

## Ari's Pursuit: Into the Badger's Burrow

*This place reeks...* Ari kicked over the coffee table, scattering fast food wrappers and expended ChemVape canisters onto the carpeted floor. Open disgust drove an irritation within her furred frame, her ears flattened as she looked down at the silvery canisters. She crouched down, and pulled out her PDA. Shimmering emitted from the glass tablet. An interlacing web of light flickered over the exhausted canisters.

*Zzzt-Zzzt* There was no match for DNA. Ariana let out a sigh.

The holoscreen broadcasted a shimmering white light across the room, and her ears folded back to continuous static that blared through the infotainment console's synth speakers. She moved into the kitchen, and grimaced. Her hand covered her snout as watering eyes took in the grotesque rot within the fridge, open and unplugged. *No way I'm getting a latent scent. Whoever was here has dealt with us before...*

Turning, she ventured to one of the rooms, PDA in hand. A tension crawled up her spine. *Who are you hanging around, Nikita...*

She pushed the door and felt a brief resistance before it opened. *Click*

Ari's eyes widened as a font of liquid sprang from the darkness like a hand reaching for her face. Her hands, with a deft swiftness, raised her jacket to shield her precious features. The fluid splashed across the leather, sizzling and hissing as it began burning the tanned hide clothing. "Mother fucker..."

Ari jerked the sizzling cloth from her body, panting and checking her arms and chest. Cool air kissed her furred torso now clad in only her white tank. She didn't see any acid burns. Green hues slid shut as she let out a shivering breath. Large holes still smoked at the edges of the ruined clothing.

"My favorite fucking jacket... I'm gonna kill this bitch." Sighing and with ears flat, she turned toward the open doorway. There didn't seem to be any other surprises. She entered the room, lifting her PDA. A bright light shone into the darkness from the glass tablet. Eyes traced the tripwire attached to the door to the expended spring loaded trap across the room. *Yeah... this person's smart. Too smart to be hanging around Nikita.*

Ari checked the personal console. *Wiped clean.*

Her finger drew away the desk and she raised it to her eye. *Six days at least...*

Green eyes were drawn to the purple and silver glitter coating the bed. She pulled back the covers, finding a pair of panties. Brows arched, she grimaced as she held it before her snout.

Ears folded back in disgust and a dozen childhood memories flooded her mind. Ari shook them from her mind, black and white locks swaying across her shoulders.

*Ugh.. yeah, that's my sis...* Ari slipped the panties in her pocket. The less evidence here, the better. Her head tilted, looking down to a small card or something similar.

*Yeah... that's my sis...* Her eyes rolled and she leaned down. Collecting the paper, the husky woman's curled tail wagged slightly at the clue she'd uncovered. Green eyes studied the markings, but there was no address or business name, only a bunny rabbit symbol at the top and a matrix sequence. *I'll have to analyze the code back at my car... see what it turns up.*

A shuffling in the other room pulled a fluffy ear toward the door. Ari straightened and her hand gripped the cylinder of her tazey stick. Stepping to the edge of the doorway, she focused on the sweeping light of an electric torch. Sharp green eyes measured the distance, the timing and the footfall of the lamp wielder. Turning the corner, her eyes locked on the man. For a moment, time slowed for Ari's perception, her green eyes thin rings around wide pupils.

It was a calico cat. He was portly, his face displayed with a mixture of shock and fear. He was shorter than her, his outstretched arm clutching his pistol in a grip far too tight. The golden glint of light on the badge on his coat outlined the letters Z. P. D. etched into the surface. Ari's verdant eyes narrowed with irritation. *He left his safety on... idiot...*

His outstretched arm deflected with her prod, Ari swept in close. The situation was already too confrontational, and she would need to de-escalate from a position of dominance. She knew this as slipped beneath the chubby cat man's wildly telegraphed swing. She drew the shaft of her tazey stick against his neck, cranking back while kicking the back of his knee. His weight fell against her grip, and she let out a shaky breath, adrenaline pumping through her monochromatic form. Her voice growled.

"Easy there, Badger... I'm a Growler, Tracking and Trapping."

*Bullshit... Growlers are all down at the Daiku factory...* The officer thought as he struggled against the rod pressed over his throat. The pressure in his head intensified. "Mmf... auth code?" He groaned.

"Zeta Nine Phoenix, you want my extension too," Ariana's throat rumbled with malice, and she tightened her grip. *Little shit...*

The officer went limp in her hand as he processed the Growler authorization phrase. He tapped her knuckles, relaxing his body against hers, and Ari eased the pressure, releasing him.

"Fuck," He let out an exasperated pant, his paw like hand rubbing the soreness from his adam's apple, "I thought I was a goner. Thought the Syndicate had me blind in the light."

Ari reached down, collecting the police cat's side-arm from the ground. "Yeah... well you woulda been, walking around with your safety on. Guess it's your lucky day."

Green hues flicked to the amber eyes of the portly man and she handed him back his weapon.

"Yeah... Debs, my uh.. My partner. She says the same thing," He sighed and slid the weapon into the holster on his belt. Offering a paw, his whiskers twitched as a sheepish grin spread across calico striped face. "Corporal Julian. Ron Julian. My friends call me Arjay."

Ariana slid her electric prod back onto her belt and folded her arms, looking over the room. *There probably isn't much else here...*

"What are you doing here, Corporal? I can tell by your body odor that your shift ended hours ago," Ari scoffed and drew her hand through her hair. *I need a shower after this shit...*

"I... uhm," His brow arched, clearly put off by the open hostility of the husky woman. A bitter taste bit at his throat, but he fought through the swill, "I'm following a lead... A hunch really. Related to that Syndicate shoot out."

Ari raised an eyebrow, and her hand gestured for the calico officer to continue.

"Well... my cousin Stacey works a valet down on the lowers. She said she seen the car from the shoot out; parked over here a few nights a week. Purple painted, chrome runners, and a big rumbler under the hood. A real beast of a thing. Hard to miss, up here. Well, I found the building super and he said everyone but this unit was month to month, but this place was paid for the whole year. Seemed kinda sus."

*Syndicate... doesn't seem like Nikki's cup of tea...* Arianna processed what the man said. She wasn't working on the Syndicate case. MilGov was being real tightlipped on whatever was there. Her finger fished into her jean pocket, and she produced the receipt stub.

"Recognize this, Corps," Ari asked, holding up to the glare of the holoscreen. The cutesy pink bunny reflected on the surface.

"Yeah, that's a receipt stub for The Hopping Hare. It's a Syndicate club tied with some of the local chapters. They move locations every few days. Makes it harder for their rivals to push on em," He said, This was as much a clue for him as it was for this Growler. His eyes flicked over her furred form clad in white tank top and dark jeans.

"Uhm... speaking of rivals... what are you doing here, Miss...," His voice pitched with suspicion. If MilGov was involved so directly, then there was a good chance his hunch was paying off. But he'd seen the Growlers on the Syndicate case. This woman wasn't one of them. *What's a Growler like you doing so far off the beaten track...*

“That’s classified... and... it’s *Agent Ari*. You know where we can find this club,” Ari asked, her curly tail gave a slight wag as she watched the officer’s face shift from concern to curiosity. *Everyone wants to be helpful... no one wants to be disappeared.*

“Y..yeah. Yeah, I know a few people who could probably point us in the right direction.”

Ari nodded and slid the receipt stub back in her pocket. Collecting the ruined remains of her jacket from the ground, she stepped past the officer. Pausing at the doorway out, she rolled her eyes and gestured toward the exit.

“You coming, Arjay?”