

LIMBAWAY 21: GOING PUBLIC

by Paul Watson

It's only a short cab ride from LimbAway to the gleaming headquarters of VDC, but it seems to pass much more slowly for Angelica, watching the approaching tower of glass and steel with apprehension. She pushes through the rotating doors and marches forward. "Hi, Louie. Can you buzz me in?"

"I don't..."

"Pleeeeeease."

Louie's shoulder sag, "Yes, Miss van Dyne."

She favours him with her best winning smile and heads for the elevators. She taps her foot all the way up, crossing and uncrossing her arms.

"Hello, Janet. Is the Dragon free?"

"Your mother is busy with Henri leBeau, Miss van Dyne, discussing the showing."

"Perfect." Angelica walks towards the doors.

"Miss van Dyne, Miss van Dyne, you can't..." she scrambles for the intercom.

Angelica stops, just short of the doors. She turns. "Could you let her know I'm here to see her, and Henri, when she's free?"

Janet breathes out a long sigh of relief. "Yes, Miss van Dyne." she puts the call through, "Ms van Dyne? Yes'm, but Miss van Dyne is waiting outside. She would like to speak to you and Mr leBeau when it's convenient. Yes'm. No, ma'am, she didn't say." she looks up, "Miss van Dyne, what is the nature of your visit?"

"Business."

Janet repeats this. "Ms van Dyne says you have five minutes."

"See you later." she pushes on the doors. Across the office, her mother sits behind the desk, a wire-thin man in an elegant white shirt and black slacks with thin black hair sits across from her.

"Angelica, darling, what a surprise."

"Mother." Angelica replies, walking up to give her an air kiss, hugging Henri leBeau, who looks down at the pressure of an additional bosom, "Henri."

"To what do we owe this visit? Janet said it was about business. You're not here for a loan, I hope."

"Nope. We're doing ok and, frankly, I'd rather sell organs than ask for a loan now. Marcy's handling our angel investors to keep the lights on. I'm here to talk about the show."

"The show?"

"Henri's showing. I've had an idea."

"I see."

"Ok, so Cat Grant is coming to see me tomorrow. I have some good stories to feed her, but it's pushing us to go public."

"Public? Are you ready?"

"We'll have to be. We have a route forward, but having a splash event for a launch would make life easier for everyone."

"A splash event? You want to use the showing...for your product?"

"One model, only. Can be me, but it would be better if it was a professional. I can't expect top tier, but an up-and-coming one would jump at the chance for spotlight time."

"And why would I agree to this?"

"What better way to showcase VDC's innovation in fashion?"

"And you're sure just one model?"

"Just one would be a splash. More risks overshadowing the show entirely and you'd be an idiot to agree to that. And I know you're not, so one model."

"And what would she be doing?"

Angelica lets out a long breath, "Henri, do you think you could customise one of your lesser creations for someone with multiple arms?"

"Multiple arms?" he asks.

"Can I demonstrate?" she asks her mother.

"Go ahead."

Angelica pulls out a pot of blue gel, pulling up her blouse, which exposes the underside of her lower breasts and rubbing it on her side. Henri stares as a third arm grows out. Angelica waves it. "Like this."

"Incroyable." he whispers.

"Think you're up to the challenge of designing an outfit for this sort of thing?"

"Challenge? Oh, ma petite, it shall be a pleasure."

"I haven't agreed yet."

"I know. But if Henri would have said no, it would have nixed it immediately."

"You know I can't refuse you, Angel."

"You say the nicest things."

"One model. And this once. This is a concept show-off, nothing formal."

"Sure."

"No branding. This is a VDC affair that I would be allowing you to gatecrash."

"Understood."

"You will also be in the audience, with minimal modifications. And you'll be beside me in the party afterwards."

Angelica's eyes widen. "That's..."

"A requirement. I don't want any stories about this being 'Angelica van Dyne's latest rebellion' overshadowing the showing."

"I mean, I could get a rebellion story going..."

"You could. But you're being responsible because you know that doing that would sink your business. So?"

"Fine. I'll be a good girl for the party."

"And beforehand. Any stories of your...excesses and the deal is off."

"All excesses in private. Got it."

"That is probably the best I'm going to get from you."

"Possibly. I am being responsible, after all."

"I will have Marlo send over contracts."

"Personally? So she can check up on me?"

"No. That would lead to exactly the sort of thing I'd like to avoid."

"I'll await the instructions. Henri, if you want to come round to fire your creativity, I'm sure Mother can give you the address." she kisses him on the cheek, he kisses her on the hand and she's off.

Back at the office, "You told your mother we're going public?! Without asking me?!"

"Technically, I said we were being pushed to go public. Which we are. The Shrink Shots, Cat Grant, and when we open Loretta's body mod shop...any and all of that is pushing us. So we need to get ahead of things so it looks like we're visionary geniuses rather than being forced by events."

Marcia sighs, "It looks like I'm boxed into a corner."

"Pretty much. But you did say marketing was mine."

"I didn't think you'd use that to try and get us into a van Dyne event! And if I'd known, I wouldn't have thought you'd succeed."

"Oh ye of little faith."

"Angel, be reasonable. It's you and your mother. No faith is more appropriate there. Or so I thought."

"Obviously I have hidden depths."

"Yes, that must be it." her phone rings, "Excuse me. Yes..." she mouths 'it's the investor' and makes a shooing motion.

Angel waves over her shoulder as she leaves, "Hi, Chloe!" she turns towards the lab, "Now to get my stars ready for tomorrow."

Tomorrow dawns, as fresh as it can, which is more than can be said for all the workers. Sindi and Drone stumble in, the former very much worse for wear, "It's too early!" she whines, shading her eyes.

"It is only just before work begins." Drone replies from their other shoulder as it pilots its shared body into the lab.

"You can say that. You weren't drinking all night."

"This Drone was drinking water." it corrects

"That doesn't count. You just don't know how to have fun."

"That is correct. That is not this Drone's purpose."

"Purpose? Fuck purpose! Live a little."

"This Drone has responsibilities. Which you agreed to and agreed were important."

"No fair. Arguing with facts! You can make anything true with facts."

"That is the point of facts." Drone replies, pulling on its lab coat.

"Well, that's..."

"As agreed, work is this Drone's domain."

Sindi nods, and zips up her mouth, "I'll be good. And if I'm not, you know what to do. You always know what to..."

"We have had this discussion ad nauseum. This Drone is not erasing you."

"Well, obviously not. You'd just lie rigid in bed, on your own, and then come here. You need me to live."

Drone doesn't reply, just starts working.

"Are you both ok?" Jennifer asks, laying a reassuring paw on their shoulder.

"This Drone is fine."

"I'm fine. Really. Well, not fine fine, I've got a killer hangover, which Drone escaped, which is unfair, but it's kinda my own fault, but I don't want to be erased, so for what you're asking for I'm fine. Anyway, I'm just gonna go to sleep and let Drone work." she pulls a travel pillow from her small bag, fastening it around her neck. "Don't wake me up unless, I don't know, this place is going to explode. Actually, don't wake me up then, either. Drone will handle it." she leans against the pillow and is swiftly snoring like a demented chainsaw. Drone sighs, pulls out an Away wipe and rubs out Sindi's mouth and nose.

"This is permitted. This Drone acquired Sindi's agreement before she went to sleep."

"Sure. You're ok with the measurements needed?"

"This Drone understands its assignments."

"And Sindi won't..."

"Not while she is sleeping."

"Right."

Inside the marketing office, Angelica's eyes droop. Loretta bites her lip. "You have beautiful white wings." she starts, "It is natural for you to have wings on your shoulder blades. You have beautiful white wings." she continues, opening some purple gel.

"You're getting good at that." Dalia says, clapping into the room.

Loretta blushes. "I have a good subject. She likes being controlled. On her terms, at least." Angelica remains quiet, repeating her mantra, her eyelids quivering.

"Yeah, it seems like it. And you enjoy controlling her." Loretta's blush deepens, spreading down her neck and around her shoulders. "Yeah, got it bad. Don't worry. I wouldn't dream of embarrassing you with the reporter."

Loretta breathes a sigh of relief.

"Now, with anyone else, all bets are off." She laughs as Loretta's blush burns brighter. "You know I'm kidding, right?"

"Oh, sure, obviously." she takes a deep breath and continues her induction of Angelica.

An hour later, half-an-hour before they'd agreed, Cat Grant arrives at the front desk and is ushered

swiftly into the 'conference room'. Angelica sits across the desk, sitting on a low-backed chair, her large white wings folded over her back. Dalia stands on one side, her hooves hidden within her sneakers and Lori on the other, fidgeting with her long hair. "Nice try, Cat, but I know your 'Oh, I'm so sorry, I must have got the wrong time' trick."

Cat shrugs it away. "What's with the feather-shawl?"

Angelica smiles wickedly and spreads her wings wide, "What shawl?"

Cat's professional facade of journalistic cynicism fails for a moment as she stares, her mouth hanging half-open.

"Cute, aren't they?"

"You...you...you have wings!"

"There are those famous journalistic observational skills..."

"Fuck you, bitch! Those are...they're real. That's...you're...what the fuck is going on?!"

"Somewhere a bell rung, and..." she shrugs, flexing her wings, "this angel got her wings."

Cat takes a long, deep breath to steady herself, "You know we only called you Angel ironically, right? Ok, ok. This is your big story, I take it?"

"Oh, no, this is just background."

"Just..."

"You're looking a little pale there, Cat." she smiles, "Why don't you have a seat. And let us introduce you to what LimbAway is capable of outside of shrinking students."

Years later, "...and that is the story before the story everyone knows. Angel's wings inspired Henri and the model's look brought more publicity than we knew what to do with and things just grew from there." Marcia explains, spreading her upper arms wide while the lower ones rest on her desk, a small plate naming her as 'Chairman, VDC-LA Industries.'

"And what happened to the rest of LimbAway's freshman class?" she asks, making notes on her phone.

"Angel stayed our winged-spokesperson, as you know. At least when she isn't letting herself become a perverted sex toy. Don't print that bit! I meant, avant garde art installation. Lori's still working as the owner-manager-lead artist at the original Body Shoppe. Become something of a local arts celebrity, especially with all the 'help' Angel gives her. Doc finally got the recognition he's always thought he deserved as Professor Harrison, Chair of Transformative Bioscience and winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine. Make sure you include that last bit, he gets grouchy when it's left out. Still consults with us, and not just when Angel's 'available'."

"Something else not to print?"

Marcia smiles. "Jennifer took over the lab at LimbAway when Doc went back to Academia. She's doing some remarkable things with the research team, especially on the fluidity of a person's mental body map. Sindi-Drone are still working with her. Sindi's probably as important as her aide-de-camp as Drone is in the lab these days. Hank's head of VDC-LA's medical branch. We're doing good work there on recovery from traumatic injury, erasing the limb and restoring it whole."

"What about, what was her name, Dalia?"

"Councilwoman Foster is doing very well. People are talking about her for a Congressional run. She drops by when she wants to change her legs up. So...every couple of months, really. Speaking of people who need to change their look, when are you going to come back to upgrade to full feline?"

"I'm good." Cat purrs, her feline eyes sparkling, her striped tail hanging from her skirt, a light coating of tortoiseshell fur running over her body. "And Hemmings?"

Marcia's look sours. "Who knows? Ever since Angel fired his ass, no one's heard a peep out of him. He's just vanished off the face of the Earth."

"Is that why you're doing that thing with your hands?"

Marcia looks down at her treacherous hands, rubbing over themselves like she's washing something away. She presses her hands decisively flat on the table. "What thing? Anyway, is that enough?"

“Plenty to start with.” she scratches the triangular ears poking through her hair, “I’ve got enough for the history of LimbAway article.” she looks up across the desk, “Sooooo, what have you got planned next?”