

Afterlife - Digital Shadow

By Dextor

Chapter 0

It was rare to hear this part of the city so quiet. Usually the constant rumble of cars moving overhead would keep him awake, even during the coldest of nights. But shelter was shelter, even if it didn't really help against the piercing winds. Going through his four jackets with ease, all lined with newspaper. After a while, your skin goes numb from the cold.

Which all made the small fire questionable. The more you tried to warm yourself up, the more pain you felt of the cold. But it was either feel cold, or feel hungry. And sometimes one can be the lesser of two evils. That is until the wind blows out your heat. Making the man sigh heavily. He would now have to wait for another person to pass by to beg for another light.

The sounds of a large trash can in front of him nearly stopped his heart. Landing where his warmth was coming from, and then receiving the horrendous screech of a claw against metal. Soon enough, that warmth returned, greater than before. "...Thank you." The man said, dryly. Still not really able to see whoever helped him, but felt a large presence nearby.

"Why are you here?" It was barely a question, and one the man was almost afraid to answer the raspy voice. Deep, and clearly inhuman. He recalled the cries and roars of creatures echoing through the city before, as well as heard the reports from radios on display or from others. Frightened, the older man just lowered his head. Almost to submit to the monster. "...It's yours, isn't it?" It asked.

"What?"

"The Structure." He heard the faint claws trace on the large wall of the bridge. "You hold a connection to it. Like it was yours to raise and strengthen."

"...Yes." The man swallowed, feeling a bowl of fresh water in his lap.

Again, he hesitated, but drank it anyway. "I was the architect of it a long time ago."

"And that would explain why you're still here. Attempting to hold onto the one thing people cannot take away from you. Even if it does not block against the wind." He tried to look at the creature, but all he seen was shadows. Even with the light of the fire faintly helping his poor vision. Even when it knelt down and studied the man closer, he could not make it out. "You built a bridge that you now sleep under. While others use to pass over, without any regard to what it is to you or anyone else who forged their names into it."

"...What do you mean?"

"-Do you want this?" The creature interrupted him, rather thickly and almost a growl. "Do you want to be cast out of their lives? While they abuse the only thing you have left?"

Again, he didn't know how to respond. "Please... I'm just a blind man-"

"Being able to fully see will not make you less blind." The larger one exhaled. Getting the man to feel a large grip on his shoulder and almost yelp, but the brace was too strong for him. In a few moments, he started to make out the color of the flames. The entire barrel, then the creature holding onto him. "Stand Up." It said, getting the man to look into its feline-like blue eyes. "They can only control you if you let them." It then got up, turning around and leaving in the direction of the wind. Grabbing a large metal sheet and placing it up against the wall of the bridge, aiding against the harsh force of nature.

Chapter 1

It was slowly getting brighter. Something he was still getting used to in this world. That slow setting sun, finally getting into the position from which his closed eyes could no longer escape. It also meant two things: that it was

dusk, and- "Asking people on the streets what they think of the Black Bull."

The damn radio alarm. "I'm honestly not sure. I mean, the attacks have been more recent lately. They've been all over the news and web, pictures of new creatures every night seem to appear, as well as this guy." One man said, getting the Bull to grunt while turning around on his flattened mattress. Flopping his head down in a position that could half avoid the sun's rays.

"I personally think he's a time bomb. I mean, what's keeping him from attacking us like the rest of them? And when is he going to decide to no longer protect us?" A woman asked.

"He attacks these creatures. He attacks people. Even attacks those who are trying to defend themselves. I wouldn't call them innocent, but at the same time it shouldn't be up to this Creature to be the arbiter... Arbiter means judge." The man grumbled, possibly at the confused look of the news host.

"I believe he's protecting us. I mean, we've always wanted someone outside the law to finally punish those who need to be punished. That's what this Gorret is doing. I completely agree with-" The black paw hit the radio with a loud slap. Missing the snooze button and hitting the Seek instead.

"He's an Aatxe." A young woman said, getting the bull to almost freeze and hold his breath. Instantly recognizing the voice.

"A what?"

"They're normally flaming bulls, but they're vigilantes. They seek out those who've been Malevolent and punishes them, all the while making those who are innocent stay in their homes at night. In comparison, he's kinda like Robbin Hood or Batman. He might not obey the law completely, but that's his advantage. That's our advantage."

"So you support this creature murdering people?"

"He only goes that far if they've deserved it-"

"And how far would that be? What would someone have to do to get his attention?"

"The worst of the worst. But you are looking at this the wrong way. We are not his priority."

"...Then what is?" As much as he enjoyed listening to her, the black paw searched the metal casing around the alarm clock for the off button. Flopping his head down once again with a thud and sighing deeply. (It's been three months since Leslie's interview, and they're still playing it on stations.)

For a few moments, he just laid there. Nearly drifting to sleep once again before the phone started to ring.

Grumbling at the harsh, high-pitched noise ringing in his ears, it rang three times before taking a message. "Gorret? Gorret, I know you're there. Hit the speaker button already." The man on the other end pestered, getting the black beast to growl a bit in annoyance. "I can picture you sleeping on that flattened mattress, probably staring at the phone right now and grumbling like you usually do." The black one stared at the phone for a moment while he was speaking, and started to stretch and raise up. "Slowly getting up and grunting at the sunlight hitting your eyes from the window." A loud growl at the bright light in his red eyes. "But that light means something for you... Well, us. Com'on! Hit the speaker button already!" The bull slapped the phone.

"...You talk too much." It grumbled in a raspy voice.

"You know you like my morning wakeup calls." A slight grumble from the black one. "How close was I to your wake up routine?" A louder grumble. "Spot on, huh?"

"Past the level of 'Good Guess' and deep into 'Creepy'. How can you possibly be so cheery in the mornings?" The large one started to stretch a bit. Walking towards the window and looking out while the sun was blocked by some clouds.

"Simply put: Coffee. Something you should try sometime."

"I don't drink coffee anymore."

"Doesn't mean you can't try it. Best addiction known to man and Black Bull kind. Ironically, the brand I'm drinking." A slight grumble as the creature searched a thick clothing pile for some pants. Ones that held zippers onto the sides so he wouldn't have to balance on one hoof to get them on. "How are the new ones fitting?"

"They're too tight. And buttons were a terrible idea. Though a good distraction once I got them off."

"Is that why you were taking two on with no pants? Wow, that came out very wrong."

"Very wrong. Putting you on hold." And the bull pressed a button on the phone. Another device that had a steel plating. Slightly dented, mostly due to Gorret not knowing his own strength at times. Walking down the metal stairs with loud clomps and turning to the ground level towards another phone. Staring at it for a few moments while enjoying the peace and quiet, then

pressing the speaker button once again.

"I'm back, baby!"

"Yes, you are."

"And you sound so happy to hear from me again. How was the stairs?"

"Creepy, Gene."

"I know, I know. But still, just making sure you're getting up. I don't want to wait on rooftops for an hour, only to find that you fell back asleep." Another grumble as the Bull walked over towards a very thick bar connected to two engines. Lifting them up like a dumbbell a few times with rather ease.

"That only happened twice, and on days that were very cloudy or raining."

"It's a wonder I didn't catch a cold." Hearing another flick of a lighter from the speaker, as well as the man inhaling. "Besides, you don't need to push yourself this much." He talked a bit funny with the cigarette in his mouth.

"You never know what's going to come out from there. And we haven't found the source of it yet." The large one rested the heavy bar on his shoulders for a moment, taking a breath. "What if the day I take a break that we would find the cause of these rifts?"

"And what if the day comes when you push yourself too hard that you can no longer defend the city for a week?"

"It doesn't take me a week to heal, Gene. Only a few hours."

"And it only takes a moment to make a mistake. And I can only assume that you can get damaged as easily as they can."

"Not really. I just make it look easy." The black one continued his work out, getting more awake.

"Too easy. To the point where I wonder if you're a bad influence on me."

"Says the person that's smoking 18 packs a day."

"That's exaggerating. It's only 9..." He mumbled, getting the black one to flick an ear at the phone for a moment. "But the question does pop up: what are you going to do once you find it?"

"You mean the source?" Gene made a noise in confirmation, and the bull didn't answer. Putting down the weights and exhaling through his muzzle.

"I'll have to see when it happens. Might even turn myself in."

"To the police? I guess you couldn't really hide from them."

"Unless I left the country, even then." Another breath. "Either way, it would be the right thing to do."

"I could argue against that, but it's almost time. I'll meet you downtown."

"Fair enough." He hung up the phone. Taking a deep breath while the question echoed in his head for a few moments. Pondering the answer as he left the old abandoned building. Slightly glancing at the hole in the wall that he made that first morning Leslie was here. Gene did his best to cover it up with battery powered tools, but the cold never really bothered Gorret anyway.

Granted, he never knew how much he missed Power until he got it back. Though he was stealing it from a nearby underground cable, connected to a semi-active warehouse, it was nice to have for just a few things. Trying to keep up with the media about him and his position. Granted, Leslie's father gave her an old CB Radio that could still tune into the police scanners, which did help if there was some sort of emergency when it came to these creatures. But at least they didn't seem to be adapting to the daylight, much like he was... 'Trying.'

Getting on top of a building greeted the black bull with a bright sun, getting him to growl at it a bit. If there was one thing he disliked about such a world, it's that damn light. Though Gorret didn't have a 'Bane' to it, a term Leslie came up with that would describe a harmful effect towards his body, he still didn't like it. Eventually he would learn to wait it out a bit longer at his hideout before meeting with Gene.

And the thoughts came back to square one, while he started moving from building to building. Though the man knew he didn't have much time left in the world, it didn't stop the bull from feeling a little guilty about shouldering the same burden. Let alone, attempting to fight against things that could greatly reduce what time he had remaining.

A stupid idea, both the black one and the young woman told him many times, however it didn't change his decision. Perhaps there was some other reason deep down Gene had, but the bull couldn't read minds. Even if he could, odds are all that smoke would've gone to his brain by now.

Speaking of such things, he could smell it from here. A few roofs away, probably downwind of the meeting zone. One that seemed to have a ramp to the rooftop for Gene to ride his motorbike up there. The first couple of nights, they tried different buildings, only to find that people were attempting to

steal that bike or parts of it. And one time, they actually succeeded. At least they were able to capture the thief and give him a harsh warning. One no doubt the younger man ignored.

But there was only so much they could do. However, their staging of Good Cop, Bad Cop was pretty good. Granted, it was more Good Cop Trying To Keep The Big Black Bull From Trampling Bad Guy, it got the message across. If people were afraid of Gorret, that was fine. Better if they knew someone else was with him trying to keep the black one 'In Line'. Let alone, if that person was human.

Landing on the roof no longer startled the man, nor increased his heartbeat a bit. The bull was hardly good at Stealth, which was obvious. "That didn't take long." He said, exhaling a stream of smoke out of his nose. "At least you didn't get lost this time."

"Okay, first: that only happened once." The man chuckled. "Second: the other times, I was not lost. I merely forgot that we switched roofs. And third: it's hard to lose track of a walking ashtray when you can smell it halfway across the city."

"I try deodorant." Gene shrugged, getting back on his bike and pulling out the sheathed blade from under the casing. It always worried the bull a bit to see him strap that thing to his waist, but the man needed something to defend himself with. Firearms rarely worked on these creatures, unless they were designed to pierce through armor. And ammo like that was not easy to come by, not without promoting illegal activity. "Ready when you are." He said, still finishing is cigarette before starting the motor.

Gorret nodded, taking a deep breath of the smoky air. Though he didn't like it, he didn't use his muzzle to find these creatures. They held their own unique frequency within their bodies. Something that couldn't be heard by even animals of this world. Closing his eyes still left the solid red glow over them. Getting his ears to flick at some of the noises around them, but feeling out for any signals of the creatures.

The bull grunted a bit, instinctively turning his head towards a direction and almost growling like they were in his territory. A habit that, to this day, was still hard to break. "This way." The black one said, jumping buildings towards the west.

"Roger." Gene started the bike, and took off down the ramp.

The dirty city never looked so beautiful to him. After seeing it all in a mess of very dark grey and black, it was difficult to even scavenge for food. Far worse when it was sunny out, whereas the light would only bring more distortion. Though much of this part of the city was slums, just being able to see and read the graffiti put a smile on his face.

The man wasn't alone, he knew that much. The streets were populated with families without homes. Taking what kind of shelter they could in many of the unsafe, abandoned buildings. Occasionally, there would be one that looked rather nice, but it probably now belonged to a bank. Locking everyone out who desperately needed shelter just to attempt to sell the place for a profit.

Anyone who knew this location would have enough sense to never buy a place here. It wasn't that the people were bad... These were just desperate times. And often enough, that meant people were forced to steal what they could. Break into other people's homes and pawn anything they could get their hands on. All just for something to eat, even if it wasn't for their own bellies.

It would be pointless to dig through the trash here. Anything and everything seemed to be picked clean ten times over. Several skeletons of cars and trucks lined the sidewalks, creating a small barrier from the roads inbetween. Ones barely traveled, probably because there was nothing worth seeing or getting to beyond this direction. Let alone the fear of getting ambushed by several people, taking whatever they possibly could. So the road became a drag race strip, one avoided by everyone besides some children.

But the further up the street, towards the middle of the city, the housing became cleaner. There were a lot more citizens walking the streets, and more stores that seemed to be opened. Of course, they were all digitally blind. Walking with their eyes glued to their phones and tablets. Ones shackled to their wrists so they could not just be grabbed by others and taken. It always seemed so strange to him. Hardly a metaphor anymore when they're literally chained to a digital world.

Of course, it made sense. Especially around here. No one wants to notice a homeless man or woman. No one wants to give up what change they earned, when they could use it to have another attempt at an addictive mobile game. But he wasn't asking for money. He was just trying to earn some himself. Something he's rarely been able to do since he lost his vision.

Thankfully there was a soup kitchen nearby, as well as a few people that helped him get to it when he needed to. It wasn't much, but it showed that there was some generous people still left in the world. People who actually cared about the lives of others. If only he could have their names to thank them personally, but he could understand why they wouldn't publicly display such a thing.

"It was so dark, it was really hard to see them." Someone on a displayed TV said, their face blurred to protect their identity.

"It looked like a huge centipede! I usually liked bugs as a kid, but this one gave me the geebies!"

"I seen the Aatxe once, but only for a moment. Sometimes it lands on my rooftop at night and spooks my son."

"So you're saying it's being a nuisance to the city?"

"What? No-"

"I seen something lurking in the shadows a few days ago. I'm not sure what it was, but it sure didn't like the light on my phone. It sounded like it burned it."

"Would you possibly suggest using bright lights as a defensive tactic towards these monsters?"

"Possibly. All I know is that I lived to tell about it. So it's worth a shot."

"These were just a few of the people within the city that have encountered these Malefactors. The police are still gathering information about such things, and are welcoming those who provide any experience with such creatures a small reward down at the station." It sounded promising, almost too good to be true. But then again, what did he have to lose?

Chapter 2

It was like it knew the Aatxe was coming for it. Constantly moving away like it was trying to escape though the spaces between the buildings. Being slowed down slightly by small barriers and possibly trash bins that were blocking the way, while the bull was able to just clear streets by a forceful leap. Though, rolling to keep momentum did make a lot of noise for the residence of those homes.

The creature was skittish, that's for sure. Something quadruped that could barely be spotted from afar as he chased after it. But the bull could feel something within it. Fear. It was being chased into a corner in a strange land. A territory not its own.

Gorret kept his pursuit, chasing the creature into a dead end between two large buildings. Landing at the only way out heavily while cracking the street with his hooves. Scanning the alley that was filled with trash with his senses while the red glow of his eyes got the creature to hiss from afar. He knew it wasn't nearly as big or threatening as some of the others, being about adult tiger sized. But it was still a trespasser in his instincts. One that needed to be exiled in one form or another.

His black ears flickered at the engine coming down the street. The bull had to hand it to the ashtray, he really knew how to follow him without the need of any device. The talk of putting a tracking collar on the Aatxe still put the black one into a rotten mood just by thinking about it, which in turn ended such a discussion.

Exhaling through his muzzle, his attention returned to the slight clawing and scrapes of sharp weapons against brick walls. This thing wasn't great at climbing up steep terrain without having something to grasp, much like that of a feline. Barely making out the boney rattle of large spines. Long, double-jointed in several areas, and most likely used to transfer a venom of sorts. Something the bull encountered too often to really be threatened by anymore.

But another motor caught his ear with his first step into the alley. One of a large car, versus the higher pitched of the bike that Gene managed to fix up. Getting Gorret to growl loudly as it came closer to them. "How the hell did they find us?" The bull grumbled when the man came in earshot.

"Not sure, but you're not exactly the quiet type." A glare from those solid red eyes, and Gene shrugged. "You can't deny the truth." He had a point, Blunt as it was.

"Deal with them." The black one motioned to the van that was pulling up, one with a journalist logo on it. As he took a few heavy stomps towards the whimpering hisses within the darkness.

"Get that camera and get it rolling ASAP!" A bright red haired man in rather casual looking clothes shouted. Holding onto a microphone and tending to the last few touches to his hair with the vehicle's mirror. "It's about time we found one of these-"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" The ashtray tried to block their path to the alley, as many growls, scratches, hisses and cracks of brick omitted from it. "You guys can't be here! Who knows what might happen-"

"And you are?" The host barely glanced at him, finally putting away his comb. "Police, I'm guessing? Badge please."

"I'm not an officer-"

"Then we don't need to listen to you-is that thing rolling yet?" The cameraman motioned a 3 on his hand, and started counting down. "Sup, Xtremists! This is Lazlo from XTM360, reporting to you guys live at the most recent attack on our streets by the Xenomorphs! As you can hear behind me, the Aatxe is fighting one in this alleyway, and we're going to try to get you guys a good look at it-"

"What!? No way 'Lazlo'! It's dangerous here!"

"Don't care, Gramps. Because here on XTM, we live for danger-"

"Hold on. Gramps!? How old do you think I am?" Gene growled.

"I donno. 45?" A very hurtful look from the Blonde one.

"45...? Well, that's only because I work in the sun, sleep on my face, smoke alot-"

"What part of Don't Care don't you understand? Point is, you're boring. Get off my network." The host shoved Gene out of the way, just as the skittish creature was thrown towards the alley entrance. Exposing it's skinless face to the light and making it hiss in a panic as it toppled on top of Gene. Trying to claw at the prone man while the humans were cursing frantically. Granted, with its senses being constantly attacked; from the screams, the blinding street light, and the horrible smell of cigarettes, it couldn't hit one below it.

The Bull managed to grab one of its paws and hold pull the creature back. Holding onto that same shoulder and twisting the arm back until it omitted a loud snap, making the quilled monster cry in pain. But even its

whimper was cut short with the massive black paw over its muscle-covered muzzle, while Gorret's other arm held back the creature's functional forepaw.

Taking the chance to get up, Gene scampered to his feet. A bit angry at both the creature, and being called old, he stabbed the held creature in the chest with his sword. Feeling himself having to put most of his weight behind the blade to pierce through the creature's hide, it did manage to get through with a disgusting squish. Ripping the weapon down and letting the black ooze spill on the streets, along with a few other pieces he really didn't want to make out.

When the smaller creature began to fall limp, the Aatxe tossed it to the side. Giving the camera that felt like it was in his face a harsh glare of solid red eyes and a low growl. Making the man operating it take a step back and almost whimpering. "...Ohhh God." Lazlo whimpered, looking at the blonde man's left hand, which in turn got everyone else to look at the shadowy glow over it. "It infected him...!"

"It infected me!?"

"No, it didn't." Gorret grumbled. "You're not wounded, so you're fine. But let that go."

"He's going to mutate in front of the camera-keep it rolling! Keep it rolling!"

"I'm going to mutate-!?"

"You're not going to mutate!" Another loud growl, one more directed at the host, pushing the man back a few steps with a harsh stare. "But let it go, Gene."

"How do I let it go?"

"Try shaking it off!" And the blonde one tried shaking his hand.

"I'm shaking it, but it's not coming off!"

"Don't shake your hand, it's only going to make it worse!" Gorret grunted, exhaling loudly as the darkness around the man's hand started to fade. Making everyone give the Bull a look in question, forcing his ears to go back in irritation. "Too late now."

"W-what does that mean?"

"So I'm going to die?" Gene almost whimpered.

"Not any sooner than you were expected to."

"Well that's comforting." The black one snorted at him. "So... What?"

"You accepted the bounty." The large one grumbled.

"What does that mean?" Lazlo asked, almost holding up the mic to Gorret and getting another harsh stare.

"If you don't pack up and get out of here, I will throw you into that tin-can of a vehicle and launch you into the fifth floor of your station from here!" He roared, getting the two to take another step back. "**Get! Out!**" And they scampered away, leaving the van behind.

Gorret exhaled, putting a paw over his eyes in irritation. Hearing the faint flint create a spark, and his partner desperately inhale the smoke from another Durry. Getting the bull to just look at him for a moment. "Don't give me that, after this I think I need one." One of the harder things the Black one had to deal with at night; his solid eyes would often keep the same look.

"N-no... I wasn't..." He exhaled. "You're going to be fine Gene. It won't kill you."

"But it might...?"

"Alter you in some way. There's no telling until later."

"Like how though? Am I going to... Look like a blonde porcupine?" That time, a harsh look at the man.

"You didn't absorb part of its body. You Accepted its Essence. Your bounty."

"Meaning what?" A snout toss. "You're the one that's been doing this a lot longer than I have."

"You protect your city and people from these creatures, Gene. I hunt them. They're in my territory, and they know if they do not leave or escape, they will die. Their powers and abilities will be taken to make the hunter stronger. They become one with it, while losing their..."

"Identity." A half shrug, but a nod.

"You killed it. So it's victory belongs to you."

"But I've seen you kill dozens of these things, and never witnessed anything like that."

"I reject it before it starts." The man's eyes drifted off to the corpse, now almost melting away in the shadows.

"...What happens to them if they don't get accepted?"

"...Don't know." There was a bit of silence, and the bull put a heavy black hand on Gene's shoulder. Getting the two to look eye to eye. "Don't. Pity. Them. It was their choice to come here." The blonde one nodded, seeing the bull's ears flick off to the side again.

"Another one?"

"...No. Just those two idiots. If you want to go home and rest, I'll be fine on my own." A heavy inhale of the smoke, and the man shook his head. "Alright. Get to your bike then."

"Just one question." A noise in question from the Aatxe. "Am I old?"

"I recall being alive for over two hundred years. No. You don't know old." It made Gene chuckle, yet feel better. "Let's go." They started walking.

"Alright. Oh, are you okay?"

"Just a few scratches. I'll live."

"Even from my... Y'know." A questionable look. "When I stabbed it?"

"You stabbed it. You didn't impale it."

"Same difference." The bull stopped, gesturing his abs; completely unharmed. "So, you're okay then. Gotcha."

"Congratulations on your first kill, by the way."

"Thanks!"

"That only took you three months."

"And, you ruined it." The two chuckled.

"It almost looked like a demonic cat."

"A cat?" The detective asked, it was barely a question.

"Yes. Dark orange fur, black spots around its neck. And blue, cat-like

eyes. I know it had horns as well, ones that seemed to sleek backwards, and I think multiple ears-

"I'm not sure what you were tripping on, sir, but-

"Tripping on? I'm not on drugs!" The homeless man grumbled.

"Look, I know you're probably just here for the reward to go spend on something like booze-" The man scoffed in defeat. "But your description doesn't match anything else these other people have seen. So, I can only assume you hallucinated something, or you're making this up."

"I know what I saw-!"

"In the darkness. Under a bridge-

"In the firelight that it gave me." The officer rolled his eyes. "Look." The homeless man dug through his coats, trying to find something in the mess of papers.

"What, did you take a picture of it-?" The man placed a folded white paper on the desk, one that looked a bit old, but attempted to keep in good shape. Opening it, the detective looked at it. "Mullen...? Why does that sound familiar?"

"Just read it." The man said quietly. And the officer did.

"...I know Doctor Arrosin. And that is his signature..."

"I was 80% blind, sir... This thing... It cured that." A strange look from the detective. "I got here by myself. For the first time in years, I can see color again." The homeless one looked around the room. "That pen is red. That trophy a bronze. The woman's dress at the front desk was yellow. I couldn't make it to the soup kitchen to the far northeast without help, and that's a twenty minute walk from my bridge."

The detective sighed quietly. "I know this sounds farfetched to you, but you're interviewing people who've seen monsters in the dark. I know what I saw, and what it did for me. Whether or not it fits some sort of standards you have been collecting or not, this thing is out there, and I thought you should know." The man sighed. "I was just hoping I could get a meal out of it as well." After a bit of silence, the detective nodded.

Chapter 3

It was ironic. The one cloudy day for the past two weeks, and he had a hard time staying asleep. Though, that didn't stop the bull from laying on his mattress regardless, trying desperately to get some much needed rest. But when he couldn't, his mind began to wander in his subconscious. Shifting from old memories that were still trying to be pieced together, and current worries that surfaced from time to time.

Granted, one of the major events from the latter was whatever that Ashtray picked up and absorbed. Gorret didn't show it in front of the man, but he larger one was worried about it. Though Gene really didn't have that much time left in his life, it was still Time. Something that he could be enjoying, yet he foolishly chose to help an anthropomorphic black bull rid the streets of creatures that did not exist in this world. Even though he was clearly one of them.

It sounded so stupid when placed into a single sentence. Almost unbelievable. Is that what kind of mark the man was really trying to leave on this city? The idea of someone who was told a deathwish by multiple people that he could still make a difference in the fraction of time that everyone else in the city had? ...Actually, that wasn't half bad. But still, foolish-

The fur over his body suddenly stood on end, getting the bull to growl at a faint presence he detected within the warehouse. But it was gone in the split second it took him to raise his head and glance around. Flicking his ears to pick up any little sound, he knew he didn't imagine it. But whatever it was, it left nothing. Not a mark, not a noise, not even a scent. But some uneasy presence that reminded him of... Socks, of all things.

Perhaps Gorret was just being paranoid. Though it wouldn't be the first time people went looking for his hideout. Much like those reporters from the other night. A good scare though was enough to warn them off. That, and breaking their equipment instead of their legs. Then threatening to break their legs if they ever attempted something of the sort again. A hollow threat, but intimidating regardless.

Sighing heavily and flopping his large head on the flattened mattress again, he grunted loudly. Feeling restless and tired of laying down, he got up. Stretching out his thick arms and neck, all the while sticking out his chest. Feeling the metal amulet shift around during his flexing suddenly created her portrait in his mind, making him smile without even looking at her gift.

He missed her already, even if it's only been a few days. Leslie really was a positive experience when it came to the Aatxe's return to this world, to the point where he almost thought of her as his own daughter. But only because he could not picture Zoe's face, same with the rest of his late family. He knew the names; Zack and Heleen, but such figures evaded his sight.

A heavy sigh as he got up. It was for the better overall. Even after Leslie offered to find a picture of the three for him, he declined. Knowing it would only wound his Humaneity. At least the young woman understood, she was smart in so many ways. To the point he was so proud of her. But that also lead to another issue as he climbed down the metal stairs. The bull was treating the girl as his own daughter, when she already had a father.

He remembered Simon quite well. After seeing the man's face from afar, many of the memories involving it returned like ironing the broken cracks in glass. Piecing together so many questions with answers. About home, work at the station, or even just parts of the city. One the two grew up in. Yet, he still could not confront the man he once called Friend. Much like he could not approach Leslie until she was in danger.

Finally reaching the bottom of the stairs and looking at his black reflection in a broken mirror, he couldn't help but stare at it. Seeing how much he's changed. From the man he used to be, to this monstrosity. Yet, it was that one glimmer around his neck that brought everything back. The thing that rested on his beating heart, carved with several symbols that he could still recall: Charity. Diligence. Kindness. Humility. Patience. Yet, at the center of it was Wrath. The very thing that defined what he was now, counterweighted by what felt like five Virtues to balance out his one Vice.

But he's done better lately, thanks to Gene's company during his raids. Letting him deal with protecting the people while the bull faced the real threat. But after the man absorbed that essence, there was something a bit different about him. He was acting a bit more daring, yet durable. He was no longer just babysitting any people who were caught in the crossfire, but he was helping the Aatxe fight against the creatures more. Perhaps it was just some confidence, something he hoped didn't go to the man's head anytime soon.

Regardless, Gorret was thankful for the partnership. Turning to face an old CD player that once belonged to the young woman, he pressed the power

then play to get one of her music discs to resume where it last left off. Granted, it was another choice of the beast's to use Leslie's music, though her idea. She told him that Music sounds like Memories, something that might be bad for him to go through. However, her style of music was... In his mind; Not Music. At least at first.

After a while, he started to like it. It was good to listen while working out. Picking up the massive bar with two truck engines on the ends, he began lifting the massive weight to his shoulders, then upward. Holding it for several seconds before setting it down. Doing it several times before flicking his ear towards the door. Growling a bit until he heard the young woman's voice, sing along to the song that was playing. "I don't know how you can understand them." He grumbled playfully as she giggled. Opening the door and shaking her head.

"Call it experience." She dropped her bags on the nearby table and walked up to the bull, now resting the weights on his shoulders. "It's a wonder you're still up." Leslie said, giving him a hug without worrying about the massive weight he was holding. Though he couldn't really hold her back like this, the bull tried with his muzzle.

"Couldn't sleep." He muttered, still enjoying her scent, which was mostly a strange mix of hairspray and fresh clothes. "Seems like the perfect day for it too." Gorret grumbled, motioning her to take a step back so he could drop the engines. Still enjoying the slight squeak she makes with the loud clank of them hitting the cement.

"That's what I thought. Here I was expecting to finally sneak up on you in your sleep." A half scolding growl at that. "Don't worry, I wasn't going to disturb you. Just the adventure of sneaking up on you like Gene used to."

"A lesson he learned after almost getting thrown out a window." The purple haired woman giggled at him. "His mongoose reflexes saved him that time."

"Something you wish you had." She teased, getting him to snort as she looked over the music player. "Home Is Where The Heart Is, So Maybe That's Where I Left Mine." It got Gorret to study it as well. "I Know I Failed You, But Please Don't Change The Lock On Your Heart."

"I can't..." He grumbled, seeing her smile made him as well. "But perhaps I'm still getting used to it."

"It takes time. Some of them I still don't get until I read the lyrics." The woman took her bags upstairs, getting the scent of warm food in one of them. He almost missed the idea of getting hungry, whereas the scent brought back

a shattered memory of bringing such meals home for dinner. "Everything okay?"

The bull shook his head a bit, giving a faint snort at the scent. "Fine. Just was trying to figure out what you bought for a meal."

"Ah. What's your guess?" She asked, still walking upstairs and hearing his heavy footsteps follow her.

"Smells like takeout chicken. Breaded and deep fried, then boxed for about twenty minutes." She giggled at the detail. "Does it really take you that long to come here?"

"Only because there was some traffic on the bus. They don't like us eating on it, so." A faint nod as the black one watched her sit at an old table. Still in that stiff chair he found in someone's storage area, something that's yet to be reported missing. "So, how are things?"

"...Alright." Leslie gave him a playful, less-than-satisfied look. Making the larger one exhale as he took a few steps across and sat on his mattress. "You ever get the feeling you're being watched?"

"You talking about the news reporters and journalists again?" Gorret shook his head.

"Not exactly. I swear I felt something in... Here. While I was sleeping." A noise in question from her as she pulled out a disposable utensil. A slight brush over his muzzle as he rubbed the space between his eyes. "They've never lied to me. I know there was something there."

"Doing what, exactly?"

"Watching me. Strategizing how to approach me. It wasn't friendly, but Hostile. Like it wanted me removed." A sad look from her, and he decided to drop it. "How are things for you lately?"

"Alright. Sometimes they still bother me for interviews and comments."

"Do they know about your visits?"

"I mentioned it in one of the early interviews." A bit of a worried look from him. "I also warned them not to follow, yet they still do from time to time, don't they?" A grumbling nod from the large one.

"...What about your parents?" A faint chuckle from her flicked his ear.

"You ask about them everytime I visit." Gorret lowered his head a bit. "I text them when I'm coming so they don't worry about me." A bit of silence.

"You're worried about meeting them, aren't you?"

"...Eventually. Mostly Simon."

"He doesn't suspect anything, if that's what you're worried about. Though... Your case has gone cold. He's mentioned that." A heavy exhale through his muzzle. "You should though. You can't have enough friends, especially in the law department."

"He used to tell me that as well." The two smiled a bit as she got out her books and sketchpad. "What've you been working on lately?"

"Just some commissions. I got someone who wants me to make him a Howler-Displacer Beast mix for one of his games. So I've been flipping back and forth between pictures trying to get this hybrid style down. Harder than it seems." A faint shake of the bull's head got her to chuckle a bit. "I thought it might be over you." She took one of the books and pulled on the ribbon used as a mark. "This is a Howler."

A large, boney feline that was completely furless covered the page. Dozens of long quills covered it's back, forming out like a mane against its skeleton-like body. Another creature that belonged in someone's nightmare, leaving the Aatxe in silence for a few moments. "That's a lot like the thing we hunted down a few nights ago."

"Oh?"

"...It squealed alot." Leslie chuckled at him.

He couldn't believe he was out this late. Still grumbling through his rattling helmet as the large truck drove over poorly kept roads. Usually the back of this metal box was packed full of stress when him and the boys were out on another job, but this was hardly worth it. So what if these people denied being evicted? That's no reason to disturb him of a night of needed sleep.

A heavy grumbling sigh left his helm, getting the attention of the man beside him. "What is it?" He asked, barely a question.

"What the hell are we doing here? Why call SWAT for this?" He grumbled again.

"I'm with him, Sir. Why are we here?"

"Because the boys in office can't handle a few families in homes that ain't theirs. Too much red tape covering their doorways."

"I think you mean, they don't want to get their hands dirty-"

"Shut it. All of you." The leader exhaled. "I don't want to be here either, but we're doing it. Let's just get this done and over with." Though the other three mumbled something, they nodded. "Don't expect this to be easy. They think it's their territory, and odds are will use force to keep it."

"Meaning: Expect the Poor Man's Grenade."

"Better grab the fire extinguisher." Another one joked.

"Please, like they would have the booze for something like that." The truck geared down.

"Let alone the gas."

"Can it!" The leader shouted, getting up to open the door and motioned the others to get out. Then following him outside the dimly lit urban street. One barely taken care of, and neglected for years. Even some of the streetlights weren't replaced, giving the men a very eerie feeling towards the darker homes. "Search every one of these buildings for people, and get them out of there. Taze them if you need to. Someone will come around in the morning to change the locks."

"Like that's going to stop them." Another one joked.

"Just for that, you're going first, Karmen." The man rolled his eyes, but went up towards the door. "You two, start getting out the Walls, just in case."

"Yes, Sir!"

The door opened easily, like it was used for decades and half off its hinges. Of course there wouldn't be any power for him to see, his luck never called for such a thing. Let alone in his cranky mood. Getting out his flashlight, and keeping his Taser handy, he started searching the rooms. Most were trashed, like old ruins that've been raided centuries ago. Taken anything valuable that was somehow left behind and pawned for what little bit of cash it was worth.

The place got under his skin. Almost being able to make out small markings of children from the torn wallpaper. Images of what could've possibly happened to the families that lived here, what the children grew up to. Odds are it was criminals or punks. The ones he used to encounter almost on a daily basis until he got promoted. It was their criminal records that paved a path to his current life.

A slight whimper of a child got his attention, coming from another room up ahead. Quickly walking and searching the area with his portable spotlight, he found a woman and her two children in a corner. "Ma'am, you're going to have to come with me." He said in a harsh voice.

"No, please!"

"You got the notice. You can't stay here, miss. Now come with me-"

"What do you expect us to do then?"

"It's not my problem."

"It's in the shadows." The little boy said, getting a questionable look from the officer that they couldn't see.

"What?"

"**Leave.**" A heavy voice said, next to the man's ear. Getting him to almost panic and jab the Taser into something solid. What almost felt like a large animal, but it didn't faze it. Feeling a large claw grab his neck and choke Karmen.

"And that's why the Lightsaber is better than the Energy Sword from Halo-"

"Do you even listen to yourself?" The other man asked, getting his riot shield strapped onto his arm.

"Sometimes. I think it's pretty thought out-" The three stopped and looked towards the building, hearing the old flooring creek loudly against the heavy footsteps. Just before Karmen was thrown out of the darkness and before them. Grunting like he was still alive and catching his breath while the others helped him up. "What the hell-!?"

"**Leave.**" The figure in the darkness said harshly, yet calmly. Needing to duck to get through the doorway and keeping itself on the stone porch, crossing it's thick arms. "You do not belong here."

"Christ, it's one of those creatures...!" Another officer said, getting a growl and almost insulted glare from the beast. But it didn't respond past that.

"Damn thing came up behind me. Taser didn't do jack!"

"I did bring the shotguns in the back-"

"You really don't want to fight me." It said bluntly. "Now leave these people in peace."

"These people are living on bought land-"

"You cannot *Own* land. It belongs to the planet itself." It growled, getting impatient.

"Look pal, we don't want any trouble-"

"Yet, you were planning to remove these people with force?"

"Are you seriously trying to reason with a monster?" One of them whispered.

"Got any better plans?"

"I can hear you. Don't bother whispering."

The leader cleared his throat. "Look, someone bought the land here for a future project. Maybe in your world, where ever you're from, people don't own land. But here, this is how it works-"

"*Works* implies that such a thing Functions Correctly. Unless you're telling me that the blood of these people keep your machine running-"

"What? We're not here to kill them-"

"What do you expect to happen to them once you take away their shelter? Perhaps one or two will survive in the streets. All Forty Seven currently in these sixteen homes? Keeping off the cold ground is the only thing that's keeping them alive." A bit of silence fell over them. "Clearly, you do not care, do you?"

"We never said that-"

"***It's. Not. My. Problem.***" The beast quoted the man from earlier, staring into his eyes harshly. "Leave. This place, and these people, alone. They have done nothing to you, and you are not needed here." It turned around and started its way inside the building again.

"We still have a job to do." The leader said, getting the beast to completely stop. Making the man swallow loudly.

"Bribery?" It grumbled harshly.

"What? No we're not being bribed-"

"Then what are you doing this for?" Silence again. "Calling it a Job is claiming that you are being *paid* to do this, correct?"

"Which isn't the same as being bri-"

"It's still dirty currency." It growled. "Now leave, or I will Force **You** to leave."

"Okay, then why are *you* here?"

"Because I *Choose* to be."

"But what do you gain-?"

"Nothing."

"I don't think you're going to win its mind game." Another officer whispered, getting an irritated ear flick from the beast.

"Better ideas? I'm all ears here."

"Captain's got a point." Slight movement of the creature got them to stiffen up a bit, but only seen it was putting a few claws on its forehead in annoyance.

"So you're getting nothing from these people or from anyone-?"

"I am not. Unlike you, I am not easily manipulated by objects and currency-"

"But to Self-Righteousness-"

"I swear to God, if your mouth gets us killed...!" Another man whispered.

"I would rather be a Slave to my Convictions than to Fibers, Ink, Shaves of Metal or Digital Numbers."

"Should I dive for the shotguns now?" Another one whispered, getting the creature to grumbled again.

"They're only rubber bullets. Don't think they'll help."

"They won't." The beast growled. "But if you choose to arm yourself, I will." It pulled out a small rod from the back of its belt. Holding it in one hand, it supernaturally began to fold outward and around its paw. Forming into a seven foot, six arched bow with light for strings. Almost illuminating the cat-like creature in a thick jumpsuit.

"And we're boned." One of the men whimpered.

"-Okay, okay. Easy." The leader said, raising his hands in surrender. "We'll drive out of here-"

"You'll walk." It pulled back lightly on the ethereal strings, aiming at the side of their SWAT truck. A faint spear of light launched from the bow, impacting the van with a bright flash and a massive force that sent the vehicle rolling across the street. Getting stuck between two houses on its side.

Looking back at the five men who were quite terrified behind their shields, the beast let out a low growl. "Perhaps now you'll get some perspective. Leave." It said, flicking the bow slightly and it morphed back into the small rod. Ducking under the doorway and retreating back into the darkness.

Chapter 4

"Gooooood Morning, Gorrrrret!" The cheery man on the speakerphone almost sang. Getting the bull to just stare at it for a few moments before hitting the answer button.

"I'm awake, Gene."

"What? How? There's no sun out."

"Couldn't sleep."

"...Because Leslie's there, isn't she? ...I can hear her giggling."

"Hello Gene." The woman chuckled.

"Good Mornin' M'lady. How do you fair?"

"How's your coffee?"

"Terrific. You should convince the big guy to try some, whereas you got him to wear pants for the sake of children."

"Children are usually in bed by the time I come out." The black one grumbled, getting his pants on and slightly struggling with the large zipper. "Everyone should be."

"He's definitely in the Aatxe spirit, isn't he?"

"I donno. That's your department, girl." Another chuckle from her. "What are you still doing there anyway?"

"I'm spending the night here until morning. And yes, Dad knows."

"I sure hope so. But better than wandering the streets in the dark."

"That's what he said." She smiled at the larger one, getting him to playfully snort at her as he went to exit. Trying to put an easy paw on her shoulder.

"Nothing should come here during the night." Leslie nodded at him, tapping his hard bicep.

"Be careful out there, both of you."

"I'll take care of him, ma'am." The two looked at the speakerphone for a few moments. "I'll see you in the spot." And Gene hung up. Still keeping the two looking at the dialtone until the woman shut it off. Then looked at the Aatxe for a moment, getting him to sigh.

"...I'll take care of him."

"You better." She teased, getting another snort and eye roll. Almost making him look like he was tossing his snout in the air.

There was something unusually dark in the night. The strong smell of rain was being carried downwind over the buildings. Letting the black bull

finally get a breath of fresh air, away from most of the exhaust and pollution that seemed to hover over the city like it's very own atmosphere. Something he never remembered, nor noticed until the day he returned.

Granted, the pleasantries of such a thing was cut short. The strong scent of cigarette smoke was faint, but there. Telling him the meeting spot was close. Though, it did take a bit longer to smell it out, thanks to the wind at his back. He was thankful for gift, however short lived it was.

"That didn't take long." The man mumbled with the Durry in his mouth. Exhaling the smoke through his nose while the bull approached him. "How is the lady, by the way?"

"Leslie? She's fine. Better now that people have more or less stopped pestering her for interviews." Gene nodded at him. "...I detested that idea still."

"About making you public?" The large one snorted. "I know, but it's better for your image if you lay your motives on the table."

"And her image? It's done nothing but stress her."

"She can handle a little press. Besides, she has your blood or something, doesn't she?" A look from those solid red eyes. "Hey, be thankful she's more opened to me than she is to them." A faint snout toss. "Leslie's strong. Like someone else I know."

"Her father?"

"I... Was going to say me, but her old man works too." A smirk from the black muzzle this time. "Any signals yet?"

Gorret studied the air a bit. "...Nothing besides you." The statement half worried the blonde man. "Perhaps that came out wrong."

"I know what you meant though. No hard feelings." Another look from the Aatxe. "...Nothing new to report, really. Though it does feel like..." A noise in question. "This morning, I was trying to reach for the blinds above my headboard, and I ended up scratching my wall." A motion to go on. "Without touching it."

"Without touching it?"

"Like... My nails extended, just not physically."

"You have nails?" The bull looked at his hands closely.

"Not really. I like to keep them really short, but..." He shrugged. "Other

than that, and not having to wait for my coffee to cool before drinking it, nothing new."

"Keep an eye out then-" A loud bang was heard several blocks away, getting the black one to growl loudly.

"That sounded like a Frag Grenade."

"Gang fight?" A shrug from Gene. "Whatever it is, we're putting an end to it."

The rain started to wash the road of blood, as if it was trying to remove the crime scene of the two dead officers. One still in the vehicle, torn to shreds while shards of plastic remained in the cracked windshield. The other, several feet away in the intersection, already bled out by the time the large cat arrived. Kneeling down to closely observe the late man's identical wounds, the strap that would normally hold such an indirect weapon was not loose.

A chilling wind blew, as the loud steps of hooves finally reached the road. As well as the motor of a bike behind the observing beast. Though choosing to ignore them until getting a specific scent off of one. Raising above the man's body, the dark orange furred feline stared at the bull coldly with blue eyes. Getting the black one to do the same, as he went into grappler's stance, while the striped cat went into its own; slightly crouching and covering his chest with parallel arms.

"That's a new one." Gene said, coming up to the Aatxe's side, leaving the sword sheath behind with the bike. "Doesn't really seem like the rest, does it?"

"Doesn't matter." Gorret growled, still not getting a response from the creature in the thick jumpsuit. Other than a challenging stare...

The stand-off seemed to last hours. The only thing brave even to get between them was the cold breeze. But something was off about this creature, Gorret couldn't explain it. It was new, yes, but there was something else. It was almost... Invisible to him. Lacking a certain presence.

Accidentally getting clouded in thought was enough to drop the bull's guard. Barely seeing the large feline pull out a roped dagger from the back of his belt and launch it at Gorret. Hearing the blade pierce several raindrops

before shaving off a bit of fur on his black throat. Following the dagger's direction to rebalance himself, a heavy paw from a spin kick stun his muzzle. Disorientating the black one and guarding his face with a thick arm.

Rather surprised at the feline's teleport behind the two, Gene tried to slash down at it, only to get the blade slightly locked into a slight fork at the hilt. Barely dodging the right hind paw that came after his head, then a second strike from the same paw. Making the man retreat his attack while evading getting raked.

However, that step back put Gene against the wall. Trying to guard himself against the large cat's next attack, he wasn't expecting two upward sweeping kicks. The first lifting up the man's defensive stance, and the second slightly clawing at his torso. Landing on the first kick's paw, the second one went in for a third attack. Slamming into the blonde man's ribs and almost knocking the wind out of him.

A black fist nearly clobbered the feline, feeling it slightly graze his muzzle before cracking the wall heavily. Reacting with a quick smack on the bull's muzzle before getting away from the wall, aiming for Gorret's back. Seeing the wide backfist coming a mile away, the dark orange furred one ducked slightly to avoid it, coming in for a counter attack. However, not expecting the second fist swinging at mid-range. Getting cleanly hit by it and thrown back several feet before rolling back to his hind paws and stance.

Another stand-off silenced the street apart from the rain falling down, as the two inhuman ones stared at each other. Locking eyes, however there was no anger between them. There was something very calming about this conflict. Serious, yes, but it reminded Gorret of a fight that he craved. One that he wanted deep down.

The man came up beside the bull, lightly coughing and rubbing his sore ribs. "You okay?" The black one asked, still not taking his eyes off the challenger.

"Oh yeah. Perfectly fine. I get kicked in the stomach by giant cat ninjas all the time." Gene grumbled sarcastically, getting a smirk from the Aatxe. Clearly, he didn't seem to enjoy the challenge as much as the bull did. "What about you?"

"Just a few shots in the snout. Nothing I can't shake off."

"You hear that, cat burglar? It'll take more than a few shots in the snout to take this guy down-!" The feline suddenly disappeared in a faint cloud of dark smoke, only to hit Gorret in the muzzle with a heavy dive kick. Knocking the bull backwards, off his hooves while the orange one landed. His back to

the Aatxe, and almost in the same spot where the black one was standing. "Wowa-SHI-!" Gene shouted in surprise, barely blocking the plated knee aimed for his face. But doing so made the man stagger backwards a bit.

Trying to keep his balance, the blonde one felt a paw grab the back collar of his jacket. Lifting him up to his feet and forward a bit, the cat's leg then tripped the man off his feet, making him do a full front flip before landing on his back. All the while, the feline continued his rotation from the trip to land heavily on the blonde one's chest with the metal plated knee.

During this, however, Gorret was getting on his hooves. Barely foreseeing the attack that might do some serious damage, the bull grabbed one of Gene's legs and quickly threw him down the road. Skidding out of harm's way just barely before the orange one landed with a massive force. Cracking the pavement loudly while shaking the ground a bit.

Using the opportunity, the bull tried to ram the large cat in the back. Hopefully to get the challenger in a grapple. But with the first step, the feline disappeared. Feeling it roll along the black one's back and behind Gorret. Expecting a shot in the muzzle as soon as he turned around, the Aatxe guarded his face. Finally blocking one of the snout shots; an elbow that hit his black arm, then another that hit his side.

The attacks against his large body barely phased the Aatxe, allowing him to finally focus on counter attacking. Landing a heavy palm to the cat's bare arm, Gorret felt the dense muscle, much like his own. A few more quick hits towards the face and throat, this creature was the complete opposite of primal. But as long as the bull kept his guard towards his snout, he could resist the stuns. A completely different strategy than what he was used to.

A hard, crossing jab pushed the feline back a step. Seeing it quickly recover, but kept his back towards the bull. Taking the opening, Gorret went for a Straight, but left his muzzle opened. As soon as the black one was in reach, the large cat came around with a heavy roundhouse to the Aatxe's snout, once again stunning him for a second kick to the throat. Closing his airway and getting him to seize breathing. A very short ranged palm attack from the feline to the bull's stomach threw him backwards onto the pavement. Between the attack and the landing, he wasn't sure what reopened his airway, but the black one wasn't complaining.

Gene tagged in, opening with an overhead slash downward. One that made the orange furred creature make a small jump backwards to avoid it. Giving the man the ranged advantage as he covered the bull. Giving the black one time to get up while occupying the cat with a series of wild slashes. Holding back on one of them, the man quickly threw in a lot of power into a single horizontal swing. It gave off a slight pitch as a dark purple covered the

blade and launched out from it. Though the feline did jump over Gene to avoid the attack, the energy that shot outward did manage to cut through several objects: streetlight, mailboxes, parking meters and a few trash cans. "...I know I'm gonna get hit, but how did I do that!?" The blonde one asked, trying to guard himself and brace for the next hit.

After about five seconds of not feeling anything, Gene carefully looked behind him. Only to see the creature remain in its stance, its back turned to the blonde man. As Gorret carefully stared the cat down, seeing the dagger into its upper paw, he let out a low growl. Knowing any movement the black one made would wound his partner before he could get to him. Several moments passed where nobody moved, letting the rain dance over them.

"...So. You come here often?" The man asked, still not really sure what the holdup was with the Aatxe, but if the bull didn't move, there was something wrong. "I ask because the upper part of town is a lot better than this place. Though Kelly's Pub around the corner has some pretty nice fries and wings." A loud swallow as there was no reaction. "They probably do something special with the spices. I'm thinking garlic and rosemary, but I'm no cook. Seriously, I barbeque my hotdogs with a blowtorch-"

"You talk too much." The cat grumbled, slightly looking in the direction towards Gene and giving Gorret an opening to charge the creature. As the feline reached back towards the man harshly, the bull heard something rip. Shouting while fearing the worst as it threw the blonde one towards the Aatxe, almost completely switching places with Gene in the process.

As the man stumbled into the black one's thick body, he turned around slashed his blade towards the cat. Though half tripping made the attack go upward rather than horizontal. Barely connecting with the feline's dagger hand aimed at the black one's eyes, and parrying the attack to land between his thick neck and shoulder. Getting him to growl, but he would take it in place of his eyes, or somewhere in Gene.

Shoving the creature away while the man slashed at it again got the cat to hop over the sword. Lightly kicking the two once each and using them as a spring to get some distance. Rolling on the road and recovering to its stance in one fluid motion, while the other two caught their balance. Panting and collecting their own stances, the street once again fell into silence. "Okay..." Gene breathed heavily. "This isn't fun anymore."

"Definitely one of our hardest fights." The bull grumbled, seeing the feline stare at them rather calmly. After a few moments, it turned its back towards them while still in its stance. Getting the man to leak out a faint noise in question and brace his offense a bit, until the black one's arm got in his way. "Do Not Attack." Gorret tried to whisper, slightly seeing the

creature's four ears flicker a bit.

"If I can figure out how I did that ranged slash thing-"

"It is **NOT** an Opening." The Aatxe growled through his teeth. "Don't-?" The cat made a slight noise in question itself, looking down at the ground below it. And soon enough, Gorret could hear a faint bending of metal. In a few moments, the street under the feline exploded upwards, making the wet air mix with a cloud of dust and pavement. Soon being sunk down by the rain, and seeing the feline land on a building before them. Studying the hole that now sectioned between them, then off to their right side sharply. The sounds of running steps echoed faintly as the creature took off in pursuit.

"The hell is he going?" The blonde one asked, seeing the bull take off in the same direction. "The hell are *you* going!?"

"Grab your bike and follow!"

Gene sighed heavily. "You don't think one near-death experience is enough tonight?" He complained, but took off to his motorcycle regardless.

Chapter 5

At least the streets were well illuminated for driving, however wet they were. Trying to keep up with the Aatxe in the distance, Gene was trying his best to be cautious. Yet, not losing sight of Gorret. At least the streetlights were on his side, staying green between every intersection. Yet at a slight glance to the side, something strange caught his eye in the reflection of the wet road.

That's all it took for a car to pull up in front of him. Crossing the intersection at the same time, and getting the blonde man to ram right into its door. Sending Gene soaring over the obstacle and skidding across the pavement. After a few tumbles, he stopped on his back, groaning loudly. "This just isn't my night..." He got up, tending to his sore back and once again thankful for the extra armor from that Essence.

Hearing the hooves at a distance stop for a moment, the man coughed a bit. "I'm fine! Keep going! I'll catch up." A slight pause, and they started again. For now, he had to apologize to the person in that car. Usually people stop to see if they were alright, let alone exchange insurance. But a quick look at the intersection, and the car was gone. Just his bike lying on the road.

Getting up to walk towards it, cracking his neck back into place a bit, he seen it again. All the lights in this intersection were green. As well as the ones down every street, in every direction. "The hell...?" It's no wonder he got into an accident. He could hear the officers now: running lights, driving without a helmet, let alone speeding.

But speaking of the accident, the car was down the road it was heading a ways. Getting Gene to walk towards the running vehicle and knock on the roof a bit. "Hey, you okay?" No response. Walking up to the door, the car was completely empty of passengers and a driver. "The hell?" A slight tug on the car door said it was still locked. No keys in the ignition either.

Though it was mysterious, he would have to come back to it later. Leaving his business card in the car door the best he could, the man got back on his motorbike and attempted to track the Black Bull once again.

"I'm fine! Keep going! I'll catch up." Gene's voice carried over the buildings between him and the Aatxe, stopping his pursuit as soon as he heard the crash. As worried as he was, Gorret continued. Keeping track of the fugitive from a few blocks away, he wondered why he didn't detect such a thing sooner. Was it actually human? The two have come across others who've wanted in on the crusade of cleaning the streets before. Warning them that they're going to get themselves killed, especially if they come across the wrong creature. Though the enthusiasm was appreciated.

The bull took across the streets, needing to land in a few of them to get around very tall buildings. Granted, always landing on the side of oncoming traffic, a mistake he's made before when he first returned. He never seen such a thing happen before, what attacked that large cat. Was there a bomb planted underneath the street where they were fighting? Sure, the conflict did feel like it took a while, but not *That* long.

However, he would get the answers when got his paws on this person. Even if he had to threaten it to make it squeal. No Vigilante should be resorting to property damage, however hypocritical that sounded. Of course, if Gorret said that out loud, Gene would be the first to point that out.

Landing in the streets again, several large tire squeals and bright headlights came behind him. Getting the transport to hit the Bull just as he turned around and braced. Hearing the man inside panic and curse several times as the large vehicle pressed on to trample the Aatxe. Though he was putting up a heavy resistance, the tires burning out on the wet streets, Gorret cursed himself. Pushing the truck back a bit and feeling the thing regain traction and once again attempt to run him over.

This time, the bull just started climbing on the large vehicle. Giving the man in the driver's seat a 'What The Hell!?' growl. But he looked more distressed than afraid, almost powerless. Growling, the black one swung himself to the driver's door. "I Can't Control It!" The man shouted at him, trying to steer the thing, but the wheel was locked.

Ripping the door off, Gorret tried the wheel for himself. Aiming to turn the thing before they ran into the building up ahead. But part of the wheel broke before it was even moved. Getting another growl from the beast made the trucker afraid. "Undo your seatbelt!" And he did without question. Getting lifted and landing safely in the sidewalk before the transport crashed into the building. Being forced to stop.

Letting the man down, the Aatxe took a breath. Studying the shipping truck for a moment before looking at the driver. His solid red eyes probably gave the wrong idea. "Get yourself checked out. There's a hospital nearby." He nodded nervously as the bull continued his pursuit.

After a bit of searching, he caught scent of the target once again. Nearby, almost hiding and watching. But as soon as the bull started to get close, it started taking off again. Forcing Gorret into the same street as it, the black one charged what looked to be human, wearing a long brown coat. But as the Aatxe got to an intersection, the road exploded again like before. Just before he approached it, masking the way forward in a grey cloud of road and steam.

Growling loudly, there wasn't a way around it without losing too much distance. Just as he was giving up, his ear flicked. Picking up the sound of something coming from the other side of the cloud. Preparing for the worst: most likely another car or something, Gorret prepared to grapple it. Seeing it barely pierce through the smoke screen, he caught the medium sized object and slammed it into the ground.

To the black one's surprise, it was the fugitive. Getting the wind knocked out of him and barely opening his eyes to reveal a strange orange glow. Keeping a firm pin on him, the Aatxe growled. "Got you." Though he heard something land nearby, and fearing it was a mistake, he didn't release his hold on the fugitive. Whom only locked eyes with the black beast.

All of a sudden, everything went black. All the power in several city blocks shut off, leaving them in darkness. Soon after, the fugitive deflated in his paws, as a faint glow scanned the area of where he was. Revealing nothing but the man's clothing on the road.

A heavy exhale left Gorret, as he looked at the glow and barely made out the one wielding it: the large Feline from before. Having about the same look on his face. After a few minutes, the power returned, and the two stared at each other in silence. Until Gene caught up with his bike. "Ah, crapbaskets. Not you again." The blonde man grunted, shutting off his bike which looked a little dented. "And great, now it has a... I donno. What is that, a Bow maybe?"

The cat half grunted a bit, flicking the large weapon and letting it fold into a small rod before putting it away. "I'm going to need that back." It said, motioning the roped dagger still stuck inside the bull's right shoulder. Seeing Gorret half look at it like he forgot it existed, he pulled it out and returned it in the form of a 'Light' punch. Growling and walking off.

It was a foolish idea, she knew that. As addicting as they were to read the scary stories and creepy pastas on her phone, it wasn't the best place to have such thing dance in her head. Bad enough in the dark, whereas the Bull never liked any form of light to begin with, worse when she was supposed to be sleeping.

Though Leslie has spent the night here before, she never noticed how the sounds of the city seemed to carry this far. Her home in the subs, the walls were very thick. Keeping out almost everything. But here, whenever a car's wheel squealed in the city, whenever something caved in or exploded... It could all be heard.

It was almost as scary as those damn online campfire stories. Her home seemed to be a great form of shelter. Even protecting her from the very thought of crime even existing. But here; a mere skeleton of a shelter barely protecting against the rain, it felt so... Naked.

However, she took a deep breath. Trying to ignore the several sound of things going on during the night. The woman swore she could hear Gene's bike coming from a distance, letting her know that they were probably done for the night, and soon she would see Gorret again. Safe and sound, after another night of punching monsters in the face. Granted, ones that probably deserved it.

But a heavy thump on the roof really concerned her. She knew the bull

would never do that, getting her to dig through her bags and pull out a small revolver, along with a flashlight. Hearing the thing upstairs slowly make its way inside the second floor of the warehouse, Leslie half hid around the corner. Taking a few quiet breaths as something landed rather softly on the upper stairway corner. Just as the doors downstairs opened.

"Freeze!" She came around the corner, shining the bright light and aiming the small pistol at what looked to be a large cat in a dark jumpsuit. Getting the Aatxe downstairs to instantly growl and make his way quickly upstairs. All the creature did was remain kneeling, though shielding its eyes from the light.

"What are you doing here?" Gorret growled, just as Gene came in and up the stairs as well.

"Leslie, where'd you get a gun-? Nevermind. Forgot your father was Simon."

Ignoring Gene's comment, the cat looked at the bull. "I followed you here. Thinking if we have the same enemy, we might as well be working together rather than apart." It looked at the woman again. "But now that I see you know two infected humans, I'm not so sure if you're a healthy ally."

"Two?" Leslie asked, looking at Gorret for a moment, then Gene. "What does he mean?" The Aatxe exhaled, glancing at his partner for a moment.

The man took a breath before entering the chaotic workspace of the station. Officers were all trying to get things done through paperwork. Not a single desk had space to work it seemed, including his. But Simon didn't want to think about that right now. He just wanted to take this time away from the white sheets and folders to see what Jerid wanted.

As thankful for any excuse to get away from that mess, Jerid often made things complicated. He did his job well when it came to forensic science, the young man also tended to complain about how difficult the work was. Regardless, if he requested to see Simon, he must have good news.

Opening the large office labeled Jerid Grinnly sent the young man to

spring up from his chair. "Good-good-good! You're here. Did you get my message? -Of course you got it. You wouldn't know to come here otherwise-

"Grinnly, calm down." The older man grumbled a bit, still trying to get through his morning.

"Easier said than done. I have been sitting at this desk, all night, drinking coffee. Just to figure this thing out, and wow! Was it a doozy!" He rapidly motioned Simon to sit down and opened a folder for him, containing dozens of pictures of numbers carved into the wall of a bedroom. "You seen the building, haven't you?"

"I didn't start the investigation, no."

"And you didn't see the thing?" A strange look from the older one, and Grinnly pulled out another photo. One that barely showed a large shadowy figure standing on the porch of the old house. "This was taken from a camera a few blocks away, but it does somewhat match the description that all five men saw." A bit of a sour look from Simon as he quietly sighed. "You don't believe them?"

"Didn't exactly say that-"

"But you sighed." The younger one started getting another cup of coffee.

"Well... A few days ago, a detective interviewed a homeless man who apparently seen something very close to this."

"The blind guy, right? It somehow cured him?"

"According to the man, yes. For over two years, he couldn't see two feet in front of him, now he can even see colors again."

"So, what? Jesus was a giant cat?"

"I don't know. It seemed so farfetched to me that I barely even considered it. But his name... Mullen, sounds so familiar-"

"Mullen-Mullen-Mullen."

"Seriously, lay off the coffee for a bit."

"There was an architect who went by the name of Mullen quite a few years ago. Was a big deal locally for a while." A strange look from the older one. "I read the paper."

"And apparently have a very good memory." Simon grumbled a bit. "Whatever happened to him?"

"Donno. He just disappeared off the media radar."

"No addictions? Divorces?"

"Probably a divorce or two, but he was no celebrity." The older one pondered. "You're trying to find a reason to disbelieve him."

"It's not really that..." The younger one grinned at him, sitting down in his desk. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He did a few things on his computer and cleared his throat. "In A World Of Uncertainty, The Night Sky Told Us All To Be Patient. But When The Ground Started Shaking, I Wondered For How Long." Simon raised his eyebrow. "There's A Place That I'd Rather Be, And There's A Voice Deep Inside Of Me Saying, The Progress We Are Making Is Not Progress At All."

"The Message? That gibberish on the walls?" Grinnly nodded.

"It's like a poetic biography that someone coded, then carved into those walls. And I Mean *Coded*! Seriously, numbers being turned into letters, those letters being scrambled, and then the words being scrambled! I just placed it the best I could."

"I was expecting more of a note-"

"This *IS* a note!" The younger one said. "And we're not to the good parts yet. In A World Of Promises Is Where We Let Ourselves Be Led. We Built The Bridges We Now Sleep Under. We Framed The Doorways, But May Not Pass Through. The Very Same Roads That We Now Wander, The Ones You Pass Us By On, We Paved With Our Bare Hands."

"So, a confession? Political message?"

"Not a confession, I don't even think this person committed any crimes when it comes to law, but was arrested regardless. Let me find it... No, I Never Meant To Hurt You. No, I Never Meant To Do You Wrong. I Stood Waiting While A Man Said Move Along." The officer went a bit quiet.

"We Laid The Tracks Down, But Now They've Rotted. And Like A Runaway Train, We Brace For The Crash. We Were In Love Once, Have You Forgotten? And Like A Runaway Train, Bearing Down Upon A Gap. We Built The Bridges, Now Underneath Their Shadows, We Now Live." More silence filled the room. "Whoever this person was, they were middle class or lower. And were probably screwed over by the higher ones. Much like alot of people are."

"You didn't really call me to talk about this, did you?"

"Nope. Now we get to the good stuff." Grinnly motioned him to come around. "Now, all of these numbers were carved by something. Spoon, blade, something somewhat sharp. This section, however, is fresh. And used, what I can only describe as a Laser Torch. Read it."

Another look from Simon as he started to read it out loud. "If You Have The Power, Time, And Resources To Discover This Message Yourself. Then You Have The Power, Time, And Resources To Finally Make A Difference In Your City. In Your Society. In Your Country. In Your World. Stop Dividing Yourself As A Species. You Are Only Making Yourself Weaker As A Whole. And When The Time Comes When You Must Unite In Order To Remain Alive, It Will Be That Much Harder If You Leave It To The Last Minute. And By Then, It Might Even Be Too Late. There Is No Drastic Difference Between You, Who Is Currently Reading This, And The Human Who Wrote That Message. People Live Here. It's About Time You Started Treating Them Like They Do." A bit of silence, and Simon sighed. "So, what? That cat thing...?"

The younger man shrugged. "Know anyone else with portable Laser Torch technology that apparently won't burn down the building? Let alone, it does sound a bit on the Self-Righteous side, doesn't it?"

"Just like the SWAT team described." The older one held his head for a moment. "So, now we have shadow creatures, and a giant demon cat on the streets threatening people?"

"Well, so far all the reports on this thing... It's like it's defending the lower class."

"But from what? And how far will it go?" A shrug from him. "It's already taken out a SWAT Van that we know of. How are we expected to stop something like that?"

"Maybe that's the point. You're not supposed to." Another odd look from the older one. "...We're not supposed to."

Chapter 6

The young woman slapped the blonde man over the head. "Ow! Hey!"

"Dumbass! Didn't Gorret warn you about these things?"

"I was trying to let go of the spooky... Light thing! But it wouldn't come off."

"You were supposed to reject it." The bull grumbled, as the two walked into the Aatxe's room, and the cat came down to the doorway. Getting the solid red eyes to stare at it. "And what about you?"

"What about me?" It repeated the question.

"Why are you here?"

"Would you rather me not be here?" The black one growled at the vague question.

"I would rather you not be here." Gene said, expecting a harsh glare from it, but it didn't take its eyes off the bull. However, Gorret was looking at the man. "He did try to kill us."

"He tried to kill you?"

"And if you were to stumble upon one of these creatures, along with an infected human, what would be your method of action?" It asked rather calmly.

"He does have a point." Both Gorret and Leslie said. Getting a groan from the man.

"Fine, but we want some answers first."

"That is fair." It gestured the man to go on, as the woman lit some candles.

"Okay, name?"

"I don't have one." A noise in question from Gene. "But you're not the first to request that. If you must call me something, then Eman Ssel will do."
{Eam-Ann Ess-Cell}

"Eman...?" The young woman questioned.

"...The word Nameless, inside out. Clever." The blonde one grumbled. "And somehow, rather suiting. Okay, species?"

"Bugbear, isn't he?" Leslie got looks from all the males. "Type of Goblin. About that size, but usually a bit more chubby."

"I worry about you and that hobby, Les." She giggled a bit.

"She is close, but incorrect. I was once known as a Charr. However, I do not recognize myself as my species any longer."

"What does that mean?" The Aatxe asked.

"It means: I am no longer considered a Charr. Other than physical appearance and perhaps some history, we no longer have anything in common."

"Okay, no name. No species. No gender?"

"Male." It said bluntly.

"Oh wow, a form of identification-"

"Where did you come from?" The bull grumbled.

"Long story. Short answer: Not here."

"As in... Earth?"

"If that's what you call this planet, then yes. A rather common name, really." Eman looked outside the window from afar. "But we are getting off topic, are we not?"

"Nope, I'm liking this topic." The man pulled out a cigarette. "It's like a mind game though."

"Shall I assist in your assessment then?" The feline questioned him, only getting a faint eye roll from the blonde one. "I am an Ally if you want me to be one-"

"But for how long?"

"That's up to you." He answered Gene rather quickly. "But Distrusting me like this will not help your case. I'm presenting my services and information so that we might work together. If you do not wish to, then I will leave." After a bit of silence, the Charr exhaled and turned around.

"Wait." Leslie said, getting him to stop and getting a glare from the other two. "We want your help-"

"We don't need him, Les-" She turned around and threatened Gene with a finger.

"You already made a mistake, be it your fault or not. If he can help prevent others, I will damn well take it. Especially if it means for both of you to come home safely." She turned to the feline. "Eman, was it?"

"Correct."

"I'm Leslie. This is Gene, and Gorret. The night I met him, I got poisoned by one of these creatures-"

"Leslie." The bull growled.

"He saved me, by giving me his blood to fight off the toxins." A look from the Charr. "That's why I'm infected, because he went out of his way to rescue me. As stubborn as these two can be, they are good people."

A bit of silence, and Eman looked at the man. "And you? Your infection was a mistake?" An exhale, but the blonde one nodded. "Because assuming that such essence gives you power is an even greater error. You realize this, yes?"

"Do now." He mumbled. Then following his blue eyes to the Aatxe.

"And you? You're not nearly as... Let's say Evolved, as the others."

"I do not claim those who I defeat, if that's what you mean." A faint nod from Eman.

"Fair enough. Is this the first time you've encountered that infected one?" A puzzling look from the woman as the other two nodded at the Charr.

"What infected one?"

"Apparently there's another creature that looks human, or it's infected." The look on Gene's face told her that this was new to him as well.

"Is that what caused the blackout?" The two nodded. "Something has the power to do that?"

"More than just shutting off a few lights." Eman added. "Where we first encountered each other, those men-"

"The officers?" A very concerned look from Leslie, and the bull casually shook his head. Telling her it wasn't her father.

"Yes. They were carrying explosive charges on their vests."

"And?"

"They exploded." The feline bluntly answered Gene, getting an odd look in return. "They unnaturally exploded."

"Meaning...? Didn't pull the pins?"

"Or manually activate them, no. They went off while they were attached onto the vests."

"But that's impossible. They can't be armed that way." Gorret mentioned.

"That's what the evidence claims. I did not witness it for myself, but heard it. As did you, I'm assuming." The two nodded.

"And that's where you two... Fought?" The woman asked, a bit concerned. Instantly getting the Aatxe to grumble and hold his muzzle, then looking to Gene for an explanation.

"That thing's a damn ninja." He gestured the Charr.

"That teleport dive kick thing really hurt..."

"I know it did." Eman said, rather bluntly. Getting Leslie to giggle a bit.

"So, when the road blew up..." The man gestured under his paws.

"That was not my doing, but the infected one." A noise in question from the other two. "It's possible it seen both of us as a threat." A faint grumble from Gene, and Eman cleared his throat. "By both, I mean both parties. I believe it was a lore."

"That our fight was planned?" The feline nodded. "It did seem to know where I was, even over buildings."

"I discovered the same thing. Even when I was aiming at it, it knew exactly where I was aiming."

"Aiming... Knives?" The woman asked, getting the Charr to pull out the small, foot long rod, and watch in amazement as it folded out into a large bow. "...Wow...!"

"It understood archery enough to know how this weapon worked. And could even pinpoint which direction I was aiming."

"How though? You were on the rooftops last I seen you." Eman looked out the window once again, getting Gene to do the same.

"Ever since I came here, I felt something... Odd. The feeling of being watched, almost constantly, when I was out in the open. Sometimes in buildings, sometimes even on top of them." He studied the others, all somewhat nodding like they shared the same feeling. "It is possible it might have multiple eyes of some sort. Astral Projection, perhaps?"

"Of what? Shadows?" Gorret asked.

"Possible."

"Wait." Leslie stopped, looking at her phone a bit. "So, we have the feeling of being watched. Explosives detonating without being armed. You said the road exploded?"

"It sounded like steam, and it happened twice." The Aatxe added, getting a noise in confirmation from the Charr. "It's definitely on some type of command."

"Okay, then Blackouts. Anything else?"

"Traffic Lights." The three looked at Gene for a moment. "I got into an accident earlier, after our catfight." A faint grunt from Eman at the cat pun. "When I got up, all the traffic lights were green. Every direction, every intersection."

"Really?" He nodded at the woman. "Anything else?"

"Oh, Ghost car." A weird look from everyone in the room. "There was no one behind the wheel, and the door was locked! The engine was running, no keys in the ignition, and it was Driving by itself: Ghost Car."

"Driving by itself...?" The bull pondered. "I was hit by a transport after Gene's accident. The driver lost control of the steering, even I couldn't move the wheel."

"That's what that crash was?" Both Leslie and Eman asked at the same time, getting Gorret to nod at both of them.

"I got the driver to safety at least, but..."

"What about you?" She asked the feline.

"I felt like I was being watched closely again, so I got up to the tallest building I could find." He gestured the black one. "Ended up using you as a decoy, then when the Infected one was distracted... Blind Ghost." A noise in question from them got Eman to sigh for a moment. "...Teleporting dive kick to the face."

"That thing *really* hurt..." The bull grumbled.

"I know it did."

"Okay..." Leslie pondered a bit.

"What're you thinking, Les?"

"Well, there's been alot of strange things on the news lately. Pacemaker and insulin pump related deaths. I half wonder..." The motioned for her to go on. "What if we're going up against a Digital Shadow?"

"A what?" Gorret questioned.

"Like, a Hacker?"

"Perhaps not just a Hacker, but the real thing." The Charr pondered, looking at her phone from a distance. "When the blackout happened, what did you feel?"

"It's like he deflated. Sunk into the ground."

"Or into the shadows." The feline looked at the woman again. "You might be onto something, Leslie."

"Well, we know that the street lights and blackout is related to digital tech. But what about everything else?" The man took out another cigarette, ignoring the less than pleased look from the woman and the bull.

"Security cameras for its sight? I mean, almost every building now has them."

"That would explain alot. The explosives could possibly be armed from afar as well."

"And what about the road exploding? It sounded like Steam, right?" The two nodded at her.

"If one of the valves underneath were closed for a bit, letting the steam build up then closing the other one. You got an instant bomb under the street." The three looked at the blonde man. "What? I know stuff."

"But could that be done remotely?" The bull faintly grumbled.

"Very likely. And nearly any time."

"And your vehicles? Do they now rely on digital technology quite heavily in your world?" A loud groan in defeat from the man answered the Charr.

"Good grief, we're so boned on this one. How the hell are we going to catch something like this?"

"Most of these creatures are primitive, but this one does not seem so." Eman glanced at the morning light through the window. "I'll do more surveillance and see what I can discover about its goals. It must want or need something. And, by the sounds of it, this Shadow started small." The group sighed. "For now, we got a lead, and a good idea of its capabilities. It's enough to make a difference so far."

"Easy for you to say. I feel like my coffee maker is going to strangle me in my sleep." Gene groaned. "You have school today, right? Want a ride in?"

"Sure, will save me the bus fee. Give me a few minutes." He nodded, walking to the doorway and past the Charr.

"...We can trust you, right?" He asked Eman, and he returned with a solid nod.

"We want the same thing."

"An Undo Command for Real Life?" Though Leslie giggled, the other two just looked at him. "I'll just... Be downstairs."

Once the woman gathered her things, she gave Gorret a hug. Seeing him attempt to return it. "Sleep well." A faint nod, and she made her way past the Feline. "Good luck playing James Bond."

A look in question, at both her and the Aatxe, and the black one shrugged. "Culture reference. He's a spy." A large nod and the two waited for them to leave. Sighing heavily, the bull snorted.

"Overwhelmed?" Eman asked him.

"Just don't know much about the digital age anymore. Never expected such a thing to be a huge threat." Another heavy exhale through his muzzle as he looked out the window. "I can try to protect them against outsiders..."

"But you cannot protect them from themselves." He hated hearing that, but it was the truth. Seeing the Charr begin to take off his bracers, Gorret made a noise in question. "You are restless. You won't sleep well like that."

"So...?"

"We should spar for a bit until your body and mind can properly rest." He rested his knives and the rod on the table. Even unstrapping the upper half of his jumpsuit. Doing so revealed a large hole in the feline's chest. One

very deep, and that should've bled out a long time ago.

It took a moment to connect, but it suddenly made sense to the Aatxe. "You have no heartbeat." He muttered. "That's why you were almost invisible to me."

"I no longer have a heart, no. And you do not rely on your sight within a conflict. I like that about you." He motioned for the black one to come downstairs, probably outside.

"...What are you?"

"I suppose you mean my state of existence?" No response. "I am trapped between Life and Death. I am neither, nor Undead." A calm look into the bull's now orange eyes. Finally free from the solid red mask that the night brings. "I am just Myself."

"I see..." A faint sigh, and Gorret got up. Following him down the stairs. "A few rules though:"

"No Breaking, nor Maiming. No Knockouts, nor weapons. No advanced techniques of any kind, including teleportation."

"Good."

"Anything else you would like to add?"

"Just watch the property." A nod, before stepping outside, he placed a heavy paw on Eman's shoulder. "Can I ask you for a favor?"

"Yes."

Chapter 7

The halls flooded with students, all scrambling to get out of the building and finally back to their homes. Most of them out to catch the several busses all lined up outside, but Leslie took her time. Getting out her sketchpad from her locker and waited for the rush to be over. Starting to walk out the door, the young woman spotted a journalist van parked outside. Though, it was possible that they were getting a story on someone else, she really didn't want to take the chance.

Making her way back through the building and towards another exit, she passed a janitor who knew her rather well. Always saying hi to him, and joking that she's evading being seen by the press. At least he's never attempted to rat her out. Even if using this exit was actually forbidden among students, he always seemed to understand. Thanking him everytime she used it.

It lead out to the fields, as small as they were. It was barely enough for something like kickball, whereas there was too many buildings around for any real sport. Regardless, Leslie was thankful for the lower fences here, allowing her to climb over them. Granted, just barely. With some effort, she climbed up the wall after throwing her bags on top. Hard part was over, now the second hard part: getting down. One foot in position, and she slipped off the wall with a yelp.

Something caught her from falling completely down though. "Thanks. That's always a bit tricky for me-" Another yelp as seeing the Charr startled her. "What are you doing out here!?" The woman whispered to him.

"Protecting you." He bluntly said.

"But... Out in the open?" She giggled, still a little uncomfortable with the many stares he was getting from others. "Don't you think that's a bit dangerous?"

"The opposite, actually. If these birds realize you have someone protecting you nearby, the less likely they'll try anything."

"Birds?"

"Vultures, specifically." A puzzled look, and then she burst into giggles.

"I see... Gorret asked you to do this, didn't he?" A solid nod as they started walking.

"He considered it a Favor. Do you have a phobia of such creatures?"

"Nah, Vultures means the press if it's coming from his muzzle."

"I see. Slang term, then?" Leslie nodded, still chuckling at the

composure of the creature, considering the many looks from people. "Your Mark was Leslie, correct?"

"My name is Leslie. But, Mark?"

"Your main form of identification." She gave him a puzzled look with a smile.

"But why call it a Mark? Sounds more like a tattoo or a scar or something."

"Is that not what a name is? If not just metaphorical?" The woman giggled at him. "Where I come from, we do not get names when we are born. We must earn one through our actions."

"How did you tell your... Um."

"Cubs." The feline informed her rather calmly.

"Cubs apart then?"

"It did not matter."

"Not even to your parents?"

"Charr have birth ties, yes. But they are not their parents. They are not responsible for the cub's upbringing, nor their actions later in life. It is not a bond they share well, unlike much of your society."

"Seems a bit strange to me, but your young are taken care of, right?"

"Yes, usually by veterans and survivors unable to fight any longer. They hold a lot of experience as well that the youth can feed from."

"Is that why you don't have a Name? I mean, Mark? Because you were never given one?"

"I was given one eventually, but not by a Charr."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"I never wanted one, but at times you must accept the requests of others."

"Why didn't you want a Mark?"

"Why does your society need one?" The rather rhetorical question made her chuckle. "Your kin are branded, often before they are even birthed. From there, they are forced to carry the weight of such a Mark and be forever

stained as that person. If you need to be found, they can follow traces of that Mark where ever you have been. In order to gain permission to use such things as..." He gestured to a few cars passing by, then to a nearby building. "They require that Mark, do they not?"

"Well, yes. But that's why we can do these things, because we have Identification. One unique to ourselves."

"Yet such a thing could easily backfire upon you. How long as your kind been at War?" The woman didn't really know how to answer that. "If the media suddenly decides to say that you are working for the wrong people, spit out a false lie about you, or just place a desirable bounty on your head, how safe would you feel knowing that your Mark was available to the public? Everywhere that Mark has been was within a record that anyone could look into?"

"Are you talking about that Shadow, now?" Eman nodded.

"This is why he is difficult to find, because he has removed his Mark. How do you find someone who is invisible to the radar your species depends on?" She shrugged. "This is why I'm here."

"Because you're a ninja?" He half grumbled at that, placing a paw on his forehead and getting the woman to giggle. Finally getting a reaction out of him.

"I don't understand why that man calls me that, but he is not the first."

"Something about you teleporting. It's more of a cultural thing in this world."

"Yes, I know of it. But a Ninja is more of a spy. One who blends into the area around him. Unseen, unnoticed, and remains that way. I am currently so far beyond that point, there isn't a word for it in existence." Leslie laughed at him. "You agree then."

"I can't argue, so I must. But I'm not sure why he calls you that, but I'm guessing it has something to do with the weapons of choice you're carrying and the dark colored jumpsuit."

"And the teleportation doesn't help either." She shrugged as she caught her breath a bit. Looking behind them, and spotting the building from afar. "And that must be your Farhar."

"My what?" She double taked. "Oh, that's my school."

"You named your educational system after a group of fish as well, I see." Another giggle from her.

"You say that like you've met humans before."

"You're a common dominate species."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not usually. But often enough, you divide yourselves and refuse to tear down those borders. Often even going as far as to have several sections of people within an entire city, for example."

"What do you mean? Gangs?"

"For one. Mafias, Political Parties, and then the Financial Classes."

"Classes? Oh, you mean the Upper, Middle, and Lower?"

"As well as the Homeless. Somewhere along the evolutionary path, your kind as forgotten the purpose of Unity. In a result of keeping your pride in such sectioned off areas, you choose to fight against each other. Your people long for Peace, yet constantly choose to War. The Keyword there is Choose." The woman gave him a sad smile, as she studied him. "Every Generation has their own choices, Leslie. You never Inherit the planet, you only borrow it from the next Generation of people in line. A Generation can either choose to change, or wait until it is forced to. Often enough, when it's forced, there's a good chance of it ending." Looking at her again, he made a noise in question at her stare.

"You like to preach, don't you?"

"I've seen alot of wars, and alot of species make the same mistakes. I am only warning you that the power to change comes from each individual. And it can make a difference, regardless how small." She nodded, still looking him over. "Your... Hobby, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah, sorry. I just really like... Other creatures. I've been lucky enough to meet a few of them in real life." The woman smiled. "Can I..." She slightly gestured his paw, and the Charr offered it. Almost smirking how amazed she looked studying it. Going from the texture and hardness of the pawpads, to the fingers and thumb. Trying to feel the bone structure through the fur, but it was difficult. Moving past the bracer he wore and to the bicep. Still rather large like someone else's, but at the same time, there was a softness to it that the long fur brought. "Tell me when I've gone too far."

"Just don't undress me." He said, not really sure if Eman was joking or not. Until the feline came to a stop and kneeled down. Giving her a better position to study his head. It was still rather wide like a large cat, almost lion or tiger-like, complete with damaged whiskers that were not too long. A few

long fangs that naturally peered out between his lips, but hardly noticeable until up close. Four ears on the side of the head. Long and a bit narrow, they didn't perk up like a cat's normally would. But remained outward to the sides, perhaps easier to flick and rotate backwards to pick up sounds and movements from behind.

Along with those, four horns. Two long ones that curled behind, over the ears. And two very small that barely stuck out between the ears. Almost dividing them from afar. Then, the eyes: a pearlescent of a medium blue and sky blue. A color that filled the entire eye outside of the pupil, which would shift faintly. "Could you focus at something in the distance?" He did, the black pupils turning into slits. "Okay, now my hand." The morphed into large black saucers. "Awwh." He growled a bit at her reaction, and she just laughed. "I'm sorry, it really did look cute though."

"Cute?" It was barely a question. "I suppose there is a first time for everything." Another chuckle.

"Okay, I want to get something to eat at the food court over here. I'll only be a minute." Eman nodded, following the woman through the large walkway for pedestrians. Of course getting several frightful looks from people, he just ignored them. The casual walking speed, and conversations with the young woman were portraying a more peaceful approach, after all.

As Leslie navigated through the food court, the Charr remained somewhat behind. Rather than try to traverse through the small tables and chairs that were currently occupied with families, he stood within the opened walkway. Carefully watching her from afar, almost strategizing how he would get to her if anyone, or anything, tried something.

But the tension soon started to die down, now studying how such a society worked. The odd idea of standing in a single line to be served one at a time. But then again, he wasn't used to options. And with a quick glance at nearly every small shop, they had at least a dozen options available.

Regardless, it was not a problem for him to fix, especially on duty. As the young woman got up to the counter safely and started communicating with the employee, the feline sighed. Crossing his arms and remaining near his full eight feet height. As much as he disliked being on public display, a request was a request. And a rather easy one to gain the Aatxe's trust.

As the woman signaled him a number 4, his ears flicked, not quite understanding the gesture until she started to wait. Most likely telling him that whatever she ordered will be a few minutes before prepared. Usually such stores had everything ready, and the citizens would just walk in and purchase the items. Another odd thing about this setup.

Half grumbling, he studied a bit more of the surroundings. More or less trying to find out what could possibly be controlled by this Digital Energy. Of course the lights came to mind, but hardly an advantage during the daytime. Many people were carrying strange devices, much like Leslie's, and often pointing it at him. By the look of it, they were taking pictures, as if it were a camera. Odds are, this Shadow would have access to them, and perhaps know of the young woman's identity. The thought of putting a tracer on Leslie came to mind, but was soon put to the side when he spotted something.

Finally moving from his position and taking several steps away, he approached a few people from behind, who were talking to pedestrians walking by. Along with a few large signs with information on a separate table. One that read of specific poisons or toxins in food, or so it claimed. And that these scientists should stop giving them to other people.

For several moments, the protesters didn't seem to notice the Charr. Not until he got several looks from those passing by and almost yelped at the sight of the larger feline. Getting Eman to rather calmly study them and ask. "What is the purpose of this?" Though rather dumbfounded by the question, he then gestured the posters of information they had on display.

"O-oh. Dude, they're mixing stuff into the food to make it grow faster. And then giving it to third world countries, man."

"I-it's not right."

"So, your plan is to...?" He gestured them to finish.

"...Put a stop to it?"

"Put a stop to it?" The Charr repeated, unimpressed. "I've heard if this country you have on display. Even visited it not long ago. The lands there make it very difficult for anything to grow well. And with so many people already living there, without a means of safe travel, your plan is to stop the ones going out of their way to give them food." They stared at the feline for a few moments. "Do I need to speak slower to you?"

"N-no. But dude, they're poisoning that food!"

"Yeah, man. That stuff is going make arms grow out of their foreheads and-"

"And death is a better solution?" It was more of a harsh statement than a question. "One would also think gaining another limb would be considered a blessing, apparently it's a curse in your society?"

"Well, they wouldn't look right."

"You mean, they wouldn't look like *You*." Another few moments of silence, and Eman pulled out the rod from his belt, almost startling them at first. After seeing it release what seemed to be a small screen made of light, he started using it like a touch screen. Looking at the board of information that the group had on display. "This chemical that you claim is toxic, have you done your research on it?"

"Y-yeah, but-"

"Then you must know that all it does is speed the growth of plants so that they may produce quickly. Perhaps it comes at a cost of the food's taste, but it is still healthy food."

"But it's not organic."

"It's not natural, dude. It's harmful to the body-"

"It's less harmful to the body than the results of these motorized vehicles have been giving out. And that is a product that I would protest against first." A slightly familiar chuckle behind Eman got his ears to flick, as Leslie came up beside him. "These people are attempting to take food away from the starving in another country."

"That's not-"

"It is." He growled at him. "You don't see it for yourself because you are literally surrounded by food. For you to feel starvation, it is a **Choice** you make. For these people in this outside country, it's a lifestyle they are burdened with. The one chance that they have to change that: to rid them from the pain of Hunger itself, and you want to take it Away from them?" The group all whimpered at once, as the Charr placed a paw between his eyes. "Leave." And they slowly did. Leslie's partially contained laughter breaking the silence over the small area. "I cannot believe I actually relied on your species at one time."

"With so many people in the world, you're bound to find a few bad eggs." She started walking, and Eman walked with her. "I got you some fries, but now I'm not sure if Charr eat potato."

"I don't eat. But thank you for the consideration."

"You don't eat either? You have more in common with Gorret than you think." She joked, but the feline didn't respond. "What do you think of him, anyway?"

"The Bull?" She nodded. "...He is lost. Placed in a position where he must have both Primal Instinct and Reason. Yet, he's having a difficult time to

balance such a thing, because he wants one more than the other."

"Reason, I hope." Eman nodded.

"Yet, he knows that you cannot reason with all creatures. You've been lucky enough to meet a few that can."

"I know I have."

"But you've encountered some of the others, yes?" She nodded, seeing a slight bit of fear in her eyes when the memory recalled. "And it has shaken you. You lack that Primal Instinct to resist that intimidation. As well as the physical prowess to fight against the threat."

"And Gorret has both."

"He needs both. As much as he probably wants to, he cannot become human." A sad look from her. "And he does not want to become what he truly is. So if you ask what I think of him, I have to say that Gorret has great strength. Though some of that strength does come from within, it also comes from others."

"Like who?"

"You, for one. And that other man."

"Gene?" A faint nod. "I never thought-"

"The man is a stick with a big mouth, but he does have a purpose." She laughed loudly at that, eventually even getting the Charr to smirk.

"I didn't mean that. I meant-" Another few chuckles as she composed herself. "I meant, that I didn't think I did anything..."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course. As long as it isn't about what happened back there with the protesters." A faint grumble from the Feline as he half glanced back, but shook his head regardless.

"You told me this morning that Gorret saved you when you first encountered one of these creatures. Are you certain about that?"

"What do you mean?" The woman asked, a bit worried.

"The way the Aatxe speaks of you... Is like *You saved Him*." She stopped for a moment, almost staring into space. "Power Is Not The Same As Strength, Leslie. You are capable of doing more for others than you believe."

Chapter 8

Another swing lead to another failure, and the blonde man was just frustrated. Already wasting so much time in the junkyard just trying to get that power to work once again, but not a single thing. Making him worry that it was a one-time use, or perhaps the three foot pipe he was improvising with. Regardless, he was getting tired of trying to recreate it. "Odd place to be training." The voice of that large cat came from the side. Of course parked on top of a tower of crushed cars.

"What are you doing here?" It was barely a question, let alone a greeting. However, Eman didn't seem to take any offense. The two knew they were not fond of each other, so such angst was expected. "Spying on me instead of that Shadow?"

"I've been hunting for the Shadow most of the day, and not a single trace. However, I'm still getting that feeling of being watched." The Charr said, overlooking the city at a distance. "Odds are, he's hiding from us, and won't be seen for at least a couple of nights. Gorret gave him quite a scare last night-"

"You mean, *you* and Gorret." Gene grumbled, looking under the hood of an old car for some spare parts. "I barely did anything but run into his traps."

"Keyword being: Traps. Not Obstacles." The large one said, not getting a response from him. Jumping down nearby and looking closely at the pipe he was using a moment ago. "You lost your power?"

The man despised him at that moment, exhaling. "I don't know. I got it to work once, and now I can't get it to do anything. Maybe it's the fact that I'm not trying with my sword-"

"To blame the tool only shows incompetence." A glare from the Blonde one, as the cat picked up the pipe and handed it to him. Giving the man the gesture to wield it again. Though frowning in annoyance, he did so. Watching as Eman took a few steps away and faced Gene Relaxing one paw on his own

back, and the other forward like he was defending himself. "Try it again."

"Against you?"

"Do not worry about my wellbeing." The blonde one rolled his eyes, but took a swing from afar. Leading to nothing happening. "Again." A grunt, but Gene tried again. Swinging heavily, but nothing came out.

"See? Nothing. Still going to blame me for it-?"

"Yes." The man grumbled as Eman took a few steps forward. "Anger is a form of Energy, Gene. But Rage is Blindness. What is wrong?"

"The hell do you mean?"

"What is clouding your mind and preventing your focus?"

"Haven't you heard of minding your own business? Why do you insist on sticking that snout of yours into the lives of-"

"And be more like your species?" Gene went a little quiet. "Just settle with ***It's Not My Problem, So Why Should I Bother?*** There is a reason why this city is circling the drain. Why people are not happy, why they're left unattended. You can turn a closed eye towards every issue you come across as you casually walk through your life, ignoring the suffering of others. But that's not going to change that it's still *There*. That it still *Exists!*" He lifted that guarding paw again. "Normal attacks."

"So you can show off your-"

"I'm only guarding. Now strike." The man grumbled, but started to. Starting to swing rather lightly at the Charr's bracer at first, then started into a more rhythmic and steady advance. "Now what is clouding your mind? Why can't you see?"

"You want to know what it is? It's the fact that I'm almost worthless as a partner. All I do is just keep people out of the way while Gorret takes care of all the dangerous stuff. And when the time comes that I can actually do something in a fight to show that I'm worth a damn, I turn out to be useless. I get turned into a hostage."

"Hostage?"

"You know when you told me I Talk Too Much? I knew something up, and why Gorret didn't move a damn muscle." Gene sighed, looking away. "He understood that if he moved, you would..." Eman remained silent. "I was just a liability to him. And he almost got severely wounded because of me." More silence as he glared at the large feline. "Say it's true. I know it is."

"Gene, I can handle Gorret. Yes, he does have very little weaknesses, but it was you that made that skirmish difficult." A noise in question. "You ever wonder why I kept hitting him in the snout? It's because he could take hits nearly everywhere else. And the only reason why he was able to learn to guard his face was because you gave him time to recover."

"Barely any time-"

"But time enough. Even just a few seconds to think clearly can sometimes make a significant difference." The man just stared at him. "Perhaps you have more weaknesses than the Aatxe, but with you, he knows he doesn't have to fight alone. With you, he gets to hold onto that Reason that keeps him Humane." A bit more silence, and Eman took a step back. Motioning him to try again. Sighing, Gene swung, but nothing came out. "Give it time to charge."

He looked at the Charr for a moment and grunted. Holding back the swing for a few moments, then released after a high pitched noise. Sending an arcing wave towards the feline as it disappeared in black smoke. Cutting through the several piles of junk behind him, and watching Eman land after the attack passed. A few breaths as the Charr overlooked the damage, and then nodded. "Good. Again." He said putting up his guarding paw again.

After a few breaths, Gene did the same thing. The pitch went off, but the projectile didn't make it to the cat before fading. "Give me a minute." He heaved.

"Perhaps your stamina isn't quite built up, but at least you have progress." The blonde one just looked at him, not sure if it was an insult or not. "In A Fogless Mind, No Mistakes Are Made. Your emotions can blind you, if you are not careful."

"Mistakes, huh?" He sat down in an old car seat, lighting a cigarette. "And what would you consider mistakes? Getting hit?"

"No, not unless you purposely leave yourself opened."

"Like when you turned your back on us?" A noise in question from the feline. "At the end of our..." The Charr studied him for a moment.

"Tell me, what did you see when I did that?"

"I seen you leave yourself opened, and I wanted to attack you."

"Then it worked."

"So, it was a mistake, according to your logic." The man smirked.

"It was not." A noise in question. "You rely on your eyes to see. I do not. Just because I am not looking at you, does not mean I cannot see what you are doing. Assuming that I'm leaving myself opened is the opponent making a mistake."

"Sounds deceptive."

"You use whatever you can in a fight to the death. A Poor warrior should never abandon his best weapons." Eman leaned against a car frame. "It's also why Gorret stopped you."

"Because he understood it."

"And he understood it because he does not see with his eyes. He usually keeps them closed when in a fight, the light is too distracting."

"The hell? I thought he never blinked."

"It's hard to explain what happens to his eyes at night, but they're usually closed." A bit of silence as they both looked off to the bull's habitat.

"It's about time I got him up, I guess."

"Leave him, and take the night off. I'll guard the city tonight and scout some more for that Shadow." A strange look from the blonde one. "Consider it my repayment for making the first offense. Deal?"

"...Fair enough. But I should at least tell him." The Charr nodded, then walked off. After a deep breath, Gene took up the old pipe again for a bit more practice.

The night fell quickly, like covering a thick blanket over the entire city. One with dozens of small holes that let a bit of light through, slightly twinkling in the distance. But the black one paid little attention to it, sitting on the rooftop alone and watching from a distance. Granted, not alone for long. "Did Gene not contact you?" The furred one asked, walking up beside the Aatxe.

"He did. But I felt restless and wanted to get out anyway." Gorret exhaled. "I can't stay in that warehouse for too long without getting out."

"I understand." The Charr murmured. "It feels like you're hiding, doesn't it?" The black one faintly nodded. After some silence, those solid red eyes looked at Eman.

"Why are you doing this?"

"I need a reason to?" He calmly replied, looking at the bull without challenge. When there was no response, the feline took a breath. "Planets are alive. They often give everything they can possibly afford, and let those who inhabit it do what they please. However, that does not mean they don't possess worry. Worry for the ones on its back. Worry about those just trying to survive. And worry about its own future."

"So, you're here because the planet asked you to?"

"I'm here because I can hear the planet's cries for help. Not for me specifically, but for anyone to lend an ear to it. Clearly, the citizens cannot read these messages, but I know they can see them." An exhale. "Like with everything else, if it's a problem: they tend to just ignore it. Let someone else fix it in the future, and that cycle repeats until it is too late."

"Sounds rather Cynical."

"Believe me when I say I do retain Faith in this species. But it's been weakened when I see how they functioned as a dominant species. It's like they didn't understand the struggles they had to go through in order become the successor to the planet. They didn't have to overthrow any other creatures, fight against extinction, or even war against something besides themselves. Instead, the land was just Gifted to them. Something that was taken for granted."

"I can't help but agree with you there..." The Aatxe muttered. "I never understood what it was like to fight for survival until I fell into that realm." A look in question from the Charr. "...I used to be human. Even live in that house right over there. But I don't remember much of it."

"But you remembered Her." The black one nodded.

"And ever since my return, I've been trying to keep a firm grip on that Humanity. I can't do it without them, but the question does haunt me:"

"What happens at the end." Another look at the feline. "It's a difficult question. What do you want to happen?"

Gorret sighed, remaining silent for several moments. "...I want her to live." No response. "I'm not going to be able to stay in her life forever. She's not my daughter, and Gene doesn't have very much longer himself. I don't really care what happens to me, as long as Leslie gets to survive." Still no response. "Eman?"

"Hmm?"

"If you find a way to send every one of these creatures back to that darkness, completely locking the doorway or not, I want you to do it."

"Even if it means casting you back there again, correct?" The bull nodded. "If that's your request, then so be it. Doubtful that such a thing is possible. I don't dwell in magics of any kind."

"Seriously?" Gene's voice came from afar, getting both of them to growl and finally pick up the scent of burning cigarettes. "None of that ninja BS is Magic?"

"It is your lacking of perception that assumes it is magic." The Charr grumbled a bit.

"I thought you were taking the night off, Gene." Gorret called, watching as the blonde one made it up on the rooftop.

"I could say the same for you. Yet here we are." The man overlooked the two. "All three of us Vs the world."

"A bit more than that." Eman muttered, his ears flicking a few times before Gorret's started to.

"Before you're welcomed to the Vigilante Club though, I want your backstory, Tony." The feline raised an eyebrow, then looked at the Aatxe who was doing the same. "Y'know... Tony the tiger? Frosted Flakes?" Another shared look before giving the man another of question. "They're Grrrrreat-! Okay, see. Now that I had to explain the joke, it's not funny."

"Perhaps now is not the time. But if you wish to know it, it will have to wait."

"Yes, they seem to be scheduling crimes now in duets, don't they?"

"Just means we'll have to split up. I'll go with Bullwinkle, and I think the Thundercat can handle the other." Another pair of unimpressed looks.

"I'll just let you handle this." The Charr said taking off towards one area. Leaving Gorret to stare at Gene for a few moments.

"...What?"

"Wasn't Bullwinkle a Moose?"

"Whatever. I never got to watch the show as a kid." The blonde one started on his way down. "It's a wonder you were able to remember that." The Aatxe chuckled at that, taking a deep breath and looking at his target area in the distance.

me."

"Some things are just coming back to