

A FOLDING CAGE

By PWB

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“It’s more than a passing fad, the sharks around here are practically addicted to that technology,” explained the lioness as she adjusted the laces on her sparring glove. “It’s an art form to them. I tried comparing it to music, but they said a creature without electroreceptors can’t begin to imagine what the cage does. Their whole culture is going to change for the better because of it, so I need you to understand this deal is about more than money. We’re making history here.”

She flexed her wrist to check the glove’s fit, then pulled the other one on and turned to face the zebra. He was back in his fighting stance, confident yet detached, looking as aristocratic as ever even in his black gloves and exercise clothes. Despite their sparring appointment he had still taken the time that morning to style his mane into the classic short mohawk of his species, and she was mischievously looking forward to flattening it during the fight.

“Eager for round two, eh?” she said. “Alright then, less talk, more pummeling.”

He grinned as best he could around the mouth-guard clenched between his teeth, a rare moment of ugliness for him. Like most people the lioness had trouble understanding what other species considered attractive, but she knew from their long friendship that he was seen as a paragon of physical beauty among his kind. Still, in her opinion there was something almost synthetic about his appearance, like he had been assembled and painted by precision machines normally reserved for edgy perfume bottles. His black stripes were a little too black, the white ones too white, and they all glistened like plastic in the intense coastal sunlight.

There was also no question that he was the healthiest person of any species she’d ever encountered. In the event of a tragedy his carcass would easily be worth a small fortune on the slaughterhouse market, and although she usually avoided citizen cuts she had to admit she’d be tempted to try a slice of him.

She slipped her own mouth-guard into place, and heard the chattering of the spectators fade to whispered jokes. It wasn’t much of an audience, just a handful of underprivileged locals taking a break from their nearby salvaging jobs to heckle the big city folk. They watched with only faint interest from the edge of the ‘arena’, an unfinished concrete pit that was once intended to become a luxury swimming pool overlooking one of the nicer sections of the bay. At least three layers of neon-colored graffiti competed for visibility on its walls, and the rough floor was covered by a sail canvas specked with old brown blood stains. It was an improvised venue, customarily reserved for more brutal contests between salt water crocodiles.

The zebra started circling to her left. His body language was defensive, typically herbivore. As usual he would wait for her to make the first move, then try one of his old tricks. She started moving to the right, slower than him, forcing an adjustment in his footwork.

It was an unfair match-up, and that was part of the fun. While society classified them both as Size Category 3 creatures, his species and gender gave him an advantage in mass that required a few tricks of her own to overcome. That didn’t bother her though; on average she beat him once every four matches, not bad given that lionesses relied on group tactics to bring down his less healthy feral cousins.

“Hey, what’s with the prissy gloves,” yelled one of the spectators, an aging seal with crusty eyes and jagged teeth. “Come on feline, take ‘em off and give him a little work over with your claws. A few scars never hurt anybody.”

She tried a few cautious jabs to test the zebra's defenses. This was just exercise, a casual point-based match while they waited for her father to arrive. They weren't looking for anything like a knockout. The zebra fended off her light punches easily but refrained from throwing any of his own. A more aggressive assault would be necessary to spring his trap.

A turtle leaning on the pool's corroded metal ladder made a snorting sound and waved her webbed hand dismissively. "I recognize this, some big city game with a bunch of rules so they can't really hurt each other. Hey, you kids should try fighting one of our crocs, get a real workout for a change. I'm warning you though, those bloodstains you're dancing around down there weren't accidental."

The rest of the audience chuckled, but more out of shared contempt than genuine amusement. The lioness swung hard from one direction then the next, high then low, trying to disorient her opponent. For a moment he seemed open to an uppercut, but the gap closed before she could extend herself, and he followed up with a feint that made her sway too close to the arena's wall. He seized the opportunity and launched his first attack into her exposed side, bouncing her off the graffiti.

A seagull cackled long and hard as she stumbled repeatedly out of the zebra's reach. Like most birds it could produce a shocking amount of noise despite being on the lower end of Size Category 2. "He's just a spoiled herbivore," he screeched with an emphatic flap of his grimy wings. "Show him who's higher in the food chain!"

The lioness ducked the next swing and prepared to retaliate with her infamous cross, but paused when she saw the uncharacteristic violence flashing in the zebra's usually mellow equine eyes. It looked like blood lust, and it made her hesitate for one split second too long.

He slammed her head sideways with a punch stronger than anything he had ever thrown at her, then followed it up with a crushing slam into her upper abdomen that blasted the air out of her lungs. She managed to stagger only a single step before he sent her spinning into the wall again with a shot to her shoulder.

As she spilled onto the canvas, gasping for breath, the onlookers made a strange collective noise that sounded like an unenthusiastic cheer, or perhaps restrained booing. Her field of vision swayed around, sweeping dizzily across the unsympathetic faces above until it fell on the zebra, who seemed only mildly concerned as he removed his mouth-guard.

"Sorry, that was a primitive overreaction on my part," he said coolly. "I should not let childish taunting affect me so. Are you going to be alright?"

She spat out her own mouth-guard. "This was supposed to be an exercise match," she protested. Even her vocal cords seemed to be in pain.

He lifted her to her feet, held her steady with both gloved hands and whispered close to her ear, "Perhaps this was not such a good idea. It is an interesting place to fight, but I cannot say I am too fond of the local audience. Let's just return to the hotel and wait for your father at the bar. I am sure he will be arriving sooner than planned."

She nodded, sending tight jolts of pain down her neck.

"The show is over," shouted the zebra, provoking groans and mocking laughter from the edge. There were no onlookers left by the time they removed their gloves and climbed up the ladder to the sandstone poolside.

They started to walk toward the beach, along the burned out walls and cracked paths of what would have been the regional governor's new mansion if not for the Staircaser Kings rebellion. Those events were decades old, yet the damage still looked recent.

The lioness' dizziness was giving way to a sense of minor outrage. She was used to losing fights to the zebra, but she had never felt so... defanged by a defeat.

That look in his eyes...

She heard him making a low sound behind her as they reached the series of plank causeways that spanned the swampy terrain between the mansion and the beach. It was a precise series of quiet snorts equines used to express either a sense of superiority or dissatisfaction. Sometimes both at once.

"What's the matter?" she asked, still debating whether she should say anything more about the match.

"Charming people these seaborns. If that was typical of how they make tourists feel welcome I can't wait to see how they conduct business."

"Don't be unfair, they're not all like that. A few of the poorer ones are bitter of course, but you can't really blame them. If you and I are well off today it's partially because our ancestors exploited this region."

"Yes, yes, I know all about the suffering and discrimination, but most of that ended years ago. Just look what we've done for them lately."

As they stepped out onto the beach he pointed with a perfectly manicured hand at what lay to their left along the curve of the bay. "You would think the least we deserve is a little politeness."

From the outskirts the town seemed ordinary enough, just a very picturesque collection of pastel colored buildings with rounded red-tiled roofs, divided by cobblestone streets and rows of gigantic palm trees. Closer examination revealed that the structures closest to the beach actually stretched and sloped down into the water, connecting the surface to the submerged other half of the community. The whole place was designed so that land dwellers and seaborns could interact as easily as possible despite their sometimes dramatic physiological differences. Even legless creatures like sharks and dolphins could travel inland through a series of canals, pressurized glass pipes, and open top tanks set up in most buildings.

It was all very ingenious. It was also undeniably the creation of land dwellers. As resourceful as they were, the seaborns had always had trouble overcoming the fact that water and technology just don't mix without expensive intervention. Modernity can be hard to achieve when key materials like metal, wood, and paper can't be used in a straightforward manner.

The lioness watched the trickle of late morning tourists pouring out of the town and onto the beach for a moment before responding. "It's true we shouldn't cut them too much slack. Still, there are plenty of seaborns who are willing to move on from the old grudges if we are. Our new business partner is a perfect example."

"Hmm. I will admit that judging from her letters she seems uncommonly sociable for a shark, but I am still concerned about her ex-convict status."

The lioness wanted to sigh deeply, but the fading pain in her abdomen flared up when she tried to inhale the necessary amount of air. "I thought I already explained that to you. The Staircaser Kings rebellion was justified, and the people who were jailed for it

are heroes, not criminals. The government even sent her an official apology last year. You'll see when we meet with her this afternoon, she's nothing like your stereotypes."

The zebra pulled a small, grayish-green rectangle of grass concentrate from his back pocket and slipped it into his mouth for what would probably amount to several minutes worth of chewing, effectively ending their conversation. He then started walking toward the town's ivy wrapped metal gates, his titanium-fitted hooves leaving almost no traces in the fluid white sand. His gloves were slung over his shoulder, and as she followed she watched them swinging against his back. He seemed more muscular than she remembered. A lot must have happened in the months since they had last seen each other.

They passed a family of zebras playing volleyball just before the gate. It was the typical assortment: a dour faced stallion serving as the reluctant referee, his three wives trying not to dominate the field, and their six children of varying ages making the sort of squealing noises that usually precede a violent death. Their bathing suits were in line with the unspoken fashion rule of their species - *Your options are black or white; anything else is the mark of a deviant.*

The lioness noticed that her friend had captured the open-mouthed attention of the oldest daughter. It was a common reaction. He gave her less than a second's worth of consideration before looking away. That was also common. He was looking for wives nowadays, not kicks, and the fact that he could permit himself astonishingly high standards in that pursuit made other male zebras snarl with jealousy.

The air beyond the gate was deliciously greasy to a carnivore's nose, and the lioness breathed it with relish as her bare feet crossed from sand to warm cobblestone. This was the town's slaughterhouse district, similar to the one her family visited regularly back home but with the novelty of local meat preparation techniques.

She could distinguish the smells of at least a dozen different dishes in various stages of preparation. There was the mellow blandness of huge brass pots full of synthetic protein, which was two days worth of food for a carnivore who couldn't afford better. There was the sweet chemical sting of insect platters, not particularly nutritious to most creatures bigger than Size Category 2, but tasty nonetheless. There was an incredible assortment of fish and crustacean species that hadn't evolved into sentience, the preferred option for those rare idealists who chose never to consume the remains of intelligent creatures.

Stronger than any of those odors however was the freshness of the citizen and feral cuts. There was a bit of everybody on the menu today: zebra, gazelle, wildebeest, hyena, cheetah, dolphin, snake, seal, elephant, even a few foreign species she couldn't recognize. She was just starting to get hungry when she walked right through the one taboo smell that automatically repulsed even the most daring food fanatic: Her own.

She looked back. They had just passed in front of a high class establishment with woven wire tables set outside under green parasols. There an overweight hyena matriarch was indulging her equally chubby pack mates with a complete feral lioness carcass that still had all its primitive jewelry on. One of the grinning youngsters was being asked to demonstrate a trick. He picked up the feline's arm and managed to suck the braised meat off each of its fingers without touching the braided grass rings on them.

“Oh wait,” said the lioness with a snap of her own fingers, “I just remembered, my father said he’ll want to eat at that famous seaside restaurant this evening, to celebrate his victory in style. Will you be joining us?”

The zebra swallowed the last of his grass concentrate prematurely but didn’t respond. He stopped at the edge of one of the town’s many canals, where he seemed to be watching its traffic without genuine interest. A narrow boat carrying tired looking seals in oil rigger wetsuits headed toward the sea, while a dolphin courier with an awkward transport tube under her arm swam frantically in the opposite direction.

The lioness came up next to him and flicked her tail against his leg. “I need to give you both a tour of the canals tomorrow... Mind telling me what’s the matter? We haven’t talked much since you arrived, and you’ve been acting a little strange.” She decided not to mention the aching aftermath of his aggression.

His long lower jaw tensed visibly. When he spoke it was in a casual yet cautious tone. “I have failed you as a friend.”

“huh?”

“I spent a lot of time with your pride before leaving the city. They made me promise not to talk about this before you...”

He paused, crossed his arms, and looked up at the cloudless sky with a corner of his lower lip between his ideal teeth, obviously rethinking what he was about to say. She hadn’t seen him do anything so awkward in years.

“Let me guess,” she said with a nervous smile. “It has something to do with my plan to move here permanently, right? They’re saying it’s not natural for a lioness to be on her own. Well it’s not like I’m leaving the continent, I’ll be calling everyday and visiting them on weekends.”

His silence told her she had guessed wrong.

“So what is it then?” she asked.

Suddenly he started walking away along the edge, toward the colorful wooden footbridge that spanned the canal. “Never mind, it’s too late. This is between you and your family anyway, if I interfere at this point it will only make things worse.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You will find out soon enough. Just let it go for now.”

Anger and anxiety welled up in her as her imagination started to offer unpleasant theories to explain his words. She caught up with him halfway across the bridge and grabbed his arm. “Hey, you can’t just walk away after saying something like that.”

Her claws accidentally tore into his skin when he wrenched away from them to face her. Whatever he had been about to say dissolved into a low groan of frustration when he saw the white stripes of his upper arm darkening red.

“I’m so sorry,” she said weakly, her hand still held out in front of her, paralyzed with shame. A few drops fell from her fingertips and burst as tiny stars on the bright yellow floorboards of the bridge.

He shook his head. “No, that was my fault. Perhaps this makes us even after that beating I gave you. Your jaw is already starting to swell up.”

“Your cuts aren’t serious,” she said with carnivore expertise, “but we should take the short way back to the hotel. Wait, you’re dripping everywhere, let me carry your gloves.”

Awkward silence.

They walked quickly through narrow backstreets, further inland, his hand clamped over the wound, her eyes downcast. The slaughterhouse district gave way to the shopping strip, then the gleaming white, palace-like homes of land dwellers who stayed year round. Seaborns became scarce, except for clusters of seagulls chatting on rooftops.

“I should have warned you,” he said without looking at her as they entered the smooth brick paved plaza in front of the hotel. The hint of shame in his voice shocked her more than the blood had. “I should have ignored your mother and called you when it happened. It would have given you time to prepare for what you are about to face. You deserved that much for always standing by me, even when I was making enemies on a daily basis.”

He nodded slightly at the hotel ahead. “Be ready for an unpleasant surprise,” he said in his normal, imperturbable voice.

It was a wide, peach colored eight storey building that owed its outrageous prices to the great view of the bay it offered from vast balconies filled with flowering plants. White gauze curtains floated slowly in and out of the open windows on the artificial breeze of powerful air conditioners. The sound of someone laughing coquettishly emerged from deep within one of the lower rooms.

After anger, anxiety, and shame it was now time for dread to seize the lioness. Her body tensed up, instinctively preparing for a physical threat.

They ascended the marble steps that led to the hotel’s enormous front door, stopping at the top to wipe the sand off their feet. A jackal attendant leaning against one of the mirrored columns in the lobby smelled the blood before he saw it, and ran to them with a look of exaggerated concern on his sharp features. He was surprisingly tall for a Size Category 2 creature, almost up to the zebra’s stomach.

“A minor accident,” explained the zebra, “nothing to be overly concerned about. Show me to the infirmary please.”

The jackal nodded and led them into the cavernous lobby.

It was then that the lioness smelled the lion.

Her emotions soared for a moment before she realized it wasn’t her father’s scent. This one was a stranger. Young. Close by.

She quickly scanned the room and spotted him in the back, sitting on a low dark leather couch next to the main desk. His eyes were hidden behind gold framed sunglasses, but she was pretty sure he was looking at her.

She felt exposed in her exercise outfit. It wasn’t exactly immodest, but it wasn’t the business suit she felt safest in when confronting bachelors. She reached for her neck and conspicuously adjusted her pride collar, the black silk ribbon with her family symbol stitched in silver on it. It was a not-so-subtle signal that every lion recognized and joked about: *I’m part of a pride and we already have a male, so don’t try anything.* Of course it lost some of its impact without her father around to back it up.

The lion stood up and slowly walked over to them, doing everything he could with his body language to indicate that he wasn’t looking for trouble. He was massive, very nearly the zebra’s size and more than a head taller than her. His pink striped shirt and white leather pants did little to conceal a brutal physique that made other guests in the lobby surreptitiously avoid him. Under less worrisome circumstances she might have

considered him attractive if not for his mane, which had been trimmed and styled to fit some awful trend.

The zebra took the laces of his gloves from between her fingers and whispered as quietly as he could in her ear to avoid being overheard by the other feline's sensitive hearing. "I know you've had bad experiences with bachelors, but this one's here for a reason and I strongly advise that you talk to him. I should go now."

"Wait, what? Don't leave me with..."

But the jackal was already leading him away, to a side door near the spiraling main staircase.

"Hey," said the lion.

The smell of him up close evoked some of her worst memories from college, especially her failed 'social experiment' as her mother referred to it. She crossed her arms and looked up into the sunglasses, which offered no reflection at all. "Hello."

"So, you're - oh wait, I wanted to try this..."

He brought his hands up and performed a series of clumsy gestures she barely recognized as the sign language seaborns used to communicate underwater. Then she realized he was doing her name.

"Did I do it right?"

She chose her words carefully before responding. "Well, a seaborner would think you had an 'accent', but that's me, yes."

"Cool. Here's mine."

More hand gestures. "Got that?"

It wasn't a moniker she recognized. "Yes. Pleased to meet you."

He grinned, revealing fangs still faintly red from a recent meal. "That's all I know right now, our names. Learned them on the train today from this crocodile language teacher I was sitting next to. They're not as dumb a species as they look."

After a pause his grin faded a little. "I guess you're wondering what this is about."

She nodded calmly. Her face was serene and neutral, but her heart was racing.

"You need to call your mother first," he said. "She thinks it would be better if you heard the news from her before I say anything else. You can use the lobby phone booth, I've paid for it at the front desk."

He pointed at the large alcove next to the bar entrance, big enough for any creature to use and partially cut off from prying ears and eyes by a soundproof sliding door. Such booths had practically been reinvented and built overnight after the portable phone ban. She warily stepped around him and headed for it. He followed close behind. Too close. Too familiar.

Her tail flicked irritably.

"Oops," he said, backing off. It was with some relief that she slid the door closed in his face.

"Who do you think you are?" she snarled in soundproof security. "You're not so big that I couldn't do some serious damage if you tried anything."

She slipped the laces of her sparring gloves over an anchor shaped coat hook and took in her surprisingly grandiose surroundings. The walls of the booth were covered with aquamarine glass sculpted in the shapes of crashing waves. The chrome plated phone was currently set at its highest position on the vertical track that allowed it to reach

the face of a Size Category 5 creature if it had to. She turned the lever that ratcheted the handset down to Size Category 3, adjusted its ear and mouth piece to suit her face, and dialed her pride's home number. Her finger, still stained with the zebra's dried blood, hovered for a second before punching the last digit.

Ring.

"Hello?"

"Hi mom."

"Ah, just the voice I wanted to hear, although you do sound a bit grim my dear. How's your first big deal shaping up down there? I hope you've been reading my notes on effective negotiating. Most people would pay a lot of money for the advice I give you for free."

"It's going great, we've had no snags or complications so far."

"Glad to hear it. Be careful not to let that shark take advantage of your open-mindedness. In your position I wouldn't fully trust a mute creature that doesn't use its face to show emotion. The voice and the eyes are very important measures of sincerity."

"Oh you'd like her. She can be as ruthless as you sometimes."

Her mother laughed. It was a dignified, controlled release of emotion. "I think that qualifies as flattery coming from you my dear... the pride misses you so very much. When is your next visit?"

"Just as soon as my signature is on the dotted line. Uh, mom... who's this lion who told me to call you?"

"There's been a change at home, child. Your father was supposed to tell you, but he foolishly decided to spare your feelings, and now I'm afraid I have to clear up this misunderstanding. Anyway, he isn't coming to the coast. He's been lying to you on the phone since last week. Don't be too angry at him, you've been so well-behaved and productive lately he couldn't bear to disrupt that."

"I don't understand, what's going on?"

"Well, as you know your father was open to being challenged last week, same time every four years, as usual."

"Yes, and he won."

"No. No, he didn't. He lost, and then lied to you... hello?... hello?"

The lioness wrapped her fingers tightly around the protruding curl of a glass wave next to the phone, almost cutting herself. What she wanted to do was scream, destroy something with her claws and teeth, attack the very fabric of reality for setting up such a cruel joke at her expense. Instead she took deep breaths.

So that was that. The event she had been dreading ever since she was old enough to understand what it would mean had managed to sneak up on her during one of the most exciting times in her life.

She had suddenly acquired a husband.

Her mother patiently continued talking into her silence. "...hello... I know you're still there. Don't be such a juvenile, you knew it was going to happen eventually. Come on, we can talk about this like adults, which you officially are as of this moment by the way... hello..."

The accusation of childishness helped the lioness to compose herself. This was no time to lose her cool. Her future, or at least her preferred version of it, was at stake. She

resumed the conversation with all the false calm she could force through her raging emotions. “Mom, are you telling me that lion waiting outside this booth is...”

“Yes, he’s our new male. He beat everyone else in ritual combat, and as a witness I can assure you that the competition was worthy. The whole pride has already accepted him.”

“Except for me. Which is why he’s here.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’d better hurry up and fall in love with him, wouldn’t want to keep him away from the rest of you.”

Her mother sighed, preemptively exasperated by the conversation she knew they were about to have. “Are you going to make a fuss about this?”

“Of course I am! I’ve said it a thousand times, this tradition is barbaric and beneath us!”

“This is more than tradition dear, it’s instinct, it’s what has kept our species strong. You need to stop being so cerebral and listen to your blood, the way your sisters and cousins have. They’re all thrilled at finally being able to start the next chapter of their lives.”

The lioness rolled her eyes at that comment, wishing her mother could see it. Her father had endured an astonishing number of challenges, making some of her more carnal and maternal siblings loudly impatient. Their constant moaning on the subject had definitely been one of the many reasons she had left for the shore. “Our blood also tells us to kill and eat our herbivore friends. Should I listen to that too?”

“Stop being ridiculous.”

There was an unmistakable edge of impatience in her mother’s last response, but the lioness pressed on. “See, it’s not as simple as that. Our instincts have been restrained and modified so much over the centuries who can say for sure what’s natural and what’s culture? We’re civilized people, we don’t have to behave like we’re living in the feral zone. It’s not that unreasonable for me to want more of a choice when it comes to who I’m intimate with. I’m pretty sure I can do better than that brute out there. I mean, how could I even respect him after what he did to dad?”

“If your father hadn’t replaced your grandfather in exactly the same way you would have never been born. As for choosing your own mate, well we all saw how well that worked out for you in college.”

“... OK, I thought we were never going to bring that up again. You never even bothered to hear my side of that story, so how can you –“

Her mother interrupted with a furious roar that almost made her drop the phone’s handset. “Enough! Why am I even talking about this!? You’re not going to argue your way out of it, and I’m sick of hearing deviant, radical nonsense coming out of someone I raised! If you don’t want to find yourself suddenly poor you’ll shut up and listen closely to what I’m about to say, understand!?”

The lioness felt a cold sense of defeat sliding down her back, causing the root of each strand of fur to tingle then go numb. Her throat tightened involuntarily when she muttered her response. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” said her mother in a normal, diplomatic tone of voice, “I realize we all let you get away with little rebellions in the past, but this is serious. What you are foolishly suggesting would undermine and eventually destroy the pride system and most

of our culture if it became widely accepted. Naturally this cannot be allowed to happen. If you don't accept our new husband you'll be made an outcast, end of discussion. So please, I'm begging you as your mother and friend, don't force me to do that. He's just a male after all, the pride is what matters... now, what are you going to do?"

The lioness turned the lever that lowered the phone to Size Category 1 and sat in the corner with her tail wrapped around her shaking legs. She struggled to respond, fighting to maintain the discipline she was going to need so badly when the time came to leave the booth. "I'll spend some time with him and see what happens," she said finally.

"That's not a firm answer, but I have faith that you'll do the right thing in the end. You always have when the time came to abandon misguided ideals."

"Mom, can you put dad on the phone?"

"I'm afraid he's already moved out, and you know I can't tell you where he is so don't ask. Even if I could he wouldn't want you to come looking for him. It's time for the pride to move on, and no one understands that better than he does. Don't worry, you'll get to see him one last time at your next birthday. I need to go now dear."

"Alright. I love you."

"I love you too, more than you realize. Try to enjoy this. Goodbye."

There was a click, followed by a scratchy electronic drone. With perfect feline hand-eye coordination the lioness threw the handset up onto the phone's hook like she was performing a dull circus trick. Then she buried her face in her knees and started picking absentmindedly at her pride collar with her claws, trying to think of solutions instead of her feelings. There would be time enough for tears and angst later; in the immediate present she would soon have to leave the booth and face the lion. Her husband.

She couldn't afford to be alone with him in any kind of private setting now. The law was on his side, as per the ancient legal exceptions her species had demanded like all the others when they joined civilization. He could do almost anything he wanted to her in private and the police would dismiss her accusations as 'lion business'. Her only defense would be the in-court support of at least two thirds of her pride, which would probably be far too much to hope for anyway. As much as her family genuinely loved her they had always considered her a bit of a radical in need of humbling, and 'affectionate attention' was considered a reliable old fashioned way of fixing such a wayward member.

She gritted her teeth, imagining what her oldest aunt might say: "Oh just ignore her screaming. I was shy too the first time, but you'll see, she'll grow to like it after a while. Maybe then she'll finally be normal."

Traitors!

If only she could hate them. If only she could ignore the almost perfect childhood, the unconditional support and nurturing through all her awkward stages. She tried to feel contempt for her mother, but there she was in her memories patiently helping with frustrating homework into the small hours of the morning. She tried to curse her male-hungry sisters and cousins, but they had been there huddled around her when she lay sprawled on the floor of her room, crying over her college catastrophe. And how could she dismiss her aunts after all the praise they had given her during the pride's hunting expeditions into the feral zone?

There was a muffled knocking at the door of the booth. In less than a second she had sprung to her feet and checked her appearance in the distorted reflection of the telephone's casing. No obvious signs of tears or distress. Good.

She pulled the door open and found herself staring at an abstract carving of an elephant. It was the top of an oversized mahogany cane, gripped in a gigantic grey hand. Her eyes traveled up the sleeve of an expensive suit, reaching the incomprehensible face she knew would be waiting above.

"Pardon the interruption," said the old elephant in a deep, naturally melodramatic voice, "but a device at the front desk told them you weren't actually on the phone anymore. Would it be alright if I used it?" His oppressive lavender perfume was quickly filling the confines of the booth.

She nodded, taking her sparring gloves off the coat hook. "Go right ahead, I'm finished."

There was something wrong with the elephant's leg, and it was difficult to maneuver around him. She jumped aside to avoid losing toes under his Size Category 5 feet and almost stumbled into the waiting lion's arms.

"So, did she explain everything?" asked the lion, clearly a little disappointed when she regained her balance before he could catch her.

"Yes, I understand the situation," she replied in a businesslike tone that masked the extreme emotions he now provoked in her. She needed more time to think of a way out of her predicament, so the trick was to make him feel she might accept him without actually committing for as long as possible. The danger was that if he sensed she wasn't going to co-operate then he would have every right to try and 'change her mind.'

He leaned in closer to her, and she noticed his sunglasses were hiding the fading stages of a bruised eye. "Then that means were family now."

The traditional feline thing to do was rub her head against his in affectionate greeting, and that was clearly what he expected. She could tell this was to be the first of many uncomfortable tests. Her body complied with robotic detachment, giving him the absolute minimum physical contact required, while her mind focused on escape plans, business, memories of her father, everything except the sensations of the moment.

"You're very tense," he whispered as her ear swept past his mouth. "The pride warned me that you were going to be upset. Don't worry, I'm here for a couple of days and we can take things slow if that's what you need."

She broke away as soon as it was polite to do so. "I appreciate the offer. Do you mind if I head up to my room to change before we talk about this further? I need to prepare for a meeting this afternoon."

"Oh yeah, with that shark. Sure, of course."

He slipped his fingers into his pockets and stepped aside to let her by. He then followed her closely, all the way to the wide spiral of the main staircase and up the first four steps before she stopped and turned, trying not to appear unnerved. "There's no need to accompany me," she said. "I'll be quick. We can just meet in the lobby, or you can give me your room number."

"Actually, I forgot to mention that your room is now my room too, and I could use some freshening up myself. I'm sort of bandaged up under the shirt. Nothing painful,

just some claw marks, but they itch like ant hills if I don't take care of them every few hours."

Her heart sank. "I wish you'd taken my father's reserved room," she said, then quickly added: "What I mean is, this is all very sudden, and I don't think I'm ready to be so... close. Yet."

There was a tremor of impatience through his tail, a few almost imperceptible flicks. "Look, I can understand a little shyness, but don't push it. Doing it this way saves us a lot of money. You can change in the bathroom if it's that much of a problem."

Think fast.

"You're right, I'm so flustered I'm forgetting my manners. Let me make it up to you. There's this local-made herbal salve available in the hotel infirmary that does wonders for cuts and scratches." She gave him an alluring sidelong glance and hated herself for it. "If you go get some I'll see what I can do to help soothe your injuries. I'll go on ahead and change in the meantime."

It wasn't a smile that flickered on his mouth at that suggestion, although he tried hard to make it look like one. His upper lip had curled in a feline display of arousal that made her shudder. "Now that's more like it. Meet you up there."

She continued to climb the stairs at a normal pace until she heard him go through the side door that led to the infirmary, then galloped up to her floor as fast as possible.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she muttered, unsure if she meant it for him or herself.

If her foolhardy gamble was going to pay off she desperately needed to find a cleaning person. The claws of her feet probably tore small tracks into the red and purple patterned carpet as she quickly zigzagged through the hallways leading to her room, listening for the sounds of sheets being folded or a toilet being scrubbed.

Her savior appeared in a blue uniform, dragging a trolley full of greasy cleaning products and bulging trash bags. It was a young crocodile with only a few ritual scars carved into his face and hands, missing most of the teeth on the left side of his jaw. His slumped shoulders managed to fall lower when she stopped to address him.

"Have you cleaned room 44 yet?"

He nodded.

"I need you to clean it again. Mess it up and start scrubbing from top to bottom as slowly as possible. Wait, that won't work.... I'll break something, then you can clean it up as slowly as possible."

If he thought she sounded crazy he gave absolutely no indication of it. She continued. "I'm going to be in there with a lion and you mustn't leave us alone together, no matter what he says. I'll make it worth your while."

She pulled some cash from the back pocket of her exercise clothes and peeled off a respectable curl of bills. His watery eyes moved from her face to the money trembling in her grip and back, filled with the apprehension that came from being at the mercy of fickle mammals since birth.

In a last ditch attempt to elicit his sympathy she used her other hand to plead using the sign language: {I really need your help, there isn't much time.}

A groan of defeat rumbled deep inside his chest. Rough, stony skin brushed through her fingers as he grabbed the money and started pushing the trolley to her room

as fast as his species' awkward land walk allowed. She charged ahead of him, practically kicking the door open.

It was like someone's fantasy of a futuristic palace in the clouds, everything pale or glassy blue, silver furniture softened with white wood components, mirrors covering entire walls, and a king sized bed that now affected her like a threat despite its playful sailing ship motif. The balcony beyond was so large and covered with greenery it could almost have been called a garden.

Her eyes darted around the scene, looking for the perfect disaster. A narrow glass fronted display cabinet with three shelves full of decorative porcelain dishes fit the bill. The crocodile was just maneuvering his trolley through the door when she scooped up a crystalline vase and launched it into her target. She felt a few specks of shattered material bouncing off her closed eyelids.

"Please, take your time," she told him, then grabbed her favorite suit out of the closet and locked herself in the bathroom.

A lawyer was what she needed, one with an encyclopedic knowledge of those absurd laws that governed her species. There had to be another way off of this fast track to psychological trauma, some obscure loophole she hadn't discovered during her rather haphazard research in college. She almost cursed herself for not making another phone call when she had the necessary time and privacy, but then how could she have known that her room had been invaded? At the next opportunity she would call the zebra's aunt, a judge who was still willing to do him favors despite his having left the herd for bachelorhood.

Naked but for her pride collar, the lioness washed her best friend's blood from her claws while examining herself in the glazed-edge mirror above the black marble sinks: A completely average member of her species, no exceptional features or flaws, no distinguishing marks.

It wasn't much, but it was hers damn it!

The lion growled somewhere in the main room. "What's going on here!?"

"Seagull vandals," she shouted through the bathroom door while quickly pulling on her clothes. "They sometimes sneak in through open balconies and take out their frustrations on what they find. The cleaner chased them off."

It was probably a lie. At least she'd never heard of anything like that happening in the nicer parts of town.

"What are you doing in the bathroom? You should be looking to see if they stole anything."

"Don't sweat it, everything important is in the closet safe. Or at least all my important stuff is in there. They did give you the combination, right?"

He grunted noncommittally.

She straightened out the sleeves of her savannah heat business suit and nodded with satisfaction at its reflection, feeling almost secure in those familiar sharp angles. Despite the zebra's insistence that its bright yellow color didn't do her fur any favors it had become her favorite professional fashion statement.

That's more like it.

Suitably armored, suddenly confident, she stepped out to face the already naked torso of her immediate destiny.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, unwrapping his bandages and watching the crocodile pick up one tiny shard at a time. His dark glasses were gone, exposing the bruised eye to unflattering light streaming through the balcony's gauze curtains.

"Just get a vacuum cleaner," said the lion to the kneeling reptile. "At that rate you'll be here until the floods."

The lioness sat down next to him, picked up the plastic tub of salve from his lap and unscrewed its lid. The space between them instantly smelled of seaweed and candy forced together by the most unnatural kind of chemistry. "A vacuum cleaner might leave some pieces. I don't want to be twisting bloody glass out of my feet later, so I don't mind letting him be thorough. Here, turn around and lean back a little so I can reach those cuts. If we're quick I can show you some of the town before my meeting."

He complied, giving her the full view of an undeniably glorious and intimidating upper body that was only slightly marred by two intersecting sets of mostly healed claw marks half-hidden by fur. "Look at you," he said, "all dressed up and fancy already. There's no need to rush, your father told me the schedule and we've still got a good while to go before we really need to get moving. We could relax here for a while. Maybe have some fun, eh?"

"Oh, you actually spoke with my father afterwards?" she asked to change the subject. With the tip of her claw she pulled a small wooden application spoon out of the lid.

"Yeah, when I was planning this trip. Cool guy, even when he's beaten. Gave me the lowdown about you and what you were doing on the coast with the sharks. He's really sorry he couldn't come."

The lioness wondered how long it would take to stab someone to death with a tiny wooden spoon. She navigated the first blob of clear green salve toward the puckered upper end of the wound that started near his armpit. Anyone watching would have thought her approach was a little hesitant despite her nonchalant expression. "Are these my father's work?"

His eyes didn't leave her face as she started spreading the substance along the dark red lines in his flesh. "No, these are from two different guys I fought during the elimination rounds. They were real tough. Everyone was tough in fact, a whole lot of soldiers and security guards, and I think at least one criminal enforcer or something like that. And they fought crazy too, really desperate stuff. One of them had a broken leg and he still gave it his all in the next round. Almost died."

"Sounds exciting. I'm sorry I missed it."

"Would have been a real ego boost for you, seeing how eager everyone was to win your pride. Seriously, they came from miles around for this opportunity."

"We're not that special."

"Don't be modest, you're the best pride in the region, and six of you have unused child permissions right now. Six! It's the prize of a lifetime."

The lioness silently transitioned from the first wound to the next one, thinking about the wide yellow envelope from the Bureau of Eugenics that was gathering dust in the pride's vault. Inside were the test results that gave her the legal right to a pregnancy, with the option of having more if the economic forecast for the next decade continued to be good. To most people such a thing would have been very precious, but she hadn't intended to use it anytime soon, if ever. The elders had pushed her into submitting for the

examination the minute she hit puberty. Motherhood ASAP was effectively mandatory in lion culture.

“That feels good,” he commented flatly, still observing her face. Over his shoulder she could see the crocodile was done with the larger pieces of her disaster and was now running his small claws through the dense white carpeting around it. The lion must have noticed the attention shift in her eyes, and he turned to address the reptile. “OK, that’s enough buddy. We’re not really going to be doing much walking in here.”

“Sit still,” she commanded gently, tugging on his shoulder to draw his attention away from her savior.

That much physical contact was a mistake apparently.

Suddenly his huge hand was wrapped around her wrist, pulling her closer. The tub of salve fell to the floor, and she lost the sticky wooden spoon somewhere in his fur. Before she could protest his head was against hers, rubbing provocatively, burying her with that absurd mane. The moisture of his breath swept across her face, a repulsive promise that his tongue would soon follow. His other hand was working its way to the small of her back, cutting off escape, grinding her against...

He froze.

For a moment neither of them moved. Then he reluctantly loosened his grip. Her head moved away from his, giving him room to see what had captured his attention: The claws of her free hand were on the wounds, their tips pressing ever so lightly into the open red flesh. He contemplated them with a look of minor disappointment before smirking at her.

“I can think of two explanations for this,” He said. “Either you’ve got some exotic fantasies like that tall sister of yours, or you’re threatening to hurt me for wanting you. Why don’t you tell me which it is so the pride doesn’t get the wrong impression when I’m explaining how you welcomed me.”

It would have been so simple, so satisfying to rip some gaping holes into his irritatingly perfect torso. Her heart was pumping pure violence, the sort that made skin tingle and whispered sweet relief as it rushed through a carnivore’s head: *Just surrender to your feral instincts and you’ll be at peace with the universe for one brilliant moment.*

She sat up as straight as she could without moving her claws, and spoke with what she hoped was a good imitation of her mother’s self-assurance. “This isn’t a rejection. Like I said before, I’m just not ready to be so close, and I think you’ll find me much more cooperative when we’ve gotten to know each other properly. So why conquer when you could win over? Also, I’m not comfortable behaving like that in front of witnesses, especially other species. We’re lions after all, we have a certain image to maintain.”

The crocodile had kept very still and quiet during the drama, still kneeling over the carpet and its nearly invisible glass traps. Her acknowledgment of his presence made him resume his search, but his eyes were now as much on the exit as the task at hand.

She removed her claws from the lion’s chest and placed her hands in a passive arrangement on her lap as a strategic show of trust. The lion considered her posture, then leaned back on the bed in a vulnerable reclining position, his upper body held up by his elbows.

“Alright, let me make a few things clear to you,” he said. “By law you’re mine unless two thirds of our pride says otherwise, and you know they won’t. Your only other choice is being an outcast, and that’s not really a choice since we’ve all seen what

happens to that kind of lioness. So basically I'm calling the shots in this relationship whether you're ready or not. However, you're right, I'd rather try this the easy way."

Most of his tail was pinned beneath his body, but he could still move enough of it to brush the tip against her ankle suggestively. "That's why I'm going to do you a favor," he continued. "I'm giving you till tonight to get over this shyness thing. Even with the meeting that's plenty of time to get to know each other properly like you said."

It was one outrage too many for her self control. The fur on her back pressed up against her suit, and her ears folded into the threat display. "That's a favor!?" she hissed through her fangs. "You really expect me to trust you by the end of the day after giving me an ultimatum like that!?"

"No, not really. Here's how I see it happening. Because I've given you a deadline you're going to think fast and hard about whether it's really worth throwing your nice life away over being such a prude. You'll probably decide there are fates worse than me, then when it's all over you'll realize it's actually a lot of fun and in a few years we'll both be laughing about this with our kids."

He leaned his weight on one elbow and pulled something out of the fur on his chest with his other hand. It was the wooden salve spoon. With a slight flourish and a playful grin he presented it to her. "You missed a few spots."

She slapped it out of his hand, but not as viciously as she wanted to. "You're one of those bitter males who enjoys making females suffer every chance he gets."

"Damn right I'm bitter," he said without losing his grin. "Poor little rich lioness gets to stay with the pride and have more than she'll ever need, and the only downside is a teensy bit of unfairness in the romantic department. Me, I've been working my ass off just to eat ever since I was old enough to get chased out of the house by the people I loved. You wouldn't believe what I've been through, and the sad part is I was the lucky one. My brother got himself k-"

He was interrupted by a knock at the door.

The lioness answered in a normal voice. "Who is it?"

"The monochrome marauder," said the zebra. "We urgently need to talk about this afternoon's meeting. Also, I have something I promised to share with your newest family member."

"Sweet, the video," said the lion. He was on his feet and halfway to the door in the blink of an eye. The lioness took the opportunity to gesture at the crocodile in sign language: {Many thanks, you can go.}

The reptile replied with gestures of his own: {You have my sympathy.}

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," said the zebra roguishly as he stepped through the door, dressed in his black silk business suit and holding a grey videocassette. The lioness couldn't conceal her shock when he and the lion greeted each other with the body language their respective species reserved for trusted acquaintances. He then pointed at the jagged wreckage of the display cabinet and the scars on the lion's chest. "Then again, if this is evidence of how you two get along then maybe it's a good thing I showed up before the ambulance had to."

The lion winked at her with his good eye. "It's not what it looks like. We were just having a friendly chat, clearing up some misunderstandings. So, is that the video everyone's been talking about at home? It better be as good as they say."

“That depends. Don’t hold me responsible for any exaggerations you might have heard. Oh wait, you there, don’t leave just yet.” He was addressing the crocodile, who had managed to get his trolley halfway through the door. “Could you set up the projector and lower the screen?”

The reptile nodded respectfully and went to dig through a mirror fronted cabinet hidden next to the minibar.

The zebra handed the video to the lion. “Here, help him with that while I have a private business conversation with my colleague.”

It was with mixed feelings of gratitude and betrayal that the lioness followed him through the billowing gauze curtains and into the small private jungle of the balcony. The heat had risen quite suddenly since their return from the beach, but it was nothing they weren’t used to from savannah city life. She slid the glass door to the room closed, looking through it to see the lion wrapping fresh bandages around his chest while trying to direct the crocodile’s tinkering with the hotel-issued video projector.

She turned to appreciate a less frustrating view. Her negative emotions subsided a little at the sight of the town in all its carefully planned, recently constructed splendor, practically glowing in the near-noon sun. Only the unfortunate gray stain that was the surface-side slum diminished its impact. The intuitive flow of the streets guided her eyes to the bay, where a spectacularly diverse array of ships filled her with the same sense of alien wonder she had felt during that first childhood vacation on the coast. They were aesthetically pleasing vessels, completely unlike the ugly river barges that marred the inland waterlines and specially designed to link to underwater structures through transport pipes and telecommunication cables.

One ship in particular held her attention, unmistakable even from a distance. It had no deck for land dwellers to walk on, just a smoothly rounded, iridescent grey shell, like some enormous aquatic beetle with most of its body hidden beneath the waterline. A sharp symbol had been painted in ragged strokes of sky blue and sunset orange on its downward sloping prow.

It was a vessel designed by sharks and for sharks, paid for by one of the nation’s leading power companies in exchange for unknown services. The lioness had not yet been aboard, but there were plenty of stories coming from the technicians she had hired to evaluate the cage technology. Apparently only a few of the rooms were dry and intended for creatures with legs. The rest of the ship was a water filled mystery where the normal rules of architecture didn’t apply.

The zebra leaned on the black wrought iron banister next to her. “Your male came looking for salve and bandages while I was still being treated in the infirmary. I knew something wasn’t right when he said you had very sweetly volunteered to tend his wounds, and I decided you might appreciate it if I conveniently interrupted whatever desperate scene you were trapped in.”

When she didn’t respond he tried to follow her gaze. “Her ship?” he guessed.

The lioness crossed her arms and nodded. “Mm. Looking forward to finally visiting it.” Her eyes hardened as they turned to him. “You two seemed awfully close in there. What’s with this video tape he’s so excited about?”

“I’ll explain the tape when you’ve seen it. As for him I’m just playing nice to stay on your pride’s good side. We met after his victory, and to be honest he’s too primitive to hold my interest. Your species really ought to consider some kind of written test for

challengers, among other reforms... I imagine you must be very frustrated at the moment. Is it as bad as the smashed furniture indicates?"

Her tail lashed around with subdued anger. "Well let's see, I'm being pursued against my will by a drooling savage who has a vendetta against females, my family thinks this will be just another wonderful stage in my maturing process, and you, my so-called best friend, conspired with them to leave me in the dark about it. As a result I only have until tonight to find a way out of this mess before the aforementioned drooling savage demands that I surrender or suffer the consequences. Yeah, it's bad, thanks for asking."

"I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do to redeem myself."

"Of course there is! Your aunt is a judge, and she's always been fond of you. I hate to bother her for something like this, but I'm sure she'll sympathize."

He gently shook his head. It was a movement that usually looked comical coming from the long faces of equines, but not this time. "I already called her, right after your father's defeat. She did some research, and although they are rare you're not the first young lioness to rebel against this particular aspect of her species. Those that tried to fight it out in court or slip away through a technicality always lost and ended up outcast for their efforts. The odds are very much against you in that department."

Her hands curled tightly around the banister in a strangler's grip. "Alright, so the law isn't going to help," she growled quietly. "Can't say that surprises me. I'll just have to think of something else. Damn it, why didn't I do more to prepare for this!?"

In truth she had a pretty good answer to that question; it had always been easier to obsess over the problems of other species rather than deal with those of her own, especially when it was so childishly comfortable to forget that her father couldn't protect her forever. Improving the lives of long oppressed species was a low-risk form of rebellion compared to challenging the ferocious conservatism of lion culture.

She thought about those lionesses who had lost their families over what she was attempting to do, individuals whose stories had been so thoroughly obscured that a judge had to look them up. Unlike the seaborns they had had no organized movement to fall back on for support. How lonely their battles must have been. Lonely as the futures that awaited them.

There was a rubbery grinding sound, the balcony's glass door sliding aside on its air-sealed tracks. The lion stepped halfway through with a near-empty bottle of *Eyes So Green* beer swinging from his fingers. "We're set up for the show in here."

"A few more minutes," said the zebra with a business smile as warm as it was false.

The lion winked again at the lioness and withdrew. She winced at the unpleasant squeaking sound the door made on its way back to the shut position.

The zebra ran his fingers through one of the small bushes sitting next to the banister, plucked a few choice leaves, and slipped them into his mouth, chewing only briefly before swallowing. "May I make a few suggestions?" he asked afterward.

"Sure."

"You're not going to like them at first, but they might help you come to terms with this."

“You’d better not say I should give up and accept him, because that would be one betrayal too many for me to take. I’m liable to go crazy and claw off the rest of your arm for a snack.”

It was just a tense joke of a threat, but then she saw a flash of violent emotion in his eyes, the kind that had preceded the punch she could still feel in her neck. Her instincts demanded that she at least back away, but she pretended not to notice.

After a quiet moment he reverted to his imperturbable self and spoke in a tone of patient superiority he often used with females of his own species. “Nasty jokes about eating my entrails and such were permissible when we were chasing each other around the park as children, but now they are signs of immaturity. In fact, everything about your approach to this situation has been immature, and it’s about time you -”

“Hold it,” she interrupted. “Don’t talk to me like I’m one of your cringing wife candidates. I’m getting enough pressure from one sexist polygamist, I certainly don’t need it from two.”

“If you stop behaving like such a female then I won’t treat you like one. I mean honestly, here you are making silly plans and melodramatic pronouncements as if your life were in actual danger. All your pride is asking for is a small sacrifice in the name of tradition. You won’t even see him that often, and the law doesn’t force you to interact with him beyond a bare minimum. You could decide never to say another word to him, and no one would hold it against you. On the other hand you may actually grow to like him once you get past his boorish side. I’m no expert, but he’s a fine physical specimen as far as I can tell.”

It wasn’t the most insensitive thing he’d ever said – anyone on his growing list of detractors would have been quick to describe some spectacular examples - but it was certainly the most insensitive thing he’d ever said *to her*. She couldn’t have been more appalled if she had caught him eating meat. “What in the name of Phoenix is wrong with you? How can you just dismiss me like that after all these years?”

He shrugged. “I’ve had some enlightening experiences during these last few months. Certain facts about life have become evident, and all I am saying is that you need to put things in perspective.”

“Well let me try fitting this into your ‘enlightened’ world view then. If you had some abusive, hideous, disgusting mare forced on you, and she could just snap her fingers to make you do whatever she wanted no matter how degrading, would you really be able to live with that?”

He hesitated slightly before answering. “That is not the same thing.”

“But it’s close. And if routine violation isn’t enough, don’t forget I’m also expected to have children ASAP or fall under suspicion. Does all that really sound like a ‘small sacrifice’ to you?”

No immediate response. His fingers went searching for more leaves in the balcony’s foliage. Only two met his standards this time, and he chewed them very thoughtfully.

“I’ll reject him,” she declared, a promise to herself and a warning to the zebra. “If I’m left with no other options I’ll become an outcast.”

He swallowed and gestured toward the shark’s ship. “She will be very disappointed if you lose your family and career over this. In all these years we are the only investors she has found who are open minded enough to touch this project, and she

trusts you more than any other land dweller. Without your mediation and money the deal cannot go forward.”

She heard a faint metallic scraping as he unconsciously slid the titanium shoe on his hoof back and forth against the balcony’s red tiles in a small circular motion. It was a sign of embarrassment she recognized from childhood.

“There is also the matter of my own prospects,” he continued. “I have been counting on the money we are supposed to make to help me secure wives.”

He had tried to make it sound like a minor concern, but she caught the significance of his last statement and bared her teeth. “Ah, so my melodrama is threatening your chances to score. No wonder you’ve been so eager to take my pride’s side in all this.”

“A selfish mistake on my part I’ll admit. I had hoped the situation wouldn’t be this problematic for you. But never mind our troubles, what about our partner and her species? You said we were poised to transform shark culture for the better, history in the making and all that. Do we have the right to deny them progress over something like this?”

It was a sobering reminder despite his cynical reasons for bringing it up. Her anger faltered, leaving room for an awful sense of responsibility. No, in all good conscience she simply couldn’t hold back progress for her own sake. “It won’t come to that. I’ve just an idea that might subdue him.”

A sadistic smirk distorted his face. It made him look more artificial than ever, like a mechanical simulation of a zebra with plastic features that just couldn’t handle the real expression. He leaned in to whisper. “Have you considered murder?”

It was disturbing, unfamiliar behavior, and she leaned away. “That’s not funny,” she said with deadly seriousness, “and it wouldn’t help anyway. The pride would just organize a new set of challenges and replace him with another jerk.”

There was a tapping of glass on glass. She turned to see the lion knocking on the other side of the door pane with the mouth of his beer bottle to get their attention. He gestured with good humored impatience for them to come in.

“Showtime,” said the zebra.

They walked in to find that the mirrors and cabinets in the bedroom’s back wall had been covered by a wide projector screen that unrolled from a hidden slot in the ceiling. The small white couch and a chair had been arranged at a viewing distance in front of it, and the projector itself was set up on an unstable looking stand next to the bed. The crocodile stood at attention behind the machine with a look of blank servitude on his face, ready to operate it.

“Beers for you guys,” said the lion, holding out two open bottles with their necks between his fingers. The zebra and the lioness exchanged quick glances before gingerly taking them. “Great minibar you got here. Mind closing the curtains and turning off the lights baby?”

“*Baby!?*” she repeated.

“Let me handle all that,” said the zebra quickly. “I enjoy playing host for this sort of thing. Just make yourselves comfortable.”

The lion let himself fall onto the couch. “Sure thing.” He then raised his eyebrows at her and patted the small space that was left next to him.

She wanted to roll her eyes at the immaturity of what she had just noticed. He had deliberately arranged only the couch and a single chair in front of the screen to restrict her options. There was no way he and the zebra could both fit on the couch even if it wasn't inappropriate for them to do so.

"You can start it," said the zebra, addressing the crocodile. The lights dimmed just as the screen filled with the vivid red flashes of a setting sun reflecting in fragments off water.

Pulling up another chair would only antagonize her nemesis, and she needed him receptive to what she was planning. She grudgingly squeezed into the space next to the lion and permitted his arm to wrap around her shoulders. She could almost smell his satisfaction. It made her flesh crawl.

"You seen this yet?" he asked her.

"I don't even know what it is." The screen was displaying a panning shot along the length of a wide river that cut through an untamed landscape. "Some sort of feral zone documentary?"

"Damn, I thought you two were best friends. How come you haven't told her yet?"

The zebra shushed him softly and sat down in the chair. "The narration is starting." He then slipped a square of grass concentrate into his mouth to chew on.

"They do it once a year, every year, without fail," said the narrator. It was a gazelle's voice. On the screen thousands of feral zebras were gathered along the bank of the river, many separate herds and families that had come together as one. "It is a sacred occasion for them, the day of their deadliest ritual, a challenge they could easily overcome with their intellects but choose to face with their bodies and souls. Despite their vast numbers they are surprisingly quiet as they whisper their nervous prayers and solemnly avoid talking to each other. They know that they might soon lose friends and family."

The lioness realized it was footage of a Crossing.

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"Our hidden cameras capture many heartbreaking scenes, too many to share. Here a young foal almost starts to cry as he grips his father's leg, unable to understand why he is about to be dragged into seemingly unnecessary danger. A stern look from his aunt warns him not to show weakness. She in turn fiddles with her favorite good luck charm, a beaded necklace we have seen her roll through her fingers well over a hundred times today. She is pregnant, and her chances of survival are lower than most.

There is always plenty of time to prepare before the crossing begins. As usual a young adult with a strong sense of duty and incredible courage has been chosen as the Initiator, and no one will enter the river until he does. He will try his best not to start the stampede until the herd is as ready as possible, and he is anxiously watching for important hand signals from the elders. To mark his role in the ceremony he wears a rough white shirt, one of the few pieces of clothing the feral zebras permit themselves to create.

Order and position are very important, both for survival and for symbolic purposes. The front rows are reserved for the young and strong, males and females in

their prime. They will face the danger first and try to protect the vulnerable groups following them. Next in line are the old and pregnant, with the occasional middle aged male thrown in for added protection. This group typically suffer the greatest casualties despite everyone's best efforts. Finally come the children and the privileged leaders. By the time they reach the water most of the carnage is over, but the risk is still great.

We've been watching them prepare for over an hour. Finally the enormous combined herd grows silent. The Initiator has seen enough hand signals to know the time is right, and he begins a wordless final prayer, a slow moving dance. In the back the priests perform similar gestures. Everyone who can see the water is staring into it intensely. Reptilian eyes stare back at them.

The enemy. The challenge.

Our underwater cameras capture the crocodiles waiting just below the surface, completely motionless. There's no real reason for them to hide at this stage, but they do so anyway out of habit. They are just as religious as the mammals on the riverbank, but they performed their own quiet rituals and prayers in the stillness before the herd's arrival. Their own gods have not been generous this year, and many of the reptiles have grown very thin and frightened.

Here we see a very young crocodile, bleeding from a fresh symbol she carved into her scales that morning in the hopes that it would please her guardian spirits. She is on edge from hunger and the constant irritation of tiny fish trying to nibble the edges of her wound. She watches the older, stronger individuals swimming near her, probably wondering how they can keep their cool when preparing to attack such a massive stampede. There are countless stories about foolish crocs who were trampled in the shallows by thousands of hooved feet.

Back on the surface the Initiator's dance becomes more frantic as he nears the critical moment..."

WW

"Pause it," said the zebra. The crocodile complied. "Right there, behind the Initiator."

Both felines strained to see what he was talking about. Then they gasped almost simultaneously.

"Holy shit," squealed the lion with childlike excitement, "it's really you!"

The lioness had experienced a lot of shocks in one day, but this one still managed to floor her. There among the nervous ferals behind the initiator stood her best friend in all his physical perfection, wearing only a loincloth and some beads in his mane. From the look on his face he seemed completely untroubled, like he was watching a comedic play in the park instead of waiting to dive into predator filled waters.

"That's so hardcore," continued the lion, jumping to his feet to get a closer look. His body cut through the projector's beam, decorating his back with zebra stripes. "Is that all we get to see of you?"

The lioness noticed a hint of manic satisfaction at the corner of the zebra's mouth as he answered. "No, there's more. The Initiator was killed almost instantly, and since I was the most photogenic individual left in the front row the cameras then focused on me several times during the rest of the sequence. There's a very nice slow-motion shot of me

dodging a crocodile who almost caught my neck. My fellow bachelors have joked that it looks like a dance.”

“Hardcore. They should just make you part of the zebra council right now. I’d vote for you if I could, you’re like the most badass non-lion I ever met. Don’t you agree baby?”

The lioness considered his expression. His face was covered in projected stripes, but there was a distinct sparkle of malice in that toothy grin. He was getting off on calling her that. She turned to confront the zebra. “You’re a lunatic. I thought you’d been acting strange, but I didn’t realize you’d lost your mind. Why in all the fires of Phoenix would you enter the feral zone?”

“For the same reason you do,” he answered nonchalantly. “For amusement.”

“But we’re predators... You’re prey.”

Again the violence flashed in his eyes, vanishing almost before she could notice it. “Yes, but it is just as much fun to be the hunted as it is to be the hunter. Perhaps even more so.”

The lion made a perverted chuckling sound. “Huhuh, he’s not giving you the whole reason. You did it for the females too, didn’t you? Yeah, they’re going to be taking turns nibbling your neck when this gets around.”

“That’s idiotic,” snapped the lioness. “They’re all going to think he’s unstable, some suicidal nut eager to throw his life away over nothing. You’ve ruined your mating prospects.”

The lion groaned. “What are you, some kind of homosexual? Normal females love this stuff. At least the mammal ones do. Damn, I wish I could have my bravery caught on tape like that. It’s too bad camera’s aren’t allowed for a pride challenge.”

The zebra sat up in his chair and snapped his fingers. “On tape!” he declared mysteriously.

“Huh?”

“You’ve just given me the most marvelous idea,” he leaned toward the lioness. “I’d like to take a look at those reports regarding our partner’s ship.”

“Sure,” she said, a little confused. “They’re on the desk. Why?”

“I’ll explain later. It is a surprise that will only work if the circumstances are just right.”

The lion waved his hand between them. “Whoa, can we finish this tape before you guys start talking shop?”

“Certainly. Let us continue.” He turned to look at the crocodile, who hesitated, then shook his head. “Is there a problem?”

The reptile opened and closed his damaged mouth a few times before gathering enough courage to speak in a gravelly voice. “This is wrong sir. You shouldn’t gamble with your life.”

He had their undivided, rather surprised attention. “Explain,” said the zebra.

“Joining the Crossing I mean. You got lucky is all. Good thing my grandma wasn’t there this time. She’s so old she’s grown to Size Category 4, bigger than all you, big as a rhino, I swear. Every year she hides in that same river where you were, catching zebra for sport, selling them as feral cuts when she gets home. She takes down stallions just like you all the time, doesn’t even need to use her hands.”

“Really. And why wasn’t she there on this occasion?”

The crocodile’s transparent third eyelid flickered at the corner of his eye, indicating nervousness. “She’s in jail, but she’ll be out in three months.”

The zebra stood up into the projector’s beam, forming a crisscross effect where the recorded stripes overlapped his own. “Good. Tell her I look forward to facing her in that river next year.”

“What!?” gasped the lioness.

“Badass,” noted the lion with a nod of approval.

“Now that you’ve shared your opinion would you kindly get the projector rolling again?”

The crocodile tilted his head back slightly to expose his throat in a show of submissive compliance. The image on the screen sprang back to life, a churning splash of brown water and red reflected sunlight where the Initiator threw himself in. His pristine white shirt barely had time to get dirty before he was dragged beneath the surface by an unseen attacker. The first row dashed undeterred through the churning blood slick that had replaced him. Within seconds the river was completely filled by a crushing mass of bodies, an impenetrable wave of black and white flesh. The camera zoomed in on a child being shoved down and trampled by his own relatives in their blind terror, his scream inaudible over the mayhem.

“I can’t watch this,” said the lioness standing up.

The lion gave her a funny look. “Don’t tell me you’re freaked out by a little violence. Your mom said you love to hunt feral zebra.”

She left her untouched beer on the minibar, picked up her briefcase from its well worn groove in the carpet next to the desk and headed for the door, passing through the projector beam. “That’s not the problem. I can’t stand to see such a ridiculous display of...” she paused with her hand on the doorknob. “I’m going to take the scenic route to her ship, the long way. I’ll meet you there.”

The zebra nodded without looking away from the screen, where his recorded self was halfway through that slow motion dodge he had mentioned. The crocodile aiming for his neck looked like the young female with the freshly carved symbols from an earlier shot.

“I wish you weren’t wearing that particular suit for this occasion,” he said. “I’ve told you before, yellow really doesn’t work for you.”

Closing the door on that scene brought a sense of relief to the lioness, but she didn’t permit herself to relax too much as she made her way to the main staircase. The outline of a plan had been forming in the back of her mind, and this brief respite from the lion’s wandering hands and the zebra’s erratic behavior was an opportunity to flesh it out. It wasn’t going to be an ideal solution, but it was probably her last reasonable hope.

She was halfway across the lobby when she heard her husband calling after her. “Hey baby, wait up!” His sunglasses were once again covering his bruised eye. “You wanted to show me the town, right? I think I’ll take you up on that.”

“What about the tape?” she asked with semi-concealed frustration.

“He switched it off right after you left, said he needed to make a phone call and prepare the ‘surprise’, whatever that means. I’d rather hang out with you anyway. So, how do people go touring around here? I’ve noticed it’s not exactly a car town.”

“I’m going by canal boat.” Her original plan had been a short, soothing cruise through a romantic part of town before heading for the ship, but that was out of the question if he came along. “There isn’t enough time left for a real tour. I’m just going to sail through the slum and then straight to the meeting after that.”

“A slum? In *this* town? A minute ago you said you were taking the scenic route.”

“That was an inside joke,” she lied. “But yes there are slums, one on the surface and most of what’s underwater. We have contacts there, people who can give us the kind of information you don’t get in the local papers. I’m hoping to spot a few of them and catch up on local rumors.”

There was skepticism in the way he tilted his head while studying her face. “Right. Well that’s OK. Having been poor myself I’d be interested to see what it’s like having no money on the shore. The brochures always make this place look like a swanky playground.”

“Then there’s the meeting.”

“Don’t tell him I blabbed, but our equine friend said I might understand you better if I attended. Your father was going to be a guest anyway, so she won’t mind if I fill in for him.”

The lioness sighed quietly and headed for the door. Why would the zebra do this to her? Was it part of the ‘surprise’ he had mentioned, some half-baked scheme that would likely make the whole situation worse? Maybe she should have pressed him more on the subject. Then again, he was acting so strangely that she doubted any straight answers would have been forthcoming.

Her husband walked beside her, close of course, everything in his body language conveying the simple confidence that comes from scoring a minor victory. It made her feel like she was on the defensive in some repulsive game. Still, his mentioning of poverty was a good opening for her own plan, and she decided to go for it.

First she needed to steer the conversation toward money, awaken his greed. That would make him more receptive to her offer.

“So, what was your life like before all this?” she asked as they stepped out onto the brick plaza. “I know most lions have it a bit rough after being forced out of their pride. I don’t approve of that custom either by the way. I stayed in touch with my brothers as long as I could after they got kicked out.”

There was no malice in his smile this time, just straightforward friendliness. “That was nice of you. I would have loved it if my sisters had at least tried. I’m guessing your dad put a stop to that pretty quick.”

“Oh, he was furious. We had a huge argument. It was the first time I realized how conservative he really was under all those fun quirks.”

“Heh, that’s not conservative, that’s instincts. You can’t—”

“Hello there!” interrupted a heavily accented, exaggeratedly feminine voice, just as they were about to leave the plaza. “Wait, question for you!”

They turned to see an unfamiliar Size Category 2 creature approaching with a saucy expression on her canid features. She resembled a jackal with vivid red fur, a lot of which was on display thanks to her immodest blue bathing suit. The surfboard under her arm was decorated with edgy cartoon characters, the kind you would never see on children’s television.

“I’m sorry, were you speaking to us?” asked the lioness.

“Ignore her,” whispered the lion urgently. “That’s a fox, a northern species. They’re all weirdoes up there.”

“I hearing that,” said the fox with a coquettish sweep of her tail. “But is not problem. Friends over there see your leaving hotel, saying you look like fun locals. Want to arrive to party on friends’ boat? Is very nice boat.”

She pointed to a family group of riotous looking creatures in equally bold bathing suits, sitting at an outside table of a nearby café. They were much bigger canines, the upper end of Size Category 2 or perhaps lower Size Category 3. Each one had dyed his or her grayish fur with a different, eye-opening combination of colors and patterns; green stripes overlapped red faces, purple spirals spread across orange torsos, and yellow crescents wrapped around blue arms. A hunger for novelty was obvious in the way they were staring at the felines.

The lion grimaced.

“Is wolf pack,” explained the fox. “Rich. Very curious mind. I mean open mind. Want to experience lion pride, north meet south. They are liking her yellow suit and your pants. You have very good fun, my promise.”

“I’m afraid we’re busy,” said the lioness turning away. The fox’s innuendo-laced voice had made clear what the northerners were after, and she was having enough trouble with just the lion trying to ‘experience’ her.

“You are sure?” asked the fox slyly.

The lion roared in horrified surprise. The lioness turned back in time to see him knock the canid off her feet with a powerful backhanded blow. “How dare you touch me, you filthy deviant!”

There were tiny drops of blood on the pink striped sleeve of his shirt, on the pastel yellow wall near that sleeve, and all over the bricks where the small foreigner had landed. She tried to yell for help, but only managed a gurgling screech through the agonizing new twists and cracks in her face. A few teeth spilled out onto her surfboard. In an instant the wolf pack had surrounded them, their own teeth bared for reprisal, one of them pulling his increasingly panicked friend to safety.

The lioness felt the lion move his back against hers, an old fashioned defensive stance for two. “Wait, let’s not do anything we’re going to regret,” she said to the green-and-white faced opponent closing in on her.

“So you deviants still want a piece of us,” said the lion behind her. “I don’t know what sick behavior they allow wherever the fuck you come from, but down here we have laws against cross-species coupling. I could have your stupid friend arrested. Everyone will know it was self-defense.”

The wolves apparently understood enough of their language to back off after that threat. The lioness pulled one of her pride’s business cards from her briefcase and offered it to them. “Here, we’ll do whatever we can to compensate for her injuries.”

“Oh no we won’t,” said the lion. He snatched the card away, grabbed her arm, and steered her past their disapproving looks. “Come on, if these freaks are as rich as she said they can pay for her mistake.”

The fox had started to scream, a sound that flowed smoothly from pain to terror and back again. Her trembling fingers were discovering that her facial features weren’t where they used to be.

“We can’t just leave her like that!” said the lioness.

“You’ll do what I tell you to if you don’t want to spend an interesting five minutes in a back alley. Let’s go.”

He pushed her ahead into the narrow pedestrian-only street leading away from the plaza, where she nearly stumbled into a counter full of cheap junk and tattered postcards spilling out of a doomed souvenir shop. Its turtle owner gave her a tired look from between dangling nets full of long dead coral.

The lioness started moving away, faster than a walk, slower than a run, so ashamed and furious it made her nauseous. The lion followed at a distance, but she could still smell the stink of his adrenaline, his eagerness to fight, to conquer. Eventually the screaming faded behind crowd noises as they pushed their way through a herd of wildebeest tourists laughing about some obscure reference. The other end of the street opened onto a wide stretch of canal where several small rental boats waited along a dock for those who could afford private trips. After two seconds of consideration she selected a tiny, almost featureless rectangular vessel with low sides, a center console, and baby blue seat cushions in the front.

“You want a tour or a straight trip?” asked the seal captain as she stepped down into his vessel. He was very young, dressed in casual land dweller clothes rather than the typical seaborne wetsuit, and he walked around the console with surprising ease despite the limited leg movements that were a trademark of his species.

“Take us through the surface-side slums, then out into the bay. I’ll direct you to our destination from there.”

Her unusual choice of route didn’t seem to faze him. She and the lion sat down facing each other on opposite sides of the wide prow as the boat pattered away from the dock. An eye-stinging cloud of engine smoke wafted forward on the warm midday breeze.

“Was that reaction necessary?” she snapped after a long silence.

The lion was busy unbuttoning his sleeves and rolling them up halfway to conceal the fox’s blood. Traces of red weren’t exactly shocking on a carnivore’s clothing, but they were often interpreted as a sign of poor table manners. “That’s real funny coming from you, seeing as you nearly ripped my scars open over a cuddle.”

“It’s not the same thing! She was Size Category 2, you could have killed or crippled her!”

“She was looking for trouble, and she found it. Probably got off on it too. Relax, they won’t mess with us. No normal person is going to take her side over mine in court.”

Arms crossed, she fell back into silence and watched the scenery changing behind him. Pastel walls with flowering balconies were gradually replaced by crumbling gray facades with tiny boarded up windows that leaned dangerously over the murky waters of the surface-side slum. The ‘triple S’ seemed impossibly ancient given the town’s recent construction, like a fragile chunk of urban blight carefully extracted from an eastern coastal city and imported to provide the underclass necessary for the maintenance of the richer districts. Those fancy vacation-home toilets weren’t going to scrub themselves.

The boat had slowed to a walking speed, allowing the crocodiles drifting just below the canal’s surface time to move out of the way. This was the only district where they were allowed to congregate in such a fashion without being accused of loitering by the image conscious local police. Many of them swam over from their homes in the

slaughterhouse district every day just to do so. In that filthy water where land dweller eyes would quickly burn away they conducted slow sign language conversations, trading news, gossip, rumors, jokes, romantic overtures, and the occasional plan for a protest.

“Check that out,” said the lion. He pointed at an enormous symbol spray painted in blue on a flaking white wall. It depicted a side view of a three step staircase using squares and triangles that, from a certain angle, also looked like an abstract mouse’s head with another staircase floating over it to form a crown. The words *AND WHO CAN BEAR TO BE FORGOTTEN?* were printed beneath it.

“Staircaser kings,” said the lioness. “A protest symbol. There’s still a long way to go before the seaborns and reptiles get their fair share in this society.”

“Huh. I once lived in a place like this. It was nicer, but not by much. I think I understand how they must feel.”

Despite her anger the lioness saw a good opportunity to steer the conversation back to her plan. She uncrossed her arms and forced her ears out of their disdainful cast. “Yes, male lions get a raw deal too. What I don’t understand is why your gender has never organized a movement to change that fact.”

“It would be a movement of weaklings and sore losers trying to ruin the natural order,” he sneered. “Real males understand that our instincts tell us to do things this way for a reason. The strong deserve what they get. But yeah, a few changes would be nice. Waiting a bit longer before chasing us out of the pride for example.”

“And giving you more money when they do.”

“What?”

“The money that’s supposed to help you get started. My brothers barely had enough to finish college.”

“Oh yeah, it’s worse if the pride you come from isn’t rich. Me, I never even started college. My brother did, but he only finished because I worked to pay for him. He was the smart one.”

“You must be relieved that your money worries are over for at least the next four years.”

“Yep.”

Time to play on his greed. “Still, you’re just getting a Lion’s Share Stipend. That’s enough to feed and clothe you, but I’m sure my pride will be monitoring all your other expenses closely. Mother is infamously budget conscious.”

It was a strange turn in the conversation, one that made him sit up. “She did give me a funny look when the bill came in for my new clothes.”

“It won’t be the last time she does that. Don’t plan on living it up like a movie star.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re going somewhere with this?”

She leaned in toward him. “I have an offer for you. As soon as this deal we’ve been working on goes forward I’m going to be making some serious money. Most of it will be going into the pride’s central bank account of course, but that still leaves a lot for me to spend as I please. Some of it could be spent on you.”

After a few expressionless seconds his malicious grin returned. “I see. You’d pay me not to touch you.”

“No touching, no children, nothing like that. A pride can expel a lioness for refusing the lion, but there’s no penalty if it’s the lion who refuses her.”

“A pride will also be very pissed off if they find out members are bribing each other. And how am I supposed to spend the money without them getting suspicious?”

“I could buy things for myself, but really they would be for you. Gifts will also work, as long as we’re subtle about it. We could even make it look like I’m trying to win your affection back or something. You could pretend to spend time on the coast with me, where they can’t easily monitor your activities.”

“What if I want a college education?”

“... Obviously there are limits, but this would still be a very sweet deal for you. All you’d be giving up is one lioness, not even the most attractive one in her pride, in exchange for a significant improvement in your lifestyle. Do we have an agreement?”

He chuckled. “Don’t be so modest, you’re plenty attractive. In fact, the more you try to get away from me, the more attractive you become. Weird huh?”

“Do we have an agreement?” she repeated with a hint of desperation slipping through.

“No! No agreement. Holy Phoenix fire, your mother was right, it’s going to take some really special attention to get through to you.”

“I don’t need your kind of attention!” she shouted. The young seal captain almost reflexively ducked behind his console. “Everything was perfect until you showed up. Leave me alone!”

Her outburst drew disapproving glares from an elderly cormorant couple scrubbing their clothes on a wide set of moss-covered stone steps that led down into the water from the street level. The slum was characterized by a heavy, almost aquatic silence that even the eternally chattering seagulls respected.

The lion had slumped back into his seat, his legs spread wide and his arms resting on the side of the boat. For the next five minutes he pretended to look at the dismal scenery, but she could tell he was giving her sidelong glances from behind those arrogant sunglasses. She fantasized that the second thing she would try to do if he attacked her would be to snatch them off his face and twist them apart in the middle. The second thing of course, because the first would have to be the ever satisfying but surprisingly tricky kick to the crotch. Pushy bachelors got pretty good at dodging that one.

The boat picked up some speed as the buildings around them tentatively resumed the pastel color scheme, indicating that they were emerging from the slum. Oppressive silence was quickly giving way to the chaotic noises of the waterfront, and she could see the open horizon of the bay approaching like the light at the end of a tunnel. Too bad that metaphor wasn’t applicable to her situation at the moment.

Wild ideas and emotions were ricocheting through her mind, sometimes colliding with each other to form increasingly unstable new plans for escaping her fate. It was an unpleasant chemical process that made her already tense nerves and muscles throb.

“You’re a lot like this lioness my brother knew,” he said.

She gave him a tired look. The cobblestone streets stretching off into the distance behind his head were becoming wider and more lively. Seaborn and tourists alike stopped to gawk at a row of flashy sports cars parked along the edge of the canal as part of a publicity campaign. An awestruck seagull child, still in her brownish feathers, reached out to touch one of the Size Category 2 vehicles with the skeletal fingers of her

wing joint, but quickly drew back when the towering rhino security guard gave a warning grunt.

The lion went on. "In most ways she was more of a rebel than you'll ever be, totally into drugs, fur dyes, anti feral hunt protests, all kinds of freaky stuff. My brother was wild about her, and she thought she felt the same for him. You've got to understand, my bro was smart, but he was a certified runt, got one of the worst ratings possible from the Bureau of Eugenics. It wasn't his fault, his intestines just didn't absorb nutrition right. Before she came along he thought he'd never score, so I didn't say anything when they ran away together. They said they were going to live monogamously, ignoring rules and instincts. But then they met some bigger lion who wanted her."

The boat emerged from the canal and started swerving its way through the network of floating docks beyond. A small jungle of tightly packed private yachts bristled around them, land dweller ships with pretentious names engraved in gold or silver leaf upon their prows: *I Must be Dreaming*, *The Toy*, *Squanderlust*, *Backlash*, *The Virgin Whore*, *What's My Line?*

"The big guy killed him," said the lion matter-of-factly.

Her eyes widened. "That's awful," she said, forgetting anger.

"Witnesses said he attacked him right in the middle of some damn rice field they were picking to earn traveling cash. Since they weren't a legal couple he was open to being challenged anytime. The worst part is my bro screamed for her to help, but all she did was wait and watch to see who would be the winner. She thought she was progressive, but when it really mattered she obeyed her instincts."

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said sincerely. "Did they arrest the lion?"

"The judge ruled it was 'accidental death due to culturally sanctioned combat', let him off easy. I don't blame the guy though, he was just doing what we do. I blame her. If she had listened to her blood from the start instead of goofy modern ideas about love she would have ignored my brother and he'd be alive today."

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. The tragedy had almost made her forget the sort of person she was dealing with. "That's an absurd conclusion. Yes, she probably didn't love him and she does bear some responsibility for not stopping the fight, but it was our barbaric culture that encouraged that lion to attack. It was our culture that allowed your brother's death to go unpunished. In fact, it was probably our culture that made her hesitate to help. If her childhood was anything like mine she was practically brainwashed into staying out of male-on-male conflicts so as not to offend their honor. Those lessons aren't easily unlearned."

"Yeah, that was the excuse she gave everybody, but guess whose bed she was in when the police came asking about my brother's carcass lying face down in rice and mud. I definitely learned a lesson from that."

She contemplated a few possible counterpoints, but decided to let the conversation go. Talking to him was stressful, and probably pointless. Soon they were free of the yacht jungle, cruising above the outskirts of the underwater section of the town.

"Where to now?" asked the seal.

The lioness scanned the horizon and pointed at the blue and orange symbol that seemed to float above the strange optical effect of the iridescent prow it was painted on. "There."

The seal looked impressed. “Oh, *her* ship. Right away.”

Traffic lanes were sectioned across the waters of the bay with color-coded buoys: white for large ships, dark yellow for small, and unmissable red for where seaborns could swim near the surface without fear of being slashed apart by propellers or disemboweled by suction engines. To tourists it appeared to be a haphazard layout that changed from day to day as ships hooked and unhooked from the pipes and towers that led to underwater buildings. Few outsiders appreciated the genius of what was essentially a floating village that could be rearranged to suit any public or private need. Mobile hotels went wherever the view was best that time of year. Mobile factories picked up their materials directly from the storage facilities below, handled the manufacturing, then got out of the way. The mobile hospital had simply traveled to the site of a major disaster on several occasions. ‘Buildings’ were added or removed without a fuss.

And that was just the surface.

As they cruised along one of the yellow lanes the lioness couldn’t resist looking down over the boat’s edge at the faint outlines of the town’s second half, home to its population of legless seaborns. The buildings and people below weren’t restricted by the usual rules of land-bound things; they weren’t concerned with stairs and gravity. Structures twirled around each other at fantastical angles, using space with incredible efficiency and catching the sunlight in beautiful curves. You could say the same of the citizens and their movements.

It was easy to forget the area’s economic conditions were on par with those of the slum they had just left. Her scuba diving trip through it had confirmed that fact more vividly than any of her agents’ reports.

The lion was also admiring the view below, but from a newcomer’s perspective. “Cool,” he said with a certain childish elation. “Wish I could see more through the seawater.”

Something about his excited tail movements reminded her of her brother when he was a cub, and she found herself wondering what this brute must have been like before puberty rearranged his priorities. She visualized him with a sweet, malice-free smile on his face as his mother helped him paint something innocent in the pride’s gathering room. Somebody’s son. A victim in his own way.

A wooden man-o-war with red sails that unfolded like paper fans cast its exotic shadow over them as they slowed for the approach to the shark’s ship. The lioness stood up in anticipation.

“I don’t understand what he was complaining about,” said the lion. “That suit looks great on you. Especially with those sails in the background.”

“Thanks.”

The seal switched the motor to its lowest setting. “Here we are.” He picked up a long shafted docking hook and used it to grab the corner of a retractable metal grill platform that extended from the ship’s oddly curved hull. The Size Category 5 land dweller entrance hatch next to it was open, its lifting door held above their heads by a pair of gleaming remote controlled pistons.

“Nobody to greet us?” asked the lion. He leapt onto the platform as soon as the seal pulled them close enough.

The lioness stepped on after him. “She hasn’t hired anyone full-time for the land dweller section of the ship yet,” she explained. “I said it wouldn’t be a problem for today.”

Once the seal was paid and on his way they entered the high, tube-like hallway beyond the hatch that could accommodate guests of any size. It curved very gradually into the ship, eventually concealing the entrance while giving no indication of what was waiting around the bend. Softly glowing light rails with an aquamarine color filter were set into the walls at waist height, spreading dramatic shadows across their faces. They walked slowly, giving their slightly nervous instincts time to adjust to the unfamiliar atmosphere.

His ears were swiveling. “Can you hear that? Can you feel it?”

She nodded. A very low rumble pulsed through the ship at regular intervals, causing her whiskers to vibrate. It wasn’t like any machine she was familiar with. “They use an unusual generator for controlling the electrical currents that go through the cages. The commercial version will have a portable power source, but here the prototype tests require a very large model.”

There was a huge open metal door ahead, the first of three to their left that they could see before the curve of the hallway. It had a hatch-wheel in the center instead of a handle, and the word **CONFERENCE** was painted above it in sharp stencil letters. This was where the shark had instructed them to enter for the first part of the tour. The lioness went in, motioning for him to follow.

The room was a fully appointed meeting space with a long mahogany table surrounded by an assortment of different-sized swiveling leather chairs. A fine layer of cardboard dust covered everything, evidence that the furniture had only recently been unpacked. A single wildebeest handprint stood out against the varnished wood. Halogen lamps were set in the ceiling, but all the light in the room was currently coming through the vast glass window that substituted for an entire wall.

“Nice setup,” commented the lion.

“That must be the main laboratory,” she said as she went to stand in front of the glass. The high-ceilinged chamber beyond was a cylinder the size of a small plane hangar, completely filled with water and tiled with small whitish-green ceramic squares. It was an area designed for creatures without legs who weren’t concerned about gravity, so storage compartments had been built at every height in the walls and all across a floor that no one was expected to walk on. A few strange tools and machines even hung from hooks in the ceiling among a tangle of cables and powerful floodlights.

The lion had taken his sunglasses off and was pressing his face against the window wall to get a better look at the parts of the chamber that were above and below them. “You think our host is in there somewh – whoa!”

He jumped away from the enormous shape in a black wetsuit that had just swum past. “Holy phoenix fire,” he said. “That was Size Category 4. I knew they got bigger with age, but no one told me they went past 3.”

The shark turned around and came back toward them, the imitation of a faint smile failing at the corners of her mouth. It clearly wasn’t a natural expression for her species, and it clashed badly with her lifeless black eyes. Still, the lioness understood

enough of her body language to see that the positive emotion was genuine even if the knife-like face couldn't convey it.

The lioness gestured a question in the sign language: {Can you hear us?} Most tanks designed for fish included a system of hidden microphones which translated outside sounds into water vibrations that were easily interpreted by their occupants' acute motion senses.

The shark stopped in front of the window and pivoted to a vertical position that gave the impression she was standing. Slow, long-practiced circular strokes from her powerful tail held her suspended in place as her webbed hands wove an answer: {Yes. There is a type bar installed above this window. If you step back I can continue the conversation in text for your convenience.}

The lion watched the exchange of gestures with one eyebrow raised. "I guess I need you to introduce me."

"Sure," said the lioness, moving away from the glass. "But first give your name in sign language since you can, it's a show of respect."

His hands made another clumsy mockery of his name. The shark acknowledged it with a subtle head movement, then replied with her own introduction before moving to a control panel and keyboard in the wall next to her side of the glass.

"I didn't catch her name, how do you pronounce it?"

"You can't. They don't have vocal cords, so their traditional names can't be spoken."

"... That's so stupid..."

I HEARD THAT. []

The text had suddenly appeared on a long black bar screen above the window. It didn't make a sound, but the bright white light that formed the letters caused their pupils to contract with uncomfortable haste.

MY NAME IS OLDER THAN YOUR SPECIES. []

IT HAS BELONGED TO QUEENS, HEROES, AND PHILOSOPHERS.

[]

FORGIVE ME IF I CHOOSE NOT TO ABANDON IT FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE. []

The sentences came one after another with an appropriate delay. The lion's lips almost moved as he struggled to read them fast enough. Then he stared at the shark hovering next to her control panel, obviously trying to discern her state of mind. Her face was blank as ever, and he lacked the experience to understand her body language. The lioness however could see from the angle of her head and positioning of her arms that she was slightly amused.

I AM JUST TEASING YOU. []

He smiled uncomfortably. "Right. Anyway, I'm the new male for her pride in case you were wondering why her father isn't here. I figured you wouldn't mind if I took his place."

NOT AT ALL, WELCOME ABOARD. []

Her eyes shifted to the lioness.

I APOLOGIZE FOR HAVING DELAYED YOUR VISIT FOR SO LONG.

[]

THE LAND DWELLER SECTIONS WEREN'T COMPLETE WHEN YOUR TECHNICIANS VISITED. []

DEMONSTRATING THE CAGE FOR THEM PROVED DIFFICULT UNDER THOSE CIRCUMSTANCES. []

I WANTED TO ENSURE THAT YOUR VIEWING OF OUR LATEST PROTOTYPE WOULD BE A COMFORTABLE EXPERIENCE. []

"PUTTING OUR BEST FOOT FORWARD," AS YOU CREATURES WITH LEGS MIGHT SAY. []

The lioness nodded and smiled professionally. "I appreciate your efforts, but you don't have to worry about impressing me. Your earlier trial runs in the beach facility were all the proof I needed, and my business partner has complete faith in my judgment. This is really a social visit. We're here to admire your ship and discuss some minor business details."

NEVERTHELESS, IT WOULD GIVE ME GREAT SATISFACTION TO SHOW YOU OUR PROGRESS. []

THIS PROTOTYPE IS A SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT OVER THE CRUDE SAMPLES THE LOCALS HAVE BEEN TRYING OUT IN THE FACILITY. []

FOR INSTANCE, WE HAVE MADE IT COLLAPSIBLE TO FACILITATE TRANSPORTATION. []

AS SOON AS YOUR PARTNER ARRIVES WE CAN PROCEED TO THE VIEWING ROOM. []

The lioness glanced at the steel faced clock on the wall. The usually punctual zebra was five minutes late. A small diversion was needed to draw attention away from that embarrassing fact. "Do you know anything about the cage?" she asked the lion pleasantly. "My father probably explained the basics while preparing you for this trip."

"Uh, not really," he admitted with some embarrassment. "Technical stuff kind of goes over my head."

IT IS QUITE SIMPLE. []

LET ME BRING YOU AN EARLIER MODEL AND YOUR WIFE CAN EXPLAIN THE BASIC PRINCIPLES. []

The lioness was startled to see herself referred to as someone's 'wife'. It was a vivid reminder that for as long as he could hold the pride her identity would always officially include his ownership. The next time she visited her family it would be as a sister-wife, a full member with new adult responsibilities and none of the childhood privileges she had retained past puberty thanks to her father's long tenure.

She looked at the lion's bored profile and felt like a piece of her essence had been extracted without her knowledge or permission, leaving a pretty white scar for all the world to admire.

The disturbing sentence lingered on the screen as the shark swam to the laboratory ceiling and unhooked a rectangular wire mesh cage large enough to comfortably hold her entire Size Category 4 body. She then attached it to a winding chain and allowed it to drop until it was suspended in front of the window. The lioness gave her standard explanatory speech with as much enthusiasm as she could muster under the circumstances:

"Thanks to organs called electroreceptors, sharks are able to perceive electricity as easily as we perceive color and sound. In fact, they can sense it with such precision that they consider certain patterns beautiful in the way we admire a field of brightly

colored flowers or a well composed musical arrangement. Until now however they have been mostly unsuccessful in their attempts to harness electricity for artistic purposes.

“That’s going to change thanks to the cages. Each of those vertical and horizontal bars can have a separate electrical current pumped through it at differing intensities. By pre-programming a sequence of current changes and variations into a simple machine you can basically compose electrical patterns the way you compose a song. Any shark who floats inside the cage can then ‘feel’ the composition when it is played out.”

The lion looked skeptical. “Wouldn’t that electrocute them?”

“The bars are insulated by a special plastic residue. I’ve seen dozens of sharks using them, they’re very safe.”

AND POPULAR [], typed the shark after returning to her control panel. WE ARE ALREADY SEEING A GREAT DEAL OF INTEREST FROM ARTISTS AND POTENTIAL AUDIENCES THROUGHOUT THE OCEANS. []

THIS WILL BE A LONG AWAITED CULTURAL REVIVAL FOR MY SPECIES. []

Suddenly a blue light on the console lit up the shark’s face. Her usually inexpressive gills fluttered open for a second in a way the lioness couldn’t interpret.

AN URGENT MATTER REQUIRES MY ATTENTION. []

NOTHING SERIOUS, BUT I MUST ASK THAT YOU REMAIN HERE.

[]

MAKE YOURSELVES COMFORTABLE AND TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO PREPARE TODAY’S DOCUMENTS. []

The shark swam to the opposite side of the lab and exited through a tunnel whose entrance had looked like a storage compartment.

“Where *is* he?” muttered the lioness with a dull edge of frustration. The zebra’s lateness wasn’t a major issue, but it certainly didn’t help her darkening mood. She placed her briefcase on the table and unpacked a few pages and her jade patterned fountain pen before sitting down heavily in one of the Size Category 3 leather chairs. “This day just keeps merrily rolling downhill.”

She heard the lion approaching from behind and swiveled around to face him just as his hands were about to land on her shoulders. “Massage?” he offered.

“No thank you. Just sit down, I have work to do.”

He chose the seat next to her, and almost put his legs up on the table before remembering his manners. For the next forty five seconds he was content to watch her face as she took notes, his arms crossed behind his head in leisurely boredom. Then he asked a question that made her break the tip of her fountain pen. “That male you went after in college, what was he like?”

Feline reflexes had her handkerchief out and wrapped around the leaking ink before it could do any serious damage to her papers or clothing. “That’s not a subject I care to discuss, although it’s good to know my family has almost no regard for my privacy.”

“Your mother talks a lot in bed. I still have trouble believing it, you going right up to a runt and asking him to be your secret mate. Even my brother’s crazy lioness waited for him to make the first move.” She saw the tip of his tail swaying around under his chair where he thought she couldn’t see, its movements betraying his sense that he was

gaining an advantage over her. “It’s interesting how you couldn’t go through with it when the time came for you to prove you loved him. Instinct made you hold on to your honor.”

“It had nothing to do with instincts or honor,” groaned the lioness. “My mother always changes the story because she doesn’t want to accept how it really happened. To use your sexist euphemism I willingly ‘proved my love’ to him after a year long relationship. He was the one who left me when I asked him to promise we’d stay monogamous and eventually tell everyone the truth.”

His tail stopped moving. “You’re not a virgin?”

“No, and I don’t feel any shame about it, so don’t bother with the guilt trip.”

She pulled out another pen and pretended that her attention was focused entirely on her notes, but it was hard to ignore the lion’s steadily bristling fur and the smell of outrage slipping past his self control. His arms uncrossed from behind his head.

“And I thought you were just being a prude. You’d let a runt fuck you... but not me?”

Quiet menace had trembled through his voice, the kind that warned of impending violence. Alarm bells went off in the tactical centers of her brain, strongly urging her to say something appeasing and diplomatic. What came out of her mouth instead was the sort of thing she’d been dying to say since the moment his intentions became clear.

“Like I have a choice. Relax, I’m as good as fucked anyway.”

He slapped her. Hard.

At first she felt nothing. Then her ear started to ring, followed by a rippling sensation across the side of her face that turned to fire as it descended into her neck. All the dormant pain of the zebra’s punches came back fresh and savage, choking her mid-breath. Blood flowed warmly along her upper lip.

“I’m sick of your attitude you spoiled slut!” he growled, his bare teeth spreading strands of spittle only inches away from her face. “You’ve got a perfect life of luxury and success with a guaranteed future just for being born female. The only thing anyone is asking for is that you obey the natural order as set down by our lady Phoenix and show me the respect I fought to earn!”

That does it.

Her body displayed fear, but only because she allowed it to. It was the reaction he wanted to see, and while he savored it her fist moved into place. No room to aim for his crotch unfortunately...

She punched him across the chin instead. The force of the impact shuddered through her arm and caused her own pain to flare up to a sickening intensity, but the sight of his awestruck head whipping back with the tip of his tongue caught between his teeth more than made up for it. The trouble was she also felt the sheer mass of him in the process: the weight of his skull, the width of his jaw, the taut muscles of his neck, the way he almost instantly recovered. If she hadn’t been intimidated before, she was now.

Oh well, too late to back down.

She was out of her chair before he could retaliate, standing firm with her own teeth bare and her ears pinned back. “Get out of my sight,” she commanded. “You can consider yourself officially rejected. Go back to my pride and tell them I’ll never submit to a disgusting, bullying idiot like you. I’d rather take my chances as an outcast.”

Bloodlust ruled his eyes. Another kind of lust curled his lip. He remained in his chair, splayed out like an obscene celebrity, his hands gripping the armrests in

preparation for a lunge at her. “Yeah right. Maybe you’re crazy enough to screw up your own life over this, but what about your fish friend with the retarded name? Nobody else is going to take a chance on those stupid cages if you drop out.”

Her resolve wavered, but she remained battle ready. When the zebra had presented that dilemma to her on the balcony the answer had seemed straightforward enough – obviously she should sacrifice her comfort for the advancement of an entire species – but the blood dripping from her lip and the guilt-free sadism on the lion’s face were giving her serious pause. She thought of the fox he had casually mutilated. History book images of seaborns who were massacred and tortured for rebelling against the land dweller administrations flashed through her head like a classroom documentary on fast-forward. It was ironic that she had to choose between rebelling for her own cause and submitting for theirs. Were the cages worth it? Could she really be expected to suffer for art?

She decided on a compromise.

Her hands fell to her sides, palms away from him to convey surrender. Her face relaxed as well, turning from violence to cold defiance. “You win. For the sake of people less fortunate than I’ve been I’ll accept you as long as you can hold our pride.”

“What’s the catch?” he asked suspiciously.

“The catch is that I’m going to spend the rest of my life and my entire personal fortune doing everything I can to destroy this absurd system. If I’m going to be forced to have a daughter or a son then at least I can make sure they’ll never have to go through anything like this.”

He laughed dismissively and stood up. “Well hey, at least you’re being halfway reasonable.” She made sure not to flinch when he stepped in close and gently lifted her chin with his fingers so he could stare down into her eyes. “We’ll work on getting that rebellious streak of yours under control.”

His fingers slid suggestively down to her pride collar and tugged at it. “You know what bachelors call these?”

“Price tags,” she answered flatly. It was a very old bit of slang, practically a cultural monument.

“Yep. It’s a good thing you just made the right decision, because there was no way I was going to let you run off after everything I’ve been through to pay that price... especially if some college runt got a free sample.”

She pushed his hand away from her collar, wiped the blood from her lip, and returned to her chair. Later, in private, she would allow herself to cry, but never again would he get to enjoy the sight of her suffering. Stone silence and a lifeless expression of contempt would greet his every advance, no matter how much charm he managed to fake or how much violence he brought to bear.

She shuffled her papers around uselessly, unable to concentrate on them. She read the same column of numbers at least four times without really *reading* it. Four years of subjugation. Maybe eight, or twelve, or more. A lifetime of being called ‘mom’ by children with his face and smile. The pounding of her heart shook her like an internal war zone, turning her handwriting into jagged scribbles.

Minutes went by. The lion paced the room, hands in his pockets, his attention wandering from her to the cage in the lab to the clock. Despite the tedium he was positively glowing with primal triumph, a hero of the natural order.

Then the type bar above the window-wall flashed solid white before displaying a new set of text.

I NEED TO SEE YOU ALONE IN THE VIEWING ROOM, TWO DOORS DOWN. []

INSTRUCT YOUR HUSBAND TO REMAIN IN THE CONFERENCE ROOM. []

As she packed her briefcase the lioness glanced at the clock again, confirming that the zebra's lateness had gone from excusable to offensive. The last thing she wanted the shark to think was that they were taking her for granted.

"Try not to get into any trouble while I'm gone," she said, and left the room without looking at him.

"Make us rich baby," he called out behind her.

There was an oddly familiar smell in the hallway. After a moment's concentration she recognized it as the black fur ink the zebra used to define his facial stripes before going out wife cruising. Its odor was designed to be extremely faint and easily overlooked, so the fact that she could detect it meant that a large quantity had passed by very recently.

Strange.

She slowed to a stop a few feet away from the viewing room and sniffed the air a few more times. Dozens of other smells hovered beneath the ink's chemical wash, most of them to be expected on a recently finished ship, but one of them wasn't supposed to be there, at least not yet; the zebra's personal scent.

She sniffed again. No mistake. Unless expensive fakery was involved he had come aboard through some other entrance without telling her. Given the extremely secure and automated nature of the ship there was no way he could have done that without the shark's knowledge.

Very strange. Suspicious in fact.

It was with a new sense of caution that she entered the viewing room, which consisted mainly of a deep rectangular pool ringed by a single row of plastic stadium style seats that could be mechanically combined and re-sized to accommodate any land dweller. There didn't seem to be any windows leading to water filled chambers, but each wall had a type bar installed on it. "I'm here," she announced for the benefit of any hidden microphones. The metal floor was damp and warm under her feet, and vibrated more from the ship's unusual generators than the hallway or conference room did. "Hello?"

She leaned over the pool for a better look into its depths. The new cage prototype glistened at the bottom, partially folded. An enormous hatch next to it was presumably how the shark would enter the room.

She sat down on one of the surprisingly comfortable plastic seats and pulled out a retractable table hidden in the armrest for her briefcase. Anxious theories about the zebra's hidden arrival and erratic recent behavior filled her mind. It was almost a relief having something worrisome enough to distract her from envisioning her new future with the lion.

Suddenly there was a soft, mechanical humming sound. She turned to see the room's high metal door being closed by a pair of motors in its hinges.

"Hey!"

Instincts commanded her to act first, ask questions later. She made a dash for the rapidly vanishing aquamarine light of the hallway, but even with a show of speed and agility that would have made her ancestors proud she only managed to reach an inch wide gap. One second later the automatic lock clicked into place. She was trapped.

“Open this door!” she shouted into the room.

The four type bars all displayed the same message.

DO NOT BE ALARMED. []

THIS IS MERELY A PRECAUTION. []

“Why, what for!”

I WILL EXPLAIN EVERYTHING IN A FEW MINUTES. []

PLEASE ACCEPT MY APOLOGIES. []

“At least tell me what’s going on!”

No reply.

If the lioness had been dealing with a land dweller she might have been inclined to believe there was a legitimate reason for locking her up without an explanation. She could have convinced herself that something had probably gone wrong on the ship, something too complicated to describe in an emergency and too dangerous for her to be exposed to.

But the shark was a seaborner.

And you know what they say about seaborners.

Sea mammals are slackers with anarchistic tendencies. Sea reptiles are even dumber than their inland counterparts. Sea birds are filthy thieves, an embarrassment to the rest of avian society. And fish...

Fish are soulless, beyond the warmth of Phoenix. They don't think or feel like other creatures do. They can't imagine pain or joy. They can't even dream, since they don't truly sleep. Morality is of no importance to such creatures. Their only drive is to satisfy their strange appetites. They'll maim or kill you without a second thought if it suits their plans.

The lioness liked to think of herself as someone who could ignore stereotypes and treat every species with the fairness they deserved. That was what her whole college experience had been about after all, and her open mindedness had paid off many times in the past. But the truth was that when things got even a little shady the worst of her wealthy mammal upbringing came back to haunt her. Is that seagull sitting too close to your briefcase? Is that dolphin trying to talk you into revealing personal information? Are those crocodiles following you as you scuba dive alone through the underwater neighborhoods?

Has this ex-convict shark been luring you into a trap all along? What happened to the zebra?

Don't panic. She's been trustworthy so far, and what ulterior motive could she possibly have?

Hostages! Just last year some seaborner radicals kidnapped a wealthy cheetah to use as a negotiating chip in some private oil deal gone bad. They let her go eventually, but not before making sure she'd never run again.

The lioness examined the lock. It was a separate mechanism from the door's hatch-wheel, and a flat brass knob was its only visible control. A metal box was welded over where the keyhole might have been.

She tried the knob, but it wouldn't yield more than a millimeter. Then she squinted into the slim gap between the keyhole and the box and saw a network of wires connecting the two. The setup reminded her of a similar installation in her pride's vacation home, a design for keeping people out rather than sealing them in. If she could insert something thin and hard into that gap she might be able to break the remote function and operate the lock manually. Then she would just have to muscle past the door's motors if they were active.

She decided to hold off on committing vandalism until she was more certain of her host's intentions. As she scanned the room for other options she spotted a blue phone and its vertical track built into the back wall. That would be the test. If she could still call the police then there was nothing to worry about and she was only making a fool of herself.

She was halfway through dialing when she heard the muffled echo of the lion roaring in anger.

The phone's handset beeped impatiently over the interrupted number.

He roared again, in pain this time.

She redialed the number and waited. A minute went by. No outgoing signal.

OK, that's proof enough.

She hurriedly scattered the contents of her briefcase across the chair and noted with dismay that none of it would break the lock. Her pens were too thick, and the paperclips would bend too easily. A credit card might have worked, but in her haste to get dressed earlier she had forgotten to move them from the pocket of her other suit. Again, she looked around the room for options.

The cage! If the prototype at the bottom of the pool was mostly like the ones she'd seen at the beach facility then its sections were held together by thin metal tabs that were easy to break in case of emergency.

She quickly peeled off her jacket and dove in. The pool was even deeper than it looked from above, forcing her to come up for air after a failed first attempt. The second attempt didn't fare much better, as her fingers grasped uselessly through the illusions of her water-blurred vision. On the third try she managed to grab it, but the damn thing kept folding around her limbs as she swam, threatening to entangle and drown her within inches of the surface. Eventually she managed to gracelessly drag herself and her payload up over the edge.

"The collapsible part of this design needs some work," she muttered. A quick inspection of the tabs confirmed that they suited her purpose. She carefully gripped two adjacent sections of the cage, steadied herself with a deep breath, and then pulled in opposite directions. After three seconds of gritted-teeth effort the tabs snapped. "Phoenix fire! Might want to make it easier to break out of too."

The tab slipped easily into the gap between the lock and its remote-control box. Jiggling it around soon mangled the thin wires inside, proof of a design not intended for holding prisoners. With the connection severed the lock was back under manual control, and she felt mischievous satisfaction when she turned the knob and heard one of her obstacles slide away. The door's simple motors quickly broke after a few rough pulls.

Aquamarine light flooded in from the hallway... along with the smell of lion and zebra blood.

The instinctive part of her wanted to run past the open conference room door without looking and escape the ship's unknown dangers as fast as possible, but she refused to give in to such an uncivilized impulse. It was her moral duty to attempt a rescue; to shirk it would make her no better than a feral. Slowly she moved through the empty hallway with all the stealth she could manage while soaking wet. The water dripping from her clothes and fur onto the metal floor sounded like a full fledged rain storm to her anxious ears.

A confusing mixture of smells was flowing out of the conference room. Adrenaline in the air told her there had been a serious fight. Aside from their blood, the personal scents of the lion and zebra confirmed they were still inside, but there was no trace of any other creature that could have attacked them. The odor of the zebra's black fur ink was much stronger now, making the back of her throat tingle.

She swallowed.

She dashed in.

She nearly tripped over the lion.

He was lying face down on the conference room's nondescript blue-gray carpet, his hands and feet firmly bound with orange electrical cables. His breathing sounded labored and painful.

Beyond the window the shark was at her control panel. Minor disappointment registered in the deep circular motions of her tail.

The zebra spoke from somewhere behind the lioness. "You couldn't have just waited patiently could you? We were almost done with this unpleasant business."

She turned, expecting to see her friend. Instead there was a frightening looking equine creature with oily black fur casually leaning against the wall next to the door. He wore a white jogging suit covered in claw rips and splashed with blood. His eyes glittered psychotically when he smiled at her stunned reaction. "Your male had a similar response to my disguise," said the creature with the zebra's voice. "From this perspective I can almost understand the satisfaction carnivores derive from causing fear. The reversal is especially amusing given how sad you look at the moment. Wet fur always did emphasize your weakest facial features."

The smell of black fur ink floated around him like a harsh aura. It must have taken a huge quantity of the stuff to completely paint over the white stripes of his head, obliterating his visual identity.

Stupefaction made her blurt out her first thought. "You look like a northerner."

"Yes, a horse perhaps," said the zebra, "a foreign degenerate, certainly not a respectable member of our business community." He pushed himself away from the wall and came a little closer. As he did so she noticed a huge ragged wound on the back of his neck that had removed some of his mane. It looked like a bite mark, dramatically red next to the glistening black.

She glanced at the lion and then the shark before cautiously asking, "What's going on?"

"We were making a movie." He pointed at a tiny iridescent glass sphere embedded in the ceiling. "Easy to overlook, isn't it? A state of the art security camera which can be operated with great finesse from any of our host's control panels."

"A movie? What for?"

“For you. If your pride ever sees the videocassette we are producing they will immediately chase your nemesis here back to the filthy shanty town he came from, and no other pride will ever accept him as a contender. He won’t dare to bother you now, not while under the threat of losing everything he worked so hard to acquire.”

Understanding came like a cold breeze through her wet fur. “Blackmail.”

“Exactly.”

“You fucking traitor!” yelled the lion without lifting his face away from the floor. His words were badly slurred, probably the result of a mouth injury.

The lioness turned to the shark. “You planned this together?”

HE CONTACTED ME VIA TEXT PHONE SHORTLY BEFORE LEAVING HIS HOTEL AND EXPLAINED YOUR PREDICAMENT. []

HE SAID YOU WOULD NEVER ACCEPT YOUR HUSBAND, AND AS A RESULT OUR DEAL WOULD COLLAPSE UNLESS WE TOOK DRASTIC MEASURES. []

WE FORMULATED A RATHER FOOLHARDY PLAN I MUST CONFESS, BUT OUR TIME AND RESOURCES WERE LIMITED. []

A sense of rising dread filled the lioness. With great care she kneeled down next to the lion and tried to turn him over.

“Don’t touch me!” he screamed. For the first time since her entrance she saw his face. It was masked with blood, and several teeth were missing from his visibly fractured lower jaw. Fear, shame, and anger twitched through the bruised flesh around his eyes.

It was a sight she had fantasized about earlier, but the reality of it only made her sick. “What have you done to him?”

The zebra cracked his badly torn knuckles and somehow managed to make the gesture look aristocratic. “So far all I have done is – let’s see, how would he put it – ‘kicked his ass’. Quite an accomplishment if I do say so myself. I was supposed to ambush him, but that would have been a coward’s way around the opportunity of a lifetime, a chance to fight a pride-winning male lion at the peak of his strength.” He drew her attention to several gashes in his jogging suit through which she could see rows of shallow wounds. “As you can tell it was a close match.”

The lion snarled. “I’ll kill you asshole! You hear me, you’re citizen cuts! I’ll suck the marrow out of every last one of your bones!”

Before she could move to stop him the zebra kicked his opponent in the ribs with a titanium-fitted hoof. The lion coughed up a small stream of gore.

“Stop!” she said.

“Don’t worry, I won’t cripple him,” said the zebra. “We need him to make a full recovery so he can go back to your pride and say he has no desire to touch you.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to do. Being defeated by a zebra isn’t embarrassing enough to get him thrown out.”

“No, but what I was about to do before you interrupted would suffice. It is why I am in disguise.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” said the lion. He tried to sound threatening, but his voice shook with fear.

Suddenly the lioness understood.

Oh no.

“Naturally I am not looking forward to it,” said the zebra, “but it is the only humiliation I could think of that will taint him badly enough in the eyes of your family and species. Conservatism certainly leads to strange situations doesn’t it?”

She stood up and adopted a defensive stance. “I won’t let you.”

It was the zebra’s turn to look confused. “Why?”

“Because it isn’t right. I don’t want to be rescued at the cost of having that suffering inflicted on him instead. No one deserves that.”

For the second time that day he made the low series of quiet equine snorts that conveyed superiority and dissatisfaction. “Strange to hear that coming from someone who goes out into the feral zone and kills people for fun.”

She hesitated before responding, but recovered quickly. “We’re citizens, not ferals. This kind of behavior is beneath us.”

“Apparently it is not beneath him.”

“He doesn’t know any better. His sense of self worth and his chances of leading a respectable life have been tied up in this stupid pride-winning system since the moment he was born. You’re a polygamist male yourself, surely you can sympathize.”

The zebra opened his mouth to say something more, but then shifted his eyes to the window behind her and remained silent. The shark was typing.

YOU ARE STILL AT HIS MERCY, AND THE ABSURD RULES OF YOUR CULTURE ARE JEOPARDIZING THE ADVANCEMENT OF MINE. []

The lioness stepped around her husband to confront her host. “I have already decided to accept him in order to save the deal.”

The shark lowered her head in respect.

A GENEROUS ACT, BUT YOU MAY BE UNDERESTIMATING THE TRAUMA INVOLVED. []

WHAT IF YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND AND REJECT HIM LATER? []
MORE IMPORTANTLY, IF WE ALLOW HIM TO LEAVE NOW HE WILL LIKELY CALL THE POLICE, AND YOU WILL BE UNABLE TO STOP HIM. []

YOUR COLLEAGUE AND I WILL BE FINISHED, AND YOU WILL BE MADE TO SUFFER EVEN MORE FOR YOUR PERCEIVED PARTICIPATION IN THIS AFFAIR. []

WE MUST HAVE THE MEANS TO KEEP HIM IN LINE. []

There was no arguing with that. The lioness realized she was trembling, partly due to her wet fur and clothing, but mostly due to the sheer perversity of what she was caught up in. She looked down at the lion and saw nothing but a child’s quiet fear left in the unblinking ruin of his eyes. It was easy to imagine such a look frozen on her own features every time he drew near over the course of many, many years.

She slammed her fists against the glass and left them there. “Phoenix damn us all. I could have resolved this myself. What gave you the right to meddle in my affairs!?”

The angles of the shark’s body drifted from what had looked like cold neutrality to something more like kindness. She moved away from her console and reverted to the sign language: {This is my fault. My sympathy for you affected my judgment. You must understand, I wasn’t simply imprisoned for my part in the Staircaser Kings rebellion - the guards tortured me in every possible way for over a decade.} The flow of her hands became more agitated in forming the next sentence. {It isn’t because of the Bureau of

Eugenics that I've never had children. Since that time, my radical impulses are never far from the surface.}

The revelation wasn't a complete surprise to the lioness, but it did serve as a jarring reminder of how minor her own problems were by comparison. It was also the rationale she needed, and she seized it with full awareness that she was making excuses.

Life goes on even after unbelievable atrocities, so how much harm could one brief violation do?

Don't think about that.

Her fists fell away from the glass. "There's plenty of blame to go around. All these years I just played at being a rebel and backed off whenever things got too serious. I should have done more to prepare for this day, found others in the same situation who would have stood by me. This could have been avoided."

{My people have a saying,} signed the shark. {Draw breath, draw blood.}

It was a classic carnivore's justification: To exist is to harm. Not too comforting, but inescapably true. Deep down she was glad it would be him instead of her, and few emotions in her life had ever been as intense as the shame she felt over that. The feral part of her had won. It was as if all her insides were tightening up into a suffocating ball just beneath her throat.

She looked over her shoulder at the lion, but couldn't quite bring herself to meet his gaze. "I'm sorry."

He spat at her ankle. "Like you really fucking care. I don't even want you anymore you sick, ugly freak. Nobody's going to want you. Any kids you have will be messed up too."

What she wanted to say was that she would keep the promise she made earlier, make sure that his sons and daughters wouldn't grow up to find such dilemmas waiting for them. It was the truth, but it was also a cheap way to make herself feel better. A tactful retreat would have to do. Her legs carried her stiffly around the lion, who had evidently shared his last opinion on the subject.

"About time," said the zebra as she passed him on the way to the door. "I still need to call an ambulance afterward before we both slowly bleed to death. By the way, the official story will be that we were in a boating accident."

She looked at his painted face and tried to find some trace of the person she'd grown up with. "It won't be the same between us from now on."

"The way I see it, our friendship was going to suffer even if I didn't intervene. You think you are tough enough to endure any indignity, but you are too privileged to fully comprehend what it means to be treated like meat. It is a degradation that affects the very core of your being."

Something about his tone of voice implied there was a deeper meaning to those statements. Curious despite the circumstances, she chose her reply with scientific care. "Yes, maybe as a carnivore my understanding of that is limited."

He smiled so confidently that even under blood and ink his handsomeness almost transcended his species. "Consider this. Herbivores built civilization, and were charitable enough to invite some of you in. The least you could have done was leave the food chain behind for good."

Ah.

So that was it.

She nodded and left the room, painfully aware of each heavy step. The door closed behind her.

Fresh air was what she needed. Fresh air and sunlight to dry herself with. She started to walk faster, toward the exit, away from...

The entrance hatch was opening automatically when she reached it, allowing afternoon brightness to gradually neutralize the hallway's aquamarine. Once outside she sat down on the edge of the metal grill platform with her feet dangling over the water and tried to concentrate on the future.

There was a lot of work to be done.

The cage project would go forward of course, no need to punish a whole species for the mistakes of four individuals.

The next priority would be helping to organize a movement to change lion culture. There was a whole underworld of outcasts and runts out there looking for a way to make their voices heard, and plenty of old seaborne rebels around who could be tempted into showing them how. No doubt most of the prides would retaliate with terrible ferocity; people were going to get hurt. *She* was going to get hurt.

Her eyes fell to the water-shrouded landscape below, buildings that twirled and folded around each other to conceal the misery within. "Draw breath, draw blood," she repeated. The quote was more comforting this time.

END

Comments? Questions? Send them to staircaser@hotmail.com

