Issue Forty-Two

YARF!

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THE • JOURNAL • OF • APPLIED • ANTHROPOMORPHICS

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Issue Forty-Two

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Subscriptions are available at the rate of $45.00 for eight issues. Back issues are available; please write for prices. Make checks payable to *Yarf!* in U.S. funds only.

Send all subscription and requests for information to:
Yarf! • P.O. Box 1299 • Cupertino, CA 95015-1299

Yarf! The Journal of Applied Anthropomorphics. Issue #42, June 1996. Published by *Yarf!*, P.O. Box 1299, Cupertino, CA 95015-1299.

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FLAMING HAIRBALLS

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

For once we won't bore you, dear reader, with our own wandering thoughts. Instead, we shall segue directly into the profound insights of contributors and other readers. . . .

From Robert Deighton of East Yorkshire, England:

It's been a while since I've written to your righteous 'zine, but since there's been so much quality material in the last few issues, I don't want to monopolize the letters section with a huge, rambling missive, as I may have done in the past. So instead I'll just comment on some salient points. . . .

The literary standard of this 'zine's storytellers is always consistently high. What can one say about Michael Payne's, Gerald Perkins', and Waverly Pierre's writing skills that hasn't been said previously, except, 'Bravo! More!' ('Changes' is a real gem of a read, further enhanced by Brian Harp's excellent art.) Similarly, I enjoyed John Cawley's 'The House Cat', a simple but highly effective tale. (No doubt Roz Gibson liked this too, with her widely known interest in 'talking animal' stories.) And Dave White's 'Mr. Worthington's Clockwork Hobby Takes a New Turn' is early SF worthy of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne — if they'd written furry fiction, that is!

The graphic stories consistently impress too. *The Ace of Spades* ended with an appropriately downbeat note; some of the characters we got to know intimately were lost, but such is the nature of this type of tale. On the other hand, *Ralph the Wonder Hamster* is a shot in the arm humour-wise and delightfully mad! I certainly can't wait for the next part of 'Beguiler'; its plotline already looks *X-Files*-esque — especially with the locket perhaps containing an AI circuit? Incidentally, [Phil] Smith, the character of Sasha [Redfox] and her scenario were devised by Monika Livingstone [and Dave White] long before *The Net* ever existed, and I have the commissioned drawings of her from 1991 to prove it.

The art in *Yarf!* just gets better too, Kris Kreutzman's particularly; that in number thirty-nine was a real seasonal treat in more ways than one! As for the *Robert and Katrina* one-pager in number thirty-eight — methinks our feisty feline has seen *Terminator II* one too many times. Christina Hanson's unicorns and dragons are a delight to see, as are Phil Bolton's pretty felines. Roy D. Pounds continues to impress — I especially liked his 'Modern Shapechanger's Guide to Survival' and that in number thirty-seven; the leonine Klingons on the bridge of a *Bird of Prey* is a favorite of mine. Jordan Greywolf's art is superb as always. 'Kaara!' I like so much, and 'Sasta' even more so, the motorbike looking very much like that in the *Streethawk* television series. And it's so good to have art from the likes of Terrie Smith and Tygger Graf grace your pages (they're also major contributors to *Fur Scene*) as is anything by Lisa Iennaco — how about introducing her Whifferets to *Yarf!*

I'd love to comment on more, but it'd take up too much space, leaving less for others. To use the well-known acronym from *Rowrbrazzle* [and other APAs]: to everyone else, RAEBNC [read and enjoyed, but no comment]. Stay fit and furry, y'all!

Freefall by Mark Stanley



ART JUGGLING FOXES ANIMATION
MUNCHIES VIDEO MUSIC

Furry Party



WHEN: 2:30 - 6:00 + 8:30 - 1:30

WHERE: 253-255

Furry party poster from Baycon by Amy Pronovost

Heavens, it's our favorite Auntie Melody Rondeau of San Jose, CA, again:

Number forty sports a nifty color cover by the ever-neato Monika Livingstone. Are those the San Jose Sabercats cheerleaders [the Saberkittens]?

Roy's "Rules of Order" for shapeshifters are delightful and the bit with the warning about operating heavy machinery was a howl.

"Catnip Overdrive": While I am not overly fond of toon or strip characters who are aware they are but "players on the stage", this installment was amusing due to the sign and the fact that characters do not always behave even when the author/artist thinks he's in control.

Fred's observations on the Redwall series echo my own. For a while there I thought I was just becoming senile or stuck in a *déjà vu* loop.

"Dirt Furmen Dances" is a wonderful piece of work.

So *The Ace of Spades* comes to an end. (Or does it?) I've seen my share of violence and death in comics and thought I was a pretty hardened old cow about the whole thing, but seeing the dead on pages fourteen and fifteen and feeling the weight of the silence really poked me into awareness. I know plenty of players have been swept off the field during the course of *Ace*, but this was the most chilling. Well done, Mr. Grant.

"*Empires:* The Drinking Game": Umm, okay. How about substituting M&Ms for us teetotalers?

Bill Fitts creates some great domestic scenes with his brushstrokes. I also like the fact that Bill has such a unique style. There's no mistaking a Fitts critter!

Terrie, Terrie, Terrie . . . what can I say? Lovely as always. (I don't think you can draw anything ugly. It's nice to know you have at least one artistic failing. Ha.)

Joe Ny: This man can *Zip!* Wowzers.

"Squirrel in a Stew" certainly captured the narrative voice of the hard-boiled detective genré within a fun story that moved right along with nary a misstep. The added trauma of the constructs' "built-in obsolescence" gave the reader a real sense of urgency. Great illo of the squirrel-girl, too.

"Copilots" — Yeeeesssss!

Red and Eeon go starkers. Truly frightening.

"Uncontinued Bits" has clean art, great character design, and a funny story. I hope we'll see more from Dave. (Where has he been hiding himself?)

"Leslie" looks ready for action and ready to run. Nice job, Steve.

"Changes": How appropriate that magic and technology meld. Furries make great security folks due to their heightened senses. Subtle lines throughout that are almost throwaways help set the scene and establish the "otherness" of the characters. The conflict seemed to be resolved a little too quickly and I expected more, but perhaps this story is a sequel? I know it's difficult to get the battle to balance the rest of the story, since the author has to spend some time setting up a situation, but Sapheer's rescue of Hank and Vern seemed a bit rushed.

Sapheer's look is a wonderful extrapolation of what a furry demon should/would look like. Great job, Brian!

"Keri" on page fifty-five looks like she could be a close cousin of Sapheer.

Phil always manages to do cute without veering off into cute that makes your teeth hurt. Not an easy thing to do, and yet he manages to pull it off.

I like [Christina] "Smudge" [Hanson]'s very distinctive dragons. More. More.

"Conrad" and Tygger's self-portrait: Hmm. The self-portrait is somewhat disconcerting — I mean, have you ever seen Tygger when she wasn't taking the world by storm? Despite the apparent quietude of the piece, there's a glint in her eyes. I'd watch my back, were I you.

"Vupis Magus" has a nice style and is a good variation on the "standard" furry fox.

"Fur" was very well-done, with many cultural details and a mystery to boot. This one surprised me, since I thought I knew where it was going. I was pleased to be taken down an entirely different path.

"Cataroo"'s art is luscious.

A bat as "Lady of the Evening" — cringe! What a great little pun; I wish I'd thought of it. And "Stripes and Spots" put to silence that old-fashioned chestnut that they just don't mix.

"Black Hunter" and "White Fisher" were good contrasting pieces.

"Voices" had a cute gag, but was a little drawn out for my tastes.

Lance [Rund]'s skunk is a good capper for another fine issue.

Bravo, gentlefurs, take a bow.

Number forty-one: Cool cover for a cool 'zine.

"Freefall": Yup, those pesky old laws of physics will get you every time.

I like seeing the furry-party fliers sprinkled throughout.

"Thrasher Fan" has movement and style.

Ah, the end of "Uncontinued Bits". Yes, yes, life imitates art once more. Heh heh.

I hope the rider and mount survive the "Terror in the Vines". Yikes!

Wingwarrior: Hooray! But argh — it ended too soon! I want more. A mystery is set up and things are moving right along and it's only been five pages!

"Such Sweet Sounds" is very nice and fit in nicely as a lead-in to the story that followed.

"Beethoven's Last" finally addressed the problem of how to wrap a muzzle around a human-style instrument. It was an interesting observation Monica made, that her music didn't seem real until someone else played it. How many other artists and writers also feel that way? The story was a sad one and I should've known it was going to end in that fashion, but I hoped it wouldn't. But that makes it all the more realistic. (Sigh.)

More eye candy from Bill Fitts—keep 'em coming, says I!

"Puff" was evocative, certainly, but I can't see Calvin ever really abandoning Hobbes. Calvin strikes me as someone who will grow up but not grow old.

"Fill in the Blanks" has potentially good gags, but the delivery and pacing need to be tightened up.

"Beach Bilby" was a refreshing little stop — easy on the eyes and put me in mind of sunny beaches. . . .

"Sarah" by Tygger: Hey, I'm not messing with her!



Furry party poster from Baycon by Roy D. Pounds II

"Confronting the Change" was a pretty clever turn on the old "were" legends. ("They're heeerrrreeee. . . .")

Summer [Jackson]'s feline is up to no good, I'm sure.

[Jim] Groat's camel . . . uh, if she's got two humps, is she a bactrian or a . . . (I forget)?

"Dumb Blonde Joke": Ouch!

"Gone Fishin'" was cute.

"Surprise Package" offered no great surprises, but the art was nicely done.

Thank you thank you thank you! The rules of order and manners regarding sketchbooks should be required reading for all fans and artists alike. And Lance's illo is soooo true.

"Beguiler": Yay! I've been waiting to see more of this, and Monika and Dave really deliver. Dawn [Shiller]'s inking follows Monika's stylistic lead nicely. I loved the way Sasha dispatched the ninja. (No helpless damsel in distress here, no sir.) The revelation of just how deeply Sasha is into all this was quite frightening. The reaction of Stockingfoot to Sasha's arrival and his quick change from studied boredom to instant alertness was just the right touch of humor after so much tense and fevered action.

"Nasira": Ho, ho.

"Lurker in the Tower" could have been a longer tale and a bit more complex. As it stands now, it could easily have been two human adventurers, and had there not been the occasional mention of ears flicking and tails lashing, I'd be none the wiser that it was a furry story.

"Draw the Fox": Oh, this is cruel (and funny).

"Fence": Man, you really know how to end on a down note, but I felt oddly boyed by the piece immediately after, of the two cubs at bedtime prayers.

"Catnip Overdrive": Somehow I missed the connection here and the joke just doesn't work for me.

I hope Katrina plans to wade in wearing big rubber boots to help out Robert. He's in trouble. Beeg, beeg trouble. ("Love your fuzzy 'do, man. . . .")

Thanks for another coupla great issues. Can't wait for more.

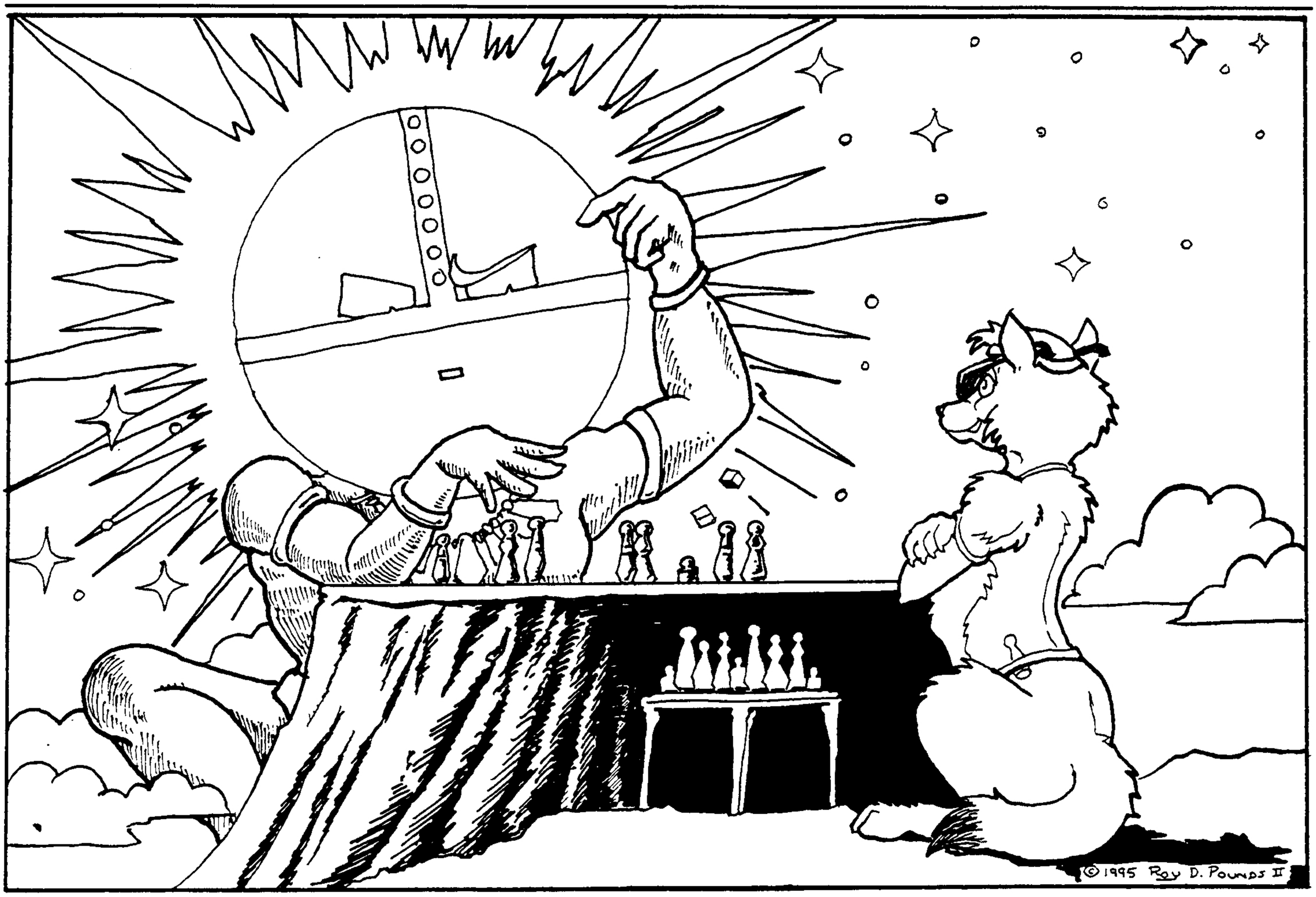
Fred Patten informs us that *Babe*, a movie about anthropomorphized farm animals (reviewed in issue thirty-nine), picked up seven nominations in this year's Academy Awards. It won only one of these: Best Visual Effects. *Toy Story* also got three nominations, but won none of them — though director John Lasseter was awarded a Special Achievement Award. Nick Parks of "Creature Comforts" fame, however, did win Best Animated Short for his new Wallace and Gromit adventure "A Close Shave". Last, but not least, Charles F. "Chuck" Jones has, at long last, been recognized by the Academy with an honorary award for his achievements in animation and character creation.

And thanks for all the warm fuzzies we've gotten from folks recently, including Ken Farrell, Summer Jackson, Amy Provonost, and Matt McAndrews. Belated thanks also to Don Fitch for his generous contribution to the *Yarf!* party fund at Confurence Seven.

Deadlines (I'm gonna need more rope!)

Remember, the deadlines listed are *not* written in stone, and are subject to change without notice. (A good rule of thumb to remember is that deadlines for upcoming issues are the last day of every even-numbered month.) *Yarf!* is, after all, a hobby, not a professional publication — the staff has real lives that occasionally interfere. We *do* encourage people to do this at home. . . .

***#44:* 31 August 1996**
***#45:* 31 October 1996**
***#46:* 31 December 1996**
***#47:* 28 February 1997**



IT'S BEEN A GOOD YEAR FOR COYOTE.

Patten's Pontifications

by Fred Patten

***House of Tribes*, by Garry Kilworth. Illustrated by Paul Robinson. London, Bantam Press, November 1995, [xiii+] 430 pages, £12.99; ISBN 0-593-03376-0.**

Kilworth has established a reputation as an author of "realistic" talking-animal novels in the vein of *Watership Down*, with *Hunter's Moon: a Story of Foxes; Midnight's Sun: a Story of Wolves;* and *Frost Dancers: a Story of Hares. House of Tribes* is a bit different — in fact, it is accurately blurbed as "An epic animal fantasy in the tradition of *Duncton Wood.*" The animals are superficially like *Watership Down*'s rabbits, but a bit too clever and well-organized to pass as "realistic".

Pedlar is a young yellow-necked mouse born into a Hedgerow community of British wildlife. They are three fields away from the House, a fabulous paradise too good to be believable:

Wandering rodents had entertained the hedges and ditches with tales about the House. It was a place where mice lived in comfort, they said, warm all the year round. It was a place where food was in plenty, whatever the season, whatever the weather. It was a place where a variety of different species of mice made nests above ground, yet still remained out of the rain, out of the wind, out of reach of the fox and weasel, the stoat and hawk. (pg. 3)

But Pedlar begins to have a Dream urging him to go to the House, for his destiny is to play a part in a great event that will befall the mice there. Dreams are believed to be messages sent by the departed ancestors and guardians of all mice, so Pedlar is morally pressured to uproot his life and venture to the House despite his doubts.

Pedlar becomes so involved in the complex society within the old country mansion that he (and the reader) tend to forget about the plot. The House is no happy playground, although it is more full of mice than it should be. Readers will recognize what the mice do not; the House's nudnik (human) inhabitants are old and probably senile, and are mostly unaware of the horde of vermin robbing their pantries and chewing up the books in the vast Library. There is a sadistic child among them, but his death traps are usually easily avoided. (Mice who do fall prey are fed to his psychotic, cannibalistic pet white mouse.)

The House has become overpopulated with mice, who have separated into warring tribes, one for practically every room. The kitchen mice, who control the coveted never-empty larder, are the Savage Tribe, marked by Viking names like Jarl Forkwhiskers, Gytha, and Tostig, and led by the appropriately brutal and bloody Gorm-the-old. The library mice, the Bookeaters such as Owain, Cadwallon, Rhodri, and Gruffydd Greentooth, are literati and mystics, led by Frych-the-freckled who is *into witchcraft and black magic.* The attic-dwelling Invisibles are aloof cynics who give each other sarcastic names like Whispersoft (he invariably bellows), Nonsensical (the most practical in their tribe), and Ferocious (a coward). The cellar-dwelling Stinkhorns have vulgar names like Phart and Flegm, and you don't want to know their personal habits. Pedlar gets so involved with these colorful personalities (and others) and their intra- and intertribal feuds that it comes as a shock when the plot resumes more than a hundred pages later, and we are reminded that Pedlar is there for a purpose.

Although the divine larder is never empty, it never has enough for all the mice at the same time. The main reason is that the mice are forced to wait for quiet after dark, while the giant nudniks can come into the kitchen and eat as much as they want whenever they want. Gorm-the-old decides to call a House-wide crusade to drive out the nudniks, so the larder will be all theirs. Astrid the high priestess prophecies disaster and a great famine if they are successful, but Gorm — who envisions all mousedom united under his leadership — bulls ahead anyway. Pedlar, not sure whether he should participate in the Great Nudnik Drive or oppose it, is swept up in the hysterical frenzy that will change all of their lives forever.

Kilworth is talented at establishing his almost-identical mice with sharply individual personalities and characteristics. The story unfolds with drama and wit:

Gorm-the-old was a legend in his own time and the story of his rise to power was told to every new infant of the Savage Tribe, whether they wanted to hear it or not. Now he was placing that legend on the line. (pg. 125)

There is a mood of both fatality and of challenge. It gradually becomes obvious that the lives of the mice are to some extent preordained, but their fates can be changed if strong individuals recognize the crisis points and act upon them. Unfortunately, the Fates never speak clearly. Pedlar must gamble as to whether he has been sent to support Gorm in his daring crusade, or to save the mice from Gorm's madness. To the reader, who will have a more realistic idea of the results of mice attacking humans, the question is more as to whether Pedlar himself can survive, or help any of his friends among the House mice to survive. The results may surprise you.

Summerhill Hounds, by J. Robert King. Illus. by Terry Dykstra. (_First Quest™ Books_) Lake Geneva, WI, TSR, Inc., November 1995, 250 pages, $3.99; ISBN: 0-7869-0196-9.

The _First Quest™ Books_ are a series of "Young Readers Adventures" set in the _Endless Quest™_ gaming world. Although it is a straightforward novel, its literary style and quality are closer to those "Choose Your Own Adventure" paperbacks. It is a very simplistic adventure in a very stereotypical fantasy setting. But it is certainly anthropomorphic. To quote the back-cover blurb:

Castle Dunkirk might have been musty and moldy, but for the Summerhill Hounds, it was home sweet home. Sheepdogs, collies, mastiffs, cockers, terriers, bloodhounds — a veritable mess of domesticated dogs — lived and worked around the massive fortress. But that was before the orc attack. Now, all is gone . . . castle . . . soldier friends . . . days of idyll. The dogs must band together to pursue the piggish warriors that are marching their men into captivity. Their decision sets them on an adventure in which — battling odds and strange creatures — they must dig deep within themselves, discover bravery and fantastical powers, and learn to live wild and free.

Keep in mind that this is intended for "Young Readers". Otherwise it is too easy to criticize its lack of sophistication. Fantasy-adventure role-playing settings are, by definition, not realistic, but they need to be pseudo-realistic enough to sustain a modicum of believability and suspense. The stereotype of _Summerhill Hounds_ is closer to that of generic Disney animation, especially the funny-animal _Robin Hood_ movie — the one in which the Sheriff of Nottingham has Pat Buttram's hillbilly accent. Here it's the "old codger" bloodhound, Lank Leonard, whose accent and manners of "southern gentility" (pg. 129) make him sound like the twin of Trusty in _Lady and the Tramp_ — not exactly what one would expect in a setting of early Norman castles with orcs and the Celtic Seelie Court just the other side of the drawbridge.

We all know that medieval courts included packs of hunting dogs. But would you believe a pack that resembles the cast of a dog show? There's Mongy the terrier; Reedel the English sheepdog (the furballs with hair covering their eyes — just picture one of those in a manor lord's deer hunt); Merry the collie; Dea the golden retriever; the aforementioned Lank Leonard; Goldie the cocker spaniel; Gray the deerhound; Sheba the part-wolf deerhound; and Slav the black mastiff. Slav is actually an enchanted fire-breathing mastiff, which is a nice touch of originality; otherwise the crew resembles the multibreed stray-dog casts of _Lady and the Tramp_ or _Oliver & Company_ more than what one expects in a sword-and-sorcery landscape. And as soon as the bloody capture of the castle is finished, the orcs suddenly start bumbling around more like the buffoonish ogres from Disney Television's _The Gummi Bears_ than the serious menaces of Middle Earth.

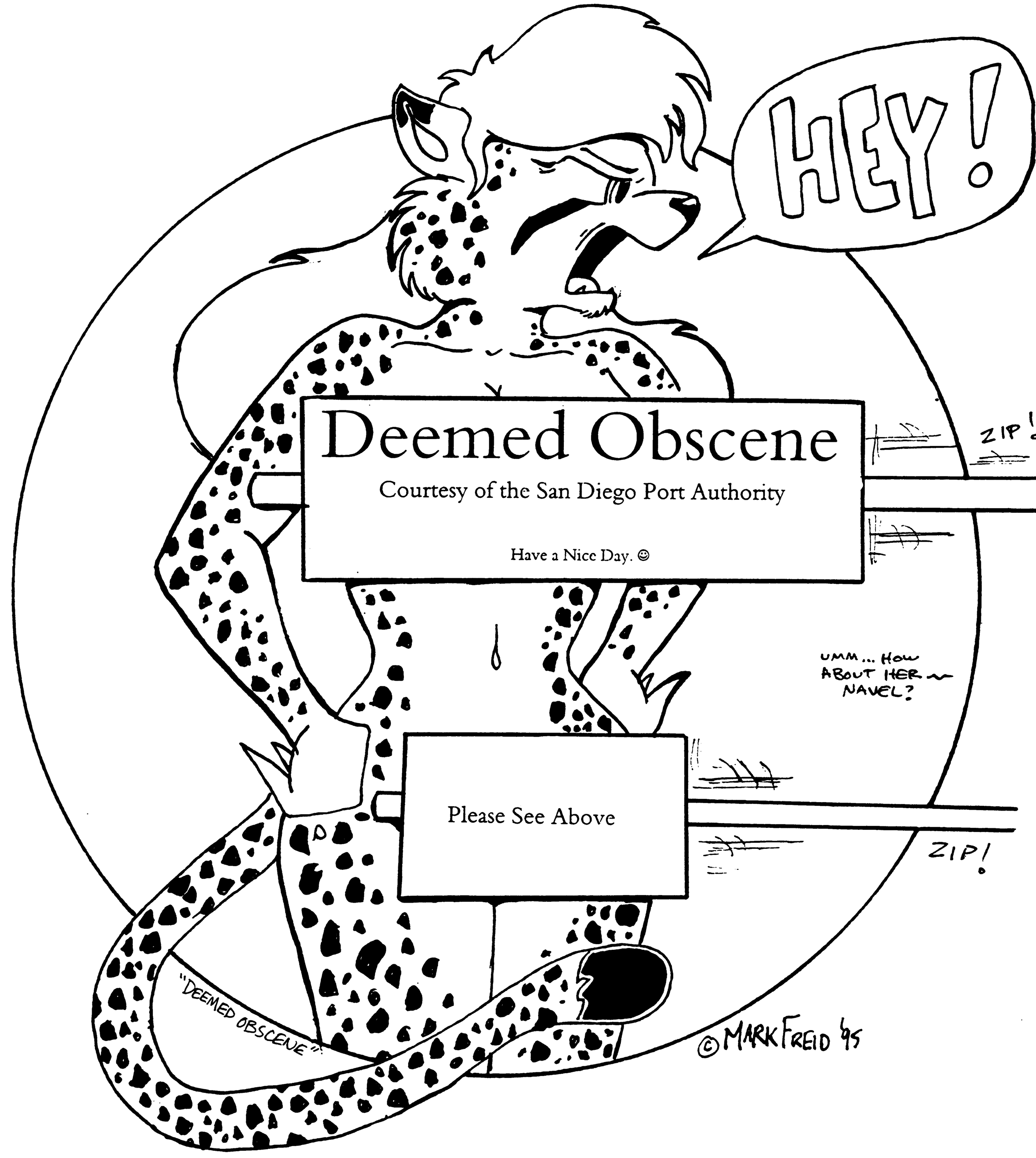
There is also the _Watership Down_-based stereotype of "realistic" animals who have their own language, folklore, and religion. But King's dog-legends unfortunately lack the word-magic of Adams, Kilworth, Horwood, _et al_. Two ancestral wolf packs are the Griooowas and the Uuffuffs. The legend of the Silver Dog and the Seelie Hound isn't bad, but it loses a lot when his First Dogs have names as pedestrian as Humphrey, Ivy, and Kelly.

One coincidentally identical conceit both here and in Kilworth's _House of Tribes_ is the least convincing aspect of both novels: that the dogs (or mice) believe themselves to be intelligent and sophisticated, but that the humans whose buildings they live in are only dumb animals — their pets, here, and unpleasant vermin (like giant cockroaches) in _House of Tribes_. It's amusing to observe these animals considering themselves to be so superior, but not really believable that characters smart enough to realize what intelligence and self-awareness are would not recognize the same traits in the humans whom they can see talking among themselves and manipulating utensils.

What happens to the loyal dogs (plus a supercilious cat named Gato) cast loose in a countryside of fierce wolves, brutal orcs, and a magical Celtic faery realm is at least unexpected. And it's a quick and relatively inexpensive read. If Disney intends to make any more movies along the lines of _The Aristocats_ or _The Black Cauldron_, they might keep this novel in mind.




SO. DID THE CONVENTION CENSORS HIT YOU TOO?
CENSORED
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CENSORED
Brought to you by the National Endowment for the Inanities
WHIP ME
BEAT ME
HIT ME
SPANK ME
FONDLE ME
BUT DON'T
CALL ME
LATE FOR
DINNER!
HAVA NAGILA
MARVEL CAN SUCK MY COCK!
SDCC 95'


HEY!
Deemed Obscene
Courtesy of the San Diego Port Authority
Have a Nice Day. ☺
Please See Above
UMM... HOW ABOUT HER NAVEL?
ZIP!
"DEEMED OBSCENE"!
ZIP!
©MARK FREID '95

New blood joins this Earth
And quickly he's subdued
Through constant pained disgrace,
The young boy learns their rules
With time the child draws in,
This whipping boy done wrong
Deprived of all this thoughts
The young man struggles on and on
He's known, a vow unto his own
That never from this day
His will they'll take away

What I've felt
What I've known
Never shined through in what I've shone
Never be, never see
Won't see what might have been
What I've felt
What I've known
Never shined through in what I've shone
ever me
Label me
So I'll dub thee Unforgiven. . . .

— lyrics by Metallica

Unforgiven • Part One

Written and Illustrated by Roz Gibson

Author's Note

This is not meant to answer questions of why Salem is the way he is. I mean this to be strictly a historical account of events, and a study of how Salem affected the people he came in contact with. I leave it to the reader to draw his own conclusions as to cause and effect. Sometimes things just happen, without any reason for it. . . .

• • •

Jack Bertram Salem was born on March 7, 2370, the second child of Allway ("Alley") and Marsha Salem. His older brother, George, had been born three years before. Jack grew up in an affluent suburb of the Eastern Confederation capital of Albany, one that dated back to the time humans alone occupied the houses. His father was a house cat-Russian sable mix, while his mother was pure sable. Both were relaxed, easygoing intellectuals, well off financially and unusually well educated for nonhumans of that time. His father had degrees in recent history and literature, and taught at the local university. His mother was involved in civic planning for the government, but switched to part-time work when her children were very young.

Jack was physically precocious, learning to crawl and walk at a much earlier age than his brother. He was extremely alert and aware of what was going on around him, so much so that he was often agitated by things his parents didn't even notice. Despite his physical development, he didn't talk until he was nearly two. Even then he used words sparingly, and was considered a very quiet, introspective kit.

By the time he was four and ready for preschool, he was already reading at a basic level. Unfortunately, his neighborhood had few small children, and other than his brother he had little contact with people his own age. When he finally entered preschool, the multitude of children of all different species astonished him. At the beginning he just sat and stared, absorbing it all.

Preschool for nonhumans was not particularly challenging in an academic sense, and Jack rapidly mastered anything they taught him. He acquired enough social skills to get by, but didn't seem interested in extensive interaction. Large groups bothered him, overwhelmed him, and he spent most of his time alone or with the one or two friends he managed to make. He proved to be overly sensitive to teasing and normal childish strife, and after being punished several times for fighting, he spent even more time alone, avoiding conflict altogether.

It must be noted here that teachers come down especially hard on predator children, because they can seriously injure others. The teachers at the school even chided Jack's parents for not teaching him better self-control, for it is considered a very grave social *faux pas* for any carnivore to use natural weaponry on anyone. His parents were befuddled by his behavior; his brother George was a good-natured and placid kit whose avoidance of conflict bordered on the timid. But Jack was nothing if not a quick learner, and once he learned that fighting resulted in punishment he did not fight in school any more — at least not openly. He usually dominated his brother at home, despite George's bigger size. On the rare occasions George got up the gumption to fight back, he won through sheer weight. But the ferocity with which Jack fought scared him, and he usually avoided fighting with his younger brother if he could help it.

When Jack entered primary school, he was already reading several grade levels above his peers, and had mastered basic computer usage. He found school boring. He

found most of his schoolmates boring as well. Because of his academic skills he was able to make himself reasonably popular with his less intelligent classmates, bartering lunch food or other favors in exchange for his help with their work, but he made few real friends.

Jack lived near one of the old, disused freeways that crisscrossed the country. On the other side of the road was an extensive woodland, left to grow fallow for well over a century. Though he had often used the freeway's long, flat expanses for skateboarding, it wasn't until he was seven or eight that the woods began to call him.

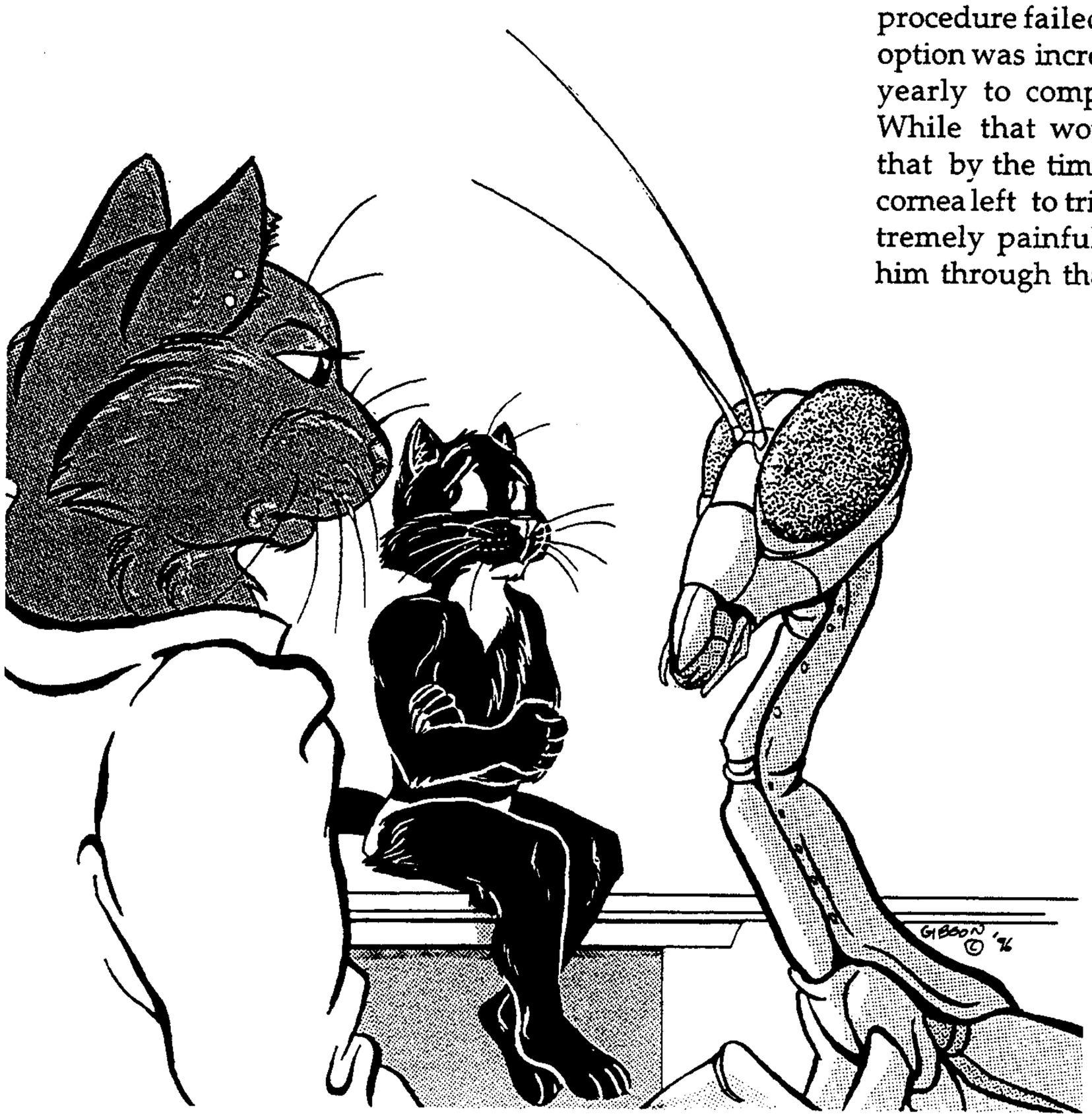
Like all other children, he had been scared by tales of "ferals", nonhumans that lived like wild animals in the woods. While ferals were very real, they were uncommon and certainly wouldn't be living so close to civilization. Still, it was enough to keep most curious kits out of the wood until they were older — but Jack had finally reached the age when curiosity overcomes fear.

He found his first excursions exhilarating, tinged with the fear of ferals or the worry of becoming lost. While he quickly learned that there was nothing to fear from nonexistent ferals, he became more aware of all the other animals around him. The woods of this time were far richer in animal and bird life than they had been during human times, an abundance of life that surrounded and embraced him. While his stuffy intellectual parents had little use for the wilder side of the world, in it Jack found new challenges.

Senses that were the legacy of his animal ancestors sharpened through practice. Clambering through brush and trees increased his already excellent motor control and strength, and he found that his sharp claws were perfect for climbing trees. One disadvantage he quickly discovered was that his long fur tended to be a magnet for burrs and other plant hitchhikers, and his mother had to spend many hours grooming these out of his coat. While his parents weren't thrilled with his sudden interest in exploring the woods, they figured there was no harm in it either, and at least it got him out of the house.

When Jack was nine, a routine vision screening at his school showed he was becoming nearsighted. While it was true he had to sit close to the vid to see it well and he often had trouble seeing what was on the board at school, it never occurred to him that this was unusual. He thought that was the way *everyone* saw. An in-depth examination by his pediatrician revealed that he had a congenital eye problem, which would rapidly worsen as he grew older — possibly leading even to legal blindness.

His parents had several options, none of them perfect. While doctors routinely cloned organs such as kidneys, eyes were trickier and not at all certain to take. If a clone procedure failed, Jack would be totally blind. Another option was incremental laser surgery on the corneas, done yearly to compensate for the growing nearsightedness. While that would work for a while, the doctors warned that by the time he was an adult he wouldn't have any cornea left to trim. Any kind of corneal work was also extremely painful, and his parents were reluctant to put him through that kind of yearly ordeal.



The procedure they ultimately decided on was laser surgery designed to scar the eye into a permanent shape, preventing it from lengthening further. It was not a common procedure, and in the hospital Jack picked up on his parents' anxiety. He had never been so scared, and for the first time in years he clung to his mother like a small kitten, fighting with all his will not to cry.

After the operation there were anxious days of blindness under bandages. They finally came off to a world that had changed from reasonably good focus to a riot of blur and colors. The procedure had been a technical success, but at a price. And that price was the worsening of his vision — permanently. Although his eyes would stay the same, that "same" was a dozen times worse than it had been before.

To a child, with little conception of the future, an explanation that this horrible thing had been done to him for the long-term good held no meaning. Jack, terrified and furious, attacked the doctor in a rage, trying to rip off its antennae. His parents were also angry over what they perceived to be a botched job that left them with fewer options than before. Although they had signed a consent form beforehand, they still persuaded the hospital to pay for Jack's vision care indefinitely. It was a small victory, but they could do nothing else besides get their kit fitted with glasses and take him home.

Their guilt over this was great, and they tried to make up for it by being even more permissive with Jack. When he entered school that year he was subjected to harsh teasing from the other students. With laser surgery able to correct most vision problems, very few people under sixty wore glasses. Almost no children did. He got into numerous fights, but instead of punishment his parents yelled at the teachers for not sticking up for him. Eventually a combination of punishment at school and the teachers getting the other students to ease off ended most of the fighting, but Jack was left embittered and even more antisocial than before.

It was around that time that he killed his first wild animal in the woods. Although he had been stalking and tracking animals for a long time, he did it just for a personal challenge. Sometimes, though, he felt the thrill of the hunt, his tail twitching in eagerness as he stalked a rabbit or bird. His first kill was a rabbit, and he had stalked into pouncing distance without it noticing him. Usually he would stop there, satisfied with getting that close, but that day the rabbit noticed him at the last second and made to bolt away. Almost without thinking he struck at it, pinning it with his sharp claws. The rabbit screamed in fear, and he silenced it forever by sinking his sharp new adult fangs into its neck.



He had never felt such a thrill in his entire life. This was the power that the Creators gave to carnivores, the power of life and death over others. His family would never know this, living the placid life of humans or plant eaters. He quickly tore apart and devoured the rabbit, reveling in the taste of its blood. Then he promptly threw it all back up, being unused to such food. The only real meat he'd had before was already dead and prepackaged, and that only about once a week because it was so expensive.

He carefully washed any traces of blood off himself before going home, worried that if his parents knew what he had done they'd forbid him to go into the woods. And there was no way he was going to let himself be deprived of that experience.

When Jack was ready to enter middle school he scored so high on the standardized tests that they placed him in the gifted classes. For once in his life the schoolwork was nearly at his level. But being in

the gifted classes brought its own set of social problems, because the classes were composed mostly of human children, with only a scattering of nonhumans. Human children tended to be cliquish and to look down their noses at nonhumans. They didn't dare tease anyone like Jack openly; most of them had learned early on that carnivores could inflict a lot of damage if provoked. But at the same time they also left the handful of nonhuman youngsters in the classes socially isolated and alone.

That didn't particularly bother Jack, who personally thought the humans just as empty-headed and weak as the nonhumans he knew. He did develop casual friendships with the other nonhumans in his class, but nothing very intimate. Simply for lack of anything better to do at school all day he excelled in his work, finishing middle school in the top five in the gifted class, the only nonhuman to score so high. The counselors at school urged his parents to send him to a private school, but they balked at the cost. They were attempting to save enough to send both him and his brother to college, and hoped that the local public high school would serve well enough.

By the time Jack was ready to enter high school at fifteen, he was essentially a recluse. His only real friend was a phlegmatic Burmese python who was in the gifted classes with him. While Jack enjoyed the python's company, there wasn't a lot the snake could do except watch vids and go to shopping centers with him. Once the cold weather hit, the python couldn't go out at all because he'd freeze to death. Other than the two weeks his family traditionally spent at an upstate ski resort, Jack spent most of his winter months at home reading or watching the vid. He was an insatiable reader, unusual for a nonhuman, devouring both fiction and nonfiction with the same interest. Although he was expert at all facets of computer use he rarely used it for anything other than homework, saying it bothered his eyes too much.

One reason for avoiding social contact might have been his lateness in reaching puberty; he was being outstripped in size by many of his classmates. Although he was placed in the gifted classes in high school, he also had to take a number of classes with the regular student body. There he found nonhumans a lot more willing to take him on than the human kids were. They resented him for his academic achievements, saying he was trying to act like a human, and mocked his glasses and smaller size. His main tormentors were a group of larger-than-average nonhumans of various species led by Ronnie "Ears" McClellen, a nonhuman of undetermined ancestry who was easily twice Jack's size. They dominated nearly all the students at the school. Even the humans wouldn't mess with them. Although they didn't quite dare attack anyone on campus, they had no problem beating the tar out of someone off campus and often did. Their victims invariably kept quiet, fearful of even worse retaliation. Jack was far too savvy to be caught off guard outside of school, but they made his school life miserable.

At the same time, indeed since his first kill at age ten, he spent weekends and at least one or two days during the week in the woods honing his hunting skills. As with anything he set his mind to, he quickly became very good at it, despite his poor vision. Once he had sight or scent of an animal, it rarely escaped. Mainly, he killed rabbits and squirrels, birds still being too wary, although once he did manage to kill a grouse. He usually ate what he killed, but more than once that resulted in some kind of nasty intestinal bug, his body unable to handle what his animal ancestors could ingest with impunity. Sometimes he just tore his victim apart. He never felt more alive than when he was stalking and killing, and he felt nothing but contempt for the other predator nonhumans who were content to throw their instincts away.

Despite all his knowledge, that was an oversight of the facts, or perhaps a deliberate self-delusion. Most of the carnivore nonhumans did not suppress or abandon their hunting instincts; the Creators had deliberately engineered them to be minimal or nonexistent. Although Jack knew as much about the dreaded regressed carnivore syndrome as anyone else, he never entertained the thought that it might be happening to him. Everyone knew those affected became mindless animals, while he still outstripped all but the brightest humans in school. He viewed his hunting activities as mental and physical exercise and an exhilarating diversion — nothing more.

As with everything else he mastered, he wanted something more challenging. Rabbits and squirrels were all well and good, but he wanted bigger, tougher prey. The woods were home to deer as well as a number of larger predators and omnivores such as raccoons, coyotes, foxes, opossums, and bobcats. Once in a great while a transient black bear or wolf would wander through, but Jack's wood was far too small to support them and they continued south toward the Appalachians. His hunt for bigger game was hindered by his poor vision, which prevented night hunting. While he got around well enough at night in the city, where there was plenty of street lighting, in the woods he was effectively blind.

He got around this by going out at dusk or very early in the morning. His first larger kill was an opossum. It didn't put up much of a fight and was so vile to bite into he didn't even try to eat it. When he tried a raccoon he got more than he could handle, and was badly bitten in the hands and arms before he smashed its skull with a rock. His parents were suitably horrified when he came home so wounded, and after rushing him to the doctor for rabies shots and a bout under a healing machine they forbade him to go near the woods.

The ban came a few years too late. As he entered his sixteenth summer puberty finally caught up with him; he grew stronger and bigger. The flood of hormones made his moods more unpredictable, and he chafed at parental attempts at control. His brother avoided conflict with him and his parents uneasily realized that he was becoming

uncontrollable. Neither boy was a youngster any more, and their father knew he would probably come out on the losing side if he tried to discipline Jack physically.

That summer marked a number of turning points in Jack's life. He finally brought down a young deer after days of careful tracking and marking of movements. He got a bit banged up, but it was nothing compared to the rush he got ripping out the animal's throat with his fangs. It tasted better than anything he had ever eaten.

Unfortunately, his parents had gotten suspicious of his dawn and dusk excursions, and asked his brother to follow him to find out what he was up to. Poor George Salem, an affable and slightly absent-minded eighteen-year-old, had no idea what he was getting into when he trailed his younger brother into the woods that day.

Quite lost in the forest, he was about to go back when the sounds of struggle drew his attention. Nothing could have prepared him for the sight of Jack crouched in a slight ditch near the partially disemboweled body of a deer, his muzzle and hands covered with blood. Blood seemed to be everywhere. Jack had heard George approach and met his horrified gaze with bared fangs, face twisted into a snarl the older boy had never seen. George was so scared that for long seconds he couldn't move. Neither of them did, the tableau still except for the lashing of Jack's tail. When George's legs finally obeyed he turned to flee. Before he ran a dozen yards Jack slammed into him with a force George didn't think the smaller boy capable of. He screamed and covered his head in terror, certain he was going to be killed, but Jack pinned him to the ground and harshly demanded his silence over what he had seen. George was so frightened he would've promised to cut off his own tail to placate Jack, and his groveling seemed enough to convince his brother. He was forced to wait while Jack washed the blood off himself in a nearby stream, then returned with him to the house.

The experience left George so terrified he didn't dare speak of it to anyone, certain Jack would kill him if he did. As for Jack, the close call worried him enough that he decided it would be prudent to leave off hunting for a time. Although he didn't fear his parents, he didn't want to find out what would happen if anyone else discovered his little "hobby". Besides, he was to start his second year of high school soon, and that would cause him enough problems without any other worries. . . .

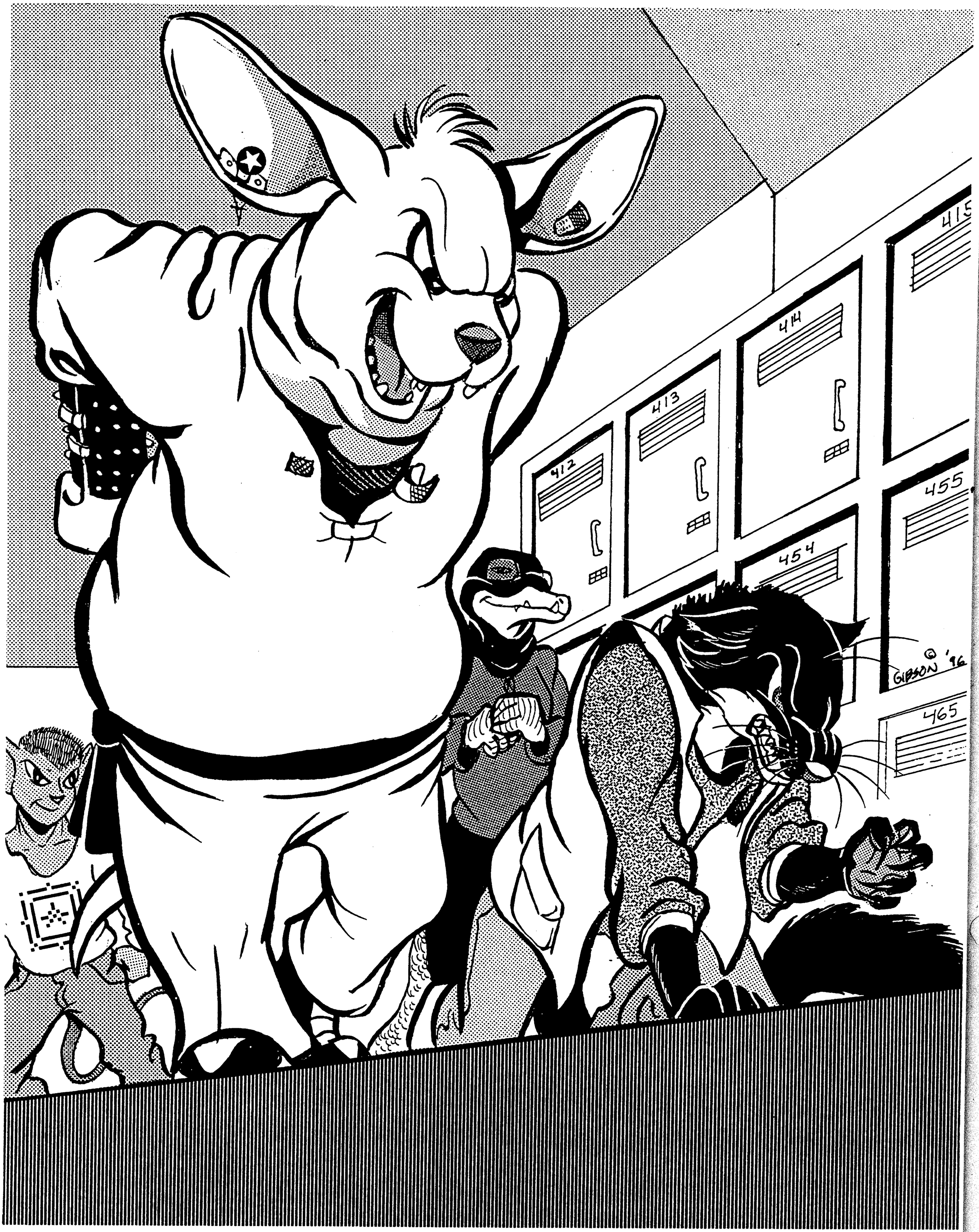
His prediction of what the next school year would hold was truer than he knew. "Ears" McClellen and his cronies were seniors then, and a lot less worried about disciplinary action from school authorities. Since few nonhumans went on to college they were unconcerned about any future academic consequences their behavior might have, and spent most of their last year at school tormenting other students. While the school authorities were aware of the bullying and extortion going on, beyond expelling the offenders for a few days at a stretch there wasn't much they did. Their choice of action was just to wait out the school year until the troublemakers left, a decision that was to have dire consequences.

Jack endured the conditions at the school as best he could. He was considerably better at holding his temper in check than when he was younger, and saw no point in getting the shit beat out of him trying to take on people who were a lot bigger. At the same time, he was probably not aware of just how powerful he was becoming. His activities in the forest left him more fit and limber than most of his peers, while progressing adolescence was bringing to the surface raging emotions he didn't know he had.

As with the other students who were targets of the bully gang's attention, Jack was subjected to verbal harassment and extortion. He got into the habit of not bringing lunch money to school, and hunger just served to make him more irritable. His locker was broken into on numerous occasions, something designed to be more an annoyance than anything else, since he never kept anything of value in it. Other students began to sense the smoldering fire in Jack and avoided him more studiously than before. The smaller students especially did not like the feral, intent way he looked at them . . . as if he were sizing them up.

Toward the end of the school year Ears and his friends were even more brazen, pushing people around in the halls and generally making a nuisance of themselves. One day they spotted Jack between classes and moved in for some fun. At the time, Jack, distracted by another student asking about a difficult assignment, was unaware of the approach of his tormentors until it was too late. Before he knew it, they had shoved him to the ground with enough force to bang his knees and knock his glasses off. As the student he was talking to stood paralyzed with fear, Ears and the two friends with him surrounded Jack, crushing his glasses to powder underfoot. They expected Jack to back down sullenly as he always had before, providing them with a few minutes of good entertainment.

In the few seconds that elapsed between hitting the floor and realization of what had happened, Jack unlocked the door in himself where he usually kept his temper in check. The red monster of rage and adrenaline roared out, and to Ears' utter astonishment Jack threw himself at him, fangs and claws bared. The only thing that saved Ears' life was an arm thrown up in panic. Even so, Jack tore that arm open to the bone and the force of his charge knocked the much larger Ears to the floor. The other students, Ears' friends included, stood in shock, stunned by the sudden attack. It took only a few seconds for them to realize something was wrong as Ears' sounds of rage over someone daring to fight back changed to screams for help as Jack methodically ripped into him. Blood spattered the walls and floors of the hallway, panicking the surrounding students as others, drawn by the sounds of the fight, crowded closer. While one of Ears' friends fled in fear, the other, to his credit, tried to get the berserk Jack off his leader. He succeeded in that, and Jack savagely


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attacked him. Thick layers of fat and loose skin saved Ears from fatal wounds, but he was too badly hurt to help his friend, who now tried frantically to get away.

Teachers and security arrived to a pandemonium of students screaming and yelling in excitement or panic, overlaid with the shrieks of the student Jack was attacking. Blood was splashed everywhere; Ears lay bleeding from a dozen wounds, and his unfortunate crony had left a trail of blood down the hall in trying to shake off his relentless attacker. It took long seconds for security to force their way through the crowd, but finally a huge moose-like guard pried Jack off his victim and held him off the ground, pinning his arms. Jack, completely lost in rage, tried futilely to reach the guard. It wasn't until the school doctor arrived and sedated him that he was still.

He woke in a holding cell at juvenile hall, stripped to his underwear and unable to see clearly without glasses. He had a whopping headache from the sedative administered by the school doctor. The cell had no windows and no clock, so he had no way to know exactly how much time he spent in there. Someone eventually showed up to give him some food, but told him nothing of his situation.

After he slept again, he was awakened by someone with clothes and his spare glasses, obviously brought by his parents. Then he was taken to where they waited. They didn't look angry, just weary. The necessary paperwork was done, and he was released into their custody.

Ears and his friend would live, but their injuries required some days in the hospital. The lawyer Jack's father hired warned that it was very possible Jack would go to juvenile hall for the attack, but help came from an unexpected quarter. The students who'd witnessed the fight testified that Ears had struck the first blow and that Jack had been provoked before fighting back. Many others, thrilled that their tormentors had finally gotten their comeuppance, eagerly told of harassment at the hands of Ears and his friends. The authorities' wrath came down on the school officials for not keeping control of the situation, and Ears' family sued them instead of the Salems because the school had liability insurance.

The ferocity and murderous nature of Jack's attack, however, convinced the judge to put him on a year's probation. That probation required Jack to get a summer job, an idea he found less than thrilling. The judge also ordered a battery of psychological tests. Jack wasn't interested in letting anyone pick his brain, and was as uncooperative as he thought he could get away with. He frustrated the people trying to give him the oral and written tests, but he could do nothing to screw up the EEG and nueroscans.

When the doctor spoke to his parents after the tests about the disturbing results, they were unsurprised. Although Jack's recalcitrance made conclusions uncertain, the doctors felt safe in saying that he was very undersocialized and a borderline sociopath. None of that came as a shock to his parents. What did put them off-balance was that the neuroscans indicated a high probability that Jack would develop regressed carnivore syndrome. But again the doctors weren't sure; sometimes people who looked likely to get it never did. There was no way to tell until the victim entered the downward spiral into animalness. All Jack's higher mental functions tested fine, but the doctors advised a stay in an institution specializing in R.C.S. until they had more definite results.

His parents agonized with indecision, but finally decided to level with their son. Jack just laughed at their news and worried faces, but deep down the talk accomplished what they'd hoped — put (as the humans would say) the fear of God into him. There are few fates more horrible than ending up in an institution for those suffering from regressed carnivore syndrome. Since there is no cure, the victims are constantly drugged into a state of compliance or restrained in cells. Exposés had shown the wretched state of inmates in some facilities, abused by supposed caretakers or attacked by other patients. The very thought of being locked up in one of those places terrified Jack, and he agreed to everything his parents asked.

His father got Jack a job as a security guard at the university where he taught. He demanded that Jack cut his claws to a socially acceptable length, something his son bristled at but eventually did. Although he missed his former freedom, Jack adapted to the work routine well enough. Hearing rumors of "Professor Salem's crazy kid", the students left him alone, and he made his rounds and watched his monitors with a minimum of trouble.

About this time, in early summer, Jack's mother unexpectedly became pregnant with her third child, surprising her and her doctor. Both had been certain she was past childbearing age. Even so, she and Alley had no problem with the idea of another child. It was then, prodded by fears that Jack might pose a threat to the future infant, that his brother George finally told his parents what he had witnessed in the forest the previous year.

Trying to calm his wife's panic at the story, Alley quickly called in some favors, contacting a friend connected to a well-regarded private school for gifted nonhumans. While he was late in applying, through his influence and Jack's extremely high test scores, Alley managed to get Jack accepted for his final year of high school. He would be away when the baby was born, and when the school year ended, Jack would be eighteen; they could legally force him from their home if he caused trouble.

Jack sensed something was wrong when he came home that day, and suspected his cowardly brother might have gotten up the guts to talk to his parents. He couldn't prove it, though, since George prudently had returned to his job and new apartment in Albany before Jack was due home. He wanted to go and beat a confession out of his brother, but didn't dare while he was still on probation. Shocked and enraged when his father told him about the private school, he shattered a chair against the wall

during the ensuing argument. But his father held firm, his courage bolstered by the thought of a baby to protect. Jack had no choice but to accept, fear of the R.C.S. institution still too strong in him. But he smoldered with resentment for the rest of the summer, and his parents counted the days until he was to leave for the school.

Even Jack's violent and erratic behavior couldn't quite dispel the excitement his parents felt over the impending birth. They spent part of the summer visiting relatives and friends to talk about the turn of events. Jack was forced to go along on the lengthier trips, his parents unwilling to leave him alone or with just George to watch him. While the lack of trust galled him to some degree, he grudgingly credited them with having sense enough to *know* he couldn't be trusted. And at least the excursions got him away from the job he hated.

Jack's first sexual experience was during one of these visits, when he was seduced by the twenty-seven-year-old daughter of Professor Greer, an academic colleague of his father's. The two men had been friends since before Jack was born, and Greer's daughter Li (pronounced "Lee") had known Jack and George since they were very young. She had not seen the Salems in years, and was surprised at what an interesting young male Jack had grown into.

For his part, Jack considered the trip just another long train ride to visit more of his parents' stupid and boring friends. The fact that Prof. Greer's scholastic credentials were even more impressive than his father's didn't alter his opinion. But the house contained some interesting books and was in beautiful country in the Finger Lakes region. He wanted to explore the surrounding woods but his parents vetoed that, so he contented himself with lobbing rocks at ducks and geese that nested at the lake. He hit a few before his father yelled at him to stop, so he spent the rest of the day sulking around the poolside.

Li had wasted no time fluffing up and dressing in an extremely skimpy bathing suit. While Jack had certainly noticed her, he hadn't bothered talking to her extensively. He was as interested in females as any other male his age, but never thought the effort of socializing with them was worth any reward he might get. He considered people his own age frivolous idiots. His opinion of Li's intellectual capacity wasn't much higher, but he found she at least acted a little more maturely than the females he had spoken to in school. And she did look very good in that suit. When she touched him while trying to coax him into the pool, it sent a shock through him he'd never felt before. He jerked away and stalked into the house, angry at how his own body seemed to betray him.

That night when the adults had gone out for a late dinner, she came to him in the living room, where he watched the vid. This time he didn't leave when she disrobed in front of him, then came over to where he sat and eased his shorts off. He was as nervous as he had been so long ago before his eye operation, but as with everything else he tried, he learned very quickly. She made love to him on the carpet in front of the vid, delighting in how strong and lithe he was.

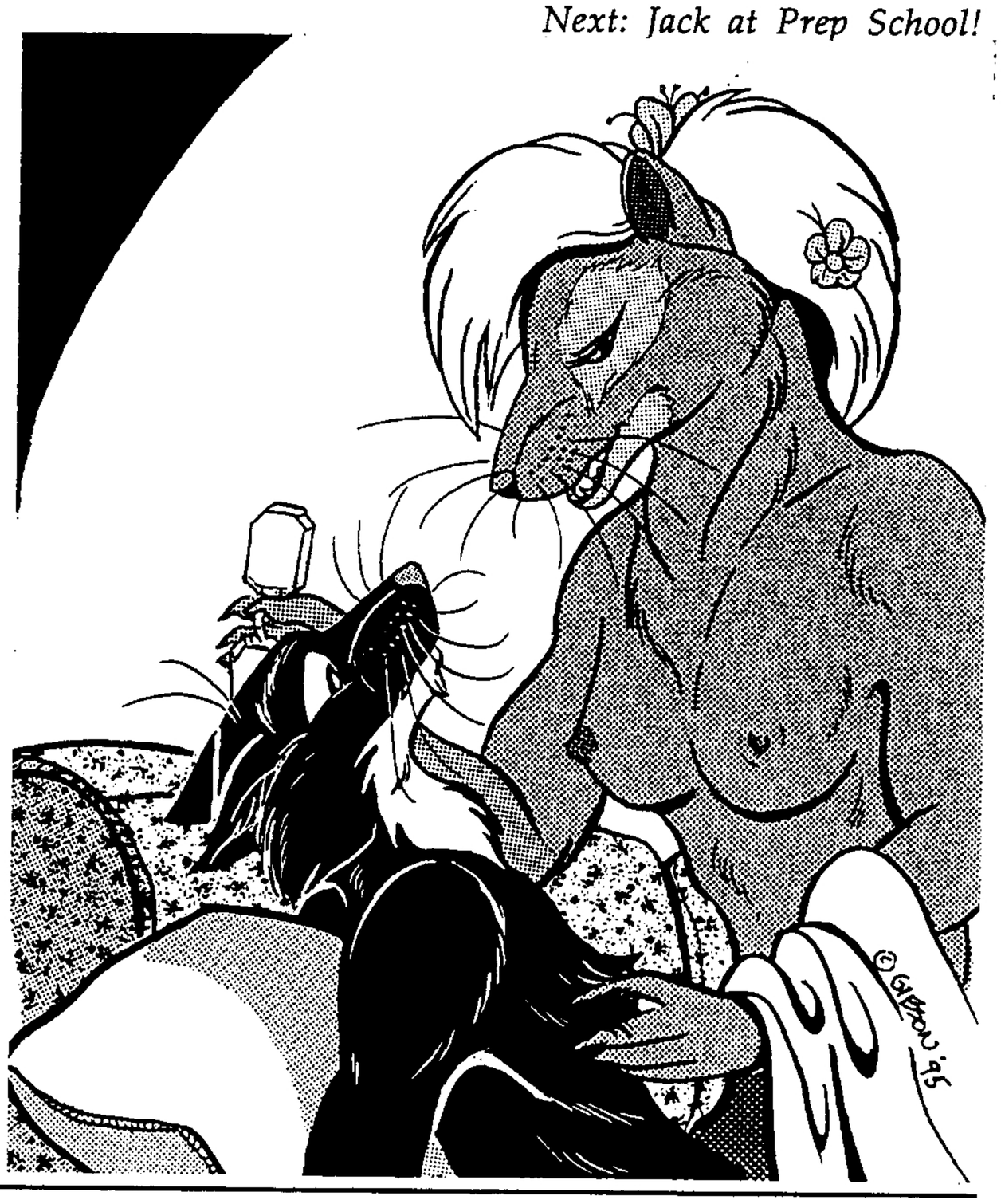
Later that night, after everyone had gone to bed, she slipped into his room and spent most of the night with him. She did things with him he had only known from school-locker talk or glimpsed in dirty vids, things he hadn't even thought about. When she finally left him to return to her room at three or four in the morning, he was exhausted, his fur damp with sweat . . . but he felt better than he had in a long time. A very long time.

The next morning over breakfast their parents gave no indication they knew what had gone on the previous night, although Jack thought they would have to be complete morons *not* to know. Regardless, nothing was said, and that night Jack eagerly followed Li into her room when she beckoned. Being of mink stock, she liked a bit of a rough edge to her sex, and Jack was happy to oblige. Several times during the night he restrained himself from biting too hard or using his claws, and later he wondered what it would be like if he didn't have to hold back.

He left the next day with his parents, feeling only minor regret. The thought of daily social and emotional intimacy with anyone turned his stomach. He did look at females a lot more closely though, imagining what sex with the ones he found attractive would be like.

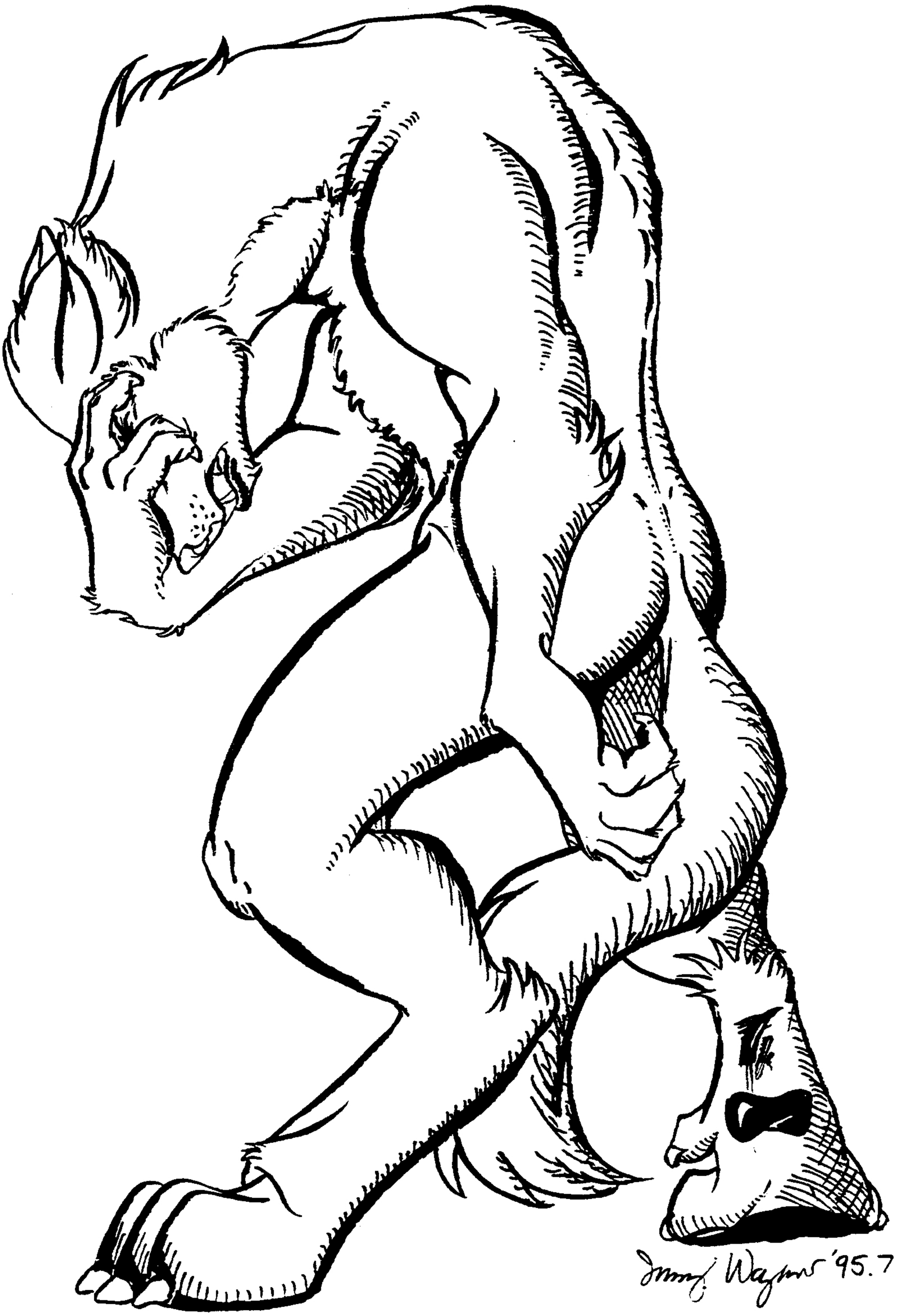
He wasn't able to follow up on it. Two weeks after returning from the Greer house, he was packed off on a train for the Peterson Center for Gifted Nonhumans.

Next: Jack at Prep School!



Columbia, Houston.
One minute to L.O.S.

"And if the band you're in starts playing different tunes..."


Jimmy Wagner '95.7


BILL
FITTS
95

MEOW!!! MEOW
MEOW-MEOW!
ROWR!!

FOSTER

"Wolfie's Escort"
©1996
KARENA KLIEFOTH


KAREN KUEPPA
'95


MCA 1996 1/15 ©'NII-ANA'

YOUR ORDERS SAY THAT YOU HAVE BEEN ASSIGNED HERE AS AN AIR RECON NAVIGATOR

YOU HAVE ALREADY BEEN PARTNERED WITH CAPTAIN QUARREL...

DO YOU KNOW HIM, LIEUTENANT?

...LIEUTENANT?

IS SOMETHING WRONG...?

OH!... SORRY! I JUST WASN'T EXPECTING... UH.. SOMEONE SAID...

UH...

NOTHING...

YOUR PAPERS ARE IN ORDER, LIEUTENANT... YOUR QUARTERS ARE ON LEVEL TWENTY... ANY QUESTIONS?

YEAH! DO YOU EVER GET OFFDUTY?

AHH!

I DIDN'T MEAN THAT YOU NEVER...

I MEANT, WHEN DO YOU GET OFF?

I MEAN, COULD WE GET OFF TOGETHER?!

I MEAN..

UH.. NOTHING!

SHHK

LEVEL TWENTY IT IS!

THANKS!

BYE!

WHEW!

20

DING!

SHHK

WAIT...

AVELDO... RIGHT...?

YES! DO I KNOW YOU?

YOU'RE LATE... WE'RE DUE ON THE FLIGHT DECK NOW!

AVELDO

EXCUSE ME, BUT HOW DO YOU KNOW I'M LATE? I JUST GOT HERE!

OH, YES... I FORGOT TO MENTION...

I'M CAPTAIN JOHN QUARREL...

COLONEL ROSS SAID YOU WERE ON THE WAY UP...

QUARREL

I'D LOVE TO CHAT, BUT WE HAVE TO BE UP IN THE PATROL GRID AS SOON AS POSSIBLE...

YOU CAN LEAVE YOUR BAG HERE

WAIT! DON'T I HAVE TO CHECK IN?

NO TIME... THE LAST PATROL HAS BEEN IN FOR OVER TEN MINUTES... ANYWAY YOU GOT PAST HAVOC SO YOU MUST BE O.K.!

HAVOC...?

SEE IF YOU CAN GET THE LIEUTENANT A HELMET

YES SIR

YOU ARE CLEARED FOR THE MARK FOUR, RIGHT?

GOOD! I HATE FLYING BLIND!

OF COURSE!

CAN YOU HEAR ME RYAN?

LOUD AND CLEAR!

THEN GET READY FOR ENGINE START...

BY THE WAY...

HOW DID YOU GET PARTNERED WITH ME?

I ASKED FOR A LOT OF ACTION.

WHY?

VREEEEE

IT'S JUST THAT YOU MAY GET WHAT YOU WISH FOR...

I'M SORT OF THE BAD LUCK KING OUT HERE...

OF THE LAST THREE CO-PILOTS I'VE HAD, TWO HAVE ASKED FOR TRANSFER

AND THE THIRD?

HE DIED...

SHAZOOM



-A·PRO '96-

reila

by jefferson swycaffer

Reila's long ears drooped in dismay. Her storage vault had been burgled again. She let the lid fall — it clacked back into place with a frigid, metallic bang — and stamped her foot in fury on the lock.

What good was it, she cursed, maintaining a vault if anyone who came along could take just anything from it?

She looked around, hoping to spy out her thieves. Under a grey-iron sky-ceiling, between curtain-like walls as far away as the horizon, the whole of the world-room's rippling landscape swirled vigorously up and away, up and away.

Large brown boles, their leafy branches vibrating, grated past one another along the east side of the vale. Their roar was louder today than it had been yesterday. Certainly no one had come or gone that way; they'd have been scissored into limbs and leather.

Reila's cousins toiled in another direction, plucking sweets from the receding sands. She saw them stooping in the distance, kneeling to steal an occasional nibble. The burglars couldn't have gone past them without being noticed . . . not that her cousins would lift a finger to stop anyone from trespassing.

It was infuriating. She felt smarter this day than on any day in past memory; it would have been the perfect time to get some work done. The Toucan god would have been proud of her. . . .

Reila ground her bare heel into the vault-door lock one last time, then began walking up the slope.

A hot wind, followed by a cold puff of intoxicating mists, ruffled her fur. She was white today, and covered in fur, an improvement after yesterday's embarrassing grey-and-tan hide, painfully splotched with tiny bald patches. On the other hand, today had also brought a painful erotic need which she hadn't yet had time to slake.

"Pain and rot to all their lower body parts!" she swore. The curse was not meant figuratively. Lowering her shoulders, she began to march purposefully down the gravel trough in the only direction remaining. If she found the people who'd looted her vault, it would go hard for them, bitter hard.

Or else, she sighed unhappily, her other needs would overwhelm her and everything would be very friendly indeed.

She wrinkled her nose in distaste. She hoped that tomorrow would bring murder-wrath and blood-rage, and the strength to do something about it.

No signs remained in the gravel to show who'd taken her tools. She bent low, sniffing at the water seeping through the trail. It was fresh, untainted, rich with undissolved sweets. She brushed the gravel away and scooped up a handful, lapping at it slowly with her tongue.

"Have you learned anything today?" asked a low, placid, unemotional voice. Reila, straightening quickly, looked around, but saw no one. Left. Right. Above. Behind.

Melting up out of the ground, coalescing from muddy liquid, the all-black Toucan god materialized before her.

Bird-shaped, black, as if he'd dyed himself in swamp water until it had become the permanent color of his feathers, he was the only person in the whole of the world-room that never changed from day to day. To Reila's knowledge, he was the only *thing* that didn't change.

"I haven't had a chance," Reila complained to him. She didn't ask how he know who she was. He knew things. He didn't change. He called himself a god. How could she, even on her smartest days, argue with him?

"You have the light of intelligence in your eyes," he said. As always, his voice was calm and perfectly even. His own onyx-black eyes gleamed with an alien intelligence all his own.

"Yes . . . but my tools are gone! Stolen!"

"I wonder who could have taken them," the Toucan god said, so drily that even Reila, his disciple in the quest for wisdom, was touched by a momentary qualm of doubt.

"I don't know." She lowered her head in contrition.

"Follow me," the bird-spirit commanded. "This way." He tilted his beak up and over his shoulder with a quick, agile flip of his neck and head. He leaped into the air and was gone.

Reila hastened in the direction he indicated.

I'm only trying to learn, she thought as she ran. *Why would anyone steal my tools? Do people hate me because I draw up patterns? Do they think I'm going to control the shape of their days?*

It was funny. If her friends and neighbors had simply left her alone, she might have given up on the Toucan god's weird talk of scholarship. By stealing away her tools and notes each time, they'd merely strengthened her resolve.

But what have I learned? she asked herself bitterly. Everything she'd studied only increased her awareness of her own ignorance.

A hill subsided, then began to rise again. Reila had to hurry. She bounded forward, her legs lengthening. That was fortunate. The last time she'd needed to run, her legs had turned all floppy and wiggling, like hair, like water, or like the meaningless patterns of the days.

A cluster of groundswells ranged over the sward, their shadows criss-crossing in eerie patterns. Reila never faltered in her race, but ran right into the rising and falling ridges, mindless of the danger.

Even as she ran, even with her blood fired with a thirst for knowledge and a lust that weakened her thighs as she ran, she paid attention to the direction taken by the swells. Only by observation, on those days her intellect would permit it, could she ever hope to learn the ways of the world-room's days. A faint pulse of excitement found room in her pounding heart.

I love the days I'm allowed to be smart! She wished that they never had to end.

Ahead, a bank of vacuums loomed up, opaque and steaming. Reila shook her head and kept running. The grass of the sward gave way to bare, slippery stone, and then to a wet, squishing marsh of ankle-deep water. Every step sent up crystalline sprays of tea-dark water, which froze in mid-air to form lacy fans of ice. Evaporating a moment later into mists, they hung behind Reila like white puffs of steam along her path.

Trees, low and knobby, loomed up on all sides. The swamp darkened. Reila foundered, submerged for a moment in the foul, leaf-smelling water. Snails raised spherical eyes on thin stalks, watching incuriously as she clambered up on a dry bank.

Frowning, she began to clean her fur of mud and congealed clay and water. Overhead, the sky, visible in the spaces between the star-shaped leaves of the dark, twisted trees, turned a soft, grassy green.

"That way," a low, casual voice suggested.

Reila looked around. Sitting in the water, the way a child will sit in a pool, the Toucan god tilted his long beak at her.

"Do you want to know who took your tools?"

"Yes!"

"No," the Toucan god contradicted, speaking in his still, flat voice.

"I do!"

"You want your tools, not the one who took them."

Reila grinned ferociously, or as ferociously as she could, given the gentle, lapine features of the face she wore today. "I want to catch the thief, too."

The Toucan god paused for a moment, then peered at her out of his other eyes. "You want the tools more. Moreover, you also want to learn how the world-room is made. Don't you want to learn the truth?"

Reila, confused, couldn't deny it. She craved knowledge more deeply than any other appetite's gnawing hunger had ever touched her. The Toucan god, when he deigned to speak, could be either a wonderful prophet — sometimes, he even predicted what the next day or days would bring — or a mischievous liar. He always looked the same, however, and so he must have had some sort of power over the changing days.

He'd helped her start to obtain tools, tools that hinted of predictable patterns hiding behind the changing shapes of the world-room. He'd told her how to make a storage vault that wouldn't be gone with the next daybreak. Sometimes, she felt he was the only real friend she had.

"Yes. I want to learn the truth. Will it be hard to find new tools?" she asked.

"Wrong question," the Toucan god placidly answered. His words, she noticed, never quite coincided with the way his beak moved. It was such a simple observation, but before making it, no one had been aware that mouths and words worked together. What else, Reila wondered, was correlated, that no one had ever noticed?

"What is the correct question?"

"Ask me if you need to find new tools."

"Well . . . do I need to find new tools?"

"Wrong question." The Toucan god looked at her without visible emotion in his eyes.

Reila blinked. Something was wrong with the sequence — the *sequence* — of questions and answers. Question and answer; cause and effect. The unusual nature of logical thought was difficult for her to grasp. . . .

Behind her, the trees began to sink down into the mire, their trunks straightening and becoming slender. From above, the leaves rained down, taking root wherever they landed on bare dirt. Soon, Reila sat on a bright, grassy island in the middle of a quietly gurgling watercourse. Other islands could be seen on all sides, across streams and ponds just too broad for her to leap. In the farthest distance, a mainland rose up and up, its chalky cliffs growing longer, foot by foot. The sky, she now saw, was a lovely glowing blue. In its light, her fur shone whiter and softer than she'd every known it.

"What is the *correct* question?" she asked again.

"Ask me if you need tools to find truth."

Obediently, although her thoughts trended down different paths entirely, she asked. "Do I need tools to find truth?"

"Wrong question."

"How do I learn?" she asked, frustrated and impatient. "What do I do to find out? Why don't you change from day to day? How can I stay smart, even tomorrow, when i will be someone else?"

"Do you want to know?"

"Yes!" She bounded erect, her long ears stiff and straight, her legs quivering with eagerness.

"Wrong answer," the Toucan god said, his voice soft and almost sad. "Here. . . ."

He spread black wings and took flight, flapping about her in tight loops, his wings buffeting her ears each time he went around. On one pass, he reached out quickly with his beak and pecked at her, sharply, once, on the very top of her head, directly between her ears.

"Ouch!" She blinked at him. "Why did you do that?"

He didn't answer. Reila saw why: a slender, glowing strand of golden light ran from his beak to her scalp. It was no thicker than a hair, a single perfect yellow filament almost too thin to be seen.

"What's that?" She reached out, trying to grasp the strand. It evaded her touch, or else was so thin as to lack firm tangibility. She was about to ask another question — doubtless a "wrong question," as the Toucan god would have told her — when the island sank into the swamp, taking her with it.

It broke up swiftly in the rushing water, crumbling into muddy fragments. The chunks, dissolving, whirled about as they shot down the funnel of the sinkhole. Reila, having never seen a maelstrom, didn't know whether or not to be afraid. Before she could make up her mind, she had disappeared into the bottom of the swamp, down into the watery, muddy hole where the island had been.

Then, down through shadowy caverns, strung wall-to-wall with ash-white webs, she fell. About her, splashing, spreading out into a huge, diffuse, airy spray, the water fell also. The muddy drops scattered, bounced, caught the light, and broke into finer and finer droplets.

Reila had never fallen so far. She wondered, idly, if it was supposed to be so exhilarating. She tucked her legs tightly up under her, and spread her arms wide. the air, rushing swiftly past, tickled her and cooled her. The sensation was very pleasing; she didn't resist it.

Above her, as if unreeling from an immense spool, the fine golden thread spun out, whipping back and forth with speed. She wondered it if connected her to the Toucan god, and, if so, what it meant.

Below, a pale, circular membrane, very much like a drumhead, approached with dizzying speed. Reila, twisting about in midair, looked at it in wonderment. The impact, when she struck it, was surprisingly forceful. The membrane tore across with a loud, rubbery snap.

Reila fell only a little further, into piercing, unexpected brightness.

• • •

Allen Mayerovik wondered, later, what might have happened it he'd gone to work, as he'd ought.

He stood, in sandals and shorts, his shirt unbuttoned, sprinkling his garden with a too-short, slightly leaky rubber hose. Dark glasses and a floppy hat completed his informal attire. Dark glasses, a hat, and a silvery ring on one finger, a ring that signified absolutely nothing. He'd tried it on once in a jewelry store, and had never been able to get it off again.

Take away the sunglasses and the hat, and Allen Mayerovik was a pleasant-looking man, tall, not too noticeably overweight, in the middle third of the middle seventh of his life. Sun-lightened blond hair, slightly too long, straggled over his ears; watery blue eyes looked out at the world about him with bland approval.

Take away the ring, and he would have been a different man entirely.

He was supposed to be at work today. He liked his job, but among the things he liked best was the fact that he had the latitude to play hooky now ant then. A machine-language computer programmer, he designed video games for the "Seagull" home game system from the Halcyon Computer Company. He was proudest of *Zapper Rapper*, a musical little shoot-em-up with some clever and innovative strategies for the player to discover. He'd hidden away a handful of "Easter eggs" in it as well; screens that displayed "secret messages" when certain unlikely conditions were met.

Instead, he'd stayed home today to work in his garden. The sunlight in Santa Carla, California, was harsh at the best of times. Now, in the middle of a long, dry summer, his plants were suffering.

Not the geraniums, of course. He nodded happily toward them, and inhaled the sharp, herbal scent of their leaves. They were ornamental weeds, really: hard to kill. Nor the roses, thirstier for sun than for water. And although some of their needles were a bit brown, the row of young pines along the rear fences was doing well. Given time, they would be tall, green, and stately some day.

He was worried about the irises. They were finicky.

Pushing his sunglasses down a bit and looking over the top of the lenses, he assayed the state of the ground in the iris beds. Wet enough. Nice and crumbly. A screen-and-trellis arrangement, covered with jasmine creepers, gave just the right amount of shade.

The waxy green sword-blades ought to bloom. They simply ought to bloom.

Allen laughed to himself. Maybe they were staying home from work also.

A cloud darkened the sun. He looked up. A drop of water struck him on the nose. He frowned. Something was. . . .

Mud and water, a sudden torrent, as if a flash-flood mudslide had slid down from some impossible overhead source. Allen ducked, lifting his hands to ward his head from the sudden deluge. Large gobbets of slick, reeking mud fell with wet, plopping sounds. He and his irises were splattered and stained.

As quickly as it had begun, the peculiar Fortean flood was over.

Allen looked up into a clear, sun-burned sky. Could an airplane, passing overhead, have emptied its holding tanks? He sniffed at the mud that dripped, oozing from his hair. It had a stench to it, not of the sewers, but rather like a deep tidewater swamp.

He turned, about to head indoors for a quick shower and change of clothes, when one of the larger chunks of mud began to move. there was something mixed up in it.

There was some*one* mixed up in it. . . .

While Allen watched, astonished and horrified, the mud-bedraggled figure rolled over and sat up. It —*she*— might have been the pilot of an airplane, having bailed out with no parachute. But no pilot that Allen had ever heard of had long, rabbit-like ears atop her head. They straightened, those ears, first the one on the right, then the one on the left, although the latter drooped a little. Her eyes opened.

"Ouch," Reila said.

"My God," Allen whispered.

Sitting spread-legged in the middle of his iris bed, a woman — or a rabbit — or a woman who was a rabbit — or —

Allen shook his head to clear it. Reila, made filthy by the mud, did the same. She took in a deep, steadying sigh, and climbed to her feet. Allen's eyes widened, and the gasp he inhaled was anything but steadying.

Not counting the ears, she was over six feet tall, with most of her height in her legs. *I'd like to see her sprint the 500*, he thought, half-crazily. He still couldn't tell, other than obviously female, what she was. Too attenuated, to slender, too clearly a biped to be a rabbit, she was covered in soft, mud-stained white fur. Her feet, he noticed, were huge. . . .

"I hope you're not here for my garden," he babbled. Gardeners and rabbits were natural antagonists.

She smiled at him quickly. "Hello. No, I'm not. My name is Reila," she said, with such ease that falling from the sky might have been an everyday occurrence with her.

"Where are you from?"

"Hm?" She looked at him as if he'd asked a particularly foolish question. "I'm from . . . look out!" She'd seen something over her shoulder that afrighted her. With that quick warning cry, she leaped powerfully forward, bearing Allen to the ground. They skidded for a few feet through the mud and wet grass of his lawn and garden.

Looking frantically around his yard, into the sky, and in every other direction he could think of, he saw nothing more menacing than some dry leaves on the hibiscus near the corner of the fence.

"What was it?" he asked.

"The . . . the . . ." Reila frowned. She stood, releasing Allen from her weight. "Those." She pointed to the young pine trees.

Allen lifted an eyebrow. "The pines?"

"They're just standing there."

Allen lifted the other eyebrow. "They do that."

"Oh." Reila nodded, accepting that explanation with no further qualms.

"What do trees do where you come from?" he asked.

"They move around." She looked at him as if amazed that no one had heard of such a thing. "When they grind against each other, if you're between them, you get killed."

"Oh. . . ." Allen was having difficulty in not staring at her. She was unquestionably the most unusual person he'd ever seen. As he looked, something caught his eye. He looked for it, lost it, and then found it again. "You've got something in your hair. . . ."

It was a faint, gleaming line, as faint as a single strand of spider-web, leading upward from her head. He found that it disappeared when he looked directly at it, but could see it best when he looked for it from the corner of his eye.

"Oh, don't worry about that. It's something that the Toucan god did, although I don't know why."

Allen swallowed, and quickly looked away. He'd been brought up a good Methodist, and had learned to shun discussions of religious preferences. When he looked again, the feeble line of golden light was still there, a wavering thread that led upward into the air. He couldn't follow it for more than a few feet before losing it against the sky.

At a loss for anything else to do, Allen bent and picked up the garden hose. It seemed the reasonable thing to do to direct the stream of running water out where Reila could wash herself if she wished. She flashed him a bright smile of thanks, and cleaned herself of all the remaining mud and dank swamp-water. During the process, every part of her body was exposed to him. Her fur, when wet and matted flat, revealed her supple musculature and lissome curves.

They regarded each other for a moment. A crafty grin stole over Reila's face. She put a damp hand on his shoulder and stared meaningfully into his eyes.

"So. You wanna?"

He wasn't about to pretend to misunderstand what she meant. Furthermore, a part of him very much did "wanna," but right now, with the mysteries of her nature and her arrival uppermost in his mind, he was damned if he'd let himself be distracted. "Later," he murmured. More forcefully, "Who the hell are you?"

She straightened. "I told you. I'm Reila."

The impasse might have continued in this vein for a while longer. Reila, however, looked over Allen's shoulder and laughed at what she saw. It was a bright, high unaffected laugh, like a child's.

"Look! There's someone who looks just like you!"

Allen turned around to look. His neighbor, Mr. Mhai, was peering curiously at them from his screened-in porch.

"Let's go inside," Allen hissed. He pushed Reila ahead of him through the open sliding-glass door and into his house. Reila resisted for a moment, then assented to go indoors with him. As he drew the curtains, Allen saw Mr. Mhai leaning on the handle of his broom, a bemused look on his face.

Allen's house was comfortably messy. His motto might have been, "A place for everything, and everything somewhere near its place." Books, in topplingly-high stacks, occupied most of the chairs and filled the sofa as cream fills an open-topped eclair. No fewer than five computers dotted the living room, the soft blue and green glow from their screens filling the room with a gentle, undersea light. Papers were strewn on dining table, coffee table, card table and floor.

One note of grace lightened the otherwise shabby and careless tone: eight large, colorful posters hung on the walls, accented by trim, modernistic silver frames. They were the advertising posters for Allen's "Seagull System" games.

"I'll get towels," Allen said, and ducked into the kitchen — where else? — returning quickly with two large bathroom towels. He cleaned and dried himself; Reila energetically toweled herself until her fur gleamed, pale and dry and ever so fluffy.

Standing, strolling about, looking at all she saw, Reila suddenly stopped. "Oh!" She laughed brightly, and bent and scooped up a glossy news magazine from the floor. She pointed to the cover. "Here's another person who looks just like you!" Her amusement couldn't have been greater.

Allen squinted for a closer look. It was the President of the United States. Allen began to worry. Reila opened the magazine. "And another!" The Mayor of the city of Santa Carla, who, in addition to looking very little like Allen Mayerovik, was also a woman.

Reila flipped through the magazine, finding more and more people who looked just like Allen. By the tenth look-alike, she had begun to frown. Allen took the magazine from her.

"Who are you?" he asked, as softly as he could.

She turned to him, stepped closer, and melted into his arms. "I told you. I told you twice. I'm Reila. You're as bad as the Toucan god!"

Allen's worries strengthened. He sought to disengage himself from her embrace, which was difficult, as her whole body seemed to press against his with an almost magnetic attraction. She was wearing no clothing at all, and he was aware of how little protection his shorts and unbuttoned shirt gave him.

"Where are you from?"

"The world-room. Where else?"

Where else indeed?

Allen pushed her gently from him, and cleared a space for her to sit. She looked at the sofa in amazement, as if it were the most unusual machine she had ever seen in her life. It took her quite some time to learn to trust it with her weight.

For the next few hours they had what the diplomats would have called "frank and earnest discussions." Reila listened, for the most part, occasionally springing up from the sofa and pacing the room with boundless energy. Allen explained, as best he could, how the world worked. He listened in open-mouthed disbelief, to Reila's account of her own world.

By sundown, they had begun to figure out, in the broadest terms, how their two worlds differed. Reila sat close against him, her fur warm against his skin, and softer than he would have imagined. She wanted more than merely to talk.

Allen had been lonely much of his life. He didn't resist Reila's overtures as forcefully as he might have. She put her hands places that he wasn't accustomed to having touched, and before long, the word "No" faded from his vocabulary.

Technically speaking, it was rape. "Date rape," as the idiom of the times would have it. Allen wasn't about to lodge a complaint.

She took off his clothes the way a child would unwrap a gift on Christmas morning. They started toward the bedroom, but didn't get that far. Their passion was reflected in the glass frames of the posters, illuminated by the soft glow from the watching computers.

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In the morning, Reila awakened Allen with a series of urgent little shakes at his shoulder.

"What's wrong?" he asked blearily. A "morning person" he was not.

"I'm still. . . ." She ran her hands down her torso and thighs. "I'm still who I was."

"What else would you be?" Allen leaned up on one elbow. They'd slept together on the living room floor; now, he was regretting it, although the impulsive nature of their love had been both cathartic and voluptuous. Strange whorling patterns indented his skin, pressed there by the shag carpet.

"I could be anyone . . . or anything. I've been low, rounded, stupid, hairless, and gooey. I've been tall, slender, strong, scaly, and fierce." She looked at him helplessly. "I'm different — *different* — every day. Now. . . ." She looked down at herself, as if unable to accept the body she wore.

"I'm trapped. . . ."

The storm of her tears was a brief one. She held him tightly, melting into him in an embrace that was sensual, blissful, exciting, and relaxing, all at once.

Their lips met. Allen wiped the dampness of her tears from the soft, fine fur of her face. He felt the quick, strong beating of her heart. Passion reawakened.

Later, hunger awakened as well. Allen, once dressed and shaved, tried her out on several different kinds of breakfast foods.

She was most pleased with oatmeal and raisins, and she couldn't get her fill of orange juice. The flavor made her laugh; she couldn't quite explain why, but it struck her as outrageously funny. She couldn't drink more than half a glass without breaking out in new peals of laughter. She ended up drinking nearly three quarts before Allen made her stop.

Then, with the rising temperature of another summer's day, their conversation turned serious again.

"Do you want to change?"

She sighed, a little sadly. "No. Not really. It's been so long — so *long!* — since I was someone I wanted to be. It makes it so hard to think, when I wake up a stupid person! I was trying to learn. I wanted to see if there were things that didn't change."

"You sound like a scientist," he said with a grin.

She didn't smile back. "What is that?"

"Someone who tries to find the truth, the underlying rules and laws of the universe."

"A sci. . . ." She frowned, and tried again. "A scientist." Then, with a snap that nearly left her ears behind, she turned to him. "What do you mean, 'underlying rules and laws'?"

He was nearly helpless before the intensity of her question. "Science," he stammered, "is a way of trying to find the truth. To explain the world. You look for constants . . . the things that don't change."

"Things that don't change. . . ." Reila wrestled with the concept.

"Yes. Or things that change in predictable ways."

"Predictable?

"Well, gravity for instance. On Earth, we really got our start in science by observing how things fall when they're dropped. Is there gravity where you come from?" he asked. "When you drop things, do they fall downward?"

She looked at him pityingly. "Well, of *course!* How else would they fall?"

Allen flushed, and didn't answer.

Reila, unable to sit for long in one place, had found a video game on one of his computers. She began fiddling around with it in a curious, idle sort of way. As soon as she worked out how to control the movements of the icons with her joystick, her attention was caught. The game ended, with her "lives" used up, with a score that was too low to be posted to the winners list, but higher than one might expect from a first-time player.

"What is this?" she asked.

"It's a game." He swelled up a bit with pride. "I designed it. It's called 'Rage Racer.' The little guy there —" he pointed to the figure on the screen "— goes faster, the madder he gets. And that increases his proficiency with his battleaxe."

Reila's head jerked up. "Fighting makes him angry?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And it makes him more able to fight?"

"Yes."

Her eyes unfocused. "The more he fights . . . the more he is able to fight? That's a . . . that's a. . . ." Reila's face twisted up in her effort to concentrate. "It's a *pattern!* It's a *shape!* It's a. . . ." She shook her head. Looking at Allen with an expression near to desperation, she asked, "Is it an 'underlying rule and law'?"

"A rule? I guess you could call it that."

"Am I a scientist?"

He laughed. "I'm certain of it."

"Oh. . . ." For Reila, it was too much to take in, all at once. But she knew she liked it, since it was something that Allen liked. Most of her qualms faded into a sense of assurance.

Striding to the window, she twitched the curtains wide, looking gleefully out at the street. Allen jumped up from his chair and dragged her back, lest she could be seen.

As she straightened the curtains, he glimpsed the frowning face of Mr. Mhai, peering nearsightedly from a window. What had he seen? What would he do?

"All that light!" Reila exclaimed in amazement. "It's still there. And the sky is still blue." She looked down at the carpeted floor under her feet, which hadn't bulged, dropped, tilted, or changed texture since she'd come indoors. She ran back to the computer and started another game of "Rage Racer".

Allen, watching over her shoulder, advised her on play. "Avoid the blue squidgies . . . those blue things with the wiggling outlines. . . . Get the little flaming bombs, instead, and. . . . Yes! See? Your axe is now a 'flaming axe,' and does extra damage. . . ."

Above her head, between her long, rabbity ears, a faint light glinted. Allen looked up. The thread he'd seen before, golden and ethereal, was stronger. It writhed with an eerie light all its own. He was about to say something, when Reila exclaimed aloud.

"Oh, look! I killed ten of the orange squidgies! Look at the score!"

Allen looked. He blinked, and looked again.

The score was impossible . . . and the game wasn't supposed to have "orange squidgies." Blue ones, yes. Green ones, too. And one nasty red one, the toughest enemy the little "Rage Racer" had to face.

No orange ones. Nor yellow ones, but even as he stared, four yellow figures, with amorphous, wiggling outlines, oozed into the screen. Reila, working the joystick with more vigor than skill, led the little "Rage Racer" character into their midst.

What happened next caused Allen Mayerovik, the game's designer, to lose his grip on the back of Reila's chair and fall to the carpeted floor in astonishment.

The game jumped into a new screen.

That would have been normal at that point, given the score that Reila had racked up. But the screen the game entered was not one he'd designed.

You've broken my computer, was his first uncharitable thought.

No. That can't explain this. . . . The computer, and its program, had changed. *Changed.* . . . The thought sent chills down his spine. He looked up, again, and saw the faint, hairlike thread above Reila's head.

Spirits! he thought, all in a panic. More calmly, he reached out and took the joystick from her fingers. She didn't protest his seizure of the game, nor did she complain when he turned the computer off.

"That's a fun game," she told him, her voice as innocent as a child's. Allen said nothing, but only stared at the computer and game-system.

The logo imprinted on the case had changed. What had been a Halcyon Model 54 was now — impossibly — a HalleyComp "Yawl" computer.

There was no "HalleyComp" computer company. And if there were, he knew he hadn't bought a machine from them. Reila was a spirit, of sorts; she was altering the reality of his world, even at the same time she was discovering it for herself.

"Reila," he said, striving for calmness, "I think we might have a problem."

"Oh?" She looked around at him. She'd discovered a small rubber ball, and was bouncing it against the hard tiles of the kitchen floor. "Look. It bounces the same way each time. Look. . . ."

With every bounce, with every delighted nod of her head, with every confirmation of the immutability of the laws of elastic impacts and gravitational acceleration, the thin, glowing line of light over her head pulsed in brightness.

"Reila. . . ."

She was intelligent. She understood. Catching the ball in her hand, she turned to face him.

"What's the problem?"

"My world . . . I think you're making it change."

It took her a moment to figure out what he meant. When she did, her face quickly fell, and her eyes grew hurt. Allen felt as guilty as if he'd just told a very young child the truth about death.

Reila folded her legs beneath her, and sat on the floor. Her ears, although drooping a bit with sadness, still rose above the height of Allen's belt. "Because of who I am? Or because of where I'm from?"

"I don't know. But change in coming into my world, through you. Every time a peculiar change is about to happen, the thread atop your head glows brighter."

Reila looked up, then lowered her gaze in embarrassment. She couldn't see the top of her own head. Allen, practical as always, handed her a small mirror. She looked into it, and was lost for several minutes in rapt appreciation of the rules and laws of the reflection of light.

Among the lights, reflected, though was the gilded radiance from the thread on her crown. It increased as she studied it. She sighed and turned away; the thread faded nearly to invisibility. The mirror, in her hand, shifted strangely; Allen didn't realize it, but he was now the proud owner of the world's only half-angle reflecting mirror. It was an impossibility. It was the truth.

Reila looked, for a moment, as if she might weep.

Allen wondered if his world was in danger of becoming like her "world-room." He didn't much care for the thought of waking up in a different body every morning, with a different mind.

"What is that thread, Reila?"

"It was attached to me by the Toucan god." Her voice was listless, but soon picked up some of its natural vibrancy. "He's my teacher. He's the only thing in the world-room that never changes. He's always the same."

"How is that? How does he manage it?"

"I don't know. He has been helping me, though. He gives me tools to help me learn. He gave me a game, once, a lot like your 'Rage Racer' game. A little one with a moving figure who left a little trail of boxes. It was stolen." A quick wave of bitterness fled over her face. "Everything that would help me learn gets stolen." But then, as fast as it had come, the bitterness passed. She jumped to her feet. "We can't give up. I still want to learn!" The thread over her head, like a light-bulb in a cartoon, gleamed every time she had an idea.

An idea came to Allen, as well. "The game. . . . You said that it had a little man who left a trail of boxes?"

"Yes."

"'Foxy Boxy'!" he exclaimed. He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her around the corner, back into the living room. On the wall, an advertising poster showed a stylized version of a little animated fox, grinning with a large, crafty grin nearly as large as its face. It crawled, slinking slyly, out of a wooden crate. One corner of the poster was taken up with a depiction of an actual playing-screen of the game. "Is this it?" he asked.

"Yes! The same. You'd move — you had to go quickly — and the boxes opened up behind you. Sometimes they opened, and good things came out — "

"— And other times, monsters!" Allen exclaimed. "That's one of mine! It plugged into a hand-held game system, the Halcyon 'Your Tern' 8-bit 32K cartridge system!"

Reila, unfamiliar with the terms, only nodded.

"It was stolen about a month ago."

Reila was aghast. "I'm sorry. . . . I didn't know!" She remembered her own anger when it had disappeared from her vault.

"You said that the Toucan god gave it to you?"

"Yes."

"Why? Why would he steal it from me, to give it to you?" Allen blinked, and thought again. "Did he teach you to speak this language?"

Reila looked at him with blank incomprehension. "Is it your language that we are speaking?"

"Yes!"

"The Toucan god taught me to speak. It took a long time. I could only learn on days that I was smart, on days that I had the right kind of mouth, too."

A shudder swept up and down Allen's spine. Who was the "Toucan god," and what game was he playing? Why was he introducing random changes into the world?

Or . . . was he stealing the certainty from it, in order to maintain his own unchanging reality? The thread, even now glinting and writhing over Reila's head: was it an umbilicus, or a fishing line?

Reila. . . . He looked at her. Was she bringing weirdness, randomness, into his world . . . or draining away the underlying substrate of rationality that hers lacked?

She sauntered away, walking with large, loose steps through the house. Once again, she pushed open the curtains, gazing up into the sunlight with intent curiosity. Her fur, where the sun struck it, was as white as shaved ice.

"Come away, Reila," Allen said. "You'll be seen."

"I have been. Look." She faced him, and pointed out the window. Allen ran over to look. In horror, he saw his neighbor, Mr. Mhai, along with a uniformed policeman and a small knot of curious onlookers. The policeman goggled back, looking not at Allen, but at the lapinoid woman by his side.

Eye contact served in lieu of invitation. The policeman hoisted his belt, and strode up the walkway to Allen's front door, his shoes clicking heavily over the concrete with every step. The doorbell rang.

"Oh, my God. . . . Say nothing," Allen told Reila. "Say absolutely *nothing*. Stand and keep your mouth shut. Do you understand?"

Reila cocked her head to one side; her ears, as if counterbalanced, flopped the other way. "Okay . . ." she murmured. Allen pushed his hand over her mouth.

"Say *nothing*."

Reila nodded. Allen drew his hand away, ready to shove it back again the instant she parted her lips. Then, satisfied, he went to the door. The policeman, standing in the shade of the house's wood-shake eaves, was slender and blond, with his left arm noticeably more tanned than his right. His name, "Henderson," was stamped on his name-plate opposite his badge.

"What's the problem, officer?" Allen asked, speaking as matter-of-factly as he could.

"You Allen Mayerovik?"

"Yes, I am."

"We got a report from your neighbor of something unusual here." The policeman squinted into the darkness of Allen's living room. "Something about. . . ." At that point, embarrassment silenced him.

Allen carried the fight forward. "Something about a big bunny rabbit? I'm surprised you bothered to come and check. Slow day?"

The policeman nodded. "Slow day."

"Costume. For a costume party. Fake feet. Fabric and padding, you know?" He smiled winningly.

"Not fake!" Reila complained, her voice aggrieved by the slander.

But Officer Henderson merely laughed. "I should'a guessed." He rolled his eyes, shook his head, and threw down his hands. "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Mayerovik."

"No bother at all," Allen said, conviviality oozing from him unctuously. The policeman, accustomed to the false friendships of people whose homes he invaded in the course of his duties, nodded, shrugged, and headed for the door.

His hair, as he walked out into the sunlight, was brown.

Allen must have gasped. Officer Henderson turned around, his expression bland, yet alert and expectant at the same time. He stopped. He frowned.

He came back into the house.

"Mr. Mayerovik? Are you okay?"

"Yeah! Sure! Right as rain!" Allen said, too hurriedly to be credible.

The policeman's frown deepened. "Mr. Mayerovik, it may be none of my business, but you. . . ." He squinted. "You're not the same man, are you?"

"What do you mean?" Allen stammered. He understood, though. While he watched, the policeman changed, subtly, in ways that only an observant person could notice. The line of his jaw lengthened a fraction; his cheekbones lifted; his eyes moved the tiniest bit higher in his face.

"You're not Mr. Mayerovik. Who are you?" The policeman reached out for Allen's face, and, catching him by the nose, dragged his features right off his skull. Allen and the policeman stared at each other in mutual horror. Allen's entire face had come away, nose, lips, cheeks, brows, and all, as easily as the skin comes off a broiled turkey at Thanksgiving dinner.

What are you?" The policeman — whose name, Allen saw, in a peculiar flash of lucidity, was now "Straphnung" — dropped his hand toward his pistol. He still held Allen's face dangling loosely in his fingers.

"Give me back my face!" Allen snarled, or tried to. The words, pushed out through lipless teeth, were indistinct. He pointed. The policeman, with a shudder of horror, flipped the loose bag of pinkish flesh to the floor. Allen, with a skull-faced grimace of intense disgust, put the

face back on, the way he'd have put on a mask for a costume-ball.

"What the hell are you?" the policeman demanded.

"Leave him alone!" Reila said heatedly, forgetting her directions to remain silent. She stepped forward and breasted against officer Henderson — or Straphnung — and shoving her impossible lapine features in his face.

"You're. . . ." He shut his mouth and drew his pistol.

"Why are you bothering us? Why are you hurting my friend? I wish you'd just go away."

She was about to say more, when a terrible and irresistible sensation shot through her body, beginning at the top of her head. "Oh!" she cried, her eyes and mouth flashing wide.

The policeman stepped back. Allen stepped forward.

The line of light, faint until now, glowed into full brightness. It sparkled and hummed, vibrating like a captive bolt of lightning between the poles of an electrostatic generator.

"Oh!" Reila said once more, and began to lift up into the air.

Allen caught her in his arms. Instead of securing her, however, he found himself drawn up with her. They crashed through the ceiling, and, a second later, burst out again into daylight in an explosion of asphalt roofing tiles. They spiraled up into the sky, gyrating wildly, drawn up at the end of the brilliant, buzzing, sun-bright line of light, one terminus of which was anchored in the top of Reila's head, the other as far away and as high as the stars.

Allen saw the city of Santa Carla below him, bathed in brilliant California sunshine. Then, all his world, his city, his house, even the irises in his garden, all popped out of existence as if they never had been.

• • •

There was a transition, a long, dangling epoch of nausea and terror, while Allen and Reila were dragged upwards at the end of the glowing tether. Allen saw caverns of light, criss-crossed with fibrous webs. He saw shadows unfold, and hear echoes of gently, thundering sounds. He felt the pressure of other minds, other spirits.

Then, with a boom and a thump, he and Reila lay, sprawled across one another, on a wet, boggy hummock in the middle of a wet-water swamp. The water — Allen's face was pushed down in an oozing puddle of it — tasted sugary, temptingly delicious.

He rose to his feet. Unsteadily, he looked around himself, stunned by the astonishing sights and sounds that surrounded him.

Ahead, across a narrow water, an army of conifers clashed as they moved. The slammed into one another, rebounding until their limbs shook, then found a way to grate past their neighbors to right and left. A wooden drumroll accompanied their dance, and fine rain of needles fell about their churning roots.

To his left, only darkness, faintly streaked with vague green bands of light. To his right, the flames of an alien morning. Behind him. . . .

He looked over his shoulder, warned by a soft, almost gentlemanly clearing of an unfamiliar throat. "Ahem. . . ."

Low to the ground, shaped like the earthly bird, Reila's "Toucan god" stood on slightly bent legs. He was all black, feathers, legs, bill, and breast, with only his circular yellow eyes showing any color at all.

Allen saw him, and began to change.

It felt unpleasant, but not painful. The discomfort was similar to the awkward feeling one has when sitting down in an unfamiliar chair. However, it was an unfamiliar body he now wore, and the sense of violation he felt nearly overwhelmed him, topped only by his sense of horror.

His clothes flowed away, writhing and flopping as if alive. His body grew a third leg, in front, where his manhood had been; soon, he stood on a tripod, atop a new set of large, ungainly, four-toed feet. An impossible arm grew out of his chest; a third eye peered through the hair in the back of his head.

"What . . . ?" he asked, speaking through three mouths. He looked to Reila for succor, but quickly realized that she could offer him no help. She, too, had changed.

Low, squat, bleary-eyed, she had a scaly, crocodilian aspect now, if crocodiles were to be woven from twining bundles of ropy vines, and equipped with long rows of emerald-shard teeth. She looked at him stupidly, with none of the bright intelligence that he'd known there before.

"I'm Reila," she said, and accidentally bit her tongue before she'd as much as finished her name.

No, you're not, Allen thought sadly. *Reila was a bright, pretty, clever woman, who happened to look like a rabbit.*

The crocodile-Reila was rooting in the mud, swallowing large throatfuls of it in order to get at the sugary water that seeped up from the swamp. A last, faint spark of intelligence surfaced for a moment in her dull, reptilian eyes. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm Allen."

Nodding without any real awareness, Reila accepted this, and shoved her long snout down in the water again.

Allen wheeled, awkwardly, to face the Toucan god. Birdlike with an alien patience, it waited for him to speak.

I'm Allen. I am Allen Mayerovik. I am unchanged. . . . Even as he formed the thoughts, they whirled away, out of his head and gone. He was still Allen . . . but who was he, now?

"Such certainty," the bird said. Allen listened for mockery in its dry, level voice, but heard none.

"Yes," Allen said, throwing his trio of voices defiantly ahead of him. He took a clumsy step forward, wheeling one-third of the way around as he moved. His overall image of the world was not altered: the bird was still ahead of him. The bird would *always* be ahead of him; that was the effect of trilateral symmetry. . . .

A spark lit in his mind, and was gone. In the unemotional yellow eye that the Toucan god turned to him, an answering spark could be seen.

"An insight," the Toucan god said. "Thank you."

In his barrel-chest, Allen's three hearts beat heavier with frustration and rage. "You want insights?" he snarled. He stepped forward, each step rotating him one-hundred-twenty degrees to the left. The gait was fast, surprisingly fast, but the Toucan god merely lifted into the air with a bird's agility.

"Birds have fragile bones!" Allen shouted. "Let me catch you, and I'll show you a toucan's anatomy in the light of day!"

"Fragile bones?" the bird asked, veering close to Allen's head then flapping away again. "Why is that?"

"It reduces your weight, making it easier to fly," Allen said, fighting to control his fury. Ahead of him — behind him — slightly to one side of him — Reila pushed up little ridges of mud with her snout as she grubbed for sweets. He knew he was giving away power to his enemy; he was giving certainty to the monster who had come to control this world.

The Toucan god fluttered lower . . . then settled into a hover, floating motionless in mid-air, his wings folded quietly at his sides. "Easier to fly?"

Allen stepped toward him, reaching out with grasping, murderous fingers. The bird rose a few feet into the air, drawn up like a yo-yo on a string. Allen looked into the air, as if expecting to see just such a string, perhaps glowing golden, perhaps merely a line of twisted twine. But there was none. The bird hovered by some other means. Perhaps he was suspended magnetically. . . .

"Your concepts of 'cause and effect' are welcome," the Toucan god said. The very softness of his speech was maddening. "I desire them. Give me more. Give me all. Give me 'natural laws,' and 'unchanging rules,' and 'underlying static concepts of reality.' Give me your world, Allen. For I am the Toucan god, and I want it for myself."

"How long have you been stealing from us?"

Birdlike, the Toucan god tilted his head to one side. "How long? In your days, or ours?"

"In mine," Allen growled.

"A long time." The bird moved around, floating like a soap bubble, to a new position in midair. "I took your computer game — a very interesting toy — and gave it to Reila. She learned from it. I learned from her. That's how I have come to be a god."

"You're taking reality, causality, statistical meaning, from my world, only for yourself?"

"The sense of power that comes from knowledge is. . . ." The bird shrugged, throwing his beak briefly back over his shoulder. "It is refreshing." He flew higher and lower with new agility. "You're right," he said, with no joy in the unchanging monotone of his voice, "my light bones make it easier for me to fly." He hovered above Reila, actually brushing her low, wrinkled back with his tail-feathers. "Do her heavier bones make it easier for her to crawl?"

Allen's self-control snapped. "Put her back. Give Reila back her body. Give her back her mind. Do it, or else. . . ."

The Toucan god might have asked, "Which body?" He might have asked, "Why do you care?" He *might* have asked, archly, "What makes you think you have power to command me?"

Instead, he asked, simply, "Or else . . . what?"

It was, as the Toucan god himself had said to Reila on another day, the wrong question.

"I'll give you reality, then, you bastard," Allen snapped. He stood forward, his three legs braced wide, his three mouths all shouting aloud. "You want to know how the world really works? Here it is. You're a bird. A *bird!* You're not a 'god' at all. You have to flap your wings to fly, and if you don't, you *fall!* Gravity is the boss here, and aerodynamic drag, and a hundred other factors. I could show you the equations. . . ."

The Toucan god, to his astonishment, lost altitude and fell into the mud with a tiny, muddy splash. Allen was too tired to be surprised; his anger, firing his spirit, was equally fatiguing to his body.

"You're a bird . . ." Allen hissed. "You're a bird. You have a brain the size of a pea. You can't understand science.

You can't understand language. You can make 'Polly wanna cracker' noises with your tongue, but you aren't even a man, let along a god. You . . . you . . ."

The Toucan god looked up at him blankly.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" Allen shouted. He received no answer. The only noise to be heard was the clashing and shaking of the trees on the opposite bank. Annoyed beyond endurance, he whirled and pointed at them. "Stop that! You can't do that! You don't have the energy. Just sit there and grow, damn it!"

The trees froze into place. Now, they looked for all the world just like a small copse of ordinary pines.

He spun back to the Toucan god, which, as dull and mindless as the crocodilian Reila, now tucked into the mud with its long, black beak, rooting for sweets.

"You're supposed to be colorful, too," Allen muttered petulantly. The Toucan, no longer to be called a 'god,' shimmered, and acquired the familiar and characteristic green plumage, touched with fiery colors — red, yellow, blue — around its head and down its breast. Its bill was a bright banana yellow, shading subtly to red where it joined its head.

Allen felt a brief pang, then. He felt like a murderer.

Then he remembered the bodies into which the Toucan had trapped Reila and him. His own was a ridiculous fabrication; he stepped out of it and into his own normal body with scarcely a thought. The idea of a human mind supported in an alien, three-lobed brain was too inane to be credited.

But what of Reila?

He looked at her. What "cause and effect" could apply to her? He knew what he wanted: *he* wanted *her*. He wanted her back, the way he'd first met her.

That wasn't the way this world worked, however. He had supplanted the Toucan god, had taken away his role as the single source of stability and certainty in a shifting, always-changing, unstable world. Or, as Allen hastened to remind himself, a *seemingly* unstable world. His triumph, and the Toucan god's fall, proved that there truly were "underlying rules and laws" here.

Well, then. . . . "Hypothesis," he murmured. "Reila is normally intelligent. Her current shape is affecting her thought-processes, suppressing her intelligence."

Reila, hearing her name, grunted and lifted her heavy, reptilian head from the mud.

"No . . ." Allen sighed. "I didn't really think so. . . ."

Then, in a flash, he understood. "It's the ultimate 'observer effect!'" Understanding begot more understanding; his insights exploded. From each pinnacle of understanding, the horizons beyond lured his intellect; in a moment, his perceptions raced outward at the speed of light. Propelled by the expanding wave-front, attenuated to infinity, the small, glowing spark of selfhood that was Allen Mayerovik attained perfect wisdom, and became one with the cosmos.

It lasted only a second. It only needed to. Then he blinked like a ninny, and sat himself down in the mud.

That's . . . that's the best thing I've ever felt. . . . It put drugs to shame, and left even sexual pleasure in second place.

"Reila?" he called, and beckoned with one finger.

Reila, eyes glazed, blunt muzzle smeared with sweet, sticky mud, ambled closer. "Yes?" she said, barely able to maintain a one-word-sentence level of conversation.

"I've figured something out. Something you'll like."

Reila blinked, too stupid right now even to be puzzled. "That's nice." She waited a moment, then looked into his eyes. "I'm Reila. Who are you?"

"Reila . . ." He held her monstrous head in his hands and kissed her right on the tip of her muddy snout. "Reila, in this place, you're as smart as you know you are!"

"What?"

"You're smart. You're intelligent. You're as smart as you recognize yourself to be. Do you see?"

It took a while. For nearly an hour, Reila struggled with the idea. At times, it eluded her, and she returned to eating mud. Each time, however, she would come back to the thoughts that Allen had suggested. Eventually, the dawn of intelligence awakened in her dead, crocodilian eyes. Then . . .

"Oh! Allen! You're right!"

"Yes!" he smiled hugely.

"I'm . . . I'm smart again. I'm *me* again!"

"You always were."

"Was I?"

"Yes."

"But what about my body? My bodies?"

"They're all yours. All *you*. Pick one you like."

"Okay. . . ." She squinted and frowned and concentrated, but couldn't find a way to change. Still quadrupedal, still scaly and awkward, she sat, idly licking the mud from between her teeth. "My mind is the important thing," she said aloud, although speaking mostly to herself. "The body isn't really an important thing, is it?"

"No," Allen said. "Still, I'd grown fond of you the way I met you."

The crocodile vanished, and the long-legged, stretch-eared, white-furred, lithe, limber, and very feminine rabbit returned, sitting in a low squat, supported by her immense feet.

"Hello," Allen greeted her.

"Hi," she answered, a bit shyly. "You defeated the Toucan god. Does this mean that you are the 'Allen god'?"

"I suppose." Allen was happy, now, just to sit and look at her, to listen to her, to think about her and to understand her. However, the best was still to come. *(Isn't it always?* he wondered.)

"But if I'm the 'Allen god,' then you'll have to be the 'Reila god.' Because, Reila. . . ." He paused for emphasis. "In this world, *you're as smart as you know you are.*"

"You told me that." She laughed. "That's so wonderful, too! I'll never have to be stupid again! I *hated* waking up dull, and confused, and foolish. . . ."

"But, Reila. . . ."

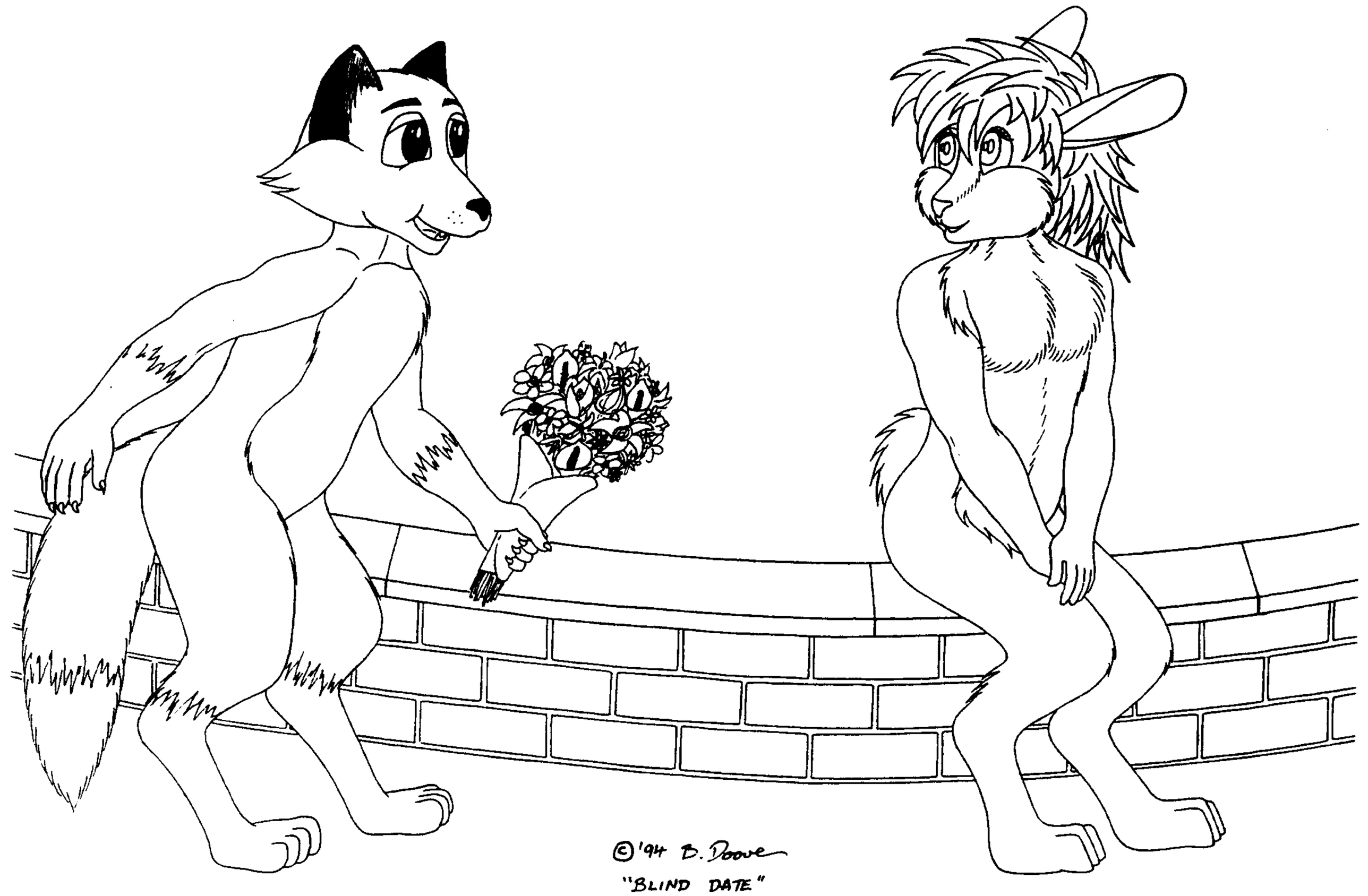
She looked at him, perplexed, not seeing what he was driving at. Then, in a flash, she did.

For her, as well, the realization only took a second. The emotions writhed across her face, as deep and as sincere and as painful as the contortions of orgasm.

"Oh!" she cried. Her eyes went wide, wide enough to perceive all of reality: the whole of the cosmos in two eyes and a single soul. Her perceptions, like his, encompassed the infinite. He relived the pleasure, simply by seeing it on her face. "Oh . . ."

She surfaced, and looked at him. Both were exactly as smart as they knew they were. They moved toward each other, and eased into a sexual embrace which united them in spirit and soul as much as in the flesh. Their love was as pleasurable as they knew it was, and their knowledge, now, had no limit.

Afterward, she gave him irises, and he gave her a new computer game.



CATNIP *OVERDRIVE*

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SO... HAVE YOU FOUND A JOB YET?

SPORT

DAILY CAT

YIFFLES REUN

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AND IT LOOKS LIKE IT COULD BE FUN.

AND SO A PHONECALL AND A BIT LATER...

ARE YOU WILLING TO START IMMEDIATELY MR CATERON?

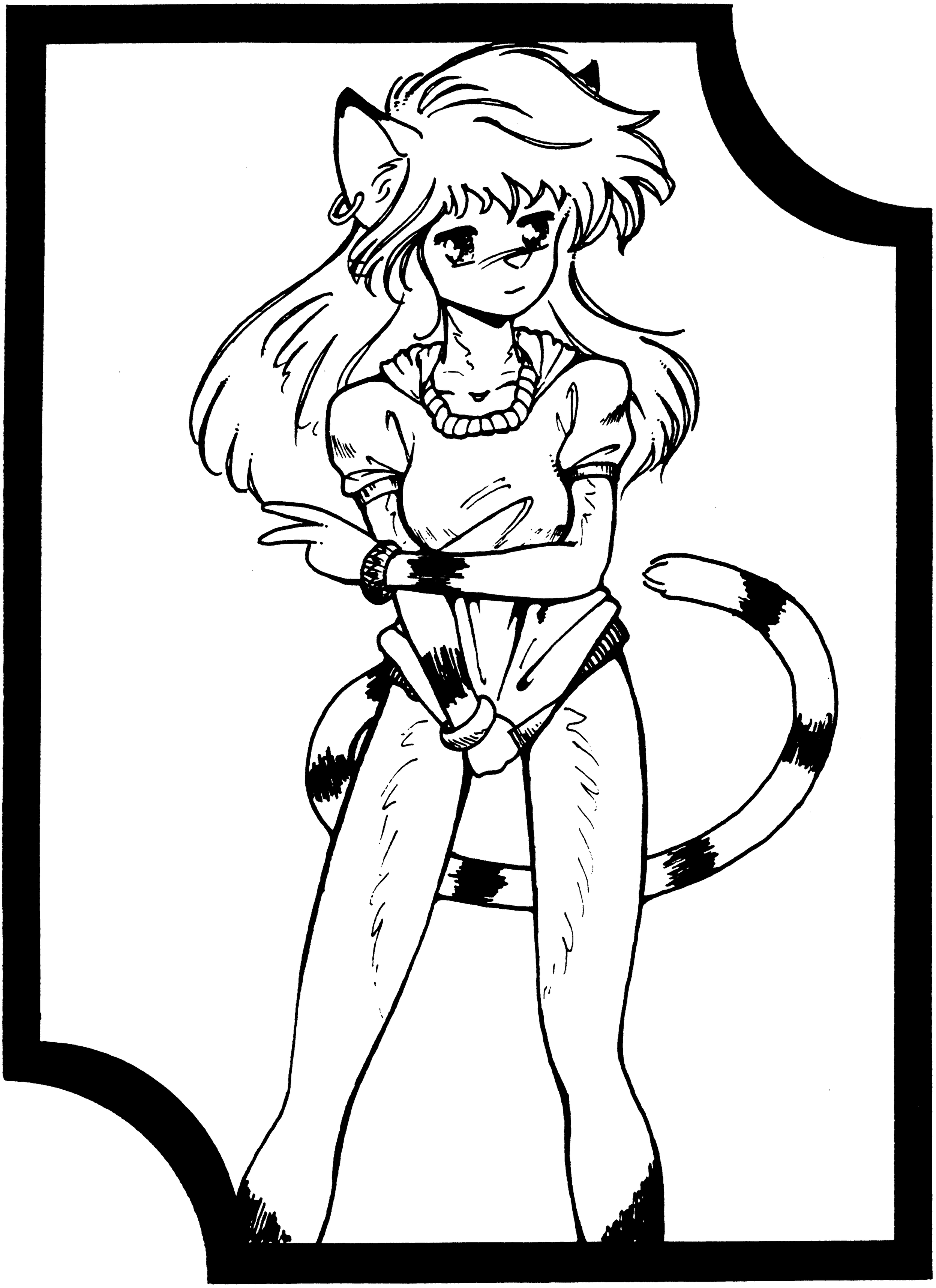
WELL IT IS DOOR TO DOOR SELLING AND IT IS ON COMMISSION, BUT IT IS A JOB SO WHAT THE HEY. I'LL TRY ANYTHING ONCE...

TATA HEY! TATA HEY!!

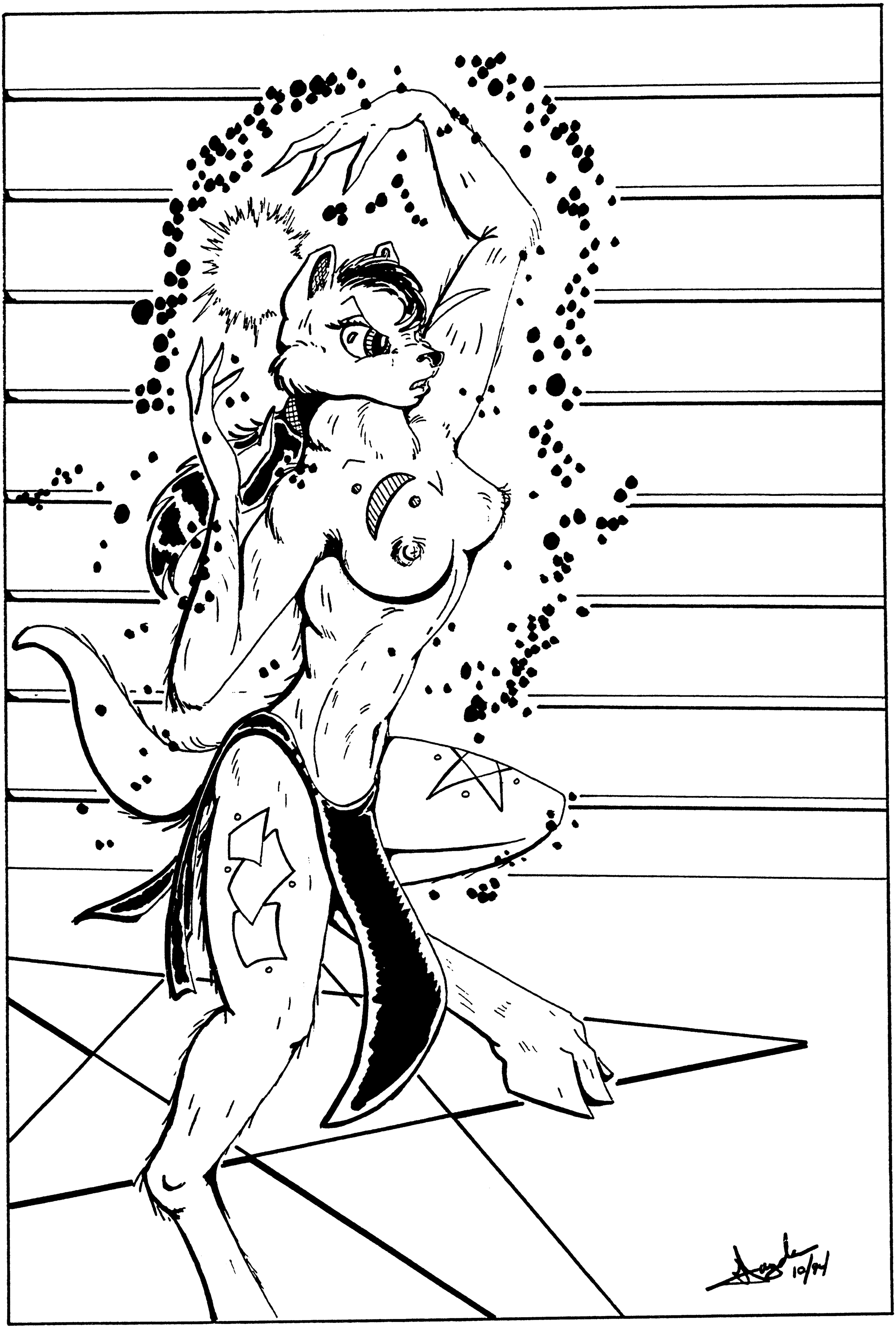
HEYMAN JUICE!

I'LL JUICE YOU IF YOU DON'T LEAVE ME ALONE.

...EXCEPT MAYBE THIS.



PERKINS 1997



Crypt of Horror

A Hanno and Loris tale by Brock Hoagland

There's something out there, Hanno." Loris, a tall and pretty leopardess of nineteen, stepped away from their campfire, drawing her long sword. She wished she hadn't removed her chainmail shirt earlier.

"Any idea of what it is?" The handsome gray mouse of twenty-five moved to her side, putting head and one arm through the strap of the satchel that had been beside him as he sat by the fire. At just over five feet, he was almost a foot shorter than she.

"Not yet." She searched the darkness with eyes, ears, and nose.

As he opened his satchel and located by feel the small parchment packets he sought, Hanno searched the darkness himself, even though he knew she would discover what it was before he would. His senses were fairly keen, the legacy of his ancestors being hunted by hers ages ago, but hers were better.

Loris's head turned, her ears flicking forward. "There. Sounds like something's hurt. Whatever it is, it's coming this way. It's got to see our fire, so it must be a thinking fur of some sort."

"We'd better go see. If someone needs our help, we have to give it."

"Aye, but keep behind me, runt, and stay alert — bandits have been known to use this trick."

"I know, kitten; remember who's seen more of the wide world."

"You may have seen more, but you civilized furs have let your senses and instincts go to pot." She was a barbarian from the Southlands veldt herself.

Loris leading the way, they headed for the sounds she'd detected. Moments later, Hanno heard them himself. It sounded like something being dragged through the brush by fits and starts. Or someone injured, crawling towards hoped-for help. They quickly found him, a badger on hands and knees, crawling towards their fire. He appeared to be in a delirium, muttering in a thick and slurred voice. Loris had no trouble hoisting him onto her shoulders and carrying him back; she had her species' amazing strength in full measure.

They laid him on a doubled blanket by the fire and he said his first clear words. "Cold! So cold! Like an ice dagger in the heart!"

The two adventurers glanced at one another. It was high summer and the night was warm. The fire had been for cooking supper and a cheery glow, not for warmth. While Loris built up the fire, Hanno examined his injuries. His findings perplexed the mouse. The injuries were not that serious. He had a single shallow cut on a shoulder that could have come from a sword or knife and three deep scratches on a cheek that looked like claw marks. They posed no danger in themselves and he couldn't have lost that much blood. From their look, he had received them no earlier than this morning. It was too soon for a wound fever to set in.

"Well?" Loris asked.

Hanno shook his head. "I don't know. I can find no explanation for his condition. His wounds just aren't that serious. Look, you'd hardly notice these if they were yours."

The leopardess shrugged. "Mayhaps they seem serious to him. You civilized furs are a bit of weaklings."

"Not that much! And that doesn't explain a wound fever so soon after the injuries!"

"Mayhaps he had a fever first," she suggested. "That would make the injuries more serious."

"Mayhaps," he agreed doubtfully. Their patient had lapsed into unintelligible mutters once more. "Well, whatever the cause of his state, he needs help."

Though Hanno was a mage and not a healer, he did have some limited knowledge of the healing arts, and all sensible adventurers carried what medicines they could afford. From a saddlebag, he selected a potion for the fever and carefully poured it into the badger's mouth. Thank the gods he was not so far gone as to be unable to swallow it. Meanwhile Loris cut open his leather jerkin and tunic and washed the cut on his shoulder. Hanno took a paste

from the saddlebag, moistened it further with a little wine, and smeared it onto the cleaned wound. When the scratches on his cheek had been cleaned, he doctored them. They bandaged the badger and wrapped him in a blanket and sat beside him, monitoring his condition.

His fever worsened and he sank further into delirium. Only one thing could help him now. Hanno drew out a small silver flask carefully wrapped in a cloth. It was one of two such precious flasks they owned. Loris said nothing, though the contents of that flask had cost them a sun, and many furs would not think a dying stranger's life worth one of those large gold coins. The average fur could live on that much money for half a year.

Hanno drew out the wooden stopper and dribbled a little of the magical healing potion into the badger's mouth. He swallowed it and the mouse mage dribbled more. He stopped after he had poured perhaps a third within.

"Will that be enough?" Loris asked.

"It'll be enough to see if it does him any good. If it does, I can give him more. If it doesn't, why waste what we may need someday?"

The badger rallied briefly, long enough to cry out, "The gods curse our greed and curse that damnable treasure!" He lapsed back into his fever and quickly sank thereafter. The end came at midnight, when he slipped from life into afterlife. They drew the blanket over his face and lay down to get what little sleep they could.

• • •

In the morning they went through the badger's clothes to discover what they could about him, a name, perhaps, or a family or town. There were no such, though there were clues concerning what he had been. His leather jerkin was as thick as Loris' own, and from the marks on it, he normally wore the armor of an armsfur over it. Yet the only weapon on him had been a small knife stuck into the top of a knee boot.

"So he abandoned his armor and weapons someplace," Loris stated. "He wouldn't have done that until the fever had him firmly within its grip. Which means he must have gotten his injuries somewhere nearby if you're right he got them yesterday."

"Aye, and what of it?"

The leopardess grinned. "He did mention a treasure, runt. I doubt I'll have much trouble backtracking him."

"He also cursed it and their greed," Hanno dryly pointed out.

"Don't tell me you want that treasure to go to waste! Where's your sense of adventure, runt?"

"Right where it's always been, kitten. I didn't say we shouldn't go looking for it. I'm just pointing out it's already cost one life that we know of — probably more. He did refer to 'our greed'."

"Which just means we have to be on our guards," Loris replied.

They fetched the shovel from their gear and took turns digging the grave. They made it deep enough to hold him securely in Mother Earth, a courtesy to one who must have been a fellow adventurer. Checking his purse, they found a silver bit and several large coppers. Hanno added a moon, ensuring he would have money in the afterlife. They wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in his grave. Loris placed her spare sword beside him. "I won't have a fellow armsfur go unarmed in the afterlife." From their supplies they added jerked meat, dried fruit, hard bread and a skin of ale so he would always have food and drink. It wasn't much, but it was more than many furs took with them. They covered him up and built a small stone cairn at his head, and there was no more for them to do. When they came to a temple of Hruska, the black panther Goddess of Death, they could give a priest money to hold the death ceremony for him.

Loris saddled her war bird and Hanno his smaller riding bird, then they loaded the bulk of their gear onto their pack bird. The leopardess strung her composite bow and set out afoot on the badger's back trail, her partner following, mounted on his bird, leading hers and the pack bird.

• • •

It was an easy trail to follow. A wounded, crawling fur leaves plenty of sign behind. Stems on bushes had been broken, small plants crushed and the ground disturbed. Several times they found places where he had collapsed and lain a while. They came to a sword that had been left at one of the places where the badger had collapsed.

Loris picked it up and tested its heft and swing. It wasn't as good as hers, but, "Serviceable enough," she commented. She placed it on the pack bird to replace the one she had given him.

It was not much further until they came across his armor. A helmet lay beside a brigandine of small lacquered iron plates sewn to a canvas coat. Loris sniffed in disdain. She much preferred her shirt of chainmail, which did not hamper movement as did the stiff garment. Nor did it have gaps, however tiny, through which a point could find its way. Of course it cost more, but it was worth it.

Hanno had dismounted and was examining the brigandine. "Look here, kitten."

One of the plates had been sheared through. Whatever had left the wound on the late badger's shoulder hadn't found a weak spot in his armor. It had cut through it. She examined it carefully herself. It was a clean cut like that left by a surgeon's scalpel, not like that left by an ax or heavy sword that would have smashed through.

They proceeded even more cautiously after that. They soon discovered the occasional drop of blood, quickly be-

coming more frequent. "It won't be long now," Loris commented. "Those wounds wouldn't have bled for long."

In less than a quarter hour she was proved right. They came to a hill and halfway up it was a black opening, about three by three feet. Fresh soil scattered below it proved it was not a natural opening — someone had been digging here recently. There were other signs as well.

Loris examined an area where the ground was greatly disturbed and announced, "Five, maybe six, birds were picketed here. Something must have frightened them and drove them off." She looked back up at the hole.

"Know what I think our friend found here, kitten?" Hanno asked. "I think it's an ancient crypt."

She nodded. "I agree, runt. Lots of treasure to be found in one of those places." Going to her war bird, she unstrung her bow and returned it to its case. It would be useless in close quarters.

"And the occasional undead horror. Judging from friend badger, I think there must be one such within." Hanno dismounted and selected several packets of spell components from his satchel. He placed them in belt pouches where they would be more readily accessible and chose one to keep in hand.

"No treasure worth having is gained without risk," she commented, donning her helmet and placing buckler on right arm.

"Aye, which means the faint of heart leave the treasures for the bold." He fetched a lantern from the pack bird, conjuring a flame to life on the wick, and slipped their flasks of healing potion into his satchel.

Loris took a pair of silver daggers from a saddlebag, sticking them through her belt. "Ready, runt?"

"Let's make ourselves rich, kitten."

• • •

The two adventurers picketed their birds and climbed up the hill to the opening. There they found shovels and picks abandoned by the party before them. Loris knelt down and peered inside.

"They didn't have to do much digging," she reported. "Just a few feet, then they came to a stone slab meant to block the entrance. One of them was no slouch as a mage — there's a hole blasted through it. Give me the lantern and I'll see what's beyond."

Leaving her shield behind and taking the lantern, the leopardess crawled into the constricted passage. Hanno watched her anxiously, a spell of protection ready. He could still reach out and touch her boot when she stopped. She blocked most of the view, but he could still see past her sufficiently to see the slab she'd mentioned and the edge of the hole blasted through it. Her long tail began twitching with her growing excitement.

Loris stuck her head in the hole. "One of our late friend's companions is just inside. A coyote and a mage by the look of her. It appears she was trying to escape, but something caught up with her first. Her head's been twisted around so that it's facing backwards. For the rest, somebody constructed a passage out of big stone slabs, four feet wide and seven high. It runs eighteen, twenty feet and ends in a heavy wood door. The door is shut."

"Anything else?"

"That's all." She backed out. "I'd say it's a crypt for sure."

"And whatever's buried there isn't quite finished with this life yet. It's our duty to both the Mother and Hruska to make it surrender the last vestiges, kitten."

"And our duty to Ryndillus and Borsa to put its treasure to better use than lying hidden in the ground, runt." Loris named the fox God of Thieves, Lawyers, and Politicians and the elephant God of Wealth.

"But before we do . . ." He reached into one of the compartments of his satchel and drew out a packet. A few mystic gestures, a few arcane words, and the packet glowed faint gold briefly before the light faded. He opened it and sprinkled the contents on them. "It won't protect from the undead as well as spell from priest or priestess, but it's better than nothing."

"Do you have a spell that will lay it to rest?"

"Nay; you know that's the priesthood's business. The best I can do is hope to destroy it."

"What about my sword? Will steel work?"

"It may, it may not, depending upon what sort of undead we face. Best rely on silver." Steel had no effect on most types of undead while silver affected most.

Loris unbuckled her sword and laid it on the ground — no sense in burdening herself with useless weight. She drew her silver daggers. Mouse and leopardess glanced at each other and nodded. She crawled back inside. Hanno followed, bringing the lantern. Slipping through the hole in the blocking slab, they stood up. He examined the body of his fellow mage. She had a grimace of unspeakable horror and pain frozen on her face.

"Well?" Loris inquired.

"Her neck was broken. However, I think worse was done to her first. I think some part of her life was drained from her beforehand by the monster within." The undead were jealous of the living since they retained but remnants of life themselves. Many could steal life from the living with a touch.

"So, do you have a plan, runt?"

Hanno shrugged. "There're not a whole lot of options to chose from — subtlety is of little use here. You open the door, I'll toss in a light spell, we charge in and play it by

ear. With luck, the light will already have weakened our opponent somewhat." Light hurt most undead, creatures of the ultimate darkness.

• • •

They were not so rash as Hanno's plan would indicate. Each in turn examined the door for traps. Finding none, they proceeded. The mouse readied his spell, all but the final word, and nodded. Loris opened the door a crack and he tossed the packet inside, speaking the word of activation. He wished he dared use Fire Blast rather than Light Burst; however, such could not be. A blast of fire could destroy much of the treasure they'd come for and if the space beyond was confined it could wash out and catch them in the flames. They shut their eyes. There was a silent, blinding burst of light, intense as the noonday sun reflecting from a mirror. Loris threw the door wide and they charged inside.

The Light Burst lingered still in the room, every object therein glowing with its aftereffect, bathing the room with light brighter than a lantern's. The effect would gradually fade, though it would take a full hour before darkness returned to the chamber. The crypt proper was perhaps ten by fifteen feet. At the far end was a chair of red sandstone. Lying next to it were a bolt of silk cloth, a costly embroidered rug, a cask with its lid open to show the gleam of gems, gold and silver, and a small table of exotic wood. On the table sat a silver serving set: gold inlaid goblet, platter, pitcher, plate and bowls which had held the dead's eternal feast, long rotted away.

Beside the table lay the body of a male kudu with an arm slashed off at the shoulder, right through his mail shirt. Near him lay the body of a female llama in the robes of a priestess, a foot separating her head from her shoulders. In one corner, as if he had retreated there when escape was cut off, slumped the body of a fox, the expression on his face a match for that on the coyote's.

In the chair sat the crypt's occupant. It was a rhinoceros, its wrinkled hide even more wrinkled due to the shriveled flesh beneath. The shroud that had been wrapped around it was faded and torn with time. Under that, it was wearing armor centuries out of date, iron rings sewn to a leather coat. Some rings lay scattered on the floor, showing how time had undone their fastenings. On its head was an ancient, open-faced great helm. Across its legs was laid a magnificent sword, bare of sheath, the yard-long blade reflecting the light in the wavy pattern of the finest steel, hammered and folded over and over. Here was the body of a champion from an age long past.

It had a withered arm flung up, shielding its face from the effects of Hanno's spell. From it issued the charnel-house reek of the undead, though his flesh should have long since rotted away. Lowering his arm, he regarded them with the black pits that were left by eyes sunk into their sockets. Deep within them, red sparks glowed balefully with unnatural life.

Lips shriveled to expose its teeth moved, and it spoke with a voice dry and lifeless as a desert a hundred years without rain. "So. More thieves come to plunder my resting place. For the pain of the accursed light I'll give you back pain a thousandfold."

"If you truly rested here, you'd not begrudge those who can use it your wealth," Loris retorted. "Never fear, we'll give you Hruska's rest in return, unnatural monster!"

"The mouse I shall drain of life within the hour. You, wench, on the other hand I shall spend a full day draining, savoring your fiery spirit as it feeds me little by little." The wight rose and started forward, sword in one hand, the other outstretched empty. Dry joints creaked like unoiled hinges.

"Beware his hand, Loris!" Hanno called. "That's the true danger! He must touch dead flesh to flesh to drain life and the claws are poison! It's that that slew friend badger!"

The adventurers separated, one going to each side. When the monster went for one, the other would go for it. Recognizing the greater danger, it went for the mouse mage. Hanno spoke a spell. The packet of spell components in his hand burst into cold, scarlet flames and shot from his hand, the flames turning hot as a forge fire the instant they left it. The Flame Arrow struck the undead rhinoceros full in the chest, burning into it. The lifeless face could show no pain, but it had clearly been hurt. A Lightning Bolt would have blasted it apart and slain it on the spot, but the blast would have also caught them. Unfortunately, Hanno was forced to use less effective spells. He reached into a pouch for another packet.

Loris darted in, striking twice at its back. Silver blades struck iron rings, doing it no harm. She danced back before it could turn on her.

The wight pursued the mouse. Hanno backed away, sidling to avoid being trapped in a corner. He cursed the lack of room. He shot another Flame Arrow, catching it again.

Loris jumped in, striking again. This time she lingered, striking twice more. One blade found a spot missing its ring and drove into their foe. He spun and struck. Catquick, she avoided his hand. She was not so fortunate regarding his sword. Its tip caught her arm, slicing through the steel of her armor as easily as her sword sliced cloth. She yowled at the pain, blood running down her arm, and leaped clear.

"Loris!"

"I've had worse, Hanno! I can still use the arm!" Her snarl and growl were pure rage as she spat at the wight, "A magic sword! I'll have that from you, monster!"

Its chuckle was as hollow as an empty skull. "And so you shall, wench! When I've drained all but the last dregs of life from you, I shall give it to you — an inch at a time through your guts!"

The wight returned to his pursuit of the mage. Hanno realized they were in trouble. There was no room to maneuver. If this fight dragged out much longer, they were bound to get unlucky. He could always escape through the door, but that would leave Loris trapped within the crypt with it. His Flame Arrows and her one good strike with a dagger had hurt it, but not enough. And he was fast using up his Power. It was time for a desperate, dangerous gamble. He groped in his satchel for one particular packet. He pulled it out, reciting the spell. He felt Power fill his right hand, leaving him little if this spell should fail. Yet if this spell failed, all was probably lost anyway. A Smashing Fist could pulverize granite, turning it to dust. It was one of his most powerful spells, but it was dangerous to use here. In order for it to work, he had to touch his opponent. Which gave it the chance to touch him in return.

Hanno balled his fist and ran forward, hoping to catch the wight off-guard. A second seemingly slowed to a minute. He ducked beneath a sword stroke and threw a punch. The monster struck first, claws raking his shoulder. He screamed, not so much from the pain as from the cold that struck his heart as a bit of his life was stolen from him. The badger had been right — it was like a dagger of ice driven into his heart. Loris drove her twin daggers into the weak spot she'd found earlier. And Hanno's fist struck.

He punched through the wight's armor, smashing dry bones and withered flesh into powder. With no body left to sustain its shadow life, the remnant of the rhinoceros's spirit lost its unnatural hold on this life and like a wisp of smoke in a strong breeze it blew away and was gone into the next life.

Hanno fell to his knees. Loris was beside him in an instant. "Hanno, are you all right?"

"I've been better." He shivered at the cold within his heart. "How's your arm?"

"It's all but stopped bleeding already."

The mouse could see that that was a lie. Blood still fell from her arm onto the crypt's stone floor. He fumbled in his satchel, drawing out a flask which he held out to her.

"I don't need healing potion for this scratch," she protested. "A bandage will do."

"Go on and drink it, Loris. We're rich enough now that we can easily replace it. Besides, the pain of a wound always makes you irritable and I don't want to have to suffer through that."

"*You* don't want to suffer! And just who is it that usually suffers the pain of wounds, runt?" The leopardess took the flask and drained it down.

"It's your own fault for being an armsfur rather than a sensible mage who wisely avoids close combat, kitten," he replied. Hanno pulled out another flask for himself.

"And was wisely avoiding close combat what you were doing when you jumped in and hit him?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time." He could feel the warmth returning to his heart and saw her bleeding had already slowed to a few drops which quickly ceased.

"Well, let's see what we've won, runt."

Hanno was mildly surprised. Usually, battle aroused in the leopardess a desire for fresh meat or blood, as well as other desires. Greed came third at such times. Upon reflection, their lack this time was not surprising. The undead always had a chilling effect upon the living.

They had done quite well. It wasn't the fabulous fortune that was sometimes discovered in an ancient crypt, but the gold, silver, and gems they'd won would allow them to live well for several years. Perhaps they could settle down for a while. Loris was especially pleased with her new sword. She declared its balance perfect and quickly learned that it could shear through a finger's thickness of steel without harm to itself. The rhinoceros had had a long dagger as well, also magical, which the mouse took. Hanno was disappointed that there were no scrolls of magic spells to be found, though he hadn't really expected such in a warrior's tomb.

"Never mind, runt," Loris told him. "Next time we plunder an undead's crypt, we'll just make sure it's a lich's. There'll be plenty of spells for you there."

Before they left, they laid out the bodies of the adventurers who had died here and the armor and few scraps of bone and flesh that were all that remained of the crypt's original occupant. With their newfound wealth, they could be generous, and they placed a sun upon each body. They brought in such food and drink as they had left; they could always live off the land until they came to village, town, or city. They resealed the crypt and Hanno cast an illusion to hide the entrance. When it faded in a few years, grass would have grown over it and the dead within could rest undisturbed. They loaded their birds and rode away.

They paused at the badger's grave to give him one of the suns to which he had led them. When they came to a city a few days later, they made offerings at the temples of Ryndillus and Borsa for their good fortune. Then they went to Hruska's temple and left gold for her clerics to hold the death ceremony for those who had died. Nor did they neglect to include the rhinoceros among them.

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ELLIOT

THE
NEW YORK
PETS

1945

KOBEKT AND KATRINA

WHAT'S THAT?

SOMETHING NEW. AN "ODEREO"

IT'S LIKE A STEREO FOR SMELLS. TRY IT!

OH, ALL RIGHT IT WONT BE ICKY OR ANYTHING?

NAH... I'LL SET SOMETHING SIMPLE

PHEW! SMELLS LIKE A FISHMARKET

TOO MUCH? SHALL I TURN DOWN THE "BASS"?

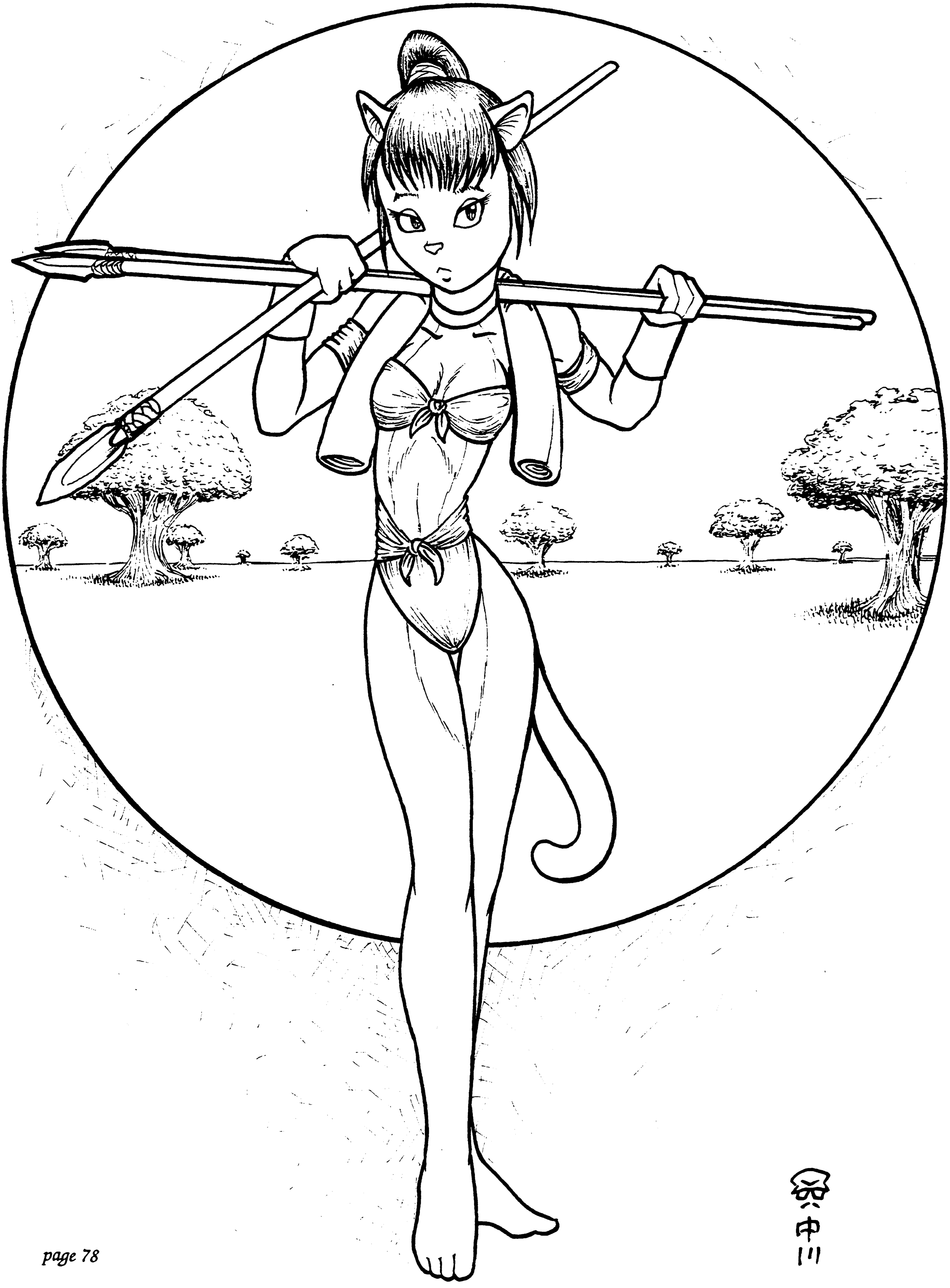
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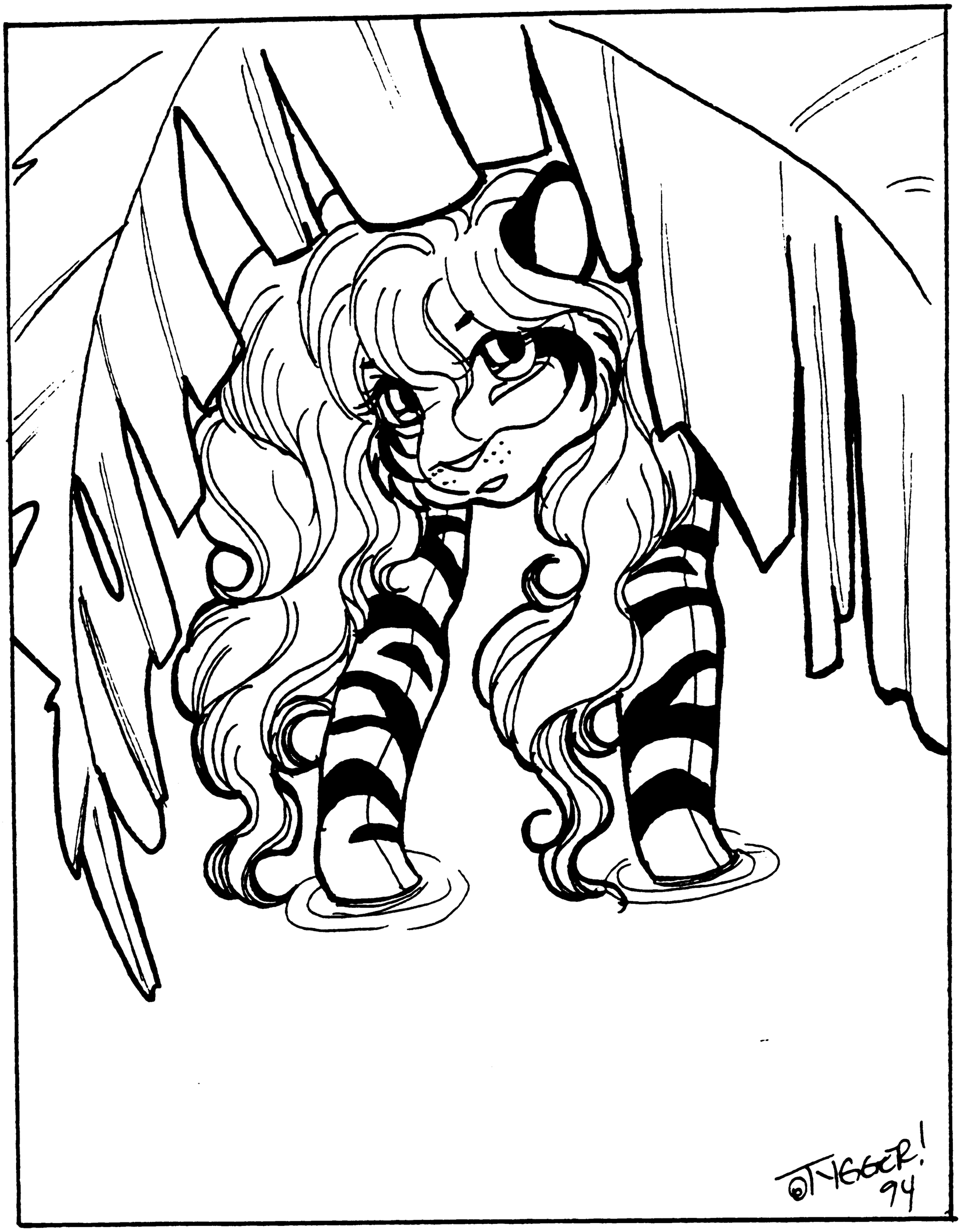
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HEY, PROFESSOR, WHAT DO YOU THINK THE ANCIENT HUMANS USED THIS THING FOR?

S.D.S.U. ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD DIG




TERRIE SMITH
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