

Sideways

The fog was so thick it would be impossible to drive without the sensors of his rigged vehicle. Thermal sensors showing the road and anything with heat in the soup. The temperature difference between the road and the swampland around him highlighting his passage in his sensors. With a feeling of power, he accelerated through the dark woods, heading toward his safehouse. An old garage that was built back in the 1980's.

Loveland, Ohio was an aging town that had been moving towards becoming a slum. Corporations and Megacorps ignoring the town. Only small ma and pa stores remained in this once pristine town. Broken buildings and burned out cars dotted the streets making it harder to drive through, but making it a better hiding place after a run gone wrong.

The black van pulls into the garage then lowers down into the ground as the building 'collapses' on itself, looking like a pile of rubble. Over the speaker in the back of the van, a mechanical voice wakes the passengers, "We're here."

The first to rouse is a large troll with a bright pink mohawk and glistening black horns that framed his hair. His leather jacket was studded with steel studs and what looked like shark teeth. The back of his jacket had a picture that depicted a shark jumping out of an exploding volcano. For this job he was known as Mr. Pink.

Next to come out was a small dwarf with long purple hair. Her hair seemed to be glowing and pulsating to some unheard music. She was dressed in a short black dress that had some spell linked to it turning this little dress into a powerful armor. The only obvious tech was a datajack over her right temple. She was known, for this job, as Mrs. Black.

The next person to come out of the van got out of the passenger side. She was the opposite of Mrs. Black. This elven lady was tall, slender, with an athletic build, and radiated beauty and charisma. She was dressed in a modest business cut suit that was from head to toe white. Her raven hair standing out across the white of her clothes. They were perfect, or would be if it wasn't for the splotches of red across her legs. It looked like she had been shot a few times in the legs. For this run she is known as Mrs. White.

Finally the rigger climbed out of the rig pod in the front of the van. He was a large human with multiple jacks on his skull. He was wearing what looked to be mechanics overalls. He was rubbing his temple as he climbed out, the red of his eyes and the obvious blood from his ears as signs of his recent combat to keep control of his rig. He was known as Mr. Blue for this job.

The code names and the fact that no one knew each other made it harder for this job to be done right. Mr. Johnson insisted on the setup. None of his colleagues objected because of how high

the pay was for this job. The team couldn't argue with the 50k Y each with half up front. Now though, they were all thinking they should have done more digging on this Johnson.

Mr. Blue walked over to the rest of the group and showed them where they can rest. This was one of his places after all. Mrs. White asked him, "So, Mr. Blue"

He interrupted, "Let's drop the color dreck. That was fraggin dreck from the Johnson. Call me Maximilian, like the robot from the old Black Hole vid."

"Alright," Mrs. White said, "Call me Elodie, it means White Blossom." She smiled, "This is your place?"

"One of them. We can lay low here for a while. The matrix doesn't connect here, and there is no way to track us astrally because of the background count in the area. We can worry about what to do next after we all get some sleep."

He turned to Mrs. Black, she looked at him and said, "Call me Pixelated Reaper, or PR for short."

"Alright PR. Did you hear anything on the matrix about Mr. Green or Mr. Gray before we went matrix dark?"

"The corp had them. I don't think they survived the fight, only that they were still there when the corp came in. They did call for a coroner before we were out of range, not sure if it was for our guys or some others that they hit before we lost comms with them."

The large troll moved over to Elodie, "You good or still need some healing. It looked like you took a couple across your legs."

She replied, "Well Mr. Pink, I would love some healing. What's your name anyway?"

He chuckled, it sounded almost like a growl, "My friends call me Pinkie." He laid his hands on Elodie's legs and started chanting. One of his hands grabbed one of the shark teeth on his jacket. His face took on the look of a shark, sharp teeth and grey before returning to normal. A glowing warmth spread across Elodie's legs, healing the holes in her legs.

He slowly moved toward the couch, then slumped onto it, falling asleep almost instantly. Elodie looked at Pinkie and whispered, "Thank you."

Maximilian looked back at PR, "I have a satellite uplink in the back closet. You can do general searches, but it is not secure enough to hack."

Her smile widened at the thought of being able to be back online. She jumped up and headed over to the closet to get the uplink.

Maximilian headed into the kitchen to prep some food for everyone. One of his drones jumped up off of its charger and started working in the kitchen. The humanoid like drone started cooking a meal with what was in the kitchen for everyone. After starting this, Max moved back into the Trid room to rejoin everyone else.

“Where is the package?” he asked.

Pinkie pointed to the corner where he had tossed a backpack adorned with Sojin Inc logos and a EYES ONLY label. He then mumbled, “I warded that corner when we first got here. It will hold for awhile. I need to sleep now.” and he dozed off.

The food was set out on a table by the drone that went in and started cleaning the kitchen. Max got a notification and told everyone, opting to let Pinkie sleep.

“PR, we need to contact Mr. J soon. I suggest waiting a day because I think he set us up. Tomorrow, we will call him and get this run over with.” he said.

Everyone agreed. Max gave people rooms to the ladies while Pinkie took the couch. Max went out to the van and started cleaning it up, patching bullet holes, and swapping the RFID tags to a different VIN. When he was done, he took a nap in the back of the van.

Maximilian woke to a crashing sound. He jumped up and ran back into the house, where he saw Pinkie throwing lightning spells at what looked to be a large frog.

“What the frag?”

The frog jumped up on its hind legs and crashed out the front door, sprinting away toward the park that had Lake Isabella. After a few bounds it was out of sight, behind some rubble and presumably heading to the lake.

Max went back into the house, lifting the front door and headed down into the ‘rubble’.

Pinkie was drinking from a water bottle he always seemed to have on him. He was pale and looked beat. “What the frag was that thing Maximillian?” he asked.

“No fraggin clue.” Maximillian looked around the house, then noticed the bag with the package was missing. “Did any of you move the package?” he asked the people who were now filling the room.

They all answered a negative. No one had touched the bag as they had all been asleep. Maximilian moved over to the Vid and started going through the surveillance video from the entry and garage of the safe house. Both cameras showed these frogs move through the area almost silently, walking upright. One of them even seemed to have something in its hand, a stick that seemed to be guiding it further into the safehouse.

PR was watching the vid without making a sound. Then she asked, "Did you already burn the RFID tags off of the package?"

"I did," Max replied. "But I also planted two stealth tags on it. I really don't trust this Mr. Johnson. He seems off to me, so to insure payment and no mess up, I planted the trackers. Unfortunately, unless there is Matrix connectivity in the area I don't have any way of tracking the tags.

"Can you send me the connection codes for your tags? I can have a program watch for them to come online." Pixelated Reaper asked.

Almost as soon as Maximilian sent the codes there was a hit. The lake had some Matrix connectivity around it. Probably from back when it was a place for families to go on a summer outing. Now it is in disrepair and overrun with gangs and violence.

Maximilian decided to do a little recon. "Pinkie, can you check this area out astrally? I will send a few drones over there and check it out with my sensors. Maybe you can find out who took the bag and where they are exactly." Turning to Pixelated Reaper, "PR, use the satellite uplink to see if there is any activity coming from the area. Maybe one of the gangs has built up the park and are using it as a place to do jobs out of."

"What do you want me to do?" Elodie asked.

"Watch over us as we work. None of us will be conscious. There is an Ingrahm in the closet overthere. Load it and cover us while we work." Max replied.

They all set out on their tasks and Elodie felt like there was nothing getting done, even though she knew better. Watching over people's meat bodies wasn't one of her favorite jobs, even if it was one that was important.

A few minutes into the watch, Pinkie sat up. "Frag." he said.

"What's up?" she inquired.

"There is no one there except for some small critters and those large frogs. There seems to be a group of 4 of them on the bank of the lake."

As soon as he finished telling Elodie what he had seen, PR sat up as she jacked out of VR. "There is no scannable tech near the lake. Only thing showing up are our RFID tags."

Elodie looked over at Max, who was still laying on the floor. "Ok, we wait for Max and set up a plan to get our stuff back."

There was a squeal in pain and the smell of burning flesh. Everyone looked over at Max. His Vehicle Control Rig was burning, the connection to his head burning the flesh around the plug, and blood was flowing out of his nose and ears.

"Frag!" both Elodie and Pinkie exclaimed in unison as they both jumped over to help Max out. Elodie pulled the plug out of his head, unhooking him from his drones while Pinkie started chanting a healing spell.

The VCR was toast. After doing some magical healing Pinkie stood, "He will be out for awhile, but he should make a full recovery. I can hit him with a stim patch if you want and we can wake him now. It could be dangerous for him later but we can find out what happened."

Elodie and PR both said "Do it."

Pinkie pulled out a stimpatch and applied it to Maximilian's skin. Almost instantly he sat up.

"Frag my head hurts," he moaned.

"What the frag happened?" Pinkie asked.

"I was flying over the lake when I noticed a small group of the frogs. I hadn't seen anything else so I did a flyover with both drones. Then I saw streaks of lightning heading for me and before I could get out of the drones, both were overcome with electrical current that created a bio-feedback loop. My head hurts."

"You gonna be okay to drive?" Pinkie asked.

"I can do it. Especially if we can get those slimy fraggers."

"Ok, gear up everyone. We got some hunting to do." Elodie ordered.

Ten minutes later, the team was piled into the van and heading toward Lake Isabella.

After parking in the public parking for the lake, the team got out of the van and looked at the situation. Off toward the edge of the lake, about 400 meters away, stood four large frogs, hunched down on all fours around the bag that the team came here for.

Pinkie looked around in astral space, making him feel sick. There was too much background count in the area for him to see anything very well. He felt that there was more than the frogs here, but he could not focus long enough to see anything useful.

Elodie pulled out a long rifle with a large scope on it. She looked out to the frogs, verifying that there were four of them. They seemed to be croaking in unison while reaching toward the backpack. She told the team what she was seeing and told them, "If any of those things reaches for the bag, I will drop them."

Pinkie tried to summon one of his bound spirits, turned and puked. He just couldn't perform any magical tasks while around this lake. "Maximilian, do you have any drones that will work here?" he asked.

Max got out of the van, shaking his head. "My rig is gone. I can't control any of my combat drones right now. Besides, my brain hurts."

Elodie pulls the trigger, then the crack, the head of one of the frogs explodes. "We need to move now!" she yelled.

PR, Pinkie, and Max bound forward toward the frogs while Elodie continues shooting at the now hopping targets. A second frog explodes into a flash of gore and blood, viscous and bone spraying across the remaining two frogs which turn to face the newcomers, ignoring the bag for now.

One of them pointed a stick at the group as we charged. Lightning flew out at the group, striking Pinkie and arching to Maximilian. Both flying down into a crumpled pile. Another shot rang out, connecting with the frog with the stick. Its head blew apart in an explosion of blood and bone. The final frog jumped toward the bag, trying to pick it up. Another shot and the frog went down in a heap.

Pixel ran over to Pinkie and Max, checking them over. She threw a slap patch on Pinkie and a trauma patch on Max. They would both live, but Max would have a fragging headache from drug overdose.

Elodie and PR loaded the two men into the van. Then they climbed in themselves, seeing there was no steering column, Elodie asked, "Reaper, can you drive this?"

“Let me try a direct connection.” she then pulled out her connection cable from behind her right ear, plugging it into the dash of the van. “Got it.” she said as the van started up. Then over a tiny speaker Elodie heard, “Back to the safe house?”

Elodie jumped out of the van, sprinting to the forgotten bag. She scooped it up and turned to run back to the van. She could hear splashing and croaking behind her. Not wanting to slow down, she did not look behind her.

As she was reaching the van, bolts of lightning arced passed her head. She could feel the power raise her hair. The bolt struck right in front of the van. Diving for the still open side door, Elodie made it inside. She slammed the door shut, as she did she looked at what was behind her. There were no less than 24 of those creatures heading toward them, all running and hopping at a fast pace.

“GOGOGO!” she yelled as PR accelerated the van away. Lightning was striking all around the van, just missing as PR swerved from side to side in no discernible pattern.

The van turned a corner and sped down the street. “Where to?” a voice sounded similar to Pixelated Reaper asked over a tiny sounding speaker.

“I know a place, I think the safehouse is blown. These creatures know where it is. Somehow they are tracking the bag too, so we need somewhere with a ward.” She pulls out her comlink and sends a text. A moment later she gets a response and sends a pin to PR’s display. “Here, go here. These guys will help.”

Just as the van turns into the parking garage marked on the map, another van pulls in behind them. “I think we have company.” PR says.

“They are my backup.” Elodie says. She looks over at Maximilian and Pinkie, both still unconscious from the lightning blast. She smiles, this is too easy. “Stop the van.”

PR brings the van to a halt and is instantly surrounded by corporate security, the same company from where the bag is from. Elodie smiles as she unplugs PR. The dumpshock will keep her busy for a little while.

She climbed out of the van. The nearest soldier aiming at her for a moment, then he snaps to attention. “Mam!” he yells. She smiled and said, “The three perpetrators are all unconscious in the back. The soldier replied, “Yes Captain.” then he turned and pulled two others with him to the door. They cuffed and hooded all three occupants, took the bag, and put them all in the back of one of the transport trucks.

Footsteps could be heard behind her, recognizing the sound of the steps she says, “Hello dear.” She turned and saw her husband and head of security for Sojin Inc heading toward her.

“Did you find out who the buyer was?”

“No, things went sideways. All we have are the runners, and they don’t know anything except the Johnson’s com number. Maxamilian has that.” she stated.

Sam looked her over, “The dark hair suits you, but loose the ears honey.”

She smiled. “Let's go home.”