

POD MAN

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PART I

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

The ax lifted, hovered for a split-second, then came down again. Ken paused to wipe his forehead before setting another block of wood in place, daydreaming as he went about getting fresh timber ready for the pile. The timing of his move here meant he had two choices, buy wood from a supplier or cut his own and hope the summer was enough to cure it properly.

Seeing how it wasn't a necessity in his fully modern house, and how chopping his own would be an enjoyable chore, he went for the latter. It was good, satisfying work; and besides, five of the large pines needed to go anyway and gave him yet another incentive to do it himself.

After a few more blocks he stopped to take a short break. Wingnut, a German Shepherd so named for his huge ears, got up from where he lay nearby and padded over. Ken took a few more gulps of water from the small cooler and started ruffling the dog's fur.

"How's my overpriced boy doing?" he asked, accepting a lick on the face and running his hands over the furry body. Wingnut was from a line carefully bred to be both friendly and free of the hip problems often experienced in German Shepherds. The price had been high, but he was an excellent pal and worth the cost.

It was after dark, and he looked out at what he could see of the secluded five acres of forest and yard that made up his new home. He couldn't help but smile. For heaven's sake, it had actually happened. One day, he was opening his mail like he did every day when the words slammed him in the face and nearly knocked him off his seat.

The fact that it was registered mail that he had to sign for had somehow not piqued his curiosity. He didn't remember what had distracted him. All he remembered of that entire day were those words.

Congratulations! You're our Grand Prize Winner!

They glowed in the back of his mind as he continued to pet and rub his grateful pet. He sent in the sweepstakes stuff because it didn't cost him anything more than a stamp, but he never thought he'd actually get five million dollars dropped in his lap!

Amazingly, getting out of the Marines had been pretty straightforward. At the time he had debated staying, since being an unarmed combat specialist didn't have a great market in the civilian world, but he was realistic enough to know that the rules and limitations would start to grate on him after a while.

Although he liked the life up until that point, he doubted it would feel as natural with millions constantly tempting him on to other things. The Corps had understood that. He certainly didn't consider it eight years down the drain, although the Corps probably did given all the tactics training they had heaped on him.

He caressed between the brute's legs a little, feeling the balls and firm sheath in his palm intermittently as he scratched and rubbed him all over.

His feelings toward dogs, wolves, and such were something he could never quite come to grips with. He found them handsome and sexy, and couldn't help a feeling of desire for them. Their sheaths and ever-present balls were erotic and suggestive. On the other hand, he never went very far because he knew what a dog's dick looked like, and the reality of that didn't sit well with him. If it was a 'real' dick he might think about it, but he just couldn't bring himself stop frowning with disapproval at what came out in its place. A big, red piece of gut just didn't do it for him.

"Yup, you've got guts hanging out when you're horny," he said, grinning and scratching around Wingnut's ears, "don't you wish you had a real dick? I do."

Wingnut simply looked at him and licked his face again, which didn't surprise him. He had to admit, however, that the appearance was starting to matter a little less. Sooner or later he was going to get himself all worked up, take a long look, and stop caring. There was no use arguing with himself. The time was getting real close, and the straining bulge in his pants right now seemed to confirm it.

He snorted and nuzzled the dog back. "You know what, Wingnut? One of these days I'm gonna do more than just jerk you off, and you're really going to like that."

One of the reasons he had chosen to build his house way out in the middle of Nowhere, Colorado was to have the freedom to try those things out if he ever got the nerve. Wingnut was young and would be around a while. Maybe it didn't feel or taste as bad as it looked.

"I don't know, Wingnut. What do you think? Should I blow you or not? Hm?"

He loved dogs, but they weren't that great for conversation. Back to the wood.

Half an hour later he decided to call it a night. Wiping the sweat from his forehead again, he looked up at the clear night sky and smiled at the shining points of light.

"I might not have found my fortune in the stars, but you sure look pretty way out here."

A bright twinkle to his left caught his eye and they both went wide as the single point blossomed into a sky-blue swirl, like a spinning cartwheel galaxy only much more immediate for being the size of a dinner plate at arm's length. With little reference it was hard to tell just how big it was; it could be in orbit or a hundred yards away. It didn't seem to cast any light on the trees bordering his yard, so he guessed it was some distance off.

Some kind of secret government experiment?

While he looked on in fascination, a tendril sprang from its center and plunged toward the ground. Looking like the underwater view of a whirlpool, it swirled and snaked downward until it disappeared behind the tree line.

Wingnut let out a worried huff and bumped his leg.

“Come on, boy,” he said, grabbing the dog’s collar. He led him into the back door, never taking his eyes off the incredible apparition he was witnessing.

Once Wingnut was securely inside he took off across the yard at a trot, keeping the twisting tendril and its disk in front of him as he entered the woods. After a hundred yards or so it became clear that it wasn’t much farther off, and having made himself familiar with his surrounding over the last two months, didn’t suffer more than a few scrapes as he rushed along. He could hear a humming and crackling from the near distance. Another thing he could hear, one that almost made him stop right there, was the far-off sound of an approaching helicopter.

Did someone know this thing was going to appear here? The whole “secret government project” thing was starting to make sense.

He decided to continue on, and soon he brought himself to a quick halt behind a large rock outcropping. Just beyond it he could see the tendril, a mixture of white and blue light that coiled and writhed constantly, and was sure it must be touching ground somewhere just on the other side. The blue disk still spun lazily overhead and he was momentarily struck by its beauty, while the taper of the tendril suggested that it was rooted in the disk only a few hundred feet up.

Moving stealthily, he began to creep around the outcropping, senses strained to their limits.

He paused as it occurred to him that he was being a complete idiot. He had nothing on but a pair of denim shorts, socks, and sneakers. In his haste and fascination he had neglected to stop and think to bring anything with him; a weapon, a camera, anything. Stupid! Who knows what this is? A freak of nature? A secret government project? An alien visitation?

The answer wasn’t long in coming. He wasn’t about to walk away now. Creeping carefully, he made his way around and peeked beyond the last rock that stood between himself and whatever that tendril was. The helicopter was closing fast and would be here any minute now. He could already hear the subtle changes that meant it was about to land.

What he saw made him draw a quiet breath. The tendril ended at the top of a gunmetal gray ball of about twenty feet in diameter. It was bisected horizontally by a deep window that ran most of the circumference. The top was flattened and rimmed with some sort of claw-like device that seemed to grip the tendril, which was moving in lazy arcs as it twisted up to the disk above. The latter, as he could now see, was about three hundred yards in diameter and probably about five hundred yards up. A door was open on one side of the pod, with a small ramp leading to the ground.

But that wasn’t the amazing part.

Movement caught his eye and he crept closer to try and make it out. It looked like someone waving sticks around outside the ball. Keeping to the trees, he moved until he got a better look at the small clearing the ball was sitting in.

Someone was definitely there, but it wasn’t some government test pilot. The thing was skinny, irregular in shape, and stood on four slender legs. Light from the pod’s window lit the area well, and he could see four arms higher up on its torso. It wore a wide, tightly fitting band around most of its upper

body with various devices attached. Its skin was dark brown and the whole thing looked sinewy in texture. Slender muscles and tendons could be seen working beneath thick skin. Those arms were busy working some sort of contraption into the ground, and a triangular head swiveled in the helicopter's direction every few seconds.

A little taller than himself, it looked like a big walking stick, like the ones you can sometimes find hiding on a tree branch. But in general shape it wasn't exactly insect-like, the texture of its skin and the details of its anatomy being all wrong for a bug. It was, simply, very, very alien.

Bursting forth was definitely out of the question. By now the helicopter had landed somewhere out of sight and surely people would be arriving soon. He looked back toward the being and froze.

Three large, white, perfectly round eyes were staring straight at him from above a blank space where one would expect a mouth. He had leaned out while looking toward the helicopter and exposed himself. There wasn't even time to gulp. The thing did something to one of the objects on its shirt and there was a bright flash.

The next thing he knew, the thing had him and they were both near the orb. His heart was instantly racing as those skinny arms gripped him tightly from behind. It was like being held in place by a bunch of small branches. Pressed against its front, he could feel it breathing, and the impression was that its body was hard but not unyielding.

Too much was happening at once, and he was instinctively about to fight his way free when two soldiers burst from the trees.

"Don't move!" one of them said, looking directly at him. Ken could tell that the rifle the soldier was aiming was directed at his captor, not him, so decided to trust him for a moment. He could trust a Marine.

"Yes! Whatever you do, don't move!" came another voice. After two more soldiers, a bookish looking, dark-skinned man in a white lab coat stumbled into the light. "It won't kill you as long as you don't threaten it!"

"What the hell is going on?" he yelled at the man as more marines emerged. They were followed by someone in a suit. Obviously a government agent of some kind.

"Just stay calm!" the man stressed, glancing at the men now gathered around him, "lower your guns, please! You know the rules!"

The last came out in a harsh whisper that Ken barely heard.

"What was that?" he asked, shifting slightly against the being that held him. The soldiers hesitated, and one of them turned to the scientist.

"We can't let this one get away! This is our chance!"

"I said lower your guns!" the scientist snapped. "If he gets hurt we are screwed, do you understand? Now put the fucking guns down!"

Ken watched as the various rifle barrels sank toward the ground, then felt the being move slightly behind him and relax, but not relinquish, its grip.

Already his mind was hard at work assessing the creature's center of gravity, the distribution of its weight, and subtle hints of joint movement. Having completely immersed himself in the martial arts since early childhood, he had been rapidly gathering information based on two decades of constant training and practice. The marines hadn't wanted him to go, being their unarmed combat champion and best instructor, but he just couldn't bring himself to stay with all that wealth in front of him.

And this situation was threatening all of that; his wealth as well as his well-being. He didn't like the way this was going at all, or where it could lead, and he was about to do something about it. His impression was that this creature wasn't going to let him go, as its weight had shifted again and they were now starting to move toward the pod. He wasn't about to get into that damned thing with his life in an alien's hands.

The other humans had been arguing urgently amongst themselves for the last few moments while keeping their eyes on Ken, then he saw a sergeant nod and slowly begin to lift his M-16. The scientist shot him an apologetic look and opened his mouth to speak.

"Mother fuckers!" Ken shouted, causing the arms to tighten slightly against him. Instantly he moved with the speed of constant training, not giving the soldiers time to raise their rifles.

He gave a hard, sharp exhalation to collapse his lungs and let his kneed buckle. At the same time he raised his arms. By making himself smaller and dropping down while pushing up at the same time, he slid from the alien's grasp with little resistance.

Having predicted the state of balance his movement caused in the alien, in the same motion he rooted himself on one knee and twisted, grabbing the startled creature and throwing it over his shoulder. It was slightly heavier than he had guessed, but lighter than a man, and it went flying as he rose under it and extended his arms.

The sound of rifles coming to bear sent him jumping as the alien immediately recovered. Unfortunately, the only place to go as the sound of clicking safeties hit him was into the pod's door. There was no time to waste, however, and he leapt in rather than obey the order to freeze that had just come.

He was surprised when the creature leapt in after him before the marines could get off a single shot. He struggled with it as the alien rushed him, fighting the four-armed attack with all his speed and skill. The hard part was fighting off three hands while a fourth tried to hit that thing on its work belt again. He now knew it was some kind of stunner. At least the thing was grappling more than swinging. Also apparent was that the fingers of each hand were arranged radially around a central palm.

The thing's face remained expressionless throughout their struggle, either because of the thick skin or a particularly calm disposition. He ignored the jobs of pain as he blocked one blow after another and finally, using a snake-style kung fu pattern, got the opening he wanted and slammed an open palmed strike into the thing's face.

It staggered back against the control panel counter and shook its head. He didn't wait to find out if it would smirk at him or not and moved in again. Before he could connect, however, a dark brown hand made an adjustment and then hit that damned button on its belt.

When he came to the creature was dragging itself up to the controls and seemed to be a bit stunned itself. So, that stunner was a bit sloppy at close range.

He slowly struggled to his feet but by the time he had regained his senses, the thing had already been at work on the controls for a few seconds. The display was flat and reminded him of recent Star Trek set designs, but there were actual buttons and dials rather than touch pads.

A red light began blinking on the console, snapping him into action. He rushed the creature again in the cramped compartment and it again fought back impassively. His mind took that moment to remind him that the alien had failed to use its legs and therefore might not expect a kick. Backing away a step, he shifted his weight and, feigning high with his right hand, sent a bulldozer of a thrust kick straight into its abdomen.

Voices from the door went unheeded as he again got his weight under the faltering alien and heaved with all his might. It went flying out the door and plowed into the men clustered just outside, sending them and their guns scattering to the ground.

The console let out a loud whoop and the door started to close.

“Shit!” he snapped, jumping at the hatch. He got there in time but couldn’t stop it from *thunking* shut. His ears popped slightly as a hiss signaled an air-tight seal.

“Shit, shit!” he repeated, jumping at the console. It was covered with displays and buttons, all of them marked in unintelligible, alien scripts. One of them seemed to be cycling through concentric circles and changed colors each time one of them lit. It had already gone through three shades of blue and was now, as the smaller inner circles began to light, turning yellow.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with this?” he growled as he rushed to make any sense of it. He let that go for a moment and rushed back to the door. There was a panel beside it, but nothing he pushed would make it open. All he got was an ugly little beep.

He got back to the console just in time to see the outside of three remaining circles brighten. The quiet hum inside the pod started to rise, then fell again as the next-to-last ring went.

Looking out the large window, he could see the scientist and government type gesturing frantically for him to get out while the soldiers concentrated on shackling the struggling alien. He pointed at the door and gave a frantic shrug, a quiet panic starting to set in as he realized he wasn’t going to get out in time.

Looking back at the control display, he watched the last ring light up and turn green.

Dr. Chester pulled the beacon out of the ground. The Stick hadn’t had time to fire the anchor from its base, so it came up easily. He very nearly swung it like a bat against the nearest tree, but got himself under control before the urge overcame him.

“Fuck!”

“You said that already, Doc.” the FBI man said, calmly taking the beacon from him and looking it over. “Just like the others.”

“How can you be so damned cool?” Dr. Chester hollered, “not only did we lose another pod, but we’ve now got an alien prisoner we don’t know how to feed and, just in case you missed it, a FUCKING CIVILIAN HAS JUST GONE WITH THE FUCKING POD!”

Johanson raised an eyebrow, then glanced briefly at the clear, starry sky before returning his gaze to the doctor.

“All that means is that he’s one less factor to worry about. I don’t know where the Stick sent him, but it sure wouldn’t have been somewhere on Earth. If he’s lucky, he’ll land somewhere he can breath.”

“What about here?”

“No problem.” Johanson said with a shrug. “Now, nice as these woods are, how about we get out of here?”

“It may be more of a problem than you think, sir.”

Johanson turned to the marine who had just arrived and took the envelope he offered.

“What do you mean?” he asked, flipping the cover and shining his flashlight on the exposed file.

“He’s an ex-marine, unarmed combat specialist – the best one, as a matter of fact – and a multimillionaire.”

“Didn’t know the marines paid that well,” he mumbled, earning a snort from the soldier. He read through a few entries, a frown growing on his lips.

“Hell.”

“What?” Dr. Chester asked.

“If he was just some guy that disappeared, it wouldn’t be a problem. But now we’ve got to cover up the disappearance of a multimillionaire, and one that the marines expect to talk to again at that,” Johanson began, paging through the file, “won a sweepstakes six months ago, got given a discharge, and had a house built near here. Probably came running when he saw the pod disk. Damn.”

Dr. Chester sighed, looking around at the dark forest for a moment. “Well, it might make the papers, but it would die down sooner or later.”

“Yeah, but the marines are going to want better answers than that.”

“Why? He was discharged, right?”

“Not so simple, Doc.” the marine said.

“Why?”

“You read this?” Johanson asked the marine.

“No sir, I didn’t have to. I was one of his trainees when he left. You simply would not believe this guy. He’s built like a gymnast but moves like he’s in a parallel universe, so fast you can’t follow him. He’s been deep into martial arts since he was six. And on top of those twenty-four years of hard work, he’s a natural to boot. The only reason he isn’t world champion right now is that he’s disinclined to compete.”

“Why? He competed to be the marine champion, didn’t he?”

“Only because it would further his marine career. He didn’t do it to beat other fighters, he did it to pad his marine record. He refuses to compete otherwise. Believe me, he gets to kick enough ass in training! He made me sore for days, but damn, was I learning from him! Shame he left.”

The marine gestured at the folder Johanson was flipping through as he spoke. “My guess is that he’s still attached. The corps probably wanted to give him some time to sew his millionaire oats before asking him back as a contractor.”

“Close,” Johanson confirmed, “but he’s already contracted. The corps gets his services free of charge starting in another six months.”

“Not any more.”

Ken’s knees wanted to buckle as the ground shot away. It took a few moments to catch his equilibrium as the pod shot upward at an amazing rate, as it was hard for his brain to reconcile the contradictory sensations of seeing the ground rush away but at the same time feeling no motion. There was a flash of blue as he passed through the disk, then the topography shrank below him as the pod sped up into what looked like low orbit. He was on the runaway elevator from hell.

Peering desperately at the console, that flashing red beacon caught his eye again. It was surrounded by concentric rings, one of which disappeared as he watched.

Another countdown.

This one scared him. The “launch” countdown didn’t have a big, blinking red light in the middle of it. He looked out the window again and saw nothing but stars; amazing, vibrant stars like nothing he had ever seen. Then there was a white flash, followed by nothing but inky blackness. All he could do was look down into the console’s glow and watch the rings disappear.

Less than a minute later there came another white flash, followed by stars again outside the window. He looked out and, in the reverse of his launch from Earth, found himself plummeting toward a planet below.

The sky was slightly greener than he expected and there were very few clouds as the ground rushed up to meet him. Again he passed through the disk and within moments found himself in the middle of a clear, grassy field. Surrounding him on all sides was a row of odd, palm-like trees and a large smattering of furry, bipedal aliens.

“Did I mention ‘oh shit?’” he asked himself, letting out a sigh.

The door slid abruptly open, making him jump, and a warm, fragrant breeze wafted in. A glance showed only three rings left in the blinking red display. He stood for a moment, debating what to do, poking frantically at the controls, as the quiet hum inside quickly rose to a higher pitch than it had before and then stayed there. The entire control panel shut itself down, except for the blinking red indicator, and the third ring disappeared. Suddenly he smelled burning electronics.

There was no denying what the display was about now. He took a deep breath and, as the second ring disappeared, ran like hell out the hatch.

“He was clearly warning everyone away, and there’s no denying what he did to get himself put in here. It nearly killed him. And he is definitely not of the species who built the pods.”

“Yes, but is he their agent?”

“I cannot answer, but I understand the question. I suspect not, though.”

“And why is that, my esteemed second?” Bessegan asked with a grin.

“He seemed to be near panic when the self-destruct final sequence began. That in itself is not unusual, since Sticks have a habit of blowing up their pods when threatened, but the fact that he clearly had no idea what to do is.”

They were interrupted by a quiet knock, followed by the door opening. A young doctor peeked in, ears lying back with uncertainty.

“Please pardon the interruption,” the doctor said, his tail staying between his knees as he stepped in, “but you said to inform you right away of definitive answers.”

“Of course. Please continue.”

“He will survive; if, that is, his bone marrow reacts quickly. His body has responded well to our surgical and medicinal efforts, both bone and...”

“He?”

“Yes, sir. Clearly.” the doctor answered coyly.

“Ah. Go on.”

“Both bone and tissue have been repaired. He is very strong. It’s believed that his injuries would have killed one of us with such a delay in treatment. Unfortunately, he lost a great deal of blood. What he has is compatible with ours but his immune system would reject whole blood. We restored his blood pressure to what the simulator thinks is normal by using only neutral fluid, but he is in oxygen infusion now. We can only wait and hope his marrow is as hardy as the rest of him.”

“Oxygen infusion?”

The doctor looked puzzled and slightly insecure for a moment, so Bessegan gave him a reassuring smile. The young can be so easily distressed by authority, he thought.

“We cannot all be doctors, young one.”

“Oh!” the doctor exclaimed, then evinced slight embarrassment and elaborated. “We can restore the volume of his blood, but not its capacity. Until his bone marrow produces more red blood cells – the ones that carry oxygen – he must be kept within a force field and saturated with pure oxygen. Force projectors constantly sweep his body, essentially seeping the oxygen directly into him by manipulating the...”

“That’s enough. Thank you,” the older wolf said, waving a paw, “You’ve done well.”

“Thank you, sir. I will be sure to tell the team.”

“Are his chances good?”

“It all depends on how quickly his body replenishes his blood.”

“What of his general...” the elder wolf began, pausing to search for the right word.

“Physiology? Very similar,” the doctor supplied. He became more animated, gaining a little confidence as he explained, “Remarkably so, it may prove. After surgery we did a full bioscan, but the computer is still compiling all the data. But what we could see during surgery looked identical. Well, inside anyway.”

“Externally, he has fur, the same number of fingers and toes...”

“But only on his head?” Bessegan interrupted.

“No, sir, all over. In most areas it is so light, short and sparse that you don’t notice it until you look closely. In his armpits and around his genitals it is darker, thicker and longer. But otherwise, the similarities are, again, remarkable. His joints are nearly identical in configuration and function, he has the same number of ribs, roughly the same total number of bones, a very similar system of ligaments, tendons, and muscles, and similar gastrointestinal function. His legs, however, are very long. He must run like the west winds. But, for all intents and purposes, beneath the skin he could almost be one of us.”

The doctor’s tail had moved from between his knees and was now wagging slowly behind him, while his nose sniffed at the scent of the two elder wolves. Now visibly more relaxed, his smile became less unsure and more genuine.

“Of course, the shape of his skull, especially the jaw, is different and his spine has a few more vertebrae than ours; very, very strong but not as flexible. Spinal injuries must be a rare thing with them. I would venture a guess that his primary senses are not as acute.”

“Why is that?”

“Our ears serve as funnels, channeling sound into the inner ear. His are fleshy and comparatively small and flat. Unless the details of how his sense of smell works are different, the small nasal cavity afforded by his somewhat flat face suggests a weaker sense of smell. As for sight, we can’t even guess until the computer is finished.”

“How much longer before the computer is done?”

“It is estimating another twenty minutes, which should be accurate unless it runs into something contradictory or unfathomable.”

“Ah, very good. Keep me informed, young one.” Bessegan said with an encouraging smile.

“With pleasure, sir,” the doctor said with a grin of his own, ears perking forward, then turned to leave. Bessegan couldn’t help but notice that the younger wolf’s tail was a little higher than it needed to be as it swished out the door.

“Are you going to take him home?” his second asked with a sly glint in his eyes.

Bessegan shrugged.

“Maybe.”

“He is an attractive one. Smart, too, and appealingly bashful.”

“The young are always drawn to superiors,” Bessegan said with another shrug.

“Not only the young.”

The elder wolf raised his eyebrows. “Do you want me to take *you* home? Again?”

The other gave a shrug of his own. “If it suits you.”

Bessegan leaned in close, still smiling, “I think tonight I’d prefer experience to youth.”

Bak licked the proffered snout a couple of times, brushing the short fangs with his tongue. “You flatter me.”

Bessegan winked and nipped one of Bak’s ears, “So be it. Now, back to our new friend.”

Bak’s ears fell a little, for he knew that he was about to disagree with his superior. He reluctantly punched up a file on his work pad and presented it to Bessegan.

“Go ahead,” the larger countered, bringing a sigh from Bak. The latter set the work pad down. He didn’t need it.

“The parents are insisting on seeing him as soon as he is awake and coherent.”

“For what? Oh, that...”

“Yes, sir, that. They have made the necessary preparations and are waiting only for official clearance to see him.”

“We don’t know enough yet. The scans show nothing contagious, but there is no guarantee that contact is safe; mainly because we have no idea how he will react when he awakens.”

Bak breathed a sigh of relief. “I was hoping that is what you would say.”

“You mean no?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m not saying no.”

Bak slumped. “Sir, this could be incredibly complicated. He is from another world. He may very well know absolutely nothing of our culture. What if they must make final reparation only for us to find out later that it was all a misunderstanding?”

“Once it is shown that there is no physical danger, they must be granted an audience immediately,” Bessegan stressed, “I can wait no longer or risk legal action from them.”

“It is a tradition, not a law, sir.”

“Ah, my newly cross-trained assistant, but what does the Law of Tradition teach?”

Bak sighed again and nodded, having briefly forgotten. “The practice of tradition must be upheld unless that practice violates law,” he quoted.

“That law does not make allowances for aliens. The parents will see him.”

Crotter straddled the stool in front of the console and slid his chip into the reader. He looked up and gazed at the alien lying beyond the glass wall while the data downloaded.

It was a good thing no one else was working this late, given what he had just done. He couldn’t help it. Knowing the scanner was almost done collecting its latest batch, he had gone in with more on his mind than collecting brain waves.

Why should the doctors have all the fun? The thing's face was turned the other way, but Crotter knew a sleeping person when he heard one. So he carefully pulled the sheet away from its waist.

His eyes had widened a moment before he looked more closely. Either their females were tiny or there was more than met the eye. No sheath was evident, so there didn't seem much room for improvement. On the other hand, it was flopped over. Maybe it extended in some different way.

On the end was a prominent bulge, which he found strangely attractive as a few ways to enjoy it flashed through his mind, and at the base nestled a mound of tightly curled fur.

"Nice balls."

The scanner's beep made him nearly jump out of his pelt. He took a deep breath and glanced at the Pod Man's face.

No change. He grabbed the full chip and turned off the scanner, hustling back out to the observation room console.

For a prototype, the language processing software package he had devised was working a charm. But whether its success was due to his talent as a developer or the creature's massive brain wave output couldn't yet be determined. One would think the man's brain was chatting to the whole universe while the body slept.

The Pod Man's dream state had therefore been easy to isolate. The software he had developed filtered and gathered the brain waves associated with language, ordered them, and then began interpreting them. Access to a conventional language database allowed it to make comparisons, correlate things like tenses, verbs, and personal pronouns, and a slew of other things. All it needed was a steady diet of brain waves from an active language lobe.

And this being's brain seemed happy to oblige, babbling away in dreams at almost twice the output expected.

"By the time you wake up, my friend," he mumbled, "I'll be saying 'hello' to you."

"What was that word?"

Crotter jolted as the doctor's smell, tainted with arousal, he noted, arrived just before his voice. He looked over his shoulder and smiled. "What are you doing here so late?"

"I've been mating with him when no one's around." Thorm joked.

"Right!" Crotter said, chuckling, "we don't even know if males interest him, let alone those covered with fur."

"Why wouldn't males interest him? Biologically he's much like us."

"Just because he also mates with females doesn't mean he also mates with males."

"Are you suggesting that he only mates four times a year, like a female? That would not sit well with the rate of sperm cell production I've measured. Then again, it doesn't sit well with us either, but there you go." Thorm said with a shrug, leaning down to rest his muzzle against Crotter's neck.

“I don’t have information like that, you know,” Crotter began, “only words. I can’t put them together very well yet. And he doesn’t seem to be dreaming much about mating, from what words I can pull out.”

“So what was that one I just heard?” the doctor asked, nibbling gently.

“Hello. It is their greeting word. Well, one of them.”

Thorm sounded out the word, then grinned. It’s very close to…”

“Yes, *that* word!” Crotter agreed with a laugh.

Thorm ran a paw over Crotter’s shoulder and down his chest, slipping under the loose shirt and stroking the fur there.

“Thorm, not here.”

“Why not?” the wolfish doctor asked, dropping a towel onto the console and earning a chuckle from the linguist, “it’s dark and he’s asleep behind soundproof glass. Besides, I need to return last night’s favor and I’m a dripping mess *right now*.”

With that Crotter found himself pulled to his feet. The events of earlier and the smell of Thorm’s arousal conspired to make him instantly aroused himself. By the time Thorm had yanked down his pants Crotter was already firmed up and damp at his sheath’s opening.

One paw began teasing under his tail as the other nudged his back, prompting him to brace on the console top. He shivered as fingers touched his clean pucker and his tail sprang up.

“Ah, you smell ready to me, and feel so, too,” the doctor cooed, leaning close and moving a paw to Crotter’s balls, “I’m going to make you grunt like you did to me last night. I hope you’ll enjoy it as much as I did.”

“Oh, I will, sexy,” Crotter agreed, groaning as his crotch and tail hole were stroked, “but be quick, gods I’m ready!”

Thorm cupped Crotter’s sheath in one paw and stroked it slowly, while using his other paw to guide the dripping head of his exposed cock to the linguist’s waiting bud. Oh, how he loved having a strong, muscular male beneath him! Almost as much as having one above him.

“Don’t forget the towel,” he whispered, as he nipped his way across the muscles of Crotter’s back, making him squirm and push back eagerly.

Paws hurriedly spread the towel out to catch the forthcoming mess and returned to the console.

“Now, sexy.”

Thorm obliged, pressing firmly against the cute pucker and pushing slowly. They both growled softly as he pushed his way through the initial resistance, his hard prick well-slickened by its own juices as it squeezed through. He absolutely loved the way Crotter’s tail shook a little as its neighbor was entered, and he pushed on until he felt the ring of his sheath pressed against his lover’s tightly spread hole.

Crotter panted softly as he felt the doctor entering him right to his sack, whimpering with lust when his own cock slid through the waiting palm. The doctor withdrew slowly, then pushed back in, stroking his cock with the same achingly slow rhythm.

After a few tantalizing, slow strokes, Thorm leaned forward, nuzzling the back of his neck and around his cheeks. He accepted the weight gladly, nudging his hips eagerly back into the doctor's thrusts while humping the paw wrapped around his own wet shaft. Thorm braced his foot paws and started plunging harder and faster, churning his strong lover's insides and pawing his lovely cock.

Before long they were rocking and panting, caught in a fantastic rhythm of lust, oblivious to their surroundings. Crotter grunted every few strokes as the doctor pounded into him, driving him crazy with lust. He could feel his cock surging within Thorm's paw, feel his balls tighten within the other. The feeling of the doctor's forearms braced around him as his paws roamed his crotch was hypnotic. He couldn't wait for the rest.

It didn't take long. A minute more and he felt something banging his straining hole with each deep stroke of Thorm's cock. His own knot was out and Thorm was using both paws to stroke his dick and roll the knot within a firm grip of his palm. Having his bulb squeezed and rubbed like that while his ass was being pounded was proving too much, and he thrashed, bucked, and growled like a wild thing.

Thorm erupted with a long, roaring breath as he pushed his swelling knot into the groaning tail hole. A shock of pleasure jolted him as he broke through and felt the smooth, tight grip of a male's ass envelope his entire sex. His thrusts became faster, shorter, and more erratic.

Crotter completely lost it as the knot bullied in and locked them, making him feel impossibly, wonderfully, full. His sizzling dick spasmed in the doctor's grip and sprayed thick, ropy jets of cum all over the towel, while his back arched and he gasped at the ceiling.

The doctor snorted as the contractions squeezed at his cock and knot, blowing a huge load into the rutting linguist, his organs thumping within him like a bass drum.

Eventually they calmed and Thorm relaxed his grip on the spent cock in his paw. They relaxed as much as possible and enjoyed the lingering shudders and simmering climax, breath deepening as the steady glow of sustained pleasure ran its course.

"Thank you, my friend," Thorm muttered, licking the side of Crotter's neck.

"My pleasure, believe me," Crotter said quietly, "gods, I don't think anyone's ever kneaded my knot like that before. Whew!"

Thorm smiled and asked for the towel. Crotter folded the mess within and handed it back. The doctor held it beneath them and slowly withdrew, enjoying the feel of Crotter's hole gently quivering around him.

"I hope I didn't delay your work too much," he said as he dropped the towel.

Crotter turned and stood, giving the doctor a long, passionate kiss. Then he dropped to his knees and began licking Thorm's cock, patiently cleaning the sheen of cum from its length before watching it slide back home.

"Not too much."

Ken knew he was waking up again. As the cobwebs cleared, he hoped that this time he would come to enough to stay awake.

He had awakened before, he knew, but never enough to comprehend much. Each time he had recognized the look and smell of a hospital room, then passed back out.

Now he felt a little stronger, though still somewhat weak. Eyes adjusting to the darkness, he caught the silhouette of a cup and water pitcher beside the bed. Skin stretched uncomfortably across his back as he reached for them, but they were close enough that he was able to confirm his suspicions. Holding himself up on his side, he poured a cup and drank it down quickly, followed by several more. He was parched.

That done, he fell back to the bed, wincing at the pain it caused. He must have been seriously fucked up.

He knew from past awakenings that there was a glass wall facing him, and movement beyond it caught his eye. There was a large console, and behind it the faintest outline of something moving.

Probably a guard, he assumed, and began shifting his gaze slightly to bring the dark form into focus. There were no lights, only a dim glow from whatever was displayed on that console, but he was able to make out the vague shape of a head. Shadows must be playing tricks, he thought, because it looked like a dog. Or a wolf. With four ears.

The shape was moving constantly, and a slight sideways movement brought it briefly into focus above a comparatively bright display.

Two heads! Were they fighting? Watching for another minute proved otherwise, as his mind was able to assemble the jumble of light and shadow now that it had gotten one good look.

Someone was getting their brains screwed out! All he could tell of the screwie was a large patch of white across the top of its head that enveloped one ear.

As he watched, all doubt left him. Yes, someone was definitely getting the screwing of a lifetime. The shapes were moving faster, and he caught a momentary glimpse of a snout framed against the ceiling. Good lord, but they were having themselves a good time! Unfortunately, he felt way too wiped out to get excited by the idea.

I can't believe it. I mean, what the hell? Two wolves screwing in a strange hospital in God-knows-where? I must be drugged.

Something beeped quietly behind him and he looked over his shoulder. Just above the tube that let to his nostrils was a display. A series of horizontal bars had started flashing, though he wasn't sure of what they were because the labeling was in some weird language he didn't recognize. It didn't even look like the writing in the pod. Then again, he was having trouble focusing, even taking the dark into account.

Giving his head a slight shake did little to clear it, but the fuzzy display momentarily came into sharper focus through the dreamy haze he suffered.

The bars changed, some growing longer and others shrinking, and he felt a change in the air being piped into his nose. Then the relative lengths of the bars snapped into focus.

Air!

All but one bar had been very short until the change. Now there was a disturbingly familiar ratio to the length of all the bars. If the big one was nitrogen, the next largest oxygen, and so on, the proportions would be just about right for, well, atmosphere.

He assumed that before he was getting almost pure oxygen, and now the equipment was recognizing that he was awake and switching to normal air. It seemed a safe enough assumption. The lights, however, in the end only served to lull him back to sleep.

The doctor came running back into the room, the towel properly disposed of, and jumped to the console. Crotter stopped his language program and got out of the way.

“You are right, the air system has switched to normal air. That can only mean that the scanners picked up an episode of full consciousness.”

“Why that?”

“It means he’s well enough to be fully awake, an assumption the equipment is programmed to make in certain situations.”

“Brain wave activity says he’s asleep again.” Crotter countered.

“Yes, but look at the current pattern compared to others,” Thorm said, quickly displaying the relevant ones, “he’s sleeping differently. He has definitely turned a corner. The patterns are very subtly different. See the shift here, here, and here?” he added, pointing.

“Ah,” Crotter agreed, “and the language graph is dead, I see.”

“This is much more consistent with a deep, healthy sleep than a recovery sleep,” Thorm added quickly, “I should suspect we can awaken him in the morning.”

“Can you trust that his brain waves indicate the same things?”

“It is a small chance to take. Waking him won’t do any harm. Looks like I’d better get a nap before morning, then set some things up before we wake him.”

“Me too. I’ll let the guard know to come back.”

Thorm gave him a quick pat on the rump. “Too bad the night is over, I really liked the first half.”

“So did I, although I will probably walk funny tomorrow.”

Ken sat, now that the top half of the bed had tilted him up to a reclined position, totally dumbfounded. Having the existence of living sticks shoved in his face was one thing, but now he was faced with half a dozen werewolves.

They all watched him carefully as he stared at them in disbelief, and it was hard not to judge their expressions as being feral. This could not be real. Well, it *could* be real, but not damned likely! He could now accept the idea of an alien race, and due to recent experience could accept that they would be very unlike us. These, however, looked like they had just jumped right out of a horror movie and into a hospital room.

And it clearly was a hospital room. The screens and various devices around him were certainly odd, and they seemed a bit more advanced than human medical technology, but there was no denying this was a place of healing.

Their legs were, in proportion to the rest of them, noticeably short, making him imagine it must be funny to watch them run. As one of them turned to put something on a counter he noted that the thighs appeared narrower than normal from the front but more broad from the side, yet from outside-to-outside the total width seemed normal. That meant a wider gap between them where all the interesting parts were hopefully hung.

The rest of the leg was stout, though still gracefully slender, with something of a digitgrade quality to the lower half. A simple sandal wrapped around a foot of widely-splayed toes and a broad central pad. He had never seen anything, either human or animal, that quite looked the same.

Their shoulders were wide and muscular, with a torso that drew down to a narrow waist. Atop those shoulders was a shaggy predator's head, with a longish, wide jaw set below large, haunting eyes. The ears were large and erect, and all were pointed eagerly toward him.

Fur varied from one individual to another, but all had an evenly-trimmed, thick pelt highlighted by longer, even thicker fur over their shoulders and down their backs. Color went from almost all black on one to various shades of gray and brown on another.

All of this was fairly obvious due to the fact that they were all lightly dressed, wearing shirts with lots of open space and pants, especially on the one he had studied below the waist, that served modesty and little else.

They were watching him carefully but not approaching, licking their lips, or sharpening knives.

So, a hopeful sign that he wasn't about to be eaten.

Between the two standing directly at the foot of his bed was a large, flat screen. One of them pointed to it before reaching around to touch a pad on the front. The dull surface came to life and showed the panning view of a camera sweeping slowly across a tree-lined field.

With an occasional glance at his wolver captors(?) he watched as the camera snapped back to an earlier position, apparently set up to be drawn by certain kinds of movement.

A swirling funnel of crackling blue light dropped into view, spreading just above the ground and depositing a pod there. It was his pod, he realized, as the window was almost facing the camera and he could see himself silhouetted within.

He watched as the many furry beings lounging or playing around it began to back quickly away. There was sound, too, and he heard the obviously worried shouts and barks of the people. The view panned back as the pod's self-destruct feedback began dancing brightly over its surface.

Four pairs of eyes watched him intently as he viewed the recording, and he tried to ignore their stares in case something important played out on the screen.

Standing not too far from the pod was a small child, a pup, he guessed, crying and frozen in fear. As he watched himself jump from the pod in a panic of his own, he could see an adult come into view and bolt for the child.

The parent, as he assumed it to be, was too far off. He had probably wandered away to talk to a friend, thinking his child safe as long as he was in sight.

Ken was not. He watched himself running, yelling, waving everyone clear, then catching sight of the terrified pup and nearly falling over by turning to reach him without slowing too much.

It was odd watching and remembering at the same time, but he observed himself scramble to scoop up the boy and start running with him. The poor little thing had been too scared to run away from what was obviously an alien to him.

The pod exploded, sending shards and chunks of metal flying in all directions as the energy tether snapped free and collapsed. A wince flashed across his face at what was about to come.

At least two cameras, judging from the alternating angles that were edited together, had caught it all. The initial shock wave sent him staggering within a wave of debris and he fell to all fours, one arm clutching the child to his chest. It had felt like forever at the time, but only a moment passed as his back was thrashed by tiny shards of hot metal. As he tried to rise up again, there was a second explosion from the pod's now-exposed core and from out of nowhere a tire-sized piece of metal that would have crushed the toddler slammed into his back.

He winced again as his earlier self hit the ground, still managing to stay up just enough to not crush the boy beneath him. Then he collapsed onto his side, the father arrived, and the boy quickly crawled into more familiar arms. All around them people had scattered. A few moments later, he watched himself smile and pass out.

One of them now reached around and touched a different pad, which had a symbol very similar to the "skip forward" button on a CD player. It seemed to have the same purpose, for he was now greeted by the gruesome sight of himself laying on an operating table.

Lying on his stomach, he was surrounded by sensors and medical devices of all kinds, most looking more advanced than he expected. But it was himself that caught the eye. One of them was examining a horrible looking wound on his back, which was almost completely bruised and covered with flaps of torn skin. The creature opened a large flap of flesh like a hinged door, and he nearly gagged at the sight of it.

The exposed wound was cleansed with what looked like water, but acted more like hydrogen peroxide. A similar mist was sprayed over his entire back, including his buttocks, and left for a few moments. The foam was then carefully rinsed away.

There were a few breaks where the recording skipped to important points of the emergency care, then a final screen showing a diagram of a typical circulatory system and a cutaway of bone with the marrow highlighted. Next to that was a quaint little animation of a human standing erect, then drooping at the shoulders, over and over.

He watched it for a few moments, trying not to chuckle. The whole situation was so absurd it was becoming hard not to get giddy.

“I lost a lot of blood and you can’t give me any, so I’m going to feel weak until my marrow catches up with red blood cells,” he stated, looking at the nearest furry face.

It looked back from behind a short, but somehow just right, snout and grinned. Then it raised its eyebrows, at least, Ken thought it did, and looked at another.

That one tore its gaze away from the human and spoke briefly to the black one who had just grinned, then turned back to him.

“Yes. Blood weak.”

It was Ken’s turn to raise an eyebrow. This one had already spoken once, but it was still amazing to hear English coming from a face like that. And this was more than the simple “hello” it had surprised him with earlier.

“I understand. How do you know my language?” he asked slowly.

The wolf paused a moment and then quickly made some adjustments to a small electronic device he was holding.

“More.”

“More?”

The wolf made a gesture with his paw-like hand, as if sweeping something out of his mouth.

“Again. More.”

“I said, ‘I understand. How do you know my language?’”

Another pause.

“Ah!”

Again it turned to the black one and spoke briefly, then turned back to him and made more adjustments.

“Sleep. Brain. Gather. Computer.”

Ken frowned.

“Sleep. Brain. Gather. Computer.”

Shaking his head slowly, the human mulled that over for a moment. It seemed they had somehow gotten hold of English words, grasped something of their meaning, but had little idea of how to put them together. Was it babbling or answering his question?

“You used a computer to gather information from my brain while I was asleep? You bastards,” he said calmly, going with the first idea that popped to mind.

More adjustments and banter with the black one.

“Ah!”

“You do that a lot, don’t you?” Ken asked idly.

“This is better?” it asked.

Ken’s eyebrows went up again and he replied, “Yes, but say ‘is this better?’” he emphasized.

“This is better?”

“Is this better?”

“Ah! Is this better?”

“Yes! Now who gave you permission to fuck with my brain?”