**Easy Money**

It was bloody cold. It was bloody cold and the chair I was sitting in hurt my ass like fucking bejeezus at this point. It hadn’t been comfy to begin with, but after three hours of ass to metal chair that I suspect was designed to be as uncomfortable as possible, it was even more of a torture to sit. I really wish I had a cushion, or a fatter ass, either one would be welcome. Jiggling the chains around my wrists yielded nothing but the tinkling noise I was sure it would produce. I didn’t open my mouth to shout any pithy comments or wry witticisms to the microphones I knew were in the room. It wouldn’t do anything, and I had run out of wit and pith in the first hour. I exhausted all my impotent rage in the second hour and had moved into sullen silence. Sullen silence was for the long game and it seems this is going to be a very long game. I sigh and lean back in the god awful metal chair to stare at the one way glass. It looked really clean. Clean and not helpful. At least they had bothered to bust out the Windex and polish up the interrogation room for me. I wonder if I should feel flattered or something, probably, not like they do this for every perp. I was a rare treat. The decision to do it comes to me in a flash of insight. I wouldn’t do it if I weren’t under considerable duress, but extraordinary times like these call for extraordinarily degrading measures. I pull my ass out of the chair and flop my front onto the metal table. It feels fucking euphoric. The simple lack of pain and cramping in my ass is like a drug and I let out a cross between a moan of pleasure and a sigh of satisfaction. Apparently, that’s what they were waiting for. The door behind me opens. I hear a set of footsteps clack across the floor into the room. The door shuts. The feet don’t move and I can feel eyes on my back. I decided to disappoint whoever they’d sent to get me all flustered. My legs bent a little and I sent my butt swinging to and fro in a lovely teasing rhythm. I bent my head back and got hit full in the face by a plume of cigarette smoke. Blinking, spluttering, and coughing eventually got all my faculties back to me. The origin of the smoke was a tall spare woman dressed in a ratty blue business suit with a red tie spotted by occasional burns. She had a cigarette holder clamped between her lips. A lit fag smoldered in the holder. She took a drag and smoothed back her long hair hanging about her face. Stuff looked like amber seaweed. I put on the best cocky grin I could manage while hungry, annoyed, and clamped to a metal table in a police interrogation room. It felt pretty damn good.

“Enjoying the show I take it?” I gave another wiggle of my assets.

The lady turned one eye to me. She didn’t wear any makeup and I could see a lack of sleep tinging her white orbs with crawling cracks of red. “I’ve seen better.” She said.

“Oh!” I tried to hold my hands to my heart but them being cuffed to the table gave me some difficulty with that. “Oh, so cruel, such cruelty, such horrible cruelty my dear.” I slumped back into the ass hating metal chair provided me and cracked my neck to relax the tension in it. “How shall I ever cope with such uncouth treatment?” The woman crossed over into my field of vision. Her hips swayed pleasantly as she did. Shouldn’t be looking. Got to keep on task. She settled into the chair across from me, one noticeably better upholstered than mine, and sat down her folder full of intimidating looking bureaucracy, her glass of water, and her ceramic ashtray that looks like it got mixed in with charcoal for a barbeque. “Next thing I know.” I continue. “You’ll have cuffed me to a table and provided me with an uncomfortable chair and a startling lack of entertainment.”

The woman sat her cigarette holder in one of the crooks of the ceramic ashtray and exhaled another plume of smoke into the room. It washed over me again and sent me spluttering and spittering and my eyes flittering open and closed.

“Is that how you get perps to crack these days?” I blew smoke away from my face with a few breaths. I tried to put some spittle into it and fling it towards the impassively expressioned woman across the table but my mouth was dry as the goddamn Gobi. “Threaten them with lung cancer?”

She opened her eyes a little bit more and I realized the full extent of how bloodshot they were. Her eyes are what I’d expect a week of all-nighters to look like. I felt a bit sorry for her. I especially felt a bit sorry for her when she politely plucked the half-burnt fag out of her cigarette holder and ashed it.

“Sorry.” She said with a rough voice. “Didn’t know you weren’t the smoking type.”

“I’ll let you off easy this time, but don’t let it happen again.” I watched her a bit more mindfully as I waited for her reply. She didn’t say anything, but a wry smile crept up the sides of her face and revealed a hot of wrinkles that didn’t look like they came from age.

“How nice of you, mind if I ask you a couple questions Mister Khepri?” Well, damn, they knew my name. That wasn’t a good thing by any stretch of the word.

“If I do, will you get me a drink, something to eat, and a cushion for my sore ass?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Ask away, shoot your shit, pick my brain, but don’t do it Tolstoy style.”

She fiddled with the papers that she’d brought in with her for a bit. She put a few to the side face down and took out a sheet of notebook paper with still drying ink. A few rubs at her eyes and she was able to see whatever was written on it to her contentment.

“First question, will you be aiding us in the capture of the rest of the Card Carriers?”

“No.”

She adjusted herself in her seat.

“Are you aware of all the crimes charged against you?”

“I was aware of everything that they could think of at the time of arrest, but I’m sure you’ve managed to pull a few more things out of the woodwork.”

She put a finger to the paper held in her right hand and started sliding it across the page. “Multiple accounts of assault with a deadly weapon, multiple accounts of bank robbery, convenience store robbery, grand theft auto, trafficking in illegal substances, obstruction of officers in their line of duty, and…” She gave me a look of tightly leashed anger from over the top of the page. “Multiple accounts of murder.”

“Shit.” I muttered. I tried to see if she was fucking with me. She was not. “Shit, what?” I asked intelligently.

“Those two boys that were sent with officer Arlo to investigate the tip off we got that you were at a gas station outside of Dallas.”

“What?” I floundered. I didn’t remember killing anyone. I never killed anyone. I had rules. I had goddamn rules.

“Report says you were issuing panic fire over the countertop and using the cashier as a hostage.” She glanced at a lower line on the paper in her hands. “Says one of them took a bullet to the neck, other one got gutshot. First one died in a half a minute, other boy tried to walk around for a bit before he realized his lungs weren’t working anymore. Took him a long while to die. I talked to Arlo. He had a lot of hope for that boy, even got him to the EMTs before he went, but it wasn’t enough.” She looked at me over the paper again. “Two counts of murder.”

I felt the color drain out of my face and I couldn’t quite process what I was hearing. I’d shot two officers, young men, boys, kids. I’d shot kids. I’d shot two kids. Goddamit, goddamit, god fucking damn me. The woman across the table kept her eyes on me. They were full of disdain. I didn’t blame her.

“We’re prepared to offer you a choice.” She said.

“Choice about what?”

“You can help us find the rest of your gang.” She picked up a photo of something and slid it across the table. “Or you can leave your wife and kids without a father. You’re looking at either life imprisonment or death. I’d go for death. Prison’s a damn slow way to die and a damn poor way to live.” She reached for her cigarette, realized it was still out, and settled for pushing around the ashes with a finger. They made crunching noises that sounded loud as fuck in that quiet room. “At least that’s the way it is around here.”

How the hell had it gone so tits up?

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“You doing alright Honey?” I ask with a sweet voice. I was good at being sweet. Molly always called me sugarmuffin so I knew it had to be true.

“Course I am sugarmuffin.” There it is. Feels good to hear it. “I’ve got you to look forward to. I got Sal to come over and babysit for me so I can give you all night, and I know you want to give it to me all night.”

“You know I could complain about how you keep giving me these erections over the phone.”

“You could, but I know you won’t.”

“Course I won’t. Helps keep my mind on what’s important in life. See you soon.” I hung up.

“You finished with the sappy phone call then?” Jackson said as he punched me in the arm. It was a light punch, the kind of punch a friend gives you.

“Yeah I guess, now let’s hurry this thing up. I’ve got dinner reservations for the wife and me.” I reply.

“As you wish bossman.” Jackson pulled on his mask. It was a nice number, made to look like it was composed entirely of a bunch of cards, the same card, the Jack of Diamonds. Two big Diamonds made up the eyeholes. I had a similar one, only my card was the ace of spades. The masks, as you might guess, weren’t actually made out of cards. All the masks in the Card Carrier gang were made out of a good Kevlar that could stop most bullets one might run into. Wouldn’t do jack against military rounds, but we didn’t tussle with the military. The vest we wore were made of the same stuff. It was supposed to be a simple job. Steal the goods and fence them for cash we could use. Don’t spend a lot of the dough at any one time so the police don’t suspect anything. Except they had apparently suspected something. They’d gotten my number some time or other and when I stopped for a rest by Dallas on the way home they fucking pinched me. Son of a bitch.

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I looked across the table at the woman. She tapped the photo of my family.

“They like family to you?” She asked.

“My family? They’re not like it they ARE it.”

“Not them, your gang.”

The pit of my stomach wrenched itself back and forth in an effort to jump out of my abdomen.

“Maybe, what’s it to you if I like the bastards I roll with?”

“Just curious. You’re taking a while to make a choice.”

“Maybe I want to see my lawyer?”

“Lawyer can’t help you out of the pile of shit you got yourself stuck in.”

“Yeah I know, but it’s a good way to get you off my back.”

“The hell it is. I can be just as on you now as I am with any Oxford boy here.”

“You don’t know shit from shinola.”

“One’s brown and comes out of your ass and the other one you clean shoes with.”

“Oh fuck off.”

“Soon as you give me an answer I will be obligated to fuck off and get you some food and drink and a cushion, might even let your wrists breathe a little.”

The room was goddamn funerary. I could have dropped my guard and heard the metaphor hit the floor. I tapped the photo of my family. The woman slid a piece of paper out of the folder to me. I signed it. She slid it back into her folder and got up. She slid the glass of water she brought in over to me and took everything else off the table. I drank and enjoyed the feeling of the cool water rushing over my tongue and down my throat and settling in my stomach. Felt like heaven. Nice and distracting.

It was the right choice. I’d made the right choice. Someone in the gang had to have ratted me out. I’d have my family still and I wouldn’t have to provide for them anymore. They’d understand what happened. My family. Both of them would understand. I had to do it. Had to.

I took another drink.

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I woke up in the house that was supposed to be my home now. It didn’t feel like it. Didn’t feel like it even with all of my shit in it and my family there. I rolled over to look at my wife. She was a lot finer of a thing to look at than the peeling plaster of the ceiling, a lot finer.

I got up sometime later, a lot later if how creaky my joints were could be any indication, and got some orange juice from the fridge. There wasn’t any there. I vaguely remembered something my wife had said about not using orange juice because it had too much sugar in it. I looked at the replacement juice, the red grapefruit juice, in utter disdain. It would have to do. I pour myself a glass and sip it while walking outside. Didn’t get the mail yesterday, need to get the mail.

It was nice out. Sun shining, birds tweeting shit at each other incessantly, no one else was out yet. It was pretty early still. I was used to waking up early and I hadn’t broken the habit yet in my, retirement. That’s what they call it. Retirement. Dragging my feet across the driveway over to the mailbox was hard this early, but the juice made it better. It made it better by tasting like crap and waking me up, but it did make it better and it was healthy, good for me. The wife said so. If she said so it had to be true. I fiddled with the clasp on the mailbox and it flipped open. There was something taped to the inside of the lid. I looked at it. I blinked my eyes until they focused properly.

I reached out a hand and turned it over, the tape made a shrick noise as it parted with the metal lid of the mailbox.

I looked at the card, I looked at the Jack of Diamonds. I looked at the address. Should have expected. Should have expected it to come back to me. Can’t outrun what you’ve got coming to you.

I went and got my coat and my keys. I left my wallet where it was.

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“Hey Jackson.”

“Hey Khepri.”

“You got some new scars.”

“You got old.”

“You want me to sit anywhere special?”

“On the tarp if you don’t mind.”

“Right, here good?”

“Yeah.”

“Wife and kids?”

“Won’t touch ‘em. You know the score.”

“Yeah, yeah I do.”

I’d gone all in on nothing. Jackson had just come to collect what he’s owed. That’s what I told myself, and I’m sure that’s what he told himself.

It got loud.

Then very quiet.