

Reaching for the Stars – by Haátse Apxan

Chapter 24: Fighting Own Battles

It was a special day for them.

Tom was up even before his alarm went. He almost threw his bag as he went inside the backstage. Today was sure to be the most challenging day in his life. He was going to present his paper in a national conference, and he was invited to this conference, nonetheless.

He had to postpone his internship registration back on campus, but his decision was supported by his profs, even his dean. It was faculty tradition that at least one of the students went to a national conference, and this year it was him. He went to Hampstertown University in another part of the country to present his paper.

However, he wasn't nervous this time—well, he *was* nervous but not as much as the provincial conference. Max was here.

Max was here.

Finally, he could prove that he made it to a national championship, whatever the form.

Sadly, Max wasn't going to watch him because he had a friendly match at the same time of his conference. However, that made Tom feel determined and proud. They were fighting their own battles, but despite that, they were not alone.

He was determined to win this conference. He had done his best in compiling his paper, even as far as doing mini-research. The participants were free to choose the topic, so he selected one that seemed mundane but most impactful.

"Loup, you can do this. I believe in you!"

Martin's words only made the fire inside him burn even more brightly. But he had to calm himself and not rush anything.

He sat down on the available chair. The other participants seemed anxious and worried, but not him. He looked at the stage and let out a sigh.

This was not his campus, but he made sure to conquer it.

"Please welcome our first contestant, Thomas Luis Purnama from University of Barrowisle!"

He stood up, a sharp and determined look in his eyes. Martin cheered for him and escorted him to the small stairs.

Tom didn't look at the crowd; he kept his head straight to the podium. Only when he was at the podium did he look at the crowd and flashed a smile.

It was as if Max himself cheered for him.

"Good morning, everyone." He started with a smooth tone. "I'm Thomas Luis Purnama from the University of Barrowisle. Currently I'm in the seventh semester, so the suffering is going to end soon."

The crowd rumbled a small laugh.

"During my study in the university, I have encountered many things that I have never encountered before. One of them is friendship. Friendship seems to us like a trivial thing; everyone surely has a friend, right?" he paused. When the crowd focused their attention on him, he continued. "You might be asking, Tom, have you never encountered friendship before? Of course I have, but it is in university did I find real friends. Let's talk about what a friend is, why do we have friends, and what kinds of friendships are there."

He clicked the controller, and the presentation advanced to the next slide. At that moment, he remembered Martin, Max, Octo, Lucy, Andy, and all the others that had supported him until this very moment. Taking a deep breath, he started.

"To put it simply, friendship is formed when two or more people create a bond of emotion between them. It's a by-product of our evolutionary history, when being together meant a better chance of survival. It *still* means a better chance of survival, since one can depend on true friends. Friendship is a result of prolonged contact and communication which formed an emotional bond."

He felt alive like this. The crowd focused his attention on him, and the giant hall was dead silent.

This was going to be fine.

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The bliss of being in a football field swept across him.

The game was starting, and Max felt the familiar gush of wind sweeping across him. The grass under his shoes felt comforting, and there were so many colours in the crowds. This brought so many flashbacks.

Today was his team's last game. They were going to graduate in two months, so he made sure to enjoy the moment while it still lasted. The crowd around him was full of energy, and he felt more alive than he had ever been.

"Hey, Max!" a familiar voice greeted him.

He turned around and smiled wide. "Heey, Luc!" He walked towards the black coyote and gave him a friendly hug. "It's been a while."

"Too long, unfortunately." Lucas stepped back and laughed. "How does it feel? It's been a while since we've tasted the grass, eh!"

Max laughed along. "Wonderful."

"So, you're ready for this?"

"Like hell I am!"

The coyote crossed his arms and grinned crookedly. "The loser treats the winner booze."

Max took his hand. "You're fucking on."

"Don't just start betting on stuff."

They turned their heads. Octo was walking towards them with a grin on his face. "Hey, Lucas. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too, Octo!"

The panther smiled. "You're graduating this year?"

"Of course! I'm done with my thesis and I'll defend it next week."

"Cool."

"You, Max?"

"Eh, I'm graduating next year." The shepherd gave a shrug. "That football exchange took one year out of my study period. Actually ten months but still. Besides, I know I'm in good hands, anyway." He smiled.

If he remembered correctly, Tom would have his presentation started by now. He hoped the wolf's presentation went without a hiccup. He glanced at the crowd, somehow hoping for the wolf to be here, watching him in all his glory, his element. That wasn't going to happen, he knew, but one could hope.

He wished he could be there in the main hall, watching Tom's presentation, giving him encouragement. How was he now? Was he nervous? He hoped Tom did just fine.

"That's rough, buddy." Lucas swung his hand around Max's shoulder, making him turn his head. "But if it goes it goes."

They laughed.

"Looks like our team really does miss each other." said Octo as he glanced over the rest of his teammates. They were greeting each other, smiles upon their faces.

"Yeah. Let's give 'em a few minutes to warm up."

The whistle was blown, signalling the start of the match.

"Looks like we gotta hold that reunion for later." said the coyote with a grin. "We got asses to kick today."

Max grinned back. "Heh, right. You better prepare your ass."

They then parted, leaving the opposite teams to themselves.

The shepherd lined up with his team and Lucas did the same. After they shook hands with each other, they got into position in the middle of the field. The crowd cheered for them, but when the referee held up the ball, everything went quiet.

Max and Lucas looked at each other with grins on their faces, then at the ball. The referee put the ball down and held his hand up.

It was unclear who got the first kick since the crowd cheered as soon as the whistle was blown.

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"What have you learned for yourself from this study?"

Tom smiled at the person who gave him the question. He walked out of the podium and walked to the centre of the stage. "That's a great question. For me, I have learned that friendship takes many forms. There is a friendship of just acquaintances, then there's of simple, pure bonds between two people who enjoy doing things together."

He felt like a thousand eyes were watching him. That shook him, but he refused to look away and give in to the urge. He was in the Q&A session, and thus far he had been answering the questions thrown at him without a problem.

He continued his explanation. "Then there is a friendship of brotherhood. It's not just between brothers; if you're very close to someone and you think of them as... older or younger than you in terms of age or experience, then you might have a bro." his mind drifted to Octo and Kevin, both of them he thought as his brothers, older and younger. "But most of all, there is a pure friendship, a 'best friend' if you will. A friendship so close it can affect yourself in the deepest way possible."

He smiled at the thought of Max. "In this kind of friendship, people don't just enjoy being with each other, but *want* to be with each other. This kind of friendship can evolve to become love, a union between two souls. Friendship needs reciprocity, and this form is the most reciprocal of them all. It is this person whom you feel comfortable sharing your deepest secrets, like your greatest fears and biggest mistakes."

"Friendship comes naturally to us because of that, and the... inner urge to form social bonds dates to *even* before our present forms." Tom walked to the front of the stage. "I have also learned that, as I have explained, loneliness is the worst thing that can happen to us. It is also the harshest, most cruel punishment to befall anybody. Those who stood up and withstand being lonely, you have my deepest appreciation."

The crowd clapped their hands as Tom smiled at them.

"So," he continued after the clapping died down. "whenever you see a lonely person in the back of the classroom, don't just shrug and go away. Go give them a smile, talk to them." He smiled at the crowd.

His thoughts went to Max and that summer festival. Smiling at himself, he felt his heart warm up. "No one deserves to be alone. Often, it's the small gestures that matters. It's those small gestures that contribute to us being a better person for those around us and the world." He then gave the crowd a small nod as he looked at the time. "And that concludes my presentation. Thank you for the stage."

The crowd clapped their hands again as he bowed, some of them giving him a standing applause.

That went *very* well. Tom walked back to the backstage as the MC took the stage again. Behind the curtain, Martin was jumping with excitement. The wolf almost laughed when Martin almost knocked down a chair.

As soon as he went down the stairs, his knees gave out and he fell forward. Fortunately, Martin caught him before he hit the floor.

His battle was over.

Now, it was fine to show weakness. He looked up with hazy eyes, smiling tiredly at Martin. "I did it."

"You did it, *loup!* That was fucking *amazing!*" The fox's eyes lit up. "Now let's get you seated before the rest of you gives out."

"I did it." he almost whimpered as he leant into the fox. Exhausted, he almost dragged his feet back to the chair, Martin almost carrying him there.

Martin put him down and gave him a drink. He just complied, still with that tired but satisfied smile.

He felt like he was turning into jelly.

His battle was over. How was Max's?

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There were only several minutes left until the end of the game. Max ran as fast as he could, effortlessly dodging the opposite team's players. The post was only a kick away.

Several players blocked the post in front of him. He immediately passed the ball to Nathan when he couldn't get a clear shot. He ran backwards as a decoy but signalled Andy to run to his direction while he dashed towards the crocodile. That worked as the block was still up. Nathan passed him the ball, and he kicked it.

Shit, his kick went too high.

Victory was already in their hands, but the shepherd wanted to enjoy the moment more. This game was not about victory, but about the moment. They would never play as one team ever again.

No! Don't think of that! We'll have another chance sometime!

He quickly ran back towards his own post. The goalkeeper threw the ball; Lucas caught it with a grin to the dog. Max chased the coyote as fast as he could, their tongues out in exhaustion. He made a gesture to John to form a blockade and to Mike to take the ball.

Mike couldn't take it.

Octo dashed towards the coyote, making him turn left and passed the ball to his teammate. His teammate passed the ball again and ran to their post. Max knew that was just a distraction and kept running towards the coyote.

As expected, the horse made a wide kick. Max jumped, but the ball was still higher, and the other team caught it. It was then passed back to Lucas who was now dangerously close to their post and gave it a kick.

Max's heart almost stopped.

The ball didn't go in. He smiled wide and continued breathing. That was dangerous. This must be the most exhausting and panic-inducing game they had ever played, aside from the Nat-Champ final.

Yohan threw the ball back into the field, but before anyone could catch it, the whistle was blown.

He was walking towards the coach when his teammates tackled him, almost making him fall. Andy was laughing on his back. He laughed back and wrestled the lion. Someone else tackled them too and he was quickly trapped in a pile of overworked smelly hunks.

They then made their way into the coach area. Locating the drinks, he gulped down a bottle and threw his arse into the seat. Fuck, he was thoroughly spent.

The referee told them to go to the field again. He just nodded and dragged his feet. Their teams greeted each other again and they exchanged handshakes and hugs.

He'd never forget this last game. After the referee officially ended the game, their teams were laughing with each other. Someone told a joke about Andy being a cheetah, and they all laughed.

Even Octo cracked a joke.

Lucas pulled him aside and gave him a hug. "Thanks, Max. That was really a great game." He laughed. "3-2. I still can't believe we lost."

"Heh, you're playing the National Champion." Max grinned at him.

"Here, you can have my ass."

They laughed.

"So, it looks like our team's gonna have some booze later tonight."

"Oh, you remember that." Lucas turned away, making Max laugh. "Okay, fine."

He flashed the coyote a cocky smile.

"I'll text ya later. And bring your entire team. We're gonna party hard tonight!"

"Hell yeah!" Max put his hand around the coyote. "Right, can I bring someone too? He's not the team but he's my bro."

"Sure. Just don't bring too many, though."

"Nah, just two." He looked at his team. "Though you should really count that crocodile as two people." He pointed at Nathan.

They laughed again.

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"Um, you sure we're invited, Max?"

The shepherd put his phone back into his jacket, chilling at the early autumn wind sweeping past him. It's colder here than in Barrowise. "Don't worry, dude, you're invited."

"But we're going to... who was it again? Lucas?"

"Yeah, Lucas, and yep we're going to his house." Max shrugged. "Apparently his house isn't that far from campus."

That appeared to calm Tom and Martin. They were going to Lucas' house since they needed to lay low with the party. They didn't need the media knowing what they were doing, thank you.

His coach was against it, of course, but he was against 14 people. So he gave up and let them go. He also told them not to get too drunk and get back to the hotel before 23.

Eh, Max wasn't there to get drunk. He was there to rekindle an old friendship.

When he reached his hotel room after the game earlier, he instantly crashed to the bed. Octo had told him about changing his jersey and having a shower first, but he was too tired for one. When he woke up five hours later, though, he *reeked*.

"Who else is there?" Martin asked him.

"The football team, mine and Lucas'. They're already there." The dog took his phone out as it beeped. "I went to pick up you guys first."

Lucas Hampstertown: Max ur missing out. Where are u?

He typed back his reply. *Almost there. Don't finish the booze before me.*

Several minutes later, they arrived at the house. Max rang the doorbell and took a glance at his two buddies. Tom looked fine, if not somewhat shy, while Martin was outright nervous.

Well, they were going to meet people so far out of their circle, so yeah.

"You're finally here." Lucas said as he opened the door. "These are your buds?"

"Yep."

The coyote smiled widely and stretched his hand to pet Tom's head. "Hey, fell— eep!"

He then leant forward and almost fell if not for Tom holding him back. Max quickly helped him to stand back up. "Dude, you okay?"

"Yeah, just... whoa, your buddy got some quick reflexes there." He said, smiling at Tom. "I wasn't trying to strangle you, buddy."

"Um, what did you do, Tom?"

The wolf scratched his nape. "I, uh, I kind of took a step back? Sorry." He said apologetically. "Reflex."

Fortunately, Lucas just shrugged it off. Instead he beckoned them to enter. "Eh, anyway, get in before it's too late!"

Max made a mental note not to startle Tom. His reflexes were creepily fast. He looked at Martin; the fox just shrugged as if he was used to it.

He greeted some of Lucas' teammates and some of his own. Nathan made a remark about him always coming late to make a show; he just laughed it off. Andy shouted at Martin to come to their group, and the fox was quick to go after nodding at them.

Lucas brought them to a small bar near the corridor. There were Octo and Paul, the opposite team's goalkeeper, and also a dog he didn't know. Wait, was that Lucas' boyfriend?

He looked behind; Tom was still following him. This time, though, he didn't seem as anxious as he had been when he first met his team. That was a good thing, and Max was glad of it.

"Hey, we got Max." Lucas said casually and sat behind the counter in front of Octo.

"Hey, man." He greeted Paul and the otter.

Octo gave him a soft push. "What took you so long?"

"I wasn't long." He shrugged. "Eh, anyone, this is Tom, my bro. He's here for the conference."

Everybody greeted the wolf; he returned the greeting with a somewhat forced smile, but Max just let it go. That was typical Tom anyway. He noticed that Tom was wary of meeting new people and he took the time to get to know them.

He was critical like that. Few could pass his acquaintance label.

The wolf seated himself next to Octo who gave him a small apologetic smile. Maybe something about forgetting to bring him here. Max sat on a stool next to them.

"You're here for the Natcon? Dude that's cool." Paul the rhino said to the wolf.

"Uh, thanks." Tom replied to him. "Sorry I couldn't see your teams playing."

"That's fine since we won anyway." Octo casually said, making Paul throw a cup at him. He laughed.

"I'm still pissed about us losing to you."

"Says the one who said they got asses to kick today."

Lucas threw Max a cup.

Tom chuckled.

Lucas then turned to Tom. "Eh, anyway, I'm Lucas, ex-captain of the Hampstertown University's football team. This one is Paul, the goalkeeper, and this one is Ronald. Nice to meet you, Tom." He extended his hand.

The wolf shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, too, Lucas."

"You can tell him about Ron. He's not judgemental." Octo said to Lucas.

"Well, uh," the coyote looked at Ronald, then back at the panther. "Maybe later."

Octo shrugged.

"Tell me what?"

"Nah, nothing." Lucas gave Tom a cup and poured some beer. "Enjoy yourself."

"Er, uh, sorry, but can I just get soda?"

Letting out a chuckle, the coyote took a bottle of soda from the counter and gave it to the wolf. "Not a drinker, are ya?"

"Well, it's complicated."

They let out a chuckle.

"Anyway, uh, sorry but is it just me or are all football guys tall?" Tom said, making them look at him. "I mean, no offence but I seem like a boy here."

"Well... you're not completely wrong."

"I think it is."

"Really? I never noticed."

"Looks like it." Paul shrugged. "I'm 183 and I'm the shortest one in the team. Lucas is 189, but I gotta admit he's got pretty long ears."

"Hey!"

"Right. I'm 190, and so is Max, right?" Octo took a sip from his cup.

"I'm 191 without the ears, actually."

"Yeah, he's 191."

"See? I'm 175." Tom said with a small shy smile. "Please be gentle with me."

They all laughed.

Max refilled his cup. "Well, I once watched my campus' basketball team practice, and they're tall too. I mean, yeah, they're supposed to be tall but how can we be as tall as them?"

"Natural selection, I guess."

The panther chuckled, then turned to Tom. "How tall is Kevin again?"

"I think he's 191, too, since he looks as tall as Max."

"Yeah, but don't they have that... uh... Darius? He's like 200 or something."

"I didn't remember."

Tom shrugged. "Darius is a horse so he kind of got the species advantage."

"Aren't giraffes the tallest species?"

"Tell me how many giraffes you've seen in your entire life." Max asked Lucas as he sipped his beer.

"Well... two."

"Right."

Tom chuckled.

"Eh, dude, wanna play some PlayStation?" Ronald said, standing up.

"Sure." Octo gulped his drink in one go. "You coming too, Tom?"

The wolf looked at the otter, then back at the panther. "Uh, okay."

"I'll go take care of Martinez." Paul stood up too. "He's a heavy drinker so I'm pretty sure he's out of his mind right now."

"Come on! You're leaving already?"

"You can mess around with Max." Octo said to the coyote, giving him a wink.

Max just looked at Octo with a frown, not impressed.

Tom nodded at him as if asking for his permission. He just flashed the wolf a smile.

"So," Max said when they were alone, his tail waving lazily. He took a sip from his cup and leant on the counter. "that your boyfriend?"

Lucas scratched his nape and said bashfully. "Erm, yeah."

"He looks cool."

"Thanks."

"I thought you were into guys bigger than you." He casually asked him.

"Yeah, but he's pretty hot." The coyote grinned at him, but it still came out bashfully.

He had to admit, Lucas was hot. He was lean like Octo; his body was more suited to a basketball player than a football player. He was handsome in a rough way, too, and he had the personality to match it. However, as they got to know each other, he realised the coyote was actually more like a more cheerful Tom, even down to the honesty. He just kept up the tough personality to go with his tough looks.

The shepherd gave him an honest smile. "I'm happy you can move on from me."

Lucas looked away as his ears went down. "Stop that or you're gonna make me red."

Max laughed.

"I wonder how I liked an idiot like you." The coyote punched his arm softly and laughed along.

Max grinned and wiggled his brows. "Come on, nobody escapes my charm."

"Your charm my ass."

They laughed again.

"Really, though, I started to get closer to him a few months after you went back." explained Lucas. "He's my junior, one year under me. We met in the dance club before I resigned, but we only got closer after that intercultural festival his class had to organize."

"Sounds like a cute anime story."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "You take that back."

"Not even sorry. So what happened next?"

The coyote poured himself another drink. "Well, it turned out he's gay and we went out. I told you about a week after we became a thing."

"Did candies fall from the sky with a rainbow on it?"

Lucas let out an exasperated sigh. Max just grinned and his tail wagged.

"Yeah, then we ate the candies. Happy?"

Max laughed again.

"Wanna hear how we did it in the bed?"

Max abruptly stopped laughing. "Wait what?"

This time, Lucas laughed.

Disclaimer: I've never done a research on friendships before, so please bear with me xD