

This is an excerpt from the novel *CLAW
OF THE WOLF*, by Daniel Castillo.

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The sun beamed warmly over the lush estate of flowing trees and winding nature paths that surrounded an expansive mansion complex, its rays reaching down to the corner of the building where Snowy the polar bear stood. The sunlight bounced off his thick white fur to highlight the expression of concern on his face.

This plant is dying, thought Snowy as he looked at the odd shoot of foliage creeping out of a crevice between his mansion exterior and the garden wall. The polar bear scratched his head with the point of his hand trowel, studying the claw-shaped leaves and the drying purple flower that drooped down. A Coloxian Flantusma, he guessed, of the Spartinza variety. It was native to the planet Cloxia, about 3 million gees away. The plant must have arrived as spores under the shoes of some intergalactic traveler who was visiting this planet, Bontuv. One spore must have drifted in the air and, instead of floating to the vast acres of fertile ground that filled his gardens, it had the bad fortune of landing on a smidgen of dirt stuck inside the crack of a concrete wall. It was doomed from the start. That is, until now.

A few minutes later, Snowy returned with a ladder. After climbing up, he gently grasped the bulk of the plant in one of his big paws, while his other paw delicately and slowly maneuvered the exposed roots. Snowy, hero of the universe, rescuer of galaxies, would dig out a little plant, put it in good soil and save it from extinction. A corner of his mouth lifted up in the slightest grin as he laughed internally at the ironical thought.

RAAAAUHHH-RAAAAUHHH—an ear-splitting noise suddenly burst out.

A siren-spinning, smoke-billowing, red-lights-blinking Alerter pod swooped down, slashing the Coloxian Flantusma in half and then swinging toward Snowy's head. Snowy jerked his body backward, flew off the ladder and crashed into a bed of gardenias.

The Alerter, a small but lively device, floated in front of Snowy and projected the three-dimensional face of a lizard into the dust that swirled around him. It was his top assistant, Rizzy.

"Ho there, chieftain!" shouted out Rizzy's face. "Hee, hee. Looks like I caught you by surprise."

Snowy's nose crinkled up into a tiny but menacing snarl.

"Oh, don't worry!" Rizzy said, grinning. "I knew your martial arts reflexes were going to keep your head from getting bonked. I've got to test you once in a while, you know. Keeps you on your toes!"

Snowy got up and stepped slowly toward the fallen plant. He bent down and picked up the remains ever so gently in his giant paws, like a father lovingly embracing a sick son. He shook his head with regret as he studied the broken petals and the smashed stem pieces. He couldn't even try to plant the broken stem; it was mutilated beyond any point of recovery.

Snowy glared angrily at Rizzy's projected face, the bear's mouth puckering into a stern grimace.

"Plant got messed up, huh," Rizzy said. "No need to get all emote over it. Just go down to Plant City and buy another one. There should be a Plant City around where you live."

The Coloxian Flantusma was a hard-to-find species, not rare but not commonly sold in your local plant shop either. Regardless, Snowy felt that it was a life needlessly de-

stroyed, even if it was just a plant. His frown grew deeper as his paw opened, allowing the petals to float sadly onto the ground.

“Hey, I didn’t buzz you just to weed your garden here,” Rizzy remarked. “There’s another major galactic emergency for the Oh-Great-Hero Snowy to attend to.”

As Snowy grimly picked up the hand trowel and folded the ladder, Rizzy continued. “It’s Wordtrione 9, close to HQ. A mutated wolf is wreaking havoc all over that planet.”

“Is the molculator ready?” Snowy said as he placed the ladder in the garden shed.

“Of course! When have I ever not had everything ready and prepared for the Oh-So-Valliant Snowy? I’ve already programmed it for your current mission. It’s all set to take you to Wordtrione 9!”

Snowy walked through the gates of his garden and around the edge of his curving pool, stepping beside the ornate waterfall that spilled into crystalline waters. A tall glass door automatically slid open, allowing him to enter his music parlor. The Alerter device floated closely behind.

“Briefing” said Snowy. While listening to Rizzy, the polar bear strode past an ivory grand piano, an indoor fountain splashing water down from a fish statue, and a bass violin with its sheet music elegantly positioned on a stand.

“A meteor crashed on Wordtrione 9 in some remote area of the woods,” replied Rizzy, his projected face continuing to follow Snowy. “This wolf comes into contact with the meteor and gets enormous super-strength. So what does he do with that strength? Does he decide to help animalkind with it? Noooo! He decides to go on a rampage, bust buildings and take over the city, Flinkop, which is the capital of Wordtrione 9!”

Snowy entered a vaulted gallery painted with immense murals depicting key scenes from the history of the bears. "Continue."

"No deaths reported thus far. We've got four seriously injured police, though. And five animals hurt from buildings that Wolveron tore apart."

"Wolveron?" asked Snowy as he descended a circular staircase.

"That what he calls himself. His real name is Porests Nibdsu. He worked as a data entry clerk. Didn't make much money. No family to speak of. Not married. No criminal record. Nothing of anything before this thing with the meteor."

"Doctor Frosty."

"Right-o. By the way, you're not at the molculator yet? How long does it take just to get to another room of your mansion? You need a molculator to get to your molculator."

"Doctor Frosty," repeated Snowy as he walked down a long, straight hall lined with wide windows. Each window showed rooms of blinking lights, glowing tubes, humming motors and computer panels.

"Right, I got your request already. Here goes."

The Alerter device beamed out an additional projection, displaying the face of a white owl next to Rizzy's image, and both faces now followed Snowy along his trek. The owl's face looked puffed in, and his slit eyes exuded absolute wisdom and tranquility.

"Good evening!" said Dr. Frosty cheerfully. "And what a beautiful evening it is! Moonshine glowing in the sky, the soft cool breeze in the night wind—"

"It's not evening here!" exclaimed Rizzy. "It's morning!"

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"I prefer evenings, so I always like to imagine that it's evening! The beautiful stars in the dark sky, the branches rustling against each other—"

"Briefing," interrupted Snowy coldly.

"Yes, yes, harummph," said Dr. Frosty, clearing his throat. "The briefing, yes. My studies indicate that the meteor contained molecules of a hitherto unknown structure, and these molecules moved in unpredictable ways, producing radiation that changed the molecular composition of the wolf's muscular tissue. Only the muscular tissue, I must say. The organ tissue seems to have remained intact and untouched."

Snowy stopped at a closed metal door. His finger punched a combination of several buttons on a side panel.

"The radiation has dissipated from the impact area," continued Dr. Frosty, "leaving no imminent danger upon other animals in the region. The wolf, however, has been affected. I see no way of reversing the process that changed his muscular molecular structure."

The metal door slid open, revealing another long hallway with an open door at the end. Snowy walked through.

"Can you translate that into simple Animalese?" asked Rizzy.

"Certainly," replied the owl, clearing his throat again. "Meteor falls. Meteor gives energy. Energy bad. Energy changes wolf. Wolf super-strong. Doctor cannot change wolf to normal."

"So it's all up to you to save the world again!" Rizzy said to Snowy.

"And save it you will!" added Dr. Frosty cheerfully. "Snowy will save another world! Hooray for Snowy!"

Snowy entered through the end doorway, which opened into a small chamber. This was the molculator, a box of a

room with a chair and controls inside. All the machinery and computers in the walls could dissolve the molecules of the room and transport them anywhere in the universe. Within a short time, Snowy could walk out and face any challenge.

Snowy looked over the controls on the molculator wall. "Danger level," he said.

"Ten," replied Dr. Frosty.

"Ten?" Snowy froze, a frown of concern stretched over his face.

"Yes, well, given the super-strength of the wolf and his invulnerability. But, ah, there is no trouble in the universe that Snowy cannot handle!"

"Absolutely right!" shouted Rizzy. "Snowy conquers all! You've beaten a ten before!"

"When?" asked Snowy.

"Uhh, err..." replied both Dr. Frosty and Rizzy, looking around puzzled, as if they could find the answer by seeing it.

"Hmm, I think it was that time when you lost your leg," Rizzy answered pensively.

"Yes! When you battled with the Decimatrix!" yelled Dr. Frosty, exuberant that they found the answer.

"Right," replied Rizzy eagerly. "It was that mechanical contraption with all those blades! I remember it took a life of its own after a computer malfunction. That was one mean machine."

"It certainly was!" Dr. Frosty said gleefully. "But Snowy ripped that mad robot apart!"

"That he did!"

"You see?" Dr. Frosty happily told Snowy. "You have defeated a ten!"

Snowy rubbed his chin, deep in thought.

"If you lose a limb or two, I can put it back!" Dr. Frosty added with confidence. "Just like I did when you fought the Decimatrix. There is nothing modern medicine can't do these days!"

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say that," Rizzy added. "If he gets his head ripped off, you can't put it back."

"I did specify limbs, did I not, my friend?"

"But you said there's nothing modern medicine can't do. So that means everything."

"It is only an expression. An expression of support. We are supposed to encourage our chieftain to fight his enemy. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah, right. Go get 'em, Snowy!"

Hmmm, thought Snowy. Things were starting to look grim. He had been very close to giving up his heroic career after fighting the Decimatrix. A Danger Level of ten was certainly no honeycomb this time either. Yet there was a world to save. As usual, he would offer his life for the sake of animalkind. And he would win. He had to win. Right?

"Oh, and your girlfriend Penelope is in trouble again!" Rizzy added, giggling.

"Shhhhhh!" Dr. Frosty said to Rizzy, with a touch of anger.

Snowy slapped himself in the face with frustration. Penelope, again. And again, and again. Is there ever a catastrophe in the universe in which Penelope doesn't manage to stick her paws into? She had a genius for getting herself into trouble, all so that her big hero Snowy would come and rescue her. Snowy shook his head, frowning. Crazy Penelope.

Snowy plopped his voluminous body onto the command chair of the molculator. "Signing off," he said solemnly, working the control consoles surrounding him.

“Go Snowy!” shouted Rizzy and Dr. Frosty. “Get that vermin! You can do it! Hooray for Snowy! Hooray! Yeeaaaaaaaa—”

The molecular door slid shut, and the cheerleading immediately gave way to the electronic beeps and hums of the instruments that surrounded him. He typed in some commands on the keyboard in front of his chair. The lights went dim, and a big numeric display counted down the seconds from 10. He sat back in his chair and relaxed slightly, his fingers tapping his armchair until the seconds reached 1. The room shuddered briefly, the lights returned to their normal intensity, and a console screen in front of him displayed the message: “Molecularization in progress. Time of estimated arrival to Worditrone 9: 32.68 minutes.”

“Computer,” said Snowy. “Begin briefing.”

A little cube on his console projected a rectangular screen in mid-air, right in front of Snowy. A message appeared: “News summary. Compiled by Rizzy.”

Rizzy scuttled across a long wall of the Snowy Mission Center, passing by other fellow co-workers who rushed through the hall with the urgency that always began a new mission. “Ho, Yando!” he said to a small sloth who was lumbering as fast as he could to another office door.

“Hi, Riz,” replied the sloth with a tad of exhaustion, waving with his long claws.

“How’s the stat report on superpowers coming along?” asked Rizzy, not stopping for a moment.

“I just sent it over to you, sir.”

“Good, good. Any more stats, shoot ‘em over.”

“Yes, sir.”

A swarm of little gray mice scrambled noisily down the hall and towards Rizzy. Each mouse held a small black chip containing an enormous amount of data.

"Rodents, where's the weapons update?" asked Rizzy.

The mice burst into commotion as they rattled at each other. "You were supposed to send me the update!" "I don't work in that department anymore!" "I haven't seen anything yet." "But Flexel didn't send me the inventory!" "I did too!" "You did not!"

"Quiet down!" called out Rizzy. "Just get yourselves together and get me the report right away. We don't want the chief to call in a weapons request without us knowing what to send him. Get going now!"

"Yes, sir!" "Yes, boss!" "Yes, scale-face!" "Yes, Riz!"

"Wait a second!" Rizzy exclaimed angrily. "Who called me scale-face?"

"He did!" "She did!" All the mice pointed at each other. "I did not!" "I didn't say it, you did!" "That's a lie!"

"Calm down, calm down! Just go do your job. OK?"

"Yes, sir!" "Absolutely, sir!" "Right away, chief!" "On my way, fly sucker!" "Hey, who said that?" "You did!" "No, you did!"

"Get going already!"

"Yes, sir!" "We're going, sir!"

Rizzy scuttled away from the ongoing litany of the mice. He arrived at a metal door with a sign that said, "Science Lab." Below that was a smaller sign with a smile drawn on it, reading, "Come on in!" Standing vertically on the wall, he pressed a panel button. The metal door slid open, and he crawled right in.

"Greetings, my slithery sleuth!" cried out Dr. Frosty from behind a maze of smoking test tubes, blinking panels and twisted wires.

"Sleuth?" said Rizzy incredulously as his legs pattered over the floor. "I'm not a detective!"

"Well, well. It's rather hard to find something that goes well with the word, 'slithery.' But it's such a beautiful evening that I just felt obligated to sing, make poetry and play with words, even if my verbal extravagance doesn't make too much sense! It's a wonderful night!"

"It might as well be night. We're cooped up in these office rooms with barely a window to look at. Did you know it's raining outside? There could be a hurricane pounding on our walls and we wouldn't feel a thing in here."

"I much prefer it that way. The absence of daylight facilitates my personal delusion of continual nocturnality."

"Uh, right." Rizzy crawled up the lab cabinet where Dr. Frosty was experimenting. "By the way, I know this is off-topic, but have you realized that our boss is going to get slaughtered?"

"Rizzy! How could you think such a thing?"

"I don't think. It's all the reports I've been getting—the battle outlook, the strength averages, the stats, the projections." From his tiny pocket, Rizzy took out his own black data chip and waved it at Dr. Frosty.

"Ah, riotous Rizzy, we have been here many times before."

"Once, just once, with the Decimatrix. After that bout, our stock went down more than 50%. Everybody lost confidence in Snowy."

"Only for a short while! There are always peaks and dips in public opinion. We just ride them out and everything will be fine!"

Rizzy looked further down the table to see a glowing chunk of rock encased in a glass bubble, which was con-

nected to many tubes and wires. The stone was transparent, yet its glow pulsed.

“What have you got cooking there?” said Rizzy, quickly flicking his head to point at the stone.

“It is a simulated replica of the meteor that caused Wolverine to obtain his superpowers. By running computerized tests on the virtual replica, I can obtain vital data that can help me to decipher the molecular origin of Wolverine’s powers. Once I find out how he got those powers, I can figure out how to take them away!”

“Uh-huh. I just understood the last part, but that’s good enough. Any chance that you’ll get this thing figured out before Snowy reaches Worditrone 9?”

Dr. Frosty gave a hearty laugh, his feathery belly bobbing up and down.

“Will you be able to invent anything at all for this mission?” asked Rizzy.

“Scientific innovation cannot be put on a schedule, my friend. Genius comes when it comes!”

“That sounds like a negative answer to me.” Rizzy sighed. “I guess I’ll start sending out my resume.”

“Ho, ho, ho!” laughed Dr. Frosty. “You far underestimate our Snowy! He is a very resourceful mammal! He will save the day!”

“Yes, I’ll remember to include that in our press release.” Rizzy walked solemnly back to the doorway. “I’m going to Public Relations to make sure they put the right spin on things. Keep looking for that genius, doctor.”

“I will! Ho, ho, I will!” As the entry door slid open and Rizzy crawled out, Dr. Frosty waved his claw. “Oh, Rizzy?”

Rizzy stopped right in the middle of the doorway and turned his head. “Yes?”

DANIEL CASTILLO

“If you hear about any job openings for brilliant scientists, please let me know!”

“Ah, yes. Sure, doctor.”

“Just for precautions! It won’t be necessary, I’m sure!”

“Uh-huh. Precautions. Sure.”

The sliding metal door slid closed shut behind Rizzy. Dr. Frosty returned to his experimentation, hopping around gleefully and whistling a happy tune.