The locals in southern Wisconsin had a joking axiom I’d heard every now and then: “Travel thirty miles up North, and it feels like you travel thirty years back in time.”

The reasoning for this involved how much the woodland forest and properties in that region rarely changed. Despite a new superstore here or a small cul-de-sac of housings there, they still held an undisturbed tranquility I often envied. Compared to the gentrifying urban sprawl surrounding Lower Lake Michigan, northern Wisconsin did not have the white noise of impatient traffic. It did not have the annoyances of inner-city wariness for your surroundings. It also certainly didn’t have the disrespect of city folk like those in Lakertown—silent suspicion towards outsiders, yes, but not enough paranoia to question.

After navigating down an unpaved road snaking from the main highway, I navigated the pickup through the trees until I breathed in relief.

It still sat there, resting comfortably atop a small hill adjoining a murky pond; a simple, two-story log cabin, complete with an outfitted garage on the bottom floor and a studio living quarters on the top, followed by a small balcony overlooking the small mulch driveway, now covered in seasons-old leaves.

The secluded cabin didn’t belong to Gradee Cormic. It belonged to a widowed wolf who, as far as the townspeople were led to believe, rarely ventured into downtown or the farmer’s market. The only times he came down were for purchasing the bare essentials. He did not speak much or interact with anybody outside of polite conversation but was courteous and reclusive enough not to turn too many muzzles in his direction. Part of me wondered how the locals would react if I brought Cherry—outgoing and flamboyant—alongside me to the grocery store. Would it raise too many eyebrows?

The previous owner had been a wild goose hunter who went missing one day (I didn’t kill him) during a hunting expedition with friends, only to turn up the next morning after having a sudden aneurism. His next of kin were desperate to sell the property off, not even caring about some of the furniture or items left behind save for the occasional family valuable.

 I opened the garage door and pulled the pickup inside before locking it closed behind us, then went to the passenger side to rouse him awake.

 “Ugh…” he moaned, “…two more minutes…?”

 “Come on,” I guided him to his feet, placing an arm around my shoulder and lightly tapping his cheek. “We’re here.”

The ocelot blinked continuously and incoherently mumbled something, nodding softly as I half-carried him up the stairs into the loft. It was dark and quiet as a graveyard, but I instinctively went right, and we collapsed together on top of a single bed.

I would have done a perimeter check around the property, checked the power and made sure there were no hidden damages to the cabin, but our escape had taken its toll, and I drifted to sleep with Cherry as soon as my head hit the pillow. Thank God I did not dream.

Instead, I lounged through hours of dead sleep and roused up to wake up in an empty bed, alarming me at first until I sat up from the mattress, recognizing him through the rays of creeping sunlight on a lone recliner. Pushing my bare feet to the ground and stretching an arm out to the ceiling, I could feel my neck crack in tired rejuvenation, and I blinked away the groggy veil covering each eye.

The cabin’s loft hadn’t changed in the years since I first bought this property. My bed sat cornered in the back opposite a door leading into the tiny bathroom, containing a metal sink, faucet, toilet, as well as a tiled shower stall. Any warm water needed to be heated first in a furnace in the garage below. Meanwhile, a wooden table and small kitchen along the wall led to a semi-living room that housed the recliner next to a bookcase, a corner fireplace for warmth, a coffee table made from some old tree, its accompanying couch and a shelf that held an old TV next to the balcony door.

As I walked over to Cherry’s sleeping form across the loft, my tail flicked away at some gathering dust, and I nudged his shoulder. When he didn’t stir, I nudged a little harder.

“Ugh…” the sleepy ocelot opened an eye, then both of them when he saw me looming over him. He tiredly stretched his legs, bare toes curling with his tail. “M-Morning, Markus…”

“Morning,” I knelt beside him, one paw on the shoulder rest of the recliner as my eyes traveled to his Adam’s apple. “How do you feel?”

Cherry faux smiled, in the same way a hustler pretended to be interested in a client.

“I’m…” he hesitated, “…I’m okay.”

I couldn’t help but raise my right eyebrow slightly. “You sure?”

He simply shrugged, yawning, “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you nearly died last night,” I almost reminded him, except my awkward cowardice won out. I did not say anything.

Instead, I leaned down to stare down at the ocelot’s neck. He tensed at my proximity, flinching slightly as I slowly touched the acute bruise marks hidden under the speckled fur along his throat. Nothing seemed amiss, but then again, I only held the knowledge of causing wounds instead of analyzing them.

“Does it hurt?” I asked again. “Do you feel any twinge of pain, or…?”

Despite accepting my examining touch, I could still see wariness in Cherry’s expression. His body trembled in frozen passivity when a feral deer found itself in the headlights of an incoming truck on the highway. Or when a young cub needed to stand still as a strange doctor surveyed their body for anything wrong. Did he see me as the truck? Or as a strange doctor?

“Only a bit…nothing’s wrong, Markus,” he then sat up from the recliner, then quickly changed the topic, “So what’s for breakfast?”

Deep down, a significant part of me demanded to ask Cherry how he really felt.

Deep down, I wanted to gently grab his shoulders and insist he could speak to me about the traumas endured the prior night. No fur waved off a near-death experience without consequences on the mind. Even I knew and understood that, however, a side of me argued to leave well enough alone for now.

“Sure thing,” I obliged, almost reluctantly. “We only have nonperishables though…”

The wooden cupboards along the kitchen wall contained nothing but canned goods like fruit, meat, and soups, as well as some packaged pasta, granola bars and some boxes of rice. Cherry practically cheered with joy when he leaned into one of the cupboards and proudly fished out a box of pancake mix.

“So, this place has power?” he eyed the patio stove along the far end of the countertop.

“There’s a river in the northern part of the property. A small hydroelectric dam helps generate electricity for the entire cabin.” I grabbed the refrigerator to reveal nothing inside. It was barely even cold, “Unfortunately, we don’t have milk, syrup or butter. It would’ve gone rancid after this time spent away.”

“Damn…” he whined before sitting down at the table. “Alright, but can you still make pancakes with water?”

I chuckled shortly. “You can, in fact.”

“Really?”

I awkwardly nodded. “Yep.”

“You’re not shitting me?”

“It takes away some of the sweet flavor,” I shook my muzzle and proceeded to pull out a decent-sized frying pan from the lower cupboard, “but it beats wasting money on milk when you’re penniless…”

Or fugitives on the run, both from the authorities and a shadowy enemy.

Thankfully, Cherry didn’t question why I paused for a couple of seconds, too wrapped up in remembering the times of my youth in Northern Ireland, when I heavily relied on flour mix and cheap foods at the local market. Instead, the ocelot was too engrossed in watching me cook.

I noticed him twiddling his thumbs, and his feline ears partly folded as he stared absentmindedly at either his fingers or the glazed tabletop he leaned against.

“Is it weird not to have a phone, Cherry?”

“Y-Yeah…” he half-laughed, twitching a whisker into a smile. “I mean, I’ve gone without a phone before, but…well, my phone was the last of my possessions before…ya know, my rat-bastard of a father tossed me to the curb.”

I finished blending the flour and pancake mix within a bowl and pour it into the pan, now sizzling with heat from the stove’s burner. Thank God I remembered to refill the small propane tank since my last visit, otherwise it would’ve meant a trip into town and leaving the ocelot to wallow alone. The last thing a lad such as him needed was alone time following such intense, unapologetic trauma. After all, look at how a random fur like me turned out years later.

“Are the photos and information on it saved to a network?” I asked, sounding hopeful in spite of my push to remain stoic. “Once this whole…fiasco is over, I could buy you a new phone and you can get all of your photos back?”

“Maybe…” He sighed, curling his tail onto his lap beneath the table. He still twiddled his fingers, almost in therapeutic motions. “It’s kinda weird though, nothing to do with no internet…”

“We have the TV there in the living room, and some DVDs,” I willed myself not to glance towards under the bed, “There is also wi-fi and my laptop, but I can’t let you use it.”

The ocelot gazed up with curious intent, sounding suddenly intrigued, “Well then. Can’t or won’t?”

I could see it in his sunset eyes. That same friendly coyness from the bus stop.

“Mostly can’t.” I started flipping over the pancakes to reveal them finally turning brown, smirking to myself before clearing my throat. “It’s for work. The laptop is only installed with Tor. It’s a browser software designed for to access the deep web. Helps me keep track of potential contract requests while I’m away.”

“Hmm,” he listened. “Is it…safe?”

“Yes. I never kept any records of this location in my penthouse. As far as the Feds or whoever sent those punks know, we simply vanished into thin air.”

Minutes later, I finished cooking us some breakfast/lunch/a decent meal and we started eating at the table, restricted to only a glass of water, a fork and the decently cooked pancakes resting on some paper plates. Not too bad, if I had to say so myself.

“So…” Cherry asked mid-bite, savoring the food without being too distracted, “Got any fucking theories about the guy after my head? Because I got nothing…”

“Hmmm,” I pondered on it, not taking another bite as I mentally compiled what we knew so far, “He’s a male canine, shorter than either of us in height, is clearly intelligent in both stealth and computer hacking, maybe even social engineering. He’s got something against prostitution, but maybe there’s something hidden underneath…The Benefactor doesn’t seem like he’s backed by any government or organization, otherwise we’d already be dead…”

“Question: Why’re we calling him the ‘Benefactor’?” Cherry interrupted. “Just curious.”

“Because each time he’s tried to kill us by paying someone else to do it for him,” I explained, my fork piercing into a cute piece of drying pancake. “And in the case of the Mullen girl, the Benefactor gave her an ultimatum: do nothing, or kill herself so her mother can get the money for surgery. You sure you don’t know her?”

“Nope.” He huffed in frustration, “I can’t even remember the last time I met another girl named ‘Becky’, let alone a ‘Rebecca’…”

“Clearly,” I mused, “the Benefactor thought nobody would look twice if a prostitute offed themselves, but the question is…why didn’t he approach you with the same ultimatum?”

The ocelot raised an eyebrow, failing to hide his amused snickering.

“W-Well for one thing,” he reminded in a cold, detached tone, “my family ain’t in dire needs. Fuck ‘em all if they are. When Daddy Dearest wasn’t lying on the couch in a drunken stupor or fucking up at work, he spent his spare time belittling me and my brothers. Alan is a loser who works between fast food joints, and Dennis is still in jail…”

His ears instantaneously folded, his tail curled, and whiskers twitched. Twisted horror slowly dwarfed on Cherry’s expression, and his eyes widened in concern.

“Do…Do you think…?”

I shared his alarm, getting to my feet.

“Only one way to find out.”

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 No reports of any Rochfords in the outer Lakertown area dying or disappearing, at least, according to police reports or news outlets. They were too focused on an upcoming mayoral election and the ‘mysterious explosion’ that occurred in a penthouse to mention it. To say Cherry looked relieved or contentedly ate the rest of his pancakes would have been a complete overstatement. For some reason, after all the shit his family did to him, the young feline still held some care for their safety. It baffled me to no end.

Days passed. Seasons changed in the blink of an eye, with September arriving in a chilly breeze one morning, and the green leaves surrounding the cabin turning to orange and black: the same bright colors as an ocelot’s fur.

Cherry did not complain too much about the downgrade in technology at our disposal, save for one night spent in lamentation of losing what little possessions he once owned, like his wallet and cellphone that had photos on it. Otherwise, the feline did his best not to sound unappreciative in front of me. We still had burner phones, but TV in the loft accepted DVDs and VHS tapes—which he comically thought were extinct—of some television shows I recorded during the 2000s.

During this time, I kept a detailed eye on what was going on throughout the Deep Web and the Dark Web, hoping to find clues about the Benefactor and if he really did have me doxxed following the penthouse attack. Still nothing. Even so, this did not stop me from scrubbing away my contracting webpage, because who knew if the Benefactor compromised it?

Cherry and I did not have sex. We did strip down and sleep together in the same bed, often finding ourselves cuddled closely together for warmth under the blanket. He didn’t initiate anything and neither did I. In the end, the last thing I wanted was pressuring him for something I could live without.

However, that didn’t stop me one morning from going into the woods during a perimeter check, dropping my trousers and leaning against a random tree, jacking my neglected dick to the thought of his lithe feline body against mine.

“Oh, f…” I bit my lip, then remembered how alone I truly was on the property, “Oh, Cherry…”

The sounds of scurrying woodland creatures wouldn’t pull me away from the sultry image of him, lying in a motel bed without a single flamboyant fabric of clothing on, moaning my name as I imagined caressing his side in each thrust. Eagerly, I traced the curving, familiar wolf cock standing attentively in the air, leaking to the lustful memories of Cherry and I in bed.

His slim torso, aching for another’s touch.

Quivering lips begging me for more.

Pert nipples in need of being pinched.

A long-since deflowered cat in need of being fucked.

I jerked my length faster to the night I first felt his velvety, spotted fur on my calloused paw pads. After making me experience the most memorable of climaxes, Cherry’s angelic moans had made me harder than any virgin male I’d ever deflowered before. I huffed deeper to the memory, inhaling the remembrance of his scent, and snarling in canid pleasure as my seed erupted into the air.

“Ah…” I panted, licking my lips of sweat. “Oh…Oh, f-fuck…”

Slumping further against the trees, my eyes warily traveled down to the flaccid shaft resting against my bare legs, then to the unfastened trousers around my ankles and my paws. Specifically, the right middle finger drenched in a dollop of musky wolf cum.

“Fuck…I think I’m losing my mind.”

Luckily, I managed to shower before Cherry stirred awake to my smell.

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 The next day, after slipping out of bed to go do another perimeter check around the property (all while enjoying the ambient orchestra of chirping birds and a hooting owl in the distance, both waiting for Fall’s welcome embrace), I arrived back to hear the shower running. The bed was empty, and his underwear laid strewn on the floor. Rolling my eyes, I plucked it up and was about to fling it in the laundry bin before I sniffed it. Definitely musky, but something else made my fur stand and made my maw drool slightly.

 He’d jerked off into it. I could smell it; earthly, feline, exotic and sweet. Like a freshly plucked cherry.

 I sniffed it once more when suddenly, “Didn’t know you have a musk fetish.”

 “Hmf.”

 I hadn’t taken notice of the shower turning off, not giving him the satisfaction of looking bashful as I placed it in the bin, ignoring the smirking, wet and half-dried ocelot in my over-sized bathrobe. Ten minutes later, I emerged from the shower to see Cherry on the recliner again.

 “Are you actually reading?”

 “What?” He asked, momentarily placing the book (City of Night by John Rechy) on his lap. “I read. I like to read, it’s just that I’ve memorized the movies we got up this point.”

 A short laugh erupted form my muzzle, and I shook it in amusement. “I’m going to go to town for supplies. Do you need anything?”

 “Some DVDs,” he replied coyly, half-grinning, “Oh! Plus a smartphone, my own laptop and a TV that doesn’t use extinct VHS tapes?”

 I clicked my tongue. “I meant food. What would you like?”

 The ocelot pouted, albeit playfully, then sighed in earnest. “I do miss some scrambled eggs and fresh milk…”

 “Why not?” I shrugged and grabbed the keys to the pickup truck downstairs. “I’ll be back soon, okay? You enjoy that book, Cherry.”

 “I think I will!” he stuck his tongue out.

The unincorporated township of Cobalt Landing remained unremarkable. It existed long before the Second World War as an all-American logging community in Ashland County, then the younger folks slowly fled in exodus for the larger cities until all that remained were middle-aged nobodies and elderly furs left to their nostalgia. The kind of residents who likely never cared about what went on in one foreign country or another, so long as they got their meager wages and pension checks on time.

Yet this didn’t stop their local radio station from detailing the latest news regarding elections and the like. All while providing his own ‘unbiased opinion’ on the subject. Normally, I turned off the radio if he annoyed me too much, but then his next bulletin caught my immediate attention.

“*And in other news, drama is occurring in Lakertown for their 2019 mayoral election after incumbent Mayor Ismael announced he is no longer seeking reelection. This comes just hours before Richard Walker the III, a prominent retired high school principal, announced his own candidacy for mayor, promising to clean up the crime rate in Lakertown while also promoting family values—*”

I slammed the brakes in the middle of Main Street, thankfully empty of other cars.

 Richard Walker the III.

Of course, it was him. How the fuck could I be so blind? Speeding off to Cobalt’s poor excuse of a public library, I parked the pickup at the only open meter and went inside, asking the bored receptionist if there were any computers open for use.