The movie ended without me noticing.

I didn’t bother going to another one. Instead, I tried further distracting myself with some dinner (some lukewarm lasagna cooked from a few nights ago) and a good run through the streaming services this penthouse had to offer, before my thoughts finally drifted back to Markus. Particularly, what he was doing right now. If he was safe.

The paper plate of half-eaten lasagna stayed on the coffee table. Before long, I leaned back into the spacious couch and held my jerking tail into my spotted paws, staring mindlessly up at the beige ceiling, reassuring myself he’d be fine. He was a badass wolf of the criminal underworld. He’d likely experienced much nightmare-inducing terrors that I’d only ever heard stories about before nearly living—or in my case, dying—through them. I’d only known of missing persons and dying hustlers in horror stories or the evening news, but I never thought that kind of world would ever come to me.

I’d always been careful in my line of work. From my days in high school to the streets of western Lakertown, I made sure to adapt myself to any situation. Backup plans with backup plans, remembering the different ways to bring a closeted dude to ecstasy, knowing the inner-city lingo and signals, as well as how to tell the difference between a john and an undercover cop.

Why was Markus different than the rest? Why did thinking about him rejecting my good luck kiss sadden me suddenly?

Letting go of my spastic tail, I sighed and muttered, “Get a grip, Charlie…”

If there was one important rule in this line of work (besides keeping condoms on your person), it happened to be the most essential to know: never fall in love with clients. They’d only leave you hurt and brokenhearted by the time they buckle up their pants.

Over the years, dozens of guys like Markus had the opportunity to feel me up. Tens of dozens really…but, not really. Sure, plenty of them lived in upscale, lavished and spacious dwellings that I only dreamed of (the dirty little hovels didn’t turn me on as much as romantic sex in a clean house did, but it didn’t matter in the end. Cash was cash, plus, most annoyed johns usually didn’t return for another round if I complained too much). However, most johns in apartments or upscale suburbs like Markus’ also saw themselves as upstanding citizens of the moral, civilized world we claimed to live in.

One of my old clients, Mr. DeVos, was a middle-aged canine neighbor who lived with his family in an upscale house down the block. He enjoyed my ‘services’ during junior and early-senior year. He went to church on Sundays, watched his cubs play sports in middle school, the usual straight bullshit. That did not stop him though from repeatedly inviting me into a men’s bath stall during the game, pulling my jean shorts down as I knelt up on the toilet, then bracing myself once he started thrusting his unlubricated dog dick inside me. He liked to tip me an extra twenty bucks the quicker I got his nuts off.

Next thing anybody knew, he walked out the same conservative patriarch he always was.

I never minded the treatment, to be honest. Straight men like him viewed romance as a dead form of affection; closeted clients in decent society married for image’s sake or love at first, only to find themselves limited with a mortgage, a cramped office job, plus a family they couldn’t ignore forever. To them, I was only a means to relive that same sinful craving they repressed in their youth, then return to their façade and absentmindedly toss a roll of hard-earned cash. Business as usual.

Markus though…he was different.

And it had nothing to do with his muddy past or his…professional occupation.

The wolf cared about me. He cared enough about my safety to tell Daddy Stripes to piss of, to leave me alone, then protect me when those wanna-be hitmen tried to murder me that night. He did not even hesitate to let me stay at his place—free of charge, no less!—before running off to…to…

…to kill those two guys. The same wanna-be hitmen who tried to murder us that night.

A pit formed inside my stomach, trying to imagine the wolf, well killing.

Part of me never knew why I didn’t flee the penthouse after learning how the mysterious dark-furred wolf earned his salary. Maybe danger didn’t bother me as much as it should’ve? Maybe it was because I was part of the same ‘criminal underworld’ Markus dwelled in? Only in my case, I traded pleasure for money instead of blood—

*Knock, knock, knock!*

My ears twitched right up towards the door across the living room.

“M…Markus?” I called out, almost in excitement.

The knocking repeated itself, this time a little louder.

“Hello, sir?” an unknown voice came out. He sounded young. “I’m, uh…I’m your neighbor across the hall. I got a package for you.”

I could almost make out some frantic whispering through the door, and see some shadows shifting under the frame, even from across the other side of the unlit foyer.

My blood immediately ran cold. My eyes fell on my cellphone left on the kitchen’s countertop island, and I slowly tip-toed to snatch it up. All without looking away from the foyer door. And without making a single sound.

He left me a single voicemail for me on that burner smartphone of his. Against some better judgement, still cautiously staring down the foyer as the knockings became more frantic, I pressed ‘play’ and held it to my right ear.

“*The bastard found where I live. Soon as you hear this, close the blinds, lock the doors and don’t do anything until I get there! Whatever you do,* do not *give him any opp—*”

**BANG!**

My ears suddenly wailed. Yelping in fright, I dropped the phone and jumped backwards as the front door splintered wide open. Three silhouettes appeared in the corner of my eye before instinct led me to crawling backwards on the floor. Right into the doorframe of the weapons room, left ajar.

“Damn, this is a nice place—”

“Quiet, dude! Where’s this fag at?”

My back remained against the wall. Sliding along it until I came to a cupboard, I tried reaching up behind me for something—anything—to get my paws on.

“You check those rooms, and I’ll look here…”

I eventually felt one of Markus’ empty handguns.

Goddamn it. No chamber.

The two other footsteps receded, while the third pairs’ owner came closer. My paw reached up and desperately patted across the countertop. Looking for a filled chamber.

The footsteps were getting closer.

My heart raced. Sweat clung to my fur.

Closer.

Found it!

Snatching it off the countertop, I could practically hear the breathing through the wall by the doorframe. The magazine chamber slid in perfectly, I pulled the slide back until it cocked, and blindly fired in front of me.

**BANG!**

Nothing prepared me for the instant recoil. My head hit the cupboard behind me as dense, white noise exploded across the room. Red blood splattered over the silhouette’s body. It crumpled backwards onto the floor as another tall figure—a feline—shouted something as he gripped a metal baseball bat in his left paw.

**BANG !**

I fired once more, only to miss him by a foot or two.

“You motherfucker!”

His bat swung against the handgun before I could try once again, knocking it from my grip. The ruthless feline swung again, but my paws blocked the strike. Intense pain erupted across my fingers.

“Ahhhh!” A cry escaped the back of my throat, only for it to be silenced immediately.

“—iece of shit!” his voice carried through the white noise.

This couldn’t be happening. This couldn’t be happening.

“—illed Johnny, you fucker!”

He violently banged the back of my head against the cupboard. I heard it crack. Stars danced across my vision as he lifted me up against the counter. Any other objects weren’t in reach. I kicked wildly at the floor, trying to hit his legs to no avail. I tried clawing at his grip, only for him to choke me harder.

It finally hit me through the hazy fog: I was gonna die…

“Kill him already!” another voice shouted by the room’s entrance, “W-We need to get outta here!”

“Just one minute!” the feline—a strong calico, I barely noted—dug his claws deeper into my jugular. “I’m gonna enjoy this…”

Tears rolled down my cheeks.

My vision grew darker. My limbs fell weakly to my sides.

This was it. The end.

For the first time in years, I prayed. For anything, a miracle even.

“CHARLIE!”

I fell hard onto the floor. My salvation had arrived, pummeling the feline who tried killing me. I still felt dazed, trying to catch my breath before I suddenly froze. All the fur on my body stood on end. The calico remained bruised and bleeding on the floor beside me. At some point however, the other intruder—a buff orange tiger in denim—had grabbed something, a garotte wire I think, from the counter and began strangling Markus. The large wolf fell to his knees, trying but unable to pull the wire away from his neck. His eyes rolled into the back of his head.

I couldn’t remember much, but I did recall feeling the most intense rage I ever felt in my life, jumping for the fallen pistol, and aiming. This time, the recoil didn’t catch me off-guard.