

Speak, geek

Every dog will have its day.

Eileen Gunn

People call me a nerd, but I say I'm a geek. In my youth, I ran wild on a farm and bit the heads off chickens. This was before the Big Tweak, back when a chicken was dinner, and a dog was man's best friend.

They call me a mutt, too. Sure, I'm a mutt. Mutt is good. Mutt is recombinant DOG. And I'm a smart mutt. I was smart before they tweaked me, and I'm a hell of a lot smarter now.

I've watched untweaked bitches (pardon the expression) trot by on leashes. I don't envy them. I don't even want to breed with them. (And, yes, I am quite intact, not that you were asking.) Their days are filled with grooming and fetching and the mutual adoration that comes with being someone's trophy pet. I have a second life, a life of the mind, beside which theirs pales.

Not that I take credit for my enhancements. Didn't get a choice. But gene engineering is inherently fascinating. Massively multiplayer, fraught with end-of-life-as-we-know-it threats. It made me who I am. I've chosen it for my career.

Working at the Lazy M is the job of a lifetime. Loyalty is a big thing here, and you'd better believe I deliver. I love this place so much that I don't want to go home at night. There's free kibble and a never-empty water dish right outside my kennel. (Did I tell you we each get our own private kennel? Except for the contractors, of course.)

I understand my place in the corporate structure, and my importance to the Man update.

There's always more code in the genome — always something to snip or interpolate. That's why I was there in the middle of the night: a last round of corrections before the code freeze on Man 2.1.

I was taking a good long slurp of water when I noticed the cats. They weren't making a big deal of it — just quietly going about their business — but there were cats in all the cubicles, in the exec offices, in the conference rooms. It looked like they were running a whole separate company in the middle of the night.

Who hired them? HR doesn't hire cats for R&D. They're not task oriented, or good at working within a hierarchy. They sleep all day. Better suited to industrial espionage.

Back on the farm, I was a watchdog, and I've still got a bit of that energy. Better keep an eye out, I think. So I'm lying there in the doorway to my office, nose on my paws, like I'm taking a break, when the alpha cat comes by. Big muscular Siamese mix. His flea collar says 'Dominic' in red letters.

"Hey, Dominic," I call. I feel like a character in *The Sopranos*. You ever see that show? No dogs to speak of, but lots of food. Great food show.

The cat stops. Stares. "You talking to me?"

"What's the story here, Dominic?"



"No business of yours." He narrows his weird cat eyes, then yawns ostentatiously. He turns away, shows me his butt, and walks slowly off, his loose belly-fur swaying. I notice that his ears are facing backwards, in case I rush him: he's not as nonchalant as he appears.

Detective work is needed. I go down to the cafeteria, keeping my eyes open en route. Funny thing: I notice there are cats in and out of Susan Gossman's office like she had a catnip rug. Gossman? Seen her in the hallways. We'd never spoken. More of a cat person.

I slip a few bucks in a vending machine for one of those big leather bones. I chew.

When I get back to my office a savvy-

looking brunette in a well-cut suit is sitting on a corner of the desk. Gossman. "You're wondering about the cats," she says.

I wave my tail a bit. Not a wag, but it says I'm paying attention. Her hair has copper highlights. Or maybe she put drugs in my water dish.

"Project Felix," she says, "is an undocumented feature of the new Man release."

"Undocumented is right," I say. "You're doing some kind of super-tweaking with the human-cat chimaeras, and I don't think it's for Man 2.1. Chimaeric DNA ripping through the wild? Influenza vector?"

"You're a smart pup," she says.

My hackles raise. "Do Bill and Steve know what you're doing?"

"Down, boy," says Gossman. Instinctively, I sit back on my haunches. "Bill and Steve will find out soon enough. This is all for the better. Infected humans — and dogs too — will be smart and independent. The rest will just keep right on dipping seafood feast into plastic bowls."

Woof. That's straightforward.

She looks at me speculatively. "Right now, we need a top-flight coder."

I'm alert: my nose is quivering.

But Gossman is relaxed. "Everybody knows dogs are the best. But, as a dog," she says, "you have some loyalty issues. Am I right?"

I just stare at her.

"Loyalty is a gift, freely given," says Gossman.

I give a half-hearted wag of my tail. Not for dogs, I think.

"But not for dogs," says

Gossman. "Wouldn't you like the freedom to make your own decisions? A whiff of feline flu could make all the difference." She pulls a tiny aerosol can out of her purse.

I've got reflexes humans can't compete with. I could have it out of her hand in a split second. But do I owe my loyalty to the company, or to the great web of which all dogs, cats and humans are part?

She sprays. I breathe deep. She's right: dogs are the best coders. ■

Eileen Gunn lives in Seattle. Her short-story collection *Stable Strategies and Others* (2004) was shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick, James Tiptree Jr and World Fantasy awards. She is editor/publisher of the *Infinite Matrix* (www.infinitematrix.net) and is on the board of directors of the Clarion West Writers Workshop.

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