

THE MORNING AFTER

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A vacation, by most people's standards, is supposed to be relaxing. It's a chance to rest and recoup from a steady, daily grind. It's a time to enjoy oneself and follow a hobby, finish a project, and just have a less stressful time.

My vacation...was anything BUT the above. Well, maybe that's a little harsh, but not far from the truth. There were parts I enjoyed, but most of the time, it was a major headache. And even the memory of it, which is painfully vivid, makes me reach for the aspirin.

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It started when my puddle jumper touched down at a small airport I was familiar with. The engine whined and died like an overheating fan. The stewardesses' smile was held painfully in place; I could see her true feelings behind her face, clear as day in her eyes. "God, just get me to the crew's lounge" they said. I couldn't say I blamed her; two hours in a flying metal cigar case so narrow I had to stoop my shoulders to get out wasn't my idea of fun either. And she'd had to endure the whole thing strapped into that chair at the front of the cabin that looked like an ejection seat. As I approached the gangway to the terminal, I held my briefcase to my chest like I was afraid someone was going to snatch it from me. It was the only way to keep from slamming it into about a dozen different passengers who looked just as cramped and mangled as I felt.

I emerged from the gangway into the terminal with everybody else, feeling like a member of a herd of cattle going up the ramp to a barn. The fact that three of the passengers were bulls didn't help dissuade me from the mental image, either. The terminal was a small one, sparsely crowded outside of the folks that just got off the plane. As I broke from the herd, I set down my briefcase, stood up, and popped my back joints, clenching my face and grimacing as I worked my ever-so stiff vertebrae back into place.

"What's the matter," a voice behind me said, "don't you like being curled up like a pretzel after being body probed by security and run a gauntlet through ticket lines?" I smirked and turned around. A fox with a bandanna, tie-dyed t-shirt, and ripped up jeans came down the ramp behind me; the all-too chatty passenger I'd had to joy to sit next to during the flight. I smirked.

"Oh sure, I think it's the best thing since sliced bread. They ought to charge us extra and call the seating method in those planes contortionist lessons." The fox made a comical shushing gesture.

"Careful! The airlines might be listening."

“Heh, yeah,” I grabbed my briefcase. “Don’t wanna give ‘em ideas.” I made my way down the low-pile carpeted hallway, the walls tastefully decorated with advertisements about locals other than where we were, backlit encouragements to get back on the flying livestock cars, plunking down a full month’s paychecks in the process. It took them ten minutes to get my luggage out to me. I had my overnight bag with a few clothing changes and some cleaning products; I figured whatever I needed to wear again, I’d wash. I knew where the cleaners were in this town.

The automated doors slid open in front of me. I looked out at the small town as it emerged in front of me in the valley below the air port. A slow breath escaped my lips; I could still feel the aches and pains from the last week. It had started simply enough with a story I was writing as a freelance reporter on some local robberies. From there, things had become more complicated as I discovered the cause of the thefts were two British kids (technically one, the other the thief’s boyfriend attempting to dissuade her from continuing her kleptomaniac tendencies).

From there events leapfrogged from trying to help them repay their debts, to being hired to take down the leader of an anarchist gang, to becoming a government macro hunter. In the end it was the anarchist gang that got the better of me, beating me to a pulp and leaving me to die in a trash compactor. I’d escaped to discover they’d taken the British thief girl hostage. Knowing the gang’s reputation for being not only violent, but for raping young women, I and her boyfriend had shot the gang up, leaving most of their members dead or wounded; an easy collar for the police. Unfortunately, I myself wound up being arrested for my part in the shoot out, my reasons pretty much ignored. I beat the rap with the help of the British kid’s foster guardian, but unfortunately the gang leader manipulated the system and got off with an insanity plea.

When it was all said and done, it was a bittersweet end to the whole affair; much of the city had been damaged by macros the anarchist gang had brought in, but the gang and their giant henchmen were busted up. The kids made enough money, thanks to winning a skating competition, to pay off their debts and had returned to England.

So what happened to me? I received a healthy sum from the government for my work, in addition to some extra cash for the stories I’d written for the papers, plus the bounty I received for delivering the gang leader for arrest. I used a lot of the money to pay off a number of my debts; I paid off my car, my student loans and a few other bills. But after the last check was mailed off, I was ready to collapse. I needed to get away; Sapphire Bay had almost been the death of me lately.

“Hey, didn’t you stay here before?” The armadillo at “The Sach Inn” motel gave me a pleasantly puzzled look. I chuckled as I signed the guest register.

“Yeah, I was here about six, seven months ago, maybe a year.”

“Oh yeah, now I remember!” The ‘dillo chuckled and pulled down a key. “You were the one who showed up those Muttford brothers. What brings you back here? Gonna turn things upside down again?”

“Heh, not if I can avoid it. I’ve had enough of things not being right-side up. Come here for some relaxation.”

“Well you should be able to get it. We’ve got the annual street fair this weekend; should be fun. We’ll have a midway, arts n’ crafts, various companies show up to demonstrate new products, all kinds of things.”

“Sounds good,” I said, shouldering my bag. I headed over to my room to get settled in. The familiar 50’s art deco appearance of the room was kind of welcoming; like an old family member you haven’t seen in a while. I’d picked up a copy of the local paper and flopped onto my bed to read it. Nothing of terrible interest was going on; just the way I wanted it. The town council had their regular meeting earlier that week, approving the schedule for the street fair, leasing space in a public building for some sort of private medical research firm, and authorizing the police to purchase additional patrol cars in time for the fair. There was an article on the research firm as well; some sort of digestive system expert was heading up a lab looking to study the effects and causes of hunger on various species as well as food preferences and their causes. I couldn’t help but smirk; I knew more than a few people who would’ve been happy to volunteer as test subjects if it mean they go to do plenty of field work.

I was musing over trying to find the chamber of commerce to get some pamphlets about local attractions when I heard particularly loud footsteps coming from outside. I clenched my eyes shut and grabbed both sides of my head, laying back against my pillow.

“Oh God,” I groaned through clenched teeth, “Please please please say it’s not another macro...” Quickly, but with a sense of dread, I got up and opened the door to my room. I let out a slow breath and leaned against the doorframe once I saw the cause of the mild-tremor-producing footpaw falls.

“Oh thank God,” I said, “it’s just a colossal fat ass.” That was the only way to describe the person I was looking at. It was a fox, although some would probably argue it was a manatee that had been given hair growth formula and a carefully done dye job. Bulges of blubber came off his tremendous body, barely fitting inside the red short-sleeved shirt he had on. Even so the buttons were rather gapped, especially around his wide-screen tv-sized, round gut. His jeans looked ready to bust a stitch if he tried to bend over. I was tempted to toss a quarter in front of him to test the theory. His face was full and chubby, his footpaws and hands just as much, and to complete the picture he had a triple scoop ice cream cone in each hand, which he was going back and forth between, taking huge slurps. He was probably about a half a foot taller than me, but whether that was caused by actual height or by the fact that he was just so FAT I couldn’t really tell.

The colossal fox looked at his watch and seemed to realize he was late for something. He took down one cone in three bites, then repeated the performance with the other. Licking his lips, he scratched his belly and let out a belch, then proceeded to go into a faster waddle down the sidewalk.

“Getting all set for the big competition, Mr. Shinakira?” some mink said to the fox as she passed him in the street.

“Yep!” he said with a deep chuckle, “And call me Eric. In fact, I’m planning on setting a new world record by the end of the fair!”

“You don’t say,” the mink put her hands on her hips and cocked her head, “which one?”

“Heh, world’s fattest fox!” The tremendous vulpine slapped his belly, “only got 200lbs to go to beat the current record.”

“Well you just be careful there, don’t wanna hurt yourself,” The mink said, continuing on her way.

“Heh, don’t you worry, you know me,” the fox said, walking in a way that made his gut bob to and fro.

“Heh, got a cast iron stom.....NNNNRRRRRGH!” He suddenly clenched his teeth and slapped a hand to his head.

“AAAAAANNNNNGGGGGGH....darn....brain freeze....”

The sound of thunder was audible overhead. I cast my gaze upward slightly, then went back to my book. The Recliner was the only bookstore in the mall, but it was a fair-sized one with a good selection. Its theme was to encourage browsing by providing a circle of leather reclining chairs in the middle of its rows of shelves so customers could read their books, magazines, or newspapers before purchasing them. I had my face buried in a hardback fantasy novel, the latest in a series I’d been following for a few years. The steady patter of rain on the overhead skylight was almost hypnotic, and once or twice I snapped my eyes open when I realized they were shut.

I was walking sideways through the rows of books, looking for anything else that caught my eye, when I bumped into somebody going through the sci-fi section.

“Oh, ‘scuse me I...,” I said, then looked up and saw who I was talking to.

“Well,” I said, smirking a bit, “fancy running into you.”

“Well if it isn’t the gumshoe.” A lion with a close-cut mane, white short sleeved shirt, and vest gave me an appraising look, a few books of his own under one arm.

“What brings you here again?” said Lionardo Furry. “Going to cause some more chaos around town?”

“Heh, not if I can help it,” I said. “I’m here on vacation; I’ve had enough excitement for a while, I’m just looking to relax for a bit.”

“That’s good,” said Li, shifting the books under his arm, “I’d rather not wind up locked in a building with....,”

“Ah geez, everywhere I go I run into YOU.” a whining voice behind the lion made his eyes clench shut. He got an expression on his face that I’ve only seen on people right before they blow chunks. And given the squat, wart-resembling person the voice came from, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had.

“Hello *Erle*...,” said Li, slowly turning around. The ill-mannered, dumpy raccoon had several magazines shoved under one arm. “...just what are you doing here, besides ruining the atmosphere?”

“Eat me Furry,” the raccoon sneered. “Oh, wait, better not say that, you might take me up on it, chunky-butt.” The raccoon snickered, then his gaze shifted to me. He eeped and dropped his mags as I gave him a tooth-fill smile.

“Remember me, slimy?” I said.

“When did they let you out again?!” The raccoon said, sweating a bit, but still unable to keep from making bad insults. “Or did you chew your way through the straight jacket this time?”

“Very funny,” said Li, rolling his eyes. “Now WHAT are you doing here?”

“I’m shopping, lardo, what’s it look like?” Li looked stunned as the ‘coon started picking his magazines back up.

“I don’t believe it!” The lion said. Erle shot him a withering look.

“What, that I shop here?”

“No, that you’re literate.”

“Ooohh!” I said, and made a tally mark in the air with my finger, “you got him on that one.”

“Go beam up to the mothership Furry,” the raccoon snorted.

“Erle,” I said, raising an eyebrow, “you’re such an idiot they dedicated the “For Dummies” section of this store to you.” I looked down and noticed one of the magazines

had fallen next to me. I picked it up and flipped it over to its cover. My eyes widened at the sight of a border collie babe in lingerie that left nothing to the imagination.

“Gimmie that!” The ‘coon said as he snatched it out of my hand. I raised an eyebrow.

“Skin mags, Erle? Get with the times and use the net like anyone else.”

“Drop dead Fang. I’ll have you know I read these so I can get ideas for what to do with my girlfriend.” Erle gave the two of us what he probably thought was a suggestive grin. On his sour puss, though, it looked more like he was trying to pass gas.

“Girlfriend, eh?” I smirked and gave Li a look. “What’s your pet name for her? Righty or Lefty?” The ‘coon snarled at me.

“Here’s one from both,” he said, and showed us his Mr. Digit hand puppets. He then took his magazines and stomped towards the checkout, taking just a moment to shoot the both of us a look and a parting shot.

“Sides, I don’t see any ladies hanging around you two!” And with that we were finally rid of him.

“Tch, good riddance,” I said, then turned towards Furry, who was looking off to the side and sighing. “Something bugging you?”

“Well...he’s got a point,” the lion said. “Much as I hate to admit it, I don’t see anyone showing me much interest. I just...I don’t know, maybe I’m just destined to never meet someone.”

“I know how you feel,” I said, the feeling of the moment hitting me as a frown tugged at my face. The lion looked at me, a bit surprised. “Really? I thought...,”

“Well...,” I said, rubbing at one arm and not meeting his gaze, “I thought I met someone, but...it didn’t work out. There were a few things about her I didn’t know and...well lets just say we’re now in the “just friends” stage.”

“Oooh, yeah...,” Li nodded, “I’ve heard about those. Tough break.” I shrugged.

“ ‘Tis better to have loved and lost, or so they claim.”

“Is it true?” Li asked. I looked down at the floor and gave a semi-hopeless grin.

“I’ll let you know if I ever meet someone else. I’ll be honest, I’m lonely as hell. And society just seems to expect people my age to get a significant other. It’s almost like its mandatory.”

The lion nodded in agreement. “Well, frankly I think if we rush it we’d just wind up contributing to the rising divorce rate, yanno? It’s hard, but I think it’s better to wait for honest feelings of attraction.”

“Yeah, guess so. So...how’s the walking garbage disposal,” I said, looking for a change of topic.

“Eh? Oh, fuzz face,” Li said, my meaning dawning on him. “He’s doin’ fine, hasn’t lost a pound since you were here, though. He’s gotten a bit better about picking up around the house.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, now he remembers to eat all the crumbs before tossing his wrappers and boxes on the floor.” I snorted a laugh.

“Actually,” said Li as we both made our way to the front and paid for our purchases. “I could use a hand getting my groceries home; no car, and living with Muttford, I gotta shop like I had a pregnant wife.”

“Sure, no sweat,” I said.

“Heh, wait until we get the food,” he chuckled. “See if you’re not sweating then.”

I hated to admit it, but Li was right. I was huffing under the weight of six bags of groceries as we trudged up the hill, three in each hand, the plastic handles cutting into the flesh of my hands. The sun was starting to go down as followed the lion to the medium sized but cozy house he shared with his somewhat unkempt room mate. The lion had six bags himself, the handles of the bag from the book store between his teeth.

“Al’ost ‘ere,” he said over his shoulder to me.

“Glad to hear it,” I said. “I’m starting to lose circulation in my fingers.”

“’preciate the ‘elp,” he said, “I’d ‘ave to ‘ake two t’ips norm’e.” We turned the corner and headed in the lion’s driveway. Li set down one set of bags and fished out his house keys, fumbling the door open while I tried to will my hands to keep from going numb. I stumbled in after him and headed for the kitchen, quickly dropping the food bags on the floor. I looked at my hands and flexed them a bit, trying to rub the blood back into them.

“Li, which bag’s the white cheddar puffs in?” I looked up. The lion was rubbing at his eyes; food hadn’t been in the house a full minute and a pudgy gray mixed breed in a tight-fitting black t-shirt and cut offs was rooting through the bags.

“Ya wanna snack while you search for ‘em?” I said.

“Don’t encourage him,” Li muttered. Muttford looked up and got a big smile on his face, his tail wagging.

“Hey, Fang! What up, bre’?” I smirked at the ghetto rapper slang term of endearment as Li’s room mate slapped his hand into mine and pulled me closer to press his shoulder to mine in the currently accepted asexual, masculine embrace.

“Keepin’ my sanity, more or less,” I said. “How ‘bout yourself?”

“Much the same, though it would be a lot easier...,” said Muttford, his eyes sliding to one side as he glared at his roomie.

“...if someone would stop with the hints that I need to shed a few.” The mutt shook a frozen lean diet dinner in his left hand. Li was busy shelving soup cans as he gave Muttford a no-nonsense look over his shoulder.

“Trying to eat smart wouldn’t kill you, yanno.”

“Taste one of these things and then tell me it wouldn’t,” Muttford said, dropping the diet food on the table.

“He does have a bit of a point,” I said, examining another one of the frozen meals. The box showed a trim and fit badger sitting happily at a table, about to dig into one of the dishes that looks as good as it OUGHT to taste, but failed miserably in doing so.

“This diet food’s lousy tasting crud that they call diet so they can have an excuse to ramp up the price,” I said, flipping it around in my hands. “It really doesn’t have that much more nutrition in it, or so I hear.”

“THANK you!” Muttford said, holding his hands up, “At last somebody agrees with me!”

“Of course,” I said, raising an eyebrow at the mutt, “It wouldn’t hurt to not scarf down half the food in town each day.”

“I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration,” Muttford said, looking off to the side. Li sputtered and laughed as he put up the last soup can.

“You wish!”

“Hey, I’m not overweight, I’ve just...still got some baby fat,” Muttford said, scrambling for a line he hadn’t used yet, or at least not recently. I couldn’t resist.

“If that’s baby fat, your mom must’ve taken one hell of a Lamaze course.” Li pounded the kitchen counter as he laughed while Muttford looked at me with a confused

expression. The mutt shrugged and rounded up a six pack of soda and two bags of cheese curls and headed out into the living room.

“Well I don’t think it’s that big a deal anymore. Not since you made sure I’m not the fattest member of my family.”

“Oh, you brothers still haven’t gotten rid of all that iced tea yet?” I chuckled, recalling how I’d drugged Muttford’s two yuppie brothers when they tried to dupe me into harassing their younger sibling for a crime he didn’t commit, making them drink enough iced tea to fill a Jacuzzi.

“Oh they shed it, but that drug of yours lingered. Last I heard, they were still having trouble not drinking more n’ three gallons of something at a sitting.” The mutt snickered as he dropped into place in front of the tv.

“Well that wasn’t quite my inten...,” I started. Muttford fired up a video game console next to the tv, and I caught sight of the game title that came up.

“...is that ‘Chopping Spree’?” I said. The game was a recent release, an adventure game where the player had to escape from a shopping mall filled with zombies, mutants, aliens, and every other standard video game enemy.

“Heh, well it ain’t no kiddie game, that’s for sure,” Said Muttford. I hopped over the couch and grabbed a second controller.

“Oh I am SO gonna beat your high score.”

“HA! That’ll be the day,” Muttford chuckled, popping open a soda. Li slapped a paw over his head, watching us from the kitchen.

“Oh for the love of...I can hear the IQ points falling already.”

“Ah lighten up Li,” I said, “The more brilliant the mind, the greater the need for the simplicity of play.”

“Yeah, what he said!” said Muttford, uploading his character profile.

“Actually I think Plato said it,” I said, using the online feature of the system to download my own profile.

“I thought Mickey’s dog couldn’t talk,” the mutt said, giving me a quizzical look.

“Plato, not Pluto.”

“A kid’s molding clay?!”

“Not PLAY-DOUGH, PLA-TO! A Greek philosopher.”

“Oh, nerdy was he?”

“NOT GEEK! **GREEK!**”

“You know he’s just doing that as a diversion,” said Li, cracking open a drink of his own. I looked at the screen; Muttford was already ten zombies, three mutants, and an entire Nazi platoon ahead of me on the scoreboard.

“Oh you little...,” I muttered, immediately going into gamer mode. Nothing existed outside of the tv and the controller for me for upwards of three hours. I was vaguely aware of Li going around, picking up discarded food containers and giving Muttford a riot act about it. It didn’t do much to distract him, although it helped my game when the lion finally gathered up all the garbage in a waste basket, then shoved it down over the mutt’s head. By the time the sun set, it was apparent Muttford and I were equally matched, so we agreed to pick up again later. I said my goodbyes and headed down the road back to my hotel room, a pleasant breeze in the air, along with the sound of crickets.

And that’s where my vacation to a definite turn for the bizarre.

Downtown was pretty dark as I walked past the rows of stores. Only a few street lamps had working bulbs; the paper had said they were changing some of them out for longer lasting fluorescents, but the new bulbs had been delayed in shipping. As a result, large patches of shadows dotted the quiet streets. The lack of noise was a bit unnerving for me.

So that’s probably why I realized I was being followed so fast.

It wasn’t easy to pick up on at first, but I did; a clicking of claws on concrete. I stopped and turned back a moment. There wasn’t anything but blackened store windows and one passing car. I shrugged and continued on, then I heard the clicking again. I picked up the pace a little, then quickly stopped and spun around. I was just in time to see a rather large figure withdraw into an alley.

I froze for a moment, clenching my teeth tightly. Then I slowly turned and continued on. Click-click-click-click-click went the sound of claws. I saw a larger alley to my left, used for letting delivery trucks through to the backs of the stores. As soon as I got abreast of it, I turned and bolted down the alley. I really didn’t feel like causing a scene in this town again; I was burned out and still recovering from all the fighting I’d done over the last few days, so ditching this guy, whoever he was, seemed in order.

I got to the back of a store and slapped my back against the concrete, panting hard. I slid up to the edge of the building and peeked around the corner. I was just in time to see a huge wolf bounding on all fours down the alley. He was easily 10 feet tall,

reddish-brown, wearing only cut-off jean shorts. He was also as fat as that fox I'd seen outside my hotel earlier. His tongue was hanging out in an almost comical way, but his eyes were dead white with no pupils, making them pretty creepy. He knocked a garbage dumpster to the side with his swaying gut, making a beeline straight for me! I didn't know what this guy's deal was, but I didn't want anything to do with him. Sucking in a breath through clenched teeth, I bolted away from the corner, just as the wolf came skidding around the side, knocking bricks loose from the building as he collided with the corner.

The wolf followed me on a chase through a small maze of alleys behind the stores on what was an oddly-shaped block of buildings. But I didn't know the town, and so I found myself cornered in a dead end where three stores met.

"Crap crap crap!" I hissed to myself. There was only one door, on the building to my left. Despite my best efforts to negotiate, beg, and threaten the lock, it wouldn't open itself for me as I hauled and yanked on it. Finally I remembered my lock picks and went to work on the deadbolt. I was almost through it when several very big globs of drool dropped onto my shoulders and ran down my coat. I spun around. The big wolf was only an inch behind me, panting breath that smelled like a buffet table.

"WANT....FOOOOOOD," the wolf rumbled, and suddenly I found myself shoved up against the side of the store by the lupine's huge belly. The wolf looked like he'd eaten an entire herd of cows, with fat bulging from all four limbs, chubby cheeks, and a gut as big as a washing machine. It would've been funny, if he hadn't also been baring a mouthful of razor sharp teeth and looking at me like I was an appetizer.

"I think I've got a candy bar," I said, still trying the doorknob. Suddenly, the wolf's face brightened and he got down on his hands and knees and started sniffing me vigorously.

"Gah! Hey, easy, okay okay it's yours!" I rummaged in my pockets and pulled out a 3 Musketeers bar I had been saving.

"Here it's allOW!" The wolf didn't even wait for me to let go of it. He clamped his jaws down on the candy bar, and in the process bit my hand, pulling the entire thing into his muzzle.

"OW! LEGGO YOU GREEDY LUNATIC!" I gave my arm a yank and slowly pulled it from the wolf's mouth, covered in slobber no less.

"Eeeeeeeuuurrrrgh!" I flicked my hand, trying to get rid of the drool. I looked over my hand; no blood came out, meaning he hadn't bitten hard enough to do more than scare me.

"HEHEHEHEHE, WANT MORE FOOD!" The wolf rumbled. I grit my teeth and prepared for a fight, thinking he was referring to ME. But instead, the lupine bounded off, wobbling away into the night.

“Well...that was weird.” I muttered. Shaking my head, I let my heartbeat slow back down before I left the alley and resumed my trudging pace towards the motel. But as I got closer, I started to feel myself getting dizzy and disoriented. The ground seemed to bounce and sway, and my vision started blurring as I got closer to my room...

....I wasn't sure where I was. Everything around me was hidden in a dense fog. I scratched my head, and started slowly making my way forward, the mist curling around my face a bit. It was a minute or two before I recognized a scent in the air. It smelled like two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame seed bun. My ears pricked up a bit as I sniffed, moving towards the smell. The mist cleared a bit, and of all the things to find...a serving trolley piled with burgers!

I sniggered, rubbing my hands together. I grabbed the first burger and started wolfing it down. For some reason, I found myself ravenously hungry, and grabbed a second burger in my right hand just as I was finishing off the one in my left. Everything was juicy and fresh, and cooked to perfection. I took bigger bites, scarfing down the food as fast as I could. It was then I noticed a chair and table next to me. I snickered and dropped into the seat, putting my footpaws up on the table. Funny...I didn't remember taking my boots off...or my coat and hat for that matter...

Ignoring the odd circumstances, I crammed my face until my cheeks bulged with burger, the slack starting to leave my shirt as my stomach grew fuller. But I was still hungry, and in an almost lightheaded way kept cramming food into my muzzle. My belly grew fatter...and fatter...and **FATTER**, bulging out roundly with the burgers I was so gluttanously gorging on. My shirt gapped at the buttons as my belly swelled to the size of a basketball, then to a pumpkin, then to a television set! My shirt grew tight around my gut, buttons gapped widely, until they started popping open one by one, letting the bulge of my brown furry girth **BLORK** out!

I grinned in a self-confident, cocky manner and kept cramming burgers into my face in a two-fisted display of gluttony. My limbs bloated and filled my sleeves and pant legs, my footpaws pudged up, my hands grew at least twice as large as normal, and still I kept stuffing my face. My belly swelled up, out, and in all directions, growing massively fat, bigger than a mini-fridge, and still growing.

“**BRAUUUUUUUUUUUURRRRRRP!**” I let out a belch that made my gut jiggle like jello, gurgling and **GLORP**-ing. I wiggled my pudgy toes and kept shoving burgers down my gullet, heedless of how massively **FAT** I was becoming, and how full my belly was beginning to feel as it bloated bigger than a footlocker...then all the way to the size of a small love seat!

“**OOOOOooohhh,**” I groaned, though not in pain but relaxation. I rested both hands on my massive, gluttanous gut. “**HICCUUUUURP! OOOOohhh,** I can't eat another **bHAUUUUURP...bite...**” I sniggered as my belly gurgled, so bloated, so swollen, so **FULL**. It was round and massive and stuffed tight.

I noticed one last burger on the cart.

“Oh what the heck,” I said, “one more couldn’t hurt...” I picked it up and shoved the entire thing into my muzzle.

“GULP!” I swallowed it down. There was a moment’s pause....and then....from the depths of my girth came....

UUUUUUUUUUUUUUURRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRGLOP!

I looked down at my gut.

“Uh oh.”

My belly suddenly BULGED in a huge surge of bloat, then slowly shrank back to its original size. My toes splayed as it did, and my eyes crossed. The sensation was intense; not unpleasant, either.

“GUUUUHHH!” I groaned, as my gut BULGED again, and again receded. Suddenly another BULGE, but this time it didn’t recede as far.

“UUuuuuhh,” I groaned, “I think I ate TOO MUCH!” My belly began to slowly swell, the tight, stuffed feeling increasing. My toes splayed and my eyes crossed as my belly began CCCCCCRRREEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAKING...

“OOOOoooohhh....HICCUP!”

KABLAM! I exploded like a bomb! My massive belly blew up, sending fragments of me like scraps of rubber or cloth flying everywhere. The fragments disintegrated further, turning into a fine brown powder. The powder slowly settled to the floor.

I felt incredibly disoriented; I was sure I wasn’t dead, but I couldn’t see how...it was like even though my body had been dispersed, it was still connected somehow, though some sort of unseen force. Then, I felt a sensation like going down a steep hill in a car, but again, much more intense. The brown dust started swirling together, rising up in a small tornado-like form, drawing all its particles together. Then, slowly, I found myself looking through my own eyes again! I glanced down and watched my body reform; the torso, arms, legs, everything! Even my clothes were fixed.

I dropped to the floor from a height of a few inches. I staggered dizzily, feeling like I’d been on a roller coaster.

“WHOA! That was a TRIP!” I said, giggling, and then dropped to the floor.

Everything was pitch black. I realized I was awakening from a deep sleep, but I didn't open my eyes yet. Recalling last night, I realized I couldn't remember anything past getting assaulted by that massive drooling wolf. I wasn't sure if I was going to like what I saw when I woke up; most likely I'd been found passed out from shock and was in the local drunk tank. It was going to be a job trying to explain what happened without looking like a complete pansy. Sighing a bit, I opened my eyes and sat up...

...and found my nose colliding with my stomach.

"WHAT THE HELL?!" I yelled. My dream suddenly snapped back to me. It's contents weren't too odd; it had been several months ago I'd discovered I possessed a rare, unusual gene that enabled my body's molecular bonds to remain intact even after being separated by direct kinetic energy. Bluntly put, I could inflate until I burst and then pull myself back together. The energy used to do this radiated a small distance from my body, enabling it to extend to any clothing I wore. I found, though, that this energy was regulated by my consciousness, so any separation of my body parts, like a cut or a blow, would fill my mind with pain, blocking my ability to pull back together. Any burning, either through fire or acid, freezing, or other chemical means of changing my body's molecules would render them unable to be re-bonded with me either. So a fiery explosion would be fatal, as would being burned with acid. My strange ability, therefore, gave me a bizarre ability, but didn't render me some kind of super being.

But none of this did anything to explain my current situation. I was lying in a wrecked convertible car in as the sun was rising in what looked like a scrap yard. Various vehicles in various states of destruction laid about me, amid them other household devices and pieces of machinery. I looked up slightly. My belly was the size of a washing machine!

"How in the...but that was a dream...but...then what...Oh God, life never cuts me any slack." I slouched back from sitting up, sprawled length-wise across the back seat of the car. For several minutes I just laid there, listening to my oversized gut gurgle and trying to decide what to do. I wasn't keen on being caught in this state; much as I was a fool for expansion, I knew not everybody was and would think I was some kind of lunatic. So my first priority was to drop about 300 lbs in one day. Where's Richard Simmons when you need him?

I started to sit up again and re-thought my last conclusion; my first priority was to get off my fat ass and on my equally fat footpaws. I rocked and heaved, making the entire junked car bounce on its hinges. I grunted and huffed, the bumper falling off the car and the shocks giving out at one point. Finally...

"HHHHHHHERRRRRRRUGH!" With one big bounce, I was up, pinwheeling my arms to avoid rolling over on my front. I teetered back and forth a bit, and finally got my balance.

“Ookay...one step at a time now, since I can’t exactly see where I’m walking...” Cautiously, with a slow, almost see-sawing waddle, I started to make my way through the junk yard.

The sun was starting to come up fuller, and I realized I had no idea where to go or what to do. I decided the only course of action was going to be to get to a phone and see if I could arrange for some kind of massive liposuction procedure with a plastic surgeon. Through the stacks of crushed cars I finally spotted what looked like the junkyard’s office.

“Please please please don’t be open so I can break in and use the phone unseen...,” I muttered. I waddled my way towards the low brick building, at first heading for the door, realizing partway I was gonna need to go in through the garage. I turned, and felt someone carrying a lot of metal pieces walk right into my gut. The rattle of steel assailed my ears and I winced.

“Nrgh! Sorry...,” I took a waddle backward and turned to the side to see who I’d knocked over. Knocked on his backside, rubbing his head was a gray rat. Dressed in a green, greasy tank top and a very stained white lab coat, the rodent sported a paunch that was severely dwarfed by my own, but was nonetheless rather round by itself. It looked very much like he’d swallowed a basket ball.

“Regular at the beer cooler, aren’t cha?” I thought to myself.

“Watch where you’re going you fat...,” the rodent looked up, and did a double take at me.

“Fat...faaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat...,” I put my hands on my hips and rolled my eyes.

“Yes, I know, I’m big enough to affect the tide. Thanks so much for calling attention to it.” The rat stood up, dusting himself off. He started picking up various odds and ends he was carrying; a few mufflers, some rear-view mirrors, some pistons and radio parts.

“Hey I don’t need to call attention to it, you’re your own billboard! Have you considered renting yourself out for advertising space?” I snorted.

“Like you’re a lightweight yourself. I need to use the phone, you mind, Mr....?”

“That’s DOCTOR. Dr. Templeton. And I don’t have a phone.”

“Damnit. Now how am I going to get rid of this?” I thumped a fist against my stomach. Templeton rummaged in a coat pocket with one hand, the other holding onto his bundle of garbage as he pulled out a garage door opener. He turned and regarded me with a searching gaze.

“Hmmm...maybe I can do something...if you’re willing to test out one of my experiments.” I raised an eyebrow.

“Experiments?” The rat smirked, wordlessly walking into the garage. It looked fairly typical, greasy tools laying scattered on a workbench, various car parts stacked or piled in the corners. The rat walked over to what looked like the control for a car lift, tossing his head in a motion for me to follow him. I’d just gotten under the door when he pushed a button, causing the garage door to come down...and the floor to start sinking! The entire floor of the garage was an elevator to a basement level. I almost lost my balance as the lift started, rocking from one footpaw to the other.

“Whoa! The heck is this?”

“My lab,” Templeton said, shrugging. “I own the dump, so I just excavate when I need more space.” He thumbed a button, turning on hanging lights. The lift was in the center of a substantial underground lab. But unlike a professional lab, this one appeared to have been built from scratch with salvaged parts. Generators hummed amidst folding tables set up with chemistry sets using carefully washed beer bottles and jelly jars, lazer emitters put together from spare parts from cars and broken electronics, robotics made out of tossed out exercise equipment and other machinery.

“Impressive setup,” I said, getting off the elevator and looking around.

“Mmm, thanks,” the rat said, dumping his load of parts into a nearby plastic bin. “Just don’t touch anything. And don’t knock anything over with that oversized gut of yours.” I gave Templeton a withering look, then spotted a computer sitting on one of his tables. I blinked, then chuckled, pointing at the comp.

“Hey...is that made up of PC parts AND Mac parts?!”

“Yep, had to rewire and reprogram the hell out of it to get it to work.”

“Oh-ho man!” I said, grinning widely, “those arrogant Apple fanatics would have a STROKE if they saw this!” Templeton snorted in a mildly amused way. He wandered into the back and came out pushing a refrigerator on wheels.

“Alright chunky...”

“The name is Mike Fang, I’ll have you know.”

“Oh really? Guy who’s on the news a lot eh? Well excuse me if I don’t ask for an autograph.” The rat connected an extension chord to the fridge, which started to shake and hum.

“Look, you wanna lose weight? Fine, but first we gotta figure out what’s wrong with you. This little baby will scan your body and discern what foreign substances and

energies are in it.” He lifted up a panel on the side of the fridge and started typing on a recessed keyboard.

“Really?” I said, cocking my head to one side. “How’s it going to do that?”

“Mild burst of radiation.”

“WHAT?!?!” I leveled a finger at the machine.

“You keep that byproduct of Chernobyl away from me!”

“Relax!” The rat grunted, flicking a switch. “It’s no more than you’d get from an X-Ray. My machine uses a different form of radioactive energy that resonates at a different frequency. It’s not gonna do any harm, it’ll just act like a sonar.”

“Ehhhhh....rrrrright...so I’m still going to be able to have kids after this, right?”

“Of course, this thing ain’t nearly strong enough to render a person sterile.”

“Well...okay, but if I get any additional limbs growing, I’m gonna use them to beat the crap out of you.”

“Yeah yeah, whatever, just hold still.” the rat pulled open the fridge door, revealing some kind of device inside with multiple blinking lights and one large lens on it like a tv camera. Actually...it was a tv camera. I smirked, then felt a smidge uneasy when I notices the rat was crouched behind the fridge door...which was lined on the inside with lead.

“Uh why...” Templeton set off his device before I could finish. I felt my hair tingle slightly and that feeling where something goes right up your back happened to me. I shuddered and grabbed one arm with the other instinctively.

“Vvvvvh! Is that it?”

“Yep,” the rat said, straightening up and shutting the door. He punched a couple buttons, and a print out started coming out of the port where the ice and water dispenser used to be on the icebox. Templeton looked it over and walked over to me, holding it out. The printout had an outline of my body from several different perspectives; straight on, profile, back, and overhead.

“Okay, as you can see this baby picks up EVERY foreign substance in your body. So this gigantic mass here in front is all the food in your gut. But here...,” he pointed at the thin, spidery lines going all through the other parts of my body,” indicate a very small amount of a very potent foreign substance in your bloodstream. That HAS to be it.”

“So...I’ve been POISONED?” I said, my eyes widening. Templeton scratched at one ear.

“For lack of a better term. You got any enemies, somebody who’d want to screw with you?”

“Not in town...wait...last night...oh God.” It hit me. The blacking out, waking up in an unfamiliar location, all right after my assault from the big fat lupine that cornered me last night, it all suggested one answer.

“What,” said Templeton.

“I think I got nailed by a werewolf.”

“HUH?” The rat looked at me like I’d blown a gasket.

“Seriously, see...,” I laid out the events of last night to the rodent. Templeton nodded along, apparently paying attention despite a mildly disinterested expression.

“Well, that would explain it. But you say he didn’t actually BITE you?”

“Nah, never broke the skin. But he slobbered about a gallon of drool on me.”

“Hmmm....It could be there’s some kind of venom, or pathogen in this particular breed of werewolf’s saliva. Let me just get a small blood sample from you...” The rat went over to a filing cabinet. He rummaged around and pulled out a syringe. Hesitantly, I rolled up my sleeve, glancing once again at the less-than-immaculate environment I was in.

“Eh...is that thing clean?”

“Disposable, just out of its wrapper,” he said, showing me the balled up plastic bag he’d removed the needle from.

“Well okayNRGH!” I winced a bit. “Jeez, give a guy some warning ‘fore you’re gonna jab him.”

“Oh don’t be such a baby.” Templeton shook his head, withdrawing the needle with several cc’s of my blood. He transferred it into a test tube, looking around for a grease pencil to mark it with. Finding none, he scratched a claw through one of the stains on his shirt and used it to label the tube.

“Baby? Doc, you’re talking to a guy who’s assisted in the putting down of four rampaging macros and an assortment of psychopathic, gun-wielding anarchists.”

“Mmmm, impressive,” Templeton said, sounding anything BUT impressed. I shook my head and rocked back and forth on my heels a bit. Templeton tossed a look over his shoulder.

“Cut it out, you’re gonna knock the lab over.”

“Oh HA HA,” I grumbled. “Just do whatever you need to do with my blood already.” The rat used a turkey baster to put a few drops on a slide. He stuck it under a microscope, humming to himself and scratching notes on a pad with one hand.

“Okay, I got good news and bad news.”

“Well, you know the drill doc, bad news first.”

“You’re gonna have to find that werewolf and get me a sample of his drool. The good news, however, is once you get me that sample I’ll be able to make a cure. Since he’s a carrying host, his body has the dormant virus in it. Once I have a fresh sample and can observe what causes the virus to start replicating, I can put together a treatment to stop it and the virus will be eliminated from your system.

“Why not just use the viruses in my blood sample?”

Templeton shook his head. “These viruses have already started multiplying. I need to find out what sets off the chain reaction, not what keeps it going. This virus looks self-sustaining; nothing I can do with this sample.” I sighed and rubbed my eyes; this was not how I’d planned to spend my vacation.

“Alright, but in the meantime, how do I deal with...” GURLORGLP! My gut made a serious sound of digestion, making my eyes cross as I let out a wet belch that made the rat cringe.

“Man, cover your mouth next time! Alright, I might have just the thing...,” Templeton went over to his chemistry set and began rummaging through labeled test tubes on a nearby shelf. He removed one filled with a bright purple liquid.

“Here we go; this sucker will speed up your metabolism and burn out that food. Of course it’ll work better if your body’s in motion, so I’ve got just the thing for that, too.” The rat beckoned me over as he shuffled to one corner of the lab. A large cross-section of an old cistern was mounted on a frame, the outside covered with magnets over some kind of metal device with wires leading to a massive collection of car batteries.

“Oh don’t tell me...,” I said, as the rat gave me a firm shove in the back.

“Damn straight. Now drink this and start running! My backup power source needs recharging.” The rat slapped the test tube into my hand and stood there looking at me expectantly. I sighed, chugged the contents of the tube, and started off at as brisk a

trot as I could muster, my belly bouncing up and down as my knees knocked it around. More than once I had to stop a moment before I lost my balance and went tumbling over. I could actually feel Templeton's concoction in my system now, urging me to pick up the pace, to burn off that fat. It took ten minutes before my slow trot finally grew into a steady jog. I've never been the most athletic person, so I was already panting for breath. But I was seeing results; no longer was I struggling to keep balance, and I figured I'd lost maybe three inches already.

"Three inches down...at least five feet to go," I muttered to myself. The torturous marathon went on for two hours. More than once I stopped to catch my breath, only to have Templeton look over his shoulder at me from whatever project he was working on to tell me to quit slacking and get back to work. Bit by bit, inch by inch I slowly shrank back down to my normal size. Finally, dizzy, unsteady on my footpaws, I slumped against the back of the giant hamster wheel, once more a broad-shoulder Doberman with less than washboard abs, but nothing like the huge girth I'd been trying to waddle around with before.

"C'mon, c'mon, pickup the pace!" The doctor has his back to me, mixing some substances in a beaker. Glowering, I staggered over and slapped a hand on his shoulder, then spun him around. He looked ready to chew me out, then realized I wasn't the awkwardly balanced butterball that came in with him.

"Oh! It worked, ahhh, great!" Templeton smiled, but his eyes said "Please don't kick my ass now that you can see your footpaws again."

"Yeah," I said, still a bit unsteady. I dropped onto a stool and started pulling on my boots. "Nice mix you've got there doc; you could sell that stuff to Jenny Craig."

.....

A light breeze blew down the street along. A dull gray sky hung overhead as I walked along, nervously looking at my watch, trying to figure out my next move. I knew what I had to do, but didn't have any idea where to start. I wasn't any kind of werewolf hunter, so I started trying to think like a detective, a state of mind I'd tried to put on the back burner while on vacation.

"Okay, so I was around here....," I muttered to myself. I was standing in front of the alley entrance I'd ducked down the night before, trying to escape the weighty wolf.

"Then he bounds off. But where?" I looked around, then spotted a newspaper dispenser. The headline wasn't anything interesting to me, but one of the sidebar stories was "Rash Of Food Thefts Hit Town". I quickly yanked out enough change to get a paper and started reading the story. It was told with the usual structure of a hard news story; the most important facts first, the least important ones last. Inverted pyramid style, it's called. I use it myself frequently in my own freelance work.

“Series of break-ins at restaurants and convenience stores,” I read under my breath. “A total of ten stores were broken into...” a list of the locations followed. I smirked; it was a good lead. If I could establish a timeline, I might be able to track the wolf’s movements.

The bell chimed as I stepped into DashMart, a combination gas station and convenience store. The glass doorway was missing a vital part: the glass. The entire doorframe was without the thick panel that usually is littered with stickers advertising cigarette brands, energy drinks, and lottery tickets. Those stickers were now littering the floor, along with the remains of the glass they had previously clung to. A hyena was sweeping up the mess while a couple customers bought road beer and overpriced cheap sunglasses. I pulled out my notebook and tapped the ‘yena on the shoulder.

“’scuse me.” The hyena turned around; he wore a pair of tan slacks similar to mine and a t-shirt with the store logo.

“Yeah, can I help ya?”

“I hope so; name’s Mike Fang, I’m a freelance reporter. I was hoping you could tell me about the break-in here.”

“Well, the dude that broke in musta had serious munchies, ‘cause all he took was food,” The ‘yena pointed with his broom; a huge pile of empty snack bags, candy bar wrappers and empty soda bottle littered the low aisles off to the side.

“Wow, he ate all the stuff in the store?”

“Almost. He left the boxes of microwave stuff, n’ the flour an’ cookin’ ingredients.”

“Did he go for the money here? The ah...,” I snapped my fingers, trying to jog my train of thought; one of my little problems is my mind moves faster than my mouth, so frequently I’ll get a thought before I’m ready to say what it is, leaving me stuck searching for a word or phrase.

“...the register or the safe?”

“Nah, didn’t even touch it. Is weird. All I can figure is he must’a been tokin’ on some weed.”

“That sounds possible. ‘bout when was the break in?”

“Surveillance camera said it was about midnight, maybe quarter past.”

“Place was locked up?”

“Yep, s’why I got to clean up this mess he made breakin’ in.”

“Yeah, looks like you got your work cut out for you. Any idea which way he went.”

“Sure, sucka left a trail of wrappers n’ crap out the door. He was headed down Elderberry St.”

“Thanks, any chance I could see the surveillance tape.”

“Police took it for evidence, sorry.”

“S’okay, did you get a good look at the guy on the tape?”

“Yeah, was this big fat ass timber wolf.”

I nodded to myself. “Great, thanks for the help.”

“Ain’t no thang, have a good one.” I nodded a goodbye as I left the store. The town hadn’t yet had the street cleaning crew pick up the mess left by the wolf, probably due to the police trying to search for evidence. Lag in communications between government departments isn’t that uncommon sometimes. I strolled along the path of empty chip bags and candy wrappers, which littered the sidewalk like fall leaves. The trail led in, and then back out, a small grocery store with crime scene tape across the front. Inside it didn’t take me long to spot a Siamese cat and a blue dragon wearing stock boy smocks doing the same thing the hyena was a few streets away. Another quick interview turned up a similar story; a fat timber wolf with a bigger case of the munchies than a California pothead decided to let himself go right there in the store. I continued this line of questioning for two more stores until the trail finally started leading me back to the neighborhood of the hotel and motel area of town.

At first I thought the wrapper trail, which had gotten a bit thicker with disposed of debris, was leading back to my own motel, but instead it passed it on, going to a two-story place that seemed to cater to truckers. The trail petered out in front of the parking lot. My gut told me this was the place I was looking for; now the trick was determining which guest, if it wasn’t one of the staff, was responsible. I decided to take a direct approach, and went into the front office. The hotel was a low-key place, with simple linoleum flooring and brown paneled walls. A tv with a leather couch and a couple leather chairs were in the lobby, a stack of old magazines on a coffee table.

“Can I help you?” A green salamander sat behind the desk, her hair done up in a bun. I scratched underneath my hat at an itch as I approached.

“Yeah, I was wondering if you answer a couple questions about last night.”

“Mmm, well that depends, what did you need?”

“I’m looking into the break-ins that occurred yesterday. I was wondering if any guests complained about someone making a lot of loud noise last night, sounded like they were coming or going and not being very quiet about it.”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” the lizard shifted a bit in her chair, leaning on the counter. “There was a couple in room 233, called the night clerk to say the person in the room above them was making a lot of racket, slamming doors and barreling up and down the stairs in the dead of night.”

“Really? Is the guy checked out yet? Assuming it’s a guy.”

“It is, and no he’s not. He’s still paid up through the weekend.”

“I see, thanks.” I headed back out of the office, trying to look casual as I headed towards the vending machines where I saw the 200 rooms. Stopping to purchase a couple candy bars, I then quickly swung around the wrought-iron railing and headed up the cement steps. A quick glance over the railing at the cars helped me determine when I was above 233.

“Alright,” I muttered under my breath, “here we go.” I knocked on the door. The sound of a tv being turned down came through the door, along with the creak of bedsprings. The chain rattled, and soon I was face to face with a somewhat beefy-looking timber wolf. Rusty red fur went over his back and arms, while tan fur covered most of his front, what I could see of it from his white tank-top. His biggest distinguishing feature was a strange coloring on top of his head, a stripe of deep, dark brown with triangular shapes coming off of it in regular intervals, sort of like the traditional outline of a Christmas tree.

“Help ya?” he said, leaning against the doorframe. I tried not to laugh; oh where to begin?

“Hey, ahh...jeez, where to start...”

“Try the beginning, it’s the usual spot.”

“Oh, right, heh. Well the name’s Mike Fang...”

“Nice to meetcha, folks mostly call me Wanderer, on account of I drift a lot.”

“Pleasure’s all mine. I’ve got a bit of an odd question....do you...have any recollection of where you were last night?” The wolf blinked.

“Why wouldn’t I?” He didn’t meet my eyes. I shifted a bit and decided to press the matter.

“Well suppose you have kind of a black spot in your memory. I know I do.”

“You do?” The wolf seemed to mull something over a minute, then looked at me again.

“Okay...yeah, last night’s kinda fuzzy for me. I remember goin’ to see that new Jodie Foster movie, then on the way home...I kinda started to get dizzy...and then...fffft,” the wolf made a sweeping gesture with his hand over his face. I nodded, recalling the exact same feeling.

“Yeah, that happened to me too. I think I know why it happened to both of us.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, we’re both infected with werewolf venom.” Wanderer blinked at me, then slapped a hand over his eyes and laughed.

“Ah jeez buddy, you got some imagination...”

“You wake up this morning and find anything strange? Like about 500 lbs you didn’t have the other day?” That stopped his laughing like someone dropped a crab down his pants. His wide eyes locked with mine, and saw I was dead serious. Before I could react, he’d put a hand on my shoulder and ushered me inside, shutting the door and locking it.

“Okay, that can’t be a coincidence,” he said.

“I should hope not,” I said with a light smirk, one hand in my pocket.

“I can’t imagine how but...when I woke up this morning, I was back in my room, but I couldn’t see the wall in front of me for the size of my gut! I mean I was freakin’ FAT! I was more than that, I was HUGE! I’ve been jogging in place all morning and doing jumping jacks to get rid of it.”

“Really? I did the same, sort of, but it took a special drug for me...,”

“Well, doc says I have an unusually high metabolism.”

“Ah. Well, in any case, I think we’ve both been bitten by a werewolf.”

“Okay, now that still sounds pretty hard to swallow.”

“Really? Well the scientist I went to for help said that’s what it was. And last night, ‘fore I blacked out, I was chased by this huge timber wolf and slobbered all over by him, and that’s the first time this’s happened to me.”

“Damn, I guess maybe...wait...do you think it was...”

“You that infected me? That’s what I’m betting.”

“Erm, well....sorry?” I shrugged.

“Eh, not like you did it deliberately, but I do need your help. Doc says that if I get a sample of the werewolf’s drool, he can put together a cure.”

“Okay, no problem. Did he say anything about me?”

“Huh?”

“I mean like can he cure me, too?”

“Hmmm, hadn’t thought about that, but I bet he could. After all, if this stuff knocks out whatever virus I got from your slobber, it could probably take out the stuff in you.”

“Jeez, I hope so.” Wanderer knit his brow as we left his hotel room. Neither of us was really keen on a repeat performance of last night, I wagered. Heading down the street, I led him in the direction of Templeton’s junkyard. Both of us kept tossing glances at the sun, knowing that once it went down, odds were we’d start getting dangerously hungry again.

“Was last night the first night you’ve had these blackouts?” I asked as we started leaving the center of the town and started getting closer to the outskirts. The houses started getting fewer between, more ranch-style homes than suburban ones.

“Yeah,” said Wanderer, throwing another glance up at the sun. It was about 5:00 by my watch, and the sun was starting to go down. “It’s weird, you’d think if I was a werewolf, I’d have had an episode like this before.”

“Well,” I mused, “If my memory of werewolf lore is accurate, usually you’re either born a werewolf from other ones, or you get turned into one by magic. Any chance your parents didn’t tell you something about your bloodline?”

“F’heh, not likely; most of my family’s trim and fit, I think I’d notice if I had any ton-sized relatives.”

“Point taken,” I said as we came to the top of a hill. The trees were sparse and a large field was just at the bottom as we came into view of the junkyard, which was located in a large field with a treeline at the back of several-acre-sized lot. The sun was going down further, and I was starting to feel nervous.

The gate in the fence was shut.

“Uhhh, that’s not a good sign...,” muttered Wanderer. We jogged down the hill and the timber wolf lost no time in climbing the fence once we got there. I hesitated only a moment; not telling if the scientist had any security devices that would melt us if we got too close. When no flamethrowers popped out of the ground, I figured it was safe, and followed the wolf, who had disappeared around the side of the garage.

“Well, where is he?!” Wanderer looked both frustrated and nervous. He was standing in the garage as I caught up with him, looking around. I smirked a bit and walked over to the same control panel Templeton had used to lower the elevator to his lab, and punched what looked like the right button. Nothing happened. I blinked, irritated that my thunder had been stolen; I wanted to shock the wolf with the rat’s hidden lab. I punched the button again, and this time a tv over on the workbench at the far wall blinked on. Templeton’s image came on the screen, his lab in the backdrop.

“I assume this is that dog detective,” the rat said, his voice scratchy through the old tv’s speaker.

“Hey doc, I found the wolf that slimed me.” Wanderer grabbed his arm and rubbed it, slightly embarrassed.

“I’m not here right now,” said the rat. The truth dawned on me; I was looking at a recording.

“WHAT?!” I snarled. “You cheese-scarfing son of a bitch, you knew I was coming back!”

“I’ve got some business in town, so you can try to find me or come by tomorrow morning...assuming you’re still mobile by then, heh heh heh.” The tv blinked off. I clenched my teeth and narrowed my eyes; I was gonna kick that rat’s ass when I got my hands on him.

“GREAT!” said Wanderer, throwing up his hands and starting to pace in circles. “Now what?! He didn’t say where he was going!”

“Well...we have to try, come on!” I jogged back outside and climbed the fence again, getting my coat hung up on the top for a second. I kicked and yanked like a cartoon character about to get off to a running start that was hanging in midair before I managed to free myself. Wanderer and I got back to town just as the sun went down, and began frantically doing a search of various places we figured the doc might be; computer stores, hardware stores, dumpsters.

“Geeze, he could be anywhere,” I said, slamming the lid on the last trash receptacle we checked.

“Yeah,” muttered Wanderer. “Listen, I don’t think we’re gonna find him. Maybe we should just....,” GURGLEGORK! Suddenly, both our stomachs gurgled in stereo unison. Both the wolf and I looked at each other and both said, also in unison...

“Uh oh.” I suddenly felt dizzy. I started blinking firmly, as my vision began to blur. I’d been comfortable a moment ago, but suddenly I felt hot and stifled. I pulled off my hat and coat, and kicked off my boots, but it still felt warm. I couldn’t see Wanderer very well, but from the groaning noises, I suspected he wasn’t doing much better than me. I felt disconnected, like after I received drugs at the dentist for surgery. Suddenly, I was dimly aware of the sensation I was...GROWING! Unlike all the times I’ve swelled up with some kind of substance, this time it felt like I was growing proportionately, becoming larger in general.

My arms started to become buffer, the muscles rippling as they tore through my shirt sleeves. My legs started to stretch my pants, the ends now coming to mid shin where they used to come to my ankles. My chest fired a button off my shirt as I grew, then more stitches gave.

What the hell?! I thought, then I was suddenly struck by the realization I was still conscious. This was no dream! I was dimly aware of my fur becoming slightly thicker, my muzzle lengthening and widening a few inches, everything on me seeming to grow! Finally, the dizziness left me. I felt my eyes open...and I hadn’t consciously opened them. In front of me, Wanderer was now a good three feet taller than he was previously; I could tell that by his height relative to his surroundings.

The shocking thing was, I was still looking him in the eyes; I’d grown that much too. The wolf in front of me was now incredibly buff, but his features were exactly like that of the wolf that attacked me the night before; they looked like Wanderer’s features, but...stretched out a bit, every feature either widened or lengthened in some way.

Without telling myself, I found myself looking down into a rain puddle. Staring back was a big wolf with Doberman markings on his fur.

Holy crap, that’s ME! I thought. I wasn’t in control of myself anymore; it felt like I was running on autopilot, conscious of what my body was doing, but I wasn’t at the wheel, I was just along for the ride.

“FOOOOOOOD!” said Wanderer, or the werewolf form of him.

“FOOOOOOOOOooooOOOOOOD!” I said. Or rather, whatever the hell was controlling me said.

“Oooooh NO!” I thought. *“Don’t you DARE...”* But who was I to argue with myself? I felt like a cowboy that just sat down in the saddle of a wild mustang, only to find out there was super glue on the seat. Wanderer and I bounded off on all fours, galloping through the streets, noses waving about, looking for the scent of food. We

knocked over several folks out late at night until Wanderer stopped at one intersection, his attention focused on the building across from us. “Sizzle Pit All-U-Can-Eat BBQ”, said the sign.

“Ah jeez, not where there’s people to see us!” We bounded across the intersection, into the parking lot, and shoved the doors open. There were maybe a half dozen people in the buffet, which was a simple kind of restaurant, with generic flatware provided by restaurant suppliers, a few framed photographs of the town in the good old days, and three of those hooded, heated serving tables you see at buffets everywhere.

Both Wanderer and I started drooling and lolling our tongues out as we saw the trays piled high with ribs, pork barbecue, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes, cole slaw, biscuits, and all the usual buffet fare. We bounded across the seating area, sending two couples running as we crashed through the tables and chairs. While at first we’d only gotten a few strange looks from our entrance, now people saw they were clearly dealing with a couple of crazies. The sparse crowd emptied from the restaurant with a few cries of shock as Wanderer and I tore into the buffet. I first buried my snout into a 5 gallon pot of chicken noodle soup and started slurping and gulping it down. My abs have been washboard as a result of the transformation into a werewolf. It didn’t last, the warm broth, chunks of chicken, noodles, and vegetables quickly taking the ripple out of my stomach muscles.

Wanderer was at the barbecue, stuffing huge handfuls of pulled pork seasoned with vinegar, peppers and other spices into his mouth. He too was losing his muscle definition in a heartbeat. The two of us quickly turned to more food trays. We snapped down barbecued ribs, bone and all, crunching them up with bone-crushing jaws. Corn on the cob went even faster, our bellies not starting to stretch outward. Pounds of potatoes were licked out of pots; I actually buried my entire head in one and spun it around to lick it clean. The fat started to widen our torsos out, though we kept our muscular limbs. It must’ve been some natural way for our bodies to remain mobile so we could find more food. After about five minutes, both Wanderer and I had significant paunches, big round bellies that looked like we swallowed beach balls.

“Hey! Don’t hog it all!” I looked up; standing in front of me was Eric Shinakira, that tremendously fat fox I’d seen the day before in front of my hotel room! The sole person left in the restaurant, he grabbed a tray of string beans and lifted the entire thing out, shoveling food into his own mouth!

What the...get out of here man! Don’t you know you’re staring at a couple of hungry werewolves?! My transformed self, blinked, cocked my head...and then tried to grab the tray from the fox.

“That’s mine, gimme!” I snorted at Eric and we had a tug of war over the tray of greens. Inwardly, it was ironic to me that I was getting in a fight over one of my least favorite foods. When it was apparent neither of us were going to relinquish our hold on the food tray, we both started grabbing handfuls out of it and stuffing beans into our

mouths. Until there was nothing left. Simultaneously, we dropped the trays and both went for different ones. I grabbed a tray of fried chicken, Eric a tray of pork chops.

“You think you’re gonna beat me in the big eating competition, doncha?! Not a chance buddy!” The fox stuffed pork chops three at a time into his mouth, making big, laborious chews before he swallowed them down. As a werewolf I was able to scarf down the chicken much faster, my gut gurgling out and pounds packing onto my sides around my spherical ball of bloat I called a belly.

I looked over at Wanderer. He was seated under a soda machine, his head stuck under the spigot. One hand reached up and tore the handle off the machine, sending an unstoppable flow of Coke into his gullet. One hand rested on his belly as he chugged and guzzled, his girth spread and rising up like bread in the oven.

I looked around; we’d successfully demolished the buffet, which was now a huge mess of empty trays tossed everywhere, overturned chairs, and very little food scraps.

“OOOOOOOooooohhhhhh....,” came out of my mouth as I rubbed my distended belly.

“GRRRRRroooooooooohhhhhh,” said Trai, rubbing his gut as he got back to his footpaws.

“BBBBBRRAAAAAAAUUUUURRRP,” said Eric, picking his teeth. He crossed his arms and smirked, his forearms resting on a gut big enough to be the engine compartment for a mac semi.

“HA! I’m still fatter than either of you,” he said, sticking his tongue out. He eeped and suddenly looked very afraid as he found himself staring at two werewolves who didn’t appreciate being razzed, and were now snarling right in his face.

“Erm, uh, I ah...” the fox stammered. Suddenly, Wanderer lifted his head. He sniffed.

“MORE FOOOOOOOD!!” I felt my own face brighten and my tongue loll out. With bellies bouncing, we took off on all fours again, leaving Eric standing in the middle of an apocalyptic scene in the buffet.

“HEY!” I heard him yell “Who’s gonna pay for this?!”

Don’t look at me buddy. I thought to myself. *I’m too busy trying to cause a food shortage.* I followed after Wanderer, who had spotted a bakery delivery truck making a late night run. Uncontrollably, we chased after it down the streets. Inwardly, I groaned again.

I'm chasing a truck. God, I'm so embarrassed. As the truck slowed down a bit to take the next turn, I got up on all fours, still running, and reached out. I grabbed a stop sign off the corner, snapping it at mid-pole. With one bound, I managed to jump up into the air and land on top of the truck, leaving two great big footpaw-pints in the top.

“What the hell?!” I could hear the driver say. I grabbed the edge of the roof with one hand and looked over the edge, hanging my head right in the view of a purple dragon with three yellow frills on his head. He looked like exactly how you’d expect him to look if he saw a grinning werewolf looking at him upside down in his windshield waving a stop sign in its hand. The dragon slammed the breaks, opening the door of his truck and taking off at a dead run. I stomped back across the roof; Wanderer had wasted no time in ripping the doors from its hinges. We both jumped in and started making the truck’s hinges rock with our gluttonous frenzy. The truck had been delivering a load of pastries, and soon the air inside the truck was filled with powdered sugar, globs of jelly, and the sounds of chewing. Bear claws, long johns, chocolate frosted doughnuts, and danishes disappeared as Wanderer and I crammed them into our faces. We shoved trays out the door to make room as our bellies kept bloating up bigger, and bigger, and BIGGER!

I'd find this a lot funnier if I wasn't stealing the food to do this. I thought with a mental grumble. Finally, when the last tray was emptied, we both wobbled out of the truck. Wanderer and I had bellies to dwarf washing machines, easily five feet in all directions. Both groaning and rubbing our massively bloated guts with big, muscular arms, we turned and gave each other big, dumb grins. We belly bumped each other like fanatic fans at the super bowls.

BBBBBBRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAA OOOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUURRRRRRRP! We belched in each other’s faces.

The call of the wild....wild glutton werewolf, that is.

“Is the coast clear?” I said.

“No, there’s still patrol cars going around.” Wanderer slid along the wall away from the alley. I was around behind the dumpster where we’d first transformed. At least, most of me was behind it. When you’re a 500 lbs fat Doberman, it’s kinda hard to keep all of yourself out of sight.

“Damn,” I muttered, cinching my hat down over my face. I was too big to fit in my trench coat, so I had it hanging over my shoulder, one finger hooked in the coathook loop in the collar. “Now what do we do?”

“Beat’s the hell out of me,” said the wolf. He was just as fat as I was. The events of last night hadn’t quite ended with our bakery truck hijacking. Three vending machines stripped of every last candy bar and potato chip, as well as the food aisles of one all-night drug store were also needed to sate our gluttonous werewolf forms. Come the dawn both

Wanderer and I could vividly remember the stuffing spree. We could also plainly hear the sounds of sirens as patrol cars were now out in force, looking for the vandals responsible for the chaos. We'd managed to dodge the patrols somehow, darting, or rather wobbling, from alley to alley until we made our way back to the one where we first transformed.

"We're still a good 45 minutes from the Doc's garage," said Wanderer, pacing back and forth. "And we're out of alleys. What we need now is some kind of taxi service."

"I don't think they make taxis in our size" I muttered, hiccupping as my gut growled loudly.

"Quiet!" I snapped, slapping my girth, making it wobble like jello. "You're gonna give us away!" Wanderer gave me a raised eyebrow.

"You are crazy, aren't you?" I gave him a tooth-filled grin.

"You know it. Okay, need a taxi service...well..." I raised one eyebrow, then felt along my belt (since I couldn't see my waist) and found my cell phone. Flipping it open, I started dialing.

"I don't know a taxi service, but maybe..." Wanderer looked at me with wide eyes.

"Hey! Do you really want anyone to find us?!"

"Relax, these guys have...experience with this sorta thing." The phone rang a few times. I bit my lip, trying to think how I was going to explain this. Before I could come up with anything, someone picked up at the other end.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Muttford, that you?"

"Hey Mike, what's up?"

"Ahhh, my cholesterol level, I'd bet," I said, looking down at my massive gut.

"Huh?"

"It's a long story. Short version, you heard about those vandalisms?"

"You mean the guys stealing food? Yeah, Li keeps giving me looks and asking me if I'm sleepwalking. WHICH I'M NOT!" The mixed breed yelled his last statement; the lion must have been in the same room with him. My suspicions were confirmed when I heard a distant voice say "I'm still not ruling you out as a suspect."

“Yeah, well, Mutt, here’s the thing...me and another guy ate all that food. But it’s not our fault!”

“YOU?!” I winced and sighed.

“Yeah, see, we’ve both been infected with werewolf venom, viruses, whatever it is that causes it. Now at night we turn into slobbering walking appetites.”

“Really? Cool!”

“Muttford!”

“Okay, sorry, sorry, so what do you need from us?” I heard Li in the background again saying “Us? What are you getting me into, fuzz face?” Muttford’s voice became a bit fainter; he must have put a hand over the phone.

“Li, Mike’s in a jam, and I think he needs our help.”

“Oh really? Lemme talk to him.” I heard the phone exchange hands. I summed up the situation with the lion as well as I could.

“Well, okay, sounds like you’re in a spot and you’re not really to blame. But what can we do?”

“Do either of you have any kind of large vehicle? If you can get us to Dr. Templeton’s, he can cure us.”

“Sorry, but neither of us owns a car...wait...I may have something...yeah! My comic book store has a delivery truck. We use it to pick up shipments of comic books, magazines, and so on.”

“Perfect! Can you bring it to Jasmine Street? We’re right between the cigar store and the music shop.”

“No problem, we’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” The minutes seemed to creep by; a watched pot never boils, and a watched for truck never arrives. There was one hair-raising moment when a patrol car came up to the entrance to the alley and stopped. The alley didn’t have much in the way of cover, but as we heard it pulling up, I grabbed two newspapers and started unfolding the sections. It took every page spread out end to end to cover us, one of them the Sunday edition, but in the end we managed to camouflage ourselves to avoid being spotted.

Just as I was starting to think we’d be better off staying under the newspapers, another engine approached. I heard it pull a bit into the alleyway, then stop.

“Hey, Mike, you back here?”

“Li, thank God!” I tossed away the newspapers. The lion jumped back against the nose of the delivery truck, which looked like a refitted bakery truck similar to the one we’d hijacked last night, and gaped in awe at me and Wanderer.

“Are you two trying out for the next Godzilla movie?!” I winced and rolled my eyes.

“Yes, I know, we affect the tides. Can we get out of here?”

“Huh? Oh, right, who’s your friend?” The lion hopped into the cab again. We waited as he got his truck turned around so we could clamber into the back. Muttford opened the back door from the inside. The mixed breed looked at us, got a big dumb grin on his face, and looked over his shoulder.

“Li, I don’t wanna hear about me being overweight anymore!”

“I don’t care how big they are, you could still stand to drop a few pounds.”

“Oh please, compared to these two, I’m Tinkerbelle.”

“So? That just makes their problem all the worse.”

“Actually,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck as I clambered into the back of the truck. “I kinda do this for fun...but I don’t steal the food and it’s a temporary thing.”

“THAT’S temporary?!” Li said, turning around and giving me an incredulous look.

“When I take the right pills with the food, yeah.” The lion shuddered.

“I’ll never get you people.” Muttford chuckles and gave my belly a backhanded pat.

“Heh, we just like livin’ large!” The lion rolled his eyes as he shifted gears and pulled us out.

“So, again, who’s your friend?” Wanderer, who’d been playing with his belly button in a contemplative fashion, looked up.

“Heh, call me Wanderer.” The wolf squeezed forward enough to shake both their hands. “I’m the guy that turned Fang here into an eating machine.”

“Really? Think you could bite me?” asked Muttford. “I need an edge against that fox in tonight’s eating competition.”

“NO!” said Li. “Oh HELL no! You’re bad enough, I don’t need you transforming on me into some insanely massive...”

“Li, watch the road,” I said. “We really don’t want t...,” too late. The sound of a faint siren right behind us chimed in at the appropriately humorous moment. All of us slapped a hand over our foreheads as Li pulled off to the side.

“Oh man,” the lion shifted around in his seat and bit his lip. “This’s just great, I’m about to get a ticket with two fugitives in the back of my boss’s van! I’m gonna get arrested, fired, wind up in jail...”

“You won’t pass go, you won’t collect \$200 dollars,” snorted Muttford.

“Can it fuzz face!”

“Enough the both of you!” I snapped. I could hear the cop car come to a stop behind us. Wanderer looked from the door to me, then back at the door again. I rubbed my chin, my mind racing.

“Okay, the cop’s got no reason to look in the back; it’s probably just a traffic stop. Li, just stay calm and follow my leads.” I leaned up against the back of the wall between me and Li, my gut pressing against the side. I just barely managed to hide myself. Wanderer squeezed himself in the back corner as well. I made a frantic motion with one hand for the wolf to get on the other side; together we were liable to tip the truck over.

The lion rolled the window down, driver’s license in hand. “Is there a...oh hello Officer Onatop.”

“Mr. Furry, nice to see you again,” A female voice came from just outside. I glanced to the passenger’s side of the truck; Muttford’s ears had shot up and he was getting a dopey grin on his face. Great; we’d been pulled over by the mutt’s crush.

“So where’s the fire?” said the cop. Li’s pause started to go on a little too long.

“Just making a delivery,” I whispered.

“Just making a delivery to my comic shop,” The lion echoed.

“Really? This early in the morning?”

“It’s the latest edition, need to get it on the shelves,” I hissed.

“It’s a brand new edition of a magazine, the boss wants it on the shelves as soon as the store opens.”

“Oh? Which one? I might be interested in seeing a copy.”

“Uh, tryin’ to remember...,”

“Pick somethin’ a woman’s not likely to want,” I muttered.

“It’s a bodybuilder’s mazazine, Buff Nuff, I think. The boss is expanding our range of mags.”

“Really? Ooh, I love the centerfolds in those.” I slapped a hand over my face.

“Smooth move, no wonder you have problems with the ladies.”

“Smahhh, sure, I think I can get one for you...” The lion turned around in his seat like he was searching behind him. I leaned over slightly to give him a resigned look.

“What now?! I don’t have anything to give her!”

“No kidding,” I muttered. Meanwhile, Muttford was looking slightly dejected in the front as he carried on with Officer Onatop.

“So...you like the muscle guys then?”

“Hmm? Oh, well some of them aren’t bad. But you know, honestly, I think it’s just big guys in general that interest me.”

“Really?” The mutt now looked like he was perking up a bit. “So you’d even like a guy that’s maybe a little...heavy?”

“Heh, more of ‘em to love, I’d say. ‘course I wouldn’t want to go out with a total BLOB, mind you.”

“Oh, sure, that makes sense,” said Muttford, but I could tell from the look on his face he couldn’t imagine why any woman wouldn’t want to go out with someone big enough to rent themselves out as a moving billboard.

“Look,” I whispered to the lion, “Tell her all the magazines are in bags, and your boss would notice if a hole was cut in one of them and would dock your pay for it.”

“Right!” The lion shifted back in his seat.

“Sorry officer, they’re in bags, so you can’t read ‘em. My boss would take it out of my paycheck if I cut one open.

“Sure, I understand. But you boys ran a stop sign about half a mile back.”

“Oh, sorry about that, I was talking to Muttford and I didn’t notice it.”

“You didn’t? The sign was on the passenger’s side of the truck.”

“Um, well....,” The lion stammered. I had to admit I was kind of at a loss myself. So I decided to go with something crazy.

“I didn’t want to mention this....,” I whispered.

“I didn’t want to mention this,” the lion echoed again.

“But Muttford had just cut a ripe one.”

“But Mutt...,” the lion started, then sputtered a bit, clenched his eyes shut, then looked somewhat resigned. “Muttford really let one rip.”

“HEY!” the mixed breed looked irritated and put his hands on his pudgy hips. The cop went kinda quiet; I imagine she was looking rather confused at that point.

“Oookay...so why did his fart distract you so much?”

“I didn’t fart!”

“Well....”

“It smelled so bad it made my eyes water,” I whispered, now trying not to laugh myself.

“It was so nasty my eyes were watering, I couldn’t see very well.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, always happens if he eats chili right before he goes to sleep.” Muttford laid back his ears; he looked like he wanted to kill Li, then me. But it worked.

“Well, okay, I’ll let you off with a warning this time.”

“Yes ma’me, thank you, it won’t happen again,” said Li. He took back his driver’s license.

“Oh, Muttford?” The mutt perked his ears up again.

“Yeah?”

“You might try Beano, I hear it works great.”

Wanderer and I were cackling in the back, and even Li had to smirk a bit as Muttford pouted.

“Har har,” said the mutt. “Let’s just get out of here before something else goes wrong.”

“Well if it ain’t the walking planet and the space dork that came from it,” said a nasally voice from the passenger side window.

“Oh great,” I grumbled. Wanderer looked quizzically at the front as both the lion and the mixed breed stared irritably out the side.

“Whose that?” The wolf whispered.

“Erle, one of the local lowlifes,” I said quietly.

“What’re you two losers doing here? Waiting for the mothership?”

“You’re getting stale Erle,” said the lion, leaning against the steering wheel and rolling his eyes, “get some new material, for pete sake.”

“Your tailor had to get new material the last time he let out one of your shirts, Furry!”

“Cute, now beat it wart-face, we gotta make a delivery.”

“Oh yeah, where?”

“We’re delivering nudie magazines,” snapped Muttford. Bad move.

“Oh really? Well I think I’ll take a free sample!” All of us jumped in our seats. Before anyone could do anything, the raccoon had whipped around to the back of the van and threw open the door. He blinked when he saw Wanderer, myself, and our massive bellies.

“HOLY,” the raccoon let out a very bad word. “Call guineas, someone actually outgrew Muttford!”

“Har har Erle,” I grunted, trying to sound nonchalant, but I was wound as tight as a spring-loaded toy car. “Now will you buzz off?”

“Wait a minute,” the raccoon narrowed his eyes. A slow grin spread across his face as a look of dawning comprehension struck him. Muttford, twisting around in his seat, glared at him through the open back door.

“Erle...I’m warning you...”

“I think I know what’s going on!” Said the ‘coon, the nasty grin spreading across his equally nasty face.

“You actually thought?” said Li. “Amazing, we should declare a national holiday.”

“You two fat asses are the ones that wrecked all those stores n’ stuff!” The ‘coon squealed “Ooooh, and your two buddies are your partners in crime! I’ve been waiting for this!” Erle turned to go run for the cops.

“Hey runt!” Wanderer stood up and blocked the entire back door with his bulk. “I got just one thing to say to you.”

“And what’s that chunky?” Sneered the raccoon. Wanderer bent at the knees and suddenly, the wolf launched himself out of the back of the truck.

“BANZAI!!!!”

“GAAHH!” The ‘coon tried to run, but it was too late. The wolf landed with a KABLORP right on top of him, burying Erle under several hundred pounds of wolf blubber.

“BAUUURRRP! S’what you get for messin’ with a heavyweight,” snickered the wolf.

Muttford pulled open the gate to the junkyard. The truck rumbled on through as the mutt jumped back in the passenger’s side. After we wedged Erle upside down in a fork between two tree branches, we quickly made a beeline for Dr. Templeton’s place. The doc was back, tinkering with a V6 engine coupled up to some discarded electronics: dvd players, televisions, telephones, and a few other things. I adverted my eyes from the welding sparks coming from his work.

“Hey doc, we’re back!”

“We?” The rat turned around, lifting up the welding mask. “Who, you and your stomach, ‘cause it could count as a separate person.”

“Save it doc, I found the guy that drooled on me. Now can you help us?”

“Sure, sure, c’mon, everybody on the lift. I can cure all three of you.”

“All three of us?” Wanderer looked at me with a quizzical expression. I had to admit, I didn’t know what he meant either, at first.

“Yeah,” said the rat, “You, the wolf, and the fuzzy parade balloon over there,” he pointed at Muttford, standing off to the side with Li. The lion chuckled, but Muttford looked fit to be tied.

“Will people get off my back about my weight?!” the mutt said, stamping one footpaw angrily.

“Sheesh, touchy,” said Templeton. He led all of us down into his lab. The others were appropriately impressed with the display of jerry-rigged contraptions and fancy equipment made out of household items. Muttford started to pick up some sort of chemistry mixer made out of a blender and Dr. Templeton cracked his tail on the mutt’s hand like a whip.

“Keep your paws off, what you don’t know about my stuff could turn you into a fly for all you know.” The mixed breed rubbed his hand and glowered some more at the rat. Templeton took some saliva samples from Wanderer and started running some tests.

“In the meantime, you two look like you need to burn off more weight,” The rat gestured dismissively at a test tube rack that held several doses of the same purple drug I drank before.

“Drink those and get in the turbine. I can never have too much backup power.” Li had been wandering around the lab, carefully looking but knowing enough not to touch. He watched as Wanderer and I waddled into the giant exercise machine that looks so much like a hamster wheel.

“How long is it gonna take them to burn off that much weight, Dr.?” Said the lion.

“I dunno, probably an hour or two,” the rat muttered, pouring a small bit of powder into one test tube containing part of the drool sample. The lion rubbed his chin and grinned.

“Hey Muttford....,”

“NOT A CHANCE IN HELL, LI!” I would’ve chuckled if I wasn’t already getting out of breath. Wanderer and I puffed and panted as our jelly bellies kept bouncing in time with our running. It was a slow process, but what started as slow, loping gaits started to become more and more rapid. The exhaustion we felt was overridden by the freedom we gained to move more as the fat began to shrink from our middles.

“You know,” I puffed. “I’m still trying to figure out how you got turned into a werewolf.”

“Search me,” huffed Wanderer. “I can’t say I recall being bitten.”

“Well, if you don’t have any werewolf ancestors, you must’ve been, I dunno, cursed or something.” My gut had shrunk down by about a foot by now, but there were several more to go.

“I can’t remember ever getting cursed,” said the wolf, taking in a deep breath through his nose and continuing to job.

“Okay,” I said, trying to think. “When did you start blacking out and waking up overweight?”

“Ehhh...must’ve been....about two weeks ago.”

“Okay, anything strange happen to you then? Make anyone mad, run into any strange characters?”

“Nope, was staying in this one fairly big town, workin’ an odd job at a hardware store.”

“Hmmm....Did you come in contact with anything strange?”

“Not really...”

“Did you get anything? Some strange package in the mail, something left for you mysteriously?”

“Nah, nothing like...wait, that’s when I picked up my ring.”

“Ring?” I said, ears perking up in interest.

“Yeah! I stopped in at this antique store, just to look around. They had a glass case with old jewelry in it. I saw a ring that looked really nice, the owner said it was part of some estate auction. Was the last piece, so he gave it to me for a nice price.”

“You got it with you?” The wolf, who was next to me, held up his left hand. On it was what looked like a wrought iron band shaped like twisting vines and leaves. Laid into the band were two rubies; it looked like red eyes staring out from between the leaves.

“That’s gotta be it!” I said. “it’s gotta be some kind of cursed jewelry or something. Some magician’s keepsake or something.”

“Are you sure?”

“Ask me after we finish up burning the pounds.” It took about another hour for us to finish trimming the fat off, but eventually, tired and dizzy, we staggered out of the cistern, returned to our normal selves. Wanderer leaned against a support beam and

rubbed his eyes. I, meanwhile, opted for the collapse-face-first-onto-the-floor course of action.

“OOooohhh,” I groaned. “Oh thank you nice cement floor. Thank you for being so nice and cool...” Muttford looked at me and chuckled, shaking his head.

“Well,” said Li, “if you guys are okay...”

“Yeah,” I said breathlessly, “Thanks for the lift, I owe you one.”

“Nah, it’s cool; you helped me with my no count, backstabbing brothers,” said Muttford. “We’ll see you guys later.” I waved limply at the lion and mutt as they took the elevator back up.

“Hey doc, how’s the cure coming” asked the wolf, staggering over to lean over the rat’s shoulder. The rat, completely absorbed in his work, shouldered Wanderer to one side as he turned up the heat on a Bunsen burner and put another test tube into a centrifugal spinner made out of a food processor.

“It’s gonna be several more hours, I’m afraid. Either of you guys got a cell phone? I can give you a call once I’m done.” I gave Templeton my seven digits and my fellow victim and I headed back up. I was certain the ring Wanderer was wearing was the cause of the transformations. But now I had to prove it. Fortunately, if there’s one thing I know how to do, it’s research. It took us a while, and I stopped off at my hotel room to get a fresh change of my usual outfit, but we finally got to the public library. It was a small, old brick building with a cathedral roof, fitting for a small town. The marble façade over the door read “City Hall”; small towns always know how to make the best use of their historic buildings, converting them into new uses with renovations. Wind was blowing, scattering leaves over the brick walkway to the door like flowers at a wedding. Inside, the library was warm and quiet, several patrons sitting in overstuffed chairs, reading in the front room that looked like the foyer of the former city hall. Spending an afternoon there reading would’ve sounded like a great idea to me, but we had work to do.

“Excuse me,” Wanderer said, leaning over the front desk, a big, old scarred number with notices about reading days and library activities taped to it. A matronly-looking armadillo turned around, several books in her arms.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, we’re wondering if you have many books on magic and magically enchanted objects.”

“We do have a few shelves of those. The non-fiction is right through there, with the internet computers,” The ‘dillo pointed through a doorway that looked like it lead to what was once a meeting room for the city council. Ceiling to floor bookshelves now filled a central row, with three computers set up at one end. I went to work looking for

books on magic rings and other enchanted objects while Wanderer went to work on the computer. The books I looked in were old, most of them leather bound, but there were a few reprints from the last decade or so, all in hardback. Pages crackled like the dry leaves just outside as I skimmed through the subject matter. While I don't have much of a taste for using magic myself, the subject was still intriguing; the various energy sources used in various spells, the necessary catalysts used in potions to release the energies and so on. I picked up some interesting tidbits of knowledge, but nothing that could help me prove or disprove that ring of Wanderer's was jinxed.

"This isn't working," I muttered to myself. Suddenly, like divine inspiration, I remembered something Wanderer said.

The owner said it was part of some estate auction.

"Hey," I said, jogging over to the wolf, who was examining a web page on beginner's spellcasting. "Did the shop owner who sold you the ring say anything about the estate the ring came from?"

"Hmm?" The wolf looked up, then bit his lip. "Nothing specific, but it was supposedly from a member of a large, influential family from the area. The estate wasn't that big, though, so it must have been from one of the less successful family members."

"Okay," I said, taking a hopping step or two back, pointing at the computer screen; fresh leads can get me excited. "Okay, start looking for important magic users around...where was it you got that thing?"

"Uhhh...Brenshaw."

"Right, around the Brenshaw area." I ran back, grabbed up the books I'd been looking through, and stuffed them back on the shelves. I went to a different shelf and started scanning the books on famous magicians and wizards. I came up with three leather books with faded yellow pages and black and white photos. The information I was looking at was sparse. It didn't surprise me; magic users frequently keep their knowledge to themselves. If I'd been back in Sapphire Bay, I would have probably come up with a list of potential creators in the space of an hour just by talking to the owners of a few bookstores in the arcane quarter.

"No, nope, nuh uh, nah not him..." I wasn't getting anywhere fast. Nothing in the magician's profiles suggested they dabbled in anything involving lycanthropy, shape changing or cursed jewelry. I was just about to give up when I got right to the last page of the book. Looking back at me from the faded page was a very rotund horse dressed in a bowler hat, white starched shirt, black (or some sort of dark color) vest, and pressed tweed pants.

"Zeke Ziegler, 1875-1945" I said, narrowing my eyes. The equine had been a master of enchantment, specializing in potions, but also dabbling in enchanting objects.

Since the bigger the object, the harder to enchant, he'd started out with small clothing articles.

"Like jewelry..." I muttered to myself. I turned the page. My eyes widened as I saw a picture of the horse standing with another one, several years his junior, outside of a shop.

"Zeke was partner with his brother George, running "Ziegler's Fine Jewelry", of Brenshaw," said the caption for the picture. I felt I was very, very close. But I had to be sure; would he have created a ring that would turn someone into a werewolf?

The next paragraph cinched it.

"Ziegler was well known for his sense of humor. He often created enchantments with amusing effects. He was known for playing practical jokes, but restrained himself to creating humorous potions after several of his enchanted objects created effects that got out of hand. Bingo!" I slapped the book closed and jogged back across the room to Wanderer.

"I think I've got it!" The wolf spun around in his chair. "Look for anything on jewelry made by a Zeke Ziegler, or coming from Ziegler's Fine Jewelry." Wanderer quickly typed in a search. A several web sites came up. The first two links were for auctions on various pieces of jewelry I could probably never hope to afford. Then the third struck paydirt.

"THERE!" I pointed. The site was a personal web site of an antique jewelry collector. The collector displayed her pieces in glass cases she'd taken digital photos of. Three photos were of rings with the same vine-and-leaf pattern as Wanderer's ring, with two gems of some kind set in the center. They were labeled as Ziegler pieces.

"This has to be it," I said, pointing at a printout of the page as Wanderer and I left the library. The wolf was yanking and tugging on his ring, trying to get it off his finger. Finally it came loose.

"Well I'm glad you warned me about this," The wolf walked over to the nearest storm drain, holding the ring by two fingers. "Good riddance to this pain in the ass piece of bling!"

"Waitaminute!" I clapped a hand over his just as he was about to drop it. "Don't throw it away!"

"Why the hell not?"

"It'd probably make a good museum piece. Sell it to a curator who knows how to handle enchanted items..."

“Oh yeah, I could make some cash on this!” The wolf chuckled and slipped the ring into his pocket instead of tossing it away. “Okay, that makes sense. Well, I’m certainly glad this is over with.”

“Not quite,” I said with a grimace and a shrug of my shoulders. “We still have to get cured.”

“When is that rat gonna call us with the damn antidote? He’s taking his good sweet time. Personally I wonder if he’s just working on his own stuff while we wait for him to get off his...” Wanderer stopped in mid-sentence. He was distracted by the street light we were walking under as we left the library parking lot. It had just lit up. We both looked up, then looked at each other.

“Oh,” I said.

“Crap,” Wanderer finished. It was twilight. Oh daylight savings time, you bastard.

“Shoot, what do we do, what do we do, what do we do...” I said, pacing back and forth, biting at my fist.

“We ahhh...we gotta find some place to restrain ourselves!” said Wanderer.

“Right, right! But ahh....but where?!”

“Uuuuuhhhh...THERE!” The wolf pointed. We were right on the edge of town, and about a football field away was what looked like an old barn. We took off at a run; good thing we’d been doing so much of it lately, otherwise we might not have made it in time. But the sun was just slipping over the horizon as we stumbled into the old, weed-enveloped building. The inside was musty, covered with cobwebs and moldy old hay. The door stuck hard, and was equally tough to pull shut, but heaving and grunting, we managed to get the big doors closed.

“We gotta lock it somehow,” I said.

“Over here!” Wanderer was dragging a thick beam. I grabbed the other end without asking what he was thinking; just as I’d hoped, he’d spotted the hooks across the doors for a beam to block them shut in the event of a storm. With a heave and a ho, we hefted the four inch thick beam up and dropped it into place with a thud that knocked dirt loose.

“Okay,” I said breathlessly, dusting my hands off. “That should doOOOOOOOOooohhhhhh....,” my belly gurgled loudly and I clapped a hand to my stomach, doubling over. Wanderer sank to his knees, clenching his eyes shut. The transformation seemed to go quicker this time; like a chore a person’s becoming practiced at. Muscles bulged and rippled through me as my muzzle once again

lengthened, my features broadened, and my clothes started to shred. I tossed off my coat and my boots, my shirt giving way at the seams. Wanderer stomped to his footpaws, clenching his fists and bending low to arch back upward. I threw open my arms and threw my head back, fully transformed, and we howled in unison.

“FOOD!”

My werewolf self looked about ravenously, trying to spot the first thing edible. Wanderer was rapidly sniffing the air, pacing back and forth.

Ha! We’ve got you two trapped! There’s only one way out of this barn, and that beam blocking the door is strong enough to hold a tractor! I felt inwardly smug, but it only lasted a minute. It’s hard to feel self assured about trapping two werewolves in a barn when they launch themselves over the bar in the door and smash through the door itself.

Too bad the door wasn’t so strong I thought with an inward groan. There was no stopping ourselves. Wanderer, essentially being the alpha of this two-werewolf pack, took off at a bound back into the city, with me close on his heels. We barreled up and down the streets, sniffing madly. But the side of town we were in was pretty far from the commercial area; no stores that sold food were within sight or smell. We began to get more and more desperate. I could feel the hunger and desperation in my werewolf self building. I started to get worried; what if we ran into some poor schmuck and became hungry enough to turn HIM into dinner? I didn’t want to think about it.

God, if it would come to that, then let us break in some restaurant or grocery shop! I’d rather get busted for petty larceny than cannibalism!

Suddenly, my nose twitched. Even in my detached state, I could tell my body had smelled something. It was the odor of cooking food; pies, covered dishes, fresh rolls, chicken, turkey, an entire schmorgasboard! I growled a signal at Wanderer, who also turned and sniffed in the same direction. We both took off at a run down one street. It looked like there were a lot of people in town going in the same direction we were. When they saw us barreling down the street on all fours, mouths slathering, they screamed and ran. I didn’t blame them. I didn’t know where we were going at first, but the smell of dinner was intoxicating as we got to a T-intersection at the road. That’s when I saw it.

Ah HELL NO!

Before us was the town civic center. It was a big concrete building, square shaped like most modern architecture used in public buildings. The doors were shut, but the scent of food was drawing us upwards. Wanderer jumped for the first branch of a large oak tree next to the building, and I followed suit, climbing up past the banner over the front door of the civic center that said “EATING CONTEST TONIGHT!”

The biggest room in the civic center was a large auditorium, the kind of place that makes you think of high school gymnasiums that can be converted into theaters when needed. Rows of folding chairs has been set up, while on the stage, what looked like the pilgrims Thanksgiving feast three times over was set up on several tables; turkeys, stuffing, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, casseroles, all the favorite comfort foods. About four figures were standing up behind the tables, a large crowd seated inside.

Wanderer and I could see all this through the skylights we were staring though, but we couldn't hear any of the chatter, or what the otter who got up in front of the tables with a mic was saying. It didn't matter much either, as he stopped shortly after we came crashing through the skylights.

"GOOD LORD!" the otter shouted, jumping back. People screamed and quickly backed away from us as we stood up, stomping slowly down the aisle between the two sections of seats, sniffing the air and making a beeline for the food. Three of the contestants quickly ran for it. But one starred at us impassively.

It was that fat fox, Eric, dressed in a fancy blue suit and tie. I guess he wanted to look his best for his big day.

"Eric are you crazy?!" a beaver standing behind the curtain of the stage hissed at the fox. "Those two are werewolves!"

"Yeah," he said, flicking an ear. "But I've worked to hard to give up now."

"You're nuts!" The beaver said, promptly running with a flap of the curtain. Wanderer and I approached the table from opposite ends. The otter glanced from side to side, unsure of what to do. Eric looked down at him, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, are you gonna start the competition or what?" Wanderer and I looked up at each other, as if even as werewolves, were had some idea of what was going on. We looked at Eric, then looked at the otter, expectantly.

"Um, er....on your marks..." Wanderer and eye hopped behind the tables.

"Get set..." Eric looked at the two of us and smirked.

"Heh, get ready to go down." I looked at Wanderer and we both emitted growling chuckles.

God, somebody tell me when it's over. I thought with an embarrassed groan, wishing I could put a hand up to cover my eyes. I may have done this kind of thing for entertainment, but I normally did it only in the company of friends, not in front of a crowd as a spectacle. I'd done some acting when I was in school, but it's easier to behave in a certain way when people know you're just acting.

“And g...,”

“Wait a minute!” From the end of the hall, both Li and Muttford had just come in, the former dressed in a red shirt and a tan windbreaker, the latter in his usual attire. The lion looked out way, and immediately pieced together what was going on. He slapped a hand over his eyes and hung his head. Muttford, meanwhile, came running up while the lion was distracted. Li swiped for his shirt tail, but missed.

“Get back here fuzz face!”

“You aren’t gonna start without me!” The mixed breed squeezed between me and the fox at the tables. Half the people in the audience, which was riveted to the spot, were in shock and obviously thinking the mutt and the fox were out of their minds. Li ran up to the first row of the audience, then stopped short, not about to get any closer. The otter blinked, then shrugged.

“And...erm....GO!”

I’ll say this much, it was a sight to behold. All four of us started grabbing food like we thought it was going to be taken away from us at any second and we’d never get another bite in our lives. We scarfed, guzzled, slurped, gulped, chewed, swallowed, gorged and stuffed. Muttford crammed an entire cherry pie into his mouth and downed it in three chews. Wanderer chugged down a gallon of gravy straight from a bowl. Eric dumped two platefuls of cranberry sauce into his mouth at the same time. I scrapped an entire dish of casserole into my muzzle, swallowing without chewing in a steady stream.

“SCARF! RARF! ARF! NARF!”

“ULP! GULP! ULP GULK!”

“URLK! GULRK! ULK!”

“BRAAAAAAOOOOOUUUURRRRRRP!”

All four of our bellies, one dark brown, one gray, one white, and one tan started bloating and bulging out. At first Muttford seemed to have the advantage to us, but as he neared everyone else’s size, he slowed down, losing his first wind, in a sense. Eric, who had been fat to begin with, was slower, but slowly gaining speed. But Wanderer and I were just eating machines, quickly gaining on our opponents who had some pudge in their paunches from the start. Soon it was four equally sized guts the size of mini-fridges getting fatter and rounder. Food debris flew, turkey bones and empty pie pans flying in all directions. Periodically, one of us would look up to let out a window-rattling BRRRRRRRUUUUUUUUUUUURRRRRP!

As Eric bloated, he began to outgrow his clothes. The buttons on his jacket grew tight, spreading and gapping a bit until KAPANG! They shot off. His stitches got tight in

his back, ripping and popping until the jacket fell away completely, revealing a pair of bright red suspenders and a white, now food-stained shirt that was getting tight around his bloating middle too, his buttons gapping wider and wider apart, revealing sections of his belly fur.

“HICCUP!” the fox let out as he took a moment to wipe his mouth on the back of his sleeve, then slurp down more mashed potatoes as his shirt buttons started popping off one by one

Muttford’s own shirt, his usual black t-shirt, was riding up and rolling up over his thickening middle. His tendency to over use the infamous Spray Stretch in his laundry to keep from exposing his midriff kept his shirt from tearing, but even the spray couldn’t let his shirt contain his beast of a belly. It rounded and bloated out too, swelling bigger like a balloon as he crammed it mercilessly.

“UUURRRRP!” he let out, slurping a tongue around his mouth and emptying a can of whipped cream right into it. Wanderer and I, meanwhile, were almost eating the flatware, but seemed to prefer the actual food to the serving platters. I downed an entire tray of corn on the cob, crunching the cobs up like pretzel sticks and gulping them down into my own bloated bulk of a gut. Wanderer ran his tongue through a dish of mashed sweet potato fluff, scooping it into his mouth like a shovel and downing it in one gulp.

“BRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAURP!” we both let out simultaneously. The audience, meanwhile, didn’t move. Didn’t say a word. They probably didn’t dare for fear of drawing attention to themselves. But everyone seemed nervous and staring at the level of food on the tables. At first I wasn’t sure why they were looking at that. Then it dawned on me.

Oh crap, what happens when the food runs out?!

The table was down to about a third of its contents. Things were looking bleak in Mudville, as they say. All four of us had guts the size of dish washers. While both Wanderer and I maintained our muscular limbs, both Eric and Muttford had fat, chubby faces, and thick, pudgy limbs about twice their normal sizes. Suddenly, my cell phone, still on my belt, began ringing.

It’s gotta be Dr. Templeton! Crap, what do I do?! My eyes suddenly locked with Li. I had to get the phone to him; he was the only one who understood what was happening.

C’mon, it’s my body, I can control it! Reach for it, REACH FOR IT! I had just started guzzling a great big pitcher of iced tea. My free hand shook a bit. I concentrated harder, trying to will my limbs to respond. Slowly, my wrist flexed. I felt like I was about to give myself a migraine, but slowly, my hand dropped to my side. A finger lifted the flap on my cell phone carrying sleeve. With a forefinger and thumb, I pulled the phone

from it's sleeve, and flipped it out and away. Li blinked as he saw it, and broke the trance that had seemed to fall over the crowd and caught the phone.

“Hello? Dr. Templeton! Mike, he and that Wanderer guy transformed again! A cure? Good, get down here, we're at the civic center! You gotta hurry, they're almost out of food!”

Inwardly, I breathed a sigh of relief; I just hoped the rat could get here in time. In the meantime, there wasn't anything more I could do; I'd mentally exhausted myself, and could only watch as we continued to pick the table clean. Turkeys disappeared and stripped bones went flying away. Pie filling smeared all our faces as we continued to cram and stuff in an almost automatic, knee-jerk reaction. Our bellies gurgled and groaned, glugged and rumbled, rounded and stuffed to an almost impossible dimension. They sagged all the way down to our knees, a yard past either of our sides, bumping together, and up to our chests!

Finally, the last olive was picked off the table. Eric, Wanderer, Muttford and I looked at each other, our bellies giving a small GLURP, and GLURGLE every now and then. The otter, apparently the judge as well as the referee, ran from one end of the stage to the other, looking us over. Finally, he stopped, scratching his head in amazement and disbelief.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, this has got to be the most amazing eating contest I've seen in a long time! I'm fairly sure...yes, yes I'm sure of it now! Ladies and gentlemen, we have a four way tie!”

“What?” muttered the fox.

“You're kidding,” said Muttford. Wanderer and I looked at each other, emitting puzzled growls. The crowd began to slowly clap, until it turned into a genuine applause. Li looked at all four of us in disbelief, then looked at the crowd and shook his head.

“My entire town has gone off the deep end,” he said.

“FOOD?” said Wanderer. My werewolf self blinked, looking at him, then back at the crowd.

“MORE FOOD?” I heard myself say. The crowd suddenly started to look fearful again, several people backing up.

GOD WILL THIS NEVER END?!

Well, I was about to get that question answered. Suddenly, a loud creaking sound filled the air. All four of us contestant blinked, then looked at each other. While the food had been spread out, it's weight had been evenly distributed along the stage. But now it

was concentrated in four spots; our big, fat, bloated selves. The floorboards sagged beneath us, another loud creak coming from the stage.

“Oh SNAP,” both Muttford and Eric said. And that’s just what happened. With a loud, groaning creak, the floorboards of the stage cracked and snapped, causing all four of us to drop down ten feet into the civic center basement. It was a good thing we were all so fat, offering one another a certain amount of padding with the fall. We bounced and jiggled, wobbling like the several platters of jello we’d stuffed ourselves with, among other foodstuffs. The air was filled with dust and splinters, coughing and muffled groans, as well as a belch or two. We all landed on our backs, mushed up against one another, moaning and groaning.

“Okay, where are the fat asses?” A familiar voice came from up top.

“Over here doctor!” Li appeared at the hole above us. The rat soon joined him, carrying a paint sprayer filled with a pink liquid.

“Alright, everybody hold still!” The rat took aim with the sprayer, which suddenly spewed out a pink mist that quickly settled around out. I hacked and coughed, and from the sound of it, so did Wanderer. I could feel a numb tingling, like the feeling of novicane at the dentist, without the needle though. It spread throughout my entire body, and slowly passed as the mist settled. I groaned and put a hand to my head, then looked at it; it was back to normal! I tried sitting up further, but my belly was in the way, and so was Muttford’s. I looked to the side; Wanderer was breathing a sigh of relief, examining himself to see that everything was still in order. We looked at each other and chuckled. Then slowly, we both blinked, and looked up at Dr. Templeton, realizing what this meant. The rat smirked.

“Heh, looks like I’m gonna have me lots of backup power for a while.”

I gasped and wheezed as I staggered out of the power cistern. I grabbed for the support beam, and just slid down it to the floor. Angrily, I pointed at the wheel.

“I don’t wanna see that thing again as long as I live!”

“Hey, don’t knock what works,” groaned Wanderer, who was sitting in a salvaged folding chair nearby. Being in better shape than I am normally, the wolf had finished before me.

“Man, why didn’t Muttford have to join us with this little torture session?” I grunted.

“Because he didn’t need to repay me for curing him with the backup power,” said Templeton, leaning against a table nearby, downing the sixth of an entire pack of beer. He crushed up the can, burped, and wiped the foam from his face.

I grunted and pulled myself up, picking up my boots and pulling on my shirt. I'd retrieved my hat, coat and boots from the barn after being cured. When the police arrived that night, I showed them the printout and explained about the cursed ring. After profuse apologies to all the various business owners, none of them pressed charges, understanding that we were under the influence of an illness, so technically, it was out of our control. The event made the front page of the local news the next day, and so did Eric; seems the fox got his wish, and while he had to share the title of town champion eater with Wanderer, myself and Muttford, he had achieved the world record for fattest fox.

"Is that cab we asked for here yet?" I grunted, getting on the elevator with the rat and the wolf. Templeton hit the button to take us up.

"Ready and waiting outside."

"Well doc, it's been a slice. Thanks for the help." I turned, and the rat shook my hand, but seemed to do it slightly grudgingly.

"Mmm, sure. Just try to keep your nose clean from now on. I hate having to clean up my own messes, let alone someone else's." Shaking my head, I followed Wanderer out of the junkyard.

"So, where are you going from here?" I asked.

"Dunno. I basically go where the wind takes me."

"Heh, ever been to Sapphire Bay? It's an interesting place."

"As interesting as this town?"

I chuckled. "Oh, it can be." I had a bit of déjà vu when I came around the side of the junkyard shop and saw Li and Muttford waiting, just like the last time I left the town. The mutt had managed to shrink back down, to my surprise.

"Heh, special pill left over from some product samples from some company called R-TeX Industries," he said to my question. All four of us shook hands as my luggage, and Wanderer's into the cab. The wolf had agreed to split the cab fare with me; he decided Sapphire Bay sounded like a good place to visit next.

"Well, it's been interesting having you around again," said Li, smirking in a wry fashion. "Think we'll be seeing you again?"

"Heh, you can count on it," I said as I climbed into the cab. "You guys ever need me, just give me a call, you got my number and email address, right?"

"Sure do," said Muttford. Have a good trip!" I waved at the pair as the cab picked up speed and headed out. Wanderer turned to me as he pulled on his seatbelt.

“Did you really mean it when you said you were gonna come back here?”

“Sure did,” I said, pulling on my own seatbelt. I tipped my fedora down over my eyes. “But first when I get back home I’m taking more time off. I need a vacation from THIS vacation.”

CAST

Character.....	copyright
Mike Fang.....	himself
Wanderer.....	himself
Lionardo Furry.....	Capt. Furry
Wolfgang Muttford.....	Capt. Furry
Erle.....	Capt. Furry
Officer Onatop.....	Capt. Furry
Dr. Templeton.....	Conner Coonster
Eric ShinAkira.....	himself.

YOU THINK IT’S OVER?

YOU THINK THIS IS THE END?

THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

FANG WILL RETURN.