

# Reaching for the Stars – by Haştse Apxan

## Chapter 52: Crying in Blood

*Small note: Since the concept of “alphas” in wolf packs is outdated now, I won't be using that. In this universe, what we call a “pack” is just an informal way of saying “family” since in real life, a wolf pack usually consists of one family (parents and their children). This is also the reason for the tight familial bonds the wolves have in this universe. What we used to call “alphas” are just called parents or informally leaders, big brothers/sisters, or formally head of the family.*

*However, a wolf can become another's “alpha” without any blood relations. Since wolves have a tight familial bond, wolves living far from their families usually form impromptu packs with other wolves despite having no blood relations. This is how Tom and Kevin became close and thought of each other as brothers; they found that they had no one to hold onto and began looking out for each other, with Tom taking more responsibility at first and Kevin adjusted from there. How Kevin came to see Tom as a big brother is not strictly because Tom managed to beat him, but also because Tom has been taking care of him.*

*Also, this concept of tight familial bonds is not limited to wolves, but also to other species that form “packs” in real life, such as lions, coyotes, sheep, and hyenas, though the extent to which they exhibit this concept vary highly even within the same species.*

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Kevin stared at the ceilings, his mind too hazy. The rays of the sun through the windows woke him up. He wanted to go back to sleep, but it was already late in the morning. The empty spot beside him smelled like Tom, and so did the room. He then sat up, gripping his head, then flinched a bit when he felt something on his back sting. Finally able to think clearly, he stared at his hands.

He was disappointed in himself for acting without thinking again.

Yesterday felt like a million things happened. He remembered attacking Tom, then crying on his shoulder. Afterwards, he remembered staring at the wall as he sat on the bed with Tom cleaning the scar on his back. Almost no words were spoken last night, yet he felt like two heavy burdens had been lifted from his shoulders. Then, in the night, he lay on the bed, hugging Tom close, trying his best not to cry on his shoulder again.

His bed was small, but last night was one of those rare times when he felt it wasn't empty. He felt warmth seep into his body, expelling the coldness away. His heart felt content. There was nothing that he was holding back.

The bathroom then opened and someone went out. Not long after, Tom came bringing a bowl of porridge and a cup of hot chocolate. He wasn't wearing any t-shirt, the bandage on his shoulder on display. That small, clipped part of his

ear coupled with his red eyes made him look somewhat dangerous. Kevin realised that for someone his size, he had decent muscles, which could explain his strength.

Most glaring of all, though, were the many scars and fur gaps on his body. They weren't noticeable at first, but under the sunlight, he could see them clearly. Some looked big enough to make a bald spot, hidden by the fur gaps. Even on his back under the fluff, there was something that looked like long slash marks.

How did he get those? A runaway accident would very unlikely give him so many scars. Some of them even looked like they'd been there for a long time. What kind of upbringing did Tom go through to earn that many scars? Not even Kevin's own scars were this many.

"Breakfast." The smaller wolf put the tray on the nightstand. Tom then sighed but didn't look at him. Kevin only stared at that tray of breakfast, but his mind wasn't there.

What happened last night felt somewhat refreshing. For the first time in a while, he didn't feel the need to have everything under control. He could let his emotions out, the anger and helplessness that he had been building inside could finally come out. That was rather ironic since he thought of himself as someone who usually went with the flow. His wolvern pride was hurt, but in his own pack, it didn't matter.

Tom then sat beside him on the bed. Kevin looked at the grey wolf, reminded just how much the size difference was between them. Tom was average, but Kevin was big. Yet even despite that, the grey wolf was still able to dominate him. Strength alone wouldn't do; wolves needed wit and teamwork, both of which Kevin did not have. He might be stronger, but he must admit he wasn't as smart as Tom.

Looking at the bandages on Tom's shoulder, Kevin felt guilty and proud. He felt guilty because he lost control and hurt the smaller wolf, but he also felt proud because he was under one strong wolf. Tom didn't flinch when he was cleaning the wound, unlike him and his back. Heck, he didn't even flinch as he bandaged it himself.

"Last night was... well..." the smaller wolf said, snapping him out of his trance. He didn't continue, just letting out a small sigh and before going quiet.

Kevin hugged his legs, feeling small all of a sudden. When Tom turned to look at him, he tried to release them, but the cold feeling around him didn't allow him to. He... didn't want to look weak as he must be... but...

Looking at him, Tom reached out and stroked his forearm. "I'm sorry for last night." He sighed. "We... we both needed that."

*No, don't apologize.*

"I may sound selfish, but I know the feeling of being a lone wolf, Kev. Please don't bottle it up; it didn't end well with me. I'm here, it's okay to talk to me. I want to help." Tom softly said. "I don't want you to end up hurting yourself like me."

The red wolf looked at him. Tom had been acting like a big brother. At first, Kevin just thought that the grey wolf was just joking around, but nowadays, he really did seem to look at Tom as a big brother, the one in charge.

Kevin hated to think that he was happy because of that.

He crossed his legs and took the cup of hot chocolate from the tray, taking a sip to calm his content heart. He hated to admit that Tom was right; he had been keeping everything himself. He had no one to trust and he couldn't afford to look weak in front of people. Despite having a big brother who was supposed to take care of him since his father left, he was instead left alone. He knew he couldn't depend on his mother forever, even more so because of her ageing self, that was why he must make a living for himself.

He must one day be the one in charge of himself, and later, of his own family. That wasn't a light responsibility, and Kevin wasn't even sure if he could do the first one, not when his own father could not. He had a fight with his brother a few days ago, his brother saying that he had no hope of ever having a family for being gay.

Since he woke up, his ears were flat, but when Tom reached out to stroke his muzzle, they went up as he fought the urge to lean into the touch. Kevin hated to think that this was something he had been missing. However, he couldn't fight it—*was tired* to fight it. He closed his eyes and leant into the touch, tail starting to wag softly beside him. His ears went down again, but this time it was out of content.

The grey wolf shifted closer. Kevin lowered his head when Tom's hand neared his head, allowing the grey wolf to stroke his hair. He rumbled a contented grunt, elongating his legs and putting the cup down on his lap. Tom chuckled, and Kevin opened his eyes and growled softly at the smaller wolf, but he thought it might be hard to take him seriously when he was being petted like this.

After a while, the hand pulled away and Kevin sighed. He sipped the hot chocolate again and almost whispered, "Th... th-thanks..."

The grey wolf didn't answer, but he put his hand on his chest with a smile. Kevin looked down at his hand on his chest. Tom looked at it too. Then, when they realised that they weren't wearing any tops, Tom pulled away almost embarrassedly. Kevin could only chuckle at that.

Even when he had control, he didn't abuse it. Unlike someone he despised...

Speaking of,

Kevin's chuckle died down, replaced with a quiet sigh. He looked down at his lap and asked the grey wolf directly, "Why did you lie to me?"

Tom looked away, shame on his face. For a while, he didn't answer. Kevin put the cup back on the nightstand, knocking a basketball-playing wolf figurine he'd gotten from Chick-er-ed. He smiled in longing as he put it back to its correct pose, then turned his head back when Tom spoke up. "Because I wanted to protect myself."

Kevin stared at him, waiting for him to continue.

"Truthfully, Kev, I won't deny it, you're hot. I... I was sexually attracted to you."

The red wolf's ears went up.

"But that's a problem for me. Selfish, I know, but I... I've never done anything with anyone, a-and I don't want my first time to be... to be a one-night stand. You seemed to me like you wanted it, so... uh, I took the easy route and told you I'm not gay." His ears flattened. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I was a coward, I know."

This time, Kevin quietly sighed and pulled the smaller wolf to his hold. He didn't say anything; he felt betrayed and taken advantage of, but now, content that he knew the answer. That really was his first intention, to get the grey wolf to a bed. It didn't matter anyway; if Tom had accepted it back then, they mightn't have become what they were now.

He pulled the smaller wolf to sit on his lap, taking in his sweet, soft scent. His words, his voice calmed him down. "If I asked you to do it just once, would you do it?" Kevin asked Tom as he put his muzzle on the grey wolf's unbandaged shoulder, hugging him close.

The grey wolf in his hold didn't answer right away. Kevin didn't want to hug him too tightly to not hurt his bandaged shoulder even more. Maybe that question was too direct, but that was the safest route for them. Kevin did not want to probe deeper, and neither did Tom seem to.

He touched the grey wolf everywhere while still mindful of the bandages and scars; his chest, his arms, his stomach, and he felt the strength inside. His muscles were developed despite how they looked. Kevin also realised how much was Tom holding back too if his scars were any indication. Kevin considered himself to be a person of bad upbringing, yet Tom must've seen more things than him.

Tom shifted, and then said, "I-I'm sorry, no. I... I have a boyfriend."

Despite himself, Kevin chuckled sadly. "Wish I could be as faithful as you."

"Why couldn't you?"

Silence overcame them again as he closed his eyes, idly stroking the grey wolf's arm. Besides sex, he rarely got physical, especially as close as this with someone else, not even with other wolves. For once, the need for physical contact inside him was resurfacing.

Kevin then took a deep sigh. He couldn't pinpoint exactly why couldn't he. There were several reasons, survival, money, satisfaction, recognition, but his thoughts were muddled and all he could say was, "I just couldn't."

Such a horny wolf was he, bent over by unspoken societal demands without even feeling the need to look up.

Tom only sighed, not responding to it. It might upset the smaller wolf, but he didn't show it. "We're wolves of the pack, aren't we?" He instead said with a sad tone, changing the topic. "Lone wolves of the pack."

Kevin's strokes became slower, but eventually, as he remembered the reason he went to Barrowise, he answered, "Yeah, we are."

They remained quiet after that. Kevin watched as the porridge on the nightstand was becoming cold, but he didn't mind. He could now feel soft touches he didn't know he was yearning for. The air around them was soft but somewhat sad. He didn't mind; at least for once, he could accept warmth.

A train of thought caught itself mid-track, and he couldn't stop himself from saying, "You know, bros don't cuddle like this."

Tom chuckled at that. "Now you admit you cuddle?"

He only buried his nose in the grey wolf's fluff, mindful of the bandages. "Don't tell anyone."

"Sure. Now keep cuddling me like a plush toy."

"Dunno man, seems kinda gay to me."

"Says the one who's tried to get me to bed."

Kevin rumbled a small laugh. He wasn't sure if he had been rubbing off on the grey wolf or the other way around. He nuzzled Tom's neck, enjoying the physical contact. Maybe he needed this more than he would want to admit. Tom felt warm, strong, and surprisingly coarse.

Smiling to himself, he hugged the wolf a bit tighter. It felt nice to let go sometimes. It felt nice to hold another wolf close like this. He felt free, unrestrained, and... not alone.

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Max pressed the bell button with a sigh. Tom stayed over at Kevin's place last night, and he hoped everything was well. He talked to Octo about it, but it only

made him worry even more. The panther said that Tom came in while they were having a fight, then he walked out to give them some privacy.

Although Tom said they were okay now and he'd come home later in the afternoon, he was still worried. More at Tom, but also at Kevin. He had seen what Tom was capable of. Despite how much he hated the red wolf for saying all those things to Tom, even he didn't deserve death by... his friend.

He let out another sigh and crossed his arms in nervousness. He didn't want to think about any of them walking with blood in their clothes. Kevin was as stubborn as a rock, so he hoped Tom was still careful enough around him. He also hoped Tom wouldn't do anything dangerous... he didn't want a repeat of what happened in that alleyway...

The shepherd couldn't even tell whose fault was it. Normally, as the captain, he was used to being the middleman to resolve problems in the football club whether he liked it or not. Sometimes—well, often—John helped him out. Yesterday, Tom kept insisting that it was his fault. Max at first thought that it was just because Kevin was pushing him too much, but as the grey wolf explained what actually happened, Max... wasn't sure. He just hoped they could resolve things.

Max knew he needed the strength to do so. Kevin got balls for saying those things to Tom. As friendly as the red wolf was, he was still an asshole sometimes, no, more than that. Max just hoped he wouldn't need to see him again so soon.

His thoughts went away when Lucas opened the door, shirtless with a towel around his waist. His fur puffed out, but the coyote didn't seem to care. "Hey, Max. Come in!" the coyote said with a smile.

Max forced the thoughts away and smiled as he went inside. The coyote's flat was tidy, though a bit musky. Seemed like Lucas hadn't really been taking care of it much. Max wouldn't complain, though, since he knew the coyote was busy lately.

"Sorry, I was taking shower." Lucas said as Max sat down on the sofa. "Just got back from extra Saturday shift. The folks invited me for a quick drink." He held his head and chuckled. "And maybe I'm still a bit drunk."

He looked at the coyote, intrigued. It wasn't every day he saw the coyote shirtless and his tribal tattoo on his upper right arm exposed. It was just a continuous red line on the coyote's upper arm, making a kind of spring. "You have work on Saturday?"

Lucas crossed his arms over his bare torso and sighed. "Yeah. There were so many things at work right now. I just want my overtime pay now." He then smiled and walked away. "Lemme get dressed and get you something."

A few moments later, he came back, fully dressed in casual clothes and with two glasses of cold water in his hand. Sitting next to the dog on the sofa, Lucas put the glasses on the table. "So... you said you got something to tell me?"

Max decided that he might tease the coyote a little bit to help himself calm down. It had been a while. "It's a bit hot here." he said as he took his jacket off. The t-shirt he was wearing wasn't really tight, but he knew Lucas could get riled up quite easily, especially with him being a bit drunk.

The coyote stared at him as Max leant back on the sofa and drank the water with a suggestive grin on his face. He then blushed and put a pillow on his lap. "Need me to turn the AC on?"

"Nah. This is okay." Max wiggled his eyebrows.

Although they teased each other pretty often, Max didn't want Lucas to think that he was interested in the coyote, so he kept his teasing to the minimum—at least what he thought was the minimum. This time, Lucas only drank from his own glass while eyeing him up and down.

Then he remembered that he had a boyfriend now, and his smirk faltered a bit.

"Still a huge tease, eh?" the coyote rolled his eyes. "So, what is it?"

Yeah, no matter how hard he tried, telling that he had a boyfriend now was still difficult. Especially to Lucas; he knew he was a bloody hypocrite by telling that to him, but he deserved to know. Truthfully, just being here made him feel guilty. It was like telling his ex that he had a new girlfriend just a week after breaking up... or telling someone who used to have a crush on him that he now had a girlfriend...

He looked up at Lucas; the coyote was watching the television easily. He really looked like he had fully moved on, but Max still remembered that disappointed, sad look the night he turned him down. Lucas was a nice guy, but he didn't feel any attraction towards the coyote. Fortunately, the coyote took it well. Lucas understood that he wasn't interested, and while the scar was quite visible for him, the coyote kept insisting that it was okay.

Looking back at it, he was glad he took the coyote seriously back then. Now, though, he felt like an arsehole eating his own words. However, it must be done; if anything, Lucas deserved to know.

"You... don't be angry, alright?" He asked the coyote, nervousness seeping into his words.

The coyote looked at him and chuckled. "Alright. Want some pinky promise?"

Max smiled a bit at that, but then it fell as he looked away bashfully. "So... I... uh..."

Lucas stared at him curiously.

"Tom and I... we're boyfriends now."

He didn't dare look at the coyote in fear of his reaction, but he braced himself and looked up. The coyote looked surprised, frozen on the spot with his muzzle open in disbelief. "Y-you..."

The shepherd looked down and uttered a small "Sorry."

"You and... Tom... boyfriends...?"

He didn't answer. Suddenly, the room seemed quiet, even the television sounded too loud for its volume. He was fucked up, he knew.

"M-Max... are you... are you bi?"

"M-maybe... I'm really confused right now... but I want to try it." He said, defeated.

He then looked up to find Lucas already recovered, though still with disbelief on his face. The coyote smiled softly at him. "I'm glad you could move on from me."

"W-what?!"

Fortunately, that broke the ice.

Lucas laughed as Max was entirely red. The shepherd felt like he wanted to yank the coyote's wagging tail for making fun of him like that, but he was glad that the coyote took it well, better than what he thought. Smirking crookedly, he wiggled his eyebrows and said to Max, "Apparently I did turn you bi, after all! Wonder how many dicks you had."

Why did people like to tease him about it?! ...oh well, it came with the package, he guessed.

Although, despite that usual playful smirk, Max caught some hints of disappointment there. His ears were on half-mast, and his tail wasn't wagging as high as it usually did. His fur was matted, almost flush with his body. It only intensified the guilt he was feeling.

But they all disappeared forcibly when Lucas reached out to take his glass and drank it, that forced playful grin back into place.

"So, you're bi but in beta then? That means I can make gay jokes on you!" He laughed, then leant forward with a glint of mischief in his eyes. "Now, you need to level up your gayness!"

"Fuck you, du—no wait *no!*" He quickly corrected himself before a repeat of his encounter with Kevin happened again.



And it did. Of course it did. "Oh, you wanna fuck me instead?" Lucas fucking blushed and asked him with a grin.

Max tried to look disgusted, but well, it would happen eventually. "Thank you, but no."

"Come on, I won't judge."

"Luc, what th—"

He was abruptly cut when the coyote lunged forward. Max found himself mere centimetres away from the coyote's muzzle. Since when had he gotten so fast?! The other was ginning, and through the loose t-shirt he could see the other's body as he was all fours on the sofa.

They stared at each other. Max was becoming redder and redder as the coyote licked the side of his own muzzle.

Then, Lucas went closer, too close for his taste. The shepherd leant backwards to distance himself from the coyote, ears down, but Lucas crawled closer until he was effectively on top of the dog. He could smell his beer-laced breath intensely.

"U-uh, Luc?"

Very close like this, he now realised just how big Lucas actually was. To Max, he always looked like a nice guy, a good boy. Now he realised how close he was to Octo in terms of size and how dangerous he actually looked. Many told him that Lucas looked like a bad boy, but he always shrugged it off because, despite his black fur, Lucas was a nice guy. But now, staring at him lustfully with an open muzzle and a seductive grin...

"This is for that one time in the dorm." The coyote said. "Did you know how hard you made me?"

He squeaked. "Uh, no?"

"I can tease you 'cause I can't get you hard, right?" He chuckled, but then leant even closer. "*Or can I?*"

"D-dude, get away from me!"

Lucas finally gave him mercy. He pulled away and laughed loudly, sitting back on his spot on the other side of the sofa. Relief washed over him and Max finally let out the breath he didn't know he had been holding back. "Y-you... I-I could report you for sexual assault!"

Still with that heated gaze, the coyote smirked lopsidedly at him. "Sexual, eh?"

"Y-yeah! Y-you violated my personal space!"

"Says the one who didn't even have that concept."

Maybe he deserved that for teasing the coyote too much. Max took the cold water down, his ears still refusing to go up. He might need a cold shower back home.

"Do you want to make it 'sexual', though?"

Yes, definitely a cold shower. The coldest one. -50 degrees would be a great choice.

"So, how?"

Max looked at him. That bastard was now blushing cutely. "It's... uh... kinda hard to explain, but... it happened. He asked me out, I agreed." He scratched his cheek nervously. "Although I was the one who forced him to ask me out anyway, so yeah I'm to blame."

"Aw, I should've flirted with you until you forced me to ask you out."

"That won't work."

"Would a blowjob work?"

"Hell no." the dog replied instantly.

Lucas laughed. He then stood up and went to the kitchen. "Want some sausage with white mayo?"

"Ugh, fuck no!"

"Respect your senior!"

"W-what do you want me to do, calling you 'sir'?!"

"'Daddy' is a good start."

Max gripped his face and groaned. "*Fuck you!*"