

WHEN OPINIONS COLLIDE

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The hallway was lined with a pompous red carpet that was befitting its owner. That is, its soon-to-be past owner. This case had dragged me so far and through so much, I wasn’t about to walk away empty-handed. The busts lining the hallway in half-circle alcoves stared at me like sentries carved out of iron. But even if they could have stood in my way, they couldn’t have stopped me. He was going DOWN.

I approached the double doors, a pair of dark oak-stained barriers; the last thing between me and my target. When you disagree with a person’s opinions to their face, it’s like challenging them to a game; depending on the spirit of the challenge and the subject, the stakes can be high or low. Reputations can be made or ruined, dignity can be lost, or you can just have to consider things that you never had before.

In these disagreements, these challenges, some people become desperate to win. They make everything that’s important to them hinge on their arguments, then realize the stakes and whether or not they’re right or wrong, all they’re concerned with is being the winner, the one everybody believes. They take the side that will gain them the most and throw aside all concern for whether or not it’s the right side. They lack the confidence in their side to believe that the facts will support them, so they resort to other measures.

Illegal measures.

I couldn’t stand for it any more. Not only did this slime argue for something that I thought was hideously immoral, he was willing to make innocent people suffer for it.

I grabbed both doorknobs.

I could have imagined that would be in my future, four days ago when this case started, but I wouldn’t have thought it likely to happen. Not as I stood in front of the airport, chill wind cutting past me, as Janet put her suitcase on the conveyor belt.

“I...I don’t know when I’ll be coming back,” she said. I nodded.

“This dig, it’s going to be a long one. Years, maybe. Who knows how many levels underground the Incan temple goes.”

“I understand,” I said, trying to give her the most supportive expression I could generate. “This is a great opportunity for you, one that doesn’t come to many people.” She nodded, apparently trying not to get too emotional.

“Mike, I know we’re both important to each other, but, well, let’s face it; lately our relationship has been.....cooling.” I started a bit.

“Uh, I wouldn’t.....well....yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“So, I don’t want you to wait for me to come back. If you meet someone who makes you happy, I don’t want you to feel like you have to avoid them for me.” Again, I could only nod.

“The same goes for you. Your work, it shows you need someone who can share your moments of glory, someone who can work beside you. I can’t fulfill that, my job pulls me all over the place.” She and I both nodded, and exchanged one last kiss as she started through the airport doorway, and I started back towards my car. Then, I paused and turned back.

“But....if you get back to town....and I haven’t found anybody....,” Janet tossed her hair and turned back, giving me one last smile.

“I’ll look you up again.” We had one last smile, and then our two ways parted.

“You let her go?!” Lenny poured me a refill for my screwdriver. I smirked and sipped at it slowly.

“You suggest I had some kind of control over her. Janet’s....exotic, untamed nature made her all the more fun.”

“Mmmm, well, ‘tis better to have loved and lost....,” The polar bear swabbed a glass, the low-lit bar flashing neon over my face from the advertising lights behind it. A fair crowd had gathered, and I kept my other hand laying across my lap, on top of my wallet, and only a few inches away from my piece. I tossed the payment for my drink down and drained the glass. Two wasn’t enough to make me drunk just yet, but I was still calling it a night ‘cause I wasn’t in the mood to be drunk on my first few hours unattached again.

“So what’re you gonna do now, Fang? Bury yourself in your work? Heh, if you do that, there won’t be a pickpocket or burglar left in this town.”

“Ahh, I’m not....,”

“..that good? Please! I’ve heard all the stories!”

“Heh, okay, maybe I’ve got skill. But we’ll see what happens when it happens.” I picked up my hat, not suspecting just how soon things would start happening.

The steady circles of light coming down from the lamp posts along the street seemed to lead a path right to my office door. I’d left my laptop there, and I never left it in my office, seeing as how I might need it at any time. I slowed my pace as I dug in my pocket for my key. It was then I became aware of someone behind me. I continued on, glancing in the rearview mirrors of the parallel parked cars on the street. I couldn’t make out the figure; the mirrors weren’t tilted at the proper angle. I pulled my keys out and tossed them into my left hand. As I stepped into the alcove of my office building

doorway, I quickly put the flat of my back against the wall. It would happen fast, so I went ahead and put my right hand in my trench coat.

The figure stepped into the alcove, and quickly became aware that I was standing in the shadows. His hand was going around and behind his back when I quickly moved forward, making his shoes scrape on the tiles as I shoved him up against the wall. It was a skunk, and an odd one at that. Dressed in a green jacket, his brown hair came out from underneath his dark blue baseball cap, worn backwards. He also had some small scars over one eye. But the oddest thing about him was that his fur, where it would normally be black, was bright orange.

“AAAH! Get off.....,” he grunted, pushing against me.

“Don’t even think about it,” I growled, drawing my revolver.

“Wha...what’re you...”

“Drop the gun, right now.”

“The what...”

“The gun in your back pocket. Or are you going to deny that you’ve got one?”

“Of course I don’t have a gun!”

“Right, then lets go tell that to the first beat cop we can find.”

Slowly, the skunk smirked. “Heh, alright, I got one. You’re not bad, that’ll come in handy.”

“Eh?! Buster, if you’re lookin’ to use me for somethin’, you got two choices: take a hike, or get a mouth full of fist!”

“Hey, calm down!” The skunk started to act nervous. But he wasn’t really scared of me; his eyes were looking out of the doorway. I tossed a fast glance that way; great, he was being chased.

“Who’s following you?”

“I can’t say. Not here. Don’t even know if they were following me, but they might...”

“Let me guess,” I holstered my piece, and let the skunk go. “You’re lookin’ to hire me.”

“Bingo.” The skunk smoothed his jacket, a sort of quiet confidence defining his whole personality. I narrowed my eyes a bit, then nodded.

“Sorry for the rough treatment, but have you ever heard of a phone call?”

“Have YOU ever heard of a phone tap?” The skunk said in reply, sticking his hands in his jeans pockets. I raised an eyebrow, and quickly unlocked the door.

“C’mon, office is on the third floor.” I ushered the skunk inside and quickly locked the door behind me. The stairwell was dark except for a few small lights on the corners where it wrapped around the rectangular central core to the building, a skylight letting in a little starlight. It looked like we were the only two in the building, save for the night janitor. At first my would-be client appeared to want to either bolt or draw on the ferret in the jumpsuit, but I put a hand on his shoulder quickly; I knew him by sight, he was no disguised thug.

“So what’s your name?” I tossed open the door to my office after opening two deadbolts, the doorknob, and turning off the electrical panel that would’ve shocked anyone trying to either force the doorknob or magic their way through it. The skunk looked around a bit, but didn’t speak up until I’d shut the door, relocked it, and flipped the shock panel’s juice back on.

“Scooter McPhearson.”

“Well Mr. McPhearson...,”

“Scooter, no need to be uptight.”

I chuckled; formality these days was almost a lost art. “Scooter, you thirsty?”

“Sure, you got a cold one?” I looked the skunk over; he couldn’t have been more than eighteen at the oldest.

“Little young for that, aren’t ya?” He gave me a “gimme a break” look. I shrugged.

“Eh, nothin’ in the Good Book that says ‘thou shalt not drink beer before you’re 21.’ I reached into my mini fridge and pulled out a can of Suds brand macrobrew.

“Heh, now you’re talkin’.” The skunk snapped open the can and took a pull. I pulled off my coat and hat, hanging them up and taking up my usual position behind my desk, drawing the blinds so as to keep my client as concealed as possible as I flipped on my desk lamp. Scooter tensed a bit, but looked at the blinds and figured they would be enough.

“So,” I said, cracking my stiff neck, “let’s get right to it. You’re being stalked or threatened by somebody, I gather from your twitching. What can you tell me about them and why are they stalking you?” Scooter rubbed at his neck, taking another sip of beer.

“I’m a computer hacker. I’m hired by businesses, law firms, and banks to check and make sure their computer systems are up to date on their security systems.”

“Like ‘Sneakers’.”

“Right. Two days ago, I get a call to go do a job for the Customs Department. I go down there, and meet some guy named Ferris Drax. He lets me in the warehouse computer room, says he wants me to see if I can hack the system to change the status of several packages in the holding queue from “Inspection Pending” to “Passed”. Well it was after hours, so that should’ve made me suspicious. But when he wrote out a check for \$500 right there, I just waltzed right on in. I even ignored the fact that there were about four other guys waiting in the room when we got there, not doin’ anything, just standing around.”

“I think I see where this is going....,” I said. “Scumbags, right?”

“Exactly. I didn’t know it at the time, though. I jus sat down at the pc and started hammering away. Well fifteen minutes go by, and I know that this is beyond my skills and I tell them so. Drax says “that’s a shame,” and pulls out a gun! Well I throw the keyboard at him and start for the door. Some of his guys grabbed at me, but I bit, punched, and kicked at them until I wriggled out and ran for it. I got home and figured I was safe. But the next day I come home and find that my place was broken into! Nothing was stolen, or even tossed around like they were searching for something, so....,”

“They must’ve been looking for you. Okay kid, I don’t suppose that you’ve gone to the police about this, have you?” Scooter shook his head, draining the rest of his beer.

“These guys know where I live, so I figure they must be watching the police station. The last thing I need is to buy it in the back of the head from a sniper rifle.” I nodded, crossing my arms. I rub at my chin and think carefully. Scooter’s safety was my first priority.

“Okay, here’s the plan: First, we make sure you’re safe. Next, I start looking into these five thugs, find out who they are, where they are, what they’re doing. Finally, I bust them and get them either in jail or sucking dirt if they’re stupid enough to try and ice me.”

“Heh, stupid enough? You think you’re that good?”

“I’m still alive in this biz, aren’t I? And you know I’m that good.”

“Oh yeah? How do you figure?”

I grin and leaned back in my seat. “You came to me for help, didn’t you?” Scooter laughed.

“Alright, maybe you are. So, what do we do right now?”

“Well, we gotta find a safe place for the both of us to spend the night. If you were worried about being followed, now I’m in this as deep as you. These guys wanted to wack you just for seeing your faces and knowing they were up to something. Right now we’ve got a name to go on, and that’s it.” I paused a second. “Unless you’ve still got

that check....” Scooter’s face lit up and he dug into his jacket pocket, dropping a folded piece of paper on the desk.

“Tried to cash it, but it bounced. The teller said that the account it was for had been canceled.” I used a pen to unfold the piece of paper. Reaching into my desk, I pulled out some evidence gathering tools; chalk powder, super glue, and latex gloves. I carefully put on the gloves and opened the check completely. As Scooter looked on curiously, I opened the bottle of glue and passed the check over it a several times. Then I took the chalk dust and sprinkled a little bit in various places. Like clockwork, the hand oils where fingerprints were had stuck to the paper had absorbed the glue fumes, allowing the chalk to stick. There were two good prints at opposite ends of the check; doubtlessly where Drax had handed the check to Scooter.

“Let me see your hand,” I said, pulling out an ink pad. I took a scrap of paper from my printer and rolled the skunk’s thumb, giving me something to compare the check prints with.

“Right, now we’ve got Drax’s print.” I took some clear scotch tape and pressed it on the print, then lifted it off and folded it over. I pulled out a fresh manilla envelope and dropped the thumbprint into a smaller plastic bag, then the check into a similar bag and put them both into the envelope, quickly labeling it “Case #57 Evidence”.

“Whoa, you ARE good,” The skunk grinned. “Haven’t even been one day on the case and you’ve already got this sucker’s print.”

“Well I like to show off,” I said, chuckling. “Now, ahhh, not to sound cold, but what do we want to do about my fee?”

“Well I’ve got cash, no problem. What’s your rate?”

“\$75 a day or \$1000 lump sum.” The skunk started a bit at my latter method of payment.

“Heh, I’ll go with the \$75 a day.”

The very last of the crowd was leaving “The Helium Club” for the evening. I flashed my ID band, wrapped around my wrist, to the doorman. Scooter seemed apprehensive to say the least, like the fly being invited into the spider’s parlor.

“Don’t worry,” I said as the doors opened, “The owner’s a friend of mine.” The skunk still seemed apprehensive, especially when security tried to take away his piece. That was the first I’d seen of it, a chromed .50 caliber.

“Easy guys, let ‘em keep it. You let me in with mine, don’t you?”

“Yeah but...,”

“Hey, I’m vouching for him.”

“Eh....okay.” The crocodile who was trying to relieve Scooter of his piece relented. As we proceeded further into the club, I smirked.

“Not a bad gun, but you should give up those lousy automatics. Jam too much. And they have to make ‘em too big to be able to handle kick back from large calibers.”

“You ever shot one of these?” Scooter said, patting his back pocket. I shook my head.

“Then trust me, it’s a lot better than you think.” I shrugged. “I suppose, but it probably can’t match this.” I drew my, double-barreled, two cylinder, .357 revolver out from under my coat. Scooter cocked his head.

“Fancy piece, what’s that on the barrel?” I tilted the gun a bit so the light caught the etched words on the side of the revolver.

“Heh, it says: ‘The Equalizer’.”

“Nice.” Just as we were approaching the lounge, the doors opened. Alden MacManx approached from inside, still turned back towards the interior, laughing at something a private guest had said, nattily dressed in his usual business suit, silver shirt, and velvet red waistcoat.

“Ha! I always told the mayor that trying to argue with the president’s illegal immigrant policy would get him in trouble...Mike! What’s the occasion? You usually don’t come by this late.”

“Nice to see you too, Al. I’ve got a case and, ahhh, I’m gonna need your help. My client’s being chased. Al, this...” I stepped to one side. “Is Scooter McPhearson. We both need a safe place to stay for a while.” Scooter extended a hand, which Al readily took.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. McPhearson. I’ll be more than happy to allow you to stay in some of the club’s overnight quarters.”

“Thanks Al. Scooter, have you eaten yet? I need to go talk with someone else here.”

“Actually, I had to skip dinner when I saw one of....them...following me to the restaurant.”

“That’s a pain. Al, could you hook him up?”

“Sure think. Right this way, sir, we’ve got a fine bill of fare....,” Ever the gracious host, the Manx cat quickly led Scooter into the best dining room the club had. I, meanwhile, headed for the doorway marked “Basement: Employees Only”.

The pumps hissed and clanked, like some steam work version of Frankenstein's monster. The basement of The Helium Club contained all the mechanical monstrosities that enabled its patrons to enjoy making as big a scene as possible. But I wasn't there to examine the masterful works of machinists, I was looking FOR a machinist.

"SPECS?! You down here?!"

"Hey, Mike, back here!" I made my way around the various dimly lit devices to a door labeled "Warning: Mad Genius Wolf At Work! Enter At Your Own Risk". Shoving it open, I was greeted with welding sparks flying from in front of the figure of a wolf in a brown leather jacket. He turned around, pulling goggles from over his eyes.

"Hey Mike, haven't seen you down here in a while!"

"Yeah, I've been kinda busy lately. I haven't seen you around town that much, either."

"Well," said Specs, tossing the welding torch aside, "work was tough to find after that incident with the moving company, you know? But fortunately Alden brought me on full time! I do most of the mechanical repairs around here."

"Excellent! Speaking of mechanics, I've got a new case, and I think it's the perfect time to try out those items you and I discussed."

"Oh, you bet!" The wolf quickly walked back into a storage closet. The sound of rummaging was quickly followed by him bringing out a cardboard box, and a large one at that.

"Okay, first item....," Specs pulled out a shoulder holster made out of nylon. I shrugged out of my coat and started pulling off my old one.

"Great, this holster's about worn out. I hope this one's made to specifications."

"Hey, you're talkin' to ME here, remember? This shouldn't ride around as much with that hand cannon of yours."

"Perfect," I chuckled, threading the straps around my belt and snapping the buttons. It fit snugly, and was specially sewn so that my piece was held parallel to the ground.

"Here's the special speed loaders, too." The wolf pulled out smaller cardboard box containing what looked like several sets of two speed loaders molded together with one release knob.

"When you turn the knob," Specs said, chewing on a sandwich from a paper plate on his work bench, "one click releases the right load, the second click releases the left one. So be sure to do it in the right order, or you'll drop your bullets."

“Gotcha,” I said, loading up the ammo compartments on the holster. Thirty-six bullets in total were put into them. Specs cocked his head slightly as I geared up.

“By the by, why did you request those silver bullets?”

“Well these days the likelihood of me going head-to-head with vampires and werewolves is greater, so when I do...,” I smirked and slapped my piece. “I’m gonna give them a little something to remember me by.”

“Hmm. I guess that makes sense. Now, we get to the fun item....,” the wolf reached in and pulled out an odd doodad. A small, flat plastic bar that looked molded to a certain shape, it had two hydraulic arms on it extended flat down. I pulled off my trench coat and Specs carefully fitted it on, also hooking up the elastic band in the back of my coat that he’d put in a few days ago; the one that had several squares of metal on it.

“Okay, if you’re up high, here’s the deal; pull that special button I put on your coat. The arms will extend and stretch your coat out like a hang glider. The elastic will also get pulled tight down the middle of your jacket so it’ll catch the air. Be sure to get your legs through that strap along the bottom there or you’ll run the risk of slipping out. That’ll ruin your day.”

“And the sidewalk,” I said, eye twitching.

The night passed quickly. It had been close to midnight anyway, so it was no surprise. When I woke up the next morning, Scooter was eating breakfast in the club’s lounge.

“So,” he said, mouth full of eggs, “what’s the plan?”

“Well,” I said, the chair squeaking a bit as I turned it around to sit in it reverse style, “First order of business is to get pictures of the five thugs you saw. We’ll run them through an ID database and see what comes up. I’ve got a friend who’s got an incredibly fancy computer set-up.” Scooter nodded, draining an orange juice glass.

“So where do we get the pictures?”

“Well I usually don’t like placing my client out in the open...,”

“Heh,” The skunk smirked, taking off his baseball cap and running his hand through his brown hair. “Don’t even think about stickin’ me in some safe house and just expectin’ me to wait. I’m a type-A personality, I’d go stir crazy.”

“Suit yourself,” I said, shrugging. “In that case we need to get you to someone to draw these guys. Since you’re sure they’re watching the police station, we need someone else. And I think I’ve got an idea who....,”

“...the PARK?” That was what Scooter said incredulously as I parallel parked just outside of the brick wall-enclosed acreage that was Rothfield Memorial Park. Almost as big as NYC’s Central Park, the tract of public land was one of the largest single plots in the city, and all publicly owned. There were rumors of a politician having

a Summer home hidden somewhere in the heavily wooded area, but nobody had found anything like that. Hills, small fields, several ponds, a hedge made, and a cobblestone walkway with picnic tables made it a real boon to the city.

“Trust me,” I said, grinning and popping the door open, “You find the most amazing things in the most amazing places.” The skunk stepped out, hands in his pockets, looking as-of-yet unconvinced.

There were a few clouds in the sky, but nothing threatening rain. The crowds were plentiful in the park, but spread out. All around, the usual park regulars were showing up; joggers, push cart vendors...oh yes, and sketch artists. Before we made our way towards one particularly busy looking guy, I stopped by a vendor and made a purchase. Scooter looked at my buy and then back at me.

“Go through a lot of ‘em?” He said. I chuckled. “This guy is something of an oddity. He does sketches for money, sure, but for big jobs, you’ve gotta sweeten the deal.” The skunk snorted a laugh.

“A’ight, here we go, another masterpiece!” The artist grinned and flipped around his sketch pad. The vixen sitting on the stool in front of him gasped and clapped her hands together.

“It’s PERFECT! Thank you!” She kissed the artist and skipped off, admiring her self-portrait.

“Heheheh, YEA! I love this job!” The artist twirled his pen to himself. I flicked the brim of my hat and grinned. The artist went by the name of Hoodah Daccat, and was without a doubt one of the best artists I’d ever seen grace the park. He had a wide variety of colors, shapes, lines, and textures to his repertoire, and that came in handy, given the myriad different species he had to draw.

“Impressive work,” I said, drawing closer as the crowd thinned a bit. Hoodah looked up. He was a sand-colored cat dressed in navy blue all over, from his T-shirt to his shorts and sneakers, all the way up to his backwards baseball cap. He slid a pair of rectangular sunglasses down his nose; in all the time I’d seen him at the park, he’d never taken them off except to clean them. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he bathed and slept in them.

“Heh, thanks. It should be after all the practice I’ve had. So what can I do for ya?”

“Well we’ve got an order to place with you.”

“Sure thing! Just pull up a seat and get comfortable.”

“Oh, actually, this one’s a bit...special...,”

“Ahh, I see....,” The cat tilted his head a bit and slid his shades back up his nose. “well, if it’s special you want, you have to give me something special in return....,”

“Heh, I think....,” I reached into the paper bag I was carrying.

“...these should fit the bill.” I pulled out my purchase from the vendor; three pairs of sunglasses were fanned out like playing cards in my hand: a pair with triangular lenses, a pair with oval lenses, and a pair with perfectly circular lenses.

“Oooooo,” Hoodah snatched the glasses out of my hand. “Now you’re talkin’ MY language!” He chuckled in his throat and put them in a case next to the bench he was sitting at that held his art supplies. He pulled out a fresh piece of paper. “ ‘Kay, how many pictures you need?”

“Five, and I need you to try and make them by description, not model.”

“Sure, no sweat.” The cat tossed his pen into a trash can and pulled out a fresh one. “Okay, shoot.”

I turned to Scooter. “Okay, describe each of them one by one.” Scooter grinned at me, then turned to Hoodah. “The first one is a panther. He’s dark black, well built, about...six feet, maybe a little more. His eyes are green and he’s got a ponytail. He was dressed in....,” Scooter continued on with the finer details. From time to time, Hoodah asked him for a few specifics he hadn’t thought of before. One by one, each of the thugs was rendered with almost photographic quality: The muscular panther Ferris Drax, an almost-rail thin beaver with two gold incisors, a monstrous lady grey wolf with tattoos on both arms, a morbidly obese brown gecko, and a lady otter with a glass eye.

“Thanks a heap, man.” I carefully rolled up the pictures. “This gi....,” that’s as far as I got. I knew this case couldn’t stay quiet forever. I just never expected it to get heated so fast.

A sudden static burst of bullets dug a line across the walkway just behind us. The crowd around us screamed and ran. Scooter and I darted around the bench Hoodah had been drawing at and dove behind a huge boulder kept around for aesthetic appeal. The cat, meanwhile, had ducked behind a balloon vendor’s cart.

“Dang! Time to blow this scene!” The cat grabbed the cart’s helium tank and pulled it over into his lap. He bit down on the nozzle and twisted on the gas. I watched as the cat’s belly started stretching his shirt, parting it from his shorts as it bloated out like a big round balloon covered with fur. His limbs puffed up a little as he sucked down the gas quickly, the look on his face suggesting that he actually was sucking on the gas rather than just letting it flow, trying to get it out of the tank as fast as possible.

I couldn’t blame Hoodah for wanting to.....do whatever it was he was doing quickly. I could now see, from my crouched position behind the rock, where the bullets came from. A car on the road that went through the park opened and out came two gray foxes in red windbreakers with headbands and parachute pants; regular gang bangers. Each had an Ingram uzi and was scanning the crowd. This wasn’t just some chance occurrence, they were looking for somebody. And I had to assume that was us.

The crowd had pretty much dispersed, and the foxes were starting to close in on our hiding spot. I drew my revolver, cocking the hammer and gritting my teeth; the one part of my job I'm not terribly fond of is shooting people, but it's an unfortunate necessity at times. Scooter was drawing his own pistol with a rather resigned look to his face. I had to agree with his thoughts at the time, which from his expression seemed to be: "Why me?"

The two foxes had just split up slightly, coming around on either side. Just then, a sandy colored bulge emerged from behind the balloon cart. Both foxes watched with amazement as a cat with a belly the size of a mini fridge and puffed up limbs suddenly started floating up and away, caught by the steady breeze that had been blowing. He had his art tool box for ballast and with the wind, had cleared the far wall of the park and disappeared in seconds.

"Clever," I chuckled, and suddenly saw our opportunity. Both foxes were still staring in the direction of the departed, inflated artist. I nudged Scooter, tossed my head at the foxes direction, then took my pistol and held it behind my head, making a motion like I was clubbing myself in the back of the head with it. He nodded, and on my signal, we both burst from our hiding spot. The skunk was faster than I was, and plowed into one fox with his shoulder, knocking him to the ground. As the gang banger tried to bring around his pistol, Scooter backhanded him across the face with his heavy automatic.

The second gang banger spotted me out of the corner of his eye and tried to get a bead on me. But I brought around my revolver and smacked his wrist, knocking away his uzi. The fox jerked back and started to wind up to sucker punch me, but stopped short when my boot reminded his stomach that getting kicked in the guts hurts. The vulpine doubled over and I brought my revolver down on his head, dropping him to the walkway.

"You okay?!" I looked at Scooter over my shoulder as I slapped some handcuffs on the first fox. The skunk was kneeling on top of his opponent, gun put up against his temple.

"Yeah, I'm okay!"

"Thank God. You recognize these guys?"

"No, I've never seen 'em before!"

"Shoot, Drax must be hiring street thugs to do his dirty work."

The police were more than happy to drag away the two gunmen to sweat them under the bright lights of a 3rd degree. But unfortunately I doubted they'd get anything out of them besides foul language and maybe some spit in their faces. I was going to keep following up the case on my own.

My motor ticked in the cool air as I led Scooter across the driveway we'd pulled into. The skunk was looking with awe at the edifice that he was staring at, a fair-sized castle, complete with ramparts and a gate.

“Good God, your friend lives HERE?”

I nodded. “That’s right. I can’t even begin to conceive where he got the money to build this place, but he did. He’s one of those magician types, you know, so who knows what they’re up to when you’re not watchin’ them.”

“A magician?” The skunk cocked his head to one side as I grabbed the doorknocker and clanged it against the oak door. “But I thought you said he was going to help us find these people in a database....,”

“Well,” I said as the door swung open on automated hinges, revealing a hallway lined with unexpectedly modern lighting, “He’s sort of a techno-magician. Dabbles in a little of both worlds. Frankly I think he’s begging to rip a doorway into another dimension and suck the planet into a black hole, but it’s his business, I guess.” The skunk suddenly looked very apprehensive to enter the house. The holographic lion butler that appeared in front of us didn’t help any.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Fang.”

“Afternoon, Puck,” I said, beckoning Scooter with a finger, “We need to see Drake, he around?”

“The master is currently in the library, please follow me.” With a little flickering, the faux lion led us up two flights of spiral stairs and down some impressively padded hallways. The foyer of the castle was the only part that had maintained the rustic medieval look, the rest of it was like a mansion. Finally, the lion indicated a pair of tall double doors. Per my usual melodramatic nature, I threw both of them open. I probably shouldn’t have.

“WHOAOAHOA!” A clatter off books greeted our ears. My dramatic entrance had startled Drake, causing him to fall off the ladder he had climbed to get to the top of a bookshelf, pulling the entire shelf of books down on top of the short dragon. Soon there was a pile of books at the bottom of the ladder with a pair of green dragon footpaws sticking out and a shock of wavy blue hair on top. A couple hands emerged and began tossing volumes of volumes away.

“Whoops. Heh, sorry Drake.” I rubbed the back of my neck. Scooter, meanwhile, was giving me this look that said “THIS is the guy who’s supposed to help us?”

“Heh, s’alright Mike, I probably would’ve wound up doing it anyway, trying to carry down half the encyclopedia with me.” Drake pulled himself out of the books, dusting off his red leather bomber jacket.

“So, what brings you to my little corner of the world?”

“Well....,” I introduced Scooter and launched into the briefest synopsis I could generate of our predicament so far. I only managed to shorten it to ten minutes.

“So we were wondering if you would scan these pictures through your computer and do comparisons of them with criminal records on the internet.”

“Right, no problem. The supercomputer’s upstairs.” The dragon led us over to a round metallic plate on the floor. Above us, we could see a hole where the apparently rising platform entered to allow a person to get to the next floor.

Drake stood in the center of the circle and stamped his foot. Nothing happened. He stamped a second time. By the time he got to jumping up and down like he was having a fit, he realized it was on the fritz.

“Dang. Well I’ve got a backup, don’t worry.” Drake walked over to a closet and started rummaging around it. He came back with a tank labeled “He” and a hooka rig with more than one hose on it. I smirked as I grabbed one of them, first untying my boots and handing them around my neck by the laces, and turned to Scooter.

“You ever do this?”

The skung smirked back and grabbed a hose of his own. “In this city? Who doesn’t?” Simultaneously, we all bit down on our hoses. Soon, three bellies were swelling outwards and towards each other, one of them unbuttoning a shirt as it went (that would be mine; I was the only one wearing a dress shirt). All three of us swelled like ripening fruit, though much more buoyant, our hands and footpaws popping out. Slowly, we became airborne as our stomachs reached a size where they offset our body weights. One by one, a dragon, a Doberman, and a skunk started flapping their arms to shift over towards the hole in the ceiling. We were each roughly the size of a desk, though, so it wasn’t too big a surprise when we all reached the hole....then got stuck!

“ACK!” We all said simultaneously. I could only imagine the scene: Drake’s upper body was stuck in the top, I was trapped in between, and Scooter’s bottom half, judging from the lack of light, was dangling out of the ceiling of the library.

“Um..., hang on guys,” Drake said, squeaking noises coming from his belly, “I’ll try to pull free!”

“Hurry up!” I grunted, “Your footpaws are right in my face! PPPCHEWWW! Don’t you take a shower in the morning?!”

“I think the more pertinent question,” grumbled Scooter, “is ‘haven’t you heard of ‘Odor Eaters’?!’”

“Hang on, I’m almost....,” The air was filled with a sound like a champagne cork coming out of a bottle, only instead of an overflow of suds, only three big bubbles came shooting out of the hole in the floor of Drake’s computer room. We bounced around like runaway super balls. Drake caught hold of the edge of a window sill and stopped himself, belching out his helium. Scooter and I, however, had to use each other as brakes, namely by colliding and hooking arms, landing on our backs and getting the gas knocked out of us.

“Owww,” I groaned.

“NOT the most fun way to get back to normal,” Said the skunk through clenched teeth. Drake chuckled, making his way to his computer. Scooter dusted himself off and took stock of the room; a sparsely decorated place with hardwood floors, a few art deco pieces here and there, and one desk with a modest desktop computer sitting at it. The skunk raised an eyebrow.

“That’s it? From what Mike told me, you had some mega super computer ripped off from N.A.S.A.” The dragon looked over his shoulder and grinned. He hit a few keys, and suddenly the wall behind the computer desk split open, revealing a pc with a screen that took up an entire wall like a movie screen, massive towers lining the walls like internet servers, and a holographic keyboard on a platform right in the center of the hidden room.

Drake raised an eyebrow and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “You mean like that?” The skunk’s eyes shot open.

“Uh, yeah, that’ll fit the bill.” I fished the sketches of the criminals out of my coat and handed them to Drake, who held them up for some unseen lazer eye to scan over. Each image was thrown up onto the screen like a portrait over a fireplace. A readout then appeared as Drake typed on the holo-keyboard, various web sites getting pulled up: Police, Interpol, C.I.A, and F.B.I.

“Jeez Drake, where’d you get the clearance for these places?” I tilted back my hat. The dragon turned and gave me an incredulous look. I raised an eyebrow.

“Ohhh God. Drake, do you want me to have to turn you in?” The dragon chuckled.

“I’m kiddin’, mate! Nah, I got clearance when I designed a few computer networks for these boys.” Finally, each sketch had a photo bearing a remarkable resemblance hanging over it, complete with an accompanying name, age, etc.

“Right,” I said, reading out loud, going down the rogue’s gallery, starting with the guy who’s name we already knew. “Ferris Drax; terrorist for hire. Real paranoid sucker, when he puts together a team, they never work without him again. If they try to leave his gang he caps them.”

Next came the skinny beaver. “Clyde Montreal. Electronics geek, big on bypassing automated security systems; security cameras, card readers, that kinda stuff. Also studying some kind of martial arts, apparently.”

Then came the flabby gecko. “Bernard Vale. Explosives expert. Total pervert, too. Say he’s responsible for vandalizing a casino by blowing up the penthouse. He was supposed to have assassinated the owner, but he was too busy committing voyeurism by watching some woman a few floors below through the long lens of a camera.”

Next up was the big lady wolf. “Gale Bloodmoon. Werewolf, nice. Comes from some ridiculously secretive “pack” of werewolf primitives. Just your usual hired muscle, and plenty of it. Reportedly ripped a bank vault door off and used it to crush four guards to death while her accomplices looted it.”

Lastly, the otter woman. “Terry Sand. Assassin. Specializes in sniper hits. She escaped from a Norwegian prison by scaling a tower, breaking the guard’s neck, sniping all the other guard towers, and as a parting shot, killed the warden through his office window.”

My eyes scanned over these five scumbags, probably the most cutthroat crew of hired criminals assembled in a decade.

“I think I’m gonna need some help.”

“So do you have any ideas where we’re going next?” Scooter scratched under his baseball cap as I flipped on my turn signal, checking both directions thoroughly before stepping on the gas. Traffic wasn’t that bad for the inner city, but I still didn’t take any chances at intersections, not since I got t-boned trying to cross one.

“I’ve got another friend who runs a gym nearby. My main concern right now is that werewolf chick. Well, actually they all make me nervous, but she’s the big concern, really.” I knew I was packing the right equipment to take on a werewolf, but still combined with her accomplice’s abilities, they might have found a way around that. And the only other thing that a werewolf is susceptible to is the attack of another werewolf.

Scooter nodded. It was then I noticed an S.U.V pull out of a parallel park right behind us. I narrowed my eyes at my rearview mirror; the smoothness and quickness in which they did it suggested it was a deliberate movement. Or was I being paranoid....

....maybe, but that still didn’t mean they weren’t out to get us! The S.U.V suddenly swept around to our side and began to speed up like it was trying to pass us. But somehow I doubted their intent was that benign. Maybe it was the look on the driver’s face, or the fact that there were four people in the vehicle, or that two of them were leaning out of the windows, one with a shot gun and the other with two automatics.

“S#!T!” I floored the gas pedal, hearing the thud of a shot gun just as my driver’s side passenger window exploded inward. Scooter instinctively ducked his head down, pulling his pistol out of his coat. Being the driver I couldn’t return fire; all that driving with one hand while shooting with the other stuff you see in the movies is ridiculous. The feeling of having to stay seated while being shot at was also discomforting; I had to fight the urge to stop the car and try to run on footpaw.

I took the next turn hard, barely missing the row of parked cars on my right. I put my hand on the horn and kept it there, sending people running for cover along the sidewalk. The S.U.V came around the corner with squealing tires, fishtailing a bit as it started coming up fast behind us. Teeth grinding, I spotted a narrow, one car bridge right ahead. On the other side, after a bit more city street was the main highway. If I could get to it, state troopers would spot us and then the gang bangers would be out of luck.

I barreled over the bridge, a couple pistol slugs (judging from the sound of the cracks) hitting my back window. He was shooting with two 9mm; a gun glorified by action movies, but in reality a real sissy gun. The slugs bounced off my rear windshield, though they did hit hard enough to shatter it. Scooter wheeled around in his seat, returning fire. It was then I looked ahead and saw that traffic on the highway was in full flow, and there was no room to merge!

“Oh God...HANG ON!” I crossed myself quickly and jerked the wheel hard to the right, then turned it back. My car lurched to the side, then straightened out as I slammed on the brakes, the seatbelt tightening around me. A couple stray shots went way past the car. I curled down as far as I could in the driver’s seat, grabbing Scooter and pulling him down with me. The S.U.V went rocketing past. The accompanying horns, squealing tires, and crashes told me what happened: the vehicle when flying past us, into highway traffic, and was nailed by a tractor trailer.

Tentatively, I looked up. There was a big mac-semi stopped about a hundred yards in front of me. Its headlights were smashed and there were dents and scratches all over its bumper. The highway was littered with glass and plastic, sparkling in the sunlight. Of the S.U.V there was no sign; it had been knocked far enough to be hidden by the line of shops along the road that led to the highway.

My heart was trying to break my ribs, and not doing a half-bad job of it. I pried my hand off the steering wheel and tried to convince my lungs to start breathing again. I glanced over at Scooter; the skunk had a death grip on the sides of his head. I rested a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, it’s over, you okay?” The skunk slowly rotated his head to look at me.

“I think I just \$#it myself.” I nodded, patting him on the back.

“Somehow I think my own underwear could use a bit of freshening.” Slowly, I climbed out of my car. Behind me, the choir of police sirens told me they’d been chasing us since the bangers had started shooting. Scooter made sure to hang up his automatic before anyone spotted him. A patrol car screeched to a halt, blocking off traffic behind it. A zebra with his hand on his holster and a vixen similarly prepared emerged quickly. When they spotted us, they immediately drew.

“FREEZE! Don’t move!” Both the skunk and I put up our hands.

“Easy officer!” Scooter said, “We were the ones getting shot at.”

“Right. Why was that?”

“He’s a private eye,” The skunk threw his head at me as we were patted down, our guns confiscated. “I’m his client, and I’m being targeted by some very unsavory people. Um, I’ve got a permit for that pistol.”

“So do I.” I said. The officers, naturally, insisted on examining our permits, but soon our weapons were returned to us. As more emergency vehicles arrived on the scene, I gave an account to the officers about exactly what happened. They nodded along, and after calling another patrol car to canvas the area back where the shooting started, got two witnesses to corroborate that passengers of the S.U.V shot first. The entire incident took an hour and a half to straighten out. While it did, we saw a couple ambulances pull up to just within our field of view at the edge of a building on the corner. Two paramedics jumped out of each, pulling gurneys. When they came back, they had sheets completely covering whoever was on them.

I sighed, rubbing the back of my head; I hate it when cases take turns like this. Even when the other guys are trigger happy gangsters, it’s no fun having to resort to lethal methods of self preservation. It’s just a necessity at times.

The sun had set by the time we pulled up in front of “The Bull’s Gym”. I’d driven to the nearest repair shop and the workmen had agreed to put in a rush job in replacing both my windshield and rear windows. Cost me, though. I sighed as I stuck the receipt in my glove compartment; my debit card was getting worn out way too quickly these days.

“The Bull’s Gym” was decked out in a real cool fashion, literally. Murals of glacial fields and polar scenery covered the walls, while an arctic blue carpet covered the floor. It was actually pretty clever; the décor helped the customers feel like they were cooler than they actually were, thus saving on fans and air conditioning.

“’Scuse me, I need to talk to the owner.” The desk clerk, a muscular (naturally) cougar looked up from a computer.

“I think he’s in his office, second floor. Do you have an appointment?”

“We know each other.”

“Mmmm, well I’ll need to verify it with him.”

“Okay, tell ‘em Mike Fang is here to see him.” The cougar picked up a phone and punched an intercom button.

“Sir, a Mike Fang is here to see you...yes, he does kinda look like Zenigata... okay, I’ll ask him.” The cougar put his hand over the phone. “The boss would like to know if you’ve caught Lupin the 3rd yet.”

“Gah, gimme that phone.” I grabbed the receiver and leaned on the counter. “I’ll slap the cuffs on YOU if you don’t quit B.S.ing me, funny boy.” The sound of laughing came from the other end as I handed it back to the cougar, who looked at me with great shock, like he thought I was nuts to talk to the boss that way. He put the receiver back to his head, and seemed even more shocked when he heard the answer.

“He says go right on up...” I nodded and turned to Scooter.

“Wait for me here, I’ll be back soon.”

“You’re gonna leave me here?” The skunk looked askance at me. I smirked.

“You’re in a gym surrounded by bodybuilders, and you still don’t feel safe?”

“Won’t do much if they come in here with machine guns.”

I smirked. “Somehow I don’t think they’re going to bust into a building with security cameras to get their photos snapped while waving around automatic weapons.” In the end I relented and Scooter came along behind me as I climbed a spiral staircase that to anyone else would have seemed suspiciously wide.

I didn’t bother knocking when I got to the door, since we were expected. I entered into a massive office with a cathedral ceiling. This was actually functional as well as artistic, considering the office’s owner. Personal gym equipment was organized in one corner, appearing to be a heck of a lot more than most of the patrons usually used. I certainly didn’t see too many of them lifting dumbbells with 500lbs on each side of the grip. There were a couple full length mirrors on either side of the room, some potted plants, not to mention a whole bunch of body building posters all over the room.

Sitting at the very back behind a massive desk was the wolf I’d come to see. He was on the phone, running a hand through his brilliantly red hair. At least his front bangs; if he’d tried to run his hand through the hair that came out of the rest of his head, he’d dislocate his arm. The wolf’s mane hung down to his tail.

The only word that could describe this guy was massive. He was over seven feet tall and at least four feet broad at the shoulders. This guy was so heavily muscled it was a wonder he was still mobile. The wolf’s limbs were the thickness of tree trunks, his stomach looked like you could do laundry on it, and he could have rented out his pecs as advertising space. If he was ever in a hit-and-run, the car would never survive colliding with him. The name plate on his desk read “Syberius Atten, Owner and Manager”. But everybody who knew him personally knew he typically went by his nickname; Ice Wolf.

“Well tell ‘em to FedEx the f**king thang! I don’t wanna hear his limp d**k excuses, he’s had a month to send me that shipment of new energy shakes, and if he don’t get the lead out of his f**kin’ *ss, I’m gonna find me a new supplier!” Ice had one addiction in his life; foul language. The guy swore so much you would’ve thought he had Tyrett Syndrome. The wolf slammed the phone down, snapping the receiver.

“S**t,” he grumbled, sweeping it into a waste basket, “Third f**kin’ one this week.”

“Only three?” I said, “Must’ve been a light week for ya.”

“Heya Mike!” the wolf stood up and came around the desk, slapping me on the back hard enough to stagger me forward several steps.

“Haven’t seen you down here in a few days.”

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that,” I said, straightening up and trying to tell if Ice had dislocated my vertebrae, “But with my schedule, sometimes I don’t have time to work out.”

“In your line’a work, m’ surprised you don’t come here every day, dealing with all those psychos,” the wolf rumbled in a deep bass voice.

“Well I may not be able to punch hard enough to go through brick walls, but I can hit ‘em where it counts.” The wolf laughed and then turned towards Scooter, crossing his arms and making it look like he was squeezing his pecs together without even trying.

“And who’s this lil’ fuzzball?” The skunk smirked at him.

“Scooter McPhearson. And you must be The Incredible Hulk’s stunt double.”

“HA! That lightweight’s got nothing on me!”

“Mmmm, that’s for sure.” Scooter said, giving Ice the once over. I, meanwhile, pulled a toothpick out of my hat brim and stuck it between my teeth.

“Ice, I hate to ask you for favors, but I’m in it up to my neck right now.”

“Really? A case getting really hot for ya?” The wolf leaned against the wall, sticking his hands in the pockets of his cut off jean shorts, and I could almost swear the office tilted when he did.

“Yep, and this guy’s my client. So if I’m in it up to here,” I put my hand against the base of my throat, “You can imagine how deep the short guy’s in.”

“Hey!” Scooter shot me a look, “I’m not short, I’m physically conservative.”

“Heh, right right,” I said, putting my hands up defensively. I laid out the situation for Ice, who stood there scratching himself in various locations. With all that hair I wouldn’t have been surprise if he’d missed a spot or two with his last flea dip.

“Mmmhmm. So, ya need some extra muscle for this lil’ caper, eh?”

“Certainly couldn’t hurt, and you’ve got some to spare.”

“Heh, what the f*ck, sounds excitin’!” I smirked, tilting my hat back as the wolf grabbed a navy blue vest off a coat rack and tossed it on his otherwise bare upper body.

“Careful what you wish for, bud. You want excitement? I’ve got a feeling you’re gonna get it in spades.”

The three of us made a weird trio walking down the street: a gigantic black, white, and red werewolf, a Doberman Pincher dressed like a character out of a Frank Miller

graphic novel, and an orange and white skunk. After I'd returned my car to the parking garage of my building, I'd decided that it'd be better if we went on footpaw from now on; Drax's goons apparently knew what car I drove, so we didn't want it to grab attention. Besides, Ice could barely fit in it.

"So what's the plan, Sherlock?" Ice said. I scratched the back of my head.

"In all honesty, I'm not sure myself. I'm makin' this up as I go." Scooter blinked as he punched the crosswalk button when we got to the corner and turned towards me.

"Are you serious?!" I grinned at him.

"Well...it makes us unpredictable."

"Sh'yeah," Scooter said, rolling his eyes as we made our way across the blacktop, "We're so secretive not even WE know what we're doing."

"Alright, quit rubbin' it in," I grunted. I let a breath out, rolling the toothpick around in my mouth. Afternoon was slowly coming on, and the crowds on the sidewalk were thinning. Or maybe they were just keeping their distance from our newest party member, since he looked like the kind of person that trouble incarnate would be behooved to avoid.

"Right, we've got descriptions on these people. We'll take what we know about 'em, then start asking around about where they are."

"Uh huh, not a bad idea." The wolf said, running a hand through his hair. "You got any ideas where to start?"

"As a matter of fact, yeah."

"Guy's Night Out" was hopping as always, with many a hollering drunk whistling and knocking down boilermakers, shots, and beers. A few people were giving Ice a look that was somewhere between shock and suspicion. It was pretty obvious he wasn't comfortable in that particular bar. I couldn't blame him, it wasn't my fav either. As I passed by one bar, several guys looked my way, then started humming the "Inspector Gaget" theme loudly and getting a lot of laughs from his friends. I gave them a sour look; it irks me when people act juvenile and make fun of me about the way I dress. I slapped a twenty down on the counter of the usual bar and got a nod from the gecko bartender.

Dale Clyde was sitting behind his usual desk, putting a firing pin into an Ingram Uzi. Ever since an incident with a rather famous criminal, the horse was one of the few criminals I had deliberately let off the hook. I didn't make it a habit of letting too many people off, but he could do me more good as an informant than behind bars. Plus the way I looked at it, selling illegal military equipment and stuff was a fairly minor offense compared to some of the things I'd seen. And so long as I never heard he knowingly sold a weapon to someone to kill an innocent person, I'd let him be. He knew the first time I

heard about him doing that, I'd haul his butt in so fast his horseshoes would start glowing from the friction.

"Hey can...ah cripes, not you again." The horse rolls his eyes and put his head in his hand. "What do you want now?"

"Information, and I'm willin' to pay, as usual." The horse smirked, tossing the uzi into a case and slapping it shut.

"Really, well I hope you've got pl OH MY GOD WHAT IS THAT?!" I turned around, as Dale had looked up and acted like he just saw...well, he did see a giant werewolf step into his office with a skunk in tow. Ice gave him a morose look and flipped him the bird.

"Same to you, numb nuts."

I smirked at the horse. "Relax, I keep him on a leash." That made the wolf give me a cocky look and slap my hat off my head. The horse seemed to sit more rigidly, like he was frozen. I walked up to him on one side and pulled out about two hundred bucks in twenties and dangled them next to his face.

"Dale, relax. Look, look, money, money!"

The horse shook his head like he was snapping out of a trance. "Hm, what, money? Oh, yeah!" The equine grabbed the bills and thumbed through them. "Okay, that's good. So what do you need?" I pulled out the print outs of Drax's gang and put them on his desk. He fanned through theses as well, whistling and giving a snort as he shook his mane.

"Nice rogue's gallery you've got here. Looking for these people, eh?"

"No, they're on my Christmas list and I'm shopping early for next year."

"Heh, ever the comedian, eh Fang? Alright, I have heard a bit. Word is, they've been looking to hire a hacker to falsify some records at the customs office."

"I know that already."

"What?! But how...,"

"I'd rather not say. Just tell me what else you know." I played it cool, trying not to let Dale know he'd actually told me a bit. At first I'd thought that hacking the customs office had been an initiation test for Scooter. But now it was clear that was actually their main job. That meant there was something in customs they wanted to get moved through without anybody knowing what it was; drugs, illegal guns, stolen goods, who knew?

"Uh, right. Well I can't say were they're staying for sure, but I can tell you that one of 'ems been racking up a heavy tab at The Keyhole."

“The Keyhole?”

“It’s a peep show on Cobbler St.” I nodded; it sounded like the kind of thing Bernard Vale, the demolitions gecko, was into.

“Does he have a favorite time to show up?”

“Sometime in the evening, five, six, seven o’ clock maybe.”

“A’ight Dale, you’ve been a help, thanks. Stay out of trouble, you hear?”

The horse gave me a nervous chuckle, tossing a glance at Ice again.

“So long as it don’t come lookin’ for me.”

I was laying next to a pile of garbage, doing the best I could to look like I was part of it. Dressed up like a bum in a dirty army surplus jacket, patched up pants, shoes with holes in them, and a food-stained shirt, I stared at the front door of “The Keyhole” across the street. To add the finishing touches to my disguise, I’d bought a bottle of cheapo bourbon and poured some of it on myself.

The neighborhood we were in was probably the worst in the city. Farthest from any police precinct, the more deplorable businesses had set up shop here, as well as several criminal enterprises revolving around the world’s oldest profession.

“So how long are we gonna be here?” Scooter’s voice came through on the earphone of my 2-way radio. I shifted my position of laying slouched against the wall so I could see him better. He was hanging out in front of a porno shop with a XXX magazine to hide his face. I couldn’t make out the title, and to be honest I didn’t want to.

“I’d say give it another hour.” We’d been on the stakeout since four. Now four hours later, my butt was starting to get sore sitting on the broken pieces of a moving palate. Scooter had been wandering back and forth from adult shop to adult shop, but I knew he could only keep up the act of an indecisive shopper for so long.

“Ice, how you holdin’ up?” I shifted to speak more clearly into the mic on my coat collar.

“Doin’ fine, but I haven’t seen diddily s#it.” The wolf was up on one of the roofs with a pair of binoculars. His position was rather necessary, due to something of a surprise he gave me. We’d been back at my apartment as I put on my disguise and Scooter also changed into something less recognizable (a black leather jacket, shades, and a tie-dyed t-shirt). I’d explained that we had to make sure that we dressed so that even people who knew us wouldn’t be able to spot us. That’s when Ice had made something of a revelation to me.

“You used to be a WHAT?” I’d said.

“What, you got wax in yer ears? I used to be a stripper.” I’d quirked an eyebrow. The wolf gave me one of my own smirks.

“What? I needed the money.”

“Bet you raked it in, Mr. Universe.” Scooter had sniggered.

“Heh, you bet your @\$\$ I did. I used to do this...”

“Alright, alright!” I’d held up my hand, “We don’t need a blow by blow.”

“Well maybe you don’t,” Scooter had snorted at me.

“Well you two can swap dirty stories later. Right now, this presents a problem. If you used to work in that area, the possibility that somebody might spot you through any disguise is really good. You’re gonna have to find yourself an out of sight perch.”

And so now we all were staring at the peep show door. We passed the time playing “I spy” over the radio, probably the most pornographic version of the game in history.

Finally, just as I was about to suggest we leave, Scooter’s voice came crackling over the radio.

“I see him.”

I tried to avoid sitting bold upright, but I did shift my posture to be better situated.

“Where?”

“Comin’ down the street.”

“I’ve got him too.” Ice sounded like he was getting up to get a better view. “He’s got on a leisure suit. Bright red.”

“I got him.” The gecko was coming down the sidewalk, leering at hookers and flicking his tongue at them in what he probably thought was a seductive gesture. From my angle, it just made Vale look like what he was; a tremendous pervert. And I do mean tremendous; they guy was without a doubt morbidly obese. Knowing some of the people I know and going to some of the places I’ve been, I’ve seen people of all shapes and sizes. A number of them were on the rather heavy side, but they’d worn it well.

Then there were people like this guy. His was a kind of fat that a person gets from overeating and a lack of exercise. I’d known people who ate a lot and were definitely fat, but they kept a rather round look to themselves by keeping active.

Vale, however, had not. His fat hung on him in flaps of flab, actually folding in a number of areas, making him look like a walking sweaty mound of blubber.

“God,” I thought to myself, “do a few jumping jacks, for heaven’s sake, you look like your melting.” Vale turned towards the entrance to “The Keyhole”. Suddenly, he stopped. He dug a fat hand into his pocket and pulled out something and put it to his ear.

“Must be a cell phone,” I muttered. He nodded his head a few times, then turned around and headed back down the way he came.

“Right, I’ll bet that was his gang. This’s it guys, we’re gonna trail him back to their hideout.”

“Gotcha. Lemme get down off this roof.” I heard Ice click off his radio.

“Let’s get out of this freak show.” Scooter said, also clicking off his radio. I stood up and started ripping off my disguise. I’d worn clothes several sizes too large so I could keep my regular clothes on underneath them. I reached into a plastic bag I’d stashed next to me and pulled out my coat and hat, slapping them back on as I stepped out of the alley on the opposite side of the street from Vale.

The gecko led us halfway across town, taking the subway a good distance. When we got to the end of the line, he stepped off with a bunch of hard hat, blue collar workers, and so did we.

We were in the industrial section of town. Tall factories, construction sites, and refinery towers made every building look like a big jungle gym. Vale slipped through a chain link fence, not bothering to check and see if anyone was following him.

“How careless,” I thought to myself. The gecko had led us to a train yard. Through the fence we could see an old warehouse where men were moving several shipping crates, but it was on the far side of the warehouse, making it hard to see inside. I tried the gate, but the gecko had been smart enough to lock it behind him.

“Great now what,” I muttered.

“I can rip that sumb!tch right off,” said Ice, cracking his knuckles.

“Whoa, easy there muscles. We break it, we pay for it. I don’t think we’ve really got enough here for probable cause.”

“Oh, yeah, m’ bad. So how are we gonna...”

“Hey! Over here!” I spun around on my heel. Scooter had found a bridge that went over a tunnel. It would at least afford us a better view of what was going on. Ice and I ran across the yard to meet him at the entrance, then carefully snuck out onto the bridge, trying not to attract attention. This was difficult, since there wasn’t exactly a lot to hide behind.

“I can’t see much,” I said once we’d reached the middle of the bridge. “It looks like they’re hauling out the crates, inspecting them...then putting them on a flatbed cart and moving them through that tunnel on the other side of the yard. Ice, can I borrow

those binoculars?” The wolf handed me the field glasses he’d been using to watch from the rooftop back in town. I narrowed my eyes as I focused them on the crates outside the warehouse.

“Okay, I think I see Drax, Bloodmoon, Vale...don’t see Sand or Montreal, though. Drax is prying open a crate....oh my God.”

“What?” Both Scooter and Ice said simultaneously. I watched as Drax, dressed up like a pimp in a black leather jacket with a turned up collar, dark pants, and expensive athlete’s sneakers, reached into the crate and withdrew a brick-shaped object with a light gray color that had the texture of clay, from the looks of it.

“They’re smuggling C4.”

“What?! How’d they get it through customs without me changing the computer files?!” Scooter took the binoculars from me to see for himself.

“I guess they decided to steal it from the waiting queue and risk someone noticing.” I reached into my pocket and started punching up the police on my cell phone.

“911, please state your emergency,”

“This is Mike Fang, I’m at Industrial Railway Station 15. There are several people smuggling illegal explosives through the city. I’ve seen them moving crates of C4. You need to get the police down here NOW.”

“Ohhh S#!T, Drax just spotted us!” Scooter’s grip tightened on the binoculars as he said that. “He’s reaching for a...HOLY S#!T, RUN!” I had just enough time to see a puff of smoke and something leaving a trail of smoke traveling our way before I took off. We hadn’t gone more than five running steps before BOOM! A bazooka shell hit the bridge behind us, tossing all of us to the ground.

“Okay,” I gagged, “I think we have probable cause now. All in favor of running with our tails between our legs?” No answer. Like me, both my team mates were just like me, a type-a personality; we hate waiting, and when confronted, none of us was into withdrawing until it was strategic.

“All in favor of kicking their @\$ses?”

All together, each of us said “AYE!” Picking ourselves back up, we jumped through the smoking hole left in the bridge and landed in the gravel interior of the yard. The far off sirens indicated the cavalry was on its way, but it was taking its sweet time getting here.

“Get the crates loaded! We gotta bail!” Drax was hollering at his crew. Bloodmoon took a crate under each arm and dropped them onto the cart. Drax jumped on himself and began working the controls for the electronic hauling cart, moving it down the tracks and into the darkened tunnel. Bloodmoon jumped down from the loading platform and barreled after him, Vale huffing and wheezing on his way down as

well. As he got inside, he reached into his coat pocket. I couldn't tell what it was he pulled out, but it must have been some kind of remote detonator, because two seconds later, an explosion collapsed part of the tunnel behind him.

"Ah CR@P!" I kicked the gravel up.

"Heh, no problem," Ice chuckled. "Ah'll have that cleared in..." KRAK! A rifle shot cut through the air. A slug grazed the wolf's cheek, making him slap a hand to his face and start spouting a veritable river of profanity.

"THAT F*CKER'S SHOOTING SILVER BULLETS!" It figured. If they had a werewolf on their team, Drax would have wanted someone to be able to help keep her in line in case she got an attitude.

"TAKE COVER!" I grabbed the wolf by his ruby mane and pulled him behind metal shipping crate, another slug bouncing off the box as we all dove behind it. Ice may have been the only werewolf on our team, but bullets are bullets, and could blow any of our heads off.

"D*mn, Mike, not by the hair! You'll give me split ends." I raised an eyebrow in disbelief as Ice stroked at his prized locks.

"Man, you're a real piece of work, you know that?" The wolf just chuckled, his bass tone making it sound like a diesel engine idling. I looked around the corner of the box, and saw a muzzle flash coming from an upper window of the warehouse.

"Right," I said, cinching down my fedora. "That's gotta be Sand, their sniper. You keep her busy, I'll take care of her."

"How are you gonna...?" But before Ice could finish that question, I had already jumped down into the track pit and was crawling along to get to the front of the warehouse. I heard the otter lady's rifle report again, and it was followed by a few reports from what must have been Scooter's gun. Working my way along the tracks in a half crouch, my back was sore from behind stooped over by the time I got to the loading dock in front of the warehouse. I waited until after another report, then climbed up and bolted into the warehouse as Sand was most likely busy chambering another bullet.

The inside of the warehouse was filled with shadows around a few hanging fluorescent lights. I didn't hear any more rifle reports; the otter must have spotted me. I ducked into the shadows as soon as I could. I knew she was just waiting like a wolf spider somewhere in the dark, muscles tense for her prey to step into sight so she could spring.

I heard a light clink, and spun around with my revolver drawn and pointed. I knew the trick she was using, tossing an empty shell to try and get me to fire; the calling card of a professional. I was in it deep; Sand would have no trouble nailing me if I made one misstep. But I had a strength myself; my weapon. It was designed to be fighting on the move; her rifle wasn't. I had to find her position, then get her to shoot.

“I know you’re waiting for me,” I heard a voice say. Immediately, I wheeled around towards the voice and fired. My magnum revolver let out a loud report and I slowly moved towards where I’d fired. I heard laughing. I’d been suckered. Laying on a work bench in the shadows was a two way radio, my slugs in the wall above it. I could just feel Sand’s crosshairs on the back of my neck, so I ducked behind an I-beam as fast as I could.

“You didn’t honestly think you were going to get to me as easily as just charging in here like a SWAT team, did you? I’ve been playing this game for YEARS, and I’m not about to be taken down by some stupid mutt in a trench coat.” I heard a bolt action being drawn, but with the echoing, I couldn’t make out where it was.

My mind raced for an idea. I scanned around the warehouse. It was pretty big, complete with a foreman’s office. When I spotted it, I knew just how I was gonna get out of this with my head unventilated.

I grabbed the walkie-talkie off the table and also picked up a roll of tape. First, I had to make sure of something, but it was going to take a big risk. I acted like I was in a panic, and dashed quickly through one of the fluorescent lights. A slug went over my head just as I did a duck-and-roll to avoid getting shot. Even so, I felt the bullet graze my shoulder. It stung like a piece of hot metal going over your flesh should.

“HA! You’re a laughable target, whoever you are.” I squeezed the radio button and snarled into it.

“You b*tch I’m gonna tear you apart when I get my hands on you!” My heart pounding in my ears, I made for the office, praying Sand wasn’t hunkered down in there. My daring her to take a shot at me had told me she was definitely on the ground floor, but I couldn’t tell where.

“I’ve heard many a person say that,” Sand said, taunting me over the radio. I made it to the office, ducking around crates. I had a feeling Sand was moving, and watching, ‘cause as soon as I got into the sparsely filled room, the window exploded with a shot.

“Oh you’re so stupid! You’re pinned now. Tell you what, come out now and I’ll make it nice and quick rather than pop you through the kneecaps and watch you bleed to death.” As Sand was running her mouth, I picked up the phone off the desk in the office and dialed my own cell phone number. I answered it hurriedly so she wouldn’t hear the tone going off. I carefully taped the phone over the mouthpiece of the radio, also taping the button down. I hurled the walkie talkie out of the doorway, as if getting more and more desperate. It bounced and clattered over the boxes and landed somewhere across the way from the office door.

I kept my hand over the mouthpiece of the phone, crouched down next to the door. I could hear Sand’s voice coming from somewhere, but with the radio button taped down, it wasn’t coming out of that. I prayed she didn’t notice. As soon as the otter shut up, I took my hand off the phone.

“Screw you, you homicidal freak! It’ll be a cold day in h*ll before you get me, so help me God!”

“Ohh, is that so? Okay smart @\$\$, I don’t know how you got out and got the radio again...” Sand’s voice was coming closer. I knew it; she’d seen me throw the radio, then when she heard my voice coming over the radio, she assumed I wasn’t in the office any more. I held my breath and watched as a slim, athletic female otter dressed in a black leather jacket, camouflage pants, and military boots came around the corner, aiming a bolt action sniper rifle. She walked right past the door, barely making a sound.

“...but it’s not going to help you in the slightest.”

“Oh really?” I said over the phone, then put it down, stood up, and stepped out of the office, drawing a bead on Sand’s head from behind.

“Tell me that to my face.” CLIK! I cocked the hammer of my revolver. The only regret I had at that moment was not being able to see Sand’s face once she realized I was standing only ten feet away with a perfect set up to pop her in the fanny.

“I’ll say this once: drop the rifle.” Sand hesitated a moment, then took one hand off the barrel of the rifle. But I saw that she still held it by the hand that was on the trigger.

“Don’t think about it!” Too late. Sand spun to the side and tried to shoot me with one hand. But the moment I saw her shoulders moving, I was squeezing the trigger. The two slugs hit the otter in the back and she spun around like a top before dropping to the floor.

I sighed. “Some people just don’t know when to listen.” I couldn’t have been more right. I also could have stood to take my own advice. If I’d been listening, I might have heard Montreal sneaking up behind me. But as it was, I never realized he was there before he struck me in the back with what felt like a tazer. I felt electricity rocketing up my spine and I collapsed to my knees. I tried to aim a kick behind me, but I got another zap for my trouble, making me lose control of my muscles and collapse to the floor. Normal tazers were only good to zap someone long enough to run for it, but this guy’s weapon, whatever it was, was nailing me with more than the usual amount of volts for a hand held zapper.

“Well now hoser,” the beaver said, stepping around me, twirling what looked like some fancy staff with electrodes like cattle prods on the ends. The beaver spoke with a thick Canadian accent. “I’d say yer bitin’ off a bit more than ya can chew, eh?” He was dressed in some kind of jumpsuit with an array of electronics gagets on his belt, wraparound shades on his head. He nailed me with another zap, this one to the back of my neck. I snarled and felt my muscles spasm, making me contract in a fetal position.

“AAAAGH, you son of a...,”

“Heh, you need to loosen up, hoser. Like, maybe I’ll loosen your teeth from your skull, eh?” The beaver whipped his staff back like he was about to use my head as a lacrosse ball.

“Hey Mike,” I heard Scooter’s voice from the doorway. “Want me to tag in here?” I pushed myself up onto my elbow and looked over my shoulder. The skunk snapped the slide of his automatic to show he’d just put in a fresh clip. I grinned weakly.

“I’d slap your hand, but I can’t feel mine right now.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re here. This lil’ loose end brought you in. Well now yer BOTH gonna regret messin’ with our operation!” The beaver spun his staff melodramatically.

“Oh please,” Scooter snorted and cracked off a shot. Montreal suddenly did a split and the bullet went right over his head.

“Is that all you got, eh?!” He snapped back up and started doing aerial somersaults, whipping his staff around with him. Scooter ducked as the sparking metal rod came cracking over his head. The beaver was in close, making it difficult for the skunk to use his gun to fight with. Even handguns are difficult to use when you’ve got some kind of hand-to-hand weapon being thrust at you from only a few feet away. The beaver twirled and cracked his staff, driving Scooter in a circle around the floor of the warehouse. The skunk was jumping from footpaw to footpaw, twisting and turning to avoid getting zapped.

Suddenly, the beaver feigned a high thrust and instead nailed the skunk in the shoulder with an axe kick, dropping him to the floor.

“Time for some barbecued skunk, eh!” Montreal twisted the shaft of his staff, making the electricity arc across the pronged ends with greater intensity. He raised it up like he was going to spear Scooter through the chest. Scooter whipped out his gun, aimed, and fired. The bullet went right past Montreal’s nose.

“Ha! Yew missed!”

Scooter grinned. “Did I?” Suddenly, a pipe overhead rattled; the fire extinguisher pipe. A spray of water burst from the cracked pipe stem, covering the beaver in a deluge of H₂O. His rod sparked and crackled, his eyes lighting up and his gold teeth starting to give off sparks of their own. Finally, he dropped the rod, little crackles coming from his fur. Scooter aimed a kick as a parting shot right in between his legs, causing his already bugged out eyes to cross as he dropped to the floor, still giving off a twitch every now and again.

“Well he was certainly a live wire,” the skunk said, dusting himself off.

“Hey, I make the wise cracks around here,” I chuckled, finally getting my motor skills back as I got unsteadily to my footpaws. “Urgh, thanks, but where’s Ice?”

“Outside, clearing out the tunnel.” I followed the skunk back out onto the platform. The wolf was heaving away huge chunks of concrete like they were styrofoam, but the more he heaved, the more it collapsed.

“Ah, f*ck this s*it. Look out!” The wolf took about three steps back and hauled back one hand, palm flat. A crackling ball of energy slowly gathered just in front of it, giving off a low humming noise. It slowly grew to the size of a beach ball, Ice’s face a mask of concentration, his legs braced for stability. Finally, he thrust his palm forward and the energy ball shot from his hand like a cannonball. It sank into the center of the rubble. The following explosion was enough to knock both Scooter and myself on our cans, leaving the tunnel open, numerous small bits of concrete laying around and a fine cloud of dust hanging in the air.

“Holy God,” I muttered, “you could make a killing in the demolition biz.”

The tunnel was a long one, a dark, engineered cavern only illuminated by the occasional emergency light. Vale’s explosives had knocked out the main power, or so I figured. I knew there had to be another trap; they’d had more than enough time to set one up. Which member of the gang would we be dealing with next? That was the big question. It was like some kind of new form of Russian roulette.

My question was answered soon enough, when a big massive hand came out from a dark portion of the wall, grabbed me by the throat, and threw me over Ice’s head.

“Son of a b!tch! Mike, you okay?!” I hacked and coughed, trying to stand up.

“Yeah...,” I rasped. The wolf spun around, snarling as Scooter got behind him. We all knew who it was. Bloodmoon stepped out of the shadows, grinning in a feral manner, cracking her knuckles. She looked just slightly taller than Ice, but not quite as well built.

“I get your attention, beeg boy?” The werewolf spoke with a thick Russian accent. She was dressed in camo fatigues and a tank top, revealing ivy vine tattoos all over her muscular arms. Bloodmoon was also sporting a pair of knuckle dusters that looked to be made out of stainless steel.

Ice clenched both hands into fists, audibly cracking the joints like gunshots. “And you’ll wish you hadn’t, B!TCH.” Both werewolves started snarling at each other, then charged and locked hands as they collided. It was like watching some kind of Greco-Roman wrestling, the two of them trying to coil around each other like boa constrictors and squeeze the other one into submission.

“Mmm, you fight vell, cutie. Maybe eef I don’t keel you, I make you my love toy, da?” Bloodmoon had her arm around Ice’s throat, the other one twisting his left arm in an arm bar. Still, Ice chuckled.

“You ain’t m’ type.” He snapped his head back, giving her a reverse head butt, making her reactively let go and clap hands to her nose with a snarl. Ice then hauled back an arm and smashed his elbow into his opponent’s stomach.

Standing on the sidelines, I turned to Scooter and grinned. “Heh, I taught him that move.”

“No you didn’t!” Ice chuckled as he was blocking the female werewolf’s vicious kicks and punches, acting like he was just toying with her. It looked that way to me. And I was right; he was trying to get her to overstep herself.

“Yeah, I did!” I shouted back at him. “Don’t you remember? I taught you some of the moves I use to handle opponents from behind, and you taught me those moves to deal with them when you’ve been knocked to the ground!”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right!” Ice had just leaned back to avoid a right hook. He went one step further by flipping halfway backwards into a hand stand, then thrusting forward with his hands, going into a horizontal kick into Bloodmoon’s stomach.

“RRRGH!” The she-wolf was getting ticked. “I BREAK you!”

Ice laughed. “This comin’ from someone scared of I.N.S!” The she-wolf bellowed at the top of her lungs and charged at Ice like a rhino on the Serengeti. He stood staring at her with his smart @\$ grin until she got within five feet. In the snap of a finger, he was down on one knee then coming back up with an uppercut that spun her in the air like a top. Ice gave her a snap kick that smashed Bloodmoon into the wall hard enough to leave an outline of her as she fell back to the floor, her eyes rolling on different tracks.

The wolf rubbed the back of his footpaw on his leg. “Ah’d make the usual glib remark about her leavin’ an impression, but that’d be too corny fer me.”

I had to smirk. “So are you gonna stand there going on about how you’re too cool, or are you gonna quit playing with yourself and get the led out?”

“What’re you ridin’ my @\$ fer?” Ice said indignantly. I couldn’t resist.

“ ‘Cause if you rode mine, you’d break my back.” The wolf groaned as we continued up the tunnel.

There was a light at the end of the tunnel. Several, in fact, all of them lamp posts on the loading ramp next to a freight train. The iron horse was short, only having a couple cars to it besides the fuel car and the engine. Draxx was shoving one of the crates into a car when he spotted us.

“What the f*ck! Vale, get your fat @\$ out here! And bring that grenade launcher!”

“Oh great,” I groaned. Draxx took off up the platform and jumped on the train near the engine. Vale came climbing up a ladder to the top of the train, still wearing his cheap leisure suit, but now carrying a short-barreled gun with a big open end.

“MOVE!” We scattered to the sides of the train as a grenade shell came spinning past us and blew a big spray of gravel up into the air a few feet behind where we had been standing just moments ago.

I crouched with my back to the platform, cocking the hammer of my revolver.

“I.am getting...really...REALLY...SICK OF THIS.” I turned and looked to the side where Ice was crouched down behind a stack of I-beams.

“Hey Ice, just kick his @\$!” Another shell detonated against the wall above me, raining down cement chips.

“He’s shootin’ silver plated grenades!” The wolf yelled back at me.

“How can you tell?!” BOOM!

“That much silver?! I can feel it cuttin’ through the air like it was red-hot!”

I sighed and groaned. “Great, now what...SCOOTER GET BACK HERE!” The skunk had climbed up onto the platform and was running across it, a grenade shell exploding behind him. The only thing I could do was pray to God that he didn’t get blown in half. That, and start giving him covering fire. I blasted three shots at Vale, all of them missing; he was over a hundred feet away. But it did get him to hit the deck for a brief moment before firing a shell at me.

I ducked down behind the platform again as the shell exploded just in front of me. Thank God I had my hands over my ears. I looked back up; Vale was trying to spot Scooter again. For that matter, so was I. Then I spotted him; he was crouched down behind a crane used to load flatbeds.

“Kid’s got balls, I’ll give ‘em that.” I had to grin as the Gecko barely noticed as the crane claw came down like the quarter game you play in the arcade to try and grab stuffed animals.

“WHAT THE F*CK!” The Gecko slapped and kicked as the claws closed in around him he kicked and flailed, firing his last grenade wildly and hitting the tracks ahead of the train.

“I’d say that puts a crimp on their travel plans,” I chuckled.

“McPHEARSON! I’VE GOT YOUR OVERSIZED STOOGES OUT HERE!” I blinked. This was something unexpected. Usually people yelling about Ice were begging somebody to get HIM away from THEM. Scooter came out from behind the crane and stepped around the other side of the train. I came around the back. Draxx was looking royally screwed and royally ticked. Most criminals do when they take a hostage. The

cougar was holding a thin bladed dagger that had a dull gray color to it to the inside of Ice's ear, his other hand gripping a handful of the wolf's red bangs. From the way Ice was contorting his face and cursing a blue streak, it must have been silver.

Drax tossed his head at me. "Who'se this walking turd?!"

I quirked an eyebrow as both Scooter and myself drew beads on Drax.

"The name is Fang, dirtbag."

"Fang?" the cougar put a really sarcastically impressed look on his face. "Yeah, I heard of ya. So you like stickin' your nose in where it doesn't belong? Buster, you have no IDEA what you've stepped in! So how about you back off, or I clean out your not-so-little friends ear with this?"

Scooter and I exchanged a glance. I looked Ice in the face and winked. I threw up both my hands.

"That's it. Screw this. Sorry Scooter, but you aren't payin' me enough for this." I stepped back around the train.

"WhoaWHOAWHOAWHOAWHOA, get you @\$ \$ back here Fang! I don't trust you any farther than I can THROW YOU!"

"Well, you're not as stupid as you look then," I smirked as I squeezed between two of the cars on the train. I'd noticed, as the light was getting low, that Draxx was right beneath one of the lamps.

"You don't give me any s*it, McPhearson..." Draxx was still making his threats.

"...quit acting like you've still got a hope, Draxx. We've got you screwed six ways to Sunday." Scooter was still covering the cougar, from what little I could see through the crack. My target was in line. I pulled the trigger. Two slugs burst from my gun.

The light over Drax's head snapped from the pole and dropped onto his head with a weighty crash. The cougar crumpled as the glass shattered, most likely cracking his skull in the process.

"Nice aim, slick," Ice said, rubbing the inside of his ear. I smirked, sliding out from between the rail cars. The sirens were finally arriving, the cops proving that some stereotypes are true, arriving just after the nick of time.

"Thank God," Scooter breathed, holstering his piece and slumped against the train. "it's over."

"Yeah," I said, looking down at Drax, something he said echoing in my head. I got down on one knee and looked closely at him. I pulled open the cougar's coat, and locked eyes on the letter in his inside pocket.

“Heh, well that’s cause you’re drinking all the same kinds of soda.” I looked over the cans. They were all the same brand of regular-flavored pop.

“What you need is a proper mixture in order to get maximum volatile output. Heh, mind if I give you a hand?” The skunk grinned widely.

“Heh, go for it!”

“Right,” I cracked my knuckles. “hey Al, can you get me a funnel, and a twelve pack each of...” I started ticking off soda brands on my fingers.

“Rocket Pack Root Beer, Jet Fruit Fizz, Kool Ize, Super Sudz, Green Tongue Guzzler, and Berry Blast Cola?” The crowd gasped a bit at that order. But the grey cat, standing on the balcony just outside his office, chuckles and whipped back to the storage room. He was back in about fifteen seconds, pushing a cart with the soda boxes stacked on them like small moving crates.

“Ho boy,” gulped Scooter, looking excited yet nervous at the same time.

“Heh, okay...” I pulled off my coat and hat and picked up the funnel. I handed it to the skunk, who took the hint and put it in his mouth. The crowd around us watched in interest as I started to act like I was giving a chemistry lesson.

“What you need to do here is get a proper mixture of various types of gassy drinks. First, you have to get a good base of root beer, which everybody knows is nice and burp-inducing...” I started pulling out cans of soda and popping the tops. They fizzed and bubbled as I poured their foamy contents into the funnel, slowly swirling around as Scooter chugged them down, and audible ‘GULP GULP GULP!’ coming from his throat. By the time the first twelve pack was gone, the small gap between his shirt and his pants had grown several inches as the diameter of his girth had swollen out.

“Next you want to add your clear drinks. I’m not sure what they do to get rid of the color, but whatever it does allows for easier release of carbonation.” I grinned as I started pouring in both the Kool Ize and Super Sudz. Scooter started to slouch a bit more in his seat as his belly got sloshier. He grinned around the funnel as he swelled like a balloon, his stomach growing in all directions, growing in height until it was almost up to his chin.

“Now after that you need something with a bit more sweet flavor to it, or you’ll get a stomach ache, and nobody wants that.” I picked up the Jet Fruit Fizz and Berry Blast Cola. Those two brands came in larger bottles, and Scooter was showing it as he guzzled and gulped. His belly swelled further, growing fatter until it was the size of a beer keg. He rubbed his hands over it as he wiggled his toes, the soda also starting to make him chubbier elsewhere, pudging up his cheeks and thickening his limbs.

“And lastly, you have the Green Tongue Guzzler.” I picked up the last case, holding it aloft like some kind of demonstration prop. “The stuff they put in these novelty drinks tend to increase the gassy nature.” I popped all the tops on the twelve pack of cans. The clear green liquid slopped into the skunk’s funnel, a little dribbling out around the edges, but the majority of it going straight into his gut, which by now was a good three feet over his head and swollen out another three feet to all sides. His limbs

were chubby and fat, his paws pudgy and jiggily, and his cheeks cute and pinchable as he spit out the funnel.

“Heh, now simply give proper agitation...” I smirked. “You folks may wanna back up for this.” The crowd started going “OOOOHHHH..” as I slapped both hands against Scooter’s belly and shook it like a martini, albeit without much speed. Have you ever tried to shake a martini shaker the size of a beer keg? The orange and white sphere rocked and rolled, sloshing like all get out. Finally, I stopped as my energy gave out. A fizzing noise filled the air around the skunk. He rested both hands on his belly, which was slowly swelling with foam and carbonation. Scooter’s cheeks puffed up like he had a pair of softballs stuffed into his mouth, and his eyes crossed. Everybody backed up a step...

“BAAAAAAHHHHHHHHUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUURRRRRRRRRrrrrrrrRRRRRRRRRRRRrrrrrrrrUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUP!” The cans and bottles rattled around on the table, and any chair that wasn’t occupied shifted several inches. As the skunk let out his window-rattling barge call, I spotted several people timing it with their watches. When he finally ended, his belly had shrunk back down to its size before being used as a blender.

“And it’s a new record!” The crowd cheered as Scooter thrust his arms into the air, his eyes rolling around in his head, a punch-drunk grin on his face. The skunk sniggered and poked at his belly as I took a seat at the same table, sweeping the empty cans and bottles into a recycling bin Alden provided. It was then that our ears were assailed by the sound of the evening news coming on the television hanging on the corner of the bar.

“This is News Channel Eight at Eight; bringing you the latest news tonight, with Brenda Fillen and Carl Goldman.” I twisted around in my seat as the familiar faces of the vixen anchorwoman and her old English sheepdog co-anchor filled the screen; the camera man managing to get the headroom perfect for both of them.

“Good evening,” said Brenda. “Tonight’s top story: an illegal weapons smuggling ring was busted today. Local private investigator Mike Fang, together with local gym manager Syberus Atten and computer technician Scooter McPhearson, subdued the smugglers as they attempted to escape the city with over five hundred pounds of plastic explosives.”

“YEAH!” Someone hollered from the crowd. Scooter and I started getting more applause and a few slaps on the back, which elicited a few more burps from the skunk, albeit smaller ones.

“Heh, our fifteen minutes of fame,” I chuckled, sipping at my drink.

“We now go live to the scene of the arrest with Tom Malone. Tom?” The view snapped over to a zebra in a blue and yellow windbreaker. He was standing on the platform in front of the train that Drax and his thugs had tried to escape in. Crime scene tape flapped in a light breeze as police walked in and out of the cars, camera flashes popping like fireflies.

“Brenda, as you can see here, police are looking for evidence to help them identify any and all people who were associated with the smugglers that may still be at large. I’m told that according to a detective Vincent Hathaway, when they compared an invoice from the shipping office where the smugglers retrieved their explosives to the contents of the train, the numbers didn’t match up. They believe a crate of C4 is still missing.”

My ears snapped up. Scooter’s tail suddenly poofed out. I knew the same thought must’ve occurred to us; stooges of Drax’s that hadn’t been caught yet were running around the city with enough volatile substance to make a national headline if they used it.

“Police are working with the FBI to try and locate the explosives and whoever is in possession of them. No other information is available at this time. Back to you, Brenda.” The zebra’s face clicked off. The vixen was biting her lip as she shuffled the papers in front of her.

“Thank you Tom. We’ll certainly have to keep tabs on this story.”

“We may already have, Brenda,” said Goldman. “Our next story: a local abortion clinic was bombed this evening. Authorities say that the perps broke in through a back door, set an explosive charge in a back room used for storing flammable chemicals and oxygen tanks used to help the patients’ breathing. The damages have practically leveled the building, and the resulting fire spread to the buildings next to it.”

A frown tugged at my face. My feelings about this incident were mixed. My fierce hatred of abortion on a whim was no secret; I’d written letters to the editor of various papers, blogged on the internet about it, and had no hesitation to tell people whenever the subject came up. Maybe I was a little obsessive, but let’s face it; after all the years that have passed since *Roe v. Wade*, and nobody’s bothered to try and go for another landmark case to try and get lawmakers to rewrite the results, a pro-lifer can get a little disgruntled.

“We now go to Felicia Tang-Wui at the scene. Felicia?” The tv picture snapped to a Siamese cat in a mauve blazer. Standing next to her was a goat in a brown leather jacket and regular business clothes with a cigarette in one hand.

“Carl, I’m here with investigating detective Frank Tesla. Detective, what measures are you taking to investigate this incident?”

“Well,” the goat said, flicking a bit of ash off his cancer stick, “We’ve called in the bomb squad to try and find out what kind of explosives were used. We suspect it might have come from that train that was found earlier tonight. As for suspects, we’re questioning all the local anti-abortion groups for nut jobs and psychos.”

“Are you looking anywhere else for suspects?”

“Ahh, no, not really.”

“WHAT?!” More than a few heads turned my way as I snarled at the tv. “Are you butting your head against a brick wall, you stupid jack @\$\$?! What about disgruntled employees, or women who got pressured into abortion and blamed the clinic?! What about the possibility it was a random bombing, aren’t you even going to CONSIDER the possibility?!”

“Uhh, Mike,” Scooter grabbed my arm, looking around, “I don’t think he can hear you, but plenty of other people can.” I glanced around. More than a few folks were staring my way.

“Eh, right, sorry.” I sat back down, letting out a breath through my nose.

“Tch, right-wing fascist,” I heard someone say behind me. One eyebrow went up on my forehead and I turned in my seat slowly to shoot a venomous look behind me.

“What was that?” A black panther sitting at the opposite table suddenly hunched his shoulders. His tail wrapped nervously around a chair leg.

“Uh, nothing.”

“Then keep your mouth shut next time you got nothing to say.” I glowered and grumbled. Scooter regarded me with a searching look.

“You ticked that they’re investigating pro-life groups?”

“Hm?” I glance back to him, trying to put a lid on my boil. “No, I understand they have to look into that possibility, which is all too...possible. But this notion that pro-life groups and their members are the only suspects is idiotic. Not to mention it certainly suggests that the generally accepted opinion is that anti-abortion folks are all dangerous extremists. That kind of reputation doesn’t help our case.”

The skunk nodded, still seeming to give me a bit of a searching look. “So what do you think of whoever did bomb the clinic?” I glanced at the tv, then back at Scooter.

“Well, IF he is an anti-abortion person, I commend his dedication, but I don’t condone his methods. Some innocent bystander could’ve been hurt. And he set fire to the buildings on both sides of the clinic.”

“Ah, I see.”

I gave the skunk a light smirk. “Personally, I would’ve just smashed the place with a sledge hammer.” Scooter then gave me a rather sharp look.

“I thought you just said you didn’t condone those kinds of methods.”

“Well bombs and stuff, no, ‘cause you could get someone killed. But just wrecking the place, well...”

“Hrm, I think you’re splitting hairs a bit.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. I mean, think about it. You say that this kind of thing makes anti-abortion folks look like dangerous extremists. You think smashing everything with a big hammer is going to make anyone think different?”

“Hmmm. Well you’ve got a point there. I guess sometimes I feel like we’re beyond trying to reason with the pro-choice people and now it’s just a matter of putting our footpaws down and saying ‘enough’s enough, we’re not going to take this any more.’”

“You could be right. But even so, there are better ways to do it besides vandalism.”

I shifted my eyes around a bit in thought. The old “there’s another way” argument. It’s a real gamble, because sometimes there isn’t another way, or no other way that isn’t prudent and timely. But in this case, I considered the options of government petitions, protests, public forums, and so forth. “Yeah, you’re right. At least for now. Whether those other ways will get results soon enough is the question.” The skunk nodded. Just then, a waitress who had been within listening distance at the bar walked past. As she did, she turned towards us.

“When exactly is ‘soon enough’?”

Both Scooter and I looked at each other and said in unison.

“Yesterday.” The waitress shrugged and went back to work. “Still,” Said the skunk, “it’s not like we can force the government to make it against the law.”

“That’s true,” I said, “But actually there is sort of a way of going about giving people more control over it.”

“How’s that?” I smirked a bit at Scooter’s question. I’d had a debate with my father one day about the issue we were currently chewing over. He’d had his own ideas about the best way to handle the situation. I hadn’t given it much credit, but in light of what Scooter had said, now maybe with a little bit of added oomph, it might do the job.

“Well, first we’ve got to get rid of the Roe v. Wade decision. The government doesn’t have any other stake in this matter except for that; abortion isn’t a federal service and it doesn’t have to do with federal property. That one trumped up law is the only thing that makes it a fed issue. We ditch that, and it’s a civil matter.”

“Why not just have the federal courts change the law?”

I took a pull from my drink. “ ‘cause frankly the more power the Supreme Court has, the worse. Supreme Court justices are appointed for life, unless they get convicted of a crime or something. And even then I’m not sure. They can do whatever they want

with federal law and nobody can touch ‘em, no matter how crazy or senile they get. They shouldn’t have been brought into this matter in the first place.”

Scooter nodded. “Okay, so then what?”

“Next, we get the state courts debating the issue, ‘cause we have some control over them. State judges can be fired, or something like that. So we let them decide and we see how many states we can get to make it illegal to get an abortion by personal choice, barring rape.”

The skunk nodded along, “Okay, now how about the states that don’t make it illegal?”

“Well since we can’t get the women in this case, we have to go after the sleazy doctors who do this stuff for a living. Now a whole lot of doctors don’t tell these girls just what kind of risks they’re taking getting abortions. There’s a whole lot of stuff that can, and does, go wrong. So we hire lawyers to sue the doctors on behalf of the patients who get scarred, go sterile, and catch diseases. And we sue them for so much, and run their malpractice rates up so high they can’t get a job as a veterinarian.”

“Not bad,” said Scooter, “But a lot of doctors get waivers signed by patients. Not much you can do then.”

“True,” I said, “except for one thing; if they can prove the girl signed without “informed consent”, then they’ve got him pinned.”

“Define “informed consent”.”

“The doctor has to tell her about every single possible risk that’s known to be a direct result of the procedure.”

“That would probably do it.”

Our time of political contemplation came to an end then. It was just in time for us to notice a hooting and cheering crowd a ways off on the club’s main floor. Curious, I stood up and made my way through the crowd, the skunk in jiggling tow, letting out the occasional hiccup as he agitated his still soda-swollen gut with his waddling.

The crowd was gathered around what looked like a pay-per-view wrestling ring. A billboard hanging over it gave us all the information we needed to get filled in on the event: “TONIGHT: INDE INFLATION WRESTLING! ALL CHALLENGERS WELCOME!” In the ring, a massively fat otter, had to be at least 800lbs, had an air filled gryphon against the ropes with his gut. The gryphon suddenly used his lighter filling to squeeze out and pop up into the air, knocking the otter into the ropes, which then propelled him backward to land on his back. The gryphon landed and pressed his gut into the otter’s face to try and keep him from getting up.

But the otter had a secret weapon; his thick tail. He unbalanced the gryphon and bowled him over by sweeping his feline footpaws out from under him and dropped him to the mat, where he pinned him with his much heavier belly for the three count.

“HA! UNDEFEATED!” The otter was proving he used his mouth for something other than swallowing food by now crowing his own achievements. If there’s one thing I enjoy, it’s taking over confident schmucks down a peg. I chuckled as the ref called for another challenger.

“Hey ref, I’ll shut ‘em up for ya.” The crowd parted a bit as I made my way forward, climbing through the ropes.

“OOOHHH, big word from a skinny dog! C’mon boy, chose your weapon and get ready for a poundin’!”

I shucked off my shirt and boots, emptying my pockets into them as well. I liked to think that I looked like John McClane in my slacks and a tank top undershirt, but truth be told I probably looked more like every New Yorker who owned an apartment in the projects.

The otter waddled over to his corner to take a breather; he had some time, I had to bulk up for the match. Seeing the way he’d tossed around the gryphon, I knew gas wasn’t the way to go. I decided to go with liquid; it wasn’t as firm as using some chemical to fatten myself, but it tended to help with momentum. Fat just doesn’t move quite the same way.

I pointed out my selection to the ringside attendant. He was standing next to one of numerous gizmos that littered the main floor of the club; a special device sort of like a gas pump, except instead of petrol, this one pumped actual gas, not to mention water, a number of sodas, and a variety of soft foods like jello and pudding.

The attendant tossed me the hose and pressed the H2O button for me. I started sucking on the hose for all I was worth, the otter standing in his corner, tapping his foot and looking at his watch. I gave him a glare as my stomach swelled out, stretching my shirt until the buttons couldn’t hold on any more and started taking off. I aimed my gut at him and bounced one off his forehead.

“HEY!” He rubbed at his face as I sniggered, my limbs also thickening out. I had to pull my boots off before my footpaws ruined the leather. Bigger and rounder I grew, my stomach coming close to bumping my chin. When it swelled down to my knees, I made a slashing motion across my throat with a pudgy hand and the attendant cut off my flow. My gut looked like I swallowed a wrecking ball. A wrecking ball made of jelly. I let out a belch and sniggered, crossing my swollen arms on top of my girth. My sleeves and pant legs were rather tight, but had just enough give to allow me to move and maintain my dignity.

“Alright boys,” The ref, a zebra who was practically blending into his own striped shirt, stood in the center of the ring. “I want a clean fight; no below-the-belt hits, no eye

gouging, and no biting. ESPECIALLY on the stomach.” The ref nodded to one of the attendants. The bell rang, and a most ridiculous grudge match was on.

The otter quickly waddled, though “quick” is perhaps a relative term, towards the center of the ring. I smirked and sloshed to meet him head on. Our stomachs met before the rest of us did, bulging and stretching from the impact. We each dug our footpaws into the mat, making ridiculously macho grunts as we shoved against each other, our girths wiggling and squirming between us. Finally, we both overbalanced in opposite directions and went staggering past each other. I spun slowly on my heel and planted myself to receive my opponent. Bad move; he had used his momentum to rebound into the ropes (actually they were stainless steel cables covered with foam) and come barreling back at me! We collided and he knocked me on my rather sizeable fanny.

The otter, now overconfident, made his first mistake of the match; he started to climb the turnbuckle. Too early in the match, I wasn’t dizzy enough yet. I rocked my belly from side to side, and quickly rolled out of the way as the otter tried to swan dive on top of me, and instead bounced himself into an opposite corner.

I tried to grab my knees, had limited success, and rolled onto my footpaws. Not wasting a moment, I charged towards my opponent, planted my footpaws, and sprang forward...about one foot. But that’s all I needed; I collided my gut with the otter from behind, squishing him between my belly and his own, which was pushed back by the turnbuckle.

“GWO!” The otter’s eyes bulged out of his head. I sniggered and backed up for a repeat performance, but the otter used his thick tail to sweep my footpaws out from under me. I landed on my back, then bulged my own eyes out. It happens when your opponent does an elbow drop into your spherical stomach. I slapped my hand against my gut, which was rolling like the ocean.

“HA! Gotcha now!” The otter waddled around to my head. All the recent movement had definitely made my head spin. And now this next move didn’t help my situation. My opponent hefted up his gut with both hand, took one step forward, and dropped it onto my face with a ring-shaking THUMP.

“MRRMRMMMMPH!” I said, flailing my limbs about.

“That’s what they all say!” The otter put his hands on his hips and laughed. He technically had me pinned! I heard the ref beginning to slap the canvas. Quickly, I kicked my legs and got my shoulders off the mat for a few seconds. But that only restarted the count. I had to act fast. But I knew what to do. I kicked again to buy some more time...

...and then I raised up a hand and stuck two fingers into the otter’s belly button. Scooter would later tell me that the guy’s eyes crossed so much he must have been trying to have a staring contest with himself. All I know is that I heard him start cackling. He fell on his lard-laden backside, and I sat up with a gasp, pressing my hand against his gut for support. But I wasn’t done yet; I had my opponent right where I wanted him. I started wriggling my fingers in his navel, making him lay flat on his back and howl with

glee. He tried to bite his tongue, but that just made his eyes water as his belly wiggled and shivered. Finally, he slapped the canvas, tapping out. The bell rang again, and the crowd started whooping it up. I did a little victory dance that mostly consisted of jumping from one footpaw to the other, bouncing my water-logged belly on the canvas.

“Great job!” Said Scooter as I rolled, literally, out of the ring. The otter, meanwhile, was trying to do the same, but he was still having a huge case of the giggles. “How’d you learn that trick, though?”

I grinned at the skunk. “Heh, it’s not just the size of your opponent’s gut, it’s how you can use it against him.”

It was overcast and cloudy the morning of the next day. After having shrunk back down (There was an all-night project!) I’d given the case some thought. Although Draxx and his stooges wouldn’t be bothering Scooter again, I still couldn’t ignore the missing explosives, nor what I suspected they were being used for.

“You know,” I said as I walked up the steps towards the police precinct, “as much as I appreciate your help, you don’t have to keep putting yourself in danger. I mean, this is something I’m following up myself.”

“Yeah, well,” said Scooter, “I couldn’t sit on my hands when I knew some freaks were committing crimes. Especially ones where innocent people are getting the rap, not to mention ones that uphold a cause I believe in.”

I chuckled. “Thanks. Who knows, before this thing is over, I could probably use the help of a hacker.”

The police precinct was buzzing with activity. The squawk of two way radios was audible above the buzz of telephones and the grumbling of various people in handcuffs as they awaited booking. I walked up to the desk sergeant, a raccoon in a policeman’s suit with his tie pulled down from how hot it was from all the various bodies moving in and out.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, I’m looking for Detective Stuart Yowler.”

“Yeah, he’s got an appointment today with a....Mike Fang...”

“That’s me.”

“Ah, okay. He’s waiting for you down the hall. Take the second right, you should see him.”

“Thanks.” Scooter and I slipped past the desk, following the sergeant’s directions. I smirked inwardly; a month or two ago the notion that I would actually want

to see Yowler would have been ridiculous. But a kidnapping case had resulted in a strange change in the cat's previously sour and bigoted demeanor. He was more subdued now, like he was scrutinizing himself. He wasn't a friend to me by any standard, but he was no longer a venomous thorn in my side. He was, in three words, respectful and professional.

Two things which I never would have guessed he was capable of being.

I turned the corner and spotted Yowler standing outside the door of an interrogation room. His suit, while still cheap, was now properly cleaned and pressed. He would have passed for Alden at a distance, but up close the detective's shorter stature and less robust physique was apparent, not to mention the different facial features and such.

"Fang," he said, giving me a nod. It was still something of a surprise that his first response to seeing me wasn't to spit out some insult.

"Detective," I said in much the same reserved tone. "I'm here because..."

"Because you're not done with the Draxx case, I take it."

"..Um, yeah, that's right."

Yowler nodded. "I figured as much. It's your big break, currently, and I'm guessing there's a loose end you're trying to tie up."

"Right again." I refrained from saying that it wasn't too long ago I would've figured the cat incapable of such higher paths of thought.

"I've got Draxx in here," said Yowler, pointing a thumb at the interrogation room door. "all ready for questioning. He doesn't know that you're here, I figured that would be a way to work at him; get him ticked by your presence so he'll spill something."

"Not a bad idea. How'd you pull this off?"

"Well I've been transferred to Major Crimes division; kidnappings, drugs, smuggling, extortion, that kind of thing. By the way, who's your friend?" The cat glanced from me to the skunk.

"Scooter," the skunk said, adjusting his baseball cap, "Scooter McPhearson,"

"Nice to meet ya. You want to come in as well, Mr. McPhearson? This guy isn't exactly in a pleasant mood."

"I can handle it. Plus if seeing Mike could tick him off, seeing me will just add fuel to the fire."

“That’s true. The guards say he’s been grumbling in his cell a lot, talking about Fang, you, and that wolf that helped you catch him, Mr. Atten.”

“Well, let’s get this started.” I said. Yowler nodded and opened the door. Inside the door was a small inner room with the two way mirror in the wall, the see-through side facing us. Waiting was Yowler’s captain, a sand colored toad.

Draxx looked up from the table he was handcuffed to. His eyes got wider as all three of us walked in.

“What the f**k are they doing here?!” The cougar snarled and tried to stand up, but the chain on his cuffs, were hooked to the edge of the table, which was bolted to the floor.

“Just cool it, Draxx,” snorted Yowler, “that kind of attitude is what got you there,” he pointed at the manacles, “in the first place. You punch two guards during booking, you’re not gonna get treated much better than they way you treat us.”

“Ahh suck my-“

“And watch your mouth! You wanna go back in solitary?” That shut the cougar up. I reached into my coat and pulled out my copy of the letter from his jacket and tossed it on the table.

“You want to enlighten us about this? Like maybe who wrote it, what’s so special about those addresses?” The cougar picked up the note and glanced at it. Then he smirked and folded it in half and made like he was going to tear it up.

“Oh please,” I said, “it’s a copy. Besides, as long as we’ve had the original, do you really think you’d be helping your case by ripping it up?” The grin from Draxx’s face fell and he tossed the letter back at me.

“What’s it to you? You caught me and my boys, so it’s not like it matters.”

“You don’t catch the news, do you?”

“Just ‘Hard Copy’.” I had to refrain from snorting; being schooled in journalism, I could hardly call the sensationalistic, overblown dramatizing and biased slanting of the facts seen on that show “news”.

“Somebody managed to snatch some of the explosives from the train,” Scooter said. “So if you know something, you might be able to bargain with it. Even your pea brain can comprehend that.”

“What’d you say you little punk @\$#!?”

“C’mon, Draxx,” Yowler leaned on the table, other hand on his hip in traditional hard boiled cop stance. “there’s somebody else out there that’s taken your job over for you. Now spill it!”

“Hey, I don’t know anything about anyone who knew about the explosives besides me and my guys. So if you lost the bombs, it’s your own d@mn fault. Now I want my lawyer.”

That was the end of that. The expected rap on the glass from the mirror came, and we shuffled out like a funeral procession, leaving the cougar to glare at us.

“Sorry detective,” said the police captian, “but once they say the ‘L’ word, that’s the end of interrogation without his ambulance chaser.” Yowler nodded. “Well guys, sorry that didn’t tell us much.”

“Well it did tell us something,” I mused. “If he’s not lying, then that means there must’ve been some other team of perps ready to go in and take over if things went sour. And if THAT’s true, then the ringleader behind this operation must be someone pretty rich to be able to hire this many thugs.”

The sun was setting as I pushed open the door to my office. Scooter was inside, pounding the keys of his laptop, a number of empty soda cans and snack wrappers laying around him on the couch.

Hackers, I thought to myself. Since nobody was paying me for this follow up I was doing, I’d stopped charging Scooter once Draxx was in custody, I had to take a small job that I’d received earlier that morning. Nothing huge, a B&E down at a local jewelry store. It was over in a few hours, but there’d been an unexpected perk.

“Any luck?” I said to the skunk, tossing my hat on the coat rack by my desk. Scooter looked up from his digital distraction, a candy bar stuck in his mouth like a cigar. He sucked it into his mouth, crunched it up, and swallowed.

“Yeah, I think so...what’s with that look on your face?”

“Hmm?” I dropped into my seat behind my desk.

“You’ve got this funny little smile on your face...you get laid or something?”

I chuckled. “Nah...though while I was workin’, I did meet this girl...”

“Oh really? What’s she like?”

“Heh, well she’s a cop. Real firey one, too. But to me that just makes her pretty enticing. I like ‘em a bit spicy, yanno?”

“Mmm, I know what you mean, but that’s not really my type.”

“Hey, to each his own. Anyway, she’s also smart, which is important to me, and she’s got dedication to her job, which is admirable. I just hope she’s not married to it.”

“Hmm, better find that out quick. How is she for looks?”

I leaned back in my seat. Now I knew I had a snickering grin on my face, 'cause I could feel it.

"Heh, she's built to take it and dish it out; got some meat on her bones, a face that could either seduce you or make you sweat, sometimes both, and bumpers that could take a head on collision from a truck."

"Sounds like maybe you hooked a keeper."

"Yeah, well..." I sat up in my seat and rubbed the back of my neck. "We only just met. Dunno if she even considers me dating material, or if I'm ready to step up to bat with her. We'll see."

"Careful you don't wait too long." Scooter said, closing out some windows on his pc. I stood up and leaned over his shoulder from the side.

"Well enough about my romantic life; did you find anything going through Drax's email account?"

"He encrypted some things; mostly receipts from electronic banking transfers."

"Any way to tell where they came from?"

"Yeah, but it was a dummy corporation. Business registration and the name of the guy signing off on all the transfers was all fake. Someone did quite a job putting together this fake partner, too. I checked the record on the name; had a driver's license, birth certificate, plus a social security number."

"Dang, that's right out of 'The Shawshank Redemption'. How'd you tell it was fake?"

"I checked with social security, the DMV, and with the hospital that had the certificate. The documents were put on record only three months ago. Apparently this mystery man called up claiming his license, SS number, and proof of birth had been wiped out due to some computer error and he needed to have them, you know, drawn back up again."

"Nice work," I patted the skunk on the shoulder. "Any chance of getting the mystery man's name?"

"Nah, he did it all by email, and the account that it was sent by got closed out. They wiped out the records. Only way I could find out is if I checked the registration copies the email provider keeps offline."

"Hmm. Five'll get you ten this guy was the one who hired Drax to smuggle the bombs. Well, first thing's first." I pulled out the copy of Drax's address list that was in my coat pocket.

“We’ll check the in-town addresses. I want to see who Drax was supposed to pay a visit.”

I set the parking brake on my car as I stepped out. We’d swung by Ice’s gym to fill him in and see if he still wanted in. I’d collected my fee from Scooter and gave the wolf a cut for his services rendered. He certainly deserved it; having a silver knife stuck in his ear couldn’t have been pleasant. Plus if he hadn’t handled the smuggler’s juggernaut, I knew Scooter and I wouldn’t have had a chance against her.

It was after hours, but Ice’d given me a key to get in late whenever I needed to see him. I should’ve known something was up when I saw his office door just barely pushed shut, but not fully closed. The wolf always kept his door wide open unless he had a phone call or a private conference with someone.

“I’m gonna hit the bathroom real quick,” Scooter said, following the signs. I went up and pushed open the door.

“Hey Ice, got a minute?”

The first thing I registered when I stepped in the door were two thugs with pantyhose over their heads pointing guns at Ice’s head. From the irritated look on his face as he sat at his desk, head resting on his fist, elbow leaning on the desk, they once again must have brought silver ammo. The second thing I registered was a gun put to the side of MY head.

“Shut the door,” The guy holding the pistol to my head hissed. I quirked an eyebrow and pushed it shut with my boot.

“I take it this isn’t a stick up.”

“Shut up.”

“Oh that’s nice.”

“I said shut UP! Where’s the other one?” I remained silent.

“I said ‘where’s your friend’?” I still didn’t say anything. I was racking my brain for a way out of this situation. Not an easy thing to do when you’ve got an automatic pressed to your...that was it. I looked closer at the thug’s gun and smirked.

“I SAID WHERE’S THAT F*CKING SKUNK?!” The thug pressed his gun against my head harder.

“That’s right stupid,” I thought to myself, *“Keep it up...”*

“You also told me to shut up.” I smirked at him.

“Oh, a wise @\$\$, eh?”

I turned to face my assailant, a fox whose particular features were obscured by the stockings pulled over his head. I pushed my forehead against the gun's barrel, grinning insanely. The pressure of the gun was starting to sting my forehead, and out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ice looking at me like he thought I was suicidal.

"Yeah, " I sneered, "What're you gonna do about it?" The fox's hand tightened on the gun and he squeezed the trigger. There was a small click.

Nothing. No gunshot, nothing. Confused, the fox blinked. That's when I shot up a hand and slapped the gun upwards towards the ceiling. With my other hand, I grabbed my assailant's denim jacket, pulled him closer in, and smashed my head into his. The other two goons immediately looked away from Ice towards myself. That's all the wolf needed. With a snarl like a Harley engine, he shot out both hands, grabbed the pistols that had been pointed at him, and with a quick squeeze bent the barrels.

"I'm gettin'...", Ice shot out one hand and grabbed the goon on his right with one massive hand.

"F*ckin' sick...", He grabbed the one on his left even as the first thug started flailing and pounding on the wolf's arm in a futile attempt to get free.

"Of bein' HELD HOSTAGE!" With that, Ice effortlessly lifted the two thugs into the air as he stood up, held them apart at arm's length, and then smacked them together over his desk.

Good thing they didn't make him mad, or he would've really gotten violent.

My own assailant, meanwhile, was clutching his nose. I kned him in the stomach to double him over, and dropped him to the floor with an elbow to the back of the head.

The door to the office burst open. Another stocking-clad goon pulled the slide on an Ingram and prepared to cut me in half. That's when two bodies fell from above him like paratroopers who forgot to open their 'chutes. He collapsed underneath them, groaned a bit, then his grip on his machine gun went slack.

I looked behind me. Ice was dusting his now empty hands; he had thrown both of his unconscious captors like crash test dummies.

"Thanks," I said, adjusting my hat where it had been knocked back from the head butt.

"M' pleasure," the wolf rumbled, "but how'd you know his gun would jam?"

"It didn't jam, actually," I said, bending over to pick it up. "I noticed what kind of gun he was using; a Kimbler .45."

"So?"

“Heh, I don’t know much about a lot of stuff, but I know a few things about guns. Kimbler’s the best when it comes to automatics. They use the old 1911 .45 design as a basis, then they make improvements. One of them is the three different safeties. They’ve got your standard switch safety on the side here,” I pointed at a little lever on the side of the goon’s pistol.

“Next they’ve got a pressure trigger on the handle on the back. That way the gun won’t go off unless someone’s squeezing the handle.”

The wolf nodded along, “ ‘Kay, what’s the third one?”

“The third one’s the most ingenious. This’s a combat sidearm, so they designed it so if it got pressed into the ground accidentally, it wouldn’t go off and backfire. They put one more safety right here,” I pointed at the business end of the automatic. “The barrel can get pushed back if you press on it from the front. When it does, it locks the hammer so it won’t fire.”

“Ahh, I get it,” Ice nodded, crossing his brawny arms. “When you saw what piece the @\$\$hole was packin’, you pressed your head up against the barrel so it couldn’t go off.”

“Bingo.” Just then, the door pushed further open. I spun around and leveled the gun I had in my hand. Scooter jumped a bit in the doorway.

“Whoa, easy! It’s just me!” I let out a breath.

“Jeez, sorry. Gave me a heart attack.”

The skunk looked around the room.

“I take it I missed all the fun?”

The goons didn’t spill anything under interrogation before the cops showed up to haul them off. As it was they didn’t know anything anyway; their orders had come from the leader of their street gang, and he wasn’t with them. Hunting him down was something I was contemplating on my back burner, but first I had to check those addresses. Late as it was in the day, I didn’t want to wait until morning with thugs still coming after us.

Ice apparently felt the same way.

“You really wanna stay involved with this?” I said to him as we made our way up the steps to an apartment building. The humor of the coincidence that it was the second time I was having this conversation with someone didn’t escape me.

“Seems like I got no choice,” the wolf rumbled. “Somebody’s after us, and this s#!t’s the only thing that could be the cause. Even if it wasn’t, ‘m bored stiff, so I could use th’ excitement.” I chuckled and shook my head; only a 7ft walking demolition crew like Ice could see a life-on-the-line case like this as a fun distraction.

I scanned the lines of mailboxes until I found the one we were looking for: Carl Wessex, Appt. 443. We opted for the stairs; I figured altogether we'd probably max out the elevator's lifting capacity. The building wasn't dirty or run-down, unlike many I'd seen while working on cases. It was probably cleaner than my own building, actually. I was starting to doubt that the addresses were for people working for Drax's employer. It just didn't seem like the type of place you'd find criminals. Then again, appearances can be deceiving.

I rapped on the door and stood back a few steps so that Wessex would be able to see me through the peephole. Living in the city, it's common courtesy to allow someone to be able to see you before they open the door. Standing to the side or too close doesn't encourage them to crack the barrier between them and a potential armed burglar. A muffled "Yes?" came from behind the door.

"Mr. Wessex, I'm Mike Fang, I'm a private investigator. I've got a couple questions I need to ask you. Can I have a moment of your time?" There was a pause, then some bolts slid back. A gryphon with bright red feathers on his head and wings and jet black body fur, at least that which could be seen on his hands, dressed in a polo shirt and jeans answered the door.

"I've got a few minutes, what can I do for you?"

"Sir, do you know anyone by the name of Ferris Drax?"

"Nope."

"Have you seen anyone suspicious lately around your home or been approached by someone suspicious?"

"Nope."

"Received any unusual phone calls, had any break-ins?"

"Nope."

"Hmm. May I ask what your occupation is?"

"I'm head librarian at the Roosevelt Memorial Library."

"Hmm...one last question, and you can decline to answer if you like; are you pro-life or pro-choice when it comes to abortion?"

"I'm pro-life."

I nodded. "Thanks for your time, sorry to bother you." The gryphon nodded and shut the door.

"Well what the hell did that tell us?" Scooter said, leaning against the wall.

“Not a thing,” I said. This case was giving me a headache. As we walked down the street, I started to think that maybe this was a waste of time. Maybe the case really was over, maybe there wasn’t a connection.

But then what were those thugs doing in Ice’s office? Was it just a petty attempt at revenge?

“Hey, guys, check this out!” Scooter was standing in front of an electronics store window, pointing at a tv. Curious, I walked over to catch the evening news report.

“...the police found evidence of explosives manufacturing in her home; pieces of the mechanisms used in the production of the bomb that leveled the abortion clinic yesterday evening. An anonymous tip led detective Vincent Hathaway to get a search warrant, which turned up the evidence. Frieda is a known anti-abortion activist and her organization is preparing a press release to address the accusations that the bombing was planned by the group.”

“This is bull s#!t,” said Scooter. “That was a mother of one in her forties that worked in the x-ray department at a hospital. She didn’t have the know how to create a bomb!”

“Might’ve downloaded it off the internet,” said Ice. Scooter looked at him.

“Then why would she think to get rid of the bomb instructions but not the rest of the evidence? What do you think Mike?” The skunk turned towards me. I had been listening to him and Ice debate the possibilities while I scanned the address list.

“Andrea Frieda...,”

“Yeah,” said Scooter, “that’s her name.”

I held up the list and pointed.

“That’s her address. She’s on the list.”

It was the dead of night by the time the bus stopped on the corner. The vehicle’s shocks actually creaked as we stepped off, probably lightening the load by well over a ton. That’s what happens when you’ve got a juggernaut werewolf in your posse. We’d raced across town to try and bring the list of names to the attention of Hathaway. It was a lot like racing to the toilet when you’ve got diarrhea, only to find that it’s out of order when you get there.

“I don’t give a rat’s fartin’ fanny if her name’s on some list, that’s not my case.” Those had been his exact words. Apparently if the goat ever had one of those idea light bulbs like you see in the cartoons, it would be one of those tiny Christmas lights that blinks on and off randomly. He couldn’t see the connection, all he saw was the prospect that he’d have to share the attention his case was getting with another department.

Now, we were walking up the sidewalk on a hill into a middle class residential section of the city. Our destination was a single story ranch style home with crime scene tape around the front door.

“What exactly are we going to do here?” Scooter kicked an empty soda can into an overturned trash can.

“We’re going to work this backwards,” I said as we came up to the house’s driveway. “Find out how the evidence got into this lady’s house. Then we find out who put it there. Then we go find said person and step on him until he spills who told him to do it and we work our way up the ladder until we find out who’s behind this conspiracy.”

“Uh, what conspiracy?” Ice said. “I’m a little hazy on these connections.”

I chuckled a bit. “Yeah, it is a bit confusing. Okay, here’s a recap: We’ve got a mercenary crew running explosives into the city. We stop them, but they’ve got this weird list of names and addresses.”

The lights were out all around the neighborhood. Still, the occasional cop car patrolled up and down the scene. I was glad I’d run into Det. Yowler before heading out here. He’d pulled some strings and managed to get us contracted by the Major Crimes department to do consulting and reconnaissance work. That got us into the crime scene without having to worry about trespassing.

I stepped over a small bush at the end of the driveway and started up the gravel path, still going on with my recap. “Now, a crate of explosives goes missing from the smuggler’s hideout. Suddenly, there’s an abortion clinic blown up with explosives. An anonymous tip off leads police to investigate the home of an anti-abortion activist, and they find evidence connecting her to bomb making. Thing is, she doesn’t have the know how to make bombs, and they haven’t even managed to place her at the clinic anywhere near the time of the bombing. Plus, her address is one of those on the list from the smugglers. This smells like a frame up. And since Scooter found that someone was paying the smugglers and going to great lengths to avoid being identified, then this bombing and framing is all part of some big plan.”

The wolf nodded. “M’kay, I think I get the gist of it. So why didn’t whoever snatched the crates of explosives from the smugglers stop us from bustin’ them in the first place?”

“I dunno,” I said, cracking my stiff neck. “Maybe we surprised them. Or maybe they planned on letting Draxx and his boys take the fall anyway. We can ask them when we find them. I just hope they didn’t realize we were onto them when those thugs who tried to wack us at your gym didn’t come back with our heads in a duffel bag.”

The exterior of the house was neat and trim; a real slice of “your average American household”. Bushes were carefully manicured, a few kid’s toys were scattered around, and it looked like the flowers were getting ready to bloom. The news report had said that the evidence was found in the woman’s basement. At first glance I had to admit

the facts looked pretty damning. But now as I looked over the outside of the house I was having second thoughts.

“Mmmhmmm,” I said to myself, kneeling down in the gravel around the planting bed on the side of the house.

“Find something?” Scooter bent over and peered over my shoulder while Ice watched the street. There was a ground-level basement window behind some tall fern plants. The sill of the window wasn’t in plain sight, easily ignored. Unless you were supposed to be looking for evidence, then you should have known to examine it.

“This window’s been forced.” I pointed at the latch of the window. There were cracks and bends in the wood, as well as dents like something was jammed between the window and the sill. Something like a crowbar.

“Okay, guys, start searching the bushes here. Look for anything that might indicate somebody’s been here. Expect small stuff; bottle caps, gum wrappers, that kind of thing.” The guys and I poked and probed through the bushes. You can’t really compare that kind of tedious work to looking for a needle in a haystack; at least when you’re doing that, you know you’re looking for a needle.

“Hey, think I got somethin’.” Ice was on his knees, pushing back the branches of a holly bush. I got up from my own probing to see what he found.

“Oh, nice job.” I rummaged in my pockets for rubber gloves, an evidence bag, and tweezers. A cigarette butt was under the bush, flicked there ever so carelessly by whoever smoked it.

“This is perfect. We can take it by the police forensics and get a DNA scan from the saliva on it.”

“Heh, I can do ya one better,” the werewolf chuckled. “hold up the butt.” I carefully grasped the spent cancer stick in the tweezers and held it a couple inches from Ice’s nose, who proceeded to sniff it gently. I’d completely forgotten the abilities werewolves and other species had as trackers; they could identify things and people by smell. Their abilities are so good, in court an identification of a suspect by a werewolf by smell is considered concrete evidence on par with DNA samples. The only hitch is making sure that the object doesn’t have a lot of other scents attached to it.

“Hmmm...” Ice had his eyes closed as he rubbed his chin and sniffed. “Smoky scent is still there....but so’s the smoker’s scent. Lessee....mammal...plenty of body fur, so no pigs or boars...not canine...not equine...not vulpine...ursine...yeah, definitely a bear...mmm...I’d say...not a grizzly...or a Kodak...black bear. Yeah, definitely a black bear...and...it’s a male...middle aged...”

“D@mn,” I said, grinning. “Do you do parties and bar mitzvahs , too?” Ice chuckled.

“I’ll be able to I.D the guy if I smell him in person, but first we gotta find him.”

“Right,” I said, “Time for another trip to Drake’s.”

“I thought your case was closed,” said Drake. The dragon punched the keys of his holographic keyboard as nearby a DNA analyzer was scanning a sample of the trace saliva from the cigarette butt from the crime scene. I rolled a toothpick around in my mouth and I leaned against the wall of Drake’s lab. The dragon had just about every piece of scientific technology imaginable in his basement, including stuff used by law enforcement to individuate stuff. That means to tell exactly where a specific object came from, not just what it was, for those of you who don’t read crime drama.

“So did I.” I muttered out of the corner of my mouth, “But things seldom work out the way you want ‘em to.”

“True,” Drake muttered, scanning lines of text on a large flat screen monitor. Finally, a mug shot came up. Just like Ice said; a middle aged black bear.

“Just our luck,” Scooter said, glancing up from some kind of x-ray machine. “Another honor’s member of the FBI’s Rogue’s Gallery.” He and Ice were poking and prodding around Drake’s lab, being careful to look but not touch as they sated their curiosities in what looked like Frankenstein’s one-stop shop.

“Tommy DeLotto,” Ice said, reading the rap sheet. “Wanted for over twenty counts of burglary, B&E, grand larceny, assault with a deadly, bank robbing, trespassing, including some federal offenses ‘cause he tried to break into federal property. Heh, talk about a career criminal.”

“Currently at large.” I mused, eyes still scanning the text. “So he wasn’t in that team that attacked us at the gym. Last known location...oh boy, Furrison.” ‘

“Mmm?” Scooter looked at me. “Furrison?”

“Yeah. No.1 hot bed of furry-human relations.”

Okay, this is going to take a bit of explaining. Until now I’ve never told you folks the name of my city, for personal safety reasons. But now if I’m to explain the extent of this issue, I’ll need to. The city of Sapphire Bay, a costal burg in the Eastern United States, has been a fairly neutral ground in national politics. It’s not so much a melting pot of the population as it is a bag of party mix; there’s no homogenous nature to the people that live here, no smooth consistency like a well blended ice cream. Any handful of people you come up with when you dip your hand into the bag will be a surprise.

In that way it’s always been a bit of a safe place to live; you don’t have to have a certain opinion, belief, or political party to fit in; inconsistency is the status quo in Sapphire Bay. Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, Anarchists, Socialists, Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jewish, Agnostics, Atheists, Protestants, Pro-choice, Pro-life, Pro-capital punishment, Anti-capital punishment, Pro-social security, Anti-social

security, Pro-war, Anti-war, the list is almost as endless as the myriad different kinds of physical people that live here. Both “furry”...and human.

Folks that know me know that as politically vocal as I am, I tend to shy away from the issue of how we furries, or as I prefer to say, anthropomorphics and the world human population get along. It's one of the few issues I do avoid, because my very species causes people's interpretation of my opinion to be automatically tilted a certain way. Like what tinted sunglasses do for a person's vision, whether one is a “furry” or a human will color however people hear what you have to say on the issue.

Still, my city has always been an even handed place; say whatever you want about the subject, just don't be surprised when somebody else disagrees with you. I'd heard about 'em all over the years, furry and human supremacists, as well as those who were for co-species integration. Technically I'm a member of the latter. But unlike some, I'm for it to a certain degree, not going so far as to encourage furries and humans to, say, marry or try to reproduce. There are just some things that aren't natural. And unlike many people of my kind, I actually understand why some humans find us intimidating.

But not every city is as well rounded in it's makeup as Sapphire Bay. It is true that at one time “furries” were concentrated in their populations in certain areas due to a lack of good will on the part of humanity. But the truth of history has been changed and rearranged by “historical revisionists” so much that it's hard to tell what the truth was any more. Without a doubt there has been furry oppression in certain areas. But whether it was widespread like the Nazi persecution of the Jewish is questionable. I personally suspect that it was more like the persecution of African Americans in the Southern U.S. during the 50's; an event that occurred in concentrated areas to a very bad degree, but not resulting in some sort of nation-wide genocide. Be that as it may, there are still some cities that have a population that's all but completely “furry”.

Furrison is one such city. And its inhabitants tend to be of a mind that oppression on a wide scale is still going on. They look at themselves as the holders of the one single truth of “furry heritage”. And so they've become a city of introverts, being rather suspicious of people outside their burg. Rumor has it they have all sorts of customs that are unique to them, but they like to claim are applicable to all “furries” everywhere, as if they set the standard. Last I heard, they were trying to rewrite evolutionary history to suggest that both humans and “furries” have some kind of common ancestor. Frankly I think the only common ancestor we have are the single cell organisms that all life came from. They'd also decided that since a few of their residents had developed a unique psychic/spiritual ability, something they called the “Sight Of Soul”, that all the world had a collective intelligence or something. I certainly didn't buy it; if that was the case, how could anybody keep a secret?

All this ran through my mind as I sat on the plane, staring out the window.

“DING! Attention passengers, we will be landing in Furrison in ten minutes. The captain has turned on the seat belt sign, please fasten your safety belts and put your trays in their upright and locked positions.” I felt that dipping sensation in my stomach as the plane started to nose down into the wind, making the craft shutter slightly. I watched as

the skyscrapers and highways of the approaching burg became larger in my window. I sighed; this was going to be interesting at the least, and exasperating at the most.

The in-flight tv broadcast hadn't been much help. The news was more of the same that I'd heard for the past week; gas prices rising, the CIA was forming new taskforces to seek out terrorist cells, and the senatorial race. In that last one, right wing candidate Frederick Vesper was running against incumbent left wing Senator Ralph Redford. Much as I hated to say it, Vesper wasn't a very good candidate. He was only one step away from a new world militia leader. On the other hand I couldn't say I liked Redford that much either; he was your stereotypical liberal that wanted the government to regulate the crap out of everything, cow-tow to minorities, and allow any sort of morally reprehensible behavior on the grounds that they were discriminated against. What else could you expect from somebody whose political campaign was backed by the ACLU?

I cracked my neck as me and my posse stepped off the plane. Scooter and I were dressed pretty much the same as we had before. Ice, on the other hand, was looking downright natty in a tailor made off-white suit and his hair clipped back in a long (very long) ponytail.

"I like to look my best when traveling," was his explanation. The airport was overly crowded; a result of people traveling on their summer vacations. In the airport there was the usual security kiosk, doing everything but giving people an alien abduction body probe to search for hidden weapons. I smirked, thinking of my own piece which was locked in my non-carry on luggage that I'd pick up on the other side of airport security.

It was just then that I got my first taste of Furrison protocol. There was another kiosk beyond the security one. I was just pulling my boots back on as a lady poodle with one of those airline artificial smiles waved me over.

"Excuse me sir, but **you and your party** will have to **register** here."

"Um, okay...what are we registering for?"

"Here in **Furrison** we're very conscious about the **species levels** in our city at any given time, in order to avoid overpopulation. So if you could just **fill out these documents...**" The poodle spoke in what was undoubtedly the infamous Furrison accent I'd heard of; an odd emphasis was added to random words in their speech. I look down at the form and then at my compatriots. Scooter was resignedly scribbling down information. Ice was looking at the form with an expression that, on him, could only be interpreted as "What the *insert bad word* is this *insert another bad word*?" I myself could only grunt and start filling out the form as well. The information requested was more than a little odd; my species, how long I planned to stay in Furrison, what was my business...I balked a little when they asked me *if I intended to mate with anyone while I was here*.

"Isn't this a violation of my privacy?" I said, giving the poodle a raised eyebrow.

“Oh **no** sir! You don’t have to answer **all** the questions. Of course, you **can’t be allowed in the city** if you don’t, either.”

“Nice,” I muttered, continuing to fill out the form, feeling like I was trying to get into some foreign country. I finished first Ice and Scooter were still working at it, so I excused myself to the restroom. While I was in there, I discovered another little piece of cultural difference. As I stepped into the stall, there was a small cabinet over the commode with the words “For canine customers”. Curious, I opened it; and could only roll my eyes at what I found inside.

A little picture of a fire hydrant.

I stepped back out of the john as the skunk and the wolf were slapping down their registration forms. As I approached, the sound of a raised voice caught my attention. A raccoon family of three with a five-year-old kid, or if you wanted to get technical, kit, was being waylaid by the registration.

“What do you mean you’re not letting any raccoons into the city at this time?!” The father was the most indignant. The same poodle who serve us with our papers was giving him her same artificial smile. I think some airline workers get them surgically affixed to their faces.

“I’m **sorry** sir, but due to your species **opportunistic nature**, we must maintain your population levels in our city so we’re **not overrun** with...”

“This is discrimination!”

“You will be free to enter the city, sir, just as soon as an **equal number of raccoons leave**. Our airline has an in-port hotel where you can wait. **Thank you!**” The poodle promptly turned and started handing another group of bewildered travelers their papers. The raccoon looked angrily at the doors where two security guards were stamping the pass cards that the poodle was handing out.

“*sigh* c’mon honey, we’ll just have to wait.”

“For how long?!” The mother held her kit’s hand as he let out an adorable little yawn.

“I don’t know, until they clear us.”

“Oh I can’t believe this...”

I had to agree with the lady. How the city could discriminate against a species was shocking. But here it was, segregation in this day and age. I felt an urge to try and help the family, but how could I?

Looking at the airport’s convenience store, I got an idea. Tilting my hat back, I approached the raccoon family.

“Hey Mike, we ready to go?” Scooter was rocking back and forth on his heels, hands in his pockets. I gave him a grin.

‘In a minute, I just need to take care of something...’

The security rhino stamped my pass, then five more in succession; Ice, Scooter, and a family of three behind us. The five-year-old was giggling, his mother trying to secretively shush him. As we exited the airport, we traveled about a block with the family behind us before stopping to check that the coast was clear.

“Okay, I think we’re safe,” I said.

“Thank you so much,” The raccoon put his arm around his wife. “I’d shake your hand, but then the dye would come off my fur.”

“Heh, that’s okay. Now according to the bottle, it’ll rinse out with the first shower, but that hair gel we used to smooth your facial fur so you’d look like ringtails will take a bit longer to come out.”

“That’s okay, we’ll manage. Thanks again.” With that, the ‘coons departed to find a hotel room.

“You know,” Scooter said, grinning, and pushing his hat up with his thumb, “If the authorities find out about this, you’re not gonna be too popular with them.”

“Yeah, well, right now they’re not too popular with me.” I reached up and pulled a fresh toothpick from my hat band to replace the one I’d worn out between my teeth. Ice, currently, was looking over a map he’d pulled from a display in the foyer of the airport.

“Mmkay, there’s a bunch of hotels down this street here. Should find one in our price range.” We set off down the street, the comfortably warm weather making the walk a pleasant one. Furrison was quite the well designed city, architecturally. All the buildings had a sort of art deco feel to them, and there was a sizeable park as well. I had to give them credit for their cultural resources as well; we must have passed at least three museums and a couple live theaters.

‘The Hamstead Furry Arms’ was a three story hotel designed with a sort of Southern plantation motif to it. Hand made furniture and high cathedral ceilings were the order of the day, with whitewashed walls and hardwood floors. A large chandelier hung in the foyer over our heads as we entered. Scooter dropped his duffel bag next to the counter and rang the old fashioned desk bell. A boar dressed in a suit like you see the guy on the chicken buckets came out of the manager’s office.

“**Welcome**, y’all! How c’n ah **help** yew?”

Scooter took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. “We’d like three rooms please.”

“**Certainly sur**, we have three that’ve just been cleaned out and are **all ready**. How long will you be staying?”

“Just overnight.”

“Ahh, not **long** in town, ah see?”

“Yes, we’re hoping to take care of some business pretty quickly.”

“Well let me just punch up yall’s tab. This will include a **continental breakfast**, by the way....and that will come to...two **hunret** dollas.” I shelled out some cash; I’d made it clear to the guys that since I was the one who insisted on pursuing this case, I’d handle all the travel expenses, outside of air fare. They tried to insist on paying their own way, but I stood firm on it. Personally, I think they were actually relieved to be spared the expenses of food and lodging.

Unfortunately, I hadn’t realized just what a budget buster it was going to be in Furrison. After we got settled in (and I unpacked my *ahem* equipment), we met outside.

“So,” said Ice, “How’re we gonna run down Tom DeLotto?”

“Well,” I said, grinning, “we could use a truck.”

“Oh har de f*ckin’ har.”

“Heh, alright, in truth I’m not sure. We’ll have to talk with the local police department. But first, we need to find a bank. I just spent all my cash on hand.”

I gazed up at the side of the building and raised an eyebrow.

“Furrybank. Good Lord, is there anything in this city that doesn’t have the word ‘Furry’ in it?”

“Wouldn’t count on it.” Ice said, glancing over at a newspaper dispenser.

“ ‘The Furrison Monitor’. Eh, then ‘gain, not all that strange for a paper t’ be named after the city it’s in.” I nodded and pushed the door to the bank open. The inside was arranged like you’d expect a bank to be; conservative, but aesthetically pleasing. The standard office-style furniture was arranged in a central waiting area for customers, with tellers in front and banking assistants to either side. Potted plants were here and there, as well as a few hanging vine plants up on suspended platforms on the walls.

I made a beeline straight for the tellers and only had to wait a minute until I was motioned over by a vixen with her hair done up in a bun. Ice and Scooter waited in the line behind me; they said they wanted to get some cash of their own in case they wanted to get any souvenirs while they were in town.

“Hello! How can I **help** you?”

“Well ma’m, I’m in town on business and I need to withdraw some money, but my account is with a different bank.”

“I **see!** Well, not to worry, we can contact your bank and have the money **transferred**. There will be a service charge of three dollars, though.”

“That sounds fair.”

“**Okay** then! I’ll just need your....”

KRA-KOW! KRA-KOW! KRA-KOW!

Several people screamed. I jerked my head around, even though I was pretty sure I knew what I was about to see. Just my freakin’ luck; I’m in an unfamiliar city and I have to pick the bank that was going to be robbed that day. Seven goons in ski masks were waving guns around at the crowd inside. Most of them had automatics, though one had a shot gun and the one that looked like the leader had a full blown M16 assault rifle.

“Okay people,” he yelled, “You’ve all seen the **movies**, so you know the **drill!**” Everybody was still frozen in place.

“Alright, we’ll play **this** one to the **hilt**,” the thug snorted, and fired two rounds off from his rifle into the ceiling, shattering a hanging light globe.

“**GET ON THE FLOOR!**” Instantly, everybody hit the deck. Everyone, that is, except for me and my possee.

“Hey, **you three!**” The leader pointed his rifle at us, and his crew focused their attention, and aim, on us. “You guys deaf? I said **GET DOWN!**” I glanced behind me at my companions.

“Well guys,” I muttered, “Shall we be good little sheep and follow orders? Or should we just beat these suckers like red-headed stepchildren?”

“Much as I’d like to do a little @\$\$ whoppin’,” Ice said, “Right now there’re too many people around. Someone might get hurt.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Let’s wait until the opportune moment.” Slowly, we all put up our hands and laid down on the floor. The bank robbers quickly made their way towards the back, leaving two lookouts at the front door, one of ‘em with the shot gun. It looked like they were going for the vault. Just as they passed by us, I heard Ice sniffing.

“Hey, Mike!”

“Yeah?”

“That @\$\$hole with the rifle! That’s DeLotto!”

“You’re kidding me!”

“Naw, it’s him, I smelled him!”

“Ohh, thank you God! Okay, who thinks they can handle the guys at the door?”

Scooter glanced back at them. “They look like your standard street trash. No sweat.”

“Okay, you take care of them. Ice, you and I will go jerk a knot in DeLotto’s head and wait for the cops to show up.” Before the rather shocked faces of the rest of the bank’s staff, the werewolf and I darted through the side door DeLotto and his four goons went through. As I made to shut the door, I just had time to observe Scooter deal with the thugs at the door; one of the posts from a rope divider made a sturdy club to bash one in the head with, as well as a support for the skunk to push up on with his hands while he delivered a stamp kick in mid air to the other one’s face as he turned around.

Ice was the first one around the corner of an L shaped hallway. The three thugs at the end froze for a brief second, then started firing. It wouldn’t have mattered even if they’d hit him; I doubted any of their bullets were silver. But as it was, none of the slugs was accurate enough to hit Ice as he barreled down the hallway and bowled two of them over with a shoulder ram. The third one made it into an office to avoid the werewolf, who became rather caught up with fighting the other two. He knocked their guns out of their hands with two fast snap kicks, sending one flying towards me as I made for the one hiding in the office. I caught the Glock and shoved open the door and leveled the pistol on the goon inside; a very large reptile of some sort, probably only a head shorter than Ice and more than a little well built.

“**Heh,**” he snorted, “You really think a **puny little gun** like that is gonna hurt **me?**”

I looked down at the gun, smirked, and gave him a good natured look.

“Ah, you’re right! What was I thinking...” I shook my head and tossed the gun away, then quickly wiped the smile from my face into a look of deadly seriousness.

“I need to use this one.” All in the same smooth motion, I drew my .357 from under my trench coat, cocked the hammer, and leveled on the reptile’s chest. He made a motion to try and snatch the gun from me when I pulled the trigger, hitting him in the side and blowing him across the office, where he smashed into a book case with a glass display panel.

“Much better, wouldn’t you say?” The thug groaned a reply and didn’t move. As I turned around, Ice was blocking several punches from both of his own opponents. He stepped forward with one footpaw after letting a fist go by his nose and smashed an elbow into one goon’s stomach, throwing him against a wall hard enough to knock him out. The second one raised up his hands clenched together and tried to drop a hammer on Ice’s head. The werewolf smirked at the blow to the back of his head, reached behind

him and with one hand did an over-the-shoulder neck toss like you see in martial arts movies.

“They were guarding that door,” I said, pointing at the one at the end of the hallway marked VAULT. “Must be where DeLotto’s holed up.”

“Right,” Ice rumbled, “How do you wanna do this?” I paused a moment for thought.

“Okay, I’ve got an idea. There’s two left. Knock on the door then stand to one side, and I’ll do the rest. Come in behind me and take care of whichever one comes at me from behind.”

“You got it.” The werewolf, due to his size, had to stand perpendicular to the door rather than put his back to the wall it was on. His fist pounded on the door, and a voice came from the other side.

“What is it? What was that shooting for?” The answer he got was me charging up to the door jumping up and kicking it open, using my momentum to propel myself further into the room. DeLotto was crouched behind a desk probably used to view items from the vault, and several slugs from his assault rifle just barely missed me. Ice was in the door just behind me as the thug, whom I’d thrown the door into, was just getting back up. The werewolf backhanded the pistol from him, and with his other hand delivered an uppercut that put his head through a ceiling tile before dropping him back to the floor.

DeLotto swung around to try and shoot me. My hands closed around the rifle barrel as it started to heat from several shots that came from it. I did my best to ignore the light burning as I pulled on the rifle, then thrust it forward, smashing the stock into the bear’s muzzle. He snarled, so I did it again. His grip relinquished, and I finished the job by wrenching the gun from his hands and smashing it across his face like a bat. DeLotto fell to his knees and elbows as I tossed away the rifle, redrew my revolver and cocked the hammer.

“Don’t move! Lay down on the floor, hands behind your head!” The bear begrudgingly followed my orders, looking like he wanted to feed me my gun.

“Who the **h#ll are you?**”

I decided to indulge myself in a bit of bravado. I pulled another toothpick from my hat band and stuck it in the corner of my mouth.

“The name’s Mike Fang, @\$Shole. Remember it.”

I rubbed at my chin as my opponent made her move. The female lynx was cunning and shrewd, so I had to be on my guard. I was careful to plan three moves ahead as I picked up my bishop and moved to take her pawn.

“Did the mayor say when he would be getting to us, Ms. Lynxen?”

“I’m afraid **not**, sir. He’s been in a budget meeting for a **long** time this morning.”

“Ah yes, I remember covering those during my internship at a newspaper. We’ll probably have time for more than one game.” I was sitting in a waiting room in Furrison’s detention center, or whatever it was they used to hold prisoners, waiting to get the mayor’s permission to speak with DeLotto. We’d needed the statements of several bank employees that we weren’t working with DeLotto before anybody would believe our statements. As we’d been escorted through the building, we passed by an office area. Several odors had assaulted us as we passed by folks workstations.

“Esh, what’s that?” Scooter had said.

“Oh,” said the officer escorting us, “Many folks like to naturally label their belongings so if folks swipe them from their work stations, they can find it again.”

Scooter had blinked a bit, “Exactly how do they naturally...” his eyes had gotten wide.

“Oh, you people are GROSS.” I had grinned and turned to the officer.

“And this is coming from a SKUNK.”

Now Scooter had returned to the hotel to follow up on his technological examination of this case. Ice was out both sightseeing and trying to see if he could dig up anything about what DeLotto had been doing lately.

I was trying not to be judgmental of a society that was different than my own... but it was difficult when it was in a city within my own state in the U.S. and it didn’t even have a PROPER POLICE DEPARTMENT. As near as I could tell, security and safety in Furrison was something that was handled by the mayor’s personal office by officers of his private security branch. An interesting way of handling things. But it made me wonder how they handled traffic violations, muggings, and so forth on a large scale with such a small private security force.

“Maybe there are a lot of gun owners in this city, so they don’t have many muggings and burglaries,” I thought to myself. Somehow I doubted it.

“I’m curious, sir,” said Ms. Lynxen, moving her queen into play, “Why you asked if there had been any **bombings** in Furrison.”

“Well there’s been evidence that connects DeLotto to one in my own city, and I think that he’s not done with his...explosive demonstrations yet.”

“**Demonstrations**, sir?”

“Yes,” I said, moving a pawn to capture one of Lynxen’s knights. “The bombing was politically motivated.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ll...” A chirping sound came from the phone just behind her. The lynx picked up the receiver. “Hello?...yes....yes....I see, thank you. Good day.” Hanging up, Ms. Lynxen turned back to the table. “Well, it seems you were **correct**, Mr. Fang. Early this morning there **was** a bombing at an abortion clinic on the **South side** of Furrison.” She glanced down at the board and castled with her king and left rook.

“I thought so,” I said, “And I have another suspicion; evidence was found connecting the bombing to a local anti-abortion group.” Lynxen’s eyes went wide.

“Sir, do you have the **Sight of Soul**?” I chuckled, moving my bishop again. “No, just what I hope is a good, if somewhat insane mind.”

“You believe you’re **insane**, sir?”

I grinned. “Let’s see, I fought against one bank robber that was a foot or two taller than myself and much broader and capable of deflecting small caliber bullets with his hide. Then I hurled myself into a room containing two bank robbers and charged a criminal with an assault rifle head on.”

“I see your **point**, sir.”

“Anyway, I’d like to suggest that you examine the evidence that connects the bombing to the anti-abortion group for something that would connect it to DeLotto.” After moving her second knight, Lynxen turned and made a phone call. It took ten minutes, but finally she turned back to the table.

“They dusted a coil of **detonator wire** for prints and found DeLotto’s. It seems you’re correct that he’s **linked** to this crime.”

“I suspected as much. Guy shouldn’t have gotten greedy and tried to rob a bank while he was here.”

“Well one can hardly **blame** him for that, sir.” I had to stare a bit as Lynxen moved her pawn.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well his lineage traces back to Russia, sir. Now they’re beginning **hibernation**, so to stock up on things is **instinctive**. In nature it would be food, for DeLotto it’s money.”

“I see,” I said with an eyebrow raised, taking the lynx’s bishop with my rook. “And you think he’s not responsible for his actions, then?”

“Well as I said, sir, it’s **instinct**.”

I regarded Ms. Lynxen for a moment as I also pondered my next move.

“Do you watch much television, ma’m? Have you ever seen a show called ‘Law & Order’?”

“I don’t believe so, sir. It is a **human** show.”

“Mmm, yes, but still a good one. I remember one episode; a little league hockey coach was found beaten to death in a garage. The police found out he was killed by the father of one of the players because the coach benched his son during a big game. In court, they tried to argue that the father wasn’t responsible for the death because he had uncontrollable rage and was temporarily insane.”

“I see, sir. Though I don’t **quite** follow how that’s relevant to the issue of DeLotto’s responsibility.”

“Exactly what’s the difference between claiming temporary insanity and claiming instinct? In both cases you’re saying the person acted in a certain way because for a brief period they were out of control of their actions. Rather convenient, wouldn’t you say; A perfect justification for any sort of morally questionable behavior. Personally I think that unless a person is incapable of differentiating between fantasy and reality, they shouldn’t be allowed to shirk responsibility for their actions. We’re thinking, rational people, either human or furry. There shouldn’t be any excusing criminal behavior by saying that the person couldn’t be expected to obey the law at the time of the crime. Check.” I put my bishop down right in front of Lynxen’s king. The lynx leaned back and steepled her fingers.

“You make your point quite **well**, sir. And play a good game of chess.” Lynxen moved her king diagonally to the side of my bishop.

“Thank you.” I moved a rook, preparing to make the final strike. Lynxen moved her queen in front of my king.

“Check mate.”

“Son of a gun.” The lynx smiled. Just then, an intercom buzzed.

“Ms. Lynxen, you may allow Mr. Fang in.”

“**Yes** your honor.” The lynx pressed a button and a gate on the other side of the room swung open. She extended a hand.

“It was a **pleasure**, Mr. Fang.”

I smiled and shook it. “Likewise, ma’m. Perhaps we’ll meet again.” I took up my fedora from the table and made my way down the hall.

The mayor was waiting just outside the interrogation room; a tan horse with a light mane. There was a dog in the room with him; a Great Pyrenees from the looks of it, and built to take it, though he was dressed in a suit that screamed ‘rent-a-cop’.

“**Mr. Fang**, correct?” The horse stepped forward and extended a hand..er, hoof.

“I’m the mayor. This is one of my officers, Martin...” I shook with him, but I couldn’t get rid of this grin spreading in the corner of my mouth. His honor must have noticed.

“Um, is there something...**funny**?”

“I’m not gonna say it,” I said, but it was just begging to be said. “Okay, I can’t resist. Is this the political dog and pony show?” I let out a snort and put a hand to my eyes as I sniggered and laughed.

“Ah, I’m sorry, I just couldn’t help it! Ah man, I crack myself up sometimes.” The mayor and his bodyguard looked at each other, and both shrugged.

“Well, if you think you’re **ready**, Mr. Fang, the prisoner is waiting. Although it isn’t normal procedure for **non-official** people to question detained criminals in our city, in light of recent **developments** we’re interested in anything you may be able to **elicit** from DeLotto.”

“Thank you. This shouldn’t take long. I think I know how to deal with this man.”

“You have extensive knowledge of Mr. DeLotto’s **instinctive** reactions and his **psychological** profile then?”

I looked through the two way mirror at the bear; they hadn’t even put him in any sort of prison-issue clothing. I didn’t know if he was just in detainment or what the deal with that was; where I come from personal belongings are confiscated when you get thrown in the slammer.

“No, but I happen to know a certain aspect of the mentality of just about every criminal element.”

“What’s that, **Mr. Fang**?”

I grabbed the handle on the door and turned to the mayor for a second.

“ ‘Look out for no. 1’.”

DeLotto looked up at me as I walked in. I leaned against the wall and pushed my hat down with one finger.

“Well well well, if it ain’t the **hot shot** that screwed me up!” DeLotto crossed his arms and cocked his head at me in an arrogant way. Typical macho screw up.

“Yeah, that’s me. But you know, you just might get to like me if you treat me nice.”

“And **why** should I do **that**?”

“ ‘Cause I’ve already called the D.A. in my home town, Sapphire Bay. They’re arranging to transfer you there for trial. We’ve got evidence to link you to two bombings, one there and one here in Furrison. We can try you for both there ‘cause we’re a county seat, making our court Superior Court, plus we can link you to explosives smuggling and nail you with conspiracy charges.” As I said this, De Lotto suddenly began to look really nervous and afraid, going so far as to hang open his mouth and put his hand up to it in fright. I had to give him a hard look.

“WHAT are you doing all those histrionics for? God, have some dignity you WIMP.” DeLotto took his hand down, but still looked like he was about to wet himself. Either that, or he expected me to launch myself at him and start beating him to within an inch of his life.

“Now, you tell me everything about who hired you to bomb these clinics and frame anti-abortionists for it and I’ll tell the D.A. Then you, he, and whatever ambulance chaser you get can work out a reduced sentence.”

“I don’t know the guys name, or what he even **looks like!** I met him in an underground parking lot. He spoke to me through a **tinted window**, then passed me a **note**. He said that plans had changed, and he only wanted the sites and people **on that list** to be bombed and framed.”

“Where’s the note?”

“My **apartment**. Grandview Flats, number 308.” I nodded, writing down the location in my notebook.

“How were you supposed to contact him once the job was done?”

“I’d leave a **message** at a certain number, then wait in a **hotel room**.”

“Where?”

“The Roadside Motel in **Cavalry**.”

“Looks like you just saved yourself several years worrying about getting shived for your desert or being made somebody’s plaything.” The bear was wringing his hands as I left. Stepping out, I pulled out my cell phone and brought the Sapphire Bay district attorney, a tan bull named Sylvester Tank up to speed. Before we’d left, I’d sent him all my evidence and explained the situation to him. The bull said he’d have a team analyzing all evidence I found and have cops ready to press charges as soon as a mastermind was identified.

“Thank you, mayor. I think we’ve got a real chance at catching whoever’s behind this.”

“Well then,” The mayor said, leaning against a table, “Since right now I have all my officers working on other projects, I hope you’ll be **amiable** to the idea of allowing us to examine any evidence found in DeLotto’s apartment **first**.”

“What for?”

“We need to investigate this from the **anti-furry/anti-human** angle...,”

“Ah Judas Priest, you can’t be serious.” The mayor seemed taken aback.

“**I beg your pardon?**”

“Mayor, not everything is about our ethnic diversity problems! I know your city has had a lot of them as of late, but this case is about something more than that.”

“**More** than the integration and successful acceptance of furies into **world society?**” I gave the mayor a hard look.

“Your honor, the problems you face here aren’t as widespread as you think. You’re not exactly the lone metropolis spearheading some movement. You may be the largest one and the one in the news the most, but you’re not the only one. And there have been varying degrees of success in cities elsewhere.”

“All of which will **mean nothing** if the city that, as you say, is in the news the most, doesn’t **succeed**. People won’t get behind a movement like furry acceptance unless they hear it’s already having success.”

I narrowed my eyes a bit at the horse. “I think you underestimate people’s resolve to follow their consciences.”

The horse snorted a bit, “And you **overestimate** the nobility of the masses.”

That tore it, I’d had it. “Yeah, well at least I’m the one trying to give people too much credit instead of looking down my oversized nose at them.” The mayor blustered a bit. But I wasn’t going to be intimidated by hard looks like that jellyfish in the interrogation room. I stared right back at the mayor.

“It’s irrelevant anyway. This issue has nothing to do with furry acceptance; it’s about something more important; the fight to respect LIFE.” The mayor crossed his arms and gave me a look of finality.

“**Your** problems aren’t **my** problems. I have more pressing issues to deal with.” I stared at the mayor a bit more, then turned and headed for the door. As I passed Martin, I glanced at him; he’d been quietly observing the entire incident, not trying to get in the middle of things; smart move. I gave him a sanity-be-damned grin.

“Hey, bud, just a bit of advice; lose that cheap suit, it doesn’t do you justice. Get something GQ.” I chuckled at grabbed the knob. Then the mayor spoke up again.

“What are you going to do about the **evidence**, Mr. Fang?” I turned and looked back at him.

“You want to look at it? Talk to the Sapphire Bay D.A.”

“But **you** will be the one who has it **first**.”

I raised an eyebrow at the horse.

“Your problems aren’t my problems. I have more pressing issues to deal with.”

The old-fashioned cage elevator chimed as I got out on our floor back at the Hamstead Furry Arms. Ice had already returned and was in Scooter’s room. The skunk was banging away on his laptop and looked really excited.

“Well, we find anything?” I tossed my coat into a chair and collapsed. I was, dare I say it, dog-tired.

“You bet!” Scooter took a pencil from behind his ear and scribbled something on a notepad. “While Ice was out, he found out the email provider that was being used to send Drax money is based here!”

“Really? Nice goin’, bud, how’d you find it?”

The wolf grinned and shrugged. “Eh, just walkin’ ‘round. Scoot told me ‘bout what he’d found n’ so ah called ‘em up.”

“I called the server company and explained the situation. They let us look through the files. I didn’t get a name, but I got an address, internet provider, and a phone number. We get the computer that was sending those emails, I’ll link it to them with an internet ID number.”

“Great, where’s the address?” Scooter looked down at a piece of paper.

“Ahh, 4221, 64th St...Cavalry.”

“Cavalry? Hey, that’s where DeLotto was to go to report the job was done.”

“Mike, there’s something else. That internet provider; it was for GOVERNMENT internet access.” My eyes widened.

Our perp was a politician. Or worked for one. Ice shook his head and muttered some swear words.

“...government. Well, let’s see if we made the news.” He flipped the tv remote to himself and flicked on the local news. Some bloodhound in a cheap hairpiece was standing in front of the bank we’d gone to. Here came our fifteen minutes of fame.

“Today the Main St. branch of Furrybank was the scene of a daring daylight attempted robbery! Authorities blasted onto the scene and slapped the cuffs on seven ruthless criminals, including the infamous Thomas DeLotto.”

“It’s so nice to see that tv news is SOOOO objective,” I grunted.

“The authorities didn’t have any trouble bringing these maniacs to justice; a trio of amazing individuals battled it out with the thugs as we can see here in this footage captured by the security cameras.” The footage piped into the news broadcast was indeed exciting by itself. So I couldn’t figure out why they felt the need to add what sounded like the soundtrack from “The Rock”.

“Jeez,” Scooter said, “This’s probably going to wind up on some ‘World’s Wildest Something’ show.”

“Do we get popcorn with this flick?” Ice said, head resting on his fist as he laid back on the bed.

“Authorities have not released the names of these daredevil men or the names of the cutthroat bank robbers that fought with them.”

“Geez,” I said, rolling my eyes, “I can’t tell if this guy’s on our side or the bank robbers’!”

“Probably whoever gets ‘em the most ratin’s,” the werewolf rumbled.

“Back to you, Dale.” The bloodhound signed off to a chipmunk in another lousy hairpiece.

“Thank you Hugh. Top story tonight, Anti-Abortion Groups: Are They Out To Kill?”

Ice stopped watching the news at that point. Why watch tv when he had live drama right in front of him? Scooter had jumped on my back and held a pillow over my mouth to muffle the vehement ranting I was doing. Some of my stuff was still audible though, when it slipped from around my muzzle.

“mrmrrrimmmrm...SENSATIONALIZING BAST...
mrmrrrrmmmmirummirmmm...TWIST THE FACTS mrrrimrrmmmmurimmmph...
GIVE ONE SIDE OF THE STORY...mrrrrmmph...LIBERAL BUTT KISSERS...
mrrrmrmmph!” Finally the skunk wrestled me to the floor as I was making like I was about to throw the tv out the window.

“Mike, take it easy! It’s over, they’ve finished the story!” I looked up at the tv and relented.

“*grunt* Sorry, but it sticks in my craw the way they do that; further their own politics by telling people what they want them to hear and only what they want them to hear, then distracting them by appealing to their voyeurism.”

“Voyeurism?” Ice said, “How?”

“We’ll be back in a minute,” said the news anchor, “Coming up later tonight, the latest video released from Britany Spears about her home life, “Can You Handle Me?”, and an update on the next court date for the Michael Jackson Trial.”

I looked at Ice with an eyebrow raised. He glanced back at the tv.

“Well, ask a stupid question...”

I picked up two blueberry muffins, a glass of orange juice, and a glass of milk from the continental breakfast. It was morning the next day and we’d packed and were just getting ready to leave. It would be some hours before our flight, so some sightseeing had been factored in. We were just about to head out when a fox that sounded nothing like he looked came up and said, “Excuse me, are you **Mike Fang, Scooter McPhearson**, and **Syberus Atten**?”

I gave him my characteristic look. “S’what my mom calls me.” Scooter and Ice responded in much the same way.

“**Heyyyyy**, I was hopin’ I’d find you guys here! Dan Spiegel, with **DCR** talk radio. Mr. Fang, you and your friends are **big** in local news right now. I’d wonder if you guys would like to be our **guest speakers** on today’s broadcast! It’s going to start in one hour. We’re doing a **special** show where this time it’s the callers that interview the speakers **rather** than the host.”

“Naw,” said Ice, “m’ not that comfortable in front of a mic.”

“Have questioned coming at me from all sides at ten in the morning?” said Scooter. “Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

I mulled it over for a second.

“Yeah, I think I can swing it.”

An hour later, while Ice and Scooter were out and around, I was getting myself set up in front of a mic as the fox was setting himself up in the host’s chair right in front of me. I’d heard stories once about a rabbit that had been on a Furrison radio station and had been led on by the people at the station to give them what they wanted, not what he meant to say. I smirked as I figured these people didn’t realize who they were about to unleash upon the airwaves.

“**GOOOOOOOD MORNING FURRISOOOOOON!** Dan Spiegel here to hit you harder than a frozen brick of coffee squared! It’s **Guest Shot Friday** folks, and we’re comin’ at you with a premo special guest today! You saw him on the news last night, folks. He’s one of a trio who stopped a bank robbery **in its tracks**! He’s a thug-**bashin’**, no-**hashin’** Doberman takin’ a bite outa crime! He’s **MIKE FANG**, Furrison.

REMEMBER THE NAME.” I had to grin and put my hand over my eyes as I tried not to blush myself to death.

“Mike, **great** to have you here on the show today!”

“Thanks Dan. Lemme just step over the IV line goin’ from your arm to the coffee pot.”

“Ho, we got a **live** one today folks. Okay, we’re going to start takin’ callers here in a moment, but **first**...,”

“Yeah, first. Hey Dan, mind if I say somethin’ here real quick?”

“Sure thing, Mike, we’ve got a **whole** hour!”

“Thanks. Folks, thanks for listening today. I just want to say one thing really quick here. What I’m likely to be telling you today, since this is talk radio, is going to be my opinion. These are not necessarily going to be the **FACTS**. These are going to be how I feel based on my observation of some of the facts. I don’t claim to have heard all of them, or that I heard them right. So if you want to agree with me, by all means do. But also feel free to disagree. Don’t believe me just ‘cause I’m on the air. The camera may add ten pounds on tv, but the microphone doesn’t add credibility anywhere.”

“So basically, Mike, you’re tellin’ folks, **‘Believe At Your Own Risk’!**” Dan and I had a laugh, but the look in the fox’s eyes said “Oh cr@p, I’m not dealin’ with a rube here!”

“You know Mike, I gotta ask; if people can’t believe you for sure, who can they believe?”

“Well, it’s like in science, Dan. Your opinion is your hypothesis; you do research to test whether it’s true. So I suggest they look into it themselves, or listen to news radio or read the paper.”

“What about tv news?”

“Eh, I don’t trust that much; too many station slant things for political agendas and most of it is sensationalistic junk, anyway.”

“Well Mike, before we **begin**, our station heard a rumor that the bank robber you helped bring in was part of some **bigger** conspiracy!”

“That’s right. I’d rather not say any more, since it might compromise my investigation.”

“**Investigation**, eh? You a cop?”

“Ah, no, I’m a private eye.”

“Look out folks, we’ve got **Sam Spade** on today! Well Mike, lemme just ask you **one thing**: what can you say about **connections** to this crime and the **anti-furry/anti-human events** that have been going on?!”

“*Je\$u\$, Mary, and Joseph*,” I thought to myself. “*Here we go again...*” Spigel had just set me up to start a whole lot of furry acceptance banter. Well, fine. If that was what they were so hyped up about in this town, I could play their game.

“I don’t think this thing had anything to do with them.”

“Are you **sure**?! ‘Cause we heard from **reliable** sources...,”

“What sources...,”

“Somebody in the **Furrison** government!”

“I see. Would either of those people happen to be a Ms. Lynxen or a dog named Martin?”

“Um, **no**, **no** they weren’t.”

“I see. Well then the only other person it could have been would have been your mayor. Am I right?”

“Whoa, I can see why you’re a **detective**!”

“I think that’s a yes. Folks, no offense to your fair city, but when I met the mayor, I was pretty amazed.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I never thought I’d live to see a horse with two rear ends.” I smirked and imagined his honor doing a spit take with his morning coffee as he heard me smear him on the air. Through the glass of the broadcast booth, I could see a few people look at me in shock (probably the ones that voted for his honor last election) and a few laughing and high-fiving, (probably the ones that didn’t). Spigel, meanwhile, looked like he was playing slots and just saw the siren on the top light up.

“Whoa, **easy** boy! Well let’s start takin’ **callers** folks! Hello, this is **DCR**, you’re on the air!”

“Yes, I’d like to address the canine **male** that seems rather **impudently** snubbing our mayor for being ever vigilant to the furry plight for **coexistence**.” I rolled my eyes; great, some arrogant naturalist with a bizarre vocabulary.

“Ma’m, I don’t think that the mayor is being dumb because he’s concerned about coexistence, I think...”

“Don’t call me ‘**ma’m**’, when conversing with me, male! We are of a **shared** species, you and I, and I will not have you referring to **me** with a human term of **femininity**! We must embrace our uniqueness!”

I gave Dan a blank look as I spoke. “Oh, please forgive me, I apologize. Allow me to refer to you in the *proper* term for a female of our mutual canine heritage.”

“Very well, you may converse with me.”

“Thank you,” I took a deep breath.

“Look bitch...”

There was a sputter, a vehement exclamation, and the sound of a slamming phone. People outside were slapping their desks as they cackled and the caller board lit up like a Christmas tree.

The callers kept on coming as the hour went on and on. Some callers were polite, some would call me ignorant, a bigot, and generally act like I was beyond all hope of saving ‘cause I didn’t come around to their side. Some people agreed with me when I said that I felt that furry/human coexistence was something that didn’t need as much emphasis as it got. Others insisted that it was the most important issue out there.

“The coexistence of our two kinds is **vital** to the survival of this **planet**!” Said one male caller.

“Maybe,” I said, “But I think the conditions currently aren’t as dire as some would have you believe.”

“But we **must** achieve balance! Two species must learn to coexist if they have a common ancestor! The fact is the **Animen**...,”

“The theory.”

“Excuse **me**?”

“I think you meant to say ‘the THEORY is the Animen are our common ancestor’.”

“I believe, Mr. Fang, that it is a proven fact.”

“Well I have to disagree with you there. All we have are theories that your authorities have speculated on with limited evidence. For all we know the Animen are a natural mutation caused by the random nature of genetics and the divine will of God... what was that?” I’d heard a beeping noise right near the end of that statement.

“Hm?” Dan looked up from his coffee mug. “Oh, that’s just the **censoring** button. We **bleep** out anything that the radio manager deems not **politically correct**.”

I blinked. “TELL me you didn’t just bleep out ‘God’.”

“Ummm...,” Dan turned around. The manager, a zebra with a clipboard sitting at a control panel, look at us and shrugged on the other side of the glass.

“WHAT?” I stood up, “You anti-religion BLEEP! I oughta beat your BLEEP! ing BLEEP! until you BLEEP! your brains out, you BLEEP!” The zebra sat there, nervously pulling his tie with one hand and pushing the BLEEP! button with the other.

“Hey, Mike, **settle** down!” Dan was looking nervous as I sat down and sighed.

“Sorry folks, but I really take offense at the continued efforts to remove all traces of religion, Christianity in particular, from society in this country.”

“Well Mike, it’s just a little **censoring**...,”

“Yeah,” I said, “And it was ‘just’ banning prayer in schools, ‘just’ tearing down the monument to the Ten Commandments, ‘just’ stopping government buildings from displaying religious ornaments at Christmas. And they’re ‘just’ trying to get ‘Under God’ taken out of the Pledge of Allegiance and ‘just’ trying to get ‘In God We Trust’ taken off our currency. They’re all ‘just’ by themselves. Put ‘em together, it’s not ‘just’; it’s ‘a whole BLEEP!ing lot’. And some people seem to think it’s just fine cause their own belief is in some faceless force like in ‘Star Wars’ that doesn’t seem to hold people to any specific doctrine of moral values. Not everybody whose beliefs are that indistinct are that lackadaisical, mind you. I’m sure there are some just as aggravated at this surreptitious cleansing of religion from society as I am. But a number aren’t. And they’re just as bad as those who are actively doing the cleansing because they’re just standing by and watching it happen.”

Later on in the show, we finally touched on something that a whole lot of people wonder: why are some humans uneasy about furries?

“Well sir,” I said to the caller in question, “I think it’s fairly simple; they’re intimidated by us.”

“**Indeed?** How so?”

“Well if I can be frank, furries have many physical advantages that humans don’t. The various species have the ability to fly, keen eyesight, senses of smell, physical strength, agility, speed, among other things. I think that, in a certain sense, many of them are justified in being a little intimidated because at first glance you would think we have the upper hand in every way except our numbers.”

“But you **don’t** think that is the case?”

“I don’t think that a race such as humanity, which has invented practically all technological advances we have, can have survived this long without having some natural advantage that we don’t.”

And then there was the odd caller that actually made me consider I was wrong. The last caller in particular.

“Well folks,” said Dan, “This has been one great broadcast, but we’ve only got time for one final caller. Okay, you’re on the air!”

“Hello, I’d like to talk about Mr. Fang’s saying that there’s **too much** attention paid to furry acceptance.”

“Yes ma’m?” I said.

“Well Mr. Fang, while perhaps the issue is **not** as earth shaking outside of our city, I think that in **Furrison**, we’re giving it just as much attention as it needs.”

“Well ma’m, as I see it, Furrison is in the news very often, so it can’t keep acting like furry acceptance is something that is balanced on a razor edge and could fall apart at any moment.”

“Well sugar, you may be right in that it’s not as **hot a topic** around the globe. But in certain areas, it is a matter of vital importance. I believe **you yourself** said that it was like the persecution of African Americans to that one earlier caller? Concentrated in a few spots, but not as bad as those spots **all around**?”

“That’s right, ma’m.”

“Well Mr. Fang, **Furrison** is one of those spots. And we **need** to deal with this problem!”

“Hmm. You make a good point, ma’m. Perhaps here it is a serious issue. Still, I think that in a world where people are ending lives before they’re born on a whim, where terrorists are killing people for nothing more than cultural differences, where governments would willingly hide and support such terrorists, I think that the city and its government would behoove themselves to remember that while furry acceptance may be an important issue...it’s not the only one.”

“You may be right, **Mr. Fang**. You may be **right**.”

“Well ma’m,” Dan interjected, “I’m afraid we’re all **out of time**. Thank you for calling. Mike, want to **thank you** for being on the air with us today.”

“My pleasure, Dan.”

“This is **Dan Spiegel**, headin’ off with **DCR** news at twelve right behind me.”

The lights were dim in the room of the Roadside Motel in Cavalry after our flight and a cab ride out. The town was a fair-sized metropolis, not quite as big as Furrison or Sapphire Bay, though. It was twilight and I was looking at the letter found in DeLotto's apartment, now in a plastic evidence bag. It was the only evidence we found. I was surprised that it was a handwritten note; the mastermind must have been in a hurry to shorten his list of targets. I was also worried; why didn't we find the explosives? Just how many thugs did this maniac employ? How many times was he prepared for one of his subordinates to get snagged and to continue on without them?

Only the pale glow from the laptop Scooter was still pounding the keys of illuminated us. I looked over the skunks shoulder, a green tie I'd put on dangling from my neck. "What do you hope to find?"

"It just hit me," said Scooter, "That I could use the phone number I found to do a call trace with an internet program and find out who lives at this number!"

"You sure it's a land line?"

"Has to be; internet service providers don't let you register cell phones. Okay, here we go..." The bars on the bottom of the screen blinked on one by one, my tension building with them as the moment came when the screen displayed our perp.

"Oh...my God." A pencil dropped out of Scooter's mouth.

"F*ck, it's HIM?" Ice bent down closer to look.

"....well, it makes sense."

"Yeah, but...Mike, can we really go after this guy? He's a..."

"I KNOW. But that doesn't make him above the law. And I'm not going to walk away while he's bombing buildings, putting people's lives at risk, framing innocent people, trying to ruin a just cause, all so he can further his political agenda."

"Mike, be realistic, what chance to we have of making anything stick?" I looked down at Scooter incredulously.

"What? We have been shot at, shocked, beaten, dragged all over the place, had explosives hurled at us, and been held hostage. We can't give up now. We've got good evidence." Scooter looked at me with an expression of frank skepticism. Ice was looking rather unsure himself.

"We have to TRY," I said. Just then came a knock at the door. I was expecting it. We'd set up the meet, after calling the DA and giving him everything we had so far, so we could take some prisoners and maybe nail this slimeball. Now we knew he'd never show up in person, but chances were whoever he sent would squeal if we stepped on them hard enough.

I looked hard at Ice and Scooter. All we had to do was stay quiet and they'd leave, figuring DeLotto decided to run for some reason or wasn't in the room.

"Well?" I whispered. They both looked at me long and hard...

...and that's when the door exploded inward. Six guys in black motorcycle gear with helmets on burst into the room; a couple looked human, the others were a mix of canine and feline. All had MP5's and were ready to use them. I found myself hurled up against the wall of the cheap motel room, a sub machine gun at the back of my head. Scooter was hurled to the floor. The four guys on Ice were keeping their distance.

"Back up, sucker, we've got silver in these guns!" The werewolf snarled, but slowly put up his hands.

"You guys aren't gonna get away with this," I snarled.

"SHUT UP! Oh you think you're tough, sucker, but the boss takes precautions. I spotted you coming in here while on lookout and knew we were blown. Now we're gonna set you up as DeLotto's partners and screw up any evidence you have."

"Good luck, sh!t bait," Scooter smirked, despite being pressed into the ugly shag carpeting. "We sent all out stuff to the Sapphire Bay DA!"

"Well, looks like we'll have to steal it from him, but guess what? You're not gonna WIN!" The thug put his helmeted head right up next to my ear.

"Get it now? You LOST. Our boss doesn't get caught. EVER. Even if he gets arrested, he got the money so he sends US in and we deal with all the evidence and snots like YOU who actually think they're going to be a hero. But you're not and he's gonna come out smellin' like my mom's home cooking! Cause you're NOTHING. What did you think you were going to do, huh? What did you THINK YOU WERE GONNA DO?"

I was silent for two seconds. I looked at Scooter and Ice, trying to say I was sorry for draggin' them into this with my eyes.

"I...AM..going to do...", I jerked my head to the side; the guy was pushing so hard on his MP5 that it went into the wall. I hooked a footpaw behind my holder's foot and pushed off the wall. He tried to back up but tripped over my boot and I went down with him, ramming an elbow into his neck. Both hands went up to his throat and I grabbed his MP5 and put it under his helmet so it was jammed under his chin.

"...WHAT I CAN!"

I got a boot in my stomach and was thrown against the wall. I snatched the lamp off the nightstand as the thug pulled his gun from his helmet and bounced it off his head, disorienting him as I pushed off from the wall, ripped off his helmet, and beat his head against the floor. Everybody else was stunned for a second, then Ice saw his chance as the perps were distracted. He grabbed the bed and with a snarl, tossed it over on top of

two of them, jumping onto it as he did a roundhouse sweep that slammed the other two thugs into the wall. Scooter, meanwhile, curled his tail and suddenly uncurled it, brushing it over the visor of the thug trying to hold him. The guy jerked back reflexively, and the skunk rolled over onto his back, then slammed both footpaws into the guys chest to knock him over, pulled out his .50 pistol and bashed him several times with the butt end.

I was panting heavily as I looked around. Everyone was on the floor unconscious and police sirens were on the way. I stepped to the doorway and looked out, readjusting my fedora after it had fallen off in the scuffle. I was thinking we could just walk away now. Hand these guys over to the cops and walk away, let them handle this. I was thinking that this could be the end and I could try to live with the thought that I hadn't seen this case through to the end and had always left that one loose end for somebody else to tie up.

I pulled out my revolver, checked that it was loaded, and then holstered it again.

I knew I couldn't live with that.

"Yes Mr. Tank, I know it's crazy, but look at this evidence!" I turned to Scooter; the skunk was sending the evidence by email as we spoke with a wireless modem. Ice was giving our statement to the cops as they put the hit team in handcuffs and loaded them into a paddy wagon.

"We've even got a handwritten note. There may be fingerprints on it we can use, too!.....Okay, I'll wait.....," ten minutes passed while I was put on hold. Tank was talking with the chief of police of Cavalry.

"...Yes Mr. DA, I'm still here....he did, great! Thanks again, we're gonna bring this sucker right to your doorstep!" I punched the call end button just as the cops received the radio transmission. They turned to me, nodded, and we were escorted into a police cruiser built to handle larger people so Ice could ride as well. The squad car took off down the road with sirens wailing. It was now officially night, the street lamps blinking on, and soon the lone siren was joined by a chorus of them, turning into a procession of four cars and two SWAT vans.

"Why the army?" Scooter asked.

"This guy's been paranoid ever since someone tried to assassinate him," said the officer behind the wheel. "Hired a whole bunch of private bodyguards, almost enough to make up a whole precinct of cops. We gotta be ready for resistance, especially if he's in possession of stolen explosives."

We turned the street corner and there it was; a three story mansion surrounded by a huge wrought iron fence. Signs indicated it was electrified. As we drew closer, a van suddenly whipped around the side of the building and burned rubber down the driveway that cut the manicured lawn in half. It stopped in front of the gates, screeching around so it put its side up against them, effectively blocking the entrance.

All the squad cars screeched to a halt. The lead car opened up and the officer jumped out, a bulldog with a bull horn.

“THIS IS THE CAVALRY POLICE DEPARTMENT! WE HAVE A WARRANT FOR YOUR ARREST! MOVE THE VEHICLE AND OPEN THE GATES NOW!”

Silence. I grunted and stepped out of the car.

“What does he think he’s doing? Where does he think he can run?”

Scooter also got out and looked up. “Not run. FLY.”

“Eh? Oh cr@p!” A low blinking light was moving slowly overhead. Too slowly for a plane; it had to be a helicopter. He was calling in a private chopper to pick him up and bail him out.

Screw that. There was more than one way through an electrified fence. I turned and ran into the building next to us, an office complex five story’s high. I was panting for breath by the time I got to the roof, the wind whipping past me as I grabbed my hat between my teeth and approached the edge. Looking around, I saw the wind was blowing in the right direction. I let out a breath.

“God, please don’t let me die. Specs, you better have done this harness right!” I reached under my coat, and pulled a chord. The spring loaded arms extended out and whipped up, pulling open my trench coat when I extended my arms up and out. I carefully put my boots into the loops near the bottom. I was just about ready to wet myself. I had to be insane. I couldn’t be serious. I couldn’t believe I just jumped off a five story building.

I couldn’t believe I was gliding.

Holding myself parallel to the ground, my coat caught the wind and enabled me to sail across the four lane highway between the building and the fence of the mansion. I didn’t have much experience picking landing spots, so I just crashed into the first available tree about twenty yards past the fence. Spitting leaves, I tumbled the last eight or so feet to the ground and just laid there, panting for breath.

“Thank you God....ohh, I’m never doing that again.” The police were shouting something, but I couldn’t hear them as I pulled out my revolver and darted over to the side of the van, trying to avoid the rear view mirror. I knocked on the door, staying crouched down. An alligator stuck his head out and looked over the side just as I put the revolver up to his forehead.

“Scoot over, I’m driving.”

The cops moved in quickly as I backed the van up and away from the door, keeping my gun trained on the ‘gator. He was quick to give up to about fifteen cops and two teams of SWAT officers after they shorted out the gate and moved in.

I turned to Ice and Scooter, who had followed the cops in the gate. “Well guys... up for one more crazy assault on heavily armed criminals?” The werewolf cracked his knuckles and grinned and Scooter drew his pistol and snapped the slide. I spun the cylinders on my revolver.

“Then let’s finish this.”

The cops were just ahead of us; we didn’t want to get in the way of the authorities. Suddenly, a good dozen bodyguards came around the sides of the mansion. The cops divided in two and they got into shouting matches about putting weapons down. I knew they wouldn’t shoot the police, but we were another matter.

I probably should have thought more about that as I picked the lock on the front door and then kicked it open. The mansion was a testimony to opulence; paintings, sculptures, a freakin’ fountain in the middle of the foyer. The floors were marble.

And the doors were automated. The front door clicked shut behind us as we stepped inside. Scooter tried the knob, but it was no good. I heard the sound of running footsteps.

“Here they come boys.” The room was round and had a balcony that went around it with columns lining the wall. There was just enough space for Ice to be able to take cover when eight gun toting thugs burst into the room at the top of the curving staircase that led to a hallway just in front of us. They stopped at the railing and opened up with machine gun fire. Scooter and I both ducked around the sides of our pillars and fired several times. Three trigger happy thugs went down, and two more did when Ice duck-and-rolled out, picked up a marble statue of a naked woman, and hurled it at the goons. The last two retreated down the hallway, with us in hot pursuit. We would have caught up with them, if it hadn’t been for that meddling portcullis-style security gate that dropped down out of the ceiling.

The guards were joined by two more at the end of a long hallway, probably a hundred feet long. Ice had to stay in an alcove on one side to avoid getting shot, while I took up refuge in a doorway.

“Just f*ckin’ great!” He said over the gun chatter. “Now what?”

“Hang on,” Scooter was squeezed into the alcove with him, “there’s a security panel. I can hack it!”

“I’ll deal with our inhospitable hosts,” I said, and assumed a marksman’s stance. Bullets clipped around me, but at that distance the most they could really do was try to make me keep my head down. It was all a matter of how long I could risk to stick out my neck; long enough to line up my shots, but not long enough for a lucky bullet to hit me.

I drew a bead on one gunman and fired. I saw his head snap back and he dropped. I wasn't enjoying this in the slightest, but I had little other choice. We were trapped, and even if we weren't, we knew this man's secret; he'd have us dead if we didn't make sure every one of his thugs wasn't either captured or brought down.

Another shot lined up, and another thug went down. Suddenly, there was a beep from the alcove.

"GOT IT!" Scooter punched one last button, and the portcullis retracted.

"Come on, move from cover to cover!" I ducked down and darted across the room to crouch in another doorway. Scooter followed suit, but Ice was just too big a target. Then again, his use of a couch in the hallway as a shield was effective. As we got closer to the end, I saw something above where the remaining guards were crouched down behind another statue. I laid down flat, took aim, and fired upwards. Two final bullets wizzed over my head just as the chandelier came down and knocked them to the floor.

I stood up as we got to the end of the hall, two double doors in front of us. I pushed them open, looking down at the men I'd shot and breathed a silent prayer for forgiveness. Suddenly, more sounds came from behind us. Ice pulled the doors shut and blocked it with the sofa. Scooter went over to another security panel on the wall and started punching buttons.

"Go'n," Ice said over his shoulder, "Ah'll hold the door here, n' Scooter will do whatever he's doing! Get that sumb!tch!"

"Thanks guys," I said, and turned to face the climax.

The hallway was lined with a pompous red carpet that was befitting its owner. That is, its soon-to-be past owner. This case had dragged me so far and through so much, I wasn't about to walk away empty-handed. The busts lining the hallway in half-circle alcoves stared at me like sentries carved out of iron. But even if they could have stood in my way, they couldn't have stopped me. He was going DOWN.

I approached the double doors, a pair of dark oak-stained barriers; the last thing between me and my target. When you disagree with a person's opinions to their face, it's like challenging them to a game; depending on the spirit of the challenge and the subject, the stakes can be high or low. Reputations can be made or ruined, dignity can be lost, or you can just have to consider things that you never had before.

In these disagreements, these challenges, some people become desperate to win. They make everything that's important to them hinge on their arguments, then realize the stakes and whether or not they're right or wrong, all they're concerned with is being the winner, the one everybody believes. They take the side that will gain them the most and throw aside all concern for whether or not it's the right side. They lack the confidence in their side to believe that the facts will support them, so they resort to other measures.

Illegal measures.

I couldn't stand for it any more. Not only did this slime argue for something that I thought was hideously immoral, he was willing to make innocent people suffer for it.

I grabbed both doorknobs.

I threw the doors open. The office was decked out with a plasma tv, leather furniture, a small putting practice green, all the amenities a politician would want. Beyond a large hardwood desk was a line of paneled glass doors that opened onto a helicopter pad. There, I could see my perp making for a private copter to try and ditch it for the nearest non-extradition country.

I put my hat on the desk so it wouldn't blow away in the chopper rotation and kicked open the door.

"REDFORD!" The wolf, hair on his head graying with the rest of it the usual gray, dressed to the nines in a tailored suit, turned to face me with a look of shock.

"It's OVER, Senator. We know. We KNOW that you've been ordering abortion clinics bombed and the anti-abortion groups framed for it! I swear to GOD you're not going to get away with it!" I had to yell to make myself heard over the rotors of the helicopter.

"Is that so, Mr. Fang?" Redford gave me a cagey, toothy smile. "Is that supposed to scare me? You seem to forget, I have the support of MILLIONS behind me, not just in money, but in voters! Those d@mn anti-abortionists were the only real thorn in my side, the only thing preventing me from going all the way! All the way to the White House! So I would have had to blow up a clinic here and there, it would have been a small sacrifice to pay to convince people those right-wingers were nothing but dangerous fanatics! So what do YOU have?"

"I've got the Constitution, I got morality, and I've got the love of Jesus. I'd say that trumps you!"

"The Constitution, you say? You're the one who wants to deny millions of women their rights!"

"What right? The right to murder their children? You better f*cking believe it!"

"There's no way to prove they're alive!"

"You can't prove they aren't either! You have to give life the benefit of the doubt!"

"Why bother when I can appeal to the desires of a big voting group and solve the overpopulation problem in one stroke?!"

"Cause it devalues life and is immoral!"

The wolf shook his head. "You moralizers will never learn that it's too late for taking the high ground! Now, it's just about survival and taking what you want from life!"

"I'd rather DIE with my dignity and my conscience than live as a soulless leech like YOU!"

"I can help you there!" The senator banged his fist on the door of the chopper. It opened and two more guards jumped out.

"Kill that annoying prick!" The thugs started climbing out of the chopper. I strode forward, raising up my revolver. The wind whipped around me as I took one shot and brought down one thug as he tried to fire a shot gun at me. The second one started running towards me, so I missed my second shot. He thrust his shot gun forward, but I duck-and-rolled out of the way, the shot barely missing me. As he swung around, I grabbed the shot gun and angled it away. I stuck my other hand under the far end of the shot gun and pushed it flat against the guard's chest, then shoved up hard, hitting him in the chin with it then hitting him in the stomach with my knee. He dropped and I kicked him in the head to keep him down.

I looked up just in time to see the Senator grinning at me from inside the cockpit of the chopper as it was beginning to rev up for take off. My expression was one of determined anger as I brought my revolver up and aimed at the back rotor. I cocked the hammer, my heart pounding in my throat as the helicopter started to take off. I lined up my shot and fired my cylinders empty. The slugs hit the rotor and soon there was smoke coming from the tail of the chopper as it got five feet off the ground, then jerkily dropped back down.

The Senator wasn't smiling anymore as I reloaded my gun and kept him and his pilot covered as Ice and Scooter came running out onto the pad with the cops right behind them.

"We got 'em!" the skunk said over the sound of the dying rotors. "Cops have all of Redford's bodyguards under arrest." I grinned and holstered my revolver.

"Heheheheh," I jerked around.

"Something funny, Senator?"

"You think you've won? I'm not gonna serve one d@mn day in jail. My money will see to that."

"Really?" I snorted. "Well maybe you will, maybe you won't. But take a good look over there." I walked right up until I was inches away from Redford. I pointed to the vans that were quickly amassing around the cop cars around the front gates, visible from the landing pad.

“That’s the PRESS, Redford. That’s the one thing that can put @\$\$holes like you in your place, the one court you’ll never escape from. I’m gonna see to it the facts come out. ALL OF THEM. See, I’m a reporter myself. I freelance. And I’m gonna write an article on your use of terrorism tactics, framing innocent people, endangering lives, and sell it to every paper that will run it!” Redford was now visibly sweating.

“Hear that sucking sound, Senator? That’s your political career swirling the bowl.”

Two cops came up and cuffed Redford. He continued to stare at me.

“You think you’ve made some big victory, don’t you? You and your friends haven’t done sh!t. There are more people out there. More people who agree with me and are willing to do whatever it takes to make people think like us.”

I grabbed the wolf by the shirt and pulled him close.

“Maybe. But one thing’s for d@mn sure. There’s one less of you to worry about now.” With that, I let go of the wolf’s shirt and walked back to his office, retrieving my hat off his desk.

“You know,” Said Scooter, standing on my one side while Ice stood on my other as we headed down the hallway, the cops coming up slowly behind us, reading Redford the Miranda, “he’s right. I mean we’ve taken him out of commission, sure. But what’s going to happen now? Is this the beginning of a new era or something?”

“Heh, I wish Scooter,” I said, hands in my pockets. “But no. We’ll get press coverage, and this’ll be in the news for a while. But eventually things will quiet down again. We won’t be foremost on people’s lips forever. But what we’ve done today will change things some. Maybe not in a really noticeable way, but they’ve changed. Who knows? Maybe some future president will hear about this and when he gets in office, be instrumental in putting that plan I told you about back in The Helium Club to put abortion clinics out of business.”

“Maybe,” the skunk said, kicking at a chip of marble as we stood in the doorway of the mansion, looking out at the gathered media and police. “But what have we really done?”

“Yeah,” said Ice, “We know there’s a chance that what we did will shape the future, but what can we say for sure we’ve accomplished here?”

I looked out at the cameras and the reporters with them.

“We did all we could. That’s all God expects us to do, and that’s what the world needs; more people who will do all they can, even if it won’t solve everything immediately. ‘Cause people will look at what we did tonight, and will be inspired to do all they can.”

“You really think so?” The skunk glanced at me. I looked down at him, up at Ice, and grinned at the both of them.

“Yeah. I do.” Still grinning, I started down the stairs.

BAM!BAM!

I pitched forward. It felt like I’d been kicked by a mule in the back twice. A sharp pain came from both my shoulder and my side as two slugs ripped through me. I was racked in pain as I did a header down the front steps, painfully falling and hitting my head as I dropped to the bottom of the steps.

“MIKE!”

“SON OF A B!TCH!”

“DROP IT! DROP THE GUN SENATOR!”

“GOD, WHAT HAPPENED!”

“REDFORD TOOK A GUN FROM THE GUY IN FRONT OF HIM!”

“WHY THE HELL DID YOU CUFF HIS HANDS IN FRONT OF HIM?!”

“CALL AN AMBULANCE!”

If I hadn’t been in so much pain, I would’ve told them their yelling wasn’t helping my head. Looks like I had the misfortune to get shot by Redford with a gun from a cop who didn’t carry a 9mm. Felt more like a .40. I felt something wet and realized it was my blood. God, did he hit an artery? I didn’t think so. No, the blood wasn’t deep, it was just where I rolled and left a stain. I wasn’t dying. I didn’t see a white light or feel like I was cold. Instead, I was in pain like crazy, not going numb like my life was slipping away.

“Mike, can you hear me?!” I unclenched my eyes and saw both the skunk and the werewolf looking down at me.

“I will be if I could have an aspirin.” A siren, different from the police, was coming closer.

“Guys, help me up.”

“What?” Ice looked down at me again, “You’re kidding, right? Wait for the stretcher!”

“C’mon guys, please. Just let me walk to the ambulance.”

“*sighs* Alright. Scooter, you let him lean on you on his injured side. I’ll hold his other arm.”

“Thanks guys.” Slowly, trying not to move my gunshot wounds, we walked towards the waiting ambulance. I wanted people to see that we were the victors.

By God, I wanted them to see we’d done all we could.

CAST

Character	Copywrite
Mike Fang-----	HIMSELF
Scooter McPhearson-----	HIMSELF
Alden MacManx-----	HIMSELF
Striker “Specs” Saberwolf-----	HIMSELF
Hoodah Daccat-----	HIMSELF
Drake Montana-----	HIMSELF
IceWolf-----	HIMSELF
Joleen Lynxen-----	Gene Catlow
Mayor of Furrison-----	Gene Catlow
Martin-----	Gene Catlow

FANG HAS NOT DIED....

....HE WILL RETURN AGAIN