I arrived back to the cabin hours later, grocery bags placed in the passenger seat as my paws gripped the steering wheel in the vice. My eyes glowered between the winding road and my fingers as they trembled in shame. Anger. Disappointment. Self-doubt. Rage.

All this time. All this fucking time, the Benefactor had been under our noses.

Was I getting too old, or had I been losing my edge from distractions like…?

I didn’t even dare finish that thought. If anything, this proved I had been underestimating this psychopath, expecting the predictable only to be greeted by confusion. The Benefactor had conned me and Cherry for the last time, goddamn it.

Parking the pickup back inside the cabin’s garage, I promptly grabbed the grocery bags and jumped out the driver’s side. Stomping up the staircase into the upper loft, I found myself welcome to a slightly started ocelot, who then relaxed upon seeing me.

“Where the hell were you?” he asked, sounding concerned. “I was worried and—” His whiskers twitched at the smell of my groceries in paw. “Did…Did it really take you ten hours to get groceries??”

“Of course, not.” I scoffed while placing the bags on the kitchen table. “Now help me put these away. We…need to talk.”

The younger ocelot perked an ear, confused. “Why not tell me about it while—”

“Trust me,” I shot him down, “you’ll need to be sitting down for this.”

An awkward silence gripped the loft as we unconsciously placed the groceries away for about five minutes. Soon though, once I placed the gallon of cold milk in the refrigerator, my next target was in getting the laptop out from under the bed.

I opened it to a regular web browser, which caught Cherry’s immediate attention.

“Hey, didn’t you say this thing only used Tor?” he asked, sitting beside me in the second table chair. Then, he pouted, “Markus, you liar!”

“I did lie,” my tail curled slightly, “but I wasn’t bluffing when I said it was solely for work purposes.”

He still pouted, albeit more curiously, “Why are you showing this to me then—”

I answered all of his questions by spinning the laptop slightly in his direction. Onscreen was a leading headline of the Lakertown Tribune’s most recent newspaper that day.

NEW CANDIDATE ENTERS THE RACE: *Richard Walker III, retired principal & philanthropist, announces candidacy for Lakertown Mayoral Election*

Cherry sat in his chair, taken aback by the familiar grizzly bear depicted in an adjacent photograph in the news article. “P-Principal Walker?”

One of the very same suspects I vetted early on into this Benefactor fiasco.

*Honestly*, I chastised myself again, *how did I not suspect him earlier on?*

“I think we now know who’s behind this…”

I described in detail what I learned at the Cobalt Landing Public Library; it was in fact true that Richard Walker was a supposedly devout, kind-hearted and well-connected grizzly bear, coming from a wealthy family who made their fortune in the stock market during WWII. To any parent-teacher association in Lakertown, he presented himself as the perfect principal for any of the regional high schools he shuffled in-between: strict, conservative and dedicated in educating students for over thirty years. Even students praised the bear as a role model, though most of these testimonies originated from the kids who came from the same elite circles as Walker.

What was most interesting though, in researching him, was that Richard Walker also worked as a devoted alderman for the Lakertown City Council during his career. Served only seven years, but he evidently held aspirations beyond an office in some high school.

Cherry let all of the information sink in, “Y-You think he’s been the one trying to…kill me?”

“He certainly has motivation,” I explained further. “If I were running for mayor as a conservative family-values politician, it would be an absolute scandal if rumors leaked that I used to solicit for underaged sex. With a male student no less. Good-bye voters and public sympathy…Hello potential prison time.”

“But-But that doesn’t make sense…” he tried defending, then slumped forward, “I mean…it kinda does, but how does Becky play into all this? I told you I never knew any Becky’s that went to Washington High. You even checked that she didn’t go to my school, didn’t you?”

“Yes, she never went to Washington,” I revealed, “However, several years back, Walker did in fact supervise at her high school, Glendale South High.”

I gripped the top of the laptop’s screen without pressing too hard.

“He probably solicited Becky Mullin when she was a student too, somehow kept her silent, and then grew paranoid in the months before announcing his candidacy this week…He did not want to risk his mayoral campaign being tarnished with one whistleblower, yet didn’t want to be suspected of making his ‘mistakes’ disappear.

“First, he likely had his goon give Becky the cyanide pills, then had some money from his bank accounts transferred into Bitcoin before transferring the funds into her mother’s account for the surgery. Becky’s death would be ruled a depression-fueled suicide. However, when Desmond Sylvester started investigating why his prized hooker would off herself, Walker wanted all loose ends tied up by having the suspicious Bengal killed by his rivals: the Mafia, who get an anonymous tip about his whereabouts.” My tail curled in anger, remember that night, “Meanwhile, he thought he could remove his other potential scandal—you—by hiring two in-debt college idiots to kill you in a hit-and-run shooting at the motel, either keeping their silence with the extra money mailed to them, or potentially having the idiots charged for the crime. It would be unlikely that the LPD would probe what seems like a closed case.

“Unfortunately for Walker, you didn’t die that night,” I pointed out, “After he found us at the apartment, he paid some gang punks nearby to finish the job. This time, for good.”

Heavy silence hunger over the loft, completely dark save for the kitchen’s sole lightbulb, the computer screen and the corner fireplace burning with dying orange embers.

“Wait…” Cherry finally spoke up, his right ear perked high, “you said Walker likely had his goon deliver her the pills…what do you mean?”

Now came the…complicated part.

“Walker isn’t acting alone,” I told the confused ocelot. “The bear is using a right-hand man to carry all of this out for him.”

Returning to the newspaper article, I superimposed the screen to show the accompanying photograph, portraying Richard Walker standing upon a townhall stage where he made his announcement. His large, suited stature and great smile nearly obscured the other furs—his campaign staff—clapping behind him in cordial excitement. Reporters overwhelmed him with question after question, their cameras flashing like spotlights.

Yet one face stood out among the team; a twenty-six-year-old male dingo dressed in a dark blue suit, wearing a prominent ‘VOTE WALKER’ button pinned to his right chest. With chestnut fur and a handsome physique hidden beneath his moderate attire, it seemed extremely hard for any sane individual to discern him as anything other than what I knew him to truly be: a psychopath.

“This is Mitchell Corbin, his campaign manager.”

I frowned, unamused at the dingo onscreen and at myself.

“Corbin is the dog who sent the mob info on Sylvester’s location, and who was following us to my apartment.” Clearing my throat, I added, “According to what I managed to dig up at the library’s computer, he was born to Australian-American immigrants and went to Washington High while becoming valedictorian during his senior year. He graduated *Summa Cum Laude* from the University of Lakertown with a double major in Political Science and Computer Engineering. Later, he attended graduate school for a master’s degree in Political Science and earned his PhD a couple years ago. I couldn’t find much about his interests, but to get fantastical grades and have a vested interested in computer engineering confirms he knows how computers work.”

The dreading realization started to dawn on his face when I mentioned computers.

My frown twisted slightly into a snarl, “Or better yet, how to exploit and hack them.”

“So, this is the bastard who’s been trying to kill me, huh?” Cherry murmured a moment later, staring more at the screen with folded ears. “And Mr. Walker, huh? God…Goddamn…”

One of my ears twitched slightly, and my anger mixed with a sizable dosage of empathy towards the ocelot. At long last, he knew who wanted him to disappear, only to discover it was for something as petty as election ballots.

“One of the two bastards, perhaps,” I reluctantly corrected him. “Your old principal is likely in on this whole thing from the start. He’s having Mitchell Corbin remove his past sins, so they won’t come back to haunt him in the future.”

Maybe he even held prospective goals beyond Lakertown Mayor? I had seen monsters use similar tactics in countries beyond America’s shores. Years before I ever encountered Cherry, one powerful leopard in Somalia contracted me to remove a competitor from the equation of a local race. I’d taken the contract without much thought, earned my paycheck, and never thought about it until that moment. In all honesty, I never thought I would find myself embroiled in a quarrel involving election fraud.

“I-I can’t believe this…” Cherry placed his shaking elbows on the table, prompting me to pull the laptop closer and turn it around towards me. I started exiting the browser and replaced it with Tor. “So, now what?”