

FOR FUN AND PROFIT

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There was a high-pitched chatter as the small ice cubes dropped into the glass. I tossed the now-empty tray into the kitchen sink. A little bit of vodka made the ice crack slightly, the chunks floating like miniature glaciers in the clear liquor. Some orange juice mixed in and the drink wasn't so clear any more. I let out a slow breath and cracked a stiff neck joint. Shuffling into my living room, I set the glass down on the end table next to the couch, condensation starting to saturate the napkin I was using as a coaster. Dropping onto the corner seat, I flicked on the tv, putting my footpaws up on the opposite arm rest and flicking the channels until I landed on the back-to-back horror movie.

My last case had left me exhausted for weeks. I and my compatriots had received quite a bit of attention for a while from the media; interviews, sound bites, and one article in a national paper. But now things were starting to wind back down; the debacle with that demented senator now becoming a story to be told to impress friends and get a free drink or two every now and again.

Couldn't say I didn't mind. Sure getting attention's nice, but you don't want the eyes of the public on you every minute. Now things had cooled off, and none of us were complaining that much. Ice Wolf had his gym to run. Scooter McPhearson was taking the cash he'd found in a hidden bank account the senator had and using it to enroll in college.

As for myself, I was back to what I do best: investigating people's problems, no matter what size, for proper compensation; the life of a competent private eye. That and writing freelance for the local newspapers. I was finally feeling refreshed, and was thinking that if life was going to throw me another curve ball, by God, I was ready for it.

And by God, it was only BY God that I managed to keep my sanity for what was to happen over the next few days.

The next day was overcast and cloudy; not necessarily weather I minded all that much. A little cool breeze stirred the leaves on the trees, unseasonably green for this time of year. I blamed the hurricanes, bringing all the moisture and warm air in. I figured the next thing I could expect was rain. As I stepped through the doorway to the brownstone my office is located in, I heard a crack of thunder. The light coming down the stairwell before me from the windows started to shimmer and wave from the water running down it.

Sometimes, I think I might be slightly clairvoyant.

I pushed open the door to my office, immediately focusing my attention on the small stack of paperwork waiting for me; nothing much, just a few invoices I needed to

fill out and send off. I first reset the digital clock that was constantly losing track of time and needing to be reset; damn thing needs new batteries. I hit it with my fist a couple times when it lost the time right after I set it again; it's the little things that keep going wrong that can drive a guy up the wall. Finally, I got it stable and dropped into my seat. Time to get to business. I smirked at looked towards a picture of my parents that adorned the corner of my desk.

At least it did for a few minutes. As I was look at the picture, a sudden massive THUD!, followed by a tremor shook my office and knocked the picture off and onto the floor, along with me desk lamp and my clock radio. I jumped up and ran around to the front of my desk, rescuing the photo from it's cracked frame. I brushed off the glass and grumbled loudly as I tucked it into my desk drawer and went to the window.

"Alright what's the big idea?!" I said. Big idea was right; I could just see a pair of black furred ears shrinking behind the line of the building tops just on the other side of the street from my office. I snorted and went back around to the front of my desk, gathering up the pieces of my office paraphernalia and depositing them in the waste basket.

"Damn macros, always makin' a mess," I snorted. The rest of the day was pretty uneventful; people who hear of my exploits would probably be surprised how infrequently things get exciting. Days, even weeks can go by before I get a mildly interesting case, or a case at all. As it started to get on into the afternoon, I realized if I was going to get a paycheck this week I'd need to do another freelance article. I walked over to my filing cabinet and started playing with the police band monitoring radio I'd picked up at a thrift shop. It was about a half an hour before I picked up on something interesting.

"Dispatch, this is car 322, responding to a B&E at 5066 Gummer Dr. Repeat, responding to B&E on Gummer Dr."

"Copy that 322, secure the crime scene, we're sending an investigation team."

"and so...am I," I said, scribbling down the address in my notebook. I grabbed my coat and hat off the coat tree just behind my door and jogged out the door.

The black and whites had already arrived and cordoned off the crime scene by the time I got there. I noticed an unusually large crowd gathered around the sawhorses and the "DO NOT CROSS" tape. There were about twenty or so break-ins in Sapphire Bay every month, so they're not too uncommon, keeping the rubber-necking down to a minimum; after you've seen one electronics store window with the glass busted in and stuff knocked over from thieves climbing in and out, you've seen 'em all. But this one was different.

Not every day you see an electronics store where the entire front of the building's been knocked off.

“Bits and Bytes” was a scene of total chaos. The brick building’s façade was in pieces all the way out into the street. Half the road had been roped off because of how far the debris had been flung. It looked like a wrecking ball had smashed its way from the inside out, then gone back in and done it again until the entire front of the building was gone, exposing the inside like a cross-section in some diagram.

“Damn,” I muttered to myself, pulling out my digital camera. It took me a minute or so of messing with the settings before I got everything set right to take pictures outdoors and in limited light. There was a buzz as people were milling around, speculating about what happened; disgruntled employee with a bomb, a prank gone wrong, terrorists, all the usual suspicions.

But I was more interested in what people knew than what they suspected. As I tried to slide through the crowd, I spotted somebody familiar; a lady German Shepherd cop who had it in all the right places.

“Hey! Sgt. Rosie!” The Shepherd looked up from her notebook, still chewing on the end of her pen.

“Well, if it isn’t the gaucho private eye. Looking for a client?” Rosie and I’d run into each other a while back on a burglary case. We’d hit it off at first, but it never went any further than “just friends”, which was fine with me.

“Nah, I’m doin’ the reporter thing today,” I said, pulling out my own notepad. “I take it you’re the officer in charge here?”

“Ci, and we’re still examining the evidence,” She nodded at several CSI’s going around the inside of the building in those dark blue coveralls. One of them was dusting the mangled cash register for prints; the machine’s drawer had been ripped out completely, emptied of all its money.

“Ah, well sorry to interrupt.”

“No problemo. I’ll let you know when I’ve got a statement ready.” When the other news crews arrived, they took down Rosie’s statement quick as you please, asking all the usual questions: do you have any suspects, are they in custody, all the standard stuff, then went rushing back to their respective papers and tv stations. I, however, lingered as the vans and cars took off. I had additional questions.

“Oh, Rosie, couple other things...is there anything unusual about this crime or the evidence, besides the amount of destruction.”

“Ci, there is. When we dusted for prints, we got more than we planned.”

“How so?”

“We found ten square yards of the debris covered in hand print.”

“That many prints?”

“No, they came from ONE hand print.”

“A hand print ten square yards big? How does this affect your suspect list?”

“Due to the large nature of the print, we suspect a macro; either a permanent one or someone with magic abilities or some other means of increasing their size.”

“Is this kind of crime common for macros?”

“The property damage, yes, but not the theft. That particular minority tends to be involved mostly in property damage, assault, disturbing the peace, public nudity, and sexual misconduct.”

“Sexual misconduct?”

“Oh trust me, you do NOT want to be on the clean up crew when a macro decides to have some fun with a train tunnel or a municipal bus.” I got a mental image of that and pulled a face.

“I see. Thank you sergeant.”

“Ci, adios.”

I flipped my notebook shut and headed for my car. The way the rubble had been pushed out, it looked like the perp had knocked the wall out from the inside. So whoever it was must have been able to shrink and grow, in my opinion. But that’s the thing about acting as a reporter; your opinion has no place in a story. You report the facts, not what you feel or suspect. At least, that’s what you’re supposed to do.

I had my gear all set up to immediately transform rough notes and digital pictures into a finished story. I had my lap top ready and waiting on idle. One keystroke and it booted right up. Years of typing practice came into use as I quickly made up a rough draft of the story, my eyes darting from my notebook to my laptop screen. These days it would amaze me if anybody could get away with that two-fingered typing stuff. Once the rough draft was down, I pulled out my copy of ‘The Associated Press Style Handbook’, a reference book used by reporters to make sure they cross their t’s and dot their i’s correctly, according to the accepted newspaper format. Any good reporter keeps it next to his Bible on his desk or bookshelf. At the same time, I plug my camera into the side of my laptop and start importing the pictures over. Finally, after giving all the pictures and the story file names and saving them to disk, I flip open my glove compartment and pull out a blank cd. Soon I have everything burned and ready to turn

into an editor. Smirking to myself, I shut down my computer and stow everything away in an aluminum brief case I bought at a hardware store. The case was normally meant for carrying electrical equipment, but I found it handy for carrying my laptop and other sensitive tools. The key scraped in the ignition as I turned over my engine and backed out of the parking space.

“Next stop, pay day.”

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“Mmm, not bad, not a bad piece of work here.” The crane looked at his computer screen with a searching gaze. I sat at the chair in front of his desk, trying not to sweat noticeably. Editors, they can be your worst enemy or your best friend in this business. You get one with a good attitude who’s willing to work with you, help you learn from your mistakes, and it’s a God send. Get one who expects perfection the moment you step through the door, and you can expect to be scanning the classifieds of your own paper looking for a new job every day you come into work.

Fortunately for me, Hugh was one of the better ones. A bit of a stickler for good grammar and things, he was nonetheless willing to teach. You just had to be able to put up with his dead-serious attitude. Which I was now trying to do, sitting in his office as he critiqued my story. The crane had a small corner workplace with windows all around, both inside and out, so he could both look at the view from the fifth story of the building his paper, “The Sapphire Bay Weekly”, was located in, and see his news room, which was a low level cubicle-style office that was mostly empty except for the occasional reporter typing up his story or trying to get someone on the phone to arrange an interview.

“You misspelled a couple things,” He said, smoothing back the feathers on his head, “And these pictures are a little on the dark side. But I think we can fix that in layout. All in all looks like you did a bang up job.”

“Thanks. So you’ll be buying this?”

“Yep, this’s good coverage. How’s \$350 sound?”

“Excellent.” I breathed an inner sigh of relief; the landlord was now officially off my back, my internet would be paid up through the month, and I could afford groceries. I was lucky enough to have sold the story to a paper just down the block from my bank, so I headed up the street, weaving my way through the afternoon crowd. As I drew near, I knew something was up at Tollman Savings and Loan before I even stepped through the door.

That’s because the sign was ON the door.

“Damn punks, vandalizing buildings, causing all kinds of trouble, oughta round ‘em up and stick ‘em all in jail, little bastards....” The eagle on the ladder with the

bucket of cleaning fluid and a rag was fit to be tied, and I didn't blame him. I doubt spray paint comes off of anything easily, even glass. With a few streaks from the drips, a big circle with an A in the center had been painted on the door, while several choice phrases had been tattooed all over the front of the bank: CAPITALIST PIGS, MONEY PIMPS, SLAVE OWNERS, to name a few. I looked at the front door and rolled my eyes.

Freakin' anarchists. Shaking my head, I pushed my way into the bank and stepped into line. There weren't too many people there, Wednesday not being a regular payday. Still there were a couple extra security guards on duty; probably in case more paint-happy chaos spreaders decided to show up. Within minutes I was balancing my check book while asking the bank to include some checks to pay off my bills in their outgoing mail. Had to save wherever I could, even on the price of a stamp.

A mild breeze whipped up as I stepped back out of the bank. I had no appointments, no responsibilities I hadn't already taken care of, and nothing seriously planned. Just the way I liked it. Then my cell phone rang.

A good thing just never lasts.

"Fang." I said, walking back towards my car. A smooth, deep voice answered me.

"Mr. Fang, this is District Attorney Yancy."

"Ah, Mr. Yancy, how're you doing?" I stepped through the space between the fence and the toll booth of the parking garage I'd pulled into, my footsteps echoing through the cavernous concrete structure.

"Quite well, Mr. Fang, though I do have a matter I need resolved, which is why I called you."

"Really? Well how can I be of assistance?"

"If you could come by my office at, say, one o'clock, we can discuss this matter. I have a job you may be interested in."

"I'll be sure to make it."

"Excellent. I'll see you then." The line went dead and I punched the end button as I hung my phone back on my belt. I remembered Yancy from back when I was doing bounty hunting to pay the bills early last year. Back then he was an assistant DA, and gave me good information on bail jumper's potential hideouts. Now after an election, he was the new DA, and not a half-bad one.

The old columns were developing a small crack or two here and there. That's what happens to the outsides of old court houses over time, I guess. I climbed the marble steps to the walkway that connected the historic building to the steel-and-glass structure that had replaced it just on the other side of Judicial Plaza, the hub in the district where all the law offices and the court house were located. The DA worked in an office just over the very court rooms he presented cases in. The receptionist was a perky cocker spaniel (is it just me, or are all cocker spaniels unflaggingly perky?) behind the wide desk in the front hall that looked for all the world like the lobby of a hotel.

"He-LO! How can I help you?"

"Yes, I've got an appointment with DA Yancy."

"Ahhh, let me just check here....Mr....Lang, correct?"

"Actually, it's Fang."

"Oooh, I'm sorry, but I don't see a Mr. Fang here..."

"I understand, but I was called by Mr. Yancy myself. Could you call him and ask? I'm pretty sure that's a typo."

"Certainly! One moment...." The spaniel picked up the phone and punched a couple buttons that looked like they were for instant dialing for a phone network. She wrapped the chord around her finger idly while swaying her hips from one side to the next. Somebody needed to introduce that girl to decaf.

"Mr. Yancy? Hi! This is Vivian down at reception, I have a Mr. Fang here to see you? He is, okay! Thank YOOOOU!" The phone clicked as she hung up.

"Whoopsie! Guess that is a typo, you can go right up."

"Thank you," I tipped the brim of my fedora a bit as I went past her to the escalator that led to the third floor. The halls of the new court house were designed with very modern architecture; low cut carpeting, plaster walls, modern "art" paintings hanging along them. But as I stepped into the DA's office, it was a whole different atmosphere altogether. Light classical music played over a stereo designed to look like an old 1920's radio. From the quality of the sound, it must have been one of those high-end radios with the advanced sound technology. Hardwood panels made up the walls, stained a deep red like old hardwood furniture. The floor was also hardwood, with a round deep pile carpet in the center. Leather furniture decorated the room, a liquor cabinet on one side just beneath framed pictures of various businessmen and politicians meeting with the DA, as well as his Masters in Law.

"If I had his money, I'd probably do my office like this," I thought to myself. As I took off my hat, I turned my attention to the DA himself. Sitting behind his desk, back

to the window and phone in hand, DA Yancy was dressed in a black sport coat and white dress shirt. A simple yellow tie was snug around his neck, on the knot a diamond-shaped pin with a picture of the scales of justice etched into it.

Yancy was intimidating to many people for a couple of reasons. He wielded his authority like a rapier, never trying to make broad judicial swipes that ignored the circumstances of each case. But when a case was brought to his attention and he knew the accused was guilty, he went straight to the heart of the matter, thrusting hard and deep. He was well known for some of his closing arguments back in his assistant days, standing before the jury and speaking calmly but frankly with them, asking them to look beyond the politics and social issues and right to the facts of whether this person committed a crime or not. This approach had made his climbing of the ranks very difficult because he didn't pander to any special interests or minorities, but it made his position, once achieved, well nigh unshakeable; he'd never made promises of enforcing political beliefs, so there was no chance to uproot him with accusations of failing to meet some party's expectations.

The other intimidating factor about him was the simple fact of WHAT he was; a seven foot, half ton gorilla. With a well-groomed coat of hair, deep, craggy face, hands that could hold a person's entire head in their palms, and a physique that suggested he could do arm curls with Harley motorcycles, one or two criminals had changed their pleas to guilty after a few minutes under his gaze in a prison interrogation cell.

"Ah, Mr. Fang, have a seat." The gorilla had a voice like Ving Rhames. I took the leftmost of two chairs in front of his desk, setting my hat in my lap and lacing my fingers together.

"Hello Mr. Yancy. Wife and kids doing well?" The gorilla smiled a bit as he reached into a candy dish in front of him and put a mint in his mouth.

"Doing well. Greta starts 3rd grade today and April says that the publisher's office is reviewing her latest cook book."

"Good, good. Well, I take it you didn't ask me down here to shoot the breeze."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Fang. You see, recently there's been an uprising in street crimes; assaults, vandalisms, things of that nature. In the past two weeks, five police cars have been vandalized; tires slashed and windows broken while the officers were responding to other calls. Graffiti has been sprayed on numerous buildings as well. We have some photos here..." Yancy reached into a drawer on his desk, producing a file and offering it to me. I flipped open the manilla folder; the familiar circle with an A in the center was photographed littering the doors and windows of various places, along with unpleasant messages about the businesses they adorned.

"It seems Sapphire Bay has a problem developing with militant anarchists," I said, handing back the folder.

“Indeed, Mr. Fang. As it is, though, we thought we’d nipped this problem in the bud when we arrested this person,” Yancy produced another photograph; a mug shot of a coyote with flame tattoos around his eyes and several piercings in each ear and in one nostril.

“His name is Timothy Green, but he goes by the alias Pyro. He appears to be the leader of the group that has been responsible for most of the vandalisms. The police caught him in the act of attempting to set fire to a car dealership. He was spouting something about expensive cars being the extensions of the ahh...genitals of the capitalist pigs, and it was time to circumsize them. Green managed to post bail, but when it came time for his trial, he never showed up. The judge has issued an arrest warrant, but we haven’t had any solid leads in three weeks, and the vandalisms have only gotten worse. Several citizens have been injured and hospitalized trying to defend their businesses. Mr. Fang, we need to catch this man.”

I bit my lip and rubbed my eyes. “Mr. Yancy, you know I don’t do bounty hunting any more. As much as I hate to sound like a coward, I’ve just found that bounty hunting is the judicial equivalent of poking through tall grass with a stick trying to get a rattlesnake to lunge at you and hope to God you can grab it before it bites you. Still....I’ll need to think it over.”

“Of course, Mr. Fang. The police are doing a good job of keeping the vandalisms to a minimum. It’s just the more capable hands we have working on this, the better.”

I nodded, and mentally registered the translated meaning; the police were able to defend the fort, but when it came to hunting this guy down, they were making blind shots in the dark, and hitting nothing. It was the only explanation why they would be directly approaching a private citizen for help.

“In the meantime, Mr. Yancy, this issue seems to be of importance to the public. Perhaps you’d...care to make a statement for the press?” Yancy raised an eyebrow and smirked as I got out my tape recorder and notepad. I asked the gorilla when the vandalisms and assaults had started to make a serious upswing, how many had been committed recently, and what plans of action the police had. He repeated himself a few times from what he’d told me earlier, and said that the police were planning a curfew as well as increasing beat patrols. After I’d gotten enough from the DA, I saw myself out. I now had the start to an article about the anarchist vandalisms, as well as a job offer.

So long as I didn’t mind sticking my head in the lion’s mouth.

It was getting onto dusk as I strolled back towards my apartment. I’d followed up at the DA’s with a visit to a local police precinct and an interview with the officer heading up the beat patrols. After interviewing the manager of a gas station, I decided to call it a day. The station had only been a few blocks away from my home, so I’d took the opportunity to stretch my legs and walked to it. The air was a bit smoky, and a bit sticky

from a light rainfall that had occurred later that afternoon, my clothes tugging and clinging to me a bit. It was just as the street lights were coming on that I heard the sound of breaking glass. My ears shot up and I turned towards the sound; a window had been broken in a darkened alley between two buildings. Noticing there was no glass on the outside, I realized somebody had gone in through it. The building was a liquor store. I drew my revolver in one hand and my cell phone in the other as I stole up to the side of the building, carefully peaking through. It was hard to see into the dark interior of the shop, but I could dimly make out the shapes of alcohol bottles on racks inside.

Then several of them clinked. At first I wasn't sure what brushed past them, but it looked....fluffy. I raised up my cell phone and punched up 911.

“911 WHAT IS YOUR EMERGENCY?”

I knew I should've turned down the volume.

A thick, bushy tail wizzed over the top of the counter on the far side of the dark store, upsetting a plastic bottle filled with beef jerky snaps and a rack of cigars. I saw the dark figure jump over the register like it was a hurdle, and kick the front door open, setting off the shop's alarm. I did a double take when that happened.

“What the...” I thought to myself *“Did I just see that thief GROW?”* I was almost certain I'd saw it gain at least a foot in height. Dashing around to the front door, I looked at the thick glass where the thief had kicked it with enough strength to break the lock. There was a footpaw print there. It looked almost canine except for the toes. The toes were longer, a bit more narrow, and appeared to have larger space between them.

“Okay, what...never mind!” I took off after the thief; I could figure out what kind of person this burglar was when I tackled them. That is, IF I could tackle them. Whoever they were, they were pretty fast; keeping a good ten yards ahead of me. The thief suddenly juke between a convenience store and a shoe outlet. I managed to get close enough to the end of the alley as the burglar ran straight at a hardwood fence that cut the alley in half. I had 'em now. Still holding my cell phone, I started to say something.

Then the thief suddenly started growing again as it ran! I watched in awe as the burglar kept becoming larger, taller, wider, outgrowing the height of a telephone pole! And the thief didn't stop there! By now the burglar's size was such it was plain, even in the dark, what it was. My thief was a raccoon, the banded bottlebrush tail a dead giveaway....and a GIRL. I could tell by the shape of her hips, the belly-bearing tank top she was wearing, and the tag on the hem of her cargo pants that read “LADIES SIZE 26”.

“26 WHAT? CAR LENGTHS?!” The raccoon thief was now truly gigantic, her huge ears poking over the tops of the buildings. She raised up a huge footpaw the size of a sedan and put it against the hardwood fence. Curling her toes over it for grip, the 'coon leaned forward and with loud cracks like gunshots the wood splintered and broke as she

stomped the fence down. A couple ground-shaking lopes forward and she started shrinking again. She was back to her normal size by the time she got to the end of the alley. By now I'd snapped out of it and was barreling down the alley again after her, but very cautious lest she get any ideas about becoming a titan again. It was when I got to the smashed boards that I saw something that made me stop; a tail was sticking out from underneath the splintered wood, just visible by the dingy light coming from the back door of the convenience store on the right. Hesitantly, I came closer and lifted up the board.

Laying underneath the boards was a wolf. *Oh God! Poor bastard!* I thought. It was hard to make out his features; he'd been pounded flat into the alley floor. The wolf must've been on the other side of the fence, minding his own business when the raccoon had stomped it flat, and consequently squashed him into a mess of fur and a few blood stains. I tried to resist being sick as I raised up my phone again, turning away from the sight of some poor kid trampled to death.

"911, ARE YOU STILL THERE?!" I dialed down my volume.

"Yes, I need you to send an ambulance to....," I jogged out to the street corner and read the number off the store.

"8774 Grand Ave. There's a....," It was then that I heard this bizarre noise; a series of snaps, pops, stretches and squelches. It make me hunch my head down and flatten my ears back. It quieted and stopped. That's when I heard the sound of wheels, skate wheels, rolling over pavement. I jerked around and looked behind me. A few boards were tossed aside from the sight of the carnage. There were a few blood stains still there, along with a lot of debris in a big, splayed-toed footprint.

But no wolf.

"What the HELL?!...." Still staring in disbelief, I raised the phone back to my head. "Uhhh, 911, cancel that. Send the police to the ABC Liquor Store on Faith Dr. There's been a break in." Without waiting for an answer, I stuck the phone back on my belt, flipping it off. I couldn't believe what I'd just seen. Or, not seen, really. First a burglar grows to a gigantic height and squashes a wolf kid into roadkill. Then while my back was turned, he disappeared!

"Oh God," I said, going down the alley and looking for anything to tell me which way the thief went, "It's gonna be one of those nights..."

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A puddle soaked my pant leg as my boot splashed through it, shattering the reflection in it of the neon sign of the furniture store I was catching my breath at. I'd followed a continually thinning trail of debris to track the raccoon thief. But the last splintered piece of 2x4 had been a block behind me, and I was ready to give up. Tired, I reached into my coat, pulled out my flask and took a swig of orange juice (with a shot of

vodka mixed in for kick). Letting out a sigh and pocketing the flask again, I pulled my hat brim low and started back the way I came.

I probably would've spent the rest of the night peacefully at home, but there's just something about the sound of a giant fist punching a hole into a roof that begs to be looked further into. I stopped dead in my tracks and jerked around. I took three running strides down the block before I remembered who I was chasing here. I slid up to the side of the store and peeked around it. The 'coon thief was standing on one leg, the other held out to the side to balance her as she reached into the top of a car dealership! Her tongue stuck out of the corner of her mouth, her eyes cast upward, she looked like a kid trying to reach the last cookie at the bottom of the jar. Her face lit up as she withdrew her arm, but then fell a bit when she looked at the car in her hand.

“Bah, an SUV? I can't afford that kind of gas...” And with that, she tossed it over her shoulder like a Hot Wheels car, only Hot Wheels cars don't collapse Pizza Huts if you drop them on their roofs.

By this point I was amazed nobody had called the national guard, but then again this wasn't a residential area of the city; it was full of businesses, most of which were dark and probably unoccupied at that hour.

Right, I thought. Now what, genius? You gonna tell her “Put your hands up or I'll shoot you with a gun that would probably feel about as bad as a bee sting”? I racked my mind, trying to come up with a plan. It was then I noticed the sticker in the corner of the furniture store's window: Protected By Barracks Security. Barracks Security was a really good protection agency; providing everything from armored cars to armed guards...to both silent and loud alarm system. I looked across the street; a coffee shop, Java Volcano, had the same sticker in their window as well. So did the clothes store next to it.

Without hesitating, I pulled out my revolver. I was about to shoot the windows when I remembered the police don't like it when I fired it when there was an alternative. And there was; one of the tire rims from the SUV the 'coon had tossed had rolled within reach. I darted out into the empty street, grabbed the piece of metal, and used it to smash the furniture store window. The air was filled with the sound of breaking glass, then the electronic bray of a not-so silent alarm. The 'coon's ears shot up, and the fur on her tail stood up as I repeated the process with the other two windows. Overkill? Maybe, but I wasn't taking chances since it didn't look like a gigantic car thief ripping open a roof got the cop's attention.

“FUCK!” The 'coon turned and ran for an overpass, shaking the ground with her gargantuan loping strides, quite appropriate for gargantuan footpaws and legs. I was just about to give chase when I saw that wolf guy come out of a nearby alley! Something in me made me pause, and I watched as he dropped a skateboard and started rolling....AFTER the 'coon!

He's FOLLOWING her! I knew he must've had some kind of connection to this thief. I took off at a slow jog. The wolf shouted something, but it was hard to make out what exactly he was saying; I was farther back, he was moving away, and there were a few cars on the overpass up ahead. The thief waited for a moment when there was a lull in the traffic, and took a vault over the pass. The wolf was getting close to a road work site as a Ferrari in the 'coon's back pocket slipped out. It flipped end over end, and the wolf saw it, jerking his skateboard to a right angle to stop. He threw his arms up over his head as the car came crashing down....five feet away. The wolf let out a sigh of relief, until he saw that the car had come down on the board across a hole he was standing on. He looked behind him, and saw the bags of cement holding it down starting to come loose. I locked eyes with him for a moment, his expression reading "you gotta be kidding me". Then the bags slid off and the board catapulted him up into the air. He flew into the power lines crossing over the street, and the air was filled with the flash of sparks, the sound of buzzing electricity, and the smell of burning hair.

Where was I during all this? Well I stopped running when the car was falling 'cause I was too far away to get there before it hit, and too close to keep running and not get hit by the car as well. When I saw the board about to spring, I tried to charge ahead and grab the wolf, but I was too far away from the poor bastard.

And now I was turning away, clenching my eyes shut from the sight of the wolf getting fried like an over-microwaved leftover chicken leg. My head hung, I reached for my cell phone again. That's when I heard the snapping and popping again. At first I thought it was a few last electrical cracks, but when I looked up, I almost made a mess in my pants.

The wolf was REFORMING. It was like watching his accident in reverse, hair regrowing, smoke getting pulled back into his body. I ducked into an alleyway, watching as the wolf popped back to normal, then dropped down onto an awning, bouncing to the ground. Dizzily, he shook his head, grabbed his board, and took off again.

Whoever this guy was, I was sure he was after that girl. And the way he showed up not once, but twice at the scene of the crime told me he knew where she was going. And something told me tailing him would be easier than the 'coon, 'cause he wasn't able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, knocking them over in the process. For a half an hour, I chased after the skate boarding lupine; he was a pretty easy tail, despite his speed. Still, I got a definite workout following this guy as he ground stair railings and jumped curbs. Along the way we passed by at least three more shops with busted open doors, broken windows, and other signs of forced entry.

Oh, and some footpaw prints the size of sedans and about a half a foot deep.

I was sucking hard, raw breaths from jogging after the wolf a half a block behind him by the time he came to a stop, gave his board a kick with his heel to put it on end, and walked into the parking lot of The Overnite-er, a low cost, single floor motel. I took a moment as I staggered up and leaned against the motel's signpost, collecting myself,

forcing myself to start breathing through my nose and not my mouth before I tipped my tails off with heavy panting. Why was I getting involved like this? A sense of duty and responsibility is like a drill sergeant sometimes. It barks orders at you and sometimes you don't like anything it's saying, but you know it's right. In this case, I couldn't say I didn't agree with what it was saying: I couldn't just ignore this.

I was just worried about what pitfall I was going to fall into. I'd jumped into this situation on the spur of the moment. I couldn't afford to make a rash decision.

The wolf shuffled along beneath the extended roof over the walkway in front of the motel doors, the lights shining down on him like a series of interrogation lights. He stopped in front of a battered and scarred door. Shaking his head, he pulled a key out of his pocket and stepped inside.

Bingo. Okay, time for some intell. Walking up to the door, I put my ear to it.

"I can't believe it," I heard a voice say. It was the wolf, no question; male, young, and from the sound of it, English.

"First the Columbaid, then the tunnel to the center of the planet, then the Columbaid AGAIN, now THIS! What do you think you're doing, trying to out-do Bonnie and Clyde?!"

"Well if I was, you'd be a shit replacement for Clyde." A new voice, female, and also English. My money was on my raccoon thief.

"How exactly is this supposed to fix our problem, anyway?" The wolf again. "You hitting this town and stealing everyone blind is just going to make things worse. The company supporting Mum isn't going to like you making problems on not one, but two sides of the bloody sea."

"Oh come on Cerb, you know every problem is a matter of money."

"Yeah? Well how's money going to solve it if the cops come 'round?"

"P'ha! I'm not scared of the bloody coppers!"

"But these aren't the stick-waving bobbies like back home, love. They're the AMERICAN cops! You know, with the GUNS? I tell you..." I heard the voice getting closer, and straightened up, crossing my arms.

"...you're going to lead trouble right to our door!" The room door opened. I stood stock still with an eyebrow raised as the wolf turned and looked up at me.

"Uh, hello mate. Who're you?"

I gave the wolf a smirk.

“I’m trouble.” The wolf half-hooded his eyes and turned towards the ‘coon, who was sitting cross legged on the motel room bed, her eyes bugging out of her head.

“Oh Rachel, it’s for you.”

I rubbed my eyes as I sat behind my desk. This situation was bizarre to say the very least. Last night I’d found myself saying the weirdest thing I’d ever uttered in a long time.

“If I see you grow so much as an inch, I’ll plug you before you can get too big for it to hurt.” With people capable of going macro, I’d found you have to show them whose boss, and be able to back it up. For about a minute we stared at each other awkwardly. Then the ‘coon, Rachel, said:

“Are you going to arrest us?” I stuck my hands in my pockets and leaned against the doorframe.

“Well...I’m not a cop, I’m a private eye. And I haven’t decided if I’m going to turn you in to the cops yet. It sounds like there’s more to your situation than you just chosing to commit robberies to make money.”

“..such as?” said the wolf.

I turned towards him. “WHY you’re doing it.”

In the end I got them to agree to come to my office the next morning. I did it by taking their pictures and saying if they didn’t show up, I’d tip the cops off.

So now I found myself looking at a couple of teenage Brits well away from their big, damp, foggy island. The wolf, named Cerberus, was several inches shorter than myself, with brown, slightly spiky headfur and tail fur, with gray body fur. He was dressed in a collar, spiked wrist bands, no shirt, and a pair of jeans with a belt. The most interesting part of his getup was the buckle: brass with a black canine paw imprint on it.

What made the buckle interesting was how it was similar to the one that the raccoon was wearing, only her buckle imprint looked more like the gigantic prints she’d left in the streets. The raccoon, Rachel, was just a little bit taller than Cerberus, with the usual fur coloring. Dull blond hair hung down as far as her shoulders. She was dressed in a red, belly-baring top with the words “STOP THIEF” printed across it and a pair of olive green trousers.

Both of them sat in front of my desk looking at me like I was the principal, or in their case the headmaster, of their school and were expecting a lecture. But I wasn’t interested in talking as much as I was interested in what they had to say.

“A’ight,” I said, leaning back in my seat and folding my hands together. “I’ll give you one chance to convince me that you aren’t career criminals and don’t need me to turn you over to the police.” The two of them looked at each other.

“Should you explain it, or should I?”

“Well, I was the one doing all the lootin’, so maybe it would sound more... honest...coming from you.”

“Right,” Cerb rubbed at his arm a bit, “Well, you see Mr....”

“Fang, Mike Fang.”

“Right, Mr. Fang, we’re in a bit of a bind. You see, Rachel and I live under the same roof with a...I guess you’d say surrogate mother. We were placed with her by a relocation agency back in Blighty, because she had agreed to take in kids like us with... difficulties. But recently, due to a rather hair-brained...,”

“...oh that’s nice...” Rachel crossed her arms and gave Cerb a ticked-off look. He shot her a look of irritation right back and sighed.

“...due to a MISCALCULATED attempt to get rich quick, our house was, well....rather demolished.”

“...wouldn’t have had that problem if Nikita had stayed out of my room...,” Rachel muttered under her breath, looking off to the side. Cerberus glared at her.

“Well what was the targeting computer for the cannon doing in there in the first place?!”

“Where did you expect me to put it?!”

“Oh I dunno, the basement maybe?”

“Oh like that would’ve helped...”

“AHEM!” I cleared my throat to snap their attention back. “If we could stay on topic here, please?”

“Oh, right,” the wolf fidgeted in his seat a bit. “Well the short an’ the sweet of it is now mum has to rely on the relocation agency for both housing and her work. And as a result, we’ve gotten another boarder as part of the arrangement, and she’s a total bitch.”

“Something Snow isn’t exactly thrilled with. For that matter, neither are we,” Rachel said, her hands in her lap.

“Snow?”

“Our surrogate mum.”

“I see. And what does this have to do with you coming over here and playing five finger discount?” Rachel cocked her head.

“ Five finger what?”

“It’s a term for stealing.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, I figured that if we raised enough money to buy our own house, maybe Snow could renegotiate the agreement and we could rid ourselves of this new house mate and her shit attitude.”

“I see...,” I rubbed at my chin, then shifted my gaze to Cerberus. “And you were alright with this?”

“Well I didn’t know Rachel was coming over here to try and knock over a bank, LITERALLY...” The wolf gave the ‘coon a look. “But I have to say I was with her all the way when she said she was coming to America to try and make cash to help our problems.”

“Mmmhmm,” I sat back in my chair and rested a fist under my chin. I was looking off to the side, mulling things over. Out of the corner of my eye, I could still see Rachel and Cerb looking a bit nervously at me, wondering what my verdict would be. I had to admit I was a little at a loss what to do. These kids weren’t vicious criminals, just misguided teens trying to improve their current lot in life. Still, I wasn’t about to just let them get away with this crime spree in the making.

“Okay, here’s my offer...” Both ‘coon and wolf looked very uneasy, so I tried to look as un-threatening as possible while still appearing in control of the situation.

“I don’t turn you into the cops. But in return, you have to return everything you stole, plus pay for the damages you caused.” Cerb seemed to breath a sigh of relief knowing he wasn’t going to be touring the inside of an American penitentiary. Rachel, on the other hand, looked rather put off.

“Um...how much does that come to?” I shrugged.

“Don’t know, let me check the paper...” I picked up the folded newspaper on my desk and flipped through it.

“Let’s see...I did the story on you wrecking that electronics shop...add those damages to the window and lock you broke in the liquor store...plus the giant hole in the

roof of the car dealership, the two cars you smashed up, the Pizza Hut that needs a new roof....\$530,000.”

I looked curiously over the edge of the paper as Rachel’s eyes rolled back into her head, she tilted back in her seat and promptly fainted with both footpaws sticking up in the air.

“Oh come on, stop the histrionics, it’s not THAT bad...”

“Not that bad?!” Cerb was looking like he was about to start getting gray hairs where he normally had brown at the announcement of their debt. “Mate, where are we supposed to get that kind of money?!”

“Well, that is a problem. But tell you what, I’ll help you with figuring out how you’re going to pay this off.”

“Well...,” Rachel slowly sat back up, having finished her performance, “I guess that’s the best deal we can hope for.”

“Indeed,” I said, standing up, “Well, that said, who wants lunch? It’s about...what the...?” I rolled back my sleeve to reveal a bare spot with some pressed-down fur where my wrist watch used to be. I glanced up sharply at the two, and Cerb promptly shot another look at Rachel. Rachel gave me an embarrassed grin, reached into her top, and pulled my watch out.

“Well we’ve got to start SOMEWHERE....”

I stuffed an envelope in a nearby mail box and sighed. In order to set a good example, I’d sent checks off to the businesses whose store windows I’d smashed. All totaled I had to spend \$600, so however we planned to pay for the rest of the damages, we’d want to try and find a way to have something left over for ourselves. The bell chimed as I stepped through the door of “Eat Your Heart Out”, a small hole-in-the-wall sort of sandwich shop, but in my opinion made the best submarine sandwiches in the city. The tv in the corner was playing the news, telling about a big arson case on the other side of the city.

“Well that explains why your little shopping spree didn’t get much attention,” I said as I sat back down at the table across from my two charges. Rachel sipped at her soda as Cerb bit into a pickle, both of them tossing a look at the tv, displaying footage of firefighters trying to put out a giant blaze that was sending a car dealership up in smoke. Three figures were hopping around the blaze, whooping it up and throwing things at the firefighters until the cops showed up, at which point they ran for it.

“Blimey,” muttered Cerb. “What’s their problem?”

“Oh nothing,” I sighed, biting into my sub, “They just hate the very society that gives them the freedom to say they hate it. You know, like Michael Moore.”

“I believe we have a conservative in our midst,” Rachel said with a smirk, emptying the last of her chips out of the bag on her tray. I was just about to toss my garbage...when in walked trouble; trouble in combat boots, black jeans, and a white tank top with a red circle with an “A” in the center.

Oooooohh God... I thought. The guy was a horse with a neon blue dyed mane and a nose ring like a bull. He had this really unpleasant look in his eyes. I thought about telling him to take whatever he had planned someplace else, but the problem was he hadn’t done anything yet. I knew the odds were good he would, but you can’t always treat every situation like the other guy’s Saddam. The horse walked up to the counter, leaning heavily on it and looking up and down at the sandwich fixings.

“What can I get you sir?” The vixen behind the counter was probably one of the last upbeat service people left in this city. She tugged at her gloves, giving the horse a bright look. The horse gave her a very unpleasant grin.

“Can you give me freedom on a whole wheat roll?” The vixen blinked, cocking her head a bit.

“Uuuuhhh...no...don’t we all have freedom already?”

“HA!” The horse snapped loud enough to make everybody in the shop turn around and look at him. I tensed; now he had attention, just the kind of fuel people like him need to escalate their troublemaking. Which is what I’d call the horse jumping up on the counter and standing on it.

“You people! You’re all SLAVES, don’t you get it?! SHOPPING an...spending MONEY, you’re all at the beck and call of a MATERIAL SOCIETY! And THESE PEOPLE...” He pointed at the vixen and her coworkers, who were understandably nervous. I was ready to spring out of my seat and tackle the nutcase if he tried anything, but I didn’t want to act while he was watching; it might’ve spurred him to do something even stupider, like take a hostage. And there were kids in the store, now scooting closer to their parents, doubtlessly feeling on some level that there was something dangerous about this guy.

“...are the bourgeois MASTERS who make you dance like PUPPETS, they’re the dealers and you’re the ADDICTS! Addicts to MONEY! But I say we don’t let them control us ANY MORE!” With that the punk jumped down from the counter on the opposite side. He reached into his back pockets, where he’d shoved two cans of spray paint.

“HEY!” The store manager, a walrus in a short sleeve dress shirt, stormed up to the vandal, who was spraying orange and blue paint all over the food and the inside of the

Plexiglas guard in front of the sandwich making station. The punk turned and sprayed the manager in the face, causing him to let out a cry of pain as he got paint right in the face, clapping a hand to his eyes like he'd been maced. The horse turned, but that was when I got to him, having bound from my seat, and slapped the cans out of his hands and grabbed him by the shirt.

"HEY!" The horse looked ticked as I hauled him halfway over the counter by his shirt.

"Think that's fun, punk?!" I snarled. "That's the last time you..." that's as far as I got, the horse grabbing the cutting board off the station and wacking me in the head with it. I saw stars briefly and let go of the horse, clutching at my head. The stallion jumped over the counter and ripped the cash register off. By now several people had bolted from the store, including parents trying to protect their children. One mother raccoon, though, was stuck in her booth, the punk horse between her and the door. She held her son, who couldn't have been more than seven and looking very afraid of this wild-eye vandal that had been shouting at the top of his lungs one moment, then attacking people the next.

The horse held the register over his head. "DON'T LET THIS BE YOUR MASTER!" With that, he took the register and hurled it across the store. Cerb and Rachel had been trying to sneak out of the shop; a smart move, but Cerb wound up getting the register right in the head, taking him through the plate glass window.

The horse looked mildly perplexed. "Oops."

"Here's your oops..." I growled, and nailed him with a straight left palm thrust to his eye. The horse growled, and gave me a shot to my side, bending me in half. He looked like he wanted to teach me a lesson, but the sirens were like a class bell, telling him school was out. He ran to the door, right past Rachel, who was looking out the window at Cerb who was slowly doing his reverse-video thing, pieces of glass popping out of his head and other parts, the big dent in his head where the register impacted popping out like a dent in a car fender. The horse pause, threw his hands up in the air.

"ULTIMATE FREEDOM! YEAH!" And with that, he bolted from the store.

I rubbed the sore spot on my side, leaning against the door next to the 'coon and the wolf. "You guys okay?" Cerb sat up, pulling the last of the glass out of his arm, nodding. I looked back at the inside of the store, the manager trying to wash the paint out of his eyes with his vixen employees help, the wrecked counter, the scared mother and son in the booth.

"Ultimate freedom eh? At what cost, I wonder."

I pulled my shirt back on, wincing a bit as I had to flex my sore ribs. The painkillers the doctor gave me helped, though they were temporary. Good thing I carried packets of powdered aspirin for these kinds of situations. Cerb and Rachel were waiting

for me in the waiting room of the free clinic, Rachel melodramatically placing her bushy tail over her face like a shield from germs. Then again, maybe it wasn't so melodramatic; both of them were flanked by kids with snotty noses, puffy eyes, and hacking coughs. Oh yeah, flu season was here with a vengeance.

The doctor had almost panicked when he saw both Cerb and Rachel; seems the wolf's on some kind of warning list in the international medical community, and so is Rachel; Cerb as regular in various emergency rooms, the 'coon as one of the people who often puts him there. When the doc found out he was treating me and neither of the walking natural disasters, he stopped trying to find reasons not to accept my health insurance.

Back out on the street, I found myself in a familiar position; wandering aimlessly with an odd pair of companions, trying to figure out my next move. Traffic was hopping, so we took a route through the park. The weather was perfect for it; light breeze, sun, and no humidity.

"So, how are we gonna make the money to pay for all those damages?" Ahh, reality, you bitch. I rubbed at the back of my neck as Cerb looked at me questioningly.

"Okay, we're gonna need some way to make a lot in as little time as possible. I don't think a regular job is going to cut it. That is, unless one of you is qualified to be a CEO or something."

"Nah," said Cerb, idly spinning his wrist band. "My last job was fryin' burgers. An' I lost that one due to...customer service difficulties."

"Heh," I smirked, "that a fancy way of sayin' you punched somebody?"

"Nah, some overdressed wanker came in, blew fag smoke in my face and told me to whip him up his lunch and step on it. So I did exactly that. I whipped it up...then I put it on the floor and stepped on it. Then I spit in it."

"Yeah, that'll getcha fired."

"Nah, that won't get ya fired."

"Really?"

"Nah. Now doin' it in front of your manager, that'll get ya fired."

"Ouch, didn't look over your shoulder, eh?"

"Bingo."

"Okay, lots of money, in a short amount of time. Sounds like we need something like a contest. What do you think Rachel...Rachel? Oh God..." I turned around; the

'coon had disappeared. In the short amount of time I'd known them, I'd deduced that her out of sight always equaled trouble. Cerb was sighing with a look of reflexive resignation; he'd been in this kind of situation before.

"Okay," the wolf muttered, "She was here two seconds ago, so what could've grabbed her attention..."

"...That," I pointed just over the wall of the park. Right across the street was Tom's Tankard. I couldn't say I'd ever seen it before, but from the look of the hand-painted sign of a rhino hoisting up a beer mug, I'd say it was a bar. So could that have grabbed the 'coon's attention? Not by itself, but put a banner under the eve reading "Drinking Contest: \$1,000 Cash Prize!" and that might do the trick.

The crowd was pretty thick at the door, making it hard for Cerb and me to get in. Judging from the noise, the contest had already started. I tried to make a hole as the wolf followed me inside. Tom's Tankard was set up like a road house, the décor being mostly neon signs advertising various kinds of beer, hub caps hanging from the walls, photos of biker rallies, and so on. In the center of the bar, surrounded by tables made from barrels with round table tops nailed to them, was another banner advertising the beer chugging contest. Everybody was whooping it up and cheering the contestants on, who were apparently competing somewhere in the center of the bar. And we still hadn't found Rachel yet.

"Oh heavens," Cerb muttered as we sidled our way through the mostly-male throng, "please say she didn't get in in time..." I managed to get a quick look through the stage.

"Oi, fat chance of that, bud." We finally got to a thin spot in the crowd. There were four contestants besides the 'coon; a cougar, a beaver, a lizard, and a wolf, all dressed up in various biker outfits containing mostly leather, bandannas, and denim. Each of them was set up with a keg and a beer mug at a rectangular folding table. Each of them was using a button operated tap to fill his mug and chug it down as fast as possible. Except Rachel, though.

"Dang, you Brits really know how to put it away," I said to Cerb, smirking. Cerb gave me a quizzical look.

"I thought you Americans had laws about the drinking age."

"We do, she must've lied to get into the contest. That, and it's probably hard to believe anybody who can drink like THAT isn't old enough." I suspected it must've been something about her macro abilities that enabled Rachel to consume the brew that fast. She wasn't even bothering with the beer mug. Footpaws up on the table, leaning back in her folding chair, the 'coon was just pouring the suds into her mouth straight from the keg tap! She was chugging like a pro, the pressure indicator on the keg going down every once in a while. Without missing a beat, she'd grab the handle and pump it

back up. The other bikers were quickly getting intimidated by this display, except for the wolf. He seemed determined not to be beaten by this girl, and had tossed his beer mug aside and was sucking on the hose for all he was worth. Rachel caught a glimpse of him out of the corner of her eye; she seemed to be suppressing a smirk. The 'coon was practically halfway through the keg, Cerb and myself looking on with equally bemused expressions, probably the only two guys in the bar who weren't finding this hilarious. Actually, I was finding it funny, but I didn't want to let on that I was encouraging her to do this kind of stuff under my charge.

The biker wolf was sucking as hard as he could on the hose, and his face was going a little blue from the effort. That, I think, was his mistake; he was tiring himself out. Meanwhile, Rachel was just kicking back and sucking down the brew, and it was showing. The raccoon started growing a beer belly worthy of the biggest regular in the joint. Though unlike a habitual alcoholic with a sagging girth from constant booze abuse, Rachel's belly was full and swollen, and swelling even more, growing bigger and rounder like a ripening melon. It started obscuring our view of her chest, then her shoulders, then right up to her nose. The wolf growled and tried to suck on the hose even harder, but he actually managed to sabotage himself; his sucking made the hose narrower so less beer could get through. Rachel gave her keg a few more pumps and held the nozzle higher as she just kept on pumping herself bigger with beer, not a care in the world, a look of indomitable confidence on her face. Finally, a few final drops of suds dropped into her mouth. She tossed the nozzle aside; Rachel had chugged the entire keg down.

The biker wolf tossed aside his own hose and collapsed into his chair. "DAMNIT!" The bar cheered loudly as Rachel looked about with a punch-drunk grin, her tail swishing back and forth. She was the unquestionable winner. Cerb and I looked at each other. I gave him a bemused grin as he laid back his ears and sighed.

"One of her crazy schemes finally worked; I think hell just froze over." I chuckled and shook my head.

"C'mon, let's go collect your girlfriend before she tries to get them to go for double or nothing." The two of us squeezed through the crowd of back-slappers to get to Rachel, who was collecting her cash from the bartender. Back out on the street, we steered Rachel back into the park so she wouldn't draw attention. Though avoiding that was sort of wishful thinking.

"WOOOOOHOOOOO! One tousand bucks! 'ats put us on the right path! Fame n' fortune, ere we cOOOWOOOAH!" The 'coon tottered and fell backward against Cerb, who did his best to help Rachel keep from falling down as she wobbled around with a beer belly the size of a county fair pumpkin, gurgling and sloshing like the ocean. She giggled and let out a rather unladylike belch, followed by an adorable hiccup, wiggling her toes.

"Hey Sherb, you know you look hanshomer wiff a few pints!" Cerb gave her a hard grin and a raised eyebrow.

“A few pints, eh? Yeah, right, that’s all you had.”

“PPPPFFFFF!” she gave him a little shove in the chest and tittered, trying to get back up. It was then she suddenly started, as Cerb later told me they called it, upsizing! The ‘coon grew rapidly until her ears were well above the treetops, her footpaws on the ground near us big enough to crush cars. But surprisingly her stomach didn’t shrink with her growth, which I expected would happen if she grew, her stomach contents not being part of her body; the booze must have had some kind of strange reaction to whatever enabled the ‘coon to grow.

“Rachel, come down here at once!” Cerb came around to her front, looking up and trying to get Rachel’s attention. Not easy when view of her face was blocked by a big spherical beer gut the size of an advertising balloon. The ‘coon must’ve heard him, though, ‘cause I saw her coming closer to the ground. Not shrinking, though; she was just flopping forward! I dove behind a rock and felt the earth move as she hit the ground like a diver doing a belly flop. The air was filled with rather loud raccoon girl giggles and deep sloshing sounds. I poked my head around the rock to take in the sight of Rachel pushing herself up with her hands in a sitting position, legs spread in front of her to make room for her girth, still wiggling her toes, and finding inebriated humor in her response to Cerb’s request.

“Oi, you sheen Sherbrus?” She looked at me with a grin. I glanced around, then spotted the wolf, or part of him; a pair of footpaws were sticking out of Rachel’s beer belly’s belly button.

“I found him. Looks like he wants to join the military, ‘cause he’s got a navel position.”

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I agreed to let the odd couple sleep in my office that evening, since it was a lot closer than the hotel they’d been staying in. By the time we’d got there, Rachel had walked (more like staggered) off her beer belly and was now delightfully hung over.

“Well I hope this teaches you not to go off on every hairbrained scheme you come up with,” Cerb said as I fumbled in my pockets for my keys.

“Oh stop whining, uuurrnnnngh,” Rachel groaned, rubbing her head, “I still say it was worth it; we got the cash!”

“Yeah, probably spend it all on asprin ‘fore the night’s over.” I shook my head as I turned to open the door. Suddenly there was a massive THUMP! I jumped and turned around; Cerb was squashed flat in a big footprint sunk about a half a foot into the pavement. Rachel had an irritated look as she tottered into the building, pausing to wipe

something off the bottom of her footpaw. I walked over and looked down at the wolf as he started popping back to normal in his reverse-videotape fashion.

“Why did you have to antagonize her like that?” He looked up and shrugged, still waiting for his legs to re-attach.

“Dunno, thought it was pretty funny, to me.” I gave him a half smirk.

“Well maybe it was, but seriously, why do you let her do that to you? C’mon, stand up for yourself!”

“Oh right, I’ll just huff and puff and blow over a fifty meter raccoon girl who’s really pissed off.” The wolf cocked an eyebrow at me as his tail bones re-aligned.

“Okay, so maybe it’s not that easy, but even macros have their weaknesses.”

“P’shea, right. I’m open to suggestions.”

“Okay, how about this...,” I helped Cerb to his footpaws, his regeneration finished, and whispered in his ear.

“Hmmm....maybe that would work.”

“What’ve you got to lose, ‘sides a thousand ton headache every time she decides to give you the cigarette stub treatment.”

“Heh. Well you know funny thing, I was a macro once.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Nah. I got my hands on this growth formula, was supposed to be like a vitamin supplement or something that went weird. Unfortunately Snow found out about it and poured the rest of it down the drain.”

“Oi, that’s rough. Why not by more?”

“Well, it was on the back shelf in a curiosity shop. Never found any more of it, and the manufacturer was American, apparently, so it wasn’t regularly stocked to begin with.”

“Hm...” My curiosity was piqued. I decided to do a bit of online research later.

I returned home after locking everything of value in my office in my desk. Even so, the next day I insist that Rachel turn out her pockets and submit to a pat-down before leaving, turning up a silver pen given to me by my parents tucked underneath her belt.

“So now what are we going to do for money?” Cerb asked as I let the duo out of my office.

“Well I’ve got an idea that just might work. I noticed you like to skateboard.” Our voices echoed through the stairwell as we made our way back down to the streets. The sky was overcast with a light breeze, not an entirely unpleasant day.

“Yeah, I’m pretty good if I do say so myself.” The wolf grinned a bit, dropping his board to the ground and did a quick kick flip; at least I think that’s what it’s called.

“Excellent, you’ll need it.”

“Erm, for what?” I pulled a folded newspaper out from under my arm and held it up for the two of them to see. On the back in bright bold colors that had practically seeped through to the inner pages was an advertisement for the X-Treme Board Rally Contest, held by the X-Treme Board Co. The contest was held at a local skating park, with an obstacle course of grinding pipes, jumps, half-pipes, and other paraphernalia used by skaters to do all kinds of stunts designed to maximize the chance of busting their asses.

But people will do crazy things for love and for money. In this case, it was for \$600,000.

Cerb gave the ad an incredulous look. “That...sounds...,”

“PERFECT!” Rachel said, grabbing the ad. “This is it Cerb! Our big chance to make a ton of cash!”

I cleared my throat and the raccoon looked up at me.

“Oh, right, and pay off our debts...but we’ll still have something left over!”

“True, but...why so much cash for one contest?” Cerb rubbed at the back of his head as we approached a bus stop. With gas prices the way they were these days, the less I drove the better, especially when I was going broke in a hurry.

“Probably because at least three professional skaters are showing up.”

“Oh, wonderful, how’m I supposed to compete against THEM?”

“You’re going to need some seriously impressive stunts. Luckily, I know just the guy to teach you.” A gray silver bus came slowly around the corner, the sides stained with graffiti, probably sprayed on in the middle of the night when it slowed down in a darkened neighborhood. The three of us slowly stepped onto the bus, the “exact change only” sign ominously askew. We couldn’t quite see the interior of the bus until we

climbed on and turned that corner past where the cracked Plexiglas divider between the driver's area and the passengers' was. We all hesitate one second too long and the doors shut behind us, trapping us on the bus. Have you ever heard that song by Weird Al Yankovic? Well, Cerb, Rachel, and I LIVED IT.

We were ridin' in the bus, down the boulevard, and the place was really packed. No room to sit, so we had to stand, with all the perverts in the back! It was smelling like a locker room, with junk all over the floor. We were packed in there like we were sardines, then stopped to pick up MORE! Lookout! *fart fart fart* another one rode the bus! *fart fart fart* another one rode the bus! An' another got on, an' another got on, an' another one rode the bus. Hey, he's came and sat by US, another one rode the bus!

There was a suitcase poking Cerb in the ribs, there was an elbow in Rachel's ear. There was a smelly old bum standing next to me, couldn't have showered in a year. I thought I was missin' a contact lens, I thought my wallet was gone! (I turned, said "Rachel!" and she looked embarrassed and handed it back to me) I was sure the bus was stoppin' again, and let a couple more freaks get on! Lookout! *fart fart fart* another one rode the bus! *fart fart fart* another one rides the bus! An' another got on, an' another got on, an' another one rode the bus. Hey, he's came and sat by US, another one rode the bus! The passengers at that point began emitting various gross body noises. Rachel tried to scoot closer to Cerb as some bobcat in a ratty army jacket and a grease stained ball cap breathed heavily and looked like he was eyeing her chest from the side. Some dragon next to me with flies buzzing around him was slurping and drooling like he had some kind of saliva disorder.

The windows didn't open, the fans didn't work, and our faces were turning blue. I hadn't been in a crowd like that since an airport in '92. We needed to get off in a couple of stops, but we couldn't reach the door! There wasn't any room for us to BREATHE, and we stopped to pick up MORE!

That's it! I thought, and clapped a hand over my mouth and made like a linebacker trying to clear a path for a touchdown. More than a couple people acted indignant as I shouldered my way to the front of the bus as we approached our stop, finally squeezing out as a few more rather weird-looking characters lurched on.

"Fuck ME that was awful!" Cerb turned and grabbed a sticky wad of chewing gum stuck in his tail. With a wince, he yanked it out and started trying to flick it into a nearby dumpster in an alley next to the sidewalk we were standing on, but it was stuck to his finger.

"So where are we going?" Rachel said, trying to brush some dirty handprints of the seat of her pants. Cerb, meanwhile, had now managed to get the gum stuck on his other hand. I glanced up and down the street.

“Well we’re a few blocks from where we need to be, I think it’s up this way.” Rachel cocked her head. “Now where exactly are we going?” Largely unnoticed by us, Cerb was now reaching into the dumpster and trying to scrape the gum off on the wall.

“There’s a skate park nearby that a friend of mine works at. He’s got some impressive tricks up his sleeve, so I figured Cerb could pick up a thing or two from him.”

Speaking of the wolf, he’d now managed to get his hand caught in the dumpster on some heavier garbage. He hoisted himself in further to try and get it loose, not realizing that the dumpster had a built-in compactor which was activated as soon as it was full enough to flip a hidden switch.

“That’s not a bad idea,” said Rachel. “He’s got some good moves, but it never hurts to have an edge, right Cerb? Cerb?” We both turned to the side, just in time to see a tail caught in the doorway of the dumpster as the crushing weight came slamming down. There was a trail of...stuff...smeared on the compactor as it raised back up that should normally be on the INSIDE of a person. Rachel winced and I scrunched my face up and turned away.

“Oh GOD, that’s gotta hurt!” I tried not to be sick, waiting for Cerb’s shaky hand to come up and grab the lip of the compactor and pulled himself out, covered with junk and reknitting bones at record speed.

“And I thought the bus was dirty and cramped.” the wolf groaned.

I shoved my way through the turnstile, looking around. The skate park was simply named Grind, but it was apt enough. The concrete playground had numerous teens performing extreme sport tricks on bikes, boards, and inline skates. Cerb quickly dropped his own skateboard and kicked off, sliding down the rail of the steps down.

“Heh, I don’t think that’s one of the obstacles, bud.” I smirked, choosing to walk down the steps instead. I was looking for a friend of mine who hung out at the park. If anybody could teach Cerb some new tricks, it was him.

“So is this friend of yours really all that hot,” Rachel asked. I smirked.

“I once saw him moonwalk with skates on.” The ‘coon looked at me with wide eyes.

“Okay, now I’m impressed.”

“Heh, well get ready to be even more impressed,” I sidled around her and headed for the park’s drink stand. Right in front of it was a yellow furred kangaroo with joint pads, helmet, and a red bandana around his neck. He leaned against a post, acting like he owned the place, draining a bottle of iced tea while he idly pushed a skate board with lightning and thunderclouds painted on it with his tail.

“Hey Dylan,” I said, clapping the ‘roo on the back. He turned quickly around, snapping the skateboard up on end with his tail and leaning it against the post.

“ ‘ey Mike! Haven’t seen you down here in a few weeks.”

“Yeah, sorry, but duty calls.”

“Ah, scum bags to bust, days to save.”

“F’heh, more like bills to pay and articles to write. I’ve got some people I’d like you to meet,” I turned to the side to reveal Cerb and Rachel like a magician sweeping his cloak away to reveal his assistant. After explaining the situation with as few incriminating details as possible, Dylan nodded and flipped his board back onto its wheels.

“Sure, I can teach you some new moves that’ll impress the judges! I wish I could enter the contest myself, but as it is, I’m barred from it.”

“Oi, that’s a tough break,” said Cerb, “what got you kicked off?”

“Datin’ one of the judges, heheheh.”

“Ahhh, why bother goin’ through the contest when you can get the birds right now, eh mate?” The two of them laughed as they skated towards a half pipe that wasn’t in use. Cerb stood just outside while Dylan skated into the center of the pipe, did a little spin on his board, and adjusted his helmet.

“Okay, I’m gonna show you some of the moves in my routine. You tell me which ones you want to learn, and I’ll give ‘em to you step by step. It’ll take a while to get them down, so be prepared to come back a few times to practice more.”

“No problem. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“Okay, gotta get up some momentum first...” Dylan started skating around in an oval shape up and down the sides of the pipe, getting up speed, going a bit higher up each side with each turn.

“This’s my “Ferris Wheel”!” The roo shot up one side of the pipe about five feet into the air. Grabbing his board, he spun around in the air, holding the board underneath his feet, keeping his head out to the side while his footpaws and his board did two complete revolutions. He came back down the pipe like greased lightning and shot up the other side.

“The Twister!” Dylan grabbed his board and spun around vertically this time, holding his board underneath him at an angle so his spinning looked like the funnel shape of a tornado. He rocketed down and back up the other side.

“The Boomerang!” The roo kicked his board up several feet above him, catching it as they both started to come back down and quickly slapped it underneath himself again.

“The Discus followed by The Wheelie!” Dylan quickly leveled out parallel to the ground as he got up into the air again. He kicked both of his powerful legs in opposite directions, causing his board to spin like a top until he caught it with his footpaws and came back down on only two wheels, holding the edge of the board up in front of him for several seconds.

“And my signature move, The Beach Ball!” Dylan began sweeping back and forth to build up some major speed this time, almost becoming a yellow blur in front of us. Finally, he took off up one side of the pipe, and did a midair somersault away from his board out into the air. He reached into his glove and pulled something out. Cerb and Rachel couldn’t tell, but having watched him before, I knew the roo’d pulled out a super-compressed air capsule. He bit down on it, and rapidly began swelling up! The roo’s already sizeable footpaws pudged out with air as he also began rapidly taking on girth. His belly was three times it’s original size by the time he started descending, then four, then five times, easily as big around as a pilate ball! His cheeks puffed up and his eyes bugged out a bit as he came down, grabbing his knees and tightening into a cannonball pose. He bounced on his belly as his board came down, narrowly skating under him on his rebound. He did a midair flip and came down again, once more just barely letting his board make it underneath. He did one more flip and then let out the air from his mouth, using the jet to spin himself around until he dropped onto his board as it came back a third time.

I smirked and clapped as I looked to the side to gauge the Brits’ expressions. Rachel was looking quite, as the expression goes, “wiggled out”, with an open mouth and eyes wide open. Cerb, meanwhile, was looking both amused and a bit apprehensive.

“Well,” said the wolf, “That was a great show. I’d like to learn all those tricks, except ahh, heh, maybe that last one.” The roo laughed.

“Yeah, I guess that one isn’t for everybody.”

“Oh come on Cerb,” Rachel said, “A trick like that would make you a shoe in for the win!”

“Oh really?” The wolf crossed his arms and smirked, “I’d like to see you do it. Oh wait, I already did when you got smashed from that drinking contest yesterday.”

devastated about it because only a few days after the incident, the wolfette contacted me again and gave me the information I needed to crack the case. I hadn't been paid anything for the aggravation of that case, but I considered meeting her more compensation than I deserved. Since that time, I'd grown closer to her than I had anyone else before. She was warm, intelligent, and a bigger knockout than a punch from Mohammed Ali back in his fighting days.

I grinned and reached for the phone, ready to dial her number. I was only inches away when the damn thing rang. Pulling the receiver off, something told me this was going to be the bend in the road that took me down a bad stretch of highway.

"Fang."

"Mr. Fang, this is DA Yancy again."

"Ah, Mr. Yancy, is this about the job offer?"

"Yes it is. Mr. Fang, there's been a development in the case against Timothy Green."

"Ah yes, I'm sorry, refresh my memory who that is?"

"The leader of the anarchist gang?"

"Oh yes, now I remember. Sorry, a little scatterbrained sometimes. Did you catch him?"

"I'm afraid not yet. I'd like you to meet a Det. Hausvich down at the St. Dominic Memorial Hospital."

"Okay, I'll leave immediately." I hung up the phone and quickly made my way outside and across the street to the garage. Something in Yancy's voice told me this wasn't going to be pretty. As I cruised down the street, I figured that this was going to be some kind of emotional ploy to convince me to get on the case. I didn't like it when people tried to coerce me using my conscience, but I tried not to get angry at Yancy for doing what he felt he had to in a difficult situation. It wasn't easy.

St. Dominic's was a small hospital situated between office buildings in the city's central hub. An ambulance pulled out, sirens howling like banshees as I parked across the street. I spotted Hausvich standing outside the front door, a short, green, nondescript dragon in a short sleeve work shirt, navy blue slacks and a blue SBPD windbreaker stubbing a smoke out and flicking it into an open manhole nearby.

"Fang?"

"That's me," I said, crossing the parking lot.

“D.A said you’d be coming down,” He shook my hand, but his expression seemed somber, like an old war vet who’d seen more than his fair share of blood and death. “Right this way, he asked that you be present when we interview this victim.” I nodded, following Hausvich through the crowded hallway, lined with oxygen tanks and wheelchairs, nurses and doctors moving from room to room with practiced, determined confidence. The dragon led me to a room at the end of the hall directly in front of the door. I was expecting some shopkeeper who’d been caught in the fire when he store had been burned, or some mugging victim who’d gotten a real beating. Either one would have made my heart feel heavy for what they’d been through.

What I saw practically ripped it out.

A young vixen was sitting on the bed inside, sniffing and letting out a small sob every now and again. She had red hair as curly as Shirley Temple’s, and one blue eye. I had to assume the other eye was also blue, because I couldn’t see it for the swelling that was holding it shut. Somebody’d given her a solid blow right to her face. Several, in fact, because she also had a bandage on her cheek and a cut on her lower lip. Somebody’d given her a couple good smacks. Something in me told me that there was more than met the eye, too.

And she couldn’t have been more than 17.

“Ms., I’m detective Hausvich, I’d like to ask you what happened.” Hausvich sat down on the corner of the bed, doing his best to look sympathetic and understanding. More and more I was dreading what was coming, because I had a bad feeling I knew what it was.

“I...,” started the vixen, her voice shaking “I was on my way home from work...”

“Where was this?” asked Hausvich.

“Slice of Life Deli on Gold St. I was walking, because *sniff* I don’t have a car. I had just reached the corner when I heard a sound coming from the alley nearby. It sounded like *sniff* a kitten that had been abandoned or something. I went to go see... and...and that’s when three guys came out of the door in the alley. They came up behind me....they grabbed me...,” Here the vixen’s voice started to get higher pitched. Hausvich was biting at his lip as he wrote on his notepad.

“...they pulled off my jacket, and I slapped and shoved at them. One of them hit me across the face, shoved me down on the ground! I reached out and grabbed his sleeve, something came off in my hand, I was screaming at them to go away, and then....*and then they*....”

That’s when she dissolved into tears and sobbing. I could feel a lump in my throat as I stepped out of the room. Hausvich finished up his note taking then stepped

back out, motioning to a fox couple sitting nearby, holding hands. They practically leapt from their seats to rush in and comfort the vixen, who must have been their daughter. A mare nurse approached the two of us as Hausvich was about to say something.

“Nurse,” he said, turning to her. “Is it what I think?”

She sighed and nodded. “The kit just came back. It’s positive. She was raped, by more than one attacker.” The word alone is enough to make you cringe a little inside. The nurse left us to tend to her patient.

“The DA,” I said, trying to maintain composure, “Called me down here because he wants me to take a case involving the anarchist gang running loose in town. How do we know this is related?” The dragon rummaged in his pocket.

“Before they cleaned her up, the vixen had something drawn on her body with a marker.” The dragon found what he was looking for; a photo taken by the doctors to record their patient’s condition on admittance. On the vixen’s bottom, some sicko had written the words “ULTIMATE FREEDOM”. Underneath it, they’d scrawled the circle-and-A logo on each side of her backside, like they were trying to call attention to the very place they’d taken their liberties at the most horrible cost someone can take from a girl.

I slowly nodded. “Well,” said the dragon, “I need to report in. D.A. Yancy told me to ask you to give him a call when you reach a decision.” I nodded again. “Thanks. Expect to be hearing from me soon.” The detective nodded and made his way out. My cell phone battery had died en route to the hospital, so I went over to the pay phone just down the hall. Two quarters went in and I listened to the cold, empty dial tone as I punched in the number. Before that point, the anarchist’s crimes had been destructive and wrong, but I’d been content in trusting to the police to handle the problem because outside of the DA, nobody had approached me to try and do something about this. And I hadn’t felt compelled to take the case from the DA because he wasn’t in any immediate danger or trouble, nor was he one of the victims. But that vixen changed everything.

“D.A.’s office.”

“I’d like to speak to the DA please.”

“One moment....,” a change in voices. “D.A. Yancy.”

“Mr. Yancy, Mike Fang. I’ll take the job.”

There are some lines that should never be crossed.

Rain was starting to come down just outside the diner I’d said I’d meet Cerberus and Rachel. Only a few people were inside, which was good; meant I wasn’t elbow-to-elbow with other people at the counter as I cut into a cheese omelet. Three days had

passed since I agreed to take the job from Yancy. It hadn't been easy, either. I'd spared the two kids the unpleasant details and just told them I needed to take a job to pay the bills, so they were going to have to work out their own schedule for practice. The contest was a few days away, so they had time. I, meanwhile, felt like there was a guillotine blade over my head, one shaped like the next victim of the anarchist punks when they decided to go out and find some fun.

I'd started out by going and re-interviewing the various victims of the crimes. But this time I was asking for more specific details. Namely, when the anarchists fled the scene, which way did they go? I'd stuck a map up on the wall in my office, using pins to track their usual escape routes. I was looking for some kind of pattern, and I started getting it. The directions the anarchists usually went to escape the cops all started pointing to a certain area, some place in the industrial section of Sapphire Bay, down near the docks. It figured they'd hide there, a location filled with numerous neglected warehouses and some tough-guy dive bars. It fit the hard ass image they were trying to portray themselves in, and not doing all that bad a job.

But the problem was picking out which specific joint. I'd started going down there periodically, the wail of sirens ever present, but always distant. Unfortunately, the local weren't really in the mood to help out. It seems they'd read my article about the rash of crimes, and many of them were anarchists themselves, even though they didn't belong to Tim "Pyro" Green's gang.

And they didn't appreciate the bad press, even if the people committing the crimes had it coming.

"You don't understand anarchism," this one gopher with chains running from his ears to his nostrils said when I stopped at a biker store to see if any of the gang members had picked up some bling to pimp his ride.

"Exactly what isn't there to understand?" I said.

"We're calling for the evolution of society! We want people to take on responsibility to work together without demand and without being forced by oppressive leaders and fascist governments."

"Uh uh, I see," I'd crossed my arms and tilted my hat back a bit. "So then what about the time after WWI when Germany was in anarchy, and the result was the rise of Adolph Hitler? The very state of society that you're advocating is just giving way to the very type of government you say you hate the most."

The gopher shook his head like I was spouting gibberish.

"You don't get it at all. Germany was fine without a government, it was just unfortunate circumstance that led to Hitler's rise."

“Oh yeah, it was fine. Military in pieces, economy shot to hell...,”

“They just didn’t have the time to get into it.”

“Really? Well let’s take a look at Africa then. It’s been in a state of turmoil for decades, with people all fighting over who’s going to lead in various countries and the countries themselves fighting among themselves. I’d call that anarchy, so do you think that’s doing them any good?”

“Dude, you just don’t get it. See, that’s not true anarchy, they’re all trying to establish governments. It’s the GOVERNMENTS that are causing the destruction! They all need to stop trying to lead and just LIVE.”

“Uh huh. Well lemme tell you something; there’s always going to be greedy, megalomaniacal bastards who want to be in charge. And since nature abhors a vacuum, whenever a government falls, there are going to be people desperate enough to follow the first person who says they have a plan. Those two things put together are dangerous, and your anarchy will produce an opportunity for all three: it will make governments fall, people to become desperate, and dictator to step up. So the real answer here is not to try and get rid of every government, but to ensure the existing governments have good leaders. Don’t tear down the system and then leave nothing behind, fix the damn thing!” The gopher thought, nodded, and finally saw my point.

Yeah, right.

“Dude, you’re fucked up. You can’t argue for shit.” And he walked off shaking his head like he couldn’t believe he’d wasted his breath on a retard like me. That wasn’t the first time I’d had a discussion like that. And it wasn’t the last, even the last time that day. I got sick of having to go over the same points over and over with some new punk with enough shrapnel in his face to make it look like he’d had a hand grenade go off five feet away from him. None of them seemed to listen to a damn word I said, because as far as they were concerned, anything I said was automatically wrong. After a while, I finally started saying the same thing every time it was brought up.

“Fine, believe it if you want to. This is America, where everybody has the right to be stupid.” That started getting me some ugly looks. I couldn’t say I liked them any more than they liked me. My patience was gone with them, and with it went my manners. I knew they didn’t have any respect for me, and I didn’t feel the need for them to come up and remind me every chance they got.

I stewed over this as I glowered into my orange juice. I had to fight to get my mind back on the case. All my wandering and questioning had gained me one lead, though. As I had come out of one slum apartment building, I caught sight of someone on a bike going around the corner. I watched him park it next to a street lamp and chain it up before stepping inside. The rider was a purple dragon wearing a black leather vest

with a red circle-and-“A” on the back. Bingo. It was a bit of a long shot, but I’d go back later and tail him after people might not remember me so well from the questioning.

The diner bell chimed. I slid around in my seat as I sipped at my juice. Cerb came in holding a newspaper over both his and his girlfriend’s head to shield them from the rain, discarding the sopping wet tabloid into the nearest garbage can. They took up stools next to me as the counter girl, a vixen with a bit too much makeup on, handed them their menus.

“So how’s the practicing going?” I said, taking another bite of my breakfast.

“Not bad,” said Cerb, handing back his menu with his order, “though it would be going a bit easier without the sabotage.”

“Say WHAT?”

“It’s true,” said Rachel, unrolling her napkin and setting up her utensils. “Cerb’s been getting good at his tricks, but the weirdest accidents keep happening. And it’s not happening to anyone else, so it’s got to be deliberate.”

“Yeah, that does sound weird...what kind of accidents?”

“Well,” the ‘coon looked up in thought and started ticking them off on her fingers, “there was the time the rail Cerb was grinding came loose and he got impaled on one of the poles, the time a section of the juice shack roof collapsed on him, the vending machine that shot a can out at him so fast it put a hole through his head...and then fell on him, the strategically spilled glue on the half pipe that snatched his board out from under him so he became “The Englishwolf Who Went Up Into The Air and Came Back Down On His Head” and lastly the car on the hill whose parking break went out and pasted him as we walked through the parking lot.”

I sat there for a minute and slowly nodded. “....and that’s all?” Both Cerb and Rachel gave me a look that said “EXCUSE ME?!” I chuckled and smirked.

“Just kidding. That does sound like way too much to be a coincidence. Well I’ve reached a lull in my work, gotta let it rest for a day or so. I’ll keep an eye on you today after the rain lets up, and we’ll see what’s what.”

.....

The rain had finally stopped, though the occasional rumble of the dying thunderstorm continued to echo through the air. I leaned against the lamp post at the opening to the skate park’s parking lot. I didn’t know what to expect, but having thus far seen Cerberus’s tendency to attract chaos and danger like a lightning rod, I decided to keep my distance.

While I was waiting to see what might happen to Cerb, I had myself a close encounter. Not with an alien, though this guy looked like he could pass for one out of a movie; The Rocky Horror Picture Show. I couldn't help but stare as walking up the street towards me was a white male lion with a pair of sunglasses on his head. He was dressed in a black skirt and a leather halter top with a garder belt around one leg. As much as I wanted to look away, I couldn't stop gawking, just like at a car wreck. He swished his hips and bounced on the balls of his footpaws, carrying himself like a street walker.

"Well HELOOOO there big boy." He came right up to me and started making circles on my chest with his finger. I leaned back as far as I could, but this weirdo had me trapped against the lamp post. He smelled as fruity as he looked, probably some kind of effeminate shampoo. "You look like MY kinda dog. Wanna play 'sit up and beg' with me?"

"Uuuuhh, buddy, I don't swing that way."

"'Buddy'? Oh-ho, sweetie, you don't seem to know a lady when you see one."

"Yeah? Well show me one and let me be the judge of that." The lion put his hands on his hips and pouted his face that on a female of most species would look cute but on him made me feel uncomfortable.

"Cutie, after a few doctor treatments and an operation, I'll be more woman than you can handle. Then you'll be sorry you passed up a chance to go with Satch Flan." With that, he walked off swishing his hips back and forth like he was trying to show me his ass under his skirt. I just about showed him my breakfast, but I kept it down.

A half an hour passed and nothing seemed out of the ordinary after Ms. Flan tried to convince me to give her a Cleveland steamer. Things were about to be set in motion, though, and little did I know that the rip tide of events had me by the ankles, ready to drag me out to sea.

It all started with the sound of a fast approaching, large, moving object. I looked up the steep hill that led to the side of the parking lot I was on; a red sports car was rolling down the hill, nobody at the wheel! I looked just slightly further up and saw an older male teen raccoon backpedaling out of the street, watching the car roll along. He must have pushed it, judging from the way he was following it's ever-increasing velocity. I tensed and drew back as it shot through the opening, looking ahead of the car to see Cerb crossing its path, Rachel a few paces behind him!

"HEAD'S UP! GET OUTTA THE WAY!" Cerb jerked his head around as I shouted at him. I could see his eyes practically shoot out of his head, though fortunately it didn't happen literally this time. The wolf kicked his skateboard out from under him and ran up onto the sidewalk towards the drink shack. The car jumped the curb, but

before it could follow Cerb any further, it smashed into a telephone pole and crumpled like tin foil.

“IS HE OKAY?!” I craned my head to try and see around the wreckage from the distance. Rachel, running to Cerb as he looked like he was trying to keep his heart from beating a hole through his rib cage, turned and waved a thumb’s up at me. I nodded, and looked back up the hill. The other raccoon was trying to walk away a bit too casually, hands in the pockets of his leather pants and whistling while looking up at the clouds, occasionally running his hands through his dull blond, wild-looking hair. That much acting, little wonder he never noticed me starting to tail him. The ‘coon didn’t wander too far, stepping into a coffee shop and taking a seat oh-so casually at the front counter.

I decided that this was not the time to play it quiet. If this guy was behind all the “accidents” Cerb was having, then the last thing he probably wanted was to get attention. I wasn’t going to let him hide anymore. The guy looked maybe a year older than I was, two at the most, but his build probably helped make him look even older; he was pretty beefy. This, however, didn’t really intimidate me; what he had over me in muscular tone I had on him in shoulder breadth and height.

The door to the coffee house chimed as I stepped in. The aroma of fresh beans was thick, the wall behind the counter lined with glass jars of every kind of blend imaginable. The décor was right out of San Francisco; wrought iron chairs with lots of artistic swirls and curves, hardwood tables, all looking very trendy for the mocha-java-super-chino slurping yuppies. The coffee the ‘coon was drinking looked like something seldom ordered there; plain, black, and strong enough to double as paint thinner. I sat right down next to him and looked straight ahead, ordering a glass of orange juice when the waitress came ‘round. I glanced down as the ‘coon paid for his own drink with a credit card, sneaking a glance at the name: Rhode Lucas.

“Cute prank back there, Lucas.” I said, taking a pull from my juice. The coon just looked at me, trying to appear disinterested. I met his gaze with a sideways glance. “But that’s the last one you’re going to pull.”

“Dunno what the fuck you’re on about,” Lucas snorted, looking away from me and taking a healthy swig from his coffee. He had an English accent. That clicked in my mind; he might have followed Cerb and Rachel here. Why, though?

“Yes you do,” I said, now turning directly towards him. “What the hell’s your problem with Cerberus and Rachel? If what I hear is right, you’ve been trying to put them six feet under, and I. Don’t. Like. That.”

The raccoon slurped down the rest of his coffee and crushed the cup in one hand. The ceramic cup. He pointed a finger at me.

“Listen wanker. I don’t give a fat fuck what you don’t like. And my beef is with the wolf, not the girl. ‘e thinks e’s good enough for ‘er, and that’s something the little

shit needs to learn different. But, it's none of your bloody business anyway, so sod off." I was locking eyes with the 'coon, but I could see out of the corners of my eyes the few patrons quickly leaving and the staff backing up in anticipation of what looked like was going to turn into a brawl. Smart move. I grabbed Lucas's extended finger and started bending back. The coon snarled and grabbed his hand as I stood up and applied more of my weight to twisting his finger.

"Now YOU listen, you stupid ass shit! We've got enough problems without YOU making them worse. I'm not going to put up with your crap, I'm calling the cops!" Lead him out, keep him in a lock, get the police to take him down to lockup. That would've been the ideal situation. But life is seldom ideal.

Lucas snarled and landed a knee in my stomach. I bent over and got another one in my face, making me lose my grip on the 'coon's hand. I didn't wait for him to nail me again, though, and slammed my elbow into his solar plexus, knocking his wind out before straightening up and pounding him twice in the head with my fists. The 'coon tackled me and slammed me across a nearby table, sending chairs, napkin holders, and sugar shakers scattering. I grabbed both his ears and wrenched them hard, then let go quickly and kicked him in the chest to get him off when he reached up with both hands. He stumbled and crashed back into the front counter and I got back to my footpaws, only to have a sugar shaker thrown at my head connect with my forehead.

"Lit-il American sod!" The 'coon cracked his knuckles.

"Little? F'heh," I snorted and popped the stiff joints in my neck. Lucas had landed some hard blows on me, but I wasn't about to go down to a punk like him.

"Get your eyes checked, dumb ass, I'm taller than you."

"Ooooh...REALLY?" The 'coon smirked and grinned like a shark. Suddenly, I realized I was tilting my head back to keep looking him in the face. His head was now brushing the ceiling, and the tiles were starting to crack under his footpaws!

"Ah crap," I grunted, and bolted out of the coffee shop. In two seconds, there no longer was a coffee shop as I was knocked to the ground from the force of the windows blasting out. The shop was demolished in an instant, replaced by Lucas, towering at least two hundred and fifty feet in the air! The 'coon's paws were as big as freight train flatbeds, his legs bigger than power cable towers, his torso like a skyscraper, his arms like tractor trailer cars, and his head was blocking out the sun with a very unpleasant grin.

"NOW WHO'S TALLER, EH SCRAWNY?" The 'coon's voice boomed out from above as just about everybody around us ran for cover.

I don't fear death. Believing in God, and that there's something better than this life, I've come to recognize death as a natural occurrence, and as something not to be feared and treated as something that one day we'll figure out how to get rid of, but as an

event that is inevitable, and to be accepted with grace and dignity. I'm not in any hurry to die, and will avoid it until I'm supposed to go. But I'm not afraid of it.

So as I stood there looking up at the massive, colossal 'coon, I was definitely on edge, my breath very quick, my jaw tightly clenched, but I refused to cower or cringe. I took maybe two backpedaling steps before I planted my footpaws, my boots grinding on the asphalt, and stood my ground.

"Fe fi fo fum," I snorted, looking up at Lucas. "Somebody's been eating their vegetables."

"YEAH, AN' YOU MAY NOT BE AN ENGLISHMAN, BUT I'LL GRIND YOUR BONES FOR BREAD MEAL ANYWAY!" Lucas raised up a massive footpaw, debris flaking off the sole as it shadowed over me. I bolted to the right as it came down and left a two foot deep imprint in the pavement.

"HA! RUN YOU LIT-IL BUG RUN!" I snarled and sneered, but what else could I do? I ran, Lucas's footpaws smashing in the pavement as I juke and dodged. The streets emptied out before us as the macro coon acted like a sadistic little kid trying to squash ants for fun. Lucky for me he didn't have a giant magnifying glass, or I would've been fried. The 'coon left a trail of destruction behind us; smashed cars, snapped telephone poles and damaged buildings. I was starting to run out of steam, dodging the massive paws trying to pulverize me into a grease stain, when I got the idea to go down a narrow alley. Not a bad idea, and it might have worked.

Had I not chosen that moment to trip.

Not watching where I was going, I collided with the handlebar of a parked motorcycle. Both the hog and I went down next to the curb. I looked up at the 'coon, glaring vehemently through my fear.

"NICE TRY, MAGGOT, BUT NOW YOU'RE PASTE!" I was about to be mashed. In desperation, I did the only thing I could think of. Nearby was a storm drain. I grabbed the grating and wrenched it off, and threw myself into the darkness just as Lucas's footpaw mashed down right over me, sending rocks and dust down after me.

About a half a foot of water broke my fall as I landed on my front. Hacking and gagging, I crawled away from where I figured the opening was and huddled up against the wall, trying to stay out of sight and wait for the aches to stop and my heart rate to drop somewhere out of the tens of thousands of beats per second. Up top, I heard what I figured was Lucas expressing surprise and irritation that I wasn't a bloody smear across the bottoms of his toes. Slowly, I got to my footpaws and started to try and quietly slink through the storm drain, not lifting my boots out of the water so they wouldn't make splashes.

It was a wasted effort.

“AHA! SO THAT’S WHERE YOU WENT!” He was onto me. I took off at a run as I heard several heavy pounds. The sound of something big squeezing into the passage told me that Lucas had made the hole wide enough to cram his arm down in the passage and was now groping around in the dark for me. I dug a hand into my pocket and pulled out my zippo lighter. A couple thumbs of the wheel and I could see for a few feet around me. Looking back, I could see a giant elbow where the street had been ripped up enough for the ‘coon to reach in. But he was reaching in the wrong direction. Perfect. I kept moving until I found the runs of a ladder going up to another storm drain. Quietly, I re-emerged on the streets, clothes dirty and matted with water and grime. I shook myself, getting the worst of it out, and looked around. Lucas had his back to me, on his knees grumbling and groping around in the passage. I looked around at the devastation he had caused with his self-serving irritation.

I was quickly learning to hate macros.

I was fast growing incredibly mad. I wanted to teach this asshole a lesson and make it stick. Nearby, an army truck, probably en route to the military base just outside of the city, was overturned, abandoned by its driver. Munitions had spilled out. Grinning insanely, I showed my semi-opportunistic nature and quickly lined my pockets with grenades and grabbed an assault rifle; more firepower for my own personal arsenal. But I needed something to use directly against Lucas. Digging deeper into the wreckage of smashed boxes and opened foot lockers, my eyes lit up as I found one of those one use shoulder mounted rocket launchers.

“Oooooohh yeah,” I said, smirking. Now I just needed a proper battle ground. I spotted a nearby construction site, and laid eyes on one of the pieces of equipment. A plan started forming in my mind as I rapidly lost more and more of my questionable sanity.

Lucas was still feeling around inside the storm drain tunnels when I picked up a brick and hurled it at his back. He jerked around and looked down.

“Hey jumbo ass! Why don’t you go find a skyscraper to molest?! Or maybe you’re one of those macros who’d rather have the bullet train go up his backside!”

“WHEN I’M DONE YOU’LL LOOK LIKE A TRAIN’S GONE OVER YOU!” The ‘coon was after me again, but I was ready. I bolted straight for the construction site, running into the skeletal half finished building and finding the makeshift elevator near the inside. I jumped in and hit the up button as Rhode’s stomped into the courtyard, getting down on all fours once more and tried to grab at me. It was a near miss, but I was headed up to the top of about 30 stories. It was like watching frames of a slowly moving film strip as I watched through the I-beams as Lucas stood up and jumped onto the construction like a kid on a jungle gym. He started climbing upwards as I hit the top floor. I quickly made my way to the edge of the platform set up around the top of the elevator, my coat and my tie flapping in the wind up there. I don’t like heights,

but in this case I felt I had decent enough footing not to be too nervous. Looking down I could see Lucas grinning at me as I took a couple steps back and shouldered the rocket launcher.

“NICE TRY,” he said, only a few feet below the top, **“BUT YOU’RE NOT GETTING A CHANCE TO SHOOT ME.”**

“Oh, I’m not gonna SHOOT you,” I snickered. I took careful aim at my target. As I did, I couldn’t help but find myself in the mood to start ripping off movies. I put on my best Hispanic accent.

“SAY HELLO TO MY LI’L FRIEN’!” The rocket blasted out of the launcher and screamed up into the air. Lucas looked up and watched as the framework and steel cable of the wrecking machine snapped and crunched, dropping the five ton wrecking ball down towards him.

“.....OH, BUGGER!”

The five ton ball smashed into him like a five ton fist, smashing him off the building and dropping him all the way to the ground. The building, and several others, shook as the ‘coon cause a seismic event with his impact. I looked over the edge, nodding slowly....for a few seconds.

“WOOOO! YEAH BABY! HA! HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT, EH?! YOU DON’T FUCK WITH ME, MAN! YOU DO *NOT. FUCK. WITH. ME!*” I took the elevator down quickly, breathing a sigh of relief and numerous thanks to God for not letting me get myself killed in the thousand different ways that my plan could have gone wrong. Down on the ground, I couldn’t help but feel a bit full of myself. As several people approached cautiously, looking around at the damage, I went up, put my boot on the forehead of the still unconscious Lucas like some big game hunter, and rested the empty rocket launcher on my shoulders.

“Hail to the king, baby!” I grinned widely. Right up until the heavy metal bucket fell from an upper rafter on the construction and landed right on my head. I weaved a bit and managed to say one last thing as stars filled my eyes.

“Man, I just can’t get a break.”

And then I passed out.

It was late the next day before everything was sorted out. The police had done their usual job of handling things; they arrested both Lucas (after he’d shrunk back down from being knocked out) and myself. After plenty of questioning and taking their good sweet time gathering witnesses testimony, they determined what had happened. Lucas was charged with malicious mischief, given community service and told to see a social

councilor. I was charged with assault and had to pay a \$250 fine. Isn't the justice system wonderful?

Sitting in the lobby of the police department, I wrote out the check for my fine. The desk sergeant was less than cordial as I handed over my money and my citation paperwork. Things were going through their usual dull paces right up to the point when a heavy thud rocked the building.

"Oh God," I muttered, looking around, "Now what?" A bulldog beat cop burst in and ran up to the panda desk sergeant.

"Tell every man to gear up and get ready to evacuate the downtown area!" the bulldog gasped, looking over his shoulder through the doors he left wide open. Outside, I could see what looked like a mob on the sidewalks running from something and more than twice as much road traffic as usual.

"What the hell?!"

"Those damn anarchists have four damn macros downtown and they're tearing everything up!" As if to accentuate the statement, a storefront came crashing down on the cars just outside of the station. Cops poured out of the building around me, rushing to try and pull trapped drivers and passengers from their cars. The air was filled with horns, screams, utter chaos. And over it all, in the distance, I could hear four big voices echoing carefree laughter and sadistic mirth.

What little sanity I had left shredded. I grinded my teeth and stomped out of the building, took a right, and headed right towards the downtown area, a salmon in the river of panicked refugees, swimming against the current. I was mad. And I wasn't gonna take the destruction of my home lying down. The crowd eventually died out as I got closer to the devastation. I was on the macros trail of smashed smaller buildings, punched taller ones with big holes in them, cars mashed like toys under a brick, and bodies pounded into the ground beyond recognition. The death caused by these bastards made me sick. Here and there, I saw what looked like medical personnel trying to clean up, give the dead some dignity by placing them in body bags. It looked like in some places, they were mixing up the parts of two different corpses. I also noticed that the outfits they were wearing weren't those of regular paramedics; they had cameo fatigues on underneath their lab coats; army doctors.

"So, the national guard's been called in," I muttered to myself. I needed to find their base of operations; I wasn't about to get in the military's way, but I was determined to help in some way. I had to turn a few street corners and climb over several piles of rubble before I finally spotted the olive green makeshift tents set up in the middle of an intersection. Personnel were running all over the place, working radio controls, looking at computers with satellite displays. Finally, somebody spotted me, a ram in fatigues with headphones carefully adjusted around his horns to reach his ears.

“Sir, are you lost? The evacuation route’s...”

“No, it’s okay, I’m not lost. I’m here to help.”

“Sir, we’ve got the situation under control...” Just then, a street lamp hit the ground ten yards away from the tent like a spear. High pitched, but incredibly loud cackling filled the air.

“...Really? Look, I’ve dealt with a macro once before single handed. Let me talk to the officer in charge.”

“Right this way, sir.” The ram led me to the back of the tent. Inside, an overlay of the city was mounted on a glowing lighted table, grease pencil markings on it, showing blocked roads, damaged buildings, and suspected locations of the macros. There were a lot of them. That could only mean one thing; the military was making educated guesses as to the destruction and the destructors.

“This situation is wildly out of control, and we need these tangos neutralized yesterday.”

“That’s an understatement,” I said. The commanding officer, apparently in conference with somebody, turned to face me. He was a foxtaur, tall, well built, in a specially designed military uniform to cover both his upper and lower half. He was dressed in a dark black uniform instead of cameo fatigues like everybody else, indicating he wasn’t regular army, probably special ops of some kind. I didn’t know his exact position and rank, but I knew the guy: Vincent Kalosoan.

“How’s it going, Vince?” I smirked. The ‘taur gave me a wry grin of his own.

“Ah, Mike, I see you’re front and center in the chaos, as usual. And aside from having four giant headaches pounding the bejesus out of this city, I’m just dandy. Fortunately, we’ve got a solution to this problem.”

“You’re not thinking of nuking these assholes, are you?”

“Naw, they got somethin’ better,” said a deep bass voice coming from someone hidden just behind the taur’s taur half. A huge shadow was cast over me as a figure got up from a sitting position and blocked the light from the hanging lamp.

“Me.”

I chuckled. “Ice. I should’ve guessed.” The giant werewolf smirked, hands in the pockets of his spandex workout shorts, grey vest hanging loosely around his bulky arms. “When did you join the military?” I said.

“I didn’t. These boys showed up at m’ gym, sayin’ they had need of my services.”

“That’s right, you did used to do contract work for some company that handled macros, didn’t you?”

“Yep, ‘till the ACLU started getting on the macro bandwagon and the company was sued to shit and went bankrupt.”

“I’ve spoken to my superiors,” said Vince, “and they’ve given me the authority to hire independent contractors with experience in this kind of situation.”

“Well how about one more?” I smirked, pointing my thumb at my chest. Ice looked surprised.

“You’ve dealt with these mother fuckers before?”

“Once. Didn’t kill him, but I put an end to his screwing around. Give me the hardware I need and I’ll do it again.”

“Heh, well a partner on this job would be a welcome change.”

“Hmm, I dunno...” said Vince. Just then, a tank went rolling up the street behind us, disappearing between the buildings. There were a few cannon reports, then suddenly it came flying back down the street, end over end, between the buildings on the other side, sending out a blast of debris and smoke. Vince watched, then turned back to me.

“Do you prefer cash, check, or direct deposit?”

.....

I could hear Ice pacing around just outside of the mobile armory truck as I geared up. The wolf didn’t need any hardware, but I was picking out some tools. When I emerged, it was with a grenade launcher slung over one shoulder, a belt of grenades for it strapped around my waist and some C4 charges in a backpack.

“This should about do it,” I said, adjusting the strap on the launcher. I pulled my fedora down low over my eyes and slid on a pair of sunglasses. “If this doesn’t work out there, I’ll improvise.”

“Heh, for improvisin’, just lead ‘em to me,” The wolf said, balling up a fist. Some kind of mystic natural energy crackled around his fist. “I’ll do the rest.” We started towards the exit to the no-man’s land that until recently had been downtown Sapphire Bay, passing by military personnel running around doing all sorts of jobs, all of them related to keeping tabs on the troublemaking macros.

“Thanks, but I don’t do relying on other people. I don’t want to be a burden.”

“Shit, isn’t a big deal, just my job.”

“Seriously, I can handle this.”

“M’sure you can, but if you get in over your head...,”

“I’m always in over my head. I mean...you know me.”

Ice was quiet for a bit as we got closer to the blockade. We passed our clearance badges to the sergeant at the gate, who went to go verify them. Ice seemed to get what had been eating at me, something that’s always been a bit of a sore spot with me.

“...you’re not weak, Mike.”

I didn’t say anything, just rubbed at the back of my neck.

“You do a damn sight more than most folks do. I’ve seen guys almost twice yer size piss ‘emselves n’ run in a situation like this.”

“Bud,” I said with a light sigh, “we live in a world where there are assholes big as a cruise ship running around, people with enough magic power to wrap almost half the laws of physics around their little fingers, and others with every kind of super enhanced natural ability from being able to run almost at the speed of light to being able to bench press a bulldozer with one hand. And exactly what do I have?”

“Probably more brains than all of ‘em put together. Plus you’re probably the best I’ve seen with a gun outside of the military, and probably better n’ a lot of people IN the military.”

I gave a light chuckle. “Maybe. I can only hope it’ll be enough.” The sergeant came back with our passes and moved aside the barricades. In two small steps, we were in the hot zone.

“Right,” Ice said, cracking his knuckles and looking around. “After they’ve wrecked everything immediately available, macros often take a breather in the center of the destructive area n’ have a good laugh. Often if they’ve got any captives, they’ll play cat n’ mouse with ‘em for fun, then squash em when they’re ready to start smashin’ again. So we better hurry.” I nodded, looking at a GPS given to me by Vincent; the damaged area of the city was highlighted in red.

“Looks like the center is this way.” We wove our way through the destruction. The once lively and crowded downtown was now deathly silent, with nothing but rubble, smashed vehicles, and the dead that hadn’t been collected yet. Finding the macros wasn’t

very hard. Their laughter was echoing off of buildings around us. Finally, we got to a central plaza that had been a shopping center. That's where we found our targets.

The four macros were toying with three people they'd managed to catch; a Dachshund in a mechanic's jumpsuit, a somewhat overweight vixen, and a yellow lizard from some fast-food joint. Three of the macros were taking telephone poles and throwing them at their victims like darts, trying to hit them as they ran for their lives around the plaza, unable to escape completely because the entrances had all been blocked with cars stacked like toys. The first macro was a huge armadillo, sniggering and picking debris out from between his claws. The second was a huge cheetah who was doing most of the pole-dart throwing. The third was a giant panda, no pun intended, watching the cheetah's antics with sadistic pleasure. Last, watching all three of them from a perch on top of a sheared-in-half skyscraper was a massive green dragon. All four of these creeps wore the same black leather vest with the red anarchy symbol. The panda had anarchy tattoos on the back of each hand, and the dragon wore a silver anarchy symbol on a chain around his neck.

"He shoots aaaaand....OOOOHHHH another miss!" The cheetah chuckled as his telephone pole smashed into the ground just ahead of the pudgy vixen's path, causing her to try and turn to run the other way and fall down in the process.

"C'mon chunky buns, you gotta do a lot more running to burn off those thighs!" The 'dillo snittered, flicking a cinder block that was caught between two claws and narrowly missing the dachshund's head as the dog hit the deck. The lizard, meanwhile, was crouched underneath the lip of a fountain in the middle of the plaza. All three hostages were scared out of their minds, from the looks of it.

Ice didn't hesitate. He launched a VW Beetle blocking our path into the air with a punting kick, headed straight for the 'dillo's head. The panda shot out a paw and caught it before it impacted, though. All four macros looked our way as we slowly made our way into the plaza.

"Who the fuck're these two bugs?" The cheetah snorted. He flicked another telephone pole straight at Ice. The werewolf watched it with his arms crossed for a second, then just as it came close to impacting, did a spinning kick and sent it back twice as fast, stabbing the panda in the hand when he tried to catch it again.

"RRGH! That stung!" The bear pulled the pole out of his paw like it was a large splinter caught in his hand, flicking it aside.

"Folks," Ice said, looking at the three terrified captives. "You better head on home now." The captives wasted no time in running for the opening we'd cleared.

"I didn't say anyone could leave." The dragon, a good head taller than the rest of his compatriots (and each of them was as tall as Lucas had been), stepped down from his perch, shaking the ground with his steps. He picked up a delivery van and hefted it

once in his hand, then made like he was going to throw it at his fleeing victims. Without hesitating, I cocked my grenade launcher and fired a shot at the van in his hand. The launcher was an advanced model, with guided ordinance. The explosive charge screamed through the air, guided by the lazer sight on my launcher until it hit the van, causing it to explode in the dragon's hand. He snarled and bellowed as he got plenty of shrapnel in his palm.

“WHO THE HELL ARE YOU LITTLE PESTS?!”

“I'm Mike Fang,” I said, sticking a match between my teeth. I jacked out the empty shell from my launcher and started to load a new one.

“M'friends call me Ice Wolf,” the werewolf said, giving the macros a cool stare, “But you can call me ‘the guy about to kick your asses’.”

“You screw ups have one chance,” I said, shutting the launcher. “Give up now and maybe we'll convince the military to go easy on you.”

The four giant rampagers just laughed.

“I had a feeling you'd say that.” I muttered.

“YOU stop US?” snorted the dragon, crossing his arms. **“That's a laugh.”**

“Right,” I snorted. “Well before we beat you all like red-headed stepchildren, answer me this: how did Pyro put you up to this?” Ice turned to me, perplexed.

“Who?”

“Pyro, leader of the anarchy gang here. They're members of it, but why they're taking orders from a normal sized person is beyond me.”

“Because anarchy is the best means to our ends.” The dragon gave a sneering grin. **“With no rule, no government, there's no organization that will stand up to us. We'll have total run of the entire damn planet! Pyro can have his society without control, and we'll stomp on whoever and whatever we like in it!”**

I nodded. “Okay, curiosity's satisfied. Now we blast you to hell.” I raised up my launcher and let one fly right at the panda's head. He just barely dodged it by juking to one side.

“Damn! They're packing serious heat!”

“Heh, cute toy, insect. But we know how to deal with your kind. Boys, split up!”

The macros all bounded off in different directions. Ice cussed a blue streak.

"I hate it when they do this, makes the job harder n' it has to be." I smirked, racking in a new grenade.

"Split up?"

"Naw, bad idea huntin' macros. We get more strength in numbers, and we need every ounce of that we can get against these guys. C'mon!" The wolf took off at a surprising pace for someone so big. We made our way down several side streets, using our smaller size as a means of cutting off the first macro. Smashing through a fence, Ice emerged first out on the street, right ahead of our first target, the armadillo. The huge armored destruction machine stopped and glared at us, Ice cracking his knuckles, energy starting to swirl around his fist.

"You wanna piece, maggot? YOU GOT IT!" The 'dillo stomped both clawed footpaws into the street, causing massive fissures to spring up, water pipes cracking, hydrants geysering. I sneered and chucked another grenade his way, the explosive making a beeline for his face. But the 'dillo had an ace up his nonexistent sleeve. In a flash, he rolled himself into a ball, the explosive impacting on the surface with a loud explosion. But it was all for nothing; the bomb didn't even make a crack.

"I got this one!" Ice had his hand cupped as he dug in his footpaws, his muscles straining from the effort of gathering whatever kind of mystic energy he used. The energy was building up into a bowling-ball sized orb in his hand. The 'dillo's unpleasant snickering was audible even from inside his armored shell as he started rolling forward, crushing everything in his path into a wafer thin parody of itself. Cars and trucks crunched and squealed the sound of bending plastic and metal. Ice put both hands together and molded the ball of energy into a flat disc.

"Much of a dancer, bub?" The wolf snarled. "Let's see you do a split!" The wolf swung his arm back, then brought it forward in an underhanded lob. The disc went spinning through the air, stretching out like pizza dough as it did, growing incredibly wide, almost as wide a building. It sliced right through the crack where the 'dillo's armored plates met, then slowly dissipated as it came out the back. The macro stopped just a few yards in front of us, uncurling and raising up a huge clawed hand! I dug my boots in and got ready to run, my heart freezing. Then the macro froze, a thin red line going right down his front from the top of his forehead to where his legs met. The two buildings on either side of him collapsed as the 'dillo split in half, falling apart on either side.

"Any cheesy one liners, Mike?" The wolf turned to me with his arms raised, smirking.

"I'll give you one when I'm not busy checking to see if I messed myself," I said, getting my wits back. Just then, over the tops of the buildings we could see a black furred ear pass by. It was round, and small on the head it was on.

“I’ve got this one,” I said, and pulled open the doors of a nearby abandoned delivery van. “Check and see if they’ve left us the keys.”

“What do we need this for?” Ice said, nonetheless checking the visor and ashtrays, where he eventually found the keys for the van.

“I need to stay standing so I can aim straight, but we need to keep moving. This lets me do both.”

“Right,” The werewolf just fit behind the wheel of the van. He managed to dent a “No U-Turn” sign and knock over a newspaper vending machine as he got turned around.

“Easy, we don’t need to make more destruction than there already is.”

“Sorry, but I usually walk or take the bus. Not many cars or trucks that’ll fit my big ass.” We peeled out and took the corner on two wheels, immediately getting the macro panda’s attention. He grinned in an almost feral way and took off after us.

“STAY AHEAD OF HIM!” I yelled over the motor. I used some moving straps tied around my waist with hooks on the end to anchor myself to the van. Kicking the doors open, I fired off a grenade that detonated just to the side of the panda as he chased after us.

“COME ON!” I bellowed at my target, firing off another shot. “YOU WANT IT?! I GOT MORE WHERE THAT CAME FROM!” The panda grinned in a sinister way, like he knew something I didn’t. It became quickly apparent, as he launched himself up and tucked into a mid-air summersault, my grenade going under him. He uncurled in mid air and came down just a few yards behind us in some kind of thrusting downward kick, his leg penetrating the ground all the way up to mid-shin. He pivoted and did a stamp kick just as Ice took the next corner on two wheels, slamming his footpaw into the building just behind us, rocking the van on its shock absorbers.

“Damn, this guy knows martial arts!” Ice turned in his seat to look at me.

“Well, got any bright ideas?!” I racked my brain fast as the scenery sped past us. I could see the macro had freed himself from the street and was after us again, his footsteps making my vision vibrate and everything in it seem to tremble; buildings, road signs, and....

...that was it.

“Ice, take the exit onto the off ramp!” I pointed towards a sign that indicated the way to the overpass freeway. The wolf did another two-wheeled turn onto the ramp. It was just in time, too. I sucked in a breath and my heart stopped for a second and I saw the macro leap into the air, both legs pulled up. He thrust them down in a two-legged

smash, trying to do a two-pawed stomp on the van, and just barely missing; chunks of asphalt came through the van's doors, it was so close.

The overpass had several cars on it, abandoned by their owners in their desperation to get away. Ice juked around them, once as they were stationary, and a second time when the panda punted them at us; the macro was chasing us on the overpass. I smirked; I had him right where I wanted him.

"Well Dick Tracy, what now?" Ice looked in the rearview mirror at me. I grimaced.

"Now, we pull the floor out from under him." I prepped a C4 charge, a big five pound block of plastic explosives. I raised up my grenade launcher again and fired off another shot. Once again, the panda did his acrobatic act to avoid the explosive missile. Which is probably why he didn't notice me kick the C4 out of the van and onto the freeway. I smirked as I pulled out the remote detonator and thumbed the button. The explosion rocked the van as it sent cracks spider webbing all over the freeway. I never got a look at the panda's face as he started to come down on the weakened structure, but I like to think it read something like "Oh SHIT!" The bear uncurled and both footpaws hit the overpass, then went THROUGH the overpass.

"HIT THE BRAKES!" Ice stepped on the brakes hard enough to send me straining against my straps. I got a good look as the panda went tumbling down on the overpass, lurching forward to involuntarily grab the edge of the cracked cement structure as he fell to about chest height. I lined up my sights as he was collecting himself after taking a spill. His eyes went wide as he saw me.

"Smile you son of a..." BOOM! The grenade launcher thumped a loud report as the explosive streaked through the air. It hit the macro right in his left eye and detonated. There was quite a mess as a quarter of his skull was turned into shrapnel. His remaining eye rolled into what was left of his head as the bear slid down into the gap in the overpass and collapsed on the road below, creating tremors as he did.

"Boo-ya", I smirked, unhooking myself. I slid up to the shot gun seat, reloading as I did and rolling down the window. Ice looked behind us and nodded.

"Not bad...for a novice." I just chuckled as he popped the van into gear and we headed off for our next target; two down, two to go. We left the van behind once we got off the freeway; it had been handy when we needed to keep moving, but it would give away our position with the engine noise when we were trying to hunt the perps down. It took us a few minutes, but we soon caught up with the cheetah at the base of a hill near a refinery. He greeted us with a volley of his telephone pole darts that sent me diving for cover and Ice into a frenzy of kicks and punches to break the projectiles into pieces before they skewered him; the cat seemed to have an obsession with throwing stuff.

“Whassa matter punk?” Ice shouted at the macro, “you don’t like to get your hands dirty?”

“Nah, I’d rather use you for target practice!” The cheetah snatched up the trailer from a mac semi and pitched it like a baseball player. Ice duck-and-rolled underneath it.

“Practice is over, asshole,” the wolf snarled. “Now let’s see if you can catch as well as you can pitch!” Ice cupped a hand and a ball of energy sprouted to life in it, crackling and snapping. The wolf did a powerful overhand lob that sent the ball spinning towards the cheetah’s chest. The cheetah watched the ball get closer...then suddenly was fifty feet away from it’s trajectory!

“What the...?” I said. I never knew a macro could move that fast.

“HAHAHAHAHA! Nice try scawny! Try hittin’ me again, maybe you’ll get lucky!” Ice snarled and looked even more pissed than before.

“On the count of three,” He muttered out of the corner of his mouth, “You shoot to his right, and I’ll shoot to his left and we’ll nail the prick whichever way he goes. One....two....THREE!” I whipped up my launcher and fired just as Ice slung another energy bomb. The Cheetah, acting like a baseball player on a base, leaned left, leaned right, then just as both shots were on top of him, slid his footpaws out from under himself and they both went right over him!

“BWHHAHAHAHAHAHA! Ah man you two can’t hit nothing!” Ice cursed a streak so blue it could have been the Danube River. I learned a few phrases I hadn’t heard before from him. I narrowed my eyes at the pain in the ass cat; this guy was quick. Too quick. We needed to get him to stand still. I scanned the scene, looking for anything that might be helpful.

I found it at the top of the hill behind the cheetah.

“Keep him busy,” I said, dodging into an alleyway as the cat got back onto his paws.

“What?” Ice said, “Where’re you going?!”

“Hey shorty! Your friend runnin’ off? Why don’t you get smart like him!”

“I’ll show you smart you dick weed...” Ice clenched both hands and shot off energy bombs, the cheetah dodging them both. I could see all this between the buildings as I circled around the cheetah and ran up the hill. I was panting for breath by the time I got there, and had to take a moment to suck the air back into my lungs, hard and raw, feeling like sandpaper.

“OOOH Baby, I’m on FIRE! Heh, c’mon puny! You got three strikes left, then it’s MY TURN!”

“You’re on fire, eh?” I said, getting my composure back. “How prophetic.” I strode over to what I’d spotted on the top of the hill; a mac semi rig all set and ready. It was a tanker truck, complete with a big tank for gasoline.

And according to its gauges, it was full.

“Pity to have to use so much with prices the way they are,” I muttered. I grabbed the door handle and yanked it open. The rig was a stick shift. I’d never learned to drive it, but then again I wasn’t planning on driving. I shifted it into neutral and drew my double barreled revolver. Walking back to the tank, I popped the valve open. Petrol began spraying out as I turned, leveled on the parking break lever, and shot it. The rig squealed a bit on its axel, and started rolling forward.

Meanwhile, down at the base of the hill, Ice hurled another bomb that the cheetah dodged just by tilting his head; frustration was making the wolf inaccurate.

“Strike ONE!”

The rig began picking up speed, making a beeline for the cheetah. I walked to the end of the fuel trail that was leading down the hill. I dug into my pocket as Ice fired off a second round, the cheetah avoiding it by bending way back like Keanu Reeves from “The Matrix”, then pushing himself back upright.

“Strike TWO!”

I flicked my zippo lighter on and glared at the cheetah.

“Burn baby, burn.” I snorted, kneeling down and touching off the gas. The fire seared down the road after the tanker as it neared the cat. It exploded into a huge pillar of fire as the flames hit the tank, hitting the cheetah’s back like a flame thrower.

“GRAAAAH!

SONOFABITCHI’MONFIRESONOFABITCHMOTHERFUCKER!” The cat howled and slapped at his back, the flames engulfing him right up to the back of his neck. He screamed and flailed, then spotted a water tower on a nearby building, grabbed it, and sent a flood down into the streets to put out the flames. A crackling sound filled the air as an energy bomb cut through the deluge. When the flow of water had dissipated, the cheetah had a hole through his chest the size of a humvee. He dropped face forward as I made my way back to Ice, almost knocking me off my footpaws as he caused the ground to shake for the last time.

“Home run, you son of a bitch.” Ice crossed his arms and grinned. I stood next to him and surveyed the damage. Then I sniffed. “What’s that?” Ice shrugged.

“Well burning hair tends to smell that way.”

“No, it’s not him, there’s something else....” I kept sniffing, then turned and looked at the saturated werewolf.

“Boy, and people say dogs smell funny when we get wet.”

Ice chuckled, going into a shake and blasting water out of his hair like a downpour. “Well, that leaves only that scaly assed dragon left.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, “where did he get off to...” I didn’t have long to wonder. The dragon suddenly came bounding over the rooftops and slammed into the open area in front of us, knocking both the wolf and myself off our footpaws. I hit the ground on my front and my gun went clattering away. A shadow fell over it, and then my gun, my .357, double cylinder, double barreled revolver, my Equalizer, disappeared underneath a massive clawed draconic footpaw.

I stared for a moment, then looked up and snarled.

“THAT, was a one-of-a-kind firearm, you **PIECE OF SHIT BASTARD!**” I don’t normally put much value in material things, but that gun had sentimental value for me; it’d served me well for a long time, been a reliable defense through many escapades. And that scaly screw up had just crushed it.

“You two have fucked up my fun LONG ENOUGH!” The dragon roared, and a massive gout of flame shot from his mouth. I rolled to the side and Ice did a cartwheel out of the way just in time to avoid getting burned to a cinder. We both went into separate buildings, looking for cover. The dragon was going brezerk, punching and kicking at both buildings. I don’t know about Ice, but the second I was in the lobby of the office building I made it into, I was running for the stairs as a draconic footpaw smashed through the doors, turning everything behind me into debris and destruction. The building shook as I barreled up the stairs. Just beneath me, a massive clawed fist would frequently smash the stairs, cutting off my escape route. I had nowhere to go but up, ever upward as the ground became ever more impossible to get back down to. One blow struck the building and sent my grenade launcher and my C4 falling back down the stairwell.

“Oh shit,” I gasped, “Oh God, oh shit, oh God.” I kept moving. What else could I do? But what could I do once I hit the roof, eye-to-eye with that massive monstrosity? What could I use against him? Suddenly, I remembered. I reached into my coat and found it strapped near the back; my old single cylinder, 6 inch barrel .357. I still carried it just in case of emergencies.

“Well, if ever there was an emergency...” I muttered. Another punch rocked the building. I ran up the last few steps and burst out onto the roof. The wind caught my

coat and caused it to flap in the breeze; good thing I had my hat snugged down so tight. I gasped and panted, looking at the face of my would-be executioner. The dragon sneered, looking sadistically pleased.

“I’m gonna enjoy this more than usual. You two have been a royal pain in the ass.” The dragon looked to the other side of the street. Ice was crouched just behind an air conditioning vent. He jumped out, looking to fire off another energy bomb, but the dragon breathed fire and sent him diving back for cover again. He couldn’t show himself long enough to fire off a shot without the dragon trying to roast him.

I looked down at the gun in my hand; what the hell good was it going to do against this thing? I was kidding myself; I wasn’t any good here. I was helpless, no use against somebody this huge, this powerful.

This isn’t you. A voice, in the back of my head. You don’t give up that quick. You don’t give up period. You know who’s on your side. You’re not going to lose unless it was never meant for you to win. Now TRY. Don’t say it can’t be done until you know it can’t be done.

I glared at the dragon. Raising up my revolver, I took a marksman’s stance; turned to the side, right hand holding my gun with the other cupped to support it from the bottom.

“You can’t be fucking serious.”

“Well it worked for David against Goliath.” I said.

The dragon snorted a laugh. **“I’m just gonna crush you BOTH.”** He raised up both fists, flaring his wings open and baring his teeth in triumph. I leveled my gun on his face, staring hard. I stared so hard I could practically make out the grooves between his scales. I could practically see the skin between them.

I aimed for it.

“Yippie-ki-yay, mother fucker.”

I fired all six bullets, one after the other. They struck the dragon in the head. I never saw one of them glance off.

“Is that all you’ve got?” The dragon snorted. **“This ends n…”** Suddenly, the dragon looked down his muzzle. Blood was dripping across it, coming from his tear ducts. My bullets, hydra shock hollow points, had gone between his scales and through his skin. I don’t know how many of them it took to crack his skull, but several of them must have gotten in and sent their shock force through part of his brain. Soon, more dribbles of blood were coming from underneath his eyes. They started to roll back in his head.

“Iiii.....iiii...iiimmmmmpossiiiiiible...” The dragon slowly lowered his arms, falling backwards and impacting so hard with the ground he shook the buildings to their foundations and left a five foot deep imprint.

Ice and I made our ways to the edges of our buildings and looked over. I snapped open my cylinder, and emptied the shells out over the edge. I glanced across the way; the werewolf was smirking at me as he called across the street.

“Never underestimate the little guy.”

+++++

“McDaniels Bar and Grill” was jam packed that night. Every soldier in the national guard seemed to have shown up to hold a party for the defeat of the macros. I’ve never been a party-hearty guy, but I did order an expensive dinner; I could afford it, or I would be able to soon. Vince informed me that the money for my services would be direct deposited, but it would take a while to process the payment; about a month, in fact. That’s the government for you. The damage that the macros had done was extensive, but ever since Katrina, FEMA has been looking to repair its damaged reputation, and got here in record time, starting immediately on repairs. All of the smaller building that had been destroyed were in the early stages of being rebuilt, and the larger ones already had architects laying out plans for repairs. Ice had stuck around long enough to accept a couple complimentary beers but had to cut things short; he had dinner plans for him and Azrial, his boyfriend. Yeah, I never mentioned before Ice was gay; never made a difference to me. Call me a new-age thinker, I guess.

“Excuse me, officer?” The bartender was talking to Vincent.

“Yes?”

“Your men seem more interested in drinking than in eating. Most of that large banquet buffet you ordered there is getting cold. Did you want me to clear it away?”

“Ah, I see. No, thank you, I’ll take care of it. No sense in letting good food go to waste. And I am feeling hungrier than usual.” I sniggered and laced my fingers together; this was gonna be good. The foxtaur weaved his way between his men to the edge of the buffet table. Most of them men were either drinking beer, chatting it up with the ladies in the bar or playing pool and pinball. The foxtaur looked over the three long folding tables set up with trays of au gratin potatoes, sliced ham, green beans, fried chicken, beans n’ rice, two different kinds of pasta with two different sauces and plenty of garlic bread.

Vincent hummed to himself as he went along, picking up one tray at a time. He would then promptly shove the entire thing into his mouth, somehow unhinging his jaw and then rehinging it as soon as he had swallowed the entire thing! The solidiers started

to noticed, and laughed and slapped their thighs as the waiting staff looked in awe as Vincent began to clear the tables of everything on them, LITERALLY. His taur belly started getting rounder and bigger as the foxtaur crammed himself silly, the buttons on the underside of his uniform gapping and straining to stay together. By the time he got to the third table, the food was starting to get to his upper half. The next few trays started to give Vincent a big pot belly, the buttons on his UPPER uniform now getting big gaps between them. By the time he swallowed the last tray of chicken ah la king, the foxtaur had a pot belly the size of a mini fridge, his buttons barely able to stay on. His taur gut was swollen almost half again as big as one of those standalone freezers, the bloat squeezing out between his legs.

“Ahhh,” the foxtaur patted his upper gut and picked at his teeth. But his performance wasn’t done just yet. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing as he unhinged his jaw again. He let out a monstrous belch and the serving trays came rattling out of his gullet, not a speck of food left on them. His bellies shrink just enough so that it didn’t look like he was about to rip through his clothes, but still left large gaps in them.

“Well that was nice,” said Vince, hands on his hips, ”but where’s dessert?” The foxtaur looked around expectantly. The entire restaurant burst out laughing at their bloated commanding officer. I couldn’t help but laugh myself at the scene, even as the waitress came over with my bill, looking over her shoulder at the spectacle.

A ring from my cell phone cut through the noise, though I had to move to the coat closet to be able to hear well enough.

“Mike, it’s Manny. I’ve got your order ready.”

“Already? Wow, that was fast, thanks.”

“No problem, my friend was workin’ late at the foundry and was able to melt it all down and cast the pieces for me. Come by any time to pick it up.”

“Okay, I’m in the neighborhood, I’ll be there presently.” I grabbed my hat and coat, said my goodbyes and made my way a few blocks down the street. “Manny’s Gun Works” was my regular place for anything that had to do with my armament, and after today, I’d come by telling him I needed a bit of a rush job. The bell chimed as I stepped through the door. The shop was my kind of place, glass cases with pistols and revolvers, racks of rifles and shot guns behind it, and all the necessary cleaning and maintenance supplies a marksman would need; it was gun nut heaven.

“Fang, you always bring me the strangest work orders,” Manny said, carrying something wrapped in an oil cloth. “First you want me to turn two guns into one, now you ask me to turn a gun and parts of another gun into one. You wanna let me in on the secret?”

“Well,” I said, leaning on the counter, “As I’ve been told by various sources, any weapon that slays a dragon absorbs some kind of energy as a result. From that point on, it can be used to slay any dragon of that kind.”

“I see, so why combine the two?”

“Well I’ve slayed dragons with both, but I can’t use the one the macro smashed anymore.”

“I see, so you’re hoping by combining the two, you’ll get this energy combined in one weapon.”

“That’s the idea.” The skunk nodded slowly. “You know you’re nutty sometimes?” I chuckled. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“Well, anyway, it’s a success. Oh, and I specially machined the parts myself with a design I’ve been wanting to experiment with. The cylinder now makes a virtually airtight seal with the frame. This will prevent pressure from escaping as the bullet leaves the cylinder and enters the barrel. That should give you extra knockdown power.”

“Excellent.”

“By the way, why’d you want to go back to a single cylinder revolver?”

“Well the double barrel was pretty good, but that trigger was really heavy to pull back. Plus the recoil made for an even slower rate of fire.”

“I getcha. Well this one will serve you well, I hope.” The skunk unwrapped the oil cloth from around a large stainless steel revolver. It was polished to a fine shine, the extra material from both guns used to add counterweight to the underside of the barrel to dampen recoil. Brand new lettering was engraved on the barrel: “The Equalizer II”. I flipped open the cylinder, the action smooth and seamless. I carefully slid it shut and holstered it.

“Excellent work Manny, as always.” I said, writing out the check for the skunk. The bell chimed again as I left. Things were looking up. I had a brand new gun, the anarchists had been deprived of four of their most dangerous members and Cerb and Rachel now had no more saboteur to bother with the wolf’s practice.

Life can’t stand it when you get a break.

I was maybe halfway to my office, the street lights flickering and tossing a copper-white glow down along the sidewalk. Night had fallen, and most of the streets were deserted. I was passing by the mouth of a back alley when I found myself spotlighted by the lights of a car parked in the dark opening of a garage just across the street. I put a hand up to block the light, when I hear the sound of squealing tires. I took

off down the alleyway, figuring the narrow space between the buildings would be too small for the vehicle. I was right, and as I looked behind me I saw a jeep pull up sideways, four guys jumping out of it, all decked out in black and red sporting a now familiar symbol on their shirts.

“Damn!” I hissed, and looked ahead again, clipping my hip on a dumpster I didn’t see ‘cause I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going. I winced and kept moving, but it was then I noticed I wasn’t hearing the sounds of my pursuers running; they weren’t in any hurry. What did they know I didn’t?

It became apparent when another jeep pulled up in front of the other end of the alley. I was boxed in.

“Ah shi...” I started to say, when somebody grabbed me from behind and hurled me against the brick wall to my side. The thugs had been closer than I thought. I did a mule kick behind me and caught the punk in the stomach, then pounded him in the head with a fist. His friends didn’t seem to take too kindly to that, and they showed it by punching me in the face, then jabbing me in the side with a cattle prod. Electricity crawled up my flesh under my skin, and I let out a strangled croak of pain. The prod’s wielder was a large gray hare with huge buck teeth that almost went down to his chin. He grinned at me and shocked me again, dropping me to my knees. One of his compatriots, an otter with piercings all through his ears, gave me a kick in the stomach like he was kicking off the super bowl. I was down on all fours, but managed to kick the otter in the shin, drop him to my level, grab him by the shoulders and slam a head butt into him that knocked him on his back. I staggered to my footpaws while the hare was trying to get around his crony laying on the ground.

“C’mon Zack,” The hare said, looking down with a disgusted expression, “quit bein’ a wuss and get up! He barely tagged ya.”

“RRRGH! Easy for you to say!” While the two of them were having their lover’s quarrel, I started to go for my gun, when a pair of arms clamped themselves around my torso.

“I don’t think so, fucker!” An unpleasant chuckle filled my ears. I couldn’t tell the species of my captor, but it was probably a wolf; I felt a canine muzzle against the back of my head as I tried to do a reverse head butt. He snarled and squeezed me hard, picking me right up off the ground and swinging me so my legs were painfully smacked against the edge of the dumpster.

“Gutless assholes!” I snarled, “Gotta gang up on a guy to take him?! Why don’t you come at me one atta time, I’ll...”

“You’ll WHAT?” said a voice quickly approaching. I looked up. Stepping out of the dark shadows of the alley was a coyote. A chain led from one ear to his nostril. A cigarette was dangling from one corner of his mouth, the smoke cloying around his face,

partly obscuring the flame tattoos around his eyes. Hands in the pockets of a black duster covered with buckles and belts, the coyote wore red-dyed jeans and a red t-shirt with a black anarchy symbol on the front. Gothic rings with lots of twists and curls covered all his fingers. The way he carried himself, he was obviously the leader.

There was a moment of silence as the two of us sized each other up. I spoke first.

“Tim Green. Well, you’re just about everything I expected.”

“I prefer to be called ‘Pyro’. Lester, educate him.” The hare gave me a backhand that split my lower lip and drew blood. I tried to aim a kick at the hare but the goon behind me still had me in a bear hug. Pyro laughed, taking the cigarette from between his lips.

“So this is the infamous Mike Fang. P’feh, what a joke.”

“Yeah, a joke that’s gonna punch you back into line.”

“Oh, that’s clever. I don’t think you’re in any position to be makin’ threats.”

“Asshole, I’ve personally killed two macros that were workin’ for you, do you think that anything you say’s gonna intimidate ME?”

“Oh you think that makes you hot shit?” The coyote dropped his coffin nail and stamped it out. “Wacking the giants? Shoot, you’re not the first one who’s ever done that.”

“No, but not many have.”

“Yeah yeah, well let’s all give you a pat on the back, whoop de fuckin’ do.” Pyro lit up another cig, blowing smoke in my face.

“You think you’ve dealt me some kinda major blow? Please, I’m not some movie bad guy with some kind of grand master plan. I’m here to set this town FREE! Free from its laws, free from its fascist restrictions!”

“Free from sanity and reason,” I muttered. The coyote smirked.

“EXACTLY. And that doesn’t take any PLAN. Like they say, nothing to it but to do it.”

“Yeah, well you’ve gone over the edge AND the line.” I snarled. “I was willing to leave you to the cops, but then your crew went and raped a girl. Now you’ve got ME on your case.” Pyro’s grin got even more unpleasant.

“Oh, Mr. Big Bad Dog, gonna stand up for the weak people. Feh, don’t you get it? It’s all about natural survival, man. The strong will do what they want, ‘cause they can. And lemme tell ya, she didn’t put up much of a fight. Heh, probably wanted it.”

“WHAT?!” I snarled even louder, straining and heaving against the thug holding me. Pyro had just admitted to being one of the bastards that had forced themselves on that poor vixen from the hospital, and had the gall to suggest that she’d wanted it to happen. I was ready to tear his head off. If I could only get my hands on it.

“Yeah, she wasn’t even that good. Not like the one we did tonight, eh boys?” Pyro looked around and the assembled goon squad all chuckled and laughed agreements.

Another rape victim. That did it. I raised up my boots and slammed them down on the footpaws of the goon behind me. His grip loosened just the slightest bit, and I got one arm free. I slammed my elbow into his stomach twice, weakening his grip further, then wrenched his arms from around me. Pyro was watching this with mirth, up until I broke the thug’s grip. Then his hand was going into his coat, but I grabbed him by the throat first and started squeezing. He rasped and grabbed at my hands. I put a knee into his crotch, making the coyote’s knees buckle and his eyes cross.

“You God damn BASTARD! I’ll see you BURN IN H...” Once again they couldn’t let me finish a sentence. The thug behind me got his wind back and hurled me against the wall so hard my vision was swimming. I collapsed against the wall as Pyro began to regain his composure, the thugs all gathering around me, their visages swirling together and blurring in my vision.

“Alright, that’s it, enough chit chat.” Pyro knelt down, from the look of it. I felt a hot, burning sensation on my cheek; he’d just put out his cigarette on my face. I groaned in pain.

“You’re through, you damn shit. Boys....work him over GOOD.” What followed next was a professional-grade beat down. Punches were thrown, kicks were hurled, and my body sustained serious punishment. I could barely register what was happening, my head was spinning so hard. All I could tell was blows coming from places I couldn’t see, flashes of pain coming from various parts of my body. For a full five minutes I was the anarchists’ punching bag, the crap beaten out of me twice over.

“A’ight, that’s good enough.” A bit of a far off voice said. “I know where we can ditch him. Heh, he won’t be botherin’ us again...”

Darkness, that’s all I could see. I hadn’t dreamt, but I was pretty sure I’d been unconscious. I felt like I’d been hit by a truck and dragged a mile. I doubted there was much more than a half a square foot of my body that hadn’t been beaten. It hurt to move, but something in me told me I had to.

The sound of a machine kicking on was confirmation.

A small window of sky and buildings was getting smaller, from my view. I wasn't sure what was going on at first, but then I felt that I was laying in a pile of loose objects, some of them in plastic bags.

I was in a trash compactor. And it was ON.

The realization hit me like one of the many blows I'd been dealt. I lurched up, feeling the heavy compressing top coming down. The window was already too small for me to try and crawl out of. This was it, I was destined to be put in a pine box the size of a dresser drawer. But for one thing. My mind raced back to a summer when I'd worked at a maintenance man for a hotel. They'd had their own garbage compactor, and there was an emergency stop button on it. I threw myself forward and shot an arm out of the ever-shrinking opening, wildly slapping the side of the compactor, feeling for anything.....

....found it. A button went down under my hand, and the lid stopped just above my arm. Slowly, the compactor started to raise up, returning to its open position. Grunting and gasping in agony, I dragged myself from the foul-smelling prison and collapsed against its front. For ten minutes all I wanted to do was pass out again, but I knew after the beating I took, that was dangerous. Feeling a different bruise every time I moved, I slowly dragged myself to my footpaws and started slowly towards the door in the chain link fence near the compactor. Even in my state, I could just recognize where I was, an abandoned lot that was dog-legged to my office. I made my way across the street, staggering, weaving back and forth. Just a little further. The street was like jello beneath me. Or was that my legs? Everything was tipping and bobbling like it was an earthquake. Is another macro behind me? I could see my office building door. There was somebody coming up the opposite way. The sound of rolling wheels told me he was on a skate board.

"Mr. Fang? Mike? Ah fuck, what happened to you?!"

"Cerberus? 'At you? Can't see straight..."

"Yeah, it's me. What happened to you, you look worse than a year of bad weather!"

"I w..." I just couldn't seem to get a complete thought out that night. It seemed more prudent to collapse on the spot.

This time I did dream, but it wasn't anything worth mentioning. Just my usual bizarre imagery, created by movies I've watched, books I've read, among other things. I clenched my eyes and slowly the world started sliding into focus. I was staring up at a familiar ceiling; my office. I winced hard and pushed myself into a sitting position. I

was laying on the leather couch against my office wall, something cold on my head; an ice bag. I heard the sound of the door opening, and unsteadily I yanked my gun free from my holster and started to turn towards it.

“Whoa, easy mate!” Cerb pushed the door shut. He had a plastic bag with what looked like all sorts of first aid stuff. I lowered my revolver and stuffed it back in the holster.

“Sorry. Thought you were one of the assholes come to finish me off.”

“S’alright, no harm done. There was an all-night pharmacy down the block, so I picked up some stuff to try and patch you back together.”

“Thanks.” I dipped my hand into the bag and pulled out a bottle of aspirin. I took a sizeable handful of painkillers, then slowly took off my holster and undid my shirt. Cerb apparently had taken my hat and coat off and hung it on the rack by my door. I looked down at my chest; it looked worse than it actually was, from my point of view. I was covered with bruises, several of them bleeding, but my bones weren’t broken from the feel of it, though one or two might’ve been cracked. The real pain was in my head, where I’d taken several bad blows. My head was still spinning; I’d probably taken a serious concussion from them. I prayed to God I didn’t have a brain hemorrhage. For the next half an hour I applied ointments, tied bandages, and filled in Cerberus on what the hell happened to me, since he was so curious.

“These anarchists sound like a real bunch of monsters,” Cerb said, rolling his skateboard back and forth with one footpaw. I nodded, now sitting at my desk. The aspirin was kicking in, and I was remembering more and more. My mind kept coming back to Pyro, that son of a bitch. My face was set in a deadly glare as I sat there, loading up my revolver, which until now I had forgotten was empty. I was done trying to play nice. I was done trying to follow the rules. I’d told myself that I’d never act like one of those dumb ass action hero types and go maverick, go outside the law, leave the police out of things, and act like the rules didn’t apply to me, unless I had no other alternative.

Well, it was looking that way now. There was no reasoning with these asshole anarchists. They weren’t going to see the error of their thinking, because they didn’t WANT to. They weren’t willing to listen to anybody, all they cared about was being right in their own minds and getting what they wanted.

Fuck reasoning with people like that. It’s a waste of time and breath. I’d encountered people like them often in my time, but now they were actually a threat to life and limb.

“Oh, by the way,” Cerb said, looking a touch uneasy by my behavior. “Have you seen Rachel?”

“Mmm?” I looked up, trying not to glare at the wolf like it was his fault. “No, can’t say I have.”

“It’s why I was comin’ by so late. She said she was going to come by to give you your ticket to the contest, but she never came back to the hotel.”

“Really? Well I didn’t...” It was then I noticed something unusual about my desk. My case book, the three ring binder I keep a record of all my work in, was out, sitting on the corner of my desk, and open. I looked down at the page it was open to, where I’d put in a copy of Pyro’s wanted poster, complete with reward for his capture.

“...Cerb, does Rachel know how to pick locks?”

“Yeah, it’s one of her numerous questionable hobbies.”

“Yeah, well I know how to do it too, but that’s beside the point. Would she be the type to snoop through other people’s things?”

“You’re joking, right? When she wanted to find out Snow’s real age, she didn’t bother to ask, she just broke into her desk and looked for her driver’s license.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“What?” Cerb looked up at me. I clenched my teeth a bit apprehensively.

“I think she’s gone after him?”

“Gone after...?” That’s when the wolf looked down at the poster with Pyro’s mug shot on it and the words: “\$20,000 for capture” underneath it.

“Ah fuck me! That’s all we bloody well need.” The wolf sighed and dropped back into his seat.

“Well, not to worry, really. She’ll probably wreck a building or two chasing him, wind up squashing the sod, and that’ll be the end of it.”

“I...don’t think so.” I said, flipping my revolver shut. “Pyro had four giants in his gang. I think he’d have a way to keep them under control.” Cerb now sat up straighter, fear starting to grow in his face.

“You think she’s in real danger?” I had trouble meeting the wolf’s gaze. I’d left out part of my case when I’d told him, but now I felt he should know just how deep Rachel was probably in. I took a breath and locked eyes with Cerberus.

“Pyro and his gang have raped two girls already.”

The wolf's eyes grew bigger than truck tires and his pupils shrank to the size of pin pricks. He bounded off the couch and grabbed me by the shoulders, making me twinge in pain.

“YOU MEAN MY GIRL’S OUT THERE TRYING TO FIND AN INSANE GANG OF MANIACS LED BY A RAPIST?!”

“That’s about the size of it.”

Cerberus grabbed his ears, threw back his head, and let out a lupine howl of misery. He then proceeded to pace a hole in my floor, jabbering like a tape recording being played at double speed, wringing his hands. I couldn’t make out everything he was saying, but some phrases I caught were “might be dead already”, “why does she have to do these things”, “can’t live without her” and “never forgive myself”. I can’t say that if I’d been in his position, I’d be acting any different. I swallowed another handful of aspirin and pushed myself out of my seat. I strapped my holster back on, retied my tie, and pulled on my coat and hat. Cerb brought his frantic panicking to a stop and looked at me.

“What’re you doing?”

“We’ve got two options,” I said, dropping the aspirin bottle into my coat pocket. “Either we can sit here and wait for the police to contact us and tell us what’s happened, or we can go find her. Which would you rather do?” The wolf looked to the side, and mulled it over for all of five seconds.

“Let’s go.”

The bike ahead of us tooled along the roads through a bad neighborhood. Cerb and I had gone back to the apartment building I’d seen one of the anarchist gang members going into and staked it out. It hadn’t been long before the punk beaver had shown himself and headed off for his evening of mayhem. I followed him, hoping that he would meet up with the rest of his gang first.

It looked like my hunch was right. I slowed down as the chopper headed down towards the end of a dead-end street near the docks. At the end was a mechanic’s garage that had been turned into a bar. A long line of motorcycles were parked out front. The beaver flipped his kickstand open and headed inside. I pulled up my car a ways down from the bar and stepped out, staring at the bar. I knew they had to have Rachel in there. Pyro wasn’t exactly big on keeping a low profile; there just weren’t many people who knew where he was that were eager to tell the cops. The ‘coon would have found him pretty easy if she went asking around in the bad parts of town, seeing as how unlike myself, she didn’t have a rep in this town for being a pain in the criminal element’s ass and she didn’t look like an undercover cop.

“So what do we do?” asked Cerb. The wolf was wired, ready to spring at a moment’s notice. I walked around to the back of my Thunderbird and popped the trunk. I had a rolling arsenal in the back, a collection of weapons I’d collected during various cases and from gun shows. All my pieces were licensed and registered, though. A true firearm enthusiast is nothing if not law-abiding. Anybody who isn’t is just a gun waving idiot.

“Kid,” I said, reaching in and pulling out a pistol-grip shot gun. “This is going to get ugly. I’m not going to lie to you. And real life criminal violence isn’t like you see in the movies, or on tv, or on video games. There’s a serious difference between using a plastic light gun and a real one, a difference between shooting some virtual bad guy and actually having to shoot a real person. It’s not fun. It’s not pleasant. But sometimes it’s a very unfortunate necessity. Because these bastards would kill you or your girlfriend without so much as a second thought.”

“Well they might try, but as you’ve noticed, I’m a bit...resilient.”

I regarded Cerberus with a searching look. “Cerb, as soon as they saw you could come back from a bullet, they’d soak you with gas and burn you to ashes.”

“Ahh, okay, that...I’m not sure I’d survive. There’s always been some part of me left to reform.”

“Right. Or they’d soak you in battery acid and watch you melt or...fuck, I don’t know, but they’d find a way. So, that being the case....,” I let out a breath and reached into my trunk. I pulled out a Kimber .45 automatic and handed it to him with three reload clips.

“You ever shot one of these before?”

“Can’t be too hard,” said the wolf, giving the gun a twirl like he was in a Western. He managed to drop the gun and we both jerked back, afraid it would go off. When it didn’t, I growled and snatched the gun off the ground and shook it at him, holding it by the barrel.

“This is NOT A TOY. You can KILL somebody with this. Treat it with respect, or DON’T TOUCH IT.” I then offered it back to him. Cerb looked hesitant, but took the gun once more and tucked it into his back pocket, using his belt to keep it secure.

“Good. Now here’s how to aim: you hold it so the front blade is in the notch on the back blade and the top is even with top on the back blade. Put whatever you want to shoot on top of the front blade, and squeeze the trigger.” I demonstrated with my revolver, then hung it back up and strapped my shot gun into the spot in my coat where I’d sewn in straps to hold it in place. I loaded ammo into an inside pocket in my trench coat as well. Shutting the trunk, I let out a breath and turned to Cerberus.

The wolf pulled the gun from his back pocket, checked the clip, checked the slide, and put it back.

I nodded. “Let’s go.”

Rachel wasn't saying anything. At least nothing audible from the basement window. Cerb and I had snuck around back of the bar, trying to get a better idea of what we were about to walk into. Pyro had the 'coon downstairs, handcuffed to a metal folding chair. Crates of beer and liquor, old chairs and tables, and other odd and ends filled the basement. The coyote was swigging from a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels, sneering in a sadistically amused manner. I could just see Rachel's expression in a grimy mirror in one corner. She looked like she wanted to stomp Pyro flat, and would, if it weren't for the four other punks leveling various guns on her. Pyro had probably ordered them to gun her down if she started growing.

“Please, I wouldn’t touch you with a five meter pole. I just want the reward on your head.”

“We’re too big to squeeze through this thing,” I said. “Plus, all that shooting would get the attention of the other gang members. We wouldn’t be able to escape, we’d be trapped down there. The window’s too high up for any of us to reach.”

“Well if we give Rachel a chance, she’ll just upsize and squash the lot of ‘em.”

“How much do you want to bet they’d shoot her enough times before she got too big? Besides, how’d Pyro catch her like this in the first place?”

“By the way honey,” the coyote said, looking at the side of her neck. “How’re the drugs we shot you up with? When you showed up at my apartment and started growin’, the first five shots were from a tranq gun to put you out. The sixth one was a little home concocted brew a drug dealer friend of mine cooked up that’s got a real neat affect on people like you; makes it so you can’t get it up for a while, know what I mean?”

“Oh, you mean like you in bed?” Rachel smirked. Pyro’s grin fell and he backhanded her. Cerb started to pull his gun, but I grabbed his wrist; shooting the coyote right now would have made more trouble than it ended.

“Listen sugar,” the coyote shook a finger at the ‘coon “I may not know how long it’ll take that drug to wear off, but I’ve still got more than enough guns here to put you out of MY misery if you start to cause trouble, so watch your mouth!”

“Sod off you wanker!” Rachel spit in his face. Pyro snarled.

“Alright, you’re startin’ to really push my buttons!” The coyote went over to a shelf on the wall and picked up a blowtorch with an instant-light button. Blue flame shot up from the torch. He then stormed back over to Rachel, grabbed one of her ankles, and lifted up her leg so it was straight out in front of her.

“I know how much you macros love to stomp on stuff, so how about I burn the bottoms of your paws until you can’t walk anymore?” Rachel’s toes curled and it looked like she was starting to wimper as he taunted her by waving the blow torch ever closer to her paws.

“Okay, we can’t wait any longer,” I said. “time to play it Boggart.”

“What’s that mean?” Cerb asked, following me as I marched toward the front.

“Means we go right in the front door like it’s nothing.” I pulled my cell phone from my belt. I dialed up the police and asked for Det. Hausvich, the dragon I’d met at the hospital. After he was filled in, Hausvich said he’d get a S.W.A.T team together and have them at the bar in ten minutes.

“See you then,” I said. But we weren’t going to wait. Ten minutes was far too long. I looked at the front of the bar, let out a breath and made the sign of the cross.

God, watch over us on this one. ‘Cause there’s no way in hell we’re going to pull this off without Your help.

I pushed open the door to the bar. The interior was set up with a couple pool tables towards the back, most of the round tables set up on the left with a dart board and

neon light signs littering the wall. The bar was directly on the right, a rather nervous bartender setting up shot glasses for the three or so punks at the bar. There were about ten or so anarchists altogether, including the two at the back of the bar standing like guards by the door marked "BASEMENT". They weren't very good guards, though; there were beer bottles next to them and they looked like they were working on pretty good benders.

Almost immediately everyone noticed myself and Cerb. I glanced left and right, then walked up to the bar. I wasn't about to give these guys an excuse any of them could use later in court; they were gonna have to be the ones to draw first. Cerb stood with his back to the bar, keeping an eye on the majority of the punks. Right at the bar were two familiar faces; that gopher who'd given me lip at the biker store and the hare with the buck teeth who'd played electrician with my rib cage. Both stared at me like they couldn't believe I'd shown myself there.

The german shepherd next to me I didn't know, and he didn't know me either. I ordered a double shot of bourbon, which the 'tender set down in front of me. I motioned for him to lean closer.

"If I were you, I'd step outside for the next fifteen or so minutes." I gave him a knowing look over my sunglasses. The 'tender nodded, and quickly scooted out the door behind the bar. Sitting next to me, the shepherd chuckled.

"Sure you ain't in the wrong place, Inspector Gadget?" He snickered. I granted him a sideways glance.

"I hate it when people call me that, so shut your fucking mouth." I tossed back the bourbon as the guy stood up off his stool.

"Oh really? Well shit bait, how 'bout you MAKE ME?" The cur pulled a switch blade from his leather jacket and flicked it open. Show time.

"Fine," I said, and slammed an elbow into his face. His head snapped back and I grabbed the beer bottle off the bar in front of him and smashed it over his head, dropping him to the floor. I saw his two compatriots at the bar reaching behind their backs. I didn't hesitate a second, I yanked out my revolver and cocked the hammer. The second I saw the black automatic in the gopher's hands, I leveled on him.

"DROP IT!"

He didn't. I pulled the trigger and sent a hydra shock hollow point right into his chest, the bullet putting a massive hole in his torso, hurling him to the floor and making the hare duck for cover. I heard two reports from behind me as Cerb drew his own piece and shot into the crowd of five or so thugs at the tables. They each had some kind of gun of their own, but instinctively took cover when the wolf fired at them. That gave us the precious few seconds we needed to take cover behind the bar.

“Mother FUCKERS!”

“Gonna fucking kill you!”

“WACK ‘EM!”

Bullets of varying calibers started smashing into the bar, leaving pock marks and splinters. Several heavy thuds and racking sounds told us that one of the thugs had a shot gun, which he used to smash the mirror above the bar, raining shards of broken reflective glass down on us. I could feel the sting of several shards cut my hands and the bridge of my muzzle. I glanced over at Cerb; the wolf withdrew a big shard that had stuck into his back like a knife stuck into a cutting board without even blinking. I guess after all the times he’s been mauled and mutilated, a piece of glass in the back isn’t going to phase him much.

I slid to the edge of the bar. Waiting for a lull when most of the punks were reloading, I stepped out from behind the bar in a crouch and drew a bead on a gryphon slamming a clip into a Glock. One shot and he went down; alive or dead I couldn’t say, but he was definitely out of the action. I juke back behind the bar as more shots came my way. Cerb was playing it smart and staying down behind the bar, putting his hand up over the edge to shoot at them. Suddenly, somebody grabbed his wrist and dragged him over the bar! I started to climb over myself, but Lester the hare met me face-to-face and shoved me back over, pinning me on the floor on my back.

“Gonna do you MY way, fucker!” He had a pistol in one hand, but was firing up his cattle prod in the other. He made a stab at me with it, but I twisted my torso out of the way and it hit the floor. I grabbed the hare’s shirt and pulled myself as high up as I could, then swung my revolver at his head. The heavy steel gun connected with his face, shattering his oversized buck teeth.

“GAAAH! MY TEETH! YOU SHIT!” The hare dropped his cattle prod and clapped a hand to his face, screaming in pain. He brought around his pistol, but I already had my gun jammed right up against his face. One pull on the trigger, and most of the left upper quarter of his skull was blown away. Lester’s body dropped onto me. I grunted in disgust at getting an up-close-and-personal look at the damage and shoved it off me. What was left of his face had an incredibly surprised look on it, now staring directly at his prod.

“Shocking, isn’t it?” I said, getting up. Cerb was on his back, the beaver pulling out a switch blade and trying to push it down on his throat, the wolf grabbing his arms and pushing against him. His other gang members egging him on, the buck-toothed, rough tailed rodent was baring all his teeth at Cerb, a look on his face that suggested he was hopped up on drugs.

“Die you little twerp!”

I started to draw a bead on the beaver, but needn't have bothered. The wolf slammed a foot into the beaver's crotch, then shoved him against another table. Cerb dropped to his paws and leveled his .45. The beaver snarled, bringing around his own gun. He never got a chance to get a shot off. The wolf put three slugs into his chest, dropping the beaver against the table, which turned over as he fell dead.

"I'm through being kicked around by asshole shits like you." The wolf said flatly.

The sound of a shot gun cocking filled the air. A heavy set fox with neon purple died hair thrust his weapon forward at Cerberus.

"Eat this sucka!" A shot gun report echoed loudly through the air. But it wasn't the fox's. I stood in front of the bar after having vaulted over the side, drawn my own shot gun, and put a load of shot into the vulpine. He dropped. My face set, I racked in another shell.

"Who else wants it?"

The remaining anarchists looked at both Cerb and myself. Then they all bolted for the basement door, slamming and locking it behind them.

"Shit!" I snarled. Now they were holed up down there with Rachel. We were gonna have to blast our way in, from the looks of it. I started towards the basement door, Cerb right behind me. Without warning, it flew open, Pyro at the top of the stairs, thrusting an Uzi forward.

"GET DOWN!" I ducked behind one of the pool tables and Cerb dove behind an overturned table. 9mm rounds came rocketing at us at a dozen a second. 9mm is a real sissy caliber, but when there's over fifty of them coming at you with one pull of a trigger, it's plenty dangerous. The coyote kicked over a table as another member of his gang came up the stairs, wielding two pistols. I jumped up, giving him just enough time to fire two poorly aimed shots before I hit him with a shot gun blast that sent him back down the stairs.

I cocked the shot gun and marched towards the coyote's hiding spot. There was a righteous fire blazing in my chest, and I wasn't about to let a little thing like my own neck concern me when it came to bringing these bastards down. Still, I did have a healthy dose of self concern, which is why I duck and rolled to the side when the coyote came up, blasting away with his machine gun, sending a river of bullets across the floor and up the wall.

"Hold it Fang!" The coyote stood up. I hadn't realized it before, 'cause he'd turned sideways so quickly, but now it was apparent.

Pyro had Rachel. His arm underneath hers and bent at the elbow. A Beretta was clenched in his hand, screwed up underneath Rachel's chin. The 'coon looked otherwise unharmed, walking without any apparent pain, but she looked very uneasy about being held at gunpoint by a sadistic, maniacal freak like Pyro.

"Get the FUCK outa my way, or I'll fucking kill her!" The 'coon was breathing hard. She desperately looked like she wanted to upsize on the freak and crush him, but she couldn't risk him capping her before she could get big enough.

I stuck the shot gun back under my coat and drew my revolver; if I had to, I'd take the shot, but I didn't want to risk it.

"Let her go, Pyro."

"Oh get the fuck real! You just stay the hell outta my way!" The coyote still had his uzi trained on me. "You've been a real fucking pain, dickwad. So now me, and my girl here are goin' on a little trip."

"Like hell you are," I snarled. I wasn't about to let him get away. The coyote was edging towards the bar, lifting up the gate. Once he was out that side door, we'd never see him again. And I doubted we'd see Rachel, either.

"Get the FUCK BACK!" Pyro hollered, pushing his uzi forward more as I pulled up my revolver and drew a bead on his ugly head.

"Don't even think about it, mutt, or I'LL BLOW THE GIRL'S FUCKING BRAINS OUT!"

"OVER MY DEAD BODY!" Pyro jerked around to see who'd yelled at him. Cerb kicked off a vending machine near the front of the bar on his skateboard. He did a jump and landed on the bar, shooting down the polished wood, knocking shattered beer bottles and fragmented shot glasses off along the way. Pyro turned towards the wolf, started to raise up his uzi. The wolf did a jump, sailing over the bullets as he pulled his skateboard out from under himself. Pyro's eyes bugged out of his head and Rachel shoved herself free from him as Cerberus raised up his board with both hands and brought it smashing down on the coyote's head. The gang leader crumpled to the floor like wet cardboard. Cerb dusted himself off, glaring down at the coyote.

"Keep your filthy hands of my girl, you disgusting shit." Rachel came running up to Cerb, jumped up, wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his shoulders, and planted a long kiss right on his lips. It took a full ten seconds for her to break her lip lock on him and give him a sultry look.

"My hero." Cerb gave the 'coon a rougish grin.

"You know it, love."

This touching moment was ruined by a heavy thud from a shot gun. I felt the hot sting of buck shot as a piece of it got me in the hip. I snarled in pain as my previous wounds began to ache anew. I spun around and fired off a fast shot at the basement door.

“We’re not out of this yet!” Rachel got down from Cerb as he fired off a few shots of his own. The punks didn’t have the balls to come up from the basement yet, but they had enough to shoot from the darkened stairwell. I kept the door covered and turned to the reunited couple.

“Go! I’ll keep them busy!” The two wasted no time in running, and good thing too. A gila monster covered in “bling” came charging up the stairs, gun thrust forward. I greeted him with a revolver smashed across his face, a kick to the stomach, and a shove back towards the stairs. I saw a gun coming forward in the dark and fired off my last two rounds. I emptied the casings and dropped in more from a speed loader as I took cover behind a pool table once more.

“Run you pussy, run!” I heard a voice from the stairwell jeering. “You haven’t heard the last of us!” I looked up, anger rising like a thunderstorm in my mind. He though all the chaos, the vandalism, the beatings, the killing, the raping, it was going to keep on going.

I drew my shot gun again and fully loaded it.

“Oh yes I have,” I snarled. I stood up from behind the pool table. Marching forward, I went right up to the doorway, looked down at the three or four gang members crouched down in it, guns ready. I said nothing, did nothing, just stared at them for a few seconds. Then I spoke.

“You’ve got one chance. Drop ‘em NOW.”

They all started to point their guns at me.

“Bad move.” I raised up my shot gun and fired shell after shell. One thug dropped immediately. The back two raced back downstairs. The third fired a shot at me and caught me in the shoulder, but I caught him right back and sent him staggering back downstairs, howling in pain.

I let out a slow breath. My shot gun was out. I stuck it back in my coat, all my aches and pains coming to life as adrenaline drained from my system. Now, it was over. I leaned against one of the pool tables and looked upward.

“Thank you God.” As I slowly walked toward the front of the shattered bar, I could see red and blue lights rotating in the windows. The police. I hung up all my guns and slowly pushed open the door, shielding my eyes from the light.

“Hold it!”

“Get your hands up!”

“Put your hands on your head!”

“On the ground, now!”

I couldn't believe it. After all that, and now they were gonna treat me like a perp. Police, sometimes they're the heroes, sometimes they're really idiots. I was too tired to argue, so I put my hands up.

“You mind if I stay standing? My knees hurt.”

“Don't MOVE,” said one officer of about fifteen that'd shown up. There was a S.W.A.T van and three patrol cars there, uniformed officers swarming around, police issue weapons all leveled at me. The officer closest to me came up and started to pat me down.

“You got any weapons?”

“Yep, several.” The officer began to disarm me as the S.W.A.T team stormed the bar, sounds of arrests being made echoing from inside; it hadn't taken them long to find the remains of the anarchist gang.

Then the ground shook. I looked up. Coming around the corner was a huge domestic cat. A gray, white-tipped tail swished behind her as she looked around, the evening breeze blowing her white, purple-highlighted hair. She was dressed in a purple dress shirt with a black stomach-bearing top underneath. Light pink slacks covered her lower half, with a black leather belt with a buckle that had a cat's paw print on it.

“Holy mother of God,” I sighed. I rolled my eyes up exasperatedly at the new macro as the cops all whirled around and stared up at her in fear.

“You want a piece of me, lady?” I muttered under my breath. “Well get in line...” Just then, Cerberus and Rachel appeared from the alleyway where they were hiding. Cerb looked up and waved.

“Hi mum!” The cat looked down, and relief washed over her face as she started shrinking down to a less intimidating size, running towards the two.

“Oh thank Heavens! I've been worried sick about you two!”

“Sorry Snow...,”

“Yeah, sorry...”

“What have you two been doing over here?! I knock on your door one morning and find a note in Rachel’s room “Dear Snow, gone to America, be back in a couple weeks, hugs and kisses, Rachel and Cerb”. Would it have killed you to call me?! Or sent a letter?! I’ve been going out of my mind with worry about you two!”

Oh yeah, she was their surrogate mother, all right.

“Well it’s okay mum, we’re not hurt or anything.”

“Well that’s a relief. But what’s all this then?! Police, S.W.A.T, what’s going on? What were you two doing, running around in this city unsupervised?”

“Oh we weren’t unsupervised,” said Rachel.

“Yeah, he’s been looking after us,” said Cerb, pointing towards me. Snow looked my way just as I was handcuffed and being shoved up against the hood of a squad car for further patting down. The cat hung her head and slapped a hand over her eyes.

“Oh, wonderful.”

NOT my proudest moment.

The holding cell cot I was laying on with my hands behind my head wasn’t all uncomfortable. But I would’ve preferred at that moment to have been at home, nursing my still aching wounds and maybe a stiff drink. Stripped of all the contents of my pockets, I waited for my court appointed attorney to show up and tell me more about the bullshit charges against me. I’d been arrested for a number of things; discharging a firearm, assault, assault with a deadly weapon, reckless endangerment, even manslaughter. It was all a tissue of lies spun by the anarchists we hadn’t killed, but society doesn’t look kindly on gun owners in America. I wondered what happened to Cerberus and Rachel. They may have been “kids”, but by their ages in the eyes of the law they were grown up enough to stand trial.

“Mr. Fang, you’ve got a visitor.”

I tilted my fedora up with one thumb and looked. It was Cerberus’s mother, Snow.

“Miss ahhh...” I snapped my fingers, trying to recall her name. “...Miss Snow, correct?”

“Actually, it’s Ms. Rendell, but you can call me Snow.” The guard opened the cell door so the cat could come in, closing it behind her.

“You have half an hour. I’ll be down the hall if you need me.” The guard’s footsteps echoed away.

“Well, what brings you out here at this hour, ma’me?” I said, sitting up on my cot, wincing at my still bruised physique.

“Are you alright?” she said, sitting down on the other end of the cot.

“Oh, I’m okay,” I said, rubbing at my side. “The jail doctor saw me, gave me some painkillers, said I’d live but he was amazed I’d been able to do what I did after taking a beating. Also saw the jail priest, got to make a confession, which felt a bit needed.”

“Well, if half of what Cerberus said is true, I’d say you were probably justified in most of what you did.”

“He’s told you his side of things, eh?”

“Indeed, and I wanted to thank you for looking out for the two lost members of my rag tag herd of troublemakers. At first I thought to myself “hey, fine, they want to go get themselves in trouble in America, let them learn the hard way”. Then I began thinking about just what that might mean; police, national guard, prison, and that was just for starters.”

“Yes, this country’s nice, but don’t make problems for the authorities. ‘specially after 9/11.”

“Quite. And while I’m not the perfect parent in the least, I do care about my charges. And when Cerb told me what that gang leader was going to do to Rachel...and what else he might have done...”

I nodded. “Not a problem. I wasn’t about to let them hurt anybody anymore. Least of all your kids. Also, from what Cerberus and Rachel told me, I’d say you’re doing your best in a very difficult situation; being a young mother to three, no that’s right you got another one, four teenagers.”

“Mmm. Well, in any case, I want to repay you for your generosity. I was wondering, what’s your case look like?

“You mean my legal case? Well my court appointed ambulance chaser says that it’s going to be hell, but he might be able to get me off with five years.”

“WHAT?! They had a HOSTAGE!”

“Yep, but he says that I should have just called the police and let them handle it.”

“Just call the police?! And wait around while they got their jollies with Rachel?!”

“According to him, a “mere citizen” has no right to try and enforce the law.”

“...oh, this is crap. I’m taking your case.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m an, as you so delightfully put it, ambulance chaser myself.”

“Really? Um, but, no offense, you’re an English lawyer.”

“True, but I studied American law in school. They’re fairly similar. Besides that, I think I can get the...oh what’s the American term for the people making the accusations...the plaintiffs to drop the charges.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes. Just leave everything to me.”

Those words were still rattling around in my head the next morning when the jailer came around, keys scraping in the lock of my cell door.

“You’re free to go, Mr. Fang.” I sat bolt upright.

“I’m WHAT?!”

“You’re free to go. That Ms. Rendell, after she took your case, went out and found an eye witness that corroborated your story. Seems the bartender had been watching the whole thing from the door of the bar. Plus several of the gang members that didn’t get killed suddenly were willing to turn state’s evidence to prove your innocence.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nah. Funny thing,” The jailer turned out to be talkative, leaning up against the wall as I stepped out of the cell. “They were being held at the prison hospital pending incarceration for trial. In the middle of the night, two of them started hollering for their phone calls to their lawyers, saying they wanted to make a deal for testimony. Never knew why, but they did find some strange giant paw prints in the parking lot just outside their room windows...what’s so funny?”

“Nothing, nothing,” I said with an irrepressible grin. I figured I’d let Snow get away with this; it was one time when bending the rules was actually more right than going by the law books.

I was out in only a few hours, all my possessions returned to me, even my guns. No matter how much the gun haters may whine, when you've got five people willing to say it was self defense, there's little arguing it. Out in the jail lobby, I was met by not just Snow, Rachel, and Cerberus, but by D.A. Yancy.

"Thanks a lot," I said, shaking Snow's hand.

"Hey, it was the least I could do." She said with a smile. I turned to D.A. Yancy.

"Sorry things got so violent, but I did get you your perp."

"Indeed you did, Mr. Fang," Yancy said, his hands behind his back. "You and your friend here did a fine job. We'll be sending you your payment promptly."

"Payment?" said Rachel "Are we going to get a cut?"

"Rachel!" Snow hissed at her, cuffing her upside the head, "You don't need to be worrying about money right now!"

"Well actually we do have that contest to get to later this week," said Cerb.

"Yes, yes, you can enter the contest to try and win enough money to pay for your damages," said Snow. "And if you don't, then you can stay here and flip burgers until your fifty." I chuckled and looked at Cerberus incredulously. He gave me a sad gaze back.

"Don't laugh, she means it."

"Damn," I muttered. "Well don't worry, I've also got the money from the government. When that comes in, if you don't win the contest, I'll pay for the damages. You kids have been through enough...Um, Mr. Yancy..." I'd just noticed the gorilla was biting at his lower lip. "...is there something bothering you?"

"I...have some bad news about the case against Pyro..."

.....
"NOT GUILTY?!" My voice echoed in the plaza leading up to the courthouse. "This has got to be a joke. No, it's not a joke because it's not funny, it's a damn nightmare!"

"I have to agree, Mr. Fang," said the gorilla, walking beside me. Cerb and family were also with us, equally fit to be tied.

"Mr. Yancy," said Snow, "Is this bloody LEGAL? How did your office agree to such a plea?!"

“It wasn’t my decision, I assure you. Though I take full responsibility for it. One of my assistants is a heavy reformationist; she believes that all criminals can be rehabilitated, that prison is a bad place to do it in, and that most criminal actions are due to mental problems and deep seated trauma.”

“Wait wait wait,” I said, turning to Yancy. “You mean he won on a plea of not guilty by INSANITY?! Pyro isn’t insane, he’s EVIL!”

“I agree,” sighed the gorilla. “But my assistant begged me to put her on the case. I should have known, she’s doing this to try and make a landmark case for her cause. She thinks that a year in a mental institute will help Pryo break his criminal tendencies through psychiatric care.” I was ready to have a fit right there on the courthouse steps. Just then, a slew of news reporters came charging up the steps past us. Up ahead, I could see Pyro standing next to his personal lawyer, looking smug and cocky.

“You bastard...” I snarled. I saw both Snow and Rachel start to grow to reach Yancy’s height. The gorilla put a hand on both their shoulders.

“Not a good idea you two. If you kill him now, it’ll be murder and there will be hell to pay. And the national guard is already on alert for troublemaking macros.” The girls looked at each other and sighed, shrinking back down. The crowd was slowly making their way down the marble steps of the courthouse towards us. As some of the news crews caught sight of us, they came running forward, putting forth questions. Yancy stepped in front of Snow and her kids and fielded the questions like a veteran interviewee. As for myself, I just ignored them and glared at Pyro. The coyote locked eyes with me and smirked.

“Better luck next time, heh heh heh.”

I glared at him hard. “Oh, yeah, and you better believe there’ll be a next time.” Everybody else seemed to go silent. “ ‘Cause I’m gonna be waiting for you. And when you get out, you step out of line for an instant, and I’m gonna be there. And that next time will be the LAST.”

“You wanna threaten me, wimp?!” The coyote balled up his fists and made like he was going to march down the steps and try to kick my ass. I was ready to march up the steps and REALLY kick HIS ass. But with Yancy holding me back and Pyro’s lawyer holding him, we were pulled apart, snarling and yelling obscenities at each other.

“Well, you win some, you lose some.” I sighed. “Just gotta stay strong and keep fightin’ the good fight.” It was getting onto dusk as I sat in my office, filling out reports and doing paperwork. I’d written several stories based on my notes from what I’d been through, making some phone calls to get quotes for each of them. After all the emails I sent to Hugh, the editor would probably owe me over a thousand bucks.

“Story of our lives,” said Cerb, sitting on my couch. Rachel lay across it with her footpaws in his lap, grinning with a bit of a dreamy look on her face. The wolf was giving her a paw massage, and I couldn’t help but wonder what thoughts were running through his mind, given the likelihood that he’d been squashed probably a good number of times by those very appendages.

“Well, it’s about time to go. You ready?” I stood up, pulling on my coat.

“As I’ll ever be,” said the wolf, sliding out from under Rachel and collecting his skateboard. “I’ve certainly practiced enough. But now...the pressure’s on.”

“Yeah, I hear ya. Oh hey, I got this for ya.” I reached behind my desk and pulled something out of a bag and tossed it to Cerb. It was a leather vest with the Union Jack on the back.

“Thanks mate! Heh, how do I look, Rachel?” He slid it on as the ‘coon stood up and stretched.

“Stylish and patriotic at the same time,” she said, giving him a playful little punch in the arm. The drive over was a bit of a problem. We hit unexpected traffic, and so by the time we showed up, Cerb’s last opponent was already finishing up his routine. We ran through the turnstile, under the filled-to-capacity bleachers. Flood lights lit up the empty pool where the competition was being held like it was daytime. TV crews and reporters dotted the crowd; this event was BIG. Cerb was breathing a bit hard as we got to the contestant’s entry stairwell. A crocodile with an outfit covered with endorsement patches was heading down the steps. He spotted Cerberus.

“Good luck man, you’ll need it.”

“Oh boy,” the wolf sighed. Rachel rubbed his shoulder.

“Just take it easy now, Cerb, you’ll do fine!”

“Yeah, it shouldn’t be that hard,” I said. “Now there are five judges, each one grades you out of ten points. Your score shows up there...” I pointed at a lighted billboard over the skating pit.

“You just gotta do better than...” I looked at the other skater’s scores: 34, 28, 33, and 44.

“...44.”

“I’m fucked.”

“Hey, Cerb!” Dylan came hopping up, with Snow right behind her. “Just wanted to say good luck man. And seriously, I think you’re gonna win this. I watched, and none of these guys pulled off any tricks like you’ve been.”

“Heheh, right, thanks, hope so...” Cerb turned to Snow.

“Well...” she said.

“Well...” he said.

“Well,” I said, “this is touching.” They both glared at me and I put my hands up defensively.

“Well it’s about time,” said Snow. The cat looked a bit out of sorts. “Um..I know I don’t act like much of a mother most of the time, but...I just wanted you to know that you doing this to try and make amends for the mistakes you and Rachel made is...really mature of you. I’m...I’m very proud of you.”

“Aw, thanks mum.” Cerberus said, hugging the cat.

“AND NOW FOR OUR LAST CONTESTANT OF THE EVENING, FROM GREAT BRITIAN....CERBERUS!”

“That’s my cue!” The wolf reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of wraparound mirror shades.

“Show ‘em how it’s done!” I yelled after him. The crowd went into applause as Cerb climbed the steps and put his board down. He put both hands into the air in double peace signs.

“ON YOUR MARK....GET SET.....GO!!!!” The announcer blatted an air horn and a heavy thumping techno beat came from the overhead speakers. Snow, Dylan, Rachel, and I crowded around the edge of the rim since the seats were all full. Cerb was skating around and around in the empty pool, picking up speed. Then for his first trick, he did a grind around the entire rim of the pool. Keeping his weight low, the wolf tipped back into the pool and started doing more circles. He had five minutes to show off as many tricks as he could. Picking up more speed, Cerb shot up the rim and went into “The Twister”. The audience cheered louder, and I could have been mistaken, but I was sure I saw the wolf’s smile getting bigger. He was up in the air on the other side in an instant, doing “The Ferris Wheel”. The crowd was now screaming loud enough to beat the music.

The wolf came down again, racing around so fast he was practically a blur. Time was running down on him, so he shot up and did “The Discus”. Camera flashes went off like fireworks; the wolf was going to be a media star come the next day. Another shot down the side of the pool. Time enough to pick up speed and do one more trick.

Cerberus was a lupine blur racing around, blasting off like a rocket up the side of the pool. He kicked with his footpaws and sent his board shooting up into the air past him. The wolf tucked into a summersault, twirling end over end, then uncurled and went into a spin like a top, looking for all the world like an acrobat on the uneven bars at the Olympics. His board went shooting down past him and he came out of his twirl, dropped out of the air, and landed on his board. He came to a stop on two wheels in the center of the pool, thrusting his hands up.

The crowd EXPLODED. Every person in the stands was on their footpaws, roaring applause for Cerberus. The judges were conferring amidst the deafening roar, which only got a second wind when they put up Cerb's score, a 46!

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, OUR WINNER: CERBERUS!" The crowd started chanting his name as the wolf was led up the steps to a platform with the X-Treme Board Co. logo on it. He stood on the platform as the judges placed a gold medal around his neck in the shape of a skater on a skateboard. Cerberus beamed out at the crowd as more cameras flashed.

And that was when the "X" in the billboard for the skateboard company over Cerb's head came loose and dropped on him, knocking him flat on his back, out cold.

Like I said, life can never stand it when you get a break.

The sun was shining the next day as I stood out at the pier. Cerberus and I were waiting for Rachel and Snow to come out of the bathroom.

"Well, is everything taken care of?" he asked. I nodded.

"Yeah, all the checks have been mailed off. Did your bank confirm that the remainder of the money made it to your account?"

"Yeah, it's all good."

"Good, good. Oh, got a couple things for you."

"Ah mate, really, you didn't have to."

"Nah, it was no big deal." I handed Cerb a copy of a newspaper I'd picked up. The photo of him pulling off the discus move was on the front, with the headline "CINDERELLA STORY: ENGLISH WOLF TAKES SKATING CHAMPIONSHIP". The wolf chuckled, rubbing his medal and smirking.

"Ah, this'll look great once it's framed."

“Gah, there’ll be no living with him after this,” Snow’s voice came from out of the bathroom. “Once championship and he thinks he’s king.”

“I’m just gonna get it framed, mum! Bloody hell...”

“Watch your language!”

“Yes mum...” I smirked and shook my head. “Oh, and one other thing.” I lowered my voice, turning to the duffel bag I’d brought with me. I unzipped it to reveal two dozen bottles labeled “Growth Spurt”.

Cerb’s eyes shot open and he started to say something, but I quickly motioned for him to keep it down.

“I found it online,” I said. “Here,” I dug in my pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “This’s their web site. You run out, you can order more. But keep it a secret!” He nodded, grinning and stuffing the paper in his pocket.

“Well are we all ready?” Snow and Rachel stepped out of the bathroom. They’d changed into swim suits.

“Yep, all set!” Cerb shouldered the duffel bag.

“What’s that?” Snow said, pointing to it.

“Oh, some free stuff I got with winning the contest.”

“Ah, I see. Well since you’re carrying that, can you hang on to our stuff too on the way, since you’re going to be on top.”

“Sure mum.” The wolf took two more duffel bags from the cat and the ‘coon.

“So, you’re going to swim back, eh?” I said, crossing my arms.

“Saves us loads on travel expenses,” said Rachel, pinning her hair back with a scrunchie.

“Heh, good for you. Well, it’s been a slice you guys.”

“That it has,” said Cerb. “You’re ever in England, look us up.”

“Same here,” I said, “Though next time you decide to come for a visit, do me a favor and call ahead of time? That way I can warn the authorities.” We had a laugh over that. I shook hands with each of them, thanking them for their help over the past few days. Though when I got to Rachel, immediately after I started checking my pockets.

“Ah c’mon mate,” she said. “You don’t think I’d do it to you now, do you?”

“Ahem,” Cerb said. He reached into the ‘coon’s duffel and pulled out a pda. MY pda.

“Aheh,” she said as I took it back, giving her a wry grin. “Force of habit.”

“Heh. Cerb, you keep an eye on her.”

“Heh, you got it, mate. See you around!” Rachel and Snow hopped over the railing of the pier, diving into the water. There was a bit of silence, then suddenly two massive ladies emerged from the water, sending up a tidal wave that made Cerberus and myself dodge back from the edge. The wolf stepped onto the top of Rachel’s head. I waved to them as they swam off into the horizon, slowly growing smaller in the distance.

I let out a breath and turned after they were gone. Slowly walking down the pier, coat and tie shifting in the wind, I looked to the side as I got to the sidewalk. Suddenly, two fire trucks, three ambulances, and six police cars sped past me, all of them with lights going like crazy.

I stood stark still for a moment. I looked down the road the emergency vehicles had just gone. I shook my head and turned to go the other way. I got ten steps, then stopped. I sighed, reaching into my pocket and pulling out my digital camera and hanging it around my neck. I also checked to make sure my revolver was ready and loaded.

“After whatever this is,” I said. “I’m going on vacation.”

CAST

Character.....	Copyright
Mike Fang.....	His player
Cerberus.....	His player
Rachel.....	Cerberus
Snow Rendel.....	Cerberus
Rhodes Lucas.....	Cerberus
Syberus “Ice Wolf” Atten.....	His player
Vincent Kalosoan.....	His player
Rosie.....	Yiffer
Sach Flan.....	His player
Dylan.....	His player