After driving the truck as far south as central Wisconsin, Cherry and I visited the state capital’s public library to make our return official. Under the cover of the library’s ISP network, I used my laptop to upload Vic’s doctored CCTV image to the forum on Reaper’s Row. Expectedly, it seemed to have worked. The comments beneath it blew up like a California wildfire in July, with many of the users suggesting that the rumors about the Iron Phantom being in Canada being considered false. However, a good portion insisted it had to be doctored. Whatever the case, it certainly would help muddy me and Cherry’s trail back down to Lakertown.

Speaking of whom, Cherry managed to convince me to have us stop a local diner off the main highway once we finished uploading the photo. He insisted on it to an annoyingly cute extend. As much as I wanted us to get there before early morning, the prospect of driving hungry did little to dissuade me from agreeing.

The diner itself was nothing spectacular (I couldn’t even remember the name, but it definitely had to be christened after the original owner), yet the greasy smell and allure of all-American food definitely caught the ocelot’s appetite. In fact, he appeared to be on the verge of orgasm as he perused the laminated dinner menu.

“Yes, oh, yes, I thought I’d never have a burger again!” He moaned with unsexual delight. Quite a rare sight to behold. “Mhm, all of ‘em look good. You’re paying, right?”

“Only if you don’t gorge yourself and waste the progress we made,” I slipped my wallet out and counted to see fifty-eight dollars nestled inside. When we next made it to an ATM, I’d need to withdraw roughly $1,200 for our next destination. “High metabolism or not, I don’t need you addicted to grease.”

“Bitch, I’ve always been addicted to grease!” The lithe ocelot cackled before setting his menu aside and turning to the confused vixen waitress to his left. “Sorry, I’ll have this one, but can you please add in some onions?”

The bored vixen barely batted an eye at his antics. Just another crazy customer for the night, apparently. “Sure thing,” she scribbled it down. “Anything else?”

“Oh,” he raised a finger, “and some extra cheese? If the chef can?”

“I uh,” she composed herself, “I think he can make it work.”

Struggling not to roll my eyes, I suppressed a chuckle and waited for the waitress to finish answering his questions. I ordered myself a delectable chicken salad after realizing how hungry I really was, as well as a glass of water. Meanwhile, Cherry eagerly requested a double-patty hamburger with extra layer of American cheese, grilled onions, thickened bacon, mushrooms, and salted French fries, plus a large can of diet soda.

Ten minutes later, our plates arrived at the table steaming hot.

“What?” He shrugged at me mid-sip, “I got the diet pop. It’s healthy, right?”

“Hardly, even if it’s diet.” I huffed at his cheeky ignorance. “Do you know how much carbohydrates is in a single bottle, let alone a large cup?”

“I dunno, five hundred?” Cherry gulped down a large bite, only to wince at how hot the meat was. “Ah, hot, hot, hot!”

I sipped my water, casually setting it down on a coaster. “I almost forgotten what a blackhole you can be with food, boy…”

To that, the bold ocelot winked directly at me once he recovered from the burnt tongue, and swallowed a bite into his greasy burger, which had already begun to fall apart around his clenched fingers.

“You of all furs know that. I love thick, delectable meat. And the juices in it, hehehe...”

Coyly, I tried my best to ignore that comment and, despite me knowing it didn’t matter what kind of sex talk the strangers surrounding us heard, tried to hide my embarrassment. In particular, the one tenting between my closed legs.

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Autumn looked good for Lakertown. The lukewarm evergreen trees dotting the parks and every building’s crevice had become husks shedding themselves of golden leaves. They were ready for hibernation, and so were the residents, already wearing long coats in preparation for the inevitable polar vortex a few months down the road. However, a significant portion were also readily preparing for the upcoming mayoral election, if the political signs in yards and on advertising billboards were any indication.

By the time we arrived at the northwestern suburbs of Lakertown, booking a room at a sleazy, 1980’s-styled motel called The Sleep-Inn (either the owner could not let go of that singular decade, or they never bothered to update with the times), Cherry and I literally passed out together on the bed. As my eyes fluttered between the gaudy lime green wallpaper, the rough tan carpeting and eventually on Cherry laying exhausted beside me, neither of us even bothered to remove our clothes, let alone turn off the bedroom lights.

Based on the number of those in the suburbs compared to the inner city, not all residents were too focused on the election yet. Most were just preparing for Halloween in the coming week. It could be found in the decorations on the doors, the front yards and amidst the falling autumn leaves.

The date was October 26th, late in the morning. I managed to awaken before he did, sometime before ten. After tucking Cherry into bed and resisting the urge to jerk one in the shower, focusing on preparing for the next objective gave me enough time to get redressed, organize our suitcases and step over to the neighboring 6-Eleven across the street. There, I had to make a choice between expired, microwavable egg burritos or a box of cereal for eight dollars.

Suffice to say, once I found a half-dried ocelot sitting on the motel room bed, he gladly dove right into his burrito without complaint.

“That’s what makes them so good!” He burped, biting again into the microwaved meal, “Seriously, Markus, ya need to relax with healthy and unhealthy food.”

“I don’t have your high metabolism, kid.” A smug grin snuck its way up my muzzle as I shifted my tail to the side, then munched on my own egg burrito. It burned the roof of my upper maw, but I ignored the miniscule discomfort, “Plus, you wouldn’t enjoy this body if it lost muscle, would you?”

“Don’t be silly,” He scoffed between chews, “So then, what’s the plan? We got a week until the party, and I doubt it’d be a good idea to go ‘round town and invite trouble.”

“Correct,” I nodded, finally savoring the unique texture and taste of the burrito’s egg and bits of cooked bacon. “We’ll be preparing for the night, do surveillance on Corbin and Walker, but first…we’ll need to visit St. Francis.”

Cherry’s ear perked as he licked some crumbs off his whisker, “St. Francis?”

“St. Francis Catholic Church,” I reiterated. “The one southwest of the airport. One of Father Levi’s children will help us know more of our current situation.”

“Father Levi?” He asked, “Why’re we going to meet a priest?”

“He is a priest, but he is also an information broker.” I chewed on the last of my burrito, then gulped it down. “And the scariest man I know…”

On our way to the truck and to the St. Francis church, I explained to the clueless, half-naïve ocelot what little I knew about Father Levi Zacharias, a white-furred, middle-aged tiger of unknown origin. He became renowned in the criminal underworld for his lack of backstory and expansive network of brokering information for anybody who could give tithes in exchange, before entering the confessional. His information was rarely incorrect, otherwise the syndicates of the criminal underworld wouldn’t go to him first for knowledge they couldn’t obtain on their own. Whatever someone wanted to know, Father Levi and his followers would provide.

Of course, an exchange of knowledge came with four simple rules: no weapons on church grounds, the tithes must be in laundered cash, be polite and show respect within the walls, and lastly, as a Catholic priest, the Father could not break the sacramental seal of the confessional.

“In other words, the Father at this church won’t mention if Corbin or Walker happened to ask for my whereabouts while in the confessional. The sacrament seal will prevent them from telling us.”

“That means they can’t tell you what someone says in confession, right? Even if it’s illegal?” He assumed, sitting beside me in the passenger seat. “I heard about that on a TV show once. They can’t testify or say if a murderer confessed.”

“They can testify, but they won’t…” I clarified for Cherry once we arrived at the right intersection, waiting for the light to turn green, “Any priest who breaks their seal of confession will be immediately excommunicated from the Catholic Church. Murder or not. And for Father Levi and his priest cubs, they have taken advantage of it.”

“So, they’re getting rich from it, huh?”

“Yes, and no.” I turned right towards the parking lot, “Almost all the money made from the so-called tithes is donated anonymously to charities that need it. Some mobsters who contract his network’s help call him the Mister Rogers of crime…”

“Mister Rogers? Seriously?” The ocelot stared in disbelief at me, which I could feel in the way his eyes traced my motionless expression once we parked. “Seriously?”

“If you ever have the misfortune to meet Father Levi in person, you will be surprised.”

The pristine front entrance of St. Francis Church, a two-storied gothic revival with an opulently crafted stained-glass window, stood opposite the street of a decently sized Catholic school in the middle of a lunch break. Four preteen students wandered outside in their uniforms, likely bored out of their minds, not paying attention to me or Cherry as we walked up the front steps into the building’s interior. Still, I paid attention to my surroundings. God wasn’t the only one who listened from the walls of his holy house.

The corridor leading into St. Francis’ central nave smelled of incense. Empty pews lined up the central hall leading down to the chancel and the stained-glass window gazing down upon an altar. Beside it, a middle-aged priest—Bengal tiger with orange and black stripes visible on his cheekfur and in the rope-like tail swishing along the floor—hanging his head low alongside an elderly she-wolf, hunched together in prayer.

“Amen.” They murmured together, to which the priest waved to the she-wolf as she walked down the aisle between the pews. “You have a wonderful rest of your day, Mrs. Evans. God bless you.”

The elderly she-wolf tipped her head, “And bless you, Father…”

The Bengal tiger spotted me and Cherry, who looked at the Father with as much skepticism as to be expected. In all fairness though, even to someone as battle-hardened as myself, it was sometimes hard to believe the smiling, perky feline was Levi Zacharias’s eldest offspring. The eldest son of a man whose name garnered respect from the highest echelons of the criminal underworld.

Chaotically neutral and devoted to God like his father, Abraham Zacharias garnered enough respect from Lakertown all the way down to Magnolia or New Carnaval. Fuck, even Caesar and his Outfit thugs knew better than to do something like insult Father Levi, let alone interfere with his family’s independent operations. After all, why ruin a perfectly good relationship with an ally who could just as easily slit your throat? If he wanted to, of course.

“Good morning, my sons.” The Bengal tiger greeted us with humility, “How are you on this fine day?”

“Hello Father…Abraham, is it?” I asked, to which the Bengal nodded. My tail wagged in a friendly manner, while I smiled and slowly reached for the hundred-dollar bills in my coat pocket, letting one be noticeable for him to see, “I was wondering if you were available for confession?”

A small, fanged smile curved up his aging snout as he said, “Right this way, my son.”

Father Abraham guided us to the left side of the church’s large hall towards a row of three wooden boxes, each with the cross and a wooden door on them. The collared feline entered first, but not before glancing between us and the donation box resting comfortably near the front entrance to the nave. Locked yet free for anyone to snatch it away, if they wanted to, not that anybody would have the morals or the audacity to do so.

I pulled out three bills and handed them to Cherry, “Make a donation for us,” I instructed him quietly, “and wait for me. Don’t wander off, and for the love of God, do not pocket these instead.” Before the ocelot could convey much offense for what I said, my steely eyes scrutinized towards him and the walls around us. “He will know if you cheat them.”

“G-God or the priest?” He asked skeptically.

“Both.” I simply said.

To that, I trusted him enough to follow my instructions. After walking over to the donation box and slipping the bills inside for our tithe, I cleared my throat, straightened my coat and entered the empty confessional.

“Forgive me Father, for I have sinned…” I recited in the dimly lit box, sitting down on the bench to see a form move behind the latticed divider obscuring Father Abraham.

“When was your last confession, my son?”

“…years ago.” I left my answer at that. “My sins have been innumerable since then, but I am not here to tell you mine. I am wondering if you could tell me about…someone else’s?”

Father Abraham replied, “That depends on what you are looking for, my son.”

“There is a website on the Dark Web, a website for hired murderers.” I clarified for him, “It has gone by many names over the years, but most call it ‘Reaper’s Row’. I would like to know how many of their users are already in the greater Lakertown area.”

“It will require some time,” the feline hummed deeply, “but it can be done.”

“My second question, Father Abraham,” I bowed my head and glared down at my paws, clenching and unclenching them as I imagined a certain dingo and grizzly bear’s throats gripped in each of them. “I assume you have been watching the news on the upcoming mayoral election, correct?”

“I have.” He stated evenly. “I do not like to get involved with politics, but I am curious as to why you would bring it up. Do you wish to know a dark sin regarding one of the candidates, my son?”

“One of the candidates? Kind of,” I relaxed my paws on my knees, “but I want to know more about Richard Walker III’s campaign manager. He is an Australian-American dingo dog named Mitchell Corbin. Let’s just say that he and I have some…important things to discuss, and I need to know where he officially resides here, in Lakertown. Where does he spend most of his time outside of Walker’s campaign?”

“It will also take some time as well to figure out, but I believe you are a patient soul, are you not?” He surmised after a quiet moment, to which I grunted in approval, “Otherwise, the additional tithe your little friend donated, is it simply a friendly gift to the poor?”

“Not exactly.” I cleared my throat, twitching my nose at the lack of scent as I leaned closer to the latticed divider, “I must know if anybody has asked the location of a nineteen-year-old local ocelot named Charlie Rochford. He might go by ‘Cherry’, his nickname.”

The Father did not move or say anything at first.

“Father Abraham?” I asked him again, “Did anyone ask for the location of Charlie Rochford?”

“My son, you know I am not emboldened to break my seal of silence.”

That vague reply was coded for: Yes, someone asked about the boy’s whereabouts already. And it did not take a genius to know the name of the fur.

“I have one final request.” I spoke up, “Can you tell me if the boy’s family, his father and two brothers, are in any kind of danger?”

“I can.”

I sighed with relief, knowing that it’d put Cherry’s mind at ease somewhat. He knew that we couldn’t exactly contact either his father or brothers, lest it risk the Benefactor finding out we were in Lakertown and undoing the element of surprise. Father Abraham wouldn’t benefit from ratting us out, nor would it be good for his business if he played favorites.

“For your sins, I would recommend ninety Hail Marys at your own personal expense,” Father Abraham concluded our business, “and if you are comfortable with the idea, my son, I would like to invite you and the young man out there in prayer, if he is also accepting?”

My tail twitched at the idea. Me? Praying to God? The idea almost elicited a laugh out of me, but I immediately quieted myself. Rumor had it that, unlike Father Levi himself, his sons did not always respond to mockery with a smile and an offer for tea or coffee. If anything, the single last thing me or Cherry needed in any time was another potential target on our backs.

“Sure…why not?” I grumbled to him and myself. We could humor him.

“How did it go?” The ocelot stood up from the nearest pew, glancing at me and the older feline. “Did you…Did you get what you needed, Markus?”

“Not yet, my son,” Father Abraham answered his question, offering the younger feline a knowing smile (did he know his name? Maybe…) that matched the white stripes on his fur. “The generation of today is very anxious to know everything. However, even the most important of knowledge can take some time to gather.” He turned to me, tail swishing as he closed the wooden box’s door. “I believe that a full twenty-four hours is enough time needed for what you seek, Dark Wolf of Ireland.”

I blinked once, then twice at what he said. My eyes narrowed at how he calmly stood, watching for a reaction from either me or Cherry.

“Now then,” he lifted his paws, “shall I offer you both a prayer?”

I turned back to the ocelot, confused slightly by the Bengal tiger’s gesture, who then shrugged and joined me in interlocking our paws with his, then ours together, until the three of us were united in a contemplated circle. Finally, we lowered our heads down towards the stone tile floor as Father Abraham exhaled in the presence of his Lord.

“Saint Michael, the Archangel, defend these two souls in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray; and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls…Amen.”

“Amen.”

“Amen.”

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“You okay?”

“You could say that…” I restarted the car and guided us out of St. Francis’ parking lot, then into the intersection leading us back to the motel. “I have nothing personal against Levi Zacharias or his sons. I don’t care for religion though.”

Cherry perked his ears, “Really?”

“Really,” I sighed.

He scooted back in his seat, remembering to buckle up, “You’re not religious?”

“And you are?” I smirked back at him, which he then responded to by snickering with twitching whiskers. “Furs will do anything in the name of their Lord and mixing it with national pride often leads to something more potent. More deadly.”

“Mmmmm,” Cherry mused awkwardly to my left, swishing his tail back and forth between his legs, “I dunno if I can consider myself…religious, exactly…I mean, I’m…”

“Not a virgin?” I finished his sentence, “Or attracted to women?”

“Jesus…” He snickered, to which I rolled my eyes.

“Hey, do you want to get some lunch?” I proposed to him, then added, “It has to be healthy though. No Burger Knight or any junk food.”

Cherry opened his mouth to say something, then closed it in deep thought.

In the end, we came to a compromise that satisfied both of our appetites. I had us order takeout Chinese food from a buffet kitchen several blocks down the road, asking the operator on the other end to separate the meals into two; I ordered chow mein with some teriyaki beef for myself, while Cherry had some fried rice with a helping of chicken and wontons. We shared three Crabmeat Rangoons each. Overall, it was good protein for helping the feline build muscle he needed. I tried convincing him he needed it if he were going to be by my side. I didn’t expect him to become as muscular as me or any of the predator jocks that entered the gym like a house of worship, but the lad couldn’t defend himself with speed alone.

“Hold them like this,” I showed Cherry the proper way to hold chopsticks, then demonstrated how to pick up a dab of rice at the end. “Be patient and quick.”

“Like this?” He demonstrated, still struggling to place each stick in the right coordinated position across his right palm. He dropped the wonton before it could reach his maw, and he groaned. “Dammit.”

“You’re holding it too tightly,” I explained further to the ocelot as he tried again. “Don’t pinch the food tightly until you’re certain it isn’t being held simply due to balance. Yes, like that.”

“Mmmm, yay me!” He chirped, then used his chopsticks to take another Crab Rangoon and bit into it, his lips holding onto one end as he chewed. When it slipped, he caught it with the two sticks, much to our surprise. “Haha!”

“You are a fast learner,” I commented.

“I have a good teacher with me,” He winked, then giggled with a glint of lust in his hungry eyes, “Plus, you of all furs out there should know I have magic fingers.”

I smirked, “You do not have to remind me.”

“And magic lips too.” He quipped, “Don’t forget that, Markus.”

I rolled my eyes and went back to my meal.

“You don’t got to remind me of that either.”