

Absolutely!

Chuck Domehead never goes anywhere alone, except the potted meats shop on 12th Street. "I never go anywhere alone!" he proudly proclaims, inserting his thumbs beneath the waistband of his polyester pants and puffing out his chest. "Except Maynard's Mushy Meats. I always go there alone ... except when Mother visits."

Chuck is an absolutist—

"But within limits!"

Thank you, Chuck. And that brings us to today's topic: absolutists.

Here are just a sampling of absolutist statements I carefully curated from the vast imaginary crowd of absolutists that occupied my front stoop earlier this afternoon:

"I'm a Raw Foods absolutist, except carrots."

"I'm a 'Refer Madness' absolutist, but marijuana should be legalized."

"I'm a Graowf's Wisdom absolutist, as long as I agree with him."

"I'm an anti-clown absolutist, except when they bleed."

"I'm a Freedom of Peanut Cookery absolutist, but not boiled."

I've never seen a clown bleed. I don't think clowns have blood inside them, just a rainbow of liquid latex. Or maybe just rainbows. Or gas.

My 2nd cousin's aunt, on my mother's dad's uncle's side, once punctured a clown. She decorated a cake.

When Chuck goes to Maynard's Mushy Meats, with or without his

mother, he always takes a list. Chuck is a chronic list maker. He believes that a list ensures the best possible outcome to any outing. "I always make a list, except when I don't need one!" Maynard fills Chuck's reusable grocery bag with the meats on Chuck's list while Chuck waits. "I'm a Go Green absolutist! Well, except when it comes to the A/C. My palmist says I have Thermal Cloud Syndrome, so any warmth is extremely uncomfortable – debilitating even – for me. I'm like the planet. That's why I'm a Go Green absolutist!"

We did not eat the cake, even though it didn't go stale in the mail.

Chuck is also a moral relativist. "I believe that morality is absolutely relative. Right and wrong is different for each person, except for a few obvious things, like murder and cutting in line. Those things are always wrong, because of science."

The cake was pretty.

Science has yet to entirely fathom the mysterious depths of clown humor. People laugh at clowns, but the reasons why people find clowns – or anything – funny are not entirely clear, though Carl von Haigerbund, imminently a psychologist, has posited a theory (in his 2nd go at his doctoral dissertation) that it has to do with the uncanny quality of clowns to remind every living person of his/her father. Doug Stramboleeny, astrophysicist, asserts that it is due to social peer pressure, where the preconceived, even if false, cultural notion that clowns are funny causes people to laugh so they don't look foolish to the guy in the next seat with the chili stain on his "Breadboards and Circuitses" t-shirt. "Dr. Stramboleeny has PhD's in astrophysics and physics, so he's an expert in sociology, too," Chuck explains, "but he's wrong, because of biology."

Chuck finds clowns funny because of evolution. "Well, sure,

there doesn't *seem* to be a survival advantage to finding clowns funny, but once you toss a few million years in the recipe, well ... there you go!" Chuck believes the human species is the result of natural selection guided evolution. "I'm an Evolution Absolutist! Except for abstract reason. That can't possibly be a product of pseudo-random mutation, or we couldn't trust even our theories about evolution. But thank the universe we've had all that time, or where would we be then? Still sucking the slimy skin off the primordial ocean, I'd say!"

Get your good-natured elbow out of my ribs, there, Chuck. "Sorry." It's OK.

Chuck explains, "Certain things are so clearly non-negotiable, that they must be treated with absolutitude. You know, like $1+1=2$ and experts are always right – well, except Dr. Stramboleeny – and, ... uh ... $2+2=4$, and ... oceans! You know, stuff like that."

I asked Chuck, "So, what sets those absolutes in stone, so to speak, would you say?"

Chuck chuckles. "I'm an absolutist," he says, "except when I'm not."

Here, Chuck, have some cake.

Karmah Foxx – Part 6

Karmah Foxx

PART 6

An hour after Karmah was caged, two officers brought in a

mountain gorilla Recombinant who was placed in the cage next to Karmah's. She greeted him when the officers left and he introduced himself as Ben Savage. They talked briefly about what might become of them and then were quiet. Another hour passed and a raccoon hybrid with an irascible disposition was caged next to Ben, but they managed to learn his name was Paul Pyron and that he was a CPA. "I don't deal with the public," he told them, and sulked in the back of his cage, staring away from them through the corner into the empty darkness at the rear of the building.

About two and a half hours after Karmah was caged, the last two Recombinants the officers were seeking were brought in – a pair of tiger hybrids. They were separated into different cages deliberately far apart.

"I'm Darius Clawson," one replied when Karmah inquired about them. "and this is my wife, Talia. We were trying to get to Argentina – we heard they're offering sanctuary for Recombinants down there, but we couldn't go by commercial planes or ships, so we were looking for a private service. Nobody would take us. We were stuck."

Paul burst out in a chattering laugh. "They aren't offering sanctuary to Recombinants in Argentina! They call their Resettlement Facility 'the sanctuary'. They aren't offering sanctuary to Recombinants anywhere. I bet some human offered to help you and you paid handsomely for that information, huh?"

Darius's stunned silent stare at Paul answered for him. "That's what I thought," Paul replied, and went back to sulking at the darkness.

Within another 30 minutes, they were temporarily blinded by the sudden intrusion of light into the gloomy building when the door was opened, and several officers walked in. All five Recombinants tensed, alert and on the defensive. Karmah's ears

went forward, Darius and Talia lashed their tails, Ben huffed, and Paul snarled.

“What a zoo!” one of the officers said. “Let’s round ‘em up!”

One of the officers went to the front corner of the building and climbed up into a forklift. One by one he drove the cages with the Recombinants in them out of the building and loaded them on a flat-bed truck. Once they were all loaded, the cages were tied down under a tarp.

The drive to the airport was brief and miserable. The truck bed shook and jostled them, the wind whipping and snapping at any slack in the tarp, and the roar of the roadway droning at them. They all huddled in their cages as near the center of the bed as they could get and rode in silence.

At the airport, another forklift loaded the cages into the hold of a cargo plane along with pallets of shipping crates, all marked with the Recombinant Control logo.

About two hours later, the plane landed and the cages were removed to the tarmac. A Ryder van pulled up alongside them and Karmah and her companions were shackled and chained together at the collars. They were loaded into the back of the van and driven about 30 minutes in nearly complete darkness that not even Karmah’s keen night vision could do much to penetrate.

The truck rumbled to a stop and they were unloaded in front of a warehouse surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with coils of barbed wire. Inside the fence dozens of mammal/human hybrids, shackled and collared in groups of three, stood or sat in the shade. Many watched the newcomers being unloaded from the truck. Karmah and her companions were led to a gatehouse where they had to give their names, ages, and places of birth and then they were taken into the warehouse.

Inside, the building had been converted into a gigantic

barracks, each Recombinant supplied with a mattress on the floor and a blanket. Karmah and the other new arrivals were passed off to a gray-headed Recombinant Control officer with a square jaw and a stiff disposition.

“Welcome to the Cape Canaveral Recombinant Resettlement Facility. Those of you with exceptional aptitude or applicable experience will be provided training in the event a risk scenario materializes during your migration to TER-1. Your stay here will not be long. How long depends on how quickly you can be trained. It’s all up to you.”

He then went on to explain the Facility’s rules and routine. Karmah, despite her confusion, fatigue, and hunger, paid attention to every word. Something that was said would serve her purposes, she was certain. No human who had dared run her a fox chase had taken her, and she wasn’t going to let it happen now.

END OF PART 6

Karmah Foxx – Part 5

Karmah Foxx

PART 5

Karmah continued to live, for all practical purposes, the same life she’d been living, thanks to the advocacy of Melody Timson and the creativity of the Emory University lawyers. Karmah, despite the fact that her roommate, Sorrell, had reported as ordered to a Resettlement Facility, lived in denial of the Court’s decision. She convinced herself quite easily that years of litigation would suspend any real action

and eventually end in a return to normalcy.

Sorrell had tried to convince her to go with her to a Facility, but Karmah obstinately refused. "You're just a spoiled rich girl living in a fantasy world in that college," her exasperated roommate said on her way out the door. "Recombinant Control is going to come and hunt you down, you wait, and who knows where you'll end up after that – maybe Recomax!"

Emory's combined creative legal minds proved powerless before the Recombinant Resettlement Treaty. They could find no loophole sufficient for keeping her employed at the university or even in the same solar system. Consequently, on September 16, 2171, Recombinant Control, under the auspices of the Recombinant Resettlement Authority, was ordered to take Karmah Foxx, duly registered 3rd generation Homo sapiens/Vulpes lagopus genetic hybrid, into custody along with four others in the Atlanta, GA vicinity who had failed to voluntarily report to a Resettlement Facility.

The day she was collared, Karmah loped into her Monday morning first year genetics lecture, took roll, and began teaching.

"Math is tricks," she said, starting up a slide deck of computational shortcuts.

"You mean like animals teaching classes?"

Karmah looked out across the lecture hall trying to locate the heckler amongst the snickering faces. Her search stopped with Jason Grange's self-satisfied sneer. "Or like students who don't study, yet miraculously pass genetics tests," she retorted. The snickering turned to "Oooo...s." Karmah turned her attention back to the first slide.

Before she could speak, however, the floor-level auditorium door burst open. She looked up sharply at the intrusion and felt a knot in her stomach. Recombinant Control officers

stormed across the floor. She backed up, cornered against the front wall of the auditorium by a semi-circle of officers in black and yellow uniforms facing her with high-powered rifles.

“Paws up where I can see them!” the officer directly in front of her shouted. Karmah put her paws up.

“What is—” she started.

“Shut up! Turn around and face the wall!” Karmah obeyed, her ears back and her eyes wide with confusion. The officers snapped a steel collar around her neck and shackles on her wrists. Behind her she heard excited murmuring from her students. To the collar’s hasp, a chain was attached, and the officer holding the other end gave it a trial yank and then tugged her toward the door. “Let’s go!” he commanded.

As she was dragged out of the room, she heard her heckler shout after her, “Learn lots of new tricks, doggy!” Laughter rippled through the room. “Not a very clever fox, is she?” another student remarked.

Out in the hall, Melody rushed up to her, but was stopped by an officer walking next to Karmah.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, no one is allowed near the animals. They might be dangerous.”

Melody’s teary eyes flashed. “Karmah is not an animal! She is my friend!”

“I know, pets can seem like friends, even almost human at times.” The officer’s tone was patronizing. “I have a dog of my own,” he continued, “that I like very much – but they really aren’t people, are they? We have to remember that.”

Melody was stunned. “What are you talking about? Karmah, I’m so sorry!”

The officers moved Karmah down the hall, away from Melody who

stood powerless, tears coming again into her eyes. "I'll keep trying!" Melody shouted desperately after her. They both knew there was nothing she could do, but Karmah could not help remaining optimistically convinced her captivity was all just an honest mistake that would be resolved within a few days at most.

Karmah was taken outside and put in a black Recombinant Control patrol car.

"Where should I take it?" the officer in the driver's seat asked.

"Just stick it in one of the cages in the pound. We still have four more to round up before we load them on the plane."

The driver and one other officer took Karmah to a small, unmarked, yellow, metal building on the outskirts of Atlanta. The building had one wide door and no windows. Inside was unlit, but in the sunlight streaming in from behind them through the open door, Karmah made out about a dozen cages, each about eight feet long, three feet wide, and four feet high in neat rows of three across the concrete floor. The officers removed the shackles and shoved her, still collared, into the nearest cage. The cage door clanged shut and one of the officers padlocked it.

"Can I make a phone call?" Karmah asked from where she sat on the floor, her voice cold.

"Do you have a phone?" the officer asked.

"You know I don't. You took it back in the classroom."

"Well, without a phone, you can't make a phone call." The two officers chuckled and started toward the door.

Karmah, unable to stand in the confined height of the cage, got to her knees and grabbed the bars. "You can't hold me here! I haven't done anything! If you've got some charge, you

have to tell me!" The officers turned back toward her.

"No, I don't," one of them said, "and I can do whatever I want to you as long as you're not physically injured, and holding you here is not going to hurt you. You have no more rights than the foxes you were made from."

"But what about the humans I was made from – my grandparents? Surely I have the same rights as they did."

The officer grinned. "Sure you do: exactly ... oh, um, none. They gave up their rights when they were mutated into monsters."

Karmah felt about to cry. "What do you have against Recombinants anyway?" she demanded, steeling herself.

He pulled a mirror out of his pocket. "I carry this just for questions like that, to explain things to you brutes in a way your limited brains can understand. Look in this mirror." He held it before the cage at her eye level. "Now, look at me." She did, ears back and teeth bared. "See the difference? I look like a human. You look like a fox. You're an animal. I'm a man. Animals don't drive. They don't own houses. They can't have human jobs. They go to a vet, not a doctor."

"So just because I look different, you think you can treat me like an animal? I have two Ph.D.'s in genetics and an honorary Ph.D. in history. What animal can do that?"

The officer shrugged. "I guess the one I just caged." He turned to leave.

"What did we ever do to hurt you?" she shouted. The officer spun and stormed back to the cage and toward over her. Karmah's ears dropped and she cringed.

"I'll tell you! When my daughter had a fever of 107 degrees, I took her to the hospital. She couldn't see a doctor because a Reco had gotten there first. Later the doctor told us she was

brain damaged. He said if they'd been able to see her sooner they could have prevented it. That's what!"

Karmah was particularly sensitive to non-verbal cues, and something in his body language was wrong. She could sense an emotion in him deeper than his anger that read something more like – guilt.

"I'm sorry. Her illness must have been horrible," she replied, feigning sympathy.

"She was sick for days. She looked terrible, but still they gave preference to animals, just because they got there first. Animals should not get to see a doctor before humans."

"They must have had a hard time getting the fever down."

"No, right away, but by then we'd had to wait too long for them to finish with those animals."

Karmah raised herself as high in the cage as she could and stared brazenly up at the officer. "So, she was sick at home for days with a fever, before you took her?"

"What are you implying, fox?"

Karmah backed up to the rear corner of the cage and sat down. "Oh, nothing. I'm truly sorry for your daughter."

END OF PART 5

Karmah Foxx – Part 4

Karmah Foxx

PART 4

Karmah wrapped up a bit more work and then headed home early to get ready for the awards banquet. She rehearsed her acceptance speech as she drove. Home in her apartment she showered and brushed her thick, white fur. Why her grandparents had chosen arctic fox for their transmutation she couldn't fathom. White fur was impossible to keep clean. She did have to admit her luxuriously fluffy tail was gorgeous. Her roommate was out of town, and alone in her apartment she did not restrain her instinctive happy panting, admiring her tail as she combed it out.

She flipped on the TV to watch CNN as she painted her foot claws. Nobody would see them in her shoes, but she felt better about herself knowing she was primped down to every detail. CNN was reporting live outside the Supreme Court building as Melody had said. Behind the reporter, a crowd of Recombinants had gathered on the steps in the permitted Protest Zone. The reporter, John Lowe, stood in the Plaza droning on about Court procedure and the generalizations of the case that Karmah already understood better than he did, so she tuned him out.

She finished her claws and put together a sardine and saltine snack to stave off her hunger until the banquet was served. She sat on the couch and watched the protestors while she ate. Recombinants of every class were present, standing about peacefully, talking amongst themselves and occasionally shouting slogans and waving signs. Afternoon was waning and the Court building was transforming into a massive shadow looming over them as the sun set behind it.

Some unalloyed humans had gathered on the sidewalk and the camera operator moved back to get them in the frame. Curiously, the people in their little group all refused an interview. One of them shouted up at the demonstrators, though.

"Go back to the zoo, beasts!" Karmah couldn't be sure, but she thought it was a young man in a dirty t-shirt and blue jeans.

One of the protestors leaped from the line and turned toward the agitated group of demonstrators, clearly admonishing them to stay calm. The dirty t-shirt man threw something and hit the protestor in the back of the head, the projectile splattering into chunks on impact. The protestor fell, cracking his head on the steps. The other protestors, led by a tiger hybrid, broke the Protest Zone and charged the group of humans, who scattered like mice. The camera jostled as the operator ran until he (or she) got clear of the developing ruckus and then stabilized, taking in the whole scene. A Recombinant Control car was already there, the officers attempting unsuccessfully to round up the hybrids. More patrol cars and a van raced around the corner and officers in full riot gear darted out and into the fray. Recombinants were gassed, tazered, and beaten. A few officers went down. In the end, the Recombinants were collared together on a chain and herded into vans. Only unalloyed humans were left as the Recombinant Control vehicles drove away. Things were getting worse and worse for her kind, and Karmah could not figure out why. For a long time there had been a kind of social truce. She didn't understand why everyone on both sides couldn't just leave it as it was and live together. She couldn't finish her snack thinking about it. She looked at the clock on the wall. 5:05 PM. It didn't look like the Court would announce a decision today after all, so she turned off the set.

Two hours later she was putting the finishing touches to her her ensemble for the evening. As she put cobalt blue earrings in that complimented her ice-blue eyes, there was a knock at the door. It was Melody and she was clearly distressed about something.

"Melody, what's wrong?" Karmah asked, concerned for her friend's harried appearance. "Come in." Melody walked in quickly.

"Karmah," she said nervously, "I'm sorry. The committee has decided to postpone the ceremony." Karmah glanced at her dark

television screen, the implication of Melody's announcement clear. She backed up, tail tucked, and sat on the couch, fear in her eyes and her ears back defensively.

"The Court announced a ruling?" she asked. Her voice growled thickly despite her determination to control it. It clearly unsettled Melody for a moment, but her friend shook it off.

"Yes," Melody replied, "about an hour ago. Didn't you watch?"

"I turned it off about 5. I thought they were done for the day."

"So, you don't know ... they said ... they said Recombinants aren't human and therefore cannot be 'persons' under law. Karmah, I'm so sorry! I'll do everything I can to help you." She sat down and held Karmah's half fox paw in her human hand. "Remember, the lawyers are already working on something."

"I think I need a drink," was all Karmah could manage to say.

END OF PART 4

Karmah Foxx – Part 3

Karmah Foxx

PART 3

Karmah Foxx, Ph.D.'s in Human and Animal Genetics, honorary Ph.D. in History, finished reading the last of her Genetics 102 freshman term papers, sighed, leaned back in her chair, and cradled her cup of tea. She was waiting for it to cool a bit more so drinking it would not be so difficult. Melody Timson knocked on her open office door and poked her head in.

“Busy?” she asked.

“No, come in, please! It’ll give me a welcome break from the pain of assigning bad grades to papers.”

“That awful?” Melody replied, walking into the cramped office and taking a seat in front of Karmah’s desk. The early afternoon sun filtered through the narrow window behind Karmah and set the dust dancing in lazy sparkles above a blotter calendar and the haphazard stack of student papers.

“Not bad, just not good.”

Melody smiled sympathetically. “Have you watched the news?” she asked. Karmah glanced at her watch.

“Surely they’re not done yet.”

“No, but the live reports from outside the Supreme Court are fascinating.”

Karmah risked a sip of tea. Melody watched with interest.

“What?” Karmah asked.

“I’m sorry ... I still think it’s fascinating how you do that.”

Karmah put her cup down and smiled. It would be rude for most genetically unalloyed humans Karmah was acquainted with to ask that, but the depth of her friendship with Melody allowed for a familiarity between them that transcended social taboos.

“Practice,” she answered, and then added, “Do you think an unfavorable decision will affect this evening?”

“No, definitely not!” Melody sounded genuinely surprised by the question. “The award has already been announced, and you earned it for your merits as a respected faculty at this university. That has nothing to do with a court decision about whether or not you can decide which crooked politician should scandalize a government office.”

“It’s more than that, and you know it. The right to vote – that’s fundamental to being a citizen. The only way to take that away is to say ‘all men are created equal’ doesn’t apply to Recombinants.” Karmah paused and her ears drooped, her eyes full of anxiety. “I’m really worried. My parents have to live in a camp as it is. I’m only in an apartment because of exceptions for professors. If you hadn’t gotten me this post–“

“Stop it!” Melody interrupted. “All I did was make sure the committee gave you the same treatment as everyone else.

“Maybe, but you are the Dean. That counts for something.”

“Your credentials got you this job, Karmah, not strings. Don’t you think otherwise.” Melody gave her a wry smile. “But, just in case, I already got the university lawyers working on something to be sure we don’t lose you.”

Karmah looked a little relieved. “Thank you so much. You really are the best of friends.”

Melody stood up. “I’m just the Dean doing her job.”

Karmah went around her desk and hugged her friend, an expression of gratitude she would attempt with no other non-hybrid. Melody returned her embrace without hesitation.

“You stop worrying,” Melody said. “It’ll all be OK. Door open?” she asked as she left.

“Yes, please,” Karmah replied.

END OF PART 3

Karma Foxx – Part 2

Karmah Foxx

PART 2

Four years after her confrontation with her history teacher, Karmah stood on stage behind a lectern, indisputable valedictorian of her graduating class of 338 students. She looked out over the neat rows of chairs on the gymnasium floor at her fellow classmates, all human. Her accomplishments in the program read like the bio of the honoree at an awards banquet: 4.0 GPA, Honor Society, Volleyball team captain and MVP, black belt in Shito-Ryu, Editor of the school's paper ("The Eastsider"), founder of the student chapter of the United Minority Rights Action Coalition, a litany of volunteer community service projects, and numerous other academic and athletic awards. But the accomplishment of greatest pride to her personally was publishing The Corrected History of Recombinants in America and subtitled "An Analysis of the Treatment of Human/Animal Genetic Transmutation in Public High School Curricula." It was a book that took her nearly three arduous years to write and that won journalism award. It was also instrumental in Mrs. Stein's decision to hand in her resignation at the just prior to the start of Karmah's senior year.

On her graduation night Karmah stood before the school, despite all odds, the top of her class. The dubious presence of Mrs. Stein sitting in the audience on the front row of the bleachers made her uncomfortable. Mrs. Stein wasn't smiling. When others clapped after Karmah was introduced, Mrs. Stein sat on her hands and scowled. When the audience got quiet in anticipation of Karmah's speech, Mrs. Stein broke out in a coughing fit. Karmah began speaking, clear and strong, and Mrs. Stein dropped her handbag with a startling thud. She fumbled with it on the floor. Something metallic rolled out

noisily across the floor toward the rows of students in the center of the floor. Karmah spoke eloquently, refusing to allow Mrs. Stein's antics to ruin her moment of victor. Mrs. Stein chased what she had dropped clumsily out into the gymnasium. Karmah thanked her parents for standing behind her and extolled the support of family. Mrs. Stein tripped and fell into the Jason Haige on the end of the third row. Karmah complimented her classmates, praised them for looking beyond their differences and embracing individual strengths, and challenged them to carry their open-minded attitudes with them into the world. Mrs. Stein returned conspicuously to her seat, laughing nervously at her seatmates, snorted, and laughed again. Karmah invited Principal Waller to stand and thanked him for fostering a safe educational environment for all people of all races and creeds. The audience applauded. Mrs. Stein threw something toward the center of the room. Smoke rose thickly from a teargas cylinder. Several young men in gas masks ran into the gymnasium. Students coughed and sputtered. Parents rose and tripped over one another to get down the bleachers to their children. Karmah stood frozen in shock at the chaos blossoming below her on the floor, watching the men fearfully, ready to fight or flee. But the men rushed upon Principal Waller instead and knocked him off his feet. They followed him to where he tumbled and one of them kicked him. Mrs. Stein put on a gas mask and bounded up the bleachers to the top row. Karmah's parents circled around the expanding cloud of gas toward the back of the stage, presumably to protect Karmah from the attackers who were assaulting Principal Waller. Karmah snapped into action, leaped off the stage, and sprang through the stinging cloud of gas toward Principal Waller. Several security guards entered the gymnasium. Mrs. Stein pulled a revolver from her handbag. Karmah shouted for her parents to get down and planted a fist in the lower left back of one of Principal Waller's attackers. She stood over the Principal, the tear gas burning in her eyes and shrouding her from Mrs. Stein's frustrated aim. Karmah stepped into Waller's second assailant's attack on her,

blocked his wild swing, and drove her elbow into his sternum with a crack. The third swung his fist at the same time and missed. Karmah executed a graceful yoko geri to his mid-section as he leaned off balance from his impotent swing. The security guards entered the fray, dragging the men Karmah had disabled toward the door. Karmah darted out behind the stage to cover with her parents. Mrs. Stein, her plan foiled, rushed down the bleachers and out a side door. She was never seen in Greenville ever again. Police and ambulances arrived. Everyone went home. Karmah never got to finish her speech. Diplomas were all mailed to students.

END OF PART 2

Karmah Foxx – Part 1

Karmah Foxx

PART 1

“Karmah Foxx.”

Karmah casually raised a paw to confirm her presence in Mrs. Stein’s 9th grade Eastside High history class. Gossip whispered behind her to her left followed by a snicker. The teacher swept the class with a glance for quiet, but said nothing. Karmah’s ears slunk and she pretended to be distracted with a bent loop in her notebook’s spiral binding.

On her way out of the room after class, Mrs. Stein stopped her.

“Karmah,” she said, “may I speak with you for a moment?”

“What is it, Mrs. Stein?” Karmah replied respectfully.

Mrs. Stein's tone was officious. "I've found it best if Recombinants confine their desk choices to the back of the room. It's less distressing and that makes the environment more conducive to learning for everyone." She smiled pleasantly throughout her well-rehearsed enjoinder. Karmah's ears perked forward and her tail tensed with teenage indignation, but she kept her voice calm.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Stein, I didn't know your class had assigned seating."

"I don't," Mrs. Stein said quickly. "It's just that the other students often get distracted by ... well, you know."

Karmah's eyes flashed with the insinuation. "No," she replied feigning ignorance, "I don't know. Why don't you enlighten me." She subtly bared her fangs and snarled over the "l" in "enlighten."

The threat was not lost to Mrs. Stein, who fidgeted anxiously, but recovered her composure quickly. The classroom was her territory, and the school trained all its teachers on proper handling of Recombinants. Mrs. Stein's training had taught her the importance of making the pack hierarchy clear to canids from the start. She stiffened authoritatively.

"Animals, Karmah," she said, sneering. "Animals running loose in the class room make the human students nervous. You will need to find a seat on the back row from now on."

"I am not an animal!" Karmah countered defiantly, her hackles bristling down her spine. "I am a Recombinant, and I have the same rights as everyone else in the class – pure human and not."

"No, you do not!" Mrs. Stein retorted. "Not in my classroom!"

"We'll see about that!" Karmah shifted her backpack on her shoulder. "Let's go see Principal Waller right now!"

Mrs. Stein glanced nervously around the empty room, afraid the situation might slip from her grasp. Her control and position as head of the pack felt tenuous.

Karmah's parents had already prepped the principal in case of trouble – their daughter was the only Recombinant in 9th grade and one of the only three in the entire school. Karmah could sense Mrs. Stein's desperation and did not miss her instinctive glance around the room that betrayed her mental search for an escape.

Suddenly Mrs. Stein's expression changed and softened and her shoulders relaxed. Karmah braced herself for something coming and felt her own fight instinct coursing in her blood.

"There's no need for that," the teacher replied. "I'm sure we'll come to a resolution tomorrow. I don't want you to be late for your next class. You're dismissed."

The next day, Mrs. Stein announced her new assigned seating policy to her history class. All the students moved obediently as directed when their names were called. When Mrs. Stein had finished rearranging her classroom for the year, Karmah glared at her from where she sat alone in the back row. Mrs. Stein met her scowl with triumphant smugness.

"Today," she announced to the class, "we are going to discuss Recombinant history in America and the importance of legal bans on human/animal genetic transmutation to the stability of ordered society." Mrs. Stein turned toward the whiteboard. Karmah prepared to take detailed notes of every distasteful word her teacher uttered. If the woman wanted to turn her class into a kind of transgenic fox chase, Karmah was prepared to run her a race she'd never forget. "The game is afoot!" Karmah wrote on the top of the page.

END OF PART 1

Feran Wolfpaw – Part 6

Feran Wolfpaw

PART 6

Several days later Feran woke early as usual and checked a board in the lounge just off the barracks for the final duty rosters and passenger manifests for the arks. There were twelve of the giant interstellar transport ships built to carry Earth's entire population of 1,189,732 Recombinants to a planet unimaginatively named "Terraformed Earth One." Each ship was equipped to carry 100,000 passengers in deep, low-metabolic sleep. The assignments of passengers to ships based on species by "complimentarity of biological need" was supposed to be posted any day. Alongside the general passenger distribution manifests, the arks' contingency team assignments were to be posted on "duty rosters." It was the duty rosters that inspired trepidation in Feran and slacked his tail with worry as he approached the peg wall hung with fresh papers bound in stacks on clipboards. There were two possible roles Feran, with his flight training, could be assigned: pilot or co-pilot. He wanted neither – "Responsibility" had become a distasteful word to him – but if he had to fill one, he hoped it wasn't "pilot."

He thought of Allaria. The duty rosters were bundled together on a clipboard by themselves, one sheet per ark. The rest of the assignments were clumped on clipboards alphabetically by Recombinant last names. He picked up the "K" sheaf of papers and flipped through the pages. Allaria wasn't there. His eyes watered and he put the clipboard away quickly.

Feran took down the duty roster clipboard and pawed through it

looking for his name. On the eighth sheet he found it. His ears and shoulders drooped. He had been assigned pilot on the Romulus.

“Dang,” he said. He took consolation in the fact that the probability of something going wrong was near 0, so the only thing he’d likely have to pilot was a shuttle to carry settlers to the surface of Terraformed Earth One. He read the rest of the Romulus’ roster and lingered over one name that made his tail involuntarily sway softly:

“Co-pilot: Karmah Foxx”

“You’re welcome.” Feran started at the voice behind him. It was Donald, peering at him over a cup of coffee.

“What do you mean?” Feran asked.

“She was assigned pilot of the Remus. I pulled some strings and got Shock ‘promoted’ and Karmah re-assigned as your co-pilot. I figure after 20 years in hibernation, that would be a pleasant sight to wake up to. Call it a graduation gift. The rest is up to you.”

“Always watching out for your students. What a guy.” Sarcasm had become Feran’s way of thanking his instructor who had incidentally become as much a friend as he could think of from a human over the past three months.

“Also, I smuggled you a case of bourbon aboard. It’s marked ‘cough medicine’.”

“Thank you, Donald,” Feran said, appreciatively.

“You might need it if she turns out to be a ... well, you know what I mean.”

Feran smiled and then looked serious. “Why do you even care what happens when we leave this rock?”

Donald sighed and looked at his feet. "Repaying a debt, I guess." Feran was expectantly silent, so Donald continued. "Oh, what the heck," he said. "When I was a kid – 5 years old – it had been raining for a week. There was flooding and we were cooped up in the house. When the sun finally came out with no rain in the forecast, my mother took me and my brother to a park to get us out of the house. The park was near a river, and we were fascinated because of all the debris floating in it. We were right along the shore, watching the river, and my mother told us not to go near it, but I was five, what did I know? She turned her back for a moment, and I was at the river's edge. I stepped in the water – you know, just to splash, like little kids do in a puddle? But it was deeper there than I knew. I stepped in and went to my knees. The current was fast and pulled my feet out from under me. Next thing I know the shore is rushing by and I'm getting further and further out from it. The water was rough and fast, and it kept rolling me and pulling me under. I coughed and couldn't swim in it. Once when my head was up I heard my mother screaming my name. I cried out for her, 'Mommy! Mommy!' but the water was in my throat and I couldn't make the words. I was terrified. I was so scared.

"And then, all of a sudden, I feel these strong arms around me and I'm rolled over on my back, looking up at the sun in the clear, blue sky and a voice says, 'It's OK. I've got you. You're safe now. I've got you.' And then I'm sitting on shore, trembling and coughing, and this otter-man gets down on my level and smiles and touches me on the head, really soft. He says, 'Don't worry. My name is Father Benson. You just rest a minute. When you're ready, I'll take you back to your mom.' He sat there with me and looked at the river and talked about the sky and the sun and how good it felt and other things that made me feel happy. And then he stood up and held my hand while we walked back to my mother.

"At first my mom looked angry when she saw us – I think it was

seeing me with a Recombinant – but then she looked at me, and when she looked back at Father Benson, her face was different: soft and ... humble. Anyway, she thanked Father Benson and asked, ‘What can I do to repay you?’ and he said, ‘You just make sure Donald grows up to be a man of peace.’

“Somehow I grew up thinking that meant being a soldier. I joined the navy, believing the water was important to my destiny in some way. That’s when I learned to fly. Anyway, I guess I thought that a man of peace is a man who fights for peace, and that a good soldier is a soldier who carries peace onto the battlefield. I thought that if I was to be a man of peace, the midst of war was the place it was most needed. Sounds kind of naive, I know.”

Feran shook his head and gestured for his friend to continue.

“So, when the Treaty formed the Resettlement Authority and they asked for volunteers, I jumped at the chance. After you all leave there will be no Recombinants left on Earth, except maybe a few stragglers hiding out in the mountains and such.

“Maybe this whole thing is wrong and I’m just doing wrong for the right reason. I don’t know. All I do know is that this is my last chance to repay a debt. If I can just make sure you are ready – really ready – if there is an emergency, and you save all the lives on the ship because I helped you now, then I think I will be the man Father Benson wanted me to become.”

Feran was quiet for some time after Donald finished. “Anyway, that’s why,” Donald added, looking a little embarrassed.

“Donald,” Feran said fondly, “you may just single-handedly restore my respect for humankind. You are truly the man of peace Father Benson hoped you’d become.”

Donald smiled. “Well, congratulations, pilot!” he said and turned to go.

Feran hung the clipboard back on its hook. "I need some of that coffee," he said.

"No coffee for you. Or breakfast," Donald said over his shoulder. "The terraformer's beacon has been idle-green for 30 days now. They're loading you up today."

Feran frowned and his tail curled to his ankles. "Not wasting a minute, are they," he said, but he had more on his mind than his own departure.

"Donald," he said. His voice was deadly serious. Donald stopped and turned to face him inquiringly. Feran continued, his voice tight. "Are the Recomax inmates going?" he asked.

Donald was quiet for some time, searching Feran's face. He'd gotten pretty good at reading Recombinant body language and Feran was certain he was picking up the depth of his anxiety.

"No," he said. His voice was grave and Feran picked up disgust in his tone. "I'm sorry, Feran. The Resettlement Authority determined they would be too much of a security concern, so they were ... put down." Feran felt nauseous and coughed on the sob in his throat.

Eight hours later, stomach growling and naked to the fur, Feran lay back in his hibernation pod next to Karmah's still empty one. Technicians prepped him with monitor leads and I. V. needles and then opened the valve on the sedative cocktail that would put him in an induced comatose state. The last thing he thought before the sedative made his mind go dark for 20 years was that he'd not buried his bottle of Beam on that island in the Bahamas where they collared him.

END

Feran Wolfpaw – Part 5

Feran Wolfpaw

PART 5

Feran, it turned out to his surprise, was deemed to have an aptitude for piloting spacecraft.

“Your stats are getting worse, not better,” Feran’s flight instructor, Donald, informed him as he got out of the simulator.

“It’s gotten boring in there,” Feran replied. “And anyway, I’ll never have to fly an ark. I’ll be asleep the entire trip and the ship will fly itself on auto-pilot.”

“That’s no reason to fly the simulator in somersaults and ram into moons. Your training is for the possibility something goes wrong, and if such a scenario materializes, you will have to be better than good. You should take it more seriously.”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard all that before. I’m done fighting for other people and their causes. If a ‘risk scenario materializes’ I’m looking out for number one, just like everybody else will. The arks are too complicated to learn enough in years, much less a few months, to deal with trouble. All this training is a stupid waste of time.”

“I know you think so now, but light years from Earth with 100,000 hibernating Recombinants depending on you alone to get them out of trouble –“

“Shh!” Feran grabbed Donald’s arm and looked down the hall.

“What?”

“Who is that?” Donald followed Feran’s rapt gaze to another Recombinant and her instructor.

“That’s Karmah. She’s also in the pilot training program – only she takes it seriously.”

Feran continued to stare. Karmah did not notice, engrossed in conversation with her instructor.

“Huh,” Feran replied thoughtfully. “Arctic fox? Mmm, mmm ... just look at that tail!”

Donald rolled his eyes. “Recombinants!” he said. “Down, boy!”

Feran glared at his instructor. “Humans!” he retorted.

END OF PART 5

Feran Wolfpaw – Part 4

NOTE: Part 3 is REALLY short, so here’s part 4 as a bonus for today.

Feran Wolfpaw

PART 4

Sometime late in the evening the patrol boat docked in Miami, but Feran and the others still spent the entire night aboard ship in the cages. Around midnight a deckhand brought bowls of water and slid them through feeding slots under the cage doors. There were no bathroom trips.

“That’s why they put sawdust in the corner of your cage,” Feran’s surly neighbor said bitterly.

Dawn broke for the prisoners – that is how Feran thought of them – a dusky gray straining out of the dark shadows around the hold.

Several Recombinant Control officers bulldozed in shortly after the light of day made its timid skulk amongst the gloomy corners. The Recombinants were removed from their cages and strung together single file, neck-to-neck with chains, the reptilian in front and Feran stationed at the rear. The officers marched them out, collared, manacled, and shackled, onto the deck and down a gangway. On the dock, they were ordered to line up side-by-side to await the arrival of a truck to take them to the Resettlement Facility.

The wait was long, and several small clumps of dock workers gathered to stare and jeer. Feran figured the officers arranged it all on purpose. Two of them stood guard off to the side grinning. Feran smiled back at them politely and nodded at the crowd pleasantly and panted happily as if he didn't understand what they were saying or what was going on. The other prisoners glowered and snarled, baring their teeth, with the effect of delighting the humans and taking the attention off of Feran, so that when the hecklers threw things, they aimed at anyone but him. The poor, dumb beast was terribly boring to pick on when the crowd had the satisfaction of provoking angry humiliation from others as rational as themselves. Cruelty was far more enjoyable than simple brutality.

After about 45 minutes (as Feran reckoned by glances at his chain-mates wristwatch) two Ryder moving trucks arrived. The reptilian was loaded in the back of one and the rest of them, all feline and canine, were herded into the other. The trucks drove away from the port and through the city, and after that Feran wasn't sure. Judging by the speed they traveled and the sounds of other vehicles, he guessed they were on an Interstate. No one spoke for a long time – the ride was noisy and they were sitting in near perfect darkness, except for a sliver of light that twinkled through a break in the seal along one of the doors. Eventually they exchanged names and a few vital facts, but not much more. Except for Feran, the rest

were as sour as his cage neighbor.

At some point they made a stop at a Rest Area and the Recombinants were let out. A canine by the name of Terrence who, like the others, looked to Feran like he'd just as well bite you as say hello, started hesitantly toward the facilities. One of the officers stepped in front of him and barred his way with a rifle.

"Now, where do you think you're going?" he asked.

"Men's room," Terrence replied.

"Now why would you be going there? That there's for men. You ain't no man. They've got a place for you to go right over there." The officer indicated a direction behind Terrence with a thrust of his rifle barrel. They all looked in the direction the officer indicated.

"Dog walk," the sign said. Terrence turned back toward the officer and growled, his ears sharply back and his tail out menacingly behind him. Feran didn't like where the situation was heading. He slipped up beside Terrence and whined softly to get his attention.

"This may not be the best time," Feran said quietly. "They've got rifles and you're chained between two cats with two more canids in tow. You go feral on this monkey and we won't make it 20 yards before we're all full of lead."

Terrence hesitated, read Feran's pleading ears and tail, and backed down. The group made its way to a line of trees and they all did their best to offer one another privacy and some chance at a little dignity. When their business was concluded, they were herded back on the truck and locked in the darkness.

About two and a half hours later the truck rumbled to a stop and they were unloaded in front of a warehouse surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with coils of barbed wire. Inside the

fence dozens of mammal/human hybrids, shackled and collared in groups of three, stood or sat in the shade. Many watched the newcomers being unloaded from the truck. Feran and his band were led to a gatehouse where they had to give their names, ages, and places of birth and then taken into the warehouse.

Inside, the building had been converted into a gigantic barracks, each Recombinant supplied with a mattress on the floor and a blanket. Feran and the other new arrivals were passed off to a gray-headed Recombinant Control officer with a square jaw and a stiff disposition.

“Welcome to the Cape Canaveral Recombinant Resettlement Facility. Those of you with exceptional aptitude or applicable experience will be provided training in the event a risk scenario materializes during your migration to TER-1. Your stay here will not be long. How long depends on how quickly you can be trained. It’s all up to you.”

He then went on to explain the Facility’s rules and routine, but Feran didn’t pay attention. He was confused, hungry, and tired, and he needed to go to the bathroom.

END OF PART 4