



# Maestro

*by Neal A. Cline*

**Maestro almost got his tail stuck in the door at the Chinese take-out.**

**Of course, a full-grown tiger has to be careful in places like that. Maestro is nearly ten feet long from nose to tail and weighs a quarter of a ton. Most apex predators don't use carryout. Wild tigers catch their prey and bring it down with bloody claws. Does Maestro ever dream of running deer, of crushing backs and snapping necks?**

**I was thinking about that when we got back to the flat.**

**Would he have ever tasted Kung Pao chicken if we weren't linked? Would he even care? Is his life better or worse with me in it?**

**I know mine is better. I can't remember how I slept without him next to me. Listening to his breathing, feeling his warmth, rubbing my face in his fur. I used to sleep with a pistol next to my head. Now I sleep with a tiger. I used to be afraid all the time. Now I'm not afraid of anything.**

**Comfort animals have been around for decades. It's only in the last few years that they've been able to grow the larger wild animals in vitro and modify their behavior.**

There aren't that many Companions yet. It seems humans have an instinctive distrust of creatures that can take their heads off. But really, how far is it from taking a poodle on an airplane to walking in the park with a cheetah?

By law people must accommodate us, but everyone reacts differently. Some people cross the street to avoid us. Some are fascinated and want to touch him (or me). Some are horrified, accusing me of violating animal rights. One of those even threatened me, until Maestro growled at him and showed a little four-inch fang. The jerk pissed himself and ran off. I guess he didn't love animals as much as he thought I think we're saving them. Bengals were nearly extinct fifty years ago. Now there are thousands. What difference does it make if mine is a little more civilized? Wild Bengals don't survive very long. Nobody cares for them or mourns when they die. It's so sad. I think it's better to be Linked.

It's better to have someone. It's better... not to be alone. But sometimes I wonder what Maestro thinks.

**The End**

