*Warning: As a reminder, you are 60 DAYS overdue on monthly rent, and currently owe 1,248 Pc as of March of this year. Failure to reimburse Juniper Apartments Inc. within one more month may result in prosecution, up to and including eviction and seizure of property.*

I let out a frustrated groan. Another damn notice from the landlord.

I found it flickering on my front door’s screen, and the excitement traveling all over my tense body short-circuited. The frown on my ashy, feminine muzzle creased down even further when I swiped it aside, pressed my palm on the screen to unlock the door, then stepped outside to see a continuing downpour. Another press of my thumb relocked it automatically. Though I still had the good sense to make sure it locked and didn’t misread my fingerprint.

“Good morning, Toby,” called out one of my neighbors down the open-air corridor, an always-tired human in his mid-thirties. “How’s life going for ya?”

“Pretty good,” I lied. “You?”

“Eh, the bosses are having me work another long night shift later,” he shrugged as I walked by. “I can’t wait to finally afford an ani-coding procedure soon.”

“You’ll love it,” I didn’t lie. Before leaving for the central staircase, I decided to mention, “Just don’t eat anything before. It’ll give you a nasty ache.”

A sudden gust of heavy wind drowned out his response, and we went our separate ways. I walked down a crowded street as the cold air swept over the glass skylight dividing the subfloor residences from a twilit sky camouflaged by low-lying clouds. They snaked around tall, densely packed buildings made of neon adverts.

My steps were impatient. At least the earlier rainstorm had calmed down to a stable trickle. My heavy boots splashed through almost every puddle as I hugged my rain cloak closer to my white-furred chest, dark-furred tail occasionally thrashing at large droplets or avoiding brushes against the concrete. I desperately wanted to punch something. I steeled down the growing anger though.

One sigh, then two.

“Three-hundred more credits,” I whispered beneath the mask protecting my muzzle. “How am I gonna make three-hundred more credits? More hours? Ugh. Fuck.”

Thank gods that the Fearless Fitness wasn’t a longer trek. In fact, it was the biggest reason I signed up for a gym membership. It didn’t require taking a transit pod across Persephone’s only metropolis colony. If anything, I considered it an early part of the main workout. No matter the weather, I could simply walk several blocks between tall skyscrapers whose top glass floors barely touched the permanent sunrise at their incredible heights. That day was no different, hugging my cloak and wading past humans and animalistically-coded persons of every species, all of them living their complicated lives on a tidally-locked exoplanet over thirty lightyears from Sol.

During the ten-minute walk from my home to the concrete building I visited three times a week, I liked imagining life somewhere else. Twilight City was once a penal colony based on the terminator zone of Persephone, the habitable second planet in the Lyra System. The closest neighboring system to ours was ‘New Eden’, formerly known as Gliese 581, and they were populated by religious fanatics, while Twilight City—and Persephone as a whole—had millions of citizens who were the descendants of criminals. My sperm and egg donors were the exception, having emigrated from Alpha Centauri to be larger fish in a smaller, less cosmopolitan pond.

I made it. The automatic steel-and-glass doors welcomed me in, and hot air-conditioning with hints of sweat in the air wafted over my cloak. The hood went down and so did the mask. I blinked at the harsh lights embedded in the ceiling, then groaned at the line of people waiting in front of the reception desk, with the sounds of crashing weights and intense music echoing from the large room to our right. It didn’t help that a short canine and a few others joined behind me.

Little by little, the line grew shorter. My plans for a quick workout, followed by a long evening spent dreading/recovering for the next job shift, started to dramatically wane. Someone in line walked away before my eyes wandered. A tiny part of me wanted to give up.

Instead, I admired some motivational holo-posters from afar. Then, tail swishing impatiently against my ankles, I stared boredly at one of many large TV screens playing sitcom reruns or interstellar news; a new Secretary-General had been elected back on Earth. Several celebrities changed their species, announced new virtual films, or got married. An anti-Martian protest on Venus transformed into violent rioting. More faraway depressing shit.

In local news, the Twilight City Police Department planned to continue tackling gang warfare. A witness for an upcoming mob trial went missing. Vandals destroyed a historic statue earlier in the year, with Twilight City’s governor standing on a podium and unveiling a newly designed replacement while condemning urban destruction. He mentioned several donors being responsible for the funding. There was applause all around.

Behind the governor, I spotted three familiar figures; two middle-aged humans, a male and female in matching dresswear that cost more than my monthly rent, plus their smiling daughter. If she still had a twin brother, he’d look uncannily like her. Combed black hair, bright blue eyes, and perfectly white teeth our parents insisted on having flossed every meal, even after a small snack. Nobody in the Kensington family had flawed teeth.

Memories tried resurfacing. Particularly of her brother on that day, when he finally became me. When I got the procedure to go from a human male to an ani-coded she-wolf.

Frowning, my blue eyes darted immediately away from the screen, and I surveyed my home away from home. Compared to the private gymnasiums in Twilight City’s Elysium Towers I once grew accustomed to, Fearless Fitness didn’t have expensive equipment or fitness instructors tailored to species—be it human or a variation of ani-coded. Everything was used or at least older than fifty years, but the barbells, virtual treadmills, and weights did their jobs well enough. They certainly helped me during the previous two years.

Finally, my turn. Behind the desk, a muscular vixen stood up straighter upon seeing me.

“Toby, welcome!” Mara yipped cheerfully, one eye wide and the other hidden by her Smart Monocle connected to her desk computer. “I didn’t think you’d come. The weather out there’s *terrible!*”

“It’s gonna take more than rain to keep me from here,” I laughed half-heartedly, then sighed. “Actually, could you…Could you do something for me?”

Her ears perked. “Something wrong, sweetie?”

Exhaling, I finally said, “I’ll need you to cancel my membership. At least, let it expire by the end of this month.”

The normally peppy vixen blinked, like I told a bad attempt at a joke. “Oh,” she said, then awkwardly asked, “Is…Is it because of something Fearless Fitness has done, or I did—”

“No, no, no, not at all!” I waved my paws in front of my chest. My ears splayed down towards the floor. “I just…money’s really tight right now, I need to pay my rent, and M-Way Mart’s refusing to give us raises. It’s like they don’t even wanna let us live on our own.”

“You’re not gonna try out that ‘on-site initiative’?” Mara asked, frowning with me.

“‘On-site housing initiative’,” I corrected without thinking, “but yeah, no. Not gonna happen, Mara. I’d rather work in the mines first. At least they get paid more than I do.”

She gave a sympathetic chuckle. “I’m sorry,” she said, her ears folded downward too. Her red paws went to the touchscreen in front of her, and she focused. “Truly, I am. I hope you get that raise. But if you change your mind, I’ll resume your membership, no questions asked.”

I returned her offered smile. “Thanks, Mara.”

“No problem, sweetie. For now, you go enjoy your workout.” She motioned for me to swipe my I.D. badge, giving me a final smirk before looking at the small canine behind me.

Worry and stress were shoved to the back of my mind. They didn’t exist for the following two hours. Once I waltzed from the women’s locker room minutes later, wearing knee-high shorts, fingerless gloves, plus a t-shirt with a training bra installed inside (one of my best impulse buys in recent history, even if it cost a bundle), I went straight to work. No more thinking about M-Way Mart, no more thinking of bills, rent, groceries, or the weather, let alone the past.

Station to station. Equipment to equipment. I didn’t push my muscles too far, but my subconscious tried reasoning that I didn’t push far enough. Arms ached, grime caked into my ashen fur, and sweat always trickled down my muzzle. I held my resolve though. After all, I wanted to save the last of my remaining energy for the best part, using Fearless Fitness’ Mark VI Goliath™ boxing machine.

Placed in the far corner next to a boxing ring, the mechanical wonder operated as a punching bag and opponent at six foot seven, made of a titanium skeleton covered in dense padding that left very little bruises. Well, unless someone inexperienced was dumb enough to set the settings high. Me? I settled on being a masochist, letting the Goliath’s A.I. run on a slugger setting as I let it bring out the swarmer in me.

“Ack!” My head jerked back from a hit to the nose, and I swore obscenities through my trusty teeth guards. More swift dodging followed, and I escaped a few direct hits. “Come n’ get me, ya rusty dildo! Ass-squelching piece of junk, c’mon! Hfm!”

My sperm and egg donors would’ve fainted hearing such crude language. Then again, they didn’t know the true personality of the colony city, outside their luxury dome. I learned about it quickly the day after I started living on my own.

Between solid hits, I continued muttering, “C’mon, get me! Get me! Shit—”

Swarmers often beat out-boxers using continuous, unrelenting strikes. Out-boxers often beat sluggers by tiring their opponent with maintained distance in the ring and out-running the clock. Sluggers unfortunately often beat swarmers by using pure strength alone, regardless of speed or agility. Due to broken mobility wheels keeping the Goliath stationed in the corner, nobody could use the out-boxer setting ever again. I remained stuck either fighting a swarmer like me or a slugger that hit my muzzle every twenty seconds.

Nevertheless, I got my workout. It left a bruise under my left eye, plus aches that made my arms feel like brittle glass, but it felt worth it. I scored more strikes than my previous record too. All I had left was post-workout stretching, then limping away from my powered down rival.

“Good job,” I muttered to myself, then left with a wince.

Sadly, the one-minute shower did its job a little too well. Between removing all the grime and drying down my fur coat until my form disappeared beneath the fluff, I didn’t have time to think. Dread trickled into the plastic stall but didn’t go down the drain. Within a couple of weeks, I’d no longer be able to enter Fearless Fitness. How was I going to keep fit? The M-Way Mart’s backrooms required heavy-lifting, but not enough to be called a complete workout. Besides, the other half of my shifts usually revolved around assisting ungrateful customers on the salesfloor. The closest I’d ever come to boxing would be eventually knocking my manager’s lights out if he kept deadnaming me.

Suddenly, I walked over to my locker naked and feeling sour. It grew exponentially when my eyes fell on a smaller figure in the far corner, staring at me. A short canine ten years older than me, wearing only formfitting black shorts. A fennec, perhaps? My brief glimpse had led me to notice red fox markings on his otherwise tan fur. A cross-species hybrid then.

I suppressed a groan. The locker rooms were communal, but while Fearless Fitness boasted a zero-tolerance policy about harassment, and regulars didn’t cause trouble, it didn’t stop all the perverts. Newbies were the ones to watch out for.

“Do you wanna keep those eyes of yours? I can help if you don’t,” I offered.

“I’m not staring,” he said in a rather deep, yet professional-like voice.

I turned around to face the fennec hybrid after putting my long-sleeved blouse on. “If you wanna stare at tits and ass so badly, there’s always the Web. Or the prostitutes at Madam Lilith’s.”

The nameless fennec hybrid chuckled. “Not really,” he said, shaking his muzzle. “Porn’s not for me, and the girls at Lilith’s charge too much for shared drinks. The guys are worse.”

Levity filled the tense air. “Is that so?”

He assessed me, but not in a leering way. “Ya never been to Lilith’s, huh?”

“Not really,” I said with a more relaxed shrug. “The entry fee’s too high for me, and I can always waste the money on actual dates. Besides, I…” The sour feeling from earlier returned with a vengeance. “I’ve got more things to worry about than a good time.”

“Money problems?” he inquired.

My eyes shot from the floor to the canine, whose arms were crossed as he leaned against what I assumed to be his own opened locker. Cold daggers glaring at him didn’t affect the fennec hybrid’s relaxed posture.

“Were you listening at the desk?” I wondered if I’d noticed him earlier.

“Guilty,” he confessed. Both paws raised, he clarified, “I’m not a stalker! Let’s get that straight. I’m just here for a quick workout, like you. Then I saw ya going hard on that Goliath machine earlier, and I thought I’d make ya an offer.”

Both wolf ears perked high. “An offer?” I repeated his words.

“My name’s Cayden,” he introduced himself. “What’s yours?”

“Toby,” I replied carefully. “What’s this offer? If you’re gonna tell me I need God—”

“No, no, no!” He waved his paw dismissively. “I don’t touch the stuff. It’s related to your money problems, and how you can keep working out here. And keep your place. And no longer work at that M-Way you despise. See, my boss is looking for a new bodyguard to replace his old one.”

My eyes widened slightly. “Are you offering me a job?” I asked, tail wagging at my feet.

“A chance at a job,” he corrected me. “Ya won’t be the only one going for it. We’re hosting a, uh…a small fighting tournament. We need a competent scrapper who can kick as much ass as they can protect the boss’s ass too.”

A scoff escaped the back of my throat. “If you were really watching me, didn’t you see the times I was getting my ass kicked by that Goliath?” I asked, motioning a finger to my bruise.

Cayden gave a short laugh. “You were giving that hunk of metal just as much punishment. Which is what we’re ultimately looking for.”

A stray but important thought crossed my mind. Scams weren’t uncommon, no matter where you came from on the off-world colony, after all.

“If your boss needs a new bodyguard so badly, why not hire actual bodyguards from that big union of theirs?” I asked. He paused at giving a response, only for me to quickly connect the dots. “Let me guess? It’s not exactly…legal?”

“The bodyguard union’s rules are restrictive,” he explained after a moment. “But it’s not just that. Let’s just say the boss is paranoid and convinced it’s easier to background check civilians and wannabe tough guys than that union’s best and brightest. That’s all I can say. Anyway, I heard you talking to Mara at the front desk, and heard you’re having money problems, and thought you’d be interested in our tournament. Preliminary survivors get two-thousand upfront, no questions asked, but if you can keep your ground, a level head, and survive the background check, you’ll be guaranteed a great pay, great benefits, hours, and a steady gig.”

I raised an eyebrow in his direction. On the outside, I was skeptical. On the inside though, my mind was already made up. The thought of returning to my soulless job panged my already sore body. Plus, he did say survivors of the first round got two-thousand credits. More than enough to pay off the rent without starving myself.

“Can I ask some questions? Within reason, of course,” I added. “I’m not gonna apply for a job unless I know what I’m getting myself into.”

He shrugged without giving what I said any thought. “Fair enough. Ask away then.”

“Who’s your employer?” I asked. “Is he somebody I’ve heard of?”

“Bowie Tremaine,” Cayden said.

My posture went up straighter. “The black-market dealer?”

Specifically, the CEO of Twilight Deliverance. Based primarily in Twilight City, they regularly competed with larger shipping corporations throughout the Lyra System. The M-Way managers I worked under often complained about our prices being higher than theirs. One former supervisor got fired after she was caught taking pain medication that didn’t come from the in-store pharmacy. Another coworker who used to work shifts with me often mentioned buying pirated holo-films and VR games from Earth via this underground market.

“No, he is not,” Cayden stressed those four words. My eyes wandered with his to the locker room door, which had remained closed and unmoving since we last entered. “Mr. Tremaine is a businessman, like any other.”

“Right. Right, sorry.” Rather than say I was uninterested after learning such a huge piece of the fine print, I gently inquired, “Will I be required to…kill people?”

A reassuring smile crossed Cayden’s tan muzzle. “Not unless someone tries to kill you.”

“Is it often?”

“Not since a year after I started working for him,” he said.

“How much do I get paid annually?”

With that, Cayden didn’t immediately answer.

At least, not until he fished for his smartphone from his front pocket. He stepped over across the unoccupied locker room and showed me a calculator app after typing in some numbers. Blinking once, then twice, I let out an impressed whistle. For a moment, I wondered if the mysterious canine had either given me a proposed yearly salary or his contact number.

Finally, I asked, “When and where?”

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Weatherproof, mostly soundproof, and fifty times smaller than the dome that housed Twilight City’s rich and famous, the plastic construction dome I walked towards was roughly an acre in diameter. It stood on the southernmost tip of the colony city’s outskirts, nestled between outlying apartment complexes, and a seemingly endless rocky landscape bathed in cloud-covered twilight. The shining sky loomed far away behind me as I came across the unlocked hatch, and I entered.

Eyes winced at bright lights. My boots met moist, unpaved dirt. I weaved my way around a large collection of offline construction vehicles. Beyond them were prefabricated housing units. At least one large apartment building and several large condominiums. No workers.

Cayden had recommended I not bring anything I didn’t want stolen. No smart devices, no money, no valuable items, or exterior clothing that could weigh me down. Just my workout clothes and a few wrist wrappings. The hooded cloak and muzzle mask remained at home. Not wearing them outside my apartment made me feel exposed, however. If not to protect from condensation, then to hide my identity if I’d suddenly trespassed into the wrong construction area, then sent a massive criminal fine to my front door.

The time on my cheap wristwatch said it was midnight. The closest I could find to other signs of life was overwhelming male sweat, and littered soda cans. Plus, a used condom that I avoided like an intergalactic plague.

“Did Cayden fuck me over?” I muttered to myself, snarling. “And I called off work today. That fennec douche better not have been pulling my tail, or I’ll…I’ll…huh?” My negative attitude evaporated when I walked a little further and peeked around one of the hollow condominium units. I muttered, “Well then…fuck me. ‘Small tournament’, my tight ani-coded ass…”

A large crowd of denizens stood around each other. Humans and animalistically-coded alike filled the clearing, the latter likely being workers who traded flesh for fur in exchange for jobs on a faraway colony divided by night and day. All ani-coding courtesy of Kaleidascape Cyber-Genetics. Those given the DNA of bears, foxes, wolves, or tigers would work in the Polaris District, their genetic makeup making them more immune to the unnaturally cold temperatures. Meanwhile, those given the DNA of lions, jackals, cheetahs, hyenas, or rhinos would work in the Solaris District, toiling relentlessly to keep Twilight City’s vast solar farm operational. I think I spotted a few who appeared to be second or third-generation but couldn’t be sure. A quick glance at their dirtied fur and clothing reassured me they didn’t become ani-coded for identity or fashion trends.

Between me and the crowd, a small long line had formed in front of a few important-looking figures. One of whom I recognized to be Cayden. His workout clothes were replaced by a hooded black jacket and dirtied jeans. A serious glare replaced whatever friendly banter he’d given me back at Fearless Fitness.

“Hey there,” I greeted him once I made it to the front of the line. “Nice to see you again.”

Cayden simply gave an inaudible grunt, patting me down after I lifted my arms up. He stopped after touching around my back, feeling for any weapons. “You’re good,” the canine informed me. His muzzle motioned towards the crowd behind him. “Wait for further instructions. Otherwise, good luck with tonight.” I could’ve sworn he smuggled an unnoticeable smile to me before turning to a gruff human standing behind me. “Next! C’mon, we don’t have all night!”

Yelling and chatter echoed from all sides. I could barely hear myself think as I joined in the mass of shoulders and icy glares. Some formed small cliques. Others simply stood around, talking to each other or asking questions about what brought them here. I kept to myself, remaining vigilant as we all waited for something to happen.

Not one second after the rest of us coalesced into the crowd, a shrill whistle stabbed through the loud noise. Everyone fell silent, the whistling being replaced by an amplified voice. It was Cayden’s, who stood on a large shipping container being improvised into a large platform, looking down on all of us.

“May I have your attention please?” he spoke up into a microphone held in his paw. My eye caught sight of a hovering camera drone that flew over the canine’s head. “I think we all know why we’re here. My name’s Cayden, and tonight, I’m serving as a liaison for your potential employer. Rules for tonight: no weapons at all, even the ones we couldn’t find! The first round’s preliminary, until only ten of you remain. Afterwards, the winner of a fight will go against the next in line until only one of you is chosen.”

A wave of murmurs and eager laughter interrupted Cayden. “Also, nothing goes beyond cuts and bruises!” he spoke up, “Mr. Tremaine’s not having me look for killers. If I so much as see a *single* body drop dead, I’ll personally pour liquid concrete down the responsible motherfucker’s throat, then have that same motherfucker’s corpse tossed from orbit straight into our star. Do I make myself clear?”

We all exclaimed in understanding.

“Excellent. Now, like I said, let’s start with preliminaries. Only ten of ya will be allowed to pass.” He grinned with a raised paw in the air, then let it descend, “Go!”

At first, nothing happened. Then, everything fell apart all at once. Those who decided to back out of the tournament bolted away to form a large circle around the clearing, leaving the rest of the crowd to descend into chaos. If it hadn’t been for me realizing at the last minute what ‘preliminaries’ really meant, I would’ve met my maker that night.

Ruthless violence filled the next ten to twenty minutes. Those who didn’t enter the construction dome knowing what was expected of them went down like sacks of meat. Palms struck, claws swiped, legs kicked, and blood dripped. Someone had lashed their razor-like claw nails along my back, but I managed to jump away, narrowly missing a large fist before mine connected to the ursine owner’s kneecap. He went down immediately after my other pair of knuckles struck his solid jawline.

Clawed fingers swiped the air beside me. I nearly stumbled from a kick to my shins. The earlier clawed assailant was lost in the sea of aggressors, and I kept distance from the kicker—a lithe leopard graduated straight out of K-12 school, maybe younger. He gave me the evil eye for some reason.

It was hard to out-box when other fighters in every direction wanted to knock you down, or at least tap out. However, I managed to keep a level head. I maintained distance from the larger slugger fighters, then waited for them to make a swing and perform a quick strike that immobilized them to the ground.

Little by little, the crowd grew increasingly smaller. In the corners of my eyes, I spotted the camera drone still buzzing overhead, and dozens of humans and ani-coded starting to leave the frenzy. Most limped out after sustaining a serious injury. Broken bones were the most popular, along with deep claw cuts that needed immediate attention. Luckily, it seemed that Cayden anticipated it, having a few on-site medics and doctors look at the serious cases behind the wall of bystanders. Those knocked out cold had to be literally dragged out by said doctors, with the help of a volunteering bystander or two. Meanwhile, Cayden watched us intently—he watched me intently, especially as the preliminary pool hemorrhaged.

I could feel bruises on my cheek and across various parts of my dirty workout shirt (some of the drops of blood weren’t mine). Sweat covered my muzzle and nearly blinded my alert eyes. So did a small layer of dirt, after one of the fighters had knocked me over and tried stomping me unconscious. Fortunately, I reacted just in time to grab the ankle, then twist away just as a large mass charged in my direction. It missed me by a mere inch.

The same whistle from earlier sliced clean through the cheers around us, and everyone froze. I let out an exhale of hot relief. Tortured, aching muscles pleaded for me to give out, give in to lying on the ground with the others who didn’t make the cut. Wiping drool from my maw, I stood uneasily beside the other nine ‘contestants’, all of us turning to face Cayden.

The fennec hybrid’s smile either made me feel proud or terrified of what would happen next. I couldn’t decide as the adrenaline threatened to wear off. It also felt like my heart and lungs wouldn’t stop racing.

Ten of us remained; there was me, a polar bear with a permanent frown and black sweat clothes big enough to be cut into window drapes, followed by a rhino who sneered when making eye contact with me, a tall, brutish human with scars all over his chest (most of them old, and some fresh), a lion with a bloodied nose and mane, a pair of cheetah twins in muddy denim, the lithe leopard with evil intent in his young eyes, a bored-looking hyena, and finally, a musclebound tiger dressed in what used to be a nice white suit.

“Well done,” Cayden announced after surveying us from his vantage point. “You’ve all managed to exceed expectations. For those who remain, congratulations! The night’s still young, so get yourselves hydrated and ready. Second round is in ten minutes.”

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Ten minutes went by without me noticing. After having one of the on-site medics patch up the claw marks on my back, they gave me three items I eagerly accepted: pain pills, a large water bottle I chugged down empty, as well as a piece of paper with the number nine written on it. So did every one of the other winners. I thanked whichever deity showed favor in making me the second-to-last to go.

Fortune favored me further when the cheetah twins dropped out. From what we were able to gleam from their hushed conversation with Cayden, neither wanted to fight their opponents separately, let alone against each other. I made out the words ‘we are a matched set’ in the female fighter’s argument. The fennec hybrid didn’t look amused. Still, the twins adamantly refused to reconsider in the end, leaving with their promised credits soon after.

Everyone and their mothers didn’t like this, shouting insults or taunts as they went straight for the construction dome’s exit. Me? I couldn’t stop grinning like a mad woman. Nine challengers went suddenly down to seven, without anyone getting back into the makeshift ring.

“Numbers one and two, get ready!” Cayden barked into his microphone.

The brute human and suited tiger entered the clearing. Dozens cheered the minute Cayden’s whistle blew, and their fists started flying. Both brawlers fought like sluggers, but I noticed the human—skin unnaturally pale, biceps well-defined, and his scars more visible without his discarded jacket—attacking without impulse. The tiger in the ruined business suit knew how to throw punches, clearly. However, his hidden beer belly and tired panting showed a likely gap in training. Something the human didn’t hesitate to exploit. For each attempted punch or missing swipe of his feline claws, the tiger’s non-ani-coded opponent gracefully returned in kind.

Finally, the human ended the fight with two ferocious hits to the tiger’s throat and stomach. Seconds later, the tiger waved an arm after stumbling towards a trashcan to puke his guts out.

“Number three into the ring!”

Medics examined the vomiting tiger, as the polar bear from earlier stepped past the wall of onlookers. Everyone held their breaths, expecting a bloodbath within minutes. Much to our surprise though, after the whistle shrilled again, the human held his ground. He did what I’d do and keep a wide distance, letting the larger foe make missed swings that wasted energy. A part of me wanted to see if the strategy would play out. A shame that Cayden’s employer didn’t organize a boxing match with standard rules. After five minutes, the fennec hybrid turned his microphone back on, the feedback slowing time.

“Mr. Tremaine is getting very impatient, you two,” he informed the human and polar bear. “End this round, or you’re both walking out. You have sixty seconds!”

That drone hovering above the ring displayed a large hologram. It started counting down from sixty, and it seemed to make the normally calm human snap. Suddenly, he didn’t continue the out-boxer strategy. He couldn’t. Not with the timer hanging over his shoulders. He did wait for the polar bear to strike first, then connected a fist into a white-furred muzzle.

He didn’t pull away fast enough. A big mistake, in hindsight.

It all happened in a flash. One minute, the brute human had fingers on his right hand. The next, he didn’t have them. His ursine opponent had craned his neck and quickly snapped two powerful jaws down on unprotected digits. Then, the polar bear snapped his head back, and an audible *crack* was drowned out by the human’s agonized scream.

Everyone blanched or gasped at what they saw. I certainly did. The bear spat the poor human’s severed fingers from his mouth towards the ground, letting out a blood-drenched roar as another solid punch sent his collapsed victim flying backwards into the crowd. I think squirting blood hit a few horrified onlookers. Those who didn’t care about what they’d witnessed cheered for the polar bear’s bloody victory.

One of the on-site medics saved the fingers. Whether they brought the miserable human to a hospital or treated him themselves, I never found out.

“Well, that was brutal,” Cayden announced minutes later, “Number six into the ring!”

The bored-looking hyena stepped away from the surrounding crowd. I watched with nauseous, rapt attention as he stood in front of the polar bear, his white-furred muzzle painted dried crimson and a wild look in his green eyes.

Unlike the previous round, it didn’t result in a sudden timer. The hyena was smart enough not to drag the fight out too long in hopes of tiring his larger adversary. Rather, he made sure the polar bear didn’t have time to give a single punch.

*A swarmer, huh?* I thought. *He’s not gonna make it.*

Then again, I needed to remind myself that we weren’t in a boxing match.

Much to everyone’s surprise, the hyena held his ground against the polar bear, the former avoiding the latter’s upper body and instead striking blows as far as possible from the face. A kick to the groin made the large ursine stagger. The hyena made an expressive snarl as the polar bear tried to make a biting lunge forward. Not only did he dodge the attack but kneed his opponent in the throat. Very hard.

“Aha!” The hyena laughed. “Gotcha, ya big bastard!”

The polar bear fell into the dirt, still choking and raising a paw after the hyena started giving relentless kicks to the back of his head. Everyone subsequently cheered, including me.

“Number seven into the ring!”

The lithe leopard stepped forward, but not before giving me another smug glare. It caused me to stare confusedly, then give my own sharp glare back. Who was this creep? Had I seen him before? It wasn’t like ani-coded leopards were a rarity in the galaxy, let alone Twilight City.

“I’m gonna slice that smile right off your fuckin’ face, yeen!” The leopard let out a mocking cackle, his smile unwavering. “C’mon, bitch! C’mon!”

The whistle erupted. So did the crowd, their noise drowning out the leopard’s hiss as he started giving relentless strikes that were soon blocked. The hyena held his arms up in defense until a swipe of claws made it no longer feasible. Before anyone could react, the leopard’s claws swiped above his forehead. Blood trickled down, blinding the hyena enough for him to be struck in the chest, stomach, and groin before being kneed in the throat and elbowed in the back of the head.

“Yeen bitch!” The leopard spat down at him, then flipped middle fingers at a few members of the audience booing in his direction. “Oh, go fuck yourselves! Fuck you!”

Cayden hollered into the mike, “Number eight into the ring!”

The lion with a blood-stained mane didn’t wait for the whistle. Even so, the leopard was prepared; he performed the same strategy of blinding his opponent, then punching his head until the fellow feline collapsed into an unconscious heap. If disregarding the whistle hadn’t caused him to lose the fight, then ignoring the leopard’s strategy immediately did.

Again, Cayden hollered into the mike, “Number nine into the ring!”

My narrowed eyes connected with the rabid leopard’s, who seemed to purr excitedly upon seeing me. “Finally, I’ve been looking forward to this,” he said. “I can smell your fake cunt a mile away from here.”

“Do I know you?” I asked, half-annoyed and half-concerned.

He cocked his ears up. “Don’t recognize me, he-bitch?”

Blood boiled underneath my skin, yet I didn’t let him see how much it angered me. If Elysium Towers’ expensive boxing lessons ever taught me anything, it was to never let your enemy see weaknesses. Be it physical or psychological.

“Not really.” I feigned a shrug before tensing my raised fists.

“You work back at that M-Way,” he said. “Me and my buddies were having fun last month, then ya had to ruin our night by getting us arrested. And banned too!”

I remembered. The urge to suddenly attack before the whistle rang felt strong. “You were spraying paint on merchandise,” I barked at him, frowning. “You’re just a sad little punk who—”

The whistle rang. My leopard foe practically flung himself at me in milliseconds, narrowly hitting my temple with his claws. An elbow nearly connected to my ribs, but I was faster. I was older too, more trained and precise. Whatever experience the leopard had under his belt couldn’t compare to what I once gained in Elysium Academy’s All-Star Boxing Club.

“Get outta here and go back to M-Way, he-bitch,” he tried intimidating me.

The cheers around us faded to background noise, along with catcalls and individual jabs about me being an ‘exposed’ transwoman. He attempted a punch, missing, only to leave a sharp claw scratch on my cheek. I growled at feeling pain, as well as small spurts of blood.

“You’re better off back in retail, pretending to be a woman!”

Again, he tried using his claws. I anticipated it, snatching his wrist and bending it downward, my right knee hitting his whiskered nose. “I *am* a woman!” I spat.

He made another blind swipe, and I punched him in the jaw. He lunged, and I let him slide past me, using his miss to twist an arm around his back and pressing my own arms rigidly to the throat.

“And that’s *she*-bitch to you, *pussy*!” I barked into his round, boiling-hot ears. “Tap out!”

He tried struggling, snarling and hissing as my arm applied further pressure. His free paw flailed around as a striped tail thrashed between our torsos. Those fast legs couldn’t connect to mine. It wasn’t until another holographic timer appeared via the drone that the desperate leopard started acting more like a cornered animal.

“You’re the one calling me pussy, tranny?” he managed to say between short breaths.

“Mine’s better than any pussy you’ve had,” I snidely retorted. “Or have!”

He let out a curt snort. “Very funny, he-wolf—Ack!”

I squeezed down harder. Whimpering left with the remaining air in his throat. The nameless leopard’s eyes bulged out, and his claws reached down to dig into my thigh. I could smell and feel blood. My knees gave out, but I didn’t let go, instead bringing the punk down with me to the dusty earth.

“Tap out!” I shouted into his ears. “Tap out! Tap out! *I said to* fucking *tap out!*”

At last, he let go of my knee and raised a paw high into the air.

I shoved him away. His gasping for air got drowned out by the loud whopping and chanting of ‘she-bitch’ coming from all sides. Several onlookers raised their clenched paws high when I did too, with some laughing and pointing at the leopard.

He didn’t say anything. Merely gave me the finger, called me several variations of the c-word, then roughly pushed and shoved his way through the crowd. Presumably to nurse his pride more than his wounds.

“Number ten into the ring!”

The musclebound rhino approached with the same unchanging expression. He towered over twice my height and wore immense clothes like the earlier polar bear’s. Sizing him up did little to boost my confidence. If anything, it caused my tail to curl and every single hair of fur on my body to stand straight on end. He wasn’t just big. He was massive. One brutal punch from him would result in me being taken to the E.R. If not on a stretcher, then in a rehabilitation home’s hover chair.

“Just get outta here while you can. Before things get messy,” he huffed before colliding his knuckles together. “You got lucky earlier, but we both know you can’t beat me.”

Some would blame it on the adrenaline rush clouding my judgment. In any scenario, I would’ve walked away. A smarter decision for most, but not for me. Not after everything I did to survive the preliminaries. Either I had a death wish or an undiagnosed concussion. Whatever the case, my steely blue eyes didn’t waver from staring daggers back into his.

“Maybe,” I said after refastening my wrist straps. “Do me a favor though: don’t fuckin’ hold back.”

His sneer morphed into a respectful smirk. “You got it, girlie.”

I almost thanked him for calling me by my correct gender. He was an utter gentleman compared to that leopard. The whistle had other plans though, and the towering rhino stampeded with a descending fist.

My dodge felt natural. Nimble on my toes and sly in my returning punches, I knew I couldn’t just outrun the clock. Not like in a regular round of boxing. My potential employer wanted a fighter who could take down their antagonist quickly. So, I improvised.

*Go for the pressure points! And the joints!* I thought. *Points and joints, points and joints!*

One small obstacle came with the plan, however. The rhino not only took advantage of his height and weight, but his horns too. I wondered if he ever worked in the Solaris District one day in his ani-coded life. Otherwise, the sharpened protrusion at the end of his nose would’ve been shaved into a stub. Not into a makeshift machete that tried impaling me each time he leaned down to punch me, then I tried striking him in the wrist, arm, or even face. Only to open myself up to a strike from the longer horn.

His fist collided with my face at one point. I remember letting out a wounded yelp, sounding like the wolf species I resembled. Pain flared along my ashen muzzle as I flew backwards, my shoulders hitting random paws belonging to onlookers. They screamed in my ears before propelling me forward. It took immense willpower not to fall to the ground, my head swaying as black dots and bright stars danced across my vision.

A holographic timer appeared once again, the drone hovering over our heads as the rhino approached me. “Ya done yet?” he called out.

Using my tongue, I moved my loosened tooth back into place, the copper taste in my maw keeping me alert. When I didn’t respond to his question, he swung and missed. Swung and missed. My hackles stood on end with the fur on my hide.

Fifty seconds.

Sweat flew off our arms and foreheads.

“C’mon, tap out!” he grunted, again trying to hit me.

My knuckles started to wear down the power in his arms. His elbows weren’t as fluid as before. His knees visibly staggered even harder each time I laid a steady strike—be it with my paws or ankles. There wasn’t enough time though!

Forty seconds.

In hindsight, the following plan was uncoordinated and impulsive. Stupid too. An idea came to mind, and as soon as I had distance from my now-urgent opponent, I lifted my shirt off. Thank the gods above for sports bras.

The catcalls, confused shouts, and dumbfounded jeers didn’t register. The rhino either didn’t care or had tunnel vision, because he didn’t hesitate to steamroll towards me. I did too, tightly gripping my workout shirt in my left paw. During which, I feigned a right hook, enticing him to lean down and thrust his horn forward like a fencing lance.

Twenty-five seconds.

The bait was taken. Instead of delivering that right hook, I launched into a slide. My smaller body slinked between his legs, and my elbow collided with the family jewels. He skidded to a halt, hunched over and groaning. So did our watching, sympathetic audience.

Twenty seconds.

I did not give him a chance to recover. I launched myself onto his back, grasping both ends of my shirt, and started to strangle the rhino.

Fifteen seconds. The shouting around us rose in tempo. His attempts to shake me off or blindly backhand me were in vain. Not even as he started shaking his body with rabid motions.

Twelve. Eleven. Ten.

Nine. Eight. Seven.

Six. Five. Four.

A gray-skinned hand rose in the air, and I let go, falling backward to the earth.

The sounds of cheers and people chanting ‘she-bitch’ registered in my ears. My eyes stared up in disbelief towards the tall, bland ceiling of the construction dome, then the camera drone that hovered away. Presumably to Cayden.

Next, I spotted the rhino staring down at me. His frown formed into an amused grin, then extended a bloody-knuckled hand. I accepted the offer and was lifted off the ground. We somehow managed to exchange some small talk.

“Good fight,” he said, handing me my dirtied workout shirt.

“Good fight.” I nodded. “And thanks. Sorry for that dirty tactic.”

A few of Cayden’s men came to me. They grabbed me by my sore arms and shuffled me through the crowd as they started to disperse. It all happened so quickly; they wouldn’t even let me try to resist. I wasn’t able to hear what the rhino’s following words were, but I could guess.

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I was taken to a parked limousine sitting outside the construction dome. A sleek new model resembling a smooth, obsidian stone that hovered off the metal track embedded in the road. A large section of it opened wide for me with a soft hum.

The guards didn’t go for their own cars until I entered. They let me put my shirt back on before stepping inside, at least. Then, the passenger side door closed behind me.

Everything ached all at once the moment my tail end met the soft velvet cushions. I couldn’t help myself from running a thumb along the heavenly material, then stare in awe at the familiar features on the circular seating.

“This looks expensive,” I murmured to myself.

“It is, but not enough to worry you’ll ruin the fabric, miss.”

My eyes darted to a hunched figure sitting on the other end of the limo. The voice came from him. A tall ani-coded feline, what some would assume was a Siberian tiger, in an expensive business suit as black as his stripes. I could tell from the low-level lighting just bright enough to illuminate the interior without blinding us. His icy blue eyes scrutinized my reaction.

“Do you recognize me?”

“Yes,” I stumbled with my next words. “You’re…You’re Bowie Tremaine.”

The limousine started moving. “Correct,” he said, giving the subtlest of nods and professional smiles. “Congratulations on making it to the final stage, and for not hesitating to do whatever it took to survive. You were impressive, and quite resourceful.”

“Th-Thank you, Mr. Tremaine,” I replied. A nervous chill went up my back when I spotted tiny turrets embedded in the ceiling corners. They were security measures, I guessed. “I’m h-happy to hear I impressed you.”

“You also followed instructions perfectly. The last time my men held one of these tournaments, the challengers either didn’t fully commit or ignored instructions altogether.” He held up a tablet, then surveyed whatever was onscreen. “My men did an extensive background check on you, and I never got to look over what they found…”

Goosebumps formed on my tired arms, and I willed myself not to stare too long. The elite of Twilight City did not venture outside of Elysium Towers, not unless their job descriptions said so. Still, the news channels loved displaying the criminal exploits of dashing criminals. Such as the Terranova syndicate back on Earth, the Alessandros, the dreaded Clouded Leopards Cartel, and speculation about local gang warfare. Whatever made the protected elite feel dangerous. The only time I recalled seeing Bowie Tremaine’s hardened face was in a police mugshot shown during a news segment on black markets across the galaxy.

“Your name’s Toby Earhart, yes?” I nodded, but before a reply could be said, the tiger lifted his head from his tablet, examining me like a puzzle. “Is it true that you used to go by a different name: Tobiah Benjamin Kensington? Son of Persephone socialites Jonah and Marie Kensington, and twin brother of their daughter, Chloe Kensington?”

I gulped. A cold, dreadful sweat trickled down the side of my neck. Lying would be a fatal option to take, especially after getting so far.

Mr. Tremaine examined me. “Well? I expect an answer from potential employees.”

My gaze wavered and then grew cold as steel at the older feline. Whatever nervousness I felt went away as I spoke. “Tobiah’s dead,” I said coldly. “He might as well be a different person from another life. But yeah, I went by that name until I went to Kaleidascape’s office and asked for a two-phase procedure.”

“Changing species and changing gender,” he mused, not reacting as I firmly nodded across the ten-yard space between us. “Records show that you moved out on your eighteenth birthday, then moved into a small bedroom apartment before becoming a midlevel sales associate at a small M-Way Mart. Quite a dramatic change for the eldest child of human socialites…I take it they didn’t approve of you changing species?”

“They didn’t approve of me changing genders either,” I confirmed. Memories began resurfacing, again. “My sperm and egg donors…They wanted the perfect son, but Chloe was their golden child who could do no wrong. I got zero sympathy when I struggled, studied, and suppressed my true self, my real self. When I turned eighteen, at that point, I didn’t fuckin’ care and went to Kaleidascape anyway. I had to. I…I didn’t care what happened.”

Of course, I didn’t think my parents would be so brutal though, so callous, in disowning me. I should’ve expected it. Coming home from the procedure to our apartment led me to a shouting match that disturbed the rest of Twilight City, then being given a packed suitcase, a one-way transit ride, and a final allowance to my card that proved they never wanted to see me again. Not in their home, not on the floor where we lived, or even in Elysium Towers, if my rejected applications for the district’s smallest apartments told me anything.

So, I gave them their wish. To them, their only son was dead.

“I am sorry to hear about that, Toby,” Mr. Tremaine said. “I truly am. No parent should ever discard their own because of who they truly are inside.”

A stray thought came to mind. “So, you don’t mind that about me?”

For the first time, I saw him appear offended. “What makes you think that?” he asked. “Do you identify as a woman?”

“Yes.” The single word flowed out as naturally as oxygen.

“Will it interfere with your ability to protect me?” he asked, “Or protect yourself?”

I gave him that steely look again. “No.”

He inanely shrugged. “Good enough for me.”

A sigh held hostage was let free, and my tail wagged.

“Now,” Mr. Tremaine told me, “I wish I could say you’ll never meet any such prejudices on the job I’m offering you, but it would be a lie. In the office, at least you’ll be treated with the respect, dignity, and honor that is expected for all my employees. Outside the office though, I can’t make any promises. Some will be disrespectful towards you. My enemies, rivals, punks, and potential allies won’t hesitate to hurt you any way they can.”

“I understand,” came my reply.

“I hope so,” he retorted. “You may have won this job but consider the next year or so your probation. Now, my current bodyguard’s retiring soon, but he’ll show you the ropes. Full training and knowledge of being a bodyguard outside of the official union. I won’t make you do anything illegal, but I expect you to sign a non-disclosure agreement. I will expect nothing but the best from you. Not only are you gonna make sure I’m safe and sound, but so is the Twilight Deliverance group, its employees, and the customers we serve throughout this city.”

From a nearby bar, Mr. Tremaine poured a glass of red wine. While sitting back down, he made a motion of his broad feline head towards the seat adjacent to him, and I complied. Even though my body protested getting up from one comfortable spot to another.

“Are you up to this next challenge?” he asked, handing me a drink. “Cayden seems to think you’re up for the job.”

I stared down at the red liquid sloshing inside my circular glass. It reminded me of blood at first, but thanks to the interior lighting, it started shimmering neon. My bruised reflection stared back, completely different from the scared, helpless she-wolf from the beginning. I wondered if Tobiah Kensington would have predicted the decision I’d ultimately make. A decision that would change my life forever. For better, for worse, and for mine alone.

I grinned brightly. “When do I start, and what else do I sign?”

Mr. Tremaine looked at me like a proud father, his ears high and tail wagging against the cushion between us. He held out his own filled glass, and we clinked them together.