

The anthropomorphic raccoon closed his eyes and rubbed his temples with his paws. He breathed in - the scent of his whiskey mixed with the musk of people and animals fill his nostrils, distracting his head from the headache that's been brewing there since his shift started nine hours before. He pressed a glass to his lips and tilted it upward. The familiar burning stampeded down his throat, forcing the headache and his worries into the familiar drunken fog. He shivered, groaning quietly.

"You okay there, Brandon?" A familiar voice, feminine and husky. He felt a hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes.

A worried human looked back at Brandon. She wore a rag on her scalp, holding back her curly red hair. Her flowing auburn shirt hid her form well, leading into loose blue jeans adorned with flowers. What Brandon noticed most, though, was the concerned look in her eyes. "You look tired."

He shook his head and adjusted his girth on the bar stool. "I'm all right, Anne. It's just been a long day." He worked up a smile for her - she had one for him every time he came here, after all. "How's the bar been?"

Anne chuckled. "As good as Tam lets it be." She waved at the bear behind the bar. He nodded back as his paws shook a mixer. He resumed his conversation with the blonde human male and skunk female. "And as fast as I can get drinks out there." She squeezed his shoulder, patted it twice. "I'll be back to check on you hon, all right?"

Brandon nodded. The alcohol began its work, loosening the kinks in his head. The hum of activity from the other patrons turned from a cacophony to a symphony as he leaned back. His shoulder slumped as he surrendered to the relaxation. His paw lifted the glass to his mouth in intervals as the crowd moved around him, ordering drinks and having their conversations. The bar's neon signs hung on the walls advertised brands of old, before the worlds merged and he went from a young human boy to the raccoon that stared at him this morning in the mirror. The lights stood in stark contrast to his day job, and that coupled with the "No Steam" policy the bar had helped him get away from it all.

He was a mall cop. His work shifts consisted of piles of video monitors on the hope that he could stop a fight or theft. Sometimes, he delivered screaming, scared children to their

parents who didn't look too happy to have them back. Most days, though, it was a thankless, monotonous job, punctuated with the rare arrest and long talk with the "real police" about some kid's behavior. The moment he swiped his time card, though, he looked for a way to forget. That's what brought him to Tam's bar, again.

"Hey look, it's one of those fucking rent-a-cops."

Brandon's ears pulled back at the sound of the high pitched voice. He recognized it immediately. One of the kids he had to run in yesterday had an older brother. The older brother let feelings known all over his fellow mall cop - a young vixen named Tandi. The hospital discharged her this morning. Since he was here, it means his rich father must have bailed him out already, and from the sound of his wavering voice he was already deep into his cup.

Anne gasped behind him - Brandon instinctively reached his right paw out and behind him. He felt a human's stomach - soft, but flat - and stopped the body from its descent towards the ground. He opened his eyes a bit to glance over at the frazzled Anne, barely holding her platter filled with drinks. None spilled, of course - she was a professional, but the look of

panic and fear in her eyes spelled out what happened moments prior. The giggles from the young men at the table behind him helped flesh out the story. The voice returned, behind him. "Hurry the hell up! I'm not drunk enough to deal with all the fucking furries in here." More giggling.

Brandon lifted his drink to his lips. Anne took a moment to collect herself and whispered her thanks, then moved unceremoniously to the bar. Behind him, more catcalling. "I bet she hasn't had a man in her in a long time - bet she forgot what a real man's like." The damn kid kept talking. Brandon clutched one of his paws tightly and breathed as he let his instincts slide from him like water.

Someone walked by him and bumped his chair roughly. The kid again. What was his name? Brandon clearly remembered seeing the altercation on the video, but could barely remember the details. Everything in that memory was red - Tandi was a good girl. She didn't deserved to be beaten, not by this prick. "Oh, sorry, fat ass. I couldn't get by you without knocking your fucking chair around." The kid kept talking, loud enough for his buddies to hear. "Must be hard, sitting all day, then coming to a bar to sit. Chase around enough old ladies in the mall, you fat fuck?"

The raccoon opened his eyes and glared at the kid. He was taller than Brandon by a good half foot, but lanky and muscled. He looked smaller than he did on the security footage, but that trademark smirk was all too familiar. Brandon's eyes calculated the distance between him and the gangly human, and decided that the boy was just too far to sucker punch. He turned back to his table and drank.

The voice wouldn't stop. "Keep drinkin' - I'm sure it'll make you forget everything, huh? Your shitty life, your lack of friends." The human leaned in. "You're nothing, you furry mall cop piece of shit."

Brandon exhaled and glanced at the kid. Underneath his fur, his muscles tensed. "I may be a piece of shit, but I don't beat women. Did you tell your boys that? You know, the part where you beat a girl to an inch of her life because she caught your little brother stealing?" He turned his upper body to face the standing human. "How'd your dad afford to spring you out of jail if you have to steal to make ends meet, huh? Or maybe you earned your way out the old fashioned way, on your knees." Brandon had planted the bait.

The bar had become deathly quiet. Anne had retreated to the bar, and watched. The human's hands clenched, his face twisted in rage.

"Fuck you, you fuck! Do you know who I am?!"

"I don't really care."

"I'm Jonathan Fucking Dinsdale! My dad runs this town!"

"Must've been a terrible father, to make your middle name 'Fucking'. You know, since that's something you'll never find a partner that'd be willing - "

Brandon saw the punch coming a mile away. What he didn't see was the jet of steam behind it. Jonathan Fucking Dinsdale's father was one of the managers of the local branch for the Dinsdale Emberyllium Extraction Company, and happened to be a nephew of the owner. Emberyllium, the mineral discovered the Merge, was a boon for the world - it contained a tremendous amount of energy in a very small package, but could only be ignited properly. With it, coupled with the technology from the

other world, a new world filled with steam-powered devices were not just possible, but necessary. People have weaponized Emberyllium in various ways. In this case, it looks like the weapon was a long glove that could turn a fist into a rocket.

He was a fraction too late. Brandon twisted his body to dodge the punch, but Jonathan's fist connected hard with his shoulder. The shoulder gave way as bones cracked and muscle twisted unnaturally. Brandon was knocked backward. He spun around from the impact, crouched and protecting his now wounded arm. A growl rumbled in his throat as his mind flipped from emotion to deduction. His eyes glanced around as he determined threats - the band of kids that came in with Jonathan were trying their hardest to stay out of the fight. Their arms were up and they were backing away. The other patrons were watching the human's arm, which he had already brought back for another blow. Brandon was reaching in his pouches.

Jonathan didn't wait for permission. His fist, warmed up, whistled as it flew through the air at Brandon. The raccoon was ready this time. He dodged the fist and thrust a device into Jonathan's arm. The device sparked against the frame of Jonathan's fist before a loud POP echoed throughout the bar.

Electricity coursed through the frame, blowing the arm frame apart.

For a moment, everything was dead still. Then, as if someone unpaused the world, Jonathan screamed. His friends grabbed him and dragged him out as Jonathan cursed everyone and everything with his words, swearing vengeance. Brandon exhaled the moment the group left the bar and clutched his shoulder. Anne and Tam were there in moments, helping him up. The old bear checked Brandon over. "Boy, do you need a doctor?"

"N-no... Well, maybe." He tried to shrug his shoulder, but only one shoulder would move. Tam frowned and grabbed the arm, nodding at Anne. Anne pulled out a clean napkin and crammed it in Brandon's mouth, on cue.

"All right, boy, this is going to hurt. Bite down on the napkin. Ready, hon?" Anne nodded as she braced his good arm.

Brandon couldn't remember the next few seconds. All he could feel, see and taste was pain. Anne was the only thing keeping him from falling over as he nearly passed out.



All he could remember next was sitting at the bar. His arm was in a sling. He tried moving it - the pain from his shoulder did a good job of convincing him that it wasn't worth trying a second time. The bar was empty, but the drink in front of him was full. He reached over with his good paw and put the glass to his lips - some flavored water.

"You feeling better, Brandon?" Anne was standing at the swinging door to the back room. Her legs moved impossibly fast as she rushed to his good side. "Tam said he fixed you up, but you had so much liquor in you that he feared giving you aspirin. Said all we had to do was wait."

Brandon's head slowly cleared up as he remembered the night's events. "I think I'm all right." He took another drink. "What time is it?"

"About two. Bar closed an hour ago, but I promised Tam I'd watch you until you woke up."

"Did anyone call the cops? Where did that little prick go?"

Anne chuckled. "Nobody wanted to bring the cops into the

bar, and I'm pretty sure Jonathan isn't going to try and press charges. You know, being in a bar with a steam powered weapon, assaulting someone in view of everyone and being slightly underage would probably be too much for his dear old dad."

Brandon blinked slowly as he tried to move. The pain shot through his shoulder, but the rest of his body seemed to be fine. "Ow... I should probably head home. Work in the morning."

"Sure you don't want to hit the ER?"

"Nah. I don't have insurance." He grunted as he got up. He finished off the glass of water and put it up on the bar.

"Thanks for the water. And everything. Thank Tam too."

"Sure, hon. You sure you can make it home?"

"Yeah. Just live a couple of blocks away."

The door opened, and the raccoon lumbered through the door, headed home. He had work tomorrow, after all.