

CALE. She did not know that the wolf was a wild sort of animal, and she was not afraid of him. One Scarlet was descending toward the alley behind the Rieux Tavern when her portscreen chimed from the passenger seat, followed by an automated voice: "Comp received for Mademoiselle Scarlet Benoit from the Toulouse Law Enforcement Department of Missing Persons." Heart jumping, she swerved just in time to keep the ship's starboard from skidding against the stone wall, and threw down the brakes before reaching a complete stop. Scarlet killed the engine, already grabbing for the discarded portscreen. Its pale blue light glinted off the cockpit's controls. The Toulouse police must have found something. "Accept!" she yelled, practically choking the port in her fingers. She expected a vidlink from the detective assigned to her grandmother's case, but all she got was a stream of unembellished text. 28 AUG 126 T.E. RE: CASE ID #AIG001558-1, FILED ON 11 AUG 126 T.E. THIS COMMUNICATION IS TO INFORM SCARLET BENOIT OF RIEUX, FRANCE, EF, TH AND/OR SUICIDE. CASE CLOSED. WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATRONAGE OF OUR DETECTIVE SERVICES. The comm was followed by a video ad from the police, reminding all delivery ship pilots to be safe and wear their harnesses while engines were running. Scarlet stared at the small screen until the words turned into a screaming blur of white and black and the ground seemed to drop out from beneath the ship. The plastic panel on the back of the screen crunched in her tightening grip. "Idiots," she hissed to the empty ship. The words CASE CLOSED I laughed back up at her. She released a guttural scream and slammed the port down on the ship's control panel, hoping to shatter it into pieces of plastic and metal and wire. After three solid whaps, the screen only flickered in mild irritation. "You idiots!" She threw the port at the floorboards in front of the passenger seat and slumped back, stringing her curly hair through her fingers. Her harness cut into her chest, suddenly strangling, and she released the buckle and kicked open her door at the same time, half falling into the alley's shadows. The grease and whorlwhiscent from the tavern nearly choked her as she swallowed her breaths, trying to rationalize her way out of the anger. She would go to the police station. It was too late to go now—tomorrow, then. First thing in the morning. She would be calm and logical and she would explain to them why their assumptions were wrong. She would make them reopen the case. Scarlet wiped her wrist over the scanner beside the ship's hatch and yanked it up harder than the hydraulics wanted to let it go. She would tell the detective that he had to keep searching. She would make him listen. She would make him understand that her grandma hadn't left of her own free will, and that she most certainly had not killed herself. Half a dozen plastic crates filled with garden vegetables were crammed into the back of the ship, but Scarlet hardly saw them. It was miles away, in Toulouse, planning the conversation in her head. Calling on every last persuasion, every ounce of reasoning power she had. Something had happened to her grandmother. Something was wrong and if the police didn't keep looking, Scarlet was going to take it to court and see that every one of their turnip-head detectives was disbarred and would never work again and— She snatched a gleaming red tomato in each fist, spun on her heels, and pummeled the stone wall with them. The tomatoes splattered, juice and seeds spraying across the piles of garbage that were waiting to go into the compactor. It felt good. Scarlet grabbed another, imagining the detective's doubt when she'd tried to explain to him that up and disappearing was not normal behavior for her grandma. She pictured the tomatoes bursting all over this smug little— A door swung open just as a fourth tomato was obliterated. Scarlet froze, already reaching for another, as the tavern's owner draped himself against the door frame. Gilles's narrow face was glistening as he took in the slushy orange mess Scarlet had made on the side of his building. "Those better not be my tomatoes." She withdrew her hand from the bin and wiped it down on her dirt-stained jeans. She could feel heat emanating from her face, the erratic thumping of her pulse. Gilles wiped the sweat off his almost-bald head and glared, his face an expression. "Well?" "They weren't yours," she muttered. Which was true—they were technically hers until he paid her for them. He grunted. "Then I'll only dock three univs for having to clean off the mess. Now, if you're done with target practice, maybe you could deign to bring some of that in here. I've been serving wilted lettuce for two days." He popped back into the restaurant, leaving the door open. The noise of dishes and laughter spilled out into the alley, bizarre in its normalcy. Scarlet's world was crashing down around her and nobody noticed. Her wave of aggression was left to rot with the smashed tomatoes. When she could take in a breath without her lungs convulsing, she stacked the crate on top of the russet potatoes and heaved them out of the ship. The line cooks ignored Scarlet as she dodged their spitting skillet, making her way to the cool storage room. She shoved the bins onto the shelves that had been labeled in marker, scratched out, and labeled again a dozen times over the years. "Bonjour, Scarling!" Scarlet turned around, pulling her hair off her clammy neck. Emilie was beaming in the doorway, eyes sparkling with a secret, but she pulled back when she saw Scarlet's expression. "What—" "I don't want to talk about it." Slipping past the waitress, she headed back through the kitchen, but Emilie made a dismissive noise in the back of her throat and trotted after her. "Then don't talk. I'm just glad you're here," she said, latching on to Scarlet's elbow as they ducked back into the alleyway. "Because he's back." Despite the angelic blond curls that surrounded Emilie's face, her grin suggested very devilish thoughts. Scarlet pulled away and grabbed a bin of parsnips and radishes, passing them to the waitress. She didn't respond, incapable of caring who he was and why it mattered that he was back. "That's great," she said, loading a basket with papery red onions. "You don't remember, do you? Come now, Scar, the street fight I was telling you about the other—oh, maybe that was Sophia." "The street fighter?" Scarlet squeezed her eyes shut as a headache started to throb against her forehead. "Really, Em?" "Don't be like that. He's sweet! And he's been here almost every day this week and he keeps sitting in my section, which definitely means something, don't you think?" When Scarlet said nothing, the waitress set the bin down and fished a pack of gum from her apron pocket. "He's always really quiet, not like Roland and his crowd. I think he's shy... and lonely." She popped a stick into her mouth and offered another to Scarlet. "A street fighter who seems shy?" Scarlet waved the gum away. "Are you listening to yourself?" "You have to see him to understand. He has these eyes that just—" Emilie fanned her fingers against her brow, feigning headache. "Emilie!" Gilles appeared at the door again. "Stop flapping those lips and get in here. Table four wants you." He cast a glare at Scarlet, a silent warning that he'd be docking more univs from her fee if she didn't stop distracting his employees, then pulled back inside without waiting for a response. Emilie stuck her tongue out after him. Settling the basket of onions against her hip, Scarlet shut the hatch and rushed past the waitress. "Is table four him?" "No, he's at nine," Emilie grumbled, scooping up the load of root vegetables. As they passed back through the steamy kitchen, Emilie gasped. "Oh, I'm so daft! I've been meaning to comm and ask about your grand—" "Nothing new," she said, then let their conversation get lost in the chaos of the cooks screaming at each other as the baskets before the waitress could say something optimistic. Emilie attempted the requisite "Try not to worry, Scar." Anyone talked about the waitress's disappearance as if she were a stray cat who would meander back home when sent a comm, without a good-bye, without any warning. She'd even missed Scarlet's eighteenth birthday. She had seen her go. None of the worker androids had recorded anything suspicious. Her portscreen had been suspicious enough. No one went anywhere without their ports. But that wasn't the worst of it. D-chip. Wrapped in cheesecloth spotted red from her blood and left like a tiny package on the table—they cut out their ID chips. He'd said it like he'd just solved the mystery, but Scarlet figured she'd be the one to find out. She walked around to the other side, yellow béchamel sauce on top of a ham sandwich. She headed around to the other side, yellow sign off on the delivery." Gilles shoveled a stack of frites beside the sandwich while she got back." Scarlet bristled. "I don't work for you, Gilles." "Just be a little shirt yellowed from years of sweat. Scarlet's fingers twitched with the tomatoes, but her grandma's stern face just as quickly infiltrated the scene of their most loyal clients in a fit of temper. Grabbing the plate, Scarlet's attention landed on the netscreens behind her. The Rieux Tavern was no different. Everyone was talking about the Ea org girl had infiltrated the party, blown up so assassinate the newly coronated emperor on the close-up of the girl with dirt smudges on her face. "How she'd ever been admitted into a royal ball in those stairs," said Roland, a tavern regular, while the screen and mimed shooting a gun. "Agreement passed through the nearest booth. She recognized Emilie's hands in his olive skin, but more because he'd expected from Emilie's swoops and a fresh bruise swelling around her eye. Three plates were already set out on the table. She didn't realize enough the crowd, she deposited her grapes still on the vine. Scarlet gruffed as she'd expected, but she you the whole pig?" she said, staring widened and for a moment Scarlet. "She withheld a scoff. "Good for you. He didn't respond. 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