



# ***A Prelude to Pilfering***

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The Brrrgh wasn't Lynn's favorite place in the world.

She didn't understand how any Toon could stand to walk down the icy streets in nothing but a t-shirt and shorts. Even the slightly warmer fabric of her sweatshirt was no match for the biting chill. Though she guessed that a good pair of boots might have helped her in that regard. Maybe that would be her next investment.

Her strolling led her to the entrance of the Warm and Cocoa-zy, a quaint little joint where, on rare occasions, she indulged in a piping hot mug of cocoa.

Oh, the days when she was just a little Toon, traveling between Neighborhoods with no worry of bumping into a Cog in her wanderings. Now it was a matter of sticking to the sidewalk while avoiding eye contact with the Back Stabbers and Spin Doctors at all costs. What she wouldn't give to see a Toon whacking those



Cogs in the face with a pie right about now.

No time for that, though. Reid was waiting for her.

Lynn swung the door to the restaurant open, basking in the nice, warm interior of the building.

“Ahhhh. Much better.” Lynn spoke as she shook off the chill and proceeded to the counter. The Toon behind it didn’t speak much, only continuing to clean the mug in front of them. She leaned in close, resting her arm against the finished wood. “Say, pal. Haven’t seen a koala come in here, have you? Greenish-yellow, yea tall, cute little tuft of hair on her forehead?”

She was met with silence.

Ok, guess she wasn’t going to get anything out of them. Or maybe...

“Need a Reid-Stock?”

The shopkeeper didn’t speak; they merely tapped their foot twice on the floor below them. Lynn stared questioningly for a moment until POP! The floor beside the shopkeeper flipped open to reveal her dear friend Reid. Before Lynn had the chance to speak, Reid quickly pressed her finger to her lips, and motioned for Lynn to follow her. Lynn leapt over the counter, minding the ceramics around her, joining Reid on the other side of the floor.

The trap door was quickly shut behind them, leaving the two Toons alone in a cozy, wooden nook.

“Hiya, Stock. Didja miss me?” Lynn was quick to wrap her arms around Reid, pulling her in for a giant hug. Reid was quick to reciprocate, her grip even stronger than Lynn’s.

“Howdy, darlin’. Didn’t have too much trouble gettin’ here, did ya? Any Cogs on yer tail in need of a little roughin’ up?” Reid asked.

Lynn giggled. She was glad to see Reid.

“Nope, you’re in the clear. Guy upstairs needed a code word though. You put him up to that?” Lynn gestured to the room above. Reid shook her head.



“Nope. Glad I taught ya that phrase. Thought lettin’ em’ know you were comin’ was enough, but guess we’re stickin’ to the rules. Safer anyhow.”

Reid gestured toward the side of the room, where two chairs and a table were set beside a window. Upon inspection, the glass was half-buried beneath the snow, allowing for just a foot or so of the street above to be visible to the occupants. On the table sat two cupcakes. Vanilla bean with sprinkles: Lynn’s favorite. She eagerly took a seat and bit into the confection. Home-grown. As suspected.

“All right, Stock. I see you sweetening me up, but you still haven’t told me why we’re meeting in this rinky-dink bunker. I don’t suppose you have a reason for that?”

Reid’s smile faded, tightening in a line as she took her seat opposite Lynn.

“Course I do. Resistance Rangers need a way o’ keepin’ eyes on the street away from any passin’ Cogs. I ain’t one o’ them any more, but I still got connections, and I’d rather no Cogs hear what I’m wantin’ t’ ask ya about.” Reid rested her elbows on the table, folding her hands and resting her chin atop them. Lynn gulped.

“Got it,” Lynn stammered, “Ask away then.”

Reid heaved a sigh. She suddenly appeared to be very, very tired.

“I know you’re plannin’ on raidin’ that Cog hub up top of Twilight Terrace again. Just what are you plannin’ to do when you get up there?”

“Oh! I could have sworn I already said something about that.” Lynn rubbed the back of her neck, doing her best to avoid Reid’s gaze. She was sure she had discussed this before. Near Halloween? Or was it-

“You did. But I need to know exactly what yer plannin’. I don’t wanna hear another, ‘easy peasy, sneak in, grab stuff, sneak out.’ I need supply lists. Names o’ other Toons involved. Any details



you can give.”

There was a pause between them. Lynn could only stare at the floor under Reid’s scrutiny. What was she supposed to say? All of her plans were played by ear. Of course, Reid would know that. She was clearly digging for something deeper.

“Heh, cut-throat as both a businesstoon and a friend, huh Stock?” Lynn let out a nervous chuckle. Reid didn’t move. Lynn continued. “I don’t really have that much to share. I was gonna do it on the fly, same as I usually do. I got out last time, I can make it out again. I’ll figure it out!”

“That’s what I was afraid of.” Reid buried her face in her hands, dragging them downwards. Lynn hated seeing her like this, especially knowing she was the cause. If there was one Toon she never wanted to disappoint, it was Reid, and yet here she was.

“Stock-”

“Lynn, you can’t be throwin’ yourself at the Cogs so recklessly like that! Do you have any idea how lucky you were to have made it out last year? I was worried sick that they were goin’ to send someone out to find you! Take you! Do who knows what to you!”

“The only Cog that even saw my face was a WIMP! He didn’t bother with that; he whined at a bunch of other Toons who relayed his message for him. He didn’t even learn my name, Stock. All we are is a nuisance to them, and to be honest, I’d like to continue being that.”

“So you’re gonna leap right into the fray without a care in the world? Risk everythin’ for some petty pot shots?”

“Well, annoying those buckets of bolts is better than just sitting there and letting them do whatever they darn well please! I’m not Resistance, but Stock, I have to do SOMETHING.”

“NO you DON’T!” Reid stood from her spot on the table, knocking her plate to the floor. The two of them stared at the pastry that had fallen, the frosting splattered across the wood



paneling. Reid's shoulders dropped as she went to grab a napkin. She casually wiped up the spill, remaining silent the entire time. Lynn stared into the distance, waiting for Reid to finish.

How much labor had gone into taking care of the tree that grew that cupcake, she wondered. How long would it take to grow another one, were it to fall?

Lynn snapped out of her thoughts as Reid sat back at the table, still looking troubled, albeit a bit embarrassed.

"Sorry. Lost my temper." She spoke curtly.

"No, no. I'm sorry. I know I'm being petty, and you're trying to stop me from being dumb." Lynn took Reid's hand in hers. "I just...I'm sick of this. I'm sick of them. Aren't you?"

Reid didn't say anything for a while. She took her time, collecting herself as she watched the snow fall outside. The look in her eye seemed to show that she was somewhere else. Somewhere far away.

"Lynn, do you remember Elvis Purrsley?" Reid finally turned her gaze back to Lynn.

"Vaguely. I remember seeing the missing posters, though." Red cat, 5'2", a few more details that escaped her. She could at least remember the pompa...dour...

Oh.

"Well, Lynn," Reid continued, "he was a friend o' mine from the Resistance. Back when I was involved with the Lawbot infiltration side o' things. We weren't the closest o' close, and heck, I kinda hated him when he was first recruited. Told anyone who asked that he was only there to push his 'celebrity image.' Still, as time went on, he grew on me."

Reid's grip tightened in Lynn's. Lynn squeezed back. Right. Cog HQs. A familiar bad taste was left in her mouth.

"I only really talk about this with the other Rangers, since it's...touchy. But Elvis was with us when one of our final operations went...wrong. We'd made so much progress, down to



carvin' through that HQ and findin' the Cog they'd left in charge. Come to find out they'd been settin' up a whole new structure behind the scenes, and our Cog of Interest was only a part of a larger equation. All our work. For nothin'." Reid slapped her free hand on the table with a light thud.

"Hey, hey!" Lynn reached up to cup Reid's face. "If this is hurting you, you don't have to keep talking about it."

"No, It's all right, Lynn. I need to finish."

Reid took a deep breath.

"We'd gone in for an ambush, but right at the end, we got jumped. Scout, Vinny, Elvis, and I were low on resources. Cornered. Goin' for the retreat. Then Elvis...he..."

She was trembling slightly now; Lynn felt her heart break a bit.

"He loaded himself in our last cannon, and shot himself directly back at the enemy before any of us had a chance to stop him. He made the openin' for us to get outta there, but as far as I know, he gave his life for that chance. Trust me, I never stopped searchin' but... it's been years, Lynn. I don't know if he's ever comin' back."

The moment the tears began to well in Reid's eyes, Lynn practically leapt out of her seat to wrap her arms around her friend. If only she'd known. Man, she was an idiot, no wonder Reid was so worried! How long had she been holding this in? Surely she talked about it with the other Rangers. She had to. Even then, though...this wasn't the type of wound that would ever fully heal. She knew that much.

"I can't let you end up like he did, Lynn." Reid spoke quietly, struggling to maintain an even tone. "Security's bound to be tighter this year. What if you're caught? What if this is the year he finally gets fed up and takes it out on you? On other Toons? I couldn't save a Toon that was 10 feet in front o' me, how could I save you if you got lost in there?"



Lynn heaved a sigh.

“You’re right. I know you’re right, Stock.” Lynn pulled back, looking her friend in the eyes, “and I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I ever hurt you.”

Reid rubbed the last of her tears away, her sadness morphing into frustration.

“Then why do I get the feelin’ yer still plannin’ on breakin’ into that stupid office?”

“Because I’m stubborn. Same as you.” Lynn let her friend go, taking her seat again. She laced her fingers together, lightly shaking her hands as she collected her thoughts. “Stock, I know I don’t have any good justification for breaking in there. Like you said, it’s dangerous. But I can’t let myself do nothing, and the Resistance isn’t about to recruit me after last year. Besides, I don’t think you’d let them, even if they wanted me.”

“Yer right. I wouldn’t.” Reid kept a stiff posture. It was the cold shoulder now.

“If I weren’t running my business off these Cogs,” Lynn continued, “I’d be mooching off of other Toons’ generosity. As much as I know a lot of Toons who are kind and willing to give, they’re already losing more and more of what they have to the Cogs with every passing day. Petty theft is dangerous, sure, but it’s the only way that I can give back. What other use would I have?”

“You could run the Gag N’ Go with me. I’ve told you, my door is always open-”

“Stock, you’re the last person I’d want to ask that of. Look: I know you’re right, and I know you brought me here to talk me out of this. You have every right to. But I spent years traveling after my last shop went out of business. I tried so hard to find anything fulfilling, and I just ended up right back here. I finally have a niche. I’m growing something from the ground up, and it’s actually taking off. I can’t just let this opportunity pass me by, because if I do, then what other use would there be for me? Aside



from just being a leech.” Lynn curled in on herself, keeping her gaze on the floor. There it was. Out in the open.

“Lynn, you’d never be a leech-”

“How am I not already? The clothes we’re selling aren’t even mine to sell! This whole thing we have going is eventually going to end, and I need a cushion. You deserve better from me, but please. Just this one time. Let me do this.”

Reid sat on that for a moment, returning to her seat and finishing her cupcake. The silence made Lynn itchy. She hated this feeling.

“It sounds like you have bigger issues that you need to talk out, but in the meantime, I’ll meet you in the middle. I won’t stop you, provided you do exactly as I say. Is that clear?”

“YES!” Lynn shot up. “Yes, absolutely, anything I can do to make this more comfortable for you.”

Reid gulped, slightly taken aback.

“I shouldn’t be enablin’ this,” she stammered, “But. I need you to bring recruits. Several of them. And not any ol’ Toon off the street, someone I can prove can hold their own in a scuffle.”

“Done and done,” Lynn said with a smile, “I think I know a few Toons who I could bargain with.”

“Not just any Toons, Lynn. I’m vettin’ them myself. Send ‘em to me with a task or two. A way to prove their ability or somethin’. Speaking of, you need to bring supplies. Two-way radio between you and the other Toons, extra portable holes, and extra Gags. Plus whatever I think you need. Might need time to make a list.”

“I’ll...stock up.” Lynn gave her a wink. Reid couldn’t help but snort at that, in spite of the serious tone. It gave Lynn a small sense of pride.

“Now, now, I’m bein’ serious, Lynn!” Reid attempted to regain her composure.

Lynn smiled, gesturing for her to continue. Reid closed her eyes.



“Finally.” Reid finished. “This will be the LAST time I see you pokin’ your nose inside that headquarters.”

Lynn was about to protest, but she could see the hurt in Reid’s eyes. This would already be something extremely uncomfortable for her to accept. There was no need to make things worse.

“...If that’s what you need from me, Stock, then this will be the last time that piece of pleather or any hunk of junk in that place even hears word of me.”

Lynn got up from her seat and wrapped her arms around Reid. She was reluctant at first, but gradually let Lynn lean into her.

“I’ll be as careful as can be. I’ll leap out at the first sign of danger. No Toon is going to get hurt. I promise.”

Reid huffed.

“You better stick to that. Worryin’ me sick, and here I am lettin’ you.”

“Because you looooooove me.” Lynn shook her lightly, burying her face in Reid’s shoulder.

Reid let out an exasperated laugh.

“Suppose I do.”

