

Stories to Tell on the Sofa

Stories to Tell on the Sofa

Dirt Coyote

ISBN: 978-1-948743-33-4

WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG: A PREHISTORIC ANTHOLOGY

Stories copyright © 2022 by their author.

Cover by Heskynn. © 2022 — www.heskynn.co.uk

Title page illustration by The Cheesen One.

Section divider by Maddy's dog Zephyr, who is a very good boy.

Wild Thing	1
Hi, I'm Jack and I'm Not From This World	43
Hey, Buddy	65
"Forever Forever Forever"	71
Saying Goodbye to Mayberry	91
A Simple Guide to Sugar-Free Lemonade by Arthur Felice. .	125
You Can Watch Me Dance	137
Last Day	159

Wild Thing

I shouldn't have been here at this party. This marble fox doesn't fit in and everyone knows it. There's a group of guys just standing next to me, joking and laughing their asses off loudly. It's embarrassing that I'm so close, and yet, galaxies away from the conversation.

The room gradually shifts in red, orange, blue, yellow, and green lights. Back and forth, almost dizzying me as I stand around stupid with a cup in my paws. I don't know anyone here and my invite was done out of pity. I'd just been sitting in the cafeteria at my college when a hare mistook me for someone else and felt too ashamed to rescind the invitation.

But, I put on some nice clothes, at least, what I think is nice: Jeans and a white cargo shirt. I'm just glad I took out my fucking pocket protector before getting here. Fuck, I'm so lame. Why did I even come here if I was just gonna be sipping booze and standing alone with my tail curled around my waist.

I scan the room, thinking it might be my time to thank the host and get back to my place in the dorms. There's a stack of anime DVDs waiting for me that I've only watched a hundred times before. Watching them live their insane lives is more than enough adventure for me.

That's when I notice him.

Another marble fox standing across the room staring at me. His eyes are piercing, the same crystal blue eyes that I have, just resting on me and me alone. At least, I think so. He could be eyeing me, waiting for me to move away from the drink table to get his own.

I shift a little to the side, his gaze following and I know for certain it's me he's looking at. Even though there's a wolf by his side, clearly talking to him as he sloshes a drink back and forth, he's more interested in me. A smirk is stuck to his muzzle and it's intimidating. He's got on a loose fitting tank top that's barely hanging off his shoulders. It's so long, covering most of his khaki shorts, that it could be described as ill-fitting if he wasn't pulling it off so well.

What sticks out the most is the flower crown on his head. I don't recognize the pedals, and they seem too large to be real. They shift colors with the lights of the room, just like the white and gray on his muzzle. A dazed look hangs in his eyes as he stares at me, and like the rest of his demeanor, he just seems so laid back and chill.

Like a Wild Thing.

His look becomes a little oppressive and I shift uncomfortably underneath it. I'm ready to just leave, scamper away from this fox that looks too cool to be interested in me, but wait! The fox says something to the wolf, dismissing himself casually as he starts towards me.

I can't think of a reason why. My glasses feel crooked on my muzzle and I adjust them like the dork I am. Trying to recover, I bring the drink in my paw up to my muzzle, and take a

sip only for most of it to dribble over my chin. Why can't I do anything cool?

I brush the liquid off with the back of my wrist, probably looking worse than before but the Wild Thing just chuckles. He's sleek, wirey, flowing between the other guests like wind. His fur pattern is similar to mine, very close as it glows red, orange, blue, yellow, and green with the shifting lights.

"Hi," I let out in a whisper, and then realizing he probably can't hear me, I say too loud, "Hello!"

He keeps that same smirk and says back, just loud enough, "Hey there."

Trying at a conversation, I point up at his crown and say, "I like your flowers."

The Wild Thing nods politely and softly replies, “I had fun making it.”

There’s a pause as his gaze moves from mine for the first time, taking a second to eye me up and down. I feel underdressed, but he seems to like what he’s looking at. He’s a little close, closer than I’m used to, but I can’t get my legs to move back. With my free paw, I brush my tail around my waist to relax until it unwinds behind me.

The Wild Thing steps beside to the drink table and grabs a cup. Despite all the attention flustering me a second ago, his immediate dismissal of me feels empty. He’s just fixing himself a cocktail, not turning to me. It’s at that moment that I

realize, I’m the one staring at him now and feel a bit abashed. I should’ve known he wasn’t interested in me.

A sudden flash of embarrassment and anger in myself strafed through my core and I decided it was time to leave. Just as my foot made the first step towards the door, a paw grabs hold of my arm. I turned to see the Wild Thing holding me while tipping the cup into his muzzle, guzzling the liquid down audibly.

I let him hold me, his relaxed grip not too forceful, until he was finished and sat the drink down onto the table. ”If you wanna leave, I know someplace we can go,” he says with alcohol fumes cascading off his breath, wrinkling my nose.

His words are so confident, without any hesitation or thought. He lets go of me and flicks his head to the side towards a hallway. I peer over him, down the dark passage he wants to lead me and then back to the front door that'll take me to safety. But my muzzle is drawn back to the Wild Thing.

He's so handsome, and though the other marble fox looks similar to me, he's so much more. I don't just want to be with him. I want to be him, and I want to gain a fraction of what he has just through osmosis. So, trying to imitate his coolness, I say, "Sure."

Without another word, he turns to the hallway and walks away. I'm left standing for a second, and only with the swish of his thick flowing tail, do I realize I'm supposed to be following. I don't even set down my drink, trying to catch up to him in large steps.

While he ambles through the bodies, men and women my age flirting with each other carelessly, I'm left awkwardly stumbling between them. An *Oops, I'm Sorry* here and an *Excuse Me, Pardon Me* there, I manage to just barely follow behind. It feels like there's eyes on me, not just judging my clumsiness. My head gets the better of me and I hear voices questioning how I was the one who the Wild Thing approached.

He's so out of my league, and yet, I'm the one he wants. I know, because a single eye turns back to make sure I'm following. He

doesn't take the first door, like he knows where he's going. I think he might live here. Like he just plucked his prey from the crowd and was dragging it to his den. I don't mind. I'd gladly be his, if he had me.

It's the third room before he grabs the handle and twists, the door opening silently as his footsteps. There's no lights, but the glim glow of the moon illuminates the room. He turns, making sure I followed, and I feel a little comfort that seems so eager I stayed with him. I step with him inside and he doesn't hesitate to pull me into a kiss.

Both of his paws are on the collar of my shirt, stretching it as he forces his lips against mine. His claws tear at the fabric, and I'm worried for a second that he might just shred my clothes rather than let me take them off. My paws straddle his sides, holding him to steady myself as he pulls us towards a bed.

The Wild Thing sure lives up to the name I've

given him, because he is after me like a beast. He lets go of my shirt just to slide a paw up underneath it and start yanking it off of me. Even as the kiss breaks momentarily to pull it over my head, he is relentlessly back to nibbling my lip.

My huffs are hard like his, our breath mixing as we tangle paws around each other. I fling his shirt to the side, my pants come off

and are kicked aimlessly away. I've never done this before, but my instincts take over. It's not long before I'm down to my tighty whities and he's wearing nothing but what god gave him. And his flower crown, of course

I'm pushed backward, a worried yipe escapes my muzzle fearing I'm about to hit the floor. The soft squeak of a mattress underneath me breaks my fall and I'm left scrambling to grab the sheets. I try to hoist myself back up, but a paw lands on my chest and holds me down. I'm worried for a second this might be too rough, but the claws tracing sensually underneath the fur on my belly tells me it's exactly as rough as I'd ever wanted it. Just fast!

A warm wet tongue wraps around my length, and I lean my head back deep into the comforter. My teeth are grit, and it's all I can do to keep myself from moaning out loudly over the noise of the party. His lips draw back and forth against my cock and the warm breath of his own moans wash over me. One paw stays on my stomach, digging in lines perfectly over my sensitive spots. The other is handling my balls, rolling them around and squeezing them gently between his fingers.

He's getting me close, and it's happening too fast. I can feel him edging me towards the point of no return without even taking me in his muzzle. A hot embarrassment is flooding over my mind, not sure

how to tell him to slow down or stop. Though, if I'm being honest. I desperately don't want him to slow or stop anything. Before I can though, he pulls his lips off my cock and stands to his feet.

"You should be wet enough now," he says, extending a paw for me. I'm not sure what he's talking about and I stare up at him dumbly, my brain still floating in my head.

He shakes his outstretched paw again, and I blink before taking it. I'm off the bed and he takes my spot, crawling up on all fours and holding his tail up with a paw. His backside is fully presented to me, and I realize now what I'm supposed to be doing.

"Are you sure?" I ask, already crawling up behind him.

He only gives a nod and flicks his tail from right to left. I touch the tip of my prick against his hole, the warmth sending shivers up my spine. With only my spit and pre for lube, I lean forward and enter him. A soft purr lets me know that I'm slick enough to be pleasurable.

One paw goes on his back and the other grabs his hips as I inch closer to him. My knees drag on the sheets. I can barely see him, but I don't need to. Just need to feel him; feel his hole wrapping around my cock as I push into him.

There's a moan of pleasure, and I'm not sure if it's me or him. Our pants and huffs become one, just over the slapping sound of my

thrusts. I instinctively lean over him, fucking his ass doggy style. My paw wraps around his length and I begin pumping him to my thrusts.

Each pull and push sends waves of serotonin through my brain.

His cock is slick in my grip, pre sticking my paw pads and the fur between my fingers. I dip my muzzle low, nibbling against the other marble fox's nape. A sense of pride envelopes me as I realize I, me alone, am the one taming this Wild Thing underneath.

My climax is quickly approaching, and I know his is too. He's leaking like a hose, pre covering my fur and the bed. I tighten my paw around his shaft, pumping him faster as I get close to shooting inside him. He calls out something in his moans, and I think it's my name, though I'm sure I didn't tell him that. His reward is my teeth sinking into the fur at the back of his neck. I feel his cock spurting just as I hit the point of no return.

I knock my knot against him, once, twice, three times, but the spit isn't enough to push past his ring. It doesn't matter. My eyes squeeze tight, and I orgasm right into the other fox's insides. Cum shoots deep into him, lining his rectum with my seed.

He's moaning loudly, even with me biting down hard (or because). My paw loosens, and I slump over him. The Wild Thing holds me up on his back as my balls empty into him. There's a sureness that I filled him up so much, my seed is leaking out his backside.

Carefully, he lowers himself until he's on his belly, and I let go of him just as my paw sinks into the puddle he's made. I pull out of him, rolling over onto the bed and taking my paw with me. My paw pulls free from underneath him, wiping most of his spunk onto the sheets and his fur.

With my back on the bed, I stare up to the ceiling and wonder just who I am. Maybe it's the afterglow settling in my head, but I'm feeling particularly proud of myself. I'd never imagined I could just follow a stranger into bed and have sex with him. I'd never so much as given a

handjob before.

Part of me wants to ask him if it was as good for him as it was for me, but that sounds stupid. Still, I should at least say something, and the only thing that comes to mind is, "That was amazing," and when I think about it, it's not the dumbest thing I'd ever said.

He hasn't said anything back. I observe my surroundings, seeing a lamp on a nightstand next to me and flicking it on. And that's when I notice it. He's laying on his side, turned away from me and I see the pattern on his back. His marble fur, gray, white, auburn, orange, and red, is so similar to mine. And there is this sun kissed patch of fur on his shoulder that is too familiar.

Way too fucking familiar.

My heart sinks in my chest, and I realize that he's way too like me. I just fucked my cousin. Of course, an idiot like me would abso-fucking-lutely accidentally lose his virginity to his cousin. The taboo instantly washes over me, and dread fills my soul. Before I can think of what to do next, possibly sneak off, if not run, grab my clothes and get the fuck out of here, he says patiently, "I'm not your cousin."

He's not looking at me, still turned away. If he's not my cousin, then—

"I'm not a lost twin brother either."

Is he?

"And I'm not reading your mind. Jeez, would you just settle down for a second," he says dismissively.

With a nervous smile on my muzzle, I say anyways, "If you're not reading my mind, you're not making a good case for yourself."

That's when he turns over to face me, and I finally see it. I see me. It's actually me! He's got a sly smirk slapped on his face, just as my muzzle is twisting into a frown. This cannot be happening.

"Yeah, I'm you. Just a little older," he says, reassuringly.

I study him, my eyes going down to his body. He can't be me. Not only is he missing my glasses, but he's just too perfect to be me, too calm and collected. Too amazing. He's the Wild Thing, and I'm—well, I'm just me.

"If you're who you say you are, then you'll be able to answer something I'd only know," I say, trying to think through my thoughts.

I find it; a memory that's only true to me. A little marble fox comes to mind, and I see him gathering dirt and worms to put in his elementary school's teacher purse. I was such a miscreant and I'm about ready to ask him to repeat the story, but his muzzle is pulling back wider than it has before. And I see it, in his eyes, the reflection of my own muzzle, pulling back at the thought of the memory.

We're reliving it together.

"How?" I ask, not needing any proof. Just answers.

Out of nowhere, he holds out his paw for me and I see it sitting on his pads. It's a multicolored pill, shimmering in the dark of the room. He's offering it to me, and I know he wants me to take it. Before I reach out, I've got only one more question:

"Is it safe?"

He gives me a wink, and says, "It's worth it."

I pluck it from his paw and hold it to my eye. It radiates in red, orange, blue, yellow, and green along with every color in-between. The Wild Thing gets comfortable, resting his head on his paw patiently. His smug look tells me he knows what I'm going to do next, and so I take the date with destiny, and pluck it in my maw.

It doesn't taste like anything, but it does hum on my tongue. There's a slight buzz of electricity or something, and I hesitate to swallow. I consciously have to will myself to get it down, and I feel it roll against my throat. Even sitting at the bottom of my stomach, I can still fill it inside me.

"Well?" I ask, expecting something to have happened by now.

The Wild Thing chuckles and says, "Oh right." Then, faster than I could have anticipated, he snatches the glasses off the bridge of my muzzle. "I wanted these back."

"Hey!" I exclaim, ready to take them off his face. Just as my arm reaches out to grab them, I watch in horror as my paw disintegrates. I stare down at where my arm used to be, jaw trembling. I turn back up to him, that smug look annoying the shit out of me, and say the only thing that comes to mind, "oh, you mother fucker—"

Reality folds in on itself, like a book being slapped shut an inch in front of my nose. It becomes apparent that my body is no longer my vessel. I've been split into a billion atoms and the only thing that exists of me is my consciousness. I clutch desperately at anything, but with no arms and no clue of what to do, I'm just thrown about between time and space.

My thoughts are the only thing that are held together, but even thinking feels like walking miles between ideas. Time itself is lost on me as my consciousness flings through the void I exist in. I try hard, trying to remember what I am or was or will be, putting myself back together like scooping sand on a beach.

And all at once, I find a foothold. I am born. My name is Thomas Forewind. My father, a serf, kisses me on the forehead as he lays eyes on me the first time. I'm a boy, a wolf cub, and I tend the fields with my family. I grow into quite the rambunctious teen.

With my friends, I dance at the slightest start of a beat and when I sing, it's louder than anyone

else. Anything to impress the barmaids and my friends. It's joyous for a time, and I couldn't imagine anything better than this.

There's a raid and in the span of a few hours, all of my friends and family are gone. As smoke rises from smoldering buildings, I am left orphaned, angry, and hollowed. I am asked to fight for my kingdom against these raiding neighbors, and I do so gladly.

With my shield wrapped around my arm, I clash against a leopard coming at me. He's an older man, maybe a veteran and he's confident. He swings his sword at me with precise thrusts, but I knock his blows away easily. I am good at this. He dies by the swipe of my blade, and I look for the next opponent.

Ten more come at me, one after the other, and there's ten corpses I'm left walking away from. I'm reveling in my prowess. Who'd have thought I could be a killer? I approach a fox, a boy like me. He's terrified, already seeing what I can do. The other teen throws down his sword in surrender, stumbling backwards as I approach. All I do is smile, thinking this one would be easiest.

I raise my sword, ready to strike him on the ground, but I recognize the fear on the vulpine's muzzle. It looks like...me? I realize just what I've become. I don't want to be this! I'm not Thomas Forewind! I am...I was something else. This doesn't make sense, and reality falls apart again. Thomas Forewind disappears on the battlefield, and is labeled a deserter, never to be seen or heard of again.

I am tossed again in the ocean, and I feel my thoughts swimming against a current. My consciousness is thrown about, and I look for something to stand on. But without a body or any physical manifestation, it's like trying to stand on the waves itself.

I'm a skunk now. My parents name me Julia after my grandmother. I like helping people, and I'm gonna be a doctor someday. The path is so clear to me, all throughout highschool and college, and I don't waver the slightest. They put me in the ER, and I'm ready to save some lives.

But a gas leak across town causes an explosion on my first night. There's too many people coming in all at once, and the hospital is immediately overwhelmed. We're short beds, short staff, and I am made to pick who I can treat and who I can't.

A bull, barely recognizable under his singed fur, grabs my arm and begs me to help him. I can barely understand him over the dozens of screams filling the hall. This isn't right. It comes rushing back to me, and I wish it wasn't happening right now when I'm needed most. I'm not a doctor. I can't save him. I can't save anyone. The last thing I see before I'm swallowed back into oblivion is the bull's eyes staring blankly into nothing.

The only thing left of Julia is an unsolved mystery tv special of a doctor vanishing in the middle of an ER.

Again, I'm caught between the planes of reality. I feel it now though. It's not an ocean of water, but the area beneath the zero-point of space itself. The sea of gluons pass me back and forth like dough in the fingers of a baker. They rise up like bubbles to the surface, and I follow them once more to existence.

When I am little, I give myself the name Wynn. My parents think this little non-binary bear cub is going through a phase, but it sticks all throughout my life, and they learn to

accept it. I am lucky. It's when I'm in the junior ranger program that I learn my first crush early: Nature.

I love it more than anything and it's enough to satisfy my needs. In the trees, the flowers, the red, orange, blue, yellow, and green of its body, do I know it cares for me as well. There's no man or woman for me. Its love is unrelenting and a hundred times more than what I or anyone else could ever express.

My first and last job is a park ranger, sworn to preserve nature's beauty for future generations. Though the national park program throws me all over the country, I finally settle on a green valley where the sun sets right at the end of a canyon. I take pride in my work, and even when I'm pushed into retirement, I stay closeby.

I take one last hike up the mountains, forcing my bones to make this final trek. There's a boulder I'm able to climb up, and I rest with my legs dangling over the edge. Life's been good to me, and there's no other way I would have done this. With my finishing breath, I let out a sigh and give myself back to the ether. Wynn disappears just as the sun sets.

I am once more.

And it's me this time.

I'm sitting atop of the void, floating as mere consciousness in space. The sun's warmth, even a dozen million miles away, wraps my

existence in a blanket. With a level head, I see my atoms scattered through the whole of the universe.

Like a child with building blocks, I put myself back together in the recess of space. I admit, it takes me a little longer than I wanted: just a few decades of pulling piece by piece to me and stacking them on top of one another. When I get to my eyes, I can see the slight astigmatism and choose to leave it, putting each part of myself back together the way it was until I can see again.

As a marble fox floating in nothingness, I ponder what I've done and what I shall do next. There's a momentary flash of guilt that bubbles up. Thomas, Julia, and Wynn were all created because I couldn't find control and they lived real lives with real people, only for me to have pulled them from existence.

I'd wished the Wild Thing would have warned me, but I worry if that would've changed my decision. Instead, I have to live with and as them, taking their memories and their feelings along for the rest of my journey. But I remember me too, and I remember I had my own ambitions to fulfill.

And like a dork, the first thing I think of is to see a black hole. I'd always been fascinated with sci-fi, and imagined what it'd be like to witness one. Now, as what I've become, there's nothing holding me back. I say goodbye to my sun, giving it a small wave, before turn-

ing my attention to the galaxies beyond my own, and push myself forward.

Space and light become a blur, and I'm shot a thousand light-years across the universe until I see the black hole I want. I approach it, moving through the void as easy as swimming through a pool. Planets and stars wizz past until I'm safely in viewing range of Messier-87.

It's aweing at first. I can see the acceleration disk burning brighter than anything I'd ever imagined. The raw destruction and power holds me for a few hours, but I'll tell you this: You'd not believe how fast you'd go from, "Wow, a black hole" to "Okay, black holes are kinda boring."

I clap my paws on my sides, rolling my shoulders awkwardly. Part of me feels like I need to excuse myself to be polite, but it's just a black hole. It doesn't really care how entertaining it has to be. So, I point myself to another direction, wave awkwardly anyways, and I find a space bar out a few thousand years in the future, and manifest myself inside.

They don't actually call it a space bar. It's just a bar that happens to be floating in space called Rico's dive and dine. Freighters stop at it to refuel and to relax between asteroid belts and planets. There's

a small crowd tonight, and all stop and stare at the naked marble fox standing in the center of the room.

Oops, forgot to put together my clothes. My presence shocks some in the crowd, but a boar in a denim jacket says, "Someone's been going through Sally's personal stash again." Everyone laughs, and the big man stands from his seat at the bar to approach me.

For as large as he is, he doesn't seem to be mad nor does he try to intimidate me in any way; just holds up a paw and asks me if I'm alright. I flick my tail over my privates and nod sheepishly, the attention a little too much. He asks what I'm on, high or drunk, and I chuckle and say I'm sober. Just forgot my clothes.

Then he looks towards the entrance, trying to see if I came in with anyone. He asks me which spaceship I'm piloting or where my crew was, and I shake my head. I say, "I am my own vessel," because not only is that the truth, but it sounds pretty badass.

That just gets another roar of laughter and they find me a table to sit at. A few come and ask me questions, but there's not many answers I can provide. I just wanted to be here and I showed up. The freight drivers manage to wrangle together some clothes for me, and now I'm wearing the loose fitting tank top and cargo shorts the Wild Thing was wearing. Destiny is unfolding in front of me.

Feeling confident, I make conversation with the crowd and learn about their world. They pass me drinks as I explain my journey to get here, and everyone in the bar is invested. I think about my time as Thomas, the medieval wolf, and I remember him at a tavern surrounded as such.

With the alcohol in my system, I think back at a song Thomas sang that really riled the crowd. I thump my glass and stomp my foot, setting the beat while starting the first verse. The men and women follow along, clapping their hands and cheering loud as I jump on the bar and start prancing around in my song.

The whole crowd sings along to my chorus and my heart is filled with their voices. At the end, I repeat the last lines alone and am met with an applause so loud, it shakes the entire station. Why didn't anyone tell me it could be this fun being the center of attention?

The bar settles down and I turn to small conversation with the patrons. I feel Thomas in me, no longer empty and angry; no longer the killer I imagined him to be. He's proud, but it's not him. It's me. I'm Thomas, Julia, Wynn, and the pride I feel isn't for someone else. It's for myself.

That warmth I

feel inside is too much, the energy pulsating in me needing release. I hug the boar, thanking everyone for the generosity and kindness, and then turn to the universe and find a spot to land.

It's back on earth. I'm on my back, the ground warm, and the desert's night air cooling my fur. I lay there, appreciating the clear sky above. I can see all the stars and galaxies millions of light-years away, and peek at them like looking through a telescope.

There's two neutron stars colliding there. Over there, there's a couple of aliens performing a form of a wedding with hundreds of guests surrounding them. All around is planets and stars and civilizations, all mine to explore. But a hollowed metal thud of something being kicked catches my attention.

"We're stranded!" a voice cries out.

I lift up, turning my attention away from the space above and to my surroundings. There's a van sitting at the side of a road, and a group of otters are leaning against it. One's got a blunt in his muzzle, taking a hit of it before passing it to another.

"Things will work out," an otter says nonchalantly.

A girl between the two boys throws up her arms and asks, "How?"

That's my cue.

“Howdy!” I call out, walking towards them while brushing the dirt off my back and fur.

All three jump, but I don’t change my gate. They’re staring at me curiously, the tallest otter shifting left and right down the road. There’s nothing for miles and miles. I can read his muzzle, and explain, “I just happened to land here.”

They shuffle nervously, afraid of me, though all three are taller and bigger. The one holding the blunt cautiously reaches his paw forward, extending a roach for me to take. I’ve never done pot before, but it seems rude to refuse the offer.

I take it, inhaling little puffs before coughing my lungs out in front of the three. They laugh at that, and quickly introductions are made. Their names are Damian, Ross, and Tiara, and their van gave out between concerts. Smoke is still pouring out the top and I offer to take a look.

Careful with the hood, I pop it open and poke my head inside. I’m not an expert at cars, but I think I know the problem. Sensing the vehicle and seeing through its design, I can almost feel where the radiator is cracked. It’s like an itch on my skin, and I mend it closed with my will until it is whole again.

The otters can’t see what I’m doing, but I can feel the car heal itself. Then I draw from the air, filling the tank with water, and in an

instant, the insides feel new again. I close the hood and smile at the group, a sense of relief washing over me. All is right.

I clap my paws together and say, "That should do it."

Tiara, ever the skeptic, laughs and says, "You didn't do anything."

I shrug, not needing her to understand. "Where we headed?" I ask casually.

Damian, the tallest otter, gets into the front seat and turns the ignition. The car comes back to life, and he lets out a gasp, "Well, shit." He stares at the panels, squinting as he notices the vans running better than it ever had before. Again, I shrug.

Ross, slapping a paw to my back, takes a hit and when he exhales, he says, "And the universe provides."

So I had.

I learn that I've landed in the middle of the 80's this time. We spend months on the road, traveling between venues and concerts and bars. Sometimes we're there to play a gig, and sometimes we're there to watch. All these bands I only knew from the radio were now playing live in front of me, testing their sounds.

Some are met with roaring crowds, screaming for more. Others are booed and mocked, the music not appreciated at the time. I recognize some of the ones that would later be hits, sleepers that just

needed the right moment. It was still good to listen to them in their raw

impact.

It is with Tiara that I learn how to braid flowers into a crown. She teaches me, her way of explaining she likes me. Despite that, it's Ross who is my first kiss amongst the three. He sneaks it in after shotgunning me with a breath of weed, our lips too close and our attraction too strong not to finish closing the gap.

We make out in our hotel room, one of the few times we ever get one. Tiara and Damian are out at the bar, but me and Ross had opted to stay in for the night. I'm glad, because I've wanted this for a while.

When he breaks from the kiss, he says, "I'm sorry. I guess I'm pretty high." He turns his head away bashfully, looking to get up off the bed. I don't let him, holding onto his paw and keeping him there. Then I steal his blunt from him, placing it on an ashtray and give him a kiss on his neck.

He shudders underneath me, my teeth sinking softly into his fur. I hear him drag his claws on the sheets, muttering moans. Our clothes come off until we're down to our underwear. He's a little unsure of himself, but I know well enough for the both of us.

"Let's start slow," I say, and he nods up and down.

There's a little pudgy over his front that I trace a claw through, and he likes that. He's careful when he touches me back, not wanting to move too fast. His fingers run through the fur on my chest, and I moan to let him know it feels good.

His cock tents up his boxers, and I dare a touch. I put my index finger to the tip, stroking it up and down over the fabric. It twitches and a bead of pre drips through to sticky my paw pads. He lets out a soothing purr as I pull back the underwear until his cock slips through the slit.

While I'm playing with his cock, he's more invested in my nipples. He keeps making a circular motion around them, every few seconds giving one a gentle pinch before moving onto the next. Then he dips his muzzle down and starts nibbling on me between his teeth.

The sensations are so amazing and my cock feels restrained in my underwear. I pull my briefs down, letting my cock hang out, pre dribbling freely along my shaft. Ross looks down, sees my cock, and cautiously wraps his paw around it, squeezing me at my knot.

I huff, grabbing hold of his own stiff member to give him a squeeze as well. Side by side on the bed, we jerk each other off. Together, we pant, only silenced when we're nibbling and pecking each other between our strokes. As I'm getting close, I rest my nose into his neck, breathing in his scent sharply.

He's first to cum, spraying a line of jizz across his chest and belly. I don't last a second longer after, and I am showered in my own spunk as well. Together, we fall back onto the bed and nuzzle in our afterglow. We stay there for a while, and I cuddle up against his side.

"I've never done that with another guy before," he admits.

I silence him with another kiss, reassuring him with my love. He feels safe beside me, and Ross doesn't even flinch when the door to our hotel opens up. Damian and Tiara slip in, pausing for a second when they see us spent on the bed together.

Even though we're in our underwear, we're still covered in our cum and it's pretty obvious what we just did. Tiara's muzzle turns, but all she has to add is, "Boys."

Tiara's jealousy lasts maybe a week at most, before I catch her alone with a crown I braided just for her. Damian, ever the most relaxed of the three, goes with the flow, not denying the inevitable before we're all pulled into a foursome almost every night on the road. It seemed like they only needed me to bridge their sexual frustrations.

It's about a year down the line that I'm laying over Damian's chest, naked and panting in the back of their van. Tiara is sliding off of my spent cock, and she turns to curl against my belly. Ross is sleepy eyed in his afterglow, his cum still fresh on my breath.

I smile at all of them, my first true friends. That warm glow fills me again, and even though I'm strong enough now to extinguish it, I know it's my time. There's a vast universe out for me to explore, and this is just a fraction of what I can experience. It's left an itch under my fur, and though I'll miss them greatly, they'll be fine without me.

"I love you all, *so much*," I say, and I stress that last bit just so they understand it. There's a small hope that one of them might recognize what I'm saying and tell me to stay. If they'd ask, I know I'd never have the willpower to leave. All they do is chuckle, and pass me love yous as well. Carefully, I stroke them all in the back of the van, trying to hold onto the touch of their fur. It's important that I remember this and find a place in my heart to cherish it forever.

And then I'm gone.

For a while, I travel here and there. Sometimes earth, most times not. Sometimes with friends and lovers, and some eons I'm left in quiet solidarity to explore the stretches of the universe. It's only when I come back to Messier-87, do I remember something important.

I remember that awkward wave I gave it centuries ago, remember how this all started and see myself so young and new. I've got business to do and I need to get back to that party. But first, I've got to pick something up. Something that isn't mine.

Again, I give an awkward wave to the black hole, feeling our time was short, and again, it doesn't have to impress me. It's a freakin black hole. It couldn't give a shit.

Then I find myself far into the future. I see a gas giant orbited by a thousand railguns. Hiding in the planet's ring is a top secret station. A research facility where they're developing the pill I need to give to myself. There's a room where it's being held in and I can't just manifest into it. They've shielded it from me, or whatever threat they perceived I might have been, keeping me from stealing what they've worked so hard to achieve.

Sure I could spend a millenia researching it on my own, but that's not how it went down or how it will go down. Oh, don't think less of me for being a thief. They're Nazis. Space Nazis! Yeah, that's right, they come back and this thing they've created is to ensure their dominance over the universe. I can't let them have it.

I will myself into the station, standing outside a hallway alone. But I'm not alone. Time stretches in front of me, and I see the few infinite versions of me standing in front of the door. I am seeing every future of me making the decision that'll change all of time.

I watch as each version turns back to greet the one behind. Three ahead, the marble fox goes for a wave. Two, the next one gives its me a sly smile. The one directly in front of me turns back, and I

recognize that mother fucker anywhere. He gives me a wink, and there's no hard feelings between us. I turn back, seeing a couple infinite marble foxes standing in a row. With confidence, I give mine a thumbs up. In turn, that one shows me up by giving his me a double thumbs up.

He's the fun one, I can tell.

Then I look forward and see that all the me's have turned their heads to the right. I follow suit, glancing into a passage of time beside me. It is there, I see a road that has never been taken, but exists all the same. It's a reality where I don't get my paws on that pill. An existence so dark and bleak, both in past, present, and future, that it proves one thing certain: I always stop them. Every time.

The me's collapse into one and I push forward on the double doors leading into a hallway in the research station. There are lizards of all sorts, each dawning white lab coats and visors. They're scrambling, the time of their ascension dawning, and none of them look up from their tablets and notes to notice a fox wearing a tank top just waltzing in.

I am fast and small, walking behind and between the men and women. At some points, I pause, waiting for a group to pass and others, I hurry quickly. My timing is perfect, because it has to be. It's almost crazy to think, with all the railguns and high tech sensors

and the room I cannot penetrate, not a one thought to lock the front door.

Ahead of me, there's a metal corridor sealing with lights flashing above. There's a tall komodo dragon walking with a couple armed guards at either of his side. He's moving with a sense of authority, chest out, shoulders straight, and his head tilting back so no one could be at eye level with him. Even amongst his own kind, he thinks himself above everyone else.

I get close behind the dictator, the guards stopping just at the door and taking either side of it. They turn and face away from the door, but their movements are so formal that neither even notices me walking just underneath their line of sight.

I stop in the room, pulling my tail forward just as the metal door behind me is sealed shut. The komodo dragon walks to a table in the center of the room, and I see the pill, shimmering in red, orange, blue, yellow, and green, along with every color in-between.

He steps around the table, getting into a position that I think he imagines to be more dignified or something. Just before he gets to his moment of triumph, he notices me across from him. He stares for a minute, blinking a couple times as if I might be something caught in his eye.

The tyrant looks around, like as if I were a prank his subjects were playing on him, and at any second they'd come bursting in saying surprise! No one is coming out, and so he asks in his final question, "Vhat iz dis?"

I raise my paw, feeling energy coursing through me before I release it out directly into his chest. In a flash, the komodo dragon is nothing but a spray of blood and ash against the wall he was formerly standing in front of. I'm a little stunned—no, a lot, because I wasn't expecting that to happen at all.

In my head, I pictured him crashing into the wall and falling unconscious. Then I'd take the pill and he would wake up, shaking a fist in anger as I foil his plans for galaxy domination. Nope, he is very very dead, and I probably should have tested my powers before this point.

Oh well. If anything, that was a freebie.

I snatch the pill off the table, clutching it in my paw and squeezing it tightly. Unlike the fascists, I know this is too valuable to leave somewhere it can be stolen. Instead, I place it deep into a fold between time and space, ever to be locked away until I need it once more.

My work here done, I look out towards earth, willing myself to sail back home. With a thud, I smack muzzle first into a wall in the

room instead. I'd forgotten that this is the one place I can't travel through. That was embarrassing. Even as a demigod, I can't help but look like a massive dork.

With a sigh, I walk back to the sealed door and give it a knock in succession to a tune I remember. It takes a second before the metal room opens up and the two guards greet me in shock. I take a step out of the room right between the two men. They both raise their guns at the same time, ready to empty their clips inside of me, but I'm already gone, and they only end up eliminating each other and any proof of my existence.

Invisible, atop of a railgun is where I place myself after. I sit there, watching their society from afar. They conclude that their experiment was a failure and never attempt to recreate it again. For as strong of a society they were, all that talk of master species and unity falls apart with their charismatic dictator gone.

Quickly, even before they finish cleaning off the bloody wall of their once great leader, factions are being made. Arguments of what to do next and how to conquer the galaxy falls to infighting. They splinter and a great civil war happens. The railguns once meant for me, are now turning on one another.

I picked a good one, it lasting most of the war. The reactor inside hums, vibrating the railgun underneath me. Radiation leaking from

the core turns the whole thing blue, and just before it can get too hot, the barrel erupts. A projectile launches from its tip, racing at unfathomable speeds to eviscerate ships, battle stations, and other railguns thousands of miles away.

The war lasts years, and I feel a little guilt that I caused this. I didn't want this violence, but I couldn't just let them go through with their plans. It felt like the only option at the time, but I wonder how I could have changed things. Before I can ponder it too hard, I see something coming out the corner of my eye.

It's a bullet from another railgun. I slow time, and even as seconds get stretched to months, it's almost moving too fast for me to follow along. Gradually, I rise from the barrel, stepping off into space just as the hull is pierced through and through. An azure glow spills from the reactor, leaking into space, and the whole gun lazily spirals into nothing.

Decades pass and the war is over. I stay close by, watching their society in fast motion. They rebuild, not just their crumbled buildings and their ruined stations, but they find their heart amongst the destruction. Their war has left them tired of fighting, tired of dictators, charismatic leaders, and talks of power and ruling the galaxy.

I watch a freighter come for the railgun, pulling it into pieces. What is salvaged of the core is sent millions of miles away to power

a station's garden atrium for generations to come. The barrel is chopped to bits, and I follow a small section smelted into raw metal that is later repurposed.

At the end of its journey, I see a small komodo dragon hatching, unwrapping a present and looking up at his parents in pure bliss. He'd never know that the casing surrounding his little easy bake oven was once a tool of awful destruction, and everyone was better for that. I leave, knowing there's nothing left for me to see here.

I've got a party to go to.

I think to just show up, but that feels a little rude. No, I need a proper invite. Then I remember the wolf the Wild Thing was standing next to, and I chase after his image through time and space. It's kinda

hard to flip through a trillion muzzles in history, but I eventually land on him about six months before the party.

I catch him in his coffee uniform, during the middle of his break. He's sipping on a latte while flicking through his social media feed, and seeing him in the light, I realize how handsome he is. It intimidates me for a second. For all the lovers and all the adventures, he catches me a little off guard.

Wiggling my body until I'm feeling loosey goosey, I give my muzzle a slap and tell myself to get it together. With some bravery, I jump right into it, walking into the cafe and taking the seat across from his table to introduce myself. The wolf's name is Giovanni.

He's a college dropout, living in a tiny apartment in a shitty neighborhood on the outskirts of town. When he's not playing video games, he is writing poetry, but he's mostly playing video games. Don't look down on him because I love nothing more than spending time together. When we go out, he likes burgers and hates sushi, but he does it for me anyways.

Giovanni is saving himself for someone special, and I know it's me. I know because I look far into the future, when his fur is gray and his eyes are milky. No spoilers. Just a quick peek, right? Even though he can't see me so well, he recognizes me walking into the room and says, "I love you."

He doesn't say it because he knows what's about to happen next. It's just something he likes to do spontaneously, and he genuinely means it every time. It makes me feel good, that same warmth coursing through my body every time he tells it to me, and maybe that's why I'm just a little too distracted to notice. I don't see the clot building up inside his head until it's too late. I say I love you back, and before anything can be done, he's

gone.

I am cold, scared, lost, and utterly alone.

“Are you crying?” Giovanni asks, and I shake myself from my vision.

I’m sitting cross-legged on his couch with a controller in my paw. I’m not alone. We’re still just playing video games together in our youth. Giovanni’s got a concerned look on his muzzle, pausing the screen for a second to check up on me. I wipe my eyes and nose with the fur on the back of my wrist.

“Yeah, sorry. Allergies, am I right?” I say, nodding assuredly.

He leans his head back, a sly smile on his muzzle as he stretches out a, “Surrreee,” unconvinced.

I shove him with my shoulder, and though he’s almost a foot taller than me, he shoves me back! The big bad wolf. We’re laughing, and resume playing the game. He’d give me so much shit if he knew I was crying about an ending. It was always about the journey. I should know that, better than anyone else.

He goes back to telling me about this cool party, and he wants me to be his plus one. Giovanni is so close to asking me out, but he’s not quite there yet. I know this is just a way to spend more time with me, and I shield the rest of our future together from myself. When he finally asks me out, I want it to be a real surprise.

But if he's not gonna do it tonight then I'm gonna get it from somewhere and I know exactly from who. I tell him yes, but I need to stop off somewhere first. No homo, so we fist bump before I walk out the door and find the last thing I need for myself.

Sitting on a tree at the end of the cretaceous period, I string together a bundle of flamingo pink flowers. I watch the sunrise, taking in the vast greenery of lands untouched. There's a brachiosaurus taking a bite of the leaves next to me, and I reach out to scratch its long neck.

It likes the attention well enough, even if it doesn't know what to make of me. This time and place feels good, and I realize that the Wild Thing was right all along: I am having a lot of fun making this crown. At this point, even after all this time, I finally relax and accept that he was always me and I was always him.

Looking up, I see an asteroid approaching. It's coming and I fold my ears back in sorrow. There's a thought that I can stop this. If there is any time I can play god, it is now. But I know it's not my place to do anything, and I know that party isn't gonna happen if I make any big changes. I'm not god. I am the Wild Thing.

The asteroid slams into the planet, the blinding light of a hundred million megaton explosion sets the world ablaze. I give a final pat to the brachiosaurus, the creature running for its life away from

the destruction. As the ground tremors up towards me, I take a bow, and I'm back in front of Giovanni's place.

He answers the door and compliments my flower crown. Just for fun, I

tell him it's not half as beautiful as he is. The wolf's muzzle turns red, but he pushes past it and holds up his phone. The rideshare is coming, ready to take me the last mile towards destiny.

When the front door opens, it's the hare that invited me to the party. He greets Giovanni with a side hug and then the wolf turns to introduce me as his plus one. The lapine looks at me with some confusion, recognizing me, but I'm just the loner he accidentally invited to the party. Thankfully, he doesn't put too much thought into it, and welcomes me inside.

I spend most of the party with Giovanni being introduced to his friends. They're all chill, and it's not too hard to have a good time with them. But it's a little difficult to also not be so excited, and I've got to focus on the conversations, hoping to make a good impression on his friends.

But it happens.

Standing across the room, holding for dear life onto a cup, I see me. It's hard to not break down into tears. There I am, a thousand

years younger, and the second biggest dork in the universe. And my heart is filled with so much pride.

He's here. He showed up. I can see him more clearly than he could ever see himself, and I'm just so god damn proud of him. It's a Friday night, and though he could have spent the evening watching animes he's seen a billion times over, he's chosen to step out of his comfort zone for the first time.

He doesn't have a single friend here, but he came anyway with the hope to make some. The invite was out of pity, but he dressed nice and

remembered to take the fucking pocket protector out of his shirt before showing up. This night could have been disastrous, and though he doesn't have my powers to see into the future, he went out anyway, like a real champ.

He's flawless.

In my opinion, that's the reason why he's so much cooler than me. It's what makes me feel this intense attraction to him, and I'm getting a little hot and bothered. The marble fox across the room is slender, young, and so nervous. He has nothing to fear, because anyone would be so lucky to be with someone as special as he is.

That's when he turns to me, and we make eye contact. I see his thoughts; see what he thinks of me, and I'm flattered. In his mind,

I see me as true: I am the Wild Thing, and I want to be with him as much as he wants to be with me. Except this time, I think I'll be on bottom.

Hi, I'm Jack and I'm Not From This World

I slap my paw on the table and shout, "And then Bethany says, 'What Sandwich?'"

The entire group erupts in laughter as I finish my story. Kenneth, the elk in front of me, throws his head back so hard that his antlers bump against the wall behind him. My boyfriend wraps an arm around me tightly, and it feels good to have the husky by my side again. It feels like it's been years since I've been able to make people laugh that hard.

The table winds down and a vixen nudges the elk's shoulder, "Hun, you're gonna get us kicked out again."

"Yeah, yeah," he waves his hooves, trying to settle himself down. "I just forgot how funny Jack can be at times."

I know what he means, though only slightly. The waitress comes around, a pug with a tablet out for us. "What drinks would you all be having?" She asks with a perky ring in her voice.

I look up at her with a wide grin. "I'll take a Coke," I say, and then immediately realize my mistake.

So does the rest of the table.

Everyone stops laughing, their eyes all on me. This happens every single time. I get ahead of myself and say something too fast and now everyone is confused. It's like I just unbuckled my pants and shat right in the middle of the table.

"A what?" she asks, turning her eyes to the rest of the group in confusion.

My boyfriend, Tre, touches a paw to my leg and mutters, "Jack?"

I grab my menu, flipping open to the beverages and point at the one on top. "Ugh, sorry, I meant a Pepsi. I'd like a Diet Pepsi," I clarify. It's not actually the soda I want, but it's the only one that I recognize.

The waitress eyes me a second longer before moving to the bear on my left, Dannon I learned. He's my best friend, I think, but it used to be Kenneth. "I think I'll have a Cane," he says, trying to act like nothing is off. I think that's the equivalent of a Coca-Cola, but I'm not really feeling adventurous enough to find out.

Everyone else orders their drinks, and just as the pug leaves, the vixen, Trish I think, asks with her eyebrows raised, "Did you try to order cocaine from the waitress?"

I wave my paws out in front of my chest. "No, no, sorry. I just got mixed up. Don't worry about it," I say, knowing she's not worth the explanation. She's just the flavor of the month with how fast Kenneth goes through girls.

"It's his condition," my boyfriend says, and I fold my ears back. I really wish he didn't, but Tre always likes to explain it so everyone's on the same page. "He was lost in the woods for half a year and so sometimes he gets the names of things mixed up."

She nods her head up and down with some sympathy, and I feel a little guilty cause that's not the truth. It's just the explanation that makes sense to all of them. I kinda hate having to live with the lie, but I put on my smile and wave a paw. "Yeah, what he said. It's not a big deal."

I try and blow past it as quickly as possible and the conversation starts up as normal again. It always feels like a close call, this whole lie I've constructed. See, I didn't get lost in any woods. No, about a month ago, I walked straight into them and knew exactly where to go cause a witch gave me a map.

Alright, none of this is making any sense to you so lemme catch you up. Hi, I'm Jack, and I'm not from this world. I'm from your world, where I graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in computer science and my favorite football team is the Packers. Not here though.

See, I wanted to go to this world for some reasons I'd rather keep to myself, and in this world I'm not the meerkat that hates Disneyland and loves Buffalo Wild Wings. I walked through a cave and suddenly, I'm Jack that graduated from UC Golden, my football team is the High Kicks, and everyone drives on the left side of the road. That blows, but worth it.

Trish leans in, not wanting to drop the conversation. "You poor thing. What was it like, being out there all by yourself?"

Oh right, and this world's Jack took a camping trip seven months ago and is probably dead.

"Harrowing," I say flatly, and that's enough to change the subject.

"We still on for Sunday?" Kenneth asks quickly, wrapping his arm over Trish's shoulder to try and bring her back in.

"Hell yeah! Doug Riot's Wyldstar!" I confirm, and though I'm not actually a big fan of movies, spending time with Kenneth sounds

good again. Back in my world, we fell out when I was being a depressed piece of shit.

The bear, Dannon, leans in and taps his big claw on the table. "Uh, actually, I thought we were watching the High Kick's game on Sunday?"

I cock my muzzle to the side, and then slap myself on the forehead. "Aw, shit, I did promise that, didn't I?"

In the month I've been in this world, I've come to learn that Dannon is the guy I hung out with all the time. He's my old college roommate, I think, and kinda clingy as all fuck. I don't know what this dimension's version of me sees in him, but he's been trying to hang out alone and I guess I owe former me that. Heck, this world's Jack could still be out there in those woods and I don't wanna ruin what he had going.

"Let's shoot for Saturday," I promise Kenneth, and he nods. It must be a little weird with me wanting to spend so much time with him. We just seemed to be Facebook, I mean, Faceshare friends in this world.

Tre, my wonderful boyfriend, leans in for a peck on my cheek. My Tre did that all the time too, usually before he wanted to tell me something. I peck him back the way I do. He's the one thing that's

a mirror replica, the treasure the witch promised when she helped take me to this universe.

“Don’t forget, we’re having dinner with my parents on Saturday,” he reminds me.

Ugh, they’re the same too, but that’s no big deal. “We’ll figure out something,” I promise Kenneth, but he looks a bit disheartened. How the fuck am I supposed to keep track of every new thing, and my schedule. It’s kinda a chore.

Saturday rolls around without too much excitement. I only mix up a few things throughout the week, but it’s nothing crazy. My coworkers had to wheel me to the correct desk only once, and I call my phone an Android, which makes no fucking sense to anyone.

“Still driving on the wrong side of the road?” Tre’s mom asks in the mocking half-joke. half-putdown that she’s so good at.

I pour my wine glass close to the brim. “All the way here,” I joke, trying not to let her ruin the mood.

Tre’s parents are dressed nice, something they like to do when they have company over. He made me put on a dress shirt too, even though I wanted to come in a t-shirt and flip flops. Even between dimensions, some things never change. “It’s just part of his condition,” Tre says, always to my defense.

I put on my smile and nod up and down. Tre's father coughs and shuffles in his seat. The husky is large and always intimidated me a little bit, but he says in his deep voice, "It's good to have you back, regardless."

I kinda feel like it's a lie. They probably tried ushering Tre towards some bitch the day I didn't come back home. They always wanted grandkids, but me and Tre aren't interested. At least I hope we still don't want any cubs.

"I'm glad to be back. Missed eating real food," I say, patting the little bulge that has grown over my tummy.

His mom snickers at that, pointing over to me. "I bet. You were fur and bones when they found you."

It's true. I stopped eating altogether back in my world, and when I think about it, it wasn't fair to let everyone watch me waste away.

Turning to Tre's father, I quickly change the subject. "How's the firm holding up? Still protecting millionaires from tax evasion?" I joke, something I could do with him from time to time.

It falls flat.

His muzzle scrunches up, brow raising. "Firm?"

Tre's mom leans back into her seat with the wine glass to her muzzle. "Here we go again," she says before taking a loud sip.

Tre darts a glare to his mom and says, "His condition—"

If I have to hear about my condition one more time, I'm gonna lose it, so I interrupt, "Sorry. What is it you do again?"

"State prosecutor.

I make sure the millionaires don't evade their share," he says bluntly, and I can see why my blunder rubbed him so wrong.

"And I'm an astronaut, don't you know?" Tre's mom jokes at my expense.

My husky straightens himself out on the seat, saying in a strained tone, "Mother, that's not funny. You're a professor of Biology at Calitazs State."

Biochem at the Stanford University, but I'm glad he said it so I couldn't mess that up to. Just little things that're off, and I feel bad for not doing my research. Like a fraud, cause that's what I am. Still, I put on my smile and nod like I belong here because I'm not going back.

I let them do most of the talking and the rest of the night moves on rather smoothly. I can tell that my husky is putting on a show though. There's just something in the way that he talks that lets me know he's getting that much closer to the truth. I need to start doing better.

I arrive at Dannon's house with a six pack of Sunnyvale, and I did my due diligence this time. It's the equivalent of the beer I used to

drink, good ol Hefe, so I feel a little proud of myself. "Game day!" I shout as the bear opens the door for me.

He gives a wide toothy smile at my cheeriness and says, "Guess you've been excited about this too, haven't you?"

Dannon leans in, gives me a brush on the whiskers, and I almost pull back. This world's me was a lot more affectionate than I was. I'd never be so intimate with my friends, but I go along with it and brush whiskers back.

"It's the High Kicks against the Calitaza Miners. Of course I'm excited!" I lie.

I'd much rather be watching Aaron Rodgers throw a laser thirty yards down the field, but the High Kick's stallion, Blee, seems to be good enough. Football is football and I'm gonna have fun anyways.

"Yeah, I guess we can watch some sports after," he says as he leads me in.

I laugh cause I think he's joking. Games about to start in ten, and I'm not really sure what after is. I'm lead into the living room, noticing that there's no game day snacks, and that's a little disheartening. I'd have at least had some chips out if I was hosting a game.

Plopping my beers on the table, I flop down into the couch and look expectantly at the TV. Dannon seems to know what I'm waiting for, so he takes a seat awfully close to me and grabs the remote.

He flicks on the screen, flipping through the channels until he finds what he's looking for.

My eyes grow wide, and I cough out. "This isn't the game?"

No, it's certainly not. It's two foxes fucking like mad. Their moans of pleasure are blaring through the speakers, and the slap of one of the dudes balls is just loud enough to overcome it. "Oh god, oh god yes," the one getting fucked screams out as he's beating his cock like it owed him money.

"The fu—"

Before I can finish my thought, there's a thick wet ursine tongue deep into my muzzle. It's running up against mine, his lips locked firmly to my face. A paw finds its way into my shirt, claws running through my fur straight to my nipples. I panic and pull back as hard as I can with my paws pushing against the bear's chest.

"Holy fuck, dude?" I scream out, trying to back into a corner of the couch, but not getting far enough.

He barely seems to register my discomfort as he forces another kiss against my lips. "Ohhhhhh, I've missed this. C'mere you sweet fuck," he mutters out as he gropes against my leg.

"No!" I shout again, and this time push the big bear back with enough force to throw him down on his own couch. "What the fuck is this?"

The foxes are so loud, I only realize now that he can barely hear me. He grabs the remote with some confusion and hits pause on the TV. I'd rather he just turn off the damn thing, cause now it's stuck on a close up of the foxes railing. Dannon says with some puzzlement.

"What we always do when you come over for the game. Or is this part of your condition?" He asks with a grin.

"Maybe? Yes? I don't wanna fuck you, if that's what I've been doing," I spit out quickly.

"Jack, you can drop the act.

It's just me," Dannon says, and my heart sinks in my gut. He lets out a low lusty growl, desire still in his eyes. "You joined some sex cult out there in those woods. Got into the really freaky shit, didn't ya?"

I'm a little disturbed, but mostly relieved he's wrong. "You're always wanting to hang out with Kenneth nowadays. You fucking him too, little slut?" he asks, and not maliciously. It's twisted. Like I'm supposed to be getting off on the idea of fucking around behind Tre's back. Like I probably did.

He's not reading me right at all, and he leans in again to run a claw right up my inner thigh. I hate it, because I know he knows exactly where to touch me. Only my Tre knew that spot. Blood rushes

to my groin, my body betraying me. He doesn't get to touch me like that again.

My fist swings wild, knocking him right on the nose. It sent the message home as he completely rolls to the other side of the couch. Paws are clutching his muzzle and I can see blood pour between his fingers. He says something like, "Fuck! My nose!" but I can't really make it out when slamming his front door behind me.

I stomp towards my car, fist still clenched tightly. I practically scrape up my paint job trying to get the keys in the door. As soon as I get in, I'm out on the street. It's not until I almost run head first into another car that I realize I'm on the wrong side of the road again.

There's a few blocks difference between me and Dannon's house before I pull over. Guilt builds up in my chest for hitting the bear the way I did. He should have stopped when I told him too, but I wasn't as angry at him as I am myself. This other me.

How did he not know how special Tre was? How could another me have taken his husky for granted like that? He couldn't have understood the lengths I've gone to get back to Tre. A bad thought crosses my mind, glad that this world's Jack went missing. It's not good, because I don't think anyone deserves to die.

I want to go home, but I can't. It would look too suspicious and I got the jitters anyways. I'm such an awful liar, I have no idea how

Tre hasn't found out already. My first thought is to go to a bar and watch the game there, but football is ruined for me at the moment. Then I remember Kenneth, my actual friend.

The elk agrees to see Wildstar with me. I'm glad that we can just sit in the cool movie theater. It gives me time to collect myself. The explosions distract me, and by the time we walk out, I'm feeling a little better. Kenneth points at a shop, some chain called BlueTops. It's sorta like Starbucks where I'm from, but everyone drinks hot cider instead of coffee around here. I think it's gross, but I do wanna chat with him, so I agree.

"How was the football game?" Kenneth asks casually, and it's a little bit of a surprise to me.

"Oh, uh, I didn't end up watching it," I say, and I guess with us not being friends in this universe, he wasn't interested in football, else he would have known that. Maybe I should have asked my Kenneth if he ever really liked watching the games with me.

He cocks an eyebrow and asks, "Did something happen with you and Dannon?"

There's a lump in my throat. I want to tell him everything, the way I'd tell my Kenneth, but he's not him and I don't want to dump everything on him. "I don't think I want to hangout with him anymore," I admitted, and that was mostly the truth.

He nods, pulling up his cider to his muzzle and taking a sip. There's a little bit of an awkward silence so I blurt out, "How's things with Trish?"

The elk snorts, the steam coming off the drink blowing all over the place. "We split up. She had too many issues with my rack, and truthfully, I wasn't a big fan of hers either," he said, waving his hooves in circles.

I laugh, "Same ol' Kenneth. Always on the hunt for something better." As I finish, I take a big sip of my cinnamon apple cider and try my best not to wrinkle my muzzle. I don't know how they do it here, but they replaced ketchup with buffalo sauce, so, I guess it's a fair trade.

His brow goes up, but his smile doesn't fade.

"You say that like we know each other. This is the most I've seen you in years," he states, though it's not a challenge.

"Why did we never hang out? You're awesome," I say, because I'm still not sure what happened in this universe.

He scratches his chin with his hoof, looking at me shyly. "I guess I never was your type? Your friends usually seem to be more your speed," he says carefully, skirting around the issue and it finally clicks with me.

I wasn't— this Jack wasn't friends with someone unless they were sleeping together. And it was a dirty secret that everyone knew. Man, I was such a loser in this world cause Kenneth is the best. Well, I guess I am a loser in my own world too, cause I let my Kenneth go as well. That wasn't going to happen again.

I lean over and say with a smile, "I'd like us to spend time together more. You watch football?"

Coming home, I'm feeling a lot better. Kenneth agrees to come over next Sunday so I can teach him about the game. I also make a note to pick out some movies to watch together, because this Kenneth seems to enjoy doing that. No foxes fucking on the TV this time. I open the door to my house, and hear Tre call me from the basement.

I get to the top of the stairs and knock on the open door. "You down here babe?" I ask, slowly descending the steps.

"Yeah! Come down here. I wanna show you something," he calls back, and I can hear him fiddling with things.

It's dimly lit down here, and I can see him in a corner with some bikes on the rack. "What're you up to, hun?"

He doesn't turn around as he continues messing with the bikes. "Just looking at old pictures of us at Cinderland. We look so goofy in the photos. You remember that?" He says chipperly.

Ugh, another thing different. I know Cinderland enough from the ads to know it's Disneyland and I hate that place. Not only was this me a cheating bastard, but he was also one of those Disney nuts. I'd never willingly go to that shithole. I roll my eyes and put on my best smile.

"Oh yeah. That was a lot of fun. Can't wait to go back," I say, and it's hard for me to keep that same cheery tone.

"Photos in the desk," he says, but his voice sounds a little different.

I turn to the desk, and it's not my Dad's cherrywood, but a blocky metal workstation. I pull open the long drawer handle and freeze as I see nothing inside at all. I turn to face the husky and say, "Um, hun, there's nothing in— oh."

Whelp, this is different. My Tre didn't own a gun. But now this Tre was pointing one right at me, paws shaking. Tears are running down the sides of his face and his muzzle is twisted in an angry frown. "Hun—"

"Don't you fucking Hun me. I don't know who you are, but my Jack would never go to Cinderland. My Jack hates that place, but you wouldn't know that cause you're not him," he says, legs spread like he's bracing himself for the gun to go off any second.

My heart's pounding, and I slowly raise my paws over my head. He's shaking so bad, it's just as likely he's gonna shoot me on accident as much as he is on purpose. Not gonna lie, but a little wee comes out. "My condition—"

"STOP IT," he barks, thrusting the pistol forward. "Stop lying! You're so fucking bad at it, and I'm done lying for you."

He's been taken way past the edge, and It's killing me to see him so distressed. I should've known he could see right through me. My Tre always could, and I shouldn't have expected any different.

"It's not what you think," I start, my heart breaking as I'm forced to admit the truth. "But I'm not your Jack."

"I knew it! I knew it from the start that you weren't him! And you just lied to me and took advantage of me," he says, fang sinking so hard in his lip that he's drawing blood. "Who the fuck are you? What the fuck are you? Are you some furwalker? Some sort of demon?"

I gulp loudly and try to explain all at once, "I'm Jack, but I'm not from here. A witch gave me directions to this cave where I—"

"I swear to God," Tre says, and grips his pistol tighter.

My muzzle cracks, I can't hold anything back because I don't want to say it.

I don't want to relive it. The lengths I've gone to escape that hell. I don't want to say it, but he deserves the truth and so I shout through a sob. "It was you!"

His maw opens and there's a look of complete puzzlement on his muzzle. He's about to speak, but I snort up snot and explain. "Where I'm from, you went on that camping trip seven months ago. Not me. And when you left you just—" I choke down mucus building up in my throat. "You just vanished.

"I spent months in those mountains looking for you. Every time the rangers went out, I was there. All the money we saved was spent on private expeditions when everyone else gave up. I stopped eating. I stopped sleeping. I stopped talking. People couldn't even stand to look at me anymore. I got so desperate, I started going to psychics and paranormal shit for help. Anything just to have you back."

I fall into the workbench, and drag the back of my paw over my eyes. He's barely visible through my tears. I can tell he's still got the pistol out, but it's pointed slightly downward. There's a small sniffling as he tries to work out everything I've said.

He shakes his head back and forth before he says, "It scares me like nothing else. Since you've been back, you've told me nothing but lies." I brace myself, thinking it might be it for me, but he finishes,

"You're such an awful liar, but I think for the first time, you're telling me the truth. Or whatever you think the truth is."

I let out a small sigh of relief and hold out my paw towards him. "I'm sorry I lied, but I'm telling you the truth now and truthfully, I want you to put down the gun so we can just talk about this."

Tre looks down at the pistol like he hadn't realized he'd whipped one out on me. He scoffs, rolls his eyes, and then tosses it my direction. I panic, floundering as it goes sailing through the air. I cup out both paws, bracing myself for it to go off and take a finger with it.

It clanks softly against my paw pads, lighter than I expect it to be. Only when I feel the slosh of water do I realize that it's not a real gun. In fact, looking at it close up, it's pretty obvious it's a squirt toy. I look up at him and he takes a step back, ears red hot with embarrassment.

The husky's lip is quivering as he whispers, "I'm sorry. All I wanted was the truth."

I set the squirt gun behind me, but I'm a little afraid to approach Tre. His muzzle is to the ground, like he did something wrong. I mean, it wasn't very nice that he pointed a gun at me, but I guess I kinda had it coming.

"Sorry, for all the lying. I thought if I stayed here long enough, you'd never notice," I admit.

He rubs his eye, letting out a small pitiful laugh. "You've always been a bad liar. He was always a bad liar too: About Dannon, the other guys, football, and all that."

My ears go up, and I feel some collateral guilt from what he just said. "You knew he was cheating on you? And you stayed with him anyways?"

His legs wobble before he can't even hold himself up anymore. He takes a weary step back, thumping against the wall and slowly sliding down it. When he's on the floor with his head between his knees, he says. "I knew. You used— he used to think he was so sly, but I always knew. He wouldn't even know the scores when he said he was out watching football. But I stayed cause losing you— him—"

He pauses to look up at me, and I feel connected with him in an awful way. The way that I never stopped looking in those damn woods. I gave up my friends, my life, my family just for the sheer hope of seeing him one last time. What we shared was the inability to let go, and I see it in his eyes like he sees it in mine.

"I guess it doesn't matter anymore," he starts, waving a paw lazily around. "I lost him anyways, and he's never coming back."

It's the words he needs to say, just as much as the words I need to hear. Cause truthfully, my Tre is gone too. My Tre is never coming

back. For the first time ever, I have to accept that. So I walk over, pick a spot close, and get down on the ground with him.

It feels like we just stay there in silence for hours. Maybe it is, because there's a million things for me to think of doing next. I could probably go back and find that cave again. Repair things with my Kenneth, make things right in my world. Not everyone gets a second chance like this, so instead I say.

"I don't know what happened to your Jack, and I don't know what happened to my Tre. They just disappeared, and I don't think they're coming back," I say, then lift my head and turn towards him. He's done the same, and our noses are just a few inches from each other. He's not crying anymore, though his eyes are red.

"But what I do know is that you're the only Tre I have left, and I think I might be the last of me that exists. So how about this?" I gulp, and hold out a paw towards him. "Hi, I'm Jack, and I'm not from this world."

He laughs, cause it does sound a little goofy. I could always make my Tre laugh unintentionally, and it gives me confidence I can make this one laugh like that too. He doesn't take my paw yet, so I continue, "I like Buffalo Wild Wings, though, I have no idea what you call it here. I hate Cinderland, but we call it Disneyland where I came from"

"Kenneth was my best friend, and I didn't hang out with anyone named Dannon. I actually watched football when I said that's what I was doing. I wasn't perfect, but not once did I ever cheat on my Tre, and I promise I would never cheat on you either," I say, and it starts to make my eyes water thinking about the things this Tre has gone through.

He looks at my paw, thinking about it for a minute, before his eyes turn up to mine in a stern look. "No more lies?"

It's a big promise to keep, but I've gone too far to turn back now. I nod and repeat, "No more lies."

With a sigh, he reaches out and clasps my paw. "Hi Jack. It's nice to meet you. My name is Tre. Welcome to my world."

Hey, Buddy

Sacha rolled cold eggs around his plate, twiddling his fork between his fingers. The metal scratched about, irritating the two other wolves at the table. Dad pretended not to hear it, scrolling through his phone and twitching with every scrape. Mom, however, was not having it.

Her utensils clattered against the granite tabletop and she coughed. "You know, I'd sure like to meet Calvin this weekend. He sounds lovely."

Subtle.

It'd been a month. Not since Sacha'd come out. That happened years ago and all *discussions* about that were long since distant hazy memories. It'd been a month since he told his parents about Calvin, the charming dalmatian he started dating.

Sacha let his fork go, pulling out his phone without taking his eyes off Mom. "I can text him. He gets straight A's so I'm sure his parents wouldn't mind. Maybe tonight, if I send it right now."

Her tongue clicked in her cheek, but he knew she'd do that. Something in his teenage hormones told him he had to make everything difficult, especially if he knew it would make everything difficult. The two's stares bore into each other, an argument boiling up to the surface underneath the silence.

A hard crack of ceramic wheels rolling over the driveway's cement slabs rang hard. It was enough to distract them, all six lupine ears flashing upwards to listen for an impending fall. It never came and they relaxed. Mom was first to speak.

"I think you know that's not what I'm saying," she said, claws rapping at the table.

"Why can't Calvin just come over?" Leaning in and lowering his voice, Sacha continued, "I don't see why I have to talk to Reggie first."

His little brother wouldn't be able to hear him from outside. Not while practicing ollies on his skateboard, but Sacha didn't like talking about him behind his back.

Mom dropped her voice similarly. "I want him to understand. We don't like springing any surprises on him."

Dad followed up, a chuckle in his voice, "Boy nearly had a heart attack when we served salmon instead of hot dogs that one night."

Both Sacha and Mom glowered, his sense of humor not welcome. He rolled his eyes and put himself back into his phone.

Sacha's fingers went up to his temple, rubbing a patch of white fur that circled his eye. "Why don't you two talk with him? You're the adults."

Her brow furrowed, the argument rehashed for so long it could walk on two feet. "He'll have questions. Questions I won't know the answer to. And, no offense hunny, but do you really want your father to talk to him about this?" Dad shrugged and mock frowned, accepting the out like the joker he was.

It wasn't that simple. Dad pulled Sacha aside once and said they'd talk to Reggie if he really couldn't, but he had to at least try. He had to genuinely try and help his little brother understand his sexuality before his father might intervene. Not before then.

Sacha pushed his plate away like his responsibilities were on top. "What do you want me to say? I date dudes? Just tell him I'm gay like he doesn't already think that word means stupid or bad?"

Mom's ears ducked, but she pushed forward anyways, "If he thinks that then you can correct him on it. He'll listen to you."

Frustration growled out from Sacha's throat and graveled his words as he spoke, "What if he doesn't? What if he freaks out or something?"

Dad squinted, a warning to keep those growls in check. Mom rubbed a paw through her headfur, just as annoyed as Sacha. "That's why you need to talk to him first."

It'd become circular, this argument.

Sacha's paws came down hard on the table. "You guys don't understand!"

He winced, embarrassed at what he'd just done. There was a ninety percent chance he was grounded, no matter what he'd do. Neither Mom nor Dad spoke, their faces frozen in shock. Seeing their expressions hurt him, almost physically, and he had to be honest with them.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to tell him. I really did. I just don't want him to hate me," Sacha said, voice quivering. Cause, oh god, he really did try. The weekend prior, he'd sat down in the driveway with Reggie. He was ready to tell him everything and it just got stuck in his chest. All the words he'd meant to say, and all he could do was teach his little brother to do an ollie.

Mom rose and Sacha's head went down. He closed his eyes, ready for the scolding of a lifetime. Arms draped over his shoulders,

whiskers brushing against his own as she hugged him from behind. Her cheek was warm, his tear soaking into the fur on her muzzle.

“He’d never hate you,” she said softly. “I know that, cause we love you too much to ever. Him especially.”

Sacha let out a sigh of relief, her affection enough to pull off some of his worries. When he opened his eyes, Dad was smiling. His eyebrows flicked up in a sorta, “She’s right, you know?” but at least he didn’t say it.

The front door opened, skateboard collapsing onto the hardwood floors of the foyer. Mom would give Reggie shit for that, but for now, she released the hug and sat back in her seat. Sacha nodded to both of them, took a deep breath, and walked into the living room.

Reggie was on the couch, flicking through channels on the TV. Two bluish-grey ears poked out of the helmet he’d not yet taken off. A white spot of fur circled his eye same as Sacha’s. He was so focused on screen, he barely registered his older brother sitting down next to him.

“Hey, buddy.”

Reggie turned, eyes and smile lit bright. Sacha knew in that look, everything would be alright.

“Forever Forever Forever”

The grass crackled like glass with every footstep Cody took onto the empty football field. Each white line of the gridiron already fading into the night. A puff of cloudy air exhaled out of the wolf’s muzzle as he sighed. It was one heck of a year.

Despite winning the game, his team, the Greenpark Loggers, was last in the division and wouldn’t be moving any further for the semester. Heck, this was probably the last time he’d ever step out onto the field. He didn’t see himself pursuing football in college, not that community would have a team. He got his one win as starting quarterback and he did it with the whole support of his team.

He couldn’t have asked for more.

“Cody!”

A voice rang out from the eerie silence of the empty stands. The wolf turned, put on a smile, and faced the panther running towards him in his own letterman jacket. He almost didn’t brace himself in

time as the cat darted across the field and into his arms. They spun around in circles, the jock lifting the other teen off the ground. His warm neck nuzzled into his shoulder the entire way.

When they'd gotten dangerously close to toppling over, Cody sat him back down on his feet.

Their eyes met, both holding onto wide smiles until their instincts became too much to hold back. They locked their muzzles into a long passionate kiss, taking in their scents and the cold night air. It was the first time they'd done it so open, and even in an empty field, this one felt special.

"You did it!" Becker shouted, following with a peck to his cheek. "You did it! You did it! You did it!"

Cody nodded his head up and down sheepishly, paw to the back of his head. "I know. I know," he replied, although there were so many things that he could have meant, he wasn't sure what he was responding to.

Becker's tail lashed about behind him, something he couldn't contain when he got this excited. "I told you your team would support you and they did. Even Drake had your back. And you won the game! I always believed in you."

He did. It was a month ago, though it felt like years now, when the first rumors went around that he was gay. Cody tried so hard

to keep it a secret, tried to squash down everything said behind his back. He'd even gotten physical with his best friend, Drake, just to try to keep things from getting out. Of course, Becker told him that the team wouldn't care, just needed to know that he trusted them.

"You were right about that, and I've never felt closer to them than I do now. Thanks," Cody said. Though he did mean it, he couldn't help but look toward the empty stands. His smile faltered a bit, but he tried to hold onto it for his panther's sake.

Becker saw through him immediately. "They'll come around. They're your family. They have to come around."

Cody's lupine muzzle dipped, the wound still fresh. They'd been caught kissing a week ago by his dad, and then was promptly thrown out. He had thought they would have come to the game anyways, always adamant about saving face. Guess not this time.

Becker rested a paw on his shoulder, and Cody did his best not to wince. He didn't want anyone to see how bad that last hit was, the one where he tucked the football under his arm and went straight into the line. Even with all the padding, the Elk he forced back really nailed him. Through it all though, he managed to push the ball forward and score the game winning touchdown.

That though relieved some of the tension, and he turned back to his panther. "You're usually about these things. You've always been the smarter one," he conceded.

"Mom says that you can stay however long you want. Heck, she can even get you a job at her warehouse until you get back on your feet. She's practically in love with you," he said, and to lighten up the situation, he added, "I should really watch out for her."

Cody's muzzle twisted into a mock frown and he stuck his tongue out. "Don't make it weird. You know you're the only cat in my life."

The panther playfully slugged his shoulder, something that he hated Cody doing back. But it was enough to let him know that he cared and would always be there for him. Even though they were about to be separated by hundreds of miles. That thought came to mind and his ears folded back.

"It'll be hard though, with you going to UC Golden in the fall. At least we'll have a few months together," Cody said, scratching a paw to the back of his head to cover up his disappointment. It took some growing up, but he'd finally come to terms with Becker's decision to leave state for school. Asking him to change schools was cublike, and he felt bad he did it to begin with.

Becker grinned slyly, and Cody knew something was up before he even said it. His ears went up just as the feline started with, "Actually--"

"Don't tell me you're--"

"I think I heard University of Greenpark has a developing CS department," Becker interrupted casually.

Cody furrowed his brow, and though he was happy, he couldn't help but feel a little guilty. "Don't do this for me. UC Golden is an opportunity of a lifetime. It'll only be a few years and I can eventually work my way out there," he said, but didn't truly believe his words.

Becker just shook his head, smile still on his muzzle, "It's already done. They were my backup anyways, so it's not too big a deal."

Tears ran down the side of the wolf's muzzle. He thought this might've been over, and now they were truly going to stay together. With so much emotions building up, he took a deep breath, reached down into his pocket, and got down onto a knee.

"Cody?" the

panther whispered, eyes wide.

This was why he wanted him to meet him on the field after the game. Even if their team had lost, he'd go through with it. Even if Becker was still going to UC Golden, he had planned this. He looked up into his boyfriend's eyes and pulled out his high school ring.

"Lance Becker Adams, we've been doing this together in secret for two years now. It's been fucking crazy, with ups and down. I don't want to keep us hidden anymore," he paused before adding, "I- I've lost so much to get here, but I don't ever want to lose you. Would you-?"

"Yes!" the panther shouted through tears.

It was good that he interrupted him, cause the big speech he had planned out was falling apart anyways. All he wanted to hear was that word. With that, he slipped his ring onto the panther's finger. His own tears ran down the sides of his muzzle, and though they stung, he couldn't be happier.

Cody asked in shaky words, "Forever?"

"Forever."

Forever.



Mistakes had

been made. Not just a decade ago, but the night prior for sure. Cody knew that before he even opened his eyes. He knew it before his arm rolled over to the side only to land on a short furred back. Immediately, he pulled it away, scooching to his side of the bed.

Well, it wasn't his side of the bed anymore. Now it just was just his bed. He threw up the sheets as quietly as possible, carefully wiggling his way off. The motion pinched his shoulder, the football injury that never seemed to heal correctly. Still, he bore the pain just to leave the bed without waking up Becker.

He needed coffee.

Cody rubbed the sand out of his eyes, only to knock into a box laying out in the hall. His footpaw went into it with a thud, thankfully only filled with clothes rather than something that would make a lot of noise. If he ran into Becker's fucking figurine set, he'd be sure to have him pull out every single one just to check for damages.

He pushed the box just out of the way so he wouldn't hit it again. Of course, there was a maze of cardboard leading all the way to the kitchen. For as smart as he brags, Becker had the organizational skills of a cub. It used to be enduring at some point: times where Cody would clean up the panther's desk because he knew his husband wouldn't be able to find anything under stacks of soda cans. Not so much anymore.

The very first thing he noticed when he walked into the kitchen was the lack of a coffee maker. "Son of a bitch," he muttered out, and when he thought about it, he actually meant it.

Cody looked over at a box on top of the island countertop. Kitchen supplies. He could understand the blender, the food processor,

the expensive knives, and even half of the dishes. He didn't cook much for himself, so there'd be no doubt packaged noodles were gonna make up the majority of his meals in the coming months.

But the coffee maker? It was only twenty bucks when he first bought it, but Cody *did* buy it. Didn't matter who used it more. He'd bought it when he was working late night shifts in the warehouse. Cody still worked late evenings, a bartender now, and would occasionally want a coffee. Not nearly as much when he was slugging around boxes for that awful woman.

It was petty, but Becker could buy his own fucking coffee machine. With his claw, he ran through the tape over the top of the box. The pounding hangover spurred him on, tossing the paper buffer onto the countertop carelessly until he found what he was looking for.

He set it up, pulling out a filter and pouring in his cheap dollar store coffee into it. Of course, Becker left him that. He was always complaining that the cheap stuff was inferior, but Cody couldn't taste the difference with the cream and sugar. His husband- ex-husband could never understand the value of a dollar.

The pot was filling just as he heard the sound of someone stumbling out into the hall. Cody leaned his back against the cupboard, something he'd gotten used to when an impending fight was coming. And sure enough, as soon as the panther came around the corner, he was already speaking.

"Please tell me what happened last night, didn't actually happen," Becker said with a paw over his forehead, no doubt sporting the same hangover.

Cody crossed his arms, brow furrowed. "Why do you do that? Always point out the obvious so it's more awkward than it already is?"

It must've been pretty early in the morning, the feline keeping his mouth shut for a second as he thought of a response. He'd almost thought he wouldn't have anything for him, but of course, there was always a bullet in the chamber. "Because some people like talking about things. Like why the hell did you take the coffee maker out?"

"My coffee maker. I bought it. Doesn't matter who used it more. It's mine," Cody said, and immediately felt like a fucking cub for saying it. His lupine ears folded back, and he shook his head as he sighed. "You're free to have a cup."

"Is it—"

“It’s the cheap shit. You can keep all of your beans,” Cody added swiftly, as if to make a point that the coffee maker was staying.

Becker moved groggily towards the pantry, pulling out two red plastic cups for himself. As he did, he spoke, “Mom said that it was a fair trade since the fur blower is staying with you, but whatever.”

“Oh, that’s a surprise: You and her calculated it all down to the penny?” he asked with some bitterness in his voice.

The panther clicked his tongue to his cheek, tail snapping like a whip.

“You know, you could be a little bit grateful.”

Cody opened his muzzle to speak, but a ding of the coffee machine’s bell interrupted him. There was nothing nice to say anyways, so it was for the best. He just grabbed the pot and poured it into his mug before holding it out to Becker. The panther held out his cup, and Cody filled it about three quarters full.

Cody sat his mug on the counter while the panther just sipped his black. He never understood how he could do that. The wolf added a hefty amount of cream before pouring in an almost equal amount of sugar inside. Becker looked at his mug, equally revolted by the wolf’s choice.

"So," Cody started, a little pause as he thought of his words. "Maybe we should divvy up our bars? Like how Rich and Josh did when they split up?"

The panther's ears folded back, and he looked up with a little bit of a glare, "The Hopper is kinda my thing. Don't you have your own bar?"

"I'm not gonna drink at my own bar. It's a straight bar. Can't you pick one of the clubs? You like dancing," he pointed out, not wanting to give up The Hopper. It was closer, easier to walk home while drunk. Course, that was why they stumbled home together the night before and made this sticky mess.

"You hardly ever go to The Hopper. You're always with your football friends when you go out. Besides, it's hard to hit on dudes at the clubs with the music blaring," Becker whined.

"Yeah, you do like to do that, don't you?" Cody shot with some ice in his voice.

The panther straightened his stance, claws dimpling the plastic cup he was holding. "I flirted. It was *just* flirting. You don't have any fucking room to speak."

"You'd do it right in fucking front of me all the time," Cody said, point his mug at the panther quick enough to spill some coffee over the rim.

A mean smile split Becker's muzzle, and he threw a paw out into the air. "Oh, Is this when you want to open up about your feelings? Didn't want to do that before you—"

"—How was I supposed to fucking feel?" He interrupted. Even as the words left his mouth, he knew he stepped in it big time.

"You weren't supposed to feel that it was okay to cheat on me. How did the math even work out that you could compare the two?" Becker brought it up, like the months of marriage counseling hadn't drilled in how he was the bad guy.

"Jeez, Beck, when's the fucking ice queen get here so I can finally stop having that thrown in my face every fucking day of my life?"

Becker slapped his cup against the table, pointing a finger at the wolf. "How dare you? Mom's done more for you than any of

your washed up highschool-peaked loser football friends. Go drink with them!"

Lines were being crossed all over, the fight they've always needed to have now that nothing was left to save. "They were the only people that stuck by me! Your mom exploited me for years in her fucking sweatshop. Even with my bad shoulder. Hell, she probably made it worse than it ever was," he said, rotating his arm just to dig in his point.

"You just resented her because you hate your own family for abandoning you! You couldn't understand how hard it was for her to take care of both of us while supporting herself," Becker said, standing straight.

Cody accepted the challenge, stepping forward to the panther. "Don't you dare bring up my family like you knew half of what I went through."

"My dad—"

"—Not the same fucking thing, Beck! Talk about false equivalencies," Cody interrupted, but Becker was far from done.

He just continued as if the wolf said nothing, "And I stayed at your side through all of it, only for you to throw it all away by sleeping with that otter."

"You think we're splitting cause I cheated on you? News flash, Becker, but that was just a symptom of the cancer that was us. Or were you only were you only paying attention to the shrink when I was being berated?"

"I gave up my chance to be at UC Golden for you—"

"That was your own choice!" Cody shouted back, but they were just yelling over one another.

"—and stayed in this bumfuck town just to be close to you, and you don't feel the slightest bit of remorse!"

Of course he felt bad about it, but Cody was done. He tried to get more words in, but the panther just kept going. Kept throwing everything in his face. He couldn't even hear the words anymore, so he grabbed his mug and chucked it as hard as he could just over his sink.

CRASH

It shattered and Becker cried out, but didn't say anything after. An eerie silence came over the room, only the drips of coffee puddling onto the sink could be heard. Cody took a deep breath, and put his paws to his eyes to wipe away the tears.

The wolf slumped his back against the counter and asked, "What're we doing? Why are we still fighting? It's done. We signed the papers. It's over. We killed the beast that was our relationship, and we finally get to move on."

Becker's body folded similarly against the kitchen island and he snorted up mucus. "I just didn't want it to end like this," he said in a sigh. There was a long pause. Cody didn't know how to respond to that, but the feline had another question on his mind. "When did we end up hating one

another?"

Cody dropped his paws and looked at the panther earnestly. Becker looked defeated, and it hurt to know that he was at fault for

it. Straightening himself out, he shook his head back and forth and said, "I don't hate you." Becker looked up, seemingly unconvinced at first, but with a half-hearted chuckle, Cody continued, "If anything, I think last night proves we don't hate each other."

That got a weak laugh from Becker, but a soft sob followed it after.

"I don't hate you either," he admitted weakly.

Cody stepped towards the shards of his mug, piling the pieces together carefully. "We just- there was so much pressure for us to work. Not just from us, but everyone. Everyone saw what we went through, everything we sacrificed: your school and my family. We just had so many unfair expectations to stay together, even when things were starting to become apparent."

The first thing that came to Cody's mind was Becker's flirting, but the cracks started long before that. Times where he'd complain about his shoulder, only for the panther to come in defense of his mom and why she worked him as hard as she did. Times where Becker would be frustrated with school, and Cody wouldn't be able to help him in the slightest. Even before the otter, he'd had thoughts of sleeping around. Never brought it up, but talking was never his thing to begin with. Too late now.

Again, they remained quiet. The ceramic clanked against the countertop as Cody traced a claw over his broken mug. He almost didn't hear the quiet padding of the panther coming up at his side. Becker rested a paw on his shoulder and held it there for a little while.

After a few seconds, he finally spoke, "I don't want us to be like Rich and Josh."

That got a snort out of Cody and he turned to face Becker. "Which part? The thing where they call bars ahead of time to make sure the other isn't there, or the weird rule that if we invite one out to do something, we have to invite the other for the next event so it seems fair?"

Both of them chuckled at that and Cody continued, "No, I don't want us to be like that either. Too many weird fucking rules. But we could probably use some distance from each other. Just for a bit. You can have The Hopper for now."

Becker shuffled his feet nervously and took a step away. "Actually, I was about to concede it. I don't think I'm ready anyways," he said with his muzzle toward the ground.

Cody turned to face the panther, "Don't think you're ready?"

He folded an arm over his chest, sleek tail flicking back and forth at his side. "Yeah, it's just- last night. I was at the bar for hours.

I thought I could just find a hookup to unwind. All I could do was stand in the corner the entire time, looking like a fucking creeper. I'm not really sure how to talk to anyone. You always were better at that than me."

Cody lifted his eyes up thoughtfully before nodding. "I guess you've never really hooked up with anyone before, right? That's weird. We're almost in our thirties and never have we had a proper date."

With some bashfulness, Becker agreed, "Yeah. So after a couple drinks, I saw you, and I just kinda wanted to do anything but stand alone in a bar."

Cody nodded and then shook his head. "Yeah, no. I get it," he said, but when he noticed the panther was still stuck in a frown, he added, "C'mon, Beck. You're a good guy. You're attractive and smart. It'll be alright. We're not even out of our twenties yet."

The compliment was hard to give, especially since he didn't want to accidentally give off the wrong signal. There were already too many sexual slip-ups between the two of them. Becker looked like he understood though, and gave a sharp nod. "Yeah, probably. Thanks."

They both sighed, exhausted, but in a better place than they were at the start. Becker flicked his ears over to the bathroom. "I should probably shower. You'll be gone by the time Mom gets here?"

He didn't ask it with any resentment, and Cody understood that, but shrugged his shoulders anyways. "I guess I can stay and help. What's one more box?"

They both laughed, but before the panther left, he asked, "Um, I packed away my towels. Would you mind if I use your towel?"

The very first thing off the tip of Cody's tongue was to say, "Never stopped you before." but he didn't. It wouldn't have been malicious, and the joke would have been understood by both of them. No, he just knew that if they were going to move on, he was going to have to start putting their relationship behind

him.

"Sure thing."

The last box was stuffed into the moving van. A decade of Becker's life squeezed into a room-sized truck. His mother had kept things cordial, even though she did need to micromanage a little bit. Cody knew she wouldn't be able to help herself, but didn't make anything more awkward than it had to be.

It took both Cody and Becker to close up the trailer. Each grabbed pull rope and rolled down the door until it locked in place. The wolf wrapped his claws against the back, saying, "That's everything?"

It wasn't so much a question about the boxes. They knew well enough that everything was in the truck. Becker gave a half-smile,

grabbing hold of the latch and locking it closed. "I think that's everything."

Cody looked towards the house, his new life in front of him just as his old life was leaving him behind. He then turned back to Becker and asked, "You'd still want to be friends after this?"

Becker slugged Cody's uninjured shoulder, even though he didn't like it when the wolf did it to him, and asked, "Forever?"

Tears built up over the wolf's eyes. He pulled him into a tight hug and Becker squeezed back tightly. Through a sob, Cody muttered into his ex's shoulder. "Forever."

Forever.

Saying Goodbye to Mayberry

Johnathan wiped at his face, still a little sleepy eyed. Even after being on the road for several hours, the sun was only just rising behind him. He could see it in the rear view mirror poking up just over the clouds. Seeing it, he let out a big yawn until his vulpine ears popped.

It was a long drive up the mountains, one that he made every year for the past ten. Back when he was a teenager, his parents would have a billion questions asking where he'd been all day, but he would just lie and say he was with friends. Now that he was older, the only person he had to tell was Sasha. Even then, he lied and told him that he was doing something for work.

A weary grin split the fox's muzzle as he saw the sign for Mayberry ahead. The long abandoned mountain town was only fifteen more miles ahead. His muzzle turned down to the dashboard. There seated a faded picture of himself, age fifteen, with a pine marten

wrapped around his side. Tears built up at the corners of his eyes, but blinked them out quickly.

It wouldn't be much longer.

The trees grew thick as he turned onto a dirt road. He'd done this trip enough times not to need a map or voice assistant. Not that one would be much help. Mayberry wasn't listed on any service and most maps don't even include it anymore. He knew the way well enough.

His truck bounced up and down, the path having not been cleared in decades. Johnathan always worried that someday he'd get stuck in some hole that formed or a tree would topple over and trap him there. It wouldn't be too bad, cause he wouldn't be alone.

Even as he pulled in, he could see another car driving towards the town. It wasn't a secret, per say. No, he only needed the internet and days of desperately scrounging the deepest folds of the web until he found what he was looking for. That was when he was sixteen, and no doubt anyone older could find it if they wanted to and some others had.

Johnathan wasn't sure if the government or some shadow organization knew about this place, but if they had, they didn't care and weren't interested in what it had to offer. If anything, they probably Mayberry alone out of pity for those who wished to seek it. The fox's ears folded back, thinking about what he was doing.

But he was already here, and turning back now would just hurt worse.

The town itself had existed up until the early sixties. There were a handful of buildings, a grocery store, a gas station, a park, and some residential homes along the sides of the road. Johnathan did what everyone else did. At least half a dozen cars were parked in the grocery store's lot.

He recognized a teenage raccoon leaning up against the side of her station wagon and picked a spot close to her. She was decked out in black, piercings all over. Black eyeliner, black lipstick. Johnathan hadn't remembered the septum piercing in her nose, figuring she must've added it in the year they'd been away.

"Becka," Johnathan greeted, stepping off his truck.

She nodded, pulling a flask and taking a swig of it before lighting a cigarette. He cocked a brow and shook his head. "Aren't you like, seventeen? You shouldn't be doing that," the fox chided, but she shrugged her shoulders.

"What're you? My fucking dad? Mind your own shit," she said, turning her head to face the bulletin board against the wall of the grocery store. "Better put your picture up. It'll be starting soon." Her words had a bite to them and he knew why.

When he first came to Mayberry ten years ago, he thought this place was a miracle. He thought that this was a gift and couldn't understand why so many people came here looking distraught. Now, he was older and knew the truth of this abandoned town: it was a curse.

Still, he'd done this trip to break free from it, and he'd have to do the ritual one more time. He grabbed the picture from his dashboard and walked to the bulletin board. His head turned at the sound of another car's door closing. The fox watched as an older looking skunk got from her vehicle.

She looked like she needed help, but when her gaze turned to Johnathan, she only gave him a frown. It was deep, he brow furrowing and her muzzle twisting. Mabel had been coming here the longest, but she held a certain disdain towards anyone new arriving. Especially for Johnathan though.

The skunk never said a word to him, but her distaste was enough that they needed to interact. At least, not now. She'd get better in a bit.

Johnathan walked towards the bulletin board, seeing maybe a hundred pictures on it. Some were like his, faded photographs that had been properly filmed. Some were printed papers that looked like

someone had just made it today. One, he recognized as Becka's was just a crayon colored drawing of her and an ermine.

All were couples.

The fox let out a sigh, turning his head down to his own picture. *Just one final time.* He whispered that to himself and then took a tac and thumbed it against the bulletin board. It was done.

He turned, noticing Mabel was standing behind him. With a bow, he stepped out of the way, noticing her follow him with her eyes. She stepped forward, placing a picture of herself and another skunk against the bulletin board. With some impatience, she raised her paw, snapping her fingers until Johnathan passed her a tac.

She pressed the photo into the corkboard, turning back towards her car without a word. Johnathan didn't have anything to say himself and just headed towards his own vehicle. Becka was still leaning against the side of her wagon. The fox approached her, holding out his paw expectantly. She gave a half smirk, before pulling her flask from her pocket and passing it.

He took a small sip of it, whiskers straightening out as soon as the alcohol touched his tongue. He had to pull it away from himself, gulping down what was in his maw before coughing. "Jeeze, Becka. What the hell?" He said, passing back the flask.

She shrugged and turned towards the rest of the buildings. "It's about to start," she said, noticing some more cars pulling up. "They better move fast."

He watched as people rushed to park their vehicles, jumping out and racing towards the grocery store. Johnathan pulled out his phone, turning the screen on. It was minutes before 7 am. Like he expected, he looked at the service signal, only to see there wasn't any. The fox wasn't sure if it was something with the town itself or if there wasn't any towers to pick up a signal.

A boar came last, parking his rig and practically jumping out of his car. He watched as one of the people standing around raced towards him. The hog was elderly like Mabel, not able to move very fast. A shepherd grabbed the photo from him and raced towards the board, putting his photo on it just before the hour struck.

Ding-dong.

Jonathan turned his muzzle up towards the front of the grocery store, noticing the intercom. Then he turned towards the crowd of a dozen that had gathered. Most of them weren't talking to each other. They didn't come here to meet strangers, though, he recognized almost all the faces. There was one new guy, an otter around his age. His muzzle was ripped to the ground, and he looked foolish.

"Does it really work?" the otter asked to no one specifically.

The boar, Dylan, let out a sigh, nodding his head up and down. "Yeah, it works," he said, almost regretfully.

Jonathan blinked, and in that half second, the abandoned grocery store, once unkept and unloved, shown new again. His ears folded back, never seeming to catch the moment that it came back to life again. It just happened so fast. The white building glowed with an eerie shine, like it was just built a second ago.

The fox turned towards the street, noticing most others had. The entire town had come to life in a second, the once dirty road now clean. The lawns in front of the houses were crisp, all the weeds removed and freshly mowed. Even the park, with its rusted equipment and trashed grounds was now perfect. It was pleasant. Almost heaven.

To the sound of footfall, Jonathan's ears lifted and he couldn't help but smile the slightest bit. He watched as a dozen walked from the edge of town towards the group waiting. Out of the corner of his eye, did he see the otter trembling. He let out a small gasp, and then shouted, "Melanie?"

He was the first to leave the group, running as fast as he could towards another otter. She wore a smile on her face, looking a little confused to see him so excited. Her paw went up, waving to him like

it was just another day. She was scooped in his arms, and twirled around in circles. Jonathan knew that feeling once.

Coming just behind the otter was his pine marten. The fifteen year old boy raised a paw towards the fox, and he smiled back giving him a wave himself. That's when he remembered what was on his finger, quickly pulling it off and then reaching to stuff it in his pocket, before he could though, he noticed he wasn't wear the jeans he came in with.

It was jarring, every time. He was just a little closer to the ground, but those inches made all the difference. He was wearing the same clothes as he did in the picture and then turned to look at the rest of the group. Everyone had changed at the same moment.

Mabel was no longer a hunched hag, and was now standing tall in heels and a yellow polka dot dress. She looked to be in her thirties or early forties. The boar had changed similarly, probably the same age as her. Becka had the biggest transformation of the group. The raccoon was now just a little cub in a pink top and a white skirt. All of her tattoos, and piercings, and makeup had disappeared.

"Emily!" she cried out, giggling like the little school girl she was. Jonathan saw a white mink, similarly dressed and about the same age as Becka was now. She immediately raced forward only for the raccoon spin around and shout out, "Bet you can't catch me!"

The two cubs started in a sprint as they chased one another around the town. Jonathan knew that with the regression came the feelings. He almost had to will those teenage hormones back down, knowing he was an adult in his twenties. Even as he tried though, he couldn't help but tear up as the pine marten got to him.

"We're here? Again?" the mustelid asked, stepping to his side.

Jonathan nodded up and down, choking back a sob as he said, "Yeah, buddy."

The pine marten looked confused for a second, seeing right through the front he tried to put up. "Everything alright, Jon?"

Jonathan nodded his head and shook it, trying to compose himself and saying, "Yeah, no. Everything's great." He tried to hold himself back, but those wild teenage emotions got the better of him. He lunged forward and gave the marten the tightest hug he could, saying into his neck, "I missed you so much, Alex. I missed you so much."

Alex returned the hug, not quite as tightly, but did so all the same with some light pats to his back. "I missed you too, but it's only been a day?" he said, and then paused as if he was just remembering something right then. "Oh, right. It hasn't been just a day, has it?"

Jonathan pulled back from the hug, looking into the marten's eyes. Tears had blurred his vision, but he blinked then out and said, "No, it's fine though." Then, unable to stop himself, he pushed Alex

into a kiss. They locked maws for a minute, the fox knowing this was wrong, but couldn't keep himself from doing it.

Alex returned the kiss, murmuring into his muzzle and when they pulled apart, he smiled at him brightly. "Wow, you really did miss me," he joked and that got a smile laugh between the two of them.

"You're such a dork," Jonathan said, and then pointed to his vehicle. "Hey, I got you something."

The two walked paw in paw, the fox noticing Mabel looking on at them. She furrowed her brow at them, like she'd never seen two boys hold paws together. Before she could say anything, a man called from behind, "Mabel!" It was loud enough to duck everyone's ears.

Jonathan didn't need to turn back to know who it was. Her husband, or what he assumed was her husband was a thick skunk with a nasty scowl. He never said anything nice and ordered her around like an animal. Jonathan didn't know why Mabel always brought him back, but that was her choice, and it wasn't his business. She just skipped along towards him, no doubt to occupy one of the houses to play home in.

All the other couples greeted their friends, family, and loved ones with sorrowful hugs. Jonathan left them alone to spend time with his pine marten. He reached into his khaki shorts, grabbing

hold of his clicker in his pocket and unlocked the doors. Alex got up next to the vehicle, asking, "This is your truck?"

Jonathan paused a second, looking at it curiously and then remembered, "Oh right, I had the sedan last time. Yeah, I got a new one for work. It's pretty good. Speakers are pretty loud." He said trying to joke.

The pine marten just furrowed his brow in confusion, "Don't you work at the sandwich shop?"

Jonathan waved it off, opening up the passenger side door and grabbing a walkman and a pair of headphones off the seat. He flipped them around, showing off a cd case. "Check this out," he said, passing it over.

The pine marten looked like he had more questions, but when he saw the case, his eyes light up. "Oh shit, dude! Yonderland's got a new album?" he asked, flipping it back and forth to look at the tracks.

"Yeah! Thought we could go listen to it together. There's a bench over at the park," he said, pointing in that direction.

The pine marten's head went up and down quickly, and then he leaned forward and gave a peck on Jonathan's cheek. They brushed whiskers together, the fox unable to contain a coo. He murmured

into his ear an, "I love you," and then pointed to the grocery store. "Let's get get something to drink first."

Alex followed by Johnathan's side, but when he noticed that he wasn't holding his paw, the fox asked, "It's alright. Nobody's gonna bother us."

He was always a tad more skittish in the closed off places, but Johnathan didn't want to spend a moment not holding him. He tangled his fingers between the other's and then stepped through the front of the grocery store. There were people already inside, though, nobody walked in.

An older gentleman, a beaver, greeted them as they entered. "Good morning, sirs," he said bowing his head. He was wearing an old 60s style white grocer uniform with a matching white cap on his head. "Gonna need a cart?"

The fox just waved him off, barely mumbling a no and then walking right past him. Alex, with his ears perked asked, "Do you guys have any Surge?"

Johnathan was about to interject, but he hadn't needed to. The gopher just stood puzzled a second, then asked, "Gonna need a cart?"

Alex stood perplexed, trying to read the man's muzzle. He looked ready to ask something else, but the fox just tugged his paw. "We'll see what they got," he said, trying to distract him.

The pine marten didn't fight it, and Johnathan was glad. He knew well enough that all the *residents* of this town were just shadows or something. Their interactions were simple, like they were stuck on repeat. He had tried for a conversation with one once, only for the shades to revert to lines of dialogue or whatever.

They walked back to the coolers, noticing some more residents just walking around aimlessly. They'd start from one side of the isle and work their way down, picking up a loaf of bread and examining it before putting it back and starting all over. They all were dressed from another era, making the two boys stick out. None of them seemed to care though.

"Looks like they only got coke and sprite," Johnathan said, grabbing two sprites. He knew what Alex liked, and passed one to the other boy. He accepted it eagerly, and they snatched a bag of potato chips from the shelf before getting to the counter. A doberman was already there, punching in each soda manually before giving him the total, "That'll be seventy cents."

Alex whistled, looking down at his soda and saying, "Man, we gotta come here more often."

That got a snicker from the fox who passed over a dollar bill and said, "Keep the change."

The dog snapped open the til, placing the dollar in and then moved to the exact position he has been in earlier. Though he smiled at the two of them, there was something in his gaze that let Johnathan know that he wasn't really looking at them. Just mimicking the idea.

Just as they left, the boar was ambling in with a small cub by his side. His paw was wrapped around her's, but seemed to grow tighter as they crossed paths. Johnathan recognized that he did the same, and they eyed each other cautiously. Alex didn't notice, getting to the small boar's level and said, "Hey Shannon, it's good to see you."

She waved, smiling brightly up at him. "Hey Alex. Daddy and I are getting hot dogs. We're going to the park," she said before turning to her father. "Can Alex and John join us?"

Johnathan watched the older boar's eyes flick over to him, and quickly interrupted, "We'll be there, but we're gonna be listening to some music for a bit. If there's any free time, we'll join you two."

That answer seemed to satisfy the group, and the boar gave a small tug to his kid. When the grocer offered a cart, he took it, placing the cub inside the basket and started off. Johnathan knew well

enough that these precious moments were fleeting fast, and sharing them was hard to do for all those that had come.

The walk to the park was short, and there already some occupying it. Becka and Emily were on the swing set, seeing how high they could go before jumping off into the air. The otter newcomer had taken a spot in the shade with his lover. They seemed to be in a deep conversation while holding onto one another. There was a fox kit on a spring horse rocking back and forth endlessly. He knew that one was one of the shadows.

Johnathan led the pine marten to an unoccupied park table. Like the dork he was, he watched Alex crawl up on top of it, rather than use one of the seats. He did the same, pulling out his keys and used a bottle opener to rip off the cap. He passed the soda in his paws over to Alex just as he received the other and did the same.

“Cheers,” Alex said, extending the bottle.

Johnathan clanked the two against each other and said back, “Cheers.”

He looked down at the soda with a small hesitation. Usually, he only drank diet soda nowadays, but there wasn’t any in the store ever. Alex was already down half of his, so he put it to his lips and took a small sip. To his teenage taste buds, they drink was sweet, way sweeter than he remembered and he almost ended up spitting it out.

Alex noticed the face he made and laughed out, “Too fizzy?”

“Something like that,” he said and then pointed to the cd. “You wanna open that?”

The pine marten nodded, practically tearing through the plastic cover. As he pulled out the cd, he asked, “When did this come out? Weren’t they breaking up?”

Johnathan nodded, remembering that the band was ready to split back when they were teens. They did eventually break up, but came back together a few years later. Alex wasn’t around for that. “Yeah, no. It’s a miracle. It was all just publicity, and they were really working on a new album all along. Celebs,” he lied, shrugging his shoulders.

He flipped open his walkman and took the cd from him before putting it in. The walkman wasn’t easy to find, but he managed to get one online. Finding authentic headphones like they used to have was impossible, so when pulled out the earbuds, he was met with more confusion.

“Are those new?” Alex asked, but Johnathan already had his head bouncing up and down.

“Yeah. You know my dad. He always likes to get things just as they come out,” he lied again.

He passed the earbud over, and the pine marten took, examined it back and forth before putting it in his ear. Johnathan pressed the play button, and they just listened to the music. Alex immediately started bobbing his head up and down to the beat of the drums. The fox just closed his eyes and enjoyed the moment.

They only got through two songs before the pine marten let out a sharp squeak. Johnathan was about to ask what was wrong before he felt the small pinch of his own tail being tugged. He let out his own yipe, flinging his head backwards only to see Becka and Emily giggling to themselves. They each had a tail in their paw, letting go when they were spotted and taking a step back like they might be chased.

“Hey! Don’t do that,” the fox said, pulling his tail back towards himself.

Alex, seeming to be annoyed, said, “Don’t you two have matches to play with or something?”

The two girls fell into their own giggle fit before Becka said, “What’re you two love birds doing?”

Johnathan glowered at them and said, “Can we get a little privacy. We’re just listening to music.”

“And kissing,” Alex added.

The fox turned his head and before he could say a word, the pine marten gave him a quick peck on his lips. Johnathan smiled and pecked back, only to be met with two girls screaming, “Ewwwww.” He caught them at the corner of his eye, making mock gagging faces before running away, squealing to one another.

Then Alex asked, “Where’s Caleb and Ashe? Haven’t seen them in ever.”

A frown grew over the fox’s muzzle, but he quickly fixed it into a half grin. “They’re busy this weekend. I think Ashe is with her family and Caleb’s probably jerking himself off in his room.”

They shared a laugh, Alex slapping Johnathan’s arm. “We should call them and see if they wanna hang,” he insisted.

The fox had to hold back a wince, and he shook his head. “Nah, I wanna spend time with you alone,” he said, and then leaned a paw forward to stroke at his arm.

Alex looked at the touch, eyebrows furrowing as he asked, “Are you... are you not telling me something?”

A pained expression fell over the fox’s muzzle, but the sound of rustling distracted the two of them. Johnathan turned to see the otters, the man still on the ground while the woman got to her feet. “Melanie, please, just hear me out,” he said, trying to stand up.

She shook her head, wiping tears against the back of her arm. "No. No, no, no, this isn't right. You shouldn't be doing this," she said, starting to take steps away from him.

Johnathan had seen this before, in others. It was something he specifically avoided with Alex, afraid of what his own reaction might be. Nobody had told the other than it doesn't really go well when people are honest, but no one really talked to each other about the proper customs. He hoped that they would work things out, but with the way the woman was walking away, he didn't think so.

"What's their deal?" Alex asked, staring at the two of them.

Johnathan saw the another couple, a kangaroo and a muskrat approaching the park. The kangaroo he recognized as one of those that came to Mayberry, the muskrat, one of the ones brought back. The kangaroo too saw the commotion and turned a knowing look to the fox. They shared a nod and he tapped Alex on the wrist. "Hey, wanna get something to eat? There's a diner right down the way."

The other teenager turned his head to him and then slowly nodded up and down. "Yeah, sure. Let's do that."

The fox grabbed him by the paw and helped him off the table. They walked down the road, and that's when he saw Mabel with a little table in front of a house. She had a white and red checkered apron on and two oven mitts over her arms. There was a tray on the

table, as well as a thick glass pitcher next to it. Her paw went up, waving to the boys.

Becka and Emily came right between the boys, racing as fast as they could towards the table. Some others had saw Mabel setting up and approached her as well. "Cookies and Lemonade for everyone," she said, beaming a smile.

The boar and his daughter were walking towards them too. He had a big paper bag in his paw, and ushered his kid forward. "Get me one too," he said and just as she grabbed a cookie off the tray, he added, "And what do we say?"

She looked up at the skunk, smile wide, as she said, "Thanks Mrs. Mabel."

Beck and Emily joined along, pouring themselves cups of lemonade. "Thanks Mrs. Mabel!"

She seemed happy, even turning up to look at Johnathan and Alex and said with a fake smile, "You're free to them too."

Johnathan was ready to tell her no thanks, not wanting anything from the skunk, but Alex was already walking forward and grabbed one. He took a large bite of it and said with his mouthful, "Thanks, Mabel. These are delicious."

She rolled her eyes, shaking her head as she said, "Boy. Don't speak with your mouth full of food."

Johnathan grabbed one for himself, figuring he might as well try it. In all the years that he came here, he never wanted to interact with her. She had older views that just reminded him too much of why he was here to begin with. Still, he held it up and said anyways, “Thanks.”

She gave a small bow, eyes on the boys like she was hiding her disgust. “Mabel!” Screamed a voice from inside the house. ”Mabel! Get me another fucking beer! Where are you?”

The skunk turned her head, frantically bowing to everyone before returning to her front door. In all the time Johnathan had been here, he’d never seen Mr. Mabel leave the house once he got in it. He didn’t seem like a very nice man and was glad he stayed inside.

“C’mon,” the boar said to his daughter, pretending that he didn’t know what went on in that house. “Let’s go grill some hotdogs.”

Johnathan pointed towards the diner, and they continued down the road. A bell jangled as the fox pushed open the door. Inside was fairly busy, a mix of both residents and visitors in the booths. A waitress was dealing with some shades, two ferrets seated across from each other, pretending to take their order. When she finished with a paper pad, the border collie walked over to them and asked, “Table for two?”

Johnathan nodded and they were led to an open booth and they got in on the same side, letting Alex go in first. Two menus were placed in front of them and the boys flipped them open. Though he suggested the diner, Johnathan wasn't actually very hungry. Alex seemed to flip through the menu, though, he didn't really look interested in the food. There was something else on his mind.

"Hey hun," the fox asked, pointing at a picture on the menu. "You wanna split a milkshake?" he said, trying to insert as much enthusiasm as he could into the question.

Alex's head turned, a smile breaking his thoughtfulness. "You mean, like, the way they do it in all those movies?" He stuck his tongue out and said, "That's silly."

Johnathan pecked him on the lips and said, "You're silly. C'mon, I'll even let you have the cherry on top."

Alex agreed and when the waitress came back around, they told her they wanted one chocolate shake, two straws. Jonathan leaned against the other teenager, resting his head on his shoulder. He cuddled up to them as they waited for the dessert. When it arrived, they were nestled into one another and she placed in front of them without a single word.

“I’ve always wanted to do this,” Johnathan said, noticing the two cherries on top. He said, taking off one and holding it over the mustelid’s muzzle.

Alex snatched it between his teeth, pulling the cherry from the stem and the fox just flicked it on the table. He let him do the same, getting fed the cherry before he grabbed one of the straws in the shake. They started giddily into one another’s eyes as they sipped their drink together. Johnathan felt like he was falling in love all over again.

He noticed Alex’s eyes turn to the side before he pulled off the straw and asked, “Hey, hun?” Johnathan followed his gaze, seeing the waitress taking the order from the two ferrets again. “Why does she keep taking their order?”

She jotted something on her notepad again and then walked away from them back towards the kitchen. “Maybe they’re having a hard time deciding,” Johnathan blurted out, reaching a paw up to pull his muzzle back to him.

Alex fought him, pushing his paw off him and shaking his head. “No, she keeps writing something down and then walking away. She’s done it three times now,” he said, touching a claw to his temple. “Why am I here? We didn’t— this isn’t where we live. I don’t remember coming here.”

Johnathan started to panic, his heart picking up speed in his chest. “We’re just, um, visiting. It’s fine. Don’t worry about it,” he said, trying to calm the marten down.

The more Alex tried to think, the more frustrated he was becoming. “I need to think. Just let me get some air,” he said, trying to scootch out of the bench.

Johnathan didn’t move, holding up a paw against the pine marten’s chest and keeping him put. “No, let’s just finish our milkshake and—”

Before he could have anticipated it, Alex pushed his shoulder against the fox’s chest, forcing him off of the cushion. He reached out, grabbing hold of the table and rocking it enough to knock the milkshake over. The glass spilt all over the table, but Alex didn’t stop. He just shoved Johnathan until he was left stumbling out of the booth.

“Alex, wait!” he cried out, watching the mustelid get to his feet.

Alex shook his head, turning in a circle and looking throughout the diner. “No, I don’t want to be here. I want to see family! Where is everyone? Where the hell are we? I want to go home, right now!” he cried out, then stormed his way

Johnathan was left leaning against the counter opposite the booth. The border collie waitress scurried over, looking at the mess.

"Uh oh, looking like you had an accident," she said in the same cheery tone she used when taking their order.

The fox looked over at her, brow furrowed and murmured, "Oh, fuck off."

The dog looked confused at that, head cocking as she tried to think of a response. Johnathan turned his attention to the rest of the patrons. The shades just stayed put, forever in their own conversation; the real people kept to themselves, whispering things to each other and trying to keep their own partners from noticing the outburst. When waitress finally did say something, all she asked was, "Would you like your tab?"

He just shook his head in disbelief. Trying to compose himself, he pulled out his wallet and placed a dollar bill on the table. He didn't even bother with an apology as he walked out of the diner. Alex was stomping away, head not even turning back.

Johnathan picked up his pace as he started a jog towards Alex. He didn't go into a full sprint, trying to think of what he might say to him. At first, his teenage mind began to put together more lies; twist this reality further to keep things together. But he wasn't a teenager anymore, and he had to fight those instincts. He didn't come here to keep this going any longer than it already had.

"Alex, wait!" the fox cried out, extending a paw into the air.

Alex slowed his trot gradually, back still turned. When finally did stop, he turned around with his ears folded back. There were some tears already running down the sides of his muzzle. There was pained expression on his face, and he asked as Johnnanthan approached, "What's going on?"

The fox hadn't noticed it, but tears were already building up at the corners of his eyes. Alex didn't fight him as he was pulled into a hug. They embraced each other tightly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shove you," Alex whispered, but Johnnanthan had apologies of his own.

"No, I'm sorry. For everything. Alex, I think it's time to tell you the truth," he said, pulling back from the hug.

Alex stared back, some determination in his eyes and then nodded his head. Johnnanthan led them back to the park bench. They sat on top of it, Becka and Emily still playing in the distance. The boar was standing over a grill, taking one of the hot dogs off and placing it in a bun before handing it over to his daughter. The otters had calmed down, but now were quietly huddled into one another.

They sat there for a minute, Alex letting Johnnanthan think over what he wanted to say patiently. There was a question on his mind though, and when he couldn't hold it in any longer, he asked, "We're not fifteen anymore, are we?"

Johnanthan nodded his head up and down, and said, "No, at least I'm not." Then he turned to him, taking a small sigh before saying, "It's been almost twelve years since."

Alex looked down at his paws, then back over to the fox. He studied him, eyeing him up and down before asking, "Twelve years? It feels like it's only been a few weeks."

The fox reached a paw up and stroked at Alex's muzzle, feeling his fingers through his fur. He did the same, running his palm to cup at his cheek. Everything felt so real, but it was just the curse. Johnanthan knew that and nodded his head again before saying, "When we were fifteen, some guys saw us together."

Johnanthan had to work out a sob, before continuing, "They didn't like us being together, the way they were. When they got physical, you fought back." He looked over Alex's muzzle, remembering how he looked after the fight. Tears were flowing openly now. "They hit you. A lot. And when they left, you were really messed up. I had to pick you up off the ground and you told me it was fine. I tried to say that we needed to go to the hospital, but you just said you were a little dizzy. You didn't want you parents to worry, so we went back to my place after."

Alex nodded his head up and down, as if he was agreeing with his own decision at the time. Johnanthan's head shook, and his muzzle

twisted up bitterly. "We went to sleep on my bed, and in the morning, you just— You wouldn't— You were sooo still and—"

Johnanthan's entire body crumbled on Alex's, and the teenage boy wrapped his arms around him. The fox was bawling into his shirt and fur. He heard the sounds of shushes. Through it, Jonathan kept repeating, "We didn't do anything to anyone. We hurt anybody."

Alex continued to stroke his back, remaining silent. Most times, it didn't go well when someone had been informed of their passing. He just remained there though, comforting Jonathan until he had the strength to continue. When he finally lifted his muzzle to see him, the pine marten's own face was matter in tears.

He reached a paw up, wiping away at some of it, but Alex just pulled himself back. The other boy let go of him, wiping off his own face with the back of his wrist before asking, "What did you do?"

Jonathan hung his muzzle down slightly with his brow furrowed. "I obsessed. When I couldn't grieve, I just went to message boards, digging deeper and deeper until I found this place. People come here with a picture of themselves and the one they loved, and on this day, we get reunited as we used to be."

Alex lifted his head, looking around at the people. It was like he could finally see them: Becka and Emily, the boar and his daughter, Mabel and her husband. Jonathan could see Alex thinking, the

pieces all coming together. Then he turned his head down to face Jonathan's and said, "You can't keep doing this."

That got a wounded sob to release out of the fox's chest, but he nodded up and down in agreement. Then, he reached down into his pocket and pulled out the thing he'd really meant to show him. "I'm sorry. It just— it just happened."

Alex reached down into Jonathan's palm, pulling up a ring to his muzzle. He twirled it around between his fingers, examining it carefully. His bottom lip sucked into his muzzle and he closed his eyes tight. His lungs filled slowly and then he let it all out in a long exhale. "Tell me about him. Or her," he whispered.

He returned the ring and Jonathan sat up straight. "His name is Sasha. We met a little after I took my trip here last year. He was a friend of a friend and everyone has always been trying to set me up," he said that and gave a choked laugh. "I didn't really intend to meet anyone... after you."

Alex didn't laugh at that. He shook his head and wiped away some more tears. "You deserve someone nice. Someone who will treat you right."

Johnathan closed his eyes and fought back crumbling into a mess again. "It was supposed to be you," he said.

Alex just turned his head towards the distance, not really looking at anything before saying, "I think that would have been nice."

Jonathan could see into his mind's eye. He was thinking about all the things he missed out on: finishing high school, learning to drive a car, going to college, getting married, having cubs of his own with the fox that he loved. It was all so clear as he just looked into nothing. Then he blinked and shook his muzzle before asking, "What happened with Caleb, Ashe, and my family?"

The fox's ears went back, and he said, "They all moved on with their lives. Me and your sister got really close for a while. We don't have to talk about it though."

With some strength, the pine marten shook his head and straightened himself out. He turned his full attention to Jonathan and said, "No, actually, I think I want this."

So Johnathan pulled out his phone, something that was a little confusing to Alex at first. Technology had really changed over the decade he'd been gone. They flipped through photos, things that he'd kept and explained what happened to the group. Caleb has gone off into the military, and Alex joked, "Of course," right after he'd mentioned it.

Ashe had cubs of her own now, having gotten married as soon as she had her high school diploma. When Alex asked if it was Russel,

the guy she'd been seeing at the time, Johnathan furrowed a brow. He'd forgotten who that was, realizing only now that Ashe had gone through a couple boys before she found her future husband.

When he asked about his family, Alex only knew so much. They didn't want to see Johnathan much after the memorial, and that was understandable. He did however, spend time with his sister, who was a freshman at the time. By the time she was a junior, she'd come out of the closet herself and last he'd saw of her, she was moving out west.

"Ha, figured she was a lesbo," Alex said with a chuckle.

Jonathan elbowed the pine marten's side, and said, trying to hold back a laugh, "You can't say that nowadays. Hell, probably shouldn't have been saying that to begin with."

He nodded up and down, a smile on his muzzle. "Yeah, sorry. I'm glad she figured it out. Maybe you can find her again online. See what she's up to," he said, blinking out some tears before wiping his nose dry. Then he grabbed the walkman and asked, "Do you wanna finish the album?"

Alex tried to hold onto a smile, though he could see the sorrow in his eyes. Jonathan nodded and said, "I'd like that, very much."

So they sat together, shoulder to shoulder for the first song they left off at. Then they traded positions back and forth. Sometimes

it was Alex cradling Jonathan. Sometimes it was Jonathan, holding Alex's head in his lap. For the last song, they held each other into a hug and whispered their love yours into one another's fur.

When they were finished, Alex insisted that they go around to everyone in Mayberry. He gave one finally a shake to the boar, and a tight hug to his daughter, Shannon. They stopped by Beck and Emily, drawing chalk paintings on a driveway. Alex complimented them, ruffling each of their headfurs before wishing them well. Finally, they each took a cookie for what remained on Mabel's tray and nodded a goodbye.

Jonathan walked towards the bulletin board, showing him his picture. Alex laughed and said, "I remember that."

"Yeah, I do too," he said, and then turned to face the pine marten. "Alex, what happened to us— you, was so unfair."

Again, tears began to work up in the fox's eyes, but Alex reached up, cupping his cheek. "Yeah, maybe," he started, nodding his head up and down. "But what you're doing to yourself isn't fair to you." They hugged one final time, tighter than they ever had before the pine marten broke the hug and said, "It's time to move on."

Jonathan wiped away the last of his tears and agreed. Then he stepped the board and grabbed at the picture. He took off the tac, pausing briefly as he turned to face Alex. He hadn't disappeared

when he removed the picture, to some relief, but he knew their time was short now.

They got into the truck together, and Jonathan turned on the engine. With some care, he put the picture onto his dashboard and immediately the smile he made to himself. Then he pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road, staring at where the town ended and the forest began.

Alex, straightening himself on the seat, looking forward past the trees. There was a bit of worry on his muzzle and he asked, "What'll happen next?"

Jonathan looked at his paw on the armrest and he reached out to hold it. They tangled their fingers together and the fox said, "I'm not sure, but whatever happens, we'll see each other again, when the time's right."

Alex gulped as the car started forward. Then, with some bravery, he turned back to face Jonathan and said, "Live your best life, buddy."

And right as they crossed the paved road onto the dirt path that led out of Mayberry, there was no paw to hold onto anymore. Jonathan wasn't a teenager anymore. He had to adjust himself on the seat, getting used to his body again. All the magic, the curse, was gone. The only thing he had left was the memories, saying goodbye to Mayberry one final time.

It was a few hours later that Jonathan arrived back to his house. He stepped inside wearily with the picture in a frame he'd picked up along the way. Sasha was sitting on the couch with a tablet in paw. The ringtail smiled up at him and asked, "Hey babe. I thought you weren't gonna be home til late?"

Jonathan took a seat next to him, and Sasha got close. "Yeah, plans changed," he said, accepting the warmth as his fiance leaned into him.

The ringtail looked at the picture, recognizing his fox, but not the pine marten. "What's that?" he asked, with some curious excitement.

Jonathan took a breath in, holding the picture for him to see it better. Then he exhaled slowly and started his story with, "I need to tell you something. This was my boyfriend, Alex."

A Simple Guide to Sugar-Free Lemonade by Arthur Felice.

A Simple Guide to Sugar-Free Lemonade

By Arthur Felice

Today, I'm gonna teach you one of my favorite summertime recipes: Sugar-free lemonade. Now, the second thing on your mind is probably, "Arthur, it's February. Why're you writing a summer-time recipe now?" while the first probably being, "An asteroid the size of Burbank is about to hit the planet. Who the fuck cares?" And to that I have two answers: The first being, these things usually are contracted in advance and are released when they're needed, not when they're written. The second answer is because I don't really care to start looting. The 45 inch LCD on my entertainment center has always been more than enough.

Well, since I've been paid already, I might as well write the article. Keeps the fingers busy.

Now, my mom is probably spinning like a top in her grave at this very moment. Sugar-free lemonade?!? She would not have approved of that and would chide me relentlessly about it. That wouldn't be the only thing she got on my case about. No, she was a very opinionated woman, noble stoat that she was, and was particularly voiceful when she caught me with my first boy.

It was a spring, quite like this, when Kendrick Sanchez was sitting on my bed shirtless. He was a couple years older than me, a very handsome dingo, and the only other boy in my high school that would do things like *that* with me. He had one paw under my shirt and I had, well, not to get too spicy, but I had my paw on something else. Our muzzles were locked together when my mother walked in on me and Kendrick. Screamed like bloody murder, and the dingo was promptly chased out of the house. Didn't even have time to get his shirt back on.

At first, it was the gay thing she was an old upsetti spaghetti about. Certainly couldn't tell father any of it. It became our secret, and she would scold me about it whenever we had a minute alone. Needless to say, afterwards, there was a no-closed-doors policy in the house whenever I had any boys over.

Eventually she simmered down and was more concerned about the age difference. It didn't matter much. That fling only lasted a season and I was left mostly boyfriendless throughout the rest of high school. All I had was a few online interactions and the entirety of the internet to explore myself.

Anyways, onto the lemonade, if there's one thing that mother and I could agree on, is that you don't just dump your sweetener into a pitcher like a feral. No, you must create a simple syrup and like the name implies, it's pretty simple. Well, you'd think that. Boiling a pot of water wasn't on my list of skills when I was in college.

Being a teenager in the dorms and having my own space, I was quite the mess. Yes, I was one of *those* boys. Dirty clothes on the floor in one pile. Clean clothes on the floor in another. It's embarrassing to think back on how many hookups I had back then, having to push trash off my bed before diving into it.

There was Bruce, a jack rabbit who was my age, who got me started on being presentable. He was a history major, or something like that. Real prissy type. We met at our school's LGBTQ+ club and I brought him over for a quick romp, and would you believe it? He refused!

Saw the state I was living in and plans changed quickly. He promptly left, leaving me a little bewildered only to come back not

ten minutes later with a basket full of cleaning supplies. He shoved a trash bag into my paws and started instructing me where to clean up. Pulled out a sponge for himself too and began wiping down my desk, every now and then adding a few choice words my direction. Swear, he nearly fainted when we opened up my closet.

No, we didn't have that quick romp. Never did, actually. Maybe a handy j, once or twice. But we became friends and part of the condition to our friendship was for me to perform some level of upkeep to my room. Even after I graduated and we parted ways, did I keep those habits. Don't have to worry about tripping over trash anymore.

Oh yes, onto the simple syrup. Since we won't be using any sugar in this recipe, you can easily replace it with Splenda. I do. Exactly one part artificial sweetener and one part water. Get the water boiling and then pull it off the heat to add the substitute. Stir it all together and remove any sediment remaining, and voila, you've got your syrup.

Now, by this point, you should have already had your pitcher out. If you're not seven years old, then I'd recommend a glass pitcher. If you are seven or just particularly clumsy, a plastic one should do you well enough. I think there's a taste it leaves, but I can be a little picky.

I certainly wasn't picky when it came to men. I'd probably gone through a hundred or so by the time I was in my mid twenties. The

grey in my fur wasn't always there! Choose to believe it or not, but this mustelid could swing these hips like nothing. My tail got allllll over the place.

Then Jett showed up and, boy oh boy, he was quite the competition. Another stoat, probably could have been mistaken for my brother if I had one, and he sure liked to get in-between me and any boy I was trying to hook up with. Dunno what got his rocks off, but if I was chatting with a guy, he'd butt in. If I was dancing with some hot horny wolf, he'd steal him away. Try to buy a stud a drink? Jett was there with two in his paws, neither for me.

Eventually, I began to pick up on his little game and suddenly, I was the one stealing boys from him. Sometimes it didn't even matter if I liked the guy or not. Just as long as he didn't leave with him was all that mattered to me. One night, though, it got particularly bad.

Can you imagine, two grown-ass adult stoats in the middle of a nightclub getting physical? I wouldn't call it a fight. That involves kicking and punching, claws and fangs, and maybe even a little tail biting. No, we just started to slap one another, batted at our paws, and pulled each other's whiskers. It only ended when a bouncer, a gruff looking wolverine, lifted us both by the nape of our necks and hurled us out onto the street.

It wasn't my proudest moment I remember. Don't even have to remember it at all. If you are good with the internet and know how to search things, I'm sure it wouldn't be too hard to find a video online. Got over a thousand hits, half of those probably being my friends watching it on repeat and laughing their asses off.

Thankfully, things cooled down from there, and me and Jett became less competitive. There was still some competition, but wasn't until a twinkish husky asked, "Why not both?" did we realize we didn't need to compete at all. Things got really interesting from then on. That night, we split that dog open like a cantaloupe.

We became quite the devious duo, Me and Jett. Can't believe it took us so long to team up. It was all very well documented too. Again, if you are good with the internet and know how to search things... well, you might find what you're looking for. That lasted a while. Even when Jett got sick, he still wanted to go out with me. He couldn't stay up quite as late, and then eventually, he couldn't stay up at all. I stayed with him until the very end.

I'll see you soon, buddy.

Real soon.

Now, the lemon is the key to any good lemonade, so that's where you're going to want to spend most of your time on. You could simply go to the store and grab a few off the shelf, sure, but what's the fun in

that? You wanna make something that'll really brighten someone's day, and that requires fresh ingredients.

Unfortunately, with that asteroid coming in a few days, you might not have time to wait for them to ripen in June. Thankfully though, they tend to produce all year and you just have to take some time and go out looking for the right one. I know I did.

It was in my early thirties, out with my friends having a gay old time. Yes, a bunch of us queers being giddy out paying money to pick fruit for fun. I bet that sounds awfully exciting to you, but it was with my friends and I made the most of it.

But it was there that I met my Rico. He was with his boyfriend at the time, a fox named George. We found ourselves underneath the same lemon tree, twisting and inspecting the fruit. It was small conversations at first and, well, we ended up exchanging numbers. Supposedly him and his boyfriend were new to the area and wanted to meet some locals.

Oh boy, you wouldn't think me and my friends were in our thirties. Those queens tore me apart relentlessly. "What's his name?" "You think they're open?" "I saw the way you were looking at him." "Someone's got a crush." "Arthur and Rico sitting in a tree." They teased me non-stop and I was, well, I was as giddy as they made me out to be.

So of course, when me and the weasel started spending more time together, our feelings for one another grew. His boyfriend George was, to say the least, not quite a fan of that. Now, I'll say, never once did we fool around. That was not the way I went about things. I'm a gentleman first.

But, I'd be lying if I didn't *hope* for certain things. And maybe, once or twice, after finishing off a bottle or two of Moscato, did I mention some of those certain things to him. Maybe passed out with my head in his lap from time to time. Oh, and, well, not to mention that kiss we shared.

Alright, alright, so I'm not a *perfect* gentleman. Hell, probably could be described as quite the scoundrel. We chalked it up to the wine and kept it between us... for a while. I'll never forget the day the fox showed up to my door. I greeted him kindly. George kneed me in the pecker so hard, I felt my gonads knock into the back of my throat. Couldn't get it up for a month!

The two of them lasted a while after that, and, despite it all, we ended up being rather cordial. Actually, we still see him, and I wonder what he and Torrence are up to at this very moment. I guess now is a better time than ever to give him a ring and apologize for being such a twat.

Back to the recipe. To bring it all together depends on your tastes. Some like a lemonade that'll punch you in the face and steal your wallet. I find about four or five large lemons to do the trick, but I wouldn't go over eight, even if you do like it a little tart. Personally, I enjoy mine to be on the sweeter side of things.

As sweet as that first night that Rico came to me. He had split things off with George, and later that week, he came to my house. I don't know what I could have expected to happen when I answered. Don't think I could have ever imagined him to just scoop my muzzle into his pawpads and pull me right into a kiss. Then he stepped through my front door and closed it behind him.

A year after that, we got married and I didn't have to worry about any other Arthurs coming around to shake things up. We've been together ever since, and I guess, we'll be together always. Even now, he's sitting on the porch, waiting for me and a pitcher of sugar-free lemonade. Just pour it all together, add some ice, and you'll be good to go.

I'm not afraid. No, I guess that's not true. I don't think there's any last minute Deux Ex Machina coming to save the day. I'm not worried, is what I mean to say. About how things turned out or about how things will turn out. Things happened the way they did and there's not much else that can be said.

I do hope though. I hope that there's gonna be some fallout shelter that survives and when its residents come out, there'll be something waiting for them. I hope that if some green aliens stop by our planet, they see that someone was here. Hell, I hope that the jellyfish in the sea evolve enough to step out of the water a hundred thousand years in the future to start things up all over again.

If someone digs through our rubble, I hope that there's a server they can repair and find this article. When they do, they'll have a headstart on one recipe they can use for themselves. And maybe, just maybe, they'll see my story and know a little about us and a little bit about me.

It's time that I go and watch one of the few remaining sunsets left for me. I'll be holding onto Rico the entire time. Before I go though, I guess I should leave you all the recipe. Thanks for sticking around this long. See you on the other side.

Ingredients for Sugar-free Lemonade:

Four cups of water

One cup of ice

Two cups of Splenda/water simple syrup

Some parts mistakes

More parts growing up

All the love in the world

And four to five freshly squeezed lemons

You Can Watch Me Dance

[Editor's Note: Story still in progress]

For My Partner

It'd been months, *months*, since River had gone out! Not, like, going out to the movies or snagging a cup of froyo walking home from grocery shopping. Real going out like he used to when he was a kid, not that he still wasn't one. Late twenties were the same as early twenties and if anyone asked, the genet was still twenty-two anyways. The black markings on his sharp short muzzle, as well as the spots on his arms and neck had been plucked of any stray grey furs. Only the bouncer and bartender needed to see his ID and if any of his friends had anything different to say about it, he'd have one less friend to contradict him.

Not that River had to worry about anyone speaking up about anything nowadays though. All of the genet's friends had partnered up and were done joining him and his late night escapades. Now,

they were more interested in tending vegetable gardens and noisy cubs rather than hangovers and mysterious bruises. Actually, being honest, the only reason why he'd not gone out in so long was because he didn't like to go out on his own.

Thankfully, out of the goodness of his soul, his boyfriend decided to give up his Friday night Dungeons & Dorkons session so they could do stuff with fairies and queens that didn't involve a constitution check. Victor stood next to him in line with his smartphone just short of making contact with his glasses. The skunk had on the same beige slacks and light blue oxford shirt he'd worn to work that morning. His modest vanilla cardigan only tagged along on his shoulder after River asked him if he wanted to try and spice it up just a little bit for him. That was the best he was gonna get.

At least he went all out on his outfit tonight. As soon as he finished scrubbing the last dish at Peppered Patty's, he flew by his manager and raced home to clean out the detergent and grease from his fur. Though his yellow tank top didn't hang quite as well as when he bought it a few years back, it still covered up his belly so long as he didn't stretch his arms high above his head. The pair of skinny jeans he'd laid out on the bed were still in that exact position even now. After half an hour trying to make them fit, Victor threatened

to stay inside if he had to wait much longer. A loose pair of white cargo shorts substituted.

Not a major setback! Actually, he thought that the cargo shorts felt just as sexy if not even more sexy than the jeans were. River's legs were his real money makers, besides his pristine smile and piercing yellow eyes, of course. If he'd worn his jeans, no one could have admired the pattern of his chocolate spots wrapped around his tan legs. They started just above his black socks and travelled allllllllll the way up before teasingly disappearing beneath his shorts.

"Babe," River whispered, giving a cough and nudge to the skunk at his side.

Victor pulled the phone away from his nose and looked around startled. Furrowing his brow, he cocked his head at genet before turning back to his phone. That earned him another nudge, one hard enough to nearly set him off-balance and out of the line altogether. "What?" he spurted, pointing towards the stallions in front of them. "We're not at the front yet."

"They'll be inside in a second," River whined, pointing just past the horses to the wolverine standing next to the door. "The bouncer doesn't wanna see you playing a game on your phone."

Contradictory to River's panicking, the wolverine was engaged in a relatively friendly conversation with the two stallions. Smiling

and boisterous, the doorman's entire upper body bobbed around as he talked just as much with his paws as his words. Annoyed but cordial, Victor stuffed his phone into his pocket, but not without getting the last word in. "Babe, I think his job is to just charge us and make sure we're presentable."

At the mention of being presentable, River sneaked a peek to his partner's feet. Even though he knew for certain that he'd made sure that the skunk didn't trade for his more comfortable tennis shoes, he couldn't double check enough times. Thankfully, he really was wearing the slick leather loafers River had bought for him when he'd had his first interview out of college. It might have been a little dressy for a start-up, but they were appropriate here in front of the BlackSky nightclub.

Victor rhythmically patted at his slacks, not quite sure what to do with his paws when there wasn't a phone in them. Stroking his own tail soothingly, River wasn't much better at that himself, though at least he could keep it quiet. They'd already gone over their days and there wasn't a show that they didn't watch together. Several times he felt flustered trying to even think of something remotely interesting and just before he was going to tell Victor that he could have his phone out just to stop the patting, a large group came roaring out of the club with laughter.

The bouncer turned his head to the group, letting them through the door before nodding the stallions inside. "Cash or card?" he asked River with one paw extended while the other curled a tablet.

"Card," River said as he reached back and pulled out his wallet. He slid his credit card out and thumbed between him and Victor to signal they were together. At the doorman's glance between the two of them, Victor smiled a polite smile and waved a waist high paw to confirm they were together. Something about the modestly dressed six foot tall nerdy skunk with the five foot nothing slutty genet wasn't clicking immediately but he shrugged it off. The wolverine took the card and nodded as he swiped it but before he could return the card to River, the genet had his ID out for him to check.

"Hmm?" the wolverine questioned, not quite sure what he was being handed until he caught River's face on the card. "Oh, right!" he exclaimed a little too loudly, pretending to glance at the date of birth before trying to hand the card back again. "Went through. You two can head in." he said without even humoring the idea of checking to see if the skunk was of age. His smile remained polite even though River's was pointedly plastic and flippant for him to see.

"Bitch," River muttered as they walked past the coat check, but Victor ignored it rather than engage with his pettiness.

Inside was considerably more comfortable than the cramped line outside. Victor was working his way towards the tabled area, spotting one that was tall and had seats. Despite the fact they waited longer in line than it took them to walk to the BlackSky, there were several tables open and plenty of space between them. In fact, everybody in that line could barge inside right now and River wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

Grumbling, the short genet had to practically scale the chair to sit in its seat while his boyfriend flumped in his chair, looking exhausted already. Waiting in line took a little bit out of him, but River still couldn't hold back his excitement, his tail lashing about like a cub at an amusement park. Crystalline bulbs hung from black panels made the ceiling look like the stars they couldn't see in the light radiated city. Dim blue fluorescent tubes lined the walls to soften in a soothing dusk all around them. Just under a large but muted incandescent sphere meant to be the moon was the bar glowing in a kaleidoscope of patterns and colors.

Surrounding the bar were kids just like himself scrambling to get a drink. There was a menagerie of lifted tails. Foxes, huskies, wolves, cheetahs, skunks, ermines, foxes, tigers, lions, stallions, leopards, ferrets, bunnies, and foxes bent over to flirt with the bartenders while also presenting the goods to anyone bold enough to stare.

Those not drinking were past the bar and tables shaking what they had out towards the back. Base blasting from the speakers near the stage were strong enough to vibrate the table, but the music itself was distant while in the seating area.

“I’m gonna get a drink,” Victor said, not quite as captured by the atmosphere. He stood slowly, still sore from work and the line, but when he tried to turn to the bar, River coughed blatantly and cleared his throat. “What? I mean- ugh, I was implying I was going to get us *both* drinks. Corona light with lime, right?”

“Corona?” River nearly shouted, his head cocked in disbelief.

Confused, Victor’s muzzle twisted and he pointed back at the bar. “You always drink Coronas on Friday. With the little key lime wedg—”

“—on D&D night! And that’s just because the last time that I drank too much, you killed my character. We’re out and about inside of a night club!” River practically threw his arms into the air, ducking them back down as soon as he felt cold air against the fur on his tummy and backside. “I want a Tokyo Iced Tea.”

“A Tokyo Tea? Seriously?” Victor laughed while folding his arms.

Nodding his head up and down excitedly, he explained, “That’s a long island with an added shot of Midori.”

“No, I—, mmm, I know what that is. I’m,” the words fumble for a second, now realizing River’s request was serious. “We’re having breakfast with your parents tomorrow. They’d be happier if you weren’t hungover and after that, you still have a closing shift.”

River thumbed his chin, thinking about it for a second before coming to a conclusion. “Eh, Mom and Dad’ll be fine. We’ll go out somewhere that has Bloody Marys. If I still feel hungover, I’ll call off work. They’ll survive without me for a night.”

“That’s not very responsible.” Before Victor can add anymore, River’s out of his seat, leaning over the table with a dangerous expression on his muzzle and a finger waving.

“I. Want. A. Tokyo. Iced. Tea,” the genet demands, elongating the last word before punctuating with, “Please.”

Victor knew well enough then to fight him, but only his tail acknowledged him as he spun around so fast that the chair got knocked back, almost tipping it over entirely. A worrying thought of his boyfriend coming back with two beers came to mind. The skunk was always doing things that he thought best for him without acknowledging his own wants. It would be enduring if it wasn’t so fucking condescending.

He was supposed to be having fun. Trying to take his mind off of the argument, he distracted himself with the only thing he loved

more than Tokyo Tea and dancing: boys. Closest to him were two doberman standing over a table without chairs. River took in the short black and brown fur, trailing it with his mind as easily as his fingers through their fishnet shirts and shorts they wore. With only their jockstraps to cover them, one red and one yellow, he didn't have to fantasize what they'd look like in bed.

Too late did he realize that he was staring and not before Yellow had noticed. He slapped Red's arm, pointing at the genet with a wide smile on his face. River, a little abashed that he'd gotten caught staring, turned his attention towards the rest of the crowd. A fox wearing almost the exact same outfit he wore was splitting his attention between the clydesdale and mustang he walked in with. Two frat boys, a dalmatian and a husky, on the other hand competed for a lithe wolf, neither interested in sharing the twink.

Before River could even fully develop jealousy for attention, a paw slid down the back of his shorts. Naturally, he lifted himself off the seat so he could be cupped easier. When he turned his head though, instead of an unusually spontaneous skunk, it was Red licking over his cocky grin. The canine locked his stare, an eyebrow arched daring him to tell him to stop. A pinch forced a squeak from River and all he could do was mumble while pressing into the grope.

Leaning over, Red let out a low growl, bristling River's fur in shivers before the dog whispered, "I like my kitties with some meat to sink into."

Okay, first, not a feline and kind of annoying to hear it all the time. Second, what meat are you talking about? Those were things River wished he could say, but it'd been so long since he'd had the sensation of a stranger's unsolicited touch that all he could do was whimper. His long tail wrapped around the doberman's wrist and he pushed back against his claws. It hurt a little bit that the dog was pinching him so roughly, but also excited him far beyond the dull monotony of what he was used to.

"Can you believe it? Twenty fucking dollars for your Tokyo Iced Tea!" Victor complained as he settled into his seat, oblivious to the panicked genet. In one paw was the Tea he promised to bring and in the other, to River's surprise, was what he assumed was a screwdriver. That, or it could have just been a glass of orange juice. "What's the point of even paying the entrance fee if they're going to gouge us for the drinks anyways?"

Some tea slushed over the brim of the glass as the skunk practically slammed it down in front of him. River picked up the glass, giving it a stir before wrapping his lips around the straw and sipping it while he continued to be fondled right in front of his boyfriend.

In fact, clueless Victor just continued along with his rant. “And of course, I’m the tallest guy standing around and the bartender serves just about everyone else before even taking my order. Still tipped him a five.”

Knowing that Victor was not going to realize what was up without his help, River cleared his throat and glanced towards the doberman. All the while Red seemed to know something was up and was just getting excited about it. At no point did he stop but he refrained from any quick movements to conceal what he was doing right in front of the skunk. River couldn’t help but enjoy it to some extent, but also was starting to feel guilty for liking it this much, so he coughed for Victor’s attention again.

Almost getting the clue, he reached across the table, extending a paw and introducing himself, “Hi. Victor. Nice shirt.” He waited for a paw and the doberman was caught thinking what to do. Wanting to continue kneading the genet’s ass, he reached up with his left paw and awkwardly tried to shake upside down. The skunk took it with a confused glance, holding onto it while he checked to see why he didn’t just shake him with his dominant arm. “Oh...Oh! Um, that’s my boyfriend you’re groping right now.”

Seeming not to care, he left his paw exactly where it had been. Infact, he even pressed his pointer finger through River’s crack, tick-

ling him enough to get a squirm. “Well, it appears he likes it,” Red said slyly, his grin facing Victor to challenge him.

“Did he say he liked it?” he asked, though his words lacked any bite.

Keeping himself cool, Victor brought his drink to his lips and took a quick sip before setting it down and waiting for the doberman to make a move. There was some tension, even if the skunk didn’t seem like he wanted a fight. The doberman stopped rubbing into his fur and when River looked to him, he could see that Red was waiting for him to give him agreed approval. When it was clear he wasn’t, the dog got the full picture and slid his paw out of River’s shorts. “Tch, fuckin’ tease,” he said soured, already walking back to his friend.

“Ugh, that was rude,” Victor chimed, rolling his eyes and grabbing his drink for another sip.

Absent a paw, his rear felt unnaturally cold and so did his mood. “That’s it? That’s all you’re gonna say?”

“What?” Victor pulled back in his seat confused. “It looked like you liked it, to be frank.”

Taking a long sip of his drink, River tried to cool himself down but he was still frazzled from the groping. “It doesn’t matter if I enjoyed it or not. You’re the one that’s supposed to be mad.”

“Mad? Like, at him?” Victor asked, pointing a finger to the doberman, already completely over them. “He’s just some horny asshole. You’re the one playing mind games.”

With that, he pulled out his phone again and switched it on, scrolling where he’d left off in the line. Pursing his lips together so tightly that they began to turn white, River glared at his boyfriend in frustration. Claws dug into his own palms as he balled his fists tightly. Victor was too invested into the phone to even notice the quiet rage across the table. Trying not to ruin his own night, he took a slow long sip of his straw until he felt steadied.

“Forget it, babe. Can we just dance already?” River tried to be as disarming as he could, and even worked a smile up for him.

Still too invested in his phone, Victor missed the smile and flipped through tabs instead. Without looking, he dismissed him with a raised paw. “Start without me. Today’s been a day and I’m not sure if I’m up for dancing,” he said, grabbing his glass and taking the tiniest sip.

Astonished, River let his maw gape a second before asking, “We are out and you don’t want to dance?”

Victor’s eyes flicked up over his screen a second to make eye contact as he spoke, “You know I don’t really like to dance. You can do it without me. I’m still here.”

Eyes back to the phone.

“Can you at least watch me dance?” River’s lips quivered, a sob choked back in his throat.

“When I finish up, I’ll look for you.”

River waited patiently for him to sit his glass down before slamming both fists hard enough against the table to rattle the drinks. Neither tipped, but they bounced about dangerously and Victor was forced to put down his phone just to save the drinks. Victor, furious, looked about ready to give his own mind about the genet’s outburst, but River didn’t even let him get a word in before he had a finger right up to his nose.

“You can either watch me dance,” River barked, his finger shifting to the dance floor. “Or you can watch me leave,” he finished, pointing to the exit.

What the fuck? What the flying fuck was that about?

Victor’s mind raced as fast as the genet raced over to stage, tail whipping anyone unfortunate enough to be standing near his path. Admittedly, part of him wanted to just pull his phone again and make sure he could see him using it instead of watching him flounder like a fish. All night, River had been acting like a bitch while he was purchasing a surprise flight for him and both their parents to vacation overseas. Ticket prices fluctuate day to day, and though

he'd seen them lower, they were pretty low right now and no guarantee they'd ever get cheaper.

He could pick up the phone sitting in front of him, but he couldn't figure out what River meant. Leave? Like, he was going to leave the club and he'd see him back home? No, that would be nice, and tonight has been anything but. What was he so pissed off about? Did River really think that he was going to get into a brawl with some himbo wearing fishnets? Last time he scuffled, it came with detention and video games stripped for a week.

Victor's paw went underneath the table, dragging fresh new lines through the wood with his thick claws. Some destruction settled him down enough not to just walk out of the club on his own. Though his muzzle was pointed to his boyfriend, the genet was completely out of his focus. Rather, him dancing was out of focus. Everything else was getting held to a magnifying glass.

They had bills, their apartment, their friends, their car, and seven years worth of furniture that weren't easily divisible. River couldn't even afford to live on his own with his shitty little fast food job. He wasn't even supposed to be working for Peppered Patty's anymore. The money had helped the last year of college, but they'd agreed that River would quit minimum wage and pursue something

real when Victor got out. Four years later and he was still scrubbing dishes, frying fries, and flipping burgers.

Victor should have known that River was going to ruin the plans he laid out for him. Tomorrow was supposed to be more than just breakfast with the genet's parents. After almost a year straight of talking about their son's potential, he'd managed to break through. Talking with them, they'd promised to help convince him to go back to school. As a thank you, Victor would announce to all of them about the travel plans he'd cover. It should have been perfect.

Now, while he was unsure if he'd have a boyfriend by night's end, he was a little glad that he was just short of pressing the "buy now" button. Wanting something a little harder than the screwdriver, he grabbed the Tokyo Tea and finished the portion that was left. It was sweet, sharing no hints of its dangerous nature. Victor knew better though, having rescued River enough times when he forgot his limits capped at two drinks. Ice clicked against his front teeth as he tipped the glass all the way back until the last drop dribbled down onto his tongue.

It really was good, maybe even worth the twenty dollars he paid for it. It mellowed him out enough to actually focus on River across the club. For a second, his heart kept still, unable to find the yellow tank top that he used to mark him. Only until he saw the opening on

the dance floor did he realize that it was *his* boyfriend with a paw up swinging the tank top around in circles over his head.

Embarrassing and childish as it was, Victor couldn't keep back a small smile creeping up the side of his muzzle. It took a bit of effort to squash it down and remind himself that he was supposed to be mad at him. That silliness was the sort of thing that he brought into D&D and completely took over the game. Sometimes it was annoying enough that he would lie about certain rolls to prevent River from causing anymore damage to the carefully crafted story.

Thinking about it though, before his boyfriend curiously participated time from time, Victor was about to hang it all up himself. Everything had become number crunching, designed fun, min/max decision making, and boring ass characters. When River's curiosity transformed to mocking half-presence, and eventually full on mountain dew drinking member of the crew, it reignited his love for the game. Heck, some of the best nights with his friend group was when River was right there by his side making everything fun.

Covering his spots again, he must have gotten self-conscious of what he was doing and put his tank top back on. Arms flying left and right though, he looked to be really going at it. Leaning in, Victor searched the genet for something familiar about the way he moved. His dance was more frantic than feverish. Instead of the music flow-

ing through him like water, it jerked his body around like he was over hot coals.

Victor remembered this, letting himself get taken back to that first night he caught his eye. A *little* skinnier, and little less grey specks hidden in his tan, Victor watch the genet swinging around on a near empty dance floor an hour before last call. Eyes closed and just vibing with the music, he thrashed about while everyone else was taking their time with their partners. Couples took heed to step away from him if he'd gotten too close.

Something about the way he moved lied so well. All of the energy erupted from River like a plasma ball sending currents to the glass. While his moves might have seemed intentional to those who were more focused on someone tangible, nothing slipped past Victor. Alone at the club himself, he thought he understood that the genet's dance was only for himself. It was his way of shaking off everything he was feeling when he didn't have an outlet to express it.

Though he never met him or even said a word to him, he could see all the warning signs: ears flattened, tail lashing, fist balled, bit lip, and eyes squeezed so tight to hold inside everything that threatened to pour out. Standing from his chair, Victor walked over and grabbed the other boy by his wrists without even thinking about it. The genet allowed himself to be led, fighting the tears more than

the stranger. Sparing him embarrassment of becoming a mess right there in front of everyone, he took him to the side to calm him down while the genet introduced himself as River though sobs.

Again, without thinking or even realizing he was doing it until they were safely towards a secluded corner of the room, Victor had led *his* genet, seven years older and still overflowing with raw emotions, off of the dance floor. Just like he did the first time, River stayed as strong as he could, holding back long enough until he was safely out of sight to start a quiet sob.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean that. I'm so stupid," he let out between bawling.

"Shhh, there's no need for that. You're fine. You're not stupid. Not the slightest bit," Victor reassured him. Every sentence was followed with strokes running down his nape and spine. They kept tight, close enough to look like they were in the middle of a slow dance. Cradling him back and forth, he kept their movements in relative time to the music to avoid a scene.

A billion apologies came pouring into Victor's chest, soaking buttons and fabric in tears and snot. Apologies for shoving him in the line, allowing the doberman to grope him, slamming his fists on the table, forgetting to grab the mail, and getting mad when Victor brought home the wrong pudding cups almost two weeks ear-

lier. Though he didn't feel like he was the one that needed apologies, they felt nice that he was getting them anyways. Victor just moved to pecks between the ears, listening while River worked everything out of his system.

Through his dance, his lonesome wild fit, Victor knew the true things that he hadn't said. It'd been months, *months*, since anyone had taken River out. All of his old friends, now saddled with responsibilities, didn't have time or energy to keep up with the wired genet. The only people that he had left were Victor's nerdy D&D friends, their parents, and the skunk himself.

As much as Victor fantasized about nothing more than curling on the couch with his boyfriend and a streaming service, it all became just as monotonous as D&D felt before River showed up. It all felt as tedious as work, bills, chores, and visits to parents. River wasn't any of those things and now the skunk felt like a wet blanket over everything fun. All the while, his boyfriend, the one who's night was being ruined, was apologizing to *him*.

"Shoosh, shoosh, shoosh," Victor whispered, caressing him as best he could. A few more kisses were enough to get him to calm down so he could pull him away from his stomach. Despite being through the worst of the tears, River didn't lift his head to look into

his eyes. He just kept his head down like a scolded cub, but Victor just lifted his muzzle with his paw until they could see each other.

“I’m sorry I ruined tonight,” River said, the waterworks starting up again. “We can just go home and do something else.”

“Babe, babe, hun. The night’s just started. Nothing’s ruined,” Victor said planting another kiss right on the bridge of his muzzle. He knew he had a million apologies of his own he owed for making this night so difficult, but for now, he wanted to focus on turning the night around. “Like, right off the top of my head, there’s two things I can think of already. You can either watch me dance, or,” trailing for a second, the skunk pointed back towards the table area and followed with a shrug, “Or, you can watch me kick the shit out of that doberman asshole.”

That earned him a snort, and a shove, and a hug, before River shoved him playfully once more and sniffled up anything left in his snout. Wiping against his own arm for good measure, he cleaned himself up before leading Victor back into the center of the dance floor. “How ‘bout both of us just dance right now, and if we have any energy left, we’ll jump him in the bathroom?”

Sliding his paw where the doberman’s had been, Victor intimidated him before leaning in to murmur, “Maybe, but for now, I’d really love that dance.”

Last Day

Bradley opened his eyes, gasping before pulling himself upright on his bed. Another nightmare, the same one he had last night still on his mind. He turned left and right, looking around himself as he took in the environment. It wasn't his room.

For a second, he began to panic more, but the pieces of the puzzle gradually fell into place as he settled his thoughts. No, it wasn't his room. He hadn't seen that in almost three weeks. The little wolf cub was at summer camp and this was the last day.

He wiped at his muzzle and forehead, and then with some dread, lifted the covers up underneath him. Thank God! The sticky wetness he was feeling all over his body was just the sweat on his fur. His sheets were still mostly dry.

Bradley was not a bed wetter, but the fear of having an accident stuck with him every morning that he was away from home.

Doubly so when the nightmares started coming. Remembering them brought him completely out of his sleep and got him out of bed.

The sun had yet to rise, and all of the cubs around him were still fast asleep. Carefully, he got out of his pajamas and put on the khaki shorts and the branded t-shirt that all the campers wore. Silver Creek Camping Grounds dawned the front and back of his shirt with a logo of a stream running through hills into a lake. Also, there was a cartoonishly happy sun overhead.

It looked kinda lame, but he and everyone else was forced to wear it. Today he didn't mind it so much, because it made it easier to blend in. Yesterday, he had made his mind up that he didn't want to be found. He didn't want his best friend, Pat, to find him at all.

Quietly, the young wolf slipped out of the cabin, dawn's crisp air bristling his fur. No one was out yet. His stomach gurgled, and he knew he wanted food first. He walked out to the cafeteria, grabbing hold of the handle and pulling. It didn't budge.

"Bradley?"

The wolf jumped up, spinning around quickly to see a portly cheetah in front of him. She had an apron on and a furlnet over her head. Her brow was raised, but she didn't look upset. With a paw scratching the back of her ear, she asked, "What're you doing up? You should be sleeping."

His ears folded back and he dipped his muzzle sheepishly. "Sorry Miss Carter. I woke up from a nightmare and didn't want to go back to bed," he said pitifully. Before he finished, he lifted his head up and asked, "Is food gonna be ready soon?"

Miss Carter chuckled at that, shaking her head. "I just got up myself. Food won't be ready for another hour," she said. Crumbling to the Bradley's puppy eyes, the cheetah let out a sigh and rolled her eyes. "Out of the way. I'll fix you something since you're up anyways."

Bradley took a step to the side, smiling as best he could. Miss Carter unlocked the door, and both made their way inside. It felt weird to see the cafeteria so empty. Usually it would be loud, very loud, with a hundred noisy cubs all talking at once while the camp leaders tried to settle them down fruitlessly.

He stepped inside, walking towards his usual spot in the back. Miss Carter went straight towards the kitchen, fast as any cheetah he'd ever seen, despite her size. As he took his seat, he couldn't help but think about Pat. After all, it was the spot where they had first met.

Bradley looked up, picturing that first day so clearly. He saw the scrawny glasses wearing coyote a couple tables ahead of him placing his tray down. His uniform was a size too big on him and he had to

tuck in his shirt just to keep his shorts up. "Seat's taken," a fox said, scooching over to fill the bench.

"I— I'm sorry," the coyote stuttered, pulling his tray back to a spot further down the table.

The fox's fur ruffled and he moved a bit more down the bench. "That one's taken too," he said, looking to rise from his seat.

The boys and girls around the fox laughed, and the coyote took the hint. He picked up his tray and looked around in a circle. Before he could stand around too long, the fox barked out, "Go sit in the back with the other losers. If you stand around here any longer, I swear—"

The coyote jumped out of his spot, walking quickly towards where the fox told him to go. Even when he got to the back, he wasn't able to take a seat. He just stood around bashfully, looking at the full table. No one seemed like they were ready to make room for him.

Bradley folded his ears, not wanting to give up his spot, but he couldn't just watch this cub stand around stupid anymore. "You can sit here," the wolf muttered, pulling himself to the side so only half his rump was still on the bench.

The coyote moved quickly between Bradley and a horse, who reluctantly made space as well. He sat his tray down and mumbled a quiet thanks. They sat in silence, and only about halfway through

their meals did the other boy speak. "I like your watch," the coyote said just above a whisper.

Bradley looked confused for a second, then he looked down at his wrist and it clicked. "Oh! Right! It's from MechaSuit Fighter X. That's my favorite one of the five, Savior Suit," he said, holding out his arm so that the coyote could see it better.

The coyote nodded his head up and down quickly, glasses bouncing on his muzzle. "Uh huh! Cunning Suit is my favorite. My name's Pat," he said, holding out a paw for him. And that's all it took. From that point on, they were inseparable chatterboxes.

At least, they were.

"Bradley?" Miss Carter called from the other side of the cafeteria. "Foods ready."

The wolf trotted quickly, walking up to the sneeze guard. A breakfast burrito sat on a plate, still steaming hot. "Can I eat outside today?" he asked, looking towards the window. The sun was just rising.

The cheetah was busy preparing food for the rest of the campers. "You're not supposed to, but if you promise you won't feed the wildlife, and throw away any trash, I'll allow it," she said, not turning as she poured liquid egg out onto a searing flattop.

Bradley grabbed the burrito, tossing it back and forth between paws until it was cool enough to hold. Right then, other cubs started to walk in, and he knew he needed to leave now. "Thanks Miss Carter!" he called as he ducked out the back entrance.

Bradley raced towards the lake, keeping behind the trees to avoid being spotted. Cautiously behind cover, he peeked towards the other campers getting out of their cabins, trying to see if the coyote was up yet. He didn't see him, but in his heart, he knew that Pat was up and probably already starting to worry.

Regardless, he didn't allow himself to be seen as he got to the side of the lake. With a thump, he plopped himself on the unearthed roots of a tree and crossed his legs. From his spot, he could see the shore where he and Pat had spent a lot of time together, especially after the race. Again, he was taken back to his memories.

Pat fiddled with a buckle on the lifejacket as he whimpered, "I don't know how to swim."

Bradley gave Pat a reassuring rub on his shoulder, leading him towards the line for the race. "We're not swimming. We're gonna be in a canoe. You won't even have to touch the water," he explained to him for the hundredth time.

Pat nodded, but he looked out past the shore as if he wasn't sure. Getting close, Bradley grabbed hold of one of the straps on the coy-

ote's lifejacket and tightened it for him before saying, "I promise, I won't let you fall into the lake."

That seemed to do the trick, Pat's muzzle softening for a second. Just then though, the fox came up next to them with his chest puffed out. "They paired us with you losers? I thought we'd have a real challenge," he sneered.

Bradley glared at the fox, but the bigger boy's size kept any words stuck in his throat. Instead, he just pulled Pat away towards the shored canoes. "Don't listen to him. C'mon, let's get ready," Bradley said, only getting a small nod in response.

A big moose stood between the two canoes. His shorts rode up way past his knees, much further than anyone wanted to see. That seemed to be the standard for all the camp leaders. Both sets of teams put on their helmets as he spoke, "Alright campers. Rules are simple. You're going to take the canoes out past the buoy and then come back to the shore. First team out of their canoes wins."

Bradley put himself at the front of the canoe so the coyote wouldn't have to get too deep in the water. Pat got on the opposite side, taking a gulp as he looked at the small waves crawling up to the shore. Both boys looked over to the fox, who had grabbed a large bear to be on his team. They had no hope of winning.

The moose did one last check over all of them, adjusting the fox's helmet so it was on properly, and then took a step away. "At the whistle, you'll get your canoes into the water, jump inside, and paddle. Ready?"

He asked, but immediately blew the whistle after. Bradley grabbed hold of the handle on the side. They hoisted it together and the wolf ran towards the water. Pat, however, stuttered his steps as soon as the water touched his paws. The other boys were already getting inside their boat.

Bradley turned back to the coyote, noticing him frozen in fear. "C'mon! We can do this," he encouraged him, grabbing his attention. The coyote turned his head up, nervously chewing on his lip. "I believe in you," Bradley said, flicking his ears towards the lake.

Pat looked down to the water crawling up his ankles, turned his head towards the other boys, seeing their lead over them, and then back to Bradley to give a stern nod. Together, they marched into the waves until it was almost up to the wolf's waist. Then they pulled themselves into the canoe, Pat kicking up water everywhere as he scrambled to get inside.

When they were situated, each boy took their paddles and began to row. The canoe went sailing, way faster than Bradley could have imagined. Wind gusted through his fur on his face, sending his

whiskers into a gentle flicker. Turning his body to face Pat, he smiled wide at his friend behind him. He couldn't imagine a better feeling than this.

The fox and bear were bigger, but their weight wasn't doing them favors nor their coordination. Bradley just felt this connection to Pat, and their paddling was perfectly synchronized. When one paddle went up, the other scooped down and pushed them forward. Despite the hiccup, they were side-by-side with the other canoe within a minute.

"You're cheating!" the fox shouted, but the waves and the kick of the paddles drowned him out. Mostly. Bradley could still hear the other boy cursing up a storm, words his parents would've twisted his ear off if they ever caught him uttering.

Bradley could see the buoy bobbing up and down right ahead of them. They were neck and neck with the other canoe right up until the point where they passed the threshold. Then, they were suddenly ahead. Both boys lurched right, taking a tight smooth circle around the buoy, while the fox and bear made an awkward turn, unable to catch up. As they rounded back towards the shore, Bradley and Pat were now firmly ahead of the other team.

THWACK!

Pat cried out and the canoe shook. Bradley turned back to see the fox was trying to swing at them with his paddle. They were too far ahead for him to reach, but the thought of the canoe capsizing with Pat in it gave him a flurry of strength. The wolf put all of his might into his paddling, and there was no doubt that the coyote was doing the same.

In a desperate attempt, the fox lunged his paddle out to hit Pat. Thankfully, it fell short and now the other team was shy one paddle. Getting back to the shore was quick, and both boys jumped out of their seats into the water. They pulled their canoe into the sand and then immediately embraced one another.

“We did it! I have no clue how it happened, but we did it!” Bradley shouted, bouncing up and down on his heels.

Pat was equally ecstatic, though he was also trembling like mad. “I was so scared but that was so fun. I can’t get my paws to stop shaking.”

“You two must’ve cheated!” the fox said, coming out of the water with a finger waving at them.

Before either boy could respond, the moose grabbed the fox by the scruff and pulled him back. “I saw what you did out there,” he snorted, hot breath being felt by everyone.

“It just came out my paw, I swear. They were the ones that cheated,” he cried out, but was yanked away quickly and they watched as he was trotted towards the guidance office. Bradley remembered turning back towards Pat, unable to wipe the smile from his muzzle.

He was almost too distracted in his memories that he almost didn’t see the coyote in the same spot they were when they won the race. He was standing at the shore, looking around with his tail between his paws. The wolf was frozen, heart still in his chest. To Pat’s misfortune though, he turned the wrong direction and by the time he did look to where Bradley had been sitting, he was already behind a tree. A second later, he darted off, shielded by the woods.

He sprinted as fast as he could while not making too much noise. The coyote wasn’t following behind him, but he ran anyways. It hurt too much to stick around and see his distraught friend. Not until he met a clearing did he slow down.

Though he could hear the sounds of campers in the distance, he was completely alone. He wandered to where the fire pits were situated. Tired from running, Bradley found a seat on top of a log to catch his breath. It was only then that he recognized this was the spot where they admitted their feelings to each other.

“You think Ashley likes you?” Pat asked in a hushed tone.

The fire crackled in its dying light. All the other campers had gone to bed, though Bradley imagined most were all still awake huddled under their sheets. The stories the camp leaders shared were pretty spooky, though, so-so to the wolf. He wanted to hear something really terrifying and so his camp leader, a husky with a ball cap, stayed up with them to tell one last story.

However, he never actually finished his story. No, the dog got about halfway through before he said he was gonna shut his eyes for a second. That'd been thirty minutes prior and he was now slumped to the side snoring gently. Bradley didn't mind cause he'd rather stay up and chat with Pat anyways.

The wolf put a paw to the back of his head, slightly abashed. "Maybe," he said, trying to hold back his smile and failing miserably. "She's always trying to get me alone."

Pat's eyes were wide behind his glasses, fascinated about the prospect. "Wow. Ashley's really cool. I saw her do archery and it was insane," he said, twisting his tail in his paws.

Bradley shrugged. She was cool, that's for sure, but he didn't feel that way for her. "How about you?" he asked, though, he figured he knew the answer.

Pat chuckled nervously and ducked his head. "I don't think any girls like me."

The coyote bit his lip nervously, but Bradley just gave him a nudge on the shoulder. "Someone's gotta like you. Don't you like anyone?"

Pat flinched slightly at the touch, and Bradley raised an eyebrow as he watched him scooch an inch away. He knew the other boy was shy, but he hadn't suspected him to get this tense over a silly conversation. The coyote didn't say anything, still keeping his head down.

"Well?" Bradley pressed him for an answer.

Pat let go of his tail, wrapping both paws around his face as he muttered out, "I don't know if I can tell you."

Bradley's muzzle twisted and he let out a little bratty huff. He crossed his arms and pouted, "Of course you can tell me. We tell each other everything."

That made the coyote squirm a bit, and Bradley felt a little embarrassed at the way he was acting. He uncrossed his arms and closed the gap between them. His arm went over Pat's shoulder and he squeezed him close. "I'm sorry. You don't have to say if you don't want to."

The coyote looked up again, turning his muzzle to face Bradley. "I want to, it's just dumb," he said, eyes starting to water.

Oof, he really had the coyote messed up. Not wanting his friend to feel so down, he gave him a light shake and smiled back at him. "Nothing you do is dumb. You're like, the smartest kid here."

Pat let out a small laugh. "It's a little weird. You promise you won't get mad at me?" he asked, trying to hold back his tears.

Bradley's muzzle cocked to the side. "Why would I be mad? It's not Miss Carter is it? Cause I heard some of the boys like—"

"—It's you."

Bradley's muzzle cracked in a smile, his head tilting to the side. "What? Me? What about me?"

Pat didn't say anything, just turning his head downward. The wolf's ears danced over his head in confusion. Slowly though, they began to settle as the words began to make sense to him. Bradley quickly let go of the coyote, getting a couple inches from the other boy.

"Me? You like me?" he asked, his voice a little louder than he meant to.

Pat was flustered, his breathing shallow. The coyote got to his feet, his shoes cracking some leaves underneath. Before he could get a step away though, Bradley darted an arm out and grabbed hold of Pat's wrist.

SNORT

Both boys froze, turning their heads to the camp counselor. The husky had stirred, eyes fluttering for a second. Bradley didn't move a muscle and neither did Pat. They just stared wide-eyed at him, before he slumped back in position and continued snoring. A sigh of relief was shared between them.

Bradley was the first to speak, just above a whisper. "Don't go."

The coyote looked down at the paw holding his, and Bradley let go, a little afraid of the touch. Pat pulled his paw back shyly, and though he didn't sit down immediately, he did find a seat. It was a foot from the wolf.

"I'm sorry," Pat said, adjusting his glasses.

Bradley didn't feel like he was owed an apology, especially from his best friend being honest. He thought of his words carefully before saying, "No, I'm sorry. I was just— I didn't think you could do that."

He felt dumb saying it, but it was the truth. He'd never heard of a boy liking another boy before. The rules were boys liked girls and girls liked boys, and it never occurred to him that they could like each other. And truthfully, now that he was thinking about it, there was no one else that he wanted to spend time with like he did with Pat.

Bradley scooched a little closer to the coyote. "What do you like about me?"

Pat's ears and brow went up, and even though he tried to suppress it, his tail started a small wag. "I think it's cool you like Mecha-Suit Fighter X," he said bashfully, and that made the wolf's muzzle hot.

Bradley inched a bit more towards him. "Is that all?"

Now the coyote's tail was wagging quick, a soft beat as it thumped against the log. "No?" Pat said, unsure of himself. His smile was so large that his glasses went crooked on his snout and he had to readjust them. "I think you're nice and you're fun."

Bradley gulped, and rested his paw next to Pat. "I think you're nice and fun too."

Pat looked down at the paw, back up at the wolf, and ever so slowly brought his own down to rest on top. The butterflies swirled like a storm inside Bradley's stomach. His fur stood on every inch of his body, and even the amazing feelings of the canoe race paled in comparison. Just before he could do anything more though, the camp counselor shifted suddenly.

THUMP

Both boys were on opposite sides of the log in a second, staring across the pit to the absent husky. Neither realized what had

fully happened until the man came up with leaves and dirt all over his fur and clothes. He scrambled for a second to get to his feet before slowly turning to the two campers.

“Did I fall asleep?” he asked, flipping his head left and right.

Bradley and Pat kept their maw’s closed, though both fought hard to keep their coy smiles to themselves. They giggled silently, still riding the high of the touch. The husky put a paw to the back of his head, and a finger to his muzzle. “Why don’t we just keep this to ourselves and I’ll get you two ice cream tomorrow.”

The ice cream was delicious, especially when Bradley shared it holding hands with his first boyfriend.

“Are you here? Bradley?” Pat called as he walked into the campsite.

The wolf heart raced as he crouched behind a trash bin, keeping his tail wrapped to his body. He didn’t dare make a move, knowing leaves were underneath his feet. Just listened and waited until he heard Pat kick up a flurry of leaves and storm off.

Why couldn’t the coyote just play soccer with the other cubs? Why couldn’t Pat just spend time with a camp counselor to learn to swim? There were a million things that he could be doing right now instead of looking for him. With tears in his eyes, Bradley got out of hiding and started a jog.

There were a few places that he thought of to go: the archery range, the crafting rooms, the waterslide by the lake, the soccer field, the foosball tables, or even the cabins themselves, but all of them were riddled with memories of Pat. Even if he could avoid the coyote all day, he couldn't keep him out of his mind.

Bradley went to the only place he knew he could get some privacy to think. Just behind the showers was a small patch of trees. The chemicals wafting from stalls were enough to hide his scent, but he knew it would be pointless. This was the spot they shared their first kiss, and Pat would think to look for him there as well.

And sure enough, even when he hid behind a bush, the coyote was stomping his way over. "Bradley, please!" Pat cried out, like he knew he was hiding just behind the leaves. His legs wouldn't move, even as he heard the other boy fall to his knees.

He could hear the coyote's sniffing, and he had never felt more ashamed at himself. Why was he doing this to him? After weeks of never leaving Pat's side, he chose the last day to act like such a coward. Bradley was about ready to crawl out of the bushes until he heard more footsteps approaching.

"Wow, look at the loser crying!" he heard the fox say in his signature sneer. "Why you crying? Can't find your *boyfriend*?"

There was a shuffling, the coyote trying to get up off the ground, immediately followed by the sound of someone falling down. Bradley poked his head around the bush to see the fox standing over Pat on his back. The other boy was so much bigger than the coyote, standing over him while his friends watched.

"I heard he left early cause he couldn't stand to be around you anymore," the fox said, looking ready to push him back down if he tried to get up.

For a split second, Bradley could make out the look of complete betrayal on Pat's muzzle. Something snapped inside the wolf, and he went wild out of the bushes. He ran straight past the coyote, and when one fist went up, one fox came down.

"OOF!" The fox wrapped a paw around his stomach, falling onto one knee. He stayed there a second, wobbling back and forth, before ultimately ending on his side in the dirt.

Riding the energy, the wolf stepped over the fox, glaring down at him. "I want you to leave us alone. You've been nothing but a total jerk to me and Pat." To emphasize his point, he waved a paw behind himself to the other boy.

Except, there was no coyote behind him. Bradley did a double-take, the empty spot jarring to see. At first he worried his guilt rid-

den mind imagined it all. Looking up though, he caught the white tip of Pat's tail disappearing around the corner of the showers.

He spun back around at the fox underneath him and shouted, voice cracking, "Just leave us alone!" Even though it didn't feel very intimidating, the fox nodded his head up and down, teeth still grit. Bradley couldn't help but feel a little pity for him. None of his friends had moved to his side. They just stepped away, not willing to put themselves in danger for him. That was what he had with Pat.

And he had spent the whole day ruining it.

In a dash, he booked it in the coyote's direction. "Pat! Wait!" he called out, unable to find him. Well, wasn't that some shi—stuff? Bradley had been avoiding him all day and now their roles were reversed. He hopped on his heels, spinning around in a circle. There was no sight of him.

Bradley calmed down and breathed in. Pat had been able to trace him all day, and he knew it was because he was following his heart. He looked into himself, thought about what he was doing all day, and walked towards his cabin.

And like he expected, the coyote was there, alone, underneath the covers of his bed quietly crying to himself. He was trying to keep it down, but Bradley could see the covers going up and down in his

sobs. The wolf's lips were pursed together tightly as he walked across the room and seated himself on top of his bed. Pat knew who it was.

"Why were you hiding from me?" he asked underneath the sheets.

Bradley knew why, but he didn't want to say it. Only stroked a paw over Pat's shoulder underneath the blanket. The coyote recoiled, not wanting the attention. "I'm sorry," Bradley said, even when he knew it wasn't enough.

Pat didn't respond other than to inch away. It wasn't really far, but it was enough for Bradley to know he messed up big time. The wolf sighed, not wanting to admit it, but knowing he had to be brave and say what he needed to say.

"I'm really sorry I ruined our last day together," Bradley started, beginning to choke up. "These past weeks have been the best, and I got scared. I kept having nightmares that we had to say goodbye. I just thought if I didn't see you, it would've been easier."

Pat came out of cover, only to look at Bradley with a bewildered look. His eyes were red, and his glasses were all over the place. Bradley wanted to fix them, but he didn't want to touch the coyote. It didn't help when he said, "That's dumb."

Bradley's ears folded back, but he figured he earned that. "Yeah, it's kinda dumb," he agreed.

There was an awkward pause, Bradley not sure what to do at this point. The sun was still up and other campers were outside, laughing and having fun. He gnawed his lip for a second, then said, "I'm sorry for being a jerk. We still have the rest of the day together though. Can't we just get out of bed and we'll do whatever you want?"

Pat nodded his head up and down at first, but before Bradley could even get up, he shook his head. "Wait," he whispered, muzzle ducked in embarrassment. "I guess, I wanted to spend all day with you because I'm scared to say goodbye too," Pat said, before looking up at the wolf. "I don't want to be scared anymore either."

Bradley, eyes watery and ears folded back, reluctantly nodded his head. It was the dread of the needle's prick before a shot, the nauseous turn of the guts when jumping from somewhere high, and the brace of impact just before a car crash rolled all into one feeling. After the day that he had given the coyote, it was the least he owed him.

He reached out, grabbing Pat's paws and pulled him out from under the sheets. Licking his lips, he thought over his words carefully before saying, "You're the smartest boy I know. You're braver than you think. You mean everything to me." A tear shed over his cheek, dangling at the end of his fur.

Pat nodded, but looked down foolishly. His thumbs twiddled inside of Bradley's palms, claws tracing little circles into his pads. Bradley made no move to rush him. Just enjoyed the soothing touch as the coyote collected himself. Being honest, if Pat asked him to just sit in his bed with him like this until their parents arrived, that would be fine too.

"Ever since the first day we met, I knew I liked you," Pat started, finally finding the courage to follow through. "You talked to me, and you made me feel welcome. When I said I liked you, I was so scared you'd be mad. I feel lucky that you liked me back, and I don't think I'll like anyone else like I do you." Claspng onto Bradley's paws tight, he got a little closer to the wolf before saying, "I'm going to miss you."

Bradley nodded, a couple tear beads flicking off his whiskers. "I'm going to miss you too," he said, and they embraced each other tight. They stayed that way, comforting one another. When there was nothing left to give, they managed to pull themselves apart. Pat gave a small laugh, seeing some of their fur had stuck together.

Bradley nodded his head up and down, confirming, "No more goodbyes?"

Pat, wiping away the last of his tears, agreed, "No more goodbyes."

Though there wasn't a lot of time left, both boys made the most out of it. They hung out by the lake, played a little soccer with the other campers, and Pat got a bullseye at the archery range. They even got to listen to one more scary story, and they never forgot their last day together.