

Satisfaction Guaranteed

By Clint McInnes

** Friday Morning **

One couldn't say that the guard was bored. Not exactly. He'd been on his shift for less than an hour and a half, and the base's morning rush hour traffic had only just begun to peter out. But it was the same-old-same-old. He knew all the faces, and watched with slight detachment as each civilian worker swiped his or her badge, tapped in his or her passcode, and had his or her retina scanned. He wasn't really even necessary for the normal functioning of the shift change. It was only in the case of the abnormal that his role would take on meaning. And that hadn't happened in the year or so that he'd been assigned this duty.

He did perk up a little, though, when he spotted a new face headed his way. A uniform, and a major, no less. He stood at ramrod attention as the officer got to his station, saluting smartly.

"Morning, soldier." The officer passed the guard his credentials.

"Good morning, Major Andrews, Sir." He read through the document, his eyebrows rising. "DARPA! Yes, Sir, you'll be wanting Colonel Ranff, Sir."

"Yes."

The guard picked up a phone. "Would you like me to get you a mobile detail, Sir?"

"That would be good, thanks."

A jeep showed up a couple of minutes later and whisked the Major to a large building in the center of the base. He walked to an elevator marked "RESTRICTED" and held a small keycard against a plate. Stepping in when the doors opened, he simply waited. The doors closed and he began to descend, which continued for over a minute. When they opened again, two MPs were waiting to escort him to the colonel. Less than a minute later he was in a small but well-appointed office, shaking hands with a thin, dapper man with iron-gray hair. "Jim! Good to see you."

"Same here, Hank." They both sat and the Colonel asked, "So what have you got for me? Must be critical if you couldn't discuss it over the SCU."

In answer the major pulled out a sheaf of photographs and dropped them on the desk. The colonel started leafing through them, sat up very straight, and stared at the major. "Is this Fred Freeman's stuff?"

"Ay-yep. He's working on the prototype right now."

"Damnation!"

“It’ll *be* damnation for whoever faces our forces on the battlefield if this pans out.”

Colonel Ranff placed the photographs on his desk and squared them neatly. Leaning back in his chair he observed, “You know the committee met yesterday.”

“Did they? No, I didn’t know. I’ve been with Freeman for the last week.”

“They cut our funding.”

“What?!”

“Chairman O’Toole got all huffy about ‘throwing good money after bad’ and likened our project to a perpetual motion machine.”

“That dead dog! I can’t stand his ... waitaminnit. This is an election year.”

“Got it in one. He’s on a soapbox for cutting government waste.”

“Oh, right. The old fart who all but invented earmarks? Make me laugh.” Major Andrews made a rude noise and asked, “What got cut?”

“The whole project got cut fifty percent.”

The major flopped back in his seat, his jaw hanging.

“And they cut our manpower by eighty percent. So after this week we’ll only have two men available for guard duty.”

“This is *precisely* the wrong time to be ...”

Colonel Ranff waved a hand to stop him. “You needn’t preach to the choir.”

“But what are we going to do about it? I can divert a squad at a time for maybe a week, but we won’t be able to keep that up for too long. And Freeman will need protection!”

“I see that now. Some of our intelligence is hinting that certain interested parties might have gotten wind of what we’re working on with Freeman. I was toying with the idea of bringing him onto the base. But that would mean setting up a whole new lab, and we don’t have the funds for that now. Besides which, until you showed me those photos, I thought he was just playing around with some really ‘out there’ basic research. Shows what I know.”

“Can you go back to the committee and ...”

He held up a hand again. “Hang on.” He looked thoughtful for a few seconds and said, “Maybe it isn’t necessary. I might have a different angle on the problem.” He reached into his drawer and pulled out a glossy brochure, which he handed to the major. “I had meant to just keep this as a backup plan, you know, just in case. But now ...”

Major Andrews read the top of the first page and looked up at the colonel hopefully. “Is this what I think it is?”

“It is. CanSec is the cover story, but I think it’s time, as the saying goes, to call in the big dogs.”

“Funny, Jim.” His eyes went back to the brochure. “Okay, this is a riot. It says ‘The leading edge in canine security systems ... unmatched safety ... results guaranteed.’ Sloshing it on a little thick here, aren’t we?”

“P-R, Hank, pure P-R. It reads well for their intended demographic.”

“And what demographic is that?”

“People with more money than they know what to do with, and a streak of paranoia.”

“So we’re actually going to be working with CanSec?”

“Not at all. But all of our people will have the right credentials. As far as he’s concerned, we’ll *be* CanSec.”

Major Andrews grinned. “Are you telling me you’re planning to get Freeman to pay for his own security? I’m sure he’ll be just thrilled.”

“Oh, hell, no. Freeman wouldn’t recognize a dangerous situation until it had his innards bagged and tagged, much less pay to circumvent it. He doesn’t think that way.”

“Then ... why? ...”

“Because my friend, his brother, Nelson, *does* think that way.”

##

** Thursday Evening **

Most of the houses in the neighborhood where *Pascal's* stood were of a type: neat, relatively small, brick Craftsman or bungalows, most of which served as retirement homes. Many of the streets were one-way or dead-end, and traffic was minimal. It was a placid area, which was part of the atmosphere that Pascal had cultivated here. He served some of the finest *haute cuisine* in the city to some of the most discriminating palates, and he never advertised. He didn't even have a sign in front of his establishment. In fact, the only indication that this was other than another dwelling on the quiet street was the presence of a small parking lot that took up most of the back yard.

So many of the patrons were regulars that Pascal's two waiters would frequently be on a first-name basis with everyone in the dining room. Tonight, though, they had a brand new pair of diners, a pair who showed up as if the restaurant were the old family manor. They didn't bother with the menu, ordering perfect appetizers, entrées, and wine with practiced aplomb, and a subtle pass of a folded fifty-dollar note. Their interaction with the waiter was excruciatingly correct, and earned them a high degree of respect.

The older man was tall and well set-up, with wavy silver hair and a neatly clipped mustache. He had an innate presence of command, and moved with a liquid grace that belied his years. Holding up his wineglass, he admired the play of candlelight through the pale amber liquid before taking an appreciative sip. Truly, it was a perfect complement for the poached sweetbread. He swallowed slowly and set the glass down before turning to his dinner companion. "So you have no doubt, then."

"None, sir. We received photographic confirmation," he explained, passing the other a folder with several examples. The younger man was maybe two centimeters shorter and more compact, his own dark brown hair cut in a close buzz; but even the flawlessly tailored suit couldn't hide the bunch and roll of hard muscle when he moved. While both men spoke in English, each flavored the tongue with his own subtle accent, neither of which was readily identifiable. "He has all the important bugs corrected and the rest of them catalogued and qualified. He let slip that he would be arranging for a presentation by the end of the month, complete with a functional prototype."

"My, my. Mr. Freeman does work very quickly, doesn't he?" His companion made no comment on the obviously rhetorical question. "I expected this project to drag on for years before finally sputtering out."

"We all did, sir."

"And yet in less than seven months he took a concept that could charitably be described as science fiction and turned it into a working model. And it will be battlefield-ready by this time next year, if I know anything at all about Colonel Ranff." He ate in silence for most of a minute while digesting this new information. At length, he asked, "So tell me, Raul, don't you think that gives the United States something of an unfair advantage?"

His mouth in a slightly bitter twist, the younger man replied, "You mean more of an advantage than they enjoy already?"

“Touché.” He leaned back in his chair and pondered what to do about the enterprising Mr. Freeman. “In any case it is well that we got involved as early as we did. That was quite a stroke of luck.”

“Yes, sir. Though I dislike relying on luck ...”

“As do I. But when it turns in our favor, I won’t refuse it.” He took another drink from his wine glass, swirling the liquid briefly before swallowing. “Very well. I will contact the Chamber tonight. Undoubtedly, they will want us to procure the plans and the prototype.”

“And what of Mr. Freeman?”

“He must die, of course. We can’t leave him loose to develop it all over again. You will communicate with our agent tomorrow.”

White, even teeth appeared in a smile that had absolutely no humor in it. “Very good, sir. I’ll see to it personally.”

##

** Monday Afternoon **

Nelson Freeman waited patiently while the international telephone connection went through. A lilting voice on the other end finally answered, "Hello? Is this my Nellie?"

"Hey, Sarah! How's Canada?"

"Beautiful. We should move here."

"You really dig that place, huh?"

"Arr-arr. Earth humor." She giggled and asked, "To what do I owe the honor?"

"Well ... you know that big-important-super-secret thingamajig Fred's working on for the DoD?"

"Yeah. Last time we were there we tripped over his guards the whole time."

"Well you won't be anymore."

"What? Did he quit?"

"Oh, no. The government committee that oversees that part of DARPA cut his funding. He's only got two guards now."

"Really? Is that ... a good idea?"

"Well, I don't think so, even if he doesn't give a rip. That's what I called you about."

"What?"

"See, I was at the health club this morning and this guy I'd seen in there a few times just sort of struck up a conversation. He'd gotten this really great dog, he said, and wanted to tell people about it."

"A dog?"

"Yeah!"

"I'm not following you."

"It's a special kind of guard dog. Super smart or well-trained or both. Anyway, he was praising the thing to the skies because he said it had saved one of his kids over the weekend. Couple of crack heads cooked up some harebrained kidnapping scheme and tried to get the kid. The dog, um ... stopped them."

"... Ooooookay. So?"

"So I'd like to get one for Fred."

"Oh." She considered that for a bit and offered, "You know, that's not a bad idea. Fred likes dogs. He just doesn't have time for one any more. And it sounds like something the bad guys maybe wouldn't be expecting."

"Right you are, my girl." He paused and asked, "So, is it okay?"

"What? You getting it for him? Sure."

“Great!”

“Uh ... wait. Why do you need my permission? You’re a big boy.”

“Well, it’s kind of ... pricey.”

“Pricey? As in *how* pricey?”

“As in, slightly less than our first house pricey.”

She squeaked.

“Yeah, I know. But they have a money-back guarantee!”

“Guarantee against what?”

“The safety of the people it guards.”

“Well for that kind of money it ought to!”

“So are you still okay with it?”

“Hon, it’s your money. If you want to get your brother a hundred-thousand dollar dog, go for it. It’s not something I’d think of, but then you’re the world-famous mystery author, not me.”

“Eh ... yeah, I know. But I like to keep you in the loop.”

“Do you have any idea how much I love you?”

“None at all. Why don’t you come home and show me?”

“Give me a few more weeks to tie up this dig and I’ll light a fire under you that’ll make your toes pop off.”

“I can’t wait.”

“You’ll have to. Unless you want to come up here. My tent’s really cozy.”

“I might just do that after Fred’s birthday.”

“Oh, that’s right. It’s the big four-oh isn’t it?”

“Yep.”

There was a rise in the background noise on Sarah’s end. She said, “Hon, I gotta go. One of my grad students ...”

“Say no more. Go be smart.”

“Love you!”

“Love you back.”

##

** Wednesday Morning **

The young woman waited passively, legs crossed at the ankle, hands properly in her lap, watching as the insurance agent ran his numbers. After several minutes he glanced up at her.

“All right, ma’am, I have all the pertinent data for you and Mr. Freeman in the system. And you said you wanted the policy for an even five million?”

“Correct.”

“Same amount for each of you?”

“Correct.”

The agent tapped in the information. “You won’t like the payments, Mrs. Freeman. Given these conditions, the premium is seventeen-seventy-eight a month for limited-term, fully reflective, non-concatenating coverage.”

“What do you mean non-concatenating?”

“That’s what you asked for, Mrs. Freeman. It means that if either of you dies, the other gets the policy amount, and we pay only once. If you both die, the estate gets the money. And the policy terminates when Mr. Freeman reaches the age of fifty-five.”

Me die first? Fat chance. “That’s fine. That’s just what he wants. We’ll take it.”

They made all the arrangements, he filed the policy with the courthouse records department, and she transferred the first payment to the insurance company’s account.

She left in high spirits. *Good. Only a couple more steps to go.*

Just because she was involved from one end didn’t mean she couldn’t engineer herself a little perk on the other.

##

The thin man squatted down and gazed into the eyes of the huge canine sitting before him. Large, intelligent eyes they were, perked with interest and seeming to examine him in return.

He looked up at the slight Asian woman standing beside the dog. “He’s magnificent.”

“Thank you, Mr. Freeman. I agree.”

“He’s huge. He must top seventy kilos.”

“Eighty-four, as of yesterday morning. Over twice my own mass.”

Hells bells! He weighs more than I do. “I’ve never seen a pure white dog with blue eyes and a black tongue before.”

“That’s a characteristic of the breed.”

“What breed is he, anyway? He looks like a well-fed cross between a Husky and a Great Pyrenees.” He chuckled softly. “On steroids. His head is huge.”

“Our breeding program details are proprietary, sir. But we’ve never had a complaint, and as you know, your total satisfaction is absolutely guaranteed. If you ever determine that anything is actually wrong with ...”

“Oh, I’m not complaining! Not at all. I was just curious.” Nelson Freeman held his hand out to the dog, palm down, fingers curled. The dog immediately turned its head toward the woman and made a small, questioning *wff* sound.

She met the dog’s gaze and said, distinctly, “Titan ... Catalogue seven-oh-three-nine. He’s a good guy.”

Titan’s stiff pose relaxed. He turned back to the man and sniffed the hand, then gave it a perfunctory lick.

Mighty damn smart for a dog. “So, can I pet him now?”

“Yes. He’s especially fond of getting scratched on the back of his head, just behind that knob of bone.”

Nelson carefully and slowly moved his hand toward the dog’s head, sliding it up by the neck and around to the spot in question. Titan leaned into the scratching; his tail began a rhythmic percussion against the wall.

“Ms. Takei?”

“Yes?”

“He seems awfully ... well, tame, for a guard dog.”

“He’s not a ‘guard dog’,” and her inflection placed the quotation marks clearly around the term, “he’s a highly sophisticated canine security system. You can get a *kennel* full of ‘guard dogs’ for a great deal less than you’re paying for Titan.”

“I’m sorry. That came out wrong.” He stood, still scratching the dog’s head – a task easily accomplished, as the animal’s shoulders came nearly up to his belt. “It’s just that I can’t get over how gentle he seems to be.”

“He is very gentle with those he’s assigned to protect. He dotes on children, especially. But trust me, you don’t want to be the guy who makes a move against anyone he’s charged with protecting. Titan’s bite force has been measured at over seventy megapascals. And you’ve seen the videos.”

“Right. That’s why I’m surprised.” He caught her eye. “But from what I’ve seen here, it looks like I’ll be getting my money’s worth.” He raised his hand to eye-level, rubbing his fingers together. “You must have just bathed him.”

“Fairly recently. But cleanliness is another aspect of the breed. Also, he hardly sheds at all.”

“Even better.” His mouth curled into a wry grimace. “He might even win over Freddie’s wife if he doesn’t mess up her house.” Nelson never referred to his sister-in-law by name.

“I’m sure that will be the case when she meets him. This breed has a way with their people.”

##

** Afternoon **

Jeanne Freeman paused on her way into the public library, examining herself in a large mirror. *Kid, as arm-trophy material, you qualify.* From the piled-up wealth of long, wavy hair so black it seemed blue, past the wide, light-purple eyes, the aquiline nose and the pouty lips, to the point of her perfect chin, she was a traffic-stopper, and south of the border was nothing to complain about either. She pushed on in and made her way over to one of the public-access internet stations. Rolling the chair closer as she sat down, she logged in with practiced ease.

Send to: acetrampwaydriver@squashooter911.edu

The train is on its way to the station. Arriving at 1900. Please deliver package. Standard fees.

She hit the ‘send’ button, a smile sneaking past her lips. *Happy birthday, Freddie.*

##

** Friday Evening **

Jeanne freewheeled up the driveway to the carriage house, then frowned as she noticed the dark red jag in the garage. *What's Nelson doing here?* Her brother-in-law always got on her nerves. He loved to flaunt his money, always buying ridiculously expensive gifts, or whisking the whole extended family away on some awful vacation. Always something. She jerked her Audi to a stop, hopped over the driver's door, and marched up to the house.

Not that they had anything to kick about. Freddie's consulting firm had netted him nearly a half-million the previous year, never mind the government contract. But that, of course, had nothing to do with her original reasons for being here.

She went inside, and followed her ear to the kitchen. The brothers were halfway through a bottle of tequila, which usually made them quite loud.

"... and now you get to say 'thirty-nine *again*', big bro."

"Not m' style, Nellie. I earned these crows' feet an' nobody's gonna deny 'em to me."

"Yeah, subtlety never was your strong suit."

"Not my job t' be subtle. My job t' tell th' clients what they don' wanna hear."

"Which always makes me wonder why your services are so popular." Nelson poured himself another shot, regarding his brother with a smile. "You never *have* learned how to hold your liquor, have you?"

Fred held himself as straight in the chair as he could manage. "Hmph. 's not like 'at's a bad thing. 'm a cheap date."

They looked over when Jeanne sauntered into the room, leaned her svelte self against the central island's polished black granite top and favored them both with a well-schooled smirk. "Huh. Drunk and drunker. Nelson, I think you might be a bad influence on my husband."

"Hello, Jeanne." Nelson placed his glass on the table and gave her his full attention. It was hardly possible to avoid doing so. She didn't even have to go to any great lengths to make herself desirable; it was simply her ground state. He had no illusions about why the brunette bombshell, fourteen years Fred's junior, had pursued his brother so hotly. Not that he was anyone's idea of a troll, but Nelson was convinced that she was a good bit more attracted to Fred's status and income than any of his other qualities. He stood and said, "Nice to see you again."

She didn't respond for a few seconds, her eyes snapping back and forth between the two. Fred got up and walked over to her, almost steadily. "Sweetie! D'ya have a good time in town?" He'd nearly reached her when a sour belch bubbled up, twisting his face into a mask of distaste.

She gripped his shoulder to keep him at arm's distance. "Freddie, you know I can't stand the smell of tequila!"

“Oops. Sorry.” He blinked a couple of times and looked back at his brother. “Shoulda got up slower.”

Nelson nodded once. “Yeah, probably.”

“Freddie, why don’t you go get a shower and ... use some mouthwash or something.”

“Uh ... yeah. ‘s a good idea.” And he made his way out of the kitchen, not stumbling even once.

Jeanne turned that heavy-lidded, smoky gaze back to Nelson. “So. To what do I owe the honor?”

He stared at her in shock for a second. That phrase, identical to the one his wife had used on him during their last conversation, sounded nothing like it; and he knew the connotations were worlds apart as well. His answer came slowly. “You know a week from tomorrow is his fortieth birthday.”

“Mm-hmm. And I have a *very* special day planned for him.”

I’ll just bet. He cleared his throat. “I’d like to have you both over for dinner on Thursday.”

She stiffened slightly. “Thursday? Why Thursday?”

“Because he’s leaving Sunday to talk with those military guys and won’t be back until Wednesday. I’d like to give him time to rest before the visit. And I don’t like to take up your weekends if I can help it.”

Aren’t we just the most thoughtful little thing? “I see.” She considered her options briefly and gave him a noncommittal shrug. “Sure. Why not.” *It’s dinner, so we surely won’t have to show up before four or five. I can get my other plans out of the way before that.*

Nelson sighed heavily. “Jeanne, I’m not the enemy.”

“I never said you were.”

“But you always seem to resent my presence. It’s been like that since you two started dating.”

“That’s not true.”

“You know what they say. Perception is reality.”

“Maybe your perceptions aren’t as clear as you think they are.”

“... Possibly.” *But I doubt it. I seriously doubt it.*

“You don’t sound convinced.” She came around the island and ambled over to rest her flawless rear against the counter, maybe a meter from him. “What can I do to change that?”

He regarded her soberly for several seconds. This was the first time she had allowed any of their conversations to get beyond shallow banalities. Maybe that was a good sign? He drew a long breath and said, “I guess time will tell. You two have only been married four months, after all.”

“Exactly! Hell, we’re still getting to know each other’s ... preferences.”

“Yeah. He does seem ... happy.” *Preferences? What does **that** mean?* “And if you make him happy, I’m happy for you.” He stuck his hands in his pockets. “It’s just that the two of you, as a couple ... well ... you’re not ... immediately obvious. I guess.”

“Why do you say so?”

Nelson opened and closed his mouth a couple of times. “Okay. Look, see, you’re ...” He gestured at her with one hand.

She turned toward him and leaned an elbow on the counter, her chin rested on one fist, which pose gave him a more advantageous view of some of her attributes than he really felt he needed. “I’m what?”

“... a lot younger than he is,” he finished, lamely.

“Age means very little to me. He is considerate and sweet and I love him.”

“Yeah, he brings a lot to the table.” Nelson had spent a bit of time and energy a few months earlier researching his new sister-in-law’s background, and had gleaned very little about what made her tick. He discovered that she’d been born in a small town in upstate New York, had no living relatives, and had a Bachelor’s degree in History from the University of Virginia. She had no police record, not even so much as a speeding ticket; she’d never owned her own home; the two years immediately after graduation had been spent overseas, studying in England and Italy; and she had most recently worked as a rare-document transcriptionist at a local private college. There was nothing there – absolutely nothing – to arouse his suspicion. And yet ... “And obviously I can see what he *sees* in you ... but he’s always been awfully ... cerebral.”

“Cerebral.”

Nelson nodded. “That’s why Mary left him. She said he always had his head either in the clouds or up his ...”

She interrupted, “So you think, what? I’m not smart enough for him? That’s not very flattering.”

“I don’t know whether you are or not. But ... you don’t seem to have much in common in that area.”

“There are a lot of aspects to a loving relationship that don’t have anything to do with being a Braniac.”

“I’ll grant you that. But it can’t be discounted, especially when one partner *can* be described that way.” He shifted his gaze away, glancing around the kitchen, trying to find something to concentrate on besides her décolletage.

“I take good care of him and he seems to appreciate it.”

“How so?”

“Well,” she continued, sliding a few centimeters closer, “for one thing I see to it that he never has to suffer from SRS.”

He gave her a raised eyebrow in question.

“Surely you’ve noticed how much more relaxed he is lately.”

“Um ... now that you mention it, he is pretty mellow. But what is SRS?”

“Semen Retention Syndrome.”

He blushed. She grinned even wider. “Kinda the male version of PMS. But fortunately a *lot* easier to remedy.”

“Ooookay, I think we’ve hit the TMI ceiling.”

Her smile was practically predatory now; she leaned a little closer. “Oh, you have no idea.”

He scuttled away, easing around past the pantry to the mud room. “I’m ... ah ... sure he’s very glad of ... all that attention. And, ah ... I’ll ... um, be seeing you.” The door hissed closed in his wake.

Jeanne straightened and went over to the sideboard where she poured herself one finger of neat scotch. *Self-righteous bastard. I can’t wait to see his face at the funeral.*

##

** Sunday Afternoon **

The metro station was cool and dim, especially compared with the heat and noise she'd left at the top of the long escalator. Jeanne was thankful (well, if you could call her entitled attitude one of thanks) that she no longer needed to live in the city. It was great for shopping, but ...

No matter. She wouldn't be here long.

Slipping down past the end of the platform, out of the range of the security cameras, she paused at the very entrance to the tunnel, beside the maintenance walkway. When she was sure no one was near or watching, she ducked inside. Two dozen steps brought her to a small access hatch which was conveniently ajar. It took only a moment to get her agile form inside.

Now it was dark enough that she needed the flashlight. Shining it around the echoing space, she spotted the short bank of electrical boxes her boss had told her about. Counting from the right, she stopped in front of the sixth one and examined it. Tentatively feeling around behind it, she discovered the loose panel.

With a small sigh of relief she pulled a thick envelope from her fanny pack and stuffed it into the dark crevice. All the codes and keycards necessary to get into the house, into Freddie's study, and into his safe would soon be in the hands of her co-conspirators; and soon after that she wouldn't have to stomach her husband's slimy, superior touch any longer.

##

** Wednesday Afternoon **

Fred flipped open his phone on the third ring. “Mmmmyello.”

“Hey, Fred-O, how’s the boy?”

“Fighting off jet lag, but I guess I’ll live. What’s up?”

“Just wanted to make sure you were still on for tomorrow.”

“Yep. Dinner, right? When are we supposed to be there?”

“Eh. Five-ish. The meal won’t be until seven, but I wanted a chance to sit and chew the fat a while first. Plus, I’ve got a sort of a surprise. Didn’t want you to miss it.”

“You know you didn’t have to do that.”

“Fred, you wouldn’t buy yourself a new pair of jeans if you could figure out how to keep yourself from violating decency laws with the old scraps. Besides, you only hit forty once. It ought to be meaningful.”

“Is it a bottle of cognac?”

“Nope.”

“Bigger than a bread box?”

“Decidedly so. And you can stop guessing. You’ll find out tomorrow.”

“And I can’t wait.”

“Okay, see you then.”

“See ya.”

##

** Wednesday night **

Persephone had her mind deep into her Integral Calculus assignment, so she didn’t pay it much attention when she heard the hall phone ringing. But not many seconds had ticked by when Polly, who had the room next to hers, stuck her head in the door and said, “Seph? It’s for you.”

“Oh!” That was different. She rarely received calls, at least on the land-line. All her friends would have called her cell. Her father preferred email or chat. Those media allowed him to refine what he wanted to say before he said it. He had always maintained that he thought better with his fingers than with his tongue. And Persephone certainly didn’t mind. That meant she could continue to carry on other conversations while communicating with him ... always a plus. Ergo, this was not her father. She trotted out into the hall, got into the booth and closed the door. “Hello?”

“Hey, Sephalococcus!”

“Uncle Nellie! Hi!”

“How’s that snooty prep school treating my favorite niece?”

“Great, as usual. I’ve got a practical coming up in two weeks, and if you don’t mind sitting through a couple of hours of baroque string music, you’re welcome to come.”

“I might just do that.”

“So. What’s up?”

“I wanted to know if you could get away and join us for dinner tomorrow.”

“Us?”

“Your immediate family.”

“Ah. Ooookay ... Tomorrow ... hang on.” She dug out her phone and tapped up the calendar. “What time?”

“I’d like to pick you up around two if possible.”

“... Yeah. That’ll work. This for Dad’s birthday?”

“Yup.”

“What’s the hell-bitch say about that?”

“Eh. She wasn’t just thrilled to pieces, but she didn’t veto it outright. Her celebration is planned for Saturday, so it’s not a conflict.”

“Celebration? What’s she ... oh, wait. Never mind. I bet I *really* don’t want to know.”

Nelson grinned. “Still can’t imagine your old man doing the dirty.”

“La-la-la-la-la-la! I can’t hear you! Swimming in DeNial so my brains don’t explode!”

He hooted a laugh. “So, where do I pick you up? Your dorm?”

“Yeah. May as well. My last class is in the building right next to it.”

“That your last final?”

“Finals are next week, and I only have one final anyway. I’ve got Professor Bates for Microbiology and Genetics, and she said up front that if you have a nine-fifty or better going into finals week that you don’t have to take them. I’ve got a nine-eighty-five in Micro and a nine-ninety-one in Genetics. So I’m gold.”

“Excellent! I’ll be there at two sharp.”

“Okay.”

Nelson could hear the sigh behind the girl’s words, and asked, “Hey, Seph? Something bothering you?”

She paused for a couple of seconds and said, “I was just ... thinking. How come ...”

“Yes? How come what?”

“How come you lucked into finding someone like Sarah, and Dad ended up with Satan’s evil twin?”

“Hmm.” He wanted to word this very carefully. “I guess ... there can only be so many perfect women in the world. I just happened to run across one who wasn’t picky.”

“Yeah. So, why couldn’t Dad have done that?”

“Well. He, um, always said your Mom was perfect. Maybe ... maybe we’re only allowed one per customer.”

“It’s not fair.”

I couldn’t agree more! “You know, we’ve only known Jeanne a few months. Maybe we just haven’t found the gold underneath yet.”

“The digging machine that could find gold in that quisquilian heap hasn’t been invented.”

He suppressed a laugh, nearly hurting himself doing so. The kid had a way with words.

“Then we just grin and bear it until he comes around to the same conclusion.”

“Is Sarah gonna be there?”

“No. She’s still in Alberta on that dig.”

“Crap.”

“I know it’s tough, but if I didn’t think you were up to it I wouldn’t have invited you.”

“Oh, I’m up to it all right. She’d better watch her step.”

“It won’t be all bad. I’ve got a surprise.”

“A surprise? What kind?”

“Heh. You sound just like your Dad. If I tell you, it won’t be a surprise.”

“Fine. Keep your secrets, then.”

“I’ll just do that little thing. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye.”

##

** Thursday Evening **

Jeanne was nearly apoplectic. “Nelson Freeman, have you lost your freaking *mind*?”

He was honestly perplexed at her question. “No, I’m pretty sure my faculties are intact. What’s wrong? I thought you said you liked dogs.”

“Dogs, yes. This ... *thing* is no dog. This is a horse with fangs.”

Fred was kneeling in front of Titan, enchanted. “I think he’s the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen.”

Persephone’s hands were buried in the thick fur of his neck. “He’s just adorable! Like the biggest plushie in the whole world.”

“Nellie, this is way over the top.”

“Not at all.”

“I mean, I love it. He’s terrific! But I don’t see why.”

“Why what?”

“Why the ...” He looked at the brochure again. “... the ‘ultimate in canine security systems’. Surely you don’t think I’m in any danger.”

“Could be. You’ve got that big, secret muckety-muck contract with DARPA, right?”

“Um, yeah, but ...”

“You’ve done the majority of the work right here in your home, right?”

“... Yeah, in my lab in the basement. It’s convenient.”

“Well, there you go.”

“There I go what? *They’re* providing security.”

“All they’ve got left is a car with two suits outside your driveway. That’s not security as far as I’m concerned.”

“But Nel, they don’t even need *that* much! I *know* that must be why they got rid of the other half-dozen guards they had floating around and getting in my way.” He pushed his glasses back up his nose and stood. “Nobody outside the DoD even knows that contract was *awarded*, much less that I got it. You’re just being paranoid.”

“I am not. I love my big brother and I want him safe. That’s all.”

“Awfully expensive way to show it.”

“Fred, I’ve got four hundred hectares with a nice house in the middle and as much privacy as anyone could ask for. I’ve got the love of a good woman.” His eyes flickered momentarily Jeanne’s way as he offered up a brief prayer of thanks for Sarah. “I don’t owe a soul a nickel and I’m totally off the grid. That’s everything I need. What else am I going to spend the royalty checks for? They hit my mailbox twice a month whether I ask

for them or not.”

During the interchange Ms. Takei, standing stoically beside Titan, hadn't uttered a word. But now she said, “Mrs. Freeman, you must understand: there is no danger to you whatsoever. This dog, once assigned to you, will protect your person against all intruders. When his order to defend is activated he goes completely silent. He moves much more quickly than any human, is totally without fear, and when he engages an unfriendly ... it's ‘game over’ for the bad guy. A team of bodyguards couldn't protect you as well as Titan can.”

“I don't want him in my house!”

Seemingly glued to the dog by this time, Persephone stated, “Well I love him!” The enormous, furry head swung around until they were eye-to-eye, and a long, black tongue touched her delicately under the chin. She gave a little squeal of delight and hugged him tighter.

Fred stood and looked at his wife with concern. “Honey, I think you're being unreasonable. I've heard of these ‘imprinted’ dogs. Your own mother couldn't be any more concerned with your safety than this dog will be.”

“I swear, Freddie, if you let that thing stay here ...”

“Well, you can just *adapt*, Jeanne. You're being ridiculous.”

She looked from him to his brother, to the dog and the tight-assed little bitch that brought him. “You're all crazy. That thing could kill us in our beds.”

“But he won't. Do you honestly think Ms. Takei's company, which has over four dozen of these animals placed, would offer a 200% money-back guarantee if they had any doubts about them at all?”

That stopped her. “Two hundred percent? Seriously?”

Ms. Takei nodded. “Yes, Mrs. Freeman. We have a very high level of confidence in these animals, so much so that we offer that level of reassurance to the buyer. You have no idea how sophisticated our breeding and training programs are. I have one of these dogs for my personal protection, as does each of the managing trainers in our company. I can attest from personal experience that they work perfectly.”

Two hundred percent? That's almost a quarter-mil! And I'll get to collect it from Little Miss Pucker here? Well, hells, yeah! The more the merrier. “Personal experience? How so?”

“I was the victim of a home invasion. My canine companion identified the threat and neutralized it before I was even aware that a break-in had occurred.”

“What does neutralized mean?”

“Well, in that case, since the intruder was carrying a firearm and obviously willing to use it, my companion bit his arm off just behind the wrist.”

Jeanne's face telegraphed her reaction more clearly than anything she could have said. Her voice faint, she responded, "Bit it ... off?"

"Yes. Then he searched the intruder for other weapons, found none, and brought me the pistol. That was the first I knew that anyone had broken in. You see, he had disabled my alarm system. But he couldn't disable the dog."

"What if he'd shot the dog?"

"He tried. One of the characteristics of this breed is the fur. Please, won't you come and pet him? He really does enjoy it."

"I think I'll pass. But what about the fur?"

"Through our breeding program, we have been able to infuse certain inorganic compounds into the hair shafts. It is not exactly bullet proof, but it is fire-resistant and offers a great deal more impact protection than natural fur." She gave the other woman a reassuring smile. "It wasn't an issue, though. Plato was simply too fast for him."

"Plato."

"Yes. He's quite affectionate. And he takes his job *very* seriously."

"Bit the guy's arm off, I guess he does."

"Tell you what, Jeanne," Fred said. "We'll keep him a month. If he hasn't proved himself by then ... well, then Nel can have him. What do you say?"

Realizing that she wasn't going to win this fight, she slumped against the wall.

"Whatever. You obviously don't think my opinion is worth a damn."

"It would be worth a lot more if it were backed up with some facts." He moved over to stand behind her and ran his hands gently up her arms to her shoulders. "Do you think I'd do anything that would put you in danger?"

Turning a coy look of little-girl innocence his way, she answered, "No. I know you'll take good care of me."

"Then don't worry." He gave her a pat and turned back to the dog and its handler.

As she watched her husband and her brother-in-law fawn over the stupid dog, her mind raced. *Got to let the others know about this. Damned dog. What insanely awful timing. Gotta make sure Raul knows what to expect, what to do. Gotta make sure ...*

##

** Friday Night **

Ms. Takei had spent four hours with the Freeman family. She explained a great deal more about what made Titan tick, his likes and dislikes, and the various features of the dog that were decidedly not standard dog equipment. She made a canvass of the house, and examined the family suite, finding it imminently suitable as a defensible position.

“Yeah, that was part of the plan,” Fred explained. “A house-within-a-house. Sort of like the old idea of having a Keep inside a castle.”

“You should have the doors modified.”

“How so?”

“Add some dog-doors. Allow Titan the freedom to roam and patrol around the entire suite as he sees the need.”

Fred had considered that an excellent idea and lost no time in carrying it out. The workmen were done before noon.

Titan spent the day getting *really* familiar with his new surroundings. Jeanne was afraid, even after all that Ms. Takei had told them, that the stupid mongrel would mark his territory, but he didn't seem at all interested in that. He sniffed every last object in the house, though.

At sunset, he started patrolling. He checked in all the rooms, spending some time with each family member to assure himself they were well. Then he settled down in a corner of Persephone's room. He didn't sleep. In fact, he seemed unnaturally alert, as if listening for something he was *expecting* to happen.

Persephone was thrilled that he'd chosen her room as his home base for the night. Ms. Takei had explained that he would choose a different one each night until he settled into a regular routine. But the girl didn't worry about that. Tonight she had him to herself.

She flopped on the floor in front of him and started running a hand through the fur on his massive chest. His head dropped for a moment to sniff her arm and then he resumed his Sphinx-like pose.

“You're something else, Titan. I can't think of anything that Uncle Nellie could have done that would top you.” She rolled into a sitting position, scooted around to his side, and leaned up against him. “Mmm. So warm.” She turned so that her cheek could rest against his broad back. “Just perfect.”

He looked back at her and gave the tip of her nose a gentle lick. She grinned and scratched his head.

A few minutes later she got up and went into that bathroom. “You know, Titan,” she called conversationally, “I was lonely a lot after Mom died. Don't know that you'd say I'm exactly 'over it' yet. I was twelve and we were close.” She came back into the room, naked but for a towel over one arm. Titan's eyes tracked her movements closely. “And it's only been five years. And then Dad had to go and marry that ... woman.”

She draped the towel over the back of her vanity chair, padded over and locked the door, then sat in front of her mirror and started brushing out her long, auburn hair. After a minute or so she said, "I've got pictures of Mom. You wanna see?" She picked up a large framed portrait and carried it over to the dog. "See, her hair was just like mine. Or, I guess my hair is like hers. As Dad would say, she filed the patent first. I didn't get her green eyes though. It mixed with Dad's brown eyes and gave me these hazel things."

Titan gave the glass a token sniff and turned his attention back to the girl. She placed the portrait on the floor and took a seat beside him, resuming her brushing. "Titan, you're a guy ... sort of. Can you explain what makes an otherwise intelligent man stop using his brain *at all* when a gorgeous chick comes into the picture?"

The huge head swung slowly toward her until his muzzle rested in the hollow of her throat; he gave a low *wrff* sound and licked her cheek. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. "Yeah, I didn't think you could. Thanks for listening, though."

For some reason, most likely as part of his guard-duty training Persephone thought, Titan chose that moment to get to his feet and pad quickly out of the room. She sighed and resumed her bedtime preparations.

##

** Saturday Night **

Raul checked his weapons. He carried a specially modified .40-caliber semi-auto on each hip and several spare magazines. The rounds were loaded hot, and the nose of each bullet configured to maximize both penetration and energy transfer. His garb included a fine titanium-alloy mesh layered with small scales of carbon-nanofiber-reinforced resin that covered his torso, upper arms, and legs to the knee. Armed and armored as he was, he feared no land creature on the planet. A mere dog would give him no difficulties, no matter how well-trained it was.

He knew that Freeman had made some modifications to the family suite in the rambling mansion, allowing the dog freedom to roam the place. He might run into the brute anywhere in the house. As he screwed a suppressor onto one of his pistols, he thought, *I hope I meet it someplace far enough removed from the sleeping quarters so that killing it won't wake anyone.* His plan included leaving the daughter alive, and it would be inconvenient to have to kill her.

##

By oh-dark-thirty the lights went out and nothing moved in the big house. Jeanne lay beside her husband, watching him as he snored softly. *Stupid lummox.* What with her wearing him out between the sheets, and the bottle of excellent wine he'd drunk afterward, he'd be dead to the world until morning. But then, her plan was that he'd be dead, period.

The idea was really pretty straightforward. Raul would break in and make his way up to the family suite on the second floor. That was where Jeanne would play her only role in the drama, since the suite was only accessible via one door, and that door was locked manually from the inside. There was no key. She would have to make sure it was left unlocked for the assassin.

She couldn't help worrying a little bit that Titan might give Raul some trouble. He assured her that nothing could go wrong, that with the firepower he would be carrying it wouldn't matter if they had a trained grizzly. Still, she'd thought to try something else earlier. She followed the dog into one of the guest rooms, went over to the bathroom door, and tried to entice Titan to go inside. She figured that if he were locked in that would be one less thing for Raul to worry about. But the dog didn't cooperate. He did come to the door, take a look around in the bath, and give her a questioning look. A few seconds later it was as if he suddenly understood what she was trying to do. He gave a low, dismissive rumbling noise and left without further ado. His obvious intelligence she found unsettling, and tried not to think about it any more, instead going over her role in the aftermath.

Her story for the cops would be one of fear. Fearing the noises she heard, she would try to wake Fred, but he would be too drunk. In fear for her life, she would hide in the bathroom and squeeze herself into the clothes hamper. She would manage not to scream

when she heard the gunshots and would stay there the rest of the night, cowering in terror. That is where Fred's daughter would find her, sobbing hysterically. She would weep and rant and scream and then lapse into a nervous breakdown. The one man in her life who had understood her, who had *loved* her, brutally murdered! She wouldn't be able to stay in the house; she would need to go to someplace different for rest and recuperation. Someplace like Sedona, maybe. Or France. Or, hell, why not both? The grieving widow. The *rich* grieving widow. And Raul would be there waiting. A triumphant smile slid across her face at the thought.

So she waited, calmly, until the clock read 1:45. Then she rose and made her way to the door of the suite. Maybe before he had to leave, she and Raul could spend some quality time together. It had been quite a while since their last tryst.

##

The wall gave him no trouble. The two so-called guards he dispatched with a minimum of fuss and no noise to speak of. The outer door yielded to his passkey, and the code he quickly punched in to disarm the alarm system worked perfectly. He eased along through the house, headed for the rear staircase, aided in his work by the low-light monocle over one eye. After acquiring the materials he came for and wrapping up the loose end embodied in Fred Freeman, he would find and remove the storage device for the video surveillance system, the location of which Jeanne had thoughtfully provided. The cops would have precisely squat to go on when they finally showed up. Raul was a methodical man, and he appreciated a tidy job.

He went to Freeman's lab in the basement first. The floor plan he'd memorized guided him right to the safe where the scientist/engineer/MEM expert stored his plans, and in less than a minute they were safely tucked into the compartmented body-sock he wore for that purpose. He took the half-finished prototype neural-interface unit and left it on the floor beside the front door so that he could grab it quickly once he was done.

Jeanne said the dog would probably be on the second floor, since that's where they sleep. He had both his pistols out and ready as silently he climbed the stairs.

##

Titan heard noises downstairs where no noises should be. He rose and listened more carefully, then padded the length of the rear hall, stopping at the eastern intersection and sniffing the air. After half a minute he detected the faint aroma of gun oil. It was a new smell here, but one he knew quite well all the same. Hugging the floor, he moved quickly toward the source of the scent. Though he didn't seem to hurry he made exceptional time.

A few minutes later Titan lay in wait behind a large potted plant under the skylight in the expansive anteroom outside the family suite. The gun oil smell was getting very close.

Had anyone cared to observe, the dog's eyes could be seen to emit a faint red glow, an indication that his infrared vision had kicked in. His hackles stood erect as he gathered himself to charge. Then another thing happened out of the ordinary: the door to the family suite opened, and the Alpha's mate peered out. She looked around without seeing him. Then she seemed to catch sight of someone coming up the stairs.

Protect!

##

Three things happened simultaneously. Raul's head and shoulders appeared at the top of the stairs, Jeanne waved at him, and Titan launched himself.

Raul was good. He wouldn't have been given the assignment otherwise. He got four shots off in the second or so before impact, and three of them connected. The huge canine jerked in midair, but his aim was true enough. He and the assassin tumbled down the stairs.

Jeanne screamed the assassin's name and ran down after them. When she got to the bottom it was in time to witness the massive jaws close over her lover's face. Titan shook him like a rag. The stray thought that flitted through her mind as Jeanne heard the crunch was *How can so much blood come from one man?* But she screamed again, trying to call the dog off. She'd never imagined that Raul would fail. He *never* failed!

She spotted one of his guns where it had fallen and grabbed it up. Taking aim at the enormous dog, her teeth gritted in hate, she emptied the magazine.

As round after round slammed into him, he dropped the corpse and turned to his new attacker. But ... wait ... *what?* It is the Alpha's mate! That is wrong! All wrong! She is catalogued as a good guy. The Defended Ones aren't supposed to attack him. They would never do that! So the only logical outcome is that this must be an imposter!

At that moment the Alpha's offspring appeared at the top of the stairs and screamed. The imposter had just located the assassin's other weapon and was turning it toward the child.

Protect!

##

Later, there were police cars and ambulances and many, many flashing lights.

##

** very early Sunday morning **

Most people would be asleep during the wee hours; but then, Ms. Takei wasn't most people.

Her office in the DARPA complex wasn't large or ostentatious. Maybe five meters square, it held her desk, a comfortable chair, and her workstation. One filing cabinet stood in the corner, but it was mostly empty. All the records she needed were electronically maintained, and backed up to a remote server once every twelve hours. This is where she usually spent her nights, summarizing the day's reports for the rest of the managers.

The peculiar thing about this office's door was that it had neither lock nor knob. It was a swinging door, and a gently-sprung one at that. She glanced up when it silently swung inward.

Titan padded across the thick carpet and stopped beside her desk. She gave him an expectant look. "Well?"

His form flowed and changed, melting here, elongating there, thinning and growing until a lean, muscular man stood where the dog had been. "It went about as we thought it would."

"So. An inside job."

"Yeah. *Really* inside. The wife."

Ms. Takei's eyes widened a touch. "Damn. That could get complicated."

"Not so much. She was a casualty."

"Ah. Incidental?"

"No. I stuck around where they couldn't see me and watched when the LEOs got there. It was obvious even to Deputy Dope that she was in on it. And it'll all be on the security tapes."

"Hmm. Complicated in a different way, then."

The man shrugged. "He'll get over it. And I doubt he'll be so eager to hop in bed with the next *femme fatale* that shows an uncommon interest in him."

The disgust in his voice prompted the woman to ask, "Something else about the situation you want to tell me?"

"Those defense guys need to tighten up their act."

"How so?"

"Any conscious mammal with a working hindbrain could have sensed there was something *really* wrong with that woman. I'm pretty sure the brother knew she was bad news. The daughter *certainly* did. Yet it doesn't look like the Department did any sort of thorough background check on her at all."

“Did the daughter tell you something?”

He grinned. “Yeah, kinda. Showed me a few things, too.”

“What does that mean?”

“Let’s just say the job had its perks.”

“Ah-huh. And nobody suspects the dog of being a Peeping Tom? Is that it?”

He pointed a finger at her and made a ‘shot’ sound.

“You’ll get yourself in trouble one of these days. It would be well if the DoD didn’t have to pull any more rabbits out of their hat on your account.”

“Not my problem.”

Deciding that a change of subject was in order, she indicated several puckered spots on his chest. “You took some fire.”

Another shrug. “Nothing a good meal and ten hours in the sack won’t cure.”

“They’ll miss you.”

“So?”

“You don’t think they’re just going to let a \$125,000 dog disappear without making some effort to find it, do you?”

“Eh. They can follow my blood trail for a while if they want to, but it’ll just take ‘em into some really ugly ravines. They’ll think I crawled off and died and that’ll be the end of it. They got their money’s worth.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. It ain’t the first time, as you know quite well. And, yeah, the brother is gonna call you up and rant and rave, but once you see the security tapes, you’ll understand. The wife shot me.”

“*She* shot you?!”

“Yep. Emptied the magazine. She was catalogued as ‘protected’, and yet she attacked me. You can tell them, very firmly, that Titan, even if he had lived, would be ruined forever for his job. There’s no way he’d ever trust anyone again.” He gave her a wink.

“And then you won’t have to pay the guarantee money.”

“True enough.” She studied him for a few seconds and nodded. “Very well. You go get your rest, then. I’ve already got your next assignment in the pipe.”

“Oh, goody.”

“Now don’t be like that. Besides, there’s an aged porterhouse with your name on it in the hanger. It’s gotta mass a kilo and a half if it’s a gram.”

His eyes lit up. “Oh, *hell* yeah! Who needs sleep?” He jumped for the door.

“You might want to get some clothes on first.”

Pausing briefly, he concentrated. A plain white tee-shirt and denim shorts materialized in place. “Better?”

“For my money you look *better* the other way.”

He grinned. “Got a preference for where I get my, um, ‘rest’ tonight?”

Returning his smile, she answered, “You *know* my preferences.”

“That I do. I’ll be back soon. Don’t forget about me.”

“Not likely, kid,” she murmured. “Not likely at all.”

He stopped halfway to the door. “On second thought, why don’t you join me? Call it a midnight snack.”

“Midnight was some time ago.”

“You know what I mean. Chuck the paperwork for a bit and help me get on the outside of that steak.”

A smile blossomed on her features. “You know, that does sound like a good idea.”

“Of course it is.”

She stood and walked around the desk. “Do you have an inclination for whether or not it’s cooked?”

“Why?”

“Well, if I’m going to join you ...” She leaned forward, her conservative business attire shrinking and flowing, to be replaced shortly by spotted fur. Padding over to him, the sleek jaguar rubbed against his leg. Her voice sounded in his mind. << ... *I’d prefer it raw* >>

“Works for me.” He shortly assumed his canine form and the two of them pushed the door open and vanished down the hall.

The End