“Now? We wait for the perfect time to strike.”

 Cherry stared at me for three long seconds.

“That’s it?” He growled in utter disbelief. “That’s all we’re going to fucking do?”

 “For now,” I nodded without looking away from my laptop.

 “For now?” He echoed my words, and grimaced when I looked over my shoulder. “We got the names of the bastards! Why don’t we give—I don’t know—an anonymous tip or something?”

 I could not help but cackle briefly.

 “Excellent idea there. While you’re doing that, go ahead and tell the police that Richard Walker III is secretly an alien in disguise. Either accusation will be taken seriously.”

 “But…But…” the ocelot stammered across the table. “We-We have proof, don’t we?”

 “We have *coincidences*,” I emphasized the word, “None of which is enough for the LPD to tie Walker and his lackey to the murders of Mullin, Sylvester and the dime store goons they sent our way.”

 An uncomfortable silence filled the void. His foot tapped on the wooden floor.

“And before you suggest we go to the police ourselves,” I told Cherry, who returned it with a knowing frown, “I have one question: which criminals do you think the police will be more interested in interrogating? The politician who supposedly hired his tech-wiz campaign manager to commit murders by proxy, or the male hustler who is connected to one of the most wanted contract killers in the Western Hemisphere?”

 When Cherry didn’t reply to me, I returned to my laptop screen and started searching across the Deep Web’s directories, or their version of an anonymous search engine. No arbitrary mention could be found regarding a cold case involving a missing Northern Irish teen named Markus Faoláin, or the Iron Phantom’s identity (besides a few comments on forums from a few years ago) on the hidden network’s metaphorical grapevine, or even suggestions about it on conspiracy theory message boards. Let alone any updated Red Notices from Interpol. Had they been given the Iron Phantom’s data, there would be no doubt Interpol would eagerly inform the public that said assassin lived somewhere in the Midwestern United States.

 *Why hasn’t Corbin followed through on his threat to leak my information?* I wondered. *Were he and Walker bluffing? No, his convictions didn’t seem…oh shit…what if…?*

Cherry seemed to notice my typing becoming more frantic. “What’s wrong?”

 I tried willing the fur on the back of my neck to relax, “I need to go to the Dark Web and check something.”

 “‘Dark Web’?” he sounded confused, “Wait, aren’t you already on it?”

 “No, no, no, the Deep Web is just what I was just using earlier,” I began updating my browser and VPN, then waited for my router to reengage, “The Deep Web is the layer of websites that cannot be accessed by regular search engines. Just some non-indexed web pages that won’t be Googled on a whim. The Dark Web is the portion of the Deep Web that is both non-indexed AND used primarily for…not-so-legal purposes.”

 “Ah, like the black market,” Cherry nodded slowly, his tail curling slightly along the floor. “I…think I get it, but what does it have to do with us?”

 “Most of the rumors you hear about the Dark Web are false,” I spoke as I continued browsing and searching for the site, hoping that it either found itself taken down, or my paranoia had only finally gotten the best of me. “While criminals do use it for anonymous trade, it is not a place where bounty hunters, serial killers or advertisements for hitmen like me can be easily found with a simple button click. Much more difficult to find. Especially if you’re just fumbling around the net without a clue where you’re going…However, that doesn’t mean murder marketplaces don’t exist. They’re just more obscure and difficult to find, like Reaper’s Row.”

 The Reaper’s Row had an underground reputation. Ever since the Internet became a household appliance, that darknet site went by monikers like Assassin’s Network, Hassassin’s Net, Iron Market, Deadman’s Market (my favorite had to be ‘Grave Understanding’, back in 2009), changing its name every six months—sometimes three months—to avoid notable detection from law enforcement agencies. The names would change but leave its entirely layout relatively the same; two scythes crossed together and the universal currency symbol in-between, with the newest name at the bottom of the logo, and a drop-down menu displaying the names of those caught up in the death pool.

 I briefly explained to Cherry that Reaper’s Row (which used to be ‘Deadman’s Row’ up until a month prior) operated as both a place to allegedly hire contract killers, as well as a gambling ring revolving around which famous person would die. One feature of the site involved the List, where furs all around the globe would anonymously set up a profile for someone they wanted killed, then place a starting bid and wait for a fur to volunteer their services and take out the target. Of course, to prove you were the true assassin-for-hire that committed the deed, you were required to send the contractor video proof of the killing.

“Otherwise, there’s no payment, and the administrators not only boot you out, but crash your computer too.” When the ocelot asked how I knew about this, my reply was simply, “I used to advertise, then I stopped…it’s a long story.”

 “Oh.” He cleared his throat, awkwardly shifting in his seat.

 My nose twitched as my index finger scrolled down the screen.

 “A good two-thirds of the requests are scams, but that does not mean there aren’t real professionals looking at the List,” I continued explaining to Cherry across the table, my eyes scouring the profiles. “And if someone places a starting bid that is high enough, then it will automatically weed out the true killers from the fakes.”

 Like some contracts out there, the reasons behind it were often petty, ranging between ex-wives demanding more alimony and defendants hiding in the government’s Witness Protection program, or even the victims of crimes in need of securing revenge.

 And sure enough, among the profiles on the List…I found myself.

 Or more specifically, a profile carrying a stilled image of ‘The Real Iron Phantom’, zoomed in on myself in the middle of a Lakertown street, cell phone in paw. It had been taken from a CCTV camera the same day I ventured out to Dicky’s Bar.

 I clenched my fists, then unclenched them.

So, the little bastard HAD been watching me during the call. There would be no other reason for him to know exactly where to find this photo.

Once again, Cherry seemed to read my turmoiled emotions across the table.

 “What?” He pushed himself out of his chair and glanced over to see for himself. His eyes became golden-colored dinner plates when they landed on the stilled image, then the profile itself detailing everything regarding my probable weight, my fur colors, national origin, all without mentioning the name of the wolf onscreen. “Well, fuck me…”

 “To put it mildly but look at this. The starting bid is at $1 million.”

“That’s a lot of money,” he whistled in disbelief.

“You don’t seem to understand, Cher. It’s too much money. Too much!” I craned my neck to him, watching the ocelot’s whiskers twitch in the same dosage of fear I now felt. “No starting bid on the List has ever been that high…The Benefactor is getting desperate.”

“Why would he place a bounty on you though? Why not me?”

“The last thing Corbin or Walker would want is more attention than they need,” I groaned against my seat. “My guess is that they figured the best way to kill you is by making me the fur with the largest bounty on the list, and if a pro targets me, then they’ll target you for being a witness to my murder.”

I dug my nails into my calloused paw pads, willing myself to stay calm as I stood from my seat. Cherry uncertainly waited for me to say something, no doubt to reassure him that everything would be fine.

“I’m going to do another perimeter check. I’ll be back soon, okay?”

“…okay.”

\*\*\*

The perimeter check did little to alleviate my worry, let alone give me time to think, but it did give me an excuse to release some of the building anger in my chest. The property surrounding the cabin included not just a small river, but a small trail encircling the border. Previous owners used it to check for either trespassers, paying no heed to how isolated the cabin happened to be, or to exercise. It certainly gave you an opportunity to find clarity.

After about half an hour of walking, growling at myself, at the world, plus a few hard punches to random trees, I walked back into the cabin’s main loft.

 “Markus?” Cherry called down through the door. “Is that you?”

 “It is,” I replied back, then opened the door to find him standing in the same place as he stood before, gripping the top of my chair and staring at where my laptop once rested. Blindly placing my coat on the rack, the question escaped my lips, “Is there something on your mind?”

 “Uh, yeah there is.” Cherry stepped forward and surprised me with a hug, murmuring into my broad chest, “I can’t thank you enough for…well, everything.”

 Slowly, I raised my paws to pat his shoulders, my tail wagging slightly as I felt his body close to mine. “It is no problem. You do not have to thank me.”

 “I do though,” He murmured again, parting from me to look in my eyes. “While you’ve been out there, risking your life to find answers, all I’ve ever done is sit lazily in your apartment. All I’ve ever done is eat your food and watch TV, letting you do everything for me, and…I’m tired of it, so what can I do to help?”

“…huh?” I raised a thick eyebrow at the feline, who gave me the same expression one would give a naïve, patriotic cadet. “What did you mean?”

“I said…I want to help,” his sunset eyes glinted in uncertainty, then returned with that same determination as before. “I want to help you take down Walker and Corbin.”

My response was immediate: “Absolutely not.”

Those very eyes flickered in shock; his jaw lay open, agape. “Why not?”

“You have no skills,” I reminded him, “and those professional killers are only after me. The idea of you getting involved more than you’ve already have is out of the question.”

“But, wait—”

“Out of the question!” I insisted. “You are not going to ‘help me’. I work alone.”

Roughly, I pulled away from him and went into the loft’s living room to check the fireplace, currently blinking in dying embers. Cherry paced behind me, then stopped directly behind my hunched form. Right ear perked, I wanted him to speak his mind, then let me finish our pointless argument.

“You’re scared of me getting hurt.” He accused. “Aren’t you?”

My voice remained level as I said, “I am not scared. I’m cautious.”

He would not relent. “Markus, it’s okay to be afraid—”

“Fear is an irrational emotion that is completely different from caution,” I interrupted him, sighing in annoyance as I stood. Willing the fur on the back of my neck to relax, I turned to the ocelot. “You would be a hindrance in the field. A liability. I can’t afford to babysit you and handle what—”

“I’m not helpless!” He stomped on the floorboards, hissing. “In case you fucking forgot, I saved your life back at the apartment! I shot one guy, then the fucker who tried to strangle you. Y-You’re not the only one here who’s got blood on your paws, Markus!”

Cherry grew uncomfortably silent, staring down at the carpeting with shaking fists. He seemed on the verge of tears. Meanwhile, I tried my best to remain rational; to retain control of my emotions, as always, to not feel the urge to hug him and relent in my convictions.

“I’m thankful for what you did, but I cannot let you risk your life because you feel the need to compensate me, Charlie.” His real name tasted foreign in my mouth. “The world is not like those action movies you watch.”

He huffed angrily. “Jesus Christ, all I’m asking is that you stop keeping me on the sidelines, like I’m some fragile old lady.”

“Charlie, you’re being ridi—”

“Just shut up for one second!” He spat, “And don’t call me ‘Charlie’ like that.”

“Why not?” I crossed my arms at him. “You let me call you that on occasion.”

“That was before you started treating me like I’m just another suburb brat!” the ocelot angrily flicked his tail at the ground and snarled, “If I were just another fucking ignorant kid in a safe little bubble, then we wouldn’t even be here! *I* wouldn’t be here! The moment I tried hustling, my dumb ass would’ve already been raped and tossed into some ditch to rot away ‘til there’s nothing left! Now here you are, acting like I know nothing about the real world or how cruel it really is!”

“You don’t understand how much crueler it can be.” I raised my voice, now growing fully tired of our pointless tirade. I’d ignored the glares in Cherry’s eyes, which also started tearing up. “These people after me aren’t drug dealers or pimps. They’re psychopaths, and unlike you, I have fully seen what they are capable of. They have no morals. If it earns them more money, these furs don’t care if their target is pregnant or young enough to start walking their first steps! Now, I do not need some tortured little shit lecturing me about how fucked up his own pathetic home life was!”

The hypocrisy of my own words stung, but not as much as the unexpected slap to my right cheek.

“*Shut the fuck up!*” The feline snarled.

Cherry tried punching my stomach, only for my right grip to squeeze on his wrist.

Furious and unfazed by my hold, he swung blindly for my neck with his free arm, sharp claws already protracted. Instinct and experience surged through my bones, taking control. I easily managed to snatch it with my left paw, then harshly pushed him against the edge of the kitchen table, knocking over one of the chairs in the process.

His arms were tightly crossed together, bound by my larger stature and strength. The young ocelot tried hissing, baring his teeth, and kicking at my knees, struggling to break free, but to no avail. I started thinking it was a fit, until I finally realized the expression on his face; an all-too-familiar kind of panic I had seen (and endured) before.

That was when he began gasping for breath. He was reliving the trauma of being choked in the apartment! I immediately let Cherry go, and he gripped the edge of the table for support.

“Sorry.”

“…”

“…”

 We spoke nothing under the dim glow of a lit kitchen. Minutes passed as either of us refused to look directly at the other. I did hear him sniffling though.

 “Why do you keep trying to change my mind?” I asked the foolish feline. “Why do you keep insisting on being by my side? Nothing good will ever come from it...”

 Cherry wiped his nose with his sleeve, then exhaled gently.

 “Because I don’t have *anything* anywhere…not even a damn phone.” He reached for my right paw. It was larger, possessed darker fur, and more experienced in causing pain. Comparatively, his smaller digits knew only how to cause pleasure. “My family rejected me the moment they found out I pimped myself for food. Nobody looked for me when I left. The only person left out there who cares about me…is you. And I want to do everything to help you bring an end to this…this nightmare we’re in. Can I at least do that?”

 Stunned in complete silence, I slowly raised my head to see Cherry, watching me as I stared back at his tear-streaked cheeks, and I softly wiped them clean. In all honesty, his slap from earlier paled in comparison to the ones I’d endured at his age. His grieved expression certainly neared that same kind of pain.

 “I love you, Markus,” he pleaded, “Just please let me help you. Let me…Let me stay with you.”

 I had to be a broken fool to fall for the ensuing delusion. If so, then why did I slowly nod my muzzle up and down, and mutter, “…okay,” to him? “Okay, you…you can help.”

Looking back, I likely started succumbing to madness. Oh well.

\*\*\*

 Licked nipples and nuzzled napes. The sound of him mewling as I fondled his buttocks, then peeled the clothing off of him like a second skin. Before we knew it, he spread himself open for me. Inviting me to take him at that single moment. No more waiting for either of us.

“Ah, fuck…yeah, fuck me…” Cherry cried out the moment his walls enveloped the tip of my cock. “Oh, M-Markus…”

“Grrrr…”

The ocelot’s toned legs hugged closely to my hips as he eagerly sank on the several inches of wolf cock he’d abandoned during all the weeks of us together. His fingers clung to my hairy pectorals for support, making my grunts grow louder as the horny cat teased my hard nipples with his playful thumbs. They quit the caressing though when I bucked my hips upward, and a gasp erupted from Cherry.

“You okay?” I asked sharply. “We can stop—”

“Don’t you dare!” He inhaled deeply, either to smell our potent musks mixing or to concentrate over some small pain, before a moan bubbled from his lips. “Ohhffff~”

He allowed my shaft to further impale, letting it sink deeper and moaning each time. I understood the cue and began to eagerly push against the ocelot’s constricting ring. Before either of us knew it, we were fucking faster and faster on the old bed. I did not touch his member as it bounced up and down over the abs hidden beneath my furry stomach, knowing how much it drove Cherry wild.

Olive oil did not make a good lube, and we likely used a little too much, but neither of us cared. Cherry and I needed to fulfill our carnal desire. I needed to feel his velvet walls envelop my manhood, to feel the young man sitting atop accept my lovemaking, to run my rough fingers through his chest fur and his feminine curves, to watch his eyes widen and wince every instance my length spread his tight walls, only for them to open and gaze lovingly into space.

Not even the loud creaking of the ancient bed under us could distract me from the carnal high. Hell, the isolation of the cabin enabled us to be as loud as we wanted, to howl and bark and pant and hiss in ecstasy without limits to our audible pleasure.

Though when I thrust in him again, my back arching over the creasing bedsheets, I closed my eyes and suddenly felt something soft touch my mouth.

 My eyes widened to find (and feel) him leaning down to kiss me, slowing his motions to focus on massaging my lips with his. Though mine were longer and his more…feline, the anatomical difference did little to dilute from Cherry’s passionate licks.

 He parted from my lips, softly smiling as I stared dumbfounded at his face. I took in the details of his soft pink nose, his twitching whiskers, wet lips and beautiful orbs looking down at me beneath him. Unlike me, Cherry did not have any creases along his jawline or his eyes, and had not truly suffered the full might of the cruel world, let alone seen the true horrors the naïve world could ever comprehend.

Looking back, my past self would have smacked some sense in me, tell me that the concept of love he shared with me earlier meant nothing; lust could only deceive your true self in the heat of a vulnerable moment.

 If Cherry truly meant nothing to me—served as nothing more than a toy for me to use in order to suppress distractions from the world—then why did I feel something else build inside me? Why did I feel it rising up my esophagus until I almost found the only words to convey an emotion I thought had been destroyed?

 I cared for him too. No, not cared…something else.

 “I…” my mouth ran dry from the implication, but I still said, “I think…we ought to sleep now. Tomorrow, I’m going to start teaching you what I know. There’s a hiking trail we can use.”

 Cherry spoke nothing, did nothing, and then pounced back to taste inside of my maw. I allowed him access, relaxing, and moaning as our tongues danced and tasted each other. Our tastes entwined as one. Our paws drifted and felt the other shiver, tense and gasp for air until we eagerly dove in each other again, all as I continued deflowering the ocelot like he was still a virgin lad.

He and I had kissed plenty of times, often due to the heat of our passions, but never like that night. Cherry’s shivers went up my hardened member inside him in a way I never knew possible.

 *Is this what love feels like?* I wondered. *Is this…what losing your mind feels like too?*