Issue Forty-One

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YARF!

THE • JOURNAL • OF • APPLIED • ANTHROPOMORPHICS

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Issue Forty-One

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New and improved! Now with eleven new creators! Yes, count them — eleven!

FLAMING HAIRBALLS

Editorial ramblings and letters of comment from you to us and from us to you.

After six years of faithful service and a recent move up into the wilds of the Santa Cruz Mountains, our illustrious Chancellor of the Exchequer, Dave White, has decided to take a sabbatical. He will not, however, be absent from these pages — he is currently collaborating with Monika Livingstone on the comic story *Beguiler*. He also hopes to take more time for writing.

And now it's time for everyone's favorite game — "Name that Artist!" The unsigned piece on the page opposite has been in our files long enough for us to forget completely who drew it and to misplace the paperwork to boot. The first person who can help us correct this oversight will receive a copy of the second edition of *The Anthropomorphic Bibliography*, due out in time for San Diego Comic Con. With this in mind, we remind artists once again to sign their artwork, and to write name and title on the back of each piece, to avoid similar problems in the future.

In this, our first post-*Ace of Spades* issue, we'd like to thank Chris Grant for seeing through that long, difficult story — missing only one issue over the course of six years. Not bad for a story originally projected to run a dozen issues. With the passing of the old comes the new — Will Faust's story *Wingwarrior*, slated to run for the next twenty or more issues. Will, a long-time member of *Rowrbrazzle*, is an animator originally from Chicago, currently living in the Bay Area.

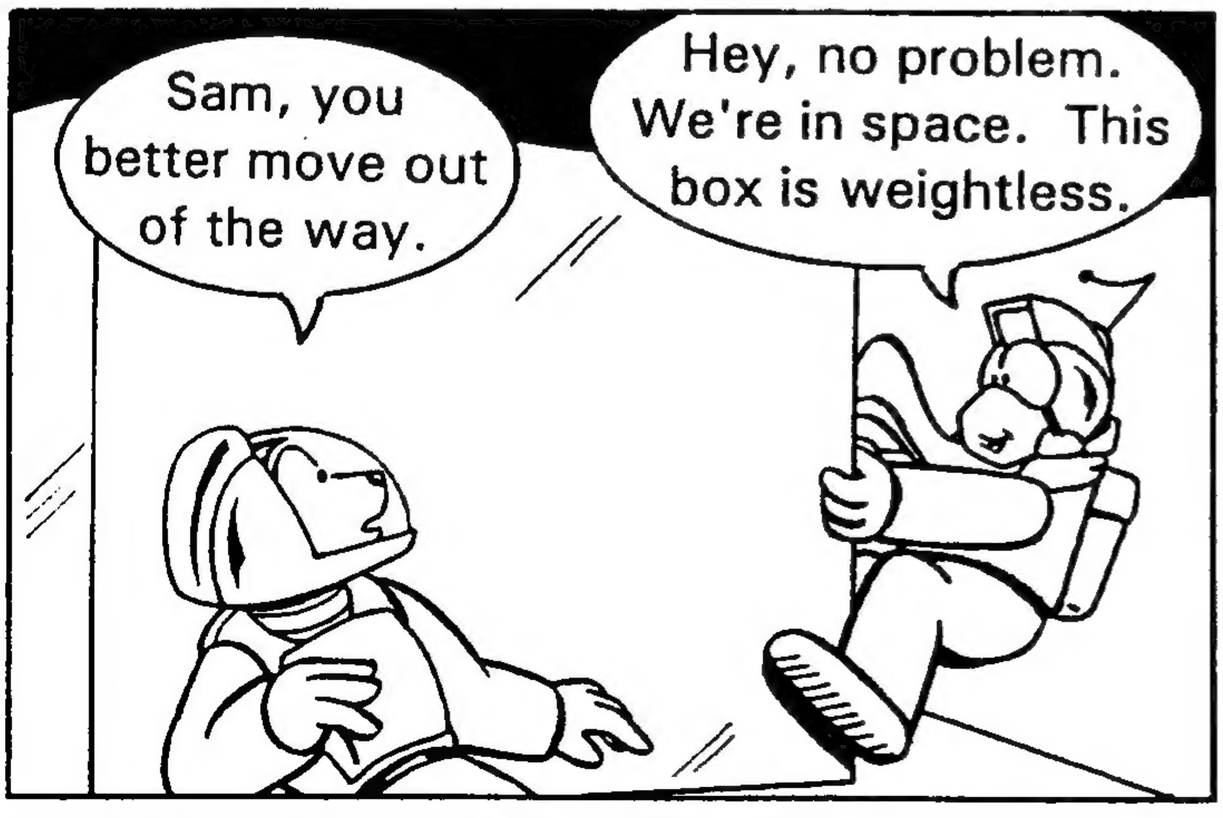
In addition, we have lined up a variety of new talent for your edification. Besides Will, folks appearing for the first time include Joe Ekaitis, Brian Havernack, Robert Kirkpatrick, James Lowry, Matt McAndrews, Amy Provonost, Wayne Quick, Sara Rosenberg, Dawn Schiller, and Dave Schneberger. Others we've featured only a few times before are "Cataroo", John Cawley, Matt McCullar, and Brock Hoagland, whose story is the first of a short series we'll feature over the next several issues.

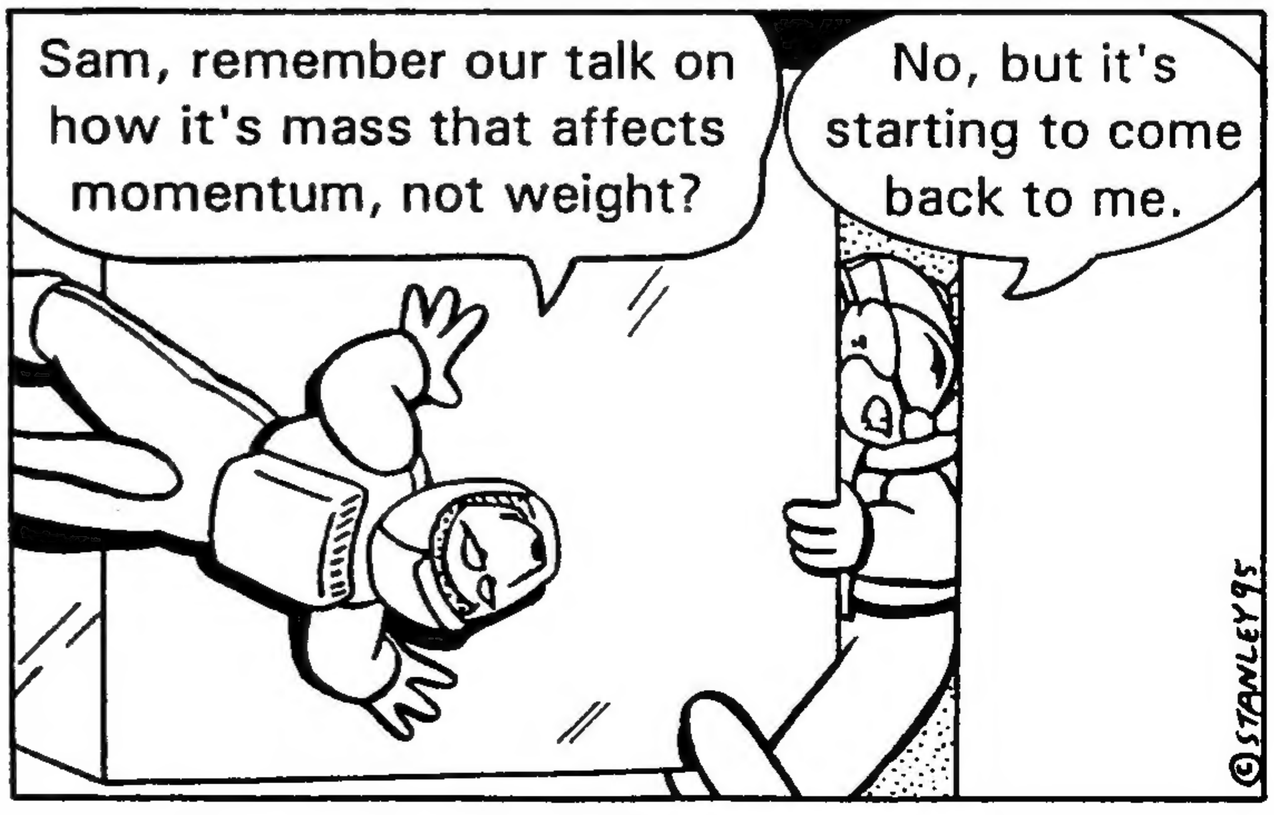
Ms. Provonost, by the way, is in her last year at James Cook University in Queensland, Australia. She very much would like to make it to Confurence Eight, and would be extremely thankful to anyone who could help to make this a reality by buying her art prints. She can be reached at 2/65 Arthur St., Aitkenvale, Queensland 4814 Australia or by e-mail at apron@cleo.murdoch.edu.au.

More from the Oops! Department: We also managed to misplace the last page of Dave Clarehout's "Uncontinued Bits". He shipped it in a mailing tube, and it stuck when we pried the story out, y'see. . . . We apologize to Dave and, in the surreal spirit of his art, present the missing page in this issue.

Here's an alert from the *Yarf!* Media Watch: The winter 1996 issue of *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine* (issue thirty) features a story by the inestimable Michael Payne — "Why I'm Traveling with a Talking Cow". He tells us it was inspired by Carl Sandberg's *Rootabaga Stories* and by a recent editorial in the magazine lamenting that "everyone sent her things about dragons and unicorns while terrific subjects like cows were ignored completely." Keep a weather eye out for it, folks.

Freefall by Mark Stanley





Our very own Auntie Melody Rondeau (of San Jose, CA) graces us with her inimitable presence:

Hi kids!

Here I am with an LoC on *Yarf!* number thirty-nine . . . a little bit late, but I hope worth the wait. Thanks for sending me two 'tribber's copies — you really are quite generaous. (You'll never make any money this way, m'dears. . . .) I took the liberty of passing the second copy on to Mary Lynn Skirvin in the hopes of coaxing her into sending something. *[Two copies is our standard contributor's recompense. And we hope that coaxing is successful. — Ed.]*

Now, on with the show!

Enrique [Rosenthal]'s cover was both sad and hopeful and all too appropriate for me, as I'd lost an animal companion of thirteen years just days before the issue arrived.

Kris [Kreutzman]'s Christmas Vixen sets just the right warm touch for the issue. Well done!

"Freefall" is always a delight and in its simplicity lies its great charm (and the occasional universal truth).

Fred [Patten]'s book reviews are always informative, and he's rooted out many books I would've missed otherwise.

"Catnip Overdrive" . . . y'know, I *never* can get the hang of those 3D glasses, either. . . .

I also liked the spot illustrations throughout. (Down with "aesthetic white space"! Boo! Hiss!)

Corbett's art continues to improve, and his latest offering puts me in mind of paper cut-out art. His lines are crisp, with no slips of the pen. Very nicely rendered.

"To Fly [And Not Die]" was a terrific team-up of Gary's words and Chad's pictures. I hope there'll be more of this to come. (Nudge, nudge.) I've always wondered how non-avian furries approach the "wonder" of flight.

Phil [Bolton]'s lovely little dancer makes a nice segue into "Her Majesty". The story was a bit difficult to get into, and Chelisse's responses seem almost too "human" for me. Perhaps if there were some other reactions, unique to her people, that could've been used to convey the same emotions, I would've found it less jarring. (An aside here: to my admittedly jaded tastes, far too many furry stories dish up fur-persons who aren't alien or animal enough, and read too often as simply "fleshies" in fur suits.)

Great album cover for the Morays. Is their music as entertaining, one wonders?

Dusty [Rhodes]'s cycle cat has a lot of dynamic movement and threatens to leap right off the page.

[Bill] Fitts' nocturnal visitor could turn out to be a real nightmare, eh? Good use of lines to convey a shadowed room.

"Ralph the Wonder Hamster" — this is sooo strange. Roy [Pounds]'s visuals are chock-full of puns and the dialog likewise. These two guys are sick, sick puppies who need a very careful eye kept on them at all times. Tsk.

Christina [Hanson]'s lovely harp and flute duet was a nice bit of quietude after all the mayhem. It allowed me to catch my breath.

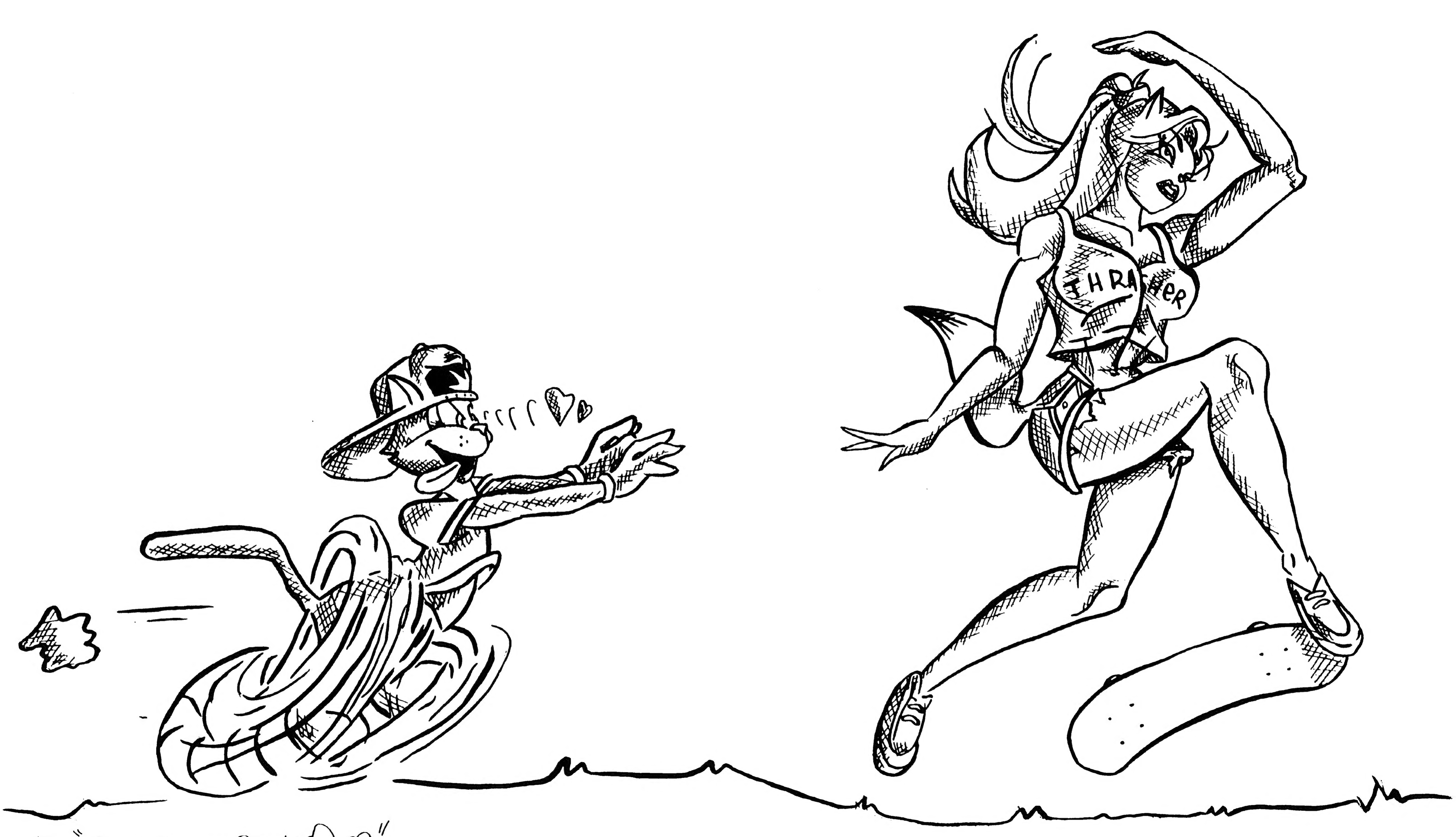
"Valeta" was nicely done. (But just *how* doees that bathing suit stay on? Velcro™?)

"The House Cat" is great stuff. I had not realized Mr. Cawley had turned his considerable talents toward penning fiction — more! More! And "Cataroo" — who *is* this person? The work recalls quite strongly the style and content of Canadian Bonnie Burchill. (Hey, if I guessed right, do I win a "No-Prize"?) *[No, the artist in question is not Ms. Burchill, though we'd be very happy to accept submissions from her as well. — Ed.]*

"Saucy Vixen" by [Rich] Hernandez — hmm . . . he sculpts, he draws . . . he's too good, Pinky. We shall have to hurt him.

"Mr. Worthington's Clockwork Hobby Takes a New Turn" is one of the most polished prose pieces I've seen in ages. The dialect flows, and I can actually hear the crisp English tones as I read along. The Victorian setting is fully realized in such a setting. The most striking aspect

Poster for Yarf! *party at Confurence Seven. Art by Jim Hayden.*



"SCOTT ROSENBERG" ©1996

Poster for furry party at San Diego Comic Con. Art by Mitch Beiro.

of the whole piece is the anthropomorphization of the machine by her creator. Very cleverly done.

And Monika [Livingstone]'s illustration is luscious! (I worship the pen she inks with.) The precision of her lines perfectly complements the story.

Roy [Pounds]'s energetic dance piece was a fitting cap for the clockwork story. The bubble-blowing gryphon was also very nice.

"Alone" shows a good use of visuals and differing angles to create real interest for the eye. (But for Pete's sake, fella, tell her *how* you feel!) "'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."

The Christmas mouse surely is a cute li'l Dickens.

[Robert] Newell's pony will give you one tough ride. Yee-haw!

I don't care for military-themed stories, but I always give *The Ace of Spades* a look. The art continues to improve and become more complex as the story itself does the same.

Jack's saucy reindeer just has to be Vixen (or maybe Dancer).

Tygger's li'l bringer of cheer is an excellent parting shot to a wonderful issue.

And last, but not least, one who needs no introduction . . . Phil Smith of Reading, PA:

Sorry I didn't write this sooner. We've been busy here on the East Coast with snowstorm after snowstorm. Good luck at Worldcon.

"Santa Substitute Seven": Oh, yes, I *have* been a good little boy this year.

Fred Patten: Just finished reading *Fortune's Wheel*. It does ramble a bit. I hope the next book is more focused.

Michael Payne: Another enjoyable story. You ought to do an article on the Glist. But I hope your "final word" at the end doesn't mean you're ending this storyline. If so, my only regret is that your stories didn't include illos.

Ralph the Wonder Hamster: A confusing but funny interlude. Glad to see that Sheila is still in the story.

"The House Cat": This looks like a children's story, but it is a good tale on the meeting of two different worlds.

"Mr. Worthington's Clockwork Hobby . . .": Nice illo, and the story is interesting. The only flaw is that, if not for the picture and the mention of Cecily's French cosmetic fur, we wouldn't know this was a story with furries.

"Alone" by Jason Gaffney: This is a very stirring work, especially since I know how the nameless furry feels.

The Ace of Spades: Didn't expect to see Nile get killed by her own side. I kind of expected a gun battle with Morrigan. I also hoped the jamming from the Centrality forces would keep the nerve gas from being released.

More later. Tara *is* people.

Deadlines (This Space for Rent)

Remember, the deadlines listed are *not* written in stone, and are subject to change without notice.

#43: 30 June 1996
#44: 31 August 1996
#45: 31 October 1996
#46: 31 December 1996

WHY NOT?

YOU'RE A LOSER.

BUH... BUH...
UH... I'LL...

I'LL BUY YOU ROSES, CHOCOLATES, DIAMONDS, AND A WHOLE NEW GUCCI WARDROBE.

WELL... OH. OKAY!

Patten's Pontifications

by Fred Patten

Dinotopia: The World Beneath. **Written and illustrated by James Gurney. Atlanta, Turner Publishing, September 1995, 160 pages, $29.95; ISBN: 1-57036-164-9.**

Dinotopia: Windchaser, **by Scott Ciencin. Map. New York, Random House/Bullseye Books, April 1995, 148 pages, $3.99, ISBN: 0-679-86981-6.**

Dinotopia: River Quest, **by John Vornholt. Map. New York, Random House/Bullseye Books, April 1995, 146 pages, $3.99; ISBN: 0-679-86982-4.**

Dinotopia: Hatchling, **by Midori Snyder. Map. New York, Random House/Bullseye Books, September 1995, 148 pages, $3.99; ISBN: 0-679-86984-0.**

Dinotopia: Lost City, **by Scott Ciencin. Map. New York, Random House/Bullseye Books, February 1996, 143 pages, $3.99; ISBN: 0-679-86983-2.**

Artist Gurney's sequel to his 1992 mega-hit *Dinotopia: A Land Apart from Time* (reviewed in *Yarf!* #27) is more of the same — heavy on beautiful art but weak on story. Since the art is the primary purpose of the book, this is not a serious problem.

The first book was presented as the travel diary of Professor Arthur Denison, an explorer who was shipwrecked in 1862 with his twelve-year-old son, Will, on a large unknown island settled by a joint civilization of humans and intelligent dinosaurs. The art book was Denison's illustrated notes, in the fashion of *National Geographic* recreations of past civilizations, of his first four years on Dinotopia: the flora and fauna, the unique native costumes and culture, the architecture, city scenes, notable characters among both the humans and dinosaurs, the saurian footprint alphabet, and so on. The diary incidentally recorded Will's merging into this civilization as he made acquaintances among both the young humans and saurians, and grew up with the desire to join his skybax friend, Cirrus, in becoming one of Dinotopia's elite messenger corps of flying saurians with human riders.

The one weak aspect of Dinotopian knowledge was its own history, and this, *Dinotopia* hinted at its conclusion, was what would be the subject of its sequel. *The World Beneath* fills in this information in two parallel plots. Prof. Denison is finally ready to launch his expedition into the caverns that underlie the island, which he hopes will reveal the truths behind the legends of Dinotopia's half-man, half-dinosaur first king and his lost city of Poseidos. Among his party is Bix, the small protoceratops-translator who was the Denisons' first friend in Dinotopia. Meanwhile, Will and Cirrus receive their chance to join a dangerous mission to escort a convoy across Dinotopia's last unexplored territory, the Rainy Basin, home of unfriendly tyrannosaurs. The stories remain parallel for the first three-quarters of the book, then merge as Denison and his expedition find an exit from the caverns in the Rainy Basin near where Will and his group are located. There are some brief adventures, but again the main focus is upon Gurney's lavish art, with beautiful double-page spreads of awesome grottoes, the ruins of ancient cities including forgotten mecha-sauroid technology, and so forth.

What makes *The World Beneath* anthropomorphic is the presence of such intelligent saurians as Bix and Cirrus, the giganotosaur leader Stinktooth, the ailing baby triceratops Stubbs, and others. The best scene is the special meeting that Prof. Denison calls to propose his expedition, in a gigantic meeting hall in Waterfall City designed for both human and dinosaur elders, including a saurian stenographer with a foot-pedal writing machine. However, due to the artistic nature of *The World Beneath*, there is very little characterization among the cast. The dinosaurs, in particular, seldom stand out as much more than vivid but isolated pictures.

Dinotopia as a scenario for stories works better in the series of juvenile novels that has recently appeared from Random House's Bullseye paperback imprint for young readers. These are not illustrated, so the story is told in a standard fiction format, with plenty of dialogue:

Hugh growled in frustration as he saw the scroll was littered with characters and formulae he could not read, "Raymond! Quickly. What does it say?"

Raymond was about to respond when Sollis [a dinosaur teacher] *stopped him.*

"No," Sollis said. "Hugh, if you want the secret so badly, you can learn to read it for yourself. What you have in your hands is a copy. There are others on the shelf. Borrow this one and see if you can unravel its mysteries."

Scott Giencin, *Windchaser*, pg. 52

Be warned that these novels may be too simplistic for most of *Yarf!*'s readers. They all feature twelve- to fourteen-year-old human protagonists, with some of Gurney's supporting cast — such as Bix in *Windchaser* and Malik, the stenonychosaurus Timekeeper of Waterfall

City in *River Quest* — as incidental characters. *Windchaser* introduces Dinotopia through the eyes of Raymond and Hugh, two English castaways who settle their own emotional losses and culture shock through bonding with Windchaser, a young skybax who had previously lost his human friend in an accident and needs his confidence restored. In *River Quest,* Magnolia (a native human) and Paddlefoot (her lambeosaur comrade) are apprentices of wise Master Edwick and his saltasaurus partner, Calico, the Dinotopian equivalent of Chief Forest Rangers. They expect to succeed their mentors eventually, but when Edwick and Calico are gravely injured, Magnolia and Paddlefoot must carry out an immediate investigation of an earthquake-diverted river in the tyrannosaur-dominated Rainy Basin, without their tutors' comforting guidance. In *Hatchling,* Janet runs away from remorse with her dryosaur friend Zephyr after she falls asleep while guarding the eggs at a dinosaur hatchery. But she redeems herself by helping Kranog, an almost-extinct dinosaur who is injured in the forest, to save her rare last egg. In *Lost City,* three young castaways, Andrew from England, Lian from China, and Ned from Louisiana (which makes one wonder how rapidly Dinotopia is filling up with castaways), find a hidden city of knightly stenonychosaurs and persuade them to rejoin Dinotopian society.

Although all four novels have some mild drama, their emphasis is less on story or characterization than on depicting insecure young adolescents faced with their first mature responsibilities. All are helped by their saurian best friends to conquer their self-doubts, and acquit themselves so honorably that they become famous throughout Dinotopia. This wish-fulfillment similarity, plus the fact that all four are the same basic length, make them all look written to a preassigned formula. In many scenes the dinosaurs talk so humanly that, without illustrations, it is hard to keep in mind that they are not just human playmates. Readers might read one novel to make sure that it is to their taste before buying the others.

Toad Triumphant, by William Horwood. Illus. by Patrick Benson. London, HarperCollins U.K., October 1995, 283 pages, £12.99; ISBN: 0-00-225309-7.

The Wind in the Willows, by Kenneth Grahame (1859-1932) has been a literary classic for most of this century. William Horwood began writing sequels to it in 1993 with *The Willows in Winter. Toad Triumphant* is his second in the series.

It must take nerve as well as talent to invite comparison with a famous masterpiece, yet Horwood has plenty of both. He is best known for his six-volume *Duncton* drama, an anthropomorphic saga about political-religious wars among English moles that combines the grandeur of Tolkien's Middle Earth with the intolerance and brutality of the seventeenth-century Thirty Years' War in a massive 3,681 pages. This is an epic of a different sort than Grahame's gentle wood-and-stream fantasy, yet Horwood has done an excellent job of simulating both Grahame's writing style and the personalities of his well-known characters.

The charm of the world of the Willows falls into two broad categories: the paean to the beauty of the English countryside, as seen through the eyes of Rat and Mole, and the rollicking exploits of the vain and high-spirited Toad. The two are symbiotic. The pastoral scenes are deeply moving, but too placid to support a whole novel on their own, while Toad's hijinks are lively and amusing, but too shallow and, at their extremes, overly silly to hold our attention. The biggest complaint about Horwood's writing is that he has imitated Grahame's faults as well as his virtues.

Toad Triumphant tells two parallel stories. Rat and Mole get curious about the origins of their beloved River, and decide to leave their River-bank community and explore up to its unknown — and, according to gossip, mysteriously dangerous — headwaters. Horwood is at his bucolic best here, focusing upon the honeysuckle growing on the ruin of an old mill or the butterflies fluttering over the lilacs near the riverbank as the two friends row upstream on their peaceful camping trip. Then, for contrast, Toad comes along in a roaring motor-launch:

Cows and sheep turned and fled across fields at his loud approach; horses bolted in alarm, leaping gates to get away; rooks flocked up from trees and headed to all points of the compass in their eagerness to escape. As for those fish unfortunate enough to be harmlessly grubbing about amongst the weed and mud beneath the water, such as roach and perch, silver dace and stickleback, the shock of Toad's passage caused general panic and disarray. (pgs. 156-157)

Toad decides that Toad Hall needs a statue of himself. The sculptor whom he calls in is a distant cousin, a noted French *artiste,* Madame Florentine. Think of Miss Piggy as a toad, and you will know her.

"'Ow 'appy I am!" said she, retaining her grasp of the hapless Toad, and squeezing tighter still. "'Ow content! Already I adore you!" (pg. 87)

Badger, aghast, cannot decide whether the countess should be endured for long enough to sculpt the statue (a second Toad is bad enough as a temporary guest), or whether she has more permanent, matrimonial intentions that must be firmly discouraged. Toad himself dithers between playing the devoted Romeo or the confirmed-bachelor Figaro. The plot develops in histrionic comic-opera style. A good time will be had by the reader.

The dust-jacket blurb says that Patrick Benson's numerous pen-and-ink drawings in the tradition of Ernest Shepard have "received outstanding praise," which I will echo. *The Wind in the Willows* may not have *needed* a sequel, but it now has two that can stand with it as equals.

APRO'96

DANGER

TOXIC HAZARD
KEEP OUT!

!

WHOA!
HOLD UP A MINUTE!

NNG!

SKRFFFFF

OKAY... WHY ARE WE STOPPING THIS TIME!

CAN'T YOU HEAR IT?

THERE IT IS NOW!

AVELDO!

WINGWARRIOR

ART and STORY by
WILL FAUST
©1996

TWO

ANYBODY WHO WOULD TRAVEL LIKE THAT MUST BE CRAZY

I'M GOING TO BE TRAVELING LIKE THAT

YOU MUST BE CRAZY TOO!

NOT LIKELY... NOW THAT I'M OUT OF THE ACADEMY, I'LL BE ABLE TO LOOK AT THE WORLD LIKE AN EAGLE INSTEAD OF AN ANT!

HEY!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!

I CAN HEAR SOMETHING DIGGING UNDER HERE!

HAVEN'T YOU BEEN LIS...

WHAT?!

AW SKIP IT...

YOU WANT ME TO SKIP?

NO, YOU STUPID LOB...

CHFFF

THERE'S OAKTREE COMMAND COMING UP NOW!

THE ENTRANCE MUST BE THAT GAP IN THE TRUNK, SO..

MMMPH!

EEP!

SKRIFFF

WHAT TH' ('GASP') WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT ALL ABOUT?!

UH.. NOTHING!

WE'RE HERE, SIR

HERE?! YOU'RE STILL TOO FAR AWAY!

NO I'M NOT

NOW LOOK YOU!

IAVE

AW FER...

LET ME GET MY GEAR

YOU AREN'T ACTUALLY GOING IN THERE, ARE YOU?

I DIDN'T COME HERE FOR THE VIEW!

I WAS RIGHT..

YOU REALLY ARE CRAZY!

GOOD LUCK, SIR

KZZZZK

ENTRY TO THIS FACILITY IS RESTRICTED...

MAY I HAVE YOUR AUTHORIZATION, PLEASE?

June 6-7

©JG 93
CUBSLAUGHTER PRODUCTIONS

Beethoven's Last

By David Schneberger

As I straightened the two chairs and the music stand for the third time, I checked my watch once more. It was 3:58 PM, a minute later than the last time I had looked, yet it seemed to be much longer. Glancing out the window, I watched and waited for my student.

It seemed strange, really, that I should be this nervous about someone I was going to be teaching, but then again this was my first attempt at it. When the band director had called me up the night before, I had thought he was going to chew me out for having missed the last four practices. Instead, he had asked me to tutor the newest member of the band. Apparently, having joined only three weeks ago, she was having trouble with some of her basic techniques and was looking for someone to teach her, said that she didn't want to drag the others down.

Perhaps I was just nervous about how I'd teach her. I'd certainly had my fill of private lessons on my road to principal trombonist with the band, a feat unheard of for someone only twenty years old. Still, I had hated most of those lessons with a passion, and I didn't want to pass that tradition to my own student.

The doorbell rang at exactly four, snapping me out of my little anxiety fit. I got up, opened the door, and said hello to my new student. At least that was what I had intended to say; one look at my student and the greeting died on my lips as I gazed into the yellow eyes of a black humanoid wolf of about my own height.

"Hello?" she asked apprehensively. "Is this 264 14th Street? I was supposed to come for a music lesson . . . ?" She nervously adjusted the strap of her music case, which was slung over her shoulder.

"Umm . . . *Yes.* I mean, yes, that's right. Won't you please come in?" I finally replied as my mind tried to recover from the initial shock. She was a biomorph? It wasn't that biomorphs were something new. They had been created some fifty years ago, to be used in space. Since then, some had settled back on Earth, once things had been straightened out with the UN and the trade alliances. It's just that there weren't many of them around here. I'd seen perhaps one or two out at the university now and then, but always from a distance. I'd never had to interact with one. Until now.

She seemed a little off-balance herself as she carefully removed the slide from her case and set it on the floor, taking great pains to do it gently. I remembered doing that too. It was the sort of thing you did when you were nervous, trying to do everything correctly for the teacher. The uneasiness was mutual. There were some things the average person wasn't ready for — like your new student having fur and a tail. Which reminded me to take away the chair I had originally set out, replacing it with a stool.

"Um, listen, I'm sorry for the way I reacted at the door just now. You see, Mr. Kensington didn't tell me. . . ."

"It's okay. I understand." She replied with a quick glance over her shoulder before going back to assembling her horn.

". . . And I've been away from practices for the last couple weeks 'cause of my exams. What position are you playing?" I asked, hopefully trying to save the conversation and smooth over some of my mistakes. This was not going well at all.

"Bottom. . . . Third actually. Really, I'm not sure how much longer I'll even be there, though. I can't quite keep up with the rest. At least on most of the pieces."

I nodded. That was probably why the conductor had sent her to me, but I was beginning to wonder if this wasn't what he thought was punishment for my not showing up.

"Well, I hope I can help you out there. I doubt I'll be much better when I finally get back," I said, recovering somewhat. That reply got a sort of haruffing sound out of her that I took to be laughter as she sat down. I sat beside her.

"Okay, then. Let's warm up with a simple F scale up and down. Take your time and hold onto each of the notes."

As she began to play, I was a little surprised by the quality of the notes she was bringing forth from the instrument. I had expected her to be a little rusty because she was just warming up, but it sounded more like she hadn't touched the thing in months. Each note, as she slowly made her way up the scale, seemed weak and insipid. It was as if something were sapping the power she appeared to be putting into the mouthpiece, and she *was*

trying hard. There was also an airy sound, like somewhere air was leaking out where it shouldn't, and I could tell she also heard it. With every note it seemed like her ears plastered themselves more firmly to her head. I couldn't tell if she was angry or just trying to hold out the notes until they sounded right, but by what I thought I saw on her face, she was not enjoying it. Then again, I had little idea of what any expression would look like on a wolf. Her fur color also made it hard to see.

I stopped her before she could descend the scale. Her ears seemed to perk a little at this, but still remained down. She sighed in what I thought was relief.

"How long have you been playing . . . ?"

"Monica," she replied, filling in the blank. "About seven years now."

Seven years? That seemed wrong for the sound she was getting out of the horn. There was a sort of time scale over which a someone improved, and by the time people made it out of their fifth year or so, most of the serious problems were gone, or at least reasonably under control. I also knew that it wasn't for lack of practicing. She'd attended the last few practices, by what the conductor had told me. Something else must be wrong.

"Unn. . . My name is Paul, by the way," I volunteered. "Monica, I guess I should ask if you've been havin' some problems getting a good tone out of your instrument? Have you taken it for repair?"

She nodded, her ears turning to the sides slightly for whatever reason. I sure as hell didn't know why, but when she looked down, it was obvious that the problem was not in the instrument, it was in her.

"Okay." I brought a hand down to her gaze and waved so that she raised her gaze a little closer to the vicinity of my face. "I guess, then, we'll have to work on that first, unless there is some piece that is giving you trouble?"

"No. They're *all* giving me trouble!" she said, with what sounded to be a cynical haruff. "It's not that I can't get the notes with the slide. I just can't make any of it sound good! I know they're going to drop me soon!" Again the ears seemed to do a raise, then lower, finally ending up sliding away from her face.

"No, no, take it easy, now. I've never known them to throw someone out of the band for anything besides failure to pay dues." I said, smiling, and hoping she'd perk up a bit. If she had this frame of mind, it would only make her playing that much worse. I calmed her down and had her play the same scale again, this time paying closer attention.

The problem became clear within the first few seconds. I should have seen it from the start, but it hadn't really registered. The shape of her mouth was completely wrong. Unlike the wolves that could be seen in the zoo, she did have lips, so she could speak reasonably well. But they were stretched across a muzzle, perhaps not as sharp as a natural canine's, but pointed enough that it looked like part of her mouth was going to fall into her mouthpiece. To make matters worse, her upper lip was very narrow and split, causing God only knew what kind of problems. I knew a number of musicians that complained about having to play with braces on their teeth, and how much they'd suffered. I had just been given someone who not only had a radically different set of teeth, but who also had a mouth that for all practical reasons should have prevented her playing the trombone at all.

I stopped her playing and thought for a second.

"Are you going to send me to someone else?" she asked, beginning to disassemble her instrument before I could answer. I may not have known her expression, but her voice was easy enough to understand.

"What?"

"Well, the last few people I've been sent to have told me I'd be better to find someone more experienced. I was just thinking. . . ."

I don't know really what made me shake my head then, but I did. Perhaps I hated to be second-guessed on something, or perhaps I was just being stupid, but I still shook my head.

"I'm not that experienced, but I'll take you. First, though, if we're going to make any progress by the time the concert comes around, we're going to have to put in a lot of extra time. Are you willing to do that? I'm talking at least a couple extra hours a week, likely much more."

Monica head snapped up from gazing at the floor and nodded vigorously, her ears coming up in what I would later know was the way she showed she was happy.

• • •

"And again."

Monica took a deep breath, brought her lips to the mouthpiece once more, and played me a middle C. It was still shaky and there was still the faintest detectable hiss of escaping air, but it was much better than a week ago. There was more force behind her playing now, and the quavering tone had become much less detectable.

She quickly let the note go, though, rubbing her lips and blowing her nose, which had started running again. It seemed to be sensitive to the vibrations of the mouthpiece, which almost contacted the lower edge of its black moist surface. This wasn't easy on her, I knew. Some days we played until she was ready to drop. Never once did she complain. In fact, she seemed positively driven to continue. It made me feel good in what I was doing, and perhaps just a tad envious. If I had had her drive when I was younger, I wondered how good I'd be now.

She was a little surprised when I told her that the overtime we were spending was not going to cost anything. In truth, I was learning about as much as she was I think. The problems we had to overcome meant that I had had to do a lot of research into techniques used in playing, correct positioning of the mouth, special lip exercises, and much more. After that, I'd had to adapt what I'd learned to Monica's case, in some instances purposely using "wrong" techniques that would be better suited for her. She in turn gave me feedback, and we arrived at compromises that now were now showing some promise. I also learned a great deal about biomorphs in that time, and more importantly, how to read some of the subtle tail and ear signals that Monica gave, though that was more a side-effect of being around her. It helped me tell when she was exhausted, but didn't want to tell me. Perhaps in a sense it came to be more like two friends helping each other out, and my reward for the work I put in was seeing her get more enjoyment from her playing.

• • •

"And now we'll do the *Gladiator's March*, starting from bar three."

Monica nodded, taking a couple of shots at the tricky first passage. She was still having some difficulty with the faster songs. The new, smaller mouthpiece I had loaned her was helping to overcome that. She had no problems with the slower, more melodious pieces and, in fact, if her tone were better, I thought she would have been much better than I. Despite whatever shortcomings she had, her sense of pitch was fabulous! Likely it was something in her canine heritage, but whatever it was, I had no doubt that at any time she knew exactly what the music *should* sound like.

"Okay, that's fine for now. We'd better stop before you get too tired. Tomorrow's the practice with the band."

She nodded, likely a little in relief, and looked like she was about to put her instrument away when she turned to me.

"Paul . . . I . . . I was wondering. . . ."

"Yes?"

"I was wondering if you'd try this piece I wrote out last night," she said, obviously more than slightly nervous at asking. It was difficult for me to restrain a smile at the image she presented. It's hard to describe someone asking you something with her tail tucked between her legs, quite literally.

When I nodded, she handed over a few sheets of paper. Placing them on the stand, I took a quick glance over the melody before taking a crack at it.

It was a little odd to realize that I was nervous playing it in front of her. I don't really know why. Perhaps it was her keen hearing and sense of pitch that made me a little afraid I wouldn't play up to the standard I should, being her teacher. There was some expectation that I should be quite a bit better than she — or at least that was my feeling on it. Would she listen to someone who couldn't play that much better?

The thought quickly vanished from my head, though, as I became aware of what I was playing. I have never claimed to have a great memory for things, but I could swear that I had never heard a piece as beautiful as the one she placed before me. There was nothing in it that was borrowed from anywhere else, just a lovely, long, melodic piece that I knew had to be original, for I'd definitely remember it if I'd heard it before.

It was not easy to play, that much was certain. It was loaded with marks and notations for a wide range of small changes, from slight pitch shifts to crescendos that only lasted for the briefest of moments. But it almost seemed as if each tiny variance was essential to the whole piece. The result was a tune that seemed more to float from my instrument, to be caught up by the air in the room. It was as if I wasn't even part of the equation. The music came out of my horn, but what took shape wasn't determined by me at all. I wasn't pushing sounds out, the instrument was birthing a tune of its own and I was just going through the motions of moving the slide.

When I finished, I was spent, not only physically, for some of the passages were quite difficult, but also emotionally. Monica just stared at me for a minute saying nothing, until a grin started to creep across her black muzzle, and for the first time I saw her tail actually wag. I probably would have laughed under other circumstances, but I was still thinking back over that song. Numbly, I told her to pack up her instrument and I'd meet her in the kitchen for a drink. I had insisted on an informal working relationship from day one. Seeing as how I'd had to go as far as poking around her mouth to see what I was dealing with, it had been a necessity.

When she joined me, she took the pop can I offered and sat down, pulling herself up onto the counter that ringed my kitchen.

"So what d'you think?"

"I . . . I . . ." I said at first. I hadn't been this tongue-tied since the first day she had surprised me at the door.

"You like it?"

I nodded my head in agreement, which was met by another grin and some more movement from her tail, which brushed back and forth along the glasses stacked behind her.

"I didn't know you wrote music as well . . . and *so* well!"

She nodded and grinned once more. "I have a pretty good idea in my mind what it sounds like . . . what I'm writing, that is. It just doesn't feel . . . well, *real* until I hear someone play it right. I'd try myself but. . . well . . . you know the problems I have with that."

I nodded. It wasn't like we both didn't know that. She was making progress, but it would still be slow going.

"Thanks for playing it for me. That was exactly how I thought it would sound," she said with a conviction in her voice that caught me a little off-guard.

"Monica, can I ask you a question?"

"Hmmm?" Her ears twitched and perked up, orienting on me.

"Unn. . . I don't mean to put your playing down — you've been improving faster than I've ever heard before — but with all the things you have going against you when playing the trombone, why are you still trying? I mean, I probably would have quit after the first year if I had to deal with some of the things you have to. . . . I'm sorry, I don't think that came out right. . . ."

She held up a hand to stop me from saying anything else, chuckling a little as her ears relaxed themselves to either side of her head.

"Don't worry. No offense taken," she said with a small grin. "You're not the first to ask me that. Most of the time, I heard that shortly after being told to find someone else to take lessons from."

"I just meant with all the synthesizers out there I would have thought you'd be interested in something like that. You could play those without any of the problems your mouth imposes, and God knows you have songs that need to be played! Monica, that has got to have been one of the most beautiful solos I have ever seen or heard!"

She looked down at the floor, her ears moving to the sides and her tail tucking itself by her leg in what I had learned was her equivalent of a blush.

"Paul, you can tell the difference between a synthesizer and someone playing the actual instrument, can't you?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I think a lot of musicians can, though I will admit it gets harder and harder as the years go by. It's not that different, is it? I mean, seeing all the extra work you have to do with the horn. . . ."

She nodded. "Yeah, and what is it that you notice about the sound?"

"I don't know, it's sort of the tone quality, it just sort of . . . that is . . ."

"Flat? For me it's like that. Lifeless. Synthetic. The same on each and every note. The sort of thing that only a machine could produce. No small quavers in pitch, no off vibrations. Everything's perfect . . . and that's just it — no feeling. The little things that people put into playing, those are the things that make it musical. When you played my song, I could tell you were enjoying it. Either that or you're a great actor," she amended with a smile, to which I shook my head.

"But . . ." she paused. "Those are the things I *want* to hear! The things I want to play. I could play a keyboard, I suppose. Take lessons, get better, play some of my own stuff, but . . ."

"It would be hollow and meaningless?" I finished. I understood, well, as best as I think I'm capable of doing. Such an instrument would be like trying to tap-dance with boots on. Sure the moves would be there, but the style or feeling wouldn't.

She nodded. "And it's the trombone I want to write for. I like it. When I think of tunes, they're almost always for the trombone. That may sound a little stupid, but I like the way it sounds. The other instruments don't sound as nice. I can't really explain why. It's not as mechanical, more smooth."

I nodded. I'd heard that before. It was usually a complaint from beginners that there were no set key combinations for notes, just moving the slide to the area where the note "should be, sort of".

"It's just hard sometimes. I know in my head what something I write sounds like, or how somebody else's piece should sound, but it's not the same if you can't play it. It's like you're being kept away from doing what you want . . . like someone is keeping you away from what the composer wanted. Even if you are the composer yourself."

"But if you're interest is in solos and composing, then why play with the band? Sure, it's a chance to play some pieces, and to practice, but why . . . ?"

"I don't know," she replied, looking out the window, "I suppose I like the company. It's nice being around others who love music as well."

"I can't say I agree with you there. I don't talk to many of the people in the band," I admitted.

"You should. I guess for me it sort of helps keep me plugging away at getting better. They sort of give me encouragement. It's like I'm playing for them more than any audience."

She must have caught my look of bewilderment because she tried to explain it to me.

"It's like you're part of a group of friends, right?" she said, to which I nodded. "Anyway, we're all sort of trying to come together to pull off a single work, everyone doing their part to try and bring some life to the music on the paper." I still must have looked a tad confused, so she sighed and tried again.

"Everyone is working toward the same goal, each person trying to accommodate the others?"

I finally nodded to this, her words starting to make more sense.

"All the sections work for the benefit of the whole band," she continued, "and even when someone can't keep

up, the others do what they can to help. You understand."

I didn't know quite how to answer that other than to nod, but, fortunately, further elaboration on my part wasn't necessary. Our time was up for the day and she had to leave. The family sponsoring her on-planet expected her in at six — otherwise they'd begin to worry. There were still more than a few people out there that didn't approve of biomorphs. The streets were not the safest place to be at night.

At the door, though, she turned and gave me a slight brush of her muzzle on my cheek. I really didn't know what to say, but I don't think I minded.

• • •

It was the last practice before the Thursday night concert and I had just gone back into the small room off the practice hall for a coffee when Tony came over. A number of years older than I, he covered the second trombone position and was a damn fine player, if not a few pounds overweight (much more than a few, really). He was also one of the few people in the band with whom I had actually gotten to be friends. Another glance told me the other three people that made up the section, except Monica, were coming over with him. That was odd. Usually the five of us had little to talk to each other about.

"Hi, Paul. How's it going?" Tony said, taking a sip from his cup and looking back at the others for a second.

"Not bad."

"Yeah. I see you've really been doing some impressive stuff with Monica. She's really improving. Where is she, by the way?"

"In the other room, going over some stuff before the second half." I said, gesturing behind me. "And thanks for the compliment. I can't take all the credit, though. She's really thrown herself heart and soul into practicing. Every teacher's dream student." I grinned.

I noticed a sharp look from Kelly, another member of our section, aimed at Tony. He was also aware of the look, apparently, and his expression seemed to change completely.

"Unn. . . Paul. The rest of us were talking, you know, the rest of the section."

"Yeah?"

"And . . ." he paused, looking back to the others again, receiving a few small nods.

"And we were thinking that it might be best if Monica . . . well . . . if she would consider skipping the concert Thursday night. For the sake of the band."

"What?" What on Earth was he talking about? I'd never heard of this before, or of it being done, and I had played in quite a few bands in my few years. Then again, I did recall a few times when people skipped at the last minute for some unknown reason.

"Well, she's really improved quite a bit. You've made a big difference with her, Paul, don't get me wrong. We just thought that, unn, for the sake of the performance, she could sit this one out. Perhaps by the next concert she'll be ready, but not right now. . . ."

Behind Tony I saw the heads of the other members of the section nod. I couldn't believe this. They were serious.

"And why are you coming to me about this?" I said in a level voice.

"Well . . . we felt you should be the one to tell her. After all, you're the section leader, and you do know her best." He said it, but I wasn't sure he meant it. He was reluctant, but apparently not enough to stand up to the others.

"And be the scapegoat? The one who breaks her heart? Do you know how much she's looking forward to playing in this concert? Do you have any idea?"

Tony winced slightly, but appeared to be steeling himself against my arguments.

"We still think it would be best if she didn't play in this concert. C'mon, Paul, even you know she isn't really ready for this. Tell her, okay?"

It could be that he was right. Maybe somewhere deep down I didn't think she was ready. I also knew she had done more work to get ready for it than the entire section combined, and how important the band itself was to her. It was more than just a group, it was where she got most of her strength to continue playing.

"No," I said, with as little emotion as I could manage, but I didn't maintain that tone for long. "I think she's ready, and I don't see where you have any damn right to decide who should and shouldn't play! She's had the guts to practice day in and out while the whole damn bunch of you can barely work up the courage to tell *me*, let alone *her!* You can all fucking well go to hell! Maybe there you can find your hatchet man! She *is* playing in that concert, dammit! You want me to tell someone not to show up? Okay. I would greatly appreciate it if the whole fucking lot of you didn't show up!" I turned my back on them, heading back to the concert hall where it was a little quieter and the company much better.

"C'mon, Paul, why are you defending that thing? Are you sweet on her or something?" This came from Bernice, another in the section.

That stopped me dead in my tracks. Turning, I fixed her with as hard a stare as I could.

"She has more right to be here than you do. *She* knows more about music and what a band *should* be than any of you *ever* will!"

• • •

It was the next afternoon when I found Monica knocking at my door. I was puzzled as to why she'd come over. I had canceled lessons for the last few days before the concert. I didn't want her tiring herself out too much. I wanted no excuse for her to miss that concert.

"Hi. I know we weren't going to practice today,", she said, grinning as I let her in, "But I was hoping maybe we could do a few duets together? I've been sort of working on a few other pieces. I was wondering if we could go over them."

That afternoon we played for close to an hour. One thing that was clear to me was that the piece she'd given me some days ago was not a fluke. She was a phenomenal composer! I wasn't a music critic or anything, but I know what's good, and what she was writing was certainly that and much, much more.

When we finally stopped, she blew her nose once more to clear it, then laughed.

"I'm sorry for that. I still can't get it to sound like I want to . . . my playing I mean. At least, though, some of the guys in the band think I'm doing better."

I nodded. "You *are* improving pretty quickly, Monica. I wouldn't be so self-critical if I were you. That last piece sounded a little like Beethoven. You using some ideas from him?" I asked, trying to deflect the conversation to another topic. I wished she were right about the others.

"Yeah. I really like his stuff. I get more of a feeling from his music than a lot of other composers. But how was it?"

"You know how I feel about the stuff you write. It's amazing!"

"You're getting too easy to please. But I like doing it," she said with a grin.

"And if I don't watch out, you're going to start playing better than me one day," I replied.

"Just as long as I get by at the concert tomorrow, I'll be happy."

"Yeah. . . ." I said, pausing on the word. Luckily she didn't catch it, but I was worried too. I wanted to warn her about what some of the others said to me, in case they tried to take matters into their own hands. Telling her might be just as bad. By her own words, Monica was a team player, like many of her kind. I don't know, perhaps it was a throwback instinct or something, something that passed by all the gene screenings that the scientists did. She seemed to gain confidence from the improvements she made at group practices and loved the praise she'd gotten from the others. Praise I had found out was more politeness than anything else.

I couldn't tell her that. Still, I figured she was pretty safe. They had barely had the guts to ask me to tell her not to show. They'd never tell her. Besides, I thought that my objections had probably turned one, or maybe two, of the group against the little plan they had presented me. Monica also seemed to be gaining a lot of confidence from my praise. I know it sounds a little conceited, but I do think that was the case. At least I *was* honest about it. She was phenomenal!

• • •

At the half-time break in the concert the next evening, I was furious. Monica hadn't shown up and I had a good idea why not. Finding the closest convenient person in my section, I pushed Tony against the wall of the dressing room and held him there, my right hand pushing on his chest. His folder fell from his pudgy hand to the floor, scattering music, and drawing the attention of a few others nearby.

"Okay, where the hell is she? Tell me! What did you do?" I asked through clenched teeth.

"I . . . I . . . don't know what you're . . ." he stammered, his eyes looking back and forth at the others who had taken an interest in the little show.

"The hell you don't! She wouldn't have missed this concert for the world! So either you tell me what happened or I'm going to ram that instrument down your bloody throat!" I doubt I would have done anything to him, I'm not that sort of person, but right then I wanted to beat him to a pulp. I pushed him harder against the wall.

I don't really know what possessed me that night, but it did work to scare Tony into a confession. He told me he'd called Monica earlier that day and told her that the concert was the next evening. In the end he'd wimped out and resorted to a cheap lie. Perhaps it was better than the truth. I didn't care. She should have been here. She would also find out eventually what had happened.

Letting go of Tony, I went back to where my own instrument lay and packed it up. When the conductor asked what I was doing I gave him my music and told him to ask the others. I wasn't part of the band any more.

I walked home that night, needing the time to cool off and think of what I was going to say to Monica the next day.

• • •

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised by the call I got the next morning from the family that was letting Monica stay with them. Monica had been a smart 'morph, and she hadn't fallen for the story, but she had figured out the likely reasons behind the lie.

I don't know if I should take solace that, in the letter they found with her, she hadn't blamed me. She knew I had nothing to do with it. I had been the one to help her, or, as she said, ". . . helped me realize my music, even though I know I'll never be able to play." I blame myself for raising her expectations too high, too fast. She even apologized to me for taking the easy way out.

She also left me a folder with her pieces in it. As it turned out, she was quite a prolific composer. She even did a small piece the night of the concert, almost finishing it. Another work with some ties to her favorite composer, Beethoven. By the way the notes were written and the quiver in the lines, I know she knew about the deception when she wrote it. Perhaps she had tried to work things out through her music. But to her mind I think that had just been ripped away from her.

The media is all over this, of course, calling it another case of "biomorph psychological instability". Of course, they haven't talked to me or anyone else about her yet. That might disrupt the picture they wanted to paint of this. Frankly, I don't care. They'll go around asking "Why did this happen?" for a few days, then find something else more interesting.

I wish I'd known, or thought to call her that night, just in case. Maybe I could have stopped her. How much harder had it been for her? At least before Beethoven went deaf, he'd heard himself play some of his own works. He'd never had to overcome disability from the first day or had to hear with excruciating clarity every mistake he made. Monica had had all those problems. She had trusted the opinions of others who didn't give a damn about her. She had been too sensitive, both in listening to her playing and to the voices of others. Those were almost crimes these days.

How would Beethoven have taken it if someone had cut off his hands? That was in essence what they had done to Monica with that call. Perhaps cut off one hand was a better analogy. Her hearing and mouth had already taken the first one off.

I'll see to it that the pieces she wrote get the attention they deserve. Perhaps talking to the media will give them the push they need to be "found" by the world. I want to do it so her songs don't die with her. But, quite honestly, I also hope that those people in the band who hear them will know what it is they did, and what they took away from everyone else, and away from me.

I'll keep the last piece she wrote, though, as a remembrance. She said it was meant for me, even if she hadn't put a title to it.

"I HAVE NEVER HEARD MUSIC FOR MUSIC'S SAKE BEFORE. IT'S SO... BEAUTIFUL!"

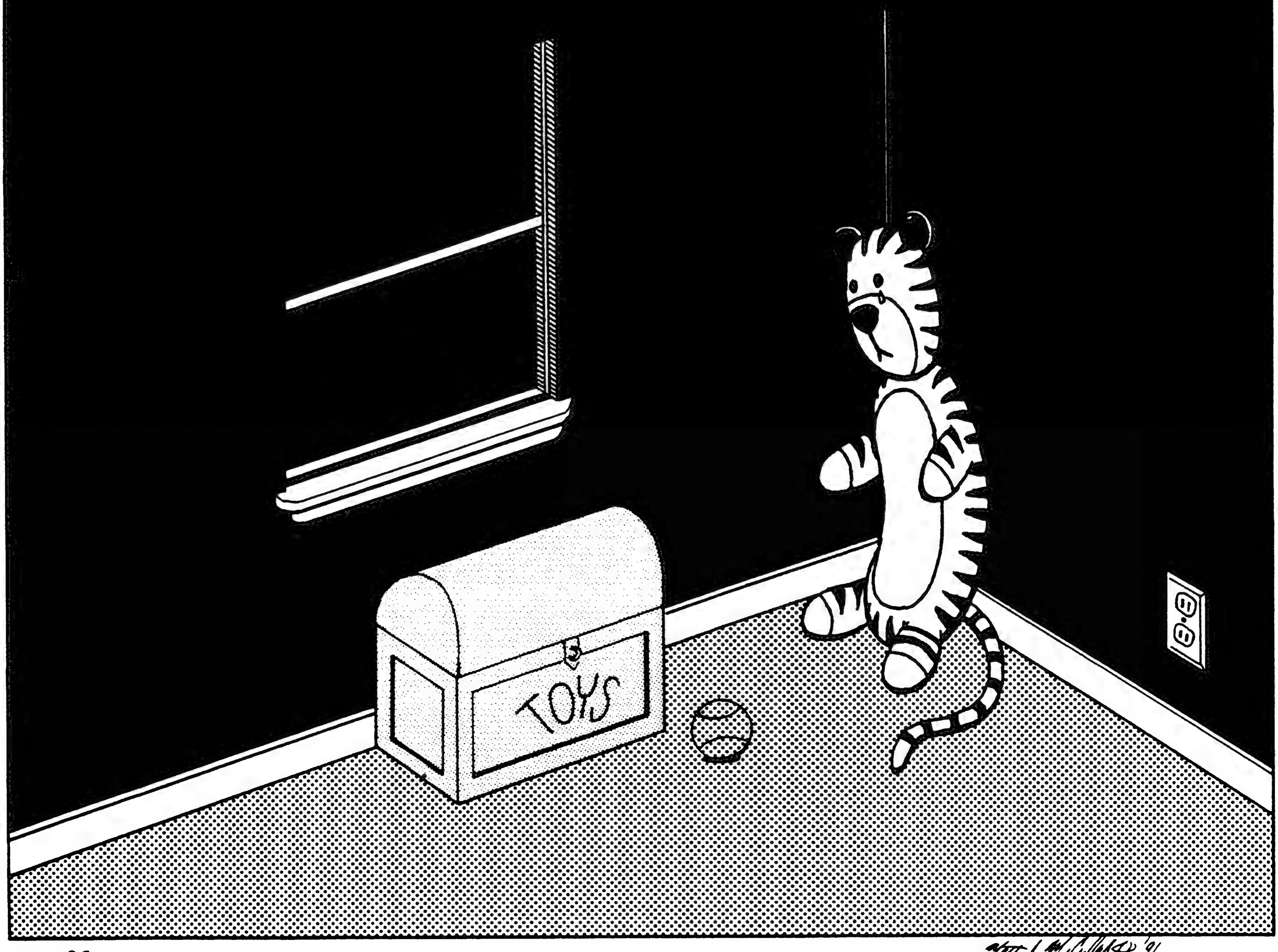
BILL
FITTS

"RAPTURE"

A dragon lives forever, but not so little boys.
Painted wings and giant's rings make way for other toys.
One gray night, it happened: Jackie Paper came no more...
And Puff, that mighty dragon, he ceased his fearless roar.

His head was bent in sorrow, green scales fell like rain.
Puff no longer went to play along the Cherry Lane.
Without his lifelong friend, Puff could not be brave,
So Puff, that mighty dragon, sadly slipped into his cave. Oh!

Puff, the Magic Dragon, lived by the sea
And frolicked in the autumn mist in a land called Honalee.
Puff, the Magic Dragon, lived by the sea
And frolicked in the autumn mist in a land called Honalee.



FILL IN THE BLANKS....

500

HELLO, BRANDY!

HI, COCO!-SAY, COULD Y'ALL BE A SWEETIE N' "SPOT" ME ?

500

300

100

500

UH...

....oooohhkayyyy.....

H-HEY! WHUT ARE Y'ALL DOIN'?! THAT TICKLES!!

WELL, YOU DID ASK ME TO "SPOT" YOU! (THOUGH I HAVE NO IDEA WHY....)

Now hold still and stop giggling!

Let's see ya beat that, Matt! I have only just begun to fight! -WQ

'95 WQ 10-24

BRANDYWINE RUFUS ©'95 MATTHEW McANDREWS/COCO DESTÈNE ©'95 WAYNE QUICK

INTERMISSION

Nyahh Nyahh!

ZIP!

Lindy

Order more Red Fox Beer

—Lindy

WHAT WAS THAT?

OH, THAT'S COCO.

OH.

SO, WHAT DO YOU CALL THAT?

ZOOM!

A BRANDY CHASER!

I HADDA' ASK...

no more Cat Nip For Kuan Brandy

COCO DESTENE & TIM FEYKIS ©95 WQ
Brandywine Rufus & Indera Mangus

©95 mmm

A TICKLISH SITUATION

GIRL'S LOCKER ROOM

HEE HEE "SPOT ME" SHE SAID *GIGGLE*

=B WAAA-HA-HA=

NO BRANDY (Giggle)

NOT THERE! =HEE-HEE=

I'M TICKLISH!!

GOTCHA'LL CLAVER LIL' FOX!

KI TCH-KITCH COO..

Wayne: The gantlet has been taken up, Let the Battle Be well and Truly Joined. MJM

COCO
DEST'ENE ©95
WAYNE QUICK
&
BRANDYWINE
RUFUS ©95 MJM
Matt McAndrews

-A.PRO'96-

TYGER!
©94

Confronting the Change

By James Lowry

The world of Nivaria created by Christina Hanson; used with permission

Thom quietly slipped into his clothes. It wouldn't do for his parents to pay too much attention to him this morning. Slipping his shirt over his head, he quickly made his way down the stairs and into the kitchen. While he waited for the microwave oven to finish with breakfast to still his rumbling stomach, he cleaned up some of the mess in the kitchen.

He hoped his mother hadn't noticed the mess yet. It being a Saturday, his father would be sleeping in, but his mother would get up at her usual early hour.

The microwave dinged, and Thom downed the danish while checking to make sure he had enough money for the bus to Daleport. He was walking out the side door, rechecking his bus schedule, when his mother's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Thomas! Where are you going?" He had been so worried about being on time, that he had forgotten to check the garden, and now he was caught.

He turned, trying not to look guilty. "Over to Rick's." He backed off a step. "Just going to hang out some."

His mother had a worried look on her face. "Are you sure there isn't something you should be telling me?"

"N-no. Not at all." *Nothing you'd believe*. He finally lost his battle for control, and ran from the yard.

• • •

Thom stared out the bus's windows at the slowly changing landscape. Over the buildings that were slowly clustering closer together as the bus drew nearer to Daleport rose the large crescent of the moon Jazmeir and the thin double arch of Nivaria's rings. In the distance rose the cluster of skyscrapers that marked downtown Daleport, the bus's eventual destination.

Thom drew some needed comfort from watching the scenery go by. This morning had been terrible. Not that the night had been any better. No better than the ten before it, in fact. He didn't like to lie — in fact, he was terrible at it — but he couldn't tell his parents the truth. His mother's attempted quiz this morning told him she suspected that something was going on.

As the buildings reached higher, his view of the sky was cut off and he looked around the interior of the bus. It was reasonably full of people in suits headed for their jobs. The only sign of life was a female centaur in the back, lying on a row of seats that had been folded down into a bench to give centaurs some comfort. She was playing with her foal, who looked to be about five or so. That on a bus mostly full of humans the only person not enclosed by a shell of his own blandness should be a centaur struck Thom as odd. He looked again at all the people patiently waiting, with barely a word between people obviously long used to each other. *They all look like robots*. Thom turned away, shuddering.

When the bus finally got near where he wanted to be, Thom got off and looked uncertainly up at the new skyscraper. This was only his third time in downtown Daleport, and it was kind of intimidating. He certainly had never just hopped on the bus for a trip here before. The worst of it was, he wasn't even sure why he was here.

The late-night TV ad had rather stood out from the steak knives and party lines. Most of them Thom remembered with a combination of amazement and disbelief. Many looked like the results of a ten-year-old's efforts. Did anyone really expect to call some strange party line and get some gorgeous model who has nothing better to do?

This particular ad had been well done and looked like it was meant for daytime TV, however. Opposing this was the fact that it was almost impossible to take seriously. The "Were Agency" sounded crazy, but when he called the 800 number that morning, not only was there an answer, but he had an appointment before five words were out of his mouth.

He wasn't sure just what had made him decide to come. He'd only called on an impulse, to see if there was anything behind the joke. He hadn't even dared to hope for anything more. Even after the call he had no idea what to expect. He had no reason to expect it to be real, except for why he'd been sitting up watching TV at three in morning in the first place. . . .

Feeling rather self-conscious in jeans and T-shirt, Thom walked inside, spotted the Were Agency on the directory, and took the elevator to the fifth floor. He was happy that no one else was in the elevator; the fewer people who saw him, the better.

When the elevator reached the fifth floor, Thom looked out the door nervously, making sure the corridor outside was clear of any witnesses. Then he quickly stepped out and started left down the hallway before he could change his mind.

After a short hunt through the corridors, he found the proper door standing open. A small sign next to it read "Were Agency: Lycanthrope Assistance." As he stepped through the door, he noticed the reception area on the other side, complete with an attractive secretary behind the desk, was a little bare of furnishings. He tried not to look too nervous as he approached the desk. He'd never been in an office building like this before, and felt out of place with all the business suits around.

"Hi, I'm Thom Carter," he told her. "I have an appointment."

The secretary beamed up at him. "Go on in," she told him, motioning to the inner door of the office. "Ms. Lycanthas is expecting you."

Lycanthas? The appropriateness of the name made Thom pause. He saw that the door was plain-looking in contrast to the plush, if kind of Spartan, reception area. It had a small plaque with "S. Lycanthas" written in clear letters on it, but no title. As Thom raised his hand to knock on the door, he heard a clear voice from inside say, "Come in."

He slowly opened the door and edged in. In the plush office was an elegant oaken desk, at which sat one of the most beautiful ladies he had ever seen. Hers was a beauty that nothing could hide and nothing could enhance. Thom was even more nervous to be in the presence of someone like this. She wore a simple white business dress and had bright silver hair that reached the base of her neck. Had someone asked him how old she was, he would have said thirty or forty as a guess, but he really couldn't quite picture *age* as being anything that would ever affect her somehow.

"How —" he managed to squeak out. She looked up at him expectantly. "How did you know I was there?"

She gave a soft smile and a shrug. "I have my ways. Will you please sit down?" She motioned to a comfortable-looking chair next to him.

He sat in the chair gratefully. His legs felt weak in her presence. Thom looked around nervously at the nature art adorning the walls. The lifelike painting of a bobcat on the wall behind her made Thom swallow hard.

"What is this place about?" he managed to ask.

She watched him carefully, apparently judging his reactions. "The Agency is here to help weres. It has been a long time since there have been any, and they — you — are going to need help."

"I-I don't understand." He wondered if she could read minds; she was certainly acting like it.

She got up and went around the desk, her gaze locked with his the entire time. Thom got the image of a hunter stalking its prey. "Yes, you do." She stopped with a scant two feet between their faces. "You are a were-bobcat."

Despite the imagery, despite the revelation that he was still trying to deny, she still did not seem in the least unpleasant. "H-how do you know?"

She straightened up. "You are new to this. In time you will find that in either of your forms you have the best of both your form's senses. I can smell the scent of your human self, and the bobcat, and the scent that proclaims to all the world that you are a were."

"Smell me. . . . You, you're a were! You're like me!" Somehow something told him it should not have been such a shock. Some back part of his mind started working again. "Is Lycanthas your real name?"

She sat down on the edge of her desk softly. "Yes, it is. And if you don't mind, I like to be called by that name, no 'miss' or anything, just Lycanthas. And yes, I am a were. A were-fox, in fact. I've established the Agency to teach people about what they are, so they won't go crazy denying it, or just huddle in a corner somewhere."

Now that his secret was known to someone else, Thom actually felt relieved. "What makes you such an expert?"

Lycanthas smiled pleasantly. "I've been a were for a long time. I can tell you what you really are, what we're for, and even some of the history of weres."

In spite of himself Thom was intrigued. "Is there anyone else who you're helping currently?"

She shook her head. "You are the first. Although I know of two others who have managed on their own. There will be more, however, and I will not be able to do everything myself. I think you've heard of the mana, the magic, coming back? Weres do not exist without mana. It's now at the point where the number of weres is going to explode in the next couple of years."

He had a sudden vision of weres popping up around every corner and couldn't repress a shudder. "Are those other two helping you?"

"No, they have their own lives, their own purposes. I am rather hoping that you will help me, once you get used to what you now are."

"Me! I'm a kid! What can I do?"

"You're sixteen, the normal age for one who's born into it to start changing. You are halfway through high school. I doubt that you have any real plans for the future yet. I have need of you, or someone like you. You'll be helping people; here you will have free rein to be what you are, something that will be difficult at best anywhere else. I'd like you to consider it. In the meantime, I'd like you to be here tonight, and I think you know why."

That could be difficult. He still shuddered away from trying to tell his parents what had been happening to him every night, and he didn't want to try to explain why he was going to Daleport at night. "Uh . . . don't I have to pay some sort of fee for all this?"

"The Were Agency is a charity supported by grants from the government and the space program, therefore our services are free to all who need them."

"The NSDC? What does the space program have to do with anything?"

Lycanthas looked past him, a sad look troubling her eyes. "They have their reasons." She turned the look on him. "Will you be here tonight?"

Thom shifted uncomfortably. "I don't think that I can make it."

"I thought you might say that. Listen, if you want my help, I'm going to have to see you when you are a bobcat. And I think you're going to need my help."

Thom realized that he didn't have much of a choice. He would have to get around his parents sooner of later anyway. He'd been feeling very claustrophobic shut up in the house at night. "I'll be here."

• • •

"Going over to Rick's again?" his mother asked as she finished rinsing off the dishes.

"Uh . . . yeah." The lie tasted sour in his mouth, but he couldn't think of what else he could say.

"You know, Rick came by a little after lunch, asking after you." The very blandness of how she stated it nearly started Thom shivering.

"Oh, well, what exactly did he say?"

His mother turned to look at him. "Just that he hadn't seen much of you, and wanted to check up on how you were doing."

Thom tried to edge a little closer to the door. The bus back to Daleport was due pretty soon. "Thom, I've tried to be patient, but this is getting inexcusable." She had dropped into an exasperated-mother mode that Thom hadn't seen for years. He tried to fight the urge to drop his gaze as his mother bore down on him. "I want to know what is going on here."

Thom's gaze wandered to one side against his will. "I just . . . need to get out." That was true enough. "Please, just . . . just trust me." He looked back up at his mom.

"Thom . . . you've got to tell me what you're doing."

You'd lock me up for sure. "I . . . can't. Really. I just can't."

He was out the door and running for the bus before she could move.

• • •

When he arrived around seven o'clock that evening, the office building was generally dark and empty. When he entered the Agency's office, the secretary was gone, and Lycanthas was waiting for him, sitting on the edge of the secretary's desk.

"Good. We should have a little time to talk before we need to get going." She walked around the desk and sat down in the secretary's chair. "I have a few things I'd like to know first."

"Going? Where are we going?" It was getting dark now, summer and daylight savings the only reasons why the sun was still up. He could feel that part of him he identified with the cat more keenly, even though he tried to ignore it, and he knew he would be changing within the hour.

"To Disrupter Park. To get some exercise." Lycanthas turned to the waiting computer. "Now then, how long have you been changing?"

"Uh, well, nearly two weeks now. I've been kind of wondering if I'm ever going to sleep again."

She turned to look at him as she typed. "Yes, you will. The magic is setting up a whole new body for you, and making sure you're used to it. During that time you are forced to spend twelve hours a day in your new form, integrating your personality with the instincts that will keep you alive in your new body. In about two more weeks you will get your normal sleep schedule back." Without looking back at the screen she asked, "Besides you and me, how many people know you're a were?"

"No one. I don't know what to tell my parents, but I don't think I can hide it forever." Thom wasn't sure why he spilling it out to her, but he needed to tell somebody, and she at least had to have some idea what he was going through. "I'm scared. I don't want to chase everyone I know away from me."

Lycanthas seemed unmoved. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Yeah, Stacey. She's about a year younger than I am." He suddenly remembered what she said about being sixteen. "Is she going to be a were-bobcat too?" Thom had never been real sure about where he stood with his sister, but he didn't want her to go through what he had these last two weeks.

She smiled at him as her hands flew across the keyboard. "What sort of were you are depends on what sort of person you are, not on genetics. As for whether she will be a were or not I cannot say unless I see her. Of course, it would help if she knew about you ahead of time." Lycanthas turned off the computer and stood up. "It's time we were going."

• • •

A short, quiet drive later, they were in a silent corner of Disrupter Park. Lycanthas looked around. "This will do," she told him, and started undressing.

"What are you doing?" Thom asked in a strangled voice, hastily turning his back. He was glad it was pretty dark here, he didn't want her to see how red he was.

"You don't expect me to ruin my clothes, do you?" she asked in her same calm voice. "I think you had better do the same if you want anything decent to wear home. And don't talk so loud. It'll only attract attention." A moment later a small, silver-furred fox came up from behind him.

"Is that you?" Thom asked, startled, not really expecting an answer. He knew too well just how impossible human speech was in an animal throat.

The fox nodded and changed back into Lycanthas. "It is indeed."

Thom hastily looked away again, "How did you do that?"

"I touched on it earlier. Once you have truly accepted what you are, and the magic has finished its job, you will be able to change at any time you desire."

The two weeks-familiar feeling was overpowering now. Thom tore off his clothes just as he became a bobcat again, the pressure that had been building suddenly finding release, his vision suddenly a bit brighter, if blurred, his nose and ears picking up things he wouldn't have dreamed of a minute ago. Lycanthas gathered up his clothes and set then in a neat pile next to his own. "Thanks," he tried to tell her.

"Don't concern yourself. No one will find them." At his surprised look she continued, "Just because it isn't English, it doesn't mean that it is not a language. You can speak the same way bobcats do. I can understand it quite well. I will be teaching you parts of the fox language as well, so I will not have to flip back and forth so much."

The worst thing about speaking in this way, Thom found, was that to communicate anything meaningful you had to look at who you were talking to, and about half the time that was an unselfconscious nude female. Well, Lycanthas was a nude female the other half of the time too, Thom supposed, but it didn't seem to matter so much when she was a fox. "How can we say so much like this?" he asked her when he had thought about it a little.

"It's actually a very simple language, but our minds are capable of putting so many nuances into the patterns that it becomes almost as complex as a human language." Lycanthas crouched next to him, staring at the stars with a faraway look. "Unfortunately, after that, the language has been pushed to its limits, while human languages are constantly growing. For instance, it is utterly impossible to hold any kind of meaningful conversation about science or magic in one of the animal languages."

Thom's nose was swiveling around, getting the lay of the area. Oh, it felt good to get out of those confining boxes with those harsh smells of plastic and metal to the outside for once. "Why am I always starving right after changing?"

She glanced over at him. "Eventually, your two bodies will act as one system, and when you're hungry, eating in either form will satisfy you. Right now, the bobcat has a separate existence, and it has not eaten in over twelve hours."

"Well, I hope you planned ahead for this."

She smiled. "I always plan ahead."

Thom had an uncomfortable feeling, apart from being hungry. "So where's the food?" he asked.

The smile was still there. "You hunt for it."

• • •

"Stop tensing up so much," Lycanthas told him. "Your instincts are there for a good reason. Let them do the work."

Thom felt his stomach rumble as he watched the pigeon he'd just tried to catch fly off. All he had eaten so far was a gopher that Lycanthas had caught for him. The actual memory of the meal was one he was trying his best not to dwell on. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Lycanthas sat back, adopting a teacher mode that Thom was already getting familiar with. "All the instincts and learning of a typical bobcat are a part of you. That's why you're able to walk, although you are fighting that too, and why you can use bobcat-language. Just let yourself do what will come naturally."

Thom was quite aware of the instincts, but wasn't sure he liked them. "If I just do everything the instincts want, what will be the difference between me and a bobcat?"

"You do what you want, but don't fight how to do it. You don't normally think about how to walk, do you? So don't think about it now. Also, if you get flashes of intuition, you pay attention to them, for the instincts can pick out many things from your new senses that you will miss."

Thom's stomach rumbled again. "Okay, time for another try, I suppose."

• • •

Lycanthas spent the entire night tutoring him in the park, guiding, teaching, explaining. Thom figured they must have covered most of the park, and while they had seen many people about, none had seen them. Thom was brought up short when he realized that they had come back to their starting place, two neat piles of clothes laying there, and the morning sun shining down on them.

"You will [different], [hurry]," Lycanthas told him.

Thom, though he didn't believe it, had made good progress on her language lessons, but she still tended to speak too fast for him to figure out the nuances.

She changed back to her human form and started dressing herself. "You'll be changing back soon. I hope that you can see that it is not a curse, just a different way to live."

Lycanthas' timing was uncanny, for just as she finished, Thom changed back. "I don't know that I can take hunt-

ing down small animals like that," he said as he quickly started pulling his clothes back on.

Lycanthas turned on him, a peculiar gleam in her eye. "I admit it is cruel, but is raising an animal just so it can be slaughtered and eaten any kinder to it? This way your meal has had a real life, until you cut it short, and it had a chance to escape and keep on living, instead of being locked in place and just plain butchered. I'd rather fight to eat than enslave some helpless animal that I kill out of hand when its turn comes."

Thom was rather taken aback. "I'm not so sure. But — maybe you have a point."

Lycanthas calmed herself down. "Come on, I think you need to get home."

• • •

The following few days went well for Thom. Lycanthas' guidance made his nighttime problems a lot easier to handle. Nevertheless, he was there again on Wednesday. The secretary passed him on in as she had before.

"Well, how do you feel about being a were now?" Lycanthas asked as he came in.

Thom was a little startled by the question. "Well, I guess it's not as bad as it seemed at first, but I don't know if it's of any use. I mean, I'm a bobcat — so what? I don't see how that's going to get me a job, say."

"You might be surprised. An intelligent bobcat is very tough in a fight, so security, the military, anything like that would be open to you, and that's just the most obvious choice. If you keep your eyes open you can make being a were an integral part of any life you choose." She leaned back in her chair, "Of course, it would help if you actually made it a part of your life now."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean. I'm a were now and, well, isn't it a part of my life already?"

Lycanthas looked at him through narrowed eyes. "Have you told anyone what's happened to you?"

"Uh . . . well, no. I don't know what to tell them. I mean, why would anyone believe me?"

"You have a guaranteed way of proving it. And frankly, if you have to hide what you are from the people who know you best, you will be hiding for the rest of your life."

• • •

Thom lay on his bed, thinking. Lycanthas' advice echoed through his head. *You will be hiding for the rest of your life*. What chilled him was that she was probably right. *But what if they're scared of me?* he asked the voice.

He wouldn't blame anyone for being afraid of him. He was scared silly himself. Of course, it wasn't as bad as it had been. Lycanthas' teaching was helping him deal with it, and she had promised that it would get better, be entirely voluntary. Sometimes he wondered why he trusted her so much. But there was no reason not to, and she'd been right as far as he could tell. The only thing that bugged him was, how did she know all this already? Who taught her? The only thing she'd tell him was, "I've been around a while."

You will be hiding for the rest of your life. But what else could he do? Tell the world? Either be ridiculed or dissected?

But she hadn't said that, had she? She'd been talking about hiding it from his friends, people he was close to. He supposed they had to know something was wrong by now. But what could he say to them? Thom also knew his parents were getting worried about his erratic behavior lately. He would have to tell them something, and soon, or he might find himself visiting a psychiatrist.

Maybe that was an idea. Start with family and work from there. At the very least his sister would be forewarned. She might even — someday — thank him for it.

Before he could talk himself out of it again, Thom hopped up from the bed and hustled himself down the stairs. He found both his parents sitting at the table in the combined kitchen-dining room, and they looked up at him with a mixture of worry and guilt, obviously just breaking off a conversation. In a sudden flash of intuition Thom realized that they had been discussing what to do about him.

"Mom, Dad, there's something I need to tell you. . . ."