We sped to 329 Green Kiln Road as fast as the speed limit would allow us. As much as Cherry tried desperately telling me to go faster, hit the clutch harder, I remained stoic in my speed. The last thing either of us needed were police officers blaring their sirens behind us.

“C’mon, go faster!”

“Seven over is all I can do, alright?” I told the frantic ocelot.

“B-But my dad, and Alan!” He snapped, “They’re in danger!”

“So are we, and we won’t do ‘em favors by getting pulled over by cops, Cherry!” I snapped back, making a quick right into an empty road bringing us closer to Green Kiln Road.

Meanwhile, Cherry squirmed and writhed in his seat as he held the armrest for clinging support. I could sense the hairs on his fur being on end and hear him hiss and growl under his breath when I needed to slow down for an incoming red light. As much as I understood and even emphasized with his plight, we also needed to be aware of the possibility that his family was already dead.

The presence of an ambulance passing us by did little to help alleviate things.

Green Kiln Road was a stretch of cracked asphalt and sidewalks between a major highway and a series of old shops. Besides the fallen leaves and occasional Halloween decoration, very little color could be seen on anything else. Seeing the street that Cherry grew up in gave me the impression there were too few cubs to play around with on the weekends. It reminded me somewhat of my village in Northern Ireland. The comparisons between our childhoods and young adulthoods became further apparent though when the ambulance ahead of us stopped in front of a parked police cruiser. I didn’t need to see Cherry’s face to know which place he used to call home.

An ambulance gurney immediately exited from its back, guided by EMTs and a paramedic. I heard my companion gasp. After wordlessly parking the car and turning it off a sizable distance from the commotion of the responders and several watching neighbors, I finally glanced to the ocelot. He clearly wanted to get out of the car, even trying to reach for the passenger door.

I promptly locked it, to his immediate chagrin. “Hey!” He hissed. “My family’s—”

“We don’t know anything yet and making a scene out there won’t change it.” My voice remained even despite the grim circumstances. “If the neighbors recognize you, it won’t help us in the long-run either.”

Cherry ignored my words and unlocked the door, only for me to reach over him and promptly yank it back closed. He pushing it open again, but my superior strength stopped the lad.

“Listen to me!” I growled while closing it shut.

“No, I gotta see!” He hissed, still trying to open it. “I gotta see, I gotta!”

“Listen to me, Cherry”! I growled once more, locking the door from my control seat and gripping his wrist. He glared daggers at me. “DeadEx could still be watching, and if he sees—”

“I need to know if they’re alright!”

“We won’t be alright if someone sees us!”

“My dad and brother are in there, Markus!”

“We can’t just go out there and—” I paused mid-sentence when something caught the corner of my eye. Cherry noticed it too, staring at the house.

The EMTs guided the stretcher out onto the driveway, bringing it towards the open ambulance. A middle-aged ocelot lay unconscious as an oxygen mask covered their muzzle, or rather his muzzleCherry whimpered in his seat. I let go of his wrist, clenching my fingers. At first, I expected them to deploy another stretcher. They didn’t though. Rather, we watched as another figure stumbled over, coughing and talking/sobbing to paramedics while half-attempting to follow the occupied stretcher being placed in the ambulance. He looked exactly like an older version of his youngest brother.

Exhaling, Cherry leaned forward in disbelief, “Alan…he’s…and Dad, but that means…”

The one on the emergency stretcher had to be Mr. Rochford. He didn’t appear too well.

That was when I spotted him among the crowd; a trimmed bobcat somewhere in his mid-thirties, dressed in casual jeans and a black shirt covered by a red flannel jacket. He was likely of Canadian American descent if I gambled correctly.

“I see him.”

“Huh?” Cherry paused midway through his emerging panic attack to stare at me. “Wh-What are you talking a-about?”

“Don’t point or stare,” I cautioned the ocelot, “but look at the left side of the street. The blue two-story house directly across from your old home. There’s an old chipmunk in pink pajama bottoms, and next to her is a bobcat. He’s taller.”

He must’ve seen her from the way his nostrils flared, realizing what I did. Either he stared too long, or the universe wanted out hides, because then DeadEx suddenly steered down the sidewalk. His departure and footsteps were too erratic.

“Buckle back up.” I commanded my protégé, who quickly complied.

Not wanting to drive past the police cruiser and their dashboard cameras, I made a slick U-turn. At first Cherry made an audible protest, only to grow silent when it dawned on him that I wouldn’t be going in the other direction unless I had a plan. Making a right and then speeding right down the neighboring street until we arrived at the intersection connecting Green Kiln with the adjacent road, I peered beyond a row of unclipped hedges to see the bobcat enter an old Fjord passenger van. It purred to life like a dying old lion, then hastily sped down towards the freeway.

“Oh no, you don’t!” I snarled.

Our truck tailed him without truly shattering the speed limit. None of the cars honked their horns nor did we clip one of them in the process of catching up towards the runaway van.

I doubted our movements would go unnoticed by police cars for very long, so I pushed down on the clutch anyway. A loud clang came from our right. Either the tires struck a littered beer bottle, or I snapped off another car’s sideview mirror. I couldn’t tell. Cherry gripped the overhead handle in his seat.

“Don’t fucking crash!” He hissed, shrieking when our speed caused the truck to vibrate, nearly hitting another. “F-For Christ’s sake, Markus! Be careful!”

“We can’t lose him in the traffic!” I shouted back. Whitening knuckles gripped the wheel for dear life. “Just hold on!”

Dozens of feet became several. The distance between us and DeadEx grew shorter. The truck’s front bumper could practically flirt with the van’s back taillights. As much as I desired making him swerve into a concrete barrier, doing so would be the equivalent of placing a massive spotlight on us three.

Suddenly, DeadEx made a dangerous lane change. A convertible swerved angrily out of his way. She nearly hit us, but I managed to miss. My eyes peered forward down the road. I spotted a ramp leading off the freeway. On cue, the assassin’s van veered off towards it, and I had the vague notion he too wanted as less attention.

I tailed directly behind him as he swerved around some waiting cars. We ignored a stop sign and almost paid the price. A couple of large freight trucks blared adjacent to us off the ramp, almost slamming into his front and nearly striking my back. Cherry yelped again, only to be interrupted by his forehead hitting the window.

“Ow!” He groaned.

“Sorry, Cherry!” I grit my teeth. “Keep holding on!”

“What do you plan to do? Go *Jazz Brothers* until the National Guard show up!?”

“I hate this as much as you!” I snapped back at the ocelot.

“Where’s he planning to go anyhow?” He asked me over the continuing rise of RPMs.

“Good question!” I replied.

As our vehicles spilled into a long boulevard heading west, the truck maintained within kissing distance behind the van. The roads weren’t as packed as the freeway had been, but at the same time, me and DeadEx weren’t speeding down an isolated street as abandoned as a ghost town. Furs saw us zoom by. I could swear a few pulled out their smartphones to take video.

My truck bumped right into the van’s rear end. It slewed back and forth until a left turn gave us a view of the passenger seat. One of the bobcat’s arms reached out, holding a gun.

“Duck!” I barked, to which Cherry complied.

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

One missed. Two caused a crack in the windshield, and the last one took out the sideview mirror on my left. Not using a silencer could mean he was desperate. A sneaky feline like him never had to be as loud or in broad daylight as then. He just needed another push. At least, before the distant sirens caught up to either of us.

Another harsh right turn. An erratic left turn, resulting in DeadEx nearly clipping a group of drunks about to use the crosswalk, and I could see we were entering the industrial parks bordering along the southwestern part of Lakertown. Smokestacks and silent warehouses were as far as the eye could see, meaning I didn’t need to hold back.

“Take the wheel when I say ‘now’!” I said to Cherry, who nodded and waited for my signal while speeding up alongside the bruised van. One foot, then two, and I grabbed the S.S. P320. I cocked it with one paw. “Now!”

The truck remained at our speed. I leaned slightly out the open window, both paws holding the pistol, then aimed at the front tire. Breathing in and out didn’t feel required.

**BANG!**

The front right tire exploded. As I expected him to retaliate, I raised the handgun and shoot the bobcat assassin directly in the shoulder. The van lost control for a moment. I expected it to either crash or slow down enough for me to help make it crash. Instead of doing either, DeadEx’s vehicle sped up further down the straight road. It happened to have a railroad track cutting right between us ahead and an intersection of undeveloped offices.

Cherry pointed to our left, “Train’s coming!”

Its horn blared like a feral monster’s screeching howl.

“Fuck!” I cursed, then proceeded to push harder on the clutch. “Brace yourself, Cher!”

Time seemed to slow down for us. The truck moved like a bullet down the cracked excuse of road pavement, the bumps and our speed causing it to seemingly float like a released magnet. The escaping van, on the other paw, just lost a tire. Its driver still thought he could make it past the train crossing unscathed. My instinctual, pessimistic mind thought so too.

Well, he made it just barely. Except, the front of the unstoppable train smashed into the back. As I hit the brakes hard enough for me and Cherry to nearly fly into our windshield, I witnessed our assassin’s passenger van lying on its demolished side.

\*\*\*

I hated not having my equipment or a secure location. I absolutely hated it.

I also hated the fact that sheer, unforeseeable luck prevented us from interrogating DeadEx. The impact of the train, the subsequent lack of a functioning seatbelt, and the incoming sirens and curious onlookers ruined everything. The assassin’s cranium was caved in from the impact against the windshield, with a shard of glass lodged into his right eye.

The neighborhood we found ourselves in seemed vaguely familiar. Then, I noticed several businesses and their signs. If memory served me right, it wouldn’t be long until a police cruiser from the nearest precinct immediately approached the scene.

We acted fast. Cherry helped guard the truck while I pilfered as quick as I could through the back of the passenger van. There, I spotted a peculiar set of items like dirtied clothing, crushed takeout boxes, crumpled fast food bags, and an array of hardware tools strewn down on the ceiling. My tail thrashed angrily at how it seemed more like a car belonging to a slacking college student.

Then I spotted something: a pristine silver suitcase. Without further thought, I pulled it out of the mangled, gaping back door and bolted for the truck. We fled down the street before a cop car arrived in sight.

“What’d you get?” Cherry asked as I set the suitcase on his lap.

I pulled the suitcase on his lap. “I don’t know.”

He saw the lock keeping it shut. “Please tell me you know the combination,” he groaned after trying three times to open it.

I shook my muzzle. “Nope.”

“What’s the plan then?” He asked after another try at unlocking it. “What happened there…I don’t think we can just drive all over Lakertown.”

“You’re right.” I replied, gripping the steering wheel as I noticed familiar buildings, streetways and billboards dirtied over. “Hold onto that, Cherry. We’re going to make a small stop. And trust me, this is gonna either be brave or…incredibly stupid.”

Cherry tried not to look concerned. He asked, “Can’t it be both?”

“At this point…maybe it is,” I groaned.

The survivalist, paranoid side of my brain already accounted for something like this happening. Across years of assassinations, it became an unspoken rule to expect even the tightest, well-planned homicides to go wrong. Part of me knew the moment we tried catching DeadEx, he would either make it away, get himself arrested or simply kill himself. I never expected the bobcat to die by train collision. Whichever way it went though, it’d result in word reaching the Benefactor rather quickly about his untimely death.

Meaning, I had to improvise. Returning the truck into Rosecrest, I continued driving past Acreland Heights, away from what had been the dead bobcat’s apartment. Instead, I drove the truck until we stopped in front of another apartment complex smaller larger in size from the previous one, only it appeared more like an office building. 3564 Meadow Ridge Boulevard.

“Are we seriously—”

“Of course,” I interrupted the ocelot, once it dawned on him. “Make sure this briefcase isn’t out of your sight. Now, if you’ll excuse me…”

I parked us directly across the street, in view of the building. A security camera sat in front of the entrance. Getting out of the car, I simply walked into the lobby’s front desk. Then, I charmed the receptionist with a request to give my new phone number to Mr. Mitchell Corbin.

“Just my fuckin’ luck, a mugger took everything from me a few nights ago,” I informed the gullible receptionist with a charming, embarrassed smile. “And my buddy Mitchell in Apartment Ten is probably thinking I’m ghosting him. So, can you do me a favor and give this phone number for him? He’ll know who Markus is.”

Honestly, in my humble opinion, receptionists in general needed to be paid more.