

# When Lightning Meets Shadow (SFW Version)

Commissioned by Kazuki

Written by TwistedSnakes

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Midnights in the urban city of Deonde were deceptively quiet. Under the thin veil of serenity, citizens would curl up in bed and huddle under their blankets, hoping that the occasional screams of terror belonged to someone they didn't know.

An arctic wolf was among the fearful. However, instead of hiding in the safe shelter of his home, he was striding purposefully down the city's dirty streets. The light of the full moon reflected off his white fur and highlighted the intricate blue markings of his fur. Dressed in a grey sleeveless hoodie and black cargo pants, he blended in with the darkness of the city corners as he turned down an alley.

His path led him to an enclosed clearing surrounded by the brick walls of the connected buildings. Windows were built into the walls three floors off the ground as if to escape the reach of the graffiti that covered the walls below, each gang symbol overlapping the one below it in open defiance.

At the far end of the clearing was a stack of wooden crates that acted as a raised seat for the lizard that was sitting on it, hunched over his knees as he watched the approaching wolf. Surrounding him were three more gruff-looking canines that glared at him. All of them had one thing in common: a red scarf with a dragon marking that was tied around their left forearms: the symbol of membership to the underground and extensive gang of the Vialous.

"Kazuki Tirashira," the lizard announced as the wolf stepped into the centre of the brick enclosure.

"Scarface," the wolf replied, realizing that he only knew the lizard by an alias, "I have the money here. After this, you never speak a word of it ever again and it's like we never met."

Scarface pushed himself off the crates and landed with a heavy thud on the ground. With menacing steps, he strode up to Kazuki and smirked at him.

"Well, that was the plan, until..." Scarface trailed off as he waited to see the wolf's reaction.

"Until what?" Kazuki demanded annoyedly.

"Until I realized it's actually quite hard to keep a secret, you know?" the lizard almost seemed to savour the air in anticipation. The other gang members joined him in his grin, shuffling from foot to foot with their arms crossed.

"Your point?" the wolf sneered, trying to hide his fear behind a glare of suspicion.

"My point is, ten thousand doesn't quite cover the cost of my silence," Scarface's lips pulled into a malicious grin, stretching the scar that started below his eye and ran down the side of his jaw and all the way to his chin. "My prices have increased. Fifty thousand."

"We had a deal," the wolf stated flatly. Could the lizard sense the fear he was trying to hide? Kazuki hoped for the best.

"There is no deal other than the one we're making now. Take it or leave it."

Kazuki hesitated. "I... can't afford that much."

"Oh dear, I guess by the end of tomorrow, everyone on the streets will know the deepest..." the lizard paused as the air hung heavy between them.

"Darkest..." he continued. Kazuki tried to hold his glare.

"Secret," he finished and broke into a wide grin. The wolf looked away nervously.

"But, I can't afford that much," he pleaded earnestly.

"Then the deal is off. It's of no loss to me," Scarface scoffed and pushed past Kazuki, knocking shoulders with him as he made for the alley exit. "Come, boys," he raised his palm up in the air, "We're headed home."

The gang members walked out of the alley and the shadows of the buildings slowly swallowed them up.

"Wait!"

They paused in their tracks.

"I'll join you," Kazuki pleaded helplessly.

Leaving the other gang members behind, Scarface approached the arctic wolf.

"Join us?" he scoffed.

"I'll join you. Until my debts are all paid back," the wolf gulped. He knew of the many evil deeds the Vialous gang were capable of, but he didn't have a choice. He looked up at the haughty and scarred face of the lizard.

The lizard who would drag him into the underworld of drug-smuggling and cartels.

The lizard who had planned this from the start.

The lizard who had him where he wanted.

"I thought you'd never ask."

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The city of Deonde stood in solidarity with the dead of the night. The pouring rain fervently bashed itself against the concrete walls and pavements of the urban landscape, as if desperate to cleanse the city of its filth. The water streamed down the sloped roads, dragging with it the dirt of the pavements and washing away the dried urine of the homeless.

Above the rooftops of the city sat a black cat. Matching his fur was a black jacket and leather pants, all of it getting drenched in the heavy downpour from the heavens. He gazed upon the city below with a sense of righteous anger. While the rain purged the dirt of the streets, it did nothing to clean out the city of its vile people. Gangs and thugs that would roam its streets would find shelter from the rain, refusing to have their sins washed away.

Not that Tyrian was in a position to say anything. He was too among the criminals of Deonde. "Not by choice," he would tell himself. But then again, who would turn to a life of crime if their conditions allowed them to live an innocent life, safe and free from the evil underground?

Tyrian was definitely far from free and innocent. Tonight, he would do a dastardly deed, and once again he would get away scot-free. He had been watching his target for the past two weeks. He had watched his target wake up. Go to work. Go for meals. Go to sleep. He knew his target's habits like the back of his hand. And tonight he would put an end to it.

His target's apartment was adjacent to the one Tyrian was perched on. The apartment lights had been turned off for two hours now and it was time for him to make his move. Tyrian stepped back from the ledge until he was a distance from it. Then with a running start, he leapt off the room and sailed across the gap between the two buildings.

Time seemed to slow for Tyrian as the rain splattered against his body. The opposite ledge was approaching him and he crouched in anticipation. His feet landed on the ground and he transferred his forward momentum into a roll before smoothly jumping to his feet. He made his way back to the ledge where a fire escape was positioned outside the window of the storey below.

His motions were quick and purposeful. He lowered himself off the ledge of the building and landed softly on the metal platform of the fire escape. The metal shivered silently from the impact but the sound of pouring rain drowned all other sounds out. He swiftly made his way down the stairs until he was level with a familiar window.

Tyrian forced a sharp nail under the rickety window until he could feel a metal latch beneath the two beams of wood. Slowly and quietly he forced the latch to the side and gradually opened the window partway so that the sudden increase in volume of the downpour did not wake the apartment's sleeping inhabitant.

Making sure that the living room was empty, he cautiously climbed in, dripping rainwater all over the carpet. Furniture was neatly arranged around the room, decorated with laced cloths that draped across the couches and tables. In the middle of each table was a vase with a single rose. A mantelpiece over the faux fireplace sported picture frames of a husky couple from various vacations. Three doors led into other rooms and a passage led off into the adjacent kitchen.

Mrs Nordia was on yet another vacation with some friends, leaving Mr Nordia alone at home. Tyrian stepped towards the half-open doorway on the left. Mrs Nordia would not come home to a happy sight.

He peered into the bedroom and saw a bundle of pillows and blankets. Just a quick slit of the throat and his job would be finished. He pulled out a sharp dagger from a sheath that was hanging from his belt as stepped towards the bed, grabbing the edge of the blanket. With a sharp jerk, he pulled the blanket off the bed.

"Who are you?" demanded a voice behind him.

Tyrian turned around with his dagger raised defensively in front of him. Facing him was a surprised husky standing in his nightclothes with a glass of water. Mr Nordia. Tyrian reacted quickly and strode towards the husky.

Mr Nordia stepped backwards in surprise and dropped his glass which shattered on the carpet, spilling water everywhere. The cat, however, did not stop. The husky, suddenly aware of the mortal danger he was in, hastily turned around and ran into the living room. His shaky fingers fiddled the lock and tried to get it open.

"Hel-" he tried to call out but the cat was too fast. A black and wet arm grabbed his mouth from behind and silenced him. He flailed his arms behind him in a desperate attempt to fight off his attacker and he twisted himself out of Tyrian's grasp before throwing a punch back at him.

Tyrian dodged the flying fist and threw a punch of his own against Mr Nordia. The husky flew backwards and landed on the coffee table and it smashed into splinters. There was no time for him though, and he hurriedly scrambled to his feet and back into the bedroom where he shut and locked the door.

The window. The husky ran for the window and lifted it open.

"Help! Help me!" he called out through the rain but the loud downpour drowned him out.

"Help!" he yelled again, louder this time. He turned around to look at the door. It was still locked but nobody was banging on it. Was his attacker still after him? He fumbled for the dresser and picked up the phone. His shaky fingers dialled "911" and he put the receiver to his ear as he turned back to the door.

The shadow on the wall behind Mr Nordia, however, was shifting. A part of it rose out of the wall, solidifying into a dagger-armed fist as it separated itself from the wall. The rest of Tyrian emerged from the shadows and stepped towards the unsuspecting husky.

A swift yank of his left hand around Mr Nordia's head and a slash of the blade against his neck and the job was finished. The phone dropped and hung from the dresser by its twisted cord and the husky slumped to the ground. Blood started to spread outwards from the carpet, darkening its beige woolly fabric with a dark, rich crimson.

"Hello? 911 speaking, what is the emergency?" a voice called from the phone. Tyrian lifted it to his ear.

"False alarm," he stated flatly and put the phone back down into its cradle on the dresser before the operator could respond.

Blood on the carpet mixed in with the rain that poured in from the open window. But no matter how much the rain poured, it wouldn't be enough to wash off the blood. Tyrian stood over the husky as he coldly inspected the scene.

Indeed, no amount of rain would wash off all the blood he had shed.

There was just too much.

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The next shipment of drugs would be coming in soon. The white wolf's watch told him it was ten minutes to three in the morning when the coastal guards were changing shifts at the guard outpost. The perfect window of time to smuggle a shipment of drugs.

Sure enough, a silent shape was coming over from the horizon. Painted black, it could barely be seen as it slowly approached the shore, its quickly-dissipating wake the only evidence of its presence. The motorboat made its way to the rocky shore where Kazuki and the rest of the gang were crouched behind the large boulders that littered the gravelly ground.

A firm palm landed on his shoulder, giving him a reassuring squeeze. Kazuki turned up to see the scarred face of a lizard.

"You ready for this, Bolt?" the lizard grinned. Bolt. The alias he was to be known by to all the other members of the gang. He shrugged off the lizard's hand.

"Yes. We've been on eight runs now. I know what I'm doing," the wolf growled.

"Hey, hey. Just checking," the lizard scoffed before moving on to talk to another gang member.

The boat pulled up close to the rocky shore and the lizard waved his hand, signalling the others to advance. Kazuki followed them, moving swiftly across the gravel until he was at the boat. A masked person on the boat grabbed a heavy duffle bag and tossed it at the arctic wolf who caught it with a loud huff. Two more bags were assigned to two more gang members and the rest of them held up their guns in a high alert stance.

Kazuki led the party back up the shore towards the escape vehicle: an unmarked van parked on the road near the shore. The road stretched both ways from the left to the right, and behind it was a forest edge that led into the rest of the mainland.

Seeing the van, the wolf picked up his pace. Twelve more trips and he'd pay off his debts. It wasn't going to be easy, but if he could keep this up, he'd get to be free of the Vialous' blackmail. He'd stay on the right side of the law and pretend that none of this ever happened.

Suddenly, a bright searchlight from among the trees shone straight at him, illuminating the entire beach with its glow. Kazuki instinctively turned away and squinted his eyes from the glare.

"Drop your weapons and put your hands in the air! This is the police! I repeat, Drop your weapons and put your hands in the air!" announced a voice from a loudhailer.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he heard the lizard curse, "Bolt, grab the goods and let's go."

The wolf didn't need to be told twice. He turned on his heels and ran after the lizard.

"Halt! Do not try to escape or we will fire!" the voice called again. There were gunshots heard and bits of gravel flew into the air as the lead projectiles missed their targets.

The lizard turned around and faced the police. The darkness of the night seemed to swirl around him and the large rocky slabs rose out of the ground, shielding them from the police fire. The gang members that had their hands free turned around and fired back at the police, pinning some of them behind their covers and preventing them from firing.

"Go! Go! Go!" the lizard ordered. "Crackers, stop firing and head to the boat!"

Seeing Kazuki struggle to keep up, the lizard threw his arms open.

"Bolt! Pass the goods!" he ordered. Kazuki tossed the bag to the lizard. The lizard grabbed it and continued his speedy pace back to the boat. The fifty metres it took to reach the shore felt like a thousand. The other gang's gunners continued their retreat, turning around only to pin the policemen down as they tried to advance on them.

Kazuki pulled a pistol from his waist. Charging it up with his innate lightning power, he fired it at one a standing slab of rock where a few police officers had taken cover. Energized with an electric field, it struck the rock, blowing it up and sending the hiding attackers flying back. Kazuki turned back around and continued running.

Despite the load, the lizard had already made it back to the motorboat, dumping the duffle bag onto its deck before hopping on it himself. The other gang members were catching up with him, Kazuki included.

A flash of white blinded him as a sharp pain shot through the wolf's leg, making him trip and fall face-first into the rocky ground.

"Ahh!" he yelled in pain. The motorboat was only ten metres away. So close, yet so far!

"Help!" he called out for the rest. The lizard turned to Kazuki.

"Bolt!" he called out in concern. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," he jumped off the motorboat and tried to reach the wolf but a torrent of bullets hit the ground around him.

"Scar! Let's go!" a tiger called out for him. The lizard looked torn between trying to save Kazuki and escaping.

"I'm sorry," the lizard said, his voice barely louder than a whisper in the sound of the gunshots. But Kazuki could see read his lips, and his apology rang louder through his head than the sound of everything else. He tried to struggle to his feet but the pain made him gasp and his arms gave way again, letting gravity pull him back to the ground.

"Please!"

"We'll come back for you," the lizard promised. He jumped back onto the boat as its engines revved up, leading them away into the veil of black.

Behind them, the illuminated shore disappeared over the horizon, along with a speck of white, slowly swallowed up by the swarming specks of blue.

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Dressed in a business suit, Tyrian stepped through the glass doors of the Primsoar Corp office building and examined the lobby. At one in the morning, the office lobby was understandably deserted. The only other soul in the lobby was a bored-looking eagle seated behind the monitor of a security checkpoint.

"Evening," the eagle's eyes brightened up at the prospect of company.

Tyrian, however, was never in a mood for idle talk. He nodded his head and placed his briefcase on the conveyor belt that pulled it into the X-ray machine. There were four metal detectors that stood in a row and Tyrian made for the second one from the right.

He knew the guard wouldn't find any weapons in his briefcase. After all, everything he needed was on him. The metal detector he was going through was already sabotaged two nights before, making sure that it would not ring when he passed through it. He strode to the other end of the X-ray machine where his briefcase was waiting for him.

"Guess I'll see you," the eagle shrugged dispiritedly as the black cat made for the elevators. Tyrian reached into his pocket, pulled out an employee ID card and tapped it on the gantry in front of the elevator lobby. The gantry opened up to let him in and the automated elevator nearest to him opened its doors.

The elevator doors closed behind Tyrian stepped into it. It accelerated upwards, beginning its swift ascent to the forty-third floor. Within half a minute, its doors were open again and Tyrian strode into the office corridor.

The carpeted corridor was lined with office cubicles and potted indoor plants. The smell of cheap air fresheners hung in the corridor, threatening to assault the nostrils of anyone passing through it. As expected, the corridor was empty as Tyrian strode through the building. Even though this was his first time entering this floor, his mental map of the building led him to his target destination: a room made out of glass walls with frosted strips running horizontally across it. Office 43-19, where the head of the Legal Department should be working one of his late shifts again.

He peered between the frosted strips into the brightly-lit room and saw a feline figure hunched over the table. Mr Iorvis. Probably tired after a long day of work. Tyrian crouched down and pulled out the thin and sharp metal rod that was held against his ankle under his sock: a weapon he nicknamed the "Needle". Standing back up again, he pulled out a different employee card and tapped on the pass reader beside the door handle.

There was a soft beep and a voice announced: "Welcome back, Mr Iorvis."

Tyrian froze in place but the sleeping figure didn't stir. Before the magnetic lock on the door could reactivate, he pulled the door handle and slipped in. Despite the modern design of the building, this office had a mix of modern and traditional furniture that blended together in a

harmonious arrangement. A wooden shelf against the wall was lined with abstract metal sculptures and a sleek, black plastic recliner was lined with embroidered pillows. It gave Tyrian a feel of both familiarity and strangeness.

But he wasn't here to admire the office's interior design. He strode behind the figure and raised the Needle in the air, aiming its spiked tip down at its intended victim. The Needle was a simple but deceptively-effective weapon. It looked innocent enough to go unnoticed to the untrained eye but was dangerous enough to kill. Its extremely sharp tip allowed it to pierce even the thickest of scales and its thin length allowed it to pass between the gaps between the ribs. A stab through the heart was enough to create a gash that would drain the life out of its victim within a matter of minutes. Even if he missed, a lung would take the hit and the target would spend his last minutes gasping for air.

Would he be able to hit the heart? Tyrian plunged the Needle down through the back of the feline. But instead of feeling the firmness of muscles in his grip, he only felt the softness of cotton as the "body" fell off the chair and slumped on the ground.

Tyrian stepped back from the dummy hastily. This wasn't right. What was going on? There was a loud beep as the magnetic door lock switch into lockdown mode. Metal shutters outside the glass walls quickly descended with a loud clang, trapping him within the office.

"Do not try to escape, Mr Kain. We've caught you now," a voice announced into the room.

Tyrian looked up at the speakers that the voice came from. This assassination job was a sting operation! He wasn't going to stay here a second longer. He jumped onto the oak desk onto the paperwork scattered across it. A well-aimed punch at the ceiling light showered him with glass shards and plunged the room into darkness.

The veil of black swallowed up every inch of the room and Tyrian tried to focus on them. The shadows reached out for him, pulling him into their dark mass to teleport him away.

Suddenly, a burst of a forcefield shot through the room. His shadow power dissipated and the shadows retreated back to the rightful places.

"We've enabled the power-neutralizer. There is no escape," the same voice said again, half-taunting the cat.

Tyrian, however, seemed unfazed. He jumped down to the floor and picked up the office chair, throwing it at a glass wall and shattering it. But the metal shutter behind was meant to withstand even the blast of a bomb. He was well and truly trapped.

A hissing sound filled the room, accompanied by a green gas. From it, Tyrian could smell a sweetness indicative of a sleeping gas. He quickly unbuttoned his shirt and pressed it against his nose and mouth, trying to filter out the gas as he held his breath.

But it was only a matter of time before his air ran out. He stole a quick breath and the gas filled his lungs, clouding his mind. He wasn't going to make it. But he had to try.



His head was throbbing for more oxygen and his lungs were fighting against him. He needed just one more breath. There was a gasp and another whiff of the sleeping gas entered his lungs.

Focus. He needed to hold his breath.

But his lungs were burning.

One more.

Just one more breath...

And everything went black.

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Kazuki laid on the floor of the empty prison cell. Four bare walls surrounded him on all sides, save for a metal door in the centre of one of them. Built into the door was a narrow barred window that barely let him look into the corridor outside. He shrugged it off as a bad design until he realized the window wasn't for his benefit: it was for the guards to monitor him.

A bulb was built into the ceiling, confined behind a frosted and translucent plate that was aligned with the ceiling, forming a smooth surface as it diffused the bulb's pale blue light throughout the cell, contrasting the orange prison suit the wolf was wearing. In the corner of the room was a small hole that seemed like a drainage system that Kazuki figured was where his waste would go.

He had spent the past five days undergoing the torture and interrogation of the prison guards as they tried to force information out of him. Even if he wanted to, Kazuki could not tell them anything. He didn't even know the real names of his gang, much less reveal the identity of the drug cartel's mastermind. All he could do was to endure the punishment for withholding information that was never his to begin with. Under the orange jumpsuit were gashes, welts, and burn marks that were clumsily cleaned up with antiseptic alcohol and patched with band-aids too small for the wounds.

The cold night was sapping the heat out of the room and the wolf huddled into a corner as he tried to conserve his body heat. A strange "forcefield" hung over the entire prison, neutralizing power-users such as him. Even though he barely used his lightning powers in his day-to-day life, having that robbed from him made him feel even more vulnerable than before.

He tried to gather his lightning energy in the palm of his hand. A ball of electricity should've materialized in his hand, but within the confines of the prison, he couldn't even feel the energy within his body. All he could feel was just an empty space within him.

Kazuki sighed. Perhaps they would give up and let him go. Or at least stop the torture. How long would that take? A few days? Weeks? Months? He couldn't bear the thought of another day in the torture chamber, much less another week.

A ear-chilling scream of a prisoner from another cell echoed through the corridor and into his cell. Kazuki had gotten used to the sounds: sometimes the other inmates would cry out in their

sleep, from shouts of terror to pleas of freedom as their dreams trapped them in their mental prisons.

How long more would it take before his voice joined the other screams in the night?

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Tyrian was pushed into a blue prison cell and the metal door was slammed shut behind him. He turned to look at the door behind him before examining the rest of the cell. Contrary to what he first thought, there was, in fact, someone else in the cell. A canine figure was hugging his knees in a sitting position as he squeezed himself in the corner of the cell.

"Who are you?" the canine asked nervously.

Tyrian examined the canine. Despite the blue tint that the prison light had given everything in the room, he could make out the white pelt of the huddled wolf. The wolf was looking at him curiously, trying to make out his reaction.

After a few moments, the wolf looked confused, unable to make out anything from the cat's expressionless face.

"Tyrian," he finally replied flatly.

"Kazuki" the wolf replied. The silence returned and hung over the two prison cellmates.

Tyrian sat in the opposite corner of the room and watched the wolf cautiously. He may look harmless but Tyrian wasn't about to gamble his safety. The wolf's eyes were darting about on the ground as if he was trying to come up with something to say.

"So uh... what are you in here for?" the wolf finally managed.

Tyrian nodded up to a corner of the ceiling where a dark dot sat inconspicuously.

"They are watching us. Listening in to what we're saying," he stated in a flat and neutral tone.

The wolf turned and looked up at the concealed dot in wonder and suspicion before giving Tyrian an incredulous look without saying anything.

After a few seconds, the wolf broke the gaze and the both of them sat in silence, retreating into their own mental worlds: the only refuge of freedom in the oppressive prison.

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The sirens blared through the prison, telling prisoners to make their way back into the cell. Kazuki dropped the pickaxe and stretched his back. He had spent the day mining boulders into smaller rocks, and smaller rocks into pebbles: the only way the prison knew how to occupy the prisoners and releasing some of their pent-up restlessness.

He limped back into the prison building and headed to the familiar yet cold cell where his cellmate was already seated. He sat down and leaned against the same wall as the cat, leaving a metre gap between them. After a minute or so, the sirens stopped and the metal door swung close.

A prison guard went down the corridor, sliding their meal trays through a slot at the bottom of each cell door. One tray was shoved roughly into their cell, spilling some of the rice and gravy onto the floor. The slot was then closed and locked.

Kazuki got up and ran to the door.

"Hey!" he called out through the metal window, "You left out one more!"

The prison guard appeared in front of him.

"That's yours," he stated flatly as he nodded his head towards the tray in the room, "So what's the problem?"

"There are two of us here," the wolf explained.

"Oh?" the prison guard grinned, "Guess he needs one meal too eh? Come," he nodded at Tyrian as he opened the cell door. "Your meal is waiting," he said with a taunting tone in his voice.

Pushing himself off the ground, Tyrian strode out of the cell as Kazuki returned to his place on the cold floor. Suddenly, the door was slammed behind him and Kazuki could see other guards appear in the corridor. There were sounds of knuckles hitting flesh and gasps of pain.

"Hey!" Kazuki scrambled to the door and looked out. Tyrian was sprawled on the ground and the guards were punching and kicking him as he shielded his face from their blows with his arms.

"Stop!" the wolf cried out, "Stop this now!"

But the guards paid him no heed.

"Please!"

Blows were rained down upon the defenceless cat as the guards took out the angst from their job on him.

"Still want that dinner, kitty?" one guard taunted.

"Fucking power-user," another guard gave him a kick in the abs, "Still think you're better than us?"

"Yeah, where's your power now?" Some of the guards laughed and Kazuki could only watch helplessly.

The guards continued their assault until they grew tired. One of them opened the prison door and another two more dragged Tyrian across the corridor by his arms, throwing him into the prison. His limp body landed on the dinner tray as he slid along the floor, scattering food everywhere. The door slammed shut behind him and the sound of laughing guards faded away.

Kazuki rushed to where the bruise and battered Tyrian laid and knelt down beside him.

"Are you okay?" he asked, but Tyrian didn't respond.

"Hey!" he grabbed Tyrian's shoulders and shook him. "Are you okay? Say something, please!"

Tyrian nodded his head groggily. "Let...me rest," he groaned.

Kazuki sighed with a mix of exasperation and relief, but there was nothing he could do about it. He sat down beside the cat and took a deep breath, trying to steel his shaky nerves.

There were a few moments of silence, and the wolf sighed again.

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Tyrian stirred in his sleep. He could feel his cheek pressed against something warm and soft. Was he still in the safety of his dreams? He nuzzled against the comforting surface as if he was trying to take in every drop of satisfaction and cherish it in his heart before the harsh realities of prison ripped it from him.

The soft surface stirred with his nuzzles.

Wait.

He opened his eyes and found himself resting his head on the lap of his cellmate.

"Wha-" he hastily scrambled into a sitting position and looked at Kazuki who was woken up by the cat's movements.

"What were you doing?" Tyrian asked coldly.

"Taking care of you," Kazuki whispered softly as if afraid his words would offend the cat.

"I...don't need your help," he replied. The back of his ears twitched a little. Someone had been scratching the top of his head, leaving behind a comforting sensation where Kazuki's paws were.

They looked at each other in awkward silence. Tyrian noticed a glass of water beside an orange scrap cloth torn from the wolf's prison pants. Both the cloth and the water was stained with a bit of blood. His blood.

"Go eat something. I saved half for you," Kazuki suddenly spoke up, nodding to the half-eaten mess tray where rice, bits of meat and vegetables were messily mixed across the various compartments. The food that had scattered on the ground from earlier was mostly cleaned up, and Tyrian suspected the wolf would've still considered them edible.

Tyrian wasn't complaining. He was hungry enough to eat just about anything, including any food that had fallen on the dusty ground of the cell. He turned to Kazuki.

"And you?" he asked.

"I've eaten my fill," the wolf replied, "You can have the rest."

Without hesitation, Tyrian turned to the food and began devouring the scraps, shoving handful after handful of the remaining food into his ravenous mouth. Before he knew it, the tray was clean of every grain of rice and every morsel of food.

He licked his lips. He wanted more, but there was nothing he could do. In fact, he felt even more hungry now that he had a taste of food. Everything felt cold. The prison felt cold. Their treatment of him felt cold. His insides felt cold. He shivered, trying to avoid the inevitable cold.

He looked at the wolf, hugging himself with his knees against his chest. He must've felt cold too. Tyrian shifted over to the spot beside Kazuki and huddled close to him. The wolf looked at him in surprise. He was going to open his mouth to say something, but his gaze caught the stoic expression on Tyrian's face and he shut his mouth again, blushing as he did so.

The warmth of their two bodies together was a much-needed respite from the harshness of the night. Tyrian closed his eyes as he tried to remember the last time he had felt the warmth of another body against his. All that came to mind were the bodies that slumped against him as he drained the life out of them. Nothing was like this.

There was a gentle tap on his shoulder and he opened his eyes again. The wolf had gently rested his head against Tyrian's shoulder. He sighed and put his arm around the wolf, pulling him in closer.

Kazuki didn't resist. Instead, he nudged himself closer until each of them could feel the other's placid breaths, their chests rising and falling in time with each other.

There was a soft growling sound as Kazuki's stomach rumbled. Tyrian sighed in response as he gave the wolf's shoulder a comforting squeeze.

Perhaps life would work out for them someday. Maybe in another month. Another year. Another lifetime. But for now, at least they had each other.

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The sweltering sun bore down upon Kazuki as he swung his pickaxe down, breaking rock after rock into increasingly-granular chunks. Suddenly, there was a faint sound shouting and of blows being exchanged. Probably another group of fighting inmates. Kazuki ignored the noises and focused on his work. Paying them any heed would not benefit him in any way.

Guards around him were running towards the direction of the noise, leaving the prisoners alone as they continued to mine the rocks.

Suddenly, two firm hands pulled him from behind and turned him around. He came face to face with Tyrian.

"What are you doing here?" Kazuki asked, "Don't you have mess duty?"

"I don't have much time until the distraction is over so listen close," he shrugged off the wolf's question. "Some of us are going to escape in a few days' time."

"Wait, wha-"

"You're coming with me. Be at the mess house entrance when the power-neutralizer field goes down, you got it?"

The guards were moving back to their posts already as the fighting situation was brought under control. Tyrian noticed and quickly turned back to Kazuki.

"Got to go," he hastily disappeared into the chaos of the crowd, almost like he was never there.

Kazuki wanted to ask more, but there would be no more opportunities. During the day, they were separated while they carried out their individual duties. At night, they would be watched in their prison cells.

Kazuki hurriedly went back to work.

He would be ready when the power-neutralizer field went down.

---

Tyrian's heart was beating loudly in his chest.

Over the past number of weeks, he had been making friends with the inmates assigned to mess duty with him, and friendships turned into an escape plot. Each day, they would steal a whisper back and forth while the guards weren't paying too close attention.

Five minutes of planning could turn into five hours simply because they couldn't talk openly. He could ask "What can you steal from the supply room?" as the guards changed shifts, only to get a reply "Rope and bedsheets" a few hours later.

After a while, they settled into a pattern. They could ask each other questions like "Can we dig under the walls" or "When can you get it by?", and a subtle shake of their head or three clangs of the dinner trays would be the reply.

All that, however, would end today. The four of them had finally gotten everything they needed for the plan. By the end of today, they would either taste freedom or suffer the consequences of failure.

There was no turning back.

Tyrian slowly wiped another dinner tray dry before leisurely setting it on the top of a stack of even more trays. Suddenly, the sirens rang, telling all prisoners to go back to their bunks. Tyrian turned to the other inmates in the kitchen and shrugged knowingly before stepping towards the door.

"Stop," the guard growled, "You have been slow with your duties today. You all will clean everything up before leaving."

The inmates grumbled before going back to their tasks. Tyrian turned on the tap and lazily let the stream of water run over the trays. A muscular Doberman named Azuriel gave the guard an evil glare as he picked up the mop again. The dark grey otter named Demir grumbled before resuming his scrubbing of the stove. The last inmate, a lady lizard named Rha joined the otter and pretended to work.

The sirens stopped. Tyrian idly wiped another tray clean. Kazuki should be wondering where he was now. If only he knew.

Minutes ticked by. If Demir's expertise were to be trusted, they should soon see the fruits of his labour as the anti-power field generators entered the next charge cycle in thirty minutes.

Tyrian cleaned a few more trays as slowly as he could manage, to the guard's annoyance.

Fifteen minutes left.

He dropped a clean tray to the floor with a loud clang before taking his time to pick it up and wash it again.

Five minutes left.

The other inmates were jumpy too. Tyrian could read their tensed postures as they pretended to work nonchalantly.

A minute left.

There was no turning back indeed.

There was a loud boom and a shock wave shot through the kitchen. Pots and pans hanging on the walls shivered and the four inmates looked at each other incredulously. It worked.

"One field-gen down!" the panicked shouts of the guards outside could be heard. The guard in the kitchen looked flustered.

"Stay here and finish your duties," he ordered before running out of the kitchen and slamming the door behind him.

"Yes officer," Rha called out sarcastically behind him as the rest waited for a few minutes.

"Let's go," Tyrian finally said and they swiftly made their way out of the kitchen door. Demir and Azuriel split up from the group, each one headed towards one of the two remaining anti-power field generators.

Tyrian and Rha crossed the prison yard, swiftly darting from shadow to shadow as they approached the prison headquarters. A guard was standing by the double metal doors as a sentry. Tyrian swiftly emerged from the shadows and strode towards the guard. The movement caught the guard's eyes and he turned to look.

"Hey! What are you doing out-" the guard could barely take out his weapon before he was knocked out by Rha who had snuck behind him. Snatching the ID pass that was hanging from the guard's belt, she swiped it on the black card scanner and the doors beeped as the magnetic locks disengaged.

They entered the building and made their way past the guard bunks. As expected, all the bunks were empty. All the guards were activated and split up to guard the prison gates, prison cells, and the broken field generator. Things were going as planned.

Suddenly, the air seemed to shift. The shadows in the corridor shimmered as if welcoming Tyrian back into their arms. Rha could feel it too and they looked at each other knowingly. The other two generators were down.

---

The explosion from earlier had Kazuki worried. Tyrian was missing. But after the explosion, he began to feel something surging within him.

Minutes later the feeling within him rose to its fullest and he realized what it was: his powers had returned. His joy caused sparks to swirl around him, illuminating the pale blue room with a burst of yellow and orange.

But a second sensation began to bubble up too: the feeling of excitement. They were going to escape.

---

Tyrian and Rha stood outside the door of the control room. Tyrian nodded at the lizard, who nodded back at him. With a swift moment, Tyrian kicked open the door and the two of them stepped in. Inside, the prison warden and two more guards were busy monitoring the field generator situation.

"Why are you?" one guard shouted in surprise as he raised his pistol at the two intruders. Without warning, sharp throwing knives shot out from the shadows and straight into his heart and he crumpled to the ground. Rha struck the other guard down before he could react.

The prison warden had also gotten up and was aiming his pistol at them. They dived for the floor as a gunshot rang out and the warden's shot hit the metal cabinet behind them.

Dark tendrils shot out from the shadows around the warden, grabbing and binding his arms to the side. Rha took the opportunity and pulled the struggling warden's face to look at her. Their eyes met and the warden stopped struggling.

"Yes..." Rha smiled and licked her lips. It felt good to use her powers again.

The tendrils slowly let go of the warden and he stood limply in his place as he continued to gaze wistfully at her.

"Now, open the prison cells," she commanded. The warden nodded numbly and went over to the control panel. Entering his access code, he unlocked the system and activated the emergency release mechanism.

From the live feed on the monitor screens, Tyrian and Rha could see the cell doors open. Prisoners peered cautiously out of their cells before entering the corridor with disbelief on their faces. Within seconds, the prisoners were rioting.

Rha looked eagerly at Tyrian, unable to contain her excitement. They were actually doing it. She turned to the warden who was still staring blankly at the screen in front of him.



"Open the main gates now," she smirked. There were a few more taps of the keyboard as he opened the tall solid metal gates that separated the prison yard from the outside world.

"Okay, let's go," Tyrian said flatly and the lizard nodded.

"Now for my third and final wish," she purred at the prison warden, "Close the door behind us and lock it. Don't open it for anyone."

---

Kazuki stood outside the mess house entrance, watching the chaos unfold. The prisoners were streaming towards the prison gate as they tried to escape. Guards who stood in their way were beaten up and trampled on.

Suddenly, there was the sound of gunfire as the machine guns on the top of each side of the open gates opened fire on the prisoners trying to get out. Many of them dropped dead as bullets riddled through their body.

If going through the gates was the plan, they wouldn't make it out of here alive.

---

Tyrian stood face-to-face with the other three inmates who had helped turn the plan into reality. In front of them was a manhole that would lead into the sewers, and from there to their freedom.

"Thanks," he said flatly. He wasn't a man of many words, but the others understood as they nodded silently.

"Go now," he ordered as he pointed to the hatch, "I'll be joining you guys in a bit."

"Stay safe," Rha grinned.

Rha, Demir, and Azuri took turns to climb down the ladder. Tyrian, however, turned away and rushed back to the prison yard. He had a second promise to fulfil.

---

Kazuki looked around nervously. Guards all around him were advancing in on the mutinous prisoners, rounding them up as they fought back. Shots were fired and more prisoners fell dead.

The wolf still stood his ground as the other prisoners bumped roughly into him as they fought back. All hope of escape seemed to be dissipating with every passing second.

Suddenly, someone grabbed his wrist and roughly pulled him through the crowd around the side of the mess house.

"Tyrian!" he gasped breathlessly. He was lead to the back of the building and the black cat let go of him.

"Tyrian!" he called again, throwing his arms around the bewildered cat and hugging him, "I was so worried."

Tyrian, surprised with the sudden show of affection, hugged him back awkwardly.

"Let's leave," he said. Kazuki nodded and let go, letting Tyrian lead the way as he limped behind.

They ran around the concrete walls of the prison perimeter until they came to a clearing.

"Wait," Tyrian stopped dead in his tracks. In front of them, prison guards were sealing up the manhole, locking the hatch in place with heavy-duty padlocks.

Their way out was blocked.

Tyrian scowled at the sight. He had taken too long.

"Come with me," Kazuki suddenly spoke up, "I have an idea."

---

The chaos outside was slowly dying down. Time was running out for the two prisoners.

They had broken into the prison garage where military jeeps and tonners were parked. They were in an armoured jeep as Tyrian fiddled with the wires that would start the ignition.

"You sure this will work?" he asked cautiously.

"No clue. But we can't just wait to be captured again. We have to try."

There was a victorious spluttering as the jeep's engine came alive. Tyrian pressed a button on the dashboard, raising the shuttered doors to the garage. The road ahead of them went around a bend which would lead straight to the gate.

"We have one shot at this," Tyrian warned, "If they hit our tires, we're dead."

Sirens started blaring through the prison compound. The guards must've regained access to the control room.

"We don't have much time left. They can close the gates soon."

Kazuki quickly nodded in acknowledgement. "Let's go."

Tyrian floored the accelerator and drove the jeep straight ahead and around the bend.

A hundred metres in front of them were the open gates, littered with dead and bloody bodies. With blaring alarms, the metal gate began closing in on them, dragging the bodies along as they left a trail of blood across the tarmac ground. Guards were also turning on them, shooting bullets that ricocheted off the metal chassis of the jeep.

"Do your thing," Tyrian said. Kazuki nodded and placed his hand on the jeep's dashboard.

There was a whirring sound as he charged the vehicle with electricity. The engine seemed to burst with newfound energy and the rear wheels spun with additional velocity. The jeep accelerated forward at an unreal speed, throwing both Tyrian and Kazuki back into their seats.

as they bolted past the prison buildings. The wind rushed past them, filling the jeep with their deafening whistling sounds.

Guards quickly jumped out of the way as they approached the closing gates. Just a bit more. Kazuki closed his eyes. The jeep shuddered as it tore through the bodies on the ground. There was a pattering sound as the hail of machine gun bullets hit the roof. And then there was nothing.

Kazuki opened his eyes. Around them were trees and thick undergrowth that bordered the narrow tarmac road. The jeep had slowed to its regular speed and they were driving down the highway, away from the prison.

---

The two of them trudged through the urban landscape into the rundown inner city. They had ditched the jeep some time back to lose the trail, and they had been trekking through the hills and into the city for the past few hours.

Kazuki had come to the realization that he had nowhere else to go. Going home was a surefire way to get caught by the law again. Still, the feeling of freedom tasted good and the adrenaline of the escape was still coursing through him as he led Tyrian lead the way back.

They came to a short, bunker-like structure that was built into the side of an apartment building. Its door was boarded up with rotten planks and rusty nails. Tyrian went up to the door and pulled Kazuki towards him.

Kazuki could feel the shadows wrap around the both of them, swallowing them up. There was a moment of darkness and the shadows tore away again. They were on the other side of the boarded door.

Tyrian flicked a switch and the fluorescent lights came on, lighting up the dingy room. Kazuki looked around the place. A half-open door led into a bedroom and another doorway led to the kitchen. He could tell that Tyrian had made efforts to tidy up the house before. Magazines and bills had been messily stacked up in a pile on the corner of the coffee table. Wires from an old computer on the work desk were bundled up with duct tape and stuck to the wall behind.

There was also a sense of forlornness in the air. A layer of dust had settled over everything through the months of Tyrian's absence. Fruits in a bowl on the dining table had long rotted away and grime on the plates in the kitchen sink had dried up into a crust.

Kazuki took a step forward into the living room. There was a thud behind him as Tyrian stumbled forward.

"Hey!" the wolf caught the cat before he could hit the ground, "You alright?"

Tyrian nodded weakly. "Tired. Teleport," he explained.

Kazuki helped him into the bedroom and sat him down on a chair while he changed the dusty sheets of the single bed. The morning sun was starting to stream in through narrow slits on the

walls just below the ceiling: pathetic substitutions for actual windows, but a thousand times more secure.

Carrying the grumbling Tyrian, he dumped him onto the bed where he flopped around exhaustedly before nodding off. Kazuki shook his head and sighed before making his way to the couch. With a rag, he dusted it off before throwing himself onto the worn-out leather. Residual dust flew into the air but the wolf was too tired to mind. In a matter of moments, he joined the cat in the realm of dreamers.

---

Kazuki woke up with a start, desperately hoping that the escape wasn't a dream that was going to slip away and leave him in the reality of prison.

He tried to make out shapes in the darkness. But the darkness indicated the absence of blue light. And the soft leather under him replaced the concrete ground he was used to waking up to.

It was real.

He was free.

His heart was beating fast. He got off the couch and made for the bedroom. Through the darkness, he could make out Tyrian's figure fast asleep in bed.

Kazuki took a careful step forward into the room. Thoughts of the prison flitted through his mind. Not of the cold, uncaring walls of the cell but of the warmth of the cat's body against his, breaking through the bitter chill like beams of light piercing through the dark.

Before he knew it, he had taken another step into the room. The cat's strong arms around him like a firm foundation in the harsh and stormy reality of the world.

Another step towards the bed. The cat's chest against his. Feeling their heartbeats pulsing at their own tempos in a song only the two of them understood. A sign they were still alive in the deadness of the prison.

He gently sat on the side of the bed. Tyrian opened his eyes sleepily and saw the wolf as their gazes met. The silence hung between them, strangely soft and comforting. There was no awkwardness in the air, no compulsion to speak. Yet through their eyes, it was almost like they were communicating in a language too intimate for words.

Tyrian finally broke the gaze and shifted to the side of the bed, giving the wolf space. Kazuki gingerly laid down beside him and turned to face the cat. His heart was pounding in his chest. Could Tyrian tell?

The cat wrapped his arms around and pulled the wolf into a tight embrace. Kazuki rested his chin in the nook of his neck. Another heartbeat joined in with his. Slow. Steady. Comforting.

And with this comforting lullaby, the both of them fell asleep.

---

The sun had risen overhead, its warm beams stealing their way into the privacy of the house and illuminating specks of dust idly floating in the air. Kazuki was lying on the couch as he stirred the air with a finger, swirling the particles around.

The future seemed so uncertain. But he had never felt any more confident about facing it than he did now. He had lived most of his life without companionship, and now after having tasted it, he had no idea how he had managed to live without it.

Somehow being with Tyrian filled him with something he had not experienced in a long time.

He was experiencing optimism.

And it felt good.

The dust in the air suddenly spun swiftly around his finger as the bedroom door opened and the black cat came into the living room and picked up months-old newspaper out of habit as he sat on the couch near Kazuki's feet. Realizing that they were outdated, he tossed them onto the floor and looked at the daydreaming wolf.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked.

"Nothing," Kazuki shrugged playfully.

"Okay," Tyrian replied.

"Hey! You're supposed to ask me to tell you what I'm really thinking of!" the wolf protested.

"But you said you're not thinking about anything," the cat gave him an incredulous glare.

"It means you gotta pester me for it!" Kazuki took a couch cushion and threw at the cat.

"Hey!" Tyrian swiped the airborne cushion away and pounced on Kazuki with a threatening glare.

"Wait! I'm sorry! I didn't mean it!" Kazuki yelped in fear. He looked up at Tyrian's stern look and shivered.

There were a few tense moments of silence. Suddenly, the cat broke into a wide grin and gave a light nip on his ear.

"Ahh! Let me go!" Kazuki squirmed.

"No. That's what you get for teasing me," Tyrian gave another playful nibble on his ear.

"Look who's teasing who now?"

"Hmm," Tyrian pretended to think before confidently declaring, "You're teasing me." He grinned before lowering himself down onto the couch, hugging the wolf from the front as he stroked his paw through Kazuki's fur on the top of his head and down his back.

Kazuki rolled his eyes. "Fine," he drawled, blushing as he gave in to Tyrian's embrace and nuzzled against the cat's chest.

It felt good indeed.

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~ End ~