

THE WATER HEIST

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I squeezed the trigger of my .357 magnum revolver. A gunshot cracked through the air as the paper target at the end of the shooting range had a hole drilled through its center. Pressing the return button, I cracked open the cylinder of my gun and dumped out the empty shells. Holstering my gun, I examined my target. "Five out of six. Not bad," I thought to myself, pulling the protective headphones off my cropped ears. I turned my key in at the gun club check-in desk. "See you next week Fang," the receptionist said.

I stepped out of the gun club into a heat wave outside. Pulling a bandanna out of the pocket of my cut-off shorts, I ran a finger through the collar of my green T-shirt. It was one of the hottest springs they city had seen in years, according to the weather reporters. Even though my fur was short, one of the good things about being a Doberman, it still felt like one layer too many.

All around town, I saw people showing signs of desperate attempts to get rid of the heat as I drove to my office. I saw several lions walking down the street that had shaved off their manes. A couple of gryphons were standing back-to-back, fanning themselves with their wings. But while some people were trying to get away from the inferno that had become the outdoors, I also saw that others were actually welcoming the chance for some sun. The iguanas, dragons, and other reptilian citizens were out and about in greater numbers than usual. A small group of teen dragons and lizards were in the middle of a street hockey game, and quite a few people were doing the chores outside that they didn't feel comfortable doing in colder weather.

I finally reached my building. Fanning myself with a newspaper, I trudged up the steps to the door, my leather sandals feeling like they were about to melt on the hot pavement. The walk from the door up to the fifth floor my office was on felt like the trek legionnaires made from Cairo, or wherever they were trained at, to their forts in the middle of the desert, only not quite as short.

I threw open the door. I had bought several fans at discount prices at a local hardware store and set them up around my apartment and my office. Staggering in, I turned them all on full blast, aimed them at my chair, and collapsed behind my desk. Slowly, my blood dropped from a boil down to a simmer. Reaching up weakly, I tugged at the line going to my window shade. Fortunately it was a Venetian blind, so all it needed was a little tug before it let the plastic slats come down between me and the searing hot sun. "How do you like them apples?" I chuckled, little caring how bizarre it was to talk to a solar sphere.

I was working slowly through the paperwork that morning. As a private eye, I was always sending things to people. The police needed properly documented lists of evidence, law firms needed my signature on agreements not to disclose private information, and so on. It was a hassle sometimes. Once I accidentally got two letters mixed up, and the lawyer prosecuting a wife abuser wondered why I sent him evidence of a counterfeiting rap. I was about done around four

and was planning to cut the day short, when the phone rang. I grumbled as I grabbed the receiver.

“You have reached Mike Fang, Private Eye. I’m not here right now, so please leave a message at the.....”

“Shove it Fang, I know your faking it,” said the voice of Veldon, the elephant police chief.

“Chief,” I snickered in a sing-songy voice, “I wondered when you would call me. Did the assault and serial crimes departments get my packages?”

“Yeah, and I don’t think they appreciated those little tanks filled with laughing gas that you rigged to spray when the boxes were opened.”

I bit my lip in mirth at the picture of two departments of the police reduced to giggling idiots. “Did they get the message I was sending them?”

“Yeah they got the message, and I’ve got one for you: Turn on your faucet.”

I arched an eyebrow at the comment; was Veldon trying to be funny, rude, or both? Veldon must have correctly interpreted my silence for confusion. “I mean your sink faucet.”

“Oh,” I muttered, putting down the phone and walking to the small wash closet in the corner of my office. Flicking on my light, I twisted the sink tap. Nothing, and I mean nothing. No water, no air, nadda. I sighed, rolled my eyes, and went back to my desk. “Chief, is this your idea of payback? Shutting off my water? Please, you could at least put some creativity into it.”

“This isn’t a joke you bonehead! Someone has cut off the water to ten city blocks.”

My ears shot up higher than usual, and that’s saying something. “WHAT!!”

“That’s right. At about eight this morning, some nutcase made a threatening phone call to the mayor, saying that if the city government didn’t pay a ten million dollar ransom, they’d regret it. The mayor, the all high queen (CENSORED) of the universe refused, and then told us not to investigate. Said it would be like ignoring a spoiled child; if we didn’t acknowledge them they’d stop misbehaving.”

“That has to be the all-time brain dead decision in the history of counter terrorism.” I muttered.

“For once we agree. So it wasn’t too surprising when one hour later the Department of Water called the mayor’s office, saying that someone had just hacked into the computer controlled water valve system and shut off the H₂O to an entire city block. Then ten minutes later, it happened again. After about an hour it stopped, but it left a five square mile section of the city bone dry, and your sitting in the middle of it.”

I was immediately glad that my apartment was in another section of town. It looked as if terrorists had come for a visit, and I was betting that chief Veldon hadn't called me out of concern for my well being. "Let me guess; you want me to start an investigation because your afraid someone is watching the police station."

"You got it. I've got to admit that you're the only one that I'd trust with this kind of situation. Unfortunately the mayor won't let me have the funds I need to hire you, so this is actually coming out of my own pocket. You better not screw this up Fang! Find out who's plugging up the water works before the entire city's high and dry."

"I'll get started on it first thing," I said, hanging up. Turning around in my chair, I cracked open the blinds. Whoever was shutting off the water had picked the best, or in the city's case worst, time to do it. As soon as everyone realized that there wasn't a drop to drink, they'd get on the government's case like a mosquito on a sunbather in a swamp. I couldn't help but smirk at the fact that this was the second time the city government had come crawling to me for help, the last time being with that serial inflator, and wonder weather they were going to try and pull one on me again.

The sun was mercifully setting as I pulled into the parking lot of Circuit Waves, the biggest internet café in town. I'd never been in one of those places before, but as I understood it, it was a place were computer addicts who had gotten their internet services taken away because they couldn't pay for it came, drank coffee, and used public internet terminals to get whatever they wanted and not pay for it. The inside of the shop was set up in a tacky jazz decor, with pictures of jazz artists all over the brick walls and blues playing over the loudspeaker.

"Excuse me," said a grey-spotted horse in brown cargo pants and a red vest, "I'm afraid that only members and paying customers are allowed beyond the desk." I nodded and showed him my card. "I understand, but I'm here on business. There's been a.....computer related crime, shall we say, and I'm checking around for any suspicious characters. Have there been any new faces come in here recently?"

The horse scratched his nose and frowned, "I wouldn't know, I only just got here. But one of the waitresses might have seen someone. Hey Tanya!" he shouted over his shoulder. A wolf with red hair in a shirt with the café logo on it, blue skirt and matching sandals glanced up. The manager waved her over. "Tanya was at the register today, she'd know." Tanya leaned against the counter, cracking a mouthful of gum. "Yeah? You looking for me?" I smirked.

"Fang, P.I."

"Oh yeah, I knew I'd seen you before! You were on the news, you caught that shark." I shrugged and nodded. "So you wanted something?"

"I was wondering if there were any suspicious characters around here earlier today." I asked, turning on my pocket recorder.

“Hmmm, well there was one girl that came in. I’d never seen her before. She was using a borrowed membership card.”

“Didn’t that strike you as a tad strange?”

“If it hadn’t would I tell you?” Tanya giggled. “We trust our members to know who to lend their cards to, although I think that’s kind of stupid.”

“No kidding,” I thought to myself.

“Anyway, she comes in and sits down in the computer at the farthest corner. She’s there for about a half an hour, and doesn’t let anyone look at her screen while she’s working. If someone passed behind her, she’d close her window until they left. Then, around.....eight I’d say, she gets up and goes toward the bathroom. Then, she comes back, sits back down, and finishes up after about a minute.”

This seemed a little too good to be true. It was like I was being handed the terrorist on a silver platter. I wondered if this wasn’t a coincidence, or if I was being set up. However, I couldn’t rule out the chance that it was a particularly dumb crook. “Has anyone else used that computer?” I asked. Tanya nodded. I snapped my fingers. Then a thought hit me. “Say, does that computer have a history file?”

“Sure does. You want to see it?” Said Tanya, blowing a bubble and popping it with a long fingernail. I jogged over to the terminal and sat down. Tanya stood behind me. Unfortunately, as I opened the history file, I found that the terrorist may not have been as klutzy as I thought; the history file had been wiped out. “Hey!” Snapped Tanya, pulling the keyboard away from me. “She can’t have done that! All our files are password protected!”

“Looks like you need a new password,” I chuckled. The wolf grunted. “In the meantime,” I said, pulling my recorder back out, “Could you give me a description of this woman, and whose membership card did she use?”

“She was a green dragon, average height, three horns curving back from her forehead, with red hair that went down to her shoulders. Her card was for.....” Tanya tapped something in on the keyboard. A picture of a basset hound with black spots came up. “A Stan Wellish.” Thanking Tanya, I left a sizeable tip on my way out. I had a gut instinct that this woman was the one I was after, and when I went to several other internet cafes and found out that a woman of the same description had been in each of them during the time that the water was getting shut off, it practically became a fact. After I was done, I looked up Stan’s address. But when I got to his home, I hit another brick wall. It seemed that he had been dead for two years. Stuck with nothing but a description that I couldn’t put a name to, I decided to pick up the case the next day. In the meantime, I had an appointment to keep with Jason, Janet, and several of Jason’s friends. It was our inflation poker night.

Ever since I and my girlfriend had started inflating occasionally, me more than her, we’d been getting together with Jason, a dragon friend of mine, and having a poker game with some of

his friends every other week. However, we changed the rules. Every hand, the person with the lowest one had to take the spin, as we called it. They had to turn the knob of their tank one full turn, and depending on how low the hand was, keep in on for a number of seconds. There wasn't any deflating allowed until we ran out of tanks, and Jason made sure we had PLENTY of those.

I pulled up into the parking lot of a gym. The place was owned by one of Jason's friends, and he left the door open after hours for us. Inside, the usual collection of workout posters, exercise devices that looked like they could double as torture devices, and lockers were spread out in a large warehouse-like room. In the center was a boxing ring with a card table set up. It looked like I was the last to get there. Jason was already setting things up, dressed in his usual tank top and shorts, Janet was seated at the table in a red T-shirt, jean shorts, and sandals, chatting with Diane, a buxom red female dragon in a yellow tube top and tight spandex pants. I was pretty sure that there was something between her and Jason, since they always seemed to be acting weird around each other. Also there was Chuck, a raccoon with dyed jet-black hair in a Harley vest, pacing around the ring.

"Hey guys," I said, vaulting over the ring ropes.

"Dude, thought you weren't going to make it!" Said Jason, attaching a hose to a tank. "Hey sweetie," I said in a much lower tone, giving Janet a peck on the cheek. "Hi Mike, fashionably late?" She giggled.

I shrugged, "Hey, you know I'm always fashionable."

Diane arched her eyebrows at me. "Really? And who said that dressing like something out of the roaring 20's is fashionable?"

"Hey, I said I'm fashionable. I didn't say it was a current fashion."

"Well I think it makes him look sharp," said Janet, who then turned and looked me up and down. "Although there's something to be said about that outfit too."

Chuck cleared his throat noisily. "Well if this gets any deeper, I'm going to need to go get my boots. So before you two start french kissing right here on the table, can we get this show on the road?" I shot the raccoon a look that suggested that I wanted to shoot something else at him, as I took a seat. Jason fished out a deck of cards. "Alright, so what do we start with?"

"How about five card stud?" Diane said, giving emphasis on that last word as she gave Jason a seductive glance. He returned a crocodile grin. She winked. I rolled my eyes. "You want to go get those boots now, Chuck?" I said. That seemed to snap the two back to reality. "Okay," said Jason, shuffling the deck, "first five cards...." The cards hit the table face up. I had a pair of threes, Jason a pair of fours, Janet three of a kind in tens, Diane a queen high card, and Chuck two pairs, fives and sevens. We all did our discards. "And now for the moment of truth," the blue dragon smirked. With a flamboyant wave, he started flipping out cards. In the end, Janet and me had three of a kind, Jason his pair, Chuck a full house, and Diane zip.

“Uh-oh,” the red dragon muttered. “Oh yeah,” snorted Chuck. “You only had a high card, so you have to go ten seconds.” Diane shrugged, stood up, and put her hose in her mouth. Striking a seductive pose, she winked at Jason again and turned the knob. Her cheeks puffed out as the air rushed down her throat. Her belly began to bulge and swell, pushing her tube top up. Her bust swelled as well. “Oh yeah!” snickered Jason, whistling. “Work it baby work it!” Diane giggled and bounced on the balls of her toes, shaking the goods, if you get my drift. When she shut off the tank, her chest had swelled about eight inches, and her stomach was the size of a water melon, but round instead of oval shaped. She sat down amid the whistling from Chuck and Jason.

“And now it’s time to see who’s the next victim!” Laughed the blue dragon as he dealt the next hand. We all shot looks among ourselves, wondering who was going for a spin this time. Finally, the last cards hit the table. Diane had three of a kind, Janet a straight, Chuck three of a kind, and Jason was stuck with two pair. I snickered. “Well Jase, looks like that’s you.” Jason gave me a smug grin and looked at my cards. My own grin dropped as I looked at my hand, which consisted of nothing higher than a pair.

“Ah shoot,” I hissed.

“C’mon Mike, time to crank the valve for eight seconds,” Janet giggled. I sighed, stood up, and swallowed the hose. I turned the valve on my tank and flexed my arms like I was competing in a muscleman contest. Everyone laughed, and I couldn’t blame them, as I postured while my gut blew up like a balloon. I tried to keep a straight face, but it tickled like nobody’s business. When it was over, my gut was like a basket ball, pushing my T-shirt up.

The next two hands were lost by Diane, her gut and bust getting steadily bigger. Her arms, legs, feet and hands began to puff up as well. But when the next hand came up, Janet was the one stuck with the high card. “Well honey,” I grinned, “what goes around comes around.” Strangely, instead of shrugging or some other sign of mild frustration, she actually seemed a bit eager to inflate. Pulling out her chair and crossing her legs, she stuck her hose in her mouth at a slightly odd angle. She crossed her arms behind her head and gave me a wink as the air began to flow. Then I noticed what was odd. Her stomach wasn’t puffing up at all, and all the air was flowing into her already sizeable bosom. I couldn’t help but stare and gawk as Janet giggled while her chest swelled and grew, stretching her low-cut, belly-bearing shirt. “Good thing I didn’t wear a bra,” she said seductively as she pulled her chair back up. Her chest had swelled a good twelve inches forward and about four inches to either side. I felt my mouth go dry as I tried to search for the right words. Nothing good came to mind.

Chuck, on the other hand, was ready and willing with a comment, “Whoa baby! You got a zip code for that.....” He didn’t finish the rest of his sentence, possibly because I jammed a hose in his mouth and turned the knob. He was one of those people who balloons odd, and soon his chest began to disappear into his expanding gut. “Hey hey! That’s a penalty!” Jason said, sneaking up behind me and jamming a hose in my mouth. “Didn’t you hea.....” I started, but he had already turned the knob. My belly swelled and bulged, and the air started to spread into my arms and legs. I kicked off my sandals to avoid breaking the straps. Jason fell on his back laughing as I grew rounder and to about the size of a compact car.

I spat the hose out. “Oh you think that’s funny, eh?” I snickered, while Jason gasped for air as he kept laughing. Well he was going to get all the air he wanted. I grabbed his tank and dropped the hose into his mouth. He just had time to register what was happening as I wrenched the tank knob. It was that moment of dawning comprehension I relished. The blue dragon bloated and grew like a hot air balloon, growing about as big as I was. Diane, meanwhile, was having a big horse laugh at the both of us. “I’ve never in my life seen two crazier guys!” She said, slapping the table. It was then that Chuck decided to take advantage of the chaos and drop a hose in HER mouth. Diane was already a good six feet around her stomach, and this made her swell even more. Snickering, Chuck tried to sneak off. “Oh no you don’t!” The red dragon said. She rolled over, grabbed the raccoon by the collar, rammed a nozzle in his mouth, and turned a tank’s valve with her toes. Chuck’s eyes bugged out as he was swallowed by his bulging belly. The flaps of skin held the hose in his mouth and kept him from spitting it out as his face disappeared from view.

Janet, meanwhile, was trying to sneak off herself. I was getting into a shoving contest with Jason with our guts when I spotted her over his shoulder. I bounced up behind her and grabbed her in a bear hug. “Not so fast sweetie, we’re gonna have some laughs!” I said, planting a hose in her mouth and a kiss on her cheek at the same time. Janet’s stomach ballooned and swelled like a furry beach ball about twenty feet in diameter. She kicked off her sandals to keep from breaking them, and turned around so she could face me. Looking over her swelling breasts, she winked at me and fluttered her eyelashes. “I take it you only date women your size?”

By the time our little bout of pranks was over we had emptied all the tanks, so we called it a night. The next day I swung by the police department to tell Veldon what I’d found.

“So all you’ve got is a description?” The elephant asked, leaning back in his chair. I nodded.

“This person seems like a pro, though. I though she might already have a record. Can I have a look at the mug shots of computer crime offenders?”

“I guess there isn’t any harm in it,” Veldon muttered. He punched up a computer readout and turned the monitor for me to look at. There were about ten different faces on it, among them a green female dragon that fit the description Tanya gave me. I tapped the picture on the screen.

“This one looks close.”

The chief printed out her file. Her name was Xandra Torc and she was wanted for at least ten charges of internet fraud, grand larceny, and corporate blackmail.

“Quite a rap sheet,” I snorted. “I take it her whereabouts aren’t known.”

“Disappeared faster than a liquor bottle at an alcoholics anonymous meeting. Nobody’s seen her for two months. She was last seen with a friend of her’s. This guy.” The chief pulled up another picture, this time one of a tattooed alligator with a nose ring. “Name’s Rakel Dorsan.”

“Looks like a real straight man,” I laughed, “straight out of a street gang, that is.”

I had plenty of leads, but I needed to file all my evidence; paperwork you know. I dropped back by my office. The sun had cooled down enough to let me put my usual button up shirt, suspenders, and slacks back on, but it was nowhere near the kind of temperature I could wear my coat in comfortably, I was sweating like a pig as it was.

I went over to my desk and began typing up a written report. I had just finished and encrypted the files when I heard a scream from the street. I leapt to the side of my window and parted the shades a crack. I had just enough time to register a nasty-looking gryphon wielding an uzi before he let a round of shots through my window! I threw myself backwards and darted out the door in a crouched run, bullets chewing up the ceiling tiles and bringing my ceiling fan down behind me. I barreled down the staircase, the sound of gunfire echoing behind me.

Kicking open the front door, I rolled out onto the sidewalk and came up with my .357 drawn. The gryphon was ducking back into a car and getting ready to make a run for it. I fired off two shots and blew out his back tires. He fish-tailed for about twenty feet before abandoning the car in the street and took off running. My would-be assassin was fast, but I could match his pace easy. There were plenty of people around, but most of them ducked indoors at the sight of two armed guys in the middle of a chase. The gryphon ducked into an alley in between a barber shop and a dance hall. I reached the corner, but slowed and took a quick look around the edge of the building. Sure enough the thug let loose a volley at me. The bullets grazed just inches over my head, making me flatten my ears involuntarily as I ducked and rolled behind a dumpster. When I heard him scrambling up a fire escape, I rolled out and took a shot at his legs. I missed, but not by much.

The top of the roof was barren when I got up to it. There wasn’t a sign of the thug. I ran to each edge, looking for him, but he wasn’t anywhere in sight. Frustrated, angry, and a bit scared, I pounded my fist on the bricks. There wasn’t anything else to do but wait for the wailing sirens that belonged to the police cars to get to me.

It took quite a while to explain my situation to the officers at the scene, and they called the chief at least a dozen times. But in the end they accepted the fact that I hadn’t shot up my own office. I gave a description of the thug that turned my office into a gazebo. They said they’d run an investigation on it, which I took to mean they’d harass a few people and get nowhere. I planned to pay a visit to my biggest lead, but first I had to get something. I swung by my apartment on my way to Rakel’s dump. Rummaging under my bed, I pulled out a locked box. Inside was the second revolver of the pair that I owned. I seldom carry both at the same time, but this case was getting more dangerous

by the minute. Loading it up and stuffing my pockets with a few speed loaders, I grabbed a duster jacket to cover them.

There were a bunch of tough looking characters hanging around on the steps of the apartment building that Rakel was supposed to live in. They eyed me suspiciously, but didn't seem to be in the mood to hassle me for money. It must have been the heat; even the muggers were too tired to go to work. The stairwell was scrawled with vulgar graffiti and smelled like a port-a-potty at a chilli eating contest. I held my nose and tried not to breath as I climbed the ten stories up to the gator's pad. Counting off numbers, I found Rakel's door to be the one with the loudest and most obnoxious rap music coming from behind it. I banged on the door with one hand while drawing a gun with the other.

"WHAT?!" came the arrogant response from behind the door.

"It's the super," I said, grinning to myself. "Got to check your fuses." The sound of a slide bolt being drawn back followed. I stood to one side of the door while Rakel stepped out. Glancing around with a ticked-off look, he didn't see me until I grabbed him from behind and shoved him against the stair rail.

"HEY FOOL WADDA YOU DOIN?!" He snapped.

"SHADDUP!!" I snarled. "Is there anyone else in that apartment?" The croc told me to go do something to myself that was anatomically impossible. I belted him with the butt of my gun, pulled a pair of cuffs out of my pocket, and chained him to the rail. Ignoring his whining, I gave Rakel's apartment a once over. It looked like a holding pen for hot cd players, laptops, and all sorts of other electronics. Next to his computer, the one that was hooked up instead of piled in a stack against the wall, was a printed e-mail. And as luck would have it, it was from my No. 1 suspect, Ms. Xandra Torc.

"I'm not tellin' you fool's JACK!" Spat the croc, arrogantly crossing his arms. Chief Veldon sat on the other side of the table in the interrogation room. I simply stood in the corner, not having the experience the elephant had in getting people to confess.

"We don't want to hear about jack," the chief chuckled, "what we want to hear about is that slime bag you hang out with, Xandra Torc."

"I don't know no Xandra, pig!" he snorted, leaning back in his chair. The chief kicked it out from under him, sending the gator crashing to the floor. "Watch it chief," said the lawyer sitting at the head of the table, "or I'll have you taken off duty for brutality."

"Then why did she write you this e-mail?" grunted Veldon, blowing off the lawyer, "Quote: 'Rakel, I've got the mayor and his fuzz scared witless. They can't hold out much longer. Get me that souped-up computer and we'll be able to really do some damage!'"

“That e-mail,” said the ambulance chasing coyote, “Is private information that was illegally seized.”

“The @#\$\$ it was,” I snickered, chewing on a toothpick. “That moron opened the door for me willingly, and it was laying FACE UP,” I snapped, reading the lawyer’s expression and open mouth. He closed it immediately. The chief grinned. “We’ve got you over a barrel Rakel. You wouldn’t stand a flower’s chance in a cold snap if you went with a jury. The public is getting restless, and if we have to we’ll throw them your sorry hide to save ours.”

Rakel shifted nervously in his seat. He looked around like he had to take a leak, but couldn’t find the bathroom. He shot his lawyer a look, who whispered in his ear. The croc nodded. “He hand’s you Torc and gets off scot free.” the coyote said. The chief turned in his chair and looked to the district attorney, a tan bull who had been standing in the back across from me. He nodded. All eyes were on Rakel. He sighed. “Alright. Xandra had been planning this for a month. She had me get her equipment and stuff. She’s.....down on 3rd street in that abandoned warehouse.”

To the untrained eye, it just looked like a bunch of cars moving down 3rd street. Some of them went past the old warehouse to turn down the side street on the far side, while others stopped right in front. But what the trained eye would have seen was a police caravan setting up strategic positions to make a bust. After I told the chief about the gryphon that tried to turn me into Swiss cheese, he figured there might be more than just the first thug. I’ll give the elephant this; he doesn’t believe in taking chances, nor is he afraid to do his own dirty work.

In the lead car, chief Veldon turned the corner and pulled up on the far side of the street from the big, rusty steel building. Sitting in the passenger seat next to him, I checked both cylinders of my guns. Behind me, a Rottweiler about my age dressed in police battle gear chuckled. “Haven’t seen anyone use two revolvers since I saw the late night western. Why don’t you take a couple of automatics? They hold more bullets.”

I turned in my seat and raised my eyebrows. “What good are all those bullets if after the first few the others are stuck behind a jammed one? Besides, revolvers are more accurate and last longer.”

“If you two are done quoting ‘Guns and Ammo’,” the chief snorted, “let’s go over the plan: Leroy, you head in the first back door. The blueprints for this building says there should be a hallway before you get into the main storage area. Go to the end of it and cover that as a possible escape route.” The other cop in the back, a zebra with a sub-machine gun, nodded.

“Adam, you come with me. We’re going in the second back door. Once inside, we head up to the catwalk that supposed to run around the inside of the warehouse and cover the backs of the guy coming in the front, got it?”

“Ready to rock and roll!” Said Adam, slapping a clip into his gun.

The chief shook his head in good-natured reproof. “Fang, you go up the fire escape. When the signal’s given, you come in through the door and stop anyone already up on the catwalk. They should be too busy with the guys coming in the front to notice you.”

“The key word there is ‘shouldn’t’,” I chuckled, tilting my fedora back.

“Don’t go awol on me now, Fang. You came prepared for this, didn’t you?”

“I always do.”

“Good. Then lets get in position.”

Quickly and quietly, we emptied the car and bolted across the street. The chief got to the door first. Pumping a round into his shotgun, he gestured at the rest of us. I darted past him and snuck up the metal stairs, trying not to make much noise. At the top, the pitted and rusty fire escape door was closed, but supposedly not locked. I reached the top of the landing. So far, so good. I checked my watch. It was less than a minute to two. I gripped both my guns tighter. This was going to be dangerous, more dangerous than I preferred. Shooting was an option I always reserved as a last resort, but in this situation, resorts could start running out on a guy FAST. I wouldn’t want to shoot anyone, but if I had to I couldn’t, and wouldn’t, hesitate.

My watch hit two and I heard the front door burst open. The sound of shouting followed. Planting my heel of my boot into the door, I charged in like I was storming the beach at Normandy. There were probably about eight gangsters all told. Three were down on the ground, and had dropped their weapons almost immediately. Three of the remaining five were being held at gunpoint by the chief and Adam. The other two were sneaking directly toward me, looking over their shoulders at who they thought they were escaping.

“HOLD IT!” I shouted, leveling on both of the punks. They both glanced at me in fear and surprise. It was then I recognized one of them as the same creep that almost killed me. “Well now, isn’t it a small world?” I snickered. The gryphon was sneering at me, his hands held at either side tensely. “Get your hands up!” I snarled. He hesitated a fraction of a second, then darted a hand behind him and began to draw his uzi. As fast as I could, I snapped off a shot that ripped the gun from his hand. Several of his feathers went white. “ON THE GROUND!” I roared. The gryphon hit the mesh so fast I was sure it would leave a permanent print on his face. It was then I noticed a small office off to my left. “That’d make a good headquarters,” I thought. Keeping my guns trained on the two perps laying down, I backed toward the office, taking my eyes off them only when I saw a couple of officers start cuffing them.

I quietly cracked open the door. Seated at a desk with her back to me in an orange jogging bra and matching polyester shorts, Xandra Torc was working furiously at

a laptop computer, trying to erase the incriminating evidence. "Alright," I said, making her jolt in her seat, "lay off the keyboard and put your hands in the air." The green dragon sighed and gave me a sideways glance over his shoulder.

"So, this is the flatfoot that my guy told me about. Although I guess your feet can't be that flat if you escaped Walter without getting blown in half."

"Yeah, well you don't survive long in my business if you're out of shape," I smirked. "Besides, to quote myself, 'If you have to have a gun that shoots so fast, you must be a miserable shot'."

"Cute, detective." Xandra said, "but I've come too far to be stopped now."

"Come on, that's the oldest line in the book."

"Oh really, how about this?" The dragon snapped, tossing her chair backwards with a flick of her tail. It smacked me in the leg and sent me down on one knee. I got back up but then something hit me. Actually, several somethings, all of them 9mm. The slugs from Xandra's gun hit me in the chest and slammed me into the back wall. My vision began to fade and blur. "Well Fang it's been interesting," the dragon chuckled sinisterly. Her voice was seeming farther and farther away. "But now I've got an appointment over at the water works. If I'm going to shut off the entire city's water supply, I've got to do it direct....."

"He wasn't that bad a guy," the chief's voice said, "and he was a heck of a detective." My head was pounding, but I was still alive. Shaking my head, I saw the chief with his back to me, shoulders slumped, and shaking his head. "Why chief, I didn't know you cared." I laughed. The elephant spun around on his heel. "What the....!" I held up a hand to stifle him, and unbuttoned my shirt. "I always knew that bulletproof vest I got in that military catalogue would come in handy." I said, unbuttoning the kevlar shield that was now useless from five slugs blasted into it.

The city water treatment center was in the heart of the industrial section of my burg. Basically a giant collection of water containers, it was from here that the city of tens of thousands, maybe more I never bothered to check, got one of its necessities of life. It also stored an emergency supply of water in huge tanks should some crisis cause the main source. The only reason they hadn't been used before was because the dragon had managed to tap into their controls first.

The chief and I were the only ones that could be spared to go after Torc when I found out that she had escaped out a window. Wings give some dragons a pretty unfair advantage when it came to a chase. The other officers had to stay behind to take in the prisoners. The chief called for back-up on the way while I drove. I pulled to a halt in front of the gates. They had been pushed open, the lock shot off. Drawing our guns, Veldon and I jogged across the parking lot toward the two story building that housed the controls for the entire works. It was pretty quiet. When the chief tried the door, it was

locked. He started to aim at the lock when I stopped him. "If you give me a second, I can save my fellow tax payers the cost of replacing a door bolt." I slid my lockpick kit out of my back pocket and began to work on the door. "You know that's technically against the law," the chief chuckled.

"Well," I grinned at him as the bolt clicked open, "You know what they say about the lesser of two evils." Cracking the door open, and seeing that the lobby was empty, I snuck in.

"Oh well," muttered the elephant, "I never did care about technicalities."

The entire water works was run by about five computer geeks apparently, since that was the number Xandra had with their backs to the wall at gunpoint. She was watching them out of the corner of her eye while focusing mainly on the computer screen she was typing on. With her attention divided, she didn't even hear the door behind her creak open. Unfortunately, one of the bozos along the wall chose the moment that we were using to sneak up on Torc to get a relieved look on his face. The dragon read it, spun around, and let loose a volley from her machine pistol. The chief and I dove back out of the room. Realizing her situation, Xandra grabbed a chair and broke one of the windows. Rolling around the corner of the door, I had just enough time to see her jump from the window sill. Not about to let her get away, I grabbed a second chair and flung it at her head. I missed her head and smacked her in the back instead. She lost control and fell to the ground. But it wasn't long before she got up and darted into the maze of water holding tanks.

"C'mon, we can get her if we..." the chief started. But I knew that going down the stairs would take too long. Drawing on my vast source of hard-headedness and praying to God not to let me break my neck, I climbed onto the window sill myself and jumped for the nearest water tower. I just made it. I smacked the side of the tower but got a good grip on the edge. Carefully, I let myself down the side. The tanks were only about twelve feet high, so it was fairly safe to drop. Still I lost my balance and landed on my backside the minute I touched the ground. Rubbing a sore spot, I got to my feet and drew both revolvers. Torc was around there somewhere.

The tanks were arranged in neat, precise rows and columns, five columns from left to right and five rows from top to bottom inside a large dug out valley. In between each of them were pipes and tubes. None of the tanks was completely full, so if one had to be drained it could go into one of the other tanks and no H₂O would be lost. But I digress. I darted from tower to tower, following the flitting shadow that snuck around the oversized water coolers. I couldn't slip up; one wrong move and I'd be staring down the barrel of a gun or watching Xandra Torc slip out an emergency exit. As I moved, I noticed that Torc was leading me toward the upper left corner. "She probably plans to trick me and double back." I thought. Just then, I noticed that one of the pipes had been pulled out from in between two tanks, probably for repairs. The valves had been sealed shut.

Gathering my nerve, I stepped out into the open. A shot rang out from my left. It missed, but Torc didn't have to know that. I faked a grunt of pain and threw myself on the ground. I clutched at my shoulder as the dragon stepped out from behind one of the water tanks.

"The game's up, detective. Your all washed up."

"Oh yeah?" I laughed, "Look whose talking!" That threw Xandra off guard. She looked around, expecting an ambush. I pulled my gun out from under my side where I had been laying on it and shot the tank valve. A solid hammer of water blasted toward Torc. However, instead of holding up her hands in defense, she stood there with a dumb look on her face, and her mouth wide open.

The blast hit her in the face and pushed her up against the tank. The force held her mouth open as she began to swell. I gaped and laughed as the green dragon helplessly gulped down gallon after gallon of water. Her stomach stretched and heaved as it grew. Her limbs began to swell like sausages along with her hands, feet, toes, and fingers. The rush of water was making Torc dizzy, and now the only thing holding her up was the force of the flow. Her tail lengthened a bit before beginning to grow. Xandra's stomach was a jiggling mass that pushed up her chest, which was also quite a bit jiggily, and didn't stop until I got control enough of myself to stagger over and shut off the water.

The chief came running around the corner and took in the scene: A Doberman detective on the right slumped against the side of a water tank with an insane grin on his face, shaking with laughter. While on the left a green female dragon had turned into a living water balloon. Her wobbling hands were laying on her mammoth stomach, which was gurgling from all the H₂O in it. She had her eyes crossed and her tongue hanging out, her legs spread and was glistening slightly all over from the excess water that had drenched her. The chief shot me a look that said "you better explain this REALLY well". I giggled a few more times, pointed at Torc, and said: "She's not fat, she just retains water."

This time even Veldon had to snort in amusement. I stood up and holstered both my guns. "Well Fang," the elephant said, "you did it, I'll give you that much. But how on Earth are we going to get her back to normal size?"

I surveyed Ms. Torc, who looked like she belonged in a circus side show. "Well chief, most of the water's in her belly, so I'd just wait for the call of nature. However," I said, scratching my head under my fedora, "where are we going to find a bathroom big enough?"