

A LITTLE MORE THAN A THREE HOUR TOUR

It was another one of those lazy days. I'd spent most of the last hour staring at my ceiling fan, watching it spin around and imitating its rotations in my office chair. So it was with little surprise that when my phone rang, it shocked me so much I fell out of my chair and nearly killed myself. Grumbling and rubbing the back of my head, I picked up the cell phone chirping at me from my desk.

"Fang,"

"Teeth,"

"Excuse me?"

A feminine giggle came over the other end. "Well I figured you were playing word association." I chuckled and took my seat, after setting back upright. "Janet, sweetie, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Ohhh, I'd say you owe a pleasure back." I was just about to say the absolute worst thing a guy can say when his girlfriend is being coy (which is: "huh?"), when it hit me like a bolt of lightning, and at that moment I'd wished it had been a jolt from the heavens: I'd forgotten that day was the anniversary of the day we first met!

"Well, I'll have to see if I can come up with something extra special to surprise you with." I said in my best attempt of a seductive tone. Over the radio waves, I could tell Janet wasn't buying it. "Okay then," she said, but in a tone that suggested she was calling my bluff, "why don't you call me when you're ready to surprise me with it?"

"Sounds good to me, mein frauline," I said the usual assortment of sweet nothings every boyfriend does when he talks to his girlfriend and then hung up, my face dropping as soon as I did. I got up and walked to my wash closet, staring hard at myself in the mirror.

"Well genius," I muttered at myself, "you got yourself into this, so do something."

"Hey," my reflection said back, "I wasn't the one who forgot." Of course, that meant that I myself said it as well. Yes, I was talking to myself in the mirror. Hey, some people ensure their conversations are intelligent their way, I ensure it MY way. Just as I was really starting to dig my latest habit of lunacy, there was a knock at my door. I quickly quieted down, hoping nobody heard me having an argument with myself. I composed myself, and answered the door. A very shaggy beaver was there, dressed to kill, though not in the same manner I did, with a weapon.

"Mr. Michael Fang, I presume?" The beaver arched an eyebrow at me, speaking in a clipped British accent. He was dressed in a navy blue sport jacket, what looked like about a

thousand dollars in jewelry, rings and such, and actually had a monocle clenched in his right eyelid.

“That would be me. Please, come in.” I let my prospective client in, never turning my back to him out of habit. I returned to sitting behind my desk, putting on my best business attitude. The beaver, from what I could tell from his body language, was one of those people who’s used to being obeyed and not contradicted. My nature, as it is, isn’t to let anybody walk on me, so I tried to give the impression of being his equal, not his lackey.

“So, what brings you to my office, Mr...?” I said, choosing my words as carefully as possible.

“Holethorn. Ignatius Holethorn. I’m afraid I’ve got a rather pressing matter, Mr. Fang. I run a large jewelry company and we’ve had several of our stores lose vast quantities of their best items. The actual jewelry pieces, their total value adding up to approximately \$200,000.00, were replaced with cheap imitations.” I put the tips of my fingers together and gave the badger a calculating look. “Pace?”

“Indeed. To be blunt, Mr. Fang, we’ve exhausted all other options, so now we’ve decided to offer you a contract. If you can find the men who took the stock, we shall pay you 1% of their value. Find the jewels themselves, and we shall pay you 10%.” I cocked my head to one side, not letting on that their lowest offer was actually double my usual flat fee. The battle of the wills wasn’t over yet, anyway. I had the beaver wait while I typed up and printed out a physical copy of the offer he had just made and slid it across my desk to him, offering him a pen. He ignored it and signed the contract with his own, a sterling silver number.

“I’ll get started on it immediately, Mr. Holethorn.” I said, examining the document and putting it in my filing cabinet.

“Very good. And now if you’ll excuse me, Mr. Fang, I’m due for my flight to England.” Nodding, I saw the beaver to the door as he checked the time in his clamshell watch.

“Pompous ass,” I smirked after he’d gone, “but at least he pays well.” I plopped down in my chair again, this time careful not to fall over backwards again. If the thieves had been able to set up as careful and professional an operation as they had, then they wouldn’t try to pawn their stuff in town. At least, not to anybody legally. I picked up the phone and punched in a number. Twirling around in my seat, I got the chord from the phone wrapped around me a couple times before hearing the other end pick up.

“Yeah? I’m on my way out the door, so whoever it is, make it quick.”

“Fast as possible,” I said. The feminine voice on the other side made a sound of indignation.

“FANG?! What’n blue blazes do YOU want NOW?!”

“Denise, really, you need to work on your people skills, it’s gonna get you in trouble.”

The German Shepherd girl on the other end made a grunting sound that didn't do her teenage tomboy appearance justice. "Just spit it out."

"Okay, fine. I need to know if you've heard about a large amount of jewelry being fenced."

"No," she said quickly. TOO quickly.

"Think hard, Denise. Have you, or maybe it's not common knowledge yet." Silence on the other end, with the sound of somebody huffing and making sounds like they were pacing a bit. I just hoped that Denise was one of those people who, like me, paced when they were trying to think.

"No, I can't. Sorry, bucko." I raised an eyebrow a bit. That was the most civil thing that girl had said to me in probably....heck, since I caught her picking pockets with magic.

"Okay, thanks." I said, Denise's derisive "Uh-huh," Audible over the phone as I hung it up. My next three phone calls were to a number of local pawn shops, which turned up nothing. Then I tried calling jewelers and precious gem and metal dealers, also getting zilch. I slammed the phone down as the other end hung up first with the last of my calls.

"This's gonna be harder than I thought," I grunted. Trying to think, I reached into the drawer of my desk and pulled out a set of darts. Casting my gaze at the far wall, I started lobbing them lazily at the target I hung up next to the calendar.

"Ohhhhkay.....," I muttered, "let's assume they aren't doing this locally....." THOK! A dart hit the board, well off the bull's eye. ".....and Holeyhorn would have sent out the serial numbers by now, so they couldn't do it anywhere nearby.....THOK!.....So where.....," suddenly, I laid eyes on my calendar as I tossed a dart and got it inside the smaller ring in the middle. This month's picture was of a peaceful beach setting with a setting sun, palm trees, clouds on fire in the sky as a boat drifted slowly across the water.

"Bull's eye," I grinned, tossing my last dart and failing to live up to what I'd just said. They would try to move the stuff over seas! But how? I leaned back in my chair again. They wouldn't try to hide the stuff in a cargo ship; if they hid it, something as small as jewelry might get lost, and cargo ships don't carry passengers.....do they? I grabbed the phone and made some calls. Of the five shipping companies in the city, none of them were scheduled to carry passengers any time that month.

"Right," I said, hanging up, "that out of the way, how else...." A private boat? Please, if they could afford a private boat that could get 'em across the ocean, they wouldn't need to steal a couple hundred grand in jewelry.

"So what's left?" I muttered. I looked at the picture again. Then the obvious hit me like a brick. Grinning; I picked up my phone and dialed my girlfriend; it looked like I would be able to get two birds with one stone.

"Hey Janet! How do you feel about going on a cruise?"

A crowd that could fill an astro-dome was standing between myself, Janet, and the cruise ship. I'd explained the situation to my sweetie, I'd never been very good at keeping stuff from her, and she said that she didn't mind me doing a little work so long as she got plenty of time with me later, heh heh heh. On the other side of the mass of living bodies was a body that outsized them all (and it was up against some stiff competition with certain people), *The Imperial Ball* was a huge ship, almost the size of an oil tanker! I'd taken my time and researched the cruise lines that left sometime soon after Talking with Janet, and I found that *The Imperial Ball* was the only one that was going out this month that was planning on docking at another country before returning home.

"Okay honey," I said, shouldering two bags, their straps crossed over my shoulders in an X, digging the buttons of my green short sleeved shirt into my chest, "Just follow me." My leather sandals thumped over the wooden dock as I hopped over tails, dodged around bags, and did any number of sidesteps to avoid gettin' smacked.

"I feel like I'm in an ant colony," I heard Janet mutter, her own single suitcase clenched in her fist. Her sky blue tank top was attracting a number of prying eyes I didn't want to imagine, doubtlessly, and just once, I heard her make a sound of indignation, but before I could turn around and throttle somebody, I heard a hard smack, saw Janet blow something off the back of her hand, and knew that they'd found out my girl's not just another pretty face.

After fifteen minutes of pushing, sidestepping, and other contortionist maneuvers, we finally arrived at the gangplank. Fortunately, it was in fact a moveable escalator, so we could set down our bags and rest our tired shoulders.

"So," Janet said, leaning against the side of the moving staircase. She tilted her head back and looked up, sun flashing off her sunglasses, "how long is this cruise?"

"It's...erm....," I dug my hands into my cut off jean shorts and pulled out a brochure, "Two weeks." I grinned and put my arm around her bare midriff and hugged her close. "Nothing but you, me, and a whole lot of water." Janet grinned in her sultry way and turned her head slightly as we reached the top of the escalator.

"And about 15,000 people thinking the exact same thing." She giggled. I turned and felt my own sunglasses sliding down my nose slightly. EVERYBODY seemed to be gathered on the deck for some reason! There were a bunch of multi colored dragons, enough raccoons to make me think I was at a burglar's convention, more dogs than at the Westminster Canine Beauty Pageant, plus an assortment of cats, jackals, panthers, elephants, and some people I didn't think even HAD a discernible kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, or species!

Janet pulled down her shades with one finger. "Erm, Mike, I hate to say this, but how exactly are you going to find one jewel thief in all these people?" I grinned at her. "Well, first off, don't assume there's just one. It could've been an entire gang of 'em, each one working a different store."

"Ahh, that's true." She said, nodding and moving through the crowd.

“But, in this case, you’re right, it is just one.”

“Huh?”

I grinned and grabbed our bags, this time taking Janet’s as well as my own.

“Well, after I called you, I realized I’d forgotten to do something; ask for copies of the security surveillance from the stores. See, when I talked to the managers, they said they had just put the pieces out for display in the past week, so I looked at all the surveillance in the stores dating back a week, and I found that this one particular guy was at each of the stores.”

“Well, that’s a strong suggestion, Mike,” Janet said, “But it could be he was just browsing.”

“True,” I grinned, “But he was at each store once, and in the order of how they got robbed. Then, tack on the fact that he came in to each one within an hour of closing time...,”

“And I’d say you found your smuggler,” my girlfriend said, sounding genuinely impressed. I grinned and shrugged. “Well, I won’t know for sure until I can find him on the passenger roster. You have to have to give a copy of your drivers license to be allowed on a cruise, so I’ll just compare it with this print out of the best camera shot I got of the guy...,” I reached into my back pocket and pulled out a picture of what appeared to be an athletic looking horse.

“Hello, testing, one, two.....,” A loudspeaker crackled to life on the balcony overlooking the deck. Janet and I looked at each other, then glanced up at the railing to the next level up.

“...IS THIS THING ON?!?!?!?” The sound blast made both of us lay back our ears. Suddenly, a figure jumped up onto the railing. I lowered my shades again as Janet giggled.

“Oh my Holy God,” I muttered, “Who or WHAT is that?!” It looked, to my eyes, like a fox. But in shape and orange-red body fur only. Whoever the crazy son of a gun was, he had tied his HAIR somehow, which was a pretty crazy looking mane that came down to what looked like the small of his back. He was wearing what looked to be the most obnoxious and loud Hawaiian shirt imaginable, insane striped shorts, and while a normal fox has brown fur on his hands and feet, this one’s left hand was dyed green, his right yellow, his left foot purple and his right blue.

“He’s enough to make everybody on this entire ship color blind,” I chuckled. Janet gave me one of her looks.

“Mike, be nice...,”

“What?!”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the fox shouted into a microphone, walking back and forth across the railing with impressive agility, “I’m Quint Covex and I want to welcome each and every one of you to *The Imperial Ball* on her first voyage!!!” A round of applause went up as the fox started riling up the crowd.

“Yes, ladies and gents, this baby’s a one of a kind vessel! She’s my kinda woman, I’ll tell ya: smooth and sexy!” A groan came up from the crowd, and the fox rubbed the back of his neck.

“Okay, okay, enough with the jokes. Seriously, folks, this cruise is gonna be one you’ll never forget! It’s the first of it’s kind! This, people, will be the first inflation cruise!” A number of people cheered at this, while Janet and I looked at each other, then down at the brochure again. They’d failed to mention a rather crucial piece of information in the advertisement.

“A little license on Madison Avenue’s part,” Janet said. Still, we shrugged; it wasn’t as if we weren’t both into it, though a few stiffes did immediately start back down the gangplank (a bit difficult, since it was going in the opposite direction they wanted to be taken in.)

“That’s right folks,” The fox said, a tooth filled grin on his face as he hung by the railing with one hand; it was fast becoming apparent he was an acrobat. “All through this voyage, we will be have available for you ALL the different types of inflation devices! We’ll have air tanks, magic potions, water pumps, fattening chemicals, helium tanks, and much MUCH MORE!!! In addition, we’ll be having a number of inflation events, as well, with prizes and trophies for the winners!”

“And now, ladies and gents, I’d like you to give a warm welcome to our illustrious captain, Sam Cartell!” A particularly loud cheer went up as a somewhat short griffin stepped out onto the deck, dressed in a steam pressed navy uniform. I’d heard of Capt. Cartell; just twenty when he joined the navy, he was a decorated war veteran; having commanded a team of navy SEALS in the Vietnam war and commanded a destroyer in the Gulf War. The usual glorifying rumors had been spread about him; like him capturing an enemy outpost with only a pistol. I, however, was more impressed with his honesty and blatant refusal to kowtow to the military bureaucrats and cover up a military blunder made by one of his fellow captains.

“Capt. Cartell has graciously agreed to pilot *The Imperial Ball* on her maiden voyage,” Covex continued. “So, welcome again to our cruise! If you need help finding your cabin, one of the crew members will be more than happy to show you the way!” With that, the multi-colored fox did a backwards somersault and landed on the deck, getting another sizeable amount of applause. Janet and I grabbed our bags, and started hunting for our room.

The first three days of the cruise were nice and quiet. I figured I wouldn’t start looking immediately for the smuggler; I figured right after getting on would be when he would be at his most tense, so I’d wait until he relaxed and dropped his guard. Janet and I spent some days relaxing, swimming in the pool, losing a little money in the casino, and winning back enough to break slightly more than even. But it was in the casino that we got the first surprise on the cruise.

I was at the poker table, trying desperately to hold my own against none other than Quint Covex himself. Seems he was just as adept with the cards as he was with acrobatics, and this was inflation poker. I, however, remained the only one at the table not inflated, outside of the still-multi colored fox himself. We’d managed to get into something of a stalemate, while Janet had accumulated a nice pile of cash playing regular craps, when “HEY!” A sweet smell filled the air, something like honey. I turned and looked at a large female hippo in a mini skirt

and short sleeved shirt getting sprayed with something by a hidden nozzle in a slot machine. Suddenly, a small device poked out of the machine after the spray and poked her in the belly button. Quickly, her already sizeable paunch started swelling even bigger! Her belly pushed up her top and her skirt down, her arms thickening past their already chubby size, her legs swelling out to push her skirt up, but fortunately it slid down between them, so as to keep her dignity. However, there wasn't much of that left to be had as she bloated bigger and rounder, swelling over the tops of the slot machines until finally her head came up so her ears just barely brushed the ceiling.

I raised an eyebrow, and threw a glance at Covex. The fox was looking rather shocked and incredulous. Suddenly, I had a feeling not everything was going as planned on this little jaunt out on the big blue sea. The entire casino had gone quiet. The hippo's shout had indicated that the little bloat she went for wasn't expected, and so it was rather shocking to find out that forced inflations were unexpectedly part of the trip.

"Covex, was this your idea?" A voice behind us caused both myself and the fox, not to mention everybody else at the table, to turn. It was Capt. Cartell.

"Uh, no sir!" Said the fox. "I've regulated the forced inflations to some of the competitions only! There weren't any practical joke devices brought on board that I know of!" The captain hummed. Meanwhile, the hippo deflating much the same way I do, with a rather flustered look on her face. She looked ready to say something rather nasty when the captain stepped forward.

"My apologies, ma'me," the gryphon said. "I don't know how this happened, but I would like to make it up to you by giving you a 75% discount on all of your onboard purchases." The hippo looked thoughtful, then nodded, thanking Cartell, and sweeping up her winnings, which she'd dropped, and exiting the casino. Just then, a skunk in a tailored suit slunk up to the gryphon's shoulder and started whispering in it, but not so softly I couldn't hear it.

"Captain, if you do that too much, you'll cost the cruise line more than it'll make! And on it's maiden voyage....."

"Oh keep your shirt on!" Cartell said with a piercing glare, "It's only one customer! Besides, would you rather have a lawsuit?" The skunk considered, then shrugged and walked off. Cartell raised his eyebrows and turned, striding back to Covex. The feathers on his wings were rather ruffled; a gryphon's way of showing either interest or irritation, and somehow I didn't get the impression the captain was interested in fashion tips from the fox.

"Quint, that will be the last time something like that happens, do I make myself clear?" The fox nodded, looking like some of the wind had been sucked out of his sails. Without another word, the captain returned presumably to the bridge. The rest of the casino began to return to normal, though the people at my table had long since deflated and left. The fox slumped at the table. I was starting to feel sorry for the poor lug when suddenly I had a flash of inspiration. Leaning back against the table with my elbows, I looked at the fox to the side.

"Whoa, that's rough," I said. Covex gave a slight laugh. "Yeah, that's puttin' it mildly. I'm responsible for all on board activities and supplies. If this happens again, I'm cooked. I

don't wanna go back to that.....," The fox shuddered, ".....kid's activity center." He then looked to the side at me with a grin as I gave him a look of disbelief. "Hey, don't get me wrong, I like kids. But at that place, I didn't watch kids, they were little monsters with their horns surgically removed!" I chuckled, glancing around, wondering where my girl had gone off to.

"Yeah, I can imagine. Oh, don't think we've been introduced. Fang, Mike Fang." I extended a hand. He shook it and after a few minutes of conversation, I got right to the point.

"You know, I think I can help you with your problem, but I'll need your help as well."

"Really? Yeah, I could use the help of a detective right about now. What did you have in mind?" I explained about the case I was currently working on, after swearing him to secrecy.

"Now, I need to get a look at the passenger list, and I figure that if you get that for me, then I'll also look into this forced inflation prank while I'm at it. I'd need to look at the roster to do that, anyway." The fox looked a little nervous, raising one eyebrow and rubbing one foot on the back of his leg.

"Well, okay.....but don't tell anybody, 'kay?" I chuckled as I watched Janet come up from the craps table with a full bucket of chips.

"Oh, my lips are sealed."

Covex said the papers would take some time to get a hold of, so Janet and I cashed in our chips, I had managed to increase my holding by a half while she tripled her investment, and moved down to the lounge, a single deck below us. The place was decked out like a single's bar, a place I was slightly acquainted with. Art dekho furniture was spread out all over the place, with a wide dance floor in front, a number of couple out pulling insane dance moves I'd probably get a hernia trying to do. Janet and I ordered drinks, and found seats at the glowing neon bar. And that's where this cruise started to take a turn for the worse.

Janet and I were waiting for our drinks when a large purple dragon with two short frills coming out of his head at angles came and took a seat beside Janet. Dressed in designer clothing, he was probably nine feet easy and like most dragons that size or larger, looked like he did push ups with the entire gym sitting on his back. This guy had muscle where I didn't think it was physically possible to bulk up.

And he was eyeing MY GIRL.

It wasn't easy to notice at first, but as my gaze wandered, I noticed that his gaze was falling right on Janet's reflection in the mirror behind the bar. I frowned and engaged her in conversation about her latest project at the museum so that she'd turn her back to him and he'd stop staring at her cleavage. Nothing doing. The dragon lumbered around to the other side and leaned against the bar, making it creak, and was now plainly staring at Janet out of the corner of his eye. Irritated, I stepped between him and her. The dragon gave a rather obviously fake yawn, spreading his wings JUST enough to nudge me and knock off my sunglasses. Reflexively, I bent over to pick them up, and suddenly, looked over my shoulder. That guy was leaning against the bar, flexing a bicep big as a cantaloupe and wagging his eyebrow at Janet!

Oh, did I mention that since I was on a cruise, I didn't have my gun with me? It was a good thing, too, otherwise they would've had to have tossed me in the brig.

As it was, I turned and gave the dragon an irritated look.

"Excuse me, but you're crowding us." Now any normal oogler would have just blushed a little and walked off to drool from a safer vantage point. Not THIS guy.

"Hey, it's a free country," he snorted. That took me from irritated to seriously peeved.

"In case you didn't notice, we're on the OCEAN," I said. The dragon just snorted again. "Look Einstein, I'll stand wherever I want to."

"Hey ^!\$\$ ant, I don't care WHERE you stand, but quit eye-humping my girlfriend!" I clenched a fist, but Janet put a hand on my arm.

"C'mon, Mike, he's not worth it."

You ever have one of those moments when you know something, but you just can't help but do what you know isn't a good idea? At that moment, the dragon chose to deliberately spill his beer on Janet's front in a pathetic mock accident. I was knocked into a crouch, but that sound, that LITTLE sound of indignity, you know, the one only ladies are capable of making, coming from Janet was all it took. As the dragon laughed, I grabbed the stool by the legs, and in one smooth movement, stood up and swung it 'round, and clocked him in the head with it. I was seething. I'd never believed in physical intimidation before, and had taken on guys half again my size with little fear. And the fact that this lech was looking to try and get fresh with my girl did wonders to shrink what little qualms I had taking on a guy with a palm the size of my face.

The stool to the head sent the dragon staggering a step or two, and I took the opportunity, despite protests from both Janet and the bartender, to slam a kick in his washboard abs. He grunted, but the initial surprise was over. The dragon drew back a hand and made an attempt to backhand me. I dodged that by leaning back against the bar, but didn't miss the kick to my own midriff. THAT hit like a sledge hammer, sending me out into the middle of the now-deserted dance floor. I clutched at my side as the dragon stomped his way down into the slightly recessed dance arena, melodramatically sending a shadow across what was about to become the pit fights.

"After I'm through, scrawny, maybe your girl we'll prefer a REAL man!"

THAT just goaded me further. I gestured at the dragon with both hands.

"Bring it or go jump over the rail!" The dragon charged at me and swung like a street brawler. I duck-and-rolled to the side; and used the opportunity provided by the dragon having to bend down to swing at me to run up, use his upper leg like a step, grab his head, and slam his face into my knee. He snarled in pain, but that was the last time I had the advantage. He grabbed me by the shirt, and tossed me across the arena to smash against the railing side. The crowd started cheering a bit, and I think I heard a few bets getting placed.

It went on for about two minutes. I had my moments, like when I grabbed an empty wine bottle and tossed it at his head and connected hard enough to break the bottle, but not so many as he did, like when he back handed me at just the right angle to get me to hit the CEILING. Suffice it to say, when ship security finally broke things up, the dragon had a black eye, a broken nose, and several sprains. I, on the other hand, had two black eyes, a broken nose, fractured jaw, and a busted rib. Fortunately, the ship's doctor had the latest scientific AND magical wound treatments, so we both got patched up, PHYSICALLY. But the dragon still came out on top 'cause I had a rather wounded pride. First time I'd failed to defend my girlfriend's honor enough to my satisfaction.

"Mike, you did as much as you could!" Janet said, putting a bag of ice to my black eye back in our room. A few of the cures I'd refused, having an aversion to magic, so I still had a few minor wounds.

"More than I would've liked, to tell you the truth. But sweetie, come on, the guy had at LEAST three feet on you." I grimaced at Janet. Damn, I'm a lucky dog.

"Yeah, I know. But still, I can't let the fact that somebody's bigger than me stop me. I've gotta find a weakness for dealing with those overgrown....," Janet sighed, sitting down next to me.

"And I'm sure you will. But you can't expect to always win. Nobody's perfect." I nodded.

"Yeah, I just didn't want one of my losses to be with something so important at stake." Janet rolled her eyes, smirking at me in that seductive way. "Now you're just sucking up to me." I grinned at her. "Oh, you know me too well, sweetie." My girl raised an eyebrow and stroked me under my newly-repaired chin.

"Hey, don't stop; it works."

It took me a few days to recover from my little "dispute". Fortunately, I had my own private nurse, heh heh heh. By next week, however, it was time to get down to business. I was just stepping out of the shower and Janet was in the ship's spa when I had a knock at our door. It was Quint, with the roster.

"Hope it works out for you." The fox said, before slipping off again. I chuckled as I sat down at the cabin's dining table and flipped through the files. Finally, I found it; by luck, he was the only horse on board that had the same coloration as the one in the surveillance cameras. But as I looked over the file my eyes popped out of my skull. This guy was a CLYDESDALE. Norman Steelmane was registered as an even 10 ft in height.

"I guess it's true what they say," I muttered, "Things look bigger in real life than they do on tv."

The monster horse sat alone at a booth in the ship's restaurant. If it wasn't for the cathedral ceiling, he wouldn't have been able to fit on board. I myself was watching the guy from a booth behind his. He ordered a Caesar salad that was delivered in what looked like a bath

tub. I was both tailing the perp and trying to get a good idea as to his temperament and mentality; they can sometimes have an effect on a person's decisions. Norman seemed rather calm for the most part, but every now and again he'd throw his glance up and swivel his ears around. He was in control, but on edge. My suspicion was practically confirmed. Then I noticed that while he was wearing an inexpensive Hawaiian shirt, on his wrist he had appeared to be a Rolex.

"Must be a souvenir from his haul," I thought. I'd been by his room a while ago, but unfortunately I couldn't get in just yet; there was too much activity during the day.

"Nein, danke. I need to keep hungry for the contest." A familiar German accent suddenly got my attention. I slowly turned around in my seat, and spotted a familiar friendly face. About two seats back was Kazaran, a muscular, orange-red foxtaur wearing men's earrings and blond hair coming down in a ponytail down his back partway.

"Son of a gun," I chuckled, walking over and slapping him on the back. "Kaz, how've you been?!" The 'taur was surprised, but smiled as soon as he recognized me.

"Hey, Mike! This is a pleasant surprise! I've been doing well; finally got some time for a vacation. But vat are you doing here?"

"Oh, I'm on vacation myself....and....working." I tapped the side of my nose and winked. Kaz, ever the sharp one, nodded and glanced around a bit.

"Say, where have you been," I asked, "I thought you were staying with Alden, but the last time I was over at his place, I didn't see you."

"Well," Kaz said, rubbing at a spot on his foreleg, "Alden's place was very nice, but a little cramped for me. So I moved in with Drake; his castle gives me a bit more leg room." I nodded. We chatted for a while more when a loudspeaker cracked to life.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is now time for the *Imperial Ball's* first big inflation contest! Would the contestant's please approach the stage set in the middle of the ship's restaurant." Kaz flicked his ears at the announcement.

"Sorry, but that's my cue. I'll see after the contest! Aufwiedusehen!" The foxtaur quickly moved through the crowd gathered in front of an elevated platform at a brisk trot. I wandered over myself, mixing in with the motley assembly of many different societies. Up on the stage with him was an overweight black bear, a stocky zebra, a slinky looking female snow leopard that gave Kaz a coy wink, and finally up stomped an eight foot blue dragon with oddly shaped horns that resembled a rams that curled down around his ears. A large dining table was set up in front of them, and an attendant set each one of them up with a big around their necks. It was just a matter of time before Quint came sliding out in front of the table amid quite a bit of applause, dressed up in a chef's uniform.

"Okay folks, this contest is an old favorite; the eating contest! But in this one, we'll be doing one thing SLIGHTLY different; we'll be measuring the size the person grows rather than how much they eat! We'll have numerous different dishes to be offered. And our first one for the night.....spaghetti with meatballs!" A huge pot of angel hair pasta, tomato sauce, and balls

of ground beef was brought out. I looked at Kaz, who was grinning and running his tongue rapidly around his mouth.

“Forty bucks on the dragon.” I heard beside me. It looked like the age old desire to wager on contests was still alive and well. A wolf standing next to me was taking bets from a number of people around him. A Gila monster had just slapped two twenty dollar bills into his hand. I grinned as I walked up, digging in my own pocket.

“A hundred and fifty on the foxtaur,” I said, fishing out the bucks. The wolf looked at me, then up at Kaz, then back at me like I was nuts.

“You’re pulling my tail, right man?” I shook my head, grinning. “Man, I hate to take a fool’s money. Don’t you know taurs are built all wrong for this? They got two stomachs! He’ll have to eat twice as much to start fattening up!” I suppressed a laugh. This guy had NO CLUE who he was talking about.

“You’ve never seen Kazaran eat, have you? He’s a Teutonic munch machine.” The wolf shrugged. “Hey, it’s your loss. Heck, just to be nice, AND show you how dumb you are,” Here the wolf gave me a condescending grin, “I’ll lay three to one odds!” It was all I could do to keep from saying that this fool and his money would soon be parted. Covex raised his hand as a large serving of spaghetti was put on each contestants plate.

“Aaaaand.....GO!” BAM! The contestants started to dig in when there was a small explosion of sauce from Kaz’s plate. A large bulge was finding it’s way down his throat; the foxtaur had bolted his food so fast, it was like a frog snatching a fly out of the air! Everybody was dumbstruck for a moment as he swallowed. GLURP! A sizeable paunch developed in Kaz’s upper stomach, which he patted with one hand while grinning and picking his teeth with the claw on the pinky finger of his other hand. The wolf I’d placed my bet with dropped his jaw to the floor.

Snickering, I turned and saw that the dragon up there wasn’t about to be undone. He slurped up his serving as well, though he did it slow enough that we could actually see it happening. Kaz just looked at him with a rather amused look on his face. The dragon developed a paunch himself and gave Kaz a devious grin. Two more servings were plopped onto the contestant’s plates, the others having given up the second they saw the foxtaur make his pasta disappear into thin air. This time, Kaz opted for a slightly more dramatic approach. He twirled some spaghetti around his fork, put it in his mouth, and.....SSSSSSSSLLLLLLLLLLUUUUUUURRRRP! It took him a full minute to clean his plate, and he did it with one breath! The dragon raised his eyebrows, slammed his fist on the edge of his plate, and catapulted his serving into his mouth.

“Lets stop beating around the bush, ja?” The foxtaur chuckled.

“Fine by me,” The dragon grinned. He motioned for the server and whispered in her ear. She looked rather shocked, but shrugged and divided the rest of the pot between the two. This time, Kazaran kept twirling pasta around his fork, the thick sauce and meatballs sticking to the angel hair noodles. The dragon had just buried his snout in the mound of food and was snorking it down with a rather undignified slurping. Finally, Kaz got every last drop of sauce, meatball,

and length of pasta on his fork. Opening his jaw WIDE, the foxtaur stuffed the three foot wide ball of Italian food in his mouth. He took two squishy bites and GULP! A big lump traveled down his throat and BLORP! His paunch swelled out enough to rest on the table. The dragon finished his own plate just at that time, and his stomach was rather bloated itself.

The crowd was stunned by what the contest had turned into. Quint, standing off to the side, looked like he was about to burst out laughing. “Well, I see the appetizer hasn’t deterred either of these boys. But now for the first course....” The kitchen doors opened. They must have taken out an entire herd of cattle. My own mouth was watering as five plates stacked with grilled porterhouse steaks five feet high were brought out. The dragon bared his teeth hungrily, cracking his knuckles. Kaz, meanwhile, looked just as calm and collected as before, scratching his gut. “Ah, so that’s where the beef is,” he chuckled.

The plates were set in front of the two and the dragon, after taking a big snort over the aromatic steaks and saying “Ahhhh, fresh meat!” wasted no time in tearing into his first stack in a rather unappetizing manner. It was a wonder to me how Kaz managed to keep his own appetite, sitting next to what must have been the most unrefined and ill mannered dinner guest in history. The foxtaur calmly arranged his steaks in a neat manner on a nearby platter that he borrowed from a passing waiter.

“Excuse me, do you have a bucket of steak sauce?” The waiter blinked, left, and was back in a moment with what looked like a watering trough of A1.

“Danke,” Kaz said, smiling. He picked up the bucket, and oozed out the sauce over the steaks. Rubbing his hands, the foxtaur then immediately picked up the tray and dumped the steaks down his throat. He finished the first stack, licking the platter clean. The dragon, meanwhile, looked up from his stack in amazement, then down at the 1/4 of a plate he had left to go! Kazaran just kept smiling, and repeated the process with the next four plates. His upper belly kept bloating out more and more with each gulp, and from my vantage point I could see his lower gut also starting to swell down towards the floor, now only about an inch above it.

The dragon, growing both irritated and fatter, demolished his last stack and, in an act of ill mannered bravado, bit his plate in half in front of Kaz’s face. The foxtaur blinked, the half hooded his eyes and grinned at the dragon.

“Oh, you haven’t seen anything yet.” The dragon blinked and bared his teeth at Kazaran, who simply laced his fingers together and plopped his hands down on his belly, which was now roughly the size of a car’s engine compartment. The dragon’s had finally reached the platform, which was starting to creak slightly under the combined weight of the two contestants. The crowd was now starting to applaud, and Covex was whispering to somebody in the kitchen.

“Okay guys, you’ve done well.....so far. But now it’s time for the second course! And this baby’s a doozy.....” Kaz licked carefully at his nose and dabbed his chin with a napkin to get a few small spots of sauce. The dragon just slobbered and sucked on his claws. A GIANT bucket of garlic mashed potatoes was brought out to each of them, not to mention a vat of gravy the size of a beer keg for each. The dragon, looking at this next double header, started to look a little ill. His stomach now pushed against the table and was rather taunted. Kazaran’s was taunted as well, but his expression was like a runner who had just gotten into his groove. The platform

creaked a bit louder as the food was plopped down in front of each contestant. The crowd clapped even louder as the dragon took a breath and buried his head in the potatoes, pouring the gravy in at the same time.

Kaz seemed to be a little thoughtful with this next one. Shrugging, the foxtaur dipped in his hand, spinning the pot around, and gathered up a big fluffy glob of potatoes, which he tossed into his mouth and swallowed. But this time, the dragon actually beat him to the last few globs at the bottom!

“YEAH! Beat that, four legs!” The dragon thrust his fists into the air, potatoes and gravy sticking to the scales around his mouth....and forehead. Just then, Quint looked into the dragon’s gravy tub.

“Uhhh, sir, you didn’t finish. There’s about 2/3 of a tank left here.” The dragon’s eyes popped out. His stomach had bloated and swelled out to the size of a Volkswagen. Kaz just kept grinning, licking his fingers.

“What’s the matter? Getting full?” He turned to his own untouched tub of gravy. The foxtaur grinned, and grabbed the 20 gallon bucket with his forelegs. He handed it up to his arms, upended the vat, and started chug-a-luging the gravy to the cheering of the crowd! GLUG GLUG GLUG, both his bellies jerkily swelled and stretched. He was pushed up off the stage by the size of his lower belly, his feet now dangling a good six inches off the platform, which was now groaning in protest. His belly squished out between his legs on both sides, and his upper belly was a good ten feet wide by ten feet deep.

“C’mon Kaz it’s all yours!” I shouted over the crowd “The dragon’s gonna hurl!” The foxtaur gave me a grin and a little salute.

“Okay guys, last course!” Covex twirled the mic, his tail swishing excitedly. “We’ve saved the best for last.....” The doors came open one more time and two giant chocolate cakes were brought out. Each one had to be at least twice as tall as I was. Kaz’s tails began rapidly swishing back and forth, while the dragon’s stomach gurgled, groaned, and his eyes crossed. The huge dessert was wheeled in front of him. He looked up, his tongue hung out. And he said the two words that every contest eater avoids trying to say:

“I’m full.”

The crowd erupted into applause, myself included, and Kazaran put his hands together and shook them in the air, grinning from ear to ear. The dragon licked the last of the potatoes from his claws and extended a hand to Kaz, who smiled and shook it as his worthy yet hopelessly outmatched competitor left the stage.

“Hang on!” Quint stepped up onto the stage and the crowd quieted down a bit. “I hate to spoil the party, but in order to win, this bad boy has to take at least one bite of his cake.”

I grinned. I saw the gleam in Kazaran’s eyes. “One bite?” the foxtaur said, wiggling his toes and chuckling. “Oh, I’ll do you one better.....,” Kaz grabbed the entire top layer of his baked dessert, crammed it into his mouth, and swallowed. The crowd started clapping, but he wasn’t done there! The crazy foxtaur buried his hands into the next layer and swallowed that,

too! His bellies were swollen and bloated so much now they reached both ends of the raised platform, which was starting to bend in certain areas. Kaz demolished his own cake.....and then started on his opponents! The audience was hysterical, both laughing and applauding as the German gastronomic wonder refused to cease stuffing his face, his bellies rounding out even fatter and fatter. Finally, it looked like there wasn't anything left to eat on the stage.

But like I said to the wolf, who'd unconsciously handed me my \$450 in a daze, he'd never seen Kaz eat. The big, VERY big, ham sat up on his hind legs, and hefted up the table. With one hand, he cracked it in half; the fat he'd packed on hadn't reduced his muscle in the slightest. The crowd watched in amazement as Kazaran crunched down the TABLE! An oddly shaped bulge formed in his throat as he swallowed, and a final GLORP hit both his guts as the bloated out a final two feet all around. Kaz raised his arms and made double peace signs, grinning from ear to ear. Finally....CCCCRRRRACK! The platform gave out under his tremendous bulk. The foxtaur collapsed backward, landing on his back underneath the huge jiggily blobs that were his bellies, hitting hard enough to send a shock wave through the entire deck of the ship. Just about everybody was thrown to the deck. Kaz's eyes crossed, then he let out a loud burp, probably due to the number of people coming up to give him congratulatory slaps on the back. I fought my way through the crowd and grinned at Kaz, leaning against his mammoth girth.

"Congratulations! You just won the ship's eating contest! What're you gonna do next?!"

Kaz grinned at me inanely. "Can I *HIC!* have seconds?"

I was about to make one of my trademark smart ass remarks when one of the ship's elevator's came to a stop on the restaurant. The doors opened, and revealed.....a wall of scales. "What the," I said, uttering the most generic response to a surprise. Slowly, the mass of scales began to squeeze it's way out of the freight elevator. It was stuck in the lift so tightly, it was making a jiggily slurping sound, much like the contents of a tightly packed can giving up their vacuum seal on the bottom as they're shaken out. SCHLOOOORP! The reptilian mass rolled out to reveal it was a massively bloated alligator. Dressed in rather tacky vacation clothes, the 'gator was bloated to almost as big as Kaz. Almost.

"Uh oh. Somehow, I get a bad feeling about this.....," Kaz looked at me slightly perplexed, so I clued him in on the mystery inflation in the casino.

"So you think that....," he pointed a pudgy thumb at the alligator. I didn't have to answer. The gator did it for me.

"What kind of f@#\$ed up cruise is this?! I get in the elevator and BAM! Something sprays me with some s#!t that smells like honey, then I get a hose shoved in my mouth from a hole in the wall and they do some kind of reverse liposuction on me!" I tossed my gaze towards Covex. His face suggested that under his fur, he was going rather pale.

"Sir, my apologies....," a voice said. It was Cap. Cartel again. The griffon was, as before, looking very professional and not the least bit amused.

"It seems we've got an unintended miscreant on board. Please, let me extend you a line of credit good for anywhere on the ship." The gator scratched his big-as-a-jacuzzi gut.

“Mmmm, okay. Heh, I was gonna ‘flate on this trip anyway. Just didn’t like ‘em surprisin’ me with it.” The captain nodded as the passenger managed to move his bulk with a modicum of control. The griffin nailed Covex with a piercing gaze that would’ve outdone mine.

“Quint, you better do something about this....FAST.” The fox gulped and nodded as Cartel, who I was starting to believe wouldn’t be out of place calling his first mate Mr. Christian, strode off. The multi-colored fox, the moment his boss was out of sight, gave me a pleading look. I nodded; fun time was over for now.

Time to get to work.

“Well, for one thing, it wasn’t reverse liposuction.”

“Huh?”

“This isn’t saturated body fat.”

“Oh, well THAT *really* makes me feel better.” I gave Covex a look over my shoulder. I was in a crouch examining the inflation device; a panel put in on top of the control panel in the elevator. Wires hooked up only to the restaurant floor button, indicating that the prankster didn’t want anybody who wasn’t hungry to get bloated with what apparently was.....

“Custard,” I said, tracing a finger around a not-so-perfectly sealed tube that led to the extending piston that bloated the ‘gator. The tanks themselves must have been tied to the underside of the elevator. “That aligator must have a rather unrefined palate, not to recognize the flavor. In any case,” I saw the look Quint was giving me; stop giving me useless bits of trivia and tell me something useful.

“This was obviously done by a crew member.”

“Say WHAT?!”

“Well, think about it. This would take time to set up. I mean, cutting away part of the button panel, tying the tanks to the bottom of the lift, and so forth. Only somebody who could have gotten onto the ship before she sailed for an extended period of time could have done this.”

“Ahhhh”

“I’ll take some fingerprints, but I doubt we’ll find anything. If this guy’s this clever, he probably wouldn’t do this without gloves.” Ten minutes, a spray of Ninihydrin, a chemical that makes fingerprints glow in black light, and a black light flash light proved my assumption.

“Oooohkay, it’s time to examine this perp’s trademark: that honey scented chemical he keeps spraying people with.” I followed the hose down from the spray nozzle concealed in the muzak speaker to a spray can.

“Hello.....what’s this stuff.....” The can was just taped in place, so using a handkerchief, I reached down and pulled it loose.

“Hmmm.....Spray Stretch. Where have I heard that.....” Then it clicked; I’d seen it in the dry cleaner’s the last time I got my trench coat pressed. They’d used it on some people’s clothing to counteract shrinkage and make alterations without having to add on material. Rumor also had it that the chemical was non toxic and even digestible, so some individuals who didn’t have some kind of freak natural elasticity like myself or were partially rubber like a few friends of mine used it to enable themselves to inflate.

“Well, this kinda narrows down the.....what the?!” As I examined the can, my flash light, which I’d set on the floor, shined the black light up on the can.

The chemical residue on the tip was glowing in the black light. I looked at Covex; the fox was rather perplexed. I grinned; sometimes there are moments of pleasure reserved only for P.I’s.

“Do they use Spray Stretch in the ship’s laundry at all?”

“No, why?” I grinned wider.

“Then we just follow the trail.”

The gizmo beeped and flashed. Quickly and quietly, I moved up and down the ship’s corridor. Considering there had only been two people nailed by the prank player’s gadget’s SO far, there was a good chance that he (or she) himself would be carrying traces of it and therefore leaving a light trail. It was all based on something called “Lochard’s Principle”, a guideline that Crime Scene Unit cops swore by frequently by: whenever anything touches anything else, it leaves behind something. No matter how tiny, evidence it always left when physical contact is made.

Now, the day after the restaurant inflation, I had to assume the prankster would get some of his unique spray stuff on himself and leave a trail. But most likely it would be a faint one. That’s what the R.S. was for. My Residue Sensor was designed by a friend of mine, Striker “Specs” Saberwolf. Because I couldn’t drag around a gas spectrometer and other scientific devices used to discern what the hell something’s made of, I went to the wolf to see if he could make me something a little more compact. I still vividly remembered watching him sit at his work bench, his namesake goggles pulled down over his eyes as he chuckled and swished his long, fuzzy gray tail, welding the last plate on the gadget. For all the world it looked like a fancy magnifying glass. The wolf had wondered why I was screwing up my face when he showed it to me. I was trying not to laugh out loud at the sheer poetic irony of me, a P.I, using a souped up version of a tool my trade is known by.

“Okay,” Specs had said, “here’s the deal; you take a sample of what you want to scan for and put it on the glass slide in the handle here. Then you put it back in and turn ‘er on. The device examines the sample, determines what spectrums of light it reflects, then sets this here translucent screen to shine that light down wherever you point it. Where it doesn’t get absorbed, it glows on the screen.”

So now I was going door to door in the crew's quarters, examining doorframes and knobs. Some of the crew, when they spotted me, gave me odd looks. After the second time I came up empty on the excuse category, I took a moment and came up with one. From then on I told them I was an onboard ship's exterminator, looking into a report of roaches, and I was in casual clothes so the guests wouldn't see the Orkin symbol on my back and complain when they got back to land.

For an hour I went over the crew's quarters, and came up with ZIP. There just couldn't be anybody else! The prank player would want to watch his handywork; that was the whole point of a prank! I gritted my teeth at the end of a hallway just outside the kitchen boy's room. I leaned against the wall and tapped the R.S. on my nose.

"Wait a sec.....," I muttered, "What members of the crew don't bed down here.....the officers!" Suddenly it all made sense. The officers had full access to every part of the ship; they were the perfect candidates for this kind of thing! Trying to conceal my enthusiasm was somewhat difficult as I rode the elevator back up to the passenger floors. It was particularly bright outside as I took the scenic (and also less monitored) path to the officer's berths a couple of floors above. The ocean was in full motion, and just looking at the vast expanse of water gave me a moments pause to consider just how small we are in comparison to so much, and yet God still values us beyond anything else He's made.

The little waxed poetic moment over, I got back to work. As I passed by the pool, however, I grinned as I saw Kazaran again, somehow having managed to return to his normal athletic physique. This time he was sunning himself, stretched out on a towel while that same snow leopardess was lounging on a beach chair. It looked like the foxtaur was chatting her up....and getting someplace. I grinned a bit, wondering just how much they'd rock the boat if he....well, that was HIS business.

I cracked open the door to the upper rooms. The first mate passed by without noticing the door open and my eye peering in. As soon as I was sure it was empty, I slipped into the hall. The carpeting muffled my footsteps as I pulled out Spec's gadget again and started sweeping each doorway. Nothing on the first mate's door.....neither the lieutenants. I was starting to get discouraged.

"Knowing my luck it's probably some janitor who sleeps in the hold, or a stowaway." I muttered. "Heck, for all I know it's.....what in the name of.....?" In my mild histrionics, I played R.S. over a particular door. To my great surprise, it lit up a hand print on the doorknob, not to mention several smudges on the frame! Slowly, my gaze traveled up to the name plate on the door.

"NO....." I thought, "It CAN'T be HIM.....can it?"

"Are you sure Mike? He hardly seems the type." Janet sat across from me in the ship's restaurant, stirring some lemon into her iced tea with a straw.

"I'm tellin' ya, honey, it's got to be him! The trail led right to his cabin door."

“I dunno. I just don’t see him pulling pranks like this.”

“You’re right,” I said around a mouthful of barbecued chicken. “Which kinda makes me wonder....eh, it can wait.” I sat back in my seat, relaxing slightly as a live piano player was almost hypnotizing the patrons that evening with a lilting classical number. The lights were dimmed slightly, allowing an atmosphere of casual elegance to sweep through the room. Janet had dressed accordingly for the evening in a one piece backless dress in her favorite color. I’d gone with something slightly less dressy; a simple pair of slacks, white dress shirt and a blue sport coat. Just then, the ship’s loudspeaker blared again.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, this is your cruise director, Quint Covex. We would like to announce that our next event for the cruise, is about to commence on deck 4. All those interested in participating in the in the inflato-tag game, please take the elevator to deck for. All those wishing to watch the event, please go to deck 5.

“Hmmm,” I said, wiping my chin. “I don’t think I can pass this one up.” I grinned and dropped a tip on the table, having noticed that Janet had also finished her dinner.

“Well, I think I’ll sit this one out. While you were off chasing that prank player, I had and got turned into a ball at an on board game of inflation bingo.”

“Okay sweetie. But, you will come and watch, right?”

“*giggle* As if I could resist.” I winked at my girl and followed the back of a tiger about my height to the elevator.

The fourth floor seemed pretty nondescript when the elevator hit it, but as soon as I and about 5 or so other “contestants” opened the only door at the end of the hall, it was clear that we had been expected, so to say. The floor was a massive maze. Ceiling-less hallways with more than the normal amount of bends in it made a rat’s nest through several additional types of cover; low walls shaped like damaged brick, fake vehicles, and even several catwalks that were reachable by small elevators. On one of these stood Quint. The multi-colored fox was decked out like Rambo; red band around his head, cameo fatigues and combat boots. But on his chest he wore an odd vest that had a tube running up underneath it from a tank on his front.

“Welcome, people, to Inflato-Tag! The rules are simple: this is just like laser tag, only when you get shot, you’re inflated instead of just out. So, if any of you for any reason don’t want to participate in this game, better leave now.” No one budged for the door.

“Good, good” Well, you all get one laser pistol and one vest,” An attendant was going up to each person and gearing them up. When she got to me, she pulled a vest over my head, poked a hose between the buttons of my shirt and under my undershirt, plugging it into my navel. I grinned a bit as I took the pistol; once again, the people on board had NO idea who they were dealing with.

Then again, neither did I. “Oh by the way folks,” Quint grinned, bringing up a pistol of his own. “I’ll be joining you for this one. If you nail me, you’ll get a very special reward.

But....don't get your hopes up." The fox laughed and did a back flip off the catwalk and into the maze. I could hear the snickers and chuckles of the other people as they tried to figure on just how many times they were gonna nail the fox. I wasn't among them; overconfidence was a big enemy in my biz.

Each of us was lead off to a different section of the maze. I myself was taken to a dead end that required several turns and twists to get to. "When you hear the buzzer, that's the start," the attendant said. "Good luck!" I grinned and tapped the light gun to the side of my head in recognition. As soon as the woman was out of site, I pulled off my jacket and hung it on the corner of a wall; I didn't want to risk busting the seams.

A voice on a louspeaker overhead started clearing it's throat. "Okay, contestants ready? Aaaaand....GO!" Suddenly, there was a loud crack and a bang. Several members of the overhead audience screamed. I imagine a number of the contestants froze or panicked. Myself not excluded. The sound and light effects were undoubtedly designed to disorient people. I like to think I recovered faster than anybody else, but who knows, I might have been the last. As I jogged up to the first corner and snuck a look around it, I couldn't help but wonder whether Covex had any forewarning, or if that little surprise was set up by some member of the crew.

I was coming around the corner when a frog suddenly hopped out in front of me. I took aim and fired, but his muscular legs made him a very hard target. It took everything I had to avoid his own shots, which were surprisingly accurate, or judging from the light beams that were coming out of his gun. Apparently they'd calibrated the lazars so their beams were visible. I hit the deck and rolled to one side, finally nailing him by shooting the spot where he was about to land. At first it looked like he was just making a particularly large croak. But by the time the frog had bloated out to the size of a minivan, it was apparent that if it was a croak, it would crack every window in the ship. Attendants came out and carefully rolled away the frog, who was giving me a frustrated look. All I could do was chuckle and go look for a new hiding place, the crowd cheering and a few voices started saying "Okay ladies and gents, place your bets!"

My footsteps were echoing down an alarmingly long hallway. If I didn't get to another end, I'd be a sitting duck. Suddenly, a lazer beam came over my head! I threw myself forward and rolled over on my back, firing blindly at an opponent who was shooting from cover. As I hit my back, I saw a pipe at ground level! I quickly crawled into it, my breath deliberately shallow so it wouldn't echo in the enclosed space. Suddenly, I heard a hissing sound and ventured a peek out. A leopard was rolling down the hallway, bloated huge enough to put space between his spots. I chuckled and whistled the Indiana Jones theme as attendants came to assist him out of the arena.

I emerged from the end of the pipe to hear footsteps. Quickly, I ducked back in. A horse (no, not the one I was trying to investigate) Came clapping down the hall, firing over his shoulder at a vixen right behind him. I waited until she was past the pipe entrance then crawled out. Firing behind me as she concentrated her attention on the horse. By my fourth shot, she dropped her pistol and put her hands on her swelling stomach. Around several corners I went, then stopped in a dead end for breath. But no sooner had I wiped the sweat from my brow did I hear CLOP CLOP CLOP! The horse was coming back! Furitively, I put my hands and feet against the walls and pushed up, getting out of sight directly. There were shadows and bright spots all over the maze, and I pushed myself up into a very dark upper area. My arms immediately started to get tired as I strained to keep myself aloft. The horse came around the

corner, looked around at eye level, and saw nothing. Shaking his head like he was questioning his own sanity, he retraced his steps just in time for me to lose my strength and drop heavily to the ground. When he didn't come running back around the corner, I guessed he hadn't heard, and started to stalk my latest prey. But as I rounded the corner, I saw the horse blown up like a weather balloon and getting bigger.

"Uh oh." I muttered. Behind the horse, as I saw as the attendants rolled him away, was Quint. The sucker had TWO pistols! I barely had time to launch myself into the cab of a fake van as he blasted away. I dove out the other side, the fox RIGHT on my tail. Damn, he was fast! I weaved and fired behind me. One lazer blast actually hit me, but it was in the shin, so it didn't count. He had to nail me in either the back or the chest.

I got to a turn in the hall that lead to one of the elevators. The fox right behind me, I dove in and slapped the button. The express lift shot me up to the catwalk. Just as the doors opened, the elevator at the other side opened and out stepped a bulldog, gun blazing! I threw myself to one side and fired. Three shots went off before I finally zinged him and he went rolling off the catwalk, a fuzzy ball with paws and a face only his mother could love but I could find very amusing. The "DING" Of the lift behind me told me that Quint was coming up! I didn't have time to sprint the catwalk, so I took the super express route; I jumped and landed on the canopy back of a fake army truck. My feet gave out underneath me as I hit the uneven surface and I went sliding off the truck and landed on my side. Rubbing a sore spot, I took off at a half crouch.

I was ducked down behind a low wall, waiting for the three contestants on the other side to finish their shoot out. Just then, the audience let out a collective shout and I heard three simultaneous hisses. Looking over the edge, I saw a ballooned elephant, armadillo, and collie being rolled away! Quint was standing in the middle of the wide area where they had been having their little firefight, twirling his lazars.

"Okay, it's down to me and one more contestant!" The crowd cheered louder; they knew exactly who he was talking about.

"C'mon, Mr. Fang. Come out, come out, wherever you are....." The fox chuckled and started walking parallel to my hiding spot.

"Ookay," I breathed to myself, "It's just a game, let's keep calm, keep our priorities straight.....okay. Now, let's go wack this sucker." I slinked off to go set a trap. Getting to an uneven wall, I pulled off my shirt and hung it where it would flap from the air from a ventilation duct. Then, I got into the back of a mock van and waited. Soon enough, Covex came creeping around the corner. He spotted my shirt, chuckled, and then turned AND PULLED THE VAN DOORS OPEN! He saw the trap! I launched myself through the side door of the van, getting nicked on the shoe again. If my undershirt had sleeves, the sweat stains would have been unpleasant to look at; not to mention smell. I took off down the hallway I'd thrown myself into....and came to a wide open area.

"Ah crap," I muttered. There were no other ways in or out. It was the center of the labyrinth. Only instead of a minotaur coming down the hall, there was a crazy multi-colored fox. Quint burst into the arena with pistols going off. I duck and rolled to one side, came up in a crouch and fired. JUST missed him. We started circling the room, ducking and rolling and weaving, the crowd going nuts. Finally, I decided to give it all or nothing. I threw myself

suddenly forward into the center of the arena, that much closer to Quint and making him a bigger target. He saw what I was about to do and mimicked me. We both came to land about ten feet apart. Slowly, we both stood. We knew one of us just HAD to have hit the other. Turning around, Covex gave me a grin.

“Okay, I think that’s it. Time to see who the final winner is.” A tense second passed.....and I started feeling the gas enter my gut. My undershirt stretched as my belly bulged and swelled out, hitting the floor. I kicked off my boots as my feet bloated up as well, every inch of me getting rounder. Some of the crowd laughed as I became the size of an armored truck. Quint chuckled and twirled his light guns.

“Ohh yeah, NOBODY beats the master! Still, for being the only one to make me break a sweat in a good year, we’ll give you a 2nd place prize! Got anything in mind?” I gave the fox a grin. While I’d had to sit down because my swelling had displaced my center of gravity, I’d still had a grip on my lazer.

“Ohhh, I’m not one of those guys who wants a bunch of material stuff, ya know? I value things like God n’ memories and that kinda stuff more, in that order. So how about a little.....PAYBACK!” The fox jumped as I whipped around my lazer. Even inflated, and from 50ft away, I was still a decent shot. The fox suddenly started getting tight in the vest. One by one, his buttons popped off as his gut rounded out like a basket ball.....then a beach ball.....then a wrecking ball. He spread his arms as those too began to get bigger and fatter. His cheeks puffed out, and his feet got bloated enough to knock him over on his back. The crowd went into hysterics as the fox swelled up to the point where the top of his gut was at my eye level. Quint was now a multi-colored balloon with bloated rainbow paws.

“Heh,” I said “Yippie-ki-yay.”

The horse sat down on the weight lifting bench and started pumping iron. The ship came equipped with a gym with all the modern accessories; nautilus machines, recumbent bikes, the works. I myself was doing a little work on a treadmill, but keeping my eyes on the jewel thief. I was a little unnerved to see him bench pressing 750 and not even breaking a sweat. Still, now was the perfect opportunity to search his room. I stepped off the treadmill and walked into the locker room. There were a few people inside, so I had to wait a moment for the room to get emptied. Quickly, I walked over to the locker I saw the Clydesdale put his things in. Chuckling a bit, I took out my multi-tool, unfolded the screwdriver blade, and took the number off his locker and switched it with a different one.

“That should confuse him a bit,” I grimaced, changing back into my normal clothes and jogging out of the locker room. The stars seemed to stretch on forever that evening as I took a shortcut to my suspect’s quarters over the deck. I slipped between the outdoor tables of the ship’s café and did a quick little spin on my heel that took me around the corner of the bulkhead and into the hallway door on the opposite side. The carpet served to cushion my footsteps as I approached cabin 452. I tried the knob. Surprise, surprise. The security designer was no slacker when he made this vessel. It took me a full three minutes to pick the lock and to get the door open.

The horse's room was surprisingly neat. I couldn't use anything for evidence I found in there by an unlawful entry, so I had other plans. My first job was to find the flipping jewelry. The suitcases were a no go for obvious reasons, the first of them being it was too predictable. I slowly circled the room, trying to figure on the least obvious hiding spots.

"Let's see.....not under the bed.....or in any of the closets or dressers.....hmmm, what about the bathroom....," I took a step into the luxury W.C. Everything in it was sparkling white porcelain and soft brown marble. But I wasn't there just to critique the decor. My eyes flew around the room, and above my heartbeats I kept imagining hearing the Clydesdale's hoof falls coming down the hallway.

Then my eyes hit the john. A slow grin spread across my face as I took the lid off the tank and found three black airtight containers, each about the size of a tupperware container. Just to make sure, I unzipped one of them and peeked inside. Jackpot. Diamonds, rubies, pearls, and precious metals glinted up at me.

"Now, step two." I rummaged in my pocket. Quickly, I found the tracking bug I'd brought along and dropped it in the velvet interior of the box. I zipped it shut again and put it back in the tank, trying to refrain from panicking as I put everything back the way it had been and slipped out the door. I didn't breathe easy 'till I was 'round the corner.

"Man, that's one part of my job I could do without," I muttered to myself. As I slowly walked back to my room, I passed by a hallway that was perpendicular to the one I was in and the one on the opposite side. At the other end, I saw Kazaran unlocking the door to his room. The snow leopardess that he'd taken a liking to was riding on his back, curling his ponytail around her finger. The foxtaur fumbled the key for a minute and finally got the door open, trotted in, and pushed it shut with his hind leg.

"Ho boy," I chuckled, "no sleep for this entire floor, I'll bet."

I'd decided to take it easy after risking my neck only a few minutes ago. Back in our room, I'd enticed Janet to a private dinner and a pay per view movie. Of course, I was hoping it would lead to a little something more, heh heh heh. But just as we were finishing up our room service, every light in the room went out! The cabin was pitch black. For a minute, neither of us spoke. Then Janet, her expression palpable through the dark, said in a coy tone.

"Mike, did you arrange for this?"

"Well, no," I admitted, then snuck around to her side of the table and gave her a nuzzle. "But we can take advantage of it nonetheless." She giggled in that way that makes me melt. I was just about to start putting the moves on her when there was a low beep from my suitcase. I tried to ignore it. But then it beeped again.

"Mike, what's that?"

“No, no, no! Not NOW....,” I felt my way through the dark, wishing I was feeling something else, until I got to my suitcase and with a lot of fumbling, unzipped it. The small handheld remote tracking device had been activated. About the size of one of those calculators used to do graphs and higher mathematics, it was set to come on as soon as it detected the tracking bug I’d put in the jewelry case move more than ten feet in any direction. And boy, was it moving! In the brief course of a few seconds, it had traveled about a hundred yards.

I went to the door and threw it open; the emergency lighting in the hallway pushed back the dark in our room. The blackout and the jewel thief taking action couldn’t be a coincidence. Either he’d figured out what I’d done or he was making his move to hock his spoils. I had been praying for the latter, but not when I was about to get some lovin’!

“Honey,” I said, but didn’t have to finish. Janet read the expression on my face.

“I know, duty calls. Just be careful.” I threw her a kiss and ran out the door.

“Buster, you are SO going to regret lousing up my evening.”

I sat on the stair rail and slid down it, keeping my eye on the tracker screen, which I held in one hand. The horse was moving down towards the stern of the ship, but for the life of me I couldn’t see why. I was now in the engineering compartment, the constant thrum of the engines and the pumping of the pistons drowning out just about every other noise.

“Alden would be right at home here,” I muttered to myself. The beep on the tracker screen was getting closer as I approached a doorway. “BOAT LAUNCH” was emblazoned over the port hole. Slowly, I grabbed the wheel that undid the heavy duty lock and twisted it. I gave a shove and stepped back, avoiding the prospect of getting ambushed. The Clydesdale, dressed in a tight black wet suit, had his back to me. Standing at the end of an open cargo bay, he held his hand against the gentle moving of the ship as waves slapped against the hull and sent a spray up all over the deck.

I stepped out. In the distance through the opening I could see a moving light, then two, then a third. What looked like a fish trawling boat was coming towards the ship like it was going to dock with it. The horse waved at it, then picked up a belt that had the three bags tied to it. He pulled out a grappling hook and a length of chain (probably the only thing that could support a weight like his) and tossed the hook out towards the boat, then hooked the chain to a eye bolt in the side of the ship. It looked like he was about to bail; that figured.

“Not so fast,” I said over the beating of the waves. The horse turned around.

“Sorry, but my ride’s here. Gotta run.” The Clydesdale chuckled and grabbed the chain, making to slide down it.

“Oh, I think we can give you a lift,” I looked around, and spotted the emergency door release. Slapping the large red button, a hydraulic door slid down into place, closing off the boat launch opening and crunching down on the chain, holding it fast! No way the horse was getting out that way, nor his pick up crew pulling out.

The horse's eyes went wide, then he gritted his teeth at me. "Now, I'm ticked." He rumbled. Balling up his fists, he started stomping towards me. I narrowed my eyes; now what was I going to do? I'd already gotten my butt kicked once on this trip by a guy twice my size. How was I going to handle THIS one? As the Clydesdale got closer, my mind raced back to the little scuffle I'd had in the bar. I recalled the dragon's powerful blows, almost impervious muscle, his....suddenly, I knew JUST what to do. Grinning, I gestured at the jewel thief.

"C'mon, try your best shot."

The horse's hooves thundered across the metal decking and he swung a powerful fist at me. I rolled to one side, coming up on my feet and kicking him in the chest. He winced, but it was like he was annoyed rather than hurt. His backhand came faster than I expected, and knocked me across the room. I wiped at the cut on my lip and stood back up, waiting for the horse to try it again. Once more he charged, and I dodged a kick this time. I saw him grab a railing along the wall with both hands, and anticipated his next move. Dropping flat on the floor, I watched him pull a powerful two legged mule kick that would have knocked my head off.

"C'mon, is that all you've got?!" I jeered at him. Back up on my feet, I started jumping backwards as he came at me with skilled punches that bespoke some time boxing. But I was keeping out of reach; I wasn't much more than a bumbler when it came to boxing. A few times he almost cornered me, and I had to chance diving between his legs, taking the opportunity to give him a kick in the back.

Finally, what I'd been expecting happened. His next thrown punch carried him with the momentum a few steps. He grunted and steamed, panting for breath. I chuckled, slightly tired myself, but this guy was gasping for air.

"You're a big guy, but you've got no wind," I grimace, and duck and rolled behind him. He tried to back hand me, but by the time he released his swing, I had thrown myself on his back, wrapped my arm around his neck, and applied a sleeper hold. His neck was thick, but he was so lacking steam that he didn't have the strength to try and tighten his throat muscles. He grabbed at me like an itch he couldn't scratch, then slowly his eyes rolled into the back of his head and he passed out. That was the good news. The bad news was he fell over backwards doing it!

"ACK!" WAM! I found myself pinned under probably 400 pounds of sinew. Exhausted myself, I just laid there until several members of the crew came running. I looked up at them.

"Well don't just stand there, get a forklift!"

"Yes sir," I said. "The jewelry is in the ship's safe, and will be returned to you as soon as we get to shore.

"Excellent," Mr. Holethorn said over the phone. I was on the ship's bridge, having gotten permission from the captain to use the ship-to-shore phone to get a call through to relay my employer the good news.

“Well Mr. Fang, I am most impressed. What, pray tell, happened with the thief?”

“The Coast Guard got called in as soon as possible and hauled off both him and the three guys on the boat that was going to pick him up.”

“Well all has been set right. Your payment will be awaiting you when you return, sir.”

“Thank you, Mr. Holethorn, I’ll see you in about a week.” I hung up.

“Well this certainly has been exciting,” Quint said. I turned around; the fox had been listening in. I grimaced and hung up the mic back on it’s hook. “Yeah, that is has. And now, I think it’s about time I helped with your little mystery.” Grinning, I dusted off my sport coat, licking unconsciously at the stitches in my lip, and strolled back down the hall. For catching the thief, both myself and Janet had been invited to have dinner at the captain’s table. I chuckled; it would be the perfect place to unveil my last discovery.

My girlfriend and I stepped into the restaurant, receiving a small applause from a few of the tables. I blushed a bit and nodded my thanks. I also got a slap on the back from Kaz.

“Nice vork! I hear that horse was a real tough customer.”

“Yeah, but I’ve handled ‘em just as bad. Though, sometimes not with as much success.”

The foxtaur nodded. “So what’s going to happen now?”

“Well fortunately since he attacked me first, the authorities had all the rights to frisk him and found the jewelry. When they matched the serial numbers to the reported stolen goods, they’ll have enough to send him up for grand theft. Not to mention assaulting my backside. But before then...,” I chuckled, “I’ve got one more surprise for everybody.” The foxtaur looked slightly perplexed. I winked at him and walked up the steps to the captain’s table, where Janet had already taken her seat.

“Ah, Mr. Fang,” Capt. Cartell said, gesturing to a seat at the end of the table. “I’m sure you’ll be glad to know that the authorities found that the four criminals you delivered to them were found to have ties to organized crime, and are willing to turn state’s evidence.” I nodded, “Very good. If this leads to stopping something worse than simple jewel smuggling, I can condone putting them in the witness protection program. It’s not like they killed anybody. Though, captain,” I grinned a bit. “I think you should also know I found out something interesting about the person playing pranks around the ship.”

“Oh really?”

I nodded. “Yeah, you see,” here stood up. “While I was using the phone, I called the local Navy office,” The captain suddenly got a rather nervous look in his eyes. “Seems that you are still scheduled for active duty. In fact, I spoke with you directly.” Quickly, I darted a hand into my coat and pulled out a gold luger replica. A few people screamed as I fired two shots at the captain, and a couple of darts stuck to his forehead.

“MIKE!” Janet shouted, standing up like somebody had stuck her with an ice pick.

“It’s a dart gun! It’s okay!” I said, and everybody calmed down. Though, a few people started laughing as the captain started to get blown up! The gun had been made by my friend Specs as well, and the darts were coated with a chemical that soaked into the skin on contact and gassed their recipient up. I reached over, grabbed the gryphon’s beak.....and pulled it off! There was a collective gasp that made me feel like I was in one of those detective movies where you just found out who done it. Beneath the fake beak and feathers was.....a furry muzzle, a beard, and a mane!

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce you to Lionardo Furry, known to his friends as Captain Furry! Though the “captain” part comes from his love of those sci fi star ship shows. Seems he knows the first mate, and they worked it out with the REAL captain to play this little joke on all of you.” I grimaced as the lion swelled in his spiffy uniform, busting the buttons and blowing up fatter and rounder. His already portly self grew till his head was up near the chandelier. He lost his mobility as his legs and arms swelled out. His footpaws got puffier as well, expanding until he couldn’t stand on them and rolled over slightly, leaning up against the wall as his stomach swelled up over his head and brushed the ceiling, his belly button growing big enough to put a fist in.

The crowd laughed as Capt. Furry chuckled and tried to shrug his bloated shoulders, a sheepish grin on his face now that he was caught. I twirled the luger and hung it back up under my jacket. I picked up my wine glass and took a sip, chuckling.

“Well, this trip is certainly a repeat. I wonder what the ratings are gonna be when we get back to shore.”

FANG HASN’T BEEN DULLED YET.

HE WILL RETURN.

