Steady improvement could be seen in Cherry’s form each day we trained together, under the sheet and outside the cabin.

The ‘Question Exchange’ did wonders to motivate him, encouraging the ocelot to do his best in order to learn more about me, and encouraging myself to either not have him ask too many questions, or even to learn more about the lad.

“Why do you enjoy those ridiculous movies?” I asked.

Cherry meekly rubbed his elbow. “What? I like them. Is it wrong to like some movies that aren’t that realistic, dude?”

“No,” I admitted gruffly, before we returned to sparring, “but it still confuses me.”

“Do you enjoy…” He began as I composed myself from the strike to my stomach (Cherry had long since become accustomed to this, knowing he couldn’t truly hurt me too badly). “Do you…like…enjoy killing someone…?”

“Not really.” I replied stiffly. My tail curled slightly as memories resurfaced from the early days that I started offering cartels, mob bosses and independent ‘contractors’ my skills of murder. “It is just any other job to me. I do feel a form of satisfaction that another blacker soul is no longer on this Earth.”

Cherry raised an eyebrow. “You don’t see yourself as one of them.”

I got into a fighting position, “Wait for your next chance, boy.”

“That wasn’t a question, Markus,” he countered with crossed arms, “it was a statement.”

A sigh escaped my tired lungs. “No, I do not.” I told the curious fur across from me, “Don’t get me wrong: I am not a good person. Nobody in my line of work ever is, but…there exists a catharsis in knowing that I have the opportunity to snuff out a darker life out there who commits worse deeds than me.”

“Do you enjoy having sex with me?” He asked after landing yet another hit.

I quizzically stared at the feline.

“What do you think?” I guffawed in slight surprise. “Of course, I do! Your ass is something else.”

“Mmmm, better than a caracal ass?”

My expression became as deadpan as dishwater. As soon as spoke about it, I regretted telling him about the first fur I ever slept with. It’d been a few years since I left Norther Ireland. He was a nameless caracal who went to a bar I briefly worked at, as a bouncer. He’d been staring at me all night, and during a bathroom break, he enticed me into an empty stall and taught me how to appreciate a cat’s purring.

“Better than a caracal ass…” I muttered. “Now spar.”

Cherry rolled his eyes and once again held his stance in proper position.

Before the end of the sparring sessions—as well as stretching plus the post-training sex—I decided to teach Cherry a couple more moves in order to give the lad some variety beyond Leopard Style. It was not a bad thing to stick to one specific style of kung fu, but a smarter opponent could easily predict your next moves the longer a fight went on. So, I decided to teach him a couple of street brawling techniques, as well as ways to escape a chokehold.

The key to fighting dirty involved standing sideways in a fight, not only allowing someone of Cherry’s size the advantage of his attacker striking the crotch, but the ability to lean back in order to avoid a punch while kicking said attacker’s legs. Then, Cherry could mix in his quick Leopard-style strikes. In time, we started to ask less and less questions per hit, during the sparring sessions after each morning run. Whenever a question did arise though, neither of us held back from revealing things about each other. For example, when I asked Cherry about his mother, the ocelot didn’t hesitate in spilling the details.

“It’s a wonderful tale as old as time, Markus.” He said smarmily to me, almost smarmily to himself as well. “Once upon a time, two high school sweethearts married after graduation. They were ocelots. The husband did contractual jobs with a construction company while the wife worked part-time as a waitress. They had two cubs. Money didn’t grow on trees, but from what my brothers said, it was a happy, stable home…until the wife had a surprise pregnancy. Her husband tried pressuring her to get an abortion. She refused. She wanted to have the cub, even threatening to leave with their other two sons if the husband continued bringing it up. Nine and a half months later, she died from a severe infection untreated after the birth. The dad never forgave the son for, and I quote, ‘ruining his life’.”

Goddamn.

“Are you okay?” I asked, to which he nodded. The saddened way his tail lashed against the dirt and leaves left me thinking otherwise. “Alright, just asking.”

The thought of his childhood having a similar mentality to mine stuck with me. In fact, during our next round, I’d been so taken aback by the half-cheerful retelling, that he’d taken the opportunity to land several solid hits. Then, Cherry had to ask the ten-dollar question: “What made you leave Northern Ireland to become a…a hitman?”

“…” I did not reply, instead staring down at the ground as gore-fueled thoughts of my father and Thomas resurfaced from a deep pit in my brain. “No comment.”

“Come on, I’ve been open with you about everything in my life!” Cherry moaned, then slowly stepped forward. “You don’t need to protect me from the gory details.”

When I didn’t say anything back, he added, “You told me your true name, your occupation, but nothing else. If I’m going to trust you, then…then you need to trust me, okay?”

“I do trust you, but…” My voice trailed off into a low baritone. Standing up straight, I managed to fight down the growing bitter taste in my maw, looking up to the confused ocelot with a stern gaze. “I didn't tell you everything to protect you, but I was only protecting myself. Cherry…my childhood…I don’t like to think about it too much.”

“A…Alright then…” He smiled in nervous sympathy. “Okay, we don’t need to talk about it. Can we start stretching then and head inside? I’m getting really tuckered out.”

Silently nodding, I proceeded to help Cherry stretch his back and arms out until the popping noises could be heard from our joints. Neither of us tried to flirt or even wink mischievously at the thought of what we usually did afterward.

Once we finished stretching minutes later, something came out of me. Something inside my gut bubbled to the surface, but it wasn’t bile or even stomach acid.

Cherry’s paw touched the door to the cabin as I said, “Stop.”

He pulled away from the doorknob and turned to me with a confused expression, his feline eyes shining like fossilized amber in the afternoon sunlight. Those eyes…they always seemed to mesmerize the truth from me.

*Ugh, what the fucking hell?*

He trusted me. So, it made enough sense for me to trust him.

“What do you know about Irish History?” I asked suddenly, much to Cherry’s bewilderment and puzzled surprise, “Or rather, what do you know about the history of Northern Ireland?”

“Um, to be honest, only a little.” He replied with half-folded ears, shifting his sweat-drenched, clothed body in my direction, “I know that before World War Two, the British had been, ya know, fucking over Ireland for years.”

Quick laughter bubbled from the back of my throat. “A correct understatement…but what else do you know?”

“Hmm…” Cherry mused in thought, no doubt recalling what little America’s piss-poor excuse of an education system taught for world history. My assumptions were confirmed as the young feline answered, “My history classes back at school only covered it for a few days, but I know there were some bombings in England after Ireland gained independence?”

“That era was called ‘The Troubles’, Cherry.” I described vividly to him, “Ireland and Great Britain have always held a…strained relationship, to say the least. I won’t bore you with the details, but it is important to know that many were happy when Ireland became a republic in the Fifties. Some though, weren’t fully satisfied with the arrangement, not when many Catholic Irish were forced to stay behind, enduring persecution in the United Kingdom’s territory of Northern Ireland.

“Nationalist politicians dreamed of Northern Ireland reuniting with the Republic as one nation, but the Protestant unionists loyal to the British Crown wanted to never give up control. So, they discriminated against us, those of Irish descent and faith within their borders. It grew worse in the Sixties when marches and protests turned violent. Unionists against nationalists. Catholics against Protestants. That was when the radicals decided it was time to abandon picket lines entirely…one of them was my father, Finnian Faoláin.”

Memories from years past rumbled like tremors beneath the waves, yet I continued, letting the words flow from my lips before I could have time to question it. I had no time to stop it. Thus, I went forward.

“He **DESPISED** the English.” Nothing else could honestly be said about the bastard, except nothing else stopped me from continuing, “I am half-convinced he wanted to slaughter them all in their sleeps. Da—*Finnian*, held big aspirations in the I.R.A. Probably dreamed of rising to the top and gathering an army of pure Irish Catholics to rampage across the British Isles. To avenge what the English did to us…then he met my mother, a local dark-furred wolf by the name of Fiona McBride.

“Neither of them wanted me. My existence forced them into a marriage neither truly wanted. My existence pulled Finnian away from his so-called destiny against the English, and my birth pulled Mother from her classes at university. She…She drowned herself in opium each day while Finnian…got angry whenever I walked into a room.”

I absentmindedly rubbed my elbows, not realizing at first that Cherry’s eyes turned to saucers. When the feline lad tried to say something, my words persisted onward:

“Mother was arrested in a drug den not long after I was finishing Junior High. Finnian convinced the constables he could raise me on his own, but whenever the doors were closed, the mutt wouldn’t stop reminding me what a terrible son I was. So, I avoided home at all costs. At school, anywhere that stayed open until curfew…”

“I think I can really relate to that…” Cherry cleared his throat and smiled solemnly. “So, uh…what changed?”

I exhaled.

“My…My last year of high school. The…Tge Good Friday Agreement of ’98 ended the Troubles by giving Northern Irish furs both British and Irish citizenship. The walls came down, the military went away, the I.R.A. kept their end of the ceasefire…but Finnian…he wouldn’t accept this. He still wanted that genocidal war with Great Britain…and so…s-so…”

At some point, tears began to well up under my wolfish eyes. The strength in my powerful legs waned slightly, threatening to have me tumble to my knees against the dirt. Yet I held my ground as images of the corpses of Thomas Wright, my classmates and teachers flashed before my straining eyes.

I confessed, “…he placed a timed bomb in my backpack when I wasn’t looking. S-Sent me to school, and it detonated inside of my locker, when I went to the bathroom. Eight…Eight died in the explosion, dozens more injured, but by some goddamn miracle I walked away with a single fucking scratch.”

I dared not see the look on Cherry’s face, but I heard his footsteps. Felt his spotted paw lightly touch my hunched back.

“Finnian became my first murder, when I got home.” I breathed out, like dark embers from the back of a smoker’s lung. “And…I gutted him like some cod. I panicked, then went to Seán for help…”

“Sean?” Cherry pronounced incorrectly, in a hushed tone. “Who’s Sean?”

“*Seán*,” I corrected him, though not harshly, and raised my head when the tears finally dried up. “Seán O’Hannigan. A Provo who used to be friends with my father. Not as radical as Finnian was, and the closest thing to an uncle before they stopped speaking to one another. I still knew where he lived though. Seán hid me from the police, forged me together a passport and smuggled me to America. I landed various jobs and never looked back.”

I dared never to visit Seán or even Mother. As far as I knew, Seán O’Hannigan retired underground, likely rolling around in whatever pit the old badger dug himself in after the outcome of Brexit raised tense questions about Northern Ireland’s future. Mother though…either she died of grief or was still hopping in and out of jail. On and off opium. The thought of seeing her years later made my chest heavy.

One day, I learned from some sources that the constables back home stopped searching for Dad’s killer. Markus Faoláin had a miniscule wanted poster, but all the police in Ireland viewed my first murder as an act of retribution for the school bombing. However, I never planned to move back, instead moving to the Windy City of Lakertown, Illinois. From here, I could easily travel to either side of the country, or board an international flight across the world.

For all I cared though, the penthouse had been my only home country. I had spent years plunging myself into the only reliable job I could have to survive in this world. Relationships or bonds be damned…until Cherry arrived in my life.

The entirety of my answer to Cherry’s question drained me. I didn’t even notice the sun beginning to set until he guided me upstairs and I saw how dark it was becoming outside.

We walked upstairs together but did not have sex.

We stripped down together but did not flirt.

We showered together but did not tease.

We dressed together but did not pinch another’s bare cheeks.

We cooked dinner and ate together (baked potatoes, a differentiation from the low carb meals, given that day happened to be a cheat day), but spoke little. Not after my near meltdown in front of the cabin, rambling on and on about my shitty childhood like a scene from some fucked up soap opera.

However, Cherry and I did go to bed together in our birthday suits. We cuddled together, with the ocelot surprising me by shifting around to face me, softly wrap his toning arms around my shoulder, then kissed me tenderly. Passionately. Sensually. Comfortingly.

Our lips parted. “It is not your fault, Markus. I…I can tell you I’m sorry, but…God, I can’t imagine…” When my eyes became glazed and I didn’t respond, Cherry leaned forward to nuzzle my cheek, whispering to two twitching canine ears, “It’s not your fault. It never was.”

He and I fell asleep not long after, completely exhausted and tails, arms, blanket, succulent fur and body heat cocooning us in the other’s tight embrace. I never slept more soundly in my entire life.