

## Money For Nothing

This, Alisha thought as the tongue in his muzzle practically tried to jam itself down his throat, was probably the last time he was going to do Lyle a favor.

A grunt from the fox as he felt himself all but slammed into a wall broke the kiss. His overeager partner jerked away from the fox's face, the brown-furred coyote's expression suddenly one of concern as he peered at Alisha from behind a thick pair of glasses. "I'm... I'm sorry," he stammered out, his accent distinctly upper-crust English.

*This is absolutely the last fucking time*, Alisha thought to himself as he forced a smile to his muzzle. "Promise you can't break me, sugar," he replied, and grabbed the nerdy coyote by his ample waist and pulled him close again. Once more he pressed his muzzle against the coyote's, and once more he found that pervasive tongue all but shoved down his windpipe.

As the coyote — one Rodney Anderson, he'd been told — continued to display his utter ineptness in any matter of foreplay, Alisha put as much as he could stomach back into it. His mind wandered the rest of the way as his paws roamed over the portly little coyote's body. A thick, gold bracelet on the fox's wrist caught on the edge of Rodney's suit jacket, and he had to fight back a laugh as the coyote tried to shrug the jacket off. He had all the finesse of a drunk snake.

It wasn't his fault, after all. He'd apparently become some big hotshot CFO of a pharmaceutical company across the pond at a very young age, and that hadn't exactly left him a lot of time to date. He'd probably thought the hot vixen he'd picked up from the club had been some wild stroke of luck; a karmic bank error in his favor. He'd continue to think that, as long as Alisha didn't let slip his lack of vixen assets.

He couldn't have known that two hours after meeting Alisha, he'd be barely inside his ritzy, two-floor penthouse apartment, just about trying to kiss the fox through a wall. Alisha could feel the strain of the coyote's desperate erection through his dress pants, and his hips lifted to help grind that bulge into Alisha's thigh. He was so full of energy and need and hope.

"Bedroom?" Alisha asked him as breathlessly as he could manage as he forced himself out of Rodney's kiss. This would all be for nothing if the coyote blew his wad before they even got to the bedroom...

But fortunately, he seemed too worked up to want to do anything but wait. He grabbed Alisha by the wrist and tugged him toward the stairs, a lustful, wild grin on his face. Alisha forced himself to ignore the pain of his grip and inwardly rolled his eyes. Give him an experienced male any day of the week. These inexperienced ones... no finesse. No wonder he didn't have a girlfriend.

Not that he would by the time morning came, if Alisha had his way. His goal was the bedroom, but not for his usual reasons. The nerdy coyote's work laptop was either in his office or in his bedroom, and it sure wasn't at the office. He had one shot at this. Or... he probably had as many shots as he wanted, but the last thing he needed was multiple runs at this disaster of a coyote.

Fortunately, it seemed like everything was going according to plan. He all but ran — at least as well as he could on those stubby legs — up the stairs and tugged the fox all the way. Alisha made a mental note to demand a bit of extra compensation from Lyle for the literal pain he was being put through on this job. It seemed the least that could be done for him.

The bedroom seemed to be neatly appointed, if somewhat poorly decorated. The massive bed's sheets were black and red and unkempt, and the walls were a gaudy silver when they weren't mirrors or windows to the balcony. The lights were a strange shade of

orange and the pillows an almost sickening shade of green. No one had taught the coyote how to decorate, it seemed.

But none of that mattered, because on a short bedside table on the other side of the bed Alisha was dragged toward the laptop. His target.

The bed itself was large though, and he needed to be on the other side. In a quick few steps he found himself no longer being pulled, his momentum suddenly out-pacing that of Rodney. The coyote looked back at Alisha as the fox gave a wide grin and a noisy whoop, and with a tug on the coyote's wrist he managed to sling himself up and onto the bed. A pair of black high heels tumbled off his paws as he launched himself onto the bed with a shrieking giggle.

The bounce when he landed almost sent him right off the bed again, but that was as much the plan as anything. Alisha's upper half found itself dangled off the edge of the bed, just in front of the bedside table that bore the laptop. "Oop!" he said between giggles as he started to back up again, scrabbling back onto the bed fully.

That was somewhat more difficult to do as he fiddled with the thick bracelet on one of his wrists. The golden thing was heavy, but that was as much to protect and hide the little USB thumb drive that was slotted into place inside it. It took both of Alisha's paws to slide the thing free and into a fist as he craned his head to try and get a good look at the laptop.

Only one of the sides was visible from his vantage point, but there he could spot what looked like two USB ports. He laughed as he felt Rodney start to pull him back up and onto the bed by his legs. "I almost hit your laptop! So sorry!"

As Alisha turned his eyes on the coyote, he could see that there was a momentary flash of fear on his face as he turned toward the laptop. It was almost insulting for Alisha that the laptop deserved more care than his body did, but then he reminded himself of who exactly it was he was dealing with. "I'm just glad you're both alright," he replied, before he leaned down for another sloppy, too-forceful kiss.

And just like that, it was back on. The moan that Alisha gave helped to keep him from groaning in frustration as he leaned up into the coyote's kiss. One of his arms lifted to wrap around his middle and help to draw him close, while the other stretched out to try and bring the thumb drive toward the laptop. All he had to do was plug it in, wait ten minutes and then unplug it again. Those were Lyle's instructions. Once that was done, all the CFO's financial records would be his. What the hacker wanted them for, Alisha didn't know.

Nor did he care, as he clutched the drive tight. A hundred thousand dollars for the job wasn't something to sneer at. The fox just wished that the coyote who was trying hard to slip off the emerald green dress he wore would stop trying to take control and let the fox do the job for him.

Alisha's squirming kept him from stripping the dress off, though Rodney did threaten to rip a strap in his excitement. Enough, the fox decided, was enough. He couldn't let this nerdy little shit ruin his dress, or the illusion, or the con. He had to take charge now, and stop him from wrecking his whole night. "Hold up a sec, babe," he whispered as he forced the coyote up and away from his muzzle.

Rodney actually whimpered, his face like a scolded pup's as he squeezed tight at Alisha's middle. "What's wrong?" he asked, his tone almost annoyingly earnest. "You're not... having second thoughts, are you?"

"No, no," Alisha said, and hoped that his face didn't betray the lie. "At least, not about you. Not about this. Just... here, roll over a sec."

The coyote complied immediately, and Alisha breathed a quiet sigh of relief as he moved off him. The fox fought the urge to look at the computer; he knew it was just out of reach. He wouldn't be able to plug the drive in, let alone give it the ten minutes plugged in that he needed to. Not in this position.

However, as Alisha rolled himself atop the bespectacled coyote and straddled him with a smile, this was the only position that would allow him to remain in control of the situation. He ground himself down more firmly against the bulge in Rodney's pants, the drive still tightly clasped in one fist. New plan: ride out the coyote's stamina, wait for a moment of distraction and go from there.

As he lay back beneath the fox, Rodney began to smile. He lifted his paws and ran them up Alisha's side, tugging at the dress as he went. It took both of Alisha's paws to come to rest atop his to stop the rise, and he smiled down at the other canine. "No, leave it on," he said with a wink.

It seemed to do the trick, as Alisha was able to push Rodney's arms up over his head and down against the sheets. There they remained, even as the fox let them go. *Finally*, he thought to himself as he began to slide back just enough to unbutton and unzip the coyote's pants. The belt he left for the moment as he reached into Rodney's pants and gently fished out the coyote's prize.

Pleasantly hefty and hot to the touch, Alisha's smile turned briefly genuine as he grasped the coyote's sheath. His shaft was already erect and free of that fuzzy sleeve, and with well-practiced care it was released up and into the open air. The scent of it took a moment to reach Alisha's nostrils, but he felt a tingle run through his own malehood once it did. A little thick around the middle and nerdy though his mark was, it seemed he was equally and tantalizingly thick elsewhere as well.

Gentle paws worked up and down the length of Rodney's flesh, teasing and stroking it as the fox rolled forward and up above the coyote's lap again. He kept his eyes firmly locked on Rodney's as the male beneath him began to pant and moan. If this was the only way for Alisha to get the drive plugged in, then he was damn well going to make sure that he enjoyed himself.

He had to fight to keep control as Rodney felt the tip of his shaft come into contact with the fox's backside. He drove his hips up quickly, and Alisha had to rise again with him in order to keep himself from being speared. He needn't have bothered, though; the thrust would have missed anyway, and Rodney wound up simply grinding himself up between the fox's cheeks. Alisha clicked his tongue at the coyote and shook a single finger as he bore back down again. "Now, now. Just stay still. Let me take care of you..."

As the coyote nodded, it seemed as though the words had the intended effect. He calmed considerably and though his hips continued to twitch wantingly upward, Alisha wasn't strained by a sudden, overeager penetration. Instead he was rewarded with a soft grind from the coyote as his tip came into contact with the fox's tailhole, and an expression of supreme surprise on the face of the male below him. "Is... is that your-"

"I'm not looking to become a mother tonight, sweetie," Alisha cooed back with a wink. He wriggled his hips back and forth a little, letting that slick tip glide over his entrance. "Trust me. I'll take *good* care of you." And with that, he began to press downward.

Preparation was always the key. That he'd taken the time to lube himself up before the job was customary, but ever a good idea. The surprising girth with which Rodney was endowed was a pleasant one, but without the slickness already inside Alisha might have felt a moment's strain. As it was, the combination of relaxed muscles, experience and a generous helping of slippery stuff helped to ease the suddenly pacified coyote up and into his warmth.

Both of Alisha's paws slid down to Rodney's hips just in time to push back against a sudden, needful thrust upward. Were they not there, the fox wondered if Rodney might have simply sunk his whole self into him in a single motion. Instead though, the leverage allowed Alisha to slide down much more slowly, keeping the coyote pinned and whimpering beneath him as inch after inch vanished up into his body. "That's it," he whispered to Rodney, barely audible over the coyote's whimpers. "Don't fight it... let me do all the work."

“Feels... so good,” he groaned back at the fox, his paws lifting to squeeze tightly at Alisha’s waist. He tried to pull the fox down, but Alisha was far stronger. “Please, I need-”

“To let me work my magic,” Alisha interrupted. He had to force another smile to hide his scowl. No wonder this guy couldn’t hold down a girlfriend. If this was how he always fucked, it was a wonder he wasn’t still a virgin. “Trust me, sweetie. I’ve got you.”

Again he nodded, for whatever that was worth given his complete lack of control thus far. Alisha nodded back as he settled himself down more fully and ground himself into the coyote’s lap. He was rewarded with both a spark of pleasure as he worked his prostate against that thick shaft and a moan from beneath him. Whether or not Rodney was going to stay well-behaved, at least he knew how to fill a guy up.

If Alisha didn’t get to moving though, the fox knew that Rodney would do it for him. He kept his grip on the coyote’s hips nice and tight as he began to move his hips, working himself up and down along Rodney’s shaft. It was faster to begin with than he would normally have wanted; normally, Alisha would be working to get as much out of his partner as he could to make this part of the con worthwhile. But with this coyote, all he wanted to was to make sure that he stayed in control of things.

By taking a more eager approach to things himself though, it seemed as though he was able to keep Rodney under control. The fox’s tailhole stung with the stretch — had it really been that long since he’d ridden anything this big? Surely he could handle more than this! — but that was a small price to pay to keep the coyote from rutting him. However fast he might pop under those circumstances wasn’t worth the potential pain and discomfort.

Thankfully, Rodney seemed completely overwhelmed by what was happening to him. Buried balls deep in some sexy vixen’s ass as she rode him? It sure wasn’t the sort of thing the lonely CFO was used to. He clawed at the sheets with every flex of Alisha’s muscles around his shaft, his body left to writhe uselessly beneath the fox. Alisha’s grip on him made damn sure he wasn’t going anywhere fast.

Save for his climax, of course. That was something that Rodney was racing toward, and the fox was all too happy to let him. His hips gyrated as they did their best to match Rodney’s short, erratic motions. It was only experience that let Alisha predict the thrusts that Rodney tried to make; each one he met with a downward push where possible. When it wasn’t, he lifted higher so that the next could push down further.

Alisha had barely managed to find his stride and a method of bucking down on the coyote when he felt the male under him begin to tense up. Breath hissed out between his teeth as he clenched both them and his tailring tight. He’d be damned if he wasn’t going to find *some* enjoyment out of this before Rodney blew his load. “You close, baby?” he whispered down at the twitching coyote under him.

No sooner were the words out of his muzzle though than a deep moan of release practically erupted from Rodney’s muzzle. He practically shredded his sheets with his claws as he arched his back and ground up hard against Alisha’s squeezing backside. The muscles that had been intended to keep the coyote from cumming instead had only hastened on the inevitable. Rodney had been more of a hair-trigger than Alisha had thought.

That left the fox nothing to do but to ride out Rodney’s climax with a sense of supreme disappointment. He went through all the motions; the moans, the exaggerated twitches, the cries... all efforts that probably didn’t matter in the face of the supreme self-satisfaction that was spread across the coyote’s face. He looked so pleased with what was happening.

Alisha wanted to deck him in his stupid face.

But that wouldn’t complete the job. Instead he swallowed his pride and no small amount of bitter frustration as he waited out Rodney’s howling orgasm. The only saving grace came in the form of the coyote’s knot. It hadn’t made it past Alisha’s clenched tailring,

and instead ground up against him in an entirely pleasant manner. Small victories, he told himself as Rodney began to quiet down.

It took a few more seconds before his moans could melt into, “My *god*,” as he squirmed beneath Alisha. “I’ve... I’ve never...”

“I have that effect on people,” the fox replied, bringing his most charming smile to his muzzle. It took conscious effort to keep his ears perked. “You alright there, hon?” No reply was forthcoming, and Alisha paused and blinked before he looked down again. “Hon?”

Again there was no reply, and the sight made Alisha begin to growl. The coyote had passed completely out. He was asleep, his muzzle slack and partly open just enough for a faint snoring sound to fill the bedroom. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” he sighed as he ran a paw over his face. “Well, you do pick the good ones, don’t you?”

The fox sighed once more and lifted his gaze to the laptop. At least if Rodney was actually down for the count there was nothing stopping him from finishing the job. All he had to do was wait for the coyote to soften up a bit and he’d be golden. Alisha considered moving now and plugging the drive in, but that ran the greater risk of waking the coyote up. No, better to stay impaled on him for the moment and then attend to the drive once he was free to move a bit more easily.

As he settled back atop the sleeping raccoon’s lap, Alisha frowned and nodded to himself. Absolutely the last time he was helping Lyle with *anything*.

It was almost midnight by the time Alisha had returned to his apartment, showered, redressed and headed to the address that Lyle had given him for the meet. The fox didn’t bother dressing up too sharply for the occasion; he just needed something to get him there, hand off the USB drive, take some cash if Lyle was feeling generous — and old-school enough not to just wire the money to him — and head home. The strapless blue dress he chose for the custom tailored pockets sewn in surreptitious slits in the fabric sufficed. A purse only encouraged thieves, and female fashion had a long way to go before it caught up to male designs in the arena of pockets.

The abandoned warehouse by the docks wouldn’t have been Alisha’s first pick for a meeting place, of course; beyond cliché for a start, it was the sort of location that cops patrolled often. Explaining what an attractive, effeminate fox in his mid thirties was doing hanging around with a wolf barely out of his teens in a seedy part of town would lead to a lot more questions that Alisha had no interest in answering.

What surprised him upon arriving was the activity in the warehouse. The lights were on all through it, and it even seemed to feature new security measures. The cameras that the fox passed by on his way to the door were brand new and tracked him as he scowled at them. “If you’re pranking me, Lyle? I’ll be sure to use my *teeth* next time.”

The camera remained fixed on Alisha, but the door itself buzzed and swung open under its own power a moment later. The fox paused long enough to throw the camera a saccharine smile before he stepped inside, and the door swung shut as he made his way down a well-lit hall. There was no sign of Lyle yet, but he had to be further inside. Well, that or a projector hooked up to a smartphone connected to a dozen satellites and then to some other machine the fox couldn’t even comprehend that was hooked up to his computer. It wouldn’t be the first time, and Alisha sighed. Hackers.

But as he rounded a corner and emerged onto the warehouse’s floor, the last person Alisha would have expected was standing there waiting for him. “Gabriel?” he asked as he cocked his head, staring at the besuited lion before him. “That can’t be you.”

“Ciao, my dear Alisha!” he crowed, and the words spilled out of the lion’s muzzle in a thick Italian accent that was instantly familiar. “Oh, my dear, sweet boy, just look at you! *Mio dio*, you’ve not aged a day in the last ten years! What black magic is this?”

He swept in close to kiss each of Alisha’s cheeks before he drew back again and gave the fox a chance to take him in. Gabriel hadn’t aged as well as he’d claimed Alisha to have, but he looked positively distinguished. His golden fur and thick mane were streaked with the silver of age, but those bright yellow eyes seemed not to have lost their spark. “And you’re still as smooth a talker as you ever were, amico mio. Ciao, Gabriel. It’s so good to see you. You look very well.”

The lion’s eyes glittered as Alisha dipped into his native tongue. “Non hai dimenticato le mie lezioni!”

Alisha smiled softly as he raised a paw. “Only bits and pieces, I’m afraid,” he admitted. “Not much call for Italian fluency here, Gabriel. Not outside a few choice words for certain marks...” The fox began to frown as he watched the lion continue to beam at him. “What are you doing here? I thought I was meeting a friend here, and that you left America years ago. Was Venice just too small for you?”

The old lion chuckled as he stepped forward and draped an arm around Alisha’s shoulders. “You know how it is, tesoro. Work, work, work. I’m not so old yet to have retired; work keeps me busy! Not just in Venice, but all over the world. Work brings me everywhere... you know how I love to travel.” He began to lead the fox across the warehouse floor as he spoke. “Work brings me back here, now. And oh, the pay is very worthwhile, but I come back for more than just this.” He paused in mid-step and turned Alisha to face him. “I know you’re here to deliver something for Mister Davidson. I can take that from you now... the money is already in your account. We have so much to discuss.”

Confusion was spread across the fox’s face as Gabriel squeezed at both of his shoulders. The lion was excited about something, but what exactly was he getting at? “If you want my help with a job, Gabriel, I don’t like working with crews anymore,” he said at last as he reached into the slit in his dress and withdrew the thumb drive. “I prefer to stay on my own. Less entanglements that way... you taught me that.”

Again the lion smirked and massaged one of Alisha’s shoulders as his free paw delicately plucked the USB drive from the fox’s grasp. “Ah, but this time, I think you’ll be happy to help,” he said, his voice warm and full of confidence. “Six million for this job, tesoro. One million per head, and two to me for facilitation and organization... but for you?” He winked. “You take your cut plus, quite literally if you’ll excuse the pun, the lion’s share. Three million for your indulgence... and the chance to set right a terrible injustice.”

Alisha had been a thief and a grifter and a con-artist long enough to not betray any outward sign of the shock he felt. A million dollars for one job? And Gabriel would offer *his* share to get the fox on-board with it? “You’re gaming me, *tesoro*,” he said at last as he lifted an eyebrow and titled one ear back. The corner of his muzzle quirked into a playful smile.

Gabriel looked horrified, but Alisha knew the lion well enough to know that he was simply affecting it. He was in negotiating mode, but still supremely confident. “Alisha, mio caro, I would *never* game you,” he protested as one hand clutched at his chest. “What would ever possess me to attempt to deceive a creature of such grace and wit as-”

“You can cut the shit now, Gabriel,” Alisha interrupted him with a roll of his eyes. He let his smile slip a little, though not completely. One didn’t insult a lion of his stature lightly. “What do you want?”

For a moment it seemed as though Gabriel was going to continue to posture with his exaggerated buttering-up of the fox. When he dropped the act though, it came suddenly and without fanfare. Had he not held one of Alisha’s shoulders, the sudden seriousness of his

expression might have caused the diminutive fox to recoil. “I promise you, my boy. It is not shit. I’ve come to correct a grave injustice, as I said.”

The fox frowned. “Gabriel, you’re one of the world’s most wanted grifters. You travel the world to *commit* grave injustices.”

“Not this time,” he said as he gave a slow shake of his head. “At least, not just this time. Yes, I have work here that is supposed to be quite profitable. I offer you my share of the payment because I know of your record. I know how little you like to work with others. I taught you too well to be bogged down by the trivialities of other criminals.”

“You also taught me to be suspicious of someone offering me a lot of money and a lot of words with no details,” Alisha added as his ears flattened.

The ghost of a smile flickered across the lion’s muzzle for a second before it was gone. “Truth. Scusami. I do not mean to set you ill at ease.” He waved a paw toward the fox. “I seek to offer you the chance to repay your greatest hurt, provide a great service to my benefactors and make a great deal of money all in one little effort.”

Alisha’s stomach tied itself into a knot as he felt his heart skip a beat. His face gave away nothing, but the way Gabriel’s eyes flicked to his tail meant that the damnable thing had betrayed him. “What do your benefactors want?” he asked, though he already knew the answer.

Gabriel began again to massage the fox’s shoulders as his smile returned in full force. “A certain member of your congress has begun a run for the senate. He intends to challenge an incumbent that they would prefer not to see dislodged from his seat. Their interests are very particular, and a sympathetic voice there pays for itself.” The lion’s eyes glittered once more. “This would-be senator is someone with whom you share a special history... one Vincent Terrel.”

“Son of a bitch,” Alisha hissed under his breath, before he could stop himself. He’d not seen the raccoon in about a year. That Gabriel had missed that part of Alisha’s — *Alan’s*, he reminded himself — recent history seemed miraculous. The fox had had his chance to destroy Vince’s life, and he’d relented. He’d returned to the life he’d chosen as much to protect Vince from him as it was to protect himself from Vince.

Thankfully, Gabriel seemed to take it as a sign of lingering anger. “Yes, yes! Yes, he *is*, and his dear mother’s ambitions for him seem to be paying off! His rise in the political arena has been nothing short of meteoric, but all meteors must strike the ground eventually.” The lion leaned in and his voice dipped in volume. “I thought to simply have him killed, but such a thing would deny you your catharsis. I could never have forgiven myself if I didn’t try to convince you to help me in this matter.”

Alisha quickly weighed up everything he’d been told. Gabriel Moscatello was a master. He was a *mastermind*; one of the best crew operators in the world. If he put together a group to get something done, that thing got done. That this was being done at the behest of some unseen ‘benefactors’ of Gabriel’s added a wild card element; if Gabriel’s crew failed, there would probably be hell to pay at the paws of some powerful and rich crime syndicate or other. That they were already in deep with a senator — the one Vince looked like he had a chance to replace, ostensibly — meant that their pockets and reach were probably vast.

But it was Vince. Why the *fuck* did the mark have to be Vincent-fucking-Terrel? Alisha had already passed the opportunity to burn him down, and here was cruel fate putting the raccoon back in Alisha’s crosshairs. He grit his teeth and folded his ears flat. He had to do something, now. If he didn’t, Gabriel would be suspicious... and Alisha wasn’t favored by him enough to simply leave if he didn’t go along with whatever scheme he had cooked up. If he rejected this chance, Gabriel would sequester him away somewhere quiet and out of the way while he dismantled or even killed Vince. Rejection wasn’t an option. There was only one thing he could do.

“Mio caro?” Gabriel frowned as Alisha’s eyes refocused on him. “You are awfully quiet. Are you not pleased with this opportunity?”

“Just... all the old memories, Gabriel,” said the fox as he narrowed his eyes. Anger old and new would help hide his deception. If he was going to deceive Gabriel though, he would have to sell it like nothing else. Gabriel Moscatello had practically written the book on deception. “You’re offering me a lot for this job. Three million?”

He smiled back at Alisha. “I know you, tesoro. You are worth three *billion*. Would that I could afford to treat you as you deserve... as he failed to do.”

The fox allowed his smile to show, though it retained some of the anger he presented. “But as you said, you know me. You know what Vincent meant to me... what he *did*. That bastard needs to pay, not you.” He reached up to gently squeeze one of the lion’s paws on his shoulder. “Keep your share. I’ll take my one million, and the satisfaction of seeing him ruined will easily compensate me the rest of the way.”

He had not thought it possible, but the lion’s smile broadened further as he kneaded Alisha’s shoulders. “Dio ti benedica! Oh, my dear, sweet boy,” he said as he leaned in to plant a gentle kiss upon the fox’s forehead. “I knew you were ready for this. You are ever a lady and a gentleman, and you do an old thief proud.”

“It would be wrong to take your money for this opportunity, Gabriel,” he replied as he gave the lion’s paw another squeeze before he stepped back. Gabriel’s arms fell back to his sides, but the joy on his face was plain to see. “Especially after all you’ve done for me. I suppose you’ve already assembled a crew for this job?”

He nodded as he spread his arms wide. “And you shall meet them! Not tonight, of course; I want you to make sure you take a good night’s rest... and a bath. You stink of the use of a male far beneath you, mio caro. I have a suite already booked for you at the usual place under your usual name.” He winked again. “You’ll forgive an old fool his indulgences, won’t you?”

Alisha rolled his eyes as he brought a smile to his lips. His stomach was still all twisted, but he couldn’t let Gabriel see that. “You be careful, spoiling me like this,” he warned as he wagged an admonishing finger at the lion. “A girl could get used to this sort of treatment.”

“And perhaps after this job, you’ll be able to,” Gabriel replied with a booming, deep laugh. “But I have taken enough of your time, haven’t I? It is late, and you must rest. Tomorrow will be a big day.” He made a short shooing motion with his paws as he smirked. “I will call you at the hotel when you need to join us, and ensure you have a fine selection of delights to wear. We will go from our meeting directly to the target, and from there... to your justice.”

The fox’s heart sank, but he stepped forward nonetheless to sink into Gabriel’s embrace. He kissed the lion’s cheek as he squeezed him tight, and hoped through the suit and the dress and all their combined fur that he couldn’t hear the pounding of his heart. “Thank you, Gabriel,” he whispered up into the lion’s ear.

“You are very welcome,” he said, and he gave Alisha a tender little squeeze before he let go and waved the fox off. “Addio, bella volpe. Buona notte.”

It took all of Alisha’s control not to turn and bolt. Instead he lingered with his paws in Gabriel’s before he backed off, eyes still fixed on the lion’s. He watched until he saw the feline’s muzzle curl upward — Gabriel had always had a power over him, after all — and he turned away first. That gave Alisha the chance to break eye contact, and he whirled and started off toward the door as quickly and calmly as possible. Quickly, to get away from Gabriel. Calmly, because Lyle’s cameras were still on him. The young hacker was already a part of Gabriel’s crew, it seemed... and it wouldn’t be unlike Gabriel to keep tabs on his crew with every resource at his disposal.

Thankfully, the doors let Alisha out of the warehouse without any further trouble. The fox kept his head high and his expression a mixture of angry and thoughtful on his way back to his car. Both would seem apt after what he'd heard inside, and wouldn't alert Gabriel the way his fear and concern would have. After all, Gabriel 'knew' that Alisha hated Vince. To express anything else would tip him off.

Dammit. Why *couldn't* he just hate Vince still? It would be so much easier.

As he settled into the driver's seat, Alisha took a quick stock of the area from memory. The dock itself and the road that led directly to it were lined with security cameras. Any one of them — all of them, knowing Lyle's style and Gabriel's thoroughness — could have been tapped already. There was an alley however two blocks down the road that a much younger Alisha had once almost been mugged in. There weren't cameras there back then, and there weren't any more there now. Perfect.

As he turned the key and the engine turned over, Alisha forced himself to breathe. It was only a small inconvenience to make use of the burner phone he kept in his car for just this sort of emergency; he'd have to make sure to snag one of his spares from the storage locker he kept full of supplies downtown. He couldn't use any of his own personal methods to communicate with Vincent and warn him, of course. He had to tip the raccoon off, and do so without Gabriel knowing.

The leather steering wheel cover groaned as Alisha's fingers squeezed tighter around it.

God fucking dammit.

The sound of a ringing phone from his pocket drew the lion's attention off the moonlit dock out the warehouse window. He fumbled with one paw for the vibrating device as his eyes scanned the place where Alisha's car had been. A smile returned to his muzzle as he brought the phone to his head. "Ciao?"

"Uh, hey Gabe," came a familiar, youngish male voice from the other end of the line. "It's, uh... it's Lyle, and—"

"I know who you are, Mister Davidson," he replied with an easy chuckle. The wolf had seemed so confident and sure of himself when first they'd met. That he'd become so nervous in the lion's presence since then was equal parts amusing and adorable. "And I have collected your little drive from our lovely fox. He is on-board with our job. What can I do for you this fine evening?"

"Uh, well it's... I mean, you might not think that for much longer, buddy." The wolf stumbled over the words that he tried to get out, and the smile dropped from Gabriel's muzzle as he rolled his eyes. Adorable, yes... but only to a point. "I've got some bad news."

The lion sighed quietly into the phone's receiver as he turned away from the window. So much for his good mood. "Spit it out then, boy. Don't keep me waiting."

On the other end, he heard Lyle clear his throat. He obviously didn't want to say anything. "Look, it's... it's like this. You had me tap the phones and computers of both the marks before you put this crew together, yeah? Full spread, everything they say or do or—"

"I know what I asked you to do, Mister Davidson," Gabriel interrupted. A little growl slipped into his voice; that ought to put Lyle back on task. He did so have a tendency to babble on. "Tell me what it is that I do not know, please."

"Y-yes, well... I just got a ping off our congressman's personal cell. Someone just texted him from a burner phone. Gave him a warning. About us."

The wolf continued to speak. It might have been the contents of the message, or perhaps something about how valuable his work was, or how difficult it was to keep track of

all the different data points that Gabriel had him chasing. It didn't matter. None of it mattered.

The lion felt his heart sink as he leaned against a wall. Suddenly, he felt old. Well, older. He thought... he had been so certain. After everything that had happened, and everything that he'd done for that fox... "Dove ho sbagliato?" he whispered to himself.

Again came a quiet cough as Lyle cleared his throat. "Sir? S... Mister Moscatello, sir? Are you there?"

"He warned Mister Terrel. My dear Alisha warned our target. I... am betrayed." He closed his eyes as his head dipped. Why? What had happened?

"We, ah... we don't know it was Alisha who messaged him," Lyle pointed out. His tone was hopeful. The foolishness of youth.

Gabriel did not have the luxury of such ignorance. "You will check the cameras you monitor so well," he said as he forced himself to straighten up. His voice gave away nothing of the betrayal he felt. That hurt was to remain inside him. It would not do to show weakness, and certainly not at so critical a juncture. "You will note the precise time that our fox leaves the docks and compare it to the time that Mister Terrel's phone received this message. I expect it to be something on the order of... perhaps two minutes, give or take."

"Stand by, sir." Lyle's voice vanished from the line, replaced by the sound of a noisy keyboard being rapidly tapped away at. As the wolf worked, Gabriel opened his eyes once more and forced his breathing to steady. Calm. He would be calm. In the heat of the moment, mistakes could be made. Calm would keep him reasonable. This could be dealt with. This could still be salvaged.

It was a few seconds later when Lyle's voice returned. "Got it," he said, with a momentary burst of triumph in his voice before it turned sombre again. "You were, uh... pretty damn right, sir. One minute and fifty-one seconds after Alisha's car leaves the security grid, the message pinged on Terrel's phone. That's... uh..."

"Too close to be coincidence," Gabriel finished for him. He took a deep breath and sighed. "Time enough to drive a couple of blocks, quickly compose and send the message. That's my fox... if more emotionally invested than I could have predicted. I wonder..."

"Do you... uh, do you want me to bug Alisha's hotel suite?" Lyle asked. He sounded discomfited at the prospect.

Gabriel knew how he felt, but this was not the time for such things. "It is already done, Mister Davidson," he said with a shake of his head. "And he knows this. He knows what I do, and how I operate. He knows better than you, by far." The lion's free paw lifted to stroke at his chin, and he twisted a length of fur in one clawtip. "This will require... a more delicate touch than anticipated. The plan will require alteration. Contact Miss Ainslow and Mister Voronkov, please. Tell them to come in tonight. At once." He mashed his thumb on the end call button without waiting for an answer. Lyle would not disappoint him. The young wolf was easy enough to read, and even easier to ply.

Unlike, it seemed, his fox. Gabriel felt his phone strain in his paw, and he forced his fingers to relax before he snapped the flimsy thing in half. Calm. Rationality. Alisha had betrayed him, and that stung. He had offered his dear little fox a way to avenge himself on the cretin who had gutted him so early in a promising life, and this was how he was repaid. This would not stand. This would not stand at all, but perhaps if Gabriel was very clever he could complete this job *and* repay this knife in his back all at the same time. Yes, the plan would require some adjustment, but... such things were not beyond the realm of possibility.

The gears in his mind began to turn as the lion grit his teeth. He'd built 'Alisha' all those years ago.

It seemed only fitting then that he be the one to tear the bitch down.