

THE BADGE

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It's been a couple of days and I still can't believe it happened. I haven't had a case like this one since the Drason debacle. Well, I guess this requires a bit of explaining, so here goes.....

It was last week and I was just wrapping up a case. It had been a fairly small one, some guy knew his neighbor was robbing the other apartments in his building. I was just e-mailing the last of the paperwork to the D.A., and eating my lunch at the same time, when the familiar chime of my own e-mail service came out of my computer speakers.

"You have 1 new message!" I took a pull on my milkshake and punched up the letter. You can imagine my surprise when I read the sender's address: usmarshals.gov!

Mr. Michael Fang,

We here at the Unites States Marshals Office need to meet with you to discuss some business matters. Our representatives will be waiting for you in a restaurant on 5th street in your city called "Fanfare". I believe your familiar with it. (I was; it was the first really high class place I had taken Janet) We will be expecting you at 6:00, Tuesday evening.

Ben Darning, Head of the U.S. Marshals.

I shook my head a few times, figuring I'd eaten something that didn't agree with me and was hallucinating. If I hadn't seen the address, I would have pegged the e-mail as a joke. The government's law enforcement agencies, F.B.I, C.I.A, etc., aren't exactly known for their cooperation with civilians. I couldn't help but feel suspicious. I also noticed they hadn't bothered to give me a description of their agents. They probably wanted me to just walk in and let their men pick me out. That felt about as appealing as walking into a black widow's web and waiting for the spider to poison me.

The sun had started setting by the time the fed's showed up. It was pretty obvious who they were by the way the conducted themselves, walking through the crowds and passed the "please wait to be seated" sign with practiced impunity. I grinned to myself and walked straight up to them.

"Good evening, gentlemen, what can I get for you?"

That's right, I was dressed up as a waiter. It'd taken a sizeable amount of talking to convince the manager to let me pull off my stunt, but I figured it'd be worth it. And it was; the feds didn't even recognize me.

"Iced tea, please."

“Diet Coke.”

I nodded and went back to the kitchen, grabbed a tray, and loaded up with their drinks, not to mention pouring myself one. I went back to their table and set the men up, then pulled up a chair and sat down myself. “You know, I could have drugged those or worse easily.”

The two men exchanged glances, first with me, then with themselves. The first one, a panther in a suit as black as his fur, shrugged. “True. Then again, Mr. Fang, do you really think that you’re fooling anybody into believing that you’re a waiter?”

“Waiters don’t hang around the entrance to the kitchen, eyeing all the guests,” said the second suit, a gold-colored eagle.

I gave them my standard grin with a raised eyebrow. “Okay, point taken. Now, if we’re done sizing each other up, are you going to explain why your superiors sent me that cryptic e-mail? Or did you send that yourselves?” The two marshals, by now I’d noticed their badges just inside the lapels of their jackets, exchanged grins, like they were sharing some private joke. I really hate it when people do that.

“Yes, we sent it ourselves, and yes, the U.S. Marshals hierarchy sent it.” I raised an eyebrow as I took a pull from my drink.

“So you’re the guys in charge? I hope you’re not just lying to impress me. Which one of you is Mr. Darning?” The panther chuckled and raised a hand.

“That would be me. My associate here is Mr. Gogol, my right hand man. Mr. Fang, we’ve been researching your past cases, and we think we’ve got a job for you.” The eagle opened a briefcase and handed me a folder. I opened it, getting exactly what I expected, the dossier of a criminal, complete with mug shot. The picture was of a dragon, a light purple. A horn on his nose like a rhino’s had intricate patterns carved in it, and they were filled in with what looked like blue plastic. But that wasn’t what caught my attention first. It was the sheen all over his scales. I’d only seen it in a few of my friends.

“Say hello to Kyle Corsell. This guy’s on our top ten list.”

“How far from the top?” I said, reading over their file.

“Number 3,” said the eagle. I could believe it. His rap sheet contained several bad offenses; terrorism, kidnaping, grand theft, not to mention some particularly violent ones I won’t mention.

“He’s rubberized, isn’t he?” The two marshals exchanged glances again.

“Yes,” said the panther, stirring lemon into his iced tea. I’d had the feeling. That sheen all over Kyle could have only meant that through some means he’d managed to transform most of his physical body into rubber.

“How’d he do it? I’m guessing from those weird carvings in his horn he’s a magician.”

“That’s right.” The panther set his glass down, ice clinking inside like wind chimes in a breeze. “He apparently trained in several mystic arts schools, but his teachers never realized.....”

“They never do,” I muttered. I’ve never cared too much for magic. In my experience it’s a power that too many of it’s practitioners abuse.

“He’s currently at large,” the marshal continued, “and we believe that he’s in the city. Unfortunately, we’ve no idea where he is or what he’s planning. The thing of it is, he’s got most of our local agents identities and faces memorized, so we can’t send one of them after him. The local authorities aren’t equipped for this, either.”

“So we came to you. We need you to help us locate him.” Gogol said. I handed the folder back. I was silent for a few seconds, leaning back in my seat, my hand under my chin, my ears laid back. The idea of a magic maniac, loose in my home town, planning something.....

I looked up. “When do we start?”

The building was a very old one. Brown brick, ten stories high, with surprisingly little graffiti. That figured, since I was in a part of town where most of the magicians made their homes. Not too many gangs tried to claim territory in it, fearing that they’d get cursed if they were caught. The police patrolled the area with a certain amount of prejudice. While I don’t agree much with magic, I agree with discrimination even less. I kept my hat pulled down, walking up the street as quietly as I could but still feeling like I stuck out way too much. Magicians left and right were making little glances in my direction, like they could smell my lack of mystical energy. It ticked me off, but I bit back some scornful remarks.

I came to the building I was looking for and slowly went up the stairs. I had two hopes at that time. The first was the person I was looking for was home. The second that she had the information I needed. Glancing left and right, I made my way up the spiral staircase. I never could understand why the magic user’s apartments always needed spiral staircases. I’d once heard it had to do with the Feng Shui of their home. I’d laughed at the idea before, but now I figured it might actually have some merit; not in the sense of emotional energies but whatever strange power source the magic users dipped into.

I came to the apartment door and pounded on it. A muttering came from inside. Again I wore out my knuckles on the door. Finally, it was pulled open by a female German Shepherd in a colorful t-shirt, jeans, and with some kind of amulet around her neck that was definitely used to concentrate “mystic energy”.

“You,” she snorted.

“Me,” I grinned. “Been a while, Denise. You keeping your mind out of other people’s wallets?” The girl I was talking to was a magic pick pocket, or she used to be. She was a very

inept magic user, and the only skill she'd gotten proficient in was teleporting small objects. She'd used that to her advantage to teleport wallets, purses, watches, and jewelry to her apartment for rifling later. I'd caught her easily when I'd had a few cronies go out with tracking devices planted on their valuables. After a few weeks, I'd eventually gotten a call that a watch was lifted, and followed it to her. In return for not turning her in, she'd agreed to get me information from the less-than-upstanding characters she hung out with.

"Yes, I've been on the right side of the tracks." She grunted in frustration and walked back into her apartment, leaving me to follow and shut the door. "Can't you find some other purse snatching skirt to chase?" I smirked at this only because the girl was four years my junior and didn't know I had a steady girlfriend I was crazy about, so it looked childishly funny. If Denise had been older and known I was in monogamy, she'd have felt the palm of my hand upside her head.

"Yeah, but I'm too lazy to bother," I said. She gave me a look that said: why don't I find THAT surprising? It wasn't a bad idea for me to cultivate the idea that I was a nasty jerk among my very sparse informants (four at last count) since I didn't want them thinking they could lead me around by the nose with lies and false information.

"I hear there's a nasty character named Kyle in town. You hear anything about him?" I leaned against the wall, waiting. Denise put on a mock thoughtful look. "You know, I think I might have, but it's real hard to remember.....," I grunted and tossed her a twenty dollar bill. She grinned triumphantly and stuck it in her pocket.

"I hear there's this guy, Vinny, who's been bragging that he's doing jobs for a really big magician named Kyle. He's never come down here in person, but he's had Vinny running all over the place, buying stuff like amulets and junk."

"You ever hear this Kyle described? Like what he looks like?"

"Well, I know he's a dragon, but that's all." That was all I needed to go on.

"Uh-huh. What's this Vinny's last name?"

"Munchello. Hey, you're not gonna tell 'em I told you, right?"

I grinned as I walked out the door, tossing a look over my shoulder. "Why? I don't even know you."

A small Chinese restaurant hove into view as I rounded the corner. I was close to my quarry. I'd gone straight to Vinny's apartment from Denise's, trying to track his employer down as quickly as possible. The sooner that lunatic was off the streets, the better as far as I was concerned. I'd come up empty-handed at his shack, but his landlord said he went to this small Chinese café just down the street. It was directly on the corner, and was decorated in the traditional manner; Chinese symbols all over the place, red carpeting, soft music, etc. The two outer walls were completely glass, giving the interior of the shop a picture-like effect.

The bell rang as I stepped through. A waitress, an attractive young panda, seated me while I ordered a plate of lo mein. I'd gotten a description of Vinny, and nobody in the shop currently fit his picture. I twirled noodles around my chop sticks and swallowed them, albeit with a little more slurping than the other customers. I'd had experience with chop sticks, but they were still difficult.

I was just taking a sip from the complimentary tea I'd gotten (for some reason Chinese tea is the only kind that appeals to me) when I noticed my quarry come in. Vinny was dressed to kill in an Italian suit with those uncomfortable-looking pointy shoes. The guy was a skunk, not just in manners but literally. He gave the waiter that served him nothing more than a curt nod, and leaned back in his chair arrogantly, arm over the back of the chair, looking around like he owned the place.

I was just about to get up, when everything went to pieces. Vinny must have read my mind or SOMETHING, because one minute he's sitting there, the next he flings his chair at me and bolts for the door. I hadn't even gotten up yet! The chair cracked me in the head, knocking me out of my seat. I heard the astonished gasps of the other people in the restaurant as I scrambled to my feet and bolted after the skunk.

I came to a halt about two running steps out the door, muscles tense. Vinny hadn't gone far. He was standing in the middle of the deserted intersection, waiting for me. His stance told me he was looking for a fight, and had only run to get room for it. His eyes literally glowed as he swept a hand behind him. I could practically feel the energy he was building up. I furiously went for my gun. As I was drawing it, Vinny brought his hand around open-palmed. I felt a vicious blast like a gust from a tornado go past me. I grabbed my hat and braced myself against the current of air. Slowly, it stopped. The roaring that had deafened me just a few moments ago was gone, and I could hear the tinkling of falling glass.

I raised my eyebrow. "I don't suppose you missed me, did you?" Vinny shook his head, a smirk on his face. Irritated, I brought my gun out. Suddenly, I felt something behind me. I risked a glance over my shoulder. Every jagged piece of glass from the broken shop windows was floating in the air and pointed at me! I threw myself forward, and heard the sharp crash as the shards all smashed into the ground where I'd been standing only a second before. God and quick thinking had been the only things that saved me. I rolled on my shoulder and came up in a crouch, my gun aimed straight at Vinny. He'd been caught off guard by my evading; looking back I guess he expected me to flat out run, not dodge. I had a bead on his forehead.

"Don't even think about it, punk!" I snarled. "You think you can cast a spell faster than two bullets can reach you? Then just try it." Vinny glared at my piece, which I'd just cocked the hammers of, and put his hands on his head. I pulled out my handcuffs and started to snap them on his wrists. Looking back, I realize that was a pretty klutzy thing to do. Suddenly, his eyes glowed again. Electricity, or some magic equivalent, shot through his hands, my cuffs, and into me! I recoiled in pain, giving the skunk an opportunity to try and make a break for it. But I was faster. I barreled after him and made sure he didn't try it again by smacking him in the skull with the butt of my gun.

"You're not doing yourself any favors, kid." Darning paced in front of the interrogation room table, hands behind his back. I myself was leaning against the wall, watching. After I had collared Vinny, a car came around almost instantly. It seemed that the marshals had decided to

give me back up once they realized I was onto something. Made me kind of wonder where the guys were when I was getting the living daylight's shocked out of me. After we'd dragged the skunk downtown, I'd gone through all the cop files to find one that was proficient in magic; they were extremely scarce. Still, I finally located one and got him to put together the necessary precautions to keep Vinny from using his magic to do something like teleport himself out or incinerate us with balls of fire.

"This guy's scum, Vinny," the panther said, trying to play good cop. Vinny wasn't buying it, the arrogant smirk still on his face, although now it looked more annoyed than content.

"You morons don't have the first clue who you're dealing with," he said in a laid-back tone. His accent was like something out of "The Godfather" or "The Sopranos". That kind of low, melodious number. It ticked me off.

"My boss's gonna rock this town good. All you've done right now is inconvenience me." That did it. I lost my temper, moved across the room in one step, and had Vinny by the shirt.

"We'll see how inconvenient it is when I twist your head off!" I snarled. Vinny kept his annoyed look, but now his arrogance was replaced with anger.

"You lay one finger on me and I'll have your butt on a silver platter for police brutality." I just grinned, letting go of the guy's shirt and walking around behind him.

"Oh, I'm not the police; I'm a private investigator." That surprised the skunk. I leaned over and spoke right in his ear. "But I don't need to beat the snot out of you to get what I want, much as I'd enjoy it for when you tried to skewer me, then fry me. No, I've got enough to give to the police so they can get a search warrant for your place. And I'll be right there to pick up whatever they miss. What're we gonna find when we go through your drawers, Vinny? Drugs? Stolen goods? Illegal magic items? Maybe you're a cross dresser; we may find some flowery dresses!"

The skunk gritted his teeth. He looked like he wanted to magic me into the ionosphere and let me drop back down to earth, no parachute. I get a lot of that.

"You don't have to go through this, kid." Darning said, sitting down right across from him. "So far we don't have any reason to believe that you've done anything besides run errands for this guy. Now while Mr. Fang here is quite irritated with you for resisting arrest...." I cracked my knuckles right behind Vinny's head, making him squirm. The panther gave me a small, chastising look. What can I say? When I get mad, I'm not very subtle. ".....I'm sure he'll forgive you if you tell us what rock Kyle's crawled under." I walked back around to the front of the room, arms crossed.

"I think I can find it in myself to let the matter be, IF he helps."

"Oh, that's REAL big of you," The skunk grumbled. He sighed, then gave Darning a dead serious look. "Okay, but I don't want ANY charges, got it?" The panther nodded.

Vinny looked from side to side, as if he was afraid he'd be overheard. "He's hiding in a basement room in an apartment building near the docks; Coolridge Tenements. He's smuggling in some special magic equipment. I don't know what for, though."

The door to the interrogation room shut behind me. Darning immediately began conferring with his assistant. "Well Mr. Fang, you've been most helpful. Now, your next task is to root out Corsell and bring him in."

"Whoa, wait a minute," I said, holding up my hands, "You wanted me to help you guys find him, and I did. Now my job's done, so good luck with the rest." Gogol gave me an appraising look, like he was sizing me up for an argument. Suddenly I had the feeling there wasn't any way I could avoid getting more involved, so I let out a growl, rolled my eyes, and nodded.

"Okay, we know where this guy is, now we have to set up a sting operation. I know a way to take this guy out if he decides to get violent. We can....." I caught a look that went between the eagle and the panther. I narrowed my eyes. "What?"

The eagle sighed. "I suppose it's time you were shown this." He walked over to a t.v. with a video player used for examining taped evidence. He stuck in a recording. Suddenly I had the feeling the floor was about to drop out from under me.

The screen flicked to life; it was a surveillance camera from on a street corner ATM. I watched as Kyle, there was no mistaking him, walked on screen. The dragon looked to be on the heavy side, with some muscle hiding under his fat. Suddenly, five marshals jumped out of numerous hiding places, automatic weapons ready.

"Kyle Corsell, you're under arrest! Put up your hands and lay down on the ground!" The rubber dragon smirked, then started to bend over as if to lay down. Suddenly, he made a jerking motion with his hand. Instinctively, all the marshals opened fire. But I knew what was going to happen. Kyle just stood there as the slugs bounced off him. I sighed.

"That's not the end of it," grumbled Gogol. I kept watching. Kyle turned to face the marshals as they approached him, reloading.

"Real cute," he said, "Now it's my turn!" The dragon's mouth dropped open, and suddenly he started sucking in a HUGE breath. His stomach swelled as he stretched the material of his clothes. His gut grew past 20 ft. in seconds, his limbs swelling as well. His feet puffed up, and he lifted them off the ground, resting on his gut. He kept sucking in air, going past 300ft! The marshal's began backing off slightly. Kyle's hands and feet swelled, his chest puffing out as well, but nowhere near the huge size of his belly. Suddenly, at what looked like 600ft, Kyle exploded with a deafening bang that visibly shook the camera! I jumped at the sight. The marshals were thrown violently against buildings, cars, and such by the massive blast of air. Suddenly, I knew what this meant. It was therefore with little surprise that I watched the dust settle. Kyle's rubber body lay in fragments all over the place. Then, they quickly began reconstructing themselves like a rewinding of a movie. The feet snapped to attention, then the legs grew back. The waist, chest, and arms followed. Finally, Kyle's head landed on his shoulders, laughing sadistically.

“Oh my God,” I said under my breath. The tape ended. Darning sighed. “That’s right. He can’t be killed by destruction of his body.” I bit my lower lip. This was unexpected. I couldn’t see how I could possibly combat something like that! Then, a single thought occurred to me. I could feel a grin spread across my face. “Gentlemen, I think I might have the answer. He’s not invincible; Corsell is vulnerable.”

“But to what?” Gogol mused. “We can’t puncture him with any kind of bullet.” I grinned again. “I’ve got a way to do that. Then again, maybe it won’t come to a lethal end. Let’s hope so. But let’s let it go for today, guys. It’s getting late, and I need to think up some kind of trap for Kyle.” Darning nodded. “Okay, I’ll just post a lookout on Kyle. Make sure he doesn’t make any moves.”

I slowly walked down the steps of the police station and down the street. It was late in the evening, and I had a bit to walk to get home. Plenty of time to plan, come up with a strategy. I had been sincere when I said I hoped it wouldn’t come to anything lethal. Killing isn’t easy; it’s pretty freaking hard. But when you have to defend yourself, you don’t always have a choice. And like I said, I had a way to do it if I had to. I reflected on this as I opened my apartment. Once inside, I glanced at the clock. It was a little later than I’d figured. I quickly started changing into some casual clothes, leaving my work aside for the next day. I had plans for that evening, and they weren’t about to be interrupted.

I heard the knock at the door. I quickly crossed my living room, doing all the usual little things to fix my appearance; straightened my shirt neck, checked my breath, got the cheese ball stains off my face. Of course you’ve probably guessed who’s at the door by now. I gave my visitor the best I could muster in the realm of a suave grin.

“Janet, honey. I’d say you look especially radiant tonight, but there’s no way you could ever look any more beautiful than you always do.”

My girlfriend raised an eyebrow and smiled at me. “Mike, that’s the worst attempt at a pick-up line I’ve heard since I stopped at a corner to pick up a quarter and someone tried to look down my shirt.” My ears shot up at this. “What?! Where?! I’ll kill the son of a…….” She just giggled and pecked me on the cheek. “I was just kidding.” I grinned a bit and shut the door. “So, where are we going to go?” she asked.

“I found this small area between two hills. There are plenty of trees around, so we’ll have complete privacy.” I jogged out and opened the car door for Janet. She slid in with a kind of grace that always surprises me. As for myself, I caught my foot on the tire getting around to the driver’s door and almost tripped. Sighing and shaking my head, I jumped in behind the wheel and we took off. We drove out of the city and into the forest. It was remarkably quiet, the crickets sounding like an orchestra through the open windows. After about a mile, I pulled off the main road and went down a dirt path to a clearing. The engine ticked as Janet and I got out.

“You know someone watching this might think we’re a couple of nature nuts,” she said.

“That’s true. Good thing nobody’s around to watch,” I chuckled. I stepped behind some trees with a pair of green stretchable swim trunks and changed into them. I tossed my clothes

into the car and locked it. Janet, meanwhile, had set up several tanks of compressed air. I took the hose from the nearest one. Just before biting onto it, I gave my girlfriend a smile. "You know how much I appreciate this, don't you? Most girls wouldn't do something like this for their boyfriends." She also gave me a genuine smile.

"Well I'm not like most girls."

"You certainly aren't," I grinned, putting the hose in my mouth. Now Janet gave me her coy grin as she turned the knob of the tank. I laid down on the ground and watched as my stomach bulged. The tingling sensation increased as my belly swelled bigger and bigger. My limbs bulged, my toes puffed up, and my fingers grew a bit as well. My chest rose slightly at first, then slightly faster. But my gut grew more than anything else, stretching higher than the hood of my car.

Janet, meanwhile, rummaged around in her pocket for a calculator. She found one, then pulled out a sextant from her back pocket. Coming around to my head, she did some quick calculations on my size.

"Okay, you just reached 50 feet." I gave her a thumbs up, telling her to keep going. She turned the tank up. My swelling increased, not to mention the sensation. Grinning, my girlfriend ran a hand over my stomach. I bit back a giggle at the feeling. About five minutes later, Janet took a second reading.

"That's 200." I nodded, still giving her a thumbs up. My limbs were almost completely round by now, and my neck was starting to disappear slightly. I couldn't have looked at my feet to save my life; my belly was almost halfway up the trees. Soon, I felt a pinching sensation, like I was getting too big for my skin. I knew what that meant. The pinching increased dramatically, and it was getting very uncomfortable.

"225!" Janet said, and turned off the tank. I kept the hose in my mouth, but rested my gut. My skin felt very taught, and I didn't want to risk hurting myself by moving around too much and pulling something. I held very still, waiting for about ten minutes. Janet ticked it off on her wrist watch. "Okay, that's ten minutes, how much do you want to try for now?" I thought for a minute, then rolled the hose around to the corner of my mouth with my tongue.

"Let's go for 250."

"Okay, just be careful." I nodded at my girlfriend. The pinching sensation has slacked off to a dull throb. Janet slowly turned the knob back on. I felt myself begin to swell just a little more. The pinching started again, but after a minute and a half, my girlfriend wrenched off the tank. She took a reading with the sextant.

"That's 250!"

I spat out the hose and CAREFULLY moved a bloated arm. It was easily as big around as my car, but everything was roughly proportional, except for my stomach, which was a huge, brown hill with a belly button. I gently stroked my swollen throat, and the air began blasting out my mouth. It wasn't quite as instantaneous as when I inflate for fun, 'cause I seldom go past 100 ft. It took about two minutes before I returned to normal. Laying on the ground, I panted in exhaustion for a second. But I couldn't wait long. My skin at the time was pulling back to its original toughness. Quickly, I put my hands behind my head and started doing sit-ups. Janet ticked them off for me, until I'd done about 30. I'd found that right after doing an inflation exercise, I needed to do numerous rapid movements in order to keep the limberness I'd just achieved from being recalled, so to say. By the time I got to 30 sit-ups, I didn't feel the pulling anymore. I glanced myself over. "Well honey, how do I look?" Janet glanced me over, getting me to stand up and move a bit.

"Looks like your back to your old self. I don't see any loose skin or anything." I nodded.

"Good, let's try it again." She nodded, and I grabbed the hose a second time. I started inflating again, but this time the tank was empty, so I had to wait a second while Janet switched me over to a new one. I passed 100 without a hitch, then 200, then 225. As I got to 240, I started feeling the pinching again, and at 250, it was very taught. Again with the extreme discomfort, waiting, and this time I increased it to 275. I rubbed my throat, and snapped back to normal, limbering my muscles and skin with exercise. I fell back onto the ground, gasping for breath afterwards. Janet sat down beside me.

"Are you okay? That didn't hurt or anything, did it?"

"Nah," I said breathlessly,
"You.....know.....what.....they.....say.....no.....pain.....no.....gain....."

"Well I suppose that's true. Still, it's kind of dangerous, isn't it?" I nodded, and shrugged. "So are a lot of things." That didn't ease Janet, but it put thing into perspective.

"So, is that enough?" I shook my head, sitting up. I'd gotten my wind back and fully recovered. "One more time. I wanna go for a personal best."

"Well, okay, but this is IT. I'm not about to let you ruin those stylish good looks of yours." I grinned and gave her a peck on the cheek. After making doubly sure I had snapped back to my normal shape and size completely, and I had, I got set up again. The tanks emptied, the air hissed, and my belly swelled up huge once again. I shot past 200 with no trouble at all, stretching myself as far as possible. A lot of it was in the mind, and I kept my eyes shut, concentrating on relaxing. It wasn't too hard, seeing as how inflating was one of my most relaxing pastimes. Finally, I felt the pinching again. 275 quickly crept up on me. Janet shut off the tank and I stopped right on the dot. Five minutes passed. I gave my girlfriend a bloated thumbs up. She carefully turned the knob. I felt my monstrous belly bulge a bit more. It was now so huge it almost reached

the tops of the trees. Almost. Janet twisted the tank off. Walking around my gigantic, bloated form, she came around to my face. She grinned coyly, giving my stomach a very gentle feel.

“You know, you’ve never looked better.” I grinned at her and winked. She held up the sextant again. Just then, she looked at the device.

“Oh I can’t believe it! Of all the dumb.....Mike, you’re never gonna believe this. I’ve been reading this thing wrong! You’re not 300 ft.” I gave her a quizzical look.

“You’re 325!” My face broke out in an ear-to-ear grin. A hundred foot increase in one night. Not bad. Very slowly, and very cautiously, I moved my arm around and rubbed my throat. It wasn’t easy, but I managed. The air blasted out my mouth like a cannon shot. My skin slowly began tugging back to its old positions, returning to its usual shape and size. I somehow found the strength to do my sit ups, but after that, I flopped backward and passed out. When I opened my eyes again, Janet was sitting on the hood of my car. I sat up slowly, still a little tired.

“Whew! How long was I out?”

“About half an hour,” she said, swinging her feet. I stood up slowly, glancing myself over. I couldn’t see any stretch marks, sagging skin, or anything anywhere. It seemed like I’d been blessed by God with some sort of incredibly adaptive physique. I breathed a silent prayer of thanks to Him for it as I stumbled and tripped on my way back to my car, dizzy beyond belief.

“Well thanks again, honey,” I said, kissing Janet on the cheek once more. “I’ll make this up to you, I promise.”

She giggled a bit. “Oh don’t worry Mike. Watching THAT was payment enough. Haven’t seen entertainment like that since I saw Drew Carrey live. Now, if you’re done.....” Janet hopped off the car and stepped around behind it. I waited a second, having a feeling about what was coming. Janet stepped back out in her two piece bathing suit.

“.....it’s my turn.”

The sun had just cracked when I got a call from the marshals. I was barely awake when my phone brayed its existence into my semi-conscious mind. After finishing our inflation exercises, Janet and I each went back home to an extremely deep sleep. Now I was being pulled out of it before I was ready; that DIDN’T make me a very good morning person.

I pulled the phone off my night stand and grunted into it. “Unless this is an emergency, I’m hanging up.”

“Mr. Fang?”

I sat up, shaking off sleep quickly. “Gogol? How’d you get this number?!”

“You gave it to us, remember?”

“Oh yeah. Can’t imagine what I was thinking. I’ll have to change it again.” The eagle laughed on the other end.

“I’m calling to ask if you’ve got any plans on how to catch Kyle Corsell yet.” I chuckled, looking at the yellow notepad beside my bed, covered with my scribbling.

“I most certainly have. Get Vinny out of holding and stick him in an interrogation room again. I’ll meet you and your boss at the P.D. HQ and explain everything.” I hurriedly got dressed, throwing on duplicates of what I’d worn the other day. Heh, murphy’s law: you can never have too much work clothes.

“What, is this some kind of reunion?” The skunk grunted. I shook my head and slapped down a piece of paper and a pen in front of him. “You’re gonna help us catch Kyle.”

“What, my info not enough?!”

“No,” I said matter-of-factly. “Now we need a way in. I want you to write me a letter of recommendation to Kyle.” The guy looked at me like I was nuts. “Are you freakin’ kiddin’ me?! Whadda you think he is, a college professor?!”

I leaned in closer. “No, but he’s not gonna accept just anyone that walks in off the street to join his gang. Or even if he does, getting supported by one of his underlings will certainly help me get in closer to him. Now write.” I pushed the paper closer to the skunk. He tried to think of a way to weasel out of it, came up blank, and started writing. I read over his shoulder.

Kyle,

Have I got a deal for you! This guy that gives you this note, he’s a procurement specialist. I’ve seen him in action, and he’s good! I was thinking maybe he’d be able to get some of that stuff you’ve been after. Since he’s not magic, they won’t trace him back to us if he’s caught.

-Vinny

This same letter was being read two hours later by Kyle Corsell himself. I’d taken the letter to the location of Corsell’s hideout. Not bothering with any quiet hinting, I just went up to the door to the basement and knocked, a tape recorder in my pocket. I doubted they’d search me for electronic devices, even the simplest ones. For some reason, a lot of the magicians seemed to think only in the terms of their own areas of

knowledge. Still, I suppose that's pretty universal. The door cracked open and I said I had a message for Corsell. The person behind it demanded I hand it in, so I did. About two minutes later, I heard the sound of a dragon losing his temper and hollering at someone. The door was flung open and I was quickly ushered inside.

The basement was dank, and the air hung with burning ingredients from numerous magic concoctions, not many of them pleasant to my nose. I had a hunch they gave off something to hide Korsell from any kind of magic detection. It was also dark, sparsely lit, but apparently well furnished. There were a few oriental rugs on the floor, nice ones I wouldn't mind having in my place, if I could afford them. A desk littered with several small objects, obviously of importance to some minor magic, had been in front of me as the person sitting at it scanned the letter. Two bodyguards flanked the piece of expensive-looking furniture, behind which the large rubber dragon sat, wearing an expensive looking hunting vest, and a pair of tan jeans with a lot of pockets in them.

"So," Kyle said in a voice that sounded like it was used more often to holler and rant, "you know how to get stuff, eh? Well I've always got room in my group for someone skilled. But it still remains to be seen whether you're skilled or not." The dragon got up, his chair creaking from the weight of his bulk. I figured him to be eight feet tall, at least. The designs in his horn shined slightly in the bad light. He walked up to me, rolled up the letter, and poked me with it under the chin.

"You ready to take a test?" I nodded, silently reminding myself not to lose it; he'd get his soon. The dragon motioned to me to follow him into the next room, behind a closed door on the other side of his desk. I brought up the rear of the dragon, trying not to step on his tail. The next room contained more magic artifacts, these ones looking more powerful and more dangerous.

"I've been looking for a way to magically counterfeit money. Problem is, unless I know what serial numbers are going to be printed on the next batch of cash, I can't make anything that'll pass for greenbacks. So, I've come up with a way to get the next bunch of serial numbers out of the computers up in the capital! Only thing I need now is fuel for the spell. I'm gonna need five bales of a leaf called arrownight. I want you to get it for me. It's expensive stuff, so you'll need all your.....procurement skills to get it."

I nodded. Just then, I happened to notice some strange scratch marks on the floor. "What are those markings there?" I asked. Kyle turned. "Oh those are just claw marks from the last guy that worked those tools." I glanced at the floor again with wide eyes. The marks had to be an inch deep!

"But why.....?" I started.

"Ah, the stuff's dangerous to run. But hey, it's no skin off my nose. They want a piece of the action, they gotta shoulder the risk. 'Course, most of 'em don't want to, so we just grab some moron that comes snooping around and make THEM do it. Last sucker that did, though, well....." The dragon snickered. "Let's just say he won't be

doing any dancing any time soon.” I instantly felt a desire to pull out my gun and blast him into shreds. But I didn’t; it wouldn’t have made enough difference in the long run. I’d get him soon enough.

“I’ll give you till sundown to get me the goods. If you don’t have ‘em by then, don’t come back.” With that, Kyle had his men shove me out the door. The lock clicked behind me as I made my way back up to the street. I rounded the corner and walked for about three blocks to make sure I wasn’t followed. When I didn’t notice anyone particular following me or any cars that were slowly cruising just a block behind, I figured I’d pulled it off. Just then, a black, unobtrusive car pulled up and parallel parked just a few yards away from me. It was spotless, in comparison to all the others cars which had their dings, coats of dust, bird messes, and so on. I shook my head and walked up to the car. Sure enough, Darning and Gogol were sitting in the front.

“You’ll be happy to know I’ve got what you need.” I tossed them the tape out of the recorder. “You’ll be especially interested in the part where he admits that he grabs people off the streets and forces them to risk their lives to help him work magic counterfeiting machinery.” The two marshals looked at each other with surprise and alarm. I was getting pretty disgusted with them; I was doing all the work while they sat around playing poker for all I knew. They weren’t a branch of law enforcement; they were a couple of bounty contractors. I didn’t have anything against that, except they had acted as though they were going to help me, and instead I was being used like a pack mule.

“Excellent!” The panther said, eyeing the tape as if it were a diamond. “Now what happens?” I was seriously beginning to doubt that he had any sort of experience chasing down perps. I sighed and grunted. “NOW we set up a sting. Have your men get ready to take him at.....” I reached into the car’s glove compartment, much to the marshal’s surprise. I pointed to a building on the map near the water front. It was an old apartment building.

“.....this location in about five hours. The place is abandoned. I’ll get Corsell up on the roof. And don’t worry about his being rubber. *I* can handle that.”

I sat in my office, typing on my computer. The internet being the amazing database it was, I was looking up what I could on that arrownight stuff Kyle was demanding. For any sting to be successful, I had to have the proper bait. Every fisherman knows that there’s no universal bait that will catch every kind of fish; for some you need minnows, others shrimp, some lures, and so on. And being a fisherman, or I should say fisherdog, myself I knew exactly what Corsell would need. He’d need the real deal; nothing artificial or fake would satisfy him. No hollow promises, just the genuine article. The information on arrownight was limited; an herb that was grown locally and usually found in large forest areas. It grew like kudzu; in large clumps and fields. I quickly put in a call to several logging companies. I asked them if they’d ever come across anything like it. They said they had, and usually cleared it away and sent the clippings to gardening companies to turn into compost. I grinned as I asked if they could

set aside two bales of it for personal use. It's amazing what good phone manners can get you. After I finished with the order, I quickly typed something up on my computer and printed it out, sticking the document in my pocket. Then, I opened a locked drawer in my desk, and removed a box from it. Taking out the weapon inside, I stuck it in my belt on my hip.

The rooftop was very bright that evening; then again, it was only about four. Clouds hung in the sky all the way to the horizon on the waterfront, making things seem almost picturesque. If I hadn't been on that roof to bring an end to the case, I would have really appreciated the artistic genius God put into his creation. But I was there on business, and it wasn't going to be as pretty as the scenery. I heard footsteps on the stairs, and turned to face the door. My overcoat flapped just a bit from a slight breeze, making me cross my arms in order to hide my weapons. I stuck my right hand in my coat, putting it on the stock of the one in my belt. I wanted to be ready to draw it in an instant.

The door banged open. Kyle came in with three body guards behind him, two other dragons and a pit bull, all three dressed in the same hooded denim jackets and jeans. But while their outward appearance didn't make them look like they were magicians, the sparks in their eyes made it clear to me.

"I got your message," Kyle said, a slightly ticked-off look on his face.

"Well I'm sorry," I shrugged, raising an eyebrow, "but like I said, I was having trouble moving this stuff across town without being noticed. But here it is." I walked over to an old air conditioning unit and pulled out the bales of herbs by the twine that was wrapped around them. Kyle looked at them hungrily.

"Perfect! Boys, we're gonna be the richest suckers in the freakin' city!"

"Oh, you don't have to wait. You're already suckers," I chuckled. The dragon looked up at me suspiciously.

"Welcome to my parlor, said the spider to the fly!" I grinned, pulling out my cell phone. "Okay Darning, come and get 'em!" The sound of sirens filled the air of the streets below, sounding distant, but a lot closer than Kyle wanted them. He drew back his lips in a snarl. I grinned, waiting to hear the sound of choppers, or marshals on the stairs. The grin faded as nothing happened after a minute. I spoke into my cell phone again. "Darning? You can come up now."

"Of course Mr. Fang. As soon as you deal with Kyle." I gritted my teeth. "You back stabbing....." I growled through my teeth. Kyle was rearing back, a sadistic smirk and a cocky look in his eye.

"You stupid mutt, you actually tried to bust me!?! NOBODY does that to me, I'm gonna make you regret you ever thought of trying to take me down!" He hauled back his

hand and quickly started to thrust it forward. My leg muscles fired and I dodged to the side, Kyle's fireball passing by me as I drew my liquid nitrogen gun, the same one I'd kept from when me and a friend of mine had tangled with a lunatic called Charles Dranson, at the same time. I let a blast loose from the weapon and a stream of liquid nitro mist blasted Kyle in the side. He dodged most of it, but the wide spray still nicked him just a little. He didn't like it.

"AARGH, I don't believe this, he friggin' shot me!!! What the hell IS that thing?!" He clutched the freezer burn on his side and turned to his goons.

"Well what're you doing just standing there?! Kill the bastard!!" With that, the rubber dragon took off across the roof, making like he was about to jump it.

"Okay boss, you got it!"

"No problem!"

"Alright!"

My eyes went wide as I watched three magic thugs getting spells ready to tear me apart incredibly fast. I glanced down at the bales of arrownight, dropped my liquid nitro gun, and grabbed one. I flung it into the first dragon, causing him to lose his balance and fall into the one next to him. They both lost the energy they were concentrating into spells. But the pit bull tossed some kind of magic dart at me that snagged me in the shoulder. It stung like a gunshot, but I managed to stay standing. I pulled out my revolver and capped him in the shoulder before he could do it again. HE didn't manage to stay standing, and got knocked over pretty fast by the magnum slugs. I picked up my nitro gun and took off after Kyle. He had already made it to the next roof, using his wings to glide the gap. Me, I had to find a board to reach across and carefully make my way across, praying that my natural clumsiness wouldn't surface at that moment.

Across the roof, I dropped to the ground and took off. It didn't look like Corsell had done anything very physical recently. He was puffing hard, and I was quickly catching up to him. Then he jumped to another roof, this one a warehouse usually used to store cars in, but that was a mistake; it was the last one. Now I had him cornered. The last roof was closer, and I risked a jump. I made it, but just barely, and I caught my foot and landed in a sprawl on the roof. This gave Kyle a chance to hurl a handful of those darts that his goon had shot at me. I rolled out of the way, just barely missing them. But Kyle had made it to the door leading down into the building. I chased after him, but he managed to slip out of my sight.

I reached the ground floor, and ducked into the shadows, scanning the room quickly. It was empty, save for numerous scraps of metal from the wrecked cars that had been stored there before being shipped off. A few shafts of light came in through the windows.

I was scanning the room with my eyes when suddenly I was hurled into the middle of the room. The rubber dragon stepped out of the shadows, his fist raised as he approached. I tried to get to my feet to draw a weapon, but Kyle quickly made another gesture. An orange rod came spinning out of nowhere and cracked me in the head. I clapped my hands to my head, and the rod suddenly pivoted, and spun in a different direction, plowing me in the stomach. I dropped to my knees, just as the rod cracked me once again across the shoulders, knocking me to the floor with what felt like a blow from a sledge hammer.

The rod disappeared and Kyle approached closer, a look of anger and revenge mingling in his eyes. “You stupid fed plant, you really thought you could take on ME?!” The dragon twinged, and looked at his still-frozen side. He snapped his fingers and the rubber thawed back out.

“Good thing that didn’t hit anything vital. So, you think this was worth it for a counterfeiting rap?!” Corsell sneered as I tried to get back on my feet. He snapped his fingers and suddenly I was flung against a support I-beam. I let out a howl of pain as my already battered skull crashed against the metal pole. It was cut off pretty soon by an orange sphere the size of a cinder block coming and smashing into my solar plexus, knocking the wind out of me. I slumped down on one knee, gasping for breath.

“To catch a counterfeiter that forces other people to risk their lives to fatten his wallet,” I wheezed, “yes it is.” Kyle smirked, his eyes flashing once more. The orange rod appeared again, cracking me under the jaw viciously. I heard a crack and felt something in my mouth start to bleed. I let out another exclamation of pain through clenched teeth.

“Don’t tell me you actually think those people are more important than me! They were just the means to an end. Look at me, I’m higher on the food chain! Those saps didn’t know what living is! THIS,” he gestured at himself, “is living! Too bad you’re not gonna be around to get a chance to find out.” The dragon took several steps back. He snapped his fingers and quickly about a hundred pieces of metal debris floated up in front of him. Kyle started sucking in breath. My eyes went wide; he was gonna explode himself, sending the floating shrapnel flying and skewer me with it! I gritted my teeth and went for my liquid nitro gun. But Kyle had already sucked in a HUGE amount of breath, and he’d grown at least 100 feet high. His gut was huge, almost blocking his head from view. His arms were held wide, puffing up, and his legs were stretching the material of his pants. My guns’ spray would be too small; it couldn’t freeze enough fast enough to stop him. He reached 150 ft. Suddenly, something in my head clicked. I reached under the barrel of my gun and unsnapped the liquid nitrogen canister. I tossed it into the air, in front of the rubber dragons’ face. He looked at it in confusion, and didn’t see me draw my revolver. I waited till the can reached the top of it’s height. I raised my gun in the standard shooter’s stance, holding my breath and drawing a bead.

I pulled the trigger.

The nitrogen can exploded as the slugs hit it. Kyle's eyes went wide and he tried to raise his arms to shield himself, but it didn't help. The vicious cold spray covered him in a matter of seconds. I pulled my coat over my head to protect me from the freezing gas as it covered everything. Finally, the echoing of the bang stopped, and I looked up. Corsell was a giant frozen statue, teetering back and forth. Then he fell backward, shattering into countless fragments of frozen rubber.

I stood up slowly, groaning from the pain. The beating I'd taken had been pretty severe, but I'd pull through. Suddenly, one of the large doors front doors opened. A dozen police officers swarmed in, followed by Darning and Gogol. "Fang, what in blazes happened?!"

I took a look around the scene. "Kyle.....needed to chill out."

The eagle looked around at the mess. "But won't he just reform again?"

"No. I froze him with liquid nitrogen. The freezing sucked energy out of his body at a molecular level. That broke the bonds his body's molecules used to reform him. He's dead for sure, even his brain was shattered. When this thaws, it'll be a huge pile of rubber dust." I flinched when I spoke. "Rrrgh, is there a medic here?" One of the cops, an otter, came up and looked me over. "I used to be a paramedic. Oooh, look's like you've got a fractured skull, jaw, and some serious bruising on the shoulders. I'd check into a hospital soon. I'll call an ambulance." I nodded as he left, talking into his portable radio.

"Well Mr. Fang, looks like we can close this file," Darning grinned. I returned a deadly serious stare.

"Killing someone, even a slime bag like Kyle, isn't easy. I wouldn't joke about this if I were you." I mumbled through my teeth. Darning flinched around the eyes.

"Well, in any case, we've been very impressed with your work, Fang. And after conferring with my superiors, I'm willing to offer you a position as a U.S. Marshal." The panther gave what he must have thought to be a benevolent smile. I just glared.

"You toss me into a case like this, make me do all the work, and then expect me to accept a job doing this kind of garbage full time?!" I shook my head. "Forget it. I'm a private investigator. I'd consider it a demotion. Now here." I handed him the piece of paper I'd printed out of my computer. Darning gave me a surprised look and then took it.

"What the heck is this?"

"My bill."

"WHAT?!"

“Well you said you had a JOB for me. That means you’re gonna pay me. And since finding Corsell and then catching him were two different jobs, that’s two different cases. Oh,” here I grinned, despite the aching jaw, “And I took the liberty of billing you my flat fee.”

“Two thousand dollars?!” The panther once again exchanged glances with the eagle. Gogol sighed, shrugged, and said “Just pay the Doberman, sir.” Darning glared at me and pulled out a check book. “And how am I supposed to explain this expense to my superiors?”

I shrugged. “Bury it in red tape. That’s what you bureaucrats do best, right?”