The very next morning, after another fulfilling meal with breakfast burritos and a bottle of orange juice, Cherry and I returned to St. Francis for what we needed to know. According to Father Abraham’s sources, there was only one confirmed freelance assassin within Lakertown’s city limits. And an infamous one too.

As planned, I entered the confessional after he entered his, and the Bengal tiger went on to describe who it was. A thirty-something Canadian American bobcat named Xavier Donnelly, better known by his mobster employers and the fringes of the Canadian underworld under the ludicrous alias of ‘DeadEx’. Rumor had it the name originated from a bad pun a lowly mobster made comparing him to an efficient delivery fur. Very on the nose, that even Father Abraham stifled a deep chuckle after saying it. It did not take away the bobcat’s credibility as a contract killer, however.

“This dangerous soul has been recently residing in an apartment building.” Father Abraham cleared his throat, “Mr. Donnelly is currently living under the pseudonym of Clarence Benjamin Ruthurs at the following address: 2351 Meadow Ridge Boulevard, Apartment #32 at the Acreland Heights building in Ledgeview Terrace. Be careful in your endeavors though, my son. This soul is not to be trifled with, but I would expect someone such as the Iron Phantom to not have much difficulty.”

Residents knew Ledgeview Terrace as an expensive housing neighborhood in Northwestern Lakertown, nestled comfortable between Rosecrest and the beaches lined up along Lake Michigan. It served as a bubble for the rich to encase themselves from the seedier side of urban sprawl. Or the mundanity of the suburbs and other community areas. The perfect spot where an upper-middle class family could either visit one of the yacht clubs or drive leisurely past Rosecrest's dozens of hotel chains to go straight to the international airport.

When I next asked about Mitchell Corbin’s official residence, I wasn’t surprised when he said, “Why, the young dingo is just a few blocks east of DeadEx’s rental apartment, at 3564 Meadow Ridge Boulevard. Apartment #10. If your assassin and Walker’s campaign manager live so closely together, I can guess they are aware of each other too?”

No shit. So, Corbin thought a few steps ahead of me. The sly dingo likely knew how risky it sounded in thought, placing a bounty on an experienced contract killer and his prostitute lover, so he separately hired DeadEx through the Reaper’s Row as his *de facto* campaign bodyguard. Again, he hired someone else to do the dirty work for him if I had the bravery to return to Lakertown. Unluckily for him though, I did.

“What of the Rochford family? Are they safe?”

“…not exactly.”

The fingers on my left paw dug into the fabric of pants’ knees. “Can you explain?”

“Dennis Rochford is safe. He is serving out the rest of his sentence in the county jail.” He muttered, “However, my son, the Rochford home seems empty from a distance. A neighbor across the street has said Mr. Rochford and the second-eldest son haven’t been seen lately, but the car remains parked in the driveway. The front yard, the entrance door and the windows are completely intact.”

“Were you able to see if anyone was inside?” I asked with a thin layer of hope in my voice.

“Alas, no…” he sighed. “My informant couldn’t see anybody inside through the windows. Not before a neighbor or passing newspaper delivery boy spotted them and called the police. If I were you, my son, I would find reason to suspect your enemy is involved in their disappearance?”

No, he was wrong. Most of the time, the Father’s information proved solid, but not in regard to the well-being of the other two Rochfords. They did not just disappear, because ‘disappearance’ implied their bodies could not be found.

After thanking Father Abraham for his services, I informed Cherry in the truck about what the tiger said. Safe to say, the ocelot tried arguing about going to his former home first. In fact, he insisted on it as I drove us the opposite direction to Meadow Ridge.

“We need to see if they’re fine!” he snarled, “Turn it around, Markus!”

“That is a horrible idea,” I told him for the second time, “It’s more than a coincidence. We need to incapacitate DeadEx first before we check up on your father and brother.”

Cherry only partially listened, “What if they’re being held hostage or-or they’re—”

“Listen to me, kid,” my eyes kept trained on the road, “For all we know, Walker and Corbin didn’t hire DeadEx simply to be an unofficial bodyguard. They likely know we plan to return, so they hired him to kidnap your family and lure us out. Hell, they most likely have the house booby-trapped with explosives or a camera to confirm we’re no longer outside of Lakertown.”

“How do you know?” he asked, still glaring at me.

“That’s something I would do.” I resisted the urge to snarl, only to have it come out as a lowly groan, “I hate going into an unknown situation like this, but we have little choice. Hmm. We’ll—”

“We’re going to give them the element of surprise then.” Cherry finished for me, to which the corner of my muzzle curled upward. “I just read your mind, didn’t I?

“You’re catching on, my pupil.” I tried to joke. It fell on deaf ears, likely since the feline didn’t know whether his father and older brother (one of them, anyway) were alright. “Ngh, we should be to Ledgeview in several minutes. Review the basics of Leopard in your mind.”

“Yessir.”

Ledgeview Terrace remained elite and pristine compared to the rest of the city, and Meadow Ridge Boulevard was no exception. The clean, gentrified road along the southern side of the neighborhood did not have overflowing public trash bins, no furs warily looking at anybody walking down the sidewalk, no graffitied walls or the smell of evaporated urine in any alleyways. If there were any to be found among the co-ops and redeveloped business plazas found every block.

Finally, we came across Acreland Heights, a seven-story, mid-rise apartment complex composed of tanned white paint and polished mortar bricks. None of the balconies in sight had clothes or leftover Christmas lights hanging from them. Or, remained cluttered with useless junk—large pots, broken grills, rotting pumpkins from years past—that their tenants couldn’t afford to pawn off. The building appeared more like a hotel in Rosecrest or maybe in Las Estrellas than an actual Lakertown residency, from the stainless windows watching down at the street to the feline doorman pretending not to glance down at the phone in his pocket. Probably begging for his shift to go by much faster.

I instructed Cherry to act in a casual manner, like he and I had breathed in this area our whole lives. “Stay behind me, do not say anything to make yourself stand out, and be casual. They won’t question it if we act like we belong here.”

“Right,” Cherry nodded as we exited the truck, but couldn’t help but give a sly smile, “Don’t worry. I can pretend too, big guy.”

Rather than ask what he meant by that comment, I slipped some quarters into the clean parking meter, then motioned my head for the ocelot to follow close. He obliged, but not after nervously glancing at Acreland Heights’ lovely façade. My tail calmly swished the moment I locked eyes with the burly but well-dressed panther.

He politely nodded to us. “Morning.”

“Morning,” I nodded back, hoping he would just let us inside. When the panther held a paw up, I sighed, like I had just forgotten about something, “Oh! Uh, sorry, but we’re here to see my buddy, Clarence.”

“Clarence?” he repeated the name.

“Clarence Ruthers? Do ya know him?” I asked meekly, offering a faux-embarrassed smile. “Apartment Thirty-two? He and I are old drinking buddies from the day. Did mention the doorman was a bit of an asshat…”

He raised an offended eyebrow, “Beg your pardon?”

I thus offered Cherry an example of how to properly manipulate somebody in order to gain better access to the target. The panther doorman infrequently looking at his phone while trying to covertly look like he was doing his job indicated a distaste for his occupation. However, given the fact a job did pay well, it suggested he’d sooner not get in trouble for something trivial during his shift.

“Yeah, and here you are, looking at your phone while I wanna see my war buddy,” I drawled, knowing the panther likely hated somebody who complained. “You’re embarrassing me in front of my son. Look, can’t ya just let me in before Clarence stomps on down here? Please?”

“Uh, I’m sorry, sir.” The panther held the door open and motioned us inside, silently praying for us to simply leave him be. As well as not complain further to the landlord about his incompetence. “Y-You’re right, I-I’m sorry…Sir.”

“Thank you,” I kindly nodded. “See ya. C’mon, James. Uncle Clarence is waiting.”

The ocelot standing silently caught up to me. “Coming, Dad!”

(Did he seriously just suppress a laugh??)

A small grin curled at the corner of my lip he couldn’t see. We were almost there. Walking through the small yet well-maintained lobby—the landlord held a fascination for beige and black, go figure—we maintained a casual walk as I eyed for any cameras. Should things have gotten ugly, we’d need to be aware of evidence the police could use to identify us. If I had honestly gone so far as to act like an entitled mother ranting at a grocery store, demanding to speak to his manager, there’d be no doubt the doorman would give testimony to a detective.

Towards the elevator, I could feel Cherry staring in awe at my back. Or my ass. I couldn’t tell, but I could hear it in the way his tail amusedly swished at the floor.

“So, Daaaaaaaaaaddy,” he snickered shortly, “That was mighty risky to say that.”

I did not say anything to him until we encountered a directory plaque saying which floor apartment thirty-two lay on. When the empty elevator box opened for us, I quietly muttered to the lad, “If you ever call me ‘Daddy’ while we are in bed, I will seriously reconsider our relationship, boy.”

He playfully stuck his tongue up at me, “You’re being mean, ‘Dad’!”

I groaned, “And you’re being immature. Now focus. We need to be ready for anything.”

“Alright.” Like a switch, the teasing feline returned to his semi-professional self. Looking straight ahead alongside me as the mirror-like metal door closed and we started to ascend.

Part of me wondered if it had been idiotic to bring Cherry with me. Despite his ridiculous codename, DeadEx could not to be underestimated. Misjudging an opponent’s strategy and tactical aptitude was what led to me chasing a ghost in Lakertown before the brat eventually forced me to abandon my penthouse, my supplies and allow him to hack my information. Not again. Plus, Cherry

Still, I knew it would’ve meant leaving him alone without me to guard him. To protect him. My God, I had indeed lost my better judgement the moment the ocelot and I opened to each other. Technically, it all began either the night he almost died in that motel room, or when he nearly touched Death thanks to the gangbangers that tried killing us way back.

I sighed, glancing down to notice him sharply examine each scratch and unnoticeable dent in the elevator soors. The lad was already beginning to own the eyes of a predator. A murderer like me.

*Can’t be helped now, Markus*, I thought. *What’s done is done. Either way, it will be nice to have an extra set of eyes in the field.*

The metal box we stood in suddenly jolted to a slow halt, and the polished door dinged open to reveal an ornately beige, empty corridor. Empty, save for two hunched, elderly huskies waiting for the elevator, draped in thick autumn coats while each held a walking cane. Had to be husband and wife tenants recently retired, unaware of who we really were.

“Pardon us, sir!” The wife apologized while Cherry and I walked out to give them room, “C’mon, hurry Gerald. I don’t want us to be late!”

“I’m right behind you, dear!” The husband chuckled embarrassedly, sighing at us in offhanded jest, “Family reunion. Her side.”

“Sounds nice,” I commented in a level voice. One arm relaxed behind me, I motioned for Cherry to step outside the gap of the open elevator, then waved in a polite gesture, “Good day.”

Hopefully, they did not get a good look at us. Me or Cherry. The accuracy of remembering visual memories varied between furs, especially in later years. I only wished they didn’t bother to speak to us, in the event things turned south.

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People underestimated the use of a good lockpick. It could easily be stored anywhere, stayed useful if you knew how to use it correctly, and nobody thought to outlaw the item. It never hurt having an attentive ocelot watch the hallways while jimmying the door open.

The rental apartment of our dear Mr. Clarence Benjamin Ruthurs happened to be well-furnished. A flatscreen TV hung from the wall, facing towards an adjoining kitchen on the other side of a circular queue of sofas and a glass coffee table. A dresser beside the TV had a neatly stacked row of old, embellished books. The only wall decorations were shelves of Hindu memorabilia and one Buddha statue. Apparently, the landlord wanted to be multicultural for whoever wanted to borrow the lodging.

No sooner did Cherry close the door behind him did I motion for him to watch my back, then I reached for the Sig Sauer P320 Compact hidden under my shirt. We shared a mutual nod. I clicked the safety off, peering into each emptier room, making sure to scrutinize each probable hiding spot such as behind a shower curtain, a closet, beneath the bed, or surely the blind spots between the opened door and the wall. Part of me expected him to make a sudden appearance around a corner.

Unfortunately, the bedroom and the bathroom appeared no more lived-in than if it had been when the landlord gave tours.

“He isn’t here.” I relaxed my stance and clicked the handgun’s safety on. “He must be out and about.”

“Should we look for something?” Cherry asked, then added, “Clues? Documents?”

“You do that while I look in the trash bins.” I said to him. The ocelot gave a disgusted, confused look, then nodded with realization. “Yeah, it might tell us more…”

Professional assassins and contract killers knew better than to completely trust 21st-century technology. Unless they were completely clean computers or vintage flip phones, the best way to store ‘business information’ was by writing it down in real life. Notebooks could neither be hacked or require a digital firewall to shield it from bots. I used to prefer electronic storage until recently, due to the obvious reason, but it didn’t mean the outdated techniques were useless. All that needed to be done was destroy evidence once the target was killed.

Mr. Ruthers’ trash hadn’t been thrown away. I opened the lid and tentatively pushed and prodded through the refuse inside. Burnt strips of food, putrid waste, an empty broken bottle, some wrappers, and…shredded paper. I glared at the scissors placed at the edge of a countertop.

Pulling as many as I could find, bits of handwritten words and phrases appeared.

“Green Kiln Road?” I murmured to myself. “Three-two-nine?”

“What’d you say?”

I turned to look at Cherry, who’d stopped his searching and stared dumbfounded at the collected fragments held in my paw.

“Did you say what I think you said?” He asked.

I grimly put the pieces together. Only then did the shock hit me as hard as it did Charlie Rochford, there in the room with me. The reassembled address read ‘329 Green Kiln Road’.

My ocelot partner-in-crime gasped, “It’s home.”