

## Deer to my Heart

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## Deer to my Heart

by [NameChangeDaily](#)

### Summary

A human man goes on a hunting trip, only to have it interrupted by a visit by his estranged lover, a whitetail doe anthro. Tensions run high as a blizzard leaves the pair trapped in his house for the weekend. As they reconnect, however, they confront the demons that doomed their relationship, help each other heal, and regain the faith and hope that their love is something worth fighting for.

## Calm Before the Storm





Nestled in the heart of the Catskills, Warren's Peak and its surroundings aren't, to most people, much to write home about. A quaint community of a couple thousand, nearly half of the town's area is farmland or pasture with another forty percent covered in thick forest. At least, for 8 months of the year. For the other four, just about everything is blanketed in ice and snow. Such is life in upstate New York.

The village's namesake sits close to its western edge, its thick forests rife with noise and motion. There's a hiking trail to the peak that cuts through the woods, as well as a ski lift that operates during the winter months when the lodge opens up. I get asked often from visitors about how the slopes are. When that happens, I point them to one of my neighbors, since they tend to know more about it than I do. Skiing's not really my thing.

Hunting is.

There's something ethereal about going out into the wilderness, either alone or with company, and listening to the sounds of the wind, the birds, and your own breath as you wait for your target to make itself known. And there's nothing more exhilarating than the thrill of the kill. The moment where all of your preparation comes together, where you find your prey in the perfect position, line up a clear shot, and fire.

It's wasteful to just hunt for sport, though, so I only do it a couple of times each season, usually with my uncle Rodney on his property. And whenever we do, we only hunt animals we plan to eat, which means rabbits or deer (or in his case, bear, but we can talk about that later.) We try to use every part of the animal, as a way of treating each creature with respect. My dear uncle adopted that philosophy from his wife, partially because she wouldn't accept his proposal if he didn't. Most of the tribals I talk to have pretty negative opinions on it.

On the subject of tribal anthros, when I first moved into town I was surprised at just how many lived up here. Sure, I've met plenty of animal people back in the city, but they were mostly cats, mice, and dogs, all of which were born into generations of modern life. Out in the country, though, anthros make up more than half of the population, and there's a much greater variety of the species you see walking around. My next door neighbors are a horse family, and a ram owns the nearest sport store.

What sets tribals apart from your average anthro? There's some grey areas, but the main criterion is how much a given species or tribe 'adapts' itself into modern civilization. Dog-people, goat-people, chicken-people, they've all been around us since before we had the written word, but if a community of them fights for legal autonomy on species grounds or otherwise avoids complete integration, they would be tribal.

This was explained to me at least a dozen times in a dozen different ways, but this was how my ex-girlfriend specifically worded it, and the other tribals I've talked to seem to think of it the same way. In her case, Jenny and her family have always had a 'one foot in, one foot out' situation, where they farmed for a living like the rest of us, while still maintaining their connection to their

culture.

Four years ago, the Greenleafs were model neighbors, the kind who would drive out 10 miles on a Wednesday afternoon to help you put up your fence in the boiling summer heat. They would be the first to cook soup for a sick neighbor, or drive somebody's kid to school. There was a time when the Chief, my uncle and I could play cards at the pub, when I could break bread with him without feeling his hateful judgement bearing down on me, or worse.

Those days are long over.

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On a windy Wednesday afternoon close to November's end, I find myself driving my truck into town to run a few errands, a number of black clouds swirling around in my mind. The murder of one of my hens the day before has me in a sour mood, and getting revenge on the culprit barely numbs my anger.

My heater has been cranked up to the max setting since I got behind the wheel, so it feels like an oven, especially with the flannel I'm wearing. Playing from my car stereo is the beautiful sounds of Stone Temple Pilots. As I gently turn the steering wheel to match the curve of the road, I turn the volume up. A number of small buildings come into view as I clear the bend, my destination one of them.

I slam my foot on the brake after turning into an unpaved parking lot, my junker kicking up a dust cloud behind me as it screeches to a stop. After parking the vehicle in front of the old building, the yellow façade chipped and faded from exposure, I reach over my passenger seat to grab a box of empty milk bottles.

With my bounty under my arm, I step out of the truck and walk to the entrance. A dream catcher hangs on the center of the door, feathers of white, red and black hanging below. I grab the slightly rusted handle with my free hand, pulling it open. A few notes ring out from a chime hooked onto the frame, a hollow sound.

The inside of the farmers' market is much less dreary than one would guess from its exterior. The floors are always polished to a shine, and fresh fruits and vegetables of all kinds are stocked in its stalls, kept meticulously free of dust. The whole room is lit up with a few overhead lamps, only one of which flickers.

Most impressive is the mural painted on the back wall. It depicts a set of four tribal elders negotiating around a fire pit. The warm embers light up the hands and feet of each elder, but leaves their eyes obscured in shadow. Clockwise from the top left, the four chiefs are a fox, a deer, a rabbit, and a bear, all showing the wisdom and scars of long, difficult lives.

The mural's designer, a young deer woman wearing a colorful denim jacket and blue jeans, is playing with her phone from behind the counter. The doe stands only a few inches shorter than me, with a healthy, muscular build from physical work. Her hips and breasts are pronounced enough to clock her as female on sight, but otherwise don't stick out too much. She has round eyes, dark brown in hue. Soft, caramel-colored fur covers most of her face save her jaw and neck, which are instead an eggshell white. Around that neck hangs a bone charm shaped like the sun; one I carved for her years ago.

"Welcome to the Warren's Peak Village Market," Jenny drones, not looking up. "If you're looking for cigarettes, there's a gas station that sells them at the state minimum to your right when you leave."

“Any recommendations for flavor?” I ask.

“Maxie?” The doe’s eyes dart up from her screen, meeting mine. “Hey, didn’t realize it was you! Let me just take those...” She grabs the empty containers from my hand, fumbling a bit as she puts them behind the counter. Then she hands me a box of filled bottles from the nearest refrigerator. “So, what brings you downtown? How have you been holding up?”

“Hunting season’s started, and I needed to grab some ammo from the shop. Milk too, so I figured I’d give my old pal a visit while I was here.”

The fur around her neck stands on end when I mention hunting. She was never a fan of that hobby. “Oh. I forgot that the season started, guess I’ll wearing orange everywhere for the next two months. You always wait for the first snowfall, right, Max? You must be itching to bag something.”

“I plan on going this weekend, actually, since it’s supposed to snow on Saturday. A lot easier to see a buck on a white background.”

“Yeah...” she trails off. “You showed up later than usual, you know? Usually I catch you here around ten, but today you came in at two. What was the delay?”

I scratch the back of my neck. “Didn’t mean to worry you. Maggie died yesterday, and I spent half the night waiting for the son of a bitch that killed her to show his face. Foxes are nasty little devils; they can weasel their way into just about anything, and this one left only feathers and bones behind.”

“I won’t tell your aunt you said that,” Jenny says. “Still, I know how much you care about your animals. Our circumstances might make it difficult, but if you need someone to talk about it, call me. It’s the least I can do after you helped me with Anabel last summer. And for other things.”

“How long did you care for that cow anyway, fifteen years?” I ask.

“Just about, and you know what Dad wanted to do when he found out? He told me to go call the glue factory. The glue factory! Can you believe it?” She whines. “She was our pet, Max. And it’s like he didn’t care at all. I mean, I know he’s busy, but...”

“That’s all in the past, Jenny. What matters is that Anabel got the funeral she deserved.”

The doe takes a deep breath. “You’re right, I just wish he showed that he cared as much as you do. You were the only one who helped me dig a grave and bury her, and she wasn’t even yours. Even though we-” She touches her hoof to the necklace. “I still think about it a lot.”

“I’m just happy I could help,” I say, scratching my shoulder. “How much do I owe you for the refill?”

“I can cover you, don’t worry about it,” she says, opening up a vault under the counter. She brings out a small stack of bills and pushes it into my hand. “That’s your cut for this week’s sales, there should be 130 dollars there. Will that be all, or can you stick around for a few minutes?”

I stick the cash in my back pocket, then jab my thumb back towards my truck. “I actually have a couple more bushels of squash and corn in the back up for local delivery, do you think you can give me a hand?”

“I’d love to!” Jenny moves from the counter to bend over, propping over the door with an old wooden block. She lingers in that position with her ass up, tail twitching from outside her jeans,

taunting me, inviting me to grab hold-

*She's off limits. Get your mind out of the gutter.*

After a few more seconds, the doe stands back up, her shoulders slumped. "So, uh, how much do we need to bring in, Max?" she asks, following me outside the front door.

"Three of each," I say, opening up the hatch. "I haven't heard from your little sister in a while, is she coming back home for the holidays?"

"Nat got accepted for some big shot program for biomedical, she's spending the winter in Europe. It was just Dad and I for Thanksgiving, and it's gonna stay that way for Christmas. And New Year's. And God knows what else." Jenny kicks up a cloud of dust, which quickly gets carried off by the wind.

"You're kidding; didn't she pull the same shit on you guys last summer too? It sounds more like she's trying to cut the both of you off and run."

"I think you're right. Nat's been complaining to me for years about 'taking back her freedom.' I guess she finally found her out." Jenny sighs. "What I don't get is why she felt the need to block my number, too. I thought we were closer than that."

*Jesus Christ, this poor girl.* "Do you want to try calling her from my phone? I don't think she's blocked me yet."

The doe shakes her head. "I appreciate it, but no. If she wants to leave everything behind, move somewhere we can't follow, and cut contact, there's not much we can do anymore. She's made her choice."

"Alright, but if you need help with anything--"

"I have you on speed-dial," she says, finishing my sentence. "I appreciate the thought, and if you're making the offer..." She pauses to lean in. "Maybe Santa can bring me a surprise this year?"

"Drop some hints," I reply. "You'll get something; he can promise you that much."

"Some new watercolor supplies would be nice, or guitar strings. Does Santa want anything in return?" she whispers into my ear, a hoof rubbing against my chest.

*I miss that touch, but...*

"I'll let you decide, just keep it reasonable, appropriate, and *platonic*." I say, brushing the hand off. *Too close of a call.* "I don't need the Chief breaking down my front door because he caught me getting handsy with you. Is he in today?"

"Yeah, he's spending his break where he always does." There's frustration in her voice. "I keep telling him it's gonna destroy his liver but he doesn't care. Some days he just pounds back pint after pint until he can barely stand. It hurts to watch."

"I can't imagine," I say, pushing off the truck. "It's been nice catching up, Jen, but I really need to get out of here."

"You've barely been here five minutes. What's wrong with staying a little longer?" She clings to my arm. "Nobody's around to see us."

When all your neighbors know your name, you find that they can't keep their nose out of your business. Everybody talks to everyone about everyone. That's my only problem with living out here.

Thankfully, she looks to be right. There are no houses in this part of town, and if any cars passed by we could always hide behind the truck like we're doing now. The only person I'm really concerned about is the Chief himself. If he comes back and sees me hanging around, who knows what he'll do?

"Alright," I say, deciding to take the gamble on another few minutes. "The floor is yours, what do you want to talk about?"

I must have put her on the spot. Jenny's eyes widen, and her mouth hangs open as she tries to figure out some new direction to take the conversation. "Uh... well you... you're going hunting this weekend right? What are you hoping to bag?"

*Damn it. You had to choose the one thing we'll never see eye to eye on?* "You already know the answer, Jen. I hunt whitetail deer."

"Well, maybe considering recent tragedy, I thought maybe you'd switch to hunting foxes instead? At least for this year."

"That was a one-time thing," I explain. "For the honor of my lost hen. I'm not going out of my way to exterminate every fox in the county, especially not on uncle Rodney's property. Have you seen his family?"

"So you won't hunt foxes because they remind you of family?"

"That's a big part of it. It's their property I use; it would feel disrespectful."

"But you still hunt deer," she pushes.

"Because deer provide a large amount of edible meat per kill. When I bag a buck, I'm set on meat for weeks, even after sharing. Not to mention all the uses for the other parts of the animal, or population control."

"I was your girlfriend at one point, Max. Come on! You know it's screwed up."

I put a finger to my temple. "You always get so twisted about this, Jenny. Do you think it's weird that you milk cows and goats for a living, despite having neighbors who are also cows and goats?" *Anthros don't even look completely alike to their animal counterparts. Jenny's muzzle is short, and her head is much rounder than any wild doe I've seen. I could clock her as an anthro from 100 yards. And her fur...*

"Yeah, I do. I can't even look at Mrs. Robinson after I lead a cow into one of those trucks. I know she and her family don't care about it, they have their own dairy farm, but it still messes with me. Am I really alone in that? How can you just talk to me like nothing happened after you shoot a buck between the eyes?"

"Because you're a person, and they're animals. Wild deer are no different from cattle or goats. They aren't sapient. Besides, shooting a buck between the eyes is a lot quicker than letting a--"

Jenny cuts me off, her lips taut. "Alright, I get it. Let's talk about something else, please."

"Agreed." I could bring up that she started it, but I'm more thankful that the conversation was over.

*Thank God.* I stuff my hands in my pockets, watching a car whizz past on the road towards town.

“Well... since you’re here, I wanted to know if you’d like to hike up Warren’s Peak with me. The trails are going to close soon, and I think it’s better to connect to the wild with someone else around. It’ll put you into the right mindset for your... trip this weekend, what do you say?” She holds a hopeful expression.

“It’s not a good idea to head up there,” I state, “Not at this time of year, with the ice. Too dangerous.”

“Isn’t marching through the woods to hunt also dangerous?”

“Apples and oranges. I’m going to be in a permanent hunting blind for most of that time, one that’s not too far from my uncle’s house. Hiking up the mountain on an unlit trail is asking for trouble. Besides, someone might see us.”

The doe panics, desperately hoping to salvage the interaction. “Then we can do something indoors, or a county over! They have that laser tag place out in Sheepshank, I heard they have a discount on-.”

“Jenny, you know how he feels about us dating.”

“Who said anything about dating?” She protests. “We would just be going as a couple of good friends, it’s no big deal.”

“If he has even the slightest inkling something is up, he’ll go ballistic. He always assumes the worst.”

“What if I ask someone to cover for me? I could tell Papa I went to see that new detective movie with them, and then meet you down the block where he can’t see me.”

“He wasn’t born yesterday, Jenny. Who’s going to cover for you?” I say, putting my foot down. “He’ll figure it out, and I’ll be left to deal with the aftermath. The answer is no.”

The doe blinks a couple of times, struggling to get the words out before covering her face and turning away. “Why do I even bother asking anymore?”

“I wish things were different.”

“Fine, forget it. Whatever.” Defeated, she sulks back to the shop, looking back at me one last time. “Take care of yourself, Max,” she says, closing the door behind her.

My hand reaches towards her, acting against my mind, but she’s already gone.

I get back behind the wheel and leave the parking lot, my mood soured even more than it was before. *I hate that I have to leave things like that.*

The sports store was close enough to walk, but the Orange Nail was on the way there, and I didn’t want to run into Chief on foot. *I’d rather talk politics with a wild ass than get into any kind of conversation with him.*

I pass the pub on my left, crude slogans scrawled on a chalkboard sign right outside its entrance. Most of its customers come from out of town; a fair few were just truckers, skiers, and college students who plain didn’t know any better. But many were vagabonds, rough-and-tumble types with nothing to lose and something to prove. The Orange Nail had the reputation of being the bar-



fight capital of the county, possibly the state. It still has the odd scuffle, although its unofficial bouncer cracks down hard on that kind of behavior. Probably the best thing Chief does in recent memory.

Further down the road is the old Methodist church, its tall white spire pointing to the clouds above. I remember Laney Lee had her wedding there some years ago. More than a hundred people showed up for the two-hour service, and they ran out of space in pews, so a few local characters brought lawn chairs into the chapel. It started a huge argument between the Lees and the local pastor, ending with the former leaving the church to attend mass a couple of miles north and the latter setting a hard limit of 80 guests for celebrations.

I find the place, a nondescript brick building save for an overhead sign that reads 'Woolworth Sport Store,' in orange letters on a green camouflage background. This store has been around since my father was young, under different management. It's changed for the better since the old man retired.

Entering the shop, I saunter past aisles of sports balls, jerseys, and shin guards towards the hunting section. Two dog boys pass around a hockey puck along the tiled floor, only stopping for a moment when they see me about to walk between them. I give them both a quick nod, and they resume their game as soon as I pass. *They look like my cousin's friends.*

The owner is a sheep man covered in thick, cream-colored wool and about 40 extra pounds around the waist. Thick horns curl around his ears, and his eyes are half-lidded, probably from working a late-night shift for a different job he doesn't get paid for. He already has a box of .308s ready when I get to the counter. "Anything else, Max?" he asks.

"You know me too well, Bart," I say, my eyes descending towards the display case underneath the register. Handguns line the top shelf, while boxes of ammo and assorted knives in garish colors decorate the bottom. "Cool blades, where'd you pick them up, the gas station?"

"They had a good bargain. Buy ten, get an hour with your mother." The ram runs the box over a scanner, his free hoof tapping against glass as he waited for the computer to process it. "Fifty bucks."

"Expensive. Here." I hand him the cash from my wallet, my attention turning to the back wall. Up for display are rifles and shotguns mounted on hooks, their barrels shining with a metallic luster. Next to them are both recurve and compound bows, most of which were currently unstrung.

Pocketing the ammo, I wait around for the receipt to print. *He really needs to invest in a faster computer system.* "How have things been?"

"Good enough," Bart rumbles. "The shop makes enough money to keep us afloat, that's all that really matters."

"I'm glad things are okay. How about Junior, can he walk yet?"

The ram's head lifts, his tired face lighting up to a proud smile. That's his switch.

"He just took his first steps last week, his mother's been sending pictures and videos to everyone within a hundred miles. Of course, it means we have to be extra careful to stop him from hurting himself, but toddlers can always find new ways to put themselves in trouble. Actually, hold on-" He pulls out his phone and taps furiously for a few seconds before putting it to the side. "I just sent you a video of him, check it out when you get home."

The pocket of my jacket buzzes. “Sandra’s been watching him like a hawk, I presume.”

“You’d be correct in that presumption; she takes him everywhere she goes. He’s devolving into a mama’s boy with each passing second.”

“That such a bad thing when they’re still so young?” I ask.

“I suppose it’s not the worst,” he shrugs. “What about you? When do you plan on becoming a father?”

“Eh, me? I don’t know.”

The ram pops me with a quick jab to my shoulder. “Come on, what’s the hold up? You’re an eligible bachelor. You’ve got your own place, you’re good looking, and I’ve seen what you can do with your hands. You could have a girl in your arms in no time if you wanted it.”

“I just haven’t been that interested,” I say. “If something happens, it happens. Until then, don’t hound me.”

“It’s only going to happen if you put yourself out there and meet new people. Do I need to drag you out of your house? Because I will.”

I scowl. “Bart, you got wool in your ears? I really don’t want to talk about this right now.”

“You lucked out on the camping trip. Maybe you’ll meet your next girlfriend doing something like that, too. That’s all I’m saying.” The ram turns around, reaching into a compartment right behind his seat. “Max, you drive here?”

“Yeah.”

“Bummer.” He reveals a beer, popping off the cap and guzzling down half the bottle in one motion. “How much time do you have to kill?”

“I’ve got a few minutes.” I steal a folding chair from the closest shelf, and plant myself at the side of the line.

“Talk to Uncle Bart,” he says, touching the ends of his hooves. “What’s got you in such a bad mood?”

“More of the usual.”

“Greenleaf?”

“Yep.”

“I should have guessed; you look like a little kid who just popped his favorite balloon,” he says. “I get old feelings die hard, don’t get me wrong, but this is kinda pathetic. It’s been two years.”

“A year and a half,” I correct. “And it’s easy for you to say, your father-in-law doesn’t hate your guts. Chief is a psycho; it wasn’t our choice to stop dating.”

“Whether it was or wasn’t doesn’t matter. ‘External factors’ you can’t confront are preventing you two from seeing together, so just break it off. Until then, you’re just fucking each other up in the head.”

“I know,” I say. He’s said it before, and he was right then. *It’s just so much easier said than done.*

A dog-woman with something resembling a pixie cut clears her throat behind me. One of the boys from earlier is attached to her hand. “So unprofessional. People have places to be,” she growls.

Bart’s face sours, his rectangular pupils constricting in irritation. “We were having a chat. This is my store, if you don’t like how I run things you can sh-”

“We were just about to finish up anyway, sorry to keep you waiting.” I clear the way for her to check out. Bart tends to get a tad confrontational when he’s had a drink, so this isn’t the first time I’ve had to smooth things out for him. The woman, a collie, nods and takes my space, placing her own items on the counter. Her son already has his face pressed up against the glass, staring at the assortment of weapons for sale. It brings a smile to my face; I did the same thing at his age.

As he’s scanning everything into the machine, the ram calls out to me over the customer’s shoulder. “Stick around for a few, Max, I’ve got something for you.”

After about ten minutes, featuring a heated argument over an imaginary discount on track pants, the lady finally leaves, her son in tow. The boy’s friend has also vanished from the shop.

Bart beckons me over, waving a sealed envelope in his hoof. “So, I went to Ithaca for a couple of days to visit the grandparents, and my cousin was also in town. You’ve met Amanda before, right?”

“The chubby one or the junkie one?”

The ram grimaces. “‘Fluffy’ is the word we use, Max. We were talking about how she dumped her deadbeat boyfriend to look for something real, and I may have let slip that you were also going through the wringer. She got interested when I mentioned you by name.”

*Chubby Amanda... I think we met through him, actually.* “You introduced us at the mini-golf thing, right? She was fun to talk to.”

“You think so? She said you were cute, and she’d love to get to know you better. Hint hint, nudge nudge.”

“I don’t know about this,” I say.

“Is this about the pudgy? She’s trimmed down since you last saw her, you know.”

“It just feels out of nowhere, like I’m going to open the conversation and it’s going to be dead on arrival. Was she really interested in meeting up, or are you trying to play matchmaker again?”

The ram pushes the envelope into my hand. “She told me to give this to you, and you specifically. Take a chance, find out how much you have in common. And if it works out, we may be family someday. Does that sound so bad?”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself, but no, it doesn’t sound so bad. Why didn’t you just give her my number?”

“You know how girls can be.” He lowers his voice to just above a whisper. “She doesn’t want to come off as desperate.”

“Hah! Is she?”

“A little. So it’s better if she ends up with someone in good standing with the family than some other useless asshole. And honestly, I think you two would be good for each other.”

I fiddle with the ammo box in my pocket, gazing into Bart's rectangular pupils in order to read his intentions. "I'll think about it."

"Think hard about it, really use that head of yours."

I'm already turning around when he says that, so I flip him the bird behind me. The ram gags and chokes on his beer shortly after chuckling.

Back in the truck, I tear open the envelope, dumping the contents in the passenger seat. A small folded note falls out, bearing writing in blue ink.

*Haven't done anything like this before. My cousin says you've been asking about me and thinks we'd be a good match. We've met before, so I don't feel too weird about giving it a shot. Text me when you get this.*

Her full name and number is written at the bottom. I send a quick hello with my name attached, and stuff the note back into the envelope. *Maybe it is worth a shot.*

I start up the truck and turn down the road I came from, passing everything I saw before, including the pub. I catch the door of the bar opening, a colossal figure stumbling out with a bottle in hand. My hands tighten around the steering wheel as I recognize Jenny's father.

Achak Greenleaf is 6 and a half feet tall, over 7 if you measured to the tips of his antlers, and built like a brick shithouse. His fur is chestnut brown, darker than his daughters', although their fashion sense is near identical. He sports a jean jacket with the insignia of the Thunderhoof on its lapel, one that barely closes around his barrel chest and beer belly.

I pass him, his face forming a sneer in my right-side-view mirror. "He's not worth the trouble." I remind myself under my breath. After some time, he fades into the distance.

The farmers market speeds by on my left, and I take a quick glance to see if Jenny was outside. There's nobody there, so I floor the gas.

*Amanda's not the only desperate one, I guess. I check my mirrors, then glance at the envelope in the seat next to me. Maybe Bart's right, I think. It's not healthy for either of us to linger on a relationship that can't be. If we both want to be happy, we can't keep chasing ghosts. It's time to move on.*

## Cold Reception

I wake up early on Saturday morning, all of my chores for the week already complete. The firewood is chopped up, sitting in a pile left of my fire pit. My chickens are all well fed and inspected for mites, all coming back clean. I take great care in ensuring that the coop has no openings or drafts, intent on protecting the animals from both intruders and the weather. *Never again.*

First thing I do is check my phone, opening a late night text from a certain ewe. It's starting to pick up with her, I think. We've been talking about books we've been reading. She's a big fan of sci-fi, apparently. Bart wasn't kidding when he said she trimmed down since we met, at least if the photos she sent are accurate. *The one in the bikini was a bit forward, not that I mind.*

I text her that I'm going to have my phone off for a while today, so hopefully we can chat more tomorrow.

The snowstorm is supposed to get bad close to six, which means I have more than enough good hours to hunt. I have prepared as much as I feasibly could last night as to maximize my time in the wilderness. My rifle, a Remington 700, has been inspected thoroughly for wear and tear. Everything I needed for the trip is packed; my .308 rounds, a tarp, a first aid kit, beef jerky, trail mix, and a few bottles of water. All of my knives are as sharp as... well, knives. Today is the day.

My phone rings from my pocket, this time the balding, wrinkled head of my uncle Rodney lighting up on my screen. The still of his face switches to its live counterpart when I accept the video call. "Morning, nephew," he says. "You still plan on hunting today?"

"Of course, it's the first snow of the season, it's practically family tradition. I'd be dragging your ass to the blind with me if you weren't five hours away," I joke.

"Hey, easy with the language, Chester's in the room."

"He's eight, I'm sure he's heard worse before."

"I don't want him develop any bad hab--"

"Is that cousin Maxie?" A much younger voice chimes in.

My uncle looks down at something off-screen. "It is; do you want to say hello?"

Rodney angles the camera's perspective down a foot, revealing a face with bright orange fur and large, dog-like ears. "Hey Maxie! You gotta hear about what we did in Virginia! We went down to see Mama's family, and then Papa drove us up to see the Pawshington Monument and the Capitol building. The president even waved at us!"

"That was our local representative, kiddo," corrects Rodney.

"It was still crazy! I've never been to D.C. before."

"It's great to hear you're having a good time, Chester." I smile. Chester gets excited by just about everything, so I know I won't be hearing the end of this when he gets home. "Your mom doing alright?"

"Mama's happy that we got to be here for Thanksgiving with Gramma and Grampa. Although, I

remember she called you a neand-rathal for hunting when a storm's about to hit. I don't know what that word means."

My face reddens with embarrassment. "She's making a mountain out of a molehill, I'll get home before the storm gets bad, don't worry about me."

Rodney adjusts the phone back towards his face. "Make sure you do. Chester lost our spare key, which means you can't get into our house without breaking a window."

"I said I was sorry..." mumbles Chester in the background.

I nod. "I'll keep that in mind. Is there anything you need me to do while I'm there?"

"Everything should be taken care of, Max. Just give us a heads up if something goes wrong. And be careful!" He commands, not letting me get the last word before hanging up.

*Neanderthal? Good grief, I probably won't be hearing the end of that either.*

I look one last time to make sure I have everything, and realize that I missed an important tool in my rush to pack. From my drawer, I grab a stick of deer estrus and put it in my bag. I always find it amusing that they make these to look like deodorant. I can only imagine a few people that a scent like this would impress.

An orange jacket covers my torso, concealing a red flannel underneath. A fair few of my neighbors are trigger happy when hunting season comes around, and even though I don't expect to see any other hunters about, the last thing I need is a bullet to the head. I grab a bomber hat and scarf to keep my face warm in the chilly weather.

It takes longer to tie everything to the truck bed than to drive the shitbox to my uncle's place. It's about two miles away, the quickest path being a stretch of forest no one save my uncle and I ever use. When I park my car, the first snowflakes are already falling, so I make haste and grab all of my supplies so that I only have to make one trip down to the valley. There aren't any other cars around, meaning I'm going to have the blind all to myself. *Lucky me.*

Uncle Rodney's home is painted a rustic red with a white roof, kind of like a barn with a porch. It sits on top of a hill, surrounded by acres of wilderness on two sides. The path that leads to his door and mailbox also loops around through to his backyard, all the way to the blind he has set up by the creek.

Marching up the dirt path around the house, I pass a white gazebo with a table and two benches protected by its shade. Rodney designed it as an anniversary present for his wife, about 7 years ago. It brings back a lot of mixed feelings. *I came here to hunt.*

I reach the blind, an old shed painted orange with a brown tree pattern. Fiddling with a rusty combination lock for a moment, I unlatch the door, pushing all of my provisions against the wall. My gun rests on my shoulder as I walk out to the clearing, the deer estrus stick in hand. I slather a number of trees with the gel, then return to the station.

The shelter has a window about foot wide, and half a foot tall. I rest the barrel of my rifle on its edge, loading a bullet into the chamber. I haven't had much opportunity to aim down these sights for quite a while, but muscle memory quickly pulls through for me.

Once I've settled in, life returns to the forest, the birds and squirrels once again chattering in the trees above. Along with the smell of the falling snow, I pick up the faint aromas of smoke and tree sap in the air.

The wilds put my mind at ease and all my worries fly away on the winter wind. It feels amazing to be behind my rifle after such a long growing season. Seconds become hours as I wait for the arrival of my real prey, my finger trigger itching. Snowflakes accumulate on the ground in a white blanket, and the sky turns from blue to orange, then to a much darker blue behind the gray clouds. The wind is really picking up speed, stinging my cheeks through the blind as it howls down the valley.

My hindered vision is enough to break my zen, and I give it a rest for a few minutes. I open up my water bottle in one hand, alternating between swigs and handfuls of peanuts, dark chocolate and raisins.

When I return my attention to the clearing, what looks like a pair of ears is sticking out from behind one of the trees. I train my sight on the creature, hoping to find a pair of antlers. Instead, I discover a mere illusion, created by a few well-positioned branches. When she turns her head, it confirms that I'm looking at a doe.

For a brief moment I'm disappointed, which fades as I come to a realization. *It's mating season. If a real doe is here, that means that bucks aren't too far behind. All I need to do is sit tight and wait.*

I do exactly that, pointing my gun downwind. It's getting harder and harder to hear or see anything, and I don't want to come home empty handed if I don't have to.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, I hear the faint crunching of snow and a large animal emerge from the clearing. The buck enters my view with its head raised, trying to pick up the scent of the doe it followed. That has to be the largest rack of antlers I've seen in years. What a specimen!

*This is my chance!* I steady my rifle, waiting for a clear line of fire. My fingers are numb from the cold, so I stretch them out before placing them on top of the trigger.

The buck lumbers just close enough for me to aim right between its eyes. I take one last deep breath. All I have to do is squeeze, and-

An alarm blares from my phone, breaking my concentration. The buck, spooked by the sudden noise, charges away from the clearing in the direction it came.

"Damn it!" I take the gun out of position and yank my phone out of my pocket. *Could've sworn I put it on silent when I started.*

The banner on the lock screen reads "Emergency Alert: Blizzard Warning in effect for Delaware, Sullivan and Ulster Counties until 12 AM. Take shelter. Check local media. – NWS." The screen itself dark and difficult to make out; the cold weather must have drained the battery.

"I should have checked the wind speed again before I left," I mutter. "And it went off right as I was about to pull the trigger! Just my fucking luck!"

If I was any smarter, I would have left an hour ago instead of letting myself stay in the zone for so long. And now I have nothing to show for it. *Hopefully the visibility doesn't get any worse. Driving home is going to be a nightmare.*

I shove everything I can into the bag and put it around my back, carrying my gun around my shoulder after setting the safety switch on. *I should at least be responsible about this.*

I pick up the lock from the ground, snapping it back into place with a click. As I'm about to leave, however, I hear a voice from down the valley. *What is someone else doing down here in conditions like these?* I put my pack back down against the wall of the shed, and move through the clearing to investigate.

“Stupid blizzard...If Pa finds out, he’ll... I can’t ask him...” the voice says as I draw closer. It sounds feminine, but it’s still difficult to make out in the howling wind.

“Ma’am, this is a private hunting ground.” I say. “You aren’t allowed on this property without permission from the owner.”

“Shit, he sees me! What do I do, what do I do?” Behind the tree, I make out a brown complexion on the woman, as well as a thick orange jacket, snow pants, and... deer ears?

“Jenny? Is that you?”

The figure freezes in place, before holding her hands up in resignation. “Yeah, Max, it’s just me.”

“How did you get here? We live like ten miles away from you.”

“I... uh...” She scratches her ear, “I took a walk from town. I thought you might like it if I visited you?”

I give her an incredulous look. “You walked here? In blizzard conditions? Are you insane?”

“Not IN blizzard conditions, Max, it was only like a flurry when I got here.”

“Do you have any concern for your own safety, Jen? Jesus!” I charge. “You know how people drive on these roads.”

“I was careful, and I cut through the forest trails where I could.”

“And what if someone mistook you for an actual deer? You think it’s smart to walk around the woods in the middle of hunting season during low visibility? What if someone shot you?”

“Relax!” Jen pleads. “My jacket is bright orange, see? I look like a giant walking traffic cone. Any hunter would see it before they saw the rest of me.” She extends her arms to show off the coat. “Besides, you can’t hunt does this time of year, and last time I checked, I haven’t been growing antlers.”

“Accidents still happen! It was a needless risk. You would have been better off driving here. How long have you been on the property?”

“I jumped the fence around 5:30, which means I’ve been here for about an hour. And can you lighten up a little? You sound like Papa, fretting over every little thing. I can take care of myself.”

I narrow my eyes at the doe.

“You’re really gonna be that way, huh?” she rolls her eyes. “Fine, Max, I’m sorry that I walked four miles just to spend time with my friend, the one who seems so intent on avoiding me even when I know he wants to see me. I’m sorry that I didn’t get hurt and nothing happened. Now!”

She motions towards the pile of supplies leaning against the blind. “Since you’ve decided to call it a night, we have a few extra hours to enjoy together. What do you want to do first?”

“Don’t talk to me that way,” I snarl. “I’ll tell you what I want to do. I’m gonna take you back to your house before it becomes impossible to drive there. We shouldn’t be seeing each other; how many times do I have to tell you?”

“Are you shitting me?” spits Jenny. “I come all this way to see you where nobody else will find us and you still stonewall me. Is this about Papa? Why do you keep letting him walk all over you?”



He's not even here! Nobody's here! We're alone!"

"I have my reasons." I turn away to pick up the rest of my equipment, my fingers digging hard into the fabric of the pack. "We're wasting time. Follow me to the truck, unless you plan to walk the full eight miles back."

She gives me the silent treatment as we walk uphill through the heavy snow. It's a difficult climb, made harder by our efforts to avoid any hidden rocks or roots to trip over.

My mind wanders what this is going to look like to the rest of the town, especially him. *And I thought things couldn't get any worse. The Chief's going to have a tizzy when he sees my truck in his driveway. But fuck me, right?*

We reach the top of the hill, and soon the gazebo comes back into view. The scowl on Jenny's face curls up into a smile, and she picks up her pace, climbing over the ice covered steps to stand inside while I stay on what I think is the path.

"Check it out, Max!" she calls. "It's your Uncle's gazebo! It's so pretty under the snow."

"It is." I start to tap my foot as she takes her time strolling down memory lane.

"You remember when we first met, right?" she asks. "Mom pushed Papa to come and help you and Rodney bring this up, and I decided to come along to help paint, and while I was touching up the top I--"

"You dropped your paint brush and striped my face white on accident, I remember. Now can we please get out of here?"

"You suck so much; you know that? Don't you care at all how much this place means to me? It should mean a lot to you too." she says, holding the railing on her way down the steps. "And the weather isn't going to get so much worse in thirty seconds."

"If you have something to say, say it in the truck." I state, as we march past the house. "I don't want to stay out here any longer than I have to."

I open up the back hatch of the truck and pack away all of the equipment, tying it down with the bungee cords I planned to use on my kill. I take my rifle with me back to the front, tucking it behind me on the floor of the back seat.

I look over my supplies one last time. *I guess it's a blessing in disguise. Hauling a deer up in this weather would have been miserable.*

Jenny is already in the passenger seat when I get behind the wheel. She refuses to look at me while I check my mirrors. *Certainly makes things easier for me in the long run.*

As I twist my key into the ignition, I listen in for the sound of the engine revving up, but nothing happens. Another try, and still, the truck doesn't start. I punch the horn in frustration.

Jenny looks over to me. "Is something wrong?"

"The battery's drained. Can you grab the jump-starter from the back seat? I need to prop open the hood."

She nods and reaches over the seat to retrieve it, handing it off to me in exchange for the keys. I open up my door and step back outside to pop up the hood. Each of the cables connects to its

respective battery terminals and I turn on the machine. "Start the ignition!" I call.

"What? I can't hear you?"

*It's difficult to hear anything with this fucking wind.* "The ignition, Jenny! Start the truck!"

She nods, and the engine revs up before running normally. I give her the thumbs up and turn off the starter, putting it into the back seat before once again getting back behind the wheel.

"You got your belt on?" I ask.

"Of course."

"Good."

I pull out of my parking spot and get back on to the road, keeping my hazards and brights on while staying well below the speed limit. Even at the max setting, the wipers can barely keep up with the rate of falling snow. The ice on the ground is making it harder to stop, too. Nightmare conditions, even for an area like this.

After a couple minutes of fumbling my way back to town, I pull over to turn around. "Call Chief. Tell him you can't make it home through the storm and that you'll be staying at a friend's place for the night. Make something up."

The doe taps her screen a couple times. "My phone's dead, I'll call him when I can get a charge. Are we going back to your uncle's?"

"I don't have his spare key, and my place is only two miles further up the street. I hate driving in this weather, but we'll be going in the direction of the wind, which should be safer than whatever the fuck that was."

"Max O'Neill inviting me to stay the night." Jenny remarks.

"Don't get smarmy with me," I say, looking in my rearview mirror. "This is an emergency measure. You put me in an awful position today with that stunt you pulled. Why are you really here?"

"Is 'I wanted us to spend some time together' not good enough for you anymore? Do you think I always have some sort of ulterior motive?" Jenny sighs. "I didn't know where else to go, Max. I got into a huge argument with Papa, and I needed to cool off. I was hoping that hanging out with you like the good old days would cheer me up, but I guess not."

I grip the steering wheel tighter. "What do you want me to say to you, Jenny? Neither of us can divorce our... feelings to form that kind of friendship, and we can't be together. We need to take a few years of space from each other, then maybe, after we find other people, we can have something."

"We've been broken up for a year and a half, I still haven't gotten over it. Can't imagine you're doing too much better."

"You lack imagination, because a few days ago I got a girl's number. We're looking to meet up when the weather gets warmer in April." I smile a bit. "She's sweet."

Her teeth grind. "You leave all of your lovers hanging for months at a time, not just me. Really reassuring."

I try to ignore the jealous ill-intent of the comment. “She lives far away, and I’m a busy man. If we’re going to meet up, I want a guarantee that things out of my control don’t screw us over.” I bear right on a fork in the road, picking up speed as I make the turn.

“So you would go off on a whim and hang out with some floozy you don’t even know over me?” she asks. “This is about Papa, isn’t it?”

“She’s not just ‘some floozy,’ Jenny. She’s Bart Woolworth’s cousin, I’ve met her before. And not everything is about your fucking father! Maybe I just want to try dating a girl who’s a little more grown up for once. But God forbid I try to move on.”

The doe doesn’t buy it. “So it is about him! I knew it! Why can’t you look him in the eye and just tell him how much you care about me? It has to get through to him eventually.”

“You really don’t know anything, do you?”

“I know enough. He can be a bit overprotective, but a lot of fathers are. Why do you think he means half the things coming out of his mouth? He’s just trying to test you, and you backed out, so of course he hates you! You’re weak! Where did your balls go?”

“You weren’t there, so don’t call it a fucking test!” I shout, my attention now solely on the argument. “He sent me to the fucking hospital! You don’t know what he’s capable of, so shut up!”

“What are you- Max, look out!” Jenny lurches for the steering wheel, turning it hard to the right.

My vision jumps right back to the front of the truck, right as a car doing limit swipes us from the left. I lose control of the vehicle. My foot slams on the brake, but it isn’t enough, and we’re heading straight for a tree.

The truck collides with the trunk head-on only a second after I yank the emergency brake. The windshield cracks. The airbags engage, blowing out my dashboard. My ex and I are pushed hard against our seats. My mind blanks for a moment.

## Crashed Hopes

For a few seconds, I see stars. I can't tell what's going on. There's a bunch of lights going off and on in the corner of my eye. I hear the sound of a raging storm muddled by strange hissing noise coming from in front of me, mixed with grunts of pain. The smells of smoke, burnt rubber, and tree sap are mixed into an unholy concoction.

I put everything together. *I got ran off the road, crashed into a tree, the airbags went off... Jenny!* I tear off my belt and push the airbag out of the way, my only concern for the safety of my passenger. I grab her arms when I find her. "Are you alright, Jenny? Say something!"

"Ugh. Scared the shit out of me." She grunts, cradling her left leg. "I'm fine. Banged up my ankle a bit during the crash, but I'll recover. I'm tough."

"Thank God."

The doe turns her head towards me, then does a double take. "Christ, Max! Your head is split open! How do you not feel that?"

I touch the side of my face, now registering the warm liquid trickling down my neck and fingers. "Huh. So it is."

"So it is? You could need stitches; you might even have a concussion! This is serious!"

"What's serious is the danger we're in right now. We're stuck in this blizzard and my house is half a mile away. We're going to freeze out here if we don't haul ass."

She looks around. "But Max, what about your truck?"

"What about it? Are you seeing what I'm seeing? It's totaled. We can't stay here." Using the handle to open the driver-side door isn't working; the damn thing won't budge. With all my strength, I kick against it as hard as I can and step out to inspect the damages.

The hood of the vehicle is crumpled inward, and the dashboard is FUBAR. *Thank god this piece of shit was cheap.*

Jenny opens her own door, taking a step in the snow before tripping and clutching her foot. "Agh! Son of a-" she cries.

I slam my door, running around the truck to help her back on her feet, picking her up from the shoulders. "Are you okay to walk back with me? That leg injury doesn't seem like it's just nothing."

"I might need some support," she concedes. "If I can lean on your shoulder, it won't be so bad."

"Then that's what we'll do. Hang tight for a second, I need to grab a few things." Moving past Jenny, I reach into the glovebox for my registration paperwork, sticking it inside my jacket. *Who knows how much of a hassle insurance is going to give me about this?* While I'm in the front, I take my keys out of the ignition, hooking the carabiner to the belt loop on my pants.

I also open up the back seat and grab my hunting rifle, slinging it over my shoulder. I don't want to leave it out for some maniac to take, and it has personal significance.

When I'm sure I've taken everything I need from the car, I put my arm behind Jenny's back to give her the support she needs. We walk through the snow at a snail's pace, the doe wincing with each stride. We don't make it a 100 feet before she rolls her ankle again, screaming out in pain once more.

She's hyperventilating as she tries to pick herself up off the ground. "Damnit..." she whimpers.

"It's okay, I've got you," I say. "I can carry you back."

"I can- nff- handle this!" Wobbling as she struggles to keep her balance, Jenny pushes herself onto her lower hooves. "Maybe if I step on it this way--"

"Stop it. You're only going to hurt yourself more if you put pressure on it. We need to get inside ASAP."

"Fine, let's just get out of this cold." She holds her arms up, and I place my left hand behind her legs, positioning my right behind her shoulder blades.

"Going up in three... two... one!" I hoist the doe off of the ground, feeling a pair of arms wrap around my neck as I do. "What's the matter, afraid I'm gonna drop you?"

"It's been too long since you've carried me like this."

"Please don't start with that right now, Jen. I can just as easily haul you around like a sack of potatoes."

"That wasn't a dig, Max." It's then when I realize she's blushing through her fur. "It just reminded me of when we were close. I feel safe."

"The circumstances are different."

"But the feelings are the same. Even when you insist on acting like an ass."

I choose not to respond as I trudge through the snow with the girl in my arms, two sets of footprints now becoming one behind me, then disappearing under the heavy snow.

The winter gale lashes at my fresh wound, stinging like a bitch. I do my best to ignore the pain and focus instead on walking straight ahead, which is hard to do when you can't see anything. The wreckage disappears behind us.

"Are you sure we're going the right way, Max?"

"Of course, the right lane should be left of us. All we have to do is follow it to the house. Assuming the accident didn't scramble my brain that is."

"Don't joke about something like that!" she chides. "Are you overexerting yourself?"

"I'll be fine, stop worrying so much about me. I'm cold and tired, but that'll change once we get inside."

Jenny falls silent for a few more minutes, and we continue the trek down the road. I can just make out the dark outline of the woods on my right, its bare trees doing little to protect us the barrage of snow coming down. The wind howls above.

"When we were in the car," she starts, unprompted, "we got into that argument, I called you a coward, and you said something that rubbed me the wrong way."

“Speak your mind.” I say.

“You told me Papa put you in the hospital. Is...” Her voice lowers. “Is that true? What did he do to you, Max?”

For a moment, I think of spilling every detail about what happened the day I broke it off. My conscience stops me. *I don't want to talk about this. As much as I hate him, they need each other. I'm not going to take the last of her family away from her.*

“Does Chief treat you well?” I ask.

“Does he what?”

“Is he patient and sweet with you? Is he affectionate? Does he provide for you?”

She looks almost bewildered before answering. “He’s trying his best given the situation, and I love him, but that doesn’t-”

“Then that’s all you have to worry about.”

Her hand grazes my shoulder. “No, it’s not! Max, if he knocked you into the hospital, I want to know! He doesn’t have any-”

“Please!” I stop my march, shutting my eyes. “Just drop it. Forget I said anything.”

All we can hear around us is the wind, as my feet sink deeper and deeper into the ice. My arms are getting sore from carrying her this long. *Why can't my house be any closer?*

Jenny taps my shoulder. “Max.” I can feel her staring into my soul. “I’m sorry about getting you into this mess. None of this would have happened if I didn’t come out today. I shouldn’t have bothered you when I knew you didn’t want me around.”

“You didn’t cause the blizzard that ruined my hunting trip. You didn’t drain my battery. You didn’t run me off the road, or total my car. Very little of this is your fault.”

“But I complicated things by getting injured and distracting you while you were driving. Things would be easier for you if I didn’t run off. And I know you don’t want me here.”

I sigh. “Whether or not any of that is true, it doesn’t matter anymore. What matters is that the both of us are in one piece. Things could be so much worse, and we should be thankful that they aren’t.” My property’s wooden fence comes within view. “And look, we’re almost home.”

“Thank Christ,” Jenny mumbles, nuzzling into my chest.

When I reach my porch, I lower Jenny down onto her foot, grabbing my keys from my belt loop. I unlock my door with a bit of effort, then help the doe climb over the lip of the frame.

She tussles the hair on the back of my head. “Thanks, Max, do you think you can escort me to your bathroom? I’ve been holding it in for an hour and a half and it’s been killing me.”

“Why didn’t you go in the woods before we left?”

“Don’t get on my case,” she says. “Taking a leak outdoors is different for girls, you know? I don’t like feeling that vulnerable. Besides, I thought we would leave sooner since the storm was picking up, and we’d be here before... whatever time it is.”

“Sunk cost is a bitch.” I shrug. “What would have happened if I went home before you showed up?”

“I would have called you and asked for a ride, or I would have walked the extra two miles to your house myself,” she states.

“You’re crazy.” I lead the doe through my door to the bathroom. With a flick of the handle, I swing the door open. “You can take off your own clothes, I’m not going in there with you.”

“Since when does seeing me naked bother you?” She lets go of my hand and supports herself on the door frame. “I think I can handle this on my own.”

The doe hobbles inside of the room, hugging the sink as she lowers her butt on to the toilet. Behind her, I close the door and take a seat in the living room while I wait for her to finish.

When she opens the door, Jenny has discarded all of her heavy layers, revealing a purple t-shirt with white chain of circles wrapping around the chest, along with a pair of blue jeans. *Tribals and their jeans, heh. The one modern invention they can’t live without.*

She motions for me to come over, and I help her get seated back on to my couch. It’s then that I realize that I haven’t taken off my own layers, and I quickly take all of my soaking equipment off, standing my rifle up in the corner of the room. *I can put it away later.*

“You’ve really changed things up in here, haven’t you?” marvels Jenny, her eyes bouncing around the parlor. Flanking her left is a wooden rocking chair, and standing in front of her is a coffee table, both carved and lacquered by yours truly with some help from my dear uncle. From the blue-painted walls hang a number of photographs of old friends and family back in the city, as well as more recent ones featuring Jenny, Bart, Sandra, Laney Lee, along with others I used to talk to.

Behind the coffee table is an old CRT television, hooked up to an old console that I only pull out once in a blue moon. The fireplace stands in another corner of the room, the old mantelpiece black with soot. A few dry logs are stacked nearby for convenience. Neither of us would object to starting the fire right about now, but there are more pressing matters at hand. Namely, Jenny’s leg.

I peel back the cuff of the doe’s jeans to reveal her shin. Running my hand along the leg to feel for any poking bits of bone, I feel the doe shudder and wince as I touch her ankle and heel. “Do you need me to be more gentle?”

“Do what you have to do.”

“I’m going to take your boot off; that’s where our problem is.” I say. She nods, and I start working off the shoe, trying to jostle it as little as possible. Being unguligrade, deer tribals have differently shaped legs than humans, with the heel joint raise farther off the ground. I’m not a doctor, and I don’t want to displace a bone if this is a fracture.

Thankfully, it looks like there isn’t one. There’s a fair amount of bruising and swelling underneath the heel, but I can’t see any bone sticking out. It could be a hairline fracture, but more likely it’s just a bad sprain. Doesn’t hurt to ask though. “Jen, you hear any kind of cracking noise when we got into the accident?”

“I heard the window break.”

“No, I mean did you hear a snapping noise in your leg?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing like that. Just a bit of a popping sound when it rolled.”

“Alright, probably just a sprain.” I take a breath, relieved. “Can I get you an ibuprofen or a glass of water?”

Jenny bears an earnest but slightly pained smile. “Both of those sound amazing right now. Can you put my phone on the charger, too?” She slips her phone out of her pocket and hands it to me.

*Fuck.* I still need to make calls to both the police and insurance about the wreck, and talk to the Chief about why his daughter would be staying the night, as well as how she got here in the first place. *I’d rather pull my fingernails out.*

I set up my spare adapter and put both of our phones on the table to charge, returning to Jen with the promised pill and water. She appears a little jolted when she sees me again, but thanks me and chugs both down in seconds. She then points to something above the fireplace. “Since when was that here?”

From the chimney hangs the mounted head of a buck, it’s glassy fake eyes stuck in an eternal downward gaze. “He’s been around here since last year.” I say. “Thought he might add character to the room.”

She starts to tap her fingers. “It adds something...”

“You think he’s macabre.”

Her discomfort is evident. “That’s a good way to put it.”

“I can take it down if it’s a problem. There’s a ladder in the-”

“No!” She interrupts. “You’re hurt and tired right now, and I’ll probably be gone in the morning anyway. Don’t exert yourself anymore, I’ll get over it.”

“You’re sure?” I ask.

“I’m sure.”

“Then he stays for the night.” I chuck a few logs into the pit. “I like to think he watches over me, keeping the house safe. Don’t tribals believe that all living things have their own spirit?”

“Does he look living to you?” Jenny smirks. “And that’s an oversimplification. I’m sure I got more specific than that when I explained it to you the first five times.”

“It’s not like you really believe in that stuff anyway. Or did all those trips to the commune finally turn you away from Jesus?”

“Please, with how devout my mother was? I’m more Christian than you’ll ever be, Mr. Roman Catholic.” She gives me a light jab in the gut. “Why do I only see you at service once a month? Is Old Methodist not fancy enough for you?” She teases.

“It’s the only service I still attend; how often I go is between me and the Lord. He has to compete with Zeus, Baal, and Vishnu to earn my other three weeks.”

“That won’t do! I’m going to have to start dragging you down town just to keep your sinner soul in line. What is Christ going to say at the gates when he finds out my future husband’s been ignoring him to play in the woods?”

*Husband.* That one word takes all the fun out of our little back-and-forth, even if I knew she’s just



trying to play up a character.

It doesn't take long for Jenny to realize she's set me off. "Was that too much? Max, I didn't mean anything by that. We can talk about something else if you want. Come on, sit down!" Jenny slides herself over to the left, patting the spot next to her with her hand. "It's not like we can go anywhere, so this is a good chance for us to catch up. How have you been, big guy?"

I excuse myself from the conversation. "We can't do this right now, Jen. I have to talk to my insurance and the precinct, not to mention the call I'm going to have to make to your father later."

"Come on, can't some of that stuff wait?" she pleads.

"I have a responsibility to report this, you know it can't wait. I need an hour or two. I can put on a movie for you or bring out the old console if you get bored."

The doe pouts, resting her hooves on her neck. "If you can't talk, at least let me borrow your guitar."

I nod and waste no time in honoring the request. Grabbing the instrument from my room, I store my tuner, capo, and a few picks into the front pocket of the storage bag. "Go crazy," I say upon my return.

Delighted, Jenny snatches the instrument from my hands and yanks open the zipper, her eyes wide as she runs her hooves across the strings. By the time I take two steps into the kitchen, she's already started tuning the thing from ear. *Go figure.*

## Plucking at Heartstrings

The first two calls, on top of being utterly banal, were time consuming. My insurance put me through enough hoops with all of the directories and call-holding that I had the time to dress my wound *and* start the fire before I could talk to a real person. *To think it could be worse if I hadn't snatched my registration papers from the car.* Between them and the police office, I think I burned an hour and 45 minutes. At least they seemed sympathetic to my plight.

Both my phone and the clock on the wall tell me it's 9:30 when I finish my business with the truck. In the interim, I have received 6 missed calls as well as a number of concerned texts from Rodney, Bart, Amanda, and Chief Achak himself, the latter alternating between death threats and prayers for his daughter's safety. I feel bad about keeping him waiting, I'd be scared shitless too if my kid was out there in the cold for hours without making contact.

After a quick text to my uncle and friends to let them know that I was safe, I dial in the Chief's phone number, eager to keep the interaction as short as I can. The buck answers before the second ring, his voice screaming over the speaker. "O'Neill, this is urgent! Do you have any idea where Genesee is? She went on her break at 2 and I haven't heard from her at all since the storm started. Is my daughter with you?"

I try my best to ease his worry, being cautious with the information I shared. "Yes, Mr. Greenleaf, she's in my living room. Both of us are safe."

"Then why the fuck didn't you pick up sooner?" He seethes. "I was about to file a missing person report! Do you know how worried I've been?"

"Would it ease your mind if I let you talk to her?" I ask, unplugging my phone from the charger. Jenny is in the middle of strumming to a pop song I vaguely remember when I tap her on the shoulder. "It's your Pa." I say, handing her the device.

She takes her hoof off the body of the instrument to grab the phone, uttering a silent "thank you" as she puts it up to her ear. "Hey... Dad..." she begins with feigned enthusiasm, passing me a look. "Yeah, we're at his house... My phone died on the walk and the weather was getting bad... no, I'm going to stay the night."

I can hear him screaming from here. Jenny holds the phone tighter, her own volume rising to match her father's. "No, none of this was his idea! I wanted to surprise him... We didn't have a choice, have you seen the weather outside? Even if... Won't you listen to me? I can't come back home tonight even if I wanted to! Some good-for-nothing ran us off the road and his truck got totaled. Max carried me back to his place because my leg got fucked up in the collision."

Jenny taps the mute button as the Chief continues to ramble on from the other end. "I can't get a single word in." she sighs.

"I told you already, I'm safe," she says, jumping back into the conversation. "Yeah, I know you were worried sick, if my phone didn't die I would have called... I'll let you talk to him... Love you too." She passes me back the phone, picking up her song where she left off.

I leave the room with the phone at my ear. "Max again."

"She can't come home because you got into an accident on the road? Is she telling the truth?" Chief asks.

“Everything Jenny told you was true. I was stuck on the phone for two hours trying to file reports, otherwise you would have been the first person I called.”

“Genesee told me she hurt her leg. Is it broken? Sprained? Is she in pain, or is she handling it well?”

“It’s just a sprain. I’m not letting her walk on it, if that’s what you’re worried about. I gave her some painkillers and helped her take her shoe off.”

I hear the buck breathe sigh of relief. “Thank God and the spirits above,” says Achak. “If something happened to her, I... I’d lose my mind.”

“You and me both.”

“Shut up.” he interrupts, his demeanor completely reversing. *Typical*. “Don’t think you’re off the hook just because you got the chance to play hero today. As far as I’m concerned, half of this is your fault. You should’ve known better than to play along in her hare-brained schemes. We’ve talked about this.”

“I didn’t even want to see Jenny. I always go hunting at first snowfall, I never would have agreed to meet her today. She found me.”

The buck’s voice runs colder than ice. “Do you really think I’m that dense, O’Neill? My daughter lied to me about where she was going when she stormed off. Of course you’re in on it.”

I hold back my rage. *Fucking thick-skulled branch-headed asshole only ever hears what he decides to hear.*

“Circumstance prevents me from helping my daughter make good decisions for herself.” He continues. “I trust you’ll do a good job in my place, with what’s at stake. If I find out you’ve laid a finger on her for any reason other than first aid, I’ll *kill* you.”

“That won’t be an issue,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Oh?”

“You’ve made your position clear. All I can do now is take steps to put all of this behind me. I’m trying to talk to other girls, and I found one who seems to be into me. If everything works out, I’ll be out of your hair soon enough.”

“I see. I pray things do work out for you.” The buck clears his throat, returning to a neutral tone. “It’s good to see we have an understanding. Enjoy your night.”

“You too.” I end the call. *Who the fuck does he think he is?*

Intent on breaking out of my foul mood, I return to the parlor and take a seat in the rocking chair. Next to me, Jenny continues to strum chords on my acoustic as I drift back and forth, letting myself get lost in the sound. “Not complaining, but it’s been like two hours,” I say. Aren’t your hooves tired?”

The doe shrugs. “I haven’t been playing for two hours straight. I took a couple of breaks, so I don’t really feel it that much.”

“What were you playing before?”

“A mix of what I know from memory and the tabs you have lying around.” She gestures towards a messy pile of song lyrics, each page lined with notes on where to play certain chords. “Since when did you start listening to country?”

“My uncle, and I play it because it’s easy to find good chords, not because country is a new favorite.”

“Heh.” Jen chuckles as she aimlessly plucks a few strings. “I guess they’re good for that. And it’s hard to object to Johnny Cash, even if you aren’t a fan.” She taps the face of the guitar. “I was actually just about to put this away, but since you’re here, how about a little performance?”

*A performance?* My curiosity is piqued. “If you’re up for it, I’ll listen. Do you need your phone to pull up a tab or-”

“I’ve been practicing this for a while, Max. I have the chords and words burned into my cerebrum.” She grabs the pick off of the counter, twirling it between her digits. “It’s not a new song, but I can really relate to the words, like it reaches deep into my spirit whenever I play it. You have any songs like that?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a couple.”

Jenny smiles. “So you do get it! Well, I don’t care much for most of her music but I heard ‘Don’t Speak’ playing on the radio a few months ago, and it’s been a favorite ever since.”

The title sounds familiar to me, but I don’t remember anything about the song. “The floor is yours.”

She nods her head, tapping out the rhythm on her good foot. The doe starts strumming chord after chord, letting the strings ring out. I’m mesmerized just watching her digits jump from fret to fret.

Being an anthro means that her hands aren’t well suited for playing string instruments, and it took a fair amount of tutoring from me to help her get a consistent, clean sound from each strum when she first started. A few chords were outright impossible for her to ‘finger.’ Once she got more dexterous with her left hand, though, she started using her dewclaws to hold down the lower strings, and eventually she completely outpaced me.

The last time I’ve heard her play must have been before Chief kicked my ass. Maybe I’m just overreacting, but this is the best I’ve heard from her.

“You and me... We used to be together... Every day together always,” Jenny sings, her voice soft but controlled. I see her tear up a little as she recites the next line. “I really feel... that I’m losin’ my best friend... I can’t believe this could be the end.”

I do a double take when I make the connection, gripping the armrest of my chair. *She’s singing about us.*

The doe strums with more intensity when she hits the key change, belting out the chorus with her eyes shut tight. “Don’t speak! I know just what your sayin’, so please stop explainin’! Don’t tell me ‘cause it hurts!”

I’m not sure whether I should leave the room, tell her to stop, or just sit there and take it. The performance is impressive, and Jenny did say she’s been practicing this for a few months. I don’t want to take her out of the zone either, especially since it’ll make things even more uncomfortable.

But listening to her play her heart out, on a song like this, well... it hurts. I keep thinking of all the

memories we made together, all the time we spent jamming together, going on hikes, and just being there for each other through the worst of it. And the bitter, bitter feeling that lingered for a year and a half after we were forced apart. *The one we're still not over.*

As Jen plays the final chorus, her strumming softens, petering out with her vocals. "Hush, hush, darlin'. Hush, hush, darlin'. Hush, hush, don't tell me 'cause it hurts," she croons, letting the final F-minor chord hang in the air before muting it with her palm.

"So, uh, what do you think?" she asks, her eyes rising to meet mine. They're still moist.

"It's pretty good," I say, scratching my neck. "It was also really intense. Anyone ever tell you what a good performer you are, Jenny?"

"You're the first, because I've never played for anyone else." She puts the guitar on the couch.

"Really? Not even Chief?"

"Pa's asked me to show him, but he doesn't like my music taste, so I don't think he'd get anything out of it. Maybe if I played a rain dance song for him." Jenny jokes, stretching her arms back. "He keeps trying to set me up with these Bleeding Horn guys. Tribals, you know the deal, guys who are really connected to the culture. And some of them are cute, and some are sweet, but..."

"They don't meet your standards?"

"Not even that. They're not you, Max. Maybe I can settle down one day, but that's just it. I'd be settling. They're never gonna have what you and I have."

"What you and I had," I interject.

"I'm sorry. Had," she says, frowning. "The whole situation just... sucks."

"It does."

The fire looks weak, so I get up and throw another log on top of the pile. A few stray cinders jump out of the pit, landing on my pants. I look back to Jenny, who has her arms locked around her knees as she stares into the mantel, the glint of flame dancing in her eyes.

"When you were singing earlier, did you feel like those were your words?"

"You mean 'Don't Speak?' I mean, they're Gwen Stefani's words, not mine, but yeah. That one's really close to my heart."

"I just felt like the lyrics described us, and..." I pause. "I wanted to ask if that's why you enjoy it."

"Relating to it is a better way to phrase it." She breaks eye contact. "It just sucks when someone you saw as your soulmate doesn't want anything to do with you anymore, and refuses to tell you why. And I've just been holding on to the hope that one day you'd take me back, and we'd kiss and make up, and you'd stand up to Papa. And then he'd relent and we can be what we were."

"But it never happened," I state, looking at my hands.

"It never happened," repeats Jenny. "So I held a bit of resentment for you since that day. I thought you were just being a pussy, giving in to Papa's overprotective act and letting him get in the way of what we had."

"Yeah, well--"

“But Papa... it wasn’t just an act, was it? He really hurt you, and I was blind to it, blaming you for his choices. But you’ve just been sitting on this the whole time. Why?” Jenny leans the guitar against the coffee table.

“Because I have people.” I state. “I have my uncle and aunt up here, and my parents down in the city. I have Bart, and Sandra, and Laney looking out for me. There’s no conditions attached to those relationships, no one telling me who I can and can’t date. You’re in a much more precarious situation.”

The doe says nothing.

“Your mother’s gone, god rest her soul. Your sister doesn’t pick up the phone. You don’t have an extended family you can rely on. A lot of your friends moved out of town. That leaves your father, and yours truly. And choosing one means abandoning the other.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. Why didn’t you tell me he sent you to the hospital, Max? Why didn’t you call the police?”

“Because as controlling as he can be sometimes, you love and care for him, and he loves and cares for you. Calling the cops would be robbing you of the only family you have left without your input. And telling you about it would have burdened you with an impossible choice, so I kept it to myself. I hoped you would fall in love with someone he approved of and forget about me. Then, maybe I could move on and find someone new.”

“And here we are a year and a half later. Nothing’s changed, and just when I want to take the first steps in moving on, you pull this stunt. Now we’re stuck together until the roads clear.”

Jenny’s eyes narrow. “‘Stunt?’ I just wanted to spend some time with someone I care about, Max. I didn’t know how fucked the circumstances were, I would have backed off.” She takes a sip of water before continuing. “He told me you two ‘buted heads’ on things, and that you weren’t up to his standards. I didn’t think he meant it literally.”

“What are you going to do now that you know?”

“I need to sleep on it,” she says. “I’m still processing what you told me. Papa’s always been overprotective, everything he does he frames as ‘doing the best for his little girl.’ But beating up my boyfriend to scare him away? That crosses the line. He owes you a huge apology, and I’m going to force it out of him.”

“Good luck with that.”

“You just watch. Maybe he won’t let you into his family, but I can push his buttons enough for that.” Her eyes fall to the floor. “He hasn’t been the same since Mom passed. He never liked us dating, but she always kept his worst impulses in check. It’s not an excuse for what he did.”

“What did he tell you about me?” I ask. “He’s so focused on you shacking up with another tribal, is it a cultural thing? He doesn’t seem to have issues with anything else.”

“It’s a million things, some little, some big. He didn’t like it when we made things official when I just turned 18, and he thought you were taking advantage of me in college with the alcohol you bought for my friends and I. ‘Transactional’ was the word he used.”

“Was it transactional to you?”

Jenny vigorously shakes her head. “Of course not, and I told him so, but you know how he is. Once

Papa has a negative predisposition about someone, he can't let it go. Combine that with your hunting and suddenly you're the Great Demon of the Sea, trying to corrupt his baby into abandoning his family and despising everything he stands for."

"Does he really think that? He's twisted in the head."

"It's why he needs me," she replies. "Without Mom or Nat, it's like I'm the only one who can still keep him anywhere close to grounded. I... I can't just cut him off, Max. I know he's controlling, but he's still my Dad. He's worked so hard to give us a good life, and he loves me."

"I wouldn't expect you to leave him behind, Jenny. Family is everything. But you do understand what that means for us, right?"

"It means we shouldn't be seeing each other anymore. I understand." She's holding back tears; I can hear it in her voice. "When the snow clears up, I won't bother you to hang out with me anymore. You have my word."

"It hurts me just as much as it hurts you."

Her ears flatten. "Can you help me get to the bathroom? I want to rest."

After the day we've had, I can't blame her. I help her back onto her good leg, and she grips onto my shoulder as we hobble to the bathroom together. There, she breaks from me, and closes the door behind her.

The sound of rushing water does little to mask her sobbing. I turn my head from the door.

Jenny finishes in a few minutes, and I take back to the couch. Her face is wet. She must have run it under the tap for a few minutes. *Should I comfort her, or just give her the space? I don't think it's good idea for either of us to-*

A pair of arms wraps around my waist, her hooves interlocking at the small of my back. Fine fur brushes against my cheek. "I'm sorry..." She hiccups. "I'm sorry for what he did to you. And I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

*Looks like she's made the choice for me.* After freezing in place from the unexpected contact. I warm to her touch and whisper back "I know." I stroke the top of her head, the soft caramel fur slipping between my fingers.

"I wish you could hold me like this every day."

"I know."

"You mean a lot to me."

"I know. It's mutual."

I break from the embrace and help Jenny get adjusted on the couch. When she looks comfortable, I run back to the closet. I retrieve a spare pillow and blanket, both of which she snatches from my hands on my return.

"Thank you, you're a mind reader." The doe fumbles with the blanket for a few seconds, hitching a breath when she catches her bad ankle. I help to tuck the blanket under her feet, then step back.

"Get lots of rest, Jenny. Call my phone if you need anything. I don't want you walking on that leg."

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She yawns, a slight smile on her face. “Sweet dreams, Max.”

The doe shuts her eyes, which I take as my cue to leave. “Sweet dreams.”

I make one last trip to the toilet before stumbling into my bedroom, every minute of this exhausting, difficult day at last catching up to me. The lights don’t even turn on as I plant my face into the bed. All I hear is the patter of heavy snow on my window and the light snoring of my guest down the hall as my consciousness drifts away.



## Trapped Together

I don't want get out of bed. Every muscle in my body aches to high hell, and there's no way I'm going anywhere with that amount of snow on the ground. It comes halfway up the window.

Doesn't matter how much I ache, though. The sun's over the horizon, which means the chickens need to be fed and taken care of, the fire needs to be tended to, and God knows what else.

Rolling off of the mattress, I plant my feet on the bearskin rug that drapes my floor. I take a look in the mirror, removing the bandages around my face. The scar's healed a bit from the day before, although there's no way it won't leave a mark for the ages. *What a shame. At least I still have my hair.*

My eyes wander to the left side of the room, where I find my pine dressers, a crude wood carving of a chipmunk, and a painting on a rabbit pelt. The piece depicts a jagged background of trees and mountains in green and black, with rays of red and orange radiating out from a white orb in the center. Jenny made it for my 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

*Jenny is still here. Shit.*

I grab my phone off of the dresser. Four new messages. Two are check-ins from my uncle, one is from Bart, and the last from Amanda. I wonder how she'd feel if I told her about my guest. *Can't imagine she'd be happy, not that it's my fault.* I respond to all three with "I'm safe."

The time is 8:47 AM, a lot later than I usually get up. From my exhaustion, I failed to remove my dirty clothes the night before, and opted to sleep as I was. I open up one of the drawers, pushing aside a lockbox to grab some plaid pajama bottoms as a replacement for my current outfit. I still have chores to kill, and I don't like putting my real clothes on before I take a shower. It feels grimy.

When I go to close up the drawer, my hand freezes over the lockbox. I know exactly what's inside; a new necklace I never got the chance to give Jenny while we were still dating, intended to replace most of the old one. *I can't hold on to it forever, If I want to give it to her, now would be the time...* Closing the drawer, I shake away the thought and switch my clothes.

When I finally leave my room, though, the couch is already empty. Both my pillow and my blanket are hanging haphazardly off of the armrest. "What a mess." I grumble, folding the blanket over my arms and placing it back onto one of the cushions. *At least try to keep it neat.*

I don't have to look far to find her. Jenny's sitting at the kitchen table, chowing down on a bowl of corn flakes. Her ears bounce just the slightest bit with each crunch. Next to the bowl is an apple core, left on top of a napkin. On the other side of the room, there's a kettle of coffee boiling on my stove's heating coil, filling the air with its distinct, pleasant aroma.

The doe's smile brightens when she notices me. "Morning, handsome. How'd you sleep?"

*Handsome?* I rub my eyes. "Like a rock. How did you get all of this stuff ready when you can't walk on your own?"

"Who said I couldn't walk?" She picks up a hiking stick from the side of her chair, waving it around casually. "I found this in your closet; it's a god-send."

"Give me a heads up the next time you rifle through my stuff. Did you get enough rest, at least?"

"I tossed and turned a bit, but it was pretty good for sleeping on a couch."

"You should have said something! I would have given up the bed." I point my thumb back toward the kettle. "This ready yet?"

"It's ready. Pour me a cup, too, please?"

I grab two mugs from the cupboard, pouring the piping hot liquid into each, followed by two sugar packets and some milk. She takes her mug out of my hand when I reach the table, and I use my now free hand to pull out the opposite chair and sit down. I blow a few puffs of air over the top of the mug to cool it before taking a sip. *Hot.*

"I'm not gonna kick you out of your own bed, Maxie, that's being a bad guest," she says. "If you said we could share it, on the other hoof..."

"Cute, but no. You said you were going to tone down the flirting, remember?" My eyes pan towards towards the back, narrowing when they see all of the snow piled against the door.

"I only promised I would stop once I went back home." She says, crossing her digits. "One of the village snow plows is broken, your house won't be clear until tomorrow morning at the earliest. You and I are roommates until then."

"Goody," I grumble.

"Lighten up a little, Max! It's an excuse for us to take the day in stride. 'Restless mind makes a restless spirit,' after all." She raises her eyebrows just enough to clue me in on what's coming. "Besides, I have an idea for how we can spend our little rendezvous."

I groan. "Don't call it a rendezvous."

"Hear me out!" Jenny argues. "We never got to break things off on our own terms, right?"

"Right."

"So why don't we take the chance to act like a couple for today? Papa can't bother us, people are already going to be spreading rumors about me being here, why not enjoy ourselves?"

"So we don't make things messier than they already are, for starters," I say. "Our terms or not, we broke up, Jenny. We don't need to cause each other any more heartache by making some half-baked temporary arrangement."

She shakes her head. "I disagree. This is the perfect time for both of us to heal, and to make a few final positive memories together. Don't you want closure?"

"Closure means moving on. If you want company while you're stuck here, that's one thing, but we're not going to rekindle our old romance."

"You don't have to make up your mind right now," she says.

"And you're not listening, which means this conversation is over. I'm going out to check on my chickens." I down the rest of my coffee in one swig, then drop the mug in the sink. Jenny is still fiddling with her spoon when I leave the room. She's giving me this look, like she doesn't know what to do with me.

I throw on my snow clothes and boots and step out the back door. It's snowing when I get outside,

although nothing close to what we saw yesterday night. There's a shovel I leave out for days like these, but right now it's frozen stuck to the siding. I snort. *Pain in my ass.*

With a fair amount of swearing and a few well-placed kicks, it comes loose. I then start clearing out the path from the door to the shed. It's pretty miserable throwing shovelful after shovelful of snow over my shoulder with how sore I am, but nobody else is going to do it. By the time I've cleared the other path to the chicken coop, I can barely lift the thing past my knees.

I bust open the doors to the shed with a strike down the middle of the entrance, breaking the ice that seals them shut. From inside I grab a small bucket of rock salt, which I take care to sprinkle on every section of the cleared path. *No need to injure myself twice this weekend.*

I notice the silhouette of a deer woman stalking me from behind the drapes, who I beckon to come outside. A minute passes before she emerges from the back door, with all of her layers on and her walking stick in hoof. "Are the chickens safe?" she asks, the both of us already walking to the shed.

"I haven't checked yet; I was just about to feed them. You care to join me?"

"I do. It'll be good for my peace of mind," she says.

I push in the door to the shed once again, this time opening with much less resistance. "What if it turns out one of them is sick or dead? You really want to chance your day on that?"

She shoots me a dirty look. "Don't say things like that. Pour me a bucket of dry feed."

I do as she asks, throwing in some fruit rinds and carrot shavings on top. Extra vitamins are good for their diet.

We follow the cleared path towards the chicken coop. I knock twice before unlocking the wooden structure, sliding the door to the side to invite my guest and myself in. "Morning, ladies. Are all of you enjoying the weather as much as we are?"

No tragedy awaits us in the coop, merely 2 dozen hens either roosting or roaming around the enclosure. The room is much warmer than its surroundings, a testament to my care in setting up the insulation. There doesn't look to be any breach in the new wire I've installed either. *A job well done, I'd say.*

Jenny and I inspect each of the chickens, combing through their feathers to check for mites or other parasites. Many of my hens get wary when the doe starts handling them, a few taking the opportunity to peck at my guest.

"Shit! Forgot about how temperamental this one was," she says, shaking her hoof out after receiving a few pecks from a particularly ornery hen.

"Let me get her," I say, coming over to inspect her myself.

The hen's tan, fluffy feathers identify her as Sandy, one of my oldest animals. "Hey girl," I whisper. "I just need to look at you for a second, baby. Come here."

I gently pin the bird's wings with my hands, lifting her off the ground when I have her secure. She lets out a few squawks and kicks in protest. *She's always so dramatic.* "Hush, it's all right."

I stroke her feathers to help her feel more comfortable, and she starts to calm down. "Daddy's gonna take good care of you, Sandy, don't worry. Is this so bad?" After checking her feet, eyes,

and feathers, all of which look healthy, I let the hen go. She runs off to peck at one of her sisters, probably for looking at her funny. I'm not a chicken whisperer.

"Guess I was just missing a father's touch," jokes Jenny. She proceeds to stand up as straight as she can, doing an impression of me by cradling the feed bucket in her right arm. "'Daddy's got you, Sandy, he's gonna kiss your boobies until they feel better. He's gonna tuck you in and read you a bedtime story afterwards if you're a good girl.'"

"If I ever figure out how to speak chicken, maybe. What's wrong with giving my girls a little bit of TLC?" Another chicken passes by my feet, and I lightly pet her wings.

"Did I say something was wrong with it?" She replies. "I just thought it was sweet how you baby your animals. It's cute."

"I'd hardly say I baby them. She just gets snippy if you aren't careful with her wings, I should have warned you." I point to the food bucket in the doe's arms. "There's your chance to make it up to her."

The doe gleefully tosses out hoof-fuls of kernels and scraps to the swarm of hungry hens below, each rushing in and shoving each other around to pick up as much food as they can. While they're distracted, I make my rounds through all of the nests, collecting each egg I see. At the end, I count nine, two of which are cracked.

"It's like a PG cut of a gladiator movie. They'll really fight over a few extra kernels, like there isn't more than enough to go around."

"Feeding time came later than usual, they're just hungry. They're better behaved on most mornings."

She sticks her tongue out at me. "I think you just spoil them too much."

"Do not!" I retort. "Maybe you don't spoil yours enough."

"I treat them well." Something switches in Jenny's eyes. "I treat the dairy cattle well, I just hate getting attached to the ones that are destined for a factory. I..."

Her tail stops moving. "There's a disconnect you have to make when you raise animals for meat, I knew that since I was little. But when you hear a calf crying for its mama as you're loading it on to a truck, dooming it to a living hell? And then you hear its mother, braying in distress for weeks, some times refusing to move... it still gets to me sometimes."

*I said too much, didn't I?* I try to comfort her as best I can. "It would get to anyone who isn't used to it. I wasn't raised around it, and I know I can't just hand off one of my animals to the slaughterhouse."

"That's just it, though. I was raised around it, and I still can't get over it. Mama always knew my heart was too soft to work with the meat industry, it's why she wanted me to go to college, even while she was sick."

I step forward, careful to avoid hurting any of my chickens. "You wanted to be a vet, right? I remember you telling me that you were going for Biology when you graduated high school."

"You remembered!" She says, turning to me with bright eyes. "Yeah, I had the grades and the experience, so I knew it would be a good career choice for me. I'd be able to work with animals in a much more positive way." She flashes a winning smile. "It was my dream job since 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

Shame it didn't work out."

*Damn, she's cute when she's daydreaming like that. I'd hate to crush her, but...* "I'm sure it's better, but wouldn't that come with its own disappointments? Vets often get stuck animals they can't save, just like any other doctor, plus they have the additional burden of euthanizing any animals that aren't worth their treatment options. I don't know if that would be the best fit for someone who can't handle the slaughterhouse."

"It's different. Euthanasia stops the animal from suffering, where a factory farm induces and prolongs it. It's the cruelty that bothers me, not the death." She flicks her ears. "Papa taught Nat and I that surrounding yourself with so much needless pain is bad for the soul. If I stayed in school, I could have prevented some of that suffering."

"I figured Chief didn't have the stomach for it. How'd your family end up running a cattle ranch when I've never seen any of you so much as touch a burger?"

"My mother's side used to own it. It's a long story, how about we discuss this in the house?" asks the doe. "Leaning against this support beam isn't exactly comfortable."

We exit, and I lock the coop door behind me. Jenny leads me on the path back inside, hobbling with her bad ankle raised above its counterpart. She's very keen on keeping her balance, I observe. *I would be too if I had to walk in this goddamned ice with a bum leg.*

The cozy heat of my fireplace is a welcome change to the bitter cold outside. We each strip off our snow clothes, leaving them in the hamper. I throw the load into the dryer for an hour, then return to the kitchen. My ex is again seated when I get there, this time fidgeting with her hands rather than her food. A rumbling in my gut reminds me that I haven't eaten anything since yesterday.

"I'm making pancakes, Jen, do you want any?" I ask, grabbing a pan and a box of mix from the cupboards.

She grins. "You don't even have to ask."

"Two blueberry pancakes coming right up."

While we were still seeing each other, I used to make breakfast for Jenny all the time. Her favorite dish had to be the 'O'Neill family specialty pancakes', and she always hyped them up whenever she came over. I never had the heart to tell her I just used the recipe on the box most of the time.

I mix the milk and flour together in the bowl, then pour the dough onto the griddle in two puddles. Each gets about a dozen blue berries, sizzling for a minute before I flip them over. When they're done, I sprinkle powdered sugar on top as a personal touch.

The animal nose of my guest twitches with anticipation as I slide the plate in front of her face. As she's about to dig in, she hesitates.

"What's wrong?"

"You haven't made anything for yourself yet?" she asks, putting down her fork and knife.

"I figured I'd take care of you first. It'll take two minutes for me to make my own."

"Then I'll wait two minutes to eat. Either we eat together or the cook eats first, remember?"

"Oh, right," I respond, returning to the griddle that I so wisely left unattended. I can't believe I

forgot about that rule. Tribals drill the “cook eats first” tradition in young. Hell, Aunt Lavender enforces it in her own home.

With the leftover dough, I have enough for three more pancakes. The smell is making my mouth water. *Maybe “cook eats first” isn’t such a bad rule.*

When they finish frying, I peel them off with the spatula, spreading some butter and powdered sugar on the top. I come back to the table with my plate in hand, where Jenny has yet to dig in to her breakfast.

“Bon appetit.” I pull out the chair and start cutting into one of the pancakes.

Jenny nods, picking up her fork and taking a bite from her pile. Her ears twitch, mouth curling into a smile. “Even better than I remembered!” she exclaims, devouring three more huge forkfuls in quick succession. “You have to tell me this recipe, I’m gonna miss these like hell.”

I smirk. “It’s a family secret, passed down through generations. I can’t just give away the craft.”

“Mama used to joke about me coming over here. She used to tell me, ‘Don’t eat too much at O’Neill’s house, he’s fattening you up to claim you as a trophy, can’t ever trust those hunter types.’”

“Maybe she wouldn’t be so worried if you didn’t eat like an animal,” I joke.

“Rude!” says the doe with mock offense. “You should consider it a compliment when I eat like this. It means your food is top notch.”

“If it’s that good, then savor it. It’s not going anywhere.” I scratch my chin. “How are you still that hungry? Didn’t you have a bowl of cereal earlier? You’re gonna start putting on pounds if you keep eating like that.”

“You wouldn’t mind it if I got a little plump, would you?” Jenny bats her eyelashes. “There’d be more to look at.” Her elbows rest on the tabletop, and she’s leaning in. I’d say something about manners but we both know what she’s trying to do.

I feel my face burning up a little. “Not saying I wouldn’t appreciate it, but you really-”

“Maybe I’d take it easy if you gave me that recipe you’ve been hiding, but I’d also be happy if you lent me a little sugar.” She puckers her lips.

I shake my head and push my chair back. “Alright, I get it. Please stop.”

“What? It’s not like we haven’t kissed before.” The doe pouts.

“We aren’t a couple, remember? I don’t mind the banter, but touching and kissing is too far. I already told you that.”

“You’re such a stick in the mud.”

“Why are you pushing for this so hard anyway?” I ask before it hits me. *Hunting season means rut, and heat affects anthros too.* “Don’t tell me you’re in estrus.”

She recoils at the accusation. “What if I was? What difference does it make?”

*I knew something was up!* “Did you really walk four miles in the cold so I would rail you? Is that what this was about?”

Jenny pushes herself up from the chair. “No, of course not! I wouldn't use you like that.”

“Be honest.” I stare her down across the table.

She fumbles with her words for a few seconds, then takes a deep breath and starts over. “Look, I wouldn't be opposed to it, and it is that time of year. Being stuck inside with you isn't making it easy for me either. But it's not why I came here, Max, honest. It's about... Papa.”

“Chief? What about him?”

“I don't know how to say this.” Jenny runs her hands over her ears. “Now that Mom's gone, he wants to sell our property. He started talking about returning to his roots and moving to the tribal compound, and he expects me to come with him.”

“What?” It feels like I've just been smacked across the face.

“I'm going to be moving away, probably by the end of next year, and I was hoping to spend some quality time with you before we say goodbye.” She glances over to the window. “That's what my fight with him was about.”

“So you're leaving Warren's Peak for good? Just like that?” I squint my eyes, trying to see if she's lying to me. *Like it's some kind of sick joke.*

“Again, it's gonna take some time to find a buyer for the house, but he's set on it.” Her lips tighten. “I wish I was kidding.”

*Deep breaths, Max.* “Is that really what you want? Would you be happy living there?” I don't know the first thing about the tribal commune, I've never visited. If it's anything like what I'd imagine it to be, it's going to be a pretty big change in lifestyle for her.

The doe puts on a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. “It's not the worst way to live. Tough, but there's fulfillment in it. Besides, it's not like I can run the farm on my own, it's hard enough with only the two of us. And I wouldn't make enough money to have my own place.”

*She's apprehensive, anyone could tell.* “Can't you live with one of your friends, at least until you figure something out?”

“Which friends?” Jenny asks pointedly. “Most of mine moved away, remember? And I'm not close enough to anyone in your circle to ask them.” She starts to tap her hoof against the table. “It's probably for the best, anyhow. Wouldn't be right for me to fracture the family any more than it already is, right? Papa needs me.”

*She's really going to be out of my life. I can finally move on. This is what I asked for. So why does it feel wrong?*

# The Shell

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

My appetite is dead at this point, so I scrape any leftovers into the trash, then throw my plate into the sink. “I need to think some things through,” I say. “I’m gonna take a shower. Can you go put on a movie for us in the mean time?”

“Yeah, good idea,” says Jenny, her own spirit dampened.

*She and I have to be thinking the same thing. Anything to clear the air, right?*

She stands up and grabs her walking stick, pushing her chair in with it behind her. “What kind of movie do you want to watch?” she asks from the doorway.

“An action flick, I guess.” I wave my hand. “Surprise me.” *Something mind numbing.*

“Action?” she repeats, her eyes lighting up. “Then I know just the movie. See you in a bit.” The doe hobbles over to the couch, disappearing from view.

I take her dishes to the sink before leaving the kitchen for my bedroom. Behind the closed door, my pajamas fly into the hamper. I grab a pair of jeans and boxers from my drawers along with a clean red flannel from the closet. I then wrap a towel around my naked waist. This is my usual routine, to walk to the bathroom exposed and change into my clean clothes there once I dry off.

I’d put more effort into staying decent while I have company, but I’m still distracted by the conversation my ex and I just had.

I’m three steps into the hall when a wolf-whistle rings through the air. *Right, it’s Jenny.*

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” flirts Jenny, scrounging every detail of my chest and abs. “All I have to do is tell you I’m in heat, and the clothes come off just like that? Man...”

I roll my eyes. *Could she go without doing this?*

“How much do you usually charge for private shows?”

“Come on, be mature.” I say over my shoulder as I reach the door.

She snorts. “Lighten up, I’m just teasing.” She picks up the remote and starts channel surfing. “Good to see that you’ve stayed in shape. Still a sight for sore eyes.”

“Yeah. What movie are you looking for?” I ask, gesturing towards the screen.

“I don’t want to tell you until I find it. I want it to be a surprise. It’s more fun that way.”

*It’s going to be one of the Space Ape films.* “Check the ‘On-Demand’ menu if you can’t find it. No way it isn’t there.” I turn back towards the bathroom and twist the knob.

“Will d- shit!” Something clatters against the floor.

My eyes jump back towards the doe, now bent over on her knees, scrambling to pick up the pieces of the dropped remote. “You okay?” I ask, before I’m hypnotized by the twitching of a certain



exposed appendage. *That tail.*

“Yeah, I’m good, just dropped this.” Jenny crawls around to pick up the batteries before turning back to me, catching me red-handed. Her lips turn up in a sultry smile. “It’s rude to stare, you know...”

I look away, feeling my face burning up. “Just put on the damn movie.” I say, locking the door behind me after entering the bathroom. Her laughter is audible past the walls.

The mirror gives me a good peek at myself in my birthday suit. Years of manual labor and an improved diet have turned a once bony frame into the muscular build I’m proud of. *I guess I can see the appeal.* It’s hard to believe that I used to get mistaken for a girl in high school. While I’m there, I take another look at my scar from the accident. Much of the dried blood looks like it’ll wash off, meaning the scar itself is smaller than it looks.

I step into the shower, turning the knob until I hear the telltale click. The faucet runs, hot water splashing against my chest before flowing down my arms and legs to the floor of the tub. I rub shampoo through my hair and into my scalp with wrinkled fingers. Bubbles collect under my arms and at my feet as I lather myself down with my bar of soap, only to disappear down the drain.

I’m rinsing my privates as my thoughts wander. *I haven’t gotten any action in a long time. And here’s Jenny, right when I told myself to stop thinking about her. I know it’s a bad idea to pursue it. I don’t need to make myself vulnerable again, not when she’s leaving town in a year. And I definitely don’t need to put a target on my back for her father. But it’s been so long...*

Images of a naked Jenny enter my mind, along with the memories I had of exploring that tight, supple body. Tracing lines across that soft, caramel fur. Moving my hands down her back, brushing under the white of her tail, letting my fingers slip into her pussy. Hearing her moan into my mouth as she nears her climax, begging for a release... or panting my name into my ear.

*Better to get it out of my system now,* I concede, as I stroke myself thinking about it. *I’ll always have those memories, even if my hands are tied while she’s here. It’s not like I couldn’t get another girl if I wanted to. Hell, one just sent me some pretty nice pictures. Amanda and Jenny have that in common at least. Both know exactly what they can do a man. I mean, look at how Jen was acting earlier, with the tail shaking, and the hip swaying...*

I exhale, pressing my back against the wall of the shower, the pressure building up in my loins. *She’s got it bad, that clever, dirty doe. Trying to make me break my own rules. I grit my teeth. What I would do to her if I could, just bend her over and go to town. I’d make her scream my name louder than she ever has in her life. And she’d love every second.*

“Shit.”

My eyes widen and I shoot a load down the drain. I’m left panting in the aftermath, water droplets barraging my hair in the bliss of my release. Deep breathing helps me recover. *I don’t know what got into me. Hopefully this keeps my mind out of the gutter until tomorrow.* I rinse off my hand with some more soap.

Right when I turn off the faucet however, a series of hard knocks is made against the door. “Open up!” cries Jenny.

In my shock and rush to cover up with my towel, I slip on a puddle and fall right on my ass in the bathtub. I let out a groan of pain, feeling it in my hips. *Damn it.*

The doe continues to pound against the barrier. “I need to take a leak. It’s an emergency!”

“Christ, Jenny, take it easy.” My hand grasps at the side of the tub, allowing me to pull myself off the floor. “You startled me. Give me a second to dry off, at least.”

The doorknob rattles. “I’m gonna piss myself! Dry off in your own room!”

I grab the dry towel from the sink, shaking off most of the water from my body. “It’s locked. I’m almost done, relax.”

“Hurry up!”

Immediately after I slip my underwear and jeans on, I unlock the door. My guest rushes in like the winter draft, pushing me aside to claim the toilet seat. “Out!” she screams.

I comply, snatching my flannel during my exit. The door almost hits me on my way out, missing my rear by mere inches. *Jeez, Jen, does coffee go right through you or what?*

Exiled from my normal changing room, I button up my shirt instead in the parlor. There, the television is playing a low budget sci-fi flick, if the shoddy effects and strange buglike costumes are anything to go by. A blend of curiosity and suspicion calls on me to pick up the remote and check the title. *Space Ape 2: No New Normal in the Newt Nebula. Called it.*

Jenny forced me to binge the whole *Space Ape* series with her while I was visiting her at school once, and although it was nice to spend time with her, I wasn’t a fan. Not a big sci-fi guy.

“Enjoying the movie?” asks Jenny, hobbling back into the living room, her walking stick in hoof.

*We’re just going to pretend that whole scene in the bathroom didn’t happen, I guess.* “You’re still trying to coerce me into liking this schlock? I thought after I fell asleep halfway through the first one that you’d give up.”

“The first movie isn’t the best,” she admits, “But this one’s different. It’s better paced, and the writers did more to flesh out the characters. The *Space Ape* movies are mostly self-contained, too, so you don’t have to worry about missing anything from the first one. Give it a shot, I promise you won’t regret it.”

“We’ll see.”

The doe walks around, taking a seat to my far left at the other end of the couch. That leaves about two feet or so between us. *Looks like she’s minding boundaries, at least.*

It takes me a few minutes of deep focus to understand what’s actually going on in front of me, made even more difficult by obnoxious laser sound effects and the guttural clicking of the wasp-like aliens on screen. Again, not a sci-fi guy.

Eventually I catch up. Commander Jules is on a mission to retrieve the crown of the Newt Princess Selena for her official coronation. That’s why he’s fighting the klaxars in their off-world compound, pacing down an endless labyrinth of dark, guarded corridors with his trusty blaster in hand.

A hoof taps my left leg. “You can’t even peel your eyes off the screen. Told you I’d get you into it.”

“As if,” I say. “You asked me to give it a chance, so that’s what I’m doing. I haven’t seen enough

to make a judgement call yet.”

On-screen, Jules is hiding behind repainted oil drums, evading the detection of two Klaxar guards. One makes a noise that can pass for bug chittering when the human jumps from behind his cover, shooting both aliens with his stun ray. It takes one of the bugmen 4 seconds to fall after they get blasted.

“I didn’t like it when you punks could fit in my hand,” he growls, tucking the gun away.

“Lame,” I cough.

“It’s not a bad line, stop being such a nitpick,” Jenny says, slightly offended.

“Stilling knew it was bad, otherwise he would have done a better take. He totally phoned it in.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.” She shoots me a confused look. “Whatever. Maybe there’s a few questionable reads here and there, but they make up for it during the royal wedding scene.”

“They have a wedding scene in this movie? I thought this was sci-fi.” *What the hell am I watching?*

“It’s sci-fi with romance elements.” She puts her hoof on my arm. “Have some faith, it gets good.”

I shake off my disbelief and turn back to the television, where Jules has recovered the crown from its containment in the Klaxar fortress. Alien guards file into the hall around him, trying to incapacitate him with spears and lasers, but he evades their clutches and bolts towards the hangar.

Just as he makes it to the docking bay, though, a stray laser hits him square in the shoulder. The commander howls in pain, dropping his parcel on the floor where it shatters on impact. Only its large blue gemstone is left unscathed.

Quickly, Jules pockets it. He blasts two more klaxars in the chest, then clambers up the entry ramp of a crescent shaped ship, the Sword of Uriel. A few more lasers bounce off of the ship’s hull as guards try to stop the liftoff, to no avail. The ship’s landing gear retracts a mere second before it jettisons itself into space.

“I’m sorry.” I hold a finger to my temple. “How does a metal crown break like that as soon as it touches the ground? If it-”

“It’s important for the story,” she states. “The crown breaking puts the romance in motion for Jules and the Newt Queen later on. It doesn’t work otherwise.”

“But it didn’t break like metal at all, it shattered like ceramic or glass. Real metal would have bent for a fall from that height.”

“Artistic liberty?” She shrugs. “Metal can be brittle too, Max. Maybe they used some kind of rare alloy to craft it.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Or, maybe it’s made from plastic.”

The doe scratches her muzzle. “You joke, but that could actually be canon in the *Space Ape* universe. Plastics are super rare in the galaxy because the production process is a guarded secret by the intergalactic corporations. I’ll tell you about it after the movie’s over, it’s a whole thing.”

*Oh brother.*

The film continues with a battle against a faction of traitorous Newt pirates, hoping to intercept the ship to take the prize for themselves. Jules and his crew are able to fight them off long enough to land in the Newt capital, where he delivers the jewel to the blushing newt Princess. Her court immediately erupts into scandalous whispering at the sight of an 'alien' delivering such an important artifact to one of their esteemed royals.

Princess Selena, disturbed by the gesture, invites them to stay regardless, informing the commander in private about the hidden meaning of the gesture; a proposal. This causes him to lose his cool, desperately trying to explain the circumstances before they laugh it off as a fluke.

What follows is a royal feast scene with all kinds of weird alien food on display, featuring a debate with the Newt nobility and Jules' crew about responsibility vs. freedom. It's hammed up, but fine. Afterwards there's a pretty sensual scene where Selena helps heal the laser burn on Jules' shoulder, rubbing in medicines all around his naked upper body to heal him. *Who is this movie even for?*

Finally, right before Jules and the crew leave the Newt planet, he and Selena get the chance to confess the feelings they've acquired for each other, and... it's sweet, much better than I anticipated. Corny, sure, but there's something sincere about it that I just didn't expect from the actors up to this point. *Maybe they fell in love on set, I think. I should turn the volume up a little, Jules is pretty hard to hear.*

When I try to pick up the remote, though, something's pinning my arm against the seat. At some point over the last 15 minutes, Jenny closed the distance between us, building up small amounts of contact over time so I wouldn't notice. Now, her head is nestled against my shoulder. *Sneaky doe. Can't believe I didn't catch it sooner.*

The smarter part of me knows I should slowly break away from her somehow, or maybe interrupt it by faking a bathroom break so she's forced to let go. *There's no need to get into a fight over this. Still, I told Jenny no touching, and she's stealing a cuddle. This is such a bad idea...*

But I don't get up. I don't want to. Her soft fur is right up against my neck, and her body is so warm. It just feels right to be this close to her again. *Even without the movie, I could do this for hours.*

*I missed this.*

My arm snakes around her waist, pulling her in closer still. She's receptive, sliding over until we're practically on top of each other. I take in a whiff of her scent, that wild cinnamon smell I like so much, then lightly scratch the back of her ears.

A content sigh escapes her lips. "You've considered my offer," Jenny purrs, her eyes half-lidded. "I knew you wanted more of me."

"I'm humoring you because I'm comfortable." I respond.

"Didn't your parents ever teach you not to lie, Maxie?" She caresses my cheek. "Best pillow I've ever had..."

The scene starts with Selena acknowledging her feelings, then allows Jules to speak his piece. Jenny's breathing gets heavier as it goes on.

The human raises his arm in protest. "You know it can't be, my lady, your responsibility is here. Your people need you to rule."

"Then why can't you stay?" begs the princess. "If it's about money, I can pay you and your crew

handsomely to remain in my court.”

“Because my responsibility is out there.” The commander waves his hand towards the night sky, pointing out all of the stars surrounding the two of them. “I’m a citizen of the final frontier, you know that. My duty is to the galaxy.”

“But it doesn’t mean you have to drift away forever.” The young newt tenderly reaches for her lover’s hand, interlocking their fingers together. “If nothing else, can you promise this won’t be the last we meet?”

Jenny’s turned herself over, longing written in those deep brown eyes. Her hooves sink into the couch, pinning my body down in place. Cooler heads don’t prevail, and I’m more than ready to give her what she wants.

“Space is too wild a place to make promises like that,” says Commander Jules. “But if I live, maybe soon I can feel your touch once more. Until then, I’ll leave you with this.”

As Jules pulls in his alien sweetheart for a kiss, I decide to beat my own partner to the punch. I grasp hold of her by her neck fur, my grip gentle but firm. Jenny is surprised by the initiative, but reciprocates the affection when our lips touch. She tastes like blueberries.

My hands run up her cheeks, while her hooves crawl under my shirt, desperate to eliminate any barrier between our bodies. Her excitement is plain to see, her breaths getting shorter and shorter, broken by soft moans of pleasure.

Then her phone rings, and we both snap back to reality.

“Fuck...” she hisses, reaching into her pocket to grab the device. Her irritation only grows after identifying the caller. “It’s my dad, I should take this.” With her free hoof, she grabs the armrest and pushes herself off the couch. She limps over to the kitchen to take the call, ignoring the walking stick on the floor below.

*Damn it!* I sit up, my mood instantly soured. *Is he a fucking psychic?*

“Hey, Papa, how’s it been?” the doe asks through a strained smile. “I’ve been trying to get lots of rest; I want this sprain to heal as quickly as possible. Sorry I didn’t pick up sooner... Yeah, I suppose it would be good to have Dr. Blanc look at it.”

Shock flashes over her eyes when she hears something I’m not privy to. “What? You can’t be serious! Already? Did you even work things out with the commune yet? Who’s going to take care of Mom?”

I can’t make out Chief’s half of the argument, but I can tell from here that he’s pissed.

The hackles on her neck rise. “We can’t just leave everything behind so soon, like our life here didn’t matter! You can’t delay it by a month or two?”

“You know what? Talk to me about this tomorrow when we get in the car. Until then, don’t bother calling.”

Her finger jabs the red button on the interface, and she leaves her phone on the table face down. Her hooves tap loudly against the floor tile as she paces back and forth in the kitchen.

After a few minutes, she comes back into the room with damp fur around her eyes. “Sorry about that,” she whispers. “I haven’t checked my phone, but apparently he’s been texting me about...”

moving. He's drafting a contract to sell the property to one of those big produce conglomerates."

"So, what does that mean?" I ask, a pit forming in my stomach. "You're leaving sooner than you thought?"

She picks up the walking stick off of the floor. "Everything will be finalized at the end of February. After that, we're going to haul north to Bleeding Horn with everything we can carry in. We won't be coming back."

It's hard to wrap my head around everything I'm hearing. "Three months? What are you going to do with all of the cows?"

"Some of them are getting sold to the Robinsons, the rest to the slaughterhouse." Her frown deepens. "We can't bring them with us, they don't raise cattle at the compound."

"Then what about the farmer's market? Without you two, who's going to keep things running?"

"The Gaspards already own part of it, they're going to buy us out. Ask Sandra, she'd know."

My mind is racing to think of any excuse for her to stay. *Three months isn't enough time.* "Your mother's buried here. Who's going to maintain the gravesite?"

The doe stares at me. "Do you think Papa visits her now? Two years, and he's been to the stone three times at most. He can't even step foot in the cemetery without breaking down." Her left hoof fidgets with the walking stick. "Your aunt agreed to watch over things for us, God bless her."

After stewing in my frustration for nearly a minute, I respond. My voice is as quiet as a mouse. "I guess it can't be helped."

"He wants out, and I can't blame him. Our work is soul-crushing, and it gets depressing in that house with just the two of us. Papa sees the compound as his way of leaving the past behind him."

"And you're going to follow him," I state, getting up from my seat to pace around the room.

Jenny follows. "I don't exactly have a choice, Max. Where would I live? How would I support myself? Even if I could, Papa couldn't handle it if I left him alone. He's lost enough without Mom."

"I'm not blaming you for that, Jen. I would have made the same decision. It's about family. I get that."

"I know." She gives me a concerned look. "But this conversation is making you upset, so how about we go finish up *Space Ape 2*? We can rewind to where we left off."

"I'll pass."

Caught off guard, she stutters, "W-well, what do you want to do? We can bring out the guitar again, or dust off that old console under the TV." The doe reaches for my hand.

I quickly draw it away, my body stiff as a board. "Don't. I need space."

"I just thought you'd like it if I held your hand," she mumbles. "You liked it before."

"Why are you here?"

Her ears stand up, and she takes a moment to articulate. "I've told you, I wanted to spend some

time with you alone. I didn't want to disappear with anything left unsaid."

"You said you wanted closure. Do you really think that setting the clock back two years for a night is really going to help you move on? I know it won't help me."

"I know that there's still some things I need to sort out," she says. "I'm sure you're still lingering on your feelings too."

"'Lingering' is an understatement. I've spent the past year and a half licking my wounds." Pain builds in my chest.

"But if we break things off on our own terms-"

"That's not what's happening here. All we're doing is indulging a fantasy that we have a choice to leave each other. It's an illusion. We're as powerless as we were back then." I look back into the doe's eyes. "So, what did you really hope to accomplish by following me into the woods yesterday?"

"I don't know what you want me to say, Max." She's looking down at the floor, her hoof touching her right temple. "I really thought this would help both of us."

"All you've managed to do is hurt me, Jenny. And I keep telling you to back off, but you don't listen, it's like you don't care."

Her head jolts back up, staring at me with her eyebrows pulled together. "Of course I care! Maxie, I just wanted to be around you, I didn't mean to toy with your feelings." She places her hoof on my shoulder.

My body recoils from the touch. "You're not listening! I told you to knock it off with that!" I growl. "If you can't manage that, maybe we need to stay away from each other until tomorrow."

"I don't get it! Before Papa called, we were snuggling like we didn't have a care in the world. I thought you liked that!" she cries. "You kissed me on your own just a few minutes ago. I didn't even have to push you!"

"Because I can't get over you," I admit. My fists clench. "All you have to do is prod me enough times, and eventually I'm going to break. I'm only a man, Jenny."

"Why do I have to prod you? Why do you insist on suppressing your emotions instead of confronting them?"

"It's all I can do to protect myself."

She slams the walking stick hard against the floor, nearly breaking it. "That isn't like you!" yells Jenny. "The Max I know wouldn't hold in his feelings for such a selfish reason. You're better than that!"

"I don't want to relive that pain for something so fruitless. I'm sorry."

In the span of a few seconds, Jenny shifts from confusion, to disappointment, and finally, back to rage. "You're right, this whole thing was a waste of time."

I stay quiet.

"When you had me in your arms before, I thought I finally got you to lower your walls. Even if it

was just for a minute or two, I saw the real Max, and we were happy. But then I bring you bad news, and the walls come right back up, thicker than before."

She chokes back tears. "I know the man I love is still in there. You can't hide him from me completely, try as you might. But if you're going to keep closing yourself off consciously to ruin the last chance we have to speak in private, then I can't help you anymore. I'm done. You win."

No words are exchanged for more than a minute, the tension between us mounting to a peak. Ten feet away, the television continues to show *Space Ape 2*. The sounds of laser blasts and alien screams are the only thing cutting through the sheer silence.

"Stoic as ever," she laments. "Are you going to say anything?"

I shrug, fighting back my own bitterness. "For what it's worth, I hope you have nice life at Bleeding Horn."

"Go to hell."

## Chapter End Notes

And that's update two. Things are chugging along slower than I hoped, but I'll try to pick up the pace.

How do you like it so far? What parts stand out to you? Where do you think I need to improve? I'd love to hear your answers in either the comments or in the general, whichever you prefer.

And as always, thanks for reading.

~NameChangeDaily



## Closed Doors

We both storm off, the doe to the kitchen and I to my bedroom. A slammed door shakes the walls, knocking over the chipmunk effigy on my dresser. It takes all of my restraint not to throw it out of the window. I hop on to the bed and stare at the ceiling as thoughts race around inside my head.

*I did what I had to do, I think. I stood my ground. If that's what it takes to make her back off, then that's all there is to it. God, why does she make things so frustrating?*

I flip over on to my stomach. *She had the nerve to call me selfish. After all the shit she pulled this weekend! I didn't follow her into the woods to interrupt her annual personal retreat. I'm not the one who refuses to keep his hands to himself. And for all the times I've had to bail her out? Selfish my ass.*

My anger boils just thinking about it. I pick one of my pillows from off the bed and chuck it across the room. "Fuck!" *I can't let myself get hurt again. First thing I'm doing when she leaves is calling Amanda. Maybe she'll actually listen to me, unlike Jenny.*

*Hell, this whole situation wouldn't have happened if I put more effort into dating new people. Maybe I'd be over her by now.*

I clench my fist to nail the other pillow before I stop myself. *Deep breaths, Max. You've said your piece, and it seems like Jenny's finally going to back off. Find something to occupy yourself until you calm down.*

A minute of meditation helps me regain my sanity and I think up a list of other chores I can distract myself with, deciding in the moment to tackle the untimely loss of my truck. I can't get anywhere on my own around here if I'm not driving, so unless I want to bum rides off of my uncle for the next few months, I need to find a replacement fast.

I pull out my laptop for a quick look at what's on offer. It reveals a number of options, ranging from used cars with vague listings on dubious websites, to larger dealerships with hundreds of vehicles in all kinds of conditions, each overpriced. You'll find good deals once in a blue moon, but right now I'm just window shopping, so it doesn't really matter.

My best option is to wait until my Uncle comes back before I act. One of Rod's friends owns a dealership out in Ulster County, so maybe he can hook me up with a better lease. I make the text.

**When are you guys getting home? I need you or Aunt Lav to drive me over to the dealership soon, what days work for you two?**

While I wait for a response, I hear the sound cut off for a second in the living room, then snap to enthusiastic commentary over a cheering crowd. *Since when did she start watching football?*

After a couple of minutes, I get a response. **Yeah, you need to replace that truck you crashed, right? Got anything in mind?**

I roll my eyes. **I got ran off the road, it's not my fault.**

A number of texts flood to my phone in quick succession. **Wouldn't have happened if you beat the storm. Who stays out in conditions that bad? You didn't get that from your dad's side of the family, I'll tell you that much. Your aunt's gonna give you an earful when she sees you.**

*They're mad. I get it, I was a jackass and I should have left sooner. Not gonna happen again.*

**Better not, keep your priorities straight. As for the truck? I'll drive you out to my buddy's dealership if you're good for Thursday.**

**Works for me,** I reply. *One less weight on my back.*

**Thursday it is. How's your gf doing?**

My hand involuntarily tightens around the phone. **She's fine. Her leg is doing better.**

**That's good, she's a nice girl. Treat her well while she's still around, Lord knows the poor thing doesn't get out enough.**

**We're not dating anymore,** I punch in.

**I know that, but you two are still friends. Are we not allowed to joke about it?**

There's no need to continue this conversation, I already know where it's going. I stuff my phone into my pocket without answering.

I get out of bed to stretch my arms and legs. Counting the eyes in the wood panels above my head is making me more than a little restless. Mentally, I prepare myself for an unpleasant interaction as I open the door.

The living room seems the same as how we left it, with the exception of what's playing on TV. Jenny's eyes are glued to the screen so she doesn't notice me. My first inclination is to just walk past, since football isn't my cup of tea, but there's enough action right now to capture my attention.

One of the teams, clad in blue, is being chased down the field by their opponents, a team in red. Leading the charge is a particularly small blue player, cradling the football in his arms in his mad dash to the end zone. He passes the 30-yard line, then the 20-yard line with two reds twice his size in hot pursuit. 10 yards and there's only a few inches between them. *I guess all those times Mom forced me to watch my brother's games paid off.*

One of the pursuers makes a tackle, but the little blue runner lunges to the right in the nick of time. The reds struggle to regain their footing, only to be greeted by a screaming crowd and a celebrating blue team as the ball passes the end zone. "Makucha scores the first touchdown of the game for the Bills!"

Jenny rises from the seat, gripping the walking stick tightly. "Let's go Bills!" She yells, balling her other hoof. "C'mon, fuck 'em up!"

Not once did we talk about football while we're dating, and here she comes out with that? *You think you know someone.* I can't help but snicker.

"Max?" She's giving me the death glare now that she's noticed me. "What's so funny?"

"N-nothing, you just got really into the game, I thought it was amusing."

"I'm part of the Bills mafia, so what? There's plenty of us out here."

My hand rests on the back of the couch. "I just didn't pin you for that kind of person. Where did football come from?"

“From the bar,” she states, her hackles rising once more. “Can you go? You told me to leave you alone. It’s hard to do that when you’re standing here trying to make small talk.”

“Yeah, but would it hurt to clear the air a bit? We’re going to run into each other later, considering we’re both trapped in here.”

The doe snorts, sitting back down to watch the rest of the game. She doesn’t even turn her head when I leave for the kitchen.

*And now she blows up at me when I try to keep things civil. Talking to her is like navigating a minefield.* I flick on the lights and grab a clean glass from the drying rack, pouring myself some water from the tap. Ten seconds later, it’s empty.

I can hear the game blaring from the other room. The announcer’s talking about Kansas City, now in possession of the ball, and their current record for the season. He makes a comparison between a couple of the star players on the team, followed by a joke I don’t get. *Why am I still listening to this?*

My phone vibrates in my pocket, layers of denim doing nothing to deafen the shrill chime. I groan, anticipating either my uncle or aunt on the other end, ready to nag me for ignoring them. But when I check the caller ID, I find a name I wasn’t anticipating, one that fills me with a combination of excitement and worry.

*Am I reading too much into this, or is this a move? We haven’t called each other before. I leave the glass on the counter, taking the moment to weigh the possibilities in my head. And I’m still not in the best mood from that fight earlier. What if I get snippy with her and ruin things? Oh god, what if Amanda finds out that she’s over here? How the hell do I explain that to Bart?*

“In and out, Max.” *If I want to give her a real chance, taking this is a good start. Things will be alright, just stay calm.*

I accept the call, putting the phone up to my ear. “Hey Amanda, what’s up?”

“Well, what’s up with you?” replies a husky voice. “You texted me about a car crash yesterday and I’ve barely heard from you since. I’ve been worried.”

“Not much to explain,” I say, scratching my head. “I totaled my truck, but I’m mostly in one piece. I stayed out too long for a hunting trip and got caught by the storm.”

“Mostly in one piece?”

“I have a pretty nasty scar on the side of my face now.” I run my fingers over it with my left hand. “Definitely cut into my good looks.”

“You’re just exaggerating. Send me a picture, I’ll be the judge. How is it being trapped indoors?”

My eyes move to the doorway back to the parlor. *No way in hell I’m telling her about that situation.* “It’s boring, but it’s better than the hospital, that’s for sure. There’s plenty of ways to kill the time.”

“Yeah? What does Max O’Neill do to entertain himself?”

“Max O’Neill? Well, normally he’d be carving something or fiddling around with his guitar, but life come first. Looking for a replacement vehicle, shoveling the back, taking care of my hens, just stuff like that. I’m almost finished up, so who knows what I’ll do next?”

“I didn’t know you were a musician,” she says, a note of interest in her voice. “What kind of songs do you like to play?”

“Anything I have the vocal range for, and the skill not to completely butcher.”

A sigh. “But are there any genres or bands you prefer? I think music taste can say a lot about someone’s personality.”

“I have a soft spot for grunge.” An idea comes to mind. “What do you listen to? Maybe I can learn one of your favorite songs for when we meet up. I could give you a personal concert, if you like the sound my voice enough.”

“I do like your voice. I also like the way you use it. Do you flatter every girl you talk to?”

“Only the pretty ones.”

“You’re too funny,” Amanda giggles. “I know we talked about doing stuff together when it gets warmer, but if I’m being honest, that’s a pretty long time to wait. I’m free this week if you are.”

“I should be getting a new car on Thursday, so it would have to be the weekend.” My chest swells with pride; I wasn’t expecting things to go this well.

“I can do Saturday,” she says.

I smile. “Saturday, then. We can work out the details over text?”

“Sure thing. What’s your favorite football team?”

“Pardon?” Just like that, there’s ice in my veins. My shoulders scrunch up as I struggle to respond. “I mean... uh, why do you ask?”

“I can hear the game in the background, and I’m curious who you’re rooting for.”

*Fuck! Damn it Jenny, now I have to pretend I care about football. Are you trying to trip me up? A quick peek at the television jogs my memory. “The Bills right now, and they’re kicking ass.”*

“That’s what I’m talking about! You see that touchdown Makucha made a little while ago? Guy’s a legend in the making!”

“I did, it was pretty intense. Craziest play I’ve seen in a while.” I take a deep breath, hoping she doesn’t see through my bullshit. *That sounds right.*

“Signing him was the best decision they made in years,” she says. “You know, I just had an idea, we can bump our visit to Sunday so we can watch next week’s game together! I know this sports bar that has killer wings, just a couple blocks away from me. You’ll be begging me to come back.”

*Not so sure about football, but if there’s wings? I can work with that.* “Sunday’s a date, then. It’s a shame, I was really looking forward to playing for you.”

“If things go well next weekend, then you’ll have your chance, Casanova. I’ll see you later.” She clicks off.

*Everything went smoothly, not bad for someone who’s out of practice. It helps that Amanda doesn’t seem too hard to please. She moves fast.* My lips curl up as I pour myself another glass of water. My mouth is drier than a desert. *Next Sunday is gonna be a lot of fun.*

My mind is still on the future when I walk back into the parlor with a full glass of water in my hand. The football game is in progress, the Chiefs now in possession of the ball. My ex is still watching, although it's obvious that her attention is somewhere else.

"Hey," I call from the doorway.

No response, save a quick glance with her eyes. *So she's still going to be like that.*

Taking a swig of water, I tap the glass against the door frame, causing her ears to perk up slightly.

"How much did you hear?"

"Of what?" grunts Jenny. "You chatting up your new girlfriend? It's not my business, I was trying to focus on the game."

My eyes roll. "That's rich. Come on, I know you were listening. No way you weren't after what you tried this morning."

"Are you trying to bait me?" she asks, her eyes pulling away from the game. "I'm not interested in you or your stupid girlfriend, okay? Leave me be."

"Only if you answer this question," I say. "If you knew I was talking to a girl, why didn't you turn the volume down?"

Jenny looks at me like I just asked her the dumbest bullshit she ever heard. "Excuse me? Are you dense, Max? Why would I do that?"

"So that the person on the other end doesn't realize I have company?" My hand shoots out towards the television. "She heard the game through the phone because you had the volume on too loud."

"What does that have to do with anything?" The doe glances at the front door before returning a confused look. "Does she somehow know I'm here based on that interaction? Why didn't you just tell her you were watching it?"

"That's what I did."

"Then I don't see the problem here."

"I had to lie to cover myself because of you." I state. "I don't want to start a relationship on a foundation of dishonesty."

Jenny's composure breaks, and she moves to cover a smirk with her hand.

"What's so funny about that?"

"Plenty of things," she coughs. "Why didn't you just ask me to turn the volume down before you took the call? Why didn't you take it in your room where you could block out the sound?"

"I saw her name, so I freaked out and answered. You've done the same thing before. So why didn't you-"

"Because I was watching the game and didn't think she would hear it, or that it would be a big deal if she did. Or because it's depressing to hear you flirt with other girls like you used to with me. Or maybe I thought it would be the best way to give you privacy, all things considered." She waves a hoof at her broken ankle. "What do you *want* to hear? That I was trying to sabotage your chances with Cottonball Karen?"

“Were you?”

“No! Because I’m not the kind of person who ruins relationships out of spite, Max. You’ve asked me to respect your boundaries, so that’s what I’m trying to do.”

“Yeah sure, now you are!” I charge. “You knew yesterday I wanted to see where things went with Amanda, and you still had your hands all over me until an hour ago.”

“You didn’t seem to mind at the time,” she spits. “What was that about a ‘foundation of honesty?’ Why don’t you tell her how you made out with me?”

My mouth hangs open for a few seconds before I make my rebuttal. “If you didn’t push and push for me to humor you it wouldn’t have gotten that far! If you didn’t follow me into the brush, none of this would have happened. Maybe think about someone other than yourself for once, Jenny.”

The doe shoots up from her seat, flinching a bit when her ankle bends. “Are you serious?” she asks. “*Everything* I’ve done for the last two years has been to keep my family together! I resigned a semester of school to take care of my mother when she was sick. I dropped out and gave up on my career so my sister wouldn’t have to. And I’m going to uproot my whole life again so Papa doesn’t have to live alone, because God knows he’d be aimless without me.”

“Jenny-” I straighten up and try to approach her. My anger is all but extinguished in a matter of seconds.

“I’ve sacrificed so much, and in return the universe just spits in my face! And maybe it was fucked up of me to follow you into the woods, Max, but God forbid I do one selfish thing, right?” she sobs. “I’ve been alone with my thoughts for months, you were the one close friend I had left here, but you just disappeared like everyone else. And I needed you.”

“It was two months after your mom died when Chief... ‘told’ me we couldn’t be together anymore. You were in high spirits by then, I thought you were fine.”

“She was my *mom*, Max!” screams the doe. “You can’t just get over that! Not when your sister disappears into her classes, your dad drowns himself in liquor, and all of a sudden your boyfriend doesn’t return your calls for three weeks, and the first time he sees you after the fact he breaks off your relationship. And he doesn’t even tell you why.” Jenny limps around me, towards the hall.

“Jesus, Jen, I didn’t know.” I whisper. *She’s really been struggling alone all this time, right in front of me.* My hand reaches for her, the tips of my fingers grazing her shoulders.

Her whole body freezes up, before she swings around and swats my hand away. “Don’t.”

“Where are you going?”

“The bathroom.” She turns back towards the door. “I need space right now.”

“Do you-”

“Don’t!” A crack can be heard as her hoof strangles the walking stick. After a moment, she takes a deep breath and finishes her trek. The doe stops for a moment to look over her shoulder at me. Those deep brown eyes of hers are glistening, the fur underneath already damp. “Just don’t worry about it, okay?”

The door slams behind her.



## Hugging it Out

For the past fifteen minutes, I've been laying on the couch fiddling with my fingers as guilt and shame swirl in my head. The bathroom door has been locked for a while longer, sounds from the other side alternating between eerie silence and ugly crying.

*How could I not see it? She was going through so much shit and I just left her to the wolves. My chest gets tight. For everything that went wrong in my life, at least I had people to fall back on, like Bart, or my Uncle. I robbed her of that.*

A part of my mind tries to protest. *Her father threatened my life, I couldn't do anything to help her even if I did know. It wasn't my fault.*

I squirm. Deep down, I know I'm making excuses for myself. *She needed me, there had to be something I could have done. Maybe I could have humored a few secret dates with her, or done anything more meaningful than repeating empty overtures. She deserved better than she got from the man who used to-*

"I can't even say I stopped." I groan, rolling onto my back and placing my hands on my face. *Why the fuck did I lash out at her? Because she was having a crisis and it wasn't convenient for me? What kind of friend have I been, what kind of partner?*

*I want to apologize, but I don't want to say anything to make things worse.* My fingers drum against the table as I gaze at the door. *But I can't just do nothing. I need to make things right.*

Rising from the couch, my bare feet hit the carpet below. It muffles my steps on the way to the bathroom. I knock once. "Jenny?"

The crying ceases, but she doesn't respond.

"Can we talk for a minute?" I ask after another knock.

A few moments later, the door cracks open. A brown, bloodshot eye peeks out from the other side. "What, so you can give a speech about how I'm the worst person you know?" Her voice is hoarse. "Don't bother. I get it."

"I'm not here to scream at you. I'm here to..." *Swallow your pride.* "...here to apologize."

She shuts the door, locking it behind her.

"Jenny?"

"Go away, Max," she says. "I can't even look at you right now."

I grab the doorknob, but stop short of trying to get in. *That will just piss her off more, I think. Jenny needs her space, and nothing I say to her right now will make her feel better. She'll come out when she's ready.*

My fingers slip off the handle. "Just promise you'll come out if you get hungry. You won't heal if you don't eat."

She snorts. "I ate enough this morning. It won't be a problem."

"Alright." *I really fucked up.*



Returning to the living room, I shuffle back to the couch and check my phone. A text from Amanda about our plans next week appears as top banner. It makes me nauseous to even think about that right now, so I scroll down to the older texts, reading two new messages from my uncle carrying on from before.

**Jeez, something happen between you two? Giving your old uncle the silent treatment, real mature.**

**It's still an open wound.** I type back. **And yeah, things are pretty bad.**

He takes a minute to respond. **Did she bother you about hunting again?**

**I wish it were that simple. It was about boundaries and personal space. She wouldn't leave me alone this morning.**

The reply comes before I finish the second part of the message. **LOL, she could never keep her hands off of you, remember when you two started dating?**

*Oh God, do I?* Jenny wasn't exactly subtle when it came to public displays of affection. Even before we made things official, she took every chance she could to brush or lean against me when her parents weren't around.

**And it was fine then, but things are different now. Chief turned into a fucking psycho who loses his cool if I even look at her. I told her to knock it off, but she wouldn't stop, and I lost my patience. I said a lot of things I shouldn't have, and now she's really upset. I don't know what to do.**

**Why not just apologize if you think it'll make her happy?** He asks.

**Too little too late. She's holed herself up in the bathroom.**

I look up from my phone for a moment, back towards the door. Still closed.

**Sounds like you fucked up pretty bad.**

I sigh. **I want her to talk to me so I know she's OK, I'm losing my mind worrying about her. What do you do when Aunt Lav gets upset?**

A bubble appears on the screen, indicating that Rodney is taking his sweet time with the reply. **I like to make her favorite meals without telling her. The second she smells my cooking, she jumps right back into my arms like nothing's wrong in the world. Cooking and food have always been things we've shared.**

**That's a great idea. Thanks, Uncle Rod.**

**Don't mention it.** Rodney follows this message up quickly with another. **When you do make things up with her, draw the line in the sand for your personal space. If you end up in the hospital again, I'll kill Chief for laying a finger on my nephew, then the both of you for being morons who can't control themselves.**

I never saw Rod as angry as he was when he found out how I fractured my ribs. That whole week, all I heard from him was ranting and raving about how his former friend thought his own flesh and

blood wasn't good enough for the Greenleaf family. He was damn near ready to start a blood feud over it until Aunt Lav talked him down. Needless to say, the men don't talk anymore.

**I'm not trying to woo her, so chill out, I send, walking back into the kitchen. I just want to make up. It won't go past that, I promise.**

"What to do about food?" I think out loud. The most obvious option would have to be pancakes, of course. *There's nothing quite like comfort food, and I know for certain that she'll come running out the second she smells them frying.*

That plan falls apart when I check the pantry to find very little of the pancake mix left, not nearly enough to make a full batch. Dismayed, I take stock of my ingredients, cycling through a mental list of every recipe I can cook with what I have on hand.

As I'm doing this, a better idea comes to mind. *Music is what brought us together, right? Maybe a song or two will bring her out of hiding.*

I backtrack into the parlor to search for my guitar and find it in its case, leaned up against the wall. I remove it from the case, plucking all 6 strings to check if it's tuned right. *Eh, close enough.*

Guitar in hand, I pull a pick from the bag and sit on the couch. I putz around with some chords for a few minutes, then start strumming Plush as a warm up. After thinking about my audience however, I have a change of heart, switching to the opening riff of Blackbird. Jenny preferred mellow songs when we played together, so I gamble she would appreciate the latter more.

It's then when it sets in that I haven't touched the thing in a few months, and I'm pretty fucking rusty. I can't keep the tempo and a part of my soul withers each time I hit a wrong note. *It's not even that hard of a song, how am I having so much trouble?*

Ten minutes pass before I finally get the first verse down and move to the chorus, humming along. The pieces are coming back together, the frets once again familiar to my fingers. My palm slides easily over the instrument's lacquered face. *Just needed a warm up is all.*

Then I screw up the transition into the second verse, cursing myself under my breath for my hubris.

The door creaks open from down the hall. I stop playing for a moment, hoping to hear Jenny's voice or footsteps. No such luck.

I frown, then finish the second verse. It's not hard to get lost in the rhythm once I have the picking pattern down again, and the last chorus flies by with comparatively few errors. I close the song out with seven chords, satisfied with my own performance. *Now what else?*

Her shadow is hanging over me when I open my eyes. I jump in my seat, taken off guard. "Jeez, you really have to sneak up on me like that?"

The doe doesn't respond, merely staring at me with distance in her eyes. Her cheeks are damp, and her breathing is still heavy.

Frowning, I ask: "Are you ready to talk yet?"

"No."

"Alright." My lips tighten. "Are you here to watch me play?"

Silence. Jenny shuffles around the sofa, stopping short when she reaches the rocking chair. She

places the walking stick against the armrest, pinning the seat in place as she maneuvers her body over it. Only then does she return my gaze.

I clear my throat, buying myself some time to figure out what I which song I want to cover next. I settle on one familiar to the both of us. The first song I taught her to play, in fact. I strum a G7<sup>th</sup> chord, then a Cadd9, then an Am7<sup>th</sup>.

Jenny shakes her head violently. “No.”

“No?” My hand lifts from the strings.

“No,” she repeats through gritted teeth. “I can’t listen to that right now, play anything else.”

My jaw hangs open for a second. *There goes that plan. What the hell am I supposed to do now?*

“Uh... got any requests, then?”

“No,” she says. “Maybe. You up to vent?”

“If that’s what you need. Hit me.”

“Joan Jett, you know which one.”

“Tell me how you really feel,” I smirk. *Far cry from her usual preference, but if that’s what it takes for her to smile...* “I haven’t touched that one in a while, what were the chords again?”

“E minor, D, A, B and G.”

I whistle all of the major sections, making mental notes of where each chord fits in. With the song mapped out, I return to the beginning, opening with the first 8 measures and tapping to the beat with my big toe.

Jenny jumps in right on cue. “Midnight, getting uptight, where are you? You said you’d meet me now it’s quarter to two. I know I’m hanging but I’m still wanting you.” Her voice carries through the room, much scratchier than it usually is. My eyes shoot towards her out of concern, only to be greeted by a smile growing on her face. That’s all the reassurance I need.

“I think of you every night and day! You took my heart and you took my pride away!” She waves at me, cutting herself off. “Sing with me, Max!”

“Alright,” I mouth back before belting the chorus with her. “I hate myself for lovin’ you! Can’t break free from the things that you do!” *My playing isn’t the only thing that’s rusty, jeez.* “I want to walk but I run back to you, that’s why I hate myself for lovin’ you!”

This takes me all the way to before we made things official. After she learned everything I could teach her, our "lessons" turned into jam sessions where we would just play whatever we wanted for a few hours. That in turn led the two of us to perform together at open mic nights, much to Chief’s chagrin. We had lots of fun with it, driving half an hour away to some dive and singing our little hearts out to the applause of drunkards. We were partners in crime.

When I escape my little daydream, she’s staring at me from across the coffee table, still enraptured in the music. There’s a sparkle in her eyes, and underneath is the most genuine smile I’ve seen from her in ages. *I wonder if she’s thinking about the same thing.*

“I think of you every night day!” She takes the upper register while I slip into the lower one. “You took my heart and you took my pride away!”

On the last chorus, neither of us hold back, raising our voices out as loud as we can. It's enough to make the walls shake, and I can't imagine my now-furious playing is helping any. "That's why I hate myself for lovin' you!" I strum out the last E minor, which is met with thunderous applause from my partner.

Jenny throws herself back into the chair, stretching her hooves. "Aw man... you have no idea how much I missed that," says the doe.

"Makes two of us," I say. "Your performances never cease to amaze, Jen."

"Wish I could say the same for you, jerkass, but we both know you don't practice enough." She giggles. "What was that rendition of Blackbird earlier? If anybody else heard it, you'd be the laughingstock of the town."

I roll my eyes, trying not to give her the satisfaction. "Everyone's a critic." I'm honestly just happy she's cheered up. "Well, Jen? You ready to hash things out?"

"Ugh, you're not gonna let me ride the high for a little longer?" The doe sticks her tongue out.

"We can play a couple more songs together, if that's what you need."

She shakes her head. "No, you're right. We should make up."

*Thank God.* "I can start with my piece."

"I should start, actually." Jenny sucks in some air. "I haven't been considerate of your feelings since I've been here. I invited myself onto your personal retreat without asking you. Then, after you invited me into your house to protect me, I violated your personal space multiple times. That really sucked of me and I'm sorry."

I nod. "Water under the bridge."

"And I'm really sorry that I flirted as much as I did even after you told me you wanted to see this new girl you've been texting. Talking to her about it would probably sabotage whatever you two have going on, but I owe both you and her a massive apology for that."

"There's nothing to apologize for," I say. "Amanda and I haven't even had our first date yet. I was making it a bigger deal out of it than it was to keep a barrier between us." A pit forms in my gut. "Besides, I was the one who kissed you, and I can't blame you for that. I made the decision to act on lingering feelings, and that's on me."

"We both screwed up pretty bad." She scratches her head.

"We can, but I'm not finished yet. I took it too far when I lashed out at you over the game, and I assumed the worst of you when I shouldn't have. I've been bottling up a lot of shit since we broke it off, and none of that was meant for you."

"I figured. Still, it really hurt when you tried to interrogate me about it. I didn't come here to ruin your life, Max. I thought getting some time alone with you would make me feel better, and that you would enjoy it too." She whistles, throwing herself back against the chair. "But all I managed to do was fuck up and make things worse."

"You haven't been okay for a while, have you?" I place the guitar on the coffee table facing up.

The smile fades, and she averts my gaze for the ground. "No. Things have been pretty shitty."

“Then that’s another thing I need to apologize for. I haven’t been a good boyfriend to you, or much of a friend at all.”

She shakes her head. “Max, that was Papa’s fault, not yours.”

“But I could have done more.” That feeling of shame comes back in full force, and I stand up. “Even if it was just once in a while, I could have stayed with you to take your mind off of all the bullshit when you needed me. Instead, I distanced myself and added to your pain. I failed you as a partner, and I’m sorry.”

“Please, you’re going to make me cry again.”

“It needs to be said, Jen.”

Her eyes are welling up. “I know you meant well, alright? But if you had just told me what happened between you and Papa sooner, I could have done something about it. Maybe I could have kept my family together without having to break things off. You never gave me that choice,” she sniffles.

“I told myself that you didn’t need that stress after losing your Mom, and that your family would take better care of you.” I look back into her eyes. “I guess I was afraid you’d choose Chief over me, so I jumped the gun.”

“Did you think I’d throw away everything we had because he told me to?” Jenny grabs her walking stick and shoots up from her seat, gritting her teeth as her bad hoof presses against the floor. “Max, how long have you known me?”

“Seven, eight years?”

“How many of those have we dated?”

“I think two and a half.”

“And you thought I wouldn’t fight for us if I knew?” She gives me the hardest look I’ve ever been given in my life; the kind I’ve only ever seen from my Aunt Lavender. The tribal glare rumored to send bears running to their mothers in fear.

I shrink in my clothes, feeling like a little kid who tracked mud all over the house.

The doe hobbles towards me, breathing out through her teeth with every other step. She gets right up into my face, balls up her fists... and starts to laugh. “Max, I don’t even know what to say.”

Blood rushes to my face. “I wasn’t thinking straight at the time, alright? Maybe I got a concussion too.”

“I’m losing my mind here. All that time apart might have been prevented by a few conversations.” She steps back, shaking her head. “Christ.”

“I don’t think things would have changed that much. I’ve never met a bigger mule than your father.”

"I still wish I knew. I deserved to know."

I wince. "Sorry."

“Don’t be. There’s no use dwelling on it.” Jenny shoves her hands back in her pockets. “Well, I

can't think of anything else to say, so... are we cool?"

I take a deep breath. *Feels nice to have a clean conscience.* "Yeah, we're cool. Still friends?"

"Of course." She smiles. "Here's the big question. Is there any chance we can hug this out?"

*What did Rodney say about drawing a line in the sand again? Fuck it.* "Bring it in, Jen."

With outstretched arms, I approach the doe, who quickly mirrors the gesture. Her hooves rub up my back and behind my shoulders as I hold her tight, almost enough to lift her off of the floor. My nose is filled with the scent of cinnamon.

"It's good to have you back, Maxie."

## Food for Thought

Neither of us are eager to break up the hug, but we can't hold on forever. When I see her leg start to twitch I guide Jenny back to the rocking chair. "We really have to watch for that injury of yours."

"It's not that bad," she protests. "I just can't put too much weight on it. If I use the walking stick, I can barely feel it."

"Just be careful." I take a step back. *Reconciliation went as well as I could have hoped.*

"What do you want to do, now that we're done fighting?"

"I haven't really thought that far ahead. How about we finish up *Space Ape 2*? We can rewind it to where we left off."

She shakes her head. "Eh, not really in the mood for that anymore."

"Hmm... Well, I could play some more stuff for you on guitar, if you'd prefer that."

"I wouldn't mind listening to a couple more songs from you." Her stomach growls, so she shifts her body to silence the noise. "On second thought, it can wait. I'm famished. What time is it?"

"With how dark it is outside, I'd say six, six-thirty latest." Six-fifteen exactly, when I look at my phone.

"Do you mind if I cook something up?" She picks up the walking stick, pushing herself back to her feet.

"You can use the stove, but aren't you afraid you might fall or hurt yourself while you're moving around? It's not easy to cook with only one hand free."

"Will you stop worrying about that? I'll be fine!"

"I'm just saying-"

"You already covered breakfast," she insists, bringing out her pleading doe eyes. "Let me make dinner for you."

*She knows I can't resist.* I look away, towards the kitchen door. "Fine."

"Thank you. Even when we dated, you always made it such a hassle for me to do you favors. Some things never change." She hobbles to the kitchen, myself following close behind.

"I'm a man. I like to do things on my own if I can help it. Boosts my ego."

"Like your ego needs any boost."

The first thing Jenny does is open up all of the cabinets; she pulls out trays, pots and pans and lines them up on top of the oven. Soon after, she starts tearing through my fridge, snatching a few corn cobs from the shelf. "You don't have any turkey in here, do you?"

It was a bit strange to find out that turkey and fish is an important facet of the Thunderhoof diet, given the resemblance between the deerfolk and their wild counterparts. Guess you have to get your protein from somewhere.

“I didn’t buy any meat from the store,” I say. “I thought I’d bag something yesterday so I assumed I wouldn’t need it.”

“Bummer.” Her shoulders slump. “It’s going to be a lot harder to rock your taste buds without it.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. And don’t worry about portions, either. I have leftovers if there isn’t enough for the both of us.”

“I’ll make sure there’s enough,” she says, shucking one of the cobs. “That’s the whole point of this, Max.”

Tired of arguing, I sit down and recline against the backrest. *You know what? It’s great to have a home cooked meal without having to do any work for once.*

Jenny lathers each of the cobs with butter and spices from three different bottles I can’t read from where I’m sitting. She wraps them in tin-foil, then jams them into the oven on top of a metal tray. Her right hoof reaches back towards the cupboard to grab a can of soup and a can of beans.

She opens both with the can opener and dumps them both into a pot, then turns the stovetop on low boil. “That should be finished in a couple minutes. The corn will probably take an extra ten, so if you’d rather wait to eat I wouldn’t blame you.”

“I saw you sneak those cans out of the cupboard, what are you planning?”

“Squash and bean soup.”

“Oh my God,” I sigh. “You’re right. It would have been way better with turkey.”

“Why do you think I was so disappointed?” she asks. “And don’t even get me started the canned stuff, they’d never let me hear the end of this at Bleeding Horn. Neither would Mom.”

“They make this at the commune, too?” I ask, half out of curiosity and half to keep Jenny’s mind off of that last train of thought.

She turns to look at me over her shoulder. “Yeah, like every other night. It’s originally a Firepelt recipe.”

“Huh. Didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, it combines a bunch of the staples of our diet before the explorers came from across the ocean. It’s got cultural significance to us.” Her tail sways back and forth as she sprinkles some more spices into the pot. “Of course, there’s plenty of improvement that can be made to old recipes if you don’t limit yourself.”

Jenny takes a ladleful of soup, pouring it out into an empty bowl. She dips one of her digits in and samples the taste before passing it to me. “Tell me if it’s missing anything.”

I run my finger along the bottom of the bowl and touch it to my tongue. *A nice mix of sweet and savory with just a pinch of spice.* “It’s pretty good.”

“Awesome,” she says, hobbling back to the stove. “I wonder if I’d get away with sneaking a visit to Wegman’s every so often.”

“What do you mean?”

She shakes her head. “Sorry, just thinking out loud. They’re really big on self-sufficiency at the



commune, specifically raising your own food. Everything that goes in their bodies comes from their fields, their coop, or the lake, unless it's something you get at a pharmacy."

"That's pretty neat," I say. "I've never actually been to the commune. What's it like?"

"Exclusive, for starters. If you aren't already a full tribal citizen or a government agent, they only let you visit if you tell them weeks in advance. Even then, they only allow stuff like that for educational trips and family gatherings." She looks back. "Did we never talk about it?"

I shrug. "Not that I could remember."

"Really? Well, back to what I was saying, they want to avoid outside influences, especially modern ones."

"So they don't have running water or electricity?"

"Hah. They're not that backwards." Jenny rolls her eyes. "There's water, power, and cell service, as well as an emergency shelter for really bad storms, but they try not to use that stuff wherever they can help it. The whole point is to preserve the lifestyle and maintain our connection to the land and the wilds."

"Sounds spiritual."

"Ritualism is pretty big there. There's an old way to do everything, each with a dance or song or prayer to honor the Great Mother below and the Great Father above. If you ask anyone who grew up at Bleeding Horn, they'll tell you that the old way is almost always the right way, with some exceptions."

"Exceptions? What traditions did you guys leave behind?"

A devious grin appears on her face. "Are you sure you want to know? It might kill your appetite."

"I'll take the risk."

She takes a few steps towards me. "In the time long before Chief Bleeding Horn, the winters were harsh, the future uncertain, and the four great tribes of New York considered each other mortal enemies, along with other tribes. They would bicker and fight over hunting grounds and waterways, and in the most violent clashes they would take captives from each other's ranks."

"Alright." *So far it doesn't seem too bad.*

"And what they would do was, they would hunt the animal that matched the tribe of their prisoner. So if the captive was a Luckypaw, the tribe would spend the next couple of days hunting rabbits. A pyre would be built for the captive to roast alive on, and they would cook all of the hunted meat on the same fire, to represent his family burning with him. Then, they'd eat him."

I blink twice, trying to get a read on the doe. "You're fucking with me. There's no way that's true."

Her smile is elusive. "Why would I lie about my own culture like that?"

"That's... brutal, goddamn. And everyone thought that was normal?"

"It was part of the religion, you did it to keep the gods happy and the people strong. It only changed when Bleeding Horn united all the tribes under the New York council. Suddenly everyone

was an ally, so the practice fell out of favor.”

“Good.” *Ugh, cannibalism. If she keeps this up, I think I might throw up.*

“You know, there's a few stories of humans getting caught, but none of the tribes had any idea what to do for the ritual, so they ended up letting the captives go free.” Jenny winks at me. “What a waste. I think human tastes pretty good, once you try it enough times.”

“Jesus Christ!” I shout, obscene images flooding my mind. “Come on, Jenny, that’s disgusting.”

“You didn’t think so at the time,” she teases. “Don’t be such a baby.”

“We’re at the dinner table for God’s sake. And I’d prefer if we kept that to a minimum. We aren’t dating anymore, so we shouldn’t talk to each other like that.”

Her smile fades. “Alright, I’ll try to put lid on it from now on. Sorry if I overstepped there.” She grabs an oven mitt and pulls the corn cobs from the oven, putting the tray on the stovetop next to the soup. Her tail is swinging again. “Dinner’s almost ready, by the way.”

“It smells great,” I say absentmindedly. *Damn it. Now she’s got me thinking about it. A peek won’t hurt, right?* My eyes hold on her rear, watching that short fluffy tail wave back and forth like a pendulum. *Hypnotic.*

“You think it can use some garlic powder?”

“No... I don’t think so.” *Come on, Max, get a hold of yourself. You two are done, and a girl like her can get anyone she wants wrapped around her hoof. Funny, smart, beautiful... she’s probably got men lining up to woo her back at the compound. I should be happy that she could find someone else so easily, why does it make me angry?*

I take a deep breath, careful to let none of my jealousy show through my voice. “You ever think about dating again, Jen?”

“Hmm?” Her ears perk up.

“Have there been any other guys in the picture since we broke it off? Anybody you’ve thought about kissing ... or... you know...” *It makes my skin crawl even thinking about it.*

“You already know the answer to that.” She turns back to her work, stirring the soup in wide circles with the ladle. “There’s been some dates with a few tribal guys, and maybe I’ve made out with one or two, but it never felt right. Part of it was because I kept thinking about you, but it wasn’t like I had much chemistry with them to begin with. I don’t fit in with other tribals.”

My chest relaxes the slightest bit. “Why not? You engage with the culture, and you’ve probably known some of those guys longer than me.”

“I didn’t grow up in the commune, Max. I grew up here in Warren’s Peak, in normal society. We farmed cows, and went to church, and watched movies, and celebrated Christmas just like everyone else. Your Aunt was our only tribal neighbor, and I only knew one Luckypaw kid in my grade, so my only exposure past what I was taught at home came from the visits we made twice a year.”

“Everything on the table, I thought a tough country girl like you wouldn’t have much of a problem fitting in.”

“You’d think so, but no.” She pours two bowls of soup, trying to carry both back to the table by the tip of her hooves. Sensing the imminent danger, I rush out of my seat to take my bowl from her. “I said I could handle it.”

“It was about to topple over.” I say. “You cooked dinner, I’ll take care of the rest. Just sit down.” I grab a pair of tongs and put two corn cobs each on plates for my ex and I, then grab some spoons from the drawer.

Jenny is tapping her hooves against the table when I get back, staring intently at the corn. She’s already on top of it when I put everything down. Bringing the cob up to her lips, she blows on it for a few seconds so it doesn’t melt the roof of her mouth before taking her first bite.

As I wait for my own food to cool down, I start moving around bits of corn around my plate with my spoon. I look across the table. “Be honest with me. Do you want to live at the commune?”

Jenny looks up from her plate, dropping the corncob. She swallows the bite of food in her mouth but says nothing. The silence is deafening.

“Jen?”

“Give me a second, alright?” She frowns. “It’s a complicated question.”

“It’s an important one,” I insist.

“I like Bleeding Horn, okay? It’s nice to reconnect with the culture every once in a while, and I’ve made some of my best memories there.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“I know it’s going to be a big adjustment. When you grow up in a cozy little rural town, there’s comforts you take for granted. But I can handle life without them. I’m tough.” Her spoon clinks against the inside of the bowl.

*She’s lying to herself.* “It sounds like you’ve resigned yourself to it.”

Her ears twitch. “It’s what Papa wants, and I can’t change his mind. He thinks it could be the start of a new life for us. And as long as he’s around, I’m willing to give it a chance. He’s the only family I got left.”

“But what if you could do both? Live off-site, but still keep him and the Thunderhoof culture in your life?”

“There’s no way he’d let me live on my own, you know how he is.”

“It wouldn’t be his decision to make.” I push. “You’re your own woman, Jenny, you have a bank account, a car, and a cell phone. If you really wanted to you could strike out on your own tomorrow.”

Her brow furrows. “It’s not that simple. Even if he doesn’t go off the deep end when I tell him, what would I do with myself, Max? School’s off the table. I’d be living on my own from paycheck to paycheck, possibly for the rest of my life. So much could go wrong. It’s terrifying.”

“Who said you couldn’t go back to school? If you want to finish your degree, go back and finish your degree. Fight to get your scholarship back or seek out a loan. This is your future we’re-”

“That dream died with Mom!” she says, hackles raised.

*I don't know if I'm the right person to talk to her about that.*

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to touch a sore spot.” I rest my hand on her hoof. “Forget about college, and forget about us. Speaking as a friend, I don’t want to see you miserable 5 years from now because you let your dad bully you into being his perfect daughter.”

The doe looks away, and I can’t get a read on what she’s thinking.

“I know you well enough to tell that this isn’t what you want, Jen.” I massage her knuckles. “You won’t be happy if you keep following the path he’s made for you; you need to beat your own path through life. That means grabbing the reins and taking some personal risks.”

“I don’t think I can,” admits Jenny. “I’ve been playing into his vision for so long, I feel like I don’t have a say in my own future anymore.”

“Then why did you come here?” I say. “If your father was calling all of the shots you would have never ran off.”

“Because I was desperate and I needed my rock. Sneaking out to visit my ex for a day is one thing, Max, but this is different. There’s no back-up plan if I can’t handle living on my own.”

“The back-up plan is that you go to Bleeding Horn with your tail in between your legs. But it’s not going to play out like that, because you’re going to get things right the first time. Trust in yourself, Jenny, and trust that things’ll get better.”

“It’s reassuring to hear that, and the idea is appealing.” Her lips curl up. “This is still overwhelming. Can you give me a minute?”

“Mull it over while we eat. If you aren’t ready to take the plunge by the time we finish dinner, we can just relax for the rest of the night. No biggie.” I knock against the table. “But if you are, I’ll help you get things sorted out however I can. That’s a promise.”

“You would?” she asks.

“Of course I would. That’s what friends are for, right?”

“Friends.” The doe flashes a smile before returning her focus to her food. She proceeds to shovel spoonfuls of soup into her mouth at lightning pace. *Her hunger is insatiable.*

I follow her lead, chewing through the corn and leaving the now-empty cobs on my plate. Once finished, I grab my own bowl of soup, which is now just cool enough to enjoy at my own pace. Both the spices and beans work well with the sweet and savory flavor of the squash soup base. *This came from a can? I have to pick this stuff up more often.*

Across from me, with her plate and bowl left barren from her own appetite, it's clear from the look in her eyes that Jenny has come to her decision.

# New Lease on Life

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“So where do you think we should start?” asks Jenny, turning a ballpoint pen in her hoof. In her other hand is an old notebook we found tucked away in one of my drawers. Its open page is covered in her neat, cursive handwriting. “Housing and employment seem like the most pressing issues. I have to be able to support myself in the long term.”

“Don’t forget transportation,” I say. “Good luck holding a job if you can’t get anywhere.”

She nods. “Noted.”

“And insurance. You’ll need to start paying that on your own once you’re out of the house.”

She blinks twice, before scribbling something into the notebook. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Phone bills too. They don’t pay themselves, you know.”

“I get it, Max!” she snaps. “Can we please focus on the task at hand?”

I smirk. “We are focused. Living on your own is tough when you first leave the nest, and you should be prepared for as much as you can be.”

“I don’t see how listing all of that shit off without actually solving anything is productive. Shouldn’t we knock out one thing at a time?”

“Nonsense, this is how my parents helped me when they first heard my plans to move. I think you’re just acting spoiled.”

She waves the notebook menacingly at me. “Cut that out before I throw this at you.”

My hands raise in mock fear. “Easy there. Just put the book down and nobody has to get hurt.”

“Idiot.” She shakes her head. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“You were on the right track with employment, and I think it would be smart to follow the money when it comes to housing. We’ll do those two things for now, the rest shouldn’t be too hard to figure out on your own. You have any clue what you want to do for work?” I ask.

“Being a farmhand is always option. I have some management experience too, so it won’t be a big adjustment if I take a job at a general store.”

*Would she be satisfied with that work in the long term?* “If you’re cool with those types of jobs, we can probably land you a gig in no time, and one close by.”

She gives me a thumbs up. “If I can help it, I’m going to stay in Warren’s peak. I want to be close to where I grew up, near my best friend. Either that, or halfway in-between Bleeding Horn and here.”

“I don’t think you should factor me too heavily in that decision.”

“Why not?” The doe tilts her head. “Are you going to disappear on me again?”

“No, but it feels like you’re putting all your eggs in one basket. These last few years have been rough. If our friendship falls apart again, I don’t want this decision to bite you in the ass. If you want to stay in your old community, it would help if you reconnected with some of our neighbors. It can’t be just me you’re staying for.”

“I have Mom here too.”

I wince. “Come on now.”

“I know it sounds a bit pathetic, but it’s not like I have people anywhere else.”

*She and her sister have their own shitshow going on.* I remind myself.

“Before Papa broke us up, you and I didn’t really fight about anything serious besides the hunting,” she continues. “With him out of the picture, nothing’s coming in the way of our ...friendship, not again. Hell, someday we can pick up where we left off. If that’s what you want, I mean.” She gives me a hopeful look.

“I won’t say never,” I sigh. *Damn those eyes.* “Seriously, though. When’s the last time you spoke to my aunt?”

“Lav?” Jenny glances towards her legs. “It’s been some time since we’ve had a full conversation.”

“How much time? Does she call you?”

“Once every month, and sometimes she comes to check on me in person, but I’m always busy with something at the market, or home.” She writes some more notes. “I put it on the list. I’ll call her once we’re done with everything else.”

“You better, otherwise she’ll start riding *my* ass about it. She cares about you a lot, you know?”

“Yeah...” She crosses out one of the prompts and circles another. “So housing. Do you mind if I borrow your computer to do some research?”

I flinch. “I’d prefer it if you used your phone.”

“RentRodent’s interface hasn’t been updated since 2007. Trying to work with the layout on mobile is painful. It’ll just be for an hour at most. I won’t snoop through any of your files, promise.” she says.

“Alright.” I get up from the couch and grab the laptop from my bedroom, an older model given to me as a hand-me-down from my brother. Unfortunately for me, my mouse is plugged in without my knowledge, and I almost wipe out when I trip on the wire. “Shit!”

“Do that again and maybe we can get matching casts!” calls Jenny. She takes the device from my hands when I reach her chair, immediately removing the mouse from its driver and switching to the trackpad.

I sit back down, only to hear the doe succumb to a fit of the giggles. At first, I ignore it, but then I see her take a picture of the display with her phone. “What’s so funny?” I ask.

The doe glances up from the screen, feigning innocence. “Nothing. Just found a funny banner ad I’ve never seen before.”

*What the hell did she see? Do I have to keep an eye on her?* “Why don’t we go back into the

kitchen and work at the table? It'll be easier for me to look at the screen that way."

"Fine by me." She shrugs, then closes the laptop and puts it under her free arm.

In the kitchen, I pull up a seat next to her so we have only a foot of space between us. She gets settled into her chair before placing the computer on top of the table, slowly inching it open to taunt me. The screen turns back on, showing only one open tab: RentRodent.com.

"Something wrong?" asks Jenny, silently begging me to challenge her on what she witnessed.

My ears are burning. "No." *Did she go through my history?*

"Let's get back to it then." She scrolls to an apartment listing in Sheepshank. "This place seems nice. It's not too far from here, only like a 20-minute drive. Right next to the forest, too. The rent's like 600, though."

"That doesn't sound so bad. How does it compare to other offers?"

More scrolling. "725, 700, 650..." She stops and taps my shoulder, pointing at a building that's seen better days. The surrounding property is poorly maintained, shingles are falling off the roof and one of the walls has been covered by a tarp to hide obvious vandalism. "This one is 500 a month," she says, grimacing.

"How is that even up to code?" I think out loud.

"Beats me." She scrolls back to the first offer. "I'm gonna have to eat the cost, right?"

"If you want your own place, yeah. Are you alright with sharing?"

The doe changes the search settings to include double bedroom units. "I can deal with a roommate if it means saving a couple hundred dollars." She stops when a listing for a rustic two-bedroom unit on the border with Anderfield shows up on the screen. "The rent here's 900, but I'll be splitting that with someone else. 15 minutes from downtown, one hour from Bleeding Horn, okay neighborhood... I think we might have a winner." She turns to face me, seeking my approval.

"Make the call, then."

Her eyes widen. "Already? I haven't even found a new job yet. And for roommates-"

"Roommates aren't too hard to find, we're *just* close enough to the city to find some stupid yuppie to foot the other half of the bill. For jobs, you still have your old job, right? And I know you have money saved up from before."

She takes a second to think about it, then taps in the number of the landlord into her phone. "Hello? Is this the owner of the rental property at 24 Kenan Road?"

"My name is Genesee Greenleaf, and I'm calling about the offer you posted on RentRodent. Is that unit still vacant?" Her eyes light up when she recognizes the voice on the other end of the line. "Mr. Miller, how's it been? Is the wife doing well?"

She mutes the call for a second. "The Millers own the property, I used to babysit their kids!"

*Lucky us!*

"Yeah, I figured it was time to leave the nest," she says, the phone back up to her ear. "I can't live with Papa forever... Yeah, I still work at the farmer's market, I was thinking I could check out the

unit this Saturday."

Her eyes widen. "You'd really give me a discounted rate? I don't know what to say!"

"375," she mouths to me.

"It's been awesome talking to you again, Mr. Miller, you're a saint! Take care!" Jenny hangs up, a smile forming on her face. "I'm moving out!"

"So I heard!" I give her a round of applause. "Congratulations on your freedom, how do you feel?"

"Oh God, terrified and excited at the same time." She starts tapping the table with her hoof. "I feel like I'm about to throw up."

I move to go grab the garbage can but she stops me. "Not literally! I'm just a bit conflicted, a lot can still go wrong. What if they get rid of the market? What if the Millers decide to jack up the price of rent and I end up on the street?"

"That's not gonna happen, Jenny," I say. "You're among your neighbors. Everyone in this town has known you for years, and they're rooting for you, even if you haven't been yourself for a while. Do you think Mr. Miller would lower the rent for you if he didn't want you to succeed?"

"No." She squirms in her seat. "I hope this isn't a mistake."

"It's not." I place my hand on her back. "We're working out all of the details right now, but you know what you have to do to support yourself. You're gonna be fine."

"Thanks." Her breathing slows. "I've got this under control and things are in motion. Soon, Papa won't be there to boss me around anymore." She smiles, then closes her eyes and starts to giggle. "He's gonna be *pissed*."

"Let him be. Maybe this act of defiance will be a wake-up call for him. I don't think Chief would risk losing both of his daughters over his stupid pride."

She rolls her eyes. "Please, I've already made peace with the inevitable screaming match between us. I'm more worried about you."

"Why, do you think he's going to beat me up again? For helping you become independent, and trying to give you a choice on what to do with your life? Father of the fucking Year."

Jenny's back becomes tense, her head swiveling to glare at me. "I don't like it when you talk about him that way. He's still my Dad, Max."

"I can't just forgive him for what he's done. Look, you shouldn't worry about me so much. Things are different this time, and I'll be prepared if he tries anything funny." I eye my gun drawer, reminding myself of the revolver just hidden from view.

"Don't say things like that."

"I have to be prepared-"

"I don't want to think about it!" she shouts. "You're the two most important people in my life. If I lost either of you, I'd jump off of a bridge."

"You don't mean that."



Jenny gets up to put space between us. Her hands have risen to hold her elbows, and her back is turned to me. "You know how he is." Her voice wavers. "If one of you ends up dead, the other might go to prison. I can't keep going if I end up alone, it's my worst nightmare."

*Should've kept that to myself.* "I didn't mean to scare you with that kind of talk..." My voice is calm as I approach her. "I won't antagonize him if he comes asking for answers, okay? I'll keep the peace as best I can."

"Is that a promise?" she asks over her shoulder. "You won't run your mouth around him?"

My hand glides along her neck, fingers sifting through the coarse tan fur. "I promise."

"Then I'll try to stop worrying about it so much," she whispers, her hackles lowering to resting position. "Yeah, do that more..."

*She remembers how good I am with my hands, I'm flattered.* "You like that?" I bring both my hands down, rubbing my thumbs into her shoulders.

"Mmm..."

"You missed this, didn't you? You want me to touch you everywhere, right?" The back of my hand deliberately grazes her hip, sending her tail into frenzy.

"Everywhere, baby... take care of me."

"Then call my Aunt." My hands fall back to my sides, breaking off our touch. "She's been waiting forever to hear from you."

"Wha—" She crashes back to reality. "You *dick*! You can't tempt a woman with a massage just to tear it away from her!"

"You'll get your massage, just ring the poor woman already."

"Fine, but when I'm done, you're putting those hands to work. You promised me the full-body experience, and I better get it."

I suck my teeth, realizing what I've doomed myself to. "Done."

"And booze, too. I know you have beer somewhere on this property."

"Ugh... I have a couple of beers and ciders in the laundry room, what would you like?"

"Cider, please."

I leave for the laundry room, flicking on the light switch. Against the wall is a few half opened cases of beer and cider, primed for the taking. The case I'm looking for is labelled 'Saranac Party Pack' and features a cartoon graphic of an apple drinking from a bottle of cider on the front. I reach around until I find two bottles I'm looking for: One Blackberry Burst, and one Gold Standard.

*I'm gonna need about 3 of these, I think, turning the bottles around in my hand. Why did I promise her a full body massage? If things go the way I know they will, she'll get clingy, and we're going to end up back together without thinking things through. I know she'll be living on her own soon enough, but am I really ready for that?*

My face becomes itchy. *It doesn't matter where she lives three months or even a week from now, if Chief thinks we made intimate contact while she was here, I might not live that long.*

“We’ll deal with it when we get there.” I tell myself, taking a deep breath. *As long as we wash everything, he won’t be able to tell, right? No way his old-man senses are that good. And as long as she’s happy, well... maybe it’s okay to take a risk.*

I walk back into the kitchen, where my guest is in the middle of a rousing conversation with my Aunt about my cousin eating something he found on the floor. Her laughter fills the room as she cracks jokes about how it’s tribal instinct not to waste good food.

*A clever girl, that one. Once she was here, all she had to do was push a few of your buttons, then play the long game to get anything she wanted out of you. And you just let her do it, Max, because you’re still soft for her. You still love her.*

“More than life itself.” I whisper under my breath.

I place the blackberry cider on the table in front of the doe, who nods and mumbles a quick thank you.

Retrieving the bottle opener from the drawer, I crack open my own cider, then pass the tool to Jenny so that she can do the same. We clink our bottles together. “Cheers.” Without hesitation, I tilt my drink upwards, downing as much as I can. The cider provides a great mix between a refreshing apple taste and the warming sensation of the alcohol, and it goes down easy. It’s one of my favorites.

“Hey Max, can you step out for a second?” Jenny asks, holding her phone with both hooves to block the microphone.

“You don’t want me listening in? Trying to steal my Aunt?”

“We have a lot to discuss, and some of it I’d like to keep between us. Girl stuff, you know?”

“Alright, I’ll go take a nap. Just tell me when you finish up, okay?”

She gives me the thumbs up, and I walk out of the kitchen. My heart swells with pride for her. *She’s gonna be free, I think. We have a real shot at being together again, for the rest of our lives.*

I stop when I reach the couch, and my eyes turn back to Jenny. She’s sitting there, with her shoulders relaxed and her tail flicking lazily behind her. And she’s happy, laughing with my Aunt about something lost to me. Years of atrophy did nothing to dull that smile of hers. My own cheeks stretch upward, their movement disturbing the pools of fluid forming at my eyes.

My hand rises to wipe it away, moisture pooling on my fingertips. *Weird, when did I... It keeps coming. What’s gotten into me? I don’t know what it is... I just...* The bottle slips from my other hand and lands on the floor with a dull thud, leaving a sweet puddle of apple and alcohol to seep into the rug. My body rests itself against the couch. *In... out... in... out...*

“I’m keeping you on the line, Auntie, hold on.” The tone of a button press, then the sound of hooves. Out of the corner of my eye, there’s Jenny, hobbling towards me as fast as she can. “Maxie, are you okay?” She reaches out her free arm.

*God, please don’t look at me like this.* “I don’t know what’s come over me. I just... lost control.” With her help I get back up, covering my face with the other hand. “I’m fine. You can get back on the call.”

“I saw you almost collapse there, it can wait.” She presses her hoof to my forehead. “It doesn’t feel like a fever, do you think it might have been the alcohol?”

“Don’t think so. It’s only five percent, I’m not that much of a light weight.”

“So probably not that.” The doe bends down to pick up the bottle, standing it upright on the end table. “Maybe your head got knocked around yesterday and you didn’t realize it. Do you feel dizzy at all? Is your vision okay?”

“I feel a bit dizzy,” I admit. “You don’t think I have concussion, do you?”

“They told us in Physiology that symptoms could take up to 48 hours to appear. It’s been a little over a day. Spell ‘angel’ backwards for me.”

“L-E-G-N-A.”

“Give me the date and time.”

“I want to say the 25<sup>th</sup> of November, around 8 PM?”

“27<sup>th</sup>, actually.” She pokes the hand covering my face. “I need to see your eyes.”

*I don’t want her to see me like this.* “I don’t think it’s a concussion, alright? Today was draining for the both of us. I’m just tired.” I try to slink out of the doe’s reach but she stops me with her free hoof.

“I’m not letting you go until I know you’re okay. Show me your eyes.” Her voice is stern.

*Damn it.* My hand lifts, and I look into her eyes. Her face is only a foot and a half from mine, inspecting my own.

“Follow my digit.” She brings her hoof up, drawing a cross in the air. My eyes follow the digit as best they can.

*There’s no way she didn’t notice, she’s just kind enough to not say anything. Protecting my pride, she’s always been so sweet.* I smile at her.

“Handsome.” Jenny nods. “You probably don’t have a concussion.”

“That’s a relief.” *When we’re this close...*

“It is. I still want to keep an eye on you, so if you’re going to take a nap-”

“Come here.” I wrap an arm around the doe’s waist and pull her on top of me, just tight enough so she can’t escape, but not enough to hurt her. “Is Lav still on the line?” I ask.

A bleat falls out of her throat and her tail beats against my forearm. “Uh, l-let me check.” She fumbles around her pocket and pulls out her phone, unmuting the call. “Hey, A-auntie, Max just dropped a glass bottle and cut his leg. Uh... I need another few minutes.”

She drops the phone over my shoulder on to the couch cushion. After placing her walking stick against the backrest, she slides her hands up to my cheeks. “I’m not complaining, but what’s gotten into you? Was moving out really all it took?”

“I would’ve broke at some point, Jen. Trying to keep my hands off of you for a whole day, when no one’s around to see us, it drives me wild.”

The doe’s cheeks glow red, and her eyes dart towards the floor.

*Speechless.* “Once you're out of the house, he can't take you away from me anymore. We can afford a little hope now, and maybe some fun too.” I place my hand underneath her chin. “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

My hand guides her lips up to mine and we both close our eyes. My partner lets out a light moan when our mouths finally touch. It only lasts a few seconds, just enough for me to taste the cider on her lips and smell the cinnamon in her fur.

Jenny draws away first, the blush still glowing on her muzzle. She stares at me for a moment, giving me a grin from ear to ear. “That... was nice,” she mumbles.

“Agreed.” I play with one of her ears, stroking along the inside.

“Did you always play this dirty? Making me fight for you, setting up little traps for me...” She traces her hoof along my arm, feeling the muscle hidden by my sleeve. “Next time, the shirts come off.”

“Do you think you can handle that?”

“Do you think *you* can?”

I smirk. “I think a lot more than our shirts are gonna be coming off.”

“That's how I like it,” Jenny says, planting a kiss on the side of my neck. She slowly untangles from me, making sure to rub her face along my shoulder on the way. “Well, I'm going to get back to Lav while she's still on call. It's rude to keep her waiting.” She grabs the walking stick from the couch and starts making her way back to the kitchen.

“Yeah, and I should clean up this mess.” I look over to the stain, an expanded yellow blotch now tainting my defenseless carpet. *Better get the soap.*

“Oh! If you're going to the laundry room, make sure to grab the condoms from my jacket. It's better to have them on hand.”

*It's a foregone conclusion.* “Will do.”

“And Max?” she calls.

“What's up?”

Jenny's standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, supporting herself on the frame. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

## Chapter End Notes

Update 4 finally here. The delay is both because of my work and because I decided to sacrifice my writing time in favor of just trying to do as much as I could while on vacation. I'll try to get some work done on the next chapters so the wait isn't as long in the future, although who knows what that may hold.

As always, thanks for reading.  
~NameChangeDaily

## Preemptive Pillow Talk

My hand reaches for the light switch, flicking the lever to illuminate the dingy little room. *Carpet cleaner and condoms, that's what I came here for.* Above my washing machine is a cabinet filled with sanitation chemicals. I grab some baking soda and a bottle of vinegar from the shelf and place it on the side.

In the dryer is a number of items left from this morning, including my guest's orange winter jacket. Carefully, I pull the top out of the machine, holding the rest of the pile back with my hand to prevent it from falling on the floor. One of the front pockets is bulkier than the others. From there I pull out three condoms, each wrapped in tight blue foil. All three pass inspection.

I put the contraceptives in my back pocket for later, then pick up the cleaning supplies. The cider from before catches my eye; I didn't get to finish my last bottle, after all. I ponder cracking another open, but my better judgement wins out, and I decide to return to the scene of the accident without picking up another drink.

The spot looks to have dried a little from when I left it, now holding a fainter scent of apples. Hoping to dry up some of the remainder, I throw the baking soda on top.

Making a quick trip to the kitchen, I pass by my girlfriend as I run to the sink to fill a mug with water. My Aunt is still chattering about everything under the sun, and Jenny moves her hoof to cover the microphone when she sees me. "Max, what part of 'girl stuff' don't you understand?"

"Pretend I'm not here," I reply. "I'll be out in a second. I want that stain gone." I squirt a bit of dish soap and vinegar into the cup, then turn to leave, planting a kiss on the doe's ear on my way out.

The stain remains when I get back, still taunting me. The concoction pours onto the carpet and reacts with the baking soda to form a yellowish foam. All I need to do now is let it sit for a couple of minutes, then wipe up the mess with a towel. *Or my shirt,* I think, looking over to my guest. *But she'd like that.*

I walk back into my room, scrounging the recesses of my mind for ways to set the mood. *Would she like me to play music for her? Jenny's usually in the mood for a song, if our fight proved anything.* The instrument catches my eye, lying on the coffee table right in front of her. *Eh, I told her I wouldn't interrupt her conversation. Besides, she's in heat. She won't want to waste any time.*

*She liked it when I burned incense or candles while we made love. I wonder if I have any of that still lying around.* Drawers open one by one in my search for something aromatic to burn. *There's the oil,* I think, throwing the bottle on my bed. *Gotta be around here somewhere...*

As I continue to scrounge for incense, my hand unwittingly grazes metal. Pushing aside the clothing covering the object reveals it to be my lockbox. *The new necklace... Should I give that to her now? It's just been sitting here for two years.* I hesitate. *Another time, when things are calmer. Maybe for her next birthday, or if I ever decide to propose...*

Close by, I find a thin cardboard box with a few leftover incense sticks. The label reads "Moonbeam Dew." I shudder at the thought that I ever bought anything with that name, then bring it close to my nose. The scent is faint, but I can smell lemongrass and something else on the stick. I ransack the drawer some more until I find my old incense burner and a lighter. Two minutes later, the air takes on a pleasant smoky scent.

*When is she going to finish that call? I should make myself comfortable.* I unbutton my shirt and throw it on the floor after climbing on to the bed.

Starting to get bored, I pull my phone out of my trousers, where I'm greeted by a missed call notice and multiple unopened messages from Bart Woolworth. My eyes widen when I read the contents.

**My cuz told me you two arranged a date, but word got to me you have your fucking ex over right now. Thought you were trying to get over her, WTF man?**

*Amanda. Shit!* My fingers move like lightning to bang out a reply. **She followed me into the woods on my hunting trip, the blizzard hit, and my truck crashed, what was I supposed to do, leave her out to die?**

As soon as he reads the message, he starts typing his response. **Maybe you couldn't help circumstance, but I know you both well enough to predict the outcome of being locked inside a cabin for 2 nights. How long did it take you two to start sucking face?**

**Come on, Bart. You know how Jenny and I broke up, how could I not still have feelings?**

**Don't care about your poor life choices, date who you want to date. But I need to look out for family, and it's bad for me if my cousin's new boyfriend is still in love with someone else.**

My shoulders sloop. *Amanda's nice, she doesn't deserve to be left in the dark.* **I'll call Mandy now to tell her the date's off.**

**All I ask.**

Wasting no time, I go into my contacts to call Amanda, hoping to clear things up as soon as possible. My phone rings twice before she picks up. "Max! Hey!" *She's in good spirits, I think. What a great time to ruin them.*

"Hey Amanda."

"I sent you a text asking what time you wanted to meet next week. I was thinking about sticking around between four and eight, but as soon as I hung up I remembered the town is having the tree lighting that day, so it might be better if you stuck around until ten. If you like that sort of thing, I mean."

"That's what I called to talk about actually." I suck my teeth. "Look Mandy, you're a really cool woman, but I need to call off our plans."

"Ah... did something come up for you next Sunday? We can go another day!" There's still a hint of hope in her voice.

"It's not about the timing. I reconnected with someone from my past, and I'm no longer on the market. Sorry." I hear running water starting from the bathroom, but it does little to break the awkwardness of the call.

"Oh! Well... that's unfortunate."

"Yeah..." I scratch my chin. "If there's nothing else, then--"

"Don't hang up just yet." Her voice drops the façade. "Bart told me something like this might happen, but I didn't expect it immediately. This is your ex-girlfriend, right?"

“Amanda?” *Where’s this coming from?* “What did your cousin tell you?”

“He told me you were still getting over her, but he didn’t say that she was still in your life. A lot’s changed since this afternoon, huh?”

“Don’t get me started.”

“I won’t pry; I’ve been in a similar situation. Until last year I’ve been dating on and off with my high school sweetheart, but we just can’t make things work. Old feelings die hard.”

“Damn straight,” I say, tapping my fingers on the mattress. “Two years and neither of us could let go. It was her fuckin’ Dad keeping us apart.”

“Ouch. Hard to compete with family.”

“It’s not like I want to. Jenny had enough shit to deal with while we were broken up. Her father is all that’s left from her family. I don’t want to take them away from each other, even if he is a psycho.” From the other side of the door, I hear the sound of the floorboards creaking. *Shit.*

“Blood is blood,” says Amanda sagely. “Are you sure it’s such a good idea to invite her back into your life if she’s tied to her father?”

My focus shifts back to the conversation. “We have a plan for that, actually. And she said she’d cut him off if he tried to hurt me again. Things are different this time.”

“But so are the two of you. It’s been two years, and you’ve probably both changed during that time you spent apart. You might find after the rose-colored blinders come off that you aren’t headed in the same direction anymore.”

The words strike deep, and for a moment the room is completely silent. I look over to the knocked-over carving, remembering my outburst from before. *We’ve certainly had our moments of selfishness since she’s been here.*

“A part of me still worries about that,” I concede. “I’ve grown a lot more bitter in my solitude, and she’s gotten more somber. And it’s fair to say we’re rushing things along faster than we probably should. My emotions have been steering the wheel since she got here.”

A sniffle behind the door. *Our little eavesdropping friend didn’t want to hear that.* My eyes leave the door to linger on the painting of the forest and sun. The care that went into creating each brushstroke, the beautiful contrast of the colors, all is a result of her handiwork.

“But I couldn’t forgive myself if I didn’t give her and I another chance,” I say. I think about the meals we’ve cooked together, and the music we made, both today and yesterday and all the times before. I remember those deep brown eyes, her toothy smile, and the way her tail twitches when she gets excited. “Genesee’s the love of my life, and I’d jump over the moon to have her back.”

Another pause. Amanda is speechless on the line, and I don’t hear a peep outside of my room. My feet squirm uncomfortably on the bearskin carpet when I realize what I said.

“Shit. Sorry, Amanda, I didn’t mean to waste your time.”

“I get it, you’re still in love.” The ewe snickers on the other end. “We were only talking for a couple days, it’s not like you and I were an item. There’re no hard feelings.”

“Heh, that’s a relief.”



“Hope you two figure it out.”

She terminates the call before I have the chance to say goodbye. *Definitely a few hard feelings there, hopefully they'll be out of mind if we ever meet again.* My phone slides back into my pocket. *She stayed pretty cool about it, all things considered.*

“The call’s over,” I announce, not looking at the door. “You can come on in now.”

There’s a creak and a dull thud, followed by the light trotting of hooves and stick on wood. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” I smile. “You ready for your massage?”

“You were talking to Marshmallow Mandy, right?” Her tone is indecipherable.

“Amanda?” I ask, twisting my head to see her. The doe still has most of her clothes on, much to my disappointment. “Yeah, we talked. I had to cancel the date we made for next Sunday. Why, were you jealous?”

“Of course I was jealous, you think I’d give you the chance to fall for someone else when I just got you back?” Her nose twitches. “Smells really nice in here, what are you burning?”

My hand rises to hide my eyes. “It’s got a dumb name, ‘Moonbeam Dew.’ I don’t burn much incense any more, it’s just what was just lying around from when you last came over.”

“Not a fitting name.” The doe looks around my room, crystallizing the details in her mind. “I haven’t been here in a while. It’s a lot cleaner than it used to be.” Her hooves glide off the floor, onto the black fur of the rug. “Bearskin? You never told me you hunted bear.”

“It was a onetime thing. We were out looking for wild whitetails when a black bear stumbled near our blind. I couldn’t believe it, but Rodney was prepared. My uncle handed me his highest caliber rifle, then whispered ‘Take the shot, you may never get another chance in your life to kill one.’ I aimed down the sights, put my finger on the trigger, and fired a round into its neck.” I nod towards the rug. “One shot was all it took.”

“Neat,” she says. The disinterest isn’t lost on me; she never cared for my hunting stories.

Her interest is piqued when her eyes catch the rabbit pelt painting hanging from my wall. “You kept *Sunrise*!” she gasps, quickly hobbling over to the piece.

“I couldn’t put it in the garbage, Jenny. It was a gift, and a beautiful one at that.”

Jenny looks over her shoulder. “Oh, I knew you didn’t throw it away, if you did that I’d kill you. I just figured you put it in storage somewhere, but you kept it hanging in your room!” She compares the position of the painting with that of my bed. “And you placed it perfectly so it’s the first thing you see when you wake up!”

“I know, an inspired choice.”

“Ah! Brings back so many memories!” She gazes back into the artwork with a smile. “Remember when Bart Woolworth tried to make you chug 23 beers at your birthday?”

“And how I vomited after 9?” *How could I forget the fucking smell? I was lucky I didn’t have to get my stomach pumped.* “I also remember you helping me back to my room while my left hand groped your ass the whole time. I’m surprised you didn’t smack me for that.”

“The fact that I snuck a few drinks myself saved you,” she admits, her tail twitching. “And all the nonsense you were spouting put me in a good mood.”

Blood rushes to my cheeks. “Christ, that party out of control. How hard did I embarrass myself again?”

Jenny switches to a drunken impression of me. “‘Aww... Dis’ girl? Dis girl right here? I’m gonn’ marry... m-marry her sum day. I’m *hic* gonna- no sweetcheeks ‘mm talking ‘bout you... yeah you gotta cute butt...cute little tail... I’mma stick my face in it when we get *hic* home.’ You were so out of it, you forgot you were the host.”

Retroactive embarrassment hits me like a truck. “No fucking way I said that, especially that last part. I would never talk about you like that in public.”

“You can ask Bart, or Sandra, or Laney, or even my sister if you still have her number. Everyone at that party heard you rambling about my great my ass is. You’re lucky nobody told Papa.”

I pound my fist against the mattress. “That’s fucking humiliating! Never mind, I don’t want to hear another word.”

The doe smirks. “Alright, alright, we’ll change the subject. How about I tell you the story of what inspired me to make *Sunrise*?”

*Did she ever tell me this one?* “Of course.”

“Alright. This was when you and I had just had our fifth fight over hunting, and I was rambling to Mama about how you were such a stubborn jerk. She wasn’t having it that day, so she told me to either break up with you, or stick around and accept your weird hobby. And she threw the idea of asking you for a tanned pelt to paint something on.” She looks down towards her hooves. “I thought it was a terrible idea at first, but then I saw that my ancestors did the same thing with some of the old paintings they kept on display at the commune.”

“Your mom put you up to it?” I ask, eyes widening. “I always wondered why you asked me to get you that pelt, I was shocked you had such an extreme change of heart.”

“Still not a fan. I will say that you and Rodney have impeccable handiwork. That hide was spotless when I got it.”

My cheeks stretch into a grin. “Only the highest quality for my girl.”

She smiles. “But anyway, I was trying to figure out what to actually paint, and I ending up sleeping on it. The next day I wake up bright and early and manage to catch the sunrise, and it hit me. Y’know? No matter how dark the night is, even if the clouds are hiding it, the sun always rises the next day.”

“It’s just like us,” I say. “We can bicker and yell our heads off all day about stupid shit, but we always make things right eventually. Sun always rises.”

“Exactly.” Jenny plays with her collar, pulling out her necklace from under her shirt. “You know what I hate the most about the hunting? That you gave me this stupid charm when you handed over the pelt. I feel like such a hypocrite whenever I put it on, but it’s my favorite necklace and I can’t leave the house without it.”

“Glad you like it so much.” I return to my bed, patting the empty space to my right to beckon her over. “Would you mind giving me a look, actually? I’d like to inspect my own work again.”

“Yeah.” The doe stretches her shoulders, then walks to the side of the bed. Her walking stick topples to the floor, landing on the black fur below. Sitting on the mattress, she then brings the necklace up and around her head, handing it off to me from the charm. “There.”

I hold the charm up, my fingers running along the intricate details I put into it three years ago. Working with rabbit bone was a bitch; the skull, pelvis and shoulder blades were the only pieces big enough to carve what I wanted, and I ruined the center of the sun with the Dremel on the first attempt. I’d never tell her, but I actually had to borrow pieces from my uncle to finish it.

It came out really well, despite my technical difficulties. The little sun is 5 pieces, 4 sets of two rays connected to a center piece with a face carved in. Copper wire holds the piece together, carefully bent, cut and sanded to minimize its appearance from frontal view.

“I’m really proud of this one,” I admit, handing it back to her. “You have no clue the lengths I went to make this charm perfect, because I knew you wouldn’t accept it if it wasn’t.”

She snorts. “Damn straight. If you’re going to force me to wear something made from a dead animal, it better be flawless.”

“The labors of my love never were enough on their own, were they?” A laugh escapes my mouth.

There’s a distant look in her eyes all of a sudden. “... Yeah.”

“What’s up?”

Jenny puts her hoof on top of my hand. “I don’t know. I’m still thinking about something you said over the phone.”

I wince. “Sorry if you overheard the stuff about your Dad, I was just venting.”

“Not that. The part where you said I was the love of your life.”

“Huh, I did say that, didn’t I?” I draw my hand out from under hers, moving to tussle the fur on the top of her head.

She swipes at me. “Max, don’t try to weasel out of this! I want you to say it to my face.”

“Come on, you know I meant it.” My hand slides down her left cheek and her eyes close.

She feels me pull her towards me, puckering her lips for a kiss. I respond in kind, but cut it short after only two seconds. I look into her eyes and say: “You’re the love of my life, and if I had to call it right now, I’d like to spend the rest of my days with you.”

After a few seconds of basking in the moment, I snap out of it. “There, you heard it. Now, can we please start with your massage? I only have so much left-over incense, so we’re on a time limit here.”

She shakes herself free. “Right, on it!” The doe stands, grimacing at the sudden weight placed on her bad foot. She takes a few steps out, then with her back turned she begins to undress. Her purple T-shirt falls to the floor, followed by the jeans after a vigorous shake.

“I’ll let you take care of the rest... more fun for the both of us.” My girlfriend turns around, clad in nothing but a black bra and panties that hug her form. She stands with her hands at her sides, but her restless tail and broad smile betray her excitement over our plans for the night. “Let’s get started.”



# Working Out the Kinks

## Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains explicit descriptions of sexual activity. Consume at your own risk.

Jenny approaches me with yearning in her eyes. When she reaches me, she moves to straddle my waist. “Be a dear and help me climb the bed, Maxie,” she pants.

I comply, putting my hands underneath each of her thighs and hoisting her up onto my lap. Her fur brushes against my nose, giving me a strong whiff of cinnamon. *I missed this.* In the position we’re in, it’s easy for me to grab her tail or her ass, so I slide her closer and put a hand on each of her ass cheeks, lightly squeezing both. Underneath her soft fur is firm muscle, tight to the touch.

The doe giggles. “Straight for my butt. It’s what you missed the most, right?”

“It’s in the top five.” My right hand moves back to play with her tail, lightly tugging at it in intervals to get a gasp or a moan out of my partner. My left crawls farther back to tickle her mound, still shielded by her panties. Even through the layer of cloth I can feel intense warmth radiating from her nethers. “Damn, Jen, you got it bad this year. You’re burning up.”

“Oh fuck-” she mumbles, grinding into my fingers. “I h-haven’t been taking my suppressants, since I wasn’t seeing anyone. I would have popped the pill before I came here, but it was mmph! Spur of the moment!” Her lips bless my forehead.

“You’re a lucky woman, Jenny, because I know just how help you.” Tapping her thigh to warn her, I twist my body 90 degrees to the right to put us both on the bed. “Turn around for me?”

While holding on to my shoulders she slides off of my lap. She gives me a smoldering glance before turning around, showing off a canvas of caramel fur, parted by the black strap of her bra. She leans her head backward into my chest, looking up into my eyes. “I’ve been waiting all day for you to work those magic fingers of yours.”

“I live to please. Just a little bit closer? You drifted too far when I got you on the bed.”

“Sorry,” she mutters, backing up closer into me until her butt is halfway on my lap. She stops when her bad ankle hits my foot too fast, causing her to grunt in pain.

“You alright?” I ask, temporarily breaking the mood. “Didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Jenny waves off the delay. “I’m fine,” she says, continuing to push herself backwards into me. Her tail lightly bats against my penis, at half-mast behind my jeans during this whole ordeal. Noticing my hesitation, she chastises me. “I said I’m fine! My back’s not going to massage itself, get to it.”

Reassured, I put my hands back onto her shoulders, caressing them and making her purr. My arms have little room to extend, and my elbows are tucked into my sides. “Feels good to be appreciated.”

“Much better than being missed.” She nods in agreement.

Taking care of all the knots in the doe's shoulders and collar satisfies me enough to move my work down. Sliding down her shoulders, I work her upper arms for a few moments and feel her tight muscle with my fingers. Moments like these make me wonder who's getting more out of this.

From her arms I attack her hips, grabbing them tight.

"Ah!" She lets out a little gasp. "More! Fuck, Maxie..."

Spurred on, my fingers dig into her and I pull her on top of me. My hands glide up her sides, working out some of the remaining kinks. "Show me how much you missed me," I whisper right into her ear.

A few words send her into overdrive. The relaxed, light teasing from her tail is replaced with heavy grinding, her ass moving side to side against my crotch. It's getting hard to concentrate on my work when my cock feels like it's about to pop free of my jeans. *Holy fuck she's good at this.*

"Nice bra," I say. "It would look better on the floor." I move back up to pull her straps around her shoulder, then go for the hook holding everything up. One nimble pinch sends the top tumbling down onto my carpet.

Jenny responds with a moan, planting herself on my lap and trapping my arms under hers. Her hooves grab my hands; my left is compelled to cup her breast, while the right is dragged toward her pussy. "...*Fucking need you...*" she mutters under her breath.

Eager to please, my fingers start working their magic. My left hand works around her nipple, tracing my fingers in a circle around the sensitive flesh. Her skin there is supple, one of the few places on Jenny's body without any fur. As she melts in my embrace, I spice things up by giving her light pinches on her nipple every few seconds.

Simultaneously, my right hand snakes under her moist panties. Her mound is hot to the touch, and even light tickling is enough to make Jenny bite her lip. A few inches down is her vulva. I can feel it pulse as I linger on it.

Two fingers slip into her entrance.

"Hnf-" Jenny's breath hitches.

My right hand moves up and down, my fingers becoming slick with her juices as they rub against her walls. I alternate between grazing her clit and letting them sink further into her vagina.

She tilts her head back, putting us ear to ear. Her eyes are closed and her tongue is lolling out of her mouth. "Fuck... Max... I'm close... *bite me.*"

I lose my rhythm. "You want me to give you a hickey? Are you crazy?"

"Hnngh! C-collarbone!" Her eyelids scrunch up. "It's winter, he won't see it under my fur." She tilts her head to the right, giving me enough room to leave the mark.

"...Alright." I put my lips on her shoulder, suckling lightly on the furry skin. We've been here before, so I know she isn't faking when she wriggles in my arms. My teeth graze her flesh, digging in just enough to bruise.

"Fuck yes!" she screams, her pussy tightening around my fingers. Her juices run down my hand and stain the sheets. "Keep going...hah...hnngh..." Her hoof clamps around my thigh, tight enough that I can't leave even if I want to.

My mouth finds her neck, repeating the process of sucking and biting while my hips grind into hers. She collapses in my arms, panting like an animal. For the next thirty seconds, she's nothing but a convulsing, stuttering mess. *That's pretty short for her.*

I wait for her breathing to stabilize before pulling my fingers out of her underwear. Glistening sticky residue coats my hand. "Satisfied?"

A few seconds pass before she bleats out a weak "love you."

"Love you too, Jen." My tongue touches my palm. *Tangy.* "Do you need a drink?"

"...No."

My other hand moves off her boob, resting on her stomach. "Comfortable?"

"Mmph. Could be better. Take your jeans off." She pushes my hands away and sits forward, letting me stand.

I drop my pants, kicking them off and away into the corner. Getting up also gives me the chance to stretch out my joints. When I turn back to the bed, Jenny is lying on her right side with an expectant look on her face. Her top hand lies open on her hip while her bottom hand beckons me.

"You want to make out?"

"Don't ask me twice."

I hop back on to the bed and put a hand on her left hip. Jenny's hooves are on me before I land on the mattress, probing my forearms and squeezing my biceps. Our lips touch in a few pecks before sealing around each other. She moans. Our tongues dance in each other's mouths, twisting around each other in a passionate tango.

One of her hooves ends up over my boxers. After a few seconds of fidgeting, she finds my cock and starts rubbing at it through the fabric. "Who's this friend of yours?" she asks, pulling away from my face.

After failing to come up with anything clever, I let out a heavy breath, permitting the doe touch my body wherever her heart desires.

"So handsome..." Jenny whispers, her hoof slipping under my boxers.

The tough material of her hooves doesn't make for a conventionally pleasurable sensation, but truth be told I've missed this. She fondles my balls for a second, then moves to my cock, lightly rubbing it with her digits as she pulls down my underwear. The scraping is rough enough to make my back straighten out, leaving me nearly breathless.

"You did an awesome job helping me with my heat just now. Mind if I return the favor?" She stares into my eyes, pointing my penis down towards the edge of the bed.

"Please!" I suck my teeth.

Jenny flashes a coy smile, then pushes herself downward until she's face to face with my cock. She gives it a peck on the head. "I know, Mama missed you too..." she says.

"It doesn't have feelings, you know."

"How about we run a little experiment? I'll say a few things, and we'll see if he responds." She

pulls away from my penis and crawls back up to my level, stationing her face inches away from my ear. “Blond hair and brown eyes make me wet.”

It twitches. She smirks.

“You just caught me off guard.”

“We’ll see. I love it when buff human men hold me like they own me.”

Once again, my penis betrays me. “Sure it’s going to twitch if you compliment me, it’s a part of me. It doesn’t have a mind of its own.”

“Okay, genius, how about this?” She turns her gaze back to my dick and says in a complete deadpan: “The doctors did a really good job on your circumcision.”

*What the fuck?* He throbs.

I cover my mouth, refusing to validate this exercise with laughter. “Alright, you win. How did you manage to say that with a straight face?”

Jenny’s composure breaks, and she starts guffawing like a lunatic. “Honestly? I don’t know either. But I think I’ve proven definitively that the old adage is true – men do think with two heads.”

“Whatever.” I roll my eyes. She gives me a kiss on the cheek before picking herself up.

My hand shoots out to her forearm. “Wait.”

“What’s up?”

Blood rushes to my cheeks. “...Use your hooves.”

Her brow rises. “You sure? Don’t they chafe you when I use them too much?”

“Spit on them. Just... don’t blow me. I want you up here to whisper more shit in my ear.”

“What kind of shit?”

“The stuff you were saying before, stroking my ego. Like how handsome and smart I am, or how much you want me. That kind of shit.”

“It can be arranged,” she says, her mouth stretching into a sultry smile. The doe spits in her hoof, then wraps the digits around my penis. Just a little lube goes a long way in turning the grip more comfortable.

She takes a few seconds to think of something. “...You smelled like a big tough guy when you came in to the store this week. I like the way you smell.”

“Good.”

“And the way you were carrying me back to the house yesterday? Fuck, Maxie, if we couldn’t get me away from my Dad I’d be jilling off to it for the rest of my life.” She rubs her cheek against mine. “My hero.”

“It *was* pretty intense, wasn’t it?”

“You were so focused on getting us home safe that you didn’t give a fuck about anything else, at



least not in the moment.” Her tugging has increased in frequency, and her grip’s become a little stronger. “It’s such a turn on when I see that side of you.”

*Come out hunting with me some time*, I think, although I’m smart enough not to say it out loud.

“It’s a shame you’re not letting me go down on you... I was hoping to thank you properly for helping me out today.” Jenny winks.

“Good j-job. I’m getting close...” I mumble.

She lets go for a moment, moving to cup my balls. “I would have had so much fun draining these.” The hoof returns to my cock, jerking it hard and fast. “Nothing better than showing Papa who’s boss by marking me as a mate the wild way.”

“Hot...” My breathing picks up, and I’m panting like a dog.

“There’s something else I want from you more,” she teases.

“Tell me, fuck!”

Jenny puts her muzzle up to my ear. “I want you to mount me against the wall and put a fawn in me.” She moves in close enough to breathe on my ear drum. “Right now.”

That’s all it takes. My cock erupts, and cum splatters down her hooves and onto the sheets below. The bliss carries itself through my body, going up my torso, all the way to my mouth. I let out a gasp.

My girlfriend smiles, bringing her hoof to her mouth and licking it clean. She then lays her head next to mine, rubbing her wet nose into my cheek.

I angle my face up and kiss her on the forehead. Her fur is soft on the lips. “You’re good at that.”

“I was afraid I was out of practice,” she admits. “Really glad we got to do this tonight.”

“Me too.” Outside, the sky is pitch black, and the wind is howling. In the room, the stench of sex and the faint aroma of incense linger. I rub her shoulder. “Someday we’ll be able to do this every night.”

“God... I hope so.”

“You don’t have to hope. That’s a promise.”

She kisses me on the cheek. “Max...”

Her graceful form is wrapped tight around my left arm. I gaze at her, my mind taking in every detail about her, desperate to capture the perfection of the moment. Her relaxed ears, her beautiful brown eyes closed in contentment, her mouth stretched in wide toothy smile. The caramel fur of her face and arms giving way to the eggshell color on her chest, belly and thighs; and the muscle underneath that fur. Her perky breasts, her tight, perfect ass, and her short, fluffy tail.

*She’s so fucking beautiful*, I think. *I’m gonna kiss her*.

I tap her on the leg and her eyes shoot open. “Pucker up,” I command.

She gives me a confused look. “Max, you do realize I jus- MMPH!”

I grab her and push my mouth into hers, cutting her off mid-sentence. Our lips touch for a few moments with me doing all the work until she fully recovers from the shock, at which she eventually relents and returns my enthusiasm. It's only when our tongues touch when I realize why she was so hesitant. There's a lingering unpleasant salty taste in her mouth, one I recognize from a similar mistake three years ago. *Fuck.*

My body freezes for a second, as I mentally reconsider whether or not I want to commit to another make-out session. Jenny chooses for me, putting her hands on my face and pushing my tongue out of her mouth. "I love you, but I'm not ready for round two yet."

"I can still taste myself on you," I say.

"It's a taste I don't expect you to acquire. Give me the chance to brush my teeth next time." Her tail flicks impatiently. "I'm going to the bathroom."

"Need help?"

"No," she says, getting on her belly to fish for the walking stick she dropped. "Maybe."

I get up from the bed and grab the walking stick from the floor for her. She gives me a silent "thanks" after pulling herself up from the floor on my arm. The doe then hobbles out of the room.

I'm only alone for a few brief seconds before I decide to leave as well. Might as well freshen up a little while I have the chance. I end up following Jenny to the bathroom, where I catch her opening the door. She stops to talk. "What's up?"

"I want to brush my teeth."

"Makes two of us," she comments. "I should only be a couple of minutes. You don't mind waiting, right?" She winks at me as she closes the door.

I stand around the bathroom door, not really knowing what to do with myself. At first I look around for somewhere to sit down, only to remember that I'm bare naked and that would be fucking disgusting. My mind goes back to Jenny, and all of the fun things we can do together without clothes on. I think about her breasts and her ass, and how lucky of a man I am to have her here with no interference.

*And she wants to have my kid? Talk about flattering.* Jenny and I didn't talk about kids all that much before we broke up, she and I just weren't at that stage in our life. Same thing for marriage, it just felt too far away for either of us to really care. But most guys my age around here are already on their first kid, and if Jenny had stayed in college she'd have graduated already. How much did she really mean it?

*Probably not that much.* Jenny is impulsive, but not the "risk-single-motherhood" kind. She knows just as well as I do how shit of an idea it is to get knocked up right now. Still, maybe it's time we start asking the big questions.

The door opens. My girlfriend stands naked at the entrance, not immediately focused on me. "I'm finished; you can brush your-" She pauses when she sees me. "You've got a weird look in your eye."

"Do I?" I put my hands around the door frame, blocking her in. "I was considering a proposal you made earlier."

"Proposal? Shit." Her ears and tail start twitching like mad. "Look, all of that fawn talk earlier was

just to rile you up. I don't actually want you to get me pregnant."

"Ever?" I raise an eyebrow.

"C'mon." She rolls her eyes. "Not now at least, the timing is awful. Our finances are completely screwed, and think of all the bills that would come in if I got knocked up. We don't have the money for a kid."

"You and I agree on that much."

"What's gotten into you? You said you wanted to take things slower."

"I do, Jen. But I also want to treat this with a bit more maturity than we did before. We're not as young as we were, and if we're going to start dating again, we should have more real conversations about our future. What do you think?"

"I think you're still riding the high of an orgasm," says Jenny.

I laugh. "Maybe."

"If it reassures you, I wouldn't mind having a couple of fawns running around when the time is right." She caresses my arm. "But that's way ahead of us, and until then we should just focus on enjoying ourselves. I mean for God's sake, Max, we aren't even engaged yet."

"That does come first, doesn't it?" I kiss the top of her furry head. "Alright, we won't sweat it tonight. But I want a promise out of you that we talk about it once Chief leaves. Deal?"

"That's doable," she says, slinking out from my trap. "Let me know when you're up for round two." As she passes by, she brushes her hoof against my ass.

I get to the sink and grab my toothbrush, applying a small squeeze of toothpaste before sticking it into my mouth. As I scrub the surface of each tooth in little circles, I take a look at myself in the mirror. *Lucky bastard*, I think. *These last few hours have been incredible*. I hock a gob of spit into the sink, white foam with small splotches of red, probably from brushing my gums too hard.

Before I leave, I blast the faucet for a second to make sure there's no residue left behind. Less to clean up in the morning.

Jenny is waiting for me on the bed, lying on her stomach with her legs in the air. At first I think she's really ready to go, but then I realize she's just looking at her phone. *Eh, an opportunity is an opportunity*. I creep up to the edge of the bed while she's still focused on the screen. Then, I scramble on to mattress and get on top of her, pinning her down in place. "Look what I've caught..."

The doe turns around to wrestle her way free, squirming in my arms while giggling like a school girl. It doesn't take long before she gives in. "Alright, you win! Not like I had much of a chance." She glances down at my cock. "Condom?"

"Oh, hold on." I release her from my arms and run to my jeans to tear one off of the chain. I wave it around in my hand to show her. "Help me put it on. It's been a while since I've used one."

"You know how obnoxious it is putting a condom on with hooves? I can barely keep a grip on the thing."

"You don't even want to try?" I tease.

“If you insist, but I’m gonna get lube everywhere.” She grunts as she sits up, taking the rubber from my hand. She hangs her legs off the edge of the mattress and sidles up real close, wrapping her hoof around my dick. “Making me do all the work,” she says as she pumps up and down. “I’m still waiting for you to admit you’re a masochist.”

“It’s not about the hoof, it’s about the woman it’s attached to.” *It helps that you’re careful with it.*

She smiles at the compliment, loosening her grip slightly after I get hard. “Moment of truth...” She takes the condom from the package, presses it against my tip and rolls it back. The latex feels tight around my skin, not unpleasant. Not until the lip comes loose from one of her hooves and snaps against my shaft.

“Shit!”

“Sorry! It slipped. You alright?”

“Yeah, should have seen that coming.” *Fucking stings.*

“Really. I told you this would happen.”

“Cut me some slack, I thought it would be sexy.”

“You’re a dumbass.” Jenny finishes putting the condom on, this time being even more careful not to let the lip go. “Done.”

With that squared away, I grab ahold of her cheeks and bring my lips to hers, to which she’s more than receptive. This time, I can still taste the hints of toothpaste on her tongue and teeth.

My left hand gropes her breast while my right grabs on to a handful of her tight ass. She moves to jerk me off but pulls back her hoof at the last second, then breaks the kiss. “You’ve kept me waiting long enough, Maxie.” She moves back, spreading her legs wide enough to allow me entry.

I line the tip of my cock up to her glistening black slit and slip it in. Eagerly, I pull back and thrust, coaxing a moan out of my partner. Nothing separates us but a thin layer of latex.

As for Jenny? She’s loving every second. Her eyes are closed while her tongue hangs out from the side of her mouth. She purrs as I shove my face into the crook of her neck, kissing along her collarbone and taking in the scent of her fur. “Do it again...” the doe murmurs. “I know you want to.”

I pause, bringing my head back up to make eye contact. “I still feel like we’re playing with fire. What if he sees the mark?”

“My jacket covers my neck. He won’t see it until way after we leave, and by then he’ll be hard pressed to do anything about it,” she says. “Why are you so worried about this? Do you think my dad is that stupid? He knows we’re fucking.”

“If we cover our tracks, we can at least pretend nothing happened. There’s no deniability if he sees a hickey on your shoulder.”

“And what do you think he’s going to do about it if he does? If Papa hurts you, he loses me, remember?” She smiles. “He would never risk that.”

“I’ll trust you on this,” I say, turning my focus back to my partner. “You know what I really want to do? Pin you against that wall over there, if you think you can handle it.”

She nods.

“Good. Hold on tight, you’re coming up.” My arms dig under her back, lifting her off the bed.

Jenny bleats in surprise and wraps her arms and legs around me, clinging tight as she can. “More forewarning would be nice...”

“Sorry boo.” I bring her up to eye-level, planting a kiss on her cheek.

“Are you gonna mount me against the wall like I’m your trophy?” she asks in a sultry tone.

“Damn straight. I’m gonna leave you breathless.”

My body presses the doe against the wall, our lips meeting and parting. After some small adjustments, I pick up where I left off, moving my attention down to her lower body.

I might be doing most of the work, but Jenny for her part is doing a great job in egging me on. With every thrust, a new unintelligible noise escapes from her throat, and she’s too caught up in the animalistic fervor to care. *Hot*. The charm dangling from her neck bounces with the rhythm of my movement.

It takes a couple minutes of thrusting to get close to orgasm. I pick up the pace, putting my mouth on her shoulder where it was before. My teeth sink past her fur, not enough to break the skin, but certainly enough to leave a dark mark.

“Oh fuck!” she exclaims, as her hooves squeeze my back. Down below, I feel her sex spasm, constricting around my penis. Some of her juices spill onto the floor.

I climax only a few moments later, her reaction sending me over the edge. My mouth releases from her shoulder, leaving behind a wet spot in her fur and a purple blotch on the skin underneath.

We hold eye contact while we recover from our romp. Both of us are panting, shuddering messes, barely able to catch our breaths.

I carry her over to the bed, laying Jenny down on the left side of the bed. She shivers when I pull out of her. I peel off the condom, tying the end into a knot so it doesn’t leave a mess everywhere, and throw it into the waste bin. Once that’s done, I take my place next to her.

She snuggles up close to me, putting a hoof on my chest. “That was awesome,” she mumbles. “You never disappoint.”

“Glad to hear I still got it.” I dig an arm under her shoulder. “You satisfied for the night?”

“Why, you want a round three? I’m too exhausted to do anything else tonight, I’m ready to sleep.”

“Good.”

No words are exchanged for a few moments as we bask in the afterglow. Just the sounds of our breathing and the infrequent howls of the wind outside. Her wet nose is pressed up against my forearm, and her legs are straddling mine, her injured one on top. *I could do this every night*.

“Yo, Jen.” I tap her hip. “You free next weekend?”

“Saturday morning I’m going down to the compound with Papa to sort out some stuff with the elders. After that I should be good.” She kisses my neck.

“You’re coming over right after. I’ll pick you up if you can’t drive.”

“Alright,” she says with an air of insincerity.

“You have any better plans? Speak your mind.” I ask, tussling the fur on the top of her head. “I want to spend more time with my girlfriend.”

“I was thinking maybe you and I could do a date night? We could see if there’s cheap concert tickets or something else around here.”

“A date night sounds lovely. You know when Chief is picking you up tomorrow?”

Jenny pulls away for a second to grab her phone. She pulls up a news article about the storm, then sends something to her father. “Roads are supposed to be clear by 8 AM. I told him he should get here around 10, but I don’t know if he’ll listen to me. Damn it, Max, I really don’t want to leave.”

“I don’t want you to leave either.” I kiss her on her brow. “Maybe we’ll get an hour or two to ourselves tomorrow morning. If not, we’ll figure something out.” *It’s not goodbye forever anymore.*

“We will.” Jenny nuzzles into me. “Night, love.”

I close my eyes and roll my shoulders back. “Goodnight, boo.”

# Lovers to Fools

## Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains explicit descriptions of sexual activity. Consume at your own risk.

It's still dark out when my alarm wakes me the next morning, although there's not as much snow against the window as there was before. The wind's died down too, come to think of it.

With one of my arms ensnared under a sexy pile of brown fur and woman, I have to stretch my farther arm to collect my phone, hitting silence before throwing it back on my dresser.

"Ugh. So loud." The pile grumbles. "Time?"

"Eight."

"Shit. We should hop in the shower soon." The doe rolls over to free me, then puts her feet over the edge of the bed.

"What's the rush?" I ask, still a bit groggy from sleep. "We just got up."

"If I'm not washed up, Papa's going to smell that we fucked as soon as I step into the car. It can't be *that* obvious."

"Sure, but he's not gonna be here in two seconds, right? What time did he tell you he'd be here?"

"9:30"

"We have more than an hour then. That's plenty of time. Come snuggle for a few more minutes." I pat the vacant space she left behind. "You'll get a shoulder rub out of it."

"If you're offering... it can wait, I guess." Jenny backs into the divot.

"Good girl." My hands work her taut shoulder muscles. "How'd you sleep?"

"Better than usual, it's nice to have my favorite teddy bear back." Her tail swishes.

"Aww. Your leg feeling any better?"

"Yeah, a little. Still gonna ask Papa to stop at the doctors to get it checked out so it heals right."

"Smart," I say. "When do you plan on telling Chief about your new found plans for independence?"

"Maybe tomorrow or Wednesday, I don't want to overload him if he doesn't force my hand. He's already going to have a panic attack when he grills me about everything we did together. That is if he doesn't bust down your door first."

An involuntary shudder passes through my body. "How honest are you going to be with him?"

“I’m going to tell him that my boyfriend, whom I love, helped me take care of my heat the old-fashioned way. He already knows that; he just needs to accept that his daughter isn’t a little girl anymore and that she’ll see who she wants.”

“Well said. I hope it gets through to him.” My arm secures her waist, flattening the fur underneath.

“Oh, it will. He’s stubborn, sure, but he’s not dumb enough to make the same mistake twice.” She sighs and leans into me. Her ears flick intermittently, independent from each other in their motion.

“What makes you so sure?”

“You weren’t there for the fallout when he caught wind that Nat wasn’t coming home,” Jenny says. “He lost his mind, screaming at her over the phone that if she didn’t come back to visit, he’d cut off all of his financial support. She responded by telling him to buck himself, then blocked us on everything.” Her hackles rise.

“She’s never tried to reach out to you alone?”

“She did twice, but the second time I handed the phone off to Papa and she immediately hung up. Haven’t heard from her since. Somehow made him even more miserable.”

I wince. “God, she sucks.”

“You think so?” she asks rhetorically. “She just moved in with her boytoy Sven.”

“Nat the brat has a boyfriend?”

“Trust fund kiddie with investment banker parents. They offered to help her settle when she decided she wanted to stay. It’s why she isn’t coming home.” The doe grabs her phone and rolls over, a mischievous grin stretching from ear to ear. “You want to see a picture?”

I nod. She taps her phone a few times, zooming in on the picture before showing it to me.

On the left side is tall, bulky reindeer dude with blue eyes and a smile that could stun. His body is coated in thin chocolate fur, and it looks as if his antlers had been growing out for a few months at that point. Hanging on his left arm is Jenny’s sister Onatah, a Thunderhoof with golden fur. You can tell the relation from the face alone, Nat having the same light brown eyes, short snout and button nose that I love so much on Jenny. She’s much lankier than her sister once you look down from the neck, though. *Poor girl has nothing to hold onto.*

Jenny squints at me. “Are you checking out my sister?”

“No. I was wondering how she managed to pull such a good-looking dude. She looks like she just graduated middle school.”

Her eyes widen as she tries to suppress a laugh. “You’re terrible. When did you get so catty?”

“You should see me trade barbs with Bart,” I smirk. “How’d you even get that picture, I thought you were blocked?”

“Sven never blocked me, and they do everything together,” she says. “I keep tabs on social media just to make sure she’s doing well for herself. I still love her, even if she’s been a shitty brat recently.”

“Siblings, right?”



“Yeah. How are yours doing?”

“Ah, jeez...” I scratch my neck. “I haven’t really heard much from them. I spoke with my sister Cathy over the phone this Easter, her kids are doing okay.”

“Easter’s a long time. What about your brother?”

“Ugh. Last time I spoke to him, he talked my ear off for an hour about his plan to make it big by trading... I don’t know, sneakers? Penny stocks? Fake currency?” I shake my head. “It’s something new every year. He thinks he can play the market, but all he’s good at is playing himself. I don’t know why my parents keep bailing him out of his shitty get-rich-quick schemes when he’s such a fuck-up.”

“I forgot he was a hustler...” mumbles Jenny. “They’re probably just doing their best to take care of their baby. They would do the same thing for you, no doubt. Don’t you think you’re being a bit harsh?”

“How many times can you make the same mistake without learning anything? When is he gonna grow up and do something honest with his life?”

“Sorry.” She nudges me. “Just forget I asked. I didn’t realize it was a sore spot for you.”

“Don’t apologize, you didn’t do anything wrong. I should call my sister more. Hopefully she and her kids show up for Christmas at Rod’s place.”

“Your whole family’s coming up? That’s nice,” she says with strained optimism.

“You’re welcome to be my plus-one if you want to stop by,” I offer. “You know my family loves you.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I don’t think I should. Papa shouldn’t be alone on Christmas.”

“...I understand. Just promise that you’ll call me if you need anything?”

“I will.”

Jenny leans her muzzle in for a kiss, which I’m more than happy to provide.

She then breaks from my grasp and stands, cursing under her breath when she puts her weight on the bad leg. She scans the floor for a bit before picking up the walking stick. “I’m gonna take my shower now, so I have to go. Unless you’d like to help me wash, I mean.”

“I would like that,” I respond, throwing off my bed sheets and hopping onto my feet. “Would it count as community service since I’m helping a cripple?”

“No, but you’ll get a reward if you do a good job.” Jenny gives me a flirty look from over her shoulder. “Come on, Maxie.”

I follow her out the door and through the hall, my eyes moving in lockstep with the pendulum swing of her tail. We stop at the base of the tub, where I pull open the shower curtain and help my girlfriend get both feet over the lip, taking the staff from her hands as I do.

I lean the stick up against the sink, then follow my girlfriend into the tub. The doe grazes my naked chest with her hoof, pleased. She glances at my face for a second before twisting around to turn on the spigot.

I pump out a dollop of shampoo in my hand and rub it into her scalp and through her fur. Water and bubbles trickle down my arms as I lather her ears and neck. She purrs when I reach her shoulders.

*The bottle feels much lighter than it did two days ago*, I note, squeezing out another dollop of shampoo. *How much does she spend per month on soap?*

The doe laughs when I embrace her from behind, wriggling in my arms as I wash her breasts and belly. She sighs when my strokes transition into gentle caresses, and my lips form a seal around the wet fur of her neck. When she feels my half-mast manhood grazing her back, she presses against it, coaxing me to grind into her. When my hands move further south, though, she stops them with a squeeze. “Rinse first.”

I pull my hands off of her and run them under the shower head until all of the suds fall away, then wave them in front of her eyes before committing to the task. My right hand parts her legs just enough to slip through, tickling her lower lips.

Her chin lifts as my magic fingers enter her. “God, yes,” she pants, pushing herself harder against me. Her pussy is burning just as much as last night. Whoever came up with the term “heat” first hit the nail on the fucking head.

When I look down, her legs are quivering. At first I’m just glad she’s having fun, but my paranoia kicks in. *She could slip if that ankle gives out*. “Jenny, you’re putting too much weight on that leg,” I say, pulling my hand away. “You’re gonna-”

She grabs the hand and forces it back under her mound. Her head turns as far back as it can. “Don’t you ever fucking stop.” The crazed look in her eye makes the point loud and clear.

*Well, at least if she slips I can catch her*. My unburdened hand dances around the doe’s contour, running down from her breasts and stomach to her hips, then curving around to her ass and tail. Exploring her tight body is heaven on earth, her soft moans to my touch are the songs of angels.

In the corner of my eye, I see her left hoof sneaking behind her, feeling around for my cock against my legs. I smile and guide it to its destination. The hoof fumbles around, but finally finds my balls, and begins to fondle them, returning back north every so often to give my shaft some attention. My heart tenses up at her ministrations, clumsy as they are.

On her left shoulder I plant my lips. Beneath her grunts and cries of pleasure, Jenny tells me to do it. I bite her gently, sucking on the flesh through the fur for half a minute, all while she wriggles and grabs hold of my free arm. Her pussy tightens around my fingers, which I celebrate in my mind. Knowing I can get her so worked up is a great point of pride for me.

We stand joined together for a few seconds before she hunches over and presses her hooves against the wall, sliding off my hand with a wet pop just audible over the pattering of the shower. I turn away from the doe and take a few deep breaths, getting my bearings together.

“Can I wait until... we get out of the shower... to take care of you?” says Jenny between breaths. “Hurts more than I thought it would.”

“...Done.”

A moment of awkward silence follows, in which my girlfriend rinses off the remaining suds from her legs while I wait on the side. When she’s done, I carefully squeeze past her, the both of us trying to contort our bodies so we don’t have to leave the tub. A few muffled curses and some stumbling get me under the spout, and my partner behind me. I pump another dollop of shampoo

into my palm.

“You want me to use the body wash on you?” she asks. “Or is bar soap fine?”

“Body wash, unless you think you won’t drop the soap.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” she jokes as she takes the bottle of body wash in her hoof.

I run the shampoo through my hair vigorously, while Jenny rubs the soap into my chest from behind. Her breasts are pressed snug against my back, and I can feel her breath against my neck and ear, hot and heavy. Her hooves follow the trail of hair down from my chest to my navel, but hover right above my penis for a few moments.

“Go ahead.”

Her demeanor becomes more relaxed and she starts cleaning my member, sneaking in a few deliberate strokes. My breath hitches. Her evil smile lurks in the corner of my eye.

“Just a few more minutes, Max. You think you can last that long, hon?”

“Bitch...” I mutter.

The doe plays with me for another minute or two, watching my expression to see if I’m getting near climax and slowing down as I do. She relinquishes her torture about as quickly as she started, leaving me panting as she washes the rest of my body, down my legs and then from my shoulders and under my arms.

After that we rinse off a final time, and shut off the spigot. I hop out of the tub first, using my arm to support my girlfriend as she exits behind me. When both her feet are out, she picks up the walking stick from the floor. We both grab towels and dry ourselves off as we walk back through the hall.

“Sit,” commands Jenny, pointing to the bed as we enter my room.

I follow her order and sit at the edge of the bed.

“Pillow.” The doe makes a grabbing motion with her hoof, so I toss her one. She catches it one hand, placing it on the ground by my feet. She then kneels between my legs and lays the walking stick in front of her, parallel to the bed.

Both of her hooves grab my knees, and she pulls herself in. Her nose is only a few inches away from my erection. She looks up at me with those big brown eyes and smiles. “Love you, honey,” are her last words before she takes me into her mouth.

I grip the bed and close my eyes as my girlfriend goes down on me. Without a barrier of latex between us I can feel everything, from the slight twitches of her tongue to the graze of her teeth. *Way better than last night.*

“Fuck!” I grunt. “Love you too, baby.” Even when my hands give out from the sensory overload, she still doesn’t let up. I have to tap the side of her cheek to get her to slow down. “Ease up, Jen. I’m getting close.”

She slides me out of her mouth, burying her nose between my shaft and balls. “I’ll give you a minute,” she says. “Make sure you finish inside, okay? I don’t think we have time to clean my fur again.”

I nod, caressing the top of her head as the two of us take a brief rest. “You’re so fucking beautiful, you know that?” Jenny pushes into my touch. “I could stand to hear it more often.”

My hand reaches to scratch her left ear, which flicks on contact. She giggles and rubs her cheek against my thigh.

“You good now?” she asks, taking my manhood in her hooves.

“Yeah.”

My girl pounces right back on, swallowing me to the base once more. Her strokes are much more deliberate now, thorough enough to pleasure every nerve, it’s tantalizing. *Fuck...*

From her ears, I take hold of her face and start thrusting. She relinquishes her control to me, putting her hooves in her lap and moving with my pace. It’s not too easy to make out from the angle I’m looking at her, but I think she’s smiling.

“Here it comes, Jen!”

All of a sudden, there’s a loud rapping knock from the front door. Jenny pushes off from my legs and her head jerks toward the noise, popping my cock free from her muzzle. Unfortunately, she does this right as I climax.

Unable to hold back any longer, I shoot ropes across the doe’s face and chest, staining her tan and cream fur white. Bliss ripples through my whole body for a moment, although the relief is short lived.

The mess I made turns her attention back to me, and she raises her arms in an unsuccessful attempt to block the onslaught. When it’s over, she stares at me with a shocked look. One that spirals into terror as the two of us realize the nightmare we landed ourselves in.

# Chief Concerns

## Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains explicit descriptions of sexual activity. Consume at your own risk.

“Are you fucking kidding?” yells Jenny, pulling white strands from her fur. “I told you, inside!”

“You’re the one who spat my dick out right when I was about to blow! I warned you it was coming.”

She stands up, cringing as she shifts her weight on the bad leg before correcting it. “There wasn’t anything you could’ve done? You couldn’t hold it in for 5 more seconds?”

“I thought you would hold still. And it’s not like pissing, Jen. Once I’m there, I’m there. Would you have preferred I shoved your head against my crotch?”

“We would’ve better off!”

The argument is interrupted by a second round of knocking. My heart starts to race.

“Shit, shit, shit!” The doe presses her hooves into her muzzle. “My fucking father’s here, and I look like this. He’s gonna kill the both of us!”

“We’re so fucked. What on earth are we going to do?” I run my hands through my hair. “Okay, we need to stay calm. Let’s come up with a plan. What I’m going to do is put on some clean clothes and answer the front door, that way Chief doesn’t go nuclear immediately. I’ll cover for you and distract him while you wash up.”

Jenny nods. “That’s probably our best course of action. I’m gonna need to take another shower to get this shit out of my fur. It’s going to take me a minimum of fifteen minutes to freshen up, and I need you to bring my change of clothes to the bathroom for me because my hooves are dirty.”

*What am I going to talk to him about for 15 minutes?* “You think you can get all of that out of your fur that fast?”

“Most of it,” she says through gritted teeth. “We just need enough plausible deniability to get him out the door. It’s one thing to know subconsciously that your daughter got railed. It’s another thing to see her flaunting it.”

My lips tighten. “Chief was pretty clear about his expectations over the phone. I’m not so sure he’ll care about the finer points.”

“If he’s dead set on beating the shit out of you, it could be difference between him breaking your legs right now and him breaking them in an hour. If I have the time, I might be able to talk some sense into him. If he knows what’s at stake, he’ll back down.”

“Alright.” I ball up the doe’s clothes and follow her into the bathroom, placing them in the sink while she hops into the tub. I also take my last opportunity to ogle her while she’s still naked,

scanning her body from head to toe. *I know it's messed up to think so right now, but she's hot with my cum on her fur.* "You know, you don't look too bad like that."

"Shut up, you pig. It's not the time." She pulls the shower curtain between us and turns the spigot on. "Go put on some clothes. He's getting cold out there."

I leave for my bedroom, closing the bathroom door behind me. Peering into my drawers, I pick out boxer underwear and a pair of sweatpants, yanking them both up my legs. From my closet I grab a flannel and button it around my chest as I dash towards the foyer.

Before I open the door, I gaze through the peephole to confirm the identity of my visitor. What I'm greeted by is a fish-eye view of a tall, barrel-chested Thunderhoof man, with chestnut fur and a massive rack of antlers. He's wearing a denim jacket with orange bandanas tied around each bicep. *It's Chief.* His attention seems to be captured by his phone, and he looks irritated.

I take a deep breath and open the door, mentally preparing myself for every imaginable shitshow that could spiral out from here. "Achak."

Chief turns his focus to me, staring right into my eyes with a burning intensity worse than the devil. "Where's my daughter?" he asks.

"She's washing up right now, she'll be out in fifteen."

"Hmph." The buck doesn't drop his evil glare.

"Would you like to come in?" I ask, trying to be cordial.

He grunts, and strolls through the doorway, stopping once he's only a few feet away from me. "Where can I sit?"

"The parlor or the kitchen is fine."

He nods, then brushes past me to rest in the living room.

As I close the door behind him, I find that my rifle is still stood up in the corner from Saturday night. *Did I really forget to put it away?* I put my hand on my forehead, then lift the gun up and carry it against my side, trying to keep it out of view from my new guest while I relocate it to my room. When I get there, I lay it down gently on my bed, and write a quick note reminding myself to put it away once the Greenleafs are gone.

I then walk back into the parlor, where I see Chief sitting in the rocking chair, staring at the mounted head on my mantel.

"Distasteful," he sneers. "What else would I expect?"

"I would've taken it down if I'd known I would be having company this weekend."

Achak raises a hoof. "Save your breath. We'll be out of here soon enough."

I roll my eyes. *Asshole.* "You want some coffee or anything to warm you up? You must be cold."

The buck nods.

*Jenny will probably want one too,* I think, wandering back into the kitchen.

I rinse out my percolator, throw in the grounds and the water, and leave it on the stovetop to brew.

While I wait, I look into the parlor to make an attempt at small talk. *Anything to break this insufferable silence.* “Hey, Achak. You go swimming often?”

“I’m here for one reason,” he says, ignoring the question. “To pick up my little girl and take her to the hospital. I don’t need you to entertain me, and frankly I’m not in the mood.”

I don’t try again after that.

When the kettle starts whistling a few minutes later, I take it off of the coil to cool. My hand reaches blindly into the cupboard, picking out the three closest mugs, a colorful selection of green, red and blue curated from the closest thrift store. I pour each cup about two-thirds full, then pour milk and sugar into two of them. “Do you want-”

“Milk. No sugar.”

*He’s nothing if not straightforward.* I put some milk into the last cup, assemble all three mugs onto a tray, and carry them out to the coffee table.

“You made her a cup?” He asks.

“No, I made myself two.” I say sarcastically.

“Which one’s mine?”

“Green mug.”

Chief stares at me until I point out the correct cup to him, which he quickly hooves. *Forgot he was colorblind.* I take the red one and sit down on the sofa. I’ve only taken my first swig when I see him pull something out from the inside of his jacket. A steel liquor flask. I can feel my eyes bulge out of my skull when he starts to unscrew the cap.

“Are you serious?” I blurt out.

“Excuse me?” He replies.

“It’s 9:30 AM on a Monday. Why the fuck are spiking your coffee?”

“When you get older, sometimes you need a little extra to kickstart your day,” he grumbles, continuing to fumble with the cap. “Besides, my antlers nearly froze off you kept me waiting so long. I need something to warm me up.”

“No.” My face scrunches up in disgust. “This is my house and I’m putting my foot down. Get that fucking flask out of my sight before I call the police. Jenny told me you had a problem, but this is unbelievable.”

The buck stops fiddling with the flask, making eye contact with me. Something within him looks broken, and I can’t tell whether or not he’s about to blow his lid. I don’t care, I keep laying into him anyway.

“Your daughter just survived a car crash, are you going to risk putting her through another one? Do you want to be a father or an addict?”

The buck looks at the flask, then at me, then back at the flask, his hoof clenched tightly around it. After a few seconds of deliberation, he closes his eyes and lets a massive exhale through his nose. Then, he twists the cap of the flask closed and shoves it back into his coat.

“Did you have any before you came here?” I ask, hushed.

“No,” he whispers back. “Would’ve been my first of the day.”

Some of the tension in my shoulders dissipates. “You’re lucky she didn’t catch you in the act,” I say. “What would she think?”

“What would I think about what?” says Jenny, opening the bathroom door. She gingerly steps down the hall with the aid of the walking stick, now completely clean and dressed in her purple shirt and jeans. “What did I miss?”

I take a quick glance at Chief, who can’t even look his daughter in the eyes as he shrinks into his seat.

She comes over and stands behind me. “What happened between you two?” she presses with a much more severe tone, this time staring daggers at her father.

I’m conflicted. *Jenny deserves to know what happened, but if I tell her the truth about what I saw, it would completely destroy their relationship beyond repair.*

Chief passes me a pleading look from across the table. He knows he’s at my mercy. I return a sadistic smile. *Squirm around in your shit, old man.*

“Max, what happened?” Jenny turns her focus to me, looking into my eyes. Her mouth is twitching. The seconds stretch into eternity. “Did he threaten you again?” she asks, putting a hoof on my shoulder.

*As terrible as he’s been to me, as much as he’s fucked up as a parent...*

“He and I had a spat...” I say, “...about something that’s stupid in retrospect.”

“About what?”

*Damnit, think of something... the pendant!* “He expressed his frustration that you were still wearing the necklace I gave you a few years back, even after we broke up. I told him you were your own woman, and that it wasn’t my place to tell you that you couldn’t wear it anymore.”

“I hate that fucking thing,” the buck grumbles.

“Yeah. We started arguing, he made a rude gesture, I overreacted. That was all that yelling you heard.”

“That’s not overreacting. You’re owed respect.” She frowns, then turns back to her father. “You don’t have to like Max, Dad. But would it kill you to have some manners while he’s hosting us? He’s done a lot for me.”

He opens his mouth, then looks to his feet in apparent shame. “Sorry.”

“Water under the bridge,” I say, desperate to change the subject. “Jen, do you want to sit down? There’s a cup of coffee here with your name on it.”

“I would *love* a cup of coffee,” says the doe. “Scooch over for me, won’t you?”

I shift my body to the right to accommodate her.

She walks around the sofa and picks up the last remaining mug of coffee in her free hand, then sits



to my left. Her mouth forms a smile after her first sip. “Good stuff,” she comments.

The palpably hostile silence hanging over the room is now replaced with an uncomfortable, but calm one. The three of us sip on our coffees for the next few minutes, sometimes passing each other subtle glances, other times just staring off into space. When I finish my coffee, I place the dirty mug back on the tray. Chief and Jenny follow my lead.

With nothing to talk about, we come to the silent agreement that it’s time to part ways. Jenny collects her snow-clothes and puts them on, wincing in pain when she tries to get her left boot on. Both her father and I offer to help, but she insists on handling it herself, and eventually secures it properly.

It’s only when they’re walking out the door that Chief works up the courage to make an ass of himself once more. “Alright, Genesee, you’ve had your fun this weekend. Did you get all out of your system? Are you satisfied?”

Her face contorts into a scowl. “Emotionally or physically?” she asks back. “No, I’m not ‘satisfied.’ If anything, it only made me realize what I’ve been missing out on for a year and a half.”

“We’re going to talk about this in the car,” he growls.

“Yeah, and for once in your life you’re going to listen.” She shoos him away. “Go warm up the engine, I need to talk to my boyfriend for a minute.”

Chief gives her the death stare, then redirects it at me before making his exit.

Jenny shakes her head and puts her palm on her face. “I’m sorry about him, Max. I knew you two had problems but I didn’t expect him to act this psychotic.”

“It’s fine, boo. I knew what I signed up for.” I grab her hooves. “That was ballsy, what you said just now about being satisfied. I thought we agreed to be discrete about the sex around him?”

“Did you see what I saw? He’s acting antlerless. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him this timid, it’s unsettling.” She looks up to me. “The two of you are hiding something from me.”

I lie to cover my ass. “He just realizes you’re done with his bullshit. Your dad can’t threaten me anymore if he knows it’ll come back to you, and he knows you’ll side with me if he tries to leverage you. The only thing he can do now is shut up and hope he can outlast us.”

“Fat chance he can outlast us. I don’t know what could keep us apart if that nightmare couldn’t.”

“Agreed.” I pull her in for a hug, resting my chin on the top of her head. “I just got you back, I really don’t want you to leave...” I whisper, my eyes watering in a completely masculine way.

“I don’t want to leave,” she responds, nuzzling into my neck. “I don’t think I can wait a week to see you again. If you can do anything before this weekend-”

“I’ll try to make time for you this Thursday. I promise.”

Jenny pulls back, grinning from ear to ear. “I love you so much.”

I lean into her mouth, closing my eyes as my lips contact hers. It’s a soft kiss that only lasts for a few seconds, one that tastes of coffee. There’s no hunger, no animalistic passion or lust behind it. Only pure affection.

"I love you too," I say when we stop.

She leans away at me, her eyes shining with joy. "I'll call you later, okay?"

"Not if I call you first. Have a safe ride." I wave my hand to say goodbye.

She looks over her shoulder one last time to return it, then walks out the door. A few seconds later, I hear a door open and shut, followed by the sound of their car pulling out of my driveway.

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I spend the hour after the Greenleafs' departure finishing up any chores I had put off. The chickens are in high spirits when I come around with the feed bucket, and not one of them seems to be injured or ill. On my inspection, it looks like my repairs to the coop are holding up well. Today there's only three usable eggs in the coop, all of which are destined for this morning's breakfast.

After taking care of my hens, I fry myself an omelet, throwing some hot sauce and garlic powder over the top to give it a kick. I also finish off what's left of the coffee from earlier, but not before putting on the coil for a minute or two to heat it up. When I'm finished eating, I throw the dirty plate in the sink, along with the coffee mugs from earlier.

My gun has been laying on my mattress since before they left, so I make sure to lock it away in its case like I should have before. I pick up the dirty laundry and bring it to the washing machine, only to find that an extra piece somehow made its way into the pile. "She left her bra here," I think out loud, putting the black garment off to the side. "Score."

Finished with the more pressing matters, I figure that now is as good a time as any to go on a walk to blow off some steam. I stretch out my arms and legs, take my phone off the charger and open the front door, looking out at my snow-covered front yard. And in my driveway I spot a silver sedan I don't own, with a cross deer man leaning into the driver-side door with his body.

"Achak. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

He storms up to the porch. "O'Neill. You and I need to talk, man to man."

"What kind of talk?" I ask, shifting my hands forward and balling up my fists.

The buck stares at my hands for a few seconds, returning an unimpressed look. "That won't be necessary," he explains. "I made a promise to Genesee not to hurt you."

"How do I know you'll stay true to your word?"

"Because I haven't broke your spine already, in spite of you seducing my daughter."

"She was the one who chased me in the woods, you know," I say.

His eyes glint with wrath. "And I told you to back off anyway. But here we are."

"If you didn't come for a fight," I say, starting to lose my patience, "Why are you here?"

"I came here because *you* crossed a line," Chief spits, poking me in the chest. "Why is my daughter getting ideas of moving out and living on her own?"

"Inside," I say. "I don't want the neighbors to hear this."

He nods, then follows me when I turn back and walk through my front door. I hear him close it

behind us. The two of us return to the parlor, back in our previous seats. His face twitches when his eyes latch onto the trophy again.

“My daughter tells me she doesn’t want to live at Bleeding Horn as soon as she gets in the car, despite us planning the move for months. I know you planted doubts in her mind. Where did you get the nerve to interfere with my family?” probes the buck.

“If Jenny decided she was ready to leave the nest, that’s up to her. She’s a grown woman.”

“You haven’t even thought through the economics. The farm and the house are already sold, how is she going to support herself?”

“She still has a job at the market, and she’ll get a bigger cut with you out of the picture,” I mention. “And some of our neighbors are willing to give her a low rate on rent.”

“For how long?” he charges. “Do you really think that good will can last forever?”

“No. But when we get engaged, she’ll move in with me so it won’t matter.”

“Engaged?” His eyebrows rise. “How do you know *you’ll* stay together that long? If you break it off with Genesee at any point, she’s on her own here without a home or any support. It’s a huge risk. She’s better off with me.”

“Better off with only her father, whisked away from the neighborhood she grew up in? She would be miserable; you’re asking her to completely change her way of life. It’s no wonder she ran away.”

“I’m doing what’s good for her. She’s been a wreck since her mother passed, and our visits to the commune are the only times I get to see her in a good mood. My daughter is Thunderhoof at heart, like I am. She needs that connection to the spirits, the old way. Moving out is for the best, even if she can’t see it now.”

“Jenny doesn’t need to live there to feel that bond to her tribe,” I say. “Your family’s lived out here for decades, and you all had a strong connection. Sure, she likes the visits, but living at the commune full-time is a different prospect. She likes it here too.”

His eyes narrow. “You haven’t lived with her for the past two years. You haven’t seen her shut herself in like I have, nor have you heard her cry herself to sleep for weeks on end. With all due *respect*, you don’t know anything.”

“I know that she’s still hurting, you think I don’t? You didn’t let me be there for her when she needed me most, and you did a piss-poor job on your own,” I accuse. “Jenny doesn’t need some tremendous lifestyle change in order to be happy. She just needs support.”

“Because you’re the cure to all of her problems, right? Spare me.”

“I never said I was. What’s your problem with me?”

The buck lets out a bitter laugh and gets up from the chair. “I could list off a hundred,” he says, slowly approaching me. “You started dating my little girl right before she left for college, God and the spirits above only know what happened between you two before. You bought booze for her and her friends so they could debase themselves and ignore their studies.”

“Jenny was always responsible with her drinking. You’re one to talk about booze.”

"My drinking only got out of hand when her mother left this world. And even in this state I would have never let her touch the shit. But this isn't about me," he says. "It's about you. You aren't and never will be a Thunderhoof, nor any other kind of tribal, so you have no grasp of what it actually means to carry the weight of keeping your traditions alive, and you only have the most basic exposure to the culture. You say you want to marry Genesee, yet you don't even respect the law of the Thunderhoof, not hunting feral whitetails, our natural brothers. You have a fucking trophy of one in your parlor, just to flaunt it. I can't believe she fell for someone like you. It makes my fur stand on end," he sneers.

"And in spite of all of it she still loves me," I say, rising from my chair. "Maybe I don't practice myself, but I never get in the way of her participating in the rituals, nor will I ever. And it's not like the Thunderhoof or any other tribe has never hunted. Don't you have painted pelts hung up at the compound?"

"Those were from centuries ago, before the compound formed. Don't pretend you give a shit now, I can see right through you." He gets uncomfortably close. "You know what terrifies me most as a father? Genesee loves you so much more than you love her. She had eyes for you the second you two met, so she can't see what I see. And I thought you'd be enough of a man to know your place and stay away from her, but my wife betrayed me and let you get too close. I know how relationships like yours end. I know how the world treats naïve, sensitive girls like my baby, and I should have been more proactive in protecting her, before you dug your fucking claws into her like a parasite, like the invalid that stole Onatah from me, or the tumor that killed their mother." He grits his teeth. "And now I'm going to lose the last of my family, my oldest child. Because of *you*."

"Get help. Maybe you had a string of shit luck in your life, but you don't get to blame me for your failure as a father. Not when both of your daughters are running for the door."

The buck's hackles rise. "It's not easy being a father without your better half. I'm doing the best I can. You and the other one are doing all you can to undermine me."

"Undermine? If anything, I've been covering your ass for years. I didn't tell Jenny anything about your threats and violence against me until two days ago. I didn't tell her about your little fucking booze mishap this morning, I'm sure that would've gone well for you."

Achak snorts.

"I could have won right then and there," I state, "and you know it. It would have been so easy to out you for the fucking hypocrite you are. If she saw it with her own eyes, she would never talk to you again, I wouldn't even have to do anything. Do you know why I didn't bring it up?"

The buck raises his arms, taking a step back to offer me the floor. "Educate me."

"Because I love Jenny, and it would be wrong of me to damage her relationship with her only remaining parent. It would be wrong of me to take her away from you so quickly after her mother passed, and I thought you would do what you could to support her in my place. I was willing to sacrifice my own happiness in the short term if it meant she would be better off."

The buck says nothing, glowering at me.

"In spite of your best efforts, I'm still willing to help you keep a place in her life because of how much she cares about you. She deserves it, even if you don't. I'm going to make you a deal. She's not following you to live on the commune, but she might not be so opposed to making a monthly visit. She said as much."

"You've got a lot of gumption talking to me like that. You have no right making deals on behalf of my family."

"She'd back me up on every word, you know her. How much do you care about your daughter? Because if you don't take this deal, I can promise you that you really will lose everything."

"...Too much to humor my anger," he admits after a few seconds of deliberation. His voice lacks the edge it did before. "What is it you want from me?"

"Two things," I reply. "You're going to cut your drinking so you aren't a wreck all the time. Get it down to one beer a day or less by the time you leave for Bleeding Horn. Jenny hates seeing you like that."

"I abstain during my shorter visits."

"Good," I say. "Get a head start."

"Second thing?"

"I want your blessing by the time I propose, which means you need to stop treating me like I'm your enemy. I want to see her happy more than you do."

"I don't like that she's dating an outsider," He scowls. "I'm not giving you any blessing. She could do better."

"That isn't your call to make." I counter. "If we're meant to be, she'll resent you for nearly ruining something great. If we aren't, she'll try to force it in order to spite you. Even if you don't want to offer your blessing just yet, you're still better off just letting things take their natural course."

"I can see that now..." says the buck, staring off at something behind me. "If it's really inevitable, I have a few requirements of you, too."

*If it'll smooth things out.* "Yes?"

"If you lay a hand on my daughter to hurt her, I will fucking bury you," he says.

"I would never."

"And you *will* never. If Genesee wants to go to the commune for a festival, or to stay engaged with her ancestral right, you don't interfere. Got it?"

"Done."

"Any fawns you two have are going to learn what it means to be a Thunderhoof. I want them fully initiated."

I smile. "Wouldn't have it any other way. Does it conflict with a Catholic upbringing?"

He blinks. "Not our church, don't know about yours. You can hash out the details with Jenny on that. As long as they come to the commune with an open heart, I won't fight you on it."

"I'll investigate it. Anything else?"

"Yes," he says. "If you're serious about proposing, no more hunting whitetails. Foxes, rabbits, and bears are off limits from now on too. Keep it to waterfowl."

“It’s a family tradition,” I protest. “You’re asking me to give up one of the main reasons I moved out here.”

“New family means new traditions,” Achak pushes. “Genesee hates the deer-hunting almost as much as I do, and Bleeding Horn isn’t just for Thunderhoofs. We both have to give up something.”

*I have some of my best memories going hunting in the woods. And Uncle Rod won’t like this one bit. But if it means finally squashing this argument, then I’ll give it up. There are more important things.*

“Alright. No deer, no rabbits, just birds.”

“And get rid of that fucking trophy.” He shakes his hoof toward the deer head mount. “My daughter shouldn’t have to look at that shit whenever she comes here. It’s grotesque.”

“I’ll give him to my uncle, unless you want to give him a proper burial. Are we good?”

“I can’t think of anything else.”

“It’s a deal then.” I offer my right hand, which he accepts after a few minutes of deliberation. His grip is firm, although it’s me that leads the motion.

“This doesn’t mean we’re friends, you know.”

“We don’t have to be. Just play nice for Jenny’s sake.”

He nods and looks me in the eyes, not with malice nor resignation, but something else. “For Jenny.”

# Epilogue

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Christmas time in the Catskills is scenic. The peaks and valleys that shape the roads and the horizon turn a brilliant powdery white at this time of year. Most of the trees go barren, save for the scattered firs and pines that retain their needles even through the coldest season.

When I first started visiting my uncle as a little kid, the sight of a stark, dead forest covering a swath of hillside was imposing. I had nightmares of tremendous and horrifying monsters that prowled Warren's Peak and the surrounding wilderness. Ghastly creatures with long pointed fingers and bloodstained teeth that would track unfortunate souls on their lonesome, leaving nothing left for search parties to find.

As an adult who's lived here for the better half of a decade, I can safely say that my imagination got the better of me. Sure, there's still plenty of ways to die in the woods, every winter there's a new story of some punk kid ignoring the warnings on the hiking trails, or losing a fight with a bear or a buck. If you have half of a functioning brain, you'll probably be fine. Now when I wander into the forest, I can fully appreciate and respect its majesty, even in its slumber.

But while the forest sleeps, the village grows restless. The streets are awash with activity, with locals filling shops in search of the perfect gifts. Spirits are brought high by the holiday music playing from the radio, and every house in the village is decorated with red, green, or multicolored lights.

All of my shopping has been complete for days, so when I wake up on Christmas Eve, I have little to do and less to stress over. Once I've gone through my morning routine of showering, shaving, feeding my chickens and eating breakfast, I pack the wrapped gifts into my car and drive to the house of my uncle. Most of them, at least. Jenny's and Bart's gifts are staying home for now.

Parking in front of the house, I throw the sack of gifts over my shoulder and march on the cleared path up to the porch, passing a crude snow-fox-man to my left. Some of Rodney's Christmas lights are dim or broken, which I notice once I actually get close. *Probably damaged by a snowstorm.*

I knock twice. "Open up."

My cousin answers the door with a toothy grin. His mother must have dressed him this morning, because he's wearing a polo shirt and nice shorts rather than one of his usual graphic tees. "Maxie!" He shouts, pouncing on me for a hug.

I return the gesture. "Merry Christmas kiddo. Where's your mom and dad?"

"Papa has to make a phone call, and Mama is working things out for lunch. They told me to answer." He spots the bag over my shoulder. "What do you have in the bag cuz'? What did you bring for us?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I say, ruffling his head fur. "It's too early to open up presents. We have to wait until everybody gets here before we start. Patience is king."

He pulls away from me, sticking his tongue out. "You're lame."

"I'm lame? Where'd you pick that up from?" I ask, pulling a small box from the bag. "Well, I

guess I can't give you these bad boys, if I'm such a lame cousin."

"What's in there?" the fox asks with widened eyes.

"Since your mother declared a war on processed crap, I thought I'd smuggle in some rations for the troops."

"Pop-Tarts?"

I nod. "Blueberry flavored. But since you want to act spoiled, I guess I'll just take them home before your mama sees."

"No!" He begs. "I'm sorry! I'll be patient."

"Good." I walk through the entrance, onto a faded carpet with an angular design of red and black. In the hall hangs photographs of my uncle's family, as well as a few art pieces presumably made by Aunt Lav. I catch a whiff of something sweet coming from the kitchen.

Once I make it to the living room, I place the sack of presents at the foot of their Christmas tree. On the other side of the room is my uncle, reclined in his chair. He looks up from the newspaper in his hands and waves to me.

"Merry Christmas, uncle." I wave back.

"Merry Christmas. That new car still treating you well?"

"Runs like a charm, no complaints."

"Good to hear," he says, turning his attention back to the paper.

"Who were you on the phone with earlier?" I ask.

"Your father. Your folks are dragging their feet to get out the door, so they're probably gonna miss lunch."

"They're going to hit traffic..."

He rolls his eyes. "What do you think I told them?"

"Max is here?" A fox woman pokes her head out from the kitchen, the spitting image of my cousin.

"Hey Aunt Lav, merry Christmas. What's cooking?"

"Pancakes and eggs, but since everyone's going to be late, I don't know how much I actually need to make. Pain in my tail, I don't want to be wasteful."

"I wouldn't mind taking some leftovers."

She raises an eyebrow. "Yeah? Hope you brought containers from home. You're nuts if you think I'm letting you steal my tupperware."

"C'mon," I plead. "You know I'll get it back to you."

"I don't know that, actually. I'm still missing three containers from Easter." A menacing glint appears in her eyes. "Where's my tupperware, Max?"



"Point taken." I excuse myself and walk towards the door.

The path past it is blocked by a deer woman in a blue flannel and jeans. The doe is holding a few aluminum food trays in both of her hands. "Hey Maxie."

"Hey honey." I pull her up the porch and give her a big kiss on the lips. "Wasn't expecting to see you here. I thought you were spending the day with your dad."

"She's here for me!" calls my aunt from the kitchen.

Jenny smirks. "I asked Lav if I could steal some of her cooking since Papa's feeling under the weather. Seeing you is just a nice perk."

"The food isn't ready yet, sweetie. Why don't you come in to chat? Max, hold the door for your girlfriend."

"Come on in, boo." I beckon her to enter, bowing my head slightly.

"A gentleman as always." She blows me a kiss as she enters the house, walking up without any sign of a limp. *Glad everything healed up so quick.*

With the unexpected presence of my partner, I hold off on picking up the tupperware and instead make the most of the new company.

"Where's the kid?" asks Jenny.

"Beats me, probably downstairs playing with Legos."

"Good," she says, secretly handing me an envelope. "Don't want him getting jealous."

"For me?" I ask, tearing open the envelope. It's a card with two reindeer on it, one passing a wrapped present to the other. "Merry Christmas, My Deer" is written on a red banner across the top.

"Who else? Open it up, there's a surprise inside."

My cheeks burn up. "I don't have anything for you right now, I thought we were exchanging tomorrow." *If I knew she'd be here I would have brought the sketchbook here, damnit.*

"Shh! You'll make it up to me then, I can wait. Open it!"

Opening the card exposes a \$30 gift card to the Woolworth Sports Store fixed on the left. A lipstick mark stains the right side, along with the words "Happy Hunting" in cursive.

"I had no clue Bart sold gift cards," I say.

"It's a new promotion," she replies. "I heard about it from Sandra. It's something I know you'll use."

"Thanks sweetie." I smile, and pull her in with my left arm.

She taps me on the hip. "You know I'm putting stipulations on what you use that for."

"Birds only, I know."

"*And* you have to share anything you bag with me."

"Since when?" I smirk. "This is a new development."

"Did you plan on hoarding it all for yourself? Bullshit."

"Hey!" calls my uncle from the other room. "Language."

"No, just wasn't expecting you to be so supportive," I say. "It's a big turnaround."

She shrugs. "You and Papa made a good compromise. And it's not like the Thunderhooves never hunted anything."

"Yeah."

The doe hugs my arm. "It's important to you, and asking you to give it up entirely seems extreme. I don't want you to be anyone but yourself around me."

When we pass the doorway, I notice a sprig of mistletoe hanging above us. Jenny missed it, so I pull her back and press my lips against hers. It takes her off-guard for a moment, but she reciprocates without a second thought.

"I love you," she says as she pulls back. A small string of saliva spans between us for a moment before dissipating.

I caress her cheek and look into her brown eyes. "Thank God I have you back, Jen."

## Chapter End Notes

That's it, that's Deer to my Heart. All in all about two and a half years in the making, and I ended up taking the story in a much different direction than I first thought I would. I'm proud of how it turned out, even if I don't make anything like this again. As always, thanks for reading.  
~NCD

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