

Prologue: Isi

Author: Jake-Rabbit (<https://jake-rabbit.sofurry.com/> Twitter: @DamnDirtyFurry
<http://damndirtyfurry.tumblr.com/>)

Yaseda's city market district was usually a dizzying glut of sight and sound; bustling and noisy even on the slowest of days. The stone cobble streets were lined with street vendors selling handspun fabrics, artisan foods, "cultural souvenirs", and any variety of trinket that a discerning tourist would want to take home as a memento of their pilgrimage to the ruins. Buskers did their best to entertain groups of tourists for a few credits thrown into a hat, and on any given day, you could witness the melodrama of emotion play out as tired children started to act up around their frazzled and exhausted parents.

With the ongoing popularity of the nearby ruins, the square was teeming with tourists from all over the world. Tourists with wide eyes, short attention spans, and deep pockets. It was in this crowd that Isi plied her trade, using her small murine stature to her advantage. Almost no pocket went unchecked, no fat wallet unsecured handbag, or loosely dangling piece of jewelry passed her purview without a discreet scoping out of the owner and, more often than not, dipping a grubby paw into the collective till of clueless tourists.

Isi had lifted at least a dozen handbags and wallets today; her pockets lined with credit chips and IDs that she could sell to the local thugs. Better yet, she had a burgeoning collection of watches, rings, and bracelets, all made of precious metals and stones that she could easily pawn off for enough credits to buy her a hotel room for the night.

Isi was a Mus; a species of murine-like recombs who resembled a cross between a mouse and a rat; the two lines having crossed over long ago. Some of them swayed more towards one side than the other. Isi was at the extreme end of the mouse spectrum, having a very short stature, blunted muzzle, and a furred tail with a tuft of wild fur at the end. She was mostly a light brown in color, save for white that streaked up from her belly to her face. A tattered cap was worn on her head at all times, and she often wore a red leather jacket and long pants. All too often, her hair was tucked up under the cap, and she would bind her chest; in the tunnels beneath the streets, it was just plain safer to pass as male.

Isi allowed herself a few moments to think about a night spent in a hotel while watching a ragged Lapin busker squeeze his entire body into a small transparent box to the delight of several small children. The squealing intensified when he stuck his long foot up and waved at the children with his toes.

A hotel room! The lap of luxury! She could take a long, hot bath. Wash her clothing. Roll naked in silk sheets and watch the nightly programs while stuffing herself sick on room service. Akansha rolls, so savory and spicy, washed down with copious amounts of sweet Tumeran Tea, until her teeth ached. And Yoffa pastries, eaten until she might explode, and her mouth puckered from the tartness. She salivated at the thought. She'd not had a good meal in months. Pickpocketing in the Market District was extremely risky due to patrols, but also very lucrative if you could get away with it. She was determined now.

Yaseda was home to the Annaka ruins, and had quickly turned from a backwater farming village into a sprawling technology hotspot and tourist destination after the discovery of the ruins

and what they contained. The resulting technology boom and interest in the ruins poured vast amounts of money into the area. Now, the ruins were a national park, and the city occupied the area just at the base of the mountains. At four million souls, it wasn't even a shadow of its former self, though some still lived the rural lifestyle on the outskirts.

Isi tucked her cap down to further cover her icy blue eyes, sticking a brown furred hand into her pocket to count the day's tally by hand. With crowds like this, you could get away with murder in broad daylight, and she had more than enough for a few nights of luxury, but she had plans only for one, and to take the rest and ferret it away. She'd not even got close to being caught; her small stature made it very easy to blend in, looking like someone's child to any passing patrol.

Her stomach growled. She hungered for a warm meal, but knew she needed to make her way out of the district and back to her fence. He'd scam her, try to claim that times were tough, that he's have problems moving what she had given him last, that his son had all his money...any number of excuses to make her accept less. She didn't look forwards to haggling with him, but she looked forwards to a night in the lap of luxury and a bit more financial stability for the month to come. No more digging through transcans or sleeping in the stormwater drains. One precious night of not having to sleep with one eye open, waiting for gang members to come looking for a fight or for fun.

She edged her way out of the crowds, towards the edges of the district. A couple pilfered credits were exchanged for a hot savory pastry from one of the vendors, something to sate her so that she didn't need to negotiate on an empty stomach. Her stomach turned slightly as she downed the assorted meats wrapped in dough.

The marketplace was still full of tourists even as the suns were going down. In fact, the square would probably get busier as some of the more accomplished buskers came out to take advantage of the cooler climate. You could see a cross-section of the world's population here. Every species. Every single strata of income. Increasingly, there were even those whom lived among the stars, making their way to every single food vendor, eager to get the taste of reconstituted food out of their mouths.

One of the market's busier restaurants was manned by a giant, muscled Urso, a bear-like species that Isi tended to stay away from. One backhand from them could easily break your muzzle and send your teeth flying. She'd been on the receiving end of a large hand across her head once, and once only. It took her a month to grow back her front incisors, and having to be selective about what you ate when living on the street was a recipe for starvation.

A few of the more gaudy and flashy souvenir stands were owned by nimble and fidgety Racca, a raccoon-like sort which were oftentimes better thieves than she ever would be, but also wore the flashiest of jewelry. They were almost all involved in either trade or technology. Pilfering their pockets was easy due to how distracted they could get, and the loot was often well worth the risk.

A large Lapin family seemed to be slowly easing their way down the many vendors, with the mother stopping at every single stall, much to the father's consternation. Their long ears could easily pick up someone slipping up behind them, but if you went for the families, they'd be too busy tending to the inevitable large brood to notice you.

One of the more visible Commonwealth patrols was comprised of Canins, which were amazingly friendly creatures, but deceptively intelligent and observant, in addition to being fiercely loyal. That dedication made them exceptionally good civil servants, but Isi had been on the receiving end of a Canin mean streak before. Rarely had she been more frightened than when in the back of a patrol vehicle and being interrogated by a large Canin male officer.

There was occasionally the odd, rare Badger type in the crowd, clad in loose robes and quiet. They were a slight enigma to Isi, as she didn't see many of them. Insular creatures for the most part, highly intelligent, but didn't often venture outside of their own cities. They weren't exactly xenophobic, but during the ancient times, they chose to stay out of the constant wars for power, instead living among small collectives. In modern times, they were still rather nomadic, but starting to integrate as more and more of them joined the ranks of the spacefarers. A nomadic, insular lifestyle served one well if you were going to live in a steel container in billions of parsecs of open vacuum.

Then there was the Mus, of which Isi was one of. They were intelligent and crafty creatures; most of her fellows were involved in some sort of trade or craft, though they also seemed to have a penchant for diplomacy, alongside the Canin. So much so, that for much of written history, the ruling castes almost always had Mus in them, usually alongside the Canin.

Diplomacy was a skill that Isi didn't need. What she needed were attentive eyes, nimble fingers, open ears, and quick feet. She'd run away from home as a young girl, and lived on the streets for four years now. By now, her survival instincts were honed enough that she was starting to make her way up from the ranks of street urchin and into a fulltime petty thief. She hoped that, at one point soon, the local Family would take notice, and she'd be able to truly live a life of luxury while working for them. The local gangs were just street thugs, and Isi had to run from too many packs of them to make her want to even associate with that level. It was the high road or nothing.

She quickly polished off her pastry, reveling for just a moment in the savory tastes and the relief from her stomach aching. Isi pushed her way through the crowds, almost getting bowled over by a group of Urso and Canin tourists. Getting run into by the lead female Urso was mildly unpleasant, and after she'd let out a protesting squeak and taken a practiced fall, she was helped up, the female Urso apologizing profusely.

"I'm so sorry! I didn't even see you there. That was totally my fault. Are you OK?"

The big female stared down at Isi, genuinely concerned. Big, concerned green eyes and an apologetic, motherly expression marked her horror at bowling over a small girl like Isi.

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine. It's cool. No harm! Thanks for asking!"

Isi adjusted her hat back onto her head and dusted herself off.

"I'm so sorry, dear. I got excited and I absolutely did not see you there. Glad you're OK." The big female beamed. "You take care, OK?" She waved a big hand as she turned around to join her husband again, looping her arm into his.

"You too! Have fun!" Isi waved back, then quickly made her way towards the metro station that was just a half block away, the glowing signs starting to cast a red pall on the sidewalk and stairway leading down.

Isi walked briskly towards the station, and down into the underground terminal. Once she was out of sight and around a few corners, she pulled out the fat wallet that she'd pilfered off the

Urso lady's husband before getting plowed into by his wife. That almost went bad, but the payoff was worth it. A fat wad of credits, a tourist pass, ID card, and a couple gift certificates to a local restaurant. More food! She let out a happy giggle, and then tossed the rest of the wallet into a trashcan next to her, pocketing the contents into her jacket.

One item she couldn't ever be without was the monthly metro pass she scanned into the ticketing gate so she could ride back to where her fence was. It ensured her easy transport, and a place to weather out a storm in a pinch. Living on the streets, that pass was worth more than food. She walked down another flight of stairs to the platform and waited, trying to keep her hands out of her pockets when a Commonwealth patrol walked down to the boarding platform, looking around.

Isi tucked her hat down a bit more to obscure her face and muzzle. The patrol team looked a bit agitated, and Isi shrank behind a support pylon to keep herself out of sight. A high pitched whistle and subtle breeze signalled the train coming into the station, and she could see the patrolmen starting to line up along the side of the tracks where she'd have to go to board the train. She looked frantically over the passenger loading area. She knew that getting back outside was a non-starter, as there was likely a couple officers at the top of the stairs. One of the officers had already cut off the escape route into the tunnels, standing there with arms crossed, eyes scanning over the waiting passengers, which had started to mill in a dense mass near the train platform.

Panic set in. She'd gotten greedy. Probably that group had gone to pay for something and the male Urso found out that his money was missing. And, of course, they'd remember her. The lone Mus who ran into them. And they'd have grabbed that nearest patrol. She cursed at herself for being so dumb. In her mind, the night in a hotel transformed into a night in a holding cell. Great.

She looked around more, frantic, trying to find a way she could salvage the situation. No escape routes that weren't going to be covered. No way to hiding until the heat blew over. Her hands got shaky as the adrenaline hit her, the realization that she was likely completely made settling in. She made up her mind to turn herself in rather than get hit with a stun round, at least. Maybe she could dump the contents of her pockets in a trashcan before getting nicked.

Her salvation came in the form of a group of Mus tourists that hurriedly made their way towards the train platform, chattering and laughing up a storm. She quickly pulled her hat off and stuffed it into a pocket, pulling the tie from her hair and letting the dirty blonde locks fall past her shoulders. She ran her fingers through her hair to tidy it up, then pulled her jacket off, turning it inside out to show only the black liner.

Isi slipped out from behind the pylon as soon as the train came into the station, and quickly stepped up behind the group of tourists. Isi was a small girl, and she could easily pass for being younger than she was, so she tried her best to look like a bored young teenager, tired of being outside with mom and dad, and just ready to get back to the hotel. Pouty, lots of rolling the eyes...not so much as to attract too much attention. She hoped her ratty shoes and pants looked like a girl just trying to wear the latest, dingiest fashion to upset her parents.

The train pulled in and the doors opened. The passengers destined for the market exited, and Isi knew that the officers would be looking for someone matching the description of a small Mus female wearing a hat and red jacket to sprint onto the train at either the last possible

moment, or the first. She waited. Tried to blend in. Again, salvation came in the form of that family, as one of the two toddlers with them dropped a toy to the ground. As the family started to gather their things to board, Isi picked up the toy. She waited. They started to file on, and right before she would have had to make eye contact with the large, golden-furred canin officer by the door, Isi insinuated herself in the Mus mother's face.

"Mum, he dropped this on the ground. Might want to maybe, like, stuff it in a bag or something, that platform's a bit nasty." She reached around and handed the toy to the boy's mother, who gave her an initial look of confusion at being called mum by a total stranger, but then smiled widely.

"Oh thank you! I totally didn't see that! Who knows what's on the floor here, good idea." She stuffed the toy into a small bag, the little boy glaring at her, probably considering throwing a fit.

The family filed on, Isi clinging to them for shelter. The officer by the door looked them all over, and Isi clutched her jacket tighter, avoiding eye contact.

"It's okay! He doesn't seem to have noticed he lost it! Probably would have when he got home!" She smiled at the kid and leaned down, giving his ear a rub, making the young toddler squeak and smiles, forgetting the building tempest he was about to unleash.

She squeezed past the door and took a seat opposite the family. The officer didn't pay her any more mind, still looking over the onboarding passengers. After the most agonizing few seconds of Isi's week, the doors to the metro closed and sealed, and the brakes disengaged. The idle hum of the maglev train was replaced with a soft whisper of air over the carriage, and the train passed through the station, into the tunnels. She breathed a sigh of relief, then put her hat and jacket back on. She closed her eyes and leaned back into her seat, wringing her hands to try and get them to stop quaking.

A soft tug at her jacket made her open her eyes back up. She looked to her side, and then down. A small hand held onto her jacket, attached to a cute little Mus girl. Grey and white with lavender colored hair and a set of wild pigtails that rose unnaturally from behind her big pink ears. The young girl had her other hand stuffed in her mouth, and a big pair of blue eyes stared up at her. Isi looked up and made eye contact with the Mus matriarch, who flashed her a bright smile, then poked the little one on the behind.

"Now Wynne, be nice and say hello to the young lady. She found Sydney's toy for us."

The toddler just stared at her. Then lifted that paw from her jacket and wiggled chubby little fingers in greeting before grasping the jacket again, all the while seeming to be making a snack out of her own fingers.

Isi felt her teeth hurt from the cuteness. She smiled and waved back to the little girl, rather appreciative of this family for helping her escape, and a little pained at their very presence, reminding her of what she didn't have anymore. She swallowed and leaned down a little, giving the girl's ear a rub.

"Well hi, Wynne. Nice to meet you, too!"

That little paw held onto her jacket, and the girl looked down at Isi's pocket. One of the bracelets she'd pilfered earlier in the day off an Urso was hanging out. Isi bit her bottom lip, and looked back at the mother and father, whom were fussing over their boy and showing him the parts of the train.

"You want that? I don't blame you. It's pretty, isn't it?"

The girl nodded.

"Well....I think it'd look nice on you. But don't tell anyone, kay?"

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the bracelet, holding it up for Wynne. A little paw reached up and grasped it, holding on for a moment, those big eyes looking up at Isi again. Isi grinned wide, a big, sappy, bucktoothed smile. She unfastened the bracelet and leaned in, fastening it like a necklace around the little girl's neck. A small price to pay for a clean escape. The symbol of The Twins hung down low on the girl, almost touching her belly. The little girl looked down and bounced a little, smiling up at Isi from behind that paw in her mouth still. Then she turned about and crawled her way up onto the bench seat next to her mother.

The rest of the ride was uneventful. It was only four stops to where she needed to go. She said her goodbyes to the Mus family at the first stop past the market, giving a little smile and wink to the little girl whom managed to steal something other than the bracelet from the thief. The train rushed through the tunnels again, the hum and soft howl of the train threatening to lull Isi to sleep. It was tempting to catch a few winks on these trains, but later on into the night, it became quite dangerous.

After a few minutes, and a few flirtations with nodding off, the train came to a stop inside the Veryx station. Isi picked up herself and shuffled out into the station by herself, pausing to stretching out and rub at her ears. She didn't see the Lapin officer standing off to the side of the station, checking something on the heads-up display that glowed on the inside visor of his helmet. The glow turned off, and he fixed his eyes on her. He paused and studied her to make sure he was right. His hand went for his sidearm, and he lifted it, pointing it right at her.

"Freeze! Right now! Do NOT move or I will shoot."

Isi froze in fear at first. She snapped her head towards the sound, and saw the officer walking towards her, gun drawn. Panic again. She was made this time. The train was pulling out of the station behind her. She looked to the stairs leading out of the station. No doubt there would be officers running down that any second. Her eyes went to the service tunnels.

"Don't you even think it! Down on the ground! Hands above your head where I can see them!"

Too late for that, she thought. She flipped him a gesture and booked it for the service tunnels. The officer holstered his sidearm and went running after her. The lapin was much faster than she was, but she had an advantage over him in size and agility. Something she hoped to press to her advantage in getting through the narrow service tunnels. She ran down a long stretch, hearing him call out to her.

"Stop now! You won't get out of here, you are surrounded!"

Right. Surrounded. In these tunnels? The only thing surrounding you in these tunnels was filth, Shine addicts, and drunks. She quickly dodged under the handrails of the service platform and onto the tracks, running as fast as she could. Her lungs were starting to burn, as it took every ounce of strength she had to stay ahead of the Lapin, who was hardly breaking a sweat. The whooshing sound of an oncoming train was very welcome. She looked behind her, the Lapin still running after her on the platform. She saw the oncoming lights of the train, a warning horn buzz of the magnets firing as the conductor tried to stop the train in time. She made a quick

move to dart off the tracks and down another service tunnel in the split second before the train would have ended her thieving forever.

Another glance back; he hadn't followed her, and the train was slowing down as it came into station. Success! She turned her face forwards and looked down into the tunnel. What she saw made her come to a skidding stop.

The Commonwealth had been making a sweep of those same addicts and drunkards in the station, sending them off to detox facilities. A couple officers had obviously been assigned this service tunnel, and were commiserating over a thermos of tea on the way out. They both turned to look at her, and one of them put a hand up to the side of his helmet, listening to, no doubt, the Lapin cop giving her away.

Panic seized Isi again; a terrible, painful, sinking sensation. She turned about and bolted for the tracks once more. They didn't warn her this time. All she heard was the deep "shoom" of a stun round being fired at her, and then seeing the round impact the side of the tunnel, a large energy discharge crackling the air before dissipating. Even with a miss, she felt the sickening effects. The sound of boots crackling the gravel underneath them made her sprint harder as they ran for her, trying to catch up.

The train started to pull out of the station. More good luck! She could turn the corner and squeak her way under the train and further into the tunnels before they could catch up, to get her some distance. She rounded the corner and dropped to the ground, scurrying her way under the giant magnetrons of the train before it got moving. She felt the magnets pulling at every single piece of metal in her jacket.

She hauled herself up from under the train and paused. The Lapin officer was there, standing ready. He'd gotten around the train somehow. His eyes were fixed on her, sidearm drawn, and he did not look happy, his coppery spotted muzzle pulled up in a scowl, showing off big, polished incisors.

She turned to run another way, and another "shoom" from the officer's sidearm greeted her ears, echoing down the tunnel. This one hit her square in the back. Her entire body buzzed before it went numb, and she fell to her knees, feeling the gravel dig in hard against her. Her body convulsed, and even though she desperately wanted to get out, none of her muscles responded. It was like her brain was disconnected from her body. She suddenly felt violently ill and dry heaved, falling forwards onto her chest as the incapacitating round took her. Her every muscle relaxed and went slack, and she felt herself lose all control.

The most insidious thing about the non-lethal rounds the Commonwealth used was that they left your mind almost completely intact. Isi felt a great sense of shame and embarrassment wash over her as the Lapin cop holstered his weapon and pulled her shaking arms back, cuffing her and rolling her onto her side.

The Lapin called it in. "Base, this is Bravo 20. I've got that larceny suspect from Market Square in custody now. Send a patrol car to Veryx station for transport."

"Roger Bravo 20, sending a car to your location."

Isi groaned and curled on the ground, tongue extending out in another dry heave. She was relatively sure she'd wet herself from taking that round nearly point blank. Her front was covered in mud and grime from the tunnel, her nose bleeding from where she fell onto her muzzle.

One of the other officers, a russet Canin, looked down at her. The officer shook her head. "Not the most brilliant decision you've made today, was it?"

Isi shot her a look that could kill. She was no stranger to the inside of a holding cell, but she was on probation this time around. And getting caught meant time. Hard time.

The Lapin hauled her up onto her still-noodly legs, guiding her out of the tunnels and out of the station. Outside in the sunlight, she was pushed up against a patrol vehicle hard enough to make it sway slightly in place as it absorbed the impact. Every pocket was emptied, and she saw, in front of her nose, a growing pile of evidence that would ensure that she'd be seeing the inside of a prison cell for a long time.

The neck of her shirt was pulled down, and one of the officers pushed her fur up the wrong way, revealing a barcode that had been tattooed into her flesh the first time she got caught. It was scanned, and all of her loot bagged up.

She was shoved roughly into the waiting transport car, the door nearly shut on her ear. The officers exchanged paperwork outside the vehicle, a few casual fistbumps exchanged before the driver sunk into his seat. Just a casual day at work for them. The vehicle hummed loudly and lifted up and out of the district, making its way for the outskirts of the city, and towards the processing center. The canin driver looked back at her in a mirror.

"Sound like little missy was on parole. We've got no less than a dozen reports of petty theft from the Marketplace. What do you want to bet we can tie every single one of them back to you? You can make it easy and just tell me now, if you want. Maybe spare you a year."

Isi ignored him. She was sick, shaking, wet, and angry. Her icy blue eyes stared out the window, watching the twin suns slowly settle over the horizon. Out towards the spaceport, a carrier was coming in for a landing, turning and raising dust as the multi-kilotonne ship landed, looking like an insect as the stabilizing struts extended, and the engines turned off. She could see the ruins of Annaka right behind the spaceport, a giant stone obelisk and multiple stone buildings marking the old city. Underneath was a complex built by a race long gone.

She turned her face away from the sun and dry heaved again, still shaking off the effects of the stun round. Her eyes focused down, and a single wet tear ran down the bridge of her muzzle to drop off of her nose. It would be a long time yet before she even got to see the suns again.