

The edifice, made of exposed concrete and containing vast, rectangular windows, resembled a hulking spaceship of the future, perhaps one of those convoluted vessels in *Star Wars* or its less influential rival - *Star Trek*. The locale could not have been bleaker - practically everything had an ineradicable tinge of industry, including the unpleasant, ash-coloured sky and the opaque, nickel-coloured sea nearby. Opposite the edifice was a cement factory from which white vans and haul trucks with giant rubber wheels could be seen driving out sporadically. Standing in front of the edifice, however, does not guarantee you a clear view of where all these vehicles are heading, because at the end of the compound a warehouse with exhaust pipes jutting out from the roof screens the road. Behind the edifice was a nuclear power plant with absolutely no vegetation, not even the tiniest shrub or one of those desert bushes. It looked less like a plant than a 2-D roller coaster, or some sort of railway maze with a few crates and pumps where materials were stored and electricity generated. The only objects worthy of consideration were the two cooling towers at the back of the plant, unobtrusive and blending into the sky. From a distance they looked like concave corks, but upon examination they had ladders and other projections. The ground was even and coated with a fine layer of construction aggregate, but if you poked with your toe deep enough you would find a smooth cement floor. This would be enough to make any sane person wonder if the Earth was the same all the way through: a round ball of soulless concrete covered with some water and a few landmasses. A farcical notion, but given the blatant lack of anything organic, not without reason.

At the end of the road there was an oil refinery, an elaborate conglomeration of pipes and storage tanks. The oil distillation columns were connected to all the others and were so imposing they looked like rockets, except the exhaust from the former came out of the top, not the bottom. Everything in the area was either grey or becoming grey.

Sometimes one could see personnel in fluorescent yellow hazmat suits navigating the industrial excrescences, the suits protection against the lethal levels of ionising radiation and other biohazardous substances. However, these appearances rarely occurred, as all the hard labour (at least outside) was delegated to grotesque, crane-like bots, who were moreover responsible for security. Their strength and ingenuity were unparalleled, at least among creatures with artificial intelligence, and anybody who tried to break into one of those compounds stood little chance past the inner gate to the central hub. The abundance and efficiency of these robots outside leads one to speculate what kind of personnel runs the interior, although it follows logically that the bots would be better suited than humans to operating any type of machinery. The assembly lines, likewise, were all infested with conscientious, loyal bots, fixed on fulfilling their duties, however negligible. The amount of work done in each factory must've been prodigious, because large lumps of steam spurted out of the exhaust pipes incessantly.

The edifice harboured not a few bureaucrats and officials bogged down with red tape and prolix documents whose sole purpose was to stultify the human mind; the easy way out was to brush aside the administrative minutiae and skip straight to the end, where all that was needed was one's signature and an assurance that the information which one has supposedly read will not be somehow misapplied or misconstrued for personal reasons. Among these devious and obscure people there was one particular crook, a man of little known identity but notorious for his artifice and chicanery. He was a brilliant con artist, able to milk the organization he worked for in small, trivial amounts, not enough to be noticed by everyone, yet over time and incrementally his financial gain was substantial. He couldn't be apprehended by the authorities, since he changed his identity constantly and worked off the radar. Nobody knew him, nobody knew what he looked like, and even if he did make a temporary alliance with someone he broke it off whenever he sensed he was in danger, that is, in danger of having his cover blown. All this had earned him, not unreasonably, the nickname 'The Lynx'.

Although he was usually prudent enough not to remain in the offices for too long, since his precarious lifestyle required him to be on the move, today he occupied one of the most lavish offices, usually belonging exclusively to the most high-ranking functionaries. The latter were misled into believing he was just some senior executive by the name of Benjamin Gross, who had worked for the organization for 34 years and was as morally upright as any of them. In truth, he

had conjured up Benjamin Gross out of thin air and bribed the right people, so that now everybody in the organization believed unquestioningly in the existence of this Benjamin Gross. The fact that nobody had even thought of checking the payroll to confirm his validity was a tribute to The Lynx's remarkable gift for deception.

Now, the reason for The Lynx's appropriation, as it were, of a spacious and minimalist office was not to sequester himself in the upper echelons of the bureaucratic hierarchy, but rather to preside at a confidential meeting. Weeks ago, word had spread in The Lynx's milieu that he was conspiring, perhaps even against his allies, yet nobody knew what the objective of this inchoate conspiracy was, so much so that people simply referred to the bulk of The Lynx's plans as 'The Objective'. The office did not possess any special qualities, having as it did a nondescript linoleum floor, a desk that seemed to have been hewn from a fallen tree trunk, and a swivel chair with adjustable height and meshed back. There was none of that obligatory paperwork scattered over the desk, nor were the walls hung with a lacklustre *American Gothic* or *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* or *Composition in Red Blue and Yellow*, depending on the company's taste and policy regarding sentimentalism. In fact, the walls were completely naked, and the ceiling contained a single, flat light fixture. The light was of the unwelcoming kind, the kind of cool whiteness that belongs in a hospital or a tunnel, not the benign, Sun-like luminosity that is utilized in more humane places. As if that weren't enough, there were no windows in the room, and even the door was so constructed as to allow no slit between the frame and the threshold. One felt truly locked in, left to his or her own besieging thoughts. We fail to comprehend how people can work in such a claustrophobic environment, where the lack of sound and natural light would be enough to drive any ordinary soul mad, but to these bureaucrats, these jacks-in-office, being able to work peacefully in a room is a blessing. To them, an office, however synthetic and prison-like, is much more preferable to an outside world rife with pollution and disease. We're also neglecting the fact that the paperwork which these officials are subjected to, though mind-numbing and inexhaustible, distracts them from melancholy and suicidal thoughts, for some work is better than no work at all. In sooth, it is entirely conceivable that the reason so many people harbour dismal and nihilistic feelings, despite not having any physical or neurological conditions, is because they're bored and don't have anything to do. Boredom may be at one and the same time the most mild and the most acute emotion, precisely because humans

have been pre-programmed to be always engaged in some task or another. The Lynx was no exception, for though he was not filling out forms or reading over proposed policies to see if they merited legislation, he was mentally preparing for the impending meeting, immersed in thought about how best to conduct it.

Sometime after midday, though it was difficult to tell what time it was because of the clouds, a tall, cloaked man approached the edifice, enveloping his nose in a handkerchief infused with cologne, a futile countermeasure, but one designed to dilute the overwhelmingly toxified air. Double-checking to see he wasn't being followed or spied on, he entered the revolving door and heard the hiss of the depollution system as it discharged a dense, purifying vapour. He stepped onto the marble floor in a heady state, examined his surroundings and, after having confirmed that nothing was out of the ordinary, headed for the reception desk at the end of the lobby.

"Hello, is anyone there?" he said, peering over the edge and seeing nobody. Maybe they went to relieve themselves, he thought.

"Very well, I'll just be on my way then," he said, as if to himself.

"Wait!" a voice pleaded from somewhere under the desk. A woman stood up, clutching something thin and long.

"Just looking for my pen," she said, chuckling a bit. She was wearing a revealing blouse, her bright mandarin-dyed hair was drawn back in a ponytail, and her nails were about as long as the phalanx of a finger.

"Do you have a pass?" she asked.

"No, but I'm supposed to meet somebody, somebody who works here. I think his office is 7B, or 7A."

"I'll check the directory."

She leaned forward behind the desk, scrolling with her mouse and stopping in certain places.

"It can't be 7A, sir, because its holder isn't in today, but 7B is occupied right now by Mr. Benjamin Gross. He won't be leaving his office at all for the remainder of the day, not even for lunch; he specifically said so when he came in this morning. Would you like me to escort you there, sir?"

He rattled his brain for one *Benjamin Gross*. Possibly The Lynx had assumed a false identity, how clever of him, but this lady makes it sound as if he's this important office-bearer or something. I'll take the chance.

"Sir?" the receptionist repeated, with an impatient look.

“Uh, no. I’ll figure out how to get there myself, thanks.” He started on his way around the desk.

“The lift’s on the right,” she said, jabbing with her pen in the opposite direction. He thanked her and went into the lift. In the wink of an eye a prerecorded voice announced ‘Level 7 - Senior Management and Enactment Centre’. The doors retracted and opened onto an impeccably clean corridor, with a green, arabesque carpet floor. Standing still, he could hear a faint trickle of voices from behind each of the doors. 7B was four paces away, but when he made his way over there, the lift doors opened once more and a stranger emerged, similarly cloaked but shorter and stockier. The stranger lifted his hood and revealed an angular visage, with high cheekbones and a few days’ stubble. He neared 7B, looking over the first man warily.

“You’re not The Lynx, are you?” the second man asked.

“No, but he should be behind this door. That is, if The Lynx and Benjamin Gross are the same person.”

The second man nodded fervently. “They most certainly are, since The Lynx has always had to invent incognitos. Once I even heard about this stunt he pulled in a major foreign bank, wheedling one of the directors into investing in a dodgy non-profit organization, of his own invention, of course. He had almost finished the swindle when that same director threatened to take legal action against his nonexistent organization, forcing The Lynx into covering up his true identity with seven fictitious ones, so that anyone with the grit to prosecute three made-up people would probably run out of juice on the fourth.”

The first man was silent, but inwardly he grinned at The Lynx’s finesse. The second man knocked on the door.

“Come in!” a voice issued from inside the room. The two men nodded to each other, as if exchanging tacit good lucks before some unspecified but exhilarating task. The first man nudged the door, allowing it to draw back lightly. Somebody on the other side must’ve been near the door, because the force of a human hand expedited the process. The person who had done this was in a grey, mouse-coloured trench coat, and had on a slightly darker fedora. At the end of the room, seated behind a walnut desk, was the person whose voice bade the two men to come in. In a circle around him, on makeshift stools, were three dressed fellows, their eyes fixed on the newcomers. Unlike the others in the room, the person behind the desk was garbed in a purple, slightly clownish suit, and instead of the customary grey tie with gold tie clip, he had a bright red cravat.

The top of his shirt was unbuttoned, exposing a hirsute chest, and his hair was long and flowing. Rather than suggest an effeminate nature, however, the hair, combined with the toned facial features and eccentric attire, actually oozed ultra-masculine qualities, if by masculine one means freethinking and suave. Just from these observations alone, the man behind the desk was undoubtedly The Lynx.

“Greetings, gentlemen,” the Lynx began. His voice was impossible to describe: at once as velvety as the surface of the sea on a sunny day, yet as unbridled as the wind on a stormy one. Any word, however ordinary, when vocalized by The Lynx could enrapture and soothe anyone.

“I’m so glad you could make it! Here, have a seat.”

The two men were surprised that two empty stools had escaped their notice when they came in. Addled, they sat down.

“Now, I trust this is everyone. You by the door, you can take a seat too.”

“I’m fine standing, thanks.”

“Suits me. You all know why you’re here, don’t you?”

A murmur went around the group, The Lynx’s question apparently tough to answer. The second man, the short one, was a tad more versed in hearsay respecting The Lynx.

“Is it something to do with ‘The Objective’?” he ventured.

“Bravo! Ten points for Stubby-Face!” The person addressed turned scarlet. “‘The Objective’ is basically what I’m working on, or working towards. For the past few weeks, I’ve been erasing all my existing connections, so I don’t get ratted on.”

“And why would you get ratted on?” another person asked, leaning into the table.

“Because it’s a big fucking job and a lot of money’s involved, that’s why. We’re going to carry out *the* money heist of the century, robbing the National Bank of ----- . The security’s going to be tight, no doubt about that, but we’ll flee through the sewers so the authorities can’t intercept us. We’ll each be going under aliases, including myself. I’m sure you understand that an operation of this magnitude requires the utmost discretion and anonymity. Is that clear?”

The group assented to the proposal.

“Okay, here we go. You, -” he pointed at the man furthest away from the group. “You’ll be Grumpy.”

“Just Grumpy?” the man replied. “No Mr.?”

“No, just Grumpy. You, cowering in the shadows, you’re Happy, got it? You, closest to the table, you’re Sleepy. You two -” he pointed at the two men who had walked in last. “You’re Bashful and Sneezzy. You there, standing like a stork, you’re Dopey. And, because The Lynx is too noble of a name to be used in association with you buffoons, I’ll be Doc.” The Lynx folded his arms across his chest, complacent about this excellent feat of name-sorting.

A few seconds passed, and Happy burst out laughing. “What are we, the fucking Seven Dwarfs?”

The Lynx was not amused. “That’s exactly what we are.”

“Well, wait a minute Doc,” Sleepy said. “Did you pick these names randomly, or are they meant to represent something? ‘Cos I’m not a sleepy person by nature... I mean, I don’t get tired easily.”

“All of you look the same to me, so it doesn’t really matter who’s Sleepy and who’s Dickhead, does it now? Your name is not *supposed* to match your personality, but in order for this operation to work, each of us has to put on a facade, become a different person entirely, so that the authorities won’t be able to get any leads.”

“It makes sense,” the first man, Sneezzy, said. “All we have to do is reify our names by behaving unselfconsciously, though in keeping with what the name requires of us.”

“In plain English, wiseacre?” Sleepy scoffed.

“We imitate our given aliases so that each of us has a distinct personality, like stock characters in *commedia dell’arte*. How is that so fucking hard to understand?”

“I get that with some names, like Happy or Dopey, all you have to do is smile a lot or be slow on the uptake, but how are you supposed to imitate something like Sneezzy? You can’t just force your body to sneeze all the time.”

“Right, but the names are symbolic. You don’t have to stick to them categorically.”

“But that’s what you just said.”

“I said that we should behave naturally, more or less imitating our names, but not overdo it, otherwise we’ll be too conspicuous. For example, I would use my handkerchief quite often, indicating that I’m sick and will probably sneeze soon.”

“You’re not sick, though,” Grumpy pointed out.

“Yeah, but the people we’re robbing won’t be able to differentiate between a wannabe sick person and a genuinely sick person. In short, if our performances are realistic enough, then half of the job is complete.”

“Maybe I didn’t make this clear enough,” The Lynx pronounced magisterially. “But the names *themselves* don’t matter - giving out aliases is necessary, because it makes the job less personal and more of a joint undertaking. Plus, it’s a custom among thieves like me, so if any of you have any objections, you might as well leave the room right now.”

Sleepy tsk-tsked but did not say anything.

“None? No objections?” The Lynx asked rhetorically. “I thought so. Now that you each have names, you’ll get your own firearm and duffel bag.” Here The Lynx bent down and pulled out from under the desk a black duffel bag. He unzipped it while the group leaned in, catching glimpses of burnished steel. The first weapon he extracted, a Colt Automatic Rifle, went to Grumpy. Happy got an IWI Negev. Sleepy got an M27 IAR, Bashful an OTs-14 Groza, Sneezy a KRISS Vector, Dopey a Steyr AUG. Finally, The Lynx pulled out an AR-15 for himself, as well as a Smith & Wesson 686, for “emergency close-quarter situations”. He tucked the revolver into his waistband.

“All right,” he said, surveying the members of the group in a sagacious, consequential manner. “Tomorrow at nine o’clock sharp, we meet at the back of this building and head straight for the National Bank in a minivan.”

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It was a rough time riding in the back of a minivan. Standing was out of the question, except maybe for Bashful, so you had to sit on the frigid, grimy floor. The roads were unpaved and littered with razor-sharp, callous little rocks, making the floor bounce gently up and down. Sometimes the wheels met larger, even more callous rocks, giving the good old rump a nudge.

Their guns upright and at their sides, the men looked fearsome but not fearless, like naive army conscripts desperate to prove themselves. They were dressed as at the meeting, though without their cloaks or trench coats. The Lynx, or Doc, was at the wheel and whistling a merry tune.

“Let’s go over it again,” Doc said, without turning around.

“I guard the entrance, watching out for when the police arrive,” Dopey said. “When that happens, I hold them up.”



“And when I give the signal, you get your ass back inside and make for the tunnel. Keep a wall of hostages in front of you when you get in, to set the police back an extra few minutes. Sleepy and Bashful?”

“We’re in charge of the civilians and staff,” the latter replied. “The staff’ll be slippery, so we’ll tie them up in advance.”

“But no shooting, unless it’s absolutely necessary. I don’t want any casualties on my conscience. Grumpy, Happy, and Sneezy?”

“We drill into the vaults, -” they indicated bulky electric drills, fitted with thermal lance and protective sheaths, “- packing the money into duffel bags.”

“Right. And I’ll work on our escape route. One of the underground rooms contains a passage that opens out into the sewers.”

“Really?” Happy asked. “I didn’t know the bank was connected with the sewage system.”

“I dug the tunnel out myself earlier this month, but I left out about a meter of earth. I’ll be finishing up what I started.”

Five minutes later, the van pulled up at the curbside of a wide, bustling street. Doc turned around, his arm draped over the seat.

“This is it, fellas,” he said. “Put your guns in your duffel bags - we don’t wanna attract attention.” The men heeded to the advice, then looked up at Doc expectantly.

“All the best to each of you,” Doc said, getting out of the car. Happy kicked the door open, and the group hopped out onto the gravelly ground. They crossed the street, cars honking at them indignantly, and stopped at the doors. Dopey nodded at them, then walked off a bit to the side. Doc burst into the bank, followed by his crew. They unzipped the duffel bags and extracted their guns.

“FREEZE!” Doc bellowed, holding the AR-15 with both hands and pointing it at the row of counters at the back.

“Nobody fucking move! Hands UP!” the men hollered. Aiming in all directions, they approached the counters and shattered the windows with their muzzles.

“Get the fuck out of there, this isn’t a joke!” Sleepy yelled. The workers behind the till rose up. Happy and Grumpy heaved them all out, slamming them onto the floor. Doc went off through a separate opening, his gun raised. Sneezy glanced back at the entrance: people were staring into the building, realizing that a robbery was taking place and running for their lives. Dopey had not yet taken his rifle out.

One teller had not complied with Sleepy's orders and was reaching for the panic alarm mounted on the wall beneath the clock.

"Oh no you don't, lady," Bashful barked, shooting a few rounds close to the woman's feet. Civilians screamed. The woman relented and knelt down, hands behind her head. Meanwhile, Sleepy took care of the guards who had not nearly enough time to reach for their weapons. He rammed the butt of his rifle into the belly of one guard, forcing him on his knees, and whacked another one straight across the jaw.

"Where are your vaults?" Sneezy asked one of the tellers, lying on the floor and whimpering.

"T-t-to my right, go st-t-traight, then d-d-down the stairs."

Sneezy stood up and motioned to Grumpy and Happy. The three jogged across the branching hallway and took the stairs four at a time. They arrived in a dank, cellar-like area, with three vaults to the left of them, extending all the way up to the ceiling. The doors comprised three concentric circles, steel rods radiating from the innermost one at 60-degree intervals, not unlike the helm on a ship. These rods were set out thirty centimeters from the vault surface, turned clockwise to lock the vault, anti-clockwise to unlock it.

"This is it, lads," Happy said, his face blissful. "Just gotta pierce these bastards through and through."

They fished out their drills from the duffel bags, switched on the oxyacetylene canisters fused to the thermal tubes, and waited for the far ends to heat up.

"Wait," Grumpy exclaimed. "We've disabled the security system, right? Motion sensors, CCTV, alarms?"

"That'll be unnecessary," Sneezy said. "Most of the alarms were triggered when we broke into the bank anyway. As far as I'm concerned, a good bank heist is not based on how well you manage to circumvent the powers that be, because let's be honest, sooner or later word's gonna spread that there was a bank robbery, and then it doesn't matter how stylish your escape was, you'll be the prey. A good bank heist is all about efficiency and simplicity. You go in, you steal, you go out."

Grumpy and Happy bobbed their heads sympathetically. The thermal lances had warmed up now, so they thrust the drills into the spaces between the inner and outer circles. The canisters emitted a kettle-type whistle as they were drained of oxyacetylene, while the steel around the perforations turned a translucent orange-rind colour.

“How much time do you think we have left?” Happy said, shielding his eyes away from the fountains of steel sparks.

“Hopefully enough to make it out of here alive,” Grumpy replied from his end of the room.

The lock mechanisms inside the vault doors snapped. The three turned off their drills and rotated the steel helms back a full revolution. The outer locks snapped off and the doors opened. They scrambled into the vaults and chucked the bundles of hundred-dollar bills into the duffel bags. Once they had transferred all the money into their possession, they darted out of the vaults and left the room. The drills they left on the floor, nugatory now that the canisters were depleted.

Bags slung over their shoulders, the three men sprinted up the stairs and down the hallway, not knowing what to expect. The lobby area had changed drastically - the civilians were nowhere to be seen (probably massed together and locked in some side room, to clear space), all the personnel were tied up in a circle, their mouths taped over, and the other robbers were outside the building. The muted rattle of gunfire leaked through the narrow slot underneath the entrance.

“Fuck! The police must be here already,” Sneezy said, running for the entrance with Happy and Grumpy tailing him. When they made it, the noise was deafening. Bashful and Dopey were both crouching behind what used to be fetching, auto-show worthy 1969 Mustangs, now pathetically unrecognizable and almost reduced to ugly skeletal chassis. Halfway down the street was a sort of barricade of police cars, with visored coppers popping up every now and then, bearing standard-grade M16 rifles and discharging them whenever they had a clear shot. More and more police cars were appearing, with more and more fresh-faced officers hungry for glory, intending to be the ones to foil these scumbags’ plans, which description was not entirely untrue. All in all, the ratio of robbers to police officers was comparable to that of the Greeks to Persians in the Battle of Thermopylae.

The three drew near Bashful.

“What the fuck took you so long?” he cried out. “Dopey’s dead.”

“Dopey’s dead?” Grumpy asked. All three of them were incredulous. “When did he die?”

“It doesn’t fucking matter when. He’s dead, the cops took him.”

Sleepy sprang up from behind the bonnet of his car and blasted at the cops behind the barricade. They shot back, the bullets caroming off the roof. He didn't duck in time enough and got plugged in the shoulder. Shrieks of agony.

"FUCK!" Happy raged. "This is bad. This wasn't part of the plan!"

Their car took a few hits. More gunfire was coming from that end, now that Sleepy did not pose a threat anymore.

"Any sign of Doc?" Sneezy asked, seizing Bashful's shoulder.

"How the fuck should I know? He's probably still down there, preparing the escape or whatever."

Grumpy shook his head. "He's taking too long. In fact, I doubt we're gonna see him again. We're on our own."

"How would you know that? Maybe he's coming up here right now."

"Fuck waiting," Happy snapped, after shooting a full magazine at the police. "We've gotta get back into the building and into the tunnel. I'll get Sleepy, you guys cover me."

Happy crawled his way to Sleepy's car, the other three firing at the police athwart the barricade. Sleepy was in an abject condition: the shirt beneath the jacket was completely saturated with blood.

"Listen," Sleepy wheezed. "There's no point in this resistance. We're outnumbered on one side; soon the enemy will approach from the other, and then we'll be fenced in."

Happy was only half-listening, furtively double-checking that he hadn't been spotted.

"Have you ever asked yourself what this 'Objective' could be?" Sleepy continued. "Sounds real fucking vague, don't it? Infamous con man erases all his connections, assembles a group of strangers to pull off the greatest heist of the century, only to have it go shockingly wrong? This clever, manipulative son-of-a-bitch wants people to *think* he's dead, when in reality he's living the good life, draining the money that *we* stole, not him."

"What the fuck are you raving about, Sleepy? You're saying Doc set us up?"

"I *know* he set us up."

"Well then why would he go to the trouble of hiring a bunch of stooges like us, if he could presumably carry out the robbery himself?"

"Because if he did it himself, he would be more of a suspect, since pulling off a bank heist all on your own is not something you see every day. On the other hand, a group of robbers is much more plausible. I'm telling you, he's using us to

create a cover-up, with everybody taking for granted that The Lynx died along with his fellow robbers.”

“What about the money? If he’s escaped, how the fuck is he gonna get the money off us?”

Sleepy gave a grimace of stern conviction. “I never said he escaped.”

“Enough of this nonsense - I’m not leaving you here to die, so come on.”

With a shrug of resignation, Sleepy lifted his other shoulder and Happy pulled him up. He turned to face the other car, but no-one was there.

“Bashful? Sneazy? Grumpy? Where the fuck are you?”

“They’re not there?” Sleepy wheezed in despair, since from his dangling position he couldn’t catch sight of the other car.

“They couldn’t have abandoned us,” Happy said, his body welling up with a blend of dawning realization and bitterness. A tremor charged down Sleepy’s skin, portending imminent doom.

“Drop me!” he gasped with all his might, but Happy was so focused on his two associates’ perfidy - and his own haplessness - that he would scarcely have heard a bomb go off near him. Just as Sleepy tried to extricate himself from Happy’s vice-like grip on him, a bullet went through each of their heads. The police officer who accomplished this smiled complacently from behind the barricade, and whispered to himself, “Three down, four to go.”

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“This is fucked up, man,” Bashful spluttered. Jogging in tandem, Bashful, Grumpy and Sneazy had already made it past the corridor that Doc went through to get to the ‘tunnel’. There was a lift on their right with a few snake plants on both sides, but they steered clear of this area and headed straight for the stairway underground, the door plate entitled **Treasury Dept.**

When they got off the stairs, Bashful came to a halt. “Don’t you think we should show a little courtesy to Happy and Sleepy?”

“What, by going back out there?” Sneazy said. “We’d be handing ourselves over to the police, or worse, killing ourselves.”

Bashful’s face was a mixture of desperation and disapprobation. “Maybe they could’ve crawled their way back into the bank. You can’t refute that possibility.”

“No, I can’t. But three living souls sounds a whole lot better than four dead ones.”

“You self-centred wretch! It’s all about the money, isn’t it? And don’t you think the others would’ve come to our aid, had we been in a bind?”

“Maybe they would’ve, but only because they’re naturally obliging,” Sneezy said nonchalantly, shrugging his shoulders. “However, in a bank heist, where the stakes are high, that kind of behavior isn’t commendable. It’s injudicious. And yes, it is all about the money. So, unless you’re waiting for the police to come here and execute you, I suggest we leg it.”

Still glowering at Sneezy, Bashful eventually conceded and the three started searching for the mysterious entrance to the tunnel.

“Don’t you find it perplexing that Doc said he would give Dopey the signal when the escape route was ready, yet there’s been no sign of him from the moment we stormed into the bank?” Grumpy wondered, looking all around in case Doc would show up.

A figure emerged from behind a filing cabinet, dressed in a black suit, white shirt and scarlet tie. He was training a revolver, its barrel glossy, at the three of them. He had on a pair of latex gloves, stuff you’d expect in a laboratory or in an ER, as well as a balaclava.

“Nobody fucking move!” a gravelly, unflinching voice issued from behind the mask. The three turned around to face the figure, frozen in shock.

“Drop your weapons,” the voice commanded. The three complied.

The figure pulled the rifles over, making sure the robbers couldn’t reach them easily.

“What do you want?” Sneezy asked. For once, his confidence faltered, fear sprouting and billowing inside of him.

The figure did not respond. Instead, he motioned with the revolver at the distended duffel bags. Sneezy glanced at Grumpy and Bashful, who were just as cowed as he was. The two unslung their bags and dropped them immediately, but Sneezy dithered.

“How do you know I don’t have a bomb in here?” he said cunningly. “And how do you know I haven’t already activated it?”

“Suicide bombers break into a vault and steal all its contents, only to blow up the bank and the money with it? Not likely.”

The figure cocked the revolver, his eyes soulless almonds. Once he had taken the three duffel bags, he told them to get down on their knees.

“Who are you?” Grumpy grunted.

“I’m the bank manager.”

“You’re the... No, sorry, that doesn’t make sense,” Sneezy said dismissively. “Why in the hell would you be wearing a mask and gloves, if you have nothing to hide?”

“You’re wrong, I have a lot to hide - from the police,” the figure said icily. “In fact, I’m doing their dirty work for them right now.”

The drift of these words at first went over their heads, but then the figure’s intention became as clear as day.

“Wait a minute!” Bashful protested. “Surely you’ll hand us over to the police to be arrested, they’ll be here any minute now.”

“This is a private matter, beyond the police’s jurisdiction.” The figure walked around and behind them (to high-pitched shrieks from Bashful), pressed the barrel of the revolver against Bashful’s nape, and fired away. He repeated for Sneezy and Grumpy, the two putting up a short-lasting struggle.

The figure dragged the corpses into the nearby janitor’s closet, covered them with tarpaulin and sprayed the closet with eau de cologne - a temporary measure. He mopped up the blood where the robbers had been killed, and stowed the two duffel bags on the top shelf of the closet. By the time he finished all this the distant shuffling of a large group of people and a host of voices reached him, gradually nearing him and growing louder.

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When the police arrived they forced the figure to put up his hands, which he did, and for a second he believed they would have no trouble killing him.

“I’m the bank manager,” he explained, pulling out an ID card, his long and flowing hair matching the photo’s. “I was able to snatch a bag off the robbers, but there are still two others missing. We’re talking about a million dollars that belongs to us. They escaped into this tunnel,” - he showed them the aperture in the wall that was about a room away from where he had killed the robbers.

One of the police officers unzipped the duffel bag and checked the neat bundles of cash. “Did you have any knowledge of this tunnel beforehand, sir?” he asked, scribbling notes down on his scratch pad.

“None at all. It seems like somebody was planning an escape route for weeks, maybe even months, and knew the insides of the bank very well. It pains me to think that we were the object of scrutiny for such a long time.”

“So there are still three *living* robbers in the sewers? Can you describe them to us?”

The bank manager’s expression was one of scrunched-up engrossment. “One of them was short and beefy, the other was tall, and the third was tow-headed and of average height.”

Pencil-scratching from the officer. After about a minute, during which he consulted with a few other police officers, evidently higher-ranking by the way he addressed them with deference, he turned back to the bank manager with a cordial and level-headed look.

“Thanks for your assistance, sir - we’ll take it from here.”

“You’re not going to confiscate the duffel?”

“It’s not *our* money, is it?”

“I just assumed you guys might want to probe it for fingerprints or whatever...”

“The remaining robbers are a more pressing problem, sir.”

The bank manager knitted his brows in rancor. “Please find them and get me back my money.”

“Don’t worry, sir, you can count on us,” the officer replied. He gestured to his group of policemen, who were all spread out in the **Treasury Dept.**; the latter donned their helmets and raised their M4 carbines. Once they had all clambered into the tunnel and left the bank manager all alone in the room, he darted into the janitor’s closet, which none of the police officers had even thought to inspect, extracted the two duffel bags from the top shelf and put them with the third one. He sealed off the tunnel entrance, ensuring that the officers wouldn’t return, and retired from the **Treasury** floor with the loot intact. The main hall felt disturbingly desolate: Sleepy and Bashful had done a fine job of subduing and shutting the bank staff up in some faraway room.

The bank manager knew that the staff were still alive, but he scarcely knew their exact whereabouts, and anyway, the money in his possession was of much greater import now. The outside area just outside the bank struck the manager as being a warzone, in which the two wearied fighting sides agreed to a ceasefire not long ago, and were probably now lurking in their respective bivouacs, warily awaiting the resumption of military action. The police cars to the left of the bank were riddled with gunfire and looked like they had been out of commission for twenty years. The bank manager could not believe that these same cars belonged to the police officers he had seen a few minutes ago, yet any other explanation was most assuredly beyond the realm of possibility.



The minivan at the opposite end of the street, however, had miraculously come out of this calamity unscathed. Gleamingly white, it reflected the bank manager's elliptic form as he approached it. There were barely any people out in the street - everyone had fled when the shooting began - but, occasionally, somebody would peek out of the corner of a building to see what was going, to see if the police had reappeared with the robbers in shackles. Instead, that somebody saw a stylish, enigmatic man fling open the back of the minivan and toss three well-stocked duffel bags into it. Something in that somebody's brain clicked, and he recalled how a while back a group of men had exited that minivan and headed for the bank, with similar-looking duffel bags. He remembered that the first instance of gunfire occurred thereafter, and now he suddenly got a very queasy feeling in his stomach, because that man, whoever he was, was clearly connected to the robbery if he set foot in the minivan, and this eager eyewitness now scampered away as fast as his little legs would carry him, because he deemed the man menacing and did not want to be spotted by him.

Meanwhile, the bank manager sat behind the wheel of the minivan and mulled over the current state of affairs. Relaxed and poised, he dug his nails under his chin and peeled back an opaque, stretchy mask that concealed his true identity.

It was The Lynx. The long, flowing hair; the voice silky and calm; The Lynx had hatched from his cocoon, had sloughed off his outer cover, so to speak. And because the only observer of this unfolding scene had already run away, The Lynx was in no danger whatsoever of being identified. In high spirits, The Lynx inserted one of his favourite musical compositions into the DVD player above the gearstick: Rossini's Thieving Magpie Overture. Whistling cheerfully to the tune, he started the car and drove off, content that it would be long until his next escapade.

