It began as another day of drunk soliloquy. Breakfast time was spent motivating myself out of bed, ignoring the hangover and my desire for another screwdriver.

The view itself happened to be the main reason I bought this apartment years ago. The concealed windows in my living room and the master bed overlooked Midtown and the harbor, so one could imagine looking out and seeing the midnight skyline.

By the time I slumbered into the kitchen, thankfully having all the blinds shut, the only things I could find were old cereal and a quart left of expired milk. Unfortunately for me, I realized it one second too late.

“Ack! Fuck…” I spat it out and checked the expiration date. “Ugh, great, great…”

Let me tell you, if it weren’t for internet shopping, I probably would have starved a long time ago. The option of going out to buy my own things never worked out in the long run, especially for a name like myself. Before I…‘changed’, the idea of putting on some casual clothes and joining my former colleagues on a shopping spree would have sounded very divine. Except, that option died out whenever I stared into a mirror.

Two hours and a couple sips of bourbon later, a knock at the door pulled me from the couch. On cue, I grabbed the nearby blanket off the couch and covered myself in it, the silk fleece fabric smooth to my skin and long enough to engulf my entire form like a long cloak.

Peering through the peephole, I found an impatient Labrador at the door with a bag in each paw. My stomach rumbled, and I carefully unlatched the lock before creaking the door open. He asked me if this was the right address, I nodded and he handed me the bags, then left without another word. The delivery boy then disappeared down the hallway corner towards the elevator, leaving me alone once more.

Setting the bags on the kitchen counter, I poured myself another bowl of fresh cereal and unexpired milk. Any other anthro would be cranky at this point. The moment my spoon went into the bowl though, another knock at the door startled me.

“Ugh,” I groaned out loud. Who could it be?

I impatiently bolted for the entrance of the apartment’s foyer and stared back out through the peephole. Either one of those Jehovah’s Witnesses somehow found their way past security, or this was another delivery I somehow forgot about. Either way, the last thing I wanted was to interact with someone else.

Which was why I didn’t expect to see another twenty-something feline on the other side of the door. As opposed to grocery bags, he held a bucket in his right paw, and wore a black apron over his clothes.

He knocked again, making me wince again. I still haven’t fully sobered up yet.

“Hello?” the shorter cat spoke. “Does…Does Tristian Hildebrant live here?”

“Who is this?”

His pointed ears fell back slightly at my blunt question.

“My name’s Jamal. Jamal Faron,” he explained. I could see his thin, spotted tail swish at the hallway carpet. “I was hired by Mr. Janowitz to be your new housekeeper?”

I blinked. “Do you mean Luke Janowitz? Is he a huge Saint Bernard?”

“Uh yeah, your agent. He hired me last week and wanted me to start today. He said he wanted to make it some sort of a surprise.”

I groaned through the door. “Sure, sorry. I’ll…I’ll be right back. Just a sec.”

Typical behavior from Janowitz. Storming into my bedroom, I snatched my phone and turned it on to find a voicemail that dated as far back as eight this morning. The dog was most likely up early, given the time zones in California. What did he want from me now? Attempts to lure me back into the public eye? A failed reunion with some cast members? Or perhaps another warning of him coming back to Manhattan and attempt to coax me from my isolation?

“Hey, Tristian. It’s Luke…” the voicemail began, “I know you’re not going to pick this up, so I better get to the gist of things: I’ve decided…I’ve decided to no longer represent you. I’ve tried being patient with you kid. You’ve been a great client, gotten some amazing acting gigs and got us both on the map, but ever since you decided to go into this *hikikomori* phase, the opportunities have been running dry…

“I’m doing this as one last favor for you. Your place is a fucking junkyard, so I hired someone to help clean the place up. He should be there around this afternoon. I’ve done some background on the serval here, and he’s new but has experience. And before you refuse his services, the boy signed a contract with me. While Mr. Faron is aware of your identity, he also has a signed nondisclosure agreement and fifteen reasons an hour not to brag about it. He doesn’t know about your…you know, ‘condition’. Thank you very much. One less person to see that hideous face, the bett—” The dog coughed on the other end.

“I’ve been unbelievably patient with you. I’ve been there for you all these years, but it’s time for us to think realistically. I got a family to feed. You have nobody to worry about. I’m sorry…but it’s over. Good luck, Tristian. Take care…”

Beep. Beep. Beep.

I almost felt tempted to toss my phone out the window or into a solid surface. Forget leaving another hole in the bedroom wall, this bastard was abandoning me! Or…did I abandon him first? Exhaling a deep breath, I set my phone on the nightstand instead. A section of my heart told me to send that housekeeper off until the ringing in my head stopped, or when I finished eating ‘breakfast’.

On the other paw, I was surprised to see the serval—Jamal, if I remembered correctly—still standing outside the door when I peeked through the peephole once again. Then I walked back out into the middle of the apartment. I stared back down the foyer and realized how much my cleanliness had deteriorated in the past year or so. Gathering dust, stains and piles of clothes could be found in every room, save for my workout room, also abandoned.

“Faron, right?” I raised my voice, to which the cat twitched his ears attentively. “If you’re up for it, I would like to do my own interview with you?”

The serval nodded. “Sure thing.”

Before unlocking the door, I quickly placed the bowl of cereal in my bedroom before pulling the door back open, cloak/blanket on me once more. When Jamal stepped inside the apartment, I already fled back into the neighboring kitchen. Away from his sight, but not from mine as I peeked around the corner.

The feline was very handsome and looked fresh from college. Despite his choice in clothes, his sleek, yellow-and-black fur shined alongside his emerald eyes. His toned arms and slender body were impressive for his height, barely standing at no more than half my height. If he discarded the housekeeper apron and undressed for me, the serval would no doubt be eye candy for any acting or modeling agency searching for new talent.

I yanked those thoughts from my mind. Another lifetime ago, I would’ve relished at the thought of inviting the lad in for small talk and a good time in my bedroom. Feeling his claws run through the fur on my back as I eagerly came inside him (or him in me) seemed divine, except…except it’d all go downhill once he saw my face. Any potential lover or one-night stand would vomit when they realized a monster lived in here.

“So where do you want to have this interview?”

As he came near the kitchen, I quickly went down the adjacent hallway towards the bedroom. The feline followed me until I shut the door closed behind me.

“What the…?” He knocked on my door. “Mr. Hildebrant?”

“This will do!” I growled, then silenced myself. “I’m sorry, I just…I just don’t want you to see me…”

“Oh, okay then.”

I cleared my throat. “So…My *former* agent mentioned you were new to housekeeping?”

“Yes,” the feline replied a moment later. “I used to work as a housekeeper in the Eldorado and at a few hotels in Queens. Never been to Park Avenue though. Never done any of the super-fancy apartments like this.”

“Queens, eh?” I murmured to myself. “Where are you from then?”

“Baycrest Towers, it’s an apartment complex in Brooklyn, sir.”

“Do you smoke or drink?”

“I never smoke. My mom is on-again and off-again, so I might smell like nicotine on some days, but I promise I don’t smoke…”

“Where do you see yourself in a few years?”

“Uh…working for you diligently.”

Liar. Nobody liked housekeeping as a hobby.

“Did Janowitz tell you about your duties here?” I asked once more, placing my ear to the wooden frame to listen better. “What were the terms of your contract?”

“Two months in total with three days a week. I’ll be here Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, but never the weekend. I got to babysit my sister on those days. Mr. Janowitz also mentioned…ya know,” he stalled, “Your eccentricities.”

“My eccentricities?”

“Yeah. Though he never mentioned you liked dressing like a dark lord.” The feline finished with a laugh. When I didn’t reply back, his voice turned tense. “I’m sorry! I-I didn’t mean to offend you or anything, M-Mr. Hildebrant! I’m sorry if—”

“You’re fine,” I gripped onto the cloth entwined with my fingers and came to a conclusion. “Your duties are simple enough: wash the countertops, take out the trash, dust everything you see, vacuum the carpets, clean the bathrooms and such…The supplies are in the kitchen right beside the pantry.”

“Do you want me to wash the windows too?” Jamal asked. “Sorry if it sounds like a dumb question, but I just—”

“Clean it too.” I almost stepped away from the door. “By the way, before you get started, remember that the master bedroom here is off limits. I’ll always be in there whenever you’re cleaning. If you have any questions, then knock. Go in without permission, and you’re fired.”

I glanced back into my bedroom and wondered what he would think if he saw the state of it. The first few nights were spent in agony and misery, smashing every photo I had hung upbroken into crooked spiderwebs of glass. A hole in the wall opposite my bed came from the night a private eye I hired couldn’t find the bastard who did this to me, like the coyote witch disappeared without a trace. I even smashed my TV when the screen’s black mirror refused to show anything other than my repulsive face.

Oh well, I still had my laptop. Grabbing another bottle from my minifridge, I turned it on and proceeded to waste the next two to three hours while Jamal went to work.

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To say the least, my apartment didn’t smell like unwashed shit.

Life relatively stayed the same for a couple weeks. Jamal would ride up the elevator, enter my apartment and clean up whatever mess I left behind. He never complained too much, but I did hear him joking to himself at one point that I thankfully knew how to use a toilet. When I mailed him his first paycheck, the serval came by the next morning in a mood that could only be described as ‘blissful enthusiasm’.

I stayed preoccupied in my room during his visits, either drowning in liquor or binging some online series. By now, I’d already seen all of what streaming service had to offer, so I went to the next without rarely moving from my bed. Luckily, I had a private bathroom connected to the room so Jamal wouldn’t see me trying to sneak around. Part of me hoped this would continue and the handsome serval wouldn’t keep mocking my appearance with his in my home.

Sadly, or maybe fortunately, he would find out.

The third Friday of his service, he knocked on my bedroom door. “Mr. Hildebrant?”

The day before involved mixed drinks and a bottle of 50% vodka, so my hangover felt like a hot needle was sodomizing my earhole. I could barely get up and respond to him.

“Ugh, y-yeah?” I coughed and burped. “What…What is it…y-you…want?”

“Um, you’re out of paper towels and dishwasher detergent,” he said through the locked door. “I’d get some, but I don’t have any cash on me, and it’s impossible to find—”

“Fine, fine. Fuck…” I rubbed my forehead. “I-I’ll…I’ll order some…”

“Okay. Thanks, sir.” Jamal paused. “What would you like to do until then?”

“Go watch TV for all I care…” I saw him drooling for my 70-inch in the living room when I once peeked on him. “But don’t let it get in the way of your job when they come.”

“Don’t mind if I do!” the feline chirped on the other end, footsteps receding.

I chuckled before wincing at the hangover, then buried my head into the bedsheets tossed around my mattress. Under the blankets, I tried distracting myself from the pain by scrolling through newsfeeds on my phone. Another scandal for the president. China expanding trade. A bombing somewhere in the Middle East. Another celebrity passing away. Another new movie trailer trending on social media. The usual crap spewed 24/7.

Then I paused at one article…

“Film Actors Elias Blanc and Judy Willmar Announce Engagement!”

My heart skipped several beats in disbelief at the discernible tiger. Elias posed alongside the foxy vixen whose beaming teeth and magenta dress matched her luscious fur. An impressive diamond shone brightly from her ring paw in the photos, but what caught my attention involved her lucky fiancé.

It all began a long time ago. Starting off as my newest co-star for the sequel of my debut hit, *Arcadia Ascending*, Elias Blanc and I grew attracted to each other mainly due to our looks. That, as well as my fondness for felines.

Between shooting on the set and publicity events, the only real time we spent together was on an expensive hotel bed sometime after midnight. I could still remember the way he mewled into my ear as I thrust between his striped ass cheeks, his haggard breaths when I stroked him to climax and we lay together in a pool of our white seed. Our secret liaisons, though few and far across our time together, ended with the best sex I ever had with someone.

Then in the middle of filming *Arcadia Ascending 3*, Elias’ parents somehow convinced him to settle down and get married. They didn’t care whether their grandchildren were related or adopted from somewhere, which was why he surprised me during one of our trysts by asking if I wanted to make our relationship known, maybe even the thought of making our relationship monogamous. I scoffed at the idea, but Elias insisted I consider it when he paused our session.

When it became clear the tiger was super-serious about this marriage thing, I left the hotel room. I no longer returned his phone calls and stayed professional in the final days of filming. Elias didn’t say anything, but I knew I broke his heart.

*And now…he’s getting married*, I exited out of the article to a dark screen. Again, all I could see was the reflection of my face. *What a fucking joke…*

Sitting back up, I snatched the half-empty bottle of tequila I left by the nightstand and swallowed almost every drop. My vision blurred in the closed-off room as everything turned hazier than ever. *He looked so…happy…so content. Does…he even think about me?*

No. Probably not. After the first month of my isolated life up here, I rarely got phone calls from colleagues or my ‘friends’ anymore. They moved on. They abandoned me.

A muffled knocking came outside my door. “I’ll go get it!”

I continued spiraling into madness on my bed. The wallpaper turned shades of color I didn’t recognize. My shattered TV turned into a clown’s crooked grin convincing me it’d soon devour me for dinner. The soft silk of my bed felt rough and irritating one minute and then so soft that it could swallow me into the mattress. Both cases, my head pounded when a cautious knock erupted through the room.

“Mr. Hildebrant?” Jamal raised his voice like a jackhammer. “Mr. Hildebrant, I got the order, but the delivery guy needs your signature.”

“Then sign it for me!” I growled in annoyance.

“It can only be your signature, Mr. Hildebr—”

“Just sign it for me, will ya?!”

“He said it can only be your signature,” he repeated. “Otherwise, he won’t—”

“Ugh, fine!” I barked, staggering upwards and seizing the cloak left haphazardly on the floor. “Jus-Just gimme a sec! Ow…”

The lucid throbbing in my skull refused to leave, but I found the strength. I managed I place some black gloves on my scarred paws Then, tightly draping myself in that long black blanket, I tried to refocus and opened my bedroom door.

The creaking as it opened increased the throbbing beneath my forehead, to the point I rushed out the door and barely noticed Jamal getting out of my way in time.

“Woah!” he stepped aside. “Sorry there.”

Gripping the cloth around me, I rushed into the foyer and paused at the opened front door. Keeping my head down, I snatched the clipboard from the confused delivery dog and hastily signed it, daring not to look up. Could he see my ugliness? My monstrous appearance? It felt impossible to know from my hunched stance.

“H…Here!” I handed it back to him. “G-Good-bye!”

“Have a nice day—”

I slammed the door shut, only to immediately regret it the next second.

“Ahhhh!” The pain felt unbearable as it pierced my cranium. “Ow, ow, ow…”

“Mr. Hildebrant!” I could barely register the footsteps beside me. “Are you hurt?”

“Go away…” I mumbled between the tears flooding my sight. “P-Please jus—”

A pair of smaller paws wrapped around my torso. “Don’t be silly, you need to lie down!”

Despite my taller height and the idea of telling him he was fired, I couldn’t do anything to prevent Jamal from helping me up.

The serval sniffed. “Oh! Good fuck, when was the last time you showered, sir?!”

“Ugh…” I tried staying conscious between limps. “I dunno…may…maybe a day? Three? I dunno…”

“Never mind…”

Jamal stopped us in place between the foyer and the living room. Time seemed to stand still until he asked, “Uh, Mr. Hildebrant? Why…Why don’t I see a tail on you?”

The dull throb distracted me from the serious question. “Why…does it matter?”

“Y-You’re a wolf,” he argued, “but I didn’t feel it when my paw went around your back…And…” Jamal glimpsed confused and worriedly down to the ground.

“Wait, don’t…!” Too late.

Despite pulling it back under the protective covering, it was too late. He saw how misshapen and furless and flat my toes were. They weren’t like any anthro’s.

“Your footpaw…” he asked in alarm, “What happened to it?”

“Get out,” I tried saying seriously, “N-Now!”

“No!” Jamal frowned at me for the first time, then grabbed the cloth. “Now why the hell are you wearing this? What do you have to be ashamed of?”

Before I could prevent it in my drunken stupor, the serval yanked the blanket from my head, and the feline saw it. He saw everything. He saw my hideous appearance. And whether it be the alcohol in my system, or the wide-eyed shock and disbelieving horror etched into Jamal’s expression, I collapsed from consciousness.

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When I came to hours later, I found myself laying along the couch with a wet towel neatly placed over my forehead. It was nighttime, based on the light pollution leaking into the apartment and a lack of sun further burning my corneas. My pajama bottoms remained on, but not my t-shirt nor my cloak. My TV’s headset indicated it was nearing midnight.

Every muscle in my body ached when I tried sitting up. “H-Hello?”

Movement in the corner of my vision caused me to turn to my right and see a familiar feline carrying a trash bag. The instant our eyes connected across that short distance, immediate panic spread through every fiber of my body. I was exposed.

“Shit!” I hissed seconds later.

I stumbled backwards off the couch until my bare back collided protectively with the window. No matter how much I tried covering myself with my paws or raised arms, I knew it was pointless.

He could see me. He could see my true form even in the dim lighting.

I tried glancing away from him and stared out the corner window, only to see the reflection of a monstrous creature. The sight of its furless face, its hairless, pink-skinned body and scrunched-up muzzle always made the bile in my stomach nearly rise. Circular, tiny ears draped under a dirty mop of dark headfur barely concealing the only hint of an anthro: yellow auburn eyes that clearly belonged to a handsome wolf. Except, this beast clearly wasn’t a handsome wolf. He didn’t even have a tail or the kind of clawed footpaws one associated with any species of anthro.

The best way to describe it was a shaven monkey without a tail. A nameless beast.

“Sir…” Jamal tried stepping forward.

“Why are you still here?!” I tried growling. “Why…?”

“I uh…I know you said I’d be fired for cleaning your room—”

“You know that’s not what I meant! Y-You shouldn’t have seen…*this*.”

“I did,” Jamal said, then exhaled. “And…I’m very sorry…” Cautiously, the feline placed the garbage bag aside and stepped toward me. “…how do you feel?”

Against good judgement, I looked directly into his eyes, expecting to see absolute terror and fright like before. I ended up being correct, but something else lingered in his green orbs. It resembled…sympathy? Maybe pity?

“Feel like a ton of shit…” I mumbled absentmindedly.

“Literally,” he asked me, “or figuratively?”

“…both.”

Jamal gingerly guided me to the couch again. “So, I guess this explains the time in your room. And the cloak. And those gloves. And the fact you haven’t been seen by anybody all this time. And why you stopped being in movies...”

Sitting down beside him, I stayed silent and did nothing but glare down at the carpet.

“Did…Did you always look like this?” he asked, “I know you’re supposed to be a wolf. You were always a wolf, but…what are you exactly?”

I lifted a paw—now something else entirely, without my claws or fur or pads—and closed it. “I’m a freak of nature, that’s what.”

“Can I ask…how this happened?” he asked again, “Please?”

Whether it be how tired I was or how overwhelming the building emotions had grown since my first day of exile, I told him. During my final days as a wolf anthro, I invited a handsome, albeit weird coyote to my apartment after connecting with him on a random dating app. Most users had profiles dedicated to finding true love, yet I used it to find no-strings-attached fun. I didn’t even bother remembering the coyote’s name, but while he expected further dates getting to know me, I considered it over when he left my bed to go to the bathroom. When he returned to my apartment a week later, furious how I wouldn’t return his calls and deleted our messages, the teary-eyed coyote refused to let me ignore him any longer.

“You’re…cursed?”

“Believe me, or don’t, but it’s true.” I gritted my unnaturally flat teeth. “This isn’t some stupid joke. I didn’t do something like get surgery on a dare or burn myself. I just woke up the next morning to find him at my bed and myself…like…like this.”

I was surprised to feel the blanket over me again, and Jamal pat my back gently.

“Say I do believe you for a moment,” he proposed, “and say I do believe in magic and hexes and spells. Is this…permanent for you? Is there some kind of a cure?”

“It might as well be permanent,” I replied solemnly, then slowly raised my head to look curiously at the serval next to me, looking at me with the same form of interest. “Can I ask you something now? Are you a fan of mine? Is that why you got hired here?”

Now it was his turn to grow quiet. His wandering, embarrassed eyes didn’t help his case either. “Mr. Hildebrant—”

“Tristian.” I interrupted. “I…I’m approaching thirty, and the last thing I want is to feel like I’m getting older…”

“Sure…Tristian,” he suddenly giggled.

I groaned aloud. “So you are a fan then.”

“Guilty as charged,” he chuckled, “but the job was only icing on the cake for me. In all honesty, I didn’t know you were in Manhattan. Or this this happened to you…” Jamal paused, then snickered. “If it makes you feel any better, the theories thrown around online about why you became a hermit were *far* weirder.”

I raised a confused eyebrow at him. “…how so?”

“Just rumors about you becoming a BDSM sex slave, joining a cult, being assassinated, being a robot, the usual,” he chuckled with me. “I kid you not, I saw an entire hour-long YouTube video proving that you’re actually an alien who went back to his home planet.”

“Maybe I am?” I shrugged at him. “Maybe this is my true form after all, and I’m going to harvest your brains for my morning breakfast?”

Jamal smirked. “Eh, I don’t think it’s that tasty, to be honest…”

A noise escaped the back of my throat until laughed erupted from my pink lips.

“You never did answer my question: why are you still here?” I recalled. “Most rational people would run off if they see a freak of nature like me…”

The feline paused. “Well, I’m not like most people. I don’t leave my boss unconscious without making sure he doesn’t have signs of alcohol poisoning. I had an uncle who went that direction, ya know…”

Smiling, Jamal stood back up.

“Speaking of family, I gotta get going before my folks start sending me calls every minute,” he explained apprehensively. “I already spent longer than needed, but I can catch a cab. You go to bed now. See you Monday, sir—I mean, Tristian.”

I turned to him as he went for the door.

“Is-Is there anything I can do?” I asked, adding, “To show my gratitude for this?”

The serval smiled. “Take a shower. And *please* fumigate your room with air freshener.”

We gradually opened up to each other the following days.

I grew nervous the next Monday when Jamal used his key to step inside and found me wearing pajamas instead of a concealing blanket. Instead of fear however, the serval wished me a good morning before getting straight to work. I also ultimately relented in letting him tidy my room up later in the week. Before he could even touch my doorknob, I threw away my broken pictures. I didn’t even bother taking the photos from the frames. I couldn’t bear him seeing the past me.

Walking around in full view started off as nerve-wracking, not knowing how he truly felt, but Jamal never showed any negativity to my appearance. Only my bad table manners.

“Do you really have to slurp your cereal like that, Tristian?” he questioned me from the living room, his back to me while washing the windows. “I think we’re about to get complaints about the noise from your neighbors.”

“Are you referring to the next-door neighbors from Kuwait who live in this tower for two months of the year?” I asked between loud gulps. “Or the neighbors with sound-proofed rooms?”

“I’ll put in a complaint then when I walk out the lobby,” Jamal snickered as he wiped the next window down.

“Remember the old saying about not biting the paw that feeds?” I reminded the joking serval. “Or rather the same paw that pays your salary?”

“Well, those aren’t paws now, are they?” he pointed out, to which my eyes wandered down to my hairless fingers and palms.

As much as I tried to look serious, it was all in vain. “Touché.”

By the end of week four, we no longer remained separated between any rooms. I grew eager each weekend to see Jamal walk through my front door, and have conversations with him almost lasting for hours. There came one weekday where, long after he had finished his list of chores and helped me replace the broken TV in the master bedroom, we sat on the foot of the couch talking about…well, everything in existence.

I learned more about his home life, of how Jamal and his three siblings were raised by his mother. The eldest brother and sister moved to better lives years ago, leaving the serval’s younger sister to begin high school over in Brooklyn. She wanted to be an astronaut and follow in the footsteps of Buzz Aldrin, yearning to become the first woman to walk across the Moon’s surface one day. As for Jamal, he yearned to be an actor after watching my movies growing up, having taken drama classes between school and babysitting gigs. He even once landed the leads for a school production of Sweeney Todd and played the role of Romeo Montague in an independent production in the neighborhood.

He didn’t need to know much about my own life; any Internet search would give a rabid fan the basics about growing up as a child star in Los Angeles. The fame, fortune and overbearing stage parents couldn’t be unavoidable to find out about.

“You’ve never seen a cow before? Like, at all?”

I sighed. “Never in my whole life.”

“What about that one scene in *Arcadia Ascending* where you were sneaking through the underground farms?” he asked me again. “There were cows there!”

“Yeah, but that was all in a greenscreen studio,” I explained amusedly. “The SFX guys the producers hired managed to integrate well right into the scene. One minute I’d be fighting some Neo-American spies and the next sipping some Americano between takes.”

“Wait,” Jamal realized, “Isn’t the third movie when the Neo-American spies are after you? Or rather, Vic Nightshade?”

“Uh…well,” I smiled nervously. “I guess I got it wrong.”

“Oh my God,” the feline clutched his stomach and laughed. “Please tell me you actually remember the plots of your own movies, Tristian!”

“I do! I just…I don’t know, it’s been a while…” I gazed out the nearby windows and curled my flat lips up. “Would you believe me if I said I only read the original books only once?”

“Maybe,” he shrugged. “I’ve heard of actors putting less effort into a role.”

“Do you think I did well?”

“You don’t watch your movies much, do you?”

I shook my head. Even at my own movie premieres, I often focused more on my phone rather than the large theater screen right in front of me. In all honesty, it felt boring to watch something, knowing the motions of the plot. There were rarely any surprises.

“So uh…Tristian,” Jamal cleared his throat. “Would you…?”

The smiling serval held onto his twitching tail while squirming in his seat.

“Would you…like to watch it…with me?”

I raised an eyebrow at him.

Then he suggested, “Maybe we can make a drinking game of it?”

An eager grin spread across my beastly muzzle. “Now you’re speaking my language.”

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That night, two things happened that would forever change the way I saw things.

The first change was me and Jamal inventing the Arcadia Ascending Drinking Game: take a shot of bourbon every time my character said ‘corrupt’, ‘Oh my God’, or screamed my love interest’s name aloud. If my character punched a bad guy while saying my love interest’s name, that earned you two shots, and three shots whenever I frowned at the camera. By the end of the night, between mowing down some microwaved popcorn and downing two bottles, we were laughing our asses off on the couch.

Even seeing my old face, the handsome wolf onscreen who charmed his way into every interview and role with ease, I slowly didn’t care as much. Not like before, either due to the hilarity of recapping these clichés alongside a new friend, or with Jamal being here in general.

He never shuddered at my paw. He never looked at me in disgust like he had the first time he saw my true face. In fact, Jamal acted friendlier than ever now that I had nothing to hide.

We were completely wasted by the time the end credits rolled around, so I called him a cab and helped him to the elevator, allowing the bellboys to assist him. Rolling into my own bed, I imagined the serval lying entangled in the blankets beside me. I considered asking the feline if he’d stay the night, certainly, but I didn’t. Or rather, I couldn’t. Not when I could barely articulate anything. That, and the thought of asking caused a knot to swell in my stomach.

Still, I could imagine him in bed. I could imagine his gentle fingers running along my bare skin, his furry back to my stomach as my arms wrapped themselves around him. The thought of us spooning and nuzzling each other caused my hardening cock to leak like a running faucet. Next thing I knew, the thought of feeling Jamal and hearing Jamal purr dominated my dreams. Thank God I managed to wash my bedsheets before he came back.

*Like he’ll ever go for somebody like me*, I concluded the following morning, trying my best to ignore and shun these images away. *Not when I’m like this…*

This wouldn’t be the first night spent watching a movie. Jamal recognized my reluctance not to watch any of the Arcadia Ascending sequels, so we went off of a few of my own recommendations. He was surprised I enjoyed some classics no fan would normally associate with a Hollywood actor.

“So you’ve never seen *It’s a Wonderful Life*?” The feline shook his muzzle, prompting me to turn the TV on and search for a rental online. “Boy, you’ve really been missing out on a fucking great Christmas movie. Wanna watch it?”

“Mmmm, sure,” the serval chirped, “but isn’t Christmas still months away?”

“Not if it’s Christmas in July, right?”

“July was last week, Tristian.”

I sighed. “Just let me play it, alright?”

“Okay, okay,” he nodded. “Enough teasing. If you like it, I’m sure I will too.”

He did. Jamal ended up sniffling near the end when George Bailey declared how he wanted to live again. I was too, especially as he happily ran home to discover and appreciate everything left behind, calling his wife’s name over and over. He was one moment from jumping, in complete despair over his decaying life and debt, only for Clarence—the angel—to remind him how worse life would be without his mere presence on Earth.

In truth, I couldn’t even remember the last time I held that same mentality.

Weeks passed. Days were spent talking to Jamal as he worked, the evenings dedicated to more talking, then movies and an occasional drinking game. And each time, Jamal came only made the monarch butterflies in my stomach flutter more.

Eventually, the second change came into the week before his service ended. We were laughing at this one movie that involved too many camera angles, as well as the hammy acting, when I noticed the serval leaning against me.

“Uh…Jamal?”

“Hm?” he paused between some laughter, then pulled back when he noticed. “Oh! Uh, sorry there…I didn’t notice.”

“I…I don’t mind that too much,” I confessed, trying to ignore the fluttering in my stomach again. “I mean…I mean if you don’t mind. Do you Jamal?”

Jamal paused before a soft smile curved along his spotted face. “I don’t.”

Awkwardly, I allowed him to readjust his weight until his back touched my chest, each of us clothed despite feeling a sudden, chilled warmth envelop us. Soon enough, our attention strayed less on the movie and more on our subtle movements. My fingers as they touched and traced his inner arm. His tail curling and flicking along my thigh. Our breaths hitching whenever we delicately moved around. Every movement made the burning sensation in my chest grow.

Near the end of the film, both of our stomachs growled.

“I think I need a snack.”

“Me too…”

“Mind moving for me?”

“Sure thing, Tristian—”

Suddenly, I lost my grip on the couch’s arm and instinct made me grab Jamal’s wrist.

Our faces hovered a whole centimeter from each other. Neither of us said a thing for so long. The way his ears fell downward and his eyes widened made me blush like a red tomato. Unfortunately, given my lack of cheekfur I couldn’t hide the crimson embarrassment.

“Y-Your eyes,” he finally spoke.

I blinked for the first time in what felt like forever.

“They’re…They’re like a wolf.”

My blushing grew a deeper shade.

“They’re…They’re beautiful.”

My lips thinned closely. “So are yours—”

His abruptly mashed into mine, causing a spark of electric fever to run up my spine and become an audible gasp. His claws trailed up my body until they wrapped possessively around my head, to which I responded by pulling him closer. Giving Jamal more access as we explored, his whiskers tickled my bare skin and my fingers ran through that rich, spotted fur along a toned body. It had been so long.

This thrill I felt and the chill rising through my spine felt so foreign, I might as well have been an experienced virgin once again. When I reached for the hem of his shirt though, Jamal pulled away.

“Tristian…” he glanced away from me.

I paused my advances and looked at him. “Y-Yeah? Is something on your mind?”

“I…” he tried to speak, “I…I need to go.”

“Huh?”

“I…This…This is too much! Too fast! I got to go!”

Jamal suddenly pushed himself off me and hurriedly grabbed his things. I sat frozen in the cushioned couch until I leapt in alarm to my feet and chased after him down the foyer.

“Wait!”

He’d almost shut the door closed behind him when I pried it open, only for me to stop under the doorframe.

“Jamal,” I pleaded for him. “I’m sorry! Can we…talk about this?”

The serval stopped a few meters from me down the empty hallway, his back unmoving and his arms still yet firm by his sides.

“I…I just need to think things over, Tristian.”

“Jamal—”

“Please. I need a few days to myself, to think this over…can you give me that?”

As much as it pained me to answer him, I knew I had to reply, “S…Sure.”

“…good night, Tris.”

“…good night, Jamal.”

Without any other word, Jamal disappeared into the nearest elevator.

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He ended up skipping his next shift. And the one after that. Before long, I spent who knows how many hours staring at my phone, waiting for a text or call that never came.

The pristine apartment and clean décor surrounding me only served as reminders of our time together, talking and laughing and joking about the other. The kitchen where I learned about his love for acting, the windows where we traded favorite TV shows, the foyer where I helped him move a dresser away to get into the nooks and crannies.

I tried distracting myself into whatever dreck aired on TV, surfing from channel to channel as I caught short, nervous glimpses at my phone during commercials. I avoided any romances, gay or straight, and dived into as many documentaries as I could. Whatever helped pull me from this reality I thought I learned to tolerate.

Unfortunately, no amount of time spent as a couch potato could distract me from Jamal. This couch was where he watched over me that night in my drunken stupor, where we enjoyed each other’s company, where we kissed for the very first time, and where he rejected me.

At some point, I knew it was obvious. He wasn’t coming back to give me an answer. I was foolish to think Jamal would find me attractive. Not like this. There felt nothing left to do now than wallow in my pity again and remain a beast for all time—

“This is a Channel 5 Special Report. We interrupt this programming to inform you a Brooklyn apartment complex caught on fire just several minutes ago.”

I jerked my head up toward the TV screen. And my face paled in absolute horror.

Baycrest Towers.

“We’re getting word from the New York Fire Department that several residents are unaccounted for, and that three have been seriously injured with third-degree burns. While they aren’t giving us details, we can confirm one is a serval while the other is an elderly Bengal tiger suffering from smoke inhalation. We will keep you updated on this story as it continues—”

I dialed his number without any hesitation.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

“Come on, come on, come on!”

Ring. Ring. Ring.

“Hello, Jamal here!”

“Jamal, are—”

“Can’t come to the phone right now, so please leave a message—”

“Goddamn it!” I redialed his number and tried again, only for his voice dial to respond three times. All as images of the burning building repeated onscreen. “Jamal, please pick up! Tell me you’re safe! Call me back, please!”

I never felt so helpless in that moment. I needed to do something!

Tossing my long-unused coat on, I pilfered around the cleaning closet until I found one of the dust masks left over from his first few days cleaning here. I wrapped it around my mouth to cover my lower half, then snatched my gloves neatly folded on the closet’s top shelf. Then, I grabbed my wallet and phone before storming out my apartment to the elevators, desperately mashing the button over and over. The doors opened, I seemed to freeze.

*Get a grip. Jamal could be hurt, now go!*

Hesitating with a deep breath, I found the resolve to step inside. The elevator ride turned into an eternity, and when I bolted out through the building’s lobby and out into the busy city, I hailed for the nearest taxi to take me to Baycrest Towers.

If the elevator ride felt like eternity, then the drive there was an epoch of agony.

The driver eyed me occasionally through his rearview mirror, but my focus remained on Jamal, and updates on the news. Was he hurt? Did he escape the fire? Or maybe…

I shoved the possibility aside.

Behind me, 432 Park Avenue’s ivory exterior stood tall over Manhattan, while the smoke could be seen from the Brooklyn Bridge ahead of me, and I grew antsy due to the horrible traffic. I tried calling Jamal four more times before giving up. All I could do was helplessly place my gloved paw on the glass window of the taxi, praying for the first time in a long while. All my life, I’d been a terrible person and a horrible boyfriend, if you could even call me the latter, since I barely cared about my lovers’ names. I never cared about anyone else until now, and I would never ever forgive myself if—

Suddenly, my phone vibrated to life, and I smashed the ‘answer’ button.

“Jamal! Are you alright?” I spoke in a single word.

“Tr-Tristian?”

“Oh, thank God! Oh, thank fucking Christ, it’s you!” I silently thanked Him. “I-I saw the news this morning and tried calling you, but you wouldn’t answer! Are you safe?!”

“Whoa, whoa, I’m alright, Tristian!” the voice sounded panicked and hitched with breathing. “They said a gas stove was left on in one of the apartments above us, and…and we got out, but Mom seriously got her arm burned…”

“Wh-Where are you then?”

“Oh, I’m at Mercy Hospital with my little sister,” he replied, clearly saddened. “We’re waiting for the doctors to tell us how she is.”

“Good! I’m coming over there!” Taking a couple fifties from my pocket, I told the driver, “Go to Mercy Hospital in Brooklyn as fast as you can, please!”

The fact he was fine made me even more determined to pull the serval into my arms after jumping out the taxi and sprinting into the hospital’s main lobby. My head jerked left and right, trying to find him until I saw those familiar spotted ears at the far end, sitting next to a smaller serval. And when he turned my way in incredulous surprise, time itself grinded to a perfect halt. Soon, he was hugging me tighter than ever before.

“You’re really outside…” he mumbled, pulling back to look me over and at my eyes behind the sunglasses, “You came out just for me?”

I growled, “Of course, I did! I had to! I couldn’t just stay back and do nothing!”

“Good thing you have that oh-so-conspicuous disguise then.” He giggled.

“Shut up,” I laughed, hugging him even more tightly in my arms. “I’m…I’m just so happy you’re okay, because…because I really wanted to talk to you.”

The serval blinked. “Tristian—”

“No, please let me finish. I spent the past hour worrying if you were alive or not—”

“Tristian!” he tried again.

“I want to tell you that I think I love—”

Jamal shut me up by pulling my mask down and kissing me. Silently, the feline pulled away and nuzzled my nose, giving me his answer.

“I do too,” he reassured me with that smile of his.

I waited with Jamal and his little sister (whose eyes lit up when I mentioned my name was Tristian, similar to the movie star) until the doctor okayed for Mrs. Faron to have visitors. Her son formally introduced me as his employer, and we had friendly small talk until I offered to pay for their families’ medical bills, as well as give them a month’s worth of time spent in a good hotel. She and Jamal tried refusing at first, with Jamal staring at me with a shocked expression at my generosity, but I wouldn’t budge until she happily accepted.

I remembered seeing the immense relief wash over her and Jamal’s faces, and how hard his mother each hugged me to the point I wondered if she weightlifted or something. Most of all, I remember feeling Jamal’s paw grip my paw without a single shame in the world. Then again, I doubted anybody suspected my appearance, not that I could care.

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Later that night, me and Jamal snuggled together on the bed following a quick shower and a memorable hour or two spent exploring our bodies together. The serval let me gently cradle his head in my paw, burrowing his back closer to my chest as we drifted between dreamy smiles and warm kisses.

“I think you made my mom the happiest she’s ever been, Tristian…” he whispered to me.

“It’s the least I can do,” I sighed. “You and your family deserve to stay someplace better than some sleazy motel, at least, until the insurance money comes in.”

“You’re amazing, you know that, right?” he beamed happily at me. “This has to be the most selfless thing anyone’s ever done for us. I…I don’t know how many times I can thank you…”

“You never have to thank me,” I nuzzled him, then asked tentatively, “Jamal?”

“Hm?”

“Would you…” I began, then restarted my question, “I know your contract is about to end, but…I was wondering if…if you’d be open for staying longer? With me?”

The feline purred closer into my chest, chuckling, “…as long as you put another air freshener in here, sure.” A small smile formed on my lips, and I kissed his forehead again.

As we curled closer, Jamal whispered something to me.

“Tristian?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

Minutes later, a second tail appeared under the bedsheets, which wagged harder than it ever had in such a very long time. “I love you too.”