

# I need a title.

## Chapter 1: We Were Wanted.

If anything could be said about Esther it was that she wasn't much for small talk. We sat silently in a smoky bar exchanging guarded looks for what felt like hours. My earlier attempts to fill the dead space between us with words had been contemptuously shot down and now I shifted awkwardly, my tail tucked neatly against my leg, as I waited for her answer. Outside, the streets of Hong Kong were colored a disorienting hue cast by countless warring lights and signs. She finally spoke, her voice twinged with a Quebec accent, her dark brown eyes boring into me.

"You want me to come with you on a run?"

My tufted ears flattened and my tail twitched in agitation, "Yes."

"After last time?" She asked.

I grimaced, exposing my fangs, "I had nothing to do with last time."

She rolled her eyes, "You were there."

I scoffed, my ears flat against my skull, "Lot of folks were there."

"They aren't here, you are."

"They know better than to trifle with you, I don't."

She laughed, "Maybe you should follow their example, cat."

I growled, my tail lashing, "I chose to be this, did you choose to be a coward?"

Esther's eyes lit up, me augmented feline eyes tracked her movement as she lunged across the table that separated us, her cybernetic hand balled into a fist. I was on my feet and out of reach in moments. Patrons turned to look as she flipped the table away

and charged towards me. She managed to graze me with a razor blade as I stepped away, bumping into another table. The sound of a gun cocking drew both our attentions.

“Don't mess up my diner.” The dark skinned man said as he leveled his gun at us.

I flashed what I hoped was a disarming smile. Esther just glared.

“I used to be able to catch you.” She said.

“Yeah, I didn't have the gene mods yet.”

She was silent.

“This time will go better.” I promised.

She crossed her arms across her chest, “Who else is coming along?”

I held a napkin to my cut as I walked for the door, motioning for her. “Dean, Colwyn, and Grys.”

She followed me at a lazy amble, “Grys is still alive?”

I chuckled, “Grys will live forever.”

“How much?” She asked.

“20k a piece.” I answered easily.

She whistled, “Damn, you've moved up in the world, cat.”

“Somebody had to.” I replied.

I turned to look at her, the chaos of lights confusing our shadows, “You in?”

“One more question.” She said

“Go ahead.” I said.

“Why did you augment into some kind of cat-person?” She asked.

I blinked, then laughed. "Humanity was unfulfilling." I answered.

She snorted, "I'm in."

I grinned, "The van is this way."

## Chapter 2: Layered Promises

I could hear the French rap blaring from the beat up grey van as I approached it, my ears tucking back. Esther didn't seem to mind, which was another good thing about Est, once she was in she was in. I banged on the roll out door and the music quieted as the door rolled open and we were greeted by the huge grey-haired troll.

"Wow, you actually pulled it off."

"Thanks for having faith in me Grys." I said.

Grys waved me inside and stepped out to embrace Esther, "It is good to see you again, Est."

Est patted the bulky old troll fondly, "Same, Grys, same."

I stepped into the van to let them catch up, Dean was reading through his books and Colwyn was checking his guns, I raised my hand and waved.

Colwyn set his gun down and rose to his feet, "Ren, you survived."

"It's the nine lives they got now." Dean teased. I snorted.

I clapped a padded palm on Colwyn's shoulder, the dwarf grinned.

"Surprised you're not in the driver's seat." I said.

Colwyn chuckled, "Grys won't let anyone drive her truck but her, you know that."

"I also know you wouldn't miss the opportunity to play make believe." I said.

"Not while Grys was here." Colwyn replied and sat back down.

Dean looked up from his book, "Have you heard the plan?"

My ears flattened again, "You made the plan without me? Bah."

"You can chime in on the plan." Colwyn offered. I sighed.

I slid down into a seat, mindful of my tail, and crossed my legs. "Let's hear it."

Dean set his book down and rolled his broad orcish shoulders, "I got a connection who can get us janitor uniforms, we slip in at night, you take care of the security cams and turrets--"

"And elevators, and other tech." Colwyn interjected.

"Right, and Grys and I set up barriers. You, Cole, and Est break your way into the server room and snatch the AI, we all walk out 20k richer."

"And if there's a night guard?" I ask.

"There wouldn't not be a night guard that's why Cole and Est are going with you." Dean said. "Grys and I are capable of handling ourselves, especially if you leave some drones with us."

I grunted. "It sounds too easy."

Just then, Grys entered the van with Esther and spoke up, "The plan will most assuredly go to shit the moment we get started but that's why we're all master improvisers."

"You improvise with your fists Grys." Est teased, Grys cracked her knuckles. "Master improviser." She said. I smiled and took settled into the passenger seat.

Grys settled her bulk into the driver's seat as Colwyn began showing Est his new guns and we set off to case the building.

Why did it have to be a skyscraper? Gene modding myself with a caracal did not, in fact, make me any less unnerved by heights. My eyes climbed up the length of the

towering building, which disappeared into the smog, the pit growing in my stomach as I craned my neck. I felt Grys' large hand on my shoulder and gave her what I hoped was a confident smile.

Colwyn sighed wistfully, "One day we'll get that Dream Job and all get to retire."

"I don't know if I could ever give it up." Dean said in a quiet voice. Unlike Colwyn and I, who kind of fell into running, Dean had chosen this profession with enthusiasm and been running for a few decades.

"You age out eventually." Est said, "There are no old runners." All eyes turned to Grys, her messy mane of grey hair barely restrained by a headband.

"Augh, c'mon." Grys said with a scoff, "I just greyed early, is all."

I reached out and fondly patted her shoulder, "Sure, gran." I teased.

"What would you even do if you got enough to retire?" Dean asked the crew. I hrrmed audibly in thought.

"Buy my own island, fill it full of game, and swindle rich hobbyists out of their cash." Colwyn answered readily.

"Are there even any islands left to be bought?" Est asked no one in particular.

I chuckled.

"I would start a non-profit hospital in Haiti." Grys said.

"Islands popular tonight." Dean remarked.

"I think I would just return to Inukjuak and... I don't know, raise sled dogs or something." Est said.

"I'd probably set up a base somewhere and take some younger runners under my wing." Dean said softly, "It's too much a part of me to give it up."

Grys nudged me, "And you, Ren?"

I sighed, "Travel the world? That's the usual response right?" I honestly didn't know what to do with myself if I wasn't running.

Eat snorted, "You already travel the world as a runner, Ren."

My tail twitched, "Right, but this time I'd be doing it with less killing people and more anything else."

Colwyn, Dean, and Grys chuckled, Est just watched me for a long moment before shaking her head and checking her weaponry.

I pulled out my deck and slid the interface goggles over my eyes, in the Matrix I could go to any height without the vertigo and nervousness. I began to run my usual suite of programs, trying to look through any security cameras or check for any active machines. The security measures came apart easily as I navigated the virtual world comfortably. I ran the camera feeds to the monitors in the van and we sat back and watched as I set up our secure com links.

"Pretty heavy security." Dean observed.

Est grunted in reply.

"What's the plan?" Colwyn asked

"Well, good news and bad news." I announced. "Staff roster doesn't have any giant trolls or gene modded employees which means our plan to go in as janitors only works for some of us."

"Some janitors some outside maintenance folks and just pretend we belong there?" Dean suggested.

"Is Colwyn going to bring his arsenal?" Est asked.

"I can just keep it to a few pistols." Colwyn said with a pout.

"Team player." I said with a smile.

"Assuming the uniform trick works, how do we get them?" Est asked.

"I have our usual maintenance gear here in the van, and Dean knows an employee who was willing to provide us uniforms so long as we do something for him." Grys answered.

"And what does he want?" I asked.

"He wants us to give his spouse company life insurance, they rejected him because of mental illness." Grys answered with a shrug.

"Assholes." Dean said.

"When are we meeting with your contact, Dean?" I asked.

Dean snorted, "Oh he doesn't want to meet us. Too incriminating. He's leaving the uniforms in the trunk of a car we'll have to break into."

"Alarms? Cameras?" Est asked.

"Nothing Ren can't handle." Dean replied with a grin.

"When we doing this?" Colwyn asked as he began to strap several pistols to his body.

"Let's head out and come back in a few days while Ren checks the feeds." Grys said.

Colwyn pouted again, "We can't just bust in, guns blazing?"

Grys frowned severely, "You know I don't like hurting innocents on my jobs."

"Same here, let's avoid it at all costs." I said.

"Crash at your place?" Est asked Grys. Grys grinned, "People will talk."

Est shrugged, "Let them talk."

I went home alone to watch camera feeds, drink soy, and eat several protein bars. My new genes required a lot of protein. My cats laid beside me and I internally chastised myself for both literally and figuratively becoming a cat lady, just as my ex suggested I would. I let Sonya, my runty black cat, have a bite of my protein bar. A soft blip notified me of a message on my interface, I kept one eye on the feed as I answered it.

“Can you purr?” User Bullet time asked, it was Colwyn.

“Can you grow a beard?” I countered with a small smile.

“Fiction lied to us, Cat chase, only female dwarves grow beards.” Colwyn teased.

“Hormone therapy then. Long luxurious braids! Think of all the guns you could hide in them!” I replied

“But do you purr?!?!?” Colwyn asked again.

“You’ll never know.” I replied and turned back to the feeds. He sent me several more messages before a message from Bear horn blinked in.

“Anything out of sorts?” Grys asked.

“Bored security, but lots of it. Daily cleaning, they like it spotless.” I replied.

“Let’s track mud in.” Grys suggested.

I scoured the Matrix for information for a moment and was rewarded, “Hey Bear horn, good news.” I announced.

“My favorite kind of news.” Grys replied.

“We might be able to go as delivery people instead.” I told her as I discovered a scheduled delivery to one of the managers in the Matrix.

“We’d have to ambush the actual delivery folks, might make it harder.” Grys said.

“Ain’t that always the way, expanding our options so rarely makes it easier.” I said.

“Such is life.” Grys replied.