



by John Van Stry

Shorts: The Furry Years

**A Collection of Short Stories
From Anthropomorphic fanzines**

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Published by John Van Stry
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Foreword

I've always enjoyed writing, and quite a few years ago I was offered the opportunity to write for a Fanzine by the name of Yarf. I wrote several short stories of varying length, and even one Novella (which I published separately as Dialene). Some were fantasy, but most were science fiction of one stripe or another. Yes they are all anthropomorphic or furry stories, but then that was the genre of the 'zine and I enjoyed reading and writing for it.

So assembled here are several of the stories I wrote for Yarf at the time, with the exception of 'Easy Money', which was written for a different fanzine that went out of business before it could be published. Otherwise all of these have seen print in Yarf years ago.

Changes: A story written in response to a challenge by another writer, wherein the hero of the story wakes up in the morning to find his world has changed, rather drastically for him, hardly at all for others.

Old Business: This is from my 'Children of Steel' universe, a story I wrote actually long before I even knew there was a fandom for it. This story is about the beginning of it all, the very first of the sentient animen (or animorph) ever to be created.

New Beginnings: Jack is the new bartender at a small pub, a nice quiet pub in the business district. The patrons tend to find his opinions humorous, as what does a bartender know after all? (More of a slice of life type story).

Fox Hunt: A joke that I just could not resist.

Easy Money: What happens to spies who come in from the cold? Especially ones who grew up on the wrong side of the tracks? Nothing good I'm sure...

Changes

by John Van Stry

I couldn't feel the pain. That was my biggest clue that I was in real trouble. Just a dull ache where each of the slugs had entered my body.

Rasha knelt over me, eyes closed, chanting. Her and that damn magic! She was going to get herself shot if she didn't get some better cover.

"Get *down*, dammit!" I growled weakly, and then coughed from the effort. I tasted blood. My vision fogged for a second as I wavered on the edge of consciousness, but I saw a blur move by the window and I forced my eyes to focus on it. Another one of our ambushers trying to finish the job. I raised the .50 Grizzly and he ducked back behind the window sill. I squeezed the trigger three times until the slide locked open, my ears folding flat automatically from the loud echo in the room. The wall wasn't enough to stop the bullets and I saw him fall, minus the back of his head.

"Rasha, I'm dead! Save yourself! Open your eyes dammit, I'm out of ammo!"

"You're not dead yet, and I'm not letting go!" She tossed her gun at me and went back to chanting, never even opening her eyes.

I grabbed her automag and tried to keep my eyes open. I didn't know how many of our attackers were left. I know I'd killed four. Rasha had gotten at least two; her right hand was still covered in blood from the one she had eviscerated with her claws. But neither of us knew how many there were. I just hoped help would arrive in time to save her.

I looked over at the window again. It was the only way left in. The barricade at the door should hold long enough -- I hoped. I tried crawling on my side to the window to get a better view.

"No, stay still!" she growled deeply, baring her fangs.

"Dammit, I gotta see wha's going on out there!" I gurgled.

"No John, Stay Still!" She growled again.

I gave up. Not because I wanted too, I had to protect her! But mostly because I was choking too hard on my own blood to move. I fired a shot at the window just for the hell of it, and lost my grip on the gun dropping it between us.

"Damn" I burbled, "I can't see anymore."

"Just hang on, I can hear sirens! Just hang on I'll save you, I promise!" she rumbled determinedly.

The sound of her chanting changed then, it became like a wave that picked me up and pulled me in. I couldn't help but listen to it. I think I heard her automag bark once before I slipped into unconsciousness.

At least she was shooting back....

#

People always thought I was a little strange. Not at first mind you; I could blend in with the crowd. At least I used too. But then somewhere along the line the subject of my cat would come up. I had several actually, but Rasha was the only one who lived inside with me.

All three hundred and forty five pounds of her.

You see Rasha was a Bengal tiger, and my crowning achievement. I got her three years back at the tender age of four weeks. She wasn't my first, I had raised and trained others. But none had trained as well and learned as much as she had, or behaved as nicely.

That is to say she didn't destroy my house, *much*. Didn't claw the bed, more than once. She rarely threw snit fits, and most importantly, she didn't ambush me in my sleep at three in the morning on a work night.

Of course what bothered people the most was that I usually let her sleep on my bed. Especially girlfriends, they rarely stayed over.

It was late on a Monday morning and I wasn't due in work till later that day, so I was sleeping in.

I woke up slowly, feeling strangely exhausted and a rather strong hunger was making itself known in my stomach. I lay there with my eyes closed, remembering an extremely strange and vivid dream. It was about Rasha.

And me.

I'd never really had a dream like this one before. In it Rasha was a beautiful tiger-woman 'morph. I was a fairly good sized tiger-man. It was pretty hot, to say the least, and I guess a little kinky too. But I would have been lying to myself if I even tried to pretend I hadn't liked it. Big cats had been a driving passion all my life, and secretly at times I still desired to be one.

Rasha rolled over onto me then and I snapped fully awake. When a three hundred plus pound cat rolls onto you, the first thing that comes to mind is - breathing. That's a lot of weight!

That's when I realized something was wrong, or at least different. She didn't

feel heavy, and she was smaller than me!

"Wake up lover boy!" A voice rasped quietly in my ear, and then a tongue rasped in it as well. "I can hear your stomach growling and I'm starving too!"

That was the next thing I realized was wrong, a throaty female voice where there shouldn't be one, and I opened my eyes.

"Rasha?" I wuffed out in surprise. My voice didn't sound anything like I remembered it. Come to think of it, all I could see of my body was lots and lots of orange and white fur striped with black.

"Who else, silly?" She grinned at me. Really grinned, too! I studied her face carefully. After three years I knew her stripe pattern by heart and it was her all right. But her face was more expressive than it was before, maybe a little smaller too.

I looked over her body as it lay on top of mine. It hadn't been a dream. I brought my hand up to my face and examined it closely. I had pads on the underside of the fingers and in the palm. The rest was covered in short fur and when I flexed my hand claws came out of the tips; rather nasty sharp looking ones at that.

"What happened?" was all I could think of to say.

"How should I know?" she purred at me. "Last night I was a tiger, now I'm something more. I'm not complaining!"

"Me neither!" I grinned and my stomach rumbled again.

"Food!" She growled getting up and heading for the kitchen. She made it about two steps then fell to her hands and knees.

"Damn! This is harder then it looks!" she said grumbling.

I got up quickly and tried to reach her, but I was pretty dizzy myself and ended up crawling too.

"I feel real weak, how about you?" I asked crawling after her.

"I'm not sure..." she thought a moment, "I'm hungry; thirsty too." Her stomach growled pretty loudly then.

"Kitchen!" I rumbled quietly and I followed her tail as we both crawled out to the fridge.

One hundred fifty pounds of turkey, beef and assorted organ meats later we curled up on the floor together and fell fast asleep.

When I awoke it was dark. My eyes adjusted quickly. I could see quite clearly, but in a sort of black and white, all of the color was washed out of everything. Rasha was curled up against me, rumbling contentedly in her sleep. I knew that sound well. I stuck my nose by her face and took a deep sniff.

It was unbelievable! The things I could smell in her scent, nice things too! I carefully got up, so as not to disturb her and started to prowl the house, going through the dining room into the living room. I didn't feel tired or dizzy anymore, although my stomach was empty again. I sniffed around to see what I could find. Sheena's and Raj's scents were all over, even though neither had been in the house in a week. I could smell another scent too, and it puzzled me.

Until I found my car keys and they were covered with it. I grinned rather sheepishly; so that was what I smelled like? I sniffed myself, curiously. Rather that was what I *used* to smell like. I smelled somewhat different now, but it was obviously still me.

Then I started to listen. Really listen. I could hear things I had never heard before, like the mouse in the wall behind the TV.

But I didn't hear Rasha sneaking up on me. Though she did make a little "wuff" just before she hit.

And we both went flying across the room rolling and tumbling. We wrestled for quite a while. She was pretty tough, but for the first time in my life I won the match.

Then we made love, rather wildly the first time. Much slower and more enjoyably the second time.

"I've always wanted to do that with you, John," she sighed.

"Make love with me?" I asked surprised, "Really?"

"Noooo," she laughed. "I didn't know about that till this morning. I meant the ambush! I was always afraid I'd hurt you!"

"Really? I was never sure if you knew that." I said, surprised.

"Oh, I knew who was stronger." I could see her fangs as she smiled in the dark. "And who was faster, tougher, cuter."

I laughed. "Well you're still the cutest!" I gave her a lick and a nuzzle.

I untangled myself then and headed for the bathroom. "Any idea what happened?"

"Hey, you're the one with the college education, how should I know?" she said, grumbling. "I'm the tiger remember?"

I stopped and thought about that a minute as she passed me. Then I grabbed her tail and pulled her back.

"Hey! Leggo!" She flicked her tail up in annoyance and batted me in the face with it.

"Ow!" I looked at my own tail, lashing behind me in annoyance. I was going to have to learn how to do that!

"Wait a second," I said, looking back up at her. "How do you know I went to college?"

"What? I just do, that's all. Two years at Polytechnic, three more at Tech, then the service followed by..." She stopped and looked at me. "How the hell do I know that?" she gasped, astonished.

I asked her a few questions and quickly got an idea of what she knew. "Hmmm, it seems you got a lot of my education, but nothing personal; just academics."

"What do you think you got from me?" she asked, curious.

"This wonderful body?" I asked, grinning. "Which I'm dying to get a good look at by the way!" I walked by her, down the hall and ducked into the bathroom, flipping on the lights as I entered.

"Shit!" I hissed closing my eyes. "That smarts!"

"Now you know how I used to feel." She chuckled. "I always hated that until I learned what those switches did, and when to close my eyes!"

I waited until my vision adjusted and then carefully opened my eyes again.

I stood in absolute amazement. I was taller than I used to be, over seven feet now. I had a tiger's head, an absolutely beautiful one! Which was staring back at me with very wide eyes and an open mouth. A mouth with three inch fangs and a very, very long tongue which was hanging out in amazement. And shock.

"Boy do you look dumb!" She snickered.

"I'm, I'm ... "

"Gorgeous?" She supplied, sliding up against me with a happy chuff.

I looked at myself in the mirror, my mind still trying to catch up with the reality. "Yeah.... Gorgeous."

"Yeah, tigers are like that, aren't they?" She purred.

"We're both pretty conceited aren't we?" I purred happily myself. This was like a dream come true, the biggest Christmas in the world, and winning the lottery -- all in one!

I stepped on the scale. It broke.

"Damn! I must weigh a ton!"

"Not hardly," she said, poking me in the ribs, "you could use a little, actually." She examined her own ribs which were showing slightly. "Me too come to think about it."

"Well, there's more food in the barn, and a heavier scale. Poor old Sheena and Raj are probably starving by now."

"I wonder if anything happened to them?" She mused.

It was quickly apparent that nothing had. They were both still the same, though Raj, my leopard, was nervous at first and Sheena (my cougar) was downright terrified. But they recognized Rasha's scent and came up to her. After about twenty minutes of coaxing they sniffed suspiciously at me through the

chainlink. They looked confused a minute, then started to loudly remind me just how hungry they were. And where was I all day? Typical for them.

We got the food out of the freezer and I fed what was thawed to them. Next we weighed ourselves on the scale in the barn. I was three hundred and eighty pounds! Rasha was down to two ninety.

"And we both look like we could use twenty or thirty more," she said thoughtfully. "Just how much meat did we polish off this morning?"

"One fifty or so."

"And what did we weigh before?"

"I was one ninety, and you were three forty five," I quickly figured out were she was going. "That's six ninety or so. We total six seventy now. Where'd the rest go?"

"When has mass ever changed state without releasing energy?" she said looking at me matter-of-factly.

"Uhh..." I looked at her rather shocked.

"What?"

"It's going to take a little getting used to your being as smart as me, that's all."

"How do you think I feel?" she said.

I thought about that hard a second.

"You love it, but you're a little scared?"

"How'd you guess?" She said curious again.

"Cause that's how I feel."

"Well, at least we've got each other!" she said smiling, the ends her fangs showing as she did.

I could see where we might have to be careful around others. "Well let's get some of this inside, okay?"

"Sure." She picked up a hundred pounds like it was nothing and walked back to the house.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised; after all, yesterday she could pick me up in her paws and toss me ten feet in the air. So I picked up another hundred and followed.

We couldn't wait for the meat to thaw, so we raided the fridge again, cleaning it out pretty well. Afterwards we used the bathroom and took a shower.

The shower was fun, so was the shampoo. Blow drying was a pain in the ass though, and the bearings in the hair dryer made a hell of an annoying whine.

"Now I know why you always hated that thing." I winced, my ears laid flat. "I'll have to rig something up that's quieter."

"Quicker too," She mused. "An hour drying your fur is way too long."

We went to bed finally and crashed. It was late and it had been a tiring day.

I awoke the next morning to the gentle ministrations of Rasha's tongue.

"Where'd you learn that!" I gasped.

"Watching you and one of your girlfriends," she rumbled, "That one I used to like. What ever happened to her anyway?"

"When you sat on her last fall, you scared the hell out of her and she won't come out here again."

"Oh!" she looked embarrassed, "I guess I'll have to apologize for that. I was only playing."

"Sure." I grinned and looked at the clock. It was early; I normally didn't get up till 7. I had two hours yet and what we did to pass it was nobody's business but ours. I settled back down to find out just how well she had watched.

"Damn, what am I going to wear?"

It was much later and I was feeling quite exasperated. It was a quarter to and I realized that I wasn't going to fit into any of my dress slacks anymore. Or my dress shirts, blue jeans, shoes, or underwear. My tee-shirts still fit, if a little tight, and with the fur pressed flat it was pretty obvious I was solid muscle.

"Why wear anything?" Rasha said smiling, "You look good to me just like you are!"

"And you to me love," I smiled back and brumped at her. "But its bad enough I look so radically different. I figure some clothes might ease the shock."

"Try this." She tossed something at me.

I grabbed it and looked, it was my old karate gi. I slipped into it, and it actually fit! Of course the pants only came just past my knees and now fit snugly instead of loose. I grabbed a tee-shirt and stuck my cardkey and other stuff in my fanny pack. At least it had an adjustable belt.

"Don't you think you should call in first, Hon?"

"You think so?" I hesitated.

"Yes I do. I'd hate for anything bad to happen to you because you scared the hell out of them."

"I guess you're right." I went to the den to use the phone.

"Look at this," I mumbled. The light on the answering machine was blinking. "Two calls; hmmm, I wonder who called?" I pushed the button.

The first was from an old friend on the east coast, "Hey Johnman you there? Hello? I tried the office but it was closed. Listen, Michael just called. One of his friends who's with the weather service told him a nuke of some sort went off in the Key's this morning.

"I called George down in Miami and he confirmed that there was some bright flash around five-thirty in the morning. It's eight here and there's been nothin' on

the news yet. Call me, okay?"

"Hmm, now that's strange," I remarked.

The second was work, "Hello John? This is Kurt, be prepared for some strange things at work tomorrow, okay? Bye."

"You should be prepared!" Rasha said laughing. Who was that first call from anyway?"

"Oh, that was Nick. We went to college together; he's got a lot of friends in the strangest places. Nothing happens that he doesn't seem to hear about."

"Strange? Like raising tigers and such?" she smiled.

"Yup," I purred then grinned at her, "that's it."

I picked up the phone and dialed work.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is John Bayellis, is Kurt in?"

"Not yet, it's pretty quiet here so far."

"Well, could you tell him I'll be in around eight, with a bit of a surprise?"

"Oh, I don't think you'll surprise him. Not after yesterday." She sounded rather bemused.

"Oh? What happened yesterday?" I asked curiously.

"You wouldn't believe it unless you saw it." She paused "I've got another call. Gotta go, bye!" and hung up.

"Well, if that wasn't odd."

"Sure was."

"You heard?"

"Of course, silly. Didn't you notice that the receiver wasn't even near your ear?"

"This is going to take some getting used to," I sighed.

"Yeah, walking, talking, thinking are all pretty new to me."

"And the scents, smells and sounds are new to me." I thought a second. "But how come you seem to be doing better than I am?"

"Because tigers don't worry about things they don't understand. But it seems Engineers do!"

"Lucky you," I smiled. "But I'm not complaining. Well I have to get going, I guess."

"Just a sec!" She ran out of the room. A minute later she was back, dressed much like I was, tight short black pants, but with the black jacket of the gi as well. The jacket gave her a rather nice cleavage since she had it tied closed with one of my old black belts.

"Nice," I commented, 'drooling' a little too, I might add. With clothes on she looked a hell of a lot sexier than before. "What's that for?"

"I'm going with you, what else!"

"No you're not! I'm going to be enough of a shock to these people as it is!"

"I'm going, that's all there is to it," she growled.

"Want to bet?" I growled back.

It was a tight fit. I was going to have to trade in my little sports car for something bigger now.

"How's your wrist John?" Rasha asked, grinning.

"The bleeding stopped," I sighed. "That wasn't very nice, you know."

"Yes, I know. Don't ever argue with me again." She smiled.

"Next time I won't hold back Rasha. So you better watch it yourself." I warned.

"Oh, you wouldn't hurt me!" She smiled again and chuffed at me.

Damn if I didn't chuff right back, too.

"Pecking rights I believe it's called," she said looking thoughtful. "And I've got them on you, kiddo!"

"You seem to have a better memory of what I've studied then I do," I grumbled, still upset. Her little 'pecking rights' comment really bothered me.

"It's just fresher that's all. In thirty years I'll bet I'll have forgotten as much of it as you have," she teased.

"You know, I think I've figured out something else I got from you," I said steaming.

"Oh what?"

"Your TEMPER!" I nearly roared it out. I was feeling pretty pissed and was fairly shocked by it. I never lost my temper.

"Oh shit," she said quietly, and carefully reached over and started to scratch my chin. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to piss you off, Love."

"What are you worried about?" I growled, "you think I want to get bit again?"

"Calm down, Hon, calm down. If you go off in a blind rage, I've no doubts at all what'll happen. You outweigh me by about a hundred pounds now and I remember what happened when I lost my temper last year."

I remembered that too. She was only half grown and it was her only real tantrum. I still hadn't replaced the TV, much less the sofa bed, just the couch, the two bookshelves and the hole in the wall. So I got a grip on my emotions then and let her calm me down. It didn't take long for me to relax. At least my anger went as fast as it came.

Getting out of the car was tough, I was going to have to get something else and soon too. My tail was killing me!

We walked up to the door and I slid my card through the reader. On the second try the door unlocked and I stepped inside with Rasha standing behind me.

I looked at the startled faces staring at me.

"It's John," I said quietly. "The guy with the tiger, remember?"

"We kind of guessed that already," replied Susan, one of the team developers. "Who's that hiding behind you?"

"Rasha, who else?" I laughed.

Rasha stepped out from behind me. "Hello," she said rather timidly.

"Got both of you huh?" Was all she said.

"I don't mind... " We both started off together, then stopped and looked at each other.

"Well, things are definitely happening in sets around here I guess." Kurt said walking up to take a look at the two of us.

"What do you mean?" I asked, perplexed.

"Derek had a little 'accident' yesterday morning."

"What happened? How is he?"

"Where is he, you mean." Kurt said with a smile.

"Okay then, where is he?" I growled.

Kurt paled a little.

"Opps, sorry, just ignore that, okay?"

"Suuuure," he said slowly, then started back up. "Well we were talking about that thing in Florida and all the strange reports that were coming in on the news. Then Derek gets this strange idea that he can write a computer program that will take him there."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, he disappeared from right in front of our faces. We were all shocked to say the least. Then about five minutes later we get a phone call. It's Derek, he's in the Keys and could somebody help him get back please?"

"Unnn," was all I could say.

"So then Howard figures if Derek could do it, he sure as hell could reverse it. So he sits down at Derek's computer, looks at the program, makes some changes and voila."

"Derek's back?" Rasha filled in for my open mouth.

"Nope, some drop dead gorgeous blond in a bikini is standing there. Turns out she was using the phone while Derek was waiting."

"So what happened next." I said finding my tongue.

"Well, the blond threw herself at Howard, of all people, and he changed the program again and split. Taking the blond as well as the computer with him, no less. Derek is flying back on a plane, and should be here by noon."

"Where did Howard go?" I asked.

"Nobody knows. His wife called this morning, seems he hasn't been home."

"So what happened then? How'd they do it?" I think I knew, I only had to look in a mirror to figure it out, but I wanted to hear somebody else say it.

"Magic, what else? I guess Derek figured out how to do it on his computer and Howard just improved on it. In either case I don't expect either of them to stay here. I'm glad we got the project finished, at least."

"Anything else happen while I was gone?"

"Just a lot of reports about people changing like you have. You still working here?"

"I guess so, but until things settle down I was hoping to telecommute most of the time." I didn't want to say it out loud, but laying low sure seemed like a good idea right now.

"Sure, the heat's off for now. I can't see the owners getting upset, either. Rumor has it one of them grew wings."

"Sheesh! This really sounds a lot more widespread than I thought."

"Didn't you watch the news last night at all?"

I noticed Rasha looking a little embarrassed when he asked that. "No, TV's out."

"Oh. Well there are strange things going on everywhere, and while it's not epidemic, there's enough going around everywhere that people are nervous."

I thought about that and nodded absentmindedly. I'm sure glad that my change didn't affect my ability to work. This wouldn't be a good time to have to go job hunting. "Well, I need to get a few things then I guess I'll go."

"So who's your friend?"

"Kurt, Susan, Bill, this is Rasha." They all shook her hand.

"Hi," she said shyly.

"Where'd you come from?" asked Kurt.

"I thought John told you." She looked embarrassed again.

"He said you were his tiger."

"Yes, I was."

"Oh come on, how could ..." He stopped for a moment. "I should talk after yesterday. Well, nice meeting you, I have to go back to work." And he quickly shuffled off.

The others weren't so quick, and a few more drifted over as we headed for my cubicle.

"What was it like being a tiger?" seemed to be the question they wanted to ask Rasha the most.

"What's it like John?" was the question I was getting.

"I couldn't even begin to explain," I told them, while Rasha tried unsuccessfully to give a little more detail herself.

It wasn't far to my desk. Once there I gathered up the stuff I needed and quickly stuffed it in my bag. I had to admit that the smells of so many different people were making me a little nervous. Maybe because they smelled nervous too.

"Hey, that's me!" Rasha blurted out surprised.

"Huh?" I turned and saw her pointing at the five by six photo I had tacked above my computer.

"Oh, yeah." I grinned, pulled it off and handed it to her. "Have to get a new one now, I guess."

"Wow, it is you isn't it?" Susan said looking at the picture then Rasha. "I can even match the stripes on your face!"

The others started to crowd around and look too. I could see Rasha was getting nervous from all the attention. So I grabbed my stuff, and grabbed her too.

"Sorry guys, we gotta go. Send me E-mail. I'll be home for the next few days. Bye."

"Brrr," Rasha put her arm around me as we walked outside. "That was a little much. It's gonna take some getting used to -- all those people, that is."

"Yeah, I'm a little nervous myself. The smells and the sounds are like a constant assault." I hugged her with my free arm. "I want to take a quick trip to the vet's, okay?"

"The vet's? Why?"

"Just a check up, I sure don't trust any 'Human' doctors with this new bod!"

Once on the road I headed straight to my veterinarian's office.

Walking in came as a rather large surprise -- to me.

"Hello! Who are you, or rather were you?" Was the first thing the receptionist said.

"John Bayellis, this is Rasha."

"Yes, and you were?" she asked again.

"I was human, she was my tiger. You know me, or rather knew me, Randell's been my vet for six years now and I've had Rasha here before."

"Okay, just a second." She turned and went through the files. "Ah, Rasha Bayellis. Should I pull Sheena's or Raj's files too?"

"No, they're okay." I looked around, the unusually empty office. The place always had a few customers. "What's up anyway? Why aren't you surprised and why's the place so empty?"

"We cancelled all normal visits after yesterday. So far twenty of our regular

customers like yourself have been in with some rather interesting changes." She looked at Rasha, "But you're the first one to go the other way. Congratulations Rasha, are you two...?"

"Yes," I brumped. "She's mine alright."

"And he's mine," she brumped back at me. "Strange isn't it?"

"Not really. I'm just surprised we haven't seen more of it. Maybe some of the other cat owners will show up in the next day or two. Only three have been here so far."

"Really? Who?"

She rattled off their names, I only knew one from memory. One was now a cougarmorph, another was a lynxmorph and a third was a panthermorph -- female too.

"Watch it bub," Rasha hissed in my ear, "I know you like leopards and if I see you nosing around I just might cut you up again."

"Hmmm," I whispered back teasing. "But we male cats are notorious for having multiple females."

"I'm not ready to share yet," she nipped my cheek. "So just watch it."

We waited about ten minutes in one of the examination rooms. There weren't any chairs, which was normal of course, so we sat on the floor and waited.

"Hello John, Rasha!" Randell said as he came in. "Look at you two! Wow!" He looked us both over. "Could you strip please?"

"Oh sure, Randy," I said and removed my things.

"Hi Randy," Rasha said while quickly shedding her clothes. Then she stepped up to him and gave him a great big hug. "I've always wanted to do that!" She smiled.

He smiled back. Randell was always great with animals. Now that I was one, well partially at least, I could tell why. He smelled good. He also sounded good, and just plain felt good. I couldn't explain it more if you wanted me to.

"Thanks Rasha! Well let's have a look at the both of you."

He then spent the next hour giving us both a basic physical. He checked my puncture and tisked at Rasha for it. She tried to blush and looked embarrassed. Then he took urine and blood samples from each of us.

"I'll compare this with what I've got on file from Rasha, of course. Using that I should be able to work up a baseline. I'll need your medical records, too." He looked up at me.

"Sure, I'll give my doctor's name to your assistant. I'm sure he'll be interested in helping out."

"Fine, with all the calls I've made since yesterday I don't expect any problems."

"So what can you tell us?" Rasha asked.

"It would seem that you have a combination of both human and tiger anatomy. But combined beneficially. On the outside you're mostly tiger, with human form. On the inside you're about split. Musculature is more animal than human, your digestive system has the stronger acids and tolerances of the tiger. But it appears you can metabolize vegetable matter pretty much as a human. Just not as efficiently. So it would still be better for you to stick to more of a meat diet to get the amino acids you need.

"The parts which are most human about you are your heads; they are more human than tiger, even if they look otherwise. Your hands, feet, and your sexual characteristics are more human too. Rasha now has two breasts instead of six, and both of your genitals are more of human proportions. Also I don't think Rasha's going to cycle like a tiger anymore, but I suspect she's still going to be an induced ovulator."

"What does that mean?" she asked, looking at me as I gave a sigh of relief.

"That you won't go into heat and spend a week giving me no rest at all."

"What's so bad about that?" She grinned, "sounds like fun if you ask me!" Then she leered at me.

"I didn't say she wouldn't go into heat, John," Randell said with a chuckle. "Only time will tell on that. But I think her cycles will be more regular and not dependent on breeding."

"Oh well," I sighed. "I just hope I don't go ballistic when she does."

"Anyway, your tails seem to be the same as a tiger's. I'm not exactly sure how you're managing to talk; your muzzle's are more flexible and a little shorter than a regular tiger's would be. From the throaty sounds of your voices I suspect some interesting changes to your vocal cords. I don't see any reason to worry about it though.

"Oh, and if I had to pick, I'd say you're both about sixteen years old on a human scale, and in perfect health."

"Could we get something that says I'm about twenty one?" Rasha asked.

"Why?"

"Well, I think I'm going to need some kind of I.D., and I don't want to be considered a child."

"Good point," I added.

"Sure, mentally you're old enough. I don't know what good it will do you though, I'm only a vet. I think a doctor will have to handle this."

"We'll see." We said together then looked at each other and grinned.

We left after that. I could smell some pretty interesting people, one was a dog

of some sort, Rasha said a doberman. The other was a rabbit. I could understand why they didn't want us to run into one another. The rabbit made our mouths water.

So we stopped at a drive-through and got a dozen burgers. The girl at the window flipped when she saw us, but we left before anything could develop.

Next stop was the Sheriff's office.

"Why there?"

"I don't want to get shot by some deputy. That's all."

"I hadn't thought about that, hon!" she sighed, "I wonder how long it will take for the world to adjust to us."

"Don't you mean 'for us to adjust'?"

"Hell no!" She grinned, "I'm not changing again!"

I laughed with her and tried not to notice the looks we got as we walked in.

That also went fairly quick. They went to great pains to act like it was no big deal and even gave Rasha an official ID. I thought it was because I had been a contributor to the Sheriff's last re-election campaign. Rasha had other ideas.

"You smell that in there?" she giggled as we drove off.

"What, the dogs? They have a canine unit here, that's all."

"That wasn't a dog, hon, that was a wolf!" She grinned and licked my ear.

"Hey, watch it, I'm driving!" I protested weakly. "So it was a wolf, how do you know that anyway?"

"I met your friend's wolf last year remember? It means that somebody at the Sheriff's office has changed, too! I wonder if this many people have changed all over the world?"

"Good question, Hon, good question."

The next couple of days, we stayed home and kept a low profile. I took care of some tasks around the farm I'd been putting off. Rasha dug out one of my old monitors -- Seems she knew all of my hiding places!-- and hooked it up to the VCR to watch the news. I did go trade in the car early one morning and got a late model Mercury Cougar.

I couldn't resist, I admit. Also I wanted something with a big engine and dark glass.

"Well here's how it looks Hon." We were sitting around Sunday evening thinking about doing a little shopping early the next day and Rasha was summing up the news. "Throughout most of the country about two percent of the population has undergone some kind of change.

"Here in Oregon, it seems to have gone a little higher than that, maybe four percent. But several other rural areas seem to have had the same rates, so there's

nothing really unusual about it. Magic is a fact of life now, and I for one am going to start practicing!"

"Magic? You're kidding right?" I chuckled.

"No, I'm not," she replied. "Think about it; things, people, they're all objects. I know how to manipulate objects already...."

"You do?" I said skeptically.

"Sure, object orientated programming. That's what that guy at your company did. Just applied it to the real world, now that you can of course!"

"I don't buy it."

"Of course you don't," she foofed at me. "It goes against your solid engineering training."

"Which you've got as well," I pointed out.

"Yes, but I'm a tiger not a human! I know that reality isn't exactly what it appears to be."

"I will concede that point. But, you're not a tiger anymore than I'm a human." And I launched myself across the room at her. We wrestled for a while, until I let her pin me.

"We should really be doing this outdoors you know," Rasha said.

"I can't help it, I just get these terrible urges to play sometimes. How did you ever resist?"

"Oh, I had this really horrid master who would just pout everytime I got out of hand or broke something," She started to say.

"Okay, okay. I get your point. Wanna go outside and play?"

"Sure!"

And off we went. It was like being a kid again, when everything was new and different.

We did manage to try and live normally that week, but it turned out we were both becoming 'popular' as word about us got out. Everyone wanted to hear our story, even the local news media wanted our story. I wasn't pleased, but Rasha rode herd on my temper, making me give them an interview and be polite.

Few people knew where I lived, so we didn't receive any real harassment. But the station forwarded us two large bags of mail. Seems a lot of folks had an interest in us to say the least! We used the paper to start fires in the woodstove.

Then of course there was Rasha and her learning magic. I was skeptical at first, but there were one or two stories on the news about people doing things using magic, it wasn't wide spread, and more likely then not people made mistakes.

Rasha's first attempts were annoying, I'd walk into the house and it would be

full of some awful stench, or a burned spot on the wall or something. But when she turned all the gold in the living room into lead, well, I banished all of her practicing to the back shed.

"I'm sorry John, I didn't realize that your computer and stereo had that much gold in it!" She looked at me very apologetic and downcast.

"You have my training, you should have thought about the possible consequences before trying the old 'lead to gold' trick." I said with a sigh. "Besides, I'm getting more and more afraid you're going to burn the house down! At least the shed can be replaced easily."

"I guess you're right Hon, I'll be more careful."

I gave a sigh of relief and hugged her. "Just try smaller things okay? Start with the easy stuff."

The rest of the week was much more peaceful.

Trouble started on the second week after the change, when I got laid off.

"What do you mean you don't need me anymore?" I growled quietly at Kurt, my boss. I had showed up personally today, having planned on going back to my old schedule.

"Well, the company's cutting back, John. With all of this magic stuff going on, the heads don't want to start any new programs and are putting most of the others on hold."

"I don't see anybody else getting the boot!" I growled a little deeper; he blanched.

"Well, frankly, John, you terrify the hell out of us, okay?" He said stuttering slightly.

I could smell it too, he was terrified all right. It just served to agitate me even more though.

"So kindly leave or I'll call the police."

"I'll sue on this!" I threatened lamely. I didn't want to start a scene, I liked these people. But to just dump me like this was maddening.

"On what grounds?"

"Oh, I'll get a lawyer to think of something! I want, no I deserve some compensation!" At least I was keeping my voice low.

"Well, good luck. Now good day and I'm sorry, you were a good worker." He looked down at his papers obviously dismissing me. That was the best thing he could have done at that point, if he had made eye contact I was afraid the tiger in me would have lost it.

I was still fighting with my temper when I got to the car. I was learning to live with it and Rasha had been helping me to cope. But I had never had to deal with

anything like a temper before. Once I calmed down I looked at the rest of the stuff that was in with the pink slip. Three months pay; maybe they really were sorry about letting me go. That or scared. At least I'd have some money in the bank.

When I drove up, Rasha came out to meet me in front of the house.

"What's wrong?" she asked concerned.

"They let me go. Afraid I guess." I sighed dejectedly.

The word of my unemployment must of made the rounds, or maybe everybody just wanted to hire a tiger. I don't know. But by Friday I had turned down the FBI, DEA, BATF, Secret Service, State police, and three private security companies! At least the CIA only sent a card; the rest all had the gall to show up in person. I had no interest in playing spy, which is what everyone of these groups wanted, an 'inside' man. Since I had held a special clearance when I was in the service, they felt they could trust me.

I wonder how many suckers fell for it?

Saturday morning started with a persistent knocking on the Door.

"Ugh, more cops." Rasha sighed.

"Think so?" I grumbled, dragging myself out of bed.

"Yeah, they all use that same damn knock. They must teach it in school or something," she grumbled back and dragged herself out of bed behind me.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm coming!" I said as I approached the door. "Listen, I'm not joining ..." I said as I flung open the door, and stopped surprised.

"Oh really, John?" Said a rather tall wolf. He was wearing a duster and cowboy hat, over what looked like a pair of togs and a T-shirt. He also had a badge on, the kind you see in the old cowboy movies. I peered a little closer; 'United States Marshall' it read.

"Well? You gonna stand there and gawk, or you gonna invite a wolf in?"

"Ummm, do I know you?" I said bewildered.

"I used to be the Sheriff around here," he said smiling kind of lopsidedly. "But I got a better offer a few days ago. Got one for you too, lets talk."

"Sheriff Jackson?" I chuckled, "A wolf?!"

"Great ain't it?" He laughed and I showed him inside.

"Rasha, this is Sheriff Jackson, I think you remember him." I introduced her.

"Vaguely." She sniffed his hand briefly as they shook.

"Well I remember you, though I must say you look a lot friendlier now, Hon." He smiled easily.

"I hope you're not here looking to hire me," I sighed as I headed for the kitchen and started to make some coffee.

"Why's that?" he asked curiously, sitting down at the table.

Rasha sat across from him.

"I don't feel like playing snitch or any of the stuff everybody wants. Just because there's this whole new group of people around, it doesn't mean there should be a rush to spy on them, does it?"

"Couldn't agree with you more on that one! But I'm not looking for inside men, or finks."

"What are you looking for then?" grumbled Rasha as I handed her a steaming cup. She was becoming more of a caffeine freak than I was.

"Marshals, what else?"

"Why do they want a tiger for a Marshall?" I asked handing him a cup.

"Why do they want police in any minority group? To give folks somebody they feel they can talk to about their troubles. To get them on the right side of the law. To investigate their crimes. What else?"

"Their crimes? We've only been around two weeks!" protested Rasha.

"And there have been twenty murders, six lynchings, and sixteen kidnappings. And that's just on the West Coast," he said quietly. "A lot of people have been trying to grab us, for their own purposes. So the Department of Justice decided to do something about it; a task force. No spy stuff, no ratting on folks, just plain police work. Interested?"

"Kidnappings?" I said, surprised. "Nobody's bothered either of us, right love?"

"You look in a mirror lately John?" He laughed at my expression.

"Yeah, so what?" I said indignantly.

"Do you think anybody in their right mind is going to harass you? You're a huge, mean-looking tiger now, so's your girl. Well actually, she always was." He chuckled and ducked as Rasha took a playful swipe at him.

"But not all are so lucky. So I'm hiring, here's your badge and I'll see you downtown Monday morning at eight."

"What makes you think I'll take the job?" I growled annoyed at him.

"Because you need a job, for starters."

"I can get a job lots of places," I countered.

"Then there's the little thing about sleeping with a minor,"

"WHAT!" I roared. "WHO???"

"Her." He pointed at Rasha. "She is only three you know." He chuckled at my look of discomfort.

"That would never stand up in court! And you know it!" I snarled, my temper starting to show.

"Wanna bet?" He smiled nastily. "Take the job, give it a while. If you really hate it, you can quit. But right now there are a lot of people getting the short end

who don't deserve it and I need help helpin' them. You're elected."

I had a sinking feeling. I guess I had a new job after all. "I should never have contributed to your re-election campaign." I grumbled.

"Yup, like they say, 'No good deed goes unpunished!'" Marshall Jackson stood to leave.

"What about me?" asked Rasha.

"Oh, I'll see that things get set straight so you won't have to worry, Hon." He smiled.

"No, I want a job too."

"Sorry Hon, this is man's wor--ekk!"

"Rasha! Put him down! Now!" I yelled. She had him by the neck and was straight arming him two feet off the floor.

"I'm not letting you go out there to get shot at without me, dear. You're just not mean enough." She looked back at the marshal. "*I am* however!" she purred.

"Okay, okay!" Jackson gasped and she set him down carefully.

"Damn, woman!" He panted, getting his breath back. "I had damn well better hire you so I can at least fine you the next time you do that!"

"Good, now you had better get going. I can see by the look in my mate's eyes that he wants to discuss this privately."

He took one look at me, grinned and said "I'm outta here alrighty!" and left, fast!

I supposed my growling wasn't helping much.

The 'discussion' lasted till very late that evening, with the kitchen bearing much of the brunt of it. I found that trashing things did help with my temper. Of course Rasha was pretty mad about my attempts at sheltering her, and made it very clear that she had a mind of her own and was prepared to use it.

"I'm just worried about you okay?" I said when we had finally settled down. "You don't have the experience dealing with people. If anything happened to you I'd be devastated!"

"You can't protect me forever. And I don't need it anyway. You heard what Jackson said, nobody'll mess with us!"

I sighed. "Remember what guns are? People will mess with us all right. And it doesn't matter how tough you are when someone has a gun."

"Oh," she said quietly, "I hadn't realized that."

"That's what I'm worried about, Hon -- you getting shot."

"What about you?" she asked, looking concerned.

"Hmmp! I've always known when to duck." I grinned, "Plus I don't take chances. So don't worry about me, just listen to me when I tell you to do something okay?"

"As long as it's work." She grinned suddenly. "But not after!"

So we drove into Portland early on Monday, and spent the morning getting outfitted by Marshall Jackson.

"Dusters?" I asked, surprised. "Why dusters?"

"Cause its the only body armor they got which will fit you two. Also it's a lot more comfortable than a vest. Trust me, I tried one."

"Sure, okay. What about guns?"

"Go down to the armory later and take what you want. Standard issue isn't gonna fit in your hands either." He smiled at the both of us.

"Now raise your right hands and repeat after me ..."

By the end of the day, we had a case and were out questioning people.

"Jay wasn't kidding," Rasha said as we headed home. "There's a lot of trouble already, and so many of those folks are so upset by what happened, I'm surprised they even talked to us!"

"Well he was right about one thing, those people trust us 'cause we're in the same boat as they are." I turned and gave her a quick grin, "And we sure look mean enough to keep the peace!"

We both had a good laugh at that.

It was the last good laugh we had that week.

#####

The next day started well before sunrise. Somebody had kidnapped another changer, the fifth in as many days. They were all female, all lookers too. Jay had the idea that somebody was putting together a menagerie. We all had to agree on that one. After all, only fifteen years ago white slavers had worked Portland. Some thought they had never really stopped.

I grumbled to myself as we looked over the victim's personal effects.

"What's the matter Hon?" Rasha asked, looking up from a photo of the missing girl. It had only been taken yesterday.

"I feel so impotent, outclassed. I'm not a detective! I don't have the training or experience to deal with all this. But these folks either don't want to talk to the regular cops, cause they're like us now..."

"Or they don't want to talk to us, because they aren't the ones who have changed." She finished for me. She showed me the picture of the girl. "A real fox all right, literally."

I looked it over and nodded. She was a looker, I noticed the pictures of her from a few weeks ago. "She must have felt this was a gift from god or something." I nodded at the pictures that showed a less than attractive woman, "Now she's been kidnapped and who knows what else, it's just not right."

"So what are we going to do about it then?"

"Whatever we can." I sighed, "I don't like the idea of giving up very much."

"Me neither."

"Well lets go talk to the neighbors again."

Rasha nodded and we made the rounds another time.

The next day we got our first real clue.

"I can't believe it's that simple!" Rasha said, shaking her head in disbelief.

I shrugged, "I wish we had noticed this common thread earlier."

"But who would have though that they were picking their victims by newspaper articles?"

"Probably someone with a lot more experience then either of us have at this." I looked at her and grinned. "Well let's see if we can figure out who's next. Maybe we can arrange a little surprise!" and I growled deeply.

She growled back, smiling fiercely, "I like that idea."

By Friday we were ready, but we weren't in time. We obviously had been close though, when we came up to the front door a we heard a car speed off on the street behind. Kicking in the door, we could see the mess, but at least in their haste the criminals had left their scent all over. When we ran out the back door, we found their abrupt departure had attracted attention as well. We even got a couple of descriptions!

"Damn!" I swore when we got back to the office and were reporting our findings to Marshall Jackson. "We were close, really close. Another minute..."

Rasha's tail was whipping around in anger, so was mine.

"Don't be so hard on yourselves." He said, "You both did a pretty good job, considering the difficulty of it. Also there's your the fact that you're both just rookies."

"Still," Rasha complained, "If the local police would have helped, instead of not wanting to get involved, we might have had them."

He nodded, "Yes, prejudice is never a friend, or an ally. I'll go rattle the Chief's cage on this tonight though. We're closing in on these criminal's now, and if you call for back up again. I'm gonna make damn sure they send it."

He dismissed us then and we headed back to our own desks. "Good job, both of you." He said as we opened the door to go, "and don't forget that."

"Thanks boss." Rasha said

"Thanks," I echoed.

Walking over to my desk I plopped into my chair, which protested loudly at the treatment.

"You're gonna break that thing real soon Hon." Rasha said, settling into her own chair with much more grace.

"I'm still bugged, I hate losing."

"Who's said we lost?" She said leaning forward to lick my nose. "We got them on the run now. And we have more leads then ever before."

I smiled, "True..."

Just then the phone rang and Rasha grabbed it.

"Yes?"

I couldn't make out what was being said, I noticed she was having a hard time following it as well. Then the line went dead.

"What was that?" I asked.

"A tip. Supposedly one of our kidnappers lives out on Haley road, out in Tigard."

"Well, shall we check it out?"

"Might as well."

It was a good twenty minute drive from the office to the place. When we got there, it looked pretty deserted, a run down house behind an old auto wreckers.

We got out of the car and started walking carefully up to the door, trying to use what cover there was, drawing our guns.

Suddenly we both heard a sound from behind us.

"Shit!" Rasha said.

"Run for it!" I told her and took off for the door. I heard a gunshot and felt a sharp pain in my left shoulder. I hit the door going flat out as I heard more gunfire erupting behind us. I felt another sting in the leg as the door flew open, Rasha diving in behind me.

I rolled and came up on my feet right in front of four well armed men. I opened fire barely before they did. Maybe they had thought the door would hold. I got the first one before he could fire, then jumped into their midst hoping to keep them from shooting Rasha. I shot the next two as I felt their bullets hitting the body armor.

The last one got his gun inside the duster and shot me in the chest, I crushed his face with my free hand, then broke his neck as the pain hit. I turned to look at Rasha who had killed a man behind me, his chest missing and her hand all covered in blood.

"Old habits" she said shrugging.

"We better barricade that door," I said gasping. We could both hear the gunshots, there were a lot of people outside. We were pretty well trapped.

She nodded and pushed some kind of dresser in front of it, "I guess we walked right into this one."

"Sure did, love."

Right about then they charged the house, Rasha took a few shots out the partially blocked door. I took a few out the one window.

"Get any?" I coughed then, I could feel the blood running down my chest. I was getting numb.

"Yeah, but there are quite a few -- Oh shit!" she said as she turned and looked at me. "You're hit!"

"Wait!" I said as she started over to me, "The doorway."

She stopped and looked back at it. Then looked around the room. There was a sofa and a table which she quickly added to the barricade. "That should do it..." Then she headed over to me.

I was getting pretty numb by then. She helped me lay down on the floor.

"Damn, they must have used some kind of high-power rifle on you. There's a hole in the back of your duster."

"That's not the worst of it," I gasped again and coughed.

She blanched when she saw the chest wound. Then kneeled down next to me and started to chant. Shortly after that I passed out, wondering if I'd ever wake up again.

#####

I came to slowly. I was tired and weak. I could feel a bed beneath me, blankets all around. I took a sniff. I was home in bed! I slowly opened my eyes.

"Rasha?" I whispered.

"John!" She flew in the door and landed on the bed besides me.

I braced for the pain I thought would come from the wounds. Surprisingly there was none.

"Wha.. What happened? I don't feel the wounds."

"Of course not, silly," she grinned at me, then butted heads. "I fixed them."

"Huh?" I tried to pull the blankets down, but I was having trouble untangling myself. "Why am I so weak?"

"Randy said blood loss. I couldn't do anything about that. Plus I think I used more of your energy healing you than I should of."

"Let me see," I said softly. She helped me pull the covers down and held my head up. Sure enough, I was whole if weak. I could feel her own arm trembling as she held me up.

"How long since you last ate or slept?" I asked, looking up.

"It's been two days," came Jackson's voice from the doorway. "And she didn't look too good when we got there. Seems she used a lot of her own energy keeping you alive."

"Is that true?"

"What do you think? I'd let my mate die without a fight?" She growled dangerously.

"No," I said softly and smiled. "But I was terrified you'd die too."

"I just need to work on my magic some more, that's all. I wasted a lot of energy until I figured out what I was doing wrong. Next time I'll do better, I promise!"

"Hopefully, there won't be a next time!" I grumbled and managed to get an arm around her and pull her close. "Come to bed, you need to rest too."

"See you later, Boss," she said to Jackson as she snuggled close. "Lock up on the way out."

"Sure thing, see you both in a few days, I guess." and he left.

"So did we win?" I asked her as she settled down in bed.

"Yup, the ones that got arrested told us where the girls were all being held. They're all safe now."

"Well that's a relief," and I leaned over to kiss her. "Welcome to the wonderful world of sentience," I sighed and I closed my eyes laying back.

"Some things are worth any price!" she said rumbling happily as I fell asleep.

Old Business

by John Van Stry

I looked out the window of the plane as we flew over the complex. It really wasn't much to look at, a bunch of buildings, a runway, a fence. For all the controversy, the politics, the corporate maneuvering centered on those plain non-descript buildings below, I would have thought to have seen spiraling towers, large production lines, parking lots filled with cars, people bustling about every which way.

But then the first atomic reactor was built under the school bleachers in Chicago I've heard it said.... Makes you wonder.

"Sure does," said the passenger next to me, making me realize I had been thinking out loud.

"Professor Shirley Tomil," she introduced herself, "And you are?"

"Bill."

"Bill...?" she hunted for a last name.

"Just Bill."

To her credit she didn't hunt any further. It wasn't like I was on any kind of secret mission, I just didn't want any more exposure here than I had to have.

"So you here for the 'Big Unveiling'?" she smiled.

"Yes, you?"

"I work on the project, I'm a synaptic conjunctive cognitive researcher and designer." She smiled as I ran that through my lips a couple of times.

"Quite a title," I admitted, "Does it *mean* anything?" I smiled to take any sting out of my words.

"I just measure the grey matter; make sure that we get what we want."

I nodded, "Well have we?"

"If the data is to be believed, we sure have." she paused then as the plane turned onto final for landing. She was preoccupied then with baggage and papers and such and didn't say a word to me again until we finally disembarked.

"See you at the briefing, Bill?"

"Probably." I non-committed and headed out the door.

I was met by a very officious looking man, who directed me off without a word, running me quickly past the security check point. I just did a cursory flash of my credentials for the computer and we went inside where he handed me off

to someone I actually knew.

"Well Bill, how was the flight?"

"Not bad George, quick as usual."

"Yeah, these new sub-orbitals really have shrunk the world once more." He continued with the small talk, leading me down the hall. "One of these days you'll be able to put your toilet on the far side of the damn world things will get so small."

"Another company program?" I joked back.

"Got to do something with all those planes, with everyone working out of their houses and telecommuting, who goes anywhere anymore? I tell you Bill, we're turning into a world of home bodies."

"Well that's part of the reason we're here today, isn't it?"

He sighed and nodded as I started to steer the conversation towards the actual reason for my visit.

"It's gone far far *far* too well."

"And there's a problem with that? The Board will give you the promotion you want, as well as a seat on it, if that's the truth."

"Yeah I know," he sighed again and motioned me into a room. "This will make me rich, and give me everything I've been after all my life."

I went inside and found myself a seat. The room was dark and there was a window on the wall. One way glass obviously. "So why do you sound so down about it?" I turned and looked at him as I asked.

He looked me right in the eyes, "Because I have questions as to the morality of what we're doing."

"You know as well as I do that with the labor shortfalls we have to do something."

He nodded, "Hey, don't tell me, I lobbied long and hard for this program! After the superman fiasco, this was the only option we had left. But, well..." he paused a moment, then just shook his head. "You'll have to see for yourself, that's all I can say."

I nodded, "Well that's why I'm here. Can I see the subject?"

He walked over to the wall and pressed a button, "Bring out the first subject."

I watched as a door opened on the other side of the 'window' opened and a nurse led out the subject.

"Age?"

"About 10"

"Looks to be almost twice that," I noted.

He nodded, "We need a fast maturity time to get them into service quickly. From all the cellular studies this seemed to be about optimum. Same for mental

and stability studies, we figure another 2 years and this one would be prime for release."

I stood up and walked to the window, getting a closer look. "Male?"

"Yes."

"How many are there right now?"

"Well this subject is the oldest, he's the prototype for the final version. We've got another five dozen in assorted species and sexes at the 6 year mark."

I nodded and looked as the subject looked around the room. He had suspicions about what he saw as a mirror, I could tell. "Why does he think he's in there?" I asked George.

"He knows someone is here to look at him, he's told me it gives him nightmares..."

I looked up at George as he said that, "Really?"

"Yes," he nodded, "Really. That's the problem Bill, they're people, at least to me they are."

"Well they have to be," I acknowledged, "Nothing else will work when you think about it."

"Still, sometimes it makes me think."

"Having second thoughts George?"

"Yes and no. Right now I feel sorry for that poor boy. He's all alone, only one of his kind at the moment as far as he knows. He's been well educated, but he's never been outside of this place really. Kind of rough for a kid when you think about it."

I thought about that a moment. The kid had been living in a laboratory, under glass, for a decade. Probably started to become a real problem when his hormones kicked in I bet.

"Well, let's meet him." I decided.

"Now?" George looked surprised.

"Sure now. Why? He doesn't bite or anything does he?"

George started a moment at that, "He's not an animal, he's a person, educated and trained..."

I held up a hand and stopped him, "Just kidding George, let's go see your boy."

He nodded, and led me out of the room. A moment later we entered the room with the subject and the mirror. He smiled as he saw George, but stopped when he saw me and eyed me warily.

For my part I just stopped and looked him over very carefully. He stood about five foot eight. According to the reports he'd reach five eleven, give or take an inch. He was of medium build, with well defined muscles, even the fur

couldn't hide that fact. As I watched his tail flicked behind him, long, thick, and covered with fur as well. I looked up into his eyes then. His eyes were almost Human, just as his body was almost human, but not quite. His head was rather feline however, that and the tawny color of his fur proclaimed 'lion', the species on which his template had been laid. George liked cats, so his first test subjects were mainly that. He claimed he picked a lion as they are more social. Personally I think he just liked lions.

"Hello," I said. "My name is Bill, I was the person in there," I motioned to the glass. "I figured you might want to meet the person behind the mirror for a change."

He smiled at me, an interesting effect, considering it showed fangs, that while not as big as a real lion's, were still fairly large. Especially in that foreshortened muzzle. "Thank you." he said back, his voice deeper then I would have expected. It also had some interesting under and over tones. Not exactly a human voice, but then he wasn't exactly human.

"And your name is?" I prompted.

"Jeidyn," he walked over and offered his hand, or should I say paw? I shook it, happy they hadn't been cute and named him 'Leo'.

He had a firm grip, and smelled rather pleasant, if a little musky.

"So how are you today Jeidyn?"

"Ummm," he looked to the nurse and George. They just looked at him like proud parents, which I guess they kind of where.

"Ummm, Nervous." he finished.

"Why's that?"

"Well they tell me I'm supposed to be at some kind of ceremony tomorrow, that I'm supposed to meet all sorts of people and such."

I nodded, "You haven't been around many people before, have you Jeidyn?"

He shook his head, "Not really, just the folks here, and my teachers."

I nodded, "Well that's all going to change now Jeidyn," I smiled at him, "You're going to be meeting a lot of people, and going places. I suspect we'll get to know each other quite well in time."

He really looked worried then and I thought I heard an audible gulp. His tail was flicking in an obvious display of nervousness.

"Look son," I said trying to re-assure him, "you can't stay here forever. Besides," I smiled again, "I would think you'd be dying to go see the rest of the world by now, and get out of this place."

He smiled shyly then and nodded.

"Good." I reached out and tousled his head fur a bit, he had a kind of mane, only it wasn't attached all around his head, it flowed more like hair. He looked

startled for an instant, but then smiled even wider and let out a rather pleased sound, almost like a purr. The nurse and George both looked scandalized. Made me wonder just what sort of upbringing the poor kid had. 'Scientists...' I sighed to myself. But then I had been sent here for a reason.

"Well George, I have to admit things here are far better than I would have guessed." I smiled at him, then back at Jeidyn. "I guess I'll take charge of Jeidyn now."

George looked shocked again, "Now? But you just got here! And..."

"And nothing George, you've had ten years, you have others to devote your time too now."

I watched Jeidyn carefully as I said this, he looked from George to me and back again. Several times.

"Don't worry Jeidyn, I'll answer all your questions later, I promise."

He nodded a little slowly and I tousled his head fur again. He really liked that and settled down quickly.

"Well, if you'll show me to my room then? I'd like to spend sometime talking with Jeidyn here in private. Let him know what's going on tomorrow."

George hushed the nurse, who was obviously going to object and led us out of the room.

Jeidyn's eyes were wide as he looked around. I got the feeling that he definitely didn't get out much. At least not to this part of the facility. I linked my arm through his as we walked, partially to give him moral support, but more to make sure he kept up with us and didn't trip over anything, as he was looking all over. I took the time to look him over some more myself. He was wearing only sandals and shorts, so I had a good view of his physique and development. And he was developed all right. He may not be full grown yet, but I suspected he was already stronger than me. I guessed no one had thought about that when they picked a lion to build first. Might be part of the reason they were scared I guess.

Jeidyn also got a few stares back as we headed to the VIP quarters. I think everyone here had to know about the project, but I suspect most hadn't seen the first test subject in person before. But he was so busy looking around he didn't notice the stares himself.

When we got to the room, George opened the door and Jeidyn went in first, he grabbed my arm then and closed the door saying "I need to talk to Bill for a moment Jeidyn, he'll be right in."

I turned and looked at George, "Yes?"

"I don't think this is wise Bill."

"Why? Is there something you didn't put in your reports?"

"No, of course not, but he's inexperienced."

"He's just a kid, what are you worried about?"

"He's not a kid, he's almost full grown. You've seen his build, he could hurt someone if he ran amuck."

I nodded, "So could I, so could you. That's part of life George, but he seems a decent kid. Maybe a tad under socialized, I think I'm gonna ask corporate to ship a boat load of developmental psychologists out here next week. You folks obviously need help in that department."

"That's why I'm worried about you taking him! This could be too much too fast! We've spent a lot of time on this project, we don't want it ruined by him freaking out on us."

"Well, I appreciate your concerns George, but I have my orders too. Don't worry yourself though, I was asked to do this job for a reason."

"I thought you volunteered," he blinked.

"Well I could have turned them down if I had wanted to, and I thought about it too. Glad I didn't though," I grabbed the doorknob, "See you at noon tomorrow George, and keep the display part short, I don't want Jeidyn up on stage for more than ten minutes."

He nodded and we parted company as I walked in.

I caught Jeidyn sneaking away from the door as I quickly stepped inside. I had to laugh. "How much did you hear?"

Jeidyn looked guilty, "You didn't knock!"

"Nope, not now, not ever. Remember that; there's only one time you can expect me to knock and this isn't it. Now what did you hear?"

"Not much," he grumbled, "These doors are too good."

I nodded and went to my luggage, which was sitting in the center of the room. I opened it and got out a few things to check for listeners of another kind. Not that I expected any, but it pays to be safe.

"I take it you've heard a lot of things you weren't supposed to then?"

He looked at me, and I looked back. I took a real good look and memorized his expression. I checked my gizmo, the room was clean, so I sat down on the couch and put my feet up on the coffee table.

"Son, the best thing you can ever do in your life is to be totally honest and forthright with me at all times. I can be the best friend you'll ever have in your life if you do. Maybe the only friend. Lie to me, or evade my questions and you will pay the price, you're smart enough to know who and what you are. I'm here to evaluate you, your life is in my hands and I *want* to help you.

His eyes narrowed a bit. "You could have me killed couldn't you?"

I nodded, "Yes, I could have them kill you, I could have them do anything to you I wanted." I watched him carefully as I said this slowly. He didn't like it, that

I could tell, and I didn't blame him one bit for it. "But I won't."

"Why not?" he asked looking at me, still wary.

"Morals, Ideals, Beliefs, these things may only be a concept to you, but they are one of the most important things in existence. I cannot and will not compromise my belief's. That is why I am being honest with you now, upfront. So, back to the original question, what do you know that you're not supposed to?"

He tried to stay puffed up and wary, but I just kept smiling at him and he deflated and walked over to sit by me. Interestingly enough he sat on the floor with his head in easy reach. I took the hint and stroked his hair, or mane rather.

"Lots of things I guess. I know I'm a kind of freak, a created test subject, genetically engineered and all."

"Do you know about the others?" I asked.

"Before or after me?" he replied.

"You tell me."

"There are a lot more about half my age, I've never seen them of course, but I've overheard people talking about it. The technician's forget how good my hearing is, and often make mistakes and talk about what they shouldn't. As for the ones older than me, I've heard them talk about two previous test cases."

"Yes, there were two."

"They were killed, weren't they?"

I nodded, "They didn't work out, the genetics didn't match up well. Neither got past the age of one year though, so don't worry about it."

He shivered as I stroked him, "But I do worry about it, all the time. I'm just a thing, I'm not a person. I hear it in the way they talk about me, all the time."

I gave his mane a tug, "Enough of that talk," I said a little harshly perhaps, "You are not a freak, nor are you a thing. You are a person. Yes, you don't have any rights, but then when I was your age I didn't either."

"Which age is that?"

"Take your pick," I chuckled "You're either ten or seventeen depending on how you look at it."

He nodded, "But what is my purpose in life then Sir?"

"Bill in private, you can 'Sir' me in public. Your purpose? You are the first of your kind. There will be more, many more. You're here to prove that its a good idea."

"And then?"

"Well, that's a tough one. You pretty much belong to me, and I haven't thought about that yet."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't know what you'd be like when I took this job, still don't know really, takes time to really know someone." I was surprised that the issue of my owning him didn't seem to stir a response.

"Anything else?" I asked.

There was of course, and he told it all to me, but none of it was as interesting as the first. I listened to all of it however and answered all of his questions. Except those dealing with sex, seems he had witnessed two lab techs doing things they shouldn't have been. And while he knew the theory, seeing it applied gave him even more questions. And I could easily see it had an effect on him as well. I forestalled him with a simple: "I'd rather discuss that topic a little later, when we know each other better, but I promise to cover it all."

By the time we had finished talking it was dinner time, and we were both fairly hungry. I enjoyed watching him eat; he had good table manners, and ate like any teenager I had ever seen: In great quantities. He did tend to like meat more, and liked it under cooked by my standards, but that was fine.

He was mostly quiet while I watched the news and some evening entertainment programs. Asking questions now and then. Most of it he wasn't familiar with, some he was however. It seems they did their best to educate him, but they didn't cover too much present day politics, or current events, at least not in detail.

I also found he wanted to be very close to me, I did nothing to discourage him of course, being curious about him myself, and in all honesty I've always enjoyed physical contact. Being a fairly jaded individual it didn't bother me in the slightest that he was male.

"Comfy?" I asked looking down at him as it got rather late and by now his head had worked its way onto my lap. He stiffened and looked so frightened that it was all I could do to keep from laughing, and when he tried to sit up I found out just how strong he was when I pushed him back down, which was stronger than me. "You're okay there Jeidyn," I laughed. "Honestly I don't mind, I actually enjoy it. I take it you weren't allowed to do this kind of thing?"

He smiled and his ears flicked, looking embarrassed, "They weren't supposed to let me, the people in charge were afraid I might act up as I got older. So I only got to do this a little, some of the nurses didn't seem to mind, if no one else was around. Most wouldn't let me though once I started getting big."

I nodded, "Well in private again, it's fine with me most of the time. If it's not, I'll let you know. In public however it's not okay. Many people do not like displays of affection in public."

He nodded, then smiled, "So, this is a display of affection?" he rubbed his head under my hand, so I fuzzled his head a bit.

"Yes, it is. And yes I do feel affection for you."

He actually did purr at that! I found the affect interesting, I also found myself eyeing him over closer than normal. He definitely was an attractive young man, I suspected that there would be more than a few women who'd be happy to teach him the facts of life when the time came.

"Well I'm going to go to bed," I yawned then and stretched. "You can either stay up or go to sleep yourself, just don't leave this apartment. And I will be getting you up around eight, so don't stay in bed too late."

He nodded, "Where do I sleep?"

I pointed to the other bedroom, "Your bed is in there, but if you want to stay up late and watch the TV you can nap on the couch tonight."

"First time I'm allowed to stay up late unsupervised and I think I'd rather go to bed instead." he said and giggled. Definitely a teenager.

I rubbed his head, "Well you'll have plenty of chances from here on in, so don't worry about it."

We got up then and I gave him a hug like I did with my own kids, totally surprising the heck out of him. "Well goodnight and I'll see you in the morning Jeidyn."

I left him standing in the room looking almost dazed, I was most definitely going to see to it that corporate sent out those psychologists, by the end of the week if not sooner, they needed to show these new 'kids' some love and affection if they wanted them to be well balanced and not end up with a bunch of sociopaths.

I awoke a while later, in the dark. He was standing there in the doorway, looking in, looking lost, not moving.

"What's wrong?" I asked quietly.

"I don't know," he replied just as softly.

"Do you want to sleep with me tonight?"

"Y..yes" he softly stammered.

I slid over to the other side, it was a large bed, and pulled the covers back, "Come then."

He slowly padded over, I could see in the dim light that he had shed his shorts and was only wearing a pair of boxers, I guess briefs would be uncomfortable with the short fur. After he got in bed I tossed the covers back over him and snuggled up close, he may have a young man's body but there were definitely some scared little boy parts in him as well. "Better?"

"I, I think so."

"Good, now get some rest," I said and yawned again. He shivered and tensed, then relaxed slowly as I gave him another hug. "You'll be fine, don't worry."

He nodded and I fell back asleep, but not before I had noticed his own breathing slowing down.

The next morning came soon enough. I awoke feeling quite comfortable, I had never been keen on sleeping alone myself and Jeidyn's body, all covered in fur over nice firm muscle did feel rather nice pressed up against my bare skin. I lay there still for a while, just listening to his breathing, and looking at one of his hands, or paws I guess, wrapped around me. The fingers were a little thicker than mine, his hands were definitely bigger, and I could see the openings in the ends, claws. I played with one carefully and teased it out a bit, before he began to stir. Quite impressive, if his teachings didn't include martial arts, I'd have to see him trained myself. Discipline was going to be important for him, lest he get carried away some day and accidentally shred something or, worse yet, someone.

"Morning sleepyhead," I said as he yawned in my ear. He paused a moment and taking in our relative positions, which were both close and a little intimate. Then in a sudden flurry he literally leap from the bed and began a profuse string of apologies, ears twitching, tail dancing, and I'm sure under that fur he was blushing profusely.

"I'm sorry I didn't mean to do that will you please forgive me..."

"Jeidyn!" I interrupted. He stopped and looked at me, almost comical in his distress. "Jeidyn," I continued in a softer voice, "Get back in bed."

He did so a bit nervously. I slid back against him and grabbed his arm wrapping it around me. Maybe I was being a bit forward, but the last thing I wanted was for him to be traumatized by something as innocent as snuggling up to someone in bed. "Jeidyn, I don't mind any of this. It is comfortable and pleasurable. Now if you find it uncomfortable, you are free to tell me so and move away. I can assure you that if I find anything you do uncomfortable, I'll tell you, okay?"

"Umm, okay" he gave me a little hug. "Are you sure it's okay?" he asked cautiously.

"Well, in private, yes it is fine. In public; not usually. You'll get a better understanding of what you can and cannot do in public as you spend more time there. The same will go for what you can do with someone in private. Some folks will think that being in the same bed means you want to have sex with them, others would laugh at that thought. Some folks will have problems with this," I motioned to the two of us in bed, "because we're both male; though I

daresay there will be some of those who will have problems with you because you're not human anyway.

"I'll coach you as we go, and let you know what's acceptable and what's not. Don't worry about offending me or insulting me; I know you're inexperienced and young so I'm not going to get upset with you if you make mistakes."

He nodded, "I think I understand. Two of the male staff here are lovers, I always wondered why some of the others were a bit stiff around them."

"You're pretty perceptive," I chuckled, "How'd you know they were lovers? They weren't the ones you spied on, were they?"

He laughed, a rather pleasant sound, I'd have to get him to do it more often. "Oh no, they were very proper and professional, but I could smell how their scents were mingled on each other's bodies and clothes. Like the two I had spied on that time. It took me a while to figure it out. But it does lead to a question, sir, I mean Bill."

"Oh? And that is?"

"How do you do it?"

"What, Sex?"

He nodded.

"Well, basically you do what ever feels good, and what ever your partner enjoys. I can give you all the books you want on the subject, but its something better shown then described, that's half the fun."

He looked at me with a mixture of curiosity, expectation, and something else I couldn't place.

"Don't worry, I'm sure you will not lack willing teachers once people get to know you better. I would suggest that you start with others your own age. You'll have more in common," I realized then that he was starting to fixate on me, I could see some others taking advantage of these kids when they first went out into the population. Another problem I'd have to be sure to flag to corporate in my report or I'm sure there would be other unpleasant consequences. For now I'd just make sure there were a lot of people about after we left so he would be more socialized. I'd also make sure there were enough in his own 'age' group as well, to give him some peers to interact with.

"But that's not a topic for today; you should have time to figure out your own mind after you've met some more people." I rolled out of bed then and stood up stretching. "Plus it's almost eight and we have a great deal to do today. Especially if we want to get out of here by six."

"Get out of here?" he blinked.

"Yup, we've got places to go and things to do. I don't live here you know, and now you don't either."

"But, but... but where do I belong then..." His voice faded out and he sounded once again like the young, very young, man he still was.

I walked over to him, as he sat on the bed looking lost.

"You belong with me, you work for me now. You'll live at my place for the time being, and if you pass your courses, you'll go with me when I head back out."

"Back out?" his ears perked up.

"Yes, back out, to space. I captain a small exploration vessel for the company. You're going to be a member of my crew."

"Wow..." was all he could say.

"You like the idea?" I asked, bemused.

"Oh yes! In the books they used to give me, there were all sorts of space travel and aliens and all that!"

I thanked God for small miracles, but then I'd expect scientists and such to have lots of sci-fi around.

"I always wanted to be able to go to those places, so I could find a place where I would fit in..." his voice got small again.

"Well don't worry on that part. Do a good job, show the folks who are paying for all this that you were a good idea, and before you know it, you'll have a lot of brothers, sisters and cousins all around."

He nodded then, thinking for a moment, "I'd like that, I really would." He looked up at me and smiled, "I'll do my best, I promise!"

I smiled and gave him another hug, "I know you will."

Jeidyn purred so loud then that I felt like a kid again. I had no doubts now that he'd be a safe and loyal member of my crew. He wasn't really all that different under the skin then anyone else, except of course that he was company property and company built. I finally understood what George had been trying to say to me, only he couldn't find the words.

We were in the slavery business once again, like it or not. The human race had left slavery alone a long long time ago, but we needed these morphs now, we needed the help to expand or we'd die here. As one of the ones in the front of this juggernaut I realized I had better do everything I could to try and set this on the right path, or when the Day of Judgment came there would be one hell of a price tag to pay.

"What are you thinking about Bill?" Jeidyn asked, getting up and stretching again.

"Something my dad told me, back when I was thinking of learning the family business."

"Oh? What was that?"

"Treat your charges firmly, fairly, and with respect. Don't abuse them, and always set their needs before your own. Otherwise they'll lash out, and you'll probably die."

"Wow. what did your father do?" he asked blinking.

"Trained lions for the circus, still does. Maybe someday I'll introduce you."

He just stared at me.

New Beginnings

by John Van Stry

I slicked my fur down, stepping from the shower and heading over to the dryer. The hot air was soothing as it blew over me, my mind wandering to the tasks of the day ahead. I took a few more minutes taking care of the usual morning tasks, then grabbed my shorts and gear and headed off to the bar.

I nodded to the waitress as I came in the front and slipped behind the bar, then nodded to Sam.

"Afternoon Jack," he said to me, "ready to take on the night shift?"

"As always," I chuckled, "had a rough day of dealing with the dregs of society?"

He laughed at that. The Legacy was about as quiet a place as it came, especially during the day. With a location in the heart of the business district, it was mostly white collar beer drinkers during the day. At night it picked up a little, office workers like to have fun too, but a yelling match was about the worst I'd ever seen in my 3 months here.

"Oh I tell you, I've suffered the trials of the damned I have!" he went on in mock theatrics. "The trials of the damned! Oh the fights, the arguments, the very risk to life and limb!"

"That bad huh?" I snickered.

"Worse," he sighed, "I think the big excitement came when someone spilled their beer today. Isn't that right Doris?" he raised his voice at the last to attract the attention of the waitress, a rather nice springer spaniel, who was working her way through college on the tips.

"Oh give it a rest you," she shook her head coming over to talk with us. "Quiet is good. The tips are great, the customers are decent. Even the night crowd is well behaved. Go work a fight bar if you want some excitement."

"Hell no! I'm not that crazy..." he said and dropped his apron behind the register. "Well it's all yours Jack."

I nodded and put on my own apron and checked out the patrons at the bar and in the dozen booths, all regulars. "Have a good one Sam, see you round."

Doris turned to me as he left, "I don't hear you complaining about it being quiet in here."

"Course not, I like it this way. Relaxing." I smiled.

"Well I don't know if I'd call it relaxing during the dinner rush." She smiled

back and returned to waiting her tables.

For the next several hours it was a fairly typical night, after the dinner rush the cook closed down the kitchen and headed home. Doris stayed till nine, it was a Wednesday so the crowd wasn't that big. By ten it was pretty much the usual crowd, about fifteen people, all of whom I knew by name. I was cleaning glasses and popping the odd item in the microwave for whoever wanted a snack while listening to the present topic of conversation. They were talking firearms tonight, discussing the merits of different handguns mainly.

"I like the Glocks" said Harvey, a slightly hyper skunk. "They're just so cool, with all that plastic and alloy. They're just neat."

"I don't know, I think they're over rated. I prefer the Smith and Wesson's. Less jamming with a revolver."

That was Sal, a Labrador who worked in the securities trade. The rest all weighted in with their different opinions. Bill, the Rottwieller liked Ruger blackhawks. Jeff and George, two cougars who I suspected were rather familiar both sided with Harvey, getting specific by voicing their round of choice, 9mm. Jill, Mike and Nick really didn't seem to be taking much of a side on anything yet. I noticed their mugs were empty and gave them each a refill. That got them back in the conversation shortly.

"What about you Jack?" Asked Harvey, he was usually the one who dragged me into these things. I think it took him about a month to realize I wasn't going to kill him, after that he had a tendency to hang on to me at times. I guess he just had a fascination with panthers.

"What about me Harvey?" I asked grinning.

He looked exasperated. "What gun do you prefer? You seem to always have an opinion on things."

I laughed, "Well having an opinion is a bartender's job you know."

"Only you seem to enjoy that part more then most...." Added Nick, his silver foxtail flicking against Jill's redder one.

"Guilty as charged," I grinned, I enjoyed these inane conversations. "Well, for handguns, I guess it all depends on what you're gonna use it for."

"In general," said Harvey, "just in general, what do you like."

"Well in general I guess I'd just have to go with the colt 1911."

"But that's so *old*!"

I shrugged, "It got that way for a reason. Parts are plentiful, ammo is common, they're easy to clear, and it'll knock the biggest tiger, lion, bear, or bull flat on his ass. And they won't be getting up quickly either I might add."

"Oh pu-lease" whispered George, and Bill nodded in agreement.

"Hey, he asked." I grinned and pointed at Harvey.

They then went into a long discussion on stopping power and other such things, most of them seemed to be sold on 9mm. Though Sal was defending .357 magnums pretty well. I added a few things when asked. For the most part I don't think they really valued my opinion, but I didn't care. The city was pretty safe, especially this part. None of these guys, or gal, probably owned a gun anyway.

They all drifted off about 11. Except Harvey. He hung around a bit later than the rest.

"Why do you always say things like you know from personal experience? The others think you're just a braggart."

I looked at him and had to smile, "Then why is it one of you are always so quick to ask?"

"Because they think it's funny. Like the martial arts stuff you said last week. Jeff and George both work out pretty regularly, and they found some of what you said hard to believe."

"Actually I think they said it was Bullshit." I chuckled again, wiping the bar down.

"You *heard* them?" He gaped.

"Hey, alcohol hurts the senses, and while you all are sucking down the beers, I'm sober back here. Your whispers tend to be a tad loud." I snickered.

He kind of blushed then. I guess he did have a thing going for me after all. "Why didn't you do anything then?"

"Why should I? I don't care what you guys think. I enjoy chipping in to the little bull sessions when asked. I have to admit I get a kick out of what you think. But that's about it." I looked up at him into his eyes. He shrank back a bit, so I smiled to make him relax.

"But still..."

"But nothing." I cut him off lightly, "I'm not here to worry about what the patrons think."

"Then why are you here?" He asked looking very curious.

"Why to serve drinks, what else?" I laughed.

He finished his beer and left after that, looking very confused.

I closed the bar later that night, turning the chairs up and sweeping the floors before heading out. It was a quiet stroll home through the empty city streets. Very peaceful.

Friday night was busy, busier than normal. We had a band in, some kind of three piece local electric folk band. Jane, the weekend bartender was in to help, and Doris was running around trying to keep up with the demand. We had the full group of regulars of course, and about another couple dozen for the band. It

was loud and busy, and the band was pretty good. Their music was pretty fast with a strong beat. It got the blood pumping and the beers flowing, business was pretty good.

As the night wore on I had to settle a few disputes. Nothing major, but some of the newcomers were pushing the edge of acceptable behavior. I'm big enough that when I stand between two people and give a little push with a growl, that they tend to get the message. One Lion gave me some problems twice and I told him third time I'd toss him out if he didn't tone it down. He harrumphed a bit at me, but he did behave better after that.

When the band finally packed up and left at ten, I was fairly happy to see them and about half the crowd go. But it was still fairly busy. My regulars were holding their typical court down at one end of the bar.

I was just popping a pizza out of the microwave when the commotion started. That same lion had started in again, only now he was picking on Jeff and George. From the tone of it, it seemed he disapproved of their lifestyle, narrow minded sort I guess. But it was starting to get physical, and while there were two of them, he was probably as heavy as the both of them combined, and a good foot taller than either. The rest of the group didn't look inclined to get involved, being all office types, I wasn't surprised. The lion could sense they were all unsure, and he was pressing his advantage. It was obvious he was exactly the rough and tumble type they weren't.

I took off my apron with a sigh and vaulted the bar; this was going to take more than a stern voice this time.

"...fucking faggot's" he was saying as I walked up behind him.

"YOU," I said loudly from behind him. "OUT! NOW!"

He turned on me rather quickly, I could see he was spoiling for a fight, he had his weight balanced and his hands were up already.

"What the fuck do you want?" he growled.

"You the hell out of my bar. Now." I said keeping my voice even.

"You standing up for these prissy's?" he laughed looking down at me.

"Yea. Now you can either walk out, or be carried out. Your choice." I moved closer to him, I knew what his choice was going to be already. Some folks are just too easy to read.

He swung at me then, I slipped out of the way, and slid in kicking his knee hard while giving him a punch to the sternum. He grunted and tried for a grab. I blocked and dodged back, drawing him more to the center of the room as the crowd cleared.

He charged, but came up short with a feint, giving a combo of wheel kicks that continued to move me back. I gave ground a little, then shoved a chair in his

way. When he paused to deal with that I came in and gave a flurry to his chest, then gave him an uppercut to the chin as I slid back out. He roared and closed, swinging fast and furious, but still in control of his senses. I couldn't slip or dodge them all and started blocking as well.

He kept pressing, so I dropped to a knee and gave a hard combo to his crotch at point blank range, then turned and drove a knuckle shot into the side of his thigh with all my might. He screamed and I jumped up, kicking him in the face as he caught me in the side of the head with a solid hit.

I backed away, he was on one knee. I came in again, kicked the knee that was up and did a round house combo to his head and jumped back before he could do more than trade a light blow or two. He started to get up slowly then, so I spun in, and landed a spinning heel kick to his face, which I followed with a bar stool. He went down.

And stayed there.

"Asshole" I mumbled, leaning over to make sure he was still breathing. I grabbed him by the belt and bodily hoisted him up; he sure was a heavy sucker. Walked over to the door and tossed him out onto the pavement. Next I went and got some ice and slapped it against my face after putting my apron back on. That was about when I noticed the bar was still quiet, except for some whispers.

"I'm sorry about that folks. But we don't appreciate people starting fights in the bar. Next round's on the house."

That got them moving, though they were still a tad stunned. Harvey, Bill, George, Jeff and the rest all looked very shocked. And I felt very guilty.

"Where'd you learn to fight like that?" Jane asked, she had stayed late to help with closing.

"Oh, I've been around." I replied, pressing the ice in so I wouldn't get a lump.

"Obviously," Harvey piped in.

I looked over at him and shrugged, "Couldn't let him go beat up my customers, and friends, could I?"

"I didn't know we were your friends," Jeff said. "That guy was huge. He could have killed us."

"Well I don't know if he could have killed you, but a hospital would have been in your future."

"Well, thanks. Thanks for stopping him." He smiled and shook my hand, "George and I owe you."

I grinned, "Don't worry about it."

They nodded, and left, not bothering to have their drink, skirting the still unconscious body out the front door.

“Somebody better call a cop or something for that guy. If he lies there all night I don’t think he’ll wake up in the morning.”

Jane nodded and went to call the local constables, while Bill started looking me over as if I had suddenly grown wings. The others didn't seem to be at all fazed, though I noticed Harvey was getting that dreamy look. Felt kind of good though, fighting always got my blood going.

About ten minutes later the local peace officer showed up and gave us a nod, then toted the Lion off. The crowd got a little smaller after that, but most of the regulars seemed determined to make a full night of it. I guess they wanted to savor the 'win'. Even my small band stayed a bit later than usual, and seemed a lot more interested in me for a change, though I dodged most of the questions. I wasn't really interested in talking about myself, but I did learn that yes George and Jeff were a couple, had been for years. So were Nick and Jill. They were mostly native's, Jeff was from the next city over according to Harvey, but that was about it. And mostly they lived nice easy going lives in nice steady jobs. I smiled as I drank it all in, nice folk’s every last one of them.

It was about two a.m. when they all left, and the bar started clearing out. All except for Harvey of course, he was sitting at the bar obviously trying to think of something to say, and caught between fear and want. It was pretty cute, and I stopped to give him a good look over myself when he wasn't looking.

He was trim, and had a nice shape, no doubt about that. The twin white stripes running down his body and then up over his plush tail were definite eye catchers, and the pride he obviously took in caring for his fur was evident too. From the earlier conversation it was pretty apparent where his tastes lie, and he had dropped a hint in a moment of boldness that he was available.

I smiled to myself and walked down the bar until I stood across from him, "Wanna go grab a bite?"

He jumped and stared for maybe half a second, but that was about all the hesitation he had. "Sure! How much longer till you get off?"

I turned to Jane, "Could you close for me tonight? I could use something to clear my head."

She looked at Harvey then winked at me and then nodded, "Sure, I'll close up."

I turned to Harvey and took off the apron, "Now I guess," and smiled at him.

He grinned like a kid with a new toy, and I followed him out the door. The way he was walking made it clear what he wanted, and having his tail hiked that high did show that he had a very cute butt. I had to grin myself.

I caught up to him outside and we headed off to a late night dinner that catered to the swing shift. I ordered a sandwich, he just got a soda, and we

chatted a bit.

"You know, I have a lot of questions," he started off.

"I'm sure you do," I chuckled "but let's leave the really deep ones till later, okay?"

"How much later?" he asked looking coy.

"Oh, how about till morning?" I smirked at him.

"Finish your damn sandwich and lets go then!" he giggled.

I ate quickly.

"So how did you end up in Longview?" Harvey asked as we stopped outside my door and I worked the lock.

"Chance mostly, I'd never been here before," I smiled and brought him inside. I left the lights off, and literally dragged him off to my bedroom. He giggled a bit at that following me through the dimly lit hall until I pushed him back on the bed. He smiled up at me and opened his arms with a smile as I slipped out of my shorts.

"I would never have expected this..." he churred softly.

"Life is full of surprises," I purred back and slipped into bed and his embrace.

We started off slowly, I took my time and explored his firm young body. His responses and own behavior made it clear that he was an experienced lover as well, and when I finally took him, his moans were of desire and need as much as mine. We made love several times that night before falling asleep, and I discovered he had quite a few talents.

The next morning I woke up and smiled at the vision and sensations my new lover was giving me. "Insatiable are we?" I said and giggled at his rude hand gesture, his muzzle being rather occupied. Then my own rumbling purrs got the better of my desire for vocal communication.

Later, we got out of bed and I followed him into my shower, and then out to the kitchen. We got about as far as the living room when he stopped and just stared. I looked up at the walls, and the pictures on them, and the few odd memento's on the shelves and such as he took it all in.

He took a step back and bumped into me. "Those all of you?"

"Yup."

"Wow, well I guess that explains a lot then."

I shrugged, "I went in at seventeen, I was a problem kid so it was service or jail."

He turned and grinned, "Well it looks like you made the right choice, you

don't seem to have any problems *now*!"

I grabbed his butt and dragged him close against me grinning "Well, not anymore," and kissed him.

"So why'd you come here?"

I grinned, "Well I had to go somewhere, and after twenty years of Special Forces and combat in three separate theaters, I thought quiet might be a nice career change."

He nodded and ran his paws over my chest.

"Boy, George and Jeff are going to be -sooooo- jealous!" He giggled.

"Think so?"

"Oh yeah, they thought you were cute, but straight."

"Well I guess, they'll find out Monday at the bar then." I grinned.

"You kidding?" He giggled and picked up his cell phone, "I'm inviting them out to lunch to meet my new boyfriend."

"Oh? And what makes you so sure I want something serious?" I tried to glare at him.

"Shall I remind you of just what you were whispering between the growls of pleasure and the moans of lust?" he smirked at me for a change.

"Ummm, you want butter on your pancakes?" I blushed; my ear's flicking in embarrassment.

He snickered and dialed as I went to make Breakfast.

"Hello Jeff? You two have just got to meet me for lunch...." I heard him begin as I walked into the kitchen.

Well I did come here with the hopes of a more normal life; I sighed to myself and then grinned.

And things were starting to get a little dull on my off hours anyway...

Fox Hunt

by John Van Stry

Jacob sprinted down the uneven slope of the hill, stumbling over the ruts in the uneven sod. Fortunately he was able to catch himself before he fell.

"That wouldn't do now!" he thought to himself with a grin as he reached the bottom and started splashing down the stream. Hopefully any pursuers left on his trail would figure on his going upstream in this latest attempt at breaking his scent trail.

Jacob figured he had a good lead now, he could still hear the occasional bark and bay of the pursuit, but he was gaining on them. Had been since the initial minutes of his flight in fact. But he was not totally familiar with the area he was in and was getting pretty winded. Last night's celebrations were no doubt the reason, but there was no use in making excuses or laying blame.

Escape was all that mattered now.

He left the stream when he came to a low hanging branch from an old Oak Tree. A land mark he vaguely recalled from his past. Being careful not to touch it, it was an obvious place to leave one's scent after all; he scrambled up the bank trying to leave as little trace as possible. Then started off towards the west.

"I'll be able to see Marissa and the kids before the sun sets!" He thought happily to himself slowing down to a walk and catching his breath. He listened carefully for the hounds and was rewarded several moments later with their confused baying as they reached the stream bed.

He could also hear the sound of the others way off in the distance. He had split the group each time he had broken his trail and now there were very few at that bed. It sounded like only three or four, the rest would take a few minutes to catch up, and by then he'd be too far away.

Jacob picked up his pace looking for another way to confuse the trail, doubling back twice just for good measure and crossing his own trail three times.

There was a possibility that they'd split again and half would still be close to him, but he'd been sly so far, going upstream at each of the little water routes he had taken. His pursuers were not terribly bright and would expect him to repeat himself a third time. Not wanting to split their numbers anymore then they already had. After all, they were strangers here! Not him, though as he looked around he had to admit that he wasn't terribly familiar with this part of the forest

anymore. He mentally cursed the accident of fate that had sent him south instead of west this morning.

Who'd have though that damn Shepherd would have been over there?

"Oh well" He breathed quietly to himself, "What's done is done!"

Slowing down again to take another break on his tired legs he listened closely for any remaining pursuers, and was rewarded with the sound of rustling leaves not too far away!

"Damn!" He swore quietly and started off again, panting hard now. All of that doubling and trail re-crossing took time and energy; he was tired and needed a break. But the sound of pursuit was close, closer than he could believe! He sprinted across an open meadow and started to make a straight run for an outcrop of rocks that he remembered vaguely from years gone by. Just as he cleared the meadow he thought he heard a grunt behind him, but no barks or baying.

"That's one thing about the Hounds," He thought to himself, "They always bay when they sight you!"

Figuring himself to still have a good lead on his pursuit he broke straight for the rock pile, dashing up it and off to the side. The hounds would circle it, most likely to the right, and he'd gain a few more seconds on the ones behind him.

Panting harder now he ran straight ahead for a series of brambles dead ahead. They'd tear his clothes up bad, but they'd slow the hounds down as well.

Then he heard it, a panting louder and deeper than his! Redoubling his speed he put everything he had into it, running full out, his legs aching and lungs burning!

"Just a little more!" He begged, "Just another yard"

With a growl the dog was upon him, knocking him down, tumbling him end over end! Exhausted he rolled tangled up in a ball of fur and limbs, coming to a rest under the dog's bulk just inches from the shelter of the brush.

Tired from the running since dawn, tired from the panicked dash, downfallen at being caught so close to freedom, Jacob collapsed totally. Eyes closed gasping for breath. Caught.

"Hey you okay?" Harold growled down at the Fox sprawled semi-conscious beneath him. "I didn't mean to hurt you, but I knew if you made the bushes there I'd never get you!" He panted.

Jacob opened an eye to see who had caught him, then started in surprise! "You're ... You're the German Shepherd that I bumped into this morning! What are -you- doing here?"

"Oh," He grinned, "My Company sent me over here to work with our foreign office, and when I heard that my local co-workers were going on a Fox hunt,

well, I just couldn't resist."

"But only Hounds can catch a Fox ..." Jacob started, and then paused.

"Oh?" Harold laughed, "And how many have caught you?"

"None in the last six years of my working here at the games," He chuckled. "But to be caught by a non-hound, how embarrassing!"

"Oh? Really? Why's that?" Harold asked a little upset.

"Oh not for me!" Jacob reassured him, "It's embarrassing for me to be caught by anybody. But your co-workers! They'll be teased for weeks round the game circuit! Though I suspect you're going to be quite popular."

Harold reached down and offered the Fox a hand, helping him to his feet. Looking down at Jacob as he winced a little.

"You okay?"

"I think I twisted my ankle a little in that fall there." Jacob looked up at the shepherd, noticing just how large he really was. "Damn you're a big one! How'd you keep up? Oh, and I'm forgetting my manners, aren't I? I'm Jacob."

"Oh, I'm Harold. As for keeping up, well you never did run a straight course, but I did."

"Then how on earth did you follow me?" Jacob grumbled.

"Oh that was easy. I cheated."

Jacob looked shocked! "You cheated? How on earth did you do that?"

Harold laughed, "Oh, I asked somebody which way you liked to run, then just put myself between you and it. You just kept coming back to me."

"Damn, I'm getting predictable in my age!" Jacob grumped.

"I believe the Fox buys the first round?" He asked.

"Yes, but the winner usually buys the next one," Jacob sighed mellowing.

Harold chuckled and gave Jacob a pat, as they headed back to the club, deftly removing the tracking device he had planted when they had bumped earlier that morning before the hunt began. Who said that *only* foxes knew how to be crafty?

Easy Money

by John Van Stry

"You okay?"

"Unn, yeah. I guess."

"You sure? You don't sound too good."

"Really Kera I'm fine," I sighed whiskers twitching. "More or less."

She sat up in bed and started to rub my neck.

"If you're so fine why are you as tight as an Orangutan with a two week paycheck?" Kera purred in my ear.

"Okay, so I'm a little tense," I admitted leaning back into her work. It felt good, but wasn't enough to break my glum mood.

"Wanna talk about it?"

"What's to tell? I'm broke and I can't find a job."

"Bruce says you can work down at the Club whenever you want." She whispered, her own whiskers tickling at my ear.

"Bouncing at the Silver Moon is not my idea of a high paying career," I chuckled.

"But at least you'll have something," She chided nipping me. "Don't be so proud. What else is there right now anyway?"

"True," I sighed. "But," I paused and flicked my tail in agitation, "ah hell Kera, I spent years going thru school and paying my dues. I think I'm entitled to something a little better!"

I got up and grabbed my shorts.

"Please stay Pen!" She said getting up and hugging me from behind. "It's late anyway and I really would like you to."

I turned and nuzzled her, my muzzle rubbing up against the side of her face. "Sorry love, I need to think about this some."

I could see her tail flick in agitation as I said it. "Really I'm sorry, I just need some time."

"You better not take too much," She warned growling slightly. "I'm not going to wait forever Pen!" She sighed herself, tail lashing slowly. "I've never pressed you about your past and how much money you've got doesn't matter a damn to me."

"I just want you, and I think you want me too. So why don't you just bury

your pride and move in with me?"

Why not indeed?

"I'll think about it," I mumbled, my own tail lashing now.

I slipped on my shorts, grabbed my vest and gave her a quick hug. "I'll stop at the Club tomorrow and talk to Bruce, Okay?"

"Okay!" She smiled. Kera knew she was winning on points, even if I couldn't come out and say it.

"Bye."

"Bye."

We kissed and gently butted heads. Then I turned and left.

I slipped on my vest as I walked out onto the street. I felt the reassuring weight in the back settle against my spine just above my tail. It was cool out, but my winter coat still hadn't shed. So it felt good as I padded quietly down the street.

What to do, what to do? It was a big question alright. Just what do spies do when they come in from the cold? When I told the agency I was quitting they told me I'd never work anywhere again. That they'd never let me be, never even let me work as an engineer.

I'd laughed in their faces at the time.

They hadn't been kidding.

Every place I went turned me down. Oh not right away, usually I got past the second interview. But the offers never came. Always some excuse about 'Someone more qualified' or 'We restructured and filled it internally.' They were out there alright. Just watching.

The worst part was last year. They came and offered me some work. I was so hard up I had to take it. Too many bill's from my lifestyle.

As soon as it was done they canned me of course.

"We don't trust you anymore Pen," they said.

But they trusted me enough to do the job. Actually they really hadn't much of a choice in the matter, I was still the only one to penetrate the Harnian Confederation and live to talk about it.

That was the big reason I wanted out too. Our government was full of sympathizers and sooner or later some Senator or Staffer would sell me out.

Never trust the Government.

Well at least I wasn't spending money like water anymore!

And then there was Kera. Who'd have expected to find her? I wasn't a prude myself, but I had to admit it was comforting to date within my own species again. Hell, she even had black fur like me and everybody was always quick to

say what a great couple we made.

Plus she didn't even ask when I disappeared for four months last year.

I turned down the street to my apartment house. It wasn't very fancy. Not anywhere as nice as Kera's truth be told. But it was clean and it was cheap. Both prime concerns nowadays.

"My, how the mighty have fallen!" Came from the shadows as I passed the alley.

I had my gun out before my next step hit the pavement. "Come on out Track," I growled ears back, eyes slit.

"Getting a little careless are we?" He stepped out into the light, grinning as I looked him over carefully. Track was a Lemur, he usually handled night op's.

He worked for the Agency of course.

"What brings you here? Come to gloat?" I put the gun away.

"Gloat? Me?" He chuckled, "You know that's not my style Pen. Charilldel sent me."

"And just what does that smelly Chimp want?" I hissed, tail lashing.

"I'll never understand why you Leopards hate monkeys so much," he chuckled. "You should be happy Charilldel doesn't feel the same way about you!"

"Oh right, I can just feel his good will," I retorted sarcastically. "What gives?"

"A job, what else?"

"No. I quit, remember?"

"What about last year then?"

"A mistake."

"You still carry a gun though."

"It's for uninvited guests." I put my hand back on the hilt.

"Oh *really* Pen!" He laughed.

"There've been two since last year," I growled again.

He looked shocked, "You're kidding!"

I growled some more, narrowing my eyes and getting my ears back.

"Maybe not. Who were they?"

"I didn't ask. I thought you guys were supposed to be taking an interest in me. Why don't you ask Charilldel?"

"What did you do with them?"

I pointed towards the river. I lived quite close to it.

"Oh. You still have one hell of a mean streak Pen."

"I didn't kill them Track. Oh, you do know how to swim right?"

"Huh? Yeah why?"

I was on him in a flash.

"Hey Pen!"

He didn't put up much of a fight, he was only a Lemur after all. I hoisted him up on my shoulder and started for the river.

"You're not gonna throw me in the river! Are you Pen?"

"Sure looks that way," I mumbled.

"But it's cold, *real* cold! I'll get sick!"

"Real shame that."

"Aw, come on Pen!"

"If you tell me what's up, maybe I won't go out to the middle of the bridge Track."

"I don't know, Charilldel wouldn't say. He wanted me to bring you back to Sacramento. He was gonna tell you there." His tail was twitching violently. I don't think he was too fond of water.

"It's a long swim from the middle," I said as the bridge came into sight. "Of course the fall's a lot farther from the center of the span too."

"Please Pen. I'll get fined! Maybe even demoted!"

"It's just gotta hurt!" I sighed as I neared the bridge. Good thing it was late out, this would have been tough to explain to any on lookers. At least he didn't stink of fear, that always caused me to get nasty. Instinct I guess.

"Okay, okay. Rumor has it that the Harnian's are up to something."

"So?" I set foot on the east landing.

"So?!" He gasped, "They're doing it here!"

"You mean 'here' as in out country?" I kept walking.

"I mean 'here' as in Portland!"

I stopped, the thought made my tail stand straight out.

"Portland?" What the hell would they want here? There weren't any military bases here. Not much in the way of high tech industry either. Hell, that was why *I* came back here!

I must have said as much out loud too.

"I don't know, Charilldel doesn't know either I bet. That's why they want you."

"Shit." I set him down. "Tell Charilldel I'll take the job."

"Sure," He sighed relieved looking over the edge at the water twenty feet below.

"But it's gonna cost him."

"Sure Pen."

"Up front. And I want to know everything that's going on."

"You got it Pen."

"One last thing."

He turned and looked at me, "What?"

I smiled, "This is the *last* time!" and I pushed him over the side.

"Yaaaa!"

He made a nice splash.

By the time I got to my apartment I was whistling.

I headed down to the Silver Moon early next morning. I got there at eleven, it was a *long* walk. After knocking on the door a while I finally managed to rouse Witnauer, one of the Barkeeps.

"What's up?" She asked sleepily, fur mussed.

"I want to talk to Bruce."

"He's asleep." She yawned, and added pointedly "I was too."

"So let's wake him!" I laughed and slipped inside.

"Pen!"

"Hey, if I'm gonna work here I should be allowed in right?"

"Act like this and Kera or no, you won't be!" She grumbled.

"He's doing this for her?" I stopped and turned.

"Of course! She's a friend, a very good one too."

"Damn," I sighed whiskers and tail drooping, "I hate charity."

"It ain't charity Pen, we *do* need a bouncer." She poked me in the stomach as she walked by. Foxes love to poke it seems. "Crowds have gotten bigger lately and Senshal left last week. Didn't you know?"

"Not really, I've been too busy job hunting to come down here lately."

"No luck huh?"

"Actually yes," I sighed, "But its short term and I really don't like it. So I want to cover my bases with Bruce."

I followed her rather cute bushy tail to the back. There were stairs by the dressing rooms behind the stage. I went up and followed my nose to Bruce's rooms. Why he lived above the bar I'll never know myself.

I knocked on his door. After the second try I heard sounds of life inside, a moment later he opened it up.

"What are you doing here so early?"

"How much for the Bar Bruce?"

"Ha, ha, very funny. Gads, a bouncer with a sense of humor."

"No really," I smiled. "What's a place like this cost? I really want to know."

"I couldn't tell you off hand, I don't have any plans to sell. But I wouldn't sell it to you, and I sure wouldn't recommend you buy one like it."

"Why?" I asked curiously.

"You aren't the type. You'd run a this place right out of business. This isn't just a bar, it's a cabaret. Kera and the others dance and sing here. Bands play and perform."

"So?"

"It's a whole different business. Besides where would you get the cash for a place like this?"

"My Dear old Uncle kicked off last night, I'm due a small fortune."

He looked down his muzzle at me, Bruce was a brown Bear and stood over a foot taller than I did. "Yeah. Right."

"Okay, so it's a lie. But I'm in a position to make some cash and I want to do something with it when I'm done. I also want the job here."

"I don't employ crooks Pen."

"I'm legal," I growled quietly and flicked my tail in annoyance. Accusations like that always set me off these days.

"Then what is it?" He growled back.

"I can't say." This sure wasn't turning out right, suddenly the whole conversation was getting well out of hand. Too many years of honest living I guess. Or at least trying to be.

"Sure right."

"If I haven't told Kera, I'm sure as hell not going to tell you Bruce!" I grumped glaring up at him.

"Then maybe I should have a talk with her about you myself," He growled back. "I promised her Mom I'd make sure she stayed clear of trouble." He looked me over, "And if there's one thing you are Pen, it's trouble."

"You don't act like any Engineer I've ever seen. And you move too well, more like a fighter even if you are just a middle weight."

"You cause problems between me and Kera...." I growled, angry now.

"And you're not afraid of anything either," He interrupted glaring down at me. "Not what I'd expect of somebody growing up in a college. I think you'd better leave Pen."

I hooked his leg and shoved him back with a simple Judo throw. Growling I moved inside and kicked the door closed behind me.

"Don't" I said as he started to get up. "You *really* want to know?" My temper was not one of my better points.

"You're not making any points with me Pen," He looked totally non-plussed. He didn't smell of fear either. That was good. Surprising for a 'simple club owner', but good.

"I used to work for the Government." I started to pace back and forth, keeping my anger in check.

"So you've told us."

"What I told you wasn't exactly true."

"That's obvious. Can I get up?"

"Nope, I'm still mad and I'm trying to make a point." I let my tail lash to vent some of my anger.

"Well I'm lost," he growled. Bruce may be old but he was still a tough customer. Probably figuring it would be easy to trash some averaged sized Leopard.

"I stole things for the Government, from other countries. They needed an Engineer, because it was military stuff. They picked me 'cause I had a background."

"Oh? What kind?"

"Not important. But it was work for them, or else ..." I paused, the implications weren't lost on him.

"Anyway, to put it briefly, I've been *asked* to handle one last case. I'm making them pay through the nose. Bruce, I need to do something with this money so I'll never have to do something like this again for them."

"So why am I on the floor?"

"Cause that's where I am dammit! And they're keeping me there too! Why do you think I can't find real work? I wanted out instead of dying on the job like a good little spy. They don't like people who quit Bruce." Suddenly I didn't feel so mad about the whole thing anymore. Maybe confession is good for the soul.

"Sounds like a fun group."

"Oh, a real garden party for sure. You can get up now."

"Thanks."

I helped him up.

"But you're still not the Bar type Pen. Too much of a temper."

"Well if you can think of something, I'd appreciate it. I really do care for Kera and I want to marry her. But I don't want to be dragging her down."

"Everybody wants to stand on their own two feet," he agreed. "I'll look around. Will you be at work tonight?"

"Sure," I smiled. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Why won't you tell Kera anyway?" He asked as we walked over to the door. "It's not that big a deal, at least it doesn't sound like it."

"Because I want to forget every second of it. I want to pretend I never did any of it. It wasn't pretty and nothing I'm proud of." I looked at his puzzled expression, "Don't ask, it's a dirty, deadly business and you *don't* want to know!"

I opened the door then and left.

I took my time going home. I didn't know when the info I wanted would

show up, or the money. So I just kicked back and cruised a while, taking my time on the trip home and stopping in at some of the shops on the way.

I eventually came home and went upstairs to my small apartment. Opening the door I stepped in. I smelt him at the same time that I heard him.

"Hello Onri. Oh wait, it's Pen now isn't it?"

Turning quickly I saw my uninvited guest sitting in a chair across the room. He wasn't armed, or at least he wasn't holding a gun.

"Jared! What a surprise!" I smiled without feeling, keeping my tail and ears under control. "What brings you here to my humble abode?"

"A two room studio? Don't they pay spies in your country?" He didn't sound happy.

"I quit, they ruined me. But if you know my real name you probably know that too. Why are you here? To kill me?"

"I should you know!" He growled, his own eyes going to slits momentarily. "My sister was heart broken when you left. She really loved you, you know."

"It wouldn't have worked Jared, I was after all, a spy. Sooner or later I would have been caught and executed. Probably by you."

"You could have turned."

"Then *they* would have come and got me!" I sighed, letting my shoulders and tail droop a bit. "Listen, don't think I didn't consider all of this back then.

"I'm sorry about it okay? Now why are you here?"

"I need your help I'm sorry to say," he said whiskers drooping and looking downcast.

"Just you?" I asked incredulously.

"Well, my country does." He looked back up and smiled craftily.

"Can I move?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Thanks. Now why should I help your country?" I walked over to the kitchenette and made myself a drink. A stiff one.

"How about me?"

"Oh yes, where are my manners?" I made him one too. "This is all I have, sorry." I handed it to him.

"That's fine," he replied and took a sip.

"So why should I betray my country and help you?"

"Because you're not betraying them and I'll pay you."

"Let's see the cash."

He pulled out a thick sheaf of bills. I walked over and took it.

"Forty grand." He said.

I pocketed it. "It'll pay for the interview. What's the job?"

"You're familiar with the Harnian State Religion of course?"

"Please," I sighed again, "don't insult me. The religion of the All-Father, the one mystical being that created us all. Each different yet the same. The separate parts making the greater whole." I paused, "Of course I am."

"You sound as if you almost believe!" He said surprised.

"I almost do," I smiled. "One of the qualities of a good spy. I *like* your country Jared. Even the government isn't all that bad. Not really any worse than what we've got here.

"But what does this have to do with the job?"

"Simple, our scholars have tracked down a very important document to our faith."

"Scholars?" I asked surprised.

"Scholars and Spies," he chuckled. "Anyway, it's a keystone to our dogma. The treatise on differing intelligences by the All-Father himself."

My ears stood up in surprise. That was an important document I bet!

"It was stolen two centuries ago from the Abbey of Stryj in the Carpathian mountains. The State and the Church finally tracked it here."

"They've been looking for it for two hundred Years??"

"The Church has," he admitted. "But the State got involved about thirty years ago."

"How do you know it's here?" I paced back and forth a bit, sipping my drink and thinking while letting my tail wave lazily.

"The manuscript itself was hidden inside a bronze statue of the All-Father. One of our agents saw it for sale at a secret auction four years ago. We finally tracked it here."

"So what do you need me for?" I asked looking at him.

"Its in the city, we just don't know where."

"You-Don't-Know-Where?" I laughed, "Oh come on now! You really expect me to believe that?"

"The statue was stolen from its last owner. Its gems turned up on the open market. As the Statue itself was bronze we figure it's still intact, its secret safe. So we need the help of a local. You."

I thought about it. I could help them and not get in trouble for it. Probably that is. The All-Father was very popular in this country too.

I could also charge Charilldel a fortune for 'spying' on them while I did. It would really piss him off once I told him the whole story, that's for sure!

"I'll do it." I frowned, "But I want some more cash, and your word."

"My word on what?" He asked, nose twitching suspiciously.

"That no 'Hit Teams' will ever come looking for me." I smiled, "I have

enough problems worrying about my own countrymen already. One less group would be nice."

"That presents no problem." He smiled himself then and got up. "After all, it is the 'game of Foxes' and as a Fox I salute the only Leopard spy I ever met."

"Ever met and didn't kill you mean."

"That too!" And he smiled even wider, whiskers twitching again.

I showed him out, damn if he didn't poke me in the stomach as he walked by too! Then I sat down and gave in to the urge to shake violently for a while.

"That was too close for comfort!" I mumbled quietly to myself and looked at the new grooves my claws had dug in the floor. A few minutes later a thought hit me and I searched for bugs. Surprisingly I found none.

The files didn't show up till I was on my way out to the Silver Moon. They were delivered by a courier service and the envelope contained thirty grand, cash. I hid the files in my stash and went to work.

I took the bus this time so I wouldn't be late. It was packed of course, though most people were on their way home and I was heading out. I looked around for a tail, didn't spot one of course but that didn't mean there wasn't one. I'd have to start keeping my eyes open again.

I walked in the front door of the club just before six.

"Hi Pen," Said a large white Wolf who was one of the regular bouncers.

"Hi Jason." I walked over, "What's the drill?"

"Simple, anyone causes trouble with the performers or the other patrons, you give them a warning. If they don't behave then, they leave."

I cracked my knuckles thinking.

"Violence is a *last* resort" He warned growling slightly, his tail lashing once. "We don't want fights, it's bad for business."

"Oh okay," I sighed jokingly. "Actually I've never seen anybody really misbehave in here before Jason. I expect this to be an easy job."

"Hah! Not hardly. You're supposed to find trouble and stop it before it starts. Plus play go-fer for the Barkeeps, the Performers and Bruce." He led me to the stage entrance.

"Plus never sit down. It looks bad."

I nodded and made a few mental notes. "So where do I start and what do I do?"

"Front door, help the cashier with the cover charge, and don't let anyone in you think'll cause trouble."

"How should I know?"

"The cashier will point them out." He chuckled, "But I doubt we'll get any."

"What will you be doing?"

"Watching the dressing room entrance mostly. And circulating. Once the crush at the front door subsides, make sure you do that too."

"Okay."

"But first follow me."

So I followed him down into the basement, where I was loaded with cases of beer by Witnauer to take up to the bar. After four trips I was sent to my station at the door.

The night went pretty well. Kera came in about seven and gave me a real big hug and kiss.

"Thanks Pen," She smiled, her tail dancing in obvious delight.

"No, thank you Kera," I purred back. "I appreciate the help."

She purred as well then and headed for the dressing rooms. Phil, the Rabbit working the cash register shot me a grin too.

"Made her day."

"Yeah, mine too."

The other employees showed up over the next hour as the patrons started to fill the place. There were quite a few employees of the Silver Moon. A four piece band, seven other performers, another bartender, two waitresses, a waiter, one cook and a busboy.

I had been coming here for years as a customer, but I never realized there were so many working here.

It was a busy night, and things moved along fairly quick. I only had to ask two people to behave; it was a quiet night in that aspect. I did stop and watch Kera's first act. It was good as always, though the song she sang and the way she winked at me made it obvious that the first one was for me.

Too bad I was working now, I couldn't meet her in her dressing room after her first act!

As it was a Thursday night, the Club closed relatively early. By two o'clock, the last patron was ushered out and the doors were locked.

"How'd it go?" Bruce asked coming up to me as I waited by the door letting the last few customers out.

"Fine. How late do you need me?"

"Just help Jason put the chairs up and lock the place. Then you can go."

"Okay."

It didn't take long and Kera was waiting for me when I finished.

"Hey stud, what's up?" She grinned.

"Obviously you!" I laughed.

"Oh? And you're not?" She purred sliding closer to me.

My tail stood up a little higher and my ears perked up.

"I didn't say that love!" And I gave her a little nip. "Want some company?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" She purred again.

We left together for her place.

The next morning I gave her the money. All seventy grand worth.

"Pen!" She gasped, "Where did you get this?"

"I've been asked to help someone recover some stolen property." I smiled.

"Seventy grand worth?" She growled warningly, her ears laid back along her skull.

"Probably more actually," I sighed. "And yes it could be dangerous. But that's only where half of that came from."

"Oh?" Her ears not only went back down, but her eyes were getting slitted and her tail was starting to lash back and forth.

"The rest is from my old boss. He wants me to spy on these people and I'm making him pay."

"I thought you used to work for the Government." It was a simple statement. She didn't seem clear on what was going on, or very happy about it either.

"I did, and he still does. They work for a different one. It's all legal, safer than what I used to do - at least I hope it is. And I don't want to go into debates. At least not now."

I looked at her pleadingly, "Please?"

"Why?"

"It involves a lot of stuff I'd rather forget. But if you really want to know," I sighed then, "I'll tell you."

"Later," She smiled her ears perking back up and her tail curling around my waist. "Just as long as you're not a criminal."

"I'm not," I smiled. After all, a spy is a legal occupation, at least in your own country's eye that is!

"What should I do with this?" She asked eyeing the stack I had given her.

"Save it, deposit it, whatever. Just be discrete. I don't want people wondering where you got it from. But your folks had money so I figure you won't get asked too many questions."

"My folks had money!" She laughed. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Well compared to mine they did!" I laughed back. "Probably why I never learned to save."

We cuddled a little while longer, then I kissed her goodbye and left.

"You be careful," she gently reminded me as gave her a parting nip.

"Of course!" I grinned back.

I took the early morning bus back to my place, when I got there Jared was waiting inside.

"You keep this up and I'll have you arrested for breaking and entering," I growled annoyed.

"Sorry, old habits die hard," he grinned. "Besides, I'm here on a diplomatic passport. I'm immune."

I threw my hands up at that. "Still, I'd like my privacy. Okay?"

"Don't worry, I didn't look around."

I went to the next room and checked my stash. It was undisturbed, so I took him at his word. Pulling out the documents there, I walked back into the other room and collapsed on the couch.

"Where were you last night anyway?"

"Ask your tail man," I growled flicking my tail in agitation.

"Didn't bother with assigning one."

"Then why ask?"

"Old habits," he sighed. "What's that?" He indicated the envelope that I had emptied and was going through.

"Nosey bastard aren't you?" I laughed and handed him a photo of himself. Obviously taken as he left the local Harnian mission one morning.

"Lousy shot," he observed. "I thought you quit?"

"They asked me to take a special job. I needed the cash." I looked up at him, "And frankly when I heard you were in town I got concerned about my health."

"When was this?"

"Two nights ago. Before you showed up."

"This complicates things then."

"Not really. I won't turn in my report till after you've gotten your statue. I was just told to spy, not steal."

"How can I trust you?" He asked eyes narrowing.

"Cause I *hate* them," I snarled. "But I like you, more or less."

"Oh really?" He said sarcastically.

"Actually it's a favor to your sister." I looked up at him again, and showed my fangs. "I don't want her to wear black."

"What makes you think that you could?"

"There's a mine under your butt."

"What, that small thing under the cushions? I disarmed it yesterday"

"There's a claymore under the floorboards, I'm not stupid you know."

"I guess not," he stood suddenly, "and if I killed you and she found out.... Well it wouldn't be pretty. Even if she has found another."

"I'm glad to hear that," I smiled slightly. "Now, show me what you've got and

give me another thirty grand."

"Rather steep isn't it?" He pulled out an envelope like the one I was going through.

"Then leave."

He dug out the cash instead, tail fluffed in annoyance. Now that he was standing he was much easier to read.

"Let me think a bit okay?" I told him and started going over what I had.

He dragged the chair to a different spot and sat down. I smiled at that and started looking through all the info.

The stuff from my side was mostly pictures of everybody who had recently arrived in the area. Other than Jared's picture I only recognized two others. One was Jared's assistant, the other was his muscle, a Badger named Reg. Somebody I usually avoided.

"Has Reg really killed all these people?" I asked trying to goad him as I looked over the stuff.

"Them and more," he smiled craftily.

Smart ass Fox.

"Keep him away from me, okay?" I growled. "Any of his kind of trouble and the other agencies will be all over the place."

"I understand."

"Good"

I fished through the rest of what 'my side' had provided. There was a badge and an ID inside as well. I pocketed those, they might come in handy, and it made me official too.

Next I examined what he had given me. There were several drawings of the statue. One was what it probably looked like without the gems. That was good. Then there was some info on who had sold one of the gems from it. That was good too.

Especially as I knew him.

"Okay, let's go." I tossed it all in the sink and burned it. Except the one drawing I wanted.

"Both of us?" He looked surprised.

"Sure, why not? Somebody has to pay for my expenses!" I chuckled, rumbling deep in my throat.

"Where to then?"

"This fence who sold the stone, Rundle."

"You know where he is?" He asked surprised.

"You could say that," I chuckled again. "You bring a car?"

"Of course."

"A driver?"

"No."

"Good, give me the keys. I'll drive."

He grumbled a little, but handed them over.

A half hour later we drove into the less respectable part of town. I kept far away from here myself. Too many bad memories.

Things hadn't changed much and I quickly found the alley I wanted. I parked in front and got out. Jared followed.

"Here?" He looked around with disgust. "I think we should go get Reg, and maybe a Marine or two as well!"

"The Marines wouldn't last." I commented as I walked into the alley. Jared followed cautiously.

I followed the route by memory and the door was still there. I checked it, it was unlocked so I opened it and stepped in.

There was a young tiger standing behind the counter with a shotgun. He growled and looked at the two of us. "Get your pampered police asses out of here before I shoot 'em off!"

"Cool it kid. Tell your boss that Penknife is here."

"Penknife?" He asked still growling. "I've never seen or heard of no Penknife!"

"Then I suggest you ask Runner before one gets jammed through you neck," I purred. "We'll wait."

He eyed us both then left the room for a minute. I could hear him use a phone of some kind, but it had some kind of a hush screen on it. I couldn't hear what he said.

When he came back he had a whole different attitude.

"Follow me," he said.

A few doorways later we ended up in a nicely furnished room. It had one occupant, a Pack Rat.

"Penknife! Long time guy! Where you been?" He said getting up and shaking my hand.

"Here and there Runner. How is everybody?"

"Lets see, been a long time since you disappeared. Lev, Kenny and Crants are dead. Crants OD'ed, the others got it in fights. Cherise left town when Lev died, I hear she's doing well. Stoc and Terr both left town and haven't been heard from. Your brother died in a holdup back around when you dropped out. Everybody wondered why you weren't at the funeral. Where'd you go anyway?" He eyed me curiously.

"I was with him," I said quietly. "That's why I didn't come back."

"Oh, lying low?" He grinned.

"No, I got caught."

"Oh!" He said getting quiet. "Nobody saw nothing about it. Sorry or we would have visited you."

"That's okay. I wasn't anyplace you could visit. First offense and all that crap, so they offered me one of those 'deals'. I took it of course and was shipped out immediately."

"So why are you here now?"

"You sold a gem last year, I want to know who you fronted for."

"You know I can't tell you that Pen!" He groaned looking worried and his eyes started darting back and forth as his fur bristled.

I handed him the sketch. "My friend here is looking for this piece. It's a religious item, so the gems don't matter worth a damn. I want to see if the guys who stole it know where it is."

"Who's your friend?" He said looking at Jared for the first time.

"I'm Jared." He said introducing himself. "And I'll pay for the info."

"I don't know, I could get my butt in a sling for this Pen."

"Tell them I held a gun to your head." I purred smiling.

"With Tiberious there and his shotgun?" He motioned to the Tiger who smiled evilly. "Nobody'd believe it!"

I flicked my hand up. The car keys which had been cupped in my hand hit the Tiger square in the eye. I caught the barrel with my foot in a crescent kick, then rushed in brushing the gun aside. I quickly followed up with a groin and throat combination, and grabbed the shotgun as it discharged. I pulled it free as Tiberious doubled over and collapsed to the floor.

Then I pointed it at Runner.

"Did I mention that I'm much nastier now than I used to be?" I growled. "This is important to a lot of people Runner. And I'm the nicest one in the lot."

"You wouldn't kill me would you Pen?" Runner gasped quivering from nose to tail tip.

"No I wouldn't. But the next guy they send won't have that qualm. He won't be a friend."

"The Stark Street group did it." He said slowly.

"They're still around?" I asked surprised.

"Yes, they got into car theft and 'ave made a good racket of it. They found the statue in a trunk.

"It's a whole new group of people mostly now. Fat Jack still runs it though. A lot of young cubs with something to prove. Watch yourself."

"Sure, Thanks." I worked the action on the shotgun and emptied it.

"Give him a couple of grand" I said to Jared who had watched it all non-plussed.

"Why?"

"Good will."

While he did that I tossed the gun to the young Tiger who was still gasping and holding his crotch.

"Keep further away from the customers kid. At least twenty feet. Or you won't be in this job much longer. And don't put so much faith in guns, some of us wear body armor nowadays."

Then I grabbed Jared and we left.

"Penknife?" He asked as we drove off.

"I used to like to carve my name in things," I said quietly.

"Like trees and stuff?" He laughed.

"No, like people," I growled and looked away for a second so he wouldn't see the expression that passed across my muzzle.

He stopped laughing and looked over at me. "I think I'm glad that you didn't marry my sister after all. How did you end up in espionage anyway?"

"I was always good with alarms and stuff. So my brother and I figured that if I got a good education, we could start ripping off Banks and offices after hours. Then he got shot in a simple gas station robbery. The cops grabbed me the next day, but they couldn't prove much.

"So I got the old, 'Jail or Military' Deal. Because of my education the agency picked me up after basic. But once my time was done they didn't like me walking.

"Now you know. Not pretty is it?"

"Must have killed your folks." Was all he said.

"Wouldn't know, I was two when we were dumped. How my brother managed to keep us both alive I'll never know." I growled bitterly, my tail lashing against the back of the seat in anger.

"Sorry!"

"That's okay." I said relaxing, but it took a second to free my claws from the holes they had dug in the steering wheel. "It still grates though, even after all this time. Until my Brother bought it I didn't even think there was anything wrong with it. Now I know better."

"So where do we go next?" He asked quietly changing the subject.

"Stark Street. Fat Jack should be easy to find"

"Then what?"

"We dicker, that's what."

"Think he still has it?"

"Who knows?" I grinned, my ears perking back up. "But it'll be interesting finding out!"

We cruised down Stark street. There were several auto body shops so I picked one and walked inside. On the third try I walked into an office and saw a large Ram sitting behind the desk.

"Ah, Fat Jack." I grinned, "Just the person I was looking for!"

"Do I know you two?" He asked squinting at Jared and me.

"Oh surely you haven't forgotten me now. Or should we shave your back and see if my name's still there?"

"I thought you were dead Penknife," He grumbled.

"Wishful thinking."

"What do you want with me?"

"This," I handed him the sketch. "Ever seen it?"

"No, why?"

"Please Jack, don't lie. I wouldn't be here if you hadn't."

"You calling me a liar?" He reached under his desk.

I dodged around to the side, gun drawn. "Move slow Jack, *real* slow. I'd really hate to have to shoot you."

"Yeah sure." He said slowly pulling his hands out.

Jared slowly came out from behind the file cabinet he had dove behind.

"Now, you were going to tell me about this piece of bronze you have."

"I don't know what you're talking about Penknife, I really don't. Now I suggest you leave before I have you arrested!"

"Oh really now, arrested?"

"I'm a business man now, and not without influence in this community!"

"Oh please!" I chuckled rumbling, "And slide back from the desk while you're at it." I gestured with my pistol.

He slid slowly back from the table.

"He's stalling Pen," Jared said.

"Yes, I noticed." I looked under the desk, I didn't see a gun. Strange.

"Police, freeze!"

I froze. Looking in the mirror on one of the walls I noticed two cops, the one talking was a large black bear. The Raccoon was the one with the nasty looking autorifle.

"Drop the gun! Now!"

I carefully placed it on the desk.

"Really Jack, I'm surprised at you!" I grinned. "Officer, may I pull out my

ID?"

"Why?"

"It will be self explanatory."

"Okay, but any funny moves and you're dead!"

How cliché I thought as I carefully dug out the Badge and ID. I showed it to the Cops.

They eyed me cautiously. "We'll have to call this in and check it out."

"By all means do."

"What about him?" They pointed to Jared.

"You worry about that," I nodded at my ID, "And I'll worry about him, got it?"

"Sure," replied the Bear. He sent his partner out to call the whole thing in. Two minutes later he returned, very surprised and smelling of it.

"It's legit," was all he would say.

I retrieved the wallet. "Thanks. Now if you gentlemen would leave us?"

"Hey wait!" Cried Fat Jack, "This guy's a criminal! And he's threatening me! You can just leave!"

"Sorry sir, it's out of our jurisdiction. Besides, the Federal police aren't criminals. You have nothing to fear from this gentleman."

And with that they left.

"Your friends seem to not be of the highest morals" observed Jared wryly.

"Well this one was never a friend," I growled. "This is a cash deal Jack, not a shakedown. Either sell us the statue, or tell us who has it."

"Why should I sell it to you?" He asked regaining his composure.

"Well I can give you several reasons," I replied. "First off as a Religious article, only one group of people are interested in it." I flicked my tail and nodded in Jared's direction. "And he's their Rep. So you won't get cash offers from anybody else.

"Secondly, if he doesn't get it, the more radical members might decide to come back and get it for free. You know how religious people don't mind killin' if it's for their god."

"A good point Penknife, but not good enough ..."

"Wait, I'm not finished," I interrupted. "Lastly, I'll arrest you and make a federal case out of it. Then you'll get nothing at all."

"Hey, I've got nothin' to hide. Search me!" He grinned.

"I'll bet the Taxation Bureau would find something," I smirked. "Even if we had to make them really dig!"

He got real quiet suddenly, the tax guys nailed a lot of people. Nobody messed with them.

"You would too, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would Jack, it'd be so much more fun than just shooting you. Now one last time, the statue?"

"I ain't got it," he mumbled after a minute of looking worried.

"Who does?" I growled.

"Remember Dim? That Clydesdale who used to be kinda' strange?"

"Yeah, what about him?"

"He works down at the foundry. I sold it to him for scrap." He apologized.

"What!" Jared cried, eyes wide and tail all fluffed out with shock. I was surprised by that, he was usually a real cool customer. Never would have figured him as one of the devout.

"Hey, I'm sorry. If I knew I woulda' kept it for any reward. It was just bronze."

"Take it easy," I said to Jared who was noticeably upset, almost snarling but not making any sound. I couldn't tell if he was dismayed or angry. "I'll have to check your story of course." I said growling deeply, ears down and eyes slit, "If I find out you're lying, you'll regret it!"

"Hey, I'm telling the truth."

I pulled out a hundred and gave it to him. "then give me Dim's address and we'll see okay?"

He did and I dragged Jared out of there. I was beginning to doubt Fat Jack's long term health outlook.

"Destroyed! I can't believe it! All these years of work wasted! And the manuscript forever lost!" He howled.

"Oh shut UP!" I growled. "Maybe Dim still has it. The guy was strange, he might have decided to keep the thing okay?"

"I doubt it," he growled back sullenly.

"Well lets just go and see, okay?"

"Fine."

We went and had an early dinner, then hung out at Dim's place until he showed up. Jared wanted to wait inside but I vetoed that idea. Some people consider that rude.

Eventually a large brown and white Clydesdale came up the stairs into the hallway.

"Excuse me, are you Dim?" I asked politely, even if it did sound stupid.

"It's Deven if you must know sir," he said looking down. I recognized him then, it was Dim alright.

"Oh, Penknife if I remember correctly right?" He continued surprising me greatly.

"It's just Pen now Deven. Sorry that I only remembered your nickname.

"That's okay. What do you want? I don't get in trouble anymore though, I have to warn you."

"It's about a statue that Fat Jack sold you for scrap a while back. We're looking to buy it."

"It is a religious artifact of great value to my church," Jared added forlornly. "I will pay handsomely for its return."

"Damn," he cursed quietly to himself. "Jack swore to me that it wasn't hot."

"You should know better than to trust that one!" Jared hissed.

"You're right of course." He paused, "Look I'll testify in court for you if need be. But I'm sorry, I melted it down for the brass." And he looked apologetically at the both of us.

"That's it then," said Jared crestfallen. "I told you it was too much to hope for."

"Thanks anyway Deven," I sighed dejectedly. "It wasn't your fault." I turned to Jared, "Sorry, lets go."

We turned and headed for the stairs.

"If it will help I still have the book that was in it." Deven said turning to Jared.

"WHAT!?" He said whipping around, stunned.

"I had to break it up to melt it down." He stated matter of factly, "So when I found the book I saved it of course."

"Yes! Yes! Show me!" Jared cried.

"Sure, come on in."

Deven opened the door to his apartment and we rushed in. It was neat as a pin and full of books. Packed to the ceiling with them actually.

"I can't stand to throw one away," he stated indicating the shelves. He opened a cabinet and brought out a metal box. "It's pretty old so I keep it in this."

Jared took the box quickly and then carefully opened it. I peered over his shoulder at the old leather bound book inside.

"Yessss!" He hissed and carefully scanned the first few pages. "This is it! How much?"

"It was stolen from your church wasn't it?" Deven asked shrewdly. He was smarter than I thought.

"Yes, a long time ago."

"Then take it. I can not sell something which isn't mine."

"Deven!" I said surprised, "Do you know what this is?"

"Well kind of. I read it."

"You *read* it?" squeaked Jared surprised.

"Of course, very enlightening. I'm thinking of converting now because of it."

Jared pulled out a large wad of bills and a business card and placed them on Deven's desk.

"Take this, I insist!" He said when Deven shook his head. "The Religion of the All-Father has always believed in rewards, as do I. If you should ever wish to come to Harnian, I would be pleased to have you as my personal guest! Thank you."

And Jared got up and rushed out. I turned to follow.

"You just made a lot of people very happy Deven," I grinned on the way out.

"Key's please?" Jared asked as we reached the car.

"Sure," I tossed them over. "Say could you drop me by my place? I don't want to be late for work."

"I guess."

On the way back it was pretty quiet.

"Take the next plane home Jared," I said when we got to my place. "I'll have to file my report tomorrow and I don't want to worry about anything happening."

"Rest assured Pen, I will be gone."

"Oh, and no funny stuff okay?"

"You have my word Pen, but I suspect I am not the one you should be worrying about. Your old master will be quite cross with you. You should come and visit, Katerina would be happy to see you."

"Even if I wasn't available?"

"I do not think she will be much longer either, so I would not worry much about it."

"I'll see, good luck."

"Good luck yourself my friend. If you need help, call. Your help was most valuable, and greatly appreciated."

I got out then and waved as he drove off.

Work that night was considerably busier than the night before, this being Friday of course. We were open till four, and I was mighty glad when closing time finally came around. The customers were tired from working all day, so there weren't any problems or incidents. I had told Kera to go home after her last set at two thirty.

"Will you be by later?" She asked eyes glowing.

"Sorry love," I smiled wistfully, letting my tail and ears droop to show how I felt about it. "But I finished up that job today so I have to file my report. I'll be around tomorrow though, Okay?"

"Sure hon. Good night."

We bumped heads gently and kissed goodnight.

"Oh, take this too, okay?" I passed her the most recent of my payments.

When I got home I dug out my old mangled typewriter and composed my report. It was a fairly brief one, I told what Jared had wanted, and that he got it. Took about a page.

Then I crashed.

I awoke the next morning to a loud banging on my door. I looked at the clock, it was only about nine. I don't function well on three hours sleep.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" I growled loudly as I headed for the door. The noise stopped only when I opened it.

Imagine my surprise when I saw who it was.

"Charilldel," I hissed tail whipping, "what foul reason brings you to my door at this early hour? Or any hour for that matter!"

"Jared left the country late last night, I want to know why!" He chattered shuffling back and forth on his feet in agitation.

"It's all in my report," I yawned showing all my teeth.

"Then let me see it!" He demanded rudely.

"First there is the matter of payment Charilldel, or have you forgotten?"

"What?! You'd withhold important information vital to the defense of this country for *money*? Give it to me now I say!"

I noticed the two very large Bulls he had for bodyguards, were beginning to get edgy and paw a little. That didn't improve my disposition either.

"I guarantee that I will kill you before either of your thugs gets his gun out." I growled, eyes narrowing to slits. "Now pay up or split! A deal is a deal Charilldel."

He glared and fumed a bit, but he dug out the cash soon enough. I counted it all too.

"Thirty grand, it'll do." I smiled at him. "Here's your report," and I handed him the type written page.

"That's it?" He asked astounded.

"Read it."

I enjoyed the expression on his face as he did. Monkeys are terrible poker players, they can never conceal their emotions. His were a total rage by the time he was done.

"You consorted with the enemy!" He howled "This is treason! I'll have you executed for it!"

"Oh please!" I laughed scornfully, "How else was I supposed to find out what he was up to? Really, I'd expect you to understand that."

"But you let him have the book! How could you?"

"It was his and I sure wasn't being paid to steal it. It was a religious artifact Char," He winced as I called him that, he hated it, "what do you think the Senate would have said about our stealing it?"

"Why should you care?" he thundered back.

"Maybe, just maybe, I'm a *follower* of that religion. Asshole." I grumbled and started to close the door in his face.

"I'll get you for helping him. You know that don't you?" He threatened ominously.

"I think you better worry about the leaks in your organization!" I retorted spitting. "He *knew* who I was. Knew *all* about me Char. My life was at stake here," I lied - at least I hoped it was a lie, "my cooperation for my life. You should be happy, nothing military or sensitive was involved at all."

"You haven't heard the end of this Pen!" He screeched at me.

"Dear All-Father above I hope so!" I mumbled back and I shut the door.

I went back to bed and slept till two. Then I went over to Kera's and we celebrated until it was time to go to work. After work we celebrated some more. Sunday was heaven.

Monday was Hell.

I was arrested Monday by the Feds, dragged down to jail, charged with Treason, Impersonating a Federal officer, Aiding and abetting a know spy, violating the official secrets act, Assault with a deadly weapon (Fat Jack), and refused bail. I didn't even get my phone call until sometime Wednesday. Bruce was livid about my missing work when I called him, but quickly calmed down once he heard the story.

The long and short of it was I spent six months in Jail while the whole thing dragged out. My lawyer cost all of the Sixty Grand I had been paid by the Charilldel, then another ten for good measure. They even tried to hit me for tax evasion, and I ended up shelling out another twelve grand to pay for that one!

Charilldel hadn't missed a trick, the charges were easy to defend against, they had no evidence. Plus the church of the All-Father was on my side. Which amounted to about twenty percent of the general population and ten percent of the Senate. But I was still bled dry, lawyers after all cost money. And ones for treason cases cost *lots* of money. Once Charilldel knew that the cash I had made was all gone, he started to slack off.

Once he figured I was totally in debt, he left me alone. The six grand I got from the Church did help some, that was for sure.

But I knew he wasn't going to back off, it wasn't his style. Things were going to be worse now than ever. I had screwed him over this time and Charilldel was not the type to ever forget or quit.

Then Kera and I had a big public fight, to make matters worse. She wouldn't see me and Bruce told me to keep away from the bar. Or else. My landlord evicted me, keeping all my stuff for back rent. Which I owed plenty. Plus I had been in jail so long it didn't matter if I was found innocent, I was guilty by association and media exposure.

I had the clothes on my back and nothing else. Kera still had the money I had given her of course.

So I split. I went native and hit the forests on the coast and played hermit. And things still got worse. I had no money, Charilldel's men kept spying on me and harassing me, and the weather was colder and wetter than it had been in years. Even the elements hated me I guess. I tried going into the local town once or twice to buy a few things and do a few odd jobs for money. But on the third time the Sheriff ran me off. Gave me something of a beating while his cronies watched to make sure I didn't hit back. Charilldel at work yet again no doubt.

After three months of this I couldn't take it any more, the weather was dreary and depressing, always raining and overcast. I missed Kera terribly and wanted to crawl into her arms and never leave. I was as lonely as a soul could get, and roaring at the moon nearly every night and crying during the days. I was hurt from either beating up or getting beat up by the people sent to watch me all the time. When I found out about Kera taking up with Jason in a paper that one of my watchers dropped, it was just too much.

This cat would cry no more.

To: Charilldel, Head Cov Ops Nat Sec.

From: Roanoff, Field Agent

Subject: Observation of Former Agent/Traitor Pen

It was observed by this agent that on the twenty third of this month that late one night Pen did hang himself from a tree on the edge of the cliff by the ocean. I suspect that the information provided him covertly at your request is what finally caused him to lose all hope. The body was not recoverable as the rope snapped before I could get to it. I did observe it lying broken on the rocks down below, and watched it wash out to sea. No one could have survived that fall, or would have allowed the crows to pick at the body as I observed.

It is therefore this agents opinion that the subject is dead.

"Got the bastard!" Charilldel gloated.

"That you did sir," responded Track. "Roanoff sent that in this very morning. I notified Pen's girlfriend like you requested, she was fairly upset."

"Good, nobody crosses or quits on me. Ever. This'll be a good lesson to anybody who thinks otherwise."

"Yes sir, I'm sure it will. Shall I have his records closed and sent to the archives?"

"Close them yes, but burn 'em. I don't want any record of him left in this organization. When I destroy somebody it's total. Got that?"

"Yes Sir!" Truck walked out of the room quickly. Maybe Pen had been right about the old chimp after all, he thought quietly to himself.

-Except from the Sacramento Union-

...apparent motive was robbery. The police expect that Mr. Charilldel surprised the burglar in his house, and was killed by the same in the brief struggle that followed. The absence of several valuable items seem to bear this theory out. Mr. Charilldel was an employee in the personnel department at the local Federal office complex. Services will be ...

-Excerpt from the interagency report on the death of the Head of
Cov Ops Nat Sec.-

... Harnian Agent know to this agency as 'Reg' was observed in the Sacramento area one day before the incident. It is believed that he is the person responsible for the actual death of the late Mr. Charilldel, even though the evidence recovered does not match his M.O. It is suspected that Mr. Charilldel's trip to Portland exposed him to the Harnian's, who could not pass up the opportunity to remove such a valuable resource, once knowing who it was. We would caution other Department heads to not make such unwise trips to hired hands out in the field, no matter what the personal involvement. Therefore it is the finding of

-Excerpt from the Portland Nitelife Times-

The noted singer and dancer Kera Nightenstar will be leaving on a sabbatical this week from her job at the Silver Moon. She was unavailable for comment, but sources close to her said that her recent breakup with her latest

boyfriend, plus the reported suicide of a previous one, were too much for her to deal with. According to Bruce Haverstat, the owner of the Silver Moon, they do expect her back in several months. 'She just needs some time to work this thing through,' he stated.

I waited on the ship. I liked sailing, and this was my first trip on a cruise ship. I had boarded down in San Francisco, and I was watching the passengers board now in Seattle. I was hoping that Kera would show. She had said she would, but that was over four months ago when I had made my plans. The last year had been rough on her, nearly as rough as it had been on me.

Then I saw her emerge from the ramps entrance.

"Kera!" I called waving.

"Pen!" She called ears swiveling, eyes locating me a moment later. Dropping her bags she ran to me.

I met her halfway and caught her in my arms. After kissing and nibbling her for a few minutes I whispered in her ear, "It's Onri now darling. Pen's dead."

"You feel warm and alive to me love." And she kissed me some more. After a while I separated myself and told the purser where to deliver the bags. Then I led her down to my cabin.

"I was afraid you wouldn't show." I admitted.

"I was afraid you wouldn't be here," She whispered. "The report of your death they sent me was so complete. How did you fool them?"

"Easy, I sewed a couple of dead animals together and dyed the carcasses black."

"Didn't anybody notice?"

"If they had gotten close enough they might of, but I made sure they stayed far enough away. And I had beat the guy up the night before," I grinned "So he wasn't seeing too well anyway."

"Why didn't you meet me in Seattle anyway?"

"I had some unfinished business in Sacramento to attend to. My friend Jared was kind enough to lend me one of his personnel assistants." I smiled again thinking about it.

"Oh, that was nice of him. He sounds like such a nice gentleman."

"You'll like him, I promised him I'd show up for his sister's wedding."

"Oh?" She eyed me curiously, "When is that?"

"Right after ours!" I leered back at her.

She purred all night long.

So did I.

If you liked this book, please check out my other stories:

Children of Steel

Raj is just your average everyday genetically modeled and artificially created anthropomorphic worker for one of the many corporations of the future. Extensively trained and conditioned from birth he's now indentured for the next fifty years of his life; assuming he doesn't die first, or somehow manage to pay off his creation and training debts.

Created by the corporations to deal with the harsh labor shortages of the twenty second century when humans will no longer take on the dangerous jobs Raj finds himself now in the harsh world of space exploration, trading, corporate maneuverings, and sometimes the even more dangerous fanatics that hate Raj and his fellows. No longer in safe confines of the training academies he must learn how to live and deal with both his fellow workers and the humans he encounters and not get saddled with extra bills or fines because he's screwed up or worse yet, get 'put down' because he's lost his temper one time too many.

After all, it's not like he's human ...

Danger Money

Jotun was born and bred to be a corporate assassin, back in the days of the Corporate Wars. Confined these days to life in a gilded cage, Jotun welcomes any opportunity to get out and lately he's been getting out a lot. But as a genetically designed and Laboratory bred animorph by a company that isn't quite sure if it trusts him anymore his choices are few: do the jobs that eventually will kill him, or refuse, which will also kill him.

Of course it isn't like he doesn't enjoy the work, but when everybody wants you dead you start to wonder if there isn't more to life.

When an unexpected betrayal kills the few friends he has and nearly him as well, Jotun realizes he has bigger problems than his lifestyle, namely finding out who betrayed him and paying them back, no matter what the cost.

Danger Money is a Science Fiction story that takes place in my Children of Steel universe, a future where genetically created animorphs serve as second class citizens and handle all of the dirty and dangerous jobs that are part of humanity's extension to the stars.

Dialene

Dialene's Captain decided to play pirate, and one well placed nuclear torpedo later she finds herself prisoner of the Corporation whose ship they were attempting to raid; her friends and lover all dead. With no corporation to ransom her back she finds herself in the unenviable position of having to work off the debt assigned to her for her part in her Captain's actions. With concerns as to where her loyalties lie she has but two choices: Work in the mines on an airless rock where a small fem like her would not last long, or work in the company bar entertaining those very same miners. At least working in the bar beats the alternatives, until one day an interesting character inserts himself into her life.

A Novella from my Children of Steel universe, Dialene is a foxmorph who until her capture was a highly rated shuttle pilot working a deep space trader for one of the more notorious corporations. Like most of her kind she had no choices in her employer who considered her nothing more than a disposable asset.

Available in eBook format wherever eBooks are sold, available in print from CreateSpace or Amazon.

-John Van Stry