

Payback

God, it stinks in here. Wherever 'here' is. Piss, dead fish, diesel fumes, and dust – not the Waldorf, for sure, even if the twin gorillas who grabbed me tonight are wearing some fancy monkey suits. Heh. Gorillas in monkey suits. That would make a great punch line.

Speaking of punch lines, the bastard who punched me packs a good whallop. Not so much as a how-do you do – I had a fist in my gut before the door was all the way open. Still hurts like a son-of-a-bitch. I guess I knew what was going to happen anyway. If I'd made them bust the door down they'd have just been pissed off. Better to keep things strictly business, especially when you're dealing with 7-foot-tall Neanderthals.

What was that? A fog horn? Dead fish and fog horns. Gotta be some sort of shipping or fishing operation close by. We did drive for a long time. Closest place with any kind of docks is Houston. Why move me so far from home? If they were planning to kill me I'd be lying in a pool of blood in my living room. These guys aren't exactly known for finesse. Shit, I'm only into them for what? Twenty thousand? Well, maybe thirty, after today. Still, I know guys who owe more than that on credit cards and they aren't even getting nasty phone calls.

Of course, it's not so much what's in my wallet, as who's in it. After that big win at the track last week, I was sure my system couldn't lose. So I max out credit with my bookie only to have the 'sure thing' I bet on get a cramp coming out of the starting gate. What kind of race horse gets cramps? The kind that gets guys like me bound and blindfolded in some stinking broom closet.

At least I think it's a broom closet. Small enough that I can't stretch out my legs, that's for sure. None too clean, either. Mental note - make sure to at least throw on a bathrobe when I answer the door. Boxers and a sleeveless T-shirt don't provide much protection from grit and other stuff I'd rather not think about.

Voices! Sounds like the gorillas again. Oh, crap. I'm happy in my broom closet, really. Just leave me...dammit! I'm jerked to my feet so hard I think my shoulder joint is going to pop out.

One of the gorillas talks. His voice is low and guttural, almost like grunting, but I can make it out. "Time to meet the boss, kid." I wonder if it's the one who punched me? Not that I could tell the difference between them even with the blindfold off. "Mind your manners, or we'll have to mind 'em for you."

I wince as I am guided down a fairly long and vary dirty hallway or passage that is no cleaner than the closet. I just hope there isn't any broken glass or other sharp stuff in the way. I don't think these guys care much that I am barefoot. Then again, a few cuts is probably the best I can hope for. My gut clenches, but I hold on tight to the faint hope that I'm not gonna get hurt too bad. Maybe some humor will help. "Look, guys. I'm really not dressed to meet someone important. Why don't you let me run home and change into something more appropriate?"

That at least gets a chuckle from the Ugly Twin on my right. "Not a worry, kid. In fact, I think you are overdressed for the occasion."

Being in my underwear is overdressed? This is definitely getting weird, and not in a good way. So much for humor. I swallow hard to clear the lump in my throat. "Uh, am I going to be able to walk away from this meeting?"

This gets another laugh from both gorillas. I'm thinking that means 'no' until Ugly Twin number two pipes up. They sound the same, but he's on my other side. "Oh, don't worry, kid. You'll be walking out of here fine. Just maybe not the way you're used to."

What the Hell does that mean? Before I can ask any more questions, I hear a creak of hinges ahead – sounds like they need oil. The rope around my wrists loosens and falls away, and then the blindfold is jerked off. Damn! My eyes burn at the sudden glare of bright light, but before I can raise a hand to shield them the gorillas grab my arms and drag me through some sort of big opening. As soon as we get inside, I'm hoisted up high and something stabs my butt.

"Hey!" Someone just jammed a hypodermic in my ass! I can't see the bastard with the Ugly Twins holding me tight, and I'm not stupid enough to try struggling with a needle in me. Whoever it is slams the whole load into me in two seconds flat and jerks the hypo out. Then the bastards drop me, stepping back so I land on the spot that was just jabbed. "You assholes! What was that for?" The door thuds closed behind me.

"Something very special." A new voice, coming through a speaker. Pretty mellow-sounding guy, especially after the two gorillas, but there's something behind the words that makes the hair on the back of my neck prickle. As my eyes clear, prospects begin to look even bleaker. This is a big room, maybe 40 feet square, with concrete walls covered in peeling, institutional puke-green paint. The ceiling is a good 30 feet high, all open steel girders and flickering fluorescent lights. The only ways out look to be the door I was just dragged through and a big sliding panel opposite. Some new-looking mirrors are set about halfway up the wall on my left – probably one-way glass, like they use in police stations and stuff. I guess Mr. Mellow is behind them. He continues. "I assume you know why you are here?"

Swallowing hard, I look up at the glass. No point in playing dumb with this guy. "I missed a payment. Uh, two payments." Whatever they shot me up with burns, and my side is already starting to swell. Some kind of poison?

"That's part of it. I know times are tough, Tony. And I hear you're a smart kid. That's why I didn't send the boys 'round to remind you the first time. But then what happens? You win pretty big at the track, and instead of taking care of your financial responsibilities you blew it all on a fancy laptop computer. That was a real slap in the face, especially with you losing big again on my money today."

Oh, shit. How did he know about the computer? I'm sweating like crazy and the burning is spreading. This is way bad. Yeah, guys like him do kill guys like me over thirty thousand. I was an idiot. But this can't be the end of it, not over something so stupid as a new laptop. "Uh, sir? I know I messed up bad. I was so sure I had a winner! Look, I can cancel the order! That's almost the two payments right there!"

"Almost." Mr. Mellow sighs. "Do you know how many times I have heard that word, Tony? You agreed to certain terms and conditions when you accepted my money. An agreement that you have not honored. While I am not a vindictive man, I cannot allow my customers to take advantage of me."

"Advantage!?" The word explodes out of me, but I don't bother to check my anger. What's the point? Whatever he's injected me with is spreading fast – the slow burn is already working its way up my chest. I stand up, fists clenched, and glare at the mirrors. "You bastard! I got no warning, no nothing! You never even gave me a chance to make good! Just two goons who drag me here in the middle of the night to..." My throat tightens up and I can't finish.

"To what?" Mr. Mellow actually chuckles. "To kill you? Certainly not! This is strictly business. A process that will convert you from a financial liability to a very marketable commodity. Enough to pay your original debts, plus all interest and penalties. A clean slate. There's even a chance you'll find the arrangements to your liking. Several of your predecessors have ended up quite happy in their new lives."

Huh? I almost forget the burning at that. My brief flicker of hope turns into confusion. New lives? What the Hell is he talking about? Before I can ask, my whole body suddenly cramps up so badly I can only cringe and grunt in agony. My arms feel like they are being twisted out of their sockets, and an invisible vise clamps down on my skull.

It's more than just pain. I can feel pulling in my muscles, and there's a throbbing in my face and jaw. My underwear and shorts stretch tight and my belly is spilling over. What the Hell is this crap doing to me? I've heard of people reacting to bee stings like this, swelling up all over. And what's with my hair? It's hanging low, almost over my eyes. I haven't had long hair since I was a little kid. Even weirder, there seems to be yellow-brown fuzz all over my body, with thicker patches on my arms.

So much is hitting me all at once it is hard to concentrate on anything. Every muscle is on fire, and I'd swear even my bones are throbbing. It has to be some sort of poison. All that talk about a clean slate must be his sick idea of a joke – build up hope and then watch me swell up and die. Or maybe end up crippled or deformed. Most people would start screaming and crying now, I guess. Me? I'm royally pissed.

"Asshole!" The word hisses out between clenched teeth. "It's not enough just to kill me? You want to watch me suffer? Maybe beg for mercy? Well, fuck you! I'm not playin' your..." I gasp as a fresh wave of spasms rock my body, and grab at my head as the unseen vise closes a little tighter. As the haze of pain eases a little, I realize that there's a lot more wrong with my head than just the pressure.

I have a beard. Not the faint chin stubble I've had since I was 16 – this is a real mountain-man thing, so thick and full I can barely feel my jaw. I try looking down but can't see past my... oh, crap. Is that my nose? Broad, flat, and...hairy? What is happening to me? The mirrors are useless, set so high up that all I can see is the reflection of the ceiling.

"I have watched men die here, Tony. Some even younger than you. But that was never the intent." Mr. Mellow sighs audibly. "The hazards of progress, I fear. Be happy that you are benefitting from their sacrifices."

Another wave of white-hot pain burns bone and muscle so intensely that vision blurs and I think I might pass out. The bastard is still talking, but he might as well have been singing nursery rhymes for all I can understand through the haze of agony. Something about animals and genetics. Then the base of my spine decides to explode. . Whatever Mr. Mellow is saying is lost as I get the most bizarre wedgie ever – my boxers suddenly push away from my ass so violently I both hear and feel the fabric rip. At the same time I get hit by some really freaky sensations. Muscles pull in weird places and I can feel a new weight pulling and twisting behind me like some kind of snake grafted onto my butt.

I'm shaking so bad I can barely keep from falling over, but I'll be damned if I'll let this bastard break me. On the plus side, either I'm getting used to this torture or the pain is not so bad. That weird snake is hanging on, though, and as I slowly look down it clamps itself into my butt-crack and flicks up in front of my belly.

The 'snake' has golden fur and ends with a tuft of brown fur. And when I pick it up I can feel it. Not just what my fingers tell me, either. I can feel fingers touching me someplace I never had before. A tail. I have a tail? No. Fuckin'. Way. I sit down hard, something I immediately realize is a bad idea when you have something growing out of your spine.

As I stare at what seems to be a new addition to my body, I realize my hands look weird, too. Swollen up, with tawny hair cover the backs and dark, coarse-looking palms. There are patches of gold all over me, even my face. Poison doesn't grow hair. Shit, nothing grows tails! And my body isn't just swelling, it's changing. At least, it looks and feels like it's changing. But this can't be real, so it has to be a hallucination. A really, really intense hallucination. "What did you do to me, you bastard? Shoot me up with Dope? You gonna screw up my mind with drugs?"

"You are not seeing things, Tony." Mr. Mellow talks like he is chatting with me over beers. "You have a full beard and a nice coat of fur developing, and I'm afraid even your mother would not recognize your face. Not to mention the fact you are holding your own tail. It is quite fascinating to watch."

Some of it he might guess, but the tail part catches my attention. At least what part of it can be pruned away from growing fear that he is telling the truth. "But... that's impossible!"

"Not impossible – just very expensive. You would be amazed at what it cost to come up with this process. However, I am sure you know my business is highly profitable. And like any good businessman, I try to invest some of my profits into new ways of making money."

What's..?" My voice catches in my throat, a little raspy as if I had a cold or something. "What's happening to me?"

"It should be obvious. You are becoming an animal."

The covering of hair on my skin is thicker now; a golden tan covering that is starting to look like fur. Combined with the dark tuft of fur on the end of the... my tail, and the reddish-brown growth around my face, I make the connection.

"You're turning me into some kind of lion freak!"

"No. not a freak." A cell phone rings. A friggin cell phone! "Excuse me a moment." His voice is muffled as he talks to whoever it is, but I can make out his side of the conversation. "Yes, he is forming up well. You'll be quite pleased. Lots of spirit." I get a chill realizing they are talking about me. "No, you have to remember the process can't add mass. Don't worry. As long as you feed him up according to directions, he'll hit 500 pounds by the end of the week."

Me? A quarter-ton ? I'd be screaming 'Bullshit' if I didn't have a firm grip on my tail. Even putting the fact this stuff exists aside, why would the Syndicate have it? Shouldn't this be some Government thing, or at least a big research foundation or something? Except – what was that he said? They'd poured millions into developing it? And I bet they didn't follow any legal drug testing process. Yeah, once you think about it, they're the only ones who could pull it off. They have the cash and no Government controls. And no problem with the necessary 'sacrifices.'

"Sorry for the interruption." Mr. Mellow must have finished his phone call. "Your soon to be owner was anxious about your progress. We have had some... failures... in the past. Happily, you are proceeding perfectly."

Owner? I'm going to be somebody's property? Well, not yet. This guy says he has some new life all planned out for me, but I like what I got. Maybe there is still a chance. "Look, if I can pay back double, triple? Can you change me back? I swear I won't ever tell anyone. Nobody would believe me anyway."

"Sorry. It's a one-way trip." Mr. Mellow doesn't sound sorry at all. "Not that they didn't try – took several really messy failures before they figured out you could only rewrite the body once."

"Then just leave me like this!" Even as I say it I know that's not an option, so it's no surprise when Mr. Mellow gives a short laugh.

"Come on, Tony! Look at yourself. Even if I could stop the process, which I can't, you are currently what you quite accurately described as a 'lion-freak.' Would you really want to spend the rest of your life like this? I can assure you that you look considerably less human than the associates who collected you."

"You mean that those guys...?" I don't even finish my question. Like that should be a surprise.

"One of our side projects. Jobs for the homeless. Two abandoned kids who are no longer cold and hungry. I consider it a public service."

The Ugly twins were kids? That explains a lot – they are probably part gorilla for real. So much for any chance of appealing to his better nature.

Oh, God. It's all gone, isn't it? Friends, family, my job, my apartment... sure, I screwed up some things, but for the most part life has been pretty good. My throat gets tight, and my eyes burn. Shit! I am not gonna cry in front of this bastard! But I can't even feel angry now. Just sick. He could have broken my arms, cut me up, done almost anything short of killing me, and I could have worked my way back. But this?

I clench my fist, fingers aching as I force them to fold. The joints are real stiff, and won't bend all the way no matter how hard I try. But the pain helps me get angry again. This time at myself for getting into this spot to start with. I knew who I was dealing with when I made those bets. This is payback for being stupid. So what am I gonna do? Curl up in a ball and die? Fuck that. Whatever he does to me, I'm not about to throw in the towel. No matter how bad things get, I can find a...

Huh? My tail slips out of my grip suddenly and hits the floor with a dull thud. I stare at the empty hand a couple of seconds before the reason comes clear. The stuff is still working on me. My thumbs are shrinking. Hell, all of my fingers are shrinking, but the thumbs are going so fast I can actually see them move. Oh, shit! I was that things were almost done because I didn't hurt as bad.

Mr. Mellow must be watching pretty close, because he jumps right in. "Looks like the secondary stage is kicking in. Won't be long now."

"Sehh..." I have to clear my throat twice before I can get words out, and even then it sounds more like I am grunting than talking. "Sheh-cun-dery? How muhh.. muuch am I gonna change."

"All the way, of course. The only difference between you and a born lion will be whatever memories you keep. Even some of the instinctual stuff kicks in. Pretty amazing, really, how much is controlled by the genetic pattern."

I work what is left of my fingers desperately, trying to deny what the bastard is telling me. They agree with him, though, and a glance down shows that my feet are also going along for the ride. My fingernails thicken and pull back into what used to be my fingertips. Pretty much paws now, broad and covered with yellow-brown fur, instead of hands and feet. Like the tail, they include some new muscles that extend dangerous-looking talons when I flex them. Great for ripping and shredding, but not so good for working a game controller. Weird thing is I am fascinated by the transformation almost as much as it terrifies me.

Mr. Mellow sounds rather pleased with himself. "That's the beauty of Splicer. I can provide any animal someone desires – endangered species, animals you can't import, even clones of pets and valuable domestic animals."

"Do you remember the assistant DA who went missing a couple of months ago? He was investigating an associate of mine. The police didn't find anything when they checked out my associate, but they did confiscate his new pet Boa Constrictor and take it to the zoo." Mr. Mellow chuckles. "I love it. And the best part is it isn't even illegal! In the very unlikely event we got caught, what could we be charged with? There is no law against transformation."

A muscle spasm pulls at me again, and I have to catch myself with my hands... paws... to keep from doing a face-plant. My arms bend the wrong way. I guess it's not the wrong way for animal forelegs. Shit. My humanity is fading faster with each heartbeat.

I force myself to stand, struggling against muscles and joints that don't want to work that way anymore. Dammit, I'm not an animal! Not yet, anyway. I have to walk myself up the wall, and balance is wavering, but I finally manage to get myself mostly upright. It's a strain on my neck and back, but I not going to give in.

My nose wrinkles at a growing odor. Sorta musky and warm, like when I go into the bathroom after I forgot to flush. Funny thing, that isn't so bad. But there's something a little rancid mixed in with the smell of piss and sweat. Then I realize it's not so much the smell that is growing as my nose. Not to mention the rest of my face. Oh, damn! The worst root canal in history kicks in as my mouth pushes out. Vision blurs from the pain as my jaw reforms into an animal muzzle, expanding before my eyes to block more of the forward view.

The stink gets to be almost overwhelming. Problem is, the only thing in this room is me. What is all that? Body odor? Do lions sweat? The rancidness is probably fear – I've heard animals can smell that, even their own. My nostrils flare, drinking in the heavy musk. Was this what regular cats smell like? I've never been a cat person. I never had any pets. Too much work and responsibility. I have a crazy mental image of a giant litter box – it's nice to know my sense of humor isn't completely lost.

As the pain from the Splicer eases up, I start to become aware of other sensations. My clothes are stretched to the breaking point, the shirt riding high up on my chest and my shorts... well, let's just say that they've gone from being loose boxers to 'tighty whities.' It's pretty clear that my new lion's equipment is substantially larger, especially the bulges that must be my testicles. I might even be happy about that if they weren't being crushed into my crotch.

Looking down was a mistake. I can't straighten up! Even worse, I can tell that my center of balance is shifting fast. Lifting my tail up behind me helps a little, but I won't be on two legs much longer.

"You are doing quite nicely, Tony." Mr. Mellow's voice sounds a little different now, the electronic source slightly buzzy. My sense of hearing is changing, becoming more sensitive. "You are going to be a magnificent animal."

Rage explodes and I spin and leap at the mirrors. "Bastarrararrarraah!" My voice breaks into a creditable roar and I hit high enough that my claws scrape at the glass and leave gouges in the faded green paint. Dropping to the floor with a heavy thud, I stagger and fall back against the wall. My heart is pounding from the absolute need to rip Mr. Mellow into little pieces. Something I could do easily now, given the gouges I left in the concrete wall.

As satisfying as that thought is, it drives home the fact that I don't have hands any more. Even the nubs of my fingers are gone. I can flex my paws, and the heavy claws extend and retract. That's it. I can't pick anything up, dial a phone, open a door. Shit, I can't even touch someone, at least in any way they'd want to have contact.

"...surprised me, that's all. Get this cleaned up."

"Yes sir. Do you want another glass?"

The voices coming over the speaker are not directed at me, and I take a little satisfaction in realizing I must have scared Mr. Mellow with my attack. At least enough that he dropped whatever he was drinking. I mutter 'Got you' to myself – or try to. The sounds that come out of my muzzle are rumbles and growls - definitely not human. Crap. I try again, but the result is the same. I can't talk any more.

No voice, no hands. No clothes, either. That sudden jump must have been too much for my T-shirt and boxers – they are just tatters of cloth hanging off my back and butt now. Not that I need clothing. The thick gold-brown pelt I can see on my arms... forelegs... and chest must be everywhere now. I can actually feel it if I think about it. That is some weird shit. Being aware of my skin, my whole body. I can move my ears – they are way higher on my head now.

I am leaning heavily against the concrete - too heavily. Lions are four-legged animals. Even knowing that, I twist around to face the wall and push myself away, trying to stand on my own one last time. It's a useless effort. I flail at the air to stay upright, but fall forward, catching myself on what are now fully-formed forelegs. There's no 'catlike grace' either. I hit with a jarring thud and nearly go sprawling as a violent shudder ripples through me from head to tail. The movement

is enough to dislodge the remnants of my clothing, and I feel them slide off onto the floor. I drop my head, panting, lungs drawing in huge amounts of air.

The pain is gone. That's the first good news I've come up with since the gorillas knocked on my door. God, I'm wiped, though. Exhausted doesn't even come close. I feel like I've been buried in cement, and my legs tremble with the effort of just standing here.

"It looks like you are finished. Do you still understand me?"

I nod slowly, my head still hanging low.

"Excellent!" Mr. Mellow is very happy. I can hear it in his voice. "That's why I chose you for this, Tony. I knew you could be something special. Not just a magnificent animal, but a predator of unique intelligence. My clients will be delighted."

I don't feel magnificent right now. In fact, I feel like shit. I take an experimental step and nearly fall. Shit. How do you walk on all fours? I'm a full grown lion who was never a cub. I guess it's a little like crawling. That's appropriate enough.

There's a loud clunk, followed by scrapes and creaks as the sliding door rises up. "OK, Tony. There is a large container with food, water, and some padding on the other side of that door. You can either enter it on your own, or be shot with a tranquilizer and be dragged into it."

If there was even the slightest chance I could get one of these bastards before they tranq'ed me I'd fight every step of the way. As it is, I'm not sure I can make it out of here without help. I stare at the opening. What do his clients want with an intelligent lion? Improve the breed? I've heard that lions are major sex machines. Even that doesn't appeal to me right now, though it is way better than the more likely possibility that comes to mind.

I bet it's pretty hard to find a place where you can still hunt a lion. Unless you stock your own. And the kind of sick bastard who'd pay to have a human transformed into an animal is likely to get an even bigger thrill when his prey knows it used to be human. How many of the other poor saps who've gone through this door before me ended up stuffed and mounted?

Fuck 'em! Taking a deep breath, I fix the dark opening with a fierce glare and let loose with another roar. It's the real thing this time, a thundering sound that rattles the mirrors and gives me the strength to stride in with my head held high. Whoever set this up might be getting a bit more of a challenge than expected. 'Cause I'm not just prey - they made me a hunter, too. And payback's a bitch.

The End