“Are you sure Grumman’s dead?”

“I talked to the mortician myself to confirm it.”

“Damn…I didn’t know. I’m sorry for making you go all the way out—”

“It’s fine,” I chuckled despite the circumstances. “Heading back right now. After dinner, we can discuss what to do next, alright Cherry?”

“…okay, Markus. Okay. See you soon.”

Hanging up, I tossed my phone into the left coat pocket while moodily walking past passerby, all of them as cranky as I was when a small downpour began in the evening. Luckily, Cherry had enough foresight to check the weather and bring an umbrella with me before investigating our last lead. Therefore, I didn’t have to mutter to myself while navigating the dirty streets in rain-drenched clothes.

Goddammit.

The past week had been spent investigating six leads who could be responsible for Cherry’s attempted murder. Dealing with Kendall Osbourne still left a bad taste in my mouth, so I got to work on researching the leads. It didn’t lead to any further clues.

I found the first lead living as a penniless squatter. The ferret’s parents (believing I was a private investigator) told me didn’t have a clue where their son had disappeared off to. A couple days later, I found the neurotic mess hiding in some abandoned house near the Illinois/Indiana border, living alongside some other homeless junkies. Couldn’t care who Cherry was, let alone pay two men to shoot up a motel.

The second lead moved all the way to Mountainburg, became a born again Catholic, and got married to a sweet girl who gave birth to three vixens and two tods. During my mercenary years, I’d met and worked for dangerously religious furs capable of committing genocide the same day they graciously attended mass. This guy wasn’t one of them.

The third lead was Mr. Landers, a teacher Cherry let fuck him during his senior year. Since Cherry had been eighteen back then and not even been taught in the same class, it didn’t make me feel as disgusted as Kendall or the sixth and final lead. The middle-aged Labrador didn’t hold any real motives to keeping Cherry silenced, aside from the inappropriate relationship that occurred right before his retirement. His pension wasn’t at risk. Neither was his perceived heterosexuality. Not only did the ex-teacher begin advocating with LGBT rights groups soon after his last day on the job, but from what I gathered on social media, Mr. Landers managed to hold an amicable divorce with Mrs. Lander while getting a boyfriend too.

The fourth lead (whose family kicked him out after finding a video of him balls deep inside Cherry) turned to Buddhism following graduation. When I visited him in the nearest temple, the unnaturally relaxed river otter told me he accepted his sexuality a while ago, having found inner peace from his suffering. He co-owned a café beneath his apartment too, uncaring if he lived a lavish life or not.

Before departing once I politely listened to him explain to me the Four Noble Truths, the otter expressed hope that I would find inner peace one day. As would Charlie Rochford, the ocelot he hadn’t seen in two years.

The fifth lead was his high school principal, a fifty-six-year-old grizzly bear named Richard Allen Walker III, who was not only married but had two grandcubs and was highly respected by his friends and conservative community. Nothing I found in his computer system, or the rumor mill indicated he hated homosexuality. Liberals and the decline of public education in America, yes, but hiring two broke college graduates to cover up his several flings with Cherry did not make sense for him. The ocelot himself even told me that the old bear, despite being strict and staunchly Republican, would burn his own Bible before committing murder.

As for Patrick Grumman, the former high school coach who became the ocelot’s first customer at age fifteen? Get this: the rhino died in prison. A cellmate’s deep shank to one of the lumbar arteries on his back led to him dying before even making it to the correctional center’s hospital wing. Cherry hadn’t heard about Mr. Grumman’s death because it all occurred not too long after the lad took to the streets. Even the vilest of Lakertown’s prisoners out did not take kindly to sexual predators.

Still, the whole debacle led me and the ocelot to another dead end. In those moments of frustration, I almost considered visiting St. Francis, only to dismiss the idea entirely. As reliable as Levi Zacharias’ network is, it could only discover so much without more concrete information.

“Levi’s informants might be servants of God, but they’re not miracle workers,” I bitterly concluded. “Who else could have hired those two kids?”

Then, I paused on an intersection. The rain had cleared into a drizzle, allowing pedestrians to stand or walk freely as the cloudy afternoon transitioned to twilight. Seedy bars, pawn shops and neon lights already started to brighten up to life, and as I gripped my umbrella tight, my eyes fell on a familiar sight: Scantily clad call girls lined up along the road bordering our city’s red-light district.

*“It’s been a while since I had a decent twink work under my wing. Work for me and I’ll treat ya sweeter than fucking cherry pie.”*

*“Wrong answer, faggot! I was gonna give ya five percent like I do for my bitches, maybe even ten, but I’m gonna make an example of y’all.”*

My muzzle twisted into a grin. I had a new suspect.

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When I reentered my penthouse apartment to the sight of slim, spotted feline dressed in nothing but Murrs-brand white briefs and one of my larger dark t-shirts, putting together another pizza in the oven and showing off that cute ass of his…even that did not falter my resolve. A certain tiger pimp and I needed to have a face-to-face conversation.

“Heya Markus!” Cherry chirped, winking at me across the granite island. “How you—”

“I have another lead for us.” Came my blunt reply.

The ocelot’s ear immediately perked. “Who?”

I started walking immediately into my ‘armory room’, where I kept my guns, knives, fake IDs, passports, whatever I needed for a contract or occasions like tonight. To some like Cherry, it seemed like a cluttered library of destruction and death, but to me, it was just another part of my apartment.

I frowned, but not at him. “Desmond Sylvester.”

Cherry gasped in recognition, “*Daddy Stripes*?”

I growled, “It has to be him…It has to be that Bengal bastard.”

If I weren’t focused on finding my tools, I would’ve seen him wide-eyed and uncertain. “I never figured he’d be sore about me not wanting to be under his…his thumb.”

“Pimping is his income,” I explained, “and maybe he wanted to make an example of you by having those two guys try and shoot you up?”

“Um, yeah…” he nodded in partial uncertainty. The rest of his expression displayed a young man realizing how much the tiger bastard really wanted him dead. “I mean, it makes sense…”

*Too much sense*, I thought to myself, *but we don’t have any other suspects at the moment.*

For that night, I put on some discreet combat boots, blue jeans, a hidden boot knife, a throwaway phone, gloves and garotte wire. The latter I learned was very useful in close quarters combat, especially when one ran out of bullets. Unfortunately, a silencer pistol would be the first thing guards would search for.

A few days into my search for his attempted killer, Cherry had wandered into the armory by accident. To my lack of surprise, he nearly went gleeful and fanboyish over how many tools and firearms he recognized from various action flicks. The knowledge of their names but not their functions surprised me slightly. After asking several times, I reluctantly told the feline he had permission to look but not *touch* any of the weaponry lined up on use or display. I didn’t forbid him from browsing through my fake IDs and passports, however.

“Teo J. Franklin, Niko V. Bellin, Rutledge Kalvin…” he read them off to me, doing his best to poorly imitate the stereotyped voices of each stated nationalities. “Darrian Rackaw, Darrian Vlahos, George Silverman, Gradee Cormic…?” He giggled, then imitated my homeland’s accent like any American did, “An' Oirish too! 'oy aboyt dat!”

“Get away from those already!” I groaned, staring deadpan back at the now-obnoxious feline. When he complied and placed the passports back inside the box, a part of me hadn’t realized I chuckled aloud. “That last one is actually the name I leased this apartment under.”

“Huh. Go figure…” he laughed shortly. “So, you really lost your accent with time then?”

I sighed, flicking my tail at the floor as I examined a recent city map I bought several months back.

“Yes. That is what happens when you leave your home country for many years.”

“So,” he proposed, “If I moved to England, would I suddenly get an English accent?”

“Maybe,” I ran a finger along the map, then paused as it landed on the location that I labeled down. “That’s it. I might be able to find Desmond here.”

He examined at the map and raised a contemplative eyebrow. “So, what’re ya gonna do then?” Cherry asked. “You gonna go in, gun’s blazing?

“Not unless I have to, but the plan is simple, really.” I calmly placed a knife in the hidden part of my boot. “I’m going to hire his services.”

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No large city on Earth can reasonably function without a touch of criminal debauchery or vice. That is, if someone searched for it in the right neighborhoods. For residents and tourists of Lakertown, aside from petty graffiti or occasional litter, the vice was visible right along the city’s old red-light district just west of downtown. Far enough from the landmarks, lakefront property and piers, but close enough to stroll nearby.

A decaying adult theater, two competing strip clubs, several bars, countless tattoo parlors and foreign food vendors. Not to mention prostitution if one could detect and follow the signals.

One secret to know about pimping—as I learned during my early mercenary years—is that a procurer owning multiple sites never operated them all at once. It was too risky. Unless he or she wanted the police or law-abiding citizens to realize where the illegal cathouses, whorehouses and brothels operated, then a well-funded pimp would stick to one location before switching to another a couple nights later. These locations ranged from obvious ones like a massage parlor to less-than-obvious locales like a crappy hostel or a series of stagnant construction sites.

Desmond ‘Daddy Stripes’ Sylvester. Born and raised the runt of a massive tiger family in the seediest side of the Midwest. The thirty-something Bengal cat practically owned the west side of Lakertown’s red-light district, which bordered along my apartment complex by a block or two. I’d occasionally see his ‘hoes’ wait outside either the lobby or a neighboring hotel, waiting for a john to show up. Their ‘Daddy Stripes’ was known throughout the city’s underbelly to be a micromanaging, temperamental, narcissistically suave sleazebag. Any man who crossed his bitches would be beaten to a bloody pump, while any bitch who tried stealing from him lost their front teeth.

He was far from the most dangerous pimp I’d ever encountered, yet until I saved Cherry that day, no other prostitutes—especially high-valued, often androgynous twinks—sold their services in the feline pimp’s claimed territory.

‘Daddy Stripes’ owned several similar locations, one of them being a single four-story apartment building. Into the early evening, business seemed booming as several cars lay randomly parked outside, their owners no doubt visiting old friends or possible tenants getting a tour of available rooms. Long tours, no doubt.

A muscled Rottweiler with a permanent scowl stood next to the unlocked door. From a safe distance, I watched a variety of johns in unconvincing disguises meekly enter the establishment, with wagging tails and a smile always plastered on their muzzles when they leave. Almost all of them were male.

I approached in the same manner. Thankfully, the Rottweiler guard didn’t find my boot knife when he searched me. Part of me regretted not wearing a body-proof vest, but I knew if the glorified bouncer discovered one on my person, then he’d immediately think I was a cop. At least, a cop who did not happen to be on his boss’ payroll.

“Get inside…” He grumbled once finished. “Enjoy yourself.”

The smell of unprotected sex seemed to fumigate the hallways and stairs. Under cover of hip-hop music vibrating throughout the old building, the all-too-noticeable sounds of gasps and moans could be heard behind paper-thin walls. Used condoms and empty lube bottles filled any trash bins in sight. I did my best to avoid stepping in one pile of…I didn’t even want to know. Aside from a few junkies laughing at the TV (while a vixen sucked them off individually, her panties soaked as her tail swished in boredom) in the main hallway, no other souls could be found on the first floor. Which forced me to travel to the second floor, where the headbanging music and grunts of ecstasy grew louder.

Another code in hidden cathouses or bordellos: open doors meant open for business.

Standing under the doorway was a twenty-something black-and-white-furred cat in a small red tank top, plus the tightest pair of cut-off denim shorts I had ever seen. I momentarily imagined Cherry in them and refocused on the mission. I focused on her, making the feline think I had a specific interest in entering.

Her welcoming smile, fluttering (yet desperate) eyes stared directly at me as I stepped forward. “You lookin’ for a good time?” She asked like a sultry siren.

A muscled lion stood down the hallway. No doubt the boss’ enforcer.

Perfect.

“Actually, ma’am,” I spoke to her in a lighter, more friendly voice, “I would like to ask you something. Would you be open to reading passages of Scripture with me?”

“Huh?”

“I’m a pastor of a local church, my dear child,” I pretended to plead and delicately held her paws, “and you are suffering in this putrid sinful lifestyle. If you would just open your heart to Jesus Christ, our Lord who sacrificed—”

“L-Look, I ain’t letting you gimme a Bible study unless you’re willing to pay!”

“Why would I indulge in the very sins that consume your soul, child?” I asked her more fanatically. “Surely, if we sit down together and read John 8:11, you will see how much Jesus loves!”

Finally, the lion came my way, one paw gripped behind his back.

“The fuck ya think you’re doing, Bible freak? Either fuck her or get the fuck—”

In just a few swift motions, I twisted the gun from the lion’s paw, broke his thick wrist with an immediate snap, then snatched it from the air. The scantily clad white cat yelped in fright while her ‘guard’ writhed on the floor, howling in immense pain.

“Zack, help me—”

Gripping her arm, my growl immediately silenced the feline. “Shut up, now.” I held the gun to the right side of her temple. “Do not make me hurt you. Or kill you.”

Despite her whimpering, she complied.

Locking eyes with the lion as he growled up at me, I coldly said, “This is an order to your boss: unless he has an endless surplus of merchandise to replace this one, he will answer my questions. I will be waiting in this room.”

Kicking the half-closed door behind me, I roughly pulled the frightened cat with me, making sure to keep staring at the lion before slamming and locking the apartment door behind us. A heavy silence surrounded our heaving heartbeats.

“W-Whatever ya got with Daddy,” she hissed in my firm grip, “he ain’t gonna let ya walk outta here alive...”

I cooled my breathing, then told the girl, “Just do as I say and shut up.”

The bare-boned, unfurnished apartment violated many city codes. For one, it smelled like shit. No, a mixture of musk, shit, and used tobacco. Rather than keep standing and gripping the white feline hooker’s arm, I opted towards the couch. I let her sit right beside me as I held my boot knife to her ribs and the gun pointed at the front door, now remaining ajar into the hallway. Shouting and other moans could be heard, but no footsteps.

The cat suddenly inhaled her stomach. “P-Please don’t kill me…”

“I won’t, if you don’t try to do something idiotic,” my voice remained firm, resilient, and trained. “This is not about you, and I don’t want to make tonight about you in the end.”

I’d killed innocent men and women. I’d killed guilty men and women. Sometimes, I’d killed morally gray men and women. Yet whatever the difference would ever be, the last thing I wanted tonight was unnecessary blood drenching my paws.

“Wendy!” Bellowed an all-too-familiar voice through the door. “Ya still alive in there!?”

The feline gasped, “D-Daddy!”

“I told you to keep quiet…” I pressed the knife to her abdomen, close enough to remind her of how quickly I could spill her guts out with one sudden slice. My eyes remained directed on the half-closed door. “Desmond Sylvester?”

The door swung open to reveal a Bengal tiger wearing an orange-striped version of the same illegally 1970s suit I saw him in last time. He aptly held a golden Desert Eagle in his trembling paws, the luxury-plated barrel pointed directly at me, full of rage. Accompanying behind him stood the guard I injured (still cradling his wrist while giving me a venomous death glare) and a Great Dane who looked like he belonged more in a Roman arena, fighting gladiators his size. Not as a pimp’s guard dog.

“We need to talk, Sylvester.”

“Talk? Talk?!” the tiger seemed to do his best at sounding tough, despite having some sense I was not the type of fur to fume at. “Ya-You come in here, sprain one of my men’s wrists, put a knife to one of my girls all ‘cause ya wanna *t-talk*???”

A small smirk nearly appeared on the corner of my muzzle.

“I needed to show I was serious. No fucking lies.”

The Great Dane beside the Bengal, sporting a laughable excuse of a P99, took a step closer into the apartment before I cocked the gun in my paw. At the same time, I gripped the knife to the white cat. She whimpered in immediate fear, trembling.

“Shoot me, and this will puncture her right lung on reflex,” I explained under each careful breath. “It will be too late.”

“Ya think you’re pretty good with that knife there, mutt?” Sylvester seethed.

“I know I’m good with this knife,” I explained furthermore, “Puncturing her lung will immediately cause hemopneumothorax. She’ll be breathing her own blood before you can even get her off this floor, let alone a hospital. And imagine all the time spent getting rid of the stain.”

‘Wendy’ started to whimper, trying to squirm from her situation.

“N-Now, let’s not be rational here,” the Bengal raised a steady paw. “Wendy and the rest of my girls ain’t done nothing to you…”

My eyes narrowed warily. “Danny Mckenna and Harry Solomon.”

“Who?” Sylvester had the balls to raise a confused eyebrow. “W-Wait, those two kids on the news?”

“The same ones who shot up that motel room. The Traveler’s Inn…” I added, then demanded to know, “Did you send them there to kill Cherry?”

“W-Wait, Cherry was in that room?” The tiger seemed to pale under his fur.

“So then,” I readied to fire, “you knew he was there?”

“No!” He growled in alarm. “I didn’t even know the cat was in the Traveler’s Inn!”

“Bullshit,” I bared my fangs out. “Mckenna and Solomon were in debt and couldn’t pay their rent when suddenly, they get enough cash to settle their debts. All their mysterious benefactor asked was they take out a hooker neither of them ever met. And who else has a grudge with the boy and can gather enough cash to discreetly pay them off?”

The realization dawned on his striped face. I meant him, of course.

“Hey…I admit…” Sylvester sighed between exasperated breaths, “I admit I got some beef with Cher for not being under my payroll, but why would I fuck with him if that meant fucking with some mean motherfucker like you? P-Plus, I’d never send some wannabe hitmen to kill such a valuable ass like that!”

“That’s awfully convenient, isn’t it? Where were you then on that night?”

“What’re you, a fucking cop now?” the tiger laughed. “Where do you think I was? I was fucking some bitch at one of my joints! It’s kinda my thing!”

When I raised my gun up in a more aimed position, Sylvester straightened up and added, “I didn’t do it! Like I said before that Cher’s a valuable piece of ocelot ass, and I don’t fuck up the valuable ones! I-I already lost…one…wait a minute.”

The feline gasped.

“What is it?” my voice turned into another growl. “What were you going to say?”

“Lower your weapons, boys!” Sylvester ordered, like he suddenly remembered he left the stove on back in his rathole. Reluctantly, until the Bengal tiger turned to them, the goons complied for their boss. He then motioned to me and the white cat. “You can let her go now.”

“Why should I?” I asked quizzically. “The moment I let her go, I die.”

“Yeah, but it’s like ya said,” he chuckled. “It’ll take forever to get the bloodstains out of this ugly carpet.”

After a moment of contemplating whether this tiger pimp was lying or intended to back out of my deal, part of me wanted to hear him out. What did he mean by ‘already lost one’?

“I’ll only let her go if you tell your men to wait outside the door,” I suggested to him.

He nodded once. “Deal.”

The knife slowly retracted away, I loosened my grip, and the white cat named Wendy cried her way out of the apartment, clutching her side to cover the miniscule cuts inflicted from my hovering weapon. Simple as that.

“T…Thank you, Daddy…”

“Fuck off and go to Gail,” he growled at her. “Imma talk to this clown.”

Desmond ‘Daddy Stripes’ Sylvester had the perfect opportunity. To my surprise as a cold-blooded killer, he didn’t snatch it in his grasp. He let it go.

“Boys,” Sylvester barked to them, “I’m going to be fine. Me and this wolf here are gonna have a small talk. But if you so much as think ya hear a gunshot, torch this room.”

“Yessir,” the Great Dane rumbled.

“Zack?”

“…yes sir.”

“Good kid. Go to Gail now and get that fixed up.”

He left the door open and turned back to me, placing his Desert Eagle in his back pocket before I reluctantly lowered my own pistol. Sylvester then slowly sat down onto a chair opposite the sofa, his eyes glancing between me and the floor.

“Do you know Becky? ‘Becky Babe’ Mullin? This super-hot vixen?”

I only stared unsmiling at the Bengal.

“Right, right, you’re a f…You’re not into the ladies,” he made the right choice not to elaborate any further. “Becky Babe. She is…no, was…one of my best girls. That fox could make any man cum in their pants just by walkin’ into a room. The secrets she kept over so many furs could get any person killed…and a month ago, one of my men found her body in her room. According to my cleaners and a doc I got in my pocket, Becky chewed on one of those cyanide pills ya see spies use in black ops shit. Wasn’t homemade either. It came from the Deep Web.”

“Say that I believe this…back-alley diagnosis,” I proposed without peeling away the coldness in my voice. “What makes you think this girl wasn’t just troubled and wanted out?”

“That’s the thing, no—two actually!” he explained thoroughly, “Becky’s been in the businesses for years, since she dropped outta high school. She’d been enjoying this for years, since it made better money than any mini-wage job out there. Sure, she had some issues, but who doesn’t, am I right? You must have some issues too, ri—”

I snarled, “Get to the fucking point.”

“Anyway, several weeks back,” he frowned, both at me and someone else, “Becky came into my office asking for bigger cuts in the profit she makes. I only said yes after she told me her mommy needed a surgery. I’m talking enough money to buy off the President himself. And guess what I find out just a few days after the bitch decided to off herself?”

He didn’t need to tell me, but the Bengal tiger said it anyway.

“Her mother got the money for surgery.”

Desmond Sylvester further went on to describe the impromptu ‘investigation’ he and his men discreetly did in their spare time. According to the doctors and a dirty cop also under the pimp’s thumb, the money transferred to the mother’s bank account was used in Bitcoin, basically making any tracing useless (though they still allowed her to get the operation). Becky’s suicide occurred exactly one week before Cherry’s attempted murder.

*And mine*, I noted, *when I joined him in the motel room after that movie.*

Sylvester and I came to a consensus that these incidents were more than a mere coincidence. Someone out there paid Becky to kill herself in exchange for her mother getting the getting the surgery to save her life, and seven days later, another mysterious benefactor paid off two deadbeats’ rent if they could shoot up another prostitute, then get double their money if both escaped. Unfortunately for Harry and Danny, they crossed my path by targeting the ocelot.

This ‘benefactor’ knew how to hide their tracks.

Reluctantly, I made a deal with Desmond Sylvester: we both wanted to find the possible serial killer, and the tiger held connections with many of the other pimps around Lakertown. In exchange for providing me information or possible leads or clues, Sylvester would have first blood on our ‘Benefactor’, as we started calling them.

“I wanna motherfucking kill this motherfucking killer myself,” he told me.

As far as I was concerned, I was content the tiger would make sure he no longer harmed Cherry or any other fur out there. In any other circumstance, it didn’t matter if another serial killer popped up in the world, but whoever they were, they crossed the wrong furs.

Especially me.