

GONE IN 61 SECONDS

I didn't have anywhere else to go. The enemy had me pinned down, with no way out. I checked my ammo. Only five bullets left. I grit my teeth, listening to the echoing footsteps coming up the stairwell. Hollering at the top of my lungs, I dove around the corner, cranking off at the enemy soldiers storming up the stairwell. I made it to the other side of the doorway, just as a grenade came flying through the air and detonated!

"Ah man!" I groaned, slapping a hand to my face. Splaying my fingers, I looked between them at the screen of my computer. "Allies Win!" was displayed on it. I had been playing "Return to Castle Wolfenstein Internet Multiplayer", and had just got my butt handed to me. "Nice try," Read a message on the screen in the chat box, "but close doesn't count." I grinned as I typed a reply. "Oh yeah? YOU try surviving with only five bullets, your teammates all dead, and your health down to ten points."

"Yeah yeah," came the response. "Say, when are you going to get a better handle?" I shook my head. IG-88 may not have been the most imaginative moniker, but it sufficed.

I decided I'd had enough, said my goodbyes, and logged off. It was a good thing I did, 'cause the phone rang not two minutes later. "Fang.....Hey! How are you doing?!.....good, good.your kidding! That's great.....Mmmhmmm.....Uh huh.....wonderful, I know he's really been trying all these years.....Me? Oh, I'm getting along. Just closed a big case recently.....Yes, I'm being careful(little white lie, sorta).....No, I'm not taking any big risks.... (really big lie).....*sigh* no, nobody's tried to kill me yet (okay, now I'm B.S.'ing like nobody's business)....."

I carried on the conversation for another twenty minutes before I noticed that the second line button on my phone was blinking. "Well, it's been great hearing from you, but I've got a call waiting.....Yep.....okay.....I'll see you at the Easter get-together.....Love you too.....bye Mom, bye Dad."

Nothing like a call from the folks to brighten a day.

I hit the line change button. "This'd better be good, making me hang up on my parents." I grumbled to myself before answering in my customary fashion. "Hey man, it's Manny." Manny was a labrador gun smith that made customized pieces.

"Manny! Is my order done already? Jeez, that was fast."

"Well, those two revolvers you gave me to work with turned out to have more than enough material in them. I even had some left over. Mind if I keep it? I'll shave off a hundred from my fee."

“Sure, I’ll be down in a bit to pick up my piece.” I grabbed my hat and coat, jogged toward my door, when the phone rang AGAIN! “Geez, I’m popular,” I chuckled, picking up again. “Fang,”

“‘ello, is thees Fang, ze private investigator?” A french feminine voice said over the phone.

“If it’s not, then I’ve got a real identity crisis.”

“Pardon?”

“It is. What can I do for you?”

“Well, eet ees a long story. Could I come down and talk wis you in person?”

I glanced at my watch. “Uh, I’m sorry miss, but I’m afraid I’m closing up shop for the day. Could I pencil you in for an early appointment for tomorrow? Say, ten tomorrow morning.”

“*Sigh* I suppose. It won’t hurt if thees waits anozer day or two.”

“Okay, sorry about this. I’ll see you tomorrow. Do you need my office address?”

“No, I have it from a business card I found on a bulletin board in a café. Good day.”

“A little short notice, but not a problem,” I thought to myself as I ran down to my car and took off. Manny’s shop, Straight Shooters, was only a few blocks away. The Lab sold all the usual firearm supplies: bullets, cleaning kits, clips, and so on. But his real talent was making guns. The good thing about Manny was he had an imagination and didn’t mind customizing anything in a strange or unusual way.

The string of bells hanging from the door jangled as I walked in. Manny came out of the back, carrying a box with him. I rubbed my hands together. “Well your specifications were sure clear enough,” the Lab said, putting the case down on the counter, “It took a bit to make sure the barrel was strong enough to take the shock, but it works like a dream. Now, this thing’ll take a bit of extra cleaning, cause of all the bullets it’s gonna fire.”

“No prob’,” I said, opening the case. Inside, my two magnum revolvers had been transformed into one. The handle was slightly larger, and there were two hammers. That was necessary, since my new gun had two cylinders. That’s right, TWO. The six inch barrel was made like a double barreled shotgun, only this sidearm would fire two .357 rounds at once. It gave me the accuracy and reliability of a revolver with the ammo capacity of an automatic. I picked it up. “Manny,” I chuckled pressing the cylinder open switch, causing both of them to come out, one on either side of the gun, “Some people make guns. YOU craft works of art.”

“Your too kind,” the Lab chuckled. “But I’ve gotta wonder, why do you need a gun like that?”

“Well,” I said, test aiming my new piece at an electric socket to get a feel for it, “the guys I’ve had to chase down recently have been getting tougher and tougher. I figured I needed an edge. Now, the problem with using two guns at once is it’s harder to aim them. But with this baby I don’t sacrifice any firepower and improve both my drawing speed and accuracy.”

“Well, you’ve definitely got it with that item,” Manny said. I pulled off my coat and strapped on the specially made shoulder holster. Loading my new piece, I stuffed the extra speed loaders into my pockets and pulled my coat back on. Just then, I glanced at my watch. “Oh jeez, I’m late! Thanks again Manny, see ya!” The gun smith waved as I ran back to my car.

Janet had asked me earlier that week to help her move a few things around in her house, so I dropped by there. I was about to knock when I saw my girlfriend through the glass front door, talking on the telephone. I decided to let myself in. Janet’s house was quite tastefully decorated, solid color paint jobs in each room, house plants in pots shaped like Grecian urns, paintings of landscapes, and so on.

“I’m telling you, he’s not gonna be a bad influence,” Janet said sternly into her phone. The sound of a voice came other the other end and she rolled her eyes.

“Well so what if he does own guns?! He keeps them locked up!” More jabbering from the second party.

“Look, you need this opportunity, and I’m vouching for him. What, you don’t think I can be trusted?! You think I don’t know him?!?” A few more words.

“Good. I’ll let him know,” Janet said, hanging up. Walking into the kitchen she huffed. “I swear, the things I have to do to convince Sylvia to let you babysit for her.”

“Yeah, well.....WHAT?!?!?!?” I said, my girlfriend’s words finally sinking in. “Janet,” I said, grinning a predatory grin. Janet looked up at the ceiling. “Sweetie,” I continued, “apple of my eye, whipped cream on my sundae, frosting on my cake,.....what did you just get me into?!”

“Well.....” Janet hummed, “Sylvia, this lady I work with, is having a meeting with the head curator at the museum. Her husband’s out of town on work, so.....I asked if you could babysit her five-year-old son for her. I know what your going to ask,” she said quickly, seeing me about to open my mouth, “But I can’t do it because I have to be at that meeting too. Please, honey?” I hate to admit it, but Janet’s duped me into doing things before. I particularly remember an incident involving a garden shed in need of repairs, a full box of tools, and a rickety stepladder.

“Not this time,” I thought to myself. “Sorry, honey, I’ve got a case I need to start tomorrow.”

“It’ll just be this evening, we’ll be by to pick Greg up at ten. PLEASE???” I crossed my arms and shook my head. A small smile spread across Janet’s face. She sat down on her living room couch very primly, legs together, hands on her knees, ears laid back, hair coming down over one shoulder. She tilted her head coyly and batted her eyelashes. “Please???”

I clamped my eyes shut, trying not to give in. “I won’t look I won’t look I won’t.....” I looked. I could feel my resolve slipping away like water in a fist. I bit my bottom lip, whimpering like I was a pup. Then it grew into an adult groan of strain. “Ohhhhhhhh.....*SIGH*....all right.” I hung my head in defeat. Janet stood up, gently took my muzzle in one hand, and kissed me on the nose, putting a dopey grin on my face.

That afternoon I was sitting in my apartment with my arms on my knees, head still hanging after changing out of my work clothes into a green T-shirt, brown shorts, and leather sandals. Jason was there, eyes half hooded, giving me a commiserating grin and shaking his head slowly.

“I’m weak,” I moaned.

“Your weak,” Jase agreed.

“I’ve got no willpower,” I muttered.

“You’ve got not willpower,” The blue dragon chimed in.

“I can’t refuse her,” I chuckled miserably.

“No you can’t,” Jason snickered.

“You’ve got pudding for brains,” I said.

“I’ve got.....HEY!!!”

“Well, I figured if you were going to agree with EVERYTHING I said.....” I guffawed. Jason growled in a good-natured way and grabbed me in a head lock.

“So, you get everything you need?” the blue dragon asked. I checked things off on a list. I’d grabbed a couple of frozen pizzas for dinner (why bother guessing the kid’s fave food when I know what he’ll wolf down?), a couple PG movies (my personal selection was PG-13 and R rated action, comedy, and horror flicks), and a few younger kid’s video games (again, most of the ones I owned were rated teen to adult).

“Well, I’ll see you later,” Jase said. I grinned. “What, your not gonna wait around and watch me make a fool out of myself?”

“Nah,” the dragon shrugged, “When the dirt hits the fan, I wanna be long gone.” I shook my head and waved as he left. About fifteen minutes later, the doorbell rang. I opened it and greeted Janet, looking very professional in a woman’s business suit, and an average-sized vixen, similarly dressed.

“Hi Mike. Sorry, but we can’t stay long, meeting’s in a half an hour.”

“No problem. Uh, Sylvia, where’s your son?”

“Why he’s.....” the vixen turned around, obviously looking for something she though she had with her. Suddenly, I heard from just down the hall..... “There he is men, OPEN FIRE!!!!” Down the hall came tearing a short little fox in a T-shirt with some kind of comic book character on the front, blue jeans and sneakers, baseball cap on backward, and a high-powered squirt gun. I know it was high powered, ‘cause he managed to splatter me with it from twenty feet away. “Cute kid,” I thought, but decided to play along. I clutched a hand to my chest. “ARRGHHH! He got me!!” I slumped to the floor. The kid loved it, but I couldn’t say the same about his mother.

“NATHAN SIKES!!! How many times do I have to tell you not to squirt people you don’t even know!” Nathan then turned to his mother with a gleam in his eyes that brought back memories of my own childhood, when I was about to do something I knew my parents wouldn’t like, but was going to do it anyway. I jumped up. Glancing around, I grabbed my trench coat off a coat hook and darted in front of Sylvia, shielding her from her little bundle of joy’s deadly accurate spray.

“Young man, you stop that NOW!” she bellowed. “Awww, mom...” the kid huffed.

“I’m sorry,” The vixen said, turning back to me as I lowered my coat, “I thought I’d disarmed him before we got out of the car.”

“You only pulled four squirt guns off him,” Janet muttered.

“Well, we’ve gotta go,” the vixen said, rummaging though her purse, “we’ll be back at ten. Oh, Nathan....” The kid looked up at his mother with a look of sugary innocence. “.....If you break anything of Mr. Fang’s, there’ll be one less face to greet your father when he gets home.”

The evening was pretty uneventful, at the beginning. Nathan was fairly well behaved, and seemed content not to poke into my stuff. We played video games for a few hours, him kicking my butt at the sports games and me kicking his butt at the one-on-one shooters. At dinner, he scarfed down the pizza like there was no tomorrow, then wound up having to take some Pepto Bismol when he started getting a stomach ache. Finally, we sat down to watch “Star Wars: Episode 1”. It was a big hit with him, and he insisted on watching again. And again. And AGAIN! I didn’t object, since my goal was to eat up as much time as possible. Halfway through the show, I started getting sleepy and kicked off my sandals, put my feet up on the couch, and started drifting off. Nathan was sitting on the floor, munching down popcorn.

What happened after that was a bit of a blur, but using my deductive powers I’ve kind of pieced it together. I nodded off completely, which was my big mistake. After a while, Nathan began to get bored; let’s face it, even the most exciting movie gets old after four screenings in a row.

So the kid began to wander around my apartment. Somewhere in the course of his aimless meandering, he must have gotten into my hall closet. The closet where I keep my air tanks. I can only imagine the devious glee that spread across the little fox's face when he found them. He must have carefully dragged out one of my tanks, then somehow figured out how to put a hose on the nozzle. He then waited until I snored, then gently put the hose in my mouth. At lest, that what I THINK he did.

All I know is when I opened my eyes, there was a hose in my mouth, and a naughty little fox turning the knob of the tank it was attached to! My gut began to shoot out, spreading my shirt then separating it from my shorts. My limbs were rounding out, my finger puffing up and my toes splaying. The usual pleasant tickling sensation came, but I was a little distracted by the fear of what the kid was doing. My gut was about halfway up to the ceiling, and my living room is about thirty feet high; one of the perks of living on the top floor being I had plenty of room. Finally, the kid shut me off. My shirt was stretched over my expanded chest. My legs and feet, arms and hands ballooned proportionately, and my belly a brown, large, round sphere with a belly button.

I spat out the hose, surprise finally wearing off. The kid was giggling. "Ha ha, very funny." I muttered. Nathan walked over to a chair at the end of the couch. "Hey, what're you doing?!" I said. He didn't answer, just started climbing up onto the top of the chair's back.

"Hey, don't do that, you'll hurt yourself!" I said. The fox ignored, me, and rubbed his hands together, seeming to get ready to do something. Then it hit me. "Oh, no, kid, what a minute, nononono....Ooommph!" The kid jumped from the top of the chair, landing right on my stomach. Giggling like a maniac, the fox bounced up and down on my belly like it was a trampoline.

"Ooofff," I grunted, "Ouch, Oooh, Ahhhh, Urrrph, *burp*!" This last outburst made the little so-and-so laugh even harder.

"NATHAN!!!"

I threw my head back, looking upside down at Janet and Sylvia. They apparently had gone home long enough to change out of their work clothes into something more casual. "Ten o' clock?" I gasped. "Thank God!"

"Young man," the vixen snapped. "What do you think your doing?"

"Holding Mr. Fang hostage." The kid giggled. Sylvia grabbed Nathan by the hand and pulled him off me. "Wait till your father get's home he's gonna hear about this and he won't happy young man..." Still jabbering, Sylvia hauled her kid out the door.

Janet just stood there, looking at me. I stared back, devious look in my eyes and one eyebrow raised. "Umm," she said, "I guess your pretty mad at me, huh?"

"Mad?" I said, "No, not at all. Why should I be mad? I'm not mad."

“Oh, good.” She said, sitting down on the edge of the couch next to me. “Kiss and make up?” I smiled, sitting up a bit. She closed her eyes and puckered up. I gave her a quick peck, then carefully slipped the hose in between her lips. Her eyes flew open just as I twisted the knob. She clapped her hands against her stomach as it swelled, popping off her shoes and stretching the shorts she’d changed into. I turned off the tank about when she was my size. Giving me one of her looks, she snorted. “Well, happy now? Or do you want to bounce up and down on me?” My eyes lit up. Janet raised both eyebrows. “That WASN’T an invitation!”

Fortunately Janet was in a good mood, so she didn’t take my little joke too seriously. Despite our little disagreements, we always seem to work things out. The next morning, I was waiting in my office for my latest client. Aside from the fact that it was a woman, I had no idea who my latest employer was, or what. When I heard a knock at the door, I took a deep breath, preparing for the worst. “Come in.”

The door opened and an Afghan hound in a yellow blazer, women’s dress shoes and a green skirt came in. “Monsieur Fang?”

“The one and only. Please have a seat.” She crossed my office, sat down, and shook my hand. “My name is Sophia Torielle. I ‘ope you can ‘elp me. I ‘ave tried for weeks to find my brother Gaston, but he doesn’t seem to be anywhere.”

“Hmm, are you sure he’s in the city?” I asked, leaning back in my chair.

She nodded. “I got my last letter from him with thees cities’ postmark. He said he ‘ad.....found work. But no matter where I go, he eesn’t to be found. I’m afraid something may ‘ave ‘appened to him. He ees an immigrant, you see, and I’ve heard about immigrants coming to bad ends before.....”

I nodded. “Don’t worry Ms. Torielle. I’ll do everything I can. Now, which payment were you going to use?”

“I think your daily rate.”

Rats. “Fifty dollars a day? Sounds good.” I saw her to the door, little realizing that I’d just set myself up big time.

My first stop was at immigration. It was pretty crowded there, even for the morning. Not being the police hampered me a bit in my quest for information, but eventually I got to see one of the tellers. Unfortunately, he wasn’t having a very good day, given the fact that he greeted me with the words “this’d better be good.” I gave him as pleasant a smile as I could generate, and asked him as politely as possible if he could help me find the registered address for someone newly immigrated from France. He looked at me for a second, then glanced over my shoulder. “NEXT!”

I sighed, shrugged, and turned toward the door. First, though, I headed toward the restroom, passing right by a door that was labeled “Immigration records. Employees only!” After coming out of the john, I leaned against the door. “Ooops,” I said, “Someone left it un...” but as I tried the knob, it wouldn’t turn. I sighed, reaching into my back pocket. “Okay, we’ll do this the hard way.” I pulled out a lock pick. I try as much as possible to avoid breaking and entering to get evidence or leads, but sometimes I just don’t have a choice. Besides, it’s not like I’m stealing anything.

The end of the hall had a bend in it, shielding me from prying eyes as I probed about in the lock, pushing up the spring-loaded pegs that kept the knob from turning. Finally, there was a “CLICK!” as the knob turned. I grinned and twirled the pick between my fingers as I slipped in the records room.

The vault had about a hundred filing cabinets, all of them shoddily organized, even by MY standards. Finding the two cabinets labeled “T”, I was irritated to find that they weren’t alphabetized past that. The “Ta’s” were mixed up with the “Ti’s”, the “To’s” with the “Te’s” and so on. It was like some retarded monkey organized the system. My fingers sported about five paper cuts by the time I was done and I banged my head twice on a low shelf in the janitor’s closet when I had to hide because someone came in the room. Finally, I found Ms. Torielle’s brother’s file. I pulled out a digital camera and snapped a quick picture of his photo, then scribbled down his address, a rented room above a french café.

The café had a name I had a real tough time wrapping my tongue around, but it’s street address was easy enough to locate, right in the heart of the area where most of the french immigrants tended to gather. It seems to be an unchangeable fact that even though people immigrate to another country, they still want to live in a place that reminds them of their homeland. The good things about their homeland, anyway.

The place was a picturesque little number, with a bright red awning over glass tables with flower baskets on each of them. I had to admit, as living quarters went, it wasn’t half bad. At least, it beat a lot of the dumps I’d seen in my day. A gryphon waitress was writing a menu on a chalk board as I pulled into a parking spot across the street. “Excuse me, miss?” I called to her as I crossed. She looked up. “Wie?”

I gave her my card. “I’m looking for a young man, about my age, an Afghan hound named Gaston. Gaston Torielle.”

The waitress shrugged her shoulders. “I’m sorry, monsieur, but I don’t know any Gaston like zat. Zie only Gaston I know ees a fifty-year-old dragon who runs a market down zie street.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Are you sure? I was told that he was living here.” I showed her a print out of the picture I took. The gryphoness took one look at the picture.

“Oh, but his name ess not Gaston. He’s name ees Jean Fromage.” My ears laid back at this as I rubbed my eyes. He was using a fake name. Suddenly, I had a bad, bad feeling about this.

“I see. Well, is Jean at home?”

“Oh no, he ees at work.”

“And that would be....?” I asked. Again with the shrug. I sighed, thanked the waitress, and bought a bagel before I left.

About two hours later, I was sitting in my car about two blocks away from “Jean’s” home. I was half asleep in the back seat, but half awake as well. I kept my hat over one eye, but kept the other one open, watching the front. I was just about to give up when my quarry showed up. The Afghan hound was in a black vest and blue long-sleeve shirt, black slacks, and polished shoes. Using the zoom on my camera, I got a better look at his face as he sat down at a table and started eating an early dinner.

“Yep, that’s him, no doubt about it,” I thought, grinning. I was just about to go call his sister and tell her where he was when an orange dragon showed up. He sat down, ordered a cup of coffee, then began rummaging around in his pocket for change. He pulled out a huge wad of various odds and ends, searching though them for spare change. Finally, he paid the waitress, took his bean juice, and left. It was just then I noticed “Jean” get up and pass his hand over the table that the dragon had been sitting at. Then he left, walking down the street and hanging a left at the corner.

I’d seen smoother secret message drops. Gaston had obviously been passed something, and now he was probably going to read it, or had already read it and was acting on it. I should have just up and left; I’d been hired to find Ms. Torielle’s brother, not chase him around. Still, professional curiosity got the better of me, not to mention the idea that I might get a little something extra for finding out if he was in trouble (hey, I’m not cold-hearted. I just don’t make it a habit of poking into other people’s business.....without good reason, like a moral obligation.....or getting paid.)

I climbed out of the car and started after Gaston at an easy pace. The hound looked back at me a few times, but I didn’t stop moving; doing so would have been a dead giveaway. Once or twice, he stopped to see if I would stop. Instead, I just passed him, then stopped myself until HE passed by. He started to look at me a bit funny the third time we passed each other, so I ducked into a store and waited for him to go around a corner. Then I went back to tailing him.

Finally, around twilight, we got outside a fancy condo area. The neighborhood was an upper class kinda place, with private security patrols, professionally manicured hedges in between the houses, swimming pools in the back, all very classy. The kind of place everyone wishes they could afford, but would probably have trouble paying the electric bill for. Gaston looked around real quick, then ducked though the iron gate. “Uh-

oh,” I muttered. High-ball areas are sometimes prone to house drug dealers. It’s not that they attract that kind of scum, but with all the cash they make with the sales of illegal narcotics, heroin, or any of the other hundred addictive substances, upper class housing areas just make good targets as a place to set up shop. It’s just a fact that the criminals usually spend their ill gotten loot on a ritzy pad more than anything else.

Gaston was a few hundred yards ahead of me on the sidewalk. I skulked along in the bushes, trying to be as close to invisible as possible. Just then, the hound stopped. He was eyeing a white Mustang convertible. “Wait a sec,” I thought, “he’s not gonna.....” Oh, yes he did. Making sure the rent-a-cop on patrol was on the far side of the street and walking away from him, Gaston vaulted into the driver’s seat of the car. “Maybe it’s HIS car, and he loaned it to a friend or something,” I thought with a weak grin. The hound pulled out a screwdriver, undid the wiring panel, and pulled out the battery and ignition wire. “Yeah,” I thought with a smirk and one raised eyebrow, watching the hound twist the two wires together, hot wiring the car, “And my mother wears fishnet stockings.”

Staying ducked down in the shrubbery, I watched Gaston peel out past me. Acting on instinct, I pulled out my camera and snapped two pictures: one of the licence plate, one of Gaston’s face as he went around a curve, giving me a good profile shot. I didn’t know if the snapshots would be useful in any way, but it was better to have the pics and not need them than to want them and wish I’d taken a quick click.

I didn’t want to loose my quarry. I took a quick look around the bushes to make sure the security guards weren’t around. Seeing none, I darted for the gate. Gaston was stopped at a red light and, judging by the look of the traffic, would be there for a few minutes. He was the last in a line of cars, so no one noticed me as I lightly jogged out into the lane. “This is a BAD idea...” I thought to myself as I pulled out a lock pick. Going around to the back of the car, I jimmied the trunk open quickly, then hopped inside. The light must have turned green, and we started out. I took a quick look to make sure there was a safety catch on the inside of the lid so I could open the trunk. Seeing one, I carefully pulled the lid shut.

As the car rolled along, I began to question myself. What the heck did I think I was doing? This wasn’t in my contract! Professional curiosity? Okay, maybe. But this didn’t excuse the fact that I just stowed away in a car when I didn’t have any clue as to the destination. Then I remembered a thought that’d been nagging me: who passed Gaston that message? That put it all into perspective; I knew there was more than one person involved in this. I’d already seen that orange dragon, but there might have been even more. And if Gaston was taking orders, who was the boss? Okay, now stowing away doesn’t seem quite so stupid. Also, in the private eye game, knowledge can be a dangerous thing, but never so much as ignorance, despite what you hear so often in the movies.

The car bounced along, going over several bridges. I figured this ‘cause I heard it go over seams in the pavement. More than once we went over a speed bump, but Gaston

didn't slow down. I was bounced up and down in the trunk like the contents of a kid's Christmas present. "Mental note: talk to this guy about his driving skill." I hissed through my teeth as I rubbed my head. Finally, he slammed on the breaks, sending me crashing into the back. I heard a car door slam, and his footsteps going up a flight of metal stairs.

I cracked open the trunk lid. Poking my nose out, I breathed in fresh air, trying to settle my upset stomach. First time I'd been car sick in a long time. I rolled over on my back, breathing a sigh of relief and fanning myself with my hat. While I was sniffing, I noticed a salty odor; I was near the ocean. Just then, I heard voices. I pulled out my tape recorder.

"Hey, look at this baby!"

"Yep, Gaston did good this time. Craig oughta be happy."

"Ah, the boss wouldn't crack a smile if a.....hey, that dope musta drove here with the trunk open." Suddenly, the trunk slammed shut, right on the tips of my ears.

"Hey, you hear something?"

"Like what?"

"Dunno. A squealing sound."

"Ah, probably just the building creaking in the wind." Finally, the footsteps carried up the staircase. I cracked the trunk again, pulling my ears out. Thankfully no one was around to hear me whimper. I clapped my hands against my head, rubbing my ears and rocking back and forth, biting my tongue. Jamming my fedora back on, I crept out of the trunk. It was early night, and I was in some kind of dockside warehouse, a maze of crates in front of me, and a staircase leading to an office up off to the right. As stealthily as possible, I crawled up the stairs to the office door. I peered through a crack, getting my camera ready and turning up the sensitivity of my recorder.

"Not bad, kid, not bad." Chuckled a lion in an expensive suit, peering out the shades of the office at the car. There were about seven people in the office, Gaston and the lion, who I assumed was Craig, included. The others were the orange dragon, a kangaroo in dungarees, a Dalmatian in a jumpsuit and cowboy boots, a female leopard in a leather jacket, pink skirt, and stiletto heels, and a yellow lizard in a T-shirt, shorts, sneakers, and mirror shades.

"You keep this up," Said the lion in a deep voice, smoothing his mane and sitting down at a desk, "and you'll make a killing."

"Yeah, but don't get any ideas about replacing me," said the lizard, sneering at Gaston.

“Lou, lighten up for Pete sakes,” said the lion. “You’ve been my right hand man for three years, nobody’s gonna oust you.” The lizard snorted. Gaston gave him a dirty look. “Well, eef you are done accusing me, what ees my next job?”

“Heh, eager, isn’t he?” purred the leopard, giving the hound an appraising look. “Your not gonna get another job for a while, kid. You’ve gotta wait for the heat to die down. In the meantime, just got about business as usual, but make sure you get some kind of alibi for tonight, ‘cause if you get collared, we’re not gonna take the rap for you, got it?” Gaston nodded.

“Now,” said the lion, “the next job is a double header. There are two Roles Royces in a car dealership in town today. Jerry,” the kangaroo looked up, “I want you to deal with the shop’s alarm system. Todd,” the Dalmatian grunted, “You and Ben,” the lion pointed at the dragon with a pen, “go for the cars. Take different routes back here. I’ve got a few buyers that are planning to make some heavy bids for those babies.”

“Hey,” said the dragon, “what’s that clicking sound?” That clicking sound was me, taking a picture of each of the car thieves. I decided I’d heard enough, and started to crawl back down the stairs. But just as I got to the bottom, I caught my foot on the step and tripped. I could hear voices coming from the office, and then the door opened. I jumped up, and started acting like I’d just wandered in.

“Uh, ‘scuse me,” I said as the leopard came out, “do you know where Devon’s bar and grill is?” She started to say something, then Gaston stuck his head out the door. He took one look at me, then his eyes went wide. He started to open his mouth, and I took off as the woman reached for something in her coat. A bullet hit a crate outside as I rounded the corner of the warehouse door, running for cover. I ducked behind a crate and pulled out my new revolver. “Time to see what this piece can do,” I muttered as the dragon, leopard, and lizard came chasing after me, each with a pistol. I took aim at the dragon’s gun hand and pulled the trigger. The recoil was impressive, but so were the results. The bullets didn’t just take the gun out of the car thief’s mitts, it broke the pistol in two! “Good Lord!” I said with a grin, “I love this gun!”

Two slugs made me duck back down as the dragon ran back for his hideout. I fired a second time at the leopard, but missed. A stray slug shattered the street light that was illuminating our little fracas. “Crud,” I grunted. I had night vision, being a dog, but it spoiled my aim quite a bit. I didn’t want to have to kill anyone, so I decided to use the dark as cover and ran for it.

I ducked around the corner of the warehouse, but someone shouted. They had seen me, and as I glanced around, I realized that I was in an alley. Straight ahead was the water, back the other way were armed criminals, so the only way left was up. I climbed up on top of a crate and jumped for the fire escape ladder hanging down. I just caught the last rung and hauled myself up. The thieves came round the corner, and started taking potshots at me as I tore up the steps. I reached the roof, and threw myself behind a

ventilation shaft. I looked around; the roof was pretty open, and the gap between it and the next building was too big to jump. I went to the right edge. It was a straight drop down to a small dock and the water. Just then, a bullet hit the vent beside me. I spun on my heel. The lizard was on the fire escape, his head and chest just above the roof surface, taking aim at my head! I went to roll behind the vent, but tripped on a loose brick. I lost my balance, and pitched over the edge of the roof.

A holler escaped my throat as I plunged head long, down.....into a dumpster! I landed on a pile of garbage bags containing, thank God, something soft. The lid was jarred by my impact, and slammed shut, knocking a pile of trash over me. "Urrgh!" I groaned, trying not to gag on the stench. Just then, I heard the gang on the roof, muffled though the junk and the dumpster lid.

"Where is he? It's too dark, I can't see him."

"He must've hit the water. He's finished, no one could stand hitting the water that fast." The voices died away, and I waited a couple of minutes. When nobody came poking around to look for my body, I decided it must have been safe. Shoving the garbage out of the way, I grabbed my hat, which had fallen off, and climbed out of the refuse. I was a mess, judging by my reflection in the water; it looked like the contents of the dumpster had come to life. I smirked as I pulled an apple core out of my jacket collar and tried to brush a stain off my slacks, not to mention hitting the garbage head first had given me a nice black eye and several very bad bruises. "My dry cleaner's gonna have a heart attack." I smirked.

"You could have told me that your brother's a car thief!" I said irritably, holding an ice bag to my black eye. I'd called Ms. Torielle over to discuss my recent findings, but it had turned into a bit of an argument. She thought I was being judgmental, and I thought she'd withheld information from me.

"I 'ad no idea my brother was mixed up een something like car stealing!" The hound said, crossing her arms and pouting.

"Oh don't give me that," I snapped. "You said you found my card in a café. Well after I got back home, I checked with the café I found your brother at. You'd been there!" Ms. Torielle sighed. "Oh, all right. I knew Gaston was involved een some.....shady business."

"So why did you hire me? You knew where your brother was, why drag me into this?" I groaned.

"I wanted you to convince him to leave his gang."

“Whoa,” I said, putting up my hands, “Miss, what you want is a family counselor, not a private investigator.”

“I ‘ave tried to get Gaston to come wis me to one, but he refuses every time. I need someone to go to him and pull him out, if necessary.” looked from side to side and screwed up my face. “I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it. But I’m gonna warn you; if I do say yes, it’ll mean an increase in my rate. From fifty to seventy-five.”

“What!? Moisseur, I am just a.....”

I had been prepared for that. Reaching into my desk, I pulled out a page I’d printed from the internet. It was an international newspaper web site, and I’d acted on a hunch. The print out was like a newspaper front page, with the top article being “Sophia Torielle Takes Paris Fashion Show By Storm!”

“.....rich French super model.” I smirked.

“I’m not rich,” she huffed. I grinned and leafed though the printout.

“Says here you make two hundred grand a MONTH.”

“Zat is in francs, not American dollars!”

“Oh please,” I said, leaning back, “Now your just quibbling. The exchange rate can’t be THAT bad. In fact, given the American economy, I wouldn’t be surprised if francs right now were MORE valuable than dollars.”

“Rrrrgh. Oh, very well.”

“Now hang on, I said that’d be my rate IF I decided to keep working on this. I’ll let you know if I do.” And with that said, I escorted Ms. Torielle out of the building and closed up shop for the night.

I wandered the streets for a while, keeping an eye out but still letting my mind wander. I was torn; on one hand, I felt morally obligated to try and help the woman and her brother. On the other hand, I didn’t know whether or not I’d just make things worse by interfering. As I weighed it out, I found that my wandering had taken me toward “The Tank Bank,” A balloonier night club I’d been to once. The line was relatively short, and I made my way in. Sitting down at a bar where a person could get tanks to go or get empties refilled, I smirked at the people around me, inflating, laughing, just enjoying themselves.

“What can I get ya?” a voice said. I turned in my seat to a fox ‘tender. “You wouldn’t have anything to drink, would you?” He raised his eyebrows and grinned. “As a matter of fact, yeah. You won’t find any liquor here, but we do have some stuff like juices and soft drinks.”

“That’s sounds good, I’ll take an orange juice. Don’t usually drink liquor this late, anyway.” I said to myself. The fox slid a glass down to me and I caught it. Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a group of about four people. At first I was afraid it was Gaston, Craig, and the other car thieves, but it turned out to be nothing more than a group of friends. Three of them were facing the fourth, a female gryphon.

“C’mon, Jenny,” said a male gryphon, ‘I doesn’t hurt, and it isn’t permanent.”

“Yeah, give it a go!” chimed in a crocodile.

“Hey,” I whispered, waving the bartender over, “What’s with her?”

“That girls been in here every day for a week with her friends. They’ve been trying to talk her into ballooning, but she keeps opting out.”

“Babe, you won’t believe it! It’s totally out of here!” the male gryphon said, still trying to guile what looked like his girlfriend into taking a drag.

“Five bucks,” I said, putting a bill down on the counter, “Says she does it tonight.” The fox smirked, reached into his pocket, and pulled out some singles. “Your on. That girl’s never bucked up the courage yet.” The gryphoness had a hose in her hand. She was staring at it apprehensively, like it was a live wire. I’d seen something in her eyes, it reminded me of the look I felt in mine when I first tried inflating. “She’s gonna drop it,” the ‘tender chuckled. “She’s gonna drop it and run, same as last time.”

The gryphoness held the hose at arms length, then in a flash clamped her mouth over it. I smirked and picked up the money on the counter, the fox being a good sport about it, restraining himself to just snapping his fingers in frustration. The gryphoness, meanwhile, was being cheered on by her friends. Her stomach was rounding out, pushing her slightly back from the cylinder in front of her. Her feet popped out of her sneakers, puffing up nicely. She had a peculiar look on her face, somewhere between amusement and surprise, as she bloated past eight feet around. She kept going for a bit, her limbs puffing and her belly growing, not to mention her bust. I grinned and chuckled as I left, the gryphoness’ friends starting to look a bit apprehensive as she spread her arms and kept going past ten feet high, and at least half that again around. “Uhh, Jenny, that’s plenty big.....Jenny, how big are you going to get?”

As soon as I got outside, I scratched my chin, still thinking about Ms. Torielle and her sibling. Sighing, I walked to a pay phone and dialed the hotel that she said she was staying at. “Ms. Torielle? It’s Fang.....I’ll talk to your brother if I can.”

Next morning I found myself looking in my rearview mirror at my reflection, wondering why I always let people talk me into the dumbest things. I didn’t have time to answer, as I saw Gaston come round the corner. I waited until he passed me, then got out

of the car, came up behind him, and dropped a hand on his shoulder. He jumped in shock. "Nervous?" I said.

The Afghan hound rolled his eyes and huffed. "Wouldn't you be eef someone grabbed you from behind?! Who zee heck are you, anyway?"

"Mike Fang, P.I. Your sister's worried about you, Torielle."

"Oh, pfff!" Gaston snorted. "My sister thinks she can run my life just because she's the oldest of three children. Well forget eet! I'm running my own life!"

"Yeah, your running your life," I said, having to jog to keep up with him as he tried to get away. "running it straight into the ground! Gaston, I've seen guys like you a hundred times; you get mixed up in some sort of crime, you think you have it all, the BAM! Your sitting in a cell with a big fat guy who picks his nose, thinks your cute, and wants to tango."

"I don't dance," The hound chuckled.

"Well you just remember to tell Bubba that, and maybe he won't tie you in granny knots for standing him up."

Gaston rolled his eyes, came to a halt, then jerked around to face me with a ticked off look. "Look buster, you seem to think that you are talking to some dumb kid whose getting mixed up with some street gang. Well, your not. Your talking to someone YOUR age, whose got at much brains as you, probably more! I'm not about to be convinced by some nosy private di...."

"That term offends me," I said, cutting him off in mid swear word.

"...detective." Gaston said with a sneer. "So shove off! Eets not like I'm going to get caught in the next fifteen minutes or something." That said, the hound hailed a cab, jumped in, and left me behind. Now it was my turn to roll my eyes and let out a hiss through my teeth. I couldn't believe I'd agreed to this. What on earth could I do to convince this hard nose to get back on the right side of the tracks? I turned and started walking back to my car. As I passed by a news paper machine, I remembered I hadn't gotten mine. Shoving in a quarter, I pulled one out and read the headline. My ears stood up. I looked up. "Thank you, God." I chuckled, stuffing the paper under my arm.

It was about noon when Gaston walked in the diner. It was sparsely crowded, with only a few people at the booths, and one guy at the counter reading the paper. The manager was watching a t.v. that was on a shelf in the upper corner of the restaurant. The hound sat down and ordered a hamburger and fries. The guy behind the paper reached over to a plate of fried chicken and picked up a leg, took a bite, and put it back down. "Man, did you see today's headline?" Gaston jerked at the sound of a familiar voice, turned, and pushed the paper down so he could see me behind it.

“You! Your beginning to annoy me.”

“Oh really? Well, tell you what; you hear me out for the next...” I glanced at my watch. “...ten minutes. Then I’ll be gone. Fair?” Gaston narrowed his eyes at me. “All right. Ten minutes, starting now.”

I folded up the paper and put it on the counter. “When we parted you said ‘it’s not like I’m about to get caught in the next fifteen minutes’. How do you know?”

“Excuse moi?” He grinned, but in a nervous way.

“How do you know your not being followed by the cops right now? I found you, didn’t I? Let me tell you, a lot of the cops on the force are macho idiots.....but not all of them. There are some, quite a few, in fact, that have what it takes to chase down goons and toss ‘em behind bars. Now, I imagine you want an example. Here....” I pushed the paper toward him. “BANK ROBBING TEAM BROUGHT DOWN” glared up from the page in inch-high lettering. Gaston didn’t say anything, he just stared at it.

“That isn’t the half of it,” I said, pointing at the t.v. The news had just come on. “Good after noon this is new channel 8, I’m Brenda Fillen,” the vixen anchor shuffled her papers. “Making headlines today, police finally apprehended the Ferando’s, a gang of Latin bank robbers that have been terrorizing the city. Police have had several standoffs with them, and during the most recent, placed a tracking bug on their car. The police followed it to the home of one of the criminals, their driver, Miguel Ferando.” The mug shot of an armidillo with a sheepish look on his face popped into the upper corner of the screen.

“Miguel was told by the D.A that he would be given a reduced sentence if he divulged the other gang members location. Miguel refused, and received a full sentence when the other members were caught three weeks later using evidence found in the car, a city wide man-hunt, and other sources. The Ferando’s are currently serving ten years in prison for armed robbery, assault, evading arrest, and several other charges.”

I tossed a glance at Gaston. He was staring at the screen with a look of confusion. “He was just zee wheel man.....he didn’t threaten anyone....”

“Hey,” I shrugged, “when you tie yourself to a gang, they can use conspiracy to make you pay the full penalty, even if you just counted the money for them. That fat guy in the cell isn’t looking like a figment of my imagination anymore, is it?” Gaston bit his lip and stared at the counter.

“The police have ways of finding people, Gaston. They don’t use the subtle ways often, but when they do, boy do they work! The police in the grand theft auto are usually the smarter ones, by the way. Well, my ten minutes are about up,” I said, standing up and looking at my watch. “So, just keep this in mind; you might not be being followed right

now, but don't think that'll last forever." Gaston seemed to be lost in thought as I tossed the leftover chicken in a take out box and left.

I was sitting in my office, printing out the pictures I'd taken of the car thieves with my digital camera when my phone rang. "Moiisseur Fang! Zis ees Sophia. My brother has just come to see me! He says that he wants to go back home as soon as possible. I can't thank you enough for convincing him to leave those hooligans."

"My pleasure, Ms. Torielle," I said.

"I shall be mailing you your check, and my brother and I are going to zee airport tonight. Thank you again."

"Have a pleasant flight," I chuckled, and hung up. Sometimes this job has it's high points, and another one was about to come up. I grinned as I dialed the chief of police. "Hello, chief? It's Fang. How'd you like to get a hot tip on where to catch a gang of car thieves?"