Following that day, it felt as if a weight disappeared from my shoulders, although my reluctance to show much emotion remained. However, the secretive atmosphere between us seemed to slowly fade away. Our time together began awkwardly at first, but in very little time, Cherry and I opened up to each other.

Waking up, stretching, jogging, eating, stretching, fighting/training, followed by the orgasmic sex only an ocelot could provide, and then a shower and some dinner. Lastly, a good movie followed by some cuddling on the bed or the couch. Rinse, and repeat. Rinse, and repeat. The routine became the entirety of the next two weeks while I researched more of Corbin and Walker’s campaign activities online.

Richard Walker III had been busy since announcing his candidacy. Fundraisers, public speeches, political attack ads on his opponents and personally going to visit every school in the greater Lakertown area to tell students what he would go to improve their livelihood both in school and outside of it. Always trailing behind him was Corbin, smiling for the cameras one moment only to disappear the next with his cellphone.

In order to get close to them, we needed to leave the cabin behind. Doing so would mean slowly exposing ourselves to the eyes of the world, and the contract assassins searching for us.

Speaking of which, the Benefactor’s offer on Reaper’s Row had been doubled all the way up to two million dollars, then four million the night before and finally five million as dawn crept into the cabin’s windows. The highest bid ever placed in the Reaper’s Row’s history.

*They’re getting desperate to find us*, I noted. *We can use this to our advantage.*

Many of the darknet site’s users were scrambling together to find whatever information—true or not—there was on the ‘Real Iron Phantom’. Wherever he was hiding, his true identity, etc. According to the ‘forum’ (I used that term loosely, since it was only a tab where the messages self-destructed after a single day, leaving it up to users whether or not to store the gathered information on their drives.), users already figured out that I remained in the Western Hemisphere, maybe either to southern Canada or West.

Only a few vocal of the users guessed that I remained near the Great Lakes.

The money would keep going up soon. And soon enough, the assassins would do almost anything possible to claim that bounty. God, I could picture them tearing apart cities if it meant earning millions of dollars. They would be set for life.

Whatever the amount would be, however far Walker would go to keep his secrets hidden in the deepest of cavernous pits, it meant Cherry and I needed to end it quickly. Otherwise, I would find myself and the ocelot choking on our own blood.

One early morning near the end of September, I woke up early and sat at the kitchen table with my laptop. The past few days, I’d been slowly plotting together a way for us to not only get close to Corbin and Walker, but to hopefully incriminate them permanently. Of course, doing so would mean making two choices on Cherry’s part. Extremely dangerous, life-altering choices.

Speaking of whom, the ocelot stirred behind me and slid out of the bed, naked as the night before and wrapping his toned arms (his body was beginning to take shape, even gaining a small four-pack in his stomach abs) around my bare torso in the chair.

He kissed my left temple, purring. “Morning,” Cherry murmured tiredly.

I could not resist smiling faintly. “Good morning, sleeping kitten.”

He lightly smacked my shoulder and walked around to reached into an overhead cupboard, momentarily distracting me as he shook his ass for me, tail wiggling over his perfectly plump cheeks.

The teasing ocelot poured himself a glass of water from the faucet, then placed it aside for later use. “Whatcha doing, Markus?”

“Ah, I’ll uh, explain later,” I went back to face my laptop. “Now, while I’m getting ready, I would like for you to get dressed and do ten laps around the property, then shower. And don’t forget to stretch before and afterward. Okay?”

Originally, I needed to threaten the ocelot with no sex in order to make him do the laps on his own without cheating. It sincerely motivated him to perform it solo, since I could smell the lack of sweat on his person a quarter of a mile away. Doing so gave us more time to review his fighting techniques as well as some leisure between then and dinner.

“See you soon,” he giggled. “And be sure to wait for your shower, alright?”

A lecherous grin crossed my dark muzzle. “Can do.”

A couple of hours later, following the time spent gathering together my information and a sensual session spent showering with my ocelot (his legs weren’t the only sore spot, heh), Cherry and I dressed ourselves in a t-shirt and jeans before I led him into the living room, laptop under my arm.

I sat next to him on the couch and placing the opened laptop on the coffee table. “I checked this morning. The bounty on my head is now up to five million dollars.”

The relaxed expression of the ocelot’s suddenly turned sour.

“Holy shit!” he uttered in disbelief, shaking his drying headfur and folding his pointed ears down. “Where the hell does Mr. Walker have that kinda cash to give out…?”

“He is likely bluffing, but it would be stupidly risky,” I explained in stoic fashion. “If one of the assassins did succeed in taking us out, and it turned out neither he nor Mitchell Corbin had the money, they’d be hunted down and slaughtered like cattle.” My eyes narrowed back down to the screen, seeing that amount of money. “He might have some offshore bank accounts in a tax haven. It’s not unreasonable for a wealthy fur to hide money in case they need it for more…unorthodox payments.”

“So…what’s the plan then?” Cherry asked. “We gonna go back down to Lakertown and tear some shit up or something? Storm Walker’s mansion and confront him?”

“Not exactly. We can’t kill them outright, or else we will still be dealing with the assassins. And police too, if we made the murders obvious.” I leaned down to the laptop and opened another tab, typing in what I discovered while researching further on the Benefactor. “I have a plan, or rather…a series of ideas poorly placed together.”

Another news article appeared onscreen for us to see, with Cherry picking it up to read closely. His tail swished in piqued interest while I recalled what I already knew.

“This coming Halloween, Richard Walker III will be hosting a costume party-slash-fundraiser at the Majestic Hotel,” I smirked softly, my tail wagging at the thought of such a potential outcome for us. “We will keep training for some time, then confront Walker and Mitchell Corbin directly. Maybe even negotiate.” My tail calmed somewhat, curling slightly against the cold, cushioned seat. “The furs on Reaper’s Row haven’t found us yet, but we can put them on a wild goose chase of sorts. I know this black-footed ferret in St. Clarke that can help us do that, named Vic. He’s extremely talented with photoshop. He can take pictures of us and legitimately make it look like we were spotted somewhere out West.”

“How do you know he won’t turn us in?” Cherry asked, clearly concerned.

“He doesn’t go onto Reaper’s Row, plus he still owes me some debt,” I grinned for a moment, “And while the hitmen are out on that wild goose chase, we can and force the Benefactor to take down the bounty on me. Then, take them both out.”

“Take them out?” Cherry’s eyes widened, at the same time his whiskers visibly twitched. “Like…kill them?”

“If we have to.” I simply replied, raising one of my eyebrows at the slightly stunned ocelot. My smile slightly transformed into a minor frown. “Is there a problem?”

“…” he didn’t reply for several seconds, fidgeting in his seat while glancing between me, his paws and back to my judgmental gaze. “I…no.”

I continued staring, boring into his eyes to wait for a genuine answer.

“No,” I reaffirmed his reply, “No…I don’t…but it’s like you said, if we have to, right?”

“I’ve also been doing further research on Mitchell Corbin,” I said a moment later, bringing my laptop back to my knees as I typed in another tab, “There’s still not much to work off of, but I’ve been getting a clearer picture of why Interpol has not turned the Blue Notice on me into a Red one…or rather, according to their words, ‘the freelance contract killer known as Iron Phantom’…”

Sometime recently, I had explained to Cherry the workings of the Interpol Notices system, which categorized international requests between members of different police departments across the globe. There existed eight in total, with the faceless Iron Phantom having only a Blue Notice—to collect additional information about a person’s identity, location or activities in relation to a crime. Red meant that the Benefactor had told them who I was, what my modus operandi consisted of and that I was now a wanted fugitive with a name.

“Do you…Do you think he’s trying to catch you first before they do?” Cherry asked me mid-thought, then clarified, “The police, I mean?”

“Sounds exactly right,” I sighed, then stopped as we looked once again at the stilled photograph of the dingo, standing motionlessly behind his candidate. He seemed bored, or maybe distracted by something else on his mind. “Corbin is a very organized fur. I can tell you that much on the surface. Down under, no pun intended—”

He giggled shortly, bringing a sense of warmth to the cold bones in my chest.

“Down under, working as the Benefactor, I believe he likes to have a strong sense of control over a situation, but prefers to have others do the dirty work for him. There’s no doubt he has all the information from my computers. He could and would easily be able to turn all of it to every government agency, and everyone else who has a grudge against me. He has information on you too.

“If I were Corbin, and I wanted to keep sensitive information to myself that I could easily send to someone without having it compromised, I’d keep it on my person…”

Cherry seemed to read my thoughts, “Like on a smartphone.”

“Maybe,” I shrugged, flicking my tail in slight frustration at everything; the plan itself, finding ourselves cornered, plus our lack of information on Corbin, “but we’ll need to be careful going in. If we are going to confront them, I need you to do something for me. This will be a massive gamble for us and may require you to sacrifice something.”

That certainly caught the apprehensive ocelot’s attention. “Sacrifice what exactly?” he asked.

“…you’ll might need to let go of your previous life.”

He tilted his head in confusion, looking at me like I’d grown two heads.

Without detracting into an unserious tone, I explained, “There are too many unknowns ahead. Whatever happens, I don’t know if you can ever return to your previous life as Charlie Rochford, should anything happen to us. If you’re serious about working together alongside me—”

Without a beat, the sly feline slipped his left leg over my torso and pushed me against the couch seat, planting a deep kiss on my muzzle that stunned even me. One second passed, followed by two more. Then, I returned it while pulling him closer. To my chest, to my lips and against my bulge, his clothed bottom teasing it like a lap dancer.

Each of us gasped for air. “I told you I wanted to stay by your side,” he murmured against my lips, “and I wanna keep that promise.”

My tail swished between his fine legs, and mine. “You won’t have a normal life, Charlie…”

“Charlie Rochford is dead.” He stated with conviction in his trained eyes. “He’s dead. He died when I was tossed onto the street. Besides, it’s like I told you a while ago, Markus: the only other person out there who’s ever cared about my well-being is…you. And if it means getting any kind of normalcy with you, I’ll follow you to fucking hell and back.”

Purring softly, the ocelot rubbed his forehead against mine, then licked my upper cheek.

“Please…keep calling me Cherry. And never stop doing it.”

My paws lowered to his hips, cupping each of them as I ground against him for warmth, eliciting a growl from me that resonated into another loving bite from me.

I grinned at him, lost in something other than carnal lust. “Okay.”

Now, it became official: I had lost my motherfucking mind.

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The tip of my teased shaft sliding underneath his taint. One of his sensitive nipples in my gentle teeth. His fingers tracing through my head fur, moaning into my neck and eventually my lips. Our tails entwining as I felt my ocelot shudder in my arms, climaxing with me in a poetic whine that left us writhing together once it grew dark out.

Cherry slept soundly, even as I slipped out of his grip in bed and covered him in the warm blanket. I stretched my back and heard a pop, then sighed as I sat back down on the couch and tuned the laptop back on.

It was risky. Maybe even suicidal to contact somebody outside of our off-the-grid safe haven, especially with a multi-million-dollar bounty on my head. However, it didn’t stop me from contacting a certain black-footed ferret in St. Clarke.