

# Reaching for the Stars – by Haátsse Apxan

## Chapter 41: The Lone Lamp

“Haaah!”

Lucas stretched his body. Sitting in a chair all day felt really tiring. Somehow, he missed the green field, the classes, even the homework. He had been sitting all day in the office and now he had to sit again in the metro. Not that he was complaining; here he could lean his back against the wall or even put his legs on the seat if he wanted.

His thoughts wandered to the girl trio in the office, then he sighed. He wouldn't go as far as to call them horny bitches but... well... okay, he knew he was handsome, and some people had a thing with black fur and canines and he was a black coyote so... yeah.

Next to him, Tom yawned. That eyepatch made him look rather scary, but his soft smile didn't completely wash away the friendly look. He missed the wolf; really, Tom was the only one who could keep him entertained in the office. Granted, the wolf was not the chatty type, but still, having someone to be trusted was nice. And he was cute, too, in a way.

They were going to the bar tonight. Lucas only wanted some rounds with Tom, but since he was single now, meeting Mr Husky no longer seemed to be a bad idea. Heck, he could even ask for a private session, just without the usual pole dancing.

Lucas chuckled; Tom seemed tolerating, but would probably just sit there, dumbfounded, maybe uncomfortable. It would be too forward of him to invite the wolf to a private session with Mr Husky. However, Mr Husky was nice; he wouldn't just hit on customers. Besides, this bar wasn't all that horrible. No horny people were grinding on one another or anything in a way that might make them uncomfortable. The bartenders were kind of hot and flirty, though...

It never ceased to amaze him just how tolerant Barrowisle was. A bar can be both for gays and straights—bisexual bars, maybe? Here, gay bars didn't need to be hidden, while back in Hampstertown they were as rare and hidden as homosexuals themselves. He counted himself lucky to have tolerant college friends; his middle and elementary school friends had not been very open.

He... could like guys without anyone judging him.

*Next station: Old Highwall. The door will open on the right side.*

Glancing at his phone, it was now twenty. He nudged the wolf next to him and made a gesture to stand up.

“We're getting off here?”

“Yep, come on.”

They got off the metro at the station, then took the stairs and tapped their phones on the exit gate. The station wasn't packed at this hour, which made him glad.

He felt Tom's tail brushing against his hand. Looking down at the wolf, he could tell that he was nervous. “Hey, it's fine. It's just a regular bar. No one's gonna start grinding you out of nowhere.” He assured him.

“Y-yeah, just...” the wolf sighed. “I'm not really sure. Just... watch my back, okay?”

“Not your front, eh?”

Tom whacked his back softly.

They went out of the station. Lucas led him down the road. “It's not far from here. We'll just walk.”

“Sure. Anyway, when're we leaving? The last metro leaves at 23.”

“We'll take the tram if there's one or get an Over maybe.”

The road to the bar from the station was quite deserted. Lucas couldn't shake the eerie feeling off as they walked close to the almost abandoned buildings. There were occasionally unlit lamps on the side of the road, making the road look frightening. This was why he took the bus or an Over more often than the train.

Beside him, Tom didn't seem scared at all, though. The wolf kept walking like usual, not even bothered by the eerie atmosphere. His ears were still up and his tail was waving softly. Lucas walked slightly closer to him and kept his tail close between his legs, kind of regretting having chosen this road.

Finally, past one intersection, the buildings were livelier. They could see the bar sign a short distance away. *Pour 'n Co*, it wasn't really the catchiest name in his opinion, but the place was good. The coyote let out a relieved sigh, then noticed that now Tom was the one looking scared.

He put a reassuring arm around Tom's shoulder and urged him to come inside. “Don't worry, it's just a bar.”

“I've never been to a bar before, I've only been to pubs.” He said nervously. “Even not that often.”

He only stroked the wolf's fluff in encouragement.

They went past security easily, mainly because Lucas himself was as tall as them and put a stern look on his face. The guards did look at Tom for a bit but just shrugged it off. Lucas had a feeling that it might be because he was a regular here and so far, he never caused any trouble, not to mention one night, he met

Mr Husky right at the entrance and he was invited inside. Or maybe that eyepatch Tom was wearing made the wolf look more badass and dangerous.

The inside was loud like usual. The dance floor was full of people, but so far no one was getting too touchy. Well, except a few who were holding their partner close, very close.

The coyote just chuckled and navigated to the bar. Jeremy greeted him brightly there and like usual, he was topless. Well, all male waiters here only wore braces while the female waitresses wore shirts and skirts. This was a bisexual bar after all.

Sometimes it still eluded his mind that there was such a thing in existence.

"Sup, Mr Dark?" Jeremy asked him as they sat down on the stool, smiling at them. "How's it goin'?"

He leant forward on the counter. "Pretty well, thanks."

"Hey, my eyes are up here."

"I wasn't checking you out." He replied with a light chuckle. "Honestly I came here too often that I know what you look like."

"That a compliment?"

They laughed.

The coyote then looked at Tom beside him. The wolf was only vaguely paying attention to them with lowered ears. He didn't even look at the bear in the eyes.

Lucas nudged him. "Hey, too early for the gay jokes?"

"N-no! Not that. It's just... loud." The wolf answered shyly.

"Come on, grey, you're in a bar and you complain about the loudness?" Jeremy laughed.

Lucas only looked at him and shook his head quickly, making gestures to tell him that Tom wasn't familiar here.

Fortunately, the bear got the message. "Oh, sorry, sorry." He said, speaking less loudly. "You want the regular, Mr Dark? How about you, wolf?"

It was a speciesist thing, but it was a normal thing here. Back home, it was very disrespectful. Even he still got a little offended whenever someone called him wolf or coyote or yote.

Well... wolves and coyotes looked almost the same anyway, but that was beside the point.

Tom turned to him after scanning the bar. "J-just some milk, please."

“You sure, buddy?”

“Y-ya.”

“Sure then. A glass of beer and a glass of milk coming up.”

Several minutes of looking at how cute was the wolf when he was nervous later, two glasses were put in front of them. Lucas quickly took a gulp and sighed, glad that he finally got a drink. Meanwhile, Tom only took a quick sip from his glass.

The bear came back to them and started to chat. “So, you’re new ‘round here, wolf?”

It was nice for the bear to lower his voice around Tom, Lucas noticed. Probably it came with the job to quickly adapt to people.

“Y-yeah. It’s my first time here.” Tom looked up and tried to smile. “I don’t usually come to a bar. Do I look that obvious?”

The bear chuckled. “Well, pretty much. But don’t worry, people are nice here. We have a rule that says consent is everything. You can dance over there without worrying people will just grab you out of nowhere. Just say no and they’ll stop—well, most of the time. This is a bar, after all. If you need help, just call me or any of the waiters. Call me Jeremy.”

“Thanks, I’ll... uh... keep that in mind.”

“Anyway, I got some other patrons to serve. If you need anything just bark!”

Lucas just watched Jeremy leave to serve other customers. Really, the waiters here were too teasing.

Especially Mr Husky. He caught sight of the husky near the DJ area. The husky was looking at the dance area, then their eyes met. Mr Husky then smiled brightly and walked over to him.

“I take it everything is well, Mr Dark?” the husky said when they were close enough.

He laughed. “More than well, I can say.” *Gotta keep up the bad boy vibe.*

“Oh, you brought someo—”

“Yeah, he’s a friend of mine. Do you...”

He trailed off when he saw Mr Husky staring at Tom. The husky’s expression fell and he looked away, making Lucas furrow his eyebrows. He turned to Tom; the wolf was apparently surprised as if he wasn’t expecting to see the husky here.

“Vilkas?”

“Tom?”

Lucas took a gulp from his glass. Somehow, he had a bad feeling. "You two... know each other?"

Tom looked away while Mr Husky's face was turning red. The husky was about to leave, but Lucas caught his hand before he could go. "Hey, um, is there anything wrong?"

The husky didn't look at him, but then let out a sigh and sat down on the stool next to him with his ears flattened.

"Do you... know each other?"

Tom put his glass back on the counter so softly to avoid making any noise. "Y-yes. We... we know each other."

He turned to Mr Husky, who was facepalming at the situation. "Tom, I... I can explain."

"No need. Ye... do you, I guess."

"Sorry, I'm not... doing something wrong, right?" The coyote asked, his discomfort growing.

"So, uh, Luc," Tom spoke up after taking a deep breath. "He's... he's, um, we..."

"We're friends. Uni friends." Mr Husky finished. "He doesn't know I work here."

Surprised at the sudden information, Lucas asked. "Wait, wait, wait, you two are *uni friends*?! Like, you're a university student?!"

"Yeah."

The awkwardness of the situation then hit him hard. So, he had been flirting with a university student all this time?! Not that he minded, but with a *friend of his friend*?!

"So, uh, yeah." Tom said with a soft smile... trying to, he saw. The wolf's ears were still down. "You two already know each other?"

*Well... we do, just... not the kind that what you think*, the coyote thought. He just nervously took another gulp of his beer.

"In a way..." The husky said. "So, w-well..."

He then turned to Mr Husky and the awkwardness intensified. The husky tried to smile at him and extended his hand. They shook hands and nervously smiled at each other.

"Vilkas."

"Lucas."

Tom chose that moment to chuckle. "Hey, your names rhyme."

That made their cheeks turn even redder than they already were.

The wolf drank his milk. "Whoa, my friend is a stripper." He said, giving out a light chuckle.

"I'm not a stripper!"

"Uh, sorry. A waiter, then?"

"Yeah, a waiter." Vilkas scratched his ear. "M-maybe a stripper too sometimes if thou want to be specific."

Lucas choked on his drink, realising what he implied.

Tom smiled, now feeling more confident. "It's okay, Vil. As long as ye enjoy it here. Now I know why ye were so cool when we were shopping that day."

"Tom, I beg thee, please, *please*, don't tell anyone about this, especially Kevin."

"No, I'm not going to tell anyone. Although..." His ears went down again. "I think... ye... really nailed it on the looks department."

Vilkas looked down at his topless body, then back up at the wolf. "Uh, thanks, mate, I guess." He scratched behind his ear. "Also, just thou me, Tom."

"Sure, thanks."

Lucas was still trying to wipe his muzzle.

"Thou... thou know Mr D—I mean Lucas?"

"Yeah. Max introduced me to him. His team was the first one our uni played during Max's Nat-Champ."

"Oh."

"And he's..." Tom continued, but he trailed off. "I think I'll let him say it himself."

"Uh... no need?" *'Cause we already did... things...*

The husky sighed, in exasperation, maybe, he couldn't tell. This was too much information in just one night!

He took another gulp, wanting to get drunk.

"I'm going to the toilet." Vilkas then said, but not before poking his shoulder. Lucas' gaze followed him and saw that he made a subtle gesture to follow him later.

Tom put his glass down. "I think he wants you to follow him."

Lucas choked again on his drink. He had no idea that Tom understood the gesture!

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Instead of the toilet, the husky was apparently going to a small room on the backstage. He guessed this was the music stage room because it had a lot of electronic equipment. In one corner of the room, Mr Husky—maybe he should call him Vilkas now—was pinching his muzzle in exasperation.

The coyote was worried. A million thoughts were running in his head. Why did Vilkas work here? Why did he know Tom? How could he not realise it? Did he now hate him?

“So, uh, I think I should say sorry first.” Vilkas said with his tail swaying in distress, not looking at him.

Lucas just gulped.

The husky looked away, his discomfort easily visible. “Had I known you were a friend of my friend, I wouldn’t have flirted with you, and... and... done... things.”

“No, no, I think I’m the one who should apologise. If I’d known you were a friend of my friend, I wouldn’t have flirted with you.” He scratched his nape nervously, then he looked up. “Really... I... we... uh...”

“Seriously, though, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I had no idea you were Tom’s friend!”

“Then you could just *rent* me?!”

“You *worked* here! I *paid* you! God, that sounds horrible now!”

They sighed, then looked at each other.

Lucas sat down on the floor, gripping his head. “Just... how old are you? You’re not underage, right?”

“I’m 23.”

“Thank God.”

Vilkas sat down in front of him. After that, silence ensued.

Now that some questions had been answered, he dared look up. “So, what now?”

There was no answer. The husky put his face in his hands, distressed at the situation. Really, he had *absolutely* no idea that Vilkas was a uni student and a friend of Tom’s. Like... what?!

“I don’t know.” Vilkas said, not looking up. He then looked at the ceilings, then back down. “What... what do you want our relationship to be?”

“Re-relationship?!”

“Wait, wait, I didn’t mean that!”

“We were in a relationship?!”

"No! No!"

"Fuck!"

"Stop shouting!" Someone knocked at the door, making the two canines turn their heads. "I can hear you shouting from the dance floor!"

"Sorry, Lily!"

Lucas gripped his head and groaned, still trying to make sense of what just happened. Eventually, he sighed and looked at the husky. "Look, look, let's just..." he wiped his face. "Let's just start fresh, okay? Let's just... uh... ignore everything and start over?"

The husky looked up. "I can't just forget that *you rented me!*"

"Neither can I! But just... argh!" he threw his hands. "Listen," he sighed exasperatedly. "We just have a bad start, okay? Let's just... start again. I don't mean just forgetting all that's happened. I can't simply forget that we... did... things. Just... put it behind us."

They looked at each other. Honestly, the fact that Vilkas was topless wasn't doing him any good, but he should try.

"So, um," Lucas continued, looking away with a small blush on his face. Was he really going to ask the husky about his sexual preference?

"Yeah?"

*Dammit.* "Y-you're g-gay?"

Vilkas just shrugged. "I'm bi. More towards guys I think."

Right, this was Barrowisle. It wasn't that taboo of a thing.

"So no, you're not making me grossed out."

Lucas gave a relieved sigh. "Let's get back there. Tom's a nice guy so he's not going to tease us about it." He stood up. "I'm sure it takes time, but it doesn't mean we have to start everything over."

"Y-yeah, thanks."

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Lucas put his empty glass on the stool and sighed heavily, ears down. Not what he imagined what tonight would be, but still, well. He and Mr Husky... uh, Vilkas agreed to start again. They managed to keep the friendly air between them... for two minutes.

When they returned to Tom, the wolf was talking with Jeremy. Apparently, the bear told him that Vilkas was nicknamed Mr Husky in this bar and Lucas was



usually called Mr Dark. So... yeah, the wolf learnt two utterly embarrassing nicknames in their absence.

Done with the night—and he lost interest in getting drunk—they stood up and paid for the drinks. Vilkas was busy with customers, so Lucas just told Jeremy to tell the husky that they left. He... uh... didn't really want to meet the husky again for now.

As they walked back to the station, he could not help but stay close to Tom. Dang it, he should've gotten an Over or taken the bus instead. Like before, Tom didn't seem to notice the situation, or maybe he was used to it. He was from here anyway, so why wouldn't he?

But still, it was kind of creepy.

"You sure the last metro hasn't left yet?" Tom asked him.

Lucas shuddered when he heard something rustling. Maybe it was just him being paranoid again; maybe it was a good idea for him to stop watching horror films. "Yeah, the last metro leaves at 23, it's now still 10 minutes to 23."

Suddenly, the wolf stopped and stared at a dark alleyway across the road. He didn't move at all, even his tail stopped swaying.

The coyote followed his gaze but saw nothing there. It was just an empty alleyway.

Tom's ear twitched, then he tilted his head.

"Uh, Tom? You okay?"

"Yeah," he said, his ears going down. "Let's just get going."

Lucas' fur bristled; Tom was always a sensitive guy. Was there someone there? Or worse, *something*? Waiting for them to lower their guard and then snatch them as dinner?!

...he should really stop watching horror films before bed.

The wolf's ears were still flattened as they walked. Lucas shuddered, then jerked in surprise as Tom suddenly turned his head to another alleyway across the intersection and growled softly.

Uh, yeah, Tom was nice and cute and all but sometimes he creeped him out.

"Chill, I'm not here for trouble." Suddenly, someone said across the intersection and walked towards them. Lucas' ears flattened and he prepared for a fight. However, Tom was quick to move in front of him, protecting him from the stranger.

The wolf stopped growling but kept on his defensive posture. "What do you want?" he asked the stranger, apparently a bison now that he stepped into the light, with a hard tone.

"I don't wanna bring you bad news, but I guess I've been doing that."

Tom's ears went up a little, but he didn't move. The bison walked towards them with cautious steps, as if he were afraid of getting caught. Tom stepped back, and Lucas followed him. What was going on? Who was the bison?

"Listen, wolf, you should get out from this city as soon as possible." The bison said when he was close enough. "Good things ain't going your direction. There will be blood."

Lucas looked at the wolf, then at the bison. What were they talking about?

The wolf replied. "There has always been blood. What made you think it will be special?"

"Because this time it's a troop. It might be your last one."

Tom squinted his eyes. "Why are you telling me this?"

The bison went silent for a while before giving a sigh and stared at the wolf in the eyes. "Because I'm not sure you can go through this one."

"Nice of you to care." The wolf nodded and stood up straighter. "Thanks for the heads-up, anyway."

The stranger clicked his tongue but nodded.

"What makes you dare come close to a witness, bison?" he asked the bison.

The bison looked at Lucas and narrowed his eyes, making the coyote take a step back. Why were they talking in cryptic? Do they know each other? What was going on?!

"Like I said, I don't wanna bring bad news, but it's got to be done. 'S up to you what to do." The bison then turned to leave. "Don't you *dare* die."

What the hell was going on?!

"T-Tom, what was that?!" He asked the wolf as the bison walked away.

"No, it's not important. Just an old friend with a grudge." Tom answered, his tone quickly changed to his usual. "Let's just get going, I'm hungry."

The wolf walked away, and Lucas could only follow him in his own confusion. Somehow, he had a bad feeling.