

# WAYWARD

Prologue



WAYWARD

BY

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The third spring greeted me, and I have aged three years since then. I've been working in the ice cream shop and managing things, as Leo taught me. Zion graduated and now runs his family's businesses. We still visit each other from time to time.

In my spare time, I've had Mitsuru train me in Eskrima, a defensive form of fighting. So far, I have learned how to disarm and grapple, which is pretty handy.

To this day, more carnivores have been slowly depleting in population. The authorities' investigations are either information that we already know or more reports of people missing. I knew for sure that something wasn't right, and conveniently enough, Jack got laid off as an investigator. I knew I had to do something.

## CHAPTER 1

"Hey!" The small bear clicked his fingers. I had not noticed myself staring at the air for quite some time. The lack of rest recently has been taking its toll. It's not that I hadn't gotten any of it, but it was only shut-eye, with my mind drifting off somewhere far. I could be dreaming myself awake for all I know.

"Where are the peanuts?" the small bear exclaimed. "I ordered this with peanuts! Where is it?"

"It's right there," I pointed.

"I'm counting only five nuts on my cream right now," the customer said.

"You might wanna add more."

"Alright," Ludus replied. "Hand over the cone."

I reached for the cone, poured a generous amount into it for what he asked, and gave it to the small thing. "Here. That'll be fifty cents extra for the nuts."

"You gotta be shitting me," he stepped back, appalled.

"You asked for more nuts, I gave it to you, now you pay for it,"

"Hell naw!" he shouted. "I ain't paying for fifty cents on nuts!"

"You know what? You're done. I'm calling Miguel," the customer took his phone out.

"Who?" I asked.

"Hey, Miguel, this guy's making me pay extra for nuts on my ice cream," the tiny brat yelled at his phone. "He better start counting 'em nuts, 'cuz I'm boutta slap 'em for the same amount!"

"Kid, I don't make the rules; I just run the shop," I annoyingly replied.

*Damn, whose child is this? Someone pick him up, please.*

"Oh yeah? Well, I'ma shove these nuts up your ass!" the customer roared.

He smacked the cone into my face.

"Eat your nuts, Mr. fifty cent!" the customer jeered and left.

I felt shame and disgrace again this week. These kinds of people never seem to run out of this place. And I was naive enough to think that the war had at least brought some compassion within us.

The door chime rang, and another man came in, taller than the previous one. Hopefully, his ego isn't as tall as he is.

"Hey, hey. Boss called; we're going on our first renegade mission-"

It's Mitsuru, the gray wolf. An old friend I had met back when Phileo and I used to play basketball with a local college basketball team.

"He refused to pay fifty cents for extra nuts," I said, licking the ice cream off his face. "Renegade mission?"

"We're investigating a supply truck that's arriving in the west part of the city," Mitsuru explained. "It could give us some lead to the supplier. We'd get more information from there."

"Alright. Let me wash up first," I replied.

"Ay, you!" a familiar voice called out.

Mitsuru and I turned to the chiming door and saw a hulking mass approaching the counter, accompanied by a small child. It was a nearly seven-foot monster, all shoulders, with tattoos of an anchor and a pink fleshy scar on each muscle. He stared dead into me; these eyes had seen fights both past and present.

"You the guy charging my buddy fifty cents for nuts?" the stranger asked.

"Hey, that's him, Miguel! Show it to 'em!" the customer proudly cheered.

"Miguel?" Mitsuru asked.

"Oh. Hey, Mits," Miguel said. "What brings you here?"

"I'm here to pick up my friend. Ludus." The wolf tilted his head. "How about this guy? Is he your friend?" Mitsuru looked at the small bear.

"Well, I uh-" Miguel stammered.

"C'mon beat his ass!" the customer urged.

Miguel punched the customer, who flew out the window.

"Sorry about that," Miguel said, handing me fifty cents. I hope he didn't cause any trouble. Anyway, have a good evening."

Mitsuru watched Miguel leave.

"Was that tiny brat really a child?" I asked, somewhat concerned.

"No. He's twenty years old. He just looks like that."

"Oh." A wave of relief washed over me.

"Do I get a hoodie on our first mission?" I asked as I washed off the cream.

"You could if you want to," Mitsuru replied. "I find it too edgy. The boss saw the costume from the Kingdom Hearts game I played and thought it was cool. It's so hot to wear, though."

"It's from a video game?"

"Yep."

"Then I could probably dress up like Batman, with lots of utility belts."

"Careful with the belts; you'll end up looking like a BDSM Batman," he warned with a wagging finger.

We got in the car and headed for the cabin, a thirty-minute drive from the city. The boss and I have never seen each other since we last spoke, and I have yet to answer his deal. Though he already seemed to know what I had at the back of my mind in the future. I did not have much of a better choice for Leo and me, seeing him sit on the porch almost all day and stare at coming passersby like he was waiting for something.

Having to do something like this almost feels like treading on shark-infested water. I probably won't be able to get out alive when I get in too deep, but I'm willing to put everything at stake for him and everyone who's missing, just like what my father did for me.

"We're back," Mitsuru announced as we walked on the creaking porch.

"Hello, Ludus." The boss stood tall and enigmatic like he always was. He fashioned a brown trench coat that reached down to his calves, hidden by vintage trousers fastened by a thick belt gilded in precious metal. Below this was a shirt that read 'Armani' and neatly tucked it around his ideal waist.

A sharp aura emanated from him; his green eyes struck me, silent in one motion, and read what was about to escape my lips. His head was slightly tilted, a motion Mitsuru seemed to admire and replicate, but he was different. His was an uncanny yet mesmerizing taunt that ensnared anyone unlucky enough to gaze upon him, and even I couldn't step back.





"You called for a stakeout?" I dared to move closer.

"We're not going out to eat steaks," Russel clarified.

"He meant surveillance mission," Nix added.

"Cut this nonsense; it hurts my brain," Russel said. "So, do you want a cloak?"

"I'll have to pass," I replied.

"You have to cover yourself with something at least," Khordon, the orange shark, insisted.

"I don't wear a cloak, but I do wear a hoodie!" The bear meekly added. "The cloak makes me look extra fat..."

"It's fine, Shin. No one's shaming you for it," Nix said.

"It's not my fault I'm a bear!" Shin roared, showing his gigantic fangs.

"I can wear a normal hoodie with you, Shin," I offered to console his untamed rage.

"Really? That'd be nice. I won't feel left out anymore."

"Is everyone here? Settle down, and I'll do the briefing," The boss said.

"Yep," Nix confirmed.

"Today will be our first big mission and will mark the start of a new age."

"Ooh, sounds big."

"Like me?" Shin patted his belly.

"Settle down," Russel instructed. "Our target is the supply truck from Lower Manhattan. Khordon, our reliable intel, got information that the truck comes directly from one of Plakka's suppliers."

"Just to freshen up, what's Plakka again?" Shin asked.

"Shin, it's what's been causing all the outrage in the city," Nix explained.

"Yeah, but... how will the following help us?" Shin wondered.

The boss covered his face in utter disappointment.

"We're tracking it down to find a clue of where their bosses are," Nix continued.

"And after we do that, we can finally get a clue where their headmaster is."

"Okay, so we're stopping the bad guys," the bear rubbed his chin. "But aren't we the bad guys too?" Shin asked.

"Oh dear," Russel exclaimed.

"Shin, just listen, please," Khordon urged.

"No, we're not, Shin," Nix reassured. "We simply resupply some... borderline questionable stuff and do odd jobs, but that's just how we get by."

"Oh," Shin said.

I glanced at the boss. As much as I felt like Shin was about to be kicked from the group, he seemed to know where the bear's notion was coming from and did not question it any further. Just then, I felt a slight tug behind me. I turned and saw small raccoon.

"Oh." I pieced a smile.

"Are you new?" He asked.

"Y-yeah,"

"Cool!" The boy chewed on a long piece of gummy worm, and he looked at me with such innocence. He did not know what these men do, and what I was about to do. I could only hope it stayed that way.

"Timothy, go back and do your homework," The boss said.

"I'm already done!" He protested.

"We're in a meeting,"

"I'll see you later, Uncle Wolf," the boy scurried back to his room.

*Uncle?*

"If we're all done on the debacle, we are leaving in 10 minutes. We're taking the car."

"I'm taking the wheel," Mitsuru gladly volunteered.

"We're taking a backseat then," Nix said. "Ludus, you got arms?"

I shook my hands.

"No, silly. Guns!" Nix clarified.

"Oh! Uh, no."

"Here. You'll need this later," Nix said, handing me a heavy piece of metal.

"I've never held a real gun before," The thought of holding it alone had me feeling light-headed. I had never imagined having something that can end one's life so easily carried and at command. I had somehow felt like I had robbed God of his authority.

"The supplier should be guarded with armed men," Nix explained. "It should help keep you alive if we're busy on the frontlines or something else comes up."

"Yeah. Noted," I said, as my mind wandered off, staring at the firearm.

"It's your first mission with us, Ludus," Russel said. "If you feel like staying backlines, don't hesitate. Inexperience in combat is the number one cause of an early death."

"Right," I nodded anxiously.

## CHAPTER 2

When my father and I lived in the northern mountains of Pennsylvania, he brought home these weird, orange ear-shaped mushrooms from his foraging trips. Sometimes a salmon, or other times a bag of snails, where we'd boil them up with coconut milk and eat them as a stew.

He would also hunt down some game if our stock called for it. It was a luxury to have in our meals, as hunting was or perhaps still is taboo. A brown, varnished hunting rifle was his best partner for the job, as I was not to shoot with a bow and arrow or hold a knife without it slipping and accidentally cutting my foot. I was merely the patient observer.

We waited inside the vehicle; Mitsuru and the boss took the front while the rest sat silently in the second and third rows.

"Look at all that unloaded Plakka." Mitsuru anxiously tapped on the steering wheel. "At a local bakery? Is no one noticing this at all?"

"Nobody is inclined to," Russel replied. "Anyone who interferes in what they're doing vanishes. Like the rest of the predator species in the New York."

"It's only a matter of time before we disappear too." He added.

"There's the driver. It seems that they've just finished their checklist," the boss said. "Start the engine."

As soon as he instructed, the men closed the back of the truck and went in and drove. We tailed behind, putting a few meters back to keep anonymity, and the rest of us sat up to see where we were headed.

I couldn't think of the first thing when it came to espionage, let alone holding a gun properly. *What if I killed someone accidentally? And what would happen if I did kill someone?* My legs jerked at the thought of the ghosts haunting me in night and inside my dreams. The life I would be living once I became a criminal. I would never be able to go to a dollar store ever again.

We crossed the George Washington Bridge and turned to the right road of Fort Lee. On our right was the Hudson River, its blue glistening waves and sharp air helped me ease my nerves, even for just a brief moment. On our left were rubble and charcoal houses, remnants of old life that were and gray battered-up husks stretching hundreds of miles outward from here.

"Here we are," Mitsuru said. "An abandoned research facility in Tenafly."

"Who knows how many more of these Plakka farms exist, considering the amount of free time we've allowed them to operate." The boss pondered.

"Mitsuru and I will go in and ask around." He turned to us. "I have a wire on me so I can communicate with the transceivers you have. Nyx and Khordon, you two follow in after minute five to avoid suspicion and take a tour around the facility."

"What about us?" Shin asked.

"You and Ludus can stay here and guard the car."

*That's a better plan than I could have ever imagined.*

"Alright. But that sounds pretty boring."

"It's the most important job, Shin; we're entrusting you to keep our escape vehicle safe," Mitsuru reassured the bear.

"Oh, alright." Shin sat back in his seat.

"I'll keep an eye out if anything comes," I seconded.

"Good. Meet back here in fifteen minutes. If not, then we'll see what happens."

The first pair, Mitsuru and Russel, had moved out and briskly walked towards the facility. I scanned the outside of the building: It was half as long as a football field, two-storey, pale, and covered in dark grime. Its walls were crawling with vines from top to bottom, and its doors were made of stained glass, which meant they could easily break them if they ever got closed in.

I watched them disappear into the doors and waited until the next pair followed. Khordon and Nix walked around the empty front yard in search of a back entrance, while Shin and I carefully watched all the windows and corners for anything unusual.

### CHAPTER 3

Mitsuru and I entered the poorly lit room. In front of us was a large desk, where a cheetah lounged carelessly as he stared at his smartphone.

"We're here to talk to the boss," Mitsuru said.

The doors slid shut with a thud behind us, and we both needed our choice of words to be precise: *one, two, three*. The cheetah got up from his chair and walked. A blunt between his fingers glowed a warm red, and the ash gently wilted on the floor where he stood. He began to sigh. He'd heard this before. His eyes rolled, tapped on the cigar, and placed it between his lips once more before uttering a disgruntled hum.

"Where are you two from?" He asked, turning to me.

"New York."

"I know that. Where from New York?"

"Lower Manhattan. Henry street. We're here to ask if we could get a contract or some kind of partnership to supply to other parts of New York, maybe even expand to New Jersey."

"There's already a supplier there. We've expanded a year ago." His shoulders tightened, and he leaned on the desk beside him. "Are you sure you're here on a business proposal?"

Mitsuru turned to me, but I averted his gaze, and I could not risk it. If I did, there would be two bullet holes for each of us.

One of my father's advisors taught me that one's hands could tell a hundred stories, a hundred poems, or speak a hundred dialects. He had told me that if I were in



an unfavorable position in a debacle, I would have to use wit accompanied by words. That compassion is a weapon if I could imagine holding it.

I turned my palms facing forward and slightly narrowed my head. "We only want to make ends meet. We're also in an organization like you are in one." I shrugged. "Perhaps your name would be up for promotion after referring our organization as partners?"

He paused. Call the boss. I whispered in my head.

"Call the boss. Tell them what they want."

"Aight." A voice behind us replied.

Sounds of shifting and metal clicks followed somewhere around his belt, which I presumed was his holster, and that sound was his gun at point blank range before he placed it back.

Not a moment later, a small man came before us. He had big ears and beady eyes, much like a rat rather than a chinchilla, which he was, with a striped polo to fit.

"State your business." He wasted no time for pleasantries.

"We're here for a partnership," I said while looking down at the rat that was only as tall as my knees. "Or could we have a word with you, perchance?"

"What for?" He raised a brow.

"To make ends meet."

He combs the hairs on his chin. "I have not met with an organization that's struggling financially," he mused. "Still, we do need goons to deliver goods around Brooklyn."

"Follow me to my office," he gestured.

Thick brown boxes from shelves stretched to the end of the room, dampening and dulling our footsteps as we walked. Mitsuru and I exchanged glances and knew not to say anything.

A couple of turns around halls and doors were made before we made it to his office. One turn took us to a corridor of more doors, the other large hall and the last a room within a room. When we finally reached his quarters, we stopped in front of two large pine doors before his goons opened them gracefully. Inside was lit by the day through the large glass wall. At the center was a large desk that curved and a chair that was larger than he was.

It was better kept than the other rooms and better than the rest of the building. After all, it was their bosses' room. No need to keep your employees healthy when you can earn more money.

He sat and heaved, resting his little legs on the chair that seemed almost too big for him. I kept still, trying not to look amused.

"Your names?" He asked, his voice shrill.

"Ramone Wetbum," I replied. "My mother is Canadian."

"Right..." He nodded. "And you?"

"Tess Tease," Mitsuru replied, his face unfazed.

"Quebec?"

"No, from Tibet."

"I'll pass this over to the boss. You can start your first shipment by tomorrow."

The man rested his hands on his belly.

"Fantastic," I replied. "But I'm curious, aren't you the boss?"

"No. I'm only one of the soldiers." His voice simmered; he was displeased.

"But to answer your question, our Capo is Signore Rightmane. The don, however, I cannot tell you." He added. *Of course, you won't, because you don't know. But I do.* I replied, stingingly at the back of my mind. One of his grunts stopped by his side and whispered to the rat's ears.

"I imagine it pays well in... this industry. If I may say." I said. Just then, the rat's eyes lit like fire, and stared at me with such intensity that I could not help but look back.

"Yes, I can say so for sure. But I do not gloat as much as you do, Russel Vindsor. I calmly reached for my sleeves, and tried to hide my hand from clicking a switch to turn my wire on. *Hopefully, the others will hear this. If not, well...*

"Had not one of my best guards didn't tell me about you, then I wouldn't have been able to capture such a valuable criminal." He cackled like a bat screeching. I wanted to squeeze the life out of him. "What do you have to say now, exiled prince?"

"As I have said, I've come to propose a partnership. A parlay."

"A parlay? Well, I haven't heard that word in ages. Tell me, then, what do you have to offer that will be worth more than your cold corpse? Fortune? Fame? Certainly, you no longer have any of those." He smiled; he found this amusing while I had none of it. Sadly, I can't pull out my gun and just shoot him. There are already two pointed at us. Lucky bastard.

"Perhaps I could regale you with something else? Information worth more than the riches I used to possess once."

"Really now."

"I know where the silver medallion is." I stared into his beady little eyes. "Both you and I know how much power that thing holds." He sat up.

"W-where? How do you know this?" He stammered.

"It is-" A small can fell from the vent above me, and a thick cloud of smoke flushed the room within a second.

"Boss!" Mitsuru called and tugged my arm while I followed suit. We traversed the corners and long halls, shooting a few goons that stood in our way, and to my amazement, it was not long before we were back at the entrance. The gray wolf had memorized each turn as we first entered, sniffing out the gate like a bloodhound.

"Get to the car. We're getting out of here." He nodded, and we both sprinted to the vehicle just in time as we watched Nix ready his RPG-27 and fired at the building behind us, blowing it into a hundred bits.

"Russel!" The shrill cry of a rat scratches my ear, followed by a swift, airy sweep that seems to have passed the gap between Mitsuru and myself. I turned and saw the chinchilla lying face down on the dirt, gun in hand. Ludus had shot him dead.

## CHAPTER 4

The warm air and scent of sandalwood oil gently brush on my cold face. I had not known such a scent existed; sweet and buttery, followed by a hint of freshly dried cloves, warm as a spring day. For a person so unfamiliar, let alone being a shark, he knew how to invite with a welcome using scents. This may be because of his species, especially their skin, but I do not want to be rude. He's a shark.

"You're looking a bit ghastly." He sat on the bed beside me. I was lying down with my arms flat on the soft cotton, staring at the ceiling. Motionless while I listened to the sound of a clock ticking nearby.

"What if he had a family?" I muttered.

"So, what if that rodent did? It's not their fault that their father turned out to be evil."

"What about the children?"

"Most fathers are deadbeat anyway. They won't miss him."

"But-"

"You're really thinking of this too much. You killed a bad person, Ludus. If anything, you're doing the world a favor by getting rid of him."

"Give me your palm." He gently presses on the base of my palms and drops a bit of oil. Sandalwood oil, the scent caresses my nose and lifts my spirits.

"This is nice." I huffed, sated by his massage.

"I learned this from my mother. She used to have a lot of oils back home and used them to relax my dad, who worked a lot underwater. She used it for me, too, when I was little every night before going to bed. Lavender was my favorite of her oils, and I always requested it."

Lavender. I liked the scent of lavender. I remember he used it as his shampoo.

"Thank you." I turned my head as my eyes started to well up.

"You're always welcome."

I faced the wall. "What was your family like?" I asked.

"My family? Well... we live on the shores of Ontario. My mother worked as a seamstress making dresses at home, while my father worked at the undersea city." He said, "There wasn't really much about us. We cared for each other, and that was all that mattered. I only happen to be here because... it just pays more. I also get to live rent-free, so that's a bonus."

"You're not here for vengeance or grudges and all that? You're just here for the job?"

"Yes, for the most part. The boss convinced me well enough."

"Yeah? Well, the boss is why I'm here as well, but for all the wrong ones."

"Hmm—" he paused. "Whether he meant to do any wrong or not, he did offer to help you."

I could not think positively of him, nor did I even imagine too. I did not know if I wanted to try. All I was thinking about was getting Phileo back wherever he may be.