“Wait, so Daddy Stripe’s not the one who…tried to kill me?”

 “Nope.” I sighed in defeat. “I looked through what little he gathered on Becky and her death. It all checks out. Her mother got the surgery money sent to her from an unknown benefactor, and autopsy confirms the girl died from cyanide. It is the expensive kind.”

 It was half past nine in the evening, and I returned to find Cherry cleaning up from a late dinner. He was happy to see me at first, asking me a dozen questions regarding what happened and if Desmond Sylvester confessed. Once I finished explaining everything to him, the ocelot then spent minutes leaning down from his chair, staring down in shock at the floor. He seemed more lost than before. Much like me.

 “What…” he asked minutes later, “What do we do now?”

 My ear twitched at the uneasy feeling lingering in the air. “We keep looking.”

 “How though?” He asked.

 “I’ll…I’ll figure something out.” My shoulders remained slumped, and my tail half-curled at the fact the trip obtained more questions than answers for us. “Sylvester’s notes on the Becky girl aren’t half-terrible. We know this person has experience on the Deep Net and has extensive resources to pay for both two years’ worth of rent and a kidney surgery.”

 “But that isn’t much though, is it?” The ocelot pondered aloud, to which I shook my muzzle. “Goddamn…”

 Someone with knowledge on the Deep Web and a big checkbook wasn’t exactly hard to find. Combined in total, the amount of cryptocurrency throughout the criminal underworld in of itself could be used to purchase entire countries. There also happened to be the fact that Becky Mullin and Cherry didn’t seem to have anything in common to tie them together. We were in strange waters with no expertise on how to navigate ourselves to our destination.

 “Can I ask you something?” The ocelot asked, despite not needing to. “Why…didn’t you leave the one in the car alive? To interrogate?”

 I perked my ears up. “Harry Solomon? Why should I have done that?”

 “Because then we could probably know more!” he suddenly erupted, then lowered his voice down to a mumble, “H-He could’ve told us who did it or maybe give us some…some clues or something…”

 “Cherry...” After giving a deep sigh, I explained to him, “Even if I somehow found a secure place to hold Harry Solomon, there would be the issue of making his car disappear off the face of the Earth. Besides,” I glanced down at my phone, “whatever the police have found at the idiots’ place, we would’ve eventually found out, and they found nothing. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t worth checking into tomorrow. We might find more info by then…”

 I stood up and began making my way to my ‘hacker den’ in the penthouse.

 “Wait, Markus?” Cherry suddenly asked in a cheery, hopeful voice, “Do you wanna watch a few movies with me? I got a few good ones I know you’ll enjoy.”

 “No thanks.” I declined, “I’m going to keep searching for anything on the Deep Web.” He whimpered slightly behind me. Cherry knew it turned me on, and I couldn’t help but scoff. “Enjoy your B-movie trash.”

 He pouted, “Blasphemer! ‘Fury Highway’ isn’t B-movie trash!”

 By two in the morning, I found nothing else about the Benefactor. Not a single new clue to help me track down the phantom. There wasn’t any talk of a serial killer who held any similar modus operandi, let alone a post on ‘killer craigslist’ sites such as the Reaper’s Row, asking for assassins to conduct similar acts. Defeated and tired, I eventually joined Cherry in bed to gain a relaxing and dreamless sleep. Sadly, that wasn’t the case.

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 The nightmares never started out calm.

 They always began with me awaking in my childhood home, a molding structure held together with straw and weak bricks. I would always jolt awake in my bed. I would then shrivel back against the wall when I heard the heavy, uneven footsteps approach my bedroom door. My eyes would remain locked between the rusting handle and the shadows beneath the crack at the bottom of the door. Minutes would turn into incorporeal hours until the heavy breathing, jagged rasping and growls ceased…

 …to be replaced with a booming voice…

...right next to my ears.

 “**You cannot escape me, boy.**”

 In the oceans of these landlocked dreams, I wouldn’t be a man of thirty years’ worth of killing and fighting experience; no, I would always be that same scared little cub, unprepared against my father’s wrath. And despite not registering the pain in each of his punches, his clawing, or his violent grip on my neck when he pulled me to my footpaws…I always felt their impact. And I was always helpless to them as my father’s voice danced around me like shadowy devils echoing around in a crypt.

Yet the real torture came from his words.

 **“Pathetic faggot! No wonder nobody cares.”**

 **“Fuckin’ traitor, Markus!”**

 **“It’s your fault they’re all dead!”**

 **“Ungrateful mistake!”**

 **“You don’t fuckin’ deserve to live!”**

 **“Hell has a special place for murderous furs like us.”**

I’d always eventually transporting to two scenarios: either I found myself running into the burnt lockers adoring my high school’s hallways, or in my house again, gripping a knife as the dwelling flooded with police to repeatedly shoot me down. Tonight however, my dream found itself on a third path.

 I was walking through a maze of city streets and empty alleyways, carrying a Glock in my paws while keeping an eye out for my target. My terror from before suddenly transformed into unnatural glee, which then erupted in euphoria when he walked out of the shadows. I promptly shot him, only to drop my gun and see…it was Cherry.

 My Cherry. With a bullet hole gaping between his pleading eyes.

 **“Why?”**

 Warm, oozing blood poured from his body until I stood ankle-deep in it. Whatever stoic indifference I felt for gore suddenly became nauseua. I tried vomiting into the pools of crimson liquid surrounding me. Then it continued to rise in a torrential downpour, flooding the streets and painting everything, gagging and drowing me until I tasted the ocelot’s bitter plasma forever.

**“Why?”**

**“Why?”**

**“Why would you hurt me, Markus—”**

“AH!”

I nearly tumbled over from the bed, heaving, and drenched in my own sweat. The blanket at first felt like a heavy weight. It wasn’t until I glanced over to see Cherry—nestled on the other end of the bed, safe and sound—that I began to reassure myself, “It’s just a nightmare…just another fucking…fucking nightmare…”

Those horrible dreams tormented me every several months or so, repeating each night for some time until I could pull myself together. They plagued me no differently than an unearthed traumatic memory in teenagers or young adults. Whenever they started to become a problem, I’d pack up some essentials and bug out to a private remote cabin in northern Wisconsin, far from civilization or my past. The isolation always provided clarity.

With Cherry though, it wasn’t like I could immediately leave like the previous time.

My eyes drifted to the ocelot—still unharmed and breathing slowly—on my bed, who shifted to face me. I carefully sat down to look closely at Cherry’s beautiful form beneath the covers. I’d probably felt every single centimeter and inch of it, from his curved hips to his trimmed taint and lithe stomach, his sensitive chest, curling tail and spot patterns. My favorite was one at then nap of his neck, a black and white one perfectly contrasting each other. That zone always made him giggle if I licked or gently nibbled at it.

Then I suddenly imagined myself slicing a knife across it, and I immediately felt the urge to hurl over the side of my penthouse balcony. I ended up dry heaving over the side for a solid ten minutes, willing the remaining undigested contents to release, but they didn’t. When I returned, Cherry has curled up again, probably trying to feel for me on the mattress. The memory and dream from before still left me extremely unwell.

“Just a nightmare,” I told myself, “Hold…Hold yourself together, Markus.”

An area of me grew disgusted that I could think such thoughts, yet that darker side of my brain knew that if I wanted to, I could ruthlessly murder Cherry and hide his body in a dozen different ways. Some options included poisoning him during breakfast the next day, then dismembering the corpse until all of it could be flushed away. Or perhaps strangling him until the life escaped his eyes, followed by wrapping him into a rug and finding the farthest available sinkhole within the county.

Such intrusive thoughts were painfully trained into me over the years, but here…it felt unbelievably wrong. Just the simple thought of turning him into another victim caused my stomach to perform a somersault inside the ribcage. Deciding not to get any more sleep, I stumbled into the living room and wallowed myself in some (super) early morning sitcoms. Whatever helped me forget.

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 The summer dawn creeping over the Lakertown skyline didn’t soothe me the slightest.

 Since waking up, I dressed myself in a plain black bathrobe and leaned outside the exterior balcony, watching and listening to Lakertown as it loudly snored in its sleep. I ignored the pre-morning chill over my bodyfur and simply stared out into the dancing starlight that made up the Midwestern city, from the iconic skyline along Lake Michigan to the cesspool surrounding it and this apartment complex. Some lights in various buildings twinkled on and off like distant, dying stars. Most of the visible apartments and high-rises remained dark due to their tired inhabitants. Nobody could ever know what they were dreaming of, but on many occasions, I tended to guess they were often mundane things. The kind of things that made me jealous.

 Those creeping dreams of my past had haunted me since forever. In time, I’d learned to suppress them for periods of time, burying them under the many rivers of blood and death and carnage forged across twenty-plus years of my profession. Yet sometimes…these nightmares always reemerged from under the surface like tumors. They tortured me until I found the willpower to drown them away into a benign state. On and on in an inescapable cycle nobody could break away from.

 Sighing deeply, I gripped the cold railing and closed my tired eyes. I tried imagining myself faraway, at the Wisconsin cabin where no cars or souls surrounded me. It started to work until my tail no longer swished against the balcony floor, but a pair of legs.

 He yawned, “Good morning…”

 My blood ran cold, almost bringing me back to the image of the ocelot covered in gore.

 “Did you sleep well?” he asked cheerily at first.

When I didn’t answer, Cherry slithered beneath my right arm to stand between me and the balcony. He borrowed one of my extra black bathrobes, draping him like a prince in elegant cloaks that dragged behind him. If not for the dark thoughts on my mind, I would have found his lithe frame and smooth torso poking out distracting enough.

“Wait a min…” Immediate concern crossed his sharp eyes, and his tail flicked out of the robe as he asked, “How long have you been up?”

I answered, “…enough.”

Of course, the damned ocelot didn’t believe me. Somehow, he knew it wasn’t the truth. After all, his firm paws and velvet tongue and experienced lips could pull any truth from me, weakening my defenses. Fucking prostitutes could somehow always know.

“Bullshit,” he huffed, staring up at the dark bags under my eyes, “Did you even get four hours of sleep? That can’t be healthy for you!”

“Neither is being around me,” I tried to say, only for my incoherent mutterings be translated to, “N-Neith…bein’…’rou…”

The exhaustion finally caught up to me, and I nearly fell over onto the balcony’s edge.

Fortunately, Cherry yelped and managed to begin pulling me back inside after discarding his extra-large bathrobe so we wouldn’t trip over them (and likely break our jaws). My heavy, frantic eyes fluttered opened and closed as I saw the ground transition from polished brick to an ugly carpeted floor I never bothered replacing. Maybe it’d be a good idea for the future.

“Easy there, Markus…” I heard Cherry grunt besides, guiding me back towards the bed. “Jeez, I hope most of your weight is all muscles.”

I found enough strength to grumble, “Smartass…” before any remaining strength collapsed with me onto the blanket.

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 The dreams of a professional, ruthless killer varied between either vast nothingness, or the kind of agony ‘tortured’ artists only yearned for. Me? I found myself in the latter. I guess you could say I happened to be one of those ‘lucid dreamers’, because immense relief immediately flooded over my shoulders as I drifted through an endless void.

 Some sounds pierced through such as a thud or some honks from street level. They were as faint as a hooting owl, to the point my instincts almost mistook them for a rumbling threat until I remembered: only a dream. I didn’t know how long I swam in the quiet abyss—maybe just hours or minutes—but it didn’t bother me. There were no nightmares, fathers, murder victims nor demons of the past to haunt me back to the real world. No, what did pull me back to reality was a warm, suckling sensation lapping around my flaccid cock.

 My eyes opened to the sight of a bare ceiling, the blankets covering my weary body (and someone else rustling beneath them) as yellow sunlight drenched the rest of the bedroom like a spotlight. That same pair of lips started slurping up and down the hardening underside of my canine shaft, cradling it before a feline maw enveloped it whole.

 “Mmmmmmm…horny little ocelot…”

Cherry’s ‘morning treatment’ paused, even as I shifted my legs to widen them for more room. He hesitated even as I lowered my left paw on top of his headfur, while my right paw gripped the used sheets. However, his daring nature returned when my fingers scratched one of his heated ear, causing him to purr.

“Mmm,” he giggled. “I couldn’t resist. And I thought you’d appreciate it.”

Suddenly, an erupting groan echoed from the back of my throat when I felt his rough tongue tease my sensitive cocktip. This time with vigor. The same kind of vigor that brought me to orgasm within minutes. As I lay in bed, eagerly thrusting my hips into the feline’s warm maw, my balls bounced off his wet chin and I snarled as cum unloaded into his throat.

I let go of my right paw and heard Cherry gagged below the blanket, yet he didn’t complain mid-swallow. He impressed me by sucking all my seed down in a few audible gulps. As I laid my arms back and felt his mouth let go of my drained shaft, the blanket flew aside to reveal him naked and boldly licking his chops of some stained cum.

 “So, Mr. Insomniac,” he half-laughed while scooting closer to me. The ocelot’s multi-colored paws awkwardly rested on his toned knees, his tail curling behind him in a way that made me wonder if this thing was a spur-of-the-moment way to get me up. “How do you feel?”

 I stretched my neck until I heard a small crack. Then, I stretched an arm.

“It was…” My nostrils inhaled his scent and mine, “exactly what I needed…”

 Cherry tilted his head. “Me sucking you off, or actually getting some Z’s?”

 “Both, obviously,” a dry chuckle formed on my lips, only for it to pause. “So…how long have I been asleep?”

 “About nine hours or so,” he casually wiped some excess cum with his thumb, then licked it clean, “I decided to nap with you for a bit before making some brunch. You in the mood for some extra-salty and peppery eggs for linner?”

 My right ear twitched like he spoke a foreign language. “‘Linner’?”

 The ocelot snickered at my momentary confusion. “Wow, you’re so old.”

 I rolled my eyes and promptly threw the nearest pillow at him.

 The rest of the day was supposed to be relaxing, at least I hoped it would be. However, the moment I turned on the afternoon news, a single headline yanked me back to me and Cherry’s dire situation:

 **SUSPECTED PIMP MYSTERIOUSLY MURDERED**