

excerpt from...

THREE'S COMPANY

by

David S. Leyman

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He fought like a tiger but the vine became tighter and tighter until he was unable to breathe. Every time he breathed out it gripped harder and gave nothing back when he tried to breathe in. The machete slipped from his hand. In panic he tried to bend to retrieve it but movement in any direction was impossible.

His eyes went out of focus and a great weakness washed over him. 'Oh, God! If only my chest didn't hurt so much.' He was wracked and felt death smothering him. 'Only God is great. I commend my self to thy bosom' he thought just as blackness enveloped him and air rushed into his lungs. He was vaguely aware of hitting the ground—soft hands and arms scooping him up.

Coolness on his brow. Water dripping down his temples. He opened his eyes. She was incredibly beautiful.

"I am Iffan Beute. Thank you."

She purred.

*

Iffan Beute nestled back into his comfortable chair and regarded the glowing embers in his fireplace with calm relaxation.

Reaching down to his right, he idly scratched his secretary between the ears and listened to her purring. Sometimes he wondered, as now, if the striations on her short, soft fur, were only on the fur itself or, were he to shave her, they would be on the skin as well.

Such contentment—a full stomach, a compliant secretary of great beauty and a cosy chair in front of a warm fireplace.

"I was looking at some old photographs that we took when we first met in the rain forest. You haven't changed a bit and there's me got all old and wrinkled." He glanced down at her coiled up on the floor by his side. "Do you know that it was thirty-five years ago tomorrow that we went off to explore the north and a shade over thirty years since we came back here? Five years of adventure and never the slightest wish since to return. Don't you ever yearn to go home to the forest, Three?"

The purring continued unabated. He knew that it was pointless trying to engage her in conversation. She was so skilled at writing down, verbatim, every single word he dictated to

her and yet only once had she written anything that he had not said. He had asked her name and she had written 'Three'. No more and no less. Over thirty years and nothing about herself had she conveyed to him. In all other respects she had been so wonderful. Even intimacy, although she had not understood the need to be face to face and had always squirmed herself around so that she faced away from him at the last moment.

Iffan wondered if his friends would regard his closeness with her as some sort of perversion. He regarded her, now, as a cat but, really, she was as human as he was. Yes, she had fur—short and soft; it was ginger with dark stripes, like a pale tiger. The fur covered everything except her palms, soles and her small, shapely bust. Indeed, she had a tail that he had imagined would get in the way—but didn't, oddly enough. Truly, her features were strangely feline and yet, if he compared her with a real cat they were completely dissimilar. No, she was a human, no doubt about it; just not a human that everyone else would recognise.

His friends would all greet her in a friendly fashion when they met on the street. Some would even venture to ask, laughing gently, if they were to be married—knowing, as they did, Iffan's affection for her. Several of his friends had asked him if he had ever considered putting clothes on her but it had appeared an unnatural thing to him. She was comfortable as she was and showed no sign of embarrassment or shame at walking naked, as it were.

The only time that she had shown any hostility was when Sedd asked if he could borrow her while his wife was away visiting her sister for a week. Three's eyes had narrowed and Iffan could hear a very faint hissing sound that he took to be a 'no'.

*

Three uncoiled herself from the floor and went to the kitchen.

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