,” Ray said. “It was colder than here, cold enough that you couldn’t go outside at all, not without a vehicle and breather packs. Even the Yeti had a tough time of it, and we lost a lot every winter. My best friend was this kid in our settlement named Franklin, same age as me. He had this thing where his skin . . . it was like it would just suddenly split open? At first it seemed like he’d get all these tiny little cuts, and no one could figure it out, but then it got worse and worse. I saw it happen once; we were just sitting there talking, playing cards, and I watched this line appear on his face, and then turn red, and then there was blood everywhere, and he couldn’t even

feel it happening. . . . It was awful. We'd be playing, and if it happened I'd try to patch him up and get him back to Med, but it just got worse and worse. One day we had a big argument and he stormed off, and by the time I cooled down and went after him he'd opened up all over, and lost a lot of blood. . . . He made it, but then they kept him locked up in the Med bay while they tried to figure out how to stop it, and one night he just bled to death in his sleep. We were eleven."

He'd never told anyone that story.

"They couldn't heal it?"

"It was something genetic, recessive. There's a lot of things like that, because of how few of us got off Earth and got scattered, and the radiation out in space. That's also why there's so few children, and a lot like Franklin who don't make it to adulthood. They could treat the effects, if they caught it in time, but the cause . . . well, that was the way he was."

"Gene errors can be repaired," the remote said, and though the words were both gentle and puzzled, it felt like a slap.

"Yeah, well, you're aliens, that's fine for you to go messing about with yourselves," Ray said. He stabbed the sand hard, leaving the spear sticking out of the beach in front of him. "We humans don't do that. We don't want to turn into something we're not. Or at least, that's what everyone told me, over and over again when I wanted to know why my friend had to die. And if we don't have that basic sense of who and what we are, what the fuck are we saving out here?"

The problem with robot spiders was you couldn't tell if they were genuinely thinking through what you'd said or just keeping their smartass commentary to themselves. Either way, it kept its silence, and Ray's flash of anger peaked and faded. "I mean, we don't even have Earth anymore," he added. "We trashed it, and 90 percent of the population died in the collapse. Could have been all of us, and maybe should've been. Took us six centuries to get back to where we are now, and it'll be several more before the planet's even sorta back to stable, if we're lucky. That's why we hold so tight to our identity, what we have left."

"It is not incomprehensible to us that your people might feel that way, but that you would let yourself be so strictly guided by it in some circumstances, and not in others," the remote said. "For us, adaptation was survival."

"What do you mean 'some' circumstances?"

"There are your Yeti," the remote answered.

"I told you, though. They aren't humans. They're just human-like. Yeah, we added some of our genes to theirs to push them up the ladder a little, but that's all."

"Added to what?" the remote said. "What did you start with?"

"How should I know?!" Ray declared. "Do I look like a biogenetics engineer? If I was I wouldn't be stuck here with you, would I? If you hadn't brought me those damned bodies . . ." He stood up and kicked some rocks down the beach.

"We are sorry," the remote said. "We thought it would be the right thing to do."

"Yeah. Well, it was. It just sucks to be me," Ray said. "I wish I knew what was happening. I wish I could fucking *do* something. But even if I had all the answers, the guys who threw me down that hole were right: who am I to stop them? Nobody."

"You are the surface administrator," the remote said, as if that was ample counter-argument. "As to what is happening, Lena in self is in your office and is running a search party from there."

Ray stared back at the remote, then let out a short bark of a laugh. "You're in my desk!" he said. "I forgot."

"Yes."

"They find my skitter? You said you'd hide it, somehow?"

"It has been removed from where they could find it," the remote said. "Also, the

emergency tracking beacon on it has been disabled.”

“They’ll scan the water at the edge of the ice sheet.”

“It is not in the water.”

Ray took his seat on the rock again, put his chin in his hands and his elbows on his knees, staring out across the water. He could see another island in the chain in the distance, a thin green band on the horizon, but with the sun nearly perfectly overhead, he couldn’t guess what direction he was looking. Either it was PapaBear, closest to the south polar continent, or the edge of the BabyBears, reaching out toward the north. Not that their names mattered, or were right.

For a moment he wondered if he was looking at the hideout of his assailants, but no. With air traffic so tightly controlled and boats entirely forbidden, the islands would be too risky. *And anyway*, he thought, remembering the ring of familiarity when his attacker had spoken, *I knew those people. Whoever they are, they’re hiding among us.* Who knew how many people were involved? Maybe they’d infiltrated all the settlements and mining camps, north and south, right under his lazy nose.

His skitter not being found would be a minor bump in their plans at best. After seventy-two hours missing, he’d be automatically declared dead even without a body or other evidence of his demise. He wanted to mess them up much more than that, throw a Ray-sized monkey-wrench into everything they were doing, slow them down ’til he could catch up and figure out *what* the hell they were doing. More than that, he wanted to hurt them.

If only he had the slightest idea how. His creative problem solving over the last years had mostly entailed how to get a sick person from a remote point to a lift spot, or get a drunk person from where they were a danger to themselves and others to a safe place, or what to do when SystemOps forgot to send toilet paper for three supply drops running. (Noyes had thoroughly rejected his suggestion that they slip something heavily constipating into the week’s reconstituted pudding supply.)

If only he could kill them with bureaucracy, he’d be right in his element.

Ray made several more circuits of the fallen walker, picking up the last few stragglers of star-things where they had fallen and chucking them into the ocean. Only the stubborn red ones remained, proving hardier—and therefore less lucky—than all their cousins.

Just short of five hours later, he was sitting in the shade of a large, palm-like plant contemplating the one red star he had finally managed to scrape loose, and which had immediately curled up into a tight, protective, rubbery ball. He could either walk all the way back down the beach to where he could throw it in the water, or he could see if it was edible. Just as he’d resigned himself to the walk, the remote stirred from where it had been idle for several hours. “Friends are coming,” it said.

Sure enough, out over the ocean he could see where the endless march of waves began to deviate and break around something heading toward shore. Minutes later, two robot heads pushed their way up into the sky from below.

“We have reached Rafahi Where Many Dwell, and have transferred Eas in self over to our medical experts,” the remote said. “Ajr in self is about to speak with our Elders, who have many questions. We were occupied upon our arrival, and were unable to tell you that a report came back from your offworld authority as to your body’s identity.”

“Ah!” Ray said, watching the approaching walkers now only knee-deep in the surf. “They have a name?”

“There is no name,” the remote said. “The body was identified as *Homo sapiens subordinatus*.”

“What?”

“A Yeti. The finding also includes these words: ‘Assume routine disposal; closed file.’”

It didn't make sense. He'd seen the body—well, enough 2D and 3D images of it, anyway—and it was entirely human except for its injuries and its lack of skin. *Or lack of fur*, he thought. *There has to be more to it than that.*

"Ajr—" he started to say.

"I am sorry. We are being summoned by the Elders; both of us will be unavailable until that conversation is complete. Our friends will keep you company and make sure you are safe."

The two new walkers were now standing on the beach in front of their fallen fellow, water streaming off their bodies, rivulets through the obli and clumps of stars. He chuckled to see a few reds on each, glaringly visible, a secret between him and them. A host of spider remotes leapt down from each walker and swarmed toward Ka. Ray slipped his own red star in his pocket as one walker approached and stopped some distance away from where he still sat, Ajr en Logo's motionless remote beside him.

"Hi," he said.

The new remote regarded him for a long moment before it spoke in clipped tones. "We is Yeno en Paxa. Also we other is Helo and Jem en Ore. A request from Ajr was that we come to keep our friend-part Ka in safety watch, so we have. You is Ray Landham in self a human bare?"

"Bear?" he asked, confused.

"Ajr en Logo has the trust for you, but not we," Yeno en Paxa said. "There is danger, and all is none certain."

"Ain't that the truth," he said.

Another remote joined the first. "It is for your best if you move away from this our friend," it said.

"Fine," Ray said. He stood up and brushed sand and bits of dead leaves from his legs, then picked up his remote to take with him.

"No!" the first of the new remotes shouted. One of the walkers took a step and a half toward him, foot raised.

Ray glared at them. "What, are you going to *step* on me? If you make me leave, how else am I going to know what's happening? How will Ajr en Logo find me again?"

"Put this one of us down," the second remote said. "You need go not so far. Just you go."

Ray set Ajr's remote on the beach. "If you can hear me," he told it, enunciating the words loudly to be sure they carried, "I don't like your friends much."

Raising both hands up, as if being robbed, he backed away. Both walkers stood unmoving as he turned his back and, with a heavily dramatic sigh, hiked up into the foliage along a break he'd found earlier while looking for something edible.

Scrambling up rocks, he found a small promontory he could sit on and dangle his feet off the edge. He still had his boots, but his snow pants and parka were somewhere inside Logo, somewhere down in the depths of the ocean. He hoped it didn't start to rain.

Not that there was much chance of that. The sky was an unblemished blue he rarely saw down on the southern ice sheet. The ocean stretched away in similar solidity, dark and impenetrable. Barely, he could make out the vast, faint squares of the Oceanics' underwater farms, floating just below the surface.

The two new walkers didn't appear to be doing any more than he'd been: standing around being useless. At least he'd saved some star-things while he was down there.

Ray frowned, letting his focus slip away, and tried to think about only one worry at a time. Dying on a tropical island wasn't one of them; he'd been chucked down a deep hole into a frigid sea, and there wasn't much that seemed more terrifying. And he'd survived that, hadn't he?

He was fairly certain everything he thought he knew about Yeti was wrong.

Human bear, or human bare? he asked himself. That chewed-up, stripped-down, mutilated-from-the-inside body that Ajr had brought him was as human as anyone in death, and he didn't dare cling to the conceit that somehow things were all that different in life. If the Yeti were human, what did that mean?

Yeti were workers. They were kept in pens when not being utilized, shipped in to do the hard, dangerous, deadly work. Every single man and woman who came to Erax, or to any of the other worlds humans had colonized, was med-scanned, weighed, measured, fully quantified, tracked, and documented, but other than their numbers and health certificates the Yeti were livestock. Who would notice two or three or even ten gone, when if one died you just dumped it somewhere far enough away you couldn't smell the stink while you wrote it off your ledger?

If something had been smuggled in by implanting it in the Yetis' bodies, no med scan would ever pick it up because why would anyone scan the Yeti? Whatever stitches or scars were left would be buried under thick fur. And who would a Yeti tell, even if they could speak? The idea was horrifying—all of it, all the years it had never even occurred to him to see them as anything other than fur-covered tools, and that someone else saw them as a living delivery system for smuggled weaponry. Throw the Yeti down a hole, who cares if it drowns, let whatever is inside bore its way out . . .

. . . and go bore a hole through a walker to its next victim.

They'd gone after Ray because of the bodies, and because he talked to Ajr en Logo. The "waterfreak." What made no sense at all, in any way he could see, was *why*. Even if they were obsessed alien-haters, even if their goal was to entirely wipe out the Oceanics' civilization, it got them nothing. If Erax was an independent colony then yeah, they could wipe out all the humans and if they didn't get caught try to claim rights over an abandoned/failed world, but that wasn't the case. This was the Oceanics' world, and humans were only here by treaty. And if the Oceanics' home planet, however estranged, came around asking about their missing people, EarthGov would hand each and every one of them over with their heads on a platter and an apple in their mouths without trial or hesitation.

Which put it all back to alien-haters, and he hated that most of all, because it meant there was no rational motive behind any of it, which meant no predicting what they might do next or why. His toes were warm for the very first time since he arrived on Erax, but dammit he needed to get off this island.

And he had no way of doing it. Maybe he could construct some sort of raft, get southwest to Papabear Island, but he had no winter gear, no food or water, no plan. If he found something that burned he could start a signal fire, but who would see, much less be able to come rescue him? As happy as he'd been to leave all the surveillance and satellites and sensors behind when he came here, at least they would have ended whatever conspiracy was here long before it could have gotten this far.

How much worse had things gotten since he'd been thrown down the bore in the ice? And had everyone gone back to their daily routine as if he'd never existed? Hudson, with his hyperactive anxiety about rules? Ella Peakham, with her endless stream of requests and contract quibbles and testing the rules from the mining corps? Had Hollie and Ron and the other walker-watchers who obsessively charted walker sightings observed anything strange happening? If there was anything to see. Dutton probably hadn't noticed anything beyond a fortuitous drop in Ray's surprise inspections of his various "secret" labs. Did Dr. Noyes know yet that his drunken blabbing had got Ray killed?

Well, only almost killed, but Noyes didn't know that either.

Ray wanted to go yell at them all, or just as good, just go hang out quietly with everyone as if on monthly movie night. The only people he could yell at here had no

obligation to tolerate it from him, nor interest in his company.

He gazed down from his rock perch resentfully. The two walkers below were standing where they'd been since arriving, though the swarm of remotes had mostly disappeared. A few stood at the base of his makeshift trail, watching him. From here, if he wanted to, he could push rocks down the hillside at them, but if the walkers took offense—and really, why wouldn't they?—they could outrun him with ease and stomp him flat.

Exhausted by the utter lack of solution to any of his problems, he leaned back on the rock, hands under his head, and stared up. The sun would have long since set down at Icebreak Station, another day of who knew what was going on. Here, though, the sun was still bright above the horizon, the wisps of clouds far to the west lit up like someone had scratched lines through the sky. They were hypnotic as they shifted, dissipating and stretching and changing hue toward early evening orange.

The rustle and snap of movement among the plants just below his ledge dragged him back from the edge of sleep, and he peered over the drop and found himself staring down at the baleful blue eye of a remote. "What?" he called down, peeved. "You want me to move further away? Then bring me a fucking boat."

"Ray Landham," the remote said. "Do you wish to go?"

He blinked at it, then noticed that somehow, somewhen, a third walker had appeared on the beach. "Ajr en Logo?"

"In selves," it said. "I am sorry my friends do not trust you."

"Yeah, well, I suppose I can't blame them," he said. "Though I do anyway. How's Eas?"

The remote resumed its climb up the path and settled beside Ray on the rock. "Eas is not well. We can function underwater for a much longer time than your people, almost indefinitely in ideal conditions, but Ka was deep when it was compromised, and the pressure breach did great damage to Eas's physical self even before the harm of the cuts. It is hoped that Eas will heal, but it will be slow."

"I'm sorry," Ray said. "What will happen with Ka?"

"I brought with me the dweller Suna in self, who is an engineer. They will attempt to repair Ka's hull enough that it can bring it back to a repair facility. The Elders are concerned that we find out what happened in an expedient, but also circumspect and careful manner; it has been repeated to me many times that your people are a danger to us, and while I see the trueness of that in the whole, I do not believe you in self are. But I must ask, on the bond of a life saved: Are you?"

So candid a question, so easy to give reassurance without thinking about it. The sun was setting, and his back still ached from dozing on the rock, and he felt so very done with taking the easy way. "I don't know," he said at last. "I don't intend to be. But the last few days have been nothing if not illuminating of all the things I thought I knew about, but didn't know shit, and maybe that makes me dangerous despite myself. I'm sorry, that's a terrible answer."

"It is a good answer," the remote said, and stretched up and down on its legs. "What do we do now?"

"Can you get out of my desk? If you needed to?"

"Yes," the remote said, "though it would entail damage to the internal mechanism."

"Can you write in anglero?"

There was a pause before the remote answered. "No," it said. "We learned your language from listening. I could mimic the patterns with fair precision if you show me, but . . . do you not normally dictate to your office system verbally?"

"I do, but I need this to look like it came from outside the system," Ray said.

"And you do not wish to ask your friend Lena in self to write it?"

"It's not that," Ray said. "I trust her, but . . . I'm not sure I should trust anybody."

And I need her reactions to be genuine, as if the note is real. She can't bluff for shit."

"And what is the note going to communicate?"

Ray smiled. "Didn't you know? I've been kidnapped by the Eraxian People's Freedom Brigade, and they want ransom. The good guys will be out looking for fake bad guys, and the real bad guys won't know what the fuck is going on since they've gotta be absolutely positive I'm dead."

"I do not understand many of the things you've said, but what does this accomplish?"

"Confusion. Maybe a chance to flush out the people who chucked me down that hole, and who must be responsible for what happened to Eas en Ka. When Lena shows up with the ransom, I'd bet our bad guys are going to show up to watch her. And I want to watch *them*, and see which way they came from. Problem is there's just one of me, so I have to pick the ransom drop carefully and hope for a lot of luck."

The remote stirred. "There could be more watchers arranged," it said.

"Your mysterious friends who hid my skitter?"

". . . Yes."

Ray didn't miss the hesitation. "You don't really want to tell me about them," he said. "I assume you've got your reasons, and I accept that. Whatever help they're willing to give, it's on their terms and I'm grateful."

Below them, the two other walkers had moved to either side of Ka. Bending down, they wrapped their arms around it and lifted it, then walked heavily and slowly down the beach and into the surf.

"They've done all they can here," the remote said.

Ray stood up, groaning at the stiffness in his legs, and picked up his flut spear. The sun had nearly set, but the sky was still bright, lighting the beach up in shades of orange. The remote followed him nimbly down the path to where only its larger self now stood, waiting, bare dome of a head gleaming in the light. "Ha!" he said, and pointed. "You lost two of your red stars!"

"Did we?" the remote asked. "We cannot tell."

"Doesn't matter." He walked toward a smooth patch of sand away from the rocks, and began to write in the sand with the blade. "Soon as you can get your other remote out of my desk, there's emergency paper in the left-side bottom drawer. Obviously, you'll need to scale this down. Don't do it yet, though. I want to get a few things in order first. There's an emergency shelter in a low valley about halfway between Snowtown and Dunfroze, to the west. You know where that is?"

"I believe we do, yes."

"You think you can get me there tonight?"

"The night-turn? Yes," the remote said, "although you will have to hike in the last few kilometers from the shore."

"You still have my weather gear?"

"Yes."

"Then let's do this," he said. "Shake the can, see what crawls out, and if we don't like the looks of it we can step on it together."

* * *

By the time Ray reached the emergency shelter his toes were bitterly cold again, but his anger had heated up faster, so he ignored their complaints as he used the physical override to wedge open the airlock and squeeze himself inside.

The emergency shelter was designed for short-term use in adverse circumstances. There was a first aid bag, some high-protein food bars, bottled water, and—he almost cried to see it—some self-heating thermal mugs and packets of instant coffee. He didn't care how old or stale it was, though if it was either he had only himself to blame. He'd already turned one on to heat before he even took his gloves off and took

stock of the rest of the supplies.

The shelter had enough stuff to keep someone alive as they waited for help to arrive or, if no help was coming, re-equip, get out, and get somewhere better. There was a pop-tent with built-in heater, extra clothing and boots, and a good assortment of ice picks and shovels and climbing gear. There was also a log book for signing out the gear, with an admonition that the failure to do so would result in harsh disciplinary action and possible planetary expulsion by the surface administrator. He laughed as he tossed that down on the tiny bunk in the space.

The thermal cup beeped. He popped off the lid and inhaled, reveling in the glorious smell. It was way too hot to drink yet, so he set it aside where the steam could permeate the air around him, and dug what he wanted out of the shelves. The large ice pick felt satisfyingly dangerous in his hands, but it was heavy enough that he eventually chose a small one that would fit in a shoulder bag instead. He also took the small orienteering kit, with an Erax-configured compass and a pair of high-powered magnifying goggles. He took two more packets of the coffee and the thermal mug, too, putting it all in the emptied-out medical kit bag.

"Okay. Time to go find a good place to hide. Then you can exit the desk," he said. "Once you write out the note, it's easy to set off the alarms. Lena is quick even when woken from a sound sleep—if she even sleeps—so figure you'll have as little as four minutes to hide yourself again."

Ray heaved the bag over his shoulder, then pulled the goggles down over his face and tightened his hood around it. With the remote once again riding on his shoulder he squeezed out the airlock and sealed the place back up.

Snow was swirling around, loose, shiny powder swept up off the surface by the omnipresent winds along this stretch of coast. It would cover his tracks quickly. He took a second to get his bearings, then hiked southeast, inland, toward one of the many rocky bluffs that overlooked the valley.

He dropped his stuff between two rocks, used the ice pick to chop up the frozen layer of ice in between, then took a shovel to that. It took him about half an hour of backbreaking work to get enough of a pit dug that he could set up the tent, pop up the reinforcements inside, and then start burying all but a narrow slice of the entrance back under the snow. "My very own cave," he said, when he could stand back, chest heaving and sweaty inside his parka, and admire his work. "I always wanted to run away and live in one as a kid. Do your desk thing whenever you're ready."

He bent down, carefully tucked his things inside and to the back, and then climbed in. The remote followed.

There had been a sleeping bag back among the supplies, and for a moment he regretted having decided it was too much to carry. Instead, he started another coffee packet and laid down on his stomach, snapped down the goggles, and propped his head up on his hands, then stared out and down the valley toward the emergency shelter below.

"Lena in self arrived in four minutes thirty-nine seconds," the remote said. "She is now giving orders from your office, for others to gather the ransom-list of supplies. She has declared that if she is not on her way by noon, she will lock every single resident out of the station for a week."

"That would be fast work, if they pull it off. Faster than I could motivate them."

"Lena in self is more frightening than you," the remote said.

"I suppose so," Ray said. "Meanwhile, we wait for the rest of our guests to show up. Your watchers?"

"They are in place."

"Great," Ray said. He saw nothing out there, no sign of anyone either below or on the distant ridgelines, but he didn't press. He trusted. Stifling a yawn that made his

jaw ache, he took a deep breath of the cold air, let it out again in a brief cloud. "So, I told you about us. Can I ask how your people ended up here?"

The remote was a few moments answering, though he could hear, now that the wind's whine was muffled by the snow surrounding them, the tiny clockwork ticks of its mechanisms. "Much like yours," it said at last. "There was calamity on our world of origin, as perhaps all civilizations go through, and not all survive. Though we had begun to move out into the stars, we were not enough established to support our faltering planet, and resources became scarce and not easily replenished. Those of our people who had resources to survive, hoarded them. Those without enough . . . well, it was a choice: use what we had to wage war for as long as we could, in desperate hopes of surviving long enough to see the world renewed, or use it to get out. As many of us as could leave, came here. Those we could not bring entrusted us with their technologies and sciences and arts, their genetic codes, their dreams for the future."

"So they died to save you."

"Certainly yes, but in a small but important to us way, no," Ajr en Logo said. "As we adapted ourselves over generations to live on this world, we needed the full breadth of their gifts, including the diversity of genes to be a healthy species. They all live on through us, though they never could have imagined who we became. It is a sad thing."

"Yeah," Ray said, "but it's also a proud thing. Earth went right back to tooth-and-claw survival of the fittest. If it was a test of a people, ours failed."

"Is the test ever over, while any of a people live?" Ajr en Logo asked.

Ray took the lid off the thermal mug and watched the steam stream away into the night. "Just feels like it, I guess," he said. "Too deep for how little sleep I've had. Any idea what's happening?"

"Lena in self is currently arguing with Dr. Noyes in self about going out alone, as was required by our instructions," the remote said. "She has also rightly pointed out that Noyes is still under physical influence from intoxicants, and, she has added, 'poor fucking company when sober.'"

"See how I set an example of diplomacy for all my people?" Ray said. "Meanwhile, nothing going on out here? I mean, around us?"

"There are no sightings of movement so far, but it has not been long since the discovery of our note, and this location is remote."

"Then if I take a really short nap, I probably won't miss anything?"

"Ajr in self is also needing rest. I can watch and listen," the remote said.

"Thank you," Ray said, scooted far enough back into his tent-cave to get his face out of the wind, and, hoping he wouldn't regret it, closed his eyes.

Almost instantly, the remote was poking him awake. "Lena in self has arrived," it said.

"Already?!" Ray groaned.

"It has been five hours," the remote answered.

Ray blinked and hauled himself to the entrance again, his head muzzy with sleep. The storm had moved on, leaving new drifts up against his tent and the rocks it was nestled between, but his view was unimpeded. He found and zoomed in on the skitter that was easy to pick out against the monotone backdrop of snow in the early dawn light.

Ray could make out Lena's familiar bright green parka even without magnification. She checked the shelter, scanned the horizons, then began to offload the heavy crates of the demanded supplies into the tiny space. He'd get an earful about that later, and enjoy every second of it. "Any other activity out there?"

"Our watchers are reporting a presence to the west, very well hidden. Two or three people, they guess."

Ray wanted suddenly, very badly, to know if the two who had attacked him were among that group. *How big is your conspiracy?* he wondered. *How many of you do I have to take down, and will I even know when I've got you all?*

At least he was closer to some answers. Maybe.

Skitter fully unloaded, he watched the green mote of Lena pace back and forth, circle the shelter, make a slow circuit again farther out, no doubt looking for footprints or other traces of the fictional kidnappers who were now an hour late with their side of the trade. He couldn't make out details from this far, even with the growing light, but he could totally imagine the look of homicidal frustration on her face. "I wonder how much longer she'll wait," he murmured. "And if she'll take the supplies back when she figures out the exchange isn't happening."

"Our watchers report that the group to the west is retreating now. They will trail discreetly as they are able."

"Okay," Ray said. "I don't want to put anyone in danger, especially anyone without a direct stake in this. They're doing me more than enough of a favor already."

"We all have our interests here," the remote said.

They waited and watched another hour, and then finally Lena gave up; the skitter turned and began to trundle back the way it had come. *Toward home*, Ray thought with a pang.

He'd bet she bugged the hell out of the shelter while she was in there, and possibly booby-trapped it too.

When the skitter disappeared over the valley lip, he stretched, and with regret pulled himself out of the tent to shake off the melted snow-water that had accumulated on his elbows and arms. "I guess we—" he started to say, when he was knocked face first into the snow by something impossibly heavy. He couldn't see, couldn't even really breathe, and couldn't help but think *not again*.

And then he heard the growling, and knew he was going to be okay. When the weight on him retreated and hands roughly flipped him over and stuffed a pistol in his face, he was grinning. "Lena," he said.

She stood over him, Firo and Firn both quivering with excitement by her side. Taking her surprised silence for permission they both leaped on him again, crushing him further down into the snow as they fought over who got to lick his face first. He did his best to get his arms up over his face. "Bleah! Off, dogs! Off!" he shouted.

Lena stuck her pistol in her parka and hauled them back again. "Stay," she barked. "Ray, what the fuck? What kind of game is this? Did you fucking kidnap yourself?"

"Someone tried to kill me," he said. "They thought they succeeded, and I wanted to draw them out. How the hell did you get here when I just saw your skitter go over the hill the other way?"

"I sent Kenna in my parka so everyone would assume it was me," she said, and sure enough she was wearing one of the station generic loaners. "Now you need to tell me what the hell is going on, because I'm still really damned pissed about everything."

"We should go back in the tent," he said, and eyed the dogs. "If we can fit. I've got people watching—"

"You've got people?! Who?" she asked.

Ray shrugged. "I can't say. But if I have watchers out, so do the people who tried to kill me. And I really don't want to repeat that experience."

"Same people who threw those bodies in the ocean?"

"Yeah," Ray said.

"You're lucky they didn't do that to you, too," she said. "No way you could have survived."

"Right," he said. "That's why they're sure I'm dead. Go into the tent, and I'll explain."

Lena side-eyed him before she heaved a deep breath and offered him a hand. He

reached up, and just before he could grasp it she yanked it away. “That’s for letting me think you were dead,” she said, and ducked into the tent.

Firo and Firn just stared at him with their happy, sloppy grins. “In you go, too,” he said, and pointed. They collided with one another and brute-forced their way through the entrance, knocking snow down all around them. Ray sat up, got stiffly to his feet, and followed. Technically there wasn’t enough room for them all in the tent, but as soon as he was halfway in, both icedogs proceeded to try to sit on top of him, with the result that he was tightly sandwiched between heaving furballs.

“Hello, Lena in self,” the remote said, from where it stood atop Ray’s tiny pile of stuff.

“Another one?” Lena asked. “You making friends with all the robots, Ray?”

“We have already met,” the remote said.

“Yeah? I thought you went back to the ocean,” Lena said. “Ray took you with him?”

“No, we are also still in Ray’s office,” the remote said.

“Which is good luck for us, because it’ll give us a way to communicate off normal channels once you go back,” Ray said.

“You’re not coming back to the station?”

“Not yet. Lena, they tried to kill me. They bored a hole in the ice and they threw me down into the ocean. And that’s how they killed those Yeti—”

“Yeti?”

“The bodies.”

“Ray, I was there. Those were human bodies.”

“Yeah,” Ray said. “They were. Humans with fur. I’ve enjoyed knowing only as much as I needed to most of my life, and now I find there was a lot more I needed to know than I knew.”

“Ray . . .”

“Right, that was probably hard to follow. Sorry. It’s been a long couple of days. What I need you to do is to go back to the station, keep pretending you don’t know where I am, and try not to talk to too many people about it because you stink at lying. Don’t trust anyone, and particularly don’t trust Noyes.”

“You think he’s involved?”

“No, but I think he can’t keep his fucking mouth shut, which is almost the same thing,” Ray said. “I need you to discreetly check records from the settlements—all of them, miners and perms alike—for the last year or so and see who has had a lot of write-offs of Yeti deaths. Because they’re using Yeti as living couriers to smuggle weapons down, and it doesn’t end well for them. As you saw.”

Lena looked pale. “Yeah. I saw. Why?”

“I don’t know yet, but they’re targeting the walkers.”

“Again, why?”

Ray shrugged. “I’d like to beat that answer out of someone real soon,” he said.

“What’s your plan?” At his hesitation, she frowned. “Come on, I’m your security chief. You trust me?”

“I’m feeling really burned right now, but yes,” Ray said.

“That’s stupid, Ray. Why? Give me one solid, *logical* reason why you know, for sure, that I’m not your enemy.”

“For starters, because you could have just shot me, and you didn’t,” Ray said. He elbowed his furry bookends. “But more than that, because Firo and Firn trust you. Soon as they decide to eat you, I’m gonna let ’em on the theory you must deserve it. Until then, I trust you, too. But I’m taking one of them. Also, one of your guns. I know you never have less than two on you, except maybe when sleeping.”

“Even then,” she said. She pulled the pistol she’d earlier stuck in his face out of her pocket, double-checked the safety, and handed it to him grip-first. “You know how to

use this?"

"Sure do," he said. "You need to get back to the station before your absence raises suspicions. Once there, Ajr en Logo will keep us in touch."

"And you?"

"Us? Soon as night falls again, we're going hunting."

* * *

Sometime after Lena had reluctantly left, another brief storm had whipped through and left another quarter-meter of light powder to slog through in its wake while he napped. *Yay spring*, he thought, as he drank his second-to-last coffee packet, waited for the remote to get a good perch on his back, and headed out. He stopped at the shelter long enough to fill his pockets with snacks.

"Any idea how far we're going?" he asked the remote.

Some distance later, when it had not answered, Ray stopped. "You okay?" he asked it.

"We are sorry," it answered. "We are having an argument."

"You and Logo?!"

"No. Why would we argue?"

"I couldn't even guess. Lena, then?"

"No. It is . . . it is not our decision," the remote said. "It will resolve itself regardless of our input. We will not be responsible."

Ray had the feeling the words were being spoken to more than just him, but then, how hard must it be to not only have to keep track of two real selves, but any number of connected remotes? He'd probably say the wrong thing to the wrong people all the time.

"Our friends report that the group they were following has disappeared. They suspect a hidden place, underground, and do not want to approach closer for fear of being discovered."

"How far?"

"About seven kilometers."

"That's not bad," Ray said. "I mean, it's awful, but it can be done. Their camp could have been anywhere on the southern ice sheet."

"Was the shelter a guess of luck, then?"

"More a hunch, maybe," Ray said. He scanned the horizon through his goggles, infrared on, and saw nothing. "I mean, they covered their faces, so they must have worried I could identify them by sight, but probably not place them just by their voices. The mining operation way to the east of Bone Point only got here a few weeks ago, but there are two west of Dunfroze that have been here for over a year. Long enough for the bodies. Long enough for there to have been a lot more we didn't find."

"That is not an optimistic thought," the remote said.

"No," Ray said. He trudged up over the lip of the valley, stopped to scan again with the goggles' night vision. The ice sheet was flatter here, further from the waterline, but although he could see for many kilometers he saw no signs of anything above snow-temperature. "You sure this is the right way?"

"Yes," the remote said.

"I don't see anyone out here."

"You would not," the remote said. "However, they have seen us, and have communicated that we are advancing in the correct direction. My navigation skills are best below the surface, and only sufficient along the coast."

"Are you saying you were getting us lost out here?"

"Never," the remote said. "I have the expertise of the surface administrator in self to consult."

Ray snorted. "That just fills me with confidence," he said. "Now shut up while I

bask in my only moment of recognition ever.”

He was tired of slogging through the snow, pushing it up and forward with his knees so his boots could follow, only to sink again. He wanted to be back in the cocoon aboard Logo, or better yet his very own bunk at Icebreak. The snow and darkness was achingly monotonous and resistant to any admission of progress, and he found himself tuning out of all but the mechanical repetition of moving. The icedog remained near his side, steady enough in its own movement to have become a fixture of his peripheral landscape.

“Ray,” the remote said. “We should stop here.”

He stumbled to a halt, almost unwilling to break his brainless rhythm. “Yeah,” he said. “I should drink some water and rest, I guess.”

“Yes, but also, my friends say over this rise is where the other group disappeared.”

“Oh,” Ray said. Were they actually there? How long had he been walking? Looking around he’d gone most of the way up a long, steady grade, where the wind had whipped the ridge up into a sharp, frozen wave. Most everything through his goggles was grainy, a barely differentiated blue, but that line was crisp. “Any signs of them?”

“No,” the remote said.

He stomped down a nest for himself in the snow and sat, grateful for his waterproof, heated pants, and made himself his last packet of insta-coffee. Firn hollowed out more space beside him, pressing against him, and almost instantly fell asleep. He moved, with small irritation, that she wasn’t even winded.

“How big an area, do you think? That they disappeared in?” he asked.

“Our friends estimate about twelve hectares,” the remote said, “with an error margin of two or three. It is a small valley.”

“That’s still a lot of space,” Ray said. His coffee finished and he popped the lid off, trying to inhale as much of the steam as he could. “Any heat signatures?”

“Our friends do not carry such instrumentation.”

“That’s a pity,” Ray said. “Going to be really damned hard to find them before they find me.”

“If they find you first, at least then we will know exactly where they are,” the remote said.

Ray snorted, and sipped at the rapidly cooling coffee. “If I didn’t mind dying for that information, that would be a great plan,” he said. “If only I had a red stuffed bear to lure them out with, but can’t be more than one of those on this Shit!”

“Ray?”

“Is Lena in my office?”

“Yes,” the remote said. “We have been having a pleasant conversation.”

“We weigh and scan and log everything bigger than a pea coming into the solar system. Everything has to be accounted for in manifests, whether shuttled down or brought on the mining ships, even personal belongings and the clothing on people’s backs. It’s to keep contraband out. That’s why they had to smuggle the cutting weapons inside the Yeti; it was the only way to get them through undetected. My system has access to all those logs going back at least fifteen years before I got here,” he said. “Ask Lena to look up who brought down the red bear.”

“She will search the records, but warns it is not a streamlined process.”

“No, the records are a goddamned un-indexed mess,” Ray said. “Okay then. If something happens to me, then she now has a lead for who to look at.”

He stood up, tucked the now-empty thermal mug away. His icedog was already up too, alert and ready. “Firn, stay,” he said. “You too, Ajr en Logo.”

“What are you doing?”

“I have the feeling time is running out, so I’m going to flush them out with old-fashioned stupidity. Hopefully between when they jump out to kill me, but before

they actually do, Firm will come to my rescue. If not, and I die, remember this was your idea.”

“Ray, I do not think—”

“No, me neither,” he said, and stepped out of the depression in the snow. It was a short walk to the top of the ridge, and as soon as he hit the crest and got a good look at the landscape below, he ran down into the valley, using momentum to keep himself upright as he careened through the snow.

“HEY!” he bellowed. “HEY! YOU COWARDLY MURDERING BASTARDS! I'M A GHOST, AND I'VE COME TO HAUNT YOU! COME OUT AND FACE ME!”

As the valley was beginning to level out, he hit something protruding from the snow that sent him off-balance, and it was several more awkward falling, tumbling steps before he somehow got his feet solidly under him again.

It was almost impossible to spot what had tripped him up in the darkness, even with the goggles. A whip-thin rod, less than a centimeter in diameter, was sticking up out of the snow. It was a remote perimeter sentry, used by the mining companies to make sure no one crossed out of their assigned territory; the fines were significant for even small violations, and getting kicked off Erax before you'd filled your bins could bankrupt your whole enterprise. Now that he knew what he was looking for, he gazed intently across the valley floor, and could see another dozen or so around him. Each rotated until the tiny, bright dots of heat on their tips had turned to face him.

Well, he thought, now we both know we're here.

There was a particular sound snow made, when despite its careful compact layering it found itself being fractured and separated, a low, rumbling crunch that nothing else Ray had ever heard sounded quite like. It was a protest against the intrusion of plows, or the birth announcement of avalanches, and in the absence of both on the flat valley floor, it was also the sound of company coming.

He watched as a circle defined itself in the snow about thirty meters further into the valley, the edges of the pack holding its form as it was forced upward. There had been dozens of old mines along this part of the coast, depleted and abandoned a generation ago. Officially they had been sealed at termination, rendered permanently inaccessible. He was certain that wouldn't have included leaving a subsurface elevator functional.

Finally the disc of snow rose fully clear of its surrounds, revealing the dark maw of the platform space underneath as it exhaled warm air around it. He crouched down in the snow to present a smaller target and waited.

He could see movement, but not make out anything more specific than knowing that there were multiple people in heat-neutral suits slipping out into the surrounding snow. Then one came out from the front and walked leisurely toward him. *Giving their friends time to surround me*, he thought. They hadn't shot him yet, so he took a gamble and stood up again, keeping his gun low at his side but ready, and moved forward to meet them.

They stopped, by unspoken mutual agreement, about four meters apart. “Well, shit,” the man said, with that same familiar-but-can't-place-it voice he remembered far too clearly from his brief adventure in deep sea diving. “It is you.”

“Not expecting to see me here?” Ray asked.

“Not expecting to see you anywhere, really,” the man said. “This is a problem.”

“Glad to hear it,” Ray said. “Now why don't you tell me who the fuck you are? I think I've earned that right.”

“You watch too many drama vids. I told you last time, we don't work that way,” the man said. “But we have a few questions for you. Don't worry, I'll make them brief.”

He held out one hand, palms up as if in apology for that, as a small pistol appeared in his other hand. Ray brought his own gun up, but before he could fire—or be shot,

jumped, or otherwise set on—a giant ball of fur exploded past him. In a breath Firm had the man down, and the angry shout turned into a scream.

Around him, four other people rose up with long guns.

“No!” he shouted, and threw himself over his dog. He closed his eyes, expecting to die instantly, but other than the muffled growls of Firm there was only silence. The man below him was no longer making any sound, either.

What the hell? Ray thought. He raised his head and dared to look around, and could not see anyone.

“Firm! Release,” he commanded, and when his dog backed reluctantly off, he crouched down and pulled off the man’s mask.

“Well, shit. Sal Lancaster!” he declared. Every time he’d ever exchanged words with the man, Sal had talked in a fast, slightly leering whine. No wonder he hadn’t been able to place the serious, deadpan voice of his attacker. He nudged the mangled corpse with his boot. “Did you keep going on and on about alien robot sex just to make me completely avoid you? Cause if not, you had at least one hobby too many, and you probably should have stuck with that and not the murder and conspiracy shit.”

Firm began to growl again, and he turned, gun ready, to see a thick, large figure approaching along the path he’d forged through the snow. There was still no sign of the others who had come out of the elevator.

Ray put his hand on Firm’s head. “Stop there!” he called out.

The figure stopped, and Ray realized two things simultaneously: it was a Yeti, and it was holding Ajr en Logo’s remote. They regarded each other for a few moments longer, then the Yeti took a few more calm, slow steps forward. “Stop!” Ray said again, having to grab a scruff of Firm’s fur to keep her still.

The Yeti stopped again.

“Please put my friend down,” Ray said. “It’s not your enemy. *I’m* not your enemy. I don’t know if you can understand me, but I don’t want to hurt you. Please.”

The Yeti set the remote down in the jumbled, churned up snow, and straightened. “We understand you,” it said.

Ray let his hand with the gun fall to his side, and stared at the Yeti open-mouthed.

“Ray,” the remote said. “It is very difficult for us to move this unit through the snow. May Six Two pick me up again?”

“Yeah,” Ray said, and found himself suddenly sitting down, nearly upon Sal’s corpse. He dropped the gun beside him, not caring that it might get lost in the snow. Looking around he could now see other Yeti around them, where Sal’s fellow conspirators had been. Ajr’s watchers. It made sense—too much sense, for all the lies it laid brutally bare.

“It’s okay,” he said, as Firm stood protectively beside him. “Everything I know is wrong.”

“Everything you have been taught is wrong,” the Yeti said. “There is sometimes a difference.”

It picked up the remote and finished its approach, sitting in the snow comfortably across from Ray.

“I didn’t know you could talk,” Ray said.

“Most of us have our vocal chords cut at birth, so we cannot. I was born here, free,” the Yeti said. It waved to indicate the others. “Many of us escaped, or were brought here and discarded, ill or injured, to die in the snow alone.”

“I’m sorry,” Ray said.

“You did not do this,” the Yeti said. “Though you also did not stop it. I am Six Two.”

“I’m Ray. Ray Landham.”

“I know,” the Yeti said. “The surface administrator, responsible for all of us not under the water. Your duties have just become much larger, have they not?”

"You can say that," Ray said. He closed his eyes for a second, trying to find some core bit of himself that could cope with this rationally. There wasn't, when it came down to it, time for him to bemoan or defend his own ignorance. He tried to struggle up out of the snow, legs still weak, and the Yeti stood easily and held out its hand.

Ray accepted it, and was pulled upright. "Thank you," Ray said. "I . . . I have a lot of questions, but I think they'll have to wait. Right now I need to go see what's down below, and hope there's answers. I assume—" He looked around. "—there's no one up here left to ask?"

"We did not want anyone to suffer," Six Two said. "Nor could we risk our existence being reported."

"I'm grateful to know you're here, myself," Ray said.

"This was against our advice," the remote said. "Please do not underestimate the burden of responsibility this knowledge places on you."

"I will do my best," Ray said. "Who's coming in with me?"

"We would not wish to be left behind," the remote said. It scuttled up onto Ray's shoulder, where it settled securely.

Ray turned to Six Two. "There are likely more people inside, and even if they haven't seen you, they will know how many people were here and may be able to guess. They also likely have other exits."

"We will make sure no one comes out this way," Six Two said. "The rest is for you to do."

"Right," Ray said. He found his gun and brushed the snow off. "Firn, come."

There was no one at the bottom of the elevator ready to shoot him when he took it down into the mine, which he saw as a personally positive but overall troubling sign.

He'd been in abandoned mines from the same era as this one, but not like this. The typically rough and irregular walls had been ground smooth, and instead of a sand-packed floor that kicked up dust constantly around you, polycrrete had been set down and was still shiny enough to be recent. Lights came on and off as he moved in and out of their reach. At the end of the long corridor were doors that slid open at his approach, and he stepped out onto a wide balcony overlooking what could have been an entire town square dug out of the rock.

"Is Lena still in my office?" Ray asked the remote.

"Yes. She has fallen asleep on your desk."

"When she wakes up, tell her Sal Lancaster was part of it."

"Should I wake her now?"

"No," Ray said. "If she's asleep, then she needs it. I mean, if someone jumps out and kills me, then yeah. What's that sound?"

It was coming from behind him, a faint hiss, and he turned, rolled his eyes, and continued into the town. "Come along when you're done claiming the place, Firn," he called behind him.

The underground mine had three levels, most nothing but preliminary vacancy in the rock. This place, if full, would easily double Erax's population. Until SystemOps found it, and then they'd be lucky if the entire human population wasn't scoured down to zero. He thought about Six Two, and amended that in his thinking to just the humans Control defined as such or got caught in the fire.

The bottom level was roughly framed-out as offices, and the smell of coffee—sharp in the otherwise sterile, unscented air—drew him toward another set of doors, and then into a small block of offices around a large room.

There were signs of occupation here, and recently; a small box of tools sat near one console beside a half-assembled shelf unit, while a bowl of half-eaten food sat next to another. A databank set in the wall had its doors wide open. In the storageweb there was a gaping hole where a row of chips had been pulled free.

Ray watched the furiously blinking lights and smiled. "I guess someone doesn't understand automated redundancy at all," he said, though it couldn't really be said he understood it himself much more than a little. Just enough to know that the system was trying to rebuild its full dataset in its remaining space. In the center of the room a ceiling-to-floor transplasm display screen lit up as it came back online. In the center, it began to trace out in glowing blue light a map of the complex they now stood in, the familiar green squiggle of the coastline north of them zigzagging its way across the board.

"Better wake up Lena," he said. He pointed toward a long set of blue double lines extending from a bay-sized area. "That's the other exit. It has to be a service tunnel leading from the garage, because the one we came in through wasn't big enough for anything other than foot traffic and we know they have skiffs because they threw me in the back of one. I'm not sure your friends can get to where it surfaces on time, but Lena can. Can you show her on the wall map where this is?"

The remote was silent, no doubt busy doing things on the other end. Ray watched the coastline finish filling in, tiny dots popping up to indicate nearby towns he knew so well. In the lower corner was a scale manipulator, and after giving up on what he had, he stepped forward and flexed his fingers outward in front of it, letting the picture zoom in, then made pinching motions until it zoomed out and began to quickly render the entire planetary surface. Everything here must have been brought down properly logged, and then written off as defective so it could be carefully disappeared.

Control would never have put up the money for him to have something even a tenth this useful, and that made Ray just a little bit more angry at the conspirators. "When this is over, I'm going to confiscate this and put it in my office," he muttered.

When the northern coastline and the rest of the settlements were all lit, a tiny pop-up appeared that read: SHOW UNITS. Ray leaned forward and tapped the screen, and tiny yellow dots began to appear all over the map, starting at the coastlines and spreading into the ocean. There were hundreds, some in tiny groups of two or three, many of them in large clusters. One lone red dot, on the middle island where Eas en Ka had fallen, bore the tag DEFECT: PREMATURE ACTIVATION.

As he watched, he realized a number of the dots were moving, some slowly, some fast, the directions unpredictable.

"Ajr? Logo?" he asked. "This make sense to you?"

The remote straightened up on its legs and focused on the map. "Yes," it answered almost immediately. "This is not information that should be here."

"Are those your cities? Where the dots are all grouped together?"

"Yes," the remote said. "The other dots must represent the drifters. See, there is a dot exactly where I am waiting, off the coast. Others correspond to friends whose locations I currently know. I do not understand how they could have this data."

Ray pointed to a section of coastline. "This is where you found the bodies, right? The dots become more sparse the farther away they are. If the bodies were dumped here, then that's where the cutters were introduced to the water. If the drifters picked them up as they passed through the area, or currents brought them far enough out for their paths to coincide deeper down, then eventually they'd be able to track you through them."

"But our cities?"

"Walkers occasionally go back, right? They only need to hitch a ride."

"We would notice something foreign attached to us," Ajr en Logo said. "Once we did, we would search all of ourselves for more."

"So it's camouflaged somehow, something you wouldn't notice, maybe hiding in with—Shit!" Ray turned for the counter behind him, accidentally knocking the old food bowl over, and scrambled through his bag for his icepick.

"Ray . . . ?" the remote asked, as Firn moved in and dealt with the overturned bowl for him.

"Right in front of our damned faces all this time," Ray said, and pulled the forgotten curled-up red star from his pocket. He set it on the table, stepped back, raised the icepick, and hit it as hard as he could with the hammer end.

It didn't shatter as he'd hoped—or turn into a bloody pulp of former sea creature as he'd feared—but one of the star legs came loose, revealing the glint of metal inside. Ray hit it again, and more until it was little more than smashed parts. There was a small logic core at the heart of the mechanism, clad with the rubbery red exterior that had made it easy for the watchers to spot from a distance, nearly impossible for the drifters to see at all. Attached to the underside, among the remains of the legs, was a circular cutting blade.

"Ajr, listen to me," Ray said. "They have to know by now that we're onto them, and they can't afford to wait any longer. Whatever plan they have, right now they can exterminate your entire people, and I'd bet everything I have that this isn't their only op center. Any of your walkers that are close enough to the coast or the islands need to get out of the water. Get Logo out of the water *now*. Any that can't, but can get to your cities, need to go there and try to find and destroy the red stars before they start cutting into them. Do you have any way to evacuate?"

"Most dwellers will not believe," Ajr en Logo said. "Even those that will . . . may not wish to leave, nor can do so quickly. And we cannot differentiate these 'red' stars from the others."

"I can. That means the Yeti should be able to, too," Ray said. "I don't know which of my people I can trust, but you trust them."

"We are passing on the warning," the remote said. "If it were not for the attack on Eas en Ka, few would believe us. As it is . . . we will have to hope."

"I'm sorry," Ray said.

"As are we. We have explained to Lena in self what is happening as best as we can guess. She informs us that both BrodalCorp Mining Three and Four have had excessive Yeti losses and other write-offs of large materials, including three skiffs. She also tells us that the stuffed bear belongs to Hillie Goodman."

"Hillie? No fucking way," Ray said. "Dammit, I wouldn't have guessed her. I hate people."

He walked over to the datastore, found the power regulation module, and ripped it out with both hands. Every electronic console and screen in the room went instantly dark. He threw the unit on the floor under a desk, put back on his parka as quickly as he could, then grabbed a handful of tools and the remote. "Firn!" he said, and the icedog perked up from where it had been napping, sprawled out on the floor.

"Where are we going?" the remote asked.

"To the garage, and hoping there's still a skitter here," Ray said. "Then to the coast, because even if I can't do anything else useful, at least I can help you and Logo."

As he passed through the doorway, he heard a faint sound, and glanced back to see the remnants of the red star vibrate itself off the desk. "Now we run," he said, and did.

There was one skiff left in the garage bay, and Ray declared it officially commandeered as he jumped into the driver's seat. They emerged into full morning light, and found Six Two and the four other Yeti waiting for them. "We will help," Six Two said, as they climbed onto the back of the skiff. Ray set off again.

The coast was mercifully closer from there, and Ray didn't slow down until the very last moments when he fishtailed the skiff sideways to end up right at the edge of the beach. Logo was pulling another walker out of the ocean. Water streamed out of holes in the other walker's torso. "Ajr?" Ray asked.

“We are okay for now, but we are all being cut,” the remote answered, as Logo got the other walker fully out and onto its own feet. “This is our friend, Masi en Resk. There are six more drifters heading here, but I am not sure if they will make it without assistance. Some that dismissed our initial warning are also now trying to reach land, but many are too far away.”

Ray ran toward Logo, the remote tucked under an arm. “If we point them out, can your remotes remove them? Otherwise you may need to lie down so we can reach.”

Another walker stumbled up onto shore, crawling on all four limbs, and collapsed. Ray could see at least a dozen of the cutters just from where he was standing. “Six Two!” he called. “That one . . . do you see the red stars? If you can get them off, smash them on the rocks. There are tools in the skiff if you need them.”

Six Two nodded, and turned to the other Yeti, flashing a complex sequence of hand signs at them. Immediately they went to the fallen walker and climbed up on it, seeking. *Right*, Ray thought. *Vocal chords cut out at birth*.

There were four stars on Logo, three out of his reach. The walker Logo had helped out of the water had nine. Remotes swarmed up and over both of them as Ray pointed them out one by one.

He got the star on Logo’s leg free on his own, set it upon a stone, and whacked it with the icepick until it stopped moving. Blood seeped through sharp lines cut through the fingers of his gloves. Logo’s remotes brought him the remaining three to smash, and then he turned to the walker Resk and began directing the growing swarm of remotes toward them. Six Two was doing the same with the fallen walker, and Ray saw one of the other Yeti bring its star to the rock, pick up the hammer, and hit it so many times that Ray was worried about shrapnel. When there was nothing left of it bigger than a pea, the Yeti looked to Ray and grinned. “Good job,” Ray said.

The Yeti held up its hands, fingers splayed, and flashed the numbers eight and then one. “Eight One? Is that your name?” Ray asked. “Mine is Ray. It’s nice to meet you, Eight One.”

It smiled even wider, then ran back to the others.

Ray located a star on the second walker’s leg that he could just reach, and shoved a screwdriver under it to wedge it free. A remote had crawled nearer, probably to check if he’d need help. “We have temporarily patched our damage,” it said. “We go to help others in.”

“Be careful,” Ray said. “You could pick up new stars from the water.”

“We know. It is a necessary risk. Masi en Resk will follow when they are able.” The remote pointed toward the fallen walker. “Isun en Sess may be too damaged. Isun will require some small medical assistance, if Sess will let you provide it. I fear many others will be less easily convinced, and more in need.”

“We’ll do what we can, for whoever lets us,” Ray said. “How are the cities?”

“Vibrations consistent with what we are experiencing have been detected all over our cities’ outer hulls. They are much thicker, but also have a deep layer of sea growth upon them, so it is being very difficult to pinpoint the individual sources. With our walkers compromised, it is unlikely that a significant percentage of the sources will be neutralized before the cities are breached. Even a small hole, that deep under water, will be catastrophic.”

“And . . . are your people leaving?”

“Even those that wish to fear vulnerability in our small craft. A few have departed, and contact lost soon thereafter.”

“Shit,” Ray said, stepping back as Logo turned and dove off the ice sheet back into the water. “Can your cities surface?”

“It has never been done. I am passing the idea along, but swift pressure changes could be a problem for dwellers, who are not accustomed to such.”

"You're dealing with this really well," Ray said, as he got the last of the red stars off the collapsed walker and smashed it.

"This is Logo in self speaking," the remote said. "Ajr is dealing with this less well, but is still functioning as needed. I am concerned for their sustained well-being."

"If you need to get out of there and back up on land, you do it," Ray said.

"We have reached our friends Ules en Mira and Jaci en Dey. Mira is flooding badly and there is danger to Ules, but Dey less so; together we are bringing them in. Your friend Lena in self wishes to speak with you urgently. I can transmit directly, which is untenable rudeness among our peoples, but it will save time and require less of my attention."

"Please do," Ray said.

"Ray!" the remote said, the voice the same, the tenor completely different.

"Lena," Ray answered. He heard a commotion and turned to see another walker crawling up onto the beach about a kilometer away. "Hang on. You!" he shouted at the Yeti who had just finished off the last of their red stars. "Eight One? And, ah . . . Three Five? Do you think you could go help that walker?"

When they nodded, he gave them a double thumbs-up, hoping that wasn't Yeti-sign for anything vulgar. "Thank you!" he called after them as they took his hammer and screwdriver, took his skiff, and headed off down the beach. It was disconcerting and more than a little shaming how impossible it was, now, to not see them as people.

"Ray?" Lena was asking again through the remote. "Your bear decoy—"

"Hollie Goodman's," Ray said. "Ajr en Logo told me."

"Yes, but when I kicked in her door to have some bruises with her about it, and found her completely indisposed, she had no idea what I was talking about and it was fucking Ron Hill who bolted for the door. Or tried to, anyway. We found a gun in his pants, which he was not wearing at the time. Also a private comm device. I informed him I could execute him on the spot for that, and that it would be a more merciful death than handing him back to Hollie. She was upset enough that he took her bear, but when she found out he was trying to kill the walkers—"

"Lena, while normally I could listen to you tell me in excruciating detail every painful thing you did or are going to do to Hill, we were too late. They've activated their devices. I'm doing what I can to help the walkers that can make it to shore, but a lot of the Oceanics are gonna die and if Ron has any info at all I can use to stop this, I need it now. And I need to know everyone in the conspiracy. And I need absolutely everyone who isn't in on it, who is sober and even slightly useful, to get their asses to the coast and help any walkers they find there," he said. "I'm declaring a planetary emergency. Bring pop-shelters, heaters, and humidifiers if you can get them quickly, and set up an evacuation camp on the coast. Call Northtown and tell them what's going on and to set one up too. Some of the conspirators will be up there, and a lot of walkers on their coasts needing help. I don't know how you're going to get him to talk, but—"

"He's already talking," Lena said. "Don't ask me details how. There's a few people in every settlement. One BrodalCorp camp is entirely bad, the other is about a quarter compromised. Not sure how we're going to deal with that yet."

"Which one is the all-bad one?"

"S-Three. The one closer to Dunfroze."

"Okay. Deal with everywhere else, and then we'll figure it out," Ray said. "Right now we're looking at attempted genocide, and I am not interested in being nice to anyone about it. Get people we can trust to the coast. No one goes alone, and you pick the teams, not them. Pair people with people they don't like."

"Got it," she said. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, tell SystemOps I'm declaring a lockdown, and they are welcome to shoot the

fuck down anyone who leaves the planet without my express and direct permission. It's up to them if they want to give a warning shot first, but everyone down here *stays* down here. If they have a problem with that, let me know."

"Got it," Lena said through the remote.

He heard a rumbling noise and glanced up the slope away from the beach just in time to see his bright blue Icebreak admin skitter come flying over the snowdune stuffed with wildly waving Yeti.

"Hey, my skitter!" he shouted. "Gotta go!"

He grabbed Ajr en Logo's remote and ran, intercepting it just as it came to an abrupt halt in a tall drift of snow. Yeti tumbled out of it, rolling in the snow, their mouths wide open with what he at first thought were horrifically silent screams, until he realized they were *laughing*.

They sat up, scrambled to their feet, and backed away warily as he approached, so he made himself slow down. "Thank you for hiding my skitter for me," he said. "Can I have it back now?"

One nodded slowly. Ray smiled, set the remote onto the floor in front of the passenger seat where it would be less likely to bounce out, then backed the skitter up and turned for the smooth stretch of beach.

A Yeti stepped into his path, and Ray slammed on the brakes, sending up a spray of beach pebbles.

"Bring me?" Six Two asked.

"Get in and buckle up," Ray answered, and the Yeti climbed in beside him and picked up the remote, sitting it in his lap. A half-second later Firm threw herself up and past both to sprawl out in the warm back, and Six Two slammed the door closed.

The skitter was slower than the skiff, but he was going far enough he'd need the warmth of the enclosed cab, and there was always the chance he might have to carry a lot of injured Oceanics to help. "What's the situation with your people?" he asked the remote.

"There are five compromised drifters on the beach four kilometers ahead, with two more offshore nearby and struggling," the remote said from Six Two's lap. "Overall, we have twenty-nine walkers below the waterline we have no position data for and are unable to establish communication with, ninety-five attempting to assist the cities despite their own imminent danger, seventy-three approaching but not at the coastlines in varying extents of distress, and one hundred and sixteen on land. Of those last, nineteen are probable losses of one or both halves. The numbers of dead, destroyed, and lost are likely to accelerate rapidly, especially when the city hulls are finally breached."

"Whatever resources you need, ask Lena and she will arrange it," Ray said. "In the meantime, there has to be a shut-off. If they could kick off the cutters from somewhere else, then they can stop it, too. I'm betting it's in Mine Three, so I'm going there . . . and if any of your walkers can come help, I might need it. Those mining camp buildings are dropped from orbit and built to withstand almost anything."

The camps were shaped like gigantic metal bugs, filling up on precious elements before lifting again once they'd reached capacity. There had been reports of some even abandoning their Yeti to a slow, starving death in order to pack more raw material onboard, and although he'd never entirely either believed it or had evidence for it beyond hearsay, it did provide one explanation for the free Yeti here.

Six Two must have been thinking about this as well. "There are many of my people in the camp surrounds, who have no voluntary part in what is being done," they said.

"I know," Ray said. "I'm thinking about it."

And he was. But if he went up directly against SystemOps on behalf of the Yeti, or, worse, tried to go public about them, he'd be lucky if they just threw him down

another hole.

Save everyone first, he thought, then worry about what next.

The two mines would know by now he was coming. He picked up the public comm in his skitter, the one with the authority to override all other traffic on the planet, and clicked it on. "This is Surface Administrator Ray Landham, addressing BrodalMine S-Four. You have people among you who have conspired to commit mass murder. If you do not know who they are, they're probably going to be pulling a gun on you before I've finished speaking. Do whatever is necessary to secure the safety of the innocents in your facility and to collect the criminals—or the criminals' bodies—to be handed over into official custody. Addressing BrodalMine S-Three, I know you're all in on it. Either terminate your hostile action against the Oceanics this instant and get all yourselves out on the ice with your hands behind your heads and wait, or be prepared for this to be done with extreme force. There will be no other warnings. Ray Landham, out."

He was going fast enough he didn't dare take his eyes off the snow ahead. "Six Two, do the Yeti in the mining camps speak the same hand language your free people do?"

"Yes," Six Two said.

"Can you convince them to leave?"

"They would not require much convincing, but there will be a perimeter preventing them doing so without risking death."

"Ajr en Logo, do you think your remote could disable enough of the perimeter to let the Yeti out?"

"I am just Logo. Ajr is very busy and under stress. But likely yes," the remote said.

Ray drove up over a large snowbank and tilted wildly coming down the far side. In the distance he could now see the gray hulking shape of S-Three. If there was any activity around it, which he doubted, he was too far away to spot it.

He did, however, see the sprays of steam kick up in several places at once. "Not gonna work, assholes," he muttered. "I already know that trick."

"What are they doing?" the remote asked.

"Making a trench," Ray answered. "They think they're buying themselves some time. Six Two, I want you to hop out and take this remote with you, before we're close enough for you to be seen. Make your way to the trench and throw the remote over. Logo, then you can go disable the perimeter around the Yeti camp. Is that okay?"

"The Yeti will still be trapped on the other side of the trench," the remote said.

"I'm going to pull up and leave the skitter, and walk over to where I can negotiate with someone on the other side. Once I do, you can steal my skitter and push it into the trench to make a bridge, as long as you remember that I'm very fond of my skitter so you should feel bad as you do it. Okay?"

"Yes," Six Two said. "I will weep copiously, deep inside where none can see."

Ray grimaced. "I like you, Six Two. Don't get killed, okay? And Logo, if you can find your way back to me, I'll need someone to let me know if the attack stops. It'd be a shame to destroy the whole place after they've already surrendered. Better go now."

He slowed a bit, just as he crested another small hill, and Six Two leaned forward to pick up the remote from the front and then just tipped out the side door into the snow. They were up and running again without missing a beat. Ray took his eyes off Six Two to navigate the bumpy downslope, and when he glanced back again he could not spot the Yeti anywhere. *Good*, he thought, reaching over to pull the door closed again.

Steam still rose in points as the last of the lines were drawn, and he turned his skitter to run alongside one until he spotted one of the miners in the distance just shutting down their boremaker. He parked the skitter and walked along the new pit to close the distance, Firn at his heels. He tried not to look in, even though he knew it must end at rock or frozen ground only a few meters below; the sharp-cut edges

down was one memory he wasn't in the mood to re-explore.

The man stood there, waiting for him, his face masked and his arms crossed over his chest in a way that felt smug, even through a parka.

"You!" Ray called when he was close enough. "Who the fuck is in charge?"

"Not you!" the man called back.

This time Ray recognized the voice as one of the mine managers. "And you think you are, John Eddy?" he called back. "Or was Sal? He didn't look so authoritative with his face chewed off."

Eddy pulled his mask down. "Nothing you can do to stop it now," he said.

"So then tell me why," Ray said. "One man to another, across this divide."

"Because this is what being human is about," Eddy said. "Survival of the fittest, of the superior. This planet—every planet—that we can reach out and touch, we should take."

"That's not how it works," Ray said.

"That's now how it works if you're *weak*," Eddy countered. "That's the ultimate test, and you failed it by being complacent, by never once looking around you and wanting more. And so instead you get nothing."

Out of the corner of his eye, Ray saw *Ajr en Logo's* remote moving toward him through the path he'd stomped through the snow, and past it, the blue glint of the roof of his skitter lopsided in the trench and an empty snowfield beyond it.

"You know what I want?" Ray called back. "Warm toes. I didn't get them for very long, but you know what I did get? Friends."

He held out his hand, and the remote jumped up onto his shoulder. Eddy visibly recoiled. "You're a traitor to your species and the memory of Earth, Ray," he shouted.

"Whatever," Ray called back. "Surrender and shut down your attack on the Oceanics, now. Last chance."

Eddy sneered. "You want us to? Then come make us," he said.

Ray heaved a deep sigh, wondering if he should feel more disappointed than he did. "*Ajr en Logo*, as surface administrator and the authoritative representative of EarthGov and EarthGov's interests here on Erax, I hereby give your people my consent to do whatever is needed to stop that signal, even if such actions may cause damage to property or loss of life," he told the remote, as Eddy strained to hear. "Or, to put it more directly: to hell with them. Rip it apart."

"As you say," the remote said.

Behind them, he heard the oceans roil, and the ice edge crumble, and the look of surprise on Eddy's face as he stared past him told Ray all he needed to know. He crossed his own arms over his chest, mimicking the other man's earlier stance, and when the mine manager's gaze shifted back to him, Ray flashed a double middle finger.

Eddy pulled a pistol out of his parka, but before he could get a shot off at Ray, a chunk of ice not much smaller than a skitter flattened the man to the ground, exploding into a shower of ice and snow.

Shadows fell over and around him and grew taller and darker, until he was standing in the midst of an army of walkers, each stepping over the trench as easily as a man might a crack between floorboards. A group of five armed men emerged and began to fire upon the walkers, but were quickly taken out with more thrown ice blocks. One miner ran out, hands over his head in surrender, and the walkers let him pass. Unfortunately, the man made the mistake of looking backward as he ran, and disappeared with a faint cry into the trench.

"Well, it was nice of them to make sure no one would escape," Ray said. "Any word from Lena?"

"There are now fourteen walkers at the Jettyrock tent site that has just been set up. We have requested that all humans leave the area, except Dr. Noyes in self who has offered his assistance, and Lena in self who is outside the tent with your other

dog to maintain our security and privacy.”

“And your people?”

“We have breaches in three cities. Two are at least for now being successfully contained, but Amemmi at the Thermal Vents is gravely damaged. It is too soon to take stock of numbers dead yet, and does no good right now.”

“No,” Ray agreed.

There was an ear-splitting shriek as a pair of walkers tore the metal cladding off one side of the Mine Camp dome. More miners ran out, and one made it halfway across the skitter-bridge before an ice block bowled him into a trench. A second miner, running behind him, made it across and raised his fists in victory moments before he was suddenly pulled down out of sight into the snow. Ray was pleased to know Six Two was still out there.

With enough of the shielding removed, the walkers were now tearing apart the structure of the camp itself.

Eight more men came out from the back of the camp, awkwardly lugging one of the boremakers. Ray smiled grimly, hoping they were cursing out their missing Yeti.

“Boremaker,” Ray told the remote on his shoulder and pointed. They tipped it horizontally, trying to aim it, but the bulk was too much for them and the snow too unstable to get it pointed properly toward anyone. The walkers in its wavering path stepped to either side, and one came around the side of the camp dome and crushed the boremaker and at least three of the men with one foot.

The other five split and ran, two back inside the dome and three out into clear snow where they crouched down and put their hands behind their heads in surrender.

Ray tapped his comms, happy to see his poor abused skitter was still relaying. “This is Ray Landham. I know there are five of you left inside the camp, and we can bring that down to zero real fast. Surrender and stop the cutters, or we’ll stomp your camp so flat there won’t be a piece left of you big enough to ship home in a baggie. And no, I’m not going to give you time to think about it.”

Four men ran out, hands up. Three joined their fellow miners where they waited in surrender, the other kept his hands up and approached the other side of the trench from Ray. When he was close enough, he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted. “Powers is dead! This is all of us!” he said. “We don’t know how to stop the cutters! It wasn’t us!”

“The attack hasn’t stopped,” the remote said from his shoulder.

“Yeah, he’s lying,” Ray said.

Something caught his eye, and he shifted his gaze from the miner to the camp behind him, where the walkers were still pulling it apart. Through one of the widening cracks, he saw it again: a blue double-flash from inside. “Get your people back,” he snapped. “They’re overloading the camp reactor.”

The six men on the ground got up and fled, leaping down into the trench, and the one who’d shouted to Ray threw himself flat as the walkers let go of whatever they were pulling or tearing and abandoned the camp. He had idly wondered now and then if walkers could run, and here was his answer: yes, and it would have been just as comical as he’d imagined if not for the circumstances.

Which he’d been ignoring his own proximity to, he realized as the remote on his shoulder poked him on the side of his head, sharply. “Ray!” it said. “You also require cover.”

“Right,” he said, and turned away, running as best as he could through the snow. He could hear a walker behind him, but it took him by surprise when he felt a hard push from behind, fell into a giant cupped hand, and rose into the air, the wind knocked out of him.

As he worked on breathing, the camp behind them exploded.

The heat wave, such as it was, was brief and already dissipating by the time it reached them, but he could hear the ping and thump of bits of debris bouncing off the back of the walker carrying him. He finally managed to recover enough to look up, expecting to see Logo, but it was an unfamiliar walker. He feebly raised one hand and waved, managing to choke out a sincerely grateful, "Hi!"

"This is Bani en Moske," the remote said, from somewhere distinctly uncomfortable under his shoulder.

Ray sat up as best he could, and pulled the remote free. "I'm going to have some beautiful bruises," he said, "but I suspect it was a good trade-off. The attack . . . did we—?"

"The attack has stopped," the remote said.

Ray laid down again. What if he'd been wrong, or they'd had another underground base? He was all too aware how much he'd been gambling on his guesses, but now it seemed to hit him like a blow. "That's good," he managed.

"Lena in self informs us that Mine Four has also surrendered, and have brought out some bodies that correspond in number to the information Ron Hill in self gave her, as proof of their good faith."

"I should go there—" Ray started to say.

"No. Lena in self tells us now that there is a distress call from the coast, from 'Kenna,' and you should go there immediately."

He was so tired. Couldn't this be over already? He closed his eyes for a second and then made himself rally enough energy to open them and sit back up. "Okay," he said. "I'll get my skitter and—shit. That's not going to work."

"Moske is willing to carry you there," the remote said. "We have given it the location. There are also damaged walkers there who have stopped responding."

"Where are you right now?" Ray asked, as the walker picked up its pace and he was jounced up and down in the curled hand, much to the complaint of his shoulder and back.

"We are searching for more of our people lost in the deep. Even with the attack stopped, the damage and the danger remain. Lives may yet be saved."

When the walker began to run, he thought it might shake him to pieces, and he was positive he was going to be black and blue if he ever got to look in a mirror at his own ass again, but he had to admit they were covering ground far faster than he could've in his skitter.

Still, it was a long, bumpy ride until they neared the section of coast where the call had come from. When Bani en Moske slowed to a walk again, he stood up on his knees to see. Two walkers lay side by side facedown on the beach, holding hands as if they had helped each other the last few meters to land. A third was still half-submerged in surf, only its head and upper torso out of the water. Kenna's orange survey skitter was between the pair and the last, also not moving. It took him a few more minutes as they approached to spot the camouflaged skiff, like the one he was abducted in, further down the beach.

Nothing stirred at their approach.

"Have your friend put me down," Ray told the remote. "If there's danger, let me go find it before they walk into it."

Whether that made any practical sense was beyond his ability to say, much less argue, but Moske stopped and gently set Ray down in the snow.

His legs felt like jelly under him, unreliably weak and stiff as hell, but he forced himself to take a few tottering steps, and then got his feet under him again and went first to Kenna's skitter. Since she'd put in the call, he was hoping there'd be some clue there as to what had happened.

To his surprise, Kenna was sitting in the driver's seat, deathly pale and shaking, but alive. "Kenna?" he said, and though her eyes were open it took her a few moments

to focus and turn her head toward him. There was blood on the side of her head, running in rivulets down her neck to disappear into her parka. There was a large red stain seeping through at her shoulder. "Ray?" she said, as if he was the most surprising thing.

"Kenna, I'm here. Talk to me. What happened to you?"

"Shot me," she said. "The bitch."

"Who? Who shot you?"

"Ran her the fuck over so she couldn't shoot me again."

"Who, Kenna?"

She took a long, shuddering breath, and closed her eyes. "She killed them. Hudson."

"Hudson is dead?"

"No, Hudson went in to try to help. I ran her over, Ray," she said, and started sobbing.

"Hang on, Kenna. I'm just going to go look, okay?"

"Don't leave me alone," she said. "Go find Hudson."

Ray leaned away from the skitter window, and looked around. "Lena sent a skiff when the call first came," the remote said. "It is still several hours away."

"Okay," Ray said. He walked slowly down the side of the skitter, around the back, and then back up the passenger side. In the crushed snow, sticking out from beneath the middle pair of tires, there were legs. "Aw shit," he said, and got down on his knees in the snow. "I can't see who it is."

The remote dropped into the snow beside him, and shone a strong white light that lit everything underneath the skitter in sharp relief.

Ray got up, leaned back to crouch on his heels. "Ella Peakham," he said. "Dammit."

At least she was no threat to anyone anymore.

He went back to Kenna's door. "Help is on the way," he told her, and she nodded. "I'm going to go find Hudson, but I'm not going far, okay? I'll be right back. You sit there and you breathe and you don't go anywhere, okay?"

"Okay," she said.

Ray reluctantly left her there, and approached the first of the pair of walkers holding hands. The door was open, and he barely had to peer his head in to see all he needed to see. "I'm sorry," he said to the remote on his shoulder. It leapt down and ran on all its legs toward the second walker.

He heaved a deep sigh, and headed for the third.

Inside, he found Hudson on the floor covered in blood, an Oceanic in his arms. He looked up when Ray came in, as if coming out of a trance. "She shot it," he said. "I'm trying to hold the blood in. Help?"

Ray knelt beside them, checked the Oceanic, saw no signs of life. "I'm sorry, Hudson. It's gone."

"No, you have to save them," Hudson said.

"Are you hurt?" Ray asked.

Hudson started, then shook his head. "No. If I let go it will start bleeding again. You have to help us."

Ajr en Logo's remote came in behind Ray, and Hudson stared wide-eyed at it. "Get away, get away!" he cried. "The spiders are coming to eat the Oceanic!"

"No, Hudson, the spiders are part of them," Ray said. He could see now a number of other remotes waiting in the shadows behind Hudson, out of his sight.

"This was Haldi en Sima," Ray's remote said. "Sima tells us Haldi is gone. They recognize the human is trying to help, and they don't want to scare him more than they already have, but they want him to leave."

Hudson was watching the remote as it spoke. "I tried to save it. I tried to save them all, but we got here too late," he said.

"We know. We appreciate," the remote said.

Ray put his arms around Hudson's shoulders. "Kenna is outside. Ella shot her too, and she needs our help," he said. "It's okay. You did everything you could. We need to leave them now."

"But . . ."

"Kenna needs us," Ray repeated, and that seemed to rouse the man. He cradled the Oceanic's head a moment longer, then gently let it down to the floor and stood. Ray could see now the holes, head and torso, where it had been shot. Point blank, perfect aim. There was never anything any of them could have done, except Ray himself, who should have found and stopped all of this before it ever could unfold this way.

Hudson leaning on him, Ray led him out of the fallen walker back into the waning afternoon light.

"Time to go home," he said.

* * *

They met up with the skiff Lena had sent with Pine and Fairbanks, about a third of the way back. Ray helped them move Kenna and Hudson over, each in their own separate states of shock. "You coming?" Pine asked.

"Not enough room, and the weight will slow you down. I'll be along in a while." Kenna's skitter wasn't the fastest truck out on the ice, but it had decent heat down in the footwells.

Fairbanks shook his head. "No, you go. I'll drive it back," he said. "You've been gone too long already."

Ray was, in the end, too tired to argue. Pine shoved him into the seat just vacated by Fairbanks, and they turned and sped back toward Icetown. Ray tried to figure out how many days had passed since he'd first headed out to meet Ames to fix the relay, and fell asleep before he'd even reached a tentative guess.

* * *

It was night when they reached Icetown, and it seemed like everyone was outside waiting for him to return, cheering in the freezing cold like a bunch of idiots. He'd never felt so loved by a bunch of people who didn't like him. Hollie Goodman was there and handed him a thermal mug of coffee. "Thanks," he said, then turned away so they wouldn't see tears. *You're too tired for this, you jerk*, he told himself. "Sorry, got something in my eye."

Lena was there too, waiting for the crowd to get enough of their short-lived fill of him before heading with relief back indoors. "Dr. Noyes wants to talk to you, soon as you're up for it. Says it's urgent," she said. "I told him first thing in the morning."

"Where is he?"

"Still at the medical tent on the coast, cleaning up. The walkers took their hurt people back to their cities, now that they're safe again, and reclaimed their dead. Ray—"

"I'll go now," he said.

"Then I'll drive, so you don't end up in a ditch again," Lena said.

"I didn't the first time! But fine, whatever," he said. He knew he was still too tired to make it safely in the night, and if anyone had pressed him for the location of his skitter, he wasn't going to have a good answer.

They didn't speak on the drive out to the coast, though it wasn't an awkward silence. The tent was ablaze with light, glowing against the backdrop of the starlit ocean. Lena parked, and they stepped through the zipdoor into relative warmth.

Dr. Noyes was there, throwing the last few bundles of towels and bandages into an incinerator. He looked up when Ray came in and dropped what he was holding to walk forward. "Ray, I'm sorry—"

"It's okay, Dr. Noyes," Ray said. "Not your fault. Well, it was, but it worked out."

Noyes looking like he wanted to argue that, but didn't. Behind him, one of the curtained sections opened and a Yeti stepped out. "Six Two?" Ray asked.

The Yeti nodded. "And a friend," it answered, as the icedog bolted past him and knocked Ray to the floor.

"Off!" Ray shouted. Lena whistled, and Firn stepped across Ray's face to run to her next. He stood up, feeling a thousand years old, and a thousand bruises' worth of misery.

"There are some matters to discuss," Six Two said. "We are grateful for the liberation of my people from the two mining camps, though we do not know how we will find the space or resources to care for them—"

"You know the old mine we tracked the attackers to? They left us a whole nice underground settlement waiting for someone to call it home," Ray said. "It should hold several hundred people. Congratulations, you're now the Eraxian People's Freedom Brigade, occasional pilferer of supplies and disappearances of Yeti from camps. Once you make an inventory of the underground city's stocks, we can figure out something for what else you need."

"It will be a start," Six Two said.

Dr. Noyes cleared his throat. "Ray, we need to talk privately. Now."

"Lena, Six Two, can you wait outside?" Ray asked.

Lena gave him the full disapproving stink-eye, but left the tent with the Yeti and dog.

Dr. Noyes sat on one of the benches. "I shouldn't have done it, Ray, and they made me promise I wouldn't, but I did."

"What did you do?" Ray asked. Was Noyes one of the conspirators after all this?

"Ran their blood. I was curious, you know? Science. Knowledge." He pulled his handheld medical unit out of a pocket of his coat, and held it out. "You should see."

Ray took it, read it, read it again. "I don't understand," he said.

"Yeah. But think about it long enough, and you will." Noyes took the handpad back and pressed a button. "I've erased it. Now only you and I know, and whoever put together the attempt to wipe them out and claim the planet."

He threw the pad in the incinerator after it. "I'm going home to sleep," he said. "The rest of this can all be dealt with tomorrow."

Ray followed him out of the tent. Noyes went right to Lena's skiff and climbed in the back, lying down.

Six Two touched his arm gently. "I know what he has told you," Six Two said. "Neither you nor the Oceanics read much of your own histories, but we free Yeti have much time, and no roots of our own to tell us who we are, so we read them. Did you not already see that your stories were two sides of the same coin?"

"It's . . ." Ray said. "It's incomprehensible, right now. Do the Oceanics know?"

"Not any more than you did. Earth is centuries dead, and no one belongs to it any more who is not there. We are our own peoples, some made, some self-made, some being unmade by their own hand. It needs to remain this way, three peoples, separate for our safety. You understand this?"

". . . Yes," Ray said.

"You will not come to the underground town unless invited, or we will not live there," Six Two said.

"I agree."

"You told Ajr en Logo that you did not want to do any of us any harm. That test starts now and will not ever end. You understand this as well?"

"Yeah," Ray said. "Okay. I'm going to go home and fall down now. I won't seek you out except under urgent circumstances, but I'm the surface administrator, and this is the Surface, so whatever I can do to help without up above catching on, even though it may not be much, I'll do. Just ask. My door is always open . . . no, that's not actually true, but it is for you. You just might have to knock first."

He was babbling and knew it. Six Two recognized it as well, and walked him back to the skiff. Lena and Ray took off back to Icetown, leaving Yeti and tent behind.

Lena let him sleep until noon before she forced his door and came in, bearing something suspiciously resembling breakfast. “Eat while I talk,” she said. “First off, Ron told us that the whole thing was Sal’s idea, that Sal’s grandfather had been stationed here, and that once they wiped out the Oceanics the planet could be theirs to mine as they please and make a fortune. Seems like no one asked for much specifics on how that’d work, because Ron sure as hell didn’t know how the treaty means even if they killed every last one, the planet still couldn’t be ours because sovereign species and all that. Stupid bastards.”

“Yeah, no one ever reads the fucking fine print in the paperwork,” Ray said, picking up a slice of toast and admiring that it was actually *buttered*.

“North is shipping down the seven people up there who were in on it on the next shuttle. Two of them are still breathing. You need to decide what to do with them, and the miners from Mine Four that weren’t part of things.”

“I’m canceling BrodalCorp’s rights on the planet immediately, for violation of contract, smuggling of contraband, and conspiracy to commit mass violence. They can come pick up Mine Four any time they want, and the innocent miners with it, but they don’t get to mine any more. If they lose money, they should screen their people better.”

“And the guilty ones?”

“They were willing to participate in genocide,” Ray said. “They committed murders. Let them each have his boots and parka and then drop them in whatever is left of Mine Three and good luck to them.”

“They won’t last more than a few days,” Lena said.

“You collected all their guns? Give them back one, and one round for each of them.”

“And Ron?”

“Put him with the others.”

“Will do,” Lena said, and he wasn’t sure if he’d wanted her to argue him out of it or not, or even if she could. “There’s one more thing.”

The way she said it made him pause with the slice of toast halfway to his lips. “Yeah?”

“Dr. Noyes bought three bottles of Dutton’s strongest homebrew and took a walk sometime in the night,” she said.

“What?!” Ray exclaimed, dropping the toast.

“He left a note,” Lena said, and handed him the slip of paper. Ray’s name was on the front, in unsteady letters. He opened it slowly.

Took a drink with me. Can’t bear to be parted, can’t trust either of us together, it said. Just you know now.

“Shit,” Ray said.

“So now what?” Lena said. “What happens after this?”

“We go back to the way things were. We don’t talk to them, they don’t talk to us, everyone is happy—”

He was interrupted by Lena’s handpad beeping. “Something’s coming up,” she said.

“You don’t mean—”

“Yeah, I do,” she said, as they both scrambled out of Ray’s apartment toward the garage.

The ice had receded a bit further from Jettyrock since the last time he’d been here, and he and Lena waited by the skiff as a walker he didn’t recognize came up out of the water toward them. It carefully placed Ray’s blue skitter on the rock, then turned and left again.

Water poured out from the truck doors, and Ray laughed. “Great,” he said. “Probably never get the smell of obli out of there now.”

“I’ll go get a tow,” Lena said, and left with the skiff.

Ray opened the back, and discovered that although the cabin had been flooded, the back had been tightly sealed. One of the sleep cocoons was there, and small sealed

packets of ocean water with bits of the different types of aquamoss and stars inside. Kenna would be thrilled.

The flut spear was also there, and he had to smile, then sit and try not to cry. He'd been making a bad habit of that lately, and if he kept that up it was going to mess with his reputation for heartlessness.

"I'm going to miss you, my friend," he murmured, touching the cocoon.

"How so?" said a voice from inside the cocoon, and a remote crawled out.

Ray laughed. "You're not supposed to be here," he said.

"Who is? It is a strange Universe," the remote said. "Tides come in, tides go out, and it is a fool who does not sometimes let the current carry them."

"Six Two was clear we should keep our peoples apart."

"And we should, but this is just you and us, yes? Friends."

"True," Ray answered.

"Also we would still like to scan your eyes, so we can see this 'red,'" the remote said.

"Sure. In return, do you think you could teach me the Yeti hand-language?"

"It is complicated with much nuance that is not found in either of our languages, but we can teach you what we know."

"That would be good," Ray said. He eyed the cocoon. "In the meantime, my toes are freezing again, so move over. I'm getting in."