Whether it be freelance or in the mob’s clutches, any skilled hitman knew the consequences of a failed mission. If a contract found sanctuary from a bullet or disappeared without a trace, several options would likely follow. A mob boss would be angry, and if they didn’t fight back, likely make an example of the failed assassin. Or, most likely in the world of freelance contract killers, the failed assassin’s reputation as a legitimate employee for murderers would be tarnished in some form or another. Thankfully, while my last failure didn’t affect much, it did result in the night I hired Cherry’s services for the first time.

Prior to that fiasco, the other instance I allowed a target to flee from my sights was early on into my freelance work. After becoming self-taught on advertising my own services within the Dark Web, I was suddenly enraged to wake up one morning and discover everything on my computer being locked out by a ransomware virus. Some black hat hacker felt it would be a brilliant idea to blackmail a contract killer into giving up all his income within five days.

I tracked him down in four.

Vic Lucas Horvitz, aka ‘Viktimz404’. Twenty-four-year-old black-footed ferret living in St. Clarke, Missouri. Photoshop artist/part-time Deep Web troll. Usually unemployed in his field of work, rented the living space of his parents’ basement, cared little for his health. Surprisingly, he was extremely talented in creating some convincing photoshop, using it to create fictional pictures of couples cheating, maybe somebody doing something indecent, then posting them onto his victims’ social media accounts.

When I confronted the overweight weasel, his parents were none the wiser after I convinced them I was a college buddy visiting town. Vic practically pissed his pants after I ‘jokingly’ dragged him downstairs, then sobbed quietly as I coldly, methodically explained to the cocky brat which body parts his family would not be able to fully identify unless he canceled the ransomware.

Cherry nearly blanched at one of the descriptive threats I managed to recall, “You were really gonna peel his—”

“Correct.”

“With a serrated—”

“Mhm.”

“…Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

Anyway, as reckless of a stunt he pulled, I did not murder the ferret. He followed my orders, then watched in nerd-fueled agony as I destroyed his computer, then the hard drive. Next, I gave him enough money to replace it all before departing with one final threat, “Do something like that again, and I’ll come back for you.”

Occasionally, I kept watch on Vic through social media tracking. Our previous encounter had changed him completely; he lost some weight, finally moved out on his own and dated. His near-death experience changed him for the better, thanks to my well-convincing power of ‘persuasion’. Now, the time had come for him to return the favor.

My burner phone ringed, “…Hello, this is Vic.”

“Hello, Vic.”

“…” he didn’t reply for several long seconds.

“Vic, are you still there?”

The ferret nervously cleared his throat on the other end, “…what do you want, Markus?”

“I need a favor. Are you still talented with a computer?”

“Is the Pope a Catholic?”

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Two and a half weeks passed for me and Cherry. We trained hard and made love hard, but that wasn’t all we did in preparing for our return to Lakertown.

His Leopard style improved greatly, to the point I did not even need to motivate him with trading questions from each other. As the former prostitute’s body hardened with the limited time we had, I taught Cherry other ways to defend himself in a close-knit fight. This ranged from a Krav Maga technique in disarming a knife wielder to even typical handgun safety for the Sig Sauer P320 Compact I kept hidden in the nightstand.

Handgun safety all came down to simple steps.

“Lesson number one,” I instructed the ocelot with some demonstrations, “Always treat a handgun as if it is loaded. Even if it’s empty, handle it correctly. Never act careless. Number two: never point it anywhere other than your target downrange. Ignoring the first two rules will result in pointless death…so keep it downrange, Cherry. Understand me?”

He nodded reassuringly, while I let him load up the P320 and pointed at a target several yards away, a row of eight empty beer bottles defiantly sitting atop a tree stump. The small hill behind them acted as a backstop for any possible stray projectiles.

“Number three,” I continued whilst positioning his arms and legs into a much better firing stance, “Keep your finger on the trigger guard, away from it, until you make the choice to shoot. Only when you’re certain. Finally, once you are certain about your target, slowly squeeze the trigger. Understand me?”

Cherry nodded again, “Understand you, Mark…”

After giving him the pack of bullets and placing some earmuffs on him, the lad began to fire.

*Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Clack!*

“I hit one! I hit one!” Cherry suddenly cheered, lacing an arm around my torso to hug me, while also keeping the barrel of the gun pointed away from us. “I hit one, Markus! Haha!”

His giddiness was almost infection, making a proud smile curve up my lips.

Two days later, he managed to hit five of the empty bottles. The next day, he got seven before we finally ran out of ammo for the P320. Even so, I had the eager-to-learn ocelot practice handling the handgun, as well as to exercise firing outside when we did not regularly train.

By the time October 25th rolled down to a cold morning, we were ready as could be.

The previous night had been spent pretending to live a life containing some semblance of normalcy. At least, as far as normalcy went for a PTSD-laden contract assassin and his lover, a hustler with a thin layer of parental issues. We slept in on the imprinted bed, snuggled closely together in the other’s warmth before finally getting ready for the day. He and I went through our usual drills but slacked off on the run to go further off the encircling trail, out feet crunching over piling orange and red leaves that littered the forest floor. More than once, Cherry needed to hold my wrist for support as we walked around the rest of the property, just enjoying the solitude most city folk rarely found in the modern world.

An afternoon of relaxation led to an exploration of each other’s bodies that night, right after a hefty dinner (we ate the last of the food in the cabin, not wanting it to go to waste once we departed) and a few hours spent watching more of those cliched movies the ocelot enjoyed with passion. Admittedly, I’d grown to enjoy them too.

The following morning, we woke up to a beautiful sunrise and packed up everything. All of our clothing, my laptop, my burner phone, my weapons—the P320 with no bullets and a camping knife—as well as whatever amount of laundered money I had left stashed for emergencies. Minus the thousands of dollars then currently stored in an offshore bank account.

“You ready?” Cherry asked me as he sat in the front seat with me, wrapping himself in one of my oversized brown jackets.

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” I smirked, then started up the truck.

Neither of us turned back to the cabin, now disappearing into the trees. Or at the least, for no more than a second at a time. Normally, I tried my best not to grow attached to material items and locations, but I hoped deep down, we would return here once again in the future.

Maybe if things went well.

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As always, the unincorporated township of Cobalt Landing remained unremarkable. Existing in Ashland County as a remnant of the American Dream, all that remained were middle-aged nobodies and elderly furs left to their nostalgia. It held the kind of residents who likely never cared about who lived in an isolated cabin in the middle of the woods within its town limits, so long as they got their meager wages and pension checks on time.

Driving into the decrepit gas station cornered between Cobalt Landing’s diner and an intersection that rarely saw traffic, I ignored the stares from a couple of furs walking down the sidewalk. Cherry and I were just two tourists in need of gas.

“Hey, can I go pay for the gas?” he asked me in the passenger seat, his tail curling over the knees of his torn jeans. Those, I bought from a thrift shop several days prior, since the weather had been changing as of late. “Can I also use some of the extra money and get us some snacks for the road?”

“Sure,” I pulled out my wallet and handed him a fifty-dollar bill.

After grasping the bill in his paw and staring down at it, Cherry suddenly lowered his head down, snickering like an immature teenager.

I raised an eyebrow at the laughing ocelot. “What is it?”

“Hehehehe…” he inhaled and exhaled to calm himself, “I think…I think this is the first time I’ve been handed money without doing anybody any favors.”

My lips curled into an amused smirk once Cherry left the truck to ask for gas. No doubt came to mind that he’d buy us some unhealthy snacks, but could anybody blame the energetic feline for it?

Filling up the truck took shorter time than I expected, so I waited for Cherry to return from picking out the snacks and paying for them and the gas. Pulling my burner phone out, I checked my throwaway email inbox to discover a new reply from Vic. As promised on his time schedule, he’d already finished the doctored photo. As promised, it was a stilled image from a CCTV camera outside of Golden Gate Harbor, revealing a wolf similar to my height and build walking out of the entrance.

Even I felt spooked at how much he looked like me. After all, the only reference I gave him for comparison was the same photograph Corbin had posted onto the Reaper’s Row. It seriously made me wonder where Vic would be in life, had he not tried to blackmail me with malware all those years back. Would he still be hiding deep in his parents’ bedroom, ruining lives and stuffing his greasy muzzle with pizza?

“He does not look like you,” staring at the photograph, Cherry had joked before digging into a bag of chips he bought for us, “but I’ll admit, this Vic guy is pretty talented.” He gulped down one large sip of the diet orange soda he bought, out of a six-pack. “Ah! Fucking hell, I missed junk food!”

“If you want to keep those muscles, you will need to continue missing them,” I pointed out, to which the ocelot waved his paw while relaxing in the passenger seat again. “You know that the only difference between diet soda and regular is the name, correct?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know that Markus…” he sighed, “but it feels nice to enjoy some sugar again.” Then, he handed me a bright can of energy drink, swishing his tail against the seat cushion. “Besides, you’ll need to stay up if we’re going back.”

“That is something we can agree on,” I nodded. “Now then.”

Turning the keys in the ignition and bringing the truck back to life, we left the small town behind with nothing but a goal ahead of us.