

Lavishly decorated, the professional office space itself was quiet as the LED lighting fixed into the gold-colored chandelier provided artificial illumination. The massive windows behind the desk, with curtains pulled open, gave an impressive view of the gardens outside while the half moon and hundreds of stars shone in the night sky. With the door having been left ajar, the muffled commotion of some sort of social gathering elsewhere in the building barely echoed into the room. Having slipped away, however, a single individual stood alone within the office.

Along one wall was an assortment of various awards, plaques, and diplomas along with an impressive collection of various whiskey brands and glasses. Despite the grandiose nature of the beautifully polished, wooden desk and the expensive leather desk chair, the room's sole inhabitant had his attention diverted elsewhere. Opposite the wall of awards and drinks was a small library's worth of books neatly arranged on shelf after shelf stretching the length of the office and reaching from floor to ceiling. However, the coyote's attention was fixed squarely upon the steel door that had been hidden behind a section of the bookshelves.

Having pulled away the first door meant to hide the vault door behind, the coyote could not help but grin ear to ear while rubbing his hands together with mischievous glee. Installed in a panel upon the steel wall next to the door was a keypad with a digital display. Screws littered the floor and the metal frame had been pulled away to gain access to the electrical components beneath; he had already taken the liberty of connecting a spare tablet device which now hung clumsily from its port. Lights on the small display above the keypad had been going positively haywire as the coyote's associate worked remotely through the device.

The canid himself was dressed in a black tuxedo and pants with a pristine white shirt underneath. Some non-prescription glasses had been set over the bridge of his muzzle while a black bowtie fit snugly around his throat. What others might miss was the earpiece fitted into his pointed, left ear. Waiting and watching the buffering symbol on the tablet he had connected, the coyote would frequently cast cautious glances toward the door if he so much as heard the creaking of the well maintained, wooden flooring. However, despite what mild reservations he had about the situation, he could not stop his tail from wagging back and forth at a slightly faster than normal pace.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon! I ain't got all day!" the coyote grumbled, practically snarling with impatience. His complaint was met with the familiar, annoyed sigh of one of his

companions coming over his earpiece. Ignoring his colleague's mild irritation with his lack of discipline, the canid reached up for the bowtie around his neck. Beneath the soft fabric, the claw atop his index finger pressed down on the hidden microphone button before he called out, "Circuit? I'm waitin' here."

"Give me just... one... second..." came another voice, somewhat masculine sounding, in the coyote's ear. As his hand fell back to his side, the canid groaned loudly and frustratedly. He turned to the door at the sudden sound of raucous laughter coming from the party he had left behind before a brief silence. Though quiet, and uninterested, he could barely make out the voice of the event's host calling out to the rest of the guests; it seemed that the evening was quickly coming to a close. Gritting his teeth while the fur on his back stood on ends, his attention was immediately brought back to the locked vault in front of him as the mechanism within groaned loudly. In his ear he could hear his companion announce in triumph, "Bingo!"

A toothy grin worked its way across the coyote's muzzle as the lock within the vault clicked open. His tail whipped back and forth as the tablet beneath the keypad displayed a small green pop-up window over the lines of code. Just reading those two words, 'access granted', always brought a certain ecstasy to the canid's mind. Before he could even approach the now unlocked, metal door barring his way from the treasures he sought, the coyote could not help but allow himself a slight celebration.

"Aha, ha, ha! Yes, yes, yes! We did it!" he called out loud, one hand activating the device around his throat while the other was busy fist pumping the air excitedly. Having collected himself enough to focus on the task at hand, the coyote then proceeded to approach the door. That same goofy, ecstatic grin spread across his face remained, perhaps having grown even wider, as he reached out for the handle to the door. Firmly grasping the padded grip in one hand, he then turned the handle whereupon the door released with a click. Pulling back on the handle, the coyote's eyes had gone wide at the sight hidden behind the bookshelf of the office.

"Well? What do you see?" came a different voice in his ear, this one feminine and calm.

"Yeah, man, don't keep us in suspense! What're we lookin' at?" another called out from the device, another man's voice with enthusiasm to match the canid's own.

His associates' voices seemed to have fallen upon deaf ears, however, as the coyote stood stunned in the doorway. He was not even sure he was still breathing, tail having gone stone stiff, as he took in everything the vault had been keeping secure within the wall. Each wall of the hidden room had been lined with shelves holding beautifully crafted, gold- or silver-plated designer wristwatches and jewelry contained within immaculately polished cases. Expensive looking artwork, both pottery and paintings, lined the top shelves. Finally, what really caught the canid crook's attention was the delicately sculpted glass bottle of some vintage wine he had never even heard of sitting atop another desk just as absurdly classy as the one in the office behind him.

"Oh, you lot won't believe this till' you see it! We hit the motherlode!" announced the coyote after several more seconds of awestruck silence. Swallowing whatever hesitation, or overt exhilaration, may have been slowing him down, the canid knelt down to grab the duffel bag he had sat by the secret door within the bookshelf. With nothing holding him back anymore and the mixed approval of his associates in his ear, the coyote entered the vault and went to work boxing and snatching up as much as he could possibly fit into the bag.

"Hey, remember that the client is paying us to grab the documents and leave the package. Grab what you can but make sure you take care of that," came the first man's voice over the earpiece.

"Gimme a minute, Circuit! I'm like a kid in a candy store here!" the coyote returned jovially. He was now entirely lost in the moment, the thrill of another heist job on the verge of glorious success. Every case taken from the wall, the lid shut with a satisfying thump, was the equivalent of gold bricks in his eyes. The only issue the canid thief had was recognizing that not everything could fit into that one bag he had brought. Even still, the goods he would make off with would fetch him and his crew a generous pay day.

"Oh, so you're like yourself anywhere else then," teased the second man's voice in his earpiece.

The parking lot to the venue was mostly quiet with the guests still inside. From the driver's seat of a freshly waxed sedan, a badger leaned back into the seat with a snide grin across

his face and hands crossed behind his head. Looking toward the entrance of the estate, the valet staff stood idly chatting with one another and smoking cigarettes. Movement could be seen through the many first floor windows lining the front of the manor as the guests mingled. Despite a certain thrill tickling the back of his spine after hearing the news from his canid companion over their shared communications, he was content to sit and wait in the comfort of the car.

“Oh, ha, ha. Well, you keep the motor runnin’; this ‘kid’ has your retirement fund in his bag,” came the coyote’s voice over the radio set fixed into the sedan’s console. The badger snorted amusedly at the response his slight jab had received. Rolling his eyes, both hands were brought down, one resting on the door at his side while the other plucked a cigarette from the half-empty pack in the cup holder between the seats.

Fitting the butt end of the rolled paper in a gentle bite between his teeth, his hand then dove into his pants pocket to retrieve the cheap lighter he carried. Striking a small flame, the badger lit the end of the cigarette. As a bright orange glowed at the end of his bad habit and the lighter was set aside, the mustelid took a long draw of the smoke before plucking it from between his lips. Exhaling the breath he had just pulled in exhaled a large plume of dark smoke into the sedan. As the badger went back for another taste, his eyes noticed the odd behavior of the staff at the front door.

“What the—?” he muttered aloud as he sat up straight in his seat. He noticed that the three characters manning the station at the front of the estate seemed somewhat panicked, one pointing toward the road. Turning his gaze to follow where the valet was directing his companions, the badger observed just what it was that seemed to prompt some sort of alarm from the three uniformed employees.

“Hm? You say something, Axel?” came the female voice over the radio.

Axel felt the cigarette fall from his lips, the burning end bouncing off his pants before tumbling to the floor of the vehicle. Ignoring the slight sting in his thigh, the mustelid gawked at the familiar sight of blue lights flashing. The wail of sirens screeched into his ears and only grew louder as those bright lights approached the establishment he and his companions were visiting.

In a barely controlled panic, he grasped the microphone to the radio and lifted it to up to his muzzle.

“Dammit! Cops are here!” Axel exclaimed into the mouthpiece just as the police cruisers pulled into the parking lot near the front entrance of the manor.

“What?!” came the female’s voice in disbelief.

“How could they know anything?! We did everything right!” the coyote snapped incredulously in response to the announcement.

“E-everyone c-calm down! W-we, we, we just g-gotta... S-stick to the plan,” Circuit instructed uneasily.

“The plan didn’t account for the cops!” barked the coyote, a low growl rumbling in the badger’s ear. The mustelid grit his teeth as both hands had flown to the steering wheel. A vice-like grip now held tight to the sleek, leather covering.

“J-just d-drop off the package a-a-and get out of there, Steele!” came Circuit’s voice, his stuttering and anxiousness readily apparent in his speech. Surprisingly, despite the timidity in the other man’s words, a long and defeated sigh could be heard coming over the radio.

“Damn... I was really enjoyin’ myself in here...” Steele replied, clearly troubled that his looting had been interrupted. As a silence fell over the communications channel, Axel watched as police stormed into the manor. Guests had slowly begun filtering out from within, the badger could tell the crowd was confused and alarmed by the sudden appearance of the officers despite the distance from where he sat. His ear twitched slightly as the radio crackled to life again and Steele’s voice called out, “I’m headed out now. Iris, how’s things look downstairs?”

Despite how entertained the partygoers spread throughout the ballroom seemed to be, a tigress stood near the large window that looked out into the parking lot. Dressed in a form fitting, black dress and dark gloves that reached along her forearms, the tigress looked back over her shoulder and into the streetlamp lit lot. Her focus had shifted from the speech coming from her host and the laughter of her fellow guests the instant Axel had warned the crew of the imminent arrival of the law enforcement.

Gently swirling the champagne glass she held in one hand and staring blankly at the approaching police cruisers, the tigress simply sighed. While her companions continued to ramble in her ear, the large feline drained the last few swallows of her drink before setting the glass down on a nearby table. Allowing herself a moment to reposition her handbag and straighten her dress, Iris began to move through the swarm of attendees toward the back of the ballroom while reaching up to the disguised earpiece that appeared to simply be her earring.

“Not good. Lights on just outside the windows and cops just swarmed the place. Try finding yourself a backdoor,” Iris replied to Steele as she gently pushed her way through the crowd that was now listening to the police officers instructions. Reaching the opposite end of the hall, Iris swiped another glass of champagne from one of the confused serving staff before pushing through a door leading into a corridor.

“N-no, no, no... T-this can't be happening, this can't be happening,” Circuit's voice rang in her ear. Despite her companion's terror, the tigress moved though the hallway with a sense of cool collectedness. While the threat of the law was merely a ballroom's distance from her, Iris maintained the level head that the crew expected of her as she pushed her way through another door and into a storage room of sorts.

“Circuit, put a stop to the panic and get your ass to the car,” Steele ordered.

“R-right, right... I-I'm g-go—,” Circuit had started to say before his voice suddenly cut out.

Upon hearing her teammate's radio silence, Iris quirked a brow. Still moving through the storage, the tigress waited patiently to see if the crew's fourth member would chime back in. However, the deafening silence, broken only by the muffled sirens out front of the mansion, had started to chip away at Iris' resolve. Just as the large feline reached the far door to the room, her replacement champagne glass now drained, she lifted a clawed, glove-covered hand up to her earring-earpiece.

“Circuit? Circuit! Respond!” Iris called out.

“The hell? Connection's been cut! Were we set up?! Iris, get out of there, now!” replied Steele's voice. The revelation left a bitter taste in Iris' throat. With a deep breath, however, the

tigress gripped the handle to the door she stood in front of and pushed it open. Upon opening that door, however, the large feline was nearly blinded by multiple bright lights fixed on her position.

“Hands, now!”

“Steele... they... they got Iris... Where the hell are you?” Axel had called out to the coyote. Steele padded down the hallway from the office, only ducking into a bathroom to momentarily hide as officers began to march up the staircase from the first floor lobby. Once the group had passed and with a sigh of relief, the coyote resumed his impromptu exit from the estate.

“Second floor hallway; I can see the parking lot. Just gotta find a way down with all this...” Steele replied to his sole remaining ally as he approached a window at the end of the hallway. From this vantage point, the canid could see not just the car the crew had arrived in, but at least a dozen cruisers and the entire guest list standing around confused and shocked by the sudden raid. Not only that, but Steele grunted annoyedly at the sight of a tigress and an armadillo being pushed in cuffs to a large police van.

“Just pop open the window, drop me the loot. You’ll have an easier time without that slowin’ you down,” Axel instructed.

“Yeah, okay. I’m gonna drop it in the bushes out the east side; you should see it from the van if you’re lookin’,” answered Steele as he began to undo the latch on the window in front of him.

“I see you, just hurry your ass up already!” Axel’s voice snapped into his ear.

As Steele lifted the window, a pleasantly cool fall breeze drifted into the corridor. The curtains on either side of the window had been picked up in a slight dance while the commotion from the parking lot had grown significantly louder. Uninterested in whatever chatter the guests were discussing below, Steel slipped the duffel bag filled with treasures off of his shoulder. Carefully, he dropped the hefty bag from the window and into the well-trimmed hedge below him.

“Alright... just... gotta find myself a way down,” Steele said into his microphone as he watched a shadowy figure dive into the bush where he had deposited the loot.

Axel was quick and stealthy on his return to the car, had anyone of the attendees noticed the badger then they certainly had not thought anything of him. As his companion returned to their getaway, Steele found himself fixating on the van in which both Iris and Circuit had been forced into. A fury burned in the back of the coyote’s head and a tight fist pounded the side of the windowsill. As though his fist had been the ignition, Steele noticed the sedan the team arrived in begin to pull away.

“H-hey, hey! What the hell, Axel?! Axel!” Steele stammered confusedly, his gaze now locked upon the car in which he was meant to be leaving the manor grounds in depart from the parking lot.

“Sorry Steele, but I ain’t waitin’ around to get myself caught. Guess I am retirin’!” Axel’s voice replied in his ear before the sedan pulled out onto the road and disappeared into the night.

“You son of a—!” Steele had started to shout only to find that the connection had been severed.