

Afterlife Act 3 - Gravity

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 0

The darkness loomed over the city as the small limo drove through the empty streets. Well illuminated, sure, but it was like the space above the streetlights were nothing but a complete void. Almost making the driver nervous, especially with his boss in the back seat nearly growling. Smacking the side of his phone a couple of times. "Damn thing! Screen is already goin' out on it!" He smacked it on the car's interior. "What fucking brand is this anyway?"

"RSA, if I remember correctly, boss." The passenger stated.

"RSA... Really Shitty Appliance."

"Give it here, sir. I'll see if I can do something with it." A frustrated grumble from the man's superior. "We're here anyway. I'll get you another one by tomorrow, everything transferred and all. Don't worry about it." The small object was tossed in the front as the car parked, someone soon opening the rear passenger door.

"Fine. Give me something more top-of-the-line this time. None of this budget BS."

"Will do." The man in the suit got out of the car, getting greeted by one of his lackeys and being escorted indoors. Walking past a nearby group within the office and giving one of them a tap on the arm.

"You guys get anywhere with 43rd Street?"

"Most places, boss. Murry's still refusin' to pay."

"He getting security from the fuckin' Larks or something?" The three thugs shook their heads. "Then what?"

"Well... People have been sayin' that the Aatxe's been watching that area-" One of them spoke up, going silent when he seen the boss roll his eyes. Getting another to step between them.

"Relax, Agrume. I'll handle it."

"You call this handling it!?" The thug raised his hands in surrender, but resisting the intimidation. "Get it done. **Tonight.**" The boss ordered. "Break something if you have to, understood?"

"Sure thing." The thug beckoned the others to follow him out of the building while the man continued down the hall. Passing a desk with a woman working at it, currently on the phone.

"Suzanne, everything looking good?"

"A Mister Foster is on the line, saying he needs to speak with you." The boss' face went cross.
"Should I get him to call another time?"

"No. I'll take it in the office." He said, getting a worried look from her. But she nodded and went back to the phone without question. Turning towards the couple of men following him, he raised a hand to motion he'll take this alone. Nodding, they guarded the door to his luxury office. Sitting at the desk for a moment before picking up the receiver.

"Mr. Agrume, I hope."

"Yeah. Where's my fucking second half?"

"It's on the way, I assure you."

"Well, it's taking a long time to get into my hands. Makes me second guess this whole situation you've got going on here."

"It will be in by tomorrow, I promise." A bit of a growl from the boss. "Do keep in mind that I still have something against you. Patience is required, you see."

"Yeah, well, it's growing thin. I gave you the building, cleared it of any junkies for you, and even cleaned it up. What the fuck are you planning to do with a building in the middle of nowhere?"

"That is none of your concern."

"When I don't get paid on time, it is." No response, but the sounds of a man taking a casual drink. "Look, whatever you're plannin', just know that I ain't sticking my neck out for you. If you get caught doing anything illegal on my property, I'm denying any knowledge of it. Understood?"

"No one will come snooping around. I promise." Another drink. "However, I'm thinking about renting another area-"

"Not before-"

"I know." Foster stated thickly. "You will get it tomorrow. After the weekend, I'll call in which location."

"You're paying up front this time." A long silence.

"Agrume... Let's get something straight here. I'm the one that has you by the balls, you worm. If you don't cooperate, then I can have you removed and replaced, **easily**." A bit of a growl from the boss. "A bit of planted evidence, a few tips here and there... I can have your pathetic lemonade stand you call a '*Business*' completely taken down by the very foundations. Then removed **entirely** from the history books. Do I make myself clear?" No response. "Good. I'll get back to you on Monday." The phone on the line hung up, and the man slammed it on his side.

Chapter 1

Shotgun Messiah - I Come In Peace

The thunder rolled across the dark night sky, as the harsh winds blew the storm over the city. Just now getting the harsh rain to start pelting the staggering creature, pulling the heavy blade that screeched it's warnings to any that may be around. Hearing several smaller critters within its territory run in terror from afar, but they were hardly worth the concern. Crossing the damaged road and standing before a large run down church, here is where the creature's target was. Yet, the place was empty. Nearly, at any case. No matter, as long as it could hurt its target at his source. Warn him that the man was within its territory now, and if he does not leave...

The tall humanoid started to drag that long blade within the walkway up the church, until the loud rev of an engine came from the distance. Nothing out of the ordinary for such a strange planet, but this one was actually getting closer, very quickly. Hearing the tires squeal as a pair of bright lights came around a corner, the thin creature hissed and shielded its eyes as the vehicle came to a stop. Revving as if warning such a demon to retreat back into its habitat of darkness where it was safe, casting a shadow of a cross displayed over the grating that covered the headlights. Attempting to save such a darkened soul.

But the creature refused, hissing loudly as if to challenge the metallic beast. Hearing it roar back in a few revs before the rear tire started a burnout, causing a thick smoke behind the armored hearse. Getting the two to charge at each other, the creature swinging it's blade in an overhead motion. However, it mis-timed the attack against car's speed, getting trampled and nearly run over by the heavy vehicle. Holding its own, but only for a few moments before it was dragged under the car.

The malefactor's head was soon trapped under a rear tire, as the driver stopped completely. Burning out once again to nearly strip the very flesh off of black demon before stepping out of the hearse. A tall man, dressed in a mix of a preacher outfit and combat leather, towered over the still body. Narrowing his hat and pushing up his glasses before withdrawing a repeating crossbow. "Please forgive the weight. There's a lot of Mercy in the back." He quipped before shooting the creature in the chest.

A moment later, the voice of a young girl came through his communication device within his collar. "Father! I'm picking up several more readings of darklings coming your way!"

"As expected. Where there's light, there's shadow." The preacher grunted, pulling out another repeating crossbow from his belt as another door from the car opened up. A goat-like creature came out, looking much like the monsters within the city.

"Father, please. Let me assist you this time!" It spoke.

"Ragnodor. You have proven your worth to me enough for me to trust you. If you desire to fight your own brethren to help me, then you are on your path to redemption."

"Thank you, Father!"

"Father, Father!"

"Relax, Sophia. What is it?"

"The one near you, it isn't dead!" The creature under the car hissed loudly, flipping the vehicle over and attacking with its-

"-Wait, wait, wait!" The black bull interrupted the walking ashtray. Getting the blonde man to stop and stare at him for a few moments, the cool night air passing over the rooftop as the Aatxe searched for his words. "Why am I the sidekick? Also a goat?" The man shrugged.

"I donno. I'm not surprised they got things wrong."

"As much as I know I'll regret asking..." The large feline started, getting a look from both of them. "Where am I in all this?"

"Curiosity getting to you-?"

"-Don't go there." Gene just chuckled at him.

"You were the antagonist." A noise in question as he got a stare from those blue eyes. "More like a rival or something, now that I think about it. Y'know, the type that they're enemies at first, but then he gets betrayed and sides with the good guys."

"...The *Good Guys*." Eman repeated him, getting the blonde one to lift his hands in surrender.

"Don't look at me, I didn't write this stuff."

"Then who did? These things only started coming like six months ago." Gorret snorted.

"I honestly think it was a movie in production, but after all this jazz happened, they're

attempting to cash out in all the stories around here." Another shrug from Gene. "I'm just telling you what I seen. Overall the movie's kinda bad, but the action was good in it."

"Of course." The Charr grumbled. "Another one of your species famous Spectacle Films."

"Summer Blockbuster, yep."

"How tedious." Another grumble, then the Aatxe's sigh got the other's attention.

"...I'm not a Goat."

"You're not a bull either." Gene added.

"Nor an actual Aatxe-"

"But I'm not a **Goat**." A large black paw covered those solid red eyes. "Now everyone's going to assume that's what I look like from now on."

"To be fair, that is your fault." Eman started. "You tend to avoid getting your picture taken."

"I don't like the flash."

"Who does?" Both the feline and man said at the same time.

"Jinx."

"We are not doing Jinx again."

"You still owe me a soda." A stare from those blue eyes for a few moments before exhaling.

"It's slow tonight. I'm going to continue my search."

"Be careful." A nod at the bull as the Charr leapt off the building. Getting the other two to just glance at each other. "...You're never going to get a soda out of him-"

"You can't stop me from trying."

"...You can just buy one for yourself-"

"It's not about the drink." A noise in question from Gorret, hearing the man sigh a bit and take another inhale from the cigarette. "We've known him for three months."

"And?"

"He still has a stick up his ass."

"Meaning, he's... Stiff?"

"More like No Fun."

"Gene-"

"-I know, I know. The job isn't supposed to be fun. But we're risking our lives out here every night, right?" The bull shrugged at him. "Maybe we're still not considered friends to him."

"I don't think it's that. The... Cat... Demon thing-"

"Charr."

"-Charr is, well... Just that."

"Just what?" The man dropped the bunt of his cigarette and stepped on it.

"An outsider. Not human." The two shared a look. "You've heard his backstory, Eman isn't like you."

"Like us, you mean." A bit of silence, and a nod from Gorret. "Don't give up on me yet-" A coughing fit from Gene that lasted longer than a while.

"Likewise." The black one stated, waiting for a bit before giving the man a few taps when the coughs didn't stop. Nearly knocking him off the edge in the process. "You okay?"

"I'll live." A few moments and a bit of coughing later, the man took a couple of breaths. "Where was I?"

"No idea. It's hard to tell where your brain goes in our conversations."

"Sure." Another breath, and Gene looked around at the dark city. "Still nothing? It's been kinda slow lately." A noise in confirmation from the Aatxe. "Do you think the way through is just closing or something?"

"No idea. It's unlikely that storm is over." A double take from the blonde one.

"Seriously? It's been about half a year, hasn't it?"

"Yes, but I was there for a hundred and eighty years. Whereas..."

"Only about three days passed here, right." A faint head shake from the larger one, before he could correct the man, the bull suddenly grunted as he looked behind him. "The shadow again?"

"...Yes. But he's gone now." A rumbling exhale. "I feel like he's testing me."

"Testing you?" A slow nod from the bull as he stared into the darkness where he sensed it. "As in? Taunting?"

"...Doesn't feel like provoking. More feels like he's... Testing to see if I can detect him." The large one took a few steps forwards, his heavy hooves almost vibrating the roof as those leathery ears scanned the area. Taking a few moments longer before snorting. "If he was taunting, he would be closer."

"So, what? Trying different forms of stealth on you?" A mumble in response. "Are you sure it's the same guy?"

"Yes." Gorret stated confidently.

"As in, 100% sure?" Those solid red eyes gazed at Gene, and the man shrugged. "All I'm saying is that we haven't seen the guy since. And I *still* haven't seen him. Just going by the description of what you guys have been giving out."

"I know, but it's difficult to explain..." A gesture towards the bull's own ears. "But I know it's him. Same... Heartbeat. Contained breaths. Same stare... Something of both fear and..." An awkward grunt from the Aatxe.

"...What?" The black one looked away, stroking the back of his neck a bit with a paw. Not being threatened by the strange black flames that rested like a mane in constant motion. "...What?"

"Fear and... Fascination." A long silence as the man's eyes just gazed over his partner. "Please don't-"

"Does your kind even-?"

"We're not talking about this again." The large one grumbled. "It's..." A clearing of his black throat. "It's pretty obvious by now anyway." That stare didn't lift.

"That you do-?"

"-Don't! We don't! Hence the reason why I didn't wear any pants for the first few months of coming back!" The bull awkwardly groaned, covering his eyes with a paw. "Change the subject."

"Back to your love stalker-"

"Creepy, Gene." The man chuckled at him.

"Alright, alright. But how do you know that he's... I donno, cloning himself?" An odd look from the black one. "Or copying himself? Again: we haven't seen the guy since-"

"Eman has though. Even found a few hideouts." A crossed look from the blonde one, causing that bull's snout to toss in the air. "Don't tell me you're still distrusting of him-"

"We're not talking about it." The man grumbled this time, getting a chuckle from Gorret that time. Yet the blonde one's mind couldn't help but trail back a few months, as he pulled out another cigarette.

~~~~~

The late night was nearly coming to an end, as the blonde haired man opened the door to his roof. A fresh cigarette already in his mouth and lighting while closing the door in one fluid motion. Taking a few moments to enjoy the scenery before suddenly feeling spooked, double taking at the large, cat-demon-like creature just standing on the other side of where the door opened. Getting Gene to just take a breath to calm himself down. "Next time say something, will ya?"

"Because breaking the silence suddenly makes it that much easier for you to realize you're not alone?" The Charr replied rather calmly.

"Well, better than hiding in the shadows. I thought you were one of them."

"Them?"

"The... Creature things."

"A Malefactor?"

"Is that what they're called?" A slight shrug from Eman.

"They don't have a name."

"So, like you?" Those blue eyes just stared at the man. "Are you-?"

"Do I look like one of them?"

"I haven't really seen that many, but kind of?" Those four ears spaded a bit. "They're a mix of several different animals and insects. I'm pretty sure one of them could get close to looking like..." A gesture towards the feline's body.

"They could also easily look like you as well." That made the human go a bit silent, and take a breath from his therapy.

"Where did you come from then?" The large one moved a bit across the roof, finding a foldable chair and bringing it over to Gene. "You're probably going to need to find something bigger-"

"It's for you." Eman grumbled at him.

"-I knew that." A thick stare. "I'm serious, I knew that. I just wanted to see how you would react." The man said, sitting in the lawn chair. Not getting any relief from those blue eyes. "Begin."

~~~~~

"Hey." A double take from the blonde one as Gorret got his attention. "You didn't hear me?"

"Nah, spaced out." Gene shook his head. "What's up?"

"No targets but I want to scout around a bit."

"Alright, alright. Just let me stop and get a coffee then." A nod from the bull as he dropped off the roof.

Chapter 2

The older man yawned loudly as he shut off the small TV in the booth. Growing ever so tired of the late night shifts, even after he's been doing it for decades. Not like anyone would really want to sabotage a factory for kitchen and dining utensils anyway. Perhaps maybe to steal some of the materials, but he's never caught anyone other than teens sneaking around. And not crimes other than insides.

Yes, worry left the man as he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Yawning again as he started to get comfortable, but swore he heard something from afar during his loud sigh. Something in the back of the factory, near the waters. Taking a few moments to listen, yet heard nothing but silence. His instincts told him to leave it alone, but it was his job to guard the area. With a bit of a nervous breath, he got his flashlight and Taser and slowly opened the door to the booth.

Darkness covered the lot, barely being able to pick out the large building as it towered over the man. Almost picturing it like a giant colossus that was watching him, shaking up the older guard's nerves as he carefully scouted through the cone of light. At least until he got towards the docks, which normally had several lights on during the evenings. Though one seemed to be going out all the time, to the point where maintenance just stopped replacing it. A defective light just above one of the doors.

Approaching it, his flashlight got a signal back from exposed metal along the door's large bolt lock. Looking like it was melted opened by a heated knife and a torch, completely ruining it and making the door fairly easy to open. Granted, almost moaning like it's been ages since it's been opened, grinding it's rusted hinges together as it opened to a large dark stairway. One that was too far down for his flashlight to predict where it lead.

The scene made the guard's skin crawl, nearly to the point of having its own vocals. Telling him to turn back through instincts as something down below slightly echoed. With a shaky breath, the man stepped backwards. "T-they don't pay me enough for this." He muttered, turning around to see something large directly behind him and making the guard yell before falling backwards.

Yet, the creature caught his arm as the man's flashlight fell down into the abyss. Pulling him onto the docking surface and nearly switching places with the creature in one fluid motion. Getting the older man to scamper back as he attempted to make out the creature in the darkness, barely seeing the shimmers of several blades along it's strange suit. "Go home." It said in a near growl, making the man whimper. Yet didn't feel any eyes on him. "Go home where you are safe."

"B-" The guard started, starting to see the outline of the creature. Keeping in a strange stance and finally making out that it's back was turned to the old man. "But... My job-"

"This place has already been breached, and I don't mean by me." It almost growled, yet it was calm. "Report to your law enforcement if you must, we will both be gone by the time they arrive. But do not remain here." The large one gave its warnings before heading down the stairs itself. Closing the door behind it. Leaving the guard alone as the Charr ventured down quietly.

The stairway lead to a large underground tunnel, likely linked to a large transport system that has since long been used. Yet, Eman's device detected a large amount of electronic activity of sorts. Much more than what should be used in such a location. Pulling out the rod and tracing a claw out from its shell to pull out a lightscreen, showing the source of it was close. Just a few more doors down.

Carefully taking steps towards another metal door along the wall, those four ears flicked. Picking up some slight movement and tapping on the other side, along with the sounds of electronics. Slipping one of his roped dagger out of its sheath, the Charr burst through the door and startled the humanoid in the chair. Grabbing for the collar on his heavy clothing with one paw and shoving him back into the several monitors, against the wall. In the split second of the dagger's stab, the nearby computer exploded in a shower of sparks, cutting power to the entire room and feeling the Shadow escape through the wall as the blade made a gash in the concrete.

The creature once again left it's clothing behind in the process, getting Eman to stare at the shirt and jacket in his grip. Along with the lower attire over the keyboards in the dark room. Soon getting a cone of light from the doorway as the Charr half grumbled, looking behind very slightly at its source. "I told you to leave." The feline almost growled at the security guard, looking puzzled at the room, let alone the alien creature no longer in the shadows.

"W-what... Was that?" He asked, not getting a response. But the man looked at the clothing. "Was it wearing...?"

"Attempting to disguise itself as one of you, hiding within plain sight." Eman stated, prying out the weapon and seeing a small mark of dark red on the blade's tip. Exhaling a low grumble as it shined in the light. "He's marked. That's a start."

"How did he get down here? This door hasn't been opened for a decade-"

"The same way he escaped." A faint gesture towards the wall with a cut now in it. Studying it for a moment as the large feline looked over the computer before ripping the tower opened and pulling out the hard drive. "This could be useful."

"What about...?" Those blue eyes looked to where the flashlight was pointing; a small notebook that's had better days. Watching the Charr take it for a moment and browse through it quickly. "What does it say?"

"Looks like a journal of sorts." A glance back at the now damaged computer. "I suppose if he's constantly on the move, he'll need to store information in a more traditional way." Another look around the small room, and the outsider lightly pushed the man out of the doorway so he could leave.

"Where are you going?"

"To scout for information." Eman stated bluntly, not turning back and fading into the darkness. "Search more if you wish, I have what I need." That worried the guard, but the black started to get to his nerves.

"It's a nice store, really." A thug stated, looking over the selection within the small shop. Only his crew and the clerk occupying it in the late night, gazing over the older looking man behind the counter. "Be a shame if something happened to it."

"Vandalists are still running around at night." Another one started, looking out the window a bit from time to time. "Damn kids these days, got nothin' else better to do but to destroy property, I swear."

"We could... *Protect* you from them, you see." The first thug stated.

"Please..." Murry stated, worryingly. Especially when the one around the window signaled something, as a motorbike was heard down the street. Slowing down in front of the store and the blonde haired man got off, not wearing any helmet or protective gear. Entering the building as the men in suits looked like they were browsing the store. Getting a few things while Gene got his coffee ready, almost feeling like he was being watched by the bull outside across the street. Out of line of sight, yes, but Gorret wasn't watching the blonde man. Just overlooking the rather fancy car parked up front. The characters on the license plate tugging at his mind after a few moments.

"Why does that look familiar...?" The black one mumbled, recalling his memories of a past life. Eventually sliding down the wall for a better look at the license plate, and it clicked in.

"Busy night, huh?" Gene stated, getting up to the clerk and placing his coffee on the counter, the stirring stick still in his mouth like a cigarette. Reaching for his wallet, he caught the worried look of the older man as they nearly spoke in silence. Getting the smoker's eyes to almost glance behind him at the suits, nearly waiting for a fight. Until the look-out cursed under his breath a little too loudly. As the blonde one placed the cash down, he took a hold of the stirring stick from his mouth and very very silently told Murry. "Get down."

A shy head shake that the suits caught, and they started to take out their firearms. Only for the black bull to reach inside the doorway, grab the look-out by the leg and dragged him outside screaming loudly. Causing the other thugs to turn around and fire at the large creature in a panic, breaking the glass in the front of the store. However, Gorret ignored them. Throwing the look-out across the street and into the brick building, knocking the breath out of him and causing the man's skull to crack opened.

"Haley Richards." The beast growled, taking a heavy step forwards as the man attempted to regain his bearings. "Erin Fitzherbert...! Chelsey Mirroc! Those names sound familiar!?" A cough in response. "All three were rape victims! And every witness stated they seen this car when they took place!" His thunderous voice echoed through the streets as the man whimpered at the sight of those red eyes. "You're one of Agrume's men, aren't you?"

"T-the fuck is that!?" One of the suits inside cried, making out a high pitched noise from behind. Turning about to barely see a small blade of energy cut his hand wielding the pistol, causing him to drop the weapon and grasp the small wound. While the other suit just aimed at the blonde man, one that was 'threatening' him with the stirring stick. "The hell!?"

"I wouldn't stay here, if I were you." Gene stated, a little too over-confidently. Making the thug worry why he was being threatened by basically a straw. But after seeing his partner's wounded hand, he really didn't want to take a chance. Making a few steps back, the older man started to rise up from behind the counter. Getting the suit's attention and firing at Murry instead, causing the blonde one to take the bullet instead before making a break for the car.

However, upon withdrawing outside, something grabbed the thug's armed hand, locking it in place and putting him into a sleeper hold. Feeling a blade at his throat while a furred paw gripped most of his face, claws and all. Getting him to mumble as the wounded suit made an escape to the car. Getting the attention of the Aatxe, as well as a loud growl as the vehicle started up, and seeing the black beast walk towards it.

The tires squealed into the night as the car started to move past the bull, only for it to come to a sudden stop when Gorret grabbed a rear wheel and then the bumper. Dragging the fancy vehicle back a step before lifting it overhead in one fluid arcing motion. Causing the car to land on its roof behind the Aatxe. Getting another grip before sliding the upside-down car into the first thug, the one that was thrown against the brick wall.

Meanwhile, back in the store, the one being held by the beast couldn't even hear it breathe. Hearing the car crash before starting to speak up. "What were-" Another crash as the Charr waited patiently in case there was a third. "...What were they doing here?" He asked the clerk, only hearing him release a whimper.

"I'm fine, by the way...!" Gene grumbled, leaning against the counter holding his chest.

"I'm sure you are-"

"Bullets still hurt!" The blonde one still hissed, not getting a reaction out of Eman. "Painfully obvious, I know! But it needs to be said!" Let alone a look from those blue eyes, staring into Murry's. After a few moments, the large feline stabbed the thug in the throat and ripped it out. Dropping him in place as he started down the aisle, picking out a cloth-like object on display for sale and then going towards the refrigerated hard drinks. "You okay, Murry?"

"Y-yes." He could barely take his eyes off of the two creatures, the Aatxe reaching in for the third thug and tossing him across the street with the other two. "Do you...?"

"They're with me, kinda." Gene grunted. "Allies, in any case." After looking over a bottle of vodka, the Charr set it on the counter. Wiping the blood off his roped dagger and then cleaning it with

the clear liquid. "You couldn't have randomly appeared any sooner?"

"You had the situation under control." Eman stated rather calmly.

"I was shot. Hardly considered *under control*." A growl from the blonde one.

"Wounds build character." A grunt from the man, as the feline took a step closer. "Move your hand."

"Why?"

"I'm getting the bullet out of you."

"Ever heard of a hospital? Or did you forget they exist again?"

"I'm still not used to that option, but you don't need it. It's just a flesh wound." A grumble from Gene, as he looked away. Feeling the sting of the blade in the wound and releasing a harsh breath at it as the metal bit was pried out. "Your body should take care of the rest."

"Seriously Murry, what was all that about?" A bit of a sad look from the older man as the large feline started heading towards the door. Getting Gene to double take at the old book attached to his belt. "You're keeping a journal now?" A look in question from Eman, but only for a moment, reaching back and taking the scribbler. Lifting it up to show Gorret, and motioning them to join him outside. "Give me a minute."

~~~~~

"I'll start with the Charr." Eman stated, still standing on the dark rooftop with the blonde one in the lawn chair.

"Your Species?"

"If you wish to call it that, then yes. As I stated before: other than appearance, I am not associated with them any longer." The large feline stated, rather bluntly.

"...Are they extinct?"

"No. It is very unlikely that they are. Perhaps by now they've changed, but like humans, they have a difficult time to accept change." A slight look of distrust from the man. "I have encountered your species often, Gene. I know of their instincts and nature. As much as you want to believe that you are somehow unique or different from every other species in existence, you're not." The man just inhaled the cigarette in silence for a moment before sighing.

"Tell me what you really think." He grumbled, getting a blunt stare from the Charr. "...Don't actually tell me what you-"

"Very well. I expected it was sarcasm." Another breath from the man. "But like your species, the

Charr were obsessed with the violence inside of them. They fought against every possible dominant species they came across."

"Because that was their nature?"

"Because that's what our Gods commanded of us." A noise in question from him. "You could almost call it a religion we were born into, forced to live by its every word. The shamans, our leaders, were in charge of passing the words of the Gods among our soldiers."

"I can see where this is going." A slow nod from the feline.

"When you're raised by it, you were never taught how to think any differently. They were in charge of everything, you see. If you did not work or train, you did not eat. If you did not eat, you would grow weak. If you were weak, you would die the next time you were forced to fight." No response from the blonde one. "That was our law. Our truism."

"So you were a soldier for their army."

"I was trained as a ranger."

"...Like a forest ranger?" A breath from Eman as he closed his eyes for a moment and took a breath.

"Think... Scout. Survivalist. One who often did recon of the lands around. Setting up ambushes, mapping the terrain, occasionally raiding small transports."

"Sounds like... Fun?"

"It was both harder and easier work than some others were forced to do."

"The bow thing makes sense now." A gesture to the feline's back, but the large one only nodded. "So, what were you fighting?"

"Anything we came across, really. But I'll fast forward to the mission that changed everything..."

~~~~~

Chapter 3

The back door to the school opened up carefully, as the young woman sneaked out the back end. Though the reporters and interviews have pretty much come to a halt, this way was a bit faster home.

Granted, she needed to walk the distance, Leslie didn't mind that much. Strolling across the field and browsing on her phone for a few moments, she stopped about six steps away from the fence. Almost detected the presence and putting her phone away in a secure spot.

Taking a deep breath, the woman almost braced herself. Feeling the wind start to pick up before a large arm gripped her middle, carrying her quickly to the fence with one leap and flipping over to the other side before landing. Though, not without getting her to yelp in the process. "You'd think I'd be used to that by now." She mumbled, taking a few breaths as the Charr came into her field of view.

"You did detect me, however."

"Not really. Though I did feel like I was being watched." The woman chuckled. "I was expecting it."

"Does that stress you?" Eman calmly asked.

"Only like waiting in line for a new amusement park ride." Another breath as she started to walk beside him. "Thank you, though."

"Better than seeing you hurt yourself, you're welcome." A puzzled look from the girl. "Gorret's words, not mine."

"Here I thought you were growing soft on me."

"If I were in charge of training you, you'd be able to get across that fence within the first day." The large one looked back at it. "That might not be a bad idea, really. But you would have to keep practicing in order to maintain the ability." A giggle from her. "Your species tends to learn things relatively quickly, but also have a terrible habit of forgetting as well." A smirk from the purple haired woman. "What is it?"

"I've been thinking about that Car argument you made a while back." A noise in question as two ears perked up, getting Leslie to chuckle again.

"And what have you come up with?"

"Well, for starters, it helps those who need emergency help. Fire trucks, ambulances, and the like." A nod from the Charr.

"Yes, but it would be much easier for them to work if there wasn't so many cars on the roads to begin with." A playful curse from the woman, but she chuckled a bit anyway. "Besides, I've seen how often your kind tends to get hurt in such vehicles. A large percentage of them could just be avoided if you had less of them occupying the roads."

"Alright then, what about those who live too far away from the city? People need to get to work, get the things they need to survive. Like food and supplies."

"Perhaps." He stated, getting a stare from her as Eman nearly smirked back.

"You have a counter to that, I know it." The woman laughed, almost trying to bring out the expression in the hardened creature. "What is it?" A light shrug from the feline as he reached back for that rod, unfolding it into the six arc bow and taking aim high up in the sky behind them. "W-what are you doing?"

Without responding, the Charr pulled back on the illuminated string and released it. Getting a faint *oomph* as a ray of light shot out, nearly panicking those who witnessed it. But nothing seemed to come of it, even after he folded it back up into the rod, and pulled out the light screen again. Showing the woman the display that appeared to be high up on a skyscraper in the distance. "Oh, it's like a camera?"

"Yes, now what do you see?" She studied the many large buildings and streets below.

"I'm guessing you're talking about the traffic or roads."

"That is a part of it, yes." A few taps on the screen, and it highlighted the roads and several buildings within the view. Something that took up most of what was captured, even after the 'camera' turned to see more of the city.

"Okay, roads, parking lots... Parking buildings too?" A nod from the feline, and another tap. Getting a new color highlighting on other areas, especially out in the suburbs. "...Places where people live?"

"Leslie, explain what a city is to me." A strange look from her as they continued to walk. "What's the first thing that comes to mind?"

"It's a place where a lot of people live."

"Alright." He tapped the screen again, highlighting other areas that appeared to be stores and other places of business, along with bringing up a pie-chart. "Can you explain to me why 65% of your city is devoted to cars and transportation?" Another giggle from her. "A thought experiment: If you replaced most of the roads, parking lots, parking buildings and such. And in their place, you give people homes and the convenience of being closer to those stores you mentioned. Those who do live outside the city may still use the roads for the cars they require, but with everything being within walking distance, why bother having one?"

"True, but then those buildings and places where people live would have insane rent." A bit of a grunt from the Charr as he pressed the space between his eyes, getting her to giggle again.

"Another way your kind is dividing themselves, I see."

"What do you mean?"

"Most of your parking is free." Eman half grumbled. "Why is it that the areas for your vehicles to sleep is free, yet the areas for your people is not?" Another chuckle. "Your species has that concept *backwards*."

"Supply and demand, not much you can do about it-"

"You're incorrect. You have the power to do something about it." He looked over towards a group of people within the food court. Some that were looking at the two, but rather casually. "You all do. Why do you insist on submitting so easily?" He didn't get a response, as expected. Well, other than the woman's laughter.

"It's just how we're brought up. To accept that things are the way they are, and we adapt to them." An exhale through that feline muzzle.

"I suppose that's the biggest difference between Charr and Humans." A look in question from Leslie. "Humans adapt to the world they are given, whereas Charr make the change. Force the world to adapt to them." All the woman did was smile at him.

"I think you're more Charr than you realize." Another exhale from the large one as he put away the futuristic tool.

"I am more Charr than Human, that should be obvious." A chuckle from her. "How well do you know the computers of your world?"

"Not too much. Why?"

"I found a hard drive. I'd like to know what is on it." Another puzzled look from her.

"...Define *Found*." Eman's rather stoic stare got a light hearted giggle from the girl. "That kind of *Found*, huh?"

"It was in the possession of the Digital Shadow." Her tone got a bit more serious.

"You found him?"

"His location, yes. But I did not capture him." A noise of sympathy from her. "Gave him quite the scare in the process, as well as a small wound. He ended up damaging the computer in his possession, it's very possible that the data cannot be recovered."

"And your thinking the computer was his?"

"Perhaps, but I am not jumping to such conclusions just yet. It's very possible he was just searching for something on it."

"Like what, I wonder?" No response from the large feline as he overlooked the scenery for a moment. "Still no motives yet."

"It's difficult to communicate with him directly. I cannot say that I blame him, really."

"Maybe you guys just need some counseling." A very odd look from the Charr as the woman was sent into laughs. "Like- ...Like a talking circle...!"

"I'm not sure what exactly that would accomplish." He stated, waiting for Leslie to recover.

"Well, why is it that you're going after him?"

"Because he is a danger to your city and your world."

"So are you, I imagine."

"Yes, but I was requested here by your planet."

"Right, it lit up the Charr Spotlight in the night sky, and you answered it." Another odd look forced her to giggle again. "I need to take a picture of you doing that sometime." A grumble in response that time. "Alright, here's my stop." They glanced over at the small booth for a city bus.

"Visiting the Aatxe again, are you?" He mumbled a bit quietly, getting her to nod. "Do you want me to follow?"

"I don't think I'll need it, but that's up to you." A nod from the Charr.

"I'll make sure you get there safely." Another chuckle as the two waited.

~~~~~

"It probably wouldn't come to a surprise to you that in this battle, we were fighting within human territory. Specifically against them as well." A bit of a sour look from the blonde man. "I was in a raid party that were to sneak around the main battle and behind enemy lines. Our task specifically was to set the fields behind the human army ablaze to flank them."

"Sounds dirty."

"You fight with whatever tools you are given when it comes to survival. I never understood this *concept* your kind has invented called Honor." The man lit up another cigarette.

"It's more respectful, for one-"

"To hold back?" They shared a thick stare. "To not take the fight seriously, to not battle with every tool available to you, is disrespectful."

"Right, and we should cripple everyone we come across to somehow make them stronger." Gene grumbled, taking an inhale. "Honor prevents injuries and saves lives."

"Then where is your species' Honor now?" A look in question at the large feline, then Eman gestured around the city. "Where is your respect for your people? Surely your declaration of Honor should care enough that people are fed. Sheltered. **Healthy**." A breath from the Charr as the man didn't respond. "We're getting off-topic. The battle started late in the afternoon, and our mission began soon

after. However, on our way to the position, we were ambushed."

"By humans?" The blonde man half grumbled.

"By Charr." A noise in question. "We were attacked by our own kind, ones I seen before within our base. A couple I even grew up beside." That stare didn't lift.

"Were there...? Other factions or something within the ranks?"

"No. We didn't divide ourselves in such ways, other than our leaders. And to sabotage their own battle seemed counter productive. Regardless, we were attacked and my warband killed. I was stabbed in the neck with a long blade." A small gesture towards a patch of fur that didn't quite flow correctly. Even spreading the hairs quite a bit to reveal a long vertical scar. "It went completely through, but I didn't die. With some sort of dumb luck, it didn't cut anything important, just put enough pressure to cause me to pass out."

~~~~~

Chapter 4

Even the pleasant music on the radio wasn't enough to calm his nerves driving through the city. The nights getting darker and darker by every passing day, making the middle aged man feel unsafe, even inside the car. But pulling into his driveway, he felt a chill down his spine. Ever since he left the police station, he's felt like he was being watched. Followed.

Maybe all the reports were getting to him. Stories of people being swallowed up by the shadows and left as ribbons, even inside vehicles. Sometimes even while they were driving. They half announced that it might be wise to leave the inner lights on within the car, and driving more cautiously. But even then...

A heavy breath, and the man reached back for his workbag. Jumping when a stray cat landed on his hood and cursing at it. Taking a moment to calm his heart, still feeling the caffeine run through his veins before opening the door. Watching for the motion detector light above his front door turn on, as if to shield him into his safe home. Locking the car afterword, and shooing the cat away, getting a low snarl and a hiss from it before scampering off. Walking up to his small porch and getting his keys prepared- "Jerid Grinnly-?"

"Jesus Christ On A Bicycle!!!" The man yelled, dropping everything at the inhuman voice and

staying in the light. Scanning the darkness on the other side of his porch and barely making out a rather large creature.

"I'm not here to harm you if I don't have to." Several breaths as the man tried to calm himself, now wishing he owned a gun. "I have a task for you."

"T-the hell do you mean, *Task*?" Barely detecting rather soft steps along the grass. "...You're not human."

"No." The creature stated bluntly. "But I'm not one of them." A bit of moment was barely seen in the darkness.

"...Jesus-Cat?" That made the creature pause, nearly feeling a puzzled stare from the beast. "Self-Righteous, you wrote the add-on to that puzzle we found in the abandoned homes-"

"Those homes were not Abandoned. They were occupied." He stated rather thickly.

"But that's who you are, right?" A noise in response, difficult to tell if it was a Yes or No. "What do you want from me?" An orange furred paw wrapped in a dark bracer, holding out a damaged piece of electronics. "Is... That a hard drive?"

"I need to know what's on it."

"Why would I do this?"

"Because it's beneficial for you and your station as well." The man just stared at him, almost being able to see the Charr's outline. "You've heard of the Digital Shadow, correct?"

"...Yes." A nod was barely seen. "This is his?"

"Was. Let's just say his computer will no longer function, and I don't have the time to learn how your world handles Data."

"Our world...?" No response. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Make progress, and perhaps I will tell you. But know this:" He tossed something dark and fleshy into the light, the head of some monstrosity that nearly made Jerid gag and stumble backwards. "I'm an ally, if you want me to be."

...It was a mistake. I knew it deep down inside of my mind. But I didn't see any other way of getting the money needed for her treatment.

...A mistake that I should've been the one punished for, not them.

Though I managed to leak out the trafficking, I knew they would figure out it was me eventually. That their wounds didn't end me.

I only survived because of that... Thing. The shadow that was following me. The one that was eating my data.

...I remember fading. Lying on the floor as it watched over me. Like some sort of... Pet. Companion.

Then it gave it to me... That second chance. But at a cost...

The bull's ears flicked as he felt a presence come closer, getting him to grunt a bit in response. A single set of footsteps. Faint music could barely be picked up, making the Aatxe relax a bit more. Knowing who it was before the door even opened, and the young woman coming up the stairs. Witnessing the black minotaur with a notebook in his hands, attempting to read and getting her to giggle. "I thought you would find this amusing."

"It is quite, yes." Leslie set her bag on the table and stopped her media player. "Here I thought you would be asleep." Walking towards the several old mattresses that the Aatxe went through over the months and sitting beside him. Granted, after a while he just ended up piling them all into one rather dense 'Bed' and leaving it as that. Wasn't the most comfortable for the woman, but the black creature never seemed to mind.

"I attempted. Did so for a while, but..." A stroke was felt on his large arm as the young girl looked at the notebook. "He's been watching me, I can feel it."

"The Shadow?" A noise in confirmation.

"This is his..." A look from the woman. "Eman ended up finding him last night, nearly killing him."

"Yes, he told me." Those dark orange eyes looked at her with a bit of concern, then relief.

"He's still escorting you home, is he?"

"Or here. Following the bus from the rooftops." A slight sigh in comfort from the beast. "He can be quite fun to talk to, providing you don't take his preaching too personally."

"The cat really does like to... Encourage others to change." A giggle from her, making Gorret smile a bit. But it grew a bit sad after. "...I shouldn't be reading this."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm..." A breath from the Aatxe. "I'm not looking for a motive. I feel it's just going to get in the way." That same look was reflected within the young woman's face, as he took another breath and gestured the notebook. "Eman gave me a breakdown of it last night. He was working for computer security for a gang... Agrume's. Eventually quit and attempted to lay low. But someone he cared about... Likely having a one-sided relationship with, ended up getting married."

"So... Vengeance?" A head shake from the bull.

"No... No. In some ways, he felt that the husband didn't deserve her, but apparently he wasn't a

bad person." Another breath through that black muzzle. "Evan Highland... I vaguely remember his face. He ended up having a daughter with her, but that child ended up getting very sick several years after." Another arm stroke from Leslie. "She ended up asking the Shadow for money, and... He told her that he could get it."

"He...?"

"Ended up stealing from Agrume, not even leaving a trace. However, the gang caught on... Spied on him for months, and eventually found out what the money was used for. Though they didn't have proof..." A heated exhale from the black beast.

"They acted without it...?" A slow nod.

"The girl didn't get treatment, it was 'accidently switched' with another patient. Causing both of them to lose their lives. And the mother was kidnapped, forced into human trafficking." The room fell quiet as the woman's grip grew tighter. "He ended up exposing it at least, hoping that she escaped, but in the process..."

"He got caught." Another breath from the bull.

"...I half wonder, if on purpose. That way they wouldn't go after her. However, he nearly died when they were done with the Shadow."

"But he recovered?"

"Likely from one of those..." He trailed off, still not sure what to really call his species. "Apparently one has been following him around, feeding off of a few things."

"Feeding...?" A nod.

"It's... Different for every creature. Some need to eat their own kind, some hunt certain prey. This one was different... More docile than the rest." He flipped a few pages back, revealing a rough, dark sketch of what almost looked like a ghostly shadow. "Eman states that it likely fed off of electricity or perhaps some sort of digital energy. Which would explain why it would be able to manipulate them, or even cause sudden blackouts."

"But odds are it started small, like with the pacemakers." A look from those dark orange eyes. "So, what happened? They fused into one creature?"

"Likely. Instead of one completely dominating or consuming the other, this... Creature saved the Shadow's life. The rest are just riddles, including what he wants from me." Gorret mumbled.

"What do you mean?" An awkward grumble as those black ears lowered a bit, getting her to giggle. "Really?"

"I remember reading some love letters from stalkers back when I was human. I swear some of these sound a lot like those." A small laugh even made him smirk a bit. "But... He still sees me as a threat, yet important to his plans... I just can't figure it out." He took a breath, closing the book and just looking

at the aged cover. Likely being used for something else before the scribbler's pages were torn out and it was reused for its current purpose. "How are things with you?"

"Doing okay. Better really, though I still feel like I'm being watched by people." A concerned look from the beast. "Nothing like... Those things, or anything. More just people knowing what happened, wondering if I'm going to... Change, maybe?"

"Like you're carrying some sort of disease?" A shrug from her.

"They are only people I never cared about, not anyone I'm close to." A nod from Gorret. "The doctors couldn't find anything, even after the routine checkups. Parents are always at me about any sort of strange feelings, and well..."

"Growing up at your age... It's difficult to tell what is normal." A chuckle from her.

"Yeah..." Another concerned look at her tone.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." A bit of a snort from the large one, nudging her with that black muzzle. "They... A while ago, I told you about how they..."

"What?"

"Stopped your... Search." A bit of a sad look from those orange discs, but he nodded. "They... The bank started cleaning out your home next door." The Aatxe's heart sank a bit, almost looking through the wall towards it. "They won't let us go through it to find something, not legally anyway." A less than pleased look from Gorret this time, and Leslie lightly chuckled. "All I'm saying is, if you want something back from there... Now's your only chance. I don't know where they'll take it afterward." A nod from him.

"I'll... Try to think of something." A few moments of silence as they stared out of the dirty windows of the warehouse.

"So, I made more doodles." A chuckle from the large one.

~~~~~

"And they...?" Gene started, returning to the rooftop with a couple of cold drinks. Offering the feline one, but he refused. "They never thought to check your pulse? They just left you there after stabbing you in the neck?"

"I'll take that as a compliment to Charr resilience, but no. They just made assumptions and left us to reach another target." The large one couldn't help but feel for that old neck wound again. "We were always taught not to fear death. That if we did perish, it was the want of the Gods that we followed. Having a near-death experience was unheard of, let alone surviving such an attack."

"But you did." A nod from Eman. "And the others in your squad?"

"Ceased to be once I awoke towards the evening. No movement, no breaths. We were taught to sense for such a thing. However, I did find tracks to the Charr that attacked my group, and I pursued."

"Not even going to finish your job? Head back to base to inform-?"

"There was no tactic anylonger, because there was no battle. And to return after such a thing would only bring death quicker." A breath through that muzzle. "I wanted answers. And I found them when I followed those tracks to a human farmhouse quite a ways away."

"Farmhouse?" A nod in response. "Who would build a farm so close to...?"

"Charr Territory?" The man took a drink, falling a bit silent. "We advance, build a base, and advance further. Burning everything in our path."

"...They didn't build in your territory. You invaded." A bit of silence between the two.

"Do you blame me?" The large feline asked rather calmly, locking eyes with the blonde one. "You are accusing a soldier for an entire army's decision. And that's not even counting the fact that you have nothing in common with the owners of that farmland aside from Species." Another few moments of staring before Gene took another drink.

"...What happened to them." He barely questioned.

"They were alive when I got there. Most were grouped by a fire, being guarded by at least four Charr."

"Why guarded? What did they have that the Charr would want?"

"Meat." A noise in question, but those blue eyes just stared at the man for a few moments. Letting the cigarette eventually fall out of his stunned expression.

"...You mean cows, right?" No response. "...You guys actually ate...?"

"Unsettling, isn't it? To not remain on the top of the food chain." A loud swallow from Gene. "Regardless, one human was still hiding in the shadows away, just waiting for an opportunity to strike. Poorly, I might add, but the... 'Captain', as you would call it, of the Charr group was gloating his entire plan. Claiming that my warband were disobeying orders, and were acting suspicious in the woods. As if we were going to turn against our own kin during that fight." A heated exhale. "I might've released a growl in anger, grabbing a few of their attentions."

"And?"

"That freed human seen it as Opportunity." A sour look from the blonde one. "It went as well as you might think, considering he was untrained. But he was a good distraction."

"Did he...?" Another silent stare.



"...No. I managed to take out three out of four using my hunting knife before that Captain even noticed what happened. Letting us see completely eye to eye, this time a blade stuck in his throat." A few moments of silence as the Charr covered his eyes with a paw.

"...And the others?" No response. "Uh...?"

"I'm not proud of this." A noise in question. "They ended up sneaking behind me and hitting me with something. I think a shovel? Something metal." A moment of staring that the feline could detect, not even lifting his veil. "Don't laugh." But Gene did so anyway.

~~~~~

Chapter 5

"All I'm saying is I've never seen him." Gene muttered, taking another breath from his cigarette. "So, it's hard to know what to look for while searching for him."

"He looks human." The Charr stated, getting the bull to nod in agreement as the three shared a look.

"...Well, *that* narrows it down." The blonde man grumbled. "Anything else?"

"Often wears longer coats. Heavier, like he's cold. Covers his head, often his face as well. Likely trying to hide anything that might look off towards others."

"No specific smells?" The bull asked.

"Nothing that's strong enough to be called a lead. No special hunting or eating patterns that could be followed, other than perhaps some electricity or digital data. Even then, I'm unsure if he's actually consuming it."

"What kind of underwear does he use?" Gene grumbled sarcastically.

"Doesn't wear any." An odd look from the other two at the large feline for several moments.

"...I'm so curious as to how you know that."

"When he escapes, he abandons his attire. Leaving it all behind." A few more moments of staring

caused those four ears to spade a bit, until the bull sighed.

"He's right, actually. I remember him... 'Melting' before."

"A power he can only seem to do within darkness, it seems."

"Which usually means cutting the power out." The man exhaled a cloud of smoke, letting it blow away in the faint breeze. "Please tell me you have a plan made up by now."

"He's running out of places to hide, if that's what you mean." Eman stated, getting a less-than-pleased look from the blonde one.

"And if he starts reusing spots?"

"Then he will become predictable. The Shadow knows he's being hunted, if not by me, by him." A gesture to the Aatxe. "If he starts reusing hideouts, they will become trapped." The large feline looked over the city from the rooftop they stood on. "He requires some sort of connection towards this network, meaning he needs to stay within it. I've even considered shutting down the network to see what he would do, but it appears your species relies a bit too heavily on such a thing."

"Some anyway." Another exhale, heavier than the previous ones. "...What would you do?" A calm stare from those blue eyes. "If you were him, what would you be planning?"

"I would identify the biggest threats."

"And?"

"Eliminate them." The Charr stated, almost sending a cold shiver down the man's spine.

"And by threats, you mean us." He nodded at Gene. "Likely starting with the..."

"Weakest one?" Half a groan from the blonde one.

"Connotation, man. Come on. I would've gone with *Easier* at least." A light shrug from Eman.

"I don't have time to worry about feelings."

"And by that, you probably mean Charr in general." Another shrug. "You sound like wonderful people. Remind me to invite you over to dinner sometime."

"I don't eat-"

"That was-" An exhale in defeat as he put out the cigarette. Overlooking the Aatxe for a moment who was just staring out into the city. "Why are you so quiet?"

"Do you... Hear something?" Gorret replied, getting a few noises in question as they stayed silent for a bit. "It's... Not quite sound but-"

"Like something pulling you?" The man asked, getting a look from those solid red eyes. "Like

being pulled by a small thread, and not a strong one."

"Sounds like bait." The feline stated.

"But for who?" The two larger ones shared a glance. "...I want to at least check it out. Be on your guard." The two nodded in agreement before taking off.

"Com'on! Come on, old girl!" The young driver coaxed in a panic, hearing the large van continue to turn over with every twist of the key. Getting whimpers from the others of the double date, as something outside of the old vehicle hissed. Approaching them slowly while his friend whined, getting spotted by those large, spider-like eyes that extended for extra depth perception. A few getting attracted with every step within the van.

"K-Kevin...!" The other young man whined. "It's coming closer! Get us out of here-!" A loud scratch on the side of the vehicle got the ones inside to yelp loudly, now identifying a second horror. Then a third that quaked the earth outside as the car attempted to turn over again. Getting the younger folk inside to cry in terror until a motorcycle was heard down the street. "HELP-!" A loud hiss from the side before a grotesque crushing noise. "PLEASE!" They yelled from the inside at the sight of another human being.

But the blonde man slid to a stop, motioning raising a hand up to recognize them. Getting a yelp from the driver when a pair of solid red eyes came from the side door, hearing it tap on the side of it. "What's wrong?" The bull nearly growled at the driver, getting him to stutter at the sheer fact it could talk before piecing together who it was.

"I-is that the black goat!?" One of them from the back asked, instantly getting a grumble from the Aatxe.

"I-I don't know! It won't start!" Another growl as the black beast suddenly looked behind the van. Hearing something else softly land on the other side and scout the area's surroundings.

"There are more incoming." Eman informed the group. "I'm counting at least twelve so far."

"So it's not just us being attracted here..." Gene grumbled a bit worryingly, tapping on the glass of the vehicle. "Is everyone alright in there?"

"Y-yes. We just ran when something tried to attack us in the streets."

"Sounds like a fun night for a double date." The blonde one, looking over the bull who kept studying the van. "You sense him?"

"No. But that pull is coming from..." A glance down before moving towards the front of the vehicle. "All of you, inside. Brace yourselves." The group whimpered while Gene double taked.

"What exactly are you planning-?" The Aatxe slowly lifted the front of the vehicle, getting a few yelps as the man stepped back.

"Look underneath it." Gorret demanded, still getting a look of confusion from his partner, but doing so anyway.

"Remind me to call you the next time I need a jack." Another quip as Gene pulled out a flashlight, finding a small device strapped quite far into the car. "The hell is this?"

"An attraction of some kind?" The Charr asked, looking over it from afar.

"It's definitely coming from this thing." The blonde one said, fiddling with it enough to shut the homemade device off and getting out from under the van. However, hearing some inhuman hisses and cries from nearby. "Guess that won't drive them away..."

"No. Odds are it'll be quite the ambush." Eman stated. "You should take them to safety-"

"Like hell I will!" Gene snapped at him.

"Well, somebody needs to do it." The two looked over at the bull, still holding up the van and sighing at them after a moment of staring.

"Fine. But you two be careful. I'll be back soon." Another series of yelps as he lifted up the back end of the vehicle and started walking off with it. Leaving the other two to take up stances, the Charr pulling out one of his roped knives, while the blonde one unsheathed two swords; one clearly less threatening than the other. Instantly getting the attention of the larger feline as those four ears spaded, shifting his gaze from the man's face to the low quality 'weapon'.

"Time to bring the A-Game-"

"Is That A Toy!?" The man stared at him in a bit of surprise.

"Really? Out of all the conversations we've had, this actually breaks your composure-?"

"That's because you've never done something so foolish as to bring a hollow, cheap, plastic toy to an encounter!" Eman hissed, breaking his stance and not paying mind to the several creatures approaching.

"Relax, I've tested it and it works fine." That blue-eyed stare didn't lift. "Fine, I'll show you." The blonde one wound up the fake sword for a downward swing, getting a slight pitch while a faint purple covered the plastic blade. Snapping it down towards one of the creatures far in front of him, the purple aura shot off and created its own blade. Slicing through the scorpion-like creature with ease and severing its dark exoskeleton.

However, the power of the snap to release the projectile instantly made the plastic blade to break off and hold together by half an inch of grey. Giving Gene a moment to look at it with a bit of surprise and nearly drop the cigarette from his mouth, all while a set of blue discs didn't lift their gaze. Getting the man to finally look at them and roll his own eyes. "Okay, this didn't happen before, but I can fix this!" A growl in response as the large one returned to his stance before engaging.

~~~~~

The Charr grunted awake, his sense in alarm that there was someone nearby. Feeling his arms bound at the wrists by straps connected to the wall of a building. Leather reins, likely all they could find that would possibly hold the large feline. But he didn't struggle against it, instead studied his surroundings. Straw covered the floor, a storage barn of sorts?

Regardless, it was dark. Even when the large door slid open a crack and someone carrying a lantern walked in. Hanging the lighted device on a beam nearby, allowing them to see each other while the human male sat on a chair a ways in front of the dark orange furred one. Letting them stare at each other for a few moments. "Why are you here?" The man nearly demanded, but didn't get a response. "Can you speak? Or did that wound mute you?"

"Yes." The Charr answered bluntly. "I know your language."

"You have a name?"

"No." A puzzled look from the older looking human, but the beast looked back. Not being uncooperative, just another blunt statement.

"Why are you here?"

"Be more specific." The large one stated, closing his eyes for a moment.

"Why are you attacking our lands?" The younger man demanded, taking the place of his father. The same one that was sneaking around to save his family before.

"Because our gods willed it."

"That's it?" The feline just stared at him. "Because your gods...?"

"If your leaders suddenly decided to command all your kind to take up arms to destroy a threat, would you not listen?" The young human stared in anger.

"We're not a threat."

"Some state otherwise." The large one replied, almost expecting the statement.

"Then why did you attack us?"

"I **didn't**." The feline stated thickly, once again closing his eyes. "I'm the reason why you're alive." Some silence before a plate was slid towards him with food. Letting the Charr to stare at the older woman for several moments.

"It's been three days. You should eat."

"I am your prisoner. You shouldn't waste your food." A bit of a sad smile from her.

"The boys said the same thing. But it's not right to let you go hungry, especially after what you did for us-"

"I did nothing for you." The orange one stated, without anger.

"Then why did you do it?" The older man asked, getting more comfortable around the large feline. "They take out your family? Your blood?"

"Our family and blood are not the same like yours." A noise in question. "If we birth young, we are not the ones who take care of them. Others commit to that duty."

"But you must have a family, yes?" The younger female again. "Somewhere?" Those blue eyes stared into space for a bit.

"...What we call Warbands. They are like our siblings at arms, though we do not share any blood."

"Just spirit." The smaller man stated, sitting in the chair backwards and leaning on the backrest. "...Most of my friends already joined the war. I wanted to, but..."

"Do you blame me then?" The feline asked. Getting a puzzled look from the younger male. "For their death?"

"...Ma says there's no point in revenge. Eye for an eye leaves the entire world blind, and all."

"And you believe her." A bit of silence, but he nodded. A bit shakily.

"...How did it feel?" Those blue discs studied the boy. "That... Thing, it killed your..."

"I'm not going to lie, it felt good. But."

"But...?"

"It didn't change anything." A sad look from the human, as he nodded once again.

"Why hasn't anyone looked for you yet?" The girl asked, wrapping herself in a heavier blanket before offering the larger feline one. Only getting a stare from him.

"...Is that a complaint?" That made her giggle a bit. "I'm already dead to them. A soldier that doesn't return is just another dead one."

"So...?"

"You will be safe. For now." They just looked at each other for a moment. "And no, I'm not just saying that." A slow nod before she approached him with the blanket, wrapping around his furred body to protect from the nightly cold.

"...What would you do?" The older woman asked, not getting a response from the Charr. "If we... Decided to let you go. What would you do?"

~~~~~

Chapter 6

It would hardly be considered moving quietly, a bull walking quickly down the streets carrying a van with four people in it, but the Aatxe was attempting to avoid any alerts. Many of the creatures that those black ears picked up were heading towards the louder noises behind him, joining in the fight that half made Gorret worried and anxious to return to.

But people needed to be protected, and he understood why the black one was picked to do so. Honestly, the four young adults were quite safe in this wheeled box. Perhaps safe enough to set down and get them to hide until he returned? No. It was too risky, and he wasn't about to gamble their lives for such a thing.

Yet, those black ears flicked. Finally being detected by another creature that decided to seek out possible easy prey. Even after a thick growl from the Aatxe, the creature continued to stalk him as he transported the van. Eventually just setting it down near a construction zone for an upcoming building and approaching the driver's window. "Stay here." He demanded, those territorial instincts leaking through his voice a bit as he turned about to face the creature.

It was hiding from him, among the wreckage of homes that once surrounded this area. Very soft steps that could barely be heard within the overgrown grass, though something was off about them. Short. Long. Prowling like a feline as those faint yellow eyes started reflecting lights from a distance. Four of them.

The slender creature hissed, knowing it was detected by the much larger creature. Opening several vocal cords within its neck as it continued to circle around the Aatxe and the van. Now revealing that it had eight pair of limbs, but one was torn off. Different styles and sizes of paws, as if it were collecting them.

But something else grabbed both of their attentions, a wave of smaller creatures. However, not the same species born of darkness like Gorret and this feline beast. Slowly fanning out and taking cover along the broken walls, as if trying to sneak up on the two. Those black ears barely picking out faint voices and motions before detecting a few things being thrown in the wide opened space.

The small objects carried old warnings within the Aatxe's memories, as he covered his face and eyes before the objects exploded with a faint violet light. One that burned the hides of the shadows with

sheer exposure, causing the feline one to retreat and Gorret to take cover behind the van. Hearing the ones inside yelp again, especially at the bull's growl in pain.

It honestly felt like his skin was melting, searing and forming into a crispy plastic wrap that covered his muscles. Getting them to stick and throw many painful warnings not to move or crack the sensitive skin that was only exposed for a few seconds. Rushing his adrenaline from the sheer pain and having a hard time to focus on where the other creatures were moving. Nearly surrounding the vehicle before hearing the command to open fire.

Bullets showered the Aatxe's cover, piercing through the metal frame of the van and stinging his already scorched hide. Hearing a few screams from inside before getting suddenly silenced, making anger flood his mind, but Gorret retreated before the vehicle was torn to shreds.

"Target is on the move!" One of the men shouted, getting them to advance in a spread. Attempting to keep sight of the larger one as they passed through the construction zone for a tall building, but lost it within the darkness. "Keep an eye out. It couldn't have gone far."

"Systems are still detecting one around, odds are it's just hiding. Keep your eyes peeled."

"Biggest one we've seen so far, that's for sure. So that shouldn't be too hard." The beast heard, exhaling quietly to deal with the pain of the strange burns. Still able to function at least, but a direct approach would not work here.

"I got a bad feeling about this one, guys."

"Me too, Cap. Something about this job isn't right."

"Think about how much something this big will bag us!"

"This doesn't feel staged to you? First some distorted Nostradamus leaves a damn message to our facility-"

"Lex-"

"One our guys couldn't even find the source of, by the way-"

"Enough! You four, check over there. Stay together! We'll flash this thing out if we have to."

"That sounded so wrong-"

"Can It!!" A heated exhale left that black muzzle, trying to remain quiet within the wreckage of a concrete building. The pain was fading over time, at least, yet it still made the bull almost fatigued. Quietly grunting while he took out what could only be described as acidic bullets out of his body, dropping them on the ground when they burned his fingers like radiation. Getting them to callus quickly and numb the pain.

Catching footsteps on the adjacent side of the wall, those primal instincts triggered within the Aatxe. Ramming his fist through the thick concrete and grabbing the soldier's helmet, hearing him

instantly scream before being pulled into the smaller hole. One that wasn't wide enough to slip both of his shoulders inside, yet the bull didn't stop. Even after the gunshots were heard on the other side of the wall as the man panicked and accidentally shot one of his comrades before getting torn in two.

"Mother of God!!" Another one nearby was heard, instantly getting the black beast's attention and burst through the wall towards the voice. Causing the soldier to stumble backwards and trip, attempting to scramble up before a heavy hoof crushed his pelvis. Making the man scream in pain before getting his upper half ripped in two by sheer strength of a single arm and tossed aside.

A shower of bullets aimed at Gorret's direction, adding a bit more to his collection before the Aatxe could take cover. The concrete walls holding back most of them, but the area was too opened for him to remain without being surrounded. Eventually spotting a cement truck within the darkness and charging towards it for a new form of cover.

Yet, the soldiers kept track of his position, getting the beast to curse as adrenaline rushed through his slightly wounded body. Nearly getting hit a few times in the leg from under the large vehicle, those instincts kicked in again. Flipping the truck on its side made the ground quake loudly, but provided great cover. Hearing the soldiers start to approach the large machine, the Aatxe hit it hard from his side.

"Oh Shi-!" One managed to get out before the toppled vehicle steamrolled over a few of them, leaving red stains across the pavement as the truck continued its path. Knocking over some old concrete walls which caught the attention of the ones that remained. Still attempting to keep track of the black one's movements, heading towards a crane nearby.

"Spread out!" The Captain ordered angrily, attempting to take cover and firing controlled bursts. Attempting to steer the beast towards smaller cover where he could be surrounded easily.

"I don't know about this one, Sir! Maybe we should-!"

"If You Finish That Sentence, You'll Be The Next One To Be Shot! Understood!?" A bit of a whimper from the man. "You Two! Take His Left! Flank Him In A Crossfire!" The soldiers started to move, barely making out a large metal box that was being prepped under the crane. Able to spot those red eyes using it for cover as they advanced while the others distracted the beast with bursts.

Yet, those solid crimson eyes instantly picked up on the men sneaking around, grabbing the Aatxe's attention and nearly making one of them whimper as he looked directly at them. Hearing it growl loudly before hitting the heavy box with a backfist and launching it towards the soldier that whimpered. Giving him no time to react towards the massive projectile as a large crunch was heard with the impact.

Though it did cause the bull to take a few bullets, Gorret grabbed the steel cord that was attached to the box and pulled it back towards him for cover. "Is that a fucking elevator!?"

"Shit! My Horoscope was right!" Another man whined before making out the heavy box's location, seeing it being swung around and crushing him. Bouncing over two soldiers from the impact and landing on the last one that attempted the sneaking mission, before being pulled back by the Aatxe.

"Captain! We need-!" The last private started before getting the improvised weapon to turn him

into a stain like the others. Getting the one in charge to dodge the elevator's return to the bull, but his weapon got snagged by the box and his cover. Forcing him to leave it behind and run off into the darkness.

For several moments, everything was quiet as the man took cover. Unstrapping his sidearm and checking the very small amount of ammo he had with it, the man couldn't calm down. Feeling the fear of being stalked by something beyond his control, he yelped at the very first sighting of red and shot at it. Only to hear the sounds of reflective metal instead, telling the Captain that the beast was behind him.

The two didn't move, regardless if he felt the furnace-like breath of the large creature down his neck. Passing through his protective armor like cloth, letting the man's heartbeat overwhelm his own hearing as he let the pistol fall from his hands. Leaving himself at the mercy of such a horror.

Gorret half staggered towards the van, still not hearing any sounds from it besides the faint motor of a bike in the distance. Leaning up against the vehicle as he started to once again pull out the painful bullets one at a time before hearing the large feline land nearby. Overlooking the Aatxe, then scanning for any life within the wheeled container, but able to smell the scent of human blood. "What happened." Eman demanded, not getting a response from the black one until a headlight forced him to grunt.

"Christ! What the hell!?" The blonde man asked, shutting off the vehicle quickly and letting it fall. Granted, tripping on what was left of the strange grenade from earlier. Though still not getting a response from the black one. "Gorret!? Speak to me, buddy! Can you hear me?" A nod was detected, giving the man a breath of relief.

The Charr looked around the area a bit, starting to move before getting a strong grasp on one of his arms. Forcing the bull and the feline to share a thick look. "...Find Them." The Aatxe growled. "Find Whoever Did This."

~~~~~

"They freed you." The blonde man stated, not really getting an answer from the large feline. "Even though you were their enemy."

"If you wish to put it like that, yes. Keep in mind that we rarely seen them as such."

"What do you mean?"

"The humans were not our enemy. We didn't know their beliefs, agendas, nor really even considered them a threat to our existence. They were obstacles to our objectives, nothing more."

"Gee, Eman. Tell me what you really think." Gene grumbled, taking time to just inhale the rest of

his cigarette before putting it out into a nearby tray.

"Regardless, that event got me thinking. A lot." A breath from the Charr as he gazed away.  
"Possibly more than I should've been."

"Is it because you had the time to do such?"

"Likely. We were often kept busy inbetween fights. Be it training or doing tasks around the base, there was always something to be done. However..." The large one trailed off, getting a noise in question from the man after a few moments. "Humans are different, sometimes more so from planet to planet."

"Different?"

"Do you understand the concept of being Ronin?" A strange look from the blonde one.

"...You mean, like, a samurai without a lord to serve?"

"Yes, along with the discrimination that comes with such a thing." The man nodded. "It's worse for a Charr when they lose their entire warband. You're no longer treated as a soldier, but more of a bad omen. Someone who should've died in a battle, but didn't. A specter of sorts."

"And when you returned to...?" Another deep breath from the larger one.

"I was treated with more respect as a prisoner than I ever was as a soldier. I was more valuable to that family than I was to my entire army. It was a strange thing to witness, really. But..."

"But?"

"It's what convinced me to defect. Especially after learning that the gods we've been following, the very ones we put so much faith into, were... False. Just a lie that the shamans made up to keep everyone in line." Some silence as those blue eyes remained closed. "No family, no faith... I've never been so broken..." No response from Gene. "But I didn't give up."

~~~~~

The man woke up at his office desk, the glow of the monitor half blinding his eyes while his face felt half numb. Grunting awake from his small nap, his own body was telling him that was enough overtime at the station tonight. To just go home and sleep in a proper bed.

Jerid didn't argue, packing whatever things he could muster and almost staggering out into the hallway. The lights above at least getting him more awake, enough to drive home. "You're still here, Grinnly?" The woman at the front desk asked.

"Y-yeah... Was trying to get something done, but fell asleep."

"You should take better care of yourself. You can't keep working 18 hour days." A faint grumble in response was all he could muster, exiting out of the door into the near pitch black that was the night. Almost like a thick fog that nearly covered the illuminated cones of safety spread across the pavement. Taking a moment to remember where he parked before heading out.

"Jerid Grinnly-?"

"Mother Of God!!" The man jumped, dropping his bags in the process. Taking a stressful breath after recognizing the inhuman voice, attempting to find it somewhere in the shadows. "Why must you do that!?"

"Would you rather me tap your shoulder?" It was barely a question, but at least having patience letting the man calm down. "You know why I'm here."

"The... Hard drive, yeah." A worried breath from the man. "I'm still attempting to go through it, maybe only about 50% but I barely got anything. Whatever you-" A faint growl from the creature. "...Or that thing, did to it, really knew what it was doing."

"So you couldn't recover anything from it."

"I didn't say that." The man grumbled, almost seeing ears flick in the shadows. "I got a name, kind of."

"Kind of?"

"M-something Mori. It's popped up a couple of times, so it's not some bug." A breath from Jerid as the large feline pondered. "I started looking through our records for a Mori and have several matches. But that doesn't mean too much, if this guy was just collecting data. Could just be an innocent bystander."

"Possible. Keep working on it."

"And what about your end?"

"You don't look like you're in good enough shape to be taking in more information tonight. Get some sleep, I've got some investigations to take care of tonight anyway."

"Investigations?"

"None of your concern."

"The hell does that mean-?" A faint gust half interrupted him, and he couldn't detect the beast anylonger. "...Okay?" The man whimpered, feeling very uncomfortable in the darkness and heading to his car.

The warehouse remained quiet as the rain heavily fell over the evening, barely masking the large feline's climb up the metal stairs. Getting the attention of the three inside; the bull sitting up to rest, the young woman in his lap still looking at his bandages, and the walking ashtray. Respecting the Aatxe's wishes to resist lighting a much needed one up, and meeting the Charr halfway up the stairs. "Any luck?" A nod from Eman in response, then a gesture to meet into the room. Expecting the gaze of those red eyes, just now starting to become a solid glow of near anger.

"You're back." The black one stated, getting a noise in response from the feline. "What...?"

"Where do you want me to start?"

"I..." Leslie spoke up, getting a look from the three males. "I would like to know about his wounds, if you don't mind." A look in confirmation at the bull, and the black beast nodded.

"UV Light." A noise in question from Gorret.

"Ultra Violet?" The blonde man asked, getting a nod from the Charr. "Like... Blacklights?"

"Correct. Apparently they discovered that your kind tends to become harmed when exposed to it. Like a drastic sunburn."

"That explains..." The bull started.

"Don't ask me how they learned to coat bullets with it. That process still eludes me."

"Where the hell would they find something like that out? Some sort of raid party?" Gene mumbled, getting a rather concerning look from Eman which nearly sent a shiver down his spine. "...What?"

"I tracked where they came from. Footprints, tire tracks, the works."

"And?" The Aatxe motioned forward.

"I found a secluded building. One heavily guarded for just being out in the middle of nowhere." A couple of puzzled looks from the others as the Charr crossed his arms. Looking at the young woman. "Where were his wounds." He stated, barely a question.

"Mostly in the body, but..."

"Nothing I couldn't handle."

"You mean, nothing Fatal." The orange furred one stated, looking at Gene once again and nearly getting the man to whimper uncomfortably.

"Seriously, why are you staring at me like that? It's getting under my skin."

"They were not trying to Eliminate you, Gorret." A look in question at the three, while the bull studied his bandages. Sending a chill through the room.

"...They were trying to capture him." The man stated, getting a nod from the Charr. "And that place...?"

"Seems to be a Laboratory for his species. Those who've been captured, experimented, dissected-"

"-Okay, okay, okay." The blonde one muttered uncomfortably, rubbing the back of his neck. "And we... Have one of these places here? In the city?"

"It appears so." Eman stated, getting another whimper from Gene. "Does the name Mitchel Agrume sound familiar?" A near instant growl from the black bull. "Apparently so."

"A Mafia Boss, one that lives in the city." Gorret grumbled, taking a heated breath.

"Apparently he owns the lot. I highly doubt he's in charge of the operation, though."

"What do you mean?" The woman asked.

"The budget looks... More Governmental, let's say. Call it a hunch that's yet to be confirmed." A moment of silence as those blue eyes studied the red glow. "I found them for you. Now my question is; what do you plan on doing with this information." Half a growl from the Aatxe.

"Easy buddy. We need to think this through-" Gene started.

"It needs to be stopped!"

"Not tonight, it doesn't."

"The stick is right." The Charr interrupted. "They took quite the heavy loss attempting to detain you. They won't attempt it again for some time." Eman took a moment to look outside the foggy windows. "However, the longer you wait, the more powerful they might become. They have weapons against your kind, as you can see." Another look at Gene, making the man double take.

"Why are you looking at me-? Right. Nevermind."

"Since it would be unwise to attempt such a thing yourselves, perhaps get your law enforcement to look into it." A defeated sigh from Gorret.

"There would be too much red tape to go through. And by that time..." Another moment of silence as the large feline took a breath.

"I suppose it's up to me then." The Aatxe and him shared another look. "I'll scout out more information in how to best deal with such a thing first. If I come up with some crucial information, I will tell you." A nod from the group as those blue discs moved to Leslie. "However, we should get you home."

"What? I was planning to stay here tonight-"

"If those men return by following any possible leads, then you are a liability." A bit of a crossed look from her. "Perhaps I could have worded that differently, but you must understand that they've already killed four people tonight without a moment of consideration. You are very easy leverage for them to use, and will only make Gorret's possible escape more difficult." The woman took a breath and nodded. "You will be safer at home, I'll make sure of that myself."

"What about me?" Gene asked, getting several long moments of staring from the Charr. "I love you too, Tony."

"I'm sure you have other toys at home you could defend yourself with." Eman stated, looking back at Leslie for a moment. "I'll wait for you downstairs."

"Okay." She took a moment to hug the black beast before gathering her things. "Get well soon, Gorret. I'll try to be back tomorrow." A noise in conformation as he gently held her back.

"Are you going to be okay here alone then?"

"I'll be fine Gene." The bull said, getting a nod from him as the man started to head out. "...Kinda wondering what he meant about toys though-"

"Absolutely nothing." Half a chuckle from the Aatxe as he exhaled and rested.

"Everything okay?" The young woman asked walking through the rain. Thankful she brought a small umbrella, but it wasn't big enough for the Charr to squeeze under. "You seem a little... Off tonight."

"Something's wrong." He half exhaled, still scouting their surroundings. "I can sense it."

"What do you mean?"

"It feels like we're being baited... Like that first night we encountered each other." A worried look from Leslie. "I don't like being played into someone's hands, if I've used that figure of speech correctly."

"I know what you mean." A faint chuckle from her. "But I... Don't know." She mumbled, coming up to the bus stop. "I'll be fine here, it's okay-"

"I'm not risking that." Eman stated, almost thickly and worrying the woman. Watching him constantly scan the area and started doing the same herself.

"...What's that glow?" She pointed off in the distance, though not really getting his attention.

"Building fire. Started when I was returning back." A worried look from Leslie, and they caught eyes. "I'm not a superhero. It's not my job to save everyone I meet." An almost sad gaze as the large one exhaled. "...We're leaving."

"What?"

"I'm not letting you get on his bus. If I have to carry you home, I will. But I don't trust it tonight." Her worried stare didn't lift until a sharp flick from those wet ears, barely picking up the heavy familiar stops herself from afar.

A long deep exhale from the black bull as he laid on the mattresses, detesting the idea of recovery time. Let alone now having more enemies to look out for during his patrols. It's a good thing he had help, but at the same time, he was putting their lives in danger.

A heavy sigh left him, being nearly the first time that Gorret was in a situation like this. It wouldn't last long though, before the dawn, the Aatxe should be well enough to fight again. Even with these new ammunition almost poisoning his body.

Ammunition... Weapons that only the humans would use. The kind he was supposed to protect, that he was asked to protect. Of course they would naturally adapt to hunt his own kind, if that's what this building the Charr mentioned was for. It wouldn't surprise him that there would come a day when this city wouldn't need the Aatxe anymore to protect them. But then, what would they do with him?

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden detection, getting the bull to grumble a bit. Instantly recognizing who it was and just waiting for it to once again disappear, but it didn't. Even after Gorret got up, he could still sense the creature from within the city, where a faint glow was seen through the rain. A heavy growl left him as those instincts demanded to remove the stain from his territory...

He hated riding the bike in the rain. Too many accidents in his life should've taught him to avoid it, regardless of who's fault it actually was, but after a night like this, the blonde man just wanted to go home. Take the night off with a bottle in his hand, and relax with some tv until he fell asleep.

Stopping at a red light Gene took a breath, thinking that this night couldn't get any worse. Until he heard a slight rumble, one off in the distance a bit. Then closer. Closer, coming from above the buildings. Getting the man to look up behind him to barely see a large shadow jump the road and take off towards something.

It stunned Gene for a moment, to the point where he didn't even notice the light turn green until

the car behind him honked. Barely even glancing at it before making an illegal turn to follow. *So much for taking the night off. Where are you going...?*

"Gorret?" Leslie questioned, following the Charr's lead down the street. Watching his gaze following the Aatxe from a distance. "I thought he was resting."

"Odds are he's being called."

"Or... Baited?" A faint grumble from the large one. "...Go help him."

"What?" It actually got Eman's attention.

"I'll be fine. I can make it home safe-"

"I'm not taking that risk." He sternly replied.

"He could be in danger-"

"And so could you." A bit of a crossed look from the woman, but it eventually saddened. "He asked me to protect you, that is what I'll do-" A sudden noise in question from the feline as he scanned their surroundings.

"What?" A paw raised towards her as the Charr looked towards the back alleyway, slowly heading towards it while pulling out a roped dagger, worrying the young woman. "What is it?" She whispered.

"Do you smell that?" A moment of study, and Leslie shook her head. "Figures." He grumbled, slowly approaching the alley and keeping an ear out for any movement. Granted, the girl getting his attention a few times, but nothing drastic. Spotting a boarded up doorway along an old building, studying it for a moment before prying it off and taking his defensive stance.

But nothing else was heard, however Leslie could smell heated electronics coming from within. Watching the feline carefully enter the area before relieving his defense put her a bit at ease. Enough for her to enter the room full of damaged computer parts. "What is this?"

"One of the Shadow's hideouts, apparently. One he's done with." Eman half grumbled, looking over a nearby computer and tossing it aside. "Why would he do this?"

"Do what?"

"Destroy these devices? Can't most of your world's hackers already erase their traces in the digital domain?" A shrug from her, but a nod. "From what I know, destroying them wouldn't accomplish much, other than preventing others to do the same on the same device."

"Maybe it's that simple then?"

"Means he's planning something else... Something big. But what?" A browse through the desk

and he found another notebook. "Do you have a flashlight?"

"Yeah." The Charr handed her the book.

"Look into that. Tell me if you find someone by the name of M. Mori in it."

"M. Mori?" Eman nodded.

"That hard drive I obtained had..."

The black beast landed heavily on the rooftop, cursing that he lost the Shadow's trail. Once in a while sensing it back and forth, but never in one solid area. Making the Aatxe growl in anger, like he was being played with. Not to mention, that building fire was getting on his nerves, the light irking him a little bit but finally getting his attention.

A couple more leaps towards it to find out which building exactly. It wasn't in the suburbs, so Leslie and her family were safe. It didn't seem like an apartment building, but a large structure nonetheless... Agrume's?

The sudden appearance of the Shadow returning was enough to interrupt that thought. Appearing on the very rooftop Gorret was landing on, grabbing the human-like body with a second thought and warning before throwing him into the building fire. Hearing the creature hiss loudly before caving in a brick wall and falling inside. Releasing a loud roar before jumping into the hazardous building after the Shadow.

The Aatxe landed heavily through the roof, causing it to cave down and barely catching the humanoid creature struggling to get its clothing off. Attire that was covered in flames itself as it then looked desperately for a place to escape. Meeting up with the vengeful red eyes before hissing at the bull to stay back.

It was trapped. At the mercy of such a black creature. Just like Gorret, this thing used to be human. But it wasn't anylonger. It hurt people. And it would continue hurting them until it was dealt with...

Outside the burning building, a crowd was gathering. Even after Gene arrived, barely catching the Aatxe's leap from afar. "What the hell is he doing!?" The blonde man grumbled, parking his bike at a safe distance and heading around the crowd. Attempting to see anything inside the inferno as the firefighters did their best to put it out.

"Nothing." Leslie answered, expecting the slightly frustrated exhale from the large feline as he continued to look around the room.

"What's in it then?"

"Just a lot of philosophy. Respect, life, death, etc. It almost looks like rambles."

"Death...?" A noise in confirmation as those blue eyes studied her. Eventually glazing off and growling. "It's not a name..."

"What?"

"It's not a name! M. Mori: Memento Mori. Be Mindful Of Death."

"Mindful?" She questioned.

"Respect it. Accept it..." A slight shock in the Charr's expression. "Get Gene On The Phone!" He roared, startling the young woman.

"W-what?" She started doing it regardless.

"Do it!"

The fire roared loudly, to the point where the blonde man could barely hear his device. Feeling the vibration more than anything. "Les?"

"Where's the Aatxe!?" The Charr roared on the other end.

"Tony? What's wrong?"

"Stop Him!!" The Charr growled. "The Shadow isn't *avoiding* Gorret! He's **Giving Himself** to him!"

"The hell are you talking about-?" A large heatwave made Gene step back, hearing the wall break down a little bit afterwards. The black bull walking out, ignoring the constant flames still licking at what's left of his clothing, and those solid red eyes staring at Gene for several moments. Not paying any attention to the constant calls on the phone.

...Only to have that interrupted by a hose spraying on the Aatxe's body. Attempting to get the fire off of the large creature until they got a rather uneasy look from it.

Gorret returned to his hideout, exhausted and soaking wet. The bitter taste of a uneasy victory still plaguing his mind, and the guilt for caving into such instincts finally setting in. He kept telling himself it was the right thing to do, but was it? It certainly didn't feel like it, to the black beast. Climbing up those thick metal stairs, only to have the scent of the Shadow alert him once more. Getting the beast to growl and enter his room, only to find a message on the walls...

*You Can't Hang Onto Yourself
You Don't Have To Try Not To Hang Onto Yourself
It Can't Be Done, And That Is Salvation*