

BEHIND THE SCENES

By Mike Fang

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It's hard to know for sure what your day's going to hold. For all my misadventures, there are actually pretty long stretches of nothing between them. But I guess that's what makes those interesting days easier to appreciate; if I never had any time to catch my breath or even get bored, I wouldn't be able to appreciate it when things got interesting.

These thoughts ran through my mind as I idly lay across my couch, scrolling through the news feed on my PDA. It had been eight solid months since I had anything outside of a pretty average routine going on. Given what I'd been through just prior to that, however, I wasn't complaining too much. Alien abduction, body transfer, evil parasites and the like have a tendency to take it out of a person. But I'd begun feeling slightly restless in the last week or so; I was well recovered from my various ordeals and felt ready to take on some kind of challenge eventually.

I glanced around my living room. After I'd sold off all the gaudy junk that belonged to the former owner of the body I was currently occupying, I'd had a good chunk of change on my hands. My creds burning a hole in my pocket, I'd sunk a good chunk of it into buying half of a duplex condo. It was more than enough for me with two upstairs bedrooms, a spacious kitchen, living room, downstairs office and car port. I kept my furnishings modest but good quality, understated elegance being my preferred décor. I'd also tossed some money around investing in supplies for my...hobbies. As it stood, I was now well-stocked with air tanks, bulk food containers and other paraphernalia suitable for a crazy, perverted expansion freak like myself.

And even after all that, I still had enough socked away to help fund various tinkering projects I liked to fiddle with from time to time. After I finished perusing the news feeds, I stuffed my PDA in the pocket of my jeans, slid off the couch and headed out to the carport where I'd set up a workbench. I kept my tools and things locked up in storage cabinets, so I didn't have to worry about anyone stealing them. Fishing the key out of my pocket, I opened up one such cabinet and pulled out a bunsen burner, test tubes and a few chemical containers.

Back when I was still a sad, pathetic defrost living in subsidized housing, I'd obsessively watched various programs to try and get myself back up to speed with the technology and average knowledge of the day. As it was, I realized I would never really come to be more than a layman when it came to things like computers or software programming. But chemistry, now there was a subject I'd taken a shine to. I could really get into watching programs on the subjects and as a result, I'd budded into quite the amateur mad scientist, spending odd hours with PDA in one hand, the screen displaying an explanation of various chemical properties, and a beaker in the other, swirling two compounds together to see what sort of bizarre results I could come up with. The vast majority of my dabbling resulted in nothing, but every now n' then, I really hit on a breakthrough.

My favorite branch of chemistry was organic chemistry, particularly pharmaceuticals. There were quite a few biology textbooks on the chemicals and internal systems found in living organisms and how they reacted to various compounds. I wasn't anything close to a doctor or professional chemist. But with the current equivalent to a textbook right on hand to use like a cookbook, I found I could mix together some interesting juices.

I pulled on a pair of safety glasses and heavy rubber gloves. Hooking my PDA into a wall-mounted screen, I brought up a text on metabolism and how it was regulated. Smirking to myself, I looked over the chemicals I had and added a few milliliters of a general catalyst to a beaker.

"Let's see...this is the primary ingredient in a dietary supplement for burning off weight," I said to myself, looking at the text on the screen. "So if THIS would help increase how fast the body digests and burns food and fat...then logically adding something that's chemically opposed to it would have the opposite effect." I looked over my chemicals again, snickering to myself. I was still getting used to hearing that hyena cackle coming out of my own muzzle, but it was growing on me. I took out a container with some powder in it, carefully measured out about ten grams of it, and added it to the catalyst.

"Okay, this should work," I snickered. "It's on the opposite side of the pH scale, has the opposite number of protons and neutrons, plus the electron count would bond with the chemicals that would otherwise do all the digesting. That should slow down the process." I mused; I needed to figure out what else this compound would need. Looking up the known properties of the chemical I'd selected, I noticed it was known for causing light-headedness in drugs it was used in.

"Hmmm, probably not a good thing to have," I mused. "Okay, so if we add a stabilizing chemical to offset that effect...let's see...I want something that will bond through the catalyst, not the metabolism blocker...AH!" I pulled another chemical bottle off my shelf. Measuring out some of it, I decided to try and go for a two-to-one scale compound and added half as much of the metabolism blocker.

"There we go! Alright, let's see what we've got..." swirling the compound around in the beaker, I unlocked my tool cabinet and pulled out a device that looked somewhat like one of those old-fashioned milkshake mixers you saw in diners in the 1950's. A long probe extended down from a globular head, which I dipped into the beaker of chemical I'd just put together. Tapping a few buttons on the device, I plugged it into the wall-mounted screen and waited to see the results.

The machine gave a hum much like the one I did as I looked at the results. The chemical was bonding the way I'd hoped...but it was also creating a side-effect product, leftover molecules from the bonding process. I'd have to figure out what they did and how to remove them...eventually. As it was, my interest had waned, so I put a label on the test batch and stored it in a refrigerator. It was then I heard the sound of loud, booming

laughing coming from the other condo in my duplex. I smirked; when I finally got a test batch ready, I knew who would be an all-too-eager test subject. As I headed back inside and checked the local movie listings to see what was playing in town, my memory began to wander.

I'd found my current abode about three and a half months ago. After scanning the rental columns for several weeks, I finally found something that looked like I could afford it. I'd been hoping if all went well, I could start earning an income comparable to what I'd made before I was cryogenically frozen. So one day, print-out in hand, I'd found myself pulling up to the off-white duplex condo a few miles outside the city. As I'd pulled into the driveway, I'd seen numerous lots with "for sale" signs on them, water/sewer hookup pipes and power wires sticking up out of the ground. The condo was apparently the first in a new development going up, but a mild housing slump had dropped the rental costs.

Going up to the front door, I'd noticed it was a bit larger than the average Terran would need. It didn't surprise me much; I'd met plenty of people who were larger than normal, so much that lately I've begun to think that "normal" was ready to be redefined. I'd knocked on the door, looking around a bit before getting my attention drawn sharply back to the door. Heavy footfalls that are audible from behind a closed door tend to do that to me.

The door swung open. "Guten tag. Und who might you be?" said a deep voice with a thick German accent. I'd looked up; standing in front of me was a grey wolftaur that stood about two feet taller than I am. He was also a good six inches wider to each side. Large, powerful muscles were packed onto his frame, melon-sized biceps, paving slab pectorals, legs as big around as telephone poles. But for all his beef, the 'taur was undeniably F-A-T. A large, curved gut came out from his upper body, easily as big as an old-fashioned, tube screen television. His second stomach, located on his lower, four-legged body, was similar, only in an oval-like shape instead of a sphere, and bulging down until it was only about a foot off the ground.

The taur had crossed his arms over his chest and on top of his upper gut. He'd worn a black leather jacket with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows and snap buttons down the middle, which looked pretty tight around both his pecs and his paunch. He'd cocked his head slightly to the side, fierce blue eyes glittering in his face and long, blonde hair pulled back tight against his head in a ponytail.

"Mike Fang," I'd said in answer to his question. "Are you Gunther Bierbauch?"

"Heh, as if s'ere is any other," the lupine had said with a smirk. I had returned the expression.

"I'm here about the ad for a condo to rent," I'd said. The taur nodded.

"Oh ja, ja, the realtor told me they vere coming down on the rent. Come...", the 'taur had lumbered out the door, having a full inch of clearance over his head and to his sides.

Being who and what I am, I hadn't been able to help but get certain ideas that put a grin on my face as I'd followed him around the side.

"So," I'd said, "you been here long?"

"About three years now," the taur had replied. "I get ein discount for helping with the maintenance."

"You're a service man, then?" I'd said. The taur had lead me to the front door of the place and was fishing keys out of his jacket pocket.

"Ja," he'd replied, the keys rattling in the door, "I'm ein electrician by trade, though I do make a little extra money on the side doing some other things." The door swung open and the taur had started through...then got stuck partway, his forepaws through the door, his butt outside. His predicament hadn't phased him in the slightest; just a typical situation he finds himself in, apparently.

"I find the...NNNGH!...odd job here...HNNNNGH!...und there...HORNNNGH!...ein few part-time things...RRRRRRRRNNNGH!" Gunther had rocked his bulk back and forth, heaving and yanking until finally his bulk worked its way through and slid through the doorframe.

"Heh, easy there big guy," I'd said, "I'm thinkin' about taking this place, don't forget." The taur had laughed quite loudly. He'd proceeded to give me the dollar tour, telling me a bit about how the property owners were planning on having a gated condo community here, but due to a slow market development wasn't going as fast as they'd planned, so they were cutting back on their lease prices. The construction was all within the last five years, and new buildings weren't going up until the existing ones were filled.

After the tour, Gunther had led me back out the door, giving a repeat performance on the doorframe. I began to worry the thing would break loose before I ever got moved in.

"So," he'd said, brushing his sides off, "Vat do you think?"

"Well," I'd started, intending to ask if there was anything in the leases that could cause the rent to go up. At that moment, a delivery van pulled up, a picture of a steaming fresh pizza on its side. Gunther, upon seeing the van, had chuckled throatily, running his tongue around his muzzle and patting his hands on his upper paunch.

"Aaaaah, lunch time!" He'd said. One thought had entered my mind: *Oh I gotta see THIS.*

"Hey, I've got an order for...," the delivery man had said, a crocodile in the uniform of a local pizza joint. He had a small digital notepad and had been tapping at it with a stylus. He blinked when he found the order, like he wasn't sure he was reading something right.

“Uuuuuuh, 30 deep dish pizzas with pepperoni, sausage, onions, peppers, bacon, olives and extra cheese,” he’d said. It wasn’t until he’d looked up and saw Gunther standing in front of him, toothy grin and gurgling bellies proudly displayed, that comprehension started to dawn on him.

“Ja, that’s mein order,” the taur had chuckled. He’d dug into his jacket pocket and pulled out a roll of bills, shelling out enough for the pizzas and a healthy tip. He’d grabbed five pizza boxes in each hand and headed towards his own door. Jumping on the first excuse to follow along, I’d grabbed five boxes of my own while the delivery croc had used a dolly to load the rest and brought them all inside. Gunther’s own abode was a definite bachelor pad, but a well-kept one. He had a big-screen entertainment center in his living room, with an inexpensive, modular glass and chrome stand for it. A matching coffee table was in front of it, along with a couple normal person-sized chairs (no doubt for guests) along with some low-built, leather upholstered cushions on the floor.

Gunther’s kitchen looked like it had all the necessary amenities for cooking for one (though in the taur’s case, his cooking for one was other people’s cooking for a family of four), but from the collection of empty take-out containers (meticulously stacked and waiting for the recycle bin) it looked like the dishes were what got the most use. He had no less than three refrigerators, too. The rest of his place I couldn’t see just yet, but I later found out he had a downstairs bedroom and an extra bedroom he’d turned into a workshop where he’d buy broken electronics, then fix them up and sell them on the future’s equivalent of eBay; both a hobby for him and a means of additional income.

“Just bring them upstairs,” The taur had said, heading up the titanium reinforced staircase. The taur’s upstairs loft is what started getting me genuinely excited. In one corner was some workout equipment; a workout mat with a free weight stand (which went up to some remarkable weight sizes). On the far wall was a trophy cabinet that had about two dozen metals and ribbons. Looking them over, I saw that half of them were for bodybuilding competitions. The other half was for eating contests. Not one of them was lower than second place.

On the far wall of the upper loft was another sitting cushion, which the taur’d had us stack the pizzas next to, fifteen on either side. I’d liked where he was going. The taur had given the delivery croc another tip, then started to see me to his door.

“Vell, I hope you liked the condo,” he’d said, starting down the stairs. “I’m going to have mein lunch, so if you have any other questions, call any time.”

I’d given the taur a grin. “Thanks I’ll do that. So...you gonna need any help with that?”

The taur had stopped with his forepaws on the top two stairs. He turned to look at me, then started to get his own tooth-filled grin.

“Heh, I don’t think you know vat you’d be getting yourself into,” he said. I’d grinned wider.

“TRY ME,” I’d said. The ‘taur had given me a look of askance for about three seconds, then turned around. He’d walked with a strut back towards his cushion with his treasure trove of pizzas nearby, his fat bellies swinging with his cocky, self-assured gait.

“Heh, if you think you’re up to it, you’re more than welcome to try,” he said, climbing onto his cushion. “But you’d better know, I’m not ein delicate flower. When I have someone helping with mein gorging, I want to see some gusto.” I’d grinned widely, grabbing the first pizza box as the taur was turning around on the cushion.

“No nibbling slices for me, so you’d better be able to put some muscle into-GULK!” Gunther had turned around completely, and that’s when I’d struck. It looked like Gunther ordered his pizza’s special, because they weren’t pre-cut into slices. This was fortunate for me, because it had allowed me to fold the pizza in half like a giant topping and sauce filled taco, hold it in one hand, and then grab the taur’s jacket with the other. I’d pulled myself up to his eye level and crammed the pizza into his muzzle, making his cheeks pudge up like a couple of melons.

“Like THAT, big guy?!” I’d said, letting out a hyena snicker. The taur had chewed three times, then swallowed the big lump of pizza in his mouth.

“URP! MMmmmmm,” the taur had said, smirking as I’d let go of his jacket and grabbed a pizza off the opposite stack. “Not ein bad start....now let’s see you keep it up-ULK!” I’d administered another pizza right to his face, pudging out his cheeks again.

“Heh, buddy I’m gonna redefine the term CRAM SESSION for you!” I’d said, flipping open two more boxes. I’d looked around the room and noticed a stepladder; it made me suspect this wasn’t the first time Gunther had had a partner for this. I pulled it in front of the taur and yanked two more pizza’s out of their boxes.

“Oh JA!” The taur said, blue eyes glittering as I came up to his eye level again. “Stuff mein bellies-GURK!” I crammed another pizza into his muzzle, and this time I didn’t wait for him to swallow. I put another one to his muzzle and started pushing in right on top of the first one. The taur had held his arms wide, crossing his eyes while making sounds like he was struggling to take in the pizzas. Given the evidence I’d seen, I’d suspected (and still do) that he was putting on an act. But then and now, it was appreciated.

“URK! GURK! HORK! GORK! GUHORK!” The taur had sounded like that scene in “Return of the Jedi” where Jabba the Hut was getting strangled by Princess Leia. The pizza’s slid over his tongue, sauce and toppings sliding over it as well, giving him a taste of the pizza as it slid down his gullet, starting to add inches to both his waistlines. His taur belly pushed out just a bit, while his upper belly was more noticeably bulged forward, upward, downward and in every direction. I’d reached down and grabbed the next two pizzas.

“OOOhhhh,” Gunther had groaned, hands now resting on his upper paunch, a dopey grin on his face. “Ohhh ja, I haven’t had ein good CRAMMING in ein long-GUK! GORK! GURLK!” He’d hadn’t finished his thought before I’d gotten back up to the taur’s muzzle, shoving more pizza into it.

“Heheheh, well get ready for a ‘fresher,” I’d said, “cause I’m gonna stuff you stupid!” What followed was a stuffing session that stripped the rust from my skills like a wire brush wheel in a power drill. I hadn’t had a chance to stuff anyone since before my cryogenic freezing, and even back then it had been several months before I was frosted. I was LONG overdue for some practice.

Gunther’s size and shape had made him a challenge, but I was determined to rise to the occasion even as he himself was rising. I got into a groove: jump down, scoop two pizzas up, fold them with each hand, run back up the ladder, get to cramming, then repeat. I found it funny, but helping the taur pig out and bloat up was actually giving me a good calisthenic workout. Gunther was a real treat as a workout partner, too.

“G’uhhh, oh JA!” he’d said, eyes rolling as I ran back up the ladder. “Stuff me MORE! GULK! GORK! HORP! GORP! ORLP! UUUUURRRRP! Oh das ist GOOD! Do it to me-GUK! ULK! ULP! GURP! URLK! GULP! OOooooohh I LOVE s’at! Shove it in, glut mein bellies! GORLK! GUH-HORK! HORP! ORP! UUURRRRP! Oh ja, BIGGER! FATTER! Bloat mein BIG FAT BELLIES!”

The taur’d put on a great show while I’d served up pizza after pizza. He’d rest his hands on his upper belly sometimes, while other’s he’d let his arms hang limp at his sides as he leaned his upper body back and let his upper gut point up at an angle. He’d flex his arms, jutting his upper gut out, like he was posing in a bodybuilding competition while I was working his table muscle. Other times he’d put his hands behind his head and lean back with his muzzle open like a written invitation to have a go at him, which it obviously was. Each pizza was met with enthusiastic sounds of gorging, arms often held apart like he was amazed at the amount of food being stuffed into his gluttonous gullet. Other times he’d languidly slapped and pawed at his upper belly like he was vainly attempting to grab onto it and hold it back.

Those bellies of his had responded just as well as the rest of him, too. They gained inches with every couple pizzas; I honestly think he’d already eaten before the pizzas arrived; there was no way the amount of food I put in him could have fattened him up the way it did if he hadn’t been close to full already. But with each delivery of crust, sauce, cheese and toppings the taur’s bellies swelled and bloated, his upper belly swelling from microwave size to tv size, the buttons gapping further and further apart. By halfway through the pizzas, the snap buttons quivered around the massive ball of bloat that jacket was straining to hold in. The jacket fought the good fight, but then, with huge patches of grey furred gut between them, the buttons started snapping open one by one. Good thing that jacket wasn’t the kind with a zipper.

The taur’s taurbelly had also crept closer and closer to the cushion he was standing on as

I stuffed him. It touched down and kept going, squishing between his legs as it started looking like he'd swallowed a couch, his gut lifting him off his footpaws. Once he was perched on top of his taurgut, Gunther began bouncing and wobbling on it each time I shoved more pizza into him.

Finally, panting and working up a sweat, I'd carried the final two pizzas up the ladder. Now thoroughly beat, I'd clapped the two deep dishes together like a sandwich and folded them in half. Gunther was also looking thoroughly worked out by then, his hands holding the sides of his upper belly, tongue lolled out of the side of his muzzle.

"OOOOooooohhh, Jaaaaahhh...", he'd moaned. "S'at feels-GORK! HORK! GORLK!" The taur opted to go with the arms-limp-at-his-side pose that last time, taking in the pizzas as his bellies bulged out a couple final inches. His upper belly was bloated to the size of a footlocker. His taurbelly could have held a canoe in it as it raised his footpaws about five inches off the cushion.

"UUUUURRRRRRRRRRP!" The taur'd let out one final belch. His bellies gurgled in gorged contentment. Gasping for breath, I'd turned a bit and put my back to the taur's upper body, whipping his brow.

"Heh, hoo, hah," I'd gasped, looking around. "Well, I think that's all we got," The taur had chuckled throatily. Turning his upper body slightly to the side, he caught me in one arm and swept me back into his upper gut, squeezing and squishing me into its round, spherical bloat. It felt flexible and pliable, but resilient, like it would spring back to its round shape as soon as Gunther stopped pressing me into it.

"OOOooooohh, das vas GOOD," the taur moaned. "Heh heh heh, same time next week?"

I'd dug into a pocket on my pant leg and pulled out my PDA. Activating the smart phone feature, I dialed up a number.

"Ronzo Realty? Yeah, this is Mike Fang," I'd said. "That condo you've got for rent? I'll take it."

"Heh, good times," I said to myself, still channel surfing. I really wasn't all that surprised to find out that in this brave new world, there were over 1,000 channels on public broadcast alone, but still barely anything worth watching. I snorted in disgust; if entertainment wouldn't come to me, then by God I'd go find it.

"Time to hit the klub," I said to myself. I headed upstairs and put on my customary casual outfit, a green, short-sleeve button up shirt worn open over a white tank top, my traditional fedora, a pair of fingerless black gloves, tan slacks and brown hiking boots. I decided to forego taking my hand cannon with me, but never one to go completely unarmed, I slipped on a leg holder under my pant leg with my snub nose .38 in it, adding to my usual paraphernalia I carry with me; wallet, watch, Leatherman tool, among other

things. Thus fortified, I headed out the door.

As a general rule, I'm actually not a social butterfly. I'd had a group of close friends in the past, but they'd been a group I'd made over a fairly long time of hand-picking individuals I'd decided I wanted to associate with. But I digress; point is, the club scene had never really been my deal and, technically, it still isn't. At most social events I mostly do the same thing; support the wall and hit the bar. I'll sometimes fall into conversation with people, particularly if I know them or the subject of discussion. But generally I don't venture far outside my social comfort zone.

The Koopa Klub was, for me, an exception of sorts. It was a place I felt I could relax and not feel pressured or stressed to meet everybody else's standards of a good time. I didn't have to show up with a girl (or guy) on my arm to feel like I was fitting in, didn't have to make an ass of myself on a dance floor or a karaoke machine if I didn't want to and didn't feel like I was getting pity stares from the staff for relaxing by myself.

Or maybe I was, but I just didn't notice. I think part of my comfort factor at the klub is due to the fact I know the owners. The klub, as you've probably figured by now, has a Mario Bro's. theme to it, with a focus specifically on the koopa troopas. The clientele tend to be Nintendo enthusiasts, frequently coming dressed in Nintendo advertising clothing, sometimes even full costumes.

A good number of them, including the entire staff, have gone even further. With the Canmephian's genetic technology, species swapping has become a cosmetic option as easy as a lift and tuck was back in the 21st century. I hadn't swapped back to my original species myself because I felt my own transformation happened for a reason, and frankly I'd come to accept, even embrace, my new form. Others, however, did change their species, and with the Canmephian tech, they could change it to just about anything, even fictional species like koopas. A little customization of DNA, some splicing of genetic features, whirl it up in a blender and you've got a DNA cocktail for whatever you want.

I pulled into the klub's parking lot and headed towards the front door, or that is, the front drawbridge. The klub fit the whole koopa motif perfectly, with an exterior design like the koopa castle from the games, complete with a drawbridge and portcullis. There were four lines going through separate turnstile barricades, with bouncers at each one looking like very muscular hammer brother koopas; smooth helmet shells, large cast iron hammers on their belts and everything. The longer line was for the average customers, but being a friend of the owner, I showed the bouncer my VIP card and managed to slip in the shorter line.

Inside the club, the motif remained the same. A techno beat of the first Super Mario game was the standard music, while faux torches lit the stone walls. Fans overhead were made to look like those swinging balls and chains, while the dance floor was clear plexiglass over a rotating surface made to look like lava. The bar was, as usual, my first stop. It was set up to look like an old medieval tavern from a renaissance festival. They served all the usual drinks, though in keeping with the theme, you had to know how to order.

“Hey Baren,” I said, leaning on the bar. A koopa ‘tender turned around and gave me a grin. He was really pale and slim, with a shock of flyaway, dark, reddish-brown hair. He was dressed in a roughed-up looking sport coat, white shirt and black tie with blue jeans. I forget the name of the fashion...the “mod” fashion, maybe, or perhaps the “vogue” look, I dunno. Whatever it was, it was the most conservative outfit I’d seen the ‘tender in. Usually what he wears involves some strategically placed leather and not a lot else.

“Hey Mike,” he said, “Want the usual star juice?”

“You bet,” I said, nodding. Star juice was the klub’s house name for a screwdriver. Baren did the bartender flip with a bottle of booze, mixing my drink together in a pewter cup that fit the atmosphere.

“Are B and Sumea around?” I asked.

“Mom n’ Dad are here, just busy upstairs,” Baren said, collecting some empty cups and mugs off the bar and putting them in the bar sink, quickly spraying them with heated water. The staff at the klub embraced the koopa lifestyle, though not to an unhealthy degree. None of them were sinister or mean-spirited bullies, but they had an air of self-confidence and larger-than-life attitude. I guess that’s why I felt like I fit in.

Another aspect they embraced about the characters they modeled themselves after was being a tight-knit group. The senior staff was like a surrogate family to one another, with brothers and sisters among them, the couple that owned and operated the klub being their surrogate parents. I guess you could say I considered myself something like one of the family consiglieres, though I suspected to others I was more like a crazy distant cousin... or maybe the family pet.

I drained my drink. “No problem,” I said. “Are the lanes open?”

“You bet,” Baren said, nodding to the side of the bar. One of the themed attractions at the klub was “Bowling for Shrooms.” It followed the same rules as regular bowling, only two things were different. First, they shaped the pins to look like citizens of the mushroom kingdom. Second, the balls had been replaced with replica koopa shells that, rather than rolling them, you slid them along like a curling stone.

I fed my credstick into the slot in one of the lanes and conveyor belt brought out a three-spiked shell. Taking hold of the shell by its back spike, I aimed it carefully, then took two brisk strides forward, going into a kneel and shoving the shell along the floor. It hit the polished wood alley and shot along the floor like a meteor, going into a slight spin as it crashed into the mushroom pins, colliding and cracking off one another. Seven down, three in the corner to go; I grabbed the shell as it was returned to me, this time putting a bit of a deliberate spin on it by giving it a twist with my wrist.

I overcompensate; the shell went into the gutter just before it hit the ‘shrooms.

“Aaaahh,” I grunted, a machine dropping new ‘shrooms into place with a pinsetter made to look like a warp pipe. Grabbing up my shell again, I put a more gentle spin on it this time; a strike! I made a pistol gesture with my hand. I killed some time playing through two full games. I didn’t break my personal best, but I played a solid game. Re-collecting my credstick, I walked back over to the bar.

“Any sign of ‘em?” I asked Baren. He shook his head. I frowned a bit; B and Sumea were consummate hosts; busy as they might be, they wouldn’t let a good-sized crowd like they had tonight go unattended this long.

“What’re they working on? Some kind of major shipping problem or somethin’?” I asked, looking over at the staircase that led up to the large, red double doors to B’s office. Baren frowned.

“I’m not sure,” he said. A guy in an expensive suit showed up and said they needed to discuss an urgent business issue with them. Dad asked if it could wait, but they said it was very time-sensitive as well as all-around sensitive.”

I looked at the door again. The smarter half of me said it wasn’t my place to go butting into their business without being invited. But the detective in me said there was something wrong with this situation. I stood up from the bar and started to wander towards the door.

“Wait you’re not going t...,” Baren started. I put a finger to my muzzle, then tapped the side of my nose with it. The pale koopa drew in a nervous breath, clenched his teeth, and started concentrating really hard on scrubbing the bar. I got up to the door and flipped my hat off. Bending down, I untied/retied my boot laces, leaning my head close to the door. I could hear a deep, rumbling voice; had to be B. Then there was a softer, smoother voice; Sumea for sure. There was also a hard, rasping voice I didn’t recognize at all.

“This offer’s really in everybody’s best interest,” said this voice.

“So why don’t you show us your business credentials,” said Sumea.

“Ma’me, we really need to move on this now,” the raspy voice said. “We’ve already been bogged down too long in red tape, so the faster we can get the wheels turning, the better.”

“I run an honest klub,” said B, his thunderous baritone sounding not angry, yet, but definitely no-nonsense.

“And we’re not askin’ you to do anything but,” the raspy voice said in response.

“Well,” said B, “I’d have an easier time believing that if you weren’t playing coy with us about who you work for, who your customers are...you just want to rent our unused space, no questions asked, and operate out of them whenever you want.”

“I’m thinkin’ a little bit of trust wouldn’t be out of the question,” the raspy voice said.

“Think again,” B snorted.

“Mr. Talbot,” Sumea said, “Please, see it from our perspective. You may not be doing anything illegal, but if we were to gain a reputation of making business deals without the proper licensing and other credentials, it could attract the people who are involved in illegal activities.”

A chair creaked. “Well, you have my card,” said the raspy voice. “Think the offer over. I’ll be in touch.” I quickly stepped back from the door and stood just off to the side from the doorframe. The door swung open and out stepped a rhino in a sharkskin suit. He was tall enough to almost reach the top of the doorframe with his head. He snapped on a pair of wraparound shades to his face and marched down the steps, quickly getting lost in the crowd.

The door swung back shut on pneumatic hinges, but only for a second. One second later, they swung back open a second time. This time the hulking figure in it did brush the top of the door with his flaming red hair. Standing at the top of the steps was a huge Bowser-style koopa. Everything about him said “massive” with a megaphone. Huge arms crossed over his well-built pecs, biceps keeping his spiked armbands tight. A black, sleeveless shirt fit snug over him, along with the black, tight-fitting shorts. He glared down the staircase at the retreating figure of the rhino, letting out a snort through his nostrils that let a couple short jets of genuine smoke out.

“Greaseball mobster,” he rumbled.

“Now honey, we don’t know anything for sure,” said a softer voice just to his side. A smaller Koopa, dressed in a red, strapped, sleeveless top and very complimentary blue jeans, was next to him. Her long, snow-white hair hung down to just past her shoulders. I leaned back against the doorway, waiting for them to swing back shut.

“I dunno,” I said loud enough to garner attention. “You know what they say about first impressions.”

“Hey Mike,” B said, turning towards me. He grabbed my hand in one that engulfed my halfway up the forearm. “Been listening in on us?”

“Sorry, it’s a private eye thing,” I said.

“Next time, don’t feel like you have to lurk,” Sumea said, giving me a hug. “You’re know we don’t keep secrets from you if you ask.”

“Appreciate it,” I said. “So, is that what I think it was?”

B snorted. "Probably. This guy shows up unannounced, says he wants to talk about renting some of the open space at the club where we haven't decided what we're going to put in. Son of a bitch tells us he's representing a group that wants to rent it for his business, but won't tell us who he represents, won't show us a business license, won't tell us the hours he wants to operate...."

"Yeah," I said, "I smell organized crime."

"No denying....," Sumea said, putting on a concerned expression and turning back to look at the crowd, "It's suspicious at the least."

"Hrm," I muttered. "Well, odds are they won't make a move until they're sure you're going to refuse them. The one good thing about gangsters; they're so arrogant they think if you realize just who you're dealing with, you'll cave in from their reputation alone."

"HA!" B said loudly. "They think they can intimidate ME?! Oh that's RICH. There's only ONE person in the known universe who can tell ME what to do," he said, thumping a big thumb against his chest.

"Let's go see to the guests B," Sumea said, walking between B and myself with a little smile on her face.

"Yes dear," he said, dutifully following behind her. I smirked broadly, keeping the hyena-chuckle low in my throat as I also followed her. B and Sumea were the ideal hosts; they mingled, shook hands with new faces and hugged old, familiar ones. They'd stop and chat with the people they knew and make sure those that were newly arrived were enjoying themselves, but they never hovered over someone to the point they felt uncomfortable or crowded. Finding people who know just the right balance of care to personal space is a rarity.

After about a half-hour of mingling, B, Sumea and myself retired to their personal booth, or should I say, throne. The klub had a raised platform with a large, cushioned piece of furniture with multiple seats on it, with the largest and highest reserved for the king of the castle. B dropped into this seat heavily, with Sumea taking her customary seat next to his, elevated to where her head could come up to about shoulder height on her much bigger sweetheart. I took a seat a bit further down, but turned so I could still face the two.

"Looks like your klub's getting more clientele each time I come here," I said.

"Definitely," B said, pressing a button on the arm of his throne. "I think our numbers have doubled since we opened last month. We've managed to operate in the black every night since we opened."

"Wow," I said, eyebrows raised. "That's an accomplishment. Usually it takes a while for word to get around, or so I've heard."

Sumea nodded. "True, but we had an existing client pool just waiting for us to open."

I chuckled; both of the koopas couple (or should I say kouple...nah, that's going too far) were members of Nintendo-Fest, a large convention of Nintendo game enthusiasts. The festival was held twice a year, once in the spring on the west coast and once in the fall on the east coast. B and Sumea attended the east coast convention every October; in fact they'd been made king and queen of the convention dance ball two years back; last year those titles went to a couple who dressed up each year as Link and Zelda, or so I'd heard. The koopas had been passing out flyers and business cards for several months now, including at the convention, advertising their klub. By opening day, they'd had over a hundred people reserve seats.

Baren came up the throne's steps, handing B a Bowser-sized mug of "Bowser's Reserve", a flavored cola with a serious belt of that artificial additive that the put in cinnamon balls, red hots and other spicy candies.

"Thanks kiddo," B said, giving the smaller koopa a pat on the back that almost knocked him over.

"Sure thing, dad," Baren said, rubbing his shoulder as he headed back to the bar. B took two huge gulps from the mug, draining about a third of it. He tilted his head back and let loose with a huge, resounding BRUUUUUUUUUUURP! accompanied by a rather fitting 5-foot jet of fire from his muzzle.

"You've been practicing," I chuckled. B smirked at me as Sumea giggled.

You may be wondering how exactly I came to know these two. It was actually at another convention. About a month after my last misadventure, I was still getting used to having a new form. I'd learned changing form wasn't as uncommon as it once was, so with a little digging I managed to discover some support groups that held meetings. I wasn't feeling traumatized or unable to cope, but I felt that if something were to happen, unexplained medical problems, feelings of phantom pains, hallucinations, or what have you, I'd want to know who I should call for help; doctors, psychiatrists, etc.

It was at one of those meetings I first ran into B. He'd completed his own transformation treatments about two months ago and was talking with folks about how to adjust and adapt to extensive body modification. Most of the people there, it was obvious that they'd had themselves changed in some out-of-the-ordinary way; multiple arms in species you usually didn't see with them, people with traits from multiple species that seemed to suggest something besides mixed parentage, that sort of thing. I was among some of the more average-looking folks and, as B told me later, was mistaken for someone who came to talk to people who'd gotten modified because he was considering having it done to himself.

I'd been at the refreshment table, doing what I often do at social gatherings; support the

wall and hit the snacks and drinks. B had come over to the table to get something himself. Being the outgoing host type, he was more than ready to try and make the shy person feel more comfortable with a personal introduction, a rather vigorous handshake, and a one-on-one convo.

"So," he'd said, draining his drink, "I'm betting you're here to window shop for bod mods, right?"

I'd smirked a bit at him, swirling the ice in my glass. "Nah, I've already been changed around."

"Ahhh, I getcha. Went for a species swap?" B had asked. I nodded.

"Yeah, though, not quite by choice." The easygoing, self-confident grin had slid form B's face.

"What do you mean?" he'd asked. I launched into my story. By the time I'd finished, the koopa and I had moved to a table, where the koopa was now looking at me with frank amazement. When I finished, B sat back in his already-stressed seat, let out a slow breath and shook his head.

"Holy shit," he'd said. "I'm about to ask something people usually ask ME; how do you handle it?"

I shrugged. "Faith in God and rolling with the punches," I said.

Since that day I'd stayed in touch with B; being the father-figure type he is, he often helps with people adjusting to body modings, particularly when they go the video-game-character route. But about a week after we'd first met, he called me and said he'd been thinking about it and suddenly realized there were a number of people who had shown up at meetings, looking scared or uncomfortable and who left without talking. It had occurred to him maybe they were like me; victims of some kind of crime or abuse who -had- to get transformed whether they wanted to or not.

B'd asked for my help talking with these difficult cases, which I agreed to do. We now have a system to handle these hard luck cases. B brings them by his klub, where we talk with these folks where they don't have to feel out of place in a room full of people who generally are glad they got changed or are eager to do so. It's a pretty rare thing for me to get called in by B, but when he does, I don't hesitate.

It was there he introduced me to his fiance, Sumea. They apparently had also met at one of the aforementioned Nintendo conventions, the two of them deciding to get modified together. Sumea was equally amazed by my own story, almost as amazed as I was by her cooking. The koopess is an incredible chef, with a particular knack for baking. She, in

fact, has a large bakery counter at the Koopa Klub, where the staff follows her recipes to the letter, baking Bowser-symbol shaped sugar cookies, mushroom and koopa shell-shaped muffins, sculpted cakes, and other treats.

It was on one of these muffins I was munching as B told me about their plans to add one extra dance floor for private parties, as well as a Duck Hunt-style light gun shooting gallery.

"Sounds like a good plan," I said, taking another bite out of my muffin. "Have you thought about that proposal I made?" The two koopas grinned.

"Oh you bet!" B said. "We've been calling those Canmephian distribution companies to work out vendor space for inflation and fattening products. And yes, we're making sure we get stocked with those formulas of yours."

"Heh, glad to hear it," I said. "You might think about making 'em part of a Dig Dug-themed area of the klub."

B let out a throaty guffaw. "That'd round us out nicely!" I couldn't resist letting out a hyena cackle of my own.

"That'd round out EVERYBODY nicely!" I said. Just then, a koopess waitress came the throne steps.

"Excuse me, sir?" she said to B. The koopa drained the last of his drink and let out a smaller belch.

"Mmm?" he said.

"We've got a problem at the door," the waitress said, nodding in the direction of the klub's front. "That bouncer again..."

B grunted, pushing himself up out of his seat. "Say no more, I know the one you mean. Mike..." the koopa tossed his head. "Probably gonna need your help here." I nodded, falling into step next to B while Sumea just smiled resignedly and shook her head. I followed the king to the drawbridge of his castle, where there were a trio of college-age types dressed in varsity colors. A hammer brother-style bouncer was in front of them; almost as big as B was. The bouncer was leering in the three customer's faces while fingering his hammer.

"...you put one hair outa line," he was saying, "you do anything outa place, if I just decide I don't like the way you LOOK, and I'll fling you out of the klub so fast you'll get skid marks. So you watch your step 'cause I'm gonna be watchin' YOU."

B got up right behind the bouncer and cleared his throat loudly. "Adam, what are you doing?"

The hammer brother turned around. "Oh hey boss, I was just tellin' these punks here they better mind their manners."

"They're our customers, Adam, NOT punks," B said, hands now on his hips. The hammer brother just guffawed.

"Hey, boss, you don't worry 'bout security, okay? I got everything under control," he said with a smarmy grin. That grin dropped from his face as B suddenly grabbed the bouncer by the upper arms, pinning them to his sides. The koopa practically unhinged his jaw as he crammed the bouncer head-first into his muzzle!

"MMMPH! MMMMMMPH!" The bouncer thrashed and kicked, the three customers staring wide-eyed in amazement as B tilted his head back, making a bobbing motion with his head. The bouncer slid down his gullet in short jerks, the shell giving the koopa a bit of a tough time. Once it was through, however, his legs and footpaws slid easily down B's throat as the bouncer dropped into his gut with a BLORK! The koopa's gut had become distended from its usual washboard state as the bouncer had gone down, growing out bigger and rounder with each inch. In the end, it bulged out to the size of a dumpster on the koopa, his shirt riding up over the bulbous bulge that was wriggling and making muffled noises of protest.

"Sorry about that boys," B said, picking at his teeth. "He's a little too enthusiastic." The koopa smirked, rubbing at his gut and giving it several firm pats as the three customers continued to gawk in amazement. The hyena cackle I let out probably only added to their astonished expressions.

"Though if you would," B said, his girth still wriggling, "make sure you follow klub rules while you're here. You have a good evening." The koopa ushered the trio of still-slack-jawed varsity students through the entryway.

"I'd say that probably gave them something to talk about over their drinks," I said, grin now so wide on my muzzle it was starting to hurt. B chuckled, stepping to one side of the doorway.

"E'yeah, no doubt," he said. "Now, think you can give me a hand?"

I cocked my head to one side. "With what? Looks like you got this under control." B grinned, leaning back against the wall, putting his hands behind his head.

"Not quite. Heheh..." the koopa slapped the side of his gut again. "How 'bout you help me knock some sense into this lunkhead?"

I'm not sure how, but I managed to grin even wider. Being as big and tough as he is, B could take a real working-over by someone my size and it wouldn't do much more than tickle to him. I admit, I feel the same way when I was swollen up good and large myself;

I think it's something to do with the sensation of being that full and rounded.

Cracking my knuckles, I drew back and gave B's girth a good, healthy, open-handed WHAP. The koopa's gut wobbled a bit, and he let out a short BURP.

"Heh, is that the best you got?" he said. Snickering, I gave him a harder WHAP!

"ORP! Heh, better, but not good enough." B snerked. I limbered up a bit more. I balled up a fist and this time sank it good and hard into B's distended girth, feeling something like I'd just connected with a bag of loose marbles wrapped in cotton.

"BORRRRRP!" the koopa snickered after letting out his thick, wet belch. "That was a good one, now stop sandbaggin' and show me whatcha got!"

WHAP! WUMP! WHOP! I alternated between open-handed slaps to the belly and closed-fisted punches. Lefts, rights, uppercuts, I mixed them up as I worked over B's belly. The koopa leaned back against the wall, chuckling and belching the whole while. I kept the koopa's gut wobbling and shaking, bouncing it left, right, up, down and ever which way. A couple times I stepped back, then launched myself at him in a shoulder tackle to give him a good, hard shove. Finally, I was out of breath and panting hard. I leaned against B's gut and sucked in ragged breaths.

"OOooooohhhh, 'at's one helluva good massage," B said, chuckling and ruffling my head. I giggled loudly as I stepped back, the koopa pushing himself off the wall.

"Well, let's see if he's learned his lesson," B said, spreading his legs and taking a deep breath. He let out a HUGE gastric blast, again almost unhinging his jaw as he burped Adam back up. The hammer brother came out headfirst, flying a good ten feet before collapsing in a heap on the floor. B picked the bouncer back up roughly, standing him on his footpaws; the hammer brother's eyes were rolling around on different circuits as he weaved back and forth like a Jenga tower about to fall.

"Now," B said, putting his hand on top of Adam's head, turning the hammer brother's face in his direction, "You show the customer's respect from now on, or next time, I'll let Mike here use more than just his hands, got it?"

"Yessir," the bouncer slurred in a punch-drunk voice. B spun him round.

"Good," the koopa said, "Now go take five in the breakroom 'till your next shift. JERRY!" A different, slightly shorter but wider hammer brother came over as B gave Adam a shove on his way to the breakroom.

"Yessir?" Jerry said.

"Need you to start your shift early. Don't worry, you'll get overtime," B said, tucking his shirt back in his shorts.

“No problem boss,” he said, taking up his spot at the door. I followed B back to his throne, where Sumea was waiting with a bemused look on her face.

“So, what was that all about?” she asked. I smirked as B and I took our respective seats.

“Oh, not much,” I said, “just had to help B work a few kinks out.”

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully. I returned home, caught a late movie and then hit the sack. Good thing too; I was going to need the rest come the next day.

The morning started out calmly enough; I went through my typical morning routine, breaking it up slightly by actually eating some breakfast. Normally I skip it and just eat a heavier lunch, but somehow I managed to convince myself to actually stop and fuel up a bit for the day to come.

My first stop was to check some of my regular message boards. There wasn’t a lot going on at any of them, though there were one or two replies to some of my messages. I shook my head at a couple of them and started a response.

“You’re completely missing the point,” I began...then deleted it; sounded too combative, too much like an accusation.

“When I said I thought our planet needs to show more independence, I didn’t mean we need to make Canmephians feel unwelcome,” I wrote; yeah, that sounded more tactful, less likely to get knee-jerk flameout responses. “My point is we should strive for more self-sufficiency. I’ve seen far too much reliance on canmephian-based technology, designs and the like in just about every aspect of Earth (yes, I use that archaic term) life. Just about every new building going up has a canmephian design to it. Now I think it’s fine to make the buildings sized for canmephians, but the exterior appearance and interior aesthetic doesn’t have to mirror their style as well. I think we should maintain the -look- while improving the -function-.

“Another issue I’ve noticed is the decrease in Earth-based, scientific research and development. Just because the canmephians have their own interstellar ships and travel doesn’t mean we shouldn’t develop our own. In fact, I think if anything this should light a fire under our asses to catch up with the rest of the class, if you get my meaning. We shouldn’t rely on the drygers and wolfskunks to shuttle us around on their commuter ships like kids relying on their parents to take them everywhere.” I paused and thought a moment; that last paragraph might have been a little strong, but hell, if I didn’t put SOME strength behind my message it would sound less like an opinion expressed and more like a simpering, spineless whimper.

“Basically,” I wrote, “I’m saying we need to be generous hosts, but still remember that

this is OUR planet, and we are our own race, capable of a lot by ourselves; a lot more than just playing sidekick.”

I hit the “post” button, then went back and read over some of my own pervious posts and the responses. Maybe it was a little bit of ego, re-reading my previous debates and discussions, but I also found it helpful to reflect on what I’d previously said and how others had reacted; a bit of hindsight that I seldom regretted. The responses I’d received over time were varied, but there were common threads running though them all, no matter what the subject. There were the people who agreed, a fairly small bunch; there were the people who had their own arguments, a fairly large bunch; there were people who said I took this or that too seriously, people who said I was a lie like the cake and people who said other various, pointless internet fad responses that sounded like so much random drivel blurted out just for the sake of trying pathetically to get attention.

Satisfied I had my bases covered online, I headed outside and started doing some more chemistry dabbling. I’d only been at it about ten minutes, just long enough to test that concoction I’d been messing with the day before wasn’t poisonous, when my phone rang. I put a cork in the test tube I was holding and pulled my cell phone from my pocket.

“Hello?” I said.

“Mike, it’s Sumea.” The koopess sounded all business and more than a little tense. “I need you to come down to the klub. That rhino with the ‘business offer’ is back. But he’s got five friends with him and B’s in the city. I tried reaching him but his phone battery must be dead.”

“Have they done anything threatening?” I said, but I was already in motion. After getting up I’d been wandering around the condo in my slacks and my white tank-top undershirt. I quickly began yanking on my boots and getting my shirt on as fast as I could with just one hand.

“No, not yet,” Sumea said. “Right now they’re just milling around, but the way they keep looking around and nodding to one another seems...strange. Almost like...”

“Like they’re casing the place, sizing it up,” I said. “I’m on my way, just sit tight and tell the bouncers to keep an eye on ‘em.” I pulled my shirt on fast, throwing my customary tie on out of force of habit. This time I knew to expect trouble; my .38 went into my leg holster, and my .357 magnum went into the holster on my belt. My arms shot through the sleeves of my trench coat. I flipped my hat onto my head in a hurry, then turned and headed out the door.

As I navigated through traffic, I tried to will the distance to between myself and the klub to shrink. It was after hours for the klub, so a minimum of staff would be there. What few bouncers were there would probably be off guard and even if they weren’t, few bouncers are prepared for someone who’s entire occupation is based on beating up people, often to death. I was pretty convinced at this point these people were organized crime.

I came to a fast stop in the parking lot of the klub. Jumping out, I took a moment to decide on my best move. Barreling in with my gun out may have been tempting, but would probably have just made everything worse; turn an attempt at intimidation into a hostage situation, perhaps. Instead, I went around the side of the building and went to the staff entrance. I tried the door handle but it was locked, so I rapped rapidly on it. A koopa in a cook's uniform opened it.

"Mike Fang, private eye," I said quickly. "Sumea called me." He quickly nodded and pulled the door open further.

"Those thugs've been here about ten minutes," he said. I stepped through the door into the kitchen. The place looked scrubbed and clean; the thugs must have come in just as they were getting ready to start up for the day, and now nobody felt comfortable getting to work. There were two or three other cooks, all looking nervously towards the serving counter on the far side of the room.

"Jerry, one of the bouncers, told 'em that we were closed," one of the cooks said. "But the rhino said he had a business meeting with B and Sumea and won't leave."

"Any trouble from any of 'em?" I asked.

"Besides them trespassing?" The cook snorted. I gave him a look.

"You know what I mean," I said, turning my attention to the serving counter. I could see several of the trespassers. They were dressed in suits that looked like they would fit in with the middle-management of a major corporation; expensive but tasteful, the kind of outfits people like me only wear on special occasions because they're our one suit of "good" clothes, but for these guys, nothing more than typical business attire, which they have several of.

"Wish I could dress that nice all the time," I muttered under my breath. I dug a hand into my coat. I have to admit, for all my desire for more independence from canmephian tech, I definitely appreciate some of the breakthroughs they've shared with us. One of them was a physics-defying technology that enabled them to create things like bags and luggage that could hold far, far more than what should physically be possible. I had a canmephian tailor add such technology to my trench coat by adding an inside, physics-defying pocket to it. I've been told it has the capacity of a small walk-in closet. I mostly used it to carry items I use for my personal amusement, if you catch my drift, but I also keep a few tools and such in it so I can keep them on hand without worrying about dropping them, banging them against anything or losing them.

One such tool is my digital camera. I took cautious steps towards the serving counter, reaching into my coat and pulling my camera out. I snapped pictures of each of the interlopers, focusing in on the rhino ringleader and getting several good profile shots of him, and even one from an angle, giving a better view of his face. I stuffed the camera

back into my coat and slipped quietly out into the klub proper.

“Miss, I think you really need to persuade your boyfriend to see the bigger picture here.” The rhino was saying. At the moment, he had his back to me, but from the way he was looking down, he was probably talking to Sumea. His “associates” had noticed me, and I knew it. They were drawing closer as I did. I crossed my arms, carefully sliding my hand under my coat and undoing the safety strap on my revolver. I kept my hand rested on the butt of my gun as I came up behind the rhino, stopping at about ten feet or so from him.

“And exactly what bigger picture is that?” Sumea said, sounding even more tense than when she was on the phone with me.

“The people I represent don’t have bottomless patience,” the rhino said, hands on his hips, “especially for delay tactics. Now, you certainly don’t want to risk a ‘hostile takeover,’ I’m sure. But if you two won’t stop being stubborn, well...,”

“...you’ll just have to find another business to partner with,” I said. The rhino turned around quickly; not so fast it was a “jerk” per se, but enough to not be a casual glance behind him.

“And you are?” he said.

“A friend of the owners,” I said. Sumea, who had stepped to the side to see around the rhino, had given me a look of relief that she wasn’t facing this leg breaker by herself anymore (the staff certainly didn’t seem to be much help), then looked back at the rhino with renewed confidence.

“Well,” the rhino said, “This really doesn’t concern you.”

“As a matter of fact, it does,” I said, trying to play it Boggart. “This place is my favorite watering hole, so I’d hate to see anything ruin it.”

“What makes you think we want to ruin it?” The rhino said. “Far from it. We just think it would be in everybody’s best interests if we received some cooperation.”

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s have a look at your business plan and then we’ll talk turkey.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have that available,” the rhino said, sounding like he was getting testy. I responded in kind.

“Well I don’t see why they should make their cooperation available either,” I said. I heard one of the thugs who had come up behind me start to come at me with a rather heavy, stomping step, the kind that says “That’s it, I’m pissed and I’m gonna make you regret it.” I turned to the side and nailed the thug, a green dragon about a head taller than me in a grey suit, with a glare. He stopped briefly, then looked at his boss. Sumea later told me the rhino gave a small shake with his head. The dragon stopped, crossed his

arms, and met me glare for glare. I snorted lightly and turned back to the ringleader.

“Now you’re trespassing,” I said. “Now unless you’d care to explain yourselves to the cops and get escorted out, you’re going to want to leave. NOW.”

The rhino snorted. “Tough talk,” he said. “But it’s not your call, is it?”

“No, it’s MINE,” Sumea said. “And I agree with every word of what he said. We told you politely, then we told you firmly. Now you want it in the form of a threat, so fine: get out AND DON’T COME BACK.”

The rhino looked at Sumea, stone-faced, for about ten seconds. I felt my hand tightening on my gun. The thugs around us all looked like they expected a throw-down at any second. The air felt thicker than July in the everglades.

“Well,” the rhino said, “I can promise you I won’t be back,” Looking at his goons, he tossed his head at the door. Slowly, grudgingly, they gave ground, heading towards the door, glaring daggers at anyone who they caught sight of. That was mostly Sumea and myself. I never took my eyes off their boss as they left, expecting him at any moment to give some sort of signal to pull a fast one. Fortunately, he never did.

I released the grip I had on my revolver and snapped the safety strap back in place on the holster. I quickly went over to Sumea, who had quickly dropped into the nearest chair.

“Are you okay?” I said, leaning on the table she was sitting at. The koopess nodded, reaching up and putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Yes, yes, I’m just glad you got here when you did,” she said. “That goon squad had the rest of the staff scared shitless. I don’t think anyone would have so much as twitched for fear or what would have happened.”

I looked around at the rest of the staff and snorted. They did rather look like frightened cattle; it might not be very polite of me to say so, but it’s the truth. They all had a wide-eyed, cowed expression of disbelief. I guess I couldn’t entirely blame them; getting threatened by a criminal is something that probably strikes a lot of people with a sense that they never thought something like that would actually happen to them. Some initial “I can’t believe this is happening,” reaction is to be expected, I suppose. But still, for as long as it went on, I would have thought one of them would have wised up that, yes, this is real, so you need to DO something about it.

“My one question is why they didn’t throw down,” Sumea said, bringing my attention back to her.

“Good question,” I said. “I suspect one of two things. Either the rhino didn’t think it was time to resort to violence yet, or he felt he was too close to the action and didn’t wanna get caught in the crossfire.”

“Think they’ll be back today?” the koopess asked. I shook my head.

“I doubt it. They’ll probably let this scare sink in, then ramp up the threats next time,” I said. Sumea let out a sigh, then stood up.

“I’m going to go try B again,” she said. I nodded, heading towards the restroom.

“I’ll be right up with you,” I said. “Need to step to the little ‘yena’s room first.” Sumea nodded and headed upstairs.

Some people hate it when they’re right. Whether I’m right or wrong, I usually wind up feeling crappy.

I was washing my hands when I heard the sound of crashing furniture. I ran to the bathroom door and cracked it, peering out. One of the bouncers was collapsed to the floor, apparently having been thrown into a table and the chairs around it. About eight thugs, different ones from the ones we’d just tossed out but dressed in the same way, were shoving their way through the club, kicking tables and chairs aside, shoving and manhandling the staff out of the way. The bouncers put up a decent effort to stop them, but as I said before, there’s a difference between handling rowdy drunks and trying to stop a sober and stone-cold leg breaker.

I saw Adam, that bouncer who was always itching for a fight, get his wish. He came at the lead thug, a fox built like a tank in an Armani suit, with his hammer, looking to knock his head off. The hammer bro. got two swings off. The fox pivoted to the side to avoid the first downward swing, then duck under the second one that went left to right. The vulpine then gave Adam a stamp kick right to the shin, causing him to collapse to his knees as his leg was fractured, at the very least. I couldn’t be sure about how bad his leg was hurt, but there was no doubt how seriously he got it when the fox took a set of brass knuckles from his pocket and gave him a left hook to the face. I winced as I saw blood and broken teeth come out of the hammer bro.’s mouth when he collapsed to the floor.

I shut the door to the bathroom quickly and started looking around. I knew where the thugs were going; they were making a beeline for B’s office, where Sumea was. I was going to have to get the drop on them when they least expected it, but I couldn’t take them all on alone.

“You three wait here,” I heard one of the thugs say. Five in the office; that I figured I might have a better chance of taking on. But charging the door with the other three standing guard would have resulted in a hostage situation.

“HEY! GET THE HELL OUT OF...” I could hear Sumea from the bathroom. But it wasn’t just from the door I could hear her...I turned and looked up, spotting the air vent in the ceiling. Reaching it was a challenge, but by opening the door on one stall and using it to get a leg up, I managed to get up to the vent, yank it open, and grab the edge.

“Need...to...work...out...more...,” I grunted to myself as I hauled my somewhat-not-in-shape butt into the vent. I made like Bruce Willis and crawled through the ventilation system, trying to judge the best way to get to the office. Getting through an upper L-joint was tough, but I managed to flip over on my back, then squirm into a sitting position, stand up, turn, and pull myself up and over the edge.

Finally, I found myself crawling towards a vent, light shining up through the slats like some noir movie effect. As I approached, I got an angled view down into B’s office. It was done up in the koopa’s typical ostentatious style with reds, blacks and greens. There was a large, long couch off to the left side from where the front door would be, while on the right, where a wall-length two-way mirror acted as a window down to the klub floor, there was a pair of overstuffed chairs and an end table between them. Two more overstuffed chairs were in front of a large desk, complete with a throne-like chair of its own with a large koopa symbol embroidered on the back.

Sumea was backed up against the front of that desk now, looking at the five thugs that had her surrounded. Their position was clearly to intimidate, but piss-poor for tactical cover. The vent, from what I could see, opened up about ten feet behind the thugs.

“We’ve tried asking nice,” The fox said, his head tilted down at Sumea. I couldn’t imagine his expression as anything other than an angry snarl. “Now, since you two want to be idiots, we’re gonna do it the hard way.” He reached into his sport coat. I tensed up and pulled out my gun, but held back a moment when the fox slapped a piece of paper down on the desk next to the koopess.

“If you won’t go into business with us, then you’ll work FOR us,” the fox said, slapping down a pen next to the paper. Sumea picked up the paper and read it.

“SELL YOU the klub?!” she said. “You have to be...,”

“DO I LOOK LIKE I’M JOKING, BITCH!?!” the fox bellowed at her, shoving his face into her’s until she could probably hazard a guess about his lunch.

“You sign that,” the fox said, pointing at the paper, then leveling the same finger at Sumea. I was tired of this Mafioso crap. Carefully, I pressed on the vent cover until it popped loose and swung open. I had to pull myself over the open hole so I could back out and drop down footpaws first. Sumea, having to look up to stare the fox in the face, was looking right at me when I quietly dropped to the floor behind the group.

“And when you’re boyfriend gets back, he’s gonna sign that,” the vulpine continued. “Because if either of you say no, then we’re gonna tear your klub to pieces. And if THAT doesn’t convince you...,” the fox grabbed Sumea by the throat. “We’ll do the same TO YOU.”

Sumea’s eyes flitted to just behind the fox, looking at me. I straightened up, turning on

my heel to one side in a shooter's stance, one arm across my chest, holding the butt of my gun in the other as I took aim. The koopess's view turned back to the fox.

"So that's your game, huh? Organized crime family," she said. "Well asshole, your family should've known better than to pick a fight with MINE."

The thugs chuckled and laughed. The fox snorted.

"Oh please," he said, "What're you gonna do, sick the family dog on me?"

"We don't have a dog," Sumea said, looking behind the fox again. "We've got HIM."

I cocked the hammer of my revolver; I couldn't resist also letting out a light hyena snicker. Sumea told me later the fox looked up at the sound, then gave her a look that said "oh please." He then reached into his coat again and started to turn. I only waited one second to make sure it was, in fact, a gun he was pulling out (which it was) before I put a .357 shock hollow point in his chest. Sumea dropped to her hands and knees as the vulpine was hurled against the desk by the shot. The koopess crawled under the desk quickly as I turned and fired another thunderous round at the next thug to go for his gun. He went down just as fast.

I ducked behind one of the large chairs as I realized what was about to happen. I turned my aim towards the office doors. Right on cue, they flew open and the three goons outside burst in. I figured the ones on the inside that were still breathing would have been slower to get over their surprise, but the ones coming in were going to be ready for a fight. A buff hare with some kind of tattoo on his face was first through the door, waving around what looked like a desert eagle. It was certainly loud enough as he fired off two shots without even bothering to see what he was supposed to be shooting at. The shots went nowhere near my crouched body and instead made the three remaining thugs in his line of fire duck for cover.

I put a shot in the rabbit's torso, sending him to the floor and tripping his compadres with his body. Still concentrating on the thugs already wielding guns, I fired again but missed. One of the tripped thugs, however, was looking right at me, and put a round right in my side. It felt like a kick right to my ribs and burned like grabbing a bare light bulb. I turned and rolled around to the other side of the chair, firing off a wild shot that didn't hit anything other than the door.

Reflexes made me look behind me, and I saw one of the thugs that had been in the office first coming around the side of the desk. He shot at me while on the move, but I managed to catch him with a shot of my own. Neither of us missed, though my efforts were more lethal than his. I caught the shot in the other side of my torso, which knocked me on my back between the desk and the chairs in front of it. Expecting an attack from the other side of the desk, I pushed myself up on my elbow and aimed in that direction. A hand from behind and above me grabbed my gun hand, however. A fist connected with the side of my head and suddenly my vision was doing the tilt-a-whirl.

The thugs didn't have much to say to me that wasn't four letter words, unflattering remarks about my parentage or suggestions about my sexual orientation. They kept a running stream of that kind of slander while they punched me about four times in the face and threw me against the wall about a half dozen times.

"SEE THAT?!" I heard one thug saying. My vision was all over the place but a briefly caught a glimpse of one goon, I think it was a cougar, holding Sumea by the neck with one hand and pointing at me with the other.

"Sign that Goddamn paper OR YOU'RE NEXT!" he roared in her face.

The roar that followed it was much louder, much deeper and came from the office door. I'm not sure exactly when B got back, but he told me later there had been two thugs that tried to keep him out of his own klub at the front door. He'd dispatched them with a minimum of fuss. But upon coming into the office, seeing his girl being threatened and me being beaten senseless, the kid gloves came off. Even swimming as my vision was, I saw the two thugs beating me freeze in amazement as the giant koopa vaulted across the office in one bound, slammed his entire hand over the cougar's head and snapped the feline's neck with a loud CRACK by turning his wrist.

The two goons let go of me. I didn't have enough shit left un-beaten out of me to do anything, so I just collapsed to the floor with my back to the wall. The thugs went for their guns. B turned his back and the slugs bounced off his shell. When the goons stopped to reload, the koopa turned back again and spit out two fireballs one after the other. The thugs' heads went up like matches and they dropped to the floor without a sound.

Teeth bared, growling like a diesel engine, B clenched and uncleaned his teeth as his breath heaved from anger. Unfortunately, the thugs had come prepared to deal with someone as big and tough as the koopa. The last thug, a gila monster about a head shorter than B, came up from behind the desk and nailed him in the back. While the koopa's shell was as tough as Kevlar and could handle even medium-caliber bullets, the thug had a special mega-tazer gun designed for taking down plus-sized assailants. B's shell wasn't insulated, and the koopa dropped to his knees as tens of thousands of volts racked his body.

The goon walked right up to B. He took out an uzi and put the barrel right up to the koopa's head.

"Who's gonna come in and save YOU, fuck nuts?!" the gila monster said with a mean smile. That smile became permanently frozen on his face. That's what happens when a blast of arcane ice hits you in the head. The thug's face went a strange shade of deep purple as he got instant frostbite and permafrost sank into his brain. The thug's body dropped to its knees, then fell forward, the frozen head shattering on the floor.

Sumea, standing between the chairs in front of B's desk, looked down at the body, her

eyes glowing a brilliant, icy blue. Slowly, the glow faded as she walked up to her boyfriend, plucking the electrodes from the tazer from his back and putting an arm around his shoulder as he caught his breath.

“Me,” she said. B grinned as he slowly stood up, rubbing under Sumea’s chin with one finger.

“That’s my girl,” he rumbled.

I tried to let out another hyena chuckle, but it came out weak and I had to stop it halfway though so I could wince in pain. Both B and Sumea were quickly at my sides, helping me up and onto the couch. Sumea quickly phoned for an ambulance and the police. B yelled for his staff to get a first aid kit before turning back to me.

“Don’t you check out on us yet,” he said. I smirked.

“This wasn’t my first dust up,” I said. B smirked and put a hand on my shoulder, covering part of my upper arm at the same time.

“I owe you a big one,” he said. I shook my head.

“I don’t hesitate to stick my neck out for my real friends,” I said. B grinned and gripped my shoulder a bit tighter, then looked around at the war zone that was his office and sighed.

“This won’t be the end of this mess, will it?” he said. I snorted.

“We should be so lucky,” I said.

The doctor administered some reflex tests to me, giving me the standard soup-to-nuts before he signed off on my release form. I’d hadn’t balked this time at the inclusion of Canmephian technology in my treatment; I wanted to get back on the job as soon as possible, and Canmeph fleshcrafting (as they call it) was the fastest way for them to get the two slugs out of my torso and patch up the other effects of the beating I’d taken. I felt rather awkward about having a Canmephian doc molding me like I was play-dough, but it was done without fuss and with a minimum of veiled come-ons. I just smirked my way through the worst of them, and soon I was on my way out the door, heading back to the klub.

“Two days recovery?” B said after he’d been told I was there. “Damn, I had a feeling you were a fast heal but that’s faster than I expected.” I chuckled. “Canmephians’re good for medical science, that’s for sure,” I said. “Police find anything yet?”

B shook his head. “Nah, the cops tried going with that Talbot name we gave ‘em for that

rhino. Turned out it was a fake, big surprise.”

“What about that card he gave you?” I asked. B fished in his pocket and showed it to me. All it had on it was the rhino’s false name and a phone number. Just for kicks, I tried dialing it and got the canned disconnected number recording.

“Suckers work fast to cover the asses, don’t they?” I said as I dug into my pocket and pulled out an e-cig. I’d always had a bit of an oral fixation, frequently keeping things like toothpicks and hard candies in my mouth. But I’d never gone so far as to actually take up smoking, since I knew the health risks. E-cigarettes, however, piqued my curiosity; when I heard about them, I became intrigued as the prospect of being able to look more like an old-fashioned PI without worrying about lung cancer. So I bought a basic pack with a zero-nicotine formula and hadn’t seen any bad side effects yet.

I took a drag off the electric stick and let out a mouthful of spearmint-scented vapor. “Did Baren do like I asked?” I said. B nodded and turned towards the bar. Baren was lining up beer mugs as I walked over and leaned on the bar. Before the paramedics had hauled me to the hospital, I’d given the pale koopa a little field assignment to take care of so I wouldn’t miss an opportunity.

“Hey kid,” I said, getting his attention.

“Mike, good to see you’re still in one piece,” he said, reaching under the bar.

“Thanks,” I said in response, taking another puff off the artificial smoke. “You get the pictures?”

The koopa set my camera on the counter. “Yep, grabbed shots of the license plates of every unfamiliar car in the parking lot.”

I picked up the camera and flicked on the replay screen. I was treated to a slideshow of car shots that wouldn’t have been useful for advertisement, but hopefully would help me identify some people.

“Nice,” I said. “Do you know which ones the police took off to the impound?”

“Yeah,” said Baren as I cycled through the pictures. “There were just two, that one....aaaaaand....that one.” I nodded and scribbled down the plate numbers in my notebook. My next stop would be a license plate search engine.

“Why not just ask the police about it?” he said.

“Police don’t always share details like that, even with the victims,” I said. “Most of the time they don’t want some nutjob trying to take justice into his own hands. A rare once in a while it’s cause they’re crooked and being paid off to bury a case.”

“Which one do you think would happen if you asked?” Baren asked me. I shrugged.

“Hard to say, but since this is dealing with organized crime, either one could happen,” I said.

I wound up having to sign up for a year’s subscription to a professional-grade license search database. I figured it wasn’t a bad investment, since in my line of work it might come in handy again later. As it turned out, both cars were registered as company vehicles to the same office; a real estate office that, according to its web site, specialized in corporate offices and commercial buildings.

Later that afternoon, around quitting time for people with real jobs, I was parked on the street across from the realtor’s office. I figured there were two possibilities how the thugs got those cars: either they stole them or the real estate agency was their front. Either way, I figured the best way to handle it was to stake out the office and see if any of the first group of leg breakers came out when it was time to close up shop.

I sat in my car and ran my PDA battery down a bit listening to music while I kept my eyes half focused on the doors of the agency. Maybe it’s my blood sugar problem or maybe it’s my attention span, but sometimes I find it really easy to start nodding off. I would have tied a string from their door to my big toe but I didn’t have one long enough. I had to sit and wait for two hours before I saw people start to come out. I dug into my pocket and pulled out a printout of the shots I took of the rhino and his backup crew, all in 2” x 2” thumbnails. I stayed laid back in my seat, hat tilted forward so my face was partly obscured. Four people I never saw before came out before I hit paydirt. There was no mistaking that horn nose; he was even wearing the same type of suit he had the day before.

“Wonder if he’s got a closet devoted to nothing but those overpriced monkey suits,” I said. So now I knew where these gangsters had their fake day jobs. Just to see where it would lead me, I waited as “Mr. Talbot” walked over to a large, candy apple red, three-wheeled canmeephian-designed ground vehicle. I waited for him to pull out and let him get to the corner and start turning before I pulled out myself and tailed him. Tailing people’s always tricky. Most folks tend to notice the cars behind them, so I followed along for a while, then pulled into a street-side parking space and let him turn one corner before quickly pulling back out and taking off after him again. The off-work traffic was really starting to pick up, which made backing out into traffic unsettling to say the least. But it managed to put one car between me and the rhino; just enough to act as a screen but still letting me tell when he was making a turn or not.

Finally the rhino led me to an apartment complex with an adjoining parking garage. The rhino took it up all the way to the top, while I parked my car two floors down. I ran up the stairs next to the elevator.

“Probably had a penthouse apartment,” I muttered to myself. I looked around the top deck of the garage. There were quite a few luxury vehicles parked up there, enough to

lose the rhino's cherry-colored hot rod in. I heard a door slam off to the side and spotted him. I kept my distance; just like a blackjack player, I was wondering just how far I should take this before I risked a bust. Glancing around, I took note of the security cameras. No doubt I'd been seen on them, but my face was probably blocked by my hat; at least I hoped it was. Even if it was, they'd probably be able to hazard a guess as to who it was by circumstance.

Irritated at the prospect of getting traced, I nonetheless pressed on, praying to God that maybe the cameras were located in a way that would keep me fairly obscure and hard to make out. I kept to the edge of the parking area as much as I could, staying behind the rhino and well out of his hearing range. He had just reached the door and was fishing for a keycard when someone stepped up to him from behind the closest parked car.

"Mason," this new person said. The voice sounded female, and from the banded tail I suspected it was a raccoon. I ducked down behind the nearest car as the rhino turned. Then, thinking ahead as to what would happen if someone spotted me crouching down behind a car, I rolled underneath it, keeping an eye on the two pairs of legs I could see from my vantage point. I pulled out my notepad and pen.

"Sweeny," the rhino said. "I didn't think you liked being seen in public."

"Well the nice thing about owning a building is you can turn off a security camera or two when you want to," the raccoon said. That certainly gave me a bit of relief; even if they'd spotted me on the lower levels, they couldn't be sure I'd come up to keep following the rhino.

"So what do I owe the pleasure," the rhino said.

"Your mulish persistence, for one," the raccoon said. "You've kicked a hornet's nest over this one klub. Why?"

"This location is perfect," he said. "It's out of the way from all the major corporate headquarters in the city, so there's not much chance of bumping into our targets by accident. Plus, with its wild theme, it would be the last place anyone would expect us to meet our kinds of clients."

"I see," said the raccoon. "That would be useful. However, I don't want you to make it so obvious we're taking it over."

"I haven't used any tactics that wouldn't be used by a protection racket," the rhino said. Alarms started going off in my head.

"Good," the raccoon said. "But don't let your ego get in the way."

"Excuse me?" The rhino said, sounding incredulous.

“I know you,” the raccoon said. “You haven’t had anyone hold out on you this long. Usually all it’s taken is a slightly sinister glare and a brief show of muscle and people cave in for you. But this time, you sent in your boys to rough these people up and THEY sent your men back out in body bags.”

“Had to be a first time,” the rhino said. He sounded like his calm had slipped a little, but not much.

“I suppose,” the raccoon said. “But I don’t want you to just keep escalating the violence. I don’t want to hear on the news about a bomb threat on this club or a drive by shooting in broad daylight or something equally overt and attention-grabbing.”

“I can be creative, don’t worry,” The rhino said. “We still have people in city hall, don’t we? We can lean on them through health inspections or building codes if need be. Though frankly I’d rather make a few quiet visits to the owner’s homes and let them know if we want to get them there, we can.”

“The latter sounds like the only option at this point,” the raccoon said. “You probably should have used our government connections before it got to this point.”

“Well to be blunt,” the rhino said, “persuasion isn’t your area of expertise in our operation, is it? I didn’t use our people uptown first because I didn’t want to let these people know we had connections that far.”

“Heh, as if that’s as high as we go,” the raccoon said.

“Maybe not,” the rhino said, “but no sense in making government connections obvious; organized criminals usually don’t.”

“True,” the raccoon said. “Either way, just keep this low profile. I don’t want any more direct attacks on the klub or its owners. Intimidate and scare, but don’t go further for a while yet. All the paid off cops in the city can’t cover something up that makes the top headlines on every local news site in the tri-city area.”

“Understood,” the rhino said. “But, in the event these people just don’t want to cooperate?”

The raccoon was silent for a minute, then said something that made me feel very uncomfortable.

“Make it look like an accident.”

I saw the bottom of the door to the apartments slide open and the rhino stepped through. The raccoon walked to a car somewhere on the left side of the door. A car door opened and shut, a motor turned over, and a vehicle pulled out and downstairs. Quickly, I stuffed my notebook into my pocket and crawled out from under the car. I made my way back down to my car and drove to a landline phone in the parking lot of a McDonalds. I called

the klub and told B and Sumea to come by my condo the next day.

This case had just taken a very unpleasant turn.

“What we’re dealing with here,” I said, pacing up and down in my living room, “appears to be more than just gangsters. It looks like these people are some sort of clandestine, pseudo-government organization, like the Illuminati or the Freemasons or something.”

B and Sumea exchanged surprised glances at one another. They’d come by my place bright and early the morning after I’d listened in on the meeting between “Mr. Talbot,” now better known to us as “Mr. Mason”, and “Ms. Sweeny.” Both now sat on my couch with travel mugs of coffee as I laid out what I’d overheard. B took a slug from his coffee and leaned back, making me worry about the integrity of my furniture.

“So this...organization, they want what with us, exactly?” he asked.

“I can’t be sure,” I said. “But from the tidbits I got, it sounds like they’re stealing something from corporations and selling them. Probably some black market business, maybe selling company secrets.”

“And they want to use the club as a meeting place for their business,” Sumea said, huffing a bit and shaking her head. “Wonderful.”

“Think they’ll get it through their thick skulls we’re not gonna cave in, and they’ll just leave us be?” B asked. I shook my head.

“I doubt it, unfortunately,” I said, walking over to the end table where I’d set my glass of morning orange juice. “It sounds like these assholes are used to getting what they want, no compromises.” I took a pull and set the glass back down. B grunted, stroking at his goatee.

“So, police are out of the question since they’ve got connections there,” the koopa said. “Going higher, like the FBI, is dicey since they’ve got higher connections too, and there’s no telling who might be in their pocket and who isn’t. What’s left?”

“The public,” I said. B and Sumea looked at me quizzically. “Secret organizations only work as long as they stay secret. So we expose these bastards and then the authorities will have to move in on them, no matter who is in who’s pocket. Hell, we’ll probably get the people they’ve bought off exposed too.”

“Sounds fun,” B said, letting out a rumbling chuckle. “But how do we pull that off?”

“First,” I said, ticking the steps off on my fingers. “We figure out where they base their operations. That real estate office seems like a good place to start, but I’ve got a hunch

it's too out in the open for them to be keeping really big organization secrets in. Next, we get together a team to break into their base, steal proof of their activities, probably some hard drives out of their computers. Lastly, we send the information to every public media source we can; news sites, radio stations, tv stations, everybody who we can get to listen."

B and Sumea looked at each other and both nodded.

"Sounds good, we're in," B said.

"Good, I...wait, what?" I said, giving him a slightly perplexed look. The koopa chuckled.

"What, did you think we were going to make you hire a bunch of mercs or somethin' to handle this?" Sumea giggled. "We're ready to do our part. B's got more than enough muscle for something like this and I can handle the magic side of things if need be."

I smirked a bit, draining the last of my juice. "Alright, if you guys are willin', I'm certainly not going to say no. We'll probably need at least a couple more people however. A computer expert is a must for anything technical we'll run into. And one other person to help with the rough stuff, preferably a trained fighter of some kind."

B nodded, taking another pull from his coffee. "So, have anyone in mind?"

I thought for a moment. "I may have one or two leads."

I leaned against the wall just outside of the elevator. The apartment complex was your average, middle-income housing development for your average, single, 20-something. In short, the ideal place for someone to act like they've got a hum-drum life when they don't. I'd been watching the news lately, following a rather intense story about a guy who'd discovered he was a genetic clone developed for God-knows what purpose, but not likely a wholesome one. I knew it was a long shot, but if what I'd read was accurate, he would be an ideal addition to the crew I was putting together.

It may seem strange, a devout Christian looking to work with someone who was the result of a godless science experiment, but I've come to believe nobody is responsible for what they are or what they're born as. What matters is who a person chooses to become. And from the stories I'd read about this guy bringing down his deranged creator and his less-benevolent siblings (in a genetic sense), then he was making all the right choices to make the best of a hard start in life.

"Bills...bills...bills..." I heard coming from the staircase. Up the steps came a raccoon dressed in jeans, a white undershirt and a blue, button-up T-shirt left open. The 'coon was looking at a PDA, apparently going through emails of the most unwanted kind.

“More bills...for fuck sake, how much am I gonna have left in my bank account when the week’s out?!” he groaned. He started walking up to the door I’d knocked at about ten minutes earlier. He pulled out a keycard from his pocket, groaning and sliding it through the reader at the door. I stepped away from the wall and approached the raccoon.

“Conner Coonster?” I said. The ‘coon turned around and gave me a rueful look.

“Hmm?” He said. I extended a hand.

“Mike Fang. Do you have a minute?” I said. Conner leaned up against his apartment’s doorframe, crossing his arms.

“Are you a collection agent?” He asked.

“No,” I said.

“A scientist or a lab tech with some research institute?” He asked, tilting his head to one side.

“Ah, no.” I said.

“How ‘bout the military or any government agency?” He said, narrowing his eyes slightly.

“Nope,” I said.

“Good,” he said, tossing his head towards his apartment. “C’mon in then.” I smirked and followed him into a very unassuming bachelor’s pad. The ‘coon went to his kitchen, retrieving a soda, offering me one as well, which I turned down.

“I take it from the questions you’ve had people pestering you,” I said.

“Yeah,” the coon said with a bit of a snort. He dropped onto a couch across from a modest tv. “If people aren’t looking to get money from me, they either want me to be their lab rat to figure out how I tick or they want to recruit me for some screwball super soldier program.”

I chuckled a bit, shifting my weight from one leg to the other. “I guess that comes with the territory when you’ve had all the combat prowess of a Green Beret downloaded into your head.”

Conner gave me a pained grimace, popping the top of his soda can with one finger and taking a slug. “E’yeah,” he said. “That and my...other talents,” he looked over at the sliding glass door to his balcony. His eyes glowed a brilliant blue for a minute and the blinds were drawn by themselves. My own eyes widened a bit in surprise; there was something I hadn’t seen on the news feeds.

“Magic?” I said. The ‘coon chuckled.

“Nah, telekinesis. Or something like that,” he said. “So, what did you come here for, Mr. Fang? You a reporter maybe?”

“Well yes,” I said, “freelance, anyway, but that’s not why I’m here. I’ve got a job that I need some help with and I think your skills would be ideal.”

“Heh, I take it you’re not looking to open an optometrist’s clinic,” he said. I blinked in confusion.

“I’m sorry?” I said.

“My day job’s with an eye doctor’s office,” the ‘coon replied.

“Ahhh,” I said. “No, I’m afraid not. Actually, I’ll be honest with you; this job will be dangerous. I can pay you well, but it’s going to involve risking your life and is going to be...well...illegal.”

The ‘coon gave me a sharp look. “And what makes you think I’d break the law?”

“Absolutely nothing,” I said. “But I’m hoping you’ll take the job anyway because in this case, it’s the only way to do what’s right. It’s one of those cases where the letter of the law gets in the way of the spirit.”

Conner got an expression like he was mulling over the idea. He raised an eyebrow at me and took another slug from his soda.

“Tell me more,” he said. I laid out the situation for him. The ‘coon nodded at all the appropriate points and leaned back on his couch.

“Sounds like a serious problem,” he said. I nodded.

“Bad enough we’ve got organizations like this out there,” I said. “Now they’ve come banging on my friends’ front door.”

Conner seemed to chew all this new information over. “How much are you offering?” he said.

“\$20,000,” I told him. I’d socked away some cash after my last misadventure. Plus I’d been making a pretty good income with royalties on a couple chemical formulas I’d developed with my amateur science and sold to the Canmephians. There was a glitter in Conner’s eyes that I didn’t think was his mind powers when I told him the figure.

“Sounds reasonable,” he said, clearly trying not to sound TOO relieved that the bill

collectors wouldn't be collecting his thumbs. I smirked and nodded.

"Good!" I said, "Now all I need to do is find a computer expert."

"That shouldn't be too hard these days," Conner said.

"..who's not afraid of getting shot at," I followed up.

"Ah," the 'coon said, looking off to the side. "That's gonna make it tougher."

I nodded. "True, though I think I may have one idea..."

The stairwell to the building was sprayed with graffiti; some of it artistic like a mural, the rest nothing more than the usual gang-related vandalism. I noticed the discarded liquor bottles and other garbage as I climbed the steps; seems even several hundred years wasn't enough to get right of petty criminals like muggers, armed robbers and street gangs.

The scenery improved some as I got to the top of the stairs and found a door reinforced with steel grating. There was less vandalism this far up, which to me suggested either street thugs didn't bother coming up this high on the stairway, or the owner of this upper loft wasn't someone they wanted to tangle with.

I thumbed the call button in the box next to the door. I activated the video feed so the person on the other end could see me. When the response came, they kept their own end blank.

"Yes?" a female voice on the other side said.

"Ms. Kamiguwa?" I said.

"Yes, who is this?" the voice said.

"My name is Mike Fang. I'm here to talk with you about a job," I said.

"Can you explain the nature of this job?" the woman on the other end said.

"It's going to be dangerous, but well-paying," I said.

"Is it going to involve sex?" she said bluntly. I blinked in surprise; I definitely hadn't been expecting THAT.

"No," I said.

"Good," the woman on the other end of the blank screen said. "I'm sick of assholes trying to hire me that think I'm a prostitute."

“Well I promise you I didn’t come looking for you thinking that,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck.

“How exactly did you come by me, Mr. Fang?” the woman said over the intercom.

“I read your ad on the ‘Soldier of Fortune’ website,” I said. I dug a printout of a web ad from my pocket and unfolded it. “This is yours, I believe: self-aware A.I., combat experienced, seeks employment opportunities...” A buzz from the door as it slid open told me I’d gotten the right place. I stepped through the door into a well-furnished loft apartment with a modern art motif. Not exactly my style, but it still looked relaxing. I heard movement coming from a room off to the right. From a hallway came the person I’d been looking for. But I hadn’t expected her to look the way she did.

“Ms. Kamiguwa, I presume,” I said. I tried not to stare and failed miserably.

“You can call me Alice,” she said as she approached. “It stands for Armored Light Infantry Combat Enforcer, but I prefer it as a first name.” Alice may have been an android, but the only thing that made it apparent was her eyes, a gunmetal gray where the whites would be and LED blues for her corneas. While the world population had become more evenly homogenous since my time, humans were still a significant section of the population. Anthros like myself weren’t as small a minority as we once were, but humans still had a slight advantage in numbers when it came to ethnic distribution.

So it wasn’t much of a shock to me to see that Alice’s body was a human model, specifically that of a young Caucasian woman in her mid 20’s. She had a toned, athletic build that I thought looked quiet shapely and cute. But there was one remarkable thing about her physique. There was no denying it; Alice had a big, ample chest. Her bosoms had to be at least the size of honeydew melons, probably a touch larger. She wore a pair of black jeans with sneakers and a black silk vest with a white, button-up shirt with a neckline that plunged like a diving pelican, giving the android a cleavage that could have made the cover of every copy of Playboy for a year.

“I was starting to think that ad was a waste of money,” she said, passing a hand by the side of her head, smoothing back her jet black hair. “So, what else can you tell me about this job Mr. Fang?” She paused for a moment, and then said, “Please stop staring at them.”

I snapped out of it and put a hand to my eyes, rubbing them. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to turn into a pervert.”

Alice smirked ruefully and put a hand up. “It’s okay. Looking doesn’t make you a pervert. Gawking and drooling or making lewd comments after I asked you to stop would have made you a pervert.”

“I take it you’ve had some bad experience,” I said, getting a sense of déjà vu and making a point of looking the ‘droid in the face. It wasn’t hard, she had a lovely face, but I had to

check myself periodically to avoid getting wandering eyes.

“Let’s see...,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest and walking over to a black composite cabinet with frosted glass windows, “The robotics engineer who designed me to be a sex toy...the people who’ve tried to hire me the same way you’d hire a hooker or even worse, treat me like some high-tech sex toy for rent...hell once I had some guy walk around me tugging on my clothes saying ‘where’s the card reader for this fuck machine?’...yeah, I’ve had some bad experiences.” Alice shook her head, taking a wine bottle and a glass out of the cabinet.

“Care for a drink?” she asked me. As with Conner, I declined. “Not to be insulting,” I said to her, “but I’ve never heard of an android that needed food.”

“It’s mostly for tactile pleasure,” she said, using a corkscrew to pull the stopper from the bottle. Red wine filled the stemless glass as she corked the bottle again and put it up. “I can also process organic material as a backup fuel source. Helps to prolong my battery life.”

“Need to recharge often?” I asked; Alice was piquing my curiosity about life as a robot.

“Not too much,” she said, “usually once every five months if I were to operate at normal capacity without stopping. I can either directly recharge from a conventional power source, absorb solar energy or process organic material, as I said. I also enter into a low-power state when I don’t have any activities I need to be or want to be engaged in.”

“Sleep,” I said, grinning slightly. “Maybe you can tell me then, do androids dream of electric sheep?” Alice gave me an “oh please,” look and took a long sip of wine.

“I think we’re getting a bit off-topic here,” she said. “You said you had a job for me.” I filled the android in the same way I’d done with Conner. Alice nodded at all the appropriate times, sipping at her wine as I did. She drained the glass by the time I was done, taking it to the wet bar next to her wine cabinet to rinse it out.

“An interesting, and disturbing, situation,” she said. I nodded.

“Definitely. I don’t think these cretins are going to leave my friends alone, which is why I need your help.”

“Assassination?” she asked bluntly. I tried not to twitch at the thought that she seemed to proposed that rather easily and shook my head.

“No, infiltration. I’d rather keep killing to a minimum, but we can’t leave this organization to keep operating the way it is. God knows how many other people they’re terrorizing the same way. So I want to break into their headquarters, get proof of their illegal activities and publicly expose them.”

“So you need me as a hired gun on this,” she said. I nodded.

“That and more,” I said. “Now correct me if I’m wrong, but as an android, you can interact directly with computer systems, correct?”

“You’re asking an android if she’s a computer expert,” Alice said, giving me a smug grin. I smirked back. “Well I didn’t want to make assumptions. Plus not every living being’s an expert in anatomy.”

“True, but you have a general understanding of how your body works,” she said. I started to respond when she put up her hand. “yes, I can directly interact with computer systems, provided they have a wireless network or I can connect to their network in some way.”

I nodded. “Excellent. Then you can help us get past any computerized security systems they have.”

I sat at the bar, sipping at my “star juice” while waiting for Alice and Conner to arrive. I’d asked them to meet me at the klub to introduce them to B and Sumea. I checked my watch to see just how late they were; ten minutes past, not too much.

“I hope whatever you’re planning is good,” Baren said, rinsing out a beer mug. I glanced over at him.

“It should be,” I said, “though God knows I’m not perfect.”

“Mmmm,” Baren mused, “Well whatever it is you’re doing, you better step it up. It looks like this organization’s started leaning on mom n’ dad again.”

“What?” I said. I hadn’t expected them to start retaliating again so soon. I guess Mr. Mason took that loss a lot more personally than he let on.

“We had no less than three visits from inspectors today,” Baren said, hanging up the beer mug. “All unscheduled. ‘Snap inspections’ they called them, pff. City health department, building inspector AND safety inspector. They each found a laundry list of problems.” The koopa bartender started ticking them off on his fingers. “Unsanitary cooking area, poor air circulation, improperly stored chemicals, dangerous storage practices, blocked emergency exits, unsatisfactory fire safety measures, improper garbage disposal containers, dangerous unsupervised sporting area (Baren pointed his thumb at the koopa shell lanes), lack of proper staff training in emergency evacuation...,”

“What a crock of shit,” I said, draining my drink.

“Yeah,” Baren said, taking my cup and starting to wash it. “They told mom n’ dad they had one day to get things set straight to the inspectors’ satisfaction or they’d close the

klub down until further notice.”

“Gaaaah,” I grunted, rolling my eyes. “So dumb as this may sound, how did they reveal they were connected to the punks leaning on the klub?”

“Each one of them presented dad with a card,” Baren said, putting up the cup. “Told them to give them a call when he was ready to receive a clean bill of health. The number on all three cards was the same.”

“Lemme guess,” I said, looking off to the side. “All the cards were to a Mr. Talbot?”

“Bingo,” Baren said.

“SSsssshit,” I hissed through my teeth, looking off to the side. “Looks like this guy’s not one to let the fire go cold.”

“Clearly,” Baren replied, turning to serve another customer. I hated it when I had a looming deadline, but such is life. I started trying to plot out the next course of action. The real estate office I’d seen Mason leaving was the most likely spot to look for leads. I had a hunch it wasn’t this organization’s primary base of operations; it seemed too open, too accessible. Still, I hoped there would be a clue there to find this group’s primary headquarters.

“Fancy place your friends have here,” I heard someone say behind me. I turned and smirked at Conner came up behind me. The coon was dressed in a smart semi-formal attire; a button-less sport coat worn open with a white t-shirt and jeans.

“Yep, they really went all-out designing this place,” I said. Conner started puzzling over the drink menu as I looked around for our other missing party member. I spotted her, as did just about everybody else in a 20-foot radius of her. Alice was decked out in biker leathers, a tight leather jacket zipped up to about halfway over her chest with shiny black pants and combat boots. The android grabbed the attention of probably three quarters of the guys she passed by (and a few of the girls) as she came over to the bar.

“Heavy traffic?” I asked, giving the ‘droid a smirk. She returned it.

“Had a little trouble finding the place,” she said. “I don’t come by this part of town too often.”

“Understandable,” I said. Glancing to the side, I saw that Conner was hastily trying to compose himself. My back had been to him when he first showed up, but I can’t imagine his reaction to seeing Alice had been anything less than his jaw hitting the floor.

“Ah, forgot my manners,” I said, swiveling around on my barstool. “Alice, Conner. Conner, Alice. We’ll be working together on this operation, along with my other two friends, who should be...”

“Right here,” B’s heavy baritone voice said from just behind the bar. I’m not quite sure how he and Sumea managed to sneak up behind us, but the crowd was pretty heavy that night. Both the droid and the coon were appropriately surprised by the massive koopa, but his easygoing nature paired with Sumea’s sweet demeanor broke the ice quickly. The five of us went to B’s throne-like private booth to go over the situation. Alice and Conner were both empathetic to B and Sumea’s position, so I started laying out the plan. We’d observe the real estate office’s daily routine, and pick the best spot to break in. We figured night would be the best time, perhaps with a cleaning crew if one was employed. Once inside, we’d locate Mason’s office and search for evidence of his contact with his superiors; it was apparent that in this organization, Mason was a mid-level organizer who answered to at least one other person.

“For this part, I think we should keep this as quiet as possible,” I said. “So if all goes well, B, we shouldn’t need you to do a lot of heavy lifting. Still, if something goes wrong, I’d certainly feel better if you were close by if things get complicated.”

“And I think things just did,” Sumea said, her smile falling off her face as she looked past us. I looked to the side. Standing in the doorway were five uniformed police officers. One of them wearing a sergeant’s badge came forward through the crowd and marched right up to B’s throne. He was a large orca with a build that suggested he probably could have had a career in professional football if he’d taken that route.

“I’m looking for....,” he looked down at a piece of paper in one hand, trying to puzzle something out. “A Mr...something that starts with B..., damnit I can never read Charlene’s handwriting....”

“You’re looking for the owner, right?” B said, looking like he was bracing for a blow. “Well, you found him.”

The orca looked up and handed him the paper. “I’m here because we’ve had numerous complaints of disturbance of the peace. You need to shut down now.”

Sumea looked like if she could breath fire like B, she would. The cop was lucky she kept her control enough not to turn him into an ice sculpture. B, meanwhile, looked like he had a slow burn going on behind his eyes. I personally was feeling more and more like every step we took was being hamstrung.

“I see,” B said, slowly rising. He lumbered heavily past the cops, down to the stage where the klub dj was too busy mixing music to notice what was going on. B tapped him on the shoulder, pointing his thumb at the cops. The techno beat drowned out what he was saying, but from the expression and jectures the dj was making, he wasn’t happy. B nodded, and the DJ cut the music off as B picked up an extra headset and put it up to his head so he could use the mic.

“Folks, may I have your attention,” he said. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to close early

tonight, there's been a...problem that's come up." The groan of disappointment let out by the crowd was so perfectly in-sync you would have thought they were using cue cards.

"We apologize for the inconvenience," B said, "and as you leave tonight, you'll all receive a coupon for a free drink on your next visit. Now, if the staff could come up and meet me here at the stage..." The koopa set down the headset as the confused staff came forward, looking both at a loss and worried. B apparently laid down the situation for them and started giving them directions. The bouncers started helping the waiting staff clear tables and clean up, the kitchen staff quickly cancelled orders and started washing dishes and utensils and the entertainment staff started handing out the coupons and apologizing personally to each customer.

Alice, Conner and I went outside to wait. B and Sumea came out once they were sure the staff was coordinated. They watched in embarrassed resignation as probably a hundred customers, many of them regulars, left the klub like there had been a breakout of food poisoning announced. As the last dozen customers were leaving, we looked past the crowd to where the police had all parked their cruisers. The orca sergeant was standing by one of them. Just then, from behind a humvee stepped Mason. He went right up to the orca, nodding at what the cop said, then smirked and shook his hand.

I saw it. Alice, Sumea and Conner saw it. But most importantly B saw it. The koopa let out a growl like an approaching thunderstorm. He stomped across the parking lot, his footfalls causing some of the cars to rock on their shocks.

"YOU," he snarled. Sumea was following up quickly right beside him. Me, Alice and Conner started to follow, but then I held up my hand and turned to the other two.

"Wait a sec," I said, "he doesn't know you guys are working with us yet."

"That Mason?" Conner asked, turning his head away so as not to attract immediate attention.

"Yeah," I said, "You guys head back home for now, I'll call you tomorrow morning. We'll stake out the real estate office and pick our best time to hit it."

"Gotcha," Alice said. "I'll see you boys then." With that, both Alice and Conner went back to their vehicles and drove off. I turned around, drawing closer to the gathering storm that was B's temper.

"...not going to cave in!" B was finishing up. There was smoke coming out of his nostrils and his eyes were glowing so bright you could see the red behind his sunglasses like a pair of very large LED lights. Mason looked back at the Koopa impassively, like he thought he was untouchable.

"Well, then you better get used to this," he said, inclining his head towards the departing crowd. "Cause I don't think your klub's going to be able to keep operating with such

sensitive neighbors who don't like your raising cain every night."

"You son of a BITCH," B snarled, baring his teeth and balling up a fist. Mason's expression seemed to read "Go ahead, I DARE you." For a minute, I thought B would actually do it. But then he seemed to realize just what slugging him would mean; an assault charge that would land him with the biggest possible sentence due to a court system Mason's organization most likely had a connection in. The koopa shot a searing look at the cop standing next to the rhino; the orca was standing with his hand on his holster. Instead, the koopa leveled a finger at the rhino's face, the claw on the end of it only an inch from Mason's nose.

"This isn't over," he said. Mason just scoffed; if life were an internet game, the rhino would have been the kind to teabag B after beating him, an arrogant prick who rubbed his victories in his opponent's faces. Mind you, everybody does a little victory celebration online from time to time, whether it's an in-game taunt or laughing over voice chat. But then there are some who never let their opponents forget it, who would pick out one person in particular and just harass them all night. That was the kind of people we were up against.

People like that often need a get taken down a notch. I was ready to do some chopping.

The service van was approaching. Conner and I were standing in the shadows between two buildings in a neighborhood made up mostly of apartment complexes. It was late at night, the streetlights glowing like a candlelight procession along the street. On the side of the road, Alice was standing next to a rented jeep with its hood up, dressed in her leathers again, looking at the engine with a confused expression. That expression was on a face slightly different than the one she had the night before; being an android, she was able to make a few small adjustments to her face, but enough that it would fool a casual glance or a facial recognition program. She's narrowed her eyes a bit for her part and made her nose significantly narrower. She'd also lengthened her hair all the way down to her shoulders and changed it from jet black to bright red.

"Here he comes," I said into the mic of my two-way headset. Alice immediately began upping her act, pacing back and forth in the road, looking anxious and confused.

"C'mon, slow down, slow down..." I muttered under my breath. A grin spread across my face as the van began losing momentum. I smirked as the brakes squeaked slightly, the van coming to a stop as Alice waved it down just past our hiding spot, the words "Clean Getaway Cleaning Service" on the side. I hoped the name would prove prophetic.

"Are we all clear on the streets?" I said into my mic. Over at the van, Alice was playing the flustered, distressed motorist to a T. I looked to the corners of the block, where at either end, B and Sumea were standing in doorways, watching for passerbys or cops. "All clear," B said.

“Same here,” Sumea said.

“Let’s go,” I said to Conner off the mic. The ‘coon was dressed up in a black leather trenchcoat, combat boots, a black flak jacket and black tactical pants. He had an FN Herstal P90, a bullpup-style hybrid gun that was a cross between an assault rifle and a submachine gun, slung under his coat as well as a pair of .40 caliber Glocks on shoulder holsters. I’d had a change of heart about shoulder holsters myself after I found they bound up my shoulders a bit, so I had my .357 in a hip holster these days. I was also packing my .38 special in its usual ankle holster and my 12-gauge pump action with a pistol grip attached in a hidden holster sewn into my trench coat.

Conner and I pulled bandannas up over the lower halves of our faces. I pulled the brim of my fedora down low as well as we stepped out of the shadow quickly and with purpose. Conner came up along the side of the van behind Alice, who was still sweet-talking the guy behind the wheel, a human in his late teens with a lot of freckles to go with the dopey smile on his face as he was transfixed by the android’s good looks. It looked like his partner, a fox with purple-dyed hair done in corn rows, was equally taken by Alice.

Too bad for them all we were interested in taking was their van.

I went around back of the van and pulled my shot gun out of my coat. I tried the door and found the handle opened just fine as I squeezed it. I waited until I heard “Holy shit!” coming from the driver before I yanked the door open and covered his passenger. Conner had swept around and had his machine gun not a foot away from the driver’s face.

“Gentlemen,” I said, “I’m afraid we’re going to have to borrow your van and your tools.” The fox didn’t say a word as he put his hands up, nodding vigorously. I motioned him to step out of the van while Conner did the same with the driver. We ushered them into the alley, Alice standing by watching the street. The droid had dropped the helpless hottie act and was now all business, drawing a hypo from her pocket and following us over to the rented jeep. She dosed each of the cleaners with a shot of a heavy sedative that would keep them out for 24 hours minimum. We stashed one of the cleaners in the back seat and put the other in the passenger side front seat of the jeep, leaning it back so he wouldn’t be immediately noticeable.

“We’re clear,” I said. B and Sumea quickly left their respective corners of the street to meet us at the van. The koopess took the wheel with Conner in the seat beside her. I pulled the van back doors open and B jumped in the back without missing a beat, quickly followed by Alice and myself. I slammed the doors shut as Sumea turned the engine over and started down the street.

I took this time to let out a sigh of relief. My heartbeat had been almost audible during the van snatch, feeling like every eye in the neighborhood was on us, every hand on a telephone ready to call the police. But we’d picked the quietest neighborhood on the route I’d seen the cleaning crew van take to get to the real estate office and there hadn’t

been a sound. Judging by the looks on B and Sumea's faces, I wasn't the only one who felt a bit nervous.

"Damn, that was intense," B said. I smirked slightly as I shrugged out of my trench coat. Up front, Conner chuckled.

"That was the easy part," he said. There was a set of four jumpsuits with the Clean Getaway name on the breast pockets hanging in the back of the van. Along one side of the wall were commercial-grade vacuum cleaners, cleaning rags and spray bottles filled with countertop and glass cleaner, as well as a good old-fashioned mop and rolling bucket. I grabbed one of the jumpsuits, pulled off my boots and started slipping into it. Alice did the same, but after I got my zipper up, the droid started making sounds of frustration. I couldn't help but smirk slightly; that bust of hers was a blessing and a curse. She was having a seriously difficult time getting the zipper more than halfway over her chest.

"Now's not the time to be so eye-catching," I said, grinning. The droid looked up and smirked back. Suddenly, her chest withdrew into her body slightly, slimming down to a more athletic size, allowing her to slide the zipper up easily.

"Better?" she asked.

"Well for the job, maybe," I said.

It only took a few minutes to get to the real estate office. The front lobby was dark, from what could be seen from the glass front door. A few emergency lights were on inside, probably to allow passing police to look in and notice anything obviously wrong. But if all went well, there wouldn't be anything obvious about what we were up to. We pulled up to the side of the building next to a door with a keycard reader. Noticing it, I frowned.

"Conner," I said, "check the glove compartment and the visors, see if there's a card here somewhere." The raccoon looked around the front cab, but shook his head.

"Nothing. If they had a keycard, the workmen must have kept it on them," he said.

"Damnit," I mouthed under my breath. "Okay, Sumea, can we pull up so the van blocks view of the door from the street?" The koopess nodded and shifted to a more advantageous parking space. Going to the back, I cracked the van doors open and looked out carefully, scanning the poles for security cameras. I saw nothing on this side of the building; apparently these people trusted to street traffic to notice anything suspicious; that and that card reader.

I turned my head and looked behind me. Spotting a few ball cap style hats hanging on the wall next to where the jumpsuits had been hanging, I grabbed one and pull it down snugly over my head. Tossing my head towards the doors, I opened them. Alice and Cooner each grabbed a cap themselves, the latter after getting changed into his own

jumpsuit, tossing his black coat on top of mine. We pulled out the cleaning equipment and started piling it near the door, just another graveyard-shift cleaning crew going to work.

“Alice, can you handle the door?” I asked. The droid looked at the lock and smirked.

“Easy,” she said. Reaching under her jumpsuit, she pulled out a device that looked like a keycard, but it had a wire leading off of it that ended in a USB plug. She took that plug and took it up to the side of her head. One finger pushed up a small tab of artificial skin just above her ear, revealing a port that she plugged the wire into. Tensely, Conner and I watched the unprotected side of the street. The building was backed by the empty space under the overpass of the freeway, but there was still the chance some vagrant might see us.

“Almost...,” Alice said. Her eyes were glowing a bit brighter than usual, the wired card in the slot. A sharp click announced her success and she pulled the card from the slot. Conner held the door open as I took point, pushing a commercial grade vacuum ahead of me. The interior of the office was your average nine-to-five space. The decorum was muted white walls, dull brown carpeting and an overall decorum of Dilbert and motivational posters. I plugged in the vacuum, flipping it on. The machine brayed to life, its tone changing slightly as I pushed it back and forth along the floor, keeping my head down like I was focusing on my work but in reality, looking to the side to read the names on office door plates. I doubted I’d find Mason’s office on the first floor, but I wanted to be thorough. Alice and Conner followed suit, going to desks and performing typical cleaning tasks like emptying waste baskets, cleaning counter tops and the like. I’d told them to throw suspicion off as much as possible, we should try to do a passable job cleaning, or it would be pretty apparent how we got in.

The first, second and third floors all turned up nothing. I was impressed by how thorough these people were in putting up a front. Here and there, when we were sure we were out of direct sight of the windows, we’d boot up a computer to see if anything incriminating was there. All we found were real estate records, sales invoices and settlement contracts. I doubted any of them were real.

It wasn’t until we go to the fourth floor that I heard Conner over the headset.

“Found it,” he said. I let out a sigh of relief; for minute I was starting to think we’d struck out. Nonchalantly making my way over to him, I found the coon using a bottle of glass cleaner and a rag on the window of a central office. Next to the door was a plate that read “George Talbot, Director.”

On the door itself was both an old-fashioned key lock and a deadbolt. I smirked.

“Good thing I brought my own tools,” I said. “Alice, fourth floor, main hallway.”

“I’m on my way,” the android said over the mic. The central hallway we were in on the fourth floor didn’t have any windows, so I didn’t worry too much about attracting

attention; there weren't many features that could have concealed a security device. I went to work immediately on the locks, crouching down and sticking my lock picks into the mechanisms. I was still tense, worried that there might be some kind of security camera I'd never expected, but if that was the case, it was a chance I'd have to take. The cylinders of the locks turned ever so slightly as I raised the pins one by one to just the right heights, finally rotating all the way around. Alice arrived just as I was tucking my tools back under my jumpsuit. Giving her a nod, I grabbed the doorknob and pushed the door open.

The office was sparsely decorated with standard, generic-looking office furniture. He even had a Newton's cradle; that desk ornament with the metal balls that swing together, knocking back and forth perpetually. Alice wasted no time in pushing the desk chair out of the way and going to work on the computer. She took out a different wire this time, plugging it into the port on her head and then into the computer. The machine booted up with a low hum as Alice's eyes closed, though the glow was bright enough to be visible through her eyelids.

"The system's got a password system," she said, "nothing unusual...wait...oooh, limited number of attempts before a security alarm's sounded, interesting. Okay then.....ahh, backdoor to the system, so we'll just set the system to keep resetting the attempt counter back to zero before it reaches enough to set off the alarm..."

The android's face made small little twitches as she shifted her posture, holding the elbow of one arm with her hand while she held her chin in the palm of her other hand, one finger tapping her cheek. Cooner continued to watch the hallway while I went through the office, looking for anything incriminating. I wasn't having any luck, coming up mostly with generic office supplies. However, I found one desk drawer locked, a discovery that sent a thrill up my back. I went to work on the lock, finding it little challenge as Alice began to frown at what she was getting off the computer.

"Damn," she said. "Mike, we've got a problem. This computer's a network terminal with read-only access. I can't copy any files, only send them and look at them."

"Any idea where the network server's are located?" I asked.

"Hang on, I'll try to find an address..." she said.

"Conner," I said, turning to the door. "Check out the rest of the building, see if you can find a server room," The 'coon nodded and headed towards the stairs. I turned back to the cabinet I'd just unlocked. Inside, I found a box containing several flash drives. Tentatively, I pulled out my PDA. The device had a USB port on it for reading drives and hooking up to computers. One by one, I checked each of the drives.

"Whoa," I said, impressed by what I saw. Each of the drives contained numerous design documents. One was for a ground vehicle with a design I'd never seen before, a six-wheeled machine also designed to convert into a hovercraft that could move over the

water. According to the design, the model wasn't scheduled to come out until next year. Another document contained a lot of technical information I didn't understand, but I recognized the graphic in it enough to know it was a chemical compound. I scanned the document until I got to the summary conclusion at the bottom.

"This compound shows great potential to improving treatment of cancer patients. It is the basis for a universal cancer treatment and capable of reducing the probability of a fatal case of cancer to 25 percent," it said. Then, a note on the bottom of the document in a different font caught my eye.

"Great bargaining chip," the note said, "hang onto this until best possible opportunity. Heavy restrictions on distribution can be used to exact control on governments with outbreaks."

I shook my head in disgust. It takes a real scumbag to force someone to submit to them by holding back medical treatment. All the files I found were like that; product designs, technological prototypes, scientific discoveries, all stolen from their creators. I took each USB drive and copied their contents to my PDA. I wished I could take the drives with me, but that would have been too big a tipoff.

"I think I found something," Alice said. "I think...yes, there's a document here."

"Bring it up on screen," I said, carrying the box of flash drives with me to the table. The desktop's monitor flickered on, displaying an email about a year old. Once again, my old friend Ms. Sweeny was being very helpful.

"Mason," I read out loud, "Your clearance has been approved for our new headquarters. You're to be commended; being located inside an industrial complex just outside Chicago is ideal, as is our cover as an industrial storage facility. This gives us the perfect excuse for bringing in our paper records to convert them to electronic files while having few outgoing shipments. It's amazing how much space almost 700 years of blueprints, formulas and contracts takes up.

"But I digress. You can pick up your clearance at the main entrance to our headquarters. You're proving a fine addition to our hierarchy; continue to impress us, and you'll be in the upper circle before you know it.

- Celia Sweeny."

"An industrial storage facility just outside Chicago," I said, nodding. "Good work Alice, let's get out of here before we're caught."

Looking back I should have known better than to say something like that. No sooner did we emerge into the hallway with Conner, shutting the door behind us, than the elevator on the other end chimed. Quickly, I turned to the 'coon. "Look busy," I said, plugging the vacuum in.

“Why is God coming?” Conner said wryly. I shot him a look that said “now’s not the time.” He started doing the windows again while Alice darted into the upstairs cubicle maze (which was made up of low wall, clerical style cubicles this time) and started wiping down desktops.

“I know I left it in here,” a voice at the end of the hallway said, just audible over the buzz of the vacuum. I kept my eyes down as I pushed the vacuum along, my back to the elevator doors. A second voice joined the first.

“Well hurry up,” the second voice said. “Can’t believe you take your authenticator with you to the office. What’re you doing with it here?”

“Hey, I’m just expected to –look- like I’m doing an office job,” the first voice said, coming closer. “Doesn’t mean...huh? Hey, what’re you doing here?”

Shit, I thought. Okay, keep it together, we’re just the cleaning crew...

I felt a finger firmly tap my shoulder. I turned around and looked straight into the face of a sable-marked ferret and a slightly taller chestnut stallion. They were both giving me, Alice and Conner suspicious looks.

“Hmmm?” I said, pretending I hadn’t heard over the vacuum. The ferret raised his voice.

“I said, what’re you doing here?!” he repeated. I turned off the vac and shifted my weight a bit.

“We’re doin’ the cleaning,” I said, shrugging like I didn’t see what the fuss was about. The ferret looked confused and suspicious at the same time.

“What for, you’re not scheduled to be here until Friday,” the horse said. I blinked in surprise, and quickly changed my expression to confusion. I tried not to panic, despite a sense of being caught completely off-guard, and by some divine inspiration, saw an opportunity to get out of the mess we were in.

“What?!” I said. “That can’t be right.”

“Uh, no, it is right,” the ferret says. “I should know, I handle admin services here. You’re not scheduled to come in until Friday.”

“Do you have this schedule?” I asked. The ferret motioned me to follow him, turning into the cubicle maze. As we passed Alice, I saw her looking our way. She touched one hand to a pocket with a bulge on it I knew must have contained some kind of weapon. I shook my head silently; we had to get out of this without killing anyone or we’d tip the organization off and never get close to their Chicago base.

The ferret led me over to a cubicle where he opened a filing cabinet. He dug through a few files, then pulled out a schedule sheet.

“See?” he said. I looked at the sheet, clenched my eyes shut and then slapped my forehead.

“Aaaaaah ffffffffuck,” I said. “I should have known. It’s not YOUR office we’ve got today, its that one on the OTHER side of town.” I turned to Conner and Alice.

“Hey, guys, we got the wrong building,” I said, giving them a fast wink. The two caught it and played along.

“WHAT?” Alice said, throwing down a rag. “You mean we’ve spent the last three hours cleaning THE WRONG BUILDING?”

“E’yeah,” I said, nodding painfully. “We’re gonna have to burn rubber to get there.”

“Fuck me,” Conner said, throwing his hands up. “You gotta get your schedule straightened out.”

“I know, I know,” I said with an exasperated sigh. Conner and Alice started packing up the cleaning supplies as I turned to the two office workers. They were looking a bit nebulous, but not unconvinced.

“Ahh, look, guys, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention we were here off-schedule,” I said, trying to look nervous about something besides the prospect of having to get in a fight. “If my boss finds out we were at the wrong site, he’s gonna dock our pay. So, if you would, just...don’t say anything about this to anyone. Don’t want it to get back to the home office through word-of-mouth, you know?”

The horse and ferret looked at one another. For a tense minute, I thought I was going to have to tackle them and pound them unconscious. Then, they shrugged at each other.

“Thanks, ‘preciate it,” I said, walking backwards a couple steps, then turning and grabbing the vacuum. “C’mon guys,” I said to Conner and Alice, “If we hustle we can still get there and get the job done in time.”

The three of us quickly made our way back downstairs, and out the side door. We threw the equipment back into the cleaning van and piled in as Sumea burned rubber out of the parking lot.

“Holy SHIT!” the koopess said, breathing a sigh of relief once we were on the road. “Care to cut it any closer?”

“No thanks,” I said, slumping against the wall. I yanked the ballcap off my head and let out a slow breath, rubbing at my face. Alice was up front this time, while Conner was

busy pulling off his jumpsuit. B was idly replacing the cleaning equipment back where it was supposed to be. As he did, he apparently got an idea, took out a pair of disposable rubber gloves from a box of them in the van, then started using a bottle of cleaner to wipe down all the equipment we'd touched.

"Had us worried for a minute," he rumbled at me. I just smirked. "Figured you'd have to come to the rescue?" I said. Sumea grinned and looked in the rear view mirror at us.

"Oh you don't know the half of it," she said. "I had to lock the doors on him to keep him from barreling inside and tearing up the place." I chuckled, smirking even more.

"Save your strength, big guy," I said, starting to get out of my own jumpsuit. "Something tells me you're gonna need it."

I told everybody I'd be in touch with them the following night to decide how best to respond next. I slept late into the morning the next day, although that's not entirely unusual for me. As I was going through my usual morning routine, getting dressed into some casual denims, I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. I could help but frown at my reflection. Something had been eating at me ever since I'd started planning this caper. Guilt. I hated it, but it was there. I'd always made an effort to operate within the law, but now...

I sighed, left the house, got to my car, and drove. In this new, so-called enlightened day and age, Christianity wasn't as well attended a religion as it used to be. But there were still a few die-hards like me who just refused to learn that nobody else thought they needed God. As it was, I had to drive a while to get to Our Lady of The Universe Catholic Church. No services were being held, but I still felt a need to say something to somebody.

The church was done up in the modern (for my time) Catholic way. A large granite building with a roof sloping in one direction, tile flooring and soft, muted lighting on the inside. I went to the front pew, looking up at the crucifix mounted over the altar. The face of the man on the cross looked back into my own, sympathy and understanding painted on his features in broad strokes.

I sighed heavily, kneeling down and clasping my hands together. I usually wasn't one for praying out loud, preferring to keep my thoughts to myself. But this time, the unease was eating at me so much I felt the need to say it out loud, but not TOO loud.

"Almighty God," I said, forehead resting against my hands. I kept my voice low, but not quite under my breath. "I don't know what to make of my situation. I feel I need to do something to help my friends, and that this is the only way. But...I don't know if it's alright with you, and that's what worries me. Breaking into businesses, going outside the law, acting like a vigilante...is this alright with you when its done for a good reason? I

don't believe the ends justify the means, but these seem to be the only means available. These people, they've corrupted all the systems I'd need to stop their own activities....at least, I'm certain they have. But should I really be resorting to this? It would practically be stealing...I know that's a sin, but...what other choice to I have to stop this group from ruining people's lives?"

"Maybe you should join them," a gravelly voice behind me said.

I jerked around sharply, that response making me jump in my skin.

"Mr. Mason," I said, a hint of distain creeping into my voice. The rhino, this time dressed in a navy blue suit with a pair of sunglasses, looked at me with an untouchable smirk.

I slowly straightened up. "Here to confess your own sins?" I asked. The rhino scoffed.

"I'd have to believe in God to do that," he said. I rolled my eyes; what a shock.

"No, I'm here because my higher ups want to make you an offer," he said. "To my everlasting chagrin, they want to offer you a job as one of our infiltration agents."

Now it was my turn to scoff. "And what makes you think I'd be a good..."

"I don't," the rhino said, putting emphasis on the "I". "I knew when I got to my office this morning you'd been there. I saw the surveillance tapes from our hidden cameras in the hallway. I know you and your friends broke into my office. But since you came out empty handed, I'd say you're not nearly as good as my superiors THINK you are."

He doesn't know we copied those flash drives. I thought to myself. Or read the letter on his computer.

"So again, why offer me the job?" I said, crossing my arms and cocking my head to one side.

"Because they think you have potential," the rhino said with mild distain. "And they think this is the quietest way possible to get you out of our hair."

"Uh huh," I said. "So, why exactly do they think I'd ACCEPT the position?"

"Ask a lot of questions, don't you?" Mason said, looking slightly testy. I smirked a hard-bitten smirk. "It's part of the job," I said.

"They think you'd see the benefit of working WITH us rather than against us," the rhino said. I gave him a confused look, and he started to pace up and down the aisle next to me.

"You seem to think we're nothing more than some megalomaniacal group out to rule the world," he said. "Well...you're half right. We're trying to take charge, but we're not

doing it JUST for ourselves. We're doing it because we just know we're the ones fit to do it."

"Are you now?" I said, leaning against the pew, my arms crossed, giving Mason a look of askance.

"We've been acquiring the most revolutionary and ground-breaking developments for centuries," Mason continued, pride for the achievements of his organization creeping into his voice. "We have the ability to provide the keys to victory to a side in a war. We can raise or crush a corporation or business or even small to medium-sized government as we see fit. We can influence the course of HISTORY. How can any organization manage to do all that if they're not the best and the brightest?"

"By resorting to tactics anyone with a shred of morals or dignity wouldn't," I said. "Extortion, murder, bribery, you really think those ends justify your means?"

"You apparently don't have a problem with some things that are...questionable," the rhino sneered. That barb stung me, much as I tried to hide it.

"I'd rather I didn't have to," I said, "but when you're manipulating the police and apparently have the city gov in your pocket, it kinda limits my options."

"Oh that's not half the story," Mason said. "Let me do you the favor of easing your conscience; I'll tell you just how limited your options are."

"Arrogant bastard, aren't you?" I said. The rhino acted like he didn't hear me as he paced up and down.

"We have connections with the city police and government, the state government, even members of the federal government. FBI, CIA, military, we've got contacts in them. And that's just in the United States. And we do it all by controlling who gets the best toys."

"These aren't just TOYS," I snapped. "They're achievements some people have broken their backs, wracked their minds, worked for years to achieve. And you just snatch 'em out of their hands and put 'em up for sale to the highest bidder!"

"Figured that much out, did you?" Mason said. I realized he might have been testing me; baiting me to see if I had stolen something from his office. But I quickly came up with a way to throw him off; tell him the truth.

"It's amazing what you can learn through eavesdropping," I said, "especially on conversations like that one you had with Ms. Sweeny." Mason blinked; I'd managed to surprise him with THAT one. I smirked at him.

"Oh yeah, I was there that night," I said. "She certainly wasn't very happy with you, was she?"

“So, you’re better than I expected, eh?” The rhino said, eyes narrowing.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I said. Mason snorted again.

“Whatever,” he said. “You still fail to grasp what we’re doing. We’re not just trading these developments for money. We’re trading it for INFLUENCE. We provide these things to a company in return for following our instructions. We tell them how to act, what policies to follow. We tell the governments what laws and policies to follow if they want to see their economies thrive.”

“So,” I said, looking up at the ceiling. “You’re an organization looking to manipulate the world at large...from behind the scenes, beyond public scrutiny...and you’re doing this because you think your all the elite of the world who should be in control and beyond the touch of the great unwashed masses?”

Mason looked at me with a bemused expression. I think he’d been expecting things to go the way they had.

“You make it sound really...underhanded,” he said. “We’re just taking what’s rightfully ours. If it wasn’t, we wouldn’t be able to, after all.”

“You know, you said I was only half-right about your group, and you’re right,” I said. I pushed myself off the pew I was leaning on, sticking my hands in my pockets.

“You’re not a megalomaniacal group out to rule the world,” I said. “You’re a narcissistic one.”

Mason shook his head and put up his hands with a shrug. “Hey, I tried,” he said, “but if that’s the way you’re gonna be, not much I can do about it.” He turned his back and walked towards the door.

“Not very worried about me telling people about your visit, are you?” I called after him. The rhino turned and looked at me.

“What can you prove?” he said, and walked out the door. I watched him go; he had me there. I could tell the authorities and they wouldn’t believe me. Even if I had an audio recording, Mason wasn’t some kind of wanted criminal or known suspect. His contacts with the authorities could make such a recording disappear even if someone didn’t just dismiss it as a hoax. One random person rambling about a secret organization bent on turning every government and business on earth into its puppets wouldn’t mean squat without solid evidence behind it; years of experience in journalism had taught me that.

I leaned against the pew again for a moment and thought. All levels of government compromised, no solid evidence of this group’s existence...I supposed I could try to follow up on a single one of the breakthroughs I knew they’d stolen, but the trail would

be cold by now and, most likely, covered up by this organization's law enforcement contacts. Besides, odds were sooner or later the trail would lead to a single member of the group that would confess to it, take all the blame and then use the organization's legal influence to get let off scott free. And even if he wasn't, that would still leave the rest of the organization to eliminate me to prevent further interference.

Taking down the entire organization all at once really did seem like the only option. I turned and looked at the crucifix over the altar again.

"Thanks for putting the devil in the spotlight," I said. "Now, I know what has to be done."

As I walked to the door of the church, I carefully looked out into the parking lot. My car was the only one there, and I didn't see any obvious attackers lurking around, waiting for me. The possibility of a sniper occurred to me, though, so I went to the side door of the church instead and slipped out. I used the lock button on my keyring to unlock my car from a distance. Running over to it, I carefully looked underneath it, opened the passenger door, popped the hood and trunk and quickly examined the trunk and the engine compartment. I examined the inside too. Satisfied there wasn't a bomb on my car, I quickly jumped behind the wheel and pulled out of the parking lot.

I was on edge and nervous. This damn organization was onto me, and I had no doubts they'd make me vanish the second I was too big a pain to ignore. Then they'd go after B and Sumea again. Knowing the koopa, they'd probably make HIM disappear too.

I was feeling very edgy, so I turned on the radio as I cruised down the street. Mid day was coming on and traffic was starting to pick up.

"And in other news, police and FBI have arrest warrants out for the owners of the Koopa Klub. B Murakami and Sumea Northrender are both wanted on charges of drug dealing out of their place of business, along with friend and business associate Mike Fang."

I stared at the radio for a second, then put my eyes back on the road.

"Assholes work fast," I muttered.

The sky had clouded over a little before sunset, so there were no stars out that night. I felt like I was going to have a stroke as I paced back and forth in front of the memorial statue for some war that had occurred while I was in cryostasis. After hearing the announcement on the radio, I'd gone as fast as I could to a gas station I'd never been in before, bought a candy bar with a large bill so I could get some change, and then used the payphone outside to call the others.

We'd arranged to meet around 8 p.m. in a park on the west side of the city, near the financial district. I knew it was a risk, but I went by my house to pick up a few things.

There was a hair-raising moment when I heard sirens on the highway near the entrance to the neighborhood, but they went past without stopping. I took off again as fast as I could.

Now, feeling like a police dragnet was closing in, I tried to look nonchalant and failed miserably. There was a bit of movement near the trees lining the corridor that led up to the memorial, causing me to spin around on my heel sharply. Conner stepped out from behind the tree, dressed in the semi-casual clothes I'd seen him in at the klub.

"Geeze," I said breathlessly, "You about scared the crap out of me."

"Sorry," he said. "But I didn't think yelling out would have been a smart idea."

"Definitely not," said Alice, who stepped out from behind a different tree. I looked around and spotted B and Sumea coming right up the path. The big guy was dressed in sweats like he was out for a jog, while his girlfriend was in a sky-blue tube top, black jeans and a black lady's leather jacket. The koopess looked like if her hair wasn't already white, she would have gotten some gray ones from all the stress they were under. She came up to me and hugged me while B gave me a strong pat on the back.

"Thanks for the head's up," he rumbled. "Just after we left, I got a call from my neighbors on my cell. Didn't pick up, but they left a message, wanting to know why a S.W.A.T team just broke down my door."

"These people aren't going to let up, are they?" Sumea said, dismay all over her expression. She leaned against her boyfriend, who put a hand on her shoulder and held her close. He looked angry, confused and at a loss, all at the same time, trying to comfort his sweetheart while feeling chained down.

Seeing them like that was painful. Knowing who was responsible for it was infuriating. I turned to Conner and Alice.

"I'll understand if you guys don't want to get dragged into this any further," I said. The android and the raccoon looked at each other, then looked back at me.

"Nah, we're not backing out now," Conner said. I grinned grimly and nodded.

"Then get ready for a road trip," I said.

I spread out the map across the hotel room floor. It was amusing to me how even several hundred years from the age I'd been born in, there were still paper printouts. A warehouse building with four stories of office space for what was supposedly a shipping/receiving company were laid out in blueprint style, but we all knew what the building was really housing.

We'd arrived in a small suburban town just outside of Chicago the day before. To get there, Conner had rented a large moving truck, with myself, B and Sumea riding in the back. The trip was monotonous for the three of us riding in the back, spending most of our time either napping or reading digital books on the future equivalent of my era's Kindle. I'll say one good thing about e-novels; you don't need a reading light when you're in the dark.

After we got to Chicago, I had Conner drop me off in Chicago near city hall. Stepping out of the van in a back alley, then walking towards the city gov center, I felt like I was walking right into the lion's den with a steak tied to my neck. I tried to play it nonchalant, dressed casual in a T-shirt and jeans, and went to their planning and inspections department, requesting the building plan submitted for Effram's Shipping and Receiving. I'd done some research on the trip using my PDA's smartphone feature; Effram's was the only shipping company to have moved into Chicago's industrial park last year; it had the organization's greasy, underhanded fingerprints all over it.

Getting the building plan was a little bit of a challenge, but I'd had a plan. When the city planner asked me why I wanted it, even though it was a matter of public record, I played the part of an environmental group that was accusing the company of not being eco-friendly. I thought back to the times I'd been to public meetings where activists were present, and launched into a tirade about shipping using non-green trucks and the impact of storing potentially dangerous materials. After about three minutes, the planner handed over the building blueprints, probably just so I would shut up and get the hell out of their office.

Now Conner, Alice, B, Sumea and I were gathered around the building plans like football players at the huddle. I took a knee and started pointing out features, plotting out the most effective way in and out.

"This is going to be a serious challenge," I said. "I've been reading over the description of the building's features." I held up a thick printout in a manila envelope. "This building has a basement vault accessible only by elevator from the top floor. That's got to be where they're hiding access to their system. The vault itself has a two-ton door on it with both a regular locking mechanism and an electromagnetic lock. Access is through two different 10-digit access codes, and the keypads to enter them are on the far side of the building."

"What kind of design is that?" Sumea said, sounding perplexed. "Makes it kind of hard to open the door."

"I think they've got security guards and an intercom to open the door by request," I said. "But the door itself is just the start of our problems. From the looks of things they've got security guard stations on every floor of this building, which suggests they've got a big security force. Probably means they've got all kinds of measures like security cameras, heat and motion sensitive alarms, automatic door locks, all kinds of stuff."

“So how are we going to sneak in?” Conner asked. I looked around at the rest of my posse.

“This isn’t going to be a quiet job,” I said. “No cat burglar stuff this time, sorry to say. We’re going to have to go in hard, give these bastards a full-on assault.”

B’s muzzle cracked open in a slow, toothy smile. It was unsettling to watch.

“Their location actually works to our advantage for that,” I said. “Being surrounded by industrial businesses means loud noises aren’t unusual. So, we cut off their communications, take out their external surveillance, then go to war.”

I looked to each of my companions. They were all nodding their heads in a grim but determined way. I imagine soldiers on the battlefield often felt the way we did at that moment; knowing that you’re about to risk life and limb when victory is uncertain, but sure that the cause is a just one and that the only other option besides fighting is to surrender.

“Okay,” I said. “Here’s the plan...”

Cold, crisp frost was in the air early that morning. We’d spent a couple days getting all our equipment together, and now we were ready. I sat in the back of the delivery truck we’d rented, fingering my rosary.

God, if I’m wrong about this, forgive me. I thought. But if I’m right, get us through this in one piece. I pressed the rosary to my lips, then put it in my pocket and pulled the half-face gas mask over my muzzle. The mask came up over my muzzle just to my eyes, going around the back of my head with rubber straps to hold it snug to my face. I had on my traditional detective outfit, with that cloth-thin experimental body armor on underneath it, the one I’d been given during my second trip to Antarctica with Redwolf. Conner, behind the wheel of the truck, applied the breaks.

“We’re here,” he said. I nodded.

“Let’s get to work,” I said, opening the back of the van. There was a service road running behind the industrial park, a football field’s distance from the storage building. A chain link fence ran around the exterior of the building, morning dew condensing on the cold, galvanized metal. B jumped out of the van, hitching up the tactical pants with a green cameo pattern he was wearing. As he zipped up the front of the cameo pattern flak vest he was wearing, I cocked my head to one side.

“Hey B,” I asked, “How do you get your shirts to go on under your shell?”

The massive koopa smirked at me and winked. “Trade secret,” he rumbled, reaching into a pocket on the vest and pulling out a pair of ruby red wrap-around shades. He slid them

onto his face as he grabbed the shovel and chainsaw we bought at a hardware store. He stepped to the far side of the road where there were little plastic flags on wires stuck into the ground; the telltale signs of buried phone cables. The koopa started digging while Conner climbed out of the driver's seat, dressed in his black trench coat and combat getup he'd worn on our previous job. He reached back into the truck as Sumea handed him the Lapua Mag compact sniper rifle. With a bullpup design much like the 'coon's P90, the rifle had all the accuracy of a regular sniper's weapon but needed less space, with most of the barrel hidden inside the stock.

The 'coon stood on the small ladder leading up to the diesel truck's door, using the roof of the cab as a rest to steady his shots. Looking through the passenger side window, I watched Conner take careful aim and one by one, snipe each of the cameras on the edge of the building. The silencer on the end of his rifle muffled the shots from a distance, but up close the gunshot cracks were still loud enough to make the rest of us wince with each shot.

"Were good," Conner said, putting his rifle back and taking his submachine gun. As soon as the cameras were down, Alice jumped out of the back of the van. The droid was decked out in her biker leathers again, but this time, she wasn't hiding being combat ready. She had two machine pistols in leg holsters, an Israeli uzi on one hip and several ammo clips on the other. A single bandolier of flashbang grenades crossed her considerable chest. The droid had zipped up her jacket all the way over her bosom, though; no flirting this time, she was all-business.

The droid turned and picked up the battery-powered crosscut saw sitting on the van floor; another little thing we picked up from the hardware store. The droid crossed the road, going up to the fence. Her saw brayed to life and spit sparks as she cut a long slit through the fence.

"B, how're we doing?" I asked, leaning out of the back of the truck. The koopa had dug around the area of the flags, and tapped his shovel on one spot.

"Good to go," he said. "Just say the word."

"Do it," I said. The koopa stuck his shovel into the ground, grabbed his chainsaw, and yanked it to life. The saw roared as he squeezed the trigger, then pushed it down onto the located communication line. Sparks flew into the air as the wire was neatly severed, still spitting a few more after the koopa picked up his tools and returned to the truck.

Sumea, you're up." I said. The koopess stepped out of the van. She was dressed in her black jeans and black leather jacket with her blue strapped top, but she also had a choker necklace around her neck with a deep blue jewel set in it. She'd told me the jewel was enchanted, granting protection to the wearer as long as power remained in it. Of course, that power would drain the more stress was put on it, so it wasn't a license to act like you were invincible.

The koopess walked to the side of the road, her eyes beginning to glow that bright blue again. She made smooth, slow fanning motions with her hands like she was wafting something up to her nose to smell. Slowly a frosty cool vapor rose up from the ground between us and the building; a mist created by the koopess's magic creating a blanket of cold air that turned the moisture in the air into fog. It would serve to mask our approach; no sense in tipping our hand any sooner than necessary.

I jumped out of the van myself. Reaching back inside, I took my 12-gauge shot gun from where I'd leaned it. I'd traded out the pistol grip for a solid shoulder stock to reduce recoil; concealing it wouldn't be a concern this time.

"Alright," I said, cocking my scatter gun. "Let's kick this off."

The icy fogbank surrounded the building perfectly. As we approached it, stepping off of the grass and onto the paved driveway leading to the back loading doors, I could hear a couple of people talking.

"Damn, fog came in pretty heavy this morning," one said.

"Wierd I didn't hear anything about it on the news," said the other.

"Tch, they can never tell the weather for shit 'till right before it happens," said the first speaker.

"Yeah," said the second, "One time, I was planning on daysailing and they said it was gonna be clear skies all week long. I get up that morning to untie the boat, and BOOM, it's pouring. And on the way back to the house, I hear on the radio, the fuck....?"

I don't think that's what the loading bay worker actually heard on the radio. I think it was likely the reaction he had to seeing a giant koopa, a koopess with blue glowing eyes, a spotted hyena with a shot gun, an android with an uzi and a raccoon with a submachine gun stepping out of the fog, all walking in a line like something out of a movie. One loading bay worker, a human with a toothpick in his mouth, was leaning up against doorframe, while another, a crocodile, was putting a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and about to light it.

"SHIT!" The croc said, jumping up and running inside, closely followed by the other worker. One of them slapped a button next to the door as he ran further into the loading bay, the door slowly coming down. We broke into a run, B getting to the door first. The koopa grabbed it by the edge and shoved upward hard, causing the mechanism to strip its gears. The machine, mounted next to the door on the inside wall, let off a high pitched whine of protest, then some metallic cracks came from it as it broke.

Conner, Alice and I came in just behind the Koopa, guns up and ready. The inside of the loading bay was the warehouse portion of the building, with ceiling-to-floor shelving 50 feet high. Our target was to get to the stairwell; we wanted to avoid the elevators until

absolutely necessary, too easy to get trapped in one.

I looked to the right. A pair of double doors opened onto a hallway where the warehouse workers locker and breakroom was. It was also where the security station was located.

"B, the doors," I said. We'd planned out most of the operation, but in the heat of the moment, I wasn't one to leave things to chance. The koopa looked around and found the biggest, heaviest box he could find; a crate that was as tall as he was and labeled "Machine Parts." I guess the organization did a little actual industrial storage to keep up pretences. It was working to their disadvantage now, as the koopa shoved the crate across the floor until it thudded against the wall. The door started to slide open just as he got to it, the sound of pissed-off guards shouting at him from the other side making B grin.

We marched quickly through the warehouse, eyes open for trouble. It looked like most of the workers hadn't gotten there for the morning, but I spotted one gryphon running for a red box with a button on it on the far wall as we passed through the rows of storage shelves.

"Conner," I said. The 'coon looked the gryphon's way. His eyes flashed blue in a similar way to Sumea's. But Conner's power was more scientific than mystical. It grabbed hold of the gryphon, who squawked and thrashed as he was lifted up in the air by one ankle, as if he'd been caught in some kind of invisible snare. The 'coon looked around and spotted a large crate. The lid was pried up by Conner's invisible mental fingers, and the protesting gryphon was stuffed into the box, the lid nailed firmly down on top of it.

We reached a single door at the far back of the warehouse section. I slapped it's open button and it slid open, revealing the base of the fire escape stairs. I turned to the others briefly.

"Remember," I said, "avoid hitting the noncombatants," I said. Everyone nodded and I led the way up the stairs. I'd noticed something in the blueprints of the building I didn't like; the stairwells weren't completely separated from the floors. In a normal building, you have one continuous stairwell that has doors leading to each floor. If that had been the case, we could have just gone straight to the fifth floor. But the organization, sneaky bastards they were, pulled a fast one and build the stairwells so that each one led only to the floor above. The doors from one stairwell to the next were right next to each other, but it still meant we had to walk out into plain view of everybody on that floor.

We all lined up on the edge of the first door like a S.W.A.T. team about breach an entry. I rubbed my chin.

"Let's see if we can put off a bigger fight as long as we can." I said. The others nodded, so I tucked my shot gun to my side and opened the door. The first floor was like that real estate building with its 9 to 5 office cubicles. I guess when you're busy stealing people's hard work for yourself, it helps to have a company's worth of office workers to help you cover it up and sell it off. I stepped through the door and into the next quickly without

difficulty, nobody even bothering to look up from their clerk-style desks. The others followed suit, not even B getting spotted. I wondered for a minute if we'd just had some really good luck.

As we reached the second floor door, the first floor door opened and I heard the heavy tramping of boots. So much for good luck.

"MOVE," I said harshly. B took point, shoving the second doorway open. I stepped through the door and saw office workers with their eyes diligently glued to their screens as a half-dozen armed security guards in black and white uniform's stormed in. I could tell right away these were no simple rent-a-cops; your average security guard doesn't carry a submachine gun and move like a he's ex-military.

"Second door," I said. The guards saw B going for the door and opened fire. No warning, no order to drop our weapons, just a stream of bullets that the koopa had to use his shell to deflect. There were shouts of surprise as the cubicle workers all dove under their desks. I went into a crouch myself and dove behind a cubicle wall, Alice and Conner doing the same at different walls. B, meanwhile, got the door open and ushered Sumea through, his girlfriend covering her head instinctively with her hands.

Much like at the klub, when there was a lull in the gunfire, B turned and spat a fireball in the direction of the guards. But these guys weren't dopes; ducking to avoid the fiery blast as it hit the far wall and set a couple potted plants alight. The sprinkler system got activated, sending a shower down over all our heads; good thing I remembered my coat.

I stuck my head out from around the corner of the cubicle; nobody was in that aisle, so I stayed crouched and moved along until I was close to the origin of some of the gunfire. Shot gun held to my shoulder, I stood up and let loose with a blast of buckshot. One guard went down hard, getting thrown into two others. I ducked back down again, cocking my shot gun as a second guard tried to vault over the wall of one cubicle into the next, uzi held to spray me with lead. A second blast from my scatter gun caught him in mid air, causing him to go crashing down onto some number cruncher's desk.

I stood up again in time to see Alice repeating my own performance, fanning her uzi a bit to catch a guard in the chest and drop him twitching to the floor. But reinforcements were starting to arrive. The door to the first floor stairwell burst open and two more guards stuck their guns through. Conner, still crouched down at the very end of the cubicle maze, spun around and laid down a straight line of fire from his P90, dropping one guard and sending the other falling against others in the stairwell. The 'coon's eyes glowed blue again and the door slammed shut, followed quickly by the door lock panel pressing, then exploding in a shower of sparks.

I didn't need to give the others instructions to tell them now was the time to run before more guards showed up. The remaining three on the second floor were keeping their heads down, but I saw more guards coming through on the far side door to back them up. Several bullets pounded into the wall as I brought up the rear of the group, shutting the

door quickly behind us and smashing it with the butt of my shot gun.

I found the others all gathered around the third floor door. I couldn't show them my smirk behind my gas mask, but my grin may have been noticeable through my eyes.

"Waiting for me?" I said.

"They locked the door," Alice said. "And I don't have a way to jack into their security system from here."

"Fuck," I said. "B, can you kick it down?"

"Yeah, but if I do I'm probably gonna knock it so far it'll hurt someone on the other side," he said, "And you did say no non-combatants....,"

"Okay, okay," I said, "let's be creative here.....ahhhh, B, Sumea, what happens when you rapidly heat and cool metal?" The koopas grinned at each other. Sumea laced her fingers together and stretched her arms while B took a breath and pursed his lips. He carefully blew a stream of fire directly at one spot on the edge of the door, heating it up till it was glowing. Stepping back, Sumea came forward and held her hand out, palm first. An icy cold gust of air came out of her palm, causing the metal to cool rapidly. There was an audible sound of bending, warping metal as the spot on the edge looked malformed.

"Okay," I said, "this time, head for the door across the room."

"What? Why?" Alice asked.

"Cause they've probably locked all the other doors on this side too," I said, "but they'll want their security teams to have a way onto each floor, so they probably haven't locked the other doors."

"Right," B said. "Let's not waste time then," the koopa balled up a fist and smashed it through the weakened spot on the door, the metal shattering from the rapid changes in temperature. He grabbed his newfound handhold and shoved the door open. The workers on the third floor were mostly gathered at the opposite side of the room; apparently they were rubbernecking after security guards got sent down that way. As I marched across the room, I set off a shot gun blast overhead to get their attention, ceiling plaster raining down as a result. Several people screamed and they all instinctively went into a half crouch.

"OUT OF THE WAY!" I yelled through my gas mask. Some of the workers started to comply, when a new wave of guards came surging through the very doors we were trying to go through! We all dove for cubicles to hide in. The three of us with guns started playing wack-a-mole, from the perspective of the mole, popping in and out while getting off shots when we could. But we didn't have the luxury of aiming and the guards did.

"Alice! Banger!" I yelled over the intermittent shots being fired. The 'droid, in the cubicle directly across from me, pulled a flashbang from her belt and tossed it over the top of the cubicle she was crouched in. The metal cylinder bounced once of the floor as some of the guards turned away, but others were looking right at it as the grenade went off in a thud that would have knocked anyone close enough to it for a loop and a flash that had most of the guard's seeing stars.

The 'droid jumped up and ran forward, kicking one guard in the stomach to double him over and elbowed him in the head, dropping him. I rolled out from my hiding spot and ran forward, nailing another guard in the face with the stock of my shot gun. But the flash was wearing off fast, and two more guards had just arrived! They weren't much of a threat, though, after Sumea stood up from her hiding spot and froze them into statues. She started drawing energy to do another one, but one of the guards shook off his flashbang haze and fired a random spattering of bullets her way. Three bounced off the magic shield around her, making it glow a frosty blue on the points of impact for a second. It also broke her concentration and she ducked back into cover with a gasp of fright. I turned and blasted said guard right in the center mass, hurling him into a printing machine.

The five of us wordlessly ran into the stairwell, getting treated to a bullet barrage. Conner managed to get his line-of-sight on our attackers long enough to use his tekelenisis to slam two of them headfirst into the stair railing. Another one leaped down the stairs and duck-and-rolled in front of us, only for B to turn him into a charred skeleton in an instant. I smashed the lock on the third floor door as I had the second and ran up the stairs to meet the others.

Reaching the fourth floor door, I kept getting the feeling things were about to get more difficult. I've learned to listen to my instincts and rather than rush into this room, I motioned for the others to hold, then hit the door button and looked around the corner. The top floor of the building appeared to be divided, unlike the other ones. The room the stairwell lead to was a server room, filled with rows upon rows of computer servers. If only we'd been able to tap into them directly....but when I asked Alice, she shook her head.

"No wireless network into them," she said. "Maybe if we can find a jack..."

"Okay," I said, "let's spread out and take a look around." I stepped through the doorway and got all of two steps before I was lifted off my footpaws and thrown headfirst into the wall across the room. It made me see stars, and my head wasn't clear. Alice raised up her uzi, but it was yanked out of her hands by an unseen force that smashed it over her head so hard it broke the gun. Good thing she was an android or it would have broken her neck. But as it was, the impact was enough to scramble her sensors, putting her out of the fight until she could recalibrate.

"It's a telekinetic!" B said, ducking back around the doorframe, shielding Sumea. I groaned and rubbed my head, blearily looking around the room. All I could see were the servers, but I'd learned from Conner that most telepaths have to be able to see their target

to use their powers on them; they have to be able to picture in their minds what they want to do before they do it. A telepath who was also a remote viewer wasn't hampered by this. So, assuming he wasn't a remote viewer, where was he watching us from?

I looked around the room again, and that's when I spotted them. Seems like no matter how advanced technology gets, some things never go out of style. Like security mirrors, which the room had in every corner.

I looked carefully at each mirror...and in one, I spotted a stout warthog looking right into it back at me, hiding behind the far left server in the corner of the room.

"OVER THERE!" I said, pointing at the corner. The warthog glared at me in the mirror and his eyes glowed like Conner's, only bright red, much like the suit he was wearing. I suddenly found my head getting an up close and personal inspection of the floor tiling.

Conner dove leaps to the side around the servers, glaring right at the hog. The two glared at each other like a pair of gunslingers at a showdown. Their eyes lit up at the same time; you could practically see the air ripple as their two mental forces collided together at the halfway point between them. I staggered slowly to my feet, trying to get the room to stop spinning. I suddenly felt a waft of air in front of my face, like some invisible fist just took an almighty swing at me, but was knocked aside by another one coming perpendicular to it. Both the 'coon and the warthog were gritting their teeth, eyes furrowed, brows clenched in concentration. Suddenly, the boar shoved both hands into his jacket, pulled out a pair of throwing knives, and flung them at Conner! The 'coon turned his head to one side, clenching one eye further shut than the other, stopping the daggers in mid-air.

I went for my shot gun where I'd left it, but an invisible hand threw it across the room. Trying to go for my revolver, I got an unseen blow right to my solar plexus, knocking the wind out of me. Alice, meanwhile, was holding her head, her eyes rapidly moving back and forth, looking like she was doing some sort of internal repairs. Either that or she was severely malfunctioning. I crawled toward her as B and Sumea stepped out, apparently deciding now was the time to attack.

But the warthog was ready. No sooner had both koopas stepped into the room than both of them had their hands grasping for their throats. I wasn't soon to wonder why, as I felt an invisible noose come tight around my neck. My view started to turn red as the unseen force tightened, a uniform line all around my throat sealing off as my lungs begged for air.

Conner was now on his knees, his eyes flickering slightly, the daggers inching closer to him. But the warthog looked like he was getting a hernia, fists clenched, grinding his teeth, a vein standing out on his forehead. The 'coon balled up his fists, sucked in a deep breath, and let out a yell at the top of his lungs. The daggers that had been held suspended a few feet away from him before shot forward, but then as if they were caught in a looping water slide, curved around in front of him and shot straight back at the warthog! The hog had just enough time to register surprise on his face before the knives hit him

square in the chest, dropping him to his knees and then on his back.

The invisible rope around all our necks suddenly vanished. I gasped for air, coughing and groaning as I got to my feet for the second time. I staggered over to Conner, who was still on his knees, holding his head and looking like he had the worlds biggest migraine.

"Good work," I said, holding out my own, slightly-unsteady hand. He looked up at me with bleary, bloodshot eyes and grinned, panting for breath as he took my hand. We both almost pulled each other over, but the 'coon managed to get back up.

"How's Alice," I asked, turning and looking to the side. B was helping the droid back on her own feet as she clenched her eyes shut and then opened them. Their rapid, twitching movement had stopped.

"I'm alright," she said, "the blow caused some damage, but I rerouted my functions. I'll need to get it repaired sooner or later, though."

I nodded. "Don't worry, we'll get you a tune up when this is all over." I retrieved my shot gun and focused my attention at the next door. The five of us marched forward, Sumea slapping the lock panel to slide the double doors open.

On the other side of the server room was a luxury office. It was the sort of thing you'd expect the CEO of a major company to have. Either that or Tony Montana. A ceiling-to-wall window ran the entire length of the back wall, just behind steel-and-glass desk. A holographic computer monitor hovered directly over it, while on either side of the room were lines of framed portraits done in surprisingly good taste. They went well with the black leather furniture in the room.

Sitting behind the desk was Celia Sweeny. I hadn't gotten a good look at the female raccoon before, but I could see now she was definitely what you'd call a career woman. The ice-cold look in her eyes, the no-nonsense look to her mouth, everything about her demeanor said "don't fuck with me." She was small of stature, probably a head shorter than me, and on the thin side. But the dark plum women's business suit she wore looked expensive; definitely a woman of authority. Her shoulder-length auburn hair added to her looks, but that wicked look in her eyes would have warned most men away.

"So YOU'RE the ones causing all the trouble," she said, standing up from her desk. She walked around the side of the desk, glaring daggers our way.

"Yeah," I said. "Now, just cooperate and we'll be gentle with you."

"No promises," B snorted. The 'coon shook her head.

"All this over a stupid little club," she said. Sumea stepped forward.

"That's OUR club you're talking about," she said, teeth bared. "And when you've put

everything you've got into making something, it sure as hell doesn't seem so stupid or little!"

"That hardly matters in the big picture," Sweeny said, giving Sumea a glare.

"Wrong," I said. "But we're not here to argue semantics, BITCH, now show us the elevator to the basement or we'll do this the hard way." By "hard way," I meant we'd knock Sweeny out and search the room ourselves; I wasn't about to start beating her up for information. But even if I had, I don't think that would have changed Sweeny's reaction.

"Fine then," she said, "well do this...YOUR WAY." She held up her hands and electricity started to arc between her fingers.

"Ah fuck," I said. The 'coon thrust her hand forward at us when suddenly a frosted pane of ice shot up from the floor in front of us. The bolt of electricity hit the pane, shattering it but also dissipating the electrical energy. Sumea's glaring eyes glowed to match Celia's hands.

"Interesting," the 'coon said, taking a couple steps to the side. Sumea snorted at her, lacing her fingers together and flexing her hands again. As the two started to circle, we heard the telltale tramp of boots in the server room. Alice smashed the door lock on the wall while I grabbed a couch and dragged it in front of the door. Conner grabbed the other and shoved it into the middle of the room. B, meanwhile, seemed to be torn between helping us and his girlfriend.

"Sweety," Sumea said, "Go help the others. I can handle this harpy."

"Don't flatter yourself, ice queen," Sweeny said, and launched another bolt of lightning with an underhanded flick of her wrist. Sumea countered it with a bolt of frigid arcane power that met it head on, then threw a second one with her other hand. Celia pivoted to one side, letting the bolt hit the wall and spread tendrils of frost across it. She thrust her hand forward and just missed the koopess's head by an inch as Sumea ducked and thrust both hands forward, icy shards firing from both hands. They were melted by what seemed to be a cloud of static electricity that suddenly formed up in front of Sweeny's outstretched palms.

I had to divert my attention away from the dueling sorceresses as I crouched in front of the sofa with Conner and Alice. There was an unhealthy grinding noise at the door; it looked like the guards had some kind of saws and were cutting their way through. They were moving fast through the material of the door, going up either side. I gripped my shot gun, pulling it firmly against my shoulder and sighted down the middle of the door. IN ten second flat, the door fell inward, blowing a gust of air towards us as it thudded to the carpeted floor. Without wasting a second, I started firing, loud, heavy thuds coming from my scatter gun at the dozen or so thugs gathered in the door. These ones didn't look like security guards, though; they were dressed in gunmetal gray outfits that looked like flak

jackets and had com headsets as well; my first guess was they were operatives that pulled corporate espionage similar to what we were doing.

My first shot caught one of them full in the chest, dropping him to the floor where he crawled off behind one of the servers. The other four directly in front ducked behind the doorframe while the rest took cover behind servers as well. Alice and Conner opened fire in short bursts when the crews stuck their heads out to take pot shots at us with full-blown assault rifles. Shots went over our heads and hit the window on the far wall behind us, cracking and spider-webbing the glass.

B, crouched down next to the wall on the left side of the door, balled up a fist and looped it into the face of one of the agents when they stuck their head around the corner again. The uppercut caught him on the chin and threw him up against the ceiling, dropping him back down in a heap. One of the other agents on the opposite side tried to take an angled shot at B, but the koopa spat a fireball at him and fried his head into a charred skull instantly.

“Alice,” I said, ducking my head down to avoid bullets as several peppered the edge of the couch, “flashbang.”

“After this, I’ve only got one left,” the android said, hooking her arm over the edge of the couch. Several shouts of protest came afterward, prompting me to stand up and let another round loose. I was getting low on ammo, and I suspected the others were starting to get light on it too. Sumea seemed to notice this as she was now in an arcane tennis match with Sweeny. The koopess seemed to have a buckler of frost over one hand, throwing balls of magic cold with the other. The ‘coon was responding in kind with her own electric-based magic. She knew she had the upper hand; we were on the clock, while she had all the time in the world to wait while the police were undoubtedly on their way. As a result, she wasn’t doing all that much to attack Sumea, just enough to keep her at bay.

The koopess gritted her teeth, doing an underhanded lob with an ice ball. This one made it past the raccoon’s arcane shield...only to bounce off a full body electric field! Sweeny smirked as there was an overall crackle of static electricity around her in a cone shape.

“Ready to give up yet?” the ‘coon said. Sumea was momentarily surprised, and Sweeny took full advantage of that, swiping her arm across her chest, nailing Sumea in the side with an electric bolt. The shock was deflected by her frost shield, but the gem around her neck was beginning to flicker; it couldn’t take many more direct hits.

B saw the attack that sent his girlfriend stumbling back a couple steps. He bellowed in rage, but that earned him a bolt of electricity of his own, causing his muscles to clench and for him to drop to his knees again. It was probably for the best, as he’d reacted without thinking and stood up from his protective cover, exposing the back of his head.

“I’m getting bored with this,” Sweeny said, bearing down on Sumea. The koopess glared

at the 'coon, a hand to her forehead, weaving unsteadily on her footpaws.

“So. Am. I,” she growled through her teeth. The 'coon balled up a fist, charging a stronger attack. She pivoted to the side and thrust her fist forward, shooting out a bolt of electricity that looked almost as strong as a natural lighting bolt. Sumea clenched the fist her frost buckler was formed over, putting more energy into it to strengthen the shield. As the bolt came her way, she directed the shot up at an angle, sending it into the ceiling, where it hit the sprinkler system.

The bolt broke the fanning head off the sprinkler, causing the water to gush out of the pipe straight down...and on top of Sweeny. The 'coon instinctively put her hands up against the gush, the air filling with that acrid smell it gets when there's too much electricity in the air. The water caused her shield to flicker and crackle, dissipating the energy. Sumea, taking one step forward, clenched both her fists, sucked in a breath, and let out a blast of frigid air from her muzzle, engulfing the 'coon from the neck down. When the sprinkler cut off and the koopess finished exhaling, Sweeny was encased in ice at least two inches thick all around her body. The coon, her eyes clenched shut, pried them open, then started grunting like she was trying to pull herself free.

“Now who's the ice queen?” Sumea panted, leaning unsteadily on Sweeny's desk. The 'coon just glared at her and hissed profanity under her breath. B, recovered from the bolt he'd received, stepped forward and caught her before she fell completely.

“Thanks sweetie, I'm a little lightheaded,” the koopess said. B just let out a rumbling chuckle. By this time we'd driven back the assault on the office, but more were on the way, no doubt.

“I'm going to bury you all in a landfill,” Sweeny snarled, glaring at each of us. We all ignored her as we went over to the elevator door just to the right of her desk. The card reader looked intimidating, but Alice was able to hack it open in under a minute.

The elevator doors slid open silently and we all piled in. Thumbing the down button, I leaned against the wall, the momentary opportunity to catch my breath also allowing fatigue to start setting in. I could tell the fight was taking its toll on the others as well. Conner was holding his head, eyes clenched like he was in the middle of a screaming migraine. The LED's in Alice's eyes were flickering. Sumea was leaning heavily against B, who seemed to be the only one who wasn't having to work to keep himself going. But even he was looking grim and not as self-assured as he normally does.

As the elevator slowed, we all shook off our fatigue and aches as best we could, shouldering weapons and limbering up. The doors slid open, revealing a bright white hallway. With fluorescents overhead, whitewashed walls and white tile floors, it gave you the impression of walking down a porcelain tube. The hallway was smooth with no doors, ending in a T intersection at the end. After taking a knife from my belt and jamming the elevator doors open, I took point, carefully but purposefully making my way down to the end, listening for the sound of an ambush. Fortunately, there wasn't one.

At the end of the hall, just around the corners were a pair of double doors, one on either side. Sliding up to the sides, I peered through the clouded glass windows. The hallways beyond the left hand one looked empty, but the right hand one had a half dozen devices protruding from the ceiling. The clouded glass made it hard to make them out, but from the way they appeared to be rotating, I guessed they were ceiling-mounted turrets, their positions staggered to avoid shooting one another.

“Okay,” I said, turning to the others. “If I recall the map correctly, that way’s the vault.” I pointed off to the left. “And that way’s the vault controls,” I pointed to the right. “It looks like they’re relying on the vault door and locks to keep us out.”

“But it isn’t, is it?” Conner asked. I shook my head and lead the way down the left hall. The hallway curved a bit to the left, making me cautious as we rounded the corner. Fortunately, it was empty all the way to the door. As we got to it, I lowered my shot gun and let out a breath.

“Impressive,” I said, and meant it. The vault door was like something you’d see in a movie. A large, circular portal, missing only the multi-spoke handle in the middle, it was as tall as B and just about as wide as his arm span. It was set into a wall it took up about a third of, it’s stainless steel surface the only one down here that wasn’t white.

I paused for thought, trying to remember the design plan of the building again. Calling to mind the security system design, I aimed my shot gun at the wall and used up the rest of my shells; I only had five more, as it was. But the shot wasn’t wasted, as the gunfire blasting into the drywall and plaster revealed the wiring beneath. Stepping forward, I grabbed the edges and yanked on them a bit more, exposing the wire’s further.

“Alice,” I said. The ‘droid nodded, needing no other instruction. She unzipped her jacket, reaching into an inside pocket and pulling out what looked like an electrician’s current-finding tool. Taking out a wire stripper, Alice exposed a bit of each wire while the rest of us paced a bit nervously. The android found what she was looking for, then took a wire hanging from her tool with an alligator clip on the end. She clipped it to the exposed wire, then hooked her tool up to her head. The ‘droid closed her eyes, her expression remaining smooth for a minute, then her face clenched a bit. She started to get funny little twitches, sort of like dogs when they’re dreaming, head twitching from one side to the other, corners of her mouth tugging now and again.

I have to admit, I was twitchier than the others. Waiting while under pressure, like a deadline or, in this case, an impending assault, always makes me nervous. I moved back and forth, watching the hallway with my hand on the butt of my revolver, my now-empty shot gun slung across my back with the shoulder strap.

“There,” Alice finally said, “I managed to get the physical lock open, but the eletromagnet has even higher security. It’s more than I can handle.”

“That’s fine,” I said, “though I wonder why they put more security on the magnet and not the bolts.”

“Probably for safety,” Conner said, looking at the vault door. “If they had a power outage or something, and had to get the vault open, they’d want it possible to get past the physical lock.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “Conner, if you’ve got remote viewing, keep an eye on our hosts upstairs.” The ‘coon nodded, sitting down Indian-style on the floor and putting a couple fingers to his temple. I turned to B. “Well big guy, it’s your moment.”

B looked at the vault door, setting his jaw. The koopa dug into his pocket and pulled out a pair of weight lifting gloves, sliding them on as he went up to the door. Two big, scaly hands grabbed the vault’s handle. The koopa turned to the side, taking a huge, deep breath, his chest rising and falling as he exhaled. Then, he threw his considerable weight backward, planting his footpaws against the floor firmly as he heaved. The door immediately cracked open an inch, but no further. B was already clenching his teeth, but refused to yield. His already massive muscles bulged out more from his efforts as he strained against the door. The massive vault portal shuddered a bit, yielding another inch...then another. The koopa’s brow was beaded with sweat, his arms and legs shaking.

I threw a glance at Sumea. The koopess had a look on her face that made it difficult to tell if she was about to swoon at the sight of her boyfriend’s Herculean strength or jump on him in a frenzy of passion. I tried not to laugh as I turned my attention back to the koopa. B had shifted one foot backward, but in the process, slid just a bit, letting the door slide back about a quarter of an inch.

“No...you...don’t...” B growled. He pushed further with his legs, his thighs making the material of his pants go skin-tight. The vault door yielded another few inches in short, jerking movements. The koopa took a deep, snarling breath, smoke snorting from his nostrils in high-pressure streams as he exhaled. He seemed to be pouring everything he had into yanking that damn vault open as it slowly started creeping closer and closer to the edge of the frame.

“RRRGAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH HHHHHHHHH!” The koopa let out a thunderous roar, twisting his upper body to the side as the vault finally creaked all the way open and swung free from the doorframe. The koopa stumbled to the side, pushing the door all the way open to the opposite side of the wall, then collapsed to his hands and knees, gasping for breath as sweat poured from his face like rain.

Sumea ran to him and put her arms around his neck. “Honey are you alright?!” she said.

“I’ll...be....okay,” B gasped, looking very exhausted. His massive body shuddered from the strain. I admit, I was a bit worried that he’d strained something, but still looked at the door, then back at B respectfully.

“Atlas doesn’t have shit on you, big guy,” I said. The koopa let out an out-of-breath chuckle that seemed rather out-of-character for him. Sumea, meanwhile, was stroking her hands over his face, hugging him.

“Oh baby, that was AMAZING!” she said. I smirked behind my gas mask.

“Well, you two lovebirds wait here,” I said. “Conner, how’s it looking?”

“There’s a couple guards working to thaw out Sweeny,” the ‘coon said. “A couple more trying to get the elevator to come back up. I don’t see any more, I think we’ve dealt their security force a pretty good blow. But I can hear something from the office...shit, sirens!”

“Fuck,” I said, stepping through the vault door, “guess it couldn’t be avoided forever.” Alice followed behind me, keeping as far away from the magnetically charged iron beam on one edge of the vault frame as possible.

The inside of the vault was pretty spacious. Looking like a book archive, it had a combination of book shelves and network servers. Looking to the far wall, I spotted what we were after; a computer terminal.

“Bingo!” I said. I dug into my coat and pulled out the portable hard drive I’d picked up from an electronics store the day before. I’d gotten the biggest one I could find. Going up to the terminal, I was relieved to find it didn’t require a username or password; I guess they figured as exhaustive as their security was up to that point, nobody unauthorized would have made it to that point.

Well they thought wrong, I thought to myself, plugging the hard drive in. The computer system was very intuitive; they’d set it up a lot like a public record system. I did an open search of their recent business transactions and was rewarded with file after file of records and correspondence between the organization and businesses, governments and individuals they sold stolen secrets to. I didn’t have time to read through everything, so instead I copied huge chunks of data to the drive, making sure to get all the associated files with them.

I’d only copied enough to fill a fraction of the drive, but I hoped I’d have enough to connect them with a number of illicit deals. I wanted to copy more, but Conner appeared in the doorway, yelling that the police had just entered the building. I grabbed the hard drive, slid out the door (Again being careful to stay as far away from the electromagnet as possible) and rejoined the others.

“Okay,” I said, leading the others back to the elevator, “If we’re lucky they won’t have gotten to the office yet. B, ready for one last feat of strength?”

“I think I’ve got it in me,” the koopa said. He was back on his footpaws, but looking just

as weary as the rest of us now. We got back to the elevator, where I yanked my knife free and sheathed it again.

“Good,” I said. “Sumea, we’ll need cover for our escape.”

“Can do,” the koopess said. The elevator chimed and we jumped out, weapons ready. By the grace of God, the room was empty. Apparently Sweeny decided to get her ass out of the line of fire. She was probably meeting with the police (no doubt hand-picked officers that were all in the organization’s pocket) to lead the counterattack. Overhead, I could hear the thrum of rotors: a police chopper!

“Shit,” I said. “They’re gonna go for a roof breach! Sumea, we need that cover fast!”

The koopess looked at the office windows. Eyes glowing brilliant blue again, she held up her hands and icy vapor started rising rapidly from the ground. Her eyes glowed brighter than before as the fog rose thicker than it had last time, making sure to engulf the entire building and the surrounding property all the way to the road.

“That’s good!” I said. Sumea lowered her arms, now looking decidedly wiped out. B picked up his girlfriend in one arm, Alice in the other, and knelt down so Conner and I could grab the edge of his shell.

“Hang on!” He said, taking half a dozen running steps. The koopa rammed through the window, the already weakened glass shattering. Adrenaline surged through my veins as I felt the weightless sensation of freefall through the icy fog. Conner and I made sure to hang to the sides of B’s shell as we fell so we wouldn’t get slammed against it. Even so, the five-story drop was no picnic. B landed safely with the girls in his arms, while Conner and I managed to use our handholds on him to break our falls, but still dropped to the ground in heaps. Even remembering to duck-and-roll, I felt a real hard impact in my ankles and knees, not to mention slamming my shoulders pretty damn hard against the ground.

I groaned painfully, slowly rolling onto my knees. I was partly standing when I felt B grab me under one arm, haul me sharply to my footpaws, and give me a firm shove.

“That way!” he said, and took off at a ground-shaking jog. The rest of us stumbled after him to catch up. We wriggled through the hole in the fence, lurched back to the truck and piled in. Alice got behind the wheel while the rest of us leapt into the back. The truck took off down the service road, the lot of us collapsed in the back.

“Should we go back to the hotel?” Alice said.

“Fuck that,” I said, “get on the freeway, we’re going straight back to the klub.”

“Holy shit,” B said, leaned up against the back of the van, “I don’t believe we survived that.”

“Don’t breath easy just yet,” I said. “We’ve got the goods, but now we’ve got to go public with it. We’ll lay low at the klub since it’s currently closed, that should make decent cover.” I rolled over on my back, pushing myself up against the back of the van just behind the driver’s seat. “Now comes the hardest part of all.”

“What’s that?” Conner asked, still laying spread eagle on the floor of the van, head turning limply towards me. I dug into my coat, pulled out the hard drive and looked at it.

“Sifting through all this and making sense of it,” I said.

The room was pretty dark, save for the glow of the screen I was staring at with bleary, bloodshot eyes. It had been a week since we’d gotten back to the Koopa Klub. Brazenly ignoring the notice from the city condemning the building (another salt-in-the-wound effort by the organization, probably done before we’d pounded our way through their doors) we sequestered ourselves in the building, locking the doors and keeping away from the windows.

We knew hiding out at the klub was a bit risky, since it would be a likely hiding spot the organization would look for, but it was the best option we had; at least there we weren’t out in the public, plus it was a building we could secure if we had to.

All of us stayed hunkered down like Holocaust refugees, mindful of how much attention we attracted. Of all of us, Alice was the only one who could go outdoors with certainty she wouldn’t be suspected. The android adjusted her appearance every time she left, never taking the same route back to the klub twice. Doing so, she brought us food and everything else we needed. It was a good thing Sumea was such a good cook, even using a small camping stove. We kept the klub’s ovens off, not wanting an undue amount of activity to attract notice.

I don’t know who it was worse on, the others for having little to do besides wait and listen to the news on the radio, or me for being the one who had to spend all his waking hours going through reams of computer files. The day after we got back, I sat down at a computer terminal we set up in the klub’s basement, going through the files on that portable drive. Hour after hour I read through documents, taking notes on a notepad of important parts, laying out a story that could be run in newspapers, magazines and news websites. I ate right at my desk, never stopping except to use the bathroom and catch maybe five or so hours of sleep each day. Then, bright and early the next morning, I’d be back at it.

The data I had turned out to be more than enough. If I’d wanted, I could have written an individual article about each and every shady deal the organization had done. But I needed an overall look at what they were doing, so I used examples by condensing their various plots and schemes.

There was the sale of an alternate fuel formula to a major fuel company, stolen from a

scientist working in a university lab. The scientist had filed a lawsuit that was later dropped, which turned out to be because the organization threatened to kill his family if he didn't go to work for them. Then there was an assassination of the president of an African country; in exchange, the country's newly appointed leader agreed to give mining rights to an international mining company the organization had ties to.

On a slightly smaller level, the organization stole secret recipes from a chef's private restaurant and sold it to a frozen food company in exchange for the company's generous financial backing of an organization member's campaign for governor of Louisiana. A small software publisher suddenly went out of business after several of their lead programmers met with untimely ends as a result of "freak" accidents, must to the publisher's sorrow, but to the joy of their organization-backed competitors.

There were many, many more stories like those, but I felt they were enough to give people an idea of the breadth of the organization's influence. I uploaded the rest of the hard drive's contents to an off-site server, then put together emails to all the major media outlets I could think of. I wrote emails to their editors, telling them I would have a major story for them soon, then began writing up the actual article.

It was the crack of dawn on the seventh day after we'd returned. My head was pounding, my eyes hurt, but I was almost done. I'd attached the article and the necessary files for proof to an email, ready to be mass sent to everyone I'd promised access to the story. Included was access information to get at the contents of the hard drive for further follow-up articles. Within minutes, this story would be public. I scrolled my mouse across the screen, positioned it over the send button.

A click came...from just behind me. I turned my head. It was Mason. The rhino had a .50 Desert Eagle pointed right at my head. The pachyderm was in his shirt sleeves and looked like he'd been sleeping in the same suit of clothes for as long as I had too.

"You look like how I feel," I said. The rhino said nothing. His eyes flit between me and the computer screen.

"Took you a while to find us," I said. "I figured you'd be here sooner. Where are the others?" I felt worn out, cornered, and like I had nowhere to run. This was it; the standoff.

"Asleep," the rhino said. "I'll worry about them later."

"Pull that trigger and you'll be worrying about them now," I said.

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it," Mason said. "And I didn't get hear sooner 'cause I didn't think you'd be crazy enough to come back to such an obvious hiding spot."

"That's what I figured," I said, "which makes it not so obvious."

“Mmm,” the rhino grunted. “So, you’ve managed to make it this far. I gotta give you props, never thought you’d do something so brazen as attack us outright.”

“I figured that, too,” I said.

“You seem to have done a lot of figuring,” Mason said, sounding like he was getting peeved. “So how about you figure this? What’s it going to do, ruining us? You think it’s gonna make the world a better place?”

“Given what I’ve read here, yes,” I said, hand still on the mouse. The rhino shook his head in disbelief.

“I just do not understand what possesses someone to want to destroy a group that’s trying to make sure the world runs right,” he said.

“Two things,” I said. “It’s right with what I believe in...and it’s for people I care about.”

“Sentimental bullshit,” the rhino snorted. “Okay, enough. I’ll give you till three to get away from the computer. One....,”

Click. I sent the email. For a minute, Mason just stared at me in utter shock, eyes bugged out, mouth hanging open. I think, in spite of everything that had happened, his arrogance still made him think he could get things his way through intimidation. He still thought everything was going to go the way he planned it. And with one press of a button, I’d taken that self-assured feeling of dominance and snapped it.

The barrel of Mason’s gun lowered a bit. Then, as realization sank in, he got a look on his face that said he was pissed as hell. He gritted his teeth, raised the gun back up, aimed right at my face. I looked back impassively, too exhausted to do anything besides go out with a defiant look in my eyes to the end. That’s when a rattling bray of gunshots issued from behind him. The rhino jolted like someone put ice down his back, but the painful expression on his face suggested it was something a lot worse than a few frozen cubes. He dropped his gun, then dropped to his knees and planted his face on the floor, his back riddled with bullet wounds.

Alice stood in the doorway, one of her automatic pistols aimed where Mason’s back had been. She cocked her arm to hold her gun at port arms, looking at the rhino’s body on the floor.

“What an asshole,” she said. I just smirked and chuffed an exhausted laugh. The android looked past me to the computer. “It’s done then?” she asked. I nodded. “You know,” she said, holstering her sidearm, “when this goes public, we may get in trouble with the law. Breaking and entering is still a crime, no matter who the victim is.

I nodded again. “I’ll take full responsibility, ask for a dismissal for the rest of you in exchange for a full confession.” The android raised her eyebrows in a surprised and

impressed expression.

“You’re taking a lot on your shoulders,” she said. I shrugged.

“Sometimes that’s what you gotta do,” I said.

The interrogation room was pretty much like what you’d expect. A formica table held a Styrofoam cup of water in front of me as I leaned back in a folding chair. It was about a month since I’d sent out my story. It had hit the internet within an hour, the newspapers shortly after, and TV broadcasts in time for the noon programs. I had reporters calling my phone so fast I was wondering what my bill was going to look like. I answered everyone’s questions honestly, and two days later, I, Sumea, B, Conner and Alice found ourselves in police custody. We’d discussed it beforehand, and knew it was inevitable once the truth was out.

Now I was waiting for my lawyer to get there. I’d been transferred to the state prison pending trial, and was wearing the traditional orange jumpsuit. I’d decided to at least consult with an attorney before explaining to them I wasn’t going to plead insanity.

The door slid open and in came a very unusual person. I’d heard of nagas before, reptilian folks who had a lower body that was all tail, sliding along like a snake with an anthropomorphic upper body, but never met one. At least, not one that wasn’t a Cobrawolf. But this was no cobrawolf; the person sliding through the door in front of me was covered in green scales, wearing a women’s business jacket over an athletic frame. Large bracelets adorned her wrists, and she wore a pair of mirror wraparound shades on her human face. At first I thought she had green-dyed dreadlocks smoothed back over her head, but after a moment, I realized they were actually snake bodies, complete with heads.

“Mr. Fang?” she said, setting a briefcase down on the table. I nodded and she extended a slim hand. “Eudora Dionysia. I’ve been asked to take up your case.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I said. “You have an interesting accent. Greek?”

The young lady chuckled a bit. “Correct. As you’ve no doubt noticed, yes, I am a gorgon. But don’t worry, I never take these off unless in self defense,” Eudora tapped her finger to her shades. Upon closer inspection, I could see they actually had a head band that went around her like swimming goggles; probably for other people’s safety as well as her own.

“Always a good thing to know,” I said, settling back a bit. “So, what are your first impressions of my case?”

The gorgon gave me a rueful grin as she snapped open her briefcase. “I must say, I’ve never seen anything like it. Have you heard the news lately?” I shook my head.

“It seems,” Eudora said, taking out a digital notepad, “you and your friends stirred up the hornet’s nest. After the news hit the stories, the contents of your hard drive were quickly found by a lot of law enforcement offices. You’ll be pleased to know Ms. Sweeny was quickly caught and is in prison, along with numerous operatives in her organization. After the truth went public, many people came forward, admitting to being blackmailed or used by the organization or looking to cut a deal now that the truth was out. Worldwide, there have been 327 government officials deposed and arrested, 522 corporation executives, and tens of thousands of individuals who took part in some kind of criminal enterprise for the organization. And that’s just been in the last week.”

I smirked a bit. “Sounds like law enforcement’s got its work cut out for them.”

“Indeed, there will be quite a bit of work to do. But, now we come to your case,” Eudora said. I leaned back a bit and put my hands behind my head.

“I want you to tell the attorney general I’m willing to make a full confession,” I said. “In return, I want to take full responsibility for the assault on the organization headquarters. I don’t want the others charged.”

The gorgon cocked her head to one side. “You’re not going to fight this, then?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think the ends justify the means. I know what I did was a crime, but it’s the only option I was really left with. The others, I convinced them to help me so I could help them. It was my plan, my lead. I’ll take responsibility for that.”

Eudora gave me a look, her pert little mouth turned up in a slight smile. “Well, this is highly unusual,” she said. “You don’t often see people who won’t try to take any sort of excuse to get out of punishment.”

I shrugged. “It’s just how I roll,” I said. Eudora nodded. “Well, Mr. Fang, I think I have something better. We’ve lifted surveillance footage from the building you and your friends stormed. We can see you were fired on first. So, if you and your friends are willing to testify about what you went through and what you’ve seen and heard, I believe for each of you we can get...,” the naga looked at her digital notepad. “Six months probation and 1,000 hours community service.”

My eyebrows went up. “REALLY?” I said. “Well, that seems...let’s see, I think the term “God send” is the phrase I’m looking for.” The gorgon and I shared a laugh as she dug in her briefcase again.

“Oh believe me Mr. Fang, you and your friends have done many people a great service,” She said. “I think the attorney general will be more than willing to make a deal for your testimony.”

“Well I guess that’s fair,” I said. The gorgon nodded.

“I should hope so! Now, there is one other matter I wanted to discuss with you. You see, I have another client that wishes to procure your services.” I gave Eudora a perplexed look as she took out a business card and slid it across the table. I picked it up and looked at it.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” I said.

The card bore an odd symbol; a three-pronged candelabra with an eye in the flame of each candle. A single word was printed underneath it: Illuminati.

I looked up at the gorgon. “You’re kidding,” I said. She shook her head.

“No, I assure you Mr. Fang, I am not,” the gorgon said. “I was asked to speak to you on behalf of the Illuminati. My employers are impressed with the manner in which you dealt with the Colson Board.”

“Is that was they called themselves?” I said, letting a bit of testiness enter my voice. “Well I guess it’s not as melodramatic as some names they could come up with. Honestly, I’m starting to grow tired of secret organizations.”

“I can certainly understand that, given your experience,” Eudora said. “In fact, the Illuminati agrees with you.”

“I beg your pardon?” I said, giving the gorgon a very confused look.

“You see Mr. Fang, the popular perception of the Illuminati is completely backwards,” she said. “We are not an organization attempting to take control of the world from behind the scenes. We are an organization trying to stop OTHER organizations from doing that. We believe, as you do, the world is better off when people are allowed to make their choices for themselves, to follow the path they want rather than have a small group trying to decide the fate of the entire planet.”

“Uh huh...,” I said, not entirely sure if I believed her. “Keep talking.”

“Now, I suspect you’re expecting me to ask you to work for us,” she said. I just smirked and nodded. Eudora nodded in return. “As I thought. But I assure you, we understand that while you sometimes work with subtlety, you don’t try to hide your actions entirely. When the time comes, you are willing to step forward and be public. And that is where you can act as we can’t.”

“So is that why you had never tried to attack the Colson Board yourselves?” I asked. “You couldn’t risk being seen?”

“Exactly,” the gorgon said. “We’d tried to send covert operatives to find them and then expose them to the authorities through anonymous tips, but every time, if the operatives weren’t caught and killed, their tips were intercepted by the board’s contacts and

squashed.”

“An awkward position,” I said. “Well, I’m glad to have been helpful, IF your people are as upstanding as you say they are. But I doubt you brought this up just to pat me on the back.”

“Correct,” Eudora said, lacing her fingers together. “You see, ever since the arrival of the canmephians on our planet, we’ve become wary of outside attempts to covertly influence this planet’s affairs. Now we don’t have only worry about our planet’s elitists, racists, terrorists, and other power hungry types who seek to control people without responsibility for their actions. Now we have another planetary system’s to worry about.”

“I see,” I said. I rubbed my chin a bit, and suddenly put it together. “You want my help getting an inside line on the Canmephians’ affairs, don’t you?”

“Exactly,” Eudora said, smiling wider. “We need a way to be kept in the loop on what’s going on in the Canmephian system. Not just what’s making the news, but what’s going on BEHIND the scenes. That way, we can catch interlopers trying to use Sol-3 to their own ends before they get here.”

“And you think I can do this?” I said. “I’m flattered, but I’m not precisely a major power player on this planet or the next. I’m just a person willing to do what needs to be done.”

The gorgon chuckled. “That’s more than what a lot of people are willing to do,” she said. “But no, we understand you’re not a high ranking figure with lots of access to sensitive information. BUT...you have close ties to someone who is.”

“Admiral Redwolf,” I said. The gorgon nodded. “We want you to help us make private contact with hir so we can work out an arrangement with hir.”

I mused a bit. This was quite a decision to make. On the one hand, if the gorgon was being truthful, the Illuminati would be one powerful ally to try and bring an end to secret organizations trying to influence the government and world affairs. But what if they were trying to eliminate the competition so they could take over...?

“I realize this is a difficult decision,” Eudora said. “On the back of that card is my phone number. There is also a web site and a password that should give you some useful insight on us.” I flipped over the card as the gorgon collected her briefcase.

“One thing,” I asked. “If I say no...will I wake up the next day and find a whole lot of very unpleasant charges leveled against me?”

Eudora shook her head. “I already filed a motion for you and the attorney general accepted the terms. As of tomorrow you’ll be on probation with community service.” I gave the gorgon a surprised look.

“Like you, I believe in doing what’s right,” she said, and glided from the room.

It was cloudy and overcast the next day. I sat in my home office, B, Sumea, Alice and Conner all assembled. I told them all about my meeting with Eudora and her request.

“I went to the web site,” I said, twirling the gorgon’s business card between my fingers. “It has a full history on the illuminati and a list of its highest ranking members. They’ve essentially put themselves in our hands.”

I looked to each of my friends. “With everything we’ve all been through, I think this is a decision we should all make. Do we give the Illuminati a chance to prove themselves...or expose them too?”

The four looked at each other.

“If these folks are trying to stop groups like that Colson Boad...,” B rumbled, “I guess maybe they might not be bad.”

“It would certainly be good to know there’s someone out there actively trying to put an end to cretins like the board,” Sumea said.

“They’re not threatening us if we don’t cooperate,” Conner said, “so it sounds like they’re on the up and up.”

“And we seem to have an insurance policy to make sure they don’t change their ways or get out of line,” Alice said, nodding at the card.

“So, we’re in agreement?” I asked. Everyone nodded, and I picked up the receiver on my video phone.

“CMSC Headquarters please, Admiral Redwolf’s office...hey Red, how’s it going? Heh, heard about that did ya? Yeah, had ourselves a little adventure...listen, there’s someone I’ve met who wants to meet with you...”