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He nudged his mirrored sunglasses down.

"Big fella, arentcha?"

Stan shrugged.

The officer pulled out a notepad and a pencil. "You call about the break in?" "A couple of hours ago."

When the man didn't react, Stan added, "yeah. Someone broke into our house this morning. We think it was... a girl."

The cop's blonde eyebrows hopped up to the top of his sunglasses, then knitted together. "You sure? Usually it's coyotes, some foxes. There're some homeless pumas up in the hills." Stan thought about the golden hair hanging between Carla's delicately pinched claws, that alkaline funk of human skin that he too had noticed after she pointed it out. Unmistakeable. "It was a girl."

"You got a name?"

"Curtis. Stanley Curtis."

"Uh-huh." The cop scribbled something on the pad that seemed longer than the thirteen letters in Stan's name. "That your sire's?"

"Yeah. He was around ten years old

owner's family for generations. His sire took the owner's last name, Curtis, to honour his kindness. But there would be no one to help the old bear during the dregs of The First War, a time when many of the Talkies would play dumb, hoping that men would think them Sleeping and leave them alone. The sensible ones at least.

They lived in a nearby den while the log house was being built, coming in every morning to work on it and then returning, bone-tired, to the woods in the evening. In that time, twice they'd come down to find his father's work trashed. The frame they'd put up smashed to bits, tire tracks printed on the logs. Another night there was a cross in their front yard that burned so bright and long they could see it from the edge of the woods, his sire's great clawed hand pushing Stan back as they watched it blaze for an interminable hour. Its afterimage stayed like a scar of light on Stan's retina for hours afterward. They didn't dare venture closer that night.

"We've had it in our family for twenty years," he told the cop. "No one lived here before us."

"I know this herd of bisons that are still

"Anyway, Junior said wouldn't it be nice if we had some berries in it and we were fresh out. So I said to my Mrs that we should go get some fresh ones from the bushes in the woods."

"You left in the middle of a hot breakfast to pluck berries?" "It's Saturday."

"How far into the forest did you go?"

"Pretty far."

"You got a forage license?"

"Yeah," Stan said quickly. A half-truth. They'd gotten it a few years back but never renewed it. The license and renewal fee were so high most Talkies just took their chances with the law and never bothered to get one, much less renew. He hoped the cop would forget about it if he went in.

"And you left the back door open?"

"I closed it, but I...I forgot to lock the back door."

"So what happened after?"

"We picked a nice little basket full of berries. We were walking back and as we got close I could see that the back door was open. But when we went in no one was there. The girl smashed up my kid's chair. I think she slept in his bed too. She ate his porridge."

"Things of value in the house?"

"TV. A VCR. We've a bit of cash, but she didn't take it."

"You got the receipts for the TV and VCR?"

The insinuation sat between them, steaming like a pile of dung. He considered raking his claws across the policeman's face. A fast hard swipe that would rip it apart. How'd that smirk look then?

"I bought 'em second hand."

The cop snapped his notebook shut. "Let's go in and have a look."

The man made a point of sniffing loudly once inside, even though Stan made sure his family bathed everyday, used tick shampoos when they could afford it and visited the watering hole near their house in the summer, preferably daily.

Carla and Junior were talking quietly at the dining table. She stood and nodded. "Officer." The man tipped his hat.

He took the human on a tour of their small home, showing him the smashed remnants of the chair that was in a messy pile in Junior's room, the bowl flecked with drying oatmeal around which a fly, fat, blue and persistent, buzzed in tightening circles.

He was pointing to the bed in Junior's room when he noticed that the cop hadn't followed him in.

He stepped out to find him.

"What's this?" The cop pointed to the Anton Ibbutsen poster on their wall. The old freedom fighter, all nine feet of him, stood before the great Bialowieza oaks in Poland, where he escaped all those years ago after the end of The First War. His kalashnikov was slung over his trademark pork pie hat and flannel shirt. His clawed hand was clenched and lifted toward the sky. His head was pointed to the ground. "NO MORE. NO LESS," his famous slogan said, emblazoned below.

"Didn't think you were sympathisers. You talk so good."

There was a panicked tumble of words from Stan's mouth. "There're plenty of bears that have Ibbutsen posters in their homes. If you'd been to enough of 'em you'd know. It doesn't mean we sympathise. I've seen humans walk around with pictures of that bearded man on their chest and they don't even know his name."

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ILLUSTRATION:
BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

during The Awakening."

"Huh." The cop seemed to notice Stan's home for the first time. Without a word to excuse himself, he went around the porch and into the unfenced backyard that melted into the meadow and woods behind. After what seemed an endless five minutes during which Stan debated whether or not he should follow, the cop walked back around from the other side of the house.

"How long've you lived here?"

Stan's eyes flicked to their cottage. A modest log house, his sire had milled it himself from wood donated to him by the owner of the circus where he had awakened. The patch of land had been in his

waiting for a ranch and a pasture. *Just gotta wait, I tell 'em. There's human folks who don't even have homes yet.*"

Stan didn't speak. His knees hurt from holding up his six hundred pounds.

"Alright," The cop said. "Why don't you take me through what happened."

"It's just the three of us in the house. Me, the Mrs and our boy, Junior. We'd woken up this morning and wanted porridge for breakfast."

"Porridge?"

"Oatmeal. We eat it hot, with milk."

The cop muttered something that Stan didn't catch. He paused. "Pardon me?"

"Just talking to myself. Go on."