

Animal Control

By Matthew Tansek

The Animal Control van rolled down the neglected streets at a sluggish ten miles per hour casting a bright side-mounted spotlight down the alleyways it passed. It was uncharacteristic for such a van to be out at such a late hour in such a part of town, but the attacks that had been reported were grievous and too many beds at Robingrove Hospital had been filled. Mitch, the driver of the van hated this part of town, and with each passing darkened alleyway hoped that he might catch a glimpse of a dog. Hell, any dog would do that at this point he thought, just so long as the press could see that they were trying. After all, it's not like they could cut the beast open and find evidence inside, like it was Jaws or something. The dirty grey buildings that huddled unusually close together leached away at his optimism, what little he had, and reminded him how far the city had fallen. The van rumbled onward.

As the bright spotlight shot down the next alleyway a slight flicker of movement caught his attention, and with a jolt the van was stopped. One of the many problems with this part of town was that not even refuse collection came all that regularly anymore. The yawning gap between the two buildings with its overflowing dumpsters and heaps of shipping pallets

provided more than enough concealment for whatever it was that had ducked out of sight.

The Animal Control man took a step out of the truck and breathed deep the polluted air. You never really got used to the smell that always seemed to permeate this part of the city. Often, he would fantasize about moving back out to the northern country where he had grown up. A place where the buildings never towered more than two stories, and the warmth of the setting sun came with a chorus of crickets. But that unfortunately would take a lot of money, and Mitch, much to his repeated disappointment had slightly less than a lot of money. Here in this concrete winter the cold night was already turning the corridors into tunnels of icy wind and shadow.

Mitch pulled a snare, his trusty set of heavy gloves and a flashlight out of the truck. Turning, he thought he caught the sound of a single cough or bark come from the second floor of the abandoned building to his right. But neither flashlight nor straining eyes could reveal anything but the gaunt aperture of a glass bare window. The Animal Control man sighed, feeling less than delighted with the prospect of exploring the grisly cleft before

him. *Another day in paradise* he thought clicking the flashlight on and letting the cold air blow away the fatigue and hone his focus.

The wind immediately abated as he entered the deeper gloom and made him acutely aware of each rustle of his movements. Much to his relief the stench from two rather beat up dumpsters was muted in the cold and was only moderately revolting. A grunt brought his attention to a heap of rotting shipping pallets that dominated the central space of the alley. His flashlight beam swept over the scene and then suddenly caught the eyes of a creature seemingly trapped amongst the heap on the far side. Mitch was not new to this game, having worked with animals for most of his adult life and was calloused to the sorry state dogs could descend to if left to their own devices. Fur clumped with dirt or rotten from perpetual moisture, bloodied or damaged paws, emaciated or sickly bloated bodies distorting the true shape of the animal. Once he had even called out to collect an animal that had suffered so severely from hair loss and some sort of mouth infection that neighborhood kids thought they had seen a monster. But in that case, as it was in every case, reality had been far more sad than scary. But in this case, the dog that Mitch now illuminated with his light seemed

like it might have been the worst he had ever seen. At least the most deviant.

It hunched awkwardly half under an overhang of the splintered wood watching him with bulging yellow eyes that sat almost at the peak of the head. Streaming mucus from the nose matted the rest of the visible fur and clumped the hair in an almost reptilian fashion. The mouth, while pulled back into a defensive snarl, was rimmed with bloated fish like lips and gave the thing an air of putrid lunacy. A red collar squeezed tightly at the animal's throat and was hooked at the buckle around a bent nail that protruded from the adjacent boards.

“It’s ok buddy,” Mitch said soothingly carefully choosing his footsteps as he moved around the debris, “you don’t want to be out here in the cold do ya?”

It spat half-choked barks as Mitch grew closer.

Hefting the snare in his left hand, Mitch stepped closer to the animal trying to ease the chord through the debris and around its neck. “Easy now”, Mitch continued, setting the flashlight down and taking hold of the snare’s handle with both hands, “You can’t be running around hurting people, no matter how bad off you’ve got it.”

Before the chord could be tightened the creature heaved hard to the right sending a cascade of splintering wood down and setting free the collar.

“Damnit!” Mitch shouted, watching the animal scramble over the pile and away towards the other open end of the alleyway. Mitch gave chase, his jacket tearing as he blundered his way through. *Fast little bugger* Mitch thought as he worked to keep up with the animal’s unusual hopping gait. Up ahead a series of large heavily graffitied and overturned trash bins blocked the route, and Mitch poured on the steam in anticipation of gaining on his quarry; but something unexpected happened then. Upon reaching the obstacle the animal leapt hard to the left and launched its scrawny frame nearly six feet into the air before contorting its body ninety degrees. It then bounded off of the nearby building at eye level, clearing the cans and continuing its flight without a moment's delay. *Did that thing just ricochet off the wall?* It was then that Mitch questioned just what sort of animal it was that he was after, and in his dumbfounded state failed his own vault over the cans. He landed hard on his shoulder, catching the rod of the snare between himself and the ground and felt it snap beneath him.

Rolling, he flung himself back upright and kicked the remaining obstacle in anger as he resumed his pursuit.

Mitch was far from a trained runner but an active life and the ghost of youth worked in his favor even after taking a spill. He cleared the alley and hastily scanned the area in the waning sunlight.

The other side of the buildings opened up to the lovely vista of a bent down chain link fence which at one time enclosed the parking lot behind the Burger Prince fast food restaurant that butted up to the rear of the abandoned buildings. Mitch could see a couple of cars making their way around the building and heard the crackling sound of the fast food intercom taking their orders. Every second that ticked by Mitch knew reduced the chances that he would find the animal and he did not want to be out here all night if he could help it.

Then suddenly another squawking bark rang out in the wind, and Mitch zeroed in on the enclosed dumpster at the back of the lot. The old concrete shell that housed the receptacle was falling into severe disrepair, and although he could not see around it enough to know for certain, he had a feeling that the animal he had been looking for had taken up behind it.

With only the heavy duty gloves to protect him Mitch advanced around to the front of the opening.

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The tanks sloshed, the cages rattled and all manner of little voices cried out in pitiful frustration as the truck that carried them approached the rear of the little burger joint. The driver of the strange overloaded truck, a veteran catcher, would have bet money that the Anura Hound would have been nosing around a restaurant. What he didn't expect to see however was the epic struggle it was having with a uniformed man in gloves that seemed hell bent on capturing the creature.

“You might want to rethink your strategy there son,” said the man as he hopped out of the truck, “those back legs can leave one hell of a gash if you're not-”

“What?!” Mitch yelled over the grunting animal that had wriggled out the headlock he had got it into, “just stay back, I've got this under control.”

The man laughed and turned back to his truck, and began rummaging around in one of the large wooden boxes that flanked the rear bed of the

vehicle. After a moment he returned with something in his hand, the scent or sight of which seemed to spur the animal into even greater heights of frenzy. A great kick with both legs into Mitch's chest sent him falling backward and the animal bounded off of the ground and in one quick motion snatched the offered object.

Mitch pulled himself up from the ground panting. The man that before him was older perhaps in his sixties with little twinkling eyes set beneath curly greying brows that matched his curly greying hair. He wore a jacket similar in style to Mitch's but black instead of blue and marked with a curious governmental seal over the breast that Mitch did not recognize.

"You've got a lot of guts to try and strong arm an Anura Hound son," the man said smiling a crooked grin and turning to observe the animal, which tore vigorously at something that looked reminiscent of a giant insect leg on the ground about fifteen feet away. "Just what were you going to do once you had it under control?"

"That's the animal that's been hurting people," Mitch replied stepping closer, "are you with the city?" he asked gesturing toward the insignia, and then in an attempt to save his clumsy interrogation said, "the name's Mitch."

“Nice to meet you Mitch, my name is Charles. And to answer your question, yes. Although not affiliated with an agency out here on the fringe. I’m one level in.”

“What?” Mitch replied after a moment's pause.

“Hey it looks like he’s come back around. It’s a good thing that anything with a bit of Leptodactylidae in them have such short term memories,”

The last bits of the black jointed object that the animal had been eating disappeared between its rubbery lips, and after a moment of sniffing it turned back to the men, plopping its bulbous hindquarters down on the ground as it did so, watching them with a air of contentment.

“Lepto what? What depart- You mean that thing isn’t some kind of dog?”

“Some people think there is some Canine in it, but believe me if you ever saw one of these things fully grown you wouldn’t. Been trying to figure out who’s got the Brood Mother for a couple of months now. Too many of these baby ones keep popping up, or HOPPING up, get it?” Charles said, laughing at his own joke.

Mitch made a perfunctory noise in acknowledgment of the pun, further examining the strange man before him. His skin was dark and criss crossed with faded scars, and although the man was shorter and older, stood with a confidence about him usually reserved for military officers. “There’s a tag on the collar,” Mitch finally said, the want to be helpful somehow edging out his confusion and curiosity in the que of questions that was building up in his head.

“So there is, none of the others had them. Might just be the break I was hoping for,” Charles said pulling a leash out of the truck and striding over to the animal who remained where it was watching the two men with its wird bulging yellow eyes.

“I appreciate you doing the leg work on this one son, but I think it’s about high time we start heading back.”

“No, wait. If that’s the animal that has been hurting people then I’m going to need to report it, and you, and whatever it actually is. You said that you were or wern’t affiliated with the city?”

“Yes, that’s right,”

Charles smiled as he hooked the leash to the collar and examined the tag. “Do you want the chance to help capture this little guys mama? The one that’s really been hurting people?”

“If there are more animals like this that are loose in the city, then yeah. It’s my job. But-”

“Well then you had better ride along with me, that’s where I’m headed, providing that this address on the tag is good, and I doubt you’ll be able to find it on your own.”

Mitch stared blankly at the man leading the strange hopping animal to the truck, and then his eyes fell on the other animals on the vehicle. The truck was overloaded with cages and water filled tanks, mild yowling noises could be heard coming from the interior. It looked like an old fashioned pickup truck, the likes of which you might see adjacent to a roadside stand in a warmer part of the country selling fruit. Iridescent and strange looking birds fluffed up their feathers and squaked balefully in the cold while long eel-like fish flopped about in long translucent tanks of water that ran along the sides of the vehicle.

“What are all of these animals?” Mitch asked approaching the truck to get a better look into some of the cages that were stacked high in the back.

Beat up cat carriers and wooden crates with makeshift caged doors loaded against one another bound down with great bundles of bungee cords.

“Just my latest haul. I wasn’t planning on heading out here to the fringe, not exactly kosher to have these little guys cross levels, but got a tip that an Anura Hound came through the Bishop street door.” Charles opened the drivers side door of the truck and encouraged the animal on the leash beside him to enter, which it did in a single jounty bound. “The Kestrels don’t like the cold so it’s good that we managed to find him so quickly.”

“You said your name was Charles? I’m having a hard time here. What do you mean bishop street door? What do you mean fringe? And what kinds of birds did you say those were, Kestrels?” Mitch said exasperated, hesitating to climb up into the passenger seat next to the strange animal he until just recently was trying unsuccessfully to wrestle to the ground. “Those don’t look like any falcons I’ve ever seen,”

“Ah! So you know your animals do you? I knew that I liked you. I’ll do my best to give you the crash course, I sometimes forget that you lot out here on the fringe don’t know much about how things work.”

The engine roared to life and jolted forward, accompanied by a chorus of angry clicking and squeaking from the jostled animals in the rear.

“I used to be like you believe it or not, an outer worlder I mean, a fringe,” Charles began as he guided the truck down the vacant wind swept city streets with disregard of any kind of traffic laws. “Was in ‘nam, that’s where I first was exposed to critters that didn’t come from the jungles and lands of the outer world. They aren’t so regulated out there, in countries like that I mean, not all of the doors are mapped and things can just come through without anyone being the wiser,” He pulled hard to the right and began heading towards the two towering apartment buildings that dominated the eastern edge of the city. “Anyway, to answer your questions, The Bishop street door is the local door to the next level in, this-” here he gestured to the windshield and the world outside, “is the cusp, the outermost shell of the onion. You follow me?”

Mitch stared at the man, and then down to the animal between them. The dog-thing during the ride had turned around from facing forward and was intensely investigating a dark shape in a bucket of water that sloshed suspended on a peg just behind the two seats in the cab of the vehicle. Everything that the man was saying was nuts, he knew that, but then again

all around him were the most incredible animals he had ever seen. *Perhaps I'm the one going nuts*, he thought. But with curiosity getting the better of him he simply figured what the hell, and held on.

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The animal laden vehicle pulled around behind the first of the two apartment towers, and Mitch was surprised to see that the whole back side of the building was crowded with people. Leering faces in the light of the headlights advancing towards them.

“My god, what are all of these people doing out here?” Mitch asked feeling more on edge as the crowd massed around them.

“Outworlders like yourself aren't allowed through the door, which makes anything that comes through it valuable. The whole arrangement is corrupt, engineered rarity. These people are beggars and traders for anything with the warmth of the interior still on it.”

Squaking of birds could be heard as the crowd began getting too close for the emerald birds on the outermost cages. Charles put the truck into park.

“I’m going to have to go open the gate, it’s just beyond the garage door at the bottom of the ramp. Normally I’d trade something small and get one of them to do it for me, but there’s too many of them right now, they all would want something. Here take this and drive off any of them that get too close,” Charles handed Mitch a stout iron mallet from under the drivers side dash.

Before Mitch could object Charles had dove out of his seat and began sprinting down through the crowd towards the bottom of the ramp. Mitch looked about him, sure enough as soon as Charles had left the vehicle the horde had advanced even further, many hands reaching out toward the tanks and cages, hungry to pull free anything that they thought they could run off with.

“Hey now!” Mitch cried opening the door next to him and shouting at the gathering crowd, “back off all of you.”

“Who are you then, the new catch?” said a deep voice with a distinctive french bend to the syllables. Mitch turned to see a rather large shabby man and a distinctly small shabby woman approach him from the crowd.

“Can’t be a catch,” screeched the small woman, “look at his clothes, he’s one of us fringies,”

The crowd seemed to hesitate, awaiting an outcome with the big man or at least for Mitch’s attention to lapse.

“Gaston doesn’t trust new faces, and Charlie knows better. Pay the toll,” the big man barked, bringing his shaggy head uncomfortably close to Mitch’s face, a smell like pickled eggs accompanying him. “Gaston thinks that maybe you’re a tricky one, a sneak through the door. Wearing clothes to fools us.”

The sound of cackling laughter and shrieking of birds brought Mitch’s attention back to the truck. Scrambling up the back of the truck the small woman that had slunk behind the big man now was standing triumphantly atop the pile of animal carriers. “They got them rabbits that taste like cherries!” she cried brandishing something that glinted like a knife and began pulling at the network of bungee cords that held the mass of boxes to the truck.

Mitch shouted for her to get down, stepping up onto one of the long tool boxes that ran along the side of the truck to climb up, but a big beefy hand held him fast.

“Gaston likes the little cherry bunnies,”

Mitch gripped the mallet in his right hand and whirled around to strike the big man that now held him. He didn't know what exactly Charles did with all of the animals he caught, but he doubted that their fate would be better off with this bulbous bandit. These defenceless animals depended on him, and so long as he was in charge of the vehicle he was going to do his best to make sure that none of them got stolen.

The big man, swaddled as he was in a heap of mismatched clothing and apparently possessing thick rubber like skin laughed as the blow bounced ineffectually against his shoulder. A thick grey pink tongue pressed through the gaps in his teeth as he grinned at Mitch. “Gaston gets what he wants, Gaston owns this side of the door,” and with a short but powerful arm the big man slammed Mitch against the side of the truck.

A series popping sounds preceded the clattering of cages as the bungee that held up the string of birds was cut. Several of the beautiful plumed birds exploded in feathered torrents from their breached confinements, and those that did not were quickly snatched up by the surging crowd.

The big man's bulk pressed hard against Mitch pinning him in place against the vehicle. The damp smell of mold and the disturbingly moist fouled clothes made his gagging cries for help pathetic and small. Mitch felt his knees buckling and he watched upward as the light of the darkening sky grew smaller, a thinning line of light sandwiched between the truck and the man who bore mercilessly down upon him.

"Gaston wonders how much they'd pay to get you back through the door, lil' sneak."

And then something breached that line of light, something moving between the truck and the man, and as it did so there came an immediate relief of pressure. Mitch gasped at the fresh air and struggled to stand, bracing himself against the door of the truck as he did so.

"Get off of Gaston!" the fat man cried, groping with his stubby arms at the frog like dog that had launched itself through the open passenger side window and latched itself onto the big man's face tearing fiercely into the man's exposed flesh.

Mitch glanced back up at the bed of the truck and saw the small woman pull the dark form from the bucket of water through the window behind the cab. It's skin was black and smooth like salamander with a thick

tadpole like tail out the back of it, but the frame, face, legs and head all looked more like a cat.

“Cutie, cutie, cutie!” she cried, beaming at her new prize, completely ignoring the cries for help from her gargantuan counterpart.

Then the drivers side door slammed, and Mitch saw that Charles had returned. Although he couldn’t make out what he was saying through the din of the excited crowd and the roars of pain from the flailing man he got the jist- get the froggy dog thing and get back into the truck.

Tossing the mallet into the bed of the truck and taking hold of the squirming animal that was now raking wounds down the front of the big man with its large clawed back feet, Mitch gave a great heave. A tuft of the man’s reeking beard pulled free, clamped in the mouth of the animal, and Mitch without a moment to lose hurled them both into the passenger side of the truck.

“I told you to keep them off of the truck!” Charles shouted as he slammed down the accelerator. Behind the truck Mitch caught the sight of the small woman supine and twitching on the rapidly retreating ground behind the truck.

“Did you do something to that woman?” Mitch asked as the incline of the ramp removed her from view.

“I didn’t do anything. The woman had a Teslion in her hands, I don’t know what she expected to happen. Look, I was hoping to give you a bit more of a warning, but just hold on tight when we go though.”

“Hold on? To what?” Mitch said, searching around the cab for any kind of a hand hold.

The truck bounded past the stragglers of the crowd that waited at the base of the downward ramp, and as the truck passed through the aperture that once was barred with the garage door everything was plunged into total darkness.

Mitch thought the whole scene was so strange and surreal, backlit as they were by the doorway of dim light that was diminishing behind them. It was as if they were driving out across a flat floor in a massive darkened warehouse. Charles repeated himself about holding on, and then braced himself with both hands on the wheel. Mitch could only see darkness ahead of them, and wondered just what it was that he had got himself into.

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Suddenly the truck felt like it had collided with something, and although Mitch was holding on tight to the handle of the door, bracing as best he could against the unknown, when the moment came his grip faltered. Howling torrents of wind seemed to spin up out of the blackness below and tear him free from the car somehow, so that he felt like he was spinning through starless space. End over end, groping helpless in a limitless void. Primal spasmodic fear took over as Mitch wildly sought for anything solid to grab hold of, anything he could glimpse that could use to orient himself, a thread of rationality in a hurtling hell of confusion. Then suddenly his hands laid hold of something in the dark. It was smooth, like touching a soft dress, and as he gripped it he suddenly was aware of more of it around him. His experience shifted from one that was of falling, to one that was of sliding. Huge swaths of fabric in the dark seemed to be catching his falling body and gently slowing his velocity. It was hard to tell how long had passed, for each instant in a moment of fear seems exaggerated. A colorful glimmer appeared below him too, and to the relief of every fiber of his body he glided on a colorful silk fabric slide down into what looked to be a tall courtyard.

Mitch's eventual depositing on the ground was less than graceful, stumbling over his feet he landed face first on the hard crumbling cobblestones of the court. He bolted upright, bewildered, and could feel the sting in his nose and trickle of blood over his lips where he had hit the ground.

The space around him was both magnificent and oddly disquieting. It was as if he were standing in the hollowed out shell of what used to be an apartment building, perhaps one of the ones he had been next to before he and Charles had gone through the door. From countless points all over the sides of the interior structure were affixed great sheets of colorful silk. Huge sweeping sheets of blues and greens, cascades of red bundles poured lavalalike out of the points where the windows dotted the exterior, all colelecing down toward the court which he found himself standing in. The only sound that met him was the feint burbling of a foul looking fountain.

"Hello," Mitch said aware of how muted his voice sounded in the silk laden gloom of the strange space. "My name is Mitch, I'm with animal control, is anyone there? Charles?" But only the light burbling of the water sounded back.

It was quite beautiful, the contrast between the rough stone and the colorful silks. The air however was stale and gave the feeling of being in a tomb. The fabric fell in such quantities that it was hard to see if there were any doors or points of egress for the space, and as Mitch began stalking around he had the distinct sense that he was being watched.

Mitch continued to call out and wander, and as his ears grew more acclimated to the space there was another noise he became aware of far off above his head. He stopped to listen and thought it was as if there were nests of baby birds crying out in little raspy voices all over the upper spaces of the cavernous space, although he could not see through the colorful layers to see them.

Figuring that calling out would remain fruitless, Mitch began to head toward the nearest wall. *There must be a door or a window I can use to get out of this place. If I can see city center I'll be able to get my bearings enough*, Mitch thought pushing his way through the soft veils.

Then the hushed noise of sliding silk brought Mitch's attention toward the corner of the space. Small outward dimples appeared in the fabric as if someone were running their fingers along the sheeting from the other side.

“H-hello,” Mitch said. There was something about the way the finger points moved, graceful and slow, taking their time to let their presence known. He watched it uneasy, unsure if he should call out to it again or scamper and hide away in hopes of not being noticed. His indecision held him until a figure appeared, graceful and feminine. At first he wasn’t sure he had even been noticed or heard, its eyes, indeed the whole top of the figure’s head was covered in a dark purple and black fringed veil. Its motion carried it out toward the fountain, where it seemed to cast a glance down at the murky waters in contemplation.

“Excuse me,” Mitch said following at a distance, finally deciding he had better try and find help in this strange place rather than hide away and rely on his own devices. “my name is Mitch, I’m with Animal Control. I was here with a man named Charles and I seem to have got myself separated.”

The figure in response merely turned slowly and looked upon him with its veiled face, silently. Much of the fabric that it wore was sheer, and although the majority of the figure was obscured in the dark folds of the dress it wore, the curves of the youthful and lithe figure beneath could be gleaned.

“Excuse me, can you help me?” Mitch said again stepping out into the center of the space, “I don’t seem to be...well I don’t seem to be in the right place I guess.”

“It is fortunate that you came,” a raspy feminine voice said slowly from behind the veil, “it grows more and more infrequent that an outworlder has the courage to step through the doorway.”

“Look, um, I don’t know how all of this works, and quite frankly I think you and all of this may be just figments of my imagination, but I was with a man named Charles on a truck full of animals. We were attacked and-”

“Who you are and what you were doing is irrelevant my dear,” The figure said stepping closer to Mitch and extending a draped arm, “you have arrived at the house of silk, and here you will stay.”

“Stay?” Mitch said backing away and resuming his scans for a doorway or opening to escape, “No I don’t think so, although rest assured that your hospitality will be reflected in my Yelp review. Maybe there a way out that you can point me to?”

“I am the keeper of the house. I have said that you will stay,” Her voice changed as she spoke, seeming to join a chorus of many small voices

from above, “The house of silk is the home for your kind. It is your only home my dear.”

“Nope. I have a home and it’s not here I promise you. Now if you could show me to the door miss, I’ll not take up any more of your time,”

“You will struggle, it is not dignified for the keeper to deal with one who struggles. How I long for the days of noble acceptance.”

“Struggling? Who’s struggling? I’m just looking to-”

Mitch’s words were cut short as the strange veiled woman cried out in her chorus voice.

“Look I didn’t mean to upset you, I just need to find my friend Charles,” Mitch began again, but then heard the sound of the baby birds once more, louder now. “You know what? I’ve decided to find my own way,” Mitch said, and ran.

Bounding and ripping at the ensorcelling silks, Mitch moved as fast as he could, feeling with his outstretched hands through the fabric for the walls that enclosed the court. The veiled woman behind him continued to cry out to the ever growing clamour of whatever it was it was above them until finally Mitch’s hand caught hold of a corner leading to a passage.

Tearing his way through he could hear what sounded like hundreds of little voices crying out and descending down behind him.

The passage beyond was incredibly dark and although he had the strong desire to run as fast as he could away from the strange and frightening woman he knew that if he tried he would end up running into walls, or down a deep hole, or worse. With his arms outstretched he stumbled forward, hoping to find another doorway or some filtered light from a covered window, anything that he could break through or throw open and escape. He wondered how he had come to be in this moment, after all it was only a few short moments ago that he was in his truck looking for a dog. Perhaps he had fallen asleep, he wondered, he had been working long days and chalking this all up to some sort of nightmare was seeming more and more plausible. He hit his head on a low cross beam and wondered if pain like that could be felt in a dream. He could have sworn that something huge had scuttled by him in the corridor up ahead, but as he approached he could see no doors or opening where something could have moved.

Wake up, wake up, WAKE UP! Mitch thought as he continued to move forward. Around him he could hear the little voices crying out again,

growing louder as they were catching up. Then he saw it, a small point of light no bigger than the lead of a pencil shining out from the wall ten or so feet in front of him. Instantly Mitch was at the light, tearing away at the obscuring silks until he was bathed in the glorious light of the sun. The silks had covered almost completely a window to the old apartment building that he found himself in, but unfortunately for Mitch the window was also covered in thick iron bars bolted to the walls.

“Nooo,” he said without even knowing he had spoken and wrenched with all his might at the bars. They did not budge. The world outside was dazzlingly bright, cast in emerald from a canopy of leaves overhead. The area around the building he found himself in looked to be overgrown with tall wispy grasses gone to seed and gnarled dead branches covering the ground. Mitch stood agog; the change in season seeming to be somehow as unexpected as everything else he had seen.

Then Mitch saw something that gave him hope again, just beyond the grasses and the edge of trees was a road, and on the road framed in the overgrowth and foliage was Charles’s truck.

Mitch didn’t know where Charles was, but with every ounce of strength he possessed he reached through the bars and beat against the

glass. The truck on the far side of the clearing was not moving. The driver side seat lay bare and Mitch wondered if Charles was somewhere looking for him, or worse had gotten lost somewhere like he had. Repeated slamming produced large web like fractures in the glass, and blood began to trickle down white knuckles as he beat against the transparent surface.

Somewhere in the corridor behind him Mitch could hear a kind of muffled shouting, and in his immediate space he was aware of something moving through the veiling fabric. For a moment he feared it might be the huge thing that had scuttled past him just moments earlier, but felt less sure it as it grew closer. A man's grunt could be heard in the darkness ahead, and Mitch's heart leapt with relief.

"Charles is that you?" he called out, ceasing his beating of the window and moving toward the source of the noise.

From the light of the window a figure could be seen coming through the colorful layers, and as Mitch approached and tore his way through to get to the figure he suddenly doubted that this was in fact his friend at all. Hesitating in the darkness Mitch watched in growing apprehension the last layers pulled away.

Before him a figure loomed, its flesh appearing to be grotesquely inflated save for where its joints were.

Its flesh protruded in bulbous lumps and everywhere upon its surface great welts and sores could be seen, as if from hundreds of envenomed bites or acidic stings. Its face was perhaps the most putrid thing of all, lolling as it came forward from side to side in an idiotic fashion, choking out unintelligible sounds between constricted laborious breathing.

Mitch wailed in terror and turned to flee, but as he turned he noticed something that stayed his feet. Peering in through the window illuminating the advancing foe was the face of Charles, his hand cupped at the glass.

“In here, help!” Mitch cried dodging aside a heavy bloated limb that swung out at him from his advancing attacker with surprising ferocity. In a straight up fight there was no doubt that the huge figure before him would triumph, but with a weapon perhaps he could level the playing field.

Another meaty blow fell with titanic force down upon Mitch catching him in the coulder and sending him with jolting pain down to his knees. The great attacker moved with slow deliberate action, its pulpy body jiggling in swollen heavy movements, and now above him threatened to come down in an avalanche of bone splintering weight. Mitch’s hands groped at the

rubble of the corridor and found a large loose chunk of what used to form part of the cobblestone. Jumping to his feet Mitch caught another heavy blow to the side, but held firm the concrete in both hands over his head. Adrenaline fueling his desperate action Mitch struck with crazed repeated motions with his improvised weapon. The stretched and bulbous face of his attacker first stretched, then burst like a colossal pimple on impact, sending the reeking contents of it spurting out in great milky geysers after each successive impact against its face. Any normal creature would have succumbed to such an attack, but only after the bones beneath were pulverized beneath Mitch's frenzied attacks did the limbs of the giant cease their futile flopping about.

“You down there Mitch?” called Charles from the corridor by the window, its glass and bars having buckled and broke from his repeated kicks.

“Yeah, I'm down here,” replied Mitch, struggling against the urge to puke.

Charles cautiously made his way down the darkened corridor and around the body of the fallen attacker. “You really should have held on tighter to the truck son.”

Mitch wanted to tell him to go to hell, but instead he said, “We need to get out of here I think.”

“Right you are,” said Charles helping the other to his feet and to the smashed out window.

“What was that thing Charles? You need to tell me where the hell I am,” said Mitch as they made their way across the overgrowth and to the waiting truck.

The yellow eyed dog-thing greeted them with excitement as they piled in.

“You’re lucky to be alive, not many outworlders manage to survive getting snared in the house of silk.”

“Yeah, what was that place?”

“All these buildings around here,” Charles pointed the whole lot of structures in the area as he started the truck and they began making their way down the rather bumpy dirt road. “All of the ones you see draped in the silk sheets, there part of her domain. I say her, but really I should say their domain. They guard our doorway to the fringe and keep those damn thieves out. Gah, Stu is going to have my ass for losing those animals. If we don’t find this little guy’s mama, it might be curtains for my career.”

Mitch looked out the windows of the truck at the strange world around him. It was as if they were in some sort of jungle, or at least a jungle that had reclaimed part of a city. Mitch couldn't tell which city he was in though, as all of the landmarks that he would have been used to seeing in the area were nowhere in sight. Just the ragged ivy colored brick structures and decaying girders of what once were larger buildings.

“So am I in some sort of alternate dimension or something?” Mitch finally asked, trying hard to convince himself that things were as crazy as they seemed to all of his senses.

“Another dimension, no. Your world is still up there, carrying on just as it always has. We're now one layer in, still planet earth, still rotating around the sun, just one layer in. Get it?”

“Not really. If we are inside the earth how can I see the sky?”

“That's the question that boggled my mind for years. I had a guy tell me how it worked once, how we are out of phase with the rest of the material up there. But really the only practical answer to your question is that things just look a bit different when you are down here. Have you noticed the color of things?”

“Yeah, though I think my eyes have gotten used to it for the moment. I thought it was the trees, everything seems more green.”

“Yep, it’s a side effect of the light filtering down through the fringe. Changes colors as it goes, and gets dimmer. You go four levels in and it’s almost completely dark. At least to our eyes. Well here we are, the address on the little guy’s collar.”

The animal control truck pulled up in front of a modest looking brick structure, the kind of thing you might see adjacent to an old gas station. Squat, one story with high windows all plastered over with something on the inside.

“Doesn’t look like much,” Mitch said stepping out of the truck and wincing in pain.

“No it does not. Reminds me, one time, I guess it must have been nearly ten years ago by now, I had to corral a whole hive of Honey Snakes out of a ice cream cart. Sometimes it’s crazy what you find within a benign exterior.”

Mitch just gave Charles a defeated shake of the head.

“What’s wrong? Surprised that we have ice cream? Don’t be, you’d be surprised at how similar things are down here.”

“No Charles, the look was for the snakes.”

“Yeah, well those things are no joke.”

The two men skirted the perimeter of the structure. It seemed to Mitch that the whole area looked to have been abandoned for some time. Garbage was piled up against the front doorway, paper notices wedged between the broken storm door and the interior one. The concrete was cracked severely all over the area, but particularly bad in front of the little brown building, with fairly large shrubs poking out nearly four feet high.

“Doesn’t look like anyone home,” said Mitch as they came around to the back of the building, “maybe the address is wrong or something.”

“Yeah maybe, but the collar is connected with this place somehow. We should go in and make sure. Let's take a look at some of those letters by the front door and see who it is that is supposed to be living here.”

Out of all of the foreign looking envelopes of odd sizes that were held between the two doors there were really only two that seemed to be official enough to be taken seriously.

“Here we are,” said Charles pulling out one of the official looking epistles and examining the name on the outside, “looks like this place is the

residence of a Mr. Sanzo. Failed to pay his tax allotment in full too, tsk-tsk.”

“And judging by the state of this place and the accumulation of letters we can be fairly sure that he has not been home for some time, the oldest ones are dated more than a month ago.”

Charles grunted an agreement and opened wide the storm door, sending the letters spilling out at their feet. “Mr. Sanzo,” he said pounding with the palm of his hand against the door, “We’re here from Animal Control.”

There was no response from the interior, only the strange off key notes sung out from the one remaining emerald bird on the truck to break the silence.

“Well now what?” asked Mitch examining the growing discolored bruises up and down his right arm from where he had been struck by that bulbous creature.

“I tell you what, that little guys momma,” Charles gestured back towards the cab of the truck. “She’s gonna be big and dangerous, it’s not something in good conscious that I can leave on the loose out here. Let’s

get him out of the truck and see if he acts like he knows the building, if he does we will at least be fairly certain we haven't got the address wrong.”

“Alright, but you’re the one holding the leash. That thing in the truck is not on the best of terms with me.”

The Anura Hound sat unmoving as Charles approached the passenger side of the truck. It sat unmoving as he opened the door and reached for the leash. It sat unmoving up until the point the Charles gave the leash a slight tug and the outside air could filter through to the animal's nostrils, and then like a shot it lept towards the building. Bounding with an explosion of excitement and frenzy; the animal bucked against the leash nearly pulling itself over backwards in its attempt to get at the building.

“Hell’s bells son, grab the leash!” shouted Charles while doing his best to wrap the leather strap around his arm.

At first the two, straining with the leash between them managed to pull back the scrambling animal, but when the leash snapped all hope of restraint vanished and the slaving beast bounded within seconds around the back of the building.

“After him!” Charles shouted scrambling back to his feet.

Mitch was the first around the back of the building in pursuit, feeling intensely that he had spent far too much of his time that day chasing that animal. Around the back of the building a second rear door could be spotted, but before Mitch could even attempt at getting his hands on the creature it catapulted itself through one of the transom windows and vanished into the interior.

“Well that’s not good,” Charles said coming up to meet Mitch around the back of the building, “but that behavior is pretty proof positive. I’d be willing to stake my reputation that the mother is in there somewhere.”

“How do things work here, do we just let ourselves in? Or do we need a warrant or something?”

“Yeah you’re right. Better play this one by the book. Let me see what they want me to do. Give me a sec, let’s see if this phone still works.”

Charles dusted off his pants as he spoke and began making his way to the pay phone in the front of the building. Mitch doubted that the old thing would even work, but let the strange man continue his work. If Mitch was hallucinating all of this it was so vividly real, and painful, that he figured that his best course was to ride it out and let whatever would happen, happen.

After a minute of fussing Mitch could hear from his position at the rear of the truck that Charles had managed to get in touch with someone on the old payphone.

“Hey Stu, It’s Charles. No... But it’s not all bad news...Listen, so the AH lead us to the broodmother...yeah I am aware...no there is nobody around, should be no unexpected injuries...no, no I have some help here...yes animal control, different office...I’ll give you a call back when it’s done.”

“So what’s the plan Charles? I’ve already had a hell of a day, but I’m willing to see it through.”

“Thank you son. We’re going to gear up and find the mother in there, she’ll be big and nasty so we will have to use the tranq spear.”

“The what?”

Charles rummaged around in the back of the truck for a moment before brandishing a large metallic rod with a strange apparatus on the end.

“The chemical goes in here,” he said pointing to the wide end of the cylinder near the tip, “then you screw in the needle and you're good to go,” he squeezed a handle towards the bottom of the rod that looked a bit like a

bicycle break which triggered two small protective coverings to slide aside and a stout looking bladed needle to protrude out the end.

“Don’t you people have tranquilizer rifles?”

Charles smiled, “sure we do, but you can't get those little needles to penetrate the hide of a full grown Anura, believe me I’ve tried.”

Mitch frowned, the more he learned about just what it was they were planning on doing the worse he felt about it. Perhaps when this was done, the dream would end.

With quite a bit of difficulty the two men managed to pry their way through the rear door of the building. They had to use the rear door, since the front entryway felt as if it had been braced from the inside by something.

“Lead the way son, your eyes and reflexes are no doubt better than mine” Charles said handing him the flashlight from his belt and the large tranquilizer spear he had in his other hand.

A large set of shelves had partially fallen and blocked the door from opening more than ten inches or so, forcing Mitch to squeeze through and feel quite trapped once he had done so. The interior of the space was an

absolute mess, with all sorts of things scattered over the floor and pasted to the walls with an acrid smelling fluid.

“Do these things make nests?” Asked Mitch gesturing with the end of the spear to the gunk on the walls.

Charles squeezed in behind him, “yeah, through I think I would call it more of a cesspool than a nest. Pretty nasty stuff. Don’t get it in your eyes.”

The two advanced into the building, moving slowly and as quietly as they could. All sorts of furniture lay in ruined heaps on the floor, broken spindles and splintered wood poking through the heaps of paper and cloth that lay strewn about. Mitch illuminated the clear path through the rooms that had been formed when everything else had been pushed aside.

Passing through into the next room Mitch stopped short. “I think I’ve found Mr. Sanzo.”

Poking up from a particularly foul smelling heap of debris was the clear remains of a human hand. The flesh along the arm gleamed ghostly white in the electric light with ropey strands of the grey-green fluid cascading down from it to the floor.

“And that would make this a crime scene now,” said Charles a matter of factly, “for the love of God don’t touch anything, investigators on this level get real upset when you do.”

The two men had only stepped backward a pace before something huge stirred from beneath the mound of debris in the room, causing the hand to wiggle.

“Hells Bells, I think it’s-” was all Charles had time to say before the entirety of the heap rose up and came crashing down upon them.

Mitch fought for breath under the deluge of shattered furniture and shredded carpeting. Straining he threw himself free and got to his feet, wrenching the spear free in the process.

Somewhere to his right there was a groan from Charles, and before him the broodmother.

It was like a huge bloated toad with an elongated crocodilian like maw that grinned and snapped with hooked teeth. A layer of garbage from the room coated its hide, so that you would almost think that it were an animated heap, save for the great saucer-like eyes atop its head, just a slight shade darker than its offspring. As it turned Mitch got a better idea of the sheer size of it, *God, the thing must be eight feet across.* He

wondered if he would be fast enough to make it back out the rear door before it pounced on him.

Planting his feet on top of the pile Mitch squeezed the handle to deploy the needle at the end of the spear and found it to be jammed. The protective shields that were supposed to come away when the handle was depressed must have been bent.

“Damnit Charles,” Mitch shouted at the direction of the moaning, “Charles this thing is going to eat me, and you if we don’t do something fast-.”

The creature crouched and a great brown tongue rolled out of its sizable jaws. It didn’t seem to have claws from what Mitch could see, just large nubby rounded fingers at the end of squat powerful limbs.

Mitch kept the useless tranq-spear between him and the beast and tried again to spot Charles in the debris at his feet. He had just spotted the leathery brown arm of his friend when the creature made its move.

Hurling forward the great toothy maw opened wide, tongue extended like some great slimy tendril. The end of the spear entered the cavity between the creature’s jaws, but despite Mitch’s best efforts to thrust it into the fleshy pink at the back of the throat it was directed upward and collided

with the roof of the creature's mouth. The sheer weight behind the lunge send Mitch sliding backward struggling to remain on his feet. Then a snap and splintering sounded as the jaws closed on the handle of the weapon and destroyed it.

Mitch dodged a clumsy rubbery arm as the creature chewed and spat out the remainder of the weapon upon the floor.

“Charles!” Mitch shouted again, searching the ground for anything he could use to defend himself and wondering if his colleague had inadvertently been trampled by the beast. He used the remains of a file cabinet drawer to crudely deflect the next sweeping bite, and make his way around the beast to the front door.

The caustic odor of the creature was almost overwhelming, and stung his eyes. If he could just buy himself some time, just a second or two he could undo the deadbolt on the door and be able to run away. He watched the thing as it crouched again, and bellowed a strange baritone challenge.

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From his vantage point under the debris Charles had seen how close Mitch had come to getting killed by the creature, and while the last thing he wanted was the young man's blood on his hands he knew what the greater good would be if they could stop the animal. He inched his way covertly from beneath the animal, and found that he was not that far from the remains of the tranq spear that the animal had discarded. He just hoped that he could get the injector to function.

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Mitch waited for the beast to come at him, to try again to snatch him with that terrible reeking tongue, he would try and go under it, grab for the lock and wrench it open before the animal could try for a second lunge. He waited, but the moment never came.

The broodmother crouched and bellowed, its jaws opened and then all of the malicious clarity in its eyes vanished. It wobbled for a moment, and then collapsed, melding back into the heap of detritus that birthed it.

For a moment Mitch stood there dumbfounded, not sure what had happened and what he should do. He heard a groan again from the floor on the other side of the animal.

“Charles?” He waded around the bulk of the thing and finally located his friend, the silver fragment of the tranq spear still gripped firmly in his left hand and embedded in the underside of the animal. “Are You alright?”

“This one is a damn big one. Don’t know if I’ve ever seen one this size.” Charles said standing slowly, “Was beginning to think that maybe we had made a bad decision coming in here. But honestly, its better we neutralize the animal before they send in the goons with the guns to just put her down. Endangered you know.”

“Let’s see if we can get this front door working before she decides to wake up.”

“Nonsense. I gave her a full dose, so I’m guessing she’ll be out for a while. We’ll need to locate the smaller one before anyone else arrives.”

Mich had forgotten about the small lizard dog in all of the comotion. “This is still a crime scene through right? I don’t want to mess up anything for an investigation looking for-” Just as he was speaking he spotted the animal, trotting back to the truck outside as if nothing had happened,

plopping down into the seat that it had made its own over the events of the day.

“Seems like it’s taken a shine to us.”

“That’s how it goes with these critters. Fiercely territorial, which is why people keep them around to guard their homes, but create almost no personal attachment to anything. You could be locked in a life and death struggle with the thing’s own mother and it doesn't give a damn.”

Mitch wondered at the sheer alienness of the animal compared to the dogs he had known his whole life. It would be almost like keeping a crocodile around, and he wondered how you kept such an animal from seeing you as a threat in its own territory. He looked at the corpse of Mr. Sanzo and got his answer.

The two men made their way back to the truck and began cleaning the stinging mucus from their skin with rags that Charles produced from a hatch in the truck bed.

“You know, I had thought that the dream would be over once that we had dealt with that thing. That I would just wake up in my truck with only the foggy memory of any of this,” Said Mitch.

“Nah Son, the dream ends when I drive your butt back through the doorway and deposit you back on the fringe. It ends when after years of wondering if it all was real you convince yourself it wasn’t. It ends when you turn down my offer.”

Mitch stared at Charles, the twinkling in his eyes behind those bushy grey brows seemed to have intensified in the setting green tinted light.

“Your offer?” Mitch asked.

“What would you say to transferring to a different animal control office? It would be the same work, same crappy pay, just one level in.”

Mitch looked down, if all of this was real how could he refuse. He met Charles’s gaze, “yeah alright, I’m in.”