It had been yet another restless night of vacant, haunting dreams.

 After instinctively turning off the alarm clock before it could blare like a foghorn, I stretched at the foot of the bed before performing my daily workout as per usual. An hour later and I stood tiredly under the showerhead, staring off into oblivion as warm water washed over my reeking fur and crackling joints. It soon followed with eating a healthy breakfast (dry toast and berries with oatmeal) as well as a mug of sugarless black coffee. That morning, I decided to distract myself by watching current events on the mid-morning news.

 When local coverage decided to focus on a sappy, feel-good story about a homeless shelter reopening, I swallowed the rest of my toast and shut the TV off, deciding to instead see if any notifications or requests had popped up on my…well, website.

 What followed in my schedule varied between mood or priorities, but it always revolved around waiting for the next job: in my line of work, there were days I didn’t have anybody to kill. Sometimes I’d go weeks without any disgruntled mob boss or revenge-craving family member wanting to contract my services. I never worried about money due to what I charged, but I still preferred waking up to prepare for a job rather than wait.

 Fortunately for me, today was not the case.

 After finding no changes to my computer’s firewall or virus protections, I enabled Tor again to enter the Dark Net. Then, I logged onto a seemingly innocuous, albeit creepy webpage of a black background with a white wolf’s skull in the foreground and a ticking noise like a grandfather clock that refused to ever toll.

 All anybody going to the Contact page would find an email address—changing every week thanks to a digital algorithm scrounged together from technology discussions on Deep Web forums I’d occasionally visit—underneath a sizable list detailing what I could/would not do under my profession.

 A message appeared in my inbox. It read, “Request for Iron Phantom Services, please.”

 A small grin formed on the corner of my bored lips. Finally, a new target: Simon J. Valentino. Male elk, aged fifty-three, 310 lbs, 6’ 3” with dark green eyes. Occupation? Junior business executive for a marketing firm in downtown East Gemini. According to my client’s encrypted email, she wanted it to ‘look like a robbery gone wrong’, claiming that she used to be a dedicated receptionist for the professional elk until he replaced her with a younger, prettier receptionist with bigger…features.

 When she confronted him about being laid off, Mr. Valentino retaliated by blacklisting her from across the Gemini Cities. No large marking firm in either Minnesota or Wisconsin wanted to risk hiring an allegedly unbalanced desk girl.

 I held my doubts at first. However, knowing that undercover cops tended to be overly formal, so communicating back and forth with her for several messages disproved my suspicions. She did not reply to me like an agent pretending to be an angry fur desperate for revenge, but an angry fur desperate for *petty* revenge. To her, the cost of my services did not outweigh how much she wanted Mr. Valentino to suffer.

 Once the deposit appeared in my offshore account, I replied to her, “Thank you for allowing me to provide my services. Your request will be fulfilled within the week, or your money back.”

 Of course, if the nameless receptionist somehow double-crossed me, no matter. Her deposit, every zero and one of it in cryptocurrency, was already resting comfortably in my offshore account.

 Shoving my spare laptop, some nondescript short-sleeved clothes, and $2,000 worth of hundred-dollar bills into a well-used brown suitcase, I gathered the necessary equipment from my nearby closet. Working as a contract killer requires preparing for a vast number of unknowns, so I decided on a silencer pistol and a sniper rifle hidden in a guitar case. If I couldn’t fulfill the receptionist’s request to make it seem like a robbery gone wrong, then the good, old-fashioned public assassination would be best.

 *Oh!* I suddenly remembered, curling my tail at the thought of almost forgetting, *Never forget the bulletproof vest.*

Hidden beneath a suit and tie, I started wearing them after one of my clients tried literally backstabbing me. Sure, the one I bought happened to be slightly heavy, but its benefits outweighed gaining another hideous scar.

 Minutes later, I walked out of the apartment complex with a black guitar case and a black spinner suitcase. The late-morning air brushed slightly against my dark muzzle. All around me the ambience of distant police sirens and shouting would’ve disturbed any outsider to Lakertown’s western boroughs, but I’d lived in this terrible district for a long time. I’d grown accustomed to the ancient graffiti, to the foul smells of each littered alley or the petty crime. In spite of my solitary nature, I also knew most of the neighboring residents, which places to avoid trouble or where to find simple pleasures.

 “Speaking of pleasure…” I murmured to the wind.

 The bus stop lying half a city block west of my apartment remained empty, save for one familiar ocelot. Dressed in a pair of denim shorts, the feline’s short-sleeved, white t-shirt didn’t bother to cover his bare stomach or his toned black-and-yellow-furred chest. Up close and personal, anyone could see the bright green undies poking out of his midriff, like they were begging to be pulled down. His bright, sunset eyes flickered at seeing me, while my stoic gaze remained facing towards the road.

 “Morning, sir,” Cherry grinned lusciously.

 I offered only a simple nod. The ocelot’s well-brushed tail swished the air behind his rear, which brought back memories of our first session. Only on that occasion, he’d worn a purple skirt instead of denim. Was it two weeks ago?

 Compared to the junkies, pimps, pickpockets and shadier furs living together in semi-harmony near the Red District, I partially stood out by being one of the few wolves able to afford a penthouse apartment. Granted, it did not compare to the classier ones in Rosecrest or even what could be reasonably rented downtown, but it seemed preferable to living in an area of Lakertown that had CCTV cameras in almost any corner. The rent also never went up alongside the American economy.

 Still, I didn’t bother any of my neighbors and very few of them risked their own skins by interacting with the tall, dark wolf without a name. Cherry was the braver exception.

 The nineteen-year-old feline started offering his services earlier in June. No home, little in the way of possessions, and no money for college, and quickly becoming popular near the Red District. Countless times during the previous two months, I’d seen Cherry and some men discreetly enter an alleyway then walk out several minutes later, both smiling while the young ocelot pocketed dollar bills. Other times I noticed him standing by stop signs, waiting for a potential customer to show.

 Sitting down on the bus stop bench, thankfully dried of morning dew, it seemed like the lad wanted a conversation of some kind. “I haven’t seen you since that night,” he commented with a friendly smile. “Have you been busy lately, sweetie? Gone somewhere great?”

 My eyes narrowed in his direction.

 “I went on a business trip to the East Coast, slicing a tiger’s throat at the request of a Triad boss whom I owed a favor to,” I didn’t tell him. Instead, I returned my gaze back to the street (though not without one more glance at his denim-covered rear, again), telling him, “I did.”

 “Oh…” he sighed, looking sideways to watch for the bus.

 It was hard to believe Cherry happened to be a high school graduate. His lithe body and height made him almost look like teenaged jailbait, but after researching and discovering his real name to be ‘Charlie Rochford’, I knew the little twerp didn’t lie about his age. I held certain qualms about hiring underaged punks, especially since a few of my past targets happened to have been the same monsters who preyed on young cubs.

 Two weeks prior, we met the day after one of my targets fled the country. My clients bailed from the full payment. So, I wanted to expel my angry thoughts with a distraction. Lo and behold, I encountered a certain ocelot casually loitering outside the apartment lobby entrance, hoping for his next ‘paycheck’.

 We booked a motel room half an hour later. If the ocelot thought he knew the raw stamina of a real man, then he wasn’t prepared for me. The night eventually ended three climaxes later, both of us passed out and him tenderly cuddling into my dark-furred chest for warmth. Unfortunately for the hopeless romantic, I immediately left the next morning before he could propose another extra ‘round’.

 “So,” Cherry spoke up after a moment. “do you play guitar?”

 I remained silent, and so did he for another minute. Both of us tensed as a car drove by and disappeared around the corner. For both of our jobs, it seemed that we never let our guard down on the street.

 He then asked me again, “Did…Did you have a nice weekend?”

 A minute passed before boredom compelled me to answer, “I…did.”

 Immediately, the ocelot’s eyes shone like Christmas.

 “That’s cool, I did too. One of my clients paid me five-hundred bucks for him and his friends. I swear, I could only waddle back to my place like a penguin.” He giggled, causing a smile to creep across my muzzle before I could notice. “Eh, what can you do though? Beats flipping burgers or stocking shelves for eight hours.” The ocelot flicked his ears nervously, then stared down at his shifting sneakers. “It is…enjoyable, at least.”

 “Of course, it is,” I suddenly joked out of the blue. “Sex can always be…enjoyable at some level.”

 “True, true…” Cherry smirked, then raised his muzzle to look at me. “Maybe if the job market gets better, but for now you gotta go what you gotta do. Sometimes, what you’re best at isn’t always what you want, but you still need to find enjoyment in it.”

 *You do not know the half of it for me, kiddo.* I thought grimly. The metallic weight of what lay hidden inside the guitar case seemed to be heavier next to me. More so than the week’ worth of clothes.

 At long last, the bus arrived seconds later.

 “I’m waiting for the one bringing me to the business center,” he told me and the bus driver. “See you around, stranger.”

 Grunting out a reply, I stepped onboard and sat on the window seat, glancing back to the spot where Cherry stood waving to me. Whether it be courtesy or something inside, I waved back at him as the bus lurched forward. Next stop: the interstate bus station, then to East Gemini.

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 After arriving to my destination and booking into the nearest motel, I followed my target around in his daily life. I detailed his routine over the course of a few days, noting where Simon Valentino preferred doing outside of the office. I always watched him from afar, as an easy target was one who held no paranoia. An easy target held only confidence in their lackluster cradle of power.

 One would think my height and build made it difficult for a contract murderer like me to blend into a crowd. Most of the time it involved plain clothing or a hat, but the key element included staying within the middle-center of said crowd. And when the target’s salary allowed him to ride three blocks between the office and his apartment in a limousine, inconspicuousness didn’t require much.

 On the fourth day, I gathered what I needed. Seventy-two hours were enough to show Mr. Valentino wasn’t a pleasant individual.

 Fortunately, or unfortunately for me, I discovered during surveillance that Mr. Valentino was very fond of hookers. Particularly the younger ones, which led me to discover the elk journeyed in heavy disguise to East Gemini’s less-than-reputable boroughs to contact a ‘supplier’. Unfortunately for them, my target decided to stop by a porn shop nearby and never returned from the restroom. Instead, the massive elk had been…forcibly distracted by a masked wolf carrying a silencer. His fear of death suited him better than that cocky grin of his.

 “Y-You don’t have to do this,” Mr. Valentino hissed under his breath as I led him out into an abandoned alleyway from the back of the store. “I-I’ve got money. Let me go and I’ll pay you whatever you want!”

 “Quiet.” Closing the door behind me, my eyes trained on the target, I pressed the cold barrel to his back, “Or I’ll leave you without a spine.” Not that he had one to begin with.

 “I-If you’re with Decko, we can work this out!” the bastard continued to plead. “I’m sorry I beat that slut he handed me, but she decided to cry—”

 Having had enough (and being deep enough in the maze of the alleyway), I butted my pistol into the back of my target’s head. He tumbled down and yelped as it hit the ground, while the noise of a snapping twig followed with a literal one tumbling away from his limp body.

 Apparently, the elk lost an antler. And it wouldn’t be the only thing he’d lose tonight.

 “P-Please,” he whimpered, “D-Don’t kill me, I’m beg—”

 “Mr. Simon Valentino,” I growled underneath my mask, each emphasized word carrying black venom. “You have crossed many acquaintances, particularly women who used to work for you. There are other offenses you’ve committed as well though. Nothing would please me more than to do the Devil’s work. One of the women in particular asked me to help her out by killing you, but not before I give you a message: ‘Suck your own dick and get fucked in fire’…”

 One bullet went into his gut, then another between his teary eyes. He fell back against the asphalt with a loud thud, blood pooling under his paled head, especially from the bullet hole and where his antler used to be. Per the client’s request to make it seem like a botched robbery, I snatched his wallet while bothering to knock over a couple of trash cans nearby, making it appear like there was a struggle. Whatever seemed valuable enough for EGPD to not rule it as premeditated murder.

 *Rest in peace, Mr. Valentino*, I prayed for my disgusting target, *See you down there one day…*

I tossed his credit cards down a storm drain, then walked three blocks away to hide the wallet itself in a dumpster. Using the remaining cash allowed me to purchase an expensive steak dinner at a run-down restaurant. Of course, after I bothered getting rid of the suit, gloves and mask.

 Mr. Valentino’s limo driver must have eventually gotten impatient, because soon red-and-blue strobe lights raced past the diner in droves. I didn’t bother staying another night and grabbed the first interstate bus ride back.

 During the hours-long trip, I checked my phone and messaged my client that the deal was done. After confirming the additional money was transferred in my bank account, a news notification popped up about an underage sex ring being uncovered by EGPD. News articles expressed shock and horror as updates came in about a prominent business executive had been discovered dead in an alleyway, the victim of a mugging, yet a predator in disguise.

 Although I rarely interfered in the criminal businesses of others, not one fiber of me hesitated to leave a tip for the police about the late Simon Valentino’s ‘supplier’. Just another job. And another paycheck. Except some thoughts lingered.

 My mind occasionally wandered from my phone and the passing countryside between cities. Houses and small towns passed in brown blurs, some dark and others lit by their occupants. I started wondering about the furs in those houses, those small towns, and how they could live ignorant of the world’s atrocities. How could a man or woman go to work or raise cubs, knowing horrible crimes went unnoticed every other day? Was their tacky façade so dazzling enough for someone to forget? Was it enough to forget the blood and violence? I could not figure it out, at least not from my perspective.

 It was around half past one in the morning when the interstate bus drifted into Lakertown limits, then crawled to a halt one block from my apartment building. Hauling the guitar case and luggage with me off the emptied bus, I dropped them off for the bellhop (when you’re known to give tips in the triple digits, they know not to pry where they don’t belong) before deciding to take a short walk. The air was cool and the sky clear, making it the perfect combination for an after-midnight stroll.

 However, part of me only wanted to hire Cherry again.

 Passing a deep alleyway, I didn’t get past the block my apartment was on when—

 “Fucking let go of me!”

 Whirling around to find two figures struggling in the darkness, one of their smells oddly familiar. An ocelot in denim shorts trying to squirm from the grip of an older Bengal tiger. Wearing a lavish orange, almost illegally 1970s tuxedo, he leered over the smaller feline. Anyone looking for a good time knew this was Desmond Barclay, one of the city’s top pimps and assholes.

 “Ya know this is my territory, but I’ll let it all side of ya put your services with my girls,” the tiger spoke in a painful, indiscernible accent. Either Midwestern or Southern, but definitely not from the urban cities of either region. “It’s been a while since I had a decent twink work under my wing. Work for me and I’ll treat ya sweeter than fucking cherry pie.”

 “Didn’t you hear what I said, Desmond?!” he snarled, still trying to pull himself away to no avail. Brave kiddo. “I work solo here, so let me go and piss on off!”

 “Wrong answer, faggot!” the Bengal smacked him in the cheek, extending his talon-like claws downward. “I was gonna give ya five percent like I do for my bitches, maybe even ten, but I’m gonna make an example of y’all and other fellers trying to—”

 “Walk away. Now.”

 “Get outta here before I…I…”

 The Bengal tiger and his confident bravado shriveled in a coma at the sight of me.

 Although we were both the same height, Desmond Barclay knew we did not have the same amount of muscle mass. I displayed it by pulling the lightweight tiger with one paw and having him dangle half a foot off the cigarette and newspaper-littered ground. When he tried slashing at me with his left law, I gripped it mid-air with my other free paw. To say he looked absolutely mortified would have been a mortal understatement.

 “L-L-L-Listen to me, b-buddy,” Mr. Barclay stammered between panicked breaths and a twitching tail, “I got myself a buncha hoes ya can have if y’all—”

 “He said he doesn’t work for you.” I stated between deepening, ironclad growls. All I saw in this Bengal were the terrified eyes of my last target. Pathetic and devoid of power in the face of Death like me. “Intimidate this boy again or so much as glance at him across the street, and *nobody* will be able to find your dick. I’ll slice it like a hunk of salami!”

 Without any further threats, I brutally tossed the Bengal tiger out the alleyway and watched him stagger down the street. And without another verb or form of diction, I knelt by the shivering ocelot sitting defensively against the brick wall.

 “H-Hey, you…” Cherry chuckled, wincing as he rubbed his furry cheek. Besides a small cut, there also involved a bruise. “Ow, ow. I, uh…hope your business trip went well?”

 Sighing, I carefully helped the ocelot to his nimble feet. “Come with me.”

 My inner thoughts were telling me to leave the ocelot here, not to get involved and instead return for his services the next day. Yet something inside me compelled my arms and legs to bring him up to my apartment. The manager at the front desk barely reacted to my presence, nor me to hers as I assisted Cherry inside through the lobby.

 “You have a wonderful night, Mr. Cormic,” the middle-aged ram, having lived her entire life in Lakertown’s underbelly, told me without asking for details. “Your friend too.”

 Tail curled slightly, I meekly waved back to her, “Have a good night yourself, Ann.”

 A few moments later, we rode the elevator up to my solitary penthouse, the ocelot clearly having been in a similar place before. He didn’t even gawk at the size of the kitchen, making me wonder what led to him giving up his previous life. Instead of asking him outright though, I found myself putting some ointment on the noticeable bruise under his right eye. If he wanted to keep luring in customers, let alone prevent inflammation, he needed it treated.

 At least, that was how I argued myself into doing it for him.

 “I…I wanna thank you for…telling Daddy Stripes off,” he murmured while sitting on the bathroom counter, eyes darting between me and the wallpaper, “He’d been jealous of the money I’ve been making for a while now.”

 Cherry winced when my ointment-covered finger touched his bruise, currently forming under his facial fur. Easy to spot up close. If I hadn’t intervened, who knew what ‘Daddy Stripes’ might have done.

 “He won’t be bothering you again, but talk to me if there is more trouble,” I murmured back, then put the ointment back in its place. “He likely knows what I do.”

 Placing away the emergency first aid kit, I walked over to the bathtub and began running some warm water. My tail wagged in relaxation at the smell of liquid soap after pouring it, as did the young ocelot’s.

 “I want your services for tonight, if that’s okay?”

 He blinked hard at my blunt request. Then, Cherry suddenly laughed as he bent over to slowly pull his jeans off, wiggling his hips at my direction in the bathroom. Already, I could feel the neglected knot stir under my pants.

 “For what you did tonight, it’s on the house,” he answered between giggles.

 I promptly added, “If you want that bruise to go away faster, don’t wash under your eye. The ointment needs to seep in. Otherwise,” my nose wrinkled at his scent under the layers, “you smell like you need something other than deodorant for a bath.”

 “Sure thing, big guy!” he winked at me standing behind him. “Now go and wait for me to get cleaned and ready, Mr. Big Bad Wolf. You and I have a long time until morning. And I need to wrap my lips around a certain something soon.”

 Smirking and eagerly erect already, I returned to my bedroom as asked for.