

## DIGITAL DOMAIN

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The water's surface broke as I thrust my arms behind me. Pulling them back up, I dove under water again in a breast stroke. It was the final lap in my daily workout at the gym pool, and I was in a bit of a hurry. I practically vaulted out of the water to get back to my locker and change. My blue short-sleeve shirt, jeans, and dark blue sneakers stuck to my fur when I forgot to towel off completely. I shook myself to get rid of the rest of the water, much to the annoyance of the other guys in the locker room. Tossing a sheepish grin and an apologetic shrug behind me, I took off for the post office.

The dragon behind the counter was his usual about-to-go-over-the-edge self. He always made me nervous; never knew when he might take it into his head to come to work with a stick of dynamite or something. I tried to avoid his eyes as I went up to my box and hauled out my mail. It never ceased to amaze me how much stuff they could manage to cram into one tiny space. The only drawback was it also never ceased to amaze me how hard it was to get it out! I tossed the letters into my car and headed back home. I'd caught a glimpse of an envelope that was the right color, but I wanted to savor it, if I was right.

"Hichenthechecksinthemailgottagobye!" I spouted at my landlord, spinning on my heel to face him as I jogged backwards up the stairs. The panda spouted something equally unintelligible back at me in Chinese, then started laughing when I tripped trying my dumb macho stunt. I rubbed the back of my head as I unlocked my apartment. I closed the door. I had a wriggly sensation in my stomach as I neatly shuffled my letters.

"All right," I said to myself. "Let's do this nice and slowly..." I picked up the first letter. The Sinco Credit Card Company wanted to offer me the one time only.....it went straight into the trash. Next, Mr. Arthur Trimble was demanding that I answer his accusations of.....I rummaged in my kitchen drawer and pulled out a box of matches. I lit one and burned the letter, a disgusted smirk on my face. Finally, the National Geographic wanted to remind me.....I almost tossed the letter out, but thought better of it and set it aside.

Finally, I was done with the junk and down to the really important stuff. The purple and orange envelope could have come from only one company. I started breathing hard as I tore the envelope open with one finger. I scanned the letter quickly, looking for specific words. My ears shot up when I actually FOUND them.

"YES!! They liked it they liked it!!" I shouted, starting a victory dance. Finally, I calmed down and read the whole letter through.

"Dear Mr. Fang,

We at Nasaki Incorporated are pleased to announce that YOUR entry has won the "Dream Game Contest"!! The idea you have sent us will be used to create an actual video game!! We were impressed with your unusual creation: Pressure Factor. A game based on inflation is a most unique idea, and we shall be interested in seeing just how it develops. In

fact, we would like you to come to our development team and work with them on the finer aspects of the game to ensure that YOUR idea is the one that is used for the game. Again, congratulations and we hope to see you soon!

Sincerely,

William Yin-hi

Director of Electronic Entertainment, a division of Nasaki

Inc.

I still couldn't believe it. They'd actually picked MY idea! It'd been something I'd been toying with for a while. I'd come up with the idea of an adventure game where you could customize your character's looks and powers. Different types of creatures would be available: dragons (of course), dogs, cats, horses, lizards, just about anything you could think of. Powers would range from flight to strength to slowing down time. But the thing was to build up energy for these powers, the character had to find ways to inflate. It could be anything from air tanks to fire hydrants to compressors to garden hoses, ANYTHING! Once a character got something to inflate with, there'd be this BIG animation of them bloating. Then, they'd snap back to normal with the super power granted to them for a limited time. Once it wore off, they'd have to blow up again to get the power back.

The plot was something I'd been particularly proud of. It was pretty cartoony, but so what? A crazy scientist creates an army of cyborg that can disguise themselves as regular people in an effort to take over all the governments of the world. Only a select group of people (the heroes) know about his plot.

"Dude, I can't believe it!" Jason was jumping around me as I walked up the steps to the Nasaki headquarters, a mile-high sky scraper. I was a bit more controlled than the blue dragon, but not much. I still had an unerasable smile on my face and every two steps I kept doing a break dance spin on my heel.

"Man, you ACTUALLY get to make your own video game! And you asked ME to help!!" I grinned at Jason. "Hey, who could consult me better than the guy that got me hooked on inflation? Besides, you're the only person whose better at video games than I am." The blue dragon polished his claws on his chest, then gave me an exaggerated bow. We got up to the receptionist desk and I cleared my throat to get the attention of the female cat behind it. She glanced up from a computer that was running one of Nasaki's own games on it.

"Oh, so sorry. What can I do for you?"

"We're looking for the research and development department. We've got an appointment; the name's Mike Fang." The Asian cat paused her game then shrank down the window. Typing up a storm, she nodded. "Yes Mr. Fang. You and your friend are expected. 28<sup>th</sup> floor, through the red double doors." I nodded my thanks and headed for the elevator.

I recognized the music in the elevator as a theme from one of my favorite games. I was tapping my foot in tune with the music when the doors opened. The R&D department was right

down the hall. As Jason and I approached, a copper Chinese dragon in a red vest and tan cargo shorts came diving out, his lanky body stretching it's full length, about seven feet. He was dodging a hailstorm of suction darts coming from one of those gatling gun shaped dart guns. It was in the hands of a short, stocky raccoon in a T-shirt with an American flag on it, jeans with the knees torn, and high tops. The Chinese dragon rolled over on his back and let loose with a barrage of his own darts, which the raccoon artfully ducked. I managed to do the same with the darts that came our way, but I can't say Jason was as alert. The darts peppered him all over, causing him to trip over a plastic plant in surprise. I started laughing when the raccoon opened fire again. This time, about ten of the little suckers got me in the face, two of them getting stuck over my nose.

"Oops, guess we got carried away," the copper dragon said with a Chinese accent. I grinned, plucking the darts from my head. My kind of guys. We got introduced. Bruce, the dragon, apparently had been named after the actor Bruce Lee by his parents after they immigrated. He handled computer programming and animation. Seemed he was an inflation enthusiast himself. Quincy, his partner, was in charge of graphics and music composition. Seemed he had gotten himself a reputation around the company for practical jokes after he toilet-papered the C.E.O's office. According to Bruce, if Quincy wasn't such a hot musician and artist he would have been fired a LONG time ago.

"So," Said the raccoon, plopping down in a chair. The room had several posters advertising past Nagasaki games, as well as a couple of ferns and two high powered computers. "What'll we start on first? Me, I think the music should come first! Make sure it sets the right mood."

"Music?! No no no," Said Bruce, "We must work on the programming itself! It is the backbone of the entire gaming experience. The core of the entertainment. The nerve center of the...."

Quincy rolled his eyes, "Man, any moment now he's gonna start floating in the zen position." Bruce shot him a look like the raccoon just cut the cheese.

"Guys," I said, "Let's compromise.....we'll do the characters first." The dragon and the raccoon looked at each other then shrugged. "Okay," they said in unison.

The next several hours were spent going over rough sketches. Quincy was a really fast drawer, fortunately, so we had plenty of tryouts. We'd scrapped the idea of a customizable character since it would have taken up too much space on the disc. Instead we decided to come up with several characters to choose from. This actually wasn't such a bad idea; it gave us a chance to enrich the background story. Jason was put in charge of coming up with the character's bios while I worked on describing them and their powers.

In the end, we had five heroes. There was Jazzer, a brown gryphon in a backwards baseball cap, black leather jacket, and shades that was a professional D.J. who had the ability to cause an earthquake with sound vibrations. Buzz was a orange dragon computer hacker with rainbow died horns and a muscle shirt that could gain the power to control robot's minds. Sandi

was a female tiger who was a cook at a beach restaraunt that could become a flying fireball. Wesker was a cop 'gator in a uniform that could slow down time. Finally, Rogon was an alien with a head like a fox with five eyes, four arms, and purple and white fur who could walk through walls. When Jason came up with that last one, I just stared at him for about a second. He shrugged. "Hey, what's a video game without aliens?" I chuckled. "Why not? It'll certainly give the game variety."

If Bruce was right about one thing, it was that Quincy was a good artist. The sketches he made of the characters were so vivid it was almost as if they'd walked out of our imaginations and onto his sketch pad! It we had to wait a while before he had the colored ink sketches ready.

"Perfect," I chuckled. "This is great!"

"Don't applaude, just throw money." Quince grinned.

"All right, artist boy. Now it's my turn." Bruce snatched the drawings out of the raccoon's hand. He set them up carefully and began working on creating 3D images of them. It wouldn't have taken the Chinese dragon so long if Quincy hadn't kept mixing up the drawings when he wasn't looking. Jason and I had to stifle laughs as Bruce grumbled when he made Sandi's fur purple, gave Jazzer a tiger's head, and only put two eyes on Jase's weird alien character.

"Okay, now for the most important part....the inflation animations," out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jason pump his arms and whisper "yes!" But it was in the animation department that we ran into the worst problems. "No, not exactly," I said, looking over Bruce's shoulder. "The expression on his face isn't right. Mmm, not quite. He should be spreading his legs a bit for balance. Okay, now his arms are just hanging limply by his side. No not like that....." I rubbed the underside of my chin, trying to think. Bruce scratched his head. "The problem is the drawings are 2D, so it's hard to visualize this." A grin spread across my face. "You need a visual aid? No problem." I glanced over my shoulder at Jason. He took the hint and bolted out the door, a goofy grin on his mug. He came back in a half an hour, lugging an air tank.

"Okay gentlemen, DON'T pay close attention, 'cause I know we're gonna want to repeat ourselves." I snickered. Jason stuck the hose in his mouth. I leaned on the air tank, getting ready to turn the knob.

"Okay, here we have a typical.....," I looked at the blue dragon. He was flexing his muscles.

"Ooookay, maybe not so typical.....ballooning subject. Now, note how he's perfectly normal right now, or as close to normal as he gets. So, let's fix that. We'll add some air.....," I twisted the knob. Jason's belly quickly puffed out.

"Okay, now start observing guys. Note this particular expression on his face. The silly grin in particular. Also, note the hand placement. His stomach's only about as big around as a beach ball, so he still has a certain amount of stability. He places his hands on either side of his stomach, as you can see. Now, lets increase the air...." I twisted the knob some more.

“Okay, now as you can see, he can’t get his hands around his gut any more. I’d judge it to be about five feet around. Yet he still keeps his hands clapped to the sides of his stomach. The expression hasn’t changed, and you can just start to see a swelling in the limbs.” I twisted the knob a third time. Jason’s belly reached the floor.

“Okay, now it’s REALLY starting to become noticeable. His stomach having reached the ground, it now give’s him stability, so he can lean back slightly on his heels, exposing the soles of his feet. Notice the swelling of the toes and legs, as well as the arms. The hands and fingers stay on the sides of his stomach, but now it appears as if they’re losing their grip slightly. It’s impossible to see his face, but his eyes are crossed and the grin’s bigger, trust me.” I twisted the knob once again.

“Right. Now as you can see he’s laying down. He doesn’t necessarily have to do that...” my voice edged with granite a bit, showing I was a mite peeved with Jason’s histrionics. “But sometimes a subject of an inflation will do so to maximize enjoyment. As you can see he’s spread eagle, with his gut high over his head. Arms, legs, feet, and hands continue to expand, and the expression changes to one of contentment and relaxation. Sometimes however the expression is one of bliss, it depends.” I shut off the tank. Grinning, I crossed my arms and leaned against Jason’s huge belly.

“Any questions?”

The game couldn’t be created all in one day, so we knocked off work at about three in the afternoon. We’d gotten pretty far, having created the models for each character, gone over basic movements, and even developed a few of the levels. We’d also had a good laugh when we were making the inflation animations, especially when Quincy programmed Sandi to let loose with a very unladylike belch when she got to maximum size. It was when we all stepped out for lunch when things went straight down the toilet. As we stepped out of the elevator, the first thing we noticed was a black bear security guard knocked unconscious. I bent down to take his pulse while Quincy ran off to call the paramedics. After I realized he wasn’t dead, I bolted for the R&D department, Bruce on my heels, while Jason stayed with the guard. I’d been afraid of it, and it had happened. The wall safe that Bruce and Quincy had stored the test version of the game in was open, and the disc was GONE.

I pounded my fist on the door frame. “D@\*\* it!” I snapped. Bruce was about to barrel into the room. I caught him and held him back. “Whoa whoa wait a second! That’s a crime scene. I’ve gotta start collecting evidence.” I started jogging toward the elevator. “Don’t let anyone in there!” I yelled over my shoulder. I returned momentarily with the small briefcase I kept in the back of my car. I kept an assortment of evidence gathering equipment inside. Scotch tape for lifting hairs and fingerprints, super glue for exposing the prints, a flashlight cap that made blood and prints stand out more, several plastic evidence collecting bags, tweezers, and a few other odds and ends.

I clipped the cap on my mag lite and began shining it around the room. The fluorescent lights were still on, so I used a pencil to flick them off. The room went into semi-darkness rather

quickly. The first thing I noticed was the room was still in pretty good order. I say pretty good because video game designers aren't exactly known for being neat freaks. Still, nothing appeared knocked over, strewn about, or anything else that would indicate a search. That meant the person who searched the room knew what they was looking for. That probably meant it was someone in the company; they'd had to have gotten past lobby security without raising a fuss, and the only people that do that are employees. I smelled corporate espionage.

I got to the safe. There weren't any prints on the handle, or the dial. But when I flashed the light around the floor, I saw a few fingerprints on the wall! "Bingo." I chuckled. Using the glue, I raised the prints some, photographed them, then lifted them with some tape. The way the prints were kind of smeared seemed to indicate that the person had bent down to pick something up. I envisioned the guard surprising the safecracker, running for help, and getting bashed unconscious for his efforts. Then, the spy came back, got the prize, and ran.

"Okay, that takes care of that." I said, coming out of the room. Bruce, Quincy, and Jason were waiting for me. The paramedics had arrived and were holding a cold compress against the guard's face. He'd sustained several blows from what apparently had been a fist right on the end of his nose. The guy said he didn't make out any features, but the perp was taller than he was, and wings. Scaly wings. Sounded like a dragon.

"All right. I'm gonna need a list of all the people who knew about this project. Cross reference that list with disgruntled workers, laid off people, and anyw....."

"Not a chance, Fang." A sour tone said from down the hall. I clenched my eyes shut and pulled back my lips like someone just stamped on my foot. "Oh no, not HIM....." I glanced down the hall. At first I'd hoped it was an acquaintance of mine, but while they were the same species and same fur color, the guy coming down the hall was about five inches shorter. Detective Stuart "Fat Head" Yowler was sauntering down the corridor like he owned the building and was there to evict everybody. Two uniforms were right behind him like gangster bodyguards, a pair of gryphons.

"This has nothing to do with you, Fang, so just jump out a window," the cat sneered. He turned to the guard and began playing his favorite game: "Harass The Witness".

"All right pal. You can drop the innocent act, 'cause it doesn't work on me!"

"Yeah, you better 'fess up," I muttered loud enough for Stuart to hear me, "This guy's looking to make an arrest, not find out the truth."

"I thought I told you to jump in an open elevator shaft!" The cat snapped at me.

"Can you believe this guy? Can't even keep his insults straight." I snickered. Stuart shot me a nasty glare. I returned it. "Look dumb@\*\*, what on earth make's you think THE GUARD had anything to do with this?"

“Oh, something the GREAT (heavy sarcasm) Fang didn’t think of!! He’s obviously injured himself to cover up!”

“Really?” I scratched my chin. Stu gave me a smug look of triumph. “Well let’s check something.” I went up to the paramedic attending the guard, who was staring at the cat like he was nuts. “How’s he look?”

“He’s taken several hard hits to the face. His nose is broken, but that’s about it.”

“Anything you can use to see exactly how he was hit?”

“Actually, yeah.” The medic pulled the compress away from the side of the bear’s face for a second. There were several bruises forming, all of them in the exact same shape: a square with rounded corners.

“Well there you have it.” I said. Stu stared at the marks, then at me like I was the one acting loopy. I rolled my eyes. “That’s a ring imprint. Somebody hit him with a hand that was wearing a ring.” I looked at the bear’s hands. All he was wearing was a wedding band that wasn’t the same shape as the marks. I raised my eyebrows at the cat. “Satisfied?” He grumbled something I was pretty sure remarked about either my parentage or my anatomy below the belt.

It took a call to the C.E.O. to get the information I needed. It was a long wait, too, before the fax I needed was approved by a committee meeting. Then there were numerous channels the information had to go through, so by the time I finally got a list of the employees that knew about the game in production that was cross referenced with fired, unhappy, or untrustworthy individuals, It was well past afternoon. The police had gone, after Stuart had made a rather sloppy investigation. He didn’t bother to ask anyone on the floors above and below the office if they’d heard anything, he’d marched right into the office before a Crime Scene Unit could check for evidence I’d missed, and handled just about everything WITHOUT gloves, making sure to mash up prints with his own. All the while I just stood by frown on my face, rolling my eyes, and shaking my head. Sometimes it amazes me how anyone could have seen fit to give that drapery shredding dumbbell a badge.

I went home to mull over the evidence. I’d talked with the company execs on the phone, and managed to convince them to hire me. Good thing they decided to pay my 1,000 bucks; my rent was late. My footsteps echoed down the hall like a muffled drumbeat. My key scraped in the lock as I glanced at the list. Each employees name came with their health stats, their occupations, and their grudges against the office.

I locked the door behind me. My apartment was a welcome sight to the bland office decor I’d had to stare at while waiting for the higher ups to get me the info. After pulling off my work clothes and changing into a pair of sweat pants, I collapsed on my couch and read the list, checking off any employees obviously not the culprits. Three of them went right off the list; they weren’t tall enough, and didn’t have wings. That left eight. I scratched my chin, wondering about them; the guard had said it LOOKED like his attacker had wings, but I’d seen fake wing sets made. When acting groups got desperate sometimes, they’d have one of their actors, or

actresses, pull on a harness with a pair of wooden frames that had plastic sheeting coming down from them like the skin on a dragon's flying appendages.

First, I looked over the obvious possibilities. One dragon on the list was the right height, but he only had one complaint against the company; his bonus check bounced when he tried to cash it in; seems someone from finance misspelled his name so when he signed the check, the name's didn't match. Didn't seem like a likely reason to commit a robbery. The next dragon had complained that her boss had made lewd advances at her. That one wasn't a problem; her boss had been fired. The rest of the characters, according to the register at the front desk, either hadn't been in that day, or had clocked out before the assault occurred. Suddenly, I remembered something. I went to my closet and pulled a video tape out of my coat pocket; the surveillance tape from the elevator. Stu hadn't had the brains to ask for it, but I had. I stuck it in my VCR and fast forwarded to roughly three hours before the robbery. I'd called the doctors at the hospital; they'd made an educated guess, and said that the guard had gotten his clock cleaned about ten minutes before Bruce, Quincy, Jason, and I found him.

I watched the tape carefully. In the upper hand corner of the screen, a counter ticked off the floor numbers. Midnight came and went. I was tired, and practically falling asleep. No one that had used the elevator fit the description the guard gave. They were all either the wrong species or too short. Suddenly, I watched as a large brown dragon walked on camera! I sat bolt upright, and scanned the roster of suspects. There wasn't one listing of a brown dragon! But that wasn't the only problem; he kept his face partially obscured by his wings. It was hard to make out some of his features, but not impossible.

I KNEW he was the thief; there wasn't any doubt. The time was right, the elevator stopped on the right floor, but who was he?! I scanned the list a second time. Nothing. I switched off the tape, sighing in frustration. I was getting a headache, a dull throbbing behind my eyes. I needed something to relax. Only one thing came to mind. Chuckling under my breath, I pulled an air tank out of my closet. Sticking the hose in my mouth, I twisted the knob. My gut bulged out, stretching the elastic of my sweat pants. I fell back into my chair, the feeling of tickling feather points in my belly taking my mind off my problems and making it hard not to laugh. My bare feet began swelling as well, the soles exposed to the air from the way I was slouched with my legs spread to make room for my girth. My gut kept growing toward the ceiling as the rest of me also ballooned. My arms began rounding out, along with my hands, which I rubbed my gut with. My chest was inflated a bit, but no where near to the extent of my stomach, which was pushing me out of my seat.

Then, a bell went off in my head about the robbery; there was one possibility.....but I needed to make a phone call. I turned off the hose and spat it out. I tried to stand up, but to no avail; it's not easy to walk on inflated feet. Laughing, I just grinned as I bounced across the couch and grabbed the phone.

The gravel crunched under my car tires like nut shells as I pulled into the driveway of the expensive two story house. The place was built like something you'd expect out in Beverly Hills: expensive marble walkway from the driveway to the door, manicured lawn that must have been done by professionals, and a wrought iron gate at the front. I jumped out of my car and



jogged up to the door. I'd asked the cops to hang back out of site so the suspect didn't try to run before we saw him.

I hit the doorbell. I heard a shuffling like dry leaves moving toward the door. A moment later the knob turned and a seven foot brown dragon that looked exactly like the one on the video tape stepped out. "Mr. Hunley?" I asked. The dragon grunted an affirmative. I showed him my card. "Mike Fang, Private investigator. Could I ask you a few questions? Is this you in this picture?" I pulled out a still frame of the dragon in the lift. It had been blown up to get a good mug shot. Hunley took one look at the picture. Then his eyes went wide and he tried to slam the door on me. I dropped the photo and knocked the door away with the palm of my hand. The guy was racing upstairs, and I was hot on his heels. Hunley turned to the right and barreled down a hallway, stopping just in time to snatch a potted plant off a table and hit me in the head with it. I staggered and tripped, but was up in a second, a raging headache to match my rising temper.

Hunley ran into a room and was trying to get something out of a drawer when I got in. He looked up at me and froze for a second. Big mistake. I bounded across the room and slammed the drawer shut on his hand. He snarled in pain and kicked me in the chest, sending me on my back. He reopened the drawer and tried to pull out the automatic inside, but I kicked him hard in the shin and dropped him on one knee, making him fumble it. I rolled backward, losing my hat, and was on my feet as the dragon tried to charge me. I dove to one side as Hunley was carried by his momentum into the hall. Thank God for inertia!

Back on my feet, the dragon was just turning around as I bounded up to him and gave him a hard left palm thrust to the jaw. He staggered back. I stuck one foot forward and put it behind his heel. Then, I gave the dragon a hard shove in the chest. He tripped over my foot and was knocked backward through a closet door and into the shelves behind them. He tried to get up, but fell back, out like a light. Just as I stepped out into the hall, the two uniformed cops came up the stairs. I glanced at them as they stood on the staircase like a couple of rubber neckers. My head throbbed, to say nothing of my chest.

"Sorry, did I forget to call for backup?" I said with a sarcastic smirk.

"So who's this Hunley guy?" Bruce said. I'd handed the brown dragon over to the police and let them take it. In the meantime, I needed to get back to the others and let them know progress was being made.

"He was the boss that one of the women on that list of employees I got complained about. Seems he managed to take it in stride in front of the board of directors, but that was only because the second he got the pink slip, he started planning his payback. When I called security and found out he'd "forgotten" to give back his security pass, it all fit together."

"Well that's great, but where's the disk?" Quincy sighed. A frown tugged at my face. A thorough search of the dragon's house hadn't turned up a thing. There wasn't anything in his safety deposit box, either. Most likely it was either in his buyer's hands, sitting in some storage locker under an assumed name, or in one of any other billion hiding places.

“The cops are trying to sweat it out of him right now.” I said, stretching my arms over my head as I leaned back in my seat. It was a boring two hour wait. In the meantime, The guys and I kept working on the game. We fleshed out the plot a bit, designed the villain, regular bad guys, bosses, and so forth. After a lot of pleading and begging, I gave Jason the most fun part of the job; designing the final boss. He came up with a really elaborate cyborg that the crazy scientist turned into, complete with electric whips, Gatling guns, and heat-seeking missiles.

“Sheez Jase, remember we’re trying to make a villain that’s kinda cartoony. This guy might give kids nightmares.”

“Nah, take a look dude. He’s really goofy looking, but he’s huge!” Just then the phone rang. I grabbed it, praying that it had good news. “Hello?”

“Fang, it’s Chief Veldon.”

“Chief, what’s the word on Hunley?”

“Stop crossing all you fingers and toes, he just spilled the beans. Said some independent video game designer paid him to steal it in the process of being made so he could slap his own name on it and change it enough to make it look like an entirely different game.”

“Thanks, chief. Any idea where this guy is? He’s probably got the disk now.”

“All I’ve got is a name: Robert Folle. But that’s it. We can’t find diddly squat otherwise.”

“Well that’s something to go on. Thanks Chief.”

The carpeting in the office of the C.E.O of Nasaki was extremely posh with an Oriental theme. Expensive miniature plants that looked imported sat in every window sill. Small gold figurines of Chinese dogs, the type you see flanking the doors of Chinese restaurants were on the clear glass top of the desk. The walls had been painted a fire engine red while the carpet was a deep brown. The place would have put the oval office to shame. I approached the desk and shook hands with Mr. Nasaki, a short pug dog.

“Whot can I do for you, Mista Fang?” He spoke with a thick Chinese accent that was reminiscent of my land lord, though much deeper and not so sharp.

“Sir, I was wondering if you had heard of a game designer by the name of Robert Folle.”

The pug sat back in his chair and put the tips of his fingers together. “Ah yes, that name lings a bell. He did try to get a job wit us, but he was refused. Apparently when he had trouble coming up wit idea of his own, he pragiarized the idea of another game designer.”

I grinned a bit. “I think he might be the one that hired Hunley to steal the game from the R&D department. Do you have his address?”

Mr. Nasaki rummaged through his desk. “So, he’s up to his old tricks again, eh? \*sigh\* I never did trust that Antelope.” The pug pulled out his Roll-a-dex, selected a card, and handed it to me.

My fist pounded on the door, sending echoes into the empty chamber beyond. I’d heard the sound of an empty apartment before, and I knew at once that Folle had taken up a new home. I turned to the super, a hawk in coffee-stained clothes.

“Can you open this door for me?”

“Sure, as soon as you find the key I flushed down the john by accident,” he grunted. I shook my head and rolled my eyes. Right in front of the super, I pulled out my lock picks and picked the door open. “Found it,” I chuckled as I threw it open.

The apartment was almost completely bare, but there were still a few things laying around. Walking slowly, I searched each and every room. I didn’t expect to find anything big, like a piece of paper with Folle’s new address on it, but nobody can go anywhere without leaving behind some traces. It looked like the antelope had been a bit of a slob. There were empty soda cans everywhere. I picked one of them up, then took a close look at the rest of them. They were all the same brand. My ears pricked up as I examined the label. It was a small, local brand of soft drink; the kind you only see in the mom-and-pop grocery stores, not the big chain supermarkets. I chuckled as I tossed a can to myself. There’s two ways of recognizing evidence: identifying and individuating. Identifying is when you recognize WHAT something is. Individuating is when you can tell WHAT something is and WHERE it came from. The latter is vastly more important in crime solving; it’s fine if you can tell what kind of bullet came from the empty shell you find, but if you can match it to the smoking gun, that’s something to brag about.

The isles of "Dennis's Quik Stop" were short enough for me to see over them. Not much bigger than a gas station, the small grocery shop only had one counter and one cash register. A young panther jabbed the keys of the digital machine like he was playing the piano and the cash drawer popped out. He paid the customer his change and watched him leave. I had called up the company that made the soda I'd found in the apartment. They only stocked a few stores in the city, and the only one close enough to Folle's old apartment was the one I was currently staking out with the police. I'd been taken turns with several undercover cops for the past three days, each of us coming in at a different time. So far we'd gotten nadda, but we were hopeful; the cashier had recognized the picture of Folle that we'd gotten from Nasaki's personnel records.

I was just about to walk out and call my replacement when Folle walked in. Wearing torn jeans and a tie-dyed shirt, the guy looked so normal if I hadn't been staring at his picture for the past three days I would have missed him. But there was no doubting his identity when I watched him

haul three six-packs of his obscure soda up to the counter like he did it every week. I came right up behind him. "Robert Folle?" He turned around. For the second time in a week, someone took one look at me and their eyes went wide. But instead of straight out running, Folle shoved me into a bread rack and barreled for the door. I started up after him, but the approaching beat cop beat me to him.

"Nice collar," I said, jogging out to the uniform, who was slapping the bracelets on Folle. "How'd you know he was wanted for grand theft?"

The cop looked at me with a quizzical look in his eyes. "I didn't. I just saw him run without paying for that," he pointed to the six-pack of soda still clutched in the antelope's left hand.

Bruce's fingers sped across his keyboard. With the data on the disk returned, he was putting the final finishing touches on the game. Integrating the music, fixing the glitches in the animations, all the nit-picky little stuff. Finally, he hit the enter key with a flourish.

"Gentlemen, it's official. We have a video game." I grinned and slapped Jason five. On Bruce's screen, the game title was spinning in 3D. I cracked my knuckles.

"Well, now that we've got it finished, who's up for a test run?"

