Adaptability was required for an inner-city prostitute to survive.

 On the job for some easy cash, I needed to remember exit points in a building, calculate rates and have semblances of control over a location, but it wasn’t always that simple. Routines, though comfortable and welcoming, could never be found with every single john I serviced, which was why I felt conflicted after the older wolf invited me to live at his place until the heat died down.

 Early morning crept in. Cuddling next to his chiseled chest, allowing myself to become lost in his musk and warmth, I did everything in my power to erase certain images from my mind: Gunshots, shattering glass, shattered sense of normalcy, and the terror I felt for the first time since leaving home.

 Now, Fergus—no, he said his name was Markus—confessed to me how he worked as a hitman. He made a living as a contract killer, like in the movies, except not in the movies. The wolf killed people out there, for real.

 The bed we lay in creaked from our combined weights. I lowered one of my paws downward, hoping to be closer to my savior, until time seemed to freeze still. My paw touched something wet and warm soaking into the bedsheets. The distinct smell didn’t even reach my nose until I pulled my fingers close and sniffed.

 *Is that…blood?*

Panicked and unable to fully see, I used my other paw to reach for the bedside light, turned it on, and yelled in genuine shock, “Holy fucking shit!”

 “Huh…Wha…?” Markus stirred awake, then jerked his eyes awake at what we saw.

 “What the hell happened to your arm?” I rushed around the bed and examined his left shoulder, drenched in blood and soaking into the bedsheet. Never mind that some of it was on my fingers. “M-Markus, how did you—”

 “Shit.” The older canine nonchalantly sat up and gripped on the bandages, now sodden and red. I almost wondered why he looked more annoyed and tired than terrified at the amount of blood lost. “Shit, I thought I’d wrapped them better.”

 “How the fuck’re you not dead?!” I tried pulling the older wolf to his feet, then froze when he grunted in pain. “Oh fuck, fuck…M-Markus?”

 Without another word, he trailed with me to the nearby bathroom. He listlessly reached under the ornate decorative sink for a large box in the cupboard; a first aid kit. However, it carried more than just bandages or Tylenol. As Markus drowsily pulled out said pain medication, swallowing several pills in one gulp, my eyes traveled between him and the box’s contents. I noticed a couple of packaged needles, a thick spool of thread, some kind of small rectangular scissors, a wide roll of bandaging tape, what I first thought to be a pair of tweezers, and an unused syringe full of something.

 “Who did this to you?” I looked at the wolf as he washed his paws and sat on the closed toilet, his injured arm leveled on the sink next to the opened kit. “M-Markus…what happened?”

 “One of them had a knife.” He murmured while patiently preparing the needle and thread. “The driver from last night stabbed me in the shoulder. Bandaged it up before coming back here. I hoped they’d hold long enough for a good night’s sleep…guess that’s not the case…”

 “No shit, it’s not!” I huffed. “We-We need to call an ambu—”

 “No!” he growled adamantly, “No ambulances, no…I can take care of this.”

 “Like you did last night?” I somehow found the courage to question him, a trained killer assassin who probably knew fifty different ways to make me disappear. Maybe the adrenaline from waking up like this had gotten to me. “You could’ve gone into shock! You could’ve died next to me due to blood loss, for fuck’s sake! How’re you being so calm?”

 “Not the first time.” He scoffed before setting the needle and thread aside, then handed me the tweezers, “Would you keep it down now? I don’t need the next-door neighbors complaining to Ann. Or whoever’s at the desk at this hour…”

 “What’re these for?” I examined them. “W-Wait, don’t tell me that—”

 “Yes.”

 My flustered tail curled up. “And you want me to—”

 “I will be doing the suturing, that is stitching my wound,” he explained matter-of-factly, “but I do not have an extra paw. I will need you to use the tissue forceps you’re holding and the needle driver—they’re the scissors with a small blade in the kit—to help me patch it up so the bleeding can stop. Will you help me?”

 My eyes continued glancing between the ‘forceps’ in my paw and the semi-healed, still untreated knife wound on the wolf’s shoulder. What choice did I have, really?

 “What do I do with this?” I gripped the tool. “How…do I help fix you up?

 Over the course of forty-five minutes, I successfully learned how to properly stitch a laceration. I reluctantly yet carefully followed Markus’ instructions, watching his dispassion in sticking the needle into the skin under his reddened fur, gritting his canine teeth while having me use the forceps and driver to either move the stitches around or pull the needle out of the small, scabbing cavern in his arm. Blood slowly trickled from the partially closing wound, dripping on the counter, onto the floor, down his elbow like his veins were weeping. We could worry about cleaning later, according to Markus, but not until enough of the tread’s knots were tight. None were too entangled or loose enough to cause further blood to leak. My cheeks didn’t ever bother blushing at the heat coming from his bare chest near my undressed body.

 *Fuck. Haven’t been this queasy since middle school biology lab.* I mused after seeing the muscle fiber under his skin like it was layered cake made of fleshy fur. *Did…Did someone really do this…to kill me? Someone out there really wants me…dead?*

 I wanted to think the hulking canine had misspoken. Granted, my customers and I weren’t exactly upstanding citizens, but what did the fur who sent the shooters want with me? I was just another nobody faggot in Lakertown, letting older men in the closet fuck me for quick cash. Whatever I knew wasn’t enough justification to murder me, right?

 For the most part, Markus stayed deep in thought aside from quick instructions on what he wanted me to do. However, once I cut the excess thread and he wrapped some bandaging tape around his shoulder, the older wolf helped me clean up the blood and tried to put the stained bedsheet and blankets into the laundry room’s washer.

 “I’ll do it for you.” I recommended the stubborn canine. “And before you say anything, don’t. Please don’t try to say it’s nothing. I’m no doctor, but even I know you can’t exert yourself after getting stitches, right?”

 The wolf ignored what I said, bundling the blanket up on the bed as I dug my clawed fingernails into one of his wrists. The same wrists powerful enough to strangle the life from a defenseless victim.

 He stopped, if only to glare down at me.

 My eyes narrowed into the taller fur’s. “Ahem.” I cleared my throat. “Dude. Just let me.”

 He frowned, more in annoyance than disdain. Maybe in slight pain, given the painkillers hadn’t likely kicked in yet. “It’s only a knife wound, kid.”

 “I’m not gonna help you restitch that stupid thing a second time.”

 One of his dark ears folded at my threat, so he growled in defeat. “…fine.”

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 There were already hints of a sunrise coming from the windows by the time we found some sleep. He took the couch sitting opposite the TV in his living room as I settled on a recliner facing from the wall gazing towards the kitchen. For some odd reason, part of me never pictured a stoic contract killer of owning furniture like a recliner. Go figure.

 While it was clear that the wolf wanted to pass out, if only for the lack of sleep and the exhaustive evening instead of potential blood loss, the main thought on my mind continued steering back to the main question: “So…got any idea who it is?”

 “Hm?” Markus cleared his throat, his muzzle pointed up to the ceiling. “You mean, who sent them after you?”

 “No, who Santa Claus is…” I haplessly tried making a joke. It fell silent. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, th-that’s what I meant. And I’ll be one to admit many of my clients in the past have been on the secretive side—can you blame ‘em after what we do?—but I don’t remember them telling me anything that’s worth…killing me over.”

 “I’ve witnessed others kill for less.” The dark-furred wolf murmured tiredly to me.

 A thought crossed my mind. One that made my tail curl in uncertainty. “Are you sure he mentioned being paid to go after me? And not…you?”

 “I am sure.” He replied after a thoughtful moment. “Ignore the fact that few out there even know what I physically look like, let alone where I live or who I associate with outside of the criminal underworld. No business competitors would pay two random kids in deep debt to shoot me in a public place.”

 “Why’s that?” I couldn’t resist the urge to ask. “Is there an honor code or something?”

 Markus grinned at me before looking back up at the ceiling. “You’re thinking too much like in the damn movies. If I want to take out a rival, I make sure it looks like they disappeared off the face of the Earth, not make them a victim of a drive-by shooting.” The older canine yawned deeply as he shifted on the couch. “Whoever…Whoever wanted you dead…has a sp-specific grudge…against Charles Rochford…”

 It felt like ages ago since someone called me by that name. At least, apart from the teachers and my family, as opposed to the classmates who hired my services. Hearing it again reproduced memories I’d hoped to leave behind. Sitting further upright on the recliner, I nearly told the older wolf he could still call me ‘Cherry’ when I heard him snore. It rumbled from the back of his throat and exhaled with his breathing. At least it appeared his stitches were holding.

 Sighing with crestfallen ears, I murmured, “Good night, Ferg—Markus…whoever you are.”

 That earlier look in his eyes scared me. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know who wanted me dead and neither did I. It was the same kind of uncertain lost terror that reminded me of my first night on the streets, not too long after Dad kicked me out for being a ‘fag whore’. Back then, I didn’t know where to go or anything. I didn’t know if I’d be mugged or beaten around one street corner or another, or how I’d survive without any money.

 Luckily for me, I had enough of an amateur experience with johns (and discreet, sleazy teachers) in high school. There was always a semi-straight, bi-curious male out there looking to test the waters of their sexuality without consequence. It certainly helped with groceries over the years whenever my brothers were low on cash and Dad on beer.

 My sleep-deprived mind thought back to my first john: Coach Grumman. I had been curious about men for years, and the perverted old rhino took advantage of it when he caught me peeking at his players as they changed during gym class. One day, he asked me into his closed office after class and offered me five ten-dollar bills to strip down. I complied with his wishes.

 Walking back home that night, limping and still tasting semen in my maw, I clutched those dollar bills in my pocket while thinking back to what I let him do. I was fifteen and he was in his late forties. The hulking, masculine rhino was ‘happily’ married with young kids, and with the blinds to his office tightly shut, I let him fuck me right on his narrow desk. Five more times over the course of my high school career.

 Was the coach the mastermind behind my attempted murder?

 No, it didn’t make sense. I wasn’t the kid that got him caught. That honor belonged to a freshman jaguar during my junior year whose self-esteem was sufficient enough that he didn’t need Coach Grumman’s ‘attention’. Apparently, the perverted bastard thought the same approach he went with me would work twice on different students.

 *Now, he’s rotting away in that max-security prison outside of town.* I mused.

 Another familiar muzzle came to mind: Kendall Osbourne. When I was a late junior and he a senior, the stallion loved it having me suck his long horse cock an hour before each football game. From what I could recall, he planned on a scholarship to help him go pro in the big leagues, but rumors suddenly circulated about him being a faggot after his cheerleader girlfriend walked in on us. Afterward, we only saw each other when passing in the hallway.

 Was it Kendal who hired those thugs? Maybe, but I’d have to run it by Markus for review.

 Thinking back to each john I could remember racked my brain until the sun finally peeked inside the penthouse. The ordeal of remember my johns must have been keeping me up for an hour, maybe two. It felt like only minutes had passed.

 Why did I have to sleep around with so many unknown people? I already knew the answer. On any given day or night, johns would line up to spend their hard-earned money whenever I flashed my ass or wore slutty clothes, letting them use me for their forbidden pleasures. I already knew the dangers that came with prostitution, but I only saw it as a means to not starve.

 I didn’t have any other option in my chaotic home! Nowhere to go without desperation leading to the county jail. We were always poor and nearly losing the house every four months. Dad worked only when some office building needed to be built, Dennis was in jail for larceny and my oldest brother worked his tail off with two crappy jobs at a McLarnald’s and an auto center. Between measly payments, I couldn’t afford shampoo let alone pay the electric bill. And with Dad’s unpredictable mood swings, I always had to adapt with whatever was sent my way, like being beaten, screamed at, belittled at or…or…

 …or thrown out of the house (after being caught with a john in my room).

 With nothing but the clothes on my back and a high school diploma I earned weeks earlier, I walked all the way from my run-down suburban home all the way deep into the city. The immediate change definitely shook me, but I willed myself to remain calm enough to try and use my talents. Low and behold, I made enough cash to rent a motel room, the same one now filled with bullet holes.

 Markus snorted loudly nearby. Softly smiling between him and how beautiful the sunrise looked out the window, I hoped this new change wouldn’t be so bad. For both of us.