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EXPOSURE

Melissa Paulsen

“Polarcats?”

“According to the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, it’s a hybrid between a polar bear and snow leopard. They have amber-colored cat-like eyes, and long spotted tails like a snow leopard, but the creature’s ears, body, and paws are similar to a polar bear’s. Their fur is like a polar bear’s too: shaggy and white.”

“Technically a polar bear’s fur is clear.”

Captain Maria Victoria Juárez let out a long sigh and stared at the horizon. The sun reflected off the ocean as if the saltwater consisted entirely of glitter. Her research vessel, the RV Eve, left Argentina thirty-six hours ago. They still had another twelve hours to go until they reached Antarctica. She glared at the night captain, Jade Roca, from underneath her hand, the sun making her squint. The Arctic Ocean’s swells gently rocked the RV Eve in time with Maria’s breathing.

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping?” Maria asked.

“There’s only an hour until my shift starts,” Jade replied, her tan hands perched on her hips. “You should know this.”

“Whatever,” Maria said. “I need to get back to work.” She pushed past Jade and returned to her quarters.

Sitting at her desk, Maria studied the case file the Argentinian government entrusted to her. The ivory blur of the polarcat made goosebumps rise on her forearm. A blow to the head from one of those colossal paws alone would be enough to kill her.

Maria jumped when Jade barged inside her quarters, her round face transfixed in her signature scowl.

Jade’s silver bracelets jingled as she crossed her arms, “What are we going to do, Juárez?”

“About what?” Maria asked, tucking the photograph of the polarcat back inside the manilla folder.

Jade snorted. “About the approaching storm. While you’re in here daydreaming about the mystical polarcats, I’m the one keeping this research vessel running, Captain.” She dragged out the

word captain and puckered her lips as if the word left a sour taste in her mouth.

Maria fiddled with the corner of the manilla folder. Should she have the crew on deck to handle an emergency or was it better to hunker down and embrace the storm, assessing the damage afterward? She hadn't seen any signs of an approaching storm, only stray ice chunks bobbing underneath the blue sky. As much as Jade annoyed her, Maria knew that she wouldn't make up something as serious as an Antarctic storm; Jade possessed an uncanny sixth sense when it came to storm prediction. Maria remained still, cursing her indecision as Jade stared her down. When Maria lived on the streets of Buenos Aires, she had to make snap decisions, so why couldn't she make a decision now?

"Once again you're useless." Jade shrugged and continued, "But what do I expect when we have a former street urchin as the captain of our research vessel? Don't worry, I'll handle it. Somebody has to." She turned sharply, not giving Maria time to respond as she hurried out of eyesight, no doubt to bark commands at some unfortunate crew member.

Maria glanced at her watch: 19:30. Time for Jade to take over as captain. Maybe tomorrow she'd be more decisive. Maybe tomorrow she'd be the captain the RV *Eve* needed her to be. Maybe tomorrow she'd finally put Jade Roca in her place.

The storm hit two hours later and was like nothing Maria had ever experienced during her three years as captain of the RV *Eve*. The vessel lurched like a toy boat in a toddler's bathtub. Waves slapped the sides of the boat and the roar of thunder filled Maria's ears. Was this how Noah felt when God sent the flood to obliterate all life on earth? She dry-heaved and stumbled to her feet as rain pelted the windows. A flash of lightning blinded her as another roar of thunder descended from the heavens. As a child, her mother had always told her that thunder was nothing more than the angels bowling in heaven. She could still hear her mother's soft voice, "No tengas miedo, María, cariño." Don't be afraid, Maria, darling.

Frantic crew members jostled her in their haste to check and secure the research equipment. She didn't see Jade in the throng of scientists. Another flash of lightning illuminated the ship in an ominous white glow as Maria headed outside. As soon as Maria set foot on the lurching deck, raindrops soaked her and stung her skin

like a swarm of bees. She spotted Jade on the starboard side clutching the slick metal railing with one hand and a rectangular black bag in the other. It looked like she was yelling but Maria couldn't make out her words. Maria prayed to God for protection as she shuffled along the deck, her wet hands sliding along the railing.

"What are you doing? Get inside, now!" Maria had to repeat herself twice over the shrieking of the freezing Antarctic wind before Jade heard her.

"Some bonehead left this piece of equipment outside and refused to retrieve it. Do you know how much this thing is worth?!" Jade's damp black hair clung to her face and obscured one of her dark eyes.

The ship pitched forward, and Jade lost her grip on the railing. Maria tackled her back onto the deck before she could fall overboard. Another flash of lightning, this time so close that Maria could feel its heat as it scorched the deck.

Maria watched wide-eyed as the RV *Eve* smacked head-on into an iceberg, splitting it with a sharp crack!

"I'm...I'm sorry," Jade yelled.

"We need to get back inside," Maria replied, her head down. An icy wave washed over the side of the deck and soaked the back of her legs, numbing them completely.

"I know." Jade readjusted the rectangular bag so it fit more snug in the crook of her arm, like a mother protecting her baby. "I don't trust Rodriguez steering the ship for any longer than he has to, especially not in a storm like this." The RV *Eve* tilted to the left and the two women slid toward the bow before the vessel righted itself.

Another colossal wave drenched Maria and Jade. The two women rose to their knees and slowly inched along the slick deck. Another bellow of thunder sounded, followed by paparazzi flashes of lightning. For a moment, the entire ocean was illuminated, all its murky secrets exposed. Maria felt exposed: an incompetent captain. But she couldn't go back. She wouldn't go back. Being the captain of the RV *Eve* was her life; she wasn't going to let anyone take it from her, especially not Jade Roca.

Maria couldn't feel her fingers by the time they reached the metal door connecting the observation deck to the inside of the vessel. Maria flung the door open, throwing herself inside. She breathed heavily, her hands clutching her knees, making sure she

was still in one piece. Jade seemed unfazed except for the strands of wet hair plastered to her caramel-colored face. In a rare moment of tenderness Jade said, “Hey, I’m...sorry.” Maria studied Jade’s eyes as her pupils shrank in adjustment to the flickering in-door lighting.

Jade straightened and slung the equipment bag over her shoulder. “Get some rest, Maria. You’ve done a lot for me tonight. I won’t forget it.” Maria nodded once before hurrying down the hall to her quarters, gripping her cot for dear life as the wrath of the storm hook her.

They were knocked fifteen degrees off course in order to avoid the storm’s heart, adding another dull three hours to the RV Eve’s journey to the El Luz research station. The ocean today was calm. Praise the Lord, thought Maria. She sipped her coffee and grimaced. Rodriguez needed to learn how to make coffee, somehow it always managed to taste burnt.

Maria reached into her pocket, hoping to find a sugar packet to save her taste buds. Something crinkled. Instead of a Splenda packet, it was a torn grey flyer advertising for a deckhand position. Her chest tightened as she gazed at the endless cerulean horizon through a thin film of tears. “Think about the blessing,” Maria whispered, crossing herself.

It took Maria ten years to get the job as the day captain of the RV Eve. She started as a deckhand on a local fishing boat, the El Luchador, and she rose in the ranks, enduring twelve-hour work-days and countless taunts from the pig-headed men wanting to take her back to their place.

The low sound of sea ice snapping against the hull brought Maria back into the present. How long had she not been paying attention? Maria glanced down at the radar. The RV Eve remained on course.

A loud knock made Maria jump. She whirled around and saw Rodriguez standing sheepishly outside the glass door. Maria motioned for him to enter with an impatient flick of her wrist.

“Sorry to scare you, Captain,” he said. But Maria knew he wasn’t sorry. His grin was much too wide. “There’s been an unusual sight thirty-degrees southwest of our current location. Some crew members think they’ve spotted the polarcat.”

“Did you see it yourself?” Maria asked.

"No, but the others seem pretty convinced. They told me to come get you."

"Alright, take over for a minute then."

"Aye aye," said Rodriguez, snapping his hand to his wide forehead in a salute.

"Don't patronize me, Rodriguez," Maria called back over her shoulder. Rodriguez's booming laughter chased her down the corridor.

Tendrils of water and ice clung to the creature's matted white fur as it pulled itself onto land, digging its strong paws into the snow. Wind danced through Maria's dark hair as she beheld the polarcat from the observation deck. The creature's elongated snout tilted upwards, sniffing the scent of body odor and awe coming from the RV *Eve's* crew. The polarcat—a she based upon her slender frame—swept her tail from side to side, erasing the massive paw prints she left behind in the snow with every step. She chuffed and arched her thick neck, the Antarctic sunlight making her amber eyes glimmer.

Maria heard approaching footsteps and groaned when she saw Jade.

"You're not seriously thinking about going after it are you?" Jade crossed her arm and narrowed her eyes, as if she were personally offended by the majestic presence of the polarcat.

"Well, I haven't really made a decision—"

"Don't," Jade said.

"But the entire purpose of our expedition is to research the polarcat, especially now that we can confirm that it's real and not just a myth," Maria replied.

"Trust me, you don't want to be anywhere near that thing," Jade warned. "It's beyond your level of understanding."

"When did you become the polarcat expert?"

"I'm the head scientist!" Jade retorted, throwing her hands up in the air.

Maria was growing impatient with Jade questioning her every decision. She clenched her fists and said, "We're anchoring and going on land. We can't lose sight of the polarcat."

The surrounding crew stood around, stunned at Maria's ability to make a quick decision. "That's an order," Maria yelled. The crew scrambled to prepare their gear.

"Fine," Jade said. "But I'm coming with you."

"A captain needs to stay behind in case something happens," Maria said. "Besides, I'm sure you would be delighted if I got myself eaten by the polarcat."

"Maybe so, but you can't change my mind. Rodriguez will stay behind."

Maria didn't want to bring Rodriguez anyway. He'd only ramble on about how poor women leaders were compared to men, so she replied, "Fine. Be ready to go in five minutes or else I'm leaving without you."

Jade made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat but complied.

The steady humming of the Zodiac rang in Maria's ears, along with the excited chatter of her small crew and Jade's grumpy silence. They were a streak of orange, speeding from the RV Eve onto land. Jade checked and rechecked the rectangular equipment bags mumbling each name as she went, "Water-Proof Camera. Tranquilizer Gun. Tags. GPS. Compass. Radio. Flare. Snow Shelter..."

"Why don't you check again," Maria said. "I'm not sure we have everything."

Jade glared at Maria and quickly zipped the equipment bags. The other three crewmembers wearily eyed the two captains.

"I know you aren't smart enough to understand the complexity of documenting a new creature, street captain."

"I know enough to be promoted as the RV Eve's day captain. Learn your place, Night Captain Roca."

Maria knew she had pushed Jade's buttons by using her official title. Jade's slender lips curled, giving her the appearance like she was laughing at some private joke. The crew members sitting alongside each captain stiffened, their eyes wide, pleading for the Zodiac to go faster.

Maria expected more pushback, instead Jade said, "We need to return by 1700." She focused her gaze on the horizon. "A storm is coming."

That gave Maria and the crew approximately five hours to track, tag, and document the polarcat. The Zodiac slid to a stop in front of the ice flow. Jade elbowed Maria in the boob as she scooped up one of the bags of equipment and hopped onto the ice.

"Jealousy isn't a good look for you," Maria called after her. She

helped the other four crew members off the Zodiac, heavy bags of equipment slung over their backs. Jade ignored Maria's comment and shifted her weight, impatient as the rest of the crew trudged the twenty yards toward her.

When Maria caught up Jade said, "I'll be day captain of the RV Eve soon enough." She leaned toward Maria and said, "You're bound to mess up, you hellion."

"What's your problem?" Maria said through clenched teeth, trying to keep them from chattering. "Why does Day Captain even matter? We do the same exact duties."

"It's not just a job to me," Jade said quickly. "I...need to provide..." Jade's words trailed off, eaten by the bitterly-cold Antarctic gusts. "We need to get going."

"Wait," Maria said.

"No, we need to go." Jade stepped forward, lifting her arms to brace against the wind. The crew members followed behind her and Maria sped up to walk stride-for-stride with Jade.

"We weren't done," Maria said. "I don't know anything about you. You think you know me? You're right that I lived on the streets where the concrete was my pillow and tourists eyed me like I was a rabid animal or one of those poor, filthy Argentinians they saw in the commercials back home."

Jade rolled her eyes. "This has nothing to do with your past."

Maria continued as if she hadn't heard, "I considered it a good day when I found a browning apple core. I wouldn't wish that life upon anyone, not even you, Jade."

Jade's shoulders sagged. "I'm not discrediting--"

"But you know what?" Maria interrupted. "I've had to work my way up to this position on the RV Eve. I reeked of fish guts for ten years to earn this spot as day captain. I didn't get to just be placed here because of a piece of paper, like you. You can be bitter all you want, Jade, but it won't change anything. I earned this position. Can you say the same?"

Instead of replying, Jade shoved Maria. Her small pupils gazed down at Maria as she lay flat on her back, the impact of colliding with the ice momentarily stunning her. Jade extended a hand, but Maria batted it away as she stood.

"You needed to cool off," Jade said. Maria glared at one of her crew mates who tried to hide his smile behind his gloved fist.

Good will come from trials, have faith, Maria thought. She

tried to take a deep breath to recollect herself, but it felt as if her nostrils had sealed shut. “This is going in the report,” she said.

Jade shrugged in response. “Shall we continue tracking the polarcat or do you want to turn around and write that report?”

Maria shoved past Jade and heard the crew shuffle obediently behind her like ducklings. Their puffy orange coats and nylon pants swished with every cautious step, tracking the distant polarcat across the vast icecap. Jade was quiet as she walked in step with Maria, occasionally stopping to help a crew member make sense of the readings on the GPS. The polarcat never looked back, but gracefully plodded forward toward some predetermined destination, its long fur rippling in the sub-zero wind.

After walking for about three miles Maria’s crew began to smell the pungent odor of rot and decay. Five minutes later they stumbled upon hundreds of penguin carcasses: Kings, Gentoos, Rockhoppers, no species was spared. Each carcass was marred with a broken spine and puncture marks deep in the neck. Maria asked if the polarcats caused this, and Jade nodded. Maria and her crew of four were so distracted by the massacre in front of them that they failed to notice the people emerging from the deep snow drifts behind them. Maria felt a sharp prick in her neck and the bright world of the Antarctic faded to black. The polarcat roared.

When Maria awoke, she tried to stretch her cold, stiff limbs but couldn’t. She was bound with rope to a metal pole inside of a tent. Her mouth wasn’t gagged, but then again, she supposed her captors weren’t worried about anyone discovering her out in the Antarctic tundra. Outside the tent’s flap she heard Jade’s low voice.

“Earth Mother Eva, you know I love my people. I won’t let anybody hurt my family.”

“Your mission was to observe the outside world, Sister Jade. But you grew careless and fond of the things outside your community. I told you the polarcats would endanger our world, but you refused to listen—”

“Our people were lonely, they needed companionship.”

“—I gave in to my people’s demand as Earth Mother. A decision I now regret.”

A soft purring came from outside and Maria noticed the spotted tail of a polarcat sticking out from underneath the flap.

“You know my time as Earth Mother is almost done, Sister

Jade. Soon, I will have completed my fortieth cycle around the sun. I had hope in you as a future Earth Mother.”

Jade’s voice grew louder, “I have fulfilled my duties exceptionally, Earth Mother Eva! I have reported on the outside world and its flaws...the greatest of which is resistance to change. Can you not see that our people are falling into the same trap?! I—”

Maria sneezed. Of course she was allergic to polarcats. She struggled against her restraints but to no avail. The tent flooded with bright daylight as the flaps were pushed aside. A short woman with silver hair entered with Jade at her heels. The woman was... otherworldly. Her body resembled a blubberous tube and her face was round, consisting of no edges whatsoever. Her dark pupils grew as wide as the eye itself as they adjusted to the tent’s darkness. How long have these people lived here to adapt so dramatically? Blubber to keep them warm and pupils that quickly adjusted to intense periods of light and darkness? Maria felt like she had entered another dimension. Maybe she had. She closed her eyes and prayed for protection.

“Open your eyes, Maria, and show some respect to the Earth Mother Eva,” Jade chided.

“Where are the others?” Maria asked.

“Don’t...worry about them,” Jade said. The polarcat stuck its massive head through the tent flap and Jade petted it. Its black lips were smeared with blood.

Earth Mother Eva swept her silver bangs out of her eyes and tightened her long cloak of penguin feathers. Underneath she wore a seal-skin onesie and boots with crampons. The only article signaling her elite status was the elaborate multi-feathered cloak.

“Sister Jade has gotten too used to dancing around conversation during her time in the outside world,” Earth Mother Eva said, shaking her head at Jade. Jade stared at the snow beneath her feet. “Your crew members are dead. They saw too much. You’re only alive because Sister Jade convinced me.”

Maria stiffened, the Earth Mother was a lot of things, but cryptic certainly wasn’t one of them. She also noticed that the Earth Mother didn’t need Jade to translate for her. How long had the Earth Mother existed to master such various forms of communication?

“Why?” Maria whispered, trying to make Jade meet her eyes. How had she never noticed Jade’s unique pupils before now? She

was a fool and now she was destined to die in the Antarctic, or else become a slave to this strange new culture. No one would miss her.

Earth Mother Eva spoke again, "Our society has been kept secret for millennia. We have observed the rampant destruction of the outside world. The violence between siblings in pointless wars, the destruction of the very thing that gives life...how foolish the rest of the world has become." Earth Mother Eva paused to study Maria's face, causing her to squirm.

"We are the new humanity. When the world perishes, we will be ready. Your self-caused downfall will be used for our triumph. We shall populate all corners of the earth in complete harmony and utopia. We have no flaws." Earth Mother Eva smiled, sending a chill snaking down Maria's spine. It was a cold smile that didn't reach her eyes...an inhuman smile.

"I don't understand...the ice caps would be the first to go—"

The Earth Mother smiled again and stooped toward Maria. Instead of hitting Maria, she said to Jade, "Cut her restraints."

Jade pulled a bronze knife from the leather holster on her belt. The hilt was engraved with congruent bear paws. She walked around Maria and cut the rope.

"Is that more comfortable?" Earth Mother asked when Jade finished.

Maria rolled her wrists. Her voice came out as a whisper, "Yes."

"Your innocence is not something you should be proud of," Earth Mother said. Without another word she opened the tent flap, blinding Maria's inferior eyes yet again, and left. Jade stayed behind, observing Maria as if she were a lab rat.

"Earth Mother Eva has offered you a rare opportunity to become one of us," Jade said.

"Why did you spare me? You hate me."

Jade looked away from Maria. Her eyes turned glassy. Maria tried a different tactic, "How come you don't look like Earth Mother Eva?"

"I was sent out when I completed ten cycles around the sun, so I haven't had as much time to adapt. But I have been gone for too long from my community," Jade said, more to herself than in response to Maria. "Time..." she trailed, "The thing too often assumed..."

"What if I refuse Earth Mother Eva's offer?" Maria interrupted.

"Then I will let you go," Jade said so softly that Maria wasn't

sure if she heard correctly. “I am destined to be the next Earth Mother. Next year will mark my twenty-sixth year of existence. As much as I love my community, my time in your world has taught me the importance of embracing change.”

“So... what now?” Maria asked, refusing to take her eyes off the knife sitting on Jade’s waist.

“Walk with me,” Jade replied.

They left the tent and Maria cowered behind Jade when a polarcat came bounding up to Jade. She laughed. “Relax Maria, this is my companion Ursus.” Jade rubbed Ursus behind his rounded ears and a deep rumble of pleasure emitted from his snowy chest. Ursus walked soundlessly beside Jade as she showed Maria around.

The civilization took Maria’s breath away.

“Your head is probably filled to the brim with questions,” Jade said. “Especially since I doubt your brain takes up much room inside there.”

When Maria turned, she noticed Jade’s eyes shone with humor and not malice.

“It’s okay, I know it’s a lot to take in right now,” Jade continued. “We’re called the Arcrust people and Antarctica has been our home for nearly two-thousand years.”

“How?” Maria breathed. “How has your civilization survived so long without detection?”

“Well, the legend is that the soul of our Earth Mothers...past, present, and future sustains the village so that satellites can’t detect us. However—” Jade stopped speaking as three Arcrust men walked past with fishing poles. They gazed at Maria, refusing to mimic Jade’s wave of greeting. When they passed, Jade continued, “—it’s our technology that saves us. It uses the earth’s magnetic poles to scramble a satellite’s signal and generates a perpetual snow-storm to keep us concealed from outsiders.

Our technology allowed us to create the elaborate village seen before you. It also allowed for creatures like Ursus to exist by splicing the DNA between a polar bear and snow leopard.” Jade rubbed Ursus’ chest and cooed at him in a low voice. He purred, sticking his pink tongue between his lips in a show of pleasure.

Maria took in the intricate Arcrust village. Her head felt foggy, like she was dreaming of the scene in front of her. Two research labs with dome-shaped roofs were placed at the outer corners of the village, diagonal from each other. One lab contained the tech-

nology that created the snowstorm, while the other possessed the satellite-scrambling device. As Maria and Jade walked, they passed schools, piers, and modern social structures like a hospital and a library. Small black tents were set up sporadically into sparse “neighborhoods.” Kids giggled as they rushed by Jade and Maria to chase after their playful polarcats.

“People like me are called Scouts,” Jade said. “We report on the outside world and bring with us some element of that culture we found interesting.”

Maria nodded. “Why polarcats?” she asked.

Jade laughed. “Why does anyone get a pet? For companionship. But to live in our climate, I knew that the creature needed to be specially adapted, so I created the polarcat.”

“Oh,” Maria said. The way Jade talked made it seem like polarcats were the most straightforward things in the world.

“Jade!” a man with a long black beard yelled from a tent to their right. Jade and Maria turned their heads. Jade grinned. It was the first time Maria had ever seen her smile in three years of working alongside her.

“Pap!” Jade yelled back, waving. She ran up to the man’s tent. Maria reluctantly followed, not wanting to be left alone with Ursus. A woman emerged from the tent holding a toddler that clutched a chunk of her mother’s brown hair in her chubby fists. Jade hugged the woman and planted a kiss on the little girl’s forehead.

“My family, I—” Jade explained, turning around.

“No need to explain,” Maria replied. “I understand.” She watched a child ride on top of a polarcat squealing with delight as his older brother hung onto his waist. She thought of the children in Buenos Aires, kicking a balón de fútbol around in the piss-soaked alleyways, dreaming of striking it rich one day as athletes. Their dreams were their only possessions that couldn’t be stolen.

“Why do you cry?” Jade’s mother asked Maria. She shifted the toddler to her other arm.

Maria hadn’t realized that she’d been crying. Or that it was noticeable. She wiped the tears away with her knuckles. “My-I lost my mother eleven years ago. Lost everything actually. Sometimes the grief still slams into me, I’m sorry.”

Mutely, Jade’s mother passed the toddler into Jade’s arms. She turned back and enveloped Maria in a warm hug. The scent of honey filled Maria’s nose as the woman pulled away and retrieved

the toddler from Jade. The little girl gazed with wide eyes at Maria from across her mother's shoulders. When Maria waved, the girl smiled.

Jade rested a hand on Maria's forearm. "I'm sorry, Maria. I didn't know. You probably thought I was such a prick."

Maria shrugged. "It's...fine."

"No, it's not," Jade said. Maria noticed the moisture pooling in Jade's dark eyes. "I-I really admire your strength to carry on. I don't know what I would do if..."

Jade never finished her sentence. After a moment of silence Maria asked, "What's an Earth Mother?"

"The Earth Mother," Jade corrected. She straightened her spine and continued, "The Earth Mother is the leader of the Arcrust people. She protects and provides, like any good world leader. To become an Earth Mother, one must first serve as a scout for a minimum of fifteen years. An Earth Mother ages out once they reach forty-cycles around the sun, and a new, younger leader takes her place."

"That is the way it has been and always will be," Jade's father said.

"Well, Pap—" Jade began.

Jade's mother opened her mouth, but the toddler began fussing, squirming in her mother's arms like an earthworm caught on a fishhook. With an apologetic smile Jade's mother ducked inside the tent. Jade's father shook his huge head at Jade as if to say not now, before disappearing inside the tent, leaving the two women alone.

"What was that about?" Maria asked, not missing a beat.

"Nothing. Sometimes my pap and I fight over the way things should be done. That's all." Jade flicked her two short dark braids over her shoulders. "Is there anything else you'd like to see in the village? I could show you the—"

"Why did you spare me, Jade?"

"What?"

"You could have let me die, like our other crewmates," Maria said, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "But you didn't. So, why?"

"You saved my life on the way down here. During the storm."

"I don't buy that," Maria said. She paused before continuing, "You're not the life-for-a-life type of person. I did what anyone would have done in that situation, I acted on instinct. So, what's

the real reason?"

"Because I don't want to be like Earth Mother Eva," Jade said bitterly.

"Then why did you let the others die?"

Jade couldn't bring herself to make eye-contact. "I was too late."

"Why did they have to die? Couldn't you people just, I don't know, erase their minds with some kind of technology? The kind you seem so proud to own?"

"Watch it," Jade said. "This isn't like Men in Black. We aren't aliens!"

"Then what are you?"

Jade pulled back from Maria, hurt apparent in her eyes. "Human, of course. Just because we look different and have different adaptations doesn't mean we aren't human at heart."

Maria shrugged. "It's hard to tell."

Jade stepped away from Maria, resting her forehead on Ursus'. She took a deep breath before approaching Maria once again.

"I'm sorry about what happened. Truly, I am. I saved you because you're important to me Maria."

The way Jade so gently said those last five words caused Maria to take a step back. "Woah. You don't mean, like, you're in love with me, do you?"

Jade remained silent but a light-colored flush appeared on her cheeks.

"No, no..." Maria began shaking her head. "I mean, there isn't...it's not. I... I just thought we were rivals, barely even friends? I don't know!"

"Maria—" Jade began.

Over the hill, Earth Mother Eva appeared, riding on the back of her own behemoth of a polarcat from earlier. "Sister Jade!" she called. "Has your friend made a decision?"

"Look, we...we need more time, Earth Mother Eva," Jade said. Her eyes flicked frantically from Maria back to the Earth Mother.

Earth Mother Eva clicked her tongue. "We had a deal Sister Jade," she said. "I cannot make any more allowances for you." She opened her fist to reveal a square device no larger than a flash drive. Jade's face paled. Earth Mother clicked the button.

Maria dropped to her knees, her chest constricting. It felt as if somebody had punctured her lungs. She gasped for air.

"Please! Earth Mother, stop!" Jade said. Fat teardrops rolled

down her cheeks. Ursus growled, baring his fangs at the Earth Mother's polarcat even though it was twice his size. Dried blood was crusted on its lips.

The sky darkened or maybe it was only Maria's fading vision.

Jade charged at Earth Mother Eva, knocking the device from her outstretched hand. She crushed it underneath the heel of her boot. Whatever force gagging Maria ceased and Antarctica switched from black to a luminous pale blue again. A cold fury passed over Earth Mother's face, her mouth set in a hard line.

"Sister Jade. You know the rules of our society. I am only trying to protect our people. What makes you so sure she won't give us away if we let her leave?"

"I won't," Maria said.

Earth Mother Eva turned her head. "You're lying." A crowd of Arcrust men and women formed a ring around Jade and Maria. Their faces were blank but their eyes traced Maria's movements. Jade reached inside her jacket and removed a compass and a flare from one of the mesh pockets. She handed them to Maria and said, "The Earth Mother is going to punish me. The RV Eve is 120 degrees east of here. I can buy you some time, but you must leave now Maria."

"What am I supposed to tell the others?" Maria asked.

"You'll think of something." In one smooth motion Jade mounted Ursus, clutching his thick neck scruff. "Maria," Jade said, turning to look over her shoulder, "Please, keep our secret. I know things are...complicated...but please, please...I've taken such a risk."

Earth Mother Eva clutched long, slender daggers in each fist. Ursus tilted his oval-shaped head, his gaze boring into Maria's before he was scratched across the face. His eye socket became a bloody pulp. Ursus rose onto his hind paws and locked in combat with the Earth Mother's behemoth of a polarcat with a roar.

"Promise me, Maria, promise me you'll keep my people safe," Jade yelled, now locked in hand-to-hand combat with Earth Mother Eva. The two beasts rushed to the left, creating an opening in the mob of Arcrust people. Maria didn't hesitate. Frigid air stung her cheeks as she ran.

Ice and snow churned underneath her short legs. Risking a glance behind her she saw a few Arcrust people chasing after her, riding their own polarcats. Jade and the Earth Mother were still locked in combat; Jade stabbed the Earth Mother's thigh. Earth

Mother Eva howled. Maria heard the staggered breathing of a polarcats behind her, its hot breath on her neck making her skin crawl. She whipped around and dove to the side, barely avoiding the polarcats's claws. The Arcrust village skyline was shrouded in snow. Only one of the villagers had continued to pursue her, the others went to help Earth Mother Eva or Jade.

Maria didn't allow herself to think about Jade's fate. The polarcats snapped at her while its rider shouted. Maria couldn't understand the rider; her blood rushed in her ears. The polarcats charged forward, twisting its neck; its gaping jaws bore down on Maria. Maria didn't think; she lit the flare. The polarcats reared back, both it and its rider temporarily blinded. Maria sprinted, refusing to look behind her, praying to God that today wouldn't be her day to die. She clutched the compass so hard it made her hand cramp. She didn't dare slow down, even though her skin felt like it was on fire underneath her heavy clothing.

She could barely breathe, but still she pressed on for miles, until finally the brick-red hull of the RV Eve came into sight. Maria had never been so happy to see the research vessel in her life. When she was sure that there weren't any more hostile polarcats or Arcrust people chasing her, she removed her research log from the inside of her neon orange jacket. She scribbled the Arcrust village's coordinates based on the estimated distance she had travelled.

As Maria trekked the remaining distance toward the RV Eve, she distracted herself from the cold with thoughts of money. How much Argentinian Pesos would the government give her for a secret this big? She'd become famous for its discovery. This could be huge for all of womankind. She thought about the ways she could help Buenos Aires...no more starving children...no more homeless families. Buenos Aires could become a utopia.

She felt a pang of guilt as she thought about Jade and her family. Was it wrong to leave her? Jade did tell her to go. Maria shook her head. Maybe she should order the RV Eve to stay docked so Jade could find her way back. But the RV Eve needed to leave. Now. Six-foot swells viciously rocked the boat: left, right, up, and down. Rodriguez frantically waved at Maria from the observation deck. Somewhere, deep down, Maria knew Jade wouldn't be coming back. In the distance Maria heard thunder, eerily reminding her of a polarcats's growl.

Maria stood in Mujeres Argentinas Park. The vivid green blades of grass tickled her toes, and the afternoon sunlight warmed her slim shoulders. She kicked a balón de fútbol with a group of eight-year-old boys she mentored. One of them, Juan, suddenly collapsed and Maria ran over. He mumbled that he hadn't eaten in two days.

"Pobrecito niño," Maria whispered, helping him to his feet. She walked him over to a food cart selling Choripán and bought him three. Then she bought twenty more to share with the boys, and an additional twenty to take back with her to the shelter.

In the distance the horns of research vessels and navy boats belled as they headed south. Argentinian air force jets roared above, leaving a southern trail of jet-smoke in their wake.

Maria thanked God for her incredible discovery. And for Jade's sacrifice.