

RUNNER

The bird was easily four feet tall; it sat beside Haru, claws gripping its perch, preening its feathers. It saw me looking at it, closed its glassy eyes and turned its head to face the back of the shack.

"That's a shit owl," I said.

Haru took his glasses off and put them on the counter. All six lenses flashed neon from the street lights outside stall.

"Listen, prick," he said. "You want a better owl, go somewhere else."

"I don't want a better owl," I said. "I don't want any owl."

"What do you want?" he asked. "Unless it's wasting my time."

I told him.

"No," he said. "No way."

I tried to look innocent. It was hard.

"Why not?" I asked. "You made everything here. All kinds. I heard" – I leaned in – "I heard you made an unlicensed Daffy for a Yakuza's kid. I heard it was good, too."

"That was different," Haru said. He mimed slitting his own throat. "You gonna kill me?"

"No," I said. "I'm going to pay you."

I put the cards down on the counter in front of him.

"What's this? You kill a football team?"

"Each of these cards links to a numbered account," I told him. "Each account contains half a mill."

"There's ten - "

"Ten cards, that's right. A lot of money. But," I went on, "these cards expire in a week. And by 'expire', I mean - "

I mimed a series of small explosions. I should have done all ten, but Haru got the point. He sighed and put his glasses back on.

"OK," he said. "But if anyone finds out, you're dead. And by the way?"

"What?"

He looked at me over his glasses.

"That's not any owl," he said. "That's a Wol."

When I got home I took out the big catalogue and looked up what the fuck a Wol was. I felt mildly enlightened: it might have been a great Wol for all I knew, but it was a shit owl. I had nothing else to do that evening so I looked through the catalogue and found out all about Wol and his friends. It was pretty depressing: they were stuffed toys, mostly, stuffed toys based on animals, and not very nice stuffed toys at that. Whoever came up with this particular crew of losers must have been a dick, I reflected. Better an unlicensed Daffy than any of that crap: hell, I'd rather a bootleg Donald.

I heated my dinner in the microwave, timing it with my watch: the ding function had long ago perished, along with most everything else in my life. It's not that I felt sorry for myself, just that for once I'd like to cook a meal that didn't explode into boiling lava because there was no warning bell. *Just for once I'd like a week like that too*, I thought as I spooned the food into my last clean bowl.

My belly full, I crossed the room, knelt down, and pulled back the rug. Underneath was a safe set into the floorboards. Cost-wise, the safe was way out of my league but I got it in lieu of payment from a client. Unfortunately for me, the lock was speech-controlled and my client was Latvian. Consequently, whenever I wanted to get into the safe, I had to put on a generic Eastern European accent or it wouldn't open. I felt like an idiot, but I was the only person here so who cares, right.

"Open," I said in vaguely guttural tones. Nothing happened, so I gave it the full Igor.

"Open... zaaaafe."

There was a short pause, as if the safe were laughing at me, and then the doors opened. Inside the safe was a paper bag containing a few thousand, an old gun wrapped in oilcloth, and an old stationery box. I pulled out the box, set it on the table and closed the safe.

Then I sat down on the couch and removed the lid from the box. Immediately two eyes lit up inside and a voice said:

"Nyahhh... what's up, Doc?"

The Bugs had cost me a cool fifty thou but it was worth it. It even ate real carrots: well, it chewed them up and they went into a pouch inside its body. It was a bastard to clean but it was worth it. I thought so anyway. I had always been a Bugs man: the way he managed to get one over on everyone else appealed to me as a person who never got one over on anyone.

I took Bugs out and let me sass me a little. I watched as he walked round the apartment, making cracks about my stuff and the way I lived. It didn't bother me: I'd heard most of them before (his vocabulary memory was a bit limited) and besides, my girlfriend had said worse when she walked out. She hadn't liked Bugs, but then Bugs hadn't liked her.

After a while, I could hear the rabbit slurring, so I put him back in the safe and connected him to his charging device. Then I went to see if I had any more synthiwhisky. I did: a whole bottle of substitute Teacher's.

I sat back, turned on the vidscreen, and dreamed of freedom and a bird.

In the dream, the bird was invincible. It could go anywhere and do anything. It defeated all its enemies without even knowing that it had enemies: and it was always in motion.

When I awoke, the whisky was gone and I was on the floor. I showered and went to work.

A month went by, maybe more. I felt it was time to go and see Haru. He greeted me like a long lost relative, the kind you never want to see again.

"Go away."

I looked at the shelves of his shack, covered in cute but badly-made animals: buck-toothed squirrels, buck-toothed gophers, buck-toothed lions...

"Did you over order on teeth?" I asked him.

"I told you, go away."

"You sell these things?" I asked him. "Last time I saw animals this badly made, I was shooting rifles in a fairground and they were the prizes."

Haru jabbed me in the chest with his forefinger.

"You won't say that tomorrow," he said.

"Why?" I asked. "You gonna set your buck-toothed dogs on me?"

He turned away to deal with a customer, a mother and her kid. Christmas was coming, and there were no more geese.

I decided to come back tomorrow.

Tomorrow the shack was closed. The day after it, it was closed, and the day after that too. I assumed the yakuza's kid had got bitten by a duck when a little ratty guy I knew by the name of Tooley sidled up to me in the library and said:

"Haru's got it."

I gave him a two and he scurried off.

The shack was open, and it was empty.

"Big sale," said Haru.

"Cops been round?" I asked, then:

"Do you have it?"

Haru nodded impatiently. He bent down and picked up a large bag

"Here," he said, and thrust it across the counter to me. "Now get out of here."

I took the bag home, clutching it to my chest like a papoose. I nearly dropped the keys trying to get into the apartment. Once inside I set the bag down on the table and reached in carefully.

There it was, the bird.

It was bigger than I expected, and when I took it from the bag and set it down on its splayed feet it came up almost to my waist. It was blue like twilight with a yellow beak, which was right, but something about it seemed different. After a moment, I realised what it was: in every representation I'd ever seen, the bird's eyes were open but here, now, they were closed.

I wondered what to do next. It wasn't like a Bugs, something you could set in motion and it would just amble about, making reactive wisecracks: and, even though it was a bird, it wasn't a Daffy either. But then a Daffy is just a darker Bugs, the comments more bitter, the outlook sourer.

"Oh well," I said to myself. "I paid enough, I better do something with it."

And I turned it on.

It was sound activated, three handclaps or three beats on a tabletop. I opted for the claps and the sound echoed around my apartment.

The bird's eyes opened, wide. It seemed to take in the whole room, the cheap furniture, me. Its tail feathers went up like banners, its wings tucked neatly in against its body: and it stretched out a tentative leg.

Then it looked up. I saw what it saw: the door. In my haste to get in, I had left it open.

The bird tilted its head back.

I closed the door, just in time.

Or so I thought.

The bird's legs span and whirred. With a crash, it hit the door, and kept going.

If I hadn't seen it happen with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it.
The door was intact, save for a bird-shaped hole.

A few seconds later, a louder, echoing crash from the lobby told me that it had left the building.

They kept it out of the news somehow. But you'd hear people talking: a stall overturned, a truck with a bird-shaped hole in it. Sometimes people in a neighbourhood would get together, try and catch it. It never worked. The bird couldn't be stopped.

"The bird can't be stopped," said Haru.

I had tracked him down to a dirty bar in the next street. He was drinking heavily and I joined him.

"It's got to run out of juice sometime," I said.

He shook his head.

"Atomic battery," he said. "Maybe in fifty years. And that's if nobody recharges it."

"Who would recharge a thing like that?"

He looked at me over the rim of his glass.

They tried everything. Road blocks, barriers, everything: and the more desperate they were to catch, the absurder the attempts became. There were elaborate traps that backfired on the user: attempts to catch it with explosives that destroyed buildings but somehow left the bird unscathed. It was invulnerable: it was unstoppable.

Haru drank something dirty from a clean glass.

"It wants something," he said.

"What does it want?" I asked.

He gave me the look again.

"It wants to meet its maker."

Two days later, Haru was dead. Run over by something smaller than a truck and bigger than a chicken.

After that, I stayed in my apartment. I told myself, *it found its maker, that's enough, it's got to be enough. It's got to be satisfied. It found the man who made it and it punished him for making it.* But the bird wasn't Haru's idea. The bird was my idea.

I heard a sound on the stairs.

I heard a scratching sound. Claws in the hallway.

Beep beep.

David Quantick