

Reaching for the Stars – by Haštse Apxan

Chapter 39: The Touch You Missed

Warning: This chapter contains mild violence and blood.

“What’s with you?”

That question hit him like a truck even though John asked it gently. They were having a coffee at a café near Tom’s place. The place had a pleasant air, gentle and calming, but it had no effect on him. The cup of coffee innocently stared back at him, almost like feeling sad that he hadn’t taken a sip.

The Doberman in front of him put his own cup of coffee back down. John looked at him with a soft expression, but to Max it was an intense glare. John was silently—no, outright judging him.

Even without answering, the German Shepherd feared the implications. What was with him? What happened back earlier? He was just defending and protecting the wolf from Kevin’s horny remarks, right? “I-I just... I...”

The Doberman didn’t answer, only stayed quiet to allow him to continue.

“I just... Kevin was making inappropriate comments of Tom.”

“That I know, but I don’t understand that and what happened before that, Max. It seems like you’re jealous, sometimes even possessive.”

Was he jealous of Tom? Was he possessive of Tom? If so, why? Did the wolf even know about it? Why did Max do this in the first place? He looked up to John, feeling confused, although he knew whatever question the Doberman gave would leave him even more confused.

That was exactly what happened. “I’m not doubting you, Max, but do you... do you have feelings for Tom?”

If the last question made him feel like he was hit by a truck, now he felt like he was hit by a train... two trains... heck, an aeroplane because now, that made him doubt one of the most fundamental things about himself.

“Max,” John started again in a soft tone. He knew this was serious because the Doberman hadn’t been speaking in his dialect. “I know you don’t like it when people assume that you’re not straight, but this time it’s important. Tonight is not the first time it happened. You’ve been very close with Tom, that’s understandable. However, you’ve also been glaring and sometimes barking at Octo, Andy, heck, at me too when we were close with Tom. You’ve almost always been keeping Tom near you but far from the others. You’re still my captain, Max, and I respect you, but you’re also my little brother, too.”

Letting out a frustrated sigh, the shepherd pushed his coffee forward and slumped on the table. "I don't fucking know, okay! I don't fucking know what happened!"

Maybe he really was not as straight as he assumed? Wait, one didn't need to be gay to have feelings for a guy, right? Wait, did he even have feelings for guys?

"Fuck!" He hit the table.

John simply reached out and patted his head. Max could only let him, too deep in his own thoughts. Was Tom at fault here? Looking back at it, the wolf was the one who kissed him that day, making him debate whether he was straight or not for enjoying that kiss. Yet, that was just a kiss, nothing more. That was just his loss in a game. Now, Tom didn't do anything. It was Max himself who decided to help him, cuddle with him, and protect him through his depression.

He... was just protecting the wolf, right? That didn't mean he had feelings for the wolf, right?

Right?

"It's okay, Max." John said again. "It's okay to doubt yourself."

He turned his head to the other dog and growled low, but John didn't flinch at his act of aggression.

"You know, I had similar doubts myself. I used to like a guy back when I was in my old job." The Doberman pulled his hand away. "I didn't even realise I liked him. It just felt... right when he was around."

"If this is a story of you fucking a guy, then I'm not fucking listening!"

John took a sip from his cup. "That's the point, Max. Being gay isn't just wanting to do a guy. That also means liking a guy emotionally. No one is 100% straight, neither you nor me. I didn't like him sexually, at all. I never wanted to do things with him. As you know, I'm about to be engaged to my girlfriend in a few weeks, yet I'm not denying I had some experiences with guys. There's nothing wrong with liking a guy, Max."

The shepherd looked away and whined in defeat. It had to be the most logical explanation. "So... you're saying that I... might be gay..."

Chuckling a little, John pushed his cup forward. "Bis exist, you know? Also drink your coffee before it gets cold."

Max looked at the cup of coffee, then gave up and took a sip.

"Besides, you don't have to put labels on it if you don't want to. Remember, you are what you believe. So what if you like a guy? You can choose to act on it or just put it aside. Who knew, maybe you're bi with preference to women." John

finished his coffee. "If you want to know more, maybe ask Octo about this. I sure know about this stuff, but I'm no bi."

That sentence rang inside his mind. *So what if you like a guy?* What was wrong with liking a guy? Societal problems with homosexuality aside, there really was nothing wrong, right? It wasn't something you could choose to do.

Yet, that was what he chose to do, to like girls. Even if he actually *were* bi, he still chose to like girls.

Or *did* he?

That day after he confronted Tom in his dorm, he remembered what happened the morning after. Unlike the previous times in which they slept together, this time he woke up first with Tom still in his arms. If that didn't already sound gay enough, he remembered that he was hard, that his body chose that exact moment to grind his dick up the sleeping wolf's arse. He was half-conscious, sure, but when he realised what was happening, he tore himself away from the wolf in fear and disgust. That was normal, he rationally thought, it was just morning wood and his pants were too tight and instead of a girl, Tom just happened to be there. That it was not an indication that he was interested in Tom or in guys in general.

After he woke up enough, he went to the showers to angrily and confusedly rub one out. He left his phone and jacket in the wolf's dorm, not wanting the wolf to think that he left him when he woke up while he was in the showers. When he returned, the wolf was still sleeping, fortunately.

"That's a question you can only answer yourself, Max." John said as if knowing that he was thinking about it. "But don't drag Tom into this. He's innocent. I don't know whether he's gay or not, but *you're* the one who couldn't control your emotion."

Yeah... Tom was innocent. This was his own possessive arse's doing and he didn't know what caused it. Was it just because he wanted to protect the wolf or was there some other ulterior, more vague motive? He didn't know. He didn't even think about it.

...wait.

Was Tom fully innocent? The wolf had been giving him those lines... no... maybe? Was the wolf just trying some pick-up lines or were those really real and for him? Did Tom also like him?

Everything he knew about the wolf screamed no. Tom was simply trying to lighten the mood. Tom was simply trying to make jokes. Tom was simply trying to keep the conversation going so that he wouldn't be alone with his thoughts...

...was Tom?

If this were just because of something that Tom didn't mean to do like that kiss back at Octo's, he might just shrug it off... only to doubt himself and ghost everyone later. He didn't want to do that again.

"Think about it, Max. It's hard for you, I know, but please don't make us pay for what only you can resolve." John gave his head a pet again, smiling at him while doing so. "Speaking of pay, I'm paying for our coffee. I hafta get to the party before they look for me. See you tomorrow, dog. My number's open if you wanna give me a call." He said before standing up and walking away.

"See you tomorrow, dog," Max said softly, staring at John's back as he left. The Doberman stopped at the cashier, then paid for their drinks before walking away. "and thanks."

With John gone, Max buried his face in his arms, snout bumping against the table. The smell of the freshly cleaned surface mixed with his own smell after slumping on it hit his nose, but it felt rather... comforting. As if... it had always been there, he was just the one who smelled it right now. There was also something else... something familiar...

Pretzel!

The dog looked up and smiled, but that smile quickly disappeared and he slumped in the seat. Somehow, his mind was flooded with the memories of those days when he watched his mother baking pretzels. It was one of his favourite pastries; it seemed easy and fun to be made and delicious to be eaten.

Yet... he also remembered those days when he gave up trying to learn how to make it. It looked easy, sure, but when he tried himself, it was actually not that easy. In fact, it was more complicated than mere bread because it wasn't easy for him to get the right thickness and to make the knot. Although now he was more than able to bake it, that remained something he didn't really want to remember.

Max took his cup of coffee and drank it. It was cool now, nothing like the gentle warmth as before. He put the cup down and looked at it, at his reflection looking back at him on the uneven surface of the black drink. Being a coffee enthusiast, he knew very well the history of coffee, how it came from a humble origin to the very drink that played a big part in the Renaissance.

Perhaps that was his answer. Nothing was eternal. Everything changed, everyone changed. Everything happened for a reason. Was it for the better? Not always.

As he took a deep sigh, the dog couldn't help but smile a little. Such profound thoughts after a cup of coffee.

Still, maybe... just maybe, he didn't have to decide now. Max wasn't brave enough yet, not when truth was something hard to swallow. Maybe it was... ugh... really true that he was... fuck this shit... bi with a preference for women...

Whatever the case, it still made him question why was he protecting Tom. Was it really because he simply wanted to? Or was it because he really had feelings for the wolf?

Maybe the answers had always been there, but it was just now he noticed them.

The shepherd sighed. Who was Tom, anyway? He never really took the time to get to know the wolf. Tom could be so open yet so closed at the same time, it was rather disturbing. He wanted to get to know him better. He wanted the wolf to know that he cared. He wanted to understand Tom and why Tom was Tom... w-wait.

Was that really an indication that he had feelings for the wolf? Why did he want to get to know him that badly? Heck, he didn't even care much about Andy! Although the lion was a very good friend of his, he never really felt like wanting to know more about the lion. As for Tom... how could he write an essay in only a day? What colour of scarf did he like? Would he allow Max to brush him?

At that last thought, the dog's ears went down as he blushed. Y-yeah, probably a definitive answer that he had feelings for Tom. Even for canines, brushing was something personal to do. Being naked is one thing, being touched is another, yet brushing each other was on a whole new level that required both participants to be very close, be it in a pack, a family member, or a significant other.

Oh wow. Oh fuck. *Oh fuck.* He really had feelings for him, didn't he?

Max just finished his coffee in a gulp. Fuck Kevin. Fuck Tom. Fuck this. Fuck all of this for making him wonder if he didn't actually know everything about himself.

Yet...

He put the cup down. He really did not know everything about himself. No one knew everything about themselves. The dog buried his face in his arms, sighing softly. What a disappointment was he, defeated just because he realised that he had feelings for a guy.

However, as his sighs turned into sobs, he could only berate himself for admitting that yes, he might have feelings for the wolf. Yes, he didn't want to see Tom being hurt and being cast aside. Yes, he wanted to be someone the wolf could depend on... he wanted to protect the wolf.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He... couldn't do this. He should fucking take that pill and shove it down his throat. It tasted uncanny, like someone made it using the things that he despised just to spite him. Truth really tasted like shite sometimes, didn't it?

Wiping his tears away, Max looked at the empty glass in front of him. He might need another drink, this time stronger and preferably more alcoholic, and a pretzel. Pretzel. A familiar food. Something familiar. A semblance of familiarity about what he knew about himself.

A semblance of familiarity that yes, he liked pretzel. That yes, he still knew himself, but he wanted to know more. Admitting that he might have feelings for Tom didn't change who was he. He was still the same Max that everyone knew, that he himself knew.

Whether or not he decided to act on these feelings, that was for later as Wyrd, Worth, and Should guided him.

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A soft cry woke him up. It felt like a gentle nudge, waking him up from slumber. Tom rolled over on the bed, silently saying "five more minutes".

However, the more he tried to sleep again, the more the cry became louder. When the cry turned into a rasp, he opened his eyes and woke up. His ears scanned the room, trying to pinpoint the origin of the sound.

"Three hundred seventy-two." The voice sobbed. *"Three hundred sixty-six."*

That sounded creepily familiar. It sounded like someone was crying while counting. It brought up some... unpleasant memories. Those days when he could only hug himself tight, counting down to take his mind off the pain. It was a trick that he had learned.

Brows furrowed, he sat up and looked over the room. He was in his flat, in his room... but there was something off. His room seemed to be a bit darker than usual, even with the moonlight through the window.

His fur bristled in alarm. He always closed the curtains.

"Octo, wake up." He tried to wake the panther next to him, but when he looked at the other side of the bed, there was nobody.

Something was off.

Pushing the blanket away, he stood up and turned the bedside lamp on. At least it could turn on. Now, though, he smelled something familiar... something he'd become friends with... blood.

"Three hundred forty-two." followed by a shriek.

His ears flattened. The sound was becoming louder. He then walked to the door, clamping his tail close to his legs. What was this?

He cautiously opened the door with a creak. The short hallway was dark, but the living room lamp was lit, dimly lit. Here, the voice was clearer, and it sounded like...

"Max?" he softly rasped.

"Three hundred... thirty-six..."

Walking slowly towards the dimly lit living room, the wolf prepared himself. "Max?" The cry sounded hopeless, anxious. As if whatever happened had reduced the dog into nothing more than a shadow of his former self.

And it did. When Tom finally reached the living room, what he saw shook him. His fur all bristled at the sight.

Max was tied to a chair, blindfolded, his clothes torn and battered. Claw marks were everywhere on his body, even on his snout. Blood was dripping into the floor, the colour intensified by the sole lamp above him.

"Three hundred..." the cry went softer as his voice wavered. "th-thirty..."

Just when he was about to run into him, he realised something was standing behind him... no, *someone*.

He saw... himself... grinning... at the dog in front of him.

He took a step back and trembled.

That other Tom walked into the light, a sickly sweet smile on his snout. He circled the dog quietly, almost soundlessly. That other Tom had his silence. Then he softly caressed the dog's cheek, earning more sobs. He ran his hand through the scar on his snout, then licked up the blood on his paw.

"Three hundred...?"

Max rasped. "Tom... please..."

"Three hundred...?" he said as put claws out in front of the dog's nose.

"Three... hu-hundred... twenty... four..."

"Good Max." He leant forward and kissed the dog on the forehead. "This time I might push it a little bit more."

"Tom, Tom! Please! S-stop this!"

The dog's cries went ignored as the wolf walked behind him, claws ready. He then made a slash on the dog's back, all the while Max was thrashing and screaming in the chair. He continued creating that trail of blood to his shoulder.

"Three hundred?"

"Th-three... hundred..." the dog said in between cries. "e-eighteen!"

Max heaved for air when that Tom was done, fresh blood dripping from the new scar. He cried, sobbing... broken.

That other Tom then looked up to him, his eyes wide, his grin wide. His expression was crazy, like a madman. He lifted his bloody paw and licked the blood there. When Tom realised that that other Tom was staring at him with that maniacal grin and heterochromatic eyes, he felt the urge to succumb to himself...

"No, no!" he shouted as he took several steps back. "You're not me! I'm over you!"

He looked up. That other Tom was still staring.

"Stop! I have a life now!"

He heard a whisper. "Kill him. Make him yours." Then another. "No! Look away!"

He could only grip his ears and walked back as memories of being cornered overwhelmed him.

"Weak."

Tom jolted awake, eyes wide and breathing heavily. He frantically looked over the room he was in, trying to make sense of his surroundings. Everything looked... normal.

He let out a relieved sigh as his ears went up. That was just another nightmare.

Leaning on the headboard, he hugged his legs. That was a dream that he was sure would haunt him for a while. He gripped his head, glad that his eyepatch was still there. His eyes scanned the room cautiously; it looked normal and the curtains were still closed.

Fuck... Max had done nothing wrong... he must control the third voice before it could come out and make him hurt someone. Experience taught him to survive, being uncontrollable was an unfortunate side effect.

"Tom?"

He turned his head. Next to him was Octo, looking at him curiously with half-asleep eyes. That look turned worried when he saw the wolf's face. "Are you okay?"

"Ya, it's just..." he sighed and wiped his face. "Just a nightmare."

The panther yawned. "You sure? I'm here if you want to talk or cuddle."

"T-thanks, Oct."

"It's 4 in the morning, don't stay up too long." The panther said as he turned to lie on his back.

Tom closed his eyes, then let out another sigh and reached out for the bottle of water on the nightstand. That nightmare... why did it have to be Max? Why

couldn't it be... Rodrigo or someone else? Why Max? Was it because he wanted him so badly?

He put the bottle back and lay down again, pulling the blanket over himself. For some reason, he lost interest in sleeping. It was four in the morning anyway, he could stay up for just a few more hours.

However, this time there was someone next to him. Tom shifted closer to Octo, snuggling on his side. His scent was filling his nose, but like Max's, it calmed him. The panther's heartbeat calmed him, gently lulling him back into sleep. The panther's arm pulled him closer. Octo was another one he could touch to feel that he was still in this world.

He tried to sleep while snuggled on the panther's side, but the image had been too vivid.

"Ssh." he heard a whisper before realising that it was Lain inside his mind. *"Sleep now. I'll take care of that."*

"Thanks, Lain."

"Hush, sleep."

He didn't know how long he stayed like that while still awake. All that he remembered was that the sun had risen when he was finally able to sleep.

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At first, he felt disgusted. Then, he felt repulsed. Then, he felt numb.

As Rodrigo listened intently to what Big Boss was saying, he could only wish for the worst. With this much information, he expected this mission to fail spectacularly. They had this much information yet no one bothered to look up his name.

His fucking *name*.

The bison clicked his tongue silently. If this weren't incompetence, then he didn't know what was. While Big Boss was capable of leading this operation, he was also known for being crazy and obsessive. In fact, he wasn't even sure why they kept targeting Red Wolf other than Big Boss thought it was a good past-time.

Still, with the plan done, he could not deny his superiors. Even he knew his direct superior did not like this plan and did not like that Rodrigo was in it just because he had experience with Red Wolf. Yet, when Big Boss said A, it would be A.

This was not the first assassination attempt he did, yet he really wished this were his last.

Red Wolf was ruthless yet caring, deadly yet soft. Rodrigo just did not understand him while at the same time hated him. He owed that wolf for sparing

his life in that cold alleyway. Was he crazy enough to deny this mission? Not really since the torture chamber would be waiting for him.

Times like these, he wanted to be arrested by the police instead. The punishment for drug trafficking was 10 years of jail and rehabilitation. The prison system in South Iceland was a lot better than in some countries, he found out, so he wished to be caught in action and detained.

However, that would only grant him 10 years of respite. The mafia group would find him quickly after he was released and before he knew it, he would be involved again.

The bison sighed. Big Boss was monologuing again. He could only close his eyes and wait.

This started as a guy being confused about their sexuality, how did this turn into a guy outright debating his existence???

Wyrd, Worth, Should = English versions of the Norns in Norse (< Germanic) mythology. They are the keepers of Fate.

...I should probably stop reading too much into mythologies smh