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CW (highlight to reveal):

## Blood and Ice

A gust of wind blew down the street outside, rustling autumn leaves and creaking through the large, old building. Wooden beams groaned, the floor shifted ever so slightly. Magni bounced on the balls of her heels on the carpeted ground, the frost-vixen twirling one blade as she took another, anxious pass across the bank lobby. Her outfit was a mixture of utility and supervillain flair, black latex, trimmed in cobalt and covered by a loose fitting cloak, slung casually over one shoulder. A smile found Modi's lips as she looked her girlfriend and partner in crime over.

That outfit really did hug her new curves in all the right places.

*"What's got you on edge Frostbite? We've done half a dozen of these already."*

Magni's voice came back through her visor, clear and calm, with just a little strain to it. *"That's the problem. We've done half a dozen of these already. The Board's bleeding out. They're not going to keep letting us get away with it."*

Modi shrugged and adjusted her own costume. A mockery of the business world into which she was born, she wore a jet black suit, trimmed in crimson and bright red. A utility belt slung around her waist was packed with the usual supervillain essentials and what she was pretty sure was a heat ray - as though the wolf needed *that*.

*"Try not to worry hun. Rose would let us know if anything was out of the ordinary and remember, we're playing second fiddle on this op. Commander Masstress and Cole have everyone's attention on Third."*

The vixen shot her a frown from beneath her magenta visor but didn't move from her post. In her defence, the two of them had opened up pretty loud.

"Nobody move and nobody's tails get scorched off, we clear?!"

That had been the opening volley as the pair strode into the entrance of the Board owned bank, coupled with a handful of fireballs for effect. Mostly they singed concrete and plaster walls but if there was anything to get a crowd to listen to you quickly, it was fireballs. Lots of fireballs. It didn't hurt that Magni was able to materialise two wicked looking daggers out of thin air and the vixen had become *dangerously* good at twirling them for effect. Given the way

they sent a shiver down her spine, Modi really had to figure out what e/se the vixen could manifest. So much play to be had, so little time.

Since then, things had more or less calmed down. The pair had corralled the civilians onto the ground and it was just about time for Magni to do her thing with the bank's safe. Banks really did have a kind of aura of their own. The air smelled of stale donuts and panic, the sound of whimpering rose up from the floor and sirens threatened the distance, but beyond that, there was a kind of reverence for cash that echoed throughout the building. It stunk of money. That musty, old, crumbling smell clung to the marble pillars and wood trimmed walls. Yet another outdated institution to burn down with the rest.

Given the commander was doing her thing they'd have more than enough time to be in and out before so much as a squad car would be dispatched. The cream and red furred wolf gave a nod and one of Magni's daggers disappeared in a cloud of ice. She stalked towards the back of the lobby, where security doors separated them from their loot. Crystal blue eyes watched the people on the ground wearily as she stepped, not making a sound.

This was the seventh time the pair of them had emptied BOFA safes and honestly it was getting a little boring. She'd thought retribution would be more exciting.

As if prompted by the thought, one of the civilians stirred.

A hyena in a tailored suit pulled himself up off the ground from a nearby desk. Unlike the other civilians in the bank he wasn't cowering, shivering, hands behind his back on the floor. He was smiling. Modi blinked. From a distance he didn't look like much. Blonde hair was slicked back between spotted, round ears. A grin pulled at the dark fur of his muzzle, jagged teeth glinting in the bank's light. Standing fully, he rolled his shoulders, then slowly undid the buttons of his jacket.

Magni looked between him and Modi before barking a command. "Get back on the ground. Don't make me hurt you - these knives aren't just for show."

The hyena laughed - actually laughed as his hands went down the line of buttons, one by one. "Please, spare me a moment won't you? It'll hardly do to get blood on my suit."

Another look passed between the villains, but neither did anything to stop him. Finally the hyena removed his jacket, letting it fall across one of the bank desks. Muscles bulged beneath his shirt.

*Fuck.*

Modi was sure she'd made sure the crowd were civilians.

*Skoll?*

*"William Reacher. 23. Sorry Modi, didn't get a good look at his face until now. He's not Board affiliated, he is the Board. We're talking founding family."*

Modi bristled. She ought to have recognised the rich kid herself, even if they had only attended the odd event together. That smug little grin of his was unforgettable. Still, no time like the present to teach old money a little something about new blood. She felt her fists clench before she realised the aura of fire that was rolling down her arms. Flames licked at her fireproof suit and boiled the air around her. Magni had picked up on the sudden tension, she drew her daggers again as ice crystallised before her.

It was William's turn to blink. He looked between the villains. "Surely not! Surely you don't intend to fight me, two against one." His words drifted through the air, sweet as honey. His grin never left his face. Modi wanted nothing more than to knock his teeth out. "Where is the sport in that? You want to fight me, one against one."

That made sense. Two korps villains against one civilian. Better to give him a fighting chance. Better optics. Magni stepped forward, denying her the chance to challenge William herself. Fine. Watching her vixen lover beat the daylights out of the rich asshole would be nearly as satisfying as doing it herself.

Appraising Magni's approach, the hyena simply nodded, grin untarnished. "Right, Trevor, isn't it? We never got the pleasure of being introduced." He loosened the buttons on his cuffs and dropped into a casual fighting stance, more akin to a fencer's than a martial artist's. With a hand in front of him the hyena welcomed attack, while a hand behind did little but taunt.

If the hyena's fighting stance was an invitation, it was one Magni gladly accepted. She'd been deadnamed before, it would take more than that to hurt her. She dashed forward, daggers flashing in the bank's yellow lights. It was a testing strike. With William unarmed, the hyena would have to yield space. Modi *expected* him to yield space. To jump back. Instead the hyena gracefully spun to one side, avoiding both slashes. In a blur of brown fur and tailored shirt the hyena lashed out with a side kick, missing the vixen by inches as she tumbled across the ground before regaining her stance, blades at the ready.

That was fast. Way too fast for some rich kid with a passing knowledge of martial arts.

*Uh, Skoll? What are we dealing with here?*

*"Hate to say it ma'am but your guess is as good as mine. Reacher never trained as a superhero, there's no certs on record. I'm looking into it though. Keep you updated."*

*Please.*

She returned her attention to the fight. Magni's daggers trailed ice in their wake, traces of each measured slash. The vixen was clearly much more cautious now she'd had a close call. Her bladework was focused on corralling, rather than direct confrontation. It doesn't matter if a strike doesn't land - not if it can set the stage for one that will. William, to his credit, never broke his annoying smile.

Modi couldn't place the fighting style. With uncanny grace William side-stepped every slash, ducked follow-up strikes, and always managed to position himself for the next attack. Now and then he struck out, punches breaking the misty air and finding little else. For a few seconds it looked like neither would crack the other's guard, a situation Modi found untenable. How could this snot-nosed asshole be a match for Magni? Clearly she was pulling punches, lethal clearance hadn't been given after all, but even so it was frustrating.

A crack snapped the air.

Modi hadn't seen it at first. One of Magni's knives streaked crimson across the hyena's guarding arm. Using the momentum of her blow, William stepped into the vixen's guard. An instant later he drove his elbow into her ribs, the crack of them echoing through the bank lobby. Modi gritted her teeth. She could almost feel that blow. Magni staggered, whipping her daggers in front of her to block any further strikes while William sauntered casually back. The vixen waived. She'd taken worse, much worse, but Modi could see the tension in her stance. William had *hurt* her.

The wolf took a step forward. They had agreed to fight this punk one on one, but she could feel the familiar battle raging inside her. Protectiveness of her lover warring with confidence in the ice vixen's abilities. She could feel the heat start to radiate off of her again, those civilians nearest to her beginning to crawl away to avoid the oven hot aura.

*"Modi." Skoll's voice didn't draw her attention away from the fight. "I haven't been able to find any record of cybernetic augmentations but they would be obscured by BOFA's facilities. I'm reasonably confident however that Mr Reacher has been trained by martial artists since he was old enough to walk. Some exaggeration."*

*Great.*

Magni had taken another step back. Nobody else in the bank would have noticed it, but she too was sizing William up again, reconsidering her plan of action. Against most capes she used ice knuckledusters. The knives were flashy but way too lethal, using them meant she had to hold back more than she already did. William took advantage of that. He stalked across the lobby in a slow circle, shaking blood from the slice across his arm. It wasn't deep. The hyena appeared more annoyed by the damage to his shirt than his arm, a strange mix of frustration burning in his eyes behind the smile. His bright green gaze flashed, just for a second towards Modi.

"Feeling alright there Trevor? Didn't hit you too hard, did I?" The hyena projected his voice cheerfully across the lobby floor.

The frost vixen twirled her daggers in response. "Hardly. Shame about your expensive shirt."

"Yes, if you had a family that cared about you I might sue them for damages. Alas, you have no one."

Outwardly Magni remained perfectly calm, her own expression of concentration barely twitching. Modi, on the other hand, seethed. How dare a Reacher of all people claim to care about family - he was born and raised for one thing and one thing only: leeching the money from everyone around him. He wasn't a man, he was a tool to be used and discarded. The knuckles of her clenched fists cracked. Maybe it was time to break this tool.

Once again the hyena's eyes flashed. His smile grew just a little wider. "But enough of you, Trevor. Seems your partner would like a word with me. I trust you'll stay back like the good mutt you've always been."

Modi half expected the ice vixen to throw herself at William, certainly he deserved it. To her genuine surprise, Magni looked between William and her.

*"You want the last hit on douche-mcgee over here?"* She asked silently.

*"Nothing would make me happier."* Modi stepped forward, out of her patch of scorched-black carpet.

The change in combatants appeared pleasing to William, who started a slow circle around Modi. True to her word Magni faded into the shadows of the lobby, ice blue eyes glowing in the darkness. "Miss Idunn!" He projected again, speaking with his chest. "Was murdering your own brother not enough? You had to use the gifts God gave you to become," he gestured broadly with one hand, *"this?"*

"I'm just getting started." A pang of guilt. Her brother deserved what he got, but nobody gets to set the world on fire with a clear conscience. She leveraged that hate and anger into her body, into her fire. It swirled around her. He wouldn't get a hit in.

"Clearly." For the first time that smile of his wavered, expression teetering on the edge of disgust. It returned just as fast as it had left. "Well Valerie, you turned your back on everything you could have been. Let's see what it gave you."

A slight crouch to the hyena's posture was all the warning Modi got before he launched himself through the air at the wolf. The slam in her gut was the impact of years of martial arts training. His toxic, smug, dripping grin was almost worse to bear.

Breath evacuated her lungs. Stars danced in her vision. Modi staggered backwards, raising her guard with flaming fists while she gasped lungfuls of air. William jumped back, his own hand scorched. The smell of burned fur filled the lobby.

“Not much.” William shook ashes from his fist.

So the fight began.

Modi had gotten a decent view of William’s technique from his time dancing around Magni’s blades. He was faster than the wolf was and enjoyed using the momentum of his opponent against them. But Modi neither relied on speed nor power. She threw out a few testing jabs, following them up with a kick wreathed in flames. Predictably, William avoided them with ease. The hyena tested the air himself, bouncing on his feet before trying to zone her with a sidekick. He certainly didn’t seem to mind his pants being scorched as she deflected the blow with one, stinging, arm.

*Alright Skoll, we’ve got this. He’s fast, he’s well trained. I think I’ve got a plan. Just need to avoid getting slugged in the gut again.*

Her lungs still struggled for air, fatigue burned her limbs as she blocked jabs and returned fire. It had been a hell of a way for the fight to start, but she’d be the one to end it.

*“They’re wrapping up on Third. Show the Board what you’re made of hun.”*

The hyena continued to move like water, his style fluid. He invited strikes with his left hand while countering them with his right, dancing around whatever blow Modi could make. If he weren’t such an insufferable prick, the fight might have been exhilarating. Despite his smile, that smug little grin of his, Modi could see into the creature’s eyes. William hated her. Hated what she stood for. What she had become. There was a hatred behind his eyes as hot as the fire in her chest. The wolf gritted her teeth. No need to drag this out.

She lashed out with a front kick, bouncing on the same leg and twirling into a side facing kick to take the hyena off guard. William darted backwards effortlessly, moving in while the wolf regained her footing to jab at him. It would have been easily enough deflected, but Modi took the blow on her shoulder. She grunted as the hyena’s fist connected deeper, harder than she’d at first estimated. *Definitely* augmented. Instead of falling back, the wolf channeled her anger and pain. Fire coiled around her right fist like a snake as she threw her punch past the hyena’s guard. He dodged. William jumped to the side, fluid as ever. He’d been conditioned to dodge. With a grin of her own, Modi pulled all that pent up anger and anguish, the atrocities of the corporate world, she pulled at the weave of her fire, and with an effort of will thrust it into the material world. Her fist exploded in flame.

William couldn't jump back fast enough to avoid being caught in the explosion. He was pushed back - thrown bodily across the lobby to topple over one of the nearby desks. Modi slowly pulled her fist back to her side, steam rising from her unharmed fur. She smirked.

*That'll do it.*

From the darkness she felt Magni's proud smile.

Desk lamps and paper rustled behind the desk that had taken the brunt of William's fall and the hyena slowly rose again. His grin had faded back to a smile as he dusted off his singed shirt and the burned fur of one arm. For someone who had just been launched across the room he was unnervingly steady on his feet. Burn marks streaked across his body but it had never been Modi's intention to incinerate him, just hurt him. Maybe break a few bones. She wondered if she'd done much of either.

"Well now, this has been fun." The hyena looked to where Magni had observed the fight, then back to Modi. He rolled his shoulders and opened his mouth to say more before one ear flicked. The sirens had never stopped calling in the distance, but now they were starting to approach.

*"You're on a timer."* Skoll informed Modi. A flame of irritation rose inside her. She hadn't managed to finish the mission *or* beat up the rich kid.

William looked like he was considering the situation as well.

*"Let's just ditch this loser."* Magni's voice was clear as day. She was right. Augmented or not, extraction wouldn't be a problem.

Modi nodded. *"I'll cover your exit."* Flames sprung from her hands.

The vixen gave one last sneering look towards William before she started to dart out of the bank lobby.

"Stop."

Magni stumbled to a halt.

*"What are you doing, get out of here."*

The vixen blinked. Confusion fell across her features.

*"I can't... I can't leave."* Magni's voice came through her visor. Confusion bled away to distress. Her muscles trembled. Modi's gaze shifted to William as the hyena slowly stepped through the rubble of the lobby, shifting broken blanks aside with a foot.

“Good boy.” The hyena all but purred. “You see, I know you’re on a clock, but I’m not.” He took another step towards Modi, who bristled. “You might not want to face off against an army of police officers, but that’s simply not my concern, is it?”

Magni slowly turned to face the hyena again, adjusting her stance and raising her ice daggers into a guard. Modi was fuming.

*“What do you mean you can’t leave?”* Her visor flashed magenta.

*“I. Can’t. Leave.”*

*“Modi hun, something’s going on here.”*

That was the gods damned truth if ever she’d heard it. Still, one problem at a time. If they couldn’t extract she would deal with William. The wolf squared up.

The hyena switched his gaze from Magni to Modi. “There’s no need for that.”

*There’s no need for that.*

His voice echoed in her mind. Skoll was saying something, Modi couldn’t hear it. There was no need to be violent. Something inside her screamed. Something inside her burned. Her fists glowed like molten metal and the heat around her began to singe the carpet once more.

William casually walked a path between the two supervillains, guard lowered, hands clasped behind his back. Either could have struck, together they would have been unstoppable. Neither of them moved. Only the hyena, smile never quite reaching his eyes, moved across the lobby.

“You see,” William stood between them and the door, “I’m tired of your disrespect. Valerie, you think we couldn’t see what you were doing? You figured to drain our coffers, *ours*?” He barked a short, joyless laugh. “You’re an annoyance. Nothing more. Did you ever, truly, believe otherwise?”

Modi stood. The wail of sirens got louder. Skoll was still trying to say something but her voice was distant somehow, blocked out by the walls of static that had grown in her mind. Was it true? Were the Board’s coffers more robust than first she’d thought? If anyone should know, shouldn’t it have been her? Still she wanted to punch the hyena. She wanted to break that smug little grin of his. Her fists remained clenched at her sides.

“And Trevor.” His eyes shifted to the ice vixen’s with the slow grace of someone who had time on his side. “Your betrayal was of such insignificance it’s barely worthy of concern.” He



paused, tapping his chin in a show of thought. "The only problem is, if we don't punish betrayal, we encourage it, don't we?"

The vixen remained frozen, but there was something more in her posture. The way she held her daggers. She was shaking, ever so slightly. In hate or fear, Modi couldn't tell. Perhaps it was both.

"Trevor." William's voice was quiet now, little more than a whisper. "Make a razor blade from your ice, hold it up for me."

Light refracted through the gathering blade of ice, bathing the lobby in shades of blue as Magni held it in the air. It was shaking. She was trembling. Something was terribly, terribly wrong.

"Trevor," William repeated the vixen's dead name. "Slice your wrist open."

The blade slowly lowered towards her arm. Magni's expression was horror. Her arm twitched. Every muscle in her body fought in rebellion.

"No!" Modi's voice rang out across the lobby. Half plead, half command. "Magni, Frostbite, lights of my life, you have to stop."

Magni couldn't talk, her teeth gritted while the razorblade slid ever closer to the exposed flesh of her arm. William simply smiled, hands clasped behind his back, form silhouetted against the streetlights beyond the door. Trickle of blood formed at the start of Magni's wound as her ice pierced flesh.

"Stop." The hyena's voice rang out through the building, commanding, final.

Magni stopped. She pulled the blade back, crimson pooling at its edge. Her chest heaved with unspent exertion.

Now the hyena's gaze shifted lazily once more back to Modi and his grin grew ever wider. "I want you to know Valerie, truly understand. You might have left the Board. Betrayed your family. Thrown your lot in with these," he shrugged, ever so slightly, "degenerates. But you will never crawl out from beneath my heel. And if you *ever* dare to fuck with me again, I will force you to watch while I take everything you love. And turn it to ash."

The wolf's mouth was dry. She shivered with anger. Fear. Hate.

The sirens were so, so close now.

"Go." The command was delivered through a sneering grin. "Go and get out of my sight."

If a spell had been cast, it wasn't broken. Just changed. Modi found herself moving, she saw Magni do the same. She could get one last look at William while she dashed past the hyena. He was... happy. Genuinely amused. Why shouldn't he be, he'd had the pair of them dancing like puppets. Then they tumbled out onto the streets. The night air was unbearably cold. Streetlamps stood like monoliths.

*"Modi, extraction in thirty seconds. Tracking rendezvous."* She could hear Skoll again. The familiar presence of her old companion was oxygen to a drowning woman.

She cast one last glance at Magni as the pair of them stumbled over asphalt. The vixen was inspecting her own arm, she still hadn't shaken that look of horror. And then the pair of them ran.

They ran as fast as they could.

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Consciousness sliced Magni with a quick, shaky breath. Gone was the bank, the scents of blood and panic, that haunting grin and tailored suit. In its place was the scent of earth and petricore, campfires and cinnamon. A soft whine keened in her chest and she buried her muzzle in her tail. She hugged herself tightly and resented the quiet noises under her breath. The vixen's mind and heart raced in tandem, and she squeezed her eyes shut. She was home. She was safe. Modi was by her side sleeping peacefully, thank the gods. Another breath, and some of the tension eased from her coiled form. Reluctantly she relaxed, and gradually, carefully, she stretched out and rolled onto her back.

Modi groggily protested the motion, but thanks to the gods it wasn't enough to stir her. Fear and panic still danced on her nerves, still snagged her breath and blurred her vision, but there was peace in the projected night sky above her. On the low ceiling of their den she could reach out and touch it if she so desired, but she settled on doing so emotionally instead. She focused on the far northern sky, the chromatic blend of simulated aurora, and pushed the lingering dream from her thoughts. The phantom scent of blood faded, as did its remembered warmth from her wrist. Her power was her own, her ice an extension of her will, no one else's.

Unspent adrenaline tapered as she watched the stars turn against their nebulous backdrop. Consciously and deliberately she breathed, a slow, steady rhythm that brought her back to the moment, back to her home and den. Her body calmed eventually, but her mind proved much harder to quiet. In the shadows of her sanctuary, she caught the glint of the evil grin from the corner of her eye. The scar on her wrist ached and smoldered, and with it a dozen other traumas. The thought of waking her wolfess crossed her mind, but left as quickly as it arrived. Modi needed her sleep, and this was a conversation they'd had many times before and likely would have many times more. But not tonight.

*Hati?*

Her vision flashed magenta, her implant waking. *Yes, Snjokorn?* The wolf's embrace wrapped around her like a blanket.

Magni swallowed. *I saw him again.*

The phantom embrace around her squeezed tighter. *At the offices?*

*At the bank. Gods, I can still feel him.*

*I really wish you'd let me file that memory away, at least until it doesn't sting as much.*

The titan quietly chuffed. *I haven't earned it yet.*

*We don't have to earn our salves when we're hurt, we don't need to earn our rests when we are tired. This is a lesson you've taught many agents at this point,* Hati chuckled. *It's about time you learn it too.*

*This isn't the same thing.*

*Oh? Why ever not?*

A shudder ran through the titan. *Most of these agents are much younger than I. They haven't had the time to learn and arm themselves against their demons like I have. It's reasonable for them to be nervous or scared, they're at the threshold of something new. I've had almost twenty years to take this one down, and I still can't FUCKING DO It.*

*Magni, it's not-*

*-It is! It's pathetic! How can I call myself a leader when I can't follow my own teachings? How can I ask them to face their fears when I cannot? When just the thought of him makes me feel like that little terrified kit again? How can I prove that I'm more than dead weight when that fucking smile freezes me up?*

The invisible hug around her tightened.

The fox stifled a sob. *How can I ever be worthy of protecting her when I can't even protect myself?*

*You've made so much progress Snjokorn, do not lose sight of that. You've become such a strong, beautiful woman over the years, and no one or nothing can take that from you. I'm so proud of you, we all are.*

*You won't let it happen to me again, right?*

The sheets of their bed rustled, and another hug added to the embrace around her. With it came the gentle warmth of a flame in the dark, and the comforting scent of campfire. Magni wrapped her arms around the wolfess, and any pretense of holding herself together crumbled. She all but collapsed into Modi, squeezing her tight as the smaller canine ran her blunted claws through the fur of her back. Modi whispered her love and affirmations, tending to her knight's whimpered fears, and kindled a comforting warmth in the space of their den.

Eventually, no more words passed between them, only the silent, intimate touches of primal comfort. The wolfess ran her claws through the fur of Magni's back, then moved to scratch her ears when she buried her massive head in Modi's chest. The smaller canine adjusted to comfort Magni in that new position, holding her close and grooming her pelt. Eventually the titan's shuddering breaths evened and slowed, and only when they tapered into soft, shallow snores did Modi dare to release her. She followed Magni back down to the mattress and curled around her as much as her stature allowed.

When the colossal vixen eased into a deeper slumber, Modi plucked her RCGs from their nightstand and placed them gingerly onto her muzzle.

*Skoll, would you mind asking Hati to watch over Magni's dreams for the rest of the night? Maybe give her a better one if it can be done?*

*Done and done.*

The wolfess took in a breath and eased it out as a sigh. *I'm going to fucking kill him. I'm going to go down to Arjen's, borrow God's Middle Finger, perforate that motherfucker until he's more hole than hyena, and immolate the rest.*

*As much as I'd love to see that, you know we can't,* Skoll admitted.

*I know, but gods a girl can dream, right? I should have put him in the ground when I had the chance.*

*You were young and scared, you couldn't have known where this would lead. Besides, it's probably for the best you didn't. It would have been much, much harder to cover up, and might not have worked out that great for you two.*

Modi's head flopped into her pillow. *Regardless, I'd like to revisit my petition to the Overlord first thing in the morning. That asshole needs to burn and I'm about ready to risk my standing with the Korps to make it happen.*

*I'll give you a chance to review that message in the morning before we send it.*