

Magic and Other Honest Lies

by
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Tamara Welder visored her right hand above her eyes and stared skyward at the star cruiser. Drifting down as silent as a pearlescent feather, the great ship cast a shadow broader and darker than a storm cloud's. Around her churned casino chauffeurs, free-lance escorts, and purveyors of the other diversions that earned Foundationally Earthlike 117 its common name, "Funhouse."

Tam's job wasn't normally guest pickup, but the Earthman she was picking up was no normal guest.

She slid a two-Titan coin from her pocket, rolled it across the backs of her left hand's fingers, thumbed the brass disk back under her palm, repeated, then shifted it to her right.

The finger rolls calmed her, but also maintained the nimble fingers that now made her living, as Pop had always believed they would.

Not that Tam believed everything Pop had believed. Pop had believed in what he called honest lies, and he was dead. Tam believed that, except for magic, lies were lies, and she was still alive.

Clang.

The hovering cruiser's gangway telescoped out from the vast hull, rang against the arrival plaza's flagstones, then rumbled as a tide of disembarking vacationers flooded down it.

Tam whispered her guest's name onto her handheld, then held its screen high, so the three-inch tall red letters would lead the Earthman to her.

She was predisposed to mistrust Dr. Trevor Jamieson because she mistrusted everyone who wasn't Pop. Also, Merlin told her Jamieson was a Trueborn Earthman, and like most outworlders Tam believed that it was easier to take a Trueborn's money than it was to take a Trueborn.

But mostly Tam mistrusted Jamieson because he was from the government, and he was here to help her. In her lifetime, Tam had suffered the lie in that crummy joke often, enjoyed its truth never, and couldn't afford to misplace her trust again.

The man with watery blue eyes waved a hand at her as the crowd buffeted his spindly body. Predictably, he wore neat casuals. Less predictably, he carried himself with round-shouldered diffidence, rather than the upright openness that Trueborns called self-assurance. And Outworlders called arrogance.

He extended his hand to her, smiled. "Trevor Jamieson."

She nodded, furred her hand, then shook the proffered hand like it was attached to a corpse, not to a cop who had a Ph.D in Gaming Theory. "I'm Tam Welder."

Jamieson's eyes widened. "Tamara Welder? You came to meet me yourself?"

She pointed to her left. "Dr. Jamieson, baggage claim is this way."

The Earthman held up a faded knapsack. A fresh upshuttle carryon tag still dangled from one shoulder strap. "This is all there is." The Trueborn smiled again. "And call me Trevor. Please."

Jamieson raised his eyebrows when he saw the *Merlin's House of Cards* electrobus. Sagging on worn springs, it squatted diagonally where Tam had parked it, blocking both VIP pick up lanes.

A gray-haired casino chauffeur, leaning against the fender of the limo that the bus blocked in, shook his finger at Tam. "Next time I'll turn you in to the Port Authority, Tam."

She wagged a finger back at the old man. "Don't. Or next time I'll turn you into a toad, Leo."

He dismissed her threat with a wave. "Everybody knows magic's a lie."

Tam called back, "Exactly! That's what makes it an *honest* lie."

The chauffeur sighed. "Just move that heap." As he turned away, the old man scolded over his shoulder. "You got a serious problem with authority, young lady!"

Three minutes later, Tam felt the clunk as the Parkway's autolane took over driving. She sat back and looked out the window, away from the Earthman in the front passenger seat alongside her.

Jamieson said, "He seemed angry. I assume he would turn you in next time."

Tam shook her head. "Doubtful. I got Leo that job. Trueborns assume too much."

"But *you* assumed a Trueborn would have so many bags that you brought a bus."

"No. You need a VIP Lane permit to park close so I brought a bus. Plus, I refuse to buy new tags for my car."

"Ah." Jamieson nodded. "So you don't have a problem with Trueborns. You just have a problem with authority?"

Tam shrugged. "If authority has a problem with me."

Jamieson pursed his lips. "I assume you know why I'm here?"

Tam gripped the wheel, breathed deep. Because authority had a problem with her? “To ask me questions. Because I followed the rules and reported an incident to the Gaming Authority.”

Jamieson nodded.

Tam said, “Merlin said there won’t be trouble with my dealer’s license if I’m forthcoming.”

Jamieson smiled. “I expect your Merlin’s right. So, tell me how you remember the incident.”

“Incidents. It’s happened three times now, since the first one. Last month I was dealing during my show and I felt,” Tam spun a hand at her temple, “A ping. But not a ping.”

Jamieson cocked an eyebrow. “A ping?”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know what you call it at a university, Doctor. In the real world we call it a ping when a card cheat sneaks a physiologic sensor into a casino to read the dealers’ tics. To get a betting edge. Dealers are trained to feel it.”

“I assume pinging is common on Funhouse?”

Tam wrinkled her forehead. “It’s nonexistent on Funhouse. And every other gaming jurisdiction. Pinging’s obsolete. *Because* you can’t ping a ‘bot, all the casinos’ table games are dealt by ‘bots.”

“You’re not a ‘bot.”

“Sharp, you Trueborns.” Tam shook her head. “Dealing limited stakes games incident to card manipulation and table magic is defined as entertainment, not gaming. You still need a dealer’s license, though. There’s maybe four of us card pushers working the smaller casinos, and a couple lounges around Funhouse.”

“Ah. But the important thing is -”

“Whoa!” Tam and Jamieson pitched forward as the bus hard-braked itself.

A hundred yards ahead three fawn-colored, droop-snouted quadrupeds, each standing over twenty feet tall at the shoulder, had lumbered out of the orange and violet forest beside the road. The ‘pods hopped the parkway’s border fence, crossed the traffic lanes and resumed grazing the trees in the parkway’s median.

Jamieson whistled. “First live titanopods I’ve seen. Surprisingly agile.”

The bus sped itself up.

Tam shrugged. “The ‘pods always surprise first timers. But the government says they’re road hazards.”

Jamieson pointed at the Casino Grand Luxoriana, a pair of alabaster eighty-story crescents that rose like ship sails above the multihued forest, and wrinkled his brow. "Human presence on most outworlds affects less than one percent of the planet. Most indigenous species just learn to avoid us."

"Pods may be agile. But fast learners?" Tam shook her head. "No."

A two-place, open animal control skimmer popped up above the treetops and streaked for the three 'pods. The right-seat warden leaned out and darted the biggest. It wobbled and crashed into the underbrush as the smaller two sprang back into the forest from which they had come.

Tam sighed. "They'll haul that one to one off to one of the tracks and race it to death. Isn't that crap?"

Jamieson cocked an eyebrow. "You disapprove of pari-mutuel wildlife contests? But you make your living here. Without them Funhouse would be just another subtropical Earthlike."

"You ever actually see full-contact titanopod racing, Jamieson? They strap spiked armor skirts around the 'pods, hop 'em up on speed, and they gore each other the whole way round the track while the jockeys beat the hell out of one another."

The Luxoriana disappeared behind them.

Tam said, "By the sixth race, blood turns the finishing straight into red mud. Life expectancy is six months for the 'pods, three for jockeys. I feel sorrier for the 'pods."

"Oh?"

"The animals aren't intelligent enough to know it, but they don't even have a choice. The jocks are intelligent, so at least they have that."

Jamieson said, "I suppose the worst of all worlds would be to have the intelligence but not have the choice."

Tam looked away, nodded. "Trueborns would be surprised how often that happens on the outworlds."

"Some Trueborns might not be. Surprise works both ways."

Then the Earthman was again peering out at the next landmark.

Tam said, "*That* monstrosity over there's the Funhouse Sporting Club. The amphitheater in the middle's the Coliseum. They import the biggest offworld species to fight the biggest local ones. Makes 'pod races look like gerbil wrestling."

"With bigger bets?"

"Most profitable gaming enterprise in the Human Union, twelve years running." It was a question she thought a gambling expert wouldn't need to ask.

Jamieson eyed a road sign as the bus continued up resort row on Lucky U Parkway. “These are the most exclusive resorts in the Human Union. But the name of the main road sounds like it belongs on a row of cheap motels.”

Tam shrugged. “The Gaming Authority names the roads. So the names ‘evoke and promote gaming.’ Even if they sound like crap.”

The conversation between Tam and her visitor had fizzled into trivia, but Tam’s anxiety about this Trueborn’s mission hadn’t shrunk a micron.

She asked Jamieson, “Why would a crummy table game fix report bring an expert like you all the way out here from Earth?”

Jamieson’s smile flickered, but only for a heartbeat. “Actually, it didn’t. Bring me from Earth, that is. I had just come in to the Mousetrap aboard the *Valley Forge*, headed home. Then word of your report caught up with me. *Iwo Jima* was outbound for Funhouse fifty minutes later. You know I had to sprint for that connection!”

Hair stood on Tam’s neck. “I do?”

“Your dealer’s license says you were born and raised in the Mousetrap.”

Crap. Jamieson’s doctorate and smile notwithstanding, he was, after all, a kind of Trueborn cop. And cleverer than he looked. He had managed to not answer her question to him but flipped it into a question that let *him* test her.

Tam shallowed her breathing, kept her eyes on the road, “Oh.” She smiled. “Yep. Third generation ‘Trap rat.’”

“Welder. Is that a common name in Mousetrap?”

Actually, it had been picked for her because it was the *most* common.

She nodded. “My grandfather emigrated as a cutter’s apprentice during the Buildout.”

Tam Welder’s legend was respectable, yet generic. So far it had bought her the anonymity the Trueborns had promised.

Jamieson laid back against his headrest and closed his eyes like a weary traveler. Maybe because she had passed his test. Maybe because she was paranoid and it wasn’t a test at all.

Five minutes later, Jamieson sat up with a start when Tam turned off the parkway onto the seedy strip of grind clubs, slot shops, and package stores that she drove by to work each day.

She sighed. “If Lucky U Parkway’s the class of Funhouse, the Monster Mile, well, isn’t.”

Jamieson pointed at the sign above the pre-fab domelet on the right and read aloud. “Bug Tussle?”

Beneath the sign's undulating neon letters hung a clearsteel globe bigger than the electro bus. Inside the globe a man-sized crimson scorpion and a bear-sized, tiger-striped spider lunged at one another, kept apart by a transparent partition that bisected the globe. The giants' attacks swung the globe beneath its mounting. A bleary knot of men stood alongside the road, drinking from plastis, swaying beneath the globe and taking in the free show.

The flatscreen beneath the animals announced ever-changing pari-mutuel odds – the scorpion currently was favored 5-2 - and promised "Admission Includes Monster Mile's Longest Buffet!"

Tam said, "The Coliseum's the top of Funhouse animal pari-mutuel. The bug houses are the bottom. But admission's cheap, and they're always open. They're considered good entertainment value for money."

"To say nothing of the buffet."

"The bug houses can afford to give stuff away. They actually collect bounty from the government for taking bugs out of circulation. The winners eat the losers, so feed costs the owners nothing. And the bugs are naturally competing predators, so there's never danger of peace breaking out when the bell sounds."

"Efficient. Yet so classy."

They passed five slot parlors before Tam swung the bus into Merlin's cracked and weedy lot and parked in front at the "Courtesy Bus" sign.

Jamieson craned his neck at the holo generated lettering that floated above the casino's roof, bright even under the afternoon suns.

"So this is *Merlin's House of Cards*?"

The name faded and Tam's smiling image, wearing the evening shows' blue velvet sorceress robe, replaced it. Onscreen she spun, the robe flowed, and nobody could tell it was a cut down bathrobe. She produced cards in fans and fountains from her fingertips, transposed them into stacks of chips, then cascaded more cards from one hand to the other.

The video cycled back to the casino name, and Tam shrugged at Jamieson. "I deal at the center stage table as a novelty act. Card manipulation and sleight of hand magic, mostly. Simple escapes, a couple illusions."

Jamieson eyed his 'puter, glanced around the parking lot. "Noon and the place is full! Unless those cars belong to the help."

"The matinee draws. So we all have to park out back." Tam shrugged again. "But if the crowds ever start shrinking, Merlin'll replace me with a piano bar."

Jamieson furrowed his brow. "But you'd still get by?"

She snorted. “Get by? Outworlders always get by, Dr. Jamieson. Sometimes we get by with help from friends. Sometimes we get by with a lie, or a mistake. I’ll get by shoveling bug crap if I have to.”

Trueborn empathy normally extended only as far as other Trueborns, but for an instant Jamieson’s eyes softened.

Then he was again the inquisitor. “You called this road the Monster Mile. But so far,” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, “the only animals I’ve seen were the bugs.”

“The real monster show’s down the road.” Tam pointed over the vacant lot’s trees. “See the dome? That’s *Critter Fest*. They import offworld exotics to fight local animals. The poor man’s Coliseum. The species aren’t as big or as common. There’s no performance record on most of them, so the outcomes are less predictable.”

“That makes it popular?”

“They fill ten thousand seats a night. Biggest draw on Natural Way.”

“Natural Way?”

“Monster Mile’s not the street’s real name.”

Jamieson smiled. “Natural Way. I like that. Not *every* street name on Funhouse is about gambling.”

Tam stiffened. In that instant all the little inconsistencies about Jamieson, the uncharacteristically empathetic Trueborn, congealed in her gut. Then the memories that she had hidden away for twenty years flooded back.

The men with the Trueborn accents who came and sat with Pop and whispered with him. Pop telling her to forget she ever saw them. Then, later, for months, the men with the Yavi accents, who came and left, came and left, again and again. Until they came back with the needle guns. And Pop cold and small and bleeding to death in her arms.

Now she saw that, like the Yavi who had killed Pop, and like those Trueborns who had recruited him, this atypically modest Trueborn was not who he said he was.

The ice in her belly swelled and her breathing rasped. She gripped the bus wheel so this Trueborn, or whoever he really was, couldn’t see her fingers tremble.

“Tam?” Jamieson reached from the passenger’s seat and touched her arm. “Are you all right?”

She jerked back at his touch, tore open the driver’s door. “I’m late for my show.”

Trailing her costume over her shoulder on its hanger, she slammed the bus door and ran.

Merlin himself held the left door open for her, while Oscar the bouncer held the right. Merlin, his star-studded cone hat drooping, scowled through his fake beard. "You're on in four minutes! Don't be late *tonight!*"

She brushed past him, tugging the loaded prop vest over her head, then covering it with her robe. "I'm taking tonight off. Have Maya cover for me."

Her boss dropped his jaw. "Oscar's kid? Maya couldn't vanish a frog with a hand grenade!"

Tam turned back, winked at Oscar. "She'll do fine."

Four minutes later the house lights dimmed, except for the main down-spot above Tam's center stage table, and except for the pencil spots that lit the tiers of game tables that ringed the stage. The table 'bots kept on dealing, and winning, while she performed.

As Tam swept down the center aisle and mounted the stage, producing and re-vanishing card fans as she moved, the voiceover boomed above the fanfare, "This afternoon's presentation employs no holography, magnetic levitation technology, or electronic augmentation. For the next thirty minutes, what will baffle and delight you is simple magic, the universe's most honest lie."

Tam sleep-walked the show, mind racing as her heart pounded.

She transformed a customer's empty high ball glass into shrink-wrapped packets of 5-titan chips, then tossed the packets to the audience. As she did, she spotted Jamieson, seated front row left, smiling and applauding every vanish and production.

It surprised her that his smile comforted her. Was this how the Trueborns had recruited Pop? Pop himself always said "First, make a friend. Then make a deal."

She flipped and flourished decks in front of the four spectators at the stage table, conjuring buffs who had paid to watch her work up close. She dealt a winning hand to the slim man in seat two, because he wore a strap banded antique watch. As she pushed his chips to him she misdirected him with her touch and a smile while she unfastened the band. When she palmed his watch, the audience, watching the slowmo overhead replay, roared. But the mark, even though he must have been expecting *something*, never felt a thing.

In that instant the ping struck her again. No longer a confused question in her head. It was a snarl, so startling in its frustration and nascent anger that she sat up stiff, as though she had been slapped.

She lost her grip on the card fan she was about to produce, and the prop slipped down through her cloak, onto the floor. She toed the cards away with her slipper, then cut the trick from the act.

Tam stole a glance at Jamieson. He was leaning forward on his elbows, now. He had noticed. Or had he caused it? Before Jamieson arrived she only had had a mystery in her head. Now she had a banshee.

Pop had gotten mixed up with liars like Jamieson and Pop had died. In that instant Tam decided to follow through with the plan she had half-formed when Jamieson had touched her arm in the parking lot. A half ass plan implemented in time was better than a perfect plan too late.

Her hands trembled, weakened, so she omitted the handcuff escape and skipped to the final trick before the Lady And The Phoenix transformation closed the show.

She had to transpose the watch she had palmed, then produce it from the cleavage of the man's wife, who sat to his right.

As Tam loaded the watch, she stole a glance at Jamieson. He remained seated, again relaxed, though serious and intent.

Even before the applause died when the mark got his watch back, Tam climbed, then stood on, the tabletop. She closed her eyes, raised her arms overhead, and the tubular veil floated down from the ceiling and hid her.

She dropped through the trap door, and even before the veil above dropped to reveal the flapping, squawking bird that had replaced her, she wormed furiously down the tunnel, scraping her palms and knees.

Normally, when she emerged from the floor trap behind the kitchen pantry, she shed her loaded vest before she reappeared at the bar.

Today, she ran for the stage door, robe still flapping, like the devil nipped her heels. First, she would put distance between herself and the Earthman. Then she'd think of something. She always did.

As she dashed through the kitchen she jostled a sous chef, whistling as he walked, and plucked the boning knife from his belt scabbard. He never missed a note.

Tam burst through the stage door, squinted against the afternoon sun.

She held her breath against the dumpster's stink, then rounded the building's corner, full tilt, car fob in hand, into the employee parking lot. And stopped like she had struck plate glass.

Jamieson leaned against her car's driver's door, arms folded.

Tam's mouth hung open as she swung her hand around the fifty cars in the employee lot. "How'd you find my car?"

He flicked his eyes at her rear bumper. "I narrowed it to the cars with expired tags. Then I bet on the one with the 'Horn Broken, Watch for Finger' bumper sticker."

"Leave me alone."

"You said you'd be forthcoming. But your face onstage said differently."

"And you said you were a gambling expert. One honest lie deserves another."

"What do you mean?"

She drew the boning knife, crouched. "Get away from my car!"

"I can explain."

"Oh? Explain why a gambling cop was on Dead End."

The Trueborn drew back, narrowed his eyes. "What? I never said I was on Dead End."

"There are no casinos to inspect on Dead End. It's just jungle and giant grizzly bears."

Jamieson extended his hands, palms down, nodded. "Okay. Downgraded Earthlike 476 is a primitive. But there are five hundred twelve planets in the Human Union. What makes you think I came here from that one?"

"I grew up in a starship hub, remember? Hub kids memorize ships and routes like other kids memorize pop lyrics. You said you came to Mousetrap on the *Valley Forge*. But you still had an upshuttle carryon tag on your bag. The only port where the *Valley Forge* calls that bounces shuttles to orbit is Dead End."

Jamieson nodded. "Okay. You're a detective. What's it prove?"

Tam shook her head again. "By itself? Not much. But a gaming cop who doesn't know about robot dealing?"

"That's hardly -"

"In blackjack a natural's an ace and a ten point card. A winner. And a seven or eleven shooting dice. But you didn't even know it was a gambling term."

Jamieson sighed, ran a hand through his hair. "Alright. I'm no gambling expert. But the story got me past the Gaming Authority and past your boss so I could talk to you."

She snorted, poked the knife at him.

"It was an honest lie." Jamieson's face hardened. "You're no stranger to those, are you, Tamara?"

Her breath caught.

Bad enough that Jamieson was a liar. Worse, he knew she was, too. She had feared this from the moment Merlin told her a Trueborn official was coming to see *her*. Really, she had feared this since the day Pop died.

Tam blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about," Jamieson said, "A Yavi refugee in Mousetrap who supports himself and his daughter as a pickpocket. Who believes the Cold War has good guys and bad guys. And who believes that working against Yavet and for the good guys is an honest lie."

The tears welled, blurred her vision as the knife quivered in her hand. "You bastards sucked Pop in. But you didn't protect him from the Yavi when they figured out he was a double for you. Then to make up for it you stole what was left of my crummy life and gave me this crummy one. Traitor's daughter dies aboard a starship, gets buried in space. Tamara Welder gets dug up on Funhouse. You said you'd never bother me. Which is now officially one more lie."

Jamieson shook his head. "That wasn't *me*. I'm not even that kind of spook."

Tam flexed her fingers on the knife's handle and her lip quivered. "Then what kind of spook *are* you Jamieson? If that's even your name."

Jamieson sidestepped away from her car, hands still raised. "Tam, this isn't about the Cold War."

She tossed her head. "For Trueborns and Yavis everything's about the Cold War."

He stretched a thin smile. "It's more important than the Cold War. At least to me. And, if I understand you, to you, too."

She rolled her eyes. "Go ahead. This should be good."

Behind them, the kitchen door opened, a busboy stepped out, and lit a tobacco cigarette.

Jamieson eyed him. "Can we continue this somewhere private?"

Tam shifted her weight, stared at the Earthman. If Jamieson *was* the kind of spook who had recruited Pop, he would have pulled a gunpowder pistol on her by now. And as long as she and Jamieson stayed around *Merlin's*, Oscar the bouncer was only a shriek away.

Tam waved the spy away from the car, lifted the driver's door, then she motioned Jamieson to sit in the driver's seat.

With her knife pricking his throat, she tugged his wrists so that one was atop and one beneath the steering wheel rim. Then she dug in the pocket of the loaded vest beneath her cloak until her fingers closed around the handcuffs. The real cuffs, not the breakaways. Tam locked Jamieson to her car's steering wheel.

Then she swung down the driver's door to close him in, slipped into the front passenger's seat, and darkened the dome glass so they weren't visible to onlookers.

She faced Jamieson across the center console. "There. Private."

Jamieson rattled the cuffs. "Seriously? We couldn't just go for coffee?"

"You might poison mine. Talk. I've got another show in an hour."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Something true would be good."

Jamieson squirmed in his seat. "Okay. Truth. You asked me what kind of spook I am. The research kind, I guess."

"Researching what?"

"That trick you did, where you read that guy's mind?"

"I forced a card on him. You *do* know telepathy's not a real thing, Jamieson?"

"Do I?"

She paused. "You're saying maybe those pings came from somebody?"

Jamieson nodded. "Not maybe. And not somebody. Something."

Tam smirked. "Magicians lie for a living, Jamieson. You've gotta do better."

"Tam, the reason I came from Dead End is that I work there. I'm a xenobiologist. And kind of a diplomat."

"Ambassador to the man-eating grizzly bears?"

"In a way. The grezzen aren't just alien bears. They're the only other intelligent species in the known universe. And they're telepaths."

Tam's mouth formed an "o." "You're serious? We just found this out?"

"We've known for years. But the grezzen don't trust us as a species.

She smiled. "They really *are* intelligent."

"So we keep their true nature quiet because that's the way *they want it.*"

"While the government uses them to read all the rest of our minds."

Jamieson shrugged. "There are benign applications, too."

"All of which has what to do with me?"

"Three months ago poachers on Dead End managed to kill a female grezzen. Quite a feat of arms. Even a female weighs nine tons grown and can still sustain sixty miles per hour while gravid. We recovered her body, but we think the unborn cub was extracted alive, and smuggled off the planet."

“To Funhouse?”

“Makes sense, doesn’t it? Talk about an up-and-coming contender.”

“And this cub is what pinged me?”

“That’s my working hypothesis. Your report was the only lead the real spooks could come up with fast. I’m assuming the cub’s probably being kept at that monster fight club next door.” Jamieson shifted in his seat, nodded at his cuffed wrists. “My fingers are turning white. Do you mind?”

She leaned across, then paused with her fingertips on Jamieson’s wrists. “If I let you go, the cops will raid the place, save the bear, and you’ll leave me in peace?”

Jamieson squirmed. “Well –”

“Goddam it! What well?”

“You got pinged again during the show, didn’t you?”

Tam nodded.

“What was it like?”

“This time? Different. At first it was just, like, a question.”

“What question?”

Tam shrugged. “Not specific, like did I hold an ace. Just curious. Like a baby, maybe.”

“But this time was different?”

Tam nodded. “It was like – growling. Angry.” She leaned toward the slight Earthman. “What does it mean, Jamieson?”

He frowned, swore. “That it’s growing up fast. That’s why it’s just me chasing this thing. There’s no time to get operations specialists in place. These people – hell, these *murdering kidnapers* - have no idea what the physical capabilities of even an infant grezz are. If we don’t get the cub back before it starts developing ... Well, at best, they’ll get themselves killed. At worst, the cub will have to be killed.”

“And that won’t help our relations with our co-intelligent species?”

Jamieson nodded. “Or my conscience. I knew the cub’s mother.”

Tam unlocked the cuffs, and Jamieson rubbed his wrists.

She said, “There. Now call in the cops.”

Jamieson shook his head. “I told you. We – mankind – promised the grezz we’d keep their secret. Look what just one bunch of poachers did, just to trap a better pit bull. Imagine what some people, just here on Funhouse, would do to get their hands on a telepath.”

“You’re the frukin’ government. You can protect them.”

“Presuming they’d trust us to, if we can’t even make this incident right. Telepaths don’t know how to lie, but they understand that we do. And they’ve already had a belly full of it.”

“So you’re gonna try to rescue the baby by yourself? All hundred sixty-five pounds of you?”

“One sixty-eight. I was hoping for some help.”

“And since I’m the only one here who already knows the big secret, that could only be me?” Tam shook her head and raised her palms at Jamieson. “Sorry. My family’s done being recruited by spies we’ve got nothing in common with.”

“Fair enough. But you don’t like the bloodsport charnel houses on this planet any more than I do. And you’ve got plenty in common with the cub.”

“It’s a six legged bear. I’m a lounge magician.”

“You’re both orphans.” Jamieson raised a finger. “Tam, a baby bird will imprint on a sock puppet if it’s the first maternal figure it encounters. Once before we’ve seen an orphaned grezz imprint telepathically on a nearby human female presence.”

“I have a kid? And I didn’t even get laid?”

“Not exactly. But the cub could respond to you as a maternal surrogate.”

“I’m not breast feeding an alien.”

Jamieson turned pink. “The bond’s just mental. But if the cub recognizes you, it might trust you. If it trusts you, it might physically follow you.”

“Or it might eat me.”

“They usually just dismember humans. We’re too bony.”

“There are nine million women on Funhouse. Why did this thing pick my life to screw up?”

“Well, you were physically nearby. And I suspect you reminded it of its mother.”

“What?”

“Grezzen females are absolute matriarchs and apex predators. They confront any challenger head on. The human equivalent could correspond to a headstrong woman with an absolute hardon for competing authority.”

“Oh.”

“Any more questions?”

Tam shook her head.

Jamieson called up a real time overhead image of the *Critter Fest* grounds on his handheld. “First, we’ll need to break into the animal pens.

Then locate the enclosure where the cub's held." Jamieson pointed at the image. There's a fence all the way around. High one, by the shadow on the ground. We'll need cutting equipment." He scratched his head.

"Guard post here. Probably cameras —"

Tam laid her palm on Jamieson's wrist. "Jamieson, it's not that hard."
"It isn't?"

* * *

Eleven hours later, in the chill three a.m. moonless darkness, Tam pulled her coupe silently in around the electrobus in *Merlin's* deserted parking lot.

As bugs trilled in the surrounding trees, Jamieson sat on the pavement, head down and elbows on knees. The bus's dismantled seats lay beside him in a neat row and wrenches littered the pavement at his feet.

When Tam lifted the coupe's door, Jamieson massaged his skinned knuckles. "You said this wasn't hard."

"My part wasn't. Now follow me in the bus, park it, and I'll pick you up."

Ten minutes later Jamieson sat beside Tam in the coupe, parked in the shadow of a wood line fifty yards from *Critter Fest's* main rear service gate. The Earthman peered through night binoculars out the windscreen at the lone watchman, who sat in the guardhouse window, scowling as he polished a pistol. "It's not much security. But he's got a gun."

"They don't need much security if you think about it. Monsters are their own best watchdogs. And there's no point in sneaking in here to drug the contestants, because they get tested before any tickets pay."

Behind the guardhouse a fifteen-foot-tall fence topped with razor wire secured vast ranks of bar-fronted sheds and stables within which hundreds of vast, dark, disparate shapes groaned, snored, undulated and rumbled. Occasionally something snarled or shrieked and set off a chorus of its neighbors.

Jamieson asked, "You think he'll just let you drive up and walk in the door?"

"Yep. He's Oscar the bouncer's cousin. A couple times a month one of us brings him leftovers from *Merlin's* buffet. Get out and wait here."

Fifteen minutes later, Jamieson climbed back in Tam's coupe with her.

As they drove to pick up the bus parked on the opposite side of the compound from the guardhouse, Tam told Jamieson, “He recognized the grezzen when I described it. This place bought it for cash no-questions-asked a couple months ago. It doesn’t eat much, but it’s still growing.”

“You found out where it’s caged?”

“And where the nearest auxiliary gate is to the cage.” Tam held up a fob with a keypad on its top. “And this is the master key to all the gates and cages. Also, to the security camera junction box. But we won’t need to mess with it. He never watches the screens while he eats because the animals do disgusting things.”

“He gave you that key?”

“Loaned it. But he doesn’t know he did. He doesn’t make rounds for an hour. By then I’ll come back for the cake plate and then his keys will be back on his belt. He’ll never miss ‘em.”

After a further fifteen minutes, the electro bus had driven silently through the auxiliary gate nearest the cub’s cage.

Tam and Jamieson crept to the cage’s bars and peered in at the snoring lump inside.

Tam pulled her blouse collar across her nose with one hand and breathed through her mouth while she rested the other hand on one of the bars. “Do they all smell like this?”

“Think how we smell to them. You get used to it.”

“Now what do I do? Sing to it?”

“Actually, I’m surprised it hasn’t already sensed your –

“Baaoum.”

When the grezzen leapt at Tam, and crashed against the bars, its momentum knocked her onto the ground on her back.

The cub retreated, and Jamieson stepped to the bars. He thumbed the fresh claw gouges on them, then whistled. “A week older and he’d have broken through.

Tam scrambled to her feet, her eyes glued to the cub in the tiny cage and her jaw slack.

The infant was already larger than the largest bear she had seen in a wildlife park. It paced back and forth in its cage, ambling on six claw-footed legs that supported a long-haired, muscular body.

But the thing – things, actually - that riveted her were the cub’s eyes. Three glowing red coals, glowing in a line above a ragged mouth filled with razor teeth and the stubby beginnings of down-pointed tusks.

They were not the eyes of a brute, but the eyes of a being as curious and sentient as she was.

Jamieson opened the bus's back door and Tam climbed in and faced the grezzen as Jamieson backed the vehicle up against the cage's locked door.

The grezzen stared at her, mute and still as a three-eyed sphinx, betraying no intention.

Jamieson leaned back from the driver's seat, thumb on the master key's unlock button. "Ready?"

Tam, mouth dry, heart pounding, shook her head. "It doesn't know me."

Then she felt it. The cub was in her head, and the fire in its eyes died back to a warm glow.

Tam whispered out of the corner of her mouth. "Open it."

"You're sure?"

Tam nodded.

And then there was nothing between her and the cub but open air.

The cub stared at her, then crouched, its already-bulging muscles flexing, scimitar claws scraping the cage floor. Then it slid a forepaw out of its cage, into the old electro bus, and tapped a claw against metal.

Then the cub purred, and Tam cooed back at him.

* * *

Forty-eight hours later Tam stood facing Jamieson, once again in a star cruiser's shadow at the base of its extended gangway.

Jamieson said, "The cub took sedation perfectly. It's in a hold with no other cargo, and I've got the only pass card. My cabin's one deck forward. Once he's home, he should have no trouble bonding with a childless female."

Tam smiled. "He'll do fine. I feel it. What will you do after that, Jamieson?"

The Earthman shrugged. "I was on my way to Earth for leave when this business blew up."

Tam made an "o" with her lips. "I've never been. But they say it's magic."

Jamieson shook his head. "At best, an honest lie. I was actually thinking of coming back here, instead. If you'd keep me out of trouble."

She smiled again. "Maybe, Jamieson. Maybe."

Robert Buettner is the creator of the Orphans Legacy [series](#) for Baen Books, with latest entry [Balance Point](#).