

short fiction: TAMING MISS OBERON
a Psi-Kicks story by: GF WILLMETTS

Night flights gave way to deep thoughts, Cameron McKensie decided. They went hand in hand, mostly because so few people used them for anything else. No restless kids. No irritating adults. Nothing else to do if you couldn't sleep. The tourists who travelled in them were returning home, still under local time having had one last celebration, were exhausted and slept. No in-flight movies. Well, at least, not until morning. Everyone, but the flight staff, asleep at 25,000 feet gave plenty of time for contemplation of recent events.

Beside him, curled in a ball, in her seat, was the object of his thoughts: Kataya Oberon. Whether she was really asleep wasn't something he wanted to try prodding her to find out. That could still be regarded as a dangerous to one's health by anyone in the know. Just over week ago, she was little more than a subject of a report and his assignment...

Reports never gave everything, Cameron McKensie decided, as he arrived at the Stable's regional headquarters. They were too impersonal with everyone covering up some small or major fact that might put themselves in a poor light. For security, a lot of pertinent info was omitted or encoded anyway.

With the impunity offered to the Psionics, they tended to be the most honest of all. They had nothing to lose. Human Baselines and Blanks needed to either look good or hide the mess they made. It looked as though this time it was one of his own, the Blank, Maxine Caruthers, who had over-stepped the line and was hiding a mess by her silence on the matter. The best excuse was her still being on the critical list.

After that other Blank's death, hadn't it dawned on the silly bitch that she had to be cautious when dealing with Psionics. Her abrasive manner probably hadn't helped. Just because the Fey were not mentally adept Psionics, didn't make her the exception. Acquiring physical attributes didn't make them any smarter or emotionally better than a Baseline. They were still prone to any regular temperament problems. Combine that with acquired physical animal attributes and they could practically be called 'super-human'. You simply didn't put yourself in a situation where you had a direct confrontation with a Fey. Caruthers had got that message the hard way.

Out of habit, McKensie looked at the Compound map on the main desk as the PA pointed out his own quarters. Like all regional headquarters, they were masked as a regular military base with a series of offices, quarters and floorspace. This site had some minor modifications made to accommodate their resident Fey, chiefly as a chain of hidden complex training areas.

A large section of the factory space had been converted into a series of gymnasiums and one Olympic-size swimming pool as well. The staff here must have thought they'd gone to heaven when it was installed as any facility the Fey wasn't using could be shared by them. Officially, it was declared a military exercise area and a platoon was occasionally brought in to complete the image.

The PA, Elaine Forster, was the model of efficiency. She waited quietly until she was spoken to. Many of the Stable staff were recruited from the Forces, with few knowing the true nature of their work other than it was an Intelligence department. Admin was Admin the world over. They didn't need to know what they were administrating or guarding, just turn over the paperwork as instructed. Move up through the ranks and you get shifted to an out-station. For the Stable Consultancy, that was where the real action and busier Psionics were based.

As far as most staff here were aware, they housed specially trained agents. The one difference was them not knowing how 'special'. The code-names meant little to them. They were a means to conceal not to reveal. It was better not to know much in an eyes-only situation. Forster fitted the pattern. Ex-Wren. She knew the score, as far as her job was concerned. A tallish thin tight-lipped brunette who probably only

smiled off duty. Wouldn't be long before she was reassigned and moved deeper into the picture.

'Where is the Fey at the moment?' McKensie finally asked.

'Combat One, Sir', the PA replied. 'She gives herself a very hectic exercise schedule.'

'Do you like her?'

'Permission to speak candidly, Sir?'

'Please. I won't learn anything without it.'

'Miss Oberon is a bit of a man-eater, Sir. We'd been expecting a row between her and your predecessor for some time now.'

'Hardly over a man, That's hardly answering my question. How do you get on with her?'

'I'm glad my boy-friend is not within fifty miles of this base, Sir. Miss Oberon is a Manx. She draws the men like flies and drops them as fast. Hasn't been good for Base discipline.'

'This doesn't stop you working with her professionally, Lieutenant Forster?'

'We rarely see her professionally either, Sir', Forster admitted, 'other than arranging exercise schedules. Making sure the equipment is still usable. Your predecessor handled any problems. Miss Oberon's not stand-offish. Always say hello. Polite in an odd sort of way, but no long social chats. Uses some foreign language occasionally. Lacks discipline for someone who appears so physical. Refuses to take part in any group games...we've finally got a hockey league running. Offered an olive branch to get her to join a team. Begged off joining.'

'But she doesn't mix? Probably a woman thing. Not everyone's a team player, Lieutenant. What about meals?'

'Eats mostly alone, except when her grandfather is here. I watched once. They eat on the floor. He has nearly the same effect on the women. The cooks are concerned about health and hygiene over the amount of raw meat requested...by both of them.'

'Keep them in line. The Fey have particular dietary habits. Beyond that is either mine or a Bureaucratic problem. Remind them they're under orders. As to men. She promised the Board months ago not to chase anyone on Base. The invited platoons haven't been approached? You're to let me know if she breaks this promise and I'll worry about it. I take it you haven't placed yourself in a situation to form an opinion either way?'

'Not my place to have an opinion other than professionally, Sir', Forster replied curtly, 'She can raise the heckles on most of the women here when she chooses and has men equally dreamy eyed just walking past. I deemed the latter the biggest danger and schedule the men away from her as much as possible. She might not chase them, but they still have a crush on her. The women don't have to be told to keep their distance.'

'Fine. You're doing a good job, Lieutenant. See my bags are sent to my quarters. I'm off to visit Combat One.'

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One thing that could be said about Stable Compounds, even without resident Psionics, Cameron

McKensie decided, was that they were always damn spacious. Contrary to military belief all the open flat shrubland made it very difficult to hide intruders. Electronic traps recorded everything else. Psionics noted the presence of anyone but Blanks. The Fey was on par with them so it appeared, even without any apparent mental abilities.

Most of the classified combat arenas were excavations with the soil used to raise the ground level. With an automated net system they could be covered to conceal them from satellite detection at night or unused. Not that that would stop rival Psionics from scanning if they knew where to look. The Fey were a unique breed and as far as the Stable knew, they had the only super-human in active service in the world.

Now where did he come from?

A man had suddenly appeared not 50 metres away from McKensie. His portable detector tied into the security net system hadn't bleeped. As far as he was aware, there were no Psionics with the ability to teleport, or as they often called it 'skip'. There was one other possibility. He kept walking towards the man. If the stranger was as fast as this in his dotage, running away would not serve any purpose.

The stranger was wearing an open large overcoat and appeared to be lightly dressed under it, despite the chilly damp weather. A wide-rimmed hat did much to conceal the rest of his features. They didn't conceal an impressive length of grey-brown sideburns. Medium height. The walk was effortless and quiet. Even a Stealth Psionic would admire the poise. The stranger could probably walk across a room of soggy tissue paper and not leave a ripple.

'Are you the Blank?' The stranger asked. The voice was curt but without any underlying threat. An accent that was hard to place. The wrong answer and he'd probably keep on walking than attack.

'Are you Fey?' McKensie asked.

'I'm glad you didn't say, "Are you a Fey?" It's extremely embarrassing these days to be asked if I'm a fairy...and then say yes.'

McKensie extended his hand, 'Cameron McKensie. You must be Rex Oberon. I read the Full Moon report. You had a very eventful war, Sir. A pleasure to meet you.'

Rex Oberon grasped McKensie's hand and shook it firmly. There was a hidden strength in his grip. The back of his hand had enough hair to make Robin Williams look plucked. Oberon smiled widely presenting an obvious pair of sharp fangs before laughing. Pale, almost white, eyes glinted from under the hat.

'I'm retired now. You have good composure. Caruthers was a little spooked the first time she met me.'

'Understandably. It's not every day you meet a legendary wolfman. I'd have thought baselining with a wolf would have worn off by now, Sir?'

'Legacy of my DNA your medics told me. Exposed for too long. Suggested I take on another animal to neutralise the effect, but I've become rather fond of this appearance over the years. It's human enough not to arouse too much suspicion. One of the reasons why they suggested Kataya mix with a different species. Hirsute women are rather too obvious in covert activities.'

'I take it you're here because of the report?'

'No, son. I'm here to see my grand-daughter. At my time of life, one has a different set of priorities.'

They both continued in the direction that McKensie had started out towards. A small out-house that accessed a lower observatory bunker facing into Combat One.

'Has your grand-daughter given any reason for her behaviour that put Caruthers in hospital?' McKensie probed, 'Part of my job is to make sure it doesn't happen again. It would be easier if I knew informally so not to step on her toes.'

'It shouldn't happen with you, son', Oberon smiled again, but not showing his fangs this time, 'She likes men.'

'That, Sir, as far as I understand, is part of the problem. Men also like her.'

The out-house was a simple design. The men entered after McKensie used his passcard to permit access. A few sparse pieces of furniture and a TV set. It wasn't designed to be anything more than that. McKensie entered a code into the TV remote to open the bunker access lift. The majority of the Stable staff here were not permitted to see the Fey working out. Most of them weren't aware that the key operatives were even Psionics, just very special agents.

From what McKensie remembered from the maps, the bunker carried a surveillance equipment, medics lab, a shower and changing room. No expense was spared in this area. The Fey was entitled to the best to ensure that she was kept at peak performance.

Wordlessly, they let the elevator take them down the three floors to the bunker. The monitors were buzzing with images. The main windows faced out into Combat One. Lights were arranged to allow it to be lit were really shining upwards to give a day appearance. A city street obstacle course was the set-up. No sign of the Fey. Part of the practice was ensuring she was not seen unless she wanted to be seen. The exercises focused primarily on exposing her position.

On the table were the remains of a meal, looked like raw meat, and a knapsack. A small kitchen was half-hidden in an alcove. One of her early coaches had suggested the Fey watch the tapes of her own performance as a means to self-improvement. There had been no objections but ever since she had avoided the cameras, even in combat. Even the tracking cameras couldn't get a line on her.

Was she that good? Or was she demonstrating her obvious superiority?

Oberon went to the small refrigerator and pulled a can of beer. 'You thirsty, son?'

'Wha..?! No, Mr. Oberon', McKensie turned from the bay windows, 'I'm surprised there was any beer in the camp.'

'Kataya arranged it for me. Very considerate girl. Always thinks of the finer details and of her grandfather.'

'Right. How do I see her perform?'

Oberon came to the window and slurped some more beer as he looked around. 'Turn the cameras off.'

'You can't see her either then?'

'I didn't say that. She's just camera shy. Avoids being filmed but promised to let you see her...briefly. Kataya got fed up having to slow down to be photographed while performing.'

Performing? Slowed down?

'And she left them on?' he asked.

'Probably for your benefit. This is a performance. Turn them off. She'll know the difference.'

McKensie flicked the buttons systematically turning the cameras off and then the over-ride for the bunker lights to be off to improve outside contrast. The darkened room made Combat One's street lights seem brighter as McKensie's eyes adjusted.

Down the far end, McKensie could just make out a small figure. She hadn't been there a moment ago. Appeared just like her grandfather.

Oberon reached under the bench and handed the Blank a pair of binoculars. By the time he looked again, the figure was gone. Or rather she had moved forward and was bounding up the side of the building. McKensie found difficulty keeping up with her speed. The Fey barely paused jumping across the buildings, zig-zagging across the streets.

'I thought this was a combat zone...?'

Machine gun fire echoed from one of the buildings. The Fey spun in the air and landed in a tree. Using one of the branches she spun up and smashed through a window and seconds later a torn dummy came through the open window where the machine gun fire had fired.

'Blanks?'

'No challenge. Real conditions. Live ammunition', Oberon was watching the scene intently absorbed. 'She's letting herself be shot at for your benefit. You should benefit from seeing her in action. She's been asking for the combat stakes to be taken up more. This is far too easy for her.'

The Fey was out on the roof and leaped for the tree a second time to get across the street. In mid-air, the tree exploded and the Fey was left grasping air as she was flung back the way she came. A perfect somersault had her back through the window and moments later out through another window and climbing up onto the roof.

'Real bombs, too', added Oberon. 'The street is littered with them so she's been avoiding the street. No sense destroying the road for the sake of it. Puts the site out of use for too long.'

'All of this isn't from her tiger baseline? A tiger couldn't do a fraction of this.'

'Your Stable chose the tiger for its strength and savagery. Her agility and speed owes more to the domestic and feral cats in the Compound', Oberon explained. 'She is not pure animal but a synthesis of human and animal physiques, getting the combined advantages of both. A tiger would be afraid of fire. Kataya would make a more intelligent judgement to avoid or run through it.'

'I've lost her again', confessed McKensie.

'Follow schedule, gorgio. Was only supposed to take out a machine-gun loaded sniper', a husky voice said from behind. 'This practice. In outside world, wouldn't been seen or shot. Hello, Grandfather balormengro.'

'Hello, Kataya romani chi matchka.' Oberon turned to face his grand-daughter. 'You looked off-peak.'

'Keeping in sight slowed me a little. Agree though. Due for zoo visit. All arranged, gorgio?'

McKensie observed the Fey's reflection in the window before turning. The Fey stood at 5 feet 6. Short

wavy haired but fluffed up with orange and black streaks. Elfin. Even had the pointed ears of a pixie. Not even out of breath. Her face had a mischievous look with a hint of hostility. Labelling them Fey was not a bad judgement. There was certainly an element of faery about them. An odd sort of beauty that tended to make you stare waiting to see what she wanted. Shouldn't have that kind of effect on a Blank. Her accent was odd to place like her Grandfather's. English but hard to place the origin but certainly not unpleasant. The broken English a puzzle considering how well her Grandfather spoke.

'I've only been on site less than an hour. I thought the zoo trips were all a pre-arranged schedule? I'm...'

'McKensie. The new Blank here to review future with the Stable. Plan to stop zoo trip, gorgio?'

'No.. I...want to make sure everything goes to plan. What time are you scheduled to visit the zoo, Miss Oberon?'

'Seven tonight. Time to eat before. You eat with us, gorgio?'

'Is that a request or an order? You seem to be dictating the pace, Miss Oberon.'

The Fey smiled, 'You 'fraid of me, gorgio? 'Fraid like Caruthers?'

No veiled threat. It was on record that she was a capable killer. She was testing boundaries.

'That we'll have to discuss. Upstairs would rather you settled your differences with staff in a more verbal manner.'

'I only scratched her.'

'Medical says you nearly disembowelled her.'

'Fhuh! She didn't back away. The cow lunged at me with a combat knife. Her fault, gorgio. Only defended self.'

There was no apology in her manner. The plea was self-defence. How well did she control this killer instinct?

'A misjudgement', McKensie said, realising he was inviting an angry response. 'We can discuss ways to avoid such problems later...'

'When my Grandfather isn't around, gorgio?' Kataya turned to the wolfman. 'I think the gorgio is intimidated, Grandfather.'

'Mr. McKensie would probably prefer to talk business in private', Rex Oberon said consolatory. 'I would do it up on the grounds, son. Surveillance isn't so good up there.'

Surveillance? No wonder the Fey is touchy. 'If Security is over-reaching their authority. I'll ensure any recordings are erased. We'll talk above.'

Who the hell is running the show here? Do the Bureaucrats think that because she can't read minds or scan that she's open for easier observation?

Rex Oberon gave a curt nod of his head. 'You kids go ahead. I want another beer.'

Kataya kissed her Grandfather on the hairy cheek and picked up her knapsack. 'See you at dinner. They've fresh beef.'

'Yum! Would I leave without saying?'

'Come, gorgio. Let's enjoy the fresh air.'

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The sun peered through the clouds, dashing streaks into the nearby ocean. The coastal weather changed rapidly and although still breezy, the climate was warming up. It was a glorious sight. Kataya Oberon stood watching it, sniffing in the air. Despite her short stature, the Fey seemed to stretch out to absorb the atmosphere. She seemed much taller all of a sudden. As if she was becoming one with the world.

'What can you smell?' McKensie asked after a while.

'Try yourself, gorgio. Should be within sense of smell.'

McKensie sniffed. 'Sea water. That's about all. What are you doing? Counting the salt particles?'

'Fhuh! You joke poorly, gorgio. Salt odour. Doesn't particulate in spray. Is vapour. Odours indicate other things. A shoal of fish out there. Birds feeding. Strong wind above. Should break up the clouds. Means clear night at zoo. Tigers don't like wet when confined.'

'Your senses can tell you all of that?'

'Not just show or nose, gorgio. Applied metrology and folklore', Kataya turned to the Blank, 'You have something to say, Mr. McKensie? Am reprimanded for Caruthers' injury?'

'Upstairs would rather you didn't attack your own side.'

'And...?'

'For the present, I'm here to observe and prepare you for the next assignment.'

'Observe, gorgio? Observe what?'

'Reports don't always give all the circumstances. They get clouded by emotions. They can be too economic with the truth. I learn more by observing. I don't make snap judgements. I like to get the work done.'

Kataya sniffed in his direction. 'Then I, too, will observe, gorgio. Perhaps we both learn?'

The Fey looked innocently at the Blank and shook her head slightly. In the sunlight, the black in her bright orange hair gave it an almost tiger-like pattern, McKensie decided. Her eyes were light green with fleckles of golden orange. Would they reflect light in the dark? The Fey blinked a couple of times before giving a warm smile. A sexual allure. There was a developing sweet, and definitely not unpleasant, musky odour in the air. McKensie swayed. The hairs on his arms were rising. There was definitely arousal. He was getting an erection. What was the Fey doing to him? Shouldn't he be immune. It had an almost mesmerising effect.

'Wha...What perfume do you use, Miss Oberon?' McKensie took deep breaths and shook his head, hoping it would overcome the spell.

'Fhuh! Baselines use animal musk to hide nature smells. This all me, gorgio. You like it? Do you feel camova? Make you feel good? Feel good inside. Thought Blanks immune to psionic influence?'

'Outside of physical change. Can't be scanned. What is it? Essence of tiger and Fey?' The effect wasn't

wearing off but McKensie felt himself more in control of himself.

Kataya gave a hearty chuckle. 'Something like that. Grandfather says it a pheromone. Make men wild for me. Do you feel wild for me, Mr. McKensie? Does it give you lustful thoughts? Would you like to release those tensions? Would you like to feel...good?'

McKensie shook his head and turned to the sea, willing the sea air to mask the pleasurable musk. The Fey was rubbing her hand down his shoulder now, purring slightly. He hadn't even noticed her get that close to him. Was it her musk or that ability to suddenly approach without him realising that was unsettling him now?

'I...I have to go. Unpack. I'll join you...and your Grandfather for dinner.'

'Is that all, Mr. McKensie?' The Fey asked innocently as he walked off.

McKensie turned briefly. Kataya was standing with her hands at her hips. Not threatening. The symbol of desire of pure woman. Except she wasn't pure woman. She was a Fey. A tiger in a woman's body. Highly dangerous when provoked.

'No, Miss Oberon. I'm going to have a very long cold shower as well.'

McKensie was sure she was laughing as he walked to the Compound. He didn't trust himself to turn around to see if she was.

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With what he'd seen today, McKensie wondered if these zoo trips had to be so regular. Stable guards were discretely posted around the zoo to ensure no unsuspecting keeper came across the scene he was watching. Even the guards didn't know what was going on. They followed orders implicitly and weren't looking in on the scene. Even if they did, they were far enough back to see nothing important. Both Fey had gone past them without being spotted anyway. If there were any questions, cover stories ranging from a VIP visit to a practice drug hunt were ready to be circulated. Kataya Oberon was in the enclosure playing with tigers who would, under normal circumstances, treat her as another meal of raw meat. He watched from a sloped road at a higher level.

That reminded him of the meal earlier. Both Oberons had elected to eat on the floor. McKensie had no problems with that as he sat cross-legged opposite them, having ate in a similar way in Japan. Although there, they used chopsticks, not bare-hands. Their diet wasn't sushi either but shredded raw meat. The serving chef smugly ensured a bowl of rather more cooked meat was left near his hands. He made a note to arrange for vegetable dishes to be sent to his quarters if he was to have a balanced diet. As there was no cutlery, McKensie followed suit with the Fey and ate with his fingers, much to their pleasing grunts and his burning fingers. McKensie doubted they ate their meat raw to impress him but had more to do with the change merging with animals did to them.

About time he did something right in her eyes, he decided. When playing with animals, do what the animals do. Were the Fey really animals merged with humans or humans merged with animals? Where was the distinction? If legends were to be believed, this family history could be traced back to the Middle Ages. The Full Moon file explained the Oberon clan roamed amongst the Romany gypsies and accounted for the myth. How did they cope with the Fey? They were superstitious enough from all accounts. The Fey would have accented these fears, not be accepted. The subject seemed to avoid any text books he'd read about the Romanies on the way down here. A taboo subject?! They hid the reality as a myth. Remarkable.

Now here was the same woman, a Fey, making friends with a group of tigers as if it was second nature. Reading the reports and watching this Fey in action were two quite different things, he decided. She had entered the enclosure and sat down and waited for the tigers to surround her. Neither side had shown any fear or provoked an attack. She then began to feed them meat out of her hand from the bucket she brought in with her. A reminder that they were at least equal but she was in control as they made know moves on the bucket. Whether the tigers would survive a fight with her was pure speculation. He's bet on the Fey. A lot of the Psionics he'd worked with had some unusual habits and pre-occupations, but the Fey were in a class of their own. Physical Psionics. The ability to physically take on the attributes of animals. A lesser generation might have called them werew...

'How ya doin', Mac. Long time no see. Beautiful sight, ain't it?'

McKensie turned to face a large rangy sandy-haired older man watching beside him before turning back to the scene. The guards knew him and he had an authority card. Alex Pope was classed as a low-key Psionic. A Doolittle. Capable of communicating with anything. The Stable tended to focus Pope on animals more than anything else. A Doolittle. An animal-talker.

'I thought you were in America, Alex. Giving directions to pumas to stay in a national park?'

'That was last month. Just a short visit home and off again. Africa this time, I think they said. Gotta talk a few elephants from thieving crops.'

'And you'd thought you'd have an unauthorised visit to see the Fey before going home.'

'Not really, Mac. Authorised. The 'crats thought I ought to give you a hand and talk to the tigers before and after the pretty miss putty-cat plays with them.'

'So nice of them to tell me. I'm only the supervisor here...'

'Look, Mac, I'm not here to ruffle anyone's feathers. You know you'll see the report. I'll do a verbal before I go if you'd like. They're just interested in knowing something about how it works from the tiger point of view. It's the first time schedules have matched in yonks.'

'With people like Chris Lancier, it's almost an osmotic sharing with gains all round. No one's quite sure what's going on here other than the Fey develop physical characteristics similar to that of any animal they're closely associated with. The tigers don't become human-like, but they become almost civilised in her presence. Could be Sharing. Is the actual mechanism a copying, a leach process or symbiosis. The Fey are hardly standard Psionics. Nice to fill in the gaps.'

'And you think the tigers will be able to tell you something about the process over afternoon tea?'

McKensie asked, 'The Fey's fed them already. You'll be living off a promise. Do you think they'd know how it's done?'

Both men looked at each other and burst into grins. Any outsider listening in would have thought the conversation crazy. Just because Pope could understand animals was no reason that they could explain something in human terms. The Bureaucrats were just looking for answers at distance again. Probably explained the now discontinued extra-surveillance. A phone call had confirmed it had only been done since Caruthers had been hospitalised.

'Just orders to ask. They're main interest is being regularly fed. They're still baseline tigers. They don't acquire human characteristics. They don't know much more than that. Whatever Kat is acquiring is one-sided.'

'Good thing, too. They'd be asking the Stable for a Sharing fee. What else, Alex?'

'There's no way to determine if what the Fey develops is camouflage or survival mechanism. They see Kat as a friendly tigress while she's here. They can't really distinguish her from their own pack. 'Course, there's no male tigers in there to see how they react to her. No one wants to risk that yet. Have you noticed how her hair has developed orange and black stripes? Wouldn't surprise me if her eyes reflect light in the dark? Have you looked yet?'

McKensie shrugged. 'I only arrived this afternoon. I've got enough problems dealing with her pheromones. I'm beginning to understand why she's got a reputation as a man eating magnet.'

'That a fact?' Pope chuckled, 'As a Blank you should be immune to such things.'

'After that TK incident, we've become very cautious as to just exactly what we're immune to. Pheromones are organic. The effects are quite strong. I'm not sure why I wasn't more affected. I'm wondering if it wasn't an adverse reaction to them that made the Fey attack Maxie Caruthers...or the other way round.'

'A tribal leader thing? I thought it was just an argument? Maxie probably infringed on her territory. Tigers don't like that either.'

'Things are still unclear. Maxie's still in intensive care. Neither she or the Fey have given much elaboration.'

'And you're both walking on velvet claws', again Pope gave that irritating chuckle. 'Sorry, Mac, but you have to lighten up a bit. If Kat's baselining from tigers, she'll automatically be registering everything physical about you. She'll have your scent. Know when you're scared or angry. If she feels threatened, she might just lash out...or seduce you if she likes.'

'And you think that's what happened to Maxie? They worked together for a few months. Then that happened.'

Pope had his turn to shrug, 'Not my place to say, Mac. I can't see Kat seducing Maxie. You're a man. She probably wants or needs a mate. Just don't provoke a bad reaction. She may bite.'

'I'll just have to keep pussy-footing around her. Work out what makes her tick. The thing is, I'm sure the Fey was deliberately releasing the pheromone to see if I was affected by it.'

'No. She's always releasing it. It's a natural scent. That's not to say she wouldn't have tried it on.' Pope gave that irritating chuckle again.

'So what's the cure?' McKensie asked. 'You're obviously not affected?'

'Essence of skunk. Use one smell to counter another.'

McKensie sniffed, 'You don't smell of skunk.'

'Different technique. Before I was sent off to foreign parts after joining the Stable, I let Chris Lancier find my neural switches and give me conscious control. Spaking with animals gives an unusual friendliness affinity. Switching off stops any female or male fighting over me as a potential mate or rival. Same control keeps Kat Oberon at bay. She says I smell like a skunk!' Pope laughed his irritating chuckle again, 'Pity you're a Blank. No Psionic can do that to your brain.'

'Thanks a lot, Alex. Maybe it's a matter of regular chemistry this time. You've given me an idea...'

'Say, Mac, I thought her grandfather was here today. Where's he gone?'

'Visiting some old friends, he told me. Dancing with wolves I expect.'

'That I must see. See you later, Mac.'

Pope walked off in one direction and McKensie turned to find Rex Oberon waiting behind him, somewhat in the shadows.

'You've been listening, Mr. Oberon?'

'I have my grand-daughter's interests to consider, Mr. McKensie', Oberon said rather sagely, 'A responsibility you reminded me of earlier. I did introduce her to the Stable after all.'

'Can I ask a question, Mr. Oberon?'

'We can all ask questions, son', Oberon said gravely, 'It doesn't mean we all have the answers.'

'Well, this should be easy to answer. Have any of your family...clan ever gone crazy baselining with animals? Yours isn't the only family who are Fey, are you? Are there any reported instances?'

Oberon's fangs glittered in the descending sun as he gave a wry wide laugh. 'That's more than a single question. We live with your media myths that man-wolves are homicidal murderers. I am an example that is not true. At least, not without losing my temper.'

'World War Two?'

'The Nazis killed many Rhomanies we associated with. An unforgivable crime. I took my share in their blood, but only when attacked. Baselines aren't really that much of a challenge.'

'But it wasn't a reaction from your wolf baseline? You'd have killed them if you were purely human?'

'Wouldn't anyone, son?'

'I guess. Yeah!'

'We Fey acquire animal characteristics, but it is a synthesis that makes us neither human or animal. We get the best of both worlds. If Kataya was purely tiger, she'd sleep two-thirds of the day. Eat perhaps one day in three. Kill her own prey. What is regarded as the 'human' side dominates. We get the best of both worlds. Few of the disadvantages.'

'That sounds like you're quoting.'

Rex Oberon chuckled. 'One of the Stable scientists drew up the conclusion in a report he wanted me to comment on. It's a reasonable if limited assessment.'

'But doesn't it ever get lop-sided? I mean, adjusting to these new characteristics? It's not as though you're born with the animal developing within you? There must be some sort of reaction to the Sharing?'

Oberon looked vague, as if searching for a particular memory. 'The ability sometimes skips a generation but we tend to mix with animals from birth. We have an affinity that develops with us. Much like how your domestic Psionics grow with their abilities. For us, it can be a matter of taste. Are you a dog or cat person, Mr. McKensie?'

'I've never really noticed. Did your grand-daughter's always have an affinity with cats? I know the Stable

wanted tigers for more powerful abilities...'

'And you think this is making Kataya unstable?'

'It's all I have to go on. If it is, I have to tell upstairs to abort her next assignment and get some other team to do it. At least, until she stabilises. They're fearful of a loose canon in a foreign country. Might raise the wrong questions.'

'Regardless of what you think of Kataya, Mr. McKensie, she is a good girl. She won't fail you or the Stable. She would probably thank you for treating her as a person than a freak.'

'But...but I'm not.'

'She has a name, Mr. McKensie', Oberon looked into the Blank's eyes briefly with what could be called animosity, despite his rather opaque white eyes, and intently before staring out into the red and yellow streaked sunset. 'Calling her a Fey all the time treats her as an object. Maybe it would help you if you got to know her better.'

'She keeps calling me a gorgio...a non-gypsy...'

McKensie turned but Rex Oberon had gone. No doubt off to the wolf enclosure. Probably get there before Alex Pope, he decided.

Kataya Oberon looked up from the tigers, kissed one on the ear and got up. Her session was nearly over. There was a certain amount of electricity from mixing with the tiger tribe. Not sexual, but certainly loaded with energy. It was odd, that even he, as a Blank, could even feel that. Probably some reaction deep back in human ancestry. It was bringing some interesting questions that should be addressed about Blank immunity.

The dipping sunlight deepened the orange in her hair as she stood up and the Fey sniffed the air. She stood poised and relaxed as a couple of the tigers got up and looked at her. She was dressed only in shorts and open-necked shirt. A fantasy painter would have a field day with such a scene.

It would be glorious to hunt right now, Kataya Oberon thought. Partying would be cool, too. The Blank would never know. There was a need to express what she felt right now. What he didn't know would never enter his report.

o O o

The fourth night, McKensie parked his car and, for the third time, decided not to enter the pub. There seemed little point when all he could do was watch as the Fey stirred up the local menfolk. She brought a whole new definition to being the party animal. Best to catch her after the act and say she was out of order when he had definite proof of infringing her Stable contract in being unobtrusive to the local inhabitants. He was sure the Fey would deny everything otherwise. All he had to do was wait for the appropriate moment...

After the zoo trip, the Fey had vanished for the night. What she did when she was supposedly off-duty technically was her own affair. None of the Psionics were prisoners, although some of them preferred isolation to keep their own thoughts in order and others out of their heads. With an impending assignment looming that could send them both across the world within hours, she should leave notice where she could be reached. To wander off was unprofessional.

Rather than stay on base the first night, McKensie decided he really ought to see some of the local village life and found a pub. Before entering, he used his cell-phone to notify the duty desk where he was. It

would have been equally stupid had he not done so. There was always the chance the batteries would run down.

Discretely in a corner, he sipped a fruit juice and contemplated his thoughts. The pub was large but quiet. The jukebox in the corner was quiet. A few of the locals were supping beer at the bar. None of the Compound personal would be here. The Stable had thoughtfully provided them with their own social club with low priced drink so there was no real need for them to stray and cause unwanted questions with the locals. Security was best served through pleasure off-duty than a deprived hardship. He was surprised that the Stable hadn't figured out how to provide them with married quarters but most personal were selected for being single initially.

Like the Psionics, Blanks didn't really have a role here outside of working hours. As the authority figurehead, his presence would hinder any relaxation the personnel felt if he hung around. Staying in his quarters was boring and he had had his share of books for the day.

When he worked with other Psionics, they at least gave them a mutual shared company when both needed it. Rex Oberon and Alex Pope had also gone. The Doolittle had offered no real further information. The tigers had been pleased to see the Fey and felt energetic rather than deprived of leached energy. Did that have anything to do with the feeling he had felt when the Fey left the cage? Or was that her pheromones again?

Off-duty, the Compound could be a prison unless one sought out other pursuits. McKensie couldn't deny the Fey would want to go off base to relax but disregarding protocol and not saying where was not on. Especially after a Sharing period. All it would take would be another fracas and another 'scratch' and they'd be hiding a murder charge.

Supposed she got kidnapped? Yeah, right. Poor kidnappers! In a crisis, any Psionic was usually up to the task of looking after themselves and resolving any situation as far as was known. The Fey's battle prowess was frightening, based on the reports he'd read. Suppose she injured or killed a villager in her current fits of temper? The Stable Bureaucrats would do their usual cover-up, but the entire base would have to be moved. Certainly, Kataya Oberon's active status would certainly be curtailed.

His afternoon clothes had been sent off for analysis before tea with the Fey. Alex Pope had only confirmed a possibility that he was already exploring. The initial report came back before he had gone out that night. There was two distinct pheromones that had been partially neutralised by each others presence. Chemically, although not seen before, they weren't that complex to duplicate. Initial test sample deodorant neutralisers would be ready in two days if he could provide one of the pheromones in isolation. If he was going to keep his head straight when dealing with the Fey it was important to avoid such distractions. Visiting the Fey's quarters, McKensie found her missing and procured a set of her used underwear from the linen closet. The note that went with them to the science lab was to treat with extreme caution and return cleaned when sampled. Quite what the lab personal would make of the sample material wasn't really his problem. They'd want to see the effects of this pheromone for themselves. Even with protective gloves and filter mask on, McKensie still felt some of the effects. Without the Fey there to re-enforce the scent with fresh odour, the sexual feelings didn't last or she'd have all men bayning after her.

McKensie wasn't sure who was most surprised when a crowd of people came in. At their head was the Fey, Kataya Oberon, herself. Judging by their demeanour, it looked like they'd already been on a pub crawl. The jukebox went on and a heavy disco beat filled the air. The idle bar-staff were suddenly too busy selling drinks to worry about the extra noise.

So much for a quiet evening, McKensie decided. At least he knew where to find the Fey. Deciding to

return to the Compound, he quietly got up and found himself looking into the Fey's eyes. The orange feckles in them were more fiery than the afternoon. In shadow the pupils swelled to human circles, not like the slits he saw earlier.

She turned briefly to the crowd and her irises shrunk and briefly resembled cat's eyes before expanding again, 'Don't want to stay and party, Mr. McKensie?'

'I..ah only stepped out for a while. I've got to get back. You have a physical and exercise run at 6am. I'd like one of us to be awake for it.'

'Fhuh! Worry too much, Mr. McKensie. Night is young.'

A hand reached around and groped the Fey's breasts. McKensie was sure her irises shrunk briefly as if assessing before relaxing to the scent of a friend.

'Not forgetting me, darling?' a deep voice asked. 'Who's this? Another boy-friend?'

'Get off, you bugger. He's someone I work with.' She turned to the tall dark-haired man behind her and said in a loud whisper, 'He's my boss.'

Why don't you tell everyone you work for the Stable? There's enough people in earshot.

'He don't look like no craftsman.'

'Daft bugger. He's an executive. Deals with money.'

'I've got to go', McKensie said getting up. 'See you in the morning, Miss Oberon.'

As he made his way to the exit, there were giggles and laughter.

'So who's this Miss Oberon? deep voice asked. 'You told me you were Kisaiya Matchka.'

'I used to be on the stage. I'm a rawnskier dicking gueri matchka. You English find it a mouthful.'

'I like it when you talk dirty.'

'And you're a weshen-juggal.'

'What does that mean?'

'You dog. I'm not telling you.'

o O o

The next morning, Kataya Oberon had nearly finished her medical when McKensie arrived. The doctor acknowledged McKensie's presence with a brief nod. Stable Medics were cleared as far as knowing their patients were unusual but not necessarily about any of their other activities. Gave a more honest judgement. This base was also used as the initial stages for recruits of Baselines into the Stable before they were fully informed. It was a little more difficult where the Fey was concerned. This base was the only one available and had a lot of work done fast to accommodate the Fey.

'Overslept, Mr. McKensie?' Kataya asked innocently.

'Research. How is she, Doctor?'

'Robust as usual. Good respiratory and heart. Nothing out of the ordinary compared to Miss Oberon's

regular medical reports I've written.'

Briefly translated. Normal for her but would be extra-ordinary for a Baseline human. Whatever the Fey did with their animal sharing didn't tend to come to the fore at a preliminary medical. Maxine Caruthers had never persuaded the Fey to carry telemetrical bugs in training. It wasn't on his schedule, but would be something worth asking the Fey to consider some time.

Kataya smiled at the doctor as she completed buttoning her shirt to just above her breasts. 'Paracrow tute, Doctor.'

The doctor nodded as the Fey and Blank left. If he was lucky, he might get a couple more hours sleep in a chair before his official hours started attempted to make sense of the results once again. His immediate boss seemed to work impossibly early and late hours. There was that odd smell again. Only slight but unprofessionally unsettling. An early morning dip in the pool would clear his head.

The early morning sea mist clouding them in as they walked across the Compound. It would be a fine day later, when the rest of the world woke up.

'I wish you'd told me you were using an alias', McKensie started. 'It would have saved some problems last night'.

'What alias, gorgio?'

'Kisaiya Matchka.'

'Oh that. First thing came into head.'

'Kitty Cat? Matchka's Romany for cat, isn't it?'

'How do you know, gorgio?'

'I do research, Miss Oberon. I read a lot. I like reading.'

'No one there speaks Romany, Mr. McKensie,' Kataya stopped and stared at him, 'Avoid giving clues about the Stable or self. We Oberon Clan learnt to be secretive generations ago. We travel. Everyone thing we Romany.'

'But not going as far as saying where you go at night...or what you're doing? You realise there's a potential assignment that means we might have to leave at short notice? I had no way to contact you. It was only an accident that I was where I was when we met.'

'Fhuh! Too soon after zoo visit. Scientists think settling down period works best.'

'So what did you do to settle down?'

'Hunting, gorgio. Sharing with tigers quite exhilarating. So is urge to hunt. Want directions for that? Roamed fifty miles. Then took mates for pub crawl.'

'And after the pub crawl?'

'Is own time, Mr. McKensie. Do with it who and what pleases.'

She stalked off and McKensie had to run a little to keep up. The Fey was obviously pissed about having to explain her movements, he decided.

'Take a bleeper next time, Miss Oberon. It'll make it easier to reach you.'

'Fhuh!'

End of conversation. Kataya Oberon was in Combat One before McKensie reached the observation booth. Yesterday's orders had been carried out. Camera positions had been changed. The assault course had also been modified. All targeting would be based on heat source. Unless the Fey could cut her body temperature, she would be under heavy attack.

It took half an hour for the Fey to return to the booth. By that time, Combat One was a wreck. Live ammunition had done serious damage to all the buildings and would need substantial repairs. Camera telemetry wasn't perfect but the Fey had been caught on film a couple times, largely from cross-connecting views he'd told the Techs to set up, making it impossible for her to avoid being seen.

'Bostaris! Baleneskoe bostaris! Did Grandfather put you up to this, Mr. McKensie?'

McKensie scratched the back of his neck. 'I got the impression you were finding these exercises too easy, Miss Oberon.'

'Never get this tough out in world.'

'And the Stable can't afford you to be complacent on assignment. Combat Four after lunch. They should have finished the upgrade there then. There's an arms specialist coming in tomorrow afternoon. He's to give you a run-down on these new heat trackers you might be encountering. We need an assessment as to whether they're being designed with someone like you in mind, but he doesn't need to know that.'

The second night, McKensie parked his pool car a short distance from the pub and waited. Keeping the Fey busy and occupied should have cut down her night time activities, he decided. According to the door alarm he set up, the Fey had left her room by eight. She hadn't taken the bleeper. Checking previous records, what little there were, indicated these spells of absenteeism appeared to happen only certain times of the month. Otherwise, she stayed in working her way through the video catalogue. They didn't always coincide with the tiger bonding or physical activity. Is this what Maxie had complained to the Fey about? The problem would lie with whether she would have these urges and vanish into the night while away on assignment. That would make her very much a liability.

The pub closely punctually at eleven and McKensie watched the Fey walk off with her date. It was obvious as they passed under the streetlights that her date was a different man. Was she using her pheromones to work her way through the local population? Or was there something else driving her out to socialise? From all reports, both the Fey and her Grandfather tended to be unobtrusive as much as possible. Journeying with the Romanies tended to make them elusive. This was totally against character. McKensie followed at a distance on foot but both Fey and her date suddenly vanished from sight.

The next afternoon, McKensie got to the arms specialist first. An army sergeant in his mid-30s. Dark, muscular and likely to be regarded as a potential beau to the amorous Fey. McKensie introduced him to the new neutraliser deodorant as a decontaminator before introducing the Fey. It was obvious from his own body reactions, having only lightly sprayed his clothes before dressing, that she was using her odour as the sergeant went over the heat trackers but he was quite unaware of its effect. McKensie issued orders to Elaine Forster that all the men on base were to use the same deodorant.

A similar one, based off what they discovered about Rex Oberon's pheromone, would be available for the women tomorrow. Same orders. Why? Experimental trial. Fortunately, both neutralisers appeared to carry a pleasant enough odour so no one would complain of smelling like carbolic soap. It would take a little longer to bring manufacturer levels up to supply the entire area but free samples would be available

and distributed in the local villages tomorrow. It would even have the name 'Kisaiya Matchka' on the packing endorsing whatever she told them about her job. What the Stable wants, the Stable gets!

That night, McKensie watched the pub again from a different pool car. The Fey arrived on schedule with her entourage of men. Her animal-cross stamina might be astounding but he wondered how the men could keep up with her. After this afternoon, it would be important for the Fey to find out whether her pheromone was still working. It must have puzzled her. Would she figure out how he came up with the solution?

McKensie yawned. All this extra duty was tiring him out as well. With luck, the current problem with Kataya Oberon would be over tomorrow night and they could begin prepping for the assignment. Whether she would appreciate the change in her fortune would be debatable. Short of bugging her, he was still at a loss as to how she eluded him the night before. It wasn't like in the Compound where it was possible to use any outdoor sound as a distraction and move in and out of vision from some odd angle like a stage magician. It might be night but the street was too well lit to suddenly vanish. McKensie wasn't surprised when the Fey and her date did the same thing again that night.

The fourth day had McKensie reporting to collect an order package from Elaine Forster. Unlike their dealings with the other Psionics, the Stable Bureaucrats didn't have to resort to passing information through a computer chain to prevent themselves being scanned. He hadn't reported any problems and so the paperwork had come through for the assignment.

Alone in his office, McKensie read the assignment. Rio. Civilian passports for both of them as man and wife. Other identification. Traveller cheques. Loose cash. Very thorough. Honeymoon. Cute, you bastards! The Fey had to bring back the contents of a safe from a bank vault in a secure building in Rio's business district without being detected if possible. Details supplied. Information noted that these heat detection devices were being used here that had been sent to Combat One for practice. They had three days before they left. Quite why there was suddenly such a deadline wasn't clear. No doubt one of the Farsighters had scanned the area and the material was likely to be moved. Combat Four had a safe set-up. Several in fact. It was suggested they practice.

That afternoon, McKensie was left in an interesting position at seeing the Fey getting into safes. The first was rather easy. With one pointy ear against the safe door, her hand fiddled the combination lock and opened it in under a minute.

'I'm impressed, Miss Oberon, but what happens if it isn't quiet?'

'Do your best, Mr. McKensie.'

They moved to the next safe. McKensie hit the remote control that set off the loudspeaker system simulating a loud carnival taking place. The Fey gave a curt smile and began to work on the combination locks. This safe had a pair of them. McKensie raised the volume and it took the Fey twenty minutes before she gave up in frustration and thumped the safe in frustration. The Blank immediately killed the noise.

'No fair, McKensie', she complained. 'No place this noisy.'

'Yes there is. Rio. It's the middle of the carnival season over there. We've got three days to either prep you or ensure you're carrying the right tools to break in.'

McKensie examined the safe door. Where the Fey had hit it was a sizeable dent.

'Upstairs would also like you to leave no sign of entry, especially to the safe. It might delay anyone

tracking us down leaving the country. They're going to be pretty pissed when the contents go missing...'

'Fhuh! Impossible to track. You know that. If anything, you excess baggage. Do deal, Mac. You stay home. I go, do job.'

'Fine. An unaccompanied woman in Rio? Height of the carnival season? You'll have the men around you like flies, even without your added attraction. We go together.'

'Fhuh! And you want single beds? Odd married couple.'

'Right about that, too. Now let's sort out what kind of extra equipment you might need to cut down the noise and how to smuggle or get it in Rio. Judging by the security equipment it almost looks like someone has been deliberately preparing against Psionics.'

The planning went on until nearly seven before they both decided upon a break until the next day. The heat sensors weren't impossible to beat except under blanket coverage. McKensie left orders to set up Combats One and Four with that arrangement before leaving for his own rendezvous.

Using a third pool car, he settled down behind the wheel down the road from the pub. The Fey's stamina was beginning to bother him. Would she want to sample the Rio night life during their assignment? She seemed to be using her night's off as a release valve from the Compound. Better to go with the Fey than let her loose on her own. He'd have to bring it out in the open before they went and that meant catching her out. Putting her on the spot would indicate that he was no...

TAP! TAP! TAP!

'Wha..?'

TAP! TAP! TAP!

Blurry-eyed, McKensie looked out into the dark. Someone was tapping on the car door window. Must have slept, he decided. Instinctively, he wound down the window.

'Yes? Can I help y...!'

Too dulled by his own sleep, McKensie could only watch as a hand pulled up the door safety and spring the catch. His adrenaline began to surge as he was dragged out and pushed against the wall. Too late! There were several hands holding him too firmly to struggle. There had to be three of them at least.

'If...if you're after my wallet, you're going to have to put me down.'

>Huff!!!<

One of them had hit him in the stomach. Another caught him in the kidneys. If they hadn't been holding him up, McKensie would have fallen.

'Pay attention, creep!'

They hit him again. Body blows. They were out to frighten him. They were succeeding.

'We don't like the way you been following the lady Kat.'

'You're frightening her. Watching what she does. Where she goes. Who with...'

'You don't belong here. Stay away or you'll get more of the same.'

'Get another job...'

Without the hands holding him against the wall, McKensie was sure he'd have been on the floor by now. Training had never equipped him for a mugging, let alone this kind of beating. Felt sick. Ready to puke...

'Paul? George? John?', a familiar voice called. 'You boys taking long time to piss. Toilets not good enough for y...Bengako tan!'

McKensie was really past caring as he slid to the ground, expecting the boot to be put in to finish the job. Just what he needed. The Fey to gloat over him.

'Caught your stalker, Kat.'

'He won't bother you again.'

'He'll leave you alone after this.'

The Fey's pheromone reached his nose. McKensie decided that if he was going to heaven, this was probably the best smell to remember, even if he wasn't affected by it any more.

'Bengako tan! Never asked you bostaris to protect me. Piss off before getting into any more trouble. Will see he don't raise charges. Go before the poknies...police get here.'

'But...'

'We thought...'

'You know what thinking did you? Go!! Bugger off before get arrested! He's doing job, is all. He'd get you banged up for years.'

'Well, all right, Kat. If you think it's best...'

McKensie tried to move, but could only hear footfalls retreating. He lent over and puked into the gutter.

'You daft bugger, Mac.'

Kataya crouched down and held McKensie's head to her breast. The Blank thought she was weeping before he passed out.

'You really don't know nothing, do you?'

o O o

'Oooh!'

'You groan, Mac. Therefore you live.'

McKensie opened one eye. Then the other. The light was dim. He moved his head to look around and was hit by a cracking headache. As his head crashed back onto the pillow, the Blank knew that this wasn't his room. It looked like the Fey's. He really was in the tiger's den.

The next thing he knew was a cold poultice was being placed on his forehead.

'Head better now, Mac?'

McKensie opened his eyes. The lights were still dim. Looking down on him was the Fey. Her pupils wide

and dark, compensating for the low light, looking down on him.

'How'd you get me here? Should be in the infirmary.'

'And what will doctor do? Rio two days away. Doctor ground you. Mission aborted. Another Blank. Don't want no greenhorn.'

'What time is it?'

'Nearly dawn. Don't move, Mac. You plenty bruised.'

'Your friends?'

'They thought you peeping tom. Tatto ratti se len. They hot blooded. Concerned about welfare. Mine.'

McKensie tried to chuckle. 'They...they can't know you that well.'

'I'm no dinnelo, Mac.'

'Dinnelo?'

'I'm no fool, Mac. I'm a romani chohawni. The Romanies called Oberon Clan witches. They trade myth for Clan protection. Deep, deep secret. Who believes myths? Gorgios see myth not reality. Some Romanies think us myths. Being with Stable more public. Not likely to reveal Oberon potential outside other Psionics.'

'So why the...>cough!<...social life?'

'Rest now, Mac. Sleep. I have to practice.'

'Don't want to sleep...'

'Yes you will, Mac. Be good gorgio...'

'.....!!'

o O o

'Mmmm...that smells good? What is it?'

'Food. Medicine. Something Clan taught a little to Romanies. Little more time to cook.'

'What time is it?'

'Eleven. Morning.'

'Geeze!' McKensie attempted to sit up and groaned loudly as his muscles gave their own protest.

'Christ!'

'Hush. Hush, Mac', Kataya chided him. 'Told Lieutenant Forster you off base. Want to compromise self ethics found in my bedroom?'

McKensie gave another groan, albeit more suppressed. This time for the situation he was in rather than his body pains.

'There, there', the Fey continued. 'Listen, Mac. Going to roll you over. Massage muscles. Blood

circulating removes bruises. Then we eat.'

McKensie felt cold air sweep his body as the bed clothes were pulled away. The Fey expertly turned him over as he realised he was completely naked. The pain was still too much to be bothered about anything. It was enough to initially register that the lights were only slightly brighter than earlier. He turned slightly to look at the Fey as he saw her arm. The fine hairs on her forearm were orange tinged with black, like the hair on her head. Made them stand out distinctively rather than being purely hirsute. A pair of cat's eyes looked down on him. How did she hide that Fey potential in public?

'Nothing wrong with vision, Mac. See, am here.' She waved her hand in front of his eyes and watched as he followed her fingers. Unspoken, they had checked for any possible concussion from his mugging.

'Good. No head injury. Said they didn't mean serious harm.'

Expert hands then began to knead his back muscles in a thorough fashion. They were a deep caress than the comparative thumping another masseur gave him a couple years back. Backed by tiger-shared enforced muscles that shouldn't be a surprise, he decided.

Later, he was able to sit up with some assistance, surrounded by pillows supporting him, to eat. The Fey sat cross-legged on the bed eating her favoured shredded raw beef from a bowl that she had retrieved from the canteen. His dish had been filled from the cooking pot in the corner and supplied with a spoon that spared his fingers. It was basically a chicken and vegetable broth and an assortment of unrecognisable, at least to him, herbs.

'You did it again when you came in', McKensie said.

'What was that, Mac?' Her voice was calm and even.

'The door opened and then suddenly you were there. You couldn't have just edged into sight in the doorway. It couldn't have been speed either. How'd you do that? It's been bugging me for days.'

Kataya sighed. 'Not letting rest until answer, are you, Mac?'

'Your grandfather did the same thing when I first saw him. Suddenly there! Does this just happen to me or do you suddenly appear to everyone that way?'

'Is that big problem, Mac? Cameras still see me.'

'Only if you get in their way. Something you've been diligently showing me you avoid.'

Kataya Oberon stared without answering and then swallowed the last of her shredded beef.

'Look, Miss...Kataya. I'll keep it off the record if this is some sort of Clan secret. Are you Fey generally invisible to people until eye contact?'

'What you see in pub, Mac?'

'Everyone saw you as you came in.'

'Fhuh! So much for theory.'

'But you did look around...'

'Mac, not invisible to Baselines or Psionics. Grandfather think only Blanks have problem.'

It was McKensie's turn to pause before speaking. 'You looked straight at me. You knew I was there.'

The Fey fingered her nose. 'Good nose. Even new silly deodorant don't conceal smell.'

No secret about the deodorant then. Better to continue as if she was already informed in the subject.
'What does the deodorant smell like?'

'My Grandfather. Thought him there couple nights ago then saw you watching me. You steal his underwear, too, gorgio? Lost mine couple days back. Thought laundry early.'

'When did you find out it was me?'

'Found packet in your mailbox getting your clothing and books. Had a peak. You no cross-dresser. My size. Thought you buy me present. Then realised mine already. Had them cleaned.'

'You're not angry?'

'Should I? Never thought neuter Blank interested in Fey.'

'Probably won't now. That deodorant cancels out your pheromone. It's been circulated here and the village. Just sorting out a loose end.'

'Giving friends time to think about you than me. You daft bugger, McKensie. Think no one cares without pheromone? Locals like for self. Nearly use to smell. Keeps them focused. Can keep them in place with no help now.'

'It probably helps.'

'Only problem when in season...in heat.'

'Which is?'

'Distraction. Thought you wanted explanation about your sight? This different topic.'

McKensie collected his thoughts as he finished his meal but all he could really do was yawn. The Fey was being evasive now and he was tiring. There were solutions to both problems if he could frame...frame the right questions.

'Tired? Sleep, Mac. Talk later. Rest do good. Combat Four waits. Will try better there...'

o O o

McKensie woke feeling immensely aroused. Straddling him was the Fey kneading his chest. His hands groped for the sheet but it was either out of his reach or missing. If the Fey had been naked such actions could have been regarded with a more sexual motive. In this situation, he could hardly deny the effect she was having on him. Then again, she seemed more intent on his chest than what she was doing to his loins. It didn't need the pheromone this time. This was strictly a male reaction to the presence of a woman. At least, he hoped that was all it was.

'Er, Kataya...Kat?'

'Yes, Mac?'

'The blood's moving to other parts of my body.'

Without looking around, a hand reached around and placed a little pressure beneath his erection that quickly deflated. Unconcerned, her hand didn't dwell at his groin but went back to kneading his chest before moving to his left shoulder.

'Better?'

'Er...Yes. Thanks.'

'Could work from side but these muscles deep and needed weight. You don't fall well.'

'Don't remember falling. I'll try to be more careful in future.' McKensie decided to look for a different subject. 'How was Combat Four?'

'Cannelo bostaris! You expect safe protected like this?'

'Upstairs said to expect the worse. So I made it as bad as it could go. Placed cameras and sensors in ways that gave blanket coverage. Figured there might be a level of sound-proofing. Agreed with you about keeping sound out, but that was the only concession. If it's easier it'll be a cinch. Didn't want you complacent. Why?'

The Fey switched to his right shoulder. 'Need a povo-guero...a mole to dig under than me to go through or over?'

'Do any of your Clan have that attribute?'

Kataya stopped and looked into McKensie's eyes before giving a wide mouthed chuckle at his more wry smile. Her fangs might not protude out of her mouth but they were extremely distinctive and looked sharp.

'Not good option. Limited vision. There's Auntie Badger...'

'Auntie Badger?'

'You'd like her, gorgio. Good tunneller. Too bad she busy.'

'What happened? You change the subject when you want to avoid something. Did you keep the tape?'

With easy movement, the Fey rolled off his chest and padded across to the television and pushed a video into the slot. Now she was standing, McKensie could see she was wearing a loose tee-shirt and mini-briefs. He couldn't help noticing in the poor light that the fine hairs on her legs were as decidedly tiger-stripped as her arms. Rather decorative and pretty. Inhibitions didn't seem to belong to this creature, he decided. The deodorant couldn't have lasted this long, surely? What was that she said? Possible to get use to it?!! What? The smell or the effect it caused?

She came and sat next to him as McKensie slowly moved himself more upright in the bed. It no longer seemed necessary to hide his nakedness. A couple cats that must have entered her rooms this time, decided to jump up and join them on the bed. Kataya absent-mindedly smoothed one of their pelts as the other curled up by her leg and she swept the sheet over him.

Probably to prevent any of the cats from scratching me, McKensie decided.

The screen showed the scene in the distinctive sniperscope green. In the bottom left hand corner was the date, time and notice 'Combat One'. Very light streaks indicated the position of the heat sensors beams. These weren't like the home-user or even standard security. They were extremely wide-beam.

'Can your night vision spot them?'

'Enough to spot them when dark, Mac. A tech left the lights off and the hazard went up. Something neither of us thought. Compensates for normal light.'

'I'll give him a medal. I took it for granted that they'd leave the lights on. Easier to film. With these sensors they wouldn't need them.'

'Watch show, Mac.'

The Fey suddenly appeared on the screen, green sniperscope filter, seemingly dodging the beams and crashing into the safe. The lights came up and she removed three darts from her back. Kataya touched a remote pause control.

'Tech says they would have been linked to a firing mechanism. As soon as I hit the safe door, the heat goes up and dead Fey if played real.'

'Shit!'

'Tried again.'

The video continued. The Fey dodged in a longer pattern before getting to the safe and kept ducking the darts as her hand reached for the combination lock. The video timer has slowed down, compensating for the speed she was moving. The sixth time a dart connected with the back of her hand and she smashed the lock with her bare hand as the lights came up. The camera focused on the dent in the lock. The video paused briefly and then Kataya turned it off.

'I take it the Tech was watching?' McKensie turned to look at her as Kataya nodded.

'Wouldn't let me do the test alone. Refused to load weapons with real bullets.'

'Good decision. What did you tell him?'

'Said was bionic. Have to upgrade security clearance, Mac. Said big secret. Little more pay. Is OK?'

McKensie sighed. 'A small price. He did a good job.'

'No better getting into safe. Couldn't smash lock open either.'

'What happened at Combat Four?'

Kataya turned on the video and forwarded it a couple feet. The left-hand corner declared 'Combat Four'.

The scene wasn't exactly the same and the camera views panned around keeping up with her. The Fey wasn't avoiding the beams this time but jumping up and around at the heat sensors. With a gymnastic grace she disabled two of the four before moving in on the safe. Listening intently, Kataya rapidly spun the combination lock and stopped as the lights came up. An auxiliary camera by the side of the safe showed the scene behind. A man, presumably the Tech, was standing there in combat gear with a rifle aimed at the Fey.

'Bang! Bang!' He hadn't fired. Just spoke the words.

'Disabling sensors activated guard alarm. Didn't stop safe heat sensor either. Thirty seconds not enough.'

'Christ! Not when you have to get to, in and out of the room as well.'

'Not want suicide mission, Mac. Ideas needed?'

The Fey rolled off the bed and went to the corner where she dished out some more of her unique chicken broth for the Blank and brought it back to him.

'Thermal suit. Reduce your heat signature.'

'Saw Lancier video demonstration. Looked like tyre-man 'fore it exploded.'

'Yeah! I saw that too. Chris said his body drained the inner heat thermal unit and shorted out system trying to compensate for his heat demands.'

'Would reduce speed. Lose heat like Psionics.'

'Reduce room temperature?'

'Only sharpens sensor difference. This Rio, Mac. Always warm. Such places air-conditioned.'

'Psionic heat signatures would stand out in any hot climate anyway. This looks like a tailored device against Psionics.'

'Doubt Baseline human would penetrate either. Too high up for assault.'

The Fey handed the broth and a spoon to McKensie and sat watching him eat.

'Upstairs must think your chances of succeeding are better than the other Psionics', he said after a couple mouthfuls. 'The Farsighters usually suggest the Psionics with the better chances of succeeding.'

'Met once. Chatter endlessly. Reality always changing. Probability only favour. Not exact. Reality still cheats when lest expect.'

'Right. Sorry. I think it would be a mistake to rely totally on your abilities. Shield against the ammunition. Block the lift.'

'Still need to get out after. Would still set off alarms. Not covert.'

'I don't think that option is going to be that available to us...you. The priority is getting the safe contents out. The second is getting out of Rio without causing too much attention. No rush on that. Contents aren't supposed to be there that long. That's the only time priority. They're bound to watch the airport and port. Assuming they know who they're looking for.'

Kataya watched him for a few moments as he thought about the problem. 'This turn you on, Mac. The planning. The battle. The bloodlust. Better than camova...sex? Better than books?'

McKensie flushed scarlet. 'I...well, I...It's my job to think and plan...Being a Blank doesn't mean we don't have any other talents. It's nothing personal.'

'Really have no idea what I cope with, do you, Mac? Tiger in blood is more than physique.' She got up and slipped on a pair of jeans and sneakers. 'Just worry 'bout me mixing with locals. What for? 'Fraid I'd kill anyone? Control Baselines by pheromones? Fhuh! Why kill? Your 'crats think too highly of such simple task. You need to think more.'

'I...I...Yeah! That was there, but...'

'Tech is resetting Combat Four for more work. Told him do job alone for security. Read book.'

The Fey threw one of his books into McKensie's lap as she left. It was one on tigers.

o O o

Kataya Oberon arrived back much later with a large bowl of shredded beef. She seemed a combination of tired and elation as she dished out a bowl of Mac's own chicken dinner. It didn't appear to lose anything with its extended cooking.

Her hair was wet. The orange in her hair hadn't lost any of its translucent quality. Mac decided she had probably showered in the Combat bay before returning. He had finally managed to shower himself and dressed in his pyjamas. Not so much to be a prude but to be comfortable. Probably conditioning to be dressed, McKensie decided, but it was something he preferred. Naked he was totally at her mercy and she wouldn't need to smell to spot any body reaction. The bruises were coming out and no longer hurt, but it was still obvious he'd had a beating.

'How'd it go?'

She opened a cupboard full of video tapes and slotted one into the video recorder before settling down next to him on the bed.

'We go in morning. Want to rest, Mac. Think on problem.'

The opening credits of the 'Die Hard' film started to roll.

'Bruce Willis?!'

'Fhuh! Film has man roaming infra-structure of building.'

'It's fantasy.'

The Fey turned and gave a grin. 'Shows Baseline mindset thinking. I like action films!'

'With what you do, it's more like a busman's holiday?'

'Busman's holiday?' she echoed puzzled.

'Busman who works on a bus also spends his holiday time on a bus. No change in life style. You watching action films is doing the same thing. They can't do a quarter of the things you're capable of. Why not have a change? What about a romantic movie?'

'Romance films voyeurish! Prefer doing than watching. You like them? We watch one?'

'Er..No...Not particularly, but they're supposed to be more feminine.'

'Fhuh! See enough men's asses in action films.'

'Including Bruce Willis?!'

'Too fatty. Needs more exercise. Lousy tailor. Only supplied with grey vests.'

'What about Science Fiction or horror? Plenty of action films there? Including super-human lookalikes.'

'Show me sometime.'

'OK. I'm no expert on them though.'

They both settled down to watch the movie. The Fey sat cross-legged at the top of the bed next to the Blank, quite intent on the video. McKensie found himself watching her as much as the screen. A couple of the cats joined them on the bed. Half way through, Kat rolled off the bed and prepared them both drinks from a small cocktail cabinet.

'Not into beer like your Grandfather?'

'You like beer?'

'Prefer fruit juice.'

She then added the contents of his glass to her own and flicked the top of a fruit juice bottle and poured it into his glass and handed it to him. McKensie could still taste the alcohol in the glass as she settled back on the bed.

'What are you drinking? Car battery acid?'

'Keeps camova under control.'

'Camova? Isn't that Romany for lust.'

'Learn quickly, Mac. Stops tiger problem.'

'This isn't going to be a problem in Rio?'

Kataya Oberon gave him a coy look and licked her lips. 'Worried I molest you, Mac?'

'That book was quite explicit: Tigresses are on heat for two days a month where they mate up to two hundred times in that period. Where do you hide their bodies, Kat?'

'What bodies, Mac?'

'All those male hunks you must burn out on those pub crawls you go on with that pheromone working over-time. When you're on heat.'

'You see them already. Some of them mugged you, Mac. They just drinking mates. Too drunk to notice. No lunny.''

'I saw you walking home with a different man each night.'

'Fhuh! Jealous?!'

'I..No! Just fill me in on some gaps in my education. What's the difference between tiger and Fey when on heat? Your Grandfather says the Fey part over-rides animal instinct. You'd walk through fire where a tiger wouldn't. I'd have thought with sex the drives would be even but couldn't be avoided. What dominates?'

Kat sighed. 'Neither. Drink dims the urge. Help home mate most drunk. Silly buggers started taking it in turns getting rat-assed for privilege. No memory of anything. Pheromone makes think they had good time. Asleep to world. Cock wouldn't hold flag in wind if awake. Only mates. Not lovers.'

'Not angry about me asking?'

Kat kissed him on the cheek. 'I not worry. Watch film yes? Then sleep. We then very busy.'

o O o

'It's all a question of your temperature', McKensie told her. 'Get it changed by a couple degrees for a few minutes and we'd...you'd have an easier time.'

'Fhuh! Pity can't arrange indoor snowstorm', the Fey muttered back. 'Bostaris air-conditioned room is problem.'

Both of them looked out at the heat-hazed Rio tarmac, waiting for the air-con bus to arrive and whisk them out into the city from the Aeroporto Galeão. It was tropical hot. The Fey was clearly amused with McKensie's attempts at Portuguese for some reason. Studying the phrase book on the plane wasted the hours but hadn't exactly endeared him to the language. It wasn't quite the same as his crash-course in Romy where much of the time it was a matter of understanding word substitution. This was a different grammar.

The temperature was humid and hot. Somewhere in the early 30s. They were tourists amongst tourists. All of them sweating together, although McKensie doubted if Kat was sweating. She was wearing a designer trouser-suit and hat, but this was more to do with hiding her appearance. The Fey had flatly refused to have her arms and legs shaved. Her streaked hair wouldn't look out of the ordinary in today's fashions. The fine hairs on her arms gave little indication at her exposed wrists. She would have a perfect disguise out in the carnival atmosphere but not here at the airport. Immigration Control had passed no comment at a woman dressed such in a humid climate.

Then again, they had probably seen enough eccentric tourists anxious to avoid being sunburnt, too. Probably couldn't care less if they were a honeymoon couple or not either. Judging by the other couples in the group it was probably a suitable cover than to make everyone believe they'd been married for a couple years. He was sure the hotel would make a fuss over them, but that kind of attention would work in their favour. Who in their right mind would think a honeymoon couple would want to leave their bedroom at night?

Holding onto the Fey's waist, McKensie could whisper in her ear less obtrusively. It might not be as effective as the full Psionics spaking mind to mind but it beats the deadly silent they often presented in such situations and then continued the conversation verbally without a change in beat.

Once in the city, they'd be tourists amongst tourists. It was only at the airport that they might be vulnerable to being spotted. It was a myth to believe one could be truly hidden in such places. Airports might move tens of thousands of people, but this number would be reduced when looking at specific flights. You stop still long enough and someone would eyeball you to either to pick your pocket or to con some money. The ghetto kids loved American dollars or 'Anglish' pounds. There weren't that many European flights and the numbers could be counted in hundreds as they left the planes. If whoever the opposition were knew who they were looking for, it would cause problems. They had far too much information to not be taking any Psionic threat seriously. It couldn't be a fluke that these detection devices had been chosen. No one moved anywhere without someone taking interest if they wanted to. That wasn't their problem. Getting in and out of the safe should be their only worry. He had a nagging feeling that life was never worked in such a linear fashion.

Why hadn't the Stable provided a decoy? Then again, in the middle of the carnival season, the last place any of the more powerful Psionics would want to be was in the middle of an emotionally-driven crowd. They become even crazier than the Fey could ever be. Probably another reason why the safe contents were placed in Rio. Crafty buggers! The more he thought about it, McKensie was sure this had the

makings of a deadly trap. It would have to be sprung to prove it wasn't effective.

They still had no ready solution to the heat sensors. Kat had confided that she would break in and hide and let them check the safe and make her move afterwards. Even if they didn't open the safe, the heat sensors would be turned off. McKensie thought it a dangerous gamble but in the last few practices, she hadn't been hit by any of the darts. It was a matter of not enough time to come up with anything else she could try.

The air-con bus arrived and porters loaded the roof with luggage. Both of them were travelling light and carried their own suitcases. A tourist trap trip. All passengers moved to a tourist hotel. Kept happy so they'd tell their friends and have more happy tourists the following year. Makes mucho money for the natives. It was also a potential trap if anyone was taking a special interest in their movements. Everyone had to sleep sometime. Anyone knowing the city would be able to keep up with them. At least for a while.

Neither of them had spotted anyone taking any interest in their group. Maybe whoever thought their security was already good enough wasn't bothered. They certainly wouldn't after the heist when they had to leave. It was likely to piss off an angry section of the population. He already had some ideas about that. Kat might be brilliant at what she does, but in a crowded situation even she'd have problems avoiding bullets. He, himself, would be a standing target in comparison. But then, so would the mob after them. The real trick would be out-smarting them than a bloodbath. Another part in the jigsaw to be avoided if possible.

McKensie moved slowly with the queue entering the coach. Kat was supporting his weight to some extent, especially his suitcase, whenever it looked like he was likely to fall. Much of it was aches and pains that refused to go away quickly. The bruises were almost gone and he had rested well on the plane, it was just a question of getting his body working again. Compared to two days ago it was incredible he was walking at all. Kat said a burst of adrenaline would kick-start his body. Truthfully, he could walk reasonably well on his own but found it hard to deny her assistance. With the constant fear that something was likely to go wrong, Kataya Oberon's strength of will helped carry him along. It was miraculous that he could walk upright two days after that beating as it was. Score one for the Oberon Clan food cure and massages.

If Kat ever gave up this job she'd make a great therapist. Would she ever settle down, marry and have children? The Fey seemed to have adopted a lot of the Romany traditions but marriage? With that incredible pheromone? What husband could survive, even if it might be an incredible death. What a way to go! 'Camova got my body but my soul lives on in my wife.'

McKensie shook his head. Such daydreams were dangerous when there was a job to be done. Concentrate on the mental tasks. Let the body take care of itself. He made a note to douse himself in the deodorant at the hotel. Where the Fey was concerned it would be hard to distinguish between animal lust and loving affection. A phone call to the zoo before they left had informed him that the tigresses were on heat. If the Fey followed the same tendency...

Kat had permitted herself to already be sprayed with the neutraliser deodorant before they left the Compound. The scent might last a long time with Baseline humans, but her own pheromone was already breaking through for the third time. She seemed to have a natural antidote to the aerosol. McKensie hoped it wouldn't draw too much attention until they got to the hotel. If it didn't, then she might as well have worn something skimpy compared to the trouser suit. The Brazilians view on blood-lust was far stronger than any British resolute to ignore, no, fight the effect. With the mixed nationals here for the carnival it was an unhealthy combination. Stealing from the safe would be easy compared to keeping all the lusty males from the Fey and her ever-present randifying pheromone.

o O o

They only stayed in their hotel long enough to change and dispense another spray of the deodorant between them. A three-star job in the middle of Rio's carnival season. To his disgust, he discovered they had a double bed. There was also a basket of fruit and flowers decorating the room. Their passports, in the married name of McIntyre, had been deposited with the hotel clerk. The Stable had obtained the booking from MI6 who kept such places in case they had to move into the area fast. Generally, if nothing was happening, some lucky couple would have been given the booking to avoid suspiciously unused rooms. Hopefully, this was also the way the picture would look if any foreign agency looked at them.

It was only mid-morning and with the carnival procession this afternoon, there was a definite need to get out and reconnoitre the area. It wasn't the more recognised tourist February carnival. This was the June carnival, the Festa do Divino Espírito Santo. In the height of the European summer, there was a stronger attraction for European tourists and almost as popular. The Brazilians knew how to party and did it as often as possible these days to bring in foreign money. Despite the humid air, McKensie couldn't help feeling that they were being watched. With the crowds already beginning to move around it would be impossible to work out who or what paranoia was creeping in on him.

If he was a Psionic, he could well believe himself capable of such things. As a Blank it was absurd. He had no such extra talent. No Psionic could detect him was his only advantage. It would have to be human watchers. What was so special about the safe contents to have such a security force on the look out for anyone like themselves? He'd have to speak to Chris Lancier some time. Check on the active Psionics in the world outside of the Stable. It would be paranoid to think the Stable were the only active Psionic unit in the world.

A few streets from the hotel they split up. The Fey would be able to make better time on her own and really needed to go to the business district and check out the building with the safe. Other than discussing any problems, that was really her area of expertise and she wouldn't be moving at street-level. What had she called it? Keri-poggring. House-breaking. As if it could be that simple.

McKensie looked up the roofs and saw a shape leap between them. She had kept a promise to show she had reached the roofs safely. With everyone paying attention to the groundshow, he doubted if anyone else would have spotted her climbing the walls. There was a fair bet that Kat had made herself visible to show she had got up there safely at her own risk. Even from that height, she must have got his eye contact somehow to make that work. She was still evading explaining how that appeared to only work on him. There was still a worry that it could only affect Blanks. It was chipping away their general lack of immunity from Psionic ability. If other Psionics could Share this ability from the Fey then it might reduce the Blanks own role in the Stable. Any member of the Oberon Clan could, if they wished, attack a Blank without them even seeing it coming.

For the moment, his own mission was far simpler and would require less exertion. Find the nearest Cambias exchange. Not really for any currency because they also traded in-country excursions and he already had something in mind for their escape. If only he could be sure that he wasn't being watched...

o O o

Ninety minutes later, McKensie was waiting at a roadside cafe table for the Fey to arrive. People streamed past as the parade was building up. The noise and gaiety of colours and movement wasn't over-whelming here yet. They had chosen a cafe far enough back to have some of the carnival atmosphere but not be swamped by it. A lot of other people obviously thought the same way, judging by how the seats were slowly being filled. An act of civilisation before some serious enjoyment of the afternoon festivities.

The Blank made some effort to concentrate on the newspaper, the Rio Visitor, he'd bought. He checked his watch periodically. Kataya Oberon was late. Half an hour had passed. It quickly became an hour. McKensie had ordered a fruit juice cocktail, a guaraviá, but idled drinking. The cafe staff didn't seem at all bothered by him waiting there, despite the mass of other people eating. Probably thought correctly that he was the dutiful husband waiting for his wife. Presumably he'd have to oblige them by leaving a decent tip, too.

Was Kat in trouble? It seemed nothing was impossible for the Fey back in the Compound. Out in the field that had still to be proven to his own satisfaction. Some work had to be done on ensuring she didn't become over-confident. Being late indicated that she must have problems. He hoped she wasn't trying a daylight burglary. All he had to do was ensure he remained his composure.

In the field, he had to defer to her interpretation of the orders. It was a matter of logic. How could a Blank or Baseline human give orders to what was really a Psionic or super-human? He wasn't really in a position to interpret what she would do under every circumstance. When their noses were right in the shitty work they were ordered to do, the Psionics had to do the work their own way. That was the first order that was drummed into every Blank recruit. One couldn't order a superior being without being a superior being yourself. Acting with restraint was the most the Blank could do in the field.

A hand curled around his neck and brought his face up and he faced a pair of golden eyes. The green was more a blemish than the dominate colour now. Kat gave him a full kiss on the lips before moving around and sitting on the chair next to him. If there were any obvious signs of the exertions she had been through, there was no indication from her clothes. In comparison, McKensie was coated in sweat from the city's high humidity. One thing the deodorant didn't resolve was a perspiration problem. It just blended with whatever odour was being given off. Their first kiss had been inviting and he had responded as if it had been the most natural thing in the world to do.

'Miss me?'

She gestured to a waiter. The senior older man arrived. No doubt interested in seeing what kind of wife the Blank had that would keep him waiting so long.

'Boa tarde. Queria muito a carne da vaca, se faz favor. Mal passado. Ao natural.'

'A carne da vaca unico, senhora?'

'Qual é o problema?'

'Não, sehnora.'

'Queriamos cachaça e caiparaha o marudo, se faz favor.'

'That sounds rather fluent Portuguese?' McKensie asked after the old waiter had left. 'It's better than your English. Why didn't you tell me at the airport? Could have let you handle customs.'

The Fey smiled. 'Portuguese. Brazil dialect. We...travellers. Learn quickly. Didn't want to draw attention being too fluent. Wanted you to handle it there. I'm hungry here. Excessivament faminto. Didn't want you struggle over order. Ordered you drink. Do you want to eat?'

'Please. What do you suggest?'

The Fey signalled the waiter again, 'Queria coiza à portuguese o marudo, se faz favor. Meu marido's estômayo fraco.'

The waiter left them. Kat reached into her pocket and shook out a sun-hat and covered her gingery-orange black streaked hair.

Perhaps not black streaked in that sense, McKensie decided. Certain hair tips were dark and that was what was giving that effect. Was she aware how much more her colouring was changing into that of a tiger, McKensie wondered. Did she really care? Her attitude was devil-may-care. She simply wasn't bothered by the effect she could cause. The Fey was less restrained now than when back in the UK. The freedom to roam above street-level must truly have liberated her. She enjoyed her freedom. He could see that now. Like any tiger, it was the freedom to do as she pleased that was giving her the kick. Would it be enough to keep her other instincts under control. Could such as the Fey be tamed? That would be the key to keeping her happy. Go with the flow and walk with that freedom.

'Thought we Britain's most secret secret, Mac?'

'Why'd you say that?'

'You being watched. I watched them too. Why late.'

'I thought it was me being paranoid. Maybe it's because we're foreign.'

'Start of carnival season. Foreigners rife. Paying attention to you.'

'Maybe we're not tipping enough? Will this cause any more complications?'

'Fhuh! Just be more clever. They think you the agent. Not me.'

'Can we talk here?'

The Fey smiled. 'Too much other noise. Safer here than hotel.'

'What took you so long...'

'Worried, Mac?'

'Yeah! A little. All right, a lot. As you pointed out, we're drawing attention. Don't know why. Maybe Six booking gave us away.'

'Fhuh! Only confirm. Were watched at airport. No one knew hotel then. Other people too. We still watched. Wasn't sure then.'

'But didn't see where you went?'

'More interested in you. Think you James Bond?'

McKensie could barely suppress a grin., 'Maybe I should have worn a tux?'

The Fey showed her teeth briefly. 'Intelligence agency sends too many men.'

'Let them keep that belief. It'll take the heat off you. Still doesn't indicate what they think we're doing or even if they've made any connection.'

The waiter returned with their drinks. MacKensie's drink was a decorated cocktail. The Fey's appeared to be raw spirit. She downed it in one and offered her glass back to the waiter for more. The Blank sipped his and discovered the fruit juice mixed with rum.

'I'd better stick to fruit juice', he told her. 'Another guaraviá please.'

'Outro, se faz favor. Triplicar.'

The old waiter left in amazement. A heavy female drinker. A tee-total male. The world was really upside down.

'How did it work out? Was it as expected?'

'Busy busy. Watched guard routines. All over roof. Thorough. Maybe easier late night. Shouldn't stay when have contents. Be upset. You go home, Mac. Do alone.'

'We're supposed to be a team, Kat. I've got an escape route planned. As I said, it's safer as couple.'

The waiter returned with another larger drink for the Fey, his fruit juice and their meals. Kat drank the liquor straight down and asked for the bottle this time, before tackling her meat dinner. She had a piece of meat in her hand and up to her mouth as McKensie tapped the fork and indicated the variety of other diners' expressions ranging from shock to puzzled interest at her actions.

'Rum and raw meat is going to draw some attention as it is. Tourists use forks and you'll bloody a napkin.'

'Fhuh! Spoilsport! Should find place with good floors!' but the next piece of meat she picked up was with the fork.

'Bit early to hit the bottle, isn't it?'

'Second problem. Camova. Feel horny, Mac. Drink probably help lessen desire.'

'It might also might make you less than efficient, too.'

'Drink any man under table. We eat. See carnival like tourists for while. Rest then? Be all right.'

'You're in charge.'

'Forgot.' The Fey gave a meaningful smile. 'You obey my orders now, Mac.'

o O o

There were two events that might have spoilt the rest of the day in McKensie's opinion. Oddly enough, it wasn't the Fey's ability to drink liquor, even after her second bottle. If anything, it appeared she had hollow legs as it had no obvious effect on her movements or speech. He made a note never to try to compete with her in a drinking contest. The taste of that first rum cocktail was enough for him and he had stuck to fruit juice. Whether it would dampen her sexual appetite, as she claimed, had to be proven.

They quickly blended in with the crowds watching the carnival parade but rarely stayed in one place too long. The Brazilians had a way with spectacle and if it hadn't been for the assignment, it would have been pleasurable to stand and just watch. In the brief periods while they watched the procession, the Fey was enthralled and occasionally screamed something in Portuguese that got smiles from some of the procession members. Half the time she was joining in with the street dancers as they passed. Hardly a way to remain inconspicuous, McKensie pondered, but once encouraged, the tourists got in the swing of things as well before the Fey rejoined him and they were away. Kat appeared relaxed and happier than ever she had been at the Compound or even out on those pub crawls. Tigers might not be the most social of animals but it didn't mean the Fey wanted to be locked up in a box or cage.

Kataya Oberon was obviously enjoying herself despite the possible danger they were in. Maybe she had every right to be. The exercises clearly showed she was capable of dodging bullets. Maybe it was his own limitations that were the liability? It would be a lot easier if he just joined in with her enjoyment than be a stolid stick in the mud.

From excitement to business, she nudged his arm and they disappeared back into the crowds. The Fey sought out any convenient alley that allowed them to double-back. It gave them both an easy view of their tails before they moved on. He was in on her game now. They were stalking the watchers as much as they were stalking them. The only difference was the watchers didn't know. When they lost sight of them, it was obvious from the way they looked around they were doing a job of looking for them. There were at least three of them that kept re-appearing. It was the fact that they weren't paying attention to the procession that first gave them away. They were always looking into the crowds. They hadn't formed a confining triangle but watched all their exits so they could follow easily. In comparison, the Fey and himself appeared as earnest tourists.

'They could be part of Brazil's secret service', McKensie suggested at one point as they wandered away from the main carnival parade. 'Secret services have a tendency to watch for any of their opposite number. Maybe we should just disappear...'

'Better keep where we see them. Could find out who?' the Fey offered.

'And risk a blood bath? They aren't part of our brief.'

'Must stop thinking me a violent person, Mac. Ah..!'

The Fey reached down and plucked a hand leaving the Blank's coat with his wallet. The hand belonged to a small child. Probably not even in his teens. She smiled and flicked a fang with a finger.

'Cristo! Artavello, o bori rawniskie matchka.'

McKensie was still sorting out his Romany, but it sounded like the thief had called Kat a 'witch cat'. There was rather appropriate. The pickpocket was obviously surprised more at the Fey's gesture than being caught with his fingers in the Blank's pocket.

She bent down and began a conversation in Portuguese between herself and the young pickpocket who handed her his wallet. There was a lot of fast talk with the pickpocket gesturing directions before the Fey handed over one of Mac's traveller's cheques. She got up and the boy was away.

'What was that all about?' he asked her as she gave him his wallet. 'It didn't sound like you were telling him off for stealing my wallet.'

'Most kids here have kaulo ratti - gypsy blood. Thieving big industry. Part of education. They know their legends. Romany respect the Clan. He gets us wallets.'

'And the directions were where to meet us later?'

'Fhuh! He find us. No worry. Get you sunblock if asked.'

The Fey searched her pocket and placed a pair of dark glasses on. 'There, Mac. Now I secret agent too.'

As if there weren't enough complications already, McKensie pondered. Not enough that they were being tailed but the Fey was getting a kid pickpocket to steal from them. Putting the kid in danger. If they were caught with the wallets, they'd be in jail themselves for sure. Receiving was as big a crime here as in

Britain. Correct that. Jail would only be for him. He doubted any jail could imprison the Fey.

Shortly, the pickpocket caught up with them again and handed McKensie his sunblock cream, spoke briefly to Kat and left. The Fey touched his coat pocket. The three wallets were now in his possession.

'You didn't tip him this time.'

The Fey smiled. 'Your cheque more than enough. More than he thought get. He sign it off impression from previous cheque you wrote. Told him keep money from wallets. He now very wealthy. Happy to meet a legend.'

'And I'm accessory to robbery. How is this going to look in my report?'

Kat kissed him on the cheek, 'Do you report everything, Mac?'

McKensie blushed slightly, 'Well....I...'

'Good! Solved then. We go shopping.'

The tour through the shops turned into an excuse for the Fey to handle his tourist guide book. It masked her going through the contents of the wallets as they appeared to move through the shopping malls with a vengeance. Certainly faster than the watchers who were keeping their distance in the street markets.

Kataya Oberon was disappointed that they didn't reveal very much.

'If they were police officers, those wallets would have had their warrant cards. They'd hardly carry anything stronger than a Government ID. Maybe they had them in other pockets. There's a lot of thieves about.'

'Fhuh! Chore chal say they not gav-engro...not police. Not local military. Spoke foreign on radios.'

'Wonderful. They're really watching us with more in the wings.'

'Right about not losing them.' The Fey looked into eyes. 'Only Chores or spies anything to hide. How can honeymoon couple be suspicious?'

McKensie shrugged. 'I guess. Maybe we just ought to keep acting like tourists.'

Kat smiled. 'Like that. You too tense, Mac. Bruises still hurt?'

'Must be the exercise or distraction. I've hardly felt anything in the past few hours.'

'Good! Still feel camova.'

And that could really spoil his day, McKensie decided.

o O o

The sheets moved and McKensie was aware that Kataya was snuggling up to him and unbuttoning his pyjamas. Despite the heat and humidity, he had decided that wearing pyjamas wouldn't make him look sexually receptive. It worked back at the Compound after all. She was naked and rubbing her body slowly against his. Under the circumstances, McKensie's body was reacting without any conscious control. The passion of a hot woman eager to have sex was something no normal male could resist. The deodorant might be dampening her pheromone but this appeared to be natural lust. What she called in Romany, camova.

'Look, if you want the bed, I'll leave you to it,' he offered. They had agreed to share the bed on the understanding that they would each stay on their own side.

'I want the bed and you. Can't wait longer. No cold showers this time, Mac. No alcohol. No special deodorant. On heat. I want a man. I need a man. I want you. Choomande.'

Kataya gave up unbuttoning his pyjama shirt and tore the buttons off. Deft hands split and threw the shirt away and repeated the experience to the pyjama trousers. Fingernails shredded the seams with little effort.

'Do I have to do everything myself?' she asked.

They had finished the day with another meal before returning to the hotel. Their three watchers in tow were left in the lobby. They didn't follow them into the lift. That would have been too obvious. These were cautious watchers. A passionate kiss while they waited would assure anyone watching, in the busy lobby, that there was only one thing on the honeymoon couple's minds...And it wasn't the carnival! Unlike the first occasion at the cafe, McKensie couldn't but get involved with the kissing.

They were joined by a few people in the lift, giving little choice but to continue the pretence, if it could be called that, all the way up to their floor and room.

'You should do that more often, Mac. Fun day. Better than Caruthers would arrange things.' The Fey professed in their room as they stared at each other after a short interval in silence, her arms still wrapped around McKensie's neck. The outside noise of the carnival could still be heard over the low hum of the air-conditioner. 'We make love now? Good camova.'

'You promised me you'd rest. How long before you want to do that safe?'

Kat screwed her eyes up thinking, 'Couple hours. Plenty time for camova.'

'And for rest.' McKensie disengaged her arms from his neck, kissed her cheek and turned the light on. 'You might be full of beans...full of energy, Kat, but this Baseline human Blank is knackered. I'm still getting over that beating, remember? That adrenaline-surge is working but I need rest.'

The Fey ran her fingers down his back and then his front. It was more of a professional examination than an attempt at foreplay. She then guided him more into the centre of the room and directly under the room's main light and studied his eyes.

'Tired yes. Healthier than two days ago. Camova do good. Get blood moving more', she whispered huskily before adding in his ear, 'Get my blood moving more.'

'Right. And after you get back, we've got to leave. I've got to rest. So should you.'

'And later?'

'We'll be back at the Compound and I'll probably be reassigned.'

'Fhuh! Evoke my Psionic rights. Demand you stay.'

'It has to be mutually agreed.'

'Don't want to stay, Mac? Am that bad?'

'Just impossible.'

'Perhaps should be more difficult...!'

'Rest. We'll talk about this later.'

Now here he was being unceremoniously aroused and being screwed by the Fey who was now on top of him, moving up and down with an easy vigour. There was no feeling of control over his actions. The reminder from the tiger book that tigresses go on heat and mate up to two hundred times in two days beating a pulse inside his head. The tiger, not the tigress, usually took the initiative but she was a Fey and it was obvious who was calling the shots. He's have to stick with it if she wasn't to prowl the streets for more mates later. With a place like Rio, there would hardly be a shortage of volunteers. If she went on a drinking binge...

Just have to make sure I don't come to quickly, McKensie decided. Distraction. Don't lose any self-control I've got left. What was that old army joke? Colonel inspecting a platoon of women. He asks one particularly attractive woman if she was capable of killing a man. The reply? 'Eventually, sir!' What if she was a tiger or Fey on heat? Could he survive?

Everything has to go eventually, including the Blank's self-control. Finally spent, Kataya Oberon eased herself down and cuddled by his chest and kissed him on the cheek. The fine hairs from her body made sensual passes with his body as she caressed him. What would have happened if he'd been reacting to her pheromone? He hadn't smelt it for hours. Would it have acted as an aphrodisiac? Would he have been tormented for sex that he would have been begging her for it?

'You're going to have to wait a little before you can try that again,' he confessed. 'I'm not even sure if I could keep up with your mating spells.'

'Mating spells?' she asked, running her fingers down his ribs. 'You talk oddly at times, Mac.'

'The two day rut tigresses go through. Eight times in half an hour the tiger book said.'

'Oh that!' She was dismissive of the problem again. Her pheromone would have given her no problem in attracting a suitable number of men to cover her heat. Assuming that was what she really wanted.

McKensie turned and looked into the Fey's eyes. Her eyes reflected golden-white in the near dark. 'What do you mean? Oh that! How else do you normally keep these desires under control?'

She poked him in the side. Not in a painful but humorous way. 'Saw me drinking. Drink alcohol enough reduces desire. Is all.'

'And your men friends?'

'Fhuh! Told you. Drink them under table. Take them home. Chee pele. No balls for anything else. Told you that already.'

'And tonight? You've drunk at least two bottles of rum or whatever they call it in Rio.'

'Cachaça is called. Not enough, pirení. Not enough. Also have to work. Wouldn't want less than efficient at the safe. Your orders, remember. Wanted camova. You there to provide.'

'Is this what caused your problem with Maxine? She wouldn't allow you time to release camova? That or your drinking or wild social life?'

Kat kissed him full on the lips before licking his ear. McKensie felt a growl, or rather a cat-like purr, vibrating rather pleasantly across his chest. Her breasts rubbing across his chest. Her other arm was

working at his groin and McKensie realised it would be sometime before he could continue the conversation again.

One thing though, he was through lying down on the job. Without any resistance from the Fey, he rolled them over and he was on top. He was through being the passive partner. If she wanted a lover, then he was through being a 'passive' partner. Kataya was pleased with this sudden reaction to her needs. He still needed self-control to last the distance. Maybe he should go over their escape route in his head...

'If Maxine Caruthers was here...what would she have ordered?' he asked much later. 'Not this. I mean this afternoon.'

'Caruthers no fun. First assignment all right. Didn't like way men looked at me. Said made me conspicuous. Said should stay in hotel.'

McKensie twirled Kat's wavy short hair in his hands. The lights of the city through the window blind made her orange hair acquire a luminescence of its own. The base of her neck was warm and pleasing to his touch.

'The second assignment happened shortly afterwards. Little time to prepare?'

'Caruthers thought within ability. No need to check out. Airport to hotel. Stay inside until ready to move.'

'That couldn't have been any fun for you. I take it that didn't stop you going out?'

The Fey smiled, her fangs seemed more prominent in the poor light. 'When high hotel room stop going out?'

'Did she find out?'

'Quiet matchka. Left when she slept. Came back. Found her waiting. Bostaris gorgio bugged room with passive bug!'

'And...?'

'Told her reconnaissance. Believed me.'

'You did a reconnaissance today though.'

'Fhuh! This safe tougher. Building well guarded. Not total fool, Mac.'

'Third assignment then. Did she find out then?'

'Found bug. Tremor detector at window opening. Used corridor window instead. Joined holiday party in bar when came back. Caruthers saw when out collecting fax. Didn't say word. Next night did job and returned to Compound.'

'And that was the reason....the cause of....that scratch you gave her.'

'Fhuh! Out in field, Fey in charge.'

'...Capable of changing instructions providing there is no compromise to the assignment. Standing orders.'

'I do good things for Stable, Mac.'

'So what was the reason?'

'Hom te jav.'

'What...?'

'I have to go.'

Kat gave McKensie a hearty french kiss before rolling off the bed. In the poor light she wiped herself down with a towel before dressing in a dark tee-shirt, dark sleeveless shirt and denim shorts. No shoes or underwear.

'Not conspicuous, Mac?'

'Thought you were going to mask your body temperature?'

'Hot camova. Hotter body. Released tension. Have plan.'

'You'll be normal before you get there.'

The Fey smiled and upturned her bag on the floor and picked out a couple fire-lighters she had bought in the afternoon. She shook it at him before slipping it into her shorts back-pocket.

'Secret weapon. Make things hot for them.'

McKensie shook his head in disbelief. How would it read in his report. Kataya Oberon took me to bed for a hearty shag before going to attack an impossible safe with an ordinary fire-lighter.

Kat lent over him and gently touched his groin and kissed him once more. 'Paracrow tute. We go when I return.'

'Take care, Kat.' What else could he say? Do the Fey believe in luck or was that a Romany tradition?

'Love you,' she called. The Fey opened the window, turned and was gone. All without the aid of a rope from twenty stories up.

The Blank raced to the window. It was only capable of being opened up quarter way and she had squeezed out. Probably a setting by the management to prevent anyone accidentally falling out. The Fey...Kat, had taken it in her stride without even bothering to look first. She hadn't stopped to wave. Unable to see her in Rio's carnival lights, McKensie decided it would be wiser to be ready for them both to leave. After all, the minute she had stepped out of the window, Kataya Oberon was now in total control of the assignment. As her Blank, all he could do now was wait. From a Blank's perspective, probably the worst part of his job. No, the second worse. According to the mating habits of tigers, they would now sixty-nine and lick each other's genitals. A lucky break, for now, he thought. He wasn't sure if under the present conditions he'd be up to the task.

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The Fey looked across at the building from her previous vantage point. Rio's business sector was some way from the otherwise party atmosphere of its carnival. All the buildings she had jumped across had their own security arrangements but nothing that affected her using them at this height. As she was now over two hundred stories up it made little difference, none of them considered this a possible entry point. It would need a helicopter that would be rather conspicuous and noisy.

A couple of the buildings further back as heli-pads available for their executive use but were also deserted this time of night. Most of the buildings were lit up but that didn't bother the Fey as she didn't

stray near their windows. What bothered her was that her target building had armed security guards on the roof. The same number of men but probably a different shift than late-morning. They were making it an obvious target that there was something precious to protect, assuming anyone else could watch from a similar vantage point to herself.

Cautiously she looked around but she was a lone watcher. It was unlikely that any of member of her Clan had been hired to get into this building without her hearing about it. Whoever had ordered security was looking for someone like herself. Did they really know what to expect? Was it a token gesture? Was someone aware of the Oberon Clan's potential? In the end, the Fey shrugged her shoulders. It didn't matter to her. Her Clan were above such matters.

With a running leap, the Fey launched herself off the roof. Baseline humans tended to think only in terms of what they were capable of doing. They had their Guinness Book of Records smugly pleased indicating the limits they had achieved. The Oberon Clan took everything in its stride. Their limits had yet to be learnt.

In mid-air, Kat used the fall of gravity and spun in a series of somersaults. A Baseline would have thought it easier to aim for the opposite roof. Her real objective was only to reach the wall itself. Then again, a Baseline would probably have fallen straight down to ensure a strawberry stain on the tarmac far below. In a controlled fall that only lost her seventy-five stories, the Fey caught hold of the building's wall. Her feline tensile-strength then made short work of the climb back up to the roof.

The extended masonry blocks were there to prevent people, like the guards, taking their own nose-dives to the tarmac, let alone prevent anyone crazy enough to get out of one of the upper floors onto the roof. It was also used as a support for the window-cleaning gang. Effortlessly, the Fey worked her way around the building ledges to the cables and used them to get eye-level to the roof. Had the guards looked in her direction, all they'd have seen were a pair of golden eye reflections watching them. There was no distracting lights up here lest it blinded them to night. Their guns were no joke. Sub-machines primed for action. It was a well-armed gesture.

If this were some macho Baseline film, she'd come over the top and attack. Dodge the bullets and kill the guards before getting inside. Kat always thought this was a rather comical way to behave. All that noise would attract even more attention and it was a wonder that the actors got out alive. Then again, they depended on the script-writers to ensure the opposition acted with enough stupidity to die against such onslaught. In extreme circumstances, the Fey was sure that she could walk away from any such action on the roof alive but it would not achieve her objective of getting into that safe with the minimum of fuss.

With gymnastic ease, she swung herself up over the cable and rolled quietly into the window-cleaners trolley, grabbing one of its chains to reduce it rocking. The few hours of watching had made sure that the guards had got use to the trolley making some noise to practically ignore any activity it would normally make in the breezes so high. The chilly air would keep them alert at this time of night but they were also likely to be bored. Using every shadow, the Fey worked her way past each guard to the elevator assemble room. Their attention was focused looking out into the night not what was happening behind their backs.

The elevator maintenance door was locked but the Fey had no intention of using the service stairs. It was important that she used the lift system to get into the ventilation system. She extracted a sprung steel wire from the lining of her shirt and deftly picked the lock before quietly entering.

If the Tech back at the Compound had believed she was bionic, he'd probably thought she would have used the lift cables to climb down to the elevator car and ride on its roof. Even with her exceptional eyesight, the Fey could no more see the elevator than a Baseline or cat could in such poor light. With

seemingly effortless ease, she began to pound down the shaft, pausing occasionally by gripping a service step to listen.

Like many high-rise buildings, there was a sub-system within its structure linking the elevator paths to the ventilation network. The movement of the lifts circulated the air as an extra benefit to the over-worked air-conditioning system. To appease safety regulations, these shafts also had heat sensors that would slam shut emergency doors to prevent the spread of fire. So far, such designs hadn't been fully tested under operational conditions. The oil on these shutters was dirty from never being used, let alone tested. The Fey still wasn't keen to test them either. This was her route through the building.

The floor the safe was on, according to the Farsighters was the one hundred and fiftieth. There were guard units on the floors above and below. The floor, outside of office hours, was kept deserted. Presumably to ensure no one got in masquerading as a guard or cleaner. With the heat sensors, anyone who got in would be attacked by automatic defences before they made the safe. Psionic scanning, without the use of someone's eyes as a medium, tended to fall down in distinguishing colour and detail. The Farsighters' limitations in seeing events was more a view of probable choices than precise details. Psionic abilities in use tended to distort probability even further. Whether any of them could see what she was doing now or any of her planned actions would have been impossible to say. The only indication given was that she had the best probability options for success. To the Fey, that meant doing the unexpected. McKensie's plan of going through the room security dynamics was sound as far as it went for human Baseline perception. From her perspective, Kat decided her plan needed a different sort of distraction. It was an interesting bi-product that should change her heat signature sufficiently to accomplish the task.

At the one hundred and thirtieth floor, Kat entered the ventilation system and examined a number of vents before finding one not obviously within range of a security camera. The heel of her hand smashed into the screw shafts breaking the vent free, enabling her to get in. It would have been easier to have gone directly into an office but apart from spotting security sensors in these routes, the Fey wanted to disguise her route. Each entry would be selected a different way.

Picking the lock of an office, she slipped in and kept low to the floor searching for a waste bin. Kat muttered under her breath under she discovered it empty. Either the employees were meticulously tidy or the cleaning staff had already been around. A minor problem. Picking the executive table drawer lock, she pulled out some loose papers and dropped them in the bin. Setting them alight with her fire-lighter before muffling the flames. The Fey left before the sprinkler system kicked into play.

In quick succession, she repeated this over a variety of floors. Some she let burn vigorously before allowing them to smoulder, confident they'd be put out before the fire spread. There was no intention of setting the building on fire but to cause confusion everywhere but in the ventilation and lift shafts. It wouldn't affect security around the hundred and fiftieth but it would make everyone else a little cranky. If they were as on the ball as the roof guards, they would have to investigate every incident. They might also believe there was a problem with the sprinkler system. They would also be using their cameras scouring the building looking for anything out of place. If the Fey had time to rub her hands together in glee she would have done so. For the moment, any sign of victory would have to wait until after she burgled the safe.

Kat climbed up and out of the one hundred and forty-fifth floor and filling a waste bin with loose papers before returning to the life shaft.

The room with the wall safe was supposed to be only accessible by elevator. Ignoring the ventilation shaft and keeping the bin pressed between herself and the lift doors, she applied pressure to pull them open. The practice in the Compound had convinced her that dropping in through the vent would have made her

too much of a target. There had to be a delay factor coming in through this entrance or the guards would be targeted by the initial motion activators before the heat sensor accepted them.

All elevator doors were built to fully open once partially released. It prevented anyone being crushed in closing doors. Kat didn't open them that wide before squeezing in and sat cross-legged on the floor to wait. She wasn't in far enough to be spotted yet. Her keen ears intent on listening for any movement of the lift was also listening to the sensor servo motors. Quite where the guards were waiting began to puzzle her. They could hardly make a quick entry if they had to wait long minutes for it to arrive. The other lift shafts were on the other side of the building. Had the Farsighters missed something?

The room was lit to ensure full camera scans although to her trained eyes it wasn't a blanket coverage. Other than the wall safe two thirds of the way down, the only furniture was a table and a couple chairs. For such a luxury executive building this room was extremely Spartan. At near ceiling level, there were a series of heat sensor detectors cross-combined with the dart guns. They clicked and were now moving in her direction. There was no more time left to think. It was time for action.

Pouring most of the lighter fuel in the bin, she lit the paper and kicked it into the middle of the room. The dart guns targeted and fired at the bin as the sprinkler system sprayed the room. Their design was to target the hottest heat source and it was no longer her. The Fey stood up and allowed herself to be thoroughly drenched as she walked down the room, muffling her body heat even more. All the cameras focused on the fire. Any guards watching would be puzzled before calling an alert. The separate sensors swung between her and the bin but didn't fire this time. The water had dampened her heat signature below the specific temperature the sensors had been set to detect. The bin fire was the obvious target.

The sprinklers stopped as the bin's fire was put out but the Fey was now at the safe, fiddling with its tumblers. It would be half a minute before they re-loaded and targeted her again. The cameras wouldn't take that long themselves. They were probably being brought under manual control for the guard to examine the room. The guards would be here in about the same time, but the Fey was confident that she'd be finished before they arrived.

All the cameras were still focused on the smouldering bin but beginning to respond again. They weren't depending on manual control. Her body heat, combined with the air-conditioning, was already drying her body. There wasn't much time. After long moments, the final tumbler dropped and she pulled the safe door open. There were three document folders and a cache of money. She slipped the folders into her shirt and threw the money into the waste bin rekindling the flames with the last of the lighter fluid, before slamming the safe door shut. Skirting around by the walls, the Fey kicked the bin nearer to the elevator doors before positioning herself in the corner.

'Trinis! Dui! Yeck!' Not loud enough to be heard over the sprinklers that had begun to operate again, but to reassure herself that everything was going to her plan.

The doors open and the additional fresh oxygen fed the flames. It also caused the detector dart guns to open fire at the guards. Unwarned, they all dropped in the onslaught. Without waiting to see their condition, Kat slipped through the door onto a drawbridge that had dropped into place in the lift shaft. She had no intention of following their route across to the opposite room and had no choice but to climb higher to reach the next ventilation shaft.

Winding through the shafts, Kat found one of the other lift shafts and began to climb down. A Baseline human would have climbed down the shaft as if they were using stairs. The more confident Fey was going down head first, acknowledging every foot and handhold to ensure she didn't build up a terminal velocity or slip. With one elevator turned off, it was inevitable that one of the others would be used to send in more guards or a fire detail. The Fey was more concerned in seeing it coming and moving out of the way

into a vent than to be slowed on the way down.

She paused in mid-flight to listen. The entire ventilation system was giving a low rumble. There wasn't just one elevator moving but several. The Fey growled softly before continuing bounding down the shaft. With the noise spread out so much it would be hard to distinguish which lift was moving. There was a possibility that all the elevators would either be locked or move to the safe floor to drop off more security guards.

'Bostaris!'

The elevator in her shaft had suddenly appeared coming up quickly beneath her. Kat found herself instinctively spinning and somersault landing on its roof. Until it stopped it would be reckless to jump off into the passing vent shafts. The lift was obviously set in express mode. Resigning herself to her situation, the Fey sat down cross-legged and made herself comfortable.

If they heard her landing, they might investigate to see if they had a dead body. Kat thought she had landed softly despite the surprise so they might not have heard anything at all. Probably too agitated to catch the noise. If they chose to investigate, there would be plenty of warning to go higher as they brought the lift lower to the doors. More likely they would be joining the other guards trying to work out what exactly had happened. The evidence of the bodies would have them considering the security team had entered recklessly and were attacked. Not that they had an intruder.

She couldn't help smiling at that. Mac had only concentrated on the problem of the safe room itself and not thought of the more serious problem of getting out unobserved. No doubt surmising this would be the easy part. He was still thinking that more than Blanks couldn't see her without eye contact. If they were looking for a Psionic then she had provided them with a couple possibilities. A possible pyro-aggie moving around the building. With no evidence on camera, they might well believe there was a Stealth here instead. Her Clan secret had also to be kept. Kat stifled a laugh as she realised there was an even easier way to get out than the way she came in.

The elevator came to a halt and as the guards left. Cameras would be examining corridors and rooms throughout the local area then building. It would be difficult, but not impossible, to set up any more fires now. Judging by the cables on top of the elevator, there was also a camera in the lift itself. The Fey resigned herself to waiting. Whoever was in charge would realise that there was too many people on the floor and send them back.

Maybe they didn't really know. Just following orders from those who knew about Psionics. From what Lancier had once told her that wouldn't be the first time that human troops had been used as potential cannonfodder. The number of people who knew about Psionics kept it restricted than blagged to all and sundry.

Her innate sense of time indicated just over an hour had passed since she had left McKensie. There was plenty of time before Mac would really worry if she was in difficulty. He had really been concerned at lunch. No doubt because the chances of being seen were greater in daylight. Like all Baselines, they failed to realise most people didn't gooseneck towards the rooftops. They were also less likely to believe their eyes if they looked out windows if she didn't hang around. It was also more prudent to wait than to rush out like any gorgio bandit anxious to get away. She had the prize in her vest. It would have been foolish to lose it in a mad hurry to leave.

This assignment felt really good for a change. Caruthers had been a bitch ordering her confinements. She had really enjoyed herself today. Mac wasn't as confused about her as she feared. He was even bothering to learn Romany customs. A bit slow on the language but that wasn't totally a disadvantage yet.

Without the attack, he would have probably mastered more. Very intelligent. Head in books a lot but quick to adjust his ways to hers.

She was falling in love with him. The Fey wasn't sure about his motives when Mac began trailing her at night. Blanks, by the definition of their job, tend to snoop rather than ask direct questions. It was her heart that jumped when her mates had thumped him that was the deciding factor. Baselines and Blank males were more fragile emotionally than physically. Until then, he had been communicative but distancing himself. Probably thought she had a fiery temper! Like a lot of people, still not sure what to make of the Fey except for what she was. Unlike Caruthers, he had stopped thinking of her as a wild animal but a unique person. Would he fall in love without the pheromone controlling him?

Her friends thought they were protecting her? Fhuh! Secrecy had its limits. They were lucky she hadn't attacked them. That would really have got her in trouble with the Stable. More than letting Mac get mugged. Civilians were definitely off-limits. Would he want the alternative? Would he stay with her?

Mac had also hinted that he was to move onto another job shortly, meaning another Psionic problem. That, she decided, shouldn't happen. Part of her obligation to her people was bringing new blood into the Clan. If it could be brought in out of love...There weren't any Blanks, as far as she knew, in her Grandfather's day. Mac had balls. He was humorous in his own way. Very reassigned to what he had to do but had some character lurking in that personality. She was sure Mac was falling in love with her, despite what he said. He had to stay with her. She wanted him to stay. The elevator moved. It was time for action.

Only a quarter of an hour had passed. They would now be part of the various groups searching the building. As long as she stayed in the elevator or ventilation shafts there was little fear that any camera would spot her. The question was really where the occupants of this particular lift were going. The choices were easily counted. Go back where they came from. Investigate any of the floors where she had set off the sprinkler systems. Check the basement entrances. There was enough to keep them busy. Did they think there was an intruder now? Would they figure that she was still in the building?

To suddenly disappear without setting up some sort of false trail would be very suspicious, especially when the safe was opened. Safe contents don't just disappear. In the Baseline naïve world, there were no Psionics. The belief was spread that they didn't exist. A benign trick. Faked by a lot of people with very minor talents who thought they were the real thing. Who then would believe in the real thing? It was an acknowledged mythology, very much the same way the Oberon Clan had concealed themselves through various half-truths over the centuries. Psionics was very much a minor talent to the eyes of the world. A parlour game, except for those in the know who thought them more dangerous. A number that was also beginning to grow with the Stable so active.

Would they know by now that the safe had been opened? They would now be looking for an intruder than think it an accident. To give them a Stealth ghost would leave too many people guessing and attract the wrong kind of attention, mainly from those in the know. Better to give something a little more tangible. A physical presence. Kat had already considered this as part of her plan. Waiting on top of the elevator had given her time to think further. Rather than leave a mystery burglary, it was now going to be fun to leave a trail.

The elevator came to a halt and Kat climbed up and out through the nearest ventilation shaft. Her interest in the troop of guards had gone as soon as she had descended to the floor beneath and continued her flight down the lift shaft. It was unlikely it would come down on her head or rather her bottom.

The Fey was still travelling downwards head first. She paused only when a distinct smell of dry skin dust blended with oil reached her nose. The shafts might be reasonably clean but only because all the dust

floats to the bottom. Rather than pry the lift doors open, she sought out and left through the nearest ventilation vent. Her suspicions were confirmed that she had made an entrance into one of the sub-basements.

With a building such as this, it was unlikely that any of the maintenance staff or cleaning crew would be allowed to keep any of their possessions in any of the other floors. It wasn't their possessions she was after but one of their uniforms.

A swift search failed to find the locker room but there was the discovery of a fence storeroom and a selection of uniforms. Breaking in, she chose overalls and a peaked cap. There were no shoes but Kat wasn't worried as she had already decided they would have hindered her movements. The overall legs were just a little too long and she neatly rolled them higher than the ankles. The sleeves would have to stay down to hide her rather distinctive orange and black streaked arms. She decided to ask her Grandfather why they hadn't picked up the tiger's white belly undercoat. In the fluorescent light, her orange hair stood out rather too brightly. Leaving the front unzipped to nearly her waist, the Fey did a backward somersault before leaving the storeroom.

Minutes later, she walked out, carrying a bucket and mop into the reception area of the ground floor. It had been a lot easier locating the stairwell up from the sub-basement than finding the storeroom. A quick assessment of the area had spotted all the cameras. She pressed the peaked cap firmly down on her head. Unlike the occasions in the Compound, this was one time that she had to be seen but not recognised. Compared to the chaos inflicted over a hundred floors above, the reception looked perfectly normal. Then again, she considered, why would they want to do anything to attract attention down here? That still wouldn't stop the two guards from alerting any nearby team.

Dipping her mop in the bucket, Kat proceeded to clean the floor working her way towards the entrance.

'You! What are you doing here?'

English, not Portuguese. They weren't local.

'Que é?' she looked up briefly at the guard towering over her, before continuing with her mop. Despite what Mac thought, her pheromone did not act instantly.

'You speak English?'

'Sim. You want me speak English?' She didn't look up.

'Answer the question. What are you doing here?'

'What look like? Cleaning my ass? I clean floor. I go home.' Kat shrugged, 'Why you bother me? Good girl cleaner!'

Another shadow caught the corner of her eye as the other guard joined them. Without looking up, Kat was sure she was only a third of the way to the main doors. She sniffed, there was a third guard somewhere close. A cubicle of some sort. A building such as this would have to have bullet-proof glass as well as other security alarms. Smashing the glass might not be an option.

'Bet that's not all you're good at, sweetheart.'

Kat looked up briefly, smiled slightly and went back to the mopping. The pheromone was having its effect. 'What you mean? I good girl.'

'C'mon', said the first guard. 'A girl as sweet smelling as you must like...'

Acting the part, Kat paused by the bucket and leaned on her mop, looking at each guard in turn. The corner of her eye caught their walkie-talkies flashing red. Someone wanted to talk to them. There was simply no time for subtly.

'Would cost me job, senhor.'

'After work?'

'With you in hospital? I think not, senhor.'

Both guards paused briefly before the Fey hit the point home using the mop handle. In swift easy motions, she wacked each guard up between the legs and across the jaw as they fell. She kicked the bucket to the window door as a metal shutter began to descend. It had to be the hidden cubicle guard. She ran and then slid under the gap created by the bucket before the shutter crushed it flat. Kat was effectively trapped in a foot wide space between shutter and bullet-proof glass. Within a space of a couple seconds she had trapped herself. Considering that she would be facing armed guards the other side of the shutter, the Fey considered she was in the right place.

Bracing her back to the shutter, she brought her legs up and pushed against the glass. Bullet-proof glass is very effective against small impacts, but against the leverage the Fey was administering it wasn't, as it suddenly popped out of its frame onto the outside concrete. There were bound to be some sort of Baseline weapons that could duplicate that feat. The shutter was also rising.

Realising that there was no time to run off, the Fey back-flipped and held onto the shutter, blind-sided to the armed guards sweeping the area. There would only be shooting if they saw her. They were now legitimately hunting an intruder. She climbed up onto the wall and watched from the door ledge. A false trail had been laid that would indicate something more physical and human than a Stealth or Spook. Certainly not a Fey. The overalls would indicate that she had got in with the cleaning staff.

The two guards who talked to her weren't Brazilian. More Yankee American. Buildings such as this would have a larger choice of guard personal than just use local folk. As long as they were all mystified as to where she had gone, Kat decided that was enough. Like the half-tiger cat she was, the Fey worked her way around the building ledge before jumping down and stripping off the overall and hat before making her way up the next building and into the night. The three packages from the safe still neatly secure in the waist of her vest.

o O o

'Look, the last time I saw my wife, she said she was going up to the roof for some fresh air. Maybe watch the carnival lights from up there. Is that a crime?'

'Why would she want to do that, Senhor McIntyre? What is wrong with you both going out on the streets?'

There was a distinctive slap. A delay. Then a couple more slaps.

Another voice went on, 'You are not telling the truth. Perhaps you kill wife, yes?'

'We're on our honeymoon, for Christ's sake. I'm suffering jet-lag. She isn't.'

'Yet you let your wife out alone?' The first voice was more settled. A determined quieter more thoughtful voice.

'She wanted some fresh air. Is that a crime? Your country is very humid. Isn't she on the roof? Has

something happened to her?' There was a certain amount of worry in Mac's voice now.

'We're having it checked.'

'Tell us about some words we've heard you both speak. What or who is "Baseline"? You referred to yourself as such. Also a "Blank". The term "Psionic" isn't a unfamiliar term, even if a little mumbo-jumbo. What is "camova"? This Maxine Caruthers and assignments suggests you both as spies. You are English spy?'

'Yeah! Right, do I look like James Bond?'

Another slap but both men were laughing.

'He certainly sounds like Sean Connery.'

'Senhor McIntyre, this apartment is rented by the British Secret Service. We know. They know. We find our wallets in your room. Clearly you are not making a social call. Where is your wife if she is your wife? What are you doing in our country...?'

The Fey heard enough. Her instinct to pause before entering the room had probably saved Mac a lot of problems. 'Does your wife always enter through the window?' Was he talking in case she was listening? They had both made mistakes in not checking for bugs. How else could they have got the information?

What to do was the problem. Film heroes would crash into the room, kill the watchers and rescue their mate in a fury. The fact that she could do this was irrelevant. McKensie would probably be caught in the cross-fire. Her sense of smell had caught the scent of the third watcher and he was armed. The scent of gun oil was unmistakable. Their wallets also meant they wouldn't be able to talk their way out of the situation neither.

They should have dropped them in the street. Probably the only reason why they hadn't taken Mac away was because they hadn't worked out where she had gone. They were probably watching the lobby and up on the roof as well now. It reduced the chances of just walking in as if they had missed her wandering about. The only thing in their favour was that they had nothing to do with the safe guards. With nothing on her to secure the packages anywhere else, Kat decided it was probably safer to keep them in her vest. Whatever decision she was going to make had to be soon before they started to do more than rough Mac up.

She really must stop associating so much with humans, Kat decided. It was too easy to think like a Baseline than a Fey. It was time for another disappearing act. She searched along the wall of the floor for a window that could be opened quietly and crept in. The odour of cologne was strong and indicated she was in a man's room. The woman's deodrant paled in comparison. Her cat-eyes in the poor light picked out a sleeping couple in bed. She found a suit hung up in the open wardrobe. The Fey grinned as she quietly dressed in it. A bit large but like the overalls she rolled up the legs and sleeves to make it more passable. Unlocking the door with the key left on the dressing table, Kat quietly went out into the corridor.

The Fey stalked down the corridor towards their room. A man was waiting by the elevator, dressed in suit and hat. A sniff confirmed the smell of yet more gun oil. The thick carpet disguised her footfalls even more as she approached the man from his blindside.

'Nice hat. Give it me.'

The man, surprised, turned but only to be clipped under the chin by the Fey's elbow. The suit she had

stolen matched the colour of the secret service agent. He was even taller than the man she had stolen it from. She called the elevator as she placed the hat on her head. While she waited, Kat posed in the mirror. Her height was wrong.

She arched and stretched her spine, like a cat's, and went on tip-toe but she was a little taller. Not so tall as the man on the floor but it wouldn't be needed for long. When the lift arrived, she pushed the unconscious agent in, selected the lobby and sent it go down to the ground floor.

Time was of the essence. Whoever was in the lobby would be alerting everyone when the agent was discovered. Two unrelated disappearing tricks in one night was going to look suspicious but by then, Kat thought, they'd both be gone.

She knocked on the door before entering. They must have either spread their team out too far or didn't believe anyone would just walk in who shouldn't. It took only an instant to appreciate the situation. Mac was dressed and tied to a chair with two agents either side of him. His cheeks were dark red from being slapped but otherwise appeared unhurt. Certainly not as bad as the mugging her friends had given the Blank. By the wall nearest the door facing him was the third agent with the gun out.

'What is it?'

None of the agents barely glanced at Kataya Oberon. She looked like them, therefore was one of them. They didn't need to look long for a verbal report. Only Mac's eyes were widening as he was taking in her bare feet.

'Intruder in lobby.' The Fey dropped her voice into a deeper tone.

'Don't ki....!'

The Fey's arm shot out and floored the gunman with a single swipe. A forward mid-air somersault ended with each foot hitting the remaining agents each in the jaw. As they landed unconscious on the floor, Kat completed the flip landing on McKensie's lap.

She kissed the Blank on the lips as her fingernails cut through the ropes. 'Missed me, Mac?'

'Remind me not to get you angry', he whispered in a hoarse voice. 'You didn't kill them. They're Brazilian Secret Service. Would cause all sorts of problems. Wanted to know what we were doing here. Room is still bugged.'

'Heard at the window. You need protection.'

The Fey got up and looked around. Her head tilted listening before suddenly looking up at the lampshade. Kat opened McKensie's suitcase and emptied his soapbag to locate his shaving foam. She sprayed its contents rather liberally at the shade.

'Artavello. Sorry, Mac. Preoccupied earlier. Didn't look.'

McKensie got up, flexing his wrists to get his blood circulating. 'Fordias. We should have guarded our speech.'

'You remembering Romany, Mac. Am forgiven for all?'

'We're still ahead of the game, Kat. Anything I need to know?'

She emptied McKensie's belongings into her own suitcase, along with the three packages from her vest,

and then placed her smaller case inside his.

'Don't have long. Sent lift down with another agent. Expecting others. They come up. We go down. My plan.'

The Fey turned and in the dim light her smile showed a pointed fang and flicked it with her finger. 'Left fake trail at building.' She stripped off the stolen suit and hung it up in the wardrobe.

'It's going to look like you're planning another empty trail here. Is that wise? I mean, two vanishing acts. What if they make the connection?' McKensie searched the more thoughtful interrogator and extracted a small tape recorder and removed the tape. 'Let's hope they didn't make a spare copy.'

'Fhuh! Problem with safe was thinking human. Think Fey made life easier. Safe not held by these people. Not likely to report it. Shouldn't make connection.'

'As we're not checking out, just how are we leaving?'

Kat pointed at the window. 'You carry the case. I carry you. Too many watchers in hotel to do anything else.'

'I didn't realise we were so notorious.' McKensie slipped on his jacket.

'Maybe not like British Secret Service?'

'Or someone at Six doesn't like the Stable.'

'Is possible. Feel OK, Mac? We go now?'

Kataya Oberon pushed the window wide open this time. The safety limiter broke in its groove. 'No bodies. No evidence. No proof.'

McKensie at her side looked down. 'It looks a long way down.'

'Was up higher earlier. When on ledge, keep eyes shut if worried. Do as I say.'

'All without the aid of a tether or safety net?'

'Wanted action, Mac. Do this all time. Think of report. First hand information.'

McKensie didn't know which was more nerve-wrecking. His brief capture by the Brazilian Secret Service or the rather harrowing climb along the building ledge until the Fey found a rusty fire ladder. She took the suitcase and allowed McKensie to climb down. If there was any activity above, it could only be a minor detail compared to what he was doing. The Blank was several floors down before he realised the Fey wasn't with him. The route down she had selected was away from the street lights and probably into some back alley.

He continued down slowly, looking downwards hoping to see some sign of where the Fey had gone. McKensie suddenly slipped and was left hanging on by his arms to a rung. There were no rungs for his feet. How long could he hold on?

'See found problem, Mac.' A voice whispered from his left.

In the poor light, McKensie could see the Fey's shape clinging from the wall. Her eyes dimly shining in the poor light. Her strong arm pulled him up onto another ledge.

'This old style ladder. Better one on next wall but too well lit. Too close to room. They there now.'

'Christ! There's no rungs!'

'Fhuh! Didn't stopped me.' Even in the poor light, it was obvious to McKensie that she was smiling at his predicament.

'But you're a Fey', he protested.

'Bosh! Ladder too slow anyway. Keep legs out and don't hit wall.'

'What you planning to do?'

'Put your life in my hands before, Mac. Trust me.'

'Anything!'

'Including not being reassigned?'

'Just get me down!'

'Hold tight!'

Kat held him with one arm around his chest, the other under his bottom and began to run down the wall. The Blank's additional bulk didn't hinder her in the slightest. By keeping him moving his weight was evenly distributed. The Blank was glad this wall route was so dark. He was sure he'd have nightmares if he could see what she was doing. A few feet from the ground, she twirled McKensie around and holding him in both arms upside down, did a forward flip and landed upright on her feet.

'Open eyes, Mac,' she said placing his feet gently onto the ground and urging his body upright. 'Is safe now.'

'If I ever do this with you again, remind me to have some practice with you first,' he said rather hoarsely. He was shaking from reaction to events.

'You stay on? Work with lonely Fey?'

McKensie shook his head, catching his breath. Kataya Oberon was still breathing at a regularly rate. 'Yeah! Work with lonely lovely Fey.'

'Say nicest things. Choomande!'

'Can't I catch my breath?'

The Fey kissed him on both cheeks instead and hugged him until his body settled down. Her demonstration of strength was restrained with dealing with anything other than inanimate objects.

'What happened to the case?' he asked shortly.

'It here. Came down while you on ladder.'

She opened it and stripped and changed into a trouser suit and slipped the safe packages into its lining pockets. She hadn't bother with any underwear.

'Where do we go from here?'

'Eat. Hungry! Could eat whole cow. Plenty time before leaving.' Kat slipped on a pair of sandals and hat. McKensie kissed her on the cheek. 'Now that would be conspicuous.'

o O o

More conspicuous than he realised, McKensie decided. The chef at a different cafe had been extremely uncooperative in providing Kat with raw beef in the late evening. After swearing profusely in Portuguese, the Fey had stalked into the kitchen. McKensie picked up a discarded newspaper and looked at the headlines as various noises came from the kitchen. There was little he could do, other than make the scene worse. He wouldn't have been able to do much other than watch anyway. The other cafe patrons appeared to be either too pissed or high on the carnival to be that concerned. Just the activities of an annoyed tourist in their eyes.

She returned with her raw meat dish and something she described as feijoada for him. An apologetic waiter arrived with drinks for them both, adding in poor English that it was all the complements of the house. Oddly enough, the Fey chose to drink guaraviá, the fruit juice he favoured, rather than the cachaça she had been drinking all day. Diplomatically, the Blank avoided asking her about the change in her taste. Presumably, her period of camova was at an end.

The early morning bus trip to São Paulo was totally uneventful. Why would anyone suspect that they would go further inland than leave the country right away? He had slept most of the way. Kataya Oberon had taken the aisle seat and half-dosed, keeping an eye out for possible thieves. If the Fey had stopped anyone, she didn't say. A couple faces appeared to be keeping a respectable distance when he woke. An attitude developed with all Blanks working with any Psionic was to just keep out of the way while they looked after trouble. Physical Psionics like the Fey needed the same sort of respect. They were simply in a class of their own.

Maxine Caruthers had obviously tried to impose her own values on the Fey. Kat was very much a free spirit and had eventually rebelled. The fact Maxie drew a knife on her appeared to indicate the pheromone might have driven her to it, too. It would be mitigating circumstances for her and probably not restrict Maxie to desk duties.

Kataya Oberon was strong-willed with strong body. A free spirit. She resented having her freedom restricted. Kat did as she pleased, which was probably why she kept missing spy bugs. Not out of arrogance but simply because she didn't care because nothing would stop her. Yet now she had more than designs on his body and was obviously out to protect him. As a tiger would protect its mate.

She might be half-tigress but this value was carried with the Fey for the 'weaker' male. He was feeling the mood of camova but not sure if it depended on her pheromone. He hadn't smelt that odour for a couple days now. Had he got used to the smell or was he now under its spell? How could he tell the difference?

McKensie looked at the Fey curled up on the aeroplane seats. Without any assistance from her pheromone or the deodorant, they had spent a couple days and nights in a São Paulo hotel making love and eating. They had got extremely close.

If it was the love of a man that would stop her roaming the villages around the Compound then he was hardly in a position to argue. McKensie also didn't want to see her angry or upset. Least of all with him. He had too much respect for her, both as a Fey and as a woman. He could certainly do worse in lovers.

In training, Blanks were told to be pliable with the demands of the Psionic they worked with. Training never equipped anyone for this situation. Quite what the Stable Bureaucracy would say about this arrangement was hard to say. Standing orders were to encourage Psionic Pairs to get emotionally

involved in the hope that they might yield powerful Psionic offspring. It was something they tended to resist. A Blank bedding a Psionic might be frowned on. If he told them about it. A Fey offspring with the ability not to be susceptible to being scanned by a Psionic might be regarded as being dangerous to the Stable. It might not as well. Whether their relationship had tamed Miss Oberon would be hard to say. Everything had to start from somewhere.

From a management point of view, her attitude was now markedly different. The Bureaucracy would appreciate that more than the way it was achieved. Whether it was from controlling her camova lust or purely in love was hard to say. Even love was undocumented where the Fey was concerned. Would she fall out of love as easily? Would he? What would happen then? An angry Fey was as dangerous as a tiger on the loose. Another question to add to his list to ask her grandfather the next time he met the elder Fey.

Being in love had probably saved a bloodbath with those Brazilian Secret Service agents. Would it temper his caution when they were on assignment? Hopefully, not on his part. The reverse was more likely. Kat's rescue of him at the hotel was an act of protection for her mate. The same would probably have applied for any other Blank. Hadn't Chris Lancier pulled his Blank, Courtney Adams, out of a few scraps himself? The Bureaucracy didn't mind as long as trouble was minimised. Cheaper on the budget.

A thorough check of all the Brazilian newspapers had indicated nothing of the Fey's theft or of the hotel incident. Whether it was because inquiries were still being carried out discretely or there was the equivalent of a Brazilian 'D' notice in effect would be hard to say. More likely both affairs were being kept discrete for different reasons. The only real way was to see what happened was when they left the country. The McIntyre passports had been left in the Rio hotel. There simply hadn't been enough time to collect them. A loose end. Kat found another Romany thief before leaving Rio and after passing him a couple of Mac's travellers cheques, promised to retrieve and post them to the local British Embassy. Unlike the afternoon pickpocket, this adult thief was more than a little afraid of the bori rawniskie matchka! He would even take from any polcia. Quite what the Embassy staff would make of the passports would be debatable. Probably wait for some distressed tourists to come and claim them. Fat chance!

They left on a late night international flight from São Paulo to London, stopping briefly at Rio to collect a few late passengers. Both of them scrutinised these arrivals in case any of the Brazilian Secret Service watchers were looking over the flight. Kataya Oberon cuddled her mouth into his neck, suppressing the giggles as a husband was complaining to his wife about a suit missing from their hotel room as they sat down. In the same breath, he was also assuring his wife he hadn't gone out on the town while she slept. McKensie was sure she would explain it later. Her report of the actual assignment itself was going to certainly drop a few jaws upstairs. It was far more thorough than anything she had told the more prudish Maxine Caruthers. After she recovered from her stay in hospital, Maxie would probably be reassigned to less dangerous activities. If ever there were any at the Stable. She might even have his old supervisor job to give her a greater insight into other Psionic problems. He shrugged. What would Maxie make of his new role? He didn't really care. She wouldn't be working with the Fey again anyway.

When they returned to the Compound there was one thing McKensie promised himself. The local villages were to be surveyed to ensure that all the men had access to and were using the neutraliser deodorant. Immunity to Kataya's pheromone charm was a must. He didn't want to be beaten to a pulp on a regular basis should they visit a pub. He still had to find out why he couldn't always see her and if it was true of all Blanks.

Kataya Oberon stretched and uncurled on the seat beside him. In the dim aeroplane lights, her golden-like eyes looked like dim saucers looking at him. She pursed her lips at him before smiling and

grabbing his hand to haul him off to the plane toilets. McKensie gave a wry grin. He wasn't quite sure where he was getting his strength from for all of this camova but felt no resistance in joining her in the Mile High Club.

End

end-note: although it isn't really necessary to understand Brazilian Portuguese to know what is being said, it is as accurate as I can make it in this backwater, it should be more intelligible than the Net format treated my Cyrillic in the Psi-Kicks story 'Shell Game' elsewhere on this site. Any mistakes can be addressed to my e-mail address: gfwillmetts@hotmail.com.

The Romany language, however, is a different kettle of fish. The two books I used for reference indicate only word transposition with English. Any differences in their use should be blamed on me and Kataya Oberon, who although uses the language isn't strictly speaking Romany either. Again, much of what is meant can be inferred from the text and what follows below is to assist those who want the literal translation.

artavello - pardon or forgive

'Artavello, o bori rawniskie matchka' - pardon, lady lady-like cat

baleneskoe - hairy

balormengro - hairy fellow

bengako tan - hell

bengui - devil

bosh - fiddle

bostaris - bastard

camova - lust

cannelo bostaris - stinking bastard

chee pele - no testicles (balls)

choomande - kiss me

chore chal - thief boy

chores - stealing

dinnelo - a fool, one possessed by the devil

dui - 2

fordias - forgiven

gav-engro - police officers

gorgio - a gentile, non-gypsy

hom te jav - I must go

kaulo ratti - gypsy blood

keri-poggring - house-breaking

lunneny - harlot

matchka - female-cat

paracrow tute - I thank you

pireni - sweetheart

poknies - justice of the peace

povo-guero - mole or earth-fellow

rawniskie dicking gueri matchka - lady-like looking woman cat

romani chi matchka - gypsy lass cat

romani chohawni - gypsy witch

Tatto ratti se len - They have hot blood

trinis - 3

weshen-juggal - fox or dog of the wood

yeck - 1

Kisaiya Matchka - Kataya Oberon's alias: Kisaiya is a traditional female gypsy Christian name chosen because it resembles her regular name. Whether it is her true name I'll leave everyone guessing. It should never be assumed that the Fey don't have secret names. Matchka is, of course, a female cat.

Rhomanies is an old-fashioned spelling of Romany. I used it mainly to distinguish Rex Oberon's pronunciation of the term.

For those who have developed an interest in pursuing the subject may like to read: 'Romano Lao-Lil - A Book Of The Gypsy' by George Borrow (publisher: Alan Sutton 1874/1982) and 'Romany Magic' by Charles Bowness (publisher: Aquarian Press, 1972)

Kataya Oberon, Cameron McKensie, Rex Oberon, Chris Lancier, Courtney Adams, Alex Pope, the Stable Consultancy, Psi-Kicks, the Fey, Farsighters and Doolittle (these two in at least the context they are used in within the Psi-Kicks reality) are (c) GF Willmetts 1999. All rights reserved and shouldn't be used or borrowed without permission.

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