

11-18-2013

I stepped into the bar, which wasn't so much a change of scenery as it was a change in the volume of bodies compressed around me. The bright lights and smog of the streets were replaced with laser lights and fog machines. The air still smelled of carcinogens but these at least were sold pre-packaged and at a premium. Bodies crushed in against one another and writhed as one unholy mass that seethed and squirmed to the direction of the puppet master behind the DJ table. Glow sticks, neon lipstick, and a thousand other kinds of make-ups and accessories dotted the floor like its own carpet of stars. It was like a psychedelic drug trip without the personal sense of enlightenment.

I made my way to the bar. It was a long sturdy chunk of solid oak that buffeted the crowd from the wall of booze that sparkled like its own bright gleaming little city set apart from the fake neon sweet stretching on before it. A league of bartenders, all well dressed twenty somethings, made their way up and down the line taking orders, taking cards, mixing drinks, and even providing the occasional sympathetic ear or unbiased opinion. I pulled myself into a seat and waited. I'm sure I stuck out like a sore thumb in the crowd. I wasn't trendy, I wasn't young, and I wasn't glowing fluorescent. I settled back into the swivel seat and played with the edges of my black overcoat before one of the perky young ladies walked up with a manufactured smile.

"What's your poison sweetie?" she asked in a practiced saccharine tone. I took the time to brush my coat back down over my frame and offered her a slight twitch of my lips I hope she took as a smile.

"Bottle of acetone," I said. That was when I realized how dry and cracked my lips were. I must've looked like a zombie, thin and emaciated, just wasting away in a coat that was two sizes too big. Her bright white smile never faltered, though I could sense her quick appraisal and whether I could afford a bottle or would try to disappear into the crowd the moment I got my hand around it. For reassurance I pulled a fifty out of my pocket and just set it on the bartop. That got her smile to go away, if only for a second of shock. It came back stronger than before and she whirled, a black and white dervish quite akin to a busty penguin. She brought back the bottle, plinking down a square glass and a couple of balls of ice tinkling inside it.

It wasn't really acetone; though it came in an Erlenmeyer flask all the same. Brand was everything in today's consumer driven economy. I popped the old time cork and poured the clear liquid out over the ice, watching it disintegrate and paying no attention to the gal as she flitted away to serve the next guy. I re-corked it and took a long pull from my glass. At least, I didn't think it was real acetone, but it might share a lot of cleaning properties with it.

"Looking to clean your insides out, Wicht?" the low baritone of Duke Valentine rumbled in my ear before setting a heavy body down into the seat beside me. He wore an immaculate white suit that stood out far more than my drab overcoat. A couple jowls jiggled under his chin as he chuckled at his own joke and patted a few piggly fingers on my shoulder.

“That would mean I could get clean,” I answered into my drink, draining off of the glass. Duke kept chuckling. He never really stopped chuckling; everything seemed to be funny to the man. At least I think that was what the sound signified. It could have easily been a breathing problem too.

“So what brings you down to my little watering hole with all the neon animals?” he asked, shaking my shoulder again before steeping his chubby digits together on the counter and giving a knowing nod to one of the bartenders. Like magic, a glass appeared before him, three cubes of ice and one by one a new layer of liquid poured in, each a different color and consistency until the tall cup held a dozen rings of liquor.

I poured myself another drink, the ice completely dissolved now, and sat back, looking at nothing in particular.

“Why else? To talk to you,” I said between sips. My eyes wandered over the colossal wall of bottles. “I need information and a personal favor.”

He pulled a small silver case from within his suit jacket and opened it up, depositing the crazy straw within into his drink with a soft *plink*.

“One of these days you might try coming just to say hello, I’m a wonderful conversationalist,” he chuckled and leaned in to suck up the first two rings of his drink, a viridian and a cerulean layer respectively. Amazingly nothing of the above layers even tried to mix together and instead dropped lower into the glass. He smacked his lips theatrically, eliciting another chuckle. I continued to drain the clear, horrible liquid from my own glass. I looked down into the bar top.

“I’m not,” was all I could think to say. I swirled the dregs of my drink around, possibly stripping away some of the glass at the bottom. Duke sucked down another few layers and continued to smack his lips and chuckle. He was a big man, a very big man.

“Well out with it. Tell Santa what you want for Christmas already,” he said and waved a fat hand around in the air. I think it was a signal because a moment later a bowl of pretzels plopped down between us.

“Who ordered the hit on Machiavelli and Sons?” I asked. I set down my glass and turned in my chair to him. If my question meant anything to him it didn’t pause his shoveling of pretzels into his fat maw. I was surprised he managed not to spill crumbs all over his suit.

“And the favor?” he asked after he had managed to swallow two handfuls of the bar snack. I played with my glass and steeled myself for what I had to ask next.

“I want access to the Institute,” I told him. He choked. Then he coughed. One of the bartenders appeared on our side of the counter to pat him on the back and offer him water as his face grew red and his coughing grew worse. I paid them little heed and poured myself another glass of the disgusting liquor. Him dropping dead might actually solve a problem or two all its own.

"You know," he gasped, still having to clear his throat vigorously. "Once it's done, it cannot be undone. There's no going back once you're on their list."

Duke Valentine was a lot of things. A thief, a cheat, a liar, and I'd heard a number of even seedier things in the backrooms of places best not discussed. But he was very likely telling the truth. I just smiled and tilted the glass back, letting the industrial strength cleaner wash over my tongue and down the back of my throat.

"It's a price I have to pay. I know what they do and what I'll have to give up. Do it for me. I have to be able to get in," I said.

11-19-2013

"One of these days you're going to fall into that thing," the old badger commented as he stepped up beside the dragon. The reptile smiled coyly and lounged back against the tree he had spent many a day sitting beneath. A few yards away power crackled unchecked, the edge of the island was ringed with an ever-dancing lightning that held it aloft. Touching it meant instant death; even if the sheer power didn't kill you, it would stun you and you'd drop to the earth below.

"Possibly. But what a pretty way to go," the elder dragon said with a smile. He casually pressed a finger along the bridge of his muzzle and eased his spectacles back toward his eyes. The lightning sparked and jumped and reflected back in the small rounds of glass. "Better than fireworks."

The badger gave a rumbling hmph of disapproval and turned away. He never liked looking out at the edge or the edge lights. It always made him think of what was beyond them. Or, more specifically, below them. The world below was a dark, terrible place; what was left of it anyway. It had been subsumed by darkness and demon hordes and the swell of the mighty ocean. Best left alone.

"Well come on, you're nearly late for your lessons," the badger patted his friend on the shoulder and turned back to the road. A moment later and he was joined by the dragon, the reptile a solid foot taller than he but not as wide. He retrieved his walking stick from the other side of the tree and the two of them walked quietly along the dirt path together.

11-20-2013

It was a pleasant day in the province. The sky was clear, the sun shone brightly overhead, and a cool breeze tickled across the grasslands. Small farms dotted the countryside but, for the most part, it was empty wildness stretching on for miles in all directions up to long lines of mountains. It made for quiet traveling, a thought that presented itself quite delightfully in the fox's mind. He walked down one of the few well worn roads in the valley with a small pack over his shoulder containing all his earthly possessions.

He smiled to himself as that chill breeze brushed over his whiskers and made his tail flick up lightly. It was a gorgeous spring day. He was perhaps a little overdressed, the heavy overcoat making him feel warmer than he needed to be but there hadn't been room in the pack and it had so many

useful pockets to store things. He wore lighter underneath, at least, and the breeze felt much nicer this way. He stepped down the road lightly, every other step punctuated by the soft thump of his walking stick into the packed earth.

His mind wandered as he walked. There was little else for it to do really, nothing else was that pressing such as his ultimate destination, of which he had none, or food and rest for the coming night, also which he had none nor any idea of where to procure either. These were all things that could come Later rather than Now while they weren't a problem. He whistled a nonsensical little melody to himself off the top of his head. Wherever he went he managed to get by after all, why worry yourself with such pointless things? The overcoat functioned as quite the blanket in the event he had to curl up somewhere outside anyhow. So long as it didn't rain, at least.

11-21-2013

"Welcome gentlemen," the framework robot greeted them. It was mostly a tripod on wheels with a little monitor at the end, the screen flashing the words as they came out of an unseen speaker. Rax smiled at it and nudged his companion, the towering Lt. Ashman.

"It thinks we're gentlemen," he chuckled quietly.

"It will learn, I'm sure," came the wolf's stoic reply, his eyes scanning over the room for potential threats. It was a simple, clean room with a small desk for the robot to sit behind because it just felt weird without it and a small houseplant in the corner. It didn't do much to offset the sterile look and was probably artificial anyway.

"We should be expected?" Rax posed to the little monitor. It went dark a moment, a single blue circle rotating in the corner, before it blipped on again.

"The doctor will see you now," it blipped as the words faded onto its screen. The ferret leaned in and tapped it lightly on the screen.

"Not much of a conversationalist, is it?" he chuckled and stood up, the door hissing open before them. The wolf stepped in first or 'took point' as he referred to it.

"You'd only drive it crazy," the wolf drawled, checking up and down the following hallway. Clean white lines stretched on in either direction. A green arrow lit up on the wall to refer them to the right. Rax spun on his heel and went left. Jake sighed, which for him was as good as saying "And where do you think you're going?"

"To explore," Rax said simply. But he only managed a couple steps down the alternative hallway when a few warning sirens blared to life and the white hallway turned red.

"PLEASE TURN AROUND," a voice came over more hidden speakers. It was booming and loud and deep, quite unlike the robot's meek welcoming tone. Rax only paused and glanced over the smooth,

sterile walls, imagining where the sensors were. He stepped back and at once the lights and sirens turned off. He spun back.

“They really don’t want us to go that way,” he said as he stepped up behind his companion, who had already been striding down the correct hallway.

“You’ll check it later, I’m sure,” Jake answered. Rax just chuckled. He was right. The two of them stopped at a set of double doors that blinked green a few times. It hissed open for them and opened into a hospital room, just as white as everything else with dozens of beds lining the walls. Only thing curtains separated the patients from the main room but the soft moans and groans said it likely didn’t matter. The two of them stepped as one into the room, Rax with his hands in his pockets while Jake kept his paws at his sides.

“Ah, you must be the fellows sent to investigate the outbreak,” a voice called from down the main aisle.

11-26-2013

It was an honor to be in the presence of the emperor. That was the thought that resounded through young Gen’s head. The wolf trembled as he tried to stand as still as he could with his back straight, arms down, and shoulders straight. His spine, however, had other plans and the poor boy shivered in complete nervousness. This was the emperor, the god king, the will of the Divine on earth, and he felt entirely unworthy to be in his presence. He bowed as everyone bowed, he stayed stiff and silent as the others did and still he felt like he stood out like a bright, blazing sun. His robes were old and tattered, a dull brown and linens that had formerly been white. It was the best he’d had as there was never much money for new clothes. He still was unsure how he’d ever been drawn to attend the court today as it was.

Fortunately he was not up front. He could see the Emperor from a safe distance and likewise His Divinity did not need to see his threadbare self. He still trembled though. The others near him were so calm, so serene; they all bowed their heads perfectly and smiled just right, their eyes still pools. It made Gen feel all the worse and far more awkward than normal. He sighed to himself. Fortunately, he thought, it would be over soon. The Divine Emperor would leave and things would be back to normal.

The Adventures of Rax Radrav

The ferret smiled to himself as the doors hissed open. The immaculate office sprawled out before him, a cacophony of smooth white lines punctuated with the occasional gaudy artwork or expensive rug. He couldn’t help but smile a little wider as he noticed the bright red carpet that led from the door to the Chief’s desk matched his own sharp red suit almost exactly. Rax strode forward with an easy gait, looking over some of the exotic paintings on the wall and a miniature waterfall fountain set toward the middle of the room.

"I like the new décor. Very... modern," he said, fixing his tie before taking a seat in one of the two chairs resembling a sliced egg. "Love the carpet."

"You would," the chief replied as he swiveled around in his seat. The old badger stared into a tablet, occasionally punching a scarred digit at it. The old mammal had scars all over his body, from paws to muzzle to elsewhere; a particularly jagged one ran from the bridge of his muzzle down the right side of his face in a wavy pattern. His clothing, on the other hand, remained completely mundane: a pair of tan slacks, a white button up shirt, and a simple black jacket. He would have looked completely at home in a dingy little government office filing papers somewhere, if not for the network of scars. He looked up from his tablet.

"I'm putting you on assignment," he said. Rax gave a slight nod and crossed one leg over his knee. He waited a moment before asking "And? You could have called to tell me that."

12-4-2013

The cold rain pounded down against the glass. I watched the trails it formed as it shot down and added to the general deluge below. The rain gutters spewed water; it was coming down pretty hard today. I look up at the steel grey sky that stretched on to the horizon. What a lovely day. I turned back to my desk and stared at the paper before me.

12-5-2013

The old badger walked in slowly, every step punctuated with the soft thump of his walking staff. He smiled wearily to the students and made his way to the podium. The gnarled staff was set to the wall behind him and his old claws curled round the edges of the polished wood that was possibly as old as he was.

"Children," he greeted. His voice was tired and ragged; he teetered slightly on the balls of his feet and his eyes drooped.

12-12-2013

Rax idly tapped a claw against the tabletop. He looked down at the smooth, flat surface with his good eye then looked at it with his special eye. It didn't look much different, though the surface went from perfectly smooth to rough and bark-like. Under the plastic finish was pressed wood. Its spirit lingered but really no more than a shadow of itself. It was, after all, pressed wood and not the whole tree. He lightly drew his claw along it and could feel the texture of the bark under his finger.

"You look bored." Troy said as he sat down, a couple of steaming coffees in his paws.

"I'm always bored. You know that," he answered, the spiritual vision snapping off as he 'blinked'. He smiled warmly and took his coffee, immediately tearing open and mixing in as many sugars

as he could dilute into it. The wolf watched blankly and only paused to dip his head down for a sip from his own black coffee. He shook his head as the ferret sipped, tasted, then added more sugar and cream to his coffee.

"That explains a lot," he noted, a ghost of a smile perking up the corner of his mouth. Rax stirred the concoction steadily, clumps of un-dissolved sugar sticking to the small plastic rod.

"Explains what?" he asked and took another sip. He made a face, scrunching his nose and lips before he gently pushed the cup away from him. "I don't think I like coffee." Troy shook his head and gently rubbed at his eyes, waving the question away with a soft 'nevermind'.

"So do you have a plan?" Troy asked when he finished rubbing at his temples.

12-17-2013

I pulled the hammer back slowly until it locked into place and drew the trigger up so just a hair more pressure would set it off. My hands shakily gripped the big revolver together; Really, it was the only way I was going to lift the damn thing. My heart pounded in my ears and I kept my eyes closed a moment longer, pressing my back to the cool wall and hoping that the next few moments of my life wouldn't be my last. I let my breath out after realizing I'd been holding it far too long and breathed nervously, my heart beating out a tattoo in my chest that drummed out every other sound except the most vicious screams and howls down the streets. The dozen some cuts and bruises I'd picked up blazed with every beat, making me acutely aware of every ache and sharp pain.

I steadied myself. Do or die, this was that kind of moment. I whirled around the corner and raised the big revolver up high. I didn't have to make any more noise than that. Framed by the raging car fires was one of the creatures. A hell hound, by no other name could I imagine it, stood over a fresh kill with its grotesque jaws tearing away bits of flesh. It raised its head up the moment I came round the corner, alien black eyes staring at me while its hook-ended tail whipped the ground. I gave it no more chance than that as I squeezed on the trigger.

The gun barked in my hand and even with both of my hands clamped firmly around the smooth wood grain handle it jumped and threatened to smack me in the nose. Louder still, though, was the unearthly scream the creature let loose as its left eye and a good chunk of its head exploded in a cloud of red mist and gristle. The hulking thing's head jerked back before the whole body fell back onto the corpse it had been eating. I stood there amazed I had done it, looking down at the big revolver and then at the still twitching hellhound.

But then it started twitching more violently. A leg kicked, then another, violent spasms that jerked the whole body about. Its ruined head flopped up once and smacked wetly on the cracked asphalt. The misshapen jaws opened wide and it screamed again before its abdomen swelled up and exploded outward. Its ribs jutted out like daggers and two big black shapes pulled themselves out of the viscera. One resembled the thing I had just shot, a skinless, furless dog gone completely wrong, teeth

jutting from a stumpy muzzle at all angles, bulbous black eyes and a claw at the end of its tail all dripping with black ichor.

The other was an amorphous mass, a hideous afterbirth that still pulsed and squirmed. It tipped up over the sharp ribs before rolling onto the pavement with a wet splat. It quivered and shuddered before 2 long clear shapes pierced the 'skin' followed by long skinny limbs tipped with spikes. The insect thing pulled itself free of the mass, translucent wings fluttering before buzzing and lifting up. The head resembled a bees only if bees had sharks teeth and the body resembled a shredded torso, a rib cage with 2 fly like legs ending in hooks and a barbed tail dangling down like a spine.

It all happened so fast I barely had time to register what had happened. My heart seized up and instinctively I shoved the gun towards the nearest abomination and squeezed out another shot. The bullet went short but it bounced up instead, ricocheting off the asphalt to take a chunk out of it, and slamming into the mini-hellhound. The hellbug, on the other hand, screamed and leapt at me, wings buzzing hard and hook-hands outstretched. There was no time to aim and no use wasting a shot; I screamed back and scrambled to my left as fast as I could. The thing couldn't turn well and launched past me, taking out a chunk of the wall with it.

12-19-2013

I stepped into the bar. I feel like I've done that a thousand times before. It's a different bar, most times, in a different city and usually on a different planet but so often it feels like the same bar. Dozens of table strewn across the open floor with bodies filling the

12-23-2013

You'd think more people would be wary of someone walking into a bar with a plasma rifle at his hip. No one gave me as much as a passing glance though. I walked slowly over to a table and planting myself in a chair, nearly tipping myself over a few times in the process. Parts of me still smoked lightly as I slapped the rifle onto the tabletop and leaned back in the seat.

"Can I get you anything, sugar?" a waitress rolled up and asked. I took my eyes off the ceiling long enough to meet her eye to eye. She was a young thing, human, curly blond, blue eyes, big lips, a double D, which all meant she was probably just manufactured. I gave her a smile, or what I think was a smile, and said "Water."

"Comin right up big boy," she twirled once and sped off toward the bar. She made no noise though so it had to be a pair of hover shoes rather than rollerskates like I'd assumed. This place wasn't that retro I guess. I sat back and just sizzled softly, but nothing flared up so I assumed I was just smoldering. Moments passed and she rolled back up, depositing a tall glass of ice water with a lemon wedge and a pink straw.

"Anything else ya need hon?" she asked, her voice singsong despite chewing a piece of bubblegum.

"Yeah," I said and pulled the glass up to me. I took a sip. "Where the hell am I?" I asked. She giggled a little.

"You got pulled in. It happens sometimes when we pass too close," she explained. I looked around at the clean white walls and the sharp neon tubing that glowed a plethora of otherworldly colors.

12-24-2013

Rax pulled his jacket off and dropped it to the floor. Underneath was his tie and black undershirt, along with a gun harness strapped with about 6 weapons. He pulled the top two out, small silver rings with a couple contacts jutting up like the prongs of an electrical plug. He slipped them over his fists like they were brass knuckles, the prongs jutting out, and smiled.

"Are those what I think they are?" Troy asked, eyeing the ferret warily. Rax nodded and held his fists up.

"Yup. Arc wave reactors. Good for one charge. And highly illegal," he explained as he aimed at the side of the building. Power sparked between the contacts then between his arms, huge bolts of electricity that jumped and turned yellow. Rax's arms shook slightly like it was taking him an effort to hold the power in place, the humming grew louder and louder until he grunted and the arc shot off with a loud bang. It soared through the air as an electrical blade before it sliced into the wall of the black pyramid. Long snakes of electrical power writhed and grasped around the gaping wound the blade made until the rock heated up.

"Down!" Rax grabbed the wolf by the shoulder and dragged him to the floor. They didn't see but heard and felt the explosion as the wall came down. The two of them coughed but stood up slowly, the cloud of debris washing over them. Rax tossed the mini-reactors to the floor, the contacts blackened and starting to crumple up, then covered his mouth and stepped toward the hole he'd made. The smoke and dust cleared within a few moments and the pair of them looked down into the wreckage.

"Fuck," Rax muttered. He pulled one of the pistols out from under his arm and primed it, a soft hum building as it charged.

"They're gone already," Troy noted. The inside of the pyramid was empty. No worshippers. The long pews were vacant, albeit covered in debris now. But something else was missing too. Rax looked to the altar, the great onyx slab still covered in wet blood. But behind it was nothing, blank space.

"They took the statue with them?" the wolf asked, squinting into the low light. Rax growled slightly.

"I don't think it was a statue," he said, lifting up his pistol. The blue bolt illuminated the room for a split second then cracked the sacrificial table in two, sending onyx shards against the back wall right where the monstrous statue had been. "We need to hurry."

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Rax bolted upright with a loud gasp. His whole body shuddered and he clasped at the warm sensation in his head, emerald light spilling over everything. His heart pounded in his chest and he tried to stop himself from breathing so hard but it was hard to control, he felt like he hadn't been without a breath in ages. He slumped over onto his side, barely catching himself with his left arm, as his muscles protested and groaned. Parts of him still smoldered, the blood red suit burnt and smoking in patches.

When his breathing slowed enough and his muscles started to respond normally he sat up a little, still clutching his skull with his palm pressed to the glowing green stone.

"So, it's harder to kill me than I thought," he said to no one. "Good to know."

He picked himself up slowly and brushed himself off. He patted at some of the patches that still smoked and looked over his surroundings. His good eye saw the stone cast in green light from the stone. The stone saw everything in perfect clarity, light or no. He looked up at the crevice where he'd fallen from. Or rather, he would have looked at it if he had been able to see it. It was too far up see even with his enhanced vision.

"How far did I fall?" he asked aloud, popping his back. His bones should be dust if it was as deep as he thought. He touched at the stone again and felt a soft tingle against his fingertips. What else could the thing do, he wondered? The shaman hadn't really been explicit. He ached but that was it. Small miracles. Well, some kind of miracles. He rubbed at the bits of bone around his eye socket where the fur and flesh were just gone. It still felt strange. But strange was what it was all about, right?

He checked under his suit jacket. Everything still in one piece it seemed. He started to walk, unsure which way may lead out but he only had two choices and no coin to flip. The massive chasm stretched on and on.

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12-26-2013

"Do you think you can just keep hiding in here forever?" came the question for probably the third time. The fox paid little heed and continued writing into the parchment, pausing only to dab the quill tip back into the ink well. There came a soft sigh behind him and he sensed the question might come again for a fourth time.

Instead it came out as "I'm worried about you." This managed to get him to stop and he looked up, back over his shoulder at the rabbit in the doorway.

"You're always worried about me. Everyone is always worried about me. I'm fine," he answered. He turned back down to the parchment and finished a sentence. He paused once more. No footsteps, no door shutting, no noise at all except a very soft, almost imperceptible, breathing. He sighed again and set down the quill, pushing himself and his chair away from the desk to stand up. He turned to look at the lapin in the eyes.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked quietly. The grey bunny leaned in against the doorframe and twitched his whiskers.

"Take a break. Just come out, see everyone. Make an appearance to the staff," he explained. The fox nodded and gently rubbed at his eyes. He wasn't even sure what time it was.

"Is that so they know I'm alive or so they know I haven't gone rabid?" he asked with a slight smile, waving one black paw at the light bracket set into the nearby wall and sending the slightest impulse of will into it to make it go out. As the light from the hall flooded in and framed his big ears Matthias gave a small smile.

"Probably both, in your case," he chuckled.

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12-30-2013

He took a long pull from his cigarette before tapping it down against the ashtray, letting the smoke hiss out between his lips in one soft sigh.

"I don't know what to tell you," he said without ever meeting my eyes. The whole time he stared at the table or would look out the window occasionally as rain spattered down it. I knew I couldn't press him for more without making him skitter. I just gave a nod.

"Thank you for your time," I said as politely as I could and started to shift myself out of the booth.

"Wait," he reached a paw across the table and took hold of me. Unlike his paw holding the cigarette, this grip was firm and unwavering. He looked me dead in the eyes and said "I don't want to be alone tonight."

I paused. "Alright," I finally answered. The look in his eyes, his face, and about every fiber of his body was pleading. He took his hand back and nodded, trying to take another puff as his hands trembled again.

1-7-2014

Why do wizards hide their names? There is a mystic reason or two but largely it's not very frightening to be faced down by "Wilkie Barrelmacher".

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The old badger turned the book over in his claw-like paw then smiled. He set it down and tapped a crooked finger against the cover lightly.

"This is not a book," he said. The two apprentices gawked slightly and looked at the old mage, then down at the 'book'. His smile widened and he opened it. "Oh no, it does look like a book. And if you let it, you could read it like a book," he explained, turned blank page after blank page, though just as he turned it the light seemed to catch the paper just right and there was a hint of runes across each page. "But it is not a book. Or it wasn't meant to be a book."

"What is it then, Sir?" Roland asked, the fox leaning away slowly and leering at it with his ears back. The old badger chuckled a little and let it sit open.

"It's a wood elemental. Or it was. Well, still is, to a degree," he chuckled again as if it was some inside joke. He let his claw slowly run down the center toward the spine as if he were caressing a pet. The 'book' shuddered and flapped its pages slightly, causing both Roland and Emerit to jump. Magus Springtome smiled wider still and repeated the gesture; this time the book settled and the pages suddenly glowed as the ephemeral runes became wholly visible.

"You see?" he said. The runes glowed in a soft green light that reminded them of summer leaves. Roland stepped closer and ran his fingers along the top of one page. It trembled and the runes changed to a royal purple, shifting on the page. Emerit moved closer as well and lightly touched at the corner of the opposite page.

Suddenly the book shuddered and the runes turned a harsh red before disappearing once more and the book snapped shut, all three pulling their hands back simultaneously. Emerit held his hand and they all stared at it.

"Why... did it do that?" he asked warily. The old badger hmm'ed softly and stroked his chin. The book lay dormant once more but all of them could see the barest of shudders occasionally running across the spine.

"It may be a reptile was responsible for its present state. Or a prior grudge before that," the badger posited. Emerit took another half-step back. The magus smiled and patted a hand on his shoulder.

"No worries lad, it won't bite," he tried to reassure the lizard. The book jumped once, its covers snapping like a set of jaws. "Eh.. on second thought, best not risk it." Emerit nodded solemnly and kept his distance while he kept his eyes on it.

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The rain poured down in heavy sheets soaking everything in the street. I stood beneath the theater awning and hugged my coat a little tighter. Somewhere out there was the killer. Somewhere out there in the rain and the cold was his next victim. I shivered a little, from the cold or the thought I'm not

sure which, and stepped out to flag down a cab. A new model pulled up, bright yellow with checkered black along the back that reminded me of a bumble bee.

"Where to?" the cabbie, an old scottie dog, asked. I settled in the seat and stared at the little bio of the driver pasted to the back of the seat. It read Robert 'Rusty' Smith. Back to the office? There was likely little I could do there now. I rubbed my forehead with one paw and closed my eyes.

"Bandervale," I said quietly. I needed to clear my head. The scotty gave a nod and pulled into traffic, flowing in like a stream of great silver fish into the ocean pouring from above.

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"I've learned a trick or two since I saw you last," Wolf said with a confident smile. A simple snap of his fingers sent a spark into the pile of dry brush and logs Mutt had gathered. It ignited with a slight 'woosh'.

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Magus Springtome let slip a light sigh and inclined his head forward, resting his forehead on his thumb and forefinger. He made an effort to squeeze his eyes shut before opening them and lifting his head, looking up at the towering knight.

"No," he said in a very point-of-fact tone. The dog's eyes grew wide then hardened into a scowl; his paw gripped tighter around the hilt of his blade hanging at his side.

"What do you mean 'no' old man? It's a decree of the king!" he challenged, his voice a low, throaty growl. The badger stared up at him with his big golden eyes and gave only a slight smile in reaction.

"No. He is my student and therefore under my protection. His point of origin is not my concern and I can assure the king he is perfectly safe with me," he explained. Springtome made a show of collecting some of the papers from his desk and neatly piling them to one side, clasping his hands together and glancing back up at the knight as if he were surprised to still see him there. "Is there anything else I may assist you with, Captain?"

The dog stared indignantly for a long moment, and then calmly he drew his blade out to hold it before him. It was a simple, short blade about as long as his forearm that slimmed at the base and widened towards the tip. He pointed it at the badger.

"I will take my leave, but know this, mage. I am the King's Hand and when next his will be done, I shall see to it it is done as his majesty asks," he growled. Magus Springtome examined the blade pointedly, keeping his hands clasped while squinting ever so as if to catch every detail of the blade. Without a word he reached an aged paw up until his gnarled fingers closed around the widest part of the blade. The captain stared, muscles twitching like he wanted to wrench the blade free, then gasped

when the badger squeezed and the blade mushed like it was claw. They let go of it together and the bronze weapon clattered to the floor.

"You should never point a metal weapon at someone very skilled in earth magic," the badger lectured, clasping his hands back together and smiling warmly. The soldier scowled harder than before but whirled on his heel before saying another word, marching to the door. He paused only long enough to turn his head and say over his shoulder "you will regret this wizard,"

Springtome managed a polite "I usually do," before the captain slammed the door shut behind him. The magus smiled to himself then quietly shook his paw as it had started to go numb. He stood slowly, grabbing his walking cane to lean on heavily, and made his way out of the study and back down to the hall.

"Children," he called to the assemblage, hobbling over to his speaking podium and leaning heavily onto it. The students quit talking the moment he ambled in and turned to face him, everyone seating themselves immediately. "The captain has gone," he said. There was visible relief across the group, several of them letting out small sighs and others patting Marcus on the back.

"He will be back, however, as the kingdom feels dragons are a threat. Particularly any choosing to learn magic," he continued. Marcus' golden eyes' widened and the wiry youth shuddered softly. Springtome let his lips turn up in a crooked smile. "Now now my boy, I don't believe that. And I will do everything in my power to assure your safety."

2-3-2014

The world was bright with flame. It licked up the walls and simmered on the ground in bright patches and sent ash into the air all around. She laughed a high, haughty laugh that reveled in the destruction.

"What does this accomplish witch?!" Springtome yelled over the roar of the flames. The badger rose his gnarled staff high and smashed the end into the ground, causing a great gust of wind to rush from beneath him and extinguish several fires near him. He growled, golden eyes set fiercely on the vixen. She chuckled, more fires still raging all around.

"A blow hard to the end, eh old man?" she sniped. One delicate hand lifted and she snarled, a great fireball sprouting from her fingertips and crossing the gap in a blink. The magus spoke not a word but lifted the end of his staff and batted the flame away into a shower of sparks that fell harmlessly to the ground. Veletrix just smiled, lifting one paw to her lips to tap a finger against them in amusement.

"You're stronger than I am right now old man. But I can outlast you," she mused. The magus scowled at her and waved his staff, another sudden, chill gust of wind running across the walls and snuffing them out.

"Then I will finish this quickly," he growled. Gripping the staff in both paws he drew it overhead and sent the head of the staff barreling down into the ground. This time the ground itself exploded

upward, the heavy cobble stones and the dirt beneath spraying up like a geyser. There came an unseen squeal as the debris launched up then collapsed forward and sent a cloud of dust into the ash filled air that obscured the alley even as the surrounding blazes grew higher. Springtome wasted no time and brought his staff up defensively, at the same time a golden bubble springing to life around him to keep the dust and ash from him. Fire lashed from behind him, once, twice, an angry scream following a third but he turned and thrust forward to send a bolt of lightning whipping through the air. It cut through the cloud and there came another cry but, as the dust settled, the vixen was nowhere to be seen.

The magus gripped his staff and scanned around cautiously. Light cast by the flickering flame sent odd shadows that danced malevolently across the ground and walls. He gave a small smile and lifted the staff high as he spoke a word of power, sending dazzling light across the street. Veletrix gasped from a nearby corner as the shadows surrounding her fell away, one gloved paw raised to cover her eyes.

“Got you!” he snarled, another bolt of lightning erupting from the end of his staff. The vixen growled in kind but rather than be struck the bolt flew through her and she smiled wryly, slowly starting to fade away.

“Look out Magus!” a voice cried out. Springtome’s eyes went wide and he whirled on the spot to try and deflect whatever strike the witch planned. Even as he turned he saw her coming through the corner of his eye with black flame curling up from her claws as she flew forward to strike. No time, his mind cried out! He swung the staff to block but knew it would be a futile effort and he had no time to bring up another shield.

She stopped mid-strike as a dagger sprouted from her arm. Blue runes leapt to life on the blade and erupted in blue fire all the way along her arm. She screamed wildly and batted her free paw at the blaze, managing to rip the blade free but unable to extinguish with flame along her glove without ripping it too off and tossing it to the ground. Her bare arm bled from the gash with fur singed all around the wound but, more striking, were her thick, black claws larger than any fox’s should have been. They were large and sharp and etched with dark runes. Her features, as well, grew more feral, her pupils reduced to black slits while her fangs grew more pronounced.

“You can’t be..” Springtome muttered. She snarled, black fire springing to life along her claw again, but far too late as the badger lifted his staff and brought the end smashing into the earth. Golden light filled the gnarled wood and exploded out like the birth of a new star. Veletrix let loose one long, continuous scream as she turned and fled away as fast as she could; the last sign of her the bushy end of her tail disappearing around a charred building corner. Coming the opposite way was Troy, the dragon marked with cuts and ash himself.

“Magus, are you alright?” he asked before picking up the dagger he’d thrown. He looked at it closely as if he had never seen it before. Likely he hadn’t, Springtome surmised, as the badger recognized it as one of the blades he kept stored for emergency.

"Yes, thank you for the help. She nearly got me," he groused and stroked his thumb and forefinger along his thick whiskers, glancing over the destruction as small fires still flickered.

"What was she?" he asked, lowering the dagger to his side and looking at the mage seriously. "She was here for me, wasn't she?"

Springtome let out a low sigh and nodded. "Yes," he answered "She came to retrieve you. Someone wants you very badly." He turned and brought the staff up in one paw then gestured with the other until a stiff, chill breeze washed along the street and snuffed the flames out. The buildings were largely intact but the buildings were seriously charred and several bushes and trees were nothing but charcoal. The badger sighed a little, scrubbed at his whiskers and glanced at the ground.

"I believe she was a demon. Or possessed by one, at the least," he spoke with a grave tone. Troy was silent. He glanced over the dagger again then looked up to the badger.

"This hurt her. More than I thought. Is it supposed to do that to demons?" he asked. Springtome held out his free paw

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She dropped the drink in front of him and then paused.

"What's eatin ya hon? Ya look like someone just kicked your puppy," she asked in that twangy accent he couldn't quite place. Rax took the cup of coffee in both hands and stared into it just to watch the steam gently rise off the black top.

"I got pulled through an interdimensional hole with absolutely no way to tell where I am nor where I can go to get back. I'm completely lost in time and space and its bumming me out a little."

"oh, s'at all? Okay hon, things'll get better, you take care now y'hear?" she smiled, patted him on the shoulder and trundled off.

**

Cold sheets of rain poured over the city and soaked everyone to the bone. It was the third day straight of just steady water coming down; not quite enough to flood but enough to make everyone miserable and have to keep inside. I sat at the café and watched it come down on the street with the occasional car shooting down the pavement and sending minor waves up. On the plus side, it had gone on long enough to have washed away all the terrible smells. You think wet dog smells bad, try wet metropolis.

I sipped the little bit of red wine left in my glass and nibbled at a hunk of bread from the basket. The place tried to be authentic French but all they had to go off of was old media now that Paris was a

smoking hole in the ground. Strangely, no one really missed it. Well the French probably did if there were any of them left.

“Would you like to ordair somesing else besahdes our cheapest wine, Zir?” the waiter tried to pry me again. I just swirled my wine around, the stuff still 15 creds a glass, and looked up at him with a lackadaisical smile. “Another basket of bread would be divine,” I prodded. His tiny, neat mustache wrinkled as he bit back some snide reply and instead he merely nodded, though he did take the mostly full basket back with him, probably knowing I was going to stash it down my coat.

I listened to the soft patter of rain and waited. I never liked waiting for clients much, it was always more fun to make them wait on you. The serious ones stuck around as long as needed or left some sort of communique to the effect of “Where the fuck were you?” and rescheduled somewhere else. The nervous ones took off without another word and were never seen again. This one, however, had been very insistent, about 600 creds insistent.

I polished off the glass of wine and considered asking for water just to piss the uptight frag off when someone sat down before me. He was waif thin, nearly gaunt really, and dressed in sharp whites and greys, not a suit but a professional office shirt and grey vest with a blood red tie neatly tucked inside. His mustache was pencil thin like the waiter’s though his hair was thinning considerably up top. A pair of spectacles perched on a beak-like nose and his thin mouth was drawn tightly. He glanced left and right before leaning in, sliding a small black fob on a ring across the table. I quirked an eyebrow at him.

“It’s all there. Pay, schedule, info,” he said. His voice was quiet and raspy; he probably smoked or had smoked. He glanced back and forth and got up again, stepping into the rain again. Before I got out so much as a ‘hey!’ he climbed into a cab that screeched up and left. I stood a moment with my hand in the air and mostly out of my seat. I looked down at the little black fob on its chain and the keyring attached. It was small, featureless yet it bothered me. Made to wait and then dumped without so much as a hello. I scooped it into my palm and tapped at my earpiece. A thousand screens sprang to life and scrolled past my eye.

**

There are two flavors of cybers, usually. The folks that can fork over top dollar for the stuff that you can’t tell is fake and then everyone else who end up looking like they got in a fight with some chrome engine parts and lost. The lion at the door was of the latter variety. He was tall, wide, had one false eye screwed into his skull and one solid piece of metal ware off one shoulder. Guy could probably do some damage. That lens focused in on me and his muzzle turned down in a grimace. Ah, so he’d heard of me. I pulled my badge out and flashed it.

“Open up, cupcake,” I said with a half-smile and lidded eyes. Bouncers and bodyguards of all flavors want to be intimidating. They live and breathe intimidating; usually, it’s in their job description. So it really pissed them off when an asshole like my wanders up and doesn’t act afraid. Sometimes they try to muscle me just for a show, so the other small fish don’t get any big ideas. He growled at me but took the time to actually check the badge.

"In." he said, but paused me with a paw, the real one, to my chest. "No guns," he added before letting me through. He didn't need to really, since the moment I stepped past him a body scanner sprang to life around me. The small antechamber was really a second doorway, something to lock down in case someone made it past the hired meat. They lit the place with a green light while the scan went, for about three seconds before it detected the heater holstered under my coat, then it blared red with a couple klaxons buzzing. A slot opened in the wall to my right with a scrolling text screen above it that read "ALL WEAPONS HERE." It continued with "ITEMS WILL BE RETURNED OR REIMBURSED FOR UPON EXIT." That was comforting, but luckily my gun was custom and 100% traceable without just melting the thing down.

I dropped it in and the thing snapped shut, the screen reading "THANK YOU AND WELCOME TO THE KNICKNACK CLUB". The big door in front of me hissed open and let in a kaleidoscope of colors, the dance floor at full mass as a DJ delivered tunes from a wide stage with any kind of equipment he could want. I'd seen them use the T-shirt cannon a couple times but that had mostly been the bouncer taking down a guy hopped up on 15 different kinds of nasty.

The main room was huge, the place essentially an old warehouse, with enough room for a few hundred partyers. The walls and floor had been done up in hospital white with the dance floor an LED checkerboard and all the furniture made from translucent plastic. I made my way to the bar, a fat slap of perfectly smooth chrome that had a near freezing water rushing under it to keep the drinks as cold as they could. I walked to a bartender, a slinky grey rabbit with a patch of black over his eye and dotting down his face, who gave me one look and turned away as I raised a finger and opened my mouth for an order. I nearly growled but he whirled back around with a tall glass containing some fluorescent green concoction with a mini-umbrella in it. A note was attached to the tip of it.

"See me NOW. Huh, even underlined now. I guess he doesn't want to wait, eh?" I read it aloud to the bunny. He looked at me passively.

"Wouldn't waste any more time than you already have. Last guy to make boss wait got a free sex change op," he explained. I just smiled and sipped my drink, then oohh'ed at how tasty it was and sipped some more.

"He's not one to worry me," I said between a couple more sips. I walked away before he could say anything else but I caught the eye roll that said 'your funeral' well enough. He had them all whipped but you kind of wanted that out of minions. Not that they liked being called minions but they preferred it to 'goons' anyhow. I walked over to the only unlit area of the floor, a back corner with a stairwell and one more brick of meat decked in tech.

You wouldn't know it at first. He wasn't all teeth and chrome like the lion at the front. The leopard leaned back against the wall with his arms crossed and his head down just patiently watching and waiting. He wasn't huge like the other cat but you could see the bunched muscles in his arms. The slim black cords that were just hidden by his fur said he was enhanced, probably adrenaline feeds or even cybered claws. He was the loaded gun waiting to fire.

“Evening,” I greeted, taking another sip out of my drink. It was half gone but I couldn’t help myself, they’d done a good job with it. It was sweet yet tart, just enough sour in it to make your tongue tingled and your lips want to pucker. The brute gave the slightest inclination of his head to acknowledge me and let me pass. Anyone else setting a foot past him would be ribbons. Not someone I wanted to fuck with; he probably went home and carved up sides of beef with his paws.

The stairs behind him were dimly lit and went up to the second level. I came out into a small hall, neat and tidy but with walls thin enough you’d barely know they were there from the boom of the music. I stepped lightly now, still sipping my drink, and came to the end of the hall. No guards, no shows, just a simple wooden door with ‘Manager’ stenciled onto the glass. I let myself in.

“The fuck you been? I knew your dumbass would have to nab a drink. That’s on your tab, y’know,” came the greeting. The small tabby sat behind a desk that would’ve look large on one of the meatheads out front so for him it was practically his own mini-kingdom. There were stacks of paper that towered in trays surrounded by several loose leafs, pens, pencils, stamps, and a couple staplers all over the desk. His paws never stopped moving and he didn’t even look up at me, instead his nose was buried in a paper or two, reading, grumbling, jotting something down on another sheet before putting it down and picking up another.

“You called. I came. Got the evil eye from your goons. Cute bunny at the bar though,” I said, still in the door and taking another sip. He rolled his eyes and waved me to take a seat. He had one of those old wooden things that was just a bit too low so no matter how you sat the desk came up higher on you. One leg was also slightly shorter so you tilted if you didn’t sit back. It was all planned, every little detail to make him that much more in a position of power. It was serious short man syndrome.

“So... job?” I asked, draining my drink almost to the dregs. He shifted through a few more papers before flipping an envelope in front of me. It was a normal white thing, fine neat handwriting displayed the address in dark ink and one end was torn open. I picked it up, no return address, the club’s address on the front and the postage stamp typically marked. I compressed the top and bottom between my fingers so I could peek inside. A little puff inside jostled the letter nestled within so I pulled it out.

The letter was written in the same tiny, neat writing on the envelope. I read:

“My Dear Pugnacious,

I realize the timing of this letter could not be more circumspect but I have no other means and no other time than this. I know what you think and it is not true. I cannot reveal why only that I had to, else I would never have left. Please, find me. I can offer no details other than our night in the gardens. My life may depend on your expediency.

Forever yours,

Ferguson~”

I stared at it a few times to take it in. Then blinked and sucked at the last of my drink, swirling round the ice. He actually stopped working long enough to stare at me, quietly. I looked up from the letter and into his eyes. I'd never seen him so.... I don't know, I couldn't quite describe it. Still, I suppose.

"Pugnacious?" I asked just to break the silence and quirked an eyebrow.

"Fuck you. You try having religious parents," the stillness broke and he went back to shifting through papers. "500 a day.