I did not grieve for the tiger.

I did not mourn the pompous feline, offer him a meaningless prayer, or wish him the best in whatever afterlife he went to. That didn’t mean I wasn’t demanding answers though.

The local news station only went so far as to mention Sylvester’s list of crimes and how he died in one of his own cathouses—shot two times in the groin and four times in the chest with a small revolver—before focusing more on national news such as the president’s latest blunder. One look at the police report on the LPD’s ‘unhackable’ intranet, however, and I got more details of who killed him.

“The Mafia?” Cherry’s eyes bulged at my serious answer. “As in *the* Mafia?”

“Yes,” I explained, perusing through my armory until I found a suitable hidden knife to carry in my belt. “More specifically, the Boulevard Boys; the Lakertown Outfit’s personal crew of capos and soldiers on the west side. I recognize the way they positioned Sylvester’s body after shooting him.”

“‘Positioned him’?” Cherry’s tone sounded uncertain in wanting to know now.

My tail flicked slightly. “The Boulevard Boys send messages whenever they kill someone. For rival competitors like Sylvester, they like to make the murders ironic and to-the-point. The tiger was shot two times in the cock—”

He cringed in visible sympathy for the tiger.

“—because ‘lust’ is the second level of Dante’s Inferno, and four times in the chest because the fourth circle is—”

“Greed.” The ocelot finished for me, his eyes flickering from me and out the window. He saw how visibly confused I was in his knowledge of the Nine Circles of Hell. “Oh, uh, there was this video game I played years ago about Dante’s Inferno…Anyway, the Mafia, do you think they—”

“No.”

His nostrils flared. “You were awful fast to reply.”

“They did not kill Becky nor hire those two college kids,” my eyes narrowed sharply at him. “I have worked for the Outfit a couple times in the past. They would never waste money by hiring two dumb kids to do something one of their own soldiers is more capable of.”

“So, wait…” Cherry’s voice wavered, ears folded downward as he struggled to keep his paws from shaking in front of me. “D-Does…that mean Daddy Stripe’s death is…ya know, a coincidence? Eh?”

If only that were the case here. I personally never believed in coincidences. Coincidences were the events that average furs threw around to excuse themselves from acting paranoid. And in the criminal underworld, no matter how skilled or legendary one was, dismissing a coincidence could always cost you your life.

“He died the day after I confronted him about trying to kill you. No,” I shook my muzzle, “I do not think it was a coincidence, but I do think it was an attempt to tie up loose ends.”

And I knew the exact furs to speak to about finding out.

I dressed in a simple dark business suit and tie, with a white undershirt and a modified belt designed to hide my silver butterfly knife behind the leather. A pair of fine shoes and some gel to my headfur later, and I seemed like the perfect stereotype of a corporate executive in need of a strong martini after spending hours in the office.

“Hey,” I paused under the apartment doorway to look at Cherry, tail curling slightly around my left leg, “are you...feeling okay?”

“Yeah, I guess,” he hesitated to reply, “Why wouldn’t I be? I mean fuck that guy, right?”

“If you say so,” I shrugged at his answer, despite knowing he was lying. If he wanted to talk to me about something, he could do it later that night. “I’m off then. Feel free to eat dinner without me. I think there’s still some leftover lasagna in the fridge.”

The night before I confronted Sylvester at one of his cathouses (presumably condemned as a crime scene), he and I experimented in cooking something healthy to eat. We settled on this lasagna recipe that involved some sausage slices and broccoli. Cherry didn’t seem to like it at first until I relented in adding some cheddar cheese to the mix. By the time it was cooked and pulled from the oven, the silly ocelot whimpered over and over as he tried digging into the tasty food, only to partly burn his tongue each time.

I had reached for doorknob when he spoke up, “...wait.”

I turned to him, only to abruptly stagger back a few feet. Cherry had flung his thin arms around my torso and nuzzled his face into my broad chest, ruffling the undershirt in the process.

He murmured, “…be safe. Please?”

My right paw hovered before deciding to hug him back. “I will. You know me.”

Feeling his warm, recently cleaned fur brush against mine brought me back to that first night I hired his services. Time sure passed so quickly. Unfortunately, that confident, sultry smirk now found itself replaced with a look of fear and uncertainty, and part of me wondered how long it would take to bring that aura of fearless boldness back to the ocelot.

“Thank you, by the way…” Cherry cleared his throat. Raising his head up to look at me, I saw something flicker behind those beautiful eyes of his. “For everything. I would probably be dead if it wasn’t for you.”

“Most likely.” A low chuckled rumbled from my throat, causing the handsome ocelot to snicker and lightly smack my left shoulder. He sighed, then tried to surprise me by leaning upward to pull me into a kiss.

Suddenly, in a painful flash, that same snarky ocelot turned into an English wildcat. He was bloodied and lifeless, like a corpse attempting to pull me into its cold embrace. It was him, Thomas—

“No!” I yelped a little too loudly.

Staggering back, my chest tightened at the sight of Cherry freezing mid-kiss, his hurt eyes blinking at me like I had directly told him to fuck off. Those same auburn eyes moments ago resembled the wildcat’s dark hazel.

“I…I’ll see you later tonight. Good-bye.” I backed away, immediately closing and locking the door behind me as I hurried down to the elevator.

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What the hell was wrong was me?

Why the fuck did I just picture Cherry as that ghost from my past?

They hardly looked anything alike. My memories of the wildcat remained cloudy at best, to the point I couldn’t even remember his scent or smile anymore, yet I remembered his dark eyes that matched his smiling muzzle, those handsome whiskers, and broad shoulders for his species. He looked like nothing like Cherry, bright and vibrant and dripping in the sexuality of a spotted feline.

I shook my muzzle and closed my eyes once I stepped onto the city bus. The abundance of strangers onboard forced me to keep my face neutral. Even if most of them were tourists silently checking their electronic devices or gawking out the window in the hopes of seeing Wallace Tower peeking over the rooftops, I did not want to stand out.

I did *not* muse over Cherry’s hurt expression when I pulled away. No, no, no. Instead, I narrowed my eyes at the city map—almost blocked by the head of a sleeping rabbit businessman clutching his briefcase, and barely readable beneath a couple layers of red-and-black graffiti—on the righthand wall of the bus.

Several stops later, the rectangular trash bin on wheels skidded to a halt half a block from my next destination for tonight: Dicky’s Bar.

Any Lakertown resident knew to keep away from this place, not unless you intended to make a deal with the devil. Much like the Red-Light District, this wasn’t the neighborhood most tourists went; there were no historic buildings, no skyscrapers and certainly no views of Navy Pier, making it one of the perfect little façades for the Outfit.

The furs inside ranged from bored drunks lost in their stupors, wagging their tails to some ambient music on the radio, to smoking (sometimes hot) college kids loudly chatting in the corner booths. A few noticeable canines could be found staring for an indistinct threat, while the bored feline bartender cleaned some recently used bottles behind the counter.

“What brings you here?” he asked me, perking his ears up

“I need to speak with your manager,” I spoke up in a low, serious voice to the tabby cat.

He raised an eyebrow and motioned for one of the canines by the wall. The one who approached, an Italian Shepherd as large as me, wore a hideous, brown jacket that matched his fur, and did not make him any more intimidating than his permanent grimace already did.

The feline bartender asked, “What do you need to tell him?”

I narrowed my eyes when the Shepherd did his, glaring at me like a piece of shit his ancestors stepped on during their trek from Sicily or Rome or wherever.

“I’m talking about your senior manager,” my eyes trailed to the door to the back kitchen, “I need to see him.”

“What for?” the Shepherd finally asked me.

“I am talking about your senior manager,” I told them once more, then recited my self-taught Italian lessons to say, “*Il lupo oscuro dell'Irlanda è qui per riscuotere il suo debito.*”

The Italian Shepherd’s eyes widened, sizing me up before disappearing into the kitchen.

“Get back to work,” he ordered the bartender, who—probably understanding my words or not—avoided eye contact like the plague.

Minutes later, the Shepherd signaled for me to follow him down a corridor of busy cooks and up a flight of stairs to the apartment nestled above this bar. My muscles tensed in the claustrophobic quarters, preparing to suddenly find myself in a knife or gunfight, only I didn’t. Instead, I was led up to the second-story apartment, and past the open front door into the lion’s den (though not before taking away my phone and feeling me up for any weapons, unable to find the hidden butterfly knife).

I entered a hovel of a small upstairs apartment that clearly endured a golden age from long ago, but no longer. The smell of used cigarettes and beer dominated the air around a now-abandoned table filled with dollar bills and poker cards. And standing between two hulking lions in casual summer clothes, was the very Italian wolf I came to see.

“Well fuck me,” he chuckled, placing his smartphone into his expensive trouser pockets. “I haven’t seen your sorry tail in a while, Niko Bellin.”

In this line of work, it helped to make your name multiple-choice. Thanks to either Interpol, the U.S. government or familial backstabbing, I spent my post-mercenary years wandering between different cartels and mafias as their hitman. I laid low, never telling them the same identity twice for fear of capture, until I gained enough experience in the field to work for more than a single crime organization. The skills and knowledge I learned transformed me from a faceless mook ready to execute a dishonest capo into a ghostly reaper for whoever fucked with the wrong client.

“Yeah.” I nodded to the smaller canine. “You too, Little Caesar.”

“Uncle Lennie’s retired from the family business. Call me ‘Caesar’ now.” He clarified with an offended huff. “I’ve always hated that nickname…”

“I’ll keep that in mind then…” I nodded again, looking around the apartment back to the Italian wolf. “I hope he is enjoying retirement?”

Salvatore ‘(Little) Caesar’ Zuccarelli. Coddled nephew of one of Lakertown’s most notorious mobster bosses, and former caporegime-turned-underboss in his late twenties. This little brat had eagerly taken up the torch of ‘Uncle Lennie’ when the elderly wolf found out from his doctor’s diagnosis that he had early stages of Alzheimer’s.

The first time we met, the little shit wouldn’t stop joking about how I didn’t even ‘sound Irish’, after his uncle nicknamed me ‘the Dark Wolf of Ireland’.

“He’s doing alright down in Florida,” he sighed in boredom, twitching his gray ears and rolling his eyes. “He got himself a fucking gorgeous coastal house near Cape Fiesta while I’m stuck here trying to rebuild everything the Feds have been taking away all these years. Anyway, I have little time to chit-chat, so what bring you here again?”

If there was one thing I preferred about the American Mafia to South American Cartels, it was their honor and integrity. If a hitman worked long enough for them and earned their respect, then sooner or later, any debt could be repaid years later.

“You sent the Boulevard Boys to kill Desmond Sylvester in the Red-Light District this morning.” I simply stated.

The young wolf barely blinked in my direction. Neither did his soldiers.

“He’s been checked for wires, right?” he asked the Italian Shepherd behind me.

“He is clean, but he does have a phone with him,” he showed it in his paws.

“Don’t want to take chances either way,” the Italian wolf muttered to himself, then snapped his fingers to the Shepherd. “Leave and wait for us.”

The soldier left without another word, leaving me locked inside the den of a half-inexperienced underboss of the Lakertown Outfit, to demand answers. However, I did not waver when the twin lion soldiers suddenly stood on either side of me, waiting for the order from their leader.

“Explain: What makes you suddenly interested in the…business transactions of my family?”

“I am not,” I replied in an even tone, managing to keep my eyes trained and statue confident. “I simply want to know how you figured out which of his hiding places he was in.”

“And why is that?”

In spite of my experience, I knew I couldn’t take on two armed lions at once in this close of range. So, I decided to humor Caesar and explained my misadventures in finding a smart, well-coordinated serial killer who knew how to hide his tracks. When he asked why I found myself interested in this supposed mystery, I lied and told the Italian wolf that the murdered prostitute, a luscious vixen named Rebecca Mullin, was my secret lover.

“We planned to escape our lives and begin anew somewhere out West,” I faked my trembling anger, shaking my paws against my pants. “Then I find out from Desmond that not only was she killed, but one of his rogue boys disappeared too. This faggot ocelot or some shit…”

Some memories of last night and this morning resurfaced. However, the last thing I needed was to show further weakness. I dug my nails into the palms of my paws to stay focused.

“What makes you think I didn’t just find Stripes on my own?” Caesar questioned me.

“Whoever killed Becky wanted to make sure he couldn’t be found…” I told him, “Desmond was an immature nobody, Caesar, but he was smart and knew how to hide as well. This outsider wanted you to take out the cat so he wouldn’t have to. To tie up loose ends.”

Clearing my throat and digging up some sadness buried underneath my fur and bones, I knew from the expressions on everyone’s faces that they bought it. Well, mostly.

“That’s an interesting story,” Caesar chuckled as he checked his phone. “So, the big bad ‘Dark Wolf of Ireland’ actually grew a soft spot for some trashy hooker, and is now out to avenge her murder?” He chuckled, “Sounds like some Hollywood movie I’d certainly go see…”

“Are you going to tell me where you got the information,” I asked, “or not?”

The Italian wolf snapped his head up and glared daggers sharp enough to slice me into two. Did he really think it terrified me? Outfit members knew me as the Dark Wolf of (technically Northern) Ireland, a vicious rumor that Interpol had searched for over the course of more than twenty years.

Caesar relaxed into an inane shrug, “Alrighty then. Let’s say I believe all the shit you say, what’s in it for me?”

“March 11th, 2013.” I explained to the new Outfit underboss, “I helped your uncle silence that mole. The one who managed to plant a Trojan inside his home computer. He told me if I ever needed anything, to go to him.”

“Well, why are talking to me then?” he sneered at me across the room. “Go down to Cape Fiesta and ask the old man himself.”

“I don’t have the time,” a growl escaped my controlled tone. “The longer I wait, the colder the trail will get. The Outfit has a code of honor.”

“The old timers are either dead or dying,” he dismissed me and returned to texting on his smartphone. “Times are changing, and I personally don’t owe you anything, do I?”

I instinctively reached for my belt, only to be stopped when the stoic lions gripped the handguns hidden in their coat pockets. Without a beat, the Italian wolf angrily muttered to himself, “Gonna have to lecture Mickey about searching better…”

I did not say anything, keenly watching the canine as he replied to a text and tossed his phone back into his pocket.

“Tell you what, Bellin,” he offered while wearing a crooked, smug grin, “if you help me with something important right now, I will consider telling you what I know. Do this one thing, and I’ll also forgive the fact you brought a knife into my place of business. *Capisce*?”

Like I even had an option or a choice.