

FAMILY FOOD....I MEAN FEUD! ####

("Captain" Lionardo Furry, Wolfgang Muttford and the Muttford Bros, Erle, Roody Longfoot, Laura, etc, are all copyright Cap. Furry)

The phone rang. I ignored it at first, but slowly it's echoing, rattling bray was unavoidable. Grumbling to myself, I threw back the covers with one hand and slapped it down on the receiver, almost dragging the phone off my night stand.

"Mmmmlo?"

"Mr. Fang, we have a contract for you."

"....."

"Mr. Fang? I know you're there."

".....who in God's name is this?" I pulled myself into a half slump, bunching up the pillow below my lower back. The sun hadn't even poked its way through the blinds, and I could still hear the crickets outside. Blearily, I cast my gaze over to the clock on my computer desk in my bedroom. With my nearsighted vision, I could only make out a blur.

"My name is Muttford, Mr. Fang, and I'd advise you use more respect when addressing me." The guy on the other end was starting to tick me off. I'd heard of the Muttford Bros. Who hadn't? They ran one of the most successful designer clothing companies in the country. Rumor had it that the brothers themselves, rakishly handsome mixed breeds between a wolf and a dog, personally modeled the clothing that went to their most exclusive clients; movie and tv stars, company C.E.O's and the like.

With one hand, I scratched under my tank top that I slept in while groping for my glasses with the other. I normally wear contacts, but as it was I wasn't about to put them in just to glance at a clock. Finally, my hand carefully closed around the thin, silver rimmed spectacles I kept in a case in my nightstand drawer. The room snapped sharply into focus and I glanced at the clock.....

"Mr. Muttford, *sir.....It's 4 o' clock in the morning.*" My voice edged slightly with granite as the bleariness started to wear off.

"Not for me it isn't. I'm calling you at my earliest convenience, and I think you should appreciate that."

"Really? Well I hope you're about to make me a very worthwhile offer to justify contacting me after my business hours *and* at a phone number that's unlisted. I consider it very poor manners, Mr. Muttford, for people to think they can inconvenience me just because they....."

“Fang, either you take this offer now or you’re going to be kissing a \$10,000 check goodbye.”

I was silent for a moment, trying to decide exactly how to express my feelings.

“Exactly what is it that you’re offering here?”

“WHAT? I would think a person in your position would be salivating at the chance to make ten grand!”

“Well money isn’t everything. I do have my morals and ethics, and I never accept a job blindly.”

“You will receive your instructions when we give them to you! Now quit stalling!”

“Stalling? *Stalling*? Look stiff @\$\$, I’m not your trained dog who jumps when you snap your fingers! You tell me EXACTLY what you’re going to hire me to do. I’m not going to get roped into putting my sorry carcass on the line because I have a contract.”

“Very well, Mr. Fang. Recently, we’ve had a number of our clothing outlets report expense withdrawals that were not on our home office books.”

“Someone’s embezzling funds.”

“No, it’s not anyone we’ve hired.”

“How do you know that?”

“Our security people have pinned down the thief’s location to the town he’s working from. You see, he’s doing this by computer, hacking into the transaction accounts and sending himself checks. As a matter of fact, the town is our youngest brother’s home town. He was the black sheep of the family, you see. Lazy, never wanted to do a day’s work, shifty, willing to do well nigh anything to make a buck.”

“I see. Okay, if that’s the case, then I’m your dog.”

“Yes, we thought you’d see it our way. There will be a car waiting for you outside to take you to the airport. Have a *nice* flight.” Muttford’s statement about me seeing it his way made me feel dirty, like a sixteen-year-old girl who just agreed to go to the prom with the biggest jock in the school.

“This is *my* show, slime bag,” I grunted at the phone, “and I’m going to be the one calling the shots.” I felt the need to feel in control, not being led around by the neck like

they had me on a leash. I grumbled and muttered under my breath as I tossed my clothes in a suitcase, gathered up my things, and headed for the airport. Knowing to expect security, I unloaded my 2 cylinder .357 revolver, stuck the bullets in a box, and locked the gun and bullets in a carrying case, padlocked it, and put it in my non-carry on luggage. Maybe that would be enough to convince airport security I wasn't a terrorist in disguise.

I was wrong.

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"Excuse me, sir, we're doing a random baggage check."

I couldn't believe it. You would think that the airport security had never seen a Doberman in a trench coat before. There was a time I could remember when going through airport security meant putting your metal belongings in a bowl, your carry on luggage on a conveyor belt, and stepping through a metal detector.

Now, they have you take off every article of clothing that could set off the detector in any conceivable way; watches, jewelry, shoes, coats. Then after they strip you of every possible item that could contain metal, they ran it all through a metal detector and an x-ray box, and have you step through a metal detector, then as an added measure fan you with a metal detecting wand.

Where there were once two guards, there were now at least five. And as a parting shot, I was selected for a "random" baggage check. Trying to pull my boots back on, I dragged my junk over to a table and dropped everything. I handed the guard, a remarkably tall raccoon, my briefcase, my only carry-on luggage. They took some kind of wand with a piece of cloth on the end and brushed the handle of the case. Then the raccoon put the cloth in some machine's compartment and punched the keyboard of a computer. From the looks of it, I'd say he was analyzing fingerprints or DNA samples, seeing if I was on some sort of list.

"Geez, do I LOOK like a wanted felon to you?" I thought to myself. When alarms didn't go off and I wasn't hauled into some back room and strapped to a chair, I figured that chances were good that I'd make it to my flight on time.

The air port echoed with footsteps, distant conversations, and loudspeaker announcements. "DING! ATTENTION, FLIGHT 593 WILL BE DEPARTING IN FIFTEEN MINUTES." That was me. I had some time, so I stepped into the airport book store quickly and grabbed a paperback to read on the trip. Thumbing through the print version of "Red Drag Queen", the story of a transvestite serial killer hunted by a schizophrenic U.S Marshal, I fished in my pocket for the payment.

“Ahhh, I see dat you are reading “Red Drag Queen”! Yes, dat is a very, very good book, but I dink dat the movie was bedder.” I glanced up at the origin of the very thick Arabian accent. A jackal wearing a fez was manning the cash register.

“You’re probably right,” I said with my usual half grin, dropping a twenty on the counter, “some movies just don’t make the transition to paper very well.” Taking my change, I refrained from raising an eyebrow until I got out of the store.

“I’m born and bred in the U.S, haven’t traveled outside the country outside of an afternoon spent in Canada, run through insane amounts of security, and they hire an IMMIGRANT to work IN the airport?!?!” I had nothing against the book store clerk, but at the time it just seemed a bit hypocritical to me that in a time when they were supposed to be very cautious about who they let near the planes they put people who weren’t even born in the country on their payroll.

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A shudder ran through the plane like it was either coming down with the shakes from the bends as it landed. Or maybe it was in afterglow, finding having about 30 or so thoroughly exasperated, air sick, unrested, and one-second-away-from-going-postal passengers crammed into it arousing.

“Well at least it was good for ONE of us,” I grumbled, yanking my briefcase out of the overhead compartment. Anyone flying coach class could make a strong argument that if that wasn’t proof that God didn’t want us to fly, it was proof enough that He wanted us to do so in fewer numbers than “all you can pack into a 100 sq. ft. compartment, plus five”. If the compartment size wasn’t enough to convince you, how about sitting behind the standard “Child who’s parents gave them ten bags of M&M’s in the car to keep them quiet, so now they have a sugar rush”? All through the flight, this little ferret was running his mouth. Not saying anything, just making noise with his lips and tongue! Half the flight I fantasized about taking out my handkerchief and gagging him.

My neck was stiff, my back was sore, and my ankle was almost sprained from where some flight attendant hit me with the drink cart. Once outside the plane, I put one hand in the small of my lower back and CRRRCK! One stiff joint down, one to go. I grabbed my head with one hand on top and the other on my lower jaw. KRK! KRK! The docs said that it wasn’t good for my joints to be doing that. Well too bad, I wasn’t going to stoop like Quasimodo and avoid turning my head until I could get to a hot bath or whatever.

I stepped outside of the airport into the rather brisk air of the morning.

“Smallsville, USA.” I said, looking around. “I’m so happy to be here.” Okay, that last one was ripping off John Malcovitch from “Con Air” but so what?

“Right, first order of business, get a room somewhere.” The burg I had flown into was fairly small, so a cab was rather pointless. I started down the sidewalk, and it wasn’t too far before I got to the town’s main street. The assortment of mom n’ pop stores lining the sidewalk with a bank here or there brought back nostalgic memories of when I was in high school. I had to walk a fair clip, though, before I finally got to “The Sach Inn”, the first motel I could find, and what looked like the cheapest. It was a relic left over from the 1950’s age of travel, when people went on long trips to national monuments for a family vacation, roadside attractions were in full swing, and small towns made most of their money off of travelers passing through.

After making a cash payment for the first three days with the clerk, I checked into room no.2. All the rooms were ground floor. Inside, the shape of the room reminded me almost of my college dorm, only bigger and with carpeting on the floor. The furniture was 1950’s art deco probably bought at a yard sale, brownish yellows and dull oranges and browns all over the place.

“Hey, my kinda place,” I chuckled, dropping my bags on the bed. After a quick nap to get over the jet lag, I got up and suited up with my equipment: tape recorder with a bug, notepad, small pair of binoculars, camera, lock picks, pocket knife, and my piece. I doubted I would need that last tool on this case, but it never hurt to be safe. Before I went out, I grabbed the phone book. I knew the name of my main suspect, so it only figured that I would scope out his place first and get a feel for him.

“Muttford, Muttford.....,” But as I scanned the book, I couldn’t find his name anywhere.

“He’s unlisted? Well this is interesting.....,”

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The street was well nigh empty at noon as I shuffled my way along. I’d decided to go to the town’s mall and asked at the computer stores about Muttford. Since he was supposed to be pulling this job off though the expense accounts of his brothers, he’d need equipment.

“No, no Muttford’s ever come in here that I’ve heard of.” The store owner, a fair sized brown Gila monster in a yellow shirt with red triangles on it said. “Circuit Chamber” was the only computer hardware and business software store I could find in the mall (There were a couple of computer GAME stores, but I didn’t think it likely that a criminal with the smarts to hack into a company expense account would get his stuff from one of them). The pickings on the wire rack shelves were sparse; a few hard drives, some fancy monitors, memory upgrades, and the standard collection of connector cables. The store, however, did boast a waiting period on all special orders of only one week.

“I see. Well has anybody made any unusual purchases here? Like any sort of program writing software or anything?” The lizard pulled out his ledger, flicking his forked tongue out as he scanned the log of orders.

“Nope, not a thing.”

“Okay, thanks for your time.” I strolled out of the store, lost in thought. *He’s not listed in the phone book, and if he’s the crook, he’s using equipment he brought in rather than buy it locally. Either I’m way off track here, or this guy is GOOD.*

I was walking through the mall’s food court when suddenly I heard the sound of a conversation moving my way.

“Aww c’mon Li, just ONE game!”

“No way, I’m not getting up on that machine and making an ass of myself.”

“Jeez, live a little, will ya? Just one game of Jam Jam Rebellion and then we can go!”

“Muttford, I’m not about to show the entire town what a klutz I am. You, on the other hand, are free to do so at will.” My ears shot up. *MUTTFORD?* Quickly, I walked over to the mall “you are here” map and acted like I was looking at it. Around the corner, still arguing, was my target. I took one look at him and blinked.

THIS is the criminal mastermind? A pudgy, VERY pudgy, cross breed walked around the corner. He was wearing clothes that would’ve been better suited for someone half his weight. He couldn’t even tuck in his shirt, his belly button exposed to the world. His pants were so tight, I could see the outline of his wallet and the contents of his pockets.

A roll of Life Savers, breath spray bottle, stub of a pencil.....wait, what in God’s name am I doing? I switched my attention to his face. The mutt’s front fangs were exposed, which would make him look fierce if it wasn’t for the untrimmed facial fur and the fat circling him like the rings of Saturn.

This guy’s idea of The Call of The Wild must be an all you can eat buffet opening in town.

“Ah, so I can feel free to show the entire town what a klutz you are? Thanks!” The mutt’s friend gave him a surprised look. “I don’t believe this. Cave dog managed to say something dry and witty.” I looked towards Muttford’s companion.....and almost choked on my tongue.

It’s him! The guy from my cruise that pretended to be the captain!! Well as it was the guy really was sort of a captain. “Captain” Furry, commander of the sci fi show aficionados. The lion wasn’t quite as easy to place, now that he was out of the costume I’d caught him in last time we met. He was now dressed in everyday clothing, his close trimmed mane and goatee only slightly distinguishing him from the rest of the crowd.

“Ohh, all right,” Furry muttered, glancing into the “Pocket Change” arcade and noticing the small size of the crowd. “But just one quick game.” The tubby mutt raced inside and began changing some bills for tokens. As soon as the lion’s back was to me, I sauntered in myself. I didn’t want to get their attention, but I needed to tail them back to their home so I could start planning on how to spy on them.

Muttford was shoving tokens into a Jam Jam Rebellion machine; one of those devices with a stage on it that players danced on and tried to hit lighted squares on the floor while keeping up with the beat of the machine’s music. It’d never really caught on with me; in fact I’d never even seen one of those things ‘till then. But I had to find something to do while keeping an eye on them. I fumbled my wallet, trying to buy time while buying tokens as Furry begrudgingly stepped up onto the stage and began trying to limber up. I wandered a bit through the machines. *C’mon, find somethin’ to play that’s close to them.....* Just then, I laid eyes on an old friend; The Apartment Building of The Unliving.

Bingo. I slammed in two tokens and grabbed the light gun. Muttford and Furry, meanwhile, were just starting up, both of them bouncing up and down on their heels, getting ready to move with the beat. I tried to shift my position so I could look at both the screen and watch my two suspects. Furry was actually doing better than his pudgy counterpart, probably because he had a less obstructed view of the playing field. However, his movements didn’t have the same determination as Muttford’s; he hesitated a number of times and missed several steps.

I was watching them carefully when I my attention was called back to my own game by an electronic scream. I immediately started racking up points, blasting slime-covered zombies and evil mutations, trying not to choke on the obscene amounts of gooey stuff splattering against the screen. I knew I shouldn’t have been trying to do well at the game, but the siren call of a high score beckoned me. Getting more and more intense, I nailed flying zombie bats and all sorts of stuff while Muttford and Furry started going into what looked like a break dancing contest. Finally, I nailed the final boss with one last shot to the head and racked up a score that put me in 2nd place with the all time record for the machine. Just then, I heard a small smattering of applause. I turned around; about five people had been watching me over my shoulder. This led me to an interesting philosophical question: was it possible to spontaneously combust from embarrassment?

I didn’t have much time to worry, though. My suspect and his friend were finishing up with their song, when suddenly Muttford tried to jump from one foot to the next, while Furry tried to do a spin in the opposite direction. The mutt’s gut knocked into Furry’s side, and they both tumbled off the machine. However, it was done so simultaneously, the crowd of six or so people behind THEM thought it was part of the dance, especially when they both landed on their feet. As the two steadied themselves and tried not to blush themselves to death, I quickly made my exit before I gave away my cover even more.

The rest of the day I spent following Furry and Muttford around. Muttford's association with Furry galvanized my suspicion of him. Had they graduated from pranks to theft? It was a question worth answering. I tried not to follow them too closely. Stopping every once in a while, crossing to the other side of the street, the usual tricks to avoid notice. It looked like today was errand day or something, 'cause they did a lot of grocery shopping.

Then again, I thought, and gave them another once over while in the check out lane of the local Food Lemur, With their combined girths, that might be how much they normally buy. I raised an eyebrow; Furry wasn't that overweight, though he could stand to shed maybe a couple vanity pounds. Muttford, on the other hand, looked like he had some kind of allergy to exercise equipment.

Finally they led me home. Their home, anyway. As they pulled into the residential neighborhood, I hung back until they were downright out of sight. I glanced around a tree trunk and watched them walk into a house. Quickly, I scribbled down their address for later information.

So they live together. THAT must be how Muttford's staying under cover! Everything must be in Furry's name; that way if the s#!% hits the fan, he'll have a fall guy.

The sun was starting to set, and I figured if they were the perps, they would be doing their business on the net now, when the traffic was the heaviest to avoid detection; nothing like a crowd to disappear into for cover. As the sun went down, I crept into the bush near the edge of their lawn. The moon was full, so I couldn't get any farther out in front of their house without being seen. I pulled out my camera and hit the zoom, spying on the two through the front window.

What went on inside I could only make guesses on, because the show was difficult to interpret with a lack of sound.

Li and Muttford sat down on a couch, Muttford seeming to sink lower into the couch. The lion produced the remote and began channel surfing. He stopped on one channel and seemed really happy about it, while Muttford's ears drooped and he seemed to pout. Then the lion stuck out his tongue at the wolf-dog, which made him bristle. As soon as Li's attention turned back to the tv, Muttford suddenly snatched the remote out of his hand, changing the channel to something that appeared to have a lot of explosions, judging from the number of orange flashes coming from the screen.

Li started protesting and trying to grab at it, but the wolf-dog held him back with his other hand, dangling the remote out of reach. Just when it looked like he would get it, Muttford stuck the remote under his rear! Li's eyes narrowed and he started making an effort to roll Muttford off his seat to get the royal scepter of television control. Nothing doing; the lion could have more easily moved a car in park with the emergency brake on.

The mutt razzed Li this time, and pointed his thumb over his shoulder, and seemed to be saying something. The lion grumbled and sulked for a moment on the couch, but then, his ears laid back and he got a grin that I've often seen on thugs right before they've pulled a gun on me.

He stood up and went over to a cooler next to the couch, and pulled out two soda cans. When Muttford wasn't looking, the lion reached into his pocket, pulled out something, and dropped it into one of the cans, and handed it to the wolf-dog.

Muttford slurped down his drink quickly, crushing the can against his forehead. Li rolled his eyes at such a blatant display of machismo. The dog opened his mouth, and from the lion's expression, must have burped rather loudly. Then he did it again. And AGAIN. That's when I looked down and grinned.

Ahh, seems Li and I must subscribe to the same practical joke magazines.

Muttford's already fat belly was getting fatter! His stomach had blocked part of his chest from my point of view before, and now was blocking his chin.....next his nose! Completely engrossed in his tv show, he didn't notice until his stomach had blocked his eyes! His paws also puffing out a bit, he started flailing, his compatriot sitting next to him having scooted over and finally gotten up off the couch, wearing a smirk that I had often felt cross my own face when one of my friends had been suckered into eating something I'd tainted.

Muttford's belly grew fatter and wider, soon taking up the entire couch! Then, slowly, something happened.

The bloated mutt started FLOATING. The lion had blown him up with helium somehow! I clapped a hand over my mouth and started sniggering as the pudgy mutt grew fatter and wider, his belly a round blob that was airborne. He slowly lifted off the couch, wiggling his paws and trying to grab onto something. Li then calmly strolled over, picked up the remote, sat down, and changed the channel back.

"Now I can see how he managed to pull all those pranks on the ship," I snickered. It was only then that I looked up and noticed Muttford's belt buckle. His belt had been straining as he'd gotten fatter, and now the buckle started trembling.....

CRACK! I heard the sound of breaking leather. The buckle started getting larger in my camera lense. I realized that the window was open, but before I could react, I felt something square and metal impact with my skull. I dropped my camera in the bush and the last thing I saw before passing on my suspects' front lawn was that their grass needed watering.

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My eyes slowly came open. The room was a blur for a while, and I was wondering what had slugged me. Suddenly, I realized that my contacts were shifted. I

clenched my eyes shut again and this time the world snapped into focus.....and it was all gray. And fuzzy. And strangely soft....

I rolled my eyes upward, and on the crest of the gray, fuzzy, soft hill was.....a face! I had my nose right in Muttford's belly button! My face was pressed into his gut! He gave me a rather quizzical look as we locked eyes.

"Um....hi." he said. My eyes popped out and I launched myself backward. From what I could piece together later, the two of them, after deflating the wolf-dog, had tried to haul me into their living room to revive me, and in trying to get my 6' 3", 200 lb body pulled onto the couch, Muttford had accidentally pulled me on top of himself.

I stood stock still for a moment, realizing where I had just been. If my face was on Muttford's stomach, then that meant that the rest of me.....

"Oh my God! Oh my God!!!" I pulled a face and clenched my eyes shut, trying not to visualize what I must have looked like from a third person view.

"WHAT?!" Muttford said, shrugging his shoulders in an obviously good natured way.

"I don't blame you," said Furry, his arms crossed and standing nearby, "I'd react the same way."

"Oh my God!" I said one more time. "I gotta wash my hands and face!" I strode immediately into what looked like the kitchen door. The second I was inside, I froze. I can only imagine what it must have been like to see me walk back out after a moment, stony expression on my face.

"Not if that was the last working sink on the face of the Earth."

"Why?" Furry said, eyes narrowing in suspicion. He turned to shoot his compatriot a look. Chubby dog refused to meet his gaze. The lion stomped into the kitchen. It only took a second before we heard him making exclamations reminiscent to the ones I'd made upon finding myself in an embarrassing position with Muttford.

"YOU OVERFED, UN-HOUSE BROKEN.....!!!!!!" What Furry then said upon bursting out of the kitchen I would repeat, were it not for the possibility that innocent children may read this.

"Jeez, Li, it's not THAT bad!" Muttford tried to lift his fat butt up off the couch.

"NOT BAD?!?! There is a stack of dirty dishes on the sink AND the counter 2 ft high! The middle layers have MOLD on them, for Heaven's sake!"

I couldn't help but interject. "You know I think I saw new forms of life evolving in the basin." What ensued next was a verbal sparring match with no holds barred. I forget exactly what was said; it comprised basically of discussing Muttford's slovenly living habits and Furry's psychotic reaction to just about anything that didn't go his way. I'd already seen the filth-encrusted evidence of the former. I got evidence of the latter when I got a bit tired and tried to relax a bit. Furry turned towards me.

"HEY! Quit leaning on MY wall! I have enough to clean around here with only ONE mutt that isn't housebroken!! I don't believe this, my life is full of dirty, ill-bred, wet-nosed house wreckers!"

"HEY!" I snapped, but quit leaning on the wall all the same, "YOU were the ones that assaulted ME! I'm outside your house and suddenly something flies out the window and I'm seeing stars!"

"Oh really?" The lion suddenly turned to face me completely. "And what exactly were you doing outside, hmm?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"Casing the place, most likely."

"WHAT?! That's it, I'm outta here! I'm not gonna stand around and be insulted." I felt a bare skull on top of my head, so I searched around for a moment before finding my hat beside the couch. As I was leaving, I couldn't help but make one last parting shot. Turning halfway back around, I shifted my gaze between the lion and the wolf-dog and gave them my customary look; a smirk with one eyebrow raised.

"Don't you have dishes to do?"

I shut the door before I could hear either retort or explosive exclamation to my response. I quickly retrieved my camera, and started back for the motel.

I don't believe it. Why didn't he recognize me from the ship?! Oh well, it's been months, it's not that important. Now undercover surveillance was going to be tougher. They knew I was in town, and they knew I knew where they were.

But their first inclination was to believe I was a burglar. Well this is still under control. I'll start checking some records and see what comes up.

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I shuffled down the steps of the local branch of the phone company. After checking with their public records, I couldn't find any sign of Muttford being online at the time of the embezzlement. I was completely stumped for the time being, not to mention hungry. As I rounded a corner, I spotted a small shop that piqued my curiosity.

“ ‘Pizza Gut’? Heh, sounds like a place some of my friends would frequent.” Chuckling I shoved open the door and was assailed by the smell of tomato sauce, mozzarella, garlic, and various toppings. Walking up to the counter, I rummaged in my pocket for cash while the cashier, a kangaroo with a lazy look to him, lit up a cigarette.

Hmmm, that’s not a good sign; most places usually don’t let their people smoke while working.... My suspicion was nulled when a very large alligator stepped out of a back office for a second with a few stamped envelopes in his hand and gave the ‘roo a sharp look.

“Roody, how many times do I gotta tell you; butt out the cancer stick and serve the customers.”

“Right boss,” Roody insolently ground out the cig on the counter, making the ‘gator roll his eyes and sigh on his way out. He slid his eyes around in his socket to glance over me, then a small smirk started to form in the corners of his mouth.

“So what’ll it be Al Capone?” I’ve gotten ribbing about the way I dress before, but I still don’t like it ‘cause it’s childish. Never the less, I bit back a retort and shelled out some money.

“I’ll have a small pizza with sausage and extra cheese, and some ice water.” The roo nodded, and bounced back into the kitchen with lethargic hops. I found a spot to sit while I waited. And waited. And WAITED. Twenty minutes later, I tossed a glance over my shoulder. Roody was back at his spot on the counter, smoke lit up ‘cause his boss wasn’t there to tell him not to, reading a hot rod magazine. I cleared my throat a bit.

“‘scuse me, how much longer will my lunch take?” No answer. “Excuse me, when will my pizza be done?”

“It’ll be done when it’s done,” the ‘roo said, flipping a page. I grunted and turned back around; where did this guy get the insolent nerve to act like my money wasn’t green enough for his taste? Finally, thirty minutes later, Roody came hopping out with a box that had a slight wisp of what looked like steam; from a distance.

“Okay, gangster boy, here’s your pizza. That’ll be twenty.” I started at the price.

“TWENTY? For a SMALL?” I glanced up at the menu. “Says there it’s only twelve!”

“Yeah, well, you gotta factor in all the additional expenses during inflation of the economy, the prices of produce these days....,” The ‘roo said this while lazily flipping through his mag. I didn’t buy one word of it. Just then, I saw the back door open over the ‘roo’s shoulder. But I didn’t flick my eyes up. Instead, I just crossed my arms and raised one eyebrow.

“Tell me, how long have you been in the habit of gouging your boss’s customers for extra money? I don’t suppose he gets a cut, does he?”

“Ol’ scaly lard @\$?” Roody looked up right into my face with a slimy smile. “Even if he wasn’t such a goody two-shoes, he wouldn’t get a dime outta me. That extra cash is for me to buy me a car.”

“Better make it a hearse!” The ‘roo’s eyes popped out of his head. He didn’t even get a chance to turn around as the ‘gator grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. I leaned against the counter, flicked my hat brim, and gave Roody a harlequin grin.

“Shall I tell NASA that one of its rocket scientists is missing and presumed brain-dead?” The ‘roo flipped me off as the manager turned his face around to look him in the eye. “How long have you been overcharging and skimming, slimy?!”

“Uhhhhh, what month is it?”

“RRRGH! I oughta put you through a wall!” Sensing my efforts to earn a place on Roody’s black list were successful, I picked up my pizza box.

“Well while violence doesn’t upset my appetite, I think I’ll.....what the....?” I sniffed; the air was rank with the smell of fire and a little smoke. I opened the box.

“Hey, Roody, you make me a pizza or mold me a bicycle tire?” The outer crust on the pizza was jet black. The cheese was the color of a scab, and the sausage was ashes. Such a crime to one of the country’s leading mass produced chain foods. I turned the box around to show the two. The manager’s face went blank, then his eyes narrowed like he was searching for prey. And he found it right in his left hand.

“SO! This is why so many of our repeat customers left! That’s it, Roody! You’ve got bathroom detail for three weeks!”

“WHAT?! But that pig sty hasn’t been touched since the pilgrim’s landed!”

“I don’t want to hear it.” The ‘gator grabbed a toilet brush and shoved it between the ‘roo’s mouth like a rose for a Spanish flamenco dancer. He dropped the ‘roo and pointed at the door to the bathroom, where the men’s sign was ominously off kilter. Roody glared at me as he started towards it.

“Sorry about your pizza,” The manager said. “There’s another one in the oven that’s done right. On the house.” He pulled out a paddle and slid a second wheel of food into a flat box. I flipped it open once I received it. It, too was a small, but with black olives. Not my favorite topping, but one I liked.

“Thanks.”

“Hey!” Snapped Roody, “That’s my lunch!”

“Correction,” grunted the ‘gator, “WAS your lunch.” I grinned and bit into the first slice. The pizza was expertly crafted, suggesting that somebody besides Roody ever touched it.

“Top notch stuff,” I said, swallowing. I gave the ‘gator a wave as I started out the door and he back into his office. Suddenly...

“Hey flea bait!” I snapped my eyes over my shoulder. ‘Roody had grabbed the box of the ruined pizza like a frisbee.

“Two for one sale!” The ‘roo let the box fly! I ducked, but the trajectory wasn’t flat; the pizza box, due to it’s shifting contents, turned into a hail of blobs of piping hot tomato sauce and cheese! My back turned to it, globs of smoking red fruit paste and scalding-hot orange goo splattered all over the back of my coat, the heat seeping through like lava; or more precisely like the grease in the ingredients.

“YEOW!” I hollered, quickly dropping the good pizza on a table. I tossed up my shoulders, suspending the coat in mid air for a fraction of a second, and yanked my arms out of it. My trench coat fell to the floor, where I fully expected the hot ingredients to burn holes in it.

The manager started to barrel around the side of the counter, but Roody moved his lazy carcass in what looked like the most speed he’d ever shown in Pizza Gut. He slammed the bathroom door and locked it. Suddenly, ‘gator stopped, and smirked.

“HA! Never gonna get me now, Gil!” Roody gave an unpleasant laugh.

“Oh really?” Gil said, raising an eye ridge, “Turn on the light.” There was the sound of a light switch clicking on in the bathroom. The only thing missing was Psycho violins as Roody let out a horrified yell.

+++++

I chucked the empty pizza box away as I finished up my hour long trek to Quik Clean, the dry cleaning shop Gil recommended I take my coat to in order to have a fabric resurrection. I seriously doubted that anybody besides God could get the stains out of the ruined coat I held in the crook of my arm, but I could pray for a miracle while I was there. In the meantime I exercised my vocal chords with choice phrases. “Greasy little snot ball, it was his own fault, now my jacket’s probably ruined.....” The old fashioned bell chimed as I stepped into the shop, eyeing the lines of dryers and clothes waiting to be picked up. On the shelf was an odd display, advertising cans of “Spray Stretch” for sale.

AHA! So THIS is where he got it! I tried not to grin too much as I stepped up to the counter and chiming the bell. I heard the sound of a rather uncultured voice coming

my way from the back. Walking down the top of the rotating clothing delivery system was a squat raccoon with a sour look to his face in overalls. He glared at me, snorted, and jumped down. His language getting no better, he pulled out a stool, climbing the rungs like a ladder, and put his hands on his hips once he got to the top.

“Yeah? WHAT?”

Dear God, is this Town of The Disgruntled Minimum Wage Employees? Didn't I just meet this guy's marsupial brother? I decided this time to play it business-like and to the point. I gave the coat, which I'd now thrown over my shoulder, a shake.

“I got a lot of food stains on this, and I'd like it done as soon as possible.”

“Take a number and wait, loser.” The raccoon jumped down from the stool and waddled over to an unplugged lighted number sign. He stuck the plug in the socket and it started out at one. Glancing over, I saw a dust-covered ticket machine. Grabbing the paper chit, which over time had been brittle to the consistency of an onion skin from sunlight, I pulled one out. No. 34! The shop was EMPTY!

Biting down on my tongue, I leaned slightly over the counter. “Hey, you. I'm the only one you gotta serve here, so stop trying to bull-s#!% me.”

“Cram a sock in it, dork!”

“DORK?! Have we not evolved since grade school?!?” I narrowed my eyes and slammed one hand down on the counter. “My patience is wearing thin!”

Just then, the door chimed. I tossed a look over my shoulder. *Well this is unexpected.* In walked Li Furry. He had a set of grunge-stained clothes in a plastic grocery bag.

“Don't believe it,” the lion grunted. “Two hours of scrubbing, and now my duds won't stop looking like mechanic's hand rags! THREE trips through the washing machine....” Suddenly, Li looked up and locked eyes with me. We were both speechless for a second. Then the raccoon decided to make his zit-shaped presence known.

“Jeez, it's the loser convention in here.” Simultaneously, Li and I turned to look at him and said “Buzz off you...,” But there our tongues diverged. Li continued with “...little maggot larvae.” I on the other hand, finished up with. “...repulsive compost heap.”

It looked like the raccoon, who'se name I read on his overalls as “Erle”, was about to shove off in the face of being outnumbered. But then somehow the forces of darkness decided to stick its evil two bits in as the bell chimed again.

“..no good, scaly lard tub! I’ll never get the smell of that bathroom out of my clo....,” Roody bounced into Quik Clean. The ‘roo had changed into a spare set of clothes, his first set of duds, now rank with I didn’t even want to know held at the end of a stick. He froze for the briefest of seconds as he and I locked gazes. He blew out a puff of smoke from his fresh cig, causing Li to gag loudly.

“Whassa matter?” Roody snorted at the lion, “Can’t take a little smoke? Wimp. I can smell wimps a mile away.”

“Funny thing,” Li hacked, “people say the same about you, only by your BREATH.” Roody snorted at him and dropped the clothes onto the counter. “Erle, toss these in a washing machine and set it on “scrub like the wind”. The raccoon took one sniff and started his own sounds of respiratory distress.

“WHOA MOMMA! Okay Roody, in they go!” Erle grabbed the stick and hauled the foul smelling cloth items away. Li and I stood by with equal looks of irritation.

“HEY!” I snapped, raising an eyebrow. Erle came back out and clambered onto the counter to stare me in the face. I wasn’t impressed.

“I...,” I paused a moment and looked behind me for a second at Furry. Furry was apparently readying himself to be stuck in close quarters with two sleazy low-lives, and nobody to back him up. He was sighing and shaking his head resignedly, like a lion on his way to the executioner’s block. I paused for a moment more...

“WE were here first!” The lion pricked up his ears, giving me a surprised look. The ‘roo and ‘coon turned to stare us both down. “Oh yeah, what’s it to you, roadkill breath?” The raccoon cracked his knuckles.

Hey, if we’re both on the executioner’s block, let’s go down swinging. Furry and I looked between each other, then cast a glance at Erle and Roody. *Let the insult-fest commence* I thought.

Erle started. “You two dress like you went through a dumpster.”

Furry countered with “You’re guys’re so ugly you have to sneak up on a glass of water.”

The roo snorted. “You two wouldn’t know the right end of a baby to kiss.”

My turn. “If brains were money, you twerps wouldn’t have enough to break a dollar. COMBINED.”

Erle flicked something off his nose. “The gangster look is supposed to look like MODERN gangsters, doofus! It’s almost as bad as LionLARDO dressing up like he escaped from the mother ship!”

Furry rolled his eyes. “Most babies are found under a cabbage leaf. You were both found under a stink weeds.”

Roody hooked his thumbs in his pouch. “I’ve seen chick flicks that were more manly than you two!”

“Tch!” I said, “If people are born under a sign, you both must have been under a biohazard symbol.”

The raccoon sputtered for a moment, then narrowed his eyes. “Your best friend growin’ up must’ve been your parole officer! And Furry’s was only around to play from 5-5:30, central time!”

The lion examined his claws. “When you guys were born, your parents must have saved your dirty diapers and threw YOU TWO in the garbage.”

The roo make a gagging sound, then finally found his greasy tongue. “If you sat on a quarter, you’d squeeze droppings out of the eagle!”

I cracked my knuckles audibly; they’d made the mistake of concentrating on the guy they knew the best. It left me wide open. “You’re both so ugly if I had either of your faces I’d drop my pants, shave my bottom and learn to walk backwards for the rest of my life.”

Erle tried to come up with one of his lame retorts, but Furry got to them first with “You’re both so stupid even Buster wouldn’t ask you for directions.”

The raccoon was now confused as to who to insult first, but managed to get out. “The both of you are so stupid if you.....uhhh.....went to the Grand canyon you’d spend hours arguing with your echoes!” He was on the ropes; that last zinger wasn’t enough to make up for the pounding he’d taken. Furry and I went in for the kill.

First the lion nailed them with “You’re so dumb you think a scholarship is a boat.”

And for the last sting, I picked my teeth and remembered a good one. “You’re such a pair of idiots if a cannibal cracked open both your heads he wouldn’t find enough combined brains to spread on a cracker.”

Roody’s eyes darted between me and the lion. His cigarette wiggled between his tight lips. Then he spat an obscenity at us. “I’ve got better things to do than waste time with the likes of you!” And he stomped into the bathroom. I grinned and chuckled in my throat as Li licked a claw and made a tally in the air. Erle, meanwhile, shot the both of us a sour look.

“Fine! Gimmie your d@#n clothes!” I tossed my coat on the counter as the lion dropped his sack of foul smelling threads on it as well. As Erle hauled off our soiled items, the lion cocked his head to one side, giving me an odd grin. “Who on earth are you?”

I returned the smirk. “What, you don’t remember?” Then I saw it click in his eyes. He leveled a finger at me. “YOU. You’re Mike Fang, the guy from the cruise ship!”

I raised my eyebrows, trying not to openly laugh. “Yeah. And YOU are “Captain” Furry. The lion who single handedly....,” Li’s eyes bugged out as I started to regale him with his own exploits. I knew I had him then. I grinned and leaned forward until my mouth was next to his ear, like I was looking over his shoulder, and spoke as quietly as possible.

“Ahhh, so no one knows that’s what you did on your vacation. Heheheh, okay, I won’t blab...unless you make me.” I leaned back, and watched Li’s eyes narrow and slide between myself and door that Erle had just disappeared through.

“Don’t worry, I’m not about to give a little snot like that any sort of help no matter what.” That made Li breath a little easier.

“Buuuut I’ll bet your roomie would find it REALLY fascinating!” The lion extended his claws and got a really bad twitch under his eye. I raised one eyebrow, reared up to my full height, and gave him a grin that was all teeth. SHARP teeth. We stared each other down for a second, then slowly, at the same time, stopped trying to intimidate each other as we both sorta matched each other out.

“What are you doing here, Fang? Did you come here to get your kicks out of trying to blackmail me?”

“Hey, come on, I’m not like that. No, I’m here on business.”

“And what is your business?”

“Don’t you remember? I’m a private eye. I need to ask you some questions.” The lion cocked his head slightly to one side, looking askance at me.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Your friend, Muttford, does he have a computer?”

“Cave dog? Pfff! I’d be surprised if he had the mental capacity to find the power switch on one. Actually, I’d be surprised if he could fine one on anything that isn’t controlled by a remote.”

“Are you sure? Does he go to any internet café’s? Or maybe over to some other friend’s house to use their pc?”

“Not that I know of. Coffee’s the only thing that the poster child of the couch potato DOESN’T put in his mouth. ‘Sides, there aren’t any internet café’s in this town. And as for a friend, he doesn’t have one that lets him use a pc like that. Actually I’ve been thinking of buying one myself, but I’m afraid that if I do, he’ll overload the memory downloading naughty pictures.”

“Oh that’s nice!” Li jerked around. Somehow Muttford had managed to come in without ringing the bell. He had a basket of clothes with him. Apparently he’d felt bad about leaving more dirty dishes than in the mess hall of the U.S Marine Corp boot camp, so he was doing all of the laundry.

“At least I wouldn’t waste my time going to a bunch of Starfur web sites,” he grumbled, slamming the basket down on the counter.

“No,” muttered Li, “you’d probably download mp3’s of your rap crap until the police came knocking at our door.”

“Yeah? Well.....you’d max out all our credit cards on G-Bay, buying trekkie junk!”

“Least I wouldn’t gum up the keyboard cramming junk food in my face while I used it.”

“That’s it! Screw you guys, I’m going home!” Muttford started for the door. I couldn’t resist a perfect shot, and went into an impression of Eric Catman from “North Park”. I scrunched my head down into my shoulders and did my best voice of a petulant, overweight nine year old.

“Jeez! You guys! Seriously! I’m not fat, I’m big boned! Where are my Cheezy Poofs?!” I then grinned and turned to each of the two for reactions. It wasn’t what I expected. Li pulled a disdainful face at my antics, like he thought I was crude and unrefined (oh, like he’s the poster child of tact and grace!). Muttford, meanwhile, turned around and started cackling. My expression changed to one of perplexity and disbelief. I shook my head and leaned against the counter.

“Oh, you guys are just wacked.” That made Muttford laugh harder, leaning against the door.

“What’s so freakin’ funny?!” Erle stomped back out into the lobby.

“Nothin we wanna share with you.” Li said, drumming his fingers on the wall. “Now where are our clothes?”

“Keep your shirt on, Furry. Don’t wanna have any nightmares.”

“Spare me you lit.....,” CRACK! Muttford suddenly slid down to the floor.

“What the heck?!” he said, getting to his feet. Underneath him was a small, flat piece of metal. “Where did that come from?” I looked at the door and pointed. “That’s where.”

It was the handle for the lock. Muttford must have turned it when he leaned against the door and then it broke off. In the LOCKED POSITION.

“WHAT?!” the wart-shaped raccoon brayed. “Ahh man, another thing around this DUMP I gotta fix!”

“Erle, watch what you call a dump.” A new voice emerged from the back room. Out came a very attractive lady dragon, scales glimmering like she polished each one individually. She was large enough that it suggested that she benched large pieces of hardwood furniture in her exercise class, but she still maintained a sort of feminine grace. I had to admire ladies like that. In more ways than one.

“Well, seems we’ve got a new customer.” The dragoness extended a hand. “I’m Laura.” I took her hand. “Mike Fang, pleasure to.....,”

“AAAAGH! He’s gotta gun he’s gotta gun!!!!” Erle dove under the counter. I had forgotten I was wearing my shoulder holster, and in my haste to get to the dry cleaner, I hadn’t put my gun back in my room at the motel. I raised one eyebrow and looked down at him. “...meet you. Well, now we know who lived a sheltered life.”

“Um, thank you,” Laura, understandably, did give me a questioning look. I could see Furry and Muttford also looking rather nervous as well. What is it with people and guns? You’d think with all the shoot outs on tv, they’d be used to the sight.

“So, I take it you have a permit for that?” the dragoness said. I nodded, and produced it out of my wallet. After looking it over, she handed it back to me. “Erle, I think if he was gonna rob us, he would have done it by now.” The raccoon reemerged slowly, giving me a look like he expected me to go postal at any moment.

“The dorks are armed; it’s the end of the world.” I rolled my eyes. “Jeez, man, don’t you get off that track, or is your needle stuck?”

“Um, I hate to interrupt,” said Li, “ but we do have a problem.”

“Yeah,” sneered Erle, regaining his confidence in record time, “Fat @\$ broke the lock on the door!” Muttford rolled his eyes down, looking like he wanted to phase out of the picture. Laura sighed.

“Oh dear. Well I’m sure you didn’t mean it,” She patted Muttford on the head, making him go all sappy.

“Well I’ve got a news flash for everybody,” Erle whined, “Now we can’t get out! That door doesn’t open from the inside any more, and I don’t have a key to the back!”

“Erle, quit freaking out,” Laura huffed, “I’ve got my key right....,” The dragoness reached into her pocket. The way she froze told everybody just what the answer was.

“Oh no,” muttered Li.

“Shoot,” I grunted.

“Uh oh,” Muttford gulped.

“(CENSORED)” said Erle.

“....in my car,” She sighed.

“Well don’t worry,” I said, “I’ve got lock picks that I can use to get the back door open. But I left ‘em in my trench coat.”

“Where’s that?” asked Laura.

“He gave it to Erle to get cleaned,” Said Li, as everyone turned towards the raccoon. He started to nervously twiddle his thumbs.

“Erle,” Said Laura, “Where’s Mr. Fang’s coat?”

“Um...I put it on the clothes carousel.” Laura suddenly seemed to get rather irked, something which confused Li, Muttford, and myself.

“Erle, you know the carousel’s been busted for a week! It moves at a snail’s pace!” The raccoon gulped. I narrowed my eyes.

“What were you gonna do, ERLE,” I said through my teeth, “Make me wait all day?” The ‘coon razzed me. Quick as a flash, Laura grabbed Erle’s tongue. He squirmed and slapped at her arm as she picked up a can of Spray Stretch, sprayed his tongue with it, and stretched it out six feet! Then she let it go, and it snapped back at his face like a rubber band, slapping him in the forehead hard enough to bowl him over.

“Oh boy. I’ll go call the lock smith. But it’s an hour and a half drive, at least to get here from there.”

We all looked at each other, Erle rolling his tongue back up into his head. Just then, Roody stepped out of the john, he and Muttford locked eyes for second, then the mixed breed turned back to all of us.

“You mean,” Muttford said, “We’re stuck here....TOGETHER?”

“Welcome to as close to hell as you can get without actually being there,” I sighed, making the sign of the cross. “God save us all.”

It was a long wait for the carousel to come around with my coat. In that time, a lot happened. Six people never spent such a nerve shattering four hours locked together. The lock smith that Laura called were closed for renovations, so it was our only option. I really only paid attention to what was going on when things got interesting.

We all started out in several positions. Roody was thumbing through a hot rod mag from his pouch, smoking as usual. Erle was laying on his back on the counter, tossing a pen to himself, cursing every time he failed to catch it and he either poked himself in the nose, eye, or face. Laura was doing her nails with a REAL nail file; she had to with draconic claws. Lionardo and I were the designated pacers, each of us on one side of the row of washers and dryers. Muttford just sat and stared at the clock over the counter. Just then, there was an odd sound. Laura looked up.

“Erle, did you forget to unclog the toilet?”

“No, what of it?”

“Then what’s that gurgling noise?” Then it happened again. We all turned towards where we each thought the noise was coming from. And we all turned toward Muttford.

“Ohhh, I haven’t had anything to eat in so long...,” he groaned.

“How long’s it been?” I said.

“A half an hour.” The mutt sighed. I turned to look at Li with a “You’ve gotta be kidding me,” look. He gave one that read “well what did you expect?” and said “He’s serious. This’s the longest he’s gone without food in his mouth.”

Time passed.....

The raccoon had been sitting in the same position for the last ten minutes, on one of the washing machines. Curious, I walked up to him. He was staring straight ahead at the wall of dryers. One of them was on.

“What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like, doofus? I’m watching the dryer.” Without moving, I slid my eyes around to look at the dryer, then back to Erle.

“Okay...WHY are you watching it?”

“ ‘Cause it’s the closest thing we’ve got around here to tv.”

“Ahhhh,” I said, backing up two steps and turning on my heel. Raising my eyebrow, I mouthed a silent. “Whoa.....cra-zeeee....”

Time passed.....

Li and Muttford sat next to each other on the row of seats for waiting customers. They were each thumbing through one of the incredibly dated magazines on the table in the corner. Without looking up, Muttford said “Don’t say it.”

“Say what?” Li muttered, glancing at his portly companion.

“You’ve asked me five times already, and I told you I did. So don’t say it.”

“Why would I ask you again?”

“For the same reason you asked me the four times after the first; you’re obsessed with it! So don’t say it!”

“Okay, I won’t.” Each of them settled back with his magazine. Then Li said it.

“Did you remember to take out the trash?”

“RRRRGH!” WHAP! Muttford batted the lion with his magazine.

More time passed.....

Boredom was setting in faster by the second. Everybody was staring at everybody else rather lazily. The sun was starting to fade just a little bit in the window. Then it happened.

FFFFFFFFFFFFRRRRRRRRPPPPPPPPPT!!!!!! Almost simultaneously, we all slapped a hand over a nose.

“YEEESH!”

“Oh my GOD!”

“(CESNOSRED) that’s bad!”

“WHOA MAN!”

“AH FOR THE LOVE OF.....” With slightly watering eyes, we all started casting suspicious glares around.

“Alright, which one of you cut it?!” Li said suspiciously.

“Don’t look at me,” I snorted, “I’ve already hit the can ten minutes ago.”

“I haven’t had enough to eat to build up something like that,” moaned Muttford.

“Don’t look at us!” Both Roody and Erle snarled.

“Well it wasn’t me,” the lion said suspiciously. “So then....,” Suddenly, we all realized who was being rather silent. Slowly, we all turned to look at the most unlikely culprit. Laura flushed under her scales.

“Well what do you want?! I had Mexican for lunch!”

“We noticed,” everybody said almost at once.

More time, but fortunately no more gas, passed....

The washing machine was running. Curious, I walked over. Erle wasn’t to be seen staring at it. Suddenly, I became aware of a thumping noise inside. I opened it....and there was the raccoon, his eyes rolling in different directions.

“What the....,” I said.

“Hey,” The raccoon said, “It’s the closest thing we’ve got to a thrill ride.”

“Is he out?” Roody hollered from behind me, “I’m next!”

“No you’re not!” Laura said, “I don’t want you two breaking my dryer, so forget it!”

“Ah come ON lady!”

Boredom does weird things to people.

MORE time passed....

Muttford sat despondently in the corner, chewing on a rolled up magazine. I walked over to him and raised an eyebrow.

“Um, you know that’s not food, right?”

“I can dream, can’t I?” the mutt sighed. I slowly backed off, nodding. Turning to Li, who was sitting on a washing machine with his back to me, I tapped him on the shoulder.

“You know I think Muttford’s actually got a serious....,” I was stopped dead when Li turned around. HE was holding a curled up mag in the corner of his mouth which had teeth marks on it.

“serious what?” the lion said, blinking.

“.....never mind.”

Still more time passed.....

Li was walking around, really perplexed. “Hey, has anybody seen Muttford?”

“Why are you so concerned,” Grunted Roody. “I’d think you’d be glad for a little time away from him.”

“I’m not going to dignify that with a response, you....,” Li snarled, but before he could finish that delicate little term, the bathroom door opened. Muttford emerged from it, barely making it through the doorway. His belly bulged out in front of him, sloshing and gurgling, pants unbuttoned and his belly almost down to his knees. Everybody in the shop was held speechless for a minute. I poked my head in the bathroom, and put it together.

“Muttford, did you stick your head under the sink faucet and drink until....,” I eyed the gray mutt’s bulging belly, on which he rested his hands. The mutt gave everybody a haughty look.

“I don’t really care what you all think, at least my belly’s full again.” And off he sloshed to find a magazine he hadn’t chewed up beyond legibility. Roody’s mouth was left dangling open, the cigarette falling out from between his rotten teeth.

“I’d mock him, but the challenge is gone.”

Li rolled his eyes. “Oh please, you stole that from ‘Dilbert’.”

Yet again, time passed....

The entire shop, or what I could see of it, was going around and around in circles. I’d get so high, then I’d drop a bit heavily. Suddenly, Li appeared in my view. His expression was difficult to read, but it appeared to be between incredulous and irritated. Didn’t see what he had to be so upset about. Now when Laura appeared and pulled open the dryer

door, well, she had a right to be a little exasperated. I crawled out of the dryer, sniggering and trying to stand up with little success.

“I though YOU had sense,” the dragoness said.

“I used to,” I smirked.

Did I already say boredom makes people do strange things?

Still more time passed....

Erle and Roody were sniggering when I poked my head around the corner of the doorway leading into the back of the cleaners. Before I could ask what they were up to, they put their plan into motion.

“Laura! Hey Laura!” Erle yelled. The dragoness came around the corner.

“What is it?”

“I think we found an old emergency key for the door! But it’s stuck in this pipe!” The raccoon pointed at an old section of pipe hanging from the ceiling; probably used some time ago to run water to a machine that had since been removed.

“We tried to get it out, but it’s stuck in the middle. Maybe if you blew into it, you could pop it out!”

“Anything’s worth a try!” Laura said, the cabin fever obviously dulling her wits. She took a breath and put her mouth up to the pipe. Suddenly, Roody stuck a tube from one of the steam cleaners onto the pipe. Erle quickly pulled out a can of Spray Stretch and doused his boss with it. Laura made a MMMMPH! in surprise as steam began to make her swell and bloat. Her trim stomach began to swell up and stretch, becoming rounder under her jade tank top. Her jeans stretched with her, fortunately, but her skin and scales were swelling faster than her clothes were stretching around her belly, which was getting about as big as one of her washing machines out front.

The dragonesses footpaws bloated up, the toes popping out as she swelled. Her legs became rather thick, and her arms began to get rounder. She also began to swell in two very prominent places that stretched her shirt in quite the appealing way.

Finally Laura came to her senses and pushed herself off the pipe. The red dragoness was roughly the size of a home entertainment system. Her round belly reached to the floor, her bust sitting on top of it like very large pumpkins. Her limbs and paws had also puffed out, wiggling and splaying.

Erle and Roody were laughing their backsides off. Rocking back and forth on his footpaws, the ‘roo gave off a wheezing laugh very appropriate for his chronic smoking

habit. Erle gave a nasally, sputtering honk that was also befitting him. But their laughing wasn't going to be the last. Laura managed to get her footing and put her hands on her now much wider hips.

"Oh, think that's funny boys? Well you're gonna love this!" The dragoness's cheeks suddenly bulged up very wide and round. Before Erle or Roody could react, she let out a massive blast of steam and air, sending the two flying into the opposite wall like a pair of cannon balls. Though they hit more like sacks of potatoes.

"Ohh nurse...." Erle groaned as they slid back down.

Yet again, time passed.....

I heard the radio in the office click. That was my cue. With the bang on the piano keys that came out of the speaker, I slid into view of the doorway leading into the back of the cleaners with my back to the shop. I was wearing dark sunglasses I'd found in the "Lost and Found" bin, my white dress shirt, boxers.....and nothing else.

With the second hammering on they ivory's, Furry slid out, similarly adorned with sunglasses and a dress shirt he found abandoned in a bin somewhere in the back. There was a brief pause, then the radio kicked in.

"I LIKE THAT OL' KINDA ROCK AN' ROLL!" Both the lion and myself began pantomiming with the song, a can of Spay Stretch each for a microphone. We each did air guitar, heel spins, old dancing moves everybody could do. At the end of the song, we both managed a nicely coordinated spin back into the back of the shop, sliding behind opposite sides of the door.

So how did the rest of the shop denizens feel about our little show?

CLAPCLAPCLAPCLAPCLAPCLAPCLAPCLAP.

You be the judge.

More t.....oh skip it, you know what comes here....

Li paced up and down, his eyes twitching feverishly. Roody stood in front of him, looking all the more disconcerted.

"Look," Li said, pointing. "You left a cigarette butt over there....and over there....will you stop tossing garbage everywhere and use an ash tray?!"

"Jeez Furry just cool it," The roo said, rummaging in his pouch. "It's not my store, so it's not my problem." He pulled out a pack of smokes and started to light one up again. Li's eyes seemed to narrow at the sight of the lighter.

“Oh, I’ll make it your problem....,” The lion suddenly extended his claws and went for Roody’s throat. I stopped my current form of time killing, banging my head on a washer lid, to take in the newest gladiatorial drama: Stink Breath vs. The Incurable Neat Freak. The two of them were rolling on the floor and trying to kick and punch each other with deranged energy and very poor aim. Laura joined me in just blankly staring at the two, then Erle fell into place. It went on for a few seconds, then Muttford came out of the bathroom, all that water having made him a regular visitor. The pudgy mutt looked rather shocked, but in a resigned fashion.

“Shouldn’t we stop them?” he said, looking at me. I glanced up at him, then back at the two combatants.

I shrugged. “Eh, let ‘em wack each other.” Muttford seemed to be about to protest, then he seemed to remember that it was Roody Li was up against, and stuck his hands in his pockets as the lion yanked the packet of cigs out of Roody’s pouch and shoved them in his mouth, hissing in a high pitched voice “Eat it eat it EAT IT!”

Just as it looked like Roody was about to croak on his smokes, there was a thump from the clothes carousel. Everybody stopped and turned to look. Slowly, like a ghost moving through a haunted house, my trench coat came around the corner. I almost broke a leg vaulting over the counter and grabbing it.

The lock on the back door rattled a bit, clicked, then slid open. I pocketed my lock picks, took two steps outside, then promptly fell to the ground and started kissing it.

“Oh God, oh thank you thank you thank you!” Roody was the next out the door.

“Yes! Freedom! Woohooo! I’m outta here!” He proceeded to vault a fence getting away from Li.

“Shoot,” the lion hissed, claws still extended, “My quarry escaped.” I raised an eyebrow, getting back up.

“Eh, don’t sweat it, you probably know where he lives.” The lion grunted something in reply.

After the incident in the store, Laura cleaned my coat for free, and in record time, I think. While I was waiting, I decided to use this time to question Muttford. After about two questions, I had come to a very fast conclusion: Muttford was DEFINITELY off my suspect list. Those two questions were:

“Download much music off the internet?”

“What are internet cookies?”

His answers were:

“Are you kidding? I don’t wanna get arrested.”

“You can get cookies from the internet?! Chocolate chip or peanut butter?!”

The guy showed absolutely no criminal tendencies to boot, though I’m sure his room mate would want to get him sent up for the condition he keeps leaving their domicile in.

“Well,” I muttered, “You’re off the list.”

“List?” The mutt blinked, “What list?” So I explained to him about his brothers. Muttford’s face when uncharacteristically serious and he started to grind his teeth.

“Well Mr.Fang, I hate to say it but you’ve become yet another pawn in their demented little game to further ostrich-size me from...”

“I think,” groaned Li, “the word you’re looking for is OSTRACIZE, not ostrich-size.”

“Whatever,” The mutt shrugged. “to separate me from the family. I’m surprised they didn’t try to pair you up with their minion, Roody. Little suck up...”

“So they call me up and use me to take out their aggressions on their sibling....,” I snorted, narrowing my eyes. “Those manipulative, overblown, self centered....,”

Again, the mixed breed shrugged. “Eh, I live with it. Life goes on.” I raised an eyebrow at him and gave him my best crazy @\$@ grin.

“Heh, well, I on the other hand am one of those guys that doesn’t take being manipulated laying down. Those brothers of yours are going to regret (CENSORED)-ing me off.” Muttford grinned a bit.

“Wouldn’t mind seeing that.”

“Yes. Yes, that’ll work out perfectly. Certainly. Okay, I’ll see you then.” I hung up the pay phone on the corner, turning to Li and Muttford with a demented look on my face.

“Ohh yeah, payback’s gonna be a (CENSORED).”

The street that the outdoor café sat on was fairly quiet. The occasional passerby stopped to glance at the menu, then whistle at the prices. “Château du France” Boasted authentic French cuisine which was specially crafted and made by their chef straight from the heart of lower Illinois. Basically all hype, the café nonetheless produced better quality food than most restaurants, but hardly 5 star quality stuff. Besides, the only people that ate there were the image conscious that wanted to show off.

And that’s exactly what the two guys pulling up in the Jaguar were all about. I gave them the once over and knew right off the bat who I was dealing with. The fifty dollar haircuts, thousand dollar suits, car that I would have to mortgage all my belongings just to be able to rent all screamed “arrogant yuppie”. The Muttford Bros. bared resemblance to Wolfgang in species and fur color only. Their hard-chiseled good looks bespoke either countless hours in the gym or a good plastic surgeon. Either way, it was a lot to expend, all in the name of vanity. They had an air of disdain about having to BE there.

“Remind me again why we’re here,” one of them said in a cultured drawl to his counterpart, sliding a pair of sunglasses down his muzzle and looking around the town like it was the municipal dump.

“That Fang twerp said that he found out our ‘DEAR’ brother was up to more than we’d thought, and that we should see for ourselves the extent of his criminality.” The second Muttford ran a hand through his hair, brushing out his pony tail.

“Oh yes,” The former Muttford said, sitting down at an outdoor table and snapping his fingers. I hopped to it.

“Take your order, sir?” Yes, I was doing the ol’ waiter routine again. But unlike before, these arrogant snots weren’t looking to try and catch somebody posing as a busboy.

“Two Long Island iced teas, and they better be here five minutes ago.” I nodded, and stepped behind the outdoor bar.

“You wanna drink?” I muttered under my breath, sniggering, “I’ll give you a drink, all right....”

“I guess that stupid dog wasn’t as stupid as we thought. Of course, that doesn’t make him a rocket scientist.” Pony tail snickered and picked at his fingernails.

“True,” said Shades, “and who would have though our butterball brother actually had it in him? It’s about the only thing that isn’t, judging from his size!” Both mixed breeds laughed rather nastily as I set their drinks in front of them. They took their first sips, and I had them.

“Mmmm, I say, this is quite good.”

“Certainly is, I wonder if they put something extra in it...,” Pony tail took another pull on his tea. A LONG one. Within a minute, each of them had drained his glass.

“Oh, that was excellent. Waiter! Bring us two more.”

“Certainly, sir.” I hid my grin as I went back and refilled their glasses. They drained them twice as fast.

“Oh my, this is tantalizing,” said Shades, “Waiter, another round.” The more I served the Muttford Bros., the harder it became to keep from laughing. But after about the 10th round, I don’t think they would have noticed if I had. The two pretty boys were completely absorbed with knocking back their drinks, even as their stomachs started to take the slack out of their expensive shirts.

“Man, forget the glasses, bring us two pitchers.” I tried not to openly snicker evilly as I set down two chilled vessels of brown, clear liquid. Each Muttford grabbed a pitcher and started chugging it. Their expensive coat buttons popped off, followed by their fine silk shirt fasteners. Each one now has a gut the size of a basket ball, a severe change from the rock hard abs they had not ten minutes ago.

“Waiter! Are you blind?! Refill!” It was well nigh ridiculous. People on the street stopped to stare and watch as the two mixed breeds slurped and gulped their beverages, their bellies bulging out bigger and rounder. It was a good thing that the café kept its basement refrigerators overstocked. Good for me, that is.

The two Muttfords drank like camels bulking up for a long desert journey. Their pants buttons burst off to allow for their bulging stomachs, followed quickly by their shirt buttons. The swell began to spread to their arms and legs, filling their shirt sleeves. Several stitches burst, and soon they had four hundred dollar silk vests instead of shirts. They drank so much after twenty minutes they knocked over the table with the size of their guts. Their footpaws pudged out and even their toes got fatter. The orbs of their stomachs finally touched together, and that seemed to snap them back to reality.

“What....WHAT ARE WE DOING?!” Pony tail said in dismay. Each one had a belly the size of a mini-fridge, very spherical and very jiggily. They bulged and wobbled just about everywhere a tad.

“You are doing exactly as I knew you would,” I grinned, shrugging off the maroon vest, pulling off the blond-haired wig to reveal my brown, close-shaved and well groomed head. The two bloated mixed breeds gave me a quizzical look, then comprehension dawned on them.

“Fang! We’ll have your head on a stick for this!”

“Ohhh, I don’t think so.” I smirked, and pulled out a camera, and snapped several pictures. “I’ll bet the rest of your family would LOVE to see these.”

“HA!” Shades laughed, making his belly wobble more than he wanted it to. “Jokes on you, you stupid mongrel. OUR family all have unlisted addresses and telephone numbers. The rich can buy privacy that you couldn’t dream of.”

“Yeah, but I know where home is.” Muttford stepped out of the café doorway, looking like he’d just gotten over a laughing fit. Furry had decided to tag along for the spectacle, but wasn’t quite so hysterical. He was, however, smiling most unpleasantly at his roomie’s sibling. The two brothers eyed Muttford with shock, then if looks could kill, both the tubby mix, the lion, and myself would have been on a slab.

“Don’t think you’re going to get paid NOW, Fang.” Pony tail snorted at me. I smirked and thrust a finger into his belly.

“Oh come on, I’m even less dumb than you thought. Our contract says you pay me when I catch the guy embezzling funds, and I DID.”

“You what?!”

“Yeah. After I stopped working under the preconceived notion you slimeballs planted in my head about Wolfgang here, I got down to work. I checked the local house rental agencies, and found an armadillo by the name of Robert Baker moved into a house with a DSL connection and brought with him a truckload of computer equipment. A quick check of public records showed me that he had been active online at the times of the embezzlements, and once I told the cops, they got a warrant to search the place and found computer servers with the payroll codes on them.”

“I don’t believe it,” Shades groaned, slumping down so much that his face was hidden behind the bulge of his gut.

“Believe it, bloat hound,” I grinned, “I caught the guy, so cough up my ten grand!” Shades glowered and bared his teeth, but reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of fresh, crisp bills and threw it to me. I caught it and looked at it, surprised as all get out.

“You guys carry ten grand around in cash?!”

“No,” the other one said, a look of superiority on his face that appeared to have formed instinctive, despite his being big enough to have closed out “Coyote Ill-Tempered”, “We carry FIFTY grand. EACH.”

“Well whoop-de-do,” I snorted, taking the rubber band off the roll. “Money ain’t everything.”

“Careful, Mr. Fang,” Muttford grinned, pushing his hands into his brothers’ stomachs, “That’s sacrilege to these guys.”

“Knock it off, Wolfgang!” Pony tail tried to kick his brother, but couldn’t see well enough to do it.

“Blast it, what did you do to us?!”

I grinned, counting my payment. “Oh, you mean the drinks. Well I put something in them, obviously, instead of liquor. It’s a chemical from R-TEX industries; something called “thirst enhancer”. You guys just couldn’t get enough.”

“Your behavior, Fang, is reprehensible!” snorted Shades. “Nothing less than I’d expect from a low class degenerate such as yourself.” I narrowed my eyes and grabbed the bloated mix breed’s tie and pulled him as far forward as his belly would allow.

“I’M reprehensible? Well what does trying to incriminate a family member you KNEW was innocent say about YOU?!”

“Watch it Fang, or I’ll have you under arrest for assault,” Shades said icily. I let go of his tie and snorted.

“You’re not even worth the effort, you sack of (CENSORED).” The mix breed glared at me.

“We DIDN’T know he was innocent,” Pony tail grunted, for some reason feeling the need to justify himself.

“What?!” Muttford looked incredulously at his brother. “I don’t believe it....I know you don’t like me, but how could you suspect....,”

“Don’t believe ‘em Wolfgang,” I said, crossing my arms. “After you told me that Roody was their lackey, I did some extra checking while I was in the records office. Seems there was a call put into Roody from his old bosses; these two. Shouldn’t have used a company phone, boys. I’ll bet they checked with him, found out you didn’t own a computer, but decided to try and have some fun anyway.” I raised one eyebrow at the two bloated canines and shook my head. “How in the name of God Almighty you could turn on your own brother that way, completely disregard the bonds that are supposed to be between you.....I don’t care if he doesn’t meet with your approval, family is FAMILY.”

The two bloated brothers looked at each other. Some unseen telepathic message seemed to pass between the two of them.

“I think we’ve been here long enough,” They said together. Nobody, not even from the crowd that had gathered to stare in awe at their guzzling prowess, bothered to

offer a hand as they got to their bloated footpaws, then wobbled, sloshed, jiggled, and waddled back to their car. As they tried to get into the seats, Pony tail groaned.

“What now?” his brother sighed.

“We have to get out,”

“What on earth for?!”

“For the first time....I’m going to have to put the seat back so I can reach the steering wheel!”

I slapped the lid of my briefcase shut. Letting out a breath, I grabbed all my bags and went up to the register. As I dropped my key, the clerk gave me an amused look.

“Heh, heard about what you did to those Muttforfs. You hit town like a tornado, you know?”

I grimaced. “Always do.” The clerk chuckled and hung up the key as I went to hail a taxi.

“Hey! Fang!” I glanced to the side as a white and green car with the familiar lighted sign on the top pulled up. Muttford and Li were coming up the sidewalk.

“Leaving already?” Furry said, grinning just a bit, “are you sure there isn’t something you haven’t managed to turn upside down?” I gave the lion a bemused look. “Nah, I think I’ve managed to spread chaos and insanity as much as I can in this burg....for now. But who knows? I may be back. Those two over pampered goons will probably want to get a piece of me sooner or later.”

Muttford nodded, scratching his tummy. “Well if you do, don’t be a stranger.” I blinked, very surprised. So was Furry, but for a different reason. “Well that’s awfully generous of you,” I said.

“Certainly is,” Said the lion, giving Muttford a raised eyebrow, “specially since it’s MY HOUSE he’s inviting you into.”

“OUR house,” Muttford said, “I do my share of the work and pay my share of the bills.”

“Oh do you? Then explain....,” I quickly tossed my bags into the car. Looking around I grinned to myself.

“Nice, quiet place,” I said under my breath. “Maybe I’ll come back on vacation, but for now.....” I sat down in the back of the cab. The driver turned to me.

“Where to, bud?”

I took one last look at Li and Muttford, getting into it once again. Then I turned back to the driver with a very harried look on my face.

“Get me the hell out of this crazy town.”