

# And Two Becomes Three (SFW Version)

Commissioned by Kazuki

Written by TwistedSnakes

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Deonde. The name Deonde brought along a multitude of associations to the blue wolf as he sat on the edge of the rooftops under the midnight sky. On the surface, it was a prospering city filled with high-rise office buildings towering over rows of apartment buildings and shophouses. However, after all the respectable men and women have gone home and dusk has fallen over the city, lawless criminals and unruly gangs would walk the streets. And when the sun rises, perhaps some unlucky people would find their homes broken into while they were asleep, or perhaps the streets will be slathered with the bloody aftermath of mob fights.

A firm hand landed on his shoulder, giving him a gentle squeeze. "Kaz, let's go," the owner of the hand said. The wolf looked up to see his partner Tyrian, a black cat who he'd met only seven months ago but have grown close ever since. Indeed, Deonde was more than just a city to them; it was their home too. Kazuki looked down the rows of blocks to a particular apartment building he could barely make out in the darkness. It was his home for the past ten years. Or at least until he was sent to prison. Sure, he had broken out of there with Tyrian since then, but that was a part of his old life that he could never go back to.

He got up and followed the cat as they swiftly jumped from roof to roof, crossing the gaps between the buildings with unhesitating confidence. This was something Kazuki was used to; after all, both him and Tyrian were famed mercenaries of the underworld. Sometimes it was to guard the smuggling of contraband goods. Other times, it would be to assassinate someone that had crossed the wrong person at the wrong time. Tonight, they were bounty hunters stalking their prey.

After traversing a number of buildings, they came to the end of the line. In front of them was a ten-storey fall to the tarmac roads below. Ahead of them, however, was their destination. A tall condominium where their mark lived. In contrast to the rest of the dirty city, the compounds of this building were clean and white, glowing orange from the soft street lamps within its tall, iron fences. The building was highly guarded with leading-edge security technology, all of which are to protect its tenants, for a premium in price compared to the rest of the city.

Security, however, was nothing for "power users" like the two of them. Tyrian closed his eyes and concentrated as he felt for the shadows around him. On the ground, the sharp edges of the shadows shifted and warped as if to swallow the cat up. Kazuki jumped beside Tyrian and let the shadows surround them. A wave of darkness rose out of the ground to engulf them. Then it disappeared and both of them stepped out onto a narrow ledge on the side of the building. They were higher up now and this time, there was only a few inches of space for error between them and a long fall to their deaths. At least this was the floor that their mark lived on.

Shadow powers. That was Tyrian's power. Give him just an inch of space, anywhere without light, and he could turn and use that against you. Stealth movements. Shadow weapons. And like they just did: teleportation. Longer distances required more energy so this was something Tyrian used less often. With Tyrian in front, both of them carefully pressed their back against

the wall of the building and edged their way across their precarious path. Then the wall yielded to an opening into a well-lit corridor. Tyrian peered into the corridor.

"Two cameras," he nodded his head expectantly towards the corridor. The wolf knew what he was to do. Concentrating, he sensed the electricity running around the building. Straight strips of power which ran up and down the floors and ceiling. More energy splitting off from main powerlines and into individual apartment rooms. And sticking out of the walls were two protrusions, one closer to them on the left, one further down right.

"Five seconds," Kazuki whispered. Five seconds: not enough to raise the guards' alarm but enough for them to swiftly reach their mark. "Go." Both of them vaulted over the corridor railings and onto the soft carpet, swiftly running down the corridor.

*Four seconds.*

Room 30-19

Room 30-20

*Three seconds.*

And...

Room 30-21. The door with the label looked like it was solid wood but the two had done their research: they were high-tech energy barriers meant to prevent any form of intrusion.

*Two seconds.*

Kazuki raised his palm to the door and its solid facade retreated like magnets repelling each other.

*One second.*

A hole opened up as he stepped through it, holding it open for the cat to follow after. And they were in. The opening closed up behind them, leaving behind no traces that the duo had ever been in the corridor. But this was no time to rest; in a couple of minutes' time, the next detail of guards for this floor would be patrolling the corridors again.

The sound of the television playing in the room on the left gave away the location of their mark and the two bounty hunters dashed over to the wall beside the doorway. Kazuki knew the plan: they would swoop in and catch the rhino before he could react. Ropes. Canvas bag over the head. Out before anyone noticed.

At Tyrian's signal, the two of them bolted into the room ready to pounce, only to find an empty bed. The sound of a toilet flushing in the adjacent only confirmed that their guess was wrong. The rhino, the occupant of the apartment, opened the washroom door and came out of it, drying his skin with a fluffy towel as he made his way into the bedroom, dressed only in his boxers.

His eyes opened quizzically at the sight in front of him. "That's weird," he muttered, "I could've sworn I turned on the air purifier." With a relaxed stroll, he made his way to the bedside table and switched a white, cylindrical device on. Suddenly, he found a bag thrust roughly over his head and his arms pulled behind him. He opened his mouth to shout but a cloth gag was wrapped around the makeshift hood, filling his mouth with the coarse, vile-tasting material. He was trussed up like a turkey with his wrists bound behind his back and his ankles tied together.

Despite the rhino being heavier than him, Tyrian managed to lift him up albeit with a little effort. This time, Kazuki took the lead and made for the living room door. He peered through the peephole to see an empty corridor. The coast is clear. He disabled the cameras and repelled a hole in the door again as before and the two retraced their steps to the end of the corridor.

"Ready?" Tyrian asked. Kazuki nodded. He could never get used to their escape route but it'd help Tyrian conserve his energy. On the count of three, both of them vaulted over the railings, sailing down the thirty floors between their perch and the ground below. Kazuki could barely watch as the concrete pavement rushed to meet them. But so did the dark shadows on the ground, twisting to form a black mass on the ground. Then it swallowed the falling figures.

As his inertia sped him through the darkness, Kazuki could feel shadowy tendrils tugging against him, pulling him backwards and slowing him down. In front of him was some sort of window back into reality where he could see the roof where they were previously on. The window approached closer and closer until the three of them tumbled out of the shadow realm. Tyrian and Kazuki softened their impacts with barrel rolls but the tied up rhino unceremoniously hit the ground, rolling away with a couple of nasty scratches and bruises.

Kazuki's beating heart was the only thing he could hear. "Can't we use a better escape route?" he asked exasperatedly.

"This is more efficient," Tyrian responded, "Uses less energy."

"One day you're going to be a second too slow and we're both gonna go 'splat' on the concrete," the wolf responded.

"Haven't happened yet," came the casual response.

Kazuki didn't have a reply to that. "Fine," he conceded, "Let's go." That's Tyrian in a nutshell: curt and apparently devoid of emotions, even in the face of the most extreme situations.

With a great heave, Tyrian picked up their bounty and they made their way through the city.

Fifteen minutes later, they were at the docks where five people were standing around suspiciously. They wore black leather jackets with bandanas tied around their necks and arms. Gang members, in particular, the ones belonging to the gang that had paid them for this job. As Tyrian and Kazuki approached them, the gang members turned to face their visitors as they gathered in a line.

"Got the mark?" the snake in the middle, apparently the leader of the squad nodded askingly.

His response was the sound of the struggling rhino hitting the ground with a loud thud. "Go check if he's the guy," he motioned for one of the grunts to check. The greyhound he pointed out immediately went forward to untie the rhino's gag and hood to check his face. As the rhino's makeshift hood was removed, he immediately screamed for help, only to be stopped as the gag was shoved in his mouth again and secured in place.

"It's him alright," the canine told the snake.

"Good," the snake nodded, turning towards Tyrian and Kazuki, "My boss will be extremely pleased. You have no idea how much grief Mr Trevon has caused us."

"Not that you'd care, of course," the snake continued as he noticed their cold stares, "But you two did an amazing job all the same." The snake grinned widely, "You guys really are as good as they say. As promised, here's the other half of the payment." Another grunt came up to them with a briefcase, opening it to show stacks of hundred-dollar bills, neatly arranged in the briefcase as if the case's measurements were chosen for this purpose.

Tyrian's eyes gave a quick scan of the briefcase, mentally counting the stacks before nodding and accepting the case.

"Fast, good, cheap; pick three," the snake mused, "And you guys certainly aren't cheap. But the other two make it worth it. You can expect to hear from me again." He chuckled as he turned away, "Come on boys, we're going to make sure Mr Rhino over here a taste of the suffering he caused us."

Kazuki tried to hide the pride he was feeling inside. Being a reputable criminal wasn't something to be proud of but at the same time, they definitely earned it. Something about being the number-one mercenaries in Deonde sent a thrill running down the wolf's spine.

The two of them watched as the gang disappeared around the corner before departing themselves. Another twenty minutes of travelling and they were in front of a boarded-up door that belonged to a short bunker-like structure. They were home. Tyrian summoned the shadows around them and a second of darkness greeted them before fading away to the dingy room on the other side of the door.

Kazuki snapped his fingers and the lights in the room turned on. The snap wasn't necessary for him to use his electric powers, but it was something fun to do all the same. As Tyrian set the briefcase down and looked through the stack of newspapers and letters on the table, Kazuki lazily flopped down on the lumpy couch, still feeling the adrenaline coursing through him.

"News," the feline muttered as he flipped through the papers, scanning the headlines, "Another drive-by shooting. Crime rates on the rise. Important high-tech shipment stolen en route. Some cutting-edge power generator."

"Mmm..." Kazuki mumbled non-committedly. As long as they were in Deonde, the news was never good. Never had been, never will be. Someday they'd make it in this city. Sure, they had money, but there was no way they could funnel any of it towards getting a proper house or

apartment without getting identified as escaped inmates during the background checks. Still, no harm dreaming about it.

"Oh, got a job earlier today," Tyrian tossed the newspaper to the side, "Guy called Val. Seems rich. Meeting him at his office tomorrow."

Kazuki yawned as he stretched his arms and sprawled across the couch. Another day, another job. There was no end to jobs in this corrupt city and as far as their income was concerned, this was no problem at all. Tyrian pushed the wolf's feet to the side as he joined Kazuki on the couch.

"You seem distracted today," Tyrian raised his eyebrow at the wolf, "Whatcha thinking of?"

Kazuki looked the cat in the eye as he flashed a playful grin.

"Nothing."

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The two of them found themselves riding an elevator with a fox butler, descending down at an unsettling speed. They had earlier arrived at the luxurious villa of an affluent red panda named Valent, only to be guided by the butler into an elevator made out of reinforced steel, furnished with a rich carpet and elegant wallpaper. Instead of going up, it instead went down, leading to what could be a secret base under the deceptively innocent veneer of the villa.

With a chime, the door opened to a while sterile corridor made out of more reinforced metal walls.

"Come with me," the butler bowed as he led the two of them through the network of corridors. Along them were windows made of reinforced glass, revealing scientists in lab coats inside clean laboratories, all busy working on elaborate electronic devices.

Kazuki had spent the morning doing the background check on their potential client. Valent Redfale was a red panda, the son of the wealthy and influential Redfale family. He had taken over his father's industrial science research company, Redfale Technologies, that was growing to be quite the titan in the market. As far as the public was concerned, Redfale Technologies owned a skyscraper in the middle of Deonde where all the research and development was done. What the research did not reveal though, was the network of secret labs that they were going through now.

The fox pressed his face against the eye scanner next to a door and there was a sharp beep as the machine scanned his iris. A cheerful chime indicated a positive identification and the door opened up to an observation room that overlooked a huge lab. In the observation room, many wall-mounted monitors showed various metrics and measurements through flashing numbers and shifting graphs.

In the middle of the observation room was a red panda, wearing a lab coat and safety goggles as he looked upon the dozens of scientists in the lab below, all facing consoles that surrounded what seemed to be a tall glass tube with a large chiselled crystal inside. Wires connected

various points of its surface, leading up to various computing units mounted onto the glass pillar.

"We're hitting a network synchronization strength of three hundred and seventy-eight," the red panda announced through a microphone to scientists in the lab, "Systems are at three point seven degrees above room temperature."

"I apologize for the interruption Mr Redfale, but your guests are here," the fox announced.

"Hmm?" the red panda turned around to face his new visitors, "Ah, yes. Give me a second to wrap this up." He turned to the lab and spoke into the microphone, "Good job ladies and gentlemen, we managed to hit a new benchmark today. You may take a break before going back to your research. We'll try some new parameters later and aim for as close to the theoretical limit as possible."

He hung up his lab coat and goggles on the side, revealing a business casual suit underneath. He flashed them a warm smile that seemed to be characteristic of charismatic television actors. "Thank you for waiting," he nodded, "I really appreciate you two coming down here to hear me out. If you don't mind, could you follow me to my office and we can discuss the details of the job?"

"Sure," Tyrian replied curtly, slightly annoyed at the hoops that they had to jump through just to get the job. Kazuki caught himself staring a little longer than he should've and they both headed out of the room, following Valent down the corridor and into a sleek office. Just like the rest of the labs, the office was designed with modern furniture with smooth curves, all of which contrasted each other with their black and white surfaces. The red panda stood in front of a leather office chair behind the desk. Two more were already in front of him.

"Do take a seat," he gestured, making sure that the other two sat down before he joined them, "Can I get you two drinks?"

"No thanks," Tyrian responded curtly.

"Alright," he seemed to take no offence as he nodded and turned to the butler, "Just the usual for me then." The fox bowed and left, closing the door behind him.

"So, I'll cut to the chase and explain the reason I've called you two here today," his face suddenly looked intense as he leaned forward over his table, resting his elbows over its black surface and tenting his fingers in front of him.

Kazuki nodded silently but Tyrian continued to stare nonchalantly at him. "I chose you two because the word out there is that you have never failed to impress. There's an item that I want that'll further my research. A piece of technology. It's currently in the hands of the Azure Skull gang and I'd like you to acquire it for me."

"So you want us to steal it?" Kazuki asked.

"You can use that term, sure. But you'll be stealing from the thieves who stole it in the first place, so the law is not going to be an issue," the red panda maintained a cheery expression as he explained himself.

"We're not concerned about the law," Kazuki responded, "Two things: first, we need to know the job details. Second, how did you know about us? You're not exactly involved in the underworld."

"Ahh, I'll answer the second question first," Valent leaned backwards in his seat, making himself comfortable, "I have my contacts."

As if on cue, the side door to the office opened and a familiar lizard walked in and stood by the red panda's desk, dressed in a black office dress that fitted her hourglass form very well.

"I take it you have met Rha."

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Rha, a fellow inmate who helped them with the prison break, conducted the job brief on a widescreen LCD monitor on the wall. The device that they were going to steal, as Valent said, was a piece of technology in the form of a metal cubic frame with a central cylindrical core, all of which could be held in two hands, albeit with some effort. Its specifications and functionality Rha did not specify, not that the duo wanted to know anyway. All that mattered to them was the difficulty of the job.

It turned out to be a fairly straightforward job: the "Cube", as Rha had nicknamed it, was currently being held in an Azure Skull base located downtown, taking the front of an antique shophouse. The Cube was stored in the back of the shophouse, hidden in a wall safe and guarded by some of their elite gang fighters. The gang was expected to move the Cube in five days' time so they would have to make their move anytime before that.

Everything they needed to know was either already presented, or neatly ordered in dossiers. Kazuki couldn't help but feel impressed by Rha's preparation.

"Any other questions?" Rha put down the presentation clicker gently on Valent's desk before turning towards them and leaning against the table, "For me or Valent." Tyrian and Kazuki shook their heads.

"Very well, thanks for the extensive research," the red panda nodded at her, "You can go back to gathering intelligence for your next mission."

"Pleasure," she flashed a confident smile. "See you guys around," she grinned at the duo before making her way out of the office.

Valent turned to the duo and gave them an intent look. "Now that everything's on the table, I'd like to hear your thoughts on this. Are you on board for this job?" he asked the duo.

"Offer?" Tyrian leaned back into his chair. Kazuki mused to himself. Assassinations were quick and clean, so they'd expect five to ten thousand. Kidnapping was a little tougher but if the mark could be caught unguarded for just a window of ten minutes, they'd take a fifteen for that. A

locate-and-extract job like, complete with a safe surrounded by armed guards would typically go for twenty thousand, maybe thirty.

"Fifty thousand, half on acceptance, half on completion," Valent offered.

"Sixty," Tyrian replied without skipping a beat. Kazuki had difficulty containing his surprise. Negotiations were serious business and the last thing he'd like to do was to reveal anything that could jeopardize a higher payout for them.

"Fifty," Valent repeated, "But if this job is a success, I will be offering more in the other jobs to come. Yes, I will be hiring you again."

There was a moment of silence as Tyrian stared at the red panda, reading his face for any sign of a tell. Then he conceded, "Fine."

"I'm glad we've come to an agreement," Valent turned to his desk and pressed a button on the intercom system. "Irzak, can you give me a second at my office? Thanks," he spoke into it.

"I'll let Irzak take over from here," Valent turned to them, "He'll bring you guys to the armoury to issue you your equipment."

"Equipment?" Tyrian raised his brow, "We don't need your equipment."

"If you don't like it, I won't force it on you," Valent answered calmly, "But I do hope you give them a look before dismissing them."

"Fine," Tyrian conceded, albeit reluctantly.

Just then, a blue dragon entered the office. "You called, sir?" he asked as he eyed the red panda and his two guests.

"Yes, these two are the external agents I have hired for operation Box Bust," Valent introduced.

"Ah, and I'll issue them the equipment you picked out for them?" the dragon asked cheerily.

"That is correct," Valent nodded. "If you don't mind, could you follow him to the armoury?" he asked the duo, "Again, thank you for accepting this job. Contact me when the job is done and we will arrange a handover point."

Both of them got up and followed the dragon down more corridors to a reinforced steel door that was reminiscent of heavily-guarded underground bunkers. The dragon tapped his identification card on the scanner and three ascending tones played as his card was recognized. After that, he pressed his face against the retinal scanner and pressed his hand onto the palm print scanner. After three seconds, another three ascending tones played, followed by a hiss as the locking mechanisms came to life. They could hear the rotating gears embedded in the metal door as various latches and bars slid out of the way, allowing the metal door to swing open.



The door revealed a clean, white room with blue lights against the wall illuminating rack after rack of weapons, armour, and other combat gadgets. All of them were locked behind glass panels, requiring a card scan in order to access them.

"Box Bust..." the dragon mumbled as he walked down the room, scanning the racks with his eyes, "Ah, here."

Irzak tapped his card on the scanner and the glass panel slid to the side. Inside the rack were some daggers, two high-tech handheld displays, a gun, and an odd-looking spike. He picked up the handheld displays and tapped on one of them. Its screen lit up, showing a lock screen. "These two AFAs will let you contact us when you're done with this mission."

"AFA?" Kazuki asked.

"Ah, my bad. Agent Field Assistant," the dragon elaborated, "Fingerprint lock just in case this falls into the wrong hands. Typically comes with a bundle of apps but since you're not full-time agents we will only be giving you the call functionality and the databank. I've added Valent, Rha, and myself to your contact books so you can ping us anytime."

He picked up a short katana-like sword. "Wakizashi," he pulled out the blade and showed it to Kazuki, "Oriental make. Forged from a carbon-chromium steel alloy. Tested it myself, cuts beautifully." He carefully slid the blade back into its sheath and handed it to the wolf.

He continued to pick up the dark firearm from the rack. "Tactical pistol. Based on the Krug 3007, slightly modified for tactical close-combat. I upgraded it with a ten-chamber noise suppressor for stealth and a recoil damper for faster consecutive shots," he continued his lecture as he handed it to Kazuki, "Customized specifically to your electrical powers; there's a silver conductor from the pistol grip to the bullet chamber so you can channel your energy through it with up to eighty percent more efficiency."

Kazuki was fascinated as he examined the gun closely. Every single modification was crafted to perfection so well that it seemed to be part of the gun's original design.

"A pair of karambits for you," he explained, picking up a sleek, claw-like dagger in its sheath. As he pulled it out of the leather casing, the duo could see that the dagger was coated with a black sheen, making it perfect for stealth missions. "The sheath goes around your thighs so they don't shift as you walk, unlike most hip attachments," the dragon slid the blade back and handed Tyrian the two daggers.

"I believe you have a weapon you call the 'Needle'?" the dragon asked Tyrian, who nodded stiffly in response, "This spike you see is made up of a titanium and steel alloy, optimized for compressive and yield strength. Comes with a polymer handgrip that prevents slipping even with perspiration moisture." He handed Tyrian the spike and the cat turned it around in his hands, testing its strength and flexibility.

His face expressed no emotions but Kazuki could tell that he was impressed with the various equipment that Irzak was showing them.

"All these for this mission?" Tyrian asked.

"Well, if you perform on this mission, perhaps I can ask Valent if you guys can keep them," the dragon gave them a sly wink.

The black cat nodded and kept the spike and daggers in the pouch at his side.

"And I wish you two all the best for the mission."

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Three nights later found the duo once again on the roofs of Deonde. They had spent the past few nights skulking around the hideout, observing the people that came in and out of the antique shop. The shop was at the corner between a café and a sports shop in the block of shophouses, rising three storeys above the street. The upper windows were boarded up, making it impossible to observe the insides, although, with the blueprints that Rha had provided, they had a very good idea of how they would navigate the rooms inside.

Tonight, however, they would turn their plans into action. They were perched on the roof of the shophouse, ready to strike. Their newly-issued daggers were strapped to their thighs and Kazuki had a digital safecracker in his side pouch.

"Ready?" Tyrian asked and Kazuki nodded. The two of them lowered themselves over the edge of the roof to the ledge below until they were in front of a boarded window. The shadows in the window's recess engulfed the window, forming a portal to the inside. They jumped into the hole and the shadows were gone without a trace.

The duo found themselves on the top floor of the shophouse, crouched behind a stack of dusty boxes. The room was dark; the gang must've left the lights off in order not to raise suspicions from the people who might be walking outside at this time of the night. A dim lamp in the middle of the room allowed them to make out the silhouettes of four guards taking turns to patrol the floor and sit on the boxes to rest their feet.

If Kazuki's suspicions were right, the floors below would be guarded too. If they were to alert the guards below things could get messy. But given the confined space of the room, the guards were all within visual range of each other.

Signalling to Tyrian, the wolf pointed towards the door, the guards, and then to each of them in turn. The cat nodded in acknowledgement and Kazuki counted down with his fingers. At zero, Tyrian rose from the shadows to slit the throat of one of the guards.

"What the-" one of the seated guards stood up to respond but the shadow of a knife on the ground stabbed the ankle of his shadow. The piercing pain shot through his own ankle causing him to fall over in pain. In the meantime, Kazuki quickly slammed the door and latched it. Pointing his open palm towards the ceiling bulbs, he turned them on, blinding everyone in the room with the sudden increase in brightness.

The three guards shouted as they dashed for Tyrian. More guards were coming up the stairs to their aid, only to be obstructed by the locked door. They banged against the wooden door, trying to bash through it.

"Get the safe," Tyrian nodded towards a large safe on the ground in the middle of the room. Kazuki dived for it, attaching the rotating arm of the electronic safecracker to the dial of the rotary safe. After making sure that its vibration sensor was in contact with the metal door of the safe, he stuck the device to the safe and turned it on. The cracker began to rotate the wheels, sensing the location of the various catches as they clicked against each other.

While the safecracker did its job, Kazuki got up to help Tyrian. The cat had killed another guard and was now in close combat with two more. The wolf immediately dashed towards a guard, catching him unguarded as the both of them tumbled to the ground. Both of them struggled on the ground, each of them attempting to gain the upper hand in combat as they each tried to shove their knives at each other's throat.

With a strong swipe, the guard knocked the wolf's wakizashi out of his grasp. Kazuki, however, was quick to react. Before the guard could slash at him, he pressed his palm against the guard's chest and sent a thousand volts through his heart. The guard's death was painful but quick as he quivered on the ground and fell lifelessly onto the ground.

Panting, Kazuki got up to look at Tyrian, who had also managed to overpower the guard. The door, however, was still being bashed in by more guards outside. A loud click filled the room as the safecracker finished its job, unlocking the safe.

A burst of splintering wood could be heard as the heavy door was busted down. Guards ran into the room with their weapons in front of them. But the room was already empty and so was the safe.

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Unlike being chauffeured around in a limousine like what he was accustomed to doing, Valent was driving a regular car, blending in with the rest of the late night traffic. He was dressed in a polo shirt and a pair of jeans to make him seem inconspicuous.

Kazuki had contacted him earlier saying that they had obtained the Cube. He proceeded to send them a meeting time and location through the databank app. A location that he was currently headed to. He could not deny that the prospect of getting his hands on this technology excited him. If he could adapt its inner mechanics to his products, he could easily beat the competition out of the market. He could bring Redfale Tech to new heights.

But first, he had to acquire the device. He parked his car by the side of a warehouse and made for the side door. He was early; an hour early, to be exact. But this would give him enough time to check out the warehouse and set up counter-surveillance devices. He pressed the handle down, only to find the door locked.

No matter. He reached into his pocket and took out a pair of metal rods from his lockpicking set: a hook pick and a torsion wrench. He pressed it into the lock, listening as he slowly wiggled the hook pick and applied tension on the torsion wrench. After a fifth click, the lock suddenly slid free and turned, allowing Valent to push on the handle. He quietly pressed it down and swung open the door.

The warehouse inside was filled with tall, empty racks that reached for the ceiling. Judging by the thick layer of dust on the ground, all the racks should also be dusty too. He stepped into the warehouse.

Before he knew it, a hard hit to the side of the head sent him blacking out.

And then the warehouse, too, was empty.

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Blood was pooling all over the ground, mixing in with the dust on the warehouse floor as it spread. Dead bodies were littering the ground haphazardly, sprawled in awkward positions as if they were ragdolls thrown from a height. Some of them were stabbed in the neck. Some of them had their torsos slashed open. Some of them were shot between the eyes. All of them were completely dead.

The dead bodies surrounded Kazuki and Tyrian who were panting in the middle of the room, weapons still in hand as if anticipating another wave of attackers to come at them.

"What," Tyrian let out between his pants, "The fuck. Was that?"

"Ambush," Kazuki huffed.

"Valent set us up," the cat sneered.

"Wait!" the wolf stopped him, "We don't know that."

"What else could it have been?" Tyrian snapped back.

"Well, think about it. If he wanted to have us killed, he could've done it when we were in his underground bunker."

"So? Killing us here makes it harder to trace it back to him."

"The mission? The weapons? This weird phone device thing? That's a lot of trouble for that."

"If you're so sure that Valent is innocent, then how you explain this then?" he motioned to the dead bodies around them.

"I...I don't know," Kazuki looked at the corpses dejectedly, "Let's try to contact Valent again."

"Let's get somewhere safe first," Tyrian suggested, "More of them might be on the way."

Kazuki nodded and the two of them jogged out of the warehouse and hid in an alley behind stacks of wooden pallets and metal oil drums. Crouching down, Kazuki took out the AFA and tapped on Valent's name. A dial tone started playing before cutting off at the thirty-second mark. "The contact is currently unreachable."

"Damn," Tyrian muttered under his breath.

"It's okay, we can try Rha," Kazuki tapped on Rha's name and the dial tone started playing again. Then after a few seconds, it stopped and a familiar face appeared on the screen.

"Hello?" the lizard smiled back at them, "What's up?"

"Where's Valent?" Kazuki asked.

"Sorry, what?" she looked at them with a puzzled look, "Okay I'm in Lorvenia at the moment on another mission so you're going to have to bring me up to speed with what's going on."

Kazuki spent the next five minutes explaining what had transpired over the past few hours.

"Huh, this is serious," Rha furrowed her brow, "Yeah, I can't reach him from my side either."

"Could something have happened to him?" Kazuki asked.

"Not out of the question, but I hate the idea of it," the lizard admitted.

"What about, I don't know, some rival company or something?"

"I doubt it. Most companies stay on the right side of the law. Okay, so here's my theory: if someone—and I sincerely hope I'm wrong—someone got Valent, then that same someone sent those people to ambush you. Which means they know you have the Cube and desperately want it."

"Do you have any idea who could've done this?"

"A very good idea. But first, we need to come clean to you. This 'Cube' as we refer to it is a high-performance power generator or the 'Ion-Crystal Synthesis Generator' as it's technically called. As of now, the blueprints of this technology is the result of a top-secret research venture between Aberia and Stoll. So why is it with the Azure Skull?"

Kazuki opened his mouth to make a guess but Rha immediately carried on. "Because just four days ago, this device was stolen in transit from Aberia to Stoll. I don't know who could've performed this heist, but one way or another, it had found its way into the Azure Skull's possession. And now it's with you."

"So," the wolf looked puzzled, "Why are you telling us this?"

"Two reasons: first, this isn't a device that anyone can simply use; you need specialized equipment that can handle the pulsing power surges that it outputs. As far as I know, nobody in the whole of Deonde has the capacity to use this generator. So who would steal it? Two, for someone to know of your transaction tonight, they would need to have someone on the inside. Meaning we have a mole in our midst."

She took a deep breath and sighed.

"Okay, I know this is more than we initially asked of you two but there isn't a lot of other options. I will see if I can trace where Valent went. And if he was kidnapped, I will need you two to help extract him."

"Should we wait for a ransom note or something first?"

"Not likely. The evidence doesn't point towards a ransom situation. And even if it is, Valent would rather pay ten times the ransom amount to you than to let a single cent go to the undeserving. Rest assured, he will reward you well."

---

Valent's eyes were blinded as the hood over his head was unceremoniously yanked off, flooding his vision with the light of the fluorescent lights on the ceiling. As he had figured out from his earlier struggles in the dark, he was tied to a chair with his wrists behind his back.

He was in some sort of storage bunker, lined with concrete walls with stacks of cardboard boxes flushed against the walls. In front of him stood an eagle wearing a grey shirt, black jacket, and denim jeans. A light blue bandana on his arm immediately told Valent that he belonged to the Azure Skulls.

"Rise and shine, panda," the eagle sneered, "Now panda, tell me where it is."

Valent smirked back, "It's quite difficult to mix pandas and red pandas, but I suppose some people won't get it. And I have no clue what you're on about," he lied.

His snide remark earned him a painful punch to the side of his temple and he grunted in pain.

"Cut the sass, panda," he emphasized the last word venomously as if to remind Valent that he was in control, "And you'll tell me where you hid the generator or there'll be more where that came from." The eagle cracked his knuckles menacingly.

"What's this about?" Valent feigned ignorance, "What generator?"

Another punch hit him in the face, giving him a bruise on his right cheek. "Don't play stupid with me, fuckwit. I know you stole the generator so it's best you save me some time and save yourself a whole lot of pain, and just tell me where it is now."

"You have to give more context than that, I don't know what you're talking about-Gahh!" a punch to his guts made him gasp in pain. But physical pain now would save him a ton of mental headaches later. He would have to endure.

"Looks like we're going to be here all night, panda."

---

"So my worst suspicions are true," Rha later contacted them on Kazuki's AFA, "he's been kidnapped. But—wait, let me finish—but I managed to hack into the local surveillance systems and get my hands on the footage; he was unconscious when some thugs dragged him out of the warehouse. They were wearing some blue armbands—"

"The Azure Skull!" Kazuki whispered to Tyrian, who nodded back.

"Then," the lizard continued, "They drove away in a grey van towards downtown where I lost them. I've sent the approximate coordinates to your databanks so see if those mean anything to you."

A map of central Deonde appeared on the screen with a circle five blocks wide in the middle. Tyrian bent over to squint at the screen. "There's an Azure Skull hideout here," he said, pointing to a building just outside of the circle, "That's where he is now."

"Okay, I don't have the clearance to send you two in a mission but I believe it Valent was here, he'd approve. So will you do this for me?" Rha pleaded.

"We're doing this for Valent," Kazuki stated flatly.

"Okay," the lizard looked relieved, "Okay, good. Please prepare yourselves before going in. And don't do anything that will jeopardize his life. And leave the Cube in a secure location; don't bring it along. And I wish you two all the best." Rha took a few seconds to catch her breath.

"Got it," Kazuki replied, "Anything else?"

"No, no. That's all from me," Rha nodded, "Thanks."

Kazuki ended the call and turned to Tyrian. "Guess we're doing this, huh?" he shrugged.

"It's because you think he's cute, don't you?"

"...Shaddup."

---

A beaten and bruised Valent was slumped weakly in his chair.

"Boss, he ain't spilling," the eagle's voice could be heard behind him, coming from outside the storage room.

"Let me show you how an expert does it," another gruff voice replied, "Step aside."

There was the sound of sliding bolts and jiggling locks followed by the scratching of the rusty door as it was opened and closed. A leopard dressed in a formal shirt and pants walked in. Unlike the other gang members, he looked well-groomed. His clothes were properly ironed and his fur was neatly trimmed. Even his dress shoes were brushed to the point of shining. He set a car battery and some crocodile clips on the ground beside him before standing up to look at Valent.

The red panda squinted at the leopard suspiciously. Something about the feelings seemed a little familiar.

*Wait.*

"Recognize me?" the leopard smirked. Valent grunted and lowered his eyes. What would the local police chief be doing in a place like this?

"I'm Deputy Assistant Commissioner Corin, Chief Police of Deonde," the leopard declared as if they were going through a casual introduction rather than a cruel interrogation, "And you are?"

Valent stayed silent, refusing to rise to the bait.

"Valent Redfale," Corin spoke for the red panda, "Engineering prodigy and CEO of Redfale Tech. And today, the thief of the Ion-Crystal Synthesis Generator."

"Ion-Crystal what?" Valent gave the leopard a puzzled look as he continued feigning ignorance.

The metal prongs of the rod were pressed into his chest, sending a strong electrical current through the red panda's chest, making him shout in pain. The rod was pulled away, leaving Valent panting.

"Don't act stupid with me. I know what you did. I know you hired some thugs to steal the generator from right under my nose," the leopard gave the red panda a menacing look, pushing the rod threateningly at his throat, "And I want some answers. Now, where is the generator?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I don't know what this generator is, much less where it is. Just let me-*Argh!*" Valent screamed as another surge of electricity coursed through his body.

"Call the dragon in," the leopard ordered. There was the sound of the door opening as someone came into the room.

"Hello, Mr Redfale," the blue dragon nodded.

"Irzak?" Valent glared at the dragon, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm working for Mr Chief Police now," Irzak grinned, "I told them all your plans. 'Box Bust', the tech research, everything."

"But why?"

"He gave me an offer I couldn't refuse. Which isn't hard, considering how much of a skinflint you are," the dragon scoffed, "And after we get the generator, I'm gonna get my share of-*ack!*" he coughed blood onto the ground, staining it with splatters of red. A knife was sticking out of his neck where Corin had stabbed him. The leopard pulled out the knife, letting the dragon's body fall limply onto the floor.

"Moving on," Corin said casually as he wiped the bloodied blade of the knife on a dirty rag before sliding it back into its sheath, "Now that we have cleared up that you're responsible for the missing generator, let's talk."

Valent bowed his head in mild frustration. There was no easy way out of this situation and he knew it.

"Let's skip the chase and cut straight to the point. I know you hired two mercenaries, this 'Kazuki and Tyrian' duo, to infiltrate the Azure Skulls' base to steal the generator. What do you want it for?" the leopard brought the electric prod close to Valent's chest, making his fur stand from the energy.

"I wanted to get my hands on the technology to stay ahead of the competition," Valent admitted.



"For your research?"

"Yeah."

The leopard scoffed. "And you'd steal from a criminal to those ends?"

"Said the raven to the crow. You utilized similar methods to obtain the generator. And to what cause, I wonder."

"Hah. For reasons nobler than yours," Corin snorted, "What do you take more for?"

"You have many traits. 'Noble' is not one of them. Besides, you lack the necessary technology to even use the generator."

"See? Peasants like you won't come close to imagining what the genius mind can conceive. Narrow-minded, the whole lot of you."

"And what would be the grand scheme of events has your 'genius' mind come up with then?" the red panda asked sarcastically.

"When I tell you, you'll see it for the genius it is," Corin seemed full of himself as he explained, "See, this generator isn't just a generator. You're a scientist so you should know how a synthesis battery works. Hypothetically, if we reverse the polarity of the battery and feed its power back into itself, we get-"

"An explosion," Valent interrupted, "But with a capacity like that, you're going to get an explosion the size of-"

"Deonde, and then some," the chief of the police force smirked.

"But why? What are you aiming to accomplish?" Valent argued.

"See, the government is taking us for granted. Cutting funding from us. Many good men lost their jobs because we can't afford to pay them enough. And what, am I supposed to sit back while gangs run rampant in the city while the police force dwindles in numbers?"

"So I will blow up Deonde. Chalk the whole thing up to a terrorist attack. Then the government will have to see just how important local security is. The benefit is twofold: one, we get more funding for the police force, something we should've gotten years ago. Two, we clear out the scum of the city and start afresh. Like a phoenix, a new Deonde will rise out of the ashes. It will take years, maybe even decades to rebuild. But we will rise to greater heights, unburdened by the wretched criminals that plague our streets.

"You're crazy," Valent mumbled.

"What did you say?"

"You're cra-argh!" the leopard held the prod against Valent's chest for a good ten seconds. Ten seconds of screaming filled the room. And then silence.

"You were saying?"

---

Various surveillance monitors mounted on the wall of the concrete room were splattered with drops of blood. The source, a corpse with a circular hole in his neck was bent over the table bleeding all over the keyboard. Behind the body stood a black cat with a metal spike in his hand and a white wolf with a sling bag at his side.

"So this Cube is supposed to blow up the whole of Deonde?" Kazuki turned from the screens to Tyrian as the latter kept his upgraded Needle.

"Apparently," Tyrian shrugged, "What's next?"

Kazuki picked up a walkie talkie off the desk and held the button. It played a beep sound and the wolf spoke into it with a gruff voice, "I want everyone in the control room. Now."

Within minutes, gang members were charging into the room, only to stop dumbfounded at the corpse at the table. Suddenly, the metal door swung shut and the digital lock engaged. Kazuki stepped back from the electronic keypad. The door wouldn't be opening again anytime soon.

"Let's go."

The duo dashed down the corridor, heading to a specific door that they have plotted based on the bunker blueprints. Kazuki slammed the door open and burst in just in time to see Corin get out of the storage room.

The leopard reacted quickly, pulling out his gun and aiming it at Kazuki. The wolf, however, was faster. He fired at Corin, forcing the police chief to dive for cover. To the leopard's surprise, Kazuki's gun continued to fire in rapid succession, powered by the wolf's electric charge.

"Drop the gun," Kazuki demanded and the police chief complied, hastily getting up in the corner of the room. Just then, the storage door opened, revealing Tyrian and Valent. The cat had teleported into the room and freed the red panda.

Corin's eyes switched from the escaped prisoner back to the wolf's gun. His face was contorted into one of anger: angry at his three attackers, angry that he was defeated so easily, and angry at his foiled plans.

"State your demands," he said curtly.

"We don't need anything from you," Kazuki responded flatly, "We're just going to take our leave."

"We got the door open, chief. We're on the way," a voice announced through the walkie talkie. The leopard took advantage of the distraction to crouch down and grab the gun, firing a shot at the red panda's feet. Valent fell over in pain, clutching his bleeding foot.

"Looks like your plans will have to change, gentlemen," the leopard declared smugly as he got up and dusted himself off, keeping his gun trained at Valent's head. The sound of footsteps got louder and five gangsters stormed the room, pointing their guns at Kazuki and Tyrian.

"Tell me," Corin smirked, "Why shouldn't I kill you three right here and now?"

"Because we have the generator," Kazuki reached into his sling bag and pulled out a cubic metal frame with a cylindrical core, "And if anyone fires, I will charge it up with my electro-pulse."

The leopard was taken aback for a moment before composing himself and glaring at the wolf. "You wouldn't dare," he seethed, "You'll-"

"Blow up the whole of Deonde, yeah," the wolf finished coldly.

"Grr..." the leopard growled. "Fine. What do you want?"

"You give us Valent and I give you this generator on the condition that you give us an hour to leave Deonde before you blow the whole city up."

"Wait!" Valent shouted, "You can't-"

"Mr Redfale, our mission now is to rescue you. Deonde is not our priority here," Kazuki cut him off before turning to the police chief, "Do we have a deal?"

Corin scoffed. This was too easy. "Fine," he conceded, giving Valent a kick towards Kazuki, pushing both the red panda and the cat towards the wolf, "And the generator?"

"Here," he handed the generator to Corin.

The leopard looked at the generator in his hands and guffawed. "You really are naive, aren't you? Men, guns."

The gangsters in the room raised their pistols, aiming them at the three of them.

"You really think I'd let you go after that show of insolence? You three are not walking out of this bunker alive," the leopard grinned, "But since you've kindly delivered the generator to me, let me tell you what's going to happen."

Tyrian rolled his eyes while Kazuki glared at the chief of police.

"In three day's time, a mechanical charger will power the generator and then the whole of Deonde will be no more. By then the whole police force—me included—will conveniently be away for overseas training, along with their families. Those left behind will die, along with the rest of the city," the leopard explained, "A regrettable loss, but a necessary one, I'm afraid."

Valent snorted.

"I hope you three have had your fun because it's the end of the road for you," the leopard grinned, "Men, fi-"

"Now!" Kazuki shouted as he aimed his palm at the generator, charging it with electricity. Then everything happened in a blur. There was an explosion. The concrete ceiling crumbled and fell

over them. Then the shadows rising up around the three of them. The angry police chief charging at them. Then darkness.

---

Kazuki opened his eyes to the aftermath of the explosion. Tyrian and Valent were getting to their feet next to him. They were in a concrete corridor at the entrance of the underground bunker. Beside them, a wall of rubble blocked the corridor that led into the rest of the bunker.

"Gngg..." Corin's voice grunted. He was on the ground, pinned down by the rubble that had fallen over him.

"So you're here too," Valent limped over to the leopard.

"Rub it in, will you?" Corin snorted.

"Oh, I'll do more than that," the red panda taunted back.

"Ugh, you can gloat later. Just help me out of here," the police chief groaned.

"I don't think so," Valent sneered before turning to Tyrian, "Hand me your karambit, if you don't mind."

"Wait! Stop! What are you doing?" the leopard looked at the red panda nervously. There was a strange aura in the air as the red panda made the dagger hover over his open palm. Kazuki and Tyrian watched in interest; Valent was another power-user.

"Ah, how the tables have turned. Let me tell you what's going to happen," the red panda smirked, "I'm going to kill you. Then I'm going to get out of here and report the whole incident to the police. How we were both kidnapped. How we were tortured. Electrocuted."

"No! You'll regret this! Stop!" Corin begged.

Valent ignored him. "But," he continued, "We managed to escape. Unfortunately, along the way you were tragically killed by the Azure Skulls, leaving only me to live and tell the tale."

"Look, I'll forget the whole thing. No charges, no investigations. Life will go on like nothing ever happened. How does that sound?"

Valent stepped closer to the leopard.

"Money. I have money. How much do you want? Ten thousand? Twenty? Fifty? Hundred? Come on, don't do this."

Valent stepped closer still. The leopard felt his fur stand as the red panda's aura surrounded him.

"Please! I'll run away. You'll never see me again."

The red panda flicked his wrists, levitating the knife into the air before-

"Help! Please! I'm begging you! I have a wife. I have three-" the blade plunged into the top of Corin's skull silenced him.

"What a pity; the Azure Skulls were so ruthless," Valent floated the dagger out of the leopard's head and stepped back to examine the pool of blood that had started forming around the corpse. Kazuki and Tyrian looked on in silence.

"Thanks for the rescue," Valent turned to them with a smiling nod, "I take it Rha sent you two?"

Tyrian nodded back.

"And if she promised a generous reward, rest assured that I will deliver," the red panda affirmed, "This mission went well, although I do regret the loss of the Cube."

Kazuki smirked, "Mr Redfale, you do realize we're still in Deonde, right?"

"Your point?" Valent looked at the wolf with a puzzled expression, "Wait. If that was...then the whole of Deonde would be...wait a second."

"The real generator is safe with us," Kazuki grinned, "So we're collecting the other half of the payment."

Valent stared at the duo incredulously. Then he broke into a smile.

"Really, you two never fail to impress."

---

A year had passed since the three had first met. Since then, Redfale Technologies had since come up with a new line of high-performance engines meant to extend the mileage of electric cars to the point that they could compete with or even outperform patrol cars. Redfale Technologies immediately monopolized the market, leaving its competitors behind in the dust.

In the meantime, Kazuki and Tyrian had found a more permanent position: working for Valent as his bodyguards. On the side, however, Valent would get them to help him further his reach in the underworld to help him control society in ways a corporate company could never do by itself.

To this end, the red panda had some legal documents forged, giving them new identities as law-abiding citizens of Deonde. With their new legal statuses, the duo rented a quaint apartment in the suburbs, a change from the old scenery. Their apartment was now furnished with both Tyrian and Kazuki's belongings, the latter of which Valent had arranged to be retrieved from his previous apartment's landlord.

Things were going well for the three of them.

"Good job everyone, let's wrap up and call it a day," Valent spoke into the microphone of the public announcement system as he watched into an observation room below him, almost twice the size of the one in his underground labs, "I think we'll reach a breakthrough tomorrow. I can feel it." Ever since Redfale Technologies had grown, Valent had moved some of the less-

classified and more legal aspects of the research over to the Redfale Skyscraper. Behind him were Kazuki and Tyrian, watching the scientists pack up and leave with mild interest.

"Let's head off," Valent smiled at them, packing up his laptop and notes before leading them out of the lab. They met Rha ("See you guys!") as they strode down the corridor towards the elevator lobby. A glass elevator was waiting for them and the trio rode it down, sailing past floors of research labs, office spaces, and other function rooms until they reached the ground level.

They exited the elevator, walking past smiling scientists who greeted them on the way out ("Goodbye, Mr Redfale.", "Have a good one, Mr Redfale.") before they exited the building and got into an armoured sports car. Tyrian took the seat in the front as the chauffeur while Kazuki and Valent set at the back.

"Let's go home," Valent nodded and they took off. Within twenty minutes, the familiar structure of the villa rose into view and the car stopped at the drop-off point in front of the door.

The three of them got out of the car and a fox butler greeted them ("Welcome back, gentlemen.") as he opened the grand double doors of the villa.

"We'll take our leave then," Kazuki bowed but Valent stopped them.

"Can I have the pleasure of having you two for dinner tonight?" the red panda asked, giving them a charming smile.

Kazuki looked at Tyrian who nodded back. "Sure," he accepted, blushing as he did so.

---

After a grand dinner, dusk found the three relaxing in the villa's grand lounge. In the middle of the room was a circular, waist-deep recess that perfectly housed a doughnut-shaped couch. A set of stairs on one side of the couch lead down to the lower level where a circular coffee table sat.

The trio was lying down on the couch, huddled against each other as they watched exotic fish swim in the aquarium built into the ceiling. The light shining from above the tank was retracted by the waves in the water, casting pale blue ripples of light over the darkened room. Classical music was gently playing in the background, adding to the calm of the room.

Kazuki was lying down between Tyrian and Valent, leaning against the cat's shoulder while the red panda caressed his chest through his shirt.

"So what's the occasion?" Kazuki asked.

"There's something I wanted to ask," Valent smiled, "Perhaps of great importance."

The wolf got up and looked at the red panda attentively. "What's it?" he asked.

"We've known each other for quite some time now," Valent said, "And I feel comfortable in your company. In fact, I really enjoy it a lot."

Kazuki blushed in response. He didn't know where the red panda was going but his heart was already starting to beat faster.

"I know this is a huge offer, so I'll give you some time to consider; but would you two like to move in with me?" Valent proposed.

"W-wow, that's a big decision to be making," the wolf admitted, "Can you give us some time to decide?"

"Sure, take all the time you need. I can give you a week to consider," Valent agreed.

Kazuki's eyes met Tyrian's and the cat rolled his eyes but nodded back. The wolf turned back to the red panda. "We accept," Kazuki grinned.

"That certainly is a fast decision," the red panda grinned, "I must say, I'm impressed. So when do you want to move in? If tomorrow is not too much of a rush-"

"Tonight," the wolf laid back down on the couch, "Let's move in tonight."

"Sure," Valent looked thrilled, "I'll make the arrangements."

The three of them enjoyed each other's warmth, taking in the music and the rippling water. Everything felt calm. Everything felt right. Tomorrow would bring new adventures. But tonight, they would treasure each other's company as they were slowly lulled to sleep.

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~ End ~